During a brief sojourn in Paris sometime between Lent of 1139 and early 1140, Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), the famed Cistercian abbot, spiritual master, and ecclesiastical reformer addressed a group of scholars and student clerics on the theme of conversion. The tenor and substance of this appeal survives in revised and finished form in the *Ad clericos de conversione*, a “treatise in the form of a sermon” that shows Bernard’s highly-refined rhetorical skills and legendary ability to persuade at their best. If this extended version is anything to judge by, the Doctor Mellifluus presented his receptive (but potentially critical) scholastic audience with challenging ideas and captivating images that deeply penetrated their hearts. So effective were his words that a large group of his listeners followed him from Paris to his monastery in Clairvaux, where they became novices and professed their vows as Cistercian monks one year later. The enormity and suddenness of this response was probably due, at least in part, to Bernard’s great sensitivity to the situation of his audience and to the care with which he laid out for them, step by step, the inner workings of his patented psychology of conversion. Also of great importance was the insightful and highly creative correlation he made between the process of conversion itself and the eight beatitudes from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:3-10).

LEVELS OF DISCOURSE

At the very outset of his sermon, Bernard reminds his listeners of their purpose for gathering: “You have come, I believe, to hear the Word of God.” Aware that he is addressing a sophisticated clerical audience, he outlines at the very outset three distinct (albeit intimately connected) levels of discourse to which they must be attentive: the voice of God, the voice of the preacher (in this case, Bernard), and the inner voice of conscience.

1. *The voice of God.* Conversion, for Bernard, is both the will and the work of God. If it is God’s will for us that “we should be converted,” it is equally clear to him that conversion is “the work of the divine voice, not of any human voice.” Like Augustine, his theological and spiritual forbearer, Bernard will not compromise the sovereignty of God in matters concerning our salvation. He makes his position felt with much theological “tour de force” and rhetorical elegance: “He spoke and they were made. He said, ‘Let there be light, and there was light.’ He said, ‘Be converted, and the sons of men were converted.” Conversion is the work of God, not of man. To think otherwise implies a degree of ignorance (or spiritual arrogance) that cannot be tolerated.

2. *The voice of the preacher.* Having once established the preeminence of God’s grace in all that pertains to the work of conversion, Bernard then focuses on his own role (however small) in changing the minds and hearts of his listeners. Bernard recognizes that the preacher toils in vain unless he casts his net “at the Lord’s word.” He knows...
that only God can “give his voice the sound of power.”

He hopes that God will bless his words with such strength and accepts full responsibility if he does not: “If I lie, that is my own fault. It will perhaps be judged to be my own voice and not the voice of the Lord if I seek what is my own and not what is Jesus Christ’s.”

Despite fluency of speech, extraordinary rhetorical skills, and the noblest of intentions, Bernard knows that his words will compel his hearers to change their hearts only if God permits: “I can hope that what I say will be effective only if he makes it so.” For this reason, he links preaching with prayer: “I must ask him to make this voice of mine a voice of power.”

3. The inner voice of conscience. God speaks not only through the preacher but also by means of the inner voice of conscience in the deepest recesses of the heart. Bernard admonishes his listeners “to hear inwardly what is said to the outward man.” He asks them to be conscious of their souls’ inner conversation with God. There is a voice within which speaks “with magnificence and power, rolling through the desert, revealing secrets, shaking souls free of sluggishness.” This inner voice is divine, but also human; it is the voice of conscience which “judges itself in its own court.” There is no need to make an effort; one cannot help but hear it. It brings us face to face with ourselves and is the beginning of God speaking to us.

The voice of God, the voice of the preacher, the voice of conscience: by laying out these three levels of discourse at the very outset of his sermon, Bernard sets the parameters for all that follows. Of the three, the role of the preacher - significant as it is - would appear the least important. Conversion may occur without the benefit of explicit proclamation, but never if the heart does not listen to itself and to the still, small whispering voice of God. By moving himself to the background, Bernard allows his words to speak for themselves and to touch his hearers in whatever way God deems fit. He recognizes that the decisive discourse, the one that really matters, is delivered by God in the inner cloister of the soul.

**BERNARD’S CHRISTIAN ANTHROPOLOGY**

While conversion, for Bernard, entails a transformation of the whole person, its primary locus of change is the human soul. This particular dimension of human existence can be examined with respect to its own internal relations (i.e. reason, memory, and will) or to the body and its accompanying senses. Both relationships must be taken into account if one wishes to understand the comprehensive nature of Bernard’s psychology of conversion.

