

The Manifold Titles of St. Bonaventure's Threifold Way: Echoes of Dionysius Areopagite¹

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There is nothing surprising about the claim that St. Bonaventure, a leading figure of the so-called early Franciscan school of the thirteenth century, was deeply influenced by the works ascribed to Dionysius the Areopagite.² It was known not only to Modern historians of Medieval philosophy, such as Étienne Gilson,³ but also to Early Modern writers who followed St. Bonaventure's theology and philosophy and who specifically connected it with Dionysian mystics.⁴ Moreover, from the time of the publication of Jacques-Guy Bougerol's articles on Bonaventure and Pseudo-Dionysius⁵ the influence of the Areopagite and of Neoplatonism in

1 The publication of the paper was enabled by the support of MŠMT ČR (Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports of the Czech Republic) given to Palacký University Olomouc (IGA_FF_2019_018).

2 Bonaventure, in concord with a period understanding, emphasizes the importance of Dionysius by means of considering him a pupil of St. Paul. Bonaventura, *In Secundum librum Sententiarum, De rerum creatione et formatione corporalium et spiritualium*, vol. II, S. Bonaventurae Opera Omnia (Quaracchi: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1885), d. 9, 341. Cf. Jacques-Guy Bougerol, "The Church Fathers and Auctoritates in Scholastic Theology to Bonaventure," in *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West: From the Carolingians to the Maurists*, ed. Irena Backus, vol. 1 (Leiden; New York ; Köln: Brill, 1996), 289–335.

3 Gilson mentions Dionysius as the source for St. Bonaventure in two fundamental points, firstly with respect to the notion of angels and secondly as the basis for the mystical structure of Bonaventure's thought, see Étienne Gilson, *The Philosophy of St. Bonaventure*, trans. Illtyd Trethowan and Frank J. Sheed (Paterson: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1965), 240, 403.

4 Valerian Magni, seventeenth century Capuchin friar, aimed to develop St. Bonaventure's philosophy as an alternative to Aristotelianism. His attempt was considered a continuation of Dionysian mysticism by his contemporaries. See Valerian Magni, *De Luce mentium et eius imagine ex sanctis patribus Augustino et Bonaventura* (Viennae Austriae: Matthaes Rictius, 1646).

5 Jacques-Guy Bougerol, "Bonaventure et Le Pseudo-Dionysius," *Etudes Dionysius*, Vol. XXXVIII, December 2020, 128-142.

general on this Medieval Franciscan theologian and philosopher became one of the commonly accepted points of the interpretation. Bougerol carried out a comprehensive list of Bonaventure's quotations from the works of Pseudo-Dionysius which created the basis for an analysis of the Franciscan's thought from this point of view. The influence of the Areopagite on Bonaventure was consequently recognized in a number of doctrines, such as angelology,⁶ Trinitarian theology,⁷ mysticism,⁸ etc.

The aim of this paper is to contribute to modern Bonaventurian studies from a specific point of view. Rather than analyzing the entire opera omnia, I will focus on Bonaventure's work known today as *The Threefold Way*. Instead of, however, a comprehensive interpretation of the content of the work, which has been provided earlier by renowned scholars,⁹ I will concentrate on the variety of titles, under which this work was circulating in Medieval manuscripts. I will demonstrate that most of them echo the main features of Pseudo-Dionysius and correspond with the Dionysian content of the work. This approach indirectly

Franciscaines 28, no. supplement (1968): 33–123; Jacques-Guy Bougerol, "Saint Bonaventure et la Hierarchie dionysienne," *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Âge* 36 (1969): 131–67. See also Jacques-Guy Bougerol, *Introduction to the Works of Bonaventure*, trans. José de Vinck (Paterson, N.Y.: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1964), 39–48.

6 Christopher M. Cullen, *Bonaventure* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 132; David Keck, *Bonaventure's Angelology*, ed. Jay M. Hammond, Wayne J. A. Hellmann, and Jared Goff (Leiden - Boston: Brill, 2014).

