



Prayer Before Studying Theology:

O God, whose greatness know no limits, whose wisdom knows no bounds, whose peace excels all understanding; you who love and help us beyond measure--help us to love you. Though we cannot fully do so because of your infinite goodness, increase and deepen our understanding so that we may love you more and more; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

--Bernard of Clairvaux

Week #7a: The Knowledge and Love of God in Bernard of Clairvaux

- **The Life and Works of Bernard of Clairvaux**
- **Monastic Theology and the Rise of Scholastic Theology**

The Life and Works of Bernard of Clairvaux

Bernard's Early Life and Monastic Vocation

Little is known of Bernard's early years and the standard life of Bernard is a hagiographical account attributed to the theologian and spiritual writer William of St. -Thierry who came to know Bernard only later in life after he had become Abbot of Clairvaux.

- (Hagiographical=describes Bernard's life as a saint, according to the conventions of what was expected of a saint; not an objective biography, but emphasizes dreams, visions, ecstatic experiences, victory over temptations to unchastity and other traditional features of saints' lives.)
- (William also idealizes Bernard and the Abbey of Clairvaux, presenting them as a model for the newly founded Cistercian Order.)

Bernard was born into a family belonging to the minor nobility (father and brothers=knights) at Fontaines-lès-Dijon in Burgundy (France), one of seven children (six boys and a girl), Unlike his brothers, Bernard had been sent by his parents to a small school operated by the Canons Regular at St.-Vorles, near Dijon (perhaps because he was an unusually gifted child, perhaps because under the law of primogeniture younger male children needed to find a career in the church since they lacked the right to inherit property).

At the age of 21 (1111), he decided to pursue the monastic life at Citeaux, a monastery near his family's estates that was experiencing the beginning of a spiritual renewal that would ultimately lead to the founding of the Cistercian order.

- Among other things, the Cistercians rejected the idea (accepted in other monasteries which also stemmed from the Benedictine tradition) that monasteries could receive feudal revenues. By reemphasizing manual labor and promoting the cultivation of marginal, previously uncultivated land, they contributed much to the further development of agriculture, animal husbandry

and the European economy, as well as being viewed as authoritative teachers on prayer and the love of God.

A zealous and charismatic individual, Bernard persuaded his uncle, his brothers, other young noblemen and even his married sister to renounce the world and enter the monastery of Citeaux (1112 or 1113). In 1115, he was sent, with his brothers and companions, to found a monastery at Clairvaux in Champagne (France), engaging in manual labor to make the monastery self-supporting. Within two years he was named abbot of the monastery. He subsequently founded 68 monasteries in total over a 35-year period, which formed part of the emerging Cistercian order of which Bernard was the principal promoter (at the time of Bernard's death, this included 365 houses all across Europe, of which 164 were answerable more or less directly to him). Large numbers of young men left their noble station and military service to become part of a growing movement of spiritual renewal.

Bernard's Works

Bernard's primary concern was the teaching of the monks who had joined him but in 1124, he was persuaded to set down his teaching on humility in writing. This became his classic work *The Steps of Humility and Pride* (1125-1126). Around the same time, he was also asked to summarize his teaching on the love of God, which appeared as a *Letter on Love*, later appended to it his larger treatise *On Loving God* (1127-1135).

Beginning 1127 or 1128 with his work *On the Conduct and Duties of Bishops*, Bernard was also asked to provide guidance for the secular clergy, urging church leaders to be more concerned for the holiness of the church and the care of the poor. Bernard also played a certain role in the development of the Church's first military order, the Knights Templar, which had been founded in 1118 by Bernard's cousin Hugh de Payns (Hugue de Payen or Hugo of Payen) for the protection of pilgrims traveling to the Holy Land (laymen bearing arms as knights but committed to a rule of life and attached to a monastic community of Canons Regular). Bernard defended the idea of members of a religious order carrying arms to defend the innocent from violence in *De Laude novae militiae* ("In praise of the new knighthood"). In 1128 Bernard gave the Templars a form of rule, patterned after the Cistercian rule, to guide their communal life.

