**THE PRIORITY OF JESUS CHRIST**

***Seeing the World in the Right Perspective***

**David Flood**

St Bonaventure (1217-1274), the “Seraphic Doctor,” has much to teach the contemporary Church about seeing, as she navigates her way through a “secular age” with its plurality of this-worldly perspectives….

Bonaventure lived in extraordinary times. States that would dominate the European stage for the next eight hundred years were just beginning to emerge. It was an age that saw the revival of urban life and the early formation of market economies. For the first time in almost a millennium, lay urban classes became a centre of dynamism and creativity in all spheres of life….

In the world of learning, the recovery of the full corpus of Aristotle’s writings challenged traditional knowledge with new, powerful concepts and ways of knowing that would revolutionize the study of the liberal arts, theology, law, and medicine. In the midst of all this, the world seemed to swell and to take on a greater density and complexity. These were but the early birth pangs of the modern world….

Implicit in Bonaventure’s magnificent synthesis is a law of optics that is all too easily forgotten in contemporary Catholicism. If Christ is the centre of all things, as Scripture and Tradition proclaim, then he is the point of perspective from which reality, in all its creative dynamism and movement, must be viewed. Because we human beings are embodied, and, therefore, situated in particular places and times, we are prone to illusions of perspective that lead us to err in judgments about scale and movement. To use two rather mundane analogies, if I hold a pencil sufficiently close to my face, a mountain or skyscraper in the distance will appear small by comparison. As beings situated on the earth, it appears to us as if the sun travels around the earth, when, in fact, just the opposite is true. Our fallen nature, which Bonaventure, following Augustine, describes as a curving in on ourselves, serves only to exacerbate and mask these illusions of scale and movement.

From the time of Saints Bonaventure and Aquinas, and continuing up to the present day, new discoveries have afforded an ever deepening appreciation of the world’s density and complexity, (mis)leading some to conclude that the created order is larger and more real than God.

From this conclusion, there followed another – the proper task for human beings is to work for a this-worldly flourishing through a mastery of the real (i.e., physical and social) world…. Thus began the modern project in the West – a centuries-long quest to find a sure foundation for knowledge and action – reason, empiricism, enlightened self-interest, class, emotion/self-expression, will to power, critique etc…. I think it is fair to say that the world, as it stands on this feast day of St Bonaventure, … was neither the intended destination nor on the itinerary of the enlightened ones who planned the journey. Each attempt seems to have mysteriously curved from its destination.

Interestingly enough, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Bonaventure speaks a “yes” to all of these endeavours and points of view, offering to gather them, in Christ, into the Trinitarian *circumincessio* in which all particular goods and truths find the life-giving peace of order. Herein lies the ultimate question for Catholics in the Twenty-First Century. Can we seriously and in good conscience maintain the priority of Christ in the public spaces of our modern, pluralistic world?

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