7 Zachary Hayes, "Bonaventure: Mystery of the Triune God," in *The History of Franciscan Theology*, ed. Kenan Osborne (St. Bonaventure, N.Y., N.Y.: Franciscan Institute Publications, 1994), 39–125; Bernard McGinn, "The Dynamism of the Trinity in Bonaventure and Eckhart," *Franciscan Studies* 65 (2007): 137–55; Zachary Hayes, "Bonaventure's Trinitarian Theology," in *A Companion to Bonaventure*, ed. Jay M. Hammond, Wayne J. A. Hellmann, and Jared Goff (Leiden - Boston: Brill, 2014), 189–245.

8 Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism : Men and Women in the New Mysticism (1200-1350)*, *The Presence of God* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 105.

9 Jean-François Bonnefoy, *Une somme Bonaventurienne de théologie mystique: Le "De triplici via"* (Paris: Librairie Saint-François, 1934). Cf. the English translation Jean-François Bonnefoy, "The Triple Way: A Bonaventurian Summa of Mystical Theology," trans. Edward Hagman, *Greyfriars Review* 16 (2002): 1–129.

demonstrates not only the remarkable influence of Pseudo-Dionysius on Bonaventure but also the fact that this work was viewed in the Middle Ages as connected with the Areopagite.

As was common in the Middle Ages, Bonaventure's opusculum is preserved in manuscripts either holding no title or with different titles which were given to it by scribes. Modern editors of Bonaventure's work have collected more than two hundred manuscripts with a remarkable and confusing variety of titles.¹⁰ Several groups can be distinguished among them. A number of titles contain the word *Itinerarium* (such as *Itinerarium mentis ad / in se ipsum / ipsam*; *Itinerarium de triplici via perveniendi ad perfectionem vitae*; or even *Speculum sive Itinerarium mentis in Deum* [sic!]), many titles are a variation of *The Threefold Way* (for example, *Libellus quantum ad triplicem viam, per quam pervenitur ad veram sapientiam*; *Libellus de triplici via, sive purgativa, illuminativa et perfectiva*; *Speculatio secundum triplicem viam: purgationis, illuminationis, perfectionis*; *De triplici actu hierarchico*; *Trinarius / Ternarius de vita contemplativa*; *Triplicitas de meditatione*, etc.), very common was the title *Incendium amoris*, which was used by modern editors as a subtitle of *De triplici via*,¹¹ other titles sound *Fons vitae*; *Parvum bonum*; *Stimulus conscientiae*; *Regimen conscientiae*; *Tractatus graduum, quibus ad veram sapientiam pervenitur*, etc.

Let us begin with the name *Itinerarium*, a confusing title, which connects *The Threefold Way* with Bonaventure's most known work, *The Journey of the Mind to God* (*Itinerarium mentis in Deum*). *The*

10 The Quaracchi editors worked with 22 manuscripts. They, however, registered 299 Medieval manuscripts of the work. Cf. Bonaventura, "De triplici via alias incendium amoris," in *S. Bonaventurae Opera Omnia*, vol. 8 (Quaracchi: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1898), 3–27. Prolegomena, pp. ix–xxv. The variety of titles of the work also appear in its Medieval German translations, see Bonaventura, "De Triplici via": in *Altschwäbischer Übertragung*, ed. Kurt Ruh, *Texte des späten Mittelalters* 6 (Berlin: Schmidt, 1957); Kurt Ruh, *Bonaventura deutsch: Ein Beitrag zur deutschen Franziskaner-Mystik und -Scholastik*, *Bibliotheca Germanica* 7 (Bern: Francke, 1956), 98–119.

11 The title *Incendium amoris* was used also in the Medieval Czech translation of the work, see Bonaventura, "Požár lásky," in *Počátky staročeské mystiky*, ed. Jan Mensík, 2nd ed. (Praha: Dauphin, 2006), 41–54.

Threefold Way was often associated with the celebrated *Journey* as early as the Middle Ages. Both were used as evidence for the sainthood of the author during his canonization.¹² It also seems that both were written in the same period, i.e. after 1259 and before 1269.¹³ Moreover, similarly to *The Journey* which aims to ascend to God,¹⁴ or more precisely into God, the aim of *The Threefold Way* is to lead the reader to rest in God. Thus, both *The Journey* and *The Threefold Way* are in a certain sense instructions on how to accomplish the perfection of contemplation. There is a formal difference in the structure of both works. Bonaventure proceeds in six grades which correspond to the six wings of the Seraph in the vision of St. Francis in *The Journey*,¹⁵ whereas he describes the ascent in triadic steps in *The Threefold Way*.

