

## A Hermeneutical Exercise: Understanding Bonaventure's *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* as a Treatise about Education

**Abstract:** The aim of this article is to discuss Bonaventure's approach regarding the arts and sciences, the relationship between philosophy and theology as a model for achieving intellectual and practical knowledge necessary in reaching and seeing God *in via*. By the means of these concepts, the article will argue that the classical interpretation of the treatise *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* as a mystical work may be fully enriched with a new approach that will describe it as a treatise about education. The main arguments expressed in the article refer to the sources that inspired Bonaventure when writing his treatise such as ancient philosophical texts, patristics authors and the tradition that has been known as the "School of Saint Victor". The finality of this text is to analyse the connexion between Bonaventure's treatise and the above-mentioned sources in order to offer a clear perspective of the synthesis that has been made possible by the Franciscan author when discussing the problem of scientific unity of philosophy and theology, of intellectual and practical knowledge as a way of achieving the necessary wisdom in interpreting "the book of creation" and finding God through his traces in the created world.

**Keywords:** Bonaventure, education, knowledge, sciences, medieval philosophy, Christian wisdom

It is a common thing that when one speaks about Bonaventure and his work *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, one automatically perceives and defines this work as a mystical treatise, as a work that speaks about how the believer may walk the road that will lead him to meet and know God in an immediate manner. When thinking about Bonaventure's reasons and practical purposes in writing this work, I could not help myself and wonder if, at a different level, his intention was also oriented to something else and namely, to the education of his readers according to the Christian and Franciscan way of life. After all, he served his brethren as the Minister General of the Order between 1257 and 1274.

The first necessary step in understanding the *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* as a treatise that also speaks about education, and not only the *via mystica* that one has to follow in order to know God, is to observe and analyse the

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context in which Bonaventure wrote his work. For Bonaventure, the created world may be understood only by following the guiding line that comes back to medieval Christian cosmology, a line that interprets this world as a book written by the hands of God for the human being; a book that may hold the key of communicating with any other living creature, a book of creation accessible to all those wanting to open it and read it. According to this interpretation, the key of understanding creation has been lost after mankind has been found guilty for committing the original sin; therefore, losing Heaven meant in fact losing the possibility of maintaining a real and authentic connexion that has been initially established between mankind and the environment that God created for it. If man does not re-establish such a connexion, man cannot define himself in order to follow the necessary path that will allow him to be re-united with God and be perfected. A person may not reach moral rectitude and is not perfected if it does not achieve the equilibrium of the authentic connexion with the entire creation in order to reach for the connexion with its Creator (Reilly 1974, 663).

Bonaventure chooses to transpose his ideas about how one should understand and live this life in a more correct manner in order to achieve moral rectitude, in a compendious way in the treatise *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* after he already offered an elaborated description of his moral theory in the *Commentary of the Sentences of Petrus Lombardus*. In my opinion, when writing this text, Bonaventure had in mind also a moral sense, and not only a mystical one; before offering a guide for achieving a non-mediated vision of God through rapture, he firstly writes to offer a way of moral life and a model for a righteous human behaviour.

The whole created world has been made for mankind in order to know God. Knowing God is necessary for being able to love God. In which way does this world speak about God and how are we humans acquainted with Him through the words of Bonaventure? The ideas exposed in *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* reflect that the creatures are to be understood as *things*, as *signs*; in a way, the world is seen through the lens of Aristotelian physics and, in a different way, through the means of a sacred symbolism. Bonaventure tends to favour the last one and connects the created world with the Scripture as both aspects that teach mankind how to recognize and know God in the way that Francis of Assisi has offered his example initially when connecting the natural world and the word of God (Vignaux 2004, 181).

