

## Beauty in Architecture: A Cistercian Approach

It would be more accurate to title this conference as "St. Bernard's Approach to Beauty in Architecture." Because the purpose of this conference is twofold. First, to present Bernard's approach to beauty as based upon his own concept of a contemplative system that culminates in contemplative prayer. Secondly, this conference suggest how cistercian architecture expresses this beauty and the contemplative system on which it is founded.

### I. Contemplative Approach to Architecture and its Beauty

Benedictine Contemplative Prayer as an Interpretation of Cistercian Architecture rather than an Ascetical Interpretation

My opinion is that Bernard developed his contemplative system with ideas taken from from The Rule of St. Benedict. He took Benedictine principles and developed them into a teaching, characteristically his own. Flowing out of his own monastic experience and formation at Citeaux and Clairvaux, this teaching, then, merits to be labeled Cistercian. To approach cistercian architecture from this perspective of beauty, rooted in a contemplative system germane to The Rule of St. Benedict, is in contrast to the ascetical interpretation of cistercian architecture that may be more familiar to us.

This ascetical interpretation proposes to offer an adequate account and understanding of cistercian architecture in terms of poverty, renunciation, and its "puritan aspects" which in their turn, are accepted as adequate to explain simplicity, in this case, architectural simplicity. Many persons do not get beyond this ascetical approach. Some writings have suggested this is the only approach to cistercian architecture with the implication that Bernard was opposed to beauty.

(1)

To emphasize the ascetical approach as the approach in building a church clearly weakens the primary role of monastic contemplative prayer should have. The church is to be a place for prayer. Contemplative prayer, as developed by Bernard, is a search for beauty. Consequently, it is appropriate for the church building to be a place for beauty to be present. The result are examples of

cistercian churches tremendously impressive for their beauty and for the powerful, spiritual effect they have on the soul of a person physically present in them.

## II The Source of Bernard's Contemplative System Chapter 20 of the Rule of St. Benedict

Scholars claim that Bernard's contemplative system, his teaching, is not that of Augustine, nor of Pseudo Dionysius, nor William of St. Thierry, nor Aelred of Rievaulx. (2) What is this contemplative system? Where did it come from? I believe the source of Bernard's own particular contemplative system is found in the teaching of St. Benedict on prayer, Chapter 20 of his Rule. This chapter contains three elements that Bernard uses to construct his contemplative system. In this Chapter, Benedict asks that the monk pray to the Lord God with total humility and total devotion, and that he follow the inspiration of divine grace. The Latin words are *omni humilitate, puritatis devotione, ex affectu inspirationis divinae gratiae*. Here we have three elements: humility, devotion, and affectus, translated here as inspiration.

Bernard takes these three qualities and proceeds to develop them in such a manner that they constitute his quest for beauty in his contemplative system. As cistercian architecture is based upon this contemplative system, then cistercian architecture can be traced back to these three foundational elements: humility, devotion, affectus (inspiration). Let us look at each of these elements and see Bernard's development of them.

### Omni Humilitate - Humility - Self Knowledge

Humility is the foundational element for this contemplative system. When we hear the word humility in a Cistercian context, we must think of humility as taught by St. Benedict in Chapter 7 of the Rule. Bernard succinctly defines this Benedictine humility as having a low opinion of oneself because one knows himself authentically, accurately. (3)

Emero Stiegman, has this to say about self-knowledge according to St. Bernard.

Christian socratism, the search for God in self knowledge, is a patristic theme that is not absent in any era of Christian Spirituality. St. Bernard holds a singularly honored position in this tradition. The many early cistercian tracts on the soul are founded on the cornerstone of self-knowledge; and Bernard is the instigator of the movement.... Bernard followed Origen in accepting "know thyself", not as greek wisdom, but as the dynamics of grace revealed in the Song of Songs (1:8) To begin to know oneself is to begin to approach God-not merely morally, in useful awareness of the sin to be removed, but in a contemplative sense; for, the beauty and love of God is nowhere so manifest as in one's own soul. (4)

Knowing oneself in this contemplative dimension becomes for Bernard a foundation of all authenticity. The grace of the Song of Songs is the grace of self-knowledge as a quest for beauty and knowledge, a contemplative quest. Put more simply: to know oneself in the contemplative way is to know one's own beauty as God's beauty. This is the genius of Bernard's work *On the Song of Songs*.

## Beauty

The idea that beauty can be manifested in a special manner in one's soul may be a novel idea in contemporary mentality. Beauty, today, appears some what rather subjective. It is said to be in the eye of the beholder, that is, in the mentality of one who sees. Be this as it may, beauty is be said to be whatever excites pleasure in a person, whatever stirs one's emotions so as to lift up or exalt the mind.

Beauty is a sensing of something so powerful that one's mind and spirit is lifted up, out of oneself, so to speak, to something transcendent.

