

ON THE VIRTUES AND EXCELLENCES OF ST. BERNARD

Denis the Carthusian

Denis the Carthusian (1402–1471) was a medieval philosopher and theologian known for his prolific writing, including innumerable commentaries covering the entirety of scripture, sermons numbering over 900, theological expositions, and most especially his synthesis of doctrine on the spiritual life. Bishops, princes, and laymen alike flocked to his cell and inundated him with letters as a kind of Western starlets. Surnamed Doctor ecstaticus, Denis is considered one of the most important figures in the Carthusian tradition and his writings continue to be studied and admired today. Regrettably, few of his works, spanning 43 volumes, have ever been translated into English. Presented here is one of the three sermons he wrote in praise of St. Bernard.

*Behold my servant whom I have chosen; my elect,
my soul delighteth in him. Matt 12:18; Is 42:1*

ALmighty and most benevolent God has adorned the most blessed, holy father Bernard with abundant and multiple graces, so that of him could truly be said what the Savior said of the Apostle Paul: “He is a chosen vessel to me, to bear my name before kings and nations,” and what is read in Ecclesiasticus, “There was not any found like him.” For he had no equal, but was truly an apostle of his time. But now his virtues, praises, and excellencies are only briefly touched upon.

His first praise is that God prophetically foretold his grace. When Bernard’s mother conceived him, it appeared to her that she carried a beautiful and barking puppy in her womb. When she explained this to a certain holy man, he responded with a prophetic voice: “You will

be the mother of a noble whelp who will be a guardian of the Church of God, and will give great barks against its adversaries: for he will be an outstanding preacher and convert many.”

His second excellence is the magnitude of grace and virtues conferred upon him in his youth, while still in the world. For when he was the son of a soldier and had five brothers, he converted and drew them all to enter religion; two of whom, Gerard and Guido, were soldiers. He converted many others as well, so that he crossed over to the cloister with about thirty companions. He also remained in virginity, and on one occasion, when he had gazed too long at a woman, he rebuked himself, jumped into a freezing pond and remained in it until it froze around him, almost becoming lifeless. On another occa-

sion, when a lascivious girl had entered the sleeping Bernard's bed, he, perceiving her, turned to the other side of the bed and remained immaculate. While waiting for the morning office in the church on the night of Christmas Day, and wanting to know the hour when Christ was born of the Virgin, the child Jesus appeared to him in a vision, as if being born of the Virgin again. Finally, when his brother Gerard rejected his exhortations to enter the cloister, Bernard prophetically said, placing his finger on Gerard's side, "The hour will soon come when a lance will pierce this side, and it will open the way to my exhortations." Which happened shortly after.¹

His third excellence is the admirable perfection to which he came at the beginning of his conversion, that is, entering the cloister. For as soon as he joined the Cistercian Order, he was completely absorbed in spirit, and so wholly occupied with God that he did not notice external things or use his bodily senses: for a long time, entering and leaving the church, he thought there was only one window at the top, where there were actually three. He spent a year in the novice's cell, and yet did not know if the house had a ceiling. Moreover, he stayed awake beyond human capability and complained about losing no time except that which he spent sleeping. He approached food and drink as if to a prison, and ate very moderately. He was so entirely devoted to spiritual things, holy meditations, prayers, contemplations, and internal exercises that he drank oil instead of beer and did not notice. He also ate raw lard for a long time instead of butter and did not notice the difference. He never laughed in such a way that he couldn't as readily laugh as rebuke himself.

His fourth excellence is the greatness of the wisdom conferred upon him. For God frequently revealed to him the understanding of the splendor and insight of truth of the whole of sacred Scripture, as if it were laid out before him in a single glance. Therefore, he wrote many useful and beautiful works, and composed divers and

pithy treatises, which are especially useful to the religious. He also sent letters full of devotion and wisdom to various great persons. Indeed, God infused into him admirable prudence in human affairs.

His fifth excellence was his effectiveness in preaching. He was very eloquent and fervent in his preaching, and was able to convert countless people to the Lord and to religious life. Sometimes, when he preached in French to a German audience, they would weep even though they did not understand his language.

His sixth praise was the abundant fruit he produced in the Church of God. He extinguished schism and brought the Church back to unity. He founded many great and famous monasteries, around 160, in which countless devout men lived. At one point, there were 700 people in Clairvaux, and sometimes there were 200 novices. He also reformed many bishops and made remarkable reforms in the Church, making his time a golden age. Every community he visited was made more joyful and celebrated. He even converted William, Duke of Aquitaine, who had been a very wicked man, to the point where he publicly lived with the wife of his own brother for three or four years.

