

THE PROTHEMES OF BONAVENTURE'S *SERMONES*
DOMINICALES AND MINORITE PRAYER

TIMOTHY J. JOHNSON

By virtue of what took place through the passion of the Lord, I, a servant of the cross, composed this present collection of sermons to praise the name of Christ and to honor his sacred cross. . . .¹

In *Exemplum e letteratura*, Carlo Delcorno notes that although they are not sermon models, even the *reportationes* of Bonaventure's sermons on Francis of Assisi have a normative value given his theological authority and position as Minister General of the Minorite Order.² Consequently, a collection of model sermons such as the *Sermones dominicales*, or *Sunday Sermons*, edited by Bonaventure sometime between April 24, 1267 and May 17, 1268, are particularly significant; these texts constitute an eminent expression of the Minister General's desire, on both the theological and institutional level, to direct the preaching endeavors of his Minorite brothers.³ His earlier *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* and extensive personal preaching praxis evidence an intense interest in this ministry essential to the Minorites. In particular, Bonaventure's theological concerns permeate the *Sunday Sermons*, including a marked interest in prayer evidenced in the prothemes attached to twenty-five of the fifty sermons. As Jacques Bougerol indicates, this unique aspect of the medieval sermon underlines the necessity of prayer.⁴ This essay will examine the role of prothemes

¹ "Quo facto, virtute dominicae passionis, ego servus crucis, qui praesens sermonum opusculum ad laudem nominis Christi et sanctae crucis honorem compegi. . . ." *Sermo 40*, n. 4, *Sancti Bonaventurae Sermones dominicales*, ed. Jacques Bougerol (Grottaferrata, 1977), p. 407. A highly abbreviated version of this essay, presented at the 39th International Congress on Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo, Michigan, appeared without the critical apparatus in *The Cord*. See Timothy J. Johnson, "Preaching and Praying on the Seine: Minorite Theology and the Prothemes in Bonaventure's *Sermones dominicales*," *The Cord* 55/1 (2005), pp. 2-9.

² Carlo Delcorno, *Exemplum e letteratura: tra medioevo e rinascimento* (Bologna, 1989), p. 46.

³ San Bonaventura, *Sermoni domenicali*, trans. Eliodoro Mariani, intro., notes, and index Jacques Guy Bougerol (Rome, 1992), p. 22.

⁴ Jacques Guy Bougerol, *Introduction to the Works of Saint Bonaventure*, trans. José de Vinck (Paterson, 1964), p. 149.

in preaching, delineate the salient aspects of the early Minorite perspective on prayer, and detail how Bonaventure utilizes prothemes throughout the *Sunday Sermons* as a way to teach the Minorite theology of prayer as articulated at the University of Paris. Bonaventure's striking appeal to divine piety in selected prothemes is afforded particular attention as this practice exemplifies how preaching presupposes the Minorite emphasis on interiority.

PROTHEMES AND MEDIEVAL PREACHING

The thirteenth century witnessed the growing popularity in Paris and elsewhere of the *sermo modernus*; namely, an innovative style of clerical preaching from the close of the twelfth century that developed a thematic approach to a particular scripture text as opposed to the earlier patristic technique of verse commentary.⁵ Numerous authors of the period offered *Artes praedicandi* to assure the proper formulation of this emerging literary genre.⁶ The structure of the sermon included the theme, the protheme, the initial prayer, and the subdivision of the theme.⁷ The *Ave Maria* was the most common prayer recited following the protheme.⁸ While examples of twelfth century preaching demonstrate various elements of the genre, the protheme did not appear until the early thirteenth century.⁹ Bonaventure's *Sunday Sermons*, which were composed around 1267–1268,¹⁰ as well as other model sermon collections of the thirteenth century Parisian mendicants, often included prothemes linking academic biblical studies with the pastoral ministry of preaching.¹¹

⁵ M. Michèle Mulchahey, "First the Bow is Bent in Study. . . ." *Dominican Education before 1350* (Toronto, 1998), pp. 401–419.