While the title *Itinerarium*, as an alternative title to *The Threefold Way*, demonstrates the connection with the *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, its extended form *Itinerarium mentis ad se ipsam / ipsum* indicates the difference between them. In *The Journey (Itinerarium mentis in Deum)*, the human mind firstly beholds God in creatures as his vestiges (*vestigium*) and as far as God is in creatures with respect to his "being, power, and presence".¹⁶ God is consecutively

12 Marianne Schlosser, "Bonaventure: Life and Works," in *A Companion to Bonaventure*, ed. Jay M. Hammond, Wayne J. A. Hellmann, and Jared Goff (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2014), 34.

13 While *The Journey* was written in the year 1259 as Bonaventure himself states, the dating of *The Threefold Way* is not clear for it does not contain any biographical data. See *Ibid.*, 34.

14 Cf. Kevin L. Hughes, "A Song of Ascent: The *Itinerarium* as Spiritual Exercise," *Collectanea Franciscana* 79 (2009): 505–15.

15 Bonaventura, "Itinerarium mentis in Deum," in *S. Bonaventurae Opera Omnia*, vol. 5 (Quaracchi: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1891), 293–316. Cf. the English translation St. Bonaventure, *Itinerarium mentis in Deum / The Journey of the Mind to God*, trans. Zachary Hayes, Works of St. Bonaventure II (St. Bonaventure, N.Y.: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2002).

16 Bonaventura, "Itinerarium mentis in Deum," c. 1-2. Cf. Ludwig Hödl, "Die Zeichen-Gegenwart Gottes und das Gott-Ebenbild-Sein des Menschen in des hl. Bonaventura 'Itinerarium mentis in Deum' c.1-3," in *Der Begriff der repraesentatio im Mittelalter. Stellvertretung, Symbol, Zeichen, Bild*, ed. Albert Zimmermann (Berlin ; New York: De Gruyter, 1971), 94–112; Gregory F. LaNave, "Knowing God

viewed in the mind itself which is his image (*imago*). In contrast to this procedure, *The Threefold Way* as *The Journey of the Mind to Itself* emphasizes from the very beginning the need of the turn to the inward.¹⁷ Bonaventure aims to instruct the reader on how to conduct a spiritual life with the goal of preparing the soul to be beatified and rewarded with eternal life.¹⁸ If one obeys Bonaventure's instructions, one's soul can reach the font of life (*Fons vitae*). This is another title of the work derived from its last words.¹⁹

The Threefold Way as *The Journey of the Mind to Itself* can therefore be viewed as instructions on how to prepare the soul for a mystical experience. This leads us to another confusing title under which *The Threefold Way* was circulating in the Middle Ages – *Mystical Theology* (*De mystica theologia*). The same title is held by a completely different Medieval work, which was also attributed to Bonaventure. This means that two different alleged Bonaventure writings were circulated under the same title. The second one was written, however, by a Carthusian monk Hugh of Balma and only the editors of Quarracchi refuted Bonaventure's authorship.²⁰

Through and in All Things: A Proposal for Reading Bonaventure's 'Itinerarium Mentis in Deum,'" *Franciscan Studies* 67 (2009): 267–99. Cf. the critique of LaNave's interpretation, Jay M. Hammond, "Bonaventure's 'Itinerarium': A 'Respondeo,'" *Franciscan Studies* 67 (2009): 301–21.

17 According to Dayton Phillips, the title *Itinerarium mentis ad se ipsum* fits the content of the work the best, for it expresses the crucial idea of turning inward which became significant for the later Medieval piety of Thomas a Kempis *The Imitation of Christ* or Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*, cf. Dayton Phillips, "The Way to Religious Perfection According to St. Bonaventure's *De Triplici Via*," in *Essays in Medieval Life and Thought. Presented in Honor of Austin Patterson Evans*, ed. John H. Mundy, Richard W. Emery, and Benjamin N. Nelson (New York: Biblio & Tannen Publishers, 1955), 31–58.

