

# St. Bernard of Clairvaux

BORN 1090; DIED 1153  
ABBOT AND DOCTOR OF THE CHURCH  
FEAST DAY: AUGUST 20

**F**EW MEN have ever dominated the religious and political life of an age as did St. Bernard of Clairvaux, who was said to have carried the twelfth century on his shoulders.

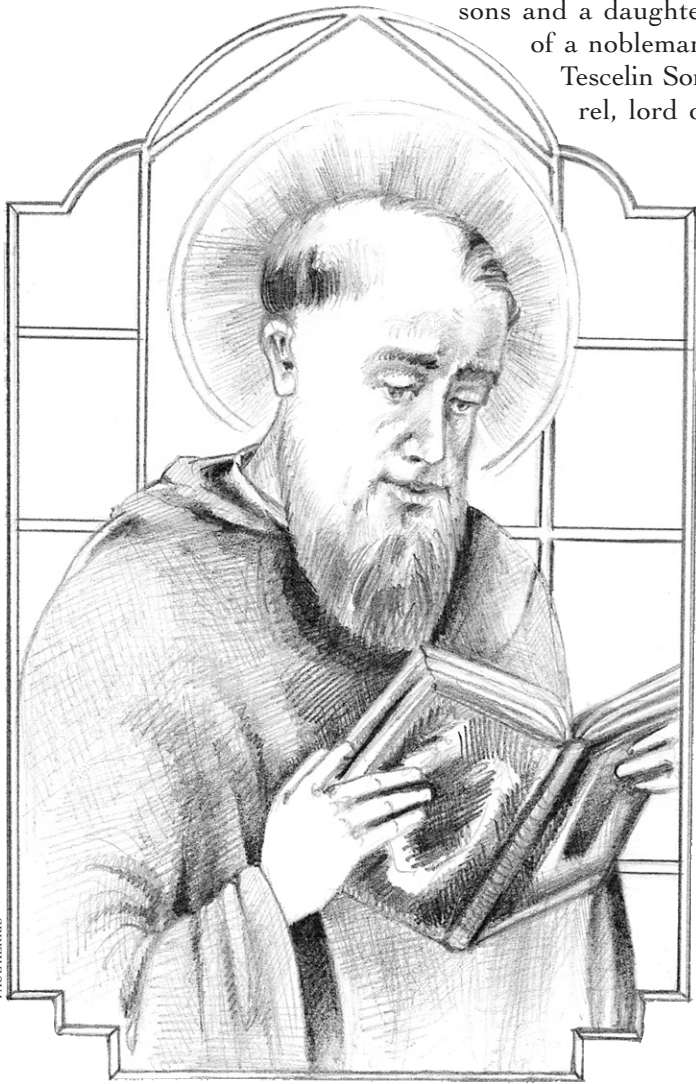
Bernard was born near Dijon in Burgundy (the eastern part of modern France), the third of six sons and a daughter of a nobleman, Tescelin Sorrel, lord of

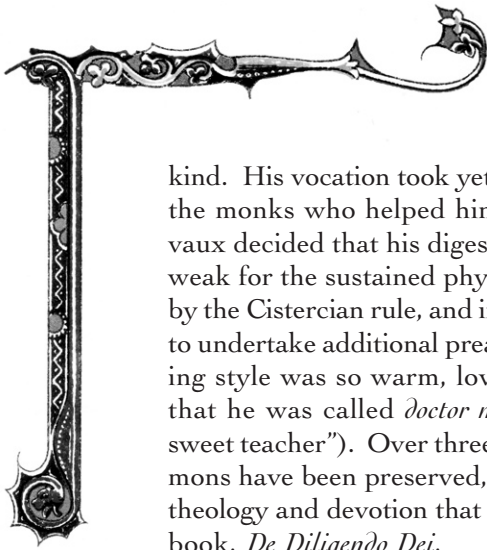
Fontaines, and his wife, Aleth of Montbard, herself of noble birth. Bernard's friendly, witty personality and wonderful temperament made him well liked by all, and he showed early intellectual talent and a gift for poetry.

