



The Feast of the Stigmata is fast approaching September 17. In 1224, when Francis was visiting the mountain at LaVarna, he prayed to love as deeply as God loved, and to feel the intensity of love that allowed Christ to give his life on the cross. The vision of the six winged seraph left upon his body the marks of the crucifixion. Still, upon reflecting on that experience, Francis was able to write the *Praises of God*: You are love, charity; You are wisdom, You are humility; You are meekness, You are rest; You are gladness and joy; You are all our sweetness, Great and wonderful Lord, Almighty God, Merciful Savior.

Years later, Bonaventure went to that very spot on the mountain to pray and reflect on Francis' experience of the stigmata. It was there he would compose *The Soul's Journey Into God*. It was addressed to those ready to answer God's call to live the mystical life and to taste God's sweetness in ecstatic union. To begin the journey, one must realize one's poverty and radical dependency on God. One must desire God deeply, for a transformation of the heart can only come about through a relationship with God. The journey begins on the level of creation. The simple order and beauty of creation can enkindle the human heart to long for God because every aspect of creation is like a reflecting pool of the divine. The physical universe and the soul are seen as mirrors reflecting God and as rungs in a ladder leading to God. He captures the Franciscan attitude toward creation as sacramentally manifesting God and the Franciscan devotion to the Incarnation as the fullness of this manifestation. Bonaventure's emphasis is on the mystical Christ. The seraph, in the form of the crucified Christ, symbolized the six stages of contemplation by which the soul ascends into God. The first six chapters trace the stages of the journey and the seventh describes the goal of ecstatic rapture. The soul turns to God and contemplates God as the All Good and from there passes over into the final stage of mystical ecstasy.

I had the gift of visiting this very place where both Francis and Bonaventure prayed. The earth was deep and formed a chasm in the rocks. Climbing to the bottom, it was as if descending into the womb of the earth itself. It is easy to see how Bonaventure proclaimed the Soul's Journey *Into* God. As we approach this feast day, I invite you to spend some time with either the *Praises of God* or *The Soul's Journey Into God*. Encourage those seeking our Franciscan way of life to a time of prayer and Franciscan affectivity. In the Prologue, Bonaventure invites the reader to the "groans of prayer through Christ crucified, so that he may not believe reading is sufficient without unction, speculation without devotion, investigation without wonder, observation without joy, work without piety, knowledge without love, understanding without humility, endeavor without divine grace, reflection as a mirror without divinely inspired wisdom."

Cousins, E. (1978). *Bonaventure: The Soul's Journey Into God, The Tree of Life, The Life of St. Francis*. New Jersey, Paulist Press.

Delio, I. (2001). *Simply Bonaventure*. New York: New City Press.