1. The soul’s inner relations. “For the soul itself is nothing but reason (ratio), memory (memoria), and will (voluntas).” Bernard uses the traditional Augustinian terminology to formulate his teaching on the soul. One must take care, however, not to mistake the variety of terms for clear and distinct anthropological divisions. For Bernard, “... the substance of the soul would seem to be spiritual and simple in its way, without any distinction of senses; the whole soul seems to see and hear at once, if we can speak of it in this way.” In like manner, reason, memory, and will are different dimensions of the soul (“potencies”, as the scholastics would say) which function separately but always as operations of the whole. This fundamental unity of the soul is essential to Bernard’s psychology of conversion. Reason can influence the will only because it is related to it via the substance of the soul. The same can be said for the way both reason and will can influence and have a lasting effect on the memory.

2. The soul’s relation to the body. “.. Worst of all, the soul sees itself contaminated, not by someone else, but by its own body, which is no other than itself.” Sentences like this one bring out a fundamental ambivalence of Bernard’s view of our bodily nature. On the one hand,
he admits that both body and soul form an integral part of what it means to be human; on the other hand, he is suspicious of the body because of the many evils it has permitted to enter into the soul's inner sanctum: "... the roving eyes, the itching ears, the pleasures of smelling, tasting, and touching have let in many of them." For Bernard, the senses are windows by which the soul reaches out and interacts with the world around it. With the onslaught of death, these windows are closed off and the soul becomes trapped within itself and will remain so until the final judgment: “For where there is no body there is no possibility of action. Where there is no action, no satisfaction can be made.”

These words underscore for Bernard the importance of conversion in this life: “... to repent is to grieve; to do penance is a remedy for sorrow. He who has no hands cannot lift his heart in his hands to heaven.” For Bernard, the very purpose of conversion is not only to cleanse and elevate the soul, but also to free it of its deep suspicion of the body. Body and soul were intended by God to coexist in a peaceful and intimate harmony: “I am your body your own self. There is nothing to fear or dread.” That they do not points to the reality of sin in the present life and highlights all the more our urgency and dire need for conversion.

THE NEED FOR CONVERSION

Bernard preaches conversion because of his hearers’ need for it. Sin has polluted their lives so badly that they can barely recall the nature of a life lived in its absence. He fills his sermon with vivid and shocking images that demonstrate their destitute situation and need for change. Their reason is found to be blind; their wills, weak and covered with itching sores; their memories, full of filth, open cesspits of abomination and uncleanness. Their souls are inflicted with an inward leprosy which cannot be taken off and cast away like a set of clothes. Like men who tear at their hands and rub them until they bleed, they have lacerated their souls with incessant scratching and incurred deep infested wounds that will not heal. Worse still, they are not even aware of what they have done: “The absent mind does not notice the internal damage, for it is not looking inward, but perhaps concentrating on its stomach - or beneath the stomach.”

Lost in this daze of inner numbness, they continue to collect for themselves purely transient goods - and all seems well: “Is it surprising if a soul does not feel its wound when it is not noticing what is happening to it, and is somewhere else far away?” The time will come, Bernard warns, when they will be brought forcibly to their senses and realize that they are nothing but filthy spiders who weave greedy webs for unsuspecting flies. Then, the worm of conscience will gnaw at them from the inside out, and they will see that their will is nothing but an old hag “with hair standing on end, her clothes torn, her breast bared, scratching at her ulcers, grinding her teeth, dry-mouthed, infecting the air with her foul breath.” Then, they will see for themselves how the threefold ulcer of voluptuousness, curiosity, and ambition covers them from the soles of their feet to the tops of their heads. Then, they will see how degenerate the soul has become through its enslavement to the foulness of the body’s senses and its keeping company with swine. Only when it experiences the utter depravity of the soul, does the voice of conscience understand its predicament: “Now it realizes the difficulty of what it has undertaken, and the ease with which it thought to proceed seems an illusion.” Filth continues to pour into the memory; bloody pus flows everywhere from the ulcers of the will; reason itself cannot repair what for now is only vaguely beginning to come to light. Worse yet, the soul senses itself at odds with its own body. The latter, in turn, rebels and “every single member is a window through which death enters the soul and ceaselessly makes the confusion worse.”

After presenting this dismal depiction of humanity’s sinful condition, Bernard does not abandon his hearers or leave them to fend for themselves. In the midst of their inner disquiet, he extends to them an open and heartfelt invitation to conversion. There is a way out. They do not have to be slaves of their bodily lusts and instincts. What is impossible for the soul to attain on its own account is possible through the grace of God. Rooted in the Gospels, in the very words of Jesus himself, Bernard’s program for conversion is sensitive both to the psychology of the repentant sinner and to the rigors of Christian asceticism. He speaks as one who has himself
experienced the humiliation of sin in his life and who has struggled to respond to the call of God. To describe this experience he falls back on the words of Jesus’ captivating vision of his Father’s kingdom.

THE WAY OF THE BEATITUDES

It is not immediately apparent how Bernard uses the eight beatitudes as a structural analogue for the process of conversion. At face value, Jesus’ words seem to be disconnected sayings or proverbs about membership in God’s kingdom. They appear to have little, if any, relation to the long, arduous process of conversion that all persons are called to undergo. If anything, they seem to represent the culmination or completion of that process, i.e., those who in some way have already “been through the fire” and have come to possess the radical values of God’s impending reign.

