

SAINT BONAVENTURE AND HIS VISION OF SAINT FRANCIS AND THE THEOLOGY OF HISTORY IN THE TEACHINGS OF POPE BENEDICT XVI

Noel Muscat ofm

Joseph Ratzinger published his study enabling him to lecture theology, entitled *Die Geschichtstheologie des heiligen Bonaventura*, in Munich in 1959.¹ Since that year this monumental volume has been translated and republished in various languages, particularly during the years in which Cardinal Ratzinger became Pope Benedict XVI (2005 - 2013).

In this volume Ratzinger makes a detailed analysis of the concept of theology of history as outlined in the context of the 13th century schools of theology, particularly in the University of Paris during the time in which Saint Bonaventure of Bagnoregio was lecturing and especially during the final years as minister general of the Franciscan Order, when he delivered some famous Parisian lectures or conferences, especially the *Collationes in Hexaëmeron*, between 9 and 28 May 1273.²

The 13th century had been characterised by the influence of the visionary abbot Joachim of Fiore (c. 1135 – 1202), author of apocalyptic volumes regarding the history of salvation and the Church,³ particularly famous for his presentation of a theological history of the Church in a trinitarian perspective, with the Old Testament as the age of the Father, the New Testament as the age of the Son, and the coming age of the Holy Spirit in

¹ JOSEPH RATZINGER, *Die Geschichtstheologie des heiligen Bonaventura*, München 1959. English edition: JOSEPH RATZINGER, *The Theology of History in Saint Bonaventure*, translated by Z. Hayes, Franciscan Herald Press, Chicago 1971. Italian edition: JOSEPH RATZINGER, *San Bonaventura. La teologia della storia*, edizione italiana a cura di L. Mauro, traduzione di M. Montelatici, Edizioni Porziuncola, Assisi 2008. For an analysis of the theology of J. Ratzinger, cfr. AIDAN NICHOLS, *The Thought of Benedict XVI. An Introduction to the Theology of Josef Ratzinger*, Burns & Oates, London 1985, 2005².

² S. BONAVENTURA, *Collationes in Hexaëmeron*, in *Doctoris Seraphici S. Bonaventurae Opera Omnia*, studio et cura PP. Collegii a S. Bonaventura, Ad Claras Aquas (Quaracchi), 1891, Tomus V, 327-454. References to this work will be indicated by the title *Hex.* with the number of the conference and paragraph, followed by the page number in the *Opera Omnia*.

³ Joachim was born in the village of Celico near Cosenza in Calabria. After his education he became a notary and worked for the archbishop of Palermo and the King of Sicily. Around 1159 he went on pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Back in Calabria he decided to withdraw to live like a hermit and later joined the Cistercians of the abbey of Sambucina. He then passed on to the abbey of Corazzo and was ordained priest in 1168. During this time he dedicated himself to the study of the Scriptures, particularly to the apocalyptic vision of revelation. He became abbot of Corazzo, but in 1182 he appealed to Pope Lucius III to be relieved of this responsibility. Joachim passed on to the abbey of Casamari. After a visit to Rome in 1184 Joachim founded the abbey of Fiore on the mountainous Sila of Calabria. The abbey became the centre of a reform of the Cistercian Order, approved by Celestine III in 1198. In 1200 Joachim passed his writings to the examination of Pope Innocent III, but died on 30 March 1202 before any judgement was pronounced. He was always venerated as a Blessed and his feast was celebrated on 29 May. Works by Joachim of Fiore include the *Liber concordiae Novi et Veteris Testamenti* (1200), the *Expositio in Apocalypsim* (1196-1199), of which the *Liber Introductorius in Apocalypsim* is a part, the *Psalterium decem chordarum*, and the *Tractatus super quatuor Evangelia*.

which a radically purified Church, an *ecclesia spiritualis*, would be born.⁴ Subsequent interpretations of the doctrine of Joachim of Fiore began to indicate the mid-13th century as the moment in which this radical transformation from a *carnal* to a *spiritual* Church would take place. The effects of these teachings in the hierarchy of the Church and in the medieval centres of theological studies was only too obvious, and all the famous theologians of the period, including Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure, were involved in this discussion.

Theological vision of history in the beginnings of the Franciscan Order

The influence of Joachim of Fiore's prophecies did not affect the Franciscan Order during the early decades of its existence. It was only during the generalate of John Buralli of Parma that we assist at the beginning of a strong apocalyptic influence in the historical vision of the Order, particularly with regards to the figure of its founder, St. Francis of Assisi.

According to David Burr, the word "spiritual" played a major role in Franciscan history right from the beginnings of the Order. "The 1223 rule told brothers what to do when they found that they could not observe the rule 'spiritually.' Later, the phrase 'spiritual man' was widely used to describe a holy man. Bonaventure's *Legenda maior* used it in that way, noting that the vision of Francis in the fiery chariot was granted in order to show his companions that they followed the new Elijah established by God to be the chariot and driver of 'spiritual men.' [...] In Joachite rhetoric, the 'spiritual church' (*ecclesia spiritualis*) of the third age is guided by 'spiritual men' (*virī spirituales*)."⁵

With the incidents that occurred in the University of Paris between the secular masters and the mendicant orders of Preachers and Minors, during the time when Bonaventure acquired his *magisterium* in the Franciscan school, the issue of the prophecies of Joachim of Fiore came to the forefront in the poverty controversy in which the Franciscan Order became suspect of nurturing sympathies for the apocalyptic prophecies of the *ecclesia spiritualis*. The publication of the *Liber introductorius in Evangelium aeternum* by Gerard of Borgo San Donnino⁶ in 1254 ignited the question, and it was difficult to calm the waters even after Gerard's work was declared heretical. The resignation of John of Parma from minister general on 2 February 1257 was a direct result of this state of affairs.

