Christ as the Center and Heart of All Knowledge

Sean Edward Kinsella

Analecta TOR, Volume XXVII 158 (1996) 167-185



or, when the center is lost in the circle, it can be found only by two lines that intersect at a right angle.'

Bonaventure, Collationes in Hexaemeron, I.24

The centrality of the image of the crucified Christ is a prominent and defining characteristic of the spirituality of the noted medieval Franciscan theologian and mystic Saint Bonaventure (1217-1274). The theological perspective of Bonaventure is articulated through the central and consummate figure of Jesus Christ and Him crucified. The world itself, and all the means by which the human person may learn to know about the world, is revealed through that center found where two lines intersect at a right angle: the Christ-bearing cross that is both the definition and exposition of all knowledge and all knowing.

In his work *De Reductione Artium ad Theologiam* Bonaventure outlined the various disciplines and attributes of human knowledge and shows them to be reducible to theology. All of the disciplines, the various and diverse arts of human endeavor, are perfectly summarized in the study of theology. This view of human knowledge and education, understood as being summarized and perfected in theology, offers both a meditative understanding and a profound insight into the relationship between any knowing and the knowledge of God.

¹In Jose de Vinck, trans., *Collations on the Six Days* (Paterson, N.J.: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1970), 13.

As the entirety of creation has been made by God through Christ, then any understanding of any particular aspect of creation must reveal a particular characteristic of God and His intention for creation as expressed in and through Jesus Christ. In as much as any knowledge is knowledge of creation, and as creation was expressed through Christ, then any knowledge is, in some part, knowledge of Christ. As Bonaventure exclaims in the *De Reductione*, "in everything which is perceived or known God Himself lies hidden within."

Geometry, or grammar, or any human learning, is theology in an important sense because it contributes to the knowledge of God and His creation. More importantly, however, for Bonaventure, is that all being and all knowledge not only reveals God, it depends on God because nothing is knowable without Him. Any knowledge is impossible unless it is reducible, or "leads back," to the uncreated word which is the foundation of all knowledge:

He is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible... all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together... For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.³

These magnificent words of the Apostle form the very ground upon which Bonaventure will build his understanding of the human endeavor to learn and to know. As Christ, through the cross, brings together all things in peace, and harmony, and proportion—"in him all things hold together"—and in this represents the center and definition of all creation, so

²Bonaventure, *De Reductione Artium ad Theologiam*, 26; in Emma Therese Healy; trans., *Saint Bonaventure's De Reductione Artium Ad Theologiam* (St. Bonaventure, N.Y.: The Franciscan Institute, 1955).

³Colossians 1.15-17, 19-20.

theology, in an analogous manner, represents the center of human knowledge. Theology is the summation of learning for Bonaventure and, therefore, all the "arts" are reducible to the experience and practice of religious faith.

It is important to note that "reduction" in this context does not mean "to reduce" in the sense of making something smaller, or lessened, or diminished. The Latin root of the word, reducere, carries the sense of convergence and consolidation. Another aspect of the word's meaning is one still used today in a specifically medical sense: the character of being brought, or led, back to an original point. It particularly suggests being returned to health after illness. For Bonaventure and the medieval scholastic community, reducere meant both "resolution" and "retracing to the origin."

When Bonaventure uses the word *reducere* he means that all of these dimensions of the word's definition be present in the mind of the reader. Each nuance, each aspect, of *reducere* suggests a fullness of meaning that is difficult to express in translation. *Reducere*, for Bonaventure, is the sense of unification and convergence that theology represents among all the intellectual disciplines. It is also the means by which the human desire to know, to learn, and to understand leads the human person back to God. It implicitly and profoundly addresses the recovery of the human person from the disease of sin through the mediation and example of Jesus Christ, Who is both Alpha and Omega; Who is both the point of origin for the entirety of creation and the final point of cosmic resolution.

"Reduction" can be understood in the sense of a chef who will stir a sauce over a flame in order to reduce it. That is, the chef will concentrate the flavor of the sauce by drawing out its very essence—its heart, so to speak—in order to have the reduction express the focused "meaning" of the sauce: its taste, its smell, its inherent qualities. Theology is "reduced" in this manner because it is the concentrated essence of all human learning. Yet this is not the complete sense of the word's meaning, because *reductio* (from *reducere*) is more than just a scholastic model wherein all knowledge converges in the experience of faith and is restored thereby to its source and ultimate end. For St. Bonaventure *reductio* is the authentic process of learning itself. In his understanding *reductio* is more than mere technique, it

