

15. July 2023

St. Bonaventure: the Seraphic Doctor

Eph 3:14-19

'This, then, is what I pray, kneeling before the Father, from whom every fatherhood, in heaven or on earth, takes its name. In the abundance of his glory may he, through his Spirit, enable you to grow firm in power with regard to your inner self, so that Christ may live in your hearts through faith, and then, planted in love and built on love, with all God's holy people you will have the strength to grasp the breadth and the length, the height and the depth; so that, knowing the love of Christ, which is beyond knowledge, you may be filled with the utter fullness of God.'

Today we commemorate a man who possessed great intellectual gifts and knew how to put them entirely at the service of the Kingdom of God. St. Bonaventure was born in Bagnoregio, Italy, around 1221 and died on 15 July 1274 in Lyon (France). This saint was a scribe who shone like the sun (cf. Mt 13:43). Because of his ardent love for the Lord, he was called the “Seraphic Doctor”.

Of St. Bonaventure it is said that, as a child, he was cured by God thanks to the blessing given to him by St. Francis of Assisi. According to the same source, his name was also given to him by this saint. When his mother took the cured child to the dying Francis, the latter is said to have exclaimed: “Oh, good fortune!” Thus, his religious name as a Franciscan was later: Bonaventure.

The centre of all his thought and faith was the Bible, as the source of the knowledge of God; a garden in which we find nourishment; the Heart of God, His mouth, His tongue and His feather... In his opinion, one should be careful not to pour too much “philosophical water” into the “wine of Sacred Scripture”. Pope Leo XIII called St. Bonaventure the “prince of mystics”.

Many episodes of his abundant and fruitful life could be listed: for example, how he guided the Franciscan Order, how he proposed Gregory X as Pope and actually became Pope; how this same Pope made him a cardinal and bishop; how the saint prepared the Second Council of Lyons and presided over it until the year of his death, etc....

However, following also the wise reading that has been chosen for the memorial of St. Bonaventure, we want to focus rather on his spiritual vision and savour something of his inner experience of God.

Since these daily meditations are always enriched with the songs of Harpa Dei (and, by the way, today we listen to the Hymn to the Sacred Heart of Jesus which was composed precisely by St. Bonaventure), we want to quote first of all a wonderful phrase of this saint about music:

“Music is a sibling to the dying, it is the first sweet sound from the far beyond, and the muse of song is the mystic sister who points to heaven.”

Let us now listen to an extract from the Hymn to the Sacred Heart, composed by St. Bonaventure:

“O Heart, Thou ark containing the Law, not of the old servitude, but of grace, and indulgence, and also of mercy.

Charity willed Thee to be wounded; by the spear thrust opened, that we might venerate the wounds of an invisible love..

Who would not love in turn the One so loving him? Who, being thus redeemed, would not love, and choose eternal dwellings in this Heart?”

Like all true mystics, St. Bonaventure was inflamed with love. Indeed, love is the fire that burns in our hearts and consumes all that stands in its way. In love we are rooted and grounded, as today's reading tells us. In this love, we can “comprehend the breadth and the length, the height and the depth” and know “the love of Christ, which is beyond knowledge.”

In his little book “Itinerary of the Mind to God”, St. Bonaventure offers us the following reflection:

“Christ is both the way and the door. Christ is the staircase and the vehicle, like the throne of mercy over the Ark of the Covenant, and the mystery hidden from the ages (cf. Col 1:26)”.

The saint invites us to look at the Crucified One “full of faith, hope and charity, devoted, full of wonder and joy, marked by gratitude, and open to praise and jubilation”, so as to make the “passage”, the transition to the interior life.

In the mystical life (i.e. the inner experience of God), it is not the human mind that takes the lead; it is the Holy Spirit who kindles in us the fire of love. He must inflame us to the core!

“If you ask how such things can occur, seek the answer in God’s grace, not in doctrine; in the longing of the will, not in the understanding; in the sighs of prayer, not in research; seek the bridegroom not the teacher; God and not man; darkness not daylight; and look not to the light but rather to the raging fire that carries the soul to God with intense fervor and glowing love. The fire is God, and the furnace is in Jerusalem (Isa 31:9) (...). No man can look upon me and live (Ex 33:20). Let us die, then, and enter into the darkness, silencing our anxieties, our passions and all the fantasies of our imagination. Let us pass over with the crucified Christ from this world to the Father so that, when the Father has shown Himself to us, we can say with Philip: It is enough. (Jn 14:8)”

In the figure of St. Bonaventure, erudition is accompanied by the ability to direct and command. His life is nourished by an intimate encounter with the Crucified One, who, through the Holy Spirit, inflamed his heart with a great love. In the example of this saint, one can see that a healthy mysticism is very well complemented by works. We thank the Lord for having given us this saint, and St. Bonaventure for having responded to His call!