18 Bonaventura, "De Triplici Via alias Incendium amoris," Prol. "quibus perfecte adeptis, anima beatificatur... In horum igitur trium cognitione pendet scientia totius sacrae Scripturae, pendet etiam meritum vitae aeternae." Cf. the English translation St. Bonaventure, "The Threefold Way," in *Writings on the Spiritual Life*, ed. Edward Coughlin, trans. Girard Etzkorn, The Works of St. Bonaventure X (St. Bonaventure, N.Y.: St. Bonaventure University - Franciscan Institute Publications, 2006), 81–133.

19 *Ibid.*, 3,14: "Nota diligenter praedicta, quoniam in illis est fons vitae."

20 Hugh of Balma, *On Mystical Theology*, ed. Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis:

The Threefold Way as Mystical Theology was in modern times entitled *The Summa of Mystical Theology*.²¹ This modern title should indicate that the work is a kind of parallel to Bonaventure's *Breviloquium*, which holds the subtitle *A Compendium of Scholastic Theology*.²² *The Threefold Way as The Summa of Mystical Theology* cannot be compared with *Breviloquium* from the point of the extension of the work which is substantially shorter than *summas* used to be. From the structural point of view, however, the title "The Summa" seems to be appropriate. First, its structure is logical and its content is divided into many sections. Second, its individual sections are clearly linked together and presented in the form of a compendium. Thirdly, it has a synthetic character as *summas* usually have.²³

The relative shortness of *The Threefold Way as The Summa of Mystical Theology* is not surprising if one considers the fact that the title refers to Pseudo-Dionysius' *Mystical Theology*.²⁴ This cannot be long from the nature of the subject. *The Mystical Theology* of the Areopagite is the final step in the way of man to God during which the human soul sinks into the mystical darkness and is unified with God who is uncognizable. At the top of the way, one must surrender all sensitive activities and intellectual conceptions. One can only describe the ascent and not the experience at the top. Bonaventure's *The Threefold Way as The Mystical Theology* is written in this context as a description not of a mystical experience, but of conditions on how to achieve it.

The Arthur J. Banning Press, 2002).

21 Bonnefoy, "The Triple Way: A Bonaventurian Summa of Mystical Theology." Cf. Marianne Schlosser, "Einleitung," in *Bonaventura, De Triplici via / Über den dreifachen Weg* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1993), 12.

22 Bonaventura, "Breviloquium," in *Opuscula varia theologica*, vol. 5, S. Bonaventurae Opera Omnia (Quaracchi: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1891), 199–292.

23 Schlosser, "Einleitung," 13; Schlosser, "Bonaventure: Life and Works," 35.

24 Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, "De mystica theologia," in *Corpus Dionysiacum*, ed. Adolf Martin Ritter, vol. 2, *Patristische Texte und Studien* 36 (Berlin ; New York: De Gruyter, 1991), 141–50.

Bonaventure declares his dependence on Dionysius' tradition of mystical theology explicitly in his text. He refers in the first chapter to "the counsel of blessed Dionysius to Timothy:" "Turn to the ray."²⁵ This can be identified as a paraphrase of the first chapter of Dionysius' *Mystical Theology*, where the author urges Timothy, the addressee of the work, to "leave behind ... everything perceptible and understandable and ... to strive upward ... toward union" with God. Then "freed from all" he will be "uplifted to the ray of divine shadow which is above everything which is."²⁶ Bonaventure quotes the beginning of Dionysius' *Mystical Theology* in the full extension at the end of *The Journey of the Mind into God*, where he speaks "On the mental and mystical excess, in which rest is given to the intellect, by an affection passing wholly into God through excess."²⁷ Bonaventure refers to the passage from Dionysius in more of his works. The reference from *The Journey* which is fully connected, however, with the goal to transcend the sensible world and his mind in the unity with God, is considered the most important.²⁸ Both quotations indicate the narrow bond between *The Threefold Way* and *The Journey of the Mind into God*.

