MY BELOVED IS MINE AND I AM HIS: SELF-KNOWLEDGE IN THE THEOLOGY
OF BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX

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by

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Abstract

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This dissertation examines the various forms and roles self-knowledge assumes in Bernard of Clairvaux’s overarching vision of the spiritual life. Previous scholarship on Bernard’s doctrine of self-knowledge has correctly emphasized the significance he attaches to humbling self-knowledge, or the soul’s honest self-recognition as a disfigured image of God, in the soul’s first conversion and the initial stages of its return to God. A certain scholarly preoccupation with this aspect of the abbot’s thought has, however, somewhat obscured the full breadth of Bernard’s teaching on self-knowledge and the diverse forms and roles it assumes across the various phases of the soul’s spiritual life, including those which both proceed and follow its first conversion.

Prior to its first conversion, Bernard believes, the soul suffers not only from self-ignorance, but also from a self-deception, a false self-knowledge born of pride, by which it imagines itself superior to others and therefore not in need of conversion or healing. It is precisely because he recognizes the seductive power of this self-deception that Bernard so frequently insists upon the soul’s humbling recognition of its own sad disfigurement as
the prerequisite for its return to God. Yet, the soul’s humbling self-awareness as a
defaced image of God is far from Bernard’s final word on the subject of the soul’s self-
knowledge. For as the soul undertakes the way of its restoration in the lost divine
likeness by its gradual conformity to the humility and charity of Christ, it comes to know
itself anew, as one gradually assuming the figure of Christ’s own Bride, radiant with her
Bridegroom’s own beauty.

Proceeding in four chapters, this dissertation begins with an overture to Bernard’s
comprehensive doctrine of self-knowledge through a study of his Sermones super
Cantica canticorum. Chapters 2 and 3 trace respectively his parallel accounts of the
soul’s descent into self-deception by way of pride and self-will and its ascent to self-
knowledge by way of humility and love. Finally, Chapter 4 shows how, for Bernard,
Christ the Incarnate Word both models and effects the soul’s ascent to self-awareness as
his Bride by his own journey of self-knowledge in his Incarnation.
To my Father,

James U. DeFrancis, Sr.

1943-1999
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INTRODUCTION

In the opening to the second book of his treatise *De consideratione ad Eugenium Papam* of 1151, abbot Bernard of Clairvaux offers the following counsel to his former Cistercian monastic son, Pope Eugenius III:

Even if you should know every mystery, the breadth of the earth, the height of the heavens, and the depth of the seas, if you do not know yourself, you will be like a building without a foundation. You will construct a ruin rather than a structure. Whatever you may construct outside yourself will be like so much dust blown by the wind…. So let your consideration begin with yourself and end with yourself. Wherever it wanders, call it back to yourself with the fruit of your salvation. You must be first and last in your own consideration.¹

When we recall that Bernard composed these lines at the age of 61, some two years before his own death in 1153, we can sense within them a touch of reminiscence and a hint, fittingly, of the autobiographical. Nearly four decades earlier, in 1113, at the age of 23, the young Bernard of Fountaines’s self-consideration had led him to the gate of Cîteaux. Now, after a lifetime of seeking God within that *schola caritatis*, the Cistercian recalls himself, and his reader, to one of the principal axioms of his spiritual doctrine:

¹ Csi 2.6 (III, 414): “Noveris licet omnia mysteria, noveris lata terrae, alta caeli, profunda maris, si te nescieris, eris similisaedificanti sine fundamento, ruinam, non structuram faciens. Quidquid extruxeris extra te, erit instar congesti pulveris, ventis obnoxium…. A te proinde incipiat tua consideratio; non solum autem, et in te finiatur. Quocumque evagetur, ad te revocaveris eam cum salutis fructu. Tu primus tibi, tu ultimus.” All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated. Bernard may here intend his reader to recall Augustine’s similar language in *Confessions*, Book X: “Some go forth to marvel at the height of the mountains, and the swelling waves of the seas, and the rushing waterfalls of the rivers, and the surging of the oceans, and the circuits of the stars, but leave themselves behind.” *Confessions* X.8.15 (CCSL 27:64).
self-knowledge is the indispensible foundation of Christian life, and a foundation that can never be transcended. For wherever he and Eugenius may direct their consideration, they must never lose sight of themselves and the truth of themselves in the undeceived and undeceiving eyes of their Creator and Redeemer. They may take their example, Bernard suggests, from “the supreme Father of all, who sends forth his Word and yet retains Him.” “Your word is your consideration,” the abbot explains, “if it goes forth, let it not leave you. Let it go forth, but never wander away from you. Let it go out, but not depart.”

Throughout his life as a teacher, preacher, and father of monks, Bernard never ceased to underscore the importance of this continual recourse to self-knowledge in the sight of the Triune God. And, with his particular concern for the category of experientia, or the personal appropriation of the truths of the faith, he did not hesitate to share the fruits of his own, personal self-encounter with his brothers. Thus, in the thirty-sixth of his Sermones super Cantica Canticorum, the abbot wrote vividly of his own search for self-knowledge and the knowledge of God: “As long as I look at myself, my eye is consumed with bitterness. Yet when I lift my eye to the aid of divine mercy, this joyous

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2 Csi 2.6 (III, 414): “Sume exemplum de summo omnium Patre, Verbum suum et emittente, et retinente. Verbum tuum, consideratio tua, quae, si procedit, non recedat. Sic progrediatur, ut non egrediatur; sic exeat, ut non deserat.”

vision of God soon tempers my bitter vision of myself.” Indeed the pursuit of the knowledge of self, and the knowledge of God that emerges within this pursuit, was of such importance to Bernard that he made these the twin foundations of his entire spiritual theology and his entire conception of the Cistercian life. So, in the conclusion to his fifth sermon *De diversis*, the abbot was able to write:

The sum total of our spiritual life consists in these two things: when we consider ourselves, we are troubled and saddened to our salvation, but when we consider God, we are revivified and consoled with the joy of the Holy Spirit. From the knowledge of ourselves, we conceive fear and humility, but from the knowledge of God, hope and love.  

As a devoted son of Benedict and a leading Cistercian champion of fidelity to his *Rule*, Bernard knew well that the primary aim of the Benedictine life is to seek the knowledge of God. Particular to his own monastic spirituality, however, is Bernard’s insistence that it is only through genuine self-knowledge that one arrives at the true knowledge of God. For unless one has first honestly acknowledged the humbling truth of his or her fallen condition, as an image of God disfigured by sin, one is not moved to seek God’s healing or to know him in the truth of his compassionate love revealed in Christ and the Spirit.

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4 SC 36.6 (II, 24): “Si autem suspexero et levavero oculos ad divinae miserationis auxilium, temperabit mox amaram visionem mei laeta visio Dei.”


6 In Chapter 58 of his *Regula*, Benedict in effect defines the essence of his conception of monastic life when he legislates a novice should only be admitted to full profession if he “truly seeks God…and shows eagerness for the Word of God, for obedience, and for trials.”  *Regula Sancti Benedicti*, Chapter 58, verse 7: “Solicitude sit si revera Deum quaerit, si sollicitus est ad opus Dei, ad oboedientiam, ad opprobria.”  The Latin text and, with some modifications, the English translation of Benedict’s *Regula* is taken from *RB 1980: The Rule of Benedict in Latin and English with Notes*, eds. Timothy Fry et al. (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1981). References to the *Regula*, hereafter RB, will be given by chapter and verse number; e.g. RB 58.7.
For Bernard, then, humble self-knowledge is the very origin of conversion and the 
wellspring of that life of continuing conversion that is the monastic vocation. So, in SC 
36, in words which echo his later counsel to pope Eugenius, the abbot writes: “I wish, 
therefore, before all else, that the soul should know itself…because such knowledge does 
not puff us up, but humbles us, and is a certain foundation on which to build. For unless 
it is founded on the firm foundation of humility, the spiritual building cannot stand.”\(^7\)

Scholars of the abbot’s spiritual theology have long noted the significance 
Bernard grants to this humbling self-knowledge in his broader spiritual teaching. In his 
pioneering work of 1934, *La théologie mystique de saint Bernard*, Étienne Gilson, who 
first proposed Bernard as a true systematic theologian, identified the soul’s knowledge of 
itself as disfigured image of God as “one of the foundations of his mysticism.”\(^8\) As we 
will have occasion to see momentarily, subsequent scholarship has readily and repeatedly 
endorsed Gilson’s claim. Without in any way contradicting Gilson’s assertion, it is the 
contention of this dissertation that a certain scholarly preoccupation with Bernard’s 
teaching on the humbling self-knowledge requisite for conversion has obscured 
somewhat the full breadth of the abbot’s teaching on self-knowledge and the various 
roles it assumes in his comprehensive vision of the spiritual life. In the chapters which 
follow, we will demonstrate that Bernard has, in fact, carefully thought through the

\(^7\) SC 36.5 (II, 7): “Volo proinde animam primo omnium scire seipsam…quia talis scientia non 
inflat, sed humiliat, et est quaedam praeparatio ad aedificandum Nisi enim super humilitatis stable 
fundamentum, spirituale aedificium stare minime potest.”

\(^8\) Étienne Gilson, *The Mystical Theology of Saint Bernard*, trans. A.H.C. Downes, Cistercian 
Studies 120 (1940; reprint, Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1990), 69. As Denis Farkasfalvy has 
observed, though Gilson’s *La théologie mystique de saint Bernard* first appeared prior to the Second World 
War, it was only with his second, revised edition of 1947 that the work obtained its full impact: *La 
functions of self-knowledge in each stage of the soul’s ascent to God, including those which both precede and follow the soul’s first conversion. Before previewing this argument, however, it will be helpful to situate it within the preceding literature on Bernard’s doctrine of self-knowledge.

Literature on Bernard’s Doctrine of Self-Knowledge

Despite scholarly agreement that the theme of self-knowledge plays a significant role in Bernard of Clairvaux’s theological synthesis, there is as yet no monograph-length study devoted exclusively to this aspect of the abbot’s thought. Consequently, the status quaestionis must be gleaned from incidental treatments of the theme in some of the more significant studies of Bernard’s theology.

As was noted above, it was Étienne Gilson who first called attention to the foundational importance of self-knowledge in the abbot’s mystical theology and who, even more fundamentally, first suggested that the abbot had a coherent, systematic mystical theology in the first place. In his *La théologie mystique de saint Bernard*, Gilson argues that Bernard’s writings espouse a systematic mystical theology centered on the concept of the soul as the image of God and on the soul’s restoration in the lost divine

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9 In the Preface to his work, Gilson announces his intention to demonstrate that Bernard’s writings witness not simply pious devotional meditations, as had previously been assumed, but a rigorous and coherent systematic mystical theology: “Saint Bernard was in no wise a metaphysician, but he must remain in our eyes a theologian whose speculative vigour and power of synthesis puts him among the greatest. That his mystical theology is essentially the science of a way of life is not to be doubted, but I hope to show that it is nevertheless a science, and that its structure could hardly be more rigorously synthetic than it is.” *The Mystical Theology of Saint Bernard*, viii. As Dom Jean Leclercq notes in his preface to the 1990 Cistercian Studies reprint of Downes’s translation, Gilson’s inclusion of the word “théologie” in his title was not unintentional and, at the same time, provocative; the great merit of Gilson’s study was to vindicate Bernard as a true theologian rather than a devotional author or Mariologist. Jean Leclercq, “Introduction: Étienne Gilson, Saint Bernard, and the History of Spirituality,” trans. Francis Kline, *The Mystical Theology of Saint Bernard*, xviii-xix.
likeness of charity. Within the Cistercian schola caritatis, the monk recovers this lost likeness through an “apprenticeship of charity” which begins in humility, consists in the passage from the unlikeness of self-will to the likeness of charity, and culminates in the ecstatic union with God this restored likeness effects. For Bernard, Gilson contends, self-knowledge constitutes the “first moment” in this apprenticeship of charity because true knowledge of self alone gives birth to humility, which in turn gives birth to charity. By a method of psychological self-analysis which Gilson dubs Bernard’s “Christian Socratism,” the novice monk comes to see himself in truth as an image of God disfigured through sin: “To know ourselves is essentially, in [Bernard’s] view, to recognize that we are defaced images of God [Se connaît, c’est essentiellement pour lui prendre conscience d’être une image divine défigurée].” In coming to know himself as he has made himself through sin, the novice begins to recognize himself as at once miserable and yet great, miserable for having lost the divine likeness, yet great for having retained the divine image. This two-fold self-knowledge moves the monk to conversion inasmuch as it both teaches him humility before God and yet fires his hope for his restoration in the divine likeness of love though God’s merciful gifts of grace.

For Bernard, Gilson continues, self-knowledge is the foundation of humility, and humility is in turn the foundation of charity: when the monk humbly accepts his responsibility for his fallen condition, he judges himself in accordance with God’s will and learns compassionate love for his neighbor who shares this misery and, above all, for the suffering God-Man who models humility and charity by his Incarnation. As he goes

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10 Gilson, The Mystical Theology of Saint Bernard, 70; La théologie mystique de saint Bernard, 93.
on to trace the monk’s passage from the carnal to the spiritual love of Christ and his resulting ecstatic union with him, Gilson devotes relatively little attention to the ongoing role of self-knowledge in Bernard’s conception of the spiritual life. Though he observes that the soul once refashioned in the divine likeness comes to know itself again in the fullness of its restored being and even to delight in the peace of its purified conscience, Gilson does not address how this new moment of self-knowledge is linked either to the soul’s prior self-awareness as the disfigured image or to the soul’s false self-understanding prior to this humbling realization. Concerned as he is to reconcile supposed contradictions in Bernard’s teaching on the loves of self and God, Gilson is content simply to note these moments of self-knowledge only insofar as they bear on his own interpretive questions rather than to trace the logic of their progression in the abbot’s mystical synthesis.

Further, although Gilson unfolds Bernard’s insight into how self-knowledge expands into the knowledge and love of neighbor, he does not consider how the novice’s newfound knowledge of neighbor refashions only recently recovered self-understanding in an ecclesial context as his knowledge of himself as a member of Christ’s true Bride, the Church. Indeed Gilson at times so emphasizes Bernard’s notion of the soul as Bride that he obscures the abbot’s complementary teaching on the Church as Bride and, therefore, on the individual soul’s developing sense of itself as defined by its relationship not only with Christ, but also with Christ’s other members who together form his one unique Spouse.

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When Gilson asserted that by self-knowledge Bernard refers “essentially” to the soul’s knowledge of itself as an image disfigured by sin, he did not, as we have just seen, intend to limit Bernard’s teaching on self-knowledge to this humbling self-awareness which is so necessary for conversion and the initial stages of the spiritual life. Yet, by and large, it has been this facet of the abbot’s teaching that has received the most attention in subsequent scholarly discussions of Bernard’s doctrine of self-knowledge. Thus Gilson’s student, Dom Jean Leclercq, writes, “At the point of the departure of the spiritual itinerary whose stages Bernard marked out is that “fear of the Lord,” as it is understood in the Bible. Not a depressing terror, but that knowledge of self, that awareness of man’s wretchedness, which is the beginning of wisdom.”

Similarly, in his multi-volume history of the Delphic oracle, “know thyself,” from Plato to Bernard, Pierre Courcelle writes:

Bernard constantly develops the idea that when a man knows himself in the light of truth, he becomes aware of his humble condition. An excellent creature on account of his reason, he is, on account of his sin, inferior to beasts of burden and lies in a region of unlikeness although he was created for the upright posture of the contemplative. From within this experience of distress there comes the discovery of our natural dignity, which consists in our likeness to God, and our confidence in that divine help which will lead us to salvation.

Thus Courcelle follows the interpretive lead of Gilson and Leclercq: when Bernard speaks of self-knowledge, he refers to the soul’s simultaneous recognition of its misery and grandeur, a recognition which convicts the soul of its own sin, but also opens it to the

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possibilities of conversion and restoration in the lost divine likeness by God’s grace in Christ.

More recent scholarship has tended to follow this same line of interpretation. Thus, in his study of spiritual desire in Bernard’s *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, Michael Casey argues that, for Bernard, “desire for God begins with self-knowledge.”14 This self-knowledge consists in acknowledging both one’s underlying orientation to God as created in his image and one’s suffering as the consequence of having lost the divine likeness through sin. In recognizing one’s orientation to God as made in his image, one grows discontent with the ephemeral satisfactions of this life and so begins to desire another, better life. In accepting suffering as the consequence of the loss of the divine likeness through sin, one confesses one’s need for God’s forgiveness and healing and so begins the journey of restoration in the divine likeness.

In his *The Spiritual Teachings of Bernard of Clairvaux*, John R. Sommerfeldt follows Gilson in closely associating Bernard’s teaching on self-knowledge with his understanding of humility as the foundation of the spiritual life. “In Bernard’s educational program,” Sommerfeldt contends, “the first step on the path to perfection, to happiness, is humility” and “humility…is an intellectual virtue; it is self-knowledge.”15 More precisely, “humility is seeing oneself as one truly is; in humility one measures this self-knowledge against another knowledge, the knowledge of what one could be.”16 For


Bernard, Sommerfeldt continues, humility entails a right ordering of the intellect, a just
self-judgment in imitation of the Son of God as Judge, and a “realistic, honest appraisal
of oneself” that “leads to knowledge of one’s weakness and one’s strength…and the
source of one’s strength, which is God.”

Sommerfeldt has, moreover, reiterated these points in his more recent studies of the abbot’s epistemology and the relational
dimensions of his spirituality.

Similarly, in his own study of Bernard’s mystical theology, Bernard McGinn has
taken up Gilson’s insight that, for the abbot of Clairvaux, the soul’s knowledge of its
simultaneous grandeur and misery as a disfigured image of God constitutes the origin of
the soul’s life of continuing conversion. McGinn writes: “For the abbot of Clairvaux, our
experience of life is one of an almost unbearable tension between what we were meant to
be and what we are – between the grandeur and misery of the human condition.” He
adds that “The existential starting point of Bernard’s anthropology, the Christian
adaptation Delphic maxim ‘Know thyself’ (Scito teipsum), was this recognition of our
combined misery and majesty.” For Bernard, McGinn continues, “self-knowledge,
then, is the knowledge of our sinfulness and the predominance of ‘carnality’ in the evil
sense in our lives.” This self-knowledge, this honest recognition of our sinfulness, is so
foundational for the abbot because it both reveals “the necessity for humility as the

17 Sommerfeldt, The Spiritual Teachings of Bernard of Clairvaux, 57.

18 See especially John R. Sommerfeldt, Bernard of Clairvaux: On the Life of the Mind (New York:
Newman Press, 2004), 92-93, 96-97; Bernard of Clairvaux: On the Spirituality of Relationship (New York:


essential starting point of the spiritual life” and at the same time opens us to the knowledge of God’s mercy and so “brings hope for a change in our condition…the first step in a lifelong process of conversion.”

Though the examples cited above do indicate a certain preoccupation with Bernard’s doctrine of self-knowledge specifically as it applies the cultivation of humility and the earliest stages of the spiritual journey, this is not to say that students of the abbot’s work have not intimated elements of a broader teaching on the question of the soul’s self-awareness. For example, some have alluded to a Bernadine teaching on the false or defective self-awareness the soul suffers prior to its first conversion on account of its pride. In particular, Sommerfeldt has referred to Bernard’s theory of “self-deception”: “If [for Bernard] humility is self-knowledge, then it is clear that pride is self-deception.”

For Bernard, Sommerfeldt notes, this proud delusion or self-deception threatens all types of persons – monks, clerics, and laity alike – and most be resisted by assiduous and honest self-consideration.

More broadly, Casey has argued that, for the abbot, “self-deception was the cause of the fall” and that fallen human beings find themselves continually susceptible to this same self-deception. Though they do not use the expression “self-deception” per se, other Bernard scholars have identified this same element of his thought in similar terms. Thus, Denis Farkasfalvy has noted Bernard’s account of how the prideful monk fashions

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23 Sommerfeldt, The Spiritual Teachings of Bernard of Clairvaux, 53.


25 Casey, Athirst for God: Spiritual Desire in Bernard of Clairvaux’s Sermons on the Song of Songs, 156.
a “false image” of himself.²⁶ Similarly, Roch Kerestzy argues that, for Bernard, the fallen human being is “alienated from himself” and, moreover, subject to a “false self-consciousness.”²⁷ Again, Charles Dumont suggests that, for Bernard, the fallen human being suffers from a “falsification” of the truth concerning himself.²⁸ Despite this widespread acknowledgment that Bernard envisions some sort of defective self-knowledge, or self-deception, associated with pride, there is as yet no study directed to the precise nature of this self-deception, its development, and its consequences in Bernard’s overall vision of the spiritual life.

In addition to noting Bernard’s teaching on this self-deception the soul suffers prior to its first conversion, and the humbling self-knowledge it acquires in that first conversion, recent scholarship on the abbot’s doctrine of the spiritual life has also gestured towards Bernard’s conviction that as the soul is progressively renewed in the lost divine likeness by Christ’s grace, it comes to experience itself anew, as one being conformed to Christ as his Bride. Particularly noteworthy in this connection are a pair of articles written in the 1990’s by Denis Farkasfalvy in which he argues that the key to Bernard’s theological synthesis is his understanding of the “spiritual life,” the human being’s quest for finding God in Christ, a spiritual journey which begins in conversion and progresses through purification to contemplation, the anticipation of the

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eschatological fulfillment of our vocation. The focal point of Bernard’s concept of the spiritual life, Farkasfalvy contends, is the twin knowledge of ourselves and God in Christ. For the abbot of Clairvaux, “theology is knowing the self for knowing Christ, or anthropology leading to Christology; knowing the ‘sorry truth’ about the self that leads to the perception of the good news in Christ, which again leads to the wonderful truth about the self and all mankind.”

For Farkasfalvy, then, Bernard’s reflections on the humbling self-knowledge requisite for the soul’s first conversion are far from his final word on the soul’s self-awareness. Rather, as the converted soul embraces the properly spiritual life, it is through a process of continuing conversion, purification, and contemplation, transformed by the grace of God in Christ and so enabled to know itself anew in all its originally intended beauty. Farkasfalvy’s point is rendered still more explicit by Roch Kereszty when he suggests that, for Bernard, the spiritual life culminates in the soul’s humble self-awareness as the Bride of Christ, conformed to Christ and his Church, and radiant with her restored dignity and beauty. For Kereszty, this graced perfection of peaceful and joyous self-knowledge constitutes a “counterpoint” to the first stage of the spiritual life when the sinner was forced to face the truth about himself with intense suffering, shame, and confusion. Thus, there is at least some scholarly agreement that Bernard envisions

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some newfound and joyous moment of self-awareness which attends the graced soul’s restoration in the divine likeness. Yet, here again, there is as yet no study specifically directed to just how Bernard conceives this graced soul’s newfound self-knowledge which dispels its former, and far more bitter, self-knowledge at conversion, or what, if any, intervening phases of self-awareness the soul experiences along the journey of its gradual restoration in the lost divine likeness.

The Contribution of This Dissertation

From the foregoing review of the literature, we have seen that scholars since Gilson have consistently recognized the significant, and indeed essential, role that knowledge of self plays in the abbot’s account of the soul’s return to God. And, we have seen that when scholars have addressed Bernard’s doctrine of self-knowledge, they have focused primarily, if not exclusively, on the specific role self-knowledge plays in the abbot’s account of the soul’s initial conversion and the earliest stages of the spiritual itinerary. Further, while preceding scholarship has, on occasion, alluded to a broader Bernadine teaching on self-knowledge, including a teaching on the self-deception the proud soul suffers prior to its conversion and the newfound self-knowledge the soul enjoys following its first conversion through its restoration in the lost divine likeness, these elements of Bernard’s doctrine have received far less attention. Finally, we should note that while preceding scholarship has also recognized what we might call the ecclesial character of Bernard’s thinking on self-knowledge and his attention to the role of Christ the Incarnate Word in bringing the soul to self-knowledge, the relationship between Bernard’s ecclesiology and Christology to his theology of self-knowledge has not been examined in any great depth.
In view of these findings, it is our contention that a certain scholarly preoccupation with Bernard’s teaching on the integral role humbling self-knowledge assumes in the experience of conversion has, unfortunately, obscured the full scope of the abbot’s reflections on self-awareness, self-deception, and their respective functions in his account of the spiritual life. The goal of this dissertation, then, will be to offer a fuller picture of Bernard’s teaching on self-knowledge which attends not only to the role self-knowledge plays in conversion, but in each of the various stages of the spiritual life, from its experience of self-deception prior to conversion to the newfound self-awareness as Christ’s own Bride it enjoys by its progressive likening to him through his grace.

In offering this more comprehensive picture of the abbot’s doctrine, we will be especially attentive to the ecclesiological and Christological dimensions of this thought. For Bernard, as we will see, the individual’s self-understanding, whether true or false, can never been understood apart from his or her relationship to others. Prior to its first conversion, the soul’s false self-understanding, or self-deception, is born of its pride, its amor proprie excellenbia or its compulsive desire to be, and to be seen to be, superior to others in some respect. The proud monk, for example, is truly self-deceived because he believes himself, wrongly, to be holier than each of his monastic brothers and allows this belief to fashion his own, specious self-image.

When, moreover, the proud soul is compelled to face the humbling truth of itself as an image of God disfigured by sin, this humbling self-knowledge not only spurs its conversion to Christ, but also transforms its understanding of others and its relation to them. By a process Bernard describes with fine psychological insight, the monk who has learned to accept the humbling truth of his own sinfulness will, with time, begin to
recognize that same sinfulness in his brothers, and so learn to love them with genuine compassion. Though this gradual, graced growth in humility and compassionate charity, moreover, the soul will be restored in the lost divine likeness as it is progressively likened to the humility and compassionate love of Christ the Incarnate Word. And, by this progressive likening to Christ, the renewed soul will begin to recognize within itself the figure of Christ’s own, unique Bride, the Church. As this *Anima-Sponsa* sees herself to be ever more bound to her *Verbum-Sponsus* in the bonds of love, she will likewise see herself as ever more bound to each and all of Christ’s members, the *Anima-Ecclesia*, in the bonds of compassionate charity. Thus, just as the proud monk once understood himself, falsely, in terms of his superiority over others, the monk renewed in the likeness of Christ’s humility and compassion will now understand himself, truly, as a member of that congregation of holy souls, the Church, which though now both earthly and heavenly, longs with one, unifying desire for the eschatological consummation of her eternal espousal to Christ, her divine Bridegroom.

Since it is, for Bernard, by the grace of the Incarnate Word that the soul is enabled to pass through these successive phases of self-awareness, we will also need to attend closely to Bernard’s Christology, his teaching on the person and saving work of Jesus Christ. As we will see, the abbot of Clairvaux has, in fact, developed a systematic and thoroughly incarnational Christology in the great tradition of Chalcedon and the Church Fathers. It is, moreover, by means of this Christology that Bernard is able credibly to claim that by his Incarnation, the divine Person of the Word has undertaken his own journey of self-knowledge in the flesh. By this journey of self-knowledge, the Incarnate Word has rendered himself both the model and the source of grace for those souls who
would undertake their own, similar journey of self-understanding. In attending to these ecclesiological and Christological dimensions of the abbot’s doctrine, we hope to show that Bernard’s work contains a truly “doctrinal” spirituality, a rich account of life in the Spirit that emerges neither apart from nor in contradiction to the Church’s dogmatic formulations, but precisely through careful theological reflection on these truths of the faith.

Method and Overview

Since abbot Bernard has left us no single work devoted specifically to the subject of self-knowledge, we will have to develop this more comprehensive picture of his doctrine through a close reading and exegesis of salient texts from throughout his corpus, with its rich variety of genres and styles. In adopting this approach, we are guided by two fundamental presuppositions concerning the abbot’s thought. First, as scholars since Gilson have suggested, we presuppose that Bernard’s corpus, despite the largely occasional character of the works it contains, nevertheless gives witness to a comprehensive, systematic theological vision which informs all the abbot’s various writings. Second, and again as scholars since Gilson have suggested, Bernard’s comprehensive, systematic theology is already present in his very first treatise, On the Steps of Humility and Pride, composed in 1125 when abbot Bernard was thirty-five years of age. As Roch Kerestzy has written: “The student of his works can hardly avoid the conclusion that Bernard has thought through the ultimate theological and philosophical
foundations of man’s return to God.”

Though he concedes that Bernard’s works contain numerous, shifting schematizations of this return to God, Kereszty argues that behind these manifold paradigms lies “an integral and consistent vision of all reality, complete with a metaphysic, anthropology, epistemology and experiential psychology” and that “this unified vision appears already in the De Gradibus Humilitatis and, with some minor changes, remains consistent throughout Bernard’s career.” Following Kereszty’s observation, this dissertation will devote special consideration to Bernard’s teaching in the Steps and take that teaching as the foundation for all Bernard’s subsequent reflections on self-knowledge and its place in the spiritual life.

Our study of Bernard’s doctrine of self-knowledge will unfold in four chapters. In Chapter 1, we will attempt to offer a sort of “overture” to Bernard’s comprehensive vision, introducing many of the main themes to be developed in subsequent chapters. To do so, we will undertake a careful reading of Bernard’s thirty-fourth through thirty-eighth Sermons on the Song of Songs. Here the abbot comments on a verse of the Canticle that has been of great significance for the Christian tradition of thought on self-knowledge, namely, Sg 1:7: “If you do not know yourself, most beautiful of women, go forth, and follow after the flocks of your companions, and feed your kids beside the shepherd’s tents.” Bernard’s sermons on these verses have often been cited as evidence of the importance he attaches to humbling self-knowledge in the experience of conversion and the foundational stages of the spiritual life, and they do indeed provide ample witness to

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this aspect of his teaching. Yet, as we will see, when these sermons are read as a “set” or whole, they in fact show that Bernard’s teaching on self-knowledge extends considerably beyond the experience of conversion, and in two directions: backwards, as it were, to an account of the soul’s self-deception prior to its first conversion, and forward to an account of the graced soul’s newfound self-knowledge as one being renewed in the lost divine likeness. So, we will argue, Bernard offers in this brief sermon set the outline of a comprehensive account of the various forms and roles self-knowledge takes throughout the sequentially linked stages of the spiritual journey to God.

In our second and third chapters, we will expound in greater depth Bernard’s accounts of the self-deception he sees to precede the soul’s first conversion and the newfound self-knowledge he believes the soul to enjoy when, following its first conversion, it has begun to be renewed in the lost divine likeness. Our organizing principle in these chapters will be the very one Bernard himself derives from the seventh chapter of Benedict’s Rule: *exaltatione descendere et humilitate ascendere*, we descend by exaltation and ascend by humility.34 By these paradoxical dynamics of the spiritual life, Bernard concludes that pride, which appears to be a form of ascent, ultimately culminates in the soul’s descent into the *regio dissimilitudinis*, or region of unlikeness, while humility, which appears to be a form of descent, is, in fact, the first step in the soul’s ascent to God by restoration in the divine likeness. Along these lines, we will argue that, for Bernard, the ascent of pride involves a descent into self-deception while

the descent of humility begins the soul’s ascent to self-knowledge, first as an image disfigured and then as image renewed.

In Chapter 2, we will expound Bernard’s theory of pride and the self-deception it brings through an analysis of the abbot’s *On the Steps of Humility and Pride*. In particular, we will be concerned with that work’s understudied second part, in which Bernard identifies twelve steps of pride to match Benedict’s twelve steps of humility. Whereas most previous scholarship has found in these steps of pride little more than amusing, satirical portraits of various proud monks, we will argue that Bernard’s steps in fact narrate how pride, the obsessive desire for one’s own superiority, gradually lures the monk into the delusional but obstinately held belief that he is what he so wants to, holier than everyone else in his community. In the grips of this self-deception, the monk who imagines himself superior to his brothers, and even his appointed superiors, soon presumes to assert his own will over theirs, even to the point of his expulsion from the monastic cloister to the world. There, freed from the salutary disciplines of obedience and the regular life, the former monk’s self-deception now assumes a still more perverse form as he first entertains, and then accepts as true, the belief that he is superior not only to his former brethren, but even to God himself. In imitation of Lucifer and humanity’s first parents, he dares to exalt his own will against the will of his Creator by embracing a life of sin. Yet, by the paradoxical dynamics of humility and pride, his apparent ascent ultimately results in his descent into the chains of sinful habit and a life of restless misery among the ephemeral pleasures of this passing world.

In Chapter 3, having traced Bernard’s account of the proud and self-willed soul’s descent into self-deception, we will trace the abbot’s parallel account of the soul’s ascent
to self-knowledge through its restoration in the lost divine likeness of humility and charity. For Bernard, we will argue, the soul’s ascending journey back to God begins with the prevenient grace of the Word, who cries out within the soul and illuminates the soul’s depths, compelling the self-deceived soul to contemplate in the light of truth the bitter reality of its own weakness and sinfulness. As painful as this self-encounter may be, Bernard insists that it is the only way the soul may return to God, for it is only through this honest self-judgment that the proud soul learns humility, is converted to the Word, and seeks the Word’s healing mercy. Once this humbled soul turns to the Word, it soon finds the divine mercy it seeks, and experiences within itself the transforming missions of the Word and the Spirit who grace its reason and will with humility and charity respectively. As it is gradually refashioned in this lost divine likeness, the soul that once hid from the sight of its own disfigured countenance now rejoices to see itself anew as one assuming the features of Christ’s own, spotless Bride, radiant with her Bridegroom’s own beauty. In this newfound and joyous self-awareness as the Bride, the refashioned soul conceives itself at once in terms of its relationship to the divine Bridegroom, to whom it is espoused, and in terms of its relationship to each of Christ’s members, with whom it forms Christ’s one, unique Spouse, the Church. Our account of Bernard’s teaching on this ascent to Bridal self-awareness will be drawn from the first part of his On the Steps of Humility and Pride, his sermon-treatise of 1140 On Conversion, and his meditation on the Bride’s spiritual beauty in the SC 85, the last of his complete sermons on the Canticle.

To complete our picture of Bernard’s comprehensive theology of self-knowledge, we will devote our fourth and final chapter to the abbot’s thought on the person and
saving work of Jesus Christ in the soul’s ascent to self-knowledge. First, we will show how Bernard has, on the basis of the biblical witness and the patristic tradition he inherits, conceived a thoroughly incarnational Christology which supplies the doctrinal foundation for his entire spirituality. In virtue of this incarnational Christology, Bernard is able to show how the divine Person of the Word, through his descent and ascent in the flesh, undertakes his own journey of self-knowledge that he might learn by human experience the humility and compassion he asks of his disciples. Second, through a study of Bernard’s *Sermons for the Liturgical Year*, we will argue that Bernard sees in the mysteries of Christ’s descent and ascent, from his Advent to his gift of the Spirit at Pentecost, the model for those who would undertake their own personal journey of self-knowledge in imitation of his example. Third, and finally, we will turn to Bernard’s letter-treatise *Against the Errors of Peter Abelard* to show how, for the abbot, the Incarnate Word renders himself not only a perfect example of the humility and charity that lead to true self-knowledge, but also the source of these virtues for those who are joined to him, as members to their Head, by faith, charity, and the sacraments of the Church. In attending to these dimensions of Bernard’s Incarnational Christology, moreover, we hope to offer a concrete example in his thought of the “doctrinal spirituality” we have referred to above.

**Bernard’s Patristic Sources**

With regard to Bernard’s patristic sources, we have already seen how the abbot depends on the teaching of the *Rule of Benedict* for the most basic foundations of his spiritual theology. Following Benedict, Bernard teaches that the spiritual life is, most fundamentally, the soul’s search for God. The monk who seeks God will, moreover,
truly ascend to God by the descent of humility, and descend from God by the false ascent of pride. In charting these journeys of ascent and descent by humility and pride, Bernard relies, of course, on Benedict’s seventh chapter and his twelve steps of humility from which the abbot of Clairvaux, in his On the Steps of Humility and Pride, derives his inverted and opposed twelve steps of pride. From the same chapter, Bernard also derives one of his most common schemas of the spiritual life: the soul returning to God will begin in humility and fear, but gradually ascend, by way of humility, to hope and charity through the Spirit’s gifts of grace.  

Further, when Bernard teaches that the soul’s ascent to God will proceed by its restoration in the lost divine likeness of humility and charity through its gradual conformation to the humility and charity of the Incarnate Word, above all in his Passion, he certainly seems to take his inspiration from Benedict’s own Prologue. Although Benedict does not employ the motif of the soul as created in the image and likeness of God to expound his monastic rule, he does, in his Prologue, teach that those who enter the monastic “school for the Lord’s service,” will return to God by their participation in

35 In RB 7.67-70, Benedict concludes his twelve steps of humility as follows: “Now, therefore, after ascending all these steps of humility, the monk will quickly arrive at that perfect love of God which casts out all fear (1 John 4:18). Through this love, all that he once performed with dread, he will now begin to observe without effort, as though naturally, from habit, no longer out of fear of hell, but out of love for Christ, good habit and delight in virtue. All this the Lord will manifest in his workman now cleansed of vices and sins.” RB 7.67-70: “Ergo, his omnibus humilitatis gradibus ascensis, monachus, mox ad caritatem Dei perveniet illum quae perfecta foris mitit timorem, per quam universa quae prius non sine formidine, observabat ullo labore velut naturaliter ex consuetudine incipiet custodire, non iam timore gehennae, sed amore Christi et consuetudine ipsa bona et delectatione virtutum. Quae Dominus iam in operarium suum mundum a vitiis et peccatis Spiritu Sancto dignabitur demonstrare.”

36 RB Prol.46: “dominici schola servitii.” In the very opening verses of his Prologue, Benedict describes the monastic life as a return to God by way of the renunciation of self-will in favor of obedience to the will of Christ, which is, for Bernard, charity: “The labor of obedience will bring you back to him from whom you had drifted through the sloth of disobedience. This message of mine is for you, then, if you are ready to give up your own will, once and for all, and armed with the strong and noble weapons of obedience to do battle for the true King, Christ the Lord.” RB Prol.2-3: “…ut ad eum per obiedientiae
the humility, obedience, and love Christ displays in his suffering and death. As Benedict writes in the conclusion to his Prologue: “As we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run on the path of God’s commandments, our hearts overflowing with inexpressible delights of love. Never swerving from his instructions, then, but faithfully observing his teaching in the monastery until death, we shall through patience share in the sufferings of Christ that we may deserve also to share in his glory.”37

Beyond these specific textual and doctrinal influences, Benedict’s Rule exerted a far more general, though by no means less significant, influence on Bernard inasmuch as its prescriptions immersed Bernard, and his monastic readers, into a regular life of lectio divina which entailed their continuing encounter with the texts of Scripture and the Fathers of the Church. Through his recitation of the liturgical hours and his practice of spiritual reading according to the Rule’s directives, Bernard daily meditated on the writings of those patristic authors who would so profoundly influence his spiritual theology. With regard to Bernard’s doctrine of self-knowledge in particular, his thought seems most especially influenced by the writings of Origen, Augustine, and Gregory the Great. Though it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to offer a comprehensive account of Bernard’s patristic sources and his creative use of them, the following indications may prove useful in beginning to understand his reflections on the forms and roles of self-knowledge in the soul’s ascent to God.

laborem redeas, a quo per inobedientiae desidiam recesseras. Ad te ergo nunc mihi sermo dirigitur, quisquis abrenuntians propriis voluntatibus, Domino Christo vero regi militaturus, oboedientiae fortissima atque praeclara arma sumis.”

37 RB Prol.49-50: “Processu vero conversationis et fidei, dilatato corde inenarrabili dilectionis dulcedine curritur via mandatorum Dei, ut ab ipsis numquam magisterio discedentes, in eius doctrinam usque ad mortem in monasterio perserverantes, passionibus Christi per patientiam participemur, ut et regno eius mereamur esse consortes.”

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As we have already observed above, and as we will see in considerably greater depth in this dissertation’s first chapter, one of the most significant Scriptural foundations for Bernard’s doctrine of self-knowledge is the Bridegroom’s rebuke of his Bride in Canticle 1:7: “If you do not know yourself, most beautiful of women, go forth, and follow after the flocks of your companions, and feed your kids beside the shepherd’s tents.” When he interprets this verse as the Bridegroom’s warning to his Bride to seek self-knowledge, the abbot follows a long interpretive tradition stemming back to Origen and Gregory the Great.\(^\text{38}\) In this regard, the influence of Origen \textit{Homilies} and \textit{Commentary} on the Canticle, in the translations by Rufinus and Jerome respectively, on Bernard and other Western patristic and medieval commenters can hardly be overstated.\(^\text{39}\)

In the second book of his \textit{Commentary}, when he turns to Sg 1:7, the Alexandrian immediately associates this verse with the celebrated Greek maxim “Know yourself” or “Understand yourself” (\textit{Scito te ipsum, vel Cognosce te ipsum}, in Rufinus’s translation).\(^\text{40}\) Though Origen acknowledges a tradition attributing this maxim to one of the seven Greek sages, he insists that, long before the Greeks, it was Solomon himself who formulated this precept when he wrote, in Rufinus’s translation of Origen’s Septuagint text, “Nisi cognoveris te, o bona – sive pulchra – inter mulieres…”\(^\text{41}\)


\(^\text{39}\) On the subject of Bernard’s appropriation of Origen, see Casey, \textit{Athirst for God: Spiritual Desire in Bernard of Clairvaux’s Sermons on the Song of Songs}, 41-46.

\(^\text{40}\) \textit{Commentarium in Cantica Cantorum}, II.5.1 (SCh 375:354).

\(^\text{41}\) On at least two occasions, Bernard himself makes reference to the Greek origins of this maxim, in both cases associating the maxim with Scriptural verses other than Sg 1:7 which will, as we will see, resurface repeatedly in his discussions of self-knowledge. In SC 23, he associates this maxim with Ps 38:5 when he writes, “I am concerned, according to that saying of the Greeks, to know myself, that together with the Prophet, I may ‘know what is lacking to me.’” SC 23.9 (I, 145): “cautus, iuxta illud Graecorum, scire...
Of particular importance to Bernard, moreover, is Origen’s suggestion that, in this verse, the *Verbum-Sponsum* warns the *Anima-Sponsa* to know herself as *pulchra*, or beautiful, on account of its original creation in the image of God (Gen 1:26). In a lengthy, and rather adventurous, paraphrase of the Bridegroom’s admonition, Origen writes:

If you do not know yourself, O beautiful among women, and if you do not understand the source of your beauty – namely that you were created in the image of God, on account of which there is in you an abundance of natural beauty – and if you do not understand how beautiful you have been from the beginning, although even now you excel other women and alone among them are said to beautiful, nevertheless, if you do not know yourself and who you are – for I do not wish your beauty to appear good by comparison with your inferiors, but rather that you judge yourself in accordance with yourself and your own beauty – if you do not know this, I command you to go forth and follow in the footsteps of the flocks, and to pasture neither sheep nor lambs, but goats, who, on account of their perversity and wickedness, will stand to the left of the King when he sits in judgment (Mt 25:32-33).  

As we will see, in his own commentary on the Canticle, and elsewhere in his *corpus*, Bernard will follow Origen in associating self-knowledge with the knowledge of oneself as created in the image of God: to know oneself in truth is, for Bernard, as for Origen, to recognize oneself as a creature made to God’s image, and to acknowledge honestly the

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42 *Commentarium in Cantica Canticorum*, II.5.2 (SCh 375:354-356): “‘Nisi cognoveris temet ipsum, o pulchra inter mulieres’, et agnoveris pulchritudinis tuae causas inde descendere, quod ‘ad imaginem Dei facta es’, per quod inest tibi plurimum naturalis decoris, et agnoveris, quam pulchra eras ex initio, quamvis et nunc iam praecefullas ceteras ‘mulieres’ et ‘pulchra inter’ eas sola dicaris, tamen ‘nisi te ipsum cognoveris’, quaesis - non enim ex comparatione inferiorum volo bonam videri pulchritudinem tuam, sed ex eo, ut tibi ipsi et decori tuo collata atque exaequata respondeas - , quod nisi feceris, iubeo te ‘exire’ et ‘in’ ultimis ‘gregum vestigiis’ collocari et non iam oves neque agnos, sed ‘haedos pascere,’ illlos videlicet, qui pro pravitate et lascivia ‘a sinistris staturi sunt regis’ iudicio praesidentis.”

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degree to which one has either cultivated that likeness to God by a life of virtue, or lost that likeness by a life of sin. Bernard will also follow Origen’s interpretation of the second half of the verse, concerning the consequences of failing to seek this self-knowledge. For Origen, the “goats” mentioned by the Bridegroom refer to the “restless and wayward senses” which lead the soul to pursue sinful, but ultimately transitory satisfactions not fit for one made in God’s image. If the soul neglects to know itself, it will come to resemble not God, but senseless beasts who trail after their senses and fleshly desires. In this case, however, the soul will descend to a state even lower than that of the animals, for while the former act according to their nature, the soul will willfully defy its own nature by seeking its fulfillment apart from the God in whose image it has been made.

Once he has established the fundamental importance of this self-knowledge to the soul’s progress in the spiritual life, Origen next proposes to apply this verse to “Christ and the Church.” In this instance, the Alexandrian refers to the Sponsa of the Canticle as “the souls of the faithful,” establishing a polyvalent signification for the Bride that Bernard will adopt in his efforts to unfold the Bride’s simultaneous psychological and ecclesiological dimensions. The souls of the faithful, Origen continues, ought to seek self-knowledge in two ways: the soul must consider first “what it is like in its essence,”

43 Commentarium in Cantica Canticorum, II.5.17 (SCh 375:364): “lascivos scilicet et inquietos sensus.”

44 Commentarium in Cantica Canticorum, II.5.6 (SCh 375:356): “Sed nunc consequentur, ut cetera, ad Christum haec et ad ecclesiam referamus, qui ad sponsam suam, ad animas scilicet credentium, loquens summam salutis et beatitudinis in scientia < sui > et agnitione constituit.”
and second, “what it is like in its affections.” In brief, Origen identifies two distinct aspects under which the soul will seek to understand itself as created in the image of God, the metaphysical and the moral respectively. Given Bernard’s markedly practical bent and his disinterest in abstract metaphysical speculation, it is perhaps not surprising to find that he does not develop to any great degree the Alexandrian’s concern for the soul to know itself in substantia or in its essence. Bernard does not, that is, share Origen’s keen interest that the soul consider “what it is in its essence, whether it is corporeal or incorporeal, whether it is simple or consists of two or three parts,” etc. It is, however, worth noting that when Origen urges faithful souls to these more speculative aspects of their self-understanding, he also exhorts them to seek the knowledge of the Trinity. For Origen, then, the knowledge of self and God are closely linked and though he does not elaborate the relationship in the manner Bernard will in his own commentary in SC 34-38, it seems plausible that the abbot’s decision to treat these two forms of knowledge and their relationship was inspired by Origen’s own interpretive association of the two.

If Bernard seems less interested than the Alexandrian in questions of the soul’s self-knowledge in substantia, he readily embraces and develops Origen’s insistence that the faithful soul must also seek to know itself in affectibus, in its affections or dispositions. For Origen, this search takes the form of a rigorous, penetrating self-examination of conscience. The soul must ask itself “whether its affections are good or

45 Commentarium in Cantica Canticorum, II.5.7 (SCh 375:358): “Videtur ergo mihi duplici modo agnitionem sui capere animam debere, quid ve sit ipsa et qualiter moveatur, id est quid in substantia et quid in affectibus habeat.”

46 Commentarium in Cantica Canticorum, II.5.21 (SCh 375:366): “Inter haec ergo erit animae quaedam etiam sui agnito, per quam scire debet, quae sit eius substantia, utrum corporea an incorporea et utrum simplex an ex duobus vel tribus an vero ex pluribus composita.”

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not, whether its intentions are upright or not,” and if it sees that its intentions are upright, it must also ask itself “whether it has the same concern for all of the virtues, as much in thought as in action, or only for those that are necessary and easily cultivated.” The faithful soul should likewise ask itself “whether it is capable of making progress, of growing in the understanding of things and in the cultivation of the virtues, or if it is standing still and resting in the progress it has already made.” After posing these and many other questions for this self-examination of conscience, Origen concludes that, if they are diligent, his readers themselves will be able to find “innumerable similar ways in which the soul might judge its self-knowledge, contemplate the beauty it has received by its creation in the image of God, and determine how it may renew and restore that beauty.” As our study of Bernard’s doctrine will show, the abbot of Clairvaux’s account of self-knowledge is plainly indebted to Origen’s insistence on the soul’s need for this continual recourse to self-examination and self-judgment. For Bernard, as for Origen, the soul must, no matter what its stage in the spiritual life, continually examine and evaluate its own dispositions, whether they are sinful or virtuous, and by this self-examination, continually seek new ways in which it may advance in the divine likeness it has lost through sin.

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47 Commentarium in Cantica Canticorum II.5.8 (SCh 375:358): “ut puta ut intelligat, si boni affectus sit aut non boni, et recti propositi aut non recti; et si quidem recti sit, si erga omnes virtutes eundem tenorem habeat, tam in intelligendo quam in agendo, an erga necessaria tantum et quae in promptu sunt; et utrum in eo sit, ut recipiat profectus et augeatur in intellectu rerum augimento que virtutum, an in eo stet et resideat, in quod potuit pervenire.”

48 Commentarium in Cantica Canticorum II.5.15 (SCh 375:362): “Possibile est enim volenti ad horum similitudinem et alia innumerata colligere, quibus 'cognoscere semet ipsum' anima probetur et pulchritudinem suam, quam 'ad imaginem Dei' in conditione suscepit, si reparare aut restituere potuerit, contemplari.”
In his ground-breaking study of medieval monastic culture and theology, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, Leclercq observed that the writings of Gregory the Great, together with texts connected to Saint Benedict, exercised a “decisive, constant, and universal influence on the origin and development of medieval monastic culture in the West” and on the spiritual theology of Bernard in particular.\(^49\) If we turn, then, to Gregory’s own *Exposition* of the Canticle, we find that his exegesis of Sg 1:7 is imbued with the spirit of Origen’s. Considering the verse first as Christ’s admonition to the individual soul, the pope teaches that “Above everything else, the soul should be concerned to know itself,”\(^50\) a phrase Bernard will echo in his own commentary. For Gregory, if the soul takes care to know itself, it will “recognize that it is created in the image of God” and should not, therefore, “follow the likeness of beasts” in giving itself over to self-indulgence and the desire for the passing pleasures of this world.\(^51\) Here Gregory adduces Ps 48:13, “Man, when he was set in honor, did not understand; he is compared to senseless beasts and made like them,” a verse Bernard will likewise invoke to explain how self-neglect and self-deception led to the fall of humanity’s first parents. Referring Sg 1:7 in turn to the Church, Gregory has the Bridegroom warn the faithful souls of the elect that they must continually remember that they have been made in the Bridegroom’s own image, and that if they neglect this truth, they will be compelled to


\(^{50}\) *Expositio in Cantica canticorum* 44 (SCh 314:134): “Omnis anima nihil debet amplius curare, quam ut se ipsam sciat.”

\(^{51}\) *Expositio in Cantica canticorum* 44 (SCh 314:134): “Qui enim se ipsum scit, cognoscit quia ad imaginem dei factus est. Si ad imaginem dei factus est, non debeat similitudinem iumentorum sequi, siue in luxuria siue in appetitu praesenti dissolui.”
imitate not Christ, but the crowds of this world who go forth after their “goats” or carnal desires.

Here it is important to note that in their respective commentaries on Sg 1:7, both Origen and Gregory concern themselves exclusively with the case of faithful souls, of the elect, of those who have already passed beyond their first conversion and have therefore already begun the journey to God by their restoration in the lost divine likeness. This would seem to confirm a significant finding of this dissertation: when, as we will see, Bernard maintains that the role of self-knowledge in the spiritual life does not cease at conversion, but continues through the soul’s graced renewal in the divine likeness, he is simply following the patristic tradition he inherits. As we will see in our study of SC 34-38, the abbot alludes to this tradition by constructing an *inclusio* extending from SC 34.1 to SC 38.5-8 in which he discusses the self-knowledge of the Bride as the self-knowledge of those who have already entered the way of the spiritual life. Within the bounds of this *inclusio*, however, Bernard goes beyond Origen and Gregory’s expositions to discuss the various forms of self-knowledge, or self-deception, the soul experiences at various other stages in its spiritual journey, including its experience prior to conversion and its experience of its first conversion itself.

Any study, however rudimentary, of Bernard’s patristic sources would not, of course, be complete without a look at his use of Augustine, the Western Father who most permeates his theology and spirituality. Yet, as Casey has observed, Augustine’s influence on Bernard’s thought was “vast and diffuse,” often making it difficult to trace
direct links between the two.\textsuperscript{52} It is perhaps for this reason that a systematic study of Augustine’s influence on the Cistercian has not been undertaken, though some efforts have been made to trace Bernard’s use of Augustine on particular theological topics.\textsuperscript{53} As regards Bernard’s indebtedness to Augustine on the subject of self-knowledge, we can derive some initial indications from two remarks of Augustine’s that Bernard explicitly quotes and makes essential principles of his doctrine.

The first is Augustine’s definition of superbia or pride as \textit{amor propriae excellentiae}, or the love of one’s own superiority – a definition Bernard deploys to great effect in his \textit{On the Steps of Humility and Pride}.\textsuperscript{54} If indeed Bernard is quoting this definition directly from the writings of Augustine, and not simply as a well-known phrase abstracted from its original context, he may have drawn it either from \textit{On the Literal Meaning of Genesis} or Sermon 354. In Book XI of the former, Augustine is engaged in a study of Genesis 3, and in the midst of reflecting on the primordial sins of Satan, Adam and Eve, writes, “pride is the love of one’s own superiority.”\textsuperscript{55} Even a cursory glance at the surrounding context makes it immediately clear that Bernard is greatly indebted to Augustine’s discussion here, both in his \textit{Steps} and in his doctrine of self-knowledge more broadly, in ways that extend far beyond the simple use of Augustine’s definition of pride.

\textsuperscript{52} Casey, \textit{Athirst for God: Spiritual Desire in Bernard of Clairvaux’s Sermons on the Song of Songs}, 47.


\textsuperscript{54} Bernard quotes Augustine’s definition in Hum 14 (III, 27). He offers a similar definition, \textit{superbia est appetitus propriae excellentiae}, in Mor 19 (VII, 115).

\textsuperscript{55} \textit{De Genesi ad litteram} X.14.18 (CSEL 28.1:346): “superbia sit amor excellentiae propriae.”
Here Augustine invokes Sirach 10:13, “Pride is the beginning of all sin (initium omnis peccati superbia),” and, just as Bernard later will, interprets this verse to mean that pride is the origin of all sins, both that first sin of Adam and Eve and all the subsequent, personal sins of their descendants.

Here too, Augustine teaches that pride, understood as excessive self-love and the love of one’s own superiority, so swelled like a tumor in the hearts of humanity’s first parents that they succumbed to self-deception. Satan would not, Augustine explains, have attempted to tempt Adam to disobedience unless “there had first existed in that man’s soul a certain self-exaltation (elatio)” by which he entertained “a false and presumptuous opinion of himself.” More precisely, Augustine continues, this false self-understanding born of excessive self-love consisted in Adam’s belief that he could by his own strength, and without any help from God, exalt himself to a share in God’s divinity. For this reason, Augustine explains, God has allowed the story of Adam’s proud self-exaltation and subsequent humbling to be included in Scripture as a lesson to the proud in every age: “Throughout the divine Scripture, with constant care, humility is so highly commended to us, that we might not presume on our own power as if we had no need of God’s assistance.” In our study of Bernard’s teaching on the self-deception that attends pride in Chapter 2, we will see that the abbot has made Augustine’s teaching here his own: pride, the love of one’s own superiority, leads one into self-deception when it so

56 De Genesi ad litteram X.5.7 (CSEL 28.1:338): “nec arbitrandum est, quod esset hominem deiecturus iste temptator, nisi praecessisset in anima hominis quaedam elatio conprimenda, ut per humiliationem peccati, quam de se falso praesumserit, disceret.”

57 De Genesi ad litteram X.6.8 (CSEL 28.1:339): “mirum est enim, quantum ista humilitas, qua subdimur creatori, ne tamquam eius adiutorio non egentes de nostris uiribus praesumamus, per scripturas omnes diuinas cura continua commendatur.”
swells in one’s heart that it moves one first to entertain, and then to accept as true, the delusional belief that one is superior to others and even, in the most serious case, superior to God himself.

