



God as Being and Goodness

St. Bonaventure

CHAPTER FIVE OF THE REFLECTION OF THE DIVINE UNITY IN ITS PRIMARY NAME WHICH IS BEING

1. It happens that we may contemplate God not only outside of us but also within us and above us. Thus we contemplate Him outside through His traces, inside through His image, and above us through His light, which has signed upon our minds the light of eternal Truth, since the mind itself is immediately formed by Truth itself. Those who exercise themselves in the first manner have already entered into the atrium of the tabernacle; the second have entered into the sanctum; but the third have entered into the Holy of Holies with the High Priest, the Holy of Holies where above the ark are the Cherubim of glory overshadowing the propitiatory. By these modes we understand two ways or degrees of contemplation of the invisible and eternal things of God, of which one deals with God's essential attributes, the other with the properties of the Persons.

2. The first way first and foremost signifies Him in Being itself, saying He Who Is is the primary name of God. The second signifies Him in His goodness, saying this [goodness] is the primary name of God. The former refers above all to the Old Testament, which preaches the unity of the divine essence, whence it was said to Moses, "I am Who I am." The second refers to the New Testament, which lays down the plurality of the Persons, by baptizing in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Therefore our Master Christ, wishing to elevate the youth who had served the law to evangelical perfection, attributed the name of goodness principally and precisely to God. No one, He said, is good but God alone. Damascenus therefore, following Moses, says that "He Who Is" is the primary name of God. Dionysius, following Christ, says that goodness is God's primary name.

3. If you wish then to contemplate the invisible traits of God in so far as they belong to the unity of His essence, fix your gaze upon Being itself, and see that Being is most certain in itself; for it cannot be thought not to be, since the purest Being occurs only in full flight from Non-Being, just as nothingness is in full flight from Being. Therefore, just as the utterly nothing contains nought of Being nor of its conditions, so contrariwise Being itself contains no Non-Being, neither in actuality nor in potency, neither in matters of fact nor in our thinking. Since, however, Non-Being is the privation of Being, it cannot enter the intellect except through Being; Being, however, cannot enter through anything other than itself. For everything which is thought of is either thought of as Non-Being or as Being-in-potency or as Being-in-actuality. If, therefore, Non-Being is intelligible only through Being, and if Being-in-potency can be understood only through Being-in-actuality, and if Being is the name of that pure actuality of Being, Being then is what first enters

the intellect, and that Being is pure actuality. But this is not particular Being, which is restricted Being, since that is mixed with potentiality. Nor is this analogous Being, for such has a minimum of actuality since it has only a minimum of being. It remains, therefore, that that Being is divine Being.

4. Marvelous then is the blindness of the intellect which does not consider that which is its primary object and without which it can know nothing. But just as the eye intent upon the various differences of the colors does not see the light by which it sees the other things and, if it sees it, does not notice it, so the mind's eye, intent upon particular and universal beings, does not notice Being itself, which is beyond all genera, though that comes first before the mind and through it all other things. Wherefore it seems very true that just as the bat's eye behaves in the light, so the eye of the mind behaves before the most obvious things of nature. Because accustomed to the shadows of beings and the phantasms of the sensible world, when it looks upon the light of the highest Being, it seems to see nothing, not understanding that darkness itself is the fullest illumination of the mind [Ps., 138, 11], just as when the eye sees pure light it seems to itself to be seeing nothing.

5. See then purest Being itself, if you can, and you will understand that it cannot be thought of as derivative from another. And thus necessarily that must be thought of as absolutely primal which can be derivative neither from nothing nor from anything. For what exists through itself if Being does not exist through itself and of itself? You will understand that, lacking Non-Being in every respect and therefore having no beginning nor end, it is eternal. You will understand also that it contains nothing in itself save Being itself, for it is in no way composite, but is most simple. You will understand that it has no potentialities within it, since every possible has in some way something of Non-Being, but Being is the highest actuality. You will understand that it has no defect, for it is most perfect. Finally, you will understand that it has no diversity, for it is One in the highest degree.

Being, therefore, which is pure Being and most simply Being and absolutely Being, is Being primary, eternal, most simple, most actual, most perfect, and one to the highest degree.