When St. Bonaventure became minister general of the Order he tried to affront the problem of Joachimite influences on the "Spiritual" Franciscans. On the one hand Bonaventure had to show a strong hand, even by processing John of Parma and sending him in solitary confinement in the hermitage of Greccio. On the other hand, Bonaventure was aware that the prophetic figure of Francis of Assisi could very well lend itself to Joachite influences, and that it was partially true that the Poverello was the harbinger of a

⁴ B. TIERNEY, *Origins of Papal Infallibility 1150-1350. A Study on the Concepts of Infallibility, Sovereignty and Tradition in the Middle Ages*, Leiden 1972, 58-81.

⁵ D. BURR, *The Spiritual Franciscans. From Protest to Persecution in the Century After Saint Francis*, The Pennsylvania State University 2001, 39-40.

⁶ R. ORIOLI, *Gerardo da Borgo San Donnino*, in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, Vol. 53 (2000), 354-358.

new spiritual age in the Church. That is why Bonaventure tried to create an intelligent balance in his dealings with the way that the friars were looking at their founder. We find such an attempt being made in some of his most famous works, including the *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* (1259), the *Major Life of Saint Francis*, or *Legenda Maior* (1260-1263), with its liturgical abridged form in the *Legenda minor*, in a series of sermons for the feast of St. Francis (from 1267), and in the three sets of Collations, namely the *Collationes de decem praeceptis* (1267), the *Collationes de donis Spiritus Sancti* (1268) and the *Collationes in Hexaëmeron* (1273). We shall take a look at two of these works, namely the prologue to the *Legenda Maior* and the *Collationes in Hexaëmeron*, which are the explicit object of the analysis of Joseph Ratzinger's monumental work.

The figure of Saint Francis in the Prologue to the *Legenda Maior*

Bonaventure deals with St. Francis mainly in the works he composed or during the poverty controversy in the University of Paris, or more especially during the years in which he was minister general of the Franciscans. Bonaventure did not regard Francis as an ordinary saint or founder of a religious order, but he presented him also as an eschatological figure, a prophet of a new spiritual age in the Church. In no other place in Bonaventure's works is such an approach more evident than in the prologue to the *Legenda Maior*.

In order to indicate Francis as the prophet of this new age Bonaventure begins the prologue with a very solemn affirmation: "*The grace of God our Saviour has appeared in these last days* (Titus 2:11) in his servant Francis to all who are truly humble and lovers of holy poverty who, while venerating in him God's superabundant mercy, learn by his example *to reject wholeheartedly ungodliness and worldly passions* (Titus 2:12), to live in conformity with Christ and to thirst after *blessed hope* (Titus 2:13) with unflagging desire."⁷

The opening paragraph of the prologue could well have been presented as the thesis of the "Spirituals" who regarded Francis as the prophet of the new age of the Spirit. Bonaventure does not go that far, but he admits that Francis was given by God to the Church at the "eleventh hour" of its history, namely in the last days heralding the second coming of Christ. The difference, as we shall see, between Bonaventure and the "Spiritual" Franciscans was that, whereas they regarded the end of times as a new age of the Spirit, which would wipe out the age of the Son evident in the hierarchical Church, Bonaventure never distances the eschatological time from the time of the Church. In other words, the mystery of Christ as continued in the mystery of the Church already marks the end of times, and there is no other new age that we have to await until the end of times. The age of the Spirit is included within the theological interpretation of the history of the Church.

Having stated this, however, Bonaventure agrees that Francis was truly a prophet of a new age, just as Elijah and John the Baptist had been prophets of the coming of Messiah in their times. The prologue of the *Legenda Maior* is a masterpiece of a theological interpretation of history in which Francis is seen to be endowed with the ministry of the prophets and heralds the apocalyptic age of the second coming of Christ,

⁷ *LMj*, Prol. 1 (FAED II, 525).

through his radical choice of poverty and through the gift of the stigmata, the seal of Christ on the body of the Poverello:

“*He preached to people the Gospel of peace* (Rom 10:15) and salvation, being himself *an angel of true peace* (Is 33:7). Like John the Baptist, he was destined by God *to prepare in the desert a way* (Is 40:3) of the highest poverty and *to preach repentance* (Lk 24:47) by word and example. First endowed with the gifts of divine grace, he was then enriched by the merit of unshakable virtue; and *filled with the spirit* (Lk 1:67) of prophecy, he was also assigned to angelic ministry and was totally aflame with a Seraphic fire. Like a hierarchic man, lifted up on *a fiery chariot* (2Kgs 2:11), it may be reasonably accepted as true that he came *in the spirit and power of Elijah* (Lk 1:17), as will appear quite clearly in the course of his life. And so in the true prophecy of that other *friend of the Bridegroom* (Jn 3:29), John the Apostle and Evangelist, he is considered not without reason to be like the angel ascending from the rising of the sun bearing the seal of the living God. For *at the opening of the sixth seal* (Rv 6:12), John says in the Apocalypse, *I saw another Angel ascending from the rising of the sun, having the sign of the living God* (Rv 7:2).”

