THE THEOLOGY OF HISTORY IN SAINT BONAVENTURE

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In his thesis, Ratzinger presents Bonaventure's vision of Revelation. For Bonaventure, Scripture is not something static in the letter but a revelation with a historical dimension, a development in the Church, God's people. It is the Spirit who writes the Bible, and he does not do it just on paper but within the life of a people, whether in interpretation, understanding, or realization, so it's alive. Bonaventure's very dynamic vision is God's unveiling in creation, the reverberation of divine light in the created. As a result, the human path to God is also dynamic, and theology, in turn, is called not to be static or a purely intellectual work but rather a dynamic inner transformation of the human being on his way to God. Thus, for Bonaventure, *history* too becomes "*theological*," the place and path of that divinization to which God calls humankind through revelation and knowledge.

The Notion of Time: Theology of History

In his development of the "theology of history," Bonaventure insists that Scripture cannot be understood outside the "historical" time in which it is set,

> Certainly, Scripture is closed objectively. But its meaning is advancing in a steady growth through history; and this growth is not yet closed. As the physical world contains seeds, so also scripture contains seeds; that is seeds of meaning. And this meaning develops in a constant process of growth in time. Consequently, we can interpret many things which the Fathers could not

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> have known because for them these things still lay in the dark future while for us, they are accessible as past history. Still, other things remain dark for us.[1]

Bonaventure emphasizes that, since no human being can live through the whole of history (all the centuries), the Holy Spirit enables us through Scripture to have this "contemplative and prophetic knowledge of the times." Time and order are important because Christ became incarnate at a specific moment in history. And even sin could not annihilate this order, this beauty in creation. The starting point of theology, and its culmination, is God Himself revealing Himself through Christ, and we, in turn, are called to let ourselves be seized and drawn into this Revelation, this fullness. Bonaventure refers to the *multiformes theoriae*—as the third dimension of interpretation of Scripture[2]—to underline the immensity of the theories that Scripture can contain, that only God can englobe through knowledge. That intelligence can only be discovered through small drops of water drawn from the sea of history. Bonaventure compares Revelation to the waters of the sea, and to seeds, for these mysteries are so deep that a human being cannot grasp them, cannot penetrate them to the bottom despite all his efforts. "Who can know the unlimited number of seeds which exist? For from one single seed, entire forests grow up, bringing forth innumerable seeds."[3] Bonaventure underlines the importance of these theories, which reveal the unity of Revelation over time through history. This is why these theories—while reflecting the times to come in the future (the seeds)—can only be grasped by those who know the past. Revelation unfolds along a meaningful

1. Joseph Ratzinger, *The Theology of History in Saint Bonaventure* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1971), 9.

2. The first two are as follows: *The spiritual meaning* (the allegorical meaning beyond the literal meaning); the *figurae sacramentales* that speak of Christ and Anti-Christ.

3. Ratzinger, *The Theology of History in Saint Bonaventure*, 7.

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line, within a continuity guided by God's Providence, through the events of history. The interpretation of Scripture cannot disregard history (past as well as future) since Christ himself did not disregard it through his incarnation in a concrete time and place in history. A historical-theological interpretation of Scripture is therefore necessary, revealing its harmony.

More widely than Scripture, for Bonaventure, the whole of Revelation is not static. Hence, he often speaks of "revelations" in the plural rather than "Revelation" in the singular, like seeds that never stop germinating and that we never stop discerning. For him, Revelation is a process of several revelations through which God addresses the Church, the depository of that revelation, so there is an aspect of *uniqueness* and *duration* at play here. Scripture is certainly complete as "letters" since its canon is closed, but this does not prevent it from containing seeds of meaning that can germinate over time, constantly producing new interpretations. Scripture can only be called "revelation" if it is received, interpreted, understood, and appropriated... through faith, within a personal and communal relationship as Church: "Only Scripture understood in faith is Holy Scripture. It is only through faith that a person enters the Church's living understanding of Scripture, and thus, and only thus, receives Revelation."[4]

