

Stefan Constantinescu

# Desire: An Inoperative Language? Exploring the Mystical Experience of Bernard of Clairvaux with the Philosophical Thought of Giorgio Agamben

**Abstract:** Der Begriff des Begehrrens ist wichtig, um die Tiefe der mystischen Erfahrung von Bernhard von Clairvaux zu verstehen. Dieser Artikel skizziert seine Sprache des Begehrrens und ihre Auswirkungen auf Charakteristika seiner theologischen Anthropologie. Um die Aktualität von Bernhards mystischen Erfahrungen und ihres sprachlichen Ausdrucks zu zeigen, wird eine philosophische Interpretation gestützt auf das Denken Giorgio Agambens angewendet.

**Keywords:** language of desire, mysticism, apophatic theology, inoperativity, theological anthropology

*Doctor mellifluus,*<sup>1</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), is known for the power of his words to reveal his mystical experiences. His writings interest philologists<sup>2</sup> as well

---

1 The tradition gave Bernard the title of *doctor mellifluus* because his words of praise for Jesus Christ flow like honey. “This title appears at the top of the first printed edition of the complete works of St. Bernard in 1508. It refers to the verse from Song of Solomon 4:3: ‘Your lips are like scarlet thread and your speech is lovely’. Milk and honey flowed from his lips, says his biographer Geoffroy de Clairvaux.” Jérôme Alexandre, “La théologie comme art. Commentaire du sermon 67 de saint Bernard sur le *Cantique*,” in *L’actualité de saint Bernard: colloque des 20 et 21 novembre 2009*, ed. Antoine Guggenheim and André-Marie Ponnou-Delaffon (Paris: Collège des Bernardins, 2010): 243.

2 See, in particular, Christine Mohrmann, *Études sur le latin des chrétiens. Tome II, Latin chrétien et médiéval*, Storia e letteratura (Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1961); Dorette Saber-ský-Bascho, *Studien zur Paronomasie bei Bernhard von Clairvaux* (Freiburg i. Ü.: Universitätsverlag, 1979).

---

**Stefan Constantinescu**, Fribourg

as theologians<sup>3</sup> and philosophers.<sup>4</sup> In my doctoral thesis I analysed the significance of the experience called by the Cistercian “the visits of the Word” (*visitatio Verbi*).<sup>5</sup> The first part of my PhD research focuses on the capacity of language to enclose its readers in the mystery of this personal encounter with God through his Word. The use of language serves in some way to reiterate this experience. Bernard’s words express his desire to keep the divine presence in his life and in his community. He offers his voice to the Word so that the Word may continually visit through the power of his words.

The title of this paper may seem contradictory. What is the relationship between the complexity of language in Bernard’s theology and the inoperative mode? Although the term “inoperative” (*inoperosità*) has been forged in recent years in the philosophical writings of Giorgio Agamben, it is important to warn readers of the possible methodological limitation. This remark requires another question: why study the theology of such a great Cistercian author of the 12th century, Bernard of Clairvaux, through the philosophical terms developed by Giorgio Agamben, who is a contemporary Italian author?

Insofar as theology has tried to express the existence of language itself without being able to affirm it in words (this is its sacramental and apophatic core), Agamben’s philosophy tries to illuminate the possibility of a ‘political messianism’ understood as an immanent and ethical work. The first step of this article is to summarise

---

<sup>3</sup> See, in particular, Jean Leclercq, *Études sur saint Bernard et le texte de ses écrits*, ASOC 9 (Rome, 1953); Jean Leclercq, *Recueil d'études sur saint Bernard et ses écrits. Vol. III*, Storia e letteratura (Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1969); Jean Leclercq, “L'écrivain,” in *Bernard de Clairvaux: Histoire, mentalités, spiritualité. Colloque de Lyon-Cîteaux-Dijon*, SC 380 (Paris: Cerf, 2010): 529–556; Jean Figuet, “Des jeux de mots de saint Bernard... à saint Bernard,” *CCist* 52 (1990): 54–65; Vladimir Lossky, “Études sur la terminologie de saint Bernard,” *ALMA* 17 (1942): 79–96; Alain Michel, *Théologiens et mystiques au Moyen Âge: La Poétique de Dieu (V<sup>e</sup>–XV<sup>e</sup> siècles)* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998); Bernard McGinn and Patricia Ferris McGinn, *La transformation en Dieu: Douze grands mystiques*, trans. Micheline Triomphe (Paris: Cerf, 2006); Bernard McGinn, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism, Vol. II: The Growth of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1994); Lia Pierluigi, *Un'estetica del Verbum in Bernardo di Chiaravalle* (Milano: Facoltà Teologica dell’Italia Settentrionale, 2011); Paul Murray, “The Word into Words: ‘Grace and Truth’ in St. Bernard of Clairvaux,” *Comm* 28 (2001): 3–25.