We know that the belief in Elijah as the prophet of the last days is a recurrent theme in the Bible, especially in the prophecy of Malachi 3:23, and that Jesus referred this prophecy to the ministry of John the Baptist (Mt 11:12-14; 17:10-13). Ratzinger states that the name of Elijah permits us to refer to the theology of history preached by Joachim of Fiore, who linked the biblical awaiting of Elijah to the apocalyptic prophecy of the two witnesses in Revelation 11:3, thus indicating the coming of a new Elijah and a new Enoch in the third age of the Spirit. The “Spiritual” Franciscans soon began to refer to this prophecy as an indication that the two witnesses had indeed come at the last age, namely Francis and Dominic, in order to re-establish the primitive Church as a Church of “spiritual men.”⁸

The figure of the Angel bearing the seal of the living God, as applied to Francis, is even stronger and very eschatological in nature. The apocalyptic Angel of the sixth seal⁹ of Revelation 7:2 is a reminder of the angel of Ezechiel 9:4 who marks the foreheads of those who are saved with the “Tau” of salvation. Bonaventure applies this biblical figure to Francis in the prologue of the *Legenda Maior*, referring both to the form of the Franciscan habit, namely the sign of the cross of penance, as well as to the stigmata that Francis received on La Verna, and which were the seal of the living God on the body of the Poverello. Ratzinger states: “had not the sign of the living God, the figure of «Christus crucifixus», been truly impressed on the body of the Saint? Was it not precisely from this event that the image of the Apocalypse acquired its colour and its meaning? Such an interpretation acquired its full actual meaning, its absolutely emotional likeness, in the coincidence of this *event* with the *prophecy* of the abbot of Fiore.”¹⁰

This presentation of St. Francis in an eschatological perspective is strong in the prologue of the *Legenda Maior*, but not so evident in other parts of the biography.

⁸ RATZINGER, *San Bonaventura. La Teologia della storia*, 57. The reference to Elijah and Enoch, within the context of the fifth age of the New Testament, before the final age, is made by Bonaventure in *Hex* 15,28 (*Opera Omnia* V, 402).

⁹ S. DA CAMPAGNOLA, *L'angelo del sesto sigillo e l'«alter Christus»*. *Genesi e sviluppo di due temi francescani nei secoli XIII-XIV*, Laurentianum, Roma 1971.

¹⁰ RATZINGER, *San Bonaventura. La Teologia della storia*, 61. The translation in English is my own.

Bonaventure had no intention of presenting the thesis of the “Spiritual” Franciscans as the only hermeneutical principle in interpreting the life and mission of Francis of Assisi. Bonaventure is keen to present Francis as a man of a new age, but at the same time as one who was obedient to the hierarchical Church founded by Christ, which would not be transformed into a hybrid *ecclesia spiritualis* made up of contemplative monks, in which the message of Scripture would no longer be valid, but would open the way for a prophetic witness of the Spirit. As we have already stated, Bonaventure was never ready to accept the thesis of Joachimite adherents that revelation had still further developments beyond the Christ-event in the New Testament and in the history of the Church. Such a position calls for an examination of the bonaventurian concept of the theology of history, as applied to St. Francis and his role in the Church, and as presented by Ratzinger in his study.

The figure of Saint Francis in the *Collationes in Hexaëmeron*

Before presenting the texts in the *Hex* that specifically deal with the figure of St. Francis of Assisi, let us see what Ratzinger has to say regarding the interpretation of history created by the event of the life of Francis. According to Ratzinger, the same life of Francis had been a constant and immediate contact with the Scripture, which he wanted to live “sine glossa”, that is, literally, in a living contact with the Lord who speaks through the Scriptures and especially in the Gospel.¹¹

The Mendicant Orders, and especially the Franciscans, were placing emphasis upon the fact that the *vita apostolica* of Francis had been an event that could be a principle of interpretation of the sense of Scripture within the context of theology during the 13th century. They were aware of the controversial nature of such an approach, and therefore they tried to confer to it a sense of stability by citing the fact that the Church had officially canonised Francis and Dominic and approved their ways of life. In this way, those who, during the poverty controversy, were combatting the Franciscan way of life were presented as being in direct conflict with the Church and thus in error.¹² This was the stand of the “Spiritual” Franciscans, but it was also diplomatically adopted, on a moderate scale, by Bonaventure himself in his efforts to validate the way of life of the Franciscan Order.

We have seen how Bonaventure presents Francis of Assisi as having had the spirit of prophecy like Elijah and John the Baptist, and how he can also be compared to the Angel of the sixth seal in the Book of Revelation. We now have to see how Bonaventure presents Francis in the *Collationes in Hexaëmeron*, which are his crowning work, and in which we can get a glimpse of the way in which Bonaventure views Francis and his Order against the backdrop of the theology of history.