His seventh excellence was the powerful gift of working miracles, in which he was truly apostolic. He could touch and heal people, and he worked so many miracles that they could not be described. He even performed 39 miracles in one day. He raised the dead, cured lepers, the blind, the lame, the deaf, and those suffering from other illnesses with amazing ease. He also supernaturally healed some people from birth. Finally, he went to the rebellious and schismatic William², who was outside the Church, wearing priestly vestments with the body of Christ on a paten, and with an inspired face, said, "Pax Domini!" He then added, "God and your judge are present. Resist if you can." The duke fell to the ground, powerless and unable to resist, and Bernard's words were accepted.

His eighth excellence was that he was gifted with prophetic spirit, and he predicted many future events and knew the secrets of people's hearts. He was truly exceptional in all these things.

His ninth excellence was the abundance and frequency of his celestial visions. He saw many things in spirit and was often visited by heavenly citizens. Sometimes, even while staying outside the monastery, he was present in spirit inside the cloister, looking around and knowing everything. Sometimes, while lying in bed, he was seen by the brothers walking through the choir, observing and rousing those who were drowsy.

His tenth excellence was his remarkable patience. He suffered almost constantly from three terribly severe afflictions: a constriction in his throat, a corruption in his stomach, and a remarkable agony in his lower parts; all of which he endured with great patience. And in short, he was full of every virtue. Though he was considered the greatest by everyone, he considered himself the lowest of all. He stood in choir with extraordinary devotion, known only to God and himself. He was also a great contemplative, and was enraptured daily as if at will.

His eleventh excellence was his glorious and blessed death, for in the presence of his griev-

ing and mourning brothers, he joyfully, devoutly, and piously fell asleep in the Lord. And for several days, while he was kept on earth, his face remained in its beauty, liveliness, and grace, to the admiration of all. And when many great miracles were being performed every day at his tomb, and there was an excessively large and frequent gathering of people, the abbot of Cîteaux, fearing the expense to the brothers therefrom, approached the tomb of the blessed Father and said: "Brother Bernard, just as you were always a son of obedience while living in the body, be so now as well; therefore, I command you to stop these miracles." Soon thereafter, Bernard, the master of virtues and teacher of obedience, completely ceased from performing miracles, and the gatherings ceased. There are countless authentic miracles recorded about him.

Therefore, let us follow in the footsteps of such a great Father, especially the three pieces of advice which he left to the brothers as his last will, saying: "I have never caused anyone to stumble intentionally, and if it happened, I tried to make amends; I have always trusted my own judgment less than that of others; I have endured wrongs without ever seeking revenge. So let us follow his example of charity, humility, and patience."

1. The Golden Legend of Jacobus de Foragine clarifies the meaning of this by telling the rest of the story, which would have likely been known by Denis' readers: "A few days later Gerard received a lance-thrust in his flank at the place where Bernard had placed his finger, and was captured by his enemies and chained in close keeping. And when Bernard came to him and they were not permitted to speak together, he cried loudly: 'I know, my brother Gerard, that in a little time we shall go and enter a monastery!' That same night the gyves fell from his feet, the door opened of itself, and Gerard, overjoyed, made his escape; whereupon he made known to his brother that he had charged his resolve, and wished to become a monk."
2. William X of Aquitaine had been a supporter of antipope Anacletus II in the papal schism of 1130, despite admonitions on the part of his own bishops that Innocent II was the true successor of St. Peter.

St. Bernard of Clairvaux (*feast day, 20 August*) is one of the Patron Saints of the Poor Knights of Christ. The Poor Knights live according to a recension of the Rule written by St. Bernard for the original Knights Templar and ratified at the Council of Troyes in 1129 under Pope Honorius II. The new Rule was approved by Gaetano Bonicelli, Metropolitan Archbishop of Siena-Colle di Val d'Elsa-Montalcino on 18 November, 1990.

In addition to taking a vow of obedience to this Rule and their lawful superiors, the Poor Knights take vows of poverty and chastity according to their state in life, as well as a fourth vow to publicly defend the Faith after a three-year novitiate and three years in simple vows. The Poor Knights observe a life of prayer and apostolate, praying the 1960 Divine Office daily and engaging in activities to support the special ends of the association. Membership is open to all men who have been confirmed and are practicing the Catholic faith, not having formally professed vows or promises in any other canonically recognized Catholic association. Additional categories of Dames (females associates), Squires (confirmed men younger than 18), and Oblates also participate in the life of the Knights.