'A PILLAR IN THE TEMPLE'

The Life and Letters of St Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153)

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IF the diffusion of his works and the range of his influence is to be taken as any guide, St Bernard was beyond question the most outstanding figure in the Europe of his day. Certainly among the schoolmen, no teacher ever had so many devoted disciples, no single preacher so fired the imagination of thousands, there was no one whose moral drive was so potent a fact in the lives of men of every degree. There were saints of the towns and saints of the country, saints of the court and the schoolroom: Bernard spoke to the world. Even to this day, when all allowance has been made for the misfortunes of time, of fire and casual destruction, a tangible witness to his power could be assembled in sackloads of manuscripts from the greater libraries, and those who have merely a nodding acquaintance with the available materials will know why Mabillon, that indefatigable scholar, doubted if any single individual were capable of coping with the task of collation. Available in print by 1475, although we still await anything like that critical edition which the great Maurist was content to leave for another generation, St Bernard's works have never ceased to be re-edited and translated right up to 1953, the eighth centenary of his death. Among the many volumes and essays devoted to Bernard in the present year, the Rev. Bruno Scott James has given us an English translation of the letters[1] and the familiar biography by Dr Watkin Williams has been reprinted.[2]

Since both in his brief introduction and his rather slight apparatus Fr Scott James is clearly making no claim to provide an edition for scholars it would be out of place to

[1] *The Letters of St Bernard of Clairvaux*, translated and edited by Bruno Scott James. (Burns Oates; 42s.) All references to the letters use the enumeration in this edition.

[2] *St Bernard of Clairvaux*, by Watkin Williams. (Manchester University Press; 28s.)

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approach his text from a critical point of view.[3] What he has done is to provide the general reader with a consistently living and attractive translation which will enable him to sit down and get, from several lengthy sessions, a first-hand impression of a man who appears to erupt like a volcano, pouring out on every hand an inundation of words. For this is undoubtedly the way to read the letters. Bernard is his own best biographer and it is inevitable that by comparison Watkin Williams' *Life* seems more remarkable for its devoted assembly of details than for sureness of outline or breadth of vision. The chapters on the expansion of Clairvaux and the rapid multiplication of daughter houses—sixty-five foundations in little more than half as many years—are characteristic of the work of a man who spared no pains, just as the discussion of the dispute with Abelard, though inadequate, is at least free from partiality and pretentiousness. But the overall impression is confused, and until another English life can supersede this one the letters, unadorned, are a safer guide; though not, it must be admitted, an altogether balanced one.

For there are so many sides to Bernard's character, and while his letters reveal clearly the broad outlines of his multifarious activity—the interventions in countless episcopal and abbatial elections, the healing of the papal schism, the preaching of the second Crusade, the battle with Abelard—they are from the nature of the case representative of his genius as a leader and prophet rather than as father of a host of spiritual children. All the time there are, of course, hints of the Bernard of the sermons and the treatises, as for instance in letter 12 which reads almost like a draft for, or summary of, the *De Diligendo Deo*, or again in letter 109.

[3] One or two points may however be noted in passing. A much fuller index of subject matter is a pressing need. The Latin sources could have been indicated with a good deal more clarity, and the footnote on page 338 would appear to make no sense at all. Letter 391 is, as stated, identical with letter 363 in the Benedictine edition, except for an additional paragraph which is therefore not represented in this translation. In letter 177 to St Ailred of Rievaulx the phrase 'ubi magis discitur silere quam loqui', very relevant to the sense, is omitted. In the comparative numerical index nos. 428, 430, 444, 452, 433 have their equivalents in the new translation expressed in a different (and misleading) manner.

But these could not be called typical. As a whole, to use a metaphor dear to Bernard, they witness to the fecundity of Lia rather than the embraces of Rachel and to a conception in anguish both of body and soul. 'I am a sort of modern chimaera', he says in a letter to a Carthusian, 'neither cleric nor layman. I have kept the habit of a monk but I have long ago abandoned the life. I do not wish to tell you what I dare say you have heard from others: what I am doing, what are my purposes, through what dangers I pass in the world, or rather down what precipices I am hurled. If you have not heard, enquire and then according to what you hear, give your advice and the support of your prayers.' It would seem that it was a peculiar combination of supernatural gifts and natural circumstances which thrust into a whirlpool of activity this handsome and delicate youth who as a novice had been so recollected that he had not known how many windows there were in the church. For it is so easy to accept the fact of Bernard's voluminous correspondence without realising that its very existence needs a more than ordinary explanation.