Although Bonaventure mentions Francis in various parts of the *Hexaëmeron*,¹³ it is in Collation 22 that he deals with him within the context of the theology of history. We shall therefore concentrate our reflection on this particular Collation.

¹¹ RATZINGER, *San Bonaventura. La Teologia della storia*, 119.

¹² RATZINGER, *San Bonaventura. La Teologia della storia*, 120.

¹³ *Hex* 3,1 (*Op. Omnia* V,343): “Donus intellectus est solidus cibus, ut panis, qui, ut dicebat beatus Franciscus, multis laboribus habetur”; *Hex* 5,5 (*Op. Omnia* V,354-355): “Et dicebat beatus Franciscus,

The theme of Collation 22¹⁴ regards the militant Church and the hierarchy of the soul. Bonaventure is dealing with the fourth vision, which is the final one that he expounds in the *Hexaëmeron*. He starts off as usual with a biblical verse, taken from Rev 12:1: *Signum magnum apparuit in caelo, mulier amicta sole, et luna sub pedibus eius, et in capite eius corona stellarum duodecim*. Bonaventure compares the woman clothed with the sun to the contemplative soul, whereas the moon at the her feet symbolises her firmness, namely the militant Church. Just as the moon receives its light from the sun, so the militant Church receives its light from the heavenly Jerusalem.¹⁵

Bonaventure then goes on to say that there are three fundamental orders in the militant Church, namely the patriarchal order, corresponding to Thrones, the prophetic order, corresponding to Cherubs, and the apostolic order, corresponding to Seraphs.¹⁶ This order conforms to Christ in the closest way. So, just as there is a hierarchical order among the choirs of angels, so there is a hierarchy in the militant Church. Indeed, Bonaventure goes on to speak of another twin set of three orders, to make nine orders in all, namely the promoting orders of martyrs, corresponding to Dominions, confessors, corresponding to Virtues, and virgins, corresponding to Powers, and the perfecting orders of presiders, corresponding to Principalities, magistrates, corresponding to Archangels, and regulars, corresponding to Angels.

Bonaventure continues to create a hierarchy of orders in the militant Church, by speaking about the order of laity, the order of clerics, and the order of contemplatives. This last order is the highest in the hierarchy, since it occupies itself with divine realities. The members of this order of contemplatives can be supplicants (the monastic Orders who dedicate their time for prayer, and these correspond to Thrones), speculative (the

quod 'pauper magis potest esse largus quam dives: quia dives, si dat quidquid habet, deficiet et confusus est; si vero non dat, cum habeat, licet vellet dare, si sibi non deficeret; voluntas bona est, sed non reputatur sibi pro facto, quia adhuc habet substantiam. Sed pauper, qui nihil habet, si vellet dare pauperi, et nihil habet, quod det; et vellet aedificare hospitalia, non tamen habet unde, voluntas pro facto reputatur'; *Hex* 18,11 (*Op. Omnia* V,416): "Unde exemplo Christ in consolatione iungendus est timor, et in tristitia iungendum est solatium, exemplo etiam beati Francisci, qui, quando ei offerebatur honor, dicebat socio suo, quod ibi nihil erant lucrati; sed quando recipiebant vituperia, tunc lucrabantur"; *Hex* 18,23 (*Op. Omnia* V,418): "Sicut enim dixit, mulier habebat daemonem, qui in illa loquebatur et dixit, quod Franciscus magnum malum eis faciebat, et quod bene erant contra ipsum congregati quinque millia ad ipsum deiiciendum; et frater, qui audivit, dixit beato Francisco; tunc ipse surrexit et dixit, quod modo fortior esset"; *Hex* 19,14 (*Op. Omnia* V,422): "Nota de beato Francisco, qui praedicabat Soldano. Cui dixit Soldanus, quod disuptaret cum sacerdotibus suis. Et ille dixit, quod secundum rationem de fide disputari non poterat, quia supra rationem est, nec per Scripturam, quia ipsam non reciperent illi; sed rogabat, ut fieret ignis, et ipse et illi intrarent"; *Hex* 20,30 (*Op. Omnia* V,430): "Intentio beati Francisci fuit esse in summa paupertate"; *Hex* 23,26 (*Op. Omnia* V,448-449): "Et dicebat, quod semel loquebatur cum fratre Aegidio, qui dicebat sibi, quod non sumus sapientes, sicut beatus Franciscus sapiens mercator fuit; sed nos dissipamus substantiam, quia deberemus dare unum denarium, ut homo aliam nobis daret; sed nos nec habemus sapientiam asini, qui portat sarcinam suam, et ubi plus percutitur et plura vituperia sibi dicuntur, tanto melius portat. Sic homo obediens nullum bonum debet dimittere, immo melius facere propter quamcumque tribulationem, nec aliter est contemplativus".

¹⁴ *Hex* 22 (*Op. Omnia* V,437-444).

¹⁵ *Hex* 22,2 (*Op. Omnia* V,437): "Unde sicut luna est filia solis et recepit lumen ab eo, similiter militans Ecclesia a superna Ierusalem."

