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SAINT BERNARD

René Guénon

Amongst the great figures of the Middle Ages, there are few whose study is more effective than that of Saint Bernard for the purpose of dissipating certain prejudices dear to the modern mind. What indeed could be more disconcerting for the modern mind than to see a pure contemplative—one who always wished to be and to remain as such—called upon to play a dominant role in conducting the affairs of Church and State, and often succeeding where all the prudence of professional diplomats and politicians had failed? What could be more surprising and even more paradoxical, according to the ordinary way of judging things, than a mystic who has nothing but contempt for what he called "the quibblings of Plato and the niceties of Aristotle," but who nonetheless triumphed over the most subtle dialecticians of his day? All of Saint Bernard's life seems destined to show, by means of a brilliant example, that, in order to solve problems of an intellectual, and even of a practical order, there exist means quite other than those which we have become accustomed to considering as the only effective ones, no doubt because they are the only ones within reach of purely human discretion, this "discretion" being something that is not even a shadow of true wisdom. Thus the life of Saint Bernard could be seen as a refutation in advance of the errors of rationalism and pragmatism, errors considered to be opposed to each other, but in fact interdependent; at the same time, for those who examine his life impartially, it confounds and upturns all the preconceived ideas of "scientific" historians, who believe—with Renan—that "the negation of the supernatural constitutes the very essence of critical thinking"—a thesis with which we readily agree, but for the reason that we see in this incompatibility the exact opposite of what the moderns do, namely, a condemnation, not of the supernatural, but of "critical thinking." What lesson, indeed, could be more profitable for our era than this?

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Bernard was born in 1070 in Fontaines-lès-Dijon; his parents belonged to the upper ranks of Burgundy's nobility, and, if we mention this fact, it is because it seems that some features of Bernard's life and doctrine, which we will discuss in the following pages, can be attributed to this origin. We do not simply wish to imply that this accounts for the sometimes bellicose ardor of his zeal, or the violence that he often brought to bear on the polemics in which he was engaged—something that was entirely superficial, for goodness and mildness were unquestionably the basis of his character. What we allude to above all is his relationship with the institution and ideal of chivalry, something that must be given serious consideration if we are to understand the events and the spirit of the Middle Ages.

At about the age of twenty, Bernard decided to withdraw from the world; and he quickly succeeded in getting all his brothers, some of his other relatives, and several of his friends, to accept his views. In his early apostleship, and in spite of his youth, his force of persuasion was such that, according to his biographer, "he became the terror of mothers and wives; friends were afraid to see him approach their friends." Here, already, there was something extraordinary, and it would surely be inadequate to attribute it simply to the force of his "genius," in the profane sense of this word. Would it not be more true to see here the action of divine grace which, in a sense, penetrated the whole person of the apostle and which, by bountifully radiating outwards, was communicated through him as through a channel, if we may use a simile which he himself later used to describe the Holy Virgin, and which can also be applied, with certain limits, to all saints?

It was thus that Bernard, accompanied by thirty young men, in 1112 entered the monastery of Cîteaux, which he had chosen because of the rigor with which the Rule was observed there—a rigor that contrasted with the laxness that had introduced itself into all the other branches of the Benedictine Order. Three years later, his superiors, in spite of his inexperience and uncertain health, did not hesitate to entrust him with the leadership of twelve monks who were going to found a new abbey, called Clairvaux, which he governed until his death, always resisting the honors and privileges offered to him in the course of his career. The renown of Clairvaux soon spread wide and far, and the abbey's quick growth was truly prodigious: when its founder died, it was said to have housed about seven hundred monks, and to have given birth to more than sixty new monasteries.

