

ST. BERNARD ON THE IMPORTANCE OF AUTHENTIC SELF-LOVE

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Examined in this article is the emphasis on graced self-love in the spiritual theology of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, along with the reasons for this emphasis, the practical benefits of authentic self-love, and the properly theological and mystical dimension in Bernard's thought on sanctified love of self.

INTRODUCTION

Every once in a while there flashes across the pages of Christian theological literature an idea or an insight that is so powerful, so luminous, so utterly unique, as to make it truly revolutionary, transformative in its brilliance and in its implications for the Church and for the world. Such is the case for one idea from St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), the twelfth-century mystic and Cistercian abbot and Doctor of the Church, in his short ten-page treatise *On Loving God* (the *De Diligendo Deo*). This is a text that is well worth re-reading today or reading for the first time.

Bernard's revolutionary idea is that authentic love of *oneself* is very important in the spiritual life. Graced *self-love* is, in fact, the highest expression of loving God in this life, according to Bernard, who is a complex figure with a magnetic yet sometimes difficult personality, usually loved and occasionally despised. Bernard's insight into the value of sanctified self-love has profound implications in today's cultures, where so many people are stuck in self-contempt and in toxic shame and where so many, especially among our remarkable youth, are tempted toward nihilism and despair and self-loathing and suicide. An antidote to such negativity and self-rejection is found in Bernard's classic treatise *On Loving God*.¹ Bernard states:

Happy is he who has been found worthy to attain to the fourth [and highest] degree [of loving God in this life], where man *loves himself only for God's sake*...and experience[s] this kind of love, so that the mind, drunk with divine love...throw[s] itself wholly on God and, clinging to God, become[s] one with him in spirit... I should call him blessed and holy to whom it is given to experience even for a single instant something which is rare indeed in this life... O holy and chaste love!... To love in this way is to become like God. [*'Sic affici, deificari est'*: To feel this way is to be deified.] (Emphasis added.)²

This is admittedly an unusual-sounding idea, that loving oneself with God's grace is the highest stage in the life-long journey of attempting to find God and to love God in this life. The idea that any form of self-love could be redemptive can sound foreign to us. This is due to the idea's being promoted only relatively rarely in the Christian spiritual tradition.

BERNARD IN RELATION TO OTHER IMPORTANT SPIRITUAL WRITERS

It is true that the fourteenth-century English mystic Blessed Julian of Norwich would realize that ‘We are not blessedly safe...until we are in all peace...with God...and loving and content with ourselves...[having] substantial love of the self, by grace.’ It is also true that the exceptional spiritual writers St. Francis de Sales and St. Jane de Chantal in the early seventeenth century would affirm through a gentle Christian humanism that a ‘well-ordered love of oneself’ is an asset in the spiritual life and that we do well to ‘be gentle and patient with [ourselves],’ despite the fact that we ‘may fall even fifty times a day.’ Yet these witnesses to the appropriateness of graced self-love are uncommon in the history of Christian spirituality.

In fact, most of the saintly souls who write about self-love are justifiably wary of its dangers especially when it is immoderate. Included here are St. Augustine and Thomas a Kempis and St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross. Augustine, for example, warns Christians about the dangers of disordered self-love, that is, self-love that is not grounded in love of Christ. Augustine states:

Make a place for [Christ]... Do not love yourself, but love him. If you are in love with yourself, you shut the door in his face; but if you are in love with him, you open it to him...[and] you will no longer be in danger of being lost through self-love.³

Nevertheless, St. Bernard through his exceptional insight and his astute spiritual psychology, develops in some depth the spiritual-theological idea of the appropriateness of a sanctified love of self. Let us explore, then, what St. Bernard’s doctrine on authentic self-love *means*, what it does *not mean*, and why graced self-love occupies (or should occupy) a *significant place* in Christian spirituality, theology, preaching, and pastoral practice.

BERNARD IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

A brief excursus on historical contextualization is in order here. Bernard, though a monk, is often considered, justifiably, yet not always to his credit, to be the most influential person in Europe in the first half of the twelfth century, due in part to his deep involvement in politics both ecclesiastical and secular. He writes his treatise *On Loving God* probably between 1127 and 1135 around the age of forty during the early stage of his peak and prolific writing career, during which he produces numerous spiritual-theological treatises and sermons and letters along with eighty-six classic sermons on the Song of Songs.

The treatise *On Loving God* is written to Cardinal Haimeric, the chancellor of the church of Rome. Its alleged purpose is to expand Bernard’s thought on loving God which he had already expounded in an earlier letter to the Carthusians, yet Bernard’s connections in Rome and in Paris also enable him to be involved in numerous other important world events. Among such events are Bernard’s probable involvement in drawing up the rules for the Knights Templar, his help in securing the victory of Innocent II over the antipope Anacletus in 1130, his preaching of the Second Crusade, his securing of the condemnation of Abelard at the Council of Sens in 1140, his influence in the papal election of 1145 which brought his former pupil to become Pope Eugenius III, and his arranging through the King of England and three successive popes to have St. William of York ousted as bishop of York in 1147 in order that a monk of Clairvaux might be installed there instead.

Bernard's document *On Loving God* would be followed around 1149 to 1152 by another treatise related to the theme of graced self-love, entitled *On Consideration*. Here he urges his former pupil Pope Eugenius III to take proper care of himself, avoid getting overextended in serving others, and 'at least sometimes give your attention to yourself...[and] let your consideration begin and end with yourself...for the sake of your salvation.'⁴ Authentic, or graced, love of oneself is a prominent theme in several places in Bernard's spiritual theology, especially in the treatise *On Loving God*.

