

THE POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY OF
SAINT BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX

IT were well that at the outset we should define the sense in which we understand the word Politics. No word has been more cruelly abused, with the result that its true sense has been disastrously obscured to the grave detriment of the people and of their rulers.

Perhaps our minds fly off at a tangent to the Tapers, Tadpoles, Rigbys and the like, so relentlessly and yet so faithfully portrayed in *Coningsby* by Disraeli; or to some Political Society the sole purpose of which appears to be to provide a licensed cockpit for the envenomed recrimination of rival partizans. We need to disillusion ourselves; this sort of thing is not true Politics; like all false notions it is more dangerous than ignorance.

In the days when Politics came into being the *politike episteme* was the Science of Citizenship and the *politike techne* was the Art of Citizenship, that is to say, the theory and the practice of a member of a *polis*, whether ruled or ruler (*cf.* Plato, *Gorg.* 521 D). The duty concerned was primarily social as distinct from individual; not that the individual was dispensed from all responsibility, but that his responsibility as a citizen was determined by his membership of the *polis* (*cf.* Plato, *Gorg.* loc. cit., *Apol.* 31 D; Arist. *Eth. Nic.* VI, viii. 2). All this worked, as it were, within a microcosm. Outside the Greek world there were no *cities*, only the *barbaros ge*, a variegated waste the contagion of which threatened—especially from the direction of Asia—the purity of Hellenic art and culture and the honest simplicity of Hellenic thought. Nor were the Greek cities, according perhaps to the highest political ideal, encouraged to mutual intercourse—on the contrary the aim of each city was to be *autarkes*, self-sufficient, to legislate for itself and to live to itself (*cf.* Arist. *Eth. Nic.* I, vii, 5). However academic this outlook may have been, and however it may have suffered modification from the conviction, promoted by the historian Herodotus, that the Egyptians were ‘the wisest of men,’ it never lost its verve in the Classical world and is traceable in the *Golden Book* of Marcus Aurelius; fundamentally it has never ceased to be a valuable asset to Political Theory and Practice by its seriousness and its probity. Greek colonisation, it should be said, bore its unmistakable impress. *Magna Graccia* was not a district, a *ge*, but a collection of cities,

the foundation of each city effected, not by private enterprise—as by some East India Company or Hudson's Bay Company—but by the *metropolis* itself, which appointed its leader or *oikistes*, but of which it was politically independent. Such principles as these constituted an historical deposit which, as the centuries passed, never wholly lost its dynamic urge. What bearing has the consideration of them upon the Political Philosophy of St. Bernard? There belonged to them an exclusiveness, a proud contempt of external claims, a smug self-satisfaction, a cold distrust of strangers which was the very negation of charity. *Hospes hostis!* Alien race spelt foemanship. How could he have subscribed to such a doctrine? And he did not do so. But *de facto* he belonged to his generation, although he was not either *de facto* or *de jure* the product of his generation. The old Greek notion of Politics was still alive in his days. He had, we are disposed to believe, learnt something about it during the period of his education at Châtillon-sur-Seine. His reading in Classical literature had probably revealed to him more of the doctrine of Plato and of Aristotle than is commonly supposed. The communal spirit which, in opposition to feudalism, was at the time reviving itself in the cities of Northern Italy and elsewhere, was undoubtedly energised by the historical dynamic urge to which we have referred, an urge which did not find its conscious origin in the Greek city of antiquity, but rather stimulated a herd-instinct in the blood of men whose forbears for centuries had lived as privileged citizens of Rome or Genoa or Pisa. A great personality of the day would have been what he was by reason both of his independence of such an urge and such an instinct and also—and no less—of his sensitive and alert recognition of their existence and of their meaning. This was St. Bernard.

