

September 16, 2012
Sunday After Holy Cross

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

As a good Franciscan, Saint Bonaventure (1221-1274) loved to contemplate the wisdom of God in the wonders of Creation. This contemplation was not vague or sentimental. It was deliberately discursive, theologically guided by the beginning of Genesis, where Creation is described in a poetic narrative. That is to say, Bonaventure approached the created world through the eyes of reflective, sapiential theology, the literary model of which was the first chapter of Genesis.

Following this biblical lead, Bonaventure concerned himself with Creation on several occasions. Around 1254, he discoursed on the subject at length in his lectures on Book II of the Sentences of Peter the Lombard. He returned to the theme in his Breviloquium, a condensed theological outline composed in 1257. During the following year, he came back to God's vestigia in universo---"footprints in the Universe"-in his Itinerarium, The Journey of the Mind Into God. Finally, in 1273, the year before he died, Bonaventure began an extensive commentary on Genesis 1. (His elevation as a Roman Cardinal and his presidency at the Second Council of Lyons prevented its completion.)

Bonaventure's discursive approach to Genesis 1 drew attention to its progressive note of distinction, the ordering of Creation by the division and separation of its components (Breviloquium 2.2.1). He wrote of God's "wisdom lucidly distinguishing all things"---sapientiam cuncta lucide distinguentem (Itinerarium 1.14). The art of "distinguishing" was one of the notable qualities and preoccupations of School Theology of the Middle Ages, and no one was better at it than Bonaventure.

Students of Holy Scripture, however, will recognize this Scholastic preoccupation with "distinctions" works remarkably well for the first chapter of Genesis, where the inspired author structured each of the six days of the story on a series of distinctions. That is to say, a preoccupation with distinctions lends organization, not only to the divine act of Creation, but also to the human act of literary composition.

Thus, God divided the light from the darkness on Day One, thereby distinguishing day from night. The second distinction was introduced on the second day, when "God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament."

On the third day, the land was distinguished from the waters, when God gathered the waters into seas and "let the dry appear"---wetera'eh hayabasha. On this "dry," God caused to bloom the plants and trees, "each according to its kind." On the third day, then, the author marked two levels of distinction: between the land and water, and among the various species of plants.

Then, having adorned the earth, on the fourth day God once again turned His attention to the heavens, where he placed two great lights, mainly for the purpose of further distinctions---"to rule over the day and over the night, and to divide the light from the darkness." By means of these lights, as well, time would be divided by seasons and days and years. The very purpose of the heavenly bodies was the insertion of distinctions into time.

On the fifth day, God formed creatures that would make their way through the air and the water. These self-mobile creatures, each distinct according to its kind, were distinguished from the plants created two days earlier, inasmuch as the plants were unable to

move themselves. Here the author marks three levels of distinction: between self-mobile creatures and plants, between animals of the water and of the air, and among the various species of each.

On Creation's sixth day, there were two narrative parts: the first, in which God created all the earth-bound animals, each according to its kind, and the second, in which "God created man in His image." The Genesis narrative conveys no historical or biological continuity between the human being and the other animals. On the contrary, the Creation of human beings was distinguished from the creation of other animals by a distinct and unique act.

The final and crowning distinction, however, was between male and female human beings. Here the language is quite unique. Unlike the Creation account in Genesis 2, Genesis 1 does not speak of "man" and "woman," but of *zakar* and *neqebah*---male and female. If we compare this vocabulary with that of Genesis 2, the difference is striking. In the second story, the distinction is what we might call "personal"; it distinguishes "man" ('ish) from "woman" ('isha). In Genesis 1 the distinction is, rather, physical and biological: male (*zakar*) and female (*neqebah*).

Perhaps this distinction gains clarity if we contrast "male and female" with "masculine and feminine." The former pair describes something physical, genetic, and absolutely immutable; a male cannot become a female, nor vice-versa. The most that can be done---and this is a sin of the most serious order---to mutilate certain biological signs of the deeper difference.

When we speak of "masculine and feminine," on the other hand, we are not referring to sex but to gender. The terms "masculine and feminine" are not, properly speaking, biological but grammatical and psychological. That is to say, these terms are more malleable; they

are open to different social, economic, and political expressions, which “male and female” are not.

At the risk of oversimplification, we might say that Genesis 2 is about “masculine and feminine,” while Genesis 1 is about “male and female.” It is certainly true that Genesis 2 refers to marriage, which Genesis 1 does not.

Indeed, the Bible rarely uses the vocabulary “male and female”--- zakar andneqebah---in reference to human beings. Being a specifically biological description, it most often refers to animals (in Noah’s Ark, for instance, and the various animals sacrificed in Israel’s religion). When Holy Scripture does use this vocabulary with respect to human beings, it is in reference to “sins against nature” (Leviticus 18:22; 20:13; cf. Romans 1:26-27).

It is worth inquiring, perhaps, which distinction is deeper in the structure of Creation, “male and female” or “masculine and feminine.” Because the former is strictly biological, it might appear to be more basic.

On the other hand, one can argue that there is something in the differences of things much deeper than biology. That is to say, perhaps the terms “masculine and feminine” grasp something more fundamental in Creation than biology. Maybe we should call it “poetry.”

If we were to question him on the point, I suspect St. Francis of Assisi (Bonaventure’s recognized master) would agree. When he described Creation in his “Canticle to the Sun,” Francis employed poetic images of his native Umbrian to speak of lo frate Sole, sora Luna, frate Uento, sor' Acqua, frate Focu, sora nostra matre Terra--- our brothers the sun, wind, and fire, and our sisters the moon, water, and mother earth.