

CISTERCIAN FATHERS SERIES: NUMBER SIXTY-EIGHT

Bernard of Clairvaux

MONASTIC SERMONS



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# Monastic Sermons

Translated by  
Daniel Griggs

Introduction by  
Michael Casey



Cistercian Publications  
[www.cistercianpublications.org](http://www.cistercianpublications.org)

LITURGICAL PRESS  
Collegeville, Minnesota  
[www.litpress.org](http://www.litpress.org)

A Cistercian Publications title published by Liturgical Press

Cistercian Publications  
Editorial Offices  
161 Grosvenor Street  
Athens, Ohio 54701  
[www.cistercianpublications.org](http://www.cistercianpublications.org)

Scripture texts in this work are by the translator of the volume.

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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Names: Bernard, of Clairvaux, Saint, 1090 or 1091-1153, author.

Title: Monastic sermons / Bernard of Clairvaux ; translated by Daniel Griggs ;  
introduction by Michael Casey.

Description: Collegeville, Minnesota : Cistercian Publications, 2016. | Series:  
Cistercian Fathers series ; Number sixty-eight | Includes index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016007880 (print) | LCCN 2016023842 (ebook) |  
ISBN 9780879074685 (pbk.) | ISBN 9780879071684 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Catholic Church—Sermons. | Sermons, Latin—Translations into  
English.

Classification: LCC BX891.3 .B4713 2016 (print) | LCC BX891.3 (ebook) |  
DDC 252/.02—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2016007880>

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## Editor's Note

**I** AM GRATEFUL for assistance in preparing this volume from Emily K. Stuckey, who prepared the indices, and from Brian Patrick McGuire.

The Editor



# Introduction

Michael Casey, OCSO

THE TALKS GIVEN in chapter by the twelfth-century Cistercian Fathers are probably the most characteristic expression of their monastic teaching.<sup>1</sup> Each day of the year, including Good Friday, the abbot was expected to give a talk to the community in chapter—nominally by way of commentary on the chapter of the Rule of Saint Benedict that had just been read, but often ranging over any topic that might be useful for the monks to hear. On the greater liturgical feasts (termed “Feasts of Sermon”) there was scope for a more formal and more carefully crafted talk.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes these talks were written before delivery, sometimes they were redeveloped in a more literary format (and perhaps expressed in Latin rather than in the vernacular), and sometimes what remains is a collection of more or less full notes probably taken by stenographers and reconstituted afterward.

Bernard’s sermon corpus is considerable.<sup>3</sup> Alongside his eighty-six magisterial *Discourses on the Song of Songs* there are over six hundred

<sup>1</sup> The reader will notice that, where possible, I try to find an alternative to translating *sermones* as “sermons.” This is to avoid giving the impression to a contemporary reader that they were given in the church during the liturgy. They were, at least notionally, addresses or discourses or talks given by an abbot to his community in the chapter room.

<sup>2</sup> On the daily commentaries on the Rule see *Ecclesiastica Officia* 70:27–29 (Danièle Choisselet and Placide Vernet, *Les Ecclesiastica Officia cisterciens du XII<sup>ème</sup> siècle* [Reiningue: La Documentation Cistercienne, 1989], 204). On the Feasts of Sermon see *Ecclesiastica Officia* 67:3–5, p. 190.

<sup>3</sup> For information on the more technical aspects of Bernard’s *sermones*, see Jean Leclercq, “Sur la genèse des sermons de saint Bernard,” in *Études sur saint Bernard et*

other *sermones* given on different occasions over a forty-year span and preserved in different forms.<sup>4</sup> The homilies on the Gospel *Missus est*, the series *Ad clericos de conversione*, and the Lenten series on Psalm 90 (*Qui habitat*) form clear blocks of their own, with a total of forty-three sermons. The 109 liturgical sermons are grouped according to the feasts with which they are associated. In some cases, such as the seven sermons for Advent, it is clear that they were written conjointly but not necessarily at the same time.<sup>5</sup> Other series of *sermones* are not

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*le texte de ses écrits*, = ASOC 9 (1953): 45–83; “Les Sermons sur les Cantiques ont-ils été prononcés?” in *Recueil d’études sur saint Bernard et ses écrits I* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1962), 193–212; “Les sermons de Bernard sur le Psaume ‘Qui habitat,’” in *Recueil d’études sur saint Bernard et ses écrits II* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1966), 3–18; “La tradition des sermons liturgiques de S. Bernard,” in *Recueil II*, 185–260; “L’art de la composition dans les sermons de S. Bernard,” in *Recueil d’études sur saint Bernard et ses écrits III* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1969), 137–62; “Sur le caractère littéraire des sermons de S. Bernard, in *Recueil III*, 163–210; “S. Bernard prêcheur,” in *Recueil d’études sur saint Bernard et ses écrits IV* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1987), 81–93; “Introduction,” SBOp 4:119–59; “Introduction,” SBOp 6a:59–71.

<sup>4</sup>The *Sermones super Cantica Cantorum* are in volumes 1 and 2 of the critical edition published at Rome by Editiones Cistercienses in 1957–1958. There are 83 *Sermones per annum* in vol. 4 (1966), 69 in vol. 5 (1968), and an additional 8 in volume 6a (1970). Volume 6a also contains *Sermones de diversis* (Div); 10 of the usual collection have been relocated or otherwise rejected. Div 35, *Sermo ad abbates*, is at SBOp 5:288. Div 36, *De altitudine et bassitudine cordis*, is at SBOp 5:214. Div 37–39, *In labore messis*, are at SBOp 5:222, 217, 220. Div 43 = Ascension 5, SBOp 5:149. Div 44 is now Resurrection 4, SBOp 5:110. Div 46 is now Assumption 6, SBOp 5:260. Div 68, which is a duplicate of Div 32, *De iudicio triplici*, is not repeated. Div 114 is a series of sentences from Augustine’s *De civitate Dei* 1.19.13 (Sch 48:678). Div 19 is by Nicholas of Clairvaux. English versions of all of these omitted texts are included in John Kelly, trans., “Sermons on Diverse Subjects by Saint Bernard of Clairvaux,” *Tjurunga* 85 (2014). Accordingly, there are 114 authentic texts, numbered 1–125. In addition, SBOp 6b (1972) contains three series of *Sententiae*, considered to be free-floating *sermones* or summaries or remembrances of talks given. Of these there are 43 in the first series, 188 in the second series, and 127 in the third. This gives a nominal total of 643 *sermones* or 729 if those on the Song of Songs are included.

<sup>5</sup>In comparing the different recensions, Jean Leclercq concluded that Adv 4–5 were written first; then followed Adv 1–3, with a final expansion in Adv 6–7. See “La Tradition,” *Recueil II*, 269. See also Claudio Stercal, *Il “Medius Adventus”*: *Saggio di lettura degli scritti di Bernardo di Clairvaux* (Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1992), 31–33. The text *In celebratione Adventus*, printed in SBOp 6a:9–20, has never been

grouped in these categories: the *sermones de diversis* and three books of *sententiae* or “sayings,” two of which Mabillon recognized and the third, comprising some 127 texts, Jean Leclercq compiled. These are miscellaneous pieces gathered together by the editors and judged to be authentic.<sup>6</sup> They are heterogeneous both in form and content and almost impossible to categorize. The most visible difference between the *Sermones de diversis* and the *Sententiae* is length. Usually, but not always, the former are longer and more developed.

Apart from random exceptions in which small sub-groupings appear, most of these texts stand on their own. Unlike the *Sermones super Cantica canticorum*, they are not part of a sequential commentary on a biblical book, and, unlike the *Sermones per annum*, they are not attached to a liturgical feast. Since, probably, they represent talks given in the chapter room, their content was probably dictated by pastoral considerations and the changing circumstances of community life. In the twelfth century, an abbot’s regular teaching of the community was the principal means of what we would term spiritual direction. In a less individualized culture, where monks were many, corporate instruction was the mainstay of monastic formation. The giving and receiving of personal counsel was probably reserved to exceptional situations where no general direction was applicable.<sup>7</sup>

These are not set pieces of oratorical eloquence. They are down-to-earth and practical expositions intended to help the monks live their monastic life more fervently and with less trouble. Even though it was impossible for Bernard to express himself without a certain degree both of elegance and erudition, these talks presuppose a familiarity with the everyday experiences and struggles of the members

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grouped with Adv 1–7 and is regarded by some as dubiously authentic. See Jean Leclercq, “L’authenticité bernardine du sermon ‘In celebratione Adventus,’” *Recueil II*, 271–90.

<sup>6</sup> On the external and internal criteria used to arrive at a decision regarding the inclusion of a particular text in the critical edition of Bernard’s works, see Jean Leclercq, “Introduction,” SBOp 6a:59–71. For more detail, see H.-M. Rochais, “Enquête sur les sermons divers de saint Bernard,” ASOC 18, nos. 3–4 (1962): 1–183.

<sup>7</sup> Div 26.3: “If he is thinking of doing something for which there is no definite commandment, he should leave the matter hanging until he asks his superior and seeks the will of God from him.” In this case and in all other texts, unless otherwise noted, I am using my own translation.

of the community. Bernard's personality is stamped all over these familiar texts. Far from being lofty discourses of disembodied mysticism, Bernard seasons his talks with references to everyday objects, animals, and plants.<sup>8</sup> Even though he does nothing to disguise the "hard and rough things" to be encountered on the monastic journey, he is never harsh or dictatorial, nor is he impatient with the imperfections he sees around him.<sup>9</sup> His style is simple and expository, sympathetic to the difficulties his monks encounter, and always encouraging, especially to beginners. He follows his own prescription: "There should be moderation in correction, abundance in exhortation, and effectiveness in persuasion" (Div 58.1). What he spoke to his community was a word of upbuilding, *sermo ædificationis* (Div 15.5).

Close examination reveals many connections with Bernard's more literary works, and these may sometimes indicate a degree of synchronicity. Unlike Aelred, however, Bernard is not given to a process of copy and paste.<sup>10</sup> On the one hand, he is prone to using different

<sup>8</sup> See the lists compiled by Françoise Callerot, OCSO, in SCh 545: References to animals, 400–401; to parts of the body, 402–4; to objects, 407–9; to plants, 411–12.

<sup>9</sup> Bernard seems reconciled to the fact that humans will never be perfect while they remain on earth. See, for example, Div 13.3, 24.3; see also 124.1: "I call good not only perfect souls but also those who are beginners, because even if they have a vice they do not consent to it but are horrified by it. Such souls, though they fall often through weakness or ignorance (as it is said, the just person falls seven times in a day), yet nevertheless, because their will is good they rise up."