In 1130-1138, Bernard played a role in supporting the pope Innocent II (1130-1143) against a rival, the antipope Anacletus II, helping Innocent II to be universally recognized as pope in 1138. During this period Bernard also wrote a treatise *On Grace and Free Will* (possibly begun as early as 1126), a series of classic sermons on the Song of Songs (1135-1153) and a penetrating work *On the Conversion of Clerics*, which examines the ways in which different forms of selfishness arise in the heart and the joy the soul experiences in turning away from self-focus to the service of others for Christ's sake. In 1145-1148 he also produced a work (the *Consideration*) for the Pope Eugene III (1145-1153, formerly one of Bernard's disciples at Clairvaux) on papal spirituality and the prevention of abuses of power and office.

Bernard's Contribution to Doctrinal and Polemical Theology:

The Systematization of Monastic/Spiritual Theology and Opposition to the Emerging Scholastic Theology

Monastic Theology

In the tenth to twelfth centuries theology was preserved and taught in the monasteries. What “theology” meant in this context was a bit different than what one finds later in the church when the scholastic method becomes dominant. Monastic theology claimed that

- (1) *faith* and the *understanding* of divine truths are both a *gift of God*
- (2) faith must come *first* before an enquiry seeking understanding can begin
 1. Augustine: “Unless you believe, you will not understand”
 2. Anselm: *Faith seeking understanding (fides quaerens intellectum)*
- (3) Knowledge of God involves grasping the things of God not merely *intellectually* but also *experientially*.
 1. For the person who already has faith, yearning to understand (*the love of learning*) increases one’s yearning for what one seeks to grasp (*the love of God*).
 - a. This distinction was further explored and developed by Bernard’s contemporary and biographer, William of St. Thierry (author of *The Nature and Dignity of Love* and *The Enigma of Faith*).
 2. *Reflective rational consciousness* and *spiritual experience* can thus be seen as part of the same unified process—the *search for knowledge* supports and plays an important role in the *quest for the contemplation of God and experiential communion with God*, even though the latter ultimately transcend the created capacities of reason:

Monastic Theology

Faith (=trust in God and what God has revealed)→

Faith questions what is known and desires greater knowledge of God→

Incremental increase in knowledge of God leads to greater desire for God and yearning to be with him and focused upon him through contemplation.

3. “Monastic theology, for its part, had always sought the understanding that was considered a gift of the Holy Spirit, a wisdom that consisted in a deeper, prayerful penetration of the mysteries of faith through contemplative experience of God, that is, through mystical experience. One should rather say that monastic life sought this, and within this search developed a way of study and reading and finally a type of theology that, especially in the twelfth century, has been designated as monastic theology” (Principe, *Introduction to Patristic and Medieval Theology*, 2 ed., p. 208).

4. The older study of Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God* (New York, 1961) is a fascinating reflection upon this older way of approaching theology and its continuing relevance to Christians today.

The Emerging Scholastic Theology

In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, a new form of education (emphasizing the teaching of the liberal arts as a necessary basis for engaging in the rational analysis of theological questions) emerged in a new place (the teaching of the cathedral schools in the towns, initially largely staffed by the secular clergy under the direction of the bishop, and primarily being concerned to educate the children of the nobility). These taught as the basis for all human rational enquiry:

- 1) **grammar**—exploring how words convey meaning, particularly through learning to analyze the logical form and syntax of sentences (so that one can examine and find the meaning of propositions)
- 2) dialectics or **logic**—reasoning from premises and critically analyzing how this occurs and which forms are more or less valid/persuasive. By this means, one can arrive at conclusions which are binding upon reason and should compel rational assent.
- 3) topical argumentation (**rhetoric**) – question and answer format plus debate to resolve apparent contradictions in claims made about the faith (or other topics)

This type of theology reflected the recent (1130-1240) and increasing translation of Greek texts on logic, physics, mathematics and psychology from an Arabic intermediary into Latin.