Bernard's theology is thoroughly Trinitarian, of course, yet decidedly Christocentric, as he emphasizes the Christian's relationship with God's Son much more than with the Father or the Holy Spirit. It is important to note that Bernard writes during the first half of the twelfth century, that is, one century prior to the (re)discovery of the philosophy of Aristotle by Aquinas and others in the thirteenth century. Therefore, Bernard's theology can be characterized as being pre-critical (pre-scholastic), primarily based in a 'philosophy' of *Christian wisdom (sapientia)*, flowing from Sacred Scripture and the Church Fathers and liturgy and monastic friendship and reflection on personal experience.

Bernard's 'philosophy,' so to speak, though not a complete systematic metaphysical synthesis in the scholastic or modern sense, does reveal roots from ancient Greek and Christian sources. Bernard affirms the Platonic-Aristotelian and patristic heritage, received especially through St. Augustine and St. Benedict, namely, that the human person is a body-soul composite, a rational animal endowed with the three spiritual faculties of intellect, memory, and will, to be transformed by faith, hope, and charity. Bernard's thought is much more like the philosophical-theological framework of the patristic Fathers of the first seven Christian centuries than that of the late-medieval scholastics. What the historian of philosophy Frederick Copleston says about St. Thomas Aquinas is equally true of St. Bernard, namely, that it is impossible 'to extract a purely-contained [bernardian] philosophy from the total thought of [Bernard].'⁵ Bernard's philosophy comes basically from his Bible, his monastic community, his study, and his prayer, all graced by God.

A word is in order about Bernard's conflict with his contemporary, the controversial philosopher-theologian Peter Abelard. It could reasonably be expected that Bernard and Abelard should have a relatively congenial friendship, since both ground their spirituality in the then-evolving western medieval devotion to the sacred Humanity of Christ. But a lasting friendship was not to be. It is true that, in order to deflect any charges of being labeled as a heretic, Abelard near the time of his death in 1142 virtually echoes Bernard's thought, as Abelard writes: 'I adore Christ reigning at the Father's right hand. With the arms of faith I embrace him working divinely in that glorious virginal flesh which he received of the Holy Spirit.' Unfortunately, a single shared thread of positive spirituality could not resolve the deeper tangle of significant theological differences between the two. Bernard comes to detest what he sees as Abelard's divorcing of the intellectual discipline of theology from the spiritual life itself, creating an autonomous rationality devoid of a proper foundation in the experiential knowledge of God. Bernard at one point calls Abelard 'an entirely double-faced person,' not a real monk at all, though happily Abelard before dying is reconciled with Bernard and, more importantly, with the Church. Bernard is 'interested less in [rational] knowledge than in love.'⁶

WHAT BERNARD DOES *NOT* MEAN

What Bernard does *not mean* by encouraging graced self-love is that it is ever permissible to wallow in any false form of self-love, so prevalent today in souls who can find themselves

trapped in varying degrees of selfish pre-occupation and distraction, or even arrogance and narcissism. Conversion away from false self-love and its accompanying sinful selfishness is a basic step in any healthy spiritual life. On this point, Bernard's thought is an extension of St. Augustine's theology of conversion, following from Augustine's own conversion and his advice to Christians in an earlier age. Augustine writes:

First of all, you must find your deformity [through sin] displeasing, and then you will receive beauty from him whom you hope to please by being beautiful... [Y]our first step must be to approach [Christ] by confession... Initiate your confession by accusing yourself of this ugliness, for as you confess you become more seemly.⁷

Bernard, like Augustine, despises the deformity of any kind of selfish love in himself and in others, although he is consistently gentle and patient with others, yet occasionally less patient with himself. Bernard knows that, ordinarily, persons who follow Christ grow *gradually* beyond self-centeredness, and toward self-giving charity, a little at a time, by stages. Clearly Bernard is not promoting any form of disordered or extreme or egotistical love of self. By encouraging his disciples, especially his fellow monks, to seek graced self-love, Bernard obviously does not mean that an immoderate love of self is good or holy or virtuous in any way.

WHAT BERNARD *DOES* MEAN

What Bernard *does mean* in fostering graced self-love is that, remarkably, it is actually possible for us humans to participate in Christ's self-sacrificing love for everyone. This participation can really happen, to such an extent that we love even ourselves in a graced manner, detestable as we may feel at times about ourselves. Self-loathing can actually be diminished or even replaced by a more powerful love in and for Christ, Whose love for us can enable us to love ourselves in a graced and properly-ordered manner. St. Augustine learned as much through his own conversion, which took him away from a disordered love of temporal goods, and towards a properly-ordered love of eternal goods. Augustine found Christ's love to be a healing medicine which moved him away from the self-loathing that came to him from sin and may well have caused him to sin.

Bernard views the transformation from self-rejection to self-affection as a positively *mystical* and *ecstatic* experience. That is, even a momentary awareness of sanctified self-love is an experiential form of *knowledge* involving intellect and emotion. This knowledge enables one to begin to comprehend and to participate more fully in the reality of Christ in this life. St. Paul describes the reality of Christ in the Church and in the world as being a 'mystery' (*mystērion*), namely, 'the mystery of Christ.' We humans can actually receive from God's revelation and through our own mental apparatus an awareness of an unfathomable presence in which Ultimate Reality is both revealed and concealed, a mystery able to be penetrated only by humble and graced assent to God in Christ (see Eph. 3:4, 9-10).

PRACTICAL WISDOM AND THEOLOGICAL REASONING

Why is it important to affirm that the experience of authentic self-love (that is, graced or purified or sanctified or divinized self-love) should play a significant role in Christian thought and spirituality and teaching?⁸ Part of the answer is that genuine self-love frees one to love God and neighbor, as one gradually learns how to love from the incarnate God Who calls us his 'friends'

(Jn. 15:15). Moreover, true self-love matters, because we Christians are trying to win for Christ many souls – our own and others’ -- and one attracts more bees with honey than with vinegar, as St. Francis de Sales used to say.

