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Ministerial experience includes: parishes, formation, education, and the Little Portion Retreat House for the poor.

Publications include:

- Teens Encounter Christ
- Journal on the writings of Francis, In the Womb of the Cave.

and the following collaborations with Josef Raischl OFS:

- Franciscan Solitude
- The Journey into God
- A Forty-Day Journey into God with St. Bonaventure
- My Heart's Quest: Writings of Eric Doyle OFM
- Three Heroes of Assisi in World War II
- A Pilgrimage through the Franciscan Intellectual Tradition
- Office of the Passion of St. Francis of Assisi
- The Cross Was Their Book
- Five Feasts of the Child Jesus
- Prayer of Franciscan Solitude
- Three CDs—Love Holding Love; Office of the Passion; Journey of the Heart.

Spiritual Motherhood

St. Bonaventure's Five Feasts of the Child Jesus

Right before Advent in the year 1259, St. Bonaventure of Bagnoregio had some free time to himself and wanted to spend it in prayer and reflection. So he decided to focus on the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, choosing a most unique approach by reflecting on the liturgical feasts that highlight Jesus' childhood—Annunciation, Nativity, Holy Name, Epiphany, Presentation. It occurred to him that like Mary, a human person can also conceive, birth, name, search for Jesus with the Magi and present the Child Jesus back to God.

Franciscan scholar, Eric Doyle OFM, wrote that Bonaventure's Five Feasts of the Child Jesus deals with "spiritual motherhood," whereby every Christian—male and female—would be able to do what Mary herself did as his Mother. After my first of many retreats on this text, I realized that St. Bonaventure wants to help us deal with the reality of grace in our lives.

In the first feast, the Annunciation, (25 March), Bonaventure remarks that Mary said her "yes" to God and became pregnant with the Child. She didn't know fully what it all would mean, yet still gave her consent to God. What is this conception? It is what we Franciscans call the highest good come from heaven, the grace of God, present in Mary's womb. With this conception Mary was literally "full of grace." So each time the Holy Spirit "overshadows" us, we too conceive a grace of God. And just as conception is precious and unique for any woman, so too is the conception of a grace from God a unique, mystical moment.

Bonaventure notes that Mary goes up to the hill country to be with her pregnant cousin Elizabeth perhaps to seek advice and learn from her. So too does a person who conceives a grace from God need to seek the advice of good people—"spiritual obstetricians" such as spiritual directors. Bonaventure even cautions one to avoid those who might kill the new conception—a type of spiritual abortion.



How many times have we conceived a grace from God? Did we feel it stirring within us? Perhaps an example would help us here. As a Franciscan, I remember almost precisely to the moment in my life when God called me to consider becoming a member of the Franciscan family. I conceived a grace and was pregnant with this call. I'll continue with this example through the rest of the five feasts.

In the second feast, the Nativity, (25 December), Mary birthed her Child in Bethlehem. Bonaventure notes that after a person has conceived a grace, one brings this grace to birth by doing that for which the grace was intended. He adds two synonyms for the word grace—gift and good. St. Francis in his Letter to the Faithful writes that all of us are mothers of Jesus Christ, and that we birth him by doing good. Perhaps Bonaventure's use of the word "good" is an allusion to Francis' letter.

A physical pregnancy is usually brought to birth when the fetus has matured or by cesarean surgery. A grace is brought to birth when it is ripe/mature, or like a woman who schedules and goes through with cesarean surgery. So, to continue with the example of my call to religious life, this grace was birthed in my life when I did what the grace intended, namely, entered the Franciscan formation program at St. Francis Seraphic Seminary.

What graces have you put into practice or birthed in your life?

In the third feast, the Holy Name, (3 January), St. Bonaventure notes that his parents gave the Child the name Jesus meaning "one who saves." So too when we conceive and birth a grace, then we must also name the grace. And just like a mother may birth more than one child giving each their own name, so too do we conceive many graces and possibly birth them. But do we come to the point of naming these graces, these "children"?