<sup>4</sup> See, in particular, Emmanuel Falque, *Le livre de l’expérience: D’Anselme de Cantorbéry à Bernard de Clairvaux* (Paris: Cerf, 2017); Sylvain Camilleri, *Phénoménologie de la religion et herméneutique théologique dans la pensée du jeune Heidegger: Commentaire analytique des Fondements philosophiques de la mystique médiévale (1916–1919)* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008); Catherine Deliot, “La phénoménologie de l’expérience du divin,” *BAGB* 56 (1997): 264–278.

<sup>5</sup> My PhD research has been published as Stefan Constantinescu, *Visitatio Verbi dans les Sermons In Cantica de Saint Bernard de Clairvaux*, Studia Oecumenica Friburgensis 109 (Münster: Aschenendorff, 2022). This article is based on the research carried out as part of my doctoral thesis.

the language of desire in the writings of the Cistercian and to underline the characteristics of his theological anthropology. The notion of “desire” is very prominent and has many shades in the works of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, especially in the *Sermons on the Song of Songs*. Secondly, I will show that the term *inoperosità* (inoperativity, *désœvrement* in French) can highlight the theological dimension of the language of desire in an apophatic meaning. Indeed, my aim, which is part of a larger research project, is to use the term *inoperosità* as a neologism to renew the specific language of apophatic theology. For this article, I try to apply it in the analysis of the mysticism of Saint Bernard.

## 1 The Shades of Desire in Bernard of Clairvaux’s Sermons

Bernard is inhabited by a language that allows him to express his mystical experiences and to discover himself in his relationship with God. Through his poetic style, the mystical language is a kind of revelation, an unveiling of the person, his desire and his way of being in the world. There are several studies that have looked into the question of desire in Bernard de Clairvaux. Among the most important, the analyses of Blanpain,<sup>6</sup> Leclercq,<sup>7</sup> Piault<sup>8</sup> and Casey<sup>9</sup> caught my attention and guided me in this research. For instance, the purpose of Casey’s study, one of the rarest in English, is “to explore Bernard’s understanding of the nature and working of human desire for God. [...] The Song of Songs, particularly in its interplay of presence and absence, was seen by Bernard and his contemporaries as a dramatic presentation of the dialectic of desire.”<sup>10</sup> Following up on his analysis, Casey highlights Bernard’s use of *desiderium* and its equivalents in his *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, to arrive at some general understanding of the notion.

In order to have a complete view of the linguistic field surrounding the notion of desire, it is important to take into account the other images used by Bernard to complete the theme of the desire for God. As a result, the themes of love, devotion,

---

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Blanpain, “Langage mystique, expression du désir dans les Sermons sur le Cantique des cantiques de Bernard de Clairvaux,” *CCist* 36 (1974): 45–68, 226–247.

<sup>7</sup> Jean Leclercq, *L’amour des lettres et le désir de Dieu: Initiation aux auteurs monastiques du Moyen âge* (Paris: Cerf, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Bernard Piault, “Le désir de la Sagesse chez S. Bernard,” *CCist* 36 (1974): 24–44.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Casey, *Athirst for God: Spiritual Desire in Bernard of Clairvaux’s Sermons on the Song of Songs*, CistSS 77 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1988).

<sup>10</sup> Casey, *Athirst for God*, 59.

compulsion are also explored in Casey's study. This leads him to analyse the anthropology of desire, strongly linked to the nature of the human being. Indeed, the origin of human desire for God has its roots in the divine image that created the human being:

If the human being is made with a deep inner void which can only be filled through an intimate interpersonal relationship with God, then spiritual desire necessarily leads to divine union. The traditional metaphor for this, which Bernard takes over, and which is already prompted by the text of the Song of Songs, is that of spiritual marriage. The soul thirsts for union with the Word. All its strivings are directed to becoming, in the words of the first letter to the Corinthians 6:17, 'one spirit' with him.<sup>11</sup>

Casey notes a dialectic of desire in Bernard's theology. On the one hand, desire aims towards the future in order to achieve divine union and to become a citizen of the heavenly Jerusalem. On the other hand, the desire for God helps us in this life to obtain reformation, repentance, self-transcendence, wisdom. Moreover, the alternation of the presence-absence (*vicissitudo-alternatio*) of the Word during his visits, raises the desire to recall him when he leaves.

