

THE SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE OF SAINT PAUL IN THE MONASTIC THEOLOGY OF SAINT BERNARD

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To my Cistercian sisters at Valley of Our Lady Monastery in Wisconsin

Introduction

The spiritual genius of two great abbots, expressed in letters and sermons, has profoundly enriched the life of the Church. The first of these, St. Paul, is technically not an abbot at all; he was, however, a founder of churches and a spiritual father (1 Cor 4:15) who taught his flock to call God “*Abba*, father” (Gal 4:6; Rom 8:15). In letters to his beloved communities, which comprise almost half of the New Testament canon, Paul greets, admonishes, and encourages believers as he creates Scripture and plants the very first seeds of Christian doctrine. The second abbot, St. Bernard, “the last of the fathers” and a doctor of the Church, was the superior of the Cistercian monastery of Clairvaux in the first half of the twelfth century. The relationship between these two fathers of the Christian faith, specifically the influence of the spiritual life and letters of Paul on Bernard’s monastic theology, is the subject of this essay.

This matter is an impossible one to treat for two principle reasons. The first is that Bernard cites and alludes to biblical passages so relentlessly that any attempt at a thorough summary of his references to Paul would read like a dry lexicon.¹ The second is that, given Bernard’s interwoven method of employing Scriptural allusions and overtones, an exclusive focus on Paul is tantamount to picking excessively at one strand of a rope such that the other strands would come undone, to the ruin of the rope. This study must necessarily neglect, therefore, other primary sources in the pursuit of the Pauline roots of Bernard’s theology, such as the *Rule of Saint Benedict*, the Psalms, the Gospel and First Letter of John, and of course, the Song of Songs.

The rewards of an exclusive focus on Paul in Bernard’s writings, however, will justify the relative sidelining of the others. For St. Bernard does not simply treat the Pauline epistles as authoritative source material for his theology;

¹ Roughly half of the New Testament passages cited or alluded to in Bernard’s works come from the Pauline epistles. For more precise details, see Denis Farkasfalvy, “The Role of the Bible in St. Bernard’s Spirituality,” *Analecta Cisterciensia* 25 (1969): 3–13.

he finds in them the fruits of the Apostle's own experience of the mystery of Christ unveiled by the Holy Spirit. From his own reflection on Paul's experience formulated in his New Testament epistles, the Abbot of Clairvaux presents Paul's life to his monks as a model of conversion and obedience. In so doing, St. Bernard wishes to enkindle and then intensify their desire to be drawn further into the mystery of God's redemptive work in Christ.

The first part of this study will offer a brief overview of the titles and praises Bernard showers on Paul, one of his spiritual masters. The second part will feature an analysis of Bernard's meditation on the inner life of Paul, as well as the Cistercian's highlighting of the Apostle to the Gentiles as a model for his own monks to imitate in their monastic *conversatio*, or way of life. The third part will present a broad overview of Bernard's anthropology and monastic theology, focusing on select verses from Paul's letters in which Bernard takes Paul's own experience and incorporates it into the structure of his theological project.²

In Praise of Paul, Master and Teacher

St. Bernard acknowledges that he frequently draws inspiration from the well of Paul's writings.³ A fascinating study could be done on the psychological and temperamental similarities between the two saints, given their pastoral zeal, concern for souls, and emotionally charged writings, but such a pursuit lies beyond the scope of this paper. A simple look at the titles and tributes Bernard grants to Paul will suffice initially to indicate the depth of his admiration.

Paul is simply and ubiquitously "the Apostle" in Bernard's writings. He is praised as a "spiritual man," "our teacher," "a good and diligent shepherd," the "doctor of the Gentiles," and a root from which many branches have come

² For the basic explanation of monastic as distinct from scholastic theology, see the classic work by Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982). For an excellent overview of the life and writings of Bernard, see Leclercq's introduction in *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works* (hereafter, *Selected Works*), Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 13–57. An indispensable guide through the Mellifluous Doctor's theology is still Étienne Gilson, *The Mystical Theology of Saint Bernard*, Cistercian Studies 120 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1990).

³ See, e.g., Bernard, Sermon 10.1: "From [the mouth of Paul] I draw for myself . . . as I am accustomed to frequently"; see *Sancti Bernardi Opera* (hereafter, *SBO*), ed. J. Leclercq, H. M. Rochais, and C. H. Talbot (Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1957–1977), 1:48. This critical edition of Bernard's works runs to eight volumes, and I will cite it either when presenting the Latin text or giving my own translations. The Latin title of the Song of Songs commentary is *Sermones super Cantica Cantorum* (hereafter, *SC*). The English translation of his commentary on the Song of Songs, often strikingly imprecise in its rendering of Bernard's Latin, is the four-volume *On the Song of Songs* (hereafter, *Song*), Cistercian Fathers 4, 7, 31, and 40 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1971–1980). Unless otherwise stated, English translations are my own translation from *SBO*.

forth.⁴ He is Bernard's *Magister*, or teacher, who has taught him how to love and live.⁵ Paul also teaches Bernard how to boast properly in the Lord (1 Cor 1:31), and Paul's "philosophy" super-excels the wisdom of this world.⁶ Paul was righteous: "For him was laid up a crown of righteousness (2 Tim 4:8). For, the soul of Paul was so pure that he could speak 'wisdom among the perfect, a wisdom hidden in mystery, which none of the rulers of this world recognized' (1 Cor 2:6–8)."⁷ The Apostle was an expert at stirring up his disciples "to the spiritual way of life [*ad spiritualem conversationem excitans discipulos*], saying 'If we live in the Spirit, then let us also walk in the Spirit' (2 Tim 1:11; Gal 5:25)."⁸

For Bernard, the mouth of Paul was "a great and unfailing fountain," a fistula funneling grace and love from God to the individual soul or the Church.⁹ He is someone who has *experienced* the consolation of conversion and mystical union with Christ, and therefore is a great authority whose words can channel the same experience via Scripture to Bernard and his monks and enable them to desire that same experience of God.¹⁰

Sermon 8 on the Song of Songs

Bernard does not mediate to his own disciples the doctrine of Paul the Apostle, but rather the Apostle's experience. In his sermons, he unveils the communication between Paul, the inspired author, and the reader or listener, who desires that same intimacy with God that Paul enjoyed. This spiritual progression, incorporating all three Persons of the Trinity, is beautifully manifest in Sermon 8 of Bernard's commentary on the Song of Songs.

⁴ For the "spiritual man," see Bernard, Epistle 168, in *The Letters of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux* (hereafter, *Letters*), trans. Bruno Scott James (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1998), 237. For "our teacher" and "a good and diligent shepherd," see *De diversis* 55.3, in *Bernard of Clairvaux: Monastic Sermons* (hereafter, *Monastic Sermons*), Cistercian Fathers 68 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2016), 261–62. For Paul as "doctor of the Gentiles" and the root from which many branches have come forth, see his *First Sermon on the Feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul* 1 (SBO, 4:327).

⁵ Bernard, SC 20.1: "Let this sermon take its beginning from the words of the Teacher: 'Whoever does not love the Lord Jesus, let them be anathema'" (SBO, 1:114). The rest of the sermon is dedicated to the manner in which Christ loves us and the way in which we are to love Christ, with copious Pauline passages supplying the main contours of the argument. See also Bernard's *First Sermon on the Solemnity of Peter and Paul*, 3, in SBO 5:190: "They taught me how to live."

⁶ See Bernard, SC 13.6 (*Song*, 1:92–93); *De diversis* 7.1: "Consider also how much the philosophy of Paul surpasses the philosophy 'of the wise of this world,' which undoubtedly is 'foolishness before God' (1 Cor. 3:19)" (*Monastic Sermons*, 44).

⁷ Bernard, SC 25.6 (*Song*, 2:54; slightly modified).

⁸ Bernard, *De diversis* 23.1 (*Monastic Sermons*, 129; SBO, 6/1:178).

⁹ See Bernard, SC 10.1 (*Song*, 1:61); SC 22.4 (*Song*, 2:16).

¹⁰ Bernard, SC 85.14: "Hear the one who has experienced this [*audi expertum*]: 'If we are out of our mind, it is for God; if we are sober, it is for you' (2 Cor. 5:13)" (*Song*, 4:210; SBO, 2:316).

