

Homily for the
Solemnity of St. Bernard
Preached by Fr. Brendan Freeman
(August 20, 2012)

[Scripture Readings: Sir 39:6-11; Eph 3:14-19; Jn 17:20-26]

In his Rule St. Benedict gives two instances where the local bishop should be called into the monastery to set things right: one is when a visiting priest monk is causing trouble and the other is when an improper abbatial election. Since St. Benedict's time and probably before that, it is not unheard of that a whole community or even a single monk will notify the Bishop when they think something is wrong and the abbot is not doing anything about it or, God forbid, he is the cause of it!

This happened, believe it or not, to St. Bernard not once but twice. The first time the local Bishop, William, imposed himself on Bernard by going to the General Chapter at Citeaux and requested that Bernard be put under obedience to him for one year. He did this because Bernard was not eating properly. Then later the whole community became suspicious of Bernard's daily chapter talks because, the text says, "He gave more consideration to the body than to the soul." Now even though they had a saint for a leader they strayed off course by believing that anything that gave pleasure to the body was bad for the soul. They complained to the Bishop about this and he set them straight.

We are not told what exactly Bernard was saying that made the community suspicious but I doubt if it had anything to do with the pleasure of food and drink since Bernard himself needed the intervention of the Bishop to set him straight on this point. We can only guess what disturbed them but since they were becoming extreme in the direction of angelism then anything sensual would upset them. Bernard was very fond of sensual imagery. He gave 89 chapter talks on the Canticle of Canticles the most sensual book of the Bible. He also loved poetic phrases. His sermon on Mary the Star of the Sea is a poem in itself. He called Mary our sweetness and hope; he loved water images, stream and springs and fountains. I wonder did he name some of his daughter houses or other Cistercian monasteries. His own abbey of Clairvaux means valley of light. Then there is Aiguebelle, beautiful water, Mellifont, fountain of honey.

The Clairvaux monks were misguided but not all wrong. They did want heart work, soul work but they did not want to get it through the body. The Bishop corrected them and Bernard, thank God, continued to give them food for their souls. Spiritual teaching is not meant to impart information it is meant to awaken the listener to his own spirit, his own heart, his soul. Teaching like this does have a bodily component but it ends in the spirit. Here is how St. Augustine explains it. He says when he wants to share with your heart what is already in his heart he uses words so that the word in his heart may find a place in your heart. "The sound of

my voice brings the meaning of the word to you and then passes away. The word which the sound brought to you is now in your heart and yet it is still also in mine." (Breviary, Sunday, Third Week of Advent) This is how St. Bernard shared what was in his heart with his monks. This is how St. Paul taught when he says in today's second reading, "May God strengthen with power through his Spirit your inner self and may Christ dwell in your hearts through faith, that you, rooted and grounded in love ... may know the love of Christ that surpassed knowledge" (Eph. 3: 16-17).

St. Bernard and our Cistercian Fathers saw the monastery as a school of love where they taught the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge. This is knowledge that comes through love and can be learned in no other way. It is knowledge that is opened to the child like, the little ones. Bernard's words are addressed to the inner self and come from his heart to our heart as Augustine said.

By choosing today's Gospel passage for St. Bernard it is as if the words of Jesus are spoken to Bernard, "I have made known to Bernard your name and will continue to make it known through him that the love with which you loved me may be in him and I in him" (Jn.17:26). Like the scribes of old this is the law that Bernard poured over and studied, the law of love.