

St. Bernard of Clairvaux

Today, the universal Church celebrates St. Bernard of Clairvaux, a doctor of the Church and one of the most important figures of the twelfth century. Bernard was born in AD 1090 in Burgundy, France to good and pious parents. He was an excellent student and wanted to give his life completely to God. Bernard studied literature and poetry because he wanted to better understand the Bible.

Bernard left home at age 20 (in 1111) to join the monastic community of Citeaux. It was at Citeaux where the first monastery of the Cistercians began. Unfortunately, at this time the Church was in recovery from difficult times. The monastic orders were not doing so well. Bernard wanted to join a reformed monastery to help renew the Church. He was so persuasive that he convinced his brothers, uncles, and 30 friends and family members to join him. There is good reason that Bernard's nickname is "honey-tongued doctor." ☺

Eventually, the abbot at Citeaux sent Bernard and twelve monks to begin a new monastery, which became the famous Abbey of Clairvaux ("Valley of Light"). Bernard was appointed abbot and feverishly set out to do the Lord's work. In just a few years, he had over 100 monks. By the time of his death, there were over 350 monasteries from St. Bernard's monks.

Bernard is well known for his theological works, including his commentary on the Song of Songs. His love for and writings on the Blessed Virgin Mary are truly remarkable. Bernard brought a lot of warmth back to devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. He spoke on Mary's perpetual virginity and gave her the title, "Star of the Sea."

Bernard also introduced the practice of *lectio divina* (prayerful reading of Scripture) which had fallen out of practice. Additionally, Bernard recommended that monks have a spiritual director. He once famously said that he who has himself for a spiritual director has a fool.

Furthermore, Bernard's ability as arbitrator and counselor became well known. Unfortunately, he was pulled away from the monastery often for both political and ecclesiastical matters.

One of Bernard's monks became Pope Eugene III. The pope asked Bernard to write out the spiritual instructions of which he had given at the monastery. This is called the Book of Considerations. One of Bernard's instructions was that to accomplish anything worthwhile prayer must precede action.

Pope Eugene III commissioned Bernard to preach the second crusade (1145 – 1149). In obedience to the Holy Pontiff, he traveled through France and Germany to arouse enthusiasm for the holy war to reclaim the Holy Land. Unfortunately, the crusade ended in a disaster as the ideals and morals of the soldiers were not those of the holy saint. It is a great reminder that great saints, too, experience tremendous suffering in their lives.

There are a few fun facts about Bernard. For example, a legend says that when a swarm of flies infested a church during a service, Bernard formally excommunicated them. The next morning, all the flies were found dead on the floor. Additionally, Bernard is the patron saint of beekeepers and candlemakers – largely because his honey-like eloquence and hard work ethic link him to bees and wax.

St. Bernard died on August 20, 1153, at the age of 63. He was the first Cistercian monk placed on the calendar of saints. His life of contemplation, love for the Blessed Virgin Mary, eloquent writings, and outstanding life of faith and virtue are truly inspirational for us today. May St. Bernard pray for us so that like him, we may bear witness to Christ and become saints!

~St. Bernard of Clairvaux, pray for us!