

St Bernard Tolomei
(1Corinthians 1:26-31 / John 15:9-17)
19.08.2016

Today we celebrate the founder of the Archabbey of Monte Oliveto Maggiore, which is the cradle of our monastic family – the Olivetan Congregation of the Benedictine Order.

Given that we will soon be living the Abbots' Congress of the whole of the Benedictine Confederation, followed by the General Chapter of our own particular Congregation within the Order, as I prepared my heart to celebrate today's Solemnity, I found myself thinking back to a letter written in 1998 by the late Pope, John-Paul II (now venerated as Saint John-Paul). This letter was addressed to our former Abbot General and to all the monks of our Congregation on the occasion of the General Chapter of that year. The text drew attention to some of the particular features of our Olivetan identity. The core message of Pope John-Paul's words remains relevant for us today. It seems worth retrieving and reiterating it at this time.

In his 1998 letter the late pope encouraged us to be true to the essential witness awaited from us in the Church and by the world. He underlined the importance of *emphasising with renewed vigour the timelessness of the Benedictine Order's charism as it is lived specifically by Olivetan monks*.

He spoke of how as Olivetans we are called to bear witness to the importance of **hospitality, hope and the spirituality of communion** – all of which are needed in today's Church and longed for by the world in which we live.

Let me quote directly from what the letter has to say about **hospitality**.

John-Paul II wrote: *Let us thank the Lord that over the centuries of its existence your particular Congregation has experienced how divine Providence guided the monks on the ways of authentic religious perfection. In particular, the Congregation has always known how to keep alive that typically monastic apostolate of hospitality, by offering 'loving welcome' (RB 53:3) to those who feel the need for an ideal place to become reconciled with themselves, with others and with God.* We are reminded there that the hospitality we offer should seek to provide for those around us as a sacred space in which that can be led to experience reconciliation. Of course, that depends upon us remained firmly engaged to live on-going reconciliation within our own community life.

The late Pope went on to remind us of our responsibility as Olivetans to bear witness to **hope** in the local Churches and in the parts of the world in which our monasteries are situated.

Again I quote directly from the letter: *It is important that the monks be for their guests witnesses to the theological virtue of hope, thus helping them in their daily task of transforming history according to God's plan.*

Our monastery has its place in this land, at the heart of the local Church, the Church right across Ireland and to begin with here in our Diocese of Dromore. The Irish Church surely needs to be renewed in hope as it continues to traverse the long drawn out crisis it is experiencing – a crisis which is leading so many to feel discouraged, bogged down in the atmosphere of disappointment and general malaise which abounds.

As regards **the spirituality of communion** – a theme as dear to John-Paul II's whole vision for the Church as it is to our own monastic family's outlook – the letter is particularly clear. While *recognising the legitimate diversity of each monastery*, we were called upon to seek to *enrich the spiritual wealth of what the Olivetan tradition calls the 'unum corpus'*. The letter goes on: *This tradition makes your Congregation a fraternal 'agape' of community and is at the origin of that special bond between monks and monasteries that distinguishes your*

contemplative family.

The idea of the Congregation as an '*agape*' of community is fundamental to our charism.

The practice of fraternal charity on the way of conversion, to be lived in humility of heart, is something which is at the centre of St Benedict's vision in his Rule for Monks. Bernard Tolomei emphasised it all the more, seeking to reinforce it in whatever ways possible. This led John-Paul II to remind us of the fact that *Olivetian monks have been able to make of their communities places of **brotherhood** and **ecumenical sensitivity***. He commended this strongly and encouraged its on-going development in our monasteries – especially in and through the worthy/prayerful celebration of the **Sacred Liturgy**. In paragraph 2 of John-Paul's letter we read: *It is precisely through a careful and deeply contemplative celebration of the 'Opus Dei', even in the midst of many trials, that over the centuries the Olivetan monks have been able to make their communities ever greater places of silence, peace, brotherhood and ecumenical sensitivity*. For John-Paul II to conclude: *In this way **Olivetian monasteries have become an eloquent witness to communion, hospitable dwellings for those who are seeking God and spiritual realities, schools of faith and workshops of study, dialogue and culture.***

