#### **JOY IN THE DISCOVERY OF GOD WITHIN *Part One***

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When you search for me, you will find me;

When you search wholeheartedly for me, I shall let you find me.

– Jeremiah 29:13

Discovering the image of God within through contemplation of the inner self, St Augustine made this his method in his great spiritual classic, the *Confessions*. For Augustine, knowledge of what is really true goes inwards rather than outwards through the senses. To discover the truth, one must enter into oneself and know oneself there.

Do not go abroad. Return within yourself. Truth dwells in the inner self. (*De vera religione*

XXXIX, 72)

Bonaventure, in the *Itinerarium:*

Entering into our very selves, we should strive to see God through a mirror. Here the light of truth, as from a candelabrum, glows upon the face of our mind, in which the image of the most blessed Trinity shines in splendour. (*Itinerarium* 3.1)

Rays of light shine down upon our soul from the Eternal Light

And so our soul,

illumined and flooded by such brilliance can be led through itself

to contemplate that Eternal Light. The radiation and contemplation of this Light

lifts up the wise in wonder. Thus the prophecy is fulfilled, ‘Lord, you enlighten wonderfully from the eternal hills.’(Ps.75.5)

(*Itinerarium* 4.7)

Thomas Merton writes that when we find our true self we find God, and when we find God we find our true self. ‘Know thyself’ is an ancient adage, Shakespeare challenges us ‘To thine own self be true and it must follow as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to anyone. (*Hamlet* Act 1. Sc. 3).

Perhaps in the later part of the twentieth century, ‘knowing yourself’ went a bit crazy with some people spending most of their time and energy running off to T- Groups, encounter groups, love-in groups of all kinds. Even to Primal Scream groups, whose screams made La Verna over one weekend I was there in the late 80s, sound like the London Dungeon, where you hear the replicates of the screams of those poor unfortunates from a few hundred years ago who were sentenced to be racked or hanged, drawn and quartered or tortured in some other sinister way.

But given that things can be taken to an extreme, and this applies to most things, that does not negate the value of the insight, long affirmed within Christian spirituality, that an important part of the religious journey is to seek to know oneself. But what is involved in seeking to know oneself? I think the operative word here is ‘to know’. And we might ask the question, ‘what does it mean to know’?

St Bonaventure offers some interesting insights here. In one of his works entitled *Disputed Questions on the Knowledge of Christ,* he employs three different ways in which we can speak about knowledge or knowing. The first way he uses the term *scientia. Scientia* is the term employed to speak about the knowledge which is gained when we use our ability to reason to reflect upon our experience of the world. This is the knowledge which pertains to the intellect, intellectual or scientific knowledge.

It is important to note that in medieval times, the word *scientia* also had a more precise technical meaning which was that of reasoning that goes from premises to a conclusion or, more pointedly, from the known to the unknown. This would be in keeping with Bonaventure’s conviction that the world has a sacred dimension and the human person has a capacity for the infinite.

Bonaventure stressed the great importance of *scientia* in the religious quest. In his work *On the Reduction of the Arts to Theology,* he includes all of the intellectual disciplines then taught at the University as ways in which we can come to grow in knowledge of God.

And so it is evident how the manifold wisdom of God, which is clearly revealed in sacred Scripture, lies hidden in all knowledge and in all nature… It is likewise clear how wide the illuminative way may be, and how the divine reality itself lies hidden within everything which is perceived or known.

So our intellectual knowledge is important in the religious journey and in coming to know oneself. It is good to use our intellect for this, in our reading, our reflecting, our study, our work. All of these are part of who we are and when seen in the proper perspective can move us along in our religious journey. They can enable us to enter into new horizons, they can help us prevent becoming ossified, stuck in a rut. They can lead us to encounter new possibilities, they can give birth in us to new dreams and visions. God’s wisdom is not limited, it is manifold, and we can never claim to have solved it all.

Yes, for Bonaventure, intellectual knowledge is important, but it is not the last word that can be said about knowledge or knowing. Indeed, it is but the first step along a way. If we remain locked in the belief that the human intellect can produce the highest knowledge, then we begin to worship idols. We are tempted to that most ancient of sins, the sin of pride, the sin of Adam and Eve when by their own efforts they sought to be equal to God. They refused to worship, that is, to acknowledge their dependence, they worshipped the god of self rather than the true God.

Pride, self-sufficiency, says Bonaventure, is the source of all sin. And we can all be tempted by pride, to place ourselves, not God, at the centre, to say ‘I am greater than’ rather than to say ‘I am part of’. I like the words of Chesterton,

Thank God for hard stones; thank God for hard facts; thank God for thorns and rocks and deserts and long winters. At least I know now that I am not the best or strongest thing in the world.

And that gives us a tremendous freedom. I don’t need to be the greatest or the best. I don’t need to be the one responsible for saving the world. God alone saves. What I can do is to humbly play my part, to be part of, and leave the rest to God.