The message of being lovable because God created us lovable, is simply a positive and edifying announcement of the Good News, much more inviting than a directive that we must hate ourselves. And even though Christ does use Hebraic exaggerative hyperbole in calling us to prioritize and to ‘hate’ our life in this world in order to gain eternal life (see Jn. 12:25), still Christ’s essential meaning is that a properly-ordered prioritization of our loves must exclude any disordered or inordinate or self-centered love of self. We are also commanded by Christ to love our neighbors as ourselves, which obviously means having a high degree of love for both neighbor and self: ‘You shall love your neighbor *as yourself*’ (Mk. 12: 31; emphasis added).

But there is a much more profound and properly *theological* reason why sanctified self-love is valuable. Bernard’s theological rationale for purified self-love is far deeper than any practical application of the advantages of self-love, many though they be. The essential *theological* value in loving oneself in Christ, is that when one loves oneself in Christ, ‘even for a single instant,’ as Bernard says,⁹ one then gains an enhanced ‘share in the divine nature’ (2 Peter 1:4).

In other words, when we love ourselves with Christ’s own love, we are then participating more completely in Christ’s love for all His people; we share in the love of the living God Who ‘is love’ (*agape*, or self-giving charity; 1 Jn. 4:16). This does not mean that we ever become God by nature; but we do become what St. John of the Cross calls ‘God by participation’ (*Dios por participacion*).¹⁰ That is, God gives to us in Christ a created share in God’s own life and love, and this created share in God’s Being is fully expressed only when we love all that God loves, including ourselves. Moreover, by practicing a graced self-love, we imitate God Who loves Himself. Etienne Gilson captures the essence of Bernard’s properly-theological thought on the importance of graced self-love. Gilson states:

As soon as the soul recovers the divine likeness [through conversion], God once more sees Himself in her, and loves Himself once more in her, with the same love as that with which He has never ceased to love Himself... [When] the likeness has been restored to the soul, then what she loves in loving herself is a divine likeness... God loves us, and we should cease to be like Him if we ceased to love ourselves... To love oneself, once one knows oneself to be a divine likeness, is to love God in oneself and to love oneself in God. And for God, when He complacently beholds Himself in an image ever more and more perfect of Himself, that is to love Himself in her and to love her in Himself.¹¹

Another key toward grasping Bernard’s brilliant insight into the importance of true self-love, lies in his thought about the gradual step-by-step character of human development in general and spiritual development in particular. Bernard is convinced of two truths in this matter. First, if one does not experience some measure of authentically loving oneself, then one is not really as advanced in loving God as one could or should be. And second, since it is solely ‘love...[that] truly converts souls because it makes them willing’¹² – a foundational principle in Bernard’s spiritual theology -- therefore one’s love is not fully converted to God and neighbor until one fully and properly loves God and everything and everyone that God has created, including oneself, as difficult as that can be.

FOUR DEGREES OF LOVING GOD

St. Bernard states in his treatise *On Loving God* that authentically loving oneself in Christ is the fourth and highest degree of loving God.¹³ Surprisingly, in Bernard’s thought in his treatise *On*

Loving God, it is a graced *self-love* that marks the highest stage in the spiritual journey of loving God, as counterintuitive as that may sound: ‘Happy is he...who loves himself only for God’s sake.’ There are, then, four degrees of loving God, according to Bernard, the fourth and highest of which is a purified love of self: (a) one loves oneself for one’s own sake, which is a very self-centered love that needs intense conversion, but this is where one normally begins the adult spiritual journey; (b) one loves God for one’s own sake, to get favors from God, which is still selfish yet getting better; (c) one loves God for God’s sake, which is a good and virtuous form of love for God, but still in need of God’s grace in order to become complete by loving oneself with God’s love; (d) one loves oneself with and through God’s love, which happens entirely by God’s love through the grace of Jesus Christ.

Again, there is a profound and properly *theological* dimension – an abstract theoretical dimension – to Bernard’s insistence on the importance of a sanctified love of oneself in the spiritual life. It follows logically, from the revealed fact that God is love and that we are called to love, that genuinely loving ourselves is a sharing in God’s own love for His creation. In other words, having a graced love of oneself is a *created participation* in the life of the uncreated God Who is love and loves Himself and loves us. That is the essence Bernard’s thought about purified self-love on a *theoretical* and properly *theological* level.

A DERIVED PASTORAL THEOLOGY

But there is, again, a secondary yet highly significant dimension in Bernard’s focus on sanctified self-love. We might well call this the derived *pastoral* theology of self-love within St. Bernard’s spiritual theology. This is a dimension that is less abstract and less theoretical, and more practical and more geared toward the salvation of souls who may be struggling in everyday life. The pastoral application of Bernard’s spiritual theology can be most helpful for those who have difficulty in self-acceptance, self-esteem, and self-worth. After all, as the ancient legal-canonical maxim states, *Salus animarum est suprema lex*: ‘The salvation of souls is the highest law’ (see *Code of Canon Law*, canon 1752). All theology and all ecclesial life ought to lead to the salvation of souls, especially for those most in need of God’s mercy, that is, for all of us.

A significant theological principle, such as the importance of graced self-love, ought to be translatable into practical help for those who are struggling in their faith journey. It is simply a good practice for each person, especially each young person, to be encouraged to enjoy a reasonably positive awareness of his or her own God-given goodness and gifts and talents, and to be urged to celebrate and to love one’s own life and abilities, despite imperfections and shortcomings. Forgiveness is always possible through contrition, even if that contrition is fear-based and imperfect. The important factor is to reject any blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, which is the denial of God’s ability to forgive (Mk. 3:29); yet even the sin of rejecting God’s mercy can be forgiven through conversion and confession.

