

7 *The Individual and his Religion*

My secret is mine; my secret is mine

BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX, quoting from Vulgate

Throughout its history, the Church has seen itself as living between two fixed points: between God's saving act in Christ, and the completion of that salvation at the end of the world. The interpretation given to these events, whether past or future, has always had a corporate and an individual aspect; they have been thought of as significant for each believer, but also for the Church and the world as a whole. It would be naïve to divide the history of the Church into two ages, that of the "corporate" and that of the "individual". Yet it is true that if we turn to the writings of the Fathers we are usually struck by the objective social content given to the Cross and the Last Day. Much more than in the theology with which we are familiar the weight fell upon the assertion that God's action has changed, or will change, the status of humanity; while its importance for each believer, although not ignored, was usually given a subsidiary place. A marked change in this interpretation can be discerned with the emergence, during the period 1050-1200, of medieval or scholastic theology.

THE PASSION

With regard to the first of these two points of reference, the passion, the stress during the first thousand years fell upon the victory which God had won in the cross, a victory which overcame the devil's hold upon men, opened all mankind to the action of God's grace, and established Christ's lordship over the world:

Death and life have contended

In that combat stupendous:

The Prince of Life, who died, reigns immortal.¹

A later age thought more readily of other things: the nature of Christ's sufferings, the love which he showed in them, and the pains he endured for the sinner's redemption. While one could not say that such thoughts were wholly foreign to the early Church, they played little part in comparison with the vision of the cross as a divine victory. Even during the Carolingian period, when there was a tendency in some writers to insist on the details of the sufferings which the Lord endured,² the element of objective thanksgiving remained predominant. The movement towards a more inward and compassionate devotion, in which the individual strove imaginatively to share in the pain of his Lord, became really strong in the eleventh century, and in the twelfth it governed much of the thought about the passion.

An early and important manifestation of the new spirit was a change in the form of the crucifix. Instead of the former figure of the living Christ, sometimes radiant with vitality, we find Christ dead on the cross. The first surviving example is probably the great wooden cross made for Archbishop Gero of Cologne (969-76), which is a moving study of majesty in death.* The head is slumped on the right shoulder, the eyes closed, the face twisted, the jaw hanging open. Between 1000 and 1200 artists working within this tradition strove to combine in their sculpture the agony and the majesty of Christ. The fact of death was clearly shown, and the attitudes of the watchers, Mary and John, became much more expressive of personal grief. On the other hand, the wounds of Christ did not receive anything like the exaggerated treatment which became usual later in the Middle Ages, the crown of thorns was rarely shown, and a kingly crown often appeared on Christ's head. The best works combined the glory and the suffering into a moving portrait of the dying King of Love. A fine example of this treatment is the crucifix on the casket of the Three Kings made by Nicholas of Verdun for Cologne about 1200.†

The change in the appearance of the crucifix corresponded with a growing devotional emphasis on the pains of Christ, which can be observed in the eleventh century, especially among the monastic reformers, whose contribution to the growth of a more inward,

* Plate 6.

† Plate 8.

and less formal, spirit we have already noticed. One way of illustrating this change is to compare a Carolingian work and a twelfth-century one: the *Short Treatise on the Passion of the Lord*³ by Candidus Bruno (c. 825) and the meditation on the passion in the *Rule for Contemplatives (de Institutione Inclusarum)* by Aelred of Rievaulx⁴ (c. 1150). With an interval of three centuries, we should expect large differences; but the purpose of the two meditations is broadly similar, and it is instructive to see in what ways the new spirituality has diverged from the old. The structure of the works is alike in that each follows step by step the events of the passion, or, in Aelred's case, of Christ's life as a whole. We are at once struck by the much more practised air of Aelred's treatment; whereas Candidus moves jerkily from text to text, the meditation of Aelred flows with an ease which indicates, not only literary excellence, but long experience of a flexible mode of meditation. The substance, too, is different. The ninth-century author does not dwell at length on the sufferings of Christ, but is interested rather in interpreting the story symbolically. Some of his comments are bound to appear to us, in the context of a crucifixion, strangely cold-blooded: "The crown of thorns placed on the head of Christ can also signify the sin of idolatry, by which the peoples ignorant of his true divinity imposed the divine name on various figments of idols."⁵ It is consonant with this treatment that Candidus shows distinct reservations about the humanity of Christ: "The Lord, being made man, allowed into himself human affections when he willed, and used them as he willed. He said he was thirsty, and he said true: therefore he thirsted when he willed, and as much as he willed."⁶ Aelred's spirit is very different. We find a new stress on compassionate participation in the Lord's passion. The only visual aid which Aelred would allow for use on an altar was "an image of the Saviour hanging on the cross, which will represent to you his passion, which you are imitating".⁷ The importance of the individual's suffering with Christ is now paramount: "I know that pity now fills your heart, anguish inflames your inward parts. Allow him to suffer, I beg, for he suffers for you." There are no reservations about the humanity of Jesus—on the contrary, it was the divinity which was veiled: "Why so, my God? So filled with compassion for me you show

