

Bonaventure, Masonry, and The Soul's Journey into God

Thomas Ellison, PM

A paper prepared for Golden State College S.R.I.C.F.

August 15, 2018

For some time now, I have been searching for a deeper understanding of the meaning held within the Masonic degrees. As I contemplated the spiritual thought of medieval stone masons and their church sponsors, I was drawn to a little known work by a Franciscan Friar named Giovanni di Fidanza (1221 – 1274) otherwise known as Bonaventure.

Bonaventure was sent from his home in Bagnorea, Italy in 1243 to be educated at the University of Paris. While at the University, he joined the Franciscans, a mendicant religious order that values poverty, chastity and obedience to God over worldly honors and authority. Francis of Assisi, the founder, had a life-changing mystical vision which led him to abandon his father's business for a simpler world of spirituality and trusting in God for all things—even for food, clothing, shelter.

After Bonaventure's graduation from the University of Paris; he stayed on as a Professor of Theology. As he taught at the University, he could look out of his window and see the Cathedral of Notre Dame being erected across the Seine River. Indeed it was a mystical time in the history of the church. Large expansive churches were in progress all over the countries of Christendom. The master architects and their clergy sponsors were contemplating the appearance, dimensions and adornments of these sacred buildings—construction that would consume each town's resources for decades if not a century. Art and architectural historians have, in recent times, discovered that many of these stately cathedrals made ample use of the sacred golden ratio (made famous in Da Vinci's Vitruvian man) and King Solomon's Temple (I Kings 6:1-37) in an attempt to imitate the Great Architect's plans for man and his temples of worship. In addition to being skilled in shaping and laying stone, these earlier masons and their patrons also speculated in matters of the Divine. Dangerously high vaulted ceilings and the reduced support of plentiful windows were attempted in order that the worshiper might be struck with awe and wonder at the house of God and to feel the light of his Divine presence. These builders were not only physically invested in the project, they were deeply spiritually involved as well.

It was in this backdrop that Bonaventure set out for Mount LaVerna, Italy in September of 1259 to retreat at a place where Francis, some decades earlier, had had one of many mystical visions. Bonaventure had reluctantly recently accepted the role of Minister General, the leader of the Franciscan order, and was greatly troubled by some of the spiritual issues he found in the order. He sought guidance from God in a three day retreat on the mountain. When his retreat was over, Bonaventure too had had a mystical experience which he attempted to capture in a short but theologically dense work called "The Journey of Soul into God." This work is often referred to as "The Journey of the Mind into God" but Bonaventure scholars¹ contend that the Latin word for Mind has a much deeper meaning of referring to the Soul.

When I studied the work, I found many astonishing parallels with the teachings of the Masonic degrees. This paper will attempt to describe some of the interesting ideas that Bonaventure uses to describe his own ascent into spiritual communion with the Great Architect of the Universe. I believe all those who have had to memorize and present Masonic ritual will also see many of these echoes of our ritual in this spiritual work written at the height of cathedral building.

Bonaventure's Seven Steps to Mystical Communion with God

Bonaventure describes his path to a mystical union with God by first reminding us of Jacob's ladder (Genesis 28:10-19) which demonstrates that there is a way for man to approach God. Bonaventure then enlightens us with an allegorical journey through King Solomon's Temple in seven days just as God

took seven days to create the world. He divides the first six steps into pairs representing Alpha and Omega: God is the beginning and the end of all things including man’s progress. He then relates them to the three levels of sacredness of Solomon’s Temple: (1) the outer courtyard (2) the sacred inner courtyard (3) Holy of Holies. Bonaventure says:

"[When] one happens to consider God as the Alpha and the Omega ... it is necessary, that these three principle steps ascend towards a group of six, so that, as God in six days perfected the entire world and on the seventh rested ... one ascended in six steps towards the throne of Solomon..."

In the illustration below, I have attempted to organize his allegorical dissertation to aid in our comparisons.

