

SAINT BERNARD

THE EDITOR

ALL over the world in this year of grace 1953 the figure of St Bernard, Abbot of Clairvaux, has stood out in great prominence. The immediate cause of this sudden limelight was the eighth centenary of his death; but a deeper reason must be sought in the fact that today men are turning to him and his Cistercian movement in a way that can hardly be equalled since the twelfth century in which he lived. He is the saint for today. It is surely more than a coincidence that the men of the U.S.A. are flocking to his standard in numbers as great as those of the saint's own lifetime. The unexpected popularity of the American Cistercian, Fr Thomas Merton, is not explained by the presence of an accomplished journalist within the silence-bound walls of Gethsemane Abbey, as though he happened there by accident. His own brethren have recognised the importance of this American Cistercian in asking him to write the preface to a monumental centenary volume of international composition.¹ Merton stands for a man of this present world who has turned to the simplicity of St Bernard for his salvation; and this modern world is searching with increasing desire for the simplicity of an ordered life in touch with the soil, with freedom of mind fostered by study and prayer and by the silence that binds a community in tranquil unity.

If we turn to the Abbot of Clairvaux we find a man who sought the retirement of the solitude of desert places but found himself in a short time helping to hold together a crumbling society by the power of that silence and solitude. Fr Merton in this preface gives some notion of that power. 'The founding of numerous monasteries, the elaboration of a theology penetrated by the love of God and by contemplation, an apostolate rich in charismatic graces, which embraced the whole world and aroused Christendom to a new realisa-

¹ *Bernard de Clairvaux. Préface de Thomas Merton.* Commission d'Histoire de l'Ordre de Cîteaux, Abbaye N.-D. d'Aiguebelle. (Editions Alsatia, Paris; pp. xxvi & 758, with plates, maps and sketches.)

tion of the divine mercy revealed in Jesus and Mary, all these works were in St Bernard the accidental expressions of a vocation substantially the same as that of St Paul. Bernard was sent by God "to complete the preaching of his word among you. This was the secret that had been hidden from all the ages and generations of the past; now, he has revealed it to his saints, wishing to make known the manifold splendour of his secret . . . Christ among you, your hope of glory." (Col. 1 : 25-6).⁷ This he achieved in particular through the Cross and through the Mother of God. The Cross he sought in his dynamic asceticism which cut through the crust of multiplicity in material things to the living Word beneath. That was why he went out into the desert, and having there been nailed to the Cross he found himself a sign on the mount of Calvary for the whole world.

The Cistercian movement in its search for the ascetic way of the Cross appears as a puritanical movement, but according to the true sense of the word. For St Stephen Harding was, for example, intent upon the *purity* of the texts of the Bible and of the chant used by the Cistercians in their prayer and study. St Bernard carried out in a general and paternal way this liturgical reform. He and his monks did not eschew the natural beauties of song and action in the worship of God like the later negative puritanical movements. He loved the chant and the liturgy; but he sought the true purity of song that avoided at once sophistication and rusticity, harshness and effeminacy. To obtain this true balance of heart, tongue and bodily action meant, as it still means, a veritable *via crucis*, the way of asceticism. (cf. pp. 150-64 of this volume.) In that first century of Cistercian vitality the great abbey churches were set up to be centres of an artistic purity which constantly strives to impregnate the work of men's hands with the beauty of the spirit, contemplation thus spreading out into human action reflecting the harmony of heaven in the beauty of human life, human work and in nature itself (cf. chapter 28 on St Bernard and the problem of art, pp. 487 *et seq.*). Fr Bede Jarrett in his sketch of St Aelred, who lived so directly under the impetus of Bernard, shows how the natural beauty of setting which we associate with the English Cistercian abbeys such as Rievaulx or Fountains was

induced in large measure by the work of the monks. They went out into the wilderness and turned the desert into a paradise (cf. *The English Way: 'St Aelred of Rievaulx',* by Bede Jarrett). And this was true of the whole Cistercian movement.

But this redemption of the world, this recapturing of divine beauty meant immense hardship and toil. That is why St Bernard is usually thought of as the fragile and pale ascetic, the vehement preacher of renunciation. The Cross, however, comes always, if it is redemptive, from the will of the Father; and the simple explanation of all this call to the ascetic life, to purity and integrity, is to be found in St Bernard's desire to take up 'the whole Rule and nothing but the Rule' of St Benedict (p. 60). Throughout this volume that theme is constantly recurring. 'The first Cistercians had no other end in view than to remain in their desert in order to find, by an exact fulfilment of the Rule, the direct union with God promised by St Benedict to the faithful disciple' (p. 178). St Bernard's poetic spirit, Cistercian architecture, the whole tone of the Cistercian life, all was formed under the inspiration of Benedict; so that the Father of monks was consciously the stem, as always however unconsciously, of every branch of religious life in the West. We need not bother our heads whether one branch or another holds the authentic interpretation of the Rule; we must, however, recognise the fact that the life-giving Cross of Christ has come down to us in large measure through the mediation of Benedict.