yourself a man, and almost seem to be unaware that you are God.”⁸

This deep personal bond with the crucified Saviour was characteristic of *Aelred*. On his death-bed, when no longer able to speak, he still wept at the Lord's suffering, and smiled at his love, as the passion story was read to him, and he recovered his voice to make a last act of hope while his friend Walter Daniel held a crucifix before his eyes.⁹ In all this he was at one with his generation, and we can observe the growth of a variety of practices which reflect devotion to the crucified Jesus and a more intimate sense of personal commitment. The elevation of the host, which first appeared in the Mass in the early twelfth century, was interpreted as a reminder of the crucified humanity, and probably derived its popular appeal from that. The Crusades owed much of their support to this spirit—Bernard of Clairvaux' treatise *In Praise of the New Militia* was at once a handbook of crusading theory and a meditation on the holy places where Jesus lived and died. A new position of prayer was widely adopted, which subsequently became conventional; kneeling with the hands together. It was the position of homage, and its use expressed the personal loyalty which the believer felt for his Lord. Its general popularity was the work of the Franciscans, but it is highly probable that this rather startling transformation of a feudal ceremony into a devotional attitude had already taken place in the twelfth century.

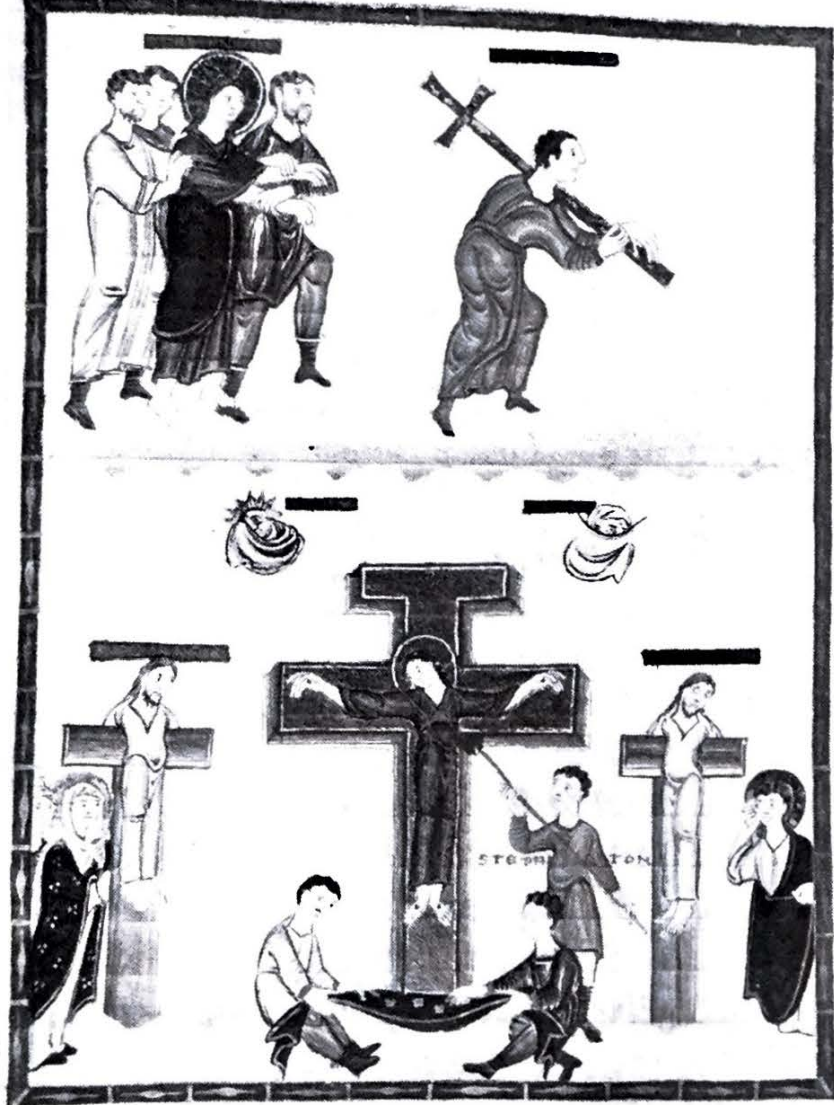
An extreme representative of this tendency towards personal and individual commitment was Peter Abelard, who adopted this attitude so radically that he produced hymns that might have been written in 1400, and an atonement theory much admired by the liberals of 1900. The language of passion hymns generally remained traditional until the thirteenth century. The main occasion for such hymns was not, as we should expect, Lent and Good Friday, but Holy Cross day. There was something of a change in style in the twelfth century, the imagery becoming more complex, but they retained the objective and triumphant tone of the hymns from Carolingian and earlier days. To this there is a striking exception in the hymn-book composed by Abelard, some time between 1128 and 1140, for the convent of the Holy Paraclete, where Heloïse was abbess. When we open its pages, a new and strident note strikes us like a blow in the face.¹⁰



