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Beyond Measure

The Poetics of the Image in
Bernard of Clairvaux

Isaac Slater, OCSO



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*To my father with gratitude: for kindling in me
both the love of learning and the desire for God.*

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Abbreviations

ABR	<i>American Benedictine Review</i>
ASOC	<i>Analecta Sacri Ordinis Cisterciensis / Analecta Cisterciensia</i> . Rome, 1945– .
CF	Cistercian Fathers series. Spencer, MA; Washington, DC; Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1970– .
Cîteaux	<i>Cîteaux: Commentarii cistercienses; Cîteaux in de Nederlanden</i>
Coll	<i>Collectanea Cisterciensia</i>
CS	Cistercian Studies series. Spencer, MA; Washington, DC; Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1966– .
CSQ	<i>Cistercian Studies Quarterly; Cistercian Studies</i> (periodical)
RBen	<i>Revue bénédictine</i> . Maredsous, Belgium, 1884– .
SBOp	Sancti Bernardi opera. Ed. J. Leclercq, H. M. Rochais, C. H. Talbot. Rome: Cistercienses, 1957–1977.
SCh	Sources chrétiennes series. Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1941– .
Spec car	Aelred of Rievaulx, <i>Speculum caritatis</i> .
TS	<i>Theological Studies</i> . New York; Woodstock, MD; Baltimore, 1940– .

Works of Bernard

Apo	<i>Apologia ad Guillelmum abbatem</i>
Asc	Sermo in ascensione domini

Conv	Sermo de conversione ad clericos
Csi	<i>De consideratione</i>
Ded	Sermo in dedicatione ecclesiae
Dil	<i>Liber de diligendo Deo</i>
Div	Sermo de diversis
Gra	<i>Liber de gratia et libero arbitrio</i>
Hum	<i>Liber de gradibus humilitatis et superbiae</i>
Nat	Sermo in nativitate domini
Nat BVM	Sermo in nativitate B.V.M.
1 Nov	Sermo in dominica I novembris
OS	Sermo in festivitate omnium sanctorum
Par	<i>Parabolæ</i>
Pent	Sermo in die sancto pentecostes
QH	Sermo super psalmum “Qui habitat”: SBOp 4 (1966), 458–62
SC	<i>Sermo super Cantica canticorum</i>
Sent	<i>Sententiae</i>

Introduction

This study began with my surprise at how often Bernard stressed the way the quality of a person's desire limits and colors his or her imagination of God.¹ That Bernard should employ this basic idea is not surprising: it was ubiquitous in the classical and medieval world, from Plato through Origen and onward. Truth and goodness were considered to be co-inherent. Only the virtuous person was disposed to perceive truth. In Christian language, only the pure of heart see God. Likewise, in the monastic tradition John Cassian began his *Conferences* by arguing that monastic asceticism ought to focus on cultivating purity of heart in order that a monk might receive the free gift of contemplation. Tracking the different articulations of this classical idea in Bernard, I began to advert to the various ways he modified and adapted it in different settings, towards different rhetorical ends. Often the notion was accompanied by a particular cluster of scriptural texts, associated ideas, and images that he subtly adjusted and refined across a range of contexts.

One measure of how important it was to Bernard to stress that the quality of desire shapes knowledge is the fact that he

¹ Later I was confirmed in this perception when I came across a similar observation by Jacques Blanpain: "*Il est frappant de constater que Bernard est très conscient du fait que notre conception de Dieu naît de nos désirs et de nos dispositions et aspirations*" ("It is striking to note that Bernard is keenly aware of how our conception of God is born from our desires, from our attitudes and aspirations.") (Jacques Blanpain, "Langage mystique, expression du désir," *Collectanea Cisterciensia* 36, no. 1 [1974]: 56).

began his masterpiece *On the Song of Songs* by underlining this very point. He entices readers who overhear his imagined discourse to an elite in-group of cloistered monks with the promise of “solid food” instead of milk.² He portrays different books of the Bible as suitable for different levels of attainment in the spiritual life, with the Song of Songs at the summit: its inner meaning is available only to those with personal experience, or at least with the ardent desire for such experience.³

Tracking the different ways Bernard made use of this notion brought to light connections among multiple key strands in his thought, all centering on his understanding of mediation: how revelation is mediated to humanity by the incarnation of the Word, and how the humanity of Jesus, along with other created realities, is perceived differently by human beings depending on their own degree of likeness to him. Bernard’s alleged iconoclasm with regard to art, the body, creation, his attitudes toward affectivity, the humanity of Jesus, and the interpretation of Scripture becomes clear with the recognition that he presents all of these realities as ambiguous not because they are in themselves suspect but because human desire, which is in fact ambiguous, mediates their perception.