- The main course of education was called the **trivium**; this focused on
 - grammar,
 - logic and
 - rhetoric,with logic being given the greatest prominence of the three.
- There was also a secondary course of studies, less commonly and diligently pursued, called the **quadrivium**, which consisted of
 - arithmetic,
 - geometry,
 - astronomy and
 - music.

The teaching of the trivium and quadrivium reflected received traditions of Greco-Roman education in the Roman imperial period, which with some adaptation and modification survived into the medieval era.

Scholastic Theology

One must seek knowledge, through the ability to reason (which God has given to human beings), of matters divine and human→

The deliverances of reason (i.e. the basic principles of grammar, logic and rhetoric, which should be accepted by any reasonable person) may be used to systematically investigate and propose answers to difficult questions→

By this means, one may arrive at greater clarity and certainty concerning what is in doubt and may also refute false teaching.

Positively, scholastic theology was an attempt of

- explaining how ordinary ways of knowing (the liberal arts) were related to religious ways of knowing, allowing one to
 - i. answer difficult questions about the interpretation of texts (*expositio textuum*=the lecturer's exposition of an authoritative text, so as to expose the meaning of the text as clearly as possible)
- give formal recognition to the role that human reason plays in theology (i.e. theology is a rational discipline which uses a scientific method to arrive at systematic conclusions), albeit under and within faith
 - i. resolving questions and doubts by discussing difficulties and apparent contradictions within an authoritative text or between authoritative texts, so that the believer might arrive at a higher degree of *certainty* regarding the truth of a statement of belief.
- arrive at greater clarity about certain matters that had not previously been an object of doctrinal definition in response to heretical teaching (e.g. sacramental teaching is discussed and clarified at this time)

Negatively, this led in some cases to

- a tendency to see grace and the supernatural as continuous with or extensions of nature and natural powers/capacities
- more polemical forms of topical discussion regarding controversial matters (*disputatio*= "disputation"), with somewhat less emphasis upon the careful exposition of the biblical text for the benefit of the whole people of God
- driving a wedge between spiritual experience and rational consciousness (once these had been separated, rational consciousness sometimes became privileged at the expense of spiritual experience)

Bernard participated in several controversies. The most notable was his opposition to Abélard's teaching on the relation between faith and reason and concerning the progress of Christian doctrine:

- Abélard's claim that **understanding must precede faith**
 - "What is more ridiculous than if someone who wishes to teach someone else is asked whether he understands what he is saying and he says he himself does not understand what he says or that he does not know what he is talking about?" (*Theologia 'Scholarium' 2.3*; PL 178,1054C; tr. in Walter H. Principe, *Introduction to Patristic and Medieval Theology*, 2 ed., Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1987, p. 197)
- Contrast Bernard's Augustinian/Benedictine view that **faith precedes understanding** and **the love of learning is profitable only when it aims at a higher purpose, namely to promote and increase the love of God** (whom one already knows by faith).
- Abélard made a distinction between *cognoscere* (to know), *intelligere* (to understand) and *credere* (to believe). It is only by engaging in active research and inquiry and experiencing doubt that we can gain understanding and arrive at a firm belief regarding divine matters: "through doubt we come to inquiry, through inquiry to truth" (*dubitando ad inquisitionem, inquirendo ad veritatem*). The

person who refuses this process of careful inquiry will never arrive at a firm faith: "He who believes quickly [i.e. without difficulty and a process of inquiry], is light in heart [i.e. is light-minded, capricious and inconstant]" (Sir. 19:4).

