

Finding The Joy of God

A young woman recently confided to me that she was not progressing in her spiritual life. She is struggling to follow the path which leads to daily, personal, intimate knowledge and love of God. St Bonaventura (1221-1274) was a godly Christian in the Middle Ages who can help us find and follow the path to joy in God.

St. Bonaventura wisely warned of the danger of speculating without devotion, investigating without wonder, examining without exultation, knowing without love, and understanding without humility. He realized that when man tries to understand God on the basis of his own intellect, he is led into error.



When God created man in His own image, man was able to know God through direct experience. Adam and Eve walked with God, talked with Him, and enjoyed His presence daily. But when man turned away from God, his nature was infected by sin, his mind by spiritual ignorance, and his body by concupiscence (lustful desires, coveting). Blinded and bent down towards the earth, man sits in the shadows and cannot see the light of God unless grace illumines his heart and leads his mind to the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ.

St. Bonaventura shows us two ways to climb from the shadows of earth into the light of union with God. The first way is to see [experience] the glory of the created world around us. As we delight in the beauty, order, and wonder of the creation, we are led to ask why something is beautiful, pleasant, and wholesome. In asking the “Why?” question, we are led upwards to the Maker of all things, so that God may be seen in all His works. As we see the beauty, pleasure and wholesomeness of the sun, moon, stars, planets, and all creatures God has made, we recognize God as the source and origin of beauty, pleasure, and wholesomeness. Because God alone is the original and true delight, we are led from created things back to seeking Him who is the Creator. This is what St. Paul means in Romans 1:20, “For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.”

The second way upwards into the light of union with God is through reflecting upon our own being. God has created man with memory, intelligence and will. These three aspects of our being point to the nature of God Himself. St. Bonaventura teaches that since God is perfect Spirit, He has memory, intelligence and will, which represent the Blessed Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Therefore, by reflecting on the nature of man, we are led more deeply into relationship with our Creator. What keeps us from knowing God, by reflecting upon the truth of our own being, are the distractions, cares, and lustful desires of this world.

How do we steer clear of the distractions, cares, and lustful desires of this world? By seeking after silence, adoration, devotion, meditation on Holy Scripture, and fervent prayer. If we practice these spiritual disciplines, we will free ourselves from worldly cares and distractions, and enter more and more into the beauty, goodness and joy of God. This is why we ought to pray each day, “Conduct me in Thy way, O LORD, and I will walk in Thy truth. Let my heart rejoice that it may fear Thy name,” (Psalm 85:11).