

The Family
that Overtook Christ
Study Edition

The Family that Overtook Christ:
Lessons in Sanctity from
the Family of
St. Bernard of Clairvaux
Study Edition

Text by
Rev. M. Raymond, OCSO

Aids to Appreciation by
Janet P. McKenzie

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Finally, we must thank Our Lady of Citeaux. So often did she answer our appeals for help! May she guide this "Saga" and all who read, leading them, through it, to the Heart of Citeaux's inspiring hero—her Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ.

In inviting us to follow Him, Christ obligated Himself to give us the necessary strength to follow, and to follow not as did the apostles at the time of the Passion—from afar—but as close as did the Cyrenean. Or as Bernard of Fontaines puts it, “Close enough to catch up with Him.” Bernard well says that it will do us little good to follow unless we do catch up!

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Preface

The Family that Overtook Christ was written in 1942 and comprises the second epoch of Rev. M. Raymond's trilogy on the history of the Order of Cistercians Strict Order (Trappists). It tells the dramatic story of the nine members of the Fontaines family, their role in the history of the Cistercian Order, and their fight for Christ against the world. However, in addition to its value as Cistercian history and as an adult study on the virtuous life, this book is also an excellent read for young adults who are preparing to receive the Sacrament of Confirmation. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, "By the sacrament of Confirmation, [the baptized] are . . . more strictly obliged to spread and defend the faith by word and deed" (no. 1285 in quoting *Lumen Gentium* no. 11). In this exciting chronicle of the life of twelfth-century knights, we can learn much about defending and spreading the faith in true soldier-like fashion.

The *Catechism* affirms that our preparation for Confirmation "should aim at leading the Christian toward a more intimate union with Christ and a more lively familiarity with the Holy Spirit –his actions, his gifts, and his biddings –in order to be more capable of assuming the apostolic responsibilities of Christian life. To this end catechesis for Confirmation should strive to awaken a sense of belonging to the . . . the universal Church . . ." (no. 1309). There is no better way of awakening this "sense of belonging" than to study the lives of those saints who have gone before us and fought the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil. In *The Family that Overtook Christ*, we have an entire family of nine saints who lay before us their individual means of achieving intimate union with Christ. Here we have examples of various ways to live the "authentic Christian life" that the *Compendium of the Catholic Church* calls us to live (no. 360)—examples of lives in which the actions and gifts of the Holy Spirit are readily apparent.

This inspiring tale of the family of St. Bernard of Clairvaux has several themes to help confirmands prepare for the

“sacrament of Christian maturity” (CCC, no. 1308). Watch for the following lessons in sanctity from the lives of the Fontaines family:

- Supernaturalize the natural – We become saints in and by our everyday living.
- Be yourself – It is in doing what God wants us to do and being what God wants us to be that we can attain sanctity.
- Develop a God-consciousness – In lovingly turning to God and becoming aware of Him and His actions in every minute detail of our lives, we can develop a genuine piety that is simple and sincere. All of our intentions and actions become God-centered to the point where we become absorbed in God.
- Spiritual conversation – Much can be gained by engaging in lively debate and discussion on spiritual matters. Be willing to participate in open discussion about important matters of faith. (Use the quotations at the end of each chapter for starters.)
- Religious vocations begin at home – Vocations come from God, but He often speaks through others.

I recommend that you review the “Formulas of Doctrine” from the Appendix before reading this book. Try to tag the various virtues, gifts, and works of mercy to the characters and their actions to see our Catholic faith as it is lived by the saints. While it is best to read this book aloud together (parents and/or sponsor and confirmand), the chapter-end quotations allow some discussion even if the parent/sponsor is not able to read the book along with their confirmand. (However, mothers will be enlightened and inspired by the chapter on Blessed Alice.)

May the Holy Spirit descend with His seven-fold gift, shine in your heart, and fill your inmost being with His divine light!

Janet P. McKenzie
Feast of the Chair of St. Peter –February 22, 2010

Author Introduction

I just want to give you one warning. It is this: DO NOT BE DECEIVED!

