ABELARD TO ABBOT BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX*

Background: Like Letter 9, this letter survives in a single manuscript (BnF lat. 13057). Although not precisely dated, it was very probably written not long before or, more likely, not long after 28 November 1131, a critical date in the lives of both Heloise and Abelard. This is the date of Pope Innocent II’s letter, our earliest surviving written testimony to the existence of Heloise herself and her new community, established on the site of Abelard’s oratory, and called the Paraclete. He reported in his Story of Calamities that he had granted this place to these women who had been expelled from Argenteuil two years earlier in its successful, though doubtfully valid, takeover by Abbot Suger of Saint-Denis. (For the pope’s letter, see Cartulaire de l'Abbaye du Paraclet, no. 1.1–3: the original of this charter is in the Bibliothèque municipale de Troyes, pièce 31; there is a copy in the Archives de l’Aube, 24 H 1.)

Innocent’s claim to the papacy was also still questionable when he sent his letter not from distant Rome, but from Auxerre, some fifty miles from the Paraclete. There he was ending a year-long campaign in France against his rival, Anacletus II, in the schismatic papal election of early 1130. Following his flight from Rome late in that year, powerfully supported by Bernard of Clairvaux and other French churchmen, Innocent was crowned as pope in Autun at Christmas. But his opponent remained entrenched in Rome and elsewhere, and the schism in the Church ended only with the death of Anacletus in 1138.1

Abelard would have met Innocent some years earlier, in late January, 1131, when he first exercised papal authority in France, presiding over a meeting in the monastery of Mortigny that included eleven cardinals, numerous French bishops and other churchmen, notable among them Bernard of Clairvaux. Abelard himself, still abbot of Saint-Gildas, was warmly welcomed by the abbot of Morigny, who praised this “monk and abbot” as a “most religious man, and a most excellent director of schools, to which learned men have flocked from almost the whole Latin world.” Abelard apparently took advantage of this occasion to seek support in his continuing struggles with his recalcitrant and

* Translated from Peter Abelard, Letters IX–XIV, ed. and intro. Smits, pp. 239–47.
1 See: Explanatory Notes, “Innocent II.”
menacing monks. Here, too, he could more readily pursue papal recognition for the Paraclete, evidently sought also by Heloise and supported by Bishop Hato of Troyes. In both cases, help was forthcoming. To arbitrate the matter of Saint-Gildas, Geoffrey, bishop of Chartres, was appointed papal legate, though his efforts ended in failure. More successfully, the papal letter of 28 November 1131 answered the “just requests of his beloved daughter, Heloise, the prioress, and other sisters in the oratory of the Holy Trinity” and took her and her community with all that it possessed “under the protection of the Holy See.”

Around this time Bernard visited the Paraclete, engaged in what may well have been a formal visitation, an “inspection,” either preceding or, more likely, following papal recognition of this community. Clearly, Bernard’s approval, and his criticism, seemed to Abelard important enough to evoke the detailed explanation found in Letter 10, which was evidently written before he had arrived at any open breach with Bernard. If the dating of this letter to 1131/32 is valid, Abelard’s reference to Heloise as “abbess” may seem puzzling, since she was not so addressed officially until 1135, in another letter of Innocent II. But it seems likely that she was given this title less formally in earlier years at the Paraclete.

As Abelard declared, Bernard and his preaching were enthusiastically welcomed by Heloise and her nuns, and his own response was mostly positive. But the abbot of Clairvaux was “somewhat dismayed” to find that in saying the Lord’s prayer, Heloise and her nuns had departed from the form commonly used in the Church. Following the Vulgate text of Matthew’s gospel, they were in the habit of using the words ‘supersubstantial bread,’ rather than ‘daily bread.’ In answer to Bernard’s criticism, reported privately by Heloise, Abelard drew on the evidence of Scripture, ecclesiastical tradition, and reason to support his contention that this version of the prayer, which he had introduced at the Paraclete, represented its earliest and most perfect form, and by no means an alarming liturgical innovation. But, unable to resist this opportunity, he went on to remind the abbot of Clairvaux of those Cistercian “novelties”—among them, the drastic curtailing of the monastic offices and the introduction of new hymns—which had aroused the wonder and antagonism of their rivals. His letter thus becomes a more general and enlightening, although controversial, discussion of the problems of diversity and innovation in monastic practice.

Pervasively ironic in its stress on “novelties,” at times somewhat provocative in tone, yet speaking throughout in the voice of “sweet reason,” with overtones of a sardonic playfulness, this letter has been much debated in recent scholarship. To some scholars, for whose work consult the bibliography, notably Arno Borst, Joseph T. Muckle, and Chrysogonus Waddell, the display of Abelard’s gifts as an “ironist,” though significant, shows no real animosity toward its recipient. Other scholars, especially Jürgen Miethke, Lodewijk Engels, and David Luscombe, find

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2 Abelard, here exposed as a true child of the Vulgate, was mistaken in attributing the use of two different Greek words to the authors of the gospels of Matthew and Luke. The word “supersubstantialem” first appears in the Vulgate text of Jerome (Matt. 6.10). Jerome renders the same Greek word—“eiousion”—as “cotidianum” in Luke 11.3.