In the sermon, the Abbot of Clairvaux meditates on the opening words of the Song: "Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth." The kiss, Bernard explains, is the Holy Spirit, the uniting glue binding the Father to the Son, the kisser and the one receiving the kiss, respectively. Already in the opening paragraph, Bernard highlights the mutual relationship between knowledge (*cognitio, agnitio*) and love (*dilectio, amor*) necessary to approach this mystery. For this mystery of divine love is beyond even the access of the angels, though "Paul has tasted it [*Paulo hoc ipsum sapiente*]: that peace which surpasses all understanding, even the angelic (Phil 4:7)."¹¹

Regarding this indivisible unity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit expressed in the analogy of the kiss, Bernard reflects on the revelation of this mystery to humanity. The Son reveals himself to whomever he wills, and he also reveals the Father:

But he undoubtedly reveals through the kiss, that is, through the Holy Spirit. The Apostle is a witness to this when he says, "God revealed it to us through his Spirit" (1 Cor 2:10). And so in giving the Spirit through whom he reveals, he also reveals himself: in giving he reveals, and in revealing he gives. Therefore the revelation which comes through the Holy Spirit not only serves for knowledge [*agnitio*], but also enkindles love [*sed etiam accendit ad amorem*], as the Apostle says: "The love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us" (Rom 5:5).¹²

Paul is thus a witness to this revealed understanding of the Holy Spirit as the kiss produced by the love between the Father and the Son. To prove further that knowledge and love are inseparable in penetrating this mystery, Bernard then asks why the philosophers and wise men of this world failed to glorify God properly, even if they had the capacity to know God (Rom 1:21). Employing quotes from Romans and 1 Corinthians, Paul asserts that to their

¹¹ Bernard, SC 8.2 (*Song*, 1:45). For Bernard, there can be no knowledge of God without a corresponding love. To emphasize this, Bernard often plays with a double meaning of related terms *sapor* and *sapere*. Literally, the verb *sapere* means "to know," but the noun *sapor* means "taste," and *sapientia* is "wisdom." The one who knows God, therefore, must have the capacity to taste the goodness of the Lord and develop an ever-increasing desire, or love, for that delectable experience of God described by Paul as wisdom in 1 Cor 1–2. See *De diversis* 96.3; SC 7.5; 8.6: "Let the Spirit illuminate the light of knowledge, and then pour in the taste of grace [*saporem gratiae*]" (SBO, 1:39). See also SC 23.14: "The taste makes one wise [*porro sapor sapientem facit*]" (SBO, 1:148).

¹² Bernard, SC 8.5 (SBO, 1:38; *Song*, 1:47–48; translation modified).

knowledge no corresponding love was found: "From all this it is clear that even their knowledge was not perfect, because they did not love."¹³

The teaching about the Spirit, in other words, is not meant to sharpen one's intellectual curiosity, but rather to enkindle charity in the heart. The bride in the Song, usually representing the soul for Bernard, desires not mere knowledge, but a kiss; the Spirit not only provides the light of knowledge but also infuses the taste of grace into the heart seeking that experience. Insight into the mystery of this kiss has been granted to Paul by the Holy Spirit and the revelation of Jesus Christ (Gal 1:11–12). Though the Apostle himself has received this kiss, his experience can be only partial, since Christ alone possesses the fullness of the kiss: "For Christ therefore, the kiss is the fullness, for Paul only a participation. Christ gloried in the kiss of the mouth, Paul only in that he was kissed by the kiss."¹⁴ But this participation in the kiss of the Spirit allows Paul to unite himself to the Lord: "Therefore the one who adheres to the Lord is one spirit with him" (1 Cor 6:17).

Bernard's eighth sermon on the Song of Songs contains most of the primary Pauline verses the Cistercian Abbot employs to describe the spiritual union of the soul with God. Bernard understands that Paul's experience of sharing in the revelatory kiss between the Father and the Son, expressed in his epistles, is now imparted to him and his monks. That experience of the Spirit granted to Paul may, therefore, be shared by all who read and meditate on his words.

The Inner Life and Experience of Paul, the Model for Monks

It must be kept in mind that most of Bernard's literary works are sermons preached to his monks, whether during the liturgy or in the daily community meeting called the *capitulum* (chapter). He also penned a substantial number

¹³ Bernard, SC 8.5 (*Song*, 1:48).

¹⁴ Bernard, SC 8.8 (*Song*, 1:52). As the model of obedience and perfect conversion, Paul is almost perfect, but his perfection is only partial. No human being is capable of possessing the full vision of God in this life, as Bernard takes pains to clarify in *Sermones qui habitat* [Sermons on Psalm 91, "He Who Dwells"] 10.1: "But, as I have just reminded you, it is very difficult, and even impossible, to analyze the nature of all those good things—unless, of course, the Spirit himself reveals to someone what, as the apostle says, 'no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him' (1 Cor. 2:9). Even Paul himself, almost perfect while still in the mortal flesh (2 Cor. 4:11), was obliged to confess, 'Now I know in part,' and again, 'Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face' (1 Cor. 13:12), because this was, as it were, only a sort of imperfect perfection; otherwise the apostle would not have said 'Let those of us who are perfect be of one mind' (Phil. 3:15), when he had said just before, in speaking of himself, 'Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect' (Phil. 3:12). Whatever man is capable of knowing here below, therefore, is best commended by good and foresighted inculcation" (*Sermons on Conversion*, Cistercian Fathers 25 [Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1981], 193).

of letters to fellow monks, kings and queens, ecclesiastical figures, and even Popes, many of whom sought his advice on matters political and spiritual. Regarding his sermons, the Cistercian Abbot preached and wrote as the spiritual father of a group of men committed to the monastic *conversatio*, or way of life, outlined in the *Rule of St. Benedict*.

Several key words appear constantly in St. Bernard's sermons as he formulates the goal of the Cistercian way of life. Among the most important concepts in Bernard's monastic vision is *conversio*, or conversion. One of his most famous treatise-length sermons features this word in its title, and though his audience for that sermon was a group of diocesan clerics, the necessity for conversion, both an instantaneous and a gradual lifelong turning of the will to God from errant desires and prideful pursuits, is essential for his monks.¹⁵ The place where the monks accomplish this continual turning to God is the monastery, which Bernard refers to unabashedly as "the new Jerusalem" in one of his letters.¹⁶

A summary statement in one of Bernard's *Sermones de diversis* ("On Diverse Topics") provides the basic contours of his approach:

In these two things, the entirety of the spiritual life is contained [*tota spiritualis conversationis summa versatur*]: that in reflecting on ourselves [*consideratio*] we are troubled and saddened in a salutary way, and that we breathe in divine things, and enjoy consolation from the joy of the Holy Spirit. From considering ourselves comes fear and humility; from divine consolation we take up true hope and charity.¹⁷

The monk's consideration is designed to be a reflection on his twofold experience of his own sinfulness and of God's great mercy. The meditation on one's personal experience of sin and on the life-giving grace of God is a hallmark of Bernard's theology, as has been amply demonstrated by others.¹⁸ A beautiful illustration of this comes in a sermon commemorating the so-

¹⁵ The work is *De conversione ad clericos* (English translation in *Sermons on Conversion*). On the topic of conversion in St. Bernard, see Denis Farkasfalvy, "The First Step in Spiritual Life: Conversion," in *La dottrina della vita spirituale nelle opere di San Bernardo di Clairvaux: atti del convegno internazionale, Roma, 11–15 settembre 1990* (Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1991): 65–84.

¹⁶ Bernard, Epistle 67.1–2 (*Letters*, 91).

¹⁷ Bernard, *De diversis* 5.5 (*Monastic Sermons*, 39; translation slightly modified).

¹⁸ See, for example, Jean Mouroux, "Sur les critères de l'expérience spirituelle d'après les sermons sur le Cantique des Cantiques," *Analecta Cisterciensia* 9 [*Saint Bernard théologien*] (1953): 253–67; Ulrich Köpf, "Die Rolle der Erfahrung im religiösen Leben nach dem heiligen Bernhard," in *La dottrina della vita spirituale*, 307–19; John Sommerfeldt, *The Spiritual Teachings of Bernard of Clairvaux*, Cistercian Studies 125 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1991), 122–33.

lemnity of Saints Peter and Paul on June 29. Bernard collects past, present, and future together in what he calls the “highest spiritual exercise and the standard of spiritual study” (*haec nempe spiritualis exercitii summa, haec forma studii spiritualis*): “that we wisely dispose of our present things, recognize what is past in the bitterness of our soul, and provide carefully for future things.” In linking wisdom, understanding, and providence to these temporal references, Bernard notes that “a certain image of eternity seems to be reformed in us,” an idea that will be developed later in the present essay.¹⁹

Scripture offers many examples of conversion to exhort the monks to a greater fidelity and desire for union with God. But Bernard regards the experience of Saul the persecutor of Christians on the road to Damascus, and then his life as a Christian missionary, as the shining paradigm of perfect conversion. It is magnificent, Bernard notes, that in this one conversion, both the magnitude of mercy and the efficacy of grace are so manifestly present.²⁰ The passage from Saul to Paul is already evident for Bernard in the question the blinded Saul poses in Acts 22:10: “Lord, what do you want me to do?” (cf. Acts 9:6). “This, brothers,” says Bernard, “is the form of perfect conversion.”²¹ Bernard thus invites his monks to regard Paul’s turning to the Lord and becoming a vessel of election as a mirror in which they can evaluate their monastic obedience.²²

Saint Bernard praises Paul for his humility in asking the question, “Lord, what do you want me to do?” (Acts 22:10; 9:6). Bernard perceives in this question the ridding of Paul’s self-will, or *voluntas propria*, which is the scourge of monks attempting to make progress in the spiritual life: “How few there are who are found in this perfect form of obedience, who have so cast away their own will and do not claim a heart of their own, such that they do not want what they want, but what the Lord wants.”²³ Bernard echoes both the *Rule* and several Pauline verses in praising the one who has emptied himself of his own will:

You too, if you abandon your own will, if you fully renounce
the desires of the flesh, if you crucify your flesh with its
passions and desires (Gal 5:24), and if you put to death

¹⁹ Bernard, *Second Sermon on the Solemnity of Peter and Paul 7* (SBO, 5:196).

