



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 3 March 2010*

Saint Bonaventure

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today I would like to talk about St Bonaventure of Bagnoregio. I confide to you that in broaching this subject I feel a certain nostalgia, for I am thinking back to my research as a young scholar on this author who was particularly dear to me. My knowledge of him had quite an impact on my formation. A few months ago, with great joy, I made a [pilgrimage to the place of his birth, Bagnoregio](#), an Italian town in Lazio that venerates his memory.

St Bonaventure, in all likelihood born in 1217, died in 1274. Thus he lived in the 13th century, an epoch in which the Christian faith which had deeply penetrated the culture and society of Europe inspired imperishable works in the fields of literature, the visual arts, philosophy and theology. Among the great Christian figures who contributed to the composition of this harmony between faith and culture Bonaventure stands out, a man of action and contemplation, of profound piety and prudent government.

He was called Giovanni di Fidanza. An episode that occurred when he was still a boy deeply marked his life, as he himself recounts. He fell seriously ill and even his father, who was a doctor, gave up all hope of saving him from death. So his mother had recourse to the intercession of St Francis of Assisi, who had recently been canonized. And Giovanni recovered.

The figure of the *Poverello* of Assisi became even more familiar to him several years later when he was in Paris, where he had gone to pursue his studies. He had obtained a Master of Arts Diploma, which we could compare with that of a prestigious secondary school in our time. At that point, like so many young men in the past and also today, Giovanni asked himself a crucial question: "What should I do with my life?". Fascinated by the witness of fervour and evangelical radicalism of the Friars Minor who had arrived in Paris in 1219, Giovanni knocked at the door of the Franciscan convent in that city and asked to be admitted to the great family of St Francis' disciples. Many years later he explained the reasons for his decision: he recognized Christ's action in St Francis and in the movement he had founded. Thus he wrote in a letter addressed to another friar: "I confess before God that the reason which made me love the life of blessed Francis most is that it resembled the birth and early development of the Church. The Church began with simple fishermen, and was subsequently enriched by very distinguished and wise teachers; the religion of Blessed Francis was not established by the prudence of men but by Christ" (*Epistula de tribus quaestionibus ad magistrum innominatum*, in *Opere di San Bonaventura. Introduzione generale*, Rome 1990, p. 29).

So it was that in about the year 1243 Giovanni was clothed in the Franciscan habit and took the name "Bonaventure". He was immediately sent to study and attended the Faculty of Theology of the University of Paris where he took a series of very demanding courses. He obtained the various qualifications required for an academic career earning a bachelor's degree in Scripture and in the *Sentences*. Thus Bonaventure studied profoundly Sacred Scripture, the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard the theology manual in that time and the most important theological authors. He was in contact with the teachers and students from across Europe who converged in Paris and he developed his own personal thinking and a spiritual sensitivity of great value with which, in the following years, he was able to infuse his works and his sermons, thus becoming one of the most important theologians in the history of the Church. It is important to remember the title of the thesis he defended in order to qualify to teach theology, the *licentia ubique docendi*, as it was then called. His dissertation was entitled *Questions on the knowledge of Christ*. This subject reveals the central role that Christ always played in Bonaventure's life and teaching. We may certainly say that the whole of his thinking was profoundly Christocentric.

In those years in Paris, Bonaventure's adopted city, a violent dispute was raging against the Friars Minor of St Francis Assisi and the Friars Preachers of St Dominic de Guzmán. Their right to teach at the university was contested and doubt was even being cast upon the authenticity of their consecrated life. Of course, the changes introduced by the Mendicant Orders in the way of understanding religious life, of which I have spoken in previous Catecheses, were so entirely new that not everyone managed to understand them. Then it should be added, just as sometimes happens even among sincerely religious people, that human weakness, such as envy and jealousy, came into play. Although Bonaventure was confronted by the opposition of the other university masters, he had already begun to teach at the Franciscans' Chair of theology and, to respond to those who were challenging the Mendicant Orders, he composed a text entitled

Evangelical Perfection. In this work he shows how the Mendicant Orders, especially the Friars Minor, in practising the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, were following the recommendations of the Gospel itself. Over and above these historical circumstances the teaching that Bonaventure provides in this work of his and in his life remains every timely: the Church is made more luminous and beautiful by the fidelity to their vocation of those sons and daughters of hers who not only put the evangelical precepts into practice but, by the grace of God, are called to observe their counsels and thereby, with their poor, chaste and obedient way of life, to witness to the Gospel as a source of joy and perfection.