Bernard, however, does not strictly concern himself with the literal meaning of these famous sayings. As a medieval monk, he interprets Scripture by way of the traditional and well-tried means of allegoresis. As the old saying goes, “Littera gesta ducet, quid credas allegoria; Moralis quid agas, quo tendas anagogia.” (“The literal sense teaches what happened; allegory what you are to believe; the moral sense what you are to do; anagogy where you are going.”) In the present context, Bernard goes beneath the literal sense and provides his listeners with a tropological (i.e., moral) reading of the beatitudes, one that focuses on the importance of the verses for the spiritual life - in this particular case, the process of conversion. In typical allegorical fashion, he seeks to discover similar patterns of meaning between the text itself and some parallel point of reference either within the text or without it. The power of Bernard’s interpretation comes from the way he correlates Jesus’ beatitudes with the psychology of a sinner’s conversion. Without forcing the text or departing from the valid insights of his own spiritual experience, he establishes a close pattern of correspondence and thus discovers a helpful way of communicating the meaning and process of conversion. He presents this interpretation, moreover, with a remarkable sensitivity to the situation of his hearers.

1. Blessed are the poor in spirit. Only after having experienced the darkness of one’s own inner turmoil and spiritual depravity can a person begin the arduous task of inner conversion. “When it is in this state, let the soul hear the divine voice; in wonder and amazement let it hear him saying, ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven’ (Mt 5:3).” Here, Bernard strikes a note sounded earlier in his sermon: conversion is both the will and the work of God; it comes not from human effort, but from the voice of God himself. And who is poorer in spirit than he “who in the whole of his own spirit finds not rest?” In the first beatitude, Jesus himself calls Bernard’s listeners “blessed.” Such news startles the soul and makes it question what it has heard: “Does wretchedness then make a man happy?” Bernard gives his listeners hope by calling them to faith in the mercy of God: “If you are in that state, have faith. It is not wretchedness but mercy which makes a man happy, so that humiliation turns to humility and need to strength.” No matter how bad their lives may seem, God can work miracles in the darkest recesses of the human heart. With him all things are possible (Mt 19:26).

2. Blessed are the meek. The amazement continues: “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth”: (Mt 5:4) They will do so precisely because they have learned through humble experience how “to check the wild motions of the will and tame the wild beast within them.” The will, Bernard notes, cannot be broken or overcome by force. Its thorny knots must be patiently and gradually untied. Bernard cautions those who think they can take the task of conversion into their own hands. Sin should never be taken lightly. One day they shall be held accountable for their deeds - and there will be no escape. Try as they may, Bernard warns them that it is impossible for them to hide their sins. God sees into the depths of the human heart: He sees, judges, and reveals all. The only viable solution is the life of virtue: we need fortitude against temptation; justice, to do good; prudence, to be prepared in all circumstances; and temperance to tame the unruly pleasures and desires of the soul. At this juncture in the process of conversion, the will behaves in one of two ways: (1) it listens to the voice of reason, or (2) it rebels. For Bernard, the meek are those who humbly turn their wills over to the penetrating insights of reason and desire with all their hearts to live a life of virtue.

3. Blessed are those who mourn. “Let him mourn abundantly, for the time for mourning has come and his state is greatly to be wept over.” The inability to change often moves a person to tears. Sorrow, Bernard notes, has a cleansing effect on the soul. To allow inner agony to surface in the form of tears and sobs purges the soul and heralds the beginning of a change of heart. The
words of Jesus ring true, “Blessed are they who mourn, for they shall be comforted” (Mt 5:5). One still grieves over the will’s refusal to listen to the voice of reason, but one trusts in Jesus’ promise of finding rest for the weary soul. Reason begs the will and the lower passions to trust it; this sudden request the will’s reply can be more bitter than ever. Reason must therefore be patient; it must approach the will gently, presenting its case gradually and at the opportune moment; it must then inform the will of its concern for its well-being and of how harmful it is to be so sad and heavy-hearted; it must tell the will of the most beautiful garden that it has discovered and of how good it would be for the two of them to be there. Gradually, and ever so slowly, a remarkable change takes place: “The will’s desire will be moved, and not only to see the place; it will also long to enter it, little by little, and make its dwelling there.”

4. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst. It is in this state of longing where the divine whisper reveals itself. Reason hears and relays its message readily to the will: “Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled” (Mt 5:6). These words touch the very heart of conversion. The will sees how foolish it is to yearn for things which never truly satisfy. It sees that the desire for righteousness casts out all other desires.

