

MONASTIC THEOLOGY AND CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ST. BERNARD'S THOUGHT FOR CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY

To commemorate the 900th anniversary of the birth of St. Bernard, Roch Kereszty prepared a paper to explore the significance of Bernard's thought for the theology of our own time. Due to illness, Kereszty could not be present, so the paper was read by the moderator, Carla Mae Streeter, responded to by Matthew Lamb, and discussed by all present.

Kereszty chose six theological themes central to the contemporary theological debate, and showed that Bernard's thought has much to offer to deepen and even change the theological perspective of these themes.

The first theme is process theology. Acknowledging that process theology is accepted by many because it seems to offer an alternative to "classical theism," Kereszty holds that it distorts the Christian understanding of God by violating God's transcendence. Rather than self-sufficient and solitary, the God of the scholastics is a Trinity whose unity is the result of the perfect love that is identical to God. This loving communion is prior to both creation and incarnation. Both the transcendence and the absolute perfection that shows itself in self-giving love must be safeguarded, Kereszty maintains.

For Bernard God is not in need of the human, yet the final fruit of the redemptive incarnation is a redeemed and glorified humanity, the *Sponsa Verbi*. Out of sheer grace rather than need, humankind is raised to a mutual relationship, not to an equal level with God. Bernard's support for this is the fact that love desires mutuality. For the God of Bernard, the spouse is beautiful in her creaturely perfection standing over against God in a relationship of mutual love. The love and beauty of the spouse comes from Love Itself, generously and freely given.

Feminist theology is Kereszty's next theme. He calls upon Bernard's designation of the Word as Son and Bridegroom, a male image that emphasizes the Word's initiative of the "love affair" between the conscious creature and God. Kereszty points out that Bernard complements this male image with the female image of Wisdom (*Sermons on the Canticle of Canticles* 32,2: 1, 227). Such a complementary use of images results in expressing the transcendent character of the relationship without losing the power of concrete poetic images.

In the third theme, the scandal of the one savior in a universal plan of salvation, Kereszty places Bernard on the side of universal salvation history. Rather than an arbitrary decree of God, Bernard points out that this divine strategy corresponds to the deepest needs of fallen humanity. Christ is the divine archetype of all human beings.

In considering this "Truth," everyone is offered an understanding of his or her own truth, what one can become. Universality and christocentrism not only do not contradict but presuppose one another in Bernard's thought.

The self-estrangement of the autonomous individual is Kereszty's fourth theme. Uncompromised autonomy resulting in estrangement is at the heart of contemporary experience. Bernard addresses both in describing the process of conversion. He points out the connection between a false freedom and self-estrangement. Describing not only the symptoms of alienation, Bernard reveals its cause in alienation from God. Kereszty explains that the original human vocation was to use conscious free self-possession as a free gift of oneself to God. Such an act of free self-giving love would have perfected human freedom. Instead we used this privilege to "grab for what did not belong" to us, the divine knowledge of the Son, to become what we could not be, absolutely autonomous. This attempt introduced estrangement and conflict into the very center of our personhood. Bernard holds that God does not fault our drive for greatness. Rather, God thwarts the way we go after it—attempting to grab it by our own power (*Four Sermons on the Ascension of the Lord* 6:V, 142-43). The Incarnation is the alternative way to go about it.

The charismatic movement is the next theme. A reaction against an overly rational and emotionless religious practice, this movement looks for the establishment of vibrant Christian communities by the renewing power of the Holy Spirit. While recognizing Bernard's interest in charisms in the church, Kereszty points out several areas where Bernard could deepen and correct the movement. First among these is the fact that for Bernard the locus of spiritual experience is the church. Second, religious experience is never for itself alone in Bernard, but is always pressing toward the object of faith, toward God revealed in the community. Third, Bernard values the religious image. The ascension is key to his christology because it calls us to let go of even the flesh of Jesus to be made ready for the further work of the Spirit. This realization can be helpful to charismatic communities whose fervor of emotional love is fading away.

Finally, Kereszty addresses the theology of the body. In the face of contemporary body obsession, Bernard offers the remedy of an eschatological humanism. The body's role is to honor the soul and help its reconciliation. If the body has consumed itself toward this end, it will be conformed to the risen body of Christ.

There is, says Kereszty, an unresolved contradiction in Bernard on the body. In many of his writings, humans are spiritual beings who realize themselves in a free self-possession and giving to God. As a result of the fall, the body has become an obstacle to this self-possession and self-giving. Yet the glorified body is necessary for the eschatological perfection of the human being. Thus for Bernard the human being can realize his or her call to a total act of self-possession and self-gift only in one's risen, glorified body (*On the Love of God* 29-33:111, 143-47; *Two Sermons on the Feast of All the Saints* 4-8:V, 345-48). Kereszty closes with the caution that theology in our time cannot be renewed by the sole assimilation of Bernard or even of the entire patristic heritage. He urges further study in the type of correlations he has attempted here. The heritage of Bernard is not to be limited to experts in medieval monasticism. It belongs to the very center of contemporary theological inquiry.

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