<sup>10</sup> With Bernard there are always exceptions. The poetic outburst in Div 42.1 appears also in Div 22.5: *O quam indebita miseratio, quam gratuita et sic probata dilectio, quam inopinata dignatio, quam stupenda dulcedo, quam invicta mansuetudo*. There is a close parallel in Dil 13 (SBOp 3:129): *Quid namque aliud faciat considerata tanta et tam indebita miseratio, tam gratuita et sic probata dilectio, tam inopinata dignatio, tam invicta mansuetudo, tam stupenda dulcedo?* In Div 22.8, there is a strong reminiscence of Bernard's ode to eternal day in SC 33.6 (SBOp 1:237). Certain phrases in Div 29.1 recall the extended treatment in SC 20 (SBOp 1:114–21): the triple modality of love in Deut 6:5 is understood in terms of loving sweetly, prudently, and strongly: *dulciter, prudenter, fortiter*. In Sent 3.93 (SBOp 6b:149) charity is qualified as *dulcis, sapiens, and robusta*. The listing of the steps of the downward trajectory in Div 14.1–7 is paralleled in Sent 3.98 (SBOp 6b:163–68), 3.4 (6:65–66), 3.19 (6b:76), 3.20 (6b:76), 3.89 (6b:136–37); Par 3.4 (SBOp 6b:276), Par 7 (SBOp 6b:299). For further information on other parallels to this passage, see Michael Casey, "Introduction and Translation of the Seventh and Eighth Parables of Bernard of Clairvaux," CSQ 22, no. 1 (1987): 38–45.

terms to describe the same realities, and, on the other, he sometimes employs particular phrases in different senses.<sup>11</sup> Given that these texts are spread out over several decades of abbatial teaching, some repetition, overlap, and nuancing may be expected. In general, however, these shorter pieces are minor masterpieces and may be considered a valuable source for understanding Bernard's monastic doctrine. Though it is clear that they have not received the same degree of authorial attention as his major works, Bernard's practical, literary, spiritual, and mystical gifts are clearly evident. These *sermones* have been ignored for too long.

## TITLES

The first things we encounter on reading the *sermones de diversis* are the titles. The titles are not original but were inserted by the editors at the time of redaction. There is some variation in the different manuscript streams. Mostly the assigned titles identify a particular element in the text that makes it distinctive—they do not necessarily provide an indication of what the whole text is about. In eight cases there seems to be an association with a liturgical celebration.<sup>12</sup> Twenty-two texts base themselves on a scriptural passage or an event in the Bible or, in one case, a response to an opinion of Origen, maybe read at Vigils.<sup>13</sup> There are fifty-three numerical sequences in the titles, thirty-one of which offer a tripartite division.<sup>14</sup> These statistics refer only to

<sup>11</sup> Thus Bernard treats the triad *disciplina–natura–gratia* in Div 92.2 differently from the same combination in SCh 23.6 (SBOp 1:142). See also Sent 3.123 (SBOp 6b:233–36).

<sup>12</sup> Div 16, 47, 52, 54, 57, 60, 66, 111.

<sup>13</sup> Div 3, 5, 9, 15, 18, 19 (S 19 is by Nicholas of Clairvaux), 20, 21, 28, 33, 34 (S 34 concerns Origen, *In Levit* 7.2), 61, 62, 63, 65, 72, 73, 74, 77, 94, 109, 123. Five are based on a text from the Psalms and five on the gospels.

<sup>14</sup> Div 2, 4, 6, 7, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 22, 23, 25, 26, 28, 30, 31, 32, 42, 45, 49, 55, 56, 59, 64, 69, 76, 78, 79, 87, 88, 90, 91, 92, 96, 98, 99, 101, 102, 103, 104, 106, 112, 113, 115, 116, 117, 118, 119, 120, 122, 124. Twofold divisions occur 5 times, threefold 31 times, fourfold 12 times, fivefold twice, sixfold once, and sevenfold twice. In two cases (Div 13 and Div 90) a title contains two different sequences.

the titles; there are many more numerical sequences in the sermons themselves, and, of course, numerical sequences are nearly universal in the *Sententiae*.

The significance of the frequency of the threefold division is that it has a rhetorical function. All the numbered sequences are useful in giving listeners a sense of how the movement of the talk is progressing, but a threefold sequence is especially effective, because three is as many items as most people can easily remember. Beyond three the strict sequence of items is managed in the mind with greater difficulty. Furthermore, because these triads often suggest three sequential stages, beginning–middle–end or past–present–future, they offer a speaker the possibility of outlining a phenomenology of progress or decline that is easy enough to remember. Ongoing reflection enables listeners to engage in a form of self–diagnosis and thence to begin to take whatever steps seem necessary to achieve their goal.

It is a useful exercise to read through the list of titles. That gives an astonishing array of topics covering many aspects of the spiritual and monastic life. As with most of Bernard’s work, the *Sermones de diversis* defy systematization. Although occasionally a few of the *sermones* cluster around a common theme, mostly the titles give the impression of a random agglomeration of topics. Reading the *sermones* in sequence, however, leads to a strong impression that their unifying motif is the monastic experience of the listening monks. And it has to be remembered that the titles do not always represent the full content of the individual talks.

These varied talks have a relaxed and familiar tone. They are part of an ongoing conversation between an abbot and his monks, spread over many years. Bernard presents himself as an understanding pastor who is concerned to guide his monks away from self–destructive behavior, not out of a zeal for abstract virtue, but from a fraternal affection that would spare them the suffering consequent upon life–diminishing choices. These are not pontifical discourses from the throne but sympathetic explanations of the way things are in the spiritual life. Often enough, even in the abridged form in which these talks have been preserved, there is a sparkle in the expression that must have endeared them to the listeners, even when he is describing serious realities; for example, “The way is arduous and rough and unwalkable

[sic: *inambulabilis*]” (Div 111.4). Often we find clever wordplays, subtle reminiscences of biblical themes and language, good humor, and, occasionally, mild witticisms.<sup>15</sup> The personableness and charm of the speaker are evident throughout these talks, but the *sermones* are also notable for the solidity of their doctrine.

## CONTENT

It is unrealistic to expect that miscellaneous talks will offer a systematic or comprehensive survey of monastic doctrine. Of necessity, such talks are occasional, tailored to the situation in which they are delivered, emphasizing what is of most relevance to particular situations. With Bernard, however, even the shortest text can be fitted into his whole worldview—almost like a piece of a jigsaw puzzle. He developed his monastic philosophy very early in his career, and it remained operative—with some nuancing—throughout his life. This means that it is possible to take a short text and fit it into a more global synthesis without doing violence to the original. This is what Sister Françoise Callerot has done so well in her notes to the Sources Chrétiennes edition of the *Sermones de diversis*. The monks of Clairvaux were exposed to aspects of Bernard’s thinking over the decades of his abbacy, and they knew him well enough to be able to insert everything he said into a more ample context and so more quickly and more faithfully appreciate what he was hoping to communicate. We should attempt the same process. Here, as elsewhere, it becomes evident that the best means to understand anything Bernard has written is to have read closely everything that Bernard wrote.

Underlying Bernard’s monastic doctrine is a theological anthropology that permeates all of his writings.<sup>16</sup> In these talks he seems concerned

<sup>15</sup> In Div 93, Bernard reflects on the properties of teeth as indicating the qualities that should be found in those who embrace the monastic profession, a lighthearted yet challenging presentation of the obligations that monks embrace.

<sup>16</sup> For a survey of Bernard’s anthropology, see Michael Casey, *Athirst for God: Spiritual Desire in Bernard of Clairvaux’s Sermons on the Song of Songs* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1988), 131–89.

to insist on the essential goodness of the human being. He tells his monks to be mindful of their basic nobility and beauty (Div 12.2) and describes the human being as “a noble creature” (Div 29.2, 40.3, 42.2) with a special dignity (29.1): “No creature that lives under the sun is of a state closer to God than the human soul” (Div 9.2); “God takes his rest in the higher region [of the soul]” (Div 84.1). And so it may be said that, “God is the life of the soul” (Div 47) and “God is the soul of the soul itself” (Div 10.1). It may also be affirmed that “truth, the sense of charity, is the life of the soul” (Div 10.1). “It cannot be said that a soul is alive that does not have the knowledge of truth. It is still dead in itself” (Div 10.1). The learning of this ultimate truth demands that the monk open himself to God’s word: “It is our food and a sword and medicine and confirmation and rest, resurrection and also our consummation” (Div 24.1).<sup>17</sup> Bernard concludes, “Hearing comes first and seeing afterward, as it is written, ‘Hear, O daughter, and see.’ Therefore it is clearly necessary that whoever desires to see God in the future must first listen to God in the present” (Div 77).

This attention to the revealed Scripture provides the monk with his image of God, and the way he conceives God determines the tone of his spiritual life. If he sees God as just, his spirituality will be marked by a fruitful compunction about the past and a fear-inspired seriousness about the present. If he sees God as truthful he will be led to self-knowledge and confession. God’s generosity inspires detachment from material things. The thought of God’s omnipotence will support his mortification. If he sees God as the Supreme Good he will more willingly let go of self-will. The eternity of God will motivate him to persevere (see Div 111.5–7 and Sent 3.124). The perceived variety in God is not due to any changeableness in God, however, but to “the changing that takes place in the soul’s activity that makes us perceive different flavors [*sapores*] [in God]” (Div 73).

It is important for the monk to be aware of the changing circumstances of his interior life. The whole of Div 70 is devoted to that topic: *De consideratione sui*. It is because of a reluctance to engage in self-reflection that people are led astray: *per incuriam devient* (Div 96.2).

<sup>17</sup> The title given to this talk is *De multiplici efficacia verbi divina*.

Bernard admits that even monks have been neglectful in this regard, *soli nosmetipsos negligimus intueri* (Div 70). This necessary self-knowledge recognizes the *miseria* of human existence (Div 110), but it also includes an appreciation of what is good in us, our fundamental dignity, nobility, and beauty. It also understands that where there is light there is shadow and that the lives of even the holiest are not without zones of lesser light. We have to overcome our unwillingness to admit our liabilities instead of denying them, rationalizing them, renaming them, or projecting them onto others. Bernard takes as his own the sentiment attributed to the Delphic oracle, *Nosce teipsum* (“Know thyself”):

There are many and varied degrees of confession difficult to practise and hard to enumerate. The first path and the first step on the way is self-knowledge. From heaven the maxim came down: “Human, know thyself.” See how the bridegroom in the Canticle of love says the same thing to the bride: “If you are ignorant of yourself, O most beautiful among women, go forth” [Song 1:7]. Self-knowledge has three elements: that people know what they did, what they deserved, and what they lost. What is more vile, O noble creature, image of God, likeness of the Creator, than to render your flesh impure with carnal immorality and thus to lose the torrent of pleasure for a brief sensual pleasure? What is so raving mad as to be carried away by anger, exalted by pride, troubled by envy, and tormented by anxiety? Why do you embrace dung, you who were nurtured in saffron [Lam 4:5]? Remember also what you have merited. . . . Turn back your eyes and note what you have lost. . . . If you bind your soul with this triple cord you will know and realize that being convinced of one’s sin is the beginning of salvation. (Div 40.3)

The self-knowledge that accompanies this admission provides the necessary foundation for all the elements of monastic *conversatio*. Persons who consider that comfort and happiness are the default state of human beings will never accept the intrinsic pain of being human, will blame others for their condition and be unwilling to accept the monastic remedies that will offer them real relief. “Don’t you see how useful it is for persons to know themselves as human [*quam utile sit*

*homini scire se hominem*]? From this [knowledge] they will be prepared to be obedient to the commandments and to tolerate afflictions so that [they will understand] that in this present life they cannot escape from labor or pain and, if they do experience labor and pain, these will become salutary foods for them” (Div 2.5), remedies for the illness of the soul (Div 105). This is why throughout his writing Bernard cites the text of Isaiah 46:8 fifteen times, calling for a return to the heart: *Redite ad cor!* (Div 5.2; Div 115): “We have ceaselessly encouraged you, brothers, so that you will walk the road of the heart; let your soul be always in your hands” (Div 9.2). Conversion begins when God touches the heart and draws the attention away from fleshly and worldly concerns toward spiritual realities. Throughout life conscience will have an important role to play in maintaining the monk in a healthy state of self-awareness (Div 112).