The direct reference to *Mystical Theology* is not the only evidence of the Dionysian background of *The Threefold Way*. The framework of the entire writing is created by the crucial ideas of Pseudo-Dionysian theology. One can find a reference to the triple so-called "hierarchical activities", i.e. purification, illumination, and

25 "secundum consilium beati Dionysii ad Timotheum, ubi eum hortatur dicens : verte te ad radium, etc." Bonaventura, "De triplici via alias Incendium amoris," 1,2.

26 Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, "De mystica theologia," 1,1. The English translation Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987).

27 Bonaventura, "Itinerarium mentis in Deum," 7, 5, 313a.

28 Bougerol, "The Church Fathers and Auctoritates in Scholastic Theology to Bonaventure," 313–14. Another quotation of the same passage can be found in Bonaventura, "Collationes in Hexaameron," in *S. Bonaventurae Opera Omnia*, vol. 5 (Quaracchi: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1891), 2, 20, 341. Bonaventure used different Latin translations of the Areopagite, cf. Bougerol, *Introduction to the Works of Bonaventure*, 40.

perfection, already in the prologue to *The Threefold Way*. It even penetrates the entire work and creates a fundamental structure determining the individual levels of the description of spiritual advice.²⁹ The human mind must execute the triple movement of the purification, illumination and perfection in all aspects of the preparation to mystical excess. Bonaventure emphasizes these Dionysian elements in the *Commentary to Luke*, where he states that "the entire mystical theology, as Dionysius says, consists of ecstatic love according to the triple hierarchical powers: purification, illumination, and perfection."³⁰ Bonaventure borrows the elements of hierarchical activities from Dionysius' *Celestial Hierarchy*³¹ where these moments play the role of the assimilation of the mind to God in analogy to the hierarchical order of the universe. He follows his teacher Alexander of Hales who attributed to the celestial hierarchy a crucial importance for the ascent of the mind to God.³²

The analogy of the individual activities of the mind to Dionysian celestial hierarchies is fully described at the very end of *The Threefold Way*. Bonaventure distinguishes here, similarly as Dionysius, the first hierarchy of angels, archangels and principalities, the second hierarchy of authorities, powers and dominions, and the third hierarchy of thrones, cherubim

29 Bonnefoy, "The Triple Way: A Bonaventurian Summa of Mystical Theology," 3-15.

30 Bonaventura, "Commentarius in Evangelium Lucae," in *S. Bonaventurae Opera Omnia*, VII (Grottaferrata: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1893), 13, 46, 349b. "Nam, sicut dicit Dionysius, tota mystica theologia... ipsa tota consistit in dilectione excessiva secundum triplicem vim hierarchicam: purgativam, illuminativam et perfectivam." Cf. McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism (1200-1350)*, 103.

31 Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, "De coelesti hierarchia," in *Corpus Dionysiacum*, ed. Günter Heil, vol. 2, *Patristische Texte und Studien* 36 (Berlin; New York: De Gruyter, 1991), 3, 2.

32 Bougerol, "The Church Fathers and Auctoritates in Scholastic Theology to Bonaventure," 316. Cf. Werner Dettloff, "Himmlische und kirchliche Hierarchie bei Bonaventura," in *Miscellanea Mediaevalia. Soziale Ordnungen im Selbstverständnis des Mittelalters*, ed. Albert Zimmermann, vol. 12, 1 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1979), 41-55.

and seraphim.³³ He then attributes the individual activities of the soul which lead to God to individual hierarchies.

Another important feature of *The Threefold Way* which follows Dionysius' *Mystical Theology* is differentiating between the affirmative and the negative way. So-called affirmative theology, in which properties are affirmed to God, i.e. names are ascribed to God, is the subject of Dionysius' *Divine Names*. Although Bonaventure knows this text very well,³⁴ he links the affirmative way with St. Augustine in *The Threefold Way*. He refers to St. Augustine as the authority in affirmation in which certain things can be appropriated to the persons of the Trinity.³⁵

Another way, the negative way, the way of Dionysius is more eminent, however, according to Bonaventure. He quotes the passage from *The Celestial Hierarchy*, which corresponds to the first paragraphs of *The Mystical Theology*, namely: "Affirmations can be disjoined, negations are true."³⁶ The human mind must deny all affirmative statements at the top of the contemplation, must negate them. Then, in the darkness of the mind, "the gaze of truth is raised higher and penetrates deeper, because it raises above itself and all created things."³⁷ This is the climax of the preparation for mystical excess and *The Threefold Way* ends at this point. Bonaventure only added the last note which I already mentioned

33 Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, "De coelesti hierarchia," VII-IX.