## 2 *Desiderium*

Bernard expresses the relationship with God by using the word *desiderium* as a key concept. The term *desiderium* is at the basis of the quest for God, an expression that dominates the *Sermons on the Song of Songs*. In fact, *quaerere Deum* is a leitmotif of the mystic of Bernard of Clairvaux. My thesis<sup>12</sup> links up *quaerere Deum* with the desire to receive the Word's visits, an experience that entails a return journey *par excellence*: "The Song is the poem of that search which is the whole monastic programme: *quaerere Deum*; a search that will only be completed in eternity, but which already receives its real satisfaction in an obscure possession; and this makes desire grow, which is, here below, the form of love."<sup>13</sup>

Casey points out that the notion *desiderium* is not a technical term. It is a descriptive word: "the value of the reality it describes is neutral in itself; it becomes possessed of either positive or negative qualities according to its object. Bernard understood spiritual desire as something coming from the very heart of human

---

11 Casey, *Athirst for God*, 61.

12 Especially in the first chapter called "Fateor et mihi adventasse Verbum (Sct 74, 5): La voix du texte bernardin."

13 Leclercq, *L'amour des lettres*, 85.

being.”<sup>14</sup> The nature of the desire for God draws its origin in the deepest part of the human being, namely in the soul (*anima*) or in the heart (*cor*) designated by Bernard as the organ of desire.

In the sermon 74,7 of the *Song of Songs*, Bernard used a traditional phrase to indicate that he was carried along by desire (*desiderio feror*):

When I have had such experience of the Word, is it any wonder that I take to myself the words of the Bride, calling him back when he has withdrawn? For although my fervour is not as strong as hers, yes, I am transported by a desire (*desiderio feror*) like hers. As long as I live the word ‘return’, the word of recall for the recall of Word, will be on my lips. As often as he slips away from me, so often shall I call him back. From the burning desire of my heart (*ardendi desiderio cordis*), I will not cease to call him, begging him to return, as if after someone who is departing, and I will implore him to give back to me the joy of his salvation, and restore himself to me.<sup>15</sup>

As previously argued, the *Song of Songs* is the poem of the quest for God which defines the whole monastic programme; a quest which will only end in eternity, but which already receives its real satisfaction in an apophatic possession; and this makes desire grow, which is, here below, the form of love. Bernard’s theological anthropology starts from fundamental psychological data, his mysticism is strongly grounded in the human nature where it takes its roots and flourishes. Generally speaking, desire is that of the human being, which seeks to be fulfilled by a presence. Human desire for union with God is nothing else but a mirroring of the divine desire which created the human race with no other purpose in view that to create a union as the ultimate result.

The occurrences of the term *desiderium* suggests the fact that most of the time Bernard uses the term in connection with the Divine Word. Table 1 highlights the main occurrences of the term *desiderium* in the work of the sermons on Bernard’s *Song of Songs*.

Fundamentally, desire aims to create a more comprehensive experience, to be gained from the presence of the Word, from seeing Christ (*SCt* 28,13), from finding God (*SCt* 84,1). It is the prospect of union with God in his Word – described by Bernard in so many ways – which is the immediate cause of spiritual desire. In this sense, Casey argues “desire has the capacity to increase its force. It grows, and will continue to grow without restriction, even in eternity. It is an all-consuming appetite which knows no satiation. Thus, desire has, for Bernard, an element of *epektasis* noted in the teaching of Gregory of Nyssa.”<sup>16</sup> In that sense, sermon 31 on

---

14 Casey, *Athirst for God*, 65.

15 *SCt* 74,7, Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs: Vol. III*, trans. Kilian Walsh and Irene M. Edmonds, CiFS (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1980), 92.