Self-knowledge demands the recognition that growth in monasticity is not a smooth process. There is alternation between moments of light and moments of darkness:<sup>18</sup> “In this present life our faith wobbles [*titubat*]” (Div 111.2). Here below nothing fully satisfies us, and hence as we look for something more gratifying, it is only the prospect of change (*vicissitudo*) that offers some relief (Div 12.3). In glory we will not experience such a yearning for change (Div 1.7). But, for the moment, “there is a manifold variation in our interior feelings [*affectiones*]” (Div 8.1). We do not remain in the same state for long. This essential changeableness is often the source of confusion and difficulty, because as soon as we develop the skills and virtues for responding to one set of circumstances everything changes and we are left bereft. A period rich in spiritual experience is replaced by a time of emptiness and trial. For Bernard the real proof of the stability of a spiritual life was the capacity to negotiate “the many transitions between the visitation of grace and the testing of temptation” (Div 3.1). In these *sermones*, as elsewhere, Bernard is at pains to insist that the default state of spiritual life is neither peace nor warfare, but an unpredictable movement from one to the other: “Perfection does not consist in the visitation [of grace] alone nor in temptation but in both of them simultaneously” (Div 3.3).

<sup>18</sup> On alternation, see Casey, *Athirst for God*, 251–80.

Not all monks respond positively to the withdrawal of grace. Without the skills needed to find God in the wilderness they begin to lose focus and to be troubled by a multiplicity of thoughts (Div 32.4). Basing himself on James 3:17, Bernard affirms that where there is no modesty or peaceableness, a person is likely to become alienated from wisdom and thence from God. These troubling thoughts can be expressive of unfulfilled desires (*cogitationes affectuosae*). Otherwise, the mind can be swamped by practical or administrative concerns (*cogitationes onerosae*), or its energies can be dissipated by idle pursuits such as horseracing or falconry (*cogitationes otiosae*) (Div 45.1, 6).<sup>19</sup> In his teaching Bernard continues the age-long monastic tradition of insisting on vigilance regarding thoughts (Div 16.1). Div 31 has the title *De triplici genere cogitationum* and deals with the kinds of thoughts from which monks need to protect themselves. It is written in an inclusive first-person plural as if to underline the fact that the struggle against inappropriate thoughts is a normal and even universal element of monastic experience. Bernard is not preaching at his monks but simply and frankly giving expression to common experience, his own as well as theirs. He summarizes his thought at the end of the talk:

The first species of thoughts, idle and irrelevant thoughts, are mud, but simple mud since they do not cling or pollute. If it happens that they remain with us for a longer time, then through our unconcern and negligence they are changed into another species—as we daily experience. If we despise idle thoughts as being of minor significance, then we begin to slide into impure and inappropriate thoughts. This second species of thought is not simple mud but, as we have already said, mud that is thick and clinging. Of the third species we must beware, since [such thoughts] are not only dirty and clinging but also extremely impure and foul-smelling. (Div 31.3)

<sup>19</sup> See Sent 1.25 (SBOp 6b:16): “The mind [*memoria*] that is in the process of withdrawing from the Father is weakened in three ways: by emotional thoughts, by burdensome thoughts, and by idle thoughts. Emotional thoughts concern our own flesh or our relations. Burdensome thoughts concern the tasks assigned to us. Idle thoughts are those about the king of the English.”

Inappropriate thoughts are more than a waste of time. They are the beginning of a process of decline that will take the monk to a level of inconsistency that he had never envisaged. Mental betrayal is the first step in a movement away from God. Bernard, like Aelred, often lists stages of decline in order to make his monks aware of the inherent dynamism of vice. First, there is a mere suggestion of evil, then an increasing delight in it until, finally, consent is given (Div 45.1, 6; 72.1). When the evil action is repeated then an evil habit develops. In a series of complicated images based on the brickmaking of the Israelites under the Pharaoh, Bernard plots the trajectory of decline from first thought to fixed habit:<sup>20</sup>

Under Pharaoh's yoke they work in the mud, that is, in things that are undisciplined and filthy. They are given straw, that is, thoughts that do not concern serious matters [*leves cogitationes*]. It is a property of straw that it quickly bursts into flame and is consumed in a moment. Thus evil thoughts infused by the devil quickly burst into flames in our minds, a process to which the troublesome flesh gives consent. If we strive manfully to resist, then they are immediately extinguished with God's help. But when the straw is set on fire, the mud is baked and changed into bricks. Evil thoughts are like mud: when set on fire by straw, they give delight. They are baked when they pass into action. When they become habitual they become hard and solid. (Div 71.2)

The stages of decline are mapped most fully in Div 14, where, as in Div 125.3 and elsewhere, Bernard aligns the downward steps with their antithesis—the means of ascent provided by the gifts of the Holy Spirit:

Pernicious negligence put the wretched soul to sleep, curiosity woke it up for worse things, experience attracted, concupiscence led on, habit bound, contempt cast into a prison, malice strangled. But now fear rouses, piety gently softens, knowledge, which

<sup>20</sup> It seems that Bernard was not too knowledgeable about the process of brick-making in ancient Egypt. The straw was used to bind the clay together, not to bake the bricks; this was done by exposing them to the sun.

indicates what is to be done, brings sorrow,<sup>21</sup> fortitude lifts up the self; counsel unbinds it, understanding leads from prison. Wisdom lays the table, feeds the hungry, and makes good the damage with wholesome foods. (Div 14.7)

Bernard sees evil habit as incapacitating darkness that makes goodness virtually impossible. Before conversion we were resident in the habitual and familiar darkness of a way of life marked by sin (Div 3.6). We were wretchedly bound by the habit of sin (Div 8.5), living in a state that derives not merely from the weakness of nature but, more especially, from the evil habits in whose formation we had been complicit (Div 3.6).

More than a merely defensive vigilance about thoughts is needed. Part of Bernard's pastoral office was constantly to exhort his monks to the active practice of the virtues.<sup>22</sup> The monastery is a *schola dilectionis*, but love is learned not only by the positive experience of being loved and loving but also by the action of teachers who help us to extinguish lust and overcome negligence (Div 121). Thus the monastery is also a *schola virtutum* (Div 3.1). Françoise Callerot has compiled lists of all the virtues mentioned in the *Sermones de diversis*.<sup>23</sup> By my reckoning, using her listings, there are 217 references to the cardinal virtues.<sup>24</sup> The second list has 403 mentions of "monastic virtues."<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup> This is a reminiscence of Prov 9:2.

<sup>22</sup> See Michael Casey, "Le spirituel: les grands thèmes bernardines," in *Bernard de Clairvaux: histoire, mentalité, spiritualité*, ed. Dominique Bertrand and Guy Lobrichon, SCH 380 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1992), esp. 623–28.

<sup>23</sup> SCH 545:446–48. It seems that some misprints have crept into the listing. Also, it has to be noted that because of Bernard's skill with synonyms, a concordance is of only limited value in attempting to determine his teaching on particular points.

<sup>24</sup> Fortitude (38), justice (129), prudence (39), and temperance (11). To be noted is the ambiguity inherent in Bernard's use of *iustitia*. Sometimes, especially in texts influenced by the Vulgate, it denotes the biblical concept of righteousness. At other times it is used in the more philosophical sense of treating neighbors appropriately. In Div 523–24 Bernard reflects on the role of the cardinal virtues in the life of the Virgin Mary.

<sup>25</sup> Chastity (20), circumspection (10), continence (22), discretion (11), humility (141), obedience (83), perseverance (27), piety (51), shame (*pudor*) (21), and purity (28).

The third list is of 163 “other virtues.”<sup>26</sup> The grand total of references to different virtues as compiled by Sister Françoise is 783. One or another of the virtues is mentioned in 99 of the 114 authentic Bernardine pieces in this series. Of course, the vices are also listed.<sup>27</sup> The numbers in every case are approximate and are cited only as an indication; each instance needs to be examined on its own merit. Not every case refers to the behavior of monks; some references are quite general. The evidence is sufficient, however, to demonstrate that Bernard’s talks were eminently practical, with a strong emphasis on appropriate monastic attitudes and behavior.

It would be wrong to conclude that Bernard advocated that his monks pursue lives of merely solitary virtue.<sup>28</sup> He insisted that the monk is a social animal (Div 16.3), who leads a social life (Div 92.3) and learns to practice social love (Div 10.2; Sent 3.73). This means that monastic morality has a social form: monastic *conversatio* is built around an objective body of observances. By following and internalizing the values inherent in these observances, the monk is trained to give himself comprehensively to his vocation and so to find happiness and fulfillment in the monastery. Bernard affirms unambiguously the importance of Cistercian *disciplina*, though he recognizes that because it necessarily implies new learning (*disciplina* derives from *discere*), it will be a challenge for many, especially at the beginning: “Whoever strives to attain the summit of perfect monastic life [*conversatio*] must first be a disciple. So he needs to enter the cell of discipline, in which

<sup>26</sup> Abstemiousness (*paritas*) (2), assiduity (4), benignity (13), boldness (14), constancy (3), equanimity (2), equity (2), goodness (10), integrity (*honestas*) (5), patience (48), rectitude (43), and sobriety (17).

<sup>27</sup> Ambition (6), anger (24), apostasy (2), arrogance (6), avarice (4), blindness (8), boastfulness (3), cunning (3), concupiscence (62), confusion (26), contempt (34), contumacy (2), cruelty (7), cupidity (7), curiosity (17), disobedience (7), dissimulation (25), elation (6), envy (16), falsity (33), fatuity (7), foolishness (*insipientia*) (15), fornication (7), fraud (7), hatred (21), hypocrisy (2), impatience (9), impenitence (3), impiety (29), impurity (7), inanity (10), incredulity (3), infidelity (3), inflation (4), ingratitude (18), iniquity (47), injustice (5), levity (6), libido (3), malice (22), malignity (20), mendacity (15), murmuring (3), negligence (16), perversity (9), pleasure-seeking (*voluptas*) (53), pride (46), pusillanimity (13), sexual sins (*luxuria*) (5), uncleanness (16), unconcern (3), unquiet (2), vanity (51), vice (42).