One does well to use one’s talents for the glory of God and for the service of others, of course, yet also for one’s own self-improvement as in preparing to get a good job by putting one’s ‘best foot’ forward. Of course, there is no attempt here to launch a revival of the ‘human potential’ movement. That has already been attempted, often successfully and helpfully, yet virtually always lacking in a solid philosophical-theological foundation in a true metaphysics based on the goodness of creation flowing from the Good Creator in Whose image we are created (Gen. 1:27).¹⁴

The derived pastoral theology in Bernard’s thought can be discussed under the rubric of the importance of authentic self-esteem as a useful tool for daily survival within a healthy spiritual

life. Precisely because a graced self-love is the peak spiritual experience in this life, therefore a graced love of oneself is a virtue that is worth pursuing and cultivating on a daily basis, but never in a conceited way. For example, if a young woman discovers that she enjoys mathematics and is exceptionally gifted at it; or if a young man realizes that he enjoys violin and is exceptionally gifted at it; clearly it would be a positive development for such young persons humbly to love their God-given talents and to love themselves enough as to cultivate rather than squander their talents.

Many souls today, especially among our wonderful young people, are tempted toward, on the one hand, self-rejection and self-destruction, or on the other hand, self-aggrandizement and self-exaggeration. It is difficult for many young people to attain a balanced degree of positive self-regard. Many young people today are often tempted toward self-destruction, as seen in habitual vices ranging from wasting time on the internet, to abusing alcohol or drugs, to cultivating attitudes of meaninglessness or despair, or even to considering suicide as a legitimate solution to life's difficulties; or the same young people can be tempted toward thinking they are so special that they need not work hard or study diligently or save money, since the government or someone else will take care of them. None of these extremes is permissible in St. Bernard's spiritual theology, and all of these distortions of reality are based on false love of self. Rather, a realistic self-assessment and an honest self-appraisal about one's own strengths and weaknesses is in order. Honesty will help, if one is to make progress in the spiritual life through positive growth away from self-seeking false love and toward self-sacrificing true love.

TRUE HAPPINESS AND AUTHENTIC SELF-LOVE IN GOD ALONE

Bernard insists: 'Happy is he... who loves himself *only for God's sake*.' (emphasis added) This is the way that Bernard as a brilliant master of spiritual psychology expresses an important truth and a practical tool for survival in an all-too-often hostile world. It would be unrealistic to expect others to love us if we do not love ourselves. It is worth noting that Bernard does *not* affirm that one will be happy merely by willfully forcing oneself into self-love apart from one's relationship with God. Rather, one is happy who has true love of self '*only for God's sake*.' In other words, when one realizes that one's entire life is a gift of love from the God to Whom one owes constant grateful love – that is, when one loves one's life *as coming from God* – then, and only then, is one truly happy with a distinct form of happiness that, in Bernard's thought, comes only from God.

It is true that self-love *in general* can be a positive skill to be learned, a very useful tool even for atheists or agnostics or non-religious people who might be inclined toward self-rejection and self-destruction. This is because many people, including devout believers, are tempted toward nihilism at some times in their lives. The derived pastoral spirituality of self-love as being good for everyone, will prove to be helpful for believer and non-believer alike, especially when the trials and tribulations of life seem to pursue a person with unrelenting hostility.

All the more helpful is the complete spiritual theology of authentic and graced self-love. Most mature believers at some time experience some degree of what St. John of the Cross calls 'the dark night of the soul,' that is, a time when God seems far away. This is true, even though God in 'the dark night' is actually flooding one's soul with a 'divine inflowing' which blinds the soul for a while on the way to the definitive and transformative union with God.¹⁵ What is needed minimally in times of struggle or darkness or temptation toward despair is a general self-love and self-affirmation, of course. But especially helpful is a *graced* self-love of the specifically bernardian kind, that is, a self-love flowing from one's personal and conscious

relationship with God our Creator and Redeemer and Sanctifier. This is the real standard of authentic self-love in its fullness. For the Lord is the Good Shepherd, Who came that we might have abundant life, and He invites everyone: ‘Come to me...and I will give you rest’ (see Jn. 10:14, Jn. 10:10, Mk. 11:28).

AN EXPERIENCE BOTH ECSTATIC AND MYSTICAL

A realization of a graced love of oneself, as Bernard states, is truly an experience, a felt awareness, both *ecstatic* and *mystical*. First, the experience of sanctified self-love is *ecstatic* (ex + stasis, taking one ‘out of one’s ordinary status’), as it takes one out of one’s usual way of feeling and thinking, yet in an entirely sane and not an insane manner. As Bernard states, this realization of a purified love for oneself moves one beyond one’s ordinary state of feeling and thinking: ‘[T]he mind, drunk with divine love and forgetting itself,...throw[s] itself wholly on God and, clinging to God, become[s] one with him in spirit.’¹⁶

Yet much more importantly, beyond the merely practical and ecstatic dimensions of graced self-love, it is essential to remember that an awareness of love of oneself for God’s sake is also a truly *mystical* experience. But who is a genuine mystic? A mystic is not necessarily someone who has extraordinary spiritual experiences like visions or locutions or levitations. Personal testimonials of extraordinary spiritual experiences are not absolutely necessary for one to be a mystic (witness Pseudo-Dionysius, a mystic who gave no personal mystical testimony). Still, unusual phenomena may well occur in a mystic’s life.