In Chapter 2, we will also see that, for Bernard, even monks removed from the world are by no means immune to pride. In the monastic enclosure, where holiness is cherished above all else, the monk is tempted to fall in love with the thought of his own moral and spiritual superiority over others, and to embrace the self-deception that he is holier than everyone else. Thus it is especially interesting to find that Bernard may also have drawn the definition of pride as *amor propriae excellentiae* from Augustine’s Sermon 354, which concerns that form of pride to which vowed religious are most especially prone. In this sermon, Augustine teaches that those who have vowed themselves to chastity have assumed a noble place among the members of Christ’s one body; but they must be vigilant, he warns, not to fall victim to pride, to the belief that they are superior to the Church’s married members. In this case, Augustine explains, their pride will rob their chastity of its merit: “I dare say,” he concludes, “that those who are leading the married life, if they hold fast to their humility, are better than those who are chaste but proud.”58

Like Benedict, Augustine here invokes the paradoxical spiritual dynamics disclosed in Christ’s saying, “Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled, and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted” (Luke 14:11; 18:14). Those who have embraced the vocation to vowed religious life must resist the temptation to the false ascent of pride and

58 *Sermo* 354 (PL 39:1565): “et audeo dicere, coniugalem agentes uitam, si tenent humilitatem, superbis castis meliores sunt.”
contempt of their supposed inferiors, and instead humble themselves to consider the truth of their own weakness and to learn charity for all Christ’s members, regardless of their calling. Augustine writes: “Why do you seek the highest place by your craving for the heights, when you can reach those heights by holding fast to humility?”\textsuperscript{59} Those who would be true members of Christ’s body must imitate the humility and love of their Head, who humbled himself, becoming obedient unto death (Phil 2:8): “Your leader is humble, but you would be proud? The Head is humble, but the members would be proud? Perish the thought.”\textsuperscript{60} As we will see in Chapter 2, Bernard will make Augustine’s teaching in this sermon the very foundation of his account of the twelve steps of pride: the monk’s descent of these steps, even to the point of contempt of God, begins with his growing love of his own superiority which, when left unchecked by humble self-judgment, deludes him into the belief that he is holier and more virtuous than any one else in his community. And, as we will see in Chapter 4, Bernard follows Augustine in teaching that it is only by contemplation of and conformation to the example of the humble and loving Incarnate Word that the soul will be brought to true self-knowledge and learn the salutary way of its ascent to God.

Along these same lines, Bernard is also likely influenced by Augustine’s teaching in his \textit{De Civitate Dei}, and especially Book XIV, on the sin of Adam and Eve. There Augustine once more invokes Sirach 10:13, “pride is the beginning of all sin” and defines

\textsuperscript{59} \textit{Sermo} 354 (PL 39:1567): “quid quaeris celsiorem locum appetitu celsitudinis, quem potes apprehendere retentione humilitatis?”

\textsuperscript{60} \textit{Sermo} 354 (PL 39:1568): “princeps tuus humilis, et tu superbus? caput humile, et membrum superbum.”

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pride as “the desire for a perverse exaltation.” Early in the same book, Augustine has already argued that human beings naturally and rightly desire happiness, but, by pride, attempt to seize that happiness through the assertion of their own wills against others and against God. Though created by God to find their happiness, their true exaltation, by that humble subjection to his will which is charity, human beings have from the beginning been tempted to grasp a certain false happiness by the exertion of their self-will. In so contradicting their own created nature, human beings subject themselves to a “lie” or a “falsehood”: “God created human beings upright, so that they might live not according to themselves, but according to him who made them by preferring his will to their own. When human beings fail to live this way, when they fail to live in the way for which they were created, this is falsehood.” It is precisely this medacium, this lie or falsehood, we will see, that Bernard understands to be heart the self-deception human beings suffer when they succumb to the wishful thinking of pride.

Considered more broadly, Augustine’s foundational conception in the City of God, that of the two civitates, the city of those who live by pride and self-will and the city of those who live by humility and love, will provide the basic framework for Bernard’s entire spiritual theology. Though Bernard does not typically invoke Augustine’s image of the two “cities,” he does essentially see human beings as faced with two fundamentally opposed ways of life. By the false ascent of pride and self-will, one will grow progressively unlike Christ in his humility and love, and so descend into restless misery.

61 De civitate Dei XIV.4 (CCSL 48): “sed quia homo ita factus est rectus, ut non secundum se ipsum, sed secundum eum, a quo factus est, uiiueret, id est illius potius quam suam faceret uoluntatem: non ita uiiure, quem ad modum est factus ut uiiueret, hoc est mendacium.”

62 De civitate Dei XIV.13 (SCSL 48): “quid est autem superbia nisi peruersae celsitudinis appetitus?”
amidst a region of unlikeness. By the salutary descent of humility and charity, however, one will be progressively restored in the lost divine likeness Christ reveals in his saving mysteries, and so ascend to the happiness of the Divine Bridegroom’s eternal embrace.

The second Augustinian phrase that Bernard explicitly quotes and makes his own is Augustine’s prayer in the *Soliloquies*, “O God, let me know myself, let me know you.” The themes of self-knowledge, the knowledge of God, and their relation were ones Augustine explored in great depth throughout his life, perhaps most notably in his *De Trinitate*. There Augustine teaches that the soul is most fully aware of itself as an image of God when it directs its powers of memory, intellect, and will, the Trinitarian image within itself, to the knowledge, love, and worship of its Creator. Though we might expect Bernard to follow up Augustine’s thinking in this regard, it is his more speculatively-minded friend and fellow Cistercian William of Saint Thierry who makes Augustine’s teaching in the *De Trinitate* a centerpiece of his spiritual theology. With his more practical frame of mind, Bernard, like his other Cistercian contemporary, Aelred of Rievaulx, appears to take a greater interest in Augustine’s teaching on the knowledge of self and God in the *Confessions*, and, in particular, *Confessions* Book X.

63 *Soliloquia* II.1.1 (PL 32:885): “deus semper idem, nouerim me, nouerim te.” Bernard explicitly cites Augustine’s prayer in the opening to his second sermon *De Diversis* where he exhorts his monks, “All your leisure should be given to this twofold consideration, as the Saint prayed, ‘O God, let me know myself, let me know you.’” Div 2.1 (VI-1, 80): “Huic duplici considerationi tota haec vestra vacatio tribuatur, sicut Sanctus orabat: <<Deus, noverim me, noverim te>>.”

64 See *De Trinitate* XIV.12 (CCSL 50A).


The knowledge of self and God in their relation is one of the main themes, even the main theme itself, of Augustine’s *Confessions*. For, in Augustine’s view, *confessio* is always and simultaneously the humble acknowledgment of one’s own sinfulness before God and the praise of God’s mercy in forgiving and healing the soul from sin.\(^{67}\) Thus, in Book I, as he prepares to confess his past life before God and his readers, Augustine pleads before God, “Though I am but dust and ashes, allow me to speak in the presence of your mercy, for, behold, it is to your mercy that I speak, and not to some person who might mock me.”\(^{68}\) In Book X, having told the story of his past life through the light of God’s continuous mercy towards him, Augustine will now confess “not what I was, but what I am now.”\(^{69}\) So he begins Book X with a prayer very similar to that he offered in the *Soliloquies*, “Let me know you, O you who know me. Let me know you even as I am known by you.”\(^{70}\) He recognizes that if he is to know himself truly, he must learn to see himself as God sees him. To believe anything else about himself is only a falsehood: “What else is it to know oneself than to hear the truth about oneself from you? If

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\(^{67}\) In Sermon 29A, which he preached around the time he was writing his *Confessions*, Augustine writes, “Whether you sing praise for God’s gifts, or pour out your sins with tears, confess to the Lord the he is good, for his mercy endures forever. For confession is not the recognition of our sins alone, but also the praise of our Lord, and we cannot do one of these without the other. For we accuse ourselves of our sins in the hope of his mercy, and we praise his mercy when we recall our sins.” *Sermo* 29A (CCSL 41:9-15): “siue dona illius laudando cantetis, siue peccata uestra gemendo fundatis, confitemini domino quoniam bonus est, quoniam in saeculum misericordia eius. neque enim sola commemoratio peccatorum nostrorum, sed etiam domini nostri laudatio confessio dicitur, quia, et si unum horum faciamus, non sine altero facimus. nam et iniquitatem nostram cum spe misericordiae ipsius accusamus, et ipsius misericordiam cum iniquitatis nostrae recordatione laudamus.”

\(^{68}\) *Confessions* I.6.7 (CCSL 27): “sed tamen sine me loqui apud misericordiam tuam, me terram et cinerem, sine tamen loqui, quoniam ecce misericordia tua est, non homo, irrisor meus, cui loquor.”

\(^{69}\) *Confessions* X.4.6 (CCSL 27): “non qualis fuerim, sed qualis sim.”

\(^{70}\) *Confessions* X.1.1 (CCSL 27): “cognoscam te, cognitor meus, cognoscam, sicut et cognitus sum.”
someone has this self-knowledge but says “it is false,” is he not lying?” Contemplating himself as God sees him, Augustine confesses that by God’s gracious mercy, he has begun to be renewed in holiness. Yet, he also realizes that he still remains weak, and begs God to complete the work of grace he has begun in him, “Have mercy on me,” he prays, “according to your great mercy, for the sake of your name. Do not abandon the work you have begun in me, but bring all my imperfection to perfection.”

At the close of Book X, following an extensive exploration of the memory that does not appear greatly to have influenced Bernard, Augustine returns to the theme of the knowledge of himself as one being renewed by grace, but still imperfect. Much like Origen in his *Commentary* on the Canticle, Augustine here subjects himself to a rigorous self-examination of conscience. The framework of this self-judgment is the threefold temptation of 1 John 2:16: the concupiscence of the flesh, the concupiscence of the eyes, and worldly pride. On each point, Augustine recognizes that by God’s mercy he has made progress against these temptations, but still has much more progress to make. He is, he confesses, still tempted by images of his past sexual gratifications, still curious for gossip and pleasant sights, and still drawn by the desire for human praise which might corroborate his lingering wish for his own superiority. Honestly acknowledging the various ways in which he is still beset by sin and weakness, he turns to God again, to seek his mercy, and to pray that God will continuing to recreate him in his love: “I am needy and poor, but I am better when I recognize this with secret sighs of lament and seek your

71 *Confessions* X.3.3 (CCSL 27): “quid est enim a te audire de se nisi cognoscere se? quis porro cognoscit et dicit: ‘falsum est’, nisi ipse mentiatur?”

72 *Confessions* X.4.5 (CCSL 27): “miserere mei secundum magnam misericordiam tuam propter nomen tuum et nequaquam deserens coepta tua consumma imperfecta mea.”
mercy until you renew all that is imperfect in me and perfect me in your peace.” In the end, recognizing how far he still remains from God, Augustine can only cling to Christ, the humble and loving Mediator between himself and God, and feed on his Eucharistic flesh and blood, that he might be gradually healed by Christ and conformed to him, imperfectly in this life, but perfectly in eternity.

In the chapters that follow, we will find that Bernard has made these themes from the tenth book of Augustine’s *Confessions* the very foundation of his teaching concerning the role of self-knowledge in the spiritual life. For Bernard, if the soul is to return to the God from whom it has wandered by sin, it must first be recalled to itself by God himself, and then compelled to know itself in the humbling truth of its own sinfulness, to see it itself through the undeceived and undeceiving eyes of Truth himself. Humbling though this self-judgment will be, it is the beginning of the soul’s return to God because it moves the soul to expose its former, proud self-deception as false, to see itself in the full measure of its weakness and vanity, and to seek God’s merciful healing. Passing from the true knowledge of self to the true knowledge of God, the soul which seeks God’s mercy finds it revealed in Christ, and recognizes God at work within it, conforming it to Christ’s own humility and love. When the soul undertakes this way of restoration in the lost divine likeness, it must not abandon the pursuit of true self-knowledge, but continue to examine itself according to the threefold temptation of 1 John 2:16 that structures Bernard’s thought as much as Augustine’s. The soul must consider itself continually,

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73 *Confessions* X.38.63 (CCSL 27): “egenus et pauper ego sum et melior in occulto gemitu displicens mihi et quaecens misericordiam tuam, donec reficiatur defectus meus et perficiatur usque in pacem.”

74 See *Confessions* X.42.67-43.70 (CCSL 27).
recognizing the recently restored divine likeness within itself as the work of God’s gracious mercy, but also acknowledging its own persistent weakness, and seeking God’s continued healing. The soul must, therefore, feed on Christ the Paschal Lamb and thereby participate in Christ’s own humility and charity, being conformed to him day by day until it is perfected for eternity.

In each of these respects, it is fair to say that it is from Augustine, more than any other patristic source, that Bernard has drawn the animating principles of his doctrine of self-knowledge and his spiritual theology more broadly speaking. Into this Augustinian matrix, however, Bernard weaves the particular strands of Bridal mysticism he has drawn from Origen and Gregory’s distinctive readings of the Canticle. Setting these both within the spirituality and praxis he has derived from the Rule of Benedict and his own life as a Cistercian, Bernard arrives a creative, synthetic doctrine of self-knowledge that is at once thoroughly traditional and yet thoroughly his own.75

75 On Bernard’s creative use of his patristic and biblical sources, see Gilson, The Mystical Theology, 31-32.
CHAPTER 1:
THE SCOPE OF BERNARD’S THEOLOGY OF SELF-KNOWLEDGE

In the Introduction to this dissertation, we observed that, since the pioneering work of Étienne Gilson, scholars of Bernard’s spiritual theology have consistently and unanimously acknowledged the significant, and indeed essential, role that self-knowledge assumes in the abbot’s account of the soul’s journey to God. When they have addressed the theme of self-knowledge in the abbot’s thought, moreover, scholars have primarily, if not exclusively, focused attention on the role true self-knowledge plays in Bernard’s account of the soul’s first conversion and the initial stages of the spiritual itinerary. On this reading, Bernard is taken to mean by cognitio sui, or self-knowledge, the fallen soul’s recognition of itself as an image of God disfigured by sin. And, Bernard is taken to regard this humbling self-knowledge as essential to the soul’s journey to God because he believes that it is only in the light of this genuine self-awareness that the soul is moved to humble itself before God and to seek its restoration in the lost divine likeness from God’s hands. For Bernard, then, the soul does not begin to seek God until it first seeks his healing for its sad disfigurement, but it does not seek God’s healing for its sad disfigurement until it first humbly recognizes and confesses that sad disfigurement within its very depths.

So far as it goes, this analysis Bernard’s theology of self-knowledge is just and reflects a prominent theme in Bernard’s spiritual teaching. Though Bernard offers in his
writings many and varied schematizations of the soul’s journey to God by its progressive restoration in the lost divine likeness, he consistently maintains that the soul’s return to its Creator, however it may be charted, originates in this humbling but salutary self-awareness. Thus in his earliest spiritual treatise, On the Steps of Humility and Pride (1125), Bernard describes the fallen soul’s recognition of its own miserable plight as the “first step of Truth,” the first and indispensible rung in the three-step ladder of the soul’s ascent to Truth himself. And again, at the very end of his life, in his On Consideration (1151), Bernard can be found once more extolling the virtues of this self-knowledge, exhorting his former novice, pope Eugene III, “[L]et your consideration begin with yourself and end with yourself. Wherever it wanders, call it back to yourself with the fruit of your salvation. You must be first and last in your own consideration.”

Certainly, then, previous scholarship has been right in underscoring Bernard’s insistence that the soul’s self-knowledge, understood as its self-recognition as a disfigured image of God, is indispensible for conversion and the origin of the soul’s journey to God. Yet, as we will argue in this dissertation, a certain scholarly preoccupation with this aspect of the abbot’s thought has unfortunately obscured the full scope of Bernard’s teaching on self-knowledge and the spiritual life. Beyond his reflections on the soul’s self-knowledge in the moment of its first conversion, Bernard has, in fact, carefully thought through the question of the soul’s self-awareness in each of the various phases of the soul’s journey to God.

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76 Csi 2.6 (III, 414): “A te proinde incipiat tua consideratio; non solum autem, et in te finiatur. Quocumque evagetur, ad te revocaveris eam cum salutis fructu. Tu primus tibi, tu ultimus.”
Prior to its first conversion, Bernard believes, the soul does possess a certain self-knowledge, but only a false self-knowledge, or better a self-deception, born of pride. Inflated with conceit, this soul, which is in truth so unlike God, deceives itself into believing that it is not, in fact, a disfigured image of God, but somehow like him, and therefore not in need of his healing grace. This self-deception, which, as we will see, assumes different forms according to the measure of the soul’s pride, effectively blinds the soul to the sad truth of its sinful self-disfigurement and so prevents the soul from seeking the divine healing it so desperately requires. Once we understand Bernard’s teaching on this self-deception and its persuasive power, we will better able to see precisely why he insists so frequently and forcefully on the need for that humbling self-knowledge which previous scholarship has found so essential to his doctrine. For if, as he believes, the proud soul suffers not simply from self-ignorance, but also from self-deception, it will only be through an honest, unflinching self-examination and self-judgment that the soul will be able to expose its prior self-delusions as false and face the true, and painful, reality of its own self-disfigurement.

Yet, the humbling self-knowledge the soul acquires in this painful self-judgment is far from Bernard’s final word on the matter of the soul’s self-knowledge. For just as this humbling self-awareness un_masks the soul’s former self-deception, it also moves the soul to turn to God, to seek his mercy, forgiveness, and healing for its disfigurement. As God greets this humble soul with the mercy it seeks, he begins to refashion it in the lost divine likeness, re-creating it in the image of the Incarnate Word and suffusing it with that beauty the Word-made-flesh models in the mysteries of his incarnate life. As the soul experiences this transforming grace of God within itself, it begins to know itself in a
new way, not now as a self-defaced image of God, but as an image being progressively
likened to Christ. The soul now knows itself to be assuming gradually the contours of
Christ’s own Bride, radiant with her Bridegroom’s own beauty. Though this soul-as-
Bride knows that her beauty remains imperfect in this life, her new self-knowledge
inspires her audacious confidence that when her beauty is made perfect in glory, she will
at last forget herself entirely and pass over into her Bridegroom for all eternity.

Since Bernard wrote no work specifically devoted to the soul’s progress through
these diverse stages of self-awareness, from the self-deception intrinsic to pride to the
soul’s newfound self-awareness as Christ’s Bride, we will have draw on several of his
most significant works to compose a comprehensive account of his teaching on this
subject. This will be our task in the chapters which follow. In the present chapter,
however, our aim will be to provide a kind of “overture” to Bernard’s comprehensive
teaching on self-knowledge, in which we will identify the major themes he elsewhere
develops in considerably greater detail. To compose this overture, we will in this chapter
undertake a close study of Bernard’s celebrated meditations on self-knowledge and self-
ignorance in sermons thirty-four to thirty-eight of his *Sermones super Cantica
canticorum*.77

In this sermon set, composed sometime between 1139 and 1143, the abbot
comments on the Bridegroom’s words to his Bride in Song of Songs 1:7: “If you do not
know yourself, most beautiful among women, go forth, and follow after the flocks of
your companions, and feed your kids beside the shepherd’s tents.” In the tradition of

77 On the composition and dating of Bernard’s *Sermones super Cantica canticorum*, see Jean
Origen, Bernard here and elsewhere associates this verse with the Delphic maxim *scito teipsum* or “know thyself” and treats the Bridegroom’s words as a rebuke directed to his Bride for her want of self-knowledge.\(^78\)

These sermons have often been cited or alluded to by scholars as evidence of the importance Bernard attaches to humbling self-knowledge in the foundational stages of the spiritual life and they provide ample witness to this aspect of the Cistercian’s teaching.\(^79\) For example, in a celebrated passage from Sermon 36, the central of these five sermons, Bernard writes:

> I wish, therefore, before all else, that the soul should know itself, for this is what both usefulness and order require. Order since what we are is our first concern, and usefulness because such knowledge does not puff us up, but humbles us, and is a certain foundation on which to build. For unless it is founded on the firm foundation of humility, the spiritual building cannot stand.\(^80\)

Read in isolation from the broader context of this sermon set as a whole, this and other, similar passages appear to confirm the scholarly finding that, for Bernard, self-knowledge means the soul’s humbling recognition of its disfigurement, and that such self-knowledge is significant to Bernard insofar as it moves the soul to humility and conversion, the

\(^78\) On Origen’s interpretation of this verse, see Courcelle, *Connaïs-toi toi-même: de Socrate à saint Bernard*, 97-100. On Bernard’s knowledge and use of Origen’s commentary on the Canticle, see Michael Casey, *Athirst for God: Spiritual Desire in Bernard of Clairvaux’s Sermons on the Song of Songs*, 41-46.


\(^80\) SC 36.5 (II, 6-7): “Volo proinde animam primo omnium scire seipsam, quod id postulet ratio et utilitatis, et ordinis. Et ordinis quidem, quoniam quod nos sumus primum est nobis; utilitatis vero, quia talis scientia non inflat, sed humiliat, et est quaedam praeparatio ad aedificandum Nisi enim super humiliatis stabile fundamentum, spirituale aedificium stare minime potest.” All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated. The reader should, however, consult the translation by Kilian Walsh, from which we have benefited. See Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs II*, trans. Kilian Walsh, Cistercian Fathers 7 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1979), 160-191.
foundational stages of the spiritual life. Yet, when this and similar passages are read in the context of this sermon set as a whole, it is clear that Bernard’s teaching on self-knowledge extends beyond the point of conversion in two directions: backwards, as it were, to an account of the soul’s self-understanding, or rather self-misunderstanding, prior to conversion, and forwards to an account of the soul’s newfound self-understanding as an image being renewed in the lost divine likeness. Considered as a whole, then, these five sermons may be shown to contain the basic outline of a comprehensive account of Bernard’s teaching on the nature of the soul’s self-awareness across the successive stages of the soul’s return to God.

**SC 34-38: The Bride’s Journey of Likeness and Vision**

With characteristic literary artistry, Bernard structures his sermon set according to an *inclusio* extending from SC 34.1 to SC 38.5-8. By means of this *inclusio*, Bernard is able to establish the overarching theme of these sermons: the spiritual life is the Bride’s journey towards the beatific vision of her Bridegroom by way of her ever increasing likeness to her Bridegroom’s incarnate, crucified, and glorified life. Within the frame established by this *inclusio*, the abbot reveals how his monastic readers will either progress or regress along this journey of likeness towards vision according to their respective knowledge or ignorance of themselves and God. By the way of true self-knowledge and true knowledge of God, Bernard teaches, his readers will grow ever more like the incarnate, crucified, and glorified Word by progressive conformity to his exemplary humility and charity, and so ascend in this life towards the beatific vision of the Word in glory. Conversely, by the way of false self-knowledge and false knowledge
of God, they will grow ever more unlike the Word by their pride and self-will, and so
descend further into the region of unlikeness, blindness, and ultimately, eternal death.

In his *inclusio*, Bernard is chiefly concerned to address an exegetical conundrum
posed by the Bridegroom’s expression, “If you do not know yourself, most beautiful
among women, go forth” (Sg 1:7). This is, the abbot observes, “a harsh and bitter
rebuke,” the sort of words one would expect to hear from an outraged lord dismissing a
disobedient servant, not a Bridegroom addressing his beloved Bride.81 Why, then, does
the Word now speak to his Beloved not as a gentle and loving Spouse, but with the
terrifying and even threatening words of a Master?

To solve this interpretive puzzle, Bernard adopts a typically inter-textual
approach, referring his readers both to similar passages in the wider Scriptures and to the
immediate narrative context of the Song.82 He observes that when Moses once aspired to
see God face to face and dared to ask him, “If I have found grace in your sight, show
yourself to me” (Ex 33:13), God did not immediately grant him this favor, but offered
him instead the vision of his back parts that “through this inferior vision, he might later
reach the great vision for which he longed.”83 Likewise, when James and John dared to
ask Christ for the privilege to sit at his side in glory (Mk 10:35-40), Christ “directed them

81 SC 35.1 (I, 248): “SI TE, inquit, IGNORAS, EGREDERE. Dura et aspera increpatio, quod
dicit: EGREDERE.”

82 As Jean Leclercq showed, Bernard’s exegetical style, which typifies the exegetical style of
twelfth-century monastic theology more broadly speaking, is characterized by a certain “phenomenon of
reminiscence whereby the verbal echoes so excite the memory that a mere allusion will spontaneously
 evoke whole quotations and, in turn, a scriptural phrase will suggest quite naturally allusions elsewhere in
the sacred books.” Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*,
73.

83 SC 34.1 (II, 9): “Accepit autem pro ea visionem longe inferiorem, ex qua tamen ad ipsam, quam
volebat, posset aliquando pervenire.”
back to the way by which they might ascend to this great grace,” namely the way of
cconformity to his Paschal Mystery by drinking the chalice he would drink and by being
baptized with his own baptism. 84 Here too, Bernard concludes, the Bride has asked her
Bridegroom for a “great grace,” but she is similarly “rebuked with a reply that that is
truly harsh, but also instructive and kind.” 85

What is this great grace the Bride has so boldly sought from her Beloved? In the
preceding verse of the Song, Bernard notes, the Bride has asked her Bridegroom, “Show
me, you whom my soul loves, where you feed your flocks, where you lie down at noon”
(Sg 1:6). In his commentary on this verse in SC 31, Bernard has explained that, by this
request, the Bride, though still on her earthly pilgrimage, has asked her Bridegroom to let
her see him “as he is” (sicuti est), in his uncreated, eternal, and immutable form, as he is
now seen and contemplated by the blessed angels in glory. 86 The Bride longs for this
beatific vision of the Word-Bridegroom as the consummation of all her loving desire for
her Spouse, for she knows that when she sees him as he is, “there will be between them
chaste and consummated love, full recognition, manifest vision, indivisible unity,
steadfast union, and perfect likeness.” 87 Then, at last, she “will know as she is known,

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84 SC 34.1 (II, 9-10): “Filii quoque Zebedaei in simplicitate cordis sui ambulantes, magnum
aliquid et ipsi ausi sunt, sed ad gradum nihilominus sunt redacti, per quem fuerat ascendendum.”

85 SC 34.1 (II, 10): “Ita et modo sponsa, quoniam rem grandem postulare videtur, reprimitur sane
austriori responsione, sed plane utili et fidelì.”


87 SC 82.8 (II, 297): “Siquidem veniente quod perfectum est, evacuabitur quod ex parte est; erit
que ad alterutrum casta et consummata dilectio, agnitio plena, visio manifesta, coniunctio firma, societas
individua, similitudo perfecta.”
and love as she is loved, and the Bridegroom will rejoice over his Bride, knowing and
known, loving and loved.\textsuperscript{88}

Yet this beatific vision, Bernard continues, this experience of reciprocal
knowledge and love between Bridegroom and Bride, is not for the present life, but is
reserved to the next. In the words of the First Letter of John, “We know that when he
appears we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is” (1 Jn 3:2). As long as the
Bride remains on her earthly pilgrimage, as long as she continues in her mortal and not
yet glorified body, she enjoys only a partial likeness to her Bridegroom and therefore
enjoys only a partial vision of him according to the measure of her humility and love.

Bernard illustrates this correlation of likeness and vision through an analogy to
physical sight. The human eye cannot gaze directly on the sun as it is, but only as it
illumines visible objects such as the air, a mountain, or a wall. The eye alone among all
the parts of the human body is capable of this partial vision of the sun on account of its
natural brightness and clarity, its own partial likeness to the sun. Should the eye grow
clouded and thereby lose its natural brightness and clarity, it would no longer be capable
of even this partial vision of the sun on account of its lost likeness to it. Yet, if the eye
were somehow raised above its natural condition and made perfectly like the sun in
brightness and clarity, it would be capable of gazing on the sun as it is owing to this
perfect likeness.

By analogy, the abbot argues, the human soul has been created with a certain
likeness to its Creator and is thereby capable of a certain partial vision of the Word.

\textsuperscript{88} SC 82.8 (II, 298): “Tunc cognosceret anima sicut cognita est; tunc amabit sicut amata est; et
gaudebit sponsus super sponsam, cognoscens et cognitus, diligens et dilectus.”
Should the soul somehow lose this created likeness, it would no longer be capable of even this partial vision on account of its lost likeness to the Word. Yet, if the Word who first created the soul with a certain likeness to himself were to restore that lost likeness, the soul would regain its partial vision of its Creator. If, in turn, the Word were to raise the soul beyond its created condition to perfect likeness to himself, this blessed soul would be capable of gazing on the Word as he is, in all his splendor and brightness.

In her present exile, then, the Bride who longs to see her Bridegroom as he is must first be enlightened by the Sun of Justice that she might grow ever more like him in his brightness according to Paul’s words, “We with unveiled face, gazing on the glory of God are transformed into that same image, from brightness to brightness, as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Cor 3:18). The Bride must remember, however, that this process of illumination and likening to the Word is only accomplished gradually. She must not rashly aspire to the beatific vision of her Bridegroom before she is perfectly conformed to him, but humbly submit herself to the transforming missions of the Word and his Spirit, who will liken her to her Incarnate Bridegroom’s humility and charity respectively. The Bride’s journey of likeness and vision begins in this life, but reaches its perfection only in the next when she will be perfectly likened to her Spouse and at last behold him face to face. Bernard writes: “The one who grows brighter draws nearer, but to be perfectly bright is to have arrived. For those who have arrived in his presence, to see him as he is is nothing other than to be as he is and not to be put to shame by any unlikeness. But this, as I have said, is for the next life.”

89 SC 31.3 (I, 221): “Qui itaque clarior, ille propinquior; esse autem clarissimum, pervenisse est. Porro iam praesentibus non aliud est videre sicuti est, quam esse sicuti est, et aliqua dissimilitudine non confundi Sed id tunc, ut dixi.”
In the *interim* or “meanwhile” of this present life, the Bride who is being likened to her Bridegroom’s humility and charity must be content to see him in a mirror dimly and not yet face to face (1 Cor 13:12). If she is in glory to see her Beloved as he is, in his eternal and divine form, the *forma Dei*, she must now contemplate him in his temporal and incarnate form, in the *forma servi*, in the mysteries of his Nativity and ministry, his Passion and death, his Resurrection and Ascension into glory, and his sending of the Spirit at Pentecost. The flesh of the Savior now veils and tempers the inaccessible brightness of his heavenly glory, affording the Bride a vision suited to her earthly condition. Yet, the Savior’s flesh is also life-giving, for as the Bride feeds on the Eucharistic flesh and blood of her Crucified Bridegroom, she is conformed to the pattern of his Paschal Mystery and infused with the very humility and charity he both models and effects by his Cross. Consuming the Paschal Lamb, she is progressively likened to him and so gradually prepared to see him as he is and to glory in the splendor of his radiant countenance. Like Moses, she must see God’s back before she can see him face to face. Like James and John, she must drink the chalice of his Passion before she can share his eternal life in his heavenly kingdom.

Bernard’s explication of the Bride’s journey to the beatific vision by her growing likeness to her Bridegroom allows him, in the second half his *inclusio*, to explain the meaning of her Bridegroom’s rebuke. When with the harsh words of a master he says “If you do not know yourself, most beautiful among women, go forth,” he rebukes not her desire for the beatific vision, but her presumption in judging herself already worthy to see him as he is. Speaking in the excess of her longing, the Bride has neglected that she still remains on her earthly pilgrimage and still possesses an earthly body and is therefore as
yet incapable of gazing on the inaccessible brightness of her Spouse. So her Bridegroom
“recalls her to herself, reveals her ignorance, and reproves her presumption.”
His words to his Beloved are indeed terrifying, but they are not spoken in anger. Rather, the
Bridegroom’s purpose is to purify his Bride’s heart by holy fear that she might become
worthy of that vision of God reserved for the pure of heart (Mt 5:8).

In the conclusion to SC 38, Bernard reprises his doctrine of likeness and vision,
now describing the Bride’s likeness to her Bridegroom as her *pulchritudo* or “beauty.”
When in his rebuke the Bridegroom calls his Bride “most beautiful among women,” the
qualification “among women” suggests that her beauty is not yet complete and is
intended to help his Spouse “know what is lacking to her” (Ps 38:5). The Bride is indeed
beautiful inasmuch as she leads the spiritual life, inasmuch as she “walks according to the
Spirit and not according to the flesh” (Rom 8:1). Yet, in this life, she remains beautiful
only in part, only among, or by comparison with, worldly and carnal souls who have not
yet embraced life in the Spirit. Beautiful among the carnal and the worldly, she is not yet
beautiful among the blessed angels in glory on account of her still mortal and perishing
body. As long as she falls short of the “perfection of beauty” the angels now enjoy, she
must know herself still unworthy of the perfect vision of her Bridegroom for which she
longs.

Assuming the Bridegroom’s voice, Bernard amplifies his rebuke of his Bride.
The Bride must know that she cannot gaze on perfect Beauty until she is perfectly
conformed to his own beauty:

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90 SC 38.3 (II, 16): “Ergo ad seipsam protinus revocatur, et ignorantia convincitur, et insolentia
castigatur SI IGNORAS TE, inquit, EGREDERE.”

53
Why do you judge yourself worthy to look upon total beauty when your beauty is still incomplete? And why do you seek to see me in my splendor when you still do not know yourself? For if you knew yourself fully, you would know that weighed down by a corruptible body you can in no way lift your eyes and fix them on my radiance, on which angels long to look. There will come a day when I will reveal myself to you and your beauty will be complete as my beauty is complete; then you will be made so like me that you will see me as I am. Then you will hear me say to you, “You are completely beautiful, my love, and there is no flaw in you” (Sg 4:7). But for now, although you are already like me in part, you are nevertheless unlike me in part, and so you must be content to know me only in part.91

Here, then, is Bernard’s most elementary schema of the spiritual journey, its origins, its progress, and its goal. It is the Bride’s journey from her present self-ignorance to her eschatological self-knowledge, from her ignorance of her incomplete beauty in this life to her knowledge of herself, attested by her Bridegroom, as perfectly beautiful, perfectly conformed to the perfect beauty of her divine Spouse. This pilgrimage from self-ignorance to self-knowledge will proceed by way of her gradual beautification in the Spirit, her progressive likening to the beauty of her incarnate, crucified, and glorified Bridegroom’s humility and charity. When her spiritual journey of beautification reaches its eschatological completion, she will know herself to be perfectly beautiful as her Bridegroom is perfectly beautiful and see her perfectly beautiful Bridegroom as he is.

Conformed to and perfectly imitating her Spouse’s humility, charity, and beauty, she will

91 SC 38.5 (II, 17): “Quomodo quae necdum tota pulchra es, idoneam te existimas universitatem pulchritudinis intueri? Quomodo denique quaeris me in mea claritate videre, quae adhuc ignoras te? Nam si te pleniuss nosses, scires utique corpore quod corrumpitur aggravatam nullatenus posse attollere oculos, et figere in illum fulgorem, in quem prospicere angeli concupiscunt. Erit, cum apparuerio, quo tota pulchra eris, sicut ego sum pulcher totus; et simillima mihi, videbis me sicuti sum. Tunc audies: TOTA PULCHRA EST, AMICA MEA, ET MACULA NON EST IN TE. Nunc vero, etsi ex parte iam similis, ex parte tamen dissimilis, contenta esto ex parte cognoscere Teipsam attende, et altiora te ne quaesieris, et fortiora te ne scrutata fueris. Alioquin SIIGNORAS TE, O PULCHRA INTER MULIERES, nam et ego te dico pulchram, sed inter mulieres, hoc est ex parte; cum autem venerit quod perfectum est, tunc evacuabitur quod ex parte est.”
find her perfect happiness in their eternal embrace of reciprocal knowledge, love, and vision.

In the context of this spiritual journey of growing beauty and vision, the Bridegroom’s rebuke is intended to restrain his Bride’s presumption lest through self-ignorance she prematurely judge herself capable of seeing him face to face. At the root of the Bride’s presumption and self-ignorance is her curiositas, her inquisitive desire to know the things of heaven and to see her Bridegroom as he is. Her Bridegroom does not fault this desire in itself; he has created her for and called her to just this knowledge and vision. Yet, he also warns her that her desire to contemplate heavenly realities may distract her from the contemplation of herself, her present condition, and her need for growth in Christ’s own humility, charity, and beauty. Curiosity for the things of heaven thus breeds ignorance of herself and this self-ignorance in turn renders her susceptible to pride, the presumption that she is greater than she truly is, that she is already in this life capable of that direct vision afforded only to those who have been purified by their gradual, graced conformation to the Word. While on her earthly pilgrimage, Bernard warns, the Bride must not, in the words of Proverbs, “investigate too curiously the things which are in heaven lest the searcher of majesty be overwhelmed by glory” (Pr 25:27). So the Bridegroom admonishes his Spouse, “Know yourself, and do not seek after things to high for you, nor scrutinize things too powerful for you to bear (Si 3:22).”

92 See 4 Asc 3 (V, 139-140): “We all desire to ascend. We all long for exaltation. For we are noble creatures, possessing a certain greatness of soul, and so we long for the heights with a natural desire (Cupidi siquidem sumus ascensionis: exaltationem concupiscimus omnes. Nobiles enim creaturae sumus, et magni cuiusdam animi, ideo que altitudinem naturali appetimus desiderio).”

93 SC 38.5 (II, 17-18): “Teipsam attende, et altiora te ne quaesieris, et fortiora te ne scrutata fueris.”
For Bernard, the lesson to be drawn from the Bridegroom’s salutary rebuke is that the only way to the beatific vision of Christ is Christ’s own way of humility: “The one who strives towards the heights must have a humble knowledge of himself. Otherwise, when he is raised above himself, he will fall beneath himself, unless he is firmly grounded in himself by true humility.”⁹⁴ The Bridegroom himself teaches just this when he says in the Gospel, “Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted” (Lk 14:11). In Christ’s words, Bernard discerns the most elemental dynamics of the spiritual life: paradoxically, those who would ascend to the heavenly heights of likeness, vision, and a share in the divine life must first descend by voluntary self-humbling in accord with the divine will. Conversely, those who contrary to the divine will presumptuously aspire to the heavenly heights will descend beneath themselves into a region of unlikeness, blindness, and spiritual death.

Essential to these spiritual dynamics is the question of self-knowledge. If the Bride should know herself, she will rightly judge herself as yet unworthy of the heavenly heights and therefore embrace the descending way of voluntary self-humbling that ascends to glory and life. If, however, the Bride should fail to know herself, she will falsely judge herself already worthy of these heavenly heights and therefore embrace the ascending way of willful self-exaltation that descends to ruin and death. In the subsequent sermon, SC 35, Bernard will identify Christ and Adam as the respective exemplary figures of these opposed and inverted patterns of ascent and descent.

⁹⁴ SC 34.1 (I, 246): “Oportet namque humiliter sentire de se nitentem ad altiora: ne, dum supra se attollitur, cadat a se, nisi in se firmiter per veram humilitatem fuerit solidatus.”
Adam’s Self-Deception

If Bernard’s *inclusio* is intended to establish his overarching vision of the spiritual life as the Bride’s journey to the beatific vision of her Bridegroom by her ever increasing likeness to him, the intervening sermons, SC 35-38.2, serve to unfold the stages of this journey in greater detail. In particular, SC 36-38.2 trace how the individual soul may either progress or regress along this journey of likeness and vision according to its respective knowledge or ignorance of self and God. Before he can speak specifically to the case of the individual soul, however, Bernard must momentarily step back to consider the panoramic view of salvation history which in several important respects determines or shapes the journey of any individual soul. More precisely, he must address the exemplary figures of Adam and Christ. The soul which would set out on the journey of likeness to vision is, in the first place, a descendent of Adam and therefore shares in his ancestor’s original sin and its consequences. If this soul would successfully undertake and complete this journey from his fallen condition to the promised beatific vision, moreover, it can do so only in and through the redemptive work of the second Adam, Christ the Incarnate Word.95

Before turning to the exemplary figures of Adam and Christ, Bernard devotes the opening of SC 35 to a meditation on the second part of the Bridegroom’s rebuke, “go forth and follow after the flocks of your companions, and feed your kids beside the shepherds’ tents” (Sg 1:7). The Bridegroom’s words are plainly a warning intended to recall his Bride to true self-knowledge, but what is the significance of this

95 Bernard’s most concise statement of his teaching concerning the soul’s relationship both to Adam and to Christ is to be found in his chapter on the Holy Sepulcher from his *In Praise of the New Knighthood* where he comments on Romans 5-8. See Mil 18-29 (III, 229-237).
warning and why should it compel her to return to herself? Bernard’s readers will have their answer if they consider from where and to where the Bride must go forth: “From where to where if not from the spirit to the flesh, from the goods of the soul to worldly desires, from the interior rest of the mind to the noise of the world and the restlessness of exterior cares?” The Bride, Bernard explains, has been taught by her Beloved and received from him the grace “to enter into herself and to seek the presence of God in her inmost depths, to seek his face always, for God is spirit and those who seek him ought to walk in the Spirit and not in the flesh.” She has learned from her experience of contemplation that she is a rational and spiritual creature capable of withdrawing her attention from the sensible world and into her heart where she may seek her Bridegroom’s presence and in seeking him find, even in this life, some measure of rest for her ardent longing.

Having once experienced the sweetness and peace that accompanies this recollection and contemplation, Bernard continues, she fears nothing more than to have to abandon this interior rest and “go forth once more to the enticements, or rather the vexing demands, of the flesh and the insatiable curiosity of her bodily senses.” For the Bride knows by experience that the sensible, created goods her senses seek and her flesh desires can never satisfy her deepest yearnings. However appealing they may appear to her eyes

96 SC 35.1 (I, 249): “Unde enim, quo putas, nisi de spiritu ad carnem, de bonis animi ad saecularia desideria, de interna requie mentis ad mundi strepitum et inquietudinem curarum exteriorum.”

97 SC 35.1 (I, 249): “Quae enim anima semel a Domino didicit et accepit intrare ad seipsam, et in intimis suis Dei praeuentiam suspire, et quærere faciem eius semper, - spiritus est enim Deus, et qui requirunt eum oportet eos in spiritu ambulare, et non in carne, ut secundum carnem vivant.”

98 SC 35.1 (I, 249): “Nihil est quod in tantum formidet quisquis hoc beneficium semel accepit, quam ne gratia derelictus, necesse habeat denuo egredi ad carnis consolationes, immo desolationes, rursum que carnalium sensuum sustinere tumultus.”
and other senses, and despite whatever immediate though ephemeral gratification they may afford her flesh, they are not her Beloved and so only stoke rather than satisfy her burning love for him.

Yet, Bernard suggests, this is precisely the meaning of the Bridegroom’s warning: if the Bride neglects to know herself, if she presumptuously aspires to spiritual heights before she is worthy of them, she will be compelled to abandon the inner sanctuary of her heart, go forth after her restless, wandering senses among the world of created things, and there strive to find some small consolation for her deepest yearnings in the satisfaction of her sinful, fleshly desires. By a “shameful exchange of desires,” the Bride who once was eager “to feed her exiled and pilgrim soul on holy meditations and heavenly goods, to seek the good-pleasure of God and the mysteries of his holy will, and to penetrate the heavens by her devotion” will now, abandoned by grace, have to “enslave herself to the shameful servitude of her body, obey her flesh, satisfy her stomach and palate, and beg throughout the whole world, whose form is passing away, to find some little consolation for her ever ravenous curiosity.” In other words, the Bride who does not know herself will have to exchange the spiritual life for life in the flesh and labor in vain to slake her burning thirst for her Beloved by the immediate gratification of sinful desires for all that is not him. Her life in the flesh will therefore be a life of misery as well as sin, for all the

99 SC 35.3 (I, 250): “Turpis mutatio studiorum, ut cui ante studii fuerat peregrinantem et exsulem animam suam sacris meditationibus, tamquam caelestibus pascere bonis, Dei beneplacitum et mysteria voluntatis eius inquirere, penetrare devotione caelos…nunc omnibus his omissis, turpi se mancipet corporis servituti ad obodiendum carni, ad satisfacendum ventri et gulae, ad mendicandum in universa terra unde, ex ea quae praeterit mundi huius figura, suam semper famelicam curiositatem aliquatenus consoletur.”
worldly things her flesh and senses crave—sensual pleasures, riches, knowledge, power, and prestige—fall short of the One her soul loves.\textsuperscript{100}

The abbot’s doleful reflection on the Bride’s “shameful exchange” evokes another, more primordial \textit{turpis mutatio}, namely Adam’s own fall from the spirit to the flesh. At the moment of his creation, Adam was an \textit{egregia creatura}, a noble and beautiful creature, a living witness to his Creator’s gracious love. Placed in a paradise of pleasure, knowing nothing of suffering nor want, and set over all the works of God’s hands, he “excelled them all on account of the divine likeness with which he was sealed and shared the fellowship of the angel hosts.”\textsuperscript{101}

Bernard’s reference to Adam’s being sealed with the divine likeness recalls the doctrine of humanity’s creation in the image and likeness of God which he elsewhere develops in considerable depth.\textsuperscript{102} Here, as in his other treatments of the theme, human

\begin{footnotes}
\item[100] Bernard describes the misery of the sinful soul most vividly in his image of the \textit{circuitus impii}, or the circle of wicked, from \textit{On Loving God}. The soul that seeks satisfaction for its deepest yearnings in created things rather than its Creator is condemned to wander this earth in circles, passing from one created good to the next, always seeking, but never finding, the rest it so deeply desires. See Dil 19 (III, 135-136) and Gilson’s masterful commentary on this image in \textit{The Mystical Theology of Saint Bernard}, 43-45.

\item[101] SC 35.3 (I, 251): “ob insigne divinae similitudinis praecellebat; et erat illi sors et societas cum plebe angelorum.”

\item[102] See especially Gra 28-31 and SC 80-83. Bernard’s “doctrine,” or perhaps better his various “doctrines,” of the image and likeness of God in the soul has generated much literature and considerable debate. It is, of course, beyond the scope of this dissertation to offer a comprehensive account of Bernard’s teaching on this vast subject. For the present purposes, we follow what we take to be a consensus among scholars that when Bernard speaks of humanity’s creation in the “image” of God, Bernard refers to the rational soul’s innate, ineffaceable capacity for God, or its creation \textit{capax Dei}; and, that when he speaks of the soul’s accidental “divine likeness,” he refers to the realization of that capacity through the soul’s conformity to the divine Word, a conformity effected by the Incarnate Word’s redemptive work. To this consensus, we add only that the conformity to the Word in question for Bernard is a conformity precisely to the Word-made-flesh and specifically to the virtues of humility and charity he models and effects by the mysteries of his incarnate life. Though Bernard never explicitly associates the lost divine likeness with conformity to the Incarnate Word’s humility and charity, I think such an interpretation reflects well his frequent assertion, in his foundational \textit{On the Steps of Humility and Pride}, his letter against the errors of Peter Abelard, and in the present sermon set, that the soul’s spiritual life, which is to say its renewal in the lost divine likeness, consists in its growing conformity to Christ’s own humility and love in its reason and will respectively. Among the most significant treatments Bernard’s doctrine of the divine image and
\end{footnotes}
beings’ creation in the image of God refers to their innate and ineffaceable similarity to and capacity for the eternal and consubstantial Image of God, the Word. In the context of the present sermon set, this similarity to and capacity for the Word is seen to consist in that special nobility or excellence of human beings which raises them above beasts and enables them to share in the fellowship of the angels, namely their rationality and freedom. Through this rationality and freedom, human beings are capable of knowing, loving, and adhering to the Word in whose image they were made. Human beings will realize this capacity to the extent that they become like the Word through their growing conformity to the humility and charity he exemplifies in his incarnate, crucified, and glorified life. To the extent that human beings imitate and participate in the Word’s humility and love, they become like the Word and so begin to know, love, and adhere to the Word, to see him as he is, and to share in his own divine life.

Had Adam voluntarily submitted himself to the will of his Creator by that humility and charity later revealed in Christ, he would have, by grace, been elevated to the perfection of divine likeness and thereby granted a share in the beatific vision now afforded to the angels. In his first sin, however, Adam proudly despised his Creator’s gracious love, scorned subjection to the divine will, and preferred his own will to the will of God. Refusing to receive the fullness of the divine life and likeness as a gift, he


103 The following account of Bernard’s doctrine of Adam’s fall and its consequences for the race of his descendants is composed from several of the abbot’s most extensive reflections on this subject: Hum 30 (III, 39-40); Gra 22 (III, 182-183); Sent 94 (VI.2, 150-153); 1 Adv (IV, 162-170); 4 Asc (V, 137-148);
aspired to seize a kind of parody of this divine likeness and life by exalting his own will
over the divine will so that, like God, his will might be raised above all and subject to
none. By this perverse imitation of God, this presumptuous assertion of his own
autonomy, Adam claimed his own will for himself and aspired to find his fulfillment in
himself alone.\textsuperscript{104}

By this brazen assertion of his self-will, the inverse of that charity which
conforms to the divine will in all things, Adam aspired to become a god on his own. In
consequence, by God’s just punishment, he was reduced to the level of a beast: “He
exchanged the glory of God for the likeness of an ox that eats grass” (Ps 105:20).
According to the Bridegroom’s warning to the Bride, the one who aspired to divine
heights above himself fell beneath himself, the one who exalted himself was humbled.
Created to share in the divine likeness and life, he has acquired the likeness and life of a
foolish beast, with his reason darkened by ignorance, his will enslaved to concupiscence,
and his body subject to suffering and death. Expelled from paradise and the fellowship of
the angels, he must now go forth like a beast, obedient to the curiosity of his promiscuous
senses and subject to the will of his sinful fleshly desires.

What was the cause of Adam’s \textit{tristis et lacrimis mutatio}? For Bernard, the
answer is found in a verse of Psalm 48: “When man was in honor, he did not understand;
he was compared to the foolish beasts and made like them” (Ps 48:13).\textsuperscript{105} The cause of

\textsuperscript{104} See 3 Sent 94 (VI.2, 150).
\textsuperscript{105} As was noted in the Introduction, Bernard’s interpretive move here most likely reflects his
dependence on Gregory the Great who, in his \textit{Expositio} on the Canticle, associates Ps 48:13 with Sg 1:7.
See Gregory the Great, \textit{Expositio in Cantica canticorum} 44 (SCh 314:134).
Adam’s brazen assertion of self-will was his pride, and the root of his pride was his
defective self-knowledge, or, more precisely, his self-deception on account of his
excessive self-love:

Placed in honor, he was so delighted with his exalted state that he
did not understand that he was clay, and soon experienced in
himself what one of his captive sons wisely and truly said so much
later: “If anyone thinks that he is something when he is nothing, he
deeives himself” (Gal 6:3). Alas for that miserable man that there
was no one present then who could have said to him: “Dust and
ashes, why are you proud?” (Si 10:19).

When God formed him as a noble and excellent creature, raised above all others by his
reasonality and freedom, Adam grew so enamored of his singular excellence that he forgot
that he was but a creature, an image created to be conformed to his Exemplar through
humble and loving subjection to his Creator. Seduced by the love of his own excellence
to such a degree that he saw nothing of his own created finitude and dependence, Adam
deceived himself into believing that he was something more than a creature, that he too,
like his Creator, possessed his freedom from himself and was therefore subject to no law
but that of his own will.

Yet, by the inescapable law of God, the creature who sought to usurp the likeness
of God for himself has been reduced to the likeness of a beast. Bernard writes: “From
then on, the excellent creature was reduced to the flock, the likeness of God was changed
into the likeness of a beast, the fellowship of the angels was exchanged for the society of
animals. See how much you ought to flee this ignorance which has brought so many

106 SC 35.6 (I, 252-253): “Positus in honore, non intellexit quod limus esset, honoris fastigio
delectatus; et continuo in se expertus est quod tanto post tempore homo de filiis captivitatis et prudenter
advertisit et veraciter protulit, dicens: QUI SE PUTAT ALIQUID ESSE, CUM NIHL SIT, IPSE SE
SEDCIT. Vae misero, quod non fuit qui iam tunc diceret ei: QUID SUPERBIS, TERRA ET CINIS?”
thousands of evils upon our entire race!”  As the abbot’s lament suggests, the consequences of Adam’s ignorance are not limited to himself, but extend to and condition the lives of all his sons and daughters in the flesh. By their generation from Adam, all human beings have assumed the likeness of beasts: their reason is darkened by ignorance, their wills enslaved to concupiscence, and their bodies subject to suffering and death.

Sadder still, Adam and has descendants have fallen not merely to the level of equality with the beasts, but even lower. As Bernard notes, the Bridegroom warns his Bride that if she does not know herself, she must go forth not with the flocks of her companions or to the flocks of her companions, but after the flocks of her companions. Though fallen human beings now live like beasts, they are, beneath their newly acquired bestial likeness, still rational and free creatures. Consequently, unlike the beasts they imitate, they are guilty of violating the law of their own nature and therefore deservedly subject to eternal damnation.

By their own sins and their participation in the sin of Adam, human beings have not ceased to be in the image of God, but find this image covered over or trapped beneath their new and alien likeness to irrational beasts. They are still the image of God, but an image disfigured by sin. Still capable of knowing themselves and their Creator in truth, their minds are blinded by ignorance of both and compelled to wander after their curious senses. Still free and capable of loving their Creator, they find their wills voluntarily and yet inescapably enslaved to the service of their fleshly lusts. Their enduring rationality and freedom not only explains why fallen human beings are guilty of sin and deserving of

\[\text{107 SC 35.6 (1, 253): “Hinc egregia creatura gregi admixta est, hinc bestiali similitudine Dei similitudo mutata est, hinc societas cum iumentis pro consortio angelorum inita est. Vides quam sit fugienda nobis haec ignorantia, de qua tot millia malorum universo nostro generi provenerunt?”} \]
damnation, but also why they experience their lives as ones of ceaseless misery. Since they remain the image of God, they can only find their rest in knowing, loving, and adhering to the Word in whose image they were made. Yet since they are now inescapably subject to ignorance of God and the love of their own flesh, they cannot return to the God in whom alone they will find their rest. Rather, they must wander about the world of created things, as through a region of unlikeness, and try in vain to find their rest in so many created and dissatisfying substitutes: sensual pleasures, human knowledge, earthly riches, worldly power and prestige. If fallen human beings could somehow be made to see plainly the stark and bitter truth of their own misery, they might be moved to turn to their Creator in humility to seek his healing and deliverance. Yet, since they share in Adam’s inescapable self-ignorance, they prefer ceaselessly to recapitulate his primordial way of self-deception, pride, and self-will, a way that leads only to further misery, death, and eternal condemnation.

Christ as the Teacher of Self-Knowledge

Though Bernard devotes most of SC 35 to the nature and consequences of Adam’s sin and lack of self-knowledge, he is careful to balance this account of humanity’s fall and fallen condition with a meditation on the redemptive work of Christ.\(^{108}\) With his characteristic concern for the intersection of Christology and anthropology, moreover, the abbot takes care to suggest how the manner of Christ’s

\(^{108}\) In his *In Praise of the New Knighthood*, Bernard argues that Christ’s redemptive work is able to overcome the consequences of Adam’s sin in the elect because their eternal election in Christ “preceded” their generation from Adam and their share in his sin. If the lives of the elect are, in some sense, determined by their generation from Adam, they are still more determined by their prior election in Christ. See Mil 24 (III, 233-234).
redemptive work is suitably adapted to the manner of humanity’s fall and fallen condition.\textsuperscript{109}

In keeping with the patristic tradition, Bernard understands God’s redemptive work in Christ as his free decision to deliver fallen human beings from their sin and to offer them a share in his own divine life, the very offer Adam refused in his pride. Given the nature of humanity’s sin and fallen condition, however, God is, in a sense, required to address several specific needs of fallen human beings if he is to accomplish his saving intention.

In the first place, God must, Bernard believes, meet fallen human beings where they are by rendering himself accessible and attractive to human beings in their fallen state. As Bernard has just shown, human beings have exchanged the likeness of God for the likeness of beasts. That is, they have voluntarily enslaved themselves to their fleshly desires for sensible goods and live only for the immediate, though ephemeral satisfaction of those desires. Consequently, if God, who is perfectly spiritual, is to recall the hearts of fallen human beings to himself, he must first allure them to himself by assuming a fleshly, sensible form, that they might first cling to his flesh and then ascend to the contemplation of him in his divinity.

Second, in their fallen condition, Adam’s descendants, in imitation of their forebear, are inclined to pride and self-will, inclined to ignore the truth of their being creatures, and driven to seize their own sort of divinity through the autonomous assertion of their own wills above the will of their Creator. Consequently, if God is to recall his

human creatures to their originally intended participation in his own divine life and 
blessedness, he must instruct their proud and willful hearts in the opposed and salutary 
ways of humility and charity.

