

BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX

Patron Saint of the Templar Order

Introduction. Bernard, the founding abbot of Clairvaux Abbey in Burgundy, in the heart of France, was one of the most commanding church leaders in the first half of the twelfth century. He rose in prominence to become one of the greatest spiritual masters of all time, as well as leading the reforms that made the monastic orders of Western Europe powerful propagators of the Catholic faith. He crafted the rules of behavior for the Cistercian Order, which he used as the model for the rules governing the Templar Order. He helped heal the great split in the papal authority and was asked to preach the Second Crusade. His appeal sent vast armies on the road toward Jerusalem. In a lesser known contribution, he was influential in ending savage persecution in Germany toward the Jews.

Bernard's Early Life. He was born in Fontaines-les-Dijon in southeastern France in 1090. Bernard's family was of noble lineage, both on the side of his father, Tescelin, and on that of his mother, Aleth or Aletta, but his ancestry cannot be clearly traced beyond his proximate forebears. The third of seven children, six of whom were sons, Bernard as a boy attended the school of the secular canons of Saint-Vorles, where it is probable that he studied the subjects included in the medieval trivium. In 1107, the early death of his mother, to whom he was bound by a strong affective tie, began a critical period in his life. Of the four years that followed, little is known but what can be inferred from their issue. In 1111, Bernard left the world and withdrew to the locality of Châtillon, where he was soon joined by all his brothers and a number of other relatives.

At the age of 22, he entered the Abbey of Citeaux in 1112, bringing thirty of his relatives with him, including five of his brothers. His youngest brother and widowed father followed later. After receiving a monastic formation from Stephen Harding (later Saint Stephen), he was sent in 1115 to begin a new monastery near Aube, in a place of great beauty called Clairvaux, the 'Valley of Light'. Bernard was guided by his conviction of the superiority of the Cistercian life to every other manner of pursuing personal holiness or evangelical perfection.

As a young abbot, he discovered a talent for persuasion in both speaking and writing. He published a series of sermons on the Annunciation, elaborating on the New Testament scripture wherein the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, to inform her that she was destined to bear the Son of God, although a virgin. These acts marked Bernard not only as a most gifted spiritual writer but also as the "cithara of Mary," especially noted for his defining of the Virgin Mary's mediatorial role in Catholic thought that continues to influence devout Catholics to the present.

Bernard's Role as a Mediator. In addition to writing about the concept of mediation as a gospel principle, Bernard soon became a valued spiritual advisor to powerful church and secular leaders, who called upon him to help resolve disputes. Bernard's spiritual writing as well as his extraordinary personal magnetism began to attract many to Clairvaux and other Cistercian monasteries, leading to many new foundations. He was drawn into the controversy brewing between the new monastic movement which he preeminently represented and the established Cluniac order, a branch of the Benedictines.

This led to one of his most controversial and most popular works, his *Apologia*. Bernard's dynamism soon reached far beyond monastic circles. More than anyone else, he helped to bring about the healing of the papal schism which arose in 1130 with the election of the rival of the officially declared pope, the so-called antipope Anacletus II.

It cost Bernard eight years of laborious travel and skillful mediation to arrive at a resolution that healed the break in western Christianity. At the same time, he labored for peace and reconciliation between the warring kingdoms of England and France and among many lesser nobles. He managed to bring a temporary end to hostilities, but the kings and nobles soon resumed fighting. His influence mounted when his spiritual son was elected pope in 1145.

At [Eugene III](#)'s command, Bernard preached the Second Crusade. His preaching in France, Germany, and the Low Countries exerted a powerful influence on nobles, landed gentry, and commoners alike. Vast armies were soon on the road toward Jerusalem. In his last years, Bernard rose from his sickbed and went into the Rhineland to defend the Jews against savage persecution.

