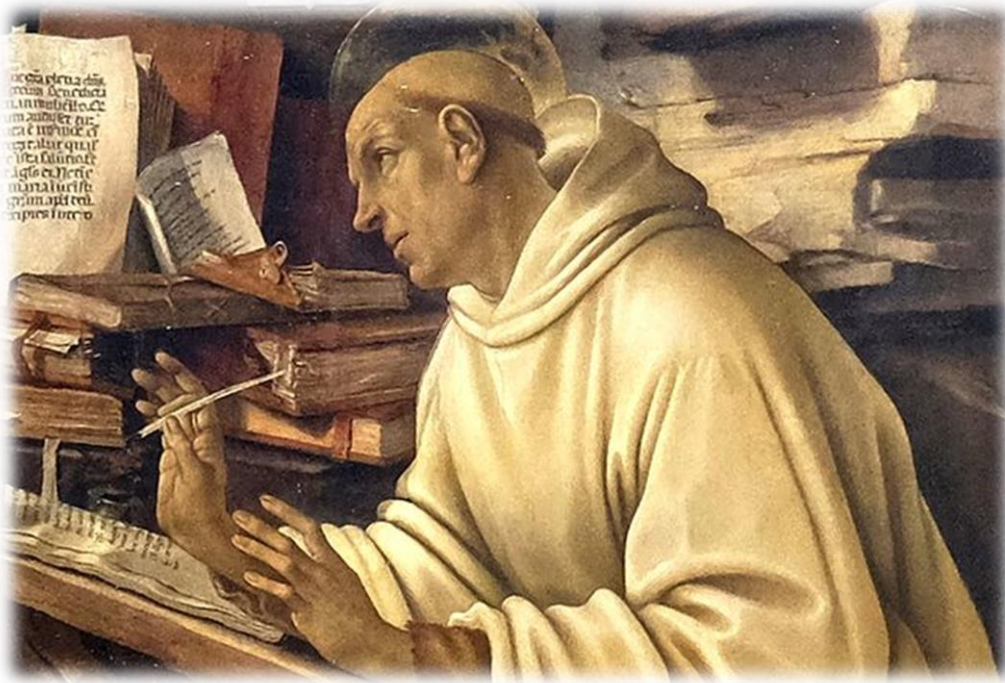




“The measure of love is love without measure.”

St. Bernard’s Three Tips to Get Wisdom

Fr. Michael Rennie/aleteia.org

Wisdom is not the same as intelligence. The mistake I made was in thinking that, if I could become educated, all my questions would disappear and I would be wise, content, and happy. That’s not how it worked, though. I only ended up with more questions.

This is because I was misunderstanding the source of wisdom entirely. Pope Benedict XVI, in commenting on St. Bernard of Clairvaux’s teaching about wisdom, explains:

“Bernard reminds us that without a profound faith in God, nourished by prayer and contemplation, by an intimate relationship with the Lord, our reflections on the divine mysteries risk becoming an empty intellectual exercise and losing their credibility ...Together with Bernard of Clairvaux, we too must recognize that humans seek God better and find him more easily in prayer than in discussion.”

In other words, wisdom is found, most of all, in knowledge whose source is love, particularly the love of God.

St. Bernard, whose feast day is this week, explains in a homily three ways to become wise.

1 Give thanks and praise

“The man who is wise,” he says, “will see his life as more like a reservoir than a canal.” A canal finds its purpose in dispensing water, and a reservoir in receiving it. Too often, says St. Bernard, we pour out our gifts before we’re ready. We haven’t yet been filled up with love. We haven’t yet learned to approach life with thanks and praise.

Wisdom is all around us. The birds of the field speak of God’s glory, the rocks cry out to him, and the cosmos reflects his truth. We can discover wisdom in a child who appreciates

a dandelion, or the calm patience of an elderly relative, or the quiet love shared between spouses of many years. A wise person doesn't need to get into exotic philosophies, obtain advanced education degrees, or learn Latin.