6. Blessed are the pure of heart. The sixth beatitude brings the very purpose of conversion to the fore. “Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God” (Mt 5:8). The goal of conversion is to see God face to face. One arrives at such intimacy only by desiring it with all of one’s heart. This can be done only if one’s heart is washed clean and purged of all sinful blemishes: “...it is sin alone which dulls and confuses the vision.” Bernard is also well aware of how sin turns a person in on oneself and how conversion involves a long, arduous process of becoming increasingly concerned for the good of others. He therefore exhorts his hearers to listen once again to the consoling yet challenging words of Jesus: “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy” (Mt 5:7). These words take on new meaning when viewed in light of conversion. Works of mercy have an interior effect on the soul. When a person makes the effort to widen the circle of God’s love, he or she reaps even further interior graces. Mercy received should thus be freely extended to others. Having restored peace in their own hearts, Bernard’s hearers are exhorted, for their own spiritual welfare, to give that peace to others. Not only will they be able to pray to God with a quiet conscience, but they will also find that giving alms and forgiving those who have done them serious harm will carry them even further along the way of conversion: “Not only will the reason be enlightened and the will put right, but memory itself will be purged.”

5. Blessed are the merciful. Make good what you owe; forgive those who have wronged you; give alms to the poor: “...and if you cannot do so from your own substance, do it from your good will and all will be clean.” Bernard is also well aware of how sin turns a person in on oneself and how conversion involves a long, arduous process of becoming increasingly concerned for the good of others. He therefore exhorts his hearers to listen once again to the consoling yet challenging words of Jesus: “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy” (Mt 5:7). These words take on new meaning when viewed in light of conversion. Works of mercy have an interior effect on the soul. When a person makes the effort to widen the circle of God’s love, he or she reaps even further interior graces. Mercy received should thus be freely extended to others. Having restored peace in their own hearts, Bernard’s hearers are exhorted, for their own spiritual welfare, to give that peace to others. Not only will they be able to pray to God with a quiet conscience, but they will also find that giving alms and forgiving those who have done them serious harm will carry them even further along the way of conversion: “Not only will the reason be enlightened and the will put right, but memory itself will be purged.”
through this life is completed.

7. Blessed are the peacemakers. Bernard also supplies his listeners with a simple description of the major stages involved in the process of conversion. In his mind, there are three types of men: (1) those who render good for good insofar as it lies within their means; (2) those who do not render evil for evil because they are patient and long-suffering; and (3) those who return good for evil even when it concerns someone who has harmed them.65 For Bernard, the first are like little children; the second possess their own souls in patience; and the third possess their own souls and win those of many others. The first, he maintains, possess peace to the extent that it lies within them; the second hold fast to peace; the third make peace.66 Conversion, in his mind, is that process whereby a person moves through these various stages of peacemaking. When one arrives at the final stage, one truly can be called a child of God. Jesus himself reminds us: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God” (Mt 5:9).67 Bernard is quick to note that each of these stages must be gone through and in their proper order. For him, it is the height of spiritual arrogance to misappropriate the rank of peacemaker. He then makes a very long and pointed attack on those in his audience who, in seeking to become priests, have preferred “to leap rather than climb,”68 and who “leave out the stages which come first.”69 He bids them not to make a mockery of the profession of perfection. If they really want to become peacemakers, they should enter the monasteries where they can pursue a life of conversion without distraction.70

8. Blessed are those who suffer persecution. Bernard reminds his listeners that Jesus does not bless those who simply call for peace, but only those who make it.71 He warns them against becoming modern day Pharisees, i.e., experts at saying the right thing, but not practicing it. The Church is not helped by hirelings and robbers, who use the flock for their own advantage and aggrandizement. Persecution, he notes, separates the hirelings from the shepherds. Hirelings serve for a price and will not persevere in the face of suffering. Robbers and wolves prefer to escape persecution rather than maintain righteousness. Shepherds, by way of contrast, fear nothing because their treasure is in heaven.72 Confident in God’s love for them, they are willing to endure countless tribulations for the sake of righteousness. “Blessed are those who suffer persecution for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:10).73 The last beatitude brings the process of conversion to its logical conclusion. Full conversion implies a willingness to suffer (and perhaps even die) for the faith. With righteousness as their purpose and Christ as their cause, they are willing to stand firm in the face of every adversity.

Bernard’s tropological interpretation of the eight beatitudes outlines in fine detail the gradual process of growth by which a sinner becomes a saint. In a few short sentences, Bernard’s teaching on conversion may be described as the movement of God in a person’s heart which (1) begins with a deep sense of one’s own spiritual poverty; (2) moves on to a humble admission of one’s inability to change and then to (3) a mourning over the soul’s stubbornness and petty obstinacy. It manifests itself in (4) a hungering for righteousness which (5) increases through spiritual and corporal acts of mercy and (6) eventually leads to a complete purification of the heart. Among the consummate signs of conversion are a person’s (7) increased ability to extend the peace of Christ to others and (8) willingness to suffer and even die for the faith. The power of Bernard’s sermon comes from the close correlation he draws between the process of conversion itself and the ipsissima verba Christi. He gives the words of Jesus immediate and urgent meaning to his listeners, so much so that a very large number of them were ready to flee with him that very day to a safer place of refuge.

