

History of the Catholic Church

The 12th Century: The Crusades

Events:

1101: Treaty of Alton: signed between Henry I of England and Robert, Duke of Normandy to recognize Henry as King of England

1102: King Coloman unites Hungary and Croatia under Hungarian Crown

1102: Muslims conquer Valencia

1103-1104: council is convened in the East to reorganize the Georgian Orthodox Church

1107-1111: Sigurd I becomes the first king of Norway

1109: The Battle of Hundseid, Boleslaus III is defeated stopping Germanic advancement eastward.

1111: Henry V is crowned Holy Roman Emperor

1113: Angkor Wat is constructed in Cambodia

1119: The Knights Templar is founded

1120: The Council of Nablus is called to establish the ecclesiastical and secular lords of the crusader kingdoms

1121: St. Nobert and 29 companions take solemn vows in Premontre, France establishing the Premonstratensians or the Norbertines

1122: Concordat of Worms: treaty between Emperor Henry V and Pope Calixtus II ending the first phase of the power struggle between the Papacy and the Holy Roman Empire

1122: 1st Lateran Council

1125: the Battle of Azaz: Crusaders states win battle against the Seljuk Turks

1128: the Kingdom of Portugal gains independence

1130-1138: Papal schism between Pope Innocent II and Antipope Anacletus II

1135-1154: Civil war in England

1139: The Second Lateran Council ends the papal schism

1145-1148: The Second Crusade is called in response to the fall of Edessa

1153: the First Treaty of Constance: between Emperor Frederick I and Pope Eugene III prevents Manuel I Comnenus from reestablishing the Byzantine Empire on Italian soil

1155: Pope Adrian IV grants overlordship of Ireland to King Henry II of England

1163: Genghis Khan of the Mongol Empire is born

1170: Thomas Becket is martyred in Canterbury

1176: Frederick Barbarossa's forces are defeated by the Lombards giving rise to the acknowledgement of the pope's sovereignty over the papal states

1176: The Battle of Myriokephalon: the Byzantine Empire tries to reclaim Anatolia from the Seljuk Turks and fails

1185: The cathedral school in Lund, Sweden is established. The oldest school in Europe

1187: Saladin defeats the king of Jerusalem and reconquers Jerusalem

1189-1192: The Third Crusade to reconquer Jerusalem

1200: Construction begins on the Grand Village of the Natchez near Natchez, Mississippi. This village is used by the Natchez people until the early 17th century

Other notes:

Blast furnace is developed after ore comes from China.

Christian humanism and a new wave in art and culture throughout Europe.

The rise of the university and schools throughout Europe.

Politics

Although the far east doesn't impact Europe during the 12th century, some of the effects of the climate of the east will have effects in the future. Trade continues to increase since the routes were opened by the Romans over 1000 years ago. During the 12th century trade in ores, especially iron ore, increases dramatically leading to the invention of the blast furnace and new metal working potentials. Politically the far east is a mess like the rest of the continent. China spends much of this century at war with itself as many emperors and leaders change. Japan is in the same situation. For 20 years of the 12th century Japan is engaged in a major civil war. Throughout China, Japan and much of the entire far east, Buddhism is in the midst of a revival. New forms of Buddhism emerge as well as a renewal of its principles.

The Byzantine Empire is in shambles. After winning its last major war against the Bulgarians in the 11th century, they attempt two different feats which proved disastrous. The first major feat was to rally troops for the reconquest of the Holy Land. The main recruits were western warriors recruited by Pope Urban II. Although this crusade was successful and recaptured a good chunk of the Holy Land, the lands and resources didn't return to Byzantium and instead came under the rule of the west. Now the west has kingship claims of the Holy Land even though the crusaders swore to the Byzantine Emperor to return these lands. Without the army and strength to take on the crusaders, the Byzantine empire turns towards Anatolia with disastrous results. The fight against the Seljuk Turks, the same people who conquered the Holy Land and fought the Byzantines several times, left the Byzantine Empire in shambles. They will leave the 12th century a broken and defeated empire.

Around the middle of the century, Byzantium experience a cultural and military revival under the leadership of Manuel I Komnenos. Emperor Manuel, taking advantage of this revival after years of defeats, took the opportunity to expand the Byzantine Empire into the west. His desire was to conquer the Normans who were in southern Italy. He failed to conquer the southern chunk of Italy and the results were devastating. Pope Eugene III and Emperor Frederick I signed a joint treaty with Komnenos that he would never invade the west again nor assist the pope in any revolts that may happen in Rome. This treaty would be reaffirmed by Pope Adrian IV with the Lombard League in 1183. The east never attempted another military effort in the west.

