Please read the Primary Source document below and then answer the questions that follow. To view this Primary Source document in a new window, click here.

ST. BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX (1090–1153)
FROM APOLOGIA TO ABBOT WILLIAM OF SAINT-TIERRY

Bernard of Clairvaux was a member of the Cistercians, an ascetic order founded in the eleventh century in opposition to the increasing opulence of the Benedictines. His letter to the Benedictine Abbot William of Saint-Thierry of about 1127 denounces all monastic luxury, especially the presence of art in cloisters. Like many others, Bernard believed that monks were spiritually superior to the “carnal” layfolk and so should not need material inducements to devotion.

As a monk, I put to monks the same question that a pagan used to criticize other pagans: “Tell me, priests,” he said, “what is gold doing in the holy place?” I, however, say,... “Tell me, poor men, if indeed you are poor men, what is gold doing in the holy place?” For certainly bishops have one kind of business, and monks another. We [monks] know that since they [bishops] are responsible for both the wise and the foolish, they stimulate the devotion of a carnal people with material ornaments because they cannot do so with spiritual ones. But we who have withdrawn from the people, we who have left behind all that is precious and beautiful in this world for the sake of Christ, we who regard as dung all things shining in beauty, soothing in sound, agreeable in fragrance, sweet in taste, pleasant in touch—in short, all material pleasures—...whose devotion, I ask, do we strive to excite in all this?...

Does not avarice cause all this? Money is sown with such skill that it may be multiplied. The very sight of these costly but wonderful illusions inflames men more to give than to pray. In this way wealth is derived from wealth. Eyes are fixed on relics covered with gold and purses are opened. The thoroughly beautiful image of some male or female saint is exhibited and that saint is believed to be the more holy the more highly colored the image is. People rush to kiss it, they are invited to donate, and they admire the beautiful more than they venerate the sacred. What do you think is being sought in all this? The compunction of penitents, or the astonishment of those who gaze at it? 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 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 troubled...
at the expense?


---

**Student submissions of this activity will be entered in the Grade Tracker.**

**About the Grade Tracker…**

**Your Class Manager session will be extended for one hour each time you visit a new page.**

**Extend your session…**

This activity contains 3 questions.

1. **How does St. Bernard contrast the spirituality of bishops and monks? Explain his statement, “Bishops have one kind of business, and monks another.”**

   To create paragraphs in your essay response, type <p> at the beginning of the paragraph, and </p> at the end.

2. **Why did St. Bernard say that the church “serves the eyes of the rich at the expense of its poor”? Discuss his reasoning.**

   To create paragraphs in your essay response, type <p> at the beginning of the paragraph, and </p> at the end.
For St. Bernard, sculpture in cloisters is “a ridiculous monstrosity ... an amazing kind of deformed beauty and yet a beautiful deformity.” Explain his attitudes toward this art, and on what grounds he finds it problematic.

To create paragraphs in your essay response, type <p> at the beginning of the paragraph, and </p> at the end.