



PROFILES IN FAITH

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) *A Mind and Heart for God*

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What have contemporary Christians got to do with the twelfth century? How can Bernard, a medieval saint, affect the lives of those commuters traveling on the Washington, D.C., beltway? Technology and professional life together tend to eliminate the relevance of history for this generation. Yet the human desires for the integration of life, to make it meaningful, to pursue happiness, and to achieve self-fulfillment have not changed. The human heart still pulsates with desire. So perhaps there is not such a chasm of nine centuries between us and Bernard as we might casually think. At least that is the intent of this essay, to stimulate interest in being more informed and sympathetic about this remarkable leader of the Church. For Bernard had a political influence over Europe that today would be the envy of anyone on Capitol Hill. Indeed, possibly no other monk has ever had such influence over affairs of state, as well as of the religious life of his generation, and of the generations to follow, an influence that Luther and other reformers were later to admire.

There are “hinge periods” of history which have profound significance for later times. The twelfth century was one of these, described as a “renaissance” in integrating faith and culture[i], for it witnessed the first stirrings of individual consciousness, with an active quest for personal values[ii]. It was richly reflective of the inner life of the Christian, while it actively promoted friendships in remarkable ways. It promoted a new status of dignity for women. It sought reform of the Christian life, in more imaginative depths of experiencing love than we know about today. Yet it also began to feel the clash of differing attitudes between monastic faith and the secular schools, in the teaching of theology. It witnessed the disastrous second Crusade, with its idealists and its villains.

Bernard was in the center of all these spiritual stirrings, an influential preacher, a rhetorical writer, an original theologian, and an extensive correspondent with all the leading players. His meditative depths, his mystical and charismatic spirit, his rhetorical skills as a communicator, even his apparent inconsistencies, mark him as inexhaustible. So he continues to remain challenging and debatable, certainly the opposite of mediocrity!

He is better known now than before, when he was so enveloped in hagiography, and his authorship was mistakenly diffused. Since the last fifty years much attention has been given to him by scholars. This began with a papal encyclical letter in 1953, to “the Mellifluous Doctor,” celebrating the eighth centenary of his death, as “the last of the Fathers” [of the Church] [iii].

Bernard: His Life and Character

Bernard was a younger son of Tescelin, feudal lord over territories in Burgundy and Champagne in France. Groomed for knighthood, he decided instead in 1111 to enter the monastic way of life. He first did this in his own home, and then shortly after moved into an obscure and poor monastic house at Citeaux, along with thirty companions, including eventually all his brothers. This house had been founded by Robert of Molesme in 1098 to promote the new order of the Cistercians, a reformed movement of the Rule of Benedict.

In 1115, Bernard was sent to found the monastery of Clairvaux, as its abbot. He was installed by the Bishop of Chalons-sur-Marne, William of Champeaux, who became one of his loyalist friends. He connected Bernard with influential leaders and launched him into public affairs, with extensive travels and wide diplomacy—unusual for a monk, let alone one still in his mid-twenties.

Bernard was subject to inner conflicts, was touchy, had an onerous sense of dutifulness, and was sometimes judgmental; some of his early letters show his immaturity. Trying to keep a balance between busyness and the contemplative life plagued him all his life. The rapid expansion of the Cistercian houses imposed onerous burdens on him also, not to mention the theological issues of heresy and papal politics. Prolonged periods of illness as well as the austerity of an ascetic life left its physical toll on him. Yet some twenty new foundations were created by Clairvaux alone, and within the next century, over 350 houses had spread from France as far north as Lapland, as far west as Ireland, and as far east as Lebanon. Bernard wrote over 500 letters; more are still being identified in widely scattered archives in Europe.

Associated with the Templars in his early days, he was asked by his pupil, the first Cistercian Pope, Eugenius III, to preach for the Second Crusade. It ended in disaster, and although Bernard had condemned its evil practices, he was blamed for its failure, and died under a cloud of failure. Because of his letters and the recording of many sermons and treatises which he re-edited throughout his life, we have remarkably detailed insights into his mind and heart.