The story of the east includes some new players: the crusaders. After their capture of Jerusalem and a good chunk of the Holy Land at the end of the 11th century, the Crusaders will have a massive impact on the Holy Land. After their conquest, they established kings and leaders in all the major cities. This will be the first time that Jerusalem is ruled by the west since the Roman Empire in the 2nd century. Additionally the land is divided into chunks called the crusaders kingdoms each with their own rulers and loyal to the Roman Pontiff. In 1119 a group of armed men took vows at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem becoming the Knights Templar. This new brand of “monks” becomes one of the dominant themes in the Church of the 12th and 13th centuries. Not only did this new brand of monks carry weapons but they were designed and dedicated to the care of the pilgrims in the Holy Land. Endorsed by St. Bernard of Clairvaux, they continued to persist and help pilgrims for about 200 years before various kings put the members under trials. Many were burned at the stake, imprisoned and tortured before the entire order was taken off the Church’s registry in 1319. The second group to form, although later in the century, were called the Knights Hospitaller. They existed to care for people in the Holy Land and were largely responsible for setting up hospitals. This organization continues to exist today under the name of the Knights of Malta.

These kingdoms will come under attack by the Seljuk Turks and then by the forces of Saladin, a commander of the Arabic forces. These fights will lead to the calling of two more crusades in this century. The second crusade, called from 1145-1149, was a combined effort from King Louis VII of France, King Conrad III of the Germans, and Pope Eugene III at the response to the fall of Edessa, one of the crusader kingdoms. With these three names listed together one might think that this crusade was a concerted effort by European kings to fight the Turks and win. It was not. Through the work of Pope Eugene III and St. Bernard of Clairvaux, the two major kings of Europe each sent delegations to Jerusalem to fight this war. With the combined, and disunified, forces of Europe, the crusade was a failure and they did not reclaim Edessa.

The third crusade was a mix of many forces. Since the 2nd crusade failed, many in Europe wanted Edessa returned to Christian hands. Almost a half-century later, Saladin united the middle east together for a unified attack against the crusader kingdoms. With a large army advancing against them, the crusaders appealed to the European kings for help. Although England and France were at odds with each other, they agreed to peace terms in order to help the Holy Land. Germany and Italy joined with England and France whose combined forces would continue to send troops from 1189 to 1192. These efforts were also unsuccessful. On Sept. 2

1192, Richard and Saladin signed a peace treaty giving the western bank to the Muslim forces with the stipulation of allowing unarmed pilgrims into the Holy Land.

The west was dealing with some of the same issues and some new ones. Spain continued its fight against the Muslims with some territory lost during the invasions of 1102 with small skirmishes throughout the century. In the previous century, Portugal was forming as its own nation and gained its independence as the Kingdom of Portugal in 1128. The Frankish kings began their fights with the papacy anew trying to establish their “rights” over the church. This battle left the Frankish people in an unfortunate situation as their two rulers duel over authority. Eventually, at the encouragement of the Archbishop of Mainz, the clergy, and the people, a settlement was written called the Concordat of Worms. Towards the east, Germany stays out of the major conflicts between pope and emperors. Instead they head east to try to capture some new lands and fail.

The conflicts arising from the ascension of William II as King of England led to 50 years of struggle and civil war in England. Upon the death of William II in 1100, Henry I became King of England. Although disputed and the cause of war, his rival, Robert, died in battle leading to Henry remaining as king. Since Henry’s only legitimate son died in a naval accident, England entered a period of civil war to decide the next king. Eventually Henry II took the throne in 1154. In 1155, Pope Adrian IV bestowed the title of Holy Roman Emperor on King Henry II passing the title from the Germans to the English. During his reign, King Henry fought the pope over the his rights to name and invest bishops. This fight led to one of the most well-known stories in Catholic English history, the martyrdom of Thomas Becket. Thomas was the Lord Chancellor for many years before being named Archbishop of Canterbury. With this new post came new relationships and new responsibilities. King Henry assumed that Thomas would support him and his claims against the church since they were good friends during Thomas’ time as chancellor. He was wrong. Thomas supported the pope and his rights to name bishops against the will of the king. When the king named his own bishops and circumvented Thomas’ rights to the coronation, he excommunicated all three of those named including the king. Henry was furious. Henry dispatched four knights to find and kill Becket. They found him in his monastery cloister, drug him out, and executed him.

Italy fared much like the rest of Europe. Whereas for centuries Italy was a series of kingdoms ruled by the pope but heavily influenced by the powerful families of Rome, the 12th century experienced the rise of new problems and desires for conquest. The Lombards, who resided to the north of Italy, had been enemies of the pope for centuries. After arriving in the 7th century, they continually caused problems for the pope through military and political maneuvers. King Frederick, aggravated by the loss of authority, went to war with Rome with the hope of returning his ability to name and invest bishops. The Lombards, although at odds with Rome for centuries, came to the aid of the Pope leading to Frederick’s defeat. Following his defeat, Frederick acknowledged the Pope’s authority over the papal states. To the south, the Normans were causing issues as well. They were influencing papal elections. Additionally, the Byzantine’s attempted to conquer the Normans as an “aid” to the pope who had been in conflict with the Normans for a few centuries. Knowing that the east desired territory expansion and with their

failed military attempt, the pope forced an agreement with the Byzantines that they would never attempt a military expedition in the west again.