²⁰ Bernard, *Sermon on the Conversion of St. Paul 5* (SBO, 4:327–34).

²¹ Bernard, *Sermon on the Conversion of St. Paul 6* (SBO, 4:331). See also the shorter sermon with the same title in SBO, 6/1:28–29, where Bernard notes how quickly Paul becomes meek and humble of heart after experiencing Christ.

²² Bernard often refers to Paul as a *vas electionis* (vessel of election), words spoken by God to Ananias in Acts 9:15. For more on these two particular sermons, see James DeFrancis, “The Apostle as Mirror of Monastic Conversion: Saint Bernard on the Conversion of Saint Paul,” *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 49, no. 1 (2014): 43–57.

²³ Bernard, *Sermon on the Conversion of St. Paul 6* (SBO, 4:331).

those parts of you which belong to the earth (Col 3:5), will be truly an imitator of Paul (1 Cor 4:16), you who do not make your soul more precious than yourself (Acts 20:24); by this loss that saves, you will prove yourself a follower of Christ (Luke 14:26).²⁴

Bernard perceives in Paul the model of conversion and obedience, at least in part, because of the role experience plays in his theological reflection on the soul and its relationship to God. Paul's own life, and his meditation on his experience of God's love and mercy, allowed him to penetrate the mysteries of God clearly and present them in his epistles. Saint Bernard forges a similar path of instruction: rather than force-feeding sermons or theological truths to his monks, he exhorts them to detect the truth of what he expounds within Scripture and their own life experience:

Do not hope to hear from me what it is within your memory that your reason detects, censures, judges and sentences. Apply your hearing within, roll back the eyes of your heart, and you will learn by your own experience what is going on. For no one knows what is in a man, except the spirit of the man which is in him (1 Cor 2:11).²⁵

The texts highlighting Bernard's emphasis on experience are numerous, and only a few exemplars will be presented here. In speaking of how one is to interpret Scripture, Bernard asserts the importance of experience as he develops his commentary on the Song of Songs: "Only the touch of the Spirit can inspire a song like this, and only personal experience can unfold its meaning. Let those who are versed in the mystery [*expertī*] revel in it; let all others burn with desire not so much to know as to experience it [*non tam cognoscendi quam experiendi*]."²⁶ The beginning of Bernard's third sermon on the Song is famous for its emphasis on experience:

Today the text we are to study is the book of our own experience. You must therefore turn your attention inwards [*convertimini ad vos ipsos*]; each one must take note of his own particular awareness of the things I am about to discuss. I am attempting to discover if any of you has been privileged to say from his heart, "Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth" (Song 1:1). Those to whom it is given

²⁴ Bernard, SC 30.10 (Song, 2:120; translation slightly modified).

²⁵ Bernard, *De conversione* 3.4 (Sermons on Conversion, 35).

²⁶ Bernard, SC 1.11 (Song, 1:6; translation slightly modified).

to utter these words sincerely are comparatively few, but anyone who has received this mystical kiss from the mouth of Christ at least once, seeks again that intimate experience, and eagerly looks for its frequent renewal. I think that nobody can grasp what it is except the one who receives it. For it is "a hidden manna" (Rev 2:17), and only he who eats it still hungers for more (Sir 34:29).²⁷

Bernard's emphasis on personal experience in generating desire for closer union with God should not be interpreted as a completely subjective and absolute pursuit.²⁸ He repeatedly asserts that Christ, who humbly emptied himself of divinity in order to experience what we experience in the flesh (Phil 2:5–11), is the model for our moral and spiritual conversion. In his treatise *On the Steps of Humility and Pride*, Bernard beautifully notes that, based on what Christ suffered in the flesh on our behalf, we cannot doubt that he can sympathize, or suffer with, all of us. What Christ knew by nature as God he wanted to experience as a human being, and to shower his mercy upon the miserable.²⁹

Bernard announces the same theme in his volume *On Consideration*, addressed to Pope Eugene III, a former Cistercian monk at Clairvaux. The Pope's former Abbot exhorts him to note that the one who has had the experience of tasting the sweetness of the Lord, of sampling the delights of contemplation, employs the standards of Scripture and the Holy Spirit to aid him in interpreting his experience of God: "The saints, then, comprehend. Do you ask how? If you are a saint, you have comprehended and you know; if you are not, be one and you will know through your own experience. Holy affection makes a saint, and this affection is twofold: holy fear of the Lord and holy love."³⁰

²⁷ Bernard, SC 3.1 (*Song*, 1:16). See also SC 22.2: "In matters of this kind, understanding can follow only where experience leads" (*Song*, 2:15).

²⁸ On this topic, it is easy to see why Reformers such as Calvin and Luther readily appropriated Bernard's theology to their own cause. But Bernard does not exalt one's personal experience of God over, or at the expense of, the community, be it the monastery or the Church. The Abbot of Clairvaux usually portrays the bride of the *Song* as the soul seeking God (SC 7.2), but the nature of the search, though intimately personal, is by definition collective: "I can only be drawn [to God] if we run together" (citing *Song* 1:4 [SC 21.11]). The bride can also be understood collectively as the Church, and the bride's search for her spouse bears an inherently ecclesial mark; see SC 12.6, 11.

²⁹ Bernard, *De gradibus humilitatis et superbiae* 3.9: Christ "wanted men to have no hesitation in entrusting their weaknesses to him, who was able as God to heal them and who wanted to do so as one close to them who understood because he had suffered the same weakness himself" (*Selected Works*, 108).

³⁰ Bernard, *De consideratione* 5.14.30, in *Five Books on Consideration: Advice to a Pope*, Cistercian Fathers 13 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1976), 177.

In addition to *conversatio*, *conversio*, and *experientia*, another essential word in the vocabulary of St. Bernard is *affectus* (sometimes *affectio*), which cannot easily be translated into English but has the connotation of desire, an emotional burst of affection, or superabundant love. It is a spontaneous emotional adherence that attaches the whole person either to good or to evil. Bernard stresses the need for the *affectus* within the will, rather than the intellect, to embolden the soul to desire a loving union with God:

God is not loved without a reward, although he should be loved without regard for one. True charity cannot be worthless [*vacua*], still, as “it does not seek its own advantage” (1 Cor 13:5), it cannot be termed mercenary. Love pertains to the will, it is not a transaction [*affectus est, non contractus*]; it cannot acquire or be acquired by a pact . . . True love is content with itself, it has its reward . . . How much more the soul that loves God seeks no other reward than that God whom it loves. Were the soul to demand anything else, then it would certainly love that other thing and not God.³¹

For Bernard, love is the only *affectus* that can link the human being to God in an experiential way. Whereas he cannot be afraid and does not experience guilt, God does love, as both the Old Testament Scriptures and the very reality of the Incarnation, the manifestation of God’s love in the person of Christ, make clear. For Bernard, the dialogue of love found in the Song of Songs is, at one and the same time, both the response of the individual soul to God and the imitation, expressed in human words, of the love God shares with and showers upon all human beings. Such an understanding brings about an ideal movement from the *affectus* to actions done for the sake of God and a constantly deepening desire to enter into that love.

The Fruits of Paul’s Experience

In relating his own experience to his readers, Saint Paul provides precious insight into his mystical encounters with God, and Saint Bernard seizes on the verses in which Paul speaks directly of his experience. Bernard then draws from the spiritual fruits Paul was blessed to receive in the process of luring his own monks to desire those same fruits.

