

St Bernard Tolomei
(1 Cor. 1:26-31 / John 15:9-17)
21.08.2014

Five days ago, on the 14th of August, we kept the memory of a Polish Franciscan priest St Maximillian Kolbe.

We celebrated this saint not as a *Confessor of the Faith*, but as a Christian martyr.

At his canonisation, on the 10th of October, 1982, Maximillian Kolbe was declared a *martyr of love* because he had volunteered to give his life in place of a fellow-prisoner, a total stranger to him, a young husband and father, in Auschwitz Concentration Camp on the 14th of August 1941.

When the question of the canonisation of the founder of our Archabbey of Monteo Oliveto Maggiore came up, over a decade ago, during the pontificate of the same Pope who canonised Maximillian Kolbe, Saint John-Paul, it was said that the Holy Father was inclined to think that the saintly abbot of Monto Oliveto, who had been venerated for centuries as *Blessed Bernard Tolomei*, might also be declared a *martyr of love* rather than, as it later transpired, a *Confessor of the Faith*. In a way, I think it would have made a lot of sense to declare Bernard Tolomei a *martyr of love*, for this is what he was.

Keeping his memory today, the gospel word spoken by Jesus (we heard it proclaimed for us just a few moments ago) inhabits my thought and prayer: *There is no greater love than this: to give one's life for those one loves.*

St Bernard Tolomei, founder of the Archabbey of St Mary of Monte Oliveto, near Siena in Italy, gave his life for his brethren whom he loved.

This 13th/14th century saint (who is at the origin of the Olivetan monastic charism which is still lived in monasteries of our particular Congregation within the Benedictine Order right across the world), died in 1348, a victim of the plague that was ravaging the city of Siena.

He could have stayed at the safe distance of Monte Oliveto Maggiore, far removed from the danger of contracting the disease that was to take his life, but, instead, he chose to go to be near to his brethren of the monastery of St Benedict on the outskirts of Siena. In going to be with the monastic community there, he also drew alongside their fellow citizens, many of whom the monks were caring for in the cloister of their monastery. When the saintly abbot Bernard had heard of their plight, he felt compelled to be in solidarity with those suffering. He went to offer them his support, and bring them comfort.

Moved by compassion, Bernard wanted to minister Christ's loving concern to his brethren. As their *father in Christ*, Bernard Tolomei nursed his brothers in practical ways, as well as ministering to them spiritually, and, as they died, one after another, he honoured their mortal remains by assuring they had Christian burials. (Eighty monks of his newly founded monastic family died that year.)

Bernard Tolomei's example shows us that *he loved much*.

That beautiful phrase from the gospels suits him well. Yes, *he loved much*.

If St Benedict says in his Rule for Monks that *the abbot is to seek to be loved rather than feared* and again that *the brethren are to have for their abbot a love that is both humble and sincere*, Bernard understood that one can only win love by showing love. He recognised that, out of love, the abbot has to make himself the humble servant of his brethren.

The abbot, like Christ, must stand in the midst of his brethren *as one who serves*.

We have Jesus' own words for it: He came *not to be served, but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many*.

Clearly, Bernard did not simply feign love. He literally *put his life on the line* to show his love for his brothers and sisters. He gave his life for them. He did so without calculation, without counting

the cost involved.

True love is never calculated. It is never worked out according to the principle *I give so much, to receive so much in return*.

True love gives all.

If I can put it this way: it dares to write a blank cheque and accept whatever losses are incurred by this act of total generosity.

True love holds nothing back!

Jesus puts us on our guard against showing love to others for what we will get back from them in return.

True Christian love takes us much further than our natural inclinations to love might take us.

True Christian love, resembling God's love, excludes no one.

True Christian love includes all.

True Christian love takes us to the point to which Jesus went: it leads us to *give our lives* not just for our friends, those who wish us well and do us good, but also for those who wish us harm and do us ill.

Even pagans love those who love them, Jesus says.

The point He is making there is that His disciples must go further than the pagans do.

As Christian disciples, we must love not just our friends, but also our enemies, those who hurt and offend us, those who disappoint and disregard us.

The love to which we are called is not only a tall order, it is actually far beyond our own capacity altogether.

We can only love as Christ loved to the degree and in the measure that we allow God's grace to do in and through us what is over and beyond our own possibilities.

To realise that of ourselves we cannot love as we are called to, serves to keep us grounded, grounded in humility. It leads us to live our lives in a radical dependence upon God's grace.

To love in this way is to love truly.

It is to *love in God*.

True love is humble.

The tradition speaks of *humilis caritas: humble love*. We find this phrase used especially in monastic literature.

What is being referred to here is God-like love.

For our sakes the Lord humbled Himself in love. Not only did Christ stoop down to humanity, He actually knelt before those He came to serve.

If *monks are to have for their abbot a sincere and humble love*, we can take it that their abbot is also to hold in his heart a true and humble love for them.

Dom Andre Louf says at one point in his writings that *humble love is perhaps the greatest of all the evangelical virtues*.

We might ask: what leads him to make this statement? What is he actually implying there?