OBSERVATIONS

Bernard’s decision to present his teaching on conversion by way of the beatitudes calls for added commentary on the nature and scope of his highly crafted and exceedingly effective sermon. The following observations are an attempt to understand more fully the intentions that inspired it and the psychology behind its reception.

1. If Bernard’s explicit goal is to inspire in his hearers a desire for conversion or change of heart, his implicit one is to get them to leave everything behind and to pursue a life of conversion in a monastery. “Fly to the cities of refuge!”74 This heartfelt reference to Europe’s spiritual landscape manifests Bernard’s strong conviction that a life of conversion can be pursued most fervently and with the least amount of distraction within a stable monastic environment.75 The monasteries (and, without explicitly stating it, he would seem to be promoting the particular brand of monasticism practised by the Cister-
rians) offered twelfth-century Christians a structured atmosphere where the body could be disciplined, the mind enlightened, the will mastered, and the memory cleansed. One need only to think of the desolate regions where the Cistercians built their monasteries, of the dedicated precision with which they followed the Rule of Benedict ad apicem litterae, and of the austere, distractionless spaces created in their architecture, to understand the strong conviction behind Bernard's plea.

2. Bernard has come to Paris, by then one of the great cities of medieval Christendom and a developing center of scholastic learning, to speak to an intellectual clerical elite, the cream of the Church's flourishing priestly crop. He addresses scholars and students from the cathedral school of Notre Dame and other centers of learning such as St. Genevieve and St. Victor on matters pertaining not to theoretical knowledge, but to the searching and restless heart. In crafting his sermon, he rallies his considerable rhetorical and persuasive skills to convince many in his audience of their deeply-rooted need for change. The success of his endeavor can be verified, at least in part, by the generous response of those who followed him to Clairvaux the following day. Since men of such high intellectual caliber could have furthered the ends of the Cistercian order in any number of ways, one has to wonder if part of Bernard's intention all along was not to skim some of the cream off the top for the benefit of his own religious order. When seen in this light, Bernard's sermon takes on the added dimension of a highly-charged (and very successful) attempt at Cistercian recruitment.

3. Bernard makes a conscious effort to speak the language and enter the mindset of his listeners. Aware of the learned background of his audience, he uses terms that will quickly capture the imagination of his hearers. He takes examples from the daily experience of scholarly life and charges them with pregnant moral and spiritual meaning. Phrases such as “the book of conscience,” and “the pen of truth,” and memory’s “thin piece of cheap ink-soaked parchment” demonstrate his willingness to convey his message in the language of his audience. Bernard reaches out to his audience and tries to establish a point of contact that will provide an avenue for a deeper exposition of the meaning of conversion. In doing so, he is also inviting them to meet him halfway by putting aside some of their intellectual reserve and allowing his carefully-crafted language of the heart to penetrate their souls.

4. Bernard’s efforts, however, go much further. He delves into the motivations of his listeners and exposes the selfish interests which many of them had for coming to Paris and starting out on an ecclesiastical career. Particularly pointed is his long discourse near the end of his sermon on the dangers of Pharisaism and his insinuation that many of his hearers have become clergymen for the wrong reasons. His suggestion that, in order to put themselves forward as shepherds and peacemakers, many among them have skipped some of the most important stages in the process of conversion must have struck cords of unease and discontent in his more complacent listeners. Bernard does not mince words when it comes to exposing the hypocrisy and false intentions of those who deem to use the priestly vocation for their own personal gain. He presents conversion as a sine qua non for anyone who seeks to serve the Church in the role of shepherd. Those who do otherwise harm the Church and themselves in the process. The health of the Church and their own salvation is at stake.

5. While the classical threefold movement of purification, illumination, and union is present in Bernard’s depiction of conversion, most of the sermon is dedicated to making Bernard’s audience aware of their need for conversion and then expanding on the way of purification. Bernard’s sermon seeks to touch the hearts of his listeners. Conscious as he is of the intellectual capacity of his audience, he is all too well aware that many of them are unaccustomed to speaking about or listening to the way of the heart. Bernard spends much of his time trying to bring his listeners down from the level of rational speculation (the particular strength of the developing scholastic thought of his day) to the vast intricacies involved in the language of the heart (the particular approach of monastic theology). Acting from his own experience or perhaps from the level of intuition, Bernard presumes that most of his hearers, despite their highly trained critical faculties, are mere beginners when it comes to speaking about the ways of the heart. It is for this very reason that he devotes so much time and space to emphasizing the initial steps involved in the long and arduous path of conversion.

