

# Mystical Theology

## Bernard of Clairvaux

Kenneth Alonso, MD, PhD



The Apparition of the Virgin to St. Bernard  
Church of Badia, Florence  
[www.wga.hu](http://www.wga.hu)

# Bernard of Clairvaux

- 1090-1153 AD.
- Opposed, ultimately unsuccessfully, the (Aristotelian) rationalism of Peter Abelard.
- The philosophy of Abelard is a critical analysis, largely linguistic. As for what can be predicated of many different things because of resemblance (universals), Abelard maintained we do not predicate a thing, but a word as meaning. General concepts, then, are not based in the nature of things, but are confused images of many things. Universals, however, are God's concepts and exist in the divine mind as patterns for creation.

- Abelard viewed that apart from Scripture, dialectic is the sole road to truth (a rejection of experiment and experience). Nothing outside the Scriptures is infallible. Abelard thought the Trinity (and probably God) could be demonstrated by human reason.
- Though Abelard was condemned for such teachings, they were adopted by the influential Abbey of St. Victor. Hugh (1096-1141 AD), the abbot, was one of the founders of medieval scholasticism.

- Bernard felt such scholasticism destroyed the merit of the Christian faith. “My teachers are the Apostles.”
- In the 13<sup>th</sup> Century, scholasticism shaped the Roman Catholic Church.
- Bernard was a monastic reformer. (It was the abbot of Citeaux, regally attired and with retinue, who lamented his failure to slow the Albigenesian heresy, that so impressed Domingo de Guzman that he structured the Order bearing his name as unlike the Cistericans as was possible.)

- Bernard held life-long regrets for his preaching of the Second Crusade (his father died in the First Crusade) as well as his support for the Knights Templars (founded by a cousin). Bernard did not grasp the political and economic situation of the times; that religious enthusiasm alone could supplant the seduction of temporal power.
- Bernard wrote *On Consideration* for Pope Eugenius III, one of his former monks, describing the bishop's task (as did Gregory the Great). He was appalled by the absorption of bishops and popes in worldly affairs as their brief was spiritual.

- Its premise that spiritual power was supreme over temporal power was used to advance papal hegemony. The spiritual message that consideration (recollection) is searching for truth, active thinking, balancing and judging, and is what is demanded of bishops, was overlooked.
- Contemplation, in contrast to consideration, is the true and sure perception of the mind, an apprehension of the truth in which there is no doubt.
- The Steps of Humility and Pride, the Letter on Love, On Love of God, In Praise of the Virgin Mother, and his Commentary on the Song of Songs are Bernard's major spiritual works.

- God is lovable in His divine beauty.
- The love of the bride and bridegroom is the most intimate of human loves.
- “This affection of love excels among the gifts of nature, especially when it returns to its source, God”
- No name better expresses love between the Word and the soul, for they hold all in common. “They share one inheritance, one table, one house, and one bed, one flesh.”



- On the path leading back to God, the point of departure is humility and the point of destination is love.
- God is the source of all things, but the first object of man's thought is himself and the experience of his unique personal history. He tries to understand that history with the help of God's grace and in light of His word. The experience of himself and his pitiable condition sends him back to God and causes him to experience His love; it also leads him to put that love into practice according to the circumstances in which he is called to serve.

- Only an ascetic life prepares one to receive God's visit.
- The Scripture predates one's own experience and enables one to interpret his own experience because it has its continual source in the Church. Through study and reflection on the Scripture, one can begin to understand the problem one has with oneself.
- Salvation history is a love story between God and his people (the Church) and between God and each individual person.

- God's love is self-revealing; it is expressed through the inspired authors and most fully in the Incarnate Word. God continues to speak in the words he has left us and through his Spirit.
- God seeks us and wants us to seek Him. He does everything to ensure that we will go to Him to experience an encounter of loving union.
- The more a person understands himself, the more he can enlighten others about themselves.