¹⁶ *Hex* 22,6 (*Op. Omnia* V,438): "Ordo patriarchalis respondet Thronis; ordo prophetalis, Cherubim; ordo apostolicus, Seraphim. In Patriarchis fuit stabilitas fidei; in Prophetis, limpiditas cognitionis; in Apostolis, fervor caritatis. Et ideo Apostoli respondent Seraphim, quia apostolicus ordo conformatur Christo."

orders who dedicate their time for the study and meditation of the Scripture, and these correspond to Cherubs), and the *sursumactivi* or ecstatic order (the order of Seraphs).

At this point Bonaventure makes a very interesting and subtle distinction. Whereas the speculative orders correspond to the Cherubs, and he mentions two of these orders, namely the Preachers and the Minors,¹⁷ the Seraphic order corresponding to the Seraphs is not yet fully present in the militant Church and still has to be realised at the end of time. Yet, there is a foretaste of this order in the person of St. Francis. Bonaventure states that St. Francis belonged to the Seraphic order.¹⁸ In this way, Bonaventure makes a clear-cut distinction between Francis (Seraphic) and his friars, the friars Minor, who like the Dominicans (Preachers) belong to the order of Cherubs. Thus Bonaventure has not linked the *Ordo Seraphicus* with the Franciscan Order as such, but only with the person of St. Francis.

The fact that the Order of friars Minor is placed in the ranks of the Cherubs, like that of the Preachers, is strengthened by Bonaventure's affirmation that Francis willed that his friars should study theology in order to be able to teach the truths of faith. This is a very personal and original approach to Francis and his relation with studies in the Order, which finds some support in the writings of the Saint himself, but which is certainly enhanced by Bonaventure's belief that, given that the Franciscans could not pretend to reach the Seraphic state of contemplative union with God, as Francis had done, they could at least aim at being Cherubs, like their Dominican brothers.

Among the three major orders of Thrones, Cherubs and Seraphs, it is the last hierarchy that is closest to the heavenly Jerusalem and that will become a reality when Christ will return at the end of time. Bonaventure states that the apparition of the crucified Seraph to St. Francis on La Verna, when the stigmata were imprinted on the body of the Poverello, was a prophetic harbinger of these last times in which Christ's passion would be renewed in his mystical body.¹⁹ Francis embodies the militant Church in its journey towards the heavenly Jerusalem. In a certain way he is the prophet of the *ecclesia spiritualis* that the prophecies of Joachim of Fiore had foretold. Bonaventure seems to imply that Francis is a proof that there is a continuity between the Church instituted by Christ and the contemplative Church of the age of the Spirit. Francis is truly a *vir hierarchicus*, a hierarchic man, who is crucified with Christ in his historical reality, but is soaring to the heights of contemplative union like a Seraph in the theological

¹⁷ *Hex* 22,21 (*Op. Omnia* V,440): "Secundus [ordo] est, qui intendit per modum speculatorium vel speculativum, ut illi qui vacant speculationi Scripturae, quae non intelligitur nisi ab animis mundis [...] Huic respondent Cherubim. Hi sunt Praedicatores et Minores. Alii principaliter intendunt speculationi, a quo etiam nomen acceperunt, et postea unctioni. – Alii principaliter unctioni et postea speculationi. Et utinam iste amor vel unctio non recedat a Cherubim. – Et addebat quod beatus Franciscus dixerat, quod volebat, quod fratres sui studerent, dummodo facerent prius, quam docerent."

¹⁸ *Hex* 22,22 (*Op. Omnia* V,440-441): "Tertius ordo est vacantium Deo secundum modum sursumactivum, scilicet ecstaticum seu excessivum. – Et dicebat: Quis enim iste est? Iste est ordo seraphicus. De isto videtur fuisse Franciscus. [...] Et in his consummabitur Ecclesia. Quis autem ordo iste futurus sit, vel iam sit, non est facile scire."

¹⁹ *Hex* 22,23 (*Op. Omnia* V,441): "Primus ordo respondet Thronis; secundus Cherubim; tertius Seraphim, et isti sunt propinqui Ierusalem et non habent nisi evolare. Iste ordo non florebit, nisi Christus appareat et patiat in corpore suo mystico. – Et dicebat, quod illa apparitio Seraph beato Francisco, quae fuit expressiva et impressa, ostendebat, quod iste ordo ille respondere ebeat, sed tamen pervenire ad hoc per tribulationes. Et in illa apparitione magna mysteria erant."

prophecy of what the Church will be like at the end of times. Great mysteries are hidden in the seraphic apparition of Francis.

One last interesting note about the angelic hierarchies in order to enlighten our reflection on Bonaventure's presentation of St. Francis is found in the distinction between the specific qualities of the highest degrees of angelic hierarchy. Thus the Thrones are characterised by their power of welcoming, the Cherubs by revelation and the Seraphs by contemplative union.²⁰ Bonaventure describes the Seraph as "burning like fire" and says that "fire has a great significance in Scripture."²¹ Francis of Assisi is therefore a member of the order of Seraphs for his contemplative union of burning love with Christ, particularly in the episode of the stigmatisation, whereas his friars should be content to be Cherubs, by delving into the contents of revelation and contemplating God through prayer and study.

