

THE FIVE FEASTS OF THE CHILD JESUS

A Mystical Text By St Bonaventure

Prologue

In God's Church there are holy men and women who have been enlightened more profoundly than others by the divine radiance and inflamed more ardently by inspiration from on high. It is their conviction and teaching that through meditation upon Jesus and reverent contemplation of the Incarnate Word, a faithful soul can experience delight far sweeter, a pleasure more thrilling and consolation more perfect than from honey and fragrant purview.

I had the opportunity to withdraw for a short while from the turmoil of distracting thoughts. In my innermost self, I asked which aspects of the Lord's Incarnation the object of my reflection during this time should be. My purpose was to obtain some spiritual consolation in which I might savour the divine sweetness reflected, as in the mirror, *in this vale of tears* (Ps. 83:7); and, having savoured it, however fleetingly, to keep myself more resolutely from passing and illusionary consolation.

As I considered these things, it rose mysteriously in my mind that by the grace of the Holy Spirit and the power of the Most High, a soul dedicated to God could spiritually conceive the holy Word of God and only begotten Son of the Father, give birth to him, name him, seek and adore him with the Magi and finally, according to the law of Moses, joyfully present him in the Temple to God the Father. In this way, as a true disciple of the Christian faith, a soul would be able to celebrate with all prayerfulness and piety, the five feasts of the child Jesus which the Church has instituted.¹

Because I thought out this little work with humility, I have written it in simple words, and for brevity's sake I have omitted references to authorities confirming what I have said.

Should anyone grow but a little in devotion towards our most sweet Jesus, from reading or meditating on this short and modest work, then let him praise, glorify and bless the Author, Font and Origin of all goodness. If no such growth takes place then let the reader either blame me for not having written it well or worthily enough, or perhaps, for lack of devotion and humility on his part, blame himself.

The First Feast

HOW CHRIST JESUS, THE SON OF GOD, MAY BE CONCEIVED SPIRITUALLY BY A DEVOUT SOUL

1. Our understanding must be purified by the waters of sorrow, our hearts inflamed and raised on high by the gentle fire of love. Then by fervent meditation and prayerful thought, we can undertake our first consideration: How it is that the blessed Son of God, Jesus Christ, may be conceived spiritually in a devout soul.

Once a devout soul has been touched or moved by the hope of heavenly bliss, the fear of eternal punishment or the weariness of living long *in this vale of tears* (Ps. 83:7), it is visited by fresh inspirations, set alight with holy desires and taken up with godly thoughts. When at length it has rejected and despised previous imperfections and

¹ These are the feasts of the Annunciation (March 25th), the Nativity (December 25th), the Holy Name of Jesus (January 2nd), the Epiphany (January 6th), and the Presentation (February 2nd).

former desires for worldly things and has resolved to lead a new life by the gracious kindness of the Father of lights from whom is every good endowment and every perfect gift (Jas. 1:17), it conceives mystically by the gift of grace.

What is happening here? It is nothing other than the heavenly Father by a divine seed, as it were, impregnating the soul and making it fruitful. The power of the Most High comes upon the soul and overshadows it (cf. Luke 1:35) with a heavenly coolness which tempers the desires of the flesh and gives help and strength to the eyes of the spirit.

2. It is a joyous conception which leads to such contempt of the world and to such longing for heavenly works and the things of God. No matter how fleetingly up to this point, even during distress, the things of the spirit have been tasted, the things of the flesh lose their savour.

Now, with Mary, the soul begins to climb *the hill country* (cf. Luke 1:39) because after this conception earthly things lose their attraction, and the soul longs for heavenly and eternal things. The soul begins to flee the company of those *with minds set on earthly things* (Phil. 3:19) and desires the friendship of those with hearts set on heavenly things. It begins to take care of Elizabeth, that is, to look to those who are enlightened by divine wisdom and ardently inflamed by love.

There is an important point to keep in mind because it applies to many people: the further one withdraws from the world, the closer becomes one's friendship with good people. And it follows that the more the company of ungodly people loses its attraction, the more the company of saintly and spiritual people inspires the heart with radiant delight. As St Gregory says: "Anyone who keeps close to a holy man discovers that by seeing him often, listening to his words and witnessing his exemplary behaviour, he is set on fire with love of the truth, keeps away from the darkness of sin and is inflamed by the love of divine light."² And St Isidore writes: "Seek the company of good people. If you share their company, you will also share their virtue."³

The faithful soul should consider well how pure, holy and devout was the conversation of the saints, how godly and salutary their counsel, how admirable their holiness, and all they achieved to their mutual benefit, as they inspired one another by word and example towards greater virtue.

3. Devout Soul, that is also what you should do when you realise that you have, by the Holy Spirit, conceived a new longing for the life of grace. Avoid the company of the wicked, go up into the hill country with Mary, seek the advice of spiritual people, strive to follow in the footsteps of the saints, reflect upon the teaching of holy people and upon their actions and example. Keep clear of the poisonous counsels of the wicked who always try to distort new desires inspired by the Holy Spirit and want to hinder them and never cease to tear them to shreds.

Often under the guise of holiness, they infect the soul with the contagion of an insidious cowardice. They say such things as: "What you have begun is beyond you; what you are taking on is far too difficult; what you are doing is too much of a burden. Your strength is not up to it, you do not have the ability to do it. Your mind will get confused, your eyesight will be destroyed, you will develop all kinds of illnesses:

² St Gregory the Great, *Homilies on Ezechiel*, Bk. I, Hom. C,n.6, PL 76, col. 823.