⁶ Nicole Bériou, "Les sermons latins après 1200" in *The Sermon*, ed. Beverly Kienzle (Turnhout, 2000), p. 370. Bériou mentions the date of 1210 in *L'avènement des maîtres de la Parole: La prédication à Paris au XIII^e siècle*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1998), p. 259.

⁷ Bougerol, *Introduction to the Works of Saint Bonaventure*, p. 137.

⁸ *Prier au moyen âge: pratiques et expériences*, eds. Nicole Bériou, Jacques Berlioz, and Jean Longère, intro. Nicole Bériou (Turnhout, 1991), p. 210.

⁹ Bériou, "Les sermons latins," pp. 397–398.

¹⁰ Bougerol, *Sermones dominicales*, p. 29.

¹¹ D. L. d'Avray, *The Preaching of the Friars: Sermons diffused from Paris before 1300* (Oxford, 1985), pp. 187–188.

Prothemes, according to Thomas Charland's study of the *Artes praedicandi*, are inseparable from prayer.¹² As the Minorite John of Wales states, "The prothema is added, however, in order to create a certain way to ask for divine assistance."¹³ Following the announcement of the biblical theme, the preacher quotes another text that is intended to unite the initial prayer to the declared theme. Bonaventure's sermon from the *Third Sunday of Advent* is indicative of this dynamic. After declaring the theme from John 1:26: *In your midst stood one whom you did not know*, he adds the protheme:

While Peter was speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came upon those who were listening, etc. Acts 10:44. These last words proposed here describe three noteworthy things pertaining to every preacher. The first is the certitude of the one speaking mentioned with the premise: *While Peter was speaking*. The name Peter is interpreted as the one who knows. The second is the swiftness of the one poured out mentioned by the following: *the Holy Spirit came*. The third is the multitude of people listening mentioned by stating: *upon all those who were listening to the words*. Given these three things, let us all devotedly implore the grace of divine piety, that it might fill the one speaking with certain words and establish the one listening among the multitude of the blessed. In this way, both the one speaking and the one listening might rejoice in the swift effusion of the Holy Spirit by whom I might say and you understand these matters to the praise and glory of our Mediator and the healthy and consolation of our souls. Amen.¹⁴

Bonaventure's usage of the protheme thus affords him the opportunity to invite the audience into a prayer to Christ the Mediator, who, according to John 1:26 stood among the Jewish people and as

¹² Thomas Charland, *Artes praedicandi: contribution à l'histoire de la rhétorique au moyen âge* (Ottawa, 1936) p. 126.

¹³ "Assumitur autem prothema ut per ipsum fiat quaedam via ad divinum auxilium impetrandum." For this text, see Charland, p. 126, n. 1.

¹⁴ "Loquente Petro verba haec, cecidit Spiritus sanctus super omnes qui audiebant verbum, etc. Actuum 10, 44. In his verbis ultimo propositis describuntur tria notabilia cuilibet praedicatori convenientia; quorum primum est conferentis certitudo quae tangitur cum praemittitur: *loquente Petro*; interpretatur enim agnoscens; secundum est infundentis promptitudo quae tangitur cum sequitur: *cecidit Spiritus sanctus*; tertium est audientis populi multitudo quae tangitur cum subiungitur: *super omnes qui audiebant verbum*. Ratione igitur horum trium, devote omnes divinae pietatis gratiam imploremos, ut conferentem impleat verborum certitudine et audientem statuat in sanctorum multitudo ut tandem conferens et audiens gaudeant in se infundentis Spiritus promptitudine, qua mediante possim ego aliqua dicere et vos intelligere quae sint ad laudem et gloriam Mediatoris nostri et salutem et consolationem animarum nostrarum. Amen." *Sermo 4, Sermones dominicales*, pp. 156–157.

he will illustrate, is the perfect medium of reconciliation between humanity and God.