As a Christian mystic, Francis tried to stress upon the importance of the affect that through the means of grace transforms in a radical way the human intellect for that it may know the creatures as marks of the love of God. As Paul Vignaux may observe, in the *Itinerarium*, Bonaventure followed this perspective and one does not only find the Anselmian problem of the intelligence discussed here, but also the way in which Bernard spoke about love and how Richard of Saint Victor defined the

problem: *a perfect union of Scholastics and mysticism* (Vignaux 2004, 182). The divine fundament of science is visible only for the conscience of someone that has been transformed by the true wisdom as Dionysius asserts and is being quoted in the sixth chapter of Bonaventure's treatise.

This pure vision that accesses true wisdom may be attained by following a way of peace according to six steps that emphasise contemplation and moral life. The destination is God and the "door" or the mediator is the Crucified Jesus Christ, as Bonaventure defines this way in the Prologue of the treatise (Bonaventure, Prologue 1 "Itinerarium mentis in Deum", *Opera omnia*, vol. V, 1891). How may one "pass through" Christ *in via*? In a both physical and spiritual way by the means of the Sacraments<sup>1</sup> and especially, the Holy Communion, and by reading and correctly interpreting the Gospel that proposes a way of life that stresses upon facts and, in this sense, ethics becomes the main key of interpreting the book of nature, the creation. God's traces in the universe show one what to know, how to know and how one should behave after achieving this knowledge. The facts are represented by prayer (contemplation of the soul) and by theoretical reflection (contemplation of the intellect) that lead to a manner of understanding and living life in accordance with oneself and with others that represent the community or the state in which one lives.

Man has to be attentive and observe that everything in the universe leads his soul back to God, that every material and spiritual aspect is a trace or an image that facilitates the reading of the Scripture and thus educates man according to God's will: traces from the universe and from the sensible world that reflect the non-rational creation (the first two chapters of the treatise), the divine image found in the faculties of the human soul (sensibility, conscience, will, intelligence, intellect, reason, synderesis) that defines through similitude the rational creation (the third chapter). The fourth chapter of the treatise presents the reformed image of God into mankind through the gifts of grace, the Sacraments and the theological virtues (faith, hope, and love). The fifth and the sixth chapter teach the human being how to call and recall God according to the names of *Being* that reflects the divine unity, *esse* as a primary name of God revealed by Him to Moses, and *Good* that defines the divine Trinity and the intra-Trinitarian relationships. In the seventh and last chapter of the treatise, Bonaventure emphasises the peace of the intellect that transcends towards the affect giving the human mind the immediate knowledge of God. This is how Bonaventure shapes the itinerary of the mind towards God showing that contemplation and prayer should always be followed by facts and deeds that define a certain way of living one's life.

When reading the pages of the *Itinerarium* one finds that it is not difficult to attain an intellectual knowledge of God, but to achieve an affectionate one represents the problem in the economy of salvation and human

perfection. One knows God through the means of the intellect by reading books that speak about Him and by hearing stories that talk about Him, but one has to know God in an affectionate way by loving Him and loving God means doing the acts of God and Good, that is, the good deeds that elevate the human behaviour, acts that are moral in themselves without the fear of punishment or the pleasure of reward.

The mind is the one that has to pursue this journey of acquiring the affectionate knowledge of God, because the mind watches over the law of the Gospel and in what way are the principles of love and good assured and accomplished by people. Respecting the law of the Gospel, that is the law of love, is identical to Christian wisdom and this is the main finality of Christian philosophy that is expressed by a Christian way of life as the experience of the Gospel transposed in the life of a person who has assumed these moral rules and is being oriented by these principles.

In the first chapter of the *Itinerarium*, Bonaventure shows that the mind is enriched with six faculties or powers of the soul (sensibility, imagination, reason, intellect, intelligence and synderesis) that are given by nature, deformed by sin and reformed by grace. The mind is purified by righteousness, exercised through knowledge and science, perfected by choosing to respect and follow a wise way of life<sup>2</sup>. How does Bonaventure actually define the concept of "mind" in this work and why is this concept so important for understanding the anthropology presented here? Humans have three sights that make them capable of knowing and understanding the world and God, according to Bonaventure<sup>3</sup>: a sight that is oriented towards the exterior things (sensibility or the five senses), a sight that is oriented towards the interior ones responsible for introspection (spirit) and a sight that is oriented towards transcendence in order to reach God (mind). The mind is also a victim of the original sin inasmuch as the body, because original sin strikes the body through concupiscence and the mind through ignorance<sup>4</sup>.