In the Coda to his study of Plato’s *Republic*, D. S. Schindler describes a dynamic closely akin to what we find in Bernard. Commenting on the seeming contradiction of Plato’s disparaging literary forms and images while making expert use of them, Schindler reads the famous allegory of the cave to mean that images mean one thing to philosophers and another to those who have never seen the sun. When one has throughout one’s life taken flickering shadows on a stone wall for reality, the

² Bernard, SC 1.1 (SBOp 1:3; *On the Song of Songs I*, trans. Kilian Walsh, CF 4 [Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1971], 1). Citations to Bernard’s works here and below refer to the critical editions and translations listed in the Table of Abbreviations. I follow the translations as cited, with occasional minor adjustments.

³ Bernard, SC 1.2, 11 (SBOp 1:3, 7; CF 4:1, 6).

shadows are opaque, objects of idolatrous attachment. But the philosopher who has known the sun on her face and seen the realities of which the images are merely shadows can see the images as transparent; she can make use of them to steer others toward the light.⁴ Bernard's attitude towards "images" (the humanity of Jesus, art, affectivity, creation, Scripture) is much the same. At a certain point the opaque becomes transparent, the idol becomes an icon—not because of any change in the perceived but because of a change in the perceiver.

Bernard and other Cistercian writers like William of Saint-Thierry and Aelred of Rievaulx describe such a pivotal moment in the spiritual life, often in terms of a movement from the carnal to the spiritual. The various arrangements of steps Bernard describes in the spiritual life frequently have the same basic structure: after an initial, highly emotive, consolation-based attachment to the humanity of Jesus, a person moves to a more rational, less heated phase characterized by zeal for virtue. A third stage sees the recapitulation of affectivity, made spiritual and transparent by the grace of mystical contact. The spiritual level lights up everything on the plane of the soul (*psyche*) in such a way that what could once have been an idol has become an icon. A taste of the divine radically relativizes all lesser realities, setting them free to reach their fullest meaning. In a striking passage, Bernard places on the lips of such a person the words of Jesus: "When I am lifted up from the earth, I shall draw all things to myself."⁵ So he shows that the recapitulation that occurs on a cosmic scale in Christ the Image is replicated in the lives of human beings "in the Image."

One of the rewards of material renunciation, Bernard says, is to receive the gift of right relation to all things. Of those who

⁴ D. S. Schindler, *Plato's Critique of Impure Reason: On Goodness and Truth in the Republic* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 2008).

⁵ Bernard, SC 21.7 (SBOp 1:126; Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons on the Song of Songs II*, trans. Irene Edmonds, CF 7 [Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1979], 9).

practice such renunciation he writes, "They do possess earthly things, but with the spirit of men who possess nothing; in reality they possess all things, not like unhappy beggars who get what they beg for, but as masters, masters in the best sense because devoid of avarice. To the man of faith the whole world is a treasure-house of riches: the whole world, because all things, whether adverse or favorable, are of service to him; they all contribute to his good."⁶

Bernard shows creation as intrinsically good, at the level of being. But he speaks from the perspective of desire and experience, where created realities appear ambiguous because desire is ambiguous. Frequently confusion arises when these levels are confused, and a reader may take Bernard to be speaking categorically about the intrinsic worth of one or another reality when in fact he is speaking about the way it is experienced. Likewise Bernard addresses an audience composed of hearers or readers at different stages in the spiritual journey and at times modulates his presentation accordingly, trying somehow to reach them all at once. Bernard's creative appropriation of Origen, for instance, makes a metaphysical model into a kind of poetic hermeneutics. More radically, it may be that for Bernard being itself is figural, and that metaphysics and poetics are one. Then the whole creation, bearing traces of the Word, the Image of the invisible, is not a static, conceptual reality best captured by the language of classical metaphysics, but divine rhetoric, a sacred text whose inner meaning lies open only to lovers, since in this view "love itself is knowledge."

