



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

September 12, 2023



Dear Friends,

“**T**HIS is hardly a fair deal: you have chosen heaven and you have left me the earth!”, Nivard, the youngest of the family, complained to his brothers who, led by the future Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, were setting out for the abbey of Cîteaux in 1112. They explained to him: “We are entering the monastery... One day, you will inherit the title, and all the land we owned will be yours!” A few years later, however, Nivard also became a monk. He went to join his brother Bernard, who was to become a beacon of light for the Church. Pope Pius XII said of Bernard’s writing: “His style, which is lively, rich, easy flowing, and marked by striking expressions, has such pleasing function that it attracts, delights and recalls the mind of the reader to heavenly things. It incites to, nourishes and strengthens piety; it draws the soul to the pursuit of those good things which are not fleeting, but true, certain, and everlasting” (Encyclical *Doctor mellifluus*, May 24, 1953, no. 8).

Born into a noble Burgundian family in the castle of Fontaine-lès-Dijon in 1090, Bernard was the third of seven children, six boys and a girl. His father, Tescelin, the lord of Fontaine, was a vassal of the Duke of Burgundy to whom his mother, Blessed Aleth of Montbard, was related. Towards the year 1100, Bernard was sent to the school of the secular canons of Saint-Vorles at Châtillon-sur-Seine. There he became well versed in the Bible, the Fathers of the Church and various Latin authors, including Horace, Cicero, Virgil and Seneca.

An arduous reform

BERNARD was deeply upset by the death of his mother which occurred when he was about sixteen. He led a worldly existence, but soon felt called to the religious life. In his twenty-second year, he decided to join the fledgling community of the abbey of Cîteaux, 20 miles (30 km) south of Dijon. The monastery had been founded in 1098 by Saint Robert and a few companions, originally from the abbey of Molesme. Their intention was to adhere to the letter of the Rule of Saint Benedict, focusing on the well-balanced nature of life according to the Rule, based on poverty, manual labour and communal life. Saint Robert had been obliged to return to Molesme soon afterwards, and his successor, Saint Alberic, had died. Saint Stephen Harding, the third abbot, had governed Cîteaux from January 1108, but not a single vocation had been accepted since then. When Bernard arrived in 1112, he was accom-

panied by some thirty young noblemen, including three of his brothers.

Despite being of noble descent, Bernard took part in all the monks’ activities, even those of a more physical nature, but he was sometimes hindered in this because of his lack of experience and poor health. He also devoted himself to studying the Sacred Scripture and the Fathers of the Church. In 1114, he took his monastic vows. Ever since his arrival, the vocations at Cîteaux had come pouring in. As early as 1113, the abbey was able to establish a foundation at La Ferté, followed by Pontigny in 1114. In 1115, Stephen Harding sent Bernard, at the head of a group of twelve monks, to found a new monastery in Champagne, in a location that was then named *Clara Vallis* (clear valley), and which would later be called “Clairvaux”. Soon after, Bernard was ordained a priest by the Bishop of Chalons, Guillaume de Champeaux. He was to serve as the abbot of Clairvaux until his death. That same year, Cîteaux also established a daughter abbey in Morimond.

The beginnings of Clairvaux were by no means easy. On the one hand, the discipline imposed by the young abbot was very austere, because he was pursuing an ascetic ideal that was beyond the reach of many; little by little, Bernard came to recognize his own limitations and those of his brothers. On the other hand, the community’s income and resources were insufficient. The monks ate black bread and beech leaf soup. One day, Bernard asked his brother Gérard, who was serving as bursar, how much money the community was lacking to meet its needs. Gérard replied,



Saint Bernard of Clairvaux
1090-1153

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“Twelve pounds.” But they had not a penny... Following the Abbot’s suggestion, they all began to pray. Not long afterwards, a woman presented herself, saying: “Please pray for my husband who is dying; here are twelve pounds.” When she returned home, her husband was cured. The abbot would go on to perform many other wonders, and soon became known as a worker of miracles; many people came to see him.

Bernard drew his entire family to the monastery: his father, Tescelin, and his two other brothers became monks at Clairvaux. One day, his sister, Ombeline, visited him, dressed in all the finery of a young noblewoman accompanied by her attendants; the abbot refused to see her, affecting not to know her. The slight prompted Ombeline to reflect on her life: changing her ways, she entered the priory of the Benedictine nuns of Jully-les-Nonnains.