- Bernard's reply:
 - "For what is more contrary to reason than to try to transcend reason by means of reason [i.e. by trying to use rational inquiry to move beyond mere knowledge to arrive at understanding and then move beyond understanding to arrive at firm belief]. And what is more contrary to faith than not to want to believe whatever cannot be arrived at by means of reason?" (*Quid enim magis contra rationem, quam rationem ratione conari transcendere? Et quid magis contra fidem, quam credere nolle quicquid non posset ratione attingi*).
 - A "faith" which included doubt and uncertainty would hardly be faith at all; without a forward-looking certainty in regard to a truth of the faith, one has not faith but mere opinion (*Fides est voluntaria quaedam et certa praelibatio necdum prolatae veritatis...Ergo fides ambiguum non habet, aut si habet, fides non est, sed opinio*).
 - ♣ Compare Heb. 11:1: "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see."
 - To know and trust in the truths of the faith and pursue holiness is sufficient to arrive at blessedness (*Nil autem malum scire, quam quae fide jam scimus...Non ea disputatio comprehendit, sed sanctitas*).
 - "Faith believes; it does not dispute" (Letter 338; tr. in F. Donald Logan, *A History of the Church in the Middle Ages*, New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 160)

Bernard's Later Years

- Bernard was sent to preach against the Cathars (*Cathari*, a dualist sect in southern France) after the latter were condemned at the Second Lateran Council in 1139. (The Cathars would eventually be crushed by force when a crusade was launched against them at the beginning of the next century.)
- Bernard secured the condemnation of Arnold of Brescia (d. 1155) at the Council of Sens in 1140. (Arnold was a radical reformer who criticized the worldliness of the Church, arguing that the clergy should not own land, that confession should be made only to lay Christians and not the priest, and that the sacraments offered by immoral priests were invalid. Arnold also led an uprising against the Pope in 1146 and controlled Rome for nearly ten years until Frederick Barbarossa captured the city and had Arnold hanged.)
- Bernard also took some controversial positions on the direction of the Church (e.g., his support in 1146-1147 for the Second Crusade declared by his former disciple at Clairvaux, Pope Eugenius III (1145-1153), which can only be regarded as a disaster),
- Bernard died on Aug. 20, 1153, was canonized (i.e. officially recognized as a saint) in 1174 and was declared a Doctor of the Church (i.e., was officially recognized as one of the authoritative teachers) of the Church, by Pope Pius VIII in 1830.
 - Note also that in the *Paradiso* (*Canto* 33) of Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), Bernard appears as a figure who leads the author, during a journey through

the heavenly realms into the presence of the Virgin Mary (which is ironic, given that in his own lifetime, Bernard, though much given to contemplating the role played by Mary in the Incarnation and at the Crucifixion, opposed the local observance of Mary's Immaculate Conception).

Evaluation of Bernard's Works and Their Significance

Bernard's writings show penetrating and deep psychological insight together with a zeal for the peace and purity of the Church. His style is imaginative, allusive and symbolic and is able to be rich precisely because of its indirectness. There is a tremendous optimism in his writings about what is possible because of Christ's redemption of our fallen nature in and through the Incarnation. Bernard emphasizes that the humility that is foundational to the Christian life comes not through the strict observance of a rule but rather is motivated by love for God. This leads Bernard to explore the relation between the bodily and sensual aspects of our existence and the higher love that the soul has for God (with the true knowledge of the good that this love implies).

In his writings, Bernard also endorsed and modeled the idea that one can find multiple levels of meaning in Scripture: The Bible functions as an authoritative text that pre-exists and defines our personal and communal experience. It has a complexity which is like a master-key that is able to function in many different ways and unlock many different doors to reveal truths which otherwise would have remained hidden.

- On Bernard's Christocentric typological and allegorical interpretation of Scripture, it has been observed that for Bernard "the Bible contains no other mystery than that of Christ, for it is he who gives the Scripture their unity and their meaning. It is Christ who is the principle of that unity for he is everywhere present, pre-figured in the Old Testament and revealed in the New" (W. Yeomans, "St. Bernard of Clairvaux" in *Spirituality through the Centuries*, ed. J. Walsh, P.J. Kenedy, New York, 1964, p. 109, quoted in Jordan Aumann, *Christian Spirituality in the Catholic Tradition*, San Francisco: Ignatius, 1985, p. 97)