

Book Review

Shelby, Katherine Wrisley, *Spiraling into God: Bonaventure on Grace, Hierarchy, and Holiness*¹

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Giovanni di Fidanza, or Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (c. 1217-1274), was one of the authoritative figures in the Franciscan Order that defined its philosophical and theological tradition. Schooled at the University of Paris, Bonaventure learned directly from Alexander of Hales, the preeminent Franciscan theologian of that time. Preceding his stint at the University, there had been disputes among the Franciscans regarding the education of the friars of the Poverello regarding the seeming contradiction between the Franciscan spirituality of poverty with utter dependence on God and the scholarly pursuits of theology. Although it had not been thoroughly addressed, the conflict between studying theology and living out the Franciscan spirituality was put to rest when Francis permitted Anthony of Padua to teach theology, given that they did not extinguish their spiritual and prayer lives due to their studies. This disagreement among the Franciscans regarding the issue was finally put to rest when Bonaventure entered the order, specifically when he became its Minister General in 1257. This is because Bonaventure was able to show the necessity of academic life to genuinely understand the intricacies of Franciscan spirituality. After all, in Bonaventure, contrary to what some scholars would argue, it is not his identity as a Franciscan that shaped his intellectual framework; instead, it is his scholarly training that structured how he understood, lived, and bore witness to his Franciscan identity. From this standpoint, I wish to frame my reading of Bonaventure's philosophy as explained thematically by Katherine Wrisley Shelby in her book *Spiraling into God: Bonaventure on Grace, Hierarchy, and Holiness*.

The book is divided into 9 chapters where Shelby focuses on grace, hierarchy, and holiness as the conceptual grounding of her reading of Bonaventurian metaphysics. Chapter 1 serves as the introduction, chapters

¹ Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2023, 391pp

2-5 focuses on the relationship of grace and hierarchy, chapters 6-8 on the connection between the two concepts and holiness, and Chapter 9 is the conclusion. The three aforementioned principles were crucial for the Bonaventurian metaphysics that culminates in the perfection of the human person with and in God. Despite the postlapsarian stature, *reditus* (return) is enabled by grace, which hierarchizes the human person. This hierarchization, in turn, advances the attainment of holiness, thereby resulting in the *reditus* or *reductio* in and into God. Contrary to how other Bonaventurian scholars would interpret and equate Bonaventure's metaphysics to the Dionysian circle, Shelby asserted that the human person, albeit ensues a descend and ascend motion in the *exitus et reductus* (procession and return), spirals back to an unending subsequent descent and ascent progression.² More specifically, *reditus* is not an end-point but a new beginning for a nuanced *exitus* so that the human person will be all the more hierarchized.³

Typically, Bonaventurian scholarship considers Augustine as Bonaventure's most influential figure. However, in tracing Bonaventure's historical sources for the doctrine of grace, Shelby surprisingly excluded the authority of Augustine. It was unexpected because, in Bonaventure's *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, the third and fourth stages of the hierarchical ascent revolved around the human person, specifically on the internal journey of examining the soul, which was rooted in Augustine, as a form of a higher ascent before passing over to the speculation of God. In examining the concept of grace, Shelby argued that it was Bonaventure's teacher, Alexander of Hales, who significantly contributed, together with Dionysius the Areopagite and the Victorine Thomas Gallus, in forming how his conception of grace.

Dionysius the Areopagite was the first to coin the word "hierarchy" in the early sixth century. From his perspective, hierarchy is a sacred order that is not associated with the degree of authority but with proximity toward God, and the end of hierarchy is to ensure that everyone will reach the summit—thereby facilitating the hierarchization of the soul.⁴ The soul can only be hierarchized once it is purified, illuminated, and perfected. Through these hierarchical movements that relate to order, understanding, and activity, all rational creatures are ordered back to God as their Creator.⁵ Shelby argued through this that Dionysius was able to reappropriate the late-Neoplatonic notion of *residuus* (remaining), *exitus*, and *reditus*.