Third, supposing God were indeed able to recall his fallen creatures to their true 
end, the loving contemplation of himself, and to show them the way to this end, the way 
of humility and love, fallen human beings would still remain voluntarily enslaved to sin 
and subject to death and therefore still incapable of themselves of embracing the way of 
humility and charity to the promise of eternal life. Consequently, if God’s saving plan is 
to be accomplished, he must not only reveal to his creatures their goal and their way to 
that goal, but also free them from their slavery to sin and infuse into their hearts his gifts 
of grace, humility, and charity.

In his brief narration of the Word’s Incarnation in SC 35, Bernard appears 
explicitly concerned to address the first of these three needs of fallen humanity, but 
implicitly speaks to the second and third as well. In their fall, he suggests, human beings 
have “exchanged the glory of God for the likeness of an ox that eats grass” (Ps 105:20). 
By this tristis et lacrimis mutatio, they have exchanged the desire for God for the desire 
for the “grass” of sensible, created realities. Consequently, the Word, by his own 
gracious mutatio, has “become like grass,” or taken flesh, that they might be drawn to and 
feed on his sacred humanity. Bernard writes:

So the bread of angels has become like grass laid in a manger, set 
before us as beasts. Indeed the Word was made flesh (Jn 1:14); 
and, according to the Prophet, all flesh is as grass (Is 40:6). Yet, 
this grass does not wither, nor does its bloom fade, for the Spirit of 
the Lord has rested upon him. For, as the Prophet also says, grass 
withers and its bloom fades, but the Word of the Lord remains 
forever (Is 40:8). If, therefore, the Word is grass, and the Word
remains forever, this grass too remains forever. How else could it bring eternal life, if it did not remain forever?\textsuperscript{110}

Since fallen human beings now sense and desire only what is fleshly, the Word has taken flesh, even the tender and sweet flesh of an infant lying in a manger, that he might lure the hearts of fallen human beings away from the sensible, fleshly goods they crave to his own sweet and sensible humanity. His purpose, however, in winning their \textit{amor carnalis} is not that they might remain in this condition, but that they might be drawn to the still sweeter taste of his divinity by an \textit{amor spiritualis}. Christ accomplishes this reeducation of the heart by the two principal stages of his incarnate life: by the descent of his Incarnation, Nativity, and Passion, he attracts fallen hearts to his flesh; by his Resurrection and Ascension in glorified flesh, together with the gift of his Spirit at Pentecost, he draws hearts in love with his flesh to the love of his divinity present within.\textsuperscript{111}

\textsuperscript{110} SC 35.4 (I, 251-252): “Inde est quod panis angelorum factus est fenum positum in praesepio, appositum nobis tamquam iumentis. VERBUM quippe CARO FACTUM EST; et iuxta Prophetam: OMNIS CARO FENUM. At fenum istud minime desiccatum est, nec ex eo cecidit flos, quia requievit super eum Spiritus Domini. FENUM, inquit, EXSICCATUM EST, ET CECIDIT FLOS; VERBUM AUTEM DOMINI MANET IN AETERNUM. Ergo si fenum Verbum, et Verbum manet in aeternum, fenum quoque maneat necesse est in aeternum Alioquin quomodo vitam praebet aeternam, si ipsum minime manet in aeternum?

In a similar fashion, by his humble and compassionate condescension in the mystery of his nativity, and in each of the saving mysteries of his earthly life, the Word-made-flesh also offers fallen humanity the most perfect model, or, as Bernard is fond of saying, the perfect “form,” of humility and love.\textsuperscript{112} By imitating and therefore being conformed to this perfect form, fallen human beings once attracted to Christ’s flesh may learn the ways of humility and charity that reverse Adam’s pride and self-will and thereby be renewed in the lost divine likeness shown forth in Incarnate Word. Yet, as the Eucharistic undertones of the above quoted passage imply, Christ’s redeeming work goes beyond that of a mere moral exemplar. For in offering himself to fallen human beings in his Eucharistic flesh and blood, the grass that bestows eternal life, Christ allows them to participate in his own humility and love and, still more basically, to share in the forgiveness of sins he won for them in his Paschal Mystery. As Bernard writes in his letter-treatise \textit{Against the Errors of Peter Abelard}, “I want to follow the humble Jesus with all my strength; I long to embrace with the arms of my love the one who loved me and gave himself for me (Gal 2:20), but I must also eat the Paschal Lamb. For unless I eat his flesh and drink his blood, I have no life in me (Jn 6:56, 33).”\textsuperscript{113}

Given Bernard’s focus on self-knowledge in the present sermon set, it is not surprising to find that the chief lesson he derives from the mystery of Christ’s Nativity is the fallen soul’s need for a humbling knowledge of its own fallen weakness. By

\textsuperscript{112} See, for example, Hum 1 (III, 17); Gra 32-33 (III, 188-189).

\textsuperscript{113} Ep 190.25 (VIII, 38): “Volo totis nisibus humilem sequi Iesum; cupio eum QUI DILEXT ME ET TRADIDIT SMESTIPSUM PRO ME quibusdam brachiis vicariae dilectionis amplecti: sed oportet me et Agnum manducare paschalem.”

Nisi enim manducavero carnem eius et bibero eius sanguinem, non habebo vitam in memetipso.”

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graciously condescending to assume the human condition, Christ has, in effect,
compelled fallen human beings to ponder their own need for his redemption. Presenting
himself as a humble infant laid in a manger, he has compelled fallen souls to figure
themselves as beasts before his crib. Bernard writes:

Alas, what a sad and sorrowful change, that man, an inhabitant of
Paradise, lord of the earth, a citizen of heaven, a member of the
household of the Lord of hosts, a brother of the blessed spirits and
a co-heir with the heavenly powers, should find himself by a
sudden conversion lying helpless in a stable on account of his own
weakness, in need of grass on account of his beastly likeness, and
bound to a manger on account of his untamed savageness….Acknowledge, O ox, your owner, and you, ass, your
Lord’s manger….Acknowledge as a beast him whom you did not
acknowledge as a man; adore in a stable him whom you fled in
Paradise; honor the manger of him whose rule you scorned; eat as
grass him for whom as bread, the bread of angels, you lost all
taste.114

By his gracious condescension, Bernard suggests, the Word-made-flesh simultaneously
instructs his fallen creatures in both the true knowledge of themselves and the true
knowledge of their Creator. Humbling himself before the very creatures who have
ignored and despised him, the Word exposes the deception of human pride with the
humbling truth of proud humanity’s fallen human condition: human beings are not, as
they suppose, autonomous gods capable of ruling themselves apart from their Creator, but
beasts enslaved to their own fleshly desires, subject to eternal death, and helpless to
deliver themselves from this their own, self-imposed misery by their own power. Yet, by

114 SC 35.5 (1, 252): “Heu! tristis et lacrimosa mutatio, ut homo, paradisi accola, terrae dominus,
caeli civis, domesticus Domini Sabaoth, frater beatorum Spirituum et caelestium coheres Virtutum,
repentina se conversione invenerit et propter infirmitatem iacentem in stabulo, et propter pecorinam
similitudinem indigentem feno, et propter indomitam feritatem alligatum praesepio….Agnosce tamen, o
bos, possessorem tuum, et tu, asine, praesepe Domini tui….Cognosce, pecus, quem non cognovisti homo;
adora in stabulo quem fugiebas in paradiso; honor praesepium cuius contempsisti imperium; comede
fenum quem panem, et panem angelicum, fastidisti.”
this very same condescension, the Word also reveals the joyous and consoling truth about God: the God who created human beings to see him as he is and to share in his own divine life lovingly wills to raise his fallen creatures from their self-imposed slavery to sin and to elevate them to their originally intended end in himself. If humanity’s fall from the spirit to the flesh consisted in their ignorance of themselves and God, their return to him, the spiritual life, will conversely consist in their growing knowledge of themselves and him.

The Ways of Self-Knowledge and Self-Deception

If SC 35 establishes Adam and Christ as the opposed and inverted paradigms of human sin and redemption, SC 36-38.2 considers how individual souls recapitulate these paradigms through their respective ignorance and knowledge of themselves and God. In SC 37, Bernard offers a concise sketch of his teaching on these two paradigmatic ways which should be counted among the most succinct summaries of his entire spiritual theology:

Just as the fear of the Lord is the beginning of all wisdom (Si 1:16), so pride is the beginning of all sin (Si 10:15); and just as the love of God is the perfection of wisdom, so despair is the consummation of all malice. And as the fear of God arises in you from knowledge of yourself, and love of God from knowledge of God, so, conversely, pride arises from ignorance of yourself, and despair from ignorance of God.\textsuperscript{115}

\textsuperscript{115} SC 37.6 (II, 12): “Etenim sicut INITIUM SAPIENTIAE TIMOR DOMINI, sic INITIUM OMNIS PECCATI SUPERBIA; et quomodo perfectionem sibi sapientiae vindicat amor Dei, ita desperatio sibi ommem malitiae consummationem Et quemadmodum ex notitia tui venit in te timor Dei, atque ex Dei notitia Dei itidem amor, sic e contrario de ignorantia tui superbia, ac de Dei ignorantia desperatio venit.”
Thus the abbot resolves his spiritual theology into two opposed and inverted ways of life, the way of wisdom and the way of malice. The crucial question concerning these two ways is that of self-knowledge. If the soul comes to know itself in truth, it embarks on the way of wisdom, the way of progressive likening to the humility and charity of the Incarnate Word, that leads to the vision of the Word as he is and a share in God’s own divine life of knowledge and love. Conversely, if the soul neglects to know itself, it sets out on the way of sin and malice, Adam’s primordial way of pride and self-will, that leads to unlikeness, blindness, misery, and eternal death. In SC 36-38.2, Bernard unfolds each of these two ways in greater detail, demonstrating their inner spiritual logic and progression.

Bernard’s comprehensive teaching on self-knowledge begins not with the humble self-knowledge requisite for and integral to conversion, but with the want of self-knowledge that breeds the self-deception of pride: “Ignorance of yourself breeds pride when your deceived and deceiving thoughts lie to you, convincing you that you are better than you truly are. For this is pride, this is the beginning of every sin, when you are greater in your own eyes than you are in God’s, than you are in Truth.”116 When fallen human beings neglect to know themselves, to confront honestly the bitter truth of their weakness and sin, this void of self-knowledge is swiftly and subtly filled by far more pleasant thoughts of their own excellence. These deceived and deceiving thoughts may take many forms: fallen human beings may delight in the thought of their superior knowledge, power, wealth, prestige, or, in the case of monks, their superior holiness,

116 SC 37.6 (II, 12): “Sic autem superbiam parit tibi ignorantia tui, cum meliorem quam sis, decepta et deceptrix tua cogitatio te esse mentitur. Hoc quippe est superbia, hoc initium omnis peccati, cum maior in tuis es oculis quam apud Deum, quam in veritate.”
whether real or imagined. 117 Whatever their particular object, each of these delightful thoughts contribute to the human being’s self-deception as they blind him or her to the disquieting reality of his or her own finitude and frailty and enable him or her to construct for himself or herself a false but gratifying identity as the wisest, the wealthiest, the most powerful, the most prestigious, or the holiest among his or her fellows.

These various species of human pride are, for Bernard, nothing more than so many reiterations of the pride of Adam. Delighted with the thought of his superiority over all other creatures on account of his rationality and freedom, Adam neglected the truth of his own finitude, and so fashioned for himself the identity of a god who possessed his excellence from himself and therefore owed his nobility to no one other than himself. Adam’s pride, however, is not the first instance of this sin, but itself a reiteration of the pride of Lucifer who “did not stand in the truth but was a liar from the beginning, for he was greater in his own thoughts than he was in Truth.” 118 Fashioned by God with unrivaled splendor and glory, Satan grew so pleased with his own beauty that he forgot the truth of his creation and aspired to rivalry with the Son of God, imaging himself an equal to the Most High with a kingdom of creatures to match that of his maker. In each of these primordial sins of pride, as in every subsequent sin of pride, want...

117 On pride as the love of one’s superior knowledge or power, see 4 Asc 3-5 (V, 140-143) and Hum 30-38 (III, 39-45). On pride as the love of one’s superior wealth and prestige, see Bernard’s warning to Archbishop Henry of Sens in Mor 4-7 (VII, 104-107).

118 SC 37.6 (II, 12): “Et ideo qui prius peccavit hoc grande peccatum - diabolum loquor -, de ipso dictum est quia IN VERITATE NON STETIT, SED MENDAX EST AB INITIO, quoniam quod in sua fuit cogitatione, non fuit in veritate.”
of self-knowledge enabled self-deception, self-deception led to rash assertion of self-will, and rash assertion of self-will led to ruin.119

What, then, are the dynamics of pride and how does it emerge specifically in the monastic context to which Bernard writes? For the abbot, all forms of human pride begin with one’s curiosity about others and one’s subsequent, self-serving comparisons with one’s fellows. Within the monastic setting, where holiness and virtue are especially esteemed, these comparisons will inevitably concern personal sanctity. The monk will tend to direct his attention to his brothers, scrutinize their conduct, and identify their inevitable failings as fallen human beings. This curiosity about the spiritual lives of others has, for Bernard, two immediate and spiritually dangerous consequences. First, when the monk directs his sensitive and mental attention elsewhere, he soon begins to neglect himself, to overlook his own failings, weakness, and sinful tendencies. In the absence of such sustained, critical self-inquiry, he grows ever more susceptible to that love of his own excellence which led to Adam’s fall. Neglecting to embrace the hard and often painful work of honest self-scrutiny, the monk finds it ever easier to embrace gratifying thoughts of his own sanctity and virtue.

This budding love of his own excellence is, in turn, only nourished by his perception and judgment of his brethren. Sense perception is his way to the knowledge of things outside him, but it fails to penetrate the heart to reveal the true inner dispositions of his brothers. Basing his judgments of his fellow monks solely on sense perceptions, he soon begins to identify and count up his brothers’ flaws, whether real or

119 As was observed in the Introduction, Bernard’s doctrine of pride and pride’s self-deception in the cases of Lucifer, Adam, and Adam’s descendants in every age draws heavily on Augustine’s teaching in De civitate Dei XIV (CSSL 50A).
conjectured. These negative judgments about his brothers coupled with his lack of honest self-scrutiny serve to feed his nascent self-love: the monk sees himself as holy, holier than his brothers, holier than everyone else.

Mindful of this tendency, and doubtless well familiar with it through his long experience as an abbot, Bernard sternly warns his sons:

I do not want you to compare yourself, O man, to others - to your superiors, to your inferiors, to some, or even to one. For how do you know, O man, whether this one whom you perhaps judge the vilest and most wretched of all, whose life you scorn and spurn as more sinful and wicked not only than your own, for you believe that you are a just and holy man, but even more sinful and wicked than that of all other sinful men; how do you know, I ask, whether he will not in the future, by the work of the Most High, become greater than both you and others if he is not already so before God?  

Sense perceptions are a precarious basis for evaluation of the spiritual lives of others and, by diverting attention from oneself, they tend only to confirm the pleasant thought of one’s moral superiority. Far better, the abbot suggests, to follow the counsel of Christ, who teaches his sons and daughters not to take the places of honor at table lest they be demoted to a lower place, but to take the lowest place of all, preferring themselves to no one, that they may in time be called to take up a more prominent place (Lk 14:10).

Bernard’s invocation of Christ’s parable is not without rhetorical effect. Though he does not mention it, his monastic readers will immediately recall how this parable ends, with Christ’s words, “Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever

\[120\] SC 37.7 (II, 13): “Quamobrem noli te, homo, comparare maioribus, noli minoribus, noli aliquibus, noli unii. Quid scis enim, o homo, si unus ille, quem forte omnium vilissimum atque miserrimum reputas, cuius vitam sceleratissimam atque foedissimam singulariter horres et propterea illum putas sperendum, non modo prae te, quod forte sobrie et iuste et pie vivere te confidis, sed etiam prae ceteris omnibus sceleratis tamquam omnium sceleratissimum; quid scis, inquam, si melior et te et illis mutatione dexterae Excelsi in se quidem futurus sit, in Deo vero iam sit?”
humbles himself will be exalted” (Lk 14:11). The monk who succumbs to self-deception and proudly imagines himself superior to his brothers will, in time, be humbled by God. Heedless of the Bridegroom’s warning and recapitulating the self-ignorance of Adam, the one who vainly aspires to the heights of holiness will be reduced to ruin and despair.

For Bernard, the monk’s descent into despair will occur through his ignorance of God.121 Suppose a proud and self-deceived monk finds himself compelled to face the bitter truth of his sin and weakness and, displeased with what he sees, decides to abandon his sinful ways and reform his life. Confronted with the stark reality of his inescapable bondage to the self-imposed shackles of his own sin, he will be required to seek his deliverance from the hands of God. Yet, if he does not know God, he may be inclined to imagine that God lacks mercy, and therefore will not save him, or else lacks justice, and therefore will not punish him for his sins. As his want of self-knowledge led him to construct a false image of himself, his ignorance of God will lead him to construct a false image of his Creator: “So iniquity deceives itself, fashioning for itself an idol that does not resemble God.”122 Fashioning for himself a god without mercy, the monk despairs of salvation and immerses himself in the delights of his flesh, hoping to at least find some gratification in this life before suffering eternal punishment in the next. Or else,

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122 SC 38.2 (II, 15): “Mentitur iniquitas sibi, formans sibi idolum pro eo quod non est ipse.”
fashioning for himself a god without justice, he imagines himself exempt from divine judgment and therefore carelessly indulges the whims of his own will. In one case, ignorance of God breeds despair; in the other, the brazen assertion of self-will; and in both, contempt of the truly just and merciful God who wills to save his fallen creatures from their sin through their conformity to his own divine will.

Through ignorance of himself and God, then, the monk recapitulates Adam’s way of pride and self-will, thereby grows unlike the humble and loving Christ, and so descends with Adam into that bestial existence that leads only to misery, despair, and condemnation. If, therefore, the monk is to be converted to Christ, likened to his humility and love, and thereby begin his ascent with Christ to the beatific vision, he will do so by discovering the truth about himself and God. As the abbot remarks in his fifth sermon *De diversis*, life in Christ, the properly spiritual life opposed to the bestial life of the flesh, depends on this two-fold knowledge:

The sum total of our spiritual life consists in these two things: when we consider ourselves we are troubled and saddened to our salvation, but when we consider God we are revivified and consoled with the joy of the Holy Spirit. From the knowledge of ourselves we conceive fear and humility, but from the knowledge of God hope and love.\(^1\)\(^2\)\(^3\)

Granted their indispensible centrality to the spiritual life, the knowledge of oneself and God must, for Bernard, be sought before all other forms of knowledge. This does not mean that these other forms of learning should be disparaged, however. Bernard is well aware of that the study of the liberal arts, for example, confers many benefits on the

\(^1\) Div 5.5 (VI-I, 104): “In his enim duobus tota spiritualis conversationis summa versatur, ut in nostra consideratione turbemur et contristemur ad salutem, in divina resipremus et de gaudio Spiritus Sancti habeamus consolationem; et hinc timorem et humilitatem, inde vero spem concipiamus et caritatem.” See Farkasfalvy, “Bernard’s Concept of the Spiritual Life,” 3-14.
Church, enabling scholars to instruct the simple in the doctrine of the faith and to refute the faith’s more subtle opponents. The abbot’s concern is not with the nature of human knowledge as such, but with the order, manner, and ends of study. Without the knowledge of oneself and God, the study of all other forms of knowledge, even the study of theology itself, is, at best, irrelevant to one’s own salvation or, at worst, an inducement to idle curiosity, vainglory, and pride.\textsuperscript{124}

For Bernard, it was with reference to this theological knowledge sought apart from humble self-knowledge that Paul wrote, “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” (1 Cor 8:1). Beyond the knowledge that brings pride, there is another, more fundamental and truly edifying knowledge, the knowledge that makes one weep over his or her fallen misery and cry out to God for his liberating mercy. Bernard writes:

\begin{quote}
You see that there are different kinds of knowledge, since one puffs us up while the other makes us weep. I would like to know which of these seems to you more useful or necessary for your salvation, the knowledge that inflates or the knowledge that saddens? I have no doubt you will prefer the latter, for pride but simulates health while sadness seeks it. Those who seek salvation draw close to it, for those who ask will receive. As Paul tells us, God heals the brokenhearted and detests the proud, for “he resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (Jm 4:6).\textsuperscript{125}
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{124} On this point, see Sommerfeldt, \textit{Bernard of Clairvaux On the Life of the Mind}, 90-102. Given that this sermon, and the sermon set SC 34-38, was composed between 1139 and 1145, in the very midst of Bernard’s campaign against Abelard, it seems very likely that he has the Parisian teacher here in mind. On the Bernard-Abelard affair, see Sommerfeldt, \textit{Bernard of Clairvaux on the Life of the Mind}, 120-135.
\textsuperscript{125} SC 36.2 (II, 5-6): “Vides quia differentia est scientiarum, quando alia inflans, alia contristans est. Tibi vero velim scire quaeam harum tibi videatur utilior seu necessario ad salutem: illa ne quae tumet, an quae dolet? Sed non dubito quin dolentem tumenti praeferas: quia sanatatem, quam tumor simulat, dolor postulat. Qui autem postulat, propinquat saluti: quoniam QUI PETIT ACCIPIT Denique qui sanat contritos corde, exsecuratur inflatos, dicente Paulo quia DEUS SUPERBIS RESISTIT, HUMILIBUS AUTEM DAT GRATIAM.”
\end{flushright}
For Bernard, a monk may diligently search the Scriptures to learn how the holy man should live, but if he does not simultaneously appropriate this knowledge to himself, judging himself in light of what he reads, his knowledge of the spiritual life will, paradoxically, only inflate his ego and nourish his vanity. Only if he reads together the book of Scripture and the book of his own experience, comparing the latter to the former, will he be moved to recognize his own sinfulness and humbly seek God’s forgiveness, grace, and sanctification.\textsuperscript{126}

It is for this reason that Bernard insists, in the passage quoted at the beginning of this chapter, that “above all else the soul should know itself.”\textsuperscript{127} At the very outset of the spiritual life, before seeking any other kind of knowledge, the monk must consciously endeavor to know himself in the full and bitter truth of his sin and weakness, for this humbling self-knowledge alone banishes self-ignorance and pride, the beginning of every sin, and lays that firm foundation of humility on which alone the edifice of the spiritual life may be raised. By this earnest self-scrutiny, the monk will at last expose his proud self-deception and shatter the painstakingly constructed façade of his own superior righteousness and wisdom. If this self-consideration is to be effective, however, the monk must renounce all distracting curiosity about, and self-serving comparisons with, the spiritual lives of his brethren. He must return to his heart and find himself in the Truth: “He must not deceive himself, nor succumb to any guile in his heart, but set himself squarely before his own face and refuse to turn away.”\textsuperscript{128}

\begin{enumerate}
\item See SC 3.1 (I, 14).
\item SC 36.5 (II, 6-7).
\item SC 36.5 (II, 7): “Tantum non dissimulet, non sit in spiritu eius dolus, statuat se ante faciem suam, nec se a se avertere abducatur.”
\end{enumerate}
Through this unflinching self-examination, Bernard suggests, the monk is truly compelled to see himself in the Truth because he is compelled to see himself in the eyes of Christ, to compare himself not now to his unreliable perceptions of his brothers’ relative virtue or vice, but to the manifest and incontrovertible humility and charity of the Incarnate Word. Contemplating himself in the mirror of Christ’s humility and love, he sees reflected in relief the full measure of his pride and self-will. Beholding his own face in the face of the infant Jesus, he must acknowledge that he is not, as he supposed, holy and like to Christ, but like a beast before Christ’s manger, subject to his curiosity and obedient to his sinful flesh: “Seeing himself in the clear light of Truth, will he not find himself in a region of unlikeness and groaning from the depth of a misery he can no longer dissemble, for he is truly miserable, cry out with the Prophet, ‘In your Truth you have humbled me’ (Ps 118:75)?”

Having once imagined himself to like Christ, the monk now must see that he is in truth like Adam, a descendent of Adam, and justly subject to the miserable consequences of Adam’s primordial sin. In one of the most striking accounts of this self-discovery to be found in his entire corpus, Bernard asks:

How can he not but be humbled by this true self-knowledge when he perceives himself to be burdened by sin, weighed down by his mortal body, entangled in earthly cares, stained with the impurity of his fleshly desires; when he sees that he is blind, bent over, and powerless, entwined in many errors, exposed to a thousand dangers, trembling before a thousand fears, anxious over a thousand difficulties, vexed by a thousand suspicions, troubled by

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129 SC 36.5 (II, 7): “Nonne ita se intuens clara luce veritatis, inveniet se in regione dissimilitudinis, et suspirans misera, quam iam latere non poterit quod vere misera sit, nonne cum Propheta clamabit ad Dominum: IN VERITATE TUA HUMILIasti ME?”
Thus the monk discovers and confesses the humbling truth that he is a fallen, disfigured image of God, voluntarily enslaved to sin, subject to suffering, and condemned to eternal death. Bitter though it may be, however, this knowledge of oneself as a disfigured image is truly salutary for it moves the monk to turn to God and to seek his healing. This monk knows that he is an image disfigured by his sin, and this is the source of his humility, but he likewise sees that he remains an image, and this grounds his hope that his Creator may still will to restore him in the likeness of the Incarnate Word: “Pierced by the thorns of his misery, will he not be converted in his sorrow? Let him be converted, I say, to tears, converted to contrition and sighs, and cry out in his humility, ‘Cleanse my soul, for I have sinned against you’ (Ps 40:5).”

When, moreover, the monk humbled by true self-knowledge approaches God in contrition and seeks his healing, his self-knowledge will lead to the true knowledge of God, as he finds in God “the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort” (2 Cor 1:3).

As so often in his sermons, Bernard illustrates this point for his readers by reference to his own experience: “As long as I look at myself, my eye is consumed with bitterness. Yet when I lift my eye to the aid of divine mercy, this joyous vision of God

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130 SC 36.5 (II, 7): “Nam quomodo non vere humiliabitur in hac vera cognitione sui, cum se percepit oneratam peccatis, mole huius mortalis corporis aggravatam, terrenis intricatam curis, carnalium desideriorum face infectam, caecam, curvam, infirmam, implicitam multis erroribus, expositam mille periculis, mille timoribus trepidam, mille difficultatibus anxiam, mille suspicionibus obnoxiam, mille necessitatibus aerumnosam, proclivem ad vitia, invalidam ad virtutes?”

soon tempers my bitter vision of myself.”

Inviting his monastic sons to share in his experience, the abbot assures them that if they turn to God in humility, they will come to know him as “kind and compassionately listening to our prayers, as one truly generous and merciful, as victorious over sin, as one whose nature is goodness, who wills to spare and to save.”

The monk who formerly wept to know himself as a disfigured image of God will now rejoice to know his Creator as the God who himself is love (1 Jn 4:8). Yet, the very occasion for his newfound knowledge of God’s mercy and love will be his newfound knowledge of himself, no longer as an image disfigured by sin, but as an image being renewed in the lost divine likeness by God’s grace:

In this way, your self-knowledge will be a step the knowledge of God; he will become visible to you as his image is being renewed in you, as you, with unveiled face, gazing with confidence on the glory of the Lord are transformed into that same image, from brightness to brightness, as by the Spirit of the Lord (2 Cor 3:18).

For Bernard, then, the monk will come to know the love of God as he comes to know himself as one being lovingly renewed by God in God’s own divine likeness. The monk who once trembled to see his unlikeness to Christ in the mirror of Christ’s Incarnation, and therefore humbled himself before Christ, now comes to see the mercy of Christ in and through his own progressive likening to Christ’s humility and charity. With his

132 SC 36.6 (II, 7): “Ego quandiu in me respicio, in amaritudine moratur oculus meus. Si autem suspexero et levavero oculos ad divinae miserationis auxilium, temperabit mox amaram visionem mei laeta visio Dei.”

133 SC 36.6 (II, 7-8): “pium et deprecabilem experiri, sicut revera benignus et misericors est, et praestabilis super malitia: quippe cuius natura bonitas, et cui proprium est misereri semper et parcere.”

134 SC 36.6 (II, 8): “Atque hoc modo erit gradus ad notitiam Dei, tui cognitio; et ex imagine sua, quae in te renovatur, ipse videbitur, dum tu quidem revelata facie gloriam Domini cum fiducia speculando, in eandem imaginem transformaris de claritate in claritatem, tamquam a Domini Spiritu.”
reason already conformed to Christ’s humility by his honest self-judgment, he now experiences his will as being gradually liberated from sin and conformed to Christ’s own charity by Christ’s gift of the Spirit. Humbling himself before the humble Incarnate Word and responding with love to the Incarnate Word who first loved him, the monk comes to know himself anew as a living likeness to the humble and loving Christ and, by the principle of knowledge through resemblance, comes to know Christ in knowing himself. If Bernard’s theology of self-knowledge begins prior to conversion with a consideration of the self-deception intrinsic to the region of unlikeness, it likewise extends beyond conversion to embrace the soul’s newfound knowledge of itself as an image being renewed in the lost divine likeness.

In SC 37, Bernard takes a closer look at the soul’s journey of renewal in the divine likeness through its deepening knowledge of itself and God. Here, the basic counters of this spiritual life are indicated by the prophet Hosea in his injunction, “Sow for yourselves righteousness, and reap the hope of eternal life” (Hos 10:12).\(^\text{135}\) When at his conversion the monk is compelled to face the bitter truth of his being a disfigured image of God, he will sow the seeds of righteousness by humbling himself to embrace the monastic disciplines of contrition, penance, good works, and ceaseless prayer. Though he sows these seeds in sorrow in this life, he will reap their fruits in joy in the next as he carries home the precious sheaves of his forgiveness, sanctification, and eternal life with God. In the beatific vision of the Word as he is, the monk’s bitter knowledge of himself at conversion will give way to the joyous knowledge of the God who has willed to

\(^{135}\) In associating Hos 10:12 with Sg 1:7, Bernard likely follows Origen. See Origen’s *Commentarium in Cantica Canticorum*, II.5.19 (SCh 375:364).
redeem him, sanctify him, and offer him a share in his own divine life of knowledge and
love. For Bernard, the Psalmist foretells this vision when he writes, “They wept as they
went forth, sowing their seeds, but they will return with exaltation, carrying their
sheaves” (Ps 125:6-7).

Should his readers grow disheartened at such a distant prospect of consolation and
joy, the abbot reassures his sons with the promise that they may, even now, reap with joy
the first fruits of the Spirit. Hosea enjoins them to reap the “hope of eternal life” and the
hope of eternal happiness is not without happiness itself. For when by the grace of the
Spirit the monk grows in holiness in this life, this growth in holiness grounds his
confidence in the forgiveness of his sins, affords him ever growing hope of eternal life,
and enables him to savor even now something of the joy he will know perfectly in the
beatific vision to come. The monk will, moreover, discover this confidence, hope, and
joy through his developing knowledge of himself as being renewed and sanctified in the
Spirit: “Those of you who now experience the Spirit at work within you know what the
Spirit says, for his voice never contradicts his work. You therefore understand what the
Spirit says, for what you hear from without you experience within.”

Through this inward experience of the Spirit at work in his soul, effecting
forgiveness and sanctification in Christ, the monk comes to know himself as being
gradually liberated from his former bestial likeness, renewed in the divine likeness of
Christ’s humility and love, and therefore increasingly capable of knowing, loving, and
embracing the God who made him for himself. Though he knows that his journey of

136 SC 37.3 (II, 10-11): “Omnis in vobis qui hoc sentit intra se actitari, scit quid loquitur Spiritus,
cuius vox atque operatio minime inter se umquam dissentiant. Propterea ergo intelligit quae dicuntur,
quoniam quae foris audit, intus sentit.”
likeness and vision will reach its fulfillment only in the glory of the life to come, the monk recognizes the Spirit’s redeeming and sanctifying work in his soul as a sure sign that God will indeed complete in him the saving work he has already begun. In particular, the Spirit’s gift of God’s own divine charity fills the monk with an ever growing *fiducia* or trust that God has called him to become his adopted son, conformed to the humility and love of his only-begotten Son, the Incarnate Word. This two-fold knowledge of God’s loving will to renew his fallen human creatures and of oneself as being renewed in God’s love is more precious than any other kind of knowledge for it alone inspires hope, and even confidence, of salvation:

If we have attained this two-fold knowledge, any further knowledge we attain will not puff us up, for any worldly profit or honor this new knowledge may afford us will fall far short of the hope we will conceive from this two-fold knowledge and the deeply-rooted joy in our souls this hope will engender. This hope does not deceive us because the charity of God is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us (Rm 5:5). This hope does not deceive us because this charity fills us with confidence. For through this charity the Holy Spirit bears witness to our spirits that we are sons of God (Rm 8:16).<sup>137</sup>

The monk who once deceived himself into falsely believing that he was holier than his brothers and then came to know that he was in truth a disfigured image of God now knows, without any fear of self-deception, though the inward work and witness of the Spirit, that he is indeed a son of God, being renewed in the likeness of the Word and destined to enjoy the fullness of that likeness in eternity.

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<sup>137</sup> SC 37.5 (II, 11): “Hac ergo in nobis gemina praeeunte notitia, iam ea quae forte supercreverit scientia minime inflat, utpote quae nihil valeat afferre terreni commodi vel honoris, quod non sit sane inferius spe concepta, laetitia que spei iam altius radicata in animo SPES AUTEM NON CONFUNDIT, QUIA CARITAS DEI DIFFUSA EST IN CORDIBUS NOSTRIS PER SPIRITUM SANCTUM QUI DATUS EST NOBIS. Ideo illa non confundit, quia ista infundit certitudinem Per hanc enim ipse Spiritus testimonium perhibet spiritui nostro, quod filii Dei sumus.”
As observed above, in the second half of his *inclusio*, Bernard explains how the graced soul’s hopeful and joyous restoration in the lost divine likeness will reach its eschatological consummation in the Bride’s knowledge, love, and vision of her Bridegroom *sicuti est*. The abbot’s seemingly unexpected transition from speaking of the individual soul to speaking of the Bride is not without significance. For as the individual soul comes to know itself as an adopted son of God being progressively conformed to the humility and charity of the natural Son of God, it likewise comes to know itself as assuming the beautiful countenance of Christ’s Bride in her anthropological and ecclesiological dimensions. As the monk is increasingly transformed to the likeness of his Christ, he is simultaneously bound to his Head’s other members in the bonds of humility and love that permeate and unify the diverse members, vocations, and orders of Christ’s one Church, his unique Spouse and Dove. In SC 34-38, Bernard’s treatment of the Bride and her Bridegroom’s rebuke focuses primarily on the individual soul’s growing conformity to the likeness of her Spouse.

In the present life, the *Anima-Sponsa* knows herself as one being ever more likened to the humility and charity of her *Verbum-Sponsum*, and this self-knowledge inspires her confident expectation that she will indeed reach that spousal embrace for which she so ardently pines. Yet as long as she remains an exile on her earthly pilgrimage, she must remember that her likening to the Word, her beautification in the Spirit, is still incomplete, especially as she still dwells in a mortal body subject to death and still susceptible to concupiscence. Inspired by the trust that wells up in her through the Spirit’s gift of charity, however, the Bride looks forward to and strives toward that eternal day when her beauty will be complete as her Bridegroom’s is complete and, made
perfectly like him in his beauty, she will see him as he is. In this beatific vision, this chaste and consummated union of reciprocal knowledge and love, the Bride’s journey of self-knowledge will reach its eschatological culmination for she will then know herself as her Bridegroom knows her, as a perfect likeness to himself. Her knowledge of herself as her Bridegroom’s own beloved and beautiful Bride, radiant with his own humility and charity, will be eternally confirmed when she will hear from his own lips, “You are completely beautiful, my love, and there is no flaw in you” (Sg 4:7).

Conclusion

The preceding study of SC 34-38 has yielded several conclusions which, taken together, suggest the need to offer a fuller picture of Bernard’s doctrine of self-knowledge than that which has been offered in previous scholarship. First, in addition to his teaching on the soul’s humbling self-awareness at its first conversion, Bernard’s doctrine of self-knowledge includes a nuanced account of the defective self-knowledge, or self-deception, the soul experiences prior to that initial conversion. More than mere self-ignorance, this self-deception consists in a false self-understanding born of pride, the excessive love of one’s own superiority over others. Second, though the soul’s self-awareness at its initial conversion is indeed bitter and humbling, the interior conversion the soul experiences in this humbling self-knowledge moves the soul to undertake the journey of its restoration in the divine likeness and, in this journey, to discover itself anew as an image of God being refashioned in the likeness of its divine exemplar. More precisely, this new self-knowledge consists in the soul’s developing self-awareness as the Bride of Christ ever more conformed to the beauty of her Bridegroom’s own humility and love. Third, the soul’s growth in this new and far more joyous self-knowledge is both
modeled and effected by the Word-made-flesh in the mysteries of his incarnate, crucified, and glorified life.

Yet, as we noted at the outset, our study of SC 34-38 has allowed us to compose only an overture to Bernard’s comprehensive doctrine of the soul’s self-awareness in the various stages of its return to God. Consequently, our task in the chapters to follow will be to develop the themes of this overture in all their richness through a broader study of Bernard’s writings. In Chapter 2, then, we will consider the abbot’s account of the self-deception intrinsic to pride. Chapter 3, in turn, will chart his account of the soul’s developing self-awareness through the journey of its restoration in the lost divine likeness. Chapter 4, finally, will consider how, for Bernard, the Incarnate Word both models and effects the soul’s restoration and its developing self-awareness as his own Bride.
CHAPTER 2:
THE DESCENT INTO SELF-DECEPTION

Scholars of Bernard’s spiritual theology have long noted the central place the vice
of pride assumes in the abbot’s account of humanity’s fall and humanity’s subsequent
fallen condition. In their treatments of this theme, some scholars have moreover
correctly observed that, for Bernard, pride entails some form of self-ignorance, defective
self-knowledge, or, more precisely, some form of “self deception.”¹³⁸ The discovery of
Bernard’s doctrine of proud “self-deception” is significant insofar as it correctly
acknowledges that, for the abbot of Clairvaux, the vice of pride engenders not so much a
sheer ignorance of self, but a false self-understanding which takes the place of true self-
knowledge. As we saw in previous chapter, Bernard teaches that pride indeed originates
in ignorance of self, but ultimately culminates in a false, and self-aggrandizing, self-
knowledge. As Bernard writes in SC 37:

¹³⁸ For example, John Sommerfeldt writes “If [for Bernard] humility is self-knowledge, pride is
self-deception.” Sommefeldt, The Spiritual Teachings of Bernard of Clairvaux, 53. Likewise, Michael
Casey argues that, for Bernard, “Self-deception was the cause of the fall…” and that fallen human beings
find themselves susceptible to this same self-deception. Casey, Athirst for God: Spiritual Desire in
Bernard of Clairvaux’s Sermons on the Song of Songs, 156. Though they do not use the phrase “self-
deception” per se, other students of the abbot’s work have identified this false self-understanding with
various synonyms. For example, Denis Farkasfalvy has written of the proud monk’s creation of a “false
image” of himself. Farkasfalvy, “St. Bernard’s Spirituality and the Benedictine Rule in The Steps of
Humility,” 254. Similarly, Roch Kerestzy argues that, for Bernard, the fallen human being is “alienated
from himself” and, moreover, subject to a “false self-consciousness.” Kereszty, “Relationship between
Anthropology and Christology. St. Bernard, a Teacher for Our Age,” 275. In the same vein, Charles
Dumont suggests that, for Bernard, the fallen human being suffers from a “falsification” of the truth
Ignorance of self breeds pride when your deceived and deceiving thoughts lie to you, convincing you that you are better than you truly are. For this is pride, the beginning of all sin, when you are greater in your own eyes than you are in the eyes of God, than you are in Truth.¹³⁹

Though previous scholarship has correctly acknowledged Bernard’s belief that pride entails some form of self-deception as opposed to sheer self-ignorance, the abbot’s teaching on this prideful self-deception, and more specifically that form of prideful self-deception to which the monk is most susceptible, has yet to receive the sustained scholarly attention it deserves. In his very first spiritual treatise, *On the Steps of Humility and Pride*, Bernard presents a thoroughly developed and remarkably nuanced theory of the self-deception born of pride which reflects both his natural psychological acuity and his years of experience as a father and teacher within Benedict’s school for the Lord’s service. Here Bernard not only defines the precise nature of this prideful self-deception in the monastic context, but also traces its origins, development, and tragic consequences through an innovative inversion of the twelve steps of humility found in the seventh chapter of Benedict’s *Regula*. Indeed Bernard’s narration of the monk’s descent through the twelve steps of pride may be read as a miniature treatise on prideful self-deception that supplies the necessary context for understanding his frequent insistence on the essential function of self-knowledge in the spiritual life. If Bernard regularly exhorts his monastic sons to “know thyself,” this is so because he is already keenly aware of their susceptibility to prideful self-deception through the stages he traces in his account of pride’s twelve steps. Accordingly, this chapter aims to articulate Bernard’s theory of

¹³⁹ SC 37.6 (II, 12): “Sic autem superbiam parit tibi ignorantia tui, cum meliorem quam sis, decepta et deceptrix tua cogitatio te esse mentitur. Hoc quippe est superbia, hoc initium omnis peccati, cum maior in tuis es oculis quam apud Deum, quam in veritate.”
prideful self-deception in its origins, development, and ends as a first step towards a more comprehensive understanding of his reflections on the various forms and roles of self-knowledge in the monk’s ascent to God.

For Bernard, we will argue, the self-deception born of pride consists in the monk’s delusional yet obstinately held belief that he is morally and spiritually superior to his brother monks. Following Augustine, Bernard generically defines superbia or pride as amor propriae excellentiae or the passionate desire for one’s own superiority. In the monastic context to which he writes, this amor propriae excellentiae takes the specific form of the monk’s passionate desire to be, and to be recognized as, the holiest member of his monastic community. The monk’s passionate desire for his own moral and spiritual superiority drives him into self-deception when it swells in his heart to such intensity that he begins to believe that he in fact is what he so wants to be, holier than everyone else. For this reason, Bernard finds the supreme model of this monastic self-deception in the figure of the Pharisee from Christ’s parable who swollen with excessive self-love falsely supposes himself holier than all and despises all others as morally and spiritually inferior to himself, boasting under the guise of a prayer, “O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of human beings” (Lk 18:11).

In his Steps, moreover, Bernard traces how this monastic form of prideful self-deception originates and develops according to a dynamic disclosed in the primordial and paradigmatic figures of human pride, Adam and Eve, and, more primordially still, in the paradigmatic figure of all pride, the apostate angel Lucifer. According to this dynamic, the monk’s proud self-deception originates in his curiositas, by which his sensible and mental gaze are diverted from the consideration of himself before God to the
consideration of others and their apparent spiritual condition. As he shifts his sensible and mental regard to others, his latent desire for his own superiority, the lingering consequence of his share in the sin of Adam, soon swells in his heart and subtly proposes for his belief the thought that he is, in fact, morally and spiritually superior to all those he beholds around him. At the same time, as the monk shifts his sensible and mental regard away from himself, he gradually ceases to seek true self-knowledge and so deprives himself of that honest, critical self-judgment which would ordinarily expose as false his delusions of superior holiness. With time, and by a series of steps Bernard articulates with great insight and care, the monk gradually comes to accept as true the specious self-understanding his *amor propriae excellentiae* continually proposes for his belief and, like the proud Pharisee, comes to judge himself superior to his brothers and to despise his brothers as inferior to himself.

Once convinced that he is holier than all, the self-deceived monk can no longer bear obedience to his monastic superiors, but presumptuously asserts his own will over theirs, arrogating the right to govern himself and others. When, inevitably, he is called to account by his superiors, he clings to his treasured self-deception and pursues a course of self-justification which eventually results in his condemnation and expulsion from the monastic cloister to the world. There freed from the salutary disciplines of the regular and common life, his self-deception assumes a still more sinister form as his ever-growing desire for his own superiority now proposes for his belief the thought that he might, in fact, be superior even to God, above and exempt from obedience to God’s law. As no immediate divine judgment greets his first forays into the life of sin, he gradually cultivates a false knowledge of God to complement his false self-knowledge. He
supposes that God is a god of mercy but not justice, a god unwilling, or even unable, to punish his sins. Liberated from the fear of God, he asserts his own will over God’s, delivering himself over entirely to the delightful satisfaction of his fleshly desires. Yet, by the inescapable law of divine justice, his repeated sins soon ensnare him in the inescapable bonds of sinful habit. Voluntarily enslaved to the pursuit of all that can never satisfy his innate orientation to and desire for God, he leads a life of restless, self-imposed misery, wandering from one dissatisfying pleasure to the next, ever seeking but never finding the One for whom he was made and in whom alone he will find his happy rest. Obstinately refusing to incline his heart’s ear to the divine Voice which ceaselessly calls him to true self-knowledge and conversion, he follows his proud self-deception into spiritual death, contemning himself and his Creator at once. So his descent into self-deception, which began with his curiosity, now culminates in his threefold false knowledge and contempt of himself, his brothers, and his God.\textsuperscript{140}

To demonstrate this Bernard’s theory of prideful self-deception, we will need to undertake a careful analysis of the twelve steps of pride found in the second half of his \textit{On the Steps of Humility and Pride}. Yet, as will be shown momentarily, Bernard’s account of the monk’s descent through these steps of pride cannot be properly understood apart from his reflections on Benedict’s steps of humility in the treatise’s first half.

Before turning to Bernard’s steps of pride, then, this chapter will begin with a

\textsuperscript{140} This dynamic of descent into proud self-deception we will attempt to demonstrate in Bernard’s twelve steps of pride seems to resemble closely a seven-fold pattern of vices he unfolds elsewhere in his \textit{corpus}: (1) negligentia, (2) curiositas, (3) experientia mali, (4) concupiscencia, (5) consuetudo, (6) contemptus, (7) malitia. See Div 14 (VI-I, 134-139); 3 Sent 19 (VI-II, 76); 3 Sent 89 (VI-II, 136); 3 Sent 98 (VI-II, 160).
consideration of his treatise as a whole and, more particularly, with an analysis of his doctrine of the three steps of Truth.

**The Structure of the On the Steps of Humility and Pride**

Though the first of his spiritual treatises, Bernard’s *Liber de gradibus humilitatis et superbiae*, written in 1125 in response to a request from Godfrey of Langres, Bernard’s former prior at Clairvaux and then abbot of Clairvaux’s second foundation, Fontenay, is by no means a juvenile composition. The fruit of Bernard’s some ten years of experience as abbot of Clairvaux, the treatise bears early witness to his capacity for both theological rigor and rhetorical subtlety. As scholars since Étienne Gilson have observed, it is here that Bernard articulates the main lines of a systematic and mystical theology which would remain remarkably consistent throughout his subsequent career.

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142 On this point, see Denis Farkasfalvy, “St. Bernard’s Spirituality and the Benedictine Rule in *The Steps of Humility,*” 249.

143 As Jean Leclercq notes, “At thirty-five years of age, the time of the publication of his first work, [Bernard] had reached full maturity. Gilson always felt this conclusion confirmed, for he could recognize no further development in the Abbot of Clairvaux.” See Jean Leclercq, “Introduction: Étienne Gilson, St Bernard, and the History of Spirituality” in Étienne Gilson, *The Mystical Theology of Saint Bernard*, xxi. Similarly, Farkasfalvy writes, “As Étienne Gilson observed, Bernard’s later works show very little change in basic outlook or doctrine, so much so that any attempt of tracing development or evolution in his thought has failed so far.” Farkasfalvy, “Saint Bernard’s Spirituality and the Benedictine Rule in the *Steps of Humility,*” 249. On the *Liber de gradibus humilitatis et superbiae* as an expression of Bernard’s consistent systematic and mystical theology, Roch Kereszty writes that behind Bernard’s changing paradigms and descriptions of the stages of the human being’s spiritual journey to God, the abbot possesses “an integral and consistent vision of all reality, complete with a metaphysic, anthropology, epistemology, and experiential psychology” and that this “unified vision appears already in *De Gradibus Humilitatis*, and,
As such, the *Steps* supplies the natural point of departure for a comprehensive study of
the abbot’s theory of prideful self-deception and the various forms and roles of self-
knowledge in his spiritual theology more broadly considered.

The abbot divides his *On the Steps of Humility and Pride* into two main parts of
roughly equal length. In the first, he comments on the twelve ascending steps of humility
found in the seventh chapter of Benedict’s *Rule*. In the second, he deftly inverts these
dee twelve ascending steps of humility to arrive at twelve corresponding and descending
steps of pride. The Cistercian’s two-fold exegesis of Benedict’s seventh chapter is
evidently inspired by that chapter’s opening in which Benedict quotes Christ’s saying,
“Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted”
(Lk 18:10). For Bernard, as for Benedict, Christ’s words speak to the fundamental,
paradoxical dynamics of pride and humility: those who would exalt themselves towards
the heights of spiritual greatness will be humbled by their descent into eternal misery,
while those who would humbly condescend to the acknowledgement of their present
misery will be exalted to the heights of spiritual greatness. In Benedict’s phrase, “we
descend by exaltation and ascend by humility.”

Bernard’s decision to arrange his treatise’s two main parts according to Christ’s
two-fold saying naturally prompts his reader to seek a certain literary and thematic

with some minor changes, remains constant throughout Bernard’s career.” See Kereszty, “Relationship

144 See Hum 1-27 (III, 16-37).

145 See Hum 28-57 (III, 38-59). This division of the treatise into two parts is reflected in the
treatise’s manuscript tradition which places at the head of the work two parallel schemas of the steps of
humility and the steps of pride respectively.

146 RB 7.7: “Exaltatione descendere et humilitate ascendere.”
symmetry between these two parts and there is much in Bernard’s text to confirm this reading. Aside from their respective concern for the ascending steps of humility and the descending steps of pride, the work’s two parts are each marked by a lengthy excursus on one of the two paradigmatic figures of humility’s ascent and pride’s descent, namely Christ and Satan. In his work’s second part, Bernard shows how in the proud ascent of his primordial sin, Satan exalted himself to seize equality with God, but was consequently humbled by his descent into unending spiritual death and misery. Conversely, in the work’s first part, Bernard shows how in the humble descent of his Incarnation, the Word-made-flesh, who did not deem equality with God something to be grasped, emptied himself to assume human misery that he might bind his fallen human creatures to himself and lead them by his Ascension to a share in his own divine life and blessedness.  

In sketching these two exemplary patterns of ascent and descent, exaltation and humiliation, Bernard effectively places his reader in the very midst of his book, between the ways of Christ and Satan, between humility and pride, between his first part and his second. As in SC 34-38, the reader is confronted with two opposed and inverted ways of life, the humble way of Christ which leads to divine life and blessedness, and the

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147 Though Bernard does not explicitly say so, Paul’s account of Christ’s descent and ascent in the Christological hymn of Philippians 2:6-11 serves as the biblical foundation for both Bernard’s teaching in the Steps and the work’s rhetorical structure.

148 Thus, in response to Basil Pennington’s invitation to find in Bernard’s parallel excurses “some subtle bit of artistry which we do not readily perceive or appreciate”, Ann Astell proposes that Bernard’s intention is “to call attention to the contrast between the two descents [of Lucifer and Christ]” and to propose these two descents as “alternative models for the monks who are about to accomplish an imaginative descent down the twelve steps of pride.” Pennington, “Introduction,” in The Steps of Humility and Pride, 14; Ann W. Astell, “‘Hidden Manna’: Bernard of Clairvaux, Getrude of Helfta, and the Monastic Art of Humility,” chap. 3 in Eating Beauty: The Eucharist and the Spiritual Arts of the Middle Ages (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2006), 70-71.
proud way of Satan which leads to spiritual death and misery. And, as in SC 34-38, the monk’s decision to embark on either path will turn on his self-knowledge, on his willingness or unwillingness to face the bitter truth of his fallen condition, to acknowledge honestly the disquieting reality of his self-imposed and inescapable slavery to sin, and the justice of his consequent consignment to eternal death. Should the monk accept and confess this truth about himself, he may be converted to Christ and be led by Christ along the way of humility and love which leads to contemplation, divine espousal, and the beatific vision God. Should the monk obstinately refuse to see and admit the truth of his sinfulness and weakness, he will succumb to self-deception and embrace Satan’s way of pride and self-will which leads to eternal blindness, misery, and condemnation.

In spite of these indications of an elegant symmetry to Bernard’s composition, there is at least one obvious and puzzling asymmetry between his treatise’s two main parts. Whereas Bernard’s second part deals explicitly with the twelve steps of pride he derives from Benedict’s twelve steps of humility, his first part does not discuss Benedict’s steps of humility in themselves, but rather situates them within a further, tripartite schema of the spiritual life of his own devising, namely his three steps of Truth. Foregoing any commentary on Benedict’s steps and their relationships, Bernard is content simply to assert that by ascending these twelve steps of humility, the monk will gradually arrive at the knowledge of the Truth in himself, in his brothers, and in Truth’s own nature. If his second main part identifies and traces the relationships between the twelve steps of pride, his first main part identifies and traces the relationships between these three steps of Truth.
Though this discrepancy at first appears to disrupt the otherwise artful symmetry of the treatise’s two main parts, it also points to another, more subtle congruity between them. Though Bernard’s second part deals primarily and explicitly with the twelve descending steps of pride, his illustration of these steps of pride is, in fact, his own commentary on Benedict’s inverse steps of humility. If the monk can discern these descending steps of pride in himself, if he can see how he himself has been guilty of the various stages of pride Bernard illustrates, he will have no difficulty, the abbot suggests, in finding the corresponding, ascending steps of humility. Indeed the very act of recognizing and confessing one’s own history of pride is already to begin ascending Benedict’s steps of humility because this act of self-scrutiny and self-judgment unmasks one’s cherished self-delusions and compels one to face plainly the truth of one’s own sinfulness and weakness. If the monk reads Bernard’s steps of pride in a purely disinterested way, delighting in Bernard’s witty portraits of the proud and finding examples of them in everyone except himself, he will not ascend the steps of humility, but descend further into pride as each step will afford him yet another opportunity to dwell on his brothers’ faults and thereby confirm his delusional sense of superiority over his brethren. Yet, if the monk reads the abbot’s steps of pride not only in Bernard’s book, but also in his own heart, he will by this self-reflexive spiritual reading judge himself in truth, ascend Benedict’s ladder of humility, and so begin to ascend the threefold steps of Truth Bernard delineates in his treatise’s first main part.\(^{149}\)

\(^{149}\) Why, then, does Bernard not simply offer his readers what his title, On the Steps of Humility and Pride, would seem to suggest, namely an explicit commentary on both these sets of steps? As Ann Astell has noted in regard to medieval allegory, medieval readers often placed high demands on their readers, concealing within their works certain meanings and structures they wished their readers to discover for themselves. In a similar vein, James Simpson has shown how Bernard’s contemporary, Allan de Lille,
Further, just as Bernard’s elaboration of the twelve steps of pride in his treatise’s second part enables his reader to see how he will ascend the three steps of Truth depicted in the first, so Bernard’s discussion of the three steps of Truth informs his account of the monk’s descent by the twelve steps of pride. Whereas the monk’s ascent of the steps of humility prepares him to ascend the steps of Truth, the monk’s descent of the steps of pride already entails his descent of the same three steps of Truth. If Bernard’s first part shows how the monk’s ascent of the steps of humility leads him to the true knowledge and love of himself, his brothers, and God, his second part demonstrates how the monk’s descent of the steps of pride simultaneously involves his descent into the false knowledge and contempt of himself, his brothers, and God in turn. In the *Steps*, then, Bernard expands the predominately bipartite schema of SC 34-38 which centers on the knowledge and love of self and God into a tripartite schema centered on the knowledge and love of

so arranged his *Anticlaudianus* that in discovering the work’s inner form, his readers might be led to true self-knowledge. In his *Steps*, likewise, Bernard’s decision to conceal his commentary on Benedict’s steps of humility within his narrative of the steps of pride serves as a warning to his readers that it is only through the discovery of the steps of pride within themselves that they will arrive at any true understanding of Benedict’s way of humility. Promising his readers a commentary on Benedict’s steps but then failing to provide that commentary in any explicit form, the abbot in effect requires his readers to discover the true meaning of Benedict’s steps by recognizing how they have inverted and descended those steps in their hearts. So Bernard writes, “If you wish to return to the Truth, it is not necessary for you to seek some new way which you do not know, but only to consider the way you by which you descended, so that following your own footprints, you may ascend those same steps of humility you once descended in your pride….When you have found, or better recognized, these steps of pride in yourself, you will have no difficulty finding the way of humility.” Hum 27 (III, 37): “Ut videlicet si ad veritatem redire cupis, non necesse sit viam quaerere novam quam non nosti, sed notam qua descendisti: quatenus reciprocis gressibus tua ipse vestigia sequens, per eodem gradus humilitatis ascendas, per quos superbiendo descenderas….Quibus superbiae gradibus in te inventis, immo recognitis, iam non laboras in quaerendo viam humilitatis.” Ann W. Astell, *Political Allegory in Late Medieval England* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999), 23-43; James Simpson, *Sciences of the Self in Medieval Poetry: Alan of Lille’s Anticlaudianus and John Gower’s Confessio Amantis*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 125-133.