Revelatio **Through Contemplation**

This appropriation is not a subjectivist sentiment but is lived as a Church (depository of every revelation) while passing through that Christian method *par excellence*, that of personal encounter. Bonaventure profoundly links this revelation to messianic hope, which is affirmed as "interior to the world and

4. Joseph Ratzinger, *La Théologie de l'Histoire de Saint Bonaventure* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2007), 8.

to history" despite its limitations and sins...this revelation can only be deployed *within* history and its events. For Bonaventure, the interpretation of Scripture is profoundly linked to contemplation, to a "new way of considering Scripture," and this way can only be revealed by the grace of the Holy Spirit, the very author of Scripture. According to Bonaventure, the people of God in the last days will be characterized as a "contemplative Church," and this last "contemplative order" will receive the *Revelatio*, which is of the mystical order. Bonaventure illustrates this *Revelatio* through the figures of Paul, John and Francis. Paul in his delight before *this wisdom which comes from God and not from men;*[5] John represents this order which, according to the Lord's promise,[6] is called to remain until the Lord's return; and in Francis, of course, is laid the historical beginning of this order, through the stigmatization received in his own flesh:

> Bonaventure recognized that Francis' own eschatological form of life could not exist as an institution in this world; it could be realized only as a break-through of grace in the individual until such time as the God-given hour would arrive at which the world would be transformed into its final form of existence.[7]

Bonaventure distinguishes six degrees of knowledge, indicated allegorically by the six days of creation, which are at the same time the figurative presentation of the six ages of salvation history. In this, we distinguish a gradual growth of knowledge according to historical stages. Ratzinger mentions the announcement of a tremendous contemplative order, to which Bonaventure refers in his *Hexaëmeron*. This order will correspond on earth to the angelic order of Seraphim, mystically close to the Heavenly Jerusalem. Bonaventure then

5. 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians.

6. John 21:22.

7. Ratzinger, *The Theology of History in Saint Bonaventure*, 51.

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draws a parallel between the Old and New Covenants, saying that just as Christ came to earth at the end of the Sixth Age of the Old Covenant, so must the Sixth and Final Age of the New Covenant finally engender the contemplative Church. Of course, this order already belongs to the 7th time, evoked by Ezekiel's prophecy about the city that will descend from heaven (while specifying that the Church militant here on earth is meant). The interesting comment regarding this 7th time is that Bonaventure insists that the Church in question is the "militant Church," which means the one "within history" in the existence of pilgrimage. Thus, this lapse of time offers a path of salvation during this earthly pilgrimage. So, for Bonaventure, the 7th and 6th time are side by side: "peace and salvation" are given in parallel with "tribulations within the history of this world." For Bonaventure, as for Joachim, this new order in which the contemplative Church of the end of time is to find its true form of existence must be contemplative. Thus, this "contemplative order" or "contemplative time" is destined to flourish in the peace of the end times, and its greatest mission would be to praise—through the gift of the lives of its members—God's presence, to *fly*, like the Seraphim. Here, too, Bonaventure makes a fine distinction between the two orders' degrees of approach: the task of the *cherubic order* is that of "*speculation*," reaching out and trying to understand God, while the intention of the *seraphic order* is *sursumactio*, the vision of God: "For of what use is it to know much and to savor nothing?"[8] This contemplation is nothing other than a new insight into Scripture, a wisdom revealed by the Spirit of God through the mystical life.

8. Ibid., 52.

7th and 6th Time are Side by Side

"Peace and salvation" are given in parallel with "tribulations, within the history of this world," a very confusing statement that is worth dwelling on for a moment. Bonaventure insists on this salvation given here and now, within our condition as pilgrims. This peace given at the very heart of tribulations seems so contradictory and even hallucinatory! Our modern world seeks at all costs to evacuate suffering, to reduce peace to a very superficial well-being, "they have forsaken me, the source of living waters; They have dug themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water."[9] Is not it one of modern society's great illusions to think it can offer true peace? While thinking that once suffering is evacuated, peace will be granted. Doesn't this seem like an illusion? How could suffering be evacuated? It sounds so ideological! Life and reality constantly show us that suffering is part of our lives, and we cannot escape it.