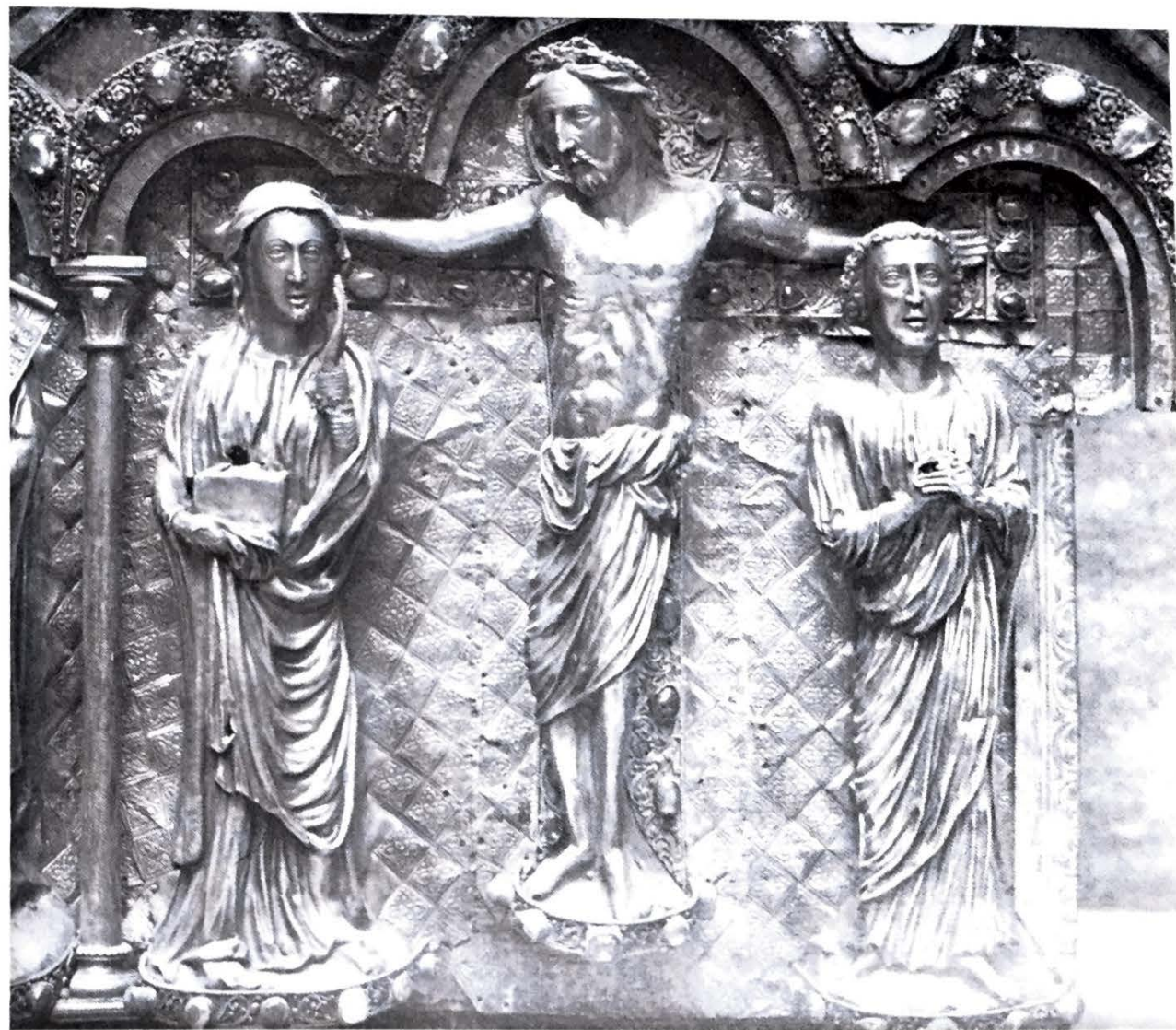
5. Crucifixion from façade of abbey of Saint-Mesme
Tenth century, Museum at Chinon



6. Gero Cross, Late tenth century
Cologne Cathedral



7. Crucifixion Scene from Codex Egberti
Late tenth century. Trier



8. Crucifixion, Three Kings Casket
About 1200. Cologne

For they are ours, O Lord, our deeds, our deeds;	<i>Nostra sunt, Domine, nostra sunt crimina:</i>
Why must thou suffer torture for our sin?	<i>quid tua criminum facis supplicia?</i>
Let our hearts suffer for thy passion, Lord,	<i>quibus sic compati fac nostra pectora,</i>
That sheer compassion may thy mercy win.	<i>ut vel compassio digna sit venia.</i>

The hymns provided for Good Friday and Holy Saturday were based on a new principle in hymnography, each resting in turn on one of the events of the passion, and each ending with the same verse:

So make us have compassion on thee, Lord,	<i>Tu tibi compati sic fac nos, Domine,</i>
That we may sharers of thy glory be:	<i>tuae participes ut simus gloriae;</i>
Heavy with weeping may the three days pass,	<i>sic praesens triduum in luctu ducere,</i>
To win the laughter of thine Easter Day.	<i>ut risum tribuas paschalis gratiae.</i>

The stress on compassion here is enormous. It becomes almost the central point of the passion, as if man was justified by compassion, by pity for suffering humanity.

