

EPWORTH LEAGUE TOPICS

Epoch Makers in Church History

VI. Bernard of Clairvaux, Father of Western Mysticism

TOPIC FOR WEEK OF OCTOBER 18. SUITABLE LESSON, EPHESIANS, THIRD CHAPTER.

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At a very early period in the history of the Christian Church there developed what is known as the monastic spirit. Men who craved most deeply to be holy conceived the idea of separation from the world not in spirit only, but in actual bodily retirement. Thus arose the monastic orders. These were, in most cases, a rebuke of the growing spirit of worldliness in the Church. The watchword of monasticism was the annihilation not only of evil affections, but of all earthward impulses of man. Strict asceticism became the rule of these communities. Idleness was not permitted. Agriculture was fostered as well as other useful arts. Study alternated with manual toil. Thus the monks were saved from the evils of sloth. Thus, too, learning and many useful arts were encouraged and kept alive during the dark ages.

But in time all the monastic orders declined from their own high ideals. And from time to time new orders arose as a protest against the growing laxity and luxury of the older orders. In time the monks who had once been the strength of the Church became its weakness and its disgrace. The middle ages saw monasticism at its best. Some of the greatest men of that period of history were monks. And among the outstanding men of the monastic orders of the middle ages none were greater than Bernard of Clairvaux.

Bernard was born in 1091 A.D., at Fontaines in Burgundy, near Dijon. His father, who was a knight in the service of the Duke of Burgundy, fell in battle in the first crusade. Bernard was trained in all knightly accomplishments, and for a time was drawn toward a soldier's career. The influence of a pious mother and the deeper feelings of his own nature led him toward the cloister. At the age of twenty-two he joined the little company of monks at Cîteaux, who belonged to the order known as Cistercians. The monastery at Cîteaux had been founded in 1098 by an Englishman named Stephen Harding. This monastery was famed for the severity of its rules; but, like Martin Luther at a later period, Bernard outdid his teachers in the passionate energy with which he pursued holiness through monastic means. The austerity of his life won him renown not only in the community at Cîteaux, but in the world he had left behind. By his devotion and by his enthusiasm in recommending the monastic life, he drew many to Cîteaux, among whom were his four brothers. The effect of his preaching was such that "mothers hid their sons, wives their husbands, companions their friends," lest they should be beguiled by this young enthusiast to his way of life.

The monastery at Cîteaux soon became too small for the numbers seeking admission. Stephen Harding had found in Bernard not only a congenial spirit, but a man of rare genius. He now sent him to found a new branch of the order. The place chosen for the new monastery was Clairvaux, a wild, uncultivated valley in

the Department of Aube, in France. By dint of incredible toil and self-sacrifice Bernard and his brother monks succeeded in making this valley rejoice and blossom as the rose. The new cloister prospered wonderfully and its young abbot soon found himself famous.

The hardships encountered in this new enterprise proved too much for Bernard. He fell seriously ill. William of Campeaux, the famous physician of that age, took the abbot's case in hand, obtained the consent of his superior and removed him to a place of rest, where he regained his health.

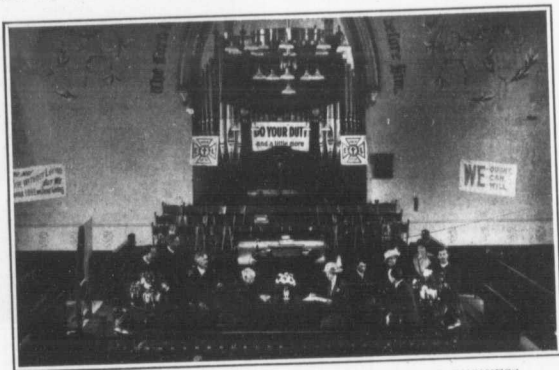
On his return to Clairvaux Bernard began that marvellous career of writing, preaching and managing the affairs of his Order that made him the most influential man of his time. His influence soon extended far beyond his cloister. His friends and pupils spread his teachings. The Church at large began to recognize him. By voice and pen he was making

which furnishes the best aid to anyone who is sick and the best remedy to anything which is wrong."

Three things bear testimony to the wide influence Bernard exerted in later life. So powerful was he after his intervention in the case of Pope Innocent II. that he was able to induce the Emperor, Conrad III., to undertake the second crusade. When the order of Knights Templar came into existence during the time of the Crusades, Bernard was called upon to draw up the rules for this famous order. But the chief event of Bernard's later life was his controversy with Abelard.

Peter Abelard was a famous scholar and teacher at Paris, at whose feet the greatest scholars of the day had sat. Bernard and others had become alarmed at his teaching, which to them was heretical. A council was called in 1140 to decide the case. Abelard dared the whole world to meet him. Bernard alone took up the challenge and entered the arena against this master of dialectics. Abelard was twelve years older than Bernard, and was accounted the subtlest intellect of that age. But the famous young abbot faced him boldly before the council and brought about his condemnation.

The chief charge against Abelard was



MOUNT FOREST CHURCH, SHOWING THE CONVENTION BUSINESS COMMITTEE AT WORK.

himself felt from his forest solitude. Strange as it may seem this young recluse for a time ruled the world with his popes, emperors and kings.

When two rival popes, Innocent II. and Anacletus II., were contending for the office of supreme head of Christendom, Bernard threw the weight of his influence into the scale for Innocent, who had been driven from Rome by Anacletus. He won France, England, Spain and Germany to the side of Innocent. Anacletus fled to the Castle of St. Angelo, where he died. A second rival pope set up his claim, but Bernard's influence was too great for him.

No one now stood higher in the whole Christian world than the Abbot of Clairvaux. The secret of his influence was his character. "He was severe, almost austere, but he was not hard; to all he showed a kindness of heart and a suavity of manners which charmed and consoled. He was humble and meek, but he was not diffident. On one thing he was so sure that his conviction made him a commander and a harbor of refuge to every one who felt weak or doubtful or tempted. He was young and singularly inexperienced, but he had that magical intuition into character and circumstances which comes from perfect sincerity of heart and

that he was a rationalist. Bernard was a mystic. Abelard held that all doctrines must be sifted by the intellect before they can be accepted as articles of faith. Bernard held that they should be embraced at once by faith through an act of the will. With Abelard faith meant reasoned conviction. With Bernard intellect meant enthusiastic contemplation. The contemplation of the divine love and the rapture of communion with God had been the one supreme, consoling and staying power in Bernard's life. He could not understand Abelard and Abelard could not appreciate him. The Church has always been afraid of the rationalist and she has usually lauded the mystic. The rationalist cannot understand the mystic and the mystic cannot understand the rationalist. Both have their place and their work. To the mystic the Church owes her best hymns and her choicest devotional literature. From the men of the Abelard type she has drawn her theologians, her apologists and her historians.

Mysticism received a great impetus from Bernard. He made men prize the contemplative life. Professor Scholz calls him "The Father of Western Mysticism." He was the forerunner of the men and