Because of the mold in which I have cast it, this may read like a novel; but do not be deceived. *It is history!* The facts are *facts*. Many of the words are *Bernard's own words*, culled either from his sermons or his letters. I have dramatized much; I have fictionalized little or nothing. So, take it for what it is—a perfectly *reliable* story.

You may ask: Why the story form? My only answer is that we have had plenty of historical novels and plenty of biographical novels; so why not have some novel history in a novel biography? This family *lived!* Why not represent them, then, as *life-like*? Furthermore, since it is only in and by your everyday living that you are going to *become* a saint, I had to give you a safe model. I am sure that you and I and all of us can learn much from this “everyday living” of Bernard’s family. They show us how we can supernaturalize the natural. What a family!

Now, remember, I have given you only sketches, not full-length lives. Bernard alone would take a volume twice this size! But I hope that the sketches will satisfy and stimulate. I never met such a family before; I feel sure you will enjoy the introduction I give you.

Fr. M. Raymond, OCSO
Our Lady's Birthday
September 8, 1942

Blessed Alice – The Mother Who Became a Saint

ABBOT JARENTON, seeing that the discussion was leading to no conclusion, decided to change the subject; but Abbot Frederic, who wanted finality to every discussion, decided that the subject should not be changed. And yet, since he was only a guest at St. Benignus de Dijon, and of no long acquaintance with Abbot Jarenton, he had to employ all his mastery in the art of conversation so that he might appear to be gracefully yielding to his host when in reality he was stubbornly mainlining his point. Frederic was adroit²⁹, but Jarenton had lived too long with men not to see through his maneuverings, and had too great a sense of humor not to lend himself to Frederic's game. So the discussion went on even though they talked of other matters.

It was amusing to one, engrossing to the other; no spider and fly, or cat and canary ever watched one another more carefully than did these two abbots as they talked about the weather, the crops, prelates, princes and the ruling powers, yet all the while discussed sanctity. Frederic had claimed that it was almost entirely the work of God; that the saints were His special favorites whom He deluged with such grace that they could hardly be other than what they were; while Jarenton insisted that every son of Adam and every daughter of Eve had it in them to be saints if they would only pay the price.

Frederic was German, physically and mentally; hence, with his painstaking, systematic, ponderous and almost plodding way of thinking and talking he formed a sharp contrast to the vivacious, quick-brained and quick-tongued Frenchman, Jarenton. The discussion had filled the best part of the morning, and during it they had balanced Scripture text with Scripture text, saint with saint, and example with example. Frederic had no sooner triumphantly quoted, "For it is God who works in you both to will and to accomplish," than Jarenton good-naturedly countered with, "Yes, but don't forget the preceding verse and the one that follows; both are imperatives! and if I remember rightly the preceding one

²⁹ Skillful; clever; competent

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goes, ‘Work out your salvation with fear and trembling,’ and the succeeding one reads, ‘Do all things without murmuring³⁰.’”

Frederic then tried to sum up his whole case in the single line of St. Paul, “I am what I am by the grace of God”; but Jarenton had asked him to recall the rest of that very verse, “and his grace in me has not been void, but I have labored more abundantly than all they³¹. ” The French abbot got great relish from that retort and laid a heavy accent on the words “I have labored.” Frederic let him have his enjoyment, but then paid him back in his own coin by asking, “And how does that verse end? Is it not something like, ‘yet not I’ —do you hear, my Lord Abbot?—‘yet not I . . . but the grace of God with me.’”

It was all done with charming gracefulness. Two keen minds were fencing; and it had been parry and thrust, thrust and parry, the whole morning through. Saint had been countered with saint; John the Baptist was leveled off by St. Peter, the apostles who had answered the call by the rich young man who had walked away sad³². As soon as Frederic would point out the Pelagian³³ tendencies in Jarenton’s tenets, the Frenchman would remind his guest of the Manichaeans³⁴. When Frederic asked if man was to determine almighty God, Jarenton asked if God was to destroy His creature’s free will. To end it all Jarenton said, “Come, let us go over to see the church.” Frederic arose, but while heading for the door said, “The church where souls are sanctified by God through His sacraments.”

“Yes,” laughed Jarenton, “the church where souls sanctify themselves by receiving the sacraments and praising their God.”