Ratzinger dedicates a section of his volume to the theme of the distinction between the two orders mentioned above, namely the *Ordo Cherubicus* and the *Ordo Seraphicus*, within the context of the Franciscan Order as the *ordo futurus*.²² The author makes a thorough study of the hierarchical distinctions we have outlined above, present in the *Hexaëmeron*, namely those regarding the ancient monastic orders (Thrones), the mendicant Preachers and Minors (Cherubs) and the *ordo futurus* (Seraphs), but then comes to a startling conclusion when he speaks about the fact that Francis alone belongs to the Seraphic order: "This means that the present Franciscan order is not yet the true order of Saint Francis. In his own person Francis anticipates in a definite way a form of eschatological existence which, as a universal form of life, pertains to the future."²³

Ratzinger goes on to say that, through this stand, Bonaventure was radically against the thesis of the "Spiritual" Franciscans, who regarded the Franciscan Order as a continuation of the "seraphic" vocation of its founder, to the point of pinpointing it as the future *ordo seraphicus* already in existence as a prophetic witness of the coming of the third age of the Spirit. Bonaventure was a practical man of government. By insisting that the Franciscan Order falls within the ranks of the Cherubs, just like its Dominican counterpart,²⁴ he states that it was high time that the friars stopped having visions about their "privileged" state of prophets for a new spiritual Church and would do better to concentrate upon their present mission in the Church of Christ, namely to study and preach Holy Scripture, and follow the example of the humility and obedience of St. Francis, who remained a faithful servant of the Church even though God gave him the privilege of enjoying the seraphic heights of contemplation and endowed him with the gift of prophecy and of the vision of the crucified Seraph who imprinted the stigmata on his body. "Bonaventure was aware that the eschatological form of life of Francis cannot exist in this world as an institution but only as an outpouring of grace in an individual,

²⁰ *Hex* 22,27 (*Op. Omnia* V,441): "Susceptio respondet Thronis, revelatio Cherubim, unio Seraphim."

²¹ *Hex* 22,29 (*Op. Omnia* V,442): "Primus respondet Seraphim, qui est ardens sicut ignis; unde ignis maximum significationem habet in Scripturis."

²² J. RATZINGER, *San Bonaventura. La Teologia della storia*, 76-86.

²³ J. RATZINGER, *San Bonaventura. La Teologia della storia*, 81. The English translation is my own.

²⁴ J. RATZINGER, *San Bonaventura. La Teologia della storia*, 83, makes, however, a subtle distinction between the two Orders: "Without any doubt the Dominicans and Franciscans pertain to the «ordo cherubicus», but on a different level: for the Dominicans the primary emphasis is placed upon «speculation» and «unctio» is found on a second level; on the other hand, for the Franciscans, the precedence is that of the «unctio» before that of «speculation»." The English translation is my own.

until the hour comes, which only God can bring about its realisation, in which the world will be transformed in its eschatological form of existence.”²⁵

Bonaventure’s theological vision of history in the teachings of Pope Benedict XVI

We conclude our presentation with some references to the speeches regarding St. Bonaventure, given by Joseph Ratzinger when he became Pope Benedict XVI. We refer in a specific way to Benedict XVI’s pastoral visit to Bagnoregio (9 September 2009) and to the speeches dedicated to St. Bonaventure during the Audiences of 3, 10 and 17 March 2010.

The speech given during Benedict XVI’s pastoral visit to Bagnoregio²⁶ contains a summary of some of the salient themes regarding Bonaventure’s theology. Benedict XVI calls Bonaventure “a tireless seeker of God,” quoting some texts from the *De Reductione artium ad theologiam*, n. 25 and from the *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, prol. 4. Benedict XVI shows how Bonaventure’s theology speaks about a new creation, and is an occasion to reflect upon the theological virtue of hope in our future encounter with the Lord. It is a theology of history: “Faith, therefore, is a perfecting of our cognitive capacities and participation in the knowledge that God has of himself and of the world: we perceive hope as a preparation for the encounter with the Lord.”

Secondly, as a true follower of Francis, Bonaventure was a “seraphic poet of creation”. His vision of the world is a positive one. Creatures are a ladder that lead us up to God through Christ. Our life-journey is a journey of faith, it is a theological vision of history that leads us back into God through Christ.

Lastly, Pope Benedict speaks about Bonaventure’s theology of hope. The seraphic doctor’s vision of human history is a prophetic vision of hope in salvation. “St. Bonaventure was a messenger of hope. We find a beautiful image of hope in one of his sermons for Advent, in which he compares the movement of hope with the flight of a bird that spreads its wings to their maximum capacity and draws on all its strength to flap them. In a certain sense it makes its whole self movement, to soar upwards and fly. Hoping is flying, St Bonaventure says. But hope requires that all our limbs become movement, projected to the true height of our being, towards the promises of God. Whoever hopes, he affirms, ‘must lift his head, turning his thoughts aloft, to the heights of our existence, namely to God’ (*Sermo XVI, Dominica I Adv., Opera omnia*, IX, 40a).”

If we see these words against the affirmations regarding the role of Saint Francis and his Order of friars Minor we understand the theological implications of the history of the Franciscan Order as a call to a mission of hope. Bonaventure is not in accord with the Joachite interpretation of history as preached by the “Spiritual” Franciscans, not because it was not prophetic, but because it envisaged a false kind of hope in a Church that Christ never intended to establish and in a future age of the Spirit that is already included in the definitive revelation of Christ. It is only Christian hope that can lead us to a sound theological vision of the future, in which the figure of St. Francis is a beacon calling us to follow his example, while being aware of the distance we still have to cover in order to spread our wings and fly to the seraphic heights of his union with God.