⁴J. Guy Bougerol, *Introduction to the Works of Bonaventure* (Paterson, N.J.: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1963), 75. For a good summary of the scholastic background of the term *reductio* see pages 75-77.

is the search for truth: it is the very heart of the soul's journey back to God. Bonaventure illustrates this understanding of *reductio* most eloquently in his description of the working of grace in the human person. It is this understanding which Bonaventure presented in his small *summa* of theology, the *Breviloquium*:

For not only is grace given by God, it also conforms and leads back to God as an end, since its purpose is to return to Him the work that had issued from Him. In this return, comparable to an intelligible circle, the rational being is brought to its final completion. ⁵

The De Reductione Artium ad Theologiam of Bonaventure follows closely the earlier example and presentation of Hugh of St. Victor (1096-1141) in his work the Didascalicon. The Didascalicon was the inspiration for Bonaventure's undertaking the writing of the De Reductione and Hugh's division of the seven mechanical arts (weaving, navigation, medicine, etc.)

⁵Bonaventure, Breviloquium, V.1.6; in Jose de Vinck, trans., The Breviloquium (Paterson, N.J.: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1963), 184. The symbolic significance of the circle is a frequent motif in the writings of Bonaventure. In his Commentaria in Quatuor libros Sententiarum Magistri Petri Lombardi Bonaventure writes that God Himself is an "intelligible circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere." (I Sent; quoted in Zachary Hayes, ed., What Manner of Man? Sermons on Christ by St. Bonaventure (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1974, 91, n. 45). Earlier in the Breviloquium Bonaventure declared that the purpose and goal of the human person was "to be returned, as in an intelligible circle, to its first Principle in whom it will be completed and beatified". (Breviloquium, II.4.3; in de Vinck, 79-80). In the De Reductione Bonaventure compared the process of this return to the original process of God's creation; that the cycle of creation and the cycle of the return of the individual to God are analogous: "Et ideo ibi completes est circulus..." ("And there the circle is completed...," De Reductione, 7). See Bonaventure's second sermon on the nativity of Christ for Zachary Hayes' excellent overview of Bonaventure's use of the circle in his theology (What Manner of Man. 91-93). There are two points regarding Bonaventure's appeal to the symbolic merging of the cirtcle which are most relevant here. First, that there is a harmony and a symmetry to Bonaventure's understanding of the creative process of God; and second, that this harmonious cycle of "consumation and completion" (Bonaventure, "Sermon II on the Nativity of the Lord"; in Hayes, 73) is intelligible: it can be known—indeed, for Bonaventure, it cannot not be known—and by its very knowability it invites our participation and our perfection.

served as the model for Bonaventure's division of the seven intellectual arts (logic, rhetoric geometry, etc.) which composed the medieval curriculum of study. The *Didascalicon* outlined the various branches and classifications of human knowledge and explored their relation to one another.

In the *Didascalicon*, as well as in his work *De Tribus Diebus* (which is frequently, although erroneously, referred to as "the seventh book of the *Didascalicon*" because the two works are closely related), Hugh suggested a progressive development in the human person's search for knowledge and understanding. Hugh of St. Victor presented this search as a gradual ascent of the mind to God, which is a traditional medieval schema. Hugh describes this search, this ascent, in the following terms:

It enlists the intellectual faculties of the soul to behold its Creator in itself and in the created universe; to meditate upon His attributes, His unity, immutability, and eternity; and, finally, with the aid of revelation, to contemplate the mysteries of the Trinity and the Incarnation.⁸

⁶Bonaventure, *De Reductione Artium ad Theologiam*, 2. For a more complete understanding of the seven arts in the medieval period see Paul Abelson, *The Seven Liberal Arts: A Study in Mediaval Culture* (New York: Russel and Russell, 1965). See also Gillian R. Evans, "The Influence of Quadrivium Studies in the Eleventh and Twelfth Century Schools," *Journal of Medieval History* 1:2 (1975), 151-164.

⁷See Alan Glynn, *The De Tribus Diebus or The Seventh Book of the Didascalicon of Hugh of St. Victor*, unpublished M.A. thesis (St. Bonaventure University, 1946), 77-79.

⁸Ibid, 80.

