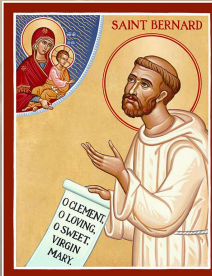
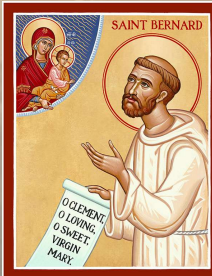


St Bernard of Clairvaux - “On Loving God”

Bryan Hall, MA
Summer, 2026



Brother Jesus –
Alive today and always,
Send your Spirit to us,
That we might be open to you speaking to us
as week seek to learn.
Amen.



Bernard's "Nativity Prayer"

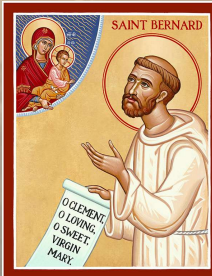
"Let Your goodness Lord appear to us, that we made in your image, conform ourselves to it.

In our own strength we cannot imitate your majesty, power, and wonder; nor is it fitting for us to try.

But your mercy reaches from the heavens through the clouds to the earth below.

You have come to us as a small child, but you have brought us the greatest of all gifts, the gift of eternal love.

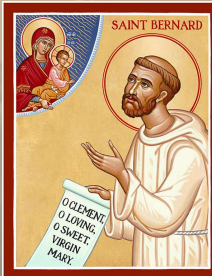
Caress us with Your tiny hands, embrace us with Your tiny arms, and pierce our hearts with Your soft, sweet cries. – Amen"



Who is Bernard of Clairvaux?

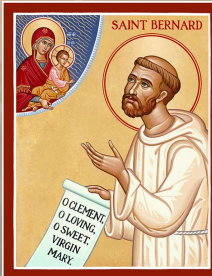
- Born 1090
- Died August 20, 1153
- Canonized January 18, 1174
- Feast day August 20
- Declared a doctor of the church by Pope Pius VIII in 1830
- Extolled in 1953 by Pope Pius XII

From <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Bernard-of-Clairvaux>; written by John Richard Meyer



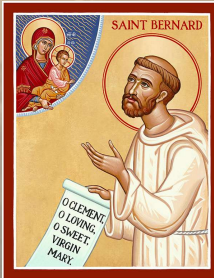
Who am I?

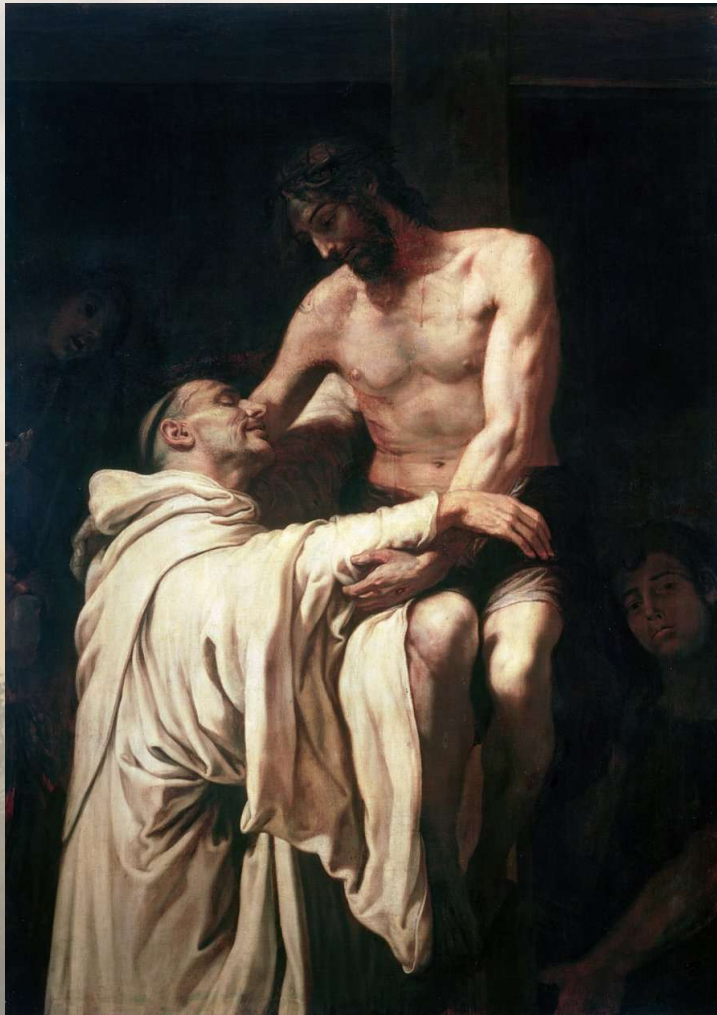
- Husband of 30+ years, father to 2 adult sons
- Member of the St Mary of the Falls parish council
- Catholic for most of my life – a “thinking Catholic”
- MA in theology from Loyola of Chicago, 1999
 - Love of learning, and a desire for God....