It is primarily *knowledge* – ordinarily what Aquinas calls ‘experiential or felt knowledge’ – it is knowledge of the mystery of God in Christ that makes one a genuine mystic; this will be clarified below.¹⁷ For practical purposes, a concise three-part definition of a mystic is useful here: A mystic is a person (a) who has a relatively-direct experiential knowledge of the ‘mystery [*mystērion*] of Christ,’ now at last made known in God’s Son our Savior, as described in Ephesians chapter three, (b) who communicates about his or her mystical experience, usually through writing, and (c) is approved by the Church. St. Bernard is one of the Church’s greatest and most approved mystics, so he knows of what he speaks, when he speaks of mystical experience. One can get a taste of Bernard’s exquisite mysticism in almost any of his writings such as his eighty-six Sermons on the Song of Songs, but especially so in Sermon 74. Bernard writes:

I tell you [my brother monks] that the Word has come even to me – I speak in my foolishness – and that he has come to me more than once...and as soon as he enters in he stirs my sleeping soul. He moves and soothes and pierces my heart, which was as hard as stone and riddled with disease... Only by the warmth of my heart...did I know that he was there... But when the Word has left me,...and as often as he slips away from me, so often will I seek him, and I shall not cease to cry, as if after someone who is leaving, begging him, with a burning desire of the heart, to return; I will beseech him to give me the joy of his salvation and return to me. I tell you, children, nothing else gives me joy when he is not with me, who alone is the source of my joy.¹⁸

EXPERIENTIAL KNOWLEDGE

The question arises here about how one can discern whether or not one’s experiential knowledge of the mystery of God in Christ is authentic and trustworthy, since experiential knowledge

is interior and often highly subjective and virtually incommunicable to others. Generally speaking, the Church's Mystical Doctor, St. John of the Cross, is our safest guide in these matters. St. John teaches his disciples to be very cautious and to detach from extraordinary spiritual experiences and to avoid making lifetime commitments based on them. For 'we can very easily be greatly deceived.' Indeed, 'one single affection' (*una sola aficion*), that is, one moment of inordinate attachment to a person, place, or thing such as an extraordinary spiritual experience to which one clings, can 'hinder [a disciple] from feeling or experiencing or communicating the delight and intimacy and sweetness of the spirit of love.'¹⁹ St. John's suspicious caution is due to his knowledge that we humans can be easily misled, as St. Paul warns, since the enemy can disguise himself as an 'angel of light' (2 Cor. 11:14).

Nevertheless, as obscure and subjective as personal awareness may be, there can be certain types of experiential knowledge of God that are useful in the spiritual life. Bernard indicates as much in the earlier-quoted passage about Christ as the Bridegroom-Word Who 'has come to me more than once' and has warmed Bernard's emotions and affections.²⁰ Even St. Thomas Aquinas, not easily given to emphasizing emotion in the life of faith, affirms that there is a legitimate and proper place for 'experiential or felt knowledge' (*cognitio...experimentalis seu affective*). This is a *sapiential knowledge*, a form of spiritual wisdom that is *more* than mere speculative cognition, and also *more* than mere emotion. This spiritual wisdom, as a gift from God, contains *not only* an intellectual awareness about God's existence *but also* a measure of the feeling or emotion of God's *Presence*.

In other words, there can be, as it were, some measure of *verifiable evidence* that an alleged intensified encounter with God is real and trustworthy. This is because the knowledge flowing from the intense encounter with God is *cognitio experimentalis seu affective* (an experiential or felt knowledge) – it is a knowledge often mixed with positive emotion. That is, experiential knowledge of God is, so to speak, perceivable or observable, marked by a detectable emotion that changes one's attitude for the better. Aquinas' famous passage in his *Summa Theologiae* affirms that, as in the case of Pseudo-Dionysius' friend Hierotheos, there is a kind of spiritual wisdom which one can attain by 'feeling' or 'suffering' spiritual realities, as one begins, in the Psalmist's words, to 'taste and see' the goodness of the Lord (Ps. 34:9).²¹ The genuine spiritual-mystical encounter with God that produces 'experiential knowledge' of God can be a life-changing moment in observable ways in a person's everyday activities.

The point here is that a thorough conversion to Christ ordinarily includes also an *emotional* component, though not necessarily extraordinary spiritual experiences like visions or locutions or levitations. Here, surprisingly, one's negative emotion toward God and neighbor and self can be – ought to be, over time – decreased or even transformed into positive affectivity. For there is often in mystical experience something like an elevated level of positive emotion, since mystical moments usually involve an emotional change in the mystic, as psychologist William James observed over a century ago.²² Still, a mystical moment in a general sense can be considered as not really extraordinary, since it is often simply an intensification of ordinary Christian faith.²³ Yet the genuine mystic has not merely a 'feeling' about Ultimate Reality, but more importantly, '*knowledge of the divine realities*,' especially in the Scriptures and in the Sacraments.²⁴ One can actually begin to think with the 'mind of Christ' (1 Cor. 2:16) and to love with a felt love from Christ, not only for God and neighbor but also for oneself, observes St. Bernard: 'Happy is he who...loves himself only for God's sake.'²⁵

A relatively complete conversion means that negative emotions like fear and anger and bitterness and resentment normally become diminished or even replaced by positive emotions. These positive emotions are linked with what St. Paul names as the 'fruits' of the Holy Spirit, signs that the Holy Spirit is dwelling in a soul. Included here as signs of the presence of the

Holy Spirit are ‘love, joy, peace, patience’ (Gal. 5:22). Of course, one who is discerning the authenticity of an allegedly ‘mystical’ experience does well to consult a competent spiritual director, in order to be reasonably confident, and not deceived, about one’s progress in being converted away from negative emotions and toward positive affectivity.

