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1-1-1994

Repository Citation
Mayeski, Marie Anne, "The Assumption as a Monastic Celebration: Ælred of Rievaulx's Homilies for the Feast" (1994). Theological Studies Faculty Works, 187.
http://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/theo_fac/187

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The Assumption as a Monastic Celebration: Ælred of Rievaulx’s Homilies for the Feast

by

Marie Anne Mayeski

Like all monastic writers of the twelfth century, Ælred of Rievaulx can be best understood if seen against the tradition which he studied with care and which he wished to reinterpret in light of his own day and context. For the Marian feast of the Assumption, Ælred’s chief predecessors were the Carolingian authors whose homilies for that feast were pivotal in the later development of the doctrine of the Assumption and its connection with the other Marian teaching. It was under the Carolingians that the feast of the Assumption found its permanent place in the liturgical calendar in the West, and in The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Anglo-Saxon England, Mary Clayton notes the importance of the Carolingians in the development of the theology of the Assumption, asserting that their “main contribution . . . was probably the greater emphasis they placed upon the person of Mary. Whereas patristic writers concentrated on Mary’s role as mother of God and its consequences for Christological doctrine, the Carolingians sought rather to explore the consequences for Mary herself.”¹ It seems helpful, then, to begin this study of some of Ælred’s homilies for the Assumption with a glance at some Carolingian homilies which can serve as foil to highlight his own contributions.

The homilies of Paul the Deacon, (c. 720-800) as found in Vol. 95 of Migne’s *Patrologia Latina,* give a fair sampling of the range of material and of ways to structure it that occurs during the Carolingian period. It is important to remember that Carolingian homilies do not generally represent what was preached in a liturgical context; they were usually written texts, designed for the spiritual reading of the devout laity or to be read in a monastic setting. Nonetheless, they were essentially pastoral in intent and can therefore appropriately be analyzed for this study. In terms of general structure, Carolingian homilies can be divided into two kinds: a single-reading homily, designed as a commentary on either the Epistle or the Gospel assigned to the feast and what I call a *mystery homily,* which addressed more directly the “matter” of the feast. The first type of homily, usually a straightforward piece of exegesis, is often taken directly from the exegetical works of earlier writers, most frequently from the works of the great Latin fathers (Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome and Gregory the Great). The second type, though generally still dependent upon the earlier exegetical traditions (the common currency of preachers throughout the medieval period) often reveals something of the author’s own thinking, at least in the process of selecting and conflating texts and interpretations. For while the single-reading homily is quite obviously controlled by the reading it is designed to explain, the *mystery homily* is usually built up by the concatenation of brief texts, related to each other and/or to a primary text by the coincidence of word or metaphor. Jean Leclercq, in *Love of Learning and the Desire for God,* calls this the method of “reminiscence” and it is, as he notes, the enduring legacy and task of the monastic tradition.

Among Paul’s ten homilies for the Assumption, most are simply selections from earlier authors (Ambrose, Augustine, a bishop Anselm, and the tract *Cognitio me*). Homily 45 is the only mystery homily for the feast of the Assumption in the sanctoral cycle and provides a good example of Paul’s pastoral understanding of the Marian feast. The foundational text for Homily 45 (of the sanctoral cycle) is 59:8:5, “Who is this coming up from the desert, leaning upon her lover.” Assuming that the feminine person referred to in the text is Mary, Paul asks a series of questions designed to elicit the allegorical (that is to say, the *usable*) meaning of the text. What is the “desert”? 6 How and how far does the woman in the text “ascend”? Who is the “lover” on which she leans? The careful exegesis of this text becomes the occasion for several points of theological importance. Paul emphasizes the initially fragile state of humanity from which Mary ascends to the highest glory, underlining, rhetorically and theologically, the graced quality of all her privileges. This is the thread that weaves through the whole homily, in spite of its often extravagant praise of the Virgin. Paul gives an extended and dramatic picture of the glories to which Mary ascends, surrounded by hosts of saints and angels (“above all excellent creatures, no matter how shining they may be”); at the same time he emphatically denies any sure knowledge about Mary’s bodily Assumption. Quoting his apostolic patron, he states that though Mary truly ascends to heaven, “whether in the body or out of the body, we do not know, God knows” (1491C, from 2 Cor 12).

