

# St. Bonaventure's Seraphic Spirituality, June 17-22, 2012

## Introduction

### A Sketch of Bonaventure's Life

St. Bonaventure was baptized Giovanni di Fidanza the day he was born in 1221. He died in 1274. During these 53 years, his angelic contemplative prayer invigorated his dynamic spiritual service. First he earned his master of arts at the University of Paris, then he joined the Franciscans. After further study, he taught theology. He and St. Thomas Aquinas were great friends and mutual supporters. When the Franciscans encountered grave troubles from some excesses of zeal, they elected Bonaventure to lead them. His angelic order cured their raw spiritual energy. The Pope chose Bonaventure to be bishop of Albano. His success encouraged the Pope to create him cardinal. When the red hat of this office arrived, Bonaventure was washing dishes. The Papal Legate asked where he should put the hat. Bonaventure replied: on that nearby bush. Pope Sixtus IV canonized Bonaventure in 1482 because of many miracles worked through his intercession. About 50 years later, Sixtus V declared Bonaventure a Doctor of the Church. This doctorate honors his teaching of divine love, and recommends him as our instructor on our way to God. In 2,000 years, the Church has recommended only 33 doctors for us.

Perhaps you recall that Seraphs are angels who excel in loving God. Among men, Bonaventure excelled at loving God, and at teaching us to love Love Himself. So St. Bonaventure is the Seraphic Doctor. His outstanding love encourages us to follow Jesus, Who is Love in the flesh. First St. Bonaventure excelled at loving, then he taught us how to move toward God by accepting Love, and by loving in return. We will review most of Bonaventure's major teaching in *The Mind's Journey to God*. Then we'll review some parts of his other books.

### His Teaching Expands Our Common Experience

Personal experience shows us that our journey to God is more adventurous than we can describe. We can't say what we live. Too much happens. Words, images, and symbols fail to express our experience. When we try to describe God's love, we fail miserably. That's why most of us say nothing about love. Spiritual geniuses, like St. Bonaventure (B for short), amaze us by finding words that jolt us to recognize God's love. Their inspired description of God's love make us say: "that's it; that's what I've experienced". They find striking symbols to represent God's gift of love, and our response. Their symbols startle us to recognize God's loving interaction. For example, B calls Jesus "the door", representing openness, invitation to God, from God, and in God. Indeed Christ opens the door to God's love, letting it flow to us and attract us to Him. We quickly insist: but I don't love God enough. True. But B reminds us that God also supplies love for us. God pours forth love. As B puts it "All of this (loving union) is accomplished by a most sincere love of Christ which 'is poured forth in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, which has been given to us', Rom 5:5, without whom we cannot know the secret things of God." This is on page 93 of *Journey*. Here B uses water to symbolize Love's flow.

Symbols inspire saints, who pass them on to inspire us. But no symbol is enough. Therefore spiritual masters use many symbols. They shift from one to another, as B did from door to water. One master develops one set of symbols, and another refines another set. This difference is necessary, because spiritual experience exceeds expression. Each symbol points in the right direction, but falls short. B's symbols express his experience, which is like ours. His symbols are strange at first. But as we learn them, they communicate God's infinite love. We enjoy several symbols of God's love, because no single one does the job. For a while, one saint's symbol thrills us. When the thrill fades, we move on to another symbol. All saints get to God. Some leave travel-guides for us. We're grateful for all the help we can get. What inspired B to use his symbols?

### Bonaventure's (B's) Inspiration

St. Francis of Assisi inspired B by curing him of an illness. That got B's attention. Cures arouse us. B's bodily cure thrilled through his entire being. Jesus used the same method; He taught by miracles. He revealed God to us by cures, because we are spirits-in-flesh. We are incarnate spirits. We are spirited flesh. I am my body.

I am my soul. I can consider each separately, but my life is their union. So a bodily cure touches my whole being. Each saint insists that all cures come from Jesus. Each cure shows Jesus loving us. His curing love inspired folks then, and inspires us today. So Christ is our Major Guide to Love. But He invites us to be minor guides, in His image. St. Francis was so dynamic an image of Jesus that people called him the mirror of Christ. To look at St. Francis was to see Jesus. Christ inspires us first, and most perfectly, but St. Francis imitated Jesus so completely that he bled from the same wounds (stigmata). So he inspired millions of people, down 7 centuries to us. St. Francis breathes Christ-life into us. But he didn't leave written directions to God. B writes striking descriptions of St. Francis' Seraphic love, and how to follow. It's a chain reaction from Jesus through St. Francis to B.

St. Francis died when B was 9 years old. Probably, they never met. B's mother was very devoted to St. Francis, and implored him to cure her son. Inspired by this cure, B followed St. Francis closely, becoming a Franciscan. Among the travel-guides that B left us, the luminous biography of St. Francis is most clear. B shows how St. Francis lived Christ-life so entirely that he inspired thousands. This communal network of open souls shines the light of Christ upon the world. St. Francis was especially luminous, shining Christ-light so vividly that thousands of men followed him to Jesus. B, thus illumined, shines for us through his written words.

Light fascinates us. Somehow, it reminds us of its Creator. As it shines in its limited way, so God shines infinitely. As it warms us somewhat, so God warms us without end. Light is not God, but represents Him so well that its sparkle attracts us to Uncreated Light. B uses this symbol of light often. He shows us that as God's image, we somehow partake of Light Eternal. Most obviously, we receive Light, and reflect Him to our neighbors. St. Francis was a fine mirror, reflecting Light totally. Our mirrors may be dusty. The more we clean our mirrors, the more completely we reflect God. St. Francis' mirror was exceptionally clean. So was B's.

While mirror is a helpful symbol, it emphasizes reflection. So it neglects absorption. Uncreated Light invigorates us because we absorb it. God's light both enlivens and shines through us. B noticed how light fills clear glass as it passes through. This clear-glass-symbol fills in what mirror-symbol misses. But neither symbol matches your experience of God enlightening your soul. In spite of these failures, these symbols encourage us towards God. From these simple starting examples, we can move directly to B's book.

### **Bonaventure's *Journey of the Mind Into God***

B's book is a masterpiece of Latin prose. Since we don't speak Latin, we need a translation. Because B's message is so vital, many people translated his book. We use Ewart Cousins' *Bonaventure*, published by Paulist Press. It is one of their *Classics of Western Spirituality* series. B excels at grouping parallel statements into one long sentence. For example, his opening sentence uses 138 Latin words. The official Franciscan translation uses 171 English words for that sentence. Most of us don't like long sentences. No wonder that most people stop reading. So Ewart Cousins breaks these long sentences into separate lines that make sense standing alone. That helps. It is easier to follow, more readable, but still requires effort. If this reading is hard for you, encourage yourself to break B's code. The spiritual rewards are worth your work. Remember that B imitates St. Francis, who imitates Jesus, Who reveals God to us. These steps help us decode B's book.

Another help is God's unity with us. Each of us experiences God's love making us one with Him. None of us can express these experiences fully. In his *Life of St. Francis*, B says: "the true love of Christ had transformed his lover (St. Francis) into His image". This is a shining example of inspiration. B shows that Jesus-love is the transforming power. Christ-love changes us (transforms). Jesus takes us to Himself. We start alienated from God, separated by sin. By sin we project our false selves into public struggle. We call it competition. This frustrating fight may look good to teenagers, but adults want more. Deep down inside, we all want Christ-love to transform us into Him. We all want union with God. Jesus came to unite us. B wrote this book to help us become one with Christ. We read this book to accept transformation. B begins with a prayer, on page 53.

"In the beginning, I call upon the First Beginning, from whom all illuminations descend as from the Father of Lights, from Whom comes every good and every perfect gift." B invokes God, the First Beginning, the

Illuminator, the Father of Lights, to enlighten him, and all who read this book. We hear echoes of Scripture here. B refers to Gen 1:1, John 1:1, and James 1:17. B lived Scripture so entirely that he wove the Good Book into his statements. This intimate connection helps us vibrate in harmony with the Word of God. Our beloved scriptural images surge forth in this prayer. B shines Scripture into almost all he writes. Mr. Cousins, the translator, separates this phrase from B's long sentence. Separation gives us English short-shots. But we lose the original rich expression. We miss the beautiful parallels of balanced phrases throughout B's 138 Latin words. It's a trade that pays off; a small price to pay to learn B's luminous symbols. His message survives all translations.

B's meaning radiates the more we review his message. First we see his request for light from Light Himself. In this opening prayer, light beams forth. Scripture illuminates this first sentence like an ocean of glistening truth. Dive into this ocean to absorb light. This first statement is incandescent. We can't say enough because the light exceeds our vision. Mystics insist that so much light blinds us. That's a fair statement because the lumens flowing from God plot out creatures we usually see. B calls creatures "vestiges" of God because they are left over godliness from His creation. As usual, B's symbols fail to contain God. But they point to Him effectively. Another pointer is sound: God peals forth everywhere. Compare these two symbols. Light suggests how Everlasting Love streams forth from the Illuminator. Sound echoes how the Eternal Word springs forth from the Speaker. Neither symbol suffices, but each lead us to profound spiritual insights.

B then invokes Our Lord, Our Lady, and St. Francis to provide peace. In peace he contemplates God's glory. St. Francis often retired from noisy people, seeking peace in solitude. Following St. Francis, B went to Mount La Verna, to the very cave where St. Francis saw a vision of the six-winged Seraph in the form of Christ crucified. That Seraph symbolizes both St. Francis' rapture in prayer, and the way to advance into rapture. After achieving peace there, B accepted an unspeakable inspiration. This flood of God's grace overwhelms all expression. But Seraphic love flows through B so completely that he realizes the mystic integration of peace, joy, and fulfillment. Seraphs were famous for living this integrated love. At that time, ordinary people knew and interacted with Seraphs. Today, to us, Seraphs are strangers. So we must stretch to synchronize with this symbol.

Perhaps it helps to review Isaiah's experience with Seraphs, or Seraphim (Hebrew plural form). Isaiah 6:2 tells us: "Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew." Wings symbolize swift flight. Just as love instantly unites lovers, so wings enable birds to zip to their beloved chicks. Seraphim love more intensely than other angels, so their love unites them more entirely with God. Six wings suggest faster flight to God. But God is so pure, so holy, that not even angels deserve to behold Him. To symbolize that fact, two wings cover the Seraph's face. No creature, not even a totally spiritual angel, deserves God's love. So two wings cover the symbol of his creation: his feet. But the other two wings fly directly to God by angelic love. God's great glory shines through these symbols because of His creative success. He created these angels to love Him, and they do, with surpassing Seraphic love.

Angels are pure spirits. Spirits have no parts. But we bodily spirits use visible parts to imagine Seraphs. Years of trying show that this winged image is the best symbol we can make. Common people loved angels, prayed to them regularly, and used a variety of images for them. Artists of the 1200's expressed these familiar friends in flowery ways. St. Francis directly interacted with Seraphs, and inspired his followers to follow suit.

Seraphs entirely glorify God, as Is 6:3 notes: "And one called out to another and said, 'Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts; The whole earth is full of His glory.'" Isaiah's experience of seraphim led him to lament that he was unworthy to proclaim God's word. So God purified him. In 6:4-7: "And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke. Then I said, 'Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.' Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs. He touched my mouth *with it* and said, 'Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven.'"

This passage emphasizes how angels serve God. They carry messages from Him to us. They bridge the gap between Infinite Divinity and finite humanity. They also keep sub-human creation on track, guiding galaxies and pushing planets. Our ancestors saw all this quite clearly. They developed extensive expositions of angelic activity. From a couple centuries BC through to about 1600 AD, Seraphim were familiar figures. Hopefully, this Scripture reflection helps us see how these angels, specializing in loving God, inspired Franciscans.

In his retreat at La Verna, B united so closely with St. Francis that the simplicity of love shone through him. Love's flow to B reminds us that Seraphs share their exalted love with us. Their union surpasses our unity with God. But love is the same kind of thing in both angels and men. The degree differs, but not the kind. How encouraging! A bit of reflection reminds us that various earthly loves are basically the same. Humans develop, step by step, into deeper love. We use the word love for so many things that we need clarification. B and we mean that love is personal spiritual union. Willing, or deciding, is the way that spirits unite. Two persons have two different wills. So they can choose different things, and usually do. If they choose the same thing, their wills unite. By complete union one person wills what the other person wills, in order to be one with that person. For humans to both will to have lunch together, to do each other's will, is a minor act of love. Because we humans advance step-by-step, developing by individual decisions, our love grows in steps. We can step forward to greater personal union, or away to less union, with each step we take. For us spiritual union is gradual.

You probably remember learning to love your family. Mom was the heartbeat of love for dad and kids. She loved you so much that she changed your dirty diapers. Her care for you, especially when you fouled your Pampers, illustrates love. She overlooked the stench to comfort you. The more she united with your little will to make you comfortable, the more she loved you. As you gradually learned her love, you yearned to respond. Your attempts to love were funny, like crude crayon hearts, and fading dandelion flowers. But you offered them with all your heart, and she accepted with all her heart. By such steps she and you grew more loving. Hopefully, this process continued and expanded, so that your love extended to more humans. From there you could learn to love God, the angels, and the saints. Each of these loves is the same kind. With practice, you love more entirely. Always, love is willing what the beloved wills. The more your wills unite, the more you love. The more you commit to love, the more love improves everything about you. Love spiritualizes you, enabling you to get beyond all bodily interests. To love is to become the beloved so much that you disappear into the other. Then your delight is to delight your beloved. God is the Great Love. He creates us to join His everlasting love. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost love each other perfectly. They create us to approach perfect love. Though we never attain perfection, we love to go in that direction. We have all eternity to grow in Love.