Bernard's Anthropology

The common bond between the twelfth and the twenty-first centuries is perhaps the constant need of reflection upon theological anthropology. Influenced greatly by Augustine of Hippo, Bernard sees everything in tripartite ways, whereas today we see more flatly, as "this or that." But for him everything was viewed as an analogy of the mystery of God as Trinity. We see things factually; medieval Christians saw them allegorically, because all things on earth lay under heaven, and they gazed heavenwards, in a way we have lost.

In his Sermon 11 on the Song of Songs, he notes three faculties in the soul: "the reason, the will, the memory, and these three may be said to be the soul herself." But where we would emphasize the importance of reason, he would focus on the will, with its associates of desire and love. The human capacity to love is truly human, truly divine. Yet he also takes the intellect seriously, for without knowledge we cannot have discernment, nor make proper choices. But the will is not necessarily governed by the intellect: for human dignity is given freedom of will, even to make wrong choices. As Bernard argues: "Reason is given to the will for instruction, not destruction." [iv]. For good choices are preceded by the exercise of right reason. But choice is free, and Bernard values the will as the most important faculty in determining one's happiness [v].

It is commonly assumed that Bernard, as an ascetic, denigrated the body. But in his Sermon 3 on the Ascension, he would have us accept our bodies as seriously as God has taken them, in becoming incarnated in flesh. In many of his sermons on the incarnation, Bernard emphasizes that if God took the human body so seriously as to become a human being himself, in order to identify and know us, we should not despise our bodies. "But the reason why the Lord showed himself in the flesh to his disciples was this: to withdraw their thoughts and affections gradually from earthly things, attaching them at first to his own sacred flesh (by which, as they perceived, he spoke and wrought so many wonders) so that from there he might lift them up to a purely spiritual love of himself; for 'God is a spirit, and they who adore him must adore him in spirit and in truth' [John 4:24]" [vi].

Humans are created in the image and likeness of God. Like the early Fathers, Bernard distinguishes between the "likeness" which has been lost by the Fall, and the "image" which is still retained [vii]. But whereas Augustine locates the "image" in reason, Bernard sees it in the will. "I believe that in freedom of choice lies the image, and in the other two [freedoms, i.e., freedom of counsel and freedom of pleasure], is contained a certain twofold likeness [viii]. But the Fall brought disastrous consequences, in the twofold loss of the freedom of counsel and of pleasure. The former means we cannot stop sinning, while with the second loss we seek pleasure wrongfully. Consequently the misdirection of the will in its use by the intellect has brought pride. The will is now dominated by concupiscence. Envy becomes the negative appetite.

So the body has been profoundly affected by "the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life." Indeed, the body, he argues, has become the recipient rather than the primary source of misdirection, which is the will. Thus we have lost the humanity God intended us to have, in perfect freedom. Only the grace of Christ can restore us, in a process of gradual, life-long changes within our whole life, body and soul.

Conversion as our Lifelong Journey

"Instant conversion" was not on Bernard's radar screen, even though it was needed to recruit young adults from being knights in a feudal society to becoming "knights in and for Christ." That is still our tension today, of putting "conversion" too impatiently behind us; now we are "Christians"—at least as far as our "churchy friends" think of us. Yes, "a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step," as a Chinese proverb observes, but a step should not be confused with the thousand miles still ahead! This is where Bernard helps us to map out the journey in much more

detail. For him, “the Church” is not merely an institution nor a corporation, but the intimate love-relation between the Bride and Jesus Christ, as her Bridegroom. Now you cannot institutionalize “love”; it is personal, intimate, relational, and so deeply desirous. Thus Bernard’s famous sermons on the Song of Songs (86 sermons) are all about the dynamics of the love between the Christian and her Lord. “I have only one desire,” Bernard writes, “to show the hidden delights [of the love] between Christ and the Church” [ix].