MYSTICISM IS NOT ALWAYS EXTRAORDINARY

It bears repeating that extraordinary spiritual experiences, or more often intense emotions, are frequently present in the life of a genuine mystic at least during his or her peak mystical moment. But these extraordinary spiritual experiences are not always necessary, or even desirable, for one to be considered as having a mystical level of faith. All that is needed for one to be in a higher mystical level of faith is for one to have, as noted above, an intensified realization or heightened awareness – a graced and authentic *knowledge* -- of the mystery of God in Christ. Usually this is an experiential knowledge of God in mind and heart that involves both intellect and emotion.²⁶ St. Therese of Lisieux, for example, never had and never wanted any extraordinary spiritual experiences like visions or levitations. Yet most experts consider her to be an authentic mystic nonetheless, precisely because she had, through God’s gift, a great sapiential *knowledge* of the mystery of God in Christ.²⁷

The spiritual life ordinarily unfolds in two main stages, as is learned in the Church’s traditional doctrine in the area of ascetical and mystical theology.²⁸ First is the ascetical life (from *askesis*, practice), in which one actively moves closer to God through effort in prayer and fasting and almsgiving and the human virtues like prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude. Second is the mystical life (from *mysticos*, hidden), in which God moves closer to the soul by doing for one what one cannot do for oneself, through graces which must be received more passively such as an intensification in the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. Those who have a graced knowledge of the mystery of God in Christ – knowledge which typically contains but does not always contain also a measure of heightened emotional awareness of Christ’s saving presence – those who have knowledge of the mystery of God in Christ have a genuinely mystical dimension in their faith and can fairly be identified as at least ‘everyday’ mystics.²⁹

Today, again, it is unfortunately and incorrectly thought in the common estimation that a mystic is a person who has had extraordinary spiritual experiences like apparitions or locutions or levitations. Not necessarily so. Rather, in the Church’s most ancient and accurate and complete understanding of mysticism, extraordinary spiritual experiences are not necessary for one to be considered as being a mystic or as having had mystical awareness. Again, what is necessary for one to be considered a mystic is that he or she have *knowledge*, of ‘the mystery of Christ...as it has now been revealed...the mystery hidden from ages past in God...[and now] made known through the church’ (Ep. 3: 4, 9-10). Returning to our earlier definition of who is a mystic, then, we can justifiably state that the true mystic is the person who has accurate and faith-based knowledge, lived out through charity, of the mystery of God in Christ, communicates about that knowledge despite the difficulty in doing so, and is approved by the Church. In fact, the Church teaches in the Catechism that persons who have an ‘ever more intimate union with Christ’ are understood by the Church to be in the kind of union which is “mystical” because it participates in the mystery of Christ...through the “holy [sacramental] mysteries”... [and] in the mystery of the Holy Trinity.³⁰ For St. Bernard, a truly mystical knowledge of God in Christ will often bring a believer to an intensified awareness and a felt recognition of Christ’s love for everyone, including oneself.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

St. Bernard of Clairvaux, the remarkable twelfth-century mystic and spiritual writer, gives to us an astounding insight into the spiritual life. His unique contention is that the highest degree of loving God in this life occurs when we love ourselves with a graced love that participates in God's own love. In the entire history of Christian spiritual theology, there is nothing else to equal Bernard's thought on the importance of sanctified self-love in the spiritual life, as expressed in his short treatise *On Loving God*. There is simply no other Christian spiritual writer who says anything comparable to what Bernard says. And even today Bernard's focus on purified self-love is still underappreciated. Every serious Christian would do well to read Bernard's words on the importance of sanctified self-love.

Not only is there a most useful *practical* and *pastoral* application of Bernard's thought flowing from his treatise *On Loving God*, namely, that graced self-love is a goal to be sought and a protection in times of trouble. But there is also a deep *theological* truth in Bernard's spiritual theology, namely, that one's experience of even one moment of graced self-love is actually a real participation in the love with which one is loved in the self-giving love of God in Christ. This mysticism of sanctified self-love can be in today's world not only an antidote to the temptations toward self-rejection or self-aggrandizement that so afflict especially young people, but also a motivation to get one through the difficult times by participating in God's love for oneself.

One must never give up on oneself, since one is always loved by the God Who invites one to share in divine love. One can actually love God by purely loving oneself, as one learns to love oneself in and through God's own love. Bernard's thought proposes to young people today that a sanctified love of self can actually produce a much greater 'high' than any drug. One can literally become 'drunk with divine love,' as Bernard says, by experiencing a graced love of self which participates in God's love.³¹ It is difficult to imagine anything more elevating and more edifying than to see a young person arrive through Christ at a real love for one's own life adventure, a love for one's very own life in God's love, to be poured out in generous service of God and neighbor.

The present author thanks all at *The Heythrop Journal* for their professionalism and kindness, including the anonymous Reviewer who around June of 2020 was so generous as to assess insightfully this article on 'St. Bernard on the Importance of Authentic Self-Love.' The Reviewer wrote:

St. Bernard's is a relatively unknown but truly revolutionary 'take' on moral theory and the proper integration of self-love within a spiritual ascesis that keeps one close to the God who is the source of one's authentic self-love... 'God doesn't make trash.' Rather than being a cause for pride or smug self-satisfaction, this essential relationship is experienced as imposing an obligation to cultivate, foster and intensify this dependency and divine orientation to bring out the maximum of the divine fruits in one's life. It is the exact opposite of the sin of pride – which is THE basic sin. This gives rise to a sophisticated and adult spirituality, after one has gotten past the need for a stern reform and penitential turn to God when one first takes one's faith seriously, to the larger project of integrating this 'twice-born' dimension into a steady and even lifestyle.