Peace enables us to look past disturbances to God's love, which increases peace. The two reinforce each other, peace enabling love, which enables peace. Material things just sit upon each other, often knocking against each other. But spiritual things interact like peace and love. They intermingle, and unite. So B invokes a unity of peace and love. St. Francis announced peace always. In contemplation, Francis experienced such profound peace that he sighed for that ecstasy again. First Francis accepted God's peace, then he dissolved in it. This ecstasis is standing outside himself. It's a foretaste of heaven. No wonder he sighed for peace when his ecstasy ended. Contemplative prayer is so much like heaven that it's fair to say the person is rapt out of this life toward God. We experience this gift now and then, so we sigh to get there again. Ecstatic peace is our share of God's own peace, given as a great gift from the Great Giver. B experienced a similar ecstasy in Francis' cave.

This divine gift reminded B of several scriptural passages, mentioned on p 54. Rather than go into them, we note that B lives Scripture so intensely that it flashed forth from him often. B sought peace so ardently that his spirit panted. To pant is to breathe heavily. You're right that no spirit breathes, but its excited desire for peace is like panting. B tells the history of his going to La Verna, because the Franciscans elected him their leader, and asked him to write a definitive biography of St. Francis. Considering himself a sinner, unworthy of these tasks, B sought peace and inspiration in St. Francis' cave. Peace flooded his soul, and inspiration struck in a vision very like St. Francis' own. This vision radiated the insight that love is both rapture and the road to rap-

ture. By these beams, B became radioactive. He accepted divine rays from God. The Ultimate Source of love loves to use intermediate sources, like St. Francis, making him a conduit for love from Love.

“The 6 wings of the Seraph can rightly be taken to symbolize 6 levels of illumination by which, as if by steps or stages, a soul can pass over to peace through ecstatic elevations of Christian wisdom. There is no other path but through the burning love of the Crucified, a love which so transformed Paul into Christ when he ‘was carried up to the 3<sup>rd</sup> heaven’, 2 Cor 12:2, that he could say: ‘With Christ I am nailed to the cross. I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me’, Gal 2:20. This love so absorbed the soul of Francis that his spirit shone through his flesh when for two years before his death he carried in his body the sacred stigmata of the passion.” Page 55.

Expanding a bit on B’s words, we recall that we go step by step toward God. Along this path, God illuminates us in different ways. The six steps are: 1) start cleansing ourselves from sin; 2) advanced cleansing; 3) God starts illuminating our minds; 4) advanced illumination; 5) God starts uniting us with Him’ 6) advanced unification. Christian wisdom is advancing unison of love with Love. Singing in unison is wonderful, but living in unison with God is better. Our deepest desire is to be in unison. These six steps advance us toward the One. Perhaps you remember that some spiritual writers call cleansing purgation. The three major stages of Christian wisdom are different stages toward union with God. The usual way to list them is: 1) purgation; 2) illumination; 3) union. B used different terms: 1) vestiges; 2) images; 3) similarity. His original way to express these stages is not immediately clear. So we need a clarifying note, to show how enlightening these terms are.

B emphasizes that God leaves His fingerprints all over His creatures. These are vestiges of God. They must be there, because God creates out of nothing. There is nothing until God loves something into existence. Nothing but God could be visible in His creatures. Compared to Himself, what God leaves behind in critters is very small. So vestige is a good word for the marks left by the Creator. Unfortunately, we often love God’s vestige out of order. This is sin. For example, we could love God’s vestige in a member of the other sex. If we do so in order, we get to know that person during courtship, and may progress to marriage and family. That would be orderly love. Other well-known possibilities are out of order, for that person and for us. Too often we flame up to unite with God’s vestige on our own terms. Then we discover how harmful that sin is. We need to cleanse our interactions with God’s vestiges. That’s its common name is the purgative stage. B shows that the positive part of purgation is our advance up a ladder of creatures, going from small vestige to larger, to God Himself.

Similarly, B calls the second stage “image” because we advance stepwise from lesser to better images on our way to God. This is the illuminative stage, during which our images improve by being better lit. God illuminates us, or improves our images.

B’s word for the third stage is similarity, because we become more similar to God as He draws us to union, which is the usual word for this stage. We do some purging, or cleansing, but God does the illuminating and unifying. True wisdom is attaining our goal: God. When he was young, B thought that some philosophers, like Plato, attained wisdom. The more he learned about Plato, the more difference he saw between him and saints. Eventually, B proposed that only Jesus bridges the gap between knowledge and wisdom. In Christ, we receive light and accept union. These 3 stages each have two steps: begin, and advance, totaling 6 steps. All steps are love. Love drives every act. Beginning, or initiating, is typically masculine. Advancing in love, bringing it to completion is typically feminine. Just as God is the unity of all Good, so man unifies fragments as love matures. Sometimes these fragments seem to be opposites, like male and female. Love unifies, producing unison we could never imagine when we start our journey. B’s final image crowns his thought. The Seraph’s six wings symbolize exalted love of God, and the 6 steps to God. All approaches unison, and each step fits his plan.

Jesus illustrates this unison. He is the One in the flesh. He is God-man. So burning is his Love that he throws Himself into the holocaust of crucifixion for love of us. This overwhelms us. God dying for us stuns us. What gets us moving again after this stupefying event? Good example from fellow humans who let Jesus take them to God. So B reminds us that Paul followed Christ up to the third heaven. He got there because he agreed with Jesus, all the way to crucifixion with Him. Then Paul no longer lived in his limited human way, but Christ

lived in him, Rom 6:8. Similarly, St. Francis let Jesus live in him, all the way to spiritual crucifixion. This spiritual activity is invisible. But the 5 wounds in Paul and Francis, the stigmata, illustrated their union with Christ. Probably, we don't love Jesus enough to suffer these wounds. But we want to love Him more, and the success of Saints Paul and Francis encourages us. There's time; there are six steps to take toward advanced union.

Whatever stage of development we are in, we keep our eyes on Jesus. We follow as best we can. Our experience with Him is the most realistic of all. He is Reality Itself. Unison with Him is exactly what we need. Truly, we pant for unison. So B's account fits us perfectly. B tells us just what we need to hear. He continues: "The six wings of the Seraph, therefore, symbolize the six steps of illumination that begin from creatures, and lead up to God, Whom no one rightly enters except through the Crucified. For 'he who enters not through the door, but climbs up another way, is a thief & a robber.' But 'if anyone enter through this door, he will go in & out, & will find pastures', Jn 10: 1, 9. Therefore, John says in Apocalypse" 'Blessed are those who wash their robes in the blood of the Lamb, that they may have a right to the tree of life, and may enter the city through the gates', Apoc 22:14. It is as if John were saying that no one can enter the heavenly Jerusalem by contemplation unless he enter through the blood of the Lamb, as through a door. For no one is in any way disposed for divine contemplation that leads to mystical ecstasy unless, like Daniel, he is a 'man of desires', Dan 9:23. Such desires are enkindled in us in two ways: by an outcry of prayer that makes us 'call aloud in the groaning of our heart', Ps 37:9, & by the flash of insight by which the mind turns most directly & intently toward the rays of light." 55

Familiar messages shine here. In simpler terms: nothing created satisfies us. Only God will do. On our way from unsatisfactory creatures to God, many paths beckon. Christ is the way, truth, and life, Jn 14:6. His way gets to God. He is the door to our Source, represented by the sheepfold, or home. Home is where the heart is: safe and peaceful. It's where we started; where we belong. We call it heaven. It's unison with God. It's less a place than a way to be. If we freely decide to exist with God, then we're home. He desires us. Our ultimate desire is Him. Unfortunately, our present desires may stray to creatures. When we choose creatures, we frustrate our ultimate desire for God. Most of the time frustration devastates us. Now and then, we achieve some peace by choosing God. With practice, we become more peaceful. After purging desires for creatures, we desire God above all. When we desire nothing but God, we unite with Him completely. He then carries us across infinity, uniting us in heaven. All those steps are better expressed in symbols. Sheep are fine symbols for humans straying after illusions. Swirling dust panics them. Jesus is our shepherd, the door we go in & out. He gives His life for us, cleansing us of sin by his divine blood. Then we obtain the "tree of life", lost in Eden. It's a fine symbol of Life Himself. If, like Daniel, we really desire God, then we groan to unite with Him. To increase that godly desire, we pray, and we delight in light rays directly from God. B describes all this much more poetically. As we learn B's poetry, we can harmonize with him really. Then we can see through these words to God's light.

B continues: "First, therefore, I invite the reader to the groans of prayer through Christ crucified, through whose blood we are cleansed from the filth of vice. [The reader should] not believe that reading is sufficient without unction, speculation without devotion, investigation without wonder, observation without joy, work without piety, knowledge without love, understanding without humility, endeavor without divine grace, reflection as a mirror without divinely inspired wisdom." 55-56

Here B urges us to strive with all our might, a prosaic way to say "groans of prayer". Our need is so great that we must groan in agony. Christ's merits supply pain-relief. He paid the price of our sins. He established mercy for us sinners. When God the Father looks at us adopted children, He sees Jesus. Recognizing this redemption, we pray in Christ's name. His crucifixion paid our sin-debt. Poetically, His blood washes filthy sin away. B then provides many comparisons of opposites. First he compares superficial acts, like reading, to profound acts, like blessing (unction). We implore Jesus to bless us, to anoint us with the oil of healing. His divine inspiration enlivens our reading. Similarly, our thoughts, or speculation, skim along the surface of reality. But devotion, or full commitment to God, pierces the skin of events, to let God's light through. Thinking is good, but it's not enough. If we devote ourselves by engaging entirely, we become authentic. Then God can inspire us

more fully. As we read Scripture, and wonder about it, we seek deeper unction and devotion. When we investigate, we should open up like children to full wonder. When we observe, we should rejoice in God's gifts, and expect more joy from greater gifts. Eventually, we receive Gift Himself. Along the way, we must work. Sometimes, we work reluctantly, even resentfully, hating every step. Instead, we should work in piety, which is respect for God's gifts. Piety is just because it gives to God what we owe Him: complete gratitude. Accepting His gifts, our knowledge expands. Rather than pride ourselves on this knowledge, and show it off, we should love it. Especially, we should love Truth, Who shares Himself with us. Then we understand completely, with humility. After all, humility is truth. Then we endeavor with divine grace, accepting Gift as He gives Himself to us. When we clean our mind's mirror, we see more of what exists. Eventually, we see divinely inspired wisdom. In light of this description, go over this set of pairs again. They gradually sink in, and glow luminously in our minds, advancing our journey to God. Profound truths demand prayerful reflection.

B then describes people who are prepared to receive divinely inspired wisdom: "predisposed by divine grace, humble and pious, contrite and devout, anointed with the "oil of gladness", Ps 44:8, lovers of divine wisdom, inflamed with desire for it, wishing to give themselves to glorifying, wondering at, & even savoring God." As we pray these words our hearts overflow with joy. Echoes of scripture bounce around our minds. Memories of moments when we were close to God reappear. Anticipation of further delights gush into mind. As we let these images blossom, we rediscover enflamed desires for God. We agree with B. We should do that more often.

Then B affirms that we can't mirror God unless we wipe our mind clean. Then we can see a second mirror: external reality, reflecting God. There's this external mirror, and the inner, mental, mirror. With our interior mirror cleansed, our view of everything, external and internal, improves. "Therefore, man of God, first exercise yourself in remorse of conscience before you raise your eyes to the rays of Wisdom reflected in its mirrors, lest perhaps from gazing upon these rays you fall into a deeper pit of darkness." 56 B's symbol of the mirror strikes us. It reminds us to remove mental dirt that obscures our understanding. Throw pride away. Arrogance, that rips off God's gift of knowledge for ourselves alone, actually prevents learning. We do not create knowledge. We receive it, and should be grateful. Even if we know more than some poor neighbor, we do not "create" knowledge. We do not give meaning to things. Their meaning is their being, given when God created them. By gratitude, we see some of this meaning. Our thanks for His gift enables us to see ever more. Ultimately, what we see in creation's mirror is the Creator. What we see in our mirror, the image and likeness of God, is God Himself.

The "pit of darkness" that B refers to is pride. By pride we try to steal God's gift. Instead of gratefully accepting it as God lavishes it upon us, we claim to invent this gift ourselves. Noisy people propagandize that we "create meaning". Nonsense! We accept it as God showers it forth. Gratitude, rather than arrogance, is our correct attitude. Gratitude enables us to overcome temptation. Humility is the truth as it is. Humble people claim neither more nor less than what is. When tempted to look down upon neighbors, pray for their uplift instead. That is "remorse of conscience". Then "raise your eyes to the rays of Wisdom reflected in its mirrors".

