

SPIRIT AND EXPERIENCE IN BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX

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[*Editor's Note: The author looks at how St. Bernard uses the term "experience," concentrating principally on the pneumatological context in his Sermons on the Song of Songs. He touches on how Bernard relates experience to the symbolic order, the stages of experience, its ecclesial character, the relation of experience to faith, and finally what contemporary theology can learn from him.*]

OF THE VARIOUS "turns" in theology (to the subject, linguistics, feminism, liberation, etc.) the most problematic is the turn to experience, a common denominator in all such theological styles. Gerhard Ebeling and Hans-Georg Gadamer complain that experience is one of the most obscure of philosophical categories.¹ Donald Gelpi thinks that experience enjoys a certain pride of place among the weasel words in the English language.² The condemnations of modernism at the turn of the century created a magisterial distrust of the appeal to experience in theology, experience being seen narrowly in psychological or subjectivist terms. This pushed a wedge between Catholic theology and those contemporary historical, social, scientific, and cultural expressions of experience. This meant that theology floated in an ahistorical stratosphere, handing on Scripture, tradition, and the scholastic synthesis, with the argument from authority being the absolute, isolated from its social context.³ Protestants had their Luther, and were still living off Friedrich Schleiermacher and William James. Some complained that the focus on the Word in dialectical theology pushed experience to the side and it was almost banished.⁴

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¹ Gerhard Ebeling, "Die Klage über das Erfahrungsdefizit in der Theologie als Frage nach ihrer Sache," in *Wort und Glaube*, 3 vols. (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1975) 3.3–28; Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury, 1975) 310–25.

² Donald Gelpi, *The Turn to Experience in Contemporary Theology* (New York: Paulist, 1994) 1–2.

³ Dermot Lane, *The Experience of God: An Invitation to Do Theology* (New York: Paulist, 1981) 5.

⁴ Ebeling, "Die Klage über das Erfahrungsdefizit."

In the patristic theology of the early centuries (for example, in Pseudo-Macarius, Gregory of Nyssa, Basil, Augustine, and Cassian) as well as in the monastic theology of the medieval West (in Peter Damian, Rupert of Deutz, William of St. Thierry, and Bernard), a continuation in its own form of patristic theology, experience still played a significant role. For instance, in the fourth century it would be difficult to separate the Cappadocian settlement on the Trinity from religious experience. Those early authors did not suffer from the later schizophrenia that separated spiritual or mystical theology from what they thought of as theology proper.⁵ In this article I propose to look at how Bernard of Clairvaux uses experience, concentrating principally on the pneumatological context in his *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, touching on how Bernard relates experience to the symbolic order, the stages of experience, its ecclesial character, the relation of experience to faith, and what contemporary theology can learn from him.

Bernard has suffered from being seen as a mere devotional writer, not worthy of the title of theologian. Yet many of his contemporaries recognized his theological competence.⁶ In the last decades, beginning with Etienne Gilson,⁷ there has been a growing awareness of Bernard as a serious theologian. It is the role that Bernard the theologian gives to experience that I will investigate. In 1926 Johannes Schuck characterized Bernard's theology, as expressed in *On the Song of Songs*, as *credo ut experiar* ("I believe that I may experience") rather than *credo ut intelligam* ("I believe that I may understand").⁸ The formulation may be overly precise, but Bernard seems to fit this description when he refers to the bridegroom-Word seeking the bride-soul/Church: "What they do not know from experience, let them believe, so that one day, by virtue of their faith, they may reap the harvest of experience. . . . We must add that the soul which knows this by experience has fuller and more blessed knowledge."⁹ Nowhere does Bernard give a definition or a description of what he understands by experience. Far from being a restrictive category, Bernard's notion of

⁵ Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, 3rd. ed. (New York: Fordham University, 1982) 191–235.

⁶ Already Geoffrey of Auxerre, a student of Abelard, wrote his own *Commentary on the Song of Songs*. In the *Incipit Prologus in secundo* Geoffrey calls Bernard "that great theologian" (*magnus ille theologus*) in reference to Bernard's *On the Song of Songs* (Jean Leclercq, "Les Écrits de Geoffroy d'Auxerre," *Revue bénédictine* 62 [1952] 282).

⁷ *The Mystical Theology of Saint Bernard* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1940) viii; Ulrich Köpf, *Religiöse Erfahrung in der Theologie Bernhards von Clairvaux* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1980) 8; J. Leclercq, "S. Bernard et la théologie monastique du XII^e siècle," in *Bernard théologien* (Analecta Sacri Ordinis Cisterciensis 9 [1953] 19).

⁸ *Das Hohe Lied des Hl. Bernhard von Clairvaux* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1926) 11.

⁹ *On the Song of Songs* 84.7 (hereafter cited as *Song*), in *S. Bernardi Opera*, 8 vols. in 9, ed. J. Leclercq, C. H. Talbot, H. M. Rochais (Rome: Editiones Cisterciensis, 1957–1977) 2.306.24–26 (hereafter cited as *Opera*).

experience is broad, embedded in desire, delight, love, awe, wonder, and anticipation.