The central section of Homily 45 can be analyzed under the three rhetorical moves which Paul makes, in what is, after all, a somewhat lengthy homily. First he lays down the reasons on which he argues for the appropriateness of Mary’s exaltation. Then he develops a lengthy and eloquent catalog of Mary’s privileges and virtues. Finally he asserts that Mary’s virtues and privileges require a response from the devout Christian faithful, a response specified by the liturgical occasion which creates its own moral requirements. Paul offers two reasons why honor is appropriately offered to Mary. First, he argues that her heavenly glory ought to be commensurate with the glory that she has on earth in being the mother of the Redeemer. This seems, at first glance, to be a weak argument, especially since he has been at some pains to describe her own lowly status as creature: “The Lord has done this and it is wonderful in our eyes [Ps 117]: that a fragile female, a small worm brought forth out of the dust of this turbulent world, deserves to surpass in the highest degree, all excellent creatures, no matter how pure and shining they may be” (1491C). But by this first
She is a most merciful mediator because, thoroughly human, she knew how to suffer. Paul the Deacon shows no discomfort with this teaching, but he does situate it with great theological care and is at pains to give Scriptural support to the importance of human mediators in the work of God, recalling the work of both Abraham (Gen 18:20-32) and Moses (Num 21:4-9) (1496C,D).

Paul’s discussion of Mary as mediator sets up the exhortatory section of the homily. Here he describes the kind of Christian response which the mystery of the Assumption requires of the faithful. For him, the sign of true devotion to Mary is conversion of life, but described precisely in its connection to the liturgical celebration of the feast. As Mary is raised up to be Queen of Heaven, the first obligation of those devoted to her is to rejoice and to celebrate. Paul has a deeply liturgical sense of Christian life: to fully grasp and respond to the story of salvation and its present reality in one’s life is to rejoice, to celebrate, to praise. The vocation of Baptism is the call to stand in the assembly of the faithful, to be already a participant in the celestial liturgy described in the Book of Revelation. Moral and practical responses, true conversion of life, follow from the initial obligation of worship and praise and are described as means of preparation for the feast, ways of dressing appropriately, as it were (we think of the parable of the guest who came in without a wedding garment), and of properly preparing our houses. Undoubtedly, behind these descriptions of festal preparations lie the rituals of hospitality and of aristocratic and royal privilege. Thus, Paul the Deacon says that the only way to celebrate the festival is to love justice and hate iniquity because “unseemly is praise upon a sinner’s lips” (Sir 15:9) and “special foods, no matter how deliciously prepared, cannot be pleasing if they are offered on dirty dishes” (1497C). The practicalities of daily living and the moral obligations of the Christian are thus clearly connected to the liturgical life and, in particular, to this feast honoring the queen of heaven. As Paul asks and answers most succinctly, “How can we honor such a queen? By imitating her most sacred life. Let us love as she loved, live as she lived” (1496D).

Lest the elaborate catalog of Mary’s virtues and privileges (to which he has given full play in the body of the homily) daunt the simple faithful Christian, Paul here draws out only the three virtues which he sees as critical to Mary’s life and character and gives them an interpretation accessible to all. He says that she welcomes beautiful chastity in her followers (“Grata est illi castitatis pulchritudo”); she is pleased with humility and self-control (“Dilecta est illi humilitatis modestia”); but above all she cherishes a fervent divine charity (“Pretiosa est in conspectu ejus divinae charitatis flagrantia”). Eschewing her unique excellence as Queen of Heaven, Paul presents Mary as a model for the average, fervent Christian. He
has praised her *virginity* in the catalog of virtues; here the audience/reader is recalled to the importance of * chastity* (a virtue required in every state of life). And more important, even, than chastity is that "humilitatis modestia" by which a Christian is called to remember her or his relationship to the dust of the earth ("humilis") and to act with appropriate simplicity, honesty and self-control. But above all, to imitate Mary is, for Paul the Deacon, to "love as she loved," that is, to prefer God above all things and to look to others with respect and, even, warmth of feeling.