Church

Following from the reforms of St. Pope Gregory VII in the 1070's, the 12th century tried to capture these great reforms and maintain their influence. The 12th century began calmly with placid relations between the papacy and the empire. This changed quickly with the events surrounding King Henry V of the Holy Roman Empire. King Henry made it clear to the pope through military threats that the investiture conflict was not over. Pope Paschal II yielded to these threats leading the king to issue the *Privilegium* in 1111. Through this document the church made concessions to the king allowing him to invest bishops. Tensions flared over the next decade as the popes and the king remained in conflict with each other. We normally think of conflicts as isolated events that effect only the rulers. This conflict affected everyone. The people were in a challenge of double allegiance, the clergy were caught in this conflict, and politic issues erupted due to the tensions between these two great rulers. Pressured by the Archbishop of Mainz, the clergy, and the people, King Henry V agreed to meet with the pope and settle this dispute. The settlement is called the Concordat of Worms. This agreement between Henry V and Pope Callixtus II reestablished the authority of the pope to name and invest bishops and reaffirmed the boundaries between emperor and pope. Following from the Concordat of Worms, the pope called a council. This council, the 9th ecumenical council and convened in the Lateran and discussed and affirmed the basic agreements set by the Concordat of Worms. Additionally, the Council set many procedures for the church. A person excommunicated by one bishop cannot be reinstated by another. Simony, blood marriages, and the transfer and sale of church lands and goods by laity were forbidden.

Peace from the Concordat of Worms gave the church about 8 years of peace before conflicts emerged in Rome. The two most powerful families in Rome, the Frangipani and the Pierleoni, were in a feud regarding the next pope. The Pierleoni favored and rightfully elected Pope Celestine II as the next pope through papal election with the cardinals. The Frangipani family favored Honorius who was not chosen by the conclave. As Pope Celestine was celebrating his election as pope and they were singing their hymn of thanksgiving for the new pope, the Frangipani family burst into the cathedral with swords drawn and demanded the Honorius be named pope. Celestine relented and Honorius became pope. As Honorius was lying ill and about to die, the Frangipani family, fearing retaliation by the Pierleoni family, hurriedly elected a new pope, Innocent II. The Pierleoni family, consequently, elected Anacletus II through a conclave with the cardinals. Pope Innocent II was favored by most of Europe including the two emperors whereas Anacletus was supported by Italy and the Normans to the south. The schism ended with the death of Anacletus in 1138.

Upon the death of Anacletus, Pope Innocent called the 10th ecumenical Council the 2nd Lateran Council in 1138. This council condemned Anacletus and nullified all his ordinations. It reaffirmed the decrees of the 1st Lateran Council and established some new regulations including the necessity of the laity to pay tithes to the bishops, forbad the use of slings and arrows against Christians, and established a maximum of 3 years that a Diocese can be without a bishop.

The church of the 12th century is expanding fast into new realms of life with new expressions of faith. Two of the most prominent innovations of the 12th century include cathedrals and new religious orders. Since the 5th century, the options for Christians were largely the same: married, clergy, or monk. Monks lived a combination of either semi-solitary life or a communal life of penance. The monks we are most familiar with are the Benedictine Monks who live a communal life centered on the monastery. Christians believed that the most sure way to follow Jesus was to imitate his life. Jesus lived a life of poverty, penance, and celibacy. Therefore the monk followed the same route. Even with the foundation of Cluny in 909 the culture around monastic life was changing. Starting in Cluny in the 12th century a new idea emerged from the preaching of St. Bernard of Clairvaux. Bernard felt that the way of life of the monk was not consistent with the preaching of Jesus nor the Rule of St. Benedict. Through the incredibly effective preaching of St. Bernard, he brought 30 men with him when he founded a new monastery at Clairvaux dedicated to a more strict following of the Rule of St. Benedict. This group became known as the Cistercians. This idea of a stricter adherence to a rule will dominate monastic reform through the modern age.