This contemplative attitude Bonaventure speaks of reveals how much God has so loved the world that He offers to enable humanity to live the greatest miracle of all: peace in the midst of anti-peace experiences. Is there a greater miracle than this? Removing or sparing tribulation would be a 'normal' way to live in peace. But to live in peace amid tribulation is disconcerting. How often do we experience this in our lives?

Already in our flesh: our humanities seem to be mixed of mud and gold, and there lies their beauty. Jesus didn't wait for his disciples to be perfect before calling them. Mysteriously, tribulations and sufferings seem to open unexpected doors toward unexpected peace. Throughout my mission, I've lived in very tough, impoverished neighborhoods, which have nothing outwardly appealing in terms of comfort or well-being, where I've met friends who have been deeply broken by life's

9. Jer. 2:13-15.

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circumstances. And yet, I experienced some of the greatest and most memorable and meaningful moments of my life. This still amazes me... I'm reminded particularly of Lucia,[10] whom I knew in Brazil, in one of the most dangerous parts of Bahia, but which became my neighborhood, inhabited by my friends, and where I felt "at home" through their hospitality.

Lucia was one of the women I knew who suffered most in her life, one of the poorest, not materially, but on many levels! From an early age, she struggled to recover from several mistakes she made that have cost her a lot in her life. Unhealthy relationships deeply destroy her in a very tough neighborhood, with very tough living conditions. A bicycle accident caused her to lose a lot of her brain's capacity, which in turn caused her to have several children - some of whom she lost, not remembering to whom she had given them in the street after birth. This was a huge suffering in her life.

In addition to her psychological and psychiatric problems, Lucia met a man who dragged her down even further by pushing her into drugs, and she ended up catching AIDS for over ten (10) years... A life full of suffering! But Lucia was also capable, in the few moments of lucidity she had, of returning to those beautiful desires that dwelt in her heart, of saying with great gratitude "thank you" for our friendship. A life full of ups and downs but also of little glimmers of friendship and small daily joys slipping in between two sufferings. Despite all the chaos in her life, she was able to recognize at moments this peaceful presence of God through the incarnate faces of her friends. She used to tell us: "Your friendship is the sign and consolation of God's presence in my chaotic life."

During all the tribulations in Lucia's life, I can't deny the moments of peace that were given to her at times alongside

10. The name has been changed out of discretion.

these sufferings, side by side. And that is a very surprising miracle, which can only be given by God, the only one capable of providing it, the only one capable of the impossible, and especially of disconcerting!

I confess that during my mission in Brazil, I prayed unceasingly for magic miracles in Lucia's life (that she would no longer have AIDS, that she would have more strength and determination to take steps to overcome her illness, that her son would no longer be autistic, that she would find her children...) so that she could live more "peacefully." I may not have received any of those physical miracles I was praying for. Still, I can't deny that I received an even greater miracle, that of those little moments of peace, of simple joys that she was able to experience in her life, of that friendship that we were given to live in Christ and that she always recognized as a consolation from God in her chaotic life. This peace can only come from God, for the events of her life offer her everything but peace.

This is the revolution of the Christian message: God becomes flesh and present at the heart of the events of our lives, whether joyful or painful, and it is His presence that gives us true peace, which no one and no event can take away, except our freedom to refuse it. This leads us to an authentic experience of profound freedom, as lived by the first Christians, who, in the simplicity of their hearts, were always turned towards this presence of Christ, the true source of all authentic peace, confessing His presence as the most triumphant of all situations, no matter how absurd they may appear.