For Paul the Deacon, the feast of Mary's Assumption is no more nor less than the logical and theological culmination of her whole life and mystery. Eschewing here the controversial issue of her bodily Assumption, this early Carolingian writer focuses on her glorification, the fulfillment toward which her unique relationship with the Trinity inevitably tends. Just as her life was lived, not for herself, but in service to the mystery of salvation, so this feast has consequences for the salvation and sanctification of the Church, described in terms of what might be called *liturgical virtues*. For Paul, the essence of Christian life is to rejoice in, praise and celebrate the central reality of salvation and to express one's joy by loving justice and hating iniquity. To him, therefore, what is pastorally significant about the feast of the Assumption is not the way in which this feast goes beyond Scripture and the most ancient of traditions but the way in which it leads the faithful to a renewed understanding of the intimate connection between liturgical celebration and moral conversion. Both are essential facets of the great mystery of salvation.

Despite his prolific theological output and his reputation as one of the most significant theologians of the Carolingian period, Rhabanus Maurus (784-856) does not offer many homilies for this study; nonetheless he must be considered here because of his theological importance. A homily on the feast of the Assumption can be found in the collection, "Homiliae de festis principis, ad Haistulfum archiepiscopum," one on each of the two readings is found among his "Homiliae in Evangelia et Epistolae ad Lothariam Augustum." All of his homilies are in Vol. 110 of Migne, the first collection dated 826-844 and the second, sometime after 842. His sole *mystery homily* forms a helpful comparison with Paul's and allows us to see the coherence in the Carolingian interpretation of the mystery of Mary's Assumption.

Though the homily is relatively brief, Maurus begins with a detailed explanation of Mary's greatness in which, though he gives due attention to the excellence of her virginity, he emphasizes much more her unique role in bearing the Son of God and the Creator of the universe. Unlike Paul the Deacon, Maurus omits the extended verbal descriptions of the heavenly scene; no mention of angels or of the hosts of saints interrupts his rather sober consideration of the mystery of Mary's glorification. For him, Mary's greatness and the foundation of her royal privileges (including intercessory power) is her role in the drama of salvation, a salvation efficacious for the whole world. This explanation of her position in the plan of God takes up about half of his short homily.

The second half of the homily is exhortation and, like Paul the Deacon, he uses the metaphor of moral uprightness as a kind of adornment appropriate to the celebration of the festival. With even more specific detail than Paul, Maurus exhorts his readers to consider their practical, moral lives as the way in which they may appropriately participate in the rituals and jubilations of the heavenly event (just as they are obliged by social convention to observe the external preparations for other significant public events). "Every person, in whatever state of life they are called, should be zealous to ornament themselves with good works for the festival; fight to the finish to remain faithful to the ideals of your own particular state in life" (Col 56A). The importance of final perseverance is obviously called to mind by the feast; Mary's Assumption is, indeed, the mystery which signifies her own perseverance in the role she was called to play in salvation. And this, in turn, leads Maurus to organize his moral exhortations according to this notion of particular states in life. The idea that moral uprightness and holiness are shaped by the duties which flow from one's particular life situation is new to Maurus; it is an idea, however, that became increasingly important in moral teaching as the sacrament of Penance grew more central to the personal lives of the faithful. The Penance manuals that date from this period inevitably group sins and assess their seriousness in relationship to the various states in life.