St. Bernard is not the only person thinking that religious life is out of sync with the Gospel message. Many Popes and several of the other great thinkers and spiritual masters of the 12th century will join his way of thinking. In 1120 a man by the name of Norbert will lead the charge for the canons or diocesan priests. Strongly disliking the laxity in the clerics, he began a new order focused on uniting the clergy in a new way of life that is more consistent with the Gospel message and the life of a priest. This new order is called the Premonstratensians, the Norbertines, or the White Friars. At the end of the 12th century, another form of religious revival will just be starting with the life of St. Francis who will begin his religious order at the beginning of the 13th century. All aspects of Christianity are looking for revival and renewal in an age of laxity and confusion. Many good popes of the 13th century will start with revolution to reclaim the Gospel message and bring revival at all levels of society.

Another form of priestly communal life formed like St. Norbert called the Augustinians. Although not new to Christianity, the reform of the secular canons led to the formation of a priestly religious group based on the Rule of St. Augustine.

Turning towards the east, Orthodox Christianity will not have the level of revival or renewal experienced by the west. Since the beginning of the desert fathers and mothers of the 3rd century, eastern monasticism will remain largely the same. The prime example of monastic life for Orthodox Christians is the Monks of Mt. Athos. The monks of Mt. Athos have lived solitary lives on Mt. Athos since the beginning of the 6th century. To eastern Christians, the image of Mt. Athos is the prime example of monastic life and the ascent of the soul to God. These monks would live in cells along the caves of the mountain and spend their lives in prayer and contemplation. Other monks and people would bring them pails of food lowered down into their caves. The Orthodox will not add new religious orders nor reform the traditions of their monastic orders. To this day, the monks of Mt. Athos persist in living their lives as they have for over a millennium. They still remain celibate and ban all women from their peninsula.

Similar to the monastic movements of the east, another monastic movement was forming in the west centered on the experience of the desert fathers called the Carthusians. Founded by St. Bruno in 1089 and named after the city of Charthouse, the order combined the eremitical life of the desert fathers with the monastic life of St. Benedict forming a community of hermits. They would live solitary lives throughout the day and then join in common for prayer and Mass. Modern day Carthusians only speak to each other on holy days and one extra day a year. The Carthusians are best known for their brand of liquor named after the city Charthouse.

The major innovation for the daily life of the individual is the cathedral. The first Christian churches were house churches designed to be a safe place to celebrate the Sacraments while under Roman persecution. Once Christianity was legalized in 313, the first churches adopted the style of the Roman Basilica with its spacious middle room that could accommodate many people and a directionality which highlighted the acts of the Mass. Starting in the 11th century and pinnacled in the 14th, architects and engineers made incredible advances in buildings. The most prominent of these advances were the Romanesque churches. These massive stone structures were some of the largest buildings of Europe for their time and some still remain to this day. With the high vaulted ceilings and the wide open spaces for church goers, they were a marvel to behold. The main innovations of the Romanesque building were the thick walls that could support the vaulted roof and the small windows that allowed light in the church. The church buildings were normally arranged in a cross pattern with the central axis being the sanctuary with the altar and the seating in the main body of the cross shape. The expanded walls and ceilings allowed for the proliferation of art work and design.

The secondary effect of these cathedrals was the addition of the side altars. Mass was a public and communal event. Everyone gathered on Sundays for the celebration of the Mass. A new wave of thought hit the priests and the people of the 12th century. With pilgrims wandering throughout Europe seeking these holy sites for devotion or indulgences, they needed a place for their Mass in their language. Priests would lead these people on pilgrimages and celebrated private Masses with their pilgrim groups on these side altars. Thus begins the private Mass, the need for extra altars in the church, and the movement away from the strictly communal sense of the Mass to one of private devotion.

Spirituality

The 12th century experienced a flowering of devotion amongst the laity. Not only were pilgrimages common due to the desire to see the Holy Land but additionally to visit holy sites throughout Europe. The proliferation of saints and places of veneration led to the mass movement of pilgrims throughout the continent. As mentioned above, this desire for pilgrimages led to a series of new popular devotions. The most important devotion was the Mass. Individual and private Masses became common as pilgrims would travel with their priest and celebrate Mass in their native language. Side altars were set up in major churches like cathedrals to accommodate the extra Masses and the celebration of the private Mass.

Although it may seem odd to us today, the reception of Communion by the faithful began to dwindle as a sense of unworthiness permeated the general sentiments of the people. A devotion

to the Eucharist was growing out of these devotional Masses. People wanted to “see” Jesus who came to them in the transubstantiated bread and wine. People requested that the priest elevate the consecrated host for longer periods of time so that they could gaze upon Jesus. This desire to see Jesus led to the practice of Eucharistic Adoration where the consecrated host would be exposed for extended periods of time and people would come and adore him. This practice of spending time with our Eucharistic Lord is not new to this century. As early as the 4th century we have records of people meeting in churches and gathering around the extra consecrated bread given to those who were sick. The 12th century saw a flowering of devotion to the Eucharist and rites associated with it.

