

St Bernard Tolomei

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

19.08.2021

Last week I found myself at the Abbey of Bec in France. Each day I had occasion to halt for a moment of quiet reflection at the tomb of the late Abbot, Dom Paul Grammont. His remains repose in the middle of the Choir area of the abbey church. It was on that same spot that Fr Eric and myself knelt on the Solemnity of St Bernard Tolomei, on the 19th August 1983, to receive the Mission Blessing that was prayed over us by Abbot Paul when he sent us to establish the Bec *cella* that existed in Northern Ireland from 1983-1987. Many years later, in the Christmas season of 1997, it was in the *Chapel of the Sanctissima* – a chapel in the Archabbey church of Monte Oliveto Maggiore dedicated to St Bernard Tolomei – that the founding fathers of what became this Abbey of the Holy Cross received the Solemn Blessing pronounced upon them by the then Abbot General. The mission confided to us by Dom Michelangelo Tiribilli – like that which Fr Eric and myself received hitherto from Abbot Paul – was to establish in this land *a House of Prayer for all Peoples*, a place where Christian charity would be borne witness to, and this with for goal to contribute to the growth of peace and reconciliation in this country marked by dissension and conflict. The fact that the Bec *cella* (with which an Olivetan outreach to Ireland first began) was inaugurated on the Solemnity of Bernard Tolomei and the fact that the later foundation of our monastic community came to birth at what the Abbot General referred to as *the crib of Monte Oliveto Maggiore* – a place so closely associated with the saint's life and the origins of our monastic family – is surely significant. The figure of St Bernard Tolomei has always been and will forever remain at the heart of the story of Holy Cross Abbey. It is important for us to continually remember that and to reflect upon its significance for the way in which we live our monastic life in this place day after day.

We know from our reading of the Bible that it is always good for God's People to return to the particular moments of grace that were and remain part of their story – and to do this with for goal to measure their present stance in regard to God's call upon them. The Sacred Scriptures bid the People of God in more than one place *to remember the rock from which they were hewn*; to come back in their minds and hearts to the foundation upon which their present life stands.

Today it is important for us as a community to think of the spiritual heritage and the living charism confided to us as Olivetan monks. The call addressed to us on this day – as indeed all along life's path – is to make Bernard Tolomei's heritage live in the here and now; it is, if I can put it this way, to give contemporary flesh to our Olivetan charism. The call addressed to us as monks of Holy Cross Abbey is to do that in this particular place where the Lord has established us. It befalls us to tend to, care for and make fructify the gift of God that has been placed within us... and to do this for the good of the Church (to begin with that of the Church in Ireland) and the salvation of the wider world. Our Olivetan Benedictine charism is rooted in love: love for Christ and for His Holy Faithful People, the Church; love for our brethren – those with whom we are called to serve, living the parable of communion together with them; love for the whole world for which Christ gave His life; love for all our brothers and sisters in humanity. Fundamental to our calling as Benedictine monks is the invitation to imitate *the Humble Christ*, God's Servant, the One who gave His life, making a total oblation of His whole being... *ex caritate, out of love*.

The text of today's first reading – an extract from Paul's Letter to the Corinthians – would have us *consider our call* and do that in the light of what we read therein. What is drawn to

our attention by the Apostle in the extract from this epistle heard this morning is that what really matters in our lives is that we leave God free to live and love in and through us. St Paul reminds us that it isn't our ingenuity, our wisdom, our strength, or our skill alone that matter. The Apostle makes it clear to us that we don't have to be famous, rich, talented, influential or particularly gifted people, according to this world's standards or its assessment of us. What matters is that we be pleasing to God; that we live as servants whom the Lord can use for the good of the Church. Paul is clear not only in the passage read this morning, but throughout his writings, that *whatever good is to be found in us should be attributed to God, for God alone is the source of all good*. The Rule of St Benedict underlines this same point in chapter 4 – the chapter entitled *On the Tools of Good Works*. The Rule makes this same point in many other places as well.

All this to say that in truly Christian people – *a fortiori* in monks and nuns who follow the Rule of St Benedict – there is no room for self-sufficiency. No place should be given to such an attitude within us. Following the example of *Christ who emptied Himself*, emptied Himself of all self-clinging pride, the monk should empty himself of all self-sufficiency.

When Jesus spoke of the good He Himself accomplished in life, He made it clear that it was all the Father's doing in and through Him. For St Paul to remind us that anything of value that any of us achieve is due to God's grace at work within us. It is never the result of our own strength alone. *It is all God's work within you*.

While we might be willing agree with what I am saying here in principle, I suspect many of us actually struggle to accept it