Bonaventure’s Journey of the Soul into God			
Seeing God	Alpha	Omega	Solomon’s Temple
Outside Ourselves	Step 1: Seeing God in Nature: Wisdom, Strength and Beauty of God An illusion to the Trinity	Step 2: Seeing God with our five senses We perceive the whole world & its Creator with our 5 senses	Outer Court
Inside Ourselves	Step 3: Seeing His Image marked in Us: Our outward observations of nature build an internal image in our minds of God	Step 4: His image reformed by Grace: Fallen-man is undeserving, but God leads us to a perfect knowledge of Him	Inner Court
Above Ourselves	Step 5: Seeing God by his name: “Being”: Understanding the timeless, infinite, limitless nature of God who pervades all nature	Step 6: Seeing God by the Trinity: -The Wisdom of the Creator, -Christ our exemplar leading the way; -The Holy Spirit strengthening our souls.	Holy of Holies
Passing Over into God	Step 7: Soul Passing over into God: Abandoning intellect, doctrine & theology; surrendering the soul to the mysteries of the Divine presence (Dying to self)		Mercy Seat

Step 1: Seeing God in Nature:

Bonaventure tells us that our first concept of God is through the observation of the world outside us. He refers to this as the Macrocosm. He says that God is first revealed to us in nature as a Vestige (Vestige is Latin for footprint). We see his wonders left behind in these footprints of His marvelous creation. If we follow these footprints, Bonaventure tells us it will lead us to the Divine. We see patterns of intelligent design everywhere. God created all this, holds it together with his will, and will dissolve it when He chooses. However, Bonaventure tells us that we do not see these signs without:

"...the Divine Assistance [that] accompanies those who seek it from their heart humbly and devoutly..."

Our observations occur based on a Trinity of the characteristics of the Divine (First Principle):

"...From these visible things, therefore, it rises up together to consider the Power, Wisdom, and Goodness [Beauty] of God..."

Bonaventure tells us that there are three qualities that allow us to observe God in nature:

- We notice God’s Power:** earthquakes, thunder, fierce storms, a large waterfall, a volcano— sense of power/energy/awe (Almighty God the Father)
- We notice God’s Wisdom:** the order you see in nature; the cycles of the season, balance of resources for animals and plants, is a sign of wisdom. (The Son, the Word) Those elements are vestiges of the Son
- We notice God’s Goodness:** Our emotions well up inside us when we view the Beauty of Nature. God has implanted this Goodness in us through the Holy Spirit.

Step 2: Seeing God with our five senses

In transition from Step 1 to Step 2, we go from observation of the outer world to internalizing God in our minds. Bonaventure refers to this as going from the Macrocosm to the Microcosm of the mind. Bonaventure tells us that we perceive the whole world through our five senses: hearing, tasting, feeling, seeing and smelling. By the senses we begin to develop a concept of God. Our senses are the doorways to the mind. We take in a mental image and abstract it to make a memory. Bonaventure calls this universe of memories *Apprehension*. When we see a beautiful seashell our mind delights in the patterns that are formed.

Bonaventure once again returns to a Trinity of forces helping us to turn observations into ideas:

1. Apprehension (understanding or wisdom) by the Father
2. Delight in the object of interest by the Son
3. Beauty by the Spirit

When we name an object in the universe, he sees the Trinity inside us:

1. Father: who is the source of all Creation
2. Son: who is the Word
3. Holy Spirit: who allows me to evaluate, make judgements and create words to talk about the object in mind. Because I now have a word, I know understand.

Bonaventure also sees an importance in numbers. He knows from his study of the Quadrivium that a simple series of numbers can produce sacred geometries which in turn can give rise to musical scales and ultimately explain the Harmonies of the heavens^{2,3}. Bonaventure's point is that man can through his senses, take in observations and abstract them into numbers and sacred geometries in imitation of God's handiwork.

With the mastery of Steps 1 and 2, we are almost ready to make an advance to focus on God within us. But the journey to pass from the outer courtyard into the Inner Courtyard of King Solomon's Temple requires further preparation. Bonaventure assumed that anyone reading his allegory would have mastered *The Seven Liberal Arts and Sciences*. From this point onward, Bonaventure takes us into the world of philosophical discourse and finally into Theology and Theosophy which requires us to have mastered the Seven Liberal Arts and Sciences common among all educated individuals of his day.