CREATION

Bonaventure developed a similar tripartite theme of progressive growth in learning: from the study of creation; to meditation on the Creator; and, finally, to contemplation of the mysteries of faith. This evolution of knowledge, from study to meditation to contemplation—was for Bonaventure, as it was for Hugh of St. Victor, the very purpose of human learning. The culmination, the Omega point, of all learning is the knowledge of Jesus Christ. The path of human study, like the path of human spirituality, reflects a three-fold progression:

CREATION	HOMAN ELAKIMING	HOWAN BINGTONETT
God expresses Himself in Creation	Study	purgative (self-knowledge)
God is revealed in and through His creation	Meditation	illuminative
Creation leads back to its Creator	Contemplation	reductio (perfective)

HUMAN SPIRITUALITY

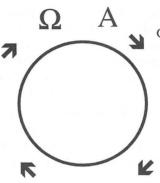
HIIMAN LEARNING

It is often helpful to diagram the thought of St. Bonaventure because his conceptual framework can become quite complex and his insights are made more comprehensible if one can "chart" his thought. It is important to remember, however, that the genius of the saint is never static: it is always dynamic. For Bonaventure knowledge is not so much something known as it is a way of knowing:

Creation leads back to God: a.contemplate the mysteries of the Creator

reductio

"Therefore as creatures went forth from God by the Word of god, so for a perfect return it was necessary that the Mediator between God and man be not only God but also man so that He might lead men back to God (*De Reductione*, 23):



God expresses Himself

- a. study creation (external)
- b. learn to know oneself (internal)

Purgative

"Self-knowledge puts us on our knees" (Mother Teresa of Calcutta)"

God is revealed in His creation meditate on the meaning of creation and the nature of the Creator consider one's relationship with creation and the Creator

Illuminative

"And so it is evident how the manifold Wisdom of God... lies hidden in all knowledge and in all nature. It is evident too how all divisions of knowledge are handmaids of theology, and it is for this reason that theology makes use of illustrations and terms pertaining to every branch of knowledge. It is likewise evident how wide is the illuminative way and how everything which is perceived or known God Himself lies hidden within (*De Reductione*, 26)."

⁹Mother Teresa of Calcutta, *Life in the Spirit*, Kathryn Spink, ed. (San Francisco: Harper &Row, 1983), 50.

This progressive growth in both intellectual and spiritual knowledge is one which finds its origin and final completion in God. The place of Jesus Christ in this journey of mind and spirit is not limited in the understanding of Bonaventure to being an abstract representation of both starting point and destination. The figure of the crucified Christ stands, not just at the Alpha and Omega point of creation, but He is also at the very center of the entire journey: the cross is the axis of the circle of creation.

Bonaventure's profound and dramatic vision understands Jesus Christ as exemplifying, illustrating, and perfecting each stage of, first, creation, and, second, the journey of the human person through creation back to God. Bonaventure, in the concluding verses of the *De Reductione*, articulates this understanding through an exposition of the word "right." There are three senses of the word "right" with which Bonaventure uses to summarize the search for knowledge. Each sense has as its model Jesus Christ. Christ is both the illustration of the word and the epitome of its implementation. Again, it is helpful to diagram Bonaventure's ideas, both for the sake of clarity and in order to more fully appreciate the beauty, symmetry, and comprehensiveness of his theology:

"right" is	Jesus is	God's creative power (=love)	Humanity
Perfect proportion	a. intermediary b. Mediator	goes out in Christ	created in Christ
Conformed to the rule of life (=Christ)	Exemplar	illustrated by Christ	Conformed to Christ by living the Gospel (=love)
the summit of human existence and restoration of unity with God	perfect image of God	returned to Him through Christ	a. perfected in the vision of man with God realized in Christ b. reconciled to the Father with Christ in a union of love

GOD

"perfect rectitude and that by His very nature... He is the beginning and the end of all things... (*De Reductione*, 23).



"I am the Way, I am Truth and Life (In 14.6).

(2) right as living in accordance with the Law "conformed to rule... the rule of life" (De Reductione, 24)

"for he indeed lives rightly who is guided by the regulations of the divine law, as is the case when the will of men accepts necessary precepts, salutary warnings, and counsels for perfection that he may thereby prove the good and acceptable and perfect will of God (*De Reductione*, 24)

"Of myself I can do nothing. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just because I seek not my own will, but the will of Him who sent me" (Jn 5.30)

"And He who sent me is with me; He has not left me alone, because I do always the things that are pleasing to Him" (Jn 8.29)

He sent His Word out to the earth (Ps 147:15

(1). **Right as perfect proportion** "...in the middle of which is not out of line with its extreme points" (*De Reductione*, 23)

"Therefore, as creature went forth from God by the Word of God, so for a perfect return, it was necessary that the Mediator between God and man be not only God but also man so that He might lead men back to God" (De Reductione, 23)

"Who being in the form of God... emptied himself... becoming as human beings are and being in every way like a human being... And for this God raised him high... that every tongue should acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord..." Phil 2.