Rather, a wise person is someone who sees God reflected everywhere, in all his works. In apprehending the glory in the small things, in giving thanks and praise, a person uncovers the true value of all created things and allows grace to flow through them and fill him up. This is wisdom.

The world is like a field, says St. Bernard, "Let us work in it and dig up wisdom." Look not just in books but through an eye attuned to praise, and "if you are looking for it, really look."

It seems to me that we're here to dig. Who knows what treasure we may unearth?

2 Go to confession

The advice to go to confession in order to gain wisdom is actually advice I regularly give to my parishioners whenever they ask me how to make a big decision. At first, the advice doesn't seem to make any sense. What does confession have to do with making a wise decision?

The reason becomes clear once we recall that sin is irrational and disordered. Cleansing our souls of sin through sacramental confession actually restores us to rationality. It allows us to see more clearly.

To be wise, says St. Bernard, we must be converted from our past ways. Conversion is a turning around and looking a new direction. When we go to confession, we are turning from sin and towards God, the source of wisdom. We are converted from our own willfulness, no longer looking to the self as the source of wisdom but, rather, looking to God. Wisdom is not based in our own resources, opinions, and preferences. We must go out from ourselves.

3 Be prudent in desire and speech

A wise person encourages others by searching out their best qualities. Generosity of speech reflects inner prudence. Wisdom, like humility, is a paradox. Those who imprudently desire it don't have it. Those who speak openly and brag about being wise probably aren't. Wise people are always quiet and unassuming because they know that, if they are wise at all, other people are also wise. A wise person watches others and observes their wisdom. A wise person doesn't offer unsolicited advice but, rather, gleans wisdom from those around them.

Those who are obsessed with becoming wise rarely become wise. This is because, as St. Bernard teaches, wisdom includes prudence. A wise person is well-balanced, appreciative of wisdom but also willing to admit with humility that none of us is ever perfectly wise. We cannot become wise without making mistakes and learning from them. We cannot be so desirous of wisdom that we won't admit to our flaws.

St. Bernard compares wisdom to honey, saying, "Do not eat so much that you become too full and bring it all up." Eat the right amount, he says, and know that a wise person is always hungry, always looking, learning from others and most of all, asking God for help.

Wisdom isn't about the glory of being considered wise. That's not the point. If you want to know who is wise, look for the person who is quietly encouraging and positive. If you yourself want to be wise, search out wisdom in others and acknowledge it.

Start with prayer and love

In the end, St. Bernard's teaching about wisdom comes down to one factor - love. Wisdom is connected to love of God and love of neighbor. Love always returns to the source, what he calls the "fountainhead." We are replenished directly from the source and from the source we learn truth, prudence, and all manner of virtue.

"Of all the movements, sensations and feelings of the soul, love is the only one in which the creature can respond to the Creator," he says. Even imperfect love begins to create union with God. So if we would be wise, don't start with an academic book. Start with prayer and love.

FAQ: St. Bernard of Clairvaux

Q: When is St. Bernard's feast day?

A: His feast day is August 20th.

Q: Who was St. Bernard of Clairvaux?

A: St. Bernard was a 12th-century Cistercian monk, mystic, theologian, and powerful preacher who helped reform the Church, deepen Marian devotion, and inspire spiritual renewal across Europe.

Q: What is St. Bernard known for?

A: He's known for founding the Abbey of Clairvaux, preaching the Second Crusade, promoting devotion to Mary, and writing beautifully about the love of God. He also helped heal Church divisions and guided popes and kings.

Q: Why is St. Bernard important today?

A: St. Bernard reminds us that love for Jesus must be the root of both action and contemplation. His life teaches us to combine deep prayer with bold leadership -and to trust in Mary as our intercessor.

Want to Imitate St. Bernard?

- ❖ Pray the **Memorare** when you need Mary's help
- ❖ **Read Scripture** slowly and prayerfully—especially the Song of Songs
- ❖ **Make time for silence and deep prayer**, even in a busy life