It is important to re-read and remember all this as we prepare for the reflection and discernment of the forthcoming General Chapter. While the programme for the Chapter points to the fact that we will be looking in a special way at the material realities of our monasteries, it is vital that we also hold to the forefront of our minds and deep in our hearts our Congregation's charismatic identity – we must not lose sight of what is really essential to our life. St Benedict warns us in the Rule that material concerns should never be allowed to distract us from what really matters: spiritual realities and the seeking of God's kingdom.

Of course, at the end of the day, it is what we strive to live here at Holy Cross in this local community that counts. I say this not envisaging the local monastery in some cut-off, stand-alone or separatist way, but precisely within the '*agape*' of community in which all our monasteries are called to be engaged. We must live wholeheartedly what is required of us here in our own particular context in a spirit of communion within the wider fellowship of the whole of our monastic family.

As the Benedictine Monks of Rostrevor, we must strive to live in accord with our monastic family's ideal. We should endeavour to be a foyer of charity which has for mission to engender an ever wider and ever deeper communion within the ambient ecclesial community. Our calling is to live a *parable of reconciliation* and thereby to offer others who feel the need to be reconciled with themselves, with God and with others others, a safe space in which this essential work of God's grace can happen.

Invited anew today to live out our great calling, we must do so from that basis to which St Paul drew the attention when he wrote to the Christian community of Corinth: the basis of humility which is so central to St Benedict's vision for the monks who would follow his Rule. Holy Cross is no great monastery. Our community is not a force to be reckoned with. We are but a weak, little flock. Few in number, we are led thus to rely all the more upon God's power and His help. We are neither an immense army nor an elite force; we are just a small band of Christian disciples.

While we recognise the fragile state of our community, we are consoled by what Paul pointed out to the Corinthians. Namely, God's strength is best experienced to be at work in human weakness. We are aware that God's plan for us – and His plan to do for others in and through us – does not depend upon our wisdom, our strength, our skill, but upon His grace. We don't have to be famous or rich or highly qualified to be used by God. All that is required of us is to be open to the Lord's guidance, ready to allow ourselves to be Spirit-led. In our poverty and in our foolishness we are invited to rely entirely upon the riches of the One whose wisdom

has brought us together for His own kind purposes: the good of the Church and the salvation of the world.

We should remember today that what is required of us, before and above all else, is that we strive to live our lives close to the source of all true life: Christ-Jesus. He is the vine of which we are the branches. God desires that our life as an Olivetan community be like the fruitful branches of a verdant olive tree. The only way to be fruitful is to remain connected to Jesus. It is to allow the Lord, who cares for us and tends to us like a good gardener, to do with us what He wills; all that He needs to do to stimulate our growth and enhance our fruitfulness. I suggest that we approach our forthcoming community retreat in this light. During the days of our community retreat the invitation addressed to us is to be ever more open and attentive to God's word, remembering that line found in John's gospel which reminds us that *we are pruned by means of God's word*. Our being pruned by God's word has for purpose to make us more robust and therefore better able to bear much fruit.

Our fervent prayer as we keep today's feast is a prayer that we may see new shoots grow upon the olive tree. It is that new members be gathered around the Lord' Table with us in this place.

Finally, the call of this day, which marks Bernard Tolomei's passing into the fullness of life, is a call to hold on to his ultimate testimony. St Bernard Tolomei lived his life-giving death as a *martyr of love*. He *gave his life*, tending to the needs of his ailing brethren, thereby exposing himself to the risk of dying of the plague that afflicted them. May we also give our lives for each other in the Christian community. *There is no greater love than this... than to give one's life*.

Let us renew our offering. *Receive me, O Lord, according to Your promise and I shall live. Do not disappoint me in my hope and expectation.*

May we not disappoint the Lord in the hope and expectation He has placed in us.

Amen!