So Bernard not only returns frequently to the classical idea that virtue and right desire are requisite to knowing truth—he develops and applies this idea in multiple ways. Adapting a medieval epitaph, Henri de Lubac once aptly described Bernard as not only the last of the fathers but also "the first of the great

⁶ Bernard, SC 21.7 (SBOp 1:126; CF 7:9).

moderns.”⁷ His writings uniquely and exquisitely balance intense spirituality and the longing for heaven with a keen sensitivity for experience, an awareness of the Word beyond thought and images and the dignity and goodness of the human Jesus. This balance can be seen in the way he adapts classical epistemology, underlining the role of the self, experience, affectivity, and freedom in ways that have made him attractive to several important contemporary thinkers from Maurice Blondel, at the end of the nineteenth century, through the recent work of Emmanuel Falque. In fact, modernity and the advent of critical thought are characterized by a heightened perception of the very thing Bernard so emphasized: the status of the viewer shapes what is seen. In perspectives beyond those available to Bernard, contemporary thought has taken account of the ways class, gender, race, and a range of social, psychological, and historical factors shape how an individual sees the world. Even the hard sciences report the phenomenon of observer interference.

Along with modern sensitivity to ways that social programming limits and colors perceptions comes anxiety about whether one can really know another, any other, as he or she is, without reducing them to one’s own horizon. While Bernard lacked the critical distance of modern thought, he stressed the way that at a deeper level, right desire and the practice of virtue open the way to a more accurate perception of other persons and especially of God in his otherness. That is, he recognized a mechanism akin to what we speak of today as projection, but he held that the images one generates can be more or less accurate, that it is possible to reach an other on the far side of images that become more transparent as a person’s own likeness to God increases. Such images can be recognized as images, not as God as he is in himself. At the same time they can serve to educate right desire towards real contact with a reality

⁷ Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, Vol. 2: The Four Senses of Scripture*, trans. E. M. Macierowski (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 153.

beyond what can be imagined. For Bernard it is freedom that constitutes the likeness between God and human beings, a freedom realized most perfectly in love. Love alone provides a way to know something of another in that person's otherness. Love, that is, freedom, cast toward the far horizon of the divine Other makes created realities appear in right perspective.

A fresh look at how Bernard understands mediation lights up every major facet of his thought: his theology, his Christology, including the vexed questions around the humanity of Jesus, and his anthropology; his understanding of freedom, affectivity, the nature of the self, and the relation of these concepts to exegesis, as well as his account of the move from the carnal to the spiritual and its implications for what Luke Anderson has described as Bernard's "rhetorical epistemology."⁸ Bernard's sensitivity to the manner in which "love itself is knowledge" holds an important insight for contemporary thought in its struggle to know others without reducing them to the familiar. His description of deep, instinctive affectivity recapitulated on the far side of the struggle for virtue restores a place for religious feeling beyond the merely sentimental. Bernard also provides a way to see union with God in heaven not as a betrayal of life in time but its culmination.

⁸ Luke Anderson, "The Rhetorical Epistemology in Saint Bernard's *Super Cantica*," in *Bernardus Magister: Papers Celebrating the Nonacentenary of the Birth of Bernard of Clairvaux*, ed. John R. Sommerfeldt, CS 135 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1992), 95–128.

1. In the Image

In his works Bernard develops a distinction made by Augustine between two ways of speaking about God. He makes certain statements of God as he is (“God is unchanging”), while others pertain to God in relation to his creatures (“The Lord is my shepherd”). He distinguishes between the language of revelation, the doctrinal formulations carefully carved out by tradition through the centuries, and the more fluid and imaginative, metaphorical language of God as encountered in the world of human experience.¹ God is his attributes, while human beings simply share in them. The Son of God is the *imago dei*, while his human nature and the nature of every human being is in the image, *ad imaginem*. By his incarnation the Son bridges the two spheres and makes it possible for images in the shifting realm of human experience effectively to signify divine realities. The transparency or opacity of such images as creation and figures in Scripture depends on the degree to which people have realized their own likeness to the image.