16 Casey, *Athirst for God*, 69, n. 22.

**Table 1:** *Desiderium in the Sermons on the Song of Songs (SCt).*

<i>desiderium</i>	desire the coming of the Bridegroom	33,1; 75,1
	desire the coming of the Word	32,2; 32,3; 74,2; 74,4
	desire to see Christ	28,13
	wish to see the Bridegroom	41,2
	to desire of God the Word	84,6
<i>desidero</i>	desire the coming of the Bridegroom	51,1
	desire the coming of the Spirit	17,1
	desire the coming of the Word	31,6; 74,2
	desire to see Christ	28,7
	desire to see the Bridegroom	41,2; 45,3

*The Song of Songs* is the example *par excellence* of the transfiguration of the soul according to the intimate manifestation of the Divine Word.

As stated by Casey, the desire arises particularly when the loved one is absent: “the desire is necessarily connected with the experience of absence or privation. Love and joy are what one feels when a loved one is present; in absence this love expresses itself through desire.”<sup>17</sup> To underline this statement, let’s go back to Bernard:

When that which is loved is at hand, love thrives; when absent is languishes. This is simply the weariness of impatient desire (*impatientis desideria*) by which the mind of the ardent lover is necessarily afflicted when the loved one is absent; wholly absorbed in expectation, she reckons even any haste to be slow.<sup>18</sup>

The dialectic of presence and absence is a constant theme in the *Song of Songs*. The substantial variation in experience was termed by Bernard *alternatio* and *vicissitudo*. In the sermon 31, Bernard speaks about the various forms in which the Word presents himself in the present life, alternating from one visit of the Word to the next:

The Word, who is the Bridegroom, often makes himself known under more than one form to those who are fervent. Why so? Doubtless because he cannot be seen yet as he is. That vision is unchanging, because the form in which he will them be seen in unchanging; for he is, and can suffer no change determined by present, past, or future.<sup>19</sup>

The Word appears in different forms to evoke different responses in the heart of the recipients, according to their conditions and needs:

<sup>17</sup> Casey, *Athirst for God*, 70.

<sup>18</sup> SCt 53,3, Bernard of Clairvaux, *Song of Songs III*, 42.

<sup>19</sup> SCt 31,3, Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs: Vol. II*, trans. Walsh, *Cistercian Fathers*, 124.

Not yet have I come round to saying that he has appeared as he is, although in this inward vision he does not reveal himself as altogether different from what he is. Neither does he make his presence continuously felt, not even to his most ardent lovers, nor in the same way to all. For the various desires of the soul, it is essential that the taste of God's presence be varied too, and that the infused flavour of divine delight should titillate in manifold ways the palate of the soul that seeks him.<sup>20</sup>

Desire is increased by the experience of absence, and with each subsequent return, the union between the soul and the Word becomes stronger and more intense.

The most beautiful presentation of alternation is found in the sermon 74, which discusses the idea of the Word's return after an absence. The Word of God comes to the soul and leaves it, just as he wishes. The Word withdraws so that the soul, in its desolation, may experience a more intense and explicit desire:

I admit that the Word has also come to me – I speak as a fool – and has come many times (*Fateor et mihi adventasse Verbum*). But although he has come to me, I have never been conscious of the moment of his coming. I perceived his presence, I remembered afterwards that he had been with me; sometimes I had a presentiment that he would come, but I was never conscious of his coming or his going. [...] The coming of the Word was not perceptible to my eyes, for he has no colour; not to my ears, for there was no sound; nor yet to my nostrils, for he mingles with the mind, not to the air; he has not acted upon the air, but created it.<sup>21</sup>

In his description of the personal visit of the Word, Bernard excludes sensible perception; he goes out of his way to show that experience cannot be reduced to sensible impressions or feelings. Only from the movement and the desire of the heart does one know about the visit.

### 3 From the Complexity of Language to the Inoperative Mode

It can be stated with conviction that the desire in Bernard's theology is only to be in the presence of the Word. The desire prepares us in some way to receive a preview of the Kingdom of God. Desire sets us on the road to the Eschaton. When desire is ardent, the human being to feel already the messianic time. Bernard's originality lies in the theology of the intermediate coming. The expression *medius adventus* (intermediate coming) is used by Bernard in the series of liturgical sermons

---

20 *SCT 31,7*, Bernard of Clairvaux, *Song of Songs II*, 129–30.

