

## Jefferson Quick, Timely Reads



*In a new entry on his mystics series, the Rev. Charles Brock turns the spotlight on mystic Bernard of Clairvaux, the cleric who founded the Cistercian Order in the early 1100s. As this heady analysis concludes, Bernard's story helps us see mysticism not as an annihilation of the person but a joining together of wills so that, like with close friends, "we can say about God, after prayer and dedication, that 'we are at one together in spirit.' Spirit – that seems to be a perfect subject to address in the time of the coronavirus.*

– Pat Cuneo, Jefferson Publications

### *Bernard of Clairvaux:* Mystical Interpreter of Love

By: Reverend Charles Brock

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One of the most famous passages in the Bible is from the *Song of Songs*: “Rise up, my darling, my fair one, come away. For see the winter is past. The rains are over and gone; the flowers appear in the countryside; the season of birdsong is come, and the turtle dove’s cooling is heard in our land; the green figs ripen on the fig trees and the vine blossoms give forth their fragrance. Rise up, my darling; my fair one, come away.” (2.10-13)

For most of us readers or hearers, this is a beautiful song between lovers. For Bernard of Clairvaux, and many other mystics, this is God speaking to us.

In a painfully youthful sermon by an awkwardly boyish chaplain and influenced by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud and their exposure of hidden motives for human behavior such as sex, power, and money (called in the trade the “hermeneutics of suspicion”), I

wanted to show off a little and speak about love to my congregation of Reformed students and faculty of Oxford University. I said the *Song of Songs* is about sexual love, my friends, and any attempt to cover that up by previous saints such as Bernard of Clairvaux and beguile us with allegorical and mystical interpretations is not only misleading but rather conniving. Faith and begorrah, the church won't like it, but let's rejoice in our bodies as a better understanding of the text. Very 60's. Very restricted. But the students rather fancied it.

Now that I am 50 years older, I have a different view. There can be many usages of biblical texts, as was indeed said long ago and grown in the Bible itself – Paul used Hebrew Scripture stories interpreted as allegories extensively. The *Song of Songs* might well be about sex and desire, and it might be about something else. Even if was originally about sexual love, we have the right to look at it from different angles as well.

And that is what Bernard did. He allegorized the texts as was the custom in his day. It is not that he rejected a literal meaning, but the deeper one looks there is much more to be reaped. And what he found was a poem strangely sandwiched in the Hebrew Scriptures about divine love, put in human love poetry. Whatever one thinks of this approach, it is nevertheless very interesting to see what he came up with, and many think he was one of the finest mystical interpreters of love that the West has produced.

Who was Bernard? Born in 1090 outside of Dijon, France, he was the founder of the Cistercian Order, a strict rule monastery devoted to poverty. It was here that his first writings evolved with the use of analogies, alliterations, and mystical symbolisms.

Bernard's struggles with the flesh during this period may account for his early and rather consistent penchant for physical austerities. He was plagued by impaired health, which took the form of anemia, migraine, gastritis, hypertension, and an atrophied sense of taste.

Pope [Eugenius III](#) and King [Louis VII](#) of [France](#) induced Bernard to promote the cause of a [Second Crusade](#) (1147-49) to quell the prospect of a great [Muslim](#) surge engulfing the Christian world. It has been said that the Crusade ended in failure because of Bernard's inability to account for the quarrelsome nature of politics. He was an idealist with the [ascetic](#) ideals of [Cîteaux](#) but he was faced with bloodthirsty fanatics.[\[1\]](#)

The entire responsibility for the failure was thrown on him. Bernard considered it his duty to send an apology to the Pope arguing that the sins of the crusaders were the cause of their misfortune and failures. Not an unusual case of shifting the blame.

The Middle Ages loved marvels. Some attributed to Bernard: One day, to cool down his lustful temptation, Bernard threw himself into ice-cold water and it worked. Another time, while he slept in an inn, a prostitute was introduced naked beside him, and he saved his chastity by running [probably set a record to this day]. At another occasion an

immense number of flies infested the Church of Foigny, and they all died instantly after Bernard excommunicated them.[\[2\]](#)

[\[1\]](#) Encyclopedia Britannica online

[\[2\]](#) Pirlo, Paolo O. (1997). "St. Bernard." *My first book of saints. Sons of Holy Mary Immaculate* - Quality Catholic Publications. pp. 186–188. ISBN 971-91595-4-5.



