

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090 – August 21, 1153)

Saint Bernard (1174)

James McDonald



Bernard had been dead for half a century by the start of the Cathar Crusade - but he was an important figure in the Catholic Church when the Cathar "heresy" in the Languedoc first attracted attention. His influence was felt in many ways during the Crusade.

Bernard was born at Fontaines, near Dijon, in France. His father, a knight, died on crusade. His mother died while Bernard was still a child. His guardians sent him to study at Châtillon-sur-Seine in order to qualify him for high ecclesiastical office and he joined the community at Cîteaux in 1098. The community of reformed Benedictines at Cîteaux grew so rapidly that it was soon able to set up daughter establishments. One of these daughter monasteries, Clairvaux, was founded in 1115, in a valley of a tributary of the river Aube. Bernard, a recent initiate, was appointed abbot.

Clairvaux became the chief monastery of one of the five branches into which the order was divided under the direction of the Abbot of Cîteaux. Bernard became the primary builder of the Cistercian monastic order.

In 1128 he was invited to the synod of Troyes, where he was instrumental in obtaining the recognition of the new order of Knights Templar, the rules of which he is said to have drawn up. The Templars were essentially fighting Cistercian monks.

His was the main voice of conservatism during the 12th century Renaissance. Bernard was the prosecutor at Peter Abelard's trial for heresy. Bernard had been hostile to Peter Abelard and other scholars at the University of Paris, the centre of the new learning based on Aristotle. Abelard was one of the greatest - arguably the greatest - scholastic philosopher of the Middle Ages. Bernard, not an intellectual himself, found it objectionable that people should learn "merely in order that they might know". For Bernard, education served a single purpose: the indoctrination of new priests. The trial was not determined by the strength of the cases put forward by the prosecution and the defence. When Abelard lost he appealed to Rome where Bernard's word was enough to confirm his condemnation. Abelard died soon afterwards.



Towards the middle of the twelfth century the preaching of a priest called Henry of Lausanne was drawing attention to what he saw as flaws in Roman Catholic theology and practices. In June 1145, at the invitation of Cardinal Alberic of Ostia, Bernard would travel to the territories of the Count of Toulouse to combat heresy. The threat was not at this time perceived as Catharism, but the teachings of Henry who had come to Occitania having been, as Bernard said, "forced to flee from all parts of France". Here

is a translation of an extract from a letter from St Bernard to Alphonse Jordan, Count of Toulouse, written in 1145 before he set off to follow Henry to the Languedoc. It gives an idea of how popular Henry's teaching had been.

The Churches are without congregations, congregations are without priests, priests are without proper reverence, and, finally, Christians are without Christ.

(Sancti Bernardi epistolae 241 from Migne, Patrologia latina, CLXXXII, 434-36; Cited by Walter Wakefield & Austin Evans, Heresies of The High Middle Ages (Columbia, 1991) p 93.)



Bernard played a leading role in the development of the cult of the Virgin Mary.

Bernard's secretary, Geoffrey of Auxerre, writing in the same year repeats Bernard's comments and goes on:

The life of Christ was barred to the children of Christians so long as the grace of baptism was denied to them. Prayers and offerings for the dead were ridiculed as were the invocation of saints, pilgrimages by the faithful, the building of temples, holidays on holy days, the anointing with the chrism; and in a word, all the institutions of the [Catholic] Church were scorned.

(Sancti Bernardi vita et res gestae libris septem comprehensae; Liber tertius auctore Gaufrido monacho, v 16, 17 in Patrologia latina, CLXXXV, 312-13; Cited by Walter Wakefield & Austin Evans, Heresies of The High Middle Ages (Columbia, 1991) p 93)

With the invective removed it sounds as though the Reformation has arrived in the Languedoc some three centuries before Martin Luther introduced it to Germany. After his visit, his main impression seems to have been the shameless corruption in his own Church. The people of the Languedoc had abandoned the Roman Catholic Church en mass for unnamed heresies:

... if you question the heretic about his faith, nothing is more Christian; if about his daily converse, nothing more blameless; and what he says he proves by his actions ... As regards his life and conduct, he cheats no one, pushes ahead of no one, does violence to no one. Moreover, his cheeks are pale with fasting; he does not eat the bread of idleness; he labours with his hands and thus makes his living ... Women are leaving their husbands, men are putting aside their wives, and they all flock to those heretics! Clerics and priests, the youthful and the adult among them, are leaving their congregations and churches and are often found in the company of weavers of both sexes.

(from Bernard's sermon 65 on the Caticle of Canticles (or Song of Songs, or Song of Solomon): Sancti Bernardi Sermones super Cantica canticorum, Semon 65 from Sancti Bernardi Opera, Cited by Walter Wakefield & Austin Evans, Heresies of The High Middle Ages (Columbia, 1991) p 130)

Although he does not mention the word Cathar, there are several indications here that Bernard is referring to Cathars: living the Christian ideal; pale through fasting; working for a living; appealing equally to men, women, and Catholic priests. The term "weaver" is frequently used as a synonym for Cathar Parfait, since this was their most favoured itinerant trade.

