

## Background on Benedict's admonishment against working too hard

John L. Allen Jr. | Aug. 26, 2006 All Things Catholic

Summers in Rome have a sleepy quality. Even by that somnambulant standard, however, this summer has been strikingly devoid of papal activity.

Last Sunday, Benedict XVI supplied a theological rationale, citing St. Bernard, 12th century abbot of the famed Cistercian monastery of Clairvaux. He recalled Bernard's admonition to Pope Eugene III that excessive activity leads to "suffering of the spirit, turbulence of intelligence, and dispersion of grace."

"This warning is valid for every kind of occupation," Benedict said, "even those concerned with the government of the church."

I spoke to Cistercian Fr. Luke Anderson, Prior of St. Mary's Monastery at New Ringgold, Penn., for background.

### What led St. Bernard to give spiritual advice to a pope?

Eugene had been Bernard's disciple at Clairvaux, and therefore he was amenable to correction from his former abbot. Bernard told Eugene that even if he had been raised to the highest level in the church, he should not abdicate his principles as a monk. He should hold on to his ascetical and mystical aspirations. Eugene had great respect for Bernard, who was probably the most prominent man of the 12th century.

### Did Eugene follow Bernard's lead?

He took the advice, but like any reformer, he could only reform with the cooperation of those people he was trying to reform. Eugene took it seriously, but the results were mixed.

### From what you can see, does Benedict XVI reflect Bernard's model?

Sure he does. Even though he was a diocesan priest, Benedict has a lot of monastic sympathies. He understands that no activity is valuable unless it's supported by the supernatural basis of faith. This is tough for any priest, because at the end of a day no one asks, 'Did you pray today?' The questions are always, 'Did you go to the hospital?' 'Did you take care of the bills?' and so on. Benedict understands the importance of contemplation. The Vatican is a busy place, and before becoming pope he had a very controversial role in the church as its defender of faith. You have to be a man of prayer to deal with all that.

### As a Cistercian, is it encouraging to hear Pope Benedict cite St. Bernard?

Very much so, because it verifies that prayer is more important than action. Obvious activity is important, but its wellspring in prayer is what's fundamental.

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