34 Bougerol, "The Church Fathers and Auctoritates in Scholastic Theology to Bonaventure," 312-13.

35 Bonaventura, "De triplici via alias Incendium amoris," 3,11. "... ad quae erigimur contemplando, et hoc dupliciter: vel per positionem, vel per ablationem. Primum ponit Augustinus, secundum Dionysius."

36 Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, "De coelesti hierarchia," 2, 3; Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, "De mystica theologia," 1-3. Bonaventura, "De triplici via alias Incendium amoris," 3,13. "Sed alia est eminentior, scilicet secundum viam negationis, quoniam, ut dicit Dionysius, 'affirmationes incompactae sunt, negationes verae.'"

37 Bonaventura, "De triplici via alias Incendium amoris," 3,11. "Et tunc veritatis aspectus fertur in mentis caliginem et altius elevatur et profundius ingreditur, pro eo quod excedit se et omne creatum."

above, namely the reference to the analogy of celestial hierarchies with the individual exercises of the soul for the ascent to God.

The Dionysian basis of *The Threefold Way* is apparent. The entire work is framed at its beginning with the reference to Dionysius' *Mystical Theology* and to Dionysian triple hierarchical activities corresponding to celestial hierarchies and at its ending with the reference to Dionysius' negative theology and once more to celestial hierarchies. Thus, the alternative title of *The Threefold Way* as *On the Mystical Theology*, which is the same as one of Dionysius' work, is also appropriate with respect to the connection between both writings. This link also indicates how this work by Bonaventure was viewed by its scribes.

Now I would like to move onto other titles which also reveal a Dionysian inspiration although not as directly as the title *Mystical Theology*.

The most common title, *The Threefold Way*, which was also chosen by the editors of Bonaventure's work, is linked with the incipit of the writing: "Behold, I have described it for you in a threefold manner." The quotation from the Book of Proverbs (22,20) is interpreted by Bonaventure in three different ways. First, it bears the insignia of the Trinity, second it leads to the threefold manner of the interpretation of the Bible: moral, allegorical and anagogical.³⁸ The triad also corresponds to the threefold manner of the exercising of the soul: reading and meditation, praying and contemplating.³⁹

Bonaventure follows the school of St. Victor in both threefold biblical hermeneutics and threefold spiritual exercises. He was also influenced by *Scala Paradisi* of the Carthusian Guigo in the doctrine of spiritual exercises. Bonaventure reduces, however,

38 Ibid., prologus. "Cum omnis scientia gerat Trinitatis insigne, praecipue illa quae docetur in sacra Scriptura, debet in se repraesentare vestigium Trinitatis; propter quod dicit Sapiens de hac sacra doctrina, se eam tripliciter descripsisse propter triplicem ipsius intellectum spiritualem, scilicet moralem, allegoricum et anagogicum."

39 Ibid. "Sciendum est igitur, quod triplex est modus exercendi se circa hanc triplicem viam, scilicet legendo et meditando, orando et contemplanando."

the four levels of exercises known from the tradition into three as he considers the reading and meditation together as one level. The motivation for the simplification lies in the strict triadistic principle of exposition which is fundamental in Bonaventure's view. Every knowledge "bears the insignia of the Trinity," as is stated at the beginning of *The Threefold Way*. The reason for the simplification can also be borrowed from Hugo of St. Victor who considered reading an exercise for beginners.⁴⁰ *The Threefold Way* is dedicated, however, to an experienced man, probably to a priest.⁴¹

Bonaventure divides the entire work into three parts according to three spiritual exercises: meditation, prayer and contemplation. Triadism can be found on each level of Bonaventure's exposition, not only in the general structure but also on the lowest particular statement, as he distinguishes triple activities of the soul on every level, triple corresponding virtues, triple goals of the soul, etc. He is influenced mostly by St. Augustine's doctrine of the soul as the image of the Trinity and by the doctrine of the triple symbolic understanding of created things of his Victorine predecessors.

