Bonaventure and Catholic Higher Education

In this paper, I propose that Bonaventure has something valuable to say to the 21st century Catholic university. The emphasis today on research, publications, income generation and reputation scores (e.g. in TEF) can contribute to marginalising religious faith – which can be relegated to the sphere of the private option, as happens so often in the wider society. For those who want that sort of thing, chaplaincy, liturgy, charitable service, bible study & faith discussions can be available – but these do not necessarily influence the big decisions in the university and the central task of promoting higher learning is often untouched by faith perspectives. From my observation, having worked in three Catholic HE institutions, there is a very low level of knowledge about, or understanding or appreciation of, Catholic thinking about education or our rich intellectual and spiritual tradition. That is why I have embarked on work towards Lights for the Path, a book that aims to introduce teachers in Catholic schools and universities to key figures in that tradition and to show their relevance for Catholic education today. Bonaventure (1217 – 74) is one of those figures.

In this paper, I will make a few brief comments about the Christian and Catholic university before drawing from Bonaventure some perspectives which may help us in the process of developing a more adequate vision for the Catholic University.

What would distinguish a Christian university would not simply be the addition of aims that are not shared by other universities, but by the fact that all aims are understood and addressed in the light of holding to a range of beliefs; among these would be the centrality of Christ, the goodness of creation, the reality of sin, the need for and offer of salvation. The academic disciplines would be seen as avenues for opening up the potential within every field of human endeavour to ‘read’ and respond to God’s creation, to recognize the pervasiveness of idolatry, to discern our place in salvation history, and to hear the call to be witnesses to the Gospel. Education would be nourished by prayer and worship. The challenge of scrutinising with the lens of faith, the underlying assumptions that govern our work, would be one that was accepted as both necessary and worthwhile.

I am going to limit my attention to one major contribution from B of value to the Catholic university today: the way he held together the intellectual and spiritual dimensions of life.

His last work was the (unfinished) Collations on the Six Days of Creation, the Hexaemeron, delivered between Easter and Pentecost in 1273. These sermons invite us to seek a union between Paris, the world of scholarly endeavour, and Assisi, the model of Gospel simplicity, humility and discipleship. In the first of these sermons B holds together diverse modes of knowing, disciplines or sciences with the role of Christ as centre of all things.

B offers the university a vision of knowledge as interconnected and constituting part of our journey towards God. His vision supplies an alternative to one that treats the academic disciplines as fragmented, as autonomous and free-standing, as in service to our mastery, as competing, rather than complementary, and as disconnected from our spiritual life and destiny. Seeing the world as God’s work of art - where we can discern his signature and as the sphere where we can be divinized - makes all the difference. If, as B frequently quotes James 1: 17 – ‘every good gift is from above, coming from the God of lights’ – then not knowing this ultimate source, and not knowing the purpose of the gifts, is likely to lead us to misread the gifts and our knowledge and to misuse them.
We need to beware that our academic ethos and methods do not lead us towards a false sense of mastery and the habits of manipulation rather than a true appreciation of mystery. The goal of mastery tempts us to treat our knowledge and the world as our possession and under our control; in contrast, receptivity to mystery orients us to receive our learning as a gift and as a theophany, a manifestation of God. A mastery-mentality encloses us in immanence while a mystery-mentality opens us up to transcendence. Any danger there might be in the pursuit of knowledge, if one reads the university in the light of B, stems not from the sciences themselves but only when we distort them by separating them from the true light, which in turn disrupts their right ordering and leads us to expect from them more than they can deliver. If the Hexaemeron sermons are aimed at prompting us to holiness and wisdom, B’s *On the Reduction of the Arts to Theology* clarifies how all forms of knowing relate to the knowledge of God. The various fields of study are led back to their source of life and of light – or perhaps better than leading back, we see them sublated or raised to a higher level of integration and purpose.

A recent comment in a book on Christian faith and the university reflects a Bonaventurean theme: ‘If we want to control and manipulate reality, we will organize knowledge into a map, but if we want to conform our souls to reality, we will understand knowledge as taking us on a pilgrimage.’¹ And earlier this year, Pope Francis issued a document called *Veritatis Gaudium* which also echoes B when Pope Francis refers to ‘the particular feature, in the formation of a Christian culture, of discovering in the whole of creation the Trinitarian imprint that makes the cosmos in which we live a “network of relations.”’ … ‘situating and stimulating all disciplines against the backdrop of the Light and Life offered by the Wisdom streaming from God’s Revelation.’² In an earlier exhortation, Evangelii Gaudium, Pope Francis said ‘What is needed, then, is to practise a way of knowing and interpreting reality in the light of the “mind of Christ,” wherein the model for approaching and resolving problems “is not the sphere … where every point is equidistant from the centre, and there are no differences between them”, but rather “the polyhedron, which reflects the convergence of all its parts, each of which preserves its distinctiveness.”³ B would have said amen to that image.