My call to the Franciscan way of life was a grace conceived and birthed that has the name "vocation." My "child—vocation" was an "infant" when I entered the formation program of the Franciscans. As I met with different challenges and obstacles in the various stages of formation, I realized that I conceived and birthed another grace—a "sister" to the grace "vocation" whom I named "perseverance."

In the fourth feast, Epiphany, (traditionally 6 January) Matthew's Gospel [2:1-12] recounts the story of the Magi/Kings who seek the Child, adore him and bring him gifts. St. Bonaventure sees the three faculties of the human person—memory, intellect, will—as the three "Magi/Kings" within us who go in search of our children.

Continuing with my example, whenever I encountered problems or obstacles on my Franciscan journey, I needed the grace of perseverance to strengthen me to overcome the obstacles that threatened my child "vocation." My King—memory helped me recall that I had a "child" called "perseverance"; my King—intellect helped me understand why I needed this "child's" assistance; and my King—will helped me make the decision to go and search for this "child—perseverance." Once the problem or obstacle had been dealt with, I was in adoration of these "children/graces" functioning in my life and offered God gifts of thanks, praise, glory.





In the fifth feast, Presentation of the Child Jesus in the Temple, (2 February), Jesus was brought to the Temple to be offered up to God, returning to God this highest good of all creation. St. Bonaventure describes our Trinitarian God as “overflowing goodness,” a goodness that is constantly being exchanged among the Three Persons and with creation, for God remarked at the end of each of the six days of creation [Genesis 1: 3, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25] that it is good, the creation of humanity being very good [1:31].

And we know from Matthew 19:17 that “only God is good.” If “only God is good,” then each time we experience goodness, we experience God. And within the Trinity, goodness is constantly being exchanged, overflowing from one Person to the Other. Then in imitation of the Trinity, we must let this goodness overflow to others from us.

Gerald Manley Hopkins, aware of St. Bonaventure’s description of God, wrote in his poem 155:

*“Thee, God, I come from, to Thee I go,
All day long I like fountain flow.”*

To hold on to any good would short-circuit the Trinitarian exchange process of the good. To let goodness flow from us in our daily lives makes God present.



My “child—vocation” is more than sixty years old. At each quarter century mark, a celebration was had with family, friars and friends. They were moments to enter God’s temple gratefully to present this “child—vocation” to God. And God has blessed me abundantly with graces—many “children” to continue living my Franciscan life.

St. Bonaventure’s meditation on these five feasts from Mary’s perspective as mother can become the tool that helps us realize how blessed we are, how many graces we’ve conceived, birthed, named, sought out and returned to God. Whenever we are gentle, kind, peaceful, generous, believing, hoping, loving, we are birthing the Child Jesus because we make goodness present, and this goodness is God!

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from
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I realize this article is for the Centenary of Greccio. After I learned about St. Bonaventure's Five Feasts of the Child Jesus (written in 1259) while teaching at Canterbury, I realized how this writing teases out further the Incarnation that Francis made visible during the Christmas of 1223. Bill Short called the experience at Greccio "the democratization of the Incarnation."

It was St. Bonaventure with his Major Life of St. Francis (1260s) his Journey into God (1259) and then his Five Feasts of the Child Jesus (also 1259) that brought the message of St. Francis fully into the literary and academic world. The Major Life made Francis more intimately known, the Journey into God uses the Stigmata of St. Francis as a launching pad (Bonaventure becomes St. Francis' theologian), and his Five Feasts of the Child Jesus took the Greccio experience, as Bill Short OFM claims, and making it "the democratization of the Incarnation," an experience the ordinary working person and homemaker can relate to. That's why I feel this writing of St. Bonaventure is so very important.

ACTIONS TO INSPIRE AN FSA SCHOOL COMMUNITY

- In a staff reflection session pose the question - "What graces have you conceived, birthed, named, sought out and returned to God this year ... this term... in your life?"
- At the end of each day name three gifts you have received before you close your eyes.
- What goodness can you identify in your school staff, students, parents and the wider community? Make a list of 10.