6. And these things are so certain that Being itself cannot be thought of by an intellect as opposed to these, and one of these traits implies the others. For since it is simply Being, therefore it is simply primary; because it is simply primary, therefore it is not made from another nor from itself, and therefore it is eternal. Likewise, since it is primary and eternal, and therefore not from others, it is therefore most simple. Furthermore, since it is primary, eternal, and most simple, therefore it contains no potentiality mixed with actuality, and therefore it is most actual. Likewise, since it is primary, eternal, most simple, most actual, it is most perfect. To such a Being nothing is lacking, nor can anything be added. Since it is primary, eternal, most simple, most actual, most perfect, it is therefore one to the highest degree. For what is predicated because of its utter superabundance is applicable to all things. For what is simply predicated because of superabundance cannot possibly be applied to anything but the one. Wherefore, if God is the name of the primary, eternal, most simple, most actual, most perfect Being, it is impossible that He be thought of as not being nor as anything save One alone. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one God." If you see this in the pure simplicity of your mind, you will somehow be infused with the illumination of eternal light.

7. But you have ground for rising in wonder. For Being itself is first and last, is eternal and yet most present, is simplest and greatest, is most actual and immutable, is perfect and

immense, is most highly one and yet all inclusive. If you wonder over these things with a pure mind, while you look further, you will be infused with a greater light, until you finally see that Being is last because it is first. For since it is first, it produces all things for its own sake alone; and therefore it must be the very end, the beginning and the consummation, the alpha and the omega. Therefore it is most present because it is eternal. For since it is eternal, it does not come from another; nor does it cease to be nor pass from one thing to another, and therefore has no past nor future but only present being. Therefore it is greatest because most simple. For since it is most simple in essence, therefore it is greatest in power; because power, the more greatly it is unified, the closer it is to the infinite. Therefore it is most immutable, because most actual. For that which is most actual is therefore pure act. And as such it acquires nothing new nor does it lose what it had, and therefore cannot be changed. Therefore it is most immense, because most perfect. For since it is most perfect, nothing can be thought of which is better, nobler, or more worthy. And on this account there is nothing greater. And every such thing is immense. Therefore it is all-inclusive (“omnimodal”), because it is one to the highest degree. For that which is one to the highest degree is the universal source of all multiplicity. And for this reason it is the universal efficient cause of all things, the exemplary and the final cause, as the cause of Being, the principle of intelligibility, the order of living. And therefore it is all-inclusive, not as the essence of all things, but as the superexcellent and most universal and most sufficient cause of all essences, whose power, because most highly unified in essence, is therefore most highly infinite and most fertile in efficacy.

8. Recapitulating, let us say: Because, then, Being is most pure and absolute, that which is Being simply is first and last and, therefore, the origin and the final cause of all. Because eternal and most present, therefore it encompasses and penetrates all duration, existing at once as their center and circumference. Because most simple and greatest, therefore it is entirely within and entirely without all things and, therefore, is an intelligible sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference nowhere. Because most actual and most immutable, then “remaining stable it causes the universe to move” [Boethius, Cons. III, met. 9]. Because most perfect and immense, therefore within all, though not included in them; beyond all, but not excluded from them; above all, but not transported beyond them; below all, and yet not cast down beneath them. Because most highly one and all-inclusive, therefore all in all, although all things are many and it is only one. And this is so since through most simple unity, clearest truth, and most sincere goodness there is in it all power, all exemplary causality, and all communicability. And therefore from it and by it and in it are all things. And this is so since it is omnipotent, omniscient, and all-good. And to see this perfectly is to be blessed. As was said to Moses, “I will show thee all good.”

CHAPTER SIX

OF THE REFLECTION OF THE MOST BLESSED TRINITY IN ITS NAME, WHICH IS GOOD

1. After a consideration of the essential traits [of God] the eye of the intelligence must be raised to look upon the most Blessed Trinity, in order that the second Cherub may be placed next to the first. Just as Being is the root and name of the vision of the essential traits, so Good is the principal foundation of our contemplation of the divine emanations [of the Trinity].

2. See then and pay heed, since the best which exists simply is that than which nothing better can be thought of. And this is such that it cannot be rightly thought not to be. For Being is in all ways better than Non-Being. This is such that it cannot rightly be thought of unless conceived of as both three and one. For the Good is said to be self-diffusive. The highest good is therefore the most self-diffusive. The greatest diffusion, however, can exist only if it is actual and intrinsic, substantial and hypostatic, natural and voluntary, free and necessary, lacking nothing and perfect. Unless, then, there be eternally in the highest good a production which is actual and consubstantial, and an hypostasis as noble as the producer through generation and spiration, so that it would be from the eternal principle eternally co-producing and would be beloved (*dilectus*) in itself and co-loved (*condilectus*), generated, and spirated as are the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, in no way would it be the highest good, for it would not diffuse itself most highly. For temporal diffusion in creation is nothing else than central and punctiform with respect to the immensity of the eternal goodness. Whence also can some diffusion be conceived as greater than that--to wit, that in which the diffusive power communicates its whole substance and nature to another. Therefore the highest good would not exist if it could lack that characteristic either in existence or in thought.