<sup>28</sup> See Michael Casey, “*In communi vita fratrum*: St Bernard’s Teaching on Cenobitic Solitude,” ASOC 46 (1990): 243–61.

his behavior is shaped by a master by means of different virtues, just as perfume is compounded from different spices” (Div 92.2). Discipline is necessarily hard, but it need not be harsh, since those responsible should temper it to suit the condition of beginners:

So when some simple men come to conversion, they fear the severity of the Rule. If they are told about contempt of the world, the conflict of vice and virtue, the challenge of vigils, assiduity in prayer, the lean [diet] of fasting, all of which will be demanded of them, they say in complaint, “What is this? Who can fulfil so many and such great requirements?” They do not know how great is the strength of the lifestyle [*ordo*] that they have assumed. The shepherd has to respond in a soothing manner and to be solicitous that they bring flour. (Div 95.2)<sup>29</sup>

The fact that adapting oneself to monastic *conversatio* is difficult means that newcomers must be constantly assured of its value and efficacy: “The rigor of discipline maintains a watch against [the vices of] the flesh” (Div 82.3). By accepting the *dura et aspera* newcomers will gradually come to experience the hidden attractions of Cistercian life, which is “hard on the outside but very sweet inside” (Div 97.2). “Both discipline and the social life are a gift of grace” (Div 92.2).

For Bernard, “bodily observances” (Div 118) were indispensable for progress in the spiritual life. In different places he singles out for mention different aspects of monastic life, but it is clear that he regards the totality of observances as necessary: picking and choosing among them will be ineffectual. “Silence, psalmody, vigils, fasting, manual work, bodily purity” comprise one list that he gives (Div 55.1). Bernard’s

<sup>29</sup> The last sentence of this passage is difficult. The context is the story in 2 Kgs 4:38-41 about Elisha and the poisoned soup. The prophet ordered flour to be brought, which, when thrown into the pot, neutralized the poison. A miracle will occur, but someone has to provide the flour. So this section of the talk begins, “The wise steward does not himself bring the flour but rather orders that it be brought, since he does not bestow charity but encourages [others] to have it, the addition of which makes sweet what previously seemed bitter.” The point is that the Cistercian lifestyle has to be accepted in its integrity even though it is challenging, but, once accepted, it begins to work its magic beyond anything that could be achieved by mere willpower and effort.

“spirituality” cannot be understood without appreciating that its foundation was lifelong perseverance in pursuing a lifestyle that sought to be “ordinary, obscure, and laborious.”

Bernard never hides from his monks the doggedness that is necessary if we are to persevere in the practice of prayer. Commenting on the reading of RB 20 about reverence in prayer, he recognizes that often prayer is a matter of mere custom and is characterized by aridity; the mind seems beset by stupidity (*hebetudo*), and the words on the lips do not resonate within (Div 25.7). Yet he also reminds his monks that sometimes the heart is lifted up to the heavenly Jerusalem (Div 19.6), and the monk is taken beyond himself in *excessus mentis* (Div 115). Bernard is interested in the changing patterns of prayer, taking 1 Corinthians 14:28 as his starting point: *obsecratio, oratio, postulatio, gratiarum actio* (Div 25). He returns to this topic in Div 107, relating each form of prayer to an interior disposition and concluding that prayer is sometimes shy, sometimes simple, sometimes large-hearted, and sometimes fervent (Div 107.1).

Granted the reputation for silence that latter-day Cistercians acquired, it may surprise some readers that Bernard often dwells on the dangers associated with undisciplined speech. It is true that he recognizes the “utility of speech” (Div 17.7), and he believes that within fraternal life there is scope for talk that builds up, *sermo ædificationis* (Div 15.5), but he recognizes that there are dangers associated with speaking. In Div 74, talkativeness (*loquacitas*) is associated with *curiositas*, *crudelitas*, and *voluptas* as behaviors that corrupt the body: “This fourfold disease corrupts the four parts of the body: curiosity corrupts the eyes, loquacity corrupts the tongue, cruelty corrupts the hands, and pleasure-seeking corrupts the genitals” (Div 74; Sent 3.9).

He mentions detraction a few times (Div 17.2, 4; 27.5), a topic that he had treated with such vehemence in SC 24, but generally he is more concerned about everyday conversation: “None of you, brothers, should consider of little importance the time that is consumed by idle words” (Div 17.3). The tongue, although it is a small member, is “a most suitable instrument for emptying hearts, as, I believe, the consciences of many among you will attest—unless we are all so perfect that it never happens that after long conversations [*post longas confabulationes*] our mind is found to be empty, as it were, our meditation is less marked by devotion, our inner feeling is drier, and the holocaust

of prayer is less rich [*pinguis*]. This happens, as we have said, because of words, whether we have spoken them or even just listened to them” (Div 17.5). He continues: “As for you who, because of many experiences, have skillfully noted to what a great extent words can be harmful, do not be stupid. Sometimes it is necessary to participate in conversation, but be careful not only to be circumspect in what you say but to be cautious about what you hear” (Div 17.6).

Monks are certainly “to abstain from lewd expressions [*impudicis locutionibus*]” (Div 125.2), but there are many other forms of improper speech, including language that is “dissolute, unchaste, boastful [*magniloqua*], or abusive [*maledica*]” (Div 17.2). Such language includes “scurrilities, detraction, boasting, and impatient words” (Div 27.5) and words that are “foolish, empty, lying, idle, deceitful, abusive, and exculpatory” (Div 55.1). Speaking about the influence of the malign spirits, he notes, “The spirit of the flesh always speaks of soft (or pleasurable) things [*mollia*], the spirit of the world always speaks of vain things, the spirit of malice always speaks of bitter things” (Div 23.3, 4; 24.1). From the effect of inappropriate speech on the individual he passes to its impact on the community: “Nothing is to be so avoided as horrible [*tam horrendum et horribile*] as murmuring and dissension” (Div 93).

#### CASE STUDY: BERNARD ON OBEDIENCE

It has been observed that monks who become abbots quickly develop a wide-ranging appreciation of monastic obedience and a certain eloquence in extolling its benefits. It is to be expected, therefore, that in a series of 125 monastic sermons, the topic of obedience would figure prominently. As so often happens in considering Bernard’s writings, however, the expected does not eventuate. Maybe this omission is one reason that Bernard’s talks were so well received by his monks and so avidly copied. Before we examine in detail the occurrences of the theme in the *Sermones de diversis*, we need to take a step back to view the broader context of Bernard’s teaching.

Bernard followed Benedict in believing that obedience, as an essential element in monastic discipline, was not primarily intended as a means of administrative or organizational control. Its purpose was

ascetic rather than merely organizational. He saw it as one means among many, one that was chiefly aimed at neutralizing the harmful effects of self-will: “Let us beware of self-will as if it were a very bad viper, because on its own it can bring our souls to damnation” (Div 11.3). Self-will is the source of the commonest deviations from the monastic ideal—concern with things that do not matter and pleasure-seeking (*vanitas et voluptas*) (Div 21.2). Self-will counteracts the effects of baptism, “putting us back under the power of darkness and subjecting us to the rule of death” (Div 11.2), and sets us on the path to self-destruction:

The soul is under [the control of] itself when it follows self-will, enjoying a harmful liberty. This is that prodigal son who received that part of his father’s property that was to be his, namely talent, memory, bodily strength, and other similar benefits of nature, and used them according to his own will and not according to God’s will, so it was as though he were without God in this world. (Div 8.2)

Bernard’s rules for discerning between right and wrong choices are simple. Whatever Scripture or conscience declares unambiguously good must be followed. Whatever Scripture or conscience declares unambiguously bad must be avoided. In other cases we should avoid automatically following our own will but, instead, declare a moratorium in the hope that clarity will emerge. If doubt persists, the counsel of a superior should be sought.<sup>30</sup> Bernard discusses this process in Div 26, which has been given the title “How our will should be subject to the divine will in three ways”:

<sup>30</sup> It seems that Bernard saw his role as abbot more in terms of giving advice than of issuing orders. Probably the most severe of any of the letters addressed to monks was one Bernard wrote to Gamellus, forbidding him to pursue his intention of taking up the eremitic life. He begins by using the verbs *mandare* and *remandare*, but he three times describes his own interventions in terms of counsel: *saniori consilio acquiescens, spreto consilio nostro, hoc est ergo meum, fultum apostolica auctoritate* [1 Cor 7:20], *consilium*.

Therefore, I beg you, brothers, attend carefully. I can think of nothing that would be more useful for you to hear. Where God's will is certain, our will must follow it totally, namely in those matters where we find something certain in Scripture, or the Spirit himself clearly cries to us in our hearts what is correct, for example charity, humility, chastity, and obedience. Let us approve and desire these values without hesitation, which we know for certain are pleasing to God. We ought to hate totally those things which we are certain God hates, for example, apostasy, fornication, evil, and impatience. In those areas where we can find nothing certain let us cling to nothing with certainty. Let us suspend our decision between the two or at least not cling excessively to either choice, being aware that perhaps the other choice is more pleasing to God, and let us be prepared to follow his will in whatever direction we know he is leading us. Let no one hesitate over what is certain. Let no one hold what is doubtful, as certain. In doubt let no one claim the right to judge or hurry a decision. Thus we experience what is written: "Those who love your law have much peace and no scandal" [Ps 119:165]. From where do scandals and tribulations come except that we follow our own will and rashly will what we decide in our own hearts. If someone tries to prevent or stop us, immediately we tend to murmur, be impatient, and be scandalised, not remembering that all things work unto good for those who have been called to be holy. And what seems to us a disaster is the word of God, indicating his will to us. But they who have determined nothing definite in their hearts about such (doubtful) matters will not be scandalised, no matter what happens afterwards. If we wish to do something for which we have no mandate, it is well to suspend our decision until we ask the superior and seek from him the will of God. If we obey him as one holding God's place, we will not be disturbed, for there is much peace and no scandal for those who love your law [Ps 119:165].<sup>31</sup>

This passage demonstrates something of Bernard's highly nuanced approach to monastic obedience. Bernard viewed his own work as

<sup>31</sup> This translation is by John Kelly, OCSO, "Bernard of Clairvaux's Sermons on Diverse Subjects," *Tjurunga* 85 (2014): 86.

abbot principally in terms of writing and teaching rather than in issuing orders. He seems to have been content for others to take over much of the temporal administration of his monastery<sup>32</sup> while he concentrated on preaching, prayer, and study—as he notes in his eulogy of his brother Gerard (SC 26.7). This approach corresponds to Saint Benedict’s injunction in RB 2.4 that the principal functions of abbatial authority are to teach, to establish policy, and to give commands: *docere, constituere, iubere*. This is quite distinct from the more modern notion that authority is exercised primarily by giving orders.

In a monastery the basic pattern of daily life is set by the Gospel and the Rule: it is the abbot’s principal task to communicate moral energy to his monks by his teaching on the beliefs and values underlying monastic practice. Then it is his duty to express these values in legislating for communal practice. Only when these ordinary means are insufficient for the circumstances are administrative orders necessary. Monastic authority is not a military command structure. Furthermore, Saint Benedict insists that the abbot ensure that what he ordains really is the will of God, not only by operating within the parameters set down in the Rule but also by ensuring that he seeks to enforce nothing for which there is no scriptural precedent: *nihil extra praeceptum Domini (quod absit)* (RB 2.4).

The question that seems to have preoccupied Bernard was the concordance of abbatial instructions and the objective manifestations of God’s will in the Rule and in the Scriptures. He discusses this matter at some length in his treatise *On Precept and Dispensation* (Pre).<sup>33</sup> In the following paragraph Bernard begins his discussion of the subordination of the abbot’s will to the Rule; this point he considers most important (*potissimum*):

<sup>32</sup> See Michael Casey, “Reading Saint Bernard: The Man, the Medium, the Message,” in *A Companion to Bernard of Clairvaux*, ed. Brian Patrick McGuire (Leiden: Brill, 2011), esp. 69–71.