Bernard makes frequent reference to Paul’s description of his ascent “to the third heaven” in 2 Corinthians 12:2–4. In *The Steps of Humility and Pride*, Bernard speaks of the three degrees, or steps, of truth (*gradus veritatis*) leading to humility. The first degree is to recognize one’s own misery and wretched

³¹ Bernard, *De diligendo Deo* 7.17, in *On Loving God*, Cistercian Fathers 13B (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1995), 20.

pride; the second is to move from the recognition of one's own weakness and misery to share compassionately the misery of others; and the third is to purify "the eye of the heart to be able to contemplate heavenly and divine things."³² The same progression, Bernard notes, can be discerned in the rapture (literally, the "taking up") of Paul. While Paul himself was capable of ascending the first and second degrees of truth on his own (though always accompanied by grace), he needed to be transported (*rapi oportuit*) to the third heaven by something or someone outside of his own will. The hearing of "ineffable words" was, according to St. Bernard, a mystical gift granted to Paul after he had humbled himself and found compassion for others.³³

The grace Paul received to be taken up into contemplation is precisely the grace Bernard wishes to experience for himself: "For just as Paul, rapt into Paradise, heard words that he could not explain (2 Cor 12:4) and saw his Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor 9:1), so may I too merit the ecstatic grace of contemplating you in your light and beauty (Isa 33:17; Ps 35:10), as you generously feed your flock and make them rest securely."³⁴

Both Paul and Bernard are certainly aware that human language is woefully insufficient to convey the full sense of their own experience. That explains why both authors resort to images of overflowing superabundance to express their inability to contain their experiences in words. One example of this comes in Bernard's use of 2 Corinthians 5:13, a passage he frequently alludes to or explicitly cites to highlight the intimate encounter of the soul with God, as well as the desire to share that experience, both Paul's and his own, with others. Regarding the introduction of the soul into the wine cellar, or rather the soul's spiritual marriage with God, the experience cannot be constrained by words or concepts:

It is good to save many souls, but to go out of oneself (2 Cor 5:13) and be with the Word is far more pleasant. But when does this happen, and for how long? It is a sweet exchange, but lasts a short time and is experienced rarely [*dulce commercium, sed breve momentum et experimentum rarum*]! . . . There may be someone who will go on to ask me, "What does it mean to enjoy the Word?" I would answer that he must find someone who has experience of it, and

³² These steps are outlined in Bernard, *De gradibus* 4.13; 5.18; 6.19.

³³ See Bernard, *De gradibus* 8.22–23.

³⁴ Bernard, SC 33.6 (*Song*, 2:150). For other examples of this language in connection with 2 Cor 12:2–4, see SC 8.8; 41.4; 52.3; 67.6–7; *De consideratione* 5.2.3; Epistle 75; Gilson, *The Mystical Theology*, 106–8; Csaba Németh, "Paulus raptus et Raptus Pauli: Paul's Rapture (2 Cor. 12:2–4) in the Pre-Scholastic and Scholastic Theologies," in *A Companion to St. Paul in the Middle Ages*, ed. Stephen R. Cartwright (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 349–92, at 371–75.

ask him. Do you suppose, if I were granted that experience, that I could describe to you what is beyond description? Listen to one who has known it [*audi expertum*]: “If we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you” (2 Cor 5:13) . . . I may have been granted this experience, but I speak little of it.³⁵

Paul is the teacher of mystical experience. If he is taken up, it is for the sake of his greater proximity to God; if he comes down, it is for the sake of his disciples. Bernard writes of two types of contemplatives: those who ascend the heights and then fall because of pride, and those who are snatched up and descend for the good of others. Bernard speaks of the first group as failing to glorify God and becoming vain in their thoughts (Rom 1:19–22).

The elect, however, are snatched up, just like Paul and those like him. But they also descend so they can tell little ones (1 Cor 3:1)—in whatever way they can comprehend—what they have seen by transcendence of mind. Paul is snatched up when he says, “Whether we be transcending in mind, it is for God.” He descends when he says, “Or whether we be sober, it is for you” (2 Cor 5:13). A perfected soul desires to be snatched up by this latter type of contemplation into the purest embraces of her Bridegroom.³⁶

The experience, therefore, must be shared with others, and to indicate this Bernard often employs other Pauline verses to channel the ineffable into communicable human phrases: “My opinion is that of the Apostle, who said that ‘he who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with Him’ (1 Cor 6:17). I try to express with the most suitable words I can muster the ecstatic ascent of the purified mind to God, and the loving descent into the soul, submitting spiritual truths to spiritual men (1 Cor 2:13).”³⁷

Sermon 67 on the Song of Songs and Biblical Inspiration

Perhaps the word that best captures the superabundant nature of the mystical experience, as well as the ecstatic drawing out of the *affectus*, is a rather unsavory one that is difficult to translate into English. Bernard speaks frequently of a *ructus*, literally a belching or burping due to excess, which encapsulates for

³⁵ Bernard, SC 85.13–14 (*Song*, 4:209–10). For reflections on SC 74, which contains perhaps the most confession-like account of Bernard’s own experience, see Paul Murray, *In the Grip of Light: The Dark and Bright Journey of Christian Contemplation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 47–82.

³⁶ Bernard, *De diversis* 87.2 (*Monastic Sermons*, 327).

³⁷ Bernard, SC 31.6 (*Song*, 2:129).

him both the presentation of Paul's experience in his letters and the desire to receive a similar ineffable gift incapable of being contained by those reading Scripture and experiencing the sweetness of the Lord. Bernard finds the verb *eructare* in Psalms 19:3 and 44:2 to describe day "bringing forth" day and the heart "bringing forth" a good word, respectively.³⁸ Bernard devotes much of Sermon 67 on the Song of Songs to this concept, and Paul's experience plays a central role in his exposition.

The sermon takes Song of Solomon 2:16 as its starting point: "My beloved is for me, and I am for my beloved." Bernard notes that the phrase in Latin is a fragment and not a complete sentence: *dilectus meus mihi et ego illi*. From that grammatical insight, he moves to a reflection on the superabundant love of the bride for her groom that would lead her to belch out uncontained expressions of passionate delight. Bernard finds the same sweet-smelling *ructus* in other parts of Scripture, examining the "belches" of Moses, Isaiah, David, Jeremiah, and John. He then asks rhetorically, "What shall I say about the belchings of Paul [*quid de Pauli ructibus loquar*], and how they have filled the world with their sweetness?"³⁹ Bernard continues this thought, drawing upon Paul's experience of being drawn up into the third heaven: "For Christ was a sweet odor in every place (2 Cor 2:14–15). Even if He does not put forth ineffable words that I may hear them, He offers them that I may desire them, and I may freely smell what it is not permitted to hear (2 Cor 12:4). I do not know by what arrangement it is that the things that are most hidden are most desirable, and that we yearn most avidly for what is denied us."⁴⁰

While speaking in this sermon of the overflowing excess of Christ in the soul, the Abbot of Clairvaux outlines his basic understanding of biblical inspiration.⁴¹ While the scriptural text itself is surely inspired, for Bernard, inspiration lies fundamentally with the sacred author himself, who experiences the Spirit at work within him and whose experience overflows into his text. In the case of Paul, Bernard perceives the movement from the inspired author (or experiencer!) to the reader pondering his words: the gift granted to Paul is presented to the monk in order that he may hear *and desire* that same experience of God. The intermediary drawing out that desire is Scripture itself, for it is the same Spirit who speaks through the mouth of Paul that speaks in the heart of the reader or listener: "It is the Spirit who speaks, interpreting spiri-

³⁸ See, for example, Bernard, SC 8.6; 18.4; and *Third Sermon on the Solemnity of Peter and Paul* 1. For the concept of *ructus* as illustrative of Bernard's understanding of the intimate relationship between the authors and readers of Scripture, united by the same desire for the experience of God, see Denis Farkasfalvy, *L'inspiration de l'Écriture Sainte dans la théologie de Saint Bernard*, Studia Anselmiana 53 (Rome: Herder, 1964), 73–82.

³⁹ Bernard, SC 67.7 (*Song*, 4:11; SBO, 2:193).

⁴⁰ Bernard, SC 67.7 (*Song*, 4:11; translation modified).

⁴¹ On this point, see Farkasfalvy, *L'inspiration*, 42–48.

tual truths to those who possess the Spirit (1 Cor 2:13).⁴² Scripture, for Saint Bernard, is the outward expression of an interior state of the author's soul, and the codification of that experience in writing allows that same experience to be channeled to the reader:

Everyone among you who enjoys this experience understands what the Spirit says, for his voice never contradicts his activity. This is why one understands what is said; what one hears from without he feels within. For one and the same Spirit both speaks to us and works within you (1 Thess 2:13), distributing gifts to each individual at will (1 Cor 12:11), giving to some the power to speak what is good, to others the power to do it (1 Cor 12:8–10).⁴³

In fact, Bernard sets the tone for his method of reading and experiencing Scripture by explicitly referring to 1 Corinthians 2:13 in the first sermon on the Song of Songs. The spiritual experience behind the text, or rather what the text invites the monk to enter into, is only for the spiritually ready:

The instructions that I address to you, my brothers, will differ from those I should deliver to people in the world; at least the manner will be different. The preacher who desires to follow the Apostle's form of teaching will give them milk to drink rather than solid food (1 Cor 3:1–2), and will serve a more nourishing diet to those who are spiritually mature: "We speak," he said, "not with the learned words of human wisdom, but in the manner of the Spirit, teaching spiritual things to the spiritual" (1 Cor 2:13) . . . Be ready then to feed on bread rather than milk. Solomon has bread to give that is splendid and delicious, the bread of that book called the Song of Songs. Let us bring it forth then, if you please, and break it.⁴⁴

⁴² Bernard, SC 24.5 (*Song*, 2:46, translation slightly modified). In paragraph 6 of Sermon 24, Bernard also quotes 1 Cor 12:11 in speaking of the many charisms produced by the same Spirit. See also SC 58.4.

