

Curvo in St Bernard's Song Commentary

This document is divided into two parts. The first deals with an important insight found in Bernard's **Song Commentary**, namely, the verb *curvo* and the adjective *curvus* derived from it. Like its English translation, the meaning of *curvo* is obvious. However, this shouldn't stand in the way of our appreciating a meaning more profound than at first glance. We can see right away that Bernard is attracted to this word and developed it to a degree that's as valuable now as it was way back then.

Right away the very definition of *curvo* has a negative connotation ¹. This is especially true when it comes to things spiritual as the excerpts below describe so well. *Curvo* is thus naturally set in contrast to its opposite or words dealing with that which is upright, raised on high. It doesn't take much to see that behind these words lies the ultimate distinction between heaven and hell. Such is the traditional way our end is depicted. In the meanwhile our lives lean towards one or the other. Even should we favor one side, the possibility of going over to the other is always present. Such is the good news. While we generally gravitate to the downward *curvo*, we shouldn't forget that we can put a halt to our slide by reversing our direction. In this context consider the verb to gravitate. It embodies the very idea of slopping downward due to our weighty-ness. The big difference is that this slopping is gradual. It doesn't crash like an elevator that has gone out of control. Not only that, to gravitate points to the necessity for us to shed this weighty-ness as much as possible without due concern.

In the notations (green) following the Latin text and English translation, I include numerous Latin words with the intent of fleshing them out. Some words are inserted more than once. To avoid explaining them a second or more time, they are followed by the plus sign (+).

The second part of this document contains a brief essay where I seek to present some reflections founded upon the verb *curvo* as well as the adjective *curvus* derived from it. I wrote it basically out of fun but with the intent to see if I could expand upon this important word.

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Sermo 24

6. *Quamquam et corporis staturam dedit homini Deus rectam; forsitan ut ista corporea exterioris viliorisque rectitudo figmenti hominem interiorem illum, qui ad imaginem Dei factus est, spiritualis suae servandae rectitudinis admoneret, et decor limi deformitatem argueret animi. Quid enim indecentius, quam **curvum** recto corpore gerere animum?*

God indeed gave man an upright stance of body, perhaps in order that this corporeal

¹Other definitions: to bend, to stoop, to yield, to arch, to influence. As for *curvus*, it too has a generally negative meaning: bent, crooked, curved, aged or downright wrong.

uprightness, exterior and of little account, might prompt the inward man, made to the image of God, to cherish his spiritual uprightness; that the beauty of the body of clay might rebuke the deformity of the mind. ¶What is more unbecoming than to bear a warped mind in an upright body?

Quanquam rendered as indeed gives the words which follow a certain authority not stated in an outright fashion but suggested. The divine *statura* or stance also means size which is not just physical but has spiritual implications. It is *rectus*, a broader way of expressing *statura* as befitting or proper. Bernard recognizes the provisional nature of corporeal reality (*rectitudo*, uprightness) rendered somewhat strongly by the adjective *vilis*, base or mean.

By contrast we have the interior (*interior*) man, another way of stating a person as the *imago* of God or representation which has been made, *facio* pertaining to doing something specific. Now for the second time Bernard uses the term *rectitudo*, here it being *spiritalis* or spiritual...not material...literally as pertaining to the breathing of air. The verb *admoneo* also as to remind, to suggest is a way of being mindful, of remembering this *rectitudo*.

The purpose of *decor* or the loveliness of clay is to rebuke the mind's deformity, *deformitas* or deformed, morally deficient with respect to *animus*. Among other things this is a general word pertaining to life force.

Bernard concludes this section with a rhetorical question as to what is more unbecoming or *indecent* (also as unsightly). That is to say, the contrast between a mind which is warped and a body which is upright. The two adjectives are *curvus* and *rectus*, two opposites which are at the heart of all these excerpts. *Deformitas* is just one word pertaining to the former.

7. Istiusmodi ergo **curvae** animae non possunt diligere sponsam, quoniam non sunt amicae sponsi, cum sint mundi. Qui vult, inquit, amicus esse hujus mundi, inimicus Dei constituitur (Jms 4.4). Ergo quaerere et sapere quae sunt super terram, **curvitas** animae est; et e regione, meditari ac desiderare quae sursum sunt, *rectitudo*. Et ipsa ut perfecta sit, in sensu definiatur et consensu. Rectum reverante dixerim, si recte in omnibus sentias, et factis non dissentias. Invisibilis animi statum nuntiet fides et actio. Rectum judica, si fide catholicum, et justum opere probaveris. Si quo minus, **curvum** censere non dubites. Sic nempe habes: Si recte offers et recte non dividis, peccasti (Gn 4.7).