Expressio-Impressio

The created mind can only achieve full contemplation through a revelation from the Holy Spirit, through *inner illumination*, through a personal rather than external encounter, and through *imprinted knowledge*. God's revelation to Francis through

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the Seraphim has had a profound impact on Bonaventure's theology since it is not just a passive revelation but an active one, imprinting itself (the Seraphim imprints his wounds) on Francis through the Holy Spirit. That's why these two words are constantly echoing each other. Of course, the intensity of the expression comes only from God, from the Crucified One, and not from Francis. But these *stigmata* could only have been imprinted because Francis had already become himself, in spirit, by grace, and by his burning love, an expression of the love of the crucified one. So, the *stigmata* are both an expression of God, of His power, and of Francis' loving spirit. This is a very important point in Bonaventure's aesthetic theology: at the very moment when the soul perceives divine Beauty, this divine Beauty also takes on its earthly form. For this reason, for Bonaventure, ecstasy is the opening of the world to God. This unity between *Expressio* and *Impressio.* It's at the very core of this *Expressio-Impressio* that the Scriptures, Tradition and Revelation take shape and remain dynamic: it is this movement between *Expressio and Impression* that ensures that they are neither static nor rigid, keeping them at the level of the personal relationship between God and his people, throughout history (in a specific place and time).

This Expression-impression movement opens our hearts to a more contemplative attitude by plunging it into profound gratitude, that of receiving all reality as a gift, an expression in which God has left us the imprint of his expression. This descending movement reveals God's humility, showing his freedom, his immense love and his humility to imprint his impression on what is limited, finite, and to make this ephemeral impression eternal. This expression-impression approach humbles us as we approach reality. Reality belongs to us without really belonging to us; creation belongs to us without really belonging to us; all the people we meet belong to us without

really belonging to us. How so? Everything that lives comes deeply from the God Creator, who chose to imprint his expression on it, and therefore, each creature takes on God's beauty and becomes unique accordingly. This descending movement of expression and impression gives back to the beauty of a flower, as to the beauty of a person, their uniqueness and their particular beauty of being the choice of God's expression and impression... this approach shifts so much the way we consider what is entrusted to us, allowing us to approach it with greater humility, not as something or someone that belongs to us and that we monopolize, but as a person or a source of God's expression and impression, and which therefore takes on a unique beauty and goodness, before which I am called first to delight, and then to preserve and sustain, since this expressed and imprinted beauty entrusts itself to me through this creation, just as the Child of Bethlehem entrusted himself to the astonishment and protection of Mary and Joseph, the Magi and the shepherds... expression and impression are at the heart of the mystery of the Incarnation, which not only converts our gaze and our approach to reality, but also affects the most concrete details of our lives. Is not this the Christian method par excellence? Our lives are not set in motion by a theory or a law but by a presence that provokes us and reveals itself to us, imprinting its newness on our lives, changing them. We see this continuously in all Jesus' encounters in the gospels: The Samaritan woman, Matthew, Nicodemus... but also in our own lives: what sets our lives in motion if not this presence that expresses itself and imprints its expression in our innermost being?

Bonaventure – Augustine – Joachim de Flore

Through knowledge, humanity is not called to fall into the pride of its own knowledge, but rather to divinize itself through a pilgrimage. Here, too, Bonaventure corrects Joachim

de Flore,[11] whose division of the ages emphasized horizontal history as the space of revelation. Whereas Bonaventure, on the contrary, shows that history is a dialogue directed towards the divinization of the created being. So, Bonaventure places Christ at the center of history, as the "axis of world events," the "turning point of history." Unlike Joachim, Bonaventure asserts that history cannot be mathematical since it depends on God's will and human response, and thus, on human freedom. In Joachim de Flore's vision, human freedom is, as it were, taken away (it is God who governs the world through ages already specified, independently of humankind, of creatures). Bonaventure responds in the *Hexaëmeron* that during the six days of Creation, God commits Himself, and that is why God is at the center of everything: *Christocentrism.* Unlike St. Augustine, for example, who in his scheme would place Christ at the end of time as plenitude, finality, and fundamental end... Bonaventure places Christ in the middle of time as the *center.* For him, the fullness of time will not come at the end of time but is to be found at the center of time, through Christ, the median person in the Trinity and the center of all creation, mediator between God and humankind. a hope that is not only to be awaited in the future, but is already present here on earth, in the history of this world. Through this Christocentric vision, Bonaventure profoundly links history to Providence, to a place of eternal encounters and expression of the Trinity: The Father expressing Himself in the Son, the Son emerging from the Father and bringing everything back to the Father, through the Holy Spirit, recapitulating all history, accompanying His people in the events of their history, of their pilgrimage