21 *SCT 74,5*, Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs: Vol. IV*, trans. Irene M. Edmond, CiFS (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1980), 90.

for Advent. The intermediate coming corresponds to a succession of comings and goings of Christ in souls in the course of human history between the two “heritages.” The first “heritage” is the Incarnation, and the second is the Parousia. Both are articulated by the intermediate coming. Bernard uses language to reveal this desire. We can say that Bernard’s language is the space between us and the Word. In the presence of the Word, language ceases to be operative and lends itself to divine glory. I call this the inoperative mode.

The language of Bernard is a *dispositive* – an apparatus able to maintain the hidden character of the mystery, to cross the limits and to recall the visit of the Word. In a certain sense, desire is a language for Bernard that has many shades. On several occasions in his sermons, Bernard explains to his monks that desire itself is a language. This is always directly related to the fact that the unique object of our desire is the Word, the Word of God. Thus, we read in the sermon 45,7:

So whenever you hear or read that the Word and the soul converse together, and contemplate each other, do not imagine them speaking with human voices nor appearing in bodily form. Listen, this is rather what you must think about it: The Word is a spirit (John 4:24), the soul is a spirit; and they possess their own mode of speech and mode of presence in accord with their nature. The speech of the Word is loving kindness, that of the soul, the fervour of devotion.<sup>22</sup>

From this comes the possibility for Bernard to awaken desire in the souls through words and preaching. Indeed, the words of a man of desire, icon of God, are likely to transmit the same fervour. Language becomes, for Bernard, an expression of his desire to receive the Word’s visits. Through this, language receives a sacramental dimension of invocation of the divine Name. The sacramental dimension of language simultaneously activates and deactivates human words. When the human being speaks, his language is activated according to a habitual usage: that of communication. However, the human capacity to produce new forms of language is not exhausted (*inoperosità*) in the use of language. Bernard de Clairvaux skilfully masters the techniques of language to transmit his sermons. It is not the actual use of language that gives his sermons a sacramental character, but the power of the Name of God which acts from within the speech. Human language, manifested also in the dialectic of desire, becomes a figure of inoperativity revealing the presence of the Word. It leads to contemplation.

With the phrase “figure of inoperativity,” I come to the Agamben’s investigation in *The Use of Bodies*.<sup>23</sup> Chapter 8 of the first part focuses of the term “inappro-

---

22 *SCT* 45,7, Bernard of Clairvaux, *Song of Songs II*, 238.

23 I have studied in more detail the relationship between Agamben’s philosophy and theology in the article “Passer de l’expression à l’inappropriable. Une relecture de la relation au Verbe chez Bernard de Clairvaux à travers la philosophie de Giorgio Agamben,” *RTP* 153 (2021): 473–488.

priable.” Therefore, the notion of “use” appears “as *relation to an inappropriable*, as the only possible relation to that supreme state of the world in which it, as just, can be in no way appropriated.”<sup>24</sup> “Use” as a relationship to an inappropriable culminates in a theory of inoperativity, that is, the ability to deactivate and open human activities to new uses. In *Homo Sacer* project, Agamben articulates this theme for the first time. “Inoperativity” translates the French term *désœuvrement* (*inoperosità* in Italian, although Agamben often uses the French word). Indeed, the inoperativity must be read as a generic mode of potentiality, which is not exhausted in a *transitus de potentia ad actum*. According to Agamben, human beings as potential beings have no proper *ergon* (activity); they are *argos*, without any activity, inoperative.

According to *The Agamben Dictionary*, the notion “inoperativity” is central to *The Time That Remains*.<sup>25</sup> The messianic vocation (*klesis*) consists precisely in the re-vocation of any vocation; however, this re-vocation does not destroy or annihilate the factitious condition of the world, but rather suspends it in the figure of the “as if not” (*hos me, come non*). Use (*uso*) is the form that this deactivation takes: “to live messianically means ‘to use’ *klesis*; conversely, messianic *klesis* is something to use not to possess.”<sup>26</sup> Importantly, this use in the form of the *as if not* does not merely have a negative connotation; it does not constitute a new identity, but rather the “new creature” is nothing but the use and the messianic vocation of the old identity. The old identity is not replaced by a new one but only rendered inoperative, and, in this way, opened to its *true use*. The key term is here *katargesis*, which describes, in St Paul’s epistles, the “fulfilment” of the law at the arrival of the Messiah; it comes from the Greek *argeo*, and thus from *argos*, and means “I make inoperative, I deactivate, I suspend the efficacy.”<sup>27</sup> *Argeo* translates also, in the Septuagint, the verb that signifies the Sabbath rest. The fulfilment in the use is thus *désœuvrement*, and messianic potentiality is precisely that which is not exhausted in its *ergon*, but that remains potential in a “weak” form. *Katargesis* restores the works – the identities – to their potentiality by rendering them inoperative.