Analysing these problems that occur due to the choice of sinning made in the first instance by Adam and continued by the entire humanity after him, Bonaventure attempts to offer a valid solution for educating one's choices and understanding practical wisdom by appealing to Christian philosophy<sup>5</sup>: praying exercises the faculties of the soul with the help of grace, righteousness purifies through choosing a morally correct way of life, science illuminates the darkness shed by ignorance by appealing to meditation or reflection that leads to theoretical knowledge and wisdom perfects the human mind through the means of contemplation that allows it to acquire practical knowledge. Firstly, one has to pray; secondly, one has to live a holy or a virtuous life and thirdly, one has to observe and to understand the world through the three sights oriented towards the truth and this synthesis represents the way to God<sup>6</sup>, the itinerary defined by

Bonaventure at a practical level that deals for now only with the moral aspects of one's life.

In the second and third chapter of the treatise, Bonaventure expresses the way in which one has to understand the exterior and interior sights: after observing that the universe has a certain beauty, order and measure, the mind has to see how different bodies and souls are made and what are their functions, which ones rule and which one are being ruled, which one generate new forms of life and which one are being generated<sup>7</sup>; and looking towards himself, man has to see in which way was he created and what does he do (he judges, chooses and acts), how does he know (in a sensorial, spiritual and contemplative manner) and what does he know through the means of memory, deliberation and choice<sup>8</sup>.

Discussing the aspects that regard human knowledge and the accuracy of the description of the faculties and processes involved in it, one may assert that Bonaventure has also tried to offer a model of understanding the human being and its condition, especially when it comes back to psychological issues. In a certain sense, he offered a "canonical" perspective on the human being and established a form of Christian anthropology for the Franciscan Order in medieval times.

According to Christian Trottman (1999, 63), Bonaventure's psychology continues the idea of Philip the Chancellor and John of Rochelle remaining faithful to the Augustinian tradition that emphasises the distinction between sensibility, spirit and mind. Although, Bonaventure maintains the five powers of the soul described by Richard of Saint Victor (adding to the list the term of "synderesis") he considers imagination as a form of sensitive knowledge and not a kind of spiritual knowledge, as Augustin defined it initially. This might signal an Aristotelian influence that may also be discovered in the classification of sciences exposed at the end of the third chapter of the *Itinerarium*.

This passage<sup>9</sup> proposes a reconstruction of different areas of philosophy according to a Trinitarian plan: natural philosophy (metaphysics, mathematics, physics) that expresses the essence and the power of the Father, rational philosophy (grammar, logics, rhetoric) that defines the reason of understanding and the wisdom of the Word or the Son and moral philosophy (monastic-individual ethics, economic- family ethics, political- ethics of the state) that speaks about order and kindness in one's way of life taking as model the Holy Spirit.

This Trinitarian model and division of sciences reflect the ones defined by Hugh of Saint Victor<sup>10</sup> in his work *Didascalicon* without taking into consideration some of the inferior arts that have not been reminded in the *Itinerarium* by Bonaventure. It is well-known that Hugh aimed to offer, by the means of his text, an introductory guide to Christianity, to reflect on what are the main elements of learning that regard a Christian education.

Bonaventure also praises and evokes Hugh of Saint Victor in another treatise named *De reductione artium ad theologiam* that has a similar structure as the *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* and treats the division of sciences in a wider manner than the *Itinerarium* (Trottmann 1999, 66-68).

