

# Bernard of Clairvaux

(1090–1153)

## 1. Biography

- born near Dijon, France; died at Clairvaux
- At the age of nine years, Bernard was sent to a much renowned school and had a great taste for literature and devoted himself for some time to poetry.
- With thirty young noblemen of Burgundy Bernard entered the monastery of Cîteaux, which was attempting to reform monastery life according to the Rule of St. Benedict in all its rigour.
- After three years he was sent to found a new monastery, which he named Claire Vallée, or Clairvaux.
- in some respects the most influential man of his age
- extremely active in Church and state.
- Cardinal Harmeric, on behalf of the pope, wrote Bernard a sharp letter of remonstrance:  
"It is not fitting that noisy and troublesome frogs should come out of their marshes to trouble the Holy See and the cardinals."

## 2. Ideas

- anti-rationalistic
  - Bernard maintains that the knowledge of profane sciences is of small value compared with that of sacred sciences.
  - his philosophy: "to know Jesus, and Jesus crucified"
  - "Trust one who has tried it," he writes in one of his epistles, "you will find more in woods than in books; trees and stones will teach you what you can never learn from masters."<sup>1</sup>
  
- Mystical Theology
  - an ecstatic blessed with high personal mystical experience
  
- Love
  - The Christian life is identical with the mystical life, and the latter in turn can be considered as a re-education of love.
  - To love God for himself is to love him with a disinterested love, that is, with a love which finds in itself its own recompense.
  - The culminating point of the twelve degrees of humility, that is, of human knowledge, is reached in the ecstasy in which the soul is in some way separated from the body, becomes empty and loses itself to enjoy a sort of deification by love.
    - \* "Just as a tiny drop of water which falls into a great quantity of wine seems to become diluted and disappear, taking on the taste and color of the wine, just as red-hot glowing

<sup>1</sup> "Expertocrede: aliquid amplius invenies in silvis quam in libris; ligna et lapides docebunt te quod a magistris audire non possis," *Epist.* 106.

iron becomes like fire and seems to lose its original form, just as air flooded with sunlight seems to be transformed into the luminous clarity itself to such a point that it seems no longer to be illuminated but light, so should all human affection in saints finally dissolve and become liquified in order to flow whole in the will of God. How, in fact, could God be all in all things if there remained in man something of man? His substance will no doubt continue to be, but under another form, another power and another glory."<sup>2</sup>

\* a harmony of wills, but not confusion of substances

- Criticism of art (at Cluny)

- "But these are minor abuses. I shall go on to major ones which seem minor because they are so common. I say nothing of the enormous height, extravagant length and unnecessary width of the churches, of their costly polishings and curious paintings which catch the worshipper's eye and dry up his devotion, things which seem to me in some sense a revival of ancient Jewish rites. Let these things pass, let us say they are all to the honor of God. Nevertheless, just as the pagan poet Persius inquired of his fellow pagans, so I as a monk ask my fellow monks: "Tell me, oh pontiffs," he said, "what is gold doing in the sanctuary?" I say (following his meaning rather than his metre): "Tell me, poor men, if you really are poor what is gold doing in the sanctuary?"

There is no comparison here between bishops and monks. We know that the bishops, debtors to both the wise and unwise, use material beauty to arouse the devotion of a carnal people because they cannot do so by spiritual means. But we who have now come out of that people, we who have left the precious and lovely things of the world for Christ, we who, in order to win Christ, have reckoned all beautiful, sweet-smelling, fine-sounding, smooth-feeling, good-tasting things—in short, all bodily delights—as

<sup>2</sup> *De diligendo Deo*, 10.

so much dung, what do we expect to get out of them? Admiration from the foolish? Offerings from the ignorant? Or, scattered as we are among the gentiles, are we learning their tricks and serving their idols?