- “There are those who, along with Mary, are concerned with God alone. They dwell on what God is in the world, in human beings, in angels, in himself, and in the condemned. They dwell on the reality of God as the ruler and lord of the world, as the liberator and helper of men, as the delight and beauty of the angels, as beginning and end within himself, as the terror and fright of wrongdoers. He is marvelous in his creatures, lovable in men, desirable in angels, beyond comprehension in Himself, and intolerable in the reprobate.”

- Love of self begins with acceptance of our carnal condition, that we exist with a body and in a body. We must care for the body properly; but we must love it in moderation and with ascetic practice keep it under control.
- We exist in a society from which we receive and to which we must contribute.
- The desire for God is a form of love, pointing to the possession of and union with God that will be completely realized only in our future life beyond time.

- God is the origin of all things. In order to speak to men, he made an image of Himself, since men, as corporeal beings, cannot understand or express things without images. The Bible is a book of mental images and places within our reach all the symbols, characters, and parables by which God speaks to us. In his Son, God shares man's experience of finiteness.

- Christ passed from the life of the flesh to glory in the life of the Spirit. This transition from flesh to Spirit can be accomplished in us because it has first taken place in Christ. The Spirit comes to us by means of the flesh of the Lord, which is united to His divinity; by the flesh of the Son of Man, we are raised to the Spirit of the Son of God.

- To be “of one mind with God, wed to the Lord of angels” is beyond our capacity. For this union one must be free even of intelligent thoughts; everything, even neighborly concern, is put aside, and the soul and its spouse are alone. The soul no longer sees the Bridegroom as King, but as Beloved, beyond speech and vision.



- This personal, intimate union is simply the extension of the coming of the Word to mankind through the Incarnation. The union of the soul and the Bridegroom is the fulfillment, the realization of the union of Christ and His Church.
- “Together we make up the church and each one participates in its blessings” as “the Church is...the unity...the unanimity of many souls” each of whom is indebted to all the others. The graces that are received by the individual soul must be placed at the service of all.

- Pride begins with curiosity. It proceeds to light chatter and merriment, boasting and talking too much. Special rights are claimed. It leads to interference with others, self-justification, insincere confession, rebellion, and habitual sinning.
- Humility requires constant watchfulness against sin; renunciation of one's own will with obedience to those in authority over one; patience, confession, restrained speech and laughter, containment of interests; realizing that one has no special rights.

- “The bread of sorrow (Ps 126:2) and the wine of compunction (Ps 59:5)... are offered first” to those who begin the way of purification. “Contemplation brings the solid food of wisdom (Heb 5:14)... with the wine that gladdens men’s hearts (Ps 103:5).”
- “The nature of truth must first be sought in our neighbors before we seek it in itself. After this you will be (understand) why you ought to seek it in yourself before you seek it in your neighbor...”

- In the list of beatitudes which He gave in the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord put the merciful before the pure in heart (Mt 5:7-8). The merciful are quick to see the truth in their neighbors when they feel for them, and unite themselves with them in love so closely that they feel their goods and ills as their own. When the weak suffer, they suffer. When their neighbors are led into sin, they burn for them (2 Cor 11:29). They ‘rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep’ (Rom 12:15). With hearts purified by this brotherly love they delight in the contemplation of truth in itself, for whose love they bear the troubles of others.”

- “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. (Mt 12:30)”
- “The faithful know how utterly they stand in need of Jesus and Him crucified (1 Cor 2:2). They wonder at and reach out to that supreme love of His which passes all knowledge (Eph 3:19). They are ashamed not to respond to such love and deserving with the little they have to give” for those to whom less has been given love less (Lk 7:47).”
- “‘Blessed are those who are hungry and thirst for righteousness’ now (Mt 5:6), for they alone will be satisfied one day.”