Well, I would say that *humble love is the greatest of all evangelical virtues* precisely because it has us recognise that we can only live it by loving in the image of God's love for humanity

The gospel calls us to the *imitation of Christ*.

Loving in the image of Christ is a humbling affair.

Loving in the image of Christ is showing love that gives itself and in the giving takes the risk and

accepts the possibility of being spurned and rejected.
It is love that accepts to be wounded by the one loved.
It is love that dares to appear weak and vulnerable.

The last image of Christ we hold before our eyes as He lived His death is that of a broken man: one brought to the lowest point a person could arrive at, totally disfigured by pain, hanging, stripped naked, upon the cross. What we contemplate at that moment is nothing other than love crucified.

Moreover, among the last words we have spoken by Jesus on the cross are those in which He dares to say to those who put him to death: *I thirst*.

Jesus' great thirst at that moment was His thirst for love.

What humility was required of Him to acknowledge this thirst at that moment!

He said to those who were crucifying Him: *I thirst for your love*.

What is even more remarkable is that Jesus accepted to go on loving, even though His thirst was not satisfied, as He might have hoped. We read: *They gave Him gall and vinegar to drink*. This is not the drink of *the sweetness of love* Jesus craved for.

Benedict tells us in his Rule for Monks that *the abbot is believed to hold the place of Christ in the community*.

This line must be properly understood.

Let me explain how we should understand it.

Another really striking image we have of Jesus, before His being lifted up upon the cross, is found in John's gospel: it is that of one who *knelt to wash His disciples' feet*.

In this gesture Jesus made Himself small before those He loved.

To wash people's feet befell the slave who was last in rank. It was the role of the lowliest servant to wash the feet of the gathered guests.

Blessed Gueric of Igny, the 12th century Cistercian abbot (coincidentally this date is also his feast-day), reminds us that *it is the property of love to make oneself small before others*.

The abbot who holds the place of Christ will want to make himself small before his brethren as he ministers to them.

If, as the Rule stresses over and over again, the abbot is to bless his brethren, his greatest blessing to them will be to efface himself before the one who is the source of all blessing: Christ.

It will be to make himself small before Christ and his brethren. It will be to be ready to pass from sight so that only Christ may be seen.

This is what St Bernard Tolomei did. He accepted to disappear out of love for Christ and the brothers and sisters to whom he ministered in Christ's name.

St Bernard was willing to die as he served his brethren out of love. He literally gave His life for his spiritual sons.

True love always leads us to give of ourselves. We could say self-gift is its natural outcome and mysteriously it is also its reward.

Yes, it is rewarding to give of oneself.

You see, the more we give of our self for those we love, the more we become truly who we are. For, in our self-giving, we realise our truest identity which is to be God-like. God so loved the world that He gave His life for the world. God so loves us, that He gave, and continually gives, His life for us.

The Bible is through and through the story of God's unending self-giving love for men and women. Its message, the call it addresses to us again and again, is that our vocation is to respond to God's love by loving Him and others as He first loved us.

The best response we can make to God's love is to reflect it. We do that by giving ourselves for those we love.

Every page of the Bible is in a way the record of divine love in search of the response of human love. The saints repeated it in every age: *Love is all; It is enough to love; In the evening of life we shall be judged on love.* We could add many other similar quotations from the sayings of the saints.

This morning I think especially of immortal words of St Therese of Lisieux, which I believe we could just as readily hear as if spoken by St Bernard Tolomei.

They are words we should be able to make our own: *Oh, I do not regret, not for one moment do I regret, having given my life to love.*

If, as the song says *regrets I have had a few* to have loved should not be one of them.

I know I have regrets in my life. I suspect you have too. Indeed, I am sure we all have some regrets. But, I also know that I have no regret to have loved, however painful that experience has been at times.

St John of the Cross tells us that our judgement will be totally concerned with whether we have loved and how we have loved.

Our whole vocation is to be true to the two-fold commandment of God: to love Him and to love others. These two commandments are never to be separated.

Words hammered out by the late Cardinal Daly come to mind as I say that this morning. I can still hear them ring in my ears, spoken in the late Cardinal's distinctive voice. Good teacher that he was, he had a way of making his point in concise phrases. Let me quote his words to you: *We must love God in Himself. We must love God in others. We must love others in God.*

The message is clear, but experience teaches us that it is never easy to live.

But, let me insist, referring to my own experience of the pain involved in loving: it is not because something has been/is not easy that it is regrettable.

I link to the late Cardinal's words an expression of our late Abbot Dom Paul Grammont, a true *father in Christ* to me, to Bro Eric and to so many others: *All true love is crucified.*

It was in accepting to be crucified that Jesus fulfilled those words which His disciples are called to make their own, words that we are called to make our own: *There is no greater love than this, to give one's love for those one loves.*

As we welcome the gift the Lord made to us in this Eucharist, the gift of Christ's self-giving love, may we be graced and strengthened to become for others what we receive here.

May we, in our turn, become a sacrament of Christ's self-giving love for those we love and for the whole world!

Amen!