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The care that Bernard brought to the administration of Clairvaux, personally overseeing, as he did, everything down to the most minute details of everyday life; the part that he took in the direction of the Cistercian Order, as head of one of its foremost abbeys; the skill and the success of his interventions aimed at smoothing over the difficulties that frequently arose with rival orders—all those things suffice to prove that what one calls "common sense" was indeed strong in him, and moreover was accompanied by a very high degree of spirituality. There was more than enough there to absorb all the energy of an ordinary man; yet Bernard soon saw a whole new field of activity open up before him, completely in spite of himself, for he feared nothing so much as being forced to leave his cloister to become involved in the affairs of the outside world, from which he had intended to isolate himself forever by abandoning himself completely to asceticism and contemplation, with nothing to distract him from what, in his eyes, and in the words of the Evangelist, was "the one thing needful." In this hope, he was greatly disappointed; but all those "distractions"—in the etymological sense of the word, those things which he could not screen out and which he would complain about with some bitterness—in no way prevented him from attaining the heights of mystical life. This is indeed remarkable; and what is no less so is that, in spite of his humility and all the efforts he made to live in seclusion, his collaboration was requested for all sorts of important affairs, and, since he had no regard for the world, everyone, including high civil and ecclesiastical dignitaries, always spontaneously bowed before his compelling spiritual authority; and whether this be due to his own saintliness or to the age in which he lived, is hard to tell. There is indeed a contrast between our own time and one when a simple monk, uniquely through the radiation of his eminent virtues, could become in a sense the center of Europe and of Christianity, the unchallenged judge of all conflicts, both political and religious, where public interest was at stake, the judge of the most highly reputed masters of philosophy and theology, the restorer of the unity of the Church, the mediator between the Papacy and the Empire, and finally one who was to see armies numbering several hundred thousands of men come into being because of his preaching.

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Bernard had begun early on to denounce the luxurious living of most of the members of the secular clergy and even of the monks in some abbeys; his reproofs had provoked resounding conversions, including that of Suger, the illustrious Abbot of Saint-Denis, who, though he did not officially hold the title of prime minister to the King of France, nevertheless fulfilled all the functions.

It was this conversion that brought the Abbot of Clairvaux's name to the attention of the French Royal Court, where, it seems, he was regarded with a respect mixed with fear, for one saw in him the indomitable foe of all abuses and injustices; and very soon, in fact, he did intervene in conflicts that had broken out between Louis le Gros and various bishops, and he protested loudly against any infringements of civil authority against the rights of the Church. In actual fact, it was still only a question of purely local affairs, of interest only to this or that monastery or diocese; but in 1130, considerably graver events occurred, which put in peril the whole Church, which became divided by the schism of the anti-pope, Anaclete II, and it was this that caused Bernard's renown to spread throughout all Christendom.

We need not retrace here all the details of the history of that schism: the cardinals, split into two rival factions, had elected in succession Innocent II and Anaclete II; the first of the two, who was forced to flee from Rome, never despaired of the rightness of his cause and appealed to the universal Church. It was France that responded first; at a council convened by the King at Étampes, Bernard appeared (in the words of his biographer) "like a true envoy of God" among the united lords and bishops; all followed his advice on the question before them and recognized the validity of the election of Innocent II. The latter was on French soil at the time, and it was to the Abbey of Cluny that Suger came to inform him of the council's decision; he traveled through all the main dioceses and was welcomed everywhere with enthusiasm; this momentum created support for Innocent throughout almost all of Christendom. The Abbot of Clairvaux made his way to the King of England and quickly overcame his hesitations; perhaps he also had a part in gaining the recognition of Innocent II by King Lothaire and the German clergy. He then went to Aquitaine to combat the influence of Bishop Gérard d'Angoulême, a partisan of Anaclete II; but it was only during a second visit to that region, in 1135, that he succeeded in destroying the schism by effecting the

conversion of the Count of Poitiers. Between the visits, he had to go to Italy, summoned by Innocent II, who had returned there with the aid of Lothaire, but who had been impeded by unforeseen difficulties due to hostility between Pisa and Genoa; Innocent had to find a compromise between the two rival cities to make them accept it; it was Bernard who was in charge of this difficult mission, and he performed it with marvelous success. Innocent was able to return to Rome, but Anaclete remained ensconced in St. Peter's, from which it was impossible to extract him; Lothaire, crowned emperor, at the basilica of St. John Lateran, withdrew shortly with his army; after his departure, the anti-pope again took the offensive, and the legitimate pontiff had to flee and take refuge in Pisa.