In 1119, Bernard took part in the first General Chapter of the Cistercians, which gave the Order its permanent form through the adoption of the “Charter of Charity” drawn up by Saint Stephen Harding. The document spelled out the internal organization of the Cistercians, with the aim of establishing unity between the various abbeys. Bernard personally founded no less than seventy-two monasteries throughout Europe. By the time he died in 1153, one hundred and sixty abbeys, that became so many breeding grounds for saints, had sprung forth from Clairvaux.

Cistercian austerity

FROM the outset of his abbatial office, Bernard wrote treatises, short essays and homilies, all peppered with quotes from the Scriptures. He had a particular penchant for the Song of Songs and the works of Saint Augustine. Some consider him to be the last Father of the Church. Bernard added to his Cistercian austerity the desire to avoid anything that might appear to entertain the mind. The monks of Cluny favored beauty as an encouragement to prayer. In their vast churches, they used rich liturgical ornaments, beautiful sculptures and resplendent stained-glass windows offering an impressive image-based catechesis. In his Apology to Guillaume de Saint-Thierry (*circa* 1123-1125), Bernard vigorously defended the Cistercian reform against the Cluniacs. He argued that lavish decorations were likely to distract the monk’s mind from meditating on divine things. Peter the Venerable, abbot of Cluny, sharply responded to Bernard’s criticisms in justifying the practice of Cluny, criticizing the pride of the new monks. Yet despite their disagreement, the two men became friends.

The views of Bernard and Peter the Venerable may have differed, but as Our Lord says, there are many dwelling places in the house of the Father (Jn 14:2). The Gospel describes how a woman poured a very valuable perfume on JESUS’ head and how indignant the disciples were (Mt 26, 7f). Commenting on this episode, Saint John Paul II remarked that the Church, following the example of this woman, never feared to be magnificent in worshiping her Lord, and never regarded the nobility and beauty of litur-

gical objects or vestments as wasteful (cf. Cardinal Robert Sarah, *Catechism of the Spiritual Life*, p. 83).

Bernard’s concern for the sanctification of the clergy and the faithful led him to write numerous letters, particularly to bishops, urging them to undertake a reform of discipline. From the start of his novitiate, Bernard himself had led a life of penance. His mortifications went so far as to compromise his health, causing stomach pains that would plague him for the rest of his life. Having failed to persuade him to tone down his penances, Guillaume de Champeaux arranged for Bernard to be entrusted to his care for one year. He had a modest house built for him outside the monastic enclosure, and forbade him to apply the sections of the Rule on fasting. Despite all these measures, the abbot’s health hardly improved. Blessed Guillaume, abbot of the Cluniac abbey of Saint-Thierry, near Reims, paid him frequent visits; won over by Bernard’s charismatic spirit, he convinced his superiors, against Bernard’s advice, to allow him to become a Cistercian in 1135.

Reading JESUS, hearing JESUS

BERNARD’S mixture of gentleness, tenderness and passion, of ardor and sensitivity, appealed to the young. Through his example and his words, he brought a multitude of sinners back onto the straight path of spiritual life, and guided many souls towards holiness. “We have shown that every soul, though it may be burdened with sins, caught in the net of evil habits, taken captive by the allurements of sinful pleasures; though it be as a captive in exile, confined in the body as in a prison, although a soul, I say, be thus under condemnation and thus despairing, yet, as I have shown, it is able to find in itself, not only reason for breathing freely in the hope of mercy and forgiveness, but also for daring to aspire to the heavenly nuptials of the Word; nor does it fear to enter into alliance with God” (*Song of Songs*, sermon 83, 1). Bernard’s love for JESUS was intense. “Write what you will, I shall not relish it unless it tells of JESUS. Talk or argue about what you will, I shall not relish it if you exclude the name of JESUS. JESUS to me is honey in the mouth, music in the ear, a song in the heart. Again, it is a medicine. Does one of us feel sad? Let the name of JESUS come into his heart, from there let it spring to his mouth... Nothing so curbs the onset of anger, so allays the upsurge of pride. It cures the wound of envy” (*Song of Songs*, sermon 16, 6).

Bernard had a deep affection for the Blessed Virgin, to whom all the Cistercian churches are dedicated. At the entrance to the estate of Tre Fontane, near Rome, where the apostle Saint Paul was martyred and where Bernard founded a monastery, was an image of the Blessed Virgin that Bernard greeted with an *Ave Maria* every time he saw it. One day, the Virgin responded with an *Ave Bernarde*; both parts of this moving dialogue were carved into the stone. There is a tradition that credits Bernard with the last invocations of the Salve Regina: *O clemens, o pia, o dulcis Virgo Maria*.

