



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Saint Peter's Square
Wednesday, 21 October 2009

[\[Video\]](#)

Saint Bernard of Clairvaux

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today I would like to talk about St Bernard of Clairvaux, called "the last of the Fathers" of the Church because once again in the 12th century he renewed and brought to the fore the important theology of the Fathers. We do not know in any detail about the years of his childhood; however, we know that he was born in 1090 in Fontaines, France, into a large and fairly well-to-do family. As a very young man he devoted himself to the study of the so-called liberal arts especially grammar, rhetoric and dialectics at the school of the canons of the Church of Saint-Vorles at Châtillon-sur-Seine; and the decision to enter religious life slowly matured within him. At the age of about 20, he entered Cîteaux, a new monastic foundation that was more flexible in comparison with the ancient and venerable monasteries of the period while at the same time stricter in the practice of the evangelical counsels. A few years later, in 1115, Bernard was sent by Stephen Harding, the third Abbot of Cîteaux, to found the monastery of Clairvaux. Here the young Abbot he was only 25 years old was able to define his conception of monastic life and set about putting it into practice. In looking at the discipline of other monasteries, Bernard firmly recalled the need for a sober and measured life, at table as in clothing and monastic buildings, and recommended the support and care of the poor. In the meantime the community of Clairvaux became ever more numerous and its foundations multiplied.

In those same years before 1130 Bernard started a prolific correspondence with many people of both important and modest social status. To the many *Epistolae* of this period must be added numerous *Sermones*, as well as *Sententiae* and *Tractatus*. Bernard's great friendship with William, Abbot of Saint-Thierry, and with William of Champeaux, among the most important figures of the 12th century, also date to this period. As from 1130, Bernard began to concern himself with many serious matters of the Holy See and of the Church. For this reason he was obliged to leave his monastery ever more frequently and he sometimes also travelled outside France. He founded several women's monasteries and was the protagonist of a lively correspondence with Peter the Venerable, Abbot of Cluny, of whom I spoke last Wednesday. In his polemical writings he targeted in particular Abelard, a great thinker who had conceived of a new approach to theology, introducing above all the dialectic and philosophical method in the construction of theological thought. On another front Bernard combated the heresy of the Cathars, who despised matter and the human body and consequently despised the Creator. On the other hand, he felt it was his duty to defend the Jews, and condemned the ever more widespread outbursts of anti-Semitism. With regard to this aspect of his apostolic action, several decades later Rabbi Ephraim of Bonn addressed a vibrant tribute to Bernard. In the same period the holy Abbot wrote his most famous works such as the celebrated *Sermons on the Song of Songs [In Canticum Sermones]*. In the last years of his life he died in 1153 Bernard was obliged to curtail his journeys but did not entirely stop travelling. He made the most of this time to review definitively the whole collection of his *Letters*, *Sermons* and *Treatises*. Worthy of mention is a quite unusual book that he completed in this same period, in 1145, when Bernardo Pignatelli, a pupil of his, was elected Pope with the name of Eugene III. On this occasion, Bernard as his spiritual father, dedicated to his spiritual son the text *De Consideratione* [Five Books on Consideration] which contains teachings on how to be a good Pope. In this book, which is still appropriate reading for the Popes of all times, Bernard did not only suggest how to be a good Pope, but also expressed a profound vision of the Mystery of the Church and of the Mystery of Christ which is ultimately resolved in contemplation of the mystery of the Triune God. "The search for this God who is not yet sufficiently sought must be continued", the holy Abbot wrote, "yet it may be easier to search for him and find him in prayer rather than in discussion. So let us end the book here, but not the search" (XIV, 32: *PL* 182, 808) and in journeying on towards God.

I would now like to reflect on only two of the main aspects of Bernard's rich doctrine: they concern Jesus Christ and Mary Most Holy, his Mother. His concern for the Christian's intimate and vital participation in God's love in Jesus Christ brings no new guidelines to the scientific status of theology. However, in a more decisive manner than ever, the Abbot of Clairvaux embodies the theologian, the contemplative and the mystic. Jesus alone Bernard insists in the face of the complex dialectical reasoning of his time Jesus alone is "honey in the mouth, song to the ear, jubilation in the heart (*mel in ore, in aure melos, in corde iubilum*)". The title *Doctor Mellifluus*, attributed to Bernard by tradition, stems precisely from this; indeed, his praise of Jesus Christ "flowed like honey". In the extenuating battles between Nominalists and Realists two philosophical currents of the time the Abbot of Clairvaux never tired of repeating that only one name counts, that

of Jesus of Nazareth. "All food of the soul is dry", he professed, "unless it is moistened with this oil; insipid, unless it is seasoned with this salt. What you write has no savour for me unless I have read *Jesus* in it" (*In Canticum Sermones XV*, 6: *PL* 183, 847). For Bernard, in fact, true knowledge of God consisted in a personal, profound experience of Jesus Christ and of his love. And, dear brothers and sisters, this is true for every Christian: faith is first and foremost a personal, intimate encounter with Jesus, it is having an experience of his closeness, his friendship and his love. It is in this way that we learn to know him ever better, to love him and to follow him more and more. May this happen to each one of us!