"No one can come to the Father except through me" Jn 14.6)

(3) **Right as synderesis**¹⁰ "...the summit of which is raised upward as for instance, as we say that man has an upright posture (*De Reductione*, 25)

"And in this sense, in the consideration of rectitude there is manifested the union of the soul with God; for since God is above, it necessarily follows that the apex of the mind itself must be raised aloft" (*De Reductione*, 25)

"The Father and I are one (Jn 10:30)

¹⁰Synderesis has two meanings, both of which Bonaventure intends. First, synderesis is understood as the spark of conscience present in each person which gives a natural knowledge of right and wrong. In his *Commentaria in Quartuor libros Sententiarum Magistri Petri Lombardi* Bonaventure defines synderesis as the natural weight, or gravity, of the soul which inclines the soul toward goodness and away from sin. (II *Sent.*, 39.2.1.; after the definition of Philotheus Boehner, trans., *St. Bonaventure's Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*

While the intellectual influence of Hugh of St. Victor and his writings on Bonaventure's *De Reductione Artium ad Theologiam* was important, far more significant for St. Bonaventure was the impact of Hugh's personal example. For Bonaventure, Hugh was an eloquent illustration of the precious balance between piety and learning that characterized the true religious. Hugh was one whose learning had only enriched his faith and whose studies had brought him increasingly closer to God. As Bonaventure wrote in *De Reductione*, "For Anselm (of Canterbury) excels in reasoning; Bernard (of Clairvaux), in preaching; Richard (of St. Victor), in contemplating; but Hugh in all three." What high praise, indeed! In order to appreciate the measure of Bonaventure's esteem for Hugh One need only consider both the source of the compliment and its comparisons.

⁽St. Bonaventure, N.Y.: The Franciscan Institute, 1956), 112, n. 11. Second, synderesis in medieval thought was considered "the spark of the soul or the essence or ground or apex of the soul" (Frederick Copleston, A History of Philosophy Book One, Volume Three (New York: Image Books, 1985), 201. Bonaventure, in the Itinerarium Mentis in Deum, writes that of the six powers of the soul, synderesis is the "apex mentis seu synderesis scintilla" ("the summit of the mind or the spark of synderesis," Itinerarium, I.6). Boehner notes that synderesis is "the highest power of the soul, the apex, and from here the mystical transitus, or mystical union proceeds" (Boehner, op. cit., 112, n. 11). Thomas Merton described this idea in Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander when he wrote of that part of the soul never corrupted by sin and which remains "a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God" and which can never be defiled or deformed because it is "inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point... is the pure glory of God in us". (Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 142. The intimate connection which Bonaventure makes between synderesis and standing upright, between synderesis as the right and as the natural inclination of the soul toward God, recalls the remarkable declaration of Plato in the Timaeus: "As concerning the most sovereign form of soul in us we must conceive that heaven has given it to each man as a guiding genius—that part which we say dwells in the summit of our body and lifts us from earth towards our celestial affinity, like a plant whose roots are not in earth, but in the heavens. And this is most true, for it is to the heavens whence the soul first came to birth, that the divine part attaches the head or root of us and keeps the whole body upright." (Plato, Timaeus, 90a; in Francis MacDonald Cornford, trans., Plato's Cosmology: The Timaeus of Plato (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, n.d.), 353.

¹¹Bonaventure, *De Reductione Artium ad Theologiam*, 5. It is not accidental that Dante, in the *Paradiso*, places Hugh in the circle around the Seraphic Doctor (canto XII, line 135).

Such praise for Hugh on the part of St. Bonaventure was not intended merely to laud Hugh as an exemplar of the harmony and balance between study and faith, between theology and the various human arts; it was also intended as a counterpoint and an indictment of the scholastic theologians of his own day. Bonaventure was faced in the mid-thirteenth century with the barren labors and the vain lure of a theology compromised and corrupted by the Aristotelianism of the theologians at Paris whose studies had filled them with learning but had emptied them of faith:

The endless cycle of idea and action,
Endless invention, endless experiment,
Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness;
Knowledge of speech, but not of silence;
Knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word.
All our knowledge brings us nearer to our ignorance.
All our ignorance brings us nearer to death,
But nearness to death no nearer to God.
Where is the life we have lost in living?
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

For Bonaventure, the writings and example of Hugh of St. Victor represented an absolute antithesis to the sterile and faithless accumulation of information and opinions which Bonaventure encountered in many of the theologians at Paris. Bonaventure was certainly not opposed to learning nor was he apprehensive of the value of studies, but he was afraid that learning without faith—a head without a heart—would never be successful. True knowledge had to be grounded in faith because all knowing was ultimately, and meaningfully, the knowing of God.