²⁵ J. RATZINGER, *San Bonaventura. La Teologia della storia*, 82. The English translation is my own.

²⁶ BENEDETTO XVI, *Discorso a Bagnoregio*, in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, CI (2 Oct. 2009), N. 10, 854-857.

The general audience given by Pope Benedict XVI on 10 March 2010, the second in the series of three audiences dedicated to the figure of St. Bonaventure, is an important milestone for our reflection on the role that Bonaventure's theology of history played in the life of Joseph Ratzinger, not only as a theologian but also as a pastor and Pope. I shall quote the text in its entirety, in order to savour its unique characteristic of being a summary of what we have been reflecting upon in these pages:

“Among St Bonaventure's various merits was the ability to interpret authentically and faithfully St. Francis of Assisi, whom he venerated and studied with deep love. In a special way, in St. Bonaventure's day a trend among the Friars Minor known as the «Spirituals» held that St. Francis had ushered in a totally new phase in history and that the «eternal Gospel», of which Revelation speaks, had come to replace the New Testament. This group declared that the Church had now fulfilled her role in history. They said that she had been replaced by a charismatic community of free men guided from within by the Spirit, namely the «Spiritual Franciscans». This group's ideas were based on the writings of a Cistercian Abbot, Joachim of Fiore, who died in 1202. In his works he affirmed a Trinitarian rhythm in history. He considered the Old Testament as the age of the Father, followed by the time of the Son, the time of the Church. The third age was to be awaited, that of the Holy Spirit. The whole of history was thus interpreted as a history of progress: from the severity of the Old Testament to the relative freedom of the time of the Son, in the Church, to the full freedom of the sons of God in the period of the Holy Spirit. This, finally, was also to be the period of peace among mankind, of the reconciliation of peoples and of religions. Joachim of Fiore had awakened the hope that the new age would stem from a new form of monasticism. Thus it is understandable that a group of Franciscans might have thought it recognised St Francis of Assisi as the initiator of the new epoch and his Order as the community of the new period the community of the Age of the Holy Spirit that left behind the hierarchical Church in order to begin the new Church of the Spirit, no longer linked to the old structures.

Hence they ran the risk of very seriously misunderstanding St Francis' message, of his humble fidelity to the Gospel and to the Church. This error entailed an erroneous vision of Christianity as a whole.

St. Bonaventure, who became Minister General of the Franciscan Order in 1257, had to confront grave tension in his Order precisely because of those who supported the above-mentioned trend of the «Franciscan Spirituals» who followed Joachim of Fiore. To respond to this group and to restore unity to the Order, St. Bonaventure painstakingly studied the authentic writings of Joachim of Fiore, as well as those attributed to him and, bearing in mind the need to present the figure and message of his beloved St. Francis correctly, he wanted to set down a correct view of the theology of history. St. Bonaventure actually tackled the problem in his last work, a collection of conferences for the monks of the *studium* in Paris. He did not complete it and it has come down to us through the transcriptions of those who heard him. It is entitled *Hexaëmeron*, in other words an allegorical explanation of the six days of the Creation. The Fathers of the Church considered the six or seven days of the Creation narrative as a prophecy of the history of the world, of humanity. For them, the seven days represented seven periods of history, later also interpreted as seven millennia. With Christ we should have entered the last, that is, the sixth period of history that was to be followed by the great sabbath of God. St Bonaventure hypothesizes this historical interpretation of the account of the days

of Creation, but in a very free and innovative way. To his mind two phenomena of his time required a new interpretation of the course of history.

The first: the figure of St Francis, the man totally united with Christ even to communion with the stigmata, almost an *alter Christus*, and, with St Francis, the new community he created, different from the monasticism known until then. This phenomenon called for a new interpretation, as an innovation of God which appeared at that moment.

The second: the position of Joachim of Fiore who announced a new monasticism and a totally new period of history, going beyond the revelation of the New Testament, demanded a response. As Minister General of the Franciscan Order, St. Bonaventure had immediately realised that with the spiritualistic conception inspired by Joachim of Fiore, the Order would become ungovernable and logically move towards anarchy. In his opinion this had two consequences:

The first, the practical need for structures and for insertion into the reality of the hierarchical Church, of the real Church, required a theological foundation. This was partly because the others, those who followed the spiritualist concept, upheld what seemed to have a theological foundation.

The second, while taking into account the necessary realism, made it essential not to lose the newness of the figure of St. Francis.

How did St. Bonaventure respond to the practical and theoretical needs? Here I can only provide a very basic summary of his answer and it is in certain aspects incomplete:

1. St. Bonaventure rejected the idea of the Trinitarian rhythm of history. God is one for all history and is not tritheistic. Hence history is one, even if it is a journey and, according to St. Bonaventure, a journey of progress.

2. Jesus Christ is God's last word in him God said all, giving and expressing himself. More than himself, God cannot express or give. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the Father and of the Son. Christ himself says of the Holy Spirit: 'He will bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you' (Jn 14:26), and 'he will take what is mine and declare it to you' (Jn 16:15). Thus there is no loftier Gospel, there is no other Church to await. Therefore the Order of St. Francis too must fit into this Church, into her faith and into her hierarchical order.