⁴³ Bernard, SC 37.3 (*Song*, 2:183). For Bernard's indebtedness to the patristic tradition on this point, see Farkasfalvy, *L'inspiration*, 60–61. This exact emphasis on the same Spirit animating both the authors and readers of Scripture is strongly emphasized in the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum* (November 18, 1965), §§ 11–13, though Saint Bernard is not quoted there.

⁴⁴ Bernard, SC 1.1 (*Song*, 1:1; translation slightly modified).

Paul's experience is precisely what Bernard desires to replicate in his own inner life and share with his monks; it indicates (Bernard might rather say that it belches out!) the fundamental way of interpreting and living Scripture:

Most gladly, too, I shall follow Paul, who in the ecstasy of his delight, wept over those who had sinned and done no penance (2 Cor 12:21). He was mightier than powers and principalities (Rom 8:38) who brought down wisdom in abundance and the most hidden sense of Scripture, not from the first, not from the second, but from the third and highest heaven (2 Cor 12:2).⁴⁵

The Pauline Influence on Bernard's Theological Anthropology

The experience of Saint Paul serves as a model for Bernard's monks in their monastic *conversatio*, and the Cistercian Abbot constantly refers to the Apostle's letters in illustrating the path to spiritual union with God. We will now analyze, in an altogether too brief and insufficient manner, some of the main contours of Bernard's theological anthropology through the lens of the Pauline verses that Bernard constantly employs to illustrate his teaching. To do this, we will make use of a convenient division of the religious experience as outlined in Bernard's works by Claude Bodard: the experience of sin by the creature created good by God, the insertion of one's life into Christ through conversion, and the life of union in the Spirit.⁴⁶

The Experience of Sin

Mention was made earlier of "the sum total of the spiritual life" for Bernard. It entails that consideration of self that leads to sadness on account of one's sins, but also to hope in the Cross of Christ and consolation in the sanctifying action of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁷ Consideration, for the Abbot of Clairvaux, must begin with one's own self, and he repeatedly emphasizes the absolute necessity of self-knowledge for the very possibility of progress in the spiritual life.⁴⁸ Taking up Paul's statement in Romans 1:20 about the "invisible things of God" being manifest through what God has made, as well as the creation of man and woman "in the image and likeness" of God in Genesis 1:26, Bernard

⁴⁵ Bernard, *First Sermon on the Solemnity of Peter and Paul* 2, cited in Sommerfeldt, *The Spiritual Teachings*, 248.

⁴⁶ C. Bodard, "La Bible, expression d'une expérience religieuse chez S. Bernard," *Analecta Cisterciensia* 9 [Saint Bernard théologien] (1953): 24–45, at 25–26.

⁴⁷ Bernard, *De diversis* 5.5 (*Monastic Sermons*, 39).

⁴⁸ Bernard quotes the ancient oracle of Delphi, "Know thyself," on multiple occasions; see *De diversis* 40.3; SC 32.9; 36.5–7; *De diligendo Deo* 2.4.

asserts: "If the understanding soul already sees aspects of the divine in other creatures, it is essential for the soul to see far more fully and understand much more subtly in that creature that was made in God's image, that is, in herself."⁴⁹

For Saint Bernard, self-knowledge, or the proper scrutiny of one's own soul and personal experience, leads by definition to humility: "Humility is the virtue by which a man by the truest knowledge of himself accounts himself contemptible [*verissima sui cognitione sibi ipse vilescit*]."⁵⁰ This is so even for the Gentiles who do not know Jesus Christ. Relying on Romans 1–2 for this insight, Bernard states that "God deserves to be loved for His own sake even by the pagan who, although he is ignorant of Christ, yet knows himself."⁵¹ Yet how can consideration of one's own self lead to knowledge (and ultimately love) of God?

According to Bernard, the human being is "a noble creature," created in the image and likeness of God. He clarifies his meaning in a beautiful passage found in his commentary on Psalm 91:

Does it seem to you a little thing that He made you? Think of what quality He made you. For even with regard to your body He made you a noble creature; and still more so with regard to your soul, inasmuch as you are the extraordinary image of the Creator (Gen 1:26), sharing His rationality, capable of eternal happiness. In both body and soul man is the most admirable of all creatures, being integrated with himself by the incomprehensible ingenuity and unsearchable wisdom of the Creator (Rom 11:33). Man is then as great as this gift itself. But do you realize how gratuitous this is? It is obvious that man did not deserve it beforehand because he simply did not exist. And once he existed, how could he hope to repay the gift to the bestower?⁵²

⁴⁹ Bernard, *De diversis* 9.2 (*Monastic Sermons*, 59). In a footnote, Gilson outlines the "Christian Socratism" that Bernard divines from Paul's letters: "St. Paul teaches that God is to be known from His creatures; He can be known then so much the better from the creature that resembles Him the most, that is to say man made to His image; and that is why man must know himself if he wishes to know his Author" (*The Mystical Theology*, 232).

⁵⁰ Bernard, *De gradibus* 1.2 (*SBO*, 3:17). In 2.5, Bernard asserts that to know oneself is to have knowledge of the truth regarding one's relationship to God.

⁵¹ Bernard, *De diligendo Deo* 3.6 (*On Loving God*, 8).

⁵² Bernard, *Qui habitat* 14.1 (*Sermons on Conversion*, 229). For other uses of the phrase "noble creature," see SC 11.5; 21.6. It is important to note that, for Bernard, Christ alone is the image of God, as mentioned in Col 1:15; see SC 80.2, where Bernard also employs the language of Phil 2:5–11 to make this point.

The soul is therefore capable of all that is contained in the divine reality it images: truth, wisdom, justice, love, and so on.⁵³ The human being, body and soul, is created to reflect its glorious origins as in a mirror. Experience in life, however, informs man just how far he has fallen from this lofty status. The story of humanity, both collective and individual, is a “sad history” (*tristis historia*) of sin and disobedience.⁵⁴ Bernard summarizes the experience of sinful and sorrowful man by recourse to Paul’s verses:

It is sin that dims and blurs the eye, and that alone screens the light from the eye, and God from man. Yet while we are in this body, we wander apart from the Lord (2 Cor 5:6), and the fault lies not in our body itself, but in the fact that our flesh is still a body of death (Rom 7:24), or rather a sinful body (Rom 6:6), in which there is no good, but only the law of sin (Rom 7:23).⁵⁵

Bernard adopts the patristic, and specifically Augustinian, language of the loss of likeness to God on account of sin, the smudging of the image, the obscuring of the mirror. Because of his corrupted will, man wanders into the region of dissimilitude, and so great was the image of God in the soul that, in its lack of similitude to God, the soul becomes dissimilar to its very self.⁵⁶

One of the primary components of conversion, then, is to recognize the absolute need of the soul to seek healing, to demand comfort and pardon for its grave offenses against its Creator. In doing so, the soul undergoing conversion seeks to restore the image effaced by sin, a process that generates increasing desire for union with God. A passage from Sermon 24 on the Song of Songs synthesizes this movement from sinful effacement of the image and likeness to its restoration:

The righteous God made man similar to Himself, without iniquity, since there is no iniquity in Him. Iniquity is a fault in the heart, not the flesh, and so you must realize that the

⁵³ See Bernard, SC 80.2: “The soul is none of these things [righteousness, wisdom, truth, light, God], since it is not the image. Yet it is capable of them and yearns for them; that perhaps is why it is said to be made in the image [*ad imaginem*]. It is a lofty creature, in its capacity for greatness” (Song, 4:146).

⁵⁴ See Bernard, *De conversione* 2.3; 3.4.

⁵⁵ Bernard, *De conversione* 17.30 (*Sermons on Conversion*, 67).