Those whose souls are warped in this fashion cannot love the Bridegroom, because they are not friends of the Bridegroom, they belong to this world. Scripture says: "Whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God." Therefore to pursue and enjoy what is worldly warps the soul, while, on the contrary, to meditate on or desire the things that are above constitutes its uprightness. But if this is to be perfect, it must be not only a conviction of the mind, but a habit of life. I shall judge you to be righteous if your opinions are correct and your deeds do not contradict them. For the state of the invisible soul is made known by one's belief and practice. You may consider a man righteous if you prove him just by his work and Catholic by faith. If otherwise, do not hesitate to appraise

him as warped.

Istiusmodi: in this fashion or such, of this kind as referring to the deformity of the soul described above. Warped is a good way of defining *curvus* as pertaining to *animus* + or soul. This prevents loving the divine Bridegroom, *diligo* also as to esteem because they aren't his friends (Jesus and *amica*) because they belong to this world, *mundus* also applicable to the universe and here with *cum* or with. Here Bernard quotes from Jms 4.4 as to *amicus* vs. *inimicus* or friend vs. enemy. the verb at hand is *constituto* which has a more permanent meaning such as to set up, to establish. As for the quote from James, it runs as follows: Unfaithful captures! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God."

Note the two verbs *quaero* and *sapio*, to seek, to look for and to have good taste, to be wise with regard to those things upon (*super*) the earth. They effect a *curvitas* of the soul, also crookedness of *anima* +. On the other hand to meditate and to desire what is above (*sursum*) is righteousness or uprightness, *rectitudo* +. The two verbs are *meditor* and *desidero*, to consider, to ponder and to desire, to long for. For this to be perfect (*perfecio*, to complete, to finish), it must be defined or marked (*definio*) by both *sensus* and *consensus* or feeling, sense and sharing.

Bernard will judge those whom he's addressing as righteous provided their opinions are correct and their deeds don't contradict them, *dissentio* as to disagree, dissent. Here it's a question of that which is *rectus*, literally that which is straight and applies to moral rectitude.

The state (*status*, situation, condition) of the soul (*anima* +) is invisible but revealed by a person's belief and practice, *fides* and *actio*. Thus a person is proved righteous (*rectus* + with the verb *judico* also to judge) by his action and being Catholic in his faith, *fides* and *opus*, the latter as work, achievement. Should he be otherwise (*minus* or less), he's to be judged (*censeo*, also as to decree, to judge) as curved, *curvus* +.

8. *Mors fidei est separatio charitatis. Credis in Christum? fac Christi opera, ut vivat fides tua. Fidem tuam dilectio animet, probet actio. Non incurvet terrenum opus, quem fides coelestium erigit. Qui te dicis in Christo manere, debes, sicut ipse ambulavit, et tu ambulare.*

The death of faith is the departure of love. Do you believe in Christ? Do the works of Christ so that your faith will live; love will animate your faith, deeds will reveal it. Let no earthly preoccupation bend down the mind that is raised on high by faith. If you say you abide in Christ you ought to walk as he walked.

Mors = *seperatio* or death = separation when it comes to *charitas* also as affection, esteem. The *opus* + of Christ makes a person's faith (*fides* +) come alive provided one carries them out. Also love is to animate this faith through deeds, *dilectio* and *animo*, the former as strong affection and the latter as to refresh, to revive. Note the two words *charitas* and *dilectio*.

Incurvo as to bend inwards with respect to any work or *opus* + belonging to the earth. However, should a person remain (*mano*) in Christ, then he must walk the same walk

as he had done, *ambulo* being opposite to *mano*. Although both are opposite verbs, in this instance the two work together.

Sermo 36

5. *Nam quomodo non vere humiliabitur in hac vera cognitione sui, cum se perceperit oneratam peccatis, mole hujus mortalis corporis aggravatam, terrenis intricatam curis, carnalium desideriorum faece infectam, caecam, curvam, infirmam, implicitam multis erroribus, expositam mille periculis, mille timoribus trepidam, mille difficultatibus anxiam, mille suspicionibus obnoxiam, mille necessitatibus aerumnosam, proclivem ad vitia, invalidam ad virtutes?*

How can he escape being genuinely humbled on acquiring this true self-knowledge, on seeing the burden of sin that he carries, the oppressive weight of his mortal body, the complexities of earthly cares, the corrupting influence of sensual desires; on seeing his blindness, his worldliness, his weakness, his embroilment in repeated errors; on seeing himself exposed to a thousand dangers, trembling amid a thousand fears, confused by a thousand difficulties, defenseless before a thousand suspicions, worried by a thousand needs; one to whom vice is welcome, virtue repugnant?