³ St Isidore, *Synonymus*, Bk. II, n. 44, PG 83, col. 855.

consumption, paralysis, stones in the kidneys, dizziness in the head, dulling of the senses, clouding of the mind and loss of faculties. All these terrible things will happen to you if you do not abandon what you have started and take greater care of your health. Such practices do not become your position, they harm your honour and good name."

You notice then how someone can masquerade as a master of discipline and a medical doctor, who does not even know how to keep his own life in order or cure the sicknesses of his own mind! How sad it is that the cursed advice of the worldly-minded has frequently ruined so many people and killed the Son of God conceived in them by the Holy Spirit. This is that damnable and deadly medicine, the devil's counsel, which hinders spiritual conception in so many souls, and kills and destroys in many others what had been conceived by a firm decision or a vow.

4. There are others who seem to be good, religious people, and perhaps they are, but who, I say it with respect, are far too timid. They forget that the hand of *the Lord is not yet shortened that it cannot save*. (Isa.59:1), nor do they remember that the kindness of the Most High has not yet run out, that he wants to help us and has power to do so. *They have a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened* (Rom.10:2). Out of compassion for physical suffering or perhaps from fear of natural weakness, they dissuade others from the pursuit of perfection. That is their reaction when they see others achieving successfully that which they themselves had judged to be good and holy, but upon which they did not have the courage to embark. They discourage others from anything that goes beyond the common average and they destroy the salutary counsels which come from God's inspiration. And the more authentic these counsels are in the light of their experience, the more dangerous they find them to be.

5. Sometimes, through the coming of the ancient enemy they slyly suggest: "If you take on such and such practices of piety, people will say you are holy, good, devout and religious. And because you have not yet acquired the virtues that others think you have, you will be judged guilty in the sight of the Supreme Judge who knows in all their horror your great and terrible sins. You will forfeit the merits of your good works, and you will be judged a liar and a hypocrite." Such practices of piety, they maintain, are only for those who have not sinned gravely and have kept to a chaste and holy life, who gave up everything for God and have remained faithful to him all their lives.

6. Beloved soul dedicated to God, keep clear of people like that. Go up into the hill country (Luke 1:39) with Mary. St Paul did not live a sinless life. Yet he had not been in the service for any length of time, when he was taken up to the third heaven and contemplated God face to face (cf. 2 Cor. 12:2-4). St Mary Magdalen had been full of pride and ambition, totally intent on worldly vanities and ensnared by the pleasures of the flesh. Yet not long after her conversion she sat among the holy Apostles at the feet of Jesus and listened attentively to the saving doctrine of perfection. She was found worthy to be the first to see the Lord shortly after his resurrection and she proclaimed steadfastly to others that he was risen from the dead (cf. Luke 7:37-47; 8:2; John 20:1-2).

God shows no partiality (Acts 10:34). He does not take account of nobility of birth, length of time in his service or the number of our good works. What counts with God is a devout soul's increased fervour and more ardent love. He does not consider how you once behaved, but what you have now begun to be. You see, therefore, how

gravely blameworthy the advice of such would be, did ignorance not excuse it, though it cannot be condoned.

7. If then you cannot be saved through innocence, strive for salvation by penance. If you cannot be a Catherine or Cecilia, do not be ashamed to be a Mary Magdalen or a Mary of Egypt.⁴ If you recognise that you have conceived God's most dear Son by a sacred resolve to strive for perfection, then keep away from the deadly poison I have just mentioned and, like a woman in labour, hasten with desire and longing towards a happy delivery.

The Second Feast

HOW THE SON OF GOD IS BORN SPIRITUALLY IN A DEVOUT SOUL

1. Secondly, let us consider and mark well how the blessed the Son of God, already conceived spiritually, is born spiritually in the soul. He is born when, after good advice, through thought and prayer for God's protection, we put into practice our resolution to lead a more perfect life. He is born when the soul begins to do that which it long had in mind but was afraid to undertake through fear of its own weakness. The angels rejoice at this most blessed birth, they glorify God and announce peace (cf. Luke 2:13).

They announce peace because peace is restored to the soul by the practice of the virtues that it long had in mind. God's peace cannot be firmly established in the soul while the spirit and flesh are at war with each other (cf. Gal. 5:7); when the spirit longs for solitude and the flesh crazes to be with the crowd; when the spirit delights in Christ and the flesh is allured by the world; when the spirit seeks the serenity of contemplation in God and the flesh desires positions of honour in the world.

On the other hand, when the flesh is subjected to the spirit, that is, once good works are put into practice - which for so long the flesh had hindered - peace is surely restored to the soul. How happy a birth which brings such rejoicing to men and angels! How lovely and delightful it would be if we always did what is best for us. But our foolishness prevents it. Once we rid ourselves of our foolishness, human nature recognises what is native to it. In this birth, we experience the truth of that gospel saying: *"Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly and heart, and you will find rest for your soul. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light"* (Matt. 11: 29-30).