The Abbot of Clairvaux, who had returned to his cloister, was dismayed by the news; shortly afterwards he heard news of the efforts of Roger, King of Sicily, to win all of Italy to the cause of Anaclete, thereby ensuring his own supremacy at the same time. Bernard immediately wrote to the inhabitants of Pisa and Genoa to encourage them to remain faithful to Innocent; but this faithfulness constituted only a feeble prop, and to conquer Rome, it was Germany alone from whom effective aid could be expected. Unfortunately, the Empire was always prey to division, and Lothaire could not return to Italy before he was assured peace in his own country. Bernard left for Germany and worked for the reconciliation of the Hohenstaufens with the Emperor; there again, his efforts were crowned with success; there he witnessed the consecration of the happy outcome the Diet of Bamberg, after which he made his way to the council that Innocent II had convened in Pisa. On this occasion, he had to address the misgivings of Louis le Gros, who opposed the departure of the bishops from his kingdom; Louis' prohibition was lifted, and the principal members of the French clergy were able to respond to the appeal of the head of the Church. Bernard was the soul of the council; between the meetings, as historians of the day describe it, his door was besieged by those who had some serious matter to resolve, as if this humble monk were endowed with the power to decide at will all ecclesiastical questions. He was then delegated to Milan to bring back that city to the side of Innocent II and Lothaire; there he was acclaimed by the clergy and the faithful, who in a spontaneous show of enthusiasm, wanted to make him their archbishop, an honor from which he freed himself only with great difficulty. He wished only to return to his monastery and did in fact go back there, but not for long.

At the beginning of 1136, Bernard once more had to abandon his solitude, in compliance with the Pope's wishes, to come to Italy to join the German army, commanded by Duke Henry of Bavaria, son-in-law of the Emperor. A misunderstanding had arisen between Henry and Innocent II; Henry, little concerned with the rights of the Church, chose consistently to align himself only with the interests of the State. But the Abbot of Clairvaux was strongly in favor of re-establishing harmony between the two powers and reconciling their rival claims, especially in certain questions of investiture, in which he seems to have regularly played the role of moderator. Meanwhile Lothaire, who had himself taken command of the army, subdued all of southern Italy; but he made the mistake of rejecting the peace proposal of the King of Sicily, who quickly took his revenge, putting everything to fire and sword. At that Bernard did not hesitate to appear at Roger's camp, but Roger was ill-disposed towards his words of peace; Bernard then predicted his defeat, which in fact happened; then retracing his steps, Bernard followed Roger to Salerno and made every effort to turn him away from the schism into which ambition had drawn him. Roger consented to listen to the partisans of both Innocent and Anaclete, but, while pretending to conduct the inquiry impartially, he was only trying to gain time and refused to make a decision; at least the debate had the happy result of bringing about the conversion of one of the principal authors of the schism, Cardinal Peter of Pisa, whom Bernard won to the side of Innocent II. This conversion dealt a severe blow to the cause of the anti-pope; Bernard knew how to profit from this, and even in Rome, through his ardent and convincing words, he managed in a few days to win over most of the dissidents from Anaclete's side. This happened around Christmas 1137; a month later, Anaclete suddenly died. Some of the cardinals most involved in the schism elected a new anti-pope who took the name Victor IV, but their resistance did not last for long, and, on the eighth day of Pentecost, they all made their submission; the next week, the Abbot of Clairvaux again headed home to his monastery.

This brief account should suffice to give an idea of what might be called Saint Bernard's political activity, which however did not stop there: from 1140 to 1144, he was to protest about the mischievous interference of King Louis le Jeune in the episcopal elections; then he had to intervene in a major conflict between the same king and Count Thibaut of Champagne; nevertheless he was fastidious in becoming involved in such matters. In brief, one could say that Saint Bernard's

conduct was always determined by the same intentions: to defend what was right, to combat injustice, and, perhaps most of all, to maintain unity in the Christian world. It was this constant preoccupation with unity which animated his struggle against schism; this also caused him to undertake, in 1145, a journey to Languedoc to bring back to the Church the neo-Manichean heretics who were starting to spread in this region. It seems that he unfailingly kept in mind the Gospel words: "That all may be one, even as my Father and I are one."