Another reason why this approach to beauty may seem novel is that many persons today have such a low self esteem. Low self esteem complicates allowing one's mind and spirit to be lifted up by beauty especially in this contemplative dimension.

Bernard claims that beauty, on our part, exists in our soul, our life, as humility.

(5) Persons who are truly lovely definitely have a humbleness about them.

Remember, the humility of Bernard is that of Benedict's Chapter Seven of his

Rule. It is a humility whereby one becomes like Christ in his passion, death and resurrection. This beauty in one's life, enables a person to enter into the mystery of Christ's passion (6) and to be like Christ in his beauty, that is, his emptying of himself to become one of us. (7) This beauty is so powerful that it does lift one's mind and spirit out of themselves in a ecstasy with the realization (knowing) that one's own beauty is participating in Christ's beauty.

## Curiosity

Bernard sees curiosity as under cutting the possibility of this beauty and realization (knowing) coming to birth in a soul.

What is curiosity? He defines it as simply being occupied with any kind of knowledge that has no bearing on oneself in terms of living a dedicated spiritual life in quest of union with God. (8) The early Cistercians tended to take a serious and radical approach to this definition, eliminating all that was not essential to their knowledge of God.

Curiosity, in this definition, is what pulls the soul away from itself, and consequently, from its contemplative dimension and knowing God. Curiosity, drawing us out of ourselves, is, an outward movement, drawing the soul away from its own beauty which is also God's beauty.

Curiosity is simply to be occupied with any kind of knowledge that has no bearing on oneself in terms of living a dedicated spiritual life in quest of union with God. Curiosity is the exact opposite of what it means to seek God. Hence it is Bernard's first step of pride, the first step we take in moving away from God for our own self-centeredness. Our focus is on our self rather than on our self in the dimension of truth, the truth that is nothing other than God.

On the other hand, self-knowledge as humility in its contemplative dimension becomes the cistercian quest for beauty and the beautiful. Attaining to this type of self-knowledge brings an authenticity to a person. Consequently, for Bernard, knowing oneself is a principle of authenticity. Bernard's contemplative system requires this first element: the soul is to turn away from curiosity and turn to a beauty of God found only in the true self. This is the cistercian quest for the beautiful, that is, for God.

Cistercian architecture is known for its radical rejection of the superfluous, any thing that fosters curiosity, and would compromise its characteristic of authenticity. The reason is this first element of Bernard's contemplative system: knowing oneself in a contemplative dimension. Cistercian buildings that rise from this first element of authenticity, no curiosity, have an element of beauty that reflects something of God's beauty. These buildings in their beauty, based on authenticity, convey a sense of the divine.

### Total Devotion

Benedict has a monk's prayer flowing from a total devotion. Bernard has devotion as a second element of his contemplative method. When we experience a fervor due to an emotion of thanksgiving for God's gifts to us, and we express this fervor enthusiastically, we can be said to have devotion. Devotion is nothing other than a desire for God aroused in us by an intimate awareness of God's favors to us. Awareness is something more than just knowing or knowledge of God's favors. Awareness, in this context, implies a sensitivity of appreciation for these favors. Total devotion, or devotion of purity as Benedict styles it, is a desire for God, whose degree of enthusiasm corresponds to its degree of selflessness. The more selfless we are in thanksgiving, the greater will be one's enthusiasm. Cistercian architecture uses space, natural light, form-lines, perfect ratios or proportion, as symbols, devoid of what fosters curiosity, to create a structure that has an ensemble effect of God's magnificence. This structure of selfless magnificence has positive effect on a person present and praying in it. It calls forth from a person a sense of total devotion to the divine.

### Inspiration - Affectus

Chapter 20 of the Rule of St. Benedict has inspiration of divine grace intimately connected with humility and total devotion. Prayer of humility and total devotion comes as a gift from God, the God working in us, affecting us with the divine grace of inspiration. Inspiration of divine grace is Bernard's third element in his contemplative system. Benedict uses the Latin for the word affectus, the

translation in English is inspiration. Our life has a natural endowment that, under proper influence of grace, shapes its focus or movement to ardently tending towards God. God affect us so that we are drawn fervently to God. This is what is meant by affectus.

Beauty can deeply affect us, fervently arousing us towards God. Bernard in his Apology warns against elements in architecture and its ornamentation that would catch the attention of persons who go to pray (this is a form of curiosity) and dry up their devotion and affectus. (9) Again, here is a principle we may not have thought of: types of architecture and ornamentation can actually dry up, suffocate, a person's focus and movement towards God during time of prayer.

Put in a positive way, the elements of architecture need to foster prayer and arouse one to an ardent tending towards God, one's surrender to God. Bernard sees architecture and its ornamentation in a relationship with a person's affectus. Cistercian architecture has a direct role in creating an environment for divine grace operating in a person's life to arouse and kindle a powerful movement of the heart to God.

## II. The Dynamics of Bernard's Contemplative System

How the Word and the Soul exists together in a union through sharing in the mystery of beauty.