11. Dividing history into three ages (of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit) gives a more mathematical approach to history, removing the freedom of the individual, since everything is already predestined, and each person of the Trinity will act when the turn of his age comes.

on earth. So, history is no longer reduced to a succession of random events but is unified and enlightened by the revelation of Scripture and tradition, which become the sign of God's benevolent Providence. Therefore, Bonaventure gives great importance to this salvation given within history, within the limits of this world age: a new *messianic* hope for Bonaventure is affirmed here, a hope within the world, within history. And the content of this time of salvation is summed up under the word *peace*. Like Joachim, Bonaventure said that history moves in opposition between the Old and New Testaments, taking the image that "these two testaments are the two cherubim placed on the Ark of the Covenant." Bonaventure offered us a way out of this fragmented schema of history, reduced to calculations, and to see how the Trinity does not flatten history into a system that works like a good factory, but, on the contrary, how the Trinity is manifest in creation.

Sapientia **– Scripture – Interpretation**

Bonaventure divides wisdom into 4 degrees: *Uniformis,*[12] *Multiformis,*[13] *Omniformis*[14] (all-form) and *nulliformis* (formless). For Bonaventure, formless wisdom is the apogee of revelation through the absence of all form:

> It is through love's union (the union that produces true knowledge) that we unite with God, who remains unknown to the intellect. It is in this mysticism that we find, in fact, the original and precise point of origin

12. Linked more to philosophy, to the knowledge of eternal rules that lead to God but without being able to grasp Him (e.g. Moses).

13. It's about understanding the mysterious language of Scripture through Revelation (veiled for the proud but revealed only to the humble (e.g. Paul).

14. Also based on Revelation, this wisdom searches for the trace of God in all creation, groping, with the temptation to stop at the creatures themselves, without going back to their Creator.

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> for the concept of love, which creates knowledge in the darkness of the intellect.[15]

This is the total night of the intellect, which now receives EVERYTHING from God, whatever God wants to give him, and it is the mystical experience par excellence. The mystic's delight in receiving the Scriptures brings us back to the process of their inspiration: "Since Scripture is born from a mystical contact of the hagiographers with God, it can be understood ultimately only on a level which must be called 'mystical.'"[16] And here, Bonaventure agrees with Augustine's *intellectual vision*. In a certain way, Bonaventure historicized the mystical experience so that the latter is not approached as something that disconnects from reality but as its fulfillment.

For Bonaventure, Scripture is called Revelation according to its depth of understanding, its spiritual apprehension, which profoundly unifies all the dimensions of the believer's life, as it enables the latter to appropriate Scripture through concrete events in the history of his life and that of the Church. This spiritual sense of approaching Scripture is threefold: *Allegorical sense* (for what to believe = faith), *Anagogical sense* (for what to await = hope), and *Tropological sense* (for what to do = charity).[17] Without this spiritual intelligence, the true spiritual meaning of the Scripture behind its letters cannot be found:

> The letter by itself is merely the water which is transformed into wine in the spiritual understanding; the letter is a stone, which much be changed into bread; the letter is the skin around the true fruit (...) it is in the spiritual understanding that Scripture becomes the Tree of Life.[18]

