**ST BONAVENTURE AND THE BEAUTY OF CREATION**

Paul Rout OFM

*Lecture delivered on the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation*

Pope Francis begins his Encyclical *Laudato Si’* with these words:

“Laudato Si’, mi signore” – “Praise be to you, my Lord”. In the words of this beautiful Canticle, Saint Francis of Assisi reminds us that our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us. (*Laudato Si’* 1)

St Bonaventure’s theology draws deeply for its inspiration upon the lived experience of St Francis. Listen to the early accounts of Francis’ experience of creation.

He embraces all things with an intensity of unheard devotion (intensity – Latin *affectus*), speaking to them about the Lord and exhorting them to praise him. (*The remembrance of the Desire of a Soul* or 2 Celano 165)

How great an exhilaration, do you think, the beauty of the flowers brought to his mind when he saw the shape of their beauty and perceived the odour of their sweetness? (*The Life of St Francis*  or 1 Celano 81)

He sought occasion to love God in everything. He delighted in all the works of God’s hands and from the vision of joy on earth his mind soared aloft to the life-giving source and cause of all. (*Legenda Maior* 9.1)

Who would be able to tell of the sweet tenderness he enjoyed while contemplating in creatures the wisdom, power, and goodness of the Creator? (1 Celano 80)

Listen carefully to the language here – ‘embraces’, ‘intensity’, ‘devotion’, ‘exhilaration’, ‘odour of their sweetness’, ‘delighted’, ‘tenderness’. Here are not words of detached speculation, but words of engagement, words which well up from the heart, words which are the vehicle for experiences which were deeply felt, deeply emotional, words which are at home in the realm of the senses. Francis’ experience of the world and, through the world, of God, was the experience of Francis, a feeling man, Francis, a man at home with his emotions, Francis, a man of passionate intensity, Francis a man of true religious sensitivity.

All of this is so powerfully captured in his Canticle. The Canticle begins with an address to God who alone is to be worshipped and then moves on to include the world of created reality spoken of in terms of symbols or reflections by means of which all praise may be returned to God.

Most High, all powerful, good Lord,

Yours are the praises, the glory, the honour, and all blessing.

To you alone, Most High, do they belong…

Praised be You, my Lord, with all your creatures,

Especially Sir Brother Sun,

Who is the day and through whom you give us the light.

And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendour;

And bears a likeness of You, Most High One…

The movement that occurs in the writing is a circular one. It begins with reference to God who is the source of all and incorporates Francis’ experience of the elements of the created world, which, as reflections (‘likeness’) of God, continue the movement back to God as source. Francis concludes the Canticle:

Praise and bless my Lord and give Him thanks

And serve him with great humility.

Francis’ relationship with God expresses itself in his relationship with all of creation. This, however, is no pantheism or mere aesthetic appreciation of the world of nature. Francis is not merely a medieval ‘New Ager’. What lies at the heart of the Canticle is Francis’ conviction that the God whom he has experienced is at the same time a God of relationship, a God of loving concern, and that this concern of God has found expression in God’s creation of the creaturely world. Note that in the Canticle, Francis addresses the created world as ‘Brother’, ‘Sister’, ‘Mother’. It has been noted that these attributes are not merely poetical personifications for Francis. The word ‘brother’ occurs 306 times in his writings as an expression of spiritual relationship. Francis’ experience of his relationship with God has led him to see and experience the reflections of God in all created elements and so enter into spiritual relationship with them.

This insight of our spiritual relationship with the world as created is taken up by Bonaventure. What we find in his writings is a theology of creation which emphasizes the inherent goodness and sanctity of all created realities while at the same time directing us beyond those realities to the source of all creation, God. In the first place, creation is both good and sacred since it flows from or *emanates* from God. As an image of creation, he uses the life-giving flow of a river.

All rivers go to the sea, yet never does the sea become full. To the place where they go, the rivers keep on going. They derive from the sea, and they return to it. (*Hexaemeron* 13.4)

Creation is the life-giving stream that comes forth from the limitless sea, the symbol for the bountiful and fertile life of God. Just as the river finally returns to the sea, its source of life, so too is creation to find its completion in God.

Bonaventure sees the created world as having a sacred purpose. It is given to humanity as a ‘home’ and is to assist humanity by awakening within the human spirit the ‘fire of love’ for God who is the Creator of all. It is because of this that we exist in relationship, not apart from, the world that God has made. Humanity, then, must respect and care for the created world, in the same way as we respect and care for the home in which we live.

All material things exist to assist humanity by enkindling in human beings the fire of love and praise for the one who has made all things and by whose providence all things are governed. They have been formed as a home for humanity. (*Breviloquium* 2.4)

The world is able to awaken within us the noblest qualities of love, peace, reverence, thanksgiving. As such it is to be contemplated with reverence and not exploited for selfish purposes.

