

St Bernard Tolomei

(1 Corinthians 1:26-31 / John 15:9-17)

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It is a real honour and a delight to have been invited to preside and preach at the Eucharist here in Holy Cross Monastery for this very important feast in this community's calendar – St Bernard Tolomei, the holy founder of the Abbey and Congregation of Our Lady of Monte Oliveto in Siena, Italy – the family of Benedictine monasteries to which Rostrevor belongs. We black-robed monks in Glenstal belong to a different Congregation, but the Benedictine family is one, and the ever-deepening communion between our two monasteries is a blessing to all of us. As the Psalmist says, *How good and how pleasant it is when brothers live in unity! It is like precious oil upon the head, running down upon the beard.* Precious oil running down the beard speaks of fragrance, abundance, luxury and prodigality. It is an image of the world made new by the Creator. And so fraternal communion is a generous sign of God's anointing, of his favour and of his blessing. For this brotherly unity, let us give thanks and praise today.

Referring to both oil and unity is particularly appropriate on the solemnity of St Bernard Tolomei:

'Oil' – because the 'precious oil' of anointing is, of course, the fruit of the *olive* tree. When Bernard and his first companions established their monastery in the hills near Siena, it was named 'Monte Oliveto', after the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, the place to which Jesus went to pray in solitude by night, the place of his agony, and the place where his Holy Mother and Apostles saw him ascend to the heavens.

Bernard can easily be understood as the righteous man of whom we sang in today's Entrance Chant: *I am like a growing olive tree in the house of God. I trust in the goodness of God for ever and ever. I will proclaim that your name is good, in the presence of your friends.* A 'growing olive tree' that has, over the past 700 years, put down roots all over the world, with monasteries of both nuns and monks today not only in Italy, but also in France, England, Belgium, Switzerland, Korea, the USA, Mexico, Guatemala, Brazil, the Holy Land and here in County Down.

And 'Unity' – because unity and communion have been, and continue to be, distinctive hallmarks of the ethos and the life of Bernard's monastic sons and daughters. He and his early companions wanted the monks of the congregation, though living in different and scattered monasteries, to form *Unum Corpus* – one body. Though they first embraced the solitary life of hermits, Bernard and his companions came to share St Benedict's understanding of the value of seeking God in community. 'Communion' became one of the principles of Olivetan life.

Unlike most other groups of monasteries, where each house is fiercely independent, Bernard's monasteries remained much more closely linked, united as *unum corpus* by the ministry of the Abbot of Monte Oliveto Maggiore and his successors.

That spirit of communion is lived out in a special way here in Rostrevor, with its particular vocation to foster unity in the one body of the Church in, as the monastery's foundation decree says, 'a land marked by reciprocal violence and stained by the blood of Christian brothers and sisters'.

In this attentiveness to building unity in the body, Bernard, who repeatedly protested that he was not a scholar or a theologian, showed that he actually *did have* a most profound knowledge of the love which is at the heart of the Blessed Trinity. The liturgy proclaims that Christ humbled himself to share in our humanity so that we might share in his divinity. We could just as easily say that 'Love' humbled himself to share in our humanity so that we might share in his divinity. For, in experiencing God's love and then loving in return, we are transformed by Love, into Love, and thereby we do indeed come to share in God's divinity. Love itself, then, makes us 'become' what we love. Loving draws us and unites us in the mutual love of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. As Bernard wrote, 'Love, in transforming the one who loves into that which is loved, causes many to become one'.

Today's Gospel reading is a beautiful and powerful meditation on the same theme. Part of the so-called Farewell Discourse by Jesus at the Last Supper on the eve of his crucifixion. Preparing the Apostles for the time when he would no longer be among them - at least in human form - Jesus speaks about love, but most of all about *communion*.

He might no longer be walking among us in the human sense, but if we love one another we will be *in* him and he *in* us. If we obey his commandment to love - and let's not forget that he calls it a commandment; it's not a suggestion or a polite request! - we will be drawn in to the love which flows between the Father and the Son, between the Father and the Spirit and between the Son and the Spirit. The Gospel presents an image that is wonderfully warm and almost domestic. If we love, we will *abide* in him and he in us. We will have *communion* with him. He will, literally, make his home in us. And we in him. Because loving, as St Bernard understood, transforms us into Christ.

What could be more consoling for Christians than to know that the Lord will make his home in us? But this is not just a consoling image. It's a challenging one. Loving is not all about nice warm and fuzzy feelings. Love also makes demands of us. It is costly.

It is the kind of thing which St Benedict spoke about in his chapter about good zeal. 'they should anticipate one another in honour; most patiently endure one another's infirmities, whether of body or of character; vie in paying obedience one to another - no one following what he considers useful for himself, but rather what benefits another - tender the charity of brotherhood chastely; fear God in love; love their Abbot with a sincere and humble charity; prefer nothing whatever to Christ'.

That is the kind of loving to which the Gospels calls us. For us monastics, it is the call to live for others, to live not just as a group of bachelors, or as members of some kind of gentleman's club, but as *unum corpus* - one body - as disciples in the school of the Lord's service. It is the call to let the Lord's joy be in us, and to let him make that joy complete.

Love is *sacrificial*. The Lord Jesus modelled this dimension of love in the most extraordinary way, freely offering up his life on the cross to redeem the people of God throughout all ages and to open up the Kingdom of Heaven for all believers. What we will celebrate on this altar in a few moments is that same love made present. How wonderful a gift and a mystery! We receive the Body of Christ, and we become the Body of Christ. We receive Love made present on the altar, and are sent forth to be Love made present in the world around us.

Though not murdered in hatred of the faith as so many have been and still are today, Bernard Tolomei was indeed a kind of martyr, a witness. A martyr not of blood, but of love.... Moved by the sufferings of the people of Siena afflicted by the Plague in Siena in 1348, he left Monte Oliveto and returned to the city to minister to the sick and dying. In serving among them, he too was infected and died of the same disease.

As Jesus teaches us in today's Gospel, there is no greater love than laying down one's life for one's friends. And so, today's Solemnity is series of interlocking love stories. May it rekindle in all of us, the spark that first drew us to commit ourselves to the Lord. May it stir up in us monastics the good zeal that first drew us to seek the Lord in the school of his service, in *communion*, as *one body* under a Rule and an Abbot. And may he bring us all alike to life everlasting! Amen.