The storm blew over, at least for a while, and through the personal intervention of Pope Alexander IV in 1257, Bonaventure was officially recognized as a doctor and master of the University of Paris. However, he was obliged to relinquish this prestigious office because in that same year the General Chapter of the Order elected him Minister General.

He fulfilled this office for 17 years with wisdom and dedication, visiting the provinces, writing to his brethren, and at times intervening with some severity to eliminate abuses. When Bonaventure began this service, the Order of Friars Minor had experienced an extraordinary expansion: there were more than 30,000 Friars scattered throughout the West with missionaries in North Africa, the Middle East, and even in Peking. It was necessary to consolidate this expansion and especially, to give it unity of action and of spirit in full fidelity to Francis' charism. In fact different ways of interpreting the message of the Saint of Assisi arose among his followers and they ran a real risk of an internal split. To avoid this danger in 1260 the General Chapter of the Order in Narbonne accepted and ratified a text proposed by Bonaventure in which the norms regulating the daily life of the Friars Minor were collected and unified. Bonaventure, however, foresaw that regardless of the wisdom and moderation which inspired the legislative measures they would not suffice to guarantee communion of spirit and hearts. It was necessary to share the same ideals and the same motivations.

For this reason Bonaventure wished to present the authentic charism of Francis, his life and his teaching. Thus he zealously collected documents concerning the *Poverello* and listened attentively to the memories of those who had actually known Francis. This inspired a historically well founded biography of the Saint of Assisi, entitled *Legenda Maior*. It was redrafted more concisely, hence entitled *Legenda minor*. Unlike the Italian term the Latin word does not mean a product of the imagination but, on the contrary, "*Legenda*" means an authoritative text, "to be read" officially. Indeed, the General Chapter of the Friars Minor in 1263, meeting in Pisa, recognized St Bonaventure's biography as the most faithful portrait of their Founder and so it became the Saint's official biography.

What image of St Francis emerged from the heart and pen of his follower and successor, St Bonaventure? The key point: Francis is an *alter Christus*, a man who sought Christ passionately. In the love that impelled Francis to imitate Christ, he was entirely conformed to Christ. Bonaventure pointed out this living ideal to all Francis' followers. This ideal, valid for every

Christian, yesterday, today and for ever, was also proposed as a programme for the Church in the Third Millennium by my Predecessor, Venerable John Paul II. This programme, he wrote in his Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, is centred "in Christ himself, who is to be known, loved and imitated, so that in him we may live the life of the Trinity, and with him transform history until its fulfilment in the heavenly Jerusalem" (n. 29).

In 1273, St Bonaventure experienced another great change in his life. Pope Gregory X wanted to consecrate him a Bishop and to appoint him a Cardinal. The Pope also asked him to prepare the Second Ecumenical Council of Lyons, a most important ecclesial event, for the purpose of re-establishing communion between the Latin Church and the Greek Church. Boniface dedicated himself diligently to this task but was unable to see the conclusion of this ecumenical session because he died before it ended. An anonymous papal notary composed a eulogy to Bonaventure which gives us a conclusive portrait of this great Saint and excellent theologian. "A good, affable, devout and compassionate man, full of virtue, beloved of God and human beings alike.... God in fact had bestowed upon him such grace that all who saw him were pervaded by a love that their hearts could not conceal" (cf. J.G. Bougerol, *Bonaventura*, in A. Vauchez (edited by), *Storia dei santi e della santità cristiana*. Vol. VI. *L'epoca del rinnovamento evangelico*, Milan 191, p. 91).

Let us gather the heritage of this holy doctor of the Church who reminds us of the meaning of our life with the following words: "On earth... we may contemplate the divine immensity through reasoning and admiration; in the heavenly homeland, on the other hand, through the vision, when we are likened to God and through ecstasy... we shall enter into the joy of God" (*La conoscenza di Cristo*, q. 6, *conclusione*, in *Opere di San Bonaventura. Opuscoli Teologici / 1*, Rome 1993, p. 187).

To special groups

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I welcome the English-speaking pilgrims present at today's Audience, including those from Nigeria, Japan and the United States. To the pilgrims from Sophia University in Tokyo I offer my prayerful good wishes that the coming centenary of your University will strengthen your service to the pursuit of truth and your witness to the harmony of faith and reason. Upon you and your families I invoke God's abundant Blessings!

Lastly, I greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. Dear *young people*, prepare yourselves to face the important stages of life by founding every project of yours on fidelity to God and to your brothers and sisters. Dear *sick people*, offer your sufferings to the heavenly Father in union with those of Christ, to contribute to building the Kingdom of God. And you, dear *newlyweds*, may you be able to edify your family in listening to God in faithful and reciprocal love.

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