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However, the Abbot of Clairvaux did not have to struggle only in the world of politics, but also in the intellectual realm, where his triumphs were no less astonishing, since they were marked by the condemnation of two eminent adversaries: Abelard and Gilbert de la Porrée. The former, through his writings and teachings, had acquired for himself the reputation of being one of the most skillful dialecticians; he even made excessive use of dialectic, for instead of seeing in it only what it really is—a simple means for reaching an understanding of the truth—he regarded it almost as an end in itself, which tended to lead to an over-reliance on words. It seems also that, either in his method, or in the very basis of his ideas, he was drawn to a pursuit of novelty all too similar to that of some modern philosophers; but, in an age in which individualism was something almost unheard of, this fault ran no risk of being taken for a quality, as happens today. Some people were soon upset by these innovations, which offered nothing more than confusion between the realms of reason and faith; it was not that Abelard could rightly be called a rationalist, as has sometimes been suggested, for there were no rationalists prior to Descartes; but he did not know how to distinguish between what pertained to reason and what was higher than it; between profane philosophy and sacred wisdom; between purely human knowledge and transcendent knowledge; it was here that lay the root of all his errors. Did he not go as far as to maintain that philosophers and dialecticians enjoyed a habitual inspiration comparable to the supernatural inspiration of prophets? One can easily understand why Saint Bernard, when his attention was drawn to such theories, rose up against them forcefully and even with passion, and that he bitterly reproached their author for having taught that faith was no more than simple belief. The controversy

between these two very different men, which had begun in private conversations, soon caused a great stir in schools and monasteries. Abelard, confident of his skill in manipulating reasoning, demanded that the Archbishop of Sens call a council before which he might justify himself publicly, for he thought he could easily lead the discussion in such a way to confuse his adversary. Things turned out quite differently: the Abbot of Clairvaux, in fact, saw the council as only a tribunal before which the suspect theologian was appearing as the accused; in a preparatory meeting, he produced Abelard's writings and indicated their most reckless propositions, which he proved were heterodox; the next day, the author having been introduced, Bernard enunciated these propositions and summoned Abelard to either renounce them or justify them. Abelard, instantly foreseeing a condemnation, did not await the judgment of the council but declared immediately that he would appeal the decision to the court of Rome; the trial, nonetheless, followed its course, and when the condemnation was pronounced, Bernard wrote such powerfully eloquent letters to Innocent II and the cardinals that six weeks later, the sentence was confirmed in Rome. Abelard had no other course than to surrender; he took refuge in Cluny, the abbey of Peter the Venerable, who arranged an interview for him with the Abbot of Clairvaux and succeeded in reconciling them.

The Council of Sens took place in 1140; in 1147, at the Council of Reims, Bernard obtained in similar manner the condemnation of the errors of Gilbert de la Porrée, Bishop of Poitiers, regarding the mystery of the Trinity; these errors arose from the fact that their author applied to God the concrete distinction of essence and being, which is applicable only to created beings. However Gilbert made a retraction without much difficulty; so he was simply forbidden to read or transcribe his writings until they had been corrected; his authority, apart from the specific points which were involved, was not affected, and his teaching remained in good repute in the schools throughout the Middle Ages.