I shall speak plainly: Isn't greed, a form of idolatry, responsible for all this? Aren't we seeking contributions rather than spiritual profit? "How?" you ask. "In a strange and wonderful way," I answer. Money is scattered about in such a way that it will multiply. It is spent so that it will increase. Pouring it out produces more of it. Faced with expensive but marvelous vanities, people are inspired to contribute rather than to pray. Thus riches attract riches and money produces more money. I don't know why, but the wealthier a place, the readier people are to contribute to it. Just feast their eyes on gold-covered relics and their purses will open. Just show them a beautiful picture of some saint. The brighter the colors, the saintlier he'll appear to them. Men rush to kiss and are invited to contribute. There is more admiration for beauty than veneration for sanctity. Thus churches are decorated, not simply with jeweled crowns, but with jeweled wheels illuminated as much by their precious stones as by their lamps. We see candelabra like big bronze trees, marvelously wrought, their gems glowing no less than their flames. What do you think is the purpose of such things? To gain the contrition of penitents or the admiration of spectators?

On vanity of vanities, yet no more vain than insane! The church is resplendent in her walls and wanting in her poor. She dresses her stones in gold and lets her sons go naked. The eyes of the rich are fed at the expense of the indigent. The curious find something to amuse them and the needy find nothing to sustain them.

What sort of reverence is shown to the saints when we place their pictures on the floor and then walk on them? Often someone spits in an angel's mouth. Often the face of a saint is trampled by some passerby's feet. If sacred images mean nothing to us, why don't we at least economize on the paint? Why embellish what we're about to befoul? Why decorate what we must walk upon? What good is it to have attractive pictures where they're usually stained with dirt? Finally, what good are such things to poor men, to monks, to spiritual men? Perhaps the poet's question could be answered with words from

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the prophet: "Lord, I have loved the beauty of your house, and the place where your glory dwells" (Ps. 26:8). I agree. Let us allow this to be done in churches because, even if it is harmful to the vain and greedy, it is not such to the simple and devout. But in cloisters, where the brothers are reading, what is the point of this ridiculous monstrosity, this shapely misshapeness, this misshapen shapeliness? What is the point of those unclean apes, fierce lions, monstrous centaurs, half-men, striped tigers, fighting soldiers and hunters blowing their horns? In one place you see many bodies under a single head, in another several heads on a single body. Here on a quadruped we see the tail of a serpent. Over there on a fish we see the head of a quadruped. There we find a beast that is horse up front and goat behind, here another that is horned animal in front and horse behind. In short, so many and so marvelous are the various shapes surrounding us that it is more pleasant to read the marble than the books, and to spend the whole day marveling over these things rather than meditating on the law of God. Good Lord! If we aren't embarrassed by the silliness of it all, shouldn't we at least be disgusted by the expense?"<sup>3</sup>

- Crusade sermons
  - Recognized as the foremost preacher of his day, he traveled widely, wrote prolifically, and was involved to the hilt in papal politics, opposition to heresy, and the planning of a crusade.
  
- Opposition to Peter Abelard

### 3. Schriften

- "De Gradibus Superbiae et humilitatis", his first treatise;

<sup>3</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *Apology*.

- "Homilies on the Gospel 'Missus est'" (1120);
- "Apology to William of St. Thierry" against the claims of the monks of Cluny;
- "On the Conversion of Clerics", a book addressed to the young ecclesiastics of Paris (1122);
- "De Laudibus Novae Militiae", addressed to Hughes de Payns, first Grand Master and Prior of Jerusalem (1129). This is a eulogy of the military order instituted in 1118, and an exhortation to the knights to conduct themselves with courage in their several stations.
- "De amore Dei" wherein St. Bernard shows that the manner of loving God is to love Him without measure and gives the different degree of this love;
- "Book of Precepts and Dispensations" (1131), which contains answers to questions upon certain points of the Rule of St. Benedict from which the abbot can, or cannot, dispense;
- "De Grati et Libero Arbitrio" in which the Catholic dogma of grace and free will is proved according to the principles of St. Augustine;
- "Book of Considerations", addressed to Pope Eugenius III;
- "De Officiis Episcoporum", addressed to Henry, Archbishop of Sens.
  
- Sermons
  - "On Psalm 90, 'Qui habitat'" (about 1125);
  - "On the Canticle of Canticles".  
St. Bernard explained in eighty-six sermons only the first two chapters of the Canticle of Canticles and the first verse of the third chapter.
  - There are also eighty-six "Sermons for the Whole Year"; his "Letters" number 530.