Why does St. Bernard matter to me?

- Representative of “mystical theology”
- I got to read “On Loving God” in grad school
- An amazing reflection on the goodness and intimacy of God.

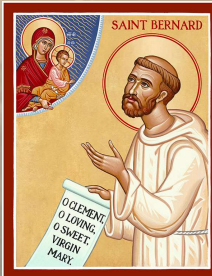




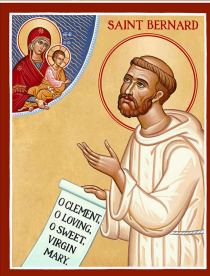
Christ embracing St Bernard –
Francisco Ribaulta - 1625

Bernard loves Jesus!

Modern icon of Bernard (contemplating
Virgin Mary and child Jesus)



- Bernard speaks
- Bernard is articulate in Scripture
- Bernard encourages



Mystical vs. Scholastic Theology

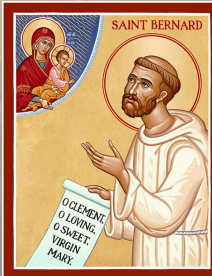
Gross oversimplification:

The scholastics declared Credo ut intelligam,

“I believe in order to understand.”

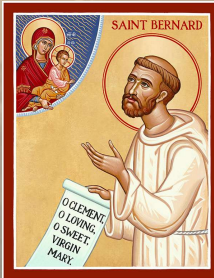
Mystics would say Credo ut experiar,

“I believe that I may experience.”



Mystical Experience

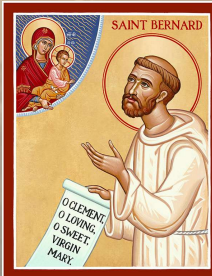
To have a physical / emotional experience of the presence of God.



Life of St. Bernard

- Bernard's early life and entry into religious life

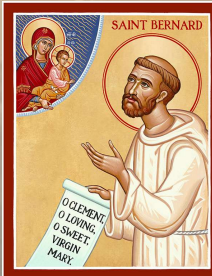
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Life of St. Bernard

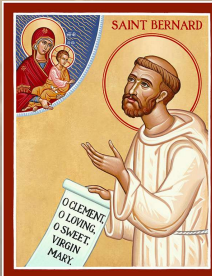
- Clairvaux

From <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Bernard-of-Clairvaux>; written by John Richard Meyer



Life of St. Bernard

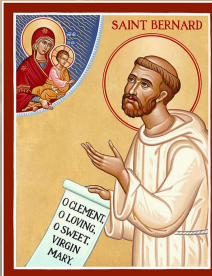
- Known for resolving disputes between popes
- Argued with Peter Abelard
- Had a deep devotion to and wrote of Mary, mother of Jesus
- Encouraged people to join the Second Crusade
- I will be focusing on “On Loving God” and its content



Why We Should Love God and the Measure of That Love

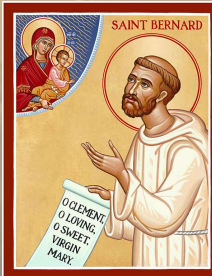
- Bernard does not mince words:

“You want me to tell you why God is to be loved and how much. I answer, the reason for loving God is God Himself; and the measure of love due to Him is immeasurable love. Is this plain?”



