

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 15 | Issue 2

Article 7

4-1-1998

Bonaventure's Contribution to the Twentieth Century Debate on Apophatic Theology

Adriaan T. Peperzak

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Peperzak, Adriaan T. (1998) "Bonaventure's Contribution to the Twentieth Century Debate on Apophatic Theology," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 15 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol15/iss2/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

BONAVENTURE'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY DEBATE ON APOPHATIC THEOLOGY

Adriaan T. Peperzak

To what extent does Bonaventure's work contribute to a renewal of negative theology? Rather than answering this question directly, this article focuses on the negative moments which, according to Bonaventure, characterize the human quest for God and the *docta ignorantia* to which it is oriented. Bonaventure's synthesis of Aristotelian ontology and Dionysian Neoplatonism is a wisdom that admires God's being good as manifested in Christ's human suffering and death.

God has died, at least in science and philosophy. He is agonizing in religious study, perhaps even in some divinity schools. Atheism and a careful sequestration of God from current business are the two main forms in which Academia deals with the long history of religion, which, notwithstanding academic reservations, goes on. For scholarship faith, God and religion have become *curiosa*. The theoretical intention has separated itself from religious commitments; it abhors edifying language and has forgotten or rejected the long history of its association with contemplation. *Curiositas* is the word Bonaventure would use to characterize the study of religion that ensues from such a situation. But what is the relevance of such curiosity? Does at least philosophy accept that the question of the ultimate and its inevitable connections with science, education, ethos, politics, art, literature, and philosophy itself cannot be ignored in a discipline that is proud of its reflexive and universalizing capacities? Where the question of the ultimate (the ultimate concern, the ultimate meaning) is still alive, the climate is dramatic: after God's death nihilism seems inevitable, but how can human beings live without rejecting it? Not everybody appreciates Nietzsche's dramatic accents; the majority of scholars in philosophy seem quite satisfied with their way of life, but those who have seen the depths and felt the radicality of great traditions of thought from Parmenides to Hegel and from Amos and Isaiah to St. John of the Cross and Pascal, cannot be impressed by the boring mediocrities of philosophers that ignore the life and death of God.

Fortunately, there are still philosophers who are not afraid of making explicit the inevitable and necessary connections between their faith and thought. Some of them agree with Nietzsche, but they point out that his "God" is different from the God of Abraham, Isaac and Moses, and from the Father of Jesus Christ. Was Nietzsche the messenger of the death of a



Victorian God, the God of Kant, or the God of the slaves' resentment only? Similar questions should be asked with regard to pre- or non-Nietzschean atheists: some exponents of the Enlightenment, certain 19th and 20th century scientists, and those contemporary philosophers who deny even the relevance of God. How do they understand the word "God"? What exactly do they deny when they declare God non-existent? What is the meaning, the possible or impossible relevance of "God"?

According to certain philosophers and theologians, only "the God of metaphysics" has died, not the God of Abraham, Moses and Jesus. Others do not accept that the history of philosophical theology can be summarized in the word "metaphysics," if this signifies the onto-theo-logical mode of thinking with which Heidegger identified it; they want to free and retrieve the non-metaphysical insights of that history to show that there are better modes than the metaphysical one to approach God in theory. Still others think that the Heideggerian and post-Heideggerian use of "metaphysics" is a caricature of what metaphysics was in the high times of its history; they want to show that the works of pre-modern Christian thinkers contain important elements for a post-modern theory of our relations to God and of the names through which we can approach and somehow reach Him or Her.

In the context of these attempts at naming God in our secularized world, apophatic theology plays an important role because it permits us to criticize the deficiency of all the names and concepts that are used in talking about God, thus showing the essential limitations of our understanding, but at the same time permitting us to point — and in a sense to pass — beyond the borders of our knowledge. Negative expressions are more true than affirmations about God, because they indicate more clearly that God surpasses any intellectual grasp. The darkness into which one ascends through contemplation is more appropriate than clarity because the infinite splendor of the superessential Good can only blind finite intellects if they are not protected by a cloud of unknowing.

There might be a certain similarity between the gesture of those who killed "God" or announced His death and those who retrieve the work of Pseudo-Dionysius and other masters of apophatism. If the murdered God is "human, all too human," a denial of such an all too human being is necessary, but this denial does not solve the question of whether our existence in the world can be conceived of without essential connections to the living God who surpasses all names.