The full force of this is apparent when we turn to Abelard's atonement doctrine. Abelard was not alone in being uneasy about traditional ideas of the atonement. Like him Anselm had impatiently rejected the view that the devil had rights over man, which were abolished through Christ's victory. Anselm, however, had constructed an "objective" theory of another kind. He accepted that in Christ God had altered the relationship between himself and mankind, quite apart from whether a given individual entered into that new relationship. Although his account of God's act differed greatly from that of previous thinkers, he was at one with them in this important respect. Abelard's theory, however, was a wholly "subjective" one. The cross had no meaning for him apart from the individual's response to it in love and compassion. In this he went so much further than his contemporaries that some scholars have argued that his subjectivity was not

absolute, and indeed one must admit that some traditional language does linger in his writings and that his fullest discussion of the atonement unfortunately does not survive. Yet it is difficult to evade the force of such a passage as the following:

It seems to us that *this* is the way in which we have been justified in the blood of Christ, and reconciled to God: that by this singular favour shown to us (that his Son took our nature, and persevered until death, providing us with both teaching and example) he bound us more fully to himself by love . . . And so our redemption is that great love awoken in us by the passion of Christ, which not only frees us from the slavery of sin, but acquires for us the true liberty of the sons of God, that we may fulfil all things more by love of him than by fear.¹¹

The same note was struck by a pupil of Abelard in a pregnant phrase: "those who live in him—that is, imitate his life".¹² Individualism could hardly go much further. The first passage reduces the traditional language about ransom and sacrifice to the believer's gratitude for the love of God shown in the cross. The second applies the same treatment to the concept of "life in Christ", which is glossed as meaning, not the totality of the sacramental life of the Church, but the believer's imitation of the Master. In all this the school of Abelard was not wholly out of touch with contemporaries—rather, they took contemporary individualism to an extreme, and thus anticipated similarly radical movements in the modern world.

ESCHATOLOGY

The salvation which had been offered, or achieved, in the death and resurrection of Christ still awaited its fulfilment. The expectation of the final end (or eschatology) in the Western Church was substantially that formulated by Saint Augustine. God had appointed an end to the course of human history, when the dead would be raised, to receive their final reward. The Last Day was to be the culmination for humanity as a whole and therefore also for the individuals who composed it. No clear view had been formulated about the departed saints, but it was usually supposed

that they were "asleep with Christ", awaiting their reward in the resurrection of their bodies. The general resurrection at the Last Day was therefore the hope of humanity in general and of each man in particular. It was accepted that the end would be preceded by a time of troubles, and by the coming of Antichrist, but that the date of this was not known. As one would expect, writers such as Odo of Cluny and Walter of Châtillon, who saw their own age as a time of troubles, were disposed to expect Antichrist's arrival in their lifetimes. Others uttered warnings against prophecies which would alarm the masses without foundation, and one must remember that, as at all times in the Church's history, the use of eschatological language might be intended, not as a prediction, but as a call to action—when Saint Bernard described in turn the anti-pope Anacletus, and Peter Abelard, as Antichrist, he was demanding that the Church should decide against them, and probably did not mean that the end of the world had arrived.

Like so many accepted opinions the traditional eschatology was challenged and transformed during our period. It was under pressure from two directions: from millenarian expectations, and from what we may call "spiritualism". Millenarianism does not directly concern our subject, but it is necessary to mention it briefly as a background to what was happening. Its essential characteristic was the expectation of a golden age upon earth, in which the saints would "come to life again, and reign with Christ a thousand years" (Rev. 20.4). It came in many shades, but in two principal colours. A conservative version was the belief that, before the coming of Antichrist, there would be a reign of peace in which the last Emperor would govern the whole earth. This idea had entered the West in the mid-tenth century, in the writings of Abbot Adso of Montier, and the French and German monarchies both showed themselves alive to the political advantages of encouraging the legend. It was conservative in the sense that it looked for no transformation of the existing order, but rather for its extension and completion. Other millenarian movements, however, were much more revolutionary. Preachers and agitators looked for the reign of the righteous poor, emphasizing the "righteous" or the "poor" according to whether their main interest was the transformation of the Church, or the overthrow

of the social order. Such expectations were found among the poverty and preaching movements of northern France and in the popular Crusades, and they culminated in the thirteenth century in the views of the Spiritual Franciscans. Apart from one or two flirtations the official Church would have nothing to do with the more radical millenarian expectations, which always remained at, or beyond, the fringe of the Catholic body.

At the same time as it was being attacked from without, the traditional eschatology was being spiritualized from within by orthodox writers. It is not easy to give a cut-and-dried description of this process, for the existing doctrine was not being consciously modified; rather, it was being drained of much of its life, while the original vitality flowed into the relationship between God and the individual. Henri de Lubac has expressed what was happening in these words:

The collective eschatology and the expectation of the final resurrection, whose outline was once so clear, are fading away. Within a framework which is still in general that of the church, the attention of the faithful is fixed less on the destiny of the church than on the destiny of each believer.¹³

One sign of this process was the development of individual meditation, in the same way as men were learning to reflect personally on the passion. The "four Last Things", which later became so conventional and popular a formula, appears in the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard in the middle of the century. It was, of course, not supposed that the Last Judgement had no objective reality, but the weight was now being placed on the answer which the individual must make. Another development pointed in the same direction. The Fathers, as has already been mentioned, were content to be ambiguous about the status of the departed. Sometimes they spoke as if the saints know what happens on earth, and as if the rank and file of the faithful are undergoing preparation for their final perfection. At other times the emphasis lay on the sleep which the departed enjoyed with Christ: "Give them rest where the light of thy countenance visiteth." This ambiguity was now replaced by a full-blooded conviction that the saints are already receiving their reward, and the imperfect their purgation.