The relationship between the *inappropriate* and the *inoperosità* (inoperativity) is revealing of a negative approach reminiscent of apophatic. Both terms include

---

<sup>24</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 81.

<sup>25</sup> Carlo Salzani, “Inoperative/Deactivation,” in *The Agamben Dictionary*, ed. Alex Murray and Jessica Whyte (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 106–108.

<sup>26</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Time that Remains. A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey, Meridian Series (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 26.

<sup>27</sup> Agamben, *Time*, 95.

a negation that is aiming to reveal the limit in the possibility of knowing and acting in the world. This negativity has a theological component with a long tradition in apophatic theology.

Our thesis uses Agamben's concept of *inoperosità* to show how Bernard of Clairvaux uses the art of words to produce the effect of the experience he calls visits of the Word. Bernard's writings discreetly bring out some elements that refer us to this term. Bernard confesses the experience of the Word (*experimentum Verbum*) with the help of words, but these cease to work at the moment of contemplation. Bernard's language is inoperative in order to express the desire for contemplation of the Word as a form of life and interior transformation. The language of desire is rendered inoperative in order to open up to a new use which will take the form of the language of the Word. Thus, the readers receive a foretaste of the messianic time, presented as inoperativity and sabbatical rest.

All in all, for Bernard, the desire is to live in the plenitude of wisdom, which is the fulfilment of *inoperosità*: "So the Bridegroom, the Word, will have no need for the food of good works since all work must cease where wisdom is understood fully by all, for it is said, *They who have little need of activity shall understand is.*"<sup>28</sup>

## 4 Conclusion

My thesis revolves fundamentally around the interplay or relationship between the experience of the visitations of the Word and its expression. Thus, I invite readers to move from a translation (or hermeneutic) perspective to an *operation in act* in the sense of a determined creation of a life in the world. In the Christian vision, it is not so much a matter of "translating" a particular experience or event into words as of "giving it a voice." This is a displacement, which means that the emphasis is placed on the moment of an "implementation," of an "operation." It is ultimately a sacramental operation, of the type of a relationship of the divine with the created, which does not conceal the latter since the human being is commanded by a transfigurative or metamorphic aim, as orthodoxy would say, or of a transforming subversion inscribed in bodies.

Agamben's project aims at unveiling a metaphysics in which essence and existence coincide. Now, through my analysis of Bernard's experience, I leave behind any vision of a reference to an event or an experience, both of which are seen as isolable, and which would be accounted for in order to confirm that they have taken place, or even to validate them. This is due to the fact that the textual moment

---

28 Bernard of Clairvaux, *Song of Songs IV*, 64.

is a moment proper to a “coming out of the body” of the world in terms of what Christianity acknowledges as “salvation” or transformation of the world and the human according to the axis of God. Therefore, one should not remain at a phenomenological consideration. On the contrary, one is invited to inhabit a space of encounter, determined and of irreducible complexity, where the subject reveals itself as a “place,” the place of intrigue and passages, the place of a series of “visits.” Yet, as God doesn’t belong to a place and is out of time, I, therefore, argue that he is “inappropriate,” bringing this term closer to apophatic theology. God is inappropriate, and our desire to have his presence sends us to a proper name, to images, to figures. As a result, we say with our words what is hidden in a mystery. Agamben’s theological explorations do not start from a transcendent God but question the way the immanent world creates a relationship with both the absent and the possible. Desire in the Bernardine expression evokes an experience in which the “transcendent” is lived in the hollow of an immanent encounter.

Finally, desire aims at a fulfilment or realisation of the human person. Our true nature is discovered through the visits of the Word. Bernard’s meditation opens onto a “messianism” understood as an immanent and operative task. To be “messianic” is to live in the Messiah, which certainly passes through a moment of “dispossession,” but this dispossession establishes not so much a new identity as a new use of the old one.