6. To convince his audience, Bernard makes con-
stant appeals to their own experience. He fills his sermon with requests that his listeners judge his words on the basis of their own inner experience. “Use the eyes of your heart, and you will learn by experience.”83 “You do not need to look it up in the pages of a book. Look to experience instead.”84 “Not learning but anointing teaches it; it is not grasped by knowledge but by conscience.”85 Remarks such as these show Bernard attempting to get his hearers to listen to the inner voice of God in their hearts which, in his estimation, is the most important discourse being delivered that day. This appeal to the experience of the heart is one of the constituent elements of monastic theology.86 That his words received such a welcome reception reveals something of the close rapport which, despite their vast differences, monastic and scholastic methods enjoyed during the twelfth century. In the words of Jean Leclercq: “We could say that in the twelfth century the situation was neatly summed up in three words: ‘monastic and scholastic,’ far from there being an opposition between them, at that time they profited one another and yet remained distinct.”87

7. Bernard’s tropological interpretation of the beatitudes provides the context for the convergence of the three distinct levels of discourse discussed earlier in this article: the voice of God, the voice of the preacher, and the inner voice of conscience. There was no question either in Bernard’s mind or in the minds of his hearers that the beatitudes represented the voice of God in their lives. As the ipsissima verba Christi from the Sermon on the Mount, they offer all who have ears to hear the clearest expression we have of what the kingdom of God is like. Bernard’s genius is not that he correlates Jesus’ words with his own teaching on conversion, but that he does so in such a way that it resonates with the inner voice of conscience in his listeners and convinces many of them to make that first painful, yet all important, step along the way of conversion. Bernard constructs his sermon in such a way that the voice of God, the voice of the preacher, and the voice of conscience speak in harmony about the central importance of conversion in the lives of his listeners. What Bernard has clearly differentiated at the outset of his sermon thus touches his hearers on different anthropological levels with a single message of metanoia.

8. Bernard’s understanding of conversion is closely tied to his Augustinian anthropology. Like Augustine, he displays the classical Neoplatonic tension between body and soul. Like Augustine, he attributes this to the effects of sin - both original and personal - which therefore will be healed as one advances along the various stages of conversion. Like Augustine, he incorporates the psychology of the sinner in search of rest within his anthropological schema. Like Augustine, he underscores the primacy of grace in the process of conversion. These similarities in no way imply that Bernard refuses to think for himself or displays little or no creativity in the sermon. Although he expresses the deeply-rooted imbalance within the soul in terms of the traditional Augustinian nomenclature (i.e., ratio, voluntas, and memoria), he does not consider himself bound to express the theory in all of its fine details.88 His rhetorical use of these categories, moreover, displays a great sensitivity to the wide range of tensions that can occur in a person during the process of conversion. Part of Bernard’s genius is his ability to express well-known theological terms and categories in a way that captures the minds and, perhaps more importantly, the hearts of those whom he is addressing.

These observations in no way exhaust the richness of Bernard’s sermon on conversion. They emphasize the pains he has taken to communicate his message and to challenge his hearers to make a concrete response to it in their lives. By depicting the way of conversion as intimately tied to the way of the beatitudes, he exhorts his listeners to root their actions ever more deeply in the fertile soil of Jesus’ life and message.

CONCLUSION

Bernard of Clairvaux’s Ad clericos de conversione combines masterful homiletic construction with zeal for ecclesiastical reform. It uses the childlike simplicity of Jesus’ beatitudes as a springboard for explicating the process of conversion. It does so while remaining sensitive to the scholarly ambience of its audi-
ence and utilizing this mindset for its own purposes. Ber-
nard demands nothing less than the total commitment
of his audience to the process of fundamental conver-
sion. While the dramatic positive results of his discourse
have been historically documented, whatever negative re-
sponses his sermon may have evoked must now be left
to conjecture. That a sermon so passionately crafted and
which aroused such strong favorable sentiments among
its listeners would not also have evoked at least some
strong feelings of outrage and protest among others in
his largely scholastic audience seems highly unlikely. With
few other concrete traces left in the wake of Bernard’s
discourse, the level and extent of such sentiments cannot
be known with any certainty.

Even though Bernard’s words should be primarily
understood in the context of the world in which he lived
and evaluated in light of the audience he addressed, they
have much to contribute to our present understanding of
the nature of conversion and how it should be commu-
nicated. With appropriate adaptations, his emphases on
fundamental conversion, the primacy of God’s grace, the
importance of having an anthropological matrix within
which conversion takes place and can be understood,
the different levels of discourse used to communicate its
necessity, and the correlation of Gospel values with the
psychology of his listeners all provide valuable points of
departure for reflection on the preaching of *metanoia*
in the very different circumstances of current world affa-

One also gets the distinct impression that it was
more than Bernard’s finely-tuned rhetorical skills and
charismatic personality that caused so many to follow
him to Clairvaux. Bernard speaks as an authority on con-
version, precisely because he himself has already gone
through the same struggles and temptations that current-
ly haunt his listeners. He is able to articulate his theory
so well only because he himself has had firsthand expe-
rience of what it means to walk the difficult and pains-
taking way of the beatitudes. Bernard understands the
process of conversion from the inside out. If he did not,
his sermon not only would have appeared theoretical and
artificially contrived for the occasion, but also would not
have elicited such a strong reaction. In his *Ad clericos de
conversione*, one hears constantly in the background the
faint voice of Bernard the repentant sinner instructing
Bernard the preacher about the intricacies of the psy-
chology of conversion and how to lead others along its
strenuous and exacting path. The great effectiveness of
his sermon is due, at least in part, to the universal nature
of this inner dialogue and unaffected revelation of self.