The Seven Liberal Arts and Sciences

The Seven Liberal Arts and Sciences are broken into two parts:

- The Trivium which covers Grammar, Logic and Rhetoric
- The Quadrivium which covers Arithmetic, Geometry, Music and Astronomy

One need read only a few pages of works by scholars of this era to be overwhelmed by 2-page run-on sentences which can only be parsed with a mastery of grammar. Logic is the language of philosophy and is the language in which Bonaventure frames his explanations. Both the works of the ancient and medieval philosophers were laced with rhetorical schema. Not understanding a particular rhetorical device has led more than one reader down the wrong path of interpretation and manuscript translation.

While the Quadrivium appears, to our modern eyes, to be familiar subjects taught in high schools and college, to both Bonaventure and the ancient philosophers, it was a form of sacred theology. The Pythagorean student Iamblichus² wrote the "The Theology of Arithmetic" with its explanations about the sacred meanings of "The Monad" (one), "Dyad" (two), etc. . Ultimately, specific sequences of numbers can lead to sacred geometrical forms that reveal God's handiwork in the world. For example, a sequence of numbers discovered by Fibonacci (c. 1175 – c. 1250): $1+1=2$, $1+2=3$, $2+3=5$, $3+5=8$, $5+8=13$, $8+13=21$, $13+21=34$...where $F_n = F_{n-1} + F_{n-2}$ when tiled in a two dimensional pattern, leads to a spiral form which in turn is found extensively in nature (nautilus shells, sunflowers, pine cones, proportions of the human body, etc.)



To progress through these four sciences was to become familiar with mysteries of how God made the world and the cosmos.^{2,3}

After being properly educated, we are now ready to pass into the Inner Chamber of King Solomon's Temple and further our spiritual journey by seeing God's image within ourselves.

Step 3: The world within us: Finding God in ourselves

In this step, we move from the light outside of us to the light inside of us—the inner world where the light of God shines. As we approach the sanctuary or most Holy place of the Temple, we begin to see in whose image we are made in. We are not only vestiges of God but we are made in the image of God.

Bonaventure tells us that if we look carefully, we will see traces of the Holy Trinity in each of us. He cites three human powers that lead us to God:

1. **An Intellect that seeks Truth:** Our minds are designed for truth. Solving a puzzle, completing a math problem correctly or reconciling an expense report successfully brings its own satisfaction. When we are told something that is false, it is disappointment to us even if the person didn't intentionally lie to us. But if we figure out that we have been lied to, it cuts to our core of our emotions—we seek Truth and it pleases us to find it.
2. **Toward the Good:** We can discriminate between good, better and the best. Such as a friend's amateur painting vs a professional artist vs a Dutch Renaissance master. We can discern between good, better, best. We call the Best a thing of *Beauty*. We are wired to be attracted to the good. Alternatively, a poorly done job is dissatisfying.
3. **Memory:** We transcend the present because we can go back through the past. Our accumulated memories allows us to have foresight into the future. Bonaventure tells us that our soul could not know itself unless it remembered. We are indeed made up of memories. Memory, knowledge, and love are all based in the will to choose. We choose to love based in freedom and the exercise of free-will. Love requires a knowledge of the thing we love. Knowledge relies on our memories.

We as humans are granted these three gifts that allow us to see God within ourselves.

Step 4: The human person touched by Grace

Bonaventure tells us that man could not see God in the complete fullness without God's Grace. Fallen man is undeserving but God leads us to a more perfect knowledge of Himself. Bonaventure describes man's state of affairs as causing us to be bent over. Man is weak and bent over toward the ground because he is focused on himself—the profound effect of original sin.