The fields of faith and experience are hardly airtight, however. They overlap and interpenetrate. People may find that they have faith in what is beyond experience, and that their

¹ As Kilian McDonnell explains, “Faith gives birth to experience; faith norms experience. But experience gives another dimension of actuality and firmness to faith. Experience is another way of knowing. What is given to experience is not taken away from faith, because experience exists only in faith” (“Spirit and Experience in Bernard of Clairvaux,” *Theological Studies* 58 [1997]: 16).

faith is alternately challenged and supported by what they experience. Truths revealed by God once for all are sifted and assimilated in human terms through the centuries by tradition. In this way truths like the triunity of God or the hypostatic union come to be clarified. Bernard is not inclined to innovate at this level of theological discourse. Instead he is concerned with the human experience of the divine in the ups and downs of spiritual life, the encounter with God not “as he is”—which apart from the signposts provided by dogma cannot be known in this life—but as he appears.

While God *is* his attributes—he is unchanging, for instance—he is *like* a teacher, a bridegroom, a warrior. The notion that the quality of one’s desire colors one’s imagination of God pertains to this second kind of language. Desire would seem to affect the first kind of language as well, however: one can relate to a dogmatic truth ideologically and restrict its resonance. Bernard himself, having distinguished two ways of speaking about God, appears deliberately to merge and confuse them. There remains for him a way of relating to language by right desire, which allows it to become transparent to what is beyond language, and he cultivates this desire.

De Trinitate

Augustine begins Book V of *De Trinitate* by stating that God is Being and that what distinguishes the Being of God is that he alone is unchanging: “The substance or being that is God is alone unchangeable, and therefore it pertains to it most truly and supremely to be, from which comes the name ‘being.’ . . . only that which not only does not but also absolutely cannot change deserves without qualification to be said really and truly to be.”²

² Sancti Aurelii Augustini, *De Trinitate*, Libri I–XII, ed. W. J. Mountain, Series Latina Libri XV (Turnhout: Brepols, 1968), 5.1.3; Augustine of Hippo, *The Trinity (De Trinitate)*, trans. Edmund Hill (New York: New City Press, 1991), 190.

Augustine observes that certain things are said of God as “substance” and others with respect to one of the three persons: the Son is so called only in relation to the Father and vice versa. Whatever is attributed to God is said of his being in the singular (“God is great”) as well as of each of the three persons (“The Father is great, the Son is great, the Spirit is great”).³ God is his attributes: “As it is not one thing for God to be and another for him to be great, but being is for him the same as being great, for that reason we do not say three greatnesses any more than we say three beings, but one being and one greatness.”⁴ God does not, like creatures, “participate” in qualities like greatness; rather, “he is great with a greatness by which he is himself this same greatness . . . he is his own greatness.”⁵ This principle applies to “absolutely all” that can be predicated of God, Augustine says, “because it is all said with reference to himself, and not metaphorically or in simile but properly.”⁶

Immediately after this, at the outset of Chapter 3, Augustine notes that what can be said of each of the persons uniquely (for example, the Son is “begotten”) is said “with reference to each other or to creation,” by relationship, not substance. Augustine mentions in passing that the being of God (as opposed to the first person of the Trinity) could not be called Father “except perhaps metaphorically” insofar as the triune God creates humanity and regenerates it by grace.⁷ Later he uses the example of a coin that remains substantially the same whatever changing values are assigned to it. Theological language that speaks of God with reference to creation likewise implies no change in his being but rather in that of the creature. Nothing new occurs in God when human beings become his “offspring,” but rather they are themselves changed, and related

³ Augustine, *The Trinity*, 5.2.9 (Hill, trans., *The Trinity*, 195).

⁴ Augustine, *De Trinitate* 5.2.9 (Hill, trans., *The Trinity*, 195–96).

⁵ Augustine, *De Trinitate* 5.2.10 (Hill, trans., *The Trinity*, 196).

⁶ Augustine, *De Trinitate* 5.2.10 (Hill, trans., *The Trinity*, 196).

⁷ Augustine, *De Trinitate* 5.3.12 (Hill, trans., *The Trinity*, 197). Some metaphors are excluded; there is no accurate metaphorical sense in which, for example, the divine nature could be spoken of as humanity’s “Son.”

to God in a new way. Scripture and tradition speak of God in this way that he may be “grasped by human feeling”: “So too when he is said to be angry with the wicked and pleased with the good, they change, not he; just as light is harsh to weak eyes, pleasant to strong; but it is the eyes, not the light, that change.”⁸

The language of Father, Son, and Spirit, while in one sense metaphorical and a concession to the weakness of human understanding, designates the relations between the persons within the Trinity, relations that do not change, rather than relations between human beings and God. In regard to human beings, however, the field is open for a variety of metaphors. Here the vast array of images from Scripture (God as rock, mother, helper, teacher, lord, and so on) comes into play. It is principally at this level that the soul’s spiritual state affects the way one imagines God.

