

## Chapter Three

### GOD HUMBLY BENDS DOWN

*Jesus and his disciples left for the villages round Caesarea Philippi. On the way he put this question to his disciples, "Who do people say I am?" And they told him. "John the Baptist," they said "others Elijah; others again, one of the prophets." "But you," he asked "who do you say I am?"*

—Mark 8:27–29

**I**t is without doubt that every person who knows something of the great Christian story knows something about Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve lived in a lovely garden until one day the Evil One appeared. The Evil One tempted Eve to eat of the forbidden tree and from that moment on humanity was doomed to death and separated from God. The story continues that while God was angry, hurt and disappointed at Eve and Adam's choice of eating fruit from the forbidden tree, God did not completely abandon them. Instead, several thousand years later, God sent his only Son, Jesus Christ, to save fallen humankind from sin and death. Jesus was born, lived a brief life, died by public execution on a cross and reconciled all men and women to God. At Easter Christians sing, "O Happy Fault!" because if Eve had not eaten the forbidden fruit, luring Adam and his descendents into a perilous death, Christ would not have come. The whole point of Jesus, according to the story, is based on the wrong choices of finite human beings.

While this story of the Incarnation lingered around for centuries, it became a significant part of the Christian tradition only after the eleventh century and Anselm of Canterbury's famous work, *Why the*

## THE HUMILITY OF GOD

*God-Man*? Jesus came, Anselm said, to repay the debt due to sin. However, not every thinker in the tradition believed that Jesus came only to pay sin's debt. Some early writers like Irenaeus of Lyons (approximately A.D. 200) or Maximus the Confessor (approximately A.D. 600) saw the Incarnation more as the completion of the cosmos rather than a payback for sin or a cure for illness. This idea, too, was shared among Franciscan writers as well.<sup>1</sup>

In the Middle Ages the tendency of theologians was to move from the story of Jesus to the widest possible horizon. They developed a style of reflection that today is commonly called "cosmic Christology." This means looking out at the entire world as one sees it at a particular time and trying to perceive the possible relations between the story of Jesus and the larger picture of the world.<sup>2</sup> The idea of cosmic Christology was already rooted in New Testament writers such as John the Evangelist and Paul who saw the immense significance in the life of Jesus, far more than one human being's life. In the opening of his Gospel, John pointed to the intrinsic connection between the mystery of creation and the mystery of Incarnation. "In the beginning was the Word," John writes, "Through him all things came to be, not one thing had its being but through him" (John 1:1-3).

For the Franciscan theologians, the life of Jesus provided a divine clue as to the structure and meaning not only of humanity but of the entire universe.<sup>3</sup> The thirteenth-century philosopher Duns Scotus said that the Incarnation was too great a mystery to simply remedy a defect. Rather, from all eternity, Christ was willed by God to come in the highest glory. The reason, according to Scotus, is simply that God is love and wanted to love a creature who could fully respond in love. Christ would have come, he said, even if there had been no sin. Christ is the first in God's intention to love and it is because of Christ that creation has its meaning. The Franciscan scholar Bill Short aptly states, "why build the Taj Majal to cover a pothole?"<sup>4</sup> Indeed, why would so great an event as the Incarnation, the Word become flesh, occur only *after* humans sinned? Why would so great and glorious an event happen because of a *defect* in humanity?

In the Franciscan view, the Incarnation occurs because of a

positive—love—not a negative—sin. This is an important point because the way we understand the Incarnation shapes our lives as Christians in the world. If love *is* the reason for the Incarnation then it is also the reason for God's humility because, as we saw in Francis, God's love is a humble love. It is a love that goes out of itself toward the other for the sake of the other. In his "Sermon on the Nativity of the Lord" Bonaventure captured the core of the humility of God when he wrote: "The Word was made flesh' [John 1:14]. These words give expression to that heavenly mystery... that *the eternal God has humbly bent down* and lifted the dust of our nature into unity with his own person."<sup>5</sup> For Bonaventure, Incarnation signifies a God who humbly bends down to lift us up. Humility means that God is turned toward us just as the Father is turned toward the Son in love. Because we are finite creatures, God bends over in love to embrace us.