Where we end up....

“At first, man loves himself for his own sake. That is the flesh, which can appreciate nothing beyond itself (**the first degree**). Next, he perceives that he cannot exist by himself, and so begins by faith to seek after God, and to love Him as something necessary to his own welfare. **That is the second degree**, to love God, not for God's sake, but selfishly. But when he has learned to worship God and to seek Him aright, meditating on God, reading God's Word, praying and obeying His commandments, he comes gradually to know what God is, and finds Him altogether lovely. So, having tasted and seen how gracious the Lord is (Psalm 34:8), **he advances to the third degree**, when he loves God, not merely as his benefactor but as God. Surely he must remain long in this state; and I know not whether it would be possible to make further progress in this life to that **fourth degree** and perfect condition wherein man loves himself solely for God's sake.”

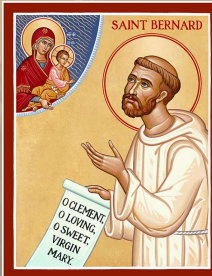


Why We Should Love God and the Measure of That Love

“Consider too that dignity without wisdom is nothing worth; and wisdom is harmful without virtue, as this argument following shows: There is no glory in having a gift without knowing it.

But to know only that you have it, without knowing that it is not of yourself that you have it, means self-glorying, but no true glory in God.”

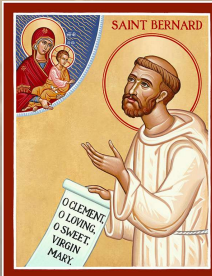
- The source of our vanity; not recognizing the source of the gift.



Why We Should Love God and the Measure of That Love

“We must know, then, what we are, and that it is not of ourselves that we are what we are. What are we really? We are not the source of ourselves.”

“Ignorance is brutal, arrogance is devilish. Pride only, the chief of all iniquities, can make us treat gifts as if they were rightful attributes of our nature, and, while receiving benefits, rob our Benefactor of His due glory.”

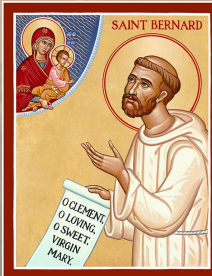


Why We Should Love God and the Measure of That Love

“Virtue seeks and finds Him who is the Author and Giver of all good.”

- Virtue allows us to find truth – that God is the source of goodness. So a reason to love God is because God is this source / giver (loving God for what God has done).

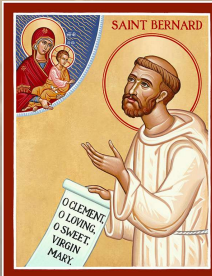
“'Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto Thy name give glory' (Psalm 115:1). “



What Greater Incentives Christians Have, More Than the Heathen, to Love God

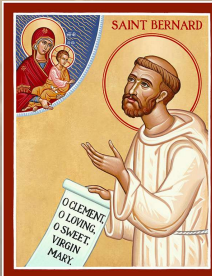
Christians can look to the great love of Christ on the cross, and recognize that we have been freed from death. Bernard uses bride / groom language when describing our wonder and appreciation of the Resurrection “the new springtime of regenerating grace.”

“So it behooves us, if we would have Christ for a frequent guest, to fill our hearts with faithful meditations on the mercy He showed in dying for us, and on His mighty power in rising again from the dead. ”



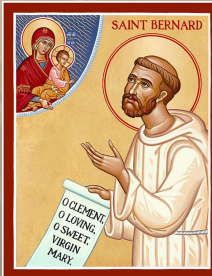
What Greater Incentives Christians Have, More Than the Heathen, to Love God

“Among us on the earth there is His memory; but in the Kingdom of heaven His very Presence. That Presence is the joy of those who have already attained to beatitude; the memory is the comfort of us who are still wayfarers, journeying towards the Fatherland .” – Our experience of God will reach perfection / fulfillment in heaven. But it can start HERE!