Maurus addresses his audience through the categories of virgin or married, rich or poor. Interestingly, and in contrast to the homily of Paul the Deacon, Mary is not mentioned as a specific model in his exhortations; her example is the general one of fidelity to one's vocation. But undoubtedly her importance to the whole tradition of virginity underlies Maurus's exhortations both to the virgins and the married; he focuses on virginity, not as a virtue of sexual continence alone, but on its relationship to the whole range of moral development. To the virgins, he admonishes first that they hold the teachings of God in memory; then he exhorts justice, religious observance, stability in faith, meekness, fraternal peace and the prompt enactment of mercy and all other good deeds. Those who are married, says Maurus, are "virginal" in the uprightness of faith, dedicated to the one spouse of God which is the universal Church (he cites 2 Cor 11). For these, the goal is to preserve conjugal modesty, do good works, love hospitality and offer alms unstintingly. Marriage is not simply a way to preserve
sexual integrity, for Maurus, but a vocation that demands social virtues, especially that generosity of spirit and of goods without which the community cannot be truly the Church of God. The rich are not to trust their riches, nor simply to savor them proudly, but to hope in the living God and share generously in good works. The poor are reminded that they have been especially chosen by God to be rich in faith and, ultimately, fulfilled by God’s promise (citing Jm 2:5 and Ps 36:29). For all, whether noble or lowly, slave or free, men or women, old or young, the ultimate command is the same and Maurus quotes 1 Cor 16:13-14: “Stand firm in faith, act valiantly and be strong; be clothed in love.” This is the way to be appropriately “dressed” for the festival of the Mother of God and, with this thought, Maurus ends his exhortation and his homily.

Again, as in the homilies of Paul the Deacon, what exercises Maurus as homilist, as pastor, is the way in which Mary, though unique in degree of virtue and in privilege, can serve to bring the devout back to the central truths of salvation. From the point of view of doctrine, Maurus emphasizes the way in which the Virgin, as Mother of God, serves only to illuminate the story of universal salvation. In spite of the many and unique privileges which might seem to remove Mary from all connection to ordinary Christian life, Maurus sees the feast of the Assumption as an opportunity to remind the faithful of their own particular moral duties. Where Paul the Deacon has a liturgical, ritualized sense of Christian life, Maurus’s is social, even political. The structured classes of a Carolingian congregation assembled for the feast of the Assumption remind him, not of the hosts of ordered saints and angels in heavenly choirs of praise (as in Paul), but of the social orders engaged in the mutual tasks of bringing the kingdom of God out of the Frankish kingdoms.

When we turn to the homilies of Ælred (1109-1167), Abbot of the Cistercian Abbey of Rievaulx, we are in a different world, not only because three centuries have passed and because we are in England rather than on the continent, but also because we are in a monastic setting. In the world of the Cistercian monastery, the homily is not primarily a text to be read for personal devotion. Each abbot was obliged by the Constitutions of the Order to preach to his community in the chapter room on the principal feast of the Church and not less than twelve times a year.7 So the homilies of Ælred had been given within a very specific context, with the audience and their spiritual obligations well-known to the speaker. Though only a small percentage of the more than one hundred sermons which Ælred must