As integral as prothemes were to prayer, preachers utilized them for various purposes and those who compiled sermon collections did not always retain them.¹⁵ Humbert of Romans, who entered the Order of Preachers in Paris in 1224 and served as Master from 1255 to 1263, wrote in *On the Formation of Preachers* that the protheme was not necessary but, when employed, should be followed by prayer asking for grace to be granted during the sermon.¹⁶ His thoughts regarding the nature of the protheme are of particular import when examining Bonaventure's sermons; given the shared emphasis on preaching among the mendicants and the cultural context proper to both men. Prothemes, according to Humbert, are suitable for formal occasions, while waiting for people to find a seat, or to inform those who may be unaware of the reason for the specific sermon. They allow the preacher to identify himself and to announce, for example, that he belongs to a religious community such as the Order of Preachers or Minors. Brevity and beauty are to mark a finely composed protheme, lest the listeners be bored at the outset and left ill-disposed and inattentive to what is to follow. Depending on the circumstances and content of the sermon, the protheme might address the responsibilities of the people in attendance, the topic or text of the sermon, the current liturgical season, or the nature of preaching.¹⁷ Their specificity, as detailed by Humbert, may explain why they are often omitted in sermon collections. Furthermore, preachers themselves rarely wrote out the protheme, preferring instead to improvise on a theme chosen in advance and developed in accord with the *sermo modernus*.¹⁸

Given the repeated absence and, in the words of Nicole Bériou, apparent "fragility" of prothemes in medieval sermon collections, their frequent appearance in the *Sunday Sermons* is noteworthy and fortunate.¹⁹ They foster a detailed study of the relationship between

¹⁵ Bériou, "Les sermons latins," p. 398 and Mulchahey, "First the Bow is Bent in Study . . .," p. 406, n. 20.

¹⁶ Humbert of Romans, *Treatise on the Formation of Preachers in Early Dominicans: Selected Writings*, ed. and intro. Simon Tugwell (Mahwah, 1982), p. 318.

¹⁷ Humbert of Romans, *Treatise on the Formation of Preachers*, pp. 317-320.

¹⁸ Bougerol, *Sermones dominicales*, p. 44.

¹⁹ After delineating the role of the protheme vis-à-vis prayer, Nicole Bériou states "On notera cependant que le prothème est une pièce facultative dans la structure

prayer and preaching, which Bonaventure explored both as Master Regent at the University of Paris and Minister General of the Minorite Order. When redacting the *Commentary on Luke* as a guide to preachers, he reminded the brothers of the role of prayer in the life of those called to proclaim the Word of God. Just as Jesus looked to heaven before sharing the loaves with the crowd, so too should the preacher turn to God:

From this a pattern is given to preachers . . . but as the Lord multiplied the five barley loaves with a divine blessing, so the entire abundance of true doctrine ought to be drawn from the *foundation of Sacred Scripture*, multiplied through *prayer*, by which it is beheld in heaven, and with *devotion*, by which it is blessed, *meditation* by which it is broken, and *preaching* by which it is distributed and explained.²⁰

This spiritual explanation of the place of prayer in preaching is an essential element of the brothers' identity as *virii spirituales* or spiritual men, whose pastoral ministry is grounded in the contemplative life. In Bonaventure's careful construct of the evangelical life, the category of spiritual men previously identified with Joachim of Fiore's eschatological theology is refashioned into the Minorite model par excellence. The *Commentary on Luke* defines the *virii spirituales* as humble servants who, following the example of Christ and the apostles, are willing to take the lowest seat at the wedding banquet.²¹ With heads raised in expectation of divine providence, they are to raise their eyes in reflection, voices in preaching and hands in good works.²² The narrative of Martha and Mary further delineates the rhythm of prayer and action among the *virii spirituales*. However preferable contemplation may be, active involvement in the world is necessary and

du sermon, et qu'elle est fragile: les compilateurs ou les auteurs de recueils peuvent prendre la liberté de l'omettre." See Bériou, "Les sermons latins," p. 398. Bougerol points out that prothemes are not found in all of Bonaventure's *Sunday Sermons*, due to the interests of particular copyists. Canon regulars and Cistercians would find little utility in the specific nature of Bonaventure's prothemes and, consequently, dispense with them as they copied the corpus of the *Sunday Sermons*, see Bougerol, *Sermones dominicales*, p. 44.