Notes

1 St. Bernard of Clairvaux, Treatise *On Loving God* (*De Diligendo Deo*), especially X, 27 to XI, 28, in J. Leclercq, C.H. Talbot, and H.M. Rochais, eds., *Sancti Bernardi Opera*, 8 vols. (Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1957-1977); English translation of *On Loving God* in G.R. Evans, transl., *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected*

Works, in *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), as referred to in eds. Louis Dupre and James A. Wiseman, O.S.B., *Light from Light: An Anthology of Christian Mysticism*, second ed., revised (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2001), 95-113. Hereafter the title 'On Loving God' is abbreviated to 'OLG.' See also *Dictionnaire de Spiritualite* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1937 -), s.v. 'Bernard (Saint),' by F. Cavallera, I, 1454-1502; also Jean Leclercq, *Bernard of Clairvaux and the Cistercian Spirit* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1976); also Andrew Louth, 'Bernard and Affective Mysticism,' in ed. Sister Benedicta Ward, *The Influence of St. Bernard: Anglican Essays* (Oxford: SLG Press, 1976), 1-10. For Bernard, the final degree of loving God is to love oneself with God's own love. Bernard feels that purified self-love is rare in this life yet conceivably possible entirely through God's grace, though he does occasionally wonder if this is realistically possible for many. See Dennis E. Tamburello, *Union with God: John Calvin and the Mysticism of St. Bernard* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 67; also Peter Verhalen, "'Convert so that You May Live': St. Bernard's Theology of Conversion," *Communio* 10 (1983): 400-406; also Conrad Baars and Anna A. Terruwe, *Healing the Unaffirmed: Recognizing Deprivation Neurosis* (New York: Alba House, 1976); also Walter Conn, 'The Conversion of Desire,' in eds. T. Fallon and P. Riley, *Religion and Culture: Essays in Honor of Bernard Lonergan* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 261-276. On the topic of self-contempt and internalized toxic shame, it is important to note that among addicts, for example, research shows that one part of the healing antidote in recovery is for the addict to learn self-love and self-acceptance and self-affirmation. This is because, paradoxically, the logic of addiction is not 'I hate myself because I am addict,' but rather 'I am an addict because I hate myself.' See Gershin Kaufman, *Shame: The Power of Caring* (Rochester, MN: Schenkman, 1985); also Ernest Kurtz, *Shame and Guilt: Characteristics of the Dependency Cycle* (Hazelden, MN: Hazelden Foundation, 1981); also John Bradshaw, *Healing the Shame that Binds You* (Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, 1985); also Robert Karen, 'Shame,' *Atlantic Monthly* (February, 1992): 56-70.

2 Bernard, *On Loving God*, X, 27 to XI, 28.

3 St. Augustine, *En. Ps.* 131.6, as translated by David Meconi, SJ, 'Ravishing Ruin: St. Augustine's Theology of Sin and Self-Loathing,' Lecture, 12 January 2019, Ave Maria University. For Blessed Julian of Norwich on the mysticism of graced self-love, see transl. E. Colledge and J. Walsh, *Julian of Norwich: Showings* (Long Form), *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), #49, 52. For St. Francis de Sales on moderate self-love, see his *Introduction to the Devout Life*, transl. J. K. Ryan (Garden City: Image Books, 1972), V, 5, 278; for St. Jane de Chantal on sanctified self-love, see her Letter of 9 February 1616, in transl. P. Thibet, *Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal: Letters of Spiritual Direction*, *Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 232.

4 Bernard, *On Consideration*, I, V, 6 and II, III, 6. See also F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, second ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), s.v. 'Bernard, St.,' 162; also Jean Leclercq, 'The School of Cîteaux,' in J. Leclercq, F. Vandenbroecke, and L. Bouyer, *The Spirituality of the Middle Ages*, vol. 2 in *A History of Christian Spirituality* (New York: Seabury Press, 1968, orig. 1961), 187-215.

5 Frederick Copleston, S.J., *A History of Philosophy*, 9 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1944-1974), vol. IX, 262. See also Bernard McGinn, 'Introduction' to *Three Treatises on Man: Cistercian Anthropology*, *Cistercian Fathers Series #24*, ed. Bernard McGinn (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1977), 1-98; also E. von Ivanka, 'L'Union a Dieu: La structure de l'ame selon S. Bernard,' in *St. Bernard Theologien: Analecta Sacri Ordinis Cisterciensis* (Paris, 1953), 202-208.

6 For Abelard's statement about 'ador[ing] Christ...[and] embracing him,' see his Letter to Heloise around 1142, as quoted in Watkin Williams, *Saint Bernard of Clairvaux* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1935), 296. For Bernard's calling Abelard 'entirely double-faced,' see Bernard's Letter 193 to Cardinal Ivo, in Williams, *Saint Bernard*, 307-309. For Bernard's being 'less interested in [rational] knowledge than in love,' see Jacques Hourlier, O.S.B., 'Saint Bernard et Guillaume de Saint Thierry dans le "Libere de amore,"' in *S. Bernardi theologien: Actes du Congres de Dijon*, second ed. (Rome: 1953), 229, as quoted in Dupre and Wiseman, *Light from Light*, 96. On the fact that Christian philosophers like Abelard are influenced by their theology while beginning to keep a distinction between the two disciplines, see the commentary on Etienne Gilson by Frederick Copleston, S.J., *A History of Philosophy*, vol. IX, 262. *Maine de Biran to Sartre* (New York: Doubleday, 1964-1974 for total nine-volume series), 262; also for background on Abelard, vol. II, *Augustine to Scotus*, 6 and 148-151. On Bernard's thought that Abelard created a 'destructive rationalism...[which would] drive a wedge between spiritual experience and rational consciousness,' see Ewert H. Cousins, 'Preface' to G.R. Evans, *Bernard*, 5; also Jean Leclercq, 'Introduction' to G.R. Evans, *Bernard*, 13-57; also Leclercq, Vandenbroecke, and Bouyer, *Spirituality of the Middle Ages*, 201, 335.

7 St. Augustine, *En Ps.* 103, 1.4, as translated by Meconi, 'Ravishing Ruin,' Lecture, 12 January 2019, Ave Maria University.