2. Devout Soul, if this happy birth brings you delights: you should remember that you must be like Mary. The name "Mary" means "bitter sea", "one who enlightens" and "one who rules". First you must be a "bitter sea" of tears of sorrow, weeping bitterly for the sins you have committed, lamenting deeply the good you have left undone, and reproach yourself unceasingly for the time you let slip by and lost. Second, you must be "one who enlightens" by speaking words of edification, practising virtue and teaching others untiringly to do good. Third, you must be "one who rules", that is, be master of your senses, of carnal passion and of all your actions. In this way, all your actions will be in conformity with right reason, and in all that you do, you will seek

⁴ St Catherine, +c. 310: According to the legend, she refused to be bride of a royal marriage and remained a virgin. St Cecilia, 2nd or 3rd century: According to a fifth century legend she chose virginity. For St Mary Magdalen, see Mark 16:9. St Mary of Egypt, fifth century: According to the legend, she was converted at the age of 29 from a life of prostitution and spent the remainder of her days doing penance by leading a solitary life in the desert.

and long for God's praise and glory, your neighbour's edification and your own salvation.

3. How blessed is such a "Mary" who weeps over sins committed, shines resplendently with virtue and has complete mastery over all carnal desires. Jesus Christ does not disdain to be born spiritually and joyfully, without pain and sorrow, from a "Mary" like this.

Once this birth has taken place, the devout soul knows and tastes how good the Lord Jesus is (cf. Ps 34:9). And in truth we find how good he is when we nourish him with our prayers, bathe him in the waters of our warm and loving tears, wrap him in the spotless swaddling clothes of our desires, carry him in an embrace of holy love, kiss him repeatedly with heartfelt longing and cherish him in the bosom of our innermost heart. That is how this Child is born spiritually in a devout soul.

The Third Feast

HOW THE INFANT JESUS IS NAMED SPIRITUALLY BY A DEVOUT SOUL

1. Thirdly, we come to consider how this holy Infant, now born spiritually, shall be named. And I think there is no name more fitting for him than *Jesus*, for Scripture says: He was called Jesus (Luke 2:21). This is the most sacred of all names. It was foretold by the prophets, announced by an Angel, proclaimed by the Apostles and desired by all the saints. O powerful name! O grace-filled and joyous name! O delightful and glorious name!

This name is *powerful* because it brings down our enemies, restores our strength and renews our mind. It is *grace-filled* because in that are contained the foundation of faith, the ground of hope and the fulfilment of Holiness. It is joyous because it is gladness to the heart, music to the ear, honey to the tongue and splendour to the mind. It is *delightful* because it nourishes when it is recalled, soothes when it is uttered, anoints when it is invoked, refreshes when it is written and instructs when it is read. It is a truly *glorious* name because it gives sight to the blind, makes the lame walk, brings hearing to the deaf, speech to the dumb and life to the dead. O blessed name endowed with such powers!

Devout Soul, whether you are writing, reading or teaching or whatever you are doing, may nothing be tasteful for you, nothing please you, apart from Jesus. To the little Infant, begotten anew spiritually, give the name Jesus that means Saviour amid the miseries of this life. May he save you from the vanities of the world that entice you, from the deceits of the devil that surround you and from the weakness of the flesh that torments you.

2. Devout Soul, amid the many scourges of this life, cry out:

**Jesus, Saviour of the world, save us
whom you have redeemed
by your cross and blood.
Help us, O Lord our God.
Save us, sweet Jesus, our Saviour.
Strengthen the weak,
comfort those who mourn,
help the frail
and give constancy to the fainthearted.**

3. After this holy name had been given to the Child, the Virgin Mary, fruitful mother in the flesh and true mother in the spirit, often felt a sense of sweetness, when through this name she witnessed that devils were cast out, miracles were performed, the blind received their sight, the sick were restored to health and the dead were brought back to life.

Undoubtedly, devout soul and spiritual mother of this Child, you will also have every right to rejoice and give praise, as you witness in yourself and in others that your holy Son, *Jesus, casts out devils* in the remission of sins; *gives sight to the blind* by infusing true knowledge into their minds; *raises the dead* through the gift of grace; cures the sick; heals the lame and restores the paralysed and crippled by giving strength to the spirit. In all these ways, those who before were sick and weak because of their sins, now become healthy and strong by grace. O glorious and holy name found worthy to have such power and strength!

The Fourth Feast

HOW THE SON OF GOD IS SOUGHT BY THE DEVOUT SOUL AND ADORED SPIRITUALLY WITH THE MAGI

1. We come now to the fourth feast, the Adoration of the Magi. After the soul, by God's grace, had spiritually conceived, brought forth and named this dear Child, the three Kings (understood here as the three powers of the soul) resolved to go in search of the Child, already revealed to them in the royal city, that is, in the structure of the created universe.

The powers of the soul are rightly described as "kings" because now they rule the flesh, have dominion over the senses and are taken up entirely, as is fitting, with the pursuit of divine things.

They seek the Child through meditation, go in search of him in heartfelt longing and enquire about him in prayerful reflection: *Where is he who has been born King of the Jews? We have seen his star in the East* (Matt.2:2). We have seen his splendour shining in the devout mind, we have seen his radiance lighting up the inner recesses of the soul. We have heard his voice and it is soft and tender; we have tasted his sweetness and it is delightful; we have caught his fragrance and it is alluring; we have felt his embrace and it is irresistible.

Now, Herod, give us the answer, tell us where the Beloved is to be found, show us the little Child we are yearning to see. He is the one we seek and long for.

2. O most tender, most loving, eternal Child, Babe from before the world began, when will we see you, when will we find you, when will we stand before your face? Without you, to rejoice is weariness; with you, to rejoice or weep is sheer delight. What is contrary to your will, we loathe; your good pleasure is our unbending happiness. If it is such delight to weep over you, what must it be to find joy in you?