Bernard employs Augustine’s conception of unchanging being at the beginning of his Sermon 31 on the Song of Songs: “That alone truly is, which is neither altered from its past mode of being nor blotted out by a future mode, but ‘is’ alone is predicated of it impregnably and unchangeably, and it remains what it is.” This statement introduces a comparison of two kinds of “vision” of God: the unchanging vision of God in heaven, and the experiences of God enjoyed in this present life, where the Word “often makes himself known under more than one form.”⁹ The sermon returns like a refrain to the idea that in this life God is encountered in the mode in which he chooses to present himself, not as he is (*non sicuti est*). Bernard appears to be directly following Augustine’s text. For instance, he uses the same example of the attribute “greatness” in his

⁸ Augustine, *De Trinitate* 5.4.17 (Hill, trans., *The Trinity*, 201).

⁹ Bernard, SC 31.1 (*Sermones super Cantica Canticorum* 1–35, ed. Jean Leclercq et al., SBOp 1 [Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1957], 219; Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs II*, trans. Kilian Walsh, CF 7 [Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1976], 124). This thought is developed in chapter 2 below.

discussion of the likeness and unlikeness of human being and God. He also employs and develops Augustine's image of the eye and light. He explains that people see not the sun itself but the sun as it lights the air and reflects off surfaces; they see it by means of the eye, which bears a likeness to that which it beholds: "Even the eye itself, when troubled, cannot approach the light, because it has lost that likeness. Just as the troubled eye, then, cannot gaze on the peaceful sun because of its unlikeness, so the peaceful eye can behold it with some efficacy because of a certain likeness. If indeed it were wholly equal to it in purity, with a completely clear vision, it would see it *as it is*, because of the complete likeness."¹⁰ So in heaven Bernard anticipates a folding together of being and experience.

The Kiss: SC 8

Bernard gives particular attention to the likeness between the human soul and the divine Word in Sermon 8, and he revisits the theme twenty years later in Sermon 80 *On the Song of Songs*. Both the trinitarian framing of this material and the distinction between metaphorical and ontological ways to speak of God are creative developments of ideas drawn from Augustine. In the course of commenting on the first verse of the Song of Songs, "Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth," Bernard distinguishes the kiss of the mouth from a direct kiss mouth to mouth. The mediated kiss, the kiss of the mouth, is that enjoyed by human beings in mystical experience, whereas the more direct experience is that enjoyed by the Father and Son alone. Citing Matthew 11:27, "No one knows the Son except the Father," Bernard explains that unique relationship: "For the Father loves the Son whom he embraces with a love

¹⁰ Bernard, SC 31.2 (SBOp 1:220; CF 14:126). See Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana* 2.9, for a related use of the eye image.

that is unique; he who is infinite embraces his equal, who is eternal, his co-eternal, the sole God, his only-begotten."¹¹

While the human, mystical experience of the kiss is a theme, he says, that is "sweet to the spirit above all other," "rare" and "difficult to understand," Bernard finds it expedient to delineate the sphere of the intimacy enjoyed by the Son alone, "a kiss past comprehension, beyond the experience of any mere creature." The mutual love between the Father and the Son is "a kiss that is utterly sweet but utterly a mystery as well."¹² He goes on: "If, as is properly understood, the Father is he who kisses, the Son he who is kissed, then it cannot be wrong to see in the kiss the Holy Spirit, for he is the imperturbable peace of the Father and the Son, their unshakeable bond, their undivided love, their indivisible unity."¹³

Within the Trinity, the Spirit relays the mutual knowledge and love of the Father and Son. He is the fruit of this mutual exchange, and he brings a gift of both love and knowledge,¹⁴ truth and devotion, to the bride.¹⁵ In this twofold knowledge it cannot be the case that, as some suggested in Bernard's day, the divine attributes lined up with different persons in the Trinity (Father-omnipotence, Son-wisdom, and Spirit-love), for the Father and Son both know and love one another, mutually, and the Spirit communicates not only love but love and knowledge. He is implied in the love-knowledge that human beings can have of the Father and Son: "The Holy Spirit indeed is nothing else but the love and benign goodness of them both."¹⁶

¹¹ Bernard, SC 8.1 (SBOp 1:36; CF 4:45).