If then you can look with the mind's eye upon the purity of goodness, which is the pure actualization of the principle of Charity, pouring forth free and due love, and both mingled together, which is the fullest diffusion according to nature and will--the diffusion as Word, in which all things are expressed, and as Gift, in which all other gifts are given--you may see by the highest communicability of the Good that a Trinity of Father and Son and Holy Spirit is necessary. Because of the greatest goodness, it is necessary that there be in them the greatest communicability, and out of the greatest communicability the greatest consubstantiality, and from the greatest consubstantiality the greatest configurability, and from all these the greatest coequality; and therefore the greatest coeternity as well as, because of all the aforesaid, the greatest co-intimacy, by which one is in the other necessarily through the highest degree of mutual penetration and one operates with the other through the complete identity of substances and power and operation of the most Blessed Trinity itself.

3. But when you contemplate these things, see that you do not think yourself able to understand the incomprehensible. For you have still in these six stages to consider what most strongly leads our mind's eye into the stupor of wonder. For there [in the Trinity] is the greatest communicability with individuality of the persons, the greatest consubstantiality with plurality of the hypostases, the greatest configurability with distinct personality, the greatest co-equality with order, the greatest co-eternity with emanation, the greatest mutual intimacy with mission. Who in the face of such great marvels would not start in wonder? But we understand with greatest certitude that all these exist in the most Blessed Trinity if we raise our eyes to the goodness that excels all goodness. For if there is the greatest communication and true diffusion, there is also true origin and true distinction. And because the whole and not the part is communicated, therefore it is itself given as a whole and not as a part. Therefore the one emanating and the one producing are distinguished by their properties, and yet are essentially one. Since, then, they are distinguished by their properties, therefore they have personal properties and a plurality of hypostases and an emanation of origin and an order which is not of posteriority but of origin, and a mission not of local change but of free spiration, because of the authority of the producer which every sender

has in respect to that which is sent. Because they are substantially one, therefore it must be true that there is unity in essence and in form, In dignity and in eternity, in existence and inimitability While therefore you consider these things one by one in themselves, you have a reason for contemplating the truth ; when you compare them with one another, you have the wherewithal to hover in highest wonder; and therefore, that your mind may ascend in wonder to wonderful contemplation these things should be considered all together.

4. For these Cherubim signify this also, since they look at each other. Nor is this free from mystery, that they look toward each, their faces being turned toward the propitiatory, that there may be verified what the Lord said in John, “Now this is the eternal life: That they may know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, Whom thou hast sent”. For we should wonder not only at the essential and personal traits of God in themselves, but also in comparison with the superwonderful union of God and man in the unity of Christ’s person.

5. For if you are the Cherub when you contemplate the essentials of God and you wonder because the divine Being is at once primary and last Being, eternal and most present most simple and greatest or unlimited, all everywhere and yet never bounded, most actual and never moved, most perfect and having nothing superfluous or lacking, and yet immense and infinite without bounds, one to the highest degree and yet all-inclusive as having all things in itself, as total power, total truth, total goodness, look to the propitiatory and wonder that in it the primal principle is joined to the last term, God joined with man formed on the sixth day, the eternal joined with temporal man, born in the fullness of time of a Virgin--the most simple joined with the most composite, the most actual with the most passive and mortal, the most perfect and immense with the little, the most highly unified and all-inclusive with the composite individual distinct from all else, namely, Jesus Christ

6. If, however, you are the other Cherub when you contemplate the properties of the Persons, you will also wonder that communicability exists with individuality, consubstantiality with plurality, configurability with personality, co-equality with order, co-eternity with production, co-intimacy with mission, for the Son was sent by the Father, and the Holy Spirit by both, Who nevertheless is always with Them and never withdraws from Them. Look to the propitiatory and wonder because in Christ is a personal union with a trinity of substances and a duality of natures, an absolute agreement with a plurality of wills, a common speech between God and man with plurality of properties, an equal worship with plurality of ranks, an equal exaltation above all things with plurality of dignities, a condominium with plurality of powers

7. In this consideration is the perfection of the mind’s illumination, when, as if on the sixth day, it sees man made in the image of God. If then the image is an express likeness when our mind contemplates in Christ the Son of God, Who is the natural image of the invisible God, our humanity now wonderfully exalted, now ineffably united, by seeing at once in one Being 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, the book written within and without, it [the mind] arrives at a perfect being in order that it may arrive with God at the perfection of His illuminations on the sixth level, as if on the sixth day; nor does anything more remain save the day of rest, on which, by the elevation of the mind, its insight rests from all work which He had done.

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