150 Here we are indebted to Denis Farkasfalvy who argues, correctly, that Bernard’s three steps of truth and love are the threefold “theological scaffolding” on which Bernard “builds his understanding of the twelve steps of pride and humility.” Farkasfalvy, “St. Bernard’s Spirituality and the Benedictine Rule in the *Steps of Humility*,” 252.
self, God, and neighbor. Since it is in the light of this tripartite schema that Bernard unfolds his account of pride’s self-deception, it will be necessary to consider his account of the three steps of Truth before turning to his discussion of the twelve steps of pride.

The Three Steps of Truth

At the outset of his *Steps*, Bernard speaks first of all not of the steps of humility themselves, but of the fruit or reward to which these ascending steps lead, reasoning that he and his monks will be more eager for the climb if they know what awaits them atop Benedict’s ladder. The fruit or reward promised to those who ascend Benedict’s steps of humility is the knowledge of the truth or, more precisely, the knowledge of Christ who himself is the Truth. Christ himself reveals this fruit of humility when he says of himself, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life” (Jn 14:16). Christ’s Way is the way of humility for as he further says of himself, “Learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart” (Mt 11:29). If the monk imitates Christ’s example of humility by ascending the steps arranged by Benedict, he will be conformed to Christ and thereby come to know Christ as the Truth. And, in coming to know Christ as the Truth, he will come to share in Christ’s own divine and eternal Life.

Humility, then, is the way to Truth, and the knowledge of Truth is the fruit of humility. Yet the Truth, Bernard explains, is discerned or recognized by three successive degrees or steps:

151 As Pennington observes, Bernard’s rhetorical arrangement bespeaks his skill as a teacher: “Before constructing his steps of humility he arouses his reader’s interest by showing him the heights to which they can lead. After all, who is interested in a ladder except the man who wants to climb up to something.” See Basil Pennington, “Introduction,” *The Steps of Humility and Pride*, 8.
We seek the Truth in ourselves, in our neighbors, and in his own nature. We seek the Truth in ourselves by judging ourselves, in our neighbors by having compassion for them in their sufferings, and in his own nature by contemplating him with a clean heart.\footnote{Hum 6 (III, 20): “Inquirimus namque veritatem in nobis, in proximis, in sui natura. In nobis, nosmetipsos diiudicando; in proximis, eorum malis compatiendo; in sui natura, mundo corde contemplando.” All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated. The reader should, however, consult the following English translations from which I have profited: \textit{The Twelve Degrees of Humility and Pride}, trans. Barton R.V. Mills (London: SPCK, 1929); \textit{The Steps of Humility}, trans. George Bosworth Burch (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963); \textit{The Steps of Humility and Pride}, trans. M. Ambrose Conway (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1973).}

Here Bernard offers in his original formulation the same fundamental progression of humility, charity, and contemplation that underlies his argument in SC 34-38. In the present formulation, however, this threefold progression is constructed not on the twofold foundation of the knowledge of self and God, but on the threefold foundation of the knowledge and love of self, neighbor, and God. In the first step of Truth, the monk will come to recognize the Truth in himself by judging himself in Truth, by honestly acknowledging and confessing the truth of his own \textit{miseria}, his own sinfulness and weakness. In the second step of Truth, the monk who has recognized his own \textit{miseria} will perceive that his brothers suffer from the very same sinfulness and weakness, and thereby learn truly compassionate charity for them in their shared \textit{miseria}. Finally, in the third step of Truth, the monk whose heart has been cleansed by his progressive conformity to the humility and compassionate charity of Christ will contemplate Christ the Truth in his own nature.

Though Bernard does not in the \textit{Steps} invoke the doctrine of humanity’s creation in the image and likeness of God as he does in SC 34-38, that doctrine’s same basic principles apply to his teaching in the present context. The monk who has been created in the divine image but lost the divine likeness through original and personal sin will be
restored in this divine likeness as he comes to imitate and participate in the Incarnate Word’s humility and charity. As he is ever more likened to God made manifest in the sacred humanity of Christ, he is by the principle of knowledge through resemblance ever more able to know, love, and contemplate God, and so to share in God’s own divine life, imperfectly in this life, but perfectly in the life to come.

Earlier in the *Steps*, Bernard assigns each of these three degrees of Truth, humility, compassionate charity, and contemplation, to the three traditional stages of the spiritual life. In the first stage, that of the beginners, the monk will come to know the Truth in himself by humble self-judgment. In the second, that of the proficient, he will come to know the Truth in his brothers by compassionate charity. In the third, that of the perfect, he will come to know the Truth in his own nature by contemplating Truth with a heart cleansed by humility and love. The three steps of Truth therefore comprise a tripartite itinerary of the spiritual life from conversion to eschatological vision.

Beyond simply identifying these three stages of the spiritual life, Bernard takes great care to explain the relationships between them. Before seeking the Truth in his own nature by contemplation, the monk must first seek him in his brothers by compassionate charity.

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153 See Hum 4-5 (III, 19-20). Bernard McGinn argues that though the abbot employs various enumerations of the stages of the soul’s progress in the spiritual life, such as the twelve steps of humility and pride in the *Steps* or the four degrees of love in *De Diligendo Deo*, “Bernard’s most frequent mode of presenting the soul’s progress is through a threefold division: stages well known in Christianity since the time of Origen and whose classic form had been shaped by the writings of the Pseudo-Dionysius – the division into ascetical purification, virtuous illumination, and loving union, later canonized as the *via purgativa*, *via illuminativa*, and *via unitiva*.” McGinn goes on to note that while Bernard does not use these terms themselves, “his formulations are variations on the same pattern.” McGinn, “Bernard of Clairvaux: ‘That Contemplative’ (*Quel Contemplante*),” 183. In the present instance, Bernard’s three steps of truth correspond to the purgative, illuminative, and contemplative ways respectively.

154 It should also be noted that Bernard’s tripartite schema structured according to the progression from beginners (*incipientes*) to the proficient (*proficientes*) to the perfect (*perfecti*) respectively closely resembles that presented by his friend and fellow Cistercian William of Saint Thierry in his *Golden Epistle*. See Epistola ad Fratres de Monte Dei 41 (CCCM 88:236).
charity. Before seeking the Truth in his brothers by compassionate charity, however, he must first seek the Truth in himself by humble self-judgment. Christ the Truth reveals this order of ascent by his ordering of the beatitudes in his Sermon on the Mount: he places the meek before the merciful and the merciful before the clean of heart (Mt 5:4, 7-8).

How, then, do the merciful or *misericordes* become the clean of heart or *mundicordes*? The merciful, Bernard teaches, recognize the Truth in their brothers when they extend their affections into the hearts of their brothers to such a degree that they begin “to feel their neighbor’s joys and sorrows as if they were their very own.”

By this affective identification with their brothers, this conformation of their affections to their brothers’ in charity, the merciful soon begin to observe with the ease of habit Paul’s command to “rejoice with those who rejoice and to weep with those who weep” (Rom 12:15). When the merciful monk sees his brother to excel in the spiritual life, he rejoices with his brother as if his brother’s growth in holiness were his own. When, on the other hand, he sees his brother to struggle and fail in the spiritual life on account of his persisting sinfulness and weakness, he will weep with his brother as if this struggle and failure were likewise his. Through this fraternal charity, moreover, the merciful monk’s heart will be so cleansed and conformed to the mercy of Christ that he will soon begin to “delight in contemplating Truth in his own nature.”

Then, out of love for the Truth he has delighted to see, and out of love for that same Truth present in his brothers, he will

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155 Hum 6 (III, 20): “Misericordes quipped cito in proximis veritatem deprehendunt, dum suos affectus in illos extendunt, dum sic per caritatem se illis conformant, ut illorum vel bona, vel mala, tamquam propria sentient.”

156 Hum 6 (III, 21): “Hac caritate fraterna cordis acie mundata, veritatem delectantur in sui contemplari natura, pro cuius amore mala tolerant aliena.”
return to his suffering brothers and bear their burdens and sorrows with a Christ-like mercy born of genuine empathy.

Of particular importance for the cultivation of this compassionate fraternal charity is the monk’s capacity to enter into and experience as his own his brother’s miseria or sinfulness and weakness. This for Bernard explains why the monk must first perceive the Truth in himself before he is able to perceive it in his brothers. Exploiting the etymology of the Latin word misericordia, the abbot teaches that those who would have true mercy towards the miseria in their brother’s heart must first have experienced the miseria in their own. Only once they have honestly acknowledged the truth of their sinfulness and weakness, how easily they are tempted and how prone they are to sin, can they recognize this same sinfulness and weakness in their brothers’ hearts and so love them with true understanding and mercy:

Just as pure truth is perceived only by a pure heart, so a brother’s misery is more truly felt by a miserable heart. Yet if you are to have a heart merciful towards another’s misery, you must first recognize your own misery, that you might find your neighbor’s mind in your own, and from your own experience learn how to help him.\textsuperscript{157}

Only when the monk has first been humbled and made meek by the acknowledgement and confession of his own sinfulness and weakness can he truly recognize and feel that same sinfulness and weakness in his brother and so learn to bear his brother’s sins and failures with the same spirit of gentle, patient mercy that he would expect of his brother

\textsuperscript{157} Hum 6 (III, 21): “Sicut enim pura veritas non nisi puro corde videtur, sic miseria fratris verius misero corde sentitur. Sed ob alienam miseriam cor miserum habeas, oportet tuam prius agnoscas, ut proximi mentem in tua invenias, et ex te noveris qualiter illi subvenias.”
in return. Just as the *mundicordes* must first be the *misericordes*, so the *misericordes* must first be the *mites* or meek.

As he traces the link between the recognition of the Truth in oneself by humble self-judgment and the recognition of the Truth in one’s brother’s by compassionate love, Bernard does not conceal from his readers the fact that this encounter with one’s own sinfulness and weakness will be a bitter and troubling experience. Following Augustine, he defines humility as “that virtue by which one grows vile in one’s own eyes because one knows oneself most truly.”

To discover and confess one’s fallen condition is by no means pleasant and it is for this reason, as Bernard will soon show, that fallen human beings are prone by their excessive self-love to flee this bitter self-knowledge and seek some relief in more comforting self-deceptions. For Bernard, however, to inquire into and acknowledge this humbling truth about oneself is, in fact, the truest form of self-love, for it is only through this humble self-knowledge that one may begin to know and love the Truth in one’s neighbors by compassionate charity and thereby come to know and love the Truth in his own nature by contemplation in this life and the beatific vision in the next.

In undertaking this way of humility and love, the monk must moreover be instructed and guided by the example of Christ the Incarnate Word who, Bernard argues, willed to know human *miseria* that he might learn by experience a human *misericordia* to complement his eternal divine mercy. If Christ has humbled himself to become like the monk in every way that he might learn mercy for the monk in his fallen condition, how

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much more should the monk not exalt himself with pleasant delusions of spiritual
superiority, but rather humble himself to confess the truth of his fallen condition that he
too might learn mercy for his likewise fallen brothers? In setting himself to climb these
two first steps of Truth, he will imitate Christ the Truth, be conformed to Christ’s own
humility and love, and so begin, even in this life, to contemplate Christ in his own divine
nature on his journey towards the full and perfect vision of heavenly glory. The vision of
his own present sin and weakness may be bitter and sorrowful, but it shows him the way
to the future and far more joyous vision of the Truth and a heavenly share in Truth’s own
eternal and blessed life.

**Pride as the Desire for One’s Own Superiority**

Through his enumeration of the three steps of Truth and his explanation of their
proper order, Bernard shows how fraternal charity born of compassion is the foundation
for the contemplative vision of God, and how genuine self-knowledge born of humility is
the foundation for compassionate fraternal charity. For Bernard, then, there is no way to
the true knowledge and love of God save by the true knowledge and love of neighbor,
and no way to the knowledge and love of neighbor save by the true knowledge and love
of self. If, therefore, the monk wishes to ascend to the contemplative vision of God, he
must, paradoxically, first descend from all delusions of moral and spiritual superiority to
face the bitter but ultimately saving truth of his own sinfulness and weakness. In so
doing, he will be conformed to Christ, who did not deem equality with God something to

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159 See Hum 6-13 (III, 21-26).
be grasped, but emptied himself to assume human misery that he might both learn and model human mercy. Bernard writes:

If therefore he who knew no misery made himself miserable that he might learn by human experience that mercy which he always knew in his divine eternity, how much more should you not exalt yourself to that which you are not, but rather consider what you are, that you are truly miserable, and so learn mercy for your brothers, you who cannot learn mercy in any other way.¹⁶⁰

If, on the other hand, the monk refuses to imitate Christ in humbling himself to accept the truth of his own misery, he will, Bernard believes, succumb to pride, that *amor propriae excellentiae* or passionate desire for his own superiority which lingers in his heart in consequence of his share in original sin. As he allows this passionate desire for superiority to swell in his heart unchecked by honest self-judgment born of humility, Bernard explains, this desire will soon so warp his sensible and mental vision that he will see nothing of his own misery and only that of his brothers. Seeing only what he wants to see, seeing only his virtues and his brothers’ vices, his prejudiced perceptions will only serve to confirm as true his deepest wish, that he should be morally and spiritually superior to his brother monks. Consequently, the monk’s refusal to judge himself honestly by true humility simultaneously spawns his false knowledge of himself, that he is superior to all, and his false knowledge of his brothers, that they are all inferior to him. And, once he has deprived himself of that true knowledge of his own misery which alone makes possible compassion, the self-deceived monk will be moved not to commiserate with his brothers, but to judge and deride them. Bernard writes: “If you have eyes only

¹⁶⁰ Hum 13 (III, 26): “Si ergo se miserum fecit, qui miser non erat, ut experiretur quod et ante sciebat, quanto magis tu, non dico ut te facias quod non es, sed ut attendas quod es, quia vere miser es, et sic discas misereri, qui hoc aliter scire non potes?”
for your brother’s misery and not for your own, you will be moved not to mercy, but to scorn, not to help your brother, but to condemn him, not to build up your brother in a spirit of gentleness, but to tear him down in a spirit of rage.”

By exalting himself over his brothers in accord with his desire for his own superiority, the proud monk paradoxically descends the first two steps of truth in reverse, trading self-knowledge for self-deception, and compassion for condemnation.

Bernard finds the biblical basis for his doctrine of pride’s self-deception in Christ’s rebuke from the Sermon on the Mount, “You hypocrites, first remove the beam from your own eye and then you will see clearly to remove the splinter from your brother’s” (Mt 7:5). Interpreting Christ’s beam in the eye as pride in the heart, Bernard writes:

The large and thick beam in your eye is pride in your heart. It is heavy, not healthy, swollen, not sound. As it fills your mind, it obscures your mind’s eye and blinds it to the truth, so that while it occupies your mind, you cannot see or know what you truly are or what you truly are able to be, but what you would love to be, this you think you are or hope to be. For what else is pride, as Augustine defined it, but the passionate desire for your own superiority?

At the root of pride and the self-deception pride occasions is amor propriae excellentiae, the passionate desire for one’s superiority, the same misguided self-love that moved

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161 Hum 13 (III, 26): “Ne forte si proximi malum consideres et tuum non attendas, movearis non ad miseracionem, sed ad indignationem, non ad adiuvandum, sed ad iudicandum, denique non ad instruendum in spiritu lenitatis, sed ad destruendum in spiritu furoris.”

162 Hum 14 (III, 27): “Trabis in oculo grandis et grossa, superbia in mente est, quae quadam corpulentia sui vana, non sana, tumida, non solida, oculum mentis obscurat, veritatem obumbrat, ita ut si tuam occupaverit mentem, iam tu te videre, iam te talem, qualis es, vel qualis esse putes, non possis sentire, sed qualem te amas, talem te vel putes esse, vel speres fore. Quid enim aliud est superbia, quam, ut quidam sanctus deffinit, amor propriae excellentiae?” As was noted in the Introduction, Augustine defines pride as amor propriae excellentiae in Sermo 354:6 (PL 36:1567) and De Genesi ad litteram XI.8.14 (CSEL 28.1:346).
Adam and Eve to aspire to be gods on their own and now in consequence swells in the hearts of all their descendents. In the mind of the proud monk, the desire to be, and to be seen to be, holier than all his brothers swells to such intensity that he gradually begins to believe that he in fact is what he so longs to be, holier than everyone else. Love, Bernard observes, and most especially this misguided self-love, is never a sound basis for correct judgment. Referring to the legal practice of his time, he notes that in both ecclesiastical and secular courts, close friends of the litigants are not permitted to judge their friends’ case for fear that their love of their friends will bias their judgment. If one’s love for one’s friends moves one to overlook or even to conceal their guilt, how much more, Bernard asks, will the monk’s self-love deceive his judgment of himself?

Bernard’s analogy underscores an essential theme of his teaching on self-knowledge and self-deception: the truth, including the truth about oneself, is never a matter of one’s own making, nor can it ever be discerned apart from the God who himself is Truth. To find the Truth in oneself is, in Bernard’s expression, “to find oneself in the Truth,”163 to see oneself through the eyes of Truth, “which can neither deceive nor be deceived.”164 The proud may judge themselves in accordance with their own self-love, but the alleged self-knowledge this judgment brings is nothing more than a self-deception because it is a judgment made apart from and devoid of the Truth.

Just as the monk’s excessive self-love distorts his perception and judgment of himself, it likewise distorts his perceptions and judgments of those around him. Regarding his brothers through the lens of his desire to excel, he comes to see only their

163 Hum 15 (III, 27): “veritate inventa in se, immo se invento in in veritate.”
164 Hum 3 (III, 18): “Veritas, cuius oculi sicut fallere nolunt, ita falli non norunt.”
sinful weakness and nothing of their virtue and goodness, a sight which only corroborates his delusions of excellence and stirs his contempt for his fellows. So it is not without reason that Bernard associates the proud monk with the proud Pharisee of Christ’s parable who declares, “O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of human beings, unjust, robbers…” (Lk 18:11). Like that proud Pharisee, the self-deceived monk exalts himself by putting others down. He gives thanks to God, Bernard explains, “not because he is good, but because he is superior, not so much for any goodness he possesses as for the evils he sees in others.” Consumed by his passionate desire for moral and spiritual superiority, and no longer seeking true self-knowledge through honest self-judgment, he has come to a false knowledge of his brothers which inspires his contempt for them, and a false knowledge of himself which blinds his mind’s eye to Truth and so constitutes the severest form of self-contempt. Having sketched this initial picture of pride’s self-deception and its harmful consequences, Bernard turns to his treatise’s second main part, on the twelve steps of pride, in which he offers a more thorough analysis of this how this prideful self-deception originates, develops, and ultimately leads to the monk’s false knowledge and contempt of self, neighbor, and God alike.

The Twelve Steps of Pride

Bernard’s twelve steps of pride have been described as satirical descriptions of “twelve proud men” or “portraits of twelve monks” with each one representing some

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165 Hum 17 (III, 29): “Et gratias agat, non quia bonus, sed quia solus; non tam de bonis quae habet, quam de malis quae in aliis videt.”

facet of pride’s descent. This characterization has some truth to it. In each step, Bernard paints a vivid, and often amusing, portrait of a monk caught up in some unfortunate aspect of pride and, on the whole, leaves his reader with a study of pride closer in genre to his lively satire of Cluniac laxities in his *Apologia* than his rather more plodding, discursive treatment of the three steps of Truth in the *Steps*’ first main part. Yet, this description of Bernard’s steps of pride as a series of satirical character sketches of various monks is nevertheless misleading. As Bernard’s pronounced transitions between the individual steps reveal, he is offering not twelve portraits of twelve monks, one in each of the steps of pride, but rather the narrative of a single monk who descends one-by-one down the steps of pride according to a psychological progression Bernard has discerned and articulated with insight and care.

Between the tenth and eleventh steps of pride, moreover, the abbot briefly interrupts his narrative to announce that his twelve steps of pride may be divided into three groups: “in the first six, contempt is shown for the brethren; in the next four, for the superiors; in the last two…for God.”

Bernard’s typical tripartite division bears close resemblance to his earlier division of the three steps of Truth and serves to alert the reader that, in his steps of pride, he intends to trace the monk’s descent of the three steps of Truth just as, in his treatment of the twelve steps of humility, he traced the monk’s ascent of these same steps. Though his treatise’s second half employs a different genre from the first, it resembles the first in its logical and systematic rigor.

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168 Hum 49 (III, 53): “Sciendum namque, quod omnes gradus, quod in duodecim partitus sum, in tres tantummodo colligi possunt, ut in sex superioribus contemptus fratrum, in quatuor sequentibus contemptus magistri, in duobus, qui restant, consummetur contemptus Dei.”
Finally, we should note that Bernard’s steps of pride are arranged according to one further tripartite pattern, namely the threefold vice of 1 John 2:16, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. Though the abbot does not render this structuring principle explicit, it will become clear to us though a careful study of his steps and their relationships: his first six steps concern curiosity, or the lust of the eyes; his next four steps concern ambition, or the pride of life; and his final two steps concern concupiscence, or the lust of the flesh.

The First Step of Pride: Curiosity

For Bernard, the beginning of all sin is pride and the beginning of all pride is curiosity. As one of the abbot’s first modern readers, Barton R.V. Mills, observed, Bernard evidently attaches great significance to this first step for his treatment of curiositas is nearly as long as his treatment of the remaining eleven steps combined. Commenting on Mills’ observation, Étienne Gilson argued that, for Bernard, curiosity means “to be preoccupied with any kind of knowledge whatever which has no bearing on oneself from the standpoint of salvation” and that “If St. Bernard allots to this first degree of pride as much space as he gives to all the rest, that is precisely because, just as the Nosce teipsum gives birth to all the other degrees of humility up to the highest, so does curiosity engender all the remaining degrees of pride, down to the lowest.”

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169 “Bernard considers the first degree of pride to be curiosity, to the description of which he allots nearly as much space as he gives to that of the eleven other degrees. He evidently attaches to it the greatest importance as being the starting point of the downward grade.” Mills, “Introduction,” The Twelve Degrees of Humility and Pride, xiv. See also Basil Pennington, “Introduction,” The Steps of Humility and Pride, 13.

170 Gilson, The Mystical Theology of Saint Bernard, 156. For further reasons why Bernard may have devoted such extraordinary attention to this first step of pride, see Pennington, “Introduction,” The Steps of Humility and Pride, 13-14.
Gilson’s comments are entirely correct, but should be complemented with two further points. First, if Bernard believes that curiosity gives rise to all the subsequent steps of pride, he also believes, as will be shown below, that curiosity gives rise to a self-deception which itself develops through each of these subsequent steps. So while it is true to say that curiosity distracts the monk from true self-knowledge, the knowledge which alone has bearing on oneself from the standpoint of self-knowledge, it is also true that curiosity prepares the monk to entertain, and ultimately accept as true, a proud false self-understanding which supplants the true self-knowledge born of humility.

Second, if Bernard’s treatment of curiosity is as long as his treatment of the remaining eleven steps combined, this is so specifically because, in the case of this step alone, Bernard decides to embellish his treatment with a discussion of three biblical exempla of curiositas, namely Dinah, Eve, and Satan. As will be shown momentarily, in his treatment of these three exemplary figures, Bernard not only shows how each embodies the vice of curiosity, but also how the curiosity of each ultimately entails their descent into self-deception, self-will, and the threefold contempt of themselves, their fellows, and God himself. In other words, for the abbot, Dinah, Eve, and Satan not only exemplify the first step of pride, but also all the remaining steps of pride put together, from the highest down to the lowest. By placing these three exempla in his very first step of pride, Bernard in effect offers his readers an preview of the entire doleful, downward

171 Although Bernard’s treatment of the monk’s own particular form of curiosity is comparable in length to that of the remaining eleven steps, his consideration of these three exempla, and most especially the case of Satan, occupies some seven additional pages in the Sancti Bernardi Opera Ominia. See Hum 28-38 (III, 38-45).
journey to which the monk will commit himself if he allows himself to fall prey to curiositas.

Before turning to his exempla, however, the abbot first offers a brief sketch of that particular form of curiositas to which the monk is most susceptible. According to one of the capitula placed at the head of Bernard’s treatise, which Leclercq judges “very probably authentic,” curiositas refers generically to “when the eyes and other senses wander into what is not their proper concern.” In the specifically monastic context of the Steps, Bernard defines curiositas as the monk’s tendency to allow his eyes and other senses to wander from their proper concern, the consideration of himself and his own behavior, to what is not their proper concern, the sensible behavior of his brother monks. Curiosity is, for Bernard, a “disease of the soul,” a form of incuria sui or self-neglect which causes the monk to trade the pursuit of self-knowledge for a curious interest in the visible and otherwise sensible actions of his fellows.

Since Bernard’s steps of pride represent his inversion of and commentary on Benedict’s twelve steps of humility, his account of each step is best interpreted in light of Benedict’s corresponding step of humility. This is especially evident in the case of curiosity, the inverse of Benedict’s twelfth and final step of humility. Describing this “highest summit of humility,” Benedict writes:

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172 Leclercq, “Curiositas and the Return to God in St Bernard of Clairvaux,” 94.

173 Hum (III, 14): “Curiositas, cum oculis et ceterisque sensibus vagatur in ea quae ad se non attinent.”

174 See Hum 28 (III, 38).

175 RB 7:5: “summae humilitatis culmen.”
The twelfth step of humility is that a monk should always manifest humility to those who see him not only in his heart, but also in his body; that is, at the Work of God, in the oratory, in the monastery, in the garden, on a journey, or in the field. Wherever he sits, walks, or stands, his head should be always bowed and his gaze fixed on the earth. Judging himself guilty of his sins at every hour, he should consider himself already present at the last judgment and say continually in his heart what the Publican in the Gospel said with his eyes cast down to the earth, “Lord, I am a sinner, unworthy to look up heaven” (Mt 8:8, Lk 18:13-14). On Bernard’s reading of Benedict’s steps, the monk who has scaled this highest step of humility is the model of humble self-knowledge, one who has reached the first step of Truth by honest self-judgment. Ceaselessly judging himself in accordance with the Truth, in the sight of the divine Judge before whom he will one day be required to give an account of himself, he is fully and ever aware of his fallen sinfulness and weakness and therefore shielded against the temptations of *amor propriae excellentiae* and its delusions of superior holiness. In contrast to the Pharisee of Christ’s parable who proudly exalts himself, boasting of his own superior holiness and deriding all others as inferior to himself, this monk is like the Publican of the same parable who ceaselessly humbles himself before God, acknowledging and confessing his sinfulness and unworthiness of heaven.

In this twelfth step of humility, moreover, the monk’s sensible, bodily bearing both manifests and corroborates his interior humility of heart. Bowed down in his heart, he keeps his head bowed to the earth. With his eyes cast down, he has no occasion to see

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176 RB 7.62-65: “Duodecimus humilitatis gradus est si non solum corde monachus sed etiam ipso corde humilitatem videntibus se semper indicet, id est in opere Dei, in oratorio, in monasterio, in horto, in via, in agro vel ubicunque sedens, ambulans vel stans, inclinato sit semper capite, defixis in terram aspectibus, reum se omni hora de peccatis suis astitans iam se tremendo iudicio repraesentari aestimet, dicens sibi in corde semper illud quod publicanus ille evangelicus fixis in terram oculis dixit: *Domine non sum dignus, ego peccator, levare oculos meos ad caelos.*”
and judge others or to see how they in turn see and judge him. His single concern, reflected in this symmetry of body and soul, is to see and know himself, to see and know himself in the eyes of Truth.

Since Benedict presents his twelfth step of humility as a passage from the interior to the exterior man, from the heart to the sensible body, Bernard inversely presents his twelfth step of pride as a passage from the exterior to the interior man, from the sensible body to the inner disposition of the heart. His readers will recognize a monk suffering from the inner disease of curiosity by certain exterior, visible symptoms. Shrewdly inverting Benedict’s twelfth step of humility, Bernard writes:

The first step of pride is curiosity. You will recognize it by the following signs: if you see a monk whom you have previously regarded as exemplary now begin, wherever he stands, walks, or sits, to allow his eyes to wander, to hold his head up, and to keep his ears pricked, you can discern from these outward movements that the interior man has changed…from these strange movements of his body, you can tell he has caught some new disease in his soul: he neglects to consider himself and grows curious about others.  

As Ann Astell has observed, Bernard’s description of curiositas entails a subtle “rhetorical trick”: if Bernard’s readers have seen such a curious monk, they have been curious themselves. If they have allowed their eyes to wander over their brother,

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177 Hum 28 (III, 38): “Primus itaque superbiae gradus est curiositas Hanc autem talibus indiciis deprehendes: si videris monachum, de quo prius bene confidebas, ubicunque stat, ambulat, sedet, oculis incipientem vagari, caput erectum, aures portare suspensas, e motibus exterioris hominis interiorem immutatum agnoscas…ex insolenti corporis motu, recens animae morbus deprehenditur, quam, dum a sui circumspexitne torpescit incuria sui, curiosam in alios facit.”

178 Astell, “‘Hidden Manna’: Bernard of Clairvaux, Getrude of Helfta, and the Monastic Art of Humility,” 69. As Astell further notes, Bernard’s rhetorical trick is consistent with his ultimate purpose in presenting this and the other steps of pride, namely to afford his readers a mirror in which to recognize their own rather than another’s pride: “Recognizing the danger that his auditors will see in the lively portraits of prideful monks everyone besides themselves, Bernard catches himself and them in curiosity at
apprehended his curiosity, and therefore come to judge him less holy than they once
supposed, they are guilty of the very vice they have seen and scorned in their brother. So,
by a sudden reversion to the second-person, Bernard returns the charge against his
readers:

If you, my man, would attend more diligently to yourself, I would
be surprised if you found time to ponder anyone else! Listen, O
curious one, to Solomon! Hearken, you fool, to the words of
Wisdom: “Guard your heart,” he says, “with all your care” (Prv 4:23) that you may direct all your senses to protecting the source of
your life! Where do you wander away from yourself, O curious
one? To whom will you entrust yourself in the meanwhile? Do
you dare to lift your eyes to heaven, you who have sinned against
heaven? Look to the earth that you may know yourself! The earth
will show you who you are, for you are earth and to earth you will return.179

Plainly, Bernard regards even the slightest relaxation of the bodily discipline Benedict
enjoins as a matter worthy of the severest rebuke. Yet why should this be? What could
possibly be so dangerous about an occasional, fleeting glance at one’s brothers?

Bernard’s answer is to be found in his three biblical exempla of curiosity. It is not
always wrong, the abbot allows, for the monk to raise his eyes from the earth, provided
he recalls the true knowledge of his own sinful misery. If he raises his eyes humbly to
heaven to seek God’s aid in his own sinfulness and weakness, he does well. If, again, he
lifts his eyes to see in his brother’s heart the same misery he sees in his own, and
therefore learns to help his brother in their shared weakness, he is to be commended, not

179 Hum 28 (III, 38): “Et vere si te vigilanter, homo, attendas, mirum est si ad aliud umquam
intendas. Audi, curiose, Salomonem; audi, stulte, Sapientem: OMNI CUSTODIA, inquit, CUSTODI COR
TUUM, ut omnes videlicet sensus tui vigilent ad id, unde vita procedit, custodiendum Quo enim a te, o
curiose, recedis? Cui te interim committis? Ut quid audes oculos levare ad caelum, qui peccasti in caelum?
Terram intuere, ut cognoscas te ipsum. Ipsa te tibi repraesentabit, quia terra es et in terram ibis.”
condemned. Lifting his eyes in humility or mercy, the monk will not descend the first step of pride but rather ascend the first two steps of truth: “If, after considering the time, the place, and the reason, you lift your eyes to your own needs or those of your brother, not only do I not blame you, but I praise you highly!” After all, David lifted his eyes with humility to the mountains to seek God’s help (Ps 120:1), and Christ lifted his eyes with compassion over the crowds to see if there was anyone he might help (Jn 6:5). Yet if the monk raises his eyes for any other purpose, Bernard warns, if his lifts his eyes out of any motive other than humility or compassion, then “you imitate neither the Prophet nor the Lord, but Dinah, or Eve, or even Satan himself!”

Bernard’s ordering of these three exempla is not without significance. By arranging his figures of curiosity in reverse historical order, from Dinah to Eve to Lucifer, he implies that the monk’s own inclination to curiosity is rooted in and patterned upon the primordial curiosity of his first parents, which lead to humanity’s fall, and that of Lucifer, which led to the first and paradigmatic sin of proud disobedience against God. Again, Bernard’s selection of these three examples of curiosity and in his treatment of them in this particular sequence enables him to show how even the slightest curious glance ultimately entails ever more serious and harmful consequences. In the case of Dinah, her curious interest in the sight of some foreign women ultimately entails her false knowledge and contempt of herself. In the case of Eve, her curious desire to know, and therefore to determine, good and evil ultimately results in her false knowledge and

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180 Hum 29 (III, 39): “Tu quoque si locum, tempus et causam considerans, tua vel fratris necessitate oculos levas, non solum non culpo, sed et plurimum laudo.”

181 Hum 29 (III, 39): “Sin alias, non Prophetae, non Domini, sed Dinae aut Evae, immo ipsius Satanae imitatorem te dixerim.”
contempt of herself and God. Finally, in the case of Satan, his curious desire to rival Christ’s dominion and kingship ultimately leads to his false knowledge and contempt of himself, God, and his fellow rational creatures both angelic and human. Curiosity is for Bernard so dangerous because even the most fleeting glance can finally lead the monk down each of the three steps of Truth. This will become clear through a closer consideration of each of his three exempla and the common pattern that underlies their curiosity.

In his account of each of his three biblical figures of curiositas, Bernard can be seen to be describing a common trajectory or dynamic to the vice. According to this dynamic, the exemplum first allows his or her sensitive or mental gaze to wander from his or her proper concern, true self-knowledge before God, to what is not his or her proper concern. This seemingly benign relaxation of their bodily and mental discipline immediately entails two rather more serious consequences. First, as they allow their regard to pass away from themselves, they gradually succumb to the spiritual disease of incuria sui or self-neglect; that is, they gradually cease to consider, and therefore to know, themselves in truth. Second, as they allow their regard to pass over to something else, their mental cura or concern likewise shifts from themselves to some new object. This newfound curious concern soon arouses in their heart some new, and illicit, desire, which in turn proposes to the intellect for its belief some new, and false, self-understanding. Since their self-neglect has led them to cease seeking that genuine self-knowledge which would ordinarily expose such a new self-understanding as false, their intellect swiftly embraces as true this new, and far more gratifying, self-conception. Thus self-deceived, they soon aspire to attain their new, curious desire through an act of self-
will contrary to both the law of God and their own true nature as his creatures. Presumptuously aspiring to some height above themselves in accordance with their deluded self-understanding, they exalt themselves against God’s law, only to descend beneath themselves into the simultaneous contempt of God, their fellows, and themselves alike.

In the case of Dinah, Bernard’s first exemplum, her tale begins with her safely ensconced in the protective care of her father and brothers, who are, in turn, safely resident in the land promised them by God. Yet, one day, while leading her flocks to pasture, Dinah allows her eyes and mind to wander from herself to the sight of some foreign women. In consequence, she soon forgets herself, strays from the safety of her family and, supposing herself safe to travel unaccompanied by her brothers, wanders abroad to satisfy her curious desire to see these exotic women. Engaging his exemplum in a fictive dialogue, Bernard asks her why she presumed to wander from her father and family: “What was your reason? What was your purpose?” When Dinah protests in reply that hers was merely harmless, “idle curiosity,” Bernard sternly reminds her that her apparently harmless curiosity soon aroused the lustful curiosity of her attacker Shechem, who seized her virginity and, in consequence, brought their two families into violent conflict. “Who would have believed,” Bernard asks Dinah, “that your curious idleness or idle curiosity would afterwards prove not idle, but ruinous (non otiosam sed

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182 For the biblical narrative of Dinah, see Genesis 34.

183 Hum 29 (III, 39): “O Dina, quid necesse est ut videas mulieres alienigenas? Qua necessitate? Qua utilitate?”
perniciosam), for you, your family, and your enemies?"\footnote{Hum 29 (III, 39): “Quis crederet tunc illam tuam curiosam otiositatem, vel otiosam curiositatem, fore post sie non otiosam, sed tibi, tuis, hostibus que tam perniciosam?”} By her apparently harmless glance, Dinah embarked upon a curious journey which ultimately resulted in her contempt of herself, her family, and, by extension, the God who had called her and her family to dwell peacefully in the land which he had given them.

Bernard’s treatment of Dinah’s\textit{ curiositas} serves to underscore his conviction that curiosity is never merely curiosity; on the contrary, to lift one’s eyes for any purpose other than one’s own need or the needs of others is always to commit oneself to a dangerous way of self-deception, self-will, and consequent disaster. In his treatment of Eve, his second\textit{ exemplum}, the abbot reprises this theme while adding several new elements to his account of curiosity. As with Dinah, Bernard introduces Eve in the safety of Eden, a living witness to her Creator’s generosity and care. Placed in paradise, she is together with her husband charged with tending and caring for God’s garden with the promise that if she and her husband should freely obey God’s commandment, they will ascend to a blessed share in his own divine life, where they will be free from all work and all care. In a sense, then, Eve’s care\textit{(custodia)} for the garden is her own way of caring for herself, for in minding the garden and God’s commandment without distraction or disobedience, she will mind the garden of her own soul, and thereby be raised to the perfection her of created nature, her perfect and eternal happiness in the arms of her Creator’s tender embrace. Like the monk atop Benedict’s ladder of humility, Eve must know herself by keeping the fear of God always before her eyes, by continually recalling that God has created her by his own free gift for himself, to find her promised happiness

\footnotetext{184 Hum 29 (III, 39): “Quis crederet tunc illam tuam curiosam otiositatem, vel otiosam curiositatem, fore post sie non otiosam, sed tibi, tuis, hostibus que tam perniciosam?”}
in him by her obedience to his will. “Keep what is committed to you,” Bernard warns her, “expect what is promised you, avoid what is prohibited you, lest you lose what has been given you.”

Yet, by raising her eyes to gaze on the tree whose fruit she is forbidden to touch or to eat, the tree which is nevertheless pleasing to the eye, good for food, and desirable for gaining wisdom (Gen 2:6), Eve allows her mental gaze to pass from herself to what is not her proper concern. When in his fictive dialogue Bernard asks her why she is so eager to look on this fruit whose consumption carries the penalty of death, he has Eve reply that she is only curious to look upon this fruit, not to touch or eat of it: “‘I stretch out my eyes,’ she says, ‘not my hand. I am not forbidden to look at this fruit, but only to eat it. May I not lift my eyes to what I please, since God has placed them in my power?’”

Though Bernard concedes that her curious glances may not themselves be a sin, he warns her that they are doubtless the origin of her sin, for they contribute to her self-neglect and evoke in her a new desire, the desire not simply to taste this fruit (sapere), but to seize for herself a kind of wisdom (sapientia), the divine Wisdom, the freedom to “know,” which is to say, to determine, good and evil for herself, apart from God. This desire, in turn and by the serpent’s promoting, proposes for her intellect’s assent a new self-understanding, that she is not God’s creature, but a god unto herself, capable of governing herself in autonomy, by the law of her self-will rather than the law of God. Distracted from the

185 Hum 30 (III, 39): “Serva ergo commissum, exspecta promissum; cave prohibitum, ne perdas concessum.”

186 Hum 30 (III, 39): “<<Oculos>>, inquis, <<tendo, non manum. Non est interdictum ne videam, sed ne comedam An non licet oculos quo volo levare, quos Deus in mea posuit potestate?>>.”
continual recollection of herself and her true condition by her restless gaze, she allows
the serpent’s deception to become her own self-deception. Bernard writes:

If your mind guarded itself with more care, you would not find
time for such curiosity. Even if this is not itself a sin, it is an
occasion of sin, the origin of your sin, and its cause. For while you
are intent on something else, the serpent slips secretly into your
heart with flattering words. He restrains your reason with flattery,
your fear with lies: “You will not die,” he says. He arouses your
interest as he entices your pallet; he sharpens your curiosity as he
excites your desire. He offers what is forbidden you, and takes
what is given you: he grants you an apple as he steals your
paradise!187

For Bernard, Eve’s curiositas results not only in her false knowledge of herself, but also
in her false knowledge of God. For in convincing herself, at the serpent’s suggestion,
that she “will not die,” she at once deludes herself into believing that she is exempt from
God’s law and that God will not execute the judgment he has plainly promised her
disobedience. Perhaps she believes, as Bernard will suggest in the case of Lucifer, that
God is a god of mercy, but not justice, who either will not or cannot punish his creatures.
With the fear of God no longer before her eyes, having deceived herself as to the truth of
her own being and the truth about God, she stretches forth her hand in the primordial act
of human presumption, seizing the Son’s Wisdom for herself and exalting her own will
over his.188 In this paradigmatic act of self-deception and self-will, she shows her

187 Hum 30 (III, 39-40): “Nisi enim mens minus se curiose servaret, tua curiositas tempus vacuum
non haberet. Etsi culpa non est, culpae tamen occasio est, et indicium commissae, et causa est
committendae Te enim intenta ad aliiud, latenter interim in cor tuum serpens illabitur, blande alloquitur
Blanditiis rationem, mendaciis timorem compescit: <<Nequaquam,>> inquiens, <<morieris>>. Auget
curam, dum incitat gulam; acuit curiositatem, dum suggerit cupiditatem Offert tandem prohibitum, et aufert
concessum: porrigit pomum, et surripit paradisum.”

188 On Eve’s sin as her attempt to seize the Wisdom of the Son, see 1 Adv 4 (IV, 163-164); 4 Asc
4 (V, 140-141), SC 69.2-5 (II, 202-205). On Eve’s sin as her exaltation of her self-will over the will of
God, see 3 Sent 94 (VI-II, 150). For an discussion of this aspect of Bernard’s thought, see Roch Kereszty,
contempt not only for herself and her Maker, but also for her fellow human beings, for in this act she condemns them as well as herself to the twin misery of voluntary enslavement to sin and the certainty of bodily death.

In his analysis of Eve’s curiosity, then, Bernard reveals how her curious gaze evoked in her heart a particular desire, namely her *amor propriae excellentiae* or the desire for her own excellence, which in turn proposed for her intellect’s assent the delusion that she was superior to God in the sense of being superior to or exempt from his law. In the case of his final *exemplum* of curiosity, that of Satan, Bernard pursues this same theme while adding that Lucifer’s original curiosity entailed not only his false knowledge of himself and God, but also of his fellow rational creatures. If Bernard introduced Eve as a living witness to her Creator’s generosity and care, the abbot introduces Lucifer as the supreme such sign of God’s creative love. Like the monk atop Benedict’s ladder of humility, the prelapsarian Lucifer stands radiant atop of the ladder of creatures. Sealed with the divine likeness and resplendent with beauty and wisdom, he is the most perfect created image of the only-begotten Son of God. Had he but fixed his gaze on his created beauty and wisdom, he would have perpetually acknowledged thesplendorous gift of his own being, and offered his Creator eternal praise and thanksgiving, sharing an eternity of delight with his Maker.

Yet, Satan too allowed his self-knowing gaze to wander into what was not his proper concern, to pass from himself to another, to the only other who excelled him, the Son of God whom he most perfectly resembled. Pondering the Son’s dominion over all his Father’s works, the highest angel conceived in his heart the supreme form of *amor propriae excellentiae*, the desire to seize for himself some share in the Son’s divine right
to lordship over creation and the obedient worship of all God’s creatures. Neglecting the
truth of his own created finitude and his indebtedness to his Creator, Lucifer deceived
himself into believing that he too might rule over a kingdom of creatures, and so
presumptuously aspired to exalt himself against their true King. So Bernard queries the
mighty angel:

“I will place my throne in the North” (Is 14:13), you say. As all
the citizens of heaven stand, you alone affect to sit and disturb the
concord of your brothers, the peace of the whole celestial country,
and even, as far as you are able, the tranquility of the Trinity!
Where has your curiosity lead you, O miserable one, that with
singular arrogance, you do not hesitate to cause scandal to
heaven’s citizens and injury to their King?...And now arrogantly
pondering, curiously investigating, and irreverently approaching
unknown heights which others dare not glimpse, you would set up
a throne for yourself in heaven, that you might be like the Most
High? To what end? With what daring? In the lengthy, relentless, and penetrating cross-examination of the apostate angel which
follows, Bernard discerns that Lucifer’s delusional daring was born of nothing other than
his false knowledge of himself and his false knowledge of his Creator. On account of his
unparalleled resemblance to the Son of God, Bernard explains, the prelapsarian Satan
enjoyed a share in the Son’s divine foreknowledge. By this share in the divine
foreknowledge, he foresaw that he would indeed one day rule over a kingdom of
subservient creatures, namely those angels who would join his revolt and, later, the race
of reprobate human beings, the sons and daughters of pride. Though he foresaw that by

\textsuperscript{189} Hum 31 (III, 40-41): “PONAM, inquis, SEDEM MEAM AD AQUILONEM. Ceteris
astantibus caelicolis, dum tu sedere solus affectas, fratrum concordiam, totius caelestis patriae pacem,
ipsius, quantum in te est, quietem Trinitatis infestas. Quo te tua, miser, curiositas ducit, ut praeumptione
singulari non dubites cibibus scandalum, inuiiam facere Regi?... et tu nescio quae prae ceteris differentius
prospiciendo, curiosius inquiringo, irreverentius pervadendo, sedem tibi collocas in caelo, ut sis similis
Altissimo? Quo fine? Qua fiducia?”
his rule over the reprobate he would, in a sense, rival the Most High, Satan could not, Bernard adds, foresee his future fall and descent into misery apart from God. Resuming his fictive dialogue, Bernard asks his subject, “I wonder, if in God’s foreknowledge you foresaw your reign, why did you not also see your fall? If you did foresee it, what madness led you to desire to rule in such misery?”

Bernard answers that Lucifer’s vision of his future was obscured or distorted by his false knowledge of himself and his Creator. With the prospect of his future rule over the proud gleaming in his mind’s eye, Satan’s *amor propriae excellentiae* swelled in his heart and proposed for his belief the delusion that he could indeed rival the Son’s lordship over all creation without fear of divine retribution. With his curious gaze distracted from the consideration of himself in Truth and fixated on his coming kingdom, he ceased to seek true self-knowledge and so neglected the truth of his created finitude and consequent dependence on his Creator. Simultaneously, his ravenous desire for superiority falsified his understanding of God, leading him to imagine that God as a god of mercy but not justice who could not punish his presumption for fear of losing his own divine goodness. Bernard writes:

> It is more likely that you did not foresee your fall either because…you presumed upon the goodness of God and therefore said in your heart, “He will not care” (Ps 9:24)…or else because, with the vision of your rule gleaming in your eye, the beam of pride grew so great that you could not see your intervening fall.

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190 Hum 36 (III, 44): “Sed miror, cum in praescientia Dei tuum praevideris principatum, cur non in eadem praevidisti et praecepitum? Nam si praevidisti, quae insania fuit, ut cum tanta miseria cuperes principari, ut malles misere praeesse, quam feliciter subsesse?”

191 Hum 36 (III, 44): “Sed credibilior est, quod non praevidisti: aut propter illam causam, quam superius dixi, quia Dei bonitatem attendens, dixisti in corde tuo: NON REQUIRET, propter quod, o impie,
Consequently, having deceived himself as to the truth regarding both himself and God, Lucifer exalted his self-will over the will of God and seized equality with God, only to be cast forth by the just judgment of God from the stable peace of heaven to a life of restless misery apart from his Maker.

In this supreme, primordial, and paradigmatic act of creaturely pride, Satan’s false knowledge of himself and his Creator drove him to the contempt of both himself and God. Exalting himself against the divine will, he despised the Most High as the rightful Lord of all creation, greeted his Creator’s lavish generosity with ingratitude, and condemned himself to wander eternally in misery apart from the God who created him and in whom alone he could find his true and lasting rest. Yet, in this same act of pride, Lucifer also revealed his false knowledge of and contempt for his fellow rational creatures, both angelic and human. For in aspiring to rival the Son’s lordship and to claim for himself the creaturely worship rightly owed him, Satan came to regard his fellow angels, and likewise future human beings, as creatures made to serve and adore him rather than their Creator. In persuading some to join his vainglorious revolt, he moved them to turn their hearts from God to himself, and so to share in his own eternity of proud misery. For Bernard, that is, Satan could not see his fellow creatures as fellow citizens in the kingdom of heaven, but only as subservient subjects to be valued only insofar as they would mouth his praise and so feed his delusional self-understanding as the rival of the Most High. In the abbot’s words, Lucifer preferred to “reign over others

Deum irritasti; aut quia, viso principatu, in oculo statim superbiae trabes excrevit, qua interposita casum videre non potuit.”
in misery rather than to be subject with others to God in happiness” and “to rule over the sons of darkness rather than to share the lot of the sons of light.”

Through his analysis of these Satan, Eve, and Dinah, then, Bernard shows how curiositas develops according to a common dynamic that ultimately entails his or her self-deception and presumptuous assertion of self-will against the will of God. Bernard concisely summarizes this common dynamic when he says of Satan, “By curiosity, he fell from the Truth, because what he first glimpsed curiously, he then wrongly desired, and presumptuously hoped to attain.” How, then, does this common dynamic of curiositas play out in the heart of the monk?

The abbot does not explicitly say, but the answer may be gleaned from his three exempla of curiosity and his eleven subsequent steps of pride. As the monk atop Benedict’s twelve step of humility gradually relaxes his bodily discipline, he allows his eyes and other senses to wander from his proper concern, true self-knowledge before God, to what is not his proper concern, the sensible behavior of his brothers. As he allows his sensitive and then mental regard to pass away from himself, he gradually succumbs to the spiritual disease of incuria sui or neglect of himself and his own position before God. In this way, the monk has already descended from the first step of Truth, the knowledge of the Truth in himself, because he has renounced the practice of regular, humble self-judgment that alone gives birth to genuine self-knowledge. And, as he allows that same regard to pass over to his brothers, his latent amor propriae excellentiae

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192 Hum 37 (III, 44): “Nam si praevidisti, quae insania fuit, ut cum tanta miseria cuperes principari, ut malles misere praeesse, quam feliciter subesse? Aut non expediebat participem esse plagarum illarum luminosarum, quam principem tenebrarum harum?”

193 Hum 38 (III, 45): “per curiositatem a veritate ceciderit, quia prius spectavit curiose, quod affectavit illicite, speravit praesumptuose.”
or desire for moral and spiritual superiority arises in his heart and proposes for his intellect’s assent the delusional belief that he is, in fact, what he so longs to be, holier than all. Since his simultaneous self-neglect has led him to cease seeking that genuine self-knowledge which would ordinarily expose this delusional self-understanding as false, he swiftly embraces as true this false, but far more gratifying self-image. Having once embraced this self-deception, the monk now asserts his self-will first against his appointed superiors and then against God himself. Presumptuously aspiring to heights above himself in accordance with his new, deluded self-understanding, the monk exalts himself against God’s law, only to fall beneath himself into the simultaneously false knowledge and himself, his brothers, and his God alike. It is this dynamic of self-deception and self-will born of curiositas that Bernard traces in his eleven remaining steps of pride, beginning with levitas animae or instability of mind.

**Cultivating Self-Deception: From Levitas Mentis to Singularitas**

In the four steps of pride which immediately follow curiositas, from instability of mind to singularity, the monk is not, properly speaking subject to self-deception, but rather engaged in constructing or cultivating a gratifying but ultimately false self-understanding that he will in the sixth step of pride, arrogantia, embrace as true. In these four steps, that is, the monk retains some lingering sense that the delusional self-image his amor propriae excellentiae proposes for his belief, namely that his is morally and spiritually superior to his brethren, does not quite match the reality he still perceives in himself and others. Yet, by descending these steps, the monk in love with the thought of his own superiority manipulates his curiosity, his words, and his deeds so as to persuade himself and his brothers that he is who he so longs to be. Paradoxically, then, the monk
descending these early steps of pride constructs for himself a pleasant but false self-image born of and sustained by the praise and admiration of those very same brothers he has simultaneously come to despise as inferior to himself.

In the second step of pride, *levitas animae* or instability of mind, Bernard shows how the monk who has allowed his sensitive and mental regard to pass from himself to others begins to see and judge his brothers through the lens of his newly revitalized *amor propriae excellentiae*. As he glances curiously about from one brother to the next, he soon comes to regard some as his moral and spiritual superiors and others as his moral and spiritual inferiors. In his perceived superiors, he sees much that he envies, while in his perceived inferiors he finds much to ridicule. Consequently, as his undisciplined gaze flits from one monk to the next, from supposed inferior to supposed superior, his mind is by turns carried up on waves of proud self-conceit and then cast down into troughs of jealousy and bitter self-contempt.\(^\text{194}\) The source of the monk’s mental and emotional instability of mind is his newfound desire for his own moral and spiritual superiority, for it is, Bernard explains, “his *amor propriae excellentiae* that makes him weep when he is surpassed by others and rejoice when he surpasses them.”\(^\text{195}\) Seeing his brother monks through the lens of his ravenous, unrestrained desire for his own superiority, the monk can no longer see his fellow monks as true brothers and companions in the shared

\(^{194}\) Here we are indebted to M. Ambrose Conway’s elegant translation which nicely captures the nautical tinge to Bernard’s description: “[The mind] is no longer steadily fixed on its real concerns and is now carried up on the crest of the waves of pride, now down in the trough of envy.” *The Steps of Humility and Pride*, trans. M. Ambrose Conway, 66.

\(^{195}\) Hum 39 (III, 46): “In altero nequam, in altero vanus, in utroque superbus existit, quia et quod superari se dolet, et quod superare se gaudet, amor propriae excellentiae facit.”
spiritual life of the monastic community, but only as competitors, rival claimants to the title of superior holiness he now so covets for himself alone.

Bernard’s teaching on this instability of mind is best understood in light of his doctrine of the three steps of Truth presented earlier in his treatise. As was noted above, for Bernard, the monk who has come to recognize and accept the bitter truth of his own miseria by humble self-judgment will swiftly recognize that same miseria in his brothers and so learn to love them with genuine compassion. Observing Paul’s command to “rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep” (Rom 12:15), he will rejoice in his brother’s spiritual growth and weep over his brother’s spiritual struggles as if these were likewise his own. When this monk raises his eyes to contemplate his brothers, his true knowledge of his own sinful weakness will afford him that empathetic access to his brother’s heart which will enable him first to commiserate with and then mercifully to help his brother monk. He will be able, in other words, to regard his brother not as a rival or a competitor, but as a true brother in the common joys and sorrows of the spiritual life. In the case of the monk subject to curiosity, however, this affective identification is sadly inverted. Devoid of that true self-knowledge which might enable him to commiserate with his brother, and able only to see his brother only in terms of his own desire for moral and spiritual superiority, he instead rejoices when he sees his brother struggle and weeps when he sees his brother succeed. His brother’s loss is his gain, his brother’s gain his loss.

The monk who has descended so far as levitas animae will, Bernard continues, naturally seek some relief from his vicissitudes of joyous vanity and embittered envy which attend his restless curiosity. Yet the proud, the abbot explains, “always seek what
pleases them and avoid what makes them sad.”196 The thoughts of superiority the monk enjoys when he contemplates his supposed inferiors are of course far more pleasant those thoughts of jealousy and self-contempt that come with considering his supposed superiors. So, in the third step of pride, inepta laetitia or false joy, the curious and emotionally unstable monk restrains his curious gaze so that he might see only what he wants to see, only those sights and sounds that gratify his ever-growing love of his own superiority: “He restrains his curiosity from everything that reveals his own vileness or another’s excellence that he might instead curiously note everything in which he seems to excel others and always hide from his gaze everything in which he is excelled by another.”197 By this selective, self-serving manipulation of curiosity, the monk enters a delusional but pleasant world of his own imagining in which all that he sees and hears around him serves only to boost his growing sense of his own moral and spiritual superiority.