The veneration of the saints is also not new to this century neither is the veneration of Our Lady. A new flowering of devotion to Our Lady and the saints grew out of the popular devotion of the people. Major preachers like St. Bernard of Clairvaux and St. Bruno captured the hearts of people and encouraged devotion to Our Lady. In this century she gained the titles, The Virgin Mother of God and The Virgin Mary. Art depicted her as the mother of Jesus and the Queen of Heaven. Art also advanced in other ways. With both devotion to the saints and well as to the Mass, the main depictions began to center of the Sacrifice of the Mass as well as the events of Jesus’ Crucifixion.

Key Figures:

Bernard of Clairvaux: born into the Burgundy nobility as the third of seven children and given a good education at the local schools. While in school, he studied literature as his entry point into studying Scripture. He grew up pious with a deep devotion to Our Lady. At the age of 19 his mother died and this led him to accept a life of solitude and prayer. He eventually entered the monastery at Citeaux. This new monastery focused on a stricter adherence to the Rule of St. Benedict. The monastery grew quickly. Under Bernard’s influence, people flocked to the monastery including his father and all of his brothers.

The Abbot, St. Richard, sent Bernard to found another monastery at a place that Bernard called Claire Vallee, which became Clairvaux. The austerity of this new monastic life proved trying to Bernard whose health failed in the first years at the new monastery. Through his trials, more people flocked to the monastery hoping for the more austere life. Over the next 30 years, Bernard would preach for the 2nd crusade, support the popes even during the schism bringing back order to the papacy, attend two councils, and establish over 10 new monasteries. Even through all this, he was best known for his preaching and theological reflections.

Peter Abelard: was born in 1079 as a nobleman of the house of Brittany. He was an intelligent young man and learned quickly. Although his father wanted him to become a knight, Abelard’s talents for the academic life soon changed his mind. Abelard went off to study at the university where he focused on liberal arts and philosophy. His fame grew quickly. At the height of his career he would claim himself to be the undefeated philosopher.

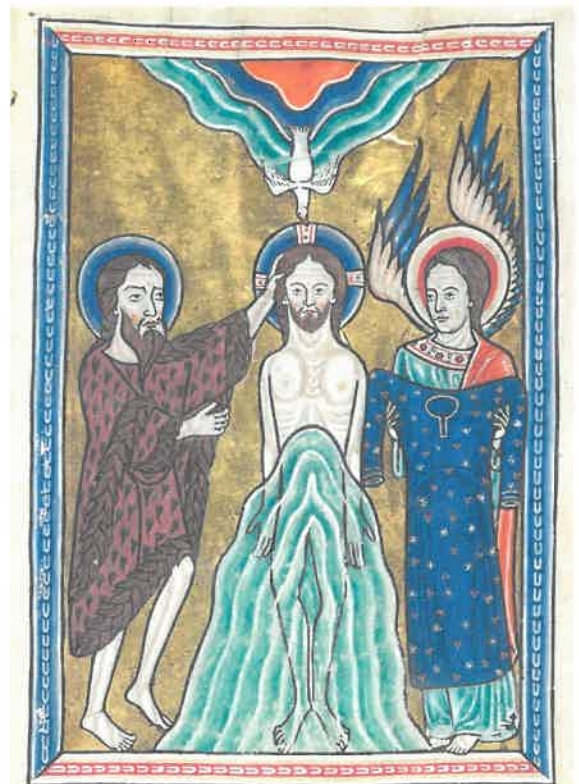
While pursuing the academic life, he met a woman named Heloise. Unfortunately, Abelard is best known for this story. He soon fell in love and wanted to marry her. Academics of the middle ages were celibate and couldn’t marry, so they arranged a secret marriage. Heloise’s uncle

eventually made the matter public causing great scandal. Abelard sent her to a monastery and they lived the rest of their lives apart. Abelard's advancements in the realm of philosophy will change the western world and become one of the most hotly debated works of philosophy for the next 600 years.

St. Bruno: was born in Cologne, Germany and became a famous teacher. He was appointed chancellor of the archdiocese at the age of 45. As chancellor, he worked with Pope Gregory VII to enact the reforms of the clergy leading to the ousting of his bishop. Bruno had a dream of living a quiet contemplative life. He encouraged a few of his friends to found a monastery in Chartreuse where they could live a quiet and contemplative life. His new rule and monastic way of life will be called the Carthusians, named after the founding town. The Carthusian order will be the only order in the church that has never been reformed nor deformed.