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9Two new sermon collections of Ælred’s were identified by Gaetano Raciti in 1981 and 1982. See his descriptions in *Collectanea Cisterciensia* 45 (1983): 165-84. Other sermons continue to be attributed to Ælred and will continue to illuminate the importance of his sermons for a full understanding of his work. See Brian Patrick McGuire, “A Changed Face of Ælred: A New Attribution of Sermons to the Abbot of Rievaulx,” *Downside Review* 103 (1985): 147-150.
many sexual demons, Mary did not know man and remained a virgin in body and soul. She surpasses Peter who could not watch one hour with the Lord and even denied him; she bore the Lord within her bosom. Paul was rapt up to the highest heaven, but "whether in the body or out of the body, we do not know;" therefore it is not to be wondered at that Mary may have been bodily assumed into heaven. Though Ælred here quotes the same Scripture that Paul the Deacon cited, he is rather more open to the possibility of her physical Assumption, especially given her superiority to all the apostles. Then he explains the many Scriptural promises of the joy and glory to come and affirms that Mary is the one who preeminently deserves those promises. If there is joy in heaven over one sinner who does penance, how much more joy before God does Mary receive who was without sin? Since light was promised to those who sit in darkness, then Mary, the dawning of the light from on high and the one who gave birth to the true light for all people surely now dwells in unapproachable light. Since Christ, in John's Gospel, promised that wherever he was, there also his ministers would be, surely the woman who ministered to him night and day and followed him even unto death is the one who most appropriately leads all those who follow after the Lamb. Throughout all of this, Ælred is arguing, as Paul the Deacon did, that anything promised to the least of the saints, anything enjoyed by those who followed Christ with some imperfection, is enjoyed preeminently and in a way that defies description (though he works hard at describing it) by the Virgin Mother of God. This principle, of arguing from the excellence of the saints to the preeminence of Mary, was an ancient one, first articulated by Epiphanius in the fifth century. Unlike earlier Carolingian authors, Ælred does not emphasize the relationship of Mary with the persons of the Trinity, and his panegyric is therefore less pointedly soteriological. He does affirm in a number of places that all of her greatness comes from bearing the Redeemer of the world, but he dwells on other points with more attention and more delight and so blunts the edge of that Christological importance. Mary is seen much more against the background of the pantheon of saints than in the bosom of the Trinity. Ælred also ignores what had been a traditional argument for the Assumption, one utilized by Paul: he does not speak of Christ honoring his mother with the Assumption in order to fulfill the command of the decalogue, though that theme was hallowed by tradition even in the Carolingian period.

The excellence of Mary's virtue has pride of place in Ælred's exposition of the mystery of the Assumption. Various texts found in the liturgical celebration, such as Ps 44:10: "The queen sits at your right hand, clothed in gold and surrounded by diversity," introduce the motif of virtue as adornment, which was given a pastoral and ethical focus in the homilies of Paul and Rhabanus Maurus. Here that thought becomes
interpretations, but all are built upon a foundational understanding of salvation history critical to his pastoral and practical applications.

Homily 17 in Migne is an excellent example of Ælred’s allegorical interpretation of the gospel for the Assumption.

That homily divides easily into two parts. In the first part, he develops the image of the home of Martha and Mary as the place where God dwells, drawn from the opening verse of the Vulgate text of Luke 11, “Intravit Jesus in quoddam castellum. . . .” Giving the word castellum its full force as “castle,” and with, no doubt, many twelfth-century examples in his imagination, Ælred builds an extended allegory around all of the elements which constitute the castle (its foundations, the walls and the tower) and make it a fortress of defense. The foundation is humility (the Latin “humilis” connected etymologically to “earthworks”) and the wall is chastity. Ælred gives here a kind of standard exposition of Mary’s excellence in these virtues. But the tower is the highest point of the castle’s defence and represents charity. In true Cistercian spirit, Ælred is eloquent on the superior importance of charity, without which both humility and chastity are easily overcome.

In the second half of the homily, Ælred develops his own variation on the traditional interpretation of Martha and Mary as types of the contemplative and active lives.10 Ælred insists that these are not two separate ways of living but two activities, held in creative tension, in all true Christian living. Sometimes our neighbor must be fed and given succor, sometimes we must perform ascetical actions, such as fasting, vigils and corporal discipline. Together all of these actions constitute the work of Martha, made necessary by the punishment for sin proclaimed in the text of Gen 3: “In the sweat of your brow, shall you eat your bread.” The active life is, therefore, a way of remembering our communal past. At other times, we must be still and taste how sweet the Lord is (Ps 33). This is the portion given to Mary, which shall not be taken from her. This is the anticipation of our communal future, which will endure forever in heaven, when all of the penalties of sin shall have long since been obliterated. In the Christian’s experience of the dynamics of action and contemplation, the full sweep of the history of salvation is present, the sinful past remembered in action and the glorious future anticipated in contemplation.

