

St Bernard Tolomei
(1 Corinthians 1:26-31 / John 15:9-17)
19.08.2018

Consider your call.

Today, here at our monastery, as in Olivetan Houses throughout the world, we celebrate the Solemnity of St Bernard Tolomei – founder of our particular Congregation in the Benedictine Order. As Olivetan Benedictines, we are invited to do as we heard the Apostle Paul bid the Corinthians do in today's first reading: we are invited to consider our call.

It is surely appropriate for us to do that in the light of today's gospel passage which calls upon us to live our lives in love. It is Jesus Himself who calls out to us: *Live within my love*. In John 15 Jesus' teaching reminds us that when we obey – that is to say, when we listen and respond to what is asked of us – we show that we are living in love and with that we find our truest fulfilment and deepest peace... what we could call, our completeness, plenitude of well-being.

The love of God to which the gospel calls us is to be expressed in healthy human relationships. It is a love which is lived not for our own benefit alone, but, also, well and truly, with and for others!

The Great Commandment could not be any clearer. Our love for God is to be made manifest in love for our neighbours. Such love requires of us that we be men and women who are properly situated within ourselves – for only then can we be correctly adjusted in our relationships with God and others. Life according to the Great Commandment depends upon our living – as St Gregory the Great tells us St Benedict lived, *with himself* – reconciled, at one, *with ourselves*.

As members of *God's family* (which is simply the *human family*, for every person was made in God's image and likeness) we are called to live in solidarity with all other people. Christian theology speaks of a life lived this way as a life lived in communion.

If communion should be typical of every Christian life, it is a particular hallmark of Olivetan Benedictine life. According to Bernard Tolomei's vision, Olivetan Benedictine spirituality is *a spirituality of communion*.

Bernard Tolomei and his first companions bore an extraordinary testimony in this regard. They showed themselves to be well and truly men of communion. Bernard (then Giovanni Tolomei) a Siennese jurist of noble birth, who had been formed first in philosophy and mathematics, before going on to study civil and canon law, as well as theology – lived a graced relationship of communion with others from the outset of his adult encounter with Christ. He lived this grace, first of all, as a member of a confraternity who cared for the sick, visiting them and tending to their needs by night in the hospital of La Scala. This Siennese confraternity known as the *Confraternity of Santa Maria della Notte* was a gathering of men who were animated by the Spirit of compassion who inspired them to look to the needs of those less fortunate than themselves and care for them. The spirit of compassion-communion which had been a characteristic of Bernard's spiritual life while he still lived in Siena as a layman was something he carried with him when he withdrew into the solitude of Acona to pursue his monastic vocation. It is surely significant that Bernard, even when he sought solitude, withdrew into the Desert of Acona with others by his side – those first companions, who, together with him, formed the nucleus of what was to become the first monastic community of our Congregation. This group of friends/co-disciples/con-fraters shared life in that place where they established what was to become – and still is today – the

archicenobium of our monastic family: Monte Oliveto Maggiore. Their example bids us to live the grace that was theirs: true communion between ourselves and with others beyond our monastery: a communion with all our brothers and sisters in Christ, rooted in a profound communion with the Lord. As Benedictines we are called to live out our lives in the ambience of a loving Christian community, wherein all seek to be supportive of each other. This climate is described for us most beautifully in chapter 72 of St Benedict's Rule for Monks.

If solitude is essential to monastic life – as the word monk itself implies – nonetheless, and indeed all the more, communion should also be a trait of a monk's existence. True monks will live their lives aware of, and caring in regard to, the whole Church, and, indeed, the entire world around them. Theirs is not – should not be – an isolated life; monastic life should not be a life cut-off from the wider Church and the whole world.

The monk is called to be a brother to the whole of humanity, for the simple reason that he is seeking to live his life in conformity to that of Christ who is the brother of all.

