

St Bernard Tolomei  
(1Corinthians 1:26-31 / John 15:9-17)  
21.08.2020

We can sometimes ask ourselves how a saint of a bygone era would have situated him or herself in the present age. This is especially true when we are thinking of a saint who lived a very long time ago. Given that the world today is so very different to that in which they lived, we are inclined to imagine that their life experience could have scant relevance for ours and their example little to teach us.

I know I have sometimes heard it said that the lives of the saints of a bygone age were so far removed from ours that we can't really be expected to look to them to guide our understanding as we seek to deal with the kinds of problems with which we are confronted today. I am not so sure about that. A closer examination of the sort of issues some of the saints had to deal with can reveal to us how not unlike our own age theirs was.

Just think of the difficulty facing us across the world at the present moment as we seek to deal with the impact of the Covid19 pandemic.

St Bernard Tolomei and his brethren in the Olivetan monasteries during the early years of our particular Benedictine Congregation's flowering were confronted with the terrible ill of the *Black Death*. Indeed, Bernard Tolomei's demise was the outcome of his having gone to minister to his ailing brethren in the Monastery of San Benedetto of Porta Tufi on the outskirts of Siena, the city of his birth. (The establishment of this monastery placed under the patronage of St Benedict was one of the original ten foundations made from Monte Oliveto Maggiore during its founder's lifetime. The year Bernard died in all eighty Olivetan monks from these ten Houses succumbed to the Black Death.)

The fact that Bernard Tolomei, a saint of more than seven centuries ago, responded to the needs of his brethren during the time of an epidemic illness in the way he did can help us see how we might better situate ourselves in regard to those around us during this time of pandemic.

It seems to me that Bernard's response to the needs of his brethren is particularly relevant for us in this day and age as we wonder about how to situate ourselves in regard to people suffering from the present ill which has engulfed our world.

What we learn from Bernard Tolomei's example is the importance of heartfelt compassion and practical solidarity in regard to all who are suffering. Fundamentally, the same response is required of all of us at this worrying time: heartfelt compassion and practical solidarity.

I am sure, like me, you have all heard remarkable stories in this respect from various quarters. We have seen for ourselves or heard from others stories concerning doctors, nurses, ancillary staff in hospitals, as well as so many people providing essential services in the community – people placing themselves at risk by the stance they have espoused to alleviate the suffering and isolation of ailing brothers and sisters. What all these good people have done is essentially what Bernard Tolomei did when he reached out to his brethren who were infected with the plague. We can take it that Bernard's ministrations went beyond his fellow-monks to include the many infected people the Olivetan community would have welcomed into the cloisters of their Monastery to care for them in a holistic way. Bernard and his companions would have tended not only to sufferers' physical requirements, but also their spiritual needs. Bernard Tolomei knowingly accepted the risks involved for himself when it came to showing charity in the way he did. We can honestly say that he made a voluntary oblation – a true self-

offering of his life – for the good of others by simply being there with and for them, giving of himself as he cared for them. *There is no greater love than this, to give one's life.*

Bernard is remembered for his self-giving love to such an extent that the question arose during his canonisation process if he should not be declared a *martyr of charity*. Pope (now Saint) John-Paul II spoke of Bernard Tolomei as *a martyr of love* as did Pope Benedict XVI. Let me quote what the latter said in the course of a homily he preached in 2009: *What Bernard Tolomei lived, caring for his brethren and so many others at the Monastery of San Benedetto at Porta Tufti, was an authentic martyrdom of love. The example of this saint invites us to express our faith in a life dedicated to God in prayer and spent in the service of our neighbour, impelled by a love that is ready to make the supreme sacrifice.*

Love was at the heart of Bernard's monastic vision. Bernard Tolomei clearly made his own the presentation of the monastic ideal we find in chapter 72 of St Benedict's Rule for Monks, *The Good Zeal Monks Should Have*. The title of that chapter of the Rule could just as well have been, as one contemporary paraphrase of *The Rule for Monasteries* puts it: *The Warm Love Monks and Nuns Should Hold in their Hearts – I would add, And Should Display by Their Whole Way of Being.*

In the Rule we read: *Monks should act zealously with a most fervent love – taking the initiative in showing care for each other, honouring each other in this way; bearing patiently with each other's weaknesses of body and character... each one putting the other's interests before his own. Let no one follow just what he thinks best for himself, but rather what is to the other's advantage. Let them love one another as brothers should... preferring nothing to Christ. (...) Monks should display loving honour and show genuine respect to all persons. (...) Great care and concern are to be shown in receiving poor people and pilgrims, because in them Christ is received. (...) Monks are to remember Christ's words: 'I was a stranger and you made me welcome'. (...) Care for the sick must rank above and before all else, so that they may be truly served as Christ.*