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Two years before this last affair, the Abbot of Clairvaux had had the joy of seeing one of his fellow Cistercian monks, Bernard of Pisa, rise to the pontifical throne; the new pope took the name of Eugene

III and Bernard always maintained the most warm-hearted relations with him. It was this new pope who, towards the start of his reign, charged Bernard to preach the Second Crusade. Until then, the Holy Land had held—at least so it seems—only a minor place in Saint Bernard's preoccupations; however, it would be wrong to think that it was completely alien to his concerns, and the proof of this is a fact which is not usually given the attention it deserves: namely, the part Bernard played in the founding of the Order of the Temple, the first of the military orders, by date and by importance, which was to serve as a model for all the others. It was in 1128, about ten years after its foundation, that the order received its Rule at the Council of Troyes, and it was Bernard who, as secretary of the council, was charged with drawing up this Rule, or at least delineating its chief features, for it seems that it was only some time later that he was called upon to complete it, and he finished the final wording of it only in 1131. He then commented on this Rule in *De laude novae militiae* ("In Praise of the New Militia"), in which he set forth, in terms of magnificent eloquence, the mission and the ideal of Christian chivalry, which he called the "militia of God." These connections between the Abbot of Clairvaux and the Order of the Temple, which modern historians regard as merely a rather secondary episode in his life, assuredly had a completely different importance in the eyes of men of the Middle Ages; and we have shown elsewhere that these connections undoubtedly constitute the reason that Dante chose Saint Bernard as his guide in the highest circles of Paradise.

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In 1145, Louis VII formulated a plan to go to the aid of the Latin principalities in the Orient, which were being menaced by the Emir of Aleppo; but the opposition of his advisers had constrained him by postponing the plan's execution, and the definitive decision had been left to a plenary assembly which was to take place in Vézelay at Easter the following year. Eugene III, detained in Italy by a revolution provoked in Rome by Arnaud of Brescia, charged the Abbot of Clairvaux to take his place at this assembly; Bernard, after having read aloud the papal bull which invited France to the Crusade, delivered a speech which was, to judge by the impact it produced, the most important speech of his life; everyone in the audience knelt to

receive the cross from his hands. Encouraged by this success, Bernard traversed the cities and provinces, preaching the Crusade everywhere with indefatigable zeal; when he could not travel in person, he sent out letters no less eloquent than his speeches. Then he went to Germany, where his preaching had the same result as in France; the Emperor Conrad, after resisting for a while, changed his mind under Bernard's influence and joined in the Crusade. Toward the middle of the year 1147, the French and German armies set off on this expedition, which, despite its formidable appearance, was to end in disaster. The causes of this failure were many; the main ones seem to be the treason of the Greeks and the lack of cooperation between the various leaders of the Crusade; but some critics, quite unjustly, sought to lay responsibility for the failure on the Abbot of Clairvaux. He had to write a veritable apology for his conduct, an apology which was, at the same time, a justification of the defeat as an act of God, showing that the unhappy outcome was not attributable only to the faults of Christians, and that therefore "the promises of God remain intact, for they do not contradict the rights of justice"; this apology is contained in the book *De Consideratione* ("On Contemplation"), addressed to Eugene III, a book which is like Saint Bernard's testament, and which contains especially his views on the rights of the papacy. Moreover, not everyone was discouraged, and Suger, the eminent prime minister of Louis VII, quickly conceived a plan for a new Crusade, of which the Abbot of Clairvaux himself would be the leader; but Suger's death halted the execution of this plan. Saint Bernard himself died shortly afterwards, in 1153, and his last letters testify that he was preoccupied until the end with the deliverance of the Holy Land.

Since the immediate purpose of the Crusade had not been attained, could one therefore say that such an expedition had been entirely useless, and that the efforts of Saint Bernard had been squandered to no avail? We do not think so, despite what may be said by historians who are concerned only with external appearances; for these great movements of the Middle Ages had—for various profound reasons, only one of which we will note here—a character which was both political and religious. The reason to which we refer was the wish to maintain within Christendom a living awareness of its unity. Christendom was identical with Western civilization, which was thus founded on an essentially traditional basis, as is every normal civilization, and which reached its peak in the 13th century; the loss of this traditional character could not but follow a split in the unity of Christendom.

This split, which was later accomplished in the religious realm by the Reformation, was achieved in the political realm by the emergence of nationalities following the destruction of the feudal regime; and, with this last point in mind, it could be said that the person who dealt the first blow to the grand edifice of medieval Christianity was Philip le Bel, who, through a coincidence that was by no means accidental, destroyed the Order of the Temple, thereby directly attacking the most profound of Saint Bernard's works.