⁵⁶ Bernard, SC 82.5: “So it is that the soul is unlike God and consequently unlike itself as well” (Song, 4:176). Bernard writes extensively about the loss of the likeness to God, the distortion of the image (though that is never lost entirely), as well as the restoration of the image, in SC 80–82, as well as in *On Grace and Free Choice*, Cistercian Fathers 19 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1988). See also Gilson, *The Mystical Theology*, 45–59.

likeness of God is to be preserved or restored in your spiritual portion, not in the substance of gross clay. For “God is spirit” (John 4:24), and those who wish to persevere in or attain to His likeness must enter into their hearts, and apply themselves in the spirit of that work, until “looking upon the glory of the Lord,” they “are transformed into that same image from glory to glory, as from the Spirit of the Lord (2 Cor 3:18).”⁵⁷

Insertion into Christ

The awareness of one’s own sinful self generates, for Bernard, a deep yearning for transformation, and it is precisely in that desire to move from the state of sin to a higher spiritual state that the role of the Incarnation in Bernard’s theology must be examined. In the third chapter of *On the Steps of Humility and Pride*, he meditates on the experience of the Son taking flesh in the person of Christ. What the Son did not know by experience—namely, the mortal life of human beings—he *wanted* to know firsthand, and in so doing to draw closer to us:

He wanted to experience for himself what they [our first parents] were (rightly) suffering because they had gone against his will. He came not out of a curiosity like theirs, but out of a wonderful charity. He did not intend to remain miserable among them, but to free those who were miserable as one made merciful [*non ut miser cum miseris remaneret, sed ut misericors factus miseros liberaret*].⁵⁸

One of Bernard’s favorite Pauline passages to underline Christ’s desire to experience our mortal existence is Philippians 2:5–11. The willingness to empty himself (*exinanitio*, *exinanire se*) of his divinity in order to assume the humble form of a servant obedient unto death is, for Bernard, not only the supreme act of love on the part of God but also the supreme model of humility and obedience for the monk to imitate.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Bernard, SC 24.5 (*Song*, 2:46; translation modified). See also SC 35.6; 36.5; 55.3.

⁵⁸ Bernard, *De gradibus* 3.12 (*Selected Works*, 111; translation slightly modified; SBO, 3:25). The Latin wordplay is presented as evidence of just how untranslatable Bernard’s beautiful phrases can be.

⁵⁹ Bernard, *De gradibus* 3.9 (*Selected Works*, 108–9). See also SC 15.4, where the name of Jesus is poured out like oil to represent how we have received from his overflowing divine abundance the status of adopted sons. Bernard also makes constant reference to this self-emptying in his letters. See, for example, Epistle 231: “It is indeed fitting that you should complete as soon as possible the good beginnings of your conversion. Having acted manfully in disdaining your worldly goods, it remains for you to leave yourself as well by

The focus on Paul's great Christological hymn is most eloquently evident in Sermon 11 on the Song of Songs. Bernard begins this homily by asking how the individual soul can blend sorrow for previous sins with the delight of tasting the merciful love of the Lord. The remainder of the sermon is dedicated to a twofold description of redemption in Christ: the means or manner (*modus*) and the fruit (*fructus*). The *modus* of our redemption is the self-emptying (*exinanitio*) of God, a direct reference to Philippians 2:7, and the fruit of our redemption is our being filled by Christ. Meditating on the fruit of Christ's redemption is the seed-ground of holy hope (*sanctae spei seminarium*), and meditating on the means of that redemption is an incentive to the highest form of love (*summi amoris incentivum*).⁶⁰

Thanks to the redemption of humanity brought about by the Incarnation, death, and Resurrection of Christ, man receives the fullness of light, peace, and love that he had desired but distorted on account of sin. Man's reason, will, and memory are restored as each Person of the Trinity manifests itself in the soul, ensuring that God within the soul is "all in all" (1 Cor 15:28).⁶¹

Bernard returns to Philippians 2 in marveling at the work of redemption. It is not sufficient to note that God emptied himself in a generic way; rather, "He emptied Himself unto flesh, unto death, unto the cross [*sed semetipsum exinanivit usque ad carnem, ad mortem, ad crucem*]."⁶² In response to Christ's assumption of flesh and his willingness to be crucified and die for our redemption, Bernard marvels at the humility, meekness, and loving condescension of the Lord.⁶³ Bernard tells his monks that the creature can easily forget to be grateful to the Creator, but the Incarnation is a stark reminder that "even if you were created out of nothing, you were not redeemed out of nothing."⁶⁴ In

living no longer under your own will, like a true follower of Christ who became obedient to his Father even unto death and who (Phil. 2:5–11), when he could do all things, declared that he could do nothing of himself but as the Father had taught him" (*Letters*, 309). Epistle 329.4 makes the same point: "Do you, Christian, fix the limit of your course where Christ fixed his. 'He became obedient unto death' (Phil 2:8); therefore, however far you run, if you do not keep on running even unto death, you will not obtain the reward. The reward is Christ" (*Letters*, 410).

⁶⁰ Bernard, SC 11.3 (SBO, 1:56).

⁶¹ Bernard, SC 11.6: "The God who is truth is the source of the first of these gifts; the God who is love, of the second; the God who is all-powerful, of the third. And so it will come to pass that God will be all in all (1 Cor. 15:28), for the reason will receive unquenchable light, the will imperturbable peace, the memory an unfailing fountain from which it will draw eternally" (*Song*, 1:58).

⁶² Bernard, SC 11.7 (SBO, 1:58).

⁶³ Bernard, SC 11.7. In a beautiful line impossible to render worthily in English, the Abbot summarizes the birth of Christ in *First Sermon of the Advent of the Lord* 7: "Note the condescension of the God who seeks, and the great dignity of man who is sought [*mira quaerentis Dei dignatio, magna dignitas hominis sic quaesiti*]" (SBO, 4:166).

⁶⁴ Bernard, SC 11.7 (SBO, 1:58).

the concluding paragraph of this eleventh sermon on the Song, Saint Bernard exhorts his monks to both meditate on and imitate the actions of Christ insofar as they can: "Meditate on these things, pour yourselves out on them [*haec meditamini, in his versamini*]."⁶⁵

Bernard also presents the Incarnation to his monks in terms of the descent of God in order to allow human beings to ascend back to him. The self-emptying of the Son in taking on the form of a servant is linked in Bernard's mind with the union of bride and groom in the Song, and he joins them by means of Ephesians 4:10: "He Himself 'who descended is the same one who ascended'—the one and same Lord who as head [of the Church] is the Bridegroom, as [his] body is the bride."⁶⁶ The Incarnation reveals to man the depths of his misery by the amazing outpouring of mercy bestowed on him by Christ, for Christ goes to meet man at his own fleshly level of existence. Bernard loves to engage in a theological word play between *miseria* and *misericordia*:

Whoever you are, if you are in this frame of mind, do not despair: it is mercy, not misery, that makes a man happy, but mercy's natural home is misery. Indeed it happens that misery becomes the source of man's happiness when humiliation turns into humility and necessity becomes a virtue. As it is written, "Rain in abundance, O God, you shed abroad; you restored your heritage as it languished" (Ps 68:9). Sickness has real utility when it leads us to the doctor's hands, and he whom God restores to health gains by having been ill.⁶⁷

The descent of God in the flesh is meant to bring us to a sanctified understanding of our own flesh. One of the primary themes in Bernard's treatise *De diligendo Deo* is the degrees of love. One must begin with the natural self-love and love of the flesh (*amor carnalis*), then be led gradually by grace to the higher, self-emptying form of love that Christ illustrated for us

⁶⁵ Bernard, SC 11.8 (SBO, 1:59).

⁶⁶ Bernard, SC 27.7 (*Song*, 2:80; translation slightly modified). See also *De diversis* 60.1: "He descended and ascended in his human nature, and he showed to us the way by which we would ascend. . . . Remaining therefore what he was in his own nature, he descended and ascended in ours for our sake" (*Monastic Sermons*, 273).

⁶⁷ Bernard, *De conversione* 7.12 (SBO, 4:86). Based on the mercy shown to us by Christ, who humbled himself to our miserable level, we must make a similar move from misery to mercy. See *De gradibus* 4.13: "If he submitted himself to human misery so that he might not simply know it, but also experience it, how much more ought you, not perhaps to make yourself what you are not, but to be aware of what you are, that you are truly miserable; and so learn to be merciful, for you can learn it in no other way?" (*Selected Works*, 111).

(*amor spiritualis*).⁶⁸ This carnal love is not sinful but natural, and Christ comes in the flesh to meet us where we are in our sinful, mortal existence in order to transform our carnal love into a love in conformity with his own selfless charity.⁶⁹ In the context of Christ's descent for the sake of our ascent, one can also understand Bernard's distinctions in *De gradibus* of the love pertaining to a slave, then a mercenary, and finally a son, as well as the love of self, neighbor, and God.⁷⁰

Life and Union in the Spirit

But how exactly is this ascent of the redeemed soul accomplished, according to St. Bernard? How does the human being, who images God in creation but who has distorted that image by sin, come to be restored by Christ and, cooperating with the Holy Spirit, desire and achieve an ever closer union with God? To explain this mystical union, St. Bernard relies heavily on Pauline passages.