Thomas Becket: born in London around 1118 whose parents settled in England from Normandy, he lived a humble beginning of noble parents who educated him well. After he finished his studies, he became a secretary eventually moving through the ranks to become the secretary of the Archbishop of Canterbury. His skills in negotiation and secretarial work brought him to the attention of the king. When King Henry II began his reign over England, he appointed Thomas as his Lord Chancellor, who was 36 at the time. In 1161, Archbishop Theobald died and the pope named Thomas as the Archbishop of Canterbury. A great change happened in his life. He went from the plush, lavish life of the Lord Chancellor to accepting simplicity, poverty, and the penances of the clerical state. King Henry assumed that Thomas would be the same man and support his fight with the papacy. Conversely, Thomas supported the Pope against the King leading to his exile. Undeterred by his exile, Thomas returned only to find the king still breathing fury upon him. King Henry is reported to have said "what do I do about this rouge priest." Shortly after this, King Henry dispatched 4 knights who found Becket in his oratory praying, They drug him out of the cloister and killed him in the street. He is hailed as a martyr for the Anglican and the Catholic churches.

Art





How delightful is your dwelling-place, Lord of hosts!

My soul is weak with longing for the courts of your palace

That is, for the broad spaces of the heavenly Jerusalem, which is the city of God.

Blessed are they who dwell in your house: *they will praise you for ever.*

THE COURTS OF THE HOUSE OF THE LORD

Now the psalmist shows why he desires to enter the courts of the Lord: Lord, God of all powers in heaven, my king and my God, *blessed are they who dwell in your house.* It is as if he said, ‘Who would not wish to enter your courts, since you are God, that is, the Creator, the Lord of the powers, the King, and since all are blessed who live in your house?’ Because ‘courts’ and ‘house’ mean the same thing here.

When he says ‘blessed’ he means that they have all conceivable blessedness. And they are surely blessed, because they will praise you with loving devotion for ever, that is, for all eternity. They would not be able to praise the Lord for all eternity unless they were blessed for all eternity.

WE NEED GRACE TO CLIMB

Blessed the man whose help comes from you, *who has set his heart on climbing to you.*

But no-one can reach this blessedness on his own, even if he has hope, faith and love. *Blessed is the man whose help comes from you* – in other words, *only* the man whose help comes from you will attain the blessedness *he has set his heart on.* That is to say: the only people who will attain blessedness are those who set their hearts on climbing many steps of virtue and good works, but also receive the help of your grace. No-one can climb by himself, as the Lord himself has said: *No-one has gone up to heaven except the Son of Man who is in heaven.*

HEAVENLY JERUSALEM – A MOUNTAIN FULL OF JOY

I say that he is *climbing to you* because he now lives in the valley of tears, that is, in this present life, which is lowly and filled with the tears of tribulation; as opposed to the other life, which can be called a mountain in comparison, a mountain full of joy.

Since the psalmist has said, *Blessed the man whose help comes from you,* one might ask, ‘Will God give his help?’ The answer is that help is truly offered by God to the blessed. For the lawgiver, that is, Christ, gave us the law and he gives us and will go on giving us blessings (that

is, the many gifts of grace) by which he blesses his own people. This means he will raise them up to blessedness, and so *they will go from strength to strength* as they climb.

SEE IN A SPIRITUAL SENSE

In the future heavenly Zion Christ will be seen, the God of gods, and since he is God he will make his people divine also. Or, if you prefer, you can say that the God of gods, God the Trinity, will be visible in a spiritual sense in those who dwell in Zion. By the light of their understanding they will see God in themselves in a way that now they cannot, for God will be all in all.

This post from St. Bruno the Carthusian (St. Bruno of Cologne) extols the heavenly Jerusalem in its commentary on [Psalm 84](#) (Ps 83 in the Latin Vulgate Ps. 83: Edit. Cartusiae de Pratis, 1891, 376-377). It interprets the psalm in terms of the spiritual or anagogical meaning, which is the fourth sense of scripture according to medieval interpretation – the ascent or climb to heaven. It appears in the Roman Catholic Office of Readings for Thursday in the 23rd week of Ordinary time along with the biblical reading taken from [Lamentations 1:1-12, 18-20](#).

Commentary on the Song of Songs^{*}

St Bernard of Clairvaux

SERMON 1 ON THE TITLE OF THE BOOK

The instructions that I address to you, my brothers, will differ from those I should deliver to people in the world, at least the manner will be different. The preacher who desires to follow St Paul's method of teaching will give them milk to drink rather than solid food, and will serve a more nourishing diet to those who are spiritually enlightened: "We teach," he said, "not in the way philosophy is taught, but in the way that the Spirit teaches us: we teach spiritual things spiritually." And again: "We have a wisdom to offer those who have reached maturity," in whose company, I feel assured, you are to be found, unless in vain have you prolonged your study of divine teaching, mortified your senses, and meditated day and night on God's law. Be ready then to feed on bread rather than milk. Solomon has bread to give that is splendid and delicious, the bread of that book called "The Song of Songs." Let us bring it forth then if you please, and break it.