Jesus reminds us in today's gospel of the implications of living in this spirit when He tells us that *there is no greater love than to lay down one's life: to give one's life* out of love for all. Clearly, St Bernard Tolomei lived this greatest love. While his whole life bears ample testimony to this fact, his death is the most eloquent witness he bore in this respect. Bernard's death was an act of self-giving love lived with and for his brethren in the Monastery of San Benedetto at the Porta Tufi in Siena (a foundation made from Monte Oliveto Maggiore in the early years of his abbacy). His death in that place shows us that his self-giving love was lived not only for his own monks, but also for the many who were suffering from the pest of the Black Death in 1348. To these suffering people, the monastery had opened its doors and was offering hospitality. Self-giving love which had animated the whole of Bernard's life led to his death as *a martyr of love*.

Such fraternity in regard to all, as that displayed by St Bernard Tolomei and his brethren, is of great significance. In the early 1990's, in preparation for the Synod which was to take place on the Consecrated Life, the *Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life* invited monastic communities and other forms of Religious communal life to reflect upon the meaning of their existence. They did so placing great emphasis upon the notion of fraternity – the importance and significance of the witness of communities in our world wherein true fraternal values are promoted and exhibited.

In a preparatory circular letter to introduce the work of the then forthcoming Synod, it was said that the witness offered by communities of monks and nuns is particularly significant. The redactors commented: *For them fraternal life has broader and deeper dimensions which derive from the fundamental demands of their particular [monastic] vocation – the search for God alone and silence etc.* The members of the *Congregation of Institutes of Consecrated Life* who composed the reflection document that was distributed to members of the Synod and others went on to say: *[monks'] constant attention to God makes their attention to other members of the community more delicate and respectful; [their] contemplation becomes a force which liberates them from every form of selfishness...* (That is the ideal, at least!) This working paper went on to state: *Fraternal life in a monastery is called to be a living sign of the mystery of the Church: the greater the mystery of grace, so much the richer the fruit of salvation... [monastic] communities have the mission of being clearly readable signs of that intimate communion which animates and constitutes the Church.*

What was stated in that working document underlines something that it is very important to understand. What is flagged up for us there is that while monastic life is lived on the margins

of the Church, to some extent, it actually places monks at the very heart of the Church – signifying what the mystery of the Church is all about: life lived in communion!

It has been said that *the monk finds the world a place where the beauty of the Creator and the love of the Redeemer are reflected.*

This led John-Paul II to make some strong statements worth reflecting on in his beautiful Apostolic Letter *Orientalium Lumen* – a text which was composed to mark the centenary of Leo XIII's *Orientalium Dignitas*. (1894/1994).

Let me quote St John-Paul's words: *In his prayers the monk utters an 'Epiklesis' of the Spirit on the world and is certain that he will be heard, for this is sharing in Christ's own prayer.*

Reading those words, an image comes to mind.

With my mind's eye I can see a very beautiful and greatly famous painting by the late 17th early 18th century painter Giuseppe Maria Crespi. This painting was commissioned by an Abbot of our Congregation's monastery in Florence (San Miniato al Monte). It is housed now in the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles. It is entitled what it depicts: *Bernard Tolomei Interceding for the Cessation of the Plague in Siena*. Crespi captures the story's pathos with great depth, expression and immediacy. Bernard is shown in the midst of plague victims who are dying in a way that reminds me of that little phrase in the Credo which is so central to our faith, but which can be so easily forgotten or so quickly passed over: *Christ descended into hell*. Descending into hell, Christ ministered to those held captive there, to lead them forth into freedom. I cannot but recall how the Orthodox monk, Saint Silouan of Mount Athos, goes as far as to say that, out of love for God's people who are suffering, the monk will willingly dare to hold his heart in hell with and for them.

In Crespi's picture, darkness surrounds Saint Bernard Tolomei, but the saint is robed in light – it is as if divine light emanates from him as he participates in Christ's own ministry.

I return to some lines from *Orientalium Lumen*: *Thus [the monk] feels rising within himself a deep love for humanity, that love which Eastern prayer so often celebrates as an attribute of God, the friend of men who did not hesitate to offer His Son so that the world might be saved. In this attitude, the monk is sometimes enabled to contemplate that world already transfigured by the deifying action of Christ, who died and rose again.*

I believe the following line to be so important: *Whatever path the Spirit has in store for him, the monk is always essentially the man of communion.*

I hear the call addressed to us as monks of Holy Cross to be a call to share in Christ's own passion out of love for the Church, filled with the desire for her growth in communion – her growth in unity.