Just as we are redeemed by the Cross, so too are we reformed and newly conformed to Christ by the Spirit of liberty (2 Cor 3:17–18). As already mentioned, this reality must generate in us not simply knowledge, but love. In the context of the Song of Songs 1:1, Bernard speaks of Christ as the kiss produced by the union of God, the groom, with the bride of human flesh. Bernard wishes to receive that same kiss insofar as he is capable of participating in it, desiring the one mediator, Jesus Christ, and no other, lesser intermediaries.⁷¹

The redemptive work of Christ enables man to desire and experience a real spiritual union through the work of the Holy Spirit: "When she [the bride/soul] will have attained to it and become perfect she will celebrate a spiritual marriage [*spirituale coniugium*]; and they shall be two, not in one flesh (Eph 5:31) but in one spirit (1 Cor 12:13), as the Apostle says: 'He who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him' (1 Cor 6:17)."⁷² For Bernard, 1

⁶⁸ See Bernard, *De diligendo Deo* 8.23–10.27; 15.39 (*On Loving God*, 25–29; 40–41). In the course of his presentation of these degrees, Bernard frequently makes reference to the first Adam and final Adam (1 Cor 15:45–49), the movement of the soul away from a fleshly attachment to earthly things, even the flesh of Christ (2 Cor 5:16), and the adherence to God as a unity of spirits (1 Cor 6:17).

⁶⁹ See Bernard, SC 6.3; 20.6–7. Gilson explains the necessary movement from carnal love to spiritual love, speaking of the purification of any *proprium*, or selfish self-love, as the converting soul turns toward the self-emptying love of Christ (*The Mystical Theology*, 72–75; 81–84).

⁷⁰ See Bernard, *De gradibus* 4.13–7.21 (*Selected Works*, 111–18).

⁷¹ Bernard, SC 2.2–3, 6, 9, citing 1 Tim 2:5 throughout. See also SC 8.8–9, where Bernard notes that Christ is the fullness of the kiss while Paul only possesses it partially, by participation.

⁷² Bernard, SC 61.1 (*Song*, 3:140–141; *SBO*, 2:148).

Corinthians 6:17 is a cornerstone verse of his mystical theology.⁷³ It highlights not only the restoration of the image through the Cross of Christ but also the identification of the soul's desire with its beloved Lord in the Spirit:

Happy the soul who has been allowed to experience [*experiri*] the embrace of such bliss! For it is nothing other than love, holy and chaste, full of sweetness and delight, love utterly serene and true, mutual and deep, which joins two beings, not in one flesh, but in one spirit, making them no longer two but one (Matt 19:5). As Paul says: "He who is united to God is one spirit with him" (1 Cor 6:17).⁷⁴

As the image is restored in the soul set on conversion and desiring union, any lingering selfishness (*proprium*, or *propria voluntas*) is eliminated, thus allowing the soul to love itself only for God's sake, no longer for its own.⁷⁵ This transformation, made possible by the Incarnation and Passion of Christ, is completed within the soul by the Holy Spirit, and to illustrate this, Bernard relies heavily on 2 Corinthians 3:17–18. In seeing the glory of Christ, we are transformed as we are conformed by the Spirit to the image of Christ, who allows us to seek his face: "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into his likeness from glory to glory; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit" (2 Cor 3:18). We are transformed when we are conformed."⁷⁶

Our own experience teaches us that the Spirit lovingly condescends to come to us, leading us from the state of sin and drawing us ever closer to the unapproachable light of the Lord:

But let us return to ourselves [*revertamur ad nos ipsos*], let us examine our paths (Lam 3:40); and in order to accomplish this in truth, let us invoke the Spirit of truth (John 14:17). Let us call to him from the deep into which he has led us,

⁷³ In fact, Farkasfalvy calls it *the* most important verse in Bernard's mystical theology (*L'inspiration*, 32n38).

⁷⁴ Bernard, SC 83.6 (*Song*, 4:186; *SBO*, 2:302). See also *Qui habitat* 14.3: "So then, your God made you, He made many things for your benefit, and He even, as it were, made Himself for you: 'The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us' (John 1:14). What was left after that? He Himself became one flesh with you: may He also make you one spirit with Him (1 Cor. 6:16–17)" (*Sermons on Conversion*, 232). Bernard's treatment of the soul's union with God does not fall into pantheism, as forcefully demonstrated in Gilson, *The Mystical Theology*, 119–27.

⁷⁵ See Gilson, *The Mystical Theology*, 133: "What difference is there then, at the limit, between loving God and loving oneself, then, when one is no longer anything but a participation in the love which God bears Himself?"

⁷⁶ Bernard, SC 62.5 (*Song*, 3:156; translation slightly modified).

since he precedes us even on our way to ourselves [*quatenus antecedit nos etiam ad nos*], and without him we can do nothing (John 15:5). Nor should we be afraid that he will disdain to come down to us, for the contrary is true: he is displeased if we attempt even the least thing without him. For he is not one “who passes and does not return” (Ps 77:39 [MT 78:39]); he leads us and brings us back from brightness to brightness because he is the Spirit of the Lord (Tob 12:3; 2 Cor 3:18). Sometimes he snatches us to himself in his light, and sometimes he adapts himself, illuminating our darkness (Ps 17:29 [MT 18:28]). But whether we are raised above ourselves or left with ourselves, let us stay always in the light; let us always walk as children of the light (Eph 5:8).⁷⁷

The dwelling of the Spirit in the soul, which allows this mystical union with God to take place, is especially activated, we might say, in the reading of Scripture and the subsequent reflection on one's own experience of the Spirit. As already noted, the same Spirit animating biblical authors such as Paul is at work in the individual soul. Nowhere is this more eloquently phrased by Bernard than in a summary passage containing a florilegium of Pauline verses:

Be careful, however, not to conclude that I see something corporeal or perceptible to the senses in this union between the Word and the soul. My opinion is that of the Apostle, who said that “he who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him” (1 Cor 6:17). I try to express with the most suitable words I can muster the ecstatic ascent of the purified mind to God, and the loving descent of God into the soul, submitting spiritual truths to spiritual men (1 Cor 2:13). Therefore let this union be in the Spirit, because “God is Spirit” (John 4:24), who is lovingly drawn by the beauty of that soul (Ps 45:12) whom he perceives to be guided by the Spirit, and devoid of any desire to submit to the ways of

⁷⁷ Bernard, SC 17.8 (*Song*, 1:132; *SBO*, 1:102–3). See also SC 24.5, in which 2 Cor 3:18 is highlighted in the context of the “spiritual portion” of the soul—namely, the preserving and repairing of the likeness accomplished by the Spirit. See also *De diligendo Deo* 4.12: “On the other hand, the faithful soul sighs deeply for His presence, rests peacefully when thinking of Him, and must glory in the degradation of the Cross (Gal. 6:14) until it is capable of contemplating the glory of God's revealed face (2 Cor 3:18)” (*On Loving God*, 14–15).

the flesh (Gal 5:16; Rom 13:14), especially if he sees that it burns with love for himself.⁷⁸

Conclusion: The Spiritual Lives of Paul and Bernard

St. Bernard offers St. Paul as a witness for his monks to imitate, a most pure soul whose odor of sanctity can draw the monks to an equally complete conversion and obedience.⁷⁹ Paul's own reflections on the mystery of the Incarnation in passages such as Philippians 2:5–11 and on the nature of the Trinitarian life imaged in the human being and reformed after sin in passages such as 1 Corinthians 6:17 and 2 Corinthians 3:18 are among the most frequently cited verses in Bernard's corpus. The Apostle's own private experience, narrated in 2 Corinthians 12:2–4, also provides Bernard with ample phrases and inspiration to communicate his own mystical theology to his monks. Though not in any way exhaustive, these are among the most important Pauline passages that Bernard frequently employs to develop his own monastic theology and anthropology. As a way of highlighting the seemingly bottomless riches of Bernard's use of Paul, a final example of yet another key verse for Bernard will serve as a fitting conclusion to this article.