Bernard's Role as a Writer. Although Bernard suffered from constant physical debility, he maintained an exhausting regime that included an ascetic life style, governing a monastery that soon housed several hundred monks and training groups sent regularly to begin new monasteries. He personally saw to the establishment of sixty-five of the three hundred Cistercian monasteries founded during his thirty-eight years as abbot. Yet, he yet found time to compose many varied spiritual works that still speak to the faithful today. He laid out a solid foundation for the monastic and personal spiritual life in his works on grace, free will, humility, and love. His gifts as a theologian were called upon to respond to the teachings of early Christian reformers Peter Abelard, Gilbert de la Porree, and Arnold of Brescia. His masterpiece, *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, was begun in 1136 and was still in composition at the time of his death. With great simplicity and poetic grace, Bernard writes of the experiences of the mystical life in ways that became normative for all succeeding Catholic writers. For Pope Eugene, he wrote *Five Books on Consideration*, which was the bedside reading of the 20th century Pope John XXIII and many other pontiffs, priests, and laymen across the centuries.

Bernard's Role with the Templar Order. When the Order of Knights Templar was founded in 1118-1119 in Jerusalem, it was a 'poor order' whose primary function was the protection of pilgrims along the main roads between the coast at Jaffa and the inland city of Jerusalem. But an important transformation took place when this nascent Order came under the patronage of Bernard of Clairvaux, a nephew of Andre de Montbard, one of the founding Templars. Until he took the cloth at the age of twenty, Bernard himself was destined for a knightly career, and when he came to patronize the Knights Templar that Order was already imbued with the ideals and convictions of the knightly class of Burgundy.

It was Hugh of Champagne who donated the site of Clairvaux to Bernard, where he built his abbey and from whence he expanded the monastic order. He became the official sponsor of the Templars, and it was his influence that ensured papal recognition at the Council at Troyes, that being the capital of Champagne. Eventually, it was a disciple of Bernard's, Pope Innocent II (formerly a monk at Clairvaux) who freed the Templars from all allegiance to anyone except the Pope himself.

In 1128, Bernard of Clairvaux was just twenty-eight years old when the Council of Troyes asked him to help create a Rule for the Templar order. Troyes was the homeland of Hugh de Payns, who had returned from the Holy Land to make the request of the Council. Young Bernard fulfilled that request, but he also became the Order's most vocal champion, urging that they be supported with gifts of land and money and exhorting men of good family to cast off their sinful lives and take up the sword and the cross as Templar Knights.

Bernard urged young men to take up the Templar sword, comparing the Templar's holy way of life, so pleasing to God, to the degenerate ways of secular knights, whose lives were dedicated to vanity, adultery, looting, and stealing, with many sins to atone for. The dedication to Christ, to a life of chastity and prayer, to a life that might be sacrificed in battle against unbelievers, was enough penance to atone for any sin or any number of sins. On that basis, Bernard appealed to 'the wicked and the ungodly, rapists and murderers, adulterers', to save their own souls by enlisting as Knights of the Temple. That guaranteed absolution was also a way out for those suffering under decrees of excommunication. The taking of the Templar oath would be evidence of submission to the Church, and the supreme penance of a lifetime at war for the True Cross would satisfy God's requirement for punishment of the contrite. Another pool of recruits was provided by the poor knights who lacked the funds to acquire horses, armor, and weapons. All of those things would be given to them upon their entry, along with personal attendants and servants. They were certain of adequate food and a place in which to live. Their self-respect, no matter how low it might have sunk, would be instantly restored (A heavy war-horse cost roughly the equivalent of four hundred days' pay for a free laborer).

A quote from Bernard himself perhaps says it best: "The warriors are gentler than lambs and fiercer than lions, wedding the mildness of the monk with the valour of the knight, so that it is difficult to decide which to call them: men who adorn the Temple of Solomon with weapons instead of gems, with shields instead of crowns of gold, with saddles and bridles instead of candelabra: eager for victory -- not fame; for battle not for pomp; who abhor wasteful speech, unnecessary action, unmeasured laughter, gossip and chatter, as they despise all vain things: who, in spite of their being many, live in one house according to one rule, with one soul and one heart."