I hear the call addressed to us this morning to be a call to commit ourselves afresh to the service of all our brothers and sisters in whom we recognise the face of Christ – and not least, among all our brothers and sisters in humanity, those in whom we recognise a reflection of the face of the suffering, disfigured Christ.

At this time, given all that we have heard and are hearing from various sources – the publication of various State Inquiries and media coverage of these reports – one cannot but think of the many people who have suffered the pain of abuse and whose lives have been marred by this terrible wound. Likewise, we think of the many more who have been and are scandalised by what these suffering innocent brothers and sisters have endured.

Is the present – now long-enduring – abuse scandal not in some way a reflection of the Plague that afflicted so many people in Bernard Tolomei's lifetime? Abuse could be considered to be a destructive plague at the heart of the Church today.

In the present reality – that of a bitterly divided world and a deeply wounded Church – we are called to live wholeheartedly in our monasteries our specific Olivetan Benedictine charism

more than ever. Our communities should seek to be true *foyers of charity*: places where God's love is made manifest and can be experienced by those who approach us.

Called this morning *to consider our call* and called furthermore *to go out and bear fruit*, I cannot help but recall the great burst of creativity that marked the early centuries of the Olivetan monastic reform in practically every domain. This truly tremendous deployment of life force and energy was due to our brethren having come together out of love for God, animated by the desire to blend their talents into one great gift to the Church.

I am convinced that *a new creativity in charity* is being asked of this at this particular time in history – albeit on a smaller, humbler scale than in ages past.

In this age and generation, I believe we are being called to create *something beautiful for God*.

With a vision of faith, the many trials and difficulties which abound all around us, even the extremely negative things we encounter, can become an occasion to experience a new creation.

In all the disfigurements which mar our world and our Churches, how important for us to recognise the face of the Crucified-Risen Christ who lives forever!

The great founder of our monastic family – Bernard Tolomei – was not afraid to face up to the challenges of his time. He recognised in the ills of his day an opportunity to renew his offering of self-giving love to God and for others. Adhering to the demands of the Gospel, Bernard and his fellow-monks chose to live *the spirituality of communion* in a unique way. They dared to open their cloister to all those who poured in from the pest-infected streets of the city. Their example reminds us that Christ, who walked the roads of Galilee, still walks the highways of our world and awaits our attention in the many suffering people to be found all around us – that multitude of men, women and children who long for resurrection peace. Christ comes to our monasteries in every person who dawns our doors in the hope that they might find the grace of resurrection peace therein. For us to be open to welcome all-comers into our midst, ready to receive from them what they have to bring to us as much as what we have to offer to them.

I would like to draw this reflection to a close by sharing with you not with my own words, but words of exhortation taken from the thoughts of Pope Francis found in various places. I invite you to welcome Pope Francis' teaching as a prophetic word for our time. Here is what he says: [*As Consecrated persons be*] *in synergy with all other vocations in the Church... spread the spirituality of communion ... in (your) internal life (...) then in the ecclesial community and even beyond its boundaries (...) Come out of yourselves (...) Don't be closed in on yourselves (...) Don't remain a hostage of your own problems (...) You will find life by giving life, hope by giving hope, love by giving love (...) Engage with ways of deepening communion with the entire Church (...)*

Our community of the Holy Cross, here at Rostrevor, is privileged to have Soeur Anne-Emmanuelle from Grandchamp with us for this year's celebration of the Solemnity of St Bernard Tolomei. The communion between our respective communities is a sign of that unity to which all the Churches are called. I hear the following final words of Pope Francis I share with you as tailor-made for us in the graced relationship our communities share. Writing to *Consecrated Men and Women of all the Churches* in 2014, Pope Francis stated: *I warmly encourage (...) respect and reciprocal cooperation [between Consecrated men and women, monks and nuns, of all the Churches], so that the ecumenism of the consecrated life can prove helpful for the greater journey towards the unity of all Christians.*

We speak of our Olivetan family forming *unum corpus – one body*.

May we all seek to be *one body, one spirit in Christ*.

Amen!