

August 20

ON SAINT BERNARD, ABBOT

158.1 ⁷⁵³ First Point

Saint Bernard was brought up so well by his mother that in a short time he acquired a solid piety, and displayed all sorts of virtues, especially chastity, which he possessed to such an eminent degree that once, because he had looked too closely at a very attractive woman, he immediately threw himself naked into a freezing pond, to take vengeance on himself and punish himself for the fault he had committed. When a shameless woman entered his room to tempt him, he immediately cried out, Robber!, and by his cries prevented her from robbing him of his chastity.

It was by such heroic actions, by generous resistance to occasions of sin, and by a holy violence that the saints acquired this virtue. These are also the same means you must use to preserve it. Above all apply yourself very much to recollection, which will make it easy for you. For, as you see, Saint Bernard suffered an attack against his virtue by looking too closely at a woman.

158.2 Second Point

This saint attained such great chastity and reached such a high degree of modesty and self-control by means of a complete mortification of his senses that after spending a year in the monastery of Citeaux, he did not know whether the dormitory ceiling was made of stone or of wood. Likewise, after walking along the shore of a lake all day long, he had not seen it. He was so mortified with regard to drink that he once drank oil, believing that he was drinking water, and he had accustomed himself to fasting and taking so little food that eating, as he himself says, had become a torture for him. That is how this saint learned to die to himself and to become a perfect religious, appearing to have almost no longer any use of his senses.

When will you be entirely detached from the pleasure found in using your senses? This requires that you watch closely over yourselves, in order to be mortified in something on all occasions. Be faithful to this practice.

158.3 Third Point

The astonishing virtues of Saint Bernard, as well as the great number of his miracles, made him known throughout the whole Church, winning for him the respect of everyone. So high was the esteem he enjoyed that as Abbot of Clairvaux he was followed by a great crowd of persons who came to place themselves under his direction. His abbey numbered as many as 700 religious, and there was an almost incredible number in the other monasteries he founded, whom he helped to live in great perfection.

This made him so venerated by bishops, princes and the people that, as a result, no one undertook any important project without coming to him for his advice and judgment. The more this saint tried to keep hidden, the more people came to him, either to embrace the austerities of his Order or for the needs of the Church.

Virtue cannot hide. When it is seen it is attractive, and the example it gives makes such a strong impression on those who witness it practiced or who hear it talked about that most people are led to imitate it.

Is this the effect that your good behavior and piety produce in your students? It is the main means you should use to win them over to God.

Bernard (1090 - 1153) was born near Dijon, France. At the age of 22 he became a Benedictine monk at Citeaux, the austere abbey of the Cistercian reform. However, he did not join alone, but brought thirty others with him, among whom were relatives — a testimony to his extraordinary influence on others even at that early age. The abbey flourished and sent out groups to make other foundations, one of which was led by Bernard and settled at what became known as Clairvaux. It became the center of the Cistercian reform for all over Europe. His influence extended further and further as mediator and advocate in the reform of the whole Church. At the same time he did not neglect the training of his own monks at Clairvaux and wrote many beautiful mystical and theological treatises. He was largely responsible for preaching the Second Crusade at the request of the pope and was greatly saddened by its failure. He died on August 20, was canonized in 1174, and named a Doctor of the Church in 1830.

753 Number 157 on Saint Joachim is on March 20, between 110 and 111 in the present edition. It got its number from the 1882 edition whose numerical designation has become standard for references.