B links knowledge to holiness and love of God. Both conscience and desire have to be activated and enlisted in the search for truth and in the ever growing deepening of a sense of God’s presence. He emphasizes the interconnectedness of all truth – it is ordered, harmonious and intelligible. He makes much of the notion of the light given to us by God to see reality. He believes that faith illuminates all aspects of our experience and knowledge. We tend to think of faith as believing in certain divine truths but give less attention to how faith alters how we see everything else.

A key theme for B is that true knowledge requires as a precondition that we conform ourselves to Christ. We resist today the notion of conformity because it seems to threaten our individuality and authenticity. But for B, not to be conformed to Christ was to be out of sync with reality and to fail to have one’s faculties operating with their full potential. It would be to regard oneself and other creatures in a false light. For, ‘It is in Christ, who holds the centre in all things, that everything has its beginning and it is through him that everything comes to its Creator. … Our intent is to show that in Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and

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³ *Evangelii Gaudium*, 236.
knowledge, and that he himself is the central point of all understanding." Conformity to Christ has both a spiritual/devotional dimension and the requirement of virtue – this is counter-cultural in the face of much thinking about the world of academia today.

In terms of virtue, Bonaventure refers to seven pillars or steps to wisdom. ‘The first is chastity of the body; the second is innocence of the mind; third is moderation of speech; fourth is docility in affect; and the fifth is generosity in action; the sixth is maturity in judgment; and the seventh is simplicity in intention.’ Access to truth is dependent on the quality of one’s character as well as the depth of one’s devotion. ‘Whoever wishes to ascend to God must first avoid sin, which deforms our nature, then exercise his natural powers: 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. … We must first pray, then live holy lives and thirdly concentrate our attention upon the reflections of truth. … The mirror presented by the external world is of little or no value unless the mirror of our soul has been cleaned and polished.’ And he brings together virtue and devotion in support of intellectual endeavour in the Soul’s Journey to God when he says, ‘Do not think that reading is sufficient without sincerity, reflection without devotion, investigation without admiration, observation without exultation, industry without piety, knowledge without charity, intelligence without humility, study without divine grace.’

Conformity to Christ will serve to align our thinking with God’s purposes in creation. As one recent commentator on B has pointed out, ‘one who regards creatures simply in themselves without attending to the way in which they represent the deeper mystery of God fails to see their full intelligibility.’ B puts great emphasis on discerning God’s signature, first, God’s signature as found in creation, then within oneself, and finally God more directly. For him, all things reflect the divine light in some way. Creation can be considered as a mirror, reflecting God’s power, wisdom and goodness, and as a book in which we can discern the vestiges, images and likeness of God, each more closely reflecting God. B sees the world as sacramental, signifying God’s presence, even if under a veil. As Ilia Delio puts this, ‘We are created to read the book of creation so that we may know the author of life.’

To read the book of nature or creation rightly, for B, is to accept that ‘The pure rays of the divinity penetrate into the universe, which acts a prism refracting the light into a myriad of colors. … B’s Itinerarium is a systematic contemplation on the reflection of God throughout the universe, where “creatures are shadows, echoes, and pictures” of the eternal Source and Light and ‘the entire universe is en route; the cosmos is pursuing an itinerarium in Deum.’ In this perspective “creatures … are a road leading to the exemplar. … the divine ray shines forth in each and every creature in different ways and in different properties; … B divides creatures according to their degree of representing God and classifies them in a descending scale: similitude, image, vestige, and shadow. Shadow refers to a general reflection of God; vestige indicates the reflection of God’s power, wisdom, and good ness; image refers to rational

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4 Hexaemeron, 1.10 and 1.11.
6 Itin, Prologue 4; trans 56.
creatures and indicates the presence of God reflected within subjectivity in the memory, understanding, and will; similitude refers to the rational creature transformed by grace.\footnote{Hexaemeron 12.14.} …

Let me conclude with two quotations from B. In \textit{On the Reduction} he says ‘this is the fruit of all sciences, that, in all, faith may be strengthened, God may be honoured, character may be formed, and consolation may be derived from the union of the Spouse with the beloved, a union that takes place through charity.’ And in the \textit{Itinerarium} (1.2.) he shows us how to see God through the visible or material world, through the soul or our interior life, and as we respond to God directly – thus modelling how to hold together the scientific, existential and the spiritual dimensions. He says ‘The university of things is the stairway to ascend to God.’ Underlying both these two quotations is an application of the notion that the movement of our minds derives from God, in all their workings, not just in our obviously spiritual aspirations. B can help us bring back together, in a healthy relationship, the intellectual and the spiritual – a task which should be at the heart of the work of a Catholic university.