By this prayer, B prepares us to accept God's light. He then describes his book, telling us about its well ordered chapters. There will be the prolog, then 1 chapter for each of the 6 steps toward God, finishing with a summary chapter on how God perfects the work that we begin. B then asks his readers to look beyond his writing defects to his good intentions. B aims at Truth, and arousing our love for God. Therefore, we should progress slowly, penetrating the words to see the symbols, then piercing these symbols to find meaning. That takes even longer. B recommends that we meditate upon "these considerations ... with the greatest care". 57

This prolog invites us to savor many meanings and values, if we "mull them over slowly". As usual, all important knowledge springs from wonder. Only then can we find, what's behind the words we read. B offers a prodigious treasure in this book. His guidelines are so well ordered & expressed, that thousands of people profit from his words. A fine example of this order is the next section of this prolog: the chapter headings. They provide an outline of our advance from ordinary experience of the world to extraordinary "Ecstasy". 58

Chapter one progresses, as B's scripture quote indicates, from this valley of tears on up by steps. Starting with common experience, B notes that happiness is enjoying the highest good. The highest good is not down here among creatures. It is above. "Above" does not mean further from the earth's center. Above means beyond material, up into spiritual being. Spiritual being is beyond space. Spirit escapes spatial limitation. When we try to "ascend" spiritually, we don't rise very far. Therefore, we know clearly that "we cannot rise above ourselves unless a higher power lift us up ... nothing will come of it (our interior progress) unless accompanied by divine aid." Fortunately, "divine aid is available to those who seek it from their hearts". 59

When B says "seek it from their hearts", he means "with all our hearts", or entirely, completely, without division. Stumbling through the valley of tears, we too often divide our hearts. That means we divide our desires, divide our decisions, or choose first one thing and then its opposite. Each decision unites us with what we choose. If I decide to drive, I become a driver. If I decide to park, I become a parker. Every day we make millions of such decisions. Most of them have no serious effect. But it's clear that my decision to cease driving ends my being a driver. Decisions to do something serious, like to pray daily, make me a serious pray-er. If I choose the opposite: to quit praying, I become a quitter. That's serious. That's important. B reminds us that we desire to make important decisions consistently. We should not tear ourselves apart by contradictions.

Naturally, decisions do not occupy space. They're spiritual. When we decide to speak truth instead of lie, our attachment to truth is not body-to-body. Nevertheless, our spiritual attachment is stronger than Superglue unites bodies. Choosing truth makes us true. Our decision identifies us with our choice. This spiritual unity changes our souls. Truthful souls are the opposite of lying souls. No material connection compares to transforming choice. Because we can't picture our spiritual decision, we picture our heart changing from divided to one. To say our heart is one, is to communicate better than to say that our decisions integrate. But our decisions do integrate us, not only internally, with ourselves, but externally with the being we choose. Ultimately, we want to decide for God, and integrate with Him. No better way exists to integrate with God than prayer. So B asks us to "humbly and devoutly ... through fervent prayer ... say to the Lord our God: Lead me, Lord, in your path, and I will enter in your truth. Let my heart rejoice that it may fear your name".

Then B explains how this prayer works. God wants to be one with us. We can't see oneness. So B uses the symbol of light. God engulfs us with light. But he respects our freedom. He will not shine upon us unless we freely ask. "By praying this way, we receive light to discern the steps of the ascent into God. In relation to our position in creation, the universe itself is a ladder by which we can ascend into God. Some created things are vestiges, others images; some are material, others spiritual; some are temporal, others everlasting; some are outside us, others within us." 60

B knows that comparisons intrigue us. So he provides a set of divisions that we made long ago. As kids we divided the universe up into what God created (vestiges) and pictures of these creatures (images). Some creatures occupy space (material), while others (spiritual) are not confined to space. Some traces of God come and go in time (temporal), while others remain forever (everlasting). Some creation is outside, and other inside us. As we ponder what B says, we connect his words to our experience. These examples encourage us to work on more difficult expressions, about more exalted interactions. That's what B does next.

"In order to contemplate the First Principle (God), who is most spiritual, eternal, and above us, we must pass through His vestiges, which are material, temporal and outside us. This means to be led in the path of God. We must also enter into our soul, which is God's image, everlasting, spiritual and within us. This means to enter in the truth of God. We must go beyond to what is eternal, most spiritual, and above us, by gazing upon the First Principle. This means to rejoice in the knowledge of God, and in reverent fear of His majesty, Ps 85:11." 60

First Principle is a fine name for God. As we trace what's happening in the universe, we see that some things are more important than others. Fathers and mothers produce children, so they are sources for kids. Principle refers to the Greek work *princeps*, or from the head, *cephalus*, or the source, or cause. Out there in reality, we find millions of causes, or sources, or principles. They show us that the ultimate cause is the First. It is First

because it is fullness of being. It couldn't possibly be caused. It is the necessary cause of all the rest. Everybody notices this First Cause. Somewhere around the age of seven, each person realized the necessity of God. Though we can confuse ourselves about this First Cause, it remains a beacon of light for us. It's the ultimate explanation of the universe. We love to contemplate the First Principle. After all, it's our Source and Destiny. All our gushing and sighing about God comes naturally. Because he created persons, He must be at least one person. As Jesus reveals, He is Three Persons. He's way beyond us, but we love His fascinating Person, Who loves us.

Remember the first person you loved; fascinating. You wondered, and were amazed. God's Persons are more wonderful, and we will spend eternity forever getting to know them. Because God is infinite, there's no end to Him, so heaven can't be boring. First we recognize God the Father, Who creates all that is. Our complete response to Him integrates knowledge, love, emotional affection, and bodily posture. Our entirety is body-soul, incarnate spirit. The First Principle created our entirety. It's free gift, and we owe it all back to Him. So B mentions the complete response range, from utmost spirit to bowing our bodies in "reverent fear of His majesty".

Reflecting the Three Persons, nature is loaded with trinities. B reminds us of "this threefold division" into the 1) path of God, 2) truth of God, and 3) knowledge of God. B becomes ecstatic over this trinity because it reminds him of many 3-fold events. He lists Moses leading Israel into the desert for a 3-day journey, Ex 3:18. Then: 3-fold daylight: evening, morning, and noon (in order of brightness), and 3-ways that creatures exist: in matter, in human mind, and in God's mind (Eternal Art), Gen 1:3. Christ provides 3-substantial aids: bodily, spiritual, and divine. As long as B is on trinities, he shows our image and likeness to God in 3-acts: sensation, spiritual, and mind. We see immediately that we do sense, and do generalize, or form concepts. Usually, we don't distinguish general pictures from general ideas. B used this further distinction to show our trinity of functions. For example, we see the material black cat. That sensation is different from our image of cat. The sensation is black, but the image is blank. Color doesn't matter for an image of cat. Size does not matter either, nor does specific shape. Each image is generalized, and therefore different from direct sensory knowledge. Finally, we distinguish the meaning of cat, which is more general than its image. This highly abstract intellecting sees beyond images to the cat's meaning. There are indeed three kinds of human knowing. Our little trinity imitates the Trinity. B finds this trinitarian arrangement almost everywhere. This vision reflects his continual conversation with the Three Persons. He loved interacting with them above all else. Therefore, he shared his joy in their company with everyone he met. Since his death, his writings extend this exuberant conversation to us.

B uses all these events and reflections "to ascend into God so as to love Him 'with our whole mind, with our whole heart, and with our whole soul', Mk 12:30, Mat 22:37, Lk 10:27. In this consists both perfect observance of the Law and Christian wisdom". His preaching was effective because of his practice. He then shows why the basic 3 steps expand into six. "Any one of these ways can be doubled, according to whether we consider God as the 'Alpha or the Omega', Apoc 1:8. B means God as start and God as end. So we can double each step by considering the start of each as a first step. Advancing from the start to the finish is the next step. Alpha is the first letter of the Greek alphabet, while omega is the last. Alpha stands for starting, and omega for finishing. B reminds us that our love yearns for God, and drives us toward Him. Once we purge away loves for creatures, our love flames up, our yearning increases, uniting us more to God. Following Christ gets us so close that we begin to live God's life. We live as the Trinity lives, in Love. So fascinating is this 6-step progress, that Scripture often uses 6 steps to express our journey to God. For example, the 6 steps to Solomon's throne, 3 Kings 10:19. Isaiah saw 6 Seraphim wings, Isa 6:2. God called Moses for 6 days "from the midst of the cloud", Ex 24:16. "After 6 days, Jesus led his disciples up a mountain, and was transfigured before them", Mat 17:1-2.

Probably, B's description convinced us: there are 6 steps. So we can skip his other examples. On page 62, B summarizes our history from the Garden of Eden to now. Here's a quick sketch. God created Adam and Eve. They were completely innocent. They sinned by disobeying God, seeking a shortcut to Him instead of following His directions. Jesus, the new Adam, followed the Father's directions, washed away all sin, and lifts us battered beings up into God. If we agree, "from a pure heart and a good conscience and faith unfeigned," 1 Tim

1:5, we journey from here to God. Christ opens theology to us by being revelation in the flesh. Now we can look at Him, and begin to read His life. B reminds us that we read in three ways: symbolic, literal, and mystical. If we do, the symbolic shows us right use of sensible things. The literal shows us right use of intelligible things, and the mystical lifts us above to ecstasy. 63 These unusual ideas stretch us, so B elaborates.

“Whoever wishes to ascend to God must first avoid sin, which deforms our nature, then exercise his natural powers mentioned above: by praying, to receive restoring grace; by a good life, to receive purifying justice; by meditating, to receive illuminating knowledge; and by contemplating, to receive perfecting wisdom. Just as no one comes to wisdom except through grace, justice, and knowledge, so no one comes to contemplation except by penetrating meditation, a holy life, and devout prayer. Since grace is the foundation of the rectitude of the will, and of the penetrating light of reason, we must first pray, then live holy lives, and thirdly concentrate our attention upon the reflections of truth. By concentrating there, we must ascend step by step until we reach the height of the mountain ‘where the God of gods is seen in Sion’, Ps 83:8.” 63

B summarizes our stepwise ascent. First we must avoid sin, which cripples us, preventing our journey to God. By praying, we freely decide to unite with God. God unites with us by giving His life, making us like Him in sanctifying us. Grace restores us to relative innocence. That relative purity advances us to better choices, that are more just. Our efforts please God, Who provides more sanctifying grace. In response, we become more pure, and advance closer to God. The cleaner we are, the more God attracts us. If God were a magnet, and we were iron, He would draw us closer as we cleansed mud away. The cleaner we get, the more we see how attractive God is. God attracts us by the gift of His life (grace), which we use to live more justly. Both grace and justice increase our knowledge. All knowledge goes eventually to God, so knowledge-light illumines us more entirely every step of the way. Meditation, prayer, and a holy life are another trinity of combined efforts leading to the Light which God is. Our advance is step by step, as if climbing a mountain. Sion is that mountain in Scripture. So it is a fine symbol for our climb to God. Fortunately for us, all this is familiar, and encouraging.

For this familiar climb, B uses the image of Jacob’s ladder. “Since we must ascend Jacob’s ladder before we descend it, let us place our first step in the ascent at the bottom, presenting to ourselves the whole material world as a mirror through which we may pass over to God, the supreme Craftsman. Thus we shall be true Hebrews passing over Egypt to the land promised to their fathers (Exod 13:33f). We shall also be Christians passing over with Christ ‘from this world to the Father,’ Jn 13:1. Jesus Himself says that we shall be like angels going up and down the ladder, Jn 1:51. The difference between the two Testaments is that the Old promises, while the New provides. The Old commands our efforts, which God blesses now and then with earthly rewards. The New provides God-in-the-flesh, Who is our ladder. He connects this vale of tears with heaven. He is the Word of God, His Wisdom. If we love Wisdom, He will provide what He promised: “Pass over to me all who long for me, and be filled with my fruits”, Eccl 23:26. “For from the greatness and beauty of created things, their Creator can be seen and known”, Wis 13:5.” 63 This vast view takes our breath away. Helpfully, B provides other steps.

On his way back to the Promised Land, Jacob dreamt of angels going up to heaven and coming back down on ladders, Gen 28:12. This moving picture represents angels taking our prayers to God, and returning with His blessings. Since angels are pure spirits, they don’t need ladders, but we need this picture. Over thousands of years, thousands of people profited from this picture of ladders. We’re all shackled slaves in foreign countries, like Israel in Egypt. Everywhere we’re oppressed by sinful men, making innocent people suffer. As B says, the world around us mirrors our desperation. Admitting our misery is the first step out of it. That’s the mirror’s negative contribution. Positively, we see wonders showing how masterly our Creator is. Scripture traces the major themes of reality, skipping unreliable details. Ever since Eden, sin has tormented us. Realistic views reveal our sad condition, and our urgent need to escape sin’s slavery. Where is that ladder? We want to climb it out of Egypt into heaven. It’s our way from slavery to the Promised Land.

Christ is this ladder. He came down from heaven to be one of us. He took all sin upon His innocent Self. His blood on Calvary washed sin away. Join Him to pass over from this world to the Father. By paying the debt

of our sins, Jesus transforms us. If we freely accept salvation, Christ enlivens us with God-life. Jesus provides negative removal of sins, and positive production of God-life. Thus He perfectly unites all Old Testament promises with His divine production. He descends from the Father to save us. He redeems us by paying our sin-debt. Then Wisdom's promise comes true by Wisdom's redemptive act. Facts, lived out by the Father's beloved Son, and enlivened by the Spirit, fulfill promises sketched in the Old Testament.

B develops how to use these facts. First they appear to our senses, delivering surface information to all who sense. Then we process this superficial input by eliminating irrelevant glints and glimmers. For example, the color of Christ's eyes does not matter. His love, poured out in death for us, matters. As B says, we follow 3 steps to eliminate irrelevant aspects of these sensed facts. First we contemplate facts by evaluating sense data to find its enduring, reliable, relations. B lists them: weight, number, and measure, p 64, but we can safely skip to his conclusion: we see God's vestige in this more basic order, behind shimmering sensations. By eliminating surface details, we save solid sensory relations. This first step enables the next. If we don't take that first step, we flit from glint to glimmer, without touching the reliable base. B's second step is faith. God knows that our damaged abilities can't process sensations adequately. We need God's revelation to see the whole picture of the universe, and to see beyond it to God's purpose. When we shine the light of faith upon the stable remains from our first step, we see God's power, His care (Providence), and His justice (expressed in the final judgment). Now we're ready for B's third way: to investigate by reason, to find stable meanings in fleeting appearances. As creatures come and go, clearly some are corporeal and some are spiritual. Corporeal creatures disintegrate, and spiritual creatures endure from creation through eternity. B's steps honor our ability to sense what happens, then our ability to apply God's gift of faith, which aids our understanding. By faith, we accept reliable landmarks, to guide our thinking to improved knowledge. All this was quite clear to most people in 1240.