Of the Christian's Debt of Love, How Great It Is

“For I know that my God is not merely the bounteous Bestower of my life, the generous Provider for all my needs, the pitiful Consoler of all my sorrows, the wise Guide of my course: but that He is far more than all that . He saves me with an abundant deliverance: He is my eternal Preserver, the portion of my inheritance, my glory. Even so it is written, 'With Him is plenteous redemption' (Psalm 130:7); and again, 'He entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us' (Hebrews 9:12).

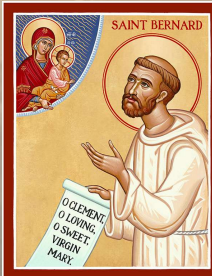


Of the Christian's Debt of Love, How Great It Is

Of His salvation it is written, 'He forsakes not His that be godly; but they are preserved forever' (Psalm 37:28); and of His bounty,

'Good measure, pressed down and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom' (Luke 6.38); and in another place,

'Eye hath not seen nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, those things which God hath prepared for them that love Him' (I Corinthians 2.9).”



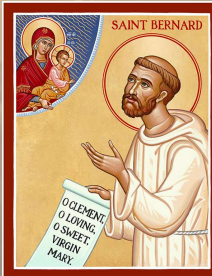
A Brief Summary (to this point)

“Admit that God deserves to be loved very much, yea, boundlessly, because He loved us first.

...This is why I said at the beginning that the measure of our love to God is to love immeasurably. For since our love is toward God, who is infinite and immeasurable, how can we bound or limit the love we owe Him?

...And since **it is the Godhead who loves us.**

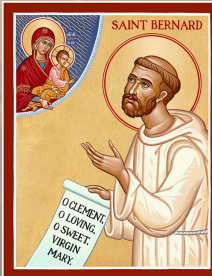
...He is all that I need, all that I long for. My God and my help, I will love You for Thy great goodness; not so much as I might, surely, but as much as I can. I cannot love You as You deserve to be loved, for I cannot love You more than my own feebleness permits.”



Of Love Toward God Not Without Reward: And How the Hunger of Man's Heart Cannot Be Satisfied with Earthly Things

“Do we not see people every day, endowed with vast estates, who keep on joining field to field, dreaming of wider boundaries for their lands ? Those who dwell in palaces are ever adding house to house, continually building up and tearing down, remodeling and changing.

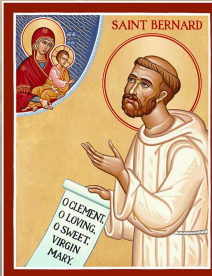
Men in high places are driven by insatiable ambition to clutch at still greater prizes. And nowhere is there any final satisfaction, because nothing there can be defined as absolutely the best or highest. But it is natural that nothing should content a man's desires but the very best, as he reckons it.



Of Love Toward God Not Without Reward: And How the Hunger of Man's Heart Cannot Be Satisfied with Earthly Things

Is it not, then, mad folly always to be craving for things which can never quiet our longings, much less satisfy them? No matter how many such things one has, he is always lusting after what he has not; never at peace, he sighs for new possessions. Discontented, he spends himself in fruitless toil, and finds only weariness in the evanescent and unreal pleasures of the world. In his greediness, he counts all that he has clutched as nothing in comparison with what is beyond his grasp, and loses all pleasure in his actual possessions by longing after what he has not, yet covets.”

... “they delight in creatures, not in the Creator . ”



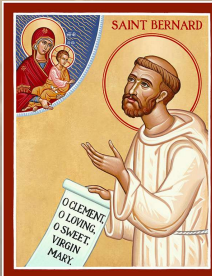
Of Love Toward God Not Without Reward: And How the Hunger of Man's Heart Cannot Be Satisfied with Earthly Things

In sum:

“Rest is in Him alone.