Francis’ awareness of the sacred dignity of the created world finds further theological expression in Bonaventure’s use of the term exemplarism. An exemplar is an original model. Exemplarism is the process whereby likenesses are created of the original model. In artistic terminology, we could speak of the exemplar as, for example, the original painting of a Great Master. Exemplarism would be the process whereby prints of the original are produced. The prints are not the original but they are likenesses of the original. Bonaventure frequently speaks of God as the Divine Artist. The original ‘model of God’, so to speak, is the Trinity. In the work of creation, the Divine Artist produces ‘prints’ of the original masterpiece. All created realities contain in some way likenesses of the Trinity. Moreover, to continue the artistic terminology, when we contemplate the work of an artist, we are able to learn something about the artist. The artist is expressed in some way in the work of art. For Bonaventure, the world is God’s work of art. As such, it expresses the life of the author and so contains within itself reflections of the life of God, the life of the Trinity. In contemplating God’s work of art, therefore, we are able to learn something about God.

Pope Francis draws on Bonaventure in stressing the importance of this contemplative approach towards the world:

The ideal is to discover God in all things. Saint Bonaventure teaches us that “contemplation deepens the more we feel the working of God’s grace within our hearts, and the better we learn to encounter God in creatures outside ourselves.” (2 *Sentences* 23, 2,3) [*Laudato Si’* 233]

 Bonaventure writes in the *Breviloquium:*

The created world is like a book in which its Maker, the Trinity, shines forth, is represented, and can be read. (2.12)

And again:

The universe is like a beautifully composed poem in which every mind may discover, through the succession of events, the diversity, multiplicity and beauty of the countless divine decrees that proceed from God’s wisdom ruling the universe. (Prologue 2.4)

In Ch 1 of the *Itinerarium,*

The beauty of things clearly proclaims the power, wisdom and goodness of God. Therefore, whoever is not enlightened by such great beauty in created things cannot see; whoever is not awakened by such outcries cannot hear, whoever does not praise God through all that He has created cannot speak, whoever does not discover God from such clear signs lacks wisdom. (*Itinerarium* 1. 14,15)

Again, the importance of Bonaventure’s insight is stressed by Pope Francis:

Saint Bonaventure went so far as to say that human beings, before sin, were able to see how each creature “testifies that God is three”. The reflection of the Trinity was there to be recognised in nature “when that book was open to man and our eyes had not yet become darkened”. (*Disputed Questions on the Mystery of the Trinity* 1,2 concl.). The Franciscan saint teaches us that each creature bears in itself a specifically Trinitarian structure, so real that it could be readily contemplated if only the human gaze were not so partial, dark and fragile. In this way, he points out to us the challenge of trying to read reality in a Trinitarian key. [*Laudato Si’* 239]

This is so true of Bonaventure since Bonaventure’s theology, as did the experience of Francis, begins with God and sees all else from there. God is the Trinitarian God, the God who is active relationships of goodness and love. Creation is an ecstatic outpouring of the divine goodness. Just as Francis experienced creation as a reflection of the divine goodness and beauty and praised God through creation, so did Bonaventure’s theology speak of all created realities as divine symbols, since they contained within themselves traces of their divine origin.

This is important in terms of the way we relate to the natural world. When one approaches the entities of this world in a spirit of *contemplatio* - contemplation, to ‘gaze at’, evoking an attitude of reverence and awe towards that which one contemplates - it becomes possible to accept the realities encountered in experience in their full significance as realities which are symbols of the divine presence.

Through contemplating the world, we come to value the world. That which I value is also that which I desire. Desire draws me out of myself towards the object of my desire. So once again, we have the experience of ecstasy. And so this knowledge of the word which is ecstatic knowledge of the world, not simply scientific knowledge about the world, is the knowledge which applies to the experience of beauty. It brings me to value the world as beautiful and so to care for and reverence the world.

So , of what relevance is this for today? The Scottish philosopher John Macmurray maintains that our modern age propagates a bias in favour of the intellect against feeling or desire (*affectus*). This, he insists, is the root cause of our contemporary malaise. We have developed our intellectual powers to an enormous extent and so have produced a complex and powerful machinery of life. But we have neglected to develop our feelings. Emotionally, we remain as children. And so it is children who are behind the wheel and driving this very powerful machine - and we are afraid of the consequences. Macmurray goes on to argue that what is necessary above all is for modern society to rediscover the feeling for beauty:

If we want to make the world better, the main thing we have to do is to make it more beautiful. We have to rediscover the sense of beauty if we are not to lose our freedom. (*Freedom in the Modern World* p.218)

Macmurray wrote against the background of the violence and destruction wrought during World War 2. War reveals that a fundamental rupture has occurred in the fundamental relationships that should characterise harmonious life: with God, with our neighbour and with earth itself. Pope Francis claims in *Laudato Si’* that the continuing violence that is a mark of contemporary life likewise demonstrates this fundamental rupture. Francis and Bonaventure call for the healing of this rupture and the restoration of right relationships.