B summarizes this triple investigation: "From these visible things, therefore, one rises to consider the power, wisdom, and goodness of God as existing, living, intelligent, pure, spiritual, incorruptible, and unchangeable." This description celebrates God's presence, as vestige, in created beings. B then launches a poem glorifying God. Our translator arranged this poem in sense lines on page 65. It's lovely because it connects important parts of our experience with Christ's revelation. Probably, the first time you read it, you have more questions than answers. But as you dwell upon its meaning, light and warmth flow through you. B asks you to think beyond what you sense to find its *origin*. You see that this riot of creatures proclaims God's power. The sheer *magnitude* of creatures acclaims God's wisdom and goodness. The *multitude* of creatures advertises God's immensity, His infinite Mastery. The *beauty* of creatures cries out His unending quality. How can we say what we see when we look past the shining surface of things to their Origin? B says a lot, perhaps too much for us all at once. Then follow his advice from the beginning: proceed slowly, savoring each step. B advances through many benefits flowing from creatures. They include: fullness, activity, and order. So wide is B's view that he connects these important relationships with their Source, Christ's ladder, the Church, and our mutual Destiny. Be sure to live in creation as B guides us. Then you will use his steps to climb these first steps of the ladder which is Christ.

Sadly, most people do not climb this ladder. B reproaches them on p 67. In our pampered way, we rebel against anything with a negative tinge. But a wiser way is to use these reproaches to spur us outside ourselves to creation. If we escape our limitations, into reality, there we find what B describes. Then we can thank him for his reproaches, which energized us up the ladder. B expresses this happy result this way: "'*apply your heart*', Prov 22:17, so that **in** all creatures you may see, hear, praise, love and worship, glorify and honor, your God, lest the whole world rise against you. For because of this, '*the whole world will fight against the foolish*', Wis 5:20. On the contrary, it will be a matter of glory for the wise, who can say with the Prophet: '*you have gladdened me, Lord, with your deeds, and in the works of your hands I will rejoice. How great are your works, Lord! You have made all things in wisdom; the earth is filled with your creatures*', Ps 91:5'6; 101:24. Thus ends B's account of the first of six big steps up the ladder toward God. 68 The more you look, the more you see.

## Chapter 2 On Contemplating God in His Vestiges in the Sense World

“Concerning the mirror of things perceived through sensation, we can see God, not only through them, as through His vestiges, but also in them, as He is in them by His essence, power, and presence. This type of consideration is higher than the previous one. Therefore it holds second place, as the second level of contemplation, by which we are led to contemplate God in all creatures which enter our minds through our bodily senses.

“It should be noted that this world, which is called the macrocosm, enters our soul, which is called the smaller world (microcosm), through the doors of the five senses, as we perceive, enjoy, and judge sensible things. This is clear from the following. In the world, some things generate, some are generated, and some govern the former and the latter. Those that generate are simple bodies, such as heavenly bodies and the four elements. Whatever is generated and produced by the operation of natural power is generated and produced from these elements by the power of the light which unites contrary elements in composite things.” 69

In chapter 2, B steps up beyond God’s vestiges into His indwelling in each creature. This step stretches us, but we can meet this challenge. B asks us to peer past appearances to see God’s very being activating each creature. Even the simplest peasants in B’s time knew about God’s work. Artists carved the Catechism and the Bible into each cathedral. All the knowledge that most of us lack today was right there, carved in stone. Written Scripture was superficial. When technology, Guttenberg’s printing press, made the Bible available, folks were grateful, but not surprised. Everyone knew two worlds, distinguished by their size. The large one, outside each person, is definitely big = *macro* world = *cosmos*. But each person, though spatially small, contained the *cosmos* in his small = *micro* body. Fortunately, reality remains the same, however we name it. What people knew 700 years ago is still true. However, some technical details have changed. No doubt, creatures generate more of the same kind. E.g. volcanoes spew forth more rock. Big turtles produce little turtles. B then provides the latest technology: “light unites contrary elements in composite things”.

This is no longer the latest technology. Perhaps it makes more sense than atoms and molecules. It surely is more appealing than string theory, with 12 mathematical dimensions, instead of our 3 sensible ones. Whatever technology we eventually choose, we can be sure that it will change. Meanwhile, we skip B’s technical account, which was up to the minute in 1240. For sure, “Generated things are composite bodies made from elements.” Today, we pride ourselves on the latest elements. To save our pride, we don’t mention the out-of-date elements from last year. These days we laugh at B’s claim that “spiritual substances rule over these groups”. In the very next breath, we use such spiritual relationships as mathematical formula to rule over these groups. It’s not necessary to keep up with science, because it changes so often. But it remains true that modern science looks beyond bodies to understand what’s happening. As every 7-year-old knows, creatures come from the Creator. Adults who solve the puzzle of where creatures came from find the same Creator. Whether it’s B, in 1240, or today’s physicist, God’s existence shines through the latest solutions to nature’s secrets.

All of us start with sensation, then move to more reliable generalizations that apply to each and every creature. B gives the example: “Everything that is moved is moved by something else”. 70. Effects lead us to causes, which lead to the Ultimate Cause. Because this First Mover is not moved, it can’t be moved by something else. It is the Unmoved Mover, as Aristotle showed in chapter 7 of Physics, about 2,400 years ago. If all this is clear to you, praise God. If not, you know that something can’t come from nothing. That gets you to God in the simplest way. B accounts for sensation in the best scientific way available at his time. 71 We don’t need those accounts. But we do experience delight in sensing. Beholding burning sunsets, hearing burbling brooks, smelling baking bread, tasting delicious fruit, and touching cool smooth silk, please us. Some of us go into ecstasies from these sensations. At the very least, B states the everlasting truth: “From this apprehension ... there follows pleasure.” How sensation works is less important than our pleasure from sensing orderly things. At the other extreme, disorderly sensations produce pain. B notes that properly tuned sensations arouse appreciation for beauty. Beauty is much more reliable than individual beautiful sensations. Somehow, we realize that beauty is basic. A bit of contemplation takes us to absolute Beauty, another name for God.

Today, the politically-correct police forbid each and every judgment. Notice, these police condemn all judgments. What did they just do? They judged us. Their judgment that “all judgment is wrong” makes them wrong for judging us. More fundamentally, it shows that condemning judgment is silly. It contradicts itself, so it can’t be correct. Seven hundred years ago, B did not face those police. So he sailed right into the next step: pleasure demands judgment. Pleasure requires judgment about which pleasures lead to increased moral integrity, and which lead to moral disintegration. Taking this second step requires good judgment, so that we choose the best good to advance toward God. B reminds us that: “the whole world can enter into the human soul through the doors of the senses”. Experience shows us that some entries harm us. Progress toward God requires us to judge which sensation should enter our inner activity: our soul. This entry is a concrete experience of being our bodies, and being our souls. Sensation is interaction between body and soul. What our eye sees, our mind knows.

### **How God Shines Through Everything**

Our spirited flesh accepts sensations. Somehow, they live in our sense organs. These appearances alert us to God’s vestiges, 72. God’s action flows through active creatures to activate our flesh. In paragraph 7, B traces God’s light from His creation, through our senses to us. For example, God shines through to create a swan. If you see this lovely creature, it activates you. Its visual activity enlivens your eyes. Light shining into your eye shows you this graceful snow-white bird gliding across a glistening pool. Take a moment to savor that image. Besides the bird floating in the water, you gain peaceful beauty. Beautiful peace reminds you of Beauty Himself flowing forth in millions of creatures like the swan you see. This beautiful swan recalls to your mind hundreds of beauties. They lead you back to God. In B’s words: “this impression leads to its source, namely, the object to be known”. On the surface, the swan is the known object. That is the simple connection. Light bounces off the swan to your eyes. You follow this light to its source: God. Your experience starts with the lovely swan, and jumps immediately to Loveliness. Your experience begins in light from the Sun, but leaps to Light. These pole vaults from creature to Creator fascinate you. You remain transfixed in awe and wonder.

B goes directly to the ultimate wonder: “This clearly suggests that the Eternal Light generates from itself a coequal Likeness or Splendor, which is consubstantial and coeternal.” That leap may leave us behind. B is so contemplative, so steeped in divine Light, that he sweeps through steps. We must take one at a time. B sees in created light the vestige of divine Light. Just as created light conveys the swan to us, giving us the entire swan, making us one with the swan, so divine Light duplicates itself, the Father generating the Son. B bounds through several steps to identify the Son as consubstantial and coeternal. We go slower. The Father’s original expansion, in our stepwise view, is to know Himself. He knows Himself perfectly, so there’s no difference between Himself as the Father and His knowledge of Himself. But this perfection includes existence. To know Himself as not existing would not be knowledge of Himself, Who is Existence Himself. So God’s perfect knowledge exists. In every respect it is the Father. That’s why Jesus said to Phillip: “He who sees me sees the Father”, Jn 14:9. But this existing Person is the Son. In every respect, except person, the two are one. You say you don’t understand that. No one does. However, Jesus teaches us to dwell in this mystery. He says that the substances are the same, but the Persons differ. Actually, practice makes perfect. The more we contemplate the Trinity, the more clearly we see that the Father and Son must be consubstantial and coeternal, or one Being and distinct Persons forever.

How can all this happen? We don’t know. But we love to wonder about its happening. B reminds us that the vestige of this Trinitarian difference-with-identity happens each time you see a swan. The swan and you are different. But in the seeing you unite. You become one with the swan by seeing it. This vestige is a long way from its Source, but it’s the same kind of being. Your view of the swan is primitive, tied directly to material limits. The swan is stuck in space. You are stuck in space. Sensation somehow overcomes being stuck. Two bodies that can’t mingle unite. Two impenetrable bodies become one spiritual act of sensation. Even if all this talk

leaves you cold, you enjoy looking at the swan. You delight in sensations. That is enough. Hold on to your delight. Enjoy sensations. Behind this joy, you advance toward the Source of the swan.

B keeps advancing. Even if you do not follow, you can delight in his advance. Sensation launches B into “the image of the invisible God”, Col 1:15. This image shines so brightly that B remembers “the brightness of his glory, and the image of his substance”, Heb 1:3. At least echoes of the Big Bang bounce through your mind. You can’t place them exactly, but you agree with B, who says that God shines through creatures to us. In his own words, B calls the air that connects the swan to you “the medium”. The appearance is the kind of thing, or “the species” in B’s terminology. Finally, B calls you “an individual of rational nature”. So he says: “Who is everywhere through His initial generation, as the object generates its likeness in the entire medium, is united by the grace of union to an individual of rational nature, as the species is united to the bodily organ”. That’s a great summary of several steps we took to catch up to B. He often out-speeds us.

Because B thinks so rapidly, we often struggle to catch up. Hopefully, B’s conclusion is now clear. “Through this union (seeing the swan), he leads us back to the Father as to the fountain-source and object. If, therefore, all things that can be known generate a likeness of themselves, they manifestly proclaim that in them as in mirrors, we can see the eternal generation of the Word, the Image and Son, eternally emanating from God the Father.” 72-3 As we progress, we should encourage ourselves to try again, when at first we do not succeed. Advancing one step at a time, and starting over often, we gradually catch up to B. Even if we don’t catch up, we can enjoy what B enjoys, delight in God’s wonderful creatures, and sail on to enjoy God.

In fact, B moves to that joy next, in paragraph 8. Remember that “species” means the act of the swan that becomes our act when we see it. In this union, the “species” is the same in the swan as it is in us. We enjoy the swan, even if we don’t understand species. Remember that enjoyment as B says: “In this way, the species which delights as beautiful, pleasant, and wholesome, suggests that there is primordial beauty, pleasure and wholesomeness in that first Species, in which there is supreme proportion and equality with the generating Source, in which there is power flowing, not from images of the imagination, but from the truth or apprehension, in which there is an impression which preserves and satisfies, and dispels all need in the one who apprehends.”

It’s quite an accomplishment to understand what the sentence says. It’s more work to understand what it means. “In this way” means that B’s example of sensing in general shows that we humans unite with what we sense. That’s too general for most folks. So use the particular example of the swan. As you see the swan, you and the swan unite, not bodily, but spiritually. The swan’s spirit and your spirit become one. The swan’s act of being and your act of knowing are the same. Even if we skip this meaning, we delight in the swan. It sort of melts us into a pleasant harmony with its beauty. That’s what B means. The swan “species delights as beautiful, pleasant and wholesome.” No doubt about that. Now expand from delight to better understanding. Reminds yourself how you felt while viewing the swan. Amplify that experience, and you advance to “primordial beauty, pleasure and wholesomeness.” This Original Beauty, Pleasure and Wholesomeness is God. God is the “generating Source”. He is “that first Species”, the Act whose echoes are acts like swans and you. Our acts are vestiges of Act Himself. Act is power among creatures. Pure Act is Pure Power in God. This Power produces creatures, who have images we unite with, and meaning we unite with. Together, images and meanings satisfy all our daily survival needs. It’s a complete package for daily life. But daily life bores us. So we seek advanced completion, which goes beyond daily life to eternal life. Hopefully, we see God’s vestiges, and go to Him.

B then proposes this advance: “If, therefore, ‘pleasure is the union of the harmonious with the harmonious’, and the Likeness of God alone contains in highest degree the notion of beauty, delight, & wholesomeness, and if it is united in truth and intimacy, and in a fullness that fulfills every capacity, it is obvious that in God alone there is primordial and true delight, and that in all of our delights we are led to seek this delight.” Here B helps us another step up the ladder. From definite delight in the swan, he leads us to fuller delight in God, Who is Delight Himself. Sad to say, delight in the swan does not last. It’s a vestige of God, but not God Himself. So

we get bored. All creatures bore us. But all of them encourage us on to God. He never bores. In this way, all creatures, by their passing delight, lead us on to Eternal Delight. Next, B goes forward to meaning-delight.

