



## Praying with St Bonaventure

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Bonaventure was born in the Italian town of Bagnoregio in the year 1217. Healed through the prayer of his mother from a serious illness at age 11, he went on to become one of the greatest spiritual teachers of his time. He studied and then taught theology at the university of Paris, joined the Franciscan order at 36, and became its Minister General at 40. On retreat at La Verna, where St Francis had received his famous vision of a winged seraph, Bonaventure was inspired with an understanding of how the human soul may draw near to God in prayer.

This led to the writing of his most famous work, *The Journey of the Mind to God*. Often called the 'second founder' of the Franciscan order, Bonaventure preserved Francis' emphasis on simplicity whilst giving the movement structural stability and theological coherence. His writings are characterised by the conviction that the intellectual and emotional aspects of the spiritual life should work together. Made a Cardinal in 1273, he died in 1274. He was canonised in 1482.

It's often said that every time we read a new book we should also read an old one. And so I thought I would reread one of the greatest books on the spiritual life ever written: Bonaventure's *Journey of the Mind to God*. His basic concept is simple: prayer, he suggested, is like climbing a ladder. You start at the bottom with the simple things of nature, and you gradually ascend until you are caught up into God himself. Bonaventure wrote in Latin, and his language is not easy. And yet his book offers a model for prayer which is inspiring in its breadth and simplicity.

### 1. Finding God in the created world

The universe itself is a ladder by which we can ascend into God. Let us place our first step in the ascent at the bottom, presenting to ourselves the whole material world as a mirror through which we may pass over to God, the supreme Craftsman.

We begin by using our senses to contemplate the natural world, for in it we find the footprints of the

Creator. Every element of the world outside is a shadow, echo and picture of the eternal God, for ever since the creation of the world, God's eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made (Romans 1.20). And as we observe with our senses, so we wonder with our imagination at the power, wisdom and goodness of God.

It was Francis himself who first looked to the natural world, rather than to the power and pomp of the Church, for the basis of his spirituality. And through the ages the natural world has been a constant source of inspiration to those with the time to stop and stare. The rippling of the wind across a sea of ripened wheat, footprint of the Spirit of God sweeping over the face of the waters; the soaring of kites on a rising thermal, picture of trust and provision; the delicate symmetrical beauty of flaked ice crystals, reflection of the order which binds the universe – all draw us towards God.

Much of Bonaventure's own delight was in the presence of number in the universe: the pattern of music and dance, proportion as the basis of beauty, the existence of number within the human mind. He would surely be delighted to know that a chaffinch sings 45 notes per second; that the humble gecko uses molecular bonding to walk faultlessly on any surface; and that the basic component of matter is now thought to be a dancing subatomic string. He would wonder at the fact that had the rate of expansion of the universe one second after the Big Bang been smaller or greater by one part in a million, life itself would not exist. And more mundanely, he would surely have smiled at the discovery that no fewer than 287 species of beetle have now been identified in Buckingham Palace gardens. He who does not turn towards the First Principle on account of such indications, Bonaventure remarks - momentarily abandoning the subtleties of scholastic Latin - is stupid.

The mathematical structure of reality ([www.fractalschlaraffenland.net](http://www.fractalschlaraffenland.net))

## 2. Finding God within ourselves

We must also enter into our soul, which is God's image...The soul itself is an image and similitude of God, to this extent, that present to itself and having him present, it seizes Him by act and through power.

The second phase of Bonaventure's journey to God takes us from the outer world to the inner world. In this phase we enter into our own mind and look for God within ourselves, for we are made in his image. The journey becomes a little more demanding, as we enter into first philosophical and then theological activity. Beginning with our natural capacities of memory, knowledge and choice, we find ourselves led into an awareness of eternity, of truth and of goodness. Through memory we are aware of past, present and future, and thus of time and eternity. Through knowledge and reason, we arrive at an understanding of necessary and contingent truth, and therefore of Truth itself. And through the exercise of choice we learn to distinguish between what is good and what is better, and are thus made aware of the existence of a supreme good, God in person.

Once we have considered our own natural powers, the powers of the created self, we move on to search for God more reliably through the redeemed self. We live in a world of competing distractions and unsatisfied desires. But through the work of Christ on the cross, we may learn to seek and receive the theological virtues of faith, hope and love. These three virtues restore to us our spiritual senses, and remove the barrier which kept us from God. And so it is that we are enabled to read and understand the words of Scripture, to receive and be filled by the Holy Spirit, and begin to

understand the breadth and depth and height and length of the love of Christ.

Seeking God within..

This, then, is the phase of the spiritual life as we still know it today, made possible through Christ who, as it were, comes to mend the ladder between man and God broken by Adam at the time of the Fall.

And yet, says Bonaventure, there is more.

### 3. Finding God in eternity

*We must get beyond to what is eternal, most spiritual and above us, by gazing upon the First Principle... [for] it still remains .. to pass beyond and above not only this world but moreover the soul itself.*

We have contemplated God outside of ourselves, through his footprints in the created world; we have contemplated him within our own souls, through the image of himself which he has implanted there. The final phase of our journey consists of the contemplation of the invisible and eternal things of God. This is a phase which few complete, and which comes only momentarily. It is the phase of the mystic, attained perhaps only by those who are able to give a great deal of time to the work of contemplation. Francis himself achieved it, and Bonaventure writes of it here. Within the pages of scripture similar experiences are recorded by Isaiah, with his vision of the seraphs before the throne of God, and by Paul, who was 'caught up to the third heaven'. Hildegard of Bingen had tried to draw it in the 12th century, and Dante described it in poetry in the 14th. Mystics down the ages have had similar experiences.

But we, probably, have not. It does however make exciting, if difficult, reading. Beginning with a simple study of the Names of God in the Old and New Testaments, we move to a consideration of being and the source of being. Bonaventure manages to describe this only as being like looking into pure light, and finding that the purity is so total that the eye seems to see nothing at all. But the result will be that our soul will be filled with wonder and admiration, and a deep appreciation of what it means that God is Alpha and Omega, pure and absolute being, first and last: or, to use the 12th century image, that he is like an intelligible sphere, whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.

From this we move to enter into contemplation of the inexpressible and incomprehensible paradoxes which lie at the heart of the Christian faith: the Trinity and the Incarnation. This is an activity which so overwhelms the mind that those who have experienced it are unable to properly recall or express it. As the mind is finally drawn to the Cross of Christ, we hear the voice of Jesus himself: Today you will be with me in Paradise. At this point all intellectual activities are relinquished, and the soul is swept into God.

*Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel. And let all the people say, so it be; 'Amen'.  
(Psalm 106.48)*