Bernard receives milk from the breast of the Virgin Mary. The scene is a legend that allegedly took place at [Speyer Cathedral](#) in 1146. [\[3\]](#)

[\[3\]](#) Lactation of St. Bernard (*Lactatio Bernardi*) is based on a miracle or vision concerning St. [Bernard of Clairvaux](#) where the Virgin sprinkled milk on his lips (in some versions he is awake, praying before an image of the Madonna, in others asleep). In art he usually kneels before a Madonna Lactans, and as Jesus takes a break from feeding, the Virgin squeezes her breast and he is hit with a squirt of milk, often shown traveling an impressive distance. The milk was variously said to have given him wisdom, shown that the Virgin was his mother (and that of mankind generally), or cured an eye infection. *Wikipedia*

Today, a short distance south of the [Church of the Nativity](#) in [Bethlehem](#) is a shrine called the Milk Grotto, on a street of the same name. An irregular grotto hollowed out of soft white rock, the site is sacred to Christian and Muslim pilgrims alike. It is especially frequented by new mothers and women who are trying to conceive.

By mixing the soft white chalk with their food, and praying to Our Lady of the Milk, they believe it will increase the quantity of their milk or enable them to become pregnant. [Seetheholdland.net](#)

## Bernard's Mysticism.

His legacy is his mysticism. He wrote a massive amount of fine material and foreshortening it is unpleasant, but here goes. One of his discoveries in the *Song of Songs* is the concept of the Bride (us) moving from room to room in the palace of Solomon (or God). They are indeed real rooms, but Bernard turns them into mystical rooms. "The King has brought me into his rooms." (1.3) Solomon had something like 700 wives and 300 concubines, though not just because of his sexual ardor, but many of the marriages were of convenience, especially for the relation of Israel to its neighbors.

The first room is the garden. "The fragrance is very attractive, and the bride runs, so do the maidens, the one to arrive first is the one whose love is most ardent. On arrival she brooks no refusal, not even delay."

The second room is the wine room, overflowing with rich graces. "O taste and see that the Lord is good." Bernard adds that the person he most admires is "the one to whom it is given to sprint through or ramble round all these rooms without stumbling" and who does not contend with his superiors or his equals but attends with kindness to the needs of others.

The third room is the bedroom. Bernard demurs: "Far from me the pretension that I have experienced so sublime a grace." Here it is that the bride explores the Bridegroom's "secret charms," which include love and calm. It is "safe from the call and concern of the greedy senses, from the pangs of care, the guilt of sin and the obsessive fancies of the imagination so much more difficult to hold at bay – such a person, when he returns to us again, may well boast and tell us" "the King has brought me into his bedroom."<sup>[4]</sup>

In Sermon 74, Bernard gives account of how gracious the Lord is to the mystical bride. "He moved and mollified and wounded my heart (Song 4.9) since it was hard as a rock and desperately ill. And then he began to root up and to destroy, to build up and to plant, to water what was parched, to enlighten what was dark, to set free what was chained up, to set on fire what was cold, as well as to set the crooked ways straight and the rough ways plain." "When the Word and Bridegroom entered into me from time to time, his coming was never made known by any sign ... my vices were banished and my carnal desires were repressed." "And as often as he slips away, I will "not cease to cry out with burning heart's desire behind his back that he may "give himself to me."<sup>[5]</sup>

There is some confusion in Bernard about the relation of the person to God, and this has been one of the great issues in mysticism East and West. Does the person lose himself in God? Is there anything left of the person during the mystical experience? In one place Bernard writes: "To lose yourself, as if you no longer existed, to cease completely to experience yourself, to reduce yourself to nothing is not a human

sentiment but a divine experience (using Phil 2.7). “Otherwise, how will God be all in all (I Cor 15.28) if something human survives in man?”<sup>[6]</sup>

In other words there is not only a diminishing of the self, but its annihilation. But in another place, I think he gets it right. He speaks about merging the wills of God and the mystic. Sermon 83 claims that God and the mystic are joined not in one flesh but in one spirit (using Cor 6.17). This helps to see mysticism as not an annihilation of the person but a joining together of wills so that, like with close friends, we can say about God, after prayer and dedication, that “we are at one together in spirit.” Not disparaging the many other forms of mysticism, here is a mysticism even I can grasp.

<sup>[4]</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons on the Song of Songs 23*, in Bernard McGinn, *the Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, Modern Library, 2006, p 28-34

<sup>[5]</sup> Ibid p 222-4

<sup>[6]</sup> Ibid p 435-6 *On Loving God – Chapter 10.27-29* – one of his last works

<sup>[7]</sup> Image below from <https://www3.dpcdsb.org/BRNRD/our-faith/our-faith>



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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