It would be unworthy of a (theological or philosophical) theologian to always want to agree with non- or anti-Christian heroes of thought, but many motivations of those who reject "God" can be shared by Christians, and this strengthens the suspicion that the god they hate must indeed be denied or at least surpassed by something better: the unique God, who in all respects, or *simpliciter*, can be called Good. But is even "good" a perfectly appropriate predicate or name? Again, we must correct the finiteness of our concept ("good") by denying that "God is good" is a fully true expression.

Going beyond all affirmations concerning God through negation does not mean that we forget, leave behind, erase or cross out the negated affirmations. Although "good" and "not-good" seem to contradict each other, both must be maintained: "good" must be kept together with "non-good"

in a subordination that can be understood neither as species of a genus, nor as part of a whole. The negation does not fall back behind the affirmation, as if it tried to re-establish the indeterminacy that precedes all determinations; it urges the thinker to think beyond that which we know as "good": some determination that, although its contours escape us, surpasses it and therefore demands us to express its non-coincidence with any good. God cannot be identified as good, but he is beyond-good (*hyper-agathos*). Dionysius even calls him super-divine, "*hypertheos*."¹

The tension created by the simultaneity of affirmations and negations is expressed in the return of the affirmations on a higher level, indicated by the word "hyper." The transition from the level of the affirmative predicates to the level beyond, a transition urged by negation, would not be possible if affirmations and negations did not translate an orientation and a dynamism that urge and move the thinker who is looking for appropriate names. Only if thinking itself is already an oriented movement can the negation of its affirmations force it to go further, to pass over to a stage that is closer to the Orient. *Theologia* could not make any progress if it were not driven by an originary movement. The source of this movement can be called Desire.

When thinking about God originates in desire, the investigation is an ascent that does not let itself be stopped by the denials of its affirmative experiments. It rather understands these negations as a warning not to take any affirmative result as definitive; all results are only pointers to a higher level of approaching God. The desire of God precedes and anticipates the end of thinking. What the thinker in the end must learn - and this is the most painful and humiliating for someone who has put his heart into *theoria* - is that theory does not reach far enough. The highest stage of thought is the obscurity of a well-prepared, thoughtfully entered ignorance: the learned *agnosia* of a union that cannot be expressed in language, a silent union in dark transcendence.

Bonaventure and apophatic theology

Can a study of Bonaventure's work enrich the actual discussion of negative theology? A certain expectation in this respect seems justified. Jacques Guy Bougerol³ called Bonaventure "without a doubt the most Dionysian mind of the Middle Ages" and although Bonaventure did not write extensive commentaries on any of Dionysius' works, he quoted them at least 248 times, as Bougerol has shown. Dionysius' influence on Bonaventure was relativized by Marianne Schlosser in her book *Cognitio et Amor*, and Bougerol himself recognizes that Bonaventure at times thinks very differently, and, in any case, "entirely transforms Dionysius' system."⁴ However, transformation does not erase influence and is normal between great thinkers. For our question, the attempt of finding out to what extent Bonaventure retrieved Dionysius' apophatism must be made. However, this paper will not offer the result of such an attempt; I rather will insist on a few aspects of negativity in Bonaventure's conception of contemplation which seem to me relevant for a correct evaluation of the possibilities contained in apophatic theology. For a thorough investigation of

Bonaventure's reception of Dionysius' work, I refer to Bougerol's precious studies "Saint Bonaventure et le Pseudo-Denys l'Areopagiste" and "Saint Bonaventure et la Hiérarchie dionysienne."⁵ The role of negative theology in Bonaventure - without emphasis on his relation to Dionysius - has been laid out in the excellent study "Lux Inaccessibilis. Zur negativen Theologie bei Bonaventura" of Marianne Schlosser.⁶

What I would like to offer is a sketch of the way in which Bonaventure points out how the human search for insight, if it is accomplished appropriately, terminates in the *docta ignorantia* of an obscure and silent, but very awake union with God. In doing this, I will draw heavily on Bonaventure's second conference on the *Hexaëmeron*, but I will also use other works, such as the Commentary on the *Sententiae* and the *Itinerary of the Mind to God*.