Bernard saw the positive side of the purity of Christ also in the figure of the Madonna. Desclée, de Brouwer have published a beautifully produced volume containing the Latin texts with French translations of all the main passages in his works dealing with our Lady.² St Bernard's 'life and work are of interest not only to the friends of the middle ages, but also to all those who are concerned with history, theology, philosophy, spirituality or the monastic life. And in one supreme point his influence is most universal and touches Christians most profoundly—his "Marial" spiri-

² *Saint Bernard et Notre Dame. Etude d'âme, textes authentiques et traduction* (Desclée de Brouwer. Abbaye de Sept-fons; n.p.)

tuality. For the Christian world Bernard is above all the Virgin's Minstrel.' The monks of Sept-fons Abbey thus introduce a fifty-page sketch of the influence of our Lady in the life of St Bernard and four hundred pages of texts. Our Lady's purity is no more an end in itself than the purity of the Rule and the Cross. These are the means of realising the purity of our Lord. 'Perhaps in him you tremble at the divine majesty, since although he be made man he still remains God. Do you look also for an advocate with him? Turn to Mary. In Mary indeed there lies pure humanity, pure not only from contamination, but pure also in singularity of nature. Without hesitation I insist: she herself will be heard "for her reverence"; the Son will undoubtedly listen to the Mother and the Father will listen to the Son.'" (p. 218.) These typical phrases, from his sermon on the 'Aqueduct', reveal the wholeness of his view which does not isolate our Lady from the picture of the redemption which has led man back to the Trinity. His poetic vision saw the whole divine action in the concrete, and in the concrete the Mother brought forth the only-begotten Son, the source and centre of all grace. We find the same inspiration in the writings of Aelred, Bernard's offspring, and in all the study and prayer of the monks who lived on 'our Lady's dowry'.

So it is today that we look back to the Cistercian inspiration in Christian life, but not with any desire to put the clock back, nor in a belief that all should strive to follow St Bernard into the cloister. The need for the simplicity of life bred in silence and on the soil, on liturgy and *lectio divina*, stirs in all our hearts in a way that it has not stirred since the time of St Bernard. In England we have not only the figure of St Aelred as our model, but we have the flourishing Abbeys of Mount St Bernard, Caldey and Stapehill. In Scotland and Ireland, too, these monks of Bernard exercise an increasing fascination for modern men from their country fastnesses. And in America the monasteries multiply as quickly as the Carmels under St Teresa, while their novitiates swell to an extent that would shock the Avilan saint with her conception of the small community. St Bernard is a fact in Christian life today, a fact that demands assimilation. We are not all to be Cistercians, but we should all look

back to our origins and forward to simplicity and a vital purity. All religious Orders, for example, should measure themselves, as St Bernard measured himself, against the Rule of St Benedict. All have sprung from that root, or at least eaten of the fruit of the Benedictine tree. Every Christian should discover his relation to nature and the land that give him life; he should recognise the present liturgical reform as Bernard recognised it in his day and fashioned his life upon it. St Bernard, says Fr Merton, sounded the depths of what he called the *magnum pietatis sacramentum*. 'This "sacrament" is the ineffable mystery of God's love for us. . . . The abbot of Clairvaux, in his life and in his theology, is the minister of this sacrament. Bernard's voice calls us once again to partake with him of "the blessings full of sweetness" which he has tasted. The power and authority, and the innocence of his voice lead us to thirst, as he thirsted, for the infinity of divine mercy. Following him we shall find, as he found, the treasure of divine love, hidden in the cleft of the rock. And with him we shall enter through this deep wound into that heart which is God's sanctuary.'



NOTICES and EXTRACTS will be resumed in the next issue
(December) of THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT



FOR JANUARY 1954

The 'Life of the Spirit Conference' was held this year at Bishton Hall, Little Haywood, Stafford, from September 15th to 18th. The general subject was 'The Bible and the Spiritual Life' and the substance of the papers read will, it is hoped, be published in the January, 1954, issue. 'The Spiritual Sense' by Sebastian Bullough, o.p., 'Lectio Divina' by Bede Griffiths, o.s.b., 'The Bible and the Liturgy' by E. I. Watkin, 'The Images of the Bible' by Nicolette Gray, etc.

St Bernard of Clairvaux



From a MS. c 1200

Cf. p. 199

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