

Gethsemani Abbey: Reading at Vigils, TUESDAY, AUGUST 20, 2019

St. Bernard as master of mystical and spousal love in Christ: a reading from a letter of Pope John Paul II to the Cistercian Abbots General.

...The age in which St Bernard lived saw the beginnings of a new stage of intellectual life in Europe. In fact, while the study of man himself increased, there began an intellectual movement which later on was called humanism and which even in our own times continues with vigor. The Doctor of Clairvaux who knew the aspirations and anxieties of his age, understood thoroughly this new passion for man and did not simply reject it nor condemn it.

On the contrary, he affirmed that man, created according to the image and likeness of God, is an “exalted creature,” and because of this—a capacity to share in the very divine grandeur itself, but at the same time, this capacity also shows him to be miserable, poor, weak and insignificant. Christ saved the whole person in order to bring into eternal life not only his soul but also his body.

Thus, affirming openly the dignity of the human condition, St Bernard exclaimed: “How admirable is the goodness of God seeking man! How great, also, the dignity of man thus found!” And thus, from the consideration of man’s dignity which is revealed by creation and redemption, he showed that there arose, as from a double spring, a true Christian humanism. In fact, in affirming that the image of God remains in us even after sin, and that God became man in order to save man,; St Bernard in theological doctrine contemplates at the same time the dignity and misery of man and in this way he avoids the danger of false “anthropocentrism.”

The christology of St Bernard offers an adequate foundation to the Christian humanism when he teaches with a certain forcefulness that the whole person was taken up in Christ. Actually, while we are living on this earth, in our human condition, we have access to God only through the law of the Incarnation. This “excellent doctor,” when he affirms that he does not yet see Christ in a form equal to the Father because he does not contemplate “God with God,” nevertheless added: “at least as a man, I present Him as man to men.” These words contain an understanding of the true sense of the word “humanism”: the recognition of the limitations as well as the exalted capacity and dignity of man who was created in Paradise, united in friendship with God and was called through the goodness of God to a much more intimate union which surpasses all human concepts and all expectations.

...In the spiritual school of St Bernard, the earthly life of Jesus is never found separated from the Eternal Word Incarnate; [it is both] present with the Father in glory and present among us by grace as the Spouse of the Church and of the soul. [It is he] who calls and leads his bride to the most intimate union [with him in the Father]. It is with reason then that the Abbot of Clairvaux was called Master of mystical and spousal love in Christ.

END OF READING