In this new scheme the decisive moment is the death of the individual. The final resurrection of the body was in no way denied, but its importance had become peripheral and remote—a startling development, when one considers that the resurrection was at first the characteristic message of Christianity. The “three-fold body” of the Church, a favourite formula with writers in our period, was modified in the course of the twelfth century, its third clause (the bodies in the tomb, awaiting resurrection) being replaced by a new one (the Church expectant in purgatory). The saints were now unambiguously proclaimed as “the souls which reign with Christ in heaven”.¹⁴ The significance of the change is apparent in the last chapter of Peter Damiani’s *Institutio Monialis*:

The spirit is lifted up to the things which are promised in the homeland, that the exile may take little account of the harshness of the way. . . Recollect therefore how happy he is who, when so great a multitude of the unworthy is rejected, deserves to enter the marriage feast, amid the shining ranks of the elect; what an honour it will be to stand always before the eyes of the Creator, to contemplate the form of Truth in His very presence; to see God face to face, to be among the angelic choirs.¹⁵

Earlier eschatology had kept a balance, or alternatively a tension, between an individual and a corporate expectation. The particular person might look forward to his own release, but he did not normally count upon the perfection of his happiness until the renewal of the creation and its final perfection in the general resurrection. Imaginatively, the whole strength of eschatology now became attached to the individual. The Last Judgement was not denied (to suggest that for the Middle Ages would be absurd), but attention was concentrated upon one’s personal answer and personal hope of heaven—if necessary, after a stay in purgatory. The world of Damiani is the world of *The Dream of Gerontius*. The uneasy combination of private and corporate hopes had now been resolved into the individual’s desire for heaven. True, as we have already seen, some writers of unquestioned orthodoxy were actively concerned about the end of the existing order. Walter of Châtillon expected the coming of Antichrist because of the corruption which was evident in the life of the Church,

and Otto of Freising saw in the progressive movement of learning from East to West the sign of the approaching end.* Most of those who entertained expectations of the collapse of the world order did so without any assumption that it would be succeeded by another, and better, society in this world; they were not, as a whole, millenarians. They therefore did not present a real contrast to the general tendency to individualize expectations of the future life. The interest of the Cistercians was concentrated on the encounter of God with the human soul, and the writings of William of Saint Thierry are not centred round any general eschatological expectation. These writers were working within a framework of traditional spirituality, but they developed the elements of individualism within it and made little use of other parts of the received teaching. Hildebert of Lavardin and Abelard had moved further from tradition. Although they would not for one moment have denied the idea of a Last Judgement, for them the heart of the matter lay in the deliverance of the believer from sorrow and sin—a view which tallied well with the intense individualism of Abelard's doctrine of the atonement.

A total assessment of the conception of the Last Things at this time would require a book in itself, and is not germane to our present purpose. The point made here is a more limited one: that in a number of circles the destiny of the individual was becoming the centre of attention, and the theme of the renewal of all things was slipping into a secondary place. This process is illustrated by the Jerusalem literature at this time. Jerusalem had always been a favourite Christian symbol, on which the twelfth century seized eagerly as a subject for meditation: "The frequent recollection of the city of Jerusalem and of its king is to us a sweet consolation, a pleasing occasion for meditation and a necessary lightening of our heavy burden."¹⁶ Contemporaries were able to find this theme in some of their favourite authors of the past, for Cassian had expounded it, and Augustine found in the desire for the heavenly Jerusalem the true motive for the Christian life: "If you wish to be armed against temptations in the world, let the desire for the eternal Jerusalem grow and flourish in your hearts."¹⁷

* See the perceptive remarks of E. Jeuneau, "Nains et Géants", *Entretiens sur la Renaissance du 12e siècle*, pp. 33-4.

In so far as the Jerusalem-devotion of the twelfth century has a single source, it may be found in this and similar passages of Augustine, but the way in which the idea was developed was substantially different from the approach of the early Church. The change may be illustrated by the use made of a passage of Cassian, in which he declared Jerusalem to be "historically speaking the city of the Jews, allegorically the church of Christ, anagogically that celestial city of God which is the mother of us all, tropologically the soul of man."¹⁸ Aelred of Rievaulx perhaps had this passage in mind, and did not depart significantly from it, when he said: "This is the Jerusalem which the Lord Jesus . . . is building out of living stones. . . . It is the holy church, it is each holy congregation, it is each holy soul."¹⁹ In Guibert of Nogent, who unquestionably is echoing Cassian, the symbol has suffered some small but significant changes:

Jerusalem, historically speaking, is a certain city; allegorically it signifies the holy Church; tropologically (that is, morally) the soul of each of the faithful who strives for the vision of eternal peace; anagogically, it signifies the life of the celestial citizens, who see the face of God revealed in Zion.²⁰