“In a more excellent and immediate way, judgment leads us to see eternal truths more surely. Judgment takes place through our reason, abstracting from place, time, & mutability, and thus from dimension, succession, and change, by reason, which is unchangeable, unlimited, and endless.” Again, B speeds through many things unfamiliar to us. Educated people of his time knew exactly what he meant. Our people probably don’t. To catch us up, judgment is combining what goes together, and separating what does not fit. For example, when the sun is shining, our true judgment is “the sun is shining”. When the sun is not shining, our true judgment is “the sun is not shining”. Judgments aim to express truth. Unfortunately, judgments can miss their aim. If they fall short, they are false judgments. Sometimes the sun shines, but sometime not. This limited judgment is not entirely reliable. If we abstract from place, time, and mutability (change), we make more stable judgments. For example,  $2+2=4$ . This judgment is so stable that it’s never false. But it is mere relationship. A never-false statement about beings is: the whole is greater than any of its parts. This is closer to perfection. A further advance is: Being is. Judgments like this are much more satisfying than any of the previous ones. They show us that our minds progress from changing, limited, and terminating beings to unchangeable, unlimited, & endless beings. Ultimately we get to God. God is much more interesting than swans, but we use the same process to unite with both.

B connects this process with our highest thoughts. Having found unchangeable being by advanced judgment, B blossoms into poetry: “nothing is absolutely unchangeable, unlimited and endless unless it is eternal. Everything that is eternal is either God or in God. If, therefore, everything which we judge with certainty we judge by such a reason, then it is clear that He Himself is the reason of all things, and the infallible rule and light of truth, in which all things shine forth infallibly, indelibly, indubitably, irrefutably, indisputably, unchangeably, boundlessly, endlessly, indivisibly, and intellectually.” Perhaps B gets to his conclusions too rapidly for us. A slower process is: we find thoughts like: “the whole is greater than any of its parts”, & “being is”. Many such thoughts come to us. They all pass sensation, into certitude. These truths are indubitable. Sensory beings, like swans, come & go. They live & die in a short time. But we know eternal truths. Their very eternity is a vestige of Eternity Himself. Judging our way from swans to eternal truths follows the same process of discarding changeable, unreliable, superficial, material parts. Behind these changing parts is the spirit of the swan. B calls it the “species”. That’s the part that survives. For example, you know dinosaur’s species, even though none have existed for about 70 million years. No species needs to be incarnate (bodily) for you to know it. You unite spiritually with the swan’s species. You do not unite with the swan’s matter. As you advance from lower spirits to higher spirits, you approach Spirit, or God. You’ve known that since you were seven years old.

Now is a good time to recall that words can’t capture meaning. Words merely point to meaning. Words are too material for the spiritual act that is a species. But you have no trouble knowing millions of species. The more you think about them, the more you realize that there are more spiritual acts than there are material bodies activated by those acts. One spiritual activity that B loves is mathematics. That may chill your blood. If so, you can skip paragraph 10, where B considers the 7 numbers by which Augustine and many others advanced to God. Indeed, math becomes more abstract as it goes. You may notice that the numbers that B reviews are actually ways to use numbers. The difference is in what you count. If you count bodies, manifested in their sounds, your sounding numbers are close to matter. If you count generalized sensations of what you hear, your encountered numbers are less material. If you count soul-acts that move bodies, as in dance, you have expressive numbers, which are even less material. If you delight in abstracting to species, like swan or dinosaur, you count less material acts with sensual numbers. If you count memories, you use remembered numbers. If you count principles that you use to judge all other numbers, you are more spiritual, and use judicial numbers. These are most spiritual because judgments like these are eternally true. A new example is: being is the opposite of non-being. The

seventh kind of number is inspiration to make something, counted by artistic numbers. Such inspirations come from divine inspiration. That's the most spiritual of all events, and its perfection is infused contemplation.

You do not need numbers to advance through these 6 steps to the 7<sup>th</sup> stage, but they help. "Since, therefore, all things are beautiful, & in some way pleasurable, and since beauty and pleasure do not exist without proportion, & since proportion exists primarily in numbers, all things must necessarily involve numbers. Thus 'number is the foremost exemplar in the mind of the Creator', and in things, the foremost vestige leading to Wisdom. Since this is most evident to all, and very close to God, it leads us most closely to God by means of these seven divisions, and it makes Him known in all bodily and sensible things when we apprehend the numerical, delight in numerical proportions, and judge irrefutably according to the laws of numerical proportion." We agree that thoughtful people progress this way. Fortunately, there's another way for the majority of folks to go. It's love. B will deal with that later. Meanwhile, we profit from B's description if we summarize it this way: Everybody sees things. Everybody goes from sight to species, like swan. This process keeps going all the way to the most reliable Being: God. When we get tired, He lifts us up to Himself. Jesus proves His love for us.

B summarizes our first two steps poetically. "From the first two stages in which we are led to behold God in vestiges, like the two wings covering the seraph's feet, we can gather that all the creatures of the sense world lead the mind of the contemplative and wise man to the eternal God. For these creatures are shadows, echoes, and pictures of that first, most powerful, most wise, and most perfect Principle." For our edification, that summary is enough. B goes on. See pp 76-78. B then gives thanks for these gifts which God hides in creatures, His vestiges. We see B's vision of God manifest in His creatures. We move on to see God in us.

### **Chapter Three: Contemplating God Through His Image Stamped Upon Our Natural Powers**

"The two previous stages, by leading us into God through His vestiges, through which He shines forth in all creatures, have led us to the point of reentering into ourselves, that is, into our mind, where the divine image shines forth. ... in the third stage, we enter into our very selves. ... as it were, leaving the outer court, we should strive to see God through a mirror in the sanctuary, that is, in the forward area of the tabernacle. [We are the sacred receptacle of God: He resides in us by Christ-life.] 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 splendor. Enter into yourself, then, and see that your soul loves itself most fervently; that it could not love itself unless it knew itself, nor know itself unless it remembered itself. ... our intellects grasp only what is present to our memory. From this you can observe, not with the bodily eye, but with the eye of reason, that your soul has a threefold power. Consider, therefore, the operations and relationships of these three powers, and you will be able to see God through yourself as through an image, which is to see 'through a mirror in an obscure manner', 1 Cor 13:12." 79-80

As B shows, when we reflect on creatures, obviously we ourselves reflect. We use our minds to perceive creatures, organize their stable parts, & discard their irrelevant changes. After separating superficial differences from reliable regularities, we remember what counts. For the swan we loved to observe, we see feathers turning up in the breeze, but eliminate that frivolous change. We remember the swan without wind disturbance. From these more stable memories we will select the swan-ing of the swan, or what the swan does that is specifically swan. This swan-doing is what counts about every swan. This is the meaning of all swans. Each person is most personal here, in his mental operations. Here, in our minds, we are most real. Here, we are at home. Yes, the noise of propaganda tries to keep us from our homes. Yes, the media strives to drive us out of our minds. That's why we oppose those tendencies, and seek peace in prayer. Everything that B told us fits together to help us rest in our homes. The main reason for this homecoming is that Jesus is here, at home, waiting for us.

Jesus comes to us in the sacrament of Baptism. Christ enters our home as free gift from God. The more we welcome Him, thank Him for coming, & love His love for us, the more at home we **both** are. Yes, as image and likeness of God, we're made to entertain Jesus, God the Son, in our homes. People back in B's time saw that clearly. Perhaps we need reminders today. Each of us is God's sanctuary, His tabernacle, first by Baptism,

then by prayer, and most emphatically by receiving His body, blood, soul and divinity in Eucharistic sacrifice. As we realize this, we see beyond our bodily eye to the eye of reason. God gave us reason to make us His image. We know relatively what He knows perfectly. But B adds quickly that our knowledge is damaged by original sin, so we see as through a glass, darkly. Treasure that sight! Thank God for it. Dwell in this seeing with Christ.

B then reviews examples of remembering, and working from memories to more universal, more abstract, and therefore more reliable truths. An example is that we can affirm or deny any judgment. B affirms that our memory transcends time. What you remember happened some time ago. But time does not isolate you from that happening. In this time-transcending, you participate in eternity. Each of your memories is an image of God's eternity. It's just an image, because God's eternity is unified, while ours is divided. Especially here on earth, each moment is God's gift, separated from each other instant. But by memory we leap over these separations to skip time's limitations. How like God we are! B celebrates our likeness to God.

God provides more reasons for celebration when He gives us His message, 81. Jesus tells us things about God that we could not observe in His creation. Christ is revelation in the flesh, giving us family knowledge about God that goes way beyond His vestiges in creatures. Jesus shows us that God loves us, even dies for us. We remember these most vital revealed facts. These memories are way different from remembering natural facts. B gives us a remarkable sentence that we should contemplate. "And so, from the activities of the memory, we see that the soul itself is an image of God, and a likeness so present to itself, and having God so present, that the soul actually grasps Him, and potentially is capable of possessing Him, and of being a partaker in Him."

As usual, B compacts many things into his long sentences. Reflecting on your memory, you tend to admit how you are like God. You are "so present to" yourself that you are aware of being aware. You know that you know. You remember that you remember. This presence to yourself is your spirit leaping over limits. Matter limits all it touches. Spirit escapes. Your presence to yourself liberates you. This too is an image of God. He is the ultimate Presence to Himself. He is also present to you. These two presences merge, so that you grasp Him. As yet, you may not be perfectly committed Him. Instead of partaking in Him, you may stray away to creatures. But you can be more and more one with Him. Prayer is being real to this reality of two merging presences. As you merge more with God, you become more His image and likeness. So you become more yourself. More fully yourself, you can be more present to Presence Himself.

This reality deserves contemplation. Take the time you need to realize your presence to yourself. After that, consider God's presence to you. Then you can return to reading this review of B's marvelous guide to God.

B gets ecstatic over higher human knowledge, as well he should for this great gift. First, we knowing by receive external acts through our senses. Then, we eliminate frivolous factors, and remember what counts. Thus we advance from external sensations to internal sensations. We get a generalize swan-picture of the specific swan. We shear this picture of many superficial external variations, like the swan's wind-disturbed feathers. Memories are more reliable than external sensation, because they don't include frivolous details. But our self-possession advances further from there. Dropping mere appearances, we find the swan-ing of the swan. Basic swan-action is the most reliable of all activities. Generally, we call them ideas. These higher-order universals are so stable that they don't need existing examples. Dinosaurs are examples. Circles are another. God is the most satisfactory of all these ideas. As with circles, so with God: they exist. Even if there are no representations of circles on earth, circles exist. Even though God can not be completely represented on earth, He exists. In fact, He is Existence. From His Existence, creatures come. So you can see why B is ecstatic over intellectual acts called ideas. They are closer unions with God than memories, which are closer than external sensations. A fine example of close-to-God ideas is a definition. Without them, we would confuse cats and dogs. With them, we keep different beings in their proper places. This human organization is the image & likeness of God's Order.

From a definition, like man is a rational animal, B soars into higher beings. Truly, we can't know animal without knowing being. In fact, the definition of animal is a being that, once created, moves itself. One idea

links to another, and depends upon increasingly more general being. Motion is an act of transferring a body from one place to another. Place is space occupied by a body. With these higher ideas, we imitate God more closely than with lower ideas. That's ecstatic! B gives a series of examples on pages 81-82. He reminds us that we can't know those well-known ideas "unless aided by a knowledge of the Being which is most pure, most actual, most complete and absolute, which is unqualified and Eternal Being, in which are the principles of all things in their purity." No wonder you were fascinated when you first realized God. That fascination grows with practice, and fills us with such awe and wonder that we experience how heavenly God is. Our happiest times are these realizations. Then, we're grooving on God. The proper name for this ecstatic experience is contemplation.

B uses that term often, and describes it well. If we dwell upon it, we notice that it's brilliant knowing, differing from other forms of knowing as the sun differs from twilight. It's also blazing love. The truer a being is, the better it is. The better it is, the more we love it. As we climb Plato's ladder of love, up from lower to higher beings, we know and love more. Many people try to trap us in sex, hiding God's image in us. He is Love. He invites us to join His Everlasting Love. Starting now, we can love for the rest of eternity. Since it never ends, we will be forever loved and loving. Knowing and loving is contemplation. Knowledge and love unite in this supreme act. The more we contemplate, the more we enjoy all beings. Ultimately, we enjoy them at fever pitch, in ecstasy, integrated with God. Nothing less satisfies. Everything else lets us down. B invites us to follow toward God. He encourages us by showing how like God we are, and providing many examples in this guide-book.

After natural examples, B gives us the Christ-example: "The Light which enlightens every man coming into the world ... the true Light and the Word who was in the beginning with God", Jn 1:9, 1. Expanding that rich statement, B quotes St. Augustine, p 83: "The light of everyone who reasons truly is enkindled by that Truth which we also strive to reach", *On the True Religion*, XXXIX, 72. Each of us knows from personal experience how delighted we are when we contemplate. Even lowly creatures please us. But contemplating these lesser beings quickly bores us. So we move on to God. Contemplating Him excites us, even exhausts us, so we must recuperate from our effort and the excitement. Practice perfects our contemplation, so we can contemplate longer without pooping out. This trend alerts us to heavenly joy of contemplating full speed ahead for eternity.

