

Concise church biographies

Bernard of Clairvaux [1090-1153]

Bernard was born into a noble family in Fontaines-les-Dijon, Burgundy in 1090. His family was traditionally pious and his father was one of the few survivors of the First Crusade, but his mother was very godly.

A godly saint

It was not surprising, therefore, that he entered a Cistercian monastery in Citeaux, only recently organised, aged 22. His five brothers joined him, with other friends. Bernard's extreme piety led to a zealous asceticism that badly affected his health. Aged only 25 he was tasked to set up a new monastery at Clairvaux as abbot, which he used as a base until his death in 1153 aged 63. It also became the principal home of the order.

While other monasteries had fallen in disgrace, Bernard drove his monks hard making them work from dawn to dusk as well as performing necessary religious tasks. As a result, his monasteries became an example of reform for others. Eventually he would establish 70 more monasteries and lead 90 others. In 1128 he gained recognition for a new order, the Knights Templar, whose rules he drafted. One of his disciples later became pope in 1145 (Eugenius III).

A good leader

Since he was an example of true piety, many people respected him. Gradually the rich and famous sought his counsel, as did other religious leaders. Bernard was not afraid to castigate clerics for their decadent, disreputable life, and even admonished a pope. He was engaged in controversies with Abelard in 1140 as well as several others.

Gradually Bernard became the most important man in Europe, just based on his godly character. He dominated the 12th century. Martin Luther thought highly of Bernard and admired his piety, regarding him as the best of the monks.

A good theologian

Bernard was a good theologian, in fact rigidly orthodox, and ready to oppose heresy. He was unafraid to oppose Roman Catholic doctrines, which he thought to be false, such as the immaculate conception of Mary, or purgatory and even transubstantiation. However, he was devoted to Mary and stimulated the Marian cult in the West. His writings show a grasp of theological issues and deep knowledge of the Bible

But Bernard also loved God's creation and believed that he could learn more about God as he contemplated nature than he did in books. He also lost himself in his meditations on God.

A good preacher

We do not have many of the sermons of Bernard but he was famed as a preacher. We can see elements of this in his sermons on the Song of Solomon, which have survived. Luther thought that Bernard was superior in preaching to all the church fathers, even Augustine, because he focused upon Christ. He said that Bernard, *'loved Jesus as much as any one can'*.

The pope asked Bernard to preach to publicise the Second Crusade in 1146. Huge numbers were affected by his preaching and joined up, including the formerly reluctant German king Conrad III. The failure of this crusade affected Bernard deeply; he attributed this to the sins of the crusaders.

A good hymn-writer

Bernard wrote many hymns, including some that are justly famous.

A mystery

He was hard to read, being different things at different times. He was an intellectual but it was his personality that made him powerful. He was orthodox and pious but some said that he was self-righteous. He was an ascetic, contemplative mystic, and yet very active in world affairs. He was opposed to rationalism and sought spirituality but managed people with logic. His mysticism was not the usual introspection to find God but a focus upon union with Christ. He was hard working but yet a great man of faith.

The Roman church canonised him in 1174 and he was made a doctor of that church in 1830. In short, Bernard may be regarded as the best of monasticism. He was a Catholic that genuinely loved Christ.