

Bernard of Clairvaux 20th August – prepared by Dr Sophia Errey

Bernard (1090-1153) was born into the Burgundian nobility. He was a good scholar, but, although attracted to the religious life, he did not join an order of monks until after the death of his mother when he was 19. The order he chose was that of the Cistercians. This community had been founded in 1098 at Citeaux Abbey, near Dijon, with the aim of returning to what was thought of as the original purity of the Rule of St Benedict, emphasizing austerity in life and possessions. An indication of Bernard's power of persuasion which was to be abundantly demonstrated in his later life, was the decision of 30 of his fellow nobles to enter at the same time. In 1115 he was chosen to found a new community in a remote area at Clairvaux. He was gradually joined by 130 others, including his father and brothers, but the extremely strict Rule caused the foundation to struggle and Bernard to become ill; nevertheless by 1121 three further foundations had been made.

From the first Chapter of the Order in 1119 Bernard became a leading figure, and began a series of books defending his own positions and encouraging adherence to the Reformed Rule. His *Apologia* converted Abbot Suger, a minister under Louis VI, and the man primarily responsible for promoting the rise of Gothic architecture through his reconstruction of St Denis in Paris – interestingly his advocacy of glorious architecture ran directly counter to the Cistercian emphasis on utmost simplicity.



St Denis demonstrates Suger's conviction that light was both a symbol of God, and a means to encourage contemplation of the divine

"The dull mind rises to the truth through material things, and is resurrected from its former submersion when light is seen"
(Inscription on the doors of St Denis)



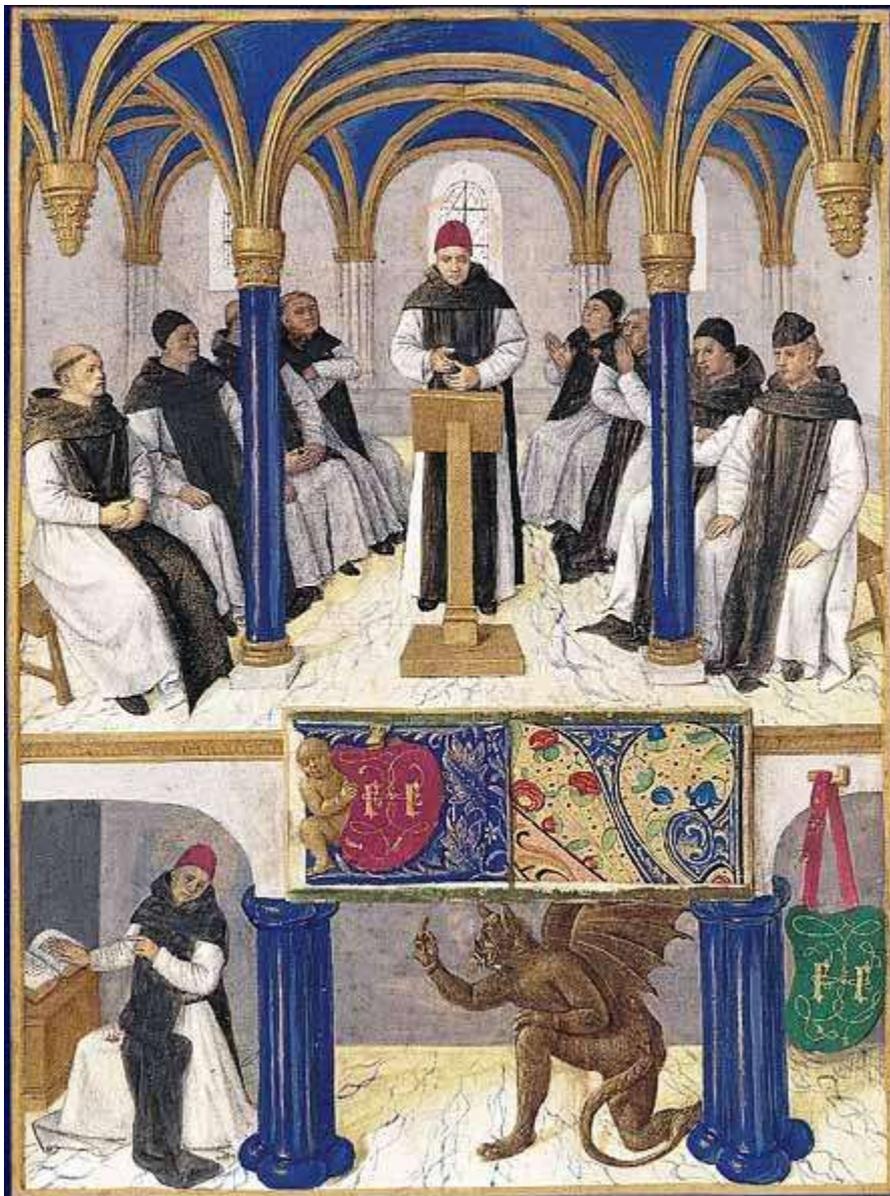
The radically simple architecture of Clairvaux (Cloister, above) was replicated all over Europe as the Order spread.

Bernard was increasingly prominent in church affairs. In 1130 rival popes were elected. Bernard supported Innocent 111, and became heavily involved in diplomatic missions between contending states over the matter, not surprisingly making many enemies (in addition to those who opposed him in the church) in the process.

After a successful campaign against Peter Abelard and various groups condemned as heretical in the 1140s Bernard began promoting a new (Second) Crusade (1146-1149) which, while commenced with great enthusiasm fueled by his passionate speeches ended in failure, clouding the final years of his life.

Three of the hymns we still sing are attributed to St Bernard
"O Sacred Head, Sore Wounded"
"Jesus the Very Thought of Thee"
"Jesus, Thou Joy of Loving Hearts"

Jean Fouquet represented Bernard preaching in the Hours of Etienne Chevalier c 1455



Many artists represented miraculous events recounted of Bernard. He was deeply devoted to the Virgin Mary from his early youth and this accounts for much of the iconography. Here are two which draw on his description of a vision he experienced.



Pietro Perugino – The Virgin Appearing to St Bernard c 1490-94



Fra Bartolommeo – The Vision of St Bernard c 1504