<sup>33</sup> For a detailed commentary on this treatise, see Jean Leclercq, “Saint Bernard dans l’histoire de l’obéissance,” *Recueil III*, 267–98.

First of all, whatever pertains to the spiritual elements handed down in the Rule is in no way left in the hand of the abbot. Not even the other part, which comprises bodily observances, is placed in his will so that it is at the service of his will. It serves only charity. The abbot is not above the Rule, since he himself has once and for all freely subjected himself to it by his profession, even if charity, which is God's rule, has precedence over Saint Benedict's Rule. No one should deny this. On occasion, then, let the letter of the Rule yield to charity, when necessity demands it, but let [the Rule] never be made subject to mere human will. He who has been elected abbot is constituted [judge] over the transgressions of the brothers, not over the traditions of the Fathers; he is to cultivate their commandments and punish vices. I consider these holy observances as entrusted to the prudence of superiors rather than made subject to their wills.<sup>34</sup>

Bernard continues by noting that the dispositions of the abbot must flow from his reflection or judgment and not from what is pleasing to his own will (*placitum voluntatis*). In the following paragraph, he reminds the abbot that he also, by virtue of his profession, is subject to the Rule. He concludes that "it is appropriate for the one who is in charge not to unleash the reins of his own will on those subject to him."

The [formula of] profession has "I promise," not "the Rule" but "obedience according to the Rule of Saint Benedict," therefore, not according to the will of a superior. Then if I make profession according to the Rule and if my abbot should try to impose something which is not according to the Rule, for example, something that is according to what Basil or Augustine or Pachomius has established, I ask you, what need is there for me in this case to comply? My judgment is that only that can be demanded of me which I have promised.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Translated from Pre 9; SBOp 3:239. Another translation of this text and those following appears in CF 1:111–13.

<sup>35</sup> Pre 10; SBOp 3:260–61.

In the next paragraph he continues his aim of defining the limits of obedience. He excludes from its zone of application anything that is “beside, beyond, or against” the *tenor professionis*. *Tenor* is a legal term signifying the content of a law or judgment. Hence Bernard excludes whatever is outside what has been promised in profession. The prepositions he uses—*citra*, *ultra*, and *contra*—were later incorporated into canonical texts:

See, therefore, the limits of obedience about which you asked. If obedience is to be defined by the form of the profession, the power of the one commanding cannot go beyond this. It is determined by the vow of the one making profession. Anything that is beside, beyond, or against this I consider to be outside the limits of obedience; its power is circumscribed within these borders. For this reason, anyone who makes profession in any way of life that leads to salvation should not be forced by the law of obedience to go beyond what his profession includes—nor to be compelled to something less. How much less [justification is there to act] against [what has been professed]: *quanto minus contra*.<sup>36</sup>

It is clear from these passages that Bernard’s view of religious authority is neither positivist nor authoritarian. He viewed the abbatial office as an everyday task to be done as an expression of the abbot’s own obedience to the various manifestations of God’s will. This means that at least some of his energies need to be devoted to becoming more familiar with the ways of God through discernment, prayer, meditation, and reading. Bernard understood that the task of those in authority is to mediate the divine will as this has been manifested in the Scriptures and in the particular rule that has been professed, and then to make rulings in situations not directly covered by these sources.

Properly, monastic obedience consists in being open to all the many ways in which the monk is instructed to follow God’s ways, including the liturgy, the reading of Scripture, the voice of conscience, the requirements of the Rule and monastic discipline, the needs of the brethren, and the everyday demands of community life. The abbot is

<sup>36</sup> Pre 11; SBOp 3:261.

one channel among many, and giving orders is but one of several ways in which he points out the way to eternal life, not the least being his own example, *ut subjectos suos exemplo magis instruat quam verbo* (Div 100).

Leadership came naturally to Bernard, and it seems that throughout his life there were many who were more than glad to follow his direction. He seems to have taken for granted that monks who were serious about their vocation would be generally and substantially obedient; his pastoral concern was less directed to exhorting them to practice obedience than to recommending ways in which the subjective experience of obedience might be improved. He was not apprehensive about potential disobedience; he was more concerned that monks would not gain the full profit from their obedience because of some defect at the level of interior disposition.

According to the CETEDOC concordance to Bernard's works, the noun *obœdientia* and its cognates occur eighty-five times in the *Sermones de diversis* and ninety-two times in the *Sententiae*—compared with 149 and 154 occurrences of *humilitas* and its cognates.<sup>37</sup> It is significant that more than half of the references to obedience occur in Div 41, titled "The Way of Obedience," a *sermo* twinned with Div 40, "The Ways to Life, which are Confession and Obedience." This leaves about forty occurrences in the remaining talks. Sometimes obedience occurs within a list of monastic virtues.<sup>38</sup> Div 2 is titled "On Obedience, Patience, and Wisdom," but there is little about obedience in the talk. In that talk "leprous obedience" is rejected without any indication of what the phrase might mean—perhaps it signifies an outward deference or servility that does not flow from an inward disposition (Div 2.3).<sup>39</sup> He later remarks that "obedience is a good food," but it needs the addition of the condiment of wisdom (Div 2.4), which is compounded of three elements: "justice in intention, cheerfulness in in-

<sup>37</sup> *Thesaurus Sancti Bernardi Claraevallensis* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1987).

<sup>38</sup> Div 2.5, 15.5, 26.3, 58.1, 64.2. See also Sent 249 (SBOp 6b:35), 3.26 (83), 3.53 (95), 3.88 (132), 3.121 (228).

<sup>39</sup> It seems likely that the adjective *leprosa* is used (perhaps eccentrically) in the sense of the noun *lepor* (or *lepos*), meaning "pleasantness of behavior," "charm," "blandishment" and has nothing to do with leprosy.

ward feeling, and humility in assessment” (Div 2.6). Clearly, this is a long way from automatic, military compliance with orders.

Obedience is associated with love (Div 10.2; 27.2; 79). Disobedience is the cause of death (Div 2.5), as when Adam obeyed Eve rather than God (Div 11.2; 66.2; 102.1), but, as Saint Benedict had noted, the labor of obedience repairs the damage caused by disobedience (Div 63; 103.2). The practice of virtue gains solidity through obedience (Div 40.2), and by “faithful obedience” (Div 15.5) “continence in the flesh, patience in troubles, and perseverance in working” are acquired (Div 58). Bernard often has in mind Acts 5:29, “It is right to obey God rather than human beings” (Div 29.5; 41.1, 3). Our primary obedience is due to God (Div 26; 77), to God’s commandments (Div 45.5), and to the four gospels (27.7). And behind it all lies the example of Christ’s obedience (Div 41.1; 42.1).

It seems clear enough, even from this facile summary, that Bernard views obedience as an ordinary element in monastic *conversatio* and holds that it both expresses and reinforces a fervent and dedicated interior life (Div 80.2–3). It is also apparent that he expects those in power to exercise their authority in a manner that promotes the ascetical utility of obedience, not as a mere expression of personal will on the part of the abbot. When discussing obedience Bernard avoids speaking of the abbot but usually refers in general terms either to *prelates* and *priors*, in the plural, or, more functionally, to *the one giving the order* (*præcipiens*); he seems to include himself among those who are bound by obedience. He understands that there is complementarity between ready obedience and discretion in exercising authority (Div 90.3) and that, as Saint Benedict affirms (RB 2.6), the abbot is answerable to God for the obedience of his monks. It is his job not only to command but also to sell what he is commanding, and to be so convincing that the monks want to buy it.

Bernard’s insistence on persuasiveness in authority anticipated what the Second Vatican Council required of superiors: “They should govern their subjects . . . fostering in them a spirit of voluntary subjection.”<sup>40</sup> This concern for the subjective dispositions of his monks is

<sup>40</sup> *Perfectæ caritatis* 14. Bernard’s acceptance of and respect for different manifestations of the monastic charism even within a single community is lyrically celebrated in his portrayal of the *paradisus claustralis* in Div 42:2.

especially noteworthy in Div 41, the only systematic treatment of monastic obedience included in the *Sermones de diversis*.<sup>41</sup>

This prolonged reflection on obedience as a life-giving way is twinned with Div 40, which discusses the value of confession; both talks are divided into seven degrees or steps and share a common conclusion and doxology (Div 41.11–13). Confession operates mainly in the area of humility and self-knowledge, but it necessarily leads to changes in behavior, *correctio operis* (Div 40.8). Obedience operates externally, but Bernard insists much less on outward conformity than on the inward dispositions that make external compliance life-giving.

Bernard begins by evoking the spirit of wisdom, “who is also a spirit of kindness [*pietas*], releasing those who are bound, enlightening the blind, and lifting up the wounded. She is also a spirit of truth, who teaches us all truth. She not only teaches but also prompts us. She prompts that we may seek and teaches that we may understand” (Div 40.1). Obedience operates in the sphere of wisdom. This is far from merely external compliance with instructions; it is “a very powerful reality” that demands great purity of heart (Div 41.3). People can do what they are told for a variety of reasons, not all of them adult or honorable. Genuine obedience is opening ourselves to guidance so that we may reach the goal for which we came to the monastery (Div 2.1). To strengthen his case Bernard calls on the example of the apostles and that of Abraham, “who does not murmur or complain or even allow grief to show on his face” (Div 41.2).

To show that monastic obedience is more than mere compliance, Bernard returns to some of the themes he had previously treated in *De praecepto et dispensatione*. Actions that are already good are obligatory even without an explicit command. Actions that are inherently evil do not become good because they are commanded by legitimate

<sup>41</sup> There is a long treatment of obedience in Sent 3.121 (SBOp 6b:225–29) in terms of the text of Matt 11:30, “My yoke is pleasant and my burden is light.” Here Bernard describes obedience as *virtus virtutum domina*, probably meaning that without a willing conformity to God’s will other virtues are bootless. It has to be said, however, that the thought progression in this text is not easy to follow. Bernard uses a wide variety of biblical images to link obedience with different virtues and distinguish it from vices.

authority; on the contrary, they must be resisted and rejected. Mostly obedience concerns actions that are indifferent in themselves but that acquire a moral character by virtue of being commanded. In this case the focus moves away from what is commanded to the fact that it is commanded. Of course, as Bernard insists elsewhere, this imposes a huge burden of responsibility of the one issuing the orders.

Bernard then lists seven qualities that should jointly characterize the monk's act of obedience. His use of adverbs qualifying the verb *obædire* rather than nouns and adjectives may indicate that he is thinking concretely rather than abstractly. The good monk obeys, willingly, simply, cheerfully, quickly, manfully, humbly, and unceasingly. The bulk of this *sermo* simply expatiates on these qualities. Taken together they indicate an attitude of antecedent willingness to do what is asked, an attitude that presupposes a correspondingly generous trust that superiors will act with deliberation and integrity and not merely seek to dominate or impose their own wills. A monk obeys his abbot only to the extent that he is able to accept that his commands really are life-giving and not just peremptory invasions of personal freedom. This is not something that can be taken for granted; it presupposes considerable progress in the monk, prudent formation, and, probably, an ongoing display of acceptance and affection on the part of the abbot (Aelred's *affectus officialis*). A monk who believes that his abbot does not accept him or that he dislikes him will seek to avoid any occasion in which his obedience will be demanded. A genuinely pastoral abbot will not rely on institutional structures to enforce obedience but will develop a deep and respectful relationship with his monks, one in which they will want to hear what he has to say and do what he recommends.