15. Ratzinger, *The Theology of History in Saint Bonaventure*, 91.

16. Ibid., 65.

17. Ibid., 62.

18. Ibid., 63.

Thus, the letter must always be surpassed by the Spirit. Is the true content of faith and revelation not to be found behind the letter? In the grasp of its spiritual meaning, in a personal appropriation that is not linked to individual subjectivism but to the faith and living interpretation of the Church, the very depository of this Revelation: "Only Scripture as it is understood in faith is truly holy Scripture. Consequently, Scripture in the full sense is theology, i.e., it is the book **and** the understanding of the book in the faith of the church"[19] It is through this faith and this *mystical attitude* that Scripture must be approached and interpreted, according to Bonaventure, to receive Revelation, and that the "The credible moves in the direction of the intelligible."[20] Bonaventure points out that even the fixed, established canon "carries within itself the seed of its own *dépassement*"[21] and must therefore be approached through this same dynamic understanding of revelation, without imposing a definitive temporal limit on it: "All tradition is of no avail against the immediate word of the Lord; this is the bold wisdom of the word with which Bonaventure discovered the break-through to the immediate encounter with Scripture."[22] This dynamic, progressive interpretation of Scripture in history provides the basis for a new understanding of tradition. In this way, Scripture historically reveals itself, so that ALL its meaning can never be ultimately manifest; part of it is already revealed, and the rest will be in the future. That is why the greatest danger for human beings is to stop at the letter of any type of Revelation (creation, Scripture...), to focus on the literal exterior of that Revelation, and ignore the true meaning intended by its Author:

19. Ratzinger, *The Theology of History in Saint Bonaventure*, 67

20. Ibid., 69.

21. Ibid., 80.

22. Ibid., 81.

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> So, there is a striking parallel between the revelation of Scripture and creation. In both cases, the revelation is hidden behind the letters that veil it; in both cases, the unveiling of the revelation is the task of the Spirit, who transcends the level of the literal in a living, existential movement that penetrates the realm of the intellectual-spiritual.[23]

Conclusion

On the one hand, Bonaventure developed a new theory of Scripture interpretation, which, in contrast to the interpretation of the Church Fathers and Scholastics, which focused more on the "immutable and permanent," emphasized the "historical character" of Biblical statements. On the other hand, he affirmed that history is not reduced to a random succession of events but is the place par excellence of Revelation. Scripture, Tradition, and interpretation are all received within a movement of *expression and impression*, within an initiative that comes only from God, and that human being's part is only to keep the wax of their heart soft to receive. So, the condition for receiving this revelation—after that of God's free and gratuitous grace to reveal Himself—is the humility of the human heart: "There is an essential relationship between *humilitas* and *revelatio*. This relation is such that anyone who is entirely lacking in *humilitas* is also the degrees in the understanding of revelation."[24]

It is surprising to witness that the seraphim appearing to Saint Francis brings him no vocal message or new revelation, or answer to the crises of the Church of his era. The only message he brings is the stigmata, the impression of the expression of God's presence, reminding us of St. Paul's

23. Ibid., 85.

24. Ratzinger, *The Theology of History in Saint Bonaventure*, 71.

words: "*My grace is sufficient for you*,"[25] all is said through the expression of my presence. So, what kind of *humilitas* are we talking about? Perhaps that of desire, of purifying our hearts so that they desire only God's presence and the impression of its expression in our lives, according to the way He wills. The temptation is always strong to "practically explain to God" in our prayers how He should manifest Himself in our lives (by removing such and such a problem, by giving us such and such a grace, by avoiding such and such a cross or trial, by sending us to this or that country...) so that we may have peace. But perhaps *humilitas* lies precisely in the fact that we desire only His presence and let Him express Himself as He wills, accepting to let ourselves be surprised:

> Bonaventure warns straight away that the contemplation of this marvel is not possible unless a great desire burns in the soul. To truly appreciate a meal, one must have an appetite. The soul, immersed in the contemplation of divine light, will obtain that in its firmament—faith—shine the sun, the moon, and the stars. And more than reasoning, it is the purity of the soul that opens itself to the full illumination of the divine sun, which, with its unifying ray, transforms created reality into a serene spectacle, received in the mind as in a mirror. When this occurs in fullness, the soul transcends itself in what Bonaventure calls *'eccessi mentali*,' which surpass all explanation, like the inexpressible groaning of which Saint Paul speaks in the letter to the Romans, and which corresponds to an obscuration or blindness which is an illumination beyond all curious investigation of the intellect.

25. 2 Cor 12:9.

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