Man knows no peace in the world; but he has no disturbance when he is with God.”

“We should have no profit in possessing a rational mind if we were to follow the impulse of the senses, like brute beasts, with no regard at all to reason .” – the value of Reason

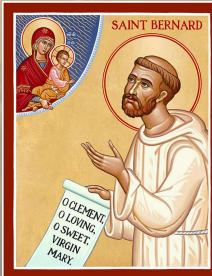


Of Love Toward God Not Without Reward: And How the Hunger of Man's Heart Cannot Be Satisfied with Earthly Things

“Righteousness is the natural and essential food of the soul, which can no more be satisfied by earthly treasures than the hunger of the body can be satisfied by air .”

It is no less foolish to imagine that the soul can be satisfied with worldly things which only inflate it without feeding it.

He bestows bounty immeasurable; He provokes You to good. He preserves You in goodness; He prevents. He sustains. He fills You. He moves You to longing, and it is He for whom You long.”

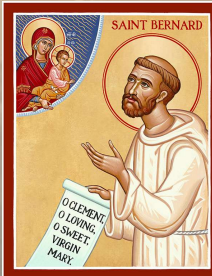


Of the First Degree of Love: Wherein Man Loves God For Self's Sake

“That is a temperate and righteous love which practices self-denial in order to minister to a brother's necessity. So our selfish love grows truly social, when it includes our neighbors in its circle.”

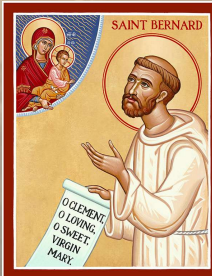
“It is surely justice to share our natural gifts with those who share our nature. ”

- Steps to draw us out of ourself and self-focus
- Self-denial is not an end in itself



Of the First Degree of Love: Wherein Man Loves God For Self's Sake

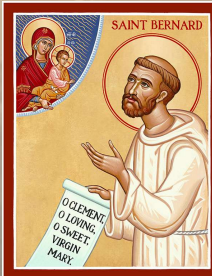
“That we might not be ignorant of this, or vainly attribute to ourselves the beneficence of our Creator, God has determined in the depths of His wise counsel that we should be subject to tribulations. So when man's strength fails and God comes to his aid, it is meet and right that man, rescued by God's hand, should glorify Him. ”



Of the Second and Third Degrees of Love

“So then in the beginning man loves God, not for God's sake, but for his own. It is something for him to know how little he can do by himself and how much by God's help, and in that knowledge to order himself rightly towards God, his sure support. (First Degree)

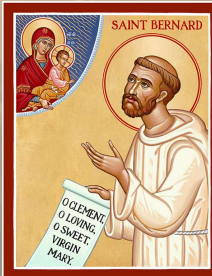
'No longer do we love God because of our necessity, but because we have tasted and seen how gracious the Lord is'. Our temporal wants have a speech of their own, proclaiming the benefits they have received from God's favor. ” (Second Degree)



Of the Second and Third Degrees of Love

“Whosoever praises God for His essential goodness, and not merely because of the benefits He has bestowed, does really love God for God's sake, and not selfishly.

The third degree of love, we have now seen, is to love God on His own account, solely because He is God.”

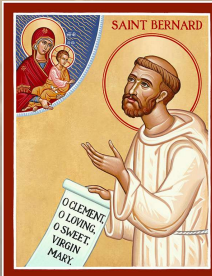


Of the Fourth Degree of Love: Wherein Man Does Not Even Love Self Save for God's Sake

“How blessed is he who reaches the fourth degree of love, wherein one loves himself only in God!

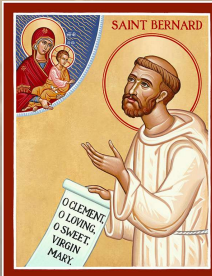
When shall my soul, rapt with divine love and altogether self- forgetting, yea, become like a broken vessel, yearn wholly for God, and, joined unto the Lord, be one spirit with Him ?