If philosophy is perfected by wisdom and wisdom is the expression of the Christian way of life as it was initially asserted in the beginning of the article, Christian education is being completed by assuming a wiser way of life closer to God and this represents the definition of “wisdom” according to Bonaventure: the knowledge of God *secundum pietatem* obtained by faith, hope, love; by living an authentic and assumed man-God relationship through religion as the Augustinian phrase *vera religione* expresses. Wisdom constitutes a direct reference to God like the other two names *Being* and *Good* that are explained in the fifth and in the sixth chapter of the treatise<sup>11</sup>. Referring to wisdom as a human feature, one may understand that it only represents the assimilation of the divine things through contemplation of the eternal aspects in an immediate manner as a gift of grace offered to the blessed and righteous ones.

The wisdom that is an effect of assuming Christian philosophy as a way of life defines a habitus of a happy man that has fulfilled his desire of knowing that what is *per se*, the causes and the links present in the created things in order to reach for the theological way of life that expresses similar relationships at the level of the non-created things. The manner in which the knowledge of the non-created things becomes evident is possible only with the help of Revelation offered in the Scripture, therefore any type of knowledge from arts and crafts to sciences is reduced and comes back to the knowledge of God as Wisdom inherent in all created things and as a finality of every form of education, both theoretical and practical. The role of the human person is very limited in this process, although essential, man only has to accept the divine gift of the Revelation that allows him to know God as a model and example for any type of knowledge present in the created world (Cullen 2014, 134). In this sense, by achieving so many levels of knowledge from crafts and arts to sciences, man only enriches his ways of being perfected and achieving salvation. The *Itinerarium* does not only educate about how one should educate and what to teach when educating, not only describes a theory of education, but it also represents a *laudatio* brought to the concept of education understood as a mean of augmenting one's ways of accessing God and therefore, his own perfection and salvation.

By assuming the model of Christian paideia defined by Augustin in the work *De doctrina christiana*<sup>12</sup> and by Hugh of Saint Victor in his *Didascalicon*, Bonaventure shapes his own educational model based on the reading, contemplating and interpreting of the Scripture according to the four doctrines. The system of sciences elaborated by Bonaventure places

theology as a fundament of every type of knowledge and this fact may be proved in a rational way by observing the commune Trinitarian structure present in every activity and product of science that humanity has ever done (Cullen 2014, 136). One might say that this approach represents an itinerary of the sciences towards theology and a reduction of the mind to God.

The human intelligence is placed here in the service of devotion and every science complements faith and praises God. Fernand van Steenberghen argues that Bonaventure has succeeded in realizing a unity of knowledge through theology, a conscious and constant effort of unifying the sciences under the mediation of Christ as a way and center in the same time. This interpretation of the scientific ideal proposed by Bonaventure transcends the limits of Christian mystical metaphysics and those of Franciscan philosophy in order to establish a theological wisdom that may accomplish the unity of knowledge, as van Steenberghen may affirm in his work *La philosophie au XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (van Steenberghen 1966, 196).

The new wisdom, the Christian wisdom assumes according to Bonaventure the other forms of secular wisdom that are reinterpreted and uses them as tools in order to define its own terms. He perceived the naturalist and rationalist spirit of his time as a threat augmented by the massive infusion of Aristotelian and Neoplatonist positions that developed in the medieval universities and tried to create a synthesis, a scientific unity of reason and faith, of philosophy and theology, an approach always perceived in favour of the latter (van Steenberghen 1966, 199).

In his view, Aristotle and Plotinus could represent good companions for Francis and after passing through the sensible and intellectual knowledge of the world, the believer is invited to experience the mystical knowledge of the spiritual and non-created things and according to this idea, Bonaventure has created an authentic Franciscan wisdom that represents the most pure form of Christian wisdom as Fernand van Steenberghen asserts. This Franciscan wisdom is not only a speculative wisdom, but also a practical wisdom that refers to life and an internal organization of knowledge that does not only establish a statically hierarchy between different sciences, but also promotes the subordination of the sciences in the dynamic order of a personal research that tries to possess the supreme Truth and the sovereign Good. The exercise of different forms of knowledge that come back to different sciences represents the itinerary of the man that succeeds in transgressing all the steps in order to be elevated to God (van Steenberghen 1966, 200).