B investigates deliberation, a bridge to love. If we deliberate, we compare various possibilities, so that we can choose the best among them. You deliberate whether or not to take a picture of the lovely swan you see on the pond. Deliberation is our way of choosing rationally. Propagandists encourage us to "follow our feelings" to decide. That's their way to enslave us. Instead, we need to remember where our feelings got us, and find a better way. Deliberation is a way to improve our choices, because we know better: certitude. Propagandists insist there is no certitude. Apply that principle to their statement, and it eats itself. Better to deliberate, to find something solid. The more we deliberate, the more we're in charge, the freer we are. Eventually, as B affirms: "in judging, our deliberative power touches the divine laws, if it reaches a solution by a full analysis", 83.

A full analysis includes the main options available. It compares one to the other, to reveal the truest and best option. To choose that one is our happiest decision. Deciding to love the best option, gradually perfects our ability to love better beings. That leads directly to the Best Being. B says it beautifully, p 84: "See, therefore, how close the soul is to God, and how, in their operations, the memory leads to eternity, the understanding to truth, and the power of choice to the highest good". This is the way to heaven. It's very loving. B expresses it this way: "From memory and intelligence, love is breathed forth as their mutual bond", 84. This is our experience indeed. As we remember and know higher ideas, the truth in both shines forth. That truth is so good that it inspires our love. B shows us that this action imitates God's activity. In fact it's Trinitarian, as B says on p 84: "If, then, God is a perfect spirit, He has memory, understanding, and will, and He has the Word generated and Love breathed forth, which are necessarily distinct, since one is produced by the other – not in the order of essence, not in the order of accident, therefore in the order of persons." As you think about this statement, your first encouragement is that we're images of Perfection. Then we see a Trinitarian image in our highest function:

knowing and loving. Finally, we profit from Christ's revelation of Three Persons in God's One Being. If we soak up these nourishing truths, in contemplation, we derive full benefit. Statements we can understand easily are easily thrown away. They don't keep our interest. Trinitarian Being, by contrast, is eternally interesting. B guides us to contemplate what we can, so that our contemplation grows to dwell in, with, and by God.

B gives us another guide: "When, therefore, the soul considers itself, it rises through itself as through a mirror, to behold the blessed Trinity of the Father, the Word, and Love: three persons, coeternal, coequal, and consubstantial. Thus each one dwells in each of the others. Nevertheless, one is not the other, but the three are one God." 84 When we start contemplating Trinitarian God, we see mostly problems. How could three be one? The shamrock is not helpful, pace St. Patrick. But if we wrestle with these problems, they resolve themselves. Opening ourselves to this reality changes us. God Himself rewards us for our faith and our efforts to understand. Indeed our faith seeks understanding. Personal experience tells us that continued contemplation does not solve all problems. So far, we do not comprehend the Trinity. But light glimmers, then becomes brilliant. Gradually, we see that the Trinity is necessary. God couldn't be any other way. E.g., He could not love unless there were other Persons to love. He could not know His Person perfectly unless His Knowledge were another Person. Similarly, His love would be imperfect if it failed to be a Person. Each of us works from our personal experience, but all of us move in the direction that B recommends. His guidance helps us along the journey to God.

B provides a set of examples that creatures are Trinitarian. "When the soul considers its Triune Principle through the trinity of its powers, by which it is an image of God, it is aided by the lights of the sciences which perfect and inform it, and represent the most blessed Trinity in a threefold way. For all philosophy is either natural, or rational, or moral. The first deals with the cause of being, and therefore leads to the power of the Father. The second deals with the basis of understanding, and therefore leads to the wisdom of the Word. The third deals with the order of living, and therefore leads to the goodness of the Holy Spirit." 84-5. Developing this Trinitarian analysis, B provides other examples, and a poetic expression of knowledge as light. Skipping these, we rest our case. B did so much, that we can't digest it quickly. Contemplation enlightens and enlivens us.

#### **Chapter Four: on Contemplating God in His Image, Reformed by the Gifts of Grace**

"Since we can contemplate the First Principle not only by passing through ourselves, but also in ourselves, and the latter contemplation is superior to the former, this mode of consideration occupies the 4<sup>th</sup> stage of contemplation." B assures us that this 4<sup>th</sup> step up the ladder to God is superior to other steps. As obvious as this is, we must admit that this next step may seem impossible. B knows that, and helps us up. "It seems amazing, when it has been shown that God is so close to our souls, that so few should be aware of the First Principle within themselves. [Why?] The reason is close at hand. The human mind, distracted by cares, does not enter into itself through memory. Clouded by sense images, it does not turn back to itself through intelligence. Allured away by concupiscence, it does not turn back to itself through desire for inner sweetness and spiritual joy." 87 When I read this indictment, I must agree. I must plead guilty as charged. How so?

The human mind is another way to say the person. Cares distract me. They loom large enough to absorb me. Today, such cares are largely financial. True, I must earn a living. But this basic duty bloats up beyond comfortable living into keeping up with the Joneses. After fulfilling my responsibilities, plenty time remains to pray. But I tell myself lies about how much I must do. I read about the "competition" and stress myself because I didn't succeed as well as Steve Jobs at Apple, or Warren Buffet... Deliberation would clear lots of this confusion away. B knows the condition, and provides the remedy. He too was distracted by sense images rioting in his head. But he turned back to himself through intelligence. He too was allured by pleasure, following it to bitter disappointment, and spiritual distress. How often have I done the same? Deliberation helps distinguish what will happen. Will this promise lead me down the primrose path to sin and sorrow? Will Christ leading me up the narrow path to sweetness and joy. Notice that these enjoyments are internal. The frauds are external. The real are internal. For some people, that's too huge a distinction to make, and an even greater challenge to live. Peo-

ple who come to reviews like these are generally inner-directed. Outer-directed people seldom endure spiritual activities. For them, distraction is paramount. They do the same old thing again and again, expecting a different result this time. Hollywood has their number. But even inveterate distracters can cease distracting themselves, if they deliberate. Then they obtain some sweetness and joy.

B gets down and dirty with us. “When one has fallen down, he must lie there unless someone lend a helping hand for him to rise. So our soul could not rise completely from these things of sense to see itself, and the Eternal Truth in itself, unless Truth, assuming human nature in Christ, had become a ladder, restoring the first ladder that had been broken in Adam. ... he cannot enter into himself to ‘delight’ within himself ‘in the Lord’, Ps 36:4, unless Christ be his mediator. [Jesus] says: ‘I am the door. If anyone enters through me, he will be saved. He will go in and out, and will find pastures’, Jn 10:9. 88 At this point, B exhorts his readers to climb the Christ-ladder. He gives many examples from Scripture that reinforce Christ’s help.

In our time, Confession, Penance, or Reconciliation is the main step to take to get up and at ‘em again, to resume our journey to God. Each and every one of us needs forgiveness for sins. Blessed John Paul II went to Confession every day. Naturally, he was not as sinful as I am. So why did he go? In his purity, John Paul saw sins that are invisible to me. I’m mired in sins that I do not notice. Each of us knows by experience that as we approach God, we find more sins for Him to forgive. God’s purity enlightens us. This light reveals sins we either forgot or ignored. It often happens that something I pridefully proclaimed a great success was instead a great sin. Whatever my specific condition, I am not yet in heaven. Therefore, I have sins to confess, reparation to make, and failures to correct. Jesus gave us the Sacrament of Confession to spruce us up, to correct our defects, to reconcile with God. Christ proves that God takes the first step to reconcile. Let’s take the second step.

If we do, God infuses virtues to purify, illumine, and perfect us. “And so the image is reformed”, 89. In our terminology, Jesus does the heavy lifting. If we give Him permission, He takes our sins away. If we second His motion, He improves us. As we improve, we must resist a temptation to give up because we are not perfect yet. We are too much like children in the car, who keep asking “are we there yet?”. Their boredom is too much like ours. Instead, we should devote ourselves entirely to taking step after step. If we do it enthusiastically, we enjoy the trip. Deliberate by remembering what happened to you when you dragged along complaining all the way. Compare that to you when you enthusiastically strode forth. B reminds us that we must apply our emotions in this stage. To apply them, we must take charge of them, and use them to return Christ’s infinite love. As we can’t return all of infinite love, we stir ourselves to return more and more. Having done our utmost, we trust Jesus to carry us the infinite distance to God. This is faith in action. As we activate faith, B tells us that: “the inner senses are restored to see the highest beauty, to hear the highest harmony, to smell the highest fragrance, to taste the highest sweetness, to apprehend the highest delight. The soul is prepared for spiritual ecstasy through devotion, admiration, and exultation, according to the three exclamations in the Canticle of Canticles”. 89

Here, B directs out attention to Scriptural love-poetry: the Song of Songs. Inspired author that he was, the poet knew that words can’t convey God’s love. They can’t even express man’s love of God. Poets therefore enhance words with rhythm, with rhyme, with images, and with emotional vibrations. These vibrations follow from identifying with the people depicted: the female and male lover. As initiator, God is the male. As receiver, each of us is the female. A teenager may be bored, but adults can identify. Mature people know that “the soul becomes ‘like a column of smoke from aromatic spices of myrrh and frankincense’, Cant 3:6.” This is like full devotion. As we become increasingly committed to God, we de-materialize. Formerly, we were like rocks, immobile in our resistance to Love. Now, we are more spiritual, resembling incense rising to God.

We want to rise to God because we admire Him so much. His love floods us with delight. If we respond to this Love-light, we become more like Him. He is Light, enlightening and warming us progressively from “the dawn, the moon, and the sun”, Cant 8:5. God courts us, enticing us to Love. He wins us from our distractions, and our admiration bursts forth into love. That’s exciting, really exciting, truly awesome. This “superabundance of exultation [is] ‘overflowing with delights’. So the soul ‘leans wholly upon her beloved’, Cant 8:5. These po-

etic words convey total abandonment to God. Learning gradually to leave creatures behind, the soul leaves self in God's hands. That's delightful. A good reason for this delight is that the person finally returns the gift of self to the Giver. Arriving at last at the soul's Source and Goal, superabundant exultation engulfs the person. This greatly encourages the soul (person). We all have similar mystical interactions with God. We're minor mystics.

Major mystics, like St. Francis and B, overflow with God's love. Our superabundant exultation usually stays inside us, giving little external indication of God's union with us. That's why B describes our inner life; so we will recognize it. "When this is achieved, our spirit is made hierarchical in order to mount upward, according to its conformity to the heavenly Jerusalem, which no man enters unless it first descend into his heart through grace, as John saw in the Apocalypse, Apoc 21:2." B assures us that when we allow God to unite with us, our spirit fits God's love for us. Entering this order, from God at top, down to the least creature, we find peace. Peace is the tranquility of order. Our disorder disrupts our advance up the Christ-ladder. But we can repent, remount the ladder, implore Christ's help, and get further up His ladder toward God. The secret is to accept heaven's advance down the Christ-ladder to us. Then the up-and-down motions fit together. God offers His loving help to us, we accept it, and He lifts us up. Seemingly, we do all the work, but really Jesus does it.

In B's time, people knew the 9 choirs of angels well. We can skip his account of those choirs, and the angelic help, because the angels understand our ignorance, and help us anyway. Similarly, we skip B's many Scripture quotes, pages 90-1, leaving them for your personal enrichment. The bottom line is that all God's gifts fit together. Heavenly harmony is exquisite, and we enter it if we accept its order. Then Jesus, as ladder to heaven, inspires us with His Holy Spirit to cross infinity to The Father.

B fits this development into his guiding images. "These two middle stages, through which we enter into the contemplation of God within us, as in mirrors of created images, are like the two middle wings of the Seraph spread out for flight, Isa 6:2. Through them we can understand that we are led to divine things through the rational soul's naturally implanted faculties in their operations, relationships, and habitual scientific knowledge, as is apparent in the third stage. Likewise, we are led through the reformed faculties of the soul, i.e. through the infused virtues, spiritual senses, and mystical ecstasies, as is apparent in the fourth stage. Moreover, we are led by the hierarchical operations, i.e. the purifying, illuminating, and perfecting of human souls, and by the hierarchical revelations of Sacred Scripture, given to us by the angels, as the Apostle says: 'by angels in the hand of a mediator', Gal 3:19. And, finally, we are led through the hierarchies and hierarchical orders which are to be arranged in our soul as the heavenly Jerusalem." 93 What a masterly summation! Contemplation helps it sink in.

Meanwhile, B rejoices in these Godly gifts. "Filled with all these intellectual illuminations, our mind, like the house of God, is inhabited by divine Wisdom. It is made a daughter of God, His spouse and friend. It is made a member of Christ the Head, His sister and coheir. It is made a temple of the Holy Spirit, grounded on faith, built up by hope, and dedicated to God by holiness of mind and body. All this is accomplished by a most sincere love of Christ which is 'poured forth in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us', Rom 5:5. Without Him we cannot know the secret things of God. 'No one can know 'the things of man except the spirit of man which is in him, so on one knows the things of God except the spirit of God', 1 Cor 2:11. Let us, therefore, be rooted and grounded in charity so that 'with all the saints we may be able to comprehend' what is 'the length' of eternity, 'the breadth' of liberality, 'the height' of majesty, and 'the depth' of discerning wisdom, Eph 3:17-18." 93 This is a veritable hymn of thanksgiving to God for taking us to Himself.