In the two steps that follow this inepta laetitiae, namely iactantia and singularitas, the monk who has manipulated his curiosity to gratify his self-conceit now in turn manipulates his brethren through his misuse of his words and deeds. Though Bernard does not explicitly say so, it seems that, at this stage, the monk is not yet entirely convinced of the truth of the new and far more gratifying self-image he has fashioned for himself. The new self-understanding his amor propriae excellentiae has proposed for his belief is indeed appealing, but is it in fact true? Faced with this dilemma, the monk now

196 Hum 40 (III, 46): “Proprium est superborum, laeta semper appetere et tristia devitare.”

197 Hum 40 (III, 46-47): “Ex illa denique parte, qua sua sibi vilitas et aliena excellentia monstratur, restringit curiositatem, ut totum se transferat in contrariam partem, quatenus in quo ipse videtur praecellere, curiosius notet, in quo alter praecellit, semper dissimulet.”
begins to seek some confirmation for his newly desired self-understanding through the praise and esteem of his brethren. If his brothers should admire him as the holiest member of their community, surely he must be so. Accordingly, in the fourth and fifth steps of pride, boasting and singularity, the monk sets out to win their admiration by his speech and actions respectively.

In his narrative of pride’s fourth step, iactantia or boasting, Bernard explains that the proud monk “hungrers and thirsts” not for righteousness, but “for an audience, on whom he might pour out all the vanity he feels within himself so that they might see how great and wise a man he is.”

According to Benedict’s ninth step of humility, the monk should “restrain his tongue and remain silent, not speaking until he is asked a question.” Not so the boastful monk of Bernard’s fourth step of pride. As soon as he finds an opportunity to speak, this monk “brings forth from his treasury things old and new; his opinions spill forth, his wealth of words resound. He interrupts his questioners, he does not answer those who ask. He will ask the questions, he will provide the answers as he cuts off all who try to speak.”

Though he may indeed be able to edify his hearers with his learning, this is not his intention: “He is not concerned to teach you or to learn from you what he does not know, but only to ensure that you know how much he

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198 Hum 41 (48): “Esurit et stitit auditores, quibus suos iactitet vanitates, quibus omne quod sentit effundat, quibus qualis et quatenus sit innotescat.”

199 RB 7.56: “Nonus humilitatis gradus est si linguam ad loquendum prohibeat monachus et, taciturnitatem habens, usque ad interrogationem non loquatur.”

200 Hum 41 (III, 48): “Inventa autem occasione loquendi, si de litteris sermo exoritur, vetera proferuntur et nova; volant sententiae, verba resonant ampullosa. Praevenit interrogantem, non quaerenti respondet. Ipse quaerit, ipse solvit, et verba collocutoris imperfecta praecidit.”
knows.” Should the topic of conversation turn to religion, he is delighted to boast of his visions and dreams, to urge vigils, fasting, and prayer, and, Bernard quips, “to offer interminable and vain lectures on patience, humility, and each of the other virtues.”

Again the boastful monk’s aim is neither to instruct nor encourage his brothers, but to persuade them of his own exemplary and admirable sanctity. He trusts that his brothers will recall Christ’s saying, “the good man brings forth good things from his good treasure” (Mt 12:35).

The proud monk knows, however, that his boasts will scarcely be credible if they are not backed with praiseworthy actions: “He would be ashamed if after boasting that he is superior to others he did not do something more than others, through which he might appear to have excelled all others.” And so, in the fifth step of pride, singularitas or singularity, the proud monk strives to impress his brother monks with various feats of virtuosic asceticism, contrary to Benedict’s eighth step of humility, that a monk “should do nothing save what is commended by the common rule of the monastery and the example set by his superiors.” While his brothers eat, he fasts. While his brothers rest, he keeps vigil. When his brothers leave the choir after the office, he remains to offer his own private prayers. Yet the proud monk’s purpose in pursuing these singular devotions above and beyond the common rule is not to grow in holiness, but rather to appear holy

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201 Hum 41 (III, 48): “Aedificare potest, sed non aedificare intendit. Non curat te docere vel a te doceri ipse quod nescit, sed ut scire sciatur quod scit.”

202 Hum 41 (III, 48): “de patientia, de humilitate, aut de singulis virtutibus plenissime, sed vanissime disputat.”

203 Hum 42 (III, 48): “Turpe est ei, qui se supra ceteros iactat, si non plus ceteris aliquid agat, per quod ultra ceteros appareat.”

204 RB 7.55: “Octavus humilitatis gradus est si nihil agat monachus, nisi quod quod communis monasterii regula vel maiorum cohortantur exempla.”
before the eyes of his brothers: “He is eager not to be better, but to be seen to be better, not to lead a better life, but to be seen to lead a better life, that he might be able to say, ‘I am not like the rest of men’ (Lk 18:11).”205

For Bernard, then, the monk who has descended as far as the step of singularity has altogether ceased to seek the Truth in himself by humble and honest self-judgment before God. He is no longer concerned, that is, to discover whether he is truly holy or to pursue true holiness by his fidelity to the regular, common life commanded by his Rule. On the contrary, his every glance, his every word, and his every deed are calculated to win from his brothers the honor and esteem he requires to sustain his still tenuous delusions of superior holiness. In one exceptionally vivid passage, concerning the singular monk’s practice at meals, Bernard shows how the monk’s obsessive desire to appear holier than all leads even to the most extreme forms of self-contempt:

While at meals he often glances around the other tables. If he sees that anyone is eating less than he is, he despises himself for being outdone. So he begins cruelly to deprive himself of the food he once thought necessary, more afraid of some detriment to his reputation than the pains of hunger. If he sees anyone more emaciated, more pallid then himself, he considers himself worthless, and never rests. Since he cannot see his own face or how he appears before others, he looks at his hands and arms, feels his ribs, his shoulders, and his loins, that from the condition of his body he might judge the pallor and color of his face.206

205 Hum 42 (III, 48-49): “Non melius vivere, sed videri vincere gestit, quatenus dicere possit: NON SUM SICUT CETERI HOMINUM.”

206 Hum 42 (III, 49): “Inter prandendum crebro solet oculos iactare per mensas, ut si quem minus comedere viderit, victum se doleat, et incipiat idipsun sibi crudeliter subtrahere, quod necessarium victui indulgendum praeviderat, plus gloriae metuens detrimentum quam famis cruciatum Si quem macriorem, si quem pallidiorem perspexerit, vilem se aestimat, numquam requiescit. Et quoniam vultum ipse suum videre non potest, qualem scilicet se intuentibus offert, manus, quas potest, et brachia spectans, palpam costas, humeros attractat et lumbos, ut secundum quod corporis sui membra, vel minus, vel satis exilia probat, pallorem ac colorem oris discernat.”
Here abbot Bernard figures the proud, singular monk as the picture of anguished self-hatred. Consumed by his ravenous hunger and thirst for the admiration of his fellows, he will even deny his body the most basic necessities of food and drink. Having deprived his body and spirit of their proper nourishment, he seeks only to nourish his growing reputation for sanctity. So, when his brothers file from the choir to the cloister, he remains alone in the oratory, not to pray, but to be heard to pray: “He coughs and clears his throat, and fills the ears of those sitting outside with sighs and groans.”\(^{207}\) Though his ways are devious, the singular monk’s virtuosic displays are not without their desired effect: “When he performs these singular but empty deeds, his reputation grows among the simpler brethren, who judge him according to the works they see him do, not the motives for which he does them.”\(^{208}\)

**Embracing Self-Deception: *Arrogantia***

In his account of the four preceding steps of pride, Bernard has shown how the monk subject to *curiositas* fashions for himself a pleasant but specious self-identity as the holiest of monks by manipulating his own curiosity and by manipulating his brothers through his misuse of words and deeds to win their praise. Yet, throughout these steps, the monk’s lingering sense that he needs to manipulate his brothers’ perceptions of him suggests that he has not yet fully embraced the self-deception he has so far spun for himself. In the subsequent, sixth step of pride, *arrogantia* or arrogance, however, the

\(^{207}\) Hum 42 (III, 49): “aliiis in claustro quiescentibus, solus in oratorio remanet: excreat et tussit, gemitibus ac suspiriis aures foris sedentium de angulo implet.”

\(^{208}\) Hum 42 (III, 49): “Cum autem ex his quae singulariter, sed inaniter agit, apud simpliciores eius opinio excreverit, qui profecto opera probant quae cernunt, sed unde prodeant non discernunt.”
monk at last succumbs to self-deception as he embraces as true the false self-
understanding his *amor propriae excellentiae* has proposed for his belief. Indeed from
the perspective of Bernard’s doctrine of self-knowledge, this sixth and central step is the
most crucial, for it is here that the monk who has labored so long and diligently to win
the praises of his brothers now accepts their perceptions of him as the truth about
himself. Bernard writes: “As the simpler brethren praise the miserable man, they only
confirm his delusion. He believes what he hears, he praises what he does, he pays no
attention to his intentions.”

It is, moreover, here in the sixth step of pride that pride’s paradox becomes most
evident. The monk who has managed to persuade everyone else, and finally himself, that
he is wiser and holier than all now depends on his brothers’ mistaken praise to squelch
any faint, lingering protests of his own conscience: “As he embraces their opinion of him,
he grows oblivious to his own intentions. In every other matter, he believes himself
wiser than others, but on this matter alone, he believes others wiser than himself.” For
Benedict, the seventh step of humility is that a monk “not only confess with his tongue,

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209 Here we cannot agree with Denis Farkasfalvy when he claims that “only three of [Bernard’s] 12 steps appear to have have real importance: the first (*curiositas*), the 5th (*singularitas*), and the 10th (*rebellio.*).” If, as Farkasfalvy rightly observes, Bernard’s treatise displays “a coherent system with deep inner logic and tight connections between the steps,” then each step should be regarded as of “real importance” as it leads to the next. From the perspective of Bernard’s doctrine of self-knowledge, however, the sixth step should be regarded as particularly important for it is here that the monk at last subscribes to the false self-understanding he has so diligently cultivated in the steps preceding.


210 *Hum* 42-43 (III, 49): “dum miserum beatificant, in errorem inducunt. Credit quod audit, laudat quod agit, et quid intendat non attendit.”

211 *Hum* 43 (III, 49-50): “Obliviscitur intentionem, dum ampectitur opinionem. Quique de omni alia re plus sibi credit quam aliis, de se solo plus aliis credit quam sibi.”
but believe in his inmost heart that he is inferior to and viler than all.”

By contrast, in Bernard’s sixth step of pride, the monk inflated with the praise that trips from his brothers’ tongues, “now not only displays his piety with affected words and works, but believes in his inmost heart that he is holier than all.” Convinced in his heart that he is what he so wants to be, the holiest of monks, he cannot even imagine that his brothers’ acclaim might spring from their ignorance or their deception at his own hands. On the contrary, their praises are his due.

In the preceding steps of pride, the proud monk has managed to deceive his brothers into praising him as the holiest of monks. Now in the sixth step, he has deceived himself into believing, against the witness of his own conscience, that their deceived estimation of himself is true and their mistaken admiration his due. Having refused to accept the humbling truth about himself in the undeceived eyes of God, and having fashioned a new and far more pleasant identity for himself in the deceived eyes of his fellow monks, he now embraces that new identity with a vigor and relish born of his swollen self-love. If in the preceding steps he preferred appearances to reality and the perceptions of his brothers to the truth about himself, he now accepts appearances as reality, and takes the perceptions of his brothers as the truth about himself. He is who he so desires to be, he is what his brothers see him to be, he is superior to everyone else. Less like the humble Publican of Benedict’s twelfth step who confesses his sinfulness and weakness before God, the proud monk now more resembles the Pharisee of the same

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212 RB 7.51: “Septimus humiliatis gradus est si omnibus se inferiorem et viliorem non solum sua lingua pronuntiet, sed etiam intimo cordis credat affectu.”

213 Hum 43 (III, 50): “iam non verbotenus aut sola operum ostentatione suam praeférat religionem, sed intimo cordis credat affectu se omnibus sanctiorem.”
parable who exults in his own superior holiness and boasts before God that he is “not like the rest of men.”

Through his descent of the first six steps of pride, moreover, the monk has not only succumbed to this self-deception, but also come to the false knowledge and contempt of his brother monks. As Bernard has shown in his discussion of Lucifer’s primordial *curiositas*, the fallen angel’s *amor propriae excellentiae* lead him to believe not only that he could rival the Son’s lordship over creation, but also that his fellow rational creatures were of value only insofar as they mouthed his praises and served as his obedient subjects. Similarly, the monk who has reached the sixth step of pride has come to regard his brothers as of value only insofar as they acknowledge his superior virtue and gratify his self-conceit. According to the spiritual itinerary of the three steps of Truth, the monk ascending to the contemplative vision of God grows in humility and compassion, and so comes to know his fellow monks as true brothers in the common spiritual life. By contrast, the monk descending the steps of pride comes to regard his brothers first as objects for his curious gaze, then as rivals to his claims of superior holiness, and finally as contemptible inferiors whose sole purpose is to celebrate his moral and spiritual superiority. As he deceives himself, then, the proud monk likewise deceives his brothers, and, like Satan, draws their hearts from the praise of God to the praise of himself. By the sixth step of pride, then, the monk’s seemingly harmless curiosity has already entailed his false knowledge of and contempt for both himself and his brethren.
Asserting Self-Will Against Superiors: From *Praesumptio* to *Rebellio*

In the four steps of pride which follow the monk’s *arrogantia*, Bernard continues to trace implicitly the parallel between Lucifer’s pride and that of the monk. As was noted above, for Bernard, Satan’s self-deception and false understanding of his fellow creatures eventually led him to assert his self-will against the will of God, and to despise the rightful rule of his only superior, Christ the Most High. In the seventh to tenth steps of pride, likewise, Bernard shows how the proud monk’s developing self-deception moves him to despise not only his brothers, but also his monastic superiors to whom, in Benedict’s words, he owes “all obedience out of love for Christ.” For Bernard, the link between these steps and those preceding is clear: how can the monk who has come to regard himself as holier than all condescend to be instructed, or worse corrected, by anyone else? Thus, in the seventh step of pride, *praesumptio*, the monk, like Satan, judges himself worthy to rule over his brethren and so presumes to usurp his superiors’ rightful authority over the community. Though he is not asked, he involves himself in their decisions, even going so far as to countermand their orders and rearrange all their arrangements, for he “thinks that whatever he himself has not done or ordered is neither rightly done nor properly ordered.” If his abbot does not recognize his manifest wisdom and promote him to the rank of prior, he is certain that this is due to the abbot’s envy or else the machinations of his jealous brethren. Though Benedict’s sixth step of humility requires him to embrace even the most humble tasks with docile obedience, the

214 RB 7.34: “Tertius humilitatis gradus est ut quis pro Dei amore omni oboedientia se subdat maiori.”

215 Hum 44 (III, 50): “Quidquid ipse non fecerit aut ordinaverit, nec recte factum, nec pulchre aestimat ordinatum.”
presumptuous monk bristles at such menial chores, knowing full well that he is worthy of more exalted responsibilities.

Speaking from his wealth of experience as an abbot, Bernard observes that a monk who so presumptuously involves himself in his superiors’ affairs will inevitably commit some fault. According to the Rule, it belongs to the abbot to reprove the monk’s faults and to the monk to confess his guilt, but “how can this monk confess his sins when he neither thinks himself guilty nor suffers anyone else to think he is guilty?” Swollen with the love of his own excellence, he cannot even imagine himself capable of sin and dreads nothing more than that his precious self-image as the holiest of all should be sullied by his brothers’ suspicions. Since he has surrendered his entire sense of himself to the perceptions and judgments of his brothers, he is desperate to preserve his reputation and so, in the eighth step of pride, contrives various excuses for his sins. Bernard writes:

The monk who excuses his sins will say, “I did not do it,” or else, “All right, I did do it, but I was right to do so.” If what he did was plainly wrong, he will say, “It was not all that bad,” or if indeed it was quite bad, he will try, “I had the best of intentions.” If, however, his intentions were obviously bad, he will like Adam and Eve defend his sin by blaming it on another. If this monk shamelessly defends even such manifest sins, how will he [according to Benedict’s fifth step of humility] humbly confess to his abbot any hidden and sinful thoughts entering his heart?

216 Hum 44 (III, 50): “Sed quomodo culpam suam confitebitur, qui nec esse putat, nec putari culpabilis patitur?”

217 Hum 45 (III, 51): “Aut enim dicit qui se excusat: <<Non feci>>; aut: <<Feci quidem, sed bene feci>>; aut si male: <<Non multum male>>; aut si multum male: <<Non mala intentione>>. Si autem et de illa, sicut Adam vel Eva, convincitur, aliena suasione excusare se nititur. Sed qui procaciter etiam aperta defendit, quando occultas et malas cogitationes, cordi suo advenientes, humiliter revelaret abbat?”
As so often in his narrative of the steps of pride, Bernard’s touch of humor here cloaks a more serious truth: the monk who has descended this far down the ladder of pride is concerned with perceptions rather than truth, with appearances rather than realities. He has by this point grown so attached to his specious self-image, so enamored of his own self-supposed superior holiness, that he will resort to every lie and subterfuge before suffering some wound to his pride. The correction of his superiors should ideally serve as an occasion for honest self-scrutiny and self-judgment, as an invitation to humility and the first step of Truth, but such a humbling self-confrontation would require him to forsake his cherished self-conception, a thought too bitter for the monk who imagines himself superior to all.

The lengths to which the proud will go to preserve their cherished reputation for sanctity become most evident in Bernard’s ninth step of pride, simulata confessio or feigned confession. If the proud monk is caught openly in sin and knows that he cannot excuse his actions, he resorts to a far more cunning means of defending himself and his reputation. Rather than excusing his sin, he openly confesses it before the community, taking care to exaggerate his guilt beyond belief and to overwhelm his brothers and superiors with a theatrical but ultimately impressive display of humble self-accusation. He casts down his eyes, throws his body to the ground, feigns tears of contrition as best as he is able, and interrupts his confession with seemingly repentant sighs and groans. As he accuses himself of scarcely believable crimes, he trusts his superiors will not only doubt his guilt in these matters, but even begin to reconsider the truth of their original charges against him. Once more his concern is for appearances, not reality, for perceptions rather than truth. Concealing his sin beneath a feigned, public display of
heroic humility, he turns even his most perilous moment into an opportunity to win his brothers’ sympathy and esteem. “How glorious a thing is humility,” Bernard exclaims, “that even pride should wear her guise so as to escape humiliation!”

The experienced abbot, however, will not be duped by this pious subterfuge, but rather test the truth of the monk’s confession and the sincerity of his intentions. He will not overlook the proud monk’s sin, nor fail to impose some punishment, for he knows that just as the potter’s vessel is tried in the furnace, so the penitent’s sincerity will be proven in the attitude with which he assumes his penance. The genuine penitent will, with the attitude described in Benedict’s fourth step of humility, patiently embrace the penance enjoined on him with a placid conscience, proving his obedience under harsh or even unjust conditions. By contrast, the proud and deceitful monk, who cannot bear to condescend to the humiliation of penance, will no longer be able to sustain his humble pretence, but rather “murmur, grind his teeth, and fume with rage,” so exposing himself as a fraud before his superiors and his entire community. In a momentary flash of anger, his façade of holiness, so painstakingly constructed, will crumble around him, leaving him naked before the enlightened eyes of his brothers:

Can you imagine the distress the proud monk will feel in his heart when his fraud is exposed, his peace is lost, his reputation is shattered, and his guilt remains? At last everyone knows him for

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218 Hum 47 (III, 52): “Gloriosa res humilitas, qua ipsa quoque superbia palliare se appetit, ne vilescat!”

219 Hum 47 (III, 52): “Cuius vero simulata confessio est, una vel levi contumelia aut exigua poena interrogatus, iam humilitatem simulare, iam simulationem dissimulare non potest. Murmurat, frendet, irascitur, nec in quarto stare humilitatis, sed in nonum superbiae gradum corruisse probatur, qui, secundum quod descriptus est, recte simulata confessio appellari potest.”

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who he is, everyone judges him, and they are all the more indignant as they see how wrongly they esteemed him.\textsuperscript{220}

Once he has been exposed as a fraud, the proud monk faces a crucial moment of decision. With his specious reputation in ruins and his deceit exposed to the judgment of his brothers, he might choose to confront himself honestly, to face up to the manifest reality of his own sinfulness, and so embark upon the bitter but life-giving way of self-judgment, humility, and repentance. Yet, Bernard observes, such a choice is extremely difficult for the proud monk as it requires him to bow to the will of his superiors and to accept silently the judgment of the entire community. It is possible, Bernard allows, that by God’s mercy, the proud monk may be moved to humble himself in this way, but it is more likely that the monk who has grown so convinced of his own superiority and so come to define himself in terms of his brothers’ praise will not find himself able to bear such an affront to his pride. And so, driven by his swollen love of his own excellence, he refuses obedience to his superiors, refuses any public confession before his brothers, and instead chooses shamelessly to assert his own will in defiance of both.

By this tenth step of pride, rebellion against his superiors, the proud monk inverts Benedict’s third step of humility, that a monk “should submit to his superior in all obedience for the love of God, imitating the Lord of whom the Apostle says: ‘He became obedient even to death’ (Phil 2:8).”\textsuperscript{221} On Bernard’s reading of the \textit{Rule}, it is here, in the third step of humility, that one ascending this ladder enters the monastic enclosure for it

\textsuperscript{220} Hum 47 (III, 52): “Quanta putas tunc confusio sit in corde superbi, cum fraus decipitur, pax amittitur, laus minuitur, nec culpa diluitur? Tandem notatur ab omnibus, iudicatur ab omnibus, eo que vehementius omnes indignantur, quo falsum conspiciunt quidquid de eo prius opinabantur.”

\textsuperscript{221} RB 7.34: “Tertius humilitatis gradus est ut quis pro Dei amore omni oboedientia se subdat maiori, imitans Dominum, de quo dicit apostolus: \textit{Factus oboediens usque ad mortem}.”

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is here that he submits in obedience to a superior. Conversely, Bernard suggests, it is in the tenth step of pride that the monk who has despised his brothers and scorned the rule of his superiors must be expelled from the monastic enclosure. Once more, the monk’s pattern of descent imitates that of Lucifer. When Lucifer revolted against the rule of his Superior, Christ, and so violated the concord of the citizens of heaven, he was justly expelled from the paradise of heaven. In the same fashion, when the monk revolts against the rule of his superiors, and so disturbs the concord of the monastic community, he must eventually be compelled to leave the paradise of the cloister, either by his own decision or by that of his superiors.

**Assertion of Self-Will Against God: From Libertas Peccandi to Consuetudo Peccandi**

In his *Rule*, Benedict affirms that the abbot is “believed to hold the place of Christ in the monastery.” It is therefore not surprising to find that, for Bernard, the monk who has revolted against his monastic superiors, and so suffered expulsion from the monastery, will eventually revolt against Christ, whom his superiors represent. Like his first parents, Adam and Eve, the former monk abandoned to his own devices will eventually seize the wisdom proper to the Son, dare to determine good and evil for himself, and so exalt his self-will against the will of God. For Bernard, the former monk dares to aspire to such heights because, once loosed to the world, he falls prey to a new and even more sinister self-deception, namely the belief that he is a god in his own right, exempt from the law of his Creator and capable of governing himself in accordance with his self-will rather than the divine will. As in the case of Lucifer, moreover, the former

222 RB 2.2: “Christi enim agere vices in monasterio creditur.”

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monk’s descent into this deepest form of self-deception is intimately related to his
descent into a false knowledge of God. In his final two steps of pride, 
\textit{libertas peccandi} and \textit{consuetudo peccandi}, the abbot traces this descent briefly but with typically astute
psychological insight.

According to Benedict, the second step of humility is that one should “love not
his own will, nor take delight in the satisfaction of his desires, but imitate in his actions
that saying of the Lord, ‘I came not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me’
(John 6:38).” As long as the proud monk remained in the monastery, he was to some extent prevented from doing his own will and gratifying his own desires by the
obligations and disciplines of regular life in community. Yet now that he has been loosed
from these restraints, he finds himself, in the eleventh step of pride, free to sin, free to
indulge his sinful desires as he wishes with all the created goods and pleasures the
outside world has to afford. Though free to sin in this respect, the former monk
nevertheless retains from his monastic formation some scant fear of God and God’s
punishments for sin which serves to check to some extent his sinful impulses. So, with
his reason or conscience meekly murmuring some protests against his will, he takes his
first steps into the life of sin tentatively, with some hesitation. In Bernard’s image, he
does not plunge headlong into the whirlpool of vice, but proceeds cautiously, like a man
testing the waters of river before attempting to ford it.

When, however, the proud man does take these first, hesitant steps into the
whirlpool of vice, he soon finds, contrary to his fear, that God does not in fact punish his

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\textsuperscript{223} RB 7.31: “Secundus humilitatis gradus est si propriam quis non amans voluntatem desideria sua non delectetur implere, sed vocem illam Domini factis imitetur dicentis: \textit{Non veni facere voluntatem meam, sed eius qui me misit.”

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sins. He experiences no vengeful blow from heaven, but only the new and delightful pleasure he finds in the gratification of his fleshly cravings. So he sins again and more deeply, wading still further into the whirlpool of vice in search of more and even greater delights. Describing this gradual descent, Bernard writes:

When by the terrible judgment of God he finds that his first steps into sin meet with no punishment, he freely enjoys again the pleasure he has experienced, and this pleasure grows sweet. His former desires revive, his reason is lulled to sleep, and habit begins to bind him. So the miserable man is drawn into an abyss of evil and handed over captive to the tyranny of his vices, so much so that he is absorbed in the whirlpool of his fleshly desires and soon forgets his own reason and the fear of God, and “the fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God’” (Ps 13:1). By now he does whatever pleases him without regard to what is lawful. He does not restrain his mind, his hands, and his feet from sinful thoughts, works, and pursuits. Whatever comes into his heart, his lips, or his hands, he wickedly designs, vainly speaks, and viciously carries out.224

By this slippery passage from the freedom to sin to the twelfth step of pride, the habit of sinning, the proud man inverts Benedict’s first step of humility, that the monk should “keep the fear of God always before his eyes and never forget it.”225 For Benedict, this means that the monk will ceaselessly ruminate on all that God has commanded and keep in mind that he will one day be judged by God in accordance with his fidelity to these commandments. He will therefore restrain himself from vices and sins of thought and tongue, hand and feet, self-will or fleshly desires, ever mindful that he is always seen by

224 Hum 51 (III, 54): “Et postquam terribili Dei iudicio prima flagitia impunitas sequitur, experta voluptas libenter repetitur, repetita blanditur. Concupiscientia reviviscet, sopitur ratio, ligat consuetudo. Trahitur miser in profundum malorum, traditur captivus tyrannidi vitiorum, ita ut carnalium voragine desideriorum absorptus, suae rationis divini que timoris oblitus, dicat INSIPiens IN CORDE SUO: NON EST DEUS. Iam indifferenter libitis pro licitis utitur, iam ab illicitis cogitandis, patrandis, investigandis animus, manus vel pedes non prohibentur; sed quidquid in cor, in buccam, ad manum venerit, machinatur, garrit, et operatur, malevolus, vaniloquus, facinorosus.”

225 RB 7.10: “Primus itaque humilitatis gradus est si, timorem Dei sibi ante oculos semper ponens, oblivionem omnino fugiat.”
God in heaven. He will acknowledge that God now withholds his judgment and punishment because he is a loving father who spares his children for a time that they might be converted to him and learn to do his will.

As Bernard explains in the passage quoted above, the man who has reached the twelfth step of pride adopts precisely the opposite attitude. When he sees that God does not judge or punish he sins, he takes this not as a sign of God’s mercy before his coming judgment, but as a sign that God is a god of mercy but not justice, that God either takes no notice of his sins or else forbears to punish them on account of his mercy. Once he has exchanged the knowledge of the true God for this idol of his own making, his former fear of God evaporates, his reason ceases to mutter its protests against the will, and he freely follows his sinful desires into the whirlpool of vice. Delighting in his own freedom, he now refuses obedience to God as he previously refused obedience to his superiors, claims his own will for himself, and shamelessly pursues whatever he desires with complete contempt for God and God’s law.

In this way, the proud man’s ignorance of God and God’s justice only serves to deepen his self-deception. Imagining for himself a god who lacks the will to punish his sins, and therefore judging himself free from obedience to God’s will, he begins to regard himself as a god in his own right, capable of determining for himself what is right and wrong, and living by no law save that of his own will. In truth, however, this is only a self-deception, for despite his delusions of divinity, he is in fact free neither from the law of God nor the law of his own nature as God’s creature. Though at first he sins freely, pursuing whatever pleasures he pleases, his repeated sins soon bind him in the inescapable chains of sinful habit and what began as a matter of choice swiftly becomes a
matter of compulsion. He is, in truth, less like a god and more like a beast, with his reason and will enslaved to the promptings of his fleshly desires. As he is dragged into the whirlpool of vice and handed over captive to the tyranny of his vices, he is truly a “miserable man” because he has now enslaved himself to the desire for everything that cannot fulfill him, for everything other than the God for whom he was made and in whom alone he can find rest for his deepest desires.

What makes this proud man’s plight all the more dire is that he himself cannot see that he is hopelessly enslaved in this way. To illustrate this point, Bernard draws a parallel between the state of the proud man who has fallen to the twelfth step of pride and the state of the monk who has ascended to Benedict’s twelfth step of humility. Recalling the conclusion to Benedict’s seventh chapter, Bernard writes:

> As the just man who has ascended all these steps runs on to life with a ready heart and the ease of good habit, so the evil man who has descended these same steps hastens boldly towards death with the ease of sinful habit, no longer governing himself by reason, no longer restrained by any fear….The one runs more swiftly, the other more eagerly. The one is made swift by charity, the other made eager by cupidity….In the one perfect charity, in the other perfect malice, casts out all fear (1 Jn 4:18). The former is made bold by truth, the latter by his blindness.  

For Bernard both the perfectly humble and the supremely proud experience a love that casts out all fear, but for the proud this is the love of cupidity, the love of themselves for their own sake with no regard for the needs of their neighbors or the law of God.

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226 Hum 51 (III, 54-55): “Quemadmodum denique ascensis his omnibus gradibus, corde iam alacri et absque labore pro bona consuetudine iustus currit ad vitam, sic descensis impius eisdem, pro malo usu non se ratione gubernans, non timoris freno retentans, intrepidus festinat ad mortem. Medii sunt qui fatigantur, angustiantur, qui nunc metu cruciati gehennae, nunc pristina retardati consuetudine, descendendo vel ascendendo laborant. Supremus tantum et infimus currunt absque impedimento et absque labore. Ad mortem hic, ad vitam ille festinat; alter alacrior, alter proclivior. Illum alacrem caritas, hunc proclivem cupiditas facit. In altero amor, in altero stupor laborem non sentit. In illo denique perfecta caritas, in isto consummata iniquitas foras mittit timorem. Illi veritas, huic caecitas dat securitatem.”
Consumed by this self-centered love, and confident by their own experience that God will
not punish them for indulging it against his law, the proud freely and carelessly seek
whatever delights them, blind to the stark truth that they have embraced a life of sin
which can only lead, by God’s true justice, to judgment, condemnation, and eternal death.
So their supposed self-love is, in the end, the most severe form of self-hatred. Having
shown their contempt for their brethren, their superiors, and their God, they now show
contempt even for themselves.

Conclusion

As the preceding exegesis of Bernard’s teaching in the On the Steps of Humility
and Pride has shown, the abbot’s comprehensive theology of self-knowledge and its roles
within the spiritual life begins not with his reflections on the humbling self-knowledge
acquired in conversion, but prior to conversion with the defective self-knowledge or self-
deception born of pride. That Bernard should adopt such an approach to the question of
self-knowledge should not be surprising for, as scholars of the abbot’s work have often
observed, Bernard consistently begins his various accounts of the spiritual itinerary not
with the image of the human being as he or she might one day be through the grace of
God in Christ, but with the state of the human being as he or she is in his or her fallen
condition. Thus, as Gilson first observed, the starting point for Bernard’s celebrated and
controversial doctrine of human love is not the question of what human love ought to be,
but what it is in its fallen condition. He begins not with the figure of the Bride in whom
the loves of self and God are perfectly ordered and reconciled, but the figure of the fallen
human being who loves nothing other than himself or herself and for his or her own sake.
For Bernard, it is only when the nature of the fallen human being’s love is fully
understood that it becomes possible to offer an account of how Christ by his life, death, and resurrection reorders fallen human love in a manner suited to the specific conditions of the sinful human heart.\textsuperscript{227} If, as has often been remarked, Bernard displays exceptional interest in human anthropology, this is so only because he wishes to show precisely how the divine Word’s assumption of the human condition is intended to lead fallen human beings from their present state to the state of glory for which they first were made.\textsuperscript{228}

What Gilson observed concerning Bernard’s doctrine of human love is likewise true concerning the abbot’s teaching on self-knowledge. To demonstrate how Christ leads fallen human beings by various stages to the knowledge of themselves as his own beloved Bride, Bernard begins with the self-deception human beings suffer in their fallen condition. To varying degrees, all fallen human beings, including Bernard’s monks, are subject to delusions of superiority born of that love of their own excellence they have inherited from their first parents. And they suffer these delusions of superiority precisely because they have allowed their sensible and mental gaze to wander by curiosity from what is their proper concern, the true knowledge of their own sinfulness and weakness before God. If therefore fallen human beings are to be brought to this humbling self-knowledge, and from this humbling self-knowledge to the knowledge of themselves as being renewed in Christ, they must first be brought to themselves, moved to return to

\textsuperscript{227} Gilson, \textit{The Mystical Theology of Saint Bernard}, 33.

\textsuperscript{228} On this relationship between anthropology and Christology in Bernard’s thought, see Roch Kereszty, “Relationship between Anthropology and Christology. St. Bernard, a Teacher for Our Age,” 271-299; Farkasfalvy, “Bernard’s Concept of the Spiritual Life,” 3-14.
their hearts. Hence Bernard’s frequent quotation of Isaiah 46:8, a verse dear to Augustine, “Return, O sinners, to your heart.”229

Yet, this return to heart will not be easy for, as Bernard has already indicated, it will require an honest, unflinching recognition and judgment of one’s own sin and weakness. In this bitter, humbling encounter with the reality of one’s own fallen condition, the temptation to seek solace in pleasant delusions will never be stronger. For this reason, Bernard insists, the return to the heart must be effected and guided by the Word who illumines the sinner’s heart by his grace and models the sinner’s way by the humility of his Incarnation. Anticipating, effecting, and guiding the sinner’s return to the heart, the Incarnate Word moves his fallen creatures to know themselves in the full and bitter truth of their misery that they may through this self-knowledge embark upon the path of humility and love that culminates in their newfound knowledge of themselves as his own Bride. The stages of this journey of self-knowledge and the work of Christ in modeling and effecting this journey will be the focus of the next two chapters.

229 Bernard quotes some form of Is 46:8, redite praevaticatores ad cor, in Ep 243.5 (VIII, 133); 3 Sent 88 (VI.2, 131); Conv 3 (IV, 72); Rog 1 (V, 121); Div 115 (V, 121); Pasc 1.17 (V, 93). Augustine uses the same in, among other places, Confessionum libri tridecem 4.12 (CCSL 27); In Iohannis evangelium tractatus 18.10 (CCSL 36); Enarrationes in Psalmos 57.1 (CCSL 39).
CHAPTER 3:
THE ASCENT TO SELF-KNOWLEDGE

In the previous chapter, we saw through a study of Bernard’s *On the Steps of Humility and Pride* that, from the perspective of the various stages of the spiritual life, the abbot’s theology of self-knowledge begins well before the point of initial conversion with his account of the soul’s descent into the self-deception, or defective self-knowledge, intrinsic to pride and the region of unlikeness. In the present chapter, we will complete our account of Bernard’s theology of self-knowledge by articulating his parallel account of the soul’s ascent to self-knowledge through its restoration in the divine likeness lost through sin. As will be shown below, this ascent entails several distinct but sequentially linked moments of self-knowledge extending from the soul’s awareness of itself as disfigured image of God at its initial conversion to the soul’s newfound self-awareness as Christ’s own Bride, radiant with her Bridegroom’s own spiritual beauty.

As was observed in the Introduction, it was Étienne Gilson who first recognized the integral role self-knowledge plays in Bernard’s theology of the spiritual life when he wrote of the Cistercian’s distinctive form of “Christian Socratism.”230 In describing this Christian Socratism, Gilson argued that, for the abbot of Clairvaux, “the first thing to be

done…by whoever would walk in the ways of charity, is to learn to know himself” and that “to know ourselves is essentially, in [Bernard’s] view, to recognize that we are defaced images of God.” Subsequent scholarship on Bernard’s spiritual theology has consistently and correctly confirmed Gilson’s observation that self-knowledge, understood as the recognition of oneself as an image of God disfigured by sin, plays a key role in the abbot’s account of the soul’s conversion from the life of sin to the life of grace; for its is only this self-knowledge, Bernard believes, which gives birth within the soul to the virtue of humility which is the foundation of the spiritual life and the wellspring of all its future progress.

Yet, when Gilson claimed that, for Bernard, self-knowledge is “essentially” the knowledge of oneself as a disfigured image of God, he did not intend to limit the role of self-knowledge in Bernard’s doctrine to the role it assumes in the experience of conversion and the initial stages of the spiritual journey. Later in his study of Bernard’s systematic mystical theology, Gilson observes that the soul which has been progressively restored in the lost divine likeness through its growth in the life of charity eventually comes to enjoy a new moment of self-knowledge which dispels its earlier self-awareness as an image disfigured by sin. Once refashioned in the lost divine likeness, Gilson writes, the soul “recognizes herself once more in all the fullness of her being.” In this moment of new self-awareness, the interior conflict the soul endured upon its self-recognition as an image of God disfigured by its own sin gives way to new experience of interior peace as the soul now recognizes itself anew as an image renewed in the lost divine likeness of


charity: “Peace is reborn, misery becomes supportable, and now that she has re-become herself, she is able to delight in the sight of her own countenance.”

Gilson’s reference to this second moment of self-knowledge the soul acquires in the restoration of its lost divine likeness has, unfortunately, received far less attention in subsequent studies of the abbot’s spiritual theology. Occasionally, students of Bernard’s work have reiterated Gilson’s point. For example, Roch Kereszty has observed that, in Bernard’s vision of the soul’s progress in the spiritual life, the peaceful self-awareness it experiences at the end of its spiritual ascent is a kind of “counterpoint” to the bitter and painful self-awareness it suffered at the beginning of its conversion.

Gilson and Kereszty’s identification of this second, and quite different, moment of self-awareness in Bernard’s itinerary of the spiritual ascent is significant because it shows that, for Bernard, the soul’s self-knowledge is never static, but rather develops and changes as the soul is itself changed by its progressive restoration in the divine likeness. As the soul is gradually likened to Christ the divine Bridegroom, the soul comes to see within itself more and more each day the beautiful figure of Christ’s beloved Bride, radiant with Christ’s own beauty. The soul’s spiritual journey, then, is at the same time a journey of developing self-awareness. If the soul’s descent into pride entailed its simultaneous descent into ever more perverse forms self-deception, the soul’s ascent to God by way of humility and love will likewise entail its ascending self-understanding as ever more the Bride of Christ.


In recognizing the two distinct moments of self-awareness the soul experiences first in its initial conversion and then its is full restoration in the lost divine likeness, Gilson and Kereszty have, in effect, marked the origin and the culmination of the soul’s ascent to self-awareness as the Bride. Yet, in his various reflections on this ascent of self-knowledge that accompanies the soul’s return to God, Bernard has in fact marked out several intervening phases of self-understanding the soul experiences as it makes this ascent. The aim of the present chapter will be to trace Bernard’s teaching on these phases of self-awareness and their relationships to one another. In so doing, we hope to show that Bernard offers a nuanced narration of the soul’s ascent to self-knowledge that matches in its psychological insight the narrative of the soul’s descent into self-deception he depicts in *On the Steps of Humility and Pride*.

In order to obtain the most comprehensive picture of the abbot’s narration of this ascent, we will consider three of his most significant itineraries of the spiritual life taken from the early, middle, and later periods of his career respectively. Following the methodology proposed in the Introduction, we will begin with Bernard’s teaching in *On the Steps of Humility and Pride* and, more specifically, with his itinerary of the three steps of Truth. Here the abbot lays the foundations for a schema of the soul’s ascent to God by humility, charity, and contemplation that underlies all his subsequent schematizations of this ascent in their manifold variety. In this earliest spiritual itinerary, we will see, the abbot has already identified the two distinct moments of the soul’s self-awareness, attained at the origin and the culmination of the soul’s ascent respectively, which delimit the journey of self-knowledge to be described below.
Second, we will consider how Bernard develops this initial picture of the soul’s ascent to self-knowledge in his sermon-treatise of 1140, *On Conversion*. Here, in the form of psychological drama, Bernard explores in significantly greater detail the moments of self-understanding through which the soul journeys as its reason, will, and memory are sequentially purified and converted to the Word. Third and finally, we will conclude with a study of Bernard’s final written itinerary of the spiritual life, SC 85, in which the abbot describes as nowhere else in his *corpus* the self-awareness the soul enjoys when it assumes most fully the figure of Christ’s own Bride in both her anthropological and ecclesiological dimensions.

**The Ascent of Self-Knowledge in On the Steps of Humility and Pride**

In the first main part of his *On the Steps of Humility and Pride*, Bernard offers his first formulation of the soul’s ascent to God, namely the three steps of Truth. In paragraphs 18-27 of this first main part, the abbot considers this ascent from four perspectives, arranged in an order characteristic of his theological method: the anthropological (18-19), the theological (20-21), the hagiographical (23), and the personal (24-27). Bernard begins, that is, by tracing the soul’s gradual restoration in the divine likeness by its ascent through humility, love, and contemplation, the three steps of Truth. Then, the abbot considers the same ascent from the perspective of the three divine Persons, the Son, the Spirit, and the Father, as they effect the soul’s progress through these three steps. Third, Bernard considers how Saint Paul exemplifies this ascent in his being rapt to the third heaven (2 Cor 12:2), gleaning further theological insight from the saint’s paradigmatic experience. Finally, the abbot reads from the book of his own
experience, lamenting how he has made so little progress in this ascent to Truth.\textsuperscript{235} For the purposes of this chapter, Bernard’s anthropological and theological accounts of the soul’s ascent are the most significant.

With his characteristic concern for theological anthropology, Bernard begins his consideration of the soul’s ascent from the perspective of the human soul and, more precisely, from the perspective of the soul’s fallen condition prior to conversion. If the monk is to undertake the way of humility that leads to true self-knowledge, the first step of Truth, he must first be delivered from the self-deception, or defective self-knowledge, he suffers in virtue of pride:

\begin{quote}
Whoever wants to know the Truth in himself fully must first remove from his eye that beam of pride which obscures the light and set up a ladder in his heart, that by ascending its rungs, he may inquire into himself and so arrive at the twelfth step of humility and the first step of Truth.\textsuperscript{236}
\end{quote}

As we saw in the previous chapter, for Bernard, the “beam of pride” in the mind’s eye is nothing other than the monk’s \textit{amor propriae excellentiae} or passionate desire for his own superiority. When left unchecked by honest self-judgment, this excessive self-love swells to such intensity that it drives the monk into self-deception, into the vain but certain conviction that he is what he so wants to be, superior to everyone else. The monk subject to this \textit{amor propriae excellentiae} soon begins a gradual descent into self-deception marked by successive stages. As long as he remains in the earlier steps of

\textsuperscript{235} Bernard’s lament is of course much more than a humility trope. For, in his view, the first step in the ascent of self-knowledge is to recognize that there is such an ascent to be made and that one has not yet made it. By mourning his own lassitude, then, Bernard invites his brother monks to do the same and so begin their personal ascent in earnest.

\textsuperscript{236} Hum 15 (III, 27): “Qui ergo plene veritatem in se cognoscere curat, necesse est ut, semota trabe superbiae, quae oculum arcet a luce, ascensiones in corde suo disponat, per quas in seipso seipsum inquirat, et sic post duodecimum humilitatis ad primum veritatis gradum pertingat.”
pride, he does not yet embrace as true the notion of his own superiority, but eagerly entertains it. If, however, he has fallen as far as the decisive sixth step of pride, he embraces this self-deception, proudly judging himself holier than all his brothers. Finally, if he has fallen so far as the final two steps of pride, the monk, now expelled from his monastic community, first entertains and then embraces as true a far more perverse self-deception, namely that he is superior to God himself in the sense that he is, in his mind, no longer subject to God’s law.

Prior to his conversion, then, the monk may be found in one of several, increasingly perverse stages of self-deception. Yet, what is common to each of these stages is the monk’s *curiositas*, his sensitive and mental fascination with everything other than himself, which distracts him from that honest self-judgment which might expose these varied self-delusions as false. Consequently, wherever the monk may be on the ladder of pride’s descent, the first moment of his conversion must consist in the eradication of his curiosity and his return to himself.

It is important to note that, for Bernard, it is not the monk himself who takes the first step in this conversion from curiosity to self-regard. It is not in the first place the monk who discovers the Truth in himself, but the Truth who causes the monk to know himself in Truth. Though the abbot does not pause to explain why this must be, it seems clear that he thinks the addiction of curiosity and the delight the monk takes in his self-delusions of superiority are so strong that they can only be overcome by Christ’s

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inward movement in the soul. In any event, for Bernard, it is only by the prevenient grace of Christ, who is Truth himself, that the monk may be recalled, or converted, to his heart and there face himself in the very light of Truth.

Further, it is equally important to note that, for Bernard, the monk’s return to himself effected by the Word entails not his passage from some sheer self-ignorance to true self-knowledge, but rather the judgment of his defective self-knowledge as false and the eradication of that *amor propriae excellentiae* which stands at the root of this self-deception. So the monk’s conversion involves a radical reordering of his affective life, his passage from the love of his own superiority to a love for Truth himself. Bernard writes:

> Those whom Truth causes to know, and therefore to revile, themselves must now find bitter all those things they once loved, including their very selves. Standing before their own face, they are compelled to see themselves and to blush at what they see. Displeased with what they are, they long to be what they are not, but they know they cannot achieve this by themselves alone.²³⁸

By the prevenient grace of the Word, the monk who once delighted in the delusion of his own superiority now bitterly laments how far his former self-image is from the harsh truth of his own sin and weakness. Painful as it is, this true self-knowledge achieved in the eradication of self-deception is a blessing, for in revealing the chasm between what he is, a truly sinful monk, and what he longs to be, a truly holy one, this self-knowledge opens his eyes to the journey his must now undertake if he is to become what he was created to be.

²³⁸ *Hum 18 (III, 29): “Quos itaque Veritas sibi iam innotescere, ac per hoc vilescere fecit, necesse est, ut cuncta, quae amare solebant, et ipsi sibi amarescant Statuentes nimirum se ante se, tales se videre cogunt, quales vel a se videri erubescent. Dum que sibi displicet quod sunt, et ad id suspirant quod non sunt, quod utique per se fore diffident.”*
At the same time, since this self-knowledge also reveals his powerlessness to accomplish this journey, it likewise opens his eyes to the truth of that holiness for which he has always yearned. True holiness, he now sees, will be found not in exalting himself over his brothers, but in humbling himself to recognize his weakness and thereby learn compassion for them. True freedom, he now understands, will consist not in exalting his own will over the will of God, but in humbly opening his mind and heart to the gracious, transformative missions of Word and Spirit. In condescending to acknowledge his own brokenness, then, the monk has come to know both the true meaning of wholeness and the true way to its discovery.

The way to wholeness and Truth, Bernard continues, is to be found in the way of Christ’s Beatitudes. As was noted in the previous chapter, the abbot has already discerned his three steps of Truth in the second, fifth, and sixth beatitudes respectively: the meek will become the merciful, and the merciful the pure of heart. Now he employs the third and fourth beatitudes to round out his schema of the soul’s ascent to Truth. Elegantly amplifying the Matthean pericope with a subtlety difficult to capture in translation, he explains that the monk who has come to know himself in Truth will “vehemently mourn” the truth of his self-imposed misery, but nevertheless find his one “consolation” in judging himself severely. Out of love for the Truth, he will “hunger and thirst for justice,” and find his “satisfaction” in making satisfaction for his past life. Yet when he finds that he is powerless to offer the satisfaction he desires, he will “fly from justice to mercy,” learning mercy for his brothers in their common misery that he might
share with them in that divine mercy Christ promises to the merciful. By this way of humble self-judgment and compassionate fraternal love, through which he discovers the Truth present in his brethren as well as in himself, his mind’s eye is progressively “purified,” that is likened to the humility and love of the Incarnate Word, and thereby enabled to “see Truth in his own purity.”

Having traced this ascent of the steps of Truth from the perspective of the progressively sanctified soul, Bernard turns in paragraphs 20-21 to a consideration of that same ascent from the perspective of the respective operations of three divine Persons in the soul’s three powers of reason, will, and memory. Here Bernard traces what Gilson has justly called the soul’s “progressive assimilation to the Divine life” and what we might also be call the abbot’s doctrine of deification.

In the first place, prior to conversion, the divine Person of the Son, the Word and Wisdom of the Father, finds the soul’s first power, the ratio, oppressed by concupiscent

239 Hum 18 (III, 29-30): “Vehementer sese lugentes, id solum consolationis inveniunt, ut severi iudices sui, qui scilicet amore veri esuriant et sitiant iustitiam, usque ad contemptum sui districtissimam de se exigant satisfactionem, et de cetero emendationem. Sed cum se ad id sufficere non posse conspiciunt, - cum enim fecerint omnia quae mandata fuerint sibi, servos se inutiles dicunt -, de iustitia ad misericordiam fugiunt. Ut autem illam consequantur, consilium Veritatis sequuntur: BEATI MISERICORDES, QUONIAM IPSI MISERICORDIAM CONSEQUENTUR. Et hic est secundus gradus veritatis, quo eam in proximis inquirunt, dum de suis aliorum necessitates exquirunt, dum ex his quae patiuntur, patientibus compati sciunt.”

240 Hum 19 (III, 30): “Ab omni ergo labe, infirmitate, ignorantia, studio ve contracta, flendo, iustitiam esuriendo, operibus misericordiae insistendo, mundatur oculus cordis, cui se in sui puritate videndam Veritas promittit: BEATI enim MUNDO CORDE, QUONIAM IPSI DEUM VIDEBUNT.”


242 Gilson, The Mystical Theology of Saint Bernard, 98.

243 Bernard’s appropriation of the divine attribute of Wisdom to the person of the Word is evidently derived from the Scriptural locus classicus, 1 Cor 1:24, “Christ the power and wisdom of God.” See Gra 26 (III, 184).
desires, captive to sin, and ignorant of itself insofar as it is subject to self-deception and
given over to curiosity about others. Operating within the reason, the Word recalls the
soul’s curiosity to itself, instructs it in the Truth about itself, and delivers it from its
bondage to sin and its enslavement to the desires of the flesh. Most significantly for
Bernard, the Word enables the rational power to share in his own prerogative as divine
Judge: “Making the reason as it were his vicar, the Son establishes the reason as its own
judge, that out of reverence to the Word to which it is now conjoined, it might execute
the office of Truth as prosecutor, witness, and judge against itself.” 244  More than a mere
moral exemplar, then, inspiring the reason to self-judgment by his exemplary display of
humility,245 the Word moves the reason inwardly to recognize and judge as false the self-
deception of superiority the soul’s unchecked amor propriae excellentiae has proposed
for its belief and to accept as true the reality of its sin and weakness. For its part, reason
is no passive partner in this graced action, but rather rendered capable of judging the soul
for itself just as it is judged by God. Thus, “from this first conjunction of the Word and
reason, humility is born.” 246

In the second place, the Spirit, who is Charity,247 finds the soul’s second power,
the voluntas, still bound to concupiscent desires, but now judged by reason as such.

244 Hum 21 (III, 32): “Mirabiliter utens tamquam pro se vicaria, ipsam sibi iudicem statuit, ita ut
pro reverentia Verbi cui coniungitur, ipsa sui accusatrix, testis et iudex, contra se Veritatis fungatur
officio.”

245 For Bernard, the Incarnate Word is indeed the preeminent moral exemplar of humility. In
condescending to wash the feet of his disciples, the abbot explains, Christ offers them the very “form of
humility” to be imitated. See Hum 20 (III, 31). Yet, here, Bernard goes further, to insist that if the soul is
to imitate Christ’s exemplary humility, its reason must be conjoined to and moved inwardly by the Word.

246 Hum 21 (III, 32): “Ex qua prima conjunctione Verbi et rationis, humilitas nascitur.”

247 In his roughly contemporaneous work On Loving God, Bernard implies that the divine attribute
of charity may be appropriated to the divine person of the Spirit when he writes: “What preserves that
Operating inwardly within this judged but still rebellious will, the Spirit purges it of those concupiscent desires which give rise to all self-will and infuses it with the gift of charity, inflaming it with the affection of love and rendering it merciful even to the point of the love of enemies. Again, the will is moved to this compassionate charity not merely by the Word’s inspiring, exemplary compassion in his Incarnation, but also by the Spirit’s gift of charity in the will, a certain accidental quality distinct from the substantial Charity which God is, out of which the graced soul will now love God and all things for the sake of God in accordance with the divine will. Thus, “from this second conjunction of the Spirit of God and the human will, charity is born.”

Finally, having traced the soul’s ascent of the first two steps of Truth by the graced missions of Son and Spirit, Bernard describes how, in the third step of Truth, this perfected soul may be rapt to the Father as his own glorious Bride. In the tradition of highest and ineffable unity in the highest and most blessed Trinity except charity? Charity is therefore a law, and the law of God, which in a certain way holds and unites the Trinity in the bond of peace.” Dil 35 (III, 149). Bernard’s friend and contemporary William of Saint-Thierry often made this appropriation explicit, most notably in his Golden Epistle 263 (CCCM 88:282). Both Cistercians here follow Augustine’s teaching in De Trinitate XV that the name charity may properly be assigned to the divine person of the Spirit. De Trinitate XV.17.29 (CCSL 50A).

248 Bernard makes this distinction explicit in On Loving God when he writes: “Therefore it is rightly said that charity is God and is the gift of God. Thus charity gives charity; substantial Charity gives accidental charity. Where it signifies the Giver, it is given the name of substance; where it signifies the gift, it is given the name quality.” Dil 35 (III, 150). Here again, Bernard is consistent with William of Saint-Thierry who draws the same distinction between charity as substance in God and as quality in the soul in his On the Nature and Dignity of Love 12 (CCCM 88:187).

249 Hum 21 (III, 32): “Et sic ex hac secunda coniunctione Spiritus Dei et voluntatis humanae, caritas efficitur.”

250 Here in his earliest treatise, the Steps, Bernard identifies the person of the Father as the soul’s divine Bridegroom. As we will see below, by the time of his Sermons on the Song of Songs, begun in 1135, Bernard has definitively settled on the person of the Word as the soul’s divine Spouse.
Gregory the Great, the abbot explains that in this graced, transient, and ultimately ineffable contemplative *amplexus* or embrace, the soul as Bride “momentarily glimpses the secrets of Truth” in her heart and then, returned to herself, feeds on these secrets in her memory. Recounting the soul’s ascent to this vision of the Truth, Bernard writes:

> At last the soul is perfected in its two parts, the reason and the will, the one taught by the Word of Truth, the other inspired by the Spirit of Truth, the one sprinkled with the hyssop of humility, the other enflamed with the fire of charity, spotless on account of its humility, without wrinkle in virtue of its charity, since neither the will rebels against reason, nor does reason deceive itself as to the Truth. This perfected soul the Father binds to himself as his own glorious Bride, so that the reason no longer thinks of itself, nor the will of others, but this blessed soul delights in saying only this: “The King has led me into his chamber” (Sg 1:3; 3:4).

Read with an eye to the abbot’s theology of self-knowledge, this account of the soul’s rapture to the Father is, to say the least, puzzling. On the one hand, Bernard avers that in this rapture, the soul’s reason “no longer thinks of itself,” suggesting that the soul is now so absorbed in the knowledge and love of God as to be forgetful of itself. On the other hand, Bernard places in the mouth of the rapt soul one of the Bride’s most strikingly self-reflexive exclamations from the Canticle: “The King has led me into his chamber.” Is Bernard denying or affirming the soul’s self-awareness in its contemplative glimpse of

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251 Throughout his account of the ascent to the third step of Truth in Hum 21ff, Bernard’s choice of language and associated Scriptural verses evinces his dependence on Gregory’s treatment of Sg 1:3, *Introductit me Rex in cubiculum suum*, in his *Expositio in Cantica canticorum* 26 (SCh 314:108-110).