² Katherine Wrisley Shelby, *Spiraling into God: Bonaventure on Grace, Hierarchy, and Holiness* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2023), 111.

³ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 32–33.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 32–34.

Another important source of Bonaventure was Thomas Gallus, a master at the University of Paris sometime between 1210 and 1218 and one among the last great Victorines, articulated a reappropriation of the Dionysian hierarchy employing his angelic anthropology, viz. the nine orders of the celestial hierarchy. For Gallus, like in his *Angelic Hierarchy*, there are three main orders (lowest, middle, and highest) in the mind that hierarchize the soul.⁶ In the soul's ascent in this hierarchy, it becomes receptive to the divine light that perfects it at the highest level of the seraph. What is unique here is the necessity for the soul, once it culminates in the level of the seraph, to make descent so that the divine light achieved through the ascent will fecundate to those at the lower hierarchy.⁷

This nuanced understanding of hierarchy was elaborated further by the former Franciscan chair of theology, Alexander of Hales, who supplied Bonaventure with necessary lens, providing the soul the perspective of sanctifying grace—grace that "purifies, illuminates, and perfects," thereby hierarchizing the soul.⁸ For Hales, there are two distinct categories of grace: uncreated grace, which pertains to the Holy Spirit, and created grace that God infuses into the human soul. For Hales, created grace is associated with sanctifying grace, which hierarchizes that soul and consequently disposes the rational soul to receive the uncreated grace.⁹ Once the soul is hierarchized, it transitions from being a mere vestige of God to a similitude.

The developing notion of hierarchy was thus refined by Bonaventure by establishing the concept of *influentia* and by qualifying the positionality of the hierarchized soul. First, Bonaventure considered Hales' sanctifying grace as *influential*, continuously proceeding from the First principle to sustain the existence of creatures. This then serves as a guide in the ascent by hierarchizing the soul so that *reditus* might be achieved.¹⁰ Second, he further asserted that once the soul is hierarchized, its positionality should not be a mere *status* or an idle remaining in God, but a *fructus* whereby the soul—and the human person by extension—not only orders one's relation with God but also makes it fruitful by including the entire created order of reality.¹¹ This makes the human person a Jacob's Ladder that assists others so that the rest of the creature can ascend into the hierarchy.¹² This Jacob's Ladder that was used to symbolize the hierarchized rational soul was taken from Jacob's dream where God's angels used it to descend and ascend from heaven and

⁶ *Ibid.*, 48–49.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 98–99.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 100–101.

¹² *Ibid.*, 111.

earth, thereby connecting the Heaven and Earth.¹³ Like Jacob's Ladder, all creatures can also ascend through the hierarchized soul.

In structuring Bonaventure's concept of grace and tracing its intellectual sources, Shelby established how all creatures are linked in two ways, vestige and *influentia*. Shelby claimed that for Bonaventure, all of creation is a vestige through the general inflowing from the Trinity, whereby all creatures are sustained in their existence and are ordered back to God.¹⁴ However, a different consideration applies to rational creatures, for the soul can transcend this vestige to be a similitude of God by cooperating with sanctifying grace.¹⁵ However, this should be clarified so as not to fall into an anthropocentric reading of Bonaventure. For him, the capacity to attain similitude is given to the rational creature so that, as a result, it can help those at the lower hierarchy. From this interpretation, genuine appreciation of deification points to the socio-ethical *fructus* inherent in the soul's ascent. As it becomes more similitude to God, it becomes responsible for those who are not. All in the created order are also connected through general *influentia* that sustains all creatures' existence.¹⁶