Desire for wisdom

Continuing the Platonic and Neoplatonic tradition, Bonaventure sees desire as constitutive for the nature of human beings. We are driven and in movement by a desire that we have not chosen. It is important to realize that this drive and this movement determine all our activities, including our thinking, contemplating, and speculating. A philosophical or theological vision is continually on the move from stage to stage, according to the quality of life of the thinker who unfolds such a vision. Thinking is not separable from the rest of a human life; the moral and religious — and we could add the aesthetic and psychological — level of a thinker conditions and codetermines what the thinking of this thinker projects and how it proceeds. Without an intense desire (*concupiscentia, vehemens desiderium*) of wisdom (*sapientia*), for example, we will never acquire true insight, not even discover the way that leads to it. Moral decency too, a pure heart, even holiness (*sanctitas*) are necessary conditions for being perceptive and receptive enough to discover the truth: the truth of a universe created, loved, saved, illuminated and inhabited by God, i.e., the truth of God as mirrored in the universe (*Hex 2, 2-6*).

Contemporary phenomenology recognizes what all traditions of spirituality have known for millennia, namely that thinking needs specific affective and practical conditions in order to let things show and unfold, to do justice to humans and animals, and to be receptive to the manifestations of God's presence. Reason and intelligence must be oriented by a desire for genuineness and purity. This is the cathartic law of perception and thought, often forgotten, despised or suppressed under the domination of scientism in philosophy and religious studies.

A corollary to this law is that the search for insight cannot be achieved as a project for which, in a first stage, we could lay the foundation in order to build other levels on it in later stages. Most often, the first stage will not represent a completely authentic and noble mode of life, and therefore will be deficient in perception, sensitivity and willingness to accept truths that are painful or humiliating. The movement of thought can thus not take for granted that its first stage is trustworthy enough to found a system. If the question of the conditions and their purification is taken seriously, a

thinker must start many times: each progress in honesty and sensitivity makes new fundamental insights possible.

Someone who has perfectly realized humanity's radical desire, is wise: a saint is "*deiformis*" and "wisdom [itself] enters immediately in him" (*Hex* 2, 6). Yet, Bonaventure holds also that wisdom cannot be acquired without intellectual labor. The dialectical relation between insight (*intellectus*) and wisdom (*sapientia*) is one of the central problems of his oeuvre. He underlines that wisdom - as discovery of the ultimate understanding of existence - is a grace and given only to a pure heart; but analysis and reflection enrich a naïve reception of that gift. Intellectuals can become wise only if they are as pure as the "simple" saints; these do not miss anything essential for their glory, but they avoid the temptations of intellectual arrogance and vain curiosity. Theologians, however, have a chance to love God not only with their heart, but also with their whole intellect.

Bonaventure distinguishes four "aspects" (*aspectus*) or "faces" (*facies*) of wisdom (*Hex* 2, 8-34):

1. Its basis lies in a network of a priori principles which constitute human consciousness. These principles owe their universal certainty and immutability to the radical orderliness (*ars aeterna*) of God, which is the source of light without which no human action can be performed. This light inhabits and unites all humans; it can be discovered through a reflection on the conditions of knowledge and practice. Faith, however, recognizes the presence of God's Word in it (*Itin.* 2, 9; cf. 5, 1).

2. Sacred Scripture mysteriously reveals the meaning of human existence to those who are humble enough to receive it as a grace and sensible enough to understand the symbols and signs through which the sacred mysteries are revealed. This revelation provokes faith, hope and love without abolishing the enigmatic character that belongs to a mortal life on earth. Human beings need allegorical, anagogical and tropological explanations to show them what and how they must believe, expect and act. Faith unites the members of the ecclesiastical body with its head; the anagogical unfolding of hope prepares the soul for a way of existence that is ruled by active and contemplative love. Faith, hope and love guide the soul on its ascent from existence in a closed universe to the enjoyment of an infinite space between God and human souls.

3. In light of the Scriptures, the universe becomes understandable: "the entire world is like one full mirror" in which God's own wisdom is mirrored. The "book of nature" (*liber naturae*) receives its explanation from the "book of Scripture" (*liber scripturae*), but intellectual labor is necessary for their interpretation. The key for the explication of Scripture and the entire universe is Jesus Christ, since he is the center of all things. Any attempt to understand the whole of reality must start from this center because all wisdom is concentrated in Him. As the uncreated, incarnated and inspired Word of the Father, Christ encompasses the whole creation and manifests how everything is an expression of God's living presence (cf. *Hex* 1, 11-37).