252 Hum 21 (III, 32-33): “Ibi modicum, hora videlicet quasi dimidia, silentio facto in caelo, inter desideratos amplexus suaviter quiescens ipsa quidem dormit, sed cor eius vigilat, quo utique interim veritatis arcana rimatur, quorum postmodum memoria statim ad se reditura pascatur.”

253 Hum 21 (III, 32): “Utramque vero partem, rationem scilicet ac voluntatem, alteram verbo veritatis instructam, alteram spirito veritatis afflatam, illam hyssopo humiliatis aspersam, hanc igne caritatis succensam, tandem iam perfectam animam, propter humiditatem sine macula, propter caritatem sine ruga, cum nec voluntas rationi repugnat, nec ratio veritatem dissimulat, gloriosam sibi sponsam Pater conglutinat, ita ut nec ratio de se, nec voluntas de proximo cogitare sinatur, sed hoc solum beata illa anima dicere delectetur: Introductit me Rex in cubiculum suum.”
the Truth in his own nature? Matters are only further complicated a few lines later when, describing the soul’s descent from this vision, Bernard explains that the soul’s third power, memory, will feed on the secrets of Truth the soul has glimpsed “when the soul has returned to itself.”

Neither here nor elsewhere in the text of the Steps does Bernard attempt to offer a solution to this conundrum concerning the soul’s seemingly simultaneous self-forgetfulness and self-awareness in its experience of the contemplative vision of God. Consequently, it is difficult to determine if he believes that the soul’s graced knowledge of God in its rapture to the Father excludes or permits in that moment its knowledge of itself as Christ’s Bride. What is, however, clear from the text is Bernard’s conviction that the soul which has ascended the first two steps of Truth now enjoys a self-awareness quite different from that it suffered in the first moments of her conversion to the Truth.

At its conversion, the soul was ashamed to contemplate its own face, disgusted by the ugliness of its own disfigured countenance, and compelled to acknowledge with tears the inescapable truth of its self-imposed enslavement to sin and misery. Now, however, once reformed in the divine likeness of the Incarnate Word’s own humility and love by the graced missions of Son and Spirit, the soul finds itself at peace. What is more, the soul now even delights to recognize herself as Christ’s own Bride, led into the marriage chamber of her King, and sees in her own face the very beauty of her Bridegroom, without spot or wrinkle. This Anima-Sponsa may, moreover, be entirely confident that the beauty she now discerns within herself is no self-deception, for she senses within

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254 Hum 21 (III, 33): “Ibi modicum, hora videlicet quasi dimidia, silentio facto in caelo, inter desideratos amplexus suaviter quiescens ipsa quidem dormit, sed cor eius vigilat, quo utique interim veritatis arcana rimatur, quorum postmodum memoria statim ad se reditura pascatur.”
herself the transforming missions of Son and Spirit, effecting Christ’s own humility and love within her reason and her will. Once more seeing the Truth in herself and seeing herself in the Truth, she knows herself to be a divinely beautiful recreation of God, to whom she owes and to whom she ascribes all her beauty with love, thanksgiving, and delight.

**The Ascent of Self-Knowledge in *On Conversion***

In his sermon-treatise *Ad clericos de conversione* of 1140, Bernard resumes the itinerary of ascent he first charted in the *Steps*, but now spells out in finer detail the steps the soul ascends along its journey from the humbling self-knowledge acquired at conversion to the joyous self-awareness of soul reformed as Christ’s Bride. During a stay at Paris sometime between Christmas of 1139 and early 1140, Bernard delivered a sermon to the students of that city on the subject of “conversion.” His sermon-treatise *On Conversion* represents a revised, elaborated version of that original sermon. In the Introduction to his critical edition of the work, Jean Leclercq characterizes the sermon-treatise as “an exposition of the psychology of that conversion which leads to a garden of delights which seems to be the *paradisus claustri*. For Leclercq, then, Bernard means by “conversion” the act of entering the monastic life, the paradise of the cloister. In the Introduction to her own English translation of the work, Marie-Bernard Saïd concurs,


256 “un exposé de ce qu’on pourrait appeler la psychologie de la conversion, celle-ci conduisant à un jardin de délices spirituelles qui paraît être le *paradisus claustri*.” Jean Leclercq, “Introduction,” *Sancti Bernardi Opera* IV, 64.
arguing from both allusions in text itself and from Geoffrey of Auxerre’s account of the sermon in the \textit{Vita Prima} that Bernard’s intention in preaching to the students at Paris was to call them to conversion, and that conversion here “must be taken in its traditional sense of ‘becoming a monk.”’\footnote{Marie-Bernard Said, “Introduction,” \textit{Bernard of Clairvaux: Sermons on Conversion}, 13.}

Yet, as Denis Farkasfalvy has argued, for Bernard, “conversion” has in addition to its “technical sense of the external act of joining the monastic life” two further and related meanings. First, conversion refers to “the first step in the spiritual life” and means most basically “turning away from a life of sin to a life of seeking God.” Second, conversion refers to a continuing spiritual \textit{conversatio}, “a beginning which persists by constantly producing new beginnings of a similar kind and thus permanently marks the whole spiritual enterprise.”\footnote{Denis Farkasfalvy, “The First Step in the Spiritual Life: Conversion,” 65.} As the following exegesis of the text will show, all three of these related meanings of “conversion” are operative in Bernard’s text. For in his \textit{On Conversion}, the abbot not only exhorts the students of Paris to join the monastic life, but also traces in unsurpassed detail how the soul which has descended the twelve steps of pride now inverts that descent to ascend the twelve steps of humility and the three steps of Truth.

In the previous chapter, we saw how Bernard groups his twelve descending steps of pride according to the triad of 1 John 2:16: the concupiscence of the eyes, the lust for domination, and the concupiscence of the flesh. In \textit{On Conversion}, accordingly, Bernard describes the inverse ascending way of the spiritual life as a progressive healing of this
triplex malignitas in the sinful human will. Likewise, in On the Steps of Humility and Pride, Bernard describes the soul’s ascent to God according to three steps of Truth - humility, charity, and contemplation - through the progressive rectification of the soul’s powers of reason, will, and memory respectively. Here too in On Conversion, Bernard structures the soul’s ascent, and the sermon-treatise itself, according to the successive conversion and purification of reason, will, and memory in turn. And, in yet another parallel to the Steps, the abbot charts this itinerary of ascent by way of the order of Christ’s Beatitudes in Matthew 5. Thus, after a prologue concerning how the Word of God effects conversion within in the soul (paragraphs 1-3), Bernard narrates in order the conversion of the reason according to the first and second beatitudes (4-22), the conversion of the will according to the third and fourth beatitudes (23-27), and the purification of the memory according to the fifth and sixth beatitudes (28-31).

Doubtless it was Bernard’s invocation of this Augustinian triad of reason-will-memory that led Leclercq to characterize On Conversion as an exposition of the “psychology” of conversion. Yet, as we will see below, the text might be better described as a “psychological drama” of conversion strikingly akin to the Ordo Virtutum of Hildegard of Bingen (c. 1151) or even the later morality plays of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In this psychological drama, the dramatis personae consists of the personified powers of reason, will, memory, and the bodily senses, who by turns appear

259 Doubtless Bernard’s description of conversion as a progressive healing from this three-fold temptation of 1 John 2:16 is influenced by Augustine’s extensive use of this triad in his own story of conversion, the Confessions. This will be the first of several parallels to be noted below between the two works.

260 In a final section (32-40), Bernard discusses the relationship between conversion and the clerical state according to each of the eight beatitudes in a manner reminiscent of his On the Conduct and Office of Bishops.
upon the “stage” of the soul and exchange “speeches” with one another. To these must be added a fifth and most essential character, namely the divine Voice, the Word of God, who addresses the soul, and in particular the power of reason, with the words of Scripture, most especially the Beatitudes. In staging this psychological drama, Bernard has in effect placed his readers in the position of spectators to this same drama as it has and will play out in their own souls, and so afforded them an occasion for honest self-judgment, self-evaluation, and self-knowledge. Thus the abbot invites his readers to know themselves in depth and to recognize, or at least anticipate, within themselves the diverse and sequentially linked moments of self-knowledge through which they will pass as they return to God.

In his sermon’s prologue, the first act of his psychological drama, Bernard offers the most thorough and rhetorically compelling account of the soul’s initial conversion to be found in his entire corpus. Recalling from the Steps his doctrine of the Word’s prevenient grace in conversion, Bernard assigns the opening speech of his drama not to one of the soul’s powers, but to the Word of God. It is this Word, the abbot insists, that resounds within the soul’s depths, anticipating and effecting the soul’s return first to itself and then to God. As his text, Bernard takes Ps 90:3, “you have said, ‘be converted sons

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265 Bernard’s insistence on the priority of the Word’s prevenient grace in the soul’s conversion reflects the theology of grace he has developed between his Steps and On Conversion in his On Grace and Free Choice of 1128. As Bernard McGinn has shown, the abbot’s Liber de Gratia et Libero Arbitrio is a complex work that poses numerous problems of interpretation. Yet, it is clear from the very outset that in his consideration of the relationship between divine grace and human action, Bernard consistently affirms that, in McGinn’s words, “all the initiative must be ascribed to grace.” Thus, in the opening to the treatise, Bernard writes: “Once, in conversation, I happened to refer to my experience of God’s grace, how I recognized myself as being impelled to good by its prevenient action, felt myself being borne along by it, and helped, with its help, to find perfection.” See Bernard McGinn, “Introduction,” On Grace and Free Choice, trans. Daniel O’Donovan (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1988), 3-50. The above translation is O’Donovan’s.
of men.’”

It is not without significance, Bernard argues, that the Psalmist attributes this word to God, *dixisti*, for it is not any human word that will move the students of Paris to conversion, not even Bernard’s, but only the Word of God speaking within the soul. This Word is, in the words of Scripture, “living and effective” (Heb 4:12) and this divine Voice is “powerful and majestic” (Ps 29:4). As at creation, when God said “Let there be light and there was light” (Gen 1:3), so now in the soul’s re-creation, God has only to say “be converted,” and the soul is converted to him. Bernard’s unstated implication is clear: the soul takes no more initiative in its re-creation than it did in its creation from nothing. The initiative remains with God’s Word and though God may speak this divine Word to the soul by Bernard’s human word as his instrument, “the conversion of souls is the working of the divine, not the human voice.” For their part, Bernard’s listeners must not close their ears to this divine Voice, but rather “arouse the ears of your heart to the inner Voice, that you might take care to hear God speaking within you rather than the man speaking without.”

When the soul does arouse its inner ear to this divine and inward Voice, it hears God’s first word, his admonition to self-knowledge, “Return, O sinners, to your hearts”

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262 Conv 1 (IV, 70): “Et occurrit interim verbum breve, sed plenum, quod os Domini locutum est, ut Propheta testatur: DIXISTI, ait, loquens sine dubio ad Dominum Deum suum: CONVERTIMINI, FILII HOMINUM.” All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated. The reader should, however, consult the translation by Marie-Bernard Saïd from which I have benefited much and in some instances borrowed liberally. See Bernard of Clairvaux: *Sermons on Conversion*, trans. Marie-Bernard Saïd, 31-79.

263 Here Bernard follows Augustine’s correlation of creation and re-creation through God’s Word in *Confessions* XIII.12.13 (CCSL 27).

264 Conv 2 (IV, 71): “Conversio animarum opus divinae vocis est, non humanae.”

265 Conv 2 (IV, 71): “Ad hanc ergo interiorem vocem aures cordis erigi admonemus, ut loquentem Deum intus audire quam foris hominem studeatis.” Bernard’s remark echoes the opening lines of Benedict’s *Rule*, “Listen carefully, my son, to the master’s instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart.” RB Prol.1: Obscula, o filii, praecepta magistri, et inclinem aurem cordis tui.”
For Bernard, this first word “seems to precede all those who convert to their hearts, not only calling them, but leading them back to themselves and setting them before their own face.”  For this divine Voice, the abbot continues, is also a divine Light penetrating the soul’s depths and “announcing to human beings their sins and illuminating things hidden in darkness.” Introducing for the first time the characters of reason and memory, Bernard recounts how the divine Light now “illumines reason and opens the book of memory before its very eyes” that reason might read within this book “the sad history” of the soul’s past life.

Though Bernard does not here explicitly mention the soul’s return from curiosity and the eradication of its prior self-deception, this is surely implied by his description of conversion as a return to the heart and the illumination of truths long shrouded there in darkness. The soul’s memory of its past sins can never be entirely effaced because the record of its sin has been indelibly “inscribed within the book of memory by the pen of truth,” but this memory can be cloaked in darkness, the darkness, presumably, of the pleasant self-delusions the soul entertains as true so long as its amor propriae excellentiae swells unchecked by honest self-judgment.

Here too, as in the Steps, this first moment of honest self-judgment is depicted as the soul’s participation in the Son’s own prerogative as Judge of all. For as the divine

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266 Conv 3 (IV, 72): “Redite, praevaricatores, ad cor. Hoc nempe initium loquendi Domino, et hoc verbum ad omnes qui convertuntur ad cor, praecessisse videtur, et non modo revocans eos, sed et reducens et statuens contra faciem suam.”

267 Conv 3 (IV, 73): “Est enim non tantum vox virtutis, sed et radius lucis, annuntians pariter hominibus peccata eorum et illuminans abscondita tenebrarum.”

268 Conv 3 (IV, 73): “Aperitur siquidem conscientiae liber, revolvitur misera vitae series, tristis quaedam historia replicatur, illuminatur ratio, et evoluta memoria velut quibusdam eius oculis exhibetur.”

269 Conv 4 (IV, 75): “Volumen grande, cui universa inscripta sunt, stilo utique veritatis.”

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Word and Light recalls reason to itself and illumines reason’s eyes to its own tristis historia inscribed within the book of memory, it constitutes the soul as at once judge, accused, and witness against itself. Conceiving the converting soul as a kind of inner courtroom, Bernard narrates the soul’s self-judgment with dramatic flair:

Since these two [reason and memory] are not so much faculties of the soul as the very soul itself, the same soul is both prosecutor and prosecuted. Set before its own face, it is dragged by the violent court-officers of its own accusing thoughts before its own proper tribunal to be judged.\(^{270}\)

For Bernard, this experience of self-accusation and self-judgment can only be one of intense bitterness and distress. When the soul is at last compelled to ponder its own face in the light of Truth, it will undoubtedly, he thinks, be ashamed of its past life and even of its very self.

To this point, Bernard has largely reprised the doctrine he teaches in his Steps, albeit in a more dramatic form suited to the task of stirring his audience to conversion. In his drama’s second act, however, on the conversion of reason, the abbot offers a lengthy analysis of the various, minute stages through which the character of reason ascends as he first gradually acknowledges the full truth of the soul’s fallen condition and then embarks on the arduous task of persuading his wife, the will, to turn from her sinful loves to the love of charity. In staging this lengthy, tortured act, Bernard’s purpose is to reveal how the Word, by a painstaking pedagogy, leads reason to the fullest recognition of the soul’s own brokenness, its powerlessness to deliver itself from this broken state, and its

\(^{270}\) Conv 3 (IV, 74): “Utraque vero non tam ipsius animae est quam anima ipsa, ut eadem sit et inspiciens, et inspecta, contra suam statuta faciem, et violentis quibusdam apparitoribus immissarum utique cogitationum coacta, proprio interim iudicanda tribunali.”
desperate need for the healing grace of the Word if it is to be delivered from its self-imposed enslavement to sin.

As Bernard has already observed in his first act, the soul’s honest confrontation with itself at the prompting of the Word has been an experience of shame, distress, and deep anguish. Facing plainly the truth of its past life, the soul now realizes that it has been obsessively engaged in a ceaseless, though unconscious, pattern of self-hatred and self-destruction. Borrowing an image from Augustine’s *Confessions*, Bernard has reason to realize that by its life of sin, the soul has torn itself to pieces, like a frenzied madman scratching his flesh until it rips and bleeds. As long as reason remained distracted from this by his unrestrained curiosity, the soul remained numb to the pain of these self-inflicted spiritual wounds. Once more following Augustine in his *Confessions*, the abbot explains that reason has, like the Prodigal Son, wandered forth from his true home and “forgetful of himself and inwardly estranged from himself, has journeyed into a far-off country” (Lk 15:13). Yet now that reason, again like the Prodigal, has “returned to himself” (Lk 15:17), he realizes with horror “how cruelly the soul has eviscerated itself to win some worthless piece of game.”

Bernard’s characterization of the soul’s horror and shame in the acknowledgment of its sinful self-mutilation is characteristically vivid and perhaps to our modern ears distasteful. Like Augustine who famously analyzed with relentless intensity his sin in stealing a few paltry pears in Book II of his *Confessions*, the abbot might be accused of

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271 See Augustine, *Confessions* III.2.4 (CCSL 27).

272 See Augustine, *Confessions* II.10.18 (CCSL 27).

273 Conv 5 (IV, 76): “Quid vero mirum, si propriam minime sentiat anima laesionem, quae, sui ipsius oblita et penitus absens sibi, in longinquam profecta est regionem?”
foisting on his readers his own psychologically unhealthy obsession with his own guilt. Is not Bernard’s self-hatred manifest in his guilt far worse, we might ask, than the self-hatred he sees reflected in human sin?

As in the case of Augustine’s, Bernard’s lament must be understood in the context of his own theological anthropology of the soul as the image of God, for in this light, his shocking imagery is intended to stir his readers to a realization of the true tragedy of their sin. As he teaches later in *On Conversion* and most famously in his image of the “circle of the impious” from *On Loving God*, sin is to be lamented above all as a form of self-starvation, by which the soul consistently refuses to seek and to taste the divine bread that alone will bring it lasting spiritual nourishment. As we observed in Chapter 1, Bernard insists that the human soul is created in image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26), and therefore bears of its very nature an orientation to the God in whose image it has been made. As long as it refuses to follow this its innate, ineffaceable orientation to God by way of humility and charity, it deprives itself of its own fulfillment and condemns itself to restless, ceaseless dissatisfaction among the various goods God has created. Sin is thus for Bernard the truest form of self-hatred and self-mutilation, and what the soul discovers in the experience of its conversion are the wounds it has so long and so tragically inflicted on itself.

For Bernard, the soul which now feels the pain of these wounds within its heart is immediately confronted with the question of how to deliver itself from its own self-imposed misery. On the one hand, the soul may choose once again to forget itself, to numb its inward pain by plunging once more into the immediate, though fleeting

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274 See Dil 18-22 (III, 134-138).
consolations afforded it by the life of sin. Yet if the soul remains obedient to the divine Voice calling out “Return, O sinners, to your heart” (Is 46:8), it will instead direct its curiosity inward to search out not simply the fact of its past sins, but also their source. Like a “curious investigator,” reason now explores the pattern of the soul’s *tristis historia* and finds that sin has entered the soul through the soul’s own “windows,” the bodily senses. Hearing the divine Voice command “You have sinned, refrain!” (Gen 4:7), reason, flush with bold resolution, sets out assiduously to shutter these windows, to tame and master the bodily senses.

Reason’s effort to restrain the bodily senses from sin is his first effort towards leading a properly spiritual life and insofar as it represents the soul’s response to the divine command, it is, for Bernard, laudable. Yet, reason’s assertion of mastery is also the occasion for a new and painful moment of self-knowledge as reason almost immediately discovers how difficult a task this will be. Since reason is “as yet inexperienced in spiritual combat,” he imagines that his conquest of the body will be swift and easy, saying to himself, “Who can stop me from controlling my members?” Yet, almost as soon as he begins to issue various laws and decrees to the senses, the bodily senses rise in collective resistance and scream their protest. They warn reason that “there is another who will resist your decrees and disobey your new laws,” namely “the paralytic lying anguished at home, she in whose service you once placed us, if you have forgotten, to obey her desires!”

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275 Conv 8 (IV, 80): “Aestimat homo facile quod iubetur implendum, tamquam ignarus exercitii spiritualis. <<Quis enim prohibeat>>, inquit, <<quominus imperem membris meis?>>”

276 Conv 9 (IV, 81): “Ceterum dum suas quibusque membris in hunc modum leges promulgat et decreta proponit, interrumpunt subito vocem iubentis ut uno impetu clamant: <<Unde haec nova religio?”

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The anguished paralytic is, of course, the will, who has heard the complaints of her bodily servants and soon takes the stage to rebuke reason as a faithless husband. In a vivid, if predictably misogynistic, scene, the “furious old hag” fumes that by reason’s neglect, she has been paralyzed by the triple illness of concupiscence, curiosity, and ambition (1 Jn 2:16): her palate and body are addicted to lust for sensual pleasure, her eyes to the curious search for pleasant sights, and her mouth and ears to the ceaseless pursuit of human praise. Even if she wished to deliver herself from this enslavement to sin, she declares, she finds herself powerless to do so. Though she must admit that she finds little rest in the satisfaction of these fleshly cravings, she chastises reason for presuming to take from her even these few, remaining consolations in her illness. “Is this how you keep faith with your spouse? Is this how you show compassion for me in my suffering?” will demands.277

In the face of his wife’s rebuke, reason is consumed with distress. His initial effort to master his bodily senses has failed, and he now realizes that it is through his own neglect that his spouse lies helpless beneath Augustine’s triplex malignitas. Yet, for Bernard, reason’s distress will be the occasion for a new and deeper moment of self-understanding, for, in those words of Isaiah which Bernard is so fond of quoting, vexatio dat intellectum, this distress will bring understanding (Is 28:19). In his distress, reason now grasps the totality of the soul’s inner disease and the soul’s paralysis beneath it. Under its triplex malignitas, the soul’s Trinitarian image of reason, will, and memory is

Facile iubes ut libet. Sed invenietur qui novis decretis obviet, qui novis legibus contradicat<<Quis enim ille est?>> inquit. Et illa: <<Nimirum ipsa, quae paralytica iacet in domo et male torquetur. Ipsa est, in cuius nos pridem deputasti obsequium, si ignoras, ad oboediendum utique concupiscentiis eius.>>”

277 Conv 10 (IV, 82): “<<Haec>>, inquit, <<tota est tui coniugii fides? Sic compateris male patienti?>>”
thoroughly diseased: reason now sees that he cannot control the bodily senses, memory is filled with the bitter recollection of the soul’s past sins, and will is enslaved to her sinful desires for all that can never bring her rest and fulfillment.

In its distress, then, the soul has come to know itself in the totality of its present misery. Yet, as in the Steps, the soul’s discovery of its own inner illness is an essential moment in its conversion, for this discovery prompts reason to turn to the Word. As reason once again lifts his ears to the divine Voice, he hears an marvelous yet bewildering promise: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:3). How, reason wonders, can a soul suffering poverty of spirit be called blessed? “How,” he asks, “can misery make the soul happy?” Bernard replies that while the soul’s misery in itself will not make it happy, it will move the soul to seek divine mercy for misery is “mercy’s proper home.”

In honestly acknowledging and confessing its own spiritual poverty, and in refusing to seek consolation in more pleasant self-deceptions, the soul has opened itself to the transforming mercy of the Word. In confessing the full measure of its spiritual illness, the soul has presented itself to the healing mercy of the divine Physician.

Now that reason has been enlightened as to the gravity of the soul’s spiritual illness, we might expect him to renounce his efforts to reform the soul and seek the help of divine grace. Yet, in Bernard’s telling, reason will choose another course. Emboldened by the Word’s promise, reason only redoubles his efforts to leave aside the life of sin. Though he has failed to master his bodily senses, he can perhaps master his

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278 Conv 12 (IV, 86): “Ergo ne beatum hominem miseria facit? Ceterum quisquis eiusmodi est, non diffidas. Non miseria, sed misericordia facit beatum; sed huius propria sedes miseria est.”

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partner, the will. And so reason addresses a speech to the will, a stern rebuke: “You must acknowledge that your wicked and useless servant [i.e., the flesh] has never afforded you even the slightest measure of satisfaction despite all its service to you!”

Reviewing in turn each aspect of the will’s *triplex malignitas*, reason argues that will should know from her own experience that fleshly pleasures fade, that her curiosity remains ever restless, and that whatever human praise her ambition has acquired has never once slaked her deepest, innate longings.

Deluded by the vain promises of the world, reason argues, the soul has forgotten the nobility of its own nature, that is a “a noble creature, capable of eternal blessedness.”

Though created in God’s image, redeemed by the Incarnate Word, and adopted in the Spirit, the soul has preferred to give itself over to the passing delights of creation rather than to cling to the God in whose image it has been made by knowledge and by love. Resuming the Augustinian theme of the Prodigal Son in his wanderings, reason wonders why such a noble creature should trade heavenly food for the slop of pigs, and leave its divine Spouse to fornicate among the good things God has made. Implicit in reason’s rebuke is the argument Bernard advances in *On Loving God*, namely that the very dissatisfaction the will experiences in the possession of all that falls short of God surely reveals that the will is made for God alone; the persistence of her desire discloses the only possible source of its fulfillment.

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279 Conv 13 (IV, 87): “<<Super hoc>>, ait, <<nequam et inutili servo tuo ipsa fatere. Nec enim inficiari potes, ne in modico quidem tibi universa eius obsequia satisfacere aliquando potuisse.>>”

280 Conv 15 (IV, 89): “Egregia creatura, capax aeternae beatitudinis.”

281 See Dil 19 (III, 135-136).
Reason’s rebuke is powerful, and his arguments compelling; they reflect the self-knowledge reason has acquired in the painful but instructive contemplation of the soul’s wounds. Yet however well they may reflect the truth of the human being, Bernard explains, reason’s arguments fail to loose her wife the will from the bonds of sinful habit that irresistibly draw her to the consolations of the world. In fact, reason’s arguments only arouse more violent resistance from the will. Narrating will’s reply to her husband’s rebuke, Bernard writes:

The will may be moved not at all by the suggestions of reason, but on the contrary be aroused with fury and rejoin, “How long must I suffer you! Your preaching has no hold on me. I know that you are clever, but your cleverness has no place in me.” Then summoning her bodily members to her aide, she may order them to be even more solicitous than before in obeying her lustful desires.282

Speaking from his long experience as a father of souls, abbot Bernard observes that “We learn from daily experience that those who resolved upon conversion are more severely tempted by the sinful desires of the flesh.”283 Like the Israelites in their wanderings, the soul that has set itself to flee Pharaoh is often strongly compelled to return to its slavery in Egypt.

By the end of his second act, Bernard has left his readers with the figure of a soul much like Augustine’s in Book VIII of the Confessions. Reason has been converted to

282 Conv 22 (IV, 95): “Invenietur forsitan, quae nihil mota suggestionibus rationis, immo et gravi commota furore respondeat, dicens: <<Quousque vos patior? Praedicatio vestra in me non capitat Scio quod astuti estis; sed astutia vestra apud me locum non habet>>. Forte et advocans membra singula, solito amplius solitis iubet oboedire concupiscentiis, nequitiis deservire.”

283 Conv 22 (IV, 95): “Hinc nimirum illud est quod quotidians discimus experimentis, eos qui converti deliberant, tentari acrius a concupiscientia carnis, et urgeri gravius in operibus luti et lateris, qui Aegyptum egredi, Pharaonem effugere moliuntur.”
the truth, but will remains enslaved to the bonds of habit. Reason has now reached yet another moment of self-knowledge, for he now grasps not only the totality of the soul’s inner enslavement to sin, but also the soul’s own inability to liberate itself from sin and embrace the spiritual life in its fullness. For Bernard, the soul in such straits finds itself in a very dangerous position, for it is now violently assailed with the temptation to despair. If in the earlier stages of its conversion, reason entertained the self-deception that it could by its own power master its senses and liberate its enslaved will, reason now stands in danger of succumbing to the opposite self-deception, that its sickness is now so serious that it has no hope of healing.

When poised on this brink of despair, Bernard insists, the soul must have mercy on itself, and raise its heart’s ear once more to divine Voice, who now speaks to it the third beatitude, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (Mt 5:5). That is, the soul must confess its weakness in tears, and learn to seek its comfort and deliverance not from itself, but from above. Having once turned to itself, it must now turn itself fully to the Word, and mourn its own poverty, brokenness, and powerlessness before him. And here in the full confession of its misery, as Bernard has already indicated, the Word will speak his consoling mercy to the soul. By the grace of the Word, the soul’s tears are not shed in vain, but begin to cleanse the eye of reason for the vision of its consolation. “Tears will purge the [soul’s] eye of darkness,” Bernard explains, “and so sharpen its vision that it will be able to turn its gaze to the brightness of a most radiant light.”

284 Conv 23 (IV, 96): “Nimirum purgatur lacrimis oculus ante caligans, et acuitur visus, ut intendere possit in serenissimi luminis claritatem.”
In this vision, reason is permitted to peer through the keyhole (Sg 5:4) and glimpse through the lattices (Sg 2:9) “a paradise of pleasure…a fertile and most lovely garden.” Leclercq has identified these paradise or garden as the monastic life, the paradisus claustri. His interpretation is immediately confirmed by Bernard’s subsequent reference to a verse that stands at the heart of Cistercian monastic theology, namely Christ’s saying, “Take my yoke upon you, and you will find rest for your souls” (Mt 11:29). Entry into the monastic life will require taking up a yoke of renunciation: life in community under rule and abbot will necessarily entail a renunciation of concupiscence, a tempering of curiosity, and the rejection of all human praise as worthless. Yet, like the yoke of Christ’s cross, this yoke paradoxically liberates the restless will to find its rest in charity, the love of God and all else for God’s sake.

Marie-Bernard Saïd follows Leclercq’s interpretation of the garden as the paradise of the cloister and adds that the soul’s sight of this garden marks its entry into the unitive way as it “catches a glimpse of the Bridegroom in fleeting moments of sweet contemplation.” Bernard’s rich imagery within this garden scene permits many possible interpretations, and Saïd’s reading of the scene may well be right. Yet, it is

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285 Conv 24 (IV, 96): “[I]nveniet paradisum voluptatis plantatum a Domino; inveniet hortum floridum et amoenissimum.”

286 Jean Leclercq, “Introduction,” in Sancti Bernardi Opera IV, 64.

287 The theme of the monastic life as Christ’s liberating yoke is carefully developed in Aelred of Rievaulx’s Speculum Caritatis, which he authored at Bernard’s own request. See, for example, Spec car I.27.78 (CCCM 1:46): “Yes, his yoke is easy and his burden is light; therefore you will find rest for your souls. This yoke does not oppress, but unites; this burden has wings, not weight. This yoke is charity. This burden is fraternal love. Here one rests, here one celebrates a Sabbath.” See also Charles Dumont’s excellent introduction to the Speculum caritatis in Aelred of Rievaulx, The Mirror of Charity, trans. Elizabeth Conner (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1990), 11-67.

difficult to see how Bernard can here be describing the unitive way when the will remains as yet unconverted; he seems, on the contrary, to reserve the soul’s contemplative vision of God to later in the soul’s ascent when, with will rectified and the memory purified, it hears the divine Voice announce the sixth beatitude, “Blessed are the pure of heart, for they will see God” (Mt 5:9).

Further, a study of Conv 25, in which Bernard describes the soul’s present vision in greater depth, suggests that the serenissimi luminis claritas the soul espies within the monastic garden is not so much the light of the Bridegroom as the light of his Bride. Within this garden, Bernard writes, reason sees that “the Bride’s nard gives forth its most fragrant scent.” There follows a richly textured account of the Bride’s revitalized spiritual senses and their corresponding virtues, concluding with the spiritual senses of taste and touch: “There she eagerly enjoys a foretaste of the incomparable delights of charity and, once the thorns and briers which once pierced her have been burned away, her soul is anointed with the balm of mercy and rests happily in her good conscience.”

Bernard hastens to add that what reason here sees is not the future reward promised the Bride in heavenly glory, but the wages she earns here and now in her temporal life. These wages are the Bride’s wisdom which, Bernard insists, can be taught only by the Spirit and is to be found not in books, but only by experience.

In effect, the radiant light Bernard has the soul glimpses within the paradise of the cloister is the radiant light of the Bride’s peaceful self-awareness, the rest in good

289 Conv 25 (IV, 99): “Illic nardus sponsae fragrantissimum praestat odorem.”

290 Conv 25 (IV, 99): “Ibi avidissime praelibantur incomparabiles deliciae caritatis et, succisis spinis ac vepribus, quibus antea pungebatur, unctione misericordiae perfusus animus in conscientia bona feliciter requiescit.”
conscience she enjoys through the mercy of Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit. The mourning soul has indeed been comforted according to the Word’s promise, for it has now foreseen the possibility, even in this life, of a new, peaceful, and joyous self-awareness to dispel its present vision of itself which is marked by fear, shame, and guilt. Once the Word has shared with reason the possibility of this newfound self-knowledge, he can return to his spouse, the will, not now with arguments, but with this sweet vision of rest in good conscience that will attend the life of repentance. Thus reason addresses a second speech to his wife, not now a stern rebuke, but a word of gentle persuasion: “I have found today a most beautiful garden, a most lovely place. It would be good for us to be there. It is not good for you to lie in this bed of grief, tossing and turning on this coverlet of sadness.”

Whereas reason’s stern rebuke failed to move the will, his words of gentle persuasion do, and for two reasons. First, from the theological perspective, this speech stirs the will because reason has called upon the Word in his tears and “The Word is close to those who seek him, to the soul that seeks him in himself; he is near to those who call upon him, and he lends efficacy to their words.” The same Word that spoke powerfully and preveniently within the soul to lead errant reason back to its heart now moves the will inwardly by granting reason’s words the grace of persuasive power.


Conv 24 (IV, 97): “<Inveni hodie hortum pulcherrimum et amoenissimum locum. Bonum esset ilic nos esse; nam et tibi nocet in hoc lecto aegritudinis, in hoc doloris strato versari, in hoc cubili tuo gravi corde compungi>>.”

Conv 24 (IV, 97): “Aderit Dominus quaerenti se, animae speranti in se; aderit votis supplicibus, et verbis eius efficaciam ministrabit.”
From the anthropological perspective, moreover, reason’s new words to his spouse are effective because they are spoken in the will’s own language, not with clever arguments proper to the intellect, but with a sweetness that draws the will from its former desires to the desire for righteousness. Reason has heard the divine Voice promise “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied” (Mt 5:6) and reason speaks this promise to the will, arousing her desire for the satisfaction reason has glimpsed in the Bride’s peaceful rest. The will’s new desire for the sweetness of this rest drives from her heart her former sinful desires, Bernard explains, “as one nail drives out another.” Moved inwardly by the Word to desire above all else the happy rest of the Bride, the will ceases to deliver her body over to the service of her former desires, and immediately hands her body over to reason, urging it to serve righteousness for the sake of holiness (Rom 6:19).

Once he has described the illumination of reason and the conversion of the will, Bernard devotes the fourth and final act of his drama to purification of the memory, an essential element of the soul’s entry into the new self-awareness of the Bride glimpsed in the monastic garden. Though the soul has now passed from the life of sin to the life of grace, the memory of its past sins remains and continues to cause the soul shame, anguish, and guilt. Yet how, Bernard asks, will the book of memory be cleansed of these painful recollections? If the soul’s sins are written indelibly on the memory like ink upon a parchment, what pen-knife, Bernard wonders, will be subtle enough to efface these marks without destroying the memory itself? The answer, he suggests, is once more the

294 Conv 27 (IV, 102): “Sic nimirum fortem armatum fortior superat, sic clavus clavo solet extundi.”
Bernard’s reference to Christ’s forgiveness and healing of the paralytic at Capernaum in Mark is not without significance: the Word’s final act in healing and delivering the soul from its paralysis beneath the triplex malignitas will be to remit the soul’s past sins.

For Bernard, the Word in his gentle mercy effects this remission of sins not by erasing the recollection of sin from the memory, but by purging that recollection of every trace of shame, guilt, and fear. Though we are aware of many sins, some we have committed and some others have committed, it is only our own sins, Bernard notes, that we recall with shame. In purging the memory, he explains, Christ effectively renders our sins like the sins of others so that we recall the fact of our past sins, but without any feeling of fear or condemnation. Or, to put it another way, we remember our past sins as the sins of someone else, of our former selves. In consequence, the memory of our sins is no longer an occasion for shame and self-contempt, but an occasion to praise the mercy of Christ in forgiving our sins: “Take away condemnation, take away fear, take away shame, full remission of sins takes all of these away, so that our past sins no longer wound us, but even work together for our good, as we offer devout thanksgiving to him who has forgiven us.”

The Word’s purification of the memory in this fashion is essential to the soul’s entry in the self-awareness of the Bride because it allows the soul to know itself anew as

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295 Conv 28 (IV, 103): “Solus utique sermo vivus et efficax, et penetrabilior omni gladio ancipiti: Dimittuntur tibi peccata tua.”

296 Conv 28 (IV, 104): “Tolle damnationem, tolle timorem, tolle confusionem, quae quidem omnia plena remissio tollit, et non modo non oberunt, sed et cooperantur in bonum, ut devotas ei referamus gratias, qui remisit.”
cleansed and forgiven and to see even its past life no longer as a *tristis historia*, but a witness to God’s mercy. It allows the soul, in other words, to pass from the terrifying courtroom of self-judgment to that beautiful garden wherein the Bride rejoices in the peace of her good conscience. The soul’s very self-understanding is now configured by the mercy of Christ, and as Christ’s Bride, she now sees herself as a beautiful, living recreation of her Bridegroom’s healing and transformative love.

Bernard underscores this point when he shows precisely how the soul seeks and finds the mercy for which it longs. The soul that pines for God’s mercy must obey the Word’s counsel in the fifth beatitude, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will obtain mercy” (Mt 5:7). In the *Steps*, the abbot associates this fifth beatitude with the fraternal compassion the monk learns by the Spirit’s gift of divine charity into the will. Here in *On Conversion*, however, he relates this beatitude to each aspect of the soul’s threefold relation to itself, its neighbors, and God. If the soul is to enjoy God’s mercy, it must first show mercy to itself, by exchanging the self-mutilation of a life of sin for the joyous freedom and fulfillment of a life lived in pursuit of righteousness. By this way of lifelong conversion, expressed in the monastic *conversatio*, the soul that once eviscerated itself by the self-hatred of sin will be reconciled to its very self.

Having shown such mercy to itself, the soul must then extend this mercy to the hearts of its neighbors by the genuinely compassionate love Bernard has described in his *Steps*. In showing mercy first to itself and then to its fellows, the soul is not only reconciled to itself and them, but also reconciled to God who now comes to the soul with “the kiss of his mouth” (Sg 1:1). In the *Steps*, Bernard showed how the monk descending into the self-deception by the twelve steps of pride simultaneously descends into the false
knowledge and contempt of himself, his brothers, and God. Here, in *On Conversion*, he shows how the life of conversion restores the soul to the true knowledge and genuine love of each.

So reconciled to itself, its neighbors, and God, and with its memory purified by Christ’s mercy, the converted soul is now prepared for the contemplative vision of God promised in the sixth beatitude, “Blessed are the pure of heart, for they will see God” (Mt 5:8). In his commentary on this vision, Bernard follows the mystical tradition in affirming that this glimpse of the Bridegroom remains imperfect in this life. When a speck is removed from the physical eye, the eye is not immediately healed, but must be progressively washed to restore its former sight. In the same way, the abbot suggests, the soul’s eye must be progressively washed of sin by an ongoing, indeed lifelong, practice of conversion.

Yet through this life of conversion, the soul is gradually renewed in the lost divine likeness and so comes by stages to an ever clearer contemplative vision. Limited though this vision may be, it is nevertheless, Bernard insists, the soul’s *confirmatio* or assurance. For as the soul begins to glimpse God, it is able to take to itself John’s confidence in saying, “We are God’s children now. It does not yet appear what we will be, but we know that we will be like him, for we will see him as he is” (1 Jn 3:2). Conflating two of his most cherished verses, Bernard concludes: “Now we see in a mirror dimly, but in the future we will see face to face (1 Cor 13:12), and once our face has been perfectly
washed clean, then God will present her [i.e. his Church] to himself, spotless and without wrinkle (Eph 5:27).”

Bernard’s concluding reference to Ephesians 5:27 which refers the Church as Christ’s Bride confirms that the soul has now begun to assume the self-awareness of the Bride it once only glimpsed from afar in the garden of the monastic enclosure. By joining this verse to 1 Corinthians 13:12, however, the abbot indicates that the soul’s growth in this self-awareness of the Bride will proceed gradually in this life as it is by stages cleansed of sin and conformed to the beauty of the Bridegroom’s humility and charity. Thus the soul’s journey of self-knowledge from the courtroom of self-judgment to the garden of the cloister is only a prelude to the soul’s journey through the life of grace, a journey of ever deepening self-awareness as the Bride and, in consequence, ever greater vision of the Bridegroom. Yet, as the soul proceeds along this ascending journey of self-knowledge and the knowledge of God, it is filled with growing confidence, for its deepening vision of the Word confirms its inward sense that it is being transformed within by that same Word and so likened to him. The soul that once trembled with fear and was ashamed to see its own, self-disfigured face now begins to delight in the sight of her own face as it is made ever more beautiful by the mercy of Christ, and in this new self-awareness conceives the daring desire to enter into mystical marriage with the Bridegroom whose very beauty she now bears.

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297 Conv 30 (IV, 107): “[N]unc quidem per speculum in aenigmate, in futuro autem facie ad faciem, ubi nimirum faciei nostrae fuerit consummata mundities, ut sibi eam exhibeat gloriosam, non habentem maculam neque rugam.”
The Self-Awareness of the Bride in SC 85

Given Bernard’s correlation of the soul’s growth in the spiritual life and its developing self-awareness as the Bride, it is not surprising to find his most illuminating treatment of the Bride’s self-knowledge in his last complete sermon on the Canticle, SC 85, composed in the final years of his life. Here the abbot offers yet another numerical schema of the soul’s ascent to God which despite its novelty reflects the same essential pattern he first articulated some twenty-five years earlier in his Steps. Commenting on Song 3:1, “In my little bed I sought him whom my soul loves,” Bernard identifies “seven reasons the soul seeks the Word” which are in fact seven ascending steps in the soul’s spiritual journey from its initial conversion to its graced conformity to the figure of Christ’s Bride: “The soul seeks the Word (1) to consent to his correction, (2) to be enlightened in knowledge, (3) to be strengthened to virtue, (4) to be reformed in wisdom, (5) to be conformed in beauty, (6) to be united to him in fruitful marriage, and (7) to enjoy him in happiness.”

In charting this seven-fold ascent, Bernard, as ever, grants the initiative to the Word’s prevenient grace, for as he has explained in the preceding sermon, the soul seeks the Word in each of these ways only because it has first been sought by him. The soul’s first two reasons for seeking the Word concern the reason and the will

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299 SC 84.4 (II, 350): “Let the soul seek him [i.e. the Word] as it is able, only let it remember that it was first sought by him, just as it was first loved by him, and this is why it both seeks and loves him (Faciat hoc quae potest; tantum se meminerit quaesitam prius, sicut et prius dilectam; atque inde esse, et quod quaerit, et quod diligat).”
respectively, for in these paired initial steps, the Word illumines reason with knowledge of what is good and moves the will to embrace that good in place of sin. In the two steps which follow, the Word grants the soul first virtue and then wisdom, that it may, by these two steps, first be strengthened to will what it knows to be good and then rejoice in willing that good with the savor of love that renders the life of holiness sweet.

In adorning the soul with each of these gifts of goodwill, knowledge, virtue, and wisdom, the Word progressively prepares the soul to be espoused to him as his Bride. Yet, as Bernard notes in citing Psalm 44:12, “The King will desire your beauty,” what the Word desires above all in his Spouse is none of these gifts in particular, but her decor or beauty. What is this decor that arouses the Word’s desire for the soul as his Bride? This beauty, Bernard answers, is the purified soul’s honestum, which might be translated as the soul’s spiritual nobility. The abbot defines this honestum as follows:

Its dwelling and source is in the conscience. Indeed its brightness is the testimony of the conscience. There is nothing brighter than this light, nothing more glorious than this testimony, when the Truth shines out in the mind and the mind sees itself in the Truth. How does this mind see itself? As chaste, modest, and filled with reverent fear. It is careful not to do anything that might diminish the glory of the testimony of its conscience. It is conscious of nothing against itself, which might cause it to be ashamed in the presence of Truth, or compel it to turn its face in shame from the piercing light of God. This truly is that beauty which above all the good gifts of the soul delights the divine gaze.300

When the brightness of this beauty fills the soul’s inmost heart, Bernard continues, it renders the body an “image of the mind” and shines forth through each of the body’s senses and members in such a way that the soul’s outward, visible life reflects this inward, spiritual beauty. This honestum or spiritual nobility is, Bernard concludes, “the beauty of purity and a certain brightness of heavenly innocence” which reveals that the soul’s “glorious conformity to the Word” who is himself the “the splendor and image of the substance of God (Heb 1:3).”

Thus Bernard depicts a self-awareness quite distinct from that the soul experienced in its proud self-deception or even the first moment of its conversion. At the first moment of its conversion, when the Truth first illumined the mind, the soul was ashamed to see within itself the sad history of its sin, the bitter truth of its self-mutilation, and its consequent dissimilarity from the Word. Now, by contrast, when the Truth shines forth in the soul purified by the Word, it sees in its conscience the glorious and certain truth of its own refashioned holiness and beauty, its splendid likeness to the holiness and beauty of the Word.

Here, in this new moment of self-knowledge, the soul sees itself to possess the holiness it once vainly imagined itself to possess in its pride. Yet, now, there is no possibility of the soul’s self-deception for the soul now glimpses within its conscience the truth of its own conformity to the Truth and, what is more, it recognizes this conformity as Truth’s own gift. Contemplating within itself the truth of its own good conscience and attributing this good conscience solely to the Word, the soul begins to recognize within

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301 SC 85.11 (II, 315): “Beata mens quae hoc se induit castimoniae decus et quemdam veluti caelestis innocentiae candidatum, per quem sibi vindicet gloriosam conformitatem, non mundi, sed Verbi, de quo legitur quod sit candor vitae aeternae, splendor et figura substantiae Dei.”
itself the features of the Word’s own Bride, purified by her Bridegroom’s grace and, in consequence, filled with the desire to preserve her purity and offer it to her Bridegroom in chaste and holy love. And it is precisely this self-awareness as Christ’s Bride that is the soul’s beauty, the beauty that allures the divine gaze and arouses the Word’s desire for the one who is clothed with his own likeness.

Since the soul has now begun to know herself as the Bride, she can no longer conceive of herself apart from her Bridegroom, nor think of anything other than her espousal to him. Her self-awareness is now, as it were, constituted by her relation to the Word, from whom she has received all her newfound nobility and to whom she longs to offer her entire self in the grateful reciprocity of love. Delivered from the shame and fear she once knew in her conversion, the soul-as-Bride now “sees that she is as worthy to marry him as she is like him” and so boldly dares to profess her entire self to him in love, rejoicing to say, “It is good for me to cleave to God, to place my hope in the Lord God” (Ps 72:28). Describing the Bride’s ecstatic gift of herself to the Word who has given her all that she now is, Bernard writes:

When you see such a soul leave all things behind to cleave to the Word with all her devotion, to live for the Word, to rule herself by the Word, to conceive from the Word all that she will bear for the Word, who is able to say, “For me to live is Christ and to is gain” (Phil 1:21), know that this is the Bride and Spouse of the Word.

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302 SC 85.12 (II, 315): “Ex hoc iam gradu audet, quae eiusmodi est, cogitare de nuptiis. Quidni audet, eo se nubilem quo similem cernens?”

303 SC 85.12 (II, 315): “Ergo quam videris animam, relictis omnibus, Verbo votis omnibus adhaerere, Verbo vivere, Verbo se regere, de Verbo concipere quod pariat Verbo, quae possit dicere: MIHI VIVERE CHRISTUS EST ET MORI LUCRUM, puta coniugem Verbo que maritatam.”
For Bernard, then, the soul that has sought the Word because it was first sought by him has now discovered not only the Word, but also her new identity as the Word’s own Bride. And, as Bernard’s language of conception and bearing indicates, all that remains once the soul has been beautified by and espoused to the Word is for her to bear fruit for her Spouse, to assume that spiritual motherhood which complements her spiritual marriage to Christ.

As spiritual Spouse of the Word, Bernard explains, the soul as Bride gives birth to two kinds of spiritual children which reflect her new self-awareness as the Bride in both her anthropological and ecclesiological aspects. In the first place, the Bride gives birth to “spiritual thoughts” by her loving contemplation of the Word. Here, without that ambiguity we saw in his Steps, Bernard teaches that the soul’s rapture to the contemplative vision of God entails its complete loss of self-awareness, the consequence of the soul’s total self-gift to her Bridegroom. The abbot writes: “In this kind of birth, she is sometimes so rapt above herself and her bodily senses that in her awareness of the Word, she has no awareness of herself.”

In this contemplative awareness of the Word, the soul, drawn to the ineffable sweetness of her Bridegroom, is “stolen, as it were, from her very self, or better, rapt and swept from her very self, that she might enjoy the Word.”

The Anima-Sponsa’s spiritual maternity is not limited, however, to her contemplative enjoyment of the Word, but also extends to all those souls to whom she is

304 SC 85.13 (II, 315): “In hoc ultimo genere interdum exceditur et seceditur etiam a corporeis sensibus, ut sese non sentiat quae Verbum sentit.”

305 SC 85.13 (II, 316): “Hoc fit, cum mens ineffabili Verbi illecta dulcedine, quodammodo se sibi furatur, immo rapitur atque elabitur a seipsa, ut Verbo fruatur.”
bound in love in the monastic community and, more broadly, in the Church. When returned to herself and her bodily senses following the transient rapture of contemplation, the soul-as-Bride exercises her motherhood in a second way as she “looks to the needs of her neighbors” in compassionate fraternal charity.306 Bernard’s integration of these contemplative and active dimensions of the Bride’s spiritual life recalls his teaching in the Steps concerning the interrelationship between compassion and contemplation, the second and third Steps of Truth respectively: “When the heart’s eye is purified by fraternal charity, it delights to contemplate the Truth in his own nature, out of love for whom it bears the sufferings of others.”307 In SC 85, Bernard illustrates this interrelationship of the loves of God and neighbor by identifying Paul as the supreme example of the Anima-Sponsa when he writes to the Church at Corinth, “When we are out of our minds, it is for God; when we are sober, it is for you” (2 Cor 5:13).

Bernard’s allusion to the purified soul’s two-fold maternity, in contemplation and compassion respectively, also reflects his integrated understanding of the Bride, the individual soul, and the Church. In the tradition of Origen, the abbot has insisted throughout his commentary that the Sponsa Christi of the Canticle is at once and inseparably the individual soul and the Church.308 In the first place, it is the Church which is Christ’s Bride, the Ecclesia-Sponsa, and the individual soul is only able to become and to be called Christ’s Bride within the Church as it realizes within itself the


307 Hum 6 (III, 20): “Hac caritate fraterna cordis acie mundata, veritatem delectantur in sui contemplari natura, pro cuius amore mala tolerant aliena.”

308 On Origen’s exegesis of the Canticle and its influence on Bernard’s, see Michael Casey, Athirst for God: Spiritual Desire in Bernard of Clairvaux’s Sermons on the Song of Songs, 40-46.
figure of this *Ecclesia-Sponsa*. On the other hand, the Church as Bride concretely exists only in the individual souls from whom she is composed, those souls who seek God in love. As Yves Congar has shown, Bernard reconciles these two dimensions of the one *Sponsa Christi* by envisioning the Church as a congregation of holy souls united with one another and with their Bridegroom in the bonds of divine charity. 309 Thus in SC 61, Bernard writes: “When you think of these lovers, you must not think of a man and a woman, but of the Word and the soul. And if I say Christ and the Church, it is the same thing, except that the Church is not one soul, but a unity, or better, a unanimity of many.” 310

Bernard’s doctrine of the *Sponsa Christi* in both her ecclesial and anthropological dimensions is, of course, not without significance for this theology of self-knowledge. Simply put, if the *Anima-Sponsa’s* self-awareness is constituted by her relation to the *Verbum-Sponsus*, it is simultaneously constituted by her relationship with each of the many souls with whom she forms Christ’s one Bride, the *Ecclesia-Sponsa*. Her gift of her entire self to her Bridegroom will necessarily entail her complementary gift of herself to all the members of Christ’s Church for the sake of Christ. Bernard makes this implication explicit in one of his earliest works, the *Apologia* to abbot William when he speaks of Christ the Second Joseph’s multicolored, but seamless robe, his wedding gift to his Bride. This robe is many-colored on account of the diverse souls and Orders that compose the Church, but still seamless on account of the “indivisible unity of undivided

charity” given by the Spirit that binds the many together as one Bride. Speaking of this robe, Bernard writes:

Let us all strive together to form this one robe, and let one robe be made of us all. For though it is composed of many and diverse people, my dove, my beautiful and perfect one is only one (Sg 2:10; 6:8). For it is not I alone, nor you without me, nor someone else without us both, but all of us together who are this one dove, provided we take care to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Bernard has already explained that this one robe given to the Bride is the Bridegroom’s own robe, dipped in the blood of his Cross. The abbot’s imagery suggests, then, that if the members of the Church are to form and wear this robe, they must be bound to one another in the humility and compassionate love the Incarnate Word exemplifies and effects above all in his Passion. The Anima-Sponsa, then, will not be able to conceive of herself apart from her fellow members in the Church, nor scorn her fellows like the proud, self-deceived monk Bernard describes in his steps of pride. On the contrary, she will embrace her brothers and sisters with Christ’s own humility and compassion, for she knows that to be herself is to be bound in the Spirit with them and that it only with them that she will most fully realize her own being as the Bridegroom’s only Bride.

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312 Apo 7 (III, 87): “Omnes ergo pariter occurramus in unam tunicam, et ex omnibus constet una. Ex omnibus, inquam, una: nam etsi ex pluribus et diversis, una est tamen columba mea, formosa mea, perfecta mea. Alioquin nec ego solus, nec tu sine me, nec ille absque utroque, sed simul omnes sumus illa una, si tamen solliciti sumus servare unitatem spiritus in vinculo pacis.”
**Conclusion**

Having considered three of Bernard’s most significant itineraries of the soul’s ascent to God, we can now glean some general conclusions concerning his overarching vision of the ascent of self-knowledge the soul experiences as it is progressively restored in the divine likeness it lost through sin. In his very first itinerary of the spiritual life, *On the Steps of Humility and Pride* of 1125, Bernard has already identified the major moments or milestones of this journey of the soul’s developing self-awareness from the humbling self-knowledge acquired in its initial conversion to the joyous self-awareness as the Bride it achieves at the culmination of its ascent. Prior to its initial conversion, the soul that has descended to one degree or another the steps of pride lacks any true self-knowledge for it is subject to a false self-knowledge, or self-deception, which assumes an increasingly perverse form as the soul slides deeper into pride. At the root of this self-deception, in whatever form it may take, is the soul’s *curiositas*, its sensitive and mental fascination with others that distracts it from its proper task of self-judgment in the light of Truth. For Bernard, the addictive power of this curiosity coupled with the conceited delight the soul enjoys in its self-deception are so great that the soul is, of itself, powerless to recognize its present self-deception, let alone judge it as false.

Consequently, it is only the prevenient grace of the Word that can recall the soul’s curiosity to itself and compel the soul to face the bitter reality of its sin and misery in the unerring light of Truth. When the Word does recall the soul to its own heart, and there reveals to it the sad history of its own sin, the soul can only be filled with guilt, shame, and fear of divine judgment, a theme Bernard develops to great effect through his image of the soul as courtroom in the opening of his *On Conversion*. Yet, as Bernard
consistently reminds his readers, the soul’s horrifying encounter with its own self-disfigured face, its own self-imposed unlikeness to the Word, must be bravely endured for it is in this encounter with its own true misery that the Word at once begins to heal the soul by his gentle, transforming mercy. By this course of healing, the soul is restored in the lost divine likeness and progressively conformed to the beauty of Christ’s Bride by the Word’s gift of humility to the reason and the Spirit’s infusion of charity into the will. Once conformed to the Incarnate Word’s beauty in both these aspects, the soul may be rapt to a contemplative vision of God which, through transient and indistinct, nevertheless confirms the truth of the soul’s newfound self-awareness as the Sponsa Christi. Thus the soul comes to enjoy a new, delightful, and certain self-understanding as her Bridegroom’s own Beloved, the joyous counterpoint to its earlier self-recognition as an image of God disfigured by sin.