Bernard Tolomei's Letters to his brethren bear eloquent testimony to the fact that for him, at the core of all things constituent to monastic life, stood humble love. The exhortations he formulated when writing to his brethren manifest his firm belief that such humble love should be exhibited especially through very practical, down to earth, fraternal service. He exhorted his monks to *live together in quiet harmony, respecting silence, caring for each other in community – with each one supporting the other out of charity.*

What Bernard and his companions lived in the fraternal communion they shared all those centuries ago is essentially what we are called to live in our own very ordinary day to day life here at Holy Cross Abbey. We are called to live our various very practical, down to earth, fraternal chores in a spirit of communion with our brothers and sisters throughout the world, remembering St Benedict's word that *wherever we are it is the same Lord whom we serve*. Our community life here – as much as that of our brethren elsewhere – is meant to be a visible sign of God's love for the world, a parable of communion, which helps people recognise that Christ who gave His life for humanity continues to do so in and through men and women who live a courageous commitment to serve, simply out of love.

Between all our monasteries there should be such solidarity that we manifest before the world that we form *one body one spirit in Christ*. The icon placed near to the abbot's stall for today's Solemnity (an icon which comes from our former monastery of Holy Trinity in Arizona) conveys Bernard's simply message that all his spiritual sons should form *unum corpus, one body*.

The icon at the back of the abbey church – which depicts Benedict and Bernard upholding this monastery in which we are called to love and serve the Lord, loving and serving each other, loving and serving the wider Church and the world in which we live – sends out a similar message. An inset in that icon shows the monks of Monte Oliveto ascending the *staircase of humility*, making their way upward, towards Christ, with Mary, Christ's Mother and theirs, watching over them. It depicts the Olivetan monks climbing the stairway of humility helping each other along, encouraging one another, as they ascend the steps before them in response to Christ's call bidding them to come to Him. This image of the monks helping one another make their way through life is an illustration for us and a reminder to us of what we are called to live each and every day... quite simply: fraternal love in practice.

It has been said that the teaching of Jesus could be summed up in one word: *love*. *The Great Commandment* tells us that we are *to love God and our neighbour as ourselves*. The entire Rule of St Benedict – and the whole specific Olivetan Benedictine ideal – could be summed up in this same word: *Love!* If love is the underlying motivation for all the actions that Benedict describes for his monks (and it is!), the same is true for Bernard Tolomei.

Everything in the Rule of Benedict points to Christ. Christian love – Christlike love – is to be the basis of our whole existence. It is on Jesus' example of self-giving that we are to model our lives.

In today's grasping world – a world in which so many want to take and retain for themselves – to be self-giving is to go against the grain in many ways. Benedict encourages his monks to dare to go against the grain, to dare to be counter-cultural, when he writes in chapter 40 of the Rule: *Your way of acting should be different from the world's way; the love of Christ must come before all else*. Esther de Waal has stated simply in her book *Living with Contradictions* that the way the Rule indicates is *lived-out love*; it is *lived-out love* in the context of daily life and work – at the heart of which is what Benedict calls the great *Work of God*, liturgical prayer, which opens our hearts to the dimensions of Christ's own heart and therefore makes us all the more ready to embrace the pain and suffering of the world around us, rather than run away from it and/or turn our back to it.

Our openness to the world finds expression in a special way through a ministry Benedict emphasises strongly in his Rule – a ministry which our Olivetan monasteries have always considered to be essential to our way of life, even it calls us to come aside and be apart in a desert place... and that is the offering of hospitality. The choice to provide hospitality is nothing less than a response to welcome in and reach out to serve those in need. Undoubtedly, it was Bernard Tolomei's awareness that Christ showed Himself ready to leave the place of solitude to which He had withdrawn when He recognised the people's crying need, moving Jesus to show compassion to them, that led Bernard to come down from the hilltop of Monte Oliveto Maggiore, in the Desert of Acona, to care for the needs of the community nearer to Siena.

A reading of what the Rule has to say about offering hospitality shows us that to care for others makes us not only givers, but also receivers of grace. It is not only that we bring Christ to others by serving them, Christ also comes to us in those we welcome and to whose needs we commit ourselves to minister.

What the final chapter of Bernard Tolomei's life shows us is that this man who wanted to love Christ above all – and who had responded to that call by leaving his beloved city of Siena behind – came to see that he was called to love Christ in all. We could say, that, in a certain way, this led Bernard's life full circle. It brought him back to where he started. He returned to Siena, from which he had distanced himself to seek Christ in his dear solitude of Acona. In