The technical meaning of these modes of interpreting the symbol does not concern us here, but the shifts of emphasis are of real interest. The historical sense has moved from "the city of the Jews" (probably with reference to the Old Testament) and is taken to refer to the existing city of Jerusalem; not for nothing was Guibert the author of a Crusading history. The tropological sense is the same, except that Guibert has added a gloss emphasizing that the soul strives for (*anhelat*) the vision of peace, an element found in Augustine and, as we have seen, strongly developed by the twelfth century. The anagogical sense is modified so as to stress that the saints already behold the face of God, an idea not expressed by Cassian and almost certainly not even implied by him. As rewritten by Guibert the definition of Cassian thus enters the age of Crusades, the age of personal longing and the age of individual eschatology, in which the devout soul may hope at death to enter the presence of God.]

A still clearer picture emerges from an examination of Jerusalem

hymns. For the period before 1050, hymns using the imagery of Jerusalem are rare. The finest of them, *Urbs Beata Jerusalem*, retains the biblical image of the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven. Originally it was probably a baptismal hymn, and its theme is the descent of the new Jerusalem, which is embodied in the new members who have become living stones through their baptism:

Blessed City, heavenly Salem,
Vision dear of peace and love,
Who, of living stones upbuilt,
Art the joy of heaven above,
And, with angel cohorts circled,
As a bride to earth dost move.

*Urbs beata Jerusalem
dicta pacis visio,
quae construitur in caelis
vivis ex lapidibus,
et angelis co-ornata
ut sponsata comite,*

From celestial realms descending,
Bridal glory round her shed,
To his presence, decked with jewels,
By her Lord shall she be led:
All her streets, and all her bulwarks,
Of pure gold are fashioned.

*Nova veniens e caelo,
nuptiali thalamo
praeeparata, ut sponsata
copuletur domino;
plateae et muri ejus
ex auro purissimo:*

Bright with pearls her portals glitter,
They are open evermore;
And, by virtue of his merits,
Thither faithful souls may soar,
Who for Christ's dear name in this
world

*Portae nitent margaritis
adytis patentibus,
et virtute meritorum
illuc introducitur
omnis qui pro Christi nomen*

Pain and tribulation bore.*²¹

hic in mundo premitur.

The new generation of Jerusalem hymns may be said to begin with Damiani. Instead of the old symbolism (the building up of

* For once, the great Victorian hymn-writer J. M. Neale has misconstrued a hymn, but his mistakes reveal so clearly the contrast between the old and new images that I have quoted his version. He has imported into the hymn the assumption that Jerusalem is in heaven, and we go up to it. Since the original thought is of Jerusalem as being prepared in heaven and as descending to earth, the result of Neale's importation of the opposite image is to make his Jerusalem travel disconcertingly up and down. The lines "art the joy of heaven above" and "thither faithful souls may soar" introduce ideas which have no equivalent in the original.

Jerusalem, its descent from heaven), we have a new one: the upward struggle of the soul to the new Jerusalem.

For the fount of life eternal
Thirsts the dry and parchèd mind
And the soul its fleshly bondage
Now endeavours to unbind;
And the exile strives and struggles
Fatherland once more to find.²²

*Ad perennis vitae fontem
mens sitit nunc arida,
claustra carnis praesto frangi
clausa quaerit anima,
gliscit, ambit, eluctatur
exsul frui patria.*

It is not surprising, considering his spirit of intense world-renunciation, to find such words on the pen of Peter Damiani; but we realize the strength of the new individualism when we find Hildebert writing in the same style. For all his humanism and love of urbane literature, Hildebert's vision of salvation is of personal escape. His *Hymn to the Trinity* ends in one of the greatest cries of the individual for deliverance:

May I enter Sion's halls,
Sight of peace, 'mid David's walls,
Founded by the Lord of light,
Entered through the Cross's might . . .
City, haven of salvation,
Hear my far-off salutation.
I salute you, and I sigh;
I desire you, and I cry.
Of your people's exultation
And their common jubilation,
Of the love that binds them all,
Of the gems that paint the wall
(Finest gems with richest glow)
Only those within can know.
In that city's golden square,
Numbered with the perfect there,
And with Moses and Elijah,
May I sing my Alleluia.²³

*Me receptet Syon illa,
Syon David urbs tranquilla;
cuius faber auctor lucis,
cuius porta lignum crucis . . .
urbs in portu satis tuto,
de longinquo te saluto.
Te saluto, te suspiro,
te affecto, te requiro.
quantum tui gratulentur,
quam festive conviventur,
quis affectus eos stringat,
aut que gemma muros pingat,
quis calcedon, quis iacinctus,
norunt illi qui sunt intus.
in plateis huius urbis,
sociatus piis turbis,
cum Moyse et Elia
pium cantem alleluya.*