For further clarity one needs to look at his environment. The culture of monastic mores with its committed relationships within a praying community gives experience a specifically monastic character. Within the brotherhood three symbiotic components defined the rhythm of that life: Scripture, patristics,¹⁰ and liturgy.¹¹ In speaking of experience, Bernard presupposes the reading and praying of the Scriptures both in private and in the monastic choir and the celebration of the mysteries. This hearing and reading is specifically contemplative, directed to tasting, to the heart, to experience. *Affectus* and *experientia* have a strong affinity in Bernard.¹² One does not go from reading to prayer, because reading or listening to the Word with the ear of the heart is already prayer. What the exterior words of Scripture say, the monk experiences interiorly: "What one hears from without, one feels within" (*quae foris audit, intus sentit*).¹³ Bernard says of St. Paul's words concerning the incomprehensible ways of God (Rom 11:33): "If you are holy, you understand and you know; if you are not holy, be holy, and you will understand by experience."¹⁴

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND EXPERIENCE

How does this experience come about? By the Holy Spirit who alone knows the depths of God and alone knows what is in the interior of the believer. The monk is "to walk in the Spirit" and have "the Spirit as a moderator" so that "your interior experience corresponds to what I speak exteriorly."¹⁵ Not the eloquence of the speaker, but the Spirit elicits the experience. Therefore Bernard recommends that those who hear or read his words should "search in experience" (*experientiam magis require*) rather than in what he is saying.¹⁶ When Bernard is about to expound the text "Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth," he gives a programmatic principle: "today the text we are going to study is the book of our own experience (*in libro experientiae*) You must turn your attention inward."¹⁷ The event to which he is referring is a composite of biblical experience and one's own experience, or even a composite of others' experience and one's

¹⁰ As regards the Fathers, Bernard said, "Do not receive my opinion, but that of the Fathers" (*Sermon in Praise of the Virgin Mother (Super missus est)* 2.14, in Opera 4.31.14–15).

¹¹ Bernard treats of liturgical prayer in *Song* 7.

¹² Köpf, *Religiöse Erfahrung* 135.

¹³ *Song* 37.3, in Opera 2.11.2. Compare the statement, "Apply your inward ear, reflect with the eyes of the heart, and you yourself will know by experience what is transpiring" (*On Conversion* 3.4, in Opera 4.74.8–9).

¹⁴ *On Consideration* 5.30, in Opera 3.492.10–11.

¹⁵ *Song* 21.4, in Opera 1.124.20–25.

¹⁶ *On Conversion* 13.25, in Opera 4.99.17.

¹⁷ *Song* 3.1, in Opera 1.14.7. Elsewhere Bernard repeats the phrase "in the book of one's own experience" (*On the Ascension* 6.2, in Opera 5.151.21–22).

own.¹⁸ He is well aware that many of the monks have not had a transforming experience; but the penitent sinner also advances by degrees and is not devoid of experience. On occasion he will appeal both to his own experience¹⁹ and the experience of others.²⁰ Some who hear him expound the Word may have had more experience than he.²¹ In fact, he invites his audience to authenticate the message he brings against their own experience;²² experience is a kind of authority.²³ "Listen to the one with experience!"²⁴ "Believe the one with experience."²⁵ This too has scriptural content, as those with experience are first of all the authors of the Scriptures, the prophets of the Old Testament, and St. Paul. Bernard goes beyond Scripture, however, to one's own proper experience. The appeal is even to "daily experience."²⁶ He returns to the expression "daily each one of us experiences this."²⁷ While the Scriptures he expounds are both the source and means of experience, the Scriptures themselves are subject to experience.²⁸ One will search in vain among books for a key to the Word Bernard is preaching; better to look at one's own experience.²⁹ Of the scriptural Song of Songs Bernard notes: "Only the anointing [of the Spirit] teaches this kind of canticle; beyond that only experience learns. Let those with experience recognize this, and those without experience burn with desire so that they will not so much know as experience."³⁰ Bernard sees the Scriptures, hearers, readers, and himself as bound together by experience of the same Spirit operative in each. This co-inherence is a contemplative principle of understanding.

Geoffrey of Auxerre, for many years Bernard's secretary and after his death his biographer, asserts that after Bernard has subjected himself to the Scriptures then the Word of the Lord lets itself be led where Bernard wants (*ducere ipse quo vellet*), the Holy Spirit, who is [Scripture's] author, following him" (*auctorem earum ducem Spiritum sequens*).³¹ Audaciously, Geoffrey declares that Bernard uses experi-

¹⁸ Köpf, "Die Rolle der Erfahrung im religiösen Leben nach dem heiligen Bernhard," *Analecta Cisterciensia* 46 (1990) 319.

¹⁹ "I speak to you of my experience, what I have myself experienced" (*Song* 51.3, in *Opera* 2.85.21–22); see Köpf, "Erfahrung als Voraussetzung bei Bernhard und seinen Hörern," in *Religiöse Erfahrung* 23–26.

²⁰ *Song* 38.2, in *Opera* 2.15.20–23. Gilson notes that Bernard is reluctant to compare his experience with that of others (*The Mystical Theology* 94).

²¹ *Song* 22.4, in *Opera* 1.130.14.

²² *Song* 39.3, in *Opera* 2.19.27–28; compare *On Conversion* 17.30.13–14, where Bernard appeals both to Scripture and the experience of the monks.

²³ Köpf, "Die Rolle der Erfahrung" 314. ²⁴ *Song* 31.1, in *Opera* 1.14.16.

²⁵ *Letter* 106.2, in *Opera* 7.266.23.

²⁶ *Song* 29.3, in *Opera* 1.204.16–19.

²⁷ *Song* 16.2, in *Opera* 1.90.20; *On the Dedication of the Church* 5.2, in *Opera* 5.389.23–25; similarly, *On Grace and Free Will* 47, in *Opera* 3.199.26–27. See Köpf, "Die Rolle der Erfahrung" 313.

²⁸ Brian Stock, *The Implication of Literacy* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1983) 414.

²⁹ *On Conversion* 25, in *Opera* 4.99.17. ³⁰ *Song* 1.11, in *Opera* 1.7.28–30.

³¹ *First Life of Saint Bernard* 3.14, in Migne, PL 185.307.

ential images from Scripture as a language now natural to him. The Spirit is agreeable and follows. This is part of the broader pattern of monastic life, in which Scriptures play a dominant role. They are read in the liturgy, at table, and in the monks' cells. Monks learn the Scriptures, especially the Psalms, by heart, so that they can pray them in the monastic choir and masticate them at will in private prayer or at work. This link between the Spirit, experience, and the Scriptures would indicate that in referring to experience Bernard does not allude primarily to isolated individual moments of spiritual elevation, though these do occur and he does mention them. He is speaking of experience in a broader context: the monk is aware that he is caught up in the drama and rhythm of God's economy, participating in the mysteries of salvation proclaimed in the Scriptures and celebrated in the liturgy. Experience, therefore, does not exist outside of, or apart from, the specifically monastic and ecclesial³² culture created by Scripture, liturgy, and the communal life.