It is significant that the harmony which Saint Francis of Assisi experienced with all creatures was seen as a healing of that rupture. Saint Bonaventure held that, “…through universal reconciliation with every creature, refashioned Francis to the state of original innocence.” (*Major Legend of St Francis* VIII, 1) [*Laudato Si’* 66]

Relationship is central to Bonaventure’s theory of knowledge. His inclusion of the concepts of *sapientia* and *ecstasis* as integral to any theory of knowledge widens a purely intellectual understanding of knowledge to incorporate notions which speak of engagement, relationship, desire and love. We come to know our world not simply as an impassive object out there but rather as that with which we enter into relationship, as that with which we are engaged.

Such an understanding of our knowledge of the world can help to provide an antidote to what have been termed the negative and destructive effects of *disengagement*. Disengagement views the human person as the investigator observing the environment from a completely detached point of view. If disengagement becomes the model for human interaction with the world, it becomes destructive.

Disengagement objectifies the other, treats the other as object rather than subject. This is the attitude which allowed the atrocities of the Nazi concentration camps and other such atrocities. It lay behind the disregard for human lives that resulted in London’s Grenfell Tower fire last year, largely caused by the fact that human beings were objectified, were looked upon merely as economic components in the drive to maximise profits – and seventy-one people lost their lives, hundreds of families were left bereft and dislocated. What is simply seen as an object can be kicked around and discarded. It is this attitude of disengagement that is the root cause of so many of our humanitarian and ecological problems.

Why does it appear that we have lost the sense of beauty? Many people today seem convinced that we can classify as meaningful only that which is rational, and rational discussion can be carried on only by means of scientific language, that is, language drawn from the natural sciences. The biologist, and one of the leading protagonists of contemporary atheism, Richard Dawkins, expresses such a conviction in this way:

Life is just bytes and bytes and bytes of digital information. (*River out of Eden* p.19)

Consequently, the ‘problem’ of the human person, or the ‘problem of consciousness’ essentially becomes one of devising a scientific theory of consciousness, and the challenge becomes one of offering a total explanation of the human person in materialistic terms. Materialism has little place for beauty.

Human beings are rational, but ‘rational’ is not to be identified with reasoning. Nor, as Bonaventure has indicated, is knowledge to be equated only with scientific knowledge. We are rational because we are embodied beings who transact meanings. Yes, we are material because we are necessarily bodily. But the meaning of being bodily in a human way is to speak the language of meaning, a language that finds its most powerful expression not in objective scientific terms but in the language of beauty, the language of poetry and music, the language of feeling.

Pope Francis reminds us of this in *Laudato Si’:*

St Francis helps us to see that an integral ecology calls for openness to categories which transcend the language of mathematics and biology and take us to the heart of what it is to be human.

He goes on in the same section of the Encyclical to include reference to Bonaventure:

Francis’ response to the world around him was so much more than intellectual appreciation or economic calculus, for to him every creature was a sister united to him by bonds of affection. That is why he felt called to care for all that exists. His disciple Saint Bonaventure tells us that “from a reflection on the primary source of all things, filled with even more abundant piety, he would call creatures, no matter how small, by the name of ‘brother’ or ‘sister’.” (*Major Legend of St Francis* VIII,6). Such a conviction cannot be written off as naïve romanticism, for it affects the choices which determine our behaviour. If we approach nature and the environment without this openness to awe and wonder, if we no longer speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world, our attitude will be that of masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their immediate needs…. The poverty and austerity of Saint Francis were no mere veneer of asceticism, but something much more radical: a refusal to turn reality into an object simply to be used and controlled. (*Laudato Si’* 11)

This is why the experience of the world of the Beautiful, so passionately embraced by Francis and Bonaventure, is important in an age which is realizing that a materialistic view of the human person is deficient in that it does not and cannot respond to the deepest aspirations of the human heart. By treating the human person as object, materialism has nothing at all to say about the human person as subject, about the fact that human beings are not simply machines which calculate, but beings endowed with responsibilities, beings who as subjects enter into relationships with other subjects, beings who are able to experience beauty, who are the source of poetry and music and who reach beyond the materialistic towards symphonies of transcendence.