It is difficult to find passages in Bonaventure's work that speak of God's absence. The overwhelming presence of God's light and grace to which Bonaventure constantly refers corresponds to the affectionate openness which, according to his descriptions, characterizes a well-disposed subject.

However, God is always hidden, enigmatically present in the form of humiliation, rejection and suppression. The Word that precedes creation and rules the world through its inspiration, invites the seekers for truth to participate in the drama of a persecuted guide. I will come back to this aspect of wisdom toward the end of this paper.

4. The ultimate secret of God's wisdom cannot be understood, but neither are we condemned to total silence about it. Bonaventure calls this aspect of true wisdom "extremely difficult" (*dificillima*, *Hex* 2, 28). It is "the depth of God" (*profunda Dei*) of which Saint Paul in the first letter to the Corinthians writes: "Among the perfect we speak about a wisdom that is not of this age [. . .], a wisdom that is hidden in mystery (*in mysterio abscondita*), which no eye has seen and no ear has heard; it has not emerged in any human heart; but God has revealed it to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit investigates all things, even the depths of God" (1 Cor 2, 6-10). This quote introduces a transition from Paul to Dionysius. Bonaventure must have experienced this highest moment of wisdom, since he writes: "this [namely the experience of the beloved beyond all substances and knowledge] nobody knows who does not have an experience of it." Yet, he prefers to appeal to the authority of "the Apostle" himself, who "taught this wisdom to Dionysius and Timotheus and other perfect [Christians], while he hid it to others" (*Hex* 2, 28).

The mysterious hiddenness of the highest wisdom, as indicated by Paul's expression "hidden in mystery" (*in mysterio abscondita*), is explained in a commentary on the first chapter of Dionysius' *Mystical Theology*. Bonaventure calls it the text with which Dionysius brought his work to completion (*consummavit*, *Hex* 2, 29). To prevent misunderstandings, he reminds the reader that Dionysius' text cannot be understood and that the wisdom indicated in it cannot be discovered unless one has passed through all former stages of discovery. He quotes the second section of the *Mystica Theologia* where Dionysius addresses himself to Timotheus, whom Bonaventure apparently sees as Paul's pupil and companion. Since Bonaventure, in *Hex* 2, 29, cites only the first words of the text, which must have been familiar to his listeners, referring by an "etc." to the rest, I will give here a more complete text, as it is found in the *Itinerarium* cap. 7, n. 5. The text is also quoted in *Hex* 2, 32, again in an abridged form ending in "etc." Several details of the quote are different in the three versions, a fact that Bougerol explains through the use of different Latin translations; perhaps we could also see it as an indication that Bonaventure quotes from memory.

Here is a translation of the Latin version used by Bonaventure in his *Itinerarium*:

However you, my friend⁷, concerning the mystical visions, be steadfast on your way;⁸ leave the senses and the intellectual activities behind, as well as sensible and invisible things and all being and non-being; then you will be brought back as much as possible and without knowledge to the unity of him who is above all essence [or beingness] and science [or knowledge]. Indeed, by an immeasurable and absolute excess of your pure mind you will transcend yourself and all things toward the superessential beam of divine darkness, leaving all things behind and free from everything.

In his commentary, Bonaventure emphasizes the necessity of becoming detached and free from all grasping and "apprehensive" activities: the secret of God surpasses all beings and knowledge, including sensibility, imagination, evaluation and all intellectual operations. The summit of the ascent to which desire drives human beings, is a union in love beyond all understanding and representation. "Nobody has an idea of this, who does not experience it." And Bonaventure concludes rather laconically: "This shows that *beatitudo* does not entirely lie in our intellectual possibilities" (*Hex* 2, 29). Thus, the tradition that started from Plato's *Republic* and was developed by the Neoplatonists was retrieved by Bonaventure as a theory about the character of God's secret and the nature of human perfection. The *henosis*, which, according to Dionysius, surpasses the ontological dimension where *noein* and *einai* coincide, reveals itself in a non-intellectual experience: the experience of love.