Despite his desire to live far away from the world, Bernard was sought out by other abbots, Church dignitaries, sovereigns and nobles asking for his advice and for help in resolving conflicts. He must travel the roads of Europe. Some of the clergy considered that a monk should not interfere in temporal affairs. However, he wrote: “I consider that nothing that concerns God is foreign to me” (Letter to Cardinal Aymeric, 20); and to the King of France: “We, sons of the Church... will stand up and fight for our Mother (the Church), if necessary to the death, with the appropriate weapons; not with shield and sword, but with prayer and beseeching of God” (Letter 221, 3). Bernard held the seat of Saint Peter in great veneration. In 1145, a Cistercian monk from Pisa who was also his disciple, was elected Pope under the name of Eugene III; Bernard gave him a great deal of advice. He even went so far as to rebuke the Sovereign Pontiffs or princes when he deemed it necessary, but he tempered his natural sharpness with a tone of marked humility. But when King Louis VI sought to depose the archbishop of Sens, he nevertheless called him a “new Herod”.

Recognizing the true Pope

IN 1130, after the death of Honorius II, two separate groups of cardinals each elected a Pope: Cardinal Aymeric, who took the name of Innocent II, and Cardinal Pierleone, who took that of Anacletus II. The latter received the support of Roger II, Duke of Apulia and Calabria. In France, Louis VI convened a synod at Étampes and asked Bernard to attend. Bernard declared himself in favor of Innocent II, whom he considered to be the more holy and suitable, and who had been elected by the sounder group of Cardinals. The King of France and his clergy then acknowledged Innocent II, who took refuge in France, since Rome was under the control of Anacletus’ supporters. The German emperor Lothar III also recognized Innocent II, and led an expedition to install him in Rome in 1133. Bernard accompanied the group. Innocent II convened a council in Pisa in 1134, where Bernard delivered a fiery speech. His success was such that the magistrates, the clergy and the people wanted to make him their archbishop, but he refused. He worked several miracles that helped confirm the restored union. In 1137, Bernard tried in vain to bring Roger II to his senses and to persuade him to abandon the antipope. It was not until the death of Anacletus in January 1138 that the Second Lateran Ecumenical Council, convened by Innocent II, finally put an end to the schism.

Bernard also took part in theological debates. He wrote: “God is Wisdom, and He desires to be loved, not only to our own delight, but also wisely. Otherwise, if you neglect knowledge, the spirit of error will with great ease lead you astray by means of your zeal; nor has our cunning enemy any device more effectual in eliminating love from the heart than that of inducing us, if he can, to act without due prudence and caution” (*Song of Songs*, sermon 19, 7). Pope Pius XII wrote that for Bernard, “learning is not

the final goal, but rather a path leading to God; it is not something cold upon which the mind dwells aimlessly, as though amusing itself under the spell of shifting, brilliant light. Rather, it is moved, impelled, and governed by love. Wherefore, carried upwards by this wisdom and in meditation, contemplation, and love, Bernard climbs the peak of the mystical life” (*Doctor mellifluus*, no. 6). Bernard opposed Abelard (1079-1142) among others. Endowed with a brilliant mind, this doctor had been appointed regent of the Paris cathedral school in 1114, and his reputation had since risen to prodigious heights. However, his teaching was marred by errors. Bernard caused these to be condemned at a council held in Sens (1140). Abelard was admitted to Cluny by Peter the Venerable and died there, at peace with the Church and with Bernard.

At the end of the 11th century, the first Crusade was launched to liberate the tomb of Christ in Jerusalem and to obtain freedom of movement for Christian pilgrims. After the Crusade, a number of Christians remained behind, founding states such as the County of Edessa. The fall of this county, which was taken by the Muslims in 1146, threatened the Frankish kingdom of Jerusalem and sparked the Second Crusade, which Pope Eugene III asked Bernard to preach. Bernard spoke on Easter Day, March 31, 1146, to a crowd gathered at the foot of the hill at Vézelay. He urged the knights to humility, obedience and sacrifice. He also preached in Speyer (now in Germany). Finally, King Louis VII of France and Emperor Conrad III embarked on the Crusade—but it ended in defeat. All blamed Bernard, although the real reasons of the disaster lay in the division and worldliness of the crusaders. Bernard patiently bore criticism and, in submission to the Pope, agreed to work towards launching a third crusade, which would never actually be undertaken.