8 On Bernard's monastic ideal of learning to love freely both God and neighbor in the context of community and friendship, see Brian Patrick Maguire, *Friendship and Community: The Monastic Experience, 350-1250*, Cistercian Studies 25 (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1988). On Bernard's being influenced by Scripture, liturgy, prayer, and monastic friendships, see John R. Sommerfeldt, *Bernard of Clairvaux and the Life of the Mind* (New York and Mahwah, NJ: Newman Press, 2004), and *St. Bernard on the Spirituality of Relationship* (New York and Mahwah, NJ: Newman Press, 2004), 3; also Anthony N. S. Lane, *St. Bernard: Theologian of the Cross*, Cistercian Studies #248 (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, Liturgical Press, 2013), 43; also E. Rozanne Elder, *Bernard and William of St. Thierry* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 108-9; also M. B. Pranger, 'Mystical Tropology in Bernard of Clairvaux,' *International Journal for Philosophy and Theology* 52 (1991, issue 4): 428-435; also Jean Danielou, 'S. Bernard et les peres grecs,' in *St. Bernard theologien: Analecta Sacri Ordinis Cistercienses* (Paris, 1953): 46-55.

9 Bernard, OLG, X, 27.

10 St. John of the Cross, *Living Flame of Love*, III, 8.

11 Etienne Gilson, *The Mystical Theology of Saint Bernard*, transl. A. Downes (London: Sheed and Ward, 1940), 117-118.

12 Bernard, OLG, XII, 34.

13 Bernard, OLG, VIII, 24 to XII, 29.

14 On the constant availability of forgiveness especially through the Sacraments, and on the blasphemy of denying God's ability to forgive, see the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1864. On the human potential movement, see, for example, for a secular source, Nathaniel Branden, *Honoring the Self: Personal Integrity and the Heroic Potentials of Human Nature* (Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, Inc., 1988); see also, for a Christian source, Robert H. Schuller, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1982).

15 St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, II, 5, 1.

16 Bernard, OLG, X, 27. On human 'experience' as felt awareness, and on the difficulties of theologizing about experience due to its rather subjective and obscure and incommunicable character, embedded as it is in personal emotion and thought and memory, see Bernard McGinn, 'The Language of Inner Experience in Christian Mysticism,' *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality*, 1/2 (2001): 156; also Killian McDonnell, 'Spirituality and Experience in Bernard of Clairvaux,' *Theological Studies* 58 (1997): 3, 18; also Michael Casey, 'In Pursuit of Ecstasy: Reflections on Bernard of Clairvaux's *De Dilegendo Deo*,' *Monastic Studies* 16 (1985): 139-156.

17 Louis Bouyer, *Mysterion: Du mystere a la mystique* (Paris, 1986), 348, quoted Dupre and Wiseman, *Light from Light*, 415; also Louis Dupre, 'General Introduction' to *Light from Light*, 3; also Wiseman, 'Mysticism,' in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, a Michael Glazier Book, 1993), 681-2; also Wiseman, *Spirituality and Mysticism: A Global View* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2006), 7-10.

18 Bernard, Sermon 74.7, *On the Song of Songs*.

19 For the fact that 'we can very easily be greatly deceived' in spiritual matters, see St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, II, 9, 1. See also Nelson Pike, 'The Epistemic Value of Mystical Visions,' in ed. R. Audi, *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986), 16-33.

20 Bernard, Sermon 74.7 *On the Song of Songs*. On how God and the human person desire union with each other, see also Jack Kilcrease, 'The Bridal-Mystical Motif in Bernard of Clairvaux and Martin Luther,' *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 65/2 (April 2014): 263-279.

21 St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIa IIae, q. 97, a 2 ad 2. See also Jean-Pierre Torrell, O.P., *St. Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 2, *Spiritual Master*, transl. Robert Royal (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003, orig. 1996), on 'The Experience of God,' 94-98. On the observable effects of affective conversion and deeper spiritual encounter with God, see Marilyn Mallory, *Christian Mysticism: Transcending Transcendence* (Amsterdam: Van Gorkum Assen, 1977), who found in studying the brainwave activity of fifty nuns in a religious community that those who attained the highest detectable levels of love and joy and peace were those who simply performed well their ordinary daily duties, without overburdening themselves with extreme ascetical practices.

22 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experiences* (New York: Random House, 1902), 370.

23 Karl Rahner, 'Everyday Mysticism' and 'The Theology of Mysticism,' in Rahner, *The Practice of Faith: A Handbook of Contemporary Spirituality*, eds. K. Lehmann and A. Raffelt (New York: Crossroad, 1986, orig. 1982), 69-77; also Rahner, 'Mystical Experience and Mystical Theology,' *Theological Investigations* 17 (1981):

90-99; also Charles A. Bernard, *Theologie Affective* (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1984); also Jean Baruzzi, *Saint Jean de la Croix et la Probleme de l'Experience Mystique*, 2 vols. (Paris: Librairie Felix Alcan, 1924).

24 Bouyer, *Mysterion*, as referred to in Wiseman, 'Mysticism,' 682.

25 Bernard, OLG, X, 27.

26 St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIa IIae, q. 97, a 2 ad 2.

27 Dupre and Wiseman, 'Commentary' on St. Therese of Lisieux, in *Light from Light*, 415.

28 See, for example, Adolphe Tanquerey, *The Spiritual Life: A Treatise on Ascetical and Mystical Theology*, transl. H. Branderis (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1923); also Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, OP, *The Three Ages of the Spiritual Life: Prelude of Eternal Life*, 2 vols. (St. Louis: B. Herder Books, 1948).

29 Rahner, 'Everyday Mysticism.'

30 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #2014.

31 Bernard, OLG, X, 27.