The dating of the *De Reductione Artium ad Theologiam* is not certain, but the noted scholar of Bonaventure, J. Guy Bougerol, in his book *Introduction to the Works of Bonaventure*, treated the *De Reductione* as a later work in which Bonaventure synthesized and consolidated his thinking on the subject of learning. As Bougerol noted:

¹²T. S. Eliot, "Choruses from 'The Rock" in *The Complete Poems and Plays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1952), 96.

Others regard *De Reductione* as the final work of the doctor (Bonaventure) seeking, after he had pronounced the *Collationes* in *Hexaemeron*, to summarize his studies; this is our position. Everyone, however, sees in this little work the most advanced attempt made by Bonaventure to draw out and justify the fundamental unity of his whole endeavor.¹³

The *De Reductione*, then, serves as Bonaventure's most focused presentation of the understanding with which he had written and preached and taught throughout his life: that all knowledge and all knowing finds its centered its heart in the mystery of the crucified Christ.

The close chronological proximity of the *De Reductione* to the *Collationes in Hexaemeron* is significant because both works were addressed to a learned and scholarly audience. In both of these works Bonaventure desired to impress upon those engaged in philosophy, or in theology, or in any of the scholarly arts, that there was a great need to relate those studies to the love of God. Bonaventure argued that as faith without works was dead, so too was study without faith. As faith was expressed and manifested by good works, in an analogus way learning and study were animated and vivified through faith.

The *De Reductione* is both a synthesis of knowledge and a study in the relationship between the various branches of learning. It is an expression of the belief that there is an essential center to which all learning is directed. The many different disciplines and areas of study that any person may come to master are ultimately reducible to theology because the pursuit of knowledge is always, finally, the search for God. For as the Apostle eloquently expressed it on the Areopagus, God had created the human race so "that they should seek God, and by feeling their way toward him, succeed in finding him; and indeed he is not far from any of us, since it is in him that we live, and move, and have our being."

¹³Bougerol, 163.

¹⁴Acts 17.27-28. It is interesting to note, in the *Discourses* of the noted Stoic thinker Epictetus (60-120), a similar declaration: "But our souls are thus connected and intimately joined to God, as being indeed members and distinct portions of his essence; and

For Bonaventure there was a center to the pursuit of knowledge. The entire labor of man to know the world and to know himself is an exercise in theology. Bonaventure is the most convincing and articulate exponent of a very strong Augustinian ontology that intimately identified self-knowledge with the knowledge of God. As Augustine (354-430) exclaimed in the *Confessions*: God is closer to me than I am to myself. For Bonaventure, the human person's desire to know anything is, in truth, a desire to know God. Every question asked, whether consciously or unconsciously, is a question about God because the question, "who am I?" is ultimately the question, "who is God?"

The conviction that all knowledge is centered in theology is a strong theme in many of Bonaventure's works but it was in the *De Reductione* where this perspective was presented most directly. Theology is that discipline which unifies, clarifies, and vivifies all the disciplines. Theology illuminates and coordinates the knowledge acquired in other fields by placing them in relation to one another in an integrated perspective that finds its center in Christ. This conviction—that theology makes learning not only meaningful but even possible—is a lovely complement to the prayer with which Bonaventure began his remarkable account of the spiritual journey, the *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*. The soul's journey into God is one which is taken "through Christ crucified" and for Bonaventure that Mediator is the source and final resolution of the journey of the mind, as well as the journey of the soul. Indeed, for Bonaventure, there is no differentiating between the two; for there are not many journeys, there is only one: the journey of the human person back to God.

The recent promulgation of the Apostolic Constitution Ex Corde Ecclesiae brings to the present day the same vision and conviction of Bonaventure, who held so strongly the view that learning must be

must he not be sensible of every movement of them, as belonging and connatural to himself... is not God capable of surveying all things, and being present with all, and in communication with all?" (1.14.6, 12-13; in Thomas Wentworth Higginson, trans., *Discourses and Enchiridon* (New York: Walter J. Black, 1944, 41-42).

¹⁵Augustine, *The Confessions*, III.vi.11; in Henry Cladwick, trans., *Saint Augustine: Confessions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 43.