So when Bernard speaks of experience, he is speaking most of the time of biblical experience, experience that grows out of reading or hearing the Word. This should not be understood in a mechanistic sense. The issue is not chronology, but rather theology (the primacy of the Word of God) and culture (the monastic/ecclesial mode of life). Experience is presupposed even before the reading of a text; it can be something the monk brings to the hearing of the Word.

DENATURING THE SYMBOL?

According to the monastic tradition, experience does not exclude sense experience. St. Benedict's first degree of humility is "the sensing (*sentiment*) of the presence of God."³³ Bernard's notion of affect, as expressed in his writings, would suffer considerable damage were it deprived entirely of sense experience. Without the involvement of sense experience one would not be able to explain his sensual images. Bernard does transpose sense images to the spiritual level—it is the whole direction of his thought—but if the transposition were total, one could not account for the breadth of experience. One would have left the symbolic order, or possibly denatured it. Or does one want to grant that the symbolic order is purely conceptual? The disjunction between symbol and symbolized would be too great. On the other hand, if the senses are not taken up and surpassed, transformed into another mode, than one is left with religious eroticism, of which Bernard is innocent. The operative words are "taken up." Bernard, like Origen before him, writes within a sacramental order (water, wine,

³² Claude Bodard, "La Bible, expression d'une expérience religieuse chez S. Bernard," in *Bernard théologien* 40.

³³ Leclercq, *The Love of Learning* 76.

bread, incarnation) where the analogue cannot be completely spiritualized.³⁴ Finally, quite apart from his intentions, which are not easy to determine, symbols, like rockets, have a life of their own after "lift-off," independent of their creator.

Here my position is close to, but not identical with, the second of Leclercq's three positions on this topic. The first goes in the direction of total transposition of sense experience. The second admits a double sense, erotic and spiritual. The third reverts to something similar to the first.³⁵

Bernard does erect warning signs about sense experience. In his rather extended description of the personal visitation of the Word to himself where Bernard excludes sensible perception, he goes out of his way to show that experience cannot be reduced to sensible impressions or feelings. Only from the movement of the heart does one know of the visitation.³⁶ If this is not experimental in the scientific

³⁴I owe this insight to Columba Stewart, O.S.B.

³⁵Leclercq seems to indicate that Bernard held a quite spiritualized position on the transposition of sense experience. Leclercq then tells of studying Bernard's *On the Song of Songs* with a group of psychologists who pointed out details, images, and psychic dynamisms, characteristics of vocabulary and style, demonstrating a "double sense" in Bernard, ostensibly the erotic and the spiritual. Leclercq was convinced at the time, but changed his mind after re-reading the work. He then opted for the formulation of T. R. Henn who treats the Song of Songs as love poems. "There are not many great love-poems in English that are direct and simple, built without shame on the delighted sense of bride and bridegroom. Much of western poetry is concerned with the divided soul of the lover, with despair, frustration, rejection or loss. A whole convention is founded upon unsatisfied desire. Here the poetry is pure, uninhibited, sensuous without a trace of sensuality or lust" (*The Bible as Literature* [Oxford: Oxford University, 1970] 87-88). The distinction between sensuous and sensuality is the pertinent point (Leclercq, *Nouveau visage de Bernard de Clairvaux* [Paris: Cerf, 1976] 153-54). Leclercq rightly contends that the success of the image is based on the "neatness" with which the original experience fits with the figured transposed meaning. The intensity of the one is a symbol of the intensity of the other (Leclercq, *Monks on Marriage: A Twelfth Century View* [New York: Seabury, 1982] 75). Leclercq seems to move away from the distinction between sensuous and sensuality when in the same text he writes that "the literary beauty snatch[es] all these images away from the sensual sphere" (ibid. 75-76). With considerable hesitation, not to say trepidation, I disagree with Leclercq's last position. I identify with something akin to the psychologists' view, Leclercq's second position. But I would emphasize more the taking up and transformation of sense experience, rather than "the double sense," the erotic and the spiritual. I also disagree with Mourou when he writes that Bernard's meaning of *sentir* is completely beyond the sensible ("Sur les critères de l'expérience spirituelle," in *Bernard théologien* 266). The sociology of 12th-century monasticism might shed some light here. The Cistercians got their recruits from among the adult population, in contrast to the more traditional Black Benedictines, whose recruits came mostly from young boys offered by parents. The Cistercian recruits, men and women, "came to monasteries with definite knowledge of secular love" (Leclercq, *Monks and Love in Twelfth Century France* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1979] 14). The marriage image works only when it corresponds to something in the reader's experience. This is not quite the same thing as saying that only those who had actual experience of sexual intercourse could understand what Bernard was saying. But if the transposition takes with it no sense experience, however general, then the symbol is not successful.