In On Conversion, Bernard reprises this fundamental itinerary of the soul’s ascent, but also elaborates it, identifying several intervening phases of self-knowledge the soul experiences as it ascends to its self-awareness as Christ’s Bride. There Bernard makes clear that the reason’s growth in humility will be a far lengthier and more arduous process than it might appear in the Steps. By a painstaking pedagogy, the Word reveals to the soul the full measure of its brokenness not all at once, but by a gradual series of painful lessons in the school of self-knowledge. Within this school, reason learns by experience first his inability to reform himself through the mastery of his bodily senses, and then his powerlessness to liberate his spouse, the will, from her self-enslavement to sin. Yet, once the Word has brought reason to see and to confess in tears the full measure of the soul’s brokenness, he then consoles reason with the delightful prospect of a new
self-awareness as his own Bride, radiant with his own spiritual beauty and at rest in the peace of good conscience. Now that the soul sees both what it truly is and what it truly might become, the will is enabled, by the inward, efficacious Word of God resounding within it, to embrace the life of holiness reason has been permitted to glimpse within the monastic cloister. Having converted the soul’s will to himself, the Word adorns his Bride with one further gift, not explicitly mentioned in the Steps, namely the purification of the soul’s memory by the forgiveness of sins. By this purification, the Word allows the soul to recall its sinful past without any lingering trace of shame or guilt and so to embrace her new identity as the Word’s Bride, truly worthy, by his gift, of her espousal to him.

In SC 85, Bernard completes his account of the soul’s ascent to self-knowledge with his last and most evocative picture of the Anima-Sponsa in the beauty of her newfound self-awareness. At the origin of her spiritual ascent, this soul stood self-condemned in the courtroom of her own mind, ashamed to see her self-disfigured face and filled with fear before the undeceived eyes of Truth. Now, thanks to the mercy of the Word, she may delight in her own renewed countenance and rejoice in the knowledge that her beautiful soul now delights the gaze of her divine Bridegroom. She rests in the peace of her good conscience, acknowledges that all her restored beauty is her Bridegroom’s gift to her, and, knowing herself as his Bride, longs to offer her entire self to him in thanksgiving and love. Radiant with her Incarnate Bridegroom’s own beauty, the beauty he desires above all in his Spouse, she is sometimes rapt to the contemplative enjoyment of the Word and so absorbed in him that she ceases to be aware even of herself. Though indistinct and passing, this vision is nevertheless the soul’s assurance that the Word has begun to conform her to his own beauty will bring her beauty to its
complete and eschatological fulfillment. In the meanwhile, when returned to herself, she delights to give herself to her brothers and sisters in compassionate love for she knows that she is only Christ’s Bride insofar as she realizes within herself and participates in Christ’s one Bride, the Church. As she grows ever more into the form of Christ’s Bride and grows ever more aware of this truth within herself, she is inflamed with confident expectation of that eternal day when, with her will entirely conformed to her Bridegroom’s, she will forget her very self and pass over entirely into God.  

Finally, in our consideration of these three paradigmatic itineraries of the soul’s ascent to God, we saw that Bernard consistently affirms the priority of divine grace in the soul’s restoration in the lost divine likeness and throughout the soul’s journey of developing self-awareness as Christ’s Bride. The soul immersed in curiosity and self-deception does not come to know itself in truth as a disfigured image of God save by the prevenient action of the Word calling the soul to conversion. Again, the soul that has been converted first to its own heart and then to the Word is only is restored in the lost divine likeness, and only arrives at its new self-awareness as the Sponsa Christi, by the continuing graced action of the Word, and the Spirit, throughout its ascent to God. For this reason, the Anima-Sponsa is filled with gratitude and love for her divine Bridegroom, not only recognizing herself as conformed to his own beauty, but also acknowledging with humility and thanksgiving that she owes all her newfound beauty to the grace of Verbum-Sponsus. Therefore, in the following chapter, we will consider the soul’s ascent to self-knowledge from the perspective of the Word who, for Bernard, both models and effects the soul’s ascent by his own journey of self-knowledge in his Incarnation.

313 See Dil 27-28 (III, 142-143).
CHAPTER 4:
SELF-KNOWLEDGE AND THE MYSTERIES OF CHRIST’S LIFE

In the three preceding chapters, we have examined Bernard’s comprehensive doctrine of self-knowledge in the spiritual life from the self-deception of the proud, self-willed soul prior to its first conversion to the graced soul’s joyous self-knowledge as Christ’s beloved Bride, radiant with the likeness of his own humility and love. Along the way, we have had occasion to see how, for Bernard, Christ the Incarnate Word plays an integral role in the soul’s journey from self-deception to its newfound self-awareness as his Spouse. To complete our examination of the abbot’s comprehensive doctrine of self-knowledge, then, it will be necessary to explore in much greater depth the place of Christ in Bernard’s account of the soul’s growth in self-knowledge. Such an exploration is the focus of the present chapter.

The scholarship concerning Bernard’s Christology is, of course, vast.314 Yet, there is at present no study devoted specifically to the intersection of Christology, soteriology,

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and the soul’s self-knowledge in the abbot’s doctrine. In undertaking such a study, our aim will be to show how Bernard, rather audaciously, argues that Christ himself, by his descent and ascent in the flesh, undertakes, in a sense, the very journey of self-knowledge we have seen the abbot chart in the preceding chapters; and, that by this journey of self-knowledge, he both models this journey for his disciples and effects their successful completion of this journey according to his example.

To demonstrate these claims, this chapter will proceed in three parts. First, following our practice of beginning with Bernard’s foundational work, On the Steps of Humility and Pride, we will explore the subtle Christology he there develops in his apparent “digression” concerning the Word’s knowledge as Incarnate. We will show that, for Bernard, the Word’s Incarnation involves the Word’s own journey of self-knowledge, as the Word first humbles himself to experience the truth of fallen humanity’s miseria by his experience in the flesh, and then, following the steps of Truth, learns compassion for his fellow human beings through this newly discovered self-knowledge. By his own descent to ascend these steps of Truth, the Word as Incarnate will both model for his disciples the way of humility and charity that leads to self-knowledge, and, at the same time, authentically learn and grow in these virtues so that he might himself become not only an example, but also a source of these virtues for those joined to him in faith and charity.

Second, to show how, for Bernard, Christ models the soul’s journey of self-knowledge, we will undertake a study of the abbot’s reflections on the mysteries of

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Christ’s incarnate, crucified, and glorified life in his self-collected and self-edited

*Sermones per annum.* Attending to a previously understudied aspect of the abbot’s teaching in these liturgical sermons, namely his reflections on Christ’s gift of the Spirit at Pentecost, we will be able to demonstrate how the abbot conceives the mysteries of Christ’s descent and ascent in the flesh, from his Advent to Pentecost, as a model for the soul’s own ascending journey of self-knowledge according to the very pattern we have seen in the preceding chapters. As the soul is progressively conformed to Christ in each of these mysteries, from his taking flesh in the womb of Mary to his Ascension and giving of the Spirit, the soul will pass from the self-deception intrinsic to the region of unlikeness to its newfound self-awareness as the Bride of Christ that it enjoys by its restoration in the likeness of his humility and love.

Third, since, for Bernard, Christ does not only model the journey of self-knowledge for his disciples, but also effects their progress in this journey by making himself the inner well-spring of their humility and love, we will consider Bernard’s soteriological teaching in his Letter 190, *Against the Errors of Peter Abelard.* Here the abbot challenges what he takes to be one of the principal doctrinal errors of Peter’s soteriology; namely, that Christ is a mere moral exemplar whose display of the greatest love in the flesh, and above all in his Passion, inspires his disciples to reciprocate this love with their whole hearts. While Bernard certainly agrees with Peter that Christ is indeed a moral exemplar who arouses those who contemplate him to imitate his unparalleled, self-giving love, he goes beyond Abelard to insist that, by his Passion, the Word as Incarnate not only inspires, but also inwardly effects this response of love in the hearts of his faithful. For the abbot of Clairvaux, as we will see, the Word by his
Incarnation not only renders himself a moving example of humility, charity, and self-knowledge, but also the inward source of these virtues for those joined to him, as members to their Head, by the bonds of faith, love, and the sacraments of the Church.

Before turning to these three interrelated elements of Bernard’s teaching on Christ and the soul’s progress in self-knowledge, however, we will need to begin with a study of the fundamentals of his Christological doctrine. For, as we will see, the abbot is only able to make these claims regarding Christ’s saving work in the flesh because he has first developed a thoroughly incarnational Christology that is faithful both to the Scriptural witness concerning Jesus and to the Church’s *regula fidei* in expounding that witness. Proceeding in this order, from Bernard’s teaching on Christ’s Person to his teaching on Christ’s saving work, we hope to offer one specific instance in his thought of a properly doctrinal spirituality in which a rich account of life in the Spirit emerges from careful theological meditation on the Church’s traditional Christological formulations.

**Doctrine and Spirituality in Bernard’s Christology**

In his article “Le Mystère de l’Ascension dans les sermons de Saint Bernard,” Jean Leclercq suggests that the abbot of Clairvaux’s meditations on Christ’s Ascension into glory feature a “perfect equilibrium” between the doctrinal and the tropological. Leclercq writes: “[Bernard’s] spiritual exhortation flows, without effort or artifice, from his dogmatic teaching.”[^315] What Leclercq has said of Bernard’s sermons on the Ascension in particular might be extended to the whole of his Christology in general and

indeed to the entirety of his theological enterprise for, as Bernard McGinn has written, “Bernard’s mystical theology is solidly rooted in, indeed inseparable from, its doctrinal foundations.”\footnote{316} 

Whereas contemporary theological discourse has lamented a certain divorce between theology and spirituality in the modern era, there is, as Hans Urs von Balthasar has remarked, no such divorce apparent in Bernard’s writings.\footnote{317} On the contrary, for Bernard, the task of theology is to present the traditional dogmas of the Catholic faith in so moving a manner that he and his brother monks might begin to regard their entire monastic life, in both its contemplative and ascetical dimensions, as a living expression of all the Church proposes for belief. And it is this conviction that accounts for Bernard’s repeated insistence on the essential dimension of \textit{experientia}, or the lived appropriation of the truths of faith, for any adequate theology. For in his view, if theology is to be more than yet another manifestation of \textit{curiositas}, more than an impersonal and ineffectual mental exercise concerning the doctrines of the faith and their logical relationships, the monk must attempt not only to understand this faith in its complexity, but also to discern, by continual recourse to the work of self-judgment and self-knowledge, how this faith informs both who he is and how he must live. Indeed, for Bernard, the doctrines of the faith are never finally understood until they are performed in the Christian life, and, for


this reason, doctrine and spirituality remain for him always intimately and necessarily related.

Consequently, if we are to understand the role Christ assumes in Bernard’s theology of self-knowledge and the spiritual life, we must first begin with an account of the abbot’s teaching concerning the Person and work of Christ, the Incarnate Word. For while it is true, as McGinn has suggested, that Bernard and his Cistercian contemporaries are concerned less with the metaphysical constitution of the Person of Christ and more with the meaning of the redemption Christ has effected, it is also true that Bernard understands well the link between an account of Christ’s Person and an account of his redemptive work. For Bernard, that is, we cannot begin to understand the nature of the Incarnate Word’s redemptive work and its implications for the spiritual life of Christian believers until we have first established who this Word is and how he has taken flesh for the sake of our salvation.

Though he was the author of treatises as well as sermons, Bernard nowhere in his corpus offers an ex professo treatment of Christ’s Person and saving work. Yet, this does not mean that Bernard has failed to develop and articulate a rigorous, systematic Christology. Indeed the Person and work of Christ are so essential to the abbot’s theological imagination that they imbue all his theological writings and it is therefore possible to glean from his many treatments of Christ a consistent doctrinal foundation that undergirds his entire spiritual theology. In what follows, we will first attempt a brief overview of his Christological teaching and then examine one of the abbot’s most

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significant individual expressions of this Christology, namely his sixtieth sermon *De Diversis*, on the mystery of the Ascension.

Together with his Cistercian contemporaries, Bernard takes as the basis of his Christology the dogmatic formula of Chalcedon: Jesus Christ is true God and true man, one Person from and in two natures. And, as a faithful heir to the orthodox patristic tradition reflected in Cyril of Alexandria and Augustine, Bernard expounds this Chalcedonian formula in a thoroughly incarnational manner. For Bernard, the single subject of Christ is the fully divine Person of the Word, the second Person of the Trinity, who is consubstantially and coeternally begotten of the Father and who together with the Father and the Holy Spirit is one and the same God in a Trinity of Persons. In the act of his Incarnation, this fully divine Person of the Word, without loss to himself as fully divine, has taken up and come to express an integral human nature, complete with a true human body and soul, and the full complement of the human faculties and passions. Since the Word suffers no loss to his divinity, what is true of him from eternity remains true of him in and following the act of his Incarnation. Yet, on account of his Incarnation, something new comes to be true of the Word. For in virtue of the integral human nature he has now assumed, the divine Person of Word as Incarnate is now capable of living an authentically human life, of sensing, feeling, knowing, and willing in a genuinely human way.

In taking up and coming to express all that is required of being human, the Word Incarnate has, for Bernard, also taken up certain features of human existence which though not strictly essential to being human nevertheless reflect the condition of actual human beings in time. In determining which of these additional characteristics the Word
as Incarnate has assumed, the abbot is consistently guided by the biblical witness 
concerning the Savior. Thus, though the capacity to suffer and die are not, strictly 
speaking, essential to being human, the Word as Incarnate has, as the Gospel accounts 
attest, assumed these capacities. By contrast, the Word has not assumed human 
sinfulness. For, as Bernard’s exposition in *On Grace and Free Will* suggests, to sin is not 
essential to being human and indeed Christ’s sinlessness is affirmed by Scripture, as in 
the Letter to the Hebrews: “[Christ] was tempted in every way that we are, without sin” 
(Heb 4:15).319

Across his diverse meditations on Christ’s Person and saving work, Bernard 
repeatedly reminds his readers that the Word has taken flesh not for his own sake, but for 
the sake of those fallen human beings he has willed to save. His Incarnation and his 
words and deeds in the flesh are fittingly adapted to the specific needs of fallen human 
beings, and are undertaken so as both to effect their salvation and to model for them, in a 
genuinely human manner, that way of humility and love by which those who follow him 
in faith may return to God. By the mysteries of his incarnate, crucified, and glorified life, 
the Word Incarnate has become both the source and the model of the fallen human 
beings’ ascent to their Creator. As Bernard puts it in his *Steps*, Christ is, as he himself 
says, the Way, the Truth, and the Life (Jn 14:6): as the Way, he models that journey of 
humility and love by which his disciples will return to God; as the Truth, he is the very 
God to whom they will return; and, as the Life, he is the very viaticum which sustains and 
strengthens them on their journey back to him according to the way he has revealed.320

319 See Gra 21-23 (III, 181-183).
320 See Hum 1 (III, 16-17).
The foregoing elements of Bernard’s systematic Christological vision are succinctly expressed in the abbot’s sixtieth sermon De Diversis, on the feast of the Ascension. Bernard’s text is Jn 3:13, *Nemo ascendit in caelum, nisi qui de caelo descendit, Filii hominis, qui est in caelo* (No one ascends into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man who is in heaven). As McGinn has argued, this Scriptural “descent-ascent motif” serves as “a fundamental premiss” of the abbot’s Christology; for Bernard, McGinn suggests, “The essential work of Christ…is to descend that he might ascend.”

From the very outset of his commentary on John 3:13, Bernard is keen to emphasize the close relationship between Christ’s Person and his saving work. The Word of God has descended and ascended in the flesh for the sake of our salvation and, more precisely, in order to reveal how human beings might themselves ascend to God after his example. As we noted in Chapter 1, the abbot believes that human beings as created images of God possess an innate desire to ascend, and this innate desire is laudable, for this is why God has created them. As Bernard writes in his fourth sermon for the Ascension, “We all desire to ascend. We all long for exaltation. For we are noble creatures, possessing a certain greatness of soul, and so we long for the heights with a natural desire.” God does not fault human beings for their desire to ascend, but rather for the proud way in which they attempt to ascend by themselves. For, as we saw in Chapter 2 through our study of Bernard’s steps of pride, Bernard believes that human

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322 4 Asc 3 (V, 139-140): “Cupidi siquidem sumus ascensionis: exaltationem concupiscimus omnes. Nobiles enim creaturae sumus, et magni cuiusdam animi, ideo que altitudinem naturali appetimus desiderio.”
beings all too often attempt to ascend by exalting themselves, through self-deception, pride and self-will, in a ceaseless recapitulation of the false ascents of Lucifer and humanity’s first parents. If fallen human beings are to ascend rightly, they must, as we saw in Chapter 3, ascend by humbling themselves, by the way of self-knowledge, humility and charity.

Since fallen human beings are, through their share in the sin of Adam, so inclined ceaselessly to recapitulate their forefather’s false ascent, the Word of God must, Bernard believes, teach them the true and salutary way of ascent by descending and ascending before their very eyes. And this is, for Bernard, the very essence of the Word’s saving work: “Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, wishing to teach us how we should ascend to heaven, himself did what he taught, by ascending into heaven.”323 Yet, in this, Bernard continues, the Word of God as God faces a certain metaphysical obstacle. For, as God, in the divine nature he eternally possesses and expresses, the divine Person of the Word cannot descend or ascend, or suffer change in any respect. For this reason, the abbot concludes, the divine Person of the Word assumed to himself our own human nature, that in and through this human nature, he might descend and ascend, and thus reveal to us the true way of our ascent to glory. Bernard writes:

Since he was not able to ascend unless he first descended, and since the simplicity of his divinity could not suffer either to descend or ascend – indeed it was not able to be increased or diminished or changed in any way – he assumed our nature into the unity of his Person, that is, our human nature, in which he

323 Div 60.1 (VI-1, 290): “Dominus et Salvator noster Iesus Christus, volens nos docere quomodo in caelum ascenderemus, fecit ipse quod docuit, ascendit scilicet in caelum.” All translations of Div 60 are my own.
descended and ascended and showed us the way by which we too might ascend.\textsuperscript{324}

Thus, by taking up and expressing our human nature, the divine Person of the Word is able to do what he could not do before; namely, to model before our eyes the salutary ascent of self-knowledge, humility, charity that inverts the false ascent of self-deception, pride, and self-will, and thereby reveals our true way to God. Evoking 1 Pet 2:21, Bernard concludes, “Through the mystery of his Incarnation, the Lord descends and ascends, leaving us an example, that we might follow in his footsteps.”\textsuperscript{325}

Yet, Bernard is equally keen to emphasize that, in the act of his Incarnation, the divine Person of the Word suffers no loss to his divinity. This is of great significance for Bernard because it enables the Word to serve as both the way and the goal of the spiritual journey. The Word as Incarnate models the way of our ascent; the Word as God is the height to which we ascend.\textsuperscript{326} Bernard writes:

> When [Christ] says, “No one ascends except he who descended,” he refers to his assumption of human nature. When he says, “who is in heaven,” he refers to the immutability of his divinity. By these same words, he also indicates that he himself is the way by which we ought to ascend and that he himself is the homeland were we ought to remain once we have ascended; the way, that is, for those going, and the homeland for those who have arrived. And so, remaining what he was in his own nature, he descended

\textsuperscript{324} Div 60.1 (VI-1, 290): “Et quoniam ascendere non poterat, nisi prius descenderet, descendere autem eum vel ascendere non patiebatur divinitatis suae simplicitas, quippe quae nec minui potest, nec augeri aut aliquo modo variari, assumpsit in unitatem suae personae naturam nostram, id est humanam, in qua descenderet et ascenderet, viam que nobis, qua et nos ascenderemus, ostenderet.”

\textsuperscript{325} Div 60.2 (V-I, 292): “Sic per incarnationis suae mysterium descendit et ascendit Dominus, relinquens nobis exemplum ut sequamur vestigia eius.”

\textsuperscript{326} Here Bernard follows Augustine’s teaching on Christ the Incarnate Word as both \textit{via} and \textit{patria}, as in, for example, \textit{De doctrina christiana} I.11.11 (CCSL 32).
and ascended in our nature, for our sake, extending powerfully from end to end and ordering all things sweetly (Wis 8:1).\textsuperscript{327}

In the act of his Incarnation, then, the divine Person of the Word assumes human nature without renouncing his divinity that he might serve as both the goal of the fallen human being’s ascent to God and the exemplary way of that ascent. And, the Word Incarnate’s words and deeds in the flesh are carefully adapted to the specific needs of fallen human beings. Since fallen human beings are so inclined to the false ascent of self-deception, pride, and self-will, the Word appears before their very eyes to disclose an alternative way of self-knowledge, humility, and love. The Word Incarnate thus becomes, in effect, a mirror for the monk’s self-knowledge; by contemplating his incarnate example, he can contemplate himself in light of Christ’s example. If the Word of God himself has humbled himself, how can the monk possibly persist in his pride? If the Word of God himself has lovingly humbled himself for the salvation of human beings, how can he possibly persist in that posture of self-will which contempt both the Word and his own brothers, whom the Word has come to save?

As we saw in Chapter 2, on Bernard’s twelve steps of pride, the monk who has followed the way of self-deception, pride, and self-will to its bitter end simultaneously descends into the threefold false knowledge and contempt of himself, his brothers, and his Creator. By his descent and ascent in the flesh, however, the Word Incarnate reveals the true way of ascent to God, which proceeds by the threefold knowledge and love of

\textsuperscript{327} Div 60.1 (VI-1, 291): “In eo enim quod dictum est: NEMO ASCENDIT, NISI QUI DESCENDIT, assumptio humanae naturae exprimitur; in eo autem quod infertur: QUI EST IN CAELO, divinitatis suae incommutabilitas ostenditur. In quibus verbis illud etiam innuitur, quod ipse sit via per quam ascendantam, ipse patria ubi maneamus: via scilicet transeuntibus, patria pervenientibus. Manens itaque quod erat in natura sua, descendit et ascendit propter nos in nostra, attingens nimimum a fine usque ad finem fortiter et disponens omnia suaviter.”
self, neighbor, and God. He has shown the monk, in other words, the way to ascend the three steps of Truth.

Yet, for Bernard, the Word Incarnate does not simply model this threefold ascent, but also performs it before humanity’s eyes in an authentically human way. As Bernard has made clear, the divine Person of the Word has assumed to himself an integral, genuine human nature, in and through which he, as the single subject of Christ, truly lives a human life of humility and love. Bernard will, however, take the point a step further. The Word Incarnate is not simply play-acting in the flesh. Rather, just as human beings must learn humility and love, and grow in these virtues on their ascending way to God, so will the Word as Incarnate truly learn and grow in the virtues of humility and compassion by the experience of his descent and ascent in the flesh. This is the thrust of the abbot’s Christological meditation in On the Steps of Humility and Pride, to which we now turn.

**Christ’s Ascent of the Three Steps of Truth**

Before considering how, in Bernard’s Steps, Christ ascends the three steps of Truth, it will be helpful briefly to recall the abbot’s teaching on those steps in themselves and their relations. In the opening of his treatise, Bernard has established that the fruit of humility is Truth. Yet, the Truth, he adds, is perceived in three degrees or steps: “We perceive the Truth in ourselves by judging ourselves; we perceive the Truth in our neighbors by showing compassion for their sufferings; we perceive the Truth in his own
nature when we contemplate him with a pure heart." The monk’s growing recognition of the Truth in himself, his brothers, and in Truth’s own nature will proceed through his growth in the three virtues of humility, compassionate charity, and contemplation respectively.

For Bernard, moreover, the monk will ascend these three steps of Truth in order, because these steps are arranged according to a certain psychological sequence. The monk must seek the Truth in his brothers before seeking Truth in his own nature, and must seek the Truth in himself before seeking the Truth in his brothers. Christ, the Truth himself, indicated this progression in the ordering of his beatitudes: he places the merciful before the pure of heart, and the meek before the merciful (Mt 5:3-12). Having noted this order, Bernard then traces the relationships between these steps in turn.

First, the monk must seek the Truth in himself before seeking it in his brothers. This is so, Bernard argues, because we can only truly perceive the Truth in another when we discern and learn compassion for the sufferings of others, and most especially their *miseria*; that is, how prone they are to sin and how easily they are tempted. Yet since we have no direct access to the sufferings others experience within themselves, we must learn to feel their *miseria* by learning to feel our own through a kind of creative empathy. As Bernard writes: “If you are to have a heart merciful towards another’s misery, you must first recognize your own misery, that you might find your neighbor’s mind in your

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328 Hum 6 (III, 20): “Inquirimus namque veritatem in nobis, in proximis, in sui natura. In nobis, nosmetipsos diiudicando; in proximis, eorum malis compatiendo; in sui natura, mundo corde contemplando.”
own, and from your own experience learn how to help him.” Yet, to know our own *miseria*, we must first engage in the difficult work of self-knowledge, honestly acknowledging the humbling truth of our own sinfulness and weakness that we might learn to see and to have mercy on that same sinfulness and weakness in others.

For Bernard, only this humbling recognition of our own sufferings will allow us to treat others with forgiveness, understanding, gentleness, and genuinely compassionate love. As long as we remain insensitive to, or self-deceived to, the truth of our own fallenness, we will be far more inclined, Bernard suggests, to treat others with thoughtless insensitivity, prideful scorn, and hard-hearted contempt. As we saw in Chapter 2, Bernard shows through his narration of the twelve steps of pride how the monk who lacks true self-knowledge born of humble self-judgment will, by degrees, come to regard his fellows first as contemptible inferiors to be valued only insofar as they sing his praises, then as subjects for his rapacious *libido dominandi*, and, finally, as mere objects for the satisfaction of his fleshly lusts.

Though the task of true self-knowledge and genuine compassion for one’s brothers is by no means always easy or pleasant, it is, Bernard suggests, the only true way to ascend to God. The momentary, but ultimately specious, sense of self-inflated superiority the monk may find in scorning his brothers as inferiors may feel like a sort of an ascent, and even a sort of divinity, but it is, in truth, a descent, for it makes the monk proud and self-willed, less like the Word Incarnate, and so far from the likeness of God. If, on the other hand, the monk embraces the way of humility and compassion, he begins

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329 Hum 6 (III, 21): “Sicut enim pura veritas non nisi puro corde videtur, sic miseria fratris verius misero corde sentitur. Sed ob alienam miseriam cor miserum habeas, oportet tuam prius agnoscas, ut proximi mentem in tua invenias, et ex te noveris qualiter illi subvenias.”
to be likened to the humility and compassion of the Word-made-flesh, and so begins, by
the principle of knowledge through resemblance, to ascend to, and see, the Truth in his
own nature. With the eye of his heart washed pure by humility and love, the monk will
begin to ascend towards, and to see, God, by a kind of indistinct and transient
contemplative glimpse that is itself the foretaste of the distinct, abiding beatific vision of
God in glory.

In the midst of his account of these three steps of Truth and their sequential
relations, it is somewhat surprising to find that while discussing the link between the first
and second steps of Truth, between genuine self-knowledge and compassionate fraternal
love, Bernard suddenly interrupts his schema to introduce the example of Jesus. If the
monk indeed makes this empathetic move from the knowledge of his own misery to
merciful compassion for his brother in his, he will imitate the Savior. To resume the
passage just quoted:

If you are to have a heart merciful towards another’s misery, you
must first recognize your own misery, that you might find your
neighbor’s mind in your own, and from your own experience learn
how to help him. In this way, you will imitate the example of our
Savior, who willed to suffer that he might learn compassion, to
share our misery that he might learn mercy. For just as it is said of
him, “He learned obedience from the things he suffered” (Heb
5:8), so in the same way, he learned mercy.330

Bernard’s provocative interjection immediately occasions a lengthy excursus on the
theme of the Word’s Incarnation, his descent and ascent in the flesh. Though Bernard’s

330 Hum 6 (III, 21): “Sed ut ob alienam miseriam cor miserum habeas, oportet tuam prius
agnoscas, ut proximi mentem in tua invenias, et ex te noveris qualiter illi subvenias, exemplo scilicet
Salvatoris nostri, qui pati voluit ut compati sciret, miser fieri ut misereri disceret, ut quomodo de ipso
scriptum est: ET DIDICIT EX HIS QUAE PASSUS EST OBOEDIENTIAM, ita disceret et
misericordiam.”
excursus has been labeled a “digression” from his main argument,331 and though the abbot himself admits as much,332 it would be a mistake to treat his teaching in these paragraphs as somehow insignificant to his main argument in the Steps or, indeed, his broader spiritual doctrine. On the contrary, Bernard’s excursus contains one of the most significant and subtle statements of his Christology and is, in the overall plan of his Steps, purposefully parallel to a second “digression” in his work’s second half that concerns the false ascents of Satan, Adam, and Eve.

As we saw in Chapter 2, Bernard there argues that through their primordial and paradigmatic pride and self-will, Satan, Adam, and Eve exalted themselves towards a share in Christ’s divinity only to be humbled by their descent into misery. In the saving act of his Incarnation, conversely, the Word will humbly assume human nature and its misery in order that he might learn compassionate mercy for fallen humanity and, by his exemplary humility and love, reveal to fallen human beings the authentic way of ascent to the Truth they all innately yearn for and seek.

Yet, as Bernard’s excursus will show, the Word-made-flesh does not simply model these transformative virtues of humility and charity by his exemplary descent and ascent. More than this, the Word as Incarnate authentically learns and grows in these virtues in a genuinely human way that he might be the life-giving source of these virtues for those who follow him in faith. This is why, in the opening to his Steps, Bernard insists that Christ is not only the Way that leads to Truth, but also the Life, the viaticum or life-giving food which sustains and nourishes those traveling along this Way.


332 See Hum 13 (III, 26).
Consuming Christ as their life-giving food, his disciples will be filled with the grace of humility and charity he has won for them by his Incarnate life, and so be inwardly strengthened to follow his outward example of the true way of ascent.

More immediately, however, the suggestion that the Word somehow learned and grew in the virtues of humility and charity poses a Christological dilemma for Bernard. According to Hebrews 5:8, Christ “learned obedience,” and likewise humility and compassion, “from the things he suffered.” But how can the eternal, immutable Word grow in humility and compassion? How can Christ the omniscient Wisdom of God learn something of which he was previously ignorant? In answering this dilemma, Bernard adopts a somewhat digressive approach, articulating and evaluating various readings of Hebrews 5:8 until he at last settles on a solution he finds adequate to the biblical witness concerning the Person of Christ and the nature of his saving work. And, in the end, Bernard’s solution to this Christological dilemma trades on the single-subject, incarnational Christology we have already seen him develop in his sixtieth sermon *De Diversis*.

How, then, can the eternal, immutable, and omniscient Wisdom of God be credibly said to learn and grow in humility and compassion? As an initial approach, Bernard entertains an exegetical solution founded on Augustine’s theology of the *totus Christus*, according to which the one Christ is said be constituted of the Person of Christ as Head and the members of Christ’s Church as members.\(^{333}\) Perhaps when the Letter to the Hebrews says that Christ “learned obedience from the things he suffered,” the verb

\(^{333}\) Augustine develops and deploys this principle throughout his writings, but perhaps most notably in his *Enarrationes in Psalmos*. See, for example, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, psalmus 37.6 (CCSL 36).
“learned” (*didicit*) is being predicated not of the Person of Christ as Head, but of the Church as his members. On this reading, the members of Christ’s Church would learn obedience, humility, and charity from the example of Christ’s obedient sufferings in the flesh. Such a reading would seem to make good sense of the passage while preserving the omniscient, immutable Word of God from any suggestion of learning and growth.

While Bernard is willing to accept this reading in principle – “I do not deny this reading” – he ultimately finds it inadequate to the full biblical witness concerning Christ and Christ’s saving work. Hebrews 5:8, he argues, must of necessity be read in conjunction with an earlier passage from the same letter which makes it clear that the single subject of the suffering, learning, and growth attributed to Christ is Christ himself in his own Person: “He did not lay hold of the angels, but of the seed of Abraham he laid hold; for which reason it was fitting for him to become like his brothers in all things that he might become merciful (*Nusquam enim angelos apprehendit, sed semen Abrahae apprehendit; unde debuit per omnia fratribus similari, ut misericors fieret*)” (Heb 2:16-17). Since these words can not be applied to the Church, Christ’s body, it follows that they apply to the Word of God himself in his own Person; the divine Person of the Word, then, is the subject of these and other Scriptural statements concerning Christ’s suffering, learning, and growth.

Read in this light, the abbot continues, Hebrews 2:16-17 indicates that the divine Person of the Word has assumed to himself the seed of Abraham that he might become like his human creatures in all things. By the act of his Incarnation, that is, the Word has humbly rendered himself capable of human suffering and immersed himself in every

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334 Hum 8 (III, 22): “Non nego hunc intellectum, quin rectus sit.”
form of human misery, save sin, that he might learn mercy for his human brothers and sisters in their shared *miseria*. Quoting the immediate sequel to the present passage, “Because he himself has suffered and been tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted,” (Heb 2:18), Bernard concludes:

I do not see how these words can be better interpreted except to say that he has willed to suffer and to be tempted, and to share in all human miseries, save sin, and so be made like his brothers in all things, that he might learn by experience how to have mercy and compassion on those who likewise suffer and are tempted.  

In other words, just as all human beings learn mercy for their fellows by first recognizing the truth of their own *miseria* and then learning to see and feel compassion for that very same *miseria* in the hearts of their neighbors, so the Word will humble himself to take up and experience human *miseria*, though not human sin, that he too might ascend these first two steps of Truth. In this sense, the Word’s Incarnate life may be seen as a journey of self-knowledge, humility, compassion which parallels and models the true way of ascent his fallen creatures must undertake if they are to attain the heights for which they yearn.

Yet, Bernard’s solution still leaves him with the question of how the divine Person of the Word can credibly be said to suffer, to learn, and to grow in humility and compassion. According to yet another passage from Hebrews, “We do not have a High Priest who is unable to have compassion on our infirmities. For he has been tempted in every way that we are, but without sin” (Heb 4:15). Granted that this passage speaks of the divine Person of the Word, how is he able to suffer our infirmities and so be tempted as we are?

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335 Hum 8 (III, 22): “In quibus verbis quid melius intelligi possit non video, nisi quod ideo pati ac tentari, omnibus que ABSQUE PECCATO, humanis voluit communicare miseriis - quod est PER OMNIA FRATRIBUS SIMILARI -, ut similiter passis ac tentatis misereri ac compati ipso disceret experimento.”
To resolve this question, Bernard returns to the single-subject, incarnational Christology he provides in his sixtieth sermon *De Diversis*. In the tradition of Athanasius, Bernard articulates this Christology through a reading of the Christological “hymn” from the second chapter of Paul’s Letter to the Philippians. According to Bernard’s reading, the hymn’s account of Christ’s descent and ascent refers to various phases of the Word’s Incarnate life. Prior to his Incarnation, that is, prior to his assumption of human nature, the divine person of the Word existed solely in *forma Dei*, that is, solely in his divine nature. Consequently, he was incapable of human suffering, lacked any experience of human misery, and therefore remained unable to learn mercy by experience in the way humans do. Though the Word certainly knew mercy in a divine way according to his divine nature, he did not know mercy in a human way according to human experience.

Yet, when, in time and without loss to himself as fully divine, the Word humbled himself to assume the *forma servi*, that is, to take up and express our human nature in addition to the divine nature he possessed and continues to possess from all eternity, he became capable of something of which he was not capable before, namely to suffer our misery and so learn mercy for us by human experience. For in assuming an integral human nature into the unity of his Person, the fully divine Word assumed to himself an integral, human body and soul, in and through which he could now experience the full range of human sufferings apart from sin. Paraphrasing Paul’s hymn, Bernard writes:

The blessed God, the blessed Son of God, in that impassible form in which he did not think equality with God something to be grasped, before he emptied himself to take the form of a servant, did not know mercy and obedience by experience because he had no experience of misery or subjection. He knew them indeed by his own [divine] nature, but not by [our human] experience. Yet,
when he humbled himself…even to that form in which he was able to suffer and to be subject, which, as I have said, he was not able to do before, he experienced mercy in his suffering and obedience in his subjection.336

By means of his incarnational Christology, then, which is at once both founded on Scripture and the necessary lens for correctly interpreting Scripture, Bernard is able to show how the eternal, omniscient Wisdom of God is able truly to learn compassion. The Word as God has from all eternity known compassion in a divine fashion according to his divine nature. In the act of his Incarnation, this remains true of the Word. Yet, in consequence of his Incarnation, something new comes to be true of the Word as well: as Incarnate, the Word now comes to know compassion in a human fashion according to his experience of human *miseria* in the flesh. Bernard concludes: “It should not therefore seem absurd if it is said that Christ did not indeed begin to know something of which he was previously ignorant, but rather that he knows mercy eternally in one way according to his divinity and learns it in another way in time and according to the flesh.”337

At the conclusion of his *excursus* on Christ’s growth in humility and love, Bernard offers his readers an excellent summary statement of his solution. His summary indicates clearly how his careful thinking through of the doctrine of Christ’s Person has borne fruit for his Christological spirituality:

336 Hum 9 (III, 23): “Beatus quippe Deus, beatus Dei Filius, in ea forma, qua non rapinam arbitratus est esse se aequalem Patri, procul dubio impassibilis, priusquam se exinanisset formam servi accipiens, sicut miseriam vel subiectionem expertus non erat, sic misericordiam vel oboedientiam experimento non noverat. Sciebat quidem per naturam, non autem sciebat per experientiam. At ubi minoratus est…usque ad illam formam, in qua pati et subici posset, quod utique, sicut dictum est, in sua non posset, et in passione expertus est misericordiam, et in subiectione oboedientiam.”

337 Hum 10 (III, 23): “Non ergo debet absurdum videri, si dicitur Christum non quidem aliquid scire coepisse, quod aliquando nescierit, scire tamen alio modo misericordiam ab aeterno per divinitatem, et aliter in tempore didicisse per carnem.”
You see, therefore, that Christ is indeed one Person in two natures, one in which he has always existed and another in which he began to be. According to his eternal [divine] nature, he always knows all things, but according to his temporal [human] nature, he began experienced many things in time. Why, then, do you doubt that as he began to be in time, in the flesh, so he began to know the miseries of the flesh by that mode of knowledge which the weakness of the flesh teaches?  

When human beings through curiosity, pride, and self-deception fell into misery, the Word of God followed the work of his hands, humbly willed to experience human misery, “not out of similar curiosity, but out of his marvelous charity.” On account of that eternal mercy he has known from all eternity according to his divine nature, the Word who knew no misery willingly took upon himself the miseries of his fallen creatures that he might first experience that misery within his own, human heart, and then, through this experience, begin to discern and learn true, human misericordia for the sufferings he likewise saw and continues to see in his human brothers and sisters. Christ descended that he might ascend the first two steps of Truth.

Yet, Christ, Bernard continues, has not taken up human misery that he and his human creatures might remain in misery, but so that he might learn mercy and so liberate the miserable. The abbot writes: “If that [divine] mercy, which knows no misery, had not come first, he would not have approached that mercy whose mother is misery. If he had

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338 Hum 12 (III, 25): “Cum igitur videas Christum in una quidem persona duas habere naturas, unam qua semper fuit, alteram qua esse coepit, et secundum sempiternum quidem suum esse, semper omnia nosse, secundum temporale vero, multa temporaliter expertum fuisse, cur fateri dubitas, ut esse ex tempore coepit in carne, sic carnis quoque miserias scire coepisse, illo dumtaxat modo cognitionis, quem docet defectio carnis?”

339 Hum 12 (III, 25): “Voluit experiri in se, quod illi faciendo contra se merito paterentur, non simili quidem curiositate, sed mirabili caritate: non ut miser cum miseris remaneret, sed ut misericors factus miseros liberaret.”
not approached this mercy, he would not have attracted us to himself, and if he had not
attracted us to himself, he would not have extracted us from our misery.”

Here Bernard hints briefly at a theme that will later assume a crucial significance
in his doctrine; namely, his theology of the carnal love of Christ. In willing to learn and
grow by experience in genuine human humility and compassion, Christ has not only
made himself the model and source of fallen human beings’ ascent to Truth, but has also
made himself “attractive” to the very human beings he has come to deliver from their
misery. As we saw in Chapter 1, Bernard believes that in consequence of their false
ascent by pride, human beings have descended into a predominantly carnal condition.
That is, fallen human beings are largely given over to a strongly emotional love of
sensible, fleshly things. Consequently, Christ has assumed a fleshly, sensible form that
by the mysteries of his incarnate life, and most especially his Passion, he might so move
the hearts of fallen human beings as to win their emotive, carnal love to himself.

For Bernard, however, Christ’s descent to win the carnal love of fallen human
beings is only the first step in a pedagogy of the affections intended to recall human
hearts to their originally intended goal, the vision of Christ according to the Spirit. Christ
accomplishes this pedagogy by his Resurrection and Ascension into glory, which is, in
effect, his ascent to the third step of Truth. By the glorification of his sensible, earthly
flesh in his Resurrection and his Ascension in this glorified flesh into heaven, Christ
draws and transforms his disciples’ carnal, emotive love into a strong and spiritual love
which longs to glimpse Christ the Truth in his own nature, in his divinity and according

\[340 \text{ Hum 12 (III, 26): “Attamen si illa, quae miseriam nescit, misericordia non praecessisset, ad}
\text{hanc, cuius miseria mater est, non accessisset. Si non accessisset, non attraxisset; si non attraxisset, non}
\text{extraxisset.”} \]
to the Spirit, by contemplation in this life and direct vision in the next. This explains why Bernard concludes his account of the three steps of Truth with a reflection on Christ’s Ascension. Whereas fallen human beings must be rapt to the third step of Truth, the contemplative vision of God in his own nature, Christ alone ascends of his own will to his rightful place in glory that he might be, as Bernard puts it in *De Diversis* 60, both the way for those traveling and the homeland for those who have arrived. Citing Luke’s account of the Ascension from Acts, Bernard writes, “‘A cloud received him from their sight.’ (Acts 1:9)… It received him from the carnal eyes of his disciples. Before they knew him according to the flesh, but now they would know him so no more.” Christ therefore descended not only that he might ascend the first two steps of Truth, but also the third as well.

Thus Bernard’s careful reflection on the doctrine of Christ’s Person has enabled him to reach a profound spiritual insight: through his Incarnate life, the divine Person of the Word has undertaken a journey of self-knowledge through which he truly learns humility and compassionate charity in a genuinely human way. Consequently, the Word Incarnate is able by his descent and ascent in the flesh to serve as both the model and the source of these virtues for his followers as they undertake their own ascent of self-knowledge according to his example. To better understand how Bernard conceives of Christ as both the model and the source respectively of the individual soul’s journey of self-knowledge, we will now turn to his *Sermones per annum* and his Letter 190 against the errors of Peter Abelard.

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341 Hum 23 (III, 34): “SUSCEPIT EUM NUBES AB OCULIS EORUM….suscepit eum ab oculis carnalibus discipulorum, qui etsi Christum noverant secundum carnem, sed ultra iam non noscerent.”
Christ as the Model of Self-Knowledge in the *Sermones per annum*

In his one hundred and twenty-five *Sermones per annum*, or Sermons on the Liturgical Year, abbot Bernard has left us a carefully edited collection of polished homiletic meditations on the major feasts of the temporal and sanctoral cycles. These include sermons on each of the major feasts celebrating the mysteries of Christ’s life: The First Sunday of Advent, Christmas, the Circumcision, Epiphany, Holy Week, Easter, the Ascension, and Pentecost. Taken together, then, these festal sermons offer us an invaluable witness to Bernard’s teaching concerning the saving work of the Incarnate Word’s ascent and descent, and how the Church ponders and participates in the Incarnate Word’s saving mysteries as she annually celebrates the feasts that commemorate them.  

For this reason, Bernard McGinn has suggested that Bernard’s *Sermones per annum*, together with his Sermons on the Song of Songs, “count as the most important part of his teaching.”  

In an important article on Bernard’s Christology entitled “Resurrection and Ascension in the Christology of the Earlier Cistercians,” McGinn makes frequent references to these *Sermones per annum* in order to show how we must not overstress the role of devotion to Christ in his sacred humanity, and especially in his Passion, in Bernard’s thought. While he acknowledges, with G.L. Prestige and R.W. Southern, that such devotion to Christ in his Passion supplies an essential element of Bernard’s spirituality, he argues that preoccupation with this theme leaves us with a one-sided, or

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worse, misguided view of the abbot’s Christological spirituality. Following J.-M. Déchanet, who produced one of the most significant early studies of Bernard’s Christology, McGinn argues that, for the twelfth-century Cistercians, “monastic piety finds its fulfillment in Christ known according to the Spirit and not Christ known according to the flesh.”

To demonstrate this claim, McGinn reminds us of the predominant position the feast of Christ’s Ascension assumes in Bernard’s account of Christ and Christian spirituality. As Jean Leclercq first observed, it was the Ascension and not the Passion on which Bernard left the largest number of sermons. And, as Leclercq also observed, in 1151, the abbot also instituted a special liturgical procession in honor of Christ’s Ascension that re-enacts the risen Christ’s ascent through the choirs of angels to the throne of God where he sends his Spirit to strengthen his followers on earth. Through his study of these sermons and their place within Bernard’s broader spiritual teaching, McGinn convincingly shows that, for Bernard, “the risen and ascended Christ, sitting at the right hand of the Father, is the goal of the religious life.”

One of the many merits of McGinn’s study is that it serves to remind us of the broader scope of Bernard’s vision of the Incarnate Word’s saving work. Without denying the special salvific efficacy of the Passion in Bernard’s soteriology, McGinn’s attention to the role of the Resurrection and Ascension in the abbot’s doctrine underscores that, for

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Bernard, each of the mysteries of the Word’s descent and ascent in the flesh are integral to his saving work. As Bernard writes in his third sermon for the Circumcision, “The whole is given to me, all is poured out for my benefit.”

Again, in his second sermon for Pentecost, the abbot has Christ proclaim:

I give you not only my conception, but also my life, in each of its stages; I give you my infancy, my boyhood, my adolescence, and my youth, together with my death, my resurrection, my ascension, and my sending of the Spirit. I will do this so that my conception may cleanse yours, my life may instruct yours, my death may destroy yours, my resurrection may precede yours, my ascension may prepare yours, and, finally, that the Spirit may strengthen you in your weakness.

Bernard’s two-fold reference to Christ’s sending of the Spirit underscores an aspect of Bernard’s soteriology that is not entirely evident in McGinn’s article: the mystery of Christ’s Ascension into glory is not complete without his gift of the Spirit at Pentecost. It is true, as McGinn notes, that, for Bernard, the feast of the Ascension is the “consummation and fulfillment of all the other feasts, the happy conclusion to the entire journey of the Son of God.” Yet, it is equally true, for Bernard, that the mystery of


348 2 Pent 5 (V, 168): “<Non solum>, ait, <conceptionem meam, sed et vitam meam; et hoc per singulos aetatum gradus, infantiae, pueritiae, adolescenteiae, iuventutis, tibi donabo, adiciens mortem et resurrectionem, ascensionem et missionem Spiritus Sancti. Hoc autem ideo, ut conceptio mea emundet tuam, vita mea instruat tuam, mors mea destruat tuam, resurrectio mea praecedat tuam, ascensio mea praeparet tuam, porro Spiritus adiuvet infirmitatem tuam.”

349 2 Asc 1 (V, 126): “Consummatio enim et adimpletio est reliquarum sollemnitatum, et felix clausula totius itinerarii Filii Dei.”
Christ’s Ascension culminates in his gift of the Spirit to his faithful so that those who receive his Spirit might be strengthened to imitate the journey of his descent and ascent in the flesh. To obtain a comprehensive picture of Bernard’s soteriology, then, we need to consider his reflections on each of the mysteries of Christ’s life, from Advent to Pentecost. In his sermons on the feasts of Advent, Christmas, the Circumcision, Epiphany, and the Passion, Bernard contemplates the mysteries of the Word Incarnate’s descent; in those for the Resurrection, Ascension, and Pentecost, he contemplates the mysteries of Christ’s ascent.

In contemplating these mysteries, Bernard and his monks will also have occasion to contemplate their own, individual progress in the spiritual life. For, in Bernard’s view, the order of Christ’s mysteries of descent and ascent reflects the order of the soul’s passage through the various stages of its return to God. As the abbot observes in the opening to his fourth sermon for the feast of Easter, Christ’s saving mysteries are “so many medicines for our souls.”³⁵⁰ As each monk progresses throughout the liturgical year, therefore, he must “consider just how far these medicines have begun to work within him.”³⁵¹ “For there are those,” Bernard continues, “for whom Christ has not yet been born, others for whom he has not yet suffered, still others for whom he has not yet risen. There are some for whom he has not yet ascended, and still others to whom he has not yet sent the Spirit.”³⁵² Each dominical feast of the liturgical year will therefore

³⁵⁰ 4 Pasc 1 (V, 110): “Omnia quae de Salvatore legimus, medicamina sunt animarum nostrarum.”
³⁵¹ 4 Pasc 1 (V, 110): “Cogitet unusquisque quantum operentur in eo tam salutaria medicamenta.”
³⁵² 4 Pasc 1 (V, 110): “Sunt enim quibus nondum natus est Christus, sunt quibus nondum est passus, sunt quibus non surrexit usque adhuc. Aliis quoque nondum ascendit, aliis nondum misit Spiritum Sanctum.”
provide the monk with an occasion for self-knowledge, a moment for honest self-assessment in the light of Christ, and an opportunity not only to gauge his spiritual progress, but also to determine how he may continue to ascend to God by personally appropriating each successive stage of the Word’s journey in the flesh.

When, moreover, we read Bernard’s reflections on these mysteries of Christ’s life with a view to his broader teaching on self-knowledge, we find a remarkable parallel between his account of Christ’s descent and ascent in the flesh and his account of the soul’s ascent to self-knowledge. As we have seen in the preceding chapters, the soul which would ascend to true self-knowledge must first be delivered from vain curiosity and be moved humbly to consider the truth of its own *miseria*, the truth of itself as an image of God disfigured by sin. Bitter though this vision of its misery may be, the soul’s return to itself is salutary, for this humbling self-knowledge leads the soul to the knowledge of God’s mercy, and inspires its grateful love of God. As this soul grows in both humility and love, moreover, it is progressively conformed to the humble and loving Christ as his Bride, and, sensing the work of the Spirit within, comes to know itself anew as an image of God being refashioned in the lost divine likeness.

For Bernard, as we will see, the mysteries of the Word Incarnate’s descent and ascent in the flesh are fittingly adapted to the soul’s descending and ascending journey of self-knowledge. By the mysteries of his humble descent, the Word recalls the fallen soul’s curiosity, humbles its pride, and leads it to the true knowledge of its own sin and misery. Yet, by the merciful love he reveals in these same mysteries of his descent, and above all in his Passion, the Word Incarnate leads this soul to a true knowledge of God’s mercy, enflames its hope, and inspires within it that humility and love by which it will be
conformed to him. Then, through the mysteries of his ascent, the Word Incarnate progressively transforms the soul’s love from a carnal to a spiritual love, gradually leading the soul from the memory of Christ’s sufferings in the flesh to the contemplation of his glorified presence. Finally, by his gift of the Spirit, Christ both strengthens souls to successfully undertake their imitation of his journey and affords them with a pledge that they are indeed being inwardly renewed in the lost divine likeness by his transformative grace.

The Mysteries of Christ’s Descent and the Cultivation of Humility

In contemplating the mysteries of Christ’s descent, from his Advent to his Passion, Bernard is first of all concerned to show how the Word’s taking flesh is intended to recall fallen human beings from their curiosity, to expose their proud self-deception as false, and to bring them to the humbling but salutary knowledge of their own misery. These themes are immediately evident in Bernard’s very first sermon for the First Sunday of Advent. Here Bernard opens with an analysis of fallen humanity’s miserable condition: “The unhappy sons of Adam have neglected to devote themselves to what is true and saving, and preferred to seek instead what is fleeting and transitory.” They are like sailors in the wake of a shipwreck, desperately clinging to bits of wood in the vain hope that these will keep them afloat: “So they perish in this vast and spacious sea, they perish in misery as they reach out for what perishes, leaving aside all that is of substance,

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353 1 Adv 1 (IV, 161): “Infelices enim filii Adam, omissis veris et salutaribus studiis, caduca potius et transitoria quae runt.”

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everything that might enable them to emerge and to save their souls.”

In effect, Bernard paints a picture of the man who has descended the twelve steps of pride: curious, proud, and self-willed. Curious about everything other than himself, he takes no account of his fallen condition; proud and self-deceived, he refuses subjection to the saving will of his Creator; dominated by his sinful self-will, he gropes in vain for some deliverance from his misery in the perishing, transitory goods of this world.

Characteristically, Bernard next transitions from anthropology to Christology. Since this man’s descent of the twelve steps of pride began with his curiosity and self-neglect, the Word of God, who alone is true and saving, has rendered himself a worthy object for this man’s ravenous curiosity. So, Bernard urges his monks, as they celebrate this mystery of Advent, to ponder carefully the saving truth of the Word’s advent among fallen humanity in the flesh. They must “diligently consider the reason for this Advent” and “seek who it is that comes, from where and to where, why and when he comes, and by what way.” By mediating on these mysteries of Christ’s coming, they will begin to practice “a praiseworthy and saving curiosity (laudabilis curiositas et salubris)” which leads not to pride, but to the mystery of Truth concealed in universal Church’s celebration of this season of Advent. In the first step of pride, the monk allowed his curiosity about others to distract him from the truth about himself; by the first step of his descent, however, the Word has rendered himself a sensible, human other, that he might capture fallen humanity’s inquisitive regard and return it to himself.

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354 1 Adv 1 (IV, 161): “Sic pereunt in hoc mari magno et spatioso, sic pereunt miseri, dum peritura sectantes, omittunt solida, quibus apprehensis emergere et salvare possent animas suas.”

355 1 Adv 1 (IV, 162): “Diligenter pensate rationem adventus huius, quaeentes nimium quis sit qui veniat, unde, quo, ad quid, quando et qua.”
Modeling this *laudabilis curiositas et salubris* for his brothers, Bernard first ponders a classical Christological question: why is it especially fitting that the Son in particular, as opposed to the Father or the Spirit, should take flesh for humanity’s salvation? The answer, Bernard suggests, has to do with humanity’s fall. As he has argued in the *Steps*, Bernard explains that, like Lucifer before them, humanity’s first parents fell through their proud attempt to steal what belonged by right to the Son, to usurp a certain likeness to the Most High. Lucifer envied and grasped at the Son’s rightful lordship over all creation, while Adam and Eve envied and grasped at the Son’s prerogative of knowledge, arrogating the right to determine good and evil for themselves. Yet there is an important difference between these two cases: whereas Lucifer’s pride emerged solely from within him, Adam and Eve’s pride sprung from without, from Lucifer’s cunning lie. This, for Bernard, suggests that there remains some hope of salvation for human beings, a hope denied the apostate angel and his followers.

As we saw through our analysis of Bernard’s steps of pride in Chapter 2, the abbot believes that the descendents of Adam and Eve share in the pride of their first parents when they too succumb to a lie, to the pleasant but specious self-delusion that they are somehow equal to or superior to God. They do so when they envy that knowledge the Son enjoys by right, when they falsely judge themselves capable of seizing such knowledge for themselves, and when they perversely imitate him by attempting to determine good and evil for themselves through their own wills. Recognizing this, the Son, through “loftiest counsels of the Trinity,”\textsuperscript{356} conceived a plan to rescue his fallen human creatures, declaring, “They all envied me. So, I will come to

\textsuperscript{356} 1 Adv 2 (IV, 162): “altissimo Trinitatis consilio.”
them, and I will show myself to them in such way that whosoever among them envies me and longs to imitate me may do so, and do so for their good!”

The way that the Word manifests himself for humanity’s imitation is, of course, the way of his Advent, his humble descent into the misery of fallen humanity. When fallen human beings strive to imitate the humility of the Word, who emptied himself to assume their misery, they are compelled to face the truth of their own misery. As Bernard puts it in his Steps, “If he who knew no misery made himself miserable that he might learn by experience [that mercy] he already knew, how much more should you not, I say, make yourself into what you are not, but attend to who you really are, for you are truly miserable.”

The self-knowledge fallen human beings attain in contemplating and imitating the example of the self-humbling Word-made-flesh puts the lie to their proud self-exaltation and exposes their former self-deception as false. So, in his Advent sermon, Bernard, speaking in the person of Adam, and in his own person, prays, “I was seduced by a lie, Lord! Let Truth himself come, that falsehood may be exposed, that I might know the Truth and Truth may set me free (Jn 8:32).” The Word assumes our flesh so that he might first recall our wayward curiosity to himself, and that, by contemplating his example, we might in turn redirect this curiosity to our own selves, and their discover the truth of ourselves as images of God disfigured by our own sin.