This reflection on Bernard's teaching on obedience in the *Sermones de diversis* is intended to demonstrate not only the content of one aspect of his monastic doctrine but also the sensitivity with which he addressed himself to his monks. The abbot spoke directly and frankly to his community in words redolent of shared experience. He did not disguise the challenges posed by obedience, but, even while setting a high ideal before them, he somehow managed to make it seem possible. Above all he includes no carping or nagging. If these talks are an example of Bernard's usual method of forming his community,

they give a good indication of why his leadership was so readily accepted.



An introduction is meant to introduce; to do more than this is to go beyond the remit. Bernard's addresses to his monks are worth reading today because they embody a sound and practical spirituality, expressed in personal and sometimes original terms. They give us a good idea of what sort of man their author was and how he exercised his role as abbot. Each reader will single out individual talks as especially powerful, but the quality of these *sermones* is best assessed by taking their impact as a whole. Together they indicate something of the richness that was provided to the monks of Clairvaux on a regular basis, forming them in the beliefs, values, and practices of Christian, monastic, and Cistercian life. Thanks to this translation the modern reader can now enjoy the privilege of having access to the same solid sources of spiritual nourishment and formation.



# Abbreviations

ASOC	<i>Analecta Sacri Ordinis Cisterciensis / Analecta Cisterciensia</i>
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina
CF	Cistercian Fathers series (Cistercian Publications)
CS	Cistercian Studies series (Cistercian Publications)
CSQ	<i>Cistercian Studies Quarterly</i>
Ep	Epistle
Evang	Gregory the Great, <i>Homiliae in Euangeliae</i> , CCSL 141
LXX	The Septuagint Bible
PL	Patrologia Latina, ed. J.-P. Migne
RB	Regula Sancti Benedicti
S	Sermo
SBOp	Sancti Bernardi Opera, ed. Jean Leclercq and H. M. Rochais
SCh	Sources Chrétiennes
Vlg	The Vulgate Bible

## WORKS OF BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX

Abb	<i>Sermo ad abbates</i>
Adv	<i>Sermo in adventu Domini</i>
Asc	<i>Sermo in ascensione Domini</i>
Asspt	<i>Sermo in assumptione B. V.M.</i>
Dil	<i>De diligendo Deo</i>
Div	<i>Sermones de diversis</i>
In lab mess	<i>Sermo in labore messis</i>
Par	<i>Parabolæ</i>
Pasc	<i>Sermo in die paschæ</i>
6 p Pent	<i>Sermo in dominica sexta post Pentecosten</i>
Pre	<i>Liber de præcepto et dispensatione</i>
SC	<i>Sermones super Cantica canticorum</i>
Sent	<i>Sententiae</i>



Bernard of Clairvaux

MONASTIC SERMONS



## SERMO 1

# On the Deceptions of This Life

1. **M**y brothers, it is absolutely true that *the life of humans on earth is a temptation*.<sup>\*</sup> If indeed it is deceptive, then its deceptions are not usually simple. That is, life deceives humans in manifold ways: it changes its face, it changes its voice. At one time it may affirm some point and later deny it without shame; life might say different things about its own span to different people.<sup>\*</sup> In fact, life may suggest contrary and adverse views to the same person at different times. Sometimes life may pretend to be short; at other times it feigns great length. Insofar as this life enjoys sin, all the more does it bemoan its brevity. This brevity is not false, but the lament is false, because the brevity that it recalls with sorrow ought rather to be celebrated.<sup>\*</sup> For surely it is better for those who continue in sin to let the necessity of death put an end to their shameful deeds since their will placed no limit. It is better for one whose soul continually dies to die bodily all the sooner; better rather *if that person had never been born*.<sup>\*</sup>

Finally, the memory of life's brevity should be a remedy for sin rather than a temptation, as it is written: *Remember your final end and you shall never sin*.<sup>\*</sup> Because if sin reigns in you unto the end, or rather, if you so enjoy being a slave to sin<sup>\*</sup> that you mourn the short time that you have to serve it, to the point that you so

\*Job 7:1

\*see 1 Cor  
12:3-11

\*1 Cor 7:40

\*Matt 26:24

\*Sir 7:40

\*see Rom  
6:6-12

\*see Matt 7:13 love the broad way\* that you would by any means make it even longer if you could, like it or not, life's end is not far off. But you, I admit, *are far from the Kingdom of God*,\* and you seem to have made an unbreakable treaty with death and a pact with hell.\*

\*Mark 12:34

\*Isa 28:15

2. *They have wandered*, says the prophet, *in a lonely place, in a place without water; they have not found the way to a city in which to dwell*.\* This lonely place is that of the proud, that is, they suppose themselves to be solitaries, and they seek to be regarded as such. If the proud

\*Ps 106:4

are well educated, then they hate their peers. If they are clever in worldly affairs,\* then they hope to find no one like themselves. Though they be wealthy, it tortures them to see others grow rich. They may be strong or handsome, but give them an equal and they wither. They are solitaries\* in that they have gone astray. They wander in their solitude, for one cannot dwell alone on the earth.\*

\*2 Tim 2:4

\*see Lam 3:28

\*see Bar 3:20

Nor is it any wonder that *without water* is added to this lonely place, as it was said, *in a lonely place, in a place without water*. For just as lonely places are usually without water and uninhabited places are usually infertile and arid, so too pride and impenitence go together. Indeed a lofty heart,\* hard and devoid of loving-kindness, ignorant of compunction, is dry for lack of any dew of spiritual grace, because *God resists the proud; he gives grace to the humble*.\* *You send forth springs in the valleys. Amidst the mountains, the waters shall pass through*, says the prophet.\* Here is what he says about himself, sadly lamenting: *To you my soul is like a land without water*.\*

\*Jdt 1:7; see  
Ps 130:1

\*Jas 4:6

\*Ps 103:10

\*Ps 142:6-7

What is more, the lack of water not only makes one dry but also makes one filthy, for there is no way to wash. A human heart ignorant of tears is not only hard but must also be vile. So the prophet says, *I shall wash my bed each night*.\* That is to say, I shall wash out the stains from my conscience. *I shall sprinkle my blanket*

\*Ps 6:7

*with my tears* lest it become in me like the scriptural seed that *fell on the rock, and having sprouted, it dried out for lack of moisture.*\*

\*Luke 8:6

3. *They have wandered in a lonely place, in a place without water; they have not found the way to a city in which to dwell.*\* They wandered in a trackless waste and not on a road.\* For the broad road is not really a road.† Indeed straightness pertains to a road; broadness pertains more to a plain than to a road. The lonely place is a way within the broad road, and where there is no road, the whole region is the road. Such a life is exposed to vices because it has the widest limits, or rather it has no limits. Nor should any reasonable person call it life, because those who live alone are dead, as the apostle is our witness, who has said, *if we have lived according to the flesh then we shall die.*\* Nor is a circle a road, and the way of the wicked is so described where it is written, *The wicked walk in a circle.*\* This road is spacious† because its space on either side is closed off by no limits: *Where there is no law, there is no transgression.*\*

\*Ps 106:4

\*Ps 106:40

†Matt 7:13

\*Rom 8:13

\*Ps 11:9

†Matt 7:13

\*Rom 4:15

\*Eph 2:2

So it is for the children of disobedience,\* who have wholly given themselves to bodily pleasures and self-will.\* This deceitful life confidently presents itself as short so that sinners will suffer carnal grief, because, like their leader, they think that their time is short.\* And that is why they lust all the more for every sort of debauchery, just as some such people have been known to say, *Let not the flower of this time pass us by. Let us crown ourselves with roses before they wither. Let no meadow escape our pleasure. Let none of us go without his part in self-indulgence. Let us everywhere leave tokens of joy, for this is our portion and this our lot.*\* And, more bluntly, *Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we shall die.*\* True indeed: *tomorrow their injustice shall answer for them,*\* and those who did not find the way to a city in which to dwell will not have a lasting city here.\* They are truly mad, for they hurry to sin all the more.

\*see Rom 1:24-28; Eph 4:19

\*Rev 12:12

\*Wis 2:7-9

\*1 Cor 15:32

\*Gen 30:33

\*Ps 106:4;

Heb 13:14

The deception of this life will at once pretend to belong to these same people if they begin to dread their impending death, and if they tremble at *the terrible expectation of judgment*.<sup>\*</sup> Thus those who so recently mourned the shortness of their sinful life suddenly now find the same life so very long that they think they are able to spend most of their life safely in sin. After all, the rest of one's life is long and sufficient for doing penance for sin.<sup>\*</sup>

\*Heb 10:27;  
Jas 2:19

\*Lev 5:5

Nevertheless, just as is true for those who think life is too short, that which they fear shall befall them<sup>\*</sup> unless they come to their senses. No, rather, more horrible things than what they fear shall befall them, for not only shall their time for disgraceful sins pass quickly, but also a time—an eternity really—of punishment shall follow. So too *when they say to these sinners "peace and security," suddenly ruin overcomes them*.<sup>\*</sup> Thus they cannot live out half the days that they had hoped to enjoy.<sup>\*</sup> No, they shall not fulfill even half the days that they promise to themselves.