I would count him blessed and holy to whom such rapture has been vouchsafed in this mortal life, for even an instant to lose thyself, as if You were emptied and lost and swallowed up in God, is no human love; it is celestial.”



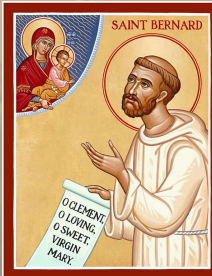
Of the Fourth Degree of Love: Wherein Man Does Not Even Love Self Save for God's Sake

“In Him should all our affections center, so that in all things we should seek only to do His will, not to please ourselves. And real happiness will come, not in gratifying our desires or in gaining transient pleasures, but in accomplishing God's will for us: even as we pray every day: 'Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven' (Matt. 6.10). O chaste and holy love! O sweet and gracious affection! O pure and cleansed purpose, thoroughly washed and purged from any admixture of selfishness, and sweetened by contact with the divine will!



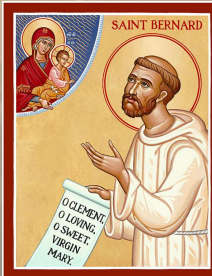
Of the Fourth Degree of Love: Wherein Man Does Not Even Love Self Save for God's Sake

...To reach this state is to become godlike. As a drop of water poured into wine loses itself, and takes the color and savor of wine; or as a bar of iron, heated red-hot, becomes like fire itself, forgetting its own nature; or as the air, radiant with sun-beams, seems not so much to be illuminated as to be light itself; so in the saints all human affections melt away by some unspeakable transmutation into the will of God.”



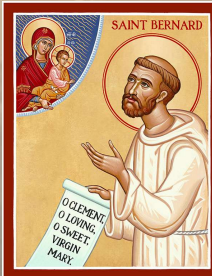
Of the Attainment of This Perfection of Love Only at the Resurrection

“What of the souls already released from their bodies? We believe that they are overwhelmed in that vast sea of eternal light and of luminous eternity. But no one denies that they still hope and desire to receive their bodies again: whence it is plain that they are not yet wholly transformed, and that something of self remains yet un-surrendered.



Of the Attainment of This Perfection of Love Only at the Resurrection

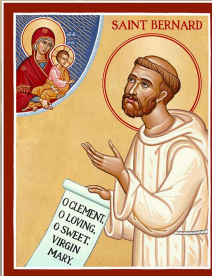
Not until death is swallowed up in victory, and perennial light overflows the uttermost bounds of darkness, not until celestial glory clothes our bodies, can our souls be freed entirely from self and give themselves up to God . For until then souls are bound to bodies, if not by a vital connection of sense, still by natural affection; so that without their bodies they cannot attain to their perfect consummation.



Of the Attainment of This Perfection of Love Only at the Resurrection

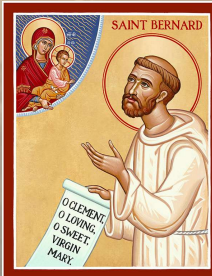
“The body is a help to the soul that loves God, even when it is ill, even when it is dead, and all the more when it is raised again from the dead: for illness is an aid to penitence; death is the gate of rest; and the resurrection will bring consummation. So, rightly, the soul would not be perfected without the body, since she recognizes that in every condition it has been needful to her good.

The flesh then is a good and faithful comrade for a good soul.”



Of the Attainment of This Perfection of Love Only at the Resurrection

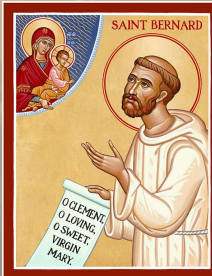
“Here indeed is appeasement without weariness: here never- quenched thirst for knowledge, without distress; here eternal and infinite desire which knows no want; here, finally, is that sober inebriation which comes not from drinking new wine but from enjoying God (Acts 2:13).”