The idea of "bending over" or "bending down" reminds me of the days when I took care of my nephew when he was just a baby. I recall moments when I would see him lying in his oversized crib—a tiny creature with hands and feet waving in the air, totally helpless. I would bend down into the crib and lift him high up in the air and he would smile uncontrollably, as only an infant can. The humility of God is something like the baby in the crib. God is at once the small helpless infant who lies quietly in the crib of the universe, and also the strong one who can raise up a fragile human being and draw that person into the embrace of infinite love. God is Most High and Most Humble. I must admit that I am attracted to the idea of Incarnation as "God bending low." Whereas the Trinity is the dancing circle of love, the Incarnation is the profound bow of God stretching forth the divine arms in a wide embrace of love. God not only loves creation profoundly but the "bow" is holy and reverential, as if God loves us to such an extent that he reverences every aspect of creation. God bends low so that God can meet us exactly where we, finite, fragile, created human beings, creatures and all living things, are. God bends low because we are small, limited, frail, confused, bewildered, chaotic and sometimes just plain infantile. God bends low because God's arms are much longer than ours, and God reaches out for our tiny human hands. Imagine a God who is humbly

## THE HUMILITY OF GOD

bent low to embrace us in love compared to a God who sits high above on a throne and keeps score of human sins. Imagine a God who is so great in love that God desires to share love with fragile and incomplete human beings compared to a God who loves only himself and wants to glorify himself by creating finite creatures to glorify him even though they have a hard time because they are full of defects due to sin. What Bonaventure (like Francis) realized in the mystery of the Incarnation is that God bends over in love to meet us where we are. God is Most High and most intimately related to us.

If God is love and love renders God a Trinity of persons-in-love then it is difficult to conceive of a God who judges harshly or unfairly or metes out undue punishment because of human bad behavior. Rather, as Saint Paul writes:

Love is always patient and kind; it is never jealous; love is never boastful or conceited; it is never rude or selfish; it does not take offence, and is not resentful. Love takes no pleasure in other people's sins but delights in the truth; it is always ready to excuse, to trust, to hope, and to endure whatever comes. Love does not come to an end. (1 Corinthians 13:4–8)

If God is love and it is love that brings us to birth, then it is difficult to conceive of the Incarnation, the Word made flesh, in any other way but the way of love. Love is what brought this creation into being and love is what will bring creation to its fulfillment to celebrate and participate in the eternal love of the Trinity. How love completes that which is brought into being is the story of Jesus, is the story of us humans, and is the story of the whole evolutionary creation itself. Jesus, the Trinity of love, and the universe story belong together.

We could easily get lost, however, in this love story between God and creation if we did not keep in mind the *humility* of God's love. We might imagine a love feast where everyone is happy and embracing one another. When Bonaventure speaks of the humility of God, he is saying that God not only meets us where we are but God meets us where we are in our sinfulness, our ugliness, our violent tendencies and selfish

## GOD HUMBLY BENDS DOWN

behaviors. The humility of God means that God's love is so abundant that God is willing to plunge into the darkness of humanity to bring us into the fullness of life. That is why God's humility is expressed most vividly in the cross because God could not bend over any further in love for us than in the suffering and death of the cross. In a small work called *The Tree of Life* Bonaventure depicted the passion of Christ in graphic images in order to convey the depths of God's humble love. The Beloved, he said, appeared on the cross stripped and bruised like a leper in order to invite us to join with him in this passion of love. Bonaventure writes:

