

Symposium at the Saint Anselm Institute (Rome)

Self-governance, governance of others. Bernard of Clairvaux's treatise *On 'Consideration'*.

Tuesday 17 November – Friday 20 November 2026 at the Saint Anselm
Institute



Towards the very end of his earthly life, probably from 1149 until 1153, Bernard of Clairvaux sent the books of his treatise **On Consideration** (**De consideratione**) to Pope Eugene III, a former monk of Clairvaux. This major work, a true spiritual testament of the Cistercian monk, is far more than a mere manual on papal governance. It offers a profound reflection on the very foundations of authority within the Church and sets out an ethics of action and a Christian political philosophy in which self-knowledge becomes the indispensable prerequisite for any form of government. Written against a backdrop of multiple crises – the schism of Anacletus II, the after-effects of which were still being felt; revolts by the Roman communes against papal authority; and the bitter failure of the Second Crusade, which Bernard himself had preached – this text lies at the crossroads of several fundamental tensions:

Between political theory and contemplative mysticism: How does Bernard manage to articulate a comprehensive theory of ecclesiastical power whilst grounding it in a contemplative experience? What role does the distinction he draws between *consideratio* and *contemplatio* play in this?

Between defence of the papacy and criticism of its excesses: The treatise forcefully affirms the *plenitudo potestatis* of the pontiff whilst denouncing the institution's excesses. Can this tension be read as an implicit criticism of certain aspects of the Gregorian Reform and its consequences for the conception of papal power?

Between temporal and spiritual power: Bernard's interpretation of the theory of the two swords offers an original articulation of temporal and spiritual powers that goes beyond a mere theocratic claim. How does Bernard position himself in relation to the Gregorian Reform?

Between the universal and the particular: The treatise constantly oscillates between universal principles of government and practical advice tailored to the specific situation of Eugene III. How does this dialectic structure Bernardine political thought and enable its relevance today?

Between anthropology and ecclesiology: The threefold distinction of *quid*, *quis* and *qualis* es that Bernard proposes to Eugene establishes a fundamental link between self-knowledge and the governance of others. How does this theological anthropology underpin an original ecclesiology in which authority is understood more as service (*ministerium*) than as domination (*imperium*)?

Between tradition and innovation: Whilst Bernard is firmly rooted in a patristic and monastic tradition, his conceptualisation of the *consideratio*—which articulates three modes of consideration (dispensative, estimative, speculative)—merits study in relation to medieval political and spiritual thought.

A bedside book for several popes with divergent theological and ecclesiological orientations, from the 12th century right up to Benedict XVI, this treatise continues to shed light on key contemporary debates. To what extent do Bernard's reflections on the bureaucratic and legal excesses of the Curia resonate with current discussions on synodality and the reform of ecclesial governance? How can his dialectic between self-governance and the governance of others shed light on contemporary crises of authority, both within the Church and in secular institutions? In what way does his emphasis on *consideratio* as an indispensable prerequisite for action offer a relevant counterpoint to the activism and immediacy that characterise current modes of governance?

Scientific Committee: Pierre-André Burton, Cédric Giraud, Guy Lobrichon, Laurence Mellerin, Philippe Nouzille.

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See the programme on the Sant'Anselmo website:

<https://www.anselmianum.com/it/26-facolta/facolta-di-teologia/1789-convegno-governo-di-se-governo-degli-altri-il-trattato-di-bernardo-di-chiaravalle-sulla-considerazione>

The lectures will be streamed via a link to be provided in due course by Sant'Anselmo.