Bernard presents a rhetorical question which can be divided into sixteen sections. All can be situated under the heading of the verb *humilio*, to be humbled, to be brought low. Self-knowledge is essential for this, *cognitio* also as inquiry, cognizance with regard to oneself. From this flows awareness of qualities which hem in or confine a person or as the section concludes, making virtue repugnant: *virtus* and *invalidus* or manliness, courage and infirm, weak.

Sermo 75

A quo enim tunc non requiretur? Mihi, inquit, curvabitur omne genu (Is 45. 24), etc. Nec tamen inveniatur ab impiis, quos ultores angeli arcebunt profecto, et tollent ne videant gloriam Dei.

Who will not seek him then? “To me,” he says, “every knee shall bow.” Yet he will not be found by the wicked; the avenging angels will restrain them and prevent them from seeing the glory of God. In vain will the foolish virgins cry, for the door is shut and he will certainly not go out to them. Let them apply to themselves the saying “You will seek me and you will not find me.”

This excerpt focuses around three scriptural verses which run in full as follows:
-Is 45.23 ²: “By myself I have sworn, from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness a word that shall not return: ‘To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear.’” This verb has the verb *curvo* or to bend the knee as a sign of reverence.
-Mt 25.10: “And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast; and the door was shut.” Emphasis is upon exclusion applicable to foolish virgins who of yet are unaware of their exclusion.

²The English text in the **Cistercian Publication** series has vs. 24 whereas the **RSV** has vs. 23 which is cited here.

-Jn 7.34: “You will seek me and you will not find me; where I am you cannot come.” This verse has a certain parallel with the one before it, the exclusion of those not worthy of the marriage feast.

Sermo 80

3. *Si enim, ut supra docui, eo anima magna est, quo capax aeternorum; eo recta, quo appetens supernorum: quae non quaerit nec sapit quae sursum sunt, sed quae super terram, non plane est recta, sed curva, cum tamen pro huiusmodi magna esse non desinat, manens utique etiam sic aeternitatis capax.*

But if, as I argued before, the soul is great in proportion to its capacity for the eternal, and upright in proportion to its desire for heavenly things, then the soul which does not desire or have a taste for heavenly things, but clings to earthly things, is clearly not upright but bent, but it does not for all this cease to be great, and it always retains its capacity for eternity.

The soul (*anima* +) has two qualities: 1) great in proportion to its capacity for what is eternal, *capax* also as wide, large, spacious, 2) upright (*rectus* +) in proportion to its desire for heavenly things: *appeto* and *supernus* or to strive, to reach and above, lofty. Compare *supernus* with *aeternus* or abiding, lasting.

Should the soul not desire nor have a taste for heavenly things—the verb being *quaero* + or those which are *super* or above, upon—but instead clings to earthly things (*super* here as with regard to *terra*), clearly (*plane*, distinctly) it is *curvus*, not *rectus* (both +). Nevertheless, the soul has the capacity (*capax* +) for eternity.

4. *Et inde misero homini incurvanti se, et incubanti his quae in terra sunt, flebilis vox illa de psalmo: Miserfactus sum, et curvatus sum usque in finem; tota die contristatus ingrediebar (Ps 38.7). In semetipso siquidem experitur veritatem illius sententiae Sapientis: Deus rectum hominem fecit, ipse autem se implicuit doloribus multis (Eccl 7.30). Et continuo vox ludibrii ad eum: Incurvare ut transeamus (Is 51.23).*

So it is to the unhappy man who is bending and brooding over earthly things that the melancholy voice from Psalms refers: ‘I am troubled. I am bowed down to the earth. I go in sadness all the day long.’ He has experienced the truth of the saying of the Preacher: ‘God made man upright, but he is bowed down by many troubles.’ Then immediately afterwards he is told mockingly, ‘Bow down, so that we may walk over you.’

This excerpt has three similar references: *incurvans*, *curvo* + and *incurvo* +: bending, to bend and bending inwards (*incurvanti*). They are situated within three scriptural verses which run in full as follows:

-Ps 38.7(6): “I am utterly bowed down and prostrate; all the day I go about mourning.”

-Eccl 7.30³: “Behold, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many devices.”

-Is 51.23: “And I will put it into the hand of your tormentors who have said to you, ‘Bow

³Cistercian Publications has vs. 30 whereas the RSV has vs. 29.

down that we may pass over'; and you have made your back like the ground and like the street for them to pass over."