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358 Hum 13 (III, 26): “Si ergo se miserum fecit, qui miser non erat, ut experiretur quod et ante sciebat, quanto magis tu, non dico ut te facias quod non es, sed ut attendas quod es, quia vere miser es.”

359 Adv 5 (IV, 165): “Mendacium mihi persuasum est, Domine: veniat Veritas, ut possit falsitas deprehendi, et cognoscam veritatem, et veritas liberabit me.”
The theme of Word’s example of voluntary self-humbling and the humbling self-knowledge we acquire in contemplating his example resonates throughout Bernard’s meditations on the mysteries of Christ’s infancy, boyhood, adolescence, and public ministry. In the mystery of his Nativity, the fully divine Word “abbreviated” himself to assume our nature and to be laid as an infant in a narrow manger. “Why was it necessary,” Bernard asks his brothers, “that the Lord of majesty should so empty himself, so humble himself, so abbreviate himself? Was it not so that we might do likewise?” Even in his speechless infancy, the Word “cries out by his example what he would later preach by his words, ‘Learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart (Mt 11:27).’” Bernard begs his brothers not overlook this “precious exemplar” of humility, but to “be conformed to it.” How, he asks, can he and his brothers see “the God of heaven become a child” and still presume to exalt themselves through pride?

For Bernard, moreover, the humility the Word Incarnate witnesses in his infancy continues in the mysteries of his boyhood, youth, and public ministry. In his Circumcision, the Word descends still lower, not only assuming our human nature, but even choosing to be branded with the mark of a sinner though he himself was entirely without sin. In this, he exposes the proud who, like the monk descending pride’s twelve steps, cherish their holy reputation and blush to consider their own sin: “He who

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360 1 Nat 1 (IV, 244): “Ad quid hoc, fratres, aut quae necessitas fuit, ut sic exinaniret se, sic humiliaret se, sic abbreviaret se Dominus maiestatis, nisi ut vos similiter faciatis?”

361 1 Nat 1 (IV, 245): “Iam clamat exemplo, quod postmodum praedicaturus est verbo: DISCITE AD ME, QUIA MITIS SUM ET HUMILIS CORDE.”

362 1 Nat 1 (IV, 245): Obsecro proinde et plurimum rogo, fratres, non patiamini sine causa tam pretiosum exemplar vobis exhibitum esse, sed conformamini illi et renovamini spiritu mentis vestrae. Studete humilitati, quae fundamentum est custos que virtutum; sectamini illam, quae sola potest salvare animas vestras. Quid enim magis indignum, quid detestandum amplius, quid gravius puniendum, quam ut videns Deum caeli parvulum factum, ultra apponat magnificare se homo super terram?
committed no sin was not ashamed to be reputed a sinner; we want to be sinners without being thought so!” In the thirty years that followed, the Word humbly concealed himself in silence and obscurity as the simple son of a carpenter that he might confound our pride and vanity. And when, after so many years of silence, the Word finally emerged to speak, he once again chose to be counted as a sinner, humbly accepting baptism as the hands of John, not because he needed to be cleansed, but because he wished to cleanse the waters of baptism for us. So, for Bernard, the humility of Christ, reflected in each of the mysteries of his descent, subverts the world’s pride and calls those who ponder his example to humble self-judgment: “How could a human being not be humbled before the humility of God?” the abbot asks.

Yet, as we have already seen in our study of SC 34-38, for Bernard, the Word-made-flesh inspires within us this humbling self-knowledge not as an end in itself, but as an invitation to the knowledge of God, and especially God’s mercy. The Word has appeared among us not simply to reveal the truth of our own sin and misery, but also to manifest the will of his Father’s heart, the Father’s loving intention to deliver us from our self-imposed misery. If the Word assumed our nature only to expose our self-deception and to illumine the depths of our sinfulness, we might be inclined, like Adam, to flee in fear from his coming; delivered from our pride, we might fall into the opposite, and

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363 2 Circ 1 (IV, 278): “Qui peccatum non fecit, non dedignatus est se peccatorem reputari; nos et esse volumus, et nolumus aestimari.”

364 1 Epi 7.

365 1 Epi 6.

366 1 Epi 6 (IV, 298): “Quomodo enim non humiliaretur homo coram humili Deo?”
equally deadly, extreme of despair. Yet, the Word’s condescension to our fallen misery, even to the point of his death for us on the cross, reveals the truth about God, that he has come among us not to judge us, but mercifully to save us from our sins. In sending us his Son, God the Father revealed his eternal mercy; he has “sent to earth, as it were, a sack filled with his mercy, a sack that must be cut open in the Passion, that the prize of our ransom hidden within it might be poured out.” So the Word Incarnate teaches us not only true self-knowledge, but also the true knowledge of God’s mercy, a truth which gives us hope in our despair and inspires our grateful love for him: “What can so instruct our faith, strengthen our hope, and enflame our charity as the humanity of God?”

In his fifth sermon De Diversis, as we have seen, Bernard teaches that the “sum total of our spiritual life” consists in the knowledge of self and the knowledge of God; the former moves us to humility, the latter enkindles our hope and love. Here in the Sermones per annum, the abbot discloses the Christological foundation of this doctrine of the spiritual life. The Word as Incarnate is the teacher of true self-knowledge and the true knowledge of God; it is his humble and loving descent into our misery that arouses our humility, our hope, and our grateful love of him.

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367 1 Epi 3.

368 1 Epi 2 (IV, 292): “Ecce quasi saccum plenum misericordia sua Deus Pater misit in terram: saccum, inquam, in passione concidendum, ut effundatur quod in eo latet pretium nostrum; saccum utique, etsi parvum, sed plenum.”

369 1 Epi 3 (IV, 294): “Quid enim sic instruit fidem, semper roborat, caritatem accendit, quomodo humanitas Dei?”

370 See Div 5.5.
The Mystery of Christ’s Passion and the Cultivation of Humility and Love

In Bernard’s vision of the mysteries of Christ’s life, the Passion assumes a central place, not only because it marks the transition from Christ’s descent to his ascent, but also because it is here that Christ most fully manifests and, as we will see shortly, most fully effects, the humility and love that lead proud and self-willed souls back to him. Nowhere is this theme more beautifully presented than in Bernard’s sermon on Christ’s Passion for the Wednesday of Holy Week. As the abbot and his brothers prepare to celebrate the liturgy of Christ’s Paschal Mystery, he urges them to “be vigilant” lest the grace-filled mysteries of this sacred time pass them by. Once again arousing their holy curiosity, Bernard invites his monks to contemplate the work, the manner, and the cause of Christ’s Passion: “In the work, his patience is especially commended to us, in the manner, his humility, and in the cause, his charity.”

If they contemplate the work of Christ on the cross, the depth of his suffering, and his steadfast refusal to murmur against either his Father or the sinners he came to save, his brothers will find, Bernard suggests, a model of unparalleled patience. If, in turn, they consider how he endured the blasphemies and false accusations of his enemies, they will likewise find an unsurpassed example of humility. For when he voluntarily remained silent in the face of his accusers, suffered their taunts, and submitted to such a shameful death, Christ once again freely chose to be counted among sinners (Is 53:2). In his Passion, Bernard explains, Christ no “longer appeared beautiful above the sons of men (Ps 44:3), but rather as the reproach of men (Ps 21:7)…as a man of sorrows, struck

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371 4 HM 2 (V, 57): “In hac igitur Passione, fratres, tria specialiter convenit intueri: opus, modum, causam Nam in opere quidem patientia, in modo humilitas, in causa caritas commendatur.”
and humbled by God, so that there was no beauty or form in him (Is 53:2-4).” Here too, Bernard figures the Word Incarnate as the antidote to the illness of the proud monk; whereas the proud monk conceals his sin beneath a specious façade of holy appearances, the Crucified, though innocent, willingly appears as a sinner to effect the salvation of his sinful creatures.

Yet, for Bernard, the patience and humility Christ models in his Passion cannot be understood apart from their cause, his limitless charity. In his unsurpassed humility, the divine Word has “deeply immersed himself in all the miseries of the human race,” assuming a human nature capable of suffering and death; in his unrivaled patience, he has, in this assumed nature, though innocent himself, suffered and died at the hands of sinners that he might pay the penalty for sin in their stead. It is, however, for Bernard, Christ’s superabundant, compassionate charity which both moves Christ to make this humble, obedient self-offering for fallen humanity and which renders his sacrifice efficacious for delivering fallen human beings from every kind of sin, both original and personal, and even the sin of his persecutors. The sin his persecutors inflicted on him was great, and the miseries he endured were many, but Christ’s mercy, Bernard affirms, has surpassed both their sin and his misery. In his Passion, then, Christ has displayed not only a caritas patiens which refuses to be overcome by evil, but a caritas superabundans

372 4 HM 3 (V, 58): “VIDIMUS, inquit, EUM, ET NON ERAT EI ASPECTUS, nec speciosum forma prae filiis hominum, sed opprobrium hominum, tamquam leprosum: novissimum virorum, plane virum dolorum, a Deo percussum et humiliatum, ita ut nulla esset ei species neque decor.”

373 4 HM 10 (V, 63): “Christus autem in universalis hominum miseria pressius et profundius se immersit,”
which overcomes evil with good (Rom 12:21), conquering sin and converting the hearts of sinners to repentance, gratitude, and love.\textsuperscript{374}

If they are to share in these fruits of Christ’s Passion, Bernard insists, Christ’s faithful must not simply contemplate the virtues he displays in his cross, but also participate in and imitate them by being gradually conformed to the figure of the Crucified. They must “suffer together with the suffering Christ”\textsuperscript{375} by voluntarily renouncing their pride to imitate his humility, and by voluntarily forsaking their self-will to imitate his superabundant love for both God and their fellow human beings. As they are conformed to the humility and charity Christ models in his Passion, Bernard explains, they will not simply look upon the Crucified, but embrace him: “The Lord Jesus has embraced us by taking up our pain and sorrow; let us likewise embrace him with the arms of his own righteousness.”\textsuperscript{376} Then they will be able to say with the Bride of the Canticle, “I have held him, and I will not let him go” (Sg 3:4). And, assuming more and more the figure of Christ’s Bride by their progressive conformity to their Crucified Bridegroom, they may dare to aspire to the mystical kiss of contemplation, saying with her, “Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth” (Sg 1:1).

**The Mysteries of Christ’s Ascent and the Growth of Love**

Though, as we have just seen, Bernard ascribes a special salvific efficacy to the mystery of Christ’s Passion, the abbot also regards Christ’s Resurrection and Ascension

\textsuperscript{374} See 4 HM 9 (V, 62-63).

\textsuperscript{375} 4 HM 1 (V, 56): “Christo patienti quodam modo compati.”

\textsuperscript{376} 4 HM 14 (V, 56): “Amplexatus est nos Dominus Iesus per laborem et dolorem nostrum; adhaereamus nos quoque ei vicariis quibusdam amplexibus per iustitiam, et iustitiam suam.”
as essential elements of the Word Incarnate’s saving work. Together with the mysteries of Christ’s descent and Passion, these mysteries of Christ’s ascent, which include his sending of the Spirit at Pentecost, form for Bernard the one “seamless garment” (Jn 19:23) of Christ’s redemptive mission.³⁷⁷ By the mysteries of his Resurrection and Ascension into heaven, Christ has definitively conquered death, “pierced the heights of heaven, cast off the weaknesses of the flesh like a cloud, and put on the robe of glory.”³⁷⁸ And, through these same mysteries, Christ continues to instruct and transform the hearts of his faithful disciples in every age by leading their nascent faith and love into their full, spiritual maturity.

As Bernard explains in his six sermons on the mystery of Christ’s Ascension, the divine Word has, by the mysteries of his descent, assumed sensible flesh that he might recapture the wayward curiosity and affections of fallen human beings. Though created as spiritual beings *capax Dei* or capable of God, human beings have, in consequence of their fall, become like beasts: their minds have become enslaved to the whims of their curious senses, and their affections to the pursuit of fleshly, sensible things and the pleasures they afford. Seeing this, the Word has assumed human nature so as to make himself visible to their curious eyes: tempering the blinding light of his divinity within the frailty of human flesh, like “a candle within a lantern,” the Word has rendered himself a sensible object for fallen humanity’s curious gaze.³⁷⁹ And, within that sensible flesh,

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³⁷⁷ See 2 Asc 2 (V, 127).

³⁷⁸ 3 Asc 1 (V, 131): “Hodie caelorum Dominus caelorum alta caelesti potentia penetravit, et infirma carnis tamquam nubila quaedam excutiens, induit stolam gloriae.”

³⁷⁹ 3 Asc 3 (V, 132): “Et quia discipuli carnales erant, et Deus spiritus est, nec bene convenit spiritui et carni, umbra corporis sui temperavit se eis, ut objectu vivificae carnis viderent Verbum in carne, solem in nube, lumen in testa, cereum in laterna.”
the Word Incarnate has shown himself so compassionate, gentle, and tender as to allure fallen humanity’s affections from the sweetness of fleshly, sensible pleasures to the sweetness of his human life and love in the flesh. He has done so that he might move his disciples in every age to “cling to him with a human sort of love.”  Though this attachment to Christ’s sacred humanity remains only an *amor carnalis*, or carnal love, it is nevertheless powerful, for it “conquers all other loves” in the heart. It is, Bernard explains, the sort of love that inspires Christ’s disciples to say, with Peter, “Behold, we have left everything and followed you” (Mt 19:27).

For Bernard, however, the faith and love aroused by the contemplation of Christ’s sacred humanity represent only the starting point of the heart’s conversion to the Word. If Christ’s disciples are to reach the maturity of faith, they must follow him not only in the mysteries of his descent, but also in the mysteries of his ascent. Exhorting his monks to follow Christ in the mystery of his Ascension, Bernard writes, “Let us lift up our hearts, my brothers, together with our hands, and strive to follow the ascending Lord with certain steps, as it were, of devotion and faith.” As long as their faith remains centered solely on the memory of Christ’s earthly words and deeds, it remains immature. They must learn to “seek and savor the things that are above” (Col 3:1), to strain by faith to glimpse the presence of the glorified Christ as he now sits at the right hand of his Father.

Likewise, as long as their hearts remain fixed on Christ in the sufferings of his Passion, their love for Christ remains an immature, purely emotional love that is easily

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380 6 Asc 11 (V, 156): “amore quodam humano...adhaererent.”

381 6 Asc 11 (V, 156): “amore utique carnali adhuc, sed tam valido ut ceteris omnibus praevaleret.”

382 6 Asc 2 (V, 151): “Levemus igitur, fratres mei, levemus in caelum corda cum manibus, et ascendentem Dominum sequi, velut quibusdam passibus devotionis et fidei, contendamus.”
led astray. Their *amor carnalis Christi* must be transformed into an *amor spiritualis Christi*. Christ effects this transformation in his disciples’ hearts as he ascends before their very eyes: “He did not draw all his disciples’ affections to his flesh that they might remain with his flesh, but rather that they might be transferred to his spirit, that they might someday say, ‘Though we once knew Christ according to the flesh, now we know him so no longer’ (2 Cor 5:16).”\(^{383}\) And, as Christ withdraws his flesh from his disciples’ sensitive gaze, he at the same time sends them his Spirit, who “transforms their [carnal] love into an altogether spiritual love and enflames with them a ‘love as strong as death’ (Sg 8:6).”\(^{384}\) As they pass from the mystery of the Ascension to the mystery of Pentecost, then, Christ’s disciples, filled with the Spirit’s gift of charity, so long for Christ’s presence in glory that they are now willing to give up all that is earthly, even their very lives, that they might reign with him there.

**The Mystery of Pentecost and New Self-Knowledge in the Spirit**

To this point, we have seen how Bernard’s meditations on the mysteries of Christ’s descent and ascent map the soul’s progression in self-knowledge we have discerned in Chapters 1 and 3. By the mysteries of his descent, from his Advent to his Passion, Christ the Word Incarnate displays such humility that he confounds the proud, and leads them to a humbling, but salutary knowledge of their own *miseria*. Yet, by these same mysteries, the Word-made-flesh reveals the compassionate, saving love of

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\(^{383}\) 6 Asc 12 (V, 157): “Ceterum non ut maneret in carne, sed ut transferretur ad spiritum, totus ab eo in illam carnem Discipulorum fuerat collectus affectus, ut dicere esset aliquando: ETSI COGNOVIMUS CHRISTUM SECUNDUM CARNEM, SED NUNC IAM NON NOVIMUS.”

\(^{384}\) 6 Asc 15 (V, 159): “in spiritalem omnino mutavit amorem, ut accensa in eis caritas fortis ut mors.”
God, and so inspires in these humbled souls a grateful love of their Redeemer. Finally, by the mysteries of his ascent, his Resurrection and Ascension, the glorified Christ elevates and transforms this incipient carnal love into the strong, spiritual love proper to Christ’s mature disciples. In light of these parallels between Bernard’s accounts of the soul’s ascent to self-knowledge and the saving work of the Incarnate Word in his descent and ascent, we might be led to wonder whether in his meditations on Pentecost, the last of Christ’s mysteries, Bernard associates Christ’s gift of the Spirit with the soul’s joyous rediscovery of itself as one being refashioned in the lost divine likeness. And this is, in fact, precisely what Bernard suggests in his sermons for the Feast of Pentecost.

As we noted above, Bernard believes that the ascended Christ’s gift of the Spirit at Pentecost constitutes the culmination of the saving mysteries of his Incarnate life. So it is in his second sermon for the feast of Pentecost that Bernard, in a passage already cited above, has Christ proclaim, “I give you not only my conception, but also my life, in each of its stages; I give you my infancy, my boyhood, my adolescence, and my youth, together with my death, my resurrection, my ascension, and my sending of the Spirit.” By his life, Bernard continues, Christ has modeled for us the way by which we may ascend to God: “In my life, you will know your way, so that just as I have held steadfastly to the paths of poverty and obedience, humility and patience, charity and mercy, so you also must follow in my footsteps.” By his death, moreover, Christ has

385 2 Pent 5 (V, 168): “Non solum, ait, conceptionem meam, sed et vitam meam; et hoc per singulos aetatum gradus, infantiae, pueritiae, adolescentiae, iuventutis, tibi donabo, adiciens mortem et resurrectionem, ascensionem et missionem Spiritus Sancti.”

386 2 Pent 5 (V, 168): “In vita mea cognosces viam tuam, ut sicut ego paupertatis et oboedientiae, humilitatis et patientiae, caritatis et misericordiae indeclinabiles semitas tenui, sic et tu eisdem vestigiis incedas.”

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delivered us from sin and enabled us to participate in his own humility and love as we strive to follow in his footsteps: “In my death, I have given you my own righteousness, shattering the yoke of your captivity.” Finally, by his Resurrection and Ascension, Christ has directed our faith and love to their proper destination, his glorified presence with the Father in heaven: “Once I have done all these things, I will return to the house from which I have come, and turn my face to those sheep who have remained upon the mountains, whom I once left for your sake, that I might not so much lead you, as carry you back.”

Though he has ascended to his Father’s house, Christ does not leave his disciples alone and unconsolled on their journey to him. On the contrary, to those of his faithful who have participated in the fruits of his Passion and begun to follow his own way of humility and love towards his presence in glory, Christ has given the gift of his own Spirit: “And that you might not complain or sorrow in my absence, I will send you the Spirit, the Paraclete, who will give you the pledge of salvation, strength of life, and the light of knowledge.” Bernard then has Christ explain in turn the fruit of the Spirit’s threefold gift. First, the Spirit gives Christ’s disciples the *pignus salutis*, or pledge of salvation, that “the Spirit might bear witness with your spirit that you are a son of God” (cf. Rom 8:15). By this pledge, the Spirit “shows and impresses upon your heart most

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387 2 Pent 5 (V, 168): “In morte autem mea dabo tibi iustitiam meam, dirumpens iugum captivitatis tuae.”

388 2 Pent 5 (V, 168): “His autem completis, revertar in domum meam unde exivi, et ovibus illis, quae in montibus remanserant, quas et propter te reliqueram, ut te non ducerem, sed reportarem, reddam faciem meam.”

389 2 Pent 6 (V, 168): “Et ne de absentia mea vel murmures, vel contristeris, mittam tibi Spiritum Paraclitum, qui tibi donet pignus salutis, robur vitae, scientiae lumen.”

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certain signs of your predestination,” and “fills you heart with the dew of heaven, if not continuously, then at least very often.”

The grounds for this confidence are given in the Spirit’s second gift, the *robur vitae*, or strength of life, by which the Spirit so conforms us to the humility and charity of Christ that “what is impossible to you by nature becomes, by the Spirit’s grace, not only possible, but even easy.”

Finally, by his gift of the *scientiae lumen*, the Spirit arouses in our hearts the proper, authentically humble response to God’s superabundant gifts of grace, so that “when you have done all things well, you will consider yourself an unprofitable servant, and whatever good you discern within you, you will attribute to him from whom all good comes and without whom you cannot even begin, let alone complete, any good work.”

In his meditation on the last of Christ’s saving mysteries, then, Bernard leaves us with a vision of the renewed soul strikingly akin to his description of the Bride’s *honestum* in the last of his complete sermons on the Canticle. The soul that has been progressively conformed to Christ, for whom Christ is born, suffered, risen, and ascended, now receives from Christ the gift of the Spirit. Sensing the Spirit’s transforming work within itself, this soul, radiant with the likeness of Christ’s exemplary humility and love, begins to discern within itself the figure of Christ’s one true Bride, the Church. This inward sense of the Spirit dispels the soul’s former anguish over its own

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390 2 Pent 6 (V, 168): “Pignus salutis, ut ipse Spiritus reddat testimonium spiritui tuo, quod filius Dei sis: qui certissima signa praedestinationis tuae cordi tuo imprimat et ostendat; qui donet laetitiam in corde tuo, et de rore caeli, si non continue, tamen saepissime mentem tuam impinguet.”

391 2 Pent 6 (V, 169): “Robur vitae, ut quod per naturam tibi est impossible, per gratiam eius non solum possibile, sed et facile fiat.”

392 2 Pent 6 (V, 169): “Scientiae lumen, ut, cum omnia bene feceris, te servum inutilem putes, et quidquid boni in te inveneris, illi tribuas, a quo omne bonum est, sine quo non parum aliuid, sed nihil omnino potes incipere, ne perficere dicam.”
miseria and fires it with the confident expectation of eternal life. Indeed as this soul grows in love of God by the Spirit’s gift of God’s own charity, it gradually thinks less and less of its own spiritual state, and more and more of its Bridegroom and his embrace. This soul has, in other words, already begun, even in this life, to forget itself and to pass over entirely into her Beloved. Further, the Spirit’s same gift of divine love has so permeated the soul that it now undertakes the spiritual and bodily exercises of the monastic life with ease and delight. In the words of Benedict’s Prologue, which Bernard does not explicitly cite but surely has in mind, this soul has “begun to run on the path of the Lord’s commandments, with [its] heart overflowing with the inexpressible delights of love.”

Finally, the soul-as-Bride’s conformity to the exemplary humility of Christ reminds it that the transforming work it now experiences within itself is not its own accomplishment, but the work of Christ and the Spirit. In this truly humble, but altogether joyous, self-knowledge, the soul sees itself anew as the beautiful fruit of their graced missions from the Father’s heart, and longs eagerly for that eternal day when the divine Persons will complete within it the work they have begun in time.

The Paschal Lamb as the Source of the Soul’s Growth in Self-Knowledge

So far, we have seen how, for Bernard, the divine Person of the Word, in virtue of his Incarnation, is able both to grow in self-knowledge, humility, and charity and to model these virtues for his disciples. To complete our study of the role Christ plays in Bernard’s theology of self-knowledge, we will need to consider one further aspect of the

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393 RB Prol.49: “Processu vero conversationis et fidei, dilatato corde inenarrabili dilectionis dulcedine curritur via mandatorum.”
abbot’s soteriology. For Bernard, the Incarnate Word is not simply an inspiring exemplar of self-knowledge, humility, and love, but also the source of each these virtues for those joined to him, as members to their Head, by faith and charity. And, though the abbot sees a saving significance in each of the mysteries of the Incarnate Word’s life, he believes that it is above all in the mystery of Christ’s redemptive death that Christ becomes the well-spring of humility and charity for his disciples, the Paschal Lamb on whom they may feed and through whom they too will grow self-knowledge.

To see how, for Bernard, Christ not only models but also effects humility, love, and self-knowledge in the hearts of his faithful, we will need to return to his letter-treatise Against the Errors of Peter Abelard. Written in the later part of 1140 in response to a request from William of St. Thierry and in the run-up to his clash with Abelard at the Council of Sens in 1141, Bernard’s Letter 190 to Pope Innocent II features a sharply-worded attack on what the abbot perceives to be the chief doctrinal errors in the Parisian master’s teaching and writing. In studying Bernard’s letter, our present aim is not to determine whether the abbot has correctly characterized Abelard’s doctrine. Rather, our aim will be to determine how Bernard’s refutations of Abelard’s alleged errors contribute to our understanding of his Christology and soteriology. For it is here, in Letter 190, more than anywhere else in his writings, that the abbot most forcefully rejects the notion of Christ as a mere moral exemplar and insists on the efficacy of Christ’s redemptive

death to bring about a real, inward, and ontological change in the souls of those united to his death by faith, charity, and the sacraments.

When Bernard’s letter is read as a whole, it is immediately clear that among all the various errors he and William have discerned in Abelard’s writings, it is those bearing on soteriological questions that most concern him. The letter is, essentially, divided into two parts. In the first, paragraphs 1-10, Bernard denounces what he sees to be Abelard’s excessive and presumptuous confidence in the power of dialectics to exhaust the mysteries of the Christian faith and specifically challenges the Parisian master’s application of dialectics to traditional Trinitarian formulations. Though he acknowledges that he might in turn discuss numerous other errors in Abelard’s writings, the abbot devotes the entire second part of his letter, paragraphs 11-25, to what he calls “graver matters…about which I cannot keep silent.” Specifically, Bernard charges that Abelard has in his writings attacked the very foundation of Christian faith, the *mysterium nostrae redemptionis* or “mystery of our redemption.” In brief, the abbot argues that by reducing Christ’s death on the Cross to merely an inspiring display of charity, Abelard has evacuated this mystery of Christ’s Passion of its saving power to deliver souls from sin and death, and to effect within them that humility and charity by which they will be conformed to Christ’s own righteousness.

395 Ep 190.10 (VIII, 26): “Haec, inquam, omnia alias que istiusmodi naenias eius non paucas prætereeo; venio ad graviora. Non quod vel ad ipsa cuncta respondeam: magnis enim opus voluminibus esset; illa loquor quae tacere non possum.”

396 Ep 190.11 (VIII, 26): “Mysterium nostrae redemptionis, sicut in libro quodam Sententiarum ipsius, et item in quadam eius expositione epistolae ad Romanos legi, temerarius scrutator maiestatis aggrediens.”

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In paragraph 17 of his letter, Bernard characterizes Abelard’s soteriological position as follows:

He thinks and argues that the whole reason the Lord of glory emptied himself, made himself lower than the angels, was born of a woman, lived in this world, experienced our infirmities, suffered our weakness, and at last returned to his own place by his death on the cross should be reduced to this: that by his life and teaching, he might give men and women a model for how to live, and by his suffering and death, set them a perfect example of charity.\textsuperscript{397}

As we have just seen through our study of Bernard’s festal sermons, the abbot certainly agrees with Abelard that Christ’s life in the flesh has given human beings an inspiring example of supreme humility and love. By the mysteries of his Incarnate life, Christ has, Bernard agrees, “given men and women a model for how to live” and, by his suffering and death, has indeed “set a perfect example of charity.” Yet, for Bernard, Christ’s death on the Cross has done, and indeed must do, much more than merely show forth a moving example of a righteous living. By his Paschal Mystery, Bernard contends, Christ not only models charity, but effects it in the hearts of those who are joined to him in his death:

“Did he therefore teach righteousness, but not give it? Did he show us charity, but not infuse it?”\textsuperscript{398} Bernard asks.

Though Christ’s redemptive death, Bernard continues, his disciples have received not only an example of perfect love, but also “reconciliation” with God, “remission of

\textsuperscript{397} Ep 190.17 (VIII, 31): “Haec est iustitia hominis in sanguine Redemptoris, quam homo perditionis exsufflans et subsannans, in tantum evacuare conatur, ut totum quod Dominus gloriae SEMETIPSUM EXINANIVIT, quod minoratus est ab angelis, quod natus de femina, quod conversatus in mundo, quod expertus infirma, quod passus indigna, quod demum per mortem crucis in sua reversus, ad id solum putet et disputet redigendum, ut traderet hominibus formam vitae vivendo et docendo, patiendo autem et moriendo caritatis metatam praefigetur.”

\textsuperscript{398} Ep 190.17 (VIII, 31): “Ergo docuit iustitiam, et non dedit; ostendit caritatem, sed non infudit?”
sins,” “justification,” and “redemption or liberation from the power of the devil.” By the superabundant love with which he offered himself to his Father for our sake in his Passion, Christ has made each of these saving gifts available to all those who are joined to his Passion, as members to their Head, by faith, charity, and the sacraments, especially the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist. And for Bernard moreover, if one has not participated in these saving fruits of Christ’s Passion, his edifying example of humility and love will be to no purpose. For if by his death Christ’s has not liberated the soul from its enslavement to sin, and infused that soul with the humility and charity he models on the cross, the soul’s efforts to imitate Christ’s example will be made in vain. “What does it profit us if Christ instructs us, but does not restore us?” Bernard asks. “Are we not instructed in vain if the body of death is not destroyed in us that we might no longer serve sin? (Rom 6:6).”

To illustrate the significance of the real, inward, ontological change Christ’s death effects within us, Bernard draws an instructive parallel between our fleshly generation in Adam and our spiritual regeneration in Christ. If Christ benefits us only by his mere display of virtue, he argues, then Adam can only harm us by his mere display of sin. Yet, just as the Catholic faith holds that by our fleshly generation from Adam we have become sharers in Adam’s sin, so it holds that by our spiritual regeneration in Christ, we have

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399 Ep 190.20 (VIII, 34): “Sive igitur reconciliatio, sive remissio peccatorum, sive iustificatio sit, sive etiam redemptio vel liberatio de vinculis diaboli a quo captivi tenebamus ad ipsius voluntatem, intercedente morte Unigeniti obtinemus.” On the relationship between these various aspects of the one mysterium redemptionis in Bernard’s Christology, see Kereszty, “Relationship between Anthropology and Christology. St. Bernard, a Teacher for Our Age,” 283-287.

400 Ep 190.23 (VIII, 36): “Ceterum quid prodest quod nos instituit, si non restituit? Aut numquid frustra instruimur, si non prius DESTRUATUR in nobis CORPUS PECCATI, UT ULTRA NON SERVIAMUS PECCATO?”
become not merely imitators of, but also sharers in Christ’s own righteousness: “If we, assenting to the Christian faith, and not to the heresy of Pelagius, confess that it was by generation, and not by instruction, that the sin of Adam was handed on to us, and through sin death, then we must likewise confess that it is not by instruction, but by regeneration that righteousness is restored to us by Christ, and by righteousness, life (Rom 5:18). For Bernard, then, unless Christ’s death is powerful to effect within us a real, spiritual regeneratio, by which we are reconciled to God, freed from sin, liberated from the power of the devil, infused with grace and charity, and, in a word, justified, then the humility and love he displays throughout his Incarnate life, however moving, will be impossible for us to attain. Our spiritual regeneratio begins in the sacrament of Baptism, in which we are inwardly conformed to Christ in his Passion, being “planted with him in the likeness of his death” (Rom 6:5).

In Bernard’s soteriology, then, Christ not only models that humility and love by which we are restored in the lost divine likeness, but also effects these within us; if we are to follow the footsteps of his descent and ascent in the flesh, we must not only imitate his humility and love, but participate in them through the mysterium redemptionis of his Paschal Mystery. For the abbot, indeed, to try to imitate Christ’s virtues without communicating in them is like “trying to paint on thin air.” To successfully imitate

\[\text{Ep 190.36 (VIII, 36): “Aut si christianae fidei et non haeresi Pelagianae acquiescentes, generatione, non institutione traductum in nos confitemur Adae peccatum, et per peccatum mortem, fateamur necesse est et a Christo nobis, non institutione, sed regeneratione restitutam iustitiam, et per iustitiam vitam.”}

\[\text{Ep 190.25 (VIII, 38): “Et quidem tria quaedam praecipua in hoc opere nostrae salutis intueor: formam humilitatis, in qua SEMETIPSUM Deus EXINANIVIT; caritatis mensuram, quam USQUE AD MORTEM, ET MORTEM CRUCIS, extendit; redemptionis sacramentum, quo ipsam mortem, quam pertulit, sustulit. Horum duo priora sine ultimo sic sunt, ac si super inane pingas.}\]
these life-giving virtues, we must commune on Christ, our Paschal Lamb. So, in the conclusion to his letter, Bernard writes: “I want to follow the humble Jesus with all my strength; I long to embrace with the arms of my love the one who loved me and gave himself for me (Gal 2:20), but I must also eat the Paschal Lamb. For unless I eat his flesh and drink his blood, I have no life in me (Jn 6:56, 33). As Roch Kereszty has shown, “Eating his flesh and drinking his blood means for Bernard not only Eucharistic communion but our manifold participation in the true Passover Lamb on whose sacrifice our participation in the life and love of Christ depends.” By this manifold participation, Bernard believes, Christ’s disciples are able to communicate in the humility and love Christ grows in and models by each of the mysteries of his Incarnate life, and therefore to undertake successfully that ascending journey of self-knowledge that we have seen Bernard chart in his other writings.

So Bernard’s conclusion to Letter 190 reflects the insight he had already attained in the opening to his very first work, On the Steps of Humility and Pride, through his meditation on John 14:6. Christ is indeed the exemplary Way of humility and love that leads to the joyous threefold Truth about self, God, and neighbor, but he is at the same time the Life, or life-giving viaticum, that nourishes and strengthens souls on this journey to Truth and Truth’s reward of eternal life.

403 Ep 190.25: “Volo totis nisibus humilem sequi Iesum; cupio eum QUI DILEXIT ME ET TRADIDIT SEMETIPSUM PRO ME quibusdam brachiis vicariae dilectionis amplecti: sed oportet me et Agnnum manducare paschalem. Nisi enim manducavero carnem eius et bibero eius sanguinem, non habebo vitam in memetipso.”

404 Kereszty, “Relationship between Anthropology and Christology,” 287.
Conclusion

The foregoing study has shown that the Person and work of Christ play not an incidental, but indeed an integral and indispensable role in Bernard’s vision of the soul’s progress in self-knowledge. Indeed at the very foundation of Bernard’s theology of self-knowledge, and his broader spiritual theology as a whole, is the thoroughly developed Incarnational Christology the abbot has received from the patristic tradition and developed across his corpus. Thanks to this Incarnational Christology, Bernard is able to say credibly that, by his descent and ascent in the flesh, the Word of God has undertaken a genuine journey of self-knowledge, learning and growing in humility and compassionate love just as he calls his disciples to do in their own lives of ongoing conversion to him. This same Incarnational Christology undergirds the abbot’s Sermones per annum in which he shows how the descending and ascending Word Incarnate both models and inspires the soul’s journey from the humbling self-knowledge of conversion to its newfound self-knowledge as the Bride of Christ, radiant with Christ’s own likeness, a joyous self-awareness sealed with the certainty that comes from Christ’s gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Finally, because his Incarnational Christology has allowed him to say credibly that the Word as Incarnate has authentically grown in humility, love and self-knowledge through his experience in the flesh, the abbot is able to show how Christ is not simply an inspiring model of these virtues for his disciples, but also the inwardly efficacious source of these virtues in the hearts of those bound to him by faith, love, and the sacraments of the Church. In demonstrating these claims, moreover, we have shown at least one example of a properly “doctrinal spirituality” in the abbot’s thought, in which he derives a rich account of life in the Spirit not apart from or in contradiction to, but
precisely through, a careful appropriation and explication of the Church’s traditional
dogmatic formulations concerning Christ and his saving work.
In the sixty-seventh to sixty-ninth of his *Sermones super Cantica canticorum*, composed sometime between 1144 and 1148, Bernard devotes his attention to the Bride’s joyous exclamation, *Dilectus meus mihi, et ego illi*, “My Beloved is mine, and I am his” (Sg 2:16). The abbot takes a special interest in these words of the Bride because, to his ear, they are scarcely intelligible. They seem to transcend the ordinary rules of grammar and therefore contain a mystery beyond his immediate understanding. They can only be, he concludes, words spoken out of love, which reason cannot comprehend: “It is the affections that speak here, not the intellect. It is not for the intellect to grasp their meaning.” In “The affections,” Bernard explains, “have their own language, through which they reveal themselves even against our will.”

For Bernard, moreover, the Bride alone may utter these words and alone know their meaning because she alone possesses affections conformed to those of her Bridegroom. Though he avers that he is unworthy to speak these words and to comprehend their significance, the abbot does suggest a possible interpretation for the benefit of the simple. When the Bride exclaims, “My Beloved is mine, and I am his,”

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405 SC 67.3 (II, 190): “Affectus locutus est, non intellectus, et ideo non ad intellectum.”

406 SC 67.3 (II, 190): “Habent suas voces affectus, per quas se, etiam cum nolunt, produnt.”
perhaps she means, “My Beloved inclines (intendit) to me, and I to him.” On this reading, the Bride would be echoing the Psalmist, who declares, “I waited eagerly for the Lord, and he inclined to me” (Ps 39:2). The Bride, however, Bernard notes, has taken care to speak first of how her Beloved inclines to her and only then of how she inclines to him; by this ordering, he argues, she acknowledges the priority of his grace before her own merits. Her merits, she knows, are her Bridegroom’s gifts to her.

Taking the verse in this sense, Bernard then suggests that these words of the Bride might be applied to the Church of the elect, the “congregation of the righteous.” With great trust in Bridegroom’s love for her and his promises of mercy, the Ecclesia-Sponsa may boldly claim his exclusive attention for herself and even dare to address him as an equal:

How marvelous it is that she should claim her Bridegroom’s exclusive intention for her very own, saying, “My Beloved is mine!” Not content with this, however, she makes bold to glorify herself still further, returning his love as if she were his equal, saying, “And he is mine.” How daring a word, “And he is mine.” And no less daring her “My Beloved is mine.” But for her to say both at once is still more daring than either one.

The Ecclesia-Sponsa’s daring, Bernard explains, springs from her confident hope in her Bridegroom’s promise of love and, still more, from her certainty that God himself has even allowed himself to have need of her. For the very fulfillment of his eternal design,

\[407\]

SC 67.3 (II, 194): “Et mihi quidem videtur satis esse ad nostram grossam et quodam modo popularem intelligentiam, si dicendo: DILECTUS MEUS MIHI, subaudiamus, <<intendit>>, ut sit sensus: DILECTUS MEUS MIHI intendit, ET EGO ILLI.”

\[408\]

SC 68.1 (II, 197): “Quam admirabile est, quod illius intentionem ista sibi quasi propriam vindicat, dicens: DILECTUS MEUS MIHI! Nec eo contenta tamen, pergit amplius gloriari respondere se illi, quasi ex aequo morem gerere et rependere vicem.

Sequitur enim: ET EGO ILLI. Insolens verbum: ET EGO ILLI, nec minus insolens: DILECTUS MEUS MIHI, nisi quod utroque insolentius utrumque simul.”
the mystery of his will, the abbot explains, depends on the eschatological consummation of the Church, for which all creation yearns and without which no single part of creation can achieve its originally intended purpose in the everlasting praise of its Creator. “Why, then, should she not glorify herself with confidence,” Bernard asks, “when mercy and truth have embraced to bear witness to her glory?”

In SC 69, Bernard goes further, to ask if any individual soul among the congregation of the righteous might presume to make these words of the Bride its own, to claim for itself that exclusive love the Bridegroom has promised to his Church. Yes, Bernard replies, but only a particular kind of soul may claim such an honor, a soul that has been so conformed to the Bridegroom in its affections that its only desire is for its will to be one with his. Bernard writes:

Give me a soul who loves nothing but God and whatever is to be loved for the sake of God, a soul for whom to live is Christ (Ph 1:21), and for whom this has been true for a long time; who in both work and leisure strives to keep the Lord always before its eyes, whose sole desire is to walk humbly with God, and who perseveres in this. Give me, I say, such a soul, and I will not deny that it is worthy of the Bridegroom’s love, the care of his majesty, the favor of his sovereignty, the concern of his governance. And if such a soul should wish to boast, it will not be foolish (2 Cor 12:6), provided that the one who boasts, boasts in the Lord (1 Cor 1:31).

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409 SC 68.7 (II, 200): “Quidni glorietur secura, in cuius testimonium gloriae misericordia et veritas obviaverunt sibi?”

410 SC 69.1 (II, 202): “Da mihi animam nihil amantem praeter Deum et quod propter Deum amandum est, cui vivere Christus non tantum sit, sed et diu iam fuerit, cui studii et otii sit providere Dominum in conspectu suo semper, cui sollicitas ambulare cum Domino Deo suo, non dicu magna, sed una voluntas sit, et facultas non desit, da, inquam, talem animam, et ego non nego dignam Sponsi cura, maiestatis respectu, dominantis favore, sollicitudine gubernantis; et si voluerit gloriari, non erit insipiens: tantum ut qui gloriatur, in Domino glorietur.”

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To such a soul, the abbot continues, the Word himself comes and, having prepared it by
his grace, makes this soul his dwelling-place (Jn 14:23). This intimacy the Word affords
the refashioned soul only further inspires the soul’s *fiducia*, or loving trust in him, so that,
Bernard writes, “I do not think such a soul should fear to say, ‘My Beloved is mine, and I
am his,’ for it senses that it loves, and loves ardently, and has no doubt that it is loved
ardently in return.” This soul, he explains, is indeed likened to the Word, for just as it
devotes all its love, care, concern, devotion, and solicitude to him, so he devotes the same
to it in equal measure. In a particularly beautiful passage concerning this mutual love
between Bridegroom and Bride, Bernard addresses the *Anima-Sponsa* directly: “Do you
keep vigil? He himself keeps vigil with you. Rise in the night for your vigil, and hasten
as quickly as you can to arrive before the hour of your vigil; you will find him there
awaiting you, and you will never arrive before him.” When this *Anima-Sponsa* looks
upon her Bridegroom, the abbot adds, she sees him as if he were gazing upon her alone,
and sees nothing but himself and her. Yet, since the *Anima-Sponsa* knows well that her
espousal is entirely the gift of the Word’s grace, Bernard concludes his sermon with a
prayer in praise of the divine Bridegroom: “You are good, O Lord, to the soul that seeks
you! You come to her, embrace her, and reveal yourself to be her Bridegroom, you who
are Lord, you who are indeed God, blessed above all things, for ever and ever. Amen.”

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411 SC 69.7 (II, 206): “Non est, ut opinor, quod iam talis anima dicere vereatur: DILECTUS
MEUS MIHI, quae ex eo quod se diligere, et vehementer diligere, sentit, etiam diligi vehementer non
ambiguit.”

tuarum, accelera quantumvis etiam ipsas anticipare vigilias: invenies eum, non praevenies.”

413 SC 69.8 (II, 207): “Bonus es, Domine, anae quaerenti te! Occursis, amplecteres, sponsum
exhibes, qui Dominus es, immo qui es super omnia Deus benedictus in saecula. Amen.”
So Bernard concludes SC 69 with the image of an *Anima-Sponsa* who knows herself entirely in terms of her love for Christ and his love for her, who can say with confidence, and without any fear of proud presumption, that she is Christ’s beloved and that Christ is hers. In view of the foregoing study of Bernard’s doctrine of self-knowledge, it is now clear that the soul only arrives at this joyous self-awareness after a long, and at times bitter, journey of developing self-understanding. As we saw in Chapter 1, through our study of Bernard’s sermon set SC 34-38, the abbot has thought through in considerable depth the various successive phases of this journey and their relationships. In his telling, this journey begins well before the soul’s first conversion with the false self-knowledge, or self-deception, which springs from the soul’s pride and self-will. It is precisely because he recognizes how powerful the hold of this self-deception can be that Bernard repeatedly underscores how essential humbling self-knowledge is in the experience of conversion. For it is, in his view, only through an honest, humbling self-encounter in the light of Truth that the soul which has so long boasted of its own superiority may be moved to renounce this self-deception and to recognize itself as a self-disfigured image of God. Though this self-judgment in the light of Truth cannot but be painful, and may even lead the soul to the brink of despair, it is the soul’s first step in the properly spiritual life as it moves, and even compels, the soul to seek God’s healing for its sad disfigurement and to find the fullness of his mercy poured out in Christ and the Spirit. And, as the soul experiences the work of Christ and the Spirit within itself, conforming it to the lost divine likeness of humility and love revealed in the Incarnate Word, it begins to discover itself anew, as an image being renewed, as one
gradually assuming the figure of Christ’s Bride, as Christ’s own Beloved, radiant with his own beauty.

In Chapter 2, through our study of Bernard’s *On the Steps of Humility and Pride*, we examined his doctrine of pride and self-deception by tracing what we have called the abbot’s account of the “descent” of self-deception. For Bernard, as we saw, the origin of all self-deception is *superbia* or pride, that misguided love of one’s own excellence that so swells in the hearts of fallen human beings as to persuade them that they in fact are what they so want to be, superior to all. Through our study of Bernard’s innovative twelve steps of pride, we saw how the monk in particular succumbs to the self-deception that he, like the Pharisee of Christ’s parable, is morally and spiritually superior to everyone else. The monk’s descent into this delusional but obstinately held belief in his own superior holiness begins with his *curiositas*, his compulsive interest in everything, and everyone, other than himself in the sight of God. As the monk allows his sensitive and mental regard to pass from himself to others, he gradually abandons the work of humble self-judgment which might normally keep his love of his own excellence in check. And, as he allows his eyes and other senses to wander over his brothers and their behavior, his unchecked love of his own excellence distorts his vision, moving him to see his brothers only as his competitors, as rival claimants to the distinction he coverts for himself. Now judging himself solely in terms of his perceived inferiority or superiority to others, he soon begins to manipulate his brothers, to impress them with seemingly holy words and deeds, that he might win their praise and admiration. As his efforts to deceive his brethren prove successful, he soon begins to accept their praise as the truth about
himself, to accept their exalted opinion of himself over the lingering protests of his own conscience.

Once this monk has, by the sixth step of pride, *arrogantia*, embraced the falsehood of his own superiority as the truth about himself, he soon exalts his own will over the will of his own superiors, renouncing obedience to feed his growing craving for domination. When his disobedience results in his expulsion from the monastery, his self-deception assumes a still more sinister form as he begins to consider, and then to embrace as true, the delusion that he is not only superior to his fellows, but even superior to God and exempt from God’s law. With his concupiscent desires loosed from the salutary constraints of regular monastic life, he begins to indulge each, delighting in the varied pleasures the world affords. When, in turn, he finds that his sins go unpunished, he concludes that God is a god of mercy, but not justice, a god who will not, or perhaps cannot, punish him for his transgressions. So, having constructed an idol to match his self-deception, he plunges headlong into a life of sin, only to find that his repeated sins have enchained him in the bonds of vicious habit and enslaved him to the desire for everything which is not God, and therefore cannot fulfill his deepest, inward yearnings. Thus his apparent “ascent” of self-exaltation proves to be a true “descent” into restless misery. By falsely judging and showing contempt for his brothers and his Creator, he has, in fact, falsely judged himself and subjected himself to the severest form of self-contempt. Without the intervening grace of the Word, Bernard concludes, this proud soul’s self-contempt will culminate in eternal death.

In Chapter 3, then, we traced how, for Bernard, the Word indeed resounds in the souls of the self-deceived proud, calling them back before their own self-disfigured faces,
to judge themselves in Truth, and so to begin what we have called the “ascent” to self-knowledge that leads to salvation and eternal life. Through our study of the *Steps*’ first part, we saw how, for Bernard, the proud soul will return to God by three steps of truth and love which progressively overcome its false knowledge and contempt of itself, its neighbors, and God. In the first step of Truth, the Son of God, the Word and Wisdom of God, cries out in the proud soul’s depths, recalling the soul’s curious gaze to itself, and enabling it to judge itself in the full and bitter truth of its own misery by a participation in his own prerogative as Judge of all. As this soul is compelled to face and confess its sin and weakness, it suffers intense guilt and shame, but also begins to recognize this same *miseria* in the souls of others, and so, by its honest self-encounter, learns a genuinely compassionate charity for its neighbors. In ascending this second step of Truth, by which it comes to see its neighbors not as rivals or inferiors, but brothers and sisters in Christ, the soul is graced with the Spirit’s inward infusion of God’s own divine charity, in and through which it is enabled to love its brothers and sisters with the compassion of Christ the Incarnate Word. Once conformed to the Son and Spirit respectively, the soul now refashioned in the lost divine likeness of humility and love may be rapt to the embrace of the Father and be bound to him as his own glorious Bride. Rejoicing in the beautiful sight of its newly refashioned countenance, and exchanging its former guilt and shame for loving trust and hope, it may say with the Bride of the Canticle, “The King has lead me into his chamber” (Sg 1:3).

Yet, as we saw through our study of Bernard’s “psychological drama” in his sermon-treatise *On Conversion*, the abbot teaches that the soul’s ascent to this Bridal self-awareness is neither swift nor easy, but passes through an arduous series of intervening
phases of self-knowledge. Invoking Augustine’s doctrine of the Trinitarian image within the soul composed of reason, will, and memory, Bernard here shows how the soul’s restoration in the divine likeness proceeds only gradually. As in the *Steps*, the soul’s conversion begins with the prevenient grace of the Word who reveals to reason the sad history of the self-deceived soul’s proud self-contempt. Once illumined by the Word, reason boldly sets forth to reform the soul, but soon finds that the will remains enslaved to its former, sinful desires, and that the memory remains filled with the bitter, ineffaceable recollection of its past. Yet, by the grace of the Spirit, the will is liberated from its enslavement, and infused with divine charity; the memory is, in turn, purified by the Word of God, so that the soul’s recollection of its past sins now serve no longer as a source of shame, but as a bright testimony to God’s transforming mercy. Once refashioned in reason, will, and memory alike, the soul that once looked in horror and shame on its own diseased face now rejoices to see itself anew, as one assuming the figure of Christ’s own Bride. Growing ever more like the divine Bridegroom by his gifts of humility and love, this soul begins to radiate a certain divine beauty, expressed in her humble, grateful self-awareness as his Beloved, a beauty which wins the Bridegroom’s love, and draws him to enter the soul as his own dwelling-place.

As we saw, moreover, through our study of Bernard’s *Apologia*, the transformed soul’s self-recognition as Christ’s Bride entails not only its growing conformity to the beauty of the Bridegroom, but also its growing union with all the members of Christ’s body, who together form his *Ecclesia-Sponsa*. In the grips of its former, proud self-deception, the soul could only regard its brothers and sisters as competitors and rivals to the title of most holy it so coveted for itself. In this state, it could not, as Paul commands,
rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep (Rom 12:15), but only rejoice when it saw others to fail, and weep when it saw itself surpassed by others. Yet once conformed to the humility and compassion of Christ, the soul begins to understand itself and its fellows anew. Through its humble recognition of its own *miseria*, the soul learns to love its brothers and sisters with compassion, forgiveness, gentleness, and understanding; the soul now regards itself and others not as competitors, but as fellow members of Christ and fellow wayfarers on their common journey towards their eschatological consummation in him. Thus the soul recognizes itself as the *Anima-Sponsa* only to the degree to which it participates in the *Ecclesia-Sponsa*, the congregation of holy souls who together form the Bridegroom’s one, perfect, and beautiful Spouse.

In Chapter 4, we completed our study of Bernard’s comprehensive theology of self-knowledge with an analysis of the abbot’s Christology, and specifically, his understanding of how the divine Bridegroom, Christ the Incarnate Word, plays an essential role in the soul’s passage from the self-deception of pride to its newfound awareness as the Bride of Christ. Integral to Bernard’s teaching here is the Incarnational Christology he develops across his *corpus* and expresses most succinctly in his sixtieth sermon *De Diversis*. According to this Incarnational Christology, the single subject of Christ is the fully divine Person of the Word, the second person of the Trinity, who without loss to himself as fully divine, has taken up and come to express an integral human nature, with a genuine human soul and body, and the full complement of human faculties and passions. Through our study of Bernard’s apparent “digression” concerning Christ’s knowledge in the *Steps*, we showed how the abbot deploys this Incarnational
Christology to reveal how the Word Incarnate, by his descent and ascent in the flesh, undertakes his own journey of self-knowledge by immersing himself in all the sufferings of fallen humanity, save sin, that he might learn compassion for his human creatures in an authentically human way. In so doing, the Word as Incarnate can credibly be said to grow in humility and compassionate charity, to ascend the three steps of Truth, and thereby to supply for fallen human beings a model for their own ascent to self-knowledge in imitation of his example.

To be understand precisely how, for Bernard, Christ models the soul’s ascent to self-knowledge, we then undertook a study of his teaching on the saving mysteries of Christ’s incarnate life in the abbot’s *Sermones per annum*. When we studied Bernard’s meditations on each of the mysteries of Christ’s descent and ascent in the flesh, from his Advent to his gift of the Spirit at Pentecost, we saw how the abbot has taken care to correlate precisely the various mysteries of Christ’s life to the various stages of the soul’s ascent to self-awareness as his Bride. In the mysteries of his descent, from his Nativity to his Passion, the Word Incarnate displays such humility in his voluntary self-emptying that he recaptures the fallen soul’s curiosity, humbles its pride, shatters its proud self-deception, and recalls it to the consideration of its own self-disfigurement through sin. Yet, in these same mysteries of his descent, and above all in his Passion, the Word Incarnate reveals to this humbled but converted soul such tender, compassionate love that the soul is moved to seek from his hands its restoration in the lost divine likeness of humility and love. Then, in the mysteries of his ascent, from his Passion to his Ascension into glory, the Word Incarnate first draws the soul’s carnal love to the sweetness he reveals in the flesh, and then gradually transforms this carnal love into a strong, spiritual
love of himself in the glory of divinity. Finally, by the gift of his Spirit at Pentecost, the culminating mystery of his incarnate life, Christ strengthens the soul to undertake this journey of restoration in the lost divine likeness and affords the soul a certain pledge that it is indeed being inwardly likened to him, day by day, on its journey to the perfect likeness it will receive in glory. Thus it is the Spirit, given by Christ at Pentecost, who ushers the soul into its newfound self-awareness as one assuming the figure of Christ’s Bride by its progressive conformity to the divine Bridegroom and all those members of his Church who together constitute his unique and perfect Spouse.

Finally, through our analysis of Bernard’s Christological teaching in his Letter Against the Errors of Peter Abelard, we saw that, for the abbot, Christ the Incarnate Word is not simply the inspiring model, but also the inwardly efficacious source of that humility and love by which the soul is restored in the lost divine likeness and led to its new self-awareness as the Bride. While Bernard readily accepts Abelard’s assertion that, in his Passion, Christ has provided the supreme example of humility and love for his disciples to imitate, he fears that Abelard’s soteriology fails to account for the redemptive character of Christ’s death which alone makes it possible for fallen human beings to imitate Christ successfully. For Bernard, the Incarnate Word has, in the mysteries of his descent and ascent, and most especially in his Paschal Mystery, offered his disciples not only a moving example of the deepest humility and love, but also that spiritual regeneratio by which his disciples are configured to him in his Passion, liberated from the power of sin, and so enabled to follow Jesus on his way of humility and love. Those joined to Christ in his Passion by faith, love, and the sacraments of the Church, are, moreover, enabled, to commune on Christ the Paschal Lamb, to share and participate in
the very humility and love he learns and models through his incarnate life. So it is that Christ the Incarnate Word, the divine Bridegroom, fills his disciples with his own beauty, restores them in the lost divine likeness, and by the gift of his Spirit, brings them to a newfound self-awareness as his own Bride, his one, beautiful, and perfect Spouse and dove (Sg 2:10; 6:8). Recognizing her inward beauty as Christ’s gift to her, and as his very own beauty, the Bride, who is at once each righteous soul and the congregation of the righteous, rejoices to incline herself entirely to her Bridegroom, and to cry out with confident trust and true self-knowledge, “My Beloved is mine, and I am his” (Sg 2:6).
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