¹² Bernard, SC 8.1 (SBOp 1:36; CF 4:45).

¹³ Bernard, SC 8.2 (SBOp 1:37; CF 4:46).

¹⁴ "For the favor of the kiss bears with it a twofold gift, the light of knowledge and the fervor of devotion" (SC 8.8 [SBOp 1:41; CF 4:49]).

¹⁵ Bernard, SC 6.3 (SBOp 1:27; CF 4:50).

¹⁶ Bernard, SC 8.4 (SBOp 1:38; CF 4:47). Bernard speaks in SC 8.5 of a *threefold* knowledge when the bride asks for the kiss.

The Son, Bernard goes on, reveals himself and the Father through the Spirit.¹⁷ “giving, he reveals, and revealing, gives” (*dando revelat et revelando dat*).¹⁸ The gift, again, “not only conveys the light of knowledge but also lights the fire of love.”¹⁹ The Father “is never fully known until he is perfectly loved” (*nequaquam plene cognoscitur, nisi cum perfecte diligitur*).²⁰ For Bernard, pagan philosophers knew God through creation, but their knowledge was imperfect because they did not love. They could perceive something of divine majesty through creation but, in Bernard’s judgment, were “content with the knowledge that gives self-importance” and so were unable to appreciate the gentleness and humility of God revealed in the incarnation. Bernard insists here on the likeness between knower and known. Those who seek knowledge for the sake of prestige can see only the God of Power, a real knowledge to some degree but reflecting and distorted by their own desire for honor. To receive the much fuller revelation of himself God makes in his incarnation, they would need, like the God revealed, to be humble.²¹ Bernard goes on to counsel his reader to seek God in love rather than curiosity, stating that neither those who have knowledge without love nor those who love without knowledge have received the kiss of the Spirit, a kiss placed on the two lips (reason and will) of the bride.

Elsewhere Bernard uses the image of the kiss not for the unity between the Father and the Son that is the Holy Spirit but for that of the two natures of the Incarnate Word: “The mouth that kisses signifies the Word who assumes human nature; the nature assumed receives the kiss.”²² Bernard depicts

¹⁷ Bernard, SC 8.5 (SBOp 1:38; CF 4:47).

¹⁸ Bernard, SC 8.5 (SBOp 1:38; CF 4:47). My translation.

¹⁹ Bernard, SC 8.5 (SBOp 1:39; CF 4:48).

²⁰ Bernard, SC 8.9 (SBOp 1:41; CF 4:52).

²¹ “They in their presumption of spirit—their own spirit, not God’s—studied his attributes of sublimity and majesty” (SC 8.5 [SBOp 1:39; CF 4:48]).

²² Bernard, SC 2.3 (SBOp 1:9–10; CF 4:10).

the Son as the true Image of the Father, an image in all ways equal to its exemplar. The Son receives the kiss as an equal, whereas the Christian “must abide content within the limits of his capacity.”²³ For Christ, he says, “the kiss meant a totality, for Paul only a participation.”²⁴ Bernard implies that Paul (whose experience is an example of the heights a human being can attain) was “kissed by the kiss.” Human nature, he writes, is *ad imaginem*. The human nature of Christ agrees perfectly with the Image that is the divine nature of the Word. The union of the two natures in Christ in turn sets up the possibility of human beings growing to be more like God, realizing their imagehood: “For what is made in the image should become like the image, and not merely share the empty name of image—as the image [of God] himself is not merely called by the empty name of image.”²⁵

Although Bernard generally presents mystical contact as between the soul and the Word of God, with God the Word assuming the various guises and appearances (teacher, bridegroom, and so on) suitable to the soul at the different stages in her development, the conclusion of SC 8 is marked by more directly trinitarian mysticism. It fuses the two vocabularies. With the Son the soul is daughter of the Father. In sharing a Father she is sister to the Son, and in sharing his Spirit she is his bride: “For if marriage according to the flesh constitutes two in one body, why should not a spiritual union be even more efficacious in joining two in one spirit?”²⁶

²³ Bernard, SC 8.8 (SBOP 1:41; CF 4:51).

²⁴ Bernard, SC 8.8 (SBOP 1:41; CF 4:52).