¹⁶Bonaventure, *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, Prologue; in Ewert Cousins, trans., *Bonaventure*, *The Soul's Journey into God. The Tree of Life. The Life of St. Francis* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 55.

understood, not as an end in itself, but in terms of its direction and final purpose. Theology is that discipline which enables the seeker after knowledge—which is to say, every person—to approach the search for knowledge with reverence and devotion; to understand that learning is not possible without the perspective which theology provides. Theology is, in this sense, the handmaid of learning because it aids and assists in the definition and articulation of the meaning of study. Theology, in the words of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, serves all of the other disciplines in their search for meaning "not only by helping them investigate how their discoveries will affect individuals and society, but also by bringing a perspective and an orientation not contained within their own methodologies." ¹⁷

Theology serves the search for knowledge by bringing the results of that search to a point of moral consideration. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* addressed the role of theology in achieving a "higher synthesis" of the many varied fields of study by directing each of those fields toward the satisfaction of the uniquely human thirst for knowing, for knowing the truth, for knowing God, which is the very yearning of the human heart.¹⁸

Finally, theology is the handmaid of learning because it moderates and contrasts the drive to know, and the desire to control, with the virtue of humility. Bonaventure is firm in his admonition to the seeker after truth that one cannot search for truth—let alone find it—while confused by sin. In the tremendous prayer with which he opened the *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum* Bonaventure insisted on the necessity of undertaking the journey toward any knowing with humility and reverence, without which the journey cannot commence. Bonaventure wrote that it was not possible to have:

...speculation without devotion, investigation without wonder, observation without joy, work without piety, knowledge without love, understanding without humility, endeavor without divine grace...¹⁵

¹⁷Ex Corde Ecclesiae, 19.

¹⁸Ibid., 16.

¹⁹Bonaventure, *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, prologue; in Ewert Cousins, trans., Bonaventure, *The Soul's Journey Into God. The Tree of Life. The Life of St. Francis* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 55-56.

In 1257 Bonaventure became Minister General of the Order of Friars Minor, a position which he held until the year of his death. It was during his years as Minister General that Bonaventure increasingly felt the need to relate the study of theology as an intellectual discipline to theology as an expression of living faith. Bonaventure's experiences at Mount La Verna, where St. Francis of Assisi had received the stigmata, led him to reflect at length on the particular charism of the Order of Friars Minor. His reflections moved him to consider the difficulties of communicating mystical insights in a meaningful and formative way. His encounters and talks with those friars who had been companions of Francis, as well as his demanding responsibilities as the Minister General of a large and rapidly growing religious order, contributed to Bonaventure's deepening sense that there was a pressing need, both within the Order of Friars Minor and without, to define and express a sense of purpose and mission. Bonaventure desired to convey a sense of mission which was oriented toward, and focused on, a unifying and centering goal that was both clear and yet transcendent. The need for articulating a center that was teachable and comprehensible and simultaneously inspiring and enrapturing was perceived by Bonaventure as becoming ever more important as his tenure as Minister General provided him with an ever-increasing understanding of an ever-widening spectrum of people and experiences.

Bonaventure's scholarly ideal of finding a center in all areas of human learning and understanding was tested throughout his daily struggles to govern and guide the Order of Friars Minor. That struggle enriched him in an important way, however, because it brought him into contact with those men and women, some of them illiterate lay brothers and others learned bishops, among them Louis IX, King of France—the Crusader King— and St. Clare of Assisi, the foundress of the Poor Clares, and these contacts allowed Bonaventure to see the abstractions and ideals of his studies at the University of Paris enfleshed in the hopes and fears, sorrows and joys of real people. In a very moving way, the Christ of Bonaventure's Sentence Commentaries is gradually transformed into a very Franciscan understanding of the Jesus of the Gospels. Bonaventure, while bringing his erudition and insight to the daily administration of the Order of Friars Minor, also brought back to Paris, and to his studies, the lived experience of daily life within the Order and among the people of his time.

Christ, through Whom all things were made and without Whom was made nothing that has been made,²⁰ is the center and summation of all creation. Theology, which is the study of God and His creation, is analogously the center and summation of all knowledge. The discipline of theology animates, invigorates, and articulates every human endeavor and each creative act: theology, as Bonaventure passionately and convincingly argued in the *De Reductione*, is "the rule, the measure, the ultimate interpretation, and harmony of them all."

To build a ship, or to plow a field, or to repair a broken tool: these are the mechanical arts, the lived arts of everyday life, and they are as much a part of the theological enterprise as the study of grammar or rhetoric. When the representatives of the pope arrived at the convent of Mugello bearing the papal proclamation which elevated Bonaventure to the cardinalate and presented Bonaventure with the red hat which is the badge of that rank, Bonaventure asked them to hang it on the branch of a nearby tree until he finished washing the dishes—that is theology.²²

If the centering of life is possible only through the reduction of life to its essence, to the imitation and love of Christ, then the centering of knowledge—the finding in the knowing the meaning of a thing—is possible only through theology because theology is the study of what is knowable about God. Yet, this is not the entirety of the theme of the center for Bonaventure, because each time he returned to Paris from his visits as Minister General to each of the far-flung houses of the Order of Friars Minor, he possessed a fuller and richer sense of what theology really meant. Theology is not the perfection of metaphysical reasoning, nor is it the enumeration of the many names and attributes of the divine nature, nor is it the categorizing of the vices and virtues. For Bonaventure theology is the union of love between man and God and that is a lived experience, not an intellectual proposition:

²⁰John 1.3.

