

ST. BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX, PREACHER OF THE LOVE OF GOD

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Homily for the Memorial of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, August 20, 2011
Sir. 15:1-6, Ps. 118, John 17:20-26

“I made known to them thy name, and I will make it known, that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them” (John 17:26).

Today we celebrate the memorial of St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153). He is honored as the second founder of the Cistercian order, which was originally founded in 1098 by Robert of Molesme, Alberic, and Stephen Harding from the Benedictine monastery of Molesme. They founded what they called the New Monastery in Cîteaux (France), where they chose to live in great poverty and austerity for the love of God. But for many years they feared that their great austerity of life would prevent them from attracting new vocations. All these fears, however, ended one bright day in 1111 when Bernard, the son of a nobleman, presented himself at the gates of Cîteaux with his four brothers and twenty-seven of his friends, all of whom requested admission as novices. Bernard was twenty-one years old. After only two years, he was sent as abbot to the desert of Clairvaux to build and run a new monastery there. Clairvaux founded sixty-eight more monasteries.

St. Bernard became a great preacher of the love of God. In him we see very clearly the two basic aspects of monasticism: 1) the ascetical, and 2) the mystical. The ascetical prepares the way for the mystical. By asceticism, we renounce the pleasures of the world and live austerely in simplicity and fasting in order to love God with an undivided heart—not divided by the pleasures of the world. We seek by asceticism to love God with all our heart, all our mind, all our soul, and all our strength (Mark 12:30). Thus prepared, we begin to experience the second aspect of monasticism, the mystical aspect, which is the profound personal experience of the love of God in our heart. St. Bernard wrote much about his experience of the love of God, especially in his commentary on the Song of Songs.

Today's gospel was chosen for St. Bernard. Like Christ, St. Bernard preached in order to make God known so that the love with which the Father loves the Son might also be in those who come to believe in the Son, and so that the Son might also be in them, filling them with his love. “I made known to them thy name and I

will make it known, that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them” (John 17:26).

Christ is the only Son of the Father, who always lived in the glory of the Father (John 17:5). He was sent into the world to give us a share in that glory: “The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them” (John 17:22). He wants us to contemplate that glory. “Father, I desire that they also, whom thou hast given me, may be with me where I am, to behold my glory which thou hast given me in thy love for me before the foundation of the world” (John 17:24). We are to contemplate this glory and remain in his love. “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love” (John 15:9).

St. Bernard preached the love of God that we are to abide in, the love that the Father gave to the Son, and the Son gave to us. Monasticism is a way of living ascetically and mystically in order to abide in the love of God, revealed to us in Jesus Christ.