Where are you? We are looking for you. Where are you? We are searching for you in all things and above all else we will stop where you are, who have been born King of

the Jews, law of believers, light of the blind, leader of the poor, life of the dead, eternal salvation of all who live forever.

3. Scripture gives us the true answer: *in Bethlehem of Judah* (Matt. 2:5) Bethlehem means "house of bread" and Judah "one who praises".

Christ is found when we have confessed our sins and listened attentively to the teaching of the Gospel, the bread of everlasting life, meditated upon it and rooted it firmly in our hearts, so that we may fulfil it by good works and proclaim it to others, that they may observe it also.

We find the Child Jesus with Mary his mother (cf. Matt. 2:11) when we taste the sweetness of divine contemplation, sometimes accompanied by abundant tears of consolation, after we have shed tears of sorrow and made fruitful confession of our sins. We find the Child when prayer, which at the outset saw us almost despairing, leaves us rejoicing and assured of forgiveness. How happy is such a "Mary" by whom Jesus is conceived, from whom he is born and with whom he is found in tenderness and delight!

4. You also, native powers of the soul, whom I have called kings, must go in search of the Child Jesus as did the three Magi, to worship him and offer him your gifts. Worship him with reverence, for he is the Creator, the Redeemer and the Rewarder of all. Worship him as our Creator, for he fashioned our very being; as the Redeemer, for he restored life to our spirit; as the Rewarder, for he grants us eternal life.

Adore him with reverence, you kings, for he is the most powerful King; adore him with veneration, for he is the wisest teacher; adore him with gladness, for he is the most generous Prince. Do not be content to adore him, offer him gifts as well. Offer him the gold of ardent love, the frankincense of devout contemplation, the myrrh of bitter sorrow. Offer him the gold of love for the graces he has bestowed on you, the frankincense of devotion for the joys he has prepared for you, and the myrrh of sorrow for the sins you have committed. Offer gold in honour of Christ's eternal godhead, frankincense in honour of the holiness of his soul, and myrrh in honour of his bodily sufferings.

Devout Soul, in this way seek the child Jesus, adore him and offer him your gifts.

The Fifth Feast

HOW THE SON OF GOD IS SPIRITUALLY PRESENTED IN THE TEMPLE BY THE DEVOUT SOUL

1. In the fifth and last place, the devout soul turns to consider how this little Child is to be presented in the Temple and offered to the Lord (cf. Luke 2:22).

He came to birth in the soul by the fulfilment of divinely inspired works; he was given his name when the soul tasted heavenly sweetness; he was sought for and found, then worshipped and adored, when it offered him spiritual gifts. He is now presented in the Temple by offering him, fervently and humbly, the thanks which are his due.

This blessed "Mary", the spiritual mother of Jesus, was cleansed through penance in conceiving her holy Son; she was strengthened in several ways by giving birth to him; she was consoled in her deepest heart by assigning him his holy name and she was filled with the divine life by adoring him with the kings.

What remains to be done? Only this, to carry the Son of God and son of the Virgin Mary to the heavenly Jerusalem and into the Temple of the godhead and there present him to the Father.

2. Go up, then, spiritual "Mary", not now into the hill country (cf. Luke 1:39), but to the dwelling place that is the heavenly Jerusalem, to the Palace of the city that is above. There, before the throne of the eternal Trinity and undivided Unity, humbly kneel in spirit and present your Son to God the Father, as you praise, glorify and bless the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

With rejoicing, praise God the Father, by whose inspiration you conceived your resolve to lead a life of holiness. With reverence, glorify God the Son, for by his grace you put into effect the resolve you conceived. Bless and adore God the Holy Spirit, for by his strength you have so far remained steadfast in good works.

3. Devout Soul, glorify God the Father for all his gifts and for all the good you do. By his mysterious inspirations, he called you away from the world, saying: Return, return O Shulammitte (Cant. 6:12). The meaning of those words will be found in the first meditation of another little work that I have written.⁵

Magnify God the Son in all his saints. By his mysterious grace, he delivered you from the devil's slavery, saying: *Take my yoke upon you* (Matt. 11:29) and cast off the yoke of the devil. His yoke is bitter, mine is sweet. His will lead you to eternal torment and pain; mine will bring you to everlasting joy and a quiet resting places (Isa. 32:18). Should the devil's yoke by chance bring you some delight, it is false and passing. My yoke brings true joy and leads to eternal salvation. Sometimes the devil exults his servants for a little while, only to put them to shame for all eternity. Everyone who honours me may suffer humiliations for a time, only to reign and be glorified forever.

This is the teaching that God's Son gave you, sometimes directly himself, at other times through his friends and the teachers whom he appointed. By that teaching, he delivered you from the wiles of the devil and the seductions of the world and the flesh.

Devout Soul, always bless and honour God the Holy Spirit who strengthens you in all goodness by his gracious consolations, saying: Come to me all you who labour and are heavily laden and I will give you rest (Matt. 11:28).⁶

Devout Soul, consider how inexperienced and easily allured, how frail and weak you were. You were so much at home in worldly pleasures, besotted with earthly delights as by the dregs of wine, like pigs wallowing in self. You were surrounded by so many and such terrible snares of the ancient enemy. On all sides you were faced by so much

⁵ *Soliloquy* in *The Works of Bonaventure III*, p. 68.

⁶ St Bonaventure refers these words to the Holy Spirit evidently because he is the author of Holy Scripture.

false advice and all kinds of obstacles and countless weapons used by relatives, friends and others close to you, to keep you from the path of love and to do you harm.