Of Love: Out of A Letter to the Carthusians (a reference to a previous writing-expansion on love)

“Neither fear nor self-interest can convert the soul . They may change the appearance, perhaps even the conduct, but never the object of supreme desire.

...Neither fear nor self-interest is undefiled, nor can they convert the soul. Only charity can convert the soul freeing it from unworthy motives.”

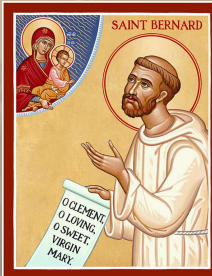


Of Love: Out of A Letter to the Carthusians

“Charity, the law of the Lord, joins the Three Persons into the unity of the Godhead and unites the holy Trinity in the bond of peace.

Do not suppose me to imply that charity exists as an accidental quality of Deity; for whatever could be conceived of as wanting in the divine Nature is not God. No, it is the very substance of the Godhead; and my assertion is neither novel nor extraordinary, since St John says, 'God is love' (I John 4.8).

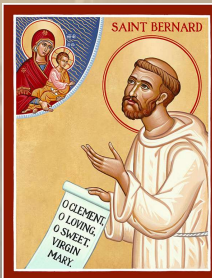
One may therefore say with truth that love is at once God and the gift of God, essential love imparting the quality of love.”



Of Love: Out of A Letter to the Carthusians

“The eternal law of righteousness ordains that he who will not submit to God's sweet rule shall suffer the bitter tyranny of self: but he who wears the easy yoke and light burden of love (Matthew 11:30) Will escape the intolerable weight of his own self-will .

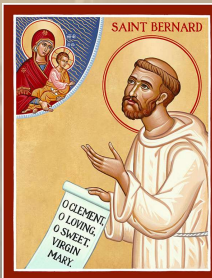
Then freed from the weight of my own will, I can breathe easily under the light burden of love.”



Of the Four Degrees of Love, and of the Blessed State of the Heavenly Fatherland

“At first, man loves himself for his own sake. That is the flesh, which can appreciate nothing beyond itself.

Next, he perceives that he cannot exist by himself, and so begins by faith to seek after God, and to love Him as something necessary to his own welfare. That is the second degree, to love God, not for God's sake, but selfishly.

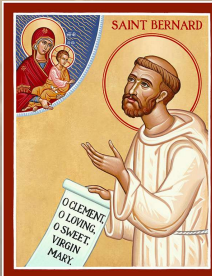


Of the Four Degrees of Love, and of the Blessed State of the Heavenly Fatherland

But when he has learned to worship God and to seek Him aright, meditating on God, reading God's Word, praying and obeying His commandments, he comes gradually to know what God is, and finds Him altogether lovely. So, having tasted and seen how gracious the Lord is (Psalm 34:8), he advances to the third degree, when he loves God, not merely as his benefactor but as God.

Surely he must remain long in this state; and I know not whether it would be possible to make further progress in this life to that fourth degree and perfect condition wherein man loves himself solely for God's sake.

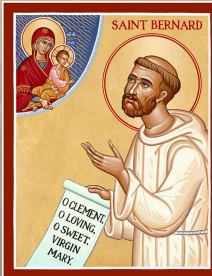
Joined unto the Lord, he will then be one spirit with Him (I Cor. 6.17).”



Of the Four Degrees of Love, and of the Blessed State of the Heavenly Fatherland

“But in the heavenly Fatherland no sorrow nor sadness can enter: as it is written, The habitation of all rejoicing ones is in You' (Psalm 87:7, Vulgate); and again, 'Everlasting joy shall be unto them' (Isaiah 61:7).

Accordingly, there will be no need for the exercise of compassion, for no misery will be there to inspire pity.”



In Sum:

Come to know God. Be united with God's will, that we might get "lost in God," as a lover gets lost in the beloved.

Know that God is seeking us as we seek God! Even the desire for God is from God!

