

Bernard of Clairvaux: Apology

By the time Suger was rebuilding the abbey church at St. Denis, a new religious order was attracting attention throughout Europe. The Cistercians began in 1098 when some Benedictine monks in search of a more rigorous life settled at Cîteaux. Their monastery attracted few converts until 1112, when a young nobleman named Bernard persuaded approximately thirty companions, including his uncle and all but one of his brothers, to enter with him. (The remaining brother was underage. He entered later.) From that moment, the community increased steadily and within a year was sending groups off to found new houses. By 1130 there were thirty Cistercian houses and by 1168 there were 288.

In 1115 Bernard became abbot of the new Cistercian monastery at Clairvaux, a position he held until his death in 1153. Bernard had little time to tend his flock, though, since he soon became a religious superstar. Recognized as the foremost preacher of his day, he traveled widely, wrote prolifically, and was involved to the hilt in papal politics, opposition to heresy, and the planning of a crusade.

Bernard was the chief spokesman for Cistercian values. Monastic life was to be austere and disciplined. Food, buildings and even worship were to be kept simple. Monasteries were to be built away from population centers, thus shielding the brothers from distraction and excessive contributions.

The Apology is part of a running feud with the Benedictine abbey of Cluny and its many dependent houses. Cluniac monasticism tended to be more integrated with society than Cistercian. Its houses extended hospitality to travelers and some Cluniac abbeys were important pilgrimage centers. Thus abbey churches were often large and sumptuously decorated, their services complex and elaborate.

In 1125 William, abbot of St. Thierry, asked Bernard to write something which would defend the Cistercians against the charge of slandering the Cluniacs and, at the same time, criticize Cluniac laxity. The result was the Apology, which begins by condemning self-righteous criticism and then proceeds to ridicule Cluniac excesses in food, clothing and buildings. Only the section on buildings is included here.

But these are minor abuses. I shall go on to major ones which seem minor because they are so common. I say nothing of the enormous height, extravagant length and unnecessary width of the churches, of their costly polishings and curious paintings which catch the worshipper's eye and dry up his devotion, things which seem to me in some sense a revival of ancient Jewish rites. Let these things pass, let us say they are all to the honor of God. Nevertheless, just as the pagan poet Persius inquired of his fellow pagans, so I as a monk ask my fellow monks: "Tell me, oh pontiffs," he said, "what is gold doing in the sanctuary?" I say (following his meaning rather than his metre): "Tell me, poor men, if you really are poor what is gold doing in the sanctuary?"

There is no comparison here between bishops and monks. We know that the bishops, debtors to both the wise and unwise, use material beauty to arouse the devotion of a carnal people because they cannot do so by spiritual means. But we who have now come out of that people, we who have left the precious and lovely things of the world for Christ, we who, in order to win Christ, have reckoned all beautiful, sweet-smelling, fine-sounding, smooth-feeling, good-tasting things-- in short, all bodily delights--as so much dung, what do we expect to get out of them? Admiration from the foolish? Offerings from the ignorant? Or, scattered as we are among the gentiles, are we learning their tricks and serving their idols?

I shall speak plainly: Isn't greed, a form of idolatry, responsible for all this? Aren't we seeking contributions rather than spiritual profit? "How?" you ask. "In a strange and wonderful way," I answer. Money is scattered about in such a way that it will multiply. It is spent so that it will increase. Pouring it out produces more of it. Faced with expensive but marvelous vanities, people are inspired to contribute rather than to pray. Thus riches attract riches and money produces more money. I don't know why, but the wealthier a place, the readier people are to contribute to it. Just feast their eyes on gold-covered relics and their purses will open. Just show them a beautiful picture of some saint. The brighter the colors, the saintlier he'll appear to them. Men rush to kiss and are invited to contribute. There is more admiration for beauty than veneration for sanctity. Thus churches are decorated, not simply with jeweled

crowns, but with jeweled wheels illuminated as much by their precious stones as by their lamps. We see candelabra like big bronze trees, marvelously wrought, their gems glowing no less than their flames. What do you think is the purpose of such things? To gain the contrition of penitents or the admiration of spectators?

On vanity of vanities, yet no more vain than insane!
The church is resplendent in her walls and wanting in her poor. She dresses her stones in gold and lets her sons go naked. The eyes of the rich are fed at the expense of the indigent. The curious find something to amuse them and the needy find nothing to sustain them.

What sort of reverence is shown to the saints when we place their pictures on the floor and then walk on them? Often someone spits in an angel's mouth. Often the face of a saint is trampled by some passerby's feet. If sacred images mean nothing to us, why don't we at least economize on the paint? Why embellish what we're about to befoul? Why decorate what we must walk upon? What good is it to have attractive pictures where they're usually stained with dirt?

Finally, what good are such things to poor men, to monks, to spiritual men? Perhaps the poet's question could be answered with words from the prophet: "Lord, I have loved the beauty of your house, and the place where your glory dwells" (Ps. 26:8). I agree. Let us allow this to be done in churches because, even if it is harmful to the vain and greedy, it is not such to the simple and devout. But in cloisters, where the brothers are reading, what is the point of this ridiculous monstrosity, this shapely misshapeness, this misshapen shapeliness? What is the point of those unclean apes, fierce lions, monstrous centaurs, half-men, striped tigers, fighting soldiers and hunters blowing their horns? In one place you see many bodies under a single head, in another several heads on a single body. Here on a quadruped we see the tail of a serpent. Over there on a fish we see the head of a quadruped. There we find a beast that is horse up front and goat behind, here another that is horned animal in front and horse behind. In short, so many and so marvelous are the various shapes surrounding us that it is more pleasant to read the marble than the books, and to spend the whole day marveling over these things rather than meditating on the law of God. Good Lord! If we aren't embarrassed by the silliness of it all, shouldn't we at least be disgusted by the expense?

Translation by David Burr [olivi@mail.vt.edu]. See his home page. He indicated that the translations are available for educational use. He intends to expand the number of translations, so keep a note of his home page.

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