## **Chapter Five: On Contemplating the Divine Unity Through Its Primary Name, Which is Being**

"We can contemplate God not only outside us, and within us, but also above us. [Contemplate Him] outside through His vestiges, within through His image, and above through the light which shines upon our minds, which is the light of Eternal Truth, since our minds are formed immediately by Truth itself." 94 These words seem strange to us, but they reflect our personal experience. After reviewing the examples B gives for the first two ways to contemplate God, you are probably convinced that you see Him in both ways. This third way will

become clearer as B provides further reasons for it. The first reason he gives above is that God creates your mind. He must be there are creator. Creator is above you, but necessary for you to exist. You also experience your existence stepwise, one instant after another. Each instant is a gift from God. So God sustains you moment by moment. From above, God keeps you going. As Eternal Truth, He enlightens your mind by providing starting points for thought. These un-provable beginnings for thought include: “Being is” and “Being is not Non-being”. B emphasizes these starting points because they are the most reliable truths we know. They come from above because here below nothing is that reliable. Creatures come and go. God is forever.

B then provides poetical images of the three methods coming closer to God. Viewing vestiges in creatures is like entering the Temple court. Viewing God’s image in us is like entering the Temple sanctuary. Viewing God keeping us alive is like entering the Holy of Holies. 94 God is more present there. Each view goes toward God, but seeing God above, creating and sustaining us, is closest to Him. B reviews the Old and New Testaments, showing that their highest expressions describe God present from above. E.g.: Old Testament: “He who is”, Ex 3:14; “I am who am”, Ex 3:14. Revelation-in-the-Flesh, Jesus, tells us more, that God is Triune. E.g.: “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”, Mat 28:19; Christ expands on our first knowledge of God: “No one is good but God alone”, Mk 10:18; Lk 18:19. 95 These reminders help us see God where He is closest to us: at our center. In some sense, as His image, each of us is God’s center. This insight led B to his famous description of God: God’s center is everywhere; his circumference is nowhere. As usual, profound expressions like this one require profound reflection. The more we reflect, the more we see.

B shares some of his profound reflections in paragraph 4, p 96. “Let him who wishes to contemplate the invisible things of God in the unity of His essence, fix his attention first on being itself. Let him see that being itself is so certain in itself that it cannot be thought not to be. For pure being occurs only in full flight from non-being, just as nothing is in full flight from being. Therefore just as absolute nothing has nothing of being ..., so contrariwise: being itself has nothing of nonbeing ...” 96 It may surprise us, but visible beings are defective because they are visible. A minute’s reflection shows that we see beings because light bounces off their surfaces. To have a surface is to be limited to some space. This limit is a defect because it restricts being to only some space. Being Himself is totally unrestricted. That’s the Being we all desire with all our hearts. No limited being satisfies us. Only full Being will do. B shows how different Being is from Non-being. That difference alerts us to the fact that Being can’t fail to exist. From above, God jump-starts our thinking with Himself. He is the Being that we first think. As thought rises above defective limitations, it strives for God.

All that is very abstract. Perhaps Carl Jung’s simple story will get B’s point across. Jung loved to tell of a 3-year old boy who wanted to visit his new-born baby sister. Naturally, the adults went first. Finally, when they let the little boy in, he rushed right up to the baby and blurted: “Tell me about God; I’m beginning to forget”. That’s our human condition in one sentence. God starts us, and we are full of God from the start. But we put creatures in God’s place so often that we begin to forget God. Putting creatures in God’s place is idolatry. God gave Moses the first commandment to remind us to put God first. Whether we come at God from Jung’s simple story, or from B’s more universal experience of God as Being, we need Him beyond all needs. B provides the most direct way to find Him: look inside to our Source.

B knows our weakness. He acknowledges that we usually fail to see our most obvious sight. He calls this “blindness of the intellect”. And so it is. B quotes Aristotle memorably: “As the eye of the bat is in regard to the light, so is the eye of our mind in regard to the most evident things of nature”. Like the little boy in Jung’s story, we forget God because we seek creatures instead of Him. That’s why B started our steps with seeing vestiges of God in creatures. But at this advanced step, B admits that when the mind “glimpses the light of the supreme Being, it seems to see nothing. It (the mind) does not realize that this very darkness is the supreme illumination of our mind, just as when the eye sees pure light, it seems to itself to see nothing.” 97

This distinction is so important that we should dwell upon it. When God illumines our minds at the source, His light, or Himself, is so unlimited that we do not see familiar reflections of light. Creatures, limited

as they are, reflect part of created light. These fragments so distract us, that we forget pure light. So we must remind ourselves that God Himself is much more pure than light fragments. If we keep sight of His pure light, gradually we become familiar with it. Too often, we rush off to some other creature instead. This frustrates our connection with God. Leaving Him for a creature ruins our union. Each creature disappoints us, lets us down. The more excited we get about a creature, the more disappointed we are when it lets us down. B recommends that we settle into God's pure light instead. Gradually, His light dawns upon us, providing real satisfaction. B describes this satisfaction in paragraph 5.

“Behold then, if you can, purest being itself, and you will realize that it cannot be thought of as received from another. From this, it must necessarily be thought of as absolutely first, since it cannot come from nothing, or from something. For what exists in itself, if being itself does not exist of itself and by itself? It will also appear to you as completely lacking nonbeing, and therefore as never beginning, nor ceasing, but rather eternal. It will also appear to you as having in itself nothing but being itself, and hence as not composite, but utterly simple. It will appear as supremely actual. It will appear as having no possibility for defect, and hence as most perfect. Finally, it will appear as having no diversity, and hence as supremely one.”

Obviously, B delights in this being which is God. If you find B's description too challenging, then focus on love. Most of us dissolve in God's love for us, rather than dissolve in Truth, as B describes here. Remember that B assures us that both knowledge and love go to God. Assuming that most of you approach God by love, we will skip B's further thinking in paragraph 6. Instead, we go to paragraph 7, which is a poem in awe and wonder, inspired by God. Look for the mark of Pure Being: the union of opposites.

“But you have something here to lift you up in wonder. Being itself is first and last. It is eternal, and most present. It is utterly simple, and the greatest. It is most actual, and most unchangeable. It is most perfect, and most immense. It is supremely one, and yet all inclusive. If you wonder at this with a pure mind, you will be flooded with a greater light, because you see further that Being is last because it is first. It does all things for itself, and therefore it must necessarily be the ultimate end, the beginning, and the consummation, the *Alpha* and the *Omega*. It is most present precisely because it is eternal. For because it is eternal, it does not flow from another, nor of itself cease to be, nor pass from one state into another. Therefore it has neither past nor future, but only present being. It is greatest precisely because it is utterly simple. For because it is utterly simple in essence, it is greatest in power, because the more power is unified, the more it is infinite.”

B expresses our experience. When you contemplate God as He is, you see His Simplicity. Then you try to understand Him the way you understand creatures. But creatures are complicated, so you complicate God if you use that inappropriate method. For example, your complication is spirit united to body. As this complication, you must think of God in pieces. This analysis is great fun. But always put the parts back together. As you synthesize God's parts back into God, you glorify Him. “The glory of God is man fully alive.” You come fully alive when you do your own version of B's description. Go over his last paragraph again and again, and you will find your own experience there. You were so intrigued by God that you did not express your experience. Now that you read B's expression, you grab hold of your experience more completely. It's like having the experience all over again. The more you practice this process, the more you love it. After all, God is Love Himself, and you love to love Him. You can't love what you don't know, so you love to know Him better. B helps us.

In fact, B continues his love-poem, or love-hymn for another page and a half. As you give yourself to his vision, you see more clearly into God. As you become more one with Truth Himself, you see more clearly that He is Goodness Himself. Then you fall deeper in love with Love Himself. God made you for this loving. God made you to contemplate. If you advance through the steps B provides, going up the Christ-ladder, you will experience heaven on earth as best you can. Then, passing through death, you will contemplate God forever in heaven. Nothing even comes close to the joy of contemplation. That's why B urges you on to the next step.

## Chapter Six: On Contemplating the Most Blessed Trinity in its Name, Which Is Good

“After contemplating the essential attributes of God, the eye of our intelligence should be raised to look upon the most blessed Trinity, so that the second Cherub may be placed alongside the first.” 102 This poetry combines three sparkling truths. The first is that people who take the first four steps finish analyzing creatures to their Source, or God, the Supreme Being. This is one way to know God. So we can represent it as a Cherub, who is an angel specializing in knowing God. The second truth is that Jesus reveals God’s secret: He is One Being with Three Persons. Revelation is a second way that we know God. The third truth is that we should place this second Cherub alongside the first. This means that we should combine our natural knowledge with our revealed knowledge, to better understand God. Another combination that helps us go to God is to unite His Truth with His Goodness. As B described in the preceding chapter, God is One. His Truth is His Goodness.

Our own experience imitates God’s unity. Our experience is limited, but like God. Finding the truth of a creature, like the swan, delights us because we recognize it’s good. Its truth is its goodness. Our truth is our goodness. Both truth and goodness expand. One way to say that is that they diffuse. Like light, truth/goodness rushes to spread everywhere. B uses this common experience vault into the Trinity. Jesus teaches us the Trinity. By faith, we accept it. Then faith expands knowledge about the Trinity. In B’s words: “Good is said to be self-diffusive. Therefore, the highest good must be most self-diffusive. ... the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Unless these were present, it would by no means be the highest good, because it would not diffuse itself in the highest degree.” 103 B says that good’s necessary self-diffusion is completely clear from creatures here below. It’s one of those complete truths that can’t be false. So God, the Highest Good, must be the most self-diffusive. It’s obvious that He self-diffuses by creating. But Jesus tells us that God is Three Persons. Accepting that by faith, we immediately see that God must self-diffuse. The Father self-diffuses the Son, another self, equal to Him in every way. They self-diffuse the Holy Spirit, another self, equal to Them in every way. This diffusion is complete with the Three, because Christ reveals only Three. As we ponder Them, we see that The Spirit knows and loves, and self-diffuses. Because there are two ways to diffuse, knowing and loving, this double diffusion produces Three Persons. After the revealed fact, we see how necessity it is. Faith seeks understanding, and gains it. B emphasizes the necessity of self-diffusion producing exactly Three in One. Then self-diffusion overflows into creation, with its uncounted many beings. At first, all this truth & goodness overwhelm me. It’s as if my mind just shattered. When I pick up the pieces, patch them back together, & they fit better than before. Ah!

As we ponder B’s guidebook to God, we find more and more overwhelming truths that shatter our minds, but enable us to put them back together better than before. B does that again by comparing self-diffusion in creation to self-diffusion in the Trinity. “For the diffusion in time in creation is no more than a center, or point, in relation to the immensity of the divine goodness. Hence another diffusion can be conceived greater than this, namely, one in which the one diffusing communicates to the other His entire substance and nature. Therefore, it would not be the highest good if it could lack this, either in reality or in thought. If therefore you can behold with your mind’s eye the purity of goodness, which is the pure act of a principle loving in charity with a love that is both free and due, and a mixture of both, which is the fullest diffusion by way of nature and will, which is a diffusion by way of the Word, in which all things are said, and the way of the Gift, in which other gifts are given, then you can see that through the highest communicability of the good there must be a Trinity of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.” 104 There’s lots to unpack here!

Creation exceeds our vision. What we see exceeds our count. What we count exceeds our understanding. So there’s a lot out there. Still, creation is finite. It has limits. The perimeter of the universe is its outer limit. Compared to Infinite God, creation is about the size of a point. In God’s image, we get beyond limits. So we conceive infinite diffusion, without any limits at all. God self-diffuses all that He is. He wouldn’t be the highest good unless He duplicated His Infinity by self-diffusion. His love is perfect union of freedom and due, or deserved, love. His beloved, the Son deserves all that Love. Because knowledge precedes love, first God self-diffuses by knowing Himself perfectly. This perfect knowing is another perfect Person, the Word of God, or His

Son. Love follows knowledge, so the Father mutually loves the Son. The perfection of this love diffuses Self again to the Holy Spirit. That completes spiritual activity, and the Trinity of self-diffused Persons.

These words point to the reality that B experienced, but don't corral it. In fact, the Reality he experienced can't be corralled. It's a mystery. While we never finish a mystery, we love expanding into it. It nourishes and sustains us. It envelops us in light. It self-diffuses throughout our lives. It attracts us to God. Nothing is better for us than a mystery. We thrive on it. As you solve the small mysteries of what B means by his statements, you hurl yourself into deeper mysteries, all the way to Mystery Himself: Trinity.

B goes on about Trinity, inspiring us to see more of God than before. But B assures us that there's much more, which he describes on p 105. He then reminds us that the Cherubim that Moses built to face each other, from either side of the ark of the covenant, go together. The emptiness between them stands for God. God is so much better than any image, that images mislead us. God's mercy flowed from between the Cherubim to His beloved people. This abstract image foreshadowed God's Incarnation as Jesus Christ. St. John says: "This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent, Jn 17:3. 106 Jesus is God Incarnate, the Word made flesh. So He expresses the Trinity most perfectly. He is Trinity come to us, and the divine ladder leading us to Trinity. Everything fits together so perfectly. Wow; inspiring!

B is so inspired that he goes on for another two pages, amplifying what we know about these mysteries. He concludes chapter 6 with a hymn of love for Christ Incarnate, the ultimate Trinitarian self-diffusion. "In this consideration is the perfection of the mind's illumination when ... it sees man made to the image of God. For an image is an expressed likeness, when our mind contemplates in Christ, the Son of God, who is the image of the invisible God by nature, our humanity so wonderfully exalted, so ineffably united, when at the same time it sees united the first and the last, the highest and the lowest, the circumference and the center, the alpha and the omega, the caused and the Cause, the Creator and the creature, i.e. the 'book written within and without', Apoc 5:1, it now reaches something perfect. It reaches the perfection of its illuminations on the sixth stage, as if with God on the sixth day of creation. Nor does anything more remain except the day of rest on which through mystical ecstasy the mind's discernment comes to rest 'from all the work which it has done', Gen 2:2." 109

In this poetry, B tells us that Trinity self-diffuses most perfectly in Jesus. Jesus pours Perfect Love upon us perfectly. He is the union of God with man. He repairs Adam's split from God. He replaces Adam's rebellion with perfect obedience. He pays our sin-debt by suffering over and above the amount due. He redeems death itself, conquering it by Love. This Love-flood washes us away. If we agree with Love, we love in return. There is no more for us to do. When God sees fit, He will call us through death to Himself, perfecting our mutual love. Right now, creatures fly apart. But Love unites all in All. This ineffable unity is Love. The person who accepts Love this far completes his six steps on the journey to God. B's final chapter is about passing over in death.