\*Job 3:25

\*1 Thess 5:3

\*Ps 54:24

4. For you, brothers, I do not fear that you [are deceived] by an empty sadness over the brevity of life, or by a false consolation of its apparent length, because most certainly you have already begun to enter into the city of our dwelling.<sup>\*</sup> Nor would you *walk in the trackless wasteland, but on the road*.<sup>\*</sup> I do however fear for you, but in another way. I fear that life itself wishes to toy with you by feigning great length, not bringing us here consolation, but rather provoking in us greater desolation. Alas, one of the brothers might suppose that he has a very long life ahead of him;<sup>\*</sup> therefore he might think he has an arduous road in store for him; his spirit could be overwhelmed by faintheartedness,<sup>\*</sup> and he would despair of his ability to sustain such long and great toils—as if the divine *consolations do not gladden the souls of the elect according to the multitude of the sorrows in their hearts*!<sup>\*</sup> Now indeed [joy] is given to [their souls]

\*Ps 106:7

\*Ps 106:40

\*1 Kgs 19:7

\*Ps 54:9

\*Ps 93:19

more or less according to the measure of their many sorrows.\* After this life, they no longer enjoy these consolations; rather, they enjoy the everlasting pleasures at God's right hand.\*

\*see John 3:34

\*Ps 15:11

Brothers, let us desire that right hand that shall embrace the whole of us.\* Let us long for those pleasures so that the time may seem so short\* and *the days seem so few because of the greatness of our love.\* The sufferings of this time are not worthy to be compared to the future glory that shall be revealed in us.\** How delightful is that promise, and how worthy of all our prayers! For we shall not just stand there as idle and empty-handed spectators,\* nor shall that glory be revealed to us from beyond, but from within us. For we shall see God *face to face.\** That is, not outside us, because the glory shall be within us, so that *God shall be all in all.\** Certainly all the earth shall be filled with that glory,\* so how much more shall it fill the human soul! *We shall be filled,* the psalmist says, *with the good things of your house.\** And why do I say that the glory shall be within us rather than around us? Even now the glory is in us, but then it shall be revealed. For *now we are children of God, but what we shall be has not yet been revealed.\**

\*Song 8:3

\*1 Cor 7:29

\*Gen 29:20

\*Rom 8:18

\*Gen 1:2

\*1 Cor 13:12

\*1 Cor 15:28

\*Isa 6:3

\*Ps 64:5

\*1 John 3:2

5. My brothers, *if we have not received the spirit of this world, but the spirit which is from God, then we know that what has been given to us is from God.\** For, I say, he has given us all things. And if you do not believe me, then believe the apostle\* who said, *He who has not spared his own son but has delivered him up for us all, how has he not also, with him, given all things to us?\**

\*1 Cor 2:12

\*see John 10:38

\*Rom 8:32

This certainly is the power of God's children that he has given to those who receive him.\* This is the glory of each of the faithful: glory as though adopted by the Father, through him whose *glory we have seen, glory like the Only Begotten of the Father.\** In short, listen to that power: *All things, he says, are possible for one who believes.\**

\*see John 1:12

\*John 1:14

\*Mark 9:22

6. “But,” you will say, “there are many gravely disturbing problems and many things more obviously in our way. And I am amazed at how you mention all things that are given to us, scarcely any of which serve our wishes. Some things seem to serve us, but only at the cost of our toil or if we have first served them. The beasts of burden do not help us unless first we have nurtured them, tamed them, and sustained them with fodder. Even Mother Earth herself, who ought to be more sincere to us, will not serve us bread without the sweat of our brow. On the contrary, when we till the land, she sprouts forth thorns and spiny plants for us.\* Finally, if you carefully consider\* all those other gifts, you will see that they take more service from us than they give to us. I shall say nothing about those things that are always ready to harm us: there is fire that burns, water that drowns, wild beasts ready to tear us apart.”

\*Gen 3:18-19;  
see Gen 4:12  
and Heb 6:8  
\*Prov 23:1

These things indeed are self-evident. But the apostle does not lie when he asserts more plainly in another place that he knows that *to them who love God, all things work together unto good, to those who are called to be saints according to his purpose.*\* Still, we must be careful to notice that they do not serve our whims, but he says that they cooperate to the good. For they do not serve our will but what is useful, not for pleasure but for salvation, not for our wishes but for our advantage. In fact, if among all things that cooperate to the good one counts even those things that have no being, such as trouble, disease, death itself, and even sin, all of which are not natural but rather corruptions of nature, then do not sins themselves truly cooperate to the good for one who by sin becomes more humble, more fervent, more watchful, more fearful, and more cautious?

\*Rom 8:28

7. These then are *the first fruits of the spirit.*\* These are the first fruits of the Kingdom, the foretaste of glory. This is the beginning of the reign and a certain pledge of the paternal inheritance.\* Moreover, *when that which*

\*Rom 8:23

\*see Eph 1:14

*is perfected shall come, then that which is partial shall pass away.\** And in turn, all things shall be put in order as we wish, because the useful and the pleasant will be joined by unbreakable and permanent bonds.\* This truly will be that eternal weight of glory about which again the apostle says, *Our light and momentary troubles work in us an eternal weight of glory far above measure.\**

\*1 Cor 13:10

\*see Matt 19:6

\*2 Cor 4:17

Go ahead then, go on to complain and say, “The way is long and the burden is heavy. I am not able to carry so grievous a load so very long.” Yet the apostle not only bears it but even insists that it is momentary and light. And certainly you have not *five times received forty minus one stripes from the Jews*, nor have you *spent a day and a night in the depths of the sea,\** nor have you *toiled more than all others,\** and, finally, you have not yet *resisted unto shedding blood.\**

\*2 Cor 11:24-25

\*1 Cor 15:10

\*Heb 12:4

See, therefore, that *these sufferings are not worthy to be compared to glory!\** See that tribulation is momentary and light, that glory is eternal, and its weight is even far above any measure.

\*Rom 8:18

Why do you count your days and years, which are so uncertain? The hour passes, and so also the hardship; neither do they accumulate, but rather they fall and give way. Not so the glory, not so the reward, not so the wages of labor. Glory knows not continual change: there is no end; all remains simultaneously and remains for eternity.\* *Since he shall give sleep to those whom he loves*, he says, *behold the inheritance of the Lord.\** *For each day has evil enough of its own,\** nor is today able to reserve its toil for tomorrow,\* but the wages of all toil will be given back on that one day that knows no tomorrow.\* *A crown of justice has been set aside for me*, says the apostle, *which the just judge shall return to me on that day.\** He does not say “in those days,” for *one day in those courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.\** Punishment is sipped by the drop, meted out in a solution; it passes through in the smallest bits. On the other hand, the reward is a

\*Ps 116:2

\*Ps 126:2-3

\*Matt 6:34

\*see Prov 29:11

\*Wis 10:17

\*2 Tim 4:8

\*Ps 83:11

\*Pss 35:9; 45:5  
 \*see Isa 66:12  
 \*see Song 4:15-16

torrent of pleasure with the force of a river,\* a torrent overflowing with happiness, a river of glory, a river of peace.\* Clearly it is a river, a river that flows in, not a river that flows past or flows out.\* It is called a river—not a river that flows past or flows through, but a river of abundance.

\*2 Cor 4:17

8. He says, *Eternal weight of Glory*,\* because neither glorious clothes nor glorious feasting nor a glorious home, but glory itself is promised to us. Truly if any of those things or the like are sometimes mentioned, then it is figuratively. For in truth the expectation of the just is not something joyful, but joy itself.\*

\*Prov 10:28  
 \*Prov 14:13

People rejoice in food, they rejoice in parades, they rejoice in wealth, they rejoice in vices, but such joys end in grief,\* because any joy in a transient good must change with changing circumstances. A lighted candle is not pure light but a lamp. In fact, the fire itself consumes the candle—its own source of nourishment—and it does not endure except by its own consumption. In turn, when the material has failed, even the flame itself shall fail, and when you have seen the candle consumed then you will find the flame completely extinguished as well. So just as that flame is replaced by smoke and darkness in the end, so also the happiness of worldly joy changes into sadness.\*

\*see John 16:20

For us, however, God has not reserved a honeycomb, but the purest and clearest honey. Obviously this is joy itself: life, glory, peace, pleasure, pleasantness, happiness, delightfulness, and exultation that our Lord God has treasured up for us.\* All these things at once, just as Jerusalem is united.\* And this one city is none other than God himself, as we noted above, where the apostle says that *God will be all in all*.\*

\*Sir 15:6  
 \*Ps 121:3  
 \*1 Cor 15:28

These are our wages, this is our crown, this is our prize. So *let us run to it so we may seize it*.\* Brothers, a prudent farmer never thinks that the time for sowing is too long, because he desires the abundant harvest to

\*1 Cor 9:24-25;  
 see 1 Cor 9:18  
 and 1 Thess 2:19-20

come. Your days, moreover, no less than *the hairs on your head, are all numbered*.<sup>\*</sup> And just like the hair of the body, so also not a moment of time shall perish.<sup>\*</sup> Having therefore such a promise,<sup>\*</sup> dearest brothers, let us not lose heart or ever grow weary,<sup>\*</sup> nor complain that the burden of Christ is heavy, because, by his witness, it is light, and the yoke is in fact sweet.<sup>\*</sup> Rather, whenever we seem *to carry the weight of the day*,<sup>\*</sup> let us think of *the eternal weight of glory*<sup>\*</sup> to which the Lord and king of glory leads us by his compassion,<sup>\*</sup> to whom, meanwhile, we shout with devout humility, *Not to us, Lord, not to us, but to your name give the glory*.<sup>\*</sup>

\*Matt 10:30

\*see Luke 21:18

\*2 Cor 7:1

\*Heb 12:3

\*Matt 11:30

\*Matt 20:12

\*2 Cor 4:17

\*Ps 23:10

\*Ps 113:9

SERMO 2

On Obedience, Patience,  
and Wisdom

\*Jude 3

1. **B**rothers, by our shared salvation,\* I beg you to take up—with eagerness—the opportunity that is given you to work out your salvation. I beg you: act according to your purpose by that mercy for which you have striven to make yourself so lowly,\* by that reason for which you have come up from the rivers of Babylon. *By the rivers of Babylon*, says the prophet, *there we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.*\* Here<sup>†</sup> you have no worry about children to feed or cares about pleasing a wife.<sup>#</sup> There is no need to think about business transactions or worldly affairs<sup>‡</sup> or even worries about food or clothing.<sup>°</sup> The greater part of today's evils and the cares of this life are truly far from you.\* God has hidden you *in the secret part of his tabernacle.*\* Therefore, my most beloved brothers, *be still and see that it is God himself.*\*

\*Rom 12:1

\*Ps 136:1

†i.e., in the  
monastery

#1 Cor 7:33

‡2 Tim 2:4

°1 Tim 6:8

\*Matt 6:34; 13:22

\*Pss 30:21; 26:5

\*Ps 45:11

In order for you to be truly capable of this, you must first look to yourself in order to see what you are, and, according to the voice of the same prophet, *Let the nations know they are but mortals.*\* May all your free time be given to this double contemplation, like the saint who prayed, “God, may I know myself, may I know you.”<sup>†</sup> For how can one even seem to know oneself who flees toil and pain?<sup>#</sup> Or how does one know oneself as a person if unprepared for life's purpose? *A human being*, says Job, *is born to suffer.*\* For only someone not

\*Ps 9:21

†Augustine,  
*Soliloquies* 2.1  
(PL 32:885)

#Ps 9:35; see

Ps 89:10

\*Job 5:7

born in pain would doubt that he was born for pain. But the cry of the mother in labor\* and the weeping and whimpering of the newborn both express pain. *For you look upon our toil and pain,\** says the prophet. Toil is in actions, pain in suffering. Therefore, those who know their humanity are prepared for both, like the prophet who on his knees prayed, *My heart is ready, O God, my heart is ready.\** And he more explicitly expresses this double preparation regarding his action: *I am ready,* he says, *and I am not troubled, so that I may keep your commands.\** And about suffering, he says in fact, *I am ready for scourges, and my pain is always before me.\**

\*see Ps 74:7

\*Ps 9:35

\*Ps 56:8

\*Ps 118:60

\*Ps 37:18

2. To be sure, let no one boast of having avoided that double trouble in this wretched life. Certainly no one among the children of Adam lives here without toil, no one without pain.\* There may be a few who avoid some sorrow, but they no doubt fall into more serious trouble. *They share not the toils of men,* says the psalmist, *nor shall they be scourged along with other people.\** You see, they are not always free from toil and scourges. *Therefore,* he goes on, *pride holds them,\** and pride is heavy toil indeed. *They are covered by their injustice and their wickedness.\** Clearly, these are heavy scourges, since *there is no joy for the wicked, says the Lord.\**

\*see Sir 40:1

\*Ps 72:5

\*Ps 72:6

\*Ps 72:6

\*Isa 57:21

Although they do not feel the anxiety of toil or the wounds of scourging, yet their insensibility itself reveals the depth of their suffering. The poor person sweats while working outdoors, but indoors, does the rich person toil any less with anxious thoughts? The poor man yawns, weary with toil, while the rich man opens his mouth to belch. Sometimes the rich are more gravely tormented by disgust than the poor by hunger. Finally, whether they wish it or not, both human beings and demons\* work and suffer as the Most High Providence ordains.