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Some Reflections on *Curvo*

Some thirty years ago a Cistercian abbot on the West Coast told me how he had been fascinated by the verb *curvo*. I'm not certain as to the exact reference, but I think he had in mind William of St Thierry, a twelfth century Cistercian monk. That abbot and I had met several times and for a few years afterwards we had exchanged emails with regard to *curvo*. This served to whet my appetite further and to carry out some exploration on my own. Since I had some familiarity with St Bernard of Clairvaux, I decided to stick with him concerning the word at hand. Regardless of which translation is used, his English comes across as somewhat gooey which can be a turn-off for a good number of readers. However, it's a whole different ball game with regard to the Latin in which he wrote. I'm of the opinion that he did not do the writing. Instead, an angel in human disguise was responsible. Also this same angel was responsible for the gooey-ness of the English so as to protect the ineffable richness of the original text.

While it might sound cute or fanciful, this business about an angel being responsible for writing in Bernard's name is not far fetched. It points to a reality to which we've once been exposed, imparts a sure-fire sense that somehow we have come home. Clearly a divine agent...an angel...had been responsible for this great gift. Don't ask how, when or why. It just happened, and we know for certain that we're the recipients of this magnificent privilege. At the same time we're in a better position to see how this home-ness ties in with *curvo*. *Curvo* is the exact opposite of home-ness—in fact, an alienation from it—while in a certain way the two are inseparable. This is true in light of the popular expression where we don't appreciate being at home unless we leave it and later return. Like most terse saying the one at hand contains an element of truth. Our problem is that often we don't take the time to explore the reality behind the common language at hand.

When we think of a curve almost always we view it as headed downward...one-way. It either comes to an end or if keeping on its trajectory, it would arrive back at the point of origin thereby forming a circle. As for this curve, let's bring in the notion of an arc. I wasn't quite sure how to articulate this so—and I say this somewhat tongue-in-cheek—I went on line and came up with the following distinction. In mathematics, an arc is a smooth curve joining two endpoints. In general, an arc is one of the portions of a circle. It is basically a part of the circumference of a circle. Arc is a part of a curve. So much for that.

The notion of *curvo* is built upon the most obvious feature of reality, one so common that we barely acknowledge it. By that I mean gravity. A curve is built upon a passage from above to below. Sloping would be more like it. Not always is it as such. The curve can be steep and

close to a sheer drop. When a curve comes to representing our slide from living a good life, in extreme cases the drop can be pretty much straight down but usually is more gentle. That means we run the risk of not noticing it. The only problem is that unlike an arc, this curve doesn't tend upwards by returning to its starting point.

As for the relationship between the verb *curvo* and being at home, we could say that the latter is situated on top or at the origin of the former. Depending on the situation of each person, it ranges from having a more or less firm foundation to teetering on the edge, ready to slide downward. Thus despite the warm and fuzzy feeling we have with the notion of home, it's ultimately it's precarious. Constant vigilance is required so as not to have its foundation crumble beneath us. I recall such wonderful perceptions of home growing up and have seen many of them in the households of good friends who have stable relationships with their family members. Then you grow up and move away. The idea of a home thus dissolves leaving a somewhat bitter aftertaste even when we recall the good times.

Once we've stepped outside the domain of a home in which we were raised and have set out on our own, we run the risk of being caught in between former memories and fear of the future where the prospect of being at home is somewhat shaky. And so we're more prone to slide down that ever present curve. As an antidote, I have in mind the image of a tent...a *skene*...borrowed from Jn 1.14: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Here we have the verbal form of *skene*, *skenoo*. If God can pitch a tent, why can't we mere mortals do the same? To pitch a tent has the direct obvious meaning of a temporary dwelling. Even a dwelling is inaccurate. *Skene* or tent is movable and therefore temporary, lacking the customary comforts we associate with a permanent dwelling. For those of us in America a tent conjures roughing it but only for a limited period of time. Related to it are those pioneers who settled in the West thereby marking out previously unknown territory.

Perhaps one of the closest images in existence today of being at home is that of a monastery. There much of the daily life revolves around home-like activities. That is to say, monk's don't engage in any external ministry such as teaching or the like which would consume much of their time. Instead life revolves around maintaining the building...the home...doing work to bring in some income and just plain hanging around. However, this hanging around where all is provided does not mean the inhabitants are on a perpetual joy ride. When you have an environment where all is taken care of and life centers around simple tasks, the temptation to slide down that *curva* is even stronger. You have nothing to do in the conventional sense. That's a ripe condition for making the downward slide more rapidly than in other circumstances.