Shelby further explains that this *Influentia* received by all creatures from the creator is classified into general and special. The former refers to the *influentia* shared by all in the created order, while the latter is solely infused into rational creatures. General *influentia* accounts for why all creatures are a vestige of God as their creator and ongoing source of existence; due to this, God's power is manifested in all creatures from the level of vestige. This *influentia* connects all in the created order by placing everything within a hierarchy of perfection. However, *influentia* operates differently in the rational soul, which receives the second type of *influentia* in addition to the general one. This special *influentia* facilitates the soul's progression from being a vestige to the state of similitude, allowing it to become like Jacob's Ladder so that all creatures can likewise ascend into the hierarchy.¹⁷ After all, the rational soul can truly return to God provided that it becomes like Jacob's Ladder. As a Jacob's Ladder it can connect creatures with God by both ascending to God and descending to the rest of the creatures, so that they, too, can ascend back to God.¹⁸ However, this is not to misconstrue that the rational soul is the mediator between God and the rest of creation for there is only one mediator, Christ. What Shelby is arguing in the foregoing is that Christ, as the "Hierarch," is the one who enables the ascents, descents, and

¹³ *Ibid.*, 103.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 213.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 215.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 205.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 101–102.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 303.

reascents to God, without which the human person cannot be hierarchized.¹⁹ Therefore, a meaningful reading of the rational soul as Jacob's Ladder should include Christ as the source of all the movements within the hierarchy.

Tracing Bonaventure's concept of hierarchy can demonstrate an alternative perspective as to how people of the contemporary world understand hierarchy. In contrast to the modern pejorative reading of hierarchy, Bonaventure considers hierarchy as an avenue through which the rational soul becomes potent to perfection. Through the *influencia* of grace, the rational soul can ascent into the hierarchy and thereby attain perfection through the ecstatic union with God, simply put, holiness. For we only become capable of holiness once we cooperate with this *influencia* so that our soul will be hierarchized, becoming like Jacob's Ladder that spirals between God and the other creatures at the lower level of the hierarchy.²⁰

Shelby's discussions of hierarchy concerning grace as *influencia* and holiness as its end direct us to the idea that although the primary ascent of the soul is somehow a solitary activity insofar as it is attained through the will in cooperation with grace, it is always relational and directed towards *fructus*. A more faithful reading of hierarchization is not for the sake of the soul *per se* but is done in relation to other creatures that also need to be hierarchized. This reading of hierarchy is faithful to how Bonaventure pursues knowledge. That knowledge is sought not for its own sake but for the sake of its source—God the *Summum Bonum*. Bonaventure pursued knowledge not for its own sake but for the sake of something higher, something perfect. Intellectual life is important, not because it constitutes the ultimate end of the human person nor serves as the sole mechanism for attaining perfection. Rather, for Bonaventure, its significance lies in its capacity to lead and aid the human person in our journey toward our true and ultimate end, thus fulfilling the metaphysical goal embedded in each creature.²¹ Thus, if one is to look at his works, each is fashioned so that his fellow Franciscans will deepen their intellectual life and how they live the spirituality they are called for. Each work for Bonaventure is not published for purely intellectual and scholarly need and satisfaction but a work meant to guide each reader on how to pursue the life everyone is meant to live, the life of perfection and holiness—a life perfected by circling back to the Ultimate source. That knowledge of the truth will not confine us to ourselves but rather predispose us to cooperate with *influencia* so that we can be deified and help others be deified.

This book is invaluable if one wishes to know more about the historical constitution of Bonaventure's concept of hierarchy and its interplay

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 280.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 348.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

with grace and holiness. Moreover, it presents biblical and uses historical figures as exemplars of a hierarchized soul and its theological implications on trinitarian theology, pneumatology, ecclesiology, social and environmental justice, and wisdom theology. However, a more holistic understanding of Bonaventure's hierarchy could be strengthened if the mystical and contemplative nature of the hierarchy was also taken into account. This is important for Bonaventure since speculation is not just a mere ascent of the rational soul nor a sapiential ascent but an intellectual and contemplative ascent. Through the discussion of contemplation, *influentia* could be further highlighted as initiated by the Trinity and not part of the nature of the rational soul. Nonetheless, the book will provide foundational knowledge on Bonaventure if one wants to understand Bonaventure's *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum* from the vantage point of hierarchy, grace, and holiness.

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Reference

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