According to Bonaventure, it is because of:

- The distractions of life that we are kept from meditating enough to access the memories in our soul.
- When we are clouded by the images from our senses, we fail to use our intellect to discern
- The Will is distorted by sin, bent on a desire to accumulate things for the Self when the Will was built for Charity and Love for others:

“When one is fallen down, he will continue to stumble unless someone will help. The one comes to help actually lies down beside us to help raise us out of our state; he acts as a ladder to replace the one broken by Adam to lift us out of our condition.” (Bonaventure as paraphrased by Friar William Short)

God’s grace allows us to walk uprightly before God and Man—upright as the Plumb. Bonaventure says that receiving this Grace is more a matter of the heart than the head. When we talk about the things of the heart, we need scripture to guide us. It is the study of Theology that leads us further. We become like a house for divine wisdom. Our soul becomes a dwelling place for God—a Temple erected to God and dedicated to His Holy Name. It is grounded in Faith, Raised up by Hope, and expressed in our lives by Charity (Love). We know this only through the inspiration of God’s spirit within us.

Now that we are grounded in Love, Bonaventure invites us to comprehend with all the Saints:

- The Length of Eternity
- The Breadth of Generosity
- The Height of Majesty
- The Depth of Wisdom of God

Having examined the world inside us, it is now time to look at the world above us; to look upward to God.

Where we have been and where we are going

Our journey has already taken us through four steps: From the outside world to the world inside us. We are now closer to the Sanctuary; the place where God and man commune. Bonaventure tells us that the light of the outside is like the dim light of dusk when the sun is in the West. The light inside us is like the dim light of dawn when the sun is in the East—that light that rises and brightens over time. The light that comes from Above is like the sun at Midday, the most beautiful and glorious time of the day; it is the light of our Exemplar: Jesus Christ; the model for our humanity. We will need the help of the one sent by God’s Son, the Holy Spirit, to lead us in the next two steps as we approach the Holy of Holies.

Bonaventure describes our journey into the Sanctuary to the threshold of the Holy of Holies. We only dare approach this place as a result of Grace and with Christ’s leadership. As the folding doors are opened, we are presented with a view of the Ark of the Covenant with its golden Cherubim on each side of the Ark; their wings outspread over the Ark. Between the two outspread wings is the Mercy Seat, where God resides when he communes directly with mankind. In Ancient Israel, this happened only once a year at Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, when the high priest would go into the Holy of Holies to offer up a sacrifice and call upon the personal name of God: יהוה or “YHWH,” the name that is too holy to pronounce in any other manner or at any other occasion.

Bonaventure uses this image of these two angels to ascend into a theosophical discourse of God’s nature. He says that one cherub is contemplating the Unity of the Divine, expressed by the term **Being**; the other is contemplating the Triune nature of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, three entities but in one. In the fifth step, we will focus on God as Being.

Step 5: The world above us: Seeing God by his name: “Being”

As we seek to understand the theosophical term “Being”, Bonaventure cites the time when Moses asked God, “What shall I tell the people your name is?” God’s reply is: “I am who I am” or “I am that I am”. In other words, **God is Being**. Physical things, including us, are “Becoming;” rocks erode, people are born, grow up, grow old and die. We are always transitioning from one state to another to “Become” something else. Theosophically, God is pure Being, existing eternally.

Bonaventure explains that God was here before the physical universe and will be here after the physical universe dissolves—he is unchanging. God both created the physical universe and pervades it with his presence. This concept of **Being** has been the subject of philosophical discourse since the time of Plato and Socrates. For example, the Corpus Hermeticum [100-300 CE] explores this concept of Being. Being has always been, will always be; it is the opposite of non-being – nothingness. It is important to us but we cannot see it. We see the effects of light hitting an object but we can’t actually see the light itself. “The Being is an intelligible sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere” says Bonaventure. In other words, God is not bounded; he has no limits.

As our minds grapple with this ponderous look at the infinite, eternal Creator of the Universe, Bonaventure then directs our attention to a God who cares so much for mankind, as insignificant as we are, that he would extend the ultimate gift of Love. Our journey takes us next to the other Cherub contemplating the Trinity and God’s Grace toward mankind.