### Words of Beauty (10)

The Bride, the soul and/or the Church, and the Bridegroom, the Word, address each other as beautiful. (Pulchra). Obviously, they do not use human voices since both are spirit. How then do they speak to one another? The Word, the Bridegroom, speaks by his loving kindness - favor dignationis. That is, he gives us the favor of esteem, respect, honor. The Word gives this to us freely, gratuitously. The Church and the Soul, the Bride, speaks by her fervor of devotion - fevor devotionis. We have already seen that this devotion is our affectus being totally fixed on Christ.

When the Word speaks, the soul must have this devotion in order to receive the

Word. Furthermore, the soul can not but experience the Word when it comes. For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit. (11) When the Soul speaks, the Word can not hide from her because the Word is present everywhere (in fact the soul lives in the Word's presence) and it is the Word himself who inspires the soul to speak by her fervor of devotion.

The architectural beauty of a 12th century cistercian church expresses in structural form the beauty that the Bridegroom and Bride speak to each other. As an ensemble, such a building voices through its own beauty the loving kindness of the Bridegroom bestowed on the Bride (church). The Bride's intense devotion to the Bridegroom is the prayer she offers in this structure. The two, the loving kindness and the prayer, are to become one beauty in this type of structure.

### The Beauty Itself (12)

On God's part, the beauty of the Bridegroom is his love for the bride. He has first loved us, even before we existed, even before he was the "beloved" of the bride, that is, even before the bride loved him. This love is poured into our souls, our lives, by his very presence. He says to us: You are beautiful and you are my friend.

On our part, the beauty of the bride consists in her acknowledging the beauty of the Bridegroom, that is, his love for her, with her whole heart, strength, ardor, in words of deepest affection. It is important for the bride to realize that he loved her first, that he was a lover before he become her beloved; before she began to love him. As this realization grows, all forms of subterfuge and deceit are removed from the bride's love. She constantly repeats over and over" You are beautiful, to emphasize that the Bridegroom he is eminently beautiful.

### Christ's Beauty

There is the beauty of the divine nature, the beauty with which Christ, in the form of God (13), appears to the angels. Christ is eternally begotten before the day star amid the splendors of heaven, (14) the radiant light of God's glory and the perfect

copy of God's nature. (15) There is the beauty of Christ's grace as man. How beautiful Christ is in the very discarding or setting aside of his divine beauty. (16) He divested himself of the native radiance of the unfading light to come to us in the darkness of human nature. One place where Bernard's teaching on the contemplative dimension of beauty is found is in SC 45.8-9. The bride calls the Word beloved and beautiful. Without any deceit or pretense she loves and feels herself to be loved by the Word. This is dignatio and stupefied at grace. Beauty is the loved where with the Word first loved us. The Bride senses the Word as loving more than as beloved. The bride gives admiration and thanksgiving for these graces. Beauty is something that is extraordinarily beautiful. We see this beauty in the two natures of Christ. The divine nature gives love to the Father in the angelic sphere for the glory of God the Father from the day of your birth. The human nature is a grace for humans, in Christ exinanitio, the liturgical year and day elaborates on all the aspects of Christ life as man. This is the grace given to us.

## Conclusion

1. Two examples of this are: Edgar DeBruyne, *Etudes d'esthetique medievale* (Bruges: 1946) 2:133 and 139; *Carolingian and Romanesque Architecture 800 to 1200* (New York: 1959) p. 125.
2. Emero Stiegman, *Saint Bernard: The Aesthetics of Authenticity*, CS 69 (Kalamazoo, MI; Cistercian Publications, 1984) p. 4. Stiegman's article is the source of the ideas I present here. However, I have both traced his ideas back to *The Rule of St. Benedict*, Ch 20, and developed them in more detail. (Author)
3. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sancti Bernardi Opera*, Leclercq, (Romae Editiones Cistercienses, 1963) 3:17, Hum 2: Humilitas est virtus., qua homo verissima sui cognitione sibi ipse vilescit.
4. Emero Steigman, *ibid*, p. 7.
5. Bernard of Clairvaux, *ibid*, 2:50, SC 45.2.
6. *Rule of St. Benedict*, Prologue 50.
7. Bernard of Clairvaux, *ibid*, 2:55, SC 45.9.
8. Etienne Gilson, *The Mystical Theology of St. Bernard*, CS 120 (Kalamazoo,

MI; Cistercian Publications, 1990) p. 156.

9. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sancti Bernardi Opera*, *ibid*, 3:104, Apo 28: curiosas depictiones, quae dum in se orantium retorquent aspectum, impediunt et affectum....

10. This section comes from Bernard of Clairvaux, *ibid*, 2:54, SC 45.7

11. Heb 4.12

12. Bernard of Clairvaux, *ibid*, 2:54-55, SC 45.8.

13. Phil 2.6.

14. Ps 109.2.

15. Heb 1.3.

16. Phil 2.7.