Fernand van Steenberghen continues and explicitly affirms that in the *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* and, of course, also in the treatise *De reductione artium ad theologiam* the work of Christian philosophy<sup>13</sup> is to facilitate the acquirement of the entire Christian wisdom; that is to harmonize in a profound and multiple way the aspects that exist between the order of

nature studied by philosophical sciences and the order of grace that only by itself reaches the theology expressed by the sacred doctrine. Whoever achieves an authentic knowledge of the above-mentioned sciences will obtain an extraordinary medium of elevating oneself to the knowledge of God Himself, because everything that defines the sciences in the created world encompasses a trace of the Trinity (van Steenberghen 1966, 215, 244).

When analyzing the *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, one observes that Bonaventure has not only succeeded in defining a mystical Christian Franciscan philosophy or way of life, but has also achieved to create a synthesis of ancient philosophical classical sources along with the most important works of patristics and some medieval contemporary texts. By the means of shaping a scientifically unity between philosophy and theology, regardless of the hierarchy of the expressed concepts, Bonaventure affirms that education is the key to salvation, either if it is described as intellectual or as practical education. Before speaking about mysticism and rapture, Bonaventure's treatise acknowledges the importance of education and asserts that education is another form of reaching and knowing God in the created world. With Bonaventure one understands that to be saved and perfected means to be educated, both by experience and by books.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Speaking about the Sacraments in the Prologue, 3-4 of his treatise, Bonaventure asserts that Communion is the most important act of expressing a Christian way of life and that no man may enter the Celestial Jerusalem through contemplation, if he does not pass firstly through the blood of the Lamb as through a gate as it has been said in the Gospel of John when describing the Last Supper (“[...] quod per contemplationem ingredi non potest Ierusalem supernam, nisi per sanguinem Agni intret tanquam per portam”). But one may not pass through the blood of Christ, if one does not have a clear conscience, because it is not enough to read and reflect upon certain spiritual aspects if one does not have faith, piety and devotion to accompany him in this process (“[...] ad gemitum orationis per Christum crucifixum, per cuius sanguinem purgamur a sordibus vitiorum, primum quidem lectorem invito, ne forte credat quod sibi sufficiat lectio sine unctione, speculatio sine devotione, investigatio sine admiratione, circumscriptio sine exultatione, industria sine pietate, scientia sine caritate, intelligentia sine humilitate, studium absque divina gratia, speculum absque sapientia divinitus inspirata. [...] Exerce igitur te, homo Dei, prius ad stimulum conscientiae remordentem, antequam oculos elevas ad radios sapientiae in eius speculis relucentes [...]”).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, I, 6: “Iuxta igitur sex gradus ascensionis in Deum, sex sunt gradus potentiarum animae per quos ascendimus ab imis ad summa, ab exterioribus ad intima, a temporalibus conscendimus ad aeterna, scilicet sensus, imaginatio, ratio, intellectus, intelligentia et apex mentis seu synderesis scintilla. Hos gradus in nobis habemus plantatos per naturam, deformatos per culpam, reformatos per gratiam; purgandos per iustitiam, exercendos per scientiam, perficiendos per sapientiam”.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, I, 4: “Secundum hunc triplicem progressum mens nostra tres habet aspectus principales. Unus est ad corporalia exteriora, secundum quem vocatur animalitas seu sensualitas: alius intra se et in se, secundum quem dicitur spiritus; tertius supra se, secundum quem



dicitur mens. – Ex quibus omnibus disponere se debet ad conscendendum in Deum, ut ipsum diligit ex tota mente, ex toto corde et ex tota anima, in quo consistit perfecta Legis observatio et simul cum hoc sapientia christiana”.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, I, 7: “[...] et totum genus suum per originale peccatum, quod dupliciter infecit humanam naturam, scilicet ignorantia mentem et concupiscentia carnem”.