Step 6: Seeing God as Three: the Highest Goodness

In the sixth step, Bonaventure contemplates God’s Goodness in the form of the Trinity. He again takes us into a dense theosophical discourse concerning the three natures of the Divinity. He reminds us that on the sixth day, God said “Let us make man in our image”. (Genesis 1:26) “And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul” (Genesis 2:7)

Bonaventure first explains the term “Goodness”. We all have a notion of the beauty of things of beauty. An example is looking at sculpture: when it’s done in Playdough by a young child we say it’s a good first attempt; when it’s done by an art student, we say it’s much better; but when done by Michelangelo, we say it is the Best, Masterful, a thing of Beauty. Bonaventure tells us that God’s ultimate gift of Grace through Jesus Christ was the greatest example of The Good, the ultimate example of Beauty. Bonaventure says, “The good has as its characteristic that it is self-diffusive; generous expression outward that one has within.” In other words, God’s love extends without limits and pervades all nature.

Bonaventure now explores the notion of the Trinity in the form of Love:

- There is some highest Good which is love itself. (God the Father).
- From this Love is generated a perfect image we call the Beloved. (The Father and the Son)
- Joining them is the relationship that binds the two together, the Co-Beloved (Holy Spirit). The whole center of the Universe is the Son, the Beloved, who will become flesh in order to share God’s love. It is the ultimate expression of Love.

In this sixth step of our journey, Bonaventure pushes our minds to exhaustion by asking us to contemplate what it is like for God to be One Essence (Being) yet really be three natures in the Trinity:

“In this Trinity, there is the greatest communicability with individuality of person, there is the greatest consubstantiality, but with plurality of hypostasy; the greatest co-equality with order the, relation of the Father to the Son and the Son and Spirit; the greatest mutual intimacy; yet there is the sending out of the Son or WORD out of Love for man.”

In the end, he proclaims that we are exhausted mentally by attempting to understand God intellectually and that we must now turn from matters of the mind to matters of the heart. He now tells us that the six days of work are over and the seventh is a day of rest—we rest our mental capacities of reason and surrender our soul to the mysteries of the Divine Presence.

Step 7: Passing Over: from six days journey to Sabbath rest

Bonaventure now leads us into the Holy of Holies to witness the “Mercy Seat” between the two Cherubs. There he sees the image of Christ crucified—the ultimate gift of Love for mankind. But how do we cross over to join with the Divine—to be One with God?

Bonaventure tells us we must Passover into God by joining Christ in the grave. He is not speaking of a physical death but one of surrendering one’s selfish Will to God as Christ did in the Garden of Gethsemane when after pleading with God “If it be Your will, let this cup pass.” He ultimately surrendered to the will of the Father—despite the cost. This seventh step cannot be observed or proven by discourse like the previous steps; it is a matter of Faith alone, of trusting in God.

Bonaventure says this about our Raising out of this former self: “The mind rises on high, passing beyond that which is sensed, now the mind is passing beyond itself...In this kind of passing over, all intellectual operations should be abandoned... If we abandon intellectual operations on the other side, the whole height of our affections is going to be transferred and transformed in God.” He says this deep love is a state of pure ecstasy. He can’t explain it for it is too mystical; only those who have experienced this hidden mystery can understand it.

“Nature can do nothing here and effort (trying) can accomplish little;

- Little attention should be given to investigating but should give great attention to anointing,
- Little attention should be given to speaking but much attention to inner joy;
- You should pay little attention to writing rather, pay attention to the gift of God, the Holy Spirit,
- [Do]not pay attention to creatures but focus attention on creative BEING, the creator not the creatures.”

Bonaventure then quotes the writings of Dionysius, the Areopagite:

“Trinity: highest Being, highest Divinity, highest Good, guardian of the Christian’s knowledge of God, direct us into the super-unknown, into the super-luminous to the most sublime summit of mystical eloquence, where the new mysteries of theology are deeply hidden, the super-luminous darkness of eloquent silence. Darkness which is supremely visible, supremely resplendent in which everything is glowing”

Bonaventure says that Dionysius is referring to the darkness of the intellect. In this condition, the mind is at rest but the heart is now awake. The heart doesn’t need light, it moves by feel toward warmth not light, basking in God’s Love.