²¹Emma Therese Healy, Saint Bonaventure's De Reductione Artium Ad Theologiam, 157.

²²Etienne Gilson, *The Philosophy of St. Bonaventure*, Dom Illtyd Trethowan and Frank I. Sheed, trans. (Paterson, N. J.: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1965), 61. One is reminded of Bonaventure's own counsel at the opening of the *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*; that there is no understanding without humility.

And this is the fruit of all sciences, that in all, faith may be strengthened God may be honored, character may be formed, and consolation may be derived from the union of the Spouse with His beloved, a union which takes place through charity, to the attainment of which the whole purpose of Sacred Scripture, and consequently, every illumination descending from above, is directed—a charity without which all knowledge is vain....²³

The center of a circle is found at the point where two lines intersect at a right angle. For Bonaventure the circle of human activity and experience is centered on the figure of Jesus Christ on the cross. The circle only acquires its form with the knowledge of its center. Without a center there can be no circle. The revelation of meaning, the illumination which descends from above, ²⁴ is only possible through the crucifixion event which has restored all creation and all meaning to God. In his work on the Christology of the Seraphic Doctor, *The Hidden Center*, Zachery Hayes has eloquently summarized the thought of Bonaventure on this point:

The principle of being is identical with the principle of knowing. But the Word is the principle through which creation comes to be. Hence, all genuine knowledge is in some way knowledge of the Word. And in as far as the Word has become visible and audible in Jesus Christ, He offers to the world the knowledge of its own deepest

²³Bonaventure, De Reductione Artium ad Theologiam, 26.

²⁴Bonaventure is alluding to the opening chapter of the Epistle of James wherein James writes: "Make no mistake about this, my dear brothers: all that is good, all that is perfect, is given us from above; it comes down from the Father of all light…" (1.16-17). It is this citation with which Bonaventure began the *De Reductione Artium ad Theologiam* in chapter 1. Even stylistically Bonaventure works with a strong sense of returning to the point where one started! It is a demonstration, not of tautology or redundancy, but of symmetry and proportion.

truth. In the knowledge of its eternal Exemplar, the world comes to a knowledge of its origin in God's loving goodness and to a knowledge of its goal which is the transforming union with God through conformity with the eternal Exemplar.²⁵

The *De Reductione Artium ad Theologiam* of Bonaventure was not simply an academic position paper or a dry lesson on the meaning of theology directed to the rest of the academy: it was his final statement on the central position of Jesus Christ in all human activity. For Bonaventure, Christ was the center of all knowing and the end of all laboring: He is, in the evocative phrase of T. S. Eliot, "the still point of the turning world." ²⁶

What St. Bonaventure feared most about the theologians of his own day was that the academic fashions and intellectual sophistries embraced by the Paris-trained scholars were distractions from, and distortions of, the real purpose of the theological endeavor. For Bonaventure, far too many of his contemporaries were pursuing studies ignorant of the final end to which those studies were directed. This approach, as Bonaventure realized, not only rendered such pursuit blind, vain, and purposeless, but, even more seriously, it contributed to a divisive and destructive approach to all of the arts. It was an endeavor which ended miserably by not only denying the center, but by destroying it: "Things fall apart; the center cannot hold; mere anarchy is loosed upon the world...."

The *De Reductione* was St. Bonaventure's attempt to define the center and, thereby, to hold it. In this the *De Reductione* served learning in a manner complemented by Bonaventure's, *Collationes in Hexaemeron* wherin the Seraphic Doctor conceptualized and contextualized the particular charism and mission of the Order of Friars Minor. Both works used careful definition and a deliberate structure to establish and then elaborate a perspective on both knowing and being which was predicated on the figure of Christ, Mediator and Exemplar. Bonaventure's love of structure and

²⁵Zachary Hayes, *The Hidden Center Spirituality and Speculative Christology in St. Bonaventure* (St. Bonaventure N.Y.: The Franciscan Institute, 1992), 198.

²⁶T. S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton," II; in *The Complete Poems and Plays*, 119.