In another famous *Sermon on the Sunday in the Octave of the Assumption* the Holy Abbot described with passionate words Mary's intimate participation in the redeeming sacrifice of her Son. "O Blessed Mother", he exclaimed, "a sword has truly pierced your soul!... So deeply has the violence of pain pierced your soul, that we may rightly call you more than a martyr for in your participation in the passion of the Son by far surpasses in intensity the physical sufferings of martyrdom" (14: *PL* 183, 437-438). Bernard had no doubts: "*per Mariam ad Iesum*", through Mary we are led to Jesus. He testifies clearly to Mary's subordination to Jesus, in accordance with the foundation of traditional Mariology. Yet the text of the *Sermone* also documents the Virgin's privileged place in the economy of salvation, subsequent to the Mother's most particular participation (*compassio*) in the sacrifice of the Son. It is not for nothing that a century and a half after Bernard's death, Dante Alighieri, in the last canticle of the *Divine Comedy*, was to put on the lips of the *Doctor Mellifluus* the sublime prayer to Mary: "Virgin Mother, daughter of your own Son, / humble and exalted more than any creature, / fixed term of the eternal counsel" (*Paradise XXXIII*, vv. 1 ff.).

These reflections, characteristic of a person in love with Jesus and Mary as was Bernard, are still a salutary stimulus not only to theologians but to all believers. Some claim to have solved the fundamental questions on God, on man and on the world with the power of reason alone. St Bernard, on the other hand, solidly founded on the Bible and on the Fathers of the Church, reminds us that without a profound faith in God, nourished by prayer and contemplation, by an intimate relationship with the Lord, our reflections on the divine mysteries risk becoming an empty intellectual exercise and losing their credibility. Theology refers us back to the "knowledge of the Saints", to their intuition of the mysteries of the living God and to their wisdom, a gift of the Holy Spirit, which become a reference point for theological thought. Together with Bernard of Clairvaux, we too must recognize that man seeks God better and finds him more easily "in prayer than in discussion". In the end, the truest figure of a theologian and of every evangelizer remains the Apostle John who laid his head on the Teacher's breast.

I would like to conclude these reflections on St Bernard with the invocations to Mary that we read in one of his beautiful homilies. "In danger, in distress, in uncertainty", he says, "think of Mary, call upon Mary. She never leaves your lips, she never departs from your heart; and so that you may obtain the help of her prayers, never forget the example of her life. If you follow her, you cannot

falter; if you pray to her, you cannot despair; if you think of her, you cannot err. If she sustains you, you will not stumble; if she protects you, you have nothing to fear; if she guides you, you will never flag; if she is favourable to you, you will attain your goal..." (*Hom. II super Missus est*, 17: PL 183, 70-71).

To special groups

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I offer a warm welcome to the English-speaking pilgrims present at today's Audience, especially from the Dioceses of Lismore and Saginaw accompanied by their Bishops, as well as from Holy Cross and St Margaret Mary Parish in Edinburgh. I also greet the visitors from The Netherlands, Nigeria, Tanzania, England, Ireland, Norway and Sweden. Upon all of you I invoke God's Blessings of peace, joy and hope!

I address a cordial greeting to the Italian-speaking pilgrims and, in particular, to the participants in the General Chapter of the Comboni Missionaries of the Heart of Jesus and while I thank this Religious Family for the missionary work they carry out, especially in Africa, I hope it will continue with renewed apostolic zeal to make the charism of St Daniel Comboni ever more up to date in the world.

I greet the Religious, Servants of Charity Opera Don Guanella and in the imminence of their Founder's Feast, I encourage them to work in the Church with generous dedication. Lastly, I greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. Dear friends, the month of October invites us to renew our active cooperation with the Church's mission. With the fresh energy of youth, with the power of prayer and sacrifice and with the potential of married life, may you be Gospel missionaries and offer your concrete support to all who toil, dedicating their whole life to the evangelization of peoples.

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