How could you have persevered in doing good, shackled as you were by the chains of sin? How could you have advanced in virtue, had not the grace of the Holy Spirit mercifully come to your aid and so often graciously strengthened and refreshed you? Refer then all the good you due to him, ascribe none of it to yourself.

4. Utter these words with an upright and faithful intention:

O Lord, you have ruled for me all my works (cf. Isa.26:12).

In your sight I am nothing and can do nothing.

By your gift, I continue to exist and without you I am good for nothing.

To you, most compassionate Father of mercies (Cor. 1:3),

I offer what is yours.

I commend and commit my unworthy self to you.

I humbly acknowledge my ingratitude for all the gifts you have showered upon me.

To you, most blessed Father, eternal Majesty,

be praise, glory and thanksgiving.

By your infinite power you created me from nothing.

I praise, glorify and give you thanks, most blessed Son,

radiance of the Father's glory (cf. Heb.1:3),

by your eternal wisdom you saved me from death.

I bless, sanctify and adore you, most holy, life-giving Spirit.

In your love and mercy, you called me from sin to grace,

from the world to a life of holiness,

from exile to the fatherland,

from labour to rest,

and from grief to the joys of heavenly and sublime happiness.

May this be granted to us all by Jesus Christ,

the Son of the Virgin Mary,

who lives with the Father and the Holy Spirit for ever and ever. Amen.

THE AUTHOR OF THE FIVE FEASTS OF THE CHILD JESUS

St Bonaventure, (1217 – 1274) was born Giovanni di Fidanza at Bagnoregio in Central Italy and is said to have acquired the name Bonaventure (from the Italian “buona ventura” meaning “good fortune”) when cured of a childhood illness by Saint Francis himself. Bonaventure became a Franciscan at twenty-two years of age and received his doctorate in Paris, along with his close friend, St Thomas Aquinas. He was elected as Minister General of the Franciscan Order in 1257 at the age of 35, having been nominated by Blessed John of Parma, the previous Minister General. He held this position until shortly before his death, restoring peace within the Order after a period of internal dissension. He became Cardinal-Archbishop of Albano and was asked by the Pope to prepare the Second Council of Lyons. It is said that he died of exhaustion while attending the opening sessions of the Second Council of Lyons, which attempted without success to reunite the Western and Eastern Churches. His funeral was attended by all the Council.

Known as the “Seraphic Doctor”, he is especially revered as one of the greatest mystical theologians in the Church. Among his many literary works is his *Life of Saint Francis* and *The Five Feasts of the Child Jesus*.

TRANSLATION OF THE FIVE FEASTS OF THE CHILD JESUS

Eric Doyle OFM (translator), *Bringing Forth Christ: Five Feasts of the Child Jesus* by St Bonaventure SLG Press Convent of the Incarnation Fairacres Parker Street Oxford OX 41 TB England. 1984.

Translator’s Preface

This short though profoundly mystical work, *The Five Feasts of the Child Jesus*, which is presented here in a new translation, came from the pen of St Bonaventure, one of the most renowned followers of Saint Francis of Assisi. Contrary to what one might expect from the title, the theme of this work is spiritual motherhood, namely, the doctrine concerning the mystical birth of God's Word in the soul and the vocation of every Christian to become a mother of Christ. This theme was dear to the hearts of Saint Francis and St Clare. While St Bonaventure's work belongs to the rich heritage of Franciscan spirituality, it is also in its own right a minor classic of the spiritual tradition of Western culture.

The doctrine of spiritual motherhood invites us, men and women alike, to fashion our spiritual lives on the model of Mary, mother of the Lord and image of the Church, and to develop the maternal element in our nature.

St Bonaventure's work is, of course, addressed to a Christian believer. It has an importance, however, beyond the confines of the church. We live in a time of unparalleled violence the causes of which are rooted in a spiritual crisis. Western culture has lost its spiritual anchor and so is floundering in a sea of meaninglessness. With no sense of direction and purpose, more and more people are becoming frustrated and that leads to violence of every kind. Far from removing frustration, violence only feeds it, precisely because it is destructive and without purpose.

Spiritual motherhood sets free the living and life-giving forces within us and fosters the loving and caring side of our nature, which is the antidote to every form of violence. Therefore, I hope this little work will be of some help not only to believers, but also to others who own no allegiance to any faith. Recognition of the maternal side of our common humanity and efforts to develop it in ourselves, even with no relationship to any faith, will increase the strength of gentleness and lessen the powers of violence. Whatever can help us to achieve that is surely of significance for the future of the earth.

This edition of *The Five Feasts of the Child Jesus* is a translation of the Latin text found in Tome VIII of Bonaventure's Opera, which was published in Quaracchi near Florence in 1891. In the Latin Edition, extensive notes are given in which the editors generally identify parallel references in previous writers. For this edition, these have been kept to the absolute minimum without detriment to the work itself.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank Sister Mary John Baillon CRSS who made her way through my untidy typescript and deciphered the additions and changes I made by the hieroglyphics I call my handwriting and managed to produce a fair copy for the publisher.

I am also grateful to Mr Hugh Pickard, devout student of English language and its poetry, for reading the first draft of this translation and for his judicious comments that enhance the text. For any defect in translation, I am alone responsible.

Eric Doyle OFM

Canterbury,

on the Feast of the Resurrection of the Lord, April 1984.

