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Collations on the Ten Commandments
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St. Bonaventure's

Collations on the
Ten Commandments
WORKS OF SAINT BONAVENTURE

Edited by

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St. Bonaventure's

Collations on the Ten Commandments

Introduction and Translation

by

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To my parents

Jerome and Ruth

who instilled in me a love of

The Bible
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Introduction

The Collations on the Ten Commandments

A. Preliminary Comments

The Collationes De Decem Praeceptis were given during the season of Lent at the University of Paris in the year 1267. Bonaventure was 50 years old when he gave these talks and he was then Minister General of the Franciscan Order. He had previously been at Paris between the years 1235 and 1257, first as a student and then as an instructor. He ended his formal academic career in 1257 when he was elected Minister General. Bonaventure continued in this position until he was made cardinal of the Church in 1273. He died one year later.

These talks are called collations, but there is some speculation as to what that term actually meant. In the case of Bonaventure’s Collationes De Decem Praeceptis the talks are very clearly sermons because they adhere very closely to the pattern of the thematic sermon. This style of sermonizing was just coming into vogue during Bonaventure’s day. There were three major elements to this style: theme, protheme, and development of the theme.

The theme gives the portion of Scripture that serves as the point of departure for the sermon, and which contains in itself the basis of all further development. The protheme is a small sermon in and of itself, usually using a different portion of Scripture and accompanied by a short exposition of that portion. The protheme usually ends with a prayer asking God’s help and guidance for the preacher and for his audience.

These two opening sections account for only a small part of the total sermon. By far the largest part of the sermon is taken up with the development of the theme. This development consists of creating divisions within the theme and then making further sub-divisions or distinctions.

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1 The Latin text used as a basis for the English translation is from Vol, 5 of St. Bonaventure’s Opera Omnia issued by the College of St. Bonaventure at Quaracchi, Italy, in 1891.
These divisions and distinctions were fleshed out by using various means of expansion. Different treatises on preaching would list different means of expansion. For example, the Ars Concionandi lists eight: 1) definition or interpretation, 2) dialectic or rhetoric, 3) argumentation, 4) comparison of authorities, 5) use of words from the same root, 6) scriptural metaphors, 7) application of tropes and 8) cause and effect.

To help with the process of construction of the thematic sermon there were various aids that were developed. Among these aids there were topical concordances to the Bible, collections of sermon illustrations called exempla (which consisted of stories and anecdotes), collections of sayings of the Church fathers (florilegia), alphabetically arranged treatises on virtues and vices, and even collections of model sermons that were never preached but written down as examples of proper sermonizing.

Theme and development in Bonaventure’s Collationes De Decem Preceptis consists of the exposition of a passage of Scripture, which is, of course, Exodus 20:1-17. His exposition is divided, as were almost all of the bible commentaries of his day, into consideration of the literal meaning and the spiritual meaning of the text. Rather than offering multiple spiritual meanings, as many of his contemporaries would, Bonaventure gives only one.

B. Structure, content overview and main themes

Bonaventure, in the first sermon of the series, begins by giving the theme not only of that sermon but also of the whole series. He does this by quoting the words of Christ from Matthew 19:17, “If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.” In this we see that Bonaventure is concerned with a goal (life), and a way to that goal (keeping the commandments). This is shown to be of the greatest importance to the Christian since the words are those of Jesus. From the start Bonaventure centers our attention on Christ. H. Heinz describes Bonaventure’s exegesis of the Decalogue as a ‘summa of the Christian life,’ in that Bonaventure portrays the Decalogue as containing

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2Collation 1.1.
fundamentally the whole of God’s will in relation to humanity.\(^3\) Bonaventure not only starts his sermons by pointing to Christ as the lifegiver, but also concludes the series of sermons by pointing to Christ as the liberator from the penalty of sin by his atoning work on the cross. In the last sermon Bonaventure likens the ten plagues that God sent against Egypt to the things that transgressors of the commandments suffer because of their actions.\(^4\) But then Christ is shown as having gone through ten acts of condescension, presumably to free the transgressor from the penalty of his sin.\(^5\) Bonaventure’s concluding remark is “that we should always conform to Christ and eat with him so that we might come to the eternal feast . . .”\(^6\) The parallel between this and the opening passage from Matthew is clear: the eternal feast or life is the goal; conforming to Christ or keeping the commandments is the way.

In all this Bonaventure demonstrates the essential unity of the revelation of Scripture. The commandments are not seen only as a moral code or something given to the Jews alone, but as a basic component of the Christian life, adherence to which is commanded by Christ himself. Tavard writes:

To St. Bonaventure the historical passage from the Old Testament to the New Testament embodies the theological scale which divides faith in implicit and explicit. The substance of faith—that is, belief in God and Christ—was realised in the Old Testament and, as far as individuals were concerned, there was no radical difference from what the New Testament was to bring. Whoever practised the Old Law with implicit faith already partook of the spirit of the New Testament.\(^7\)

Following on with the next section of the first sermon Bonaventure gives four motives or reasons for keeping the commandments.\(^8\) The first is the authority of God who gave the com-


\(^4\)Collation 7.10-14.

\(^5\)Collation 7.15-17.

\(^6\)Collation 7.18.

\(^7\)George H. Tavard, *Transiency and Permanence, the Nature of Theology According to St. Bonaventure* (St. Bonaventure, N.Y.: Franciscan Institute, 1954) 42.

\(^8\)Collation 1.2-18.