Desire reaches further than reason. It cannot grasp, but it can receive as a grace, the desired and beloved, if it separates itself affectively from all beings insofar as these are not God. These beings include one's own self - "if this were possible," Bonaventure adds. Apparently he wants here to mitigate somewhat Dionysius' phrase about transcending one's own self. He could also have said that the detachment from one's self should target this only insofar as it does not participate in God's life.

Affectivity, in the form of *caritas*, transcends intellect and science; it reaches the infinite and experiences the depth of God and humans simultaneously. Beyond the dialectic of affirmations and negations, trust, hope, gratitude, peace, pure enjoyment, and authentic love establish the self in the secret of the ultimate. "The soul enters into its own intimacy and thereby reaches its summit, for the most intimate and the highest are the same" (*Hex* 2, 31). This union, which is "affective only" (*Hex* 2, 30), is sought by all the empirical and conceptual experiments in philosophy and theology. Through a supra-intellectual intimacy, the Spirit reveals the truth - not to the brain, but to the heart. We might vary Pascal's dictum in stating that the heart has experiences that reason does not know.

If the perfection of wisdom lies in an affective event beyond theory and discussion, the importance of the opposition between affirmative and negative propositions is relativized. Although Bonaventure, like Dionysius, Plotinus, and Plato, emphasizes that consummate wisdom presupposes a thorough preparation in which intellectual and moral elements play important roles, all of them point out that the fulfillment of desire toward which all human endeavors and cultures converge does not lie in knowledge but in the simplicity of an ignorance (*agnosia*) that is experienced as trust, hope, love. Those who walk the path of theory are oriented by an experience that somehow already is present in their departure. The desired union with God, who is "greater," "more than" and different from all realities theoretical speculation can fathom, codetermines the search, even if the searchers are not aware of it. The Spirit is present in their moods, their courage and their enjoyment. Indifference or mere curiosity harms their attachment to the ultimate desideratum. What they must learn during the unfolding of their disciplines is detachment from all that is not

God, but this does not mean that they should despise or lose the enjoyable wealth of creation, for this is not opposed to God, as if God were another, higher or highest being. The turn to God is a turn to universal love and participation. "All that is not God" is a name for those elements - or rather, for those non-elements and privations - that do not contain God's creative presence. To love God, who is "all in all things," is therefore the purest form of love for all beings in the world and in history, for these have their being not only "from him and through him," but also "in him."

The negation through which pure attachment to God becomes possible is a total, not merely theoretical, abnegation; it is the affective and effective abstraction (*aphairesis*, *remotio*) of perfect poverty with regard to the totality of Godless realities. The ultimate relationship presupposes death, as is clear from the statement in the *Song of Songs*: "love is strong as death" (Cant. 8, 6). But the mortification that is demanded by love opens the lover for an encounter with the infinity of the living God who lives in all creation.



In his conferences on the *Hexaëmeron*, Bonaventure's style is often polemical: he scolds those philosophers who prefer Aristotle's interpretation of the human universe over the theological tradition. Although he had often shown how well he knew and how much he appreciated "the Philosopher" when Aristotle did not contradict the Christian faith, Bonaventure could be very harsh in speaking of the idea that philosophy would be able to operate independently from the dimension of faith; for example, when he calls the philosophers *magi Pharaonis* who sell their bad food in the darkness of Egypt (*Hex* 2, 7) or talks about their preference for having sex with an ugly maid over marrying the king's daughter called *Sapientia* (*Hex* 2, 7). This polemic might explain why the conferences of Bonaventure's last years seldom celebrate the greatness of human reason, but rather insist on its limitations. To prevent an all too sentimental reading of his texts, we can turn to less polemical works, such as his impressive *Commentary on Lombard's Sententiae*, the very detailed *Questiones Disputatae*, or the masterpiece which is his *Summa*: the *Itinerary of the Mind to God*. I will here concentrate on the last three chapters of the latter, in which Bonaventure offers a summary of his metaphysics, his theology and his epistemology of religious experience, including its mystical aspects. These disciplines are unified by an image: the image of a contemplative traveller who, after having successfully sojourned in the temple court (*atrium*) and the holy (*sancta*), has entered the holiest (*sancta sanctorum*), where the wings of two Cherubim overshadow the ark on which the "mercy-seat" is placed. These angels represent the two supreme degrees of speculative contemplation. They extend to the farthest boundaries of human understanding and can only be followed by a supra-intellectual stage of contemplation.