2. Now, unless I am mistaken, by the grace of God you have understood quite well from the book of Ecclesiastes how to recognize and have done with the false promise of this world. And then the book of Proverbs — has not your life and your conduct been sufficiently amended and enlightened by the doctrine it inculcates? These are two loaves of which it has been your pleasure to taste, loaves you have welcomed as coming from the cupboard of a friend. Now approach for this third loaf that, if possible, you may always recognize what is best. Since there are two evils that comprise the only, or at least the main, enemies of the soul: a misguided love of the world and an excessive love of self, the two books previously mentioned can provide an antidote to each of these infections. One uproots pernicious habits of mind and body with the hoe of self-control. The other, by the use of enlightened reason, quickly perceives a delusive tinge in all that the world holds glorious, truly distinguishing between it and deeper truth. Moreover, it causes the fear of God and the observance of his commandments to be preferred to all human pursuits and worldly desires. And rightly so, for the former is the beginning of wisdom, the latter its culmination, for there is no true and consummate wisdom other than the avoidance of evil and the doing of good, no one can successfully shun evil without the fear of God, and no work is good without the observance of the commandments.

3. Taking it then these two evils have been warded off by the reading of choice books, we may suitably proceed with this holy and contemplative discourse which, as the fruit

^{*}Original e-Text arranged by Darrell Wright, 2008.

of the other two, may be delivered only to well prepared ears and minds. Before the flesh has been tamed and the spirit set free by zeal for truth, before the world's glamour and entanglements have been firmly repudiated, it is a rash enterprise on any man's part to presume to study spiritual doctrines. Just as a light is flashed in vain on closed or sightless eyes, so "an unspiritual person cannot accept anything of the Spirit of God." For "the Holy Spirit of instruction shuns what is false," and that is what the life of the intemperate man is. Nor will he ever have a part with the pretensions of the world, since he is the Spirit of Truth. How can there be harmony between the wisdom that comes down from above and the wisdom of the world, which is foolishness to God, or the wisdom of the flesh which is at enmity with God? I am sure that the friend who comes to us on his travels will have no reason to murmur against us after he has shared in this third loaf.

4. But who is going to divide this loaf? The Master of the house is present, it is the Lord you must see in the breaking of the bread. For who else could more fittingly do it? It is a task that I would not dare to arrogate to myself. So look upon me as one from whom you look for nothing. For I myself am one of the seekers, one who begs along with you for the food of my soul, the nourishment of my spirit. Poor and needy, I knock at that door of his which, "when he opens, nobody can close," that I may find light on the profound mystery to which this discourse leads. Patiently all creatures look to you, O Lord. "Little children go begging for bread; no one spares a scrap for them;" they await it from your merciful love. O God most kind, break your bread for this hungering flock, through my hands indeed if it should please you, but with an efficacy that is all your own.

5. Tell us, I beg you, by whom, about whom and to whom it is said: "Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth." How shall I explain so abrupt a beginning, this sudden irruption as from a speech in mid-course? For the words spring upon us as if indicating one speaker to whom another is replying as she demands a kiss— whoever she may be. But if she asks for or demands a kiss from somebody, why does she distinctly and expressly say with the mouth, and even with his own mouth, as if lovers should kiss by means other than the mouth, or with mouths other than their own? But yet she does not say: "Let him kiss me with his mouth"; what she says is still more intimate: "with the kiss of his mouth." How delightful a ploy of speech this, prompted into life by the kiss, with Scripture's own engaging countenance inspiring the reader and enticing him on, that he may find pleasure even in the laborious pursuit of what lies hidden, with a fascinating theme to sweeten the fatigue of research. Surely this mode of beginning that is not a beginning, this novelty of diction in a book so old, cannot but increase the reader's attention. It must follow too that this work was composed, not by any human skill but by the artistry of the Spirit, difficult to understand indeed but yet enticing one to investigate.

6. So now what shall we do? Shall we by-pass the title? No, not even one iota may be omitted, since we are commanded to gather up the tiniest fragments lest they be lost. The title runs: "The beginning of Solomon's Song of Songs." First of all take note of the appropriateness of the name "Peaceful," that is, Solomon, at the head of a book which

opens with the token of peace, with a kiss. Take note too that by this kind of opening only men of peaceful minds, men who can achieve mastery over the turmoil of the passions and the distracting burden of daily chores, are invited to the study of this book.