²⁰ "Ex quo forma datur praedicantibus . . . sed sicut Dominus multiplicavit divina benedictione quinque panes hordeaceos, sic omnis abundantia verae doctrinae sumi debet ex *fundamento sacrae Scripturae*, multiplicanda per *orationem*, qua in caelum respicitur, et *devotione*, qua benedicatur, *meditatione*, qua frangitur, et *praedicatione*, qua distribuitur et explicatur." *Comm Lc* 9.28 (7.224b).

²¹ *Comm Lc* 9.89 (7.245a).

²² *Comm Lc* 21.49 (7.536b).

those who are called to serve must learn to integrate both dimensions as suggested by Jacob's vision of the ascending and descending angels.²³ Bonaventure turns to Jacob again in the *Journey of the Mind into God*²⁴ and the *Major Life*²⁵ to offer Francis of Assisi as the perfect exemplar for spiritual men.

The context of the text from the *Major Life* is especially noteworthy since it treats the question of prayer within Bonaventure's reinterpretation of Francis as preacher. In contrast to Thomas of Celano's earlier rendition in the *First Life* of the brothers' vision of Francis at Rivortorto,²⁶ the Poverello now preaches regularly in the cathedral of Assisi. Francis models the active and contemplative synthesis by offering a sermon on Sunday morning and then retiring to prayer in the evening. He appears to the brothers around midnight in the vision and returns subsequently to uncover the secrets of their consciences, to encourage them by recalling the vision, and to predict the growth of the Order. The account from the *Major Life* concludes, albeit with Joachmite undertones,²⁷ by claiming that "God rendered Francis, like Elijah, a chariot and charioteer of spiritual men."²⁸ There is little doubt that the brothers are summoned in the *Major Life* to follow the evangelical example presented by Bonaventure, whose reworking of the hagiographical material constructs a paradigm of Minorite urban prayer and preaching representative of the clerical ministry of the mid-thirteenth century.²⁹

The *Sunday Sermons* are situated within this Bonaventurian configuration of the Minorite ecclesial mission and intended for the educated, clerical audience he was accustomed to addressing. The various social grouping of medieval Christians, frequently delineated in numerous collections of *ad status* sermons, are conspicuously absent

²³ *Comm Lc* 10.75 (7.276a).

²⁴ *Itin* 7.3 (5.312b).

²⁵ *LMj* 4.4 (8.513b-514a); *FAED* 2, pp. 551-552.

²⁶ *IC* 18.47, *FAED* 1, p. 224; *Fontes*, pp. 321-322.

²⁷ Stanislao da Campagnola, "Dai 'viri spirituales' di Gioacchino da Fiore ai 'fratres spirituales' di Francesco d'Assisi: Una tipologia religiosa," in *Francesco e francescanesimo nella società dei secoli XIII-XIV* (S. Maria degli Angeli, 1999), p. 167. On the *viri spirituales* see also the following essay "Contemplation and the Formation of the *vir spiritualis* in Bonaventure's *Collationes in Hexaemeron*" by Jay M. Hammond.

²⁸ "... qui virorum spiritualium, ut alter Elias, factus fuerat a Deo currus et auriga." *LMj* 4.4 (8.513b-514a); *FAED* 2, p. 552.