But a factor much more potent went to the making of his Political Philosophy. It is true that his Classical education and certain sentiments of his generation, emerging as we have seen in various transalpine cities the welfare of which interested him deeply—played their part in determining his political mentality, but for the most part the process was subconscious and the deposit was subconscious; he was scarcely aware of himself as a forerunner of the Humanists who came to birth after the Fall of Constantinople. Deeply embedded in his personality as the primary factor of social life lay the reasoned and deliberate conviction that there was only one *polis*, the *Civitas Dei*, represented, in the present world of things seen and heard and felt, by the Catholic Church. To this *Civitas Dei*, its constitution, its methods and its aims no earthly city can with impunity fail to conform itself in its policy. Any-

thing less than such conformity would mean—as he recognised in the history of God's people under the Old Covenant—disaster both material and moral. What was the mission of God's people under the New Covenant, the Catholic Church—if not to found cities essentially on the model of the City of God? An inspiration and a working example—instances of which were multiplying daily—was the great Order of St. Benedict, the existence of which did not, of course, imply that every Christian was called to be a religious, but that no Christian could consistently live outside a community which was not ruled as were the Children of God.

St. Bernard at the end of his life, at various dates between 1149 and 1153, enriched in judgement by his intimate mystical experience and his long years of statecraft, wrote for his beloved son in religion, Eugenius III, a great treatise entitled *Of Consideration*. It is an invaluable hand-book to Political Philosophy. The Pope had been placed in charge of the *Civitas Dei*; his training for such a position had been ten years, from 1135 to 1145, spent in the cloister. It is quite unnecessary to emphasise the fact that a man must be a statesman in order to occupy at all profitably the Chair of Peter. The *De Consideratione* is a treatise in V Books, throughout which there runs a rich vein of mysticism; but it is only in the last Book that we find ourselves in the upper ether, the earlier Books are concerned rather with moral theology in its bearing upon the Ecclesiastical Polity. In a Sermon on the Song of Songs St. Bernard remarks that the Church is ruled as are the Angels, that *as is the Heavenly, so are they that are Heavenly* (S. Bern., *In Cant. Cant.* XXVII, 7); thus implying that God Himself is the one and only ruler of all created life. Eugenius finds himself as Pope in a world of almost feverish activity, very different from the tranquil cloistral life of the past years. He will need leisure, leisure for consideration of truth, above all for the consideration of the fundamental truth of the Being of God: *Be tranquil, and consider that I am God*. With consideration he will be able to govern his emotions, to restrain his extravagance, to direct his dealings, to dignify his behaviour, because consideration will bring to him knowledge of things human and Divine. But his consideration must, as its first profitable step, be concerned with himself as he is in comparison with God. With himself subjected to self-scrutiny in the light of Eternal Verity he will be protected from wandering from his true home, he will be kept safely in his fatherland.

It would be beyond our scope to illustrate St. Bernard's sagacious advice as to the handling of the various typical problems which came for solution to the Apostolic Bar; he knew his Rome, he

knew the *Curia* and he knew the people of the City. However, we may say that he gives wings to his words by his emphatic estimate of the unique dignity of the office which Eugenius occupies. He is 'in authority Moses, in judgement Samuel, in power Peter, in unction Christ' (S. Bern., *De Consider.* II, viii, 15).

We find then set forth explicitly in this treatise the fundamental principles of St. Bernard's Political Philosophy as it applied to the Church. But it is quite clear that these principles were so fundamental that they applied equally to all lesser cities than the City of God. What else was the Church intended to be if not the Divine norm of citizenship? There might be, and there were, other cities in which men were called to play in their degree the part of Moses, of Samuel, of Peter, above all of Christ. Let them see to it, at their peril and at the peril of their cities, that they responded to their vocation.

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MONASTIC ECONOMICS

It would be too much to claim that legislators would find in the monastic codes and histories of the early centuries adequate guidance for their post-war planning. Yet no student of early monachism can fail to admire the practical economic value of much of the history and teaching which make his sources.

The Egyptian monks, both hermits and cenobites, though often supported by alms, probably came as near as the monks of any time or place to adequately self-supporting manual labour. When Palladius visited Nitria, he found that no one was allowed to be idle (not even a guest, as perhaps he learnt from personal experience), and no one was in need. Yet the monks' liturgical duties were held in high esteem, and those who were qualified had opportunity for intellectual culture. Self-support was not direct, for Nitria thrived upon the weaving industry.

The same author describes in much greater detail an inspection which he made of the working departments in one of the Pachomian monasteries. After enumerating smiths, carpenters, camel-drivers and fullers, he says that every craft was practised, so that the monks