³⁶*Song* 74.5-6, in *Opera* 2.242-43.

sense, the coming of the Word still remains experiential, or what Bernard refers to as "an experience of the Word."³⁷

Brian Stock declares that, for Bernard, experience is "a co-ordinated set of responses, partly sensorial and partly intellectual"; but that formulation is only partly right, and it is excessively academic.³⁸ Experience also has to do with spiritual intuition of a supernatural order. The spiritual senses play a significant role in Bernard, as they do in Origen. They are sensory capacities for the divine, given with grace, wholly oriented to discernment of God's will, and akin to charisms.³⁹

Bernard is at one with William of St. Thierry in his concern for "reliable experience" (*per sensum certissimae experientiae*).⁴⁰ For instance, experience is not its own judge, and for this reason Bernard sketches a kind of criteriology of experience that would include signs of efficacy in the interior reformation of life.⁴¹ He insists that without personal experience his readers or listeners will not understand what he is expounding: "In matters of this kind, understanding can follow only where experience leads."⁴² Yet experience is normed, not norming; at the very least, experience is not a norm until it itself has been normed. However highly he esteems experience, clearly, in spite of appearances to the contrary, Bernard's ultimate norm is not experience but faith and the Scriptures. This control is inviolable and permanent.⁴³ Experience is not reliable if it stands outside this norm. This does not imply that neither Bernard nor his monks ever had privileged experiences. We know that Bernard had at least two visions of Mary.⁴⁴ He himself, speaking in a wider context, recognizes that various experiences exist.⁴⁵ But privileged moments, such as ecstasy, are brief and rare, when they truly occur.⁴⁶ Further, experiences of this kind are not necessary. Though Bernard refers to them, they are not the center of his concern. He is concerned about the ordi-

³⁷ *Song* 74.7, in *Opera* 2.244.2; see Mouroux, "Sur les critères de l'expérience spirituelle" 265.

³⁸ "Experience, Praxis, Work, and Planning in Bernard of Clairvaux: Observations on the *Sermones in Cantica*," in *The Cultural Context of Medieval Learning*, ed. John E. Murdoch, Edith D. Sylla (Boston: Reidel, 1975) 225.

³⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Origen: Spirit and Fire* (Washington: Catholic University, 1984) 218.

⁴⁰ William of St. Thierry, *On the Song of Songs* 4.55; *Sources Chrétiennes*, ed. Jean M. Déchanet and M. Dumontier (Paris: Cerf, 1962) 82.148.

⁴¹ Mouroux, "Sur les critères de l'expérience spirituelle" 265; *pace* Köpf, *Religiöse Erfahrung* 207.

⁴² *Song* 22.2, in *Opera* 1.130.7.

⁴³ Mouroux, "Sur les critères de l'expérience spirituelle" 261.

⁴⁴ Leclercq, *Nouveau visage de Bernard de Clairvaux* 26.

⁴⁵ *Song* 31.4, in *Opera* 1.221.

⁴⁶ *On the Love of God* 10.27, in *Opera* 3.142.13-15; *On Grace and Free Will* 15, in *Opera* 3.177.8. Compare "Sed, heu! rara hora et prava mora!" (*Song* 23.15, in *Opera* 1.148.20) and "It is a sweet exchange, for a brief moment, and the experience is rare" (*Song* 85.13, in *Opera* 2.316.8).

nary life of the monk, about the light the Spirit gives "by a sure experience day after day" (*certo et quotidiano experimento*), that is, the normal, daily experience of the Word and the Spirit.⁴⁷ Everyone may experience salvation.⁴⁸ And one who has not had this experience of God ought to believe those who have had it.⁴⁹

THREE STAGES OF EXPERIENCE

Bernard seems to lay out three stages of experience⁵⁰: that we are far from God (the experience of sin), that we are caught up in a movement of redemption (the experience of our insertion into Christ), and that the principle of this insertion is the Holy Spirit (the experience of the Spirit).

Experience begins, at the start of a pilgrimage, with the sense of our own misery and sin, the struggle with the law of sin within us.⁵¹ From the Pauline corpus Bernard gives preference not to the more ecclesiological Letter to the Ephesians, but to the Letter to the Romans with its emphasis on sin and justification; this may be one of the reasons Calvin and Luther found Bernard so sympathetic to their concerns.⁵² As a monk he took sin with great seriousness. The discord between the law of sin and the law of the Spirit (he quotes Galatians 5:17 no less than 23 times⁵³) takes place in the body "as a splendid residence," in the soul as "a magnificent and agreeable dwelling place."⁵⁴ There is no denigration of humanity here.⁵⁵ Still we have the daily experience of alienation from God, the absence of God.⁵⁶ There is no need for an exterior teacher because all "are taught by their own proper experience."⁵⁷ In the matter of sin each person has only "to consult his own experience" in order to determine his need.⁵⁸ Scripture confirms our experience.⁵⁹ In Bernard this experience of rupture of our relation to God is not seen in isolation from the restoration of

⁴⁷ *Song* 59.6, in *Opera* 2.139.7.

⁴⁸ *Song* 14.3, in *Opera* 1.77.14–16.

⁴⁹ *Song* 38.2 in *Opera* 2.15.20–23.

⁵⁰ Bodard, "La Bible, expression d'une expérience religieuse" 25–26.

⁵¹ *On Conversion* 17.30, in *Opera* 4.106.11–16; *Song* 81.7–10; 82.6–7, in *Opera* 2.288–91; 2.296–97; *Praise of the New Knighthood* 11.24, in *Opera* 3.233.21–23.

⁵² Congar, "L'ecclésiologie de S. Bernard," in *Bernard théologien* 177.

⁵³ Raffaele Fassetta, "Le rôle de l'Esprit-Saint dans la vie spirituelle selon Bernard de Clairvaux," *Analecta Cisterciensia* 46 (1990) 353. Bernard also quotes Wisdom 9:15 ("A perishable body weighs down the soul") to the same purpose 27 times (*ibid.*). See also *On the Vigil of Christmas* 2.3, in *Opera* 4.206.9–14.

⁵⁴ *On the Dedication of a Church* 2.1, in *Opera* 5.375–76.

⁵⁵ *On Quadragesima* 10.3, in *Opera* 4.44.26–28.

⁵⁶ Bodard, "La Bible expression d'une expérience religieuse" 26–30.

⁵⁷ *Song* 44.1, in *Opera* 2.45.14.

⁵⁸ *Sermons in Quadragesima* 7.11, in *Opera* 4.420.18.

