

# Saint Bernard of Clairvaux

1090-1153

PURGATORY

Saint Bernard of Clairvaux was born at Dijon in 1090. As a child he entered the school of the Canons of Châtillon, one of the most important in Burgundy, where he studied Latin writers and the Church Fathers. After the death of his mother, to whom he was very attached, in 1107, he had a crisis which made him feel distant from that world of “women, knights, arms, and lovers” which was typical of his family, instead he had a strong desire to seek and find God in the peace and quiet of the monastery. At twenty-two he entered the Cistercian monastery founded by Robert of Solesmes at Cîteaux. Bernard imitated the idea that had inspired Saint Robert of Molesme, Alberic and Stephen. The three monks left Molesme in 1098 to go to a solitary place 20 kilometers from Dijon, a place called *Cistercium*, to follow a more simple and rigorous lifestyle, regaining the spirit and the letter of the ancient Benedictine Rule. At twenty-five he was sent to found a new monastery at Clairvaux, from which will derive the Italian name Chiaravalle. Bernard was austere but was able to attract dozens of youth who wanted to follow him on the road to evangelical perfection. Soon the Cistercians spread throughout Europe. He was put in charge of delicate and challenging missions for the good of the Church. He crossed Europe to endorse the legitimate Pope Innocent II against the antipope. In 1145 one of his disciples was elected Pontiff taking the name Eugene III, who would put Bernard in charge to preach the second crusade. He wrote several works

and treaties including “De gradibus humilitatis et superbiae”, “De gratia et libero arbitrio”, “De diligendo Deo”. The tradition of ending the day of prayer with the *Salve Regina* derives from one of his own insights. His devotion was centered on the Infant Jesus and the Virgin Mary. His witness was an example for a host of monks. At Bernard's death in 1153, the Cistercian Order counted already 300 monasteries. Alexander III proclaimed him Saint in 1174 and Pius VIII declared him Doctor of the Church in 1830.

Regarding the Souls of Purgatory, Saint Bernard recounted an episode that occurred in a monastery. As they were celebrating the funeral of a monk, an elderly friar heard a group of demons sneer satisfied: *“Finally! Even in this place we were able to find a soul which will belong to us!”* The following night the deceased appeared to the monk and led him to see a precipice filled with smoke and flames: “See, the deceased told him, here is the place where the demons furious towards me have the permission from God to hurl me continuously and retrieve me from the abyss without leaving me one moment of respite.” At daybreak, the elderly monk went to Saint Bernard to tell him of the vision he experienced. The Saint confessed of having had himself a similar vision and called all the monks to a chapter. He reported to all the news of the deceased monk and entrusted him to their prayers and supplications.”