A Brief Biography of Fr Eric Doyle OFM

Fr Eric Doyle OFM (born William Martin Doyle) entered the world on 13 July 1938, son of Patrick Doyle and Josephine Reynolds, in Bolton, Lancashire, where he first attended St Joseph's Primary School and later the Thornleigh Salesian College. He entered the Franciscan Order in the English Province of the Friars Minor as a novice on 8 September 1954, was solemnly professed on 14 July 1959 (the Feast of St Bonaventure) and was ordained to the priesthood on 16 July 1961. He took his doctorate in ecclesiastical history at the Pontificium Athenaeum Antonianum in Rome, receiving it *summa cum laude*, having gained the maximum marks possible. On his return to England he lectured in ecclesiastical history at the Franciscan House of Studies in East Bergholt. This continued to be the main activity for the remainder of his life, most of which was later spent at the Franciscan Study Centre in Canterbury, of which he was one of the pioneers and 'founding fathers'.

In addition, Doyle became well known as a preacher, counsellor, writer and broadcaster, taking part in over five hundred television and radio programmes. He offered '*Thought for the Day*' on Radio 4 and was one of the three-member panel on '*The Big Question*' (Anglia TV) broadcast weekly, almost without interruption from its beginnings in 1971 until March 1984. Doyle was also much sought after as a retreat-giver and lecturer in many parts of the country. Amongst other things he gave the Fisher Lectures at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, in February 1980, where he was very well received, and he was a member of the Teilhard de Chardin Society, being their vice-president at the time of his death. He also taught in St. Bonaventure University's Graduate Theology Department in New York from 1970 until 1982, and in 1983 dedicated his translation of St. Bonaventure's sermons on St. Francis, *The Disciple and the Master*, to the Franciscan Institute there. This book, with its sixty-page introduction, has come to be regarded as invaluable to Franciscan scholars.

In a legacy of over a hundred and twenty articles and books, Doyle's most scholarly work is contained in the six articles, including his doctoral dissertation, on William Woodford. He wrote principally on Franciscan spirituality, but quite a few articles are concerned with ecumenism and the environment, both being areas of great interest to him. He wrote *A Litany of Our Lady of Walsingham*, now in common use. His book *St Francis and the Song of Brotherhood* is a commentary on St. Francis' *Canticle of Brother Sun*. Doyle states that his 'one purpose in writing the book has been to attempt to show how belief in the universal brotherhood can help us to create a better world'; this book has been re-printed three times, most recently by the Franciscan Institute, New York, in 1996. At the time of his death, he was working on a book on Christology.

Doyle died of cancer on 25 August 1984, aged 46. Many felt his loss keenly, not only those in the academic world to which he had contributed so much, but also on a more personal level. He always had time for people, and those who had met him would be left with the indelible impression of a man of enormous intellect and learning, with a quick wit and sense of humour, a man of humility, sincerity and, above all, of prayer.

The year 2004 will mark the twentieth anniversary of Doyle's death, and the anthology to be produced in that year is a sure indication that his work continues to be both inspirational and influential.

PS: In November 1975 Doyle served, by appointment of the Holy See, as a member of the Anglican/Roman Catholic Working Group on the Ordination of Women in Assisi.

This Biography has been shortened.

TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION TO THE TEXT

I

St Bonaventure was born in 1217 at Bagnoregio, not far from Viterbo in central Italy. He entered the Franciscan order in 1243 while he was a student at the University of Paris. He never met Saint Francis of Assisi (1182- 1226), and he was still a young boy when Saint Francis died. But what he lacked for not having known St Francis personally was compensated to a large extent by the love he had for him, which brought with it the gift of heart-knowledge and gave him precious insights into the character and holiness of Saint Francis.

St Bonaventure was elected Minister General or head of the Franciscan Order on February 2, 1257. Until then, he had led the serene and ordered life of a scholar, studying, writing and teaching. Now he was obliged to shoulder the heavy burden of leading and directing a large, growing and very diverse Order of Friars. Two years later, in October 1259, yearning, as he tells us himself, for the peace that is beyond understanding, he went to Mount La Verna in Tuscany where, some 35 years before, St Francis had received the Stigmata. The precious period he spent in that holy place issued in one of his best-known mystical works, *The Journey of the Soul into God*.

At the request of the General Chapter of the Order in 1260, he accepted the task of composing a new life of Saint Francis. This is known as the *Legenda Maior* or Major Life of St Francis. It is a masterpiece of spiritual biography which presents St Francis as an example of gospel perfection.

In April 1273, St Bonaventure began a series of evening sermons in Paris that bears the title *Collations on the Six Days*. In this work he defends the central place of Christ in the pursuit of wisdom and he explains at length his theology of history. It is a dense and highly complex piece of writing which unfortunately was left unfinished. Before he could complete the course of sermons, he received news that he had been created Cardinal and appointed Bishop of Albano. From that time, he was involved in the preparation for the Second Council of Lyons.

The Ecumenical Council opened on May 7, 1274. St Bonaventure played a major role at the Council in the work of the union between the Eastern and Western Churches. Exhausted from his labours, he died at the Franciscan Friary in Lyons on July 15, 1274. The Pope, the entire Council and the representatives of the Greek Church who attended the Council, were all present at his funeral. They heard his friend, Cardinal Peter of Tarentaise, a Dominican Friar, preach a moving panegyric which began with the text: "I grieve for you, my brother Jonathan" (Samuel 1:26).