⁵⁹ *On Conversion* 30, in *Opera* 4.106.14. See Jean-Marie Déchanet, "La christologie de S. Bernard," in *Bernard théologien* 86–91.

the form or image of God, a major theme⁶⁰: "The Holy Spirit wishes to trace the road we ought to follow, and imprint in us the form we ought to have."⁶¹ In other words, Bernard is not ultimately preoccupied with sin, but with the triumph over sin we have in the Spirit through Christ. The measure of our misery is not law, but the holiness of God.

Beyond the experience of sin, we have an experience of Christ, of being inserted into the mystery of Christ, who is for us a new principle of life by reason of his death and Resurrection.⁶² Experience at this christological level is twofold: first according to the flesh, then according to the Spirit. According to the flesh: Bernard's medieval devotion to the humanity of Christ is at play here, with a special accent on the sanctification of the humanity by the Holy Spirit.⁶³ According to the Spirit: we know that we have the sense of Christ because the Spirit gives testimony to our spirit that we are sons of God (Rom 8:16).⁶⁴ The link between the Spirit and experience is parallel to the bond between the Word and experience. Speaking of the visitation of the Word, Bernard says: "I tremble before the immensity of his grandeur."⁶⁵ In fact his mysticism is essentially christological and trinitarian, in the style of Origen.⁶⁶

In true trinitarian fashion, interior to the experience of Christ is the experience of the Spirit, and the experience of the Spirit is through the experience of Christ. This trinitarian expression is seen in Bernard's exegesis of "the kiss of the mouth" (*osculum de ore*), which he clearly distinguishes from "the kiss of the kiss" (*osculum de osculo*).⁶⁷ The first is the kiss that is the trinitarian love between the Father and the Son, namely, the Holy Spirit.⁶⁸ In the constitutive sense this kiss is restricted to the inner trinitarian life. But by participation it is extended to the bride, who is both the Church and the individual believer. The risen Christ gives the kiss to the Church when he breathes on the disciples, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (Jn 20:22).⁶⁹ This participated kiss is called "the kiss of the kiss," and

⁶⁰ *Song* 80–85. Against all expectations we find no significant mention of the Spirit in these sermons regarding the image of God (Fassetta, "Le rôle de l'Esprit-Saint" 379); see also Gilson, *The Mystical Theology* 119–52.

⁶¹ *On the Ascension* 3.4, in *Opera* 5.133.18.

⁶² *Praise of the New Knighthood* 11.23–24, 29, in *Opera* 3.232–33, 236.

⁶³ Fassetta, "Le rôle de l'Esprit-Saint" 354.

⁶⁴ *Praise of the New Knighthood* 11.24, in *Opera* 3.233–34.

⁶⁵ *Song* 74.6, in *Opera* 2.243.26–27.

⁶⁶ Jean Daniélou, "Saint Bernard et les pères grecs," in *Bernard théologien* 51.

⁶⁷ *Song* 8.8, in *Opera* 1.41.4–5. See also *Sermons on Diverse Topics* 89, which constitutes a small summary, in *Opera* 6/1.335–336.

⁶⁸ *Song* 8.1 and 4, in *Opera* 1.36.221–24 and 38.13–14.

⁶⁹ *Song* 8.2, in *Opera* 1.37.8. Bernard will also say that the Word is the one who does the kissing and the assumed humanity is the one receiving the kiss. This kiss which happens only once (*Song* 2.2–3, in *Opera* 1.9–10) unites the two natures in one person, the mediator between God and humankind. The kiss the Word passes on to the humanity is the Holy Spirit.

thus the unitive love constitutive of the Trinity is shared with the Church and the believer. One and the same plenitude of the Spirit is in God and in the Church. This theme is expressed in the phrase "one sole spirit" from 1 Corinthians 6:17, a verse that Bernard cites 54 times, more frequently than any other verse in the Bible.⁷⁰ Only the Spirit can reveal the mystery of the kiss.⁷¹ Since the kiss is also revelation,⁷² only those who have experienced it can grasp it.⁷³ "If marriage according to the flesh constitutes two in one body, why should not a spiritual union be even more efficacious in joining two in one Spirit."⁷⁴ Another favorite text, cited 40 times, is 2 Corinthians 3:18: "seeing the glory of the Lord . . . being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another, for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit."⁷⁵ In citing this verse Bernard gives a contemplative sense to the act of the Spirit conforming one to the image of Christ. Beyond the ontological meaning there is a contemplative experiential meaning.

If experience of sin is at the beginning of the pilgrim way, the experience of God is at the end. Bernard describes his dead brother, Gerard, as now experiencing "what God himself experiences and relishes, because he is filled with God."⁷⁶

TRINITY AND EXPERIENCE

One does not find compact trinitarian formulations in Bernard as frequently as one finds them in William of St. Thierry, but Bernard has some also. His christology, pneumatology, and ecclesiology are expressions of the trinitarian life. The "kiss of the mouth" is explicitly trinitarian in character, the Spirit being the mutual embrace of the Father and the Son,⁷⁷ making the Spirit "the imperturbable peace, the strong glue, the undivided love, and the indivisible unity" of the Trinity.⁷⁸ For Bernard the Trinity structures spiritual growth,⁷⁹ but his trinitarian awareness is not as strong as William's, and in his later works it diminishes, probably because of his preoccupation with the Word.⁸⁰ His most expansive description of an experience is that of the

⁷⁰ Fassetta, "Le rôle de l'Esprit-Saint" 384, n. 193.

⁷¹ *Song* 7.8, in *Opera* 1.36.3-6.

⁷² *Song* 8.6, in *Opera* 1.39.18.

⁷³ *Song* 3.1, in *Opera* 1.14.10-13.

⁷⁴ *Song* 83.6, in *Opera* 2.302.18-19.

⁷⁵ Fassetta, "Le rôle de l'Esprit-Saint" 379. Bernard places the whole spiritual life under the breath of the Holy Spirit (*ibid.* 387).

