

Bernard's letter to his nephew, Robert (selections)

As a child Robert seems to have been offered by his parents to Cluny, but later, when he could act on his own account, he joined the Cistercians and was professed at Cîteaux. He moved to join Bernard at Clairvaux. He found the life hard, and he was torn by doubts as to whether he had been obliterated to Cluny and should go there. Bernard writes to implore him not to listen to those who would seek to persuade him to enter Cluny and to stick to the Cistercian way of life.

Let them see and judge which has the most force: the vow a father makes on behalf of his son, or the vow a son makes on his own behalf, especially when it is a vow of something better. Let your servant and our law-giver, Benedict, judge which is the most in order: a vow made for a child when it is too young to know anything about it, or the vow he afterwards makes for himself when he realises and understands what he is doing, when he is of an age to speak for himself.

Does salvation rest rather in soft raiment and in high living than in frugal fare and moderate clothing? If warm and comfortable furs and precious cloth, if long sleeves and ample hoods, if dainty coverlets and soft woollen shirts make a saint, why do I delay and not follow you at once? But these things are comforts for the weak, not the arms of fighting men. They who wear soft raiment are in kings' houses. Wine and white bread, honey-wine and pittance, benefit the body not the soul. The soul is not fattened out of frying pans. Many monks in Egypt served God for a long time without fish. Pepper, ginger, cummin, sage, and all the thousand other spices may please the palate, but they inflame lust. And would you make my safety depend on such things.? Will you spend your youth safely among them? Salt with hunger is seasoning enough for a man living soberly and wisely. If we eat before we are hungry, then we must concoct mixtures with more and more I know not what far-fetched flavours to arouse greed and stimulate our flagging appetites.

Arouse yourself, gird your loins, put aside idleness, grasp the nettle, and do some hard work. If you act thus, you will soon find that you only need to eat to satisfy your hunger, not what will make your mouth water. Hard exercise will restore the flavour to food that idleness has taken away. Much that you would refuse to eat when you had nothing to do, you will be glad of after hard work. Idleness makes one dainty, hard work makes one hungry. It is wonderful how hard work can make food taste sweet that idleness finds insipid.