²⁹ Edith Pásztor, "La chiesa dei Minori," in *Lo spazio dell'umiltà: Atti del convegno di studi sull'edilizia dell'ordine dei minori* (Fara Sabina, 1984), p. 64.

throughout the corpus the Seraphic Doctor proposes.³⁰ As Carolyn Muessing writes, the identification of sermon audiences is frequently problematic due to the absence of explicit information in liturgical cycle collections;³¹ however, this is not the case with the *Sunday Sermons*. Bougerol notes the Seraphic Doctor produced, perhaps in collaboration with his secretary, Marco di Montefaltro, a model Sunday sermon collection for Minorites dedicated to the ministry of the word. As Minister General, he underscores his commitment to this primitive apostolic ideal, which was dear to the Poverello, throughout the process of preparing the *Sunday Sermons*.³² Where available, rubrics attached to the manuscripts forming the critical edition of the *Sunday Sermons* assist in designating the ecclesial context where the sermons were first pronounced; however, the majority of Bonaventure's sermons were composed *de novo* for the sole purpose of addressing themes not found among his earlier sermons. His efforts included the inclusion of material from other sources, such as the *Commentary on Luke* and the *Commentary on the Sentences*.³³ The subsequent text of the *Sunday Sermons* stands as a homogenous literary opus; upon examination it emerges as a consciously constructed presentation of the identity, interior disposition, and thematic concerns of the Minister General's idealized preacher and not merely a collection of previous material of a particular preacher. This objective can be traced through the *Sunday Sermons*, where Bonaventure writes of the ecclesial import of prelates, priests, and religious dedicated to the contemplative study and active proclamation of the Scriptures.³⁴ The prothemes of the *Sunday Sermons* crystallize Bonaventure's project by uniting the call to preaching with the invitation to pray.

³⁰ On the audiences for Bonaventure's sermons, see Sophronius Clasen, "Der hl. Bonaventura als Prediger," *Wissenschaft und Weisheit* 24 (1961), pp. 85-113 and *Sancti Bonaventurae Sermones de tempore*, ed. Jacques Guy Bougerol (Paris, 1990), pp. 21-34.

³¹ Carolyn Muessing, "Preacher, Sermon and Audience: An Introduction" in *Preacher, Sermon and Audience in the Middle Ages*, ed. Carolyn Muessing (Leiden, 2002), pp. 6-7.

³² Bougerol, *Sermoni domenicali*, p. 22.

³³ Bougerol, *Sermones dominicales*, pp. 82-108; esp. p. 108.

³⁴ In addition to numerous prothemes in the *Sermones dominicales*, see *Sermo* 12, n. 10, p. 216; *Sermo* 15, n. 10, pp. 238-239; *Sermo* 16, n. 10, pp. 248-249; *Sermo* 18, n. 12, p. 264; *Sermo* 20, n. 4, p. 274; *Sermo* 24, n. 8, pp. 306-307; and *Sermo* 36, n. 4, pp. 380-381.

MINORITE PRAYER AND PARISIAN THEOLOGY

Bonaventure's emphasis on prayer and preaching in texts like the *Commentary on Luke* is also evident in his frequent recourse to prothemes; consequently the prothemes of the *Sunday Sermons*, which lead to prayer, focus on preaching, and are directed toward contemplative mendicants, become an ideal medium for conveying the Minorite theology of prayer. Since they had established themselves at the University of Paris, Minorite theologians had elaborated a perspective on prayer that both continued the Augustinian-Victorine predilection for interiority and distinguished them from the Order of Preachers. The efforts of the early Minorite theologians are extant in several texts, including *Questions on Prayer*,³⁵ *On Prayer*,³⁶ Bonaventure's *Commentary on the Sentences*,³⁷ as well as other writings from the Seraphic Doctor.

If Ignatius Brady is correct in attributing the *Questions on Prayer* to Jean de la Rochelle, it is the earliest of the three texts, dating perhaps to his tenure as Regent Master of the Minorite school in Paris between 1236 and 1245.³⁸ This collection of eight questions presents a unique, yet unexamined insight into the issues central to the nascent Minorite teaching on prayer. Bonaventure, who entered the Parisian novitiate in 1243, would have been familiar with the *Questions on Prayer* since they, together with his *Commentary on the Sentences*, were utilized by William of Melitona in the composition of the lengthy *On Prayer* in the *Summa Alexandri* between 1257 and 1259.³⁹ Pope

³⁵ *De oratione*, Codex Vatic. Palat. Lat., Rome: Vatican Library, fol. 43va-46va. This text will be referred to as *Questions on Prayer* to distinguish it from *De oratione* in vol. 4 of the *Summa Alexandri*.