- The Song of Songs is a poem in praise of Christ and the Church , sung to the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. It also expresses the longings of the soul. The union with God, which is extolled in a kiss (Sgs 1:1), is the presence of the Incarnate Word.
- Through the Incarnation, Christ the Mediator brings God's mercy to man in his distress. The soul, then as did Mary Magdalene (cleansed of seven demons, Lk 8:2), cries out, "I am black but beautiful." (Sgs 1:5)

- Man can know God without loving Him. Beginning with creation, he can proceed rationally to the idea of a first cause (but not with certainty as the god of philosophy is not the God of Israel), but not to the Trinity. Love alone grants a share in the loving knowledge of the divine Persons, a share Christ granted to the Apostles, and, through them, to the Church.
- “Only the touch of the Holy Spirit teaches, and it is learned by experience alone...Let those who have not, burn with desire...”

- “After the Bridegroom has gazed on the soul with kindness and mercy, His voice whispers softly the divine will. His voice is love itself, and love never rests but is continually urging the heart to do God’s bidding. The spouse also hears the call to rise up in haste and take up the work of saving souls. The nature of pure contemplation is such that, while kindling the heart with divine love, it sometimes fills it with great zeal to win other souls for God. The heart gladly gives up the quiet of contemplation for the work of preaching...”



- Once its desires are fulfilled, the heart quickly returns to contemplation, as to the source of good works. In the same way, once it has tasted anew the delights of contemplation, it joyfully dedicates itself to new works. Nevertheless, the soul fears the changing affections and fluctuating movements between contemplation and action. It is likewise wary of becoming overly attached to anything, lest it turn away, even slightly, from the divine will. Thus, the Bride is ever watchful and listens for the steps of the Bridegroom, so as not to be taken unawares by the time or swiftness of His visits. ..

- She knows when He is near and when He is far away; He does not surprise her even if He comes in haste. In recompense, not only does He regard her with mercy, but He delights her with loving words and His voice fills her with joy.” (cf Mt 25:1-13)
- “My beloved is mine and I am his.” (Sgs 2:16) This represents a mutual assent, an embrace. There is an outpouring of love. Everything takes place in the heart and reason is powerless either to effect or express this mutual love. “I am wounded by love.” (Sgs 2:5)

- “Our couch is green; the beams of our house (1 Kg 6) are cedar, cypress, and pine.” (Sgs 1:17) These are the three woods of the Cross.
- “I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys.” (Sgs 2:1; cf Mt 6:28-30).
- “My love speaks and says to me, ‘Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.’” (Sgs 2:10; Mt 25:6). It was Moses who said, “Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying Him, and holding fast to Him; for that means life to you.”..” (Dt 30:20)

- “The Church sees King Solomon in the crown which his mother had placed on his head (Sgs 3:11). She sees the Father’s only-begotten Son carrying His Cross. (Jo 19:7) She sees the Lord of majesty (1 Cor 2:8) struck and spat upon. She sees the Author of life and glory (Acts 3:15) transfixed by nails, wounded by a lance (Jo 19:34), smeared with abuse (Lam 3:30), and finally laying down His life for His friends (Jer 12:7; Jo 15:13). She sees these things, and the sword of love pierces her soul more deeply (cf Lk 2:35), and she cries, “Surround me with flowers, pile up apples around me, for I am sick with love.” (Sgs 3:11).

- The Bride brings pomegranates into her Beloved's garden. (Sgs 6:10). "They were picked from the Tree of Life, and their taste has been transmuted to that of the heavenly bread, and their color to that of Christ's blood. At last she sees the death of death and death's author defeated. (Heb 2:14) She sees captivity led captive (Eph 4:8) from Hades to Earth and from Earth to Heaven, so that at the name of Jesus every Knee may bow, in Heaven, on Earth, and in Hades. (Phil 2:10) Under the ancient curse the earth had produced thorns and thistles; now she sees it burst into bloom again under...grace...