The Wisdom of the Cross

Chapter five of the *Itinerarium* focuses on the most fundamental condition of knowledge as such: the light of the eternal truth (*aeterna veritas*). It is thus

concerned with the first face of wisdom as indicated in *Hex 2*. A reflection on this a priori light shows the most fundamental reality under two names: "Being" (*esse*) and "Good" (*bonum*). The second name is more true, but being is included, not negated in goodness. Although Bonaventure mentions and quotes Dionysius several times in chapters 5-7, he does not follow his versions of Plato's "good beyond being." He accepts a certain subordination of being under goodness, but reconciles them as mutually inclusive. The name "Being" (*esse*) revealed God to Moses (Exodus 3, 14) and summarizes the wisdom of Israel, while "Good" summarizes the New Testament (Mt 28, 19; Luc 18, 19). Damascenus represents the theological tradition that is oriented by the first name, while Dionysius developed a theology of superessential goodness.¹⁰ Bonaventure wants to honor both traditions and distributes them as complementary perspectives among the two cherubim.

In a splendid compendium of his onto-theo-logy, Bonaventure shows that being (*esse*) as such, i.e., as pure, completely actual, eternal, simple, perfect and unique, can only be the divine beingness of God and that all its characteristics mutually imply one another. The blinding light of a thorough ontology reveals God's uniqueness as expressed in *Deuteronomium 6,4*: "Hear Israël, your God is the one, unique God."

The other cherub, i.e., the other supreme mode of speculation (cap. 6), discovers that the goodness of God implies God's trinity. Quoting the Dionysian "bonum dicitur diffusivum sui",¹¹ Bonaventure shows how the principle of all principles (*principalissimum fundamentum*), which is the good (*bonum*), can be contemplated through its most radical, uncreated emanations. By way of preparation, and differently from Dionysius, he first makes sure that there will be no opposition between God's being, through which we discover his absolute unicity, and God's goodness. His argument for their unbreakable unity is Anselmian.¹² Good, as purely or perfectly good (*optimum*), is "that better than which nothing can be thought." Since it is clearly better to be than not to be, however, it is impossible to think that God is not (*Itin. 6, 2*).

Bonaventure's "deduction" of God's trinitarian constitution is given as a concretization of the principle that the good is self-diffusive. If to be good is to give from oneself, the perfect Good cannot but totally communicate its entire being to another, who then is identical with and, as receiver who thereby exists, also different from the origin. Bonaventure gives here (in chapter six) only an incomplete sketch of the arguments that are unfolded in his *Questiones disputatae de Trinitate*. For our purpose, I would like to underline only that the concept of "good" that underlies Bonaventure's argument is a Christian transformation of the generosity that was characteristic for the Neoplatonic One. Emanation is now understood as creative and compassionate *agapē*: absolute donation of all that a person is to another person; sharing, in the most extreme way, one's being (*esse*). The "deduction" is, thus, based on the infinitization of Christian *agapē*.

To discover God as One Divinity in three loving and beloved Persons is a possibility of human reason but we cannot "comprehend" what we "apprehend" through it.¹³ The greatest difficulty lies here in the combination of God's being One and God's being Three, i.e., in the understanding of how being and goodness are intertwined. God can be known with great

certainty, but we cannot acquire an insight into God's tri-une constitution. Knowledge and incomprehensibility are here one: we can know how un-understandable God is. However, this ignorant "knowledge" is not developed through apophatic discourse about its darkness; it is enacted in a transition from understanding to another, deeper and higher dimension of the human search: un-understanding speculation turns into *admiration*. Wonderment not only precedes philosophy, it also crowns its endeavors by introducing the investigating mind to an affective relationship with God (*Itin.* 6, 3).

This level of admiration is not the end of the spiritual journey, however; not even the end of its theoretical part. The *ascent* from the lowest level of creation to the sublime heights of the Creator's inner life, must be followed by a *descent* that confirms our belonging to the corporeal, earthly, corruptible and historical reality in which we live.¹⁴ The perfect life does not consist of looking upward while leaving the messy history of humans to its own miserable destiny. "This is the eternal life: that they know you, the only true God *and* the one you sent: Jesus Christ" (Jo 17,3).