³⁰ See Philippians 2:12-14.

³¹ See 1 Corinthians 15:10.

³² See Luke 18:18-23.

³³ A reference to the fifth-century heresy of Pelagianism that denied original sin and the necessity of grace for salvation

³⁴ A heresy begun in the third century that contends that God is the creator of all that is good and the devil of all that is evil; the soul is good and the body is evil; a form of religious dualism

Blessed Alice – The Mother Who Became a Saint

The discussion knew a little lull as the abbot of St. Benignus pointed out the many beauties of his church. Perhaps it would have known an ending had they not happened upon two serfs who stood talking before six statues of stone. Jarenton motioned to his companion to be silent, then led him to a little nook from where they could see and hear without being seen or heard. “Now listen,” whispered Jarenton, “this ought to be good.”

They waited but a moment, then the high, clear voice of the first serf³⁵ came to them: “This third statue represents Bernard. He was no great hand with the lance or the battle-axe; but he had brains. He is the one who led the whole family into the cloister.”

Frederic raised his eyebrows in question, and Jarenton answered with a nod of his head that said, “That’s a fact.” The German abbot listened more intently then as the serf went on.

“He was a marvelous boy and is a still more marvelous man. He took the cream of our nobility, thirty of the finest men of the duchy, and led them to the monastery in the swamp at Citeaux. That was only the beginning. A few years later he was made abbot of Clairvaux and at this moment has a valley crowded with monks. He has his whole family there—all these statues,” he said as he waved his hand toward the six stone figures. “He has many of his near relations there; a whole swarm of knights and nobles, and so many serfs you can’t count them. Why, he even had his father there! Yes, Tescelin the Tawny, Lord of Fontaines, died just a few years back as a lay brother in the community at Clairvaux.”

“His father!” gasped the second serf. “You mean the Duke of Burgundy’s counselor?”

“I mean the Duke of Burgundy’s counselor,” said the first serf with an air of condescension and great complacency. “Oh, the boy is a wonder! Now this next statue is young Andrew; and what a promising lad he was! Think of it! He was knight-

³⁵ A member of the lowest feudal class; an agricultural worker who is bound to the land owned by a lord

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ed before he was seventeen. What a warrior he would have been. But he went with Bernard, and he stayed with Bernard. This is Bartholomew; as lovable a lad as you ever laid eyes on. He had the build of his father, but the disposition of his mother. Everybody loved him. This last is Nivard; and to him I give more credit than to all the rest."

"Why so?" asked the second serf.

"Because he had better prospects than the others and more time to realize what he was giving up. You see, when all his brothers left he was heir-apparent to all of Fontaines. Just think what would have been his—that grand castle up yonder is the smallest part of it. He would have had more land than you can run through in two days, serfs enough to make a colony, the friendship and favor of the duke—why, he would have had everything that a man hopes for, works for and prays for. And yet, he went. As soon as he was old enough, he went."

"Do you think he was old enough to know what he was doing?" asked the second serf.

"Absolutely," came the flat reply. "He had two years in which to think it over. He wasn't any child. He was going on sixteen; and no son of Tescelin the Tawny ever reached that age without knowing that two and two make four. He knew what he was doing all right; and knew it even better than the others; for he had time to look at both sides of the fence. You see, he used to visit his brothers at Citeaux and saw what it was like there; and from what some friends of mine tell me, when at home he had to fight down the opposition of his father who was constantly pointing out all that was to be his. Naturally, Tescelin wanted some son of his to carry on the family name and keep up the estate."

Frederic again looked at Jarenton with those eyebrows of his asking questions, and received the same confirmatory nod as answer. The German abbot was all interest now. He was standing on tip toe and in his anxiety to catch every single word was leaning far forward. Jarenton smiled.

"Well, there you are," said the first serf, "and there you are not; for the good Abbot Jarenton hasn't completed his job

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as yet. Two more statues belong here: one of Tescelin himself and the other of Humbeline, the only girl in the family. A real queen if ever there was one. You'd love her. She married Guy of Marcy, and the whole countryside proclaimed it as fine a match as could be made. But do you know where the good lady is at this moment?"

"No, I don't," came the reply.

