

Pierre le Vénérable, Bernard de Clairvaux, L'amitié à l'épreuve de la diversité. Correspondance de Pierre le Vénérable et de Bernard de Clairvaux. Traduite et présentée par Christophe Vuillaume, Le Coudray-Macouard (Les Acteurs du savoir) 2019, 303 p., ISBN 978-2-36452-427-9, EUR 18,00.

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When Professor Giles Constable in 1967 published his two volume edition of the letters of Peter the Venerable, he decided not to translate the letters themselves but instead devoted one of his volumes to copious notes to consider the background of the letters. Later in life Constable chose not to provide a modern biography of this outstanding figure of twelfth century monastic life.

Father Vuillaume has to some extent compensated for what was lacking in Constable, at least in terms of the letters exchanged between Bernard of Clairvaux and Peter the Venerable. He has translated all of them in an attractive manner and at the same time has given his readers a guide to the letters in his introductory essay, «L'amitié de Pierre le Vénérable pour Bernard de Clairvaux». As a supplement Vuillaume has provided a translation of the Life of Peter by his disciple Raoul. This text is unfortunately standard hagiography and does not provide the reader with the kind of insights found, for example, in William of Saint Thierry's contribution to Bernard of Clairvaux's «Vita Prima». But it is still commendable that a little known text has now become available in a modern language.

This volume benefits from the careful studies of Giles Constable on the various facts and events of Peter's life, but otherwise I find that Father Vuillaume has failed to take into account contemporary scholarship on Peter. It is as if Constable's fact-finding and Jean Leclercq's interpretations were sufficient for him. But the orientation of the volume to the friendship of Peter for Bernard requires a more careful examination of the letters.

Thanks to the work of Adriaan H. Bredero («Bernard of Clairvaux. Between Cult and History», Grand Rapids, MA 1996), we have to be careful in interpreting Bernard's letters in a literal manner. Bredero pleads for what he calls «close reading» and is in general sceptical about Bernard's motives. At times I find his analysis too negative, but he provides a sober reminder that Bernard was a man of power. Bredero claims that expressions of friendship in Bernard «were inevitable commonplaces in medieval correspondence, and no solid conclusions regarding friendships should be drawn from them» (p. 227). I think Bredero goes too far, but his approach needs to be noted and answered.

In my own «Friendship and Community. The Monastic Experience, 350–1250», Ithaca, N.Y., London 2010, I tried to tackle the dilemma of friendship and concluded that there were elements



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of friendship between Peter and Bernard. But the most careful examination of the letters is found in Gillian R. Knight, »The Correspondence between Peter the Venerable and Bernard of Clairvaux. A Semantic and Structural Analysis«, Aldershot 2002. This volume provides the most detailed analysis, but as I pointed out in a review, its approach »to medieval culture is that of a classical philologist dealing with texts revealing underlayers of texts and betraying an element of politics. And much nastiness«¹.

I am thus unable to accept the approach of what otherwise is a very thoughtful presentation of the relationship between Peter and Bernard. Certainly Father Vuillaume is aware of some of the pitfalls of seeing friendship everywhere in the correspondence, and he promises to deal with the subject with »délicatesse« and »prudence« (p. 11). But his basic assumption is that there was indeed a close friendship between the two men, even though there were matters that provided conflict and disagreement. This interpretation is basically correct, but it needs to be established and defended in response to Bredero and Knight. For them the expressions of friendship were basically rhetoric.

It might be argued that Father Vuillaume after all is living in Madagascar and cannot be expected to have access to the literature necessary to provide a more critical approach to the letters. But in our age, with access to the internet, it is not acceptable to ignore a discussion that is central to an understanding of the letters. The valuable information provided by Giles Constable does not directly address the questions addressed by Bredero and Knight. At the same time the important contributions of Jean Leclercq which are cited in this volume are insufficient because Leclercq has a tendency to idealize his figures and especially Bernard of Clairvaux.

In all fairness it should be noted that Father Vuillaume at times does admit the rhetorical dimension of the letters, as »En tenant compte de la rhétorique habituelle à ce genre de missives« (p. 35), but he is still convinced that there were affection and friendship in the letters. I would tend to agree, but I do not find a convincing argument here answering what Bredero and Knight find.

It is customary in a book review to tell the reader what is to be found between the covers and not to complain about what is not to be found there. But in this case I have broken the usual rule and have emphasized what I miss. However attractive and elegant a language is provided by this representative of Benedictine life and tradition, I would insist on the necessity for a fuller scholarly apparatus.



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¹ [The Medieval Review 03.02.15.](#)