

Assessment 2
Section B
Bernard, Letter to Robert

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In this passage from Bernard's letter to Robert, the author is deliberating on the significance and validity of vows made on behalf of someone else, particularly in the context of a father making vows for his son versus the son making vows for himself.

When Bernard suggests that vows made for oneself, particularly when one fully comprehends their implications, may carry more legitimacy, he touches upon the idea of individual accountability. In essence, a vow made autonomously reflects a conscious decision undertaken by the individual, demonstrating their understanding of the commitment and their willingness to be bound by it. This notion aligns with broader philosophical discussions about the importance of personal choice and self-determination in matters of moral and ethical decision-making.

On the other hand, vows made on behalf of someone else, even if done with good intentions such as a father vowing for his son, may raise questions about the extent of the individual's consent and understanding. Bernard seems to imply that while such vows may hold some level of significance, they might lack the same depth of personal commitment and conviction that comes with self-initiated vows.[1][2] Furthermore, Bernard's reference to the implication that vows made by parents may carry less weight, despite their familial authority, underscores the notion that true moral agency and responsibility lie with the individual themselves. This concept resonates with broader philosophical discussions on autonomy and personal identity.[3]

To further demonstrate this point imagine a scenario where a parent, perhaps due to their own unfulfilled educational aspirations, makes a vow or a promise on behalf of their child to attend university and pursue a specific degree, such as medicine or engineering. While the parent's intentions may be rooted in wanting the best for their child, the commitment made on the child's behalf might lack the same level of personal investment and understanding. Contrast this with a situation where the child independently decides to pursue higher education, carefully weighing their

interests, aspirations, and the potential implications of their chosen field of study. In this case, the decision to pursue a university degree is a self-initiated vow, reflecting the individual's personal agency and understanding of the commitment involved.

While both may lead to the same outcome of attending university, the vow made by the child themselves holds more significance because it is a reflection of their own desires, goals, and understanding of the commitment. It demonstrates a deeper level of personal investment and accountability compared to a vow made on their behalf by a parent, regardless of the parent's good intentions.

The mention of Benedict suggests that Bernard is seeking some kind of judgment or guidance on this matter from a figure of authority or wisdom. He is questioning whether it is more appropriate for a vow to be made on behalf of a child who is too young to understand or for the child to make the vow when they are older and capable of speaking for themselves. Bernard then discusses a specific instance where a boy was promised to Cluny, but without the formalities prescribed by the Rule. The absence of formal oblation, parental petition, and ceremonial offerings before witnesses suggests in his opinion that the vow lacks the proper religious or legal solemnity.

During the medieval period, the Rule of Saint Benedict, served as a foundational text for Western monasticism. It outlined guidelines for communal living, prayer, work, and obedience within monastic communities. The Rule prescribed specific procedures for making vows and entering into religious obligations, emphasizing the importance of solemnity, intentionality, and communal consent.[4]

In Bernard's discussion, the absence of formal oblation, parental petition, and ceremonial offerings before witnesses suggests a deviation from the prescribed procedures outlined in the Rule. This

departure from established norms raises questions about the validity and legitimacy of the vow made to Cluny.[5][6] From a historical perspective, this reference reflects the adherence to religious traditions and the importance placed on ritualistic practices within medieval Christianity. It underscores the significance of formalities and adherence to established protocols in matters of religious commitment.[7]

In a modern context, this scenario could be likened to the procedures and formalities surrounding legal contracts or agreements. Just as the Rule of Saint Benedict outlined specific steps for making vows within the religious context, modern legal systems have procedures and requirements for entering into contracts or agreements.

For example, in a business setting, failing to adhere to legal formalities such as signing a contract or obtaining witnesses may render an agreement legally invalid or unenforceable. Similarly, the absence of proper procedures and formalities in the vow made to Cluny may call into question its validity and legal standing within the religious community. Overall, Bernard's passage reflects on the complexities and moral implications of making vows on behalf of others, especially in matters concerning religious commitments and obligations.

In conclusion, Bernard's contemplation on the significance and validity of vows made on behalf of others, as depicted in his letter to Robert, offers valuable insights into broader philosophical and ethical discussions about personal agency, autonomy, and responsibility. Through his exploration of scenarios involving parental vows for their children and deviations from established religious protocols, Bernard prompts us to consider the complexities and moral implications inherent in commitments made on behalf of others.

Endnotes

- [1]Norman F Cantor, *The Civilization of the Middle Ages* (London: Harpercollins E-Books, 2015), 330, 363.
- [2]Giles E. M. Gasper, “Bernard of Clairvaux, Material and Spiritual Order, and the Economy of Salvation,” *Journal of Medieval History* 45, no. 5 (August 28, 2019): 580–96, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03044181.2019.1658617>.
- [3]Michael P. Leonard, “‘The Road to Hell Is Paved with Good Intentions’ (St. Bernard of Clairvaux, C. 1150),” *Canadian Urological Association Journal* 11, no. 6S2 (June 13, 2017): 112, <https://doi.org/10.5489/cuaj.4595>.
- [4]Episcopal Church and Episcopal Church. Standing Commission On Liturgy And Music, *Holy Women, Holy Men : Celebrating the Saints*. (New York: Church Pub. Inc, 2010), 166.
- [5]Christopher Holdsworth, “The Past and Monastic Debate in the Time of Bernard of Clairvaux,” *Studies in Church History* 33 (1997): 91–114, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0424208400013206>.
- [6]Hayden V. White, “The Gregorian Ideal and Saint Bernard of Clairvaux,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 21, no. 3 (July 1960): 321, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2708141>.
- [7]Eric Christiansen, *The Northern Crusades* (Penguin UK, 1997), 102.

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