But “the journey” differs for variant callings, as typified by Noah, Daniel, and Job. For the church leaders it is more like a sea voyage, such as Noah undertook to save humanity; for the monks focused on their contemplative life, it was like Daniel, standing at his window in prayer to his God; and for the people of God generally, it was like Job enduring much suffering in everyday life.

But however diverse these roles may be for the benefit of the whole Church of God, participation is a key element, of all sharing together in the love of God. “For there is not just one path to follow, just as there is not only one [heavenly] room toward which we journey. For whatever path one follows to whatever room, one will not be left outside the Father’s house” [x].

For Bernard there is no question that “faith” is the Christian’s guide for the journey, for “believing is having found [Christ]. The faithful know that Christ dwells in their hearts by faith (Ephesians 3:17). What could be nearer?”

So as he teaches his novitiates, he urges us all: “Seek him [Christ] with longing, [i.e., in prayer]; follow him in your actions; find him in faith. How can faith fail to find him? It reaches what is unreachable; makes known what is unknown; it apprehends what cannot be measured, plumbs the uttermost depths, and somehow it encompasses even eternity itself in its vast embrace. I speak in faith when I say that I believe in the eternal and blessed Trinity. Although I cannot grasp it with my mind, I hold fast by faith” [xi].

Another guide is charismatic knowledge, personal knowledge imparted by the Holy Spirit. It is experienced as the third of three “kisses”: that of the feet in contrition and repentance; that of the hand in submissive obedience to his service; and that of the “lips” in the contemplative union of love.

But of course, we can all be “charismatic,” for how can I distinguish between “my spirit” and the “Holy Spirit”? So Bernard responds: “The Holy Spirit searches not only the minds and hearts of men but even the depths of God. [1 Corinthians 2:10]; so whether it be into our own hearts or into the divine mysteries, I shall be secure in following him wherever he goes. He must keep watch over our hearts and our minds, lest

we think him present when he is not.” So he concludes that just as the Bride in the Song of Songs searches for her Beloved precisely because she knows he is absent, “the one who is indifferent to his absence will be led astray by other influences; the one who is blind to his coming cannot offer thanks for the visit” [xii].

Contemplation: As Degrees of Loving God

This then leads Bernard to seek for the life of contemplation as the *summum bonum*, the destiny of our journey into divine love. For while we serve as “Martha,” we are called to live as “Mary,” and while we actively need to “know yourself,” we are seeking to know and to be known of Christ. By “consideration,” Bernard advises Pope Eugenius III (his former Cistercian mentee) that we all need to pursue the “double knowledge” of knowing ourselves in the light of knowing God [xiii]. This is the quest of humility, indeed the true understanding of humility, that Bernard writes his treatise about, “The Steps of Humility and Pride” [xiv]. This then frees us to desire more clearly and freely to live in union with God, as the Bride seeks the Bridegroom.

So in the opening sentences of his treatise, “On Loving God,” Bernard begins: “You wish me to tell you why and how God should be loved. My answer is that God himself is the reason why he is to be loved. As for how he is to be loved, there is no limit to that love” [xv]. He then proceeds to show how God deserves our love. Living within the teaching of the Fathers, Bernard sees here no need for doctrinal polemics, for once one is secure in the arms of the Beloved, only love is needed to go on loving. So the way in which we also begin to love other people is to see Christ in them and with them, even if they themselves are unaware or ignorant of such love.

But there is progression in the journey of love. First of all, we love ourselves for our own sakes. In our fallen condition, this is destructive, for being created in God’s image implies that God gave me myself before I was ever aware of it. As I become aware of this, then I can enter the second degree of love, where for our own benefit we begin to love God; this is prudential. Then through frustrations and sufferings we learn that only God’s grace frees and sustains us through the difficulties of life. In the third degree a breakthrough occurs, when we begin to love God for God’s own sake. A liberation indeed has occurred, for what greater freedom can there be than being free from ourselves, especially in our own narcissistic culture today! But this is only possible when we have “tasted that the Lord is good!” This is why in his Encyclical letter of 1953, Pope Pius XII called Bernard “the Mellifluous doctor,” for he describes the nutrient sweetness of God’s love as being like honey. As the psalmist invites, “O taste and see that the Lord