For crowned with thorns  
he was ordered to bend his back  
under the burden of the cross  
and to bear his own ignominy.  
Led to the place of execution,  
he was stripped of his garments  
so that he seemed to be a leper  
from the bruises and cuts in his flesh  
that were visible over his back and sides  
from the blows of the scourges.  
And then transfixed  
with nails,  
he appeared to you as your beloved  
...Who will grant me  
that my request should come about  
and that God will give me  
what I long for, that  
...I may be fixed with my beloved  
to the yoke of the cross?<sup>6</sup>

What Bonaventure points out is that the cross reveals the mystery of God's overflowing love. Unlike finite human love that draws up conditions for its wants and needs, God's love is unconditional and totally self-giving. God humbly bends down to the lowest possible level to be God "for us" even in our weaknesses. The dereliction of the cross is the

## THE HUMILITY OF GOD

most intense revelation of the divine humility. The piercing of the human heart of Christ is the opening up of the depth of divine love embodied in the love of the Son of God.<sup>7</sup> Jesus was not just another good man who died for a noble cause. Jesus was the Son of God who died that we may have life and have it to the full—and we are called to follow him. This life given to us in abundance in and through the death of Jesus, is grounded in the humility of God's love. In Bonaventure's view, the mystery of cruciform love leads us into the very heart of the mystery of God.<sup>8</sup>

How do we come to know this God of humble love? Like Francis, Bonaventure claimed that we come to know the humility of God through Jesus. Bonaventure used the metaphor of the "book" to describe Jesus as the revelation of God. Jesus is the "Book of Life," the book written within in his divinity and without in his humanity. Jesus is the "Book of Life" because Jesus is the *Word of God*. The humanity of Christ is not a second word related to an inner (divine) word, according to Bonaventure, but is precisely the form the Word of God takes when it is expressed externally. Because Jesus is the book written within and without one could find in this book everything he or she wants to know about life—the basic law of created reality, the reason for being human, as well as the basic insights of the nature of God. By reading this book, Bonaventure claimed, we could come to know God's humility and poverty, which leads one into the heart of God.

Although Jesus is *the* book, creation is a "book" of God as well. In fact it was the first book, Bonaventure said, we humans were supposed to read in order to know God. Francis of Assisi, after taking up a life of conversion, was able to read the "Book of Creation" in his own way. Bonaventure said "in beautiful things, he saw Beauty itself."<sup>9</sup> Thomas of Celano wrote, "he spares lanterns, lamps, and candles unwilling to use his hand to put out their brightness which is a sign of the *eternal light*. He walked reverently over rocks, out of respect for Him who is called *the Rock*."<sup>10</sup> Bonaventure claimed that we should have been able to know God through the "Book of Creation" but our vision became poor due to sin; the Book of Creation became illegible. However, when Christ came the Book of Creation and the Book of Life became two volumes bound

in one, so to speak. Christ is *the* Book of Life. Somehow we still do not read this book properly. We buy lots of books hoping to find the answers to our many questions of life; yet, we do not know how to read this "Book of Life," the "Book of Christ."

What does it require to read a book? It requires time, quiet, patience, attentiveness to the written words, imagination and emotions. Reading a book, if it is a good book, should move us from one level of life to another because once the mind is moved to insight and the heart is changed, life is never the same. Reading a good book is experiential. It is living in the drama of someone else's life or it may be allowing the drama of the story to touch one's own life. The two stories—the story of the book and the history of the reader—merge. The horizon of the book and the horizon of the reader become one and a new horizon emerges, the horizon of insight or a new understanding of life.

This is how we should read the Book of Life, in a way that we come to a new horizon of life, new insight. But few people read this book with any imagination. Nor does the book seem to move a whole lot of people to new levels of insight. The world would be quite different if it did. Many people hear the Scriptures read on Sunday but hearing the same stories read over and over again seems to make little difference to anyone. The words come and go in the same way that people say, "have a nice day," and move on. There are many Christians who mistake ritual for worship, attending Mass for listening to the gospel and reading the Book of Life. Oftentimes the worship of God is empty even though people seem to be present for the ritual. No wonder we have a difficult time finding God in our world. We search and search for God, spend lots of energy trying to reason and speculate about God, but often our search seems to be in vain—we simply cannot find God—and sometimes we give up the search because we are too weary to continue.