Given the administrative task to which his high office obliged him, St Bonaventure's literary output is little short of miraculous. Besides the works already mentioned, he

composed a substantial *Commentary on the Sentences*, several Scripture commentaries, a compendium of theology entitled *Breviloquium*, and a fine collection of mystical treatises.

II

St Bonaventure was a mystic, a theologian and a poet. From his ardent heart and creative mind, he bequeathed to the history of culture a sublime mystical theology and a profound systematic theology. The poet radiates through all his writings and transforms the study of even his most intricate thoughts into an aesthetic experience.

Here we are concerned with St Bonaventure the mystic. The mystics are not people who possess secret or esoteric knowledge. They are men and women of faith who, by the mysterious activity of the grace of freedom, respond as fully as they can to the divine words addressed to us all in the innermost sanctuary of our soul, where God whispers his creative, sanctifying and perfecting word. Genuine mystical experiences are not different from the life of grace. They are rooted in the gift of grace and in principle they are open to everyone.

Their wholehearted response to God's Word is in fact the reason why the mystics attract us. By their radical dependence on God and the fullness of their response to his word, their very humanity is ennobled. In the mystics of all ages and religions, our common human nature attains its sublime expressions.

Sometimes the language that mystics use to describe their experiences can be a little puzzling. That is because they are straining to describe what is virtually indescribable. If, however, there is a language which goes some way towards communicating mystical experiences, it is the language of poetry. In its use for that purpose, St Bonaventure was truly a master. Indeed, the domestic and the poet blended beautifully in the meditations that make up *The Five Feasts of the Child Jesus*.

III

The work was written probably in the latter part of 1259. Though some earlier scholars questioned its authenticity, it is now recognised without doubt to be a genuine work of St Bonaventure. In the text, he himself refers to another of his works that is certainly authentic.

In a Prologue, St Bonaventure explains how it came into his mind that a devout soul could spiritually conceive the Son of God, give birth to him, name him, seek and adore him with the Magi and then finally, present him to God the Father in the Temple. The mystical theme of the work is what is called in German *Gottesgeburt* and in French *naissance divine*. The most acceptable English renderings are *spiritual motherhood* or *mystical motherhood*. I have opted for the former.

In this work St Bonaventure reminds us of the necessity of conversion. Every true conversion, that radically shift in direction, that fundamental change of heart and mind which the gospel requires as essential for holiness, he depicts as a mystical conception of the Word of God. He relates growth in the spiritual life to specific events in Christ's life, which are recorded in the gospel and celebrated in the Church's liturgy. After conceiving the Word of God, we give birth to him and name him. Then we go in search of him with the Magi and lastly present him in the Temple to God the Father. Describing how the three powers of the soul, (that is, the Three Kings) go in search of the Son of God, St Bonaventure writes:

Where is he who has been born King of the Jews?

We have seen his star in the East (Matthew 2:2).
We have seen his splendour shining in the devout mind,
we have seen his radiance lighting up the inner recesses of the soul.
We have heard his voice and it is soft and tender;
we have tasted his sweetness and it is delightful;
we have caught his fragrance and it is alluring;
we have felt his embrace and it is irresistible.

There is a maternal relationship with Christ in our spiritual lives, a most intimate union between Christ and the soul, represented symbolically as the relationship between a mother and the baby conceived in her womb.

Spiritual motherhood, like another related theme in spirituality, that of mystical espousals, can be traced back to the Fathers of the Church and beyond them to the New Testament.

The Five Feasts of the Child Jesus may be taken as an extended commentary on those words of the Lord: "Who is my mother, and who are my brethren?" And stretching out his hand towards his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brethren! For whosoever does the will of my father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother" (Matthew 12: 48 – 50).

Although not mentioned by name, Mary the Mother of Jesus is in fact commended in this dominical saying. She fulfilled perfectly the will of the heavenly Father by uttering her *Fiat* in response to the message of the Angel Gabriel. At that moment, she conceived in her womb that which she had already conceived in our heart, the Word of God. Spiritual motherhood is prior to physical motherhood, and it continues long after the tasks and duties of physical motherhood are over.

In her spiritual conceiving and motherhood by faith, which preceded and coexisted with her physical conceiving and motherhood of Jesus Christ, Mary is the model for every disciple of her son. Every disciple is called to do the will of the heavenly Father and to pronounce the *Fiat* to his word. By so doing, each becomes a mother of Christ. It is also part of our evangelical vocation as members of the Body of Christ to assist one another to be mothers of the Word of God. It is significant in this connection that H. Lietzmann has translated the text of Galatians 4:19 as follows: "My little children, with whom I am again in travail *until Christ has become incarnate in you.*"

Commenting on the text of Galatians 4:19, in a baptismal setting, Clement of Alexandria (c.150-215) describes the Church as Virgin and Mother: "O mystic marvel! The universal Father is one, and one is the universal Word; and the Holy Spirit is one and the same everywhere, and one is the only Virgin Mother. I love to call her the Church." Origen (185-254) applies the idea of motherhood to the Church and to the individual believer. The Church is joined to her heavenly espouse "so that she may be conceived by him and be saved through this chaste begetting of children... Brought forth by the spotless Church or by the soul that seeks nothing bodily... But is aflame with the single love of the Word of God."

Addressing the whole assembly in one of his sermons, St Augustine exhorts them: "Do in the chambers of our soul, what you view with amazement in the flesh of Mary. He who believes in his heart unto Justice conceives Christ, he with his mouth makes

profession of faith unto salvation brings forth Christ." By baptism, "Christ is born in the heart where he grows into a youth but does not decline in old age. In this way, faith increases and finds strength, but it does not grow old."