<sup>5</sup> Discussing the problem of education by offering an example of moral virtue and Christian way of life in an accurate manner it is widely known that as a Minister General of the Franciscan Order, Bonaventure has censored all other writings regarding the life of Francis of Assisi and established a canonical hagiography that describes the life of the founder of the Order, *Legenda maior*, written by Bonaventure himself in 1261. This event has been preceded by the Council of Narbonne (France) in 1260 in which Bonaventure establishes the Constitution of the Order as a set of rules that are meant to define the status of the members of the Franciscan Order. In 1259 Bonaventure had already begun to write his treatise *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* that is supposed to be finished in 1260.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, I, 8: “Qui igitur vult in Deum ascendere necesse est, ut vitata culpa deformante naturam, naturales potentias supradictas exerceat ad gratiam reformantem, et hoc per orationem; ad iustitiam purificantem et hoc in conversatione; ad scientiam illuminantem et hoc in meditatione; ad sapientiam perficientem et hoc in contemplatione. Sicut igitur ad sapientiam nemo venit nisi per gratiam, iustitiam et scientiam; sic ad contemplationem non venit nisi per meditationem perspicuam, conversationem sanctam et orationem devotam. Sicut igitur gratia fundamentum est rectitudinis voluntatis et illustrationis perspicuae rationis; sic primum orandum est nobis, deinde sancte vivendum, tertio veritatis spectaculis intendendum et intendendo gradatim ascendendum, quousque veniatur ad *montem excelsum*, ubi *videatur Deus deorum in Sion*”.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, II, 2: “Quod patet sic: quia in eo quaedam sunt generantia, quaedam generata, quaedam gubernantia haec et illa”.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, III, 2-4.

<sup>9</sup> Bonaventure, *op. cit.*, III, 6: “Ad hanc speculationem quam habet anima de suo principio trino et uno per trinitatem suarum potentiarum, per quas est imago Dei, iuvatur per lumina scientiarum, quae ipsam perficiunt et informant et Trinitatem beatissimam tripliciter repraesentant. – Nam omnis philosophia aut est naturalis, aut rationalis, aut moralis. Prima agit de causa essendi, et ideo ducit in potentiam Patris; secunda de ratione intelligendi, et ideo ducit in sapientiam Verbi; tertia de ordine vivendi, et ideo ducit in bonitatem Spiritus Sancti. Rursus, prima dividitur in metaphysicam, mathematicam et physicam. Et prima est de rerum essentiis, secunda de numeris et figuris, tertia de naturis, virtutibus et operationibus diffusivis. Et ideo prima in primum principium, Patrem, secunda in eius imaginem, Filium, tertia ducit in Spiritus sancti donum. Secunda dividitur in grammaticam, quae facit potentes ad exprimendum; in logicam, quae facit perspicaces ad arguendum; in rethoricam, quae facit habiles ad persuadendum sive movendum. Et hoc similiter insinuat mysterium ipsius beatissimae Trinitatis. Tertia dividitur in monasticam, oeconomicam et politicam. Et ideo prima insinuat primi principii innascibilitatem, secunda Filii familiaritatem, tertia Spiritus sancti liberalitatem”.

<sup>10</sup> One may observe that the division of natural and moral philosophy reflects the division of theoretical and practical philosophy defined by Aristotle and assumed by Hugh of Saint Victor in his work *Didascalicon*.

<sup>11</sup> For further explanations on the matter regarding the two divine names please see Vignaux 2004, 182-184.

<sup>12</sup> Augustine asserts in his work *De doctrina christiana* that all the secular sciences may be and have to be placed into the service of the sacred science or the science of the Scripture.

<sup>13</sup> According to Fernand van Steenberghen's approach, Christian philosophy represents in fact a form of science build upon the light of Christian faith and one of the features of such a philosophy is that it preferably adopts an order of exposition similar to the one of theology that is always elaborated in contact with theology and in a perfect symbiosis with it. (van Steenberghen 1966, 218-219).

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