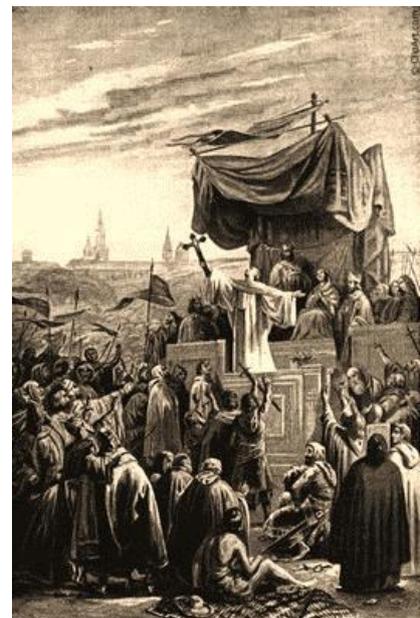
Bernard may have had some sympathy for the Cathars. He never said so explicitly, but he did share some of their views. The world had no meaning for him save as a place of banishment and trial, in which men are but "strangers and pilgrims" (Serm. i., Epiph. n. I; Serm. vii., Lent. n. I). The words could have been taken from a Cathar instruction manual.

Despite any sympathy he might have had, he was happy enough to see those whom he saw as his enemies destroyed. Speaking of heretics, he held that "it would without doubt be better that they should be coerced by the sword than that they should be allowed to draw away many other persons into their error." (Serm. lxvi. on Canticles ii. 15). Killing god's enemies was not merely permitted, but glorious. He asserted in a letter to the Templars:

"The Christian who slays the unbeliever in the Holy War is sure of his reward, the more sure if he himself is slain. The Christian glories in the death of the pagan, because Christ is thereby glorified". He also pointed out that anyone who kills an unbeliever does not commit homicide but malicide. (St Bernard, De Laude Novae Militiae, III (De Militibus Christi). For him all infidels were creatures of Satan. After being asked about how heretics could bear the agony of the fire not only with patience but even with joy, Bernard answered the question in a sermon where he ascribed the steadfastness of heretical "dogs" in facing death to the power of the devil. (Serm. lxvi. on Canticles ii. 15)

Bernard played the leading role in the development of the cult of the Virgin Mary - which many historians have seen as an attempt to counter the prominent role of women in new movements - notably those of the troubadours and the Cathars.

Bernard preached the Second Crusade. His eloquence was extraordinarily successful. At the meeting at Vézelay after Bernard's sermon many of all classes took the cross, most notably King Louis VII of France and his queen, Eleanor of Aquitaine. It was said that when Bernard preached, women went in fear. Mothers hid their sons from him, wives their husbands, and companions their friends. Bernard proudly informed the Pope of his success in preaching a crusade: "I opened my mouth; I spoke; and at once the crusaders have multiplied to infinity. Villages and towns are now deserted. You will scarcely find one man for every seven women. Everywhere you will see widows whose husbands are still alive". His patter was reminiscent of that of a high-pressure salesman selling to credulous punters:



But to those of you who are merchants, men quick to seek a bargain, let me point out the advantages of this great opportunity. Do not miss them. Take up the sign of the cross and you will find indulgence for all sins that you humbly confess. The cost is small, the reward is great.

Actually the cost was death. Most of those women were soon to become real widows for the crusader army was chopped to pieces in Anatolia before getting anywhere near to the Holy Land. The disastrous outcome of the crusade was a blow to Bernard, who found it difficult to understand why God would let his own army down like this. Perhaps the best solution was that the outcome had been a great success after all, because it had transferred so many Christian warriors from God's earthly army to his heavenly one. Not everyone was convinced. The disaster was so severe that Christians throughout Europe started considering the ultimate blasphemy - that after all God might be on the side of the Moslems.

On receiving the news of the catastrophe, an effort was made to organise another crusade. Bernard attended a meeting at Chartres in 1150 convened for this purpose. He was elected to lead the new crusade, but Pope Eugene III failed to endorse him or his project, and it came to nothing.

Bernard was discredited and looked like a spent force, but his influence was greater than it appeared, and Cistercians in his image would promote further Crusades. The Crusade against the Cathars of the Languedoc was precipitated by the murder of a Cistercian legate, preached by Cistercian orators, initially lead by a Cistercian abbot, supported by Cistercian monks, and even documented by Cistercian chroniclers.



Bernard's comments justifying the killing of God's supposed enemies are echoed in the massacres carried out by a later famous Cistercian abbot and military commander, Arnaud Amoury, the Abbot of Citeaux, most famously at Béziers where he is credited with the immortal command "Kill them all. God will know his own."

Bernard was canonised in 1174 and declared a Doctor of the Roman Catholic Church in 1830.

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