St Maximus the Confessor (c.580-662) points out that although the Word of God was born once and for all according to the flesh, by his kindness and love of humanity, he desires to be born repeatedly according to the spirit in all those who long for him. He becomes a little child and takes form on them by the virtues. And again: "The Word of God desires to realise in everyone the mystery of his incarnation."

The doctrine of spiritual motherhood is found in several mediaeval writers such as St Bernard and Gueric of Igny. Part of special significance here is the teaching of Saint Francis and St Clare. Both always connect spiritual motherhood with mystical espousals between Christ and the soul.

In his *Letter to the Faithful* (Exhortation), St Francis writes: "we are mothers [of our Lord Jesus Christ] when we carry him in our heart and body (cf. 1 Cor. 6:20) through love and a pure and sincere conscience; we give birth to him through [his] holy manner of working, which should shine before all others as an example."

Saint Francis achieves a fine balance between the masculine and feminine elements in his nature, particularly between spiritual fatherhood and motherhood. Those called to exercise authority in the Order he describes as mothers. Spiritual motherhood ensures that authority will remain in service in the fraternity and not degenerate into power over the friars.

St Clare wrote to blessed Agnes of Prague: "And you have truly merited to be called a sister, spouse and mother of the Son of the Father". Like Saint Francis, she had a tender devotion to the Child Jesus and the crib. It was the revelation of God's gentleness and humility and it evoked all the love of her maternal heart. She understood it as an essential part of her vocation to be the mother of Jesus Christ, following the example of Mary. Her biographer applied to St Clare the beautiful title: "Footprint of the Mother of God".

*** Lastly, there is an aspect of Western spirituality which is of paramount importance to the doctrine of spiritual motherhood. Quite a few theologians and mystics referred to the Persons of the godhead in feminine terms. Clement of Alexandria, for example, states that God became a mother from all eternity, in giving birth to the eternal Logos. St Ephraim speaks of the Holy Spirit as mother in God, the eternal woman in God. In his tenth authentic prayer, St Anselm explicitly calls Jesus our mother, who gathers us together as a hen gathers her chicks around her. This image was inspired, of course, by the text of Luke 13:34: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and sustaining those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!" How graphically those words portray the maternal heart of Jesus. Not all the killing and stoning of the prophets who had been sent could alter his love for the Holy City.

The motherhood of Jesus is found also in several Franciscan sources. It is, however, the Lady Julian of Norwich who ranks foremost among those who have expounded on this theme. Let one quotation suffice: "So, Jesus Christ who set good against evil is our real mother. We owe our being to him - and this is the essence of motherhood! And all the delights, loving protection whichever follow. God is as really our mother as he is our

father.... Our tender mother Jesus simply leads us into his placid breast through his open side, and there gives us a glimpse of the godhead and heavenly Julie - the inner certainty of eternal bliss."

These texts show that spiritual motherhood has its source in God. All perfections in this world come from God. The womanhood, the virginity, the spiritual and physical motherhood of Mary have their ultimate source in God. Our spiritual motherhood of Christ and of one another has its source in the spiritual motherhood in the Godhead which precedes all motherhood and fatherhood in this world.

God the origin of all creation is both Father and Mother; God the Word, through whom all things were made, is both son and daughter; God the Spirit, who renews the face of the earth is Eternal Masculine and Eternal Feminine. The development of our spiritual motherhood, in making us life-giving, creative and gentle, will fashion us more truly after the image and likeness of God who created us.

Online source:

<https://www.franciscans.org.au/>

<https://www.franciscanpublishing.com/bringing-forth-christ-five-feasts-of-the-child-jesus/>

<https://www.franciscans.org.au/becoming-a-franciscan/the-vows-we-profess/>

Francis lived a very simple life, which was austere, like most of the ordinary people of his day. They eked out a simple existence often living from day to day. We never get the sense that Francis was obsessed with the ideal of poverty, though many who have followed him have lived that way.

In our rule, and in the vows we profess, we use this formula as the essential guide for our lives:

**“To the Praise and Glory of the Most Holy Trinity,
I, Brother Tom,
since the Lord inspired me
to follow more closely the Gospel
and the footprints of Our Lord Jesus Christ,
before the Brothers here present and
in your hands, Brother Provincial Minister,
with firm faith and will
vow to God, the Holy and Almighty Father,
to live all the days of my life
in obedience, *without anything of my own* and in chastity,
and, at the same time, I profess
the life and Rule of the Friars Minor...”**

This may be the only Rule within a religious institute which does not profess poverty as a vow. For any person, be they a medieval friar or a modern day worker, poverty is an evil. It is obscene. Anyone who experiences poverty knows that it is harmful to our bodies, our minds and our soul. You cannot commit your life to a negative value.

For we Franciscans, our evangelical witness is about living a life of simplicity, where we do not grasp at things. We do not obsess over ownership of the goods at our disposal. We give up ownership in order to profess to the world that not sharing the goods of the earth—and not grasping—is the essence of the Gospel life we live and witness.

So, we hold on to what we have very lightly. We learn over our lifetime as friars to let go of things, whether that be material goods, aspirations centred on individualism, or values and ideas that run counter to the Gospel and the life of the fraternity. We live *without anything of our own* so that we are free to find God in the world around us, in all of creation, and in the men and women we encounter everyday.