### **Chapter Seven: On Spiritual & Mystical Ecstasy in Which Rest is Given to Our Intellect When Through Ecstasy Our Affection Passes Over Entirely Into God**

B compares his six steps to those rising up to Solomon's throne in the interior Jerusalem. This symbol expresses going from here to God. Similarly, the Seraph's wings, and the days of creation, each represent ascent to God. These Scriptural themes also foreshadow God coming down to us in Christ, Who is then the ladder taking us up to God, Jesus is the mediator, 1 Tim 2:5, the way and the door, Jn 14:6;10:7. Thus, the coming down and going up the Ladder is a good symbol. Because this action surpasses comprehension, we need symbols to help us focus. It is the mystery hidden from eternity, Eph 3:9. Forever escaping our understanding, it nevertheless nourishes us. We grow up in Christ, Eph 4:15 by following this mystery. Step by step, we become more Christ-like, so that we celebrate the Pasch with Him, pass over the Red Sea, and eventually go, like the good thief to "be with me in Paradise", Lk 23:43. St. Francis is the prime example of a human becoming so like Christ that "he passed over into God in ecstatic contemplation, and became an example of perfect contemplation, as he had previously been of action, like another Jacob and Israel, Gen 35:10, so that through him, more by

example than by word, God might invite all truly spiritual men to this kind of passing over and spiritual ecstasy.” 112-3 B shows that St. Francis was the pioneer who blazed the trail for us. He certainly did for B. This travel-guide is a fine example of B following Francis’ trail. What happens at the end of this trail?

“In this passing over, if it is to be perfect, all intellectual activities must be left behind, and the height of our affection must be totally transferred and transformed into God.” Here B says that thinking yields to loving in perfect union. As we pass over into God, the Holy Spirit reveals mystical wisdom. B expresses this condition vividly. “Since, therefore, in this regard nature can do nothing, and effort can do but little, little importance should be given to inquiry, and much to unction (God’s blessing). Little importance should be given to the tongue, but much to inner joy. Little importance should be given to words & writing, but all to the gift of God, i.e. the Holy Spirit. Little or no importance should be given to creation, but all to the creative essence, the Father, Son, & Holy Spirit.” 113-4 After a person takes B’s 8 steps, he’s so one with God that God does almost everything for him. In death, God does everything for him. B quotes a prayer written by Dionysius, showing the soul’s pre-death perfection. Compared to our sensory knowledge, this perfection seems to be un-knowing, 115 But really the person knows and loves God so perfectly that he’s ready to die and unite with One.

B describes death poetically. “For transcending yourself and all things, by the immeasurable and absolute ecstasy of a pure mind, leaving behind all things, and freed from all things, you will ascend to the super-sensational ray of the divine darkness.” As B says, passing over to God does go beyond yourself and all created things. When saints die, their last stage is ecstasy in God. That inspires bystanders. Having never seen God directly, even saints are not sure what’s next. We know natural light, but God is super-light. He’s so different from what we have seen that He’s “divine darkness”. It’s the last unknown we encounter. Since we come from God, and seek above all to return to Him, death is homecoming. But death is also the wage of sin. No one should die. So it’s painful from nature’s viewpoint, even though it’s the last step to Home.

B sees beyond nature, into Home. “Whoever loves this death can see God, because it is true beyond doubt that “man will not see me and live”, Ex 33:20. Let us, then, die and enter into the darkness. Let us impose silence upon our cares, our desires, and our imaginings. With Christ crucified let us pass “out of the world to the Father”, Jn 13:1, so that when the Father is shown to us, we may say with Philip: “It is enough for us”, Jn 14:8. Let us hear with Paul: “My grace is sufficient for you”, 2 Cor 12:9. Let us rejoice with David saying: “My flesh and my heart have grown faint. You are the God of my heart, and the God that is my portion forever. Blessed be the lord forever, and all the people will say: Let it be, let it be, Amen.”

Indeed, our perfectly loving response to God is “let it be”. When we renounce rebellion against God, and love him completely, we are ready to pass through death to Love. B completes his travel guide with a hymn of devoted love. It describes the perfect journey. If our journey is imperfect, our second chance is Purgatory. There we reach the union that B describes. Only then can we enter into God. Hopefully we will complete our journey here on earth, and die as St. Francis died. This union is possible even if we die imperfectly. Purgatory purges our remaining defects. Let us hope and pray to follow B’s steps and die in perfect love. B shows us how.

### **Bonaventure’s *Tree of Life*, an Organic Image of Christ-life**

In this small book, St. Bonaventure uses different symbols to look at Jesus loving us. When Christ said: “That you may have life, and have it more abundantly”, Jn 10:10, He meant Love-life. The tree is a magnificent symbol, uniting the “tree of the knowledge of good & evil”, Gen 2:9-17, with the “tree of the cross”, Mat 27:32-45; Mk 15:21-35; Lk 23:26-36; Jn 19:17-25. Our Great Artist, Who arranges the sun and the stars, arranged our history so artistically that tree echoes tree, Jesus corrects Adam, obedience rectifies revolt, and love conquers sin. The “Tree of Life” grows from the severed root of Eden’s tree. By redemption, Christ reopens heaven to us sinners. On Calvary’s tree, Jesus unites us with God. By washing our sins away in His blood, Christ connects us to our Source and Destiny. The cross is our primary symbol for these reasons, and many more. Bonaventure (B) ascends into poetry when he connects St. Paul’s “with Christ I am nailed to the cross”,

Gal 2:19 to Love, pouring forth His last drop of blood for love of us. This infinite Love moves everything, vivifying us who join Jesus.

B inspires us by reminding us what God did for us: dying in agony on the tree erected to kill, but transformed into the tree of life. Roman soldiers set that tree up to terrorize criminals and citizens, to force them to obey by extreme cruelty and torture. Christ turned that terror-drive inside out to invite us to everlasting life by giving His life in Love. No words can fully express this divine love, but B says so much that we profit greatly by reviewing his statements. In the opening poem, p 119, B unites St. Paul with the Song of Songs, because both love without reserve. Each gives entirely, 100%, because God's love is entire. B seeks "to enkindle in us this affection, to shape this understanding, and to imprint this memory ... passion and glorification of Jesus Christ. ... I have used simple, familiar and unsophisticated terms to avoid idle curiosity, and to cultivate devotion, and to foster the piety of faith. Since imagination aids understanding, I have arranged in the form of an imaginary tree the few items I have collected from among many, and have ordered and disposed them in such a way that in the first or lower branches the Savior's origin and life are described, in the middle, His passion, and in the top, His glorification." 119-120 When B appeals to our affection, he shows how much God loves us, and how much we should strive to love in return. Because God starts this cycle, we don't have to invent it. All we need to do is return His love. If we keep the cycle going by thanking God for love, it's as if the fire of love flames up. Of course, God does most of the loving, but we cooperate internally. If we apply this enflamed love to our neighbors, more ignites, until we're in a holocaust of love. That's the fiery affection B wants to stoke.

He helps us by filling us with pleasing images. "Picture in your mind a tree whose roots are watered by the ever-flowing fountain that becomes a great and living river, with four channels to water the garden of the entire Church, Apoc 22:1-2 From the trunk of this tree, imagine that there are growing twelve branches that are adorned with leaves, flowers, and fruit. Imagine that the leaves are a most effective medicine to prevent and cure every kind of sickness, because the word of the cross is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes", Rom 1:16. Let the flowers be beautiful with the radiance of every color, and perfumed with the sweetness of very fragrance, awakening and attracting the anxious hearts of men of desire. Imagine that there are twelve fruits, "having every delight, and the sweetness of every taste", Wis 16:20. This fruit is offered to God's servants to be tasted so that when they eat it, they may always be satisfied, yet never grow weary of its taste. This is the fruit that took its origin from the Virgin's womb, and reached its savory maturity on the tree of the cross, under the midday heat of the Eternal Sun, i.e. the love of Christ. In the garden of the heavenly paradise, God's table, this fruit is served to those who desire it. This is suggested by the first stanza, which says:

O cross, salvation-bearing tree, Watered by a living fountain, Your flower is spice-scented, Your fruit an object of desire."	121	Note: B mentions a longer poem, written on a picture he had. Probably there were 15 stanzas. Copyists changed it, so the critical edition has only three stanzas. This stanza praises the cross for bringing sweet, desirable, salvation from God's love (water).
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B uses symbols to unify our many experiences of salvation into a tree, limiting God's gifts so that we can focus clearly upon them. Otherwise, multiple ideas overwhelm us. Think of these few things to unify your experience. Collect God's gifts into this single symbol. Then you possess them more completely. Put your individual blessings into this tree of life, to see them in perspective, and enjoy them fully. Be developed by this symbol.

"Although this fruit is one and undivided, it nourishes devout soul with varied consolations, in view of its varied stated, excellence, powers, and works. These can be reduced to twelve. This fruit of the tree of life, therefore, is pictured and is offered to our taste under twelve flavors on twelve branches. On the first branch, the soul devoted to Christ perceives the flavor of sweetness by recalling the distinguished origin and sweet birth of her Savior. On the second branch is the humble mode of life which He condescended to adopt. On the third is the loftiness of His perfect power. On the fourth is the plentitude of His most abundant piety. On the fifth is the confidence which he had in the trial of his passion. On the sixth is the patience which He exhibited in bearing

great insults and injuries. On the seventh is the constancy which He maintained in the torture and suffering of His rough and bitter cross. On the eighth is the victory which He achieved in the conflict and passage of death. On the ninth is the novelty of His resurrection, embellished with remarkable gifts. On the tenth is the sublimity of His ascension, pouring forth spiritual charisms. On the eleventh is the equity of the future judgment. On the twelfth is the eternity of the divine kingdom.” 121 You see that B selected a dozen important gifts Christ gives.

“I call these fruits because they delight with their rich sweetness, and strengthen with their nourishment, the soul who meditates on them and diligently considers each one, abhorring the example of unfaithful Adam, who preferred the “tree of good and evil”, Gen 2:17, to the tree of life. No one can avoid this error unless he prefers faith to reason, devotion to investigation, simplicity to curiosity, and finally the sacred cross of Christ to all carnal feeling or wisdom of the flesh. Through the cross, the charity of the Holy Spirit is nourished in devout hearts, and the sevenfold grace is poured forth, as is requested in the two first and last verses:

Feed us with these fruits,  
Shed light upon our thoughts,  
Lead us along straight paths,  
Crush the attacks of the enemy.

Fill us with your sacred light,  
Breathe holy inspiration,  
Be a peaceful way of life  
For those who fear Christ. Amen” 122

Comment: B provides a beautiful picture for us to enjoy. If we imagine what he describes, we develop the affection he recommends. Be sure to do what he says. Reading the words is not enough. Enter this delightful garden. See the tree, identify each branch, one at a time. Look with faith. Let God feed you with these luscious fruits. Allow His light to flood you. Resolve to go with God as Jesus did. Implore the Holy Spirit to breathe upon you, and in you, through you, to inspire peace. They the awe and wonder of Christ is in you.

“Arise, then, O soul devoted to Christ, and examine diligently, consider attentively, and mull over carefully each of the things that are said about Jesus. 125

### **First Fruit: His Distinguished Origin**

“When you hear that Jesus is begotten of God, beware lest some inadequate thought of the flesh appear before your mind’s eye. Rather, with the vision of the dove and the eagle, believe simply, and contemplate with penetrating gaze, the following. From the Eternal Light, which is at the same time measureless and more simple, most brilliant and most hidden, there emerges a coeternal, coequal, and consubstantial splendor, Who is the power and wisdom of the Father. In him, the Father ordered all things from eternity. Through Him “he made the world”, Heb 1:2, and governs and directs it to His own glory, partly by nature, partly by grace, partly by justice, and partly by mercy, so that He leaves nothing in this world without order.” 126

Isn’t this a fine summary of Christ’s teaching, as recorded in Scripture? B lifts us above biology to Trinity. The vision of the dove and eagle is faith, which penetrates to what Jesus meant by “I and the Father are one”, Jn 10:30. John 1:1-10 come through in technical instead of poetical terms. God the Word, the Son, is the wisdom and power of the Father. All order flows from his union with the Father: making, governing, and directing the universe we observe. Law blessed by love graces nature, to show Divine Mercy through justice. As we read, and digest, these words, we grow toward the Everlasting Light. More and more light diffuses by welcoming each ray from God. Let His initiative grow in us. B continues our familiar history, showing how everything fits.

“At the beginning of the creation of nature, our first parents were placed in paradise. But they were driven out by the severity of God’s decree, because they ate of the forbidden tree. From that time, His heavenly mercy has not ceased calling straying man back to the way of penance, by giving hope of forgiveness, and by promising that a Savior would come. Lest such condescension on God’s part should fail to effect our salvation because of ignorance and ingratitude, He never ceased announcing, promising, and prefiguring the coming of His Son in the five ages of history, through the patriarchs, judges, priests, kings, and prophets, from Abel the

Just to John the Baptist. Through many thousands of years, by many marvelous prophecies, He stirred men's minds to faith, and inflamed their hearts with living desires." 127