In his twelfth sermon on the Canticle St Bernard remarks on the fact that, although the women ran early with their spices to the tomb, Christ had risen before their arrival. 'Perhaps', he says, 'the Lord Jesus was unwilling for the mixture prepared for him to be used on his dead body that he might keep it for his living one. For the Church, which eats the living bread that came down from heaven, is living. She is Christ's more precious body and every Christian knows that his other body was given over to death that this one might not taste death. This is the one he wants anointed and cherished; it is this one's weak members he wishes to be soothed with extra special remedies. So he kept for himself the precious ointments when, forestalling the time and hastening the glory, he did not so much evade as instruct the devotion of the women. He declined to be anointed, but as foregoing, not despising it; not refusing the service, but delaying its accomplishment.' It is this realisation which is for Bernard the result of those holy and happy visits to the wine-cellar of contemplation. 'For if', he says in another place, 'anyone were suffered in prayer to penetrate so far

into the hidden things of God that he later returned on fire with divine love, burning with zeal for justice and fervent beyond measure in every spiritual deed and duty so that he could say "My heart grew hot within me and in my meditation a fire broke out": when, I say, such an one begins from very fullness of charity to overflow with a good and saving surfeit of the wine of gladness he has clearly been admitted to the wine-cellar.'[4]

Such passages as these are surely the true background to all the reproving, entreating, rebuking of the letters. 'Pardon me, I pray you', he writes on one occasion, 'for my nature is such that I am consumed with zeal for your house. I cannot bear to see such holiness as yours tarnished if there is anything I can do to prevent it.'[5] It would be perfectly possible to read isolated letters and feel that here was a sharp-tongued tyrant without restraint or compassion. Even were this view not belied by the numerous examples of religious and others in difficulties who fled to Bernard as a refuge, the burden of the whole body of his correspondence is unmistakable. There can be no saint on whose feast the epistle and gospel for a Doctor of the Church is more fittingly read. Phrases from the Office ever and again spring naturally to mind. And when in fact the fire broke out in Bernard, giving him not so much a canonical as a charismatic eminence in the Church, there was ready to hand the, at that time, unique machinery of the first really centralised religious Order through which avenues of communication were opened up to him all over Europe. One discerns that his sources of information were more efficient and more reliable than those of the Papal Curia of his day, and the letters are constantly referring to the arrival and departure of messengers. 'There are not secretaries in all Clairvaux for the needs of your servant',[6] he tells the pope.

It must have required an unbelievable integrity not to abuse such unprecedented power. Yet one of the really impressive facts about the letters is the consistency with which the advice Bernard gives is dictated by a disinterested devo-

[4] *In Cantica. Sermo XLIX.*

[5] Letter 326.

[6] Letter 329.

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tion to the Church. Writers have sometimes talked as though he had made it his business to sweep the flower of contemporary youth into the monasteries, but while it is true that the phenomenal expansion of the Cistercians did for a period produce this effect, it would be hard to quote a single occasion on which Bernard encouraged anyone already holding an ecclesiastical office to renounce it for cloistered quiet. The little group of letters to Oger may be taken as representative of his customary attitude on this point (and, incidentally, of the qualities of the present translation). 'Better tell the truth and admit that your own quiet pleased you more than labouring for the benefit of others. I don't wonder at it, I admit that I feel the same way myself but that should not please you too much . . . you have preferred your own will to the designs of God, choosing quiet for yourself rather than the work for which he had selected you.'[7] Examples in this vein could be multiplied. They show that William of St Thierry's opening words in the *Vita Prima* have something more than a poetic justness about them.[8] It was as though the Church had, through Bernard, blossomed again in his own day with the ancient loveliness of apostolic graces. St Bernard, he tells us, read the Scriptures in their entirety and in order, often and gladly, drinking from the fountain at its source. It may be that, because he was so filled with the Scriptures, in him the Scriptures were fulfilled. The Spirit moved again over the chaotic waters where heaven and earth are mingled. The heavenly mind went up, the earth of human frailty sank down, and the tree which God had planted stood between, that waters might descend in season from above and the lost rhythm of seedtime and harvest be restored as at the beginning. A tree, and a pillar, 'a strong pillar of the whole Church' as Peter the Venerable calls Bernard in a characteristically gracious letter. 'He that shall overcome, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God.'

[7] Letter 90.

[8] In a volume of essays in French, *St Bernard, Homme d'Eglise* (Desclée de Brouwer), an article of P. Camille Hontoir develops the thought suggested in the foregoing paragraphs, and a brief contribution by Etienne Gilson on St Bernard's attitude to theology may also be mentioned as particularly valuable.