²⁵ Bernard, SC 80.2 (SBOP 2:278; Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs IV*, trans. Irene M. Edmonds, CF 40 [Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1980], 147).

²⁶ Bernard, SC 8.9 (SBOP 1:41; CF 4:52). For a fine study of the Trinity in Bernard, see Anne Morris, “The Trinity in Bernard’s Sermons on the Song of Songs,” CSQ 30, no. 1 (1995): 35–50.

SC 80

When two decades later Bernard revisited the relationship between the Word and the soul, he again sprang from the topic into a discussion of the Trinity. Distinguishing souls made in the Image of God from the Word who is the Image itself, he segues into a critique of views attributed to Gilbert of Poitiers by means of the Augustinian position that God is identical with his attributes. Bernard's poetics, his understanding of how human beings imagine God, is interwoven with his account of how ontologically they are made *ad imaginem*. This anthropological perspective in turn gels with his presentation of the Trinity. Bernard extends the Augustinian insight that God, unlike human beings, is his attributes into a portrayal of the Word as the Image while human beings only share in it. By means of the real affinity human beings have with the Word, and depending on the degree of likeness they have realized ontologically, they imagine God by means of more or less accurate likenesses.

From the outset of Sermon 80 Bernard places the discussion of the likeness between Word and soul in a trinitarian context. He identifies a "natural kinship" between the Image and those made in that image and holds that "their resemblance argues some affinity [*similitude*]." ²⁷ Refining his distinction between *imago* and *ad imaginem*, Bernard accents the dignity of human beings, who while not themselves the image, remain like it. He correlates image with "greatness" and likeness with "longing":

The word is truth, it is wisdom and righteousness. These constitute the Image. The image of what? Of righteousness, wisdom, and truth. For the image, the Word, is righteousness from righteousness, wisdom from wisdom, truth from truth, as he is light and God from God. The

²⁷ Bernard, SC 80.2 (SBOp 2:277; CF 40:146).

soul is none of these things, 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 in the image. It is a lofty creature in its capacity for greatness [image], and in its longing we see a token of its uprightness [likeness].²⁸

The chiasmic reversal of word order in the list “truth, wisdom, righteousness” suggests a mirror. The Nicene language (“God from God”) invokes the trinitarian horizon and states at once the equality of the Son and the identity of attributes in the divine simplicity. The soul is not these attributes but is capable of them and by right desire grows like the image in which it is made. The Word is the image of God; when incarnate, “what is made in the image [his human nature] agrees with the image.” So human likeness to God is through him who is the image of God.²⁹

Where the soul is endowed with greatness and uprightness “according to its capacity,” the image by contrast “receives in equal measure with God . . . receives them by God’s begetting.” Building on the distinction between substantial and accidental attributes, Bernard further distinguishes the *imago* from the *ad imaginem*: “Although man received his gifts from God’s hands [*a Deo*], the image received them from God’s being [*de Deo*], that is, from his very substance. For the image of God is of the same substance as God, and everything that he seems to share with his image is part of the substance of both and not accident.”³⁰ Bernard provides a simultaneous affirmation of both the Son’s equality with the Father and the identity of the persons of God with their attributes. He thereby insists that attributes pertain to the substance of God and are not acci-

²⁸ Bernard, SC 80.2 (SBOp 2:278; CF 40:146).

²⁹ Bernard, SC 80.2 (SBOp 2:278; CF 40:147). SC 81 goes on to discuss the similarities and differences between the word and the soul in terms of liberty, immortality, and simplicity.

³⁰ Bernard, SC 80.3 (SBOp 2:278; CF 40:148).

dents. In the soul the attributes of uprightness and greatness are distinct from the soul and from each other. Although greatness is inseparable from the soul, Bernard writes, "The soul itself does not consist of its greatness any more than a crow consists of its blackness."³¹ For Bernard, only the Trinity possesses the "pure and unique simplicity of essence" in which it is its attributes.³²

At this point Bernard warns his readers against recent views that he presents as rejecting this teaching. He claims that Gilbert of Poitiers has misread Boethius on the Trinity so as to conclude that "God . . . is God by reason of his divinity, but the divinity is not God."³³ In support of this objection to Gilbert, Bernard invokes "Augustine . . . that mighty hammer of heretics" and his doctrine of the identity of attributes. If for Gilbert God is not his divinity, the divinity by which God is God must be greater, equal to, or less than God. It cannot be less, since by it God is God. If equal, then there are two Gods. If it is greater, "it is itself the highest good but it is not God."³⁴ Similarly Bernard cites Gilbert's gloss on the statement in Boethius that "God, God, God—refers to the substance": "Not what [the substance] is but by which it is what it is." Bernard comments, "God forbid that the Church should give assent to the proposition that there is any substance, or any other thing, by which God is what he is, but which is not God."³⁵

³¹ The illustration is borrowed from Augustine's *De Trinitate* (5.4.5) and effects a shift in the sermon from the Word and the soul to the Trinity.