Free of pride and hatred

ONE of the obstacles to maintaining Christians in the Orient was the temporary nature of the knights’ presence: when the time for serving their suzerain was over, they would leave the Holy Land and return home. The Saracens took advantage of this to regain their positions. In order to remedy this grave problem, nine knights, including André de Montbard, Bernard’s uncle, founded an order of “soldier monks” in 1129, that would become the Order of the Temple. The Knights Templar asked Bernard to draw up a rule for them, adapted from the Rule of Saint Benedict. The Order’s beginnings were as heroic as they were beneficial to the Crusaders’ cause. In 1130, Bernard addressed a letter to the Knights Templar. He reminded them that the Templar must be a disciplined fighter, free of pride and hatred.

The heresy of the Cathars was making significant progress in the south of France at the time, and Bernard stepped in to refute its erroneous doctrines, in particular the belief in the existence of two gods, one the creator of the spirit and the other the evil author of matter. In 1145, he

accompanied Alberic of Ostia, legate of Pope Eugene III, to the Languedoc region and preached there, but to no avail. It was not until the apostolate of Saint Dominic and the Friars Preachers that the heresy was defeated root and branch.

Also at that time, Gilbert de la Porrée (1076-1154), bishop of Poitiers, was trying to explain the mystery of the Trinity through human reasoning, but he ended up falling into grave error. He made an artificial distinction between God and the divinity. To help him return to the truth, his archdeacons appealed to Pope Eugene III, who referred the matter to a council held in Reims in 1148, which Gilbert himself attended. There, Bernard made a formal accusation of heresy against the bishop. Gilbert de la Porrée's theses were condemned and he recanted publicly.

In 1152, Bernard fell seriously ill. Everyone thought his end was near. However, the Bishop of Metz urgently appealed to him to intervene in his diocese, where civil war was raging. Moved by compassion, the dying man got up from his bed and set off to Metz. His mission complete, he returned to his abbey, but he was in a state of exhaustion. His monks gathered at his bedside, begging him not to abandon them. "I do not know to which of the two I must surrender", he replied, "either to the love of my children who are pressing me to stay here below, or to the love of my God which is drawing me up above..." These were his last words on the day he gave up his soul to God at the age of sixty-three, on August 20, 1153. He was canonized in 1174 by Alexander III. Bernard de Clairvaux was declared a Doctor of the Church by Pius VIII in 1830.

"Look to the star"

SAINTE Bernard magnificently sang the praises of MARY in a now-famous homily: "All of you, who see yourselves amid the tides of the world, tossed by storms and tempests

rather than walking on the land, do not turn your eyes away from this shining star, unless you want to be overwhelmed by the hurricane. If temptation storms, or you fall upon the rocks of tribulation, look to the star: Call upon MARY! If you are tossed by the waves of pride or ambition, detraction or envy, look to the star, call upon MARY. If anger or avarice or the desires of the flesh dash against the ship of your soul, turn your eyes to MARY. If troubled by the enormity of your crimes, ashamed of your guilty conscience, terrified by dread of the judgment, you begin to sink into the gulf of sadness or the abyss of despair, think of MARY ... Let her name be ever on your lips, ever in your heart... Following her, you stray not; invoking her, you despair not; thinking of her, you wander not; upheld by her, you fall not; shielded by her, you fear not; guided by her, you grow not weary; favored by her, you reach the goal" (Second homily on the *Missus est*, no. 17).

"The reason for loving God," says saint Bernard, "is God; the measure of this love is to love without measure" (*Treatise on the Love of God*, ch. 50). "Yet, although not all can reach the summit of that exalted contemplation of which Bernard speaks so eloquently," wrote Pope Pius XII, "and although not all can bind themselves so closely to God as to feel linked in a mysterious manner with the Supreme Good through the bonds of heavenly marriage; nevertheless, all can and must, from time to time, lift their hearts from earthly things to those of heaven, and most earnestly love the Supreme Dispenser of all gifts." Moreover, "as often as we fail to return God's love or to recognize His divine fatherhood with all due reverence, the bonds of brotherly love are unfortunately shattered and—as, alas, is so often evident,—discord, strife and enmity unhappily are the result, so much so as to undermine and destroy the very foundations of human society" (*Doctor mellifluus*, 13, 14).

Pope Pius XII says that the works of Saint Bernard, the "Doctor mellifluous" (from whom honey flows) "should be carefully pondered; because from their content, which in fact is taken from the Gospels, a new and heavenly strength can flow both into individual and on into social life, to give moral guidance, bring it into line with Christian precepts, and thus be able to provide timely remedies for the many grave ills which afflict mankind." Let us draw a renewed supernatural strength from the works of Saint Bernard, by following this invaluable advice from Pope Pius XII!

*+ f. Jean-Bernard, Abbot,
and all the monks of the Abbey*

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