"She is in the convent at Jully."

"What?" exclaimed the second serf. "After being married?"

"After being married," proudly echoed the first serf. "Now what do you think? Isn't what I told you true: isn't Dijon's greatest glory outside Dijon? Isn't the family of Fontaines something to talk about? Did you ever hear the like?"

"No, I must say I didn't. But I'm puzzled and you must help me. Here are six statues representing the six boys; you say that there should be two more: one for the father and one for the sister. All right. They are all religious, so I suppose their statues have some place in church. But will you tell me what she is doing here?" and he pointed to the tomb of the mother. "She was the only one who wasn't a religious. What place has she got in this church?"

"What place has she got in this church?" repeated the first serf in an indignant tone; then grunted, "Humph! I can see now, my good friend Clontof, why you are no great success at raising cattle. No wonder your master sent you here to learn something. Didn't you ever hear the saying, 'Blood tells'?"

"I did," said Clontof in a slightly offended air, "but I'd like to know what raising cattle and blood have to do with my question."

"Sure man, if you only knew, it is your answer."

"Don't joke, Durtal, on such a holy subject and in such a sacred place."

"Joke? Joke? I was never more serious in my life. Your question astounds me. You say they have a place here because they are religious, but she hasn't a place because she wasn't one. Ah, Clontof, that's too much. Will you tell me where they got their religion? Don't you know that not only

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blue eyes, light hair and fair skin, but also cleanness of heart, of mind and conscience, honor, virtue and valor come from parents? Don't you know that not only beauty of body, but also beauty of soul is a question of breeding? Don't you know that blood tells in religious matters as well as in all others? 'What is she doing here?' Why, man alive, if it wasn't for her, they wouldn't be here! She mothered those six boys and that one girl I told you about. She was Tescelin the Tawny's wife and had much to do in making him the man he was. And you ask, 'What is she doing here?' That is not the intelligent question to ask. No! But looking at the six statues, the real man who knows anything about heredity would immediately ask, 'Who was their mother?'

"Heredity does not end with flesh and blood and physical characteristics. Never. It goes down through the flesh and blood into the mind and will of the soul. Spiritual heredity is a fact, Clontof, every bit as real as physical heredity. Of course," added Durtal in a calmer tone, "it's a puzzling business all told. For just as in many a fine litter you often find a runt, so, too, in many a fine family you'll find a black sheep. But that does not change the fact of spiritual heredity any more than the presence of runts keeps us from mating blooded stock."

"Do you mean to say that holiness is simply a matter of our sires?" asked Clontof in a tone that spelled not only incredulity but belligerency.

Durtal looked at him musingly, then quietly said, "My friend, if I put the best seed on the continent into bad soil, I won't get a bumper crop; but if I have the best soil in the world and put bad seed into it, you know what kind of a crop I'll get! Well, it is something like that with men. Some who have the best of parents turn out badly because of environment company or neglect; but it calls for a miracle of the first class to take a child of wantonness³⁶ and make him a holy man. Much, Clontof, very much is in the blood! I don't say all, but I do say much. I can graft a wild growth onto a good tree and

³⁶ An immoral or undisciplined character

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it will assume many of the characteristics of that tree, but I can always detect the dash of wildness in the fruit."

"Are you saying that we are just like trees and cattle?" said Clontof in anger.

"No," laughed Durtal, "but I'll be saying some people are, if you keep on misunderstanding me! Here, my good fellow, let me put it this way: Bernard was a very beautiful boy. He had large, blue eyes, golden hair and a soft, smooth complexion. Now, where did he get them?"

"From his parents, I suppose," came the gruff reply.

"Good!" exclaimed the good-natured Durtal. "For his father was known as Tescelin the Tawny. He had golden hair and a golden beard. While his mother, Alice of Montbar, had the most beautiful eyes I have ever seen in a human face. Now I am going to tell you that Bernard had one of the fieriest, boldest, most daring of spirits you'd care to meet, while at the same time he was one of the most considerate, gentle and generous men the serfs of the land have ever seen. How do you account for those characteristics?"

"I don't know," this a trifle sullenly.