Paul himself provides a specific exhortation to persevere and move constantly forward in the spiritual life in Philippians 3:12–13, a standard text in patristic exegesis to which St. Bernard frequently returns to remind his monks of the need to express their desire for union with Christ and to persevere in love and obedience.⁸⁰ In this passage, Paul asserts that he does not claim to have attained perfect maturity, speaking rather of "forgetting what lies behind and straining forward [literally *extendere se*, "extending oneself"] to what lies ahead," continuing his pursuit of God's upward calling in Christ. As an essential part of the spiritual life, Bernard asserts that, while Paul was already good, "he was not content, but gladly stretched forth to those things

⁷⁸ Bernard, SC 31.6 (*Song*, 2:128–29). Bodard summarizes this point quite nicely as well: "We see the sanctifying action of God, which we read about in Scripture, unfolding within us. Better yet, it is in discovering this action in ourselves, in reading it within our personal experience, that we discover the true sense of Scripture. To understand the voice of the Spirit is to experience its divinizing action, for, according to Saint Bernard, there is no discord between the Spirit and its action. . . . The Holy Spirit, who inspired the Scriptures, is the same Spirit that sanctifies the soul. The soul and the Scripture are, therefore, like two books written by the same divine hand, and there is nothing but holiness which can give us the full understanding of them" ("La Bible," 45; my translation).

⁷⁹ See, for example, Bernard, SC 13.3, 22.9, and 30.10, all citing 1 Cor 11:1: "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ."

⁸⁰ For thoughts on Bernard's appropriation of the patristic antecedents for this passage, see Denis Farkasfalvy, "The Use of Paul by Saint Bernard as Illustrated by Saint Bernard's Interpretation of Philippians 3:13," in *Bernardus Magister*, Cistercian Studies 135 (Spencer, MA: Cistercian Publications, 1992): 161–68.

that were before, forgetting those that were behind, striving ever to be better.”⁸¹ In walking ever forward, Paul displays great confidence in the Lord who has made him a vessel of election (Acts 9:15):

Let us walk while we have the light, lest darkness overtake us (John 12:35). To walk is to make progress. The Apostle was walking when he said: “I do not consider that I have taken hold of it,” and added: “but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind, I strain forward to what lies ahead” (Phil 3:12–13). What is this one thing? One thing, he says, has remained with me, as a remedy, a hope, a consolation. What is it? Evidently “forgetting what lies behind, I strain forward to what lies ahead.” What sublime confidence! That distinguished “chosen instrument” (Acts 9:15), denying that he is perfect, declares that he is moving ahead! The danger therefore is that not he who walks but he who sits will be overtaken by the darkness of death. And who sits down but the man who has no will to advance?⁸²

To strain ahead or strive forward, for St. Bernard, is to acquire humility. This entails the painful knowledge of one’s own deficiencies and shameful deeds from the past, but it also provides the path and the goal toward which such self-knowledge impels the saints, who have adopted the mindset proclaimed by Paul.⁸³ The monk straining forward in his *conversatio* walks according to the Spirit, who aids the soul in the proper arrangement of one’s past, present, and future:

⁸¹ Bernard, Epistle 94.2 (*Letters*, 140).

⁸² Bernard, SC 49.7 (*Song*, 3:28; translation slightly modified). In the Abbot of Clairvaux’s exposition of the spiritual life, standing still is entirely undesirable, for it brings about regress rather than rest; see Epistle 329.4: “If to progress is to run, when you cease progressing you cease running, and when you cease running you fall behind. From this it is evident that to cease wishing to progress is nothing else than to fall away” (*Letters*, 410).

⁸³ Bernard instructs Pope Eugene III, formerly his monk at Clairvaux, to imitate *his predecessor Paul*: “Accordingly, do not be reluctant to discover your deficiencies or ashamed to acknowledge them. Say with your predecessor, ‘It is not that I have already obtained this, or have already attained perfection,’ and again, ‘I do not claim to have reached it’ (Phil 3:12–13). This is the knowledge of the saints; this is far from that knowledge which causes one to boast” (*De consideratione* 2.7.14 [*Five Books on Consideration*, 65]). A tangential aspect of Bernard’s use of Paul worth exploring is the relationship between the Apostle and the bishop of Rome. In his letters and treatises to various popes, especially the Cistercian Eugene III, Bernard cites Paul’s “care for all the churches” in 2 Cor 11:28 (e.g., Epistle 5 and *De consideratione* 2.6.10) and becoming “all things to all people” in 1 Cor 9:22 (*De consideratione* 1.5.6). The pope is “the successor of Paul” (Epistle 205.2), has Paul as a predecessor, as just mentioned, and Paul is Peter’s co-apostle (Epistle 310.3; *De diversis* 41.1; 96.3; *First Sermon on the Solemnity of Peter and Paul* 1).

Thus you see that he who is guided by the Spirit (Gal 5:25) does not always remain in the same state (Job 14:2). He does not always advance with the same facility. "The course of man is not in his control" (Jer 10:23). It rather depends on the guidance of the Spirit who sets the pace as he pleases, sometimes torpidly, sometimes blithely, teaching him to forget the past and strain ahead for what is still to come (Phil 3:13). If you have been attentive I think you will have seen that your inward experience reechoes what I have outwardly described.⁸⁴

Just as the soul must ever desire to walk closer to Christ and fall deeper in love with him, so too must she realize that no full attainment of the reward is possible in this mortal existence: "Run, then, for victory,' my brothers (1 Cor 9:24). And you will do this if, 'forgetting what you have left behind, intent on what lies before you' (Phil 3:13), you never flatter yourselves that you have reached the goal."⁸⁵ For Bernard, the goal is, quite simply, Christ. No fleshly or temporal reward, therefore, can possibly satisfy the desire for union with the one who both inspires the desire and is the object of that desire: "He makes you desire; He is what you desire."⁸⁶

Much about the inspiration St. Bernard draws from St. Paul's writings and life has necessarily been omitted here. But these few examples of the Mellifluous Doctor's appropriation of the Apostle's teachings offer ample proof that the same Spirit animates the hearts of both Paul and Bernard, who have in turn enkindled the hearts of countless others by their writings. The pastoral emphasis on exhortation to ever greater perfection and holiness is unmistakable in the work of both saints, as is the recognition that the graced adventure of the Christian life is but a faint reflection of the reality awaiting us in Christ: "We, however, who have not yet merited to be rapt in paradise, into the third heaven (2 Cor 12:2–4), let us meanwhile be fed with the flesh

⁸⁴ Bernard, SC 21.4 (*Song*, 2:7). Note here once again the harmonious accord between one's personal experience and the external words of Scripture presented by Bernard.

⁸⁵ Bernard, Epistle 423.2 (*Letters*, 491). An important part of this spiritual insight highlights the need to be content with one's station and not to desire excessively what one cannot or is not capable of possessing. Even the great Paul, who had extended himself to the third heaven, must be content with merely partial progress and insight (see SC 8.8).

⁸⁶ Bernard, *De diligendo Deo* 7.21 (*On Loving God*, 24). In *De consideratione* 5.14.32, Bernard outlines four kinds of contemplation, corresponding to Eph 3:18. The first is the admiration of God's majesty; the second is the observation of the judgments of God; the third is the remembrance of blessings and love for the giver of those blessings; the fourth is to rest in the expected fulfillment of promises after having forgotten what lies behind. Bernard describes this last form of contemplation as the meditation of (or on) eternity (*meditatio aeternitatis*). Much of the final book of *De consideratione* is a spiritual exegesis of Eph 3:18.

of Christ, let us honor his mysteries, follow his footsteps, preserve the faith (2 Tim 4:7), and we will certainly be living in his shadow.”⁸⁷

For Bernard, faith and desire are the engines driving the soul through its monastic *conversatio*. What awaits is a more perfect understanding and love according to the capacity of the mind and heart purified by constant conversion to receive Christ, the object of desire:

If faith in God and desire for him start the exile off on the way, they culminate in understanding and love when he is there. As faith leads to full knowledge, so desire leads to perfect love. Just as it is said, “If you will not believe, you shall not understand” (Isa 7:9), so it can be equally well said, “If you do not desire God ardently, you will not love him perfectly.” Understanding is therefore the fruit of faith, and perfect love of desire. In the meantime, “The just man lives by faith” (Hab 2:4; Rom 1:16), but the blessed in heaven by understanding. . . . With these two, understanding and love, which are knowledge of and delight in the truth, as with two arms of the soul, the length and breadth, the height and depth (Eph 3:18), which are eternity, love, power and wisdom, are comprehended and embraced. And what are these but Christ himself?⁸⁸

One cannot do better than the holy Abbot of Clairvaux in bringing an intellectual pursuit of a spiritual topic to a close, though only a temporary one!

He must still be sought who has not yet sufficiently been found and who cannot be sought too much; but He is perhaps more worthily sought and more easily found by prayer than by discussion. Therefore, let this be the end of the book but not the end of the search [*proinde is sit finis libri, sed non finis quaerendi*].⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Bernard, SC 48.7 (*Song*, 3:19).

⁸⁸ Bernard, Epistle 19.2–3 (*Letters*, 53).

⁸⁹ Bernard, *De consideratione* 5.14.32 (*Five Books on Consideration*, 179).