⁷⁶ *Song* 26.5, in *Opera* 1.173.13-15.

⁷⁷ *Song* 8.1 and 4, in *Opera* 1.36.221-24 and 38.13-14. The inherent symbolism expresses both the unity of the godhead, and the distinction and equality of the three persons, that the scholastic tradition called the order of processions (Leclercq, *Monks on Marriage* 81-82).

⁷⁸ *Song* 8.2, in *Opera* 1.37.16-18.

⁷⁹ *On the Degrees of Humility and Pride* 22, in *Opera* 3.32-33.

⁸⁰ Bernard McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1994) 191.

Word.⁸¹ The experience (*sentire*) of the Son's Spirit prompts one to cry, "Abba, Father."⁸² He is aware of the Father as the goal: "Run, brothers, run! . . . The Father expects you and he desires . . . He loves you . . . for yourselves."⁸³ But this movement to the Father is not pronounced, either in Bernard or in William. Their trinitarianism is more horizontal, concerned with the unity of inner-trinitarian life and our participation in it, than with ascending toward the goal in and beyond history, the Father. Bernard is preoccupied with specific persons of the Trinity. Though his trinitarian commitment is undoubted, his trinitarian expression is less consistent than other mystics.⁸⁴ Still trinitarian communion remains the goal.

EXPERIENCE IN THE CHURCH

Bernard also has a deep ecclesial commitment. The *Sermons on the Song of Songs* is an ecclesiological tract because a central image, the bride, is both the individual person and the Church. Bernard moves back and forth across this continuum. His writings show the Spirit to be acting in a twofold direction: by infusion of the graces necessary for spiritual growth, and by effusion of these graces from the recipient to the neighbor.⁸⁵ The love of God that the monk experiences contains an imperative toward others.⁸⁶ As Galatians 4:19 suggests, whoever is espoused to the Word becomes a mother like the Church, so that the infusion of the Spirit becomes effusion in forming Christ in others.⁸⁷ Bernard's most striking expression concerns friendship in relation to the Spirit: "I call the Spirit of truth as our witness of the desire which we ourselves feel, in the bowels of Jesus Christ, the Spirit by which this love is poured forth in our hearts."⁸⁸ No privatized inwardness here, but effusion of the Spirit to others.

In responding to a request that he compose a liturgical office in honor of St. Victor, Bernard wrote that he was aware "of the sort of position I hold in the Church."⁸⁹ Though he imagines the Church as a body, his more usual image is that of a spouse, not only in the sermons on the *Song of Songs* but in his other writings.⁹⁰ For Bernard there are heavenly spouses/brides, namely the angels, and earthly spouses/brides, the individual soul or the Church. So two brides? No, just as there will be one flock and one shepherd, there will be one

⁸¹ *Song* 74.6, in *Opera* 2.243.26–27. ⁸² *Song* 8.9, in *Opera* 1.41.

⁸³ *On the Vigil of Christmas* 2.7, in *Opera* 4.209–10; *On the Love of God* 14, in *Opera* 3.130.15–20; *Song* 8.5, in *Opera* 2.38.17–24.

⁸⁴ McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism* 191.

⁸⁵ Fassetta, "Le rôle de l'Esprit-Saint" 358–87, especially 358.

⁸⁶ *Song* 18.6, in *Opera* 1.107.

⁸⁷ *Song* 85.12–13, in *Opera* 2.315–16.

⁸⁸ *Letter* 368.1, in *Opera* 8.327.1–3.

⁸⁹ *Letter* 398.1, in *Opera* 8.377.14.

⁹⁰ Congar, "L'ecclésiologie de S. Bernard" 175.

bride and one bridegroom.⁹¹ Through the gift of God the Church/bride possesses "a fullness," "a never ceasing fount" from which all draw water.⁹² What the whole Church possesses integrally, each person possesses individually according to the gift given.⁹³ Commenting on the text of Song of Songs 1:15, "the bed covered with flowers, the beams of our houses are of cedar," Bernard says that within the Church the marriage bed is the cloisters and monasteries, and houses are the ordinary communities of Christians, that is, the parishes. Experience and the Spirit are within the Church.

Bernard carefully avoids expressions that would give the impression of pantheism, insisting that "the kiss of the mouth," that is, the Holy Spirit, even though participated in by the Church and believers, is proper to the Father and to the Son.⁹⁴ The spousal relationship with the Church (and believers) is not formed at the Incarnation, but when the risen Christ breathes the kiss, the Spirit, on the infant Church, imparting the gifts of the Spirit. In this context Bernard does not cite "the two shall be one flesh" (which might lend itself to pantheistic interpretations), but "the one who clings to God is one Spirit." Note how carefully he phrases his thought: "If marriage according to the flesh constitutes two in one body, why should not a spiritual union be even more efficacious in joining two in one spirit? And therefore anyone who is joined to the Lord is one Spirit with him."⁹⁵ One Spirit, but not pantheism.

EXPERIENCE IS DECEPTIVE, FAITH IS NOT

In Bernard's writings as a whole one finds 473 instances of some form of the verb "to experience" (*experiri*).⁹⁶ To these one must add a spectrum of near synonyms, for he also speaks of learning by experience (*comperire*), feeling (*sentire*), tasting (*gustare*), undergoing (*pati*), being moved (*affici*), demonstrating (*probare*), and desiring (*desiderare*). Almost without exception, the meaning of these terms is positive. Yet experience has its boundaries.

Bernard has two principle hedges around experience: faith and Scripture. The second we have looked at already. Bernard nowhere treats faith as extensively as William of St. Thierry does in *The Enigma of Faith* and *The Mirror of Faith*, but he does lay down the

⁹¹ *Song* 27.6, in Opera 1.186.9.

⁹² *Song* 12.11, in Opera 1.67.14–15.

