



MEMORIES AT VÉZELAY

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Brother Peter awakened before the third hour of morning, as he had for some seventy of his eighty years. It was habit, not necessity, for he had long been exempted from participating at matins due to his age and crippled arthritic state. Nonetheless, as he lay on his straw pallet under the rough wool blanket, he could hear, vaguely, the chanting of his brother monks coming from the new choir.

Most of the brothers were proud of their new choir, more spacious and elegant than the sixty-three-year-old choir it replaced. After the fire in 1165, it was clear that the choir would have to be repaired or replaced. The monks at first tried to do with repairs, to save on cost, but they were incomplete and the old choir still had scaffolding and timber braces in it thirty years after the fire. A new choir was a necessity.

Granting that, Peter still didn't like it. Begun only five years before the second millennium of Christ's earthly kingdom and in anticipation of the manifestation of the heavenly kingdom, the new choir harmonized poorly with the older nave. True, it was better illuminated and the chapels that radiated from the ambulatory provided more altars. But Peter disliked it. He found the pointed arches and the cross-ribbed vaults, ideas imported from churches to the north in the kingdom of the Capetians, a distasteful novelty for such a venerated site. Vézelay was, after all, the second greatest Benedictine abbey in all Burgundy, after Cluny itself. And Vézelay

housed in a beautiful shrine in the crypt the relics of St. Mary Magdalene, relics brought from Jerusalem at the beginning of the eleventh century by the monk Badilon.

It was these relics that assured the success of the abbey as a place of pilgrimage, once they were authenticated by the holy father Pascal, second of that name, in 1103. Thousands came to worship at the shrine, and in time Vézelay became a major *ecclesia peregrinorum*, a departure point for the faithful starting the long pilgrimage to Compostela in far-away Spain.

(Peter could not know, of course, that the relics would be declared inauthentic by Pope Boniface VII, upholding the claim of the monks at St. Maxiém in Provence that the relics discovered there in 1279 were the true relics of Mary. Nor could he foresee that Vézelay would quickly thereafter lose its exalted spot and the donations that the faithful brought.)

It was still dark, and Peter began thinking of his life at the abbey. Fourth of five sons of a miller in Autun, he had been pledged to the abbey at his birth and, when he was ten, was sent away from his family to begin schooling at the abbey on the hill. Peter remembered the day vividly, not only for his tearful parting from his family, but because he came to the abbey in the entourage of the famous master sculptor Gislebertus. Gislebertus had just completed the great west portal of the city cathedral and, scandal to some, blasphemy to others, had actually inscribed his name beneath the feet of Christ: GISLEBERTUS HOC FECIT.

Peter remembered that Gislebertus had talked with him during the long, bumpy trip in the oxcart, explaining that he was to execute a different theme at Vézelay from that at Autun, although the style would, of course, be similar. At Vézelay he was to do an interpretation of Christ's charge to the apostles at Pentecost to go and teach and convert the world. The master explained that the stone in the region, while easy to cut, was soft and did not weather well. This is why, he explained, the portal at Autun was recessed under a deep porch and why the portals at Vézelay would be protected in the narthex of the church.

Impressed by the wisdom of the burly sculptor, Peter was overjoyed when he was asked to work with the masons, to bring water to them as they worked and to sweep up the dust from the work. These things Peter did as he watched the great portal take shape day by day. Then one day Gislebertus came to him and said, "I have a surprise for you." Leading Peter to the great portal, he said, "See the figure in the archivolt bent over and pulling a thorn from his foot? That is based on an ancient statue I saw in Rome, but the facial features are yours. Let's keep this a secret between us." Peter was dumfounded, but never told anyone about the figure. He did, though, from time to time go to look at it, remembering the fondness he had for Master Gislebertus. It had been some years since Peter could actually distinguish the details of the figures in the portal, but he remembered his own image as if it were in his heart, which it was.