7. Again, the title is not simply the word “Song,” but “Song of Songs,” a detail not without significance. For though I have read many songs in the Scriptures, I cannot recall any that bear such a name. Israel chanted a song to Yahweh celebrating his escape from the sword and the tyranny of Pharaoh, and the twofold good fortune that simultaneously liberated and avenged him in the Red Sea. Yet even though chanted, this has not been called a “Song of Songs”; Scripture, if my memory serves me right, introduces it with the words: “Israel sang this song in honor of Yahweh.” Song poured from the lips of Deborah, of Judith, of the mother of Samuel, of several of the prophets, yet none of these songs is styled a “Song of Songs.” You will find that all of them, as far as I can see, were inspired to song because of favors to themselves or to their people, songs for a victory won, for an escape from danger or the gaining of a boon long sought. They would not be found ungrateful for the divine beneficence, so all sang for reasons proper to each, in accord with the Psalmist’s words: “He gives thanks to you, O God, for blessing him.” But King Solomon himself, unique as he was in wisdom, renowned above all men, abounding in wealth, secure in his peace, stood in no need of any particular benefit that would have inspired him to sing those songs. Nor does Scripture in any place attribute such a motive to him.

8. We must conclude then it was a special divine impulse that inspired these songs of his that now celebrate the praises of Christ and his Church, the gift of holy love, the sacrament of endless union with God. Here too are expressed the mounting desires of the soul, its marriage song, an exultation of spirit poured forth in figurative language pregnant with delight. It is no wonder that like Moses he put a veil on his face, equally resplendent as it must have been in this encounter, because in those days few if any could sustain the bright vision of God’s glory. Accordingly, because of its excellence, I consider this nuptial song to be well deserving of the title that so remarkably designates it, the Song of Songs, just as he in whose honor it is sung is uniquely proclaimed King of kings and Lord of lords.

9. Furthermore if you look back on your own experience, is it not in that victory by which your faith overcomes the world, in “your exit from the horrible pit and out of the slough of the marsh,” that you yourselves sing a new song to the Lord for all the marvels he has performed? Again, when he purposed to “settle your feet on a rock and to direct your steps,” then too, I feel certain, a new song was sounding on your lips, a song to our God for his gracious renewal of your life. When you repented he not only forgave your sins but even promised rewards, so that rejoicing in the hope of benefits to come, you sing of the Lord’s ways: how great is the glory of the Lord! And when, as happens, texts of Scripture hitherto dark and impenetrable at last become bright with meaning for you, then, in gratitude for this nurturing bread of heaven you must charm the ears of God with a voice of exultation and praise, a festal song. In the daily trials and combats arising from the flesh, the world and the devil, that are never wanting to those who live devout

lives in Christ, you learn by what you experience that man's life on earth is a ceaseless warfare, and are impelled to repeat your songs day after day for every victory won. As often as temptation is overcome, an immoral habit brought under control, an impending danger shunned, the trap of the seducer detected, when a passion long indulged is finally and perfectly allayed, or a virtue persistently desired and repeatedly sought is ultimately obtained by God's gift; so often, in the words of the prophet, let thanksgiving and joy resound. For every benefit conferred, God is to be praised in his gifts. Otherwise when the time of judgment comes, that man will be punished as an ingrate who cannot say to God: "Your statutes were my song in the land of exile."

10. Again I think that your own experience reveals to you the meaning of those psalms, which are called not Songs of Songs but Songs of the Steps, in that each one, at whatever stage of growth he be, in accord with the upward movements of his heart may choose one of these songs to praise and give glory to him who empowers you to advance. I don't know how else these words could be true: "There are shouts of joy and victory in the tents of the just." And still more that beautiful and salutary exhortation of the Apostle: "With psalms and hymns and spiritual canticles, singing and chanting to the Lord in your hearts."

11. But there is that other song which, by its unique dignity and sweetness, excels all those I have mentioned and any others there might be; hence by every right do I acclaim it as the Song of Songs. It stands at a point where all the others culminate. Only the touch of the Spirit can inspire a song like this, and only personal experience can unfold its meaning. Let those who are versed in the mystery revel in it; let all others burn with desire rather to attain to this experience than merely to learn about it. For it is not a melody that resounds abroad but the very music of the heart, not a trilling on the lips but an inward pulsing of delight, a harmony not of voices but of wills. It is a tune you will not hear in the streets, these notes do not sound where crowds assemble; only the singer hears it and the one to whom he sings — the lover and the beloved. It is preeminently a marriage song telling of chaste souls in loving embrace, of their wills in sweet concord, of the mutual exchange of the heart's affections.

12. The novices, the immature, those but recently converted from a worldly life, do not normally sing this song or hear it sung. Only the mind disciplined by persevering study, only the man whose efforts have borne fruit under God's inspiration, the man whose years, as it were, make him ripe for marriage years measured out not in time but in merits — only he is truly prepared for nuptial union with the divine partner, a union we shall describe more fully in due course. But the hour has come when both our rule and the poverty of our state demand that we go out to work. Tomorrow, with God's help, we shall continue to speak about the kiss, because today's discourse on the title sets us free to resume where we had begun.