The fundamental triadistic approach is derived, however, from Dionysian triple hierarchical activities. Every level of spiritual exercise – meditation, prayer, and contemplation – is penetrated by the triad of purification, illumination and perfection. The soul is purged, illuminated and perfected on each level of spiritual exercises. *The Threefold Way* is in its basis the triple way of Dionysian hierarchical activities as is also indicated by some alternative titles of the writing: *Libellus de triplici via, sive purgativa, illuminativa et perfectiva; Speculatio secundum triplicem viam: purgationis, illuminationis, perfectionis...*

40 Simon Tugwell, *Ways of Imperfection. An Exploration of Christian Spirituality* (Springfield, Ill.: Templegate Publishers, 1985), 106.

41 *The Threefold Way* differs in this sense from another of Bonaventure's spiritual writing, *On the Perfection of Life (De perfectione vitae ad sorores)*, which was written for the Poor Clares sisters, which did not presuppose a reader educated in theology. Cf. Marianne Schlosser, "Bonaventura: De perfectione vitae," *Wissenschaft und Weisheit* 47 (1994): 21–75.

As a synthesis of Dionysius, the Victorines and Augustinian triadistic, Bonaventure continues with the Christianization of Neoplatonism. The degrees of hierarchical activities are not purely steps on the way of the soul to One. Their nature corresponds with the Christian experience with God, based on the revelation about which the Scripture testifies. The threefold way is the way of penitence, which is a parallel to purification, the way of gratitude corresponds to illumination and the way of charity is perfection. Threefold hierarchical activities are analogical to the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, with man becoming similar to the Trinity from God's grace by means of triple hierarchical activities, and participating in the appropriations of the individual persons of the Trinity: peace corresponding to the Father, truth corresponding to the Son, and charity corresponding to the Holy Spirit. The purged soul achieves peace in God, illuminated participates in truth, and perfected unifies with God by means of love.

Thanks to the analogy to the Trinity, Bonaventure does not speak about three different ways, but about the threefold way. He does not describe the three separate grades as individual steps of the movement of the soul. On the one hand, there is a procedure from the purification, via illumination to perfection as from the lowest to the highest grade. On the other hand, each grade is firmly bonded with two others so that each grade is conditioned by two others. Peace, truth and love, as final goals of the threefold way, are not grades in a subsequent manner but the human mind should aim at them and reach them somehow simultaneously.⁴² We can touch on the mystery of the Trinity by means of contemplation which is perfection,⁴³ but the contemplation is not possible without meditation and prayer. The triadism of *The Threefold Way* is a dynamic of true

42 McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism (1200-1350)*, 102-103.

43 Bonaventura, "De triplici via alias Incendium amoris," 3,11.

Christian wisdom⁴⁴ and as such is deeply connected with the doctrine about the Trinity based on the metaphysics of love.⁴⁵

This leads us to the last title of *The Threefold Way* which was *Fire of Love* (*Incendium amoris*). Although love is the goal of contemplation, it already appears in *The Threefold Way* in the part dedicated to prayer, where Bonaventure distinguishes between six grades of love for God. This fact demonstrates the linkage of all ways.⁴⁶ Love is not only the summit of contemplation. Due to its connection with perfection, one can find it both as the top of prayer and as the perfection of meditation in exercising the “little flame of wisdom.”⁴⁷

Bonaventure’s emphasis on love is derived from two different traditions. Firstly, Bonaventure follows St. Bernard of Clairvaux, as a master of mysticism and of preaching of the good life. He quotes both *On Loving God* (*De diligendo Deo*) and *Sermons on the Song of Songs* in particular, speaking about the love for the Spouse.⁴⁸

Secondly, the context of Bonaventure’s emphasis on love can be found once again in Dionysian theology. Bonaventure himself was later called the Seraphic doctor after the name of one of the spiritual intelligences in the third, the highest Dionysian hierarchy – Seraphim. In Bonaventure, the accent on the Seraphim burning with love, as with the highest activity in the celestial hierarchy, is analogical to the praise of St. Francis of Assisi who was captivated by the ecstatic love for God. Provided that the spiritual life should be lived by means of imitating spiritual

44 Ibid., 1.18.

45 Zachary Hayes speaks about the triadistic combination of the Dionysian doctrine on goodness with the mysticism of the ecstatic love of the Victorines. Bonaventure creates a unique conception of the Triad from these sources which has the shape of the metaphysics of love. Hayes, “Bonaventure: Mystery of the Triune God,” 45. Cf. McGinn, “The Dynamism of the Trinity in Bonaventure and Eckhart,” 137–55.