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In the course of his journeys, Saint Bernard frequently reinforced his preaching by miraculous healings, which, for the crowds, were visible signs of his mission; these facts have been reported by eye-witnesses, but Bernard himself was unwilling to speak of them. Perhaps he imposed this restriction on himself because of his great modesty; but he undoubtedly attributed only a secondary importance to these miracles, considering them simply a concession accorded by divine mercy to the weakness of the faith of the majority of the populace, in keeping with the words of Christ: "Blessed are they that have not seen and yet have believed!" This attitude was in accord with the disdain that Bernard generally showed towards all outward and material means, such as the pomp of ceremonies and the ornamentation of churches; some have nevertheless reproached him, with some seeming justification, for having only contempt for religious art. Those who made this criticism however overlooked a necessary distinction, which Bernard himself established between what he called church architecture and monastic architecture: it was only the latter that should observe the austerity that he advocated; it was only to the religious orders and to those who followed the road of perfection that he forbade the "cult of idols," that is to say, of forms, which, he proclaimed, were on the contrary useful as a means of education for the simple and the imperfect. If he protested against the abuses of representations devoid of meaning and having only purely ornamental value, he did not wish, as has been falsely maintained, to forbid symbolism in architectural art, since he himself frequently made use of symbolism in his sermons.

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Saint Bernard's doctrine is essentially mystical: by this we mean that he envisages divine things especially from the point of view of love, something which it would be wrong to interpret in a merely affective or emotive sense, as do modern psychologists. Like many great mystics, he was particularly drawn to the Song of Solomon, which he commented on in many sermons, sermons which were part of a long series that continued throughout almost all of his career; this commentary, which was never completed, describes all the degrees of the love of God, up to the supreme peace which the soul reaches in ecstasy. The ecstatic state, as he understood it, and certainly experienced it, is a sort of death with regard to the things of this world; along with sensory images, all natural feeling disappears; everything is pure and spiritual within the soul itself, as in its love. This mysticism reflected itself naturally in the dogmatic treatises which Saint Bernard wrote; the title of one of the principal ones, *De diligendo Deo* ("On Loving God"), clearly indicates the place that love held in his thought, but it would be wrong to believe that this was to the detriment of true intellectuality. If the Abbot of Clairvaux always sought to remain apart from the vain subtleties of the academics, it was because he had no need of the laborious artifices of dialectic; he resolved at a single blow the most arduous questions because his thinking did not proceed by means of a long series of discursive operations; what philosophers strove to reach by a circuitous route and by proceeding tentatively, he arrived at immediately, through intellectual intuition, a faculty without which no real metaphysics is possible, and without which one can only grasp a shadow of the truth.

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Finally, we must draw attention to a pre-eminent characteristic of Saint Bernard, namely, the central place which the cult of the Holy Virgin played in his life and in his writings. This produced a great flowering of legends, which may be the reason why Bernard has remained so popular. He loved to give the Holy Virgin the title of Our Lady, a usage which subsequently became generalized, doubtless due in large part to his influence; it is as if he were, as has been said, a true "knight of Mary," and truly regarded her as his "lady," in the chivalric sense of the word. If one links this fact regarding the role played by love in his teaching, and also played, in more or less symbolic forms, in the

ideas of the chivalric Orders, one understands easily why we took care to mention his noble family background. Having become a monk, Bernard always remained a knight, as did all those of his class; at the same time, one could say that he was in some way predestined to play (as he did in so many instances) the role of intermediary, conciliator, and arbiter between religious power and political power, since he combined in his person the nature of each. He was both monk and knight: these two characteristics were those of the members of the "militia of God," of the Order of the Temple; they were also, first and foremost, those of the author of their Rule, the great saint who was called the last of the Fathers of the Church, and whom some would regard, not without reason, as the prototype of Galahad, that perfect knight without blemish, the victorious hero of the quest for the Holy Grail.

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