Ælred cites the Rule of Benedict to demonstrate that these two dimensions of Christian life are found in the very structure of monastic life, noting that the Rule provides, as Ælred says, “that sometimes we must be intent on reading, like Mary, and at other times, sent to work, like Martha” (Migne 195, 307A). Typically Ælred resolves the tension between contemplation and action in a practical, experiential way; the perfect balance comes by living it out, in a monastic obedience that gives to each work its true worth. In explaining the Martha/Mary gospel as applied both to the monastic life and to the Virgin, Ælred points to his understanding that Mary is the perfect exemplar of the monastic ideal, resolving the tension between action and contemplation in her own historical life. When she dressed Christ and carried him and took him, in flight, to Egypt, she was absorbed in the world of action. When she considered all the words of Jesus and her experience of him, this was her life of contemplation. Since the life of contemplation is the life of heaven, the eschatological reality, Mary already anticipates that life while on earth. So too does the monastic community, both in its practice of the evangelical/eschatological virtue of chastity, and in its attention to the life of contemplation.

Sermon 17 is really only tangentially about the Assumption of Mary. In Sermon 18, Ælred is more attentive to the actual mystery of the Assumption. The primary text of the homily is 5g 3; the controlling idea, however, is taken from 2 Cor 5, Paul’s words on knowing Christ, no longer according to the flesh. The two natures of Christ, his perfect divinity and his complete humanity, form the doctrinal starting point of Ælred’s reflections; to these two natures correspond the two ways of knowing Christ, according to the flesh and according to the spirit. The first, though objectively inferior, is the only way to perfect love, the way that Mary herself followed. Ælred recapitulates the life of Mary in terms of the quest for the Beloved described in 5g 3; she sought him, did not find him, was found by his watchmen, then finds him in a way that she will never let him go. Though she loved him better than anyone else has loved him and though she sought him diligently, like the lover in the Canticle, she was seeking him in the night of the flesh and therefore she did not completely find him in the spirit. Ælred is simple and eloquent here. She sought him before the Incarnation and though she bore him first in her womb and then in her arms, she only had him in the flesh and therefore did not truly find him. At the passion, in that night of total darkness, she still sought him in the flesh, wanting him not to die, wanting the Jews to be confounded. With what sorrow, Ælred muses, did she receive that other son, the disciple, in place of the Son she really sought! She did not really find him even after the Ascension, though she sought him in the thoughts of her heart, her memories, in his words, in compassion for others. Then she is found by the watchmen of the heavenly city, that is the angels; then she finds Christ in an enduring way, never to let him go. She was not to find Christ truly, that is according to the spirit, until she relinquished her own flesh to be reborn to eternal life, the event celebrated in the feast of the Assumption. On the other hand, Mary would not have found Christ according to the spirit unless she had first sought him

ardently in the flesh. Even the greatest of the faithful must pass from earthly to heavenly love; there is no by-passing the stage of knowing Christ according to the flesh.¹¹ For Ælred the Assumption is an eschatological feast precisely because it celebrates the continuity between earthly love and spiritual love; the eschatological culmination of a faithful life, liturgically presented in the feast, transcends but does not denigrate the historical life. This same continuity between the historical and the eschatological informs his understanding of the monastic vocation. Therefore he can propose Mary as the perfect monastic model, both in the historical particularity of her own life and in its eschatological fulfillment celebrated in the Assumption. Certainly, he is faithful to Benedict here; the foundation of the Rule is Benedict’s belief that the life of the monk is the search for God. And in the method of meditation that Ælred consistently propounds, he bids the contemplative use the power of the imagination to seek Christ according to the flesh, thereby becoming another Mary. He says, for instance, in the De institutione inclusarum: ¹²

... with complete devotion go aside with [Mary] into the shelter where you can be present and assist at the childbirth. Having placed the infant in the manger break into a joyful cry. Sing with Isaiah: “A child is born to us, a son is given to us.” Embrace the crib gently, letting love conquer timidity and affection cast out fear, so that you may kiss the sacred feet.