It is interesting, and also moving, to observe the same phenomenon here as in Walter of Châtillon. Both poets, although men of the new age, with a greater confidence in the regularity of the created order, have lost the sense of community and also the immediate sense of God's presence. Hildebert can salute the heavenly city

only from far off, *de longinquo*. The same is true of Abelard. His tremendous sense of the power of the human intellect never effaced his final loneliness. In the most famous of all Jerusalem hymns, *O quanta qualia*, there is no trace of the old eschatology. Jerusalem no longer comes down from heaven, as in the Scriptures; the coming of the Son of Man to make all things new has no part in Abelard's devotion. Lonely, the exile longs for home:

Now in the meanwhile, with hearts raised on high,
We for that country must yearn and must sigh,
Seeking Jerusalem, dear native land,
Through our long exile on Babylon's strand.²⁴

MYSTICAL THEOLOGY

The conclusion seems justified that, although there was no abandonment of the Church's official eschatology, attention had moved sharply from the salvation of mankind as a whole to the deliverance of the individual. There was a shift away from cosmic expectation to personal piety, or to mystical theology, and the old symbols were exploited in a new sense. As such a hymn as the *Dies irae* shows, the emphasis was increasingly placed on the theme of Judgement, and on the choice which faced the individual believer. This still leaves open one question: Was the new mystical theology itself an individualist one? There are, after all, many mysticisms. It is possible to stress the believer's solidarity with the Church, the redeemed community, as the Bible and most of the Fathers had done. It is possible also to interpret the final union of the soul with God in a way destructive of the person's separate identity—it is even reasonable to do so, for it is hard to see how a creature can remain a distinct unit when brought into the immensity of the Godhead. One element within tradition, especially in the Eastern Church, had accordingly spoken of the "absorption" of the soul into God, and in the writings of pseudo-Dionysius this language had influenced Western thinkers, including William of Saint Thierry.

It may be instructive to consider the element of individualism in the teaching of Saint Bernard, who, because of his strong

respect for traditional opinions, was not disposed to take to an extreme the attitudes of his contemporaries. He did, indeed, share many of the distinctively twelfth-century presuppositions. As we saw in Chapter 4, psychology at this time was abandoning a sharp division between love of God and love of self, and was moving towards a more delicate analysis of human "affections". Accordingly, Bernard thought in terms, not of a chasm within the spiritual life, but of development from the fleshly love of self to a pure and spiritual love. A favourite text of both Bernard and William of Saint Thierry was 2 Corinthians 5.16: "though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now we know him so no more". The intention of Saint Paul here was presumably to contrast his attitudes before and after his conversion, but the autobiographical reference had been missed by later commentators, who usually understood it as opposing the earthly life of Christ to the risen Christ now known by the Church. Bernard and William, by applying it to a man's personal religious experience, gave it a notably new twist, taking it as a comparison between an elementary apprehension of Christ, with which the simple Christian begins, to a deeper spiritual one:

I think that this was the main cause why the invisible God wished to be seen in the flesh, and as man to converse with men: so as to draw all the affections of fleshly men, who could only love in a fleshly way, to the saving love of his flesh, and thus by stages to lead them to a spiritual love.²⁵

This did not imply that spiritual development was easy or unbroken—it is not wholly clear where in this scheme Bernard placed the transition from the secular to the monastic life, which he regarded as a *sine qua non* of full Christian growth. It was, however, a scheme readily accepted in a society where every man was born a Christian, whereas a sharp contrast between the "two loves" was more obviously appropriate to a situation in which the Church was a witnessing minority. This understanding of the nature of growth in the spiritual life brought Bernard close to another popular theme of his age: the importance of intention. "Intention" is not specially a Bernardine word (although he used it on occasions), but the *thing* is crucial in his thought. In a sense

the whole drama of the life in Christ consisted, for him, in the purification of motive, or intention, and it was the basis for the classification of the four loves, ascending from loving oneself for the sake of oneself, to loving oneself only for the sake of God. The essential motive power, moreover, which starts a man on this ascent, is compassion for the sufferings of Christ. Bernard is at one with Abelard, and with many of their contemporaries, about the importance of compassion, although for the one it is the starting-point, and for the other almost the whole, of the spiritual life.

While Bernard's presuppositions are thus in tune with the thought of his day, we are still left with the question how far his mysticism is individualistic; or, more precisely, how far his account of man's final goal is phrased in the language of self-fulfilment. This way of speaking was represented in earlier monastic teaching; but, as we have seen, it was modified by other approaches, the language of community and the language of absorption or deification, both of which Bernard used on occasions. If he was a little sparing in using of the Church as a whole the biblical symbols of community, he employed them freely of his monastery. Clairvaux, he taught, *was* Jerusalem. It was a place where men could learn in a common life the love of others and the love of God. It would be absurd to suggest that Bernard was indifferent to the experience of life in community, but we must return to this later to notice a limitation in the significance he was prepared to attach to it.