²⁷William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming," in M.L. Rosenthal, ed., Selected Poems and Three Plays of William Butler Yeats 3rd edition (New York: Collier, 1986), 89.

harmony was a reflection of his profound devotion to the Creator of a world inherently and naturally ordered and at peace until ruptured and riven by sin. This love continued to be expressed in Bonaventure's emphasis throughout his writings on the theme of the heart and the center; on the centrality of Christ in each aspect of the human experience.²⁸ It was the dissolution of this understanding, and the false esteem of a vain knowledge which diminished, rather than concentrated, and denied, rather than celebrated, the central role of faith in the human person's search for knowledge that Bonaventure opposed in the De Reductione. His work was a sincere attempt at reconciliation because it defined a very careful rationale for the synthesis of all knowledge: not dismissing or denigrating one area of study at the expense of another. Bonaventure developed the work as a critique of those fragmentary and fragmenting vanities which had brought "Knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word." The hollowness and selfishness of those who value learning for its own sake, and not for the sake of Christ, the end of all learning, threatens the knowing of the center and, therefore, the integrity of the circle.

As a postscript, it is worthwhile to consider the poignant and moving reflection of the Sioux shaman Black Elk on the passage of his life. His words lead one to consider the tragedy of a religious tradition which has lost its center. Black Elk's elegy for his people offers an evocative parallel to the situation which Bonaventure faced in the European world of the mid-thirteenth century. Black Elk, looking back on his life, expressed his grief over the fate of the Sioux people:

²⁸This understanding was recently echoed in the fifth encyclical letter of John Paul II on the Holy Spirit in the life of the church and the world in which the Holy Father addressed the relation of God to man as being expressed "in such a marvelous way" through the animating power of the Holy Spirit, Who is "not only close to this world but present in it, and in a sense immanent, penetrating it and giving life from within," and Who brings us always to Christ: "God is present in the intimacy of man's being, in his mind, conscience and heart: an ontological and psychological reality... But in Jesus Christ the divine presence in the world and in man has been made manifest in a new way and in visible form" (Dominum et Vivificantem, 54). Bonaventure, in the concluding sentence of the De Reductione Artium ad Theologiam, anticipated this insight of John Paul II—that it is the presence of the Holy Spirit Who reveals to us the Christ—when he wrote: "no one comes to the Son except through the Holy Spirit who teaches us all the truth" (De Reductione, 26).

And I, to whom so great a vision was given in my youth,—you see me now a pitiful old man who has done nothing, for the nation's hoop is broken and scattered. There is no center any longer, and the sacred tree is dead²⁹

It is both provocative and telling to consider Black Elk's words, spoken from the fullness of his heart, in the context of Bonaventure's struggle, both as a man of learning and as a man of faith, to maintain the integrity of the center. The struggle to establish for all people the significance and centrality of the cross is the struggle to prevent the breaking of the circle.

For Bonaventure the sacred tree was the cross: the Tree of Life "whose roots are watered by an ever-flowing fountain that became a great and living river with four channels to water the garden of the entire Church." The sacred tree preserves the hoop of the nation because it defines the integrity of the center; that center which is both identity and integration. To deny the center, to allow the sacred tree to wither and die, is to break the circle and scatter the nation.

In the theological perspective articulated by St. Bonaventure this is an unthinkable horror because the integrity of the circle is the communion of the individual with the life of the Church; the church which is the Body of Christ. To destroy the circle is to deny its center—the cross—which is to deny not only meaning, but the very possibility of meaning. It is also the denial of Christ, which is to deny both communion with others and union with God.

This disintegration is not only cultural in the understanding offered by Bonaventure. The centrality of the crucified Christ is not just a symbolic gesture or a visual representation of an abstract system of order: the crucified Christ is the foundation of all knowledge and, simultaneously, is the means of all knowing. Theology, the summation and reduction of all the

²⁹John G. Neidhart, Black Elk Speaks (New York: Pocket Books, 1972), 230.

³⁰Bonaventure, *Lignum Vitae*, prologue; in *Bonaventure: The Soul's Journey into God.* The Tree of Life. The Life of St. Francis, 120. See also Genesis 2.8-14.

³¹Colossians 1.17-18.

arts, is the living experience of the journey of faith and, in the words of the prayer with which Bonaventure began the *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*:

There is no other path but through the burning love of the Crucified, a love which... lead(s) up to God, whom no one rightly enters except through the Crucified.³²

³²Bonaventure, Itinerarium Mentis in Deum, prologue; in Bonaventure: The Soul's Journey into God. The Tree of Life. The Life of St. Francis, 54-55.