But even more so, it is Mary after the Ascension who embodies the life of the monk, seeking Christ in memory, in His words, in interior sweetness, and so on. These are all ways of seeking Christ secundum carnem, but this is both a good and necessary quest for Mary and for the monk alike. The text describing Mary’s life is filled with the vocabulary with which Ælred consistently describes monastic life. Therefore, her Assumption is presented as the telos toward which the monk is tending and the celebration of the feast serves to point the monk more surely in the direction he is to go.

The Durham sermon is, of the three, most dramatically an exposition of the Assumption mystery and its construction is complex, almost to the point of contrivance. There is a single controlling text, taken from 1 Ch 13:5-7, to which Ælred returns at regular intervals in the sermon, but in his allegorical interpretation of this text, he introduces many others, sometimes to force the text to speak to the Marian feast, at other times, to draw the practical lessons for his monks. The text itself is an odd choice: it may have been supplied or suggested by the readings of the night office which ran in a cycle independent of the liturgical feasts. In fact, Ælred is not quoting a particular verse or text verbatim, but has composed a kind of précis from about three verses of the Vulgate narrative. His version reads “Venerunt viri Caritasiam et aduxerunt archam domini et intulerunt eam in domum Aminadab in Gabaa” (and is, in fact, a slight misreading of the original in which the ark is taken from the house of Aminadab and not to it). Though it is impossible to outline his development, a sketch of the general movement of his thought will be helpful.

In an extended allegory, he interprets the viri of the text. He distinguishes between men and man, he speaks of Christ as “the one man” and “the men” as, variously, the Israelites, the apostles and finally (by connection with Prov 31:23) as the older men, distinguished in understanding, who are in charge of the common good. This allows him an exhortation on the qualities of a good abbot and the need for abbots to preserve the sanctity of the cloister from too much gadding about by the monks. Ps 44:10 reintroduces Mary as the mother of that noble man, Christ, and a further disquisition on her excellence above all other saints leads Ælred to a discussion of her intercessory power. The thought of an intercessory queen leads Ælred to the story of Adonijah in 1 K 1, a detailed narrative by which he preaches against various groups of monks who vitiate the ideals of the monastery—those who resist the corrections of their superiors, who seek a comfortable life rather than the spiritual riches of the monastery, those who complain and neglect their duties and so forth. He preserves a particular word of warning for those who feign friendship and then use the intimacy of friendship to betray those who have accepted their love and loyalty. We are reminded of the importance of friendship in Ælred’s understanding of the spiritual life, an importance he develops in his treatise on Spiritual Friendship. Still commenting on the word men, Ælred turns to the story of the three young men in Gen 18:2 and the example of Abraham who is, according to him, a type of Mary who leaves both land and family to go to the land God reveals.

It is in the typology of Abraham and Mary that Ælred finds the material for applying the feast to the monastic community. Others have noted that it is history, understood as salvation history, that forms the structure of Ælred’s homilies and is, indeed, his theological strength.¹³ Here he draws the comparison between the man of faith whose story is the first beginning of salvation and the woman of faith.