One further brief observation with regard to a monastery. As already noted, those living there are focused upon maintaining the building, the home. In a way, monastic life is a pre-Industrial Revolution manner of living. The residents live and work under one roof. They don't commute to work as people did starting with the Industrial Revolution thereby making

a sharp distinction between where they lived and where they worked. I can imagine those who first left home for work found such a new way of life both novel and disruptive. Perhaps this insight into monastic life is just one which could be useful nowadays as an alternative life style.

So here we have a concrete secret ingredient lifted from the monastic way of life that can be applicable elsewhere. When you think of it, such a way of life is cunningly designed to be simple and ordinary, so much so that its value can be overlooked. We could say too that Henry David Thoreau saw the same value which gave him the idea of mooching off Ralph Waldo Emerson. While repaying Emerson with odd jobs around the house as a means to live by Walden Pond, Thoreau was able to do what he wanted most of all, write. As for a life not unlike a monk or Thoreau, emphasis upon simplification can introduce a host of problems normally gone unobserved. When you simplify you open yourself to influences that otherwise wouldn't be of concern. Such influences have a way of tempting us to slide down on the *curva*. For this reason a lot of contemporary monks are fond of the so-called desert fathers and mothers who were pioneers in all this and left us a wealth of wisdom on how to deal with such problems.

Another feature of homey-mess is that we're circumscribed within a space marked by four barriers. I hesitate to render them as physical entities, but perceiving them as such makes for an interesting way of dealing with an important insight. Let's say we've become accustomed to living within this space. The four boundaries...walls...protect us from sliding down the *curva* located just outside. Even though we're relatively secure within this framework, it takes some effort to sustain it. The boundaries are not physical, of course, which means mentally we have to keep them in place to prevent a slide downward. I mentioned this to a friend who brought to mind some homes or cottages in Switzerland perched precariously on the edge of a very high cliff. He gave me the reference, and I couldn't believe my eyes. It looked as though these houses which were very fine were ready to fall off at the slightest breeze.

Another side note, if you will, one that hit home. Recently I had a great conversation with an elderly monk. By elderly I mean this fellow was in his ninety-seventh year and in surprisingly good health and spirits. I asked him for some advice as how to begin one's day. He responded by saying that the first thing he does upon waking is to slowly make the sign of the cross: in the name of the Father, in the name of the Son and in the name of the Holy Spirit. The three persons plus "amen" trace out a square on your body...four cardinal points, if you will. Having done this, you can walk around with a portable monastic enclosure as protection against succumbing to a slide down the *curva*.

So I write all this with full knowledge of the dangers involved. I was curious to know what happens to be a dominant *curvus* today, and how can we avoid it. Again, keep in mind the image of residing within a four-squared environment. We may find it confining, but then again, the alternative is less than desirable. Does this mean we have to spend our entire lives

confined within such a space? That doesn't seem a bit realistic. Yes, we start off with a four-squared place and take some time acclimatizing ourselves to it. At this point I got the answer I had been looking for, that having come from my nephrologist who is rooted in the classics of Western Civilization. I was fortunate enough to have met him earlier and discovered that he and his wife read the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* early in the morning before the kids got up. Not only that, they read the Latin poet Livy in the evening once the kids are put to bed. Now there's two rare birds. Not long ago you'd find more such people, but today unfortunately it's a rarity.

In light of an overall sense that we as a civilization are teetering on the edge of a cliff...a *curvus*...I asked the good doctor his opinion for a cure. Without missing a beat he responded with a Latin word, "more *otium*." That's a somewhat technical word meaning leisure with the aim to use time for the pursuit of loftier matters. I could be off base, but I'd equate *otium* with the ability to engage in *lectio divina*, the slow meditative reading of a sacred text. Thus *otium* is the guardian for keeping us...Western civilization...from falling off the edge. Right away there comes to mind that *otium* doesn't allow for undue tensions to build up. It may not be desirable to practice it all day but a sufficient amount of time should be given over to it in accord with one's life style. I figure if the doctor could do it, why not the rest of us.

So *otium* and the notion of homey-ness are connected, at least in my opinion and not only that, have taken deeper root in my life. The two work hand in hand to prevent us from sliding down that *curva*. As noted earlier, some discipline is required to make sure we do *otium* as often as possible...indeed, every day...and allow it to take root in our lives. We see the alternatives all around us, and they aren't pretty. That should be sufficient reason to keep us on the straight and narrow.

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