Continuing his interpretation of the cherubim in the *sancta sanctorum*, Bonaventure points out that their faces (i.e., the faces or aspects of wisdom, as mentioned in *Hex.* 2) not only are turned to one another, but are also looking at the *propitiatorium*, the place of reconciliation, or the "mercy-seat" on the ark (6, 4). The wonder of all wonders is not the mystery of God's tri-une essence and internal love, but the "superadmirable" realization of God's human, i.e., corporeal and mortal reality in Jesus Christ. Here we rejoin the beginning of Bonaventure's Conferences on the *Hexaëmeron*: as the central sacrament, Christ is the beginning and the end, Alpha and Omega, of contemplation. Perfect spirituality is the fully unfolded experience of its beginning in faith (6, 5).

Bonaventure addresses himself (in *Itin.* 6, 5) to the reader whom he has identified as the synthesis of the two cherubs: focusing on the "essentials" of God (cap. 5), you are admiring the paradoxes of God's being first and last, eternal and totally present, simple and greatest, perfectly one and encompassing all modes of being. Yet, do not forget that to be a good cherub, you must concentrate on the drama in which the reconciliation between God and humans is realized. The ultimate secret is not found in the unique, perfect, immense and eternal Present of the unique Divinity; it is hidden in the corporeal, humble and suffering history of that Presence. In the figure of the other cherub you are full of admiration for the mystery of God's trinity, but look at Christ's person, who makes this Trinity concrete in a human destiny (6, 6). Perfect enlightenment shows how the intention of the Creator and the internal life of God's self-communication are realized in the perfect image of God: a man who translates God's love in the elements of human history. The union of Creator and creation, known by faith, is experienced at the highest level of knowledge in an "experimental cognition," which, by surpassing comprehension, provokes admiration.

Having shown how intellectual perspicacity reaches its limits and turns into an affective response, Bonaventure finally dwells on the peace that crowns the journey to God. This peace is not the peace of heaven, but rather participation in a final passage or transition (*transitus*) to God in company

with Christ (*Itin.* 7, 1). Once the stages of intellectual speculation have purified the mind, it is able to fully concentrate on the reconciliatory "sacrament that was hidden for ages" (*a saeculis absconditum*, Eph. 3, 9): the man, who is God, hanging on a cross. There the secret of God is spread out in all the dimensions of space and time, thus showing "the breadth and the length and the height and the depth" of a love "that surpasses knowledge."¹⁵ The only appropriate way of responding to the self-manifestation of God in the midst of human history is an affective one that encompasses all the moments of mind and intellect and heart. Bonaventure enumerates the following moments of this final conversion: trust, hope, love, devotion, admiration, exultation, appreciation, praise and jubilation (*Itin.* 7, 2). Instead of maintaining a speculative distance, these affections unify the soul with the *pascha* of Christ who leads from Egypt through the Red Sea and the desert to paradise. At this point (*Itin.* 7, 2), it becomes clear how Bonaventure interprets the inherent negativity and the profound darkness (*caligo*) indicated by Dionysius' *Mystical Theology*, and quoted toward the end of the *Itinerary* (*Itin.* 7, 5). Reaching out to God leads through a desert of suffering with Christ into the peace of his grave. The certainty given by the Word of God that the very event of such a *pascha* is the presence (*hodie*) of paradise (*Luc.* 23, 43), is not only an article of faith, but a felt experience (*sentiens tantum*, *Itin.* 7, 2). The union with God in the dark cloud of ignorance, as thematized by Dionysius' *Mystical Theology*, is retrieved in a hermeneutics of an affective response to the sacrament of God's historical Passion. The ascent from affirmative names to negations and from negations to the obscure clarity of union is transformed into the passage from a theology of being and generosity to the dark splendor of a "more than" divine, namely, divinely human and historical, humiliated and mortified love. Sharing Christ's destiny in faith and love transforms a human being in God (*Itin.* 7, 4).