¹³ See, for example, Alf Hardelin, 34f.
whose obedience initiates the full story of salvation and thereby inherits the promise given to Abraham. With his truly pastoral bent, he moves immediately to the importance of obedience in the monastic life, pointing out that the monks, like Abraham, express their obedience by leaving all things to follow the will of God, and, like Jesus, this initial leaving brings them to identify themselves with the crucified Christ. Abraham demonstrates the initial act of obedience and Christ, its ultimate outcome. Monks who, as Ælred says, have read the whole story (L. 394-5) withhold nothing from God, sacrificing all self-will even as Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son and Christ, the best Son, was indeed sacrificed; not content with obedience to the rules and hierarchy of the Church, monks are obedient in the smallest matters and to each other. But obedience is not the primary goal for the monk; it is prized and central to monastic life because it is the best means for arriving at genuine love of neighbor. As obedience leads inexorably to the self-sacrifice of the cross, so true love of neighbor is shown by the willingness to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. Ælred translates perfect fraternal charity into the most everyday terms; how can a monk say he would die for his brother if he does not take up needle and thread to provide for that brother’s needs, if he fails to provide a cup of cold water, is slow to reach out a helping hand, thinks disdainfully of or fails to say good words for a brother. These are the works of the spirit which, along with justice, joy and peace, indicate that the monk lives truly in the kingdom and in the Spirit. The person of Mary, in her particularity, has virtually disappeared from the text. As a type of obedience, along with Abraham and Jesus himself, she serves to demonstrate the essential character of the drama of salvation. That drama is a story of obedient love, from beginning to end. By their obedience and genuine fraternal charity, the monks, like Mary, live at the heart of the mystery of salvation, recapitulate its critical events of the past and anticipate its fullness in the eschatological experience represented by the feast of the Assumption.

Seen in the context of Carolingian Assumption homilies, those of Ælred first reveal a kind of genetic likeness to their ancestry. There are similar structural elements such as the elaborate catalogs of Mary’s virtues and privileges. There continues in Ælred’s work a theological attention to giving Biblical evidence for the special privileges such as her final glorification, the appropriateness of faith in her intercessory power and, of course, the question of the bodily Assumption itself. There is the same general pattern of moral application, in which an elaboration of Mary’s virtues (especially chastity, humility and charity) serves as a hortatory frame for the lessons urged upon the audience. But in the works of this Cistercian abbot, it is the personal and experiential elements of the mystery that take center stage. It is Mary’s personal relationship with Christ, especially in the exegesis of the Song of Songs, rather than her function within the soteriological mystery that is important to Ælred. While for Paul the Deacon and Rhabanus Maurus, Mary is primarily the Queen of Heaven whose feast must be celebrated by the proper adornments of virtue, for the Cistercian monk it is the inner dynamics of her personal relationship with Christ, her faith, obedience and charity, that are to shape the monastic virtues the monk seeks to acquire. For the Carolingians, Mary is the means by which the story of salvation is told; for Ælred, Mary shows the way in which the monks whom he knows can enter that story.

All of Ælred’s reflections on Mary are shaped by his monastic experience. From years spent in lectio divina and in the drama of the liturgical cycles, Ælred has distills an imaginative and biblical sense of the full sweep of salvation history. The story within which he lives is that of the journey of humankind that begins with creation and culminates in heavenly glory. Mary takes her place in this story, marching at the head of a long line followed by all the saints as well as by Ælred and his beloved monks. Along with all the other saints, she models a variety of virtues, attitudes and practices that make the journey smooth, if not easy. Thus, she becomes a model to be imitated by monks whose needs, faults, virtues and aspirations Ælred knows well, and he can speak of her example with great specificity and direct application to daily life. Even the details of her historical life, as told in Scripture and elaborated by imagination, can be of use to the monk and they make theological sense within Ælred’s Biblical, liturgical and ascetic understanding of salvation history.

But ultimately, it was an eschatological understanding of Mary, which the feast of the Assumption gloriously reveals, that links her to the monastic community. As they understood their life, even in its everyday details, as an anticipation of eschatological fulfillment, so the feast of the Assumption was a monastic feast par excellence, holding out to the monks the vision of what they aspired to as its texts, as explained by a conscientious abbot, showed them the practical way to fulfill their aspirations.