And yet, the search for God, the clues to God's presence in the universe, are given to us in the Book of Life—the Book of Christ. If only we could read this book carefully and listen attentively we would find the answers to all of our life's questions. Jesus is the Word of God and the light of the world, the light that brings light to those in darkness. Jesus reveals to us God's hidden presence, the God who says, "I am with

## THE HUMILITY OF GOD

you," the God who is the beauty of our world and the grace of our nature. Jesus makes God's presence known to us because Jesus *is* God's presence to us, the God enfleshed in human skin with a human face, the God who is closer to each of us than we can imagine.

I often look to Francis of Assisi to learn how to read the Book of Life. I must admit that most saints can help us here but Francis was particularly attentive to this book and so he is a good example for us. As we said before, Francis did not start out in life particularly religious. However, he had a profound experience of God and this seemed to touch him deeply enough that he began to change the habits of his life in order to pursue the gospel. Francis spent long hours in solitary prayer. Bonaventure says that he devoted himself entirely to prayer. Long hours of prayer seem to be essential to reading the Book of Life. Our Western culture is so fast moving and fragmented that spending more than an hour doing anything is entirely too long. Even medications are formulated now to work quickly and effectively so we can move on with our active lives. But Francis would spend days, weeks and months at prayer, usually in a small hermitage atop a mountain. He had a good memory and his biographers tell us that when he heard the gospel read (since he himself had a limited ability to read), he would commit to memory those passages that particularly impressed him. Reading the Book of Life, for Francis, was more than reading a text, it was instead reading the lines of our poor fragile human nature as shown to us in the poor and humble Christ.

In some way "reading" the Book of Life for Francis was similar to what the monks practiced: *lectio divina*—slow meditation on the words of Scripture, "chewing and digesting" them to make them one's own, and allowing these words to lead one into deeper relationship with God. Francis committed to memory the words of Scripture, incorporated them into his own daily life, and allowed himself to be transformed by them. Thomas of Celano wrote:

The brothers who lived with him know  
that daily, constantly, talk of Jesus was always on his lips

...

## GOD HUMBLY BENDS DOWN

He was always with Jesus:  
Jesus in his heart,  
Jesus in his mouth,  
Jesus in his ears,  
Jesus in his eyes,  
Jesus in his hands,  
he bore Jesus always in his whole body.

...  
Often as he walked along a road,  
thinking and singing of Jesus,  
he would forget his destination  
and start inviting all the elements  
to praise Jesus.<sup>11</sup>

Reading the Book of Life gave Francis new meaning to the world around him. He began to read the Book of Life in the book of the world because the Book of Life gave him "insight"—new vision. He read the Book of Life in lepers and poor people because he saw in them the goodness of God. "In all the poor," Bonaventure wrote, "that most Christian poor man [Francis] also saw before him / a portrait of Christ."<sup>12</sup> He read the Book of Life in birds, flowers and all other living creatures. He realized that he was related to each of them as "brother" because each had their source in the goodness of God and reflected that goodness in their own particular and unique way. In the Book of Life Francis also realized his own limitations, his fragility and sinfulness, and it was in knowing how fragile he really was that he became a great lover of God. The Book of Life gave Francis a new self-knowledge and this knowledge liberated him from a false self. Reading the Book of Life gave Francis great insight to the poverty of being human, that is, being radically dependent on God. "What a person is before God," he said, "that he is and no more."<sup>13</sup> When we read the Book of Life we recognize our human poverty, which makes us free to be with God and for God. The Book of Life liberated Francis to throw himself into the infinite embrace of God's love. When we live in God and God lives in us then we see the world for what it truly is—pregnant with God.