- She remembers the verse, ‘My flesh has bloomed again, and willingly shall I praise Him.’ (Ps 27:7). She desires to add to the pomegranate fruits which she gathered from the tree of the Cross some of the flowers of the Resurrection whose fragrance more than anything else invites the Bridegroom to visit her more often.”

- “Next she says, ‘You are fair, my Beloved, and beautiful. Our bed is strewn with flowers.’ (Sgs 1:15) By the mention of the bed she makes it plain enough what she desires; and when she says that it is strewn with flowers she indicates clearly why she hopes to be granted her desire; not for her own merits” (but in the) “constant reflection on the grace of the Passion and the glory of the Resurrection. There He is present constantly and willingly...’ Now winter is over. The rain is past and gone. Flowers appear in our land.’ (Sgs 2:11-12) ‘Behold, I make all things new.’” (Rev 21:5)

- “The Bride enjoys a greater freedom, for she may gather fruit and pick the flowers when she wishes. (Sgs 7:13) With these she strews her conscience within, so that when the Bridegroom comes the couch of her heart may give off a sweet fragrance...With these fruits and flowers the Bride begs to be surrounded and nourished now. I believe that she does so sensing that the warmth of her love can easily cool if it is not encouraged and supported until she is led into the chamber (Sgs 2:5; 3:4), where she can be held in the long desired embrace (Prov 7:18), so that she can say, ‘His left hand is under my head and His right hand has embraced me.’ (Sgs 2:6) ...



- Then she will know and experience indeed all the testimonies of love which she has received at His first coming, as though from the left hand of the Beloved, and far less sweet and of less worth than the embrace of the right hand. (Ps 30:20) She will experience what she has heard, 'The flesh is of no value; it is the Spirit that gives life.' (Jo 6:64) She will prove in reality what she has heard, 'My spirit is sweeter than honey, and my inheritance than honey and the honeycomb,' (Sir 24:27) and what follows, 'The memory of me will endure forever.' (Sir 24:28)...

- God's chosen ones will not be without the consolation of memory until they can enjoy the feast of God's presence... 'Generation after generation will praise your works.' (Ps 144:4) And so memory for the generations of this world; presence belongs to the Kingdom of Heaven. Those who are chosen already enjoy the glory of His presence there."

- To the wicked and stubborn generation (Ps 77:8) it is said, “Woe to you who are rich; you have your consolation.” (Lk 6:24)
- To those whose soul refused to be comforted (Ps 76:3), “I remembered the Lord and rejoiced.” (Ps 76:4) This is the generation that seeks the Lord. (cf Ps 23:6)
- “He who eats me will hunger for more.” (Sir 24:29). And he who is fed by God says, “I shall be satisfied at the sight of your glory.” (Ps 16:15)

- The Lord promised that, “He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life.” (Jo 6:55)
- He also promised that, “If we suffer together, you will reign with me.” (cf Rom 8:17; 2 Tim 2:12)
- “Yet many today shrink back at these words and desert Him (Jo 6:67; 8:16), and answer...in their actions, ‘This is a hard saying. Who can listen to it?’ (Jo 6:61) ... How will (they) bear the weight of His words when (they actually hear) them, ‘Go, you who are cursed, into everlasting fire which is prepared for the Devil and his angels.’ (Mt 21:44) This stone will crush him on whom it falls.” (Mt 21:44)

- Those who have disciplined their heart, who slept but with their heart awake (Sgs 5:2), the righteous, will hear, “Come, you blessed of my Father...” (Mt 25:34)
- Taste and see how sweet the Lord is. (Ps 33:9) “In the clefts of the rock (Ex 33:21-32;1 Kgs 19:11-13)...let me see your face.” (Sgs 2:14). “Make haste, my beloved...” (Sgs 8:14)

# Bibliography

- An excellent introduction may be found in GR Evans (translator), **Bernard of Clairvaux. Selected works.** Paulist Press. New York. (1987)