By the thirteenth century, the rules for admission to the Order had gotten a lot tighter, but they were demonstrably looser in the beginning. An aspirant was required to be a knight, the son of a knight and his lady. Villein descent was a bar to entry as a knight; it was also a bar to the priesthood, so the Templar Order was no exception. An excommunicated aspirant was to be brought first to the bishop and he could be received into the Order only if the bishop would absolve him. It seems from the early Statutes of the Order that recruiting went on among knights who had been found guilty of serious moral offenses, a well-known rule in the French version directs the Templars to frequent and recruit from gatherings of excommunicated knights. That the Latin version of the rule gives the directly opposite injunction, not to frequent such gatherings, probably shows the tension between the official clerical attitudes to the Order and the vernacular military culture which lay alongside it. Opinion was divided to the end; at the time of the trial and dissolution of the Order it was being said that it was a disgraceful thing that robbers worthy of death had been admitted to the Order.

Bernard crafted his rules for the Templars from those he had created previously for Cistercian monks, adding in rules appropriate to warriors but not to ascetic monks. The principal rule required unquestioning obedience: "Every brother who is professed in the Holy service should, through fear of the flames of Hell, give total obedience to the Master; for nothing is dearer to Jesus Christ than obedience, and if anything be commanded by the Master or by one to whom he has given his power, it should be done without demur as if it were a command from God . . . for you must give up your own free will."

An English Templar, William Watson expressed his love of the Rule in this way: "'Have I not been obedient to the Rule? The Rule is the bones of my body, it runs from my feet to my head, and it is in my arms; these fingers... The Rule is my marrow. Am I not also garbed in the Rule, for it tells me what I wear. The Rule is within me and about me. It is my hand when I fight and tells me what my weapons are. Within and Without."

What rules did the early Templars follow before 1128? Hugh de Payns had adopted the Rule of Saint Augustine for the Order and attended the Council of Troyes, where he led discussions of that rule, as well as those suggested by Bernard. While Bernard led the effort to craft what was known as the Primitive Rule for the Templars, as assigned by the Council of Troyes in 1128, much of the work was performed by another monk, Johannes Michaelensis. The primitive rules dealing with knightly responsibilities and behavior numbered only 76 out of a total of 676 rules. Bernard used the Cistercian Rule as the basis for the new Templar Rule. He had previously created the Rule for the Cistercian Order from that of the Benedictines.

Rules for Nearly Every Event and Contingency.

Here is the list of subjects addressed by Bernard's Rules:

- **The Manner in which Brothers should be Received**
- **On Excommunicated Knights**
- **On Not Receiving Children**
- **On Brothers who Stand Too Long in Chapel**
- **On the Brothers' Dress**
- **On Shirts**
- **On Bed Linen**
- **On Pointed Shoes' and Shoe-Laces**
- **How They Should Eat**
- **On the Reading of the Lesson**
- **On Bowls and Drinking Vessels**
- **On the Eating of Meat**
- **On Weekday Meals**
- **On Friday Meals**
- **On Saying Grace**
- **On Taking Collation**
- **On Keeping Silence**

- **On Ailing Brothers**
- **On the Communal Life**
- **On the Master**
- **On Giving Counsel**
- **On Brothers Sent Overseas**
- **On Keeping the Peace**
- **How the Brothers Should Go About**
- **How they Should Effect an Exchange**
- **On Locks**
- **On Secular Gifts**
- **On Faults**
- **On Serious Faults**
- **On Rumour**
- **Let None Take Pride in his Faults**
- **Let None Ask**
- **On Animals and Squires**
- **That No Brother May Have an Ornate Bridle**
- **On Lance Covers**
- **On Food Bags**
- **On Hunting**
- **On the Lion**
- **How They May Have Lands and Men**
- **On Tithes**
- **On Giving Judgment**
- **On Elderly Brothers**
- **On Sick Brothers**
- **On Deceased Brothers**
- **On the Priests and Clerks who Serve Charity**
- **On Secular Knights**
- **On Secular Knights who Serve for a Fixed Term**
- **On the Commitment of Sergeants**
- **On White Mantles**
- **On Married Brothers**
- **On Sisters**
- **Let Them Not Have Familiarity with Women**
- **Not Being Godfathers**
- **On the Commandments**
- **These are the Feast Days and Fasts that all the Brothers should Celebrate and Observe**
- **These are the Feast Days which should be Observed in the House of the Temple**