is good." (Psalm 35:9) But it is a slow journey, for it requires an exchange of desires, from loving the world to loving Christ, and from self-reliance to reliance alone in Christ. Only then shall the "sweetness of Christ" grow in increasing esteem. This involves a great change of attitudes. For now we begin to love others also, whether they deserve it or not, as our Lord himself loves us. All is now being done in the obedience of love. Thus the fourth degree of love is also the ultimate degree of selflessness, of loving God with His own love. For the only love now worth having is God's love. In this realization, the Christian grows increasingly in unconscious self-forgetfulness, whether in helping and loving others, or indeed of experiencing no separation from the abiding presence of God within oneself.

It certainly illustrates the command of Deuteronomy 6:5 and of Mark 12:30, to love God with all our heart, soul, and strength. But to experience this perfectly will require that we have resurrected bodies in the eternal state. We can only have glimpses of this stage while here in our human bodies, for its realism does require embodiment, to provide availability to others, as ghosts never can provide. Such then is "a perfumed nosegay" of the mind and heart of Bernard. As he assures us so hopefully and joyously: "Nothing is impossible to believers, nothing too difficult for lovers, nothing too hard to the meek, nothing too arduous to the humble; to them grace lends its aid, and devotion gentles a command to the obedient person. Indeed, it is a great and marvelous thing to be the servant of Christ and a steward of the mysteries of God" [xvi].

Notes

[i] Robert L. Benson and Giles Constable, edit., *Renaissance and Renewal in the Twelfth Century*.

[ii] Robert W. Hanning, *The Individual in Twelfth-Century Romance*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press), 1977.

[iii] Thomas Merton, *The Last of the Fathers, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux and the Encyclical Letter, Doctor Mellifluous*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1954.

[iv] Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Grace and Free Choice*, trans. by Daniel O'Donovan, (Kalamazoo, Michigan, Cistercian Publications, 1972), section 3, 1.4.

[v] *Ibid.*, 2, 5.

[vi] *St. Bernard's Sermons for the Seasons and Principal Festivals of the Year*, trans. by Ailbe J. Luddy, (Westminster, Maryland: The Carroll Press, 1950), Ascension 3, 3.

[vii] Yet Bernard is inconsistent, sometimes saying it is rather the "image" which has been lost, and the "likeness" retained.

[viii] *On Grace and Free Choice*, 9.28.

[ix] Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs*, trans. by Irene Edmonds (Kalamazoo, Michigan), 1980, sermon 80.1.

[x] *Apologia ad Guillelmum abbatem*, 4.9, trans. by John R. Sommerfeldt, Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Life of the Mind*, (New York/Mahwah, New Jersey: The Newman Press, 2004), p. 17.

[xi] Bernard of Clairvaux, *The Song of Songs*.

[xii] *Ibid.*, sermon 17.1, pp. 126-7.

[xiii] Bernard of Clairvaux, *Five Books of Consideration: Advice to a Pope*, trans. by John N. Anderson and Elizabeth T. Kennan, (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1976.

[xiv] *On Grace and Free Will*.

[xv] Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Loving God*, with an analytical commentary by Emero Stiegman (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1995), *Song of Songs*.

[xvi] *Sermons on Conversion*, XXI, 38, p. 76.

Introductory Readings on Bernard of Clairvaux

Michael Casey, *Athirst for God: Spiritual Desire in Bernard's Sermons on the Song of Songs* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications), 1988.

Pierre-Yves Emery, *15 Days of Prayer with Saint Bernard*, (Liguori: Missouri), 2000.

Jean Leclercq, "Spiritual Guidance and Counseling according to St. Bernard," in John R. Sommerfeldt (ed.) *Abba: Guides to Wholeness and Holiness East and West* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian publications, 1982), pp. 64-87.

John R. Sommerfeldt, *On the Life of the Mind* (New York/Mahwah, New Jersey: The Newman Press), 2004.

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