Peter had kept his secret for more than half a century, and he enjoyed being present when the villagers were, on certain feast days, permitted to enter the narthex. These simple folk delighted in seeing the splendid sculptures and their bright colors, painted as they were like the illuminations in manuscripts. Even the most unlettered of them knew the subject—had not Gregory, the Great Pope, written that art works were permitted in churches so that those who could not read might learn from the art what they could not read in books? But what they really enjoyed was trying to identify the various races Master Gislebertus had sculpted in the archivolt. They were especially amused at the Ethiopians who employed their huge feet as umbrellas to protect them from the sun.

Peter must have fallen asleep, for when he awoke, dawn was beginning to break. He hobbled to the south side of the dormitory and looked out. A ground-hugging mist hid the vineyards to the east and south, although he could see the tops of some of the larger evergreens rising out of the white shroud. He didn't go to look to the north, for he knew that the hill and the abbey blocked the sun's first rays and that the countryside there was still almost totally dark. The dormitory

did not have a view to the west, but Peter knew the village was stirring: he could smell the smoke of fires in kitchens of houses lining the steep curving street leading down from the hilltop.

Breakfast was at the fifth hour, coffee with stale bread to soak in the coffee. It was an effort for Peter to go down the stairs to the refectory, but he couldn't stay in the dormitory all day—the *latrinae* were at ground level. After breakfast, the brothers went off to their various tasks, the more educated to the *scriptorium*, the less educated to the fields. Peter had copied many manuscripts in his day, in a precise scribal hand, and indicated where the illuminations were to go and what the specific scenes were to be. Now he could not see to read or to write, so he had a different task.

Peter's new job was to recount to the novices the history of the abbey, both what he had learned of what had happened before his time as well as what he remembered that had taken place during his many years in the abbey itself. He approached this assignment with diligence and enthusiasm.

Today's topic was one of special interest to Peter, for it concerned one of the most important days in the history of the abbey. In 1146, Pope Eugenius, third of that name, had issued a call for crusade, the second, against the infidel. Eugenius had selected the Cistercian reformer, Bernard of Clairvaux, to preach the crusade at Vézelay itself. Peter remembered that time, fifty-eight years earlier, as if it were yesterday. And he remembered it with mixed feelings.

No one, including Peter, doubted Bernard's piety or sincerity, but some thought him to be excessive. In preparation for Bernard's arrival from Fontenay, over forty Roman miles to the east, Peter had gone to the abbey library to read everything he could about the Cistercian ascetic. What he remembered best, because it troubled him most, was an *Apologia* Bernard had written to William, Abbot of Saint-Thierry, denouncing the decorations found in the cloisters of many monasteries. The part he remembered most vividly was

O vanity of vanities! The Church is radiant in its walls and destitute in its poor. It serves the eyes of the rich at the expense of the poor. The curious find that which may delight them, but those in need do not find that which should sustain them . . .

But apart from this, in the cloisters, before the eyes of the brothers while they read—what is that ridiculous monstrosity doing, an amazing kind of deformed beauty and yet a beautiful deformity? What are the filthy apes doing there? The fierce lions? The monstrous centaurs? The creatures, part man and part beast? The striped tigers? The fighting soldiers? The hunters blowing horns? You may see many bodies under one head, and conversely many heads on one body. On the one side, the tail of a serpent is seen on a quadruped, on the other side the head of a quadruped is on the body of a fish. Over there an animal has a horse for the front half and a goat for the back; here a creature which is horned in front is equine behind.

In short, everywhere so plentiful and astonishing a variety of contradictory forms is seen that one would rather read in the marble than in books, and spend the whole day wondering at every single one of them than in meditating on the law of God. Good God! If one is not ashamed of the absurdity, why is one not at least ashamed at the expense?

Peter did not know what to make of the impending visit by Bernard, admonisher of kings, arbitrator for popes, special advisor in *De consideratione* to Eugenius, former monk at Clairvaux and pupil of Bernard. Peter expected the fifty-six-year-old monk to have fallen victim to the sin of *hubris*. How wrong he was.

Bernard arrived riding a mule, accompanied by an entourage of two: his scribe and his confessor. The abbot had prepared the guesthouse for Bernard, but the latter insisted on a cell in the dormitory. He asked only that he be given time and place for contemplation before addressing those who would assemble a week hence.