Bonaventure concludes with these thoughts:

“If you ask how these things happen:

- Ask Grace, do not ask instruction
- Ask Desire, do not ask to understand
- Ask the cry of prayer; not the pursuit of study
- Ask the spouse (Christ), not the teacher
- Ask God, not man.
- Ask Darkness, not clarity,
- Ask not light but the burning flame which will carry you to God with burning affection.”

“Because the Fire is God; the furnace is in Jerusalem; Christ kindles it in his burning Passion. Let us then die and pass over into darkness, pass over with the Crucified Christ from this world into the Father,

- We can say then with Phillip (John 14:8) ‘When we see the Father it is enough for us.’
- Let us hear with Paul (2 Corinthians 12:9) ‘My Grace is sufficient for you’.
- Let us rejoice with David (Psalm 72:26) ‘For you, my flesh and my heart have fainted. You are the God of my heart, the God who is my portion forever’

Blessed be the Lord, God of Israel. Forever for ever let all the people say ‘Let it be, let it be’ Amen”

Conclusions: The Journey of the Soul into God

Bonaventure’s vision and subsequent allegory is one man’s attempt to explain his pilgrimage into the presence of the Divine. It was his attempt to share with friends, the spiritual alchemy which he had discovered while on retreat at the mountain at La Verna, Italy. It is a decidedly Trinitarian Christian view of his vision both because Bonaventure was a leader in the Roman Church and also because all mysticism was viewed with suspicion by orthodox leaders of his time, most of whom believed in theology, doctrine and ceremony above anything of the heart. In the thirteenth century, one need only stray a little bit from orthodoxy to be charged with heresy. His seventh step of “Resting the mind” (abandoning theology and doctrine for God’s pure love) walked that thin line between heresy and church doctrine.

Although his work was not widely read in his lifetime, his short, dense work has had considerable influence well into the twentieth century. A few decades after it was written, Hinrich Susso used portions of Bonaventure’s work in the defense of Meister Eckhart, a Benedictine mystic on trial for heresy¹. Several centuries later, two Spanish Franciscan mystics, Francisco de Osuna and Bernadine de Loreda, would write works inspired by Bonaventure’s book. These two mystics would be heavily influential in European mystical thought for over two centuries¹. In the mid-twentieth century, Professor Ratzinger (later to become Pope Benedict XVI) would author a book entitled: “Deo Verbum” based Bonaventure’s work.

In my own study of this work, I found many familiar echoes between Masonic Ritual and Bonaventure’s allegory. I chose Bonaventure’s work primarily because of its proximity to the zenith of European cathedral construction. It is one example of the spiritual, mystical and esoteric thought that encompassed the minds of the builders of these massive works of stone—works that would take all the town’s wealth and a lifetime to complete. The priests, architects, and masons that erected these stately edifices were cognizant of the two edifices made by God’s command: King Solomon’s Temple and the proportions of humans.

Additionally, I found Bonaventure’s journey to be representative of the path of my own spiritual growth over the years. I believe his seven steps, while not the only path to the Divine, are worth considering for serious study by any person seeking spiritual alchemy by embarking on a soul’s journey into presence of God.

Author’s Note: I have relied heavily on Friar William Short’s audio course¹ for interpretation, paraphrased translations and guidance as I read Bonaventure’s technically difficult but rewarding work.

References:

¹Br. William Short, OFM, STL, STD; *Saint Bonaventure: The Soul’s Journey into God*; Audible audiobook, 2017

²Iamblichus, *The Theology of Arithmetic*, Translation and commentary by Phanes Press, 1988

³Nicomachus the Pythagorean, *The Manual of Harmonics*, Translation and commentary by Flora R Levin, Phanes Press, 1994

⁴Saint Bonaventure; *The Journey of the Mind into God*; Paul A. Boer Sr. (Editor), Paperback ed.; Veritatis Splendor Publications; 2013