3. This does not mean that the Church is stationary, fixed in the past, or that there can be no newness within her. *Opera Christi non deficiunt, sed proficiunt*: Christ's works do not go backwards, they do not fail but progress, the Saint said in his letter *De Tribus Quaestionibus*. Thus St. Bonaventure explicitly formulates the idea of progress and this is an innovation in comparison with the Fathers of the Church and the majority of his contemporaries. For St. Bonaventure Christ was no longer the end of history, as he was for the Fathers of the Church, but rather its centre; history does not end with Christ but begins a new period. The following is another consequence: until that moment the idea that the Fathers of the Church were the absolute summit of theology predominated, all successive generations could only be their disciples. St. Bonaventure also recognised the Fathers as teachers for ever, but the phenomenon of St. Francis assured him that the riches of Christ's word are inexhaustible and that new light could also appear to the new generations. The oneness of Christ also guarantees newness and renewal in all the periods of history.

The Franciscan Order of course as he emphasized belongs to the Church of Jesus Christ, to the apostolic Church, and cannot be built on utopian spiritualism. Yet, at the same time, the newness of this Order in comparison with classical monasticism was valid and St. Bonaventure, as I said in my previous Catechesis, defended this newness against the attacks of the secular clergy of Paris: the Franciscans have no fixed monastery, they may go everywhere to proclaim the Gospel. It was precisely the break with stability, the characteristic of monasticism, for the sake of a new flexibility that restored to the Church her missionary dynamism.

At this point it might be useful to say that today too there are views that see the entire history of the Church in the second millennium as a gradual decline. Some see this decline as having already begun immediately after the New Testament. In fact, *Opera Christi non deficiunt, sed proficiunt*: Christ's works do not go backwards but forwards. What would the Church be without the new spirituality of the Cistercians, the Franciscans and the Dominicans, the spirituality of St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross and so forth? This affirmation applies today too: *Opera Christi non deficiunt, sed proficiunt*, they move forward. St. Bonaventure teaches us the need for overall, even strict discernment, sober realism and openness to the newness, which Christ gives his Church through the Holy Spirit. And while this idea of decline is repeated, another idea, this «spiritualistic utopianism» is also reiterated. Indeed, we know that after the Second Vatican Council some were convinced that everything was new, that there was a different Church, that the pre-Conciliar Church was finished and that we had another, totally «other» Church an anarchic utopianism! And thanks be to God the wise helmsmen of the Barque of St Peter, Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II, on the one hand defended the newness of the Council, and on the other, defended the oneness and continuity of the Church, which is always a Church of sinners and always a place of grace.

4. In this regard, St. Bonaventure, as Minister General of the Franciscans, took a line of government which showed clearly that the new Order could not, as a community, live at the same «eschatological height» as St Francis, in whom he saw the future world anticipated, but guided at the same time by healthy realism and by spiritual courage he had to come as close as possible to the maximum realisation of the Sermon on the Mount, which for St Francis was the rule, but nevertheless bearing in mind the limitations of the human being who is marked by original sin.

Thus we see that for St. Bonaventure governing was not merely action but above all was thinking and praying. At the root of his government we always find prayer and thought; all his decisions are the result of reflection, of thought illumined by prayer. His intimate contact with Christ always accompanied his work as Minister General and therefore he composed a series of theological and mystical writings that express the soul of his government. They also manifest his intention of guiding the Order inwardly, that is, of governing not only by means of commands and structures, but by guiding and illuminating souls, orienting them to Christ.

I would like to mention only one of these writings, which are the soul of his government and point out the way to follow, both for the individual and for the community: the *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, which is a «manual» for mystical contemplation. This book was conceived in a deeply spiritual place: Mount La Verna, where St Francis had received the stigmata. In the introduction the author describes the circumstances that gave rise to this writing: 'While I meditated on the possible ascent of

the mind to God, amongst other things there occurred that miracle which happened in the same place to the blessed Francis himself, namely the vision of the winged Seraph in the form of a Crucifix. While meditating upon this vision, I immediately saw that it offered me the ecstatic contemplation of St. Francis himself as well as the way that leads to it.'

The six wings of the Seraph thus became the symbol of the six stages that lead man progressively from the knowledge of God, through the observation of the world and creatures and through the exploration of the soul itself with its faculties, to the satisfying union with the Trinity through Christ, in imitation of St. Francis of Assisi. The last words of St. Bonaventure's *Itinerarium*, which respond to the question of how it is possible to reach this mystical communion with God, should be made to sink to the depths of the heart: 'If you should wish to know how these things come about, (the mystical communion with God) question grace, not instruction; desire, not intellect; the cry of prayer, not pursuit of study; the spouse, not the teacher; God, not man; darkness, not clarity; not light, but the fire that inflames all and transports to God with fullest unction and burning affection.... Let us then... pass over into darkness; let us impose silence on cares, concupiscence, and phantasms; let us pass over with the Crucified Christ from this world to the Father, so that when the Father is shown to us we may say with Philip, *It is enough for me* (*Itinerarium* VII,6).''²⁷

²⁷ https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2010/documents/hf_benxvi_aud_20100310.html