³⁶ *De oratione, satisfactionis parte* in vol. 4 of *Alexandri Alensis Universae Theologiae summa in quattuor partes ab ipsomet autore distributa* (Cologne, 1622) pp. 667b-737b. This text will be referred to as *On Prayer*.

³⁷ *III Sent* d. 17, a. 2, q. 1, concl. (3.371a-375b); *IV Sent* d. 15, p. 2, a. 1, q. 4 (4.367a-369b); and *IV Sent* d. 15, p. 2, a. 2, q. 3 (4.373a-375b).

³⁸ Ignatius Brady, "The Opera Omnia of St. Bonaventure Revisited" in *Proceedings of the Seventy Centenary of the Death of Saint Bonaventure*, ed. Paschal Foley (St. Bonaventure, N.Y., 1975), p. 56. Balduinus Distelbrink's attempt to attribute the *Questiones de oratione* in *Bonaventurae scripta, authentica dubia vel spuria critice recensita* (Rome, 1975) p. 14, is untenable given Brady's argument and evidence suggesting the *Quaestiones de oratione* were utilized in *De oratione* but are not found in Bonaventure's own work on prayer. On the *Quaestiones de oratione*, see also Victorinus Doucet, "De quaestionibus S. Bonaventurae adscriptis in Cod. Vaticano Palatino Lat. 612," *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 26 (1933), pp. 490-491.

³⁹ Timothy J. Johnson, "The Summa Alexandri vol IV and the Development of the Franciscan Theology of Prayer," *Miscellanea Franciscana* 93 (1993), pp. 526-531.

Alexander IV's request in 1255, that the Minorites complete Alexander's *Summa* after his death in 1245, prompted William to compile *On Prayer* and numerous other questions, thus concluding the Fourth Book of the *Summa*.⁴⁰ His collaborative efforts resulted in a rich, albeit frequently ignored reflection of mid-thirteenth century Minorite Parisian teaching that, together with the *Questions on Prayer* and the *Commentary on the Sentences*, elucidates the theological context Bonaventure drew from when fashioning his prothemes. These texts indicate several of the constitutive elements of the Minorite perspective on prayer such as the affective interiority of mental prayer, the dynamic relationship between rationality and love, the personal and communal utility of vocal prayer, and the dialectic of divine liberality and human indigence.

In the *Collations on the Six Days*, which Bonaventure preached in Paris in the spring of 1272, the Order of Preachers and the Order of Minors are equated with the Cherubim within the contemplative hierarchy of the Church.⁴¹ There is, nevertheless, a nuanced distinction between the two, for while the Preachers are dedicated to speculation and then unctio, the Minors invert the emphasis in imitation of Saint Francis, who asked: "What value is there to knowing many things and tasting nothing?"⁴² Scholars have long noted this insistence on interiority among the followers of Francis of Assisi in opposition to Dominic's followers.⁴³ Simon Tugwell asserts the early Preachers manifested scant interest in the interior life, choosing to ignore issues of mystical theology in favor of intercessory prayers, devotions, and meditations directed toward the apostolic life. The question of the contemplative ascent to God, so central to Bonaventure and other Minorite theologians in Paris, tended to remain a purely speculative issue among the Preachers.⁴⁴ According to Scott Matthews, the different perspectives of the Minorites and Preachers, identifiable in their respective founders and articulated by their schoolmen, suggest diverse and incompatible understandings of the encounter with the divine whereby the Preachers

⁴⁰ Johnson, "The Summa Alexandri," pp. 524-525.

⁴¹ *Hex* 22.21 (5.440b).

⁴² "Multa enim scire et nihil gustare quid valet?" *Hex* 22.21 (5.440b).

⁴³ Johann Auer, *Die Entwicklung der Gnadenteologie in der Hochscholastik I. Das Wesen der Gnade* (Freiburg, 1942), p. 347.

⁴⁴ Tugwell, *Early Dominicans*, pp. 3-4.