The best preparation for this summit, which is at the same time the deepest depth, lies in the desire that motivates all the stages of the journey, but even this is a gift of the Spirit with whom Christ inspired human history. The "natural desire" that rules all human ways is finally revealed to be the fire through which God's own spirit inflames the human heart. To understand this pertains to "the mystical wisdom" that is sought from the beginning. Darkness and peace, suffering and enjoyment, death and resurrection coincide in the human history of God's hidden presence. The rose in the cross is found neither in a dialectical explanation of the universe in light of a logical or superlogical Absolute, nor in an endless series of negations and supernegations; it reveals itself in an affectionate excess beyond all theoretical wrestlings with yes and no. "The Son of God, Jesus Christ [. . .] was not Yes and No; in Him it is always Yes. For all the promises of God find their Yes in Him. That is why we utter the Amen through Him, to the glory of God" (2 Cor 1, 19-20). According to Bonaventure, this Yes and Amen is not a logical one; it is a passionate loyalty to God as present in human history and to human history as revelation of God, a loyalty that knows how to endure the darkness of its mortality.

NOTES

1. *On Mystical Theology* 1, 1-3; 3-5; *On the Divine Names* 1, 1.5-7.
2. *On Mystical Theology* 1, 3; 5.
3. *Saint Bonaventure: Etudes sur les sources de sa pensée*, Northampton, Variorum Reprints 1989, Avant-propos.
4. *Cognitio et Amor. Zum kognitiven und voluntativen Grund der Gotteserfahrung nach Bonaventura*, Paderborn, Schöningh 1990, pp. 123-124 and 128-30; Jacques Guy Bougerol, *Introduction à l'étude de Saint Bonaventure*, Tournai, Desclée 1961, pp. 79-82; *Saint Bonaventure: Etudes . . .*, pp. 113-123. See also Zachary Hayes, *Introduction to the Disputed Questions on the Mystery of the Trinity*, St. Bonaventure, NY, 1979, pp. 22-25.
5. *Saint Bonaventure: Etudes . . .*, pp. 33-123 and 131-167.
6. *Franziskanische Studien* 68 (1968), pp. 3-140.
7. *Hex* 2, 32 has here: "dear Timotheus" (*amice Timothee*) and 2, 29 reads: "O Timotheus, my friend" (*o Timothee amice*). For the different translations of Pseudo-Dionysius into Latin and those used by Bonaventure, see Jacques Guy Bougerol, *Saint Bonaventure: Etudes . . .*, pp. 39-40 and 59-64.
8. *Corroborato itinere. Hex* 2, 29 has: *forti actione et contritione* (with strong action and contrition), while *Hex* 2, 32 reads: *forti contritione et actione*.
9. *Itinerarium* 5,6; cf. 1 Cor 15, 28.
10. Cf. Damascenus, *De fide orthodoxa* I; Dionysius, *On the Divine Names* 3, 1 and 4, 1.
11. According to Bougerol, *Saint Bonaventure: Etudes . . .*, pp. 81-104, this dictum is quoted 26 times in Bonaventure's work. The connection between God's goodness and the Trinity seems to be hinted at in *On the Divine Names* 2, 11, where the *diakrisis theia* (the divine difference) is explained as "the forthcoming emanations that fit the goodness of God's originariness" (*hai agathoprepeis t_s thearchias proodoi*).
12. Cf. *Proslogion* cap. 5: "Tu [Deus] es itaque [. . .] quidquid melius est esse quam non esse," and the title of this chapter: "Quod Deus sit quidquid melius est esse quam non esse."
13. Cf. Marianne Schlosser, *Lux inaccessibilis*, pp. 18-27 on the certainty of our knowledge of God, who remains incomprehensible. The human intellect is able to know the entirety of God, but not in a comprehensive way (*totus, non totaliter*). See I Sent, dist 3, pars 1, qu 1; II Sent, dist 3, pars 2, art 2, qu 2; III Sent, dist 14, a 1, qu 2-3.
14. In *Republic* 519C-520A and 539E-540A Plato insists on the unity of the ascent (*anabainein*) and the descent (*katabainein*), but the latter is hardly emphasized by Plotinus and Dionysius.
15. Eph. 3, 18-19. Bonaventure quotes Eph. 3, 14-19 many times at crucial places of his work; for example, at the beginning of his prologue to the *Breviloquium*, where it summarizes the program of his entire theology. See also the *Comm. in Sent*, prooemium; *Quest. Disp. de Scientia Christi* VIII; *Itin* 4,8; *Hex* 8, 4; *Soliloquia*, prologue. The Indices to the critical edition give 16 places.