**Notes**


5 “Ita plane conversio animarum opus divinae vocis est, non humanae.” *Sancti Bernardi Opera*, 4:71.


7 “...donec in verbo Domini rete iactans...” *Sancti Bernardi Opera*, 4:71.

8 “...et experiamur quod scriptum est: ‘Ecce dabit voci suae vocab virtutis!’” *Sancti Bernardi Opera*, 4:71.
9 “Si mendacium loquimur, id plane de proprio est. Sed et tunc forsitan nostra iudicabitur vox esse, et non
Domini, si quæramus quae nostra sunt, non quae Iesu Christi.” Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:71.
10 “Ceterum ... effectum tamen ab eo solo sperarc...” Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:71.
11 “... ab eo postulare necesse set, ut voci suae vocem virtutis accommodet.” Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:71-72.
12 “For the abbot of Clairvaux, the heart is conscience, or better, the organ of conscience where the acts of
our life are stored. There is an implicit opposition here that we find in other monastic writings on conscience. If the
head is the place of the cognitive faculty, the heart for monastic theology is the place of the ethical. There is a dualism
here: head/heart, knowledge/conscience, a dualism resolved to the advantage of the practical life over the cognitive.
All of monastic spirituality and in particular Cistercian spirituality possesses this characteristic” [my translation]. See
13 “… ut loquentem Deum intus audire quam foris hominem studiatis.” Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:72.
14 “Illa enim vox magnificentiae et virtutis, deserta concutiens, k secreta discutiens, k secreta discutiens, torporem excutiens ani-
marum.” Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:72.
15“proprio interim iudicanda tribunali.” Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:74.
16See Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:72. For more on Bernard’s understanding of conscience, see Philipe Delhaye,
18 “... animae quoque substantia, in suo quidem genere etiam ipsa spiritualis et simplex, sine ulla distinctione sensuum, sed tota, si tamen tota dicenda est, videns pariter et audiens videatur.” Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:73.
19According to M. Endre von Ivanka: “One sees that the ‘parts’ of the soul for him [Bernard] are not distinct
faculties, as if to say they were superimposed on one another and entered into action one after the other; they are
simply the different functions of one unique reality, which is differentiated only by the plurality of its activities and rela-
tions” [my translation]. See “L’union a Dieu: La structure de l’ame selon S. Bernard,” Analecta sacri ordinis Cisterciensis
9(1953): 204.
20 “Vider denique anima sese contaminatum, nec per alium, sed per proprium corpus, nec aliunde quam a
seipsa.” Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:84.
21 “Multa siquidem admississe videtur petulantia oculorum, multa pruritus aurium, multa quoque olfaciendi, 
gustandi tangendique voluptas.” Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:79.
22 “Ubi enim decret corpus, actus non erit. Sane ubi nulla fuerit actio, nec satisfactio quidem ulla poterit inve-
niri.” Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:77.
23 “Quocirca paenitentiam quidem habere, dolere est; nam paenitentiam agere, remedium doloris est. Neque
enim carenti manibus erit ultra levare cor in caelum cum manibus.” Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:77.
24 “Tuum est corpus, tuus ego ipse; non est quod timeas, non est quod verearis.” Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:97.
26See Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:76.
27 “Effusus siquidem animus damna interiora non sentit, quia nec intus est, sed in ventre forsitan, aut sub
ventre.” Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:76.
28 “uid vero mirum, si proprium minime sentiat anima laesionem, quae, sui ipsius oblitae et penitus absens sibi,
in longinquam profecta est regionem?” Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:76-77.
29See Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:77.
30See Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:78-79.
31 “Exsilit igitur vetula furens, et totius oblitae languorius, procedit horrentibus comis, veste lacera, pectore
nudo, scalpens ulcera, frendens dentibus et arescens, atque ipsum inficiens aereum flatibus virulentis.” Sancti Bernardi
Opera, 4:82.
32 See Sancti Benaardi Opera, 4:83.
33See Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:89.
34“Iam vero ratione ipsa vexatio dat intellectum, iam innoscesi aliquatenus huius negotii difficultas, iam prae-
sumpta facilites.” Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:84.
35See Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:84-85.
36 “... et singula membra fenestrae singulae, quibus mors intrat ac animam, et incessanter exuberat ipsa con-
na.车
fusio.” Sancti Bernardi Opera 4:85.