"Do it the same way that you did for the eyes, hair and skin," said Durtal with a chuckle. "Just say, 'His parents', and you'll be perfectly right; for Burgundy boasts no braver knight than was Tescelin the Tawny, while not only Fontaines but even Dijon will sing the praises of Alice, the generous Alice, for years to come. So if you want to know why the mother of these six is buried in this church, the answer is, 'These six!' For as God is God I'm sure that their holiness was due in great part to her."

"Ah, Clontof, she was a mother, let me tell you! She nursed everyone of them at her own breast; and that is something very few noble women of our day do! I'm positive these children drew more than mere physical sustenance from such nursing. As they grew, her knee was their only school house. Just as she had refused hired nurses for their suckling days, so did she refuse hired tutors for their early years. Only when they were strong physically, mentally and spiritually, did she allow them to fare forth; and even then she kept a watch-

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ful eye on them. In short, Clontof, Alice of Montbar was a mother who believed that mothering ended only with death; and the greatest monument to her great mothering is not these six statues. No! The greatest is the dedications that these children made of themselves to God.

“These statues are here not because of the holiness of the ones that they represent, but because of the holiness of the one who begot them. Abbot Jarenton did not have them made to honor the sons. He did it to honor the mother; and in that he was most right. ‘By their fruits you shall know them³⁷.’ But come, I see that the words of an old man like me have little effect on you; come, we will ask Angela, the little widow, and Joan, the little orphan, why Alice of Montbar is buried in the church of St. Benignus de Dijon. Come.”

They left then, and Abbot Frederic turned to Jarenton, his eyes alight with eagerness and his voice vibrant with enthusiasm as he said, “Let’s follow them.”

Jarenton laughed softly and asked, “Aren’t you afraid that Durtal will upset your theory on sanctity? He seems to say that it is not a question of God or of man, but of our mothers. But no, Frederic, we do not have to follow them. You can hear what Angela and Joan have to say over in my study. So let us have a little dinner first. Come.”

God’s Will Be Done

After dinner Jarenton saw that his guest was comfortably seated before he opened a large book that rested on his desk. He flicked over a few pages, found the place he wanted, then turned his chair so that he could look at Frederic and also at the book. When he had settled himself squarely he began, “Abbot Frederic, I enjoyed our little discussion this morning immensely. I can and have argued both sides of that case many times; sometimes I argue as you did saying that the saints are God’s favorites who have been deluged

³⁷ See Matthew 7:16.

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with extraordinary graces. A strong case can be made for that thesis both from Scripture and by examples; and yet, in my heart of hearts, I feel that the side I defended today is the truer side.

“In my very bones, I feel that all of us have sufficient grace to be great saints if we would only cooperate with it. In inviting us to follow Him, Christ obligated Himself to give us the necessary strength to follow, and to follow not as did the apostles at the time of the Passion—from afar—but as close as did the Cyrenean³⁸. Or as Bernard of Fontaines puts it, ‘Close enough to catch up with Him.’ Bernard well says that it will do us little good to follow unless we do catch up! But let that be as it may, you heard something new in church today, didn’t you? What do you think of the theory of the serf?”

“About spiritual heredity?” asked Frederic.

“Exactly,” answered Jarenton.

“Well,” said Frederic, “I’d like to mull the matter over before making any absolute statement on it, but off hand, I’d say right now that there is much plausibility for it. If I inherit my physical characteristics, why not my spiritual ones? Some may say because the body alone is generated by the parents while the soul is created directly by God. And that is true. But still the interaction of soul on body and body on soul is so intimate that the serf may be right. Then there is the very patent³⁹ fact that the adage ‘like father like son’ has been borne out again and again in the moral order as well as the physical. Warrior sons from warrior sires, and virtuous maidens from virtuous mothers. It is a notion worth considering. I shall study it out in my own abbey amongst my own men. But Durtal, as he was called, gave me more than a notion this morning; he has piqued my curiosity to the breaking point. I want to know all about this Alice of Montbar who could draw such a eulogy from such a man. I would love to hear what the widow and orphan had to say.”

³⁸ See Matthew 27:32, Mark 15:21, and Luke 23:26.

³⁹ Obvious; apparent; plain