46 Schlosser, “Einleitung,” 65n.

47 Bonaventura, “De triplici via alias Incendium amoris,” 1,15.

48 Cf. Jacques-Guy Bougerol, “Saint Bonaventure et Saint Bernard,” *Antonianum* 46 (1971): 3–79.

intelligences, the imitation of the activities of the Seraphim has the highest position in the structure of spiritual exercises.

Bonaventure modifies Dionysian triads and hierarchies in the point of the analogy of the celestial and ecclesiastical hierarchy. Bonaventure follows the Dionysian hierarchies of clergy and laity, but when he speaks about the perfection of the contemplative life, he places the clergy on the middle grade and the highest-level is reserved for members of religious orders. The highest level of thrones, cherubim and seraphim, with respect to the perfection of contemplation, corresponds to Benedictines (thrones), Dominicans and Franciscans (cherubim), and eminent members of those orders, such as St. Francis (seraphim).⁴⁹

Bonaventure also transforms the triad of activities of celestial intelligences. While purification, illumination and perfection are all of a cognitive nature in Dionysius, Bonaventure distinguishes between them as between different natures of these hierarchical activities. Purification is a moral activity, illumination is an intellectual activity and perfection is union by means of love.⁵⁰

Hugh of St. Victor, whom Bonaventure follows, had already interpreted Dionysius' characterization of Seraphs as "burning" in the way "burning with the fire of love".⁵¹ At the edge of the intellect, one must continue in the ascent to God with love. The love of Seraphim, Bonaventure writes, is higher than the intellectual cognition of Cherubim.⁵²

49 Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius. A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 32.

50 *Ibid.*, 219.

51 Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, "De coelesti hierarchia," 7, 82.

52 "Quia ibi non intrat intellectus, sed affectus.... Ablationem sequitur amore semper." Bonaventura, "Collationes in Hexaameron" 5 (V, 341–342). Bernard McGinn, "Love, Knowledge and Unio Mystica in Western Christian Thought," in *Mystical Union in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. An Ecumenical Dialogue*, ed. Moshe Idel and Bernard McGinn (London, New York, New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), 67. Cf. Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius. A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence*, 232.

Thus, *The Threefold Way* as *The Fire of Love* is the modification of the Dionysian pattern with the help of Bernard of Clairvaux, the Victorine school and St. Francis of Assisi as well. The Dionysian darkness, which is the summit of the intellectual mysticism of the Areopagite, is in Bonaventure the darkness of the death of Christ, which is followed and overcome by the resurrection. This approach can be considered the synthesis of mystical traditions, in which the Dionysian darkness is integrated into the love for the crucified Christ.⁵³

In summary, the Dionysian pattern of St. Bonaventure's *Threefold Way* is evident, although it is modified into the synthesis of traditions of Pseudo-Dionysius, St. Augustine, St. Bernard of Clairvaux and the Victorine school. It can also be viewed as a synthesis of triadistics, moral theology, spiritual exercises, intellectual mysticism, and metaphysics of love. It is *The Journey of the Mind to Itself* as a moral ascetic treatise and as a spiritual exercise; it is *The Threefold Way* as a triadistic treatise; it is *The Summa of Mystical Theology* as an elaboration of mysticism and its synthesis, and it is *The Fire of Love* as the metaphysics of love, which is the linking principle. All these titles, under which the work circulated in the Middle Ages, bear their proper justifications. Different important features of the work can be grasped by means of each of them. Most of them reveal a direct or indirect connection with Pseudo-Dionysius. This demonstrates that St. Bonaventure is an important part of the legacy of the Areopagite and that he was viewed in this manner already in the Middle Ages.

53 Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius. A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence*, 220.