

THE SERAPHIC VISION ON LA VERNA

Have on hand: O.F.S. Rule

Someone should read from our *Rule*, Article #1.

Then recall what Thomas of Celano wrote: “While he [Francis] was staying in that hermitage called



Pietro Lorenzetti: St. Francis Receiving the Stigmata, ca. 1320

La Verna, after the place where it is located, two years prior to the time that he returned his soul to heaven, he saw in the vision of God a man, having six wings like a Seraph, standing over him, arms extended and feet joined, affixed to a cross. Two of his wings were raised up, two were stretched out over his head as if for flight, and two covered his whole body. When the blessed servant of the most High saw these things, he was filled with the greatest awe, but could not decide what this vision meant for him. Moreover, he greatly rejoiced and was much delighted by the kind and gracious look that he saw the Seraph gave him. The Seraph’s beauty was beyond comprehension, but the fact that the Seraph was fixed to the cross and the bitter suffering of that passion thoroughly

frightened him. Consequently, he got up both sad and happy as joy and sorrow took their turns in his heart. Concerned over the matter, he kept thinking about what this vision could mean and his spirit was anxious to discern a sensible meaning from the vision.”¹

St. Bonaventure in his book *The Soul’s Journey Into God* offers this insight and gives us a lengthy and prayer-filled interpretation of St. Francis’ spirituality, and in general of the Franciscan approach to life. Bonaventure sets the scene for his book by saying: “Following the example of our most blessed father Francis ... I withdrew to Mount La Verna, seeking a place of quiet and desiring to find there peace of spirit. While I was there reflecting on various ways by which the soul ascends into God, there came to mind, among other things, the miracle which had occurred to blessed Francis in this very place: the vision of a winged Seraph in the form of the Crucified. While reflecting on this, I saw at once that this vision represented our father’s rapture in contemplation and the road by which this rapture is reached.

“The six wings of the Seraph can rightly be taken to symbolize the six levels of illumination by which, as if by steps or stages, the soul can pass over to peace through ecstatic elevation of Christian wisdom. There is no other path but through the burning love of the Crucified, a love which so transformed Paul into Christ when he *was carried up to the third heaven* (2 Cor.12:2) that he could say: *With Christ I am nailed to the cross. I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me* (Gal. 2:20).”²

Bonaventure then goes on and writes his book using the imagery of the six wings of the Seraph as indicators and reminders of the comprehensive and full spirituality of St. Francis, and of anyone who would follow his inspiration. How all-encompassing is this vision of reality! And again, Christ (and Christ crucified) is the center!

Bonaventure suggests that the lower two wings represent all of creation below human beings. They are not “images” of God as such, but serve as “footprints” of God (clues, hints, traces, analogies). All created things with their endless array of color and form give witness to the generous and beautiful God who created it all. The lower wings represent how nature functions, is organized, and structured; these operations also give us clues to a great God – the laws and patterns of nature (such as the natural sciences), the harmony, balance, interplay, profusion, complexity, coordination and care we find around us. This all gives us much to rejoice and celebrate in God.



Giotto di Bondone: St. Francis Receiving the Stigmata, ca. 1300

The middle two of the six wings are extended from the body of the crucified Christ as if for flight. These two outstretched wings represent humankind; they become “images” of God. One wing recalls that human beings were created in the image and likeness of God, on the natural level. We are given intellect, free will (with its capacity to choose and to love), and memory. We are “fabulously made.” We are immortal, with all our senses, and all creation is subject to us. We are an “image” of God – like seeing an image in a mirror. Then the other wing which is outstretched level with Christ represents the reality that human beings are privileged to be supernatural as well. We are raised to being children of God (through the Sacraments). Human nature re-formed, graced, re-imaged. We share such gifts as the Church, the Scriptures, His teachings, sacraments, commandments, virtues, promise of eternal glory/happiness, yes, and forgiveness. Such blessings to recall!

According to Bonaventure, looking at the upper two wings is like peering into the “Holy of Holies.”³ The Divinity is symbolized by the one wing above Christ. God Himself – His oneness, “I Am Who

Am,” eternal, unmade, the absolute, the alpha and omega, Love, the Creator. The other upper wing reminds us of the Trinity: Father/Son/Holy Spirit. Our God is community, is harmony, goodness, love and peace.

Each of these six wings offer much to contemplate, to revel in. Yet, there is more. These six wings form, as it were, a crown around Jesus Christ the center. Here in the center is the model of all creation – the Word made Flesh, the first-born of all creation; our Redeemer and Savior.

Stepping back, we see in this seraphic vision the composite of all our Franciscan theology, our spirituality – all of which comprises the wisdom needed to make our ascent into God!

- Q1. Describe the symbolism of each of the six wings of the Seraph, as St. Bonaventure sees them.⁴
- Q2. How might I use the Seraphic Vision of La Verna as a source for contemplation in my life?
- Q3. Do I understand the priority built in creation as expressed by St. Bonaventure? How do human beings compare to animate and inanimate creatures? How do they differ fundamentally? How does he highlight this?
- Q4. Why is St. Francis called the “Seraphic Saint”? What is the special characteristic associated with the angels called “seraphs”? Why was St. Bonaventure named the “Seraphic Doctor”?

¹ FA:ED, *The Life of Saint Francis*, 1228-1229, Vol. 1, pp. 263–264, Chapter III, v. 94

² *The Soul’s Journey Into God*, Bonaventure, 1978, Prologue, pp. 54-55 vs. 2-3

³ *Ibid*, Chapter Five, p. 94, v. 1

⁴ For a fuller reading of Bonaventure, see *The Soul’s Journey Into God*, pp. xiii; 53 – 101; and 305 – 306.