The language of deification is less characteristic of Saint Bernard, and his use of it was largely confined to his treatise *On the Love of God*, written between 1129 and 1141 and probably influenced by the writings of his friend William of Saint Thierry. It is usual to suggest that Bernard's employment of this language was designed to emphasize a union of wills, and not the absorption of the believer's self into the Godhead. This explanation has the merit of maintaining consistency between the passages concerned and the doctrine of his later works (and, for that matter, of other sections in *On the Love of God*). It is clear, none the less, that in choosing deification language Bernard was putting his emphasis on the unity of the Soul and God, and was relatively little concerned to make a distinction between them:

O holy and chaste love, O sweet and gentle affection, O pure and undefiled intention of the will—so much the purer and more undefiled in that nothing of its own is left mingled with it; so much the sweeter and more gentle, in that what is experienced is wholly divine! To be thus disposed is to be united with God. As a little drop of water mixed with a lot of wine seems to cease to be itself, . . . so it will then be necessary among the saints for every human affection mysteriously to cease to be itself, and wholly to be transformed into the will of God.²⁶

Sic affici, deificari est; the expression is a strong one, and Bernard dwells on the necessity for the self to be emptied out: "For in a sense to lose yourself, as if you were not, and not at all to feel yourself, but to be emptied of yourself and brought almost to nothing—that belongs to our conversation in heaven, not to our human affections."²⁷ Whatever Bernard meant by the deification language in *On the Love of God*, he expressed himself differently in his later works, the sermons on the Song of Songs (1135-53) and *On Consideration* (c. 1150). In these works he spoke of the individual as fulfilled, not lost, in the encounter with the eternal Word; and he was prepared to take the language of self-fulfilment to great lengths.

The sermons on the Song of Songs were designed, from the beginning, to appeal to private religious experience:

We read today in the book of experience. Turn inwards to yourselves, and let each of you give heed to his own conscience about what is to be said. I would discover whether it has been given to any of you to say, from his own desire, *Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth.*²⁸

Self-knowledge is, for Bernard, both the beginning and end of the spiritual journey: "For you, you are the first; you are also the last."²⁹ Accordingly, he insisted that, in the last resort, religious experience is private and individual, known only to the Bridegroom and the soul:

I do not think that the King has only one couch, but many. For there is not just one queen, but many; and there are many concubines, and maidens without number. And each finds her

own secret with the Bridegroom, and says: *My secret is mine, my secret is mine.*³⁰

In the later sermons, Bernard was particularly insistent about the continued identity of the soul in its encounter with God. Sermon 71 stressed that the unity, although profound, is one of wills and not of substance, and sermon 83 discussed the bond of love between the soul and the eternal Word. Bernard, looking back over his recent sermons, asked:

What value has there been in all this work? This, I think: we have learned that every soul—although burdened with sins, ensnared in vices, captured by enticements, captive in exile, imprisoned in the body, stuck in the mire, fast in the mud, transfixed with cares, busy with affairs, oppressed by fear, afflicted with sorrow, troubled by worry, uneasy with suspicion, in short, as the prophet has it, a stranger in the land of enemies, defiled with the dead, counted among those who are in Hades; although, I say, it is so condemned and wretched, yet we have learned that it can perceive within itself not only grounds for the hope of pardon, the hope of mercy, but also grounds on which it may dare to aspire to the marriage of the Word, may without fear enter a bond of society with God, may without alarm take up with the King of angels a sweet yoke of love.³¹

The difficulty about speaking of a “bond of society” or a “yoke of love” between God and the soul is, as Bernard realized, the extreme difference between the two parties. He dealt with this objection in a radical way, by arguing that love essentially creates equality of a sort between lover and beloved: “Love is the only one of all the motions, senses and affections of the soul in which the creature can respond to the Creator, if not perhaps on equal terms, at least in the same terms.”³² Bernard argued that the proper way of conceiving the relationship between the soul and the eternal Word is as a union of two wills, which as entities remain distinct, and even, in the special sense defined, equal:

That truly is a contract of spiritual and holy matrimony. Indeed, more than a contract: it is a union [*complexus*]. Clearly a union, when to want and reject the same things makes one

spirit of two. Nor should it be feared that the disparity of persons will make the connection of wills limp at all one-sidedly, because love knows no reverence. Love is named from loving, not from honouring. Let him give honour who is full of awe, wonder, fear, amazement. The lover knows nothing of these.³³

In the spiritual marriage, then, the individual retains his identity. It is the fulfilment, not the annihilation, of the self, and Bernard, in his later works at least, was prepared to speak with remarkable boldness about the continuance of the human will and personality. Whether his earlier excursions into deification language indicated a different view, or merely a different emphasis, the fact remains that they are exceptions within the broad conspectus of Bernard's thought. It is scarcely too much to say that the fulfilment of man is, in the last resort, the fulfilment of the believer's self, which discovers its true identity in a unity of wills with God. The experience of life in community is indispensable in the growth of the Christian, but in the final resort it is a place of preliminary training. The monastery is the school of charity, but the time comes when we must leave school. In this emphasis Bernard was loyal to an important element in Benedictine tradition, in which the Rule was seen as the starting-place of the life of perfection. It would be wrong to press this too far, for there are many fine passages in Bernard's sermons about the communion of saints. Yet it is impossible to avoid the impression that the individual is the true beginning and end of his system of thought. His thinking was much more traditional than that of Abelard, more traditional also than the Jerusalem hymns; but the final verdict must be that Saint Bernard matched their individualist atonement doctrine and eschatology with a mysticism which gave an outstanding place to the individual. That this was his message, he concealed, as we saw, neither from himself nor from his readers: "for you, you are the first; you are also the last".