Following the death of his mother when he was nineteen, Bernard for a few years drifted toward a lukewarm faith and was tempted to abandon a life of virtue. This experience led him to desire a life of prayer and, at twenty-two, he entered the monastery at Cîteaux near Dijon, which had been founded fourteen years earlier on a stricter Benedictine rule. His friends tried to talk him out of this decision, but his personality was so attractive and compelling that, instead, thirty-one men entered with him, including four of his brothers and an uncle, an event unique in the history of the Church. Bernard rapidly made great spiritual progress under the guidance of his abbot St. Stephen Harding, and expected only to live in the service of God hidden and unknown.

However, when Bernard was twenty-five, his abbot sent him and twelve others to found a new monastery at Clairvaux near Troyes, a city northwest of Dijon in the Champagne region. Initially too severe a disciplinarian, he soon learned to be an effective abbot. People were so drawn to his holiness and his austere way of life that Clairvaux grew rapidly. His father and remaining brother entered Clairvaux (his only sister also entered a convent, so that his entire family except his mother, who had died, completed their lives in a religious community). By the time of Bernard's death, sixty-eight other monasteries had been established as "daughter" foundations from Clairvaux, and he thus is considered the "second founder" of the Cistercians of the Common Observance (OCist or Cistercians) and the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance (OCSO or Trappists).

At thirty-one, Bernard began working miracles of healing, bringing him fame of a different





kind. His vocation took yet another turn when the monks who helped him administer Clairvaux decided that his digestive system was too weak for the sustained physical labor required by the Cistercian rule, and instead required him to undertake additional preaching. His preaching style was so warm, loving, and delightful that he was called *doctor mellifluus* (“honey-sweet teacher”). Over three hundred of his sermons have been preserved, as well as works of theology and devotion that he also wrote. One book, *De Diligendo Dei*, is a foundational mystical work. When one of his disciples was elected pope, he wrote the treatise *De consideratione*, a pastoral reflection on the office of pope that advises not allowing the demands of office to lead to forgetfulness of God, and stresses the importance of self-examination and daily contemplative prayer. Bernard’s *Discourse on the Song of Songs* is a collection of eloquent sermons to his own monks on the beauty of God’s Word and the nature of God’s love for his people. He also wrote on theological subjects such as grace and free will, and explored the theology of holiness. Over five hundred of his letters also still exist. In everything, his lifelong meditation on Sacred Scripture was evident. Bernard’s profound spiritual life was focused on Christ, especially on the humanity of Jesus and Jesus as an infant. As a result, he was deeply devoted to the Blessed Virgin Mary. He is credited with the phrase *Omnia per Mariam* (“all through Mary”).

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As Bernard’s renown spread, he was sought by popes, bishops, kings, and princes for advice. When he was forty, Pope Innocent II sent him across Europe to help clarify his disputed election. He provided a similar service to the civil ruler of Lombardy, a northern Italian region. For this reason, he was known as a peacemaker. Even when near death, he was asked to resolve a bloody dispute between the French town of Metz and its lord, the duke of Lorraine. Yet he did not shrink from controversy.

One opponent was Peter Abélard, a prideful man who thought that he knew everything. Another was the abbot of the well-known monastery of Cluny. Bernard also fought against the dangerous Albigensian

heresy in the area around Cologne and in southern France. The pope commissioned him to preach in France and Germany in support of the Second Crusade to the Holy Land, during which he stopped a pogrom (persecution) against Jews in the Rhineland.

Friendship was one of the most important elements in Bernard’s life, and he viewed love as something that gave pleasure to oneself as well as the one loved. Widely known for his cheerfulness, he retained throughout his life the same wonderfully pleasing personality that had led his family and friends into a life entirely devoted to God. He used his great gifts of leadership, wisdom, and the heart of a pastor not for personal gain but to breathe fresh life into the Body of Christ.