38 For the philosophical underpinnings of medieval allegoresis, see Dennis J. Billy, “Monastic Theology and the Renewal of Catholic Moral Discourse: An Experiment in Historical Correlation,” Inter Fratres 44(1994): 31-35.


40 “Quis spiritu pauperior eo, qui in toto spiritu suo non invenit requiem... ?” Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:85-86.

41 “Ergone beatum hominem miseria facit?” Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:86.

42 “Ceterum quisquis eiusmodi est, non diffidas. Non miseria, sed misericordia facit beatum; sed huius propria sedes miseria est. Aut certe faciat beatum ipsa miseria, ut humiliatio in humilitatem transeat, necessitas in virtutem.” Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:86.

43 ‘Beati mites, quoniam ipsi hereditabunt terram’ Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:86.


45 See Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:87.


47 See Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:93-94.

48 See Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:94-95.


50 ‘Beati qui lugent, quoniam ipsi consolabuntur.”’ Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:96.

51 See Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:97.

52 See Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:98.

53 “Excitabitur desiderium voluntatis, ut non modo videre locum, sedet introire paulatim, et mansionem inibi facere concupiscat.” Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:98.

54 “‘Beati qui esurient et sitiunt iustitiam, quoniam ipsi saturabuntur.’” Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:100.

55 “...de purganda scilecet memoria et exhaurienda sentina.” Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:102.

56 See Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:103.

57 “Huius indulgentia delet peccatum, no quidem ut a memoria excidat, sed ut quod prius inesse pariter et inficere consuevisset, sic de cetero in sit memoriae, ut eam nullatenus decoloriet.” Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:103.

58 “...si non potes de terrena substantia, de voluntate bona, et omnia munda erunt...” Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:103.

59 ‘Beati misericordes, quoniam ipsi misericordiam consequentur.”’ Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:104.

60 “... non modo illuminata ratio et correcta voluntas, sed ipsa quoque memoria munda...” Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:105.

61 “‘Beati mundo corde, quoniam ipsi Deum videbunt.”’ Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:106.

62 “tamen solum quod hebetat et confundit to to, peccatum est...” Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:106.

63 “Nemo ergo sentinam exiens, mundatum sese protinus arbitretur; quinimmo noverit se multis interim purificationibus eger. Nec modo lavandum aqua, sed et purgandum et examinandum igni...” Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:107.

64 “... nunc quidem per speculum in aenigmatem, in futuro autem facie ad faciem...” Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:107.


66 See Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:108.

67 “‘Beati pacifici, quoniam filii Dei vocabuntur.”’ Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:107.

68 “... saltare magis quam ascendere libet.” Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:114.

69 “... ommissis gradibus praecostensis...” Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:114. For Bernard’s invective against Pharisaism, see 4:109-115.

71 See Sancti Benzaridi Opera, 4:114.
73 ‘Beati ... qui persecutionem patiuntur propter iustitiam, quoniam ipsorum est regnum caelorum.’” Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:115.
74 “Convolate ad urbes refugii...” Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:113.
75 The editors of the critical edition of Ad clericos de conversione suggest that in Bernard’s day the term conversio was primarily understood in terms of leaving the secular world and entering monastic life. See Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:61, 61n4. See also G.R. Evans, “A Change of Mind in Some Scholars of the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries,” Studies in Church History 15(1978): 27-39. Etienne Gilson describes Bernard’s attitude toward monastic life thus: “The beatitude of heaven is union with God Who is Charity. Therefore, to restore in the heart of fallen man the life of charity which ought never to have been extinguished in it, is to bring him nearer step by step to the life eternal which is to be. The cloister, the school where charity is taught, is truly the antechamber of paradise.” See The Mystical Theology of St. Bernard, trans. A.H.C. Downes (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1990), 85.
76 See William of Malmesbury, Gesta regum Anglorum, 4.514 (PL 179:1288); Exordium parvum, no. 15 in Nomasticon Cisterciense seu antiquiores ordinis Cisterciensis constitutiones, ed., Juliano Paris and Hugone Sejalon (Solesme: E Typographeo Sancti Petri, 1892), 62.
77 See n.1 above.
78 “… conscientiae liber ...” Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:73.
79 “… stilo utique veritatis” Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:75.
80 “Membrana vilis et tenuis atramentum forte ehibit ...” Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:102-3 [my translation].
83 “… reflecte oculos cordis, et proprio discels experimento quid agatur.” Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:74.
84 “… sine causa paginam consulis; experientiam magis require.” Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:99.
85 “Non illud eruditio, sed unctio docet, nec scientia, sed conscientia comprehendit.” Sancti Bernardi Opera, 4:99-100.
86 This insight is thoroughly developed in B.P. Gaybba, Aspects of the Medieval History of Theology (Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1988), 9-18. For the importance of experience in Bernard’s spirituality, see Dumot, “La spiritualité de saint Bernard,” 503-4.
88 For Bernard’s creative use of Augustinian anthropological categories, see von Ivanka, “L’union a Dieu: La structure de l’ame selon S. Bernard,” 203-6.