\*see Jas 2:19

3. Moreover, neither an obedient leper nor a patient dog is to be commended. Therefore, we do not merely

pray that the Lord's will be done, for certainly everything that happens depends on God's will—for *who can resist his will?*\*—but we pray his will be done *on earth as it is in heaven.*\* This of course, I believe, is aptly applied to the two previous petitions as well: as we beseech our Father in heaven, we pray that his name be hallowed and that both his Kingdom come and his will be done.\* We pray that just as his will and Kingdom are in heaven, so also may they be on earth. In any case, where would his name not be hallowed? Where now does his Kingdom not come, seeing how in the name of Jesus every knee bends, that is, every knee in heaven, on earth, and under the earth?† Indeed, the Evil One himself says, *I know who you are, the Holy One of God.*\*

On the other hand, with a very different sentiment is God's name hallowed in heaven, where with most ineffable pleasure angels shout, *Holy, holy, holy Lord God Sabaoth.*\* So also God reigns not on earth alone; in fact he reigns even in hell, having the power of life and death.\* But how very differently does he reign over these demons who obey him unwillingly, as opposed to those who serve voluntarily.

4. Obedience is the good food about which the Lord himself says, *My food is to do the will of my father.*\* And the prophet says, *For you shall eat the labors of your hands; you are blessed, and it shall be well with you.*\* The good food is *the patience of the poor, which shall not perish in the end: a bread of tears, a bread of sorrow.*\* Nevertheless, a seasoning is necessary for both, without which bread is neither tasty nor sustaining and may even cause death. Of course, both of these foods\* are hard to swallow, brothers, and unless some third flavoring is added, then for each *death is in the pot.*\*

Truly, what is more flavorful than wisdom? Wisdom indeed is the tree of life that, through Moses, sweetened the waters of Mara.‡ It is the fine flour that through Elisha made the prophets' stew edible.\* It is the fire

\*Rom 9:19

\*Matt 6:10

\*Matt 6:9-10

\*Phil 2:10

\*Luke 4:34

\*Isa 6:3

\*see Wis 16:13

\*John 4:34

\*Ps 127:2

\*Pss 9:12; 79:6;  
126:2\*tears and  
sorrow

\*2 Kgs 4:40

‡Gen 2:9;  
Exod 15:23, 25\*see 2 Kgs  
4:38-41

that God commands to be burned on the altar at all times.\* It is the oil for lack of which the door to the wedding was closed to the foolish virgins.\* Wisdom is the salt that, by divine command, no sacrifice should be without.\* That is why we sometimes say that dull people are tasteless,<sup>1</sup> and the Lord bids us to have salt among us.\* And the apostle also advises us to season all our speech with salt.\*

5. I believe, however, that our third ingredient—wisdom—which we want to add to obedience and patience, likewise has a threefold nature. Our seasoning consists of three particular herbs, for there need to be justice in our purpose, joy in our disposition, and humility in our consideration. Insipid to God, and unsalted (so to speak) is all our obedience, and even our patience, unless God himself is the final cause of everything that we do and suffer. For whatever we do, we are commanded *to do for the glory of God*,\* and we are blessed not just because we suffer but only when we suffer for the sake of justice.\* It is also necessary, moreover, to guard against faint-heartedness and sadness in everything that we do and everything that we endure, because *God loves a cheerful giver*.\* Furthermore, we know that cheerfulness itself and a conscious devotion to cheerfulness pertain specially to the preparation<sup>†</sup> of which we spoke above.\*

Finally, one must avoid haughtiness above all. For if anyone be high-minded,\* then both that person's works and his patience will taste of emptiness, an emptiness that is most serious and most contrary to the truth. Do you see how useful it is to recognize one's humanity\* in order to be prepared to keep the commandments and endure scourging? May we therefore always press on! Since we cannot avoid toil or sorrow, then let us

\*Lev 6:12  
\*Matt 25:8-12

\*Lev 2:13;  
Mark 9:48

\*Mark 9:49  
\*Col 4:6

\*1 Cor 10:31

\*1 Pet 3:14

\*2 Cor 9:7

†for pain and  
suffering  
\*see §1

\*Rom 11:20

\*Ps 9:21

<sup>1</sup> *Inde est quod insulsos homines dicimus, quos intelligi volumus minime sapientes*, a play on the terms *sapor* (flavor) and *sapiens* (wise).

at least work and suffer in such a way that our toil is transformed into spiritual nourishment! *Obedience, indeed, is better than sacrifice,\* and a patient man is better than a strong man.\** Disobedience can cause death; we are all tested, and we die on account of disobedience.\* Impatience is the ruin of the soul, for the Lord says, *By your patience you shall possess your souls.\** Wisdom is likewise necessary, as we said, for salvation. Similarly, not only do we lack obedience because of our disobedience, and we might lack patience because of impatience, but if *we also lack wisdom, then we perish in our folly.\**

\*1 Sam 15:22

\*Prov 16:32

\*see Rom 5:19;  
1 Cor 15:22

\*Luke 21:19

\*Bar 3:28

\*Ps 9:21

6. By this we know that we are only human,\* assigned to lives of work and suffering. There was a time when humans were created for work and meditation, enjoying action without suffering, and even without toil. I mean, of course, when humans were put in Paradise to work and to watch over God's garden.\* In fact, even in this Paradise, if not for the Fall, humans would have advanced to a state where they could have enjoyed contemplation alone. So also we are in danger of falling from our present, lower, condition, for unless we busy ourselves with rising higher, then we all fall into hell. We most certainly risk exchanging our present condition for one of pure suffering, because in hell there is neither work nor reason, but only great suffering.

\*see Gen 2:15

Happy indeed was that first man, whose body was not corrupted; nor did it weigh down his soul.\* But how much more happy would Adam have been if he had arrived at that less active state, where he would have perceived Wisdom more fully, more perfectly,\* loving the body freely, as though having no bodily needs. For this would have been a most beautiful arrangement, and so will it be when it shall be. Nor should we despair when in the end the flesh seems to say to the soul (just as the soul now says to God), *You have no need of my goods;* it says, *You shall fill me with the*

\*Wis 9:15

\*Sir 38:25

*joy of your countenance.\** Thence the fullness and satisfaction *when your glory shall appear.\**

\*Ps 15:2, 11

\*Ps 16:15

As for our expectations about the reformation of our bodies and our conformity to the Lord's glorious body,\* it shall be from an abundant and overflowing measure.\* Happily indeed shall we rejoice in the body's glorification, but not as our primary joy. *Your wife*, it is written, *like a fruitful vine on the sides of your house.\** Thus shall the flesh be honored, but according to its own measure, not dwelling in the middle of the divine home\* but rather separately, not before the soul but on the side. *Your children like olive shoots around your table.\** Certainly our good works shall not be lacking, but we must do our good deeds now, not then,\* as it is written: *For their works follow them.\** Certainly then, let us rejoice and give thanks to God for these works that we accomplish by God's grace. However, we shall not give works first place but seat them *around the table*, so to speak.

\*Phil 3:21

\*Luke 6:38

\*Ps 127:3

\*Ps 100:7

\*Ps 127:3

\*see John 14:12

\*Rev 14:13

7. As we now dwell in the corporeal world, we are dependent on our bodies, by which our first parents violated the law of the Lord.\* So this is not only a time for action but also a time for suffering and even more toil and sorrow for us all.† This is unappetizing food indeed, like barley bread.\* It is as if a knight, one accustomed to luxury, offended the king and were forced from the palace.\* He must then resort to the hospitality of one lowly servant. The knight will have to keep a servant's hovel as a hiding place and take strange food with his servant, exchange royal delicacies for rustic porridge and a nobleman's bed for a servant's dung heap, like that of the prophetic lamentation, *Those who were brought up in scarlet have embraced dung\**—unless, of course, the prophet is actually deploring those noble creatures who forget their own\* condition and deny their extreme wretchedness. They not only lower their standards on what they can tolerate but even embrace

\*Ps 118:126

†Ecc1 3:1-8;

Ps 89:10

\*see John 6:9, 61

\*2 Sam 3:39

\*Lam 4:5

\*natural

as a great good that which they recently considered beyond the pale. So the prophet says about himself, *I am a man seeing my poverty as being from the rod of God's indignation.*\*

\*Lam 3:1

8. Let us cry out under this burden, brothers, and let us deplore our present affliction. Let each one of us continually give voice to our sincere complaint, shouting, *Unhappy man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death?*\* Now and then, let us be eager to withdraw ourselves and to steal away from the worst preoccupations for an hour: to thrust our souls, to stir our hearts unto what is their own right and to what is much more natural, to what is so much more pleasant for the human heart. For this is what is meant by the exhortation, *Be still and see that I am God.*\* For the vision is not for the eyes but for the heart, when the Lord says, *Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God.*\* This essential good of the heart has no need for the body's services. There is a more appropriate food for the soul, concerning which the prophet says, *My heart has withered because I forgot to eat my bread.*\*

\*Rom 7:24

\*Ps 45:11

\*Matt 5:8

\*Ps 101:5

Most sensibly do we say, "Talk is cheap," especially compared to deeds. For the tongue is far more nimble than the hand, and the tongue is quicker to speak than the hand is moved to strike. Besides both talking and acting, thinking is easier still because in thought the soul speaks with its own mouth, sees with its own eyes, and works with its own hands. Yet even then the soul is wearied by its groans and cries of compunction upon its bed.<sup>‡</sup> If indeed our lives have come so close to hell,\* then this life is only a place of suffering for each and every one of us.

‡Ps 6:7; see

Ps 4:5

\*Ps 87:4

So it seems that suffering occupies all our actions, and what is more, action and suffering equally burden our thoughts. For is it not true that we have passive actions and both toil and sorrow in our thoughts?\*

How sad for the calf of Ephraim who has learned to

\*Ps 89:10

love the threshing floor, having grown accustomed to the yoke, having become a stranger to serenity!\* *When shall I come and appear before the face of God?*\* When will all these troubles cease?\* When will there be no longer any mourning or wailing, or any sorrow, or any toil?\* When will the abundance of God's home and the unfailing torrent of divine pleasure inebriate my soul?\* When will the contemplation of that most tranquil light set free my entire soul?

Little children, let us long for the courts of the Lord.\* Let us often sigh with yearning for those halls. It is indeed our homeland. Let us at least breathe its fragrance and hail it from afar.\*

\*Hos 10:11

\*Ps 41:3

\*see 1 Cor 13:8

\*Rev 21:4

\*see Ps 35:9

\*Ps 83:3

\*see Heb

11:13-14