Bernard was so pleased by the creation of the Templar Rule that he enthusiastically volunteered to use his enormous influence in a recruiting campaign for the Order. To prove that marketing hyperbole is not a modern invention, he wrote the following sometime between 1132 and 1136:

"These events at Jerusalem have shaken the world. The islands hearken, and the people from afar give ear. They swarm forth from East and West, as a flood stream bringing glory to the

nations and a rushing river gladdening the city of God. What could be more profitable and pleasant to behold than seeing such a multitude coming to reinforce the few?"

Model of Humility, Love, and Charity. Personal humility is rare in anyone with such knowledge, drive, and persuasion as Bernard exhibited. In the dedication of his masterpiece *On Loving God*, he expressed his humility in the following way:

"Hitherto you have been wont to seek prayers from me, not the solving of problems; although I count myself sufficient for neither. My profession shows that, if not my conversation; and to speak truth, I lack the diligence and the ability that are most essential. Yet I am glad that you turn again for spiritual counsel, instead of busying yourself about carnal matters: I only wish you had gone to someone better equipped than I am."

Yet in his humility, Bernard taught powerful lessons on the nature of charity as the pure love of Christ that significantly affected the whole of the Christian community in Western Europe and in the Holy Land. He wrote the following priceless masterpiece:

"To love our neighbor's welfare as much as our own: that is true and sincere charity out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned. Whosoever loves his own prosperity only is proved thereby not to love good for its own sake, since he loves it on his own account. And so he cannot sing with the psalmist, 'O give thanks unto the Lord, for He is gracious'. Such a man would praise God, not because He is goodness, but because He has been good to him: he could take to himself the reproach of the same writer, 'So long as Thou doest well unto him, he will speak good of Thee'. One praises God because He is mighty, another because He is gracious, yet another solely because He is essential goodness. The first is a slave and fears for himself; the second is greedy, desiring further benefits; but the third is a son who honors his Father. He who fears, he who profits, are both concerned about self-interest. Only in the son is that charity which seeketh not her own. Wherefore I take this saying, 'The law of the Lord is an undefiled law, converting the soul' to be of charity; because charity alone is able to turn the soul away from love of self and of the world to pure love of God. Neither fear nor self-interest can convert the soul. They may change the appearance, perhaps even the conduct, but never the object of supreme desire. Sometimes a slave may do God's work; but because he does not toil voluntarily, he remains in bondage. So a mercenary may serve God, but because he puts a price on his service, he is enchained by his own greediness. For where there is self-interest there is isolation; and such isolation is like the dark corner of a room where dust and rust befoul. Fear is the motive which constrains the slave; greed binds the selfish man, by which he is tempted when he is drawn away by his own lust and enticed. But neither fear nor self-interest is undefiled, nor can they convert the soul. Only charity can convert the soul, freeing it from unworthy motives.

Next, I call it undefiled because it never keeps back anything of its own for itself. When a man boasts of nothing as his very own, surely all that he has is God's; and what is God's cannot be unclean. The undefiled law of the Lord is that love which bids men seek not their own, but every man another's wealth. It is called the law of the Lord as much because He lives in accordance with it as because no man has it except by gift from Him. Nor is it improper to say that even God lives by law, when that law is the law of love. For what preserves the glorious and ineffable Unity of the blessed Trinity, except love?"

Bernard's Life in Retrospect. Bernard died at his beloved Clairvaux on 20 August 1153. He was canonized by Pope Alexander III on 18 January 1174. Pope Pius VII declared him a Doctor of the Church in 1830.

References.

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