³² Bernard, SC 80.5 (SBOp 2:280; CF 40:151): "In the Trinity many diverse qualities are united, so that it does not suffer plurality as a result of multiplicity of elements, nor change as a result of variety."

³³ Bernard, SC 80.6 (SBOp 2:281; CF 40:152).

³⁴ Bernard, SC 80.6 (SBOp 2:281; CF 40:152).

³⁵ Gilbert was probably accused unjustly; see N. H. Häring, "The Case of Gilbert de la Porrée, Bishop of Poitiers (1142–1154)," *Mediaeval Studies* 13 (1951): 12–13.

In a glass darkly . . .

Bernard frequently returns to the idea that the soul's unlikeness to God colors the accuracy of its perception of him. Changes in the quality of one's desire make God himself appear to change:

We call God by various names: sometimes Father, sometimes Master or Lord. This is not because of any diversity in God's most simple and utterly invariable nature, but rather because of the multiple variations of our affections, according to varied progress or failure of the soul. . . . So God seems to progress with those who progress, to change with those who change.³⁶

The passage has in view the language Christians use to speak about God: for instance, father, teacher, or bridegroom. The variety referred to does not imply change in God but reflects speakers' own changing dispositions. Souls form images of God that reflect their own state of being. When Christian tradition speaks of God as great, it refers to his being (in terms of substance), when it speaks of him as "Son" it does so in relation to the Father, but when it speaks of him as "Lord" or Creator it does so in relation to creation. The "variety of names" to which Bernard refers is clearly in this last category.³⁷ He tends to speak of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in connection with the God of revelation known by faith. In describing the experience of souls, following the precedent of Scripture, he employs a whole array of names and images that vary with

³⁶ Bernard, Div 8.1 (SBOp 6:111; *Monastic Sermons*, trans. Daniel Griggs, CF 68 [Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2016], 49).

³⁷ The Scriptures speak of God as having hands and feet, but of course, as Bernard declares, "God does not have these members by his nature; they represent certain *modes of our encounter* with him [*habet Deus omnia per effectum, non per naturam*]" (SC 4.4 [SBOp 1:20; CF 4:23]). So metaphors used for God characterize a person's mode of encounter with him rather than speaking about God as he is in himself.

the soul's dispositions. It is chiefly God the Word to whom this variety of names pertains, and it is through growing in likeness to him that the soul knows God more fully and that faith begins to pass into vision.

Through developing in herself virtuous attributes, the soul comes to recognize these qualities in God as well, "recalling his promise, 'with what measure you measure it shall be measured out to you in return. . . .' She knows then without any doubt, from the attributes which have their origin in God, that she who loves is herself loved."³⁸ The soul participates in the attributes that God is, and by this participation she comes to be like him and so to know him as he is.

Purified desire, transformed affectivity, allows the soul a fleeting glimpse behind the veil, which in turn transforms the soul at the deepest level of its being. Reciprocally, as the soul is likened to God it can be seen by him more clearly, because it *is* more fully: "For when the soul can once perceive the glory of God without a veil, it is compelled by some affinity of nature to be conformed to it, and be transformed to its very image. So God must appear to you as you have appeared to God."³⁹

Bernard grounds his presentation of the way human beings *ad imaginem* experience God through the lens of their own imagedness in his account of the triune God, and in his portrayal of the likeness between the soul and the Word. Building with confidence on the Augustinian distinction between language about God in himself and language about God in relation to creatures, he is able both to unite and to distinguish a traditional account of the Trinity known to faith with a richly imaginative expression of human mystical experience.

³⁸ Bernard, SC 69.7 (SBOp 2:206; CF 40:34), citing Matt 7:2.

³⁹ Bernard, SC 69.7 (SBOp 2:206; CF 40:34).

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