⁹³ "Quod enim simul omnes plene integre possidemus, hoc singuli sine contradictione participamus" (*Song* 12.11, in Opera 1.67.25–26).

⁹⁴ Adolph Harnack thought that Bernard, with mystics in general, "nullifies historical Christianity and leads on to pantheism" (*History of Dogma*, 7 vols. [New York: Dover, 1961] 6.13).

⁹⁵ *Song* 2.3, in Opera 1.9–10. See also *Song* 8.9, in Opera 1.41–42; *Sermons on Diverse Topics* 89.1, in Opera 6/1.335–56; and Congar, "L'ecclésiologie de S. Bernard" 140.

⁹⁶ Köpf, "Die Rolle der Erfahrung" 308; *Religiöse Erfahrung* 14–17, 165, 167.

principle that here below we live more by faith than by delight.⁹⁷ Experience is the fruit of faith⁹⁸ and its medium.⁹⁹ Experience adds to faith, but faith also transcends experience.¹⁰⁰ Experience never stands outside of faith, as though it were absolute. When Bernard says, "We speak of divine things, which can only be known from experience," he is speaking within the context of faith,¹⁰¹ If through the monastic discipline of community life and through personal conquest the right environment for experience is constructed, this is a secondary achievement.¹⁰² The experience itself is a given within the context of faith—and the Church. Experience is never at the initiative or disposal of a believer.¹⁰³ God gives or God does not give.¹⁰⁴ "By the light [the Spirit] gives us, by a sure experience day after day, we are convinced that our desires and groanings come from him and go to God."¹⁰⁵ One should be sure that one is acting under the promptings of the Spirit, and not follow "one's own erratic feelings" (*sequamur sensum deviantes*).¹⁰⁶ Even the wise Isaac was led astray because he trusted his senses.¹⁰⁷ Experience can deceive, or be interpreted falsely, because it is produced in us invisibly.¹⁰⁸

The woman at the tomb sees the risen Christ but does not recognize him, because she does not believe the promise about his rising again that Jesus gave before his death. Noting that she wants to see, Bernard remonstrates with her, "So why strain with your eyes? Prepare rather to hear [the word of faith]."¹⁰⁹ However, she values experience above faith.¹¹⁰ Then in an emphatic expression, reenforced by being rhetorically placed in an isolated sentence fragment, Bernard declares: "But experience is fallacious" (*experimentum fallax*). He then admonishes the woman to recognize the narrow boundaries of sense knowledge: "What you may learn from the senses [of sight or touch] is of limited value."¹¹¹ The risen Christ invites the woman at the grave to move "to the more certain knowledge of faith, to what the senses do not know, to what experience does not find."¹¹²

Then alluding to the fallaciousness of experience, he asserts: "Faith cannot deceive" (*fides nescia falli*).¹¹³ "Faith does not know

⁹⁷ *On the Love of God* 4.11, in *Opera* 3.127–29.

⁹⁸ *Song* 84.7, in *Opera* 2.306–7.

⁹⁹ *Song* 28.6–9, in *Opera* 1.196–98.

¹⁰⁰ *Song* 84.7, in *Opera* 2.306–7.

¹⁰¹ *Song* 41.3, in *Opera* 2.30.15.

¹⁰² Bernard Bonowitz rightly criticizes Ulrich Köpf's contention that the experience of God cannot in any way be prepared for by the subject ("The Role of Experience in the Spiritual Life," *Analecta Cisterciensia* 46 [1990] 324–25).

¹⁰³ Bodard, "La Bible, expression d'une expérience religieuse" 44–45.

¹⁰⁴ *Letter* 228.2, in *Opera* 8.99.19–20.

¹⁰⁵ *Song* 59.6, in *Opera* 2.139.5–9.

¹⁰⁶ *Song* 17.1, in *Opera* 1.98.13.

¹⁰⁷ *Song* 28.8, in *Opera* 1.197.20–21.

¹⁰⁸ *On Grace and Free Will* 47, in *Opera* 3.199.26–28.

¹⁰⁹ *Song* 28.7, in *Opera* 1.196.22.

¹¹⁰ *Song* 28.8, in *Opera* 1.198.1–2.

¹¹¹ *Song* 28.9, in *Opera* 1.198.9–10.

¹¹² *Song* 28.9, in *Opera* 1.198.3–4.

¹¹³ *Song* 28.9, in *Opera* 1.198.6.

the poverty of the senses, it transcends . . . the bounds of experience."¹¹⁴ If the Scriptures norm experience, so does faith. "Therefore judge by faith, and not by your experience, because faith is true, but experience is fallacious."¹¹⁵ The conclusion is that what is not of faith is fallacious.

Bernard sets the assertions "experience is fallacious" and "faith is not fallacious" alongside each other. This striking juxtaposition should not make one forget that for Bernard experience is almost always positive. Faith and experience are not enemies. In the first place, both are radically rooted in the life of the Spouse, the Church, giving both a kind of texture. Faith gives birth to experience; faith norms experience. But experience gives another dimension of actuality and firmness to faith. Experience is another way of knowing. What is given to experience is not taken away from faith, because experience exists only in faith.

What Bernard challenges is autonomous experience, experience without hedges,¹¹⁶ experience apart from the norms of faith and Scripture. Given Bernard's overwhelmingly positive appraisal of experience, Bonowitz is probably correct in saying that Bernard "is not basically suspicious of religious experience as a potential source of illusion or heterodoxy."¹¹⁷ In Bernard's broad understanding, experience constitutes the spacious highway of commerce between the God who takes the initiative to touch and the person who reaches out to God with desire.

Such use of the theme of experience in theology sets Bernard off from other medieval spiritual writers, even from William of St. Thierry who gives experience much attention. This fact of course might open Bernard to the charge of being merely a devotional writer. Some scholastics indeed thought that he did not proceed *intellectually*, that is, in the scholastic manner, and was therefore unworthy of the title "theologian." In part this was due to a divorce between mysticism and theology among the scholastics, something that would have seemed strange to earlier centuries.¹¹⁸

In spite of his accent on experience, Bernard does not belong to the sentient tradition of spirituality represented by Diadochus, Simeon the New Theologian, and Jerome the Greek. His understanding of experience is more integrally ecclesial, less privatized, less preoccupied with feelings. While his most extended description of experience

¹¹⁴ *Song* 28.9, in *Opera* 1.198.6–8.

¹¹⁵ *On Quadragesima* 5.5, in *Opera* 4.374.20–21; see McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism* 185.

¹¹⁶ *Song* 28.8, in *Opera* 1.197–98.

¹¹⁷ "The Role of Experience in the Spiritual Life" 323. Bernard does remark that spiritual joy should never let one forget the possibility of falling back into sin: "Give thanks to God. . . . Rejoice, but still with trembling. I want you to be joyful, but not yet secure. Rejoice in the Holy Spirit, but still with fear, and on guarding against falling again" (*On Quadragesima* 3.4, in *Opera* 4.396.5–7).

¹¹⁸ Leclercq, "S. Bernard et la théologie monastique du XII^e siècle" 7–23.

is related to the Word, his most frequent recourse is to the Spirit. Both Word and Spirit are understood within a horizontal trinitarianism, emphasizing inner-trinitarian life and unity. Bernard's marriage symbolism, drawing on the intensity of the marital relationship and its sexual consummation, is not prurient and never goes beyond faith, never loses sight of faith. Different levels of experience grow out of Scripture and lead back to it in the public liturgy and private *lectio divina*. Scripture, the Fathers, the liturgy, and the common life together constitute the monastic/ecclesial culture, the environment. Bernard's audience consists of persons representing the whole spectrum of spiritual profiles from oxen to eagles—even some snails. For these individuals, experience is neither the first word nor the last, but it plays a large positive role. Like Augustine, Bernard considers experience, delight, yearning as gifts from above, as allies of the intellect and will moving one to contemplation and union. "Yearning it is that makes the heart deep."¹¹⁹

CONCLUSION

Bernard's concept of experience resonates with some contemporary theological concerns.¹²⁰ Experience is not just exaltation, but an encounter with our dark side also, with sin and the absence of God; the experience of presence consistently alternates with the experience of a void in the most diligent seekers of God. His stress on everyday experience and the immediate context of life shows that the experience of God does not step outside of its relationship to neighbor and to the everyday tasks. The experience of God is available where persons are, doing what persons do. It is socially, ecclesologically conditioned. There is no experience of God without responsibility for others, for the Church. The high-voltage language is a recognition that beneath the surface experience there is a depth experience, that the call to transcendence, built into the structures of humanity, is a call to go where believers have no power to go. Through experience God

¹¹⁹ *Tracts on the Gospel of John* 40.10 (Corpus Christianorum 36.356.5).

¹²⁰ In addition to the works of Gadamer, Gelpi, and Lane already mentioned, see various studies of Karl Rahner, esp. "Concerning the Relationship of Grace and Nature," in *Theological Investigations* 1 (Baltimore: Helicon, 1961) 297–317; "Some Implications of the Scholastic Concept of Uncreated Grace," *ibid.* 319–46; "Religious Enthusiasm and the Experience of Grace," in *Theological Investigations* 16 (New York: Seabury, 1979) 35–51; and *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Seabury, 1981) 81–89, 307–11. See further G. Siewerth, "Erfahrung-Religiöse," in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* (Freiburg: Herder, 1959) 3.979–81; Langdon Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969) 305–415; Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1972) 105–9; Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord* (New York: Seabury, 1980) 30–64; Joachim Track, "Erfahrung-Neuzeit," in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* (New York: de Gruyter, 1982) 10.116–28; Michael J. Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University, 1987) esp. 360–62; George P. Schner, "The Appeal to Experience," *TS* 53 (1992) 40–59.

lures and traps one in a single-mindedness, the will to do one thing (to borrow Kierkegaard's phrase), to walk only toward the God who anticipates by moving toward the believer, making God's initiative the believer's. This is the intentional character of experience. If blind beggars never open their hands, how can they receive alms? But this intentionality is from the inside. In pneumatological terms, the Spirit known (object) in experience is discovered by the Spirit knowing (subject).

Experience of God is gift, never at one's initiative. Though the interpretation of experience is rooted in the experience itself, it is not an atomistic interpretation, not an autonomous private reading. Even linguistically the bride image in Bernard represents both the individual and the ecclesial community. The rhetoric of direct and immediate experience is precisely rhetoric. There is no direct, immediate, unveiled experience, no experience without mediation; which is why contemporary theologians try to capture something of transcendent realism by speaking of "mediated immediacy." Bernard's intensive, high-voltage language is in the service of this conundrum. He would insist that the experience he is speaking of is truly human, but not simply a cipher for primal longing. Experience is neither rampant, nor without fences, nor without critique. Faith and Scripture mark off boundaries, act as escorts, and authenticate.

Privileged moments there are, but experience is more embedded in the broad rhythms of life, religious and secular. With all the pitfalls and land mines along the way, there is no choice but to be essentially positive toward experience. Unless God is to be displaced into some transcendental beyond history, there is a faith need to experience the two hands of the Father, Christ and the Spirit, somewhere within the room where one experiences oneself. Religious experience cannot be replaced by texts, authority, theological demonstration, or anything else. Otherwise, is faith viable? If one counters atheism only with a well-reasoned theology, who will listen? In attempting to re-integrate the experiential into theology nothing of intellectual rigor needs to be sacrificed. This is not a venture into religious sentiment. Even while experience informs theology, theology is not just a thematizing of experience. Finally, in re-integrating experience into theology Bernard is not the model, but a pointer.



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