



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

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[[Video](#)]

Two Theological Models in Comparison: Bernard and Abelard

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In [my last Catechesis](#) I presented the main features of 12th-century monastic theology and scholastic theology which, in a certain sense, we might call respectively "theology of the heart" and "theology of reason". Among the exponents of both these theological currents a broad and at times heated discussion developed, symbolically represented by the controversy between St Bernard of Clairvaux and Abelard.

In order to understand this confrontation between the two great teachers it helps to remember that theology is the search for a rational understanding, as far as this is possible, of the mysteries of Christian Revelation, believed through faith: *fides quaerens intellectum* faith seeks understanding to borrow a traditional, concise and effective definition. Now, whereas St Bernard, a staunch representative of monastic theology, puts the accent on the first part of the definition, namely on *fides* faith, Abelard, who was a scholastic, insists on the second part, that is, on the *intellectus*, on understanding through reason. For Bernard faith itself is endowed with a deep certitude based on the testimony of Scripture and on the teaching of the Church Fathers. Faith, moreover, is reinforced by the witness of the Saints and by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in the individual believer's soul. In cases of doubt and ambiguity, faith is protected and illumined by the exercise of the Magisterium of the Church. So it was that Bernard had difficulty in reaching agreement with

Abelard and, more in general, with those who submitted the truths of faith to the critical examination of the intellect; an examination which in his opinion entailed a serious danger, that is, intellectualism, the relativization of truth, the questioning of the actual truths of faith. In this approach Bernard saw audacity taken to the point of unscrupulousness, a product of the pride of human intelligence that claims to "grasp" the mystery of God. In a letter he writes with regret: "Human ingenuity takes possession of everything, leaving nothing to faith. It confronts what is above and beyond it, scrutinizes what is superior to it, bursts into the world of God, alters rather than illumines the mysteries of faith; it does not open what is closed and sealed but rather uproots it, and what it does not find viable in itself it considers as nothing and refuses to believe in it" (*Epistola CLXXXVIII,1: PL 182, 1, 353*).

Theology for Bernard had a single purpose: to encourage the intense and profound experience of God. Theology is therefore an aid to loving the Lord ever more and ever better, as the title of his Treatise on the Duty to love God says (*Liber de diligendo Deo*). On this journey there are various stages that Bernard describes in detail, which lead to the crowning experience when the believer's soul becomes inebriated in ineffable love. Already on earth the human soul can attain this mystical union with the divine Word, a union that the *Doctor Mellifluus* describes as "spiritual nuptials". The divine Word visits the soul, eliminates the last traces of resistance, illuminates, inflames and transforms it. In this mystical union the soul enjoys great serenity and sweetness and sings a hymn of joy to its Bridegroom. As I mentioned in the Catechesis on the life and doctrine of St Bernard, theology for him could not but be nourished by contemplative prayer, in other words by the affective union of the heart and the mind with God.

On the other hand Abelard, who among other things was the very person who introduced the term "theology" in the sense in which we understand it today, puts himself in a different perspective. Born in Brittany, France, this famous teacher of the 12th century was endowed with a keen intelligence and his vocation was to study. He first concerned himself with philosophy and then applied the results he achieved in this discipline to theology which he taught in Paris, the most cultured city of the time, and later in the monasteries in which he lived. He was a brilliant orator: literally crowds of students attended his lectures. He had a religious spirit but a restless personality and his life was full of dramatic events: he contested his teachers and he had a son by Héloïse, a cultured and intelligent woman. He often argued with his theological colleagues and also underwent ecclesiastical condemnations although he died in full communion with the Church, submitting to her authority with a spirit of faith. Actually St Bernard contributed to condemning certain teachings of Abelard at the Provincial Synod of Sens in 1140 and went so far as to request Pope Innocent II's intervention. The Abbot of Clairvaux contested, as we have seen, the excessively intellectualistic method of Abelard who in his eyes reduced faith to mere opinion, detached from the revealed truth. Bernard's fears were not unfounded and were, moreover, shared by other great thinkers of his time. Indeed, an excessive use of philosophy dangerously weakened Abelard's Trinitarian teaching, hence also his idea of God. In the moral field his teaching was not devoid of ambiguity: he insisted on considering the intention of the subject as the

sole source for defining the goodness or evil of moral acts, thereby neglecting the objective significance and moral value of the actions: a dangerous subjectivism. This as we know is a very timely aspect for our epoch in which all too often culture seems to be marked by a growing tendency to ethical relativism; the self alone decides what is good for it, for oneself, at this moment. However, the great merits of Abelard, who had many disciples and made a crucial contribution to the development of scholastic theology destined to be expressed in a more mature and fruitful manner in the following century should not be forgotten. Nor should some of his insights be underestimated, such as, for example, his affirmation that non-Christian religious traditions already contain a preparation for the acceptance of Christ, the divine Word.

What can we learn today from the confrontation, frequently in very heated tones, between Bernard and Abelard and, in general, between monastic theology and scholastic theology? First of all I believe that it demonstrates the usefulness and need for healthy theological discussion within the Church, especially when the questions under discussion are not defined by the Magisterium, which nevertheless remains an ineluctable reference point. St Bernard, but also Abelard himself, always recognized her authority unhesitatingly. Furthermore, Abelard's condemnation on various occasions reminds us that in the theological field there must be a balance between what we may call the architectural principles given to us by Revelation, which therefore always retain their priority importance, and the principles for interpretation suggested by philosophy, that is, by reason, which have an important but exclusively practical role. When this balance between the architecture and the instruments for interpretation is lacking, theological reflection risks being distorted by errors and it is then the task of the Magisterium to exercise that necessary service to the truth which belongs to it. It must be emphasized in addition that among the reasons that induced Bernard to "take sides" against Abelard and to call for the intervention of the Magisterium, was also his concern to safeguard simple and humble believers, who must be defended when they risk becoming confused or misled by excessively personal opinions or by anti-conformist theological argumentation that might endanger their faith.

Lastly, I would like to recall that the theological confrontation between Bernard and Abelard ended with their complete reconciliation, thanks to the mediation of a common friend, [Peter the Venerable, the Abbot of Cluny](#) of whom I have spoken in one of my previous Catecheses. Abelard showed humility in recognizing his errors, Bernard used great benevolence. They both upheld the most important value in a theological controversy: to preserve the Church's faith and to make the truth in charity triumph. Today too may this be the attitude with which we confront one another in the Church, having as our goal the constant quest for truth.

To the English-speaking pilgrims:

I am pleased to welcome the English-speaking pilgrims present at today's Audience. I particularly greet priests from the Dioceses of England and Wales celebrating Jubilees, pilgrims from the

Diocese of Wichita, student and teachers from Catholic schools in Denmark, and Catholic nurses from the United States. God's Blessings upon you all!

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Lastly, I greet the *young people*, the *sick*, and the *newlyweds*. Today is the liturgical memorial of St Charles Borromeo, an outstanding Bishop of the Diocese of Milan, who, inspired by ardent love of Christ, was a tireless teacher and guide for people. May his example help you, dear *young people* to be led by Christ in your daily decisions; may it encourage you, dear *sick people* to offer your afflictions for the Pastors of the Church and for the salvation of souls; may it support you, dear *newlyweds*, in basing your family on the Gospel values.

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