The third day of his visit, Bernard approached Peter and asked for a tour of the abbey, especially the church itself. As they walked through the nave, Bernard seemed especially interested in the capitals of the main arcade piers. Some he

found inspiring, such as that of the mystic mill; others he found inappropriate, such as that showing the abduction of Ganymede by Zeus. Still others he found puzzling and appreciated Peter's explanation, especially the story of St. Eugenia, the woman who had disguised herself as a man and who had risen to position of prior in a monastery for women. Beset by jealousy, one of the nuns accused the prior of rape. Only by revealing herself to be a woman could Eugenia expose the nun's calumny.

Emboldened by Bernard's interest in the iconographies of the capitals but unable to reconcile this interest with his denunciation of frivolities in the *Apologia*, Peter asked him about this apparent contradiction. Bernard knew perfectly well that most Benedictine monks rejected his call for simplicity, above all the monks at the great mother house at Cluny. And Suger, Abbot at Saint-Denis outside of Paris, was hopelessly attracted to "the many-colored gems." Bernard hit on an idea. "Brother Peter," he said, "Why not assemble here as many of the monks as are free, and I will explain this to them and to you."

Within half an hour, Peter had assembled some twenty of his fellow monks in the nave of the church, and Bernard began his discourse. "I am accused of disliking art, of being unable to appreciate beauty," he said. And he continued, "This is not true. I glory in God's art—sunrises and sunsets, beautiful mountains and waterfalls. I admire as much as any man the art created by God's greatest creation, man. What I have spoken and written is not against art, but against art in inappropriate places, most especially in the cloister where it distracts the monks from prayer and meditation."

As Peter listened, he understood the distinction Bernard was making. He also found himself impressed by the logic and simplicity of what the old theologian was saying. This was, after all, the man who had used logic and pattern to destroy the heresy of Peter Abelard. And Peter found himself realizing something else. While Bernard spoke quietly, his voice carried well and resonated with authority. The nearly perfect acoustics of the great vault accounted for the projection. Bernard's

skills as an orator accounted for the latter. The title *Doctor Melifluus* bestowed on him was quite appropriate.

Then came the great event, the assembling of King Louis, his wife, Eleanor, from far-away Aquitania, and the nobles and knights of the realm. Peter had never seen so many people in one place, and certainly not in such rich materials: satins, cloaks edged with ermine, doublets embroidered with gold thread. But, the sanctity of the church was placed in peril. Richly dressed nobles strode about with their weapons, many accompanied by great mastiffs. If this were not sacrilege enough, in the church men drank wine from the local vineyards and Peter was disgusted to learn that local farmers had set up stalls outside the abbey gate to sell wine, beer and food-stuffs.

Bernard's oration was spellbinding. He told of the recent capture of Edessa by the infidel, and urged the assembled throng to take up the cross, using the same words that Pope Urban had used at Clermont sixty-two years earlier: DEUS VULT! And when Bernard had finished his litany of the evils of the infidel who held the sacred places in the Holy Land, and cited *Matthew* 10:38 that Christians must take up the cross, king and knights alike rushed forward to take up small wooden crosses, symbols of their pledge.

Peter later learned, to his sorrow, that the crusade was a disaster. Despite the fact that Louis' army was joined by that of Konrad of Germany, the Christians failed to capture Damascus and never got to Jerusalem. And reports came back that Queen Eleanor's behavior was so shameful that Louis doubted her fidelity and had their marriage annulled in 1152.

Peter thought about the young queen, who was twenty-five when she accompanied Louis to Vézelay. She was beautiful, Peter remembered, thinking how sad the annulment was. Eleanor had quickly married Henry, king of the English, removing Aquitania from Louis' control and weakening the power of the French king.

It took half a century for another French king, Philip Augustus, son of Louis, to recapture the lands lost to the English,

especially Normandy. Now, King Philip was coming to the abbey to take up the cross once again.

Peter returned to his pallet, knelt and prayed that this crusade would be more successful than that of Louis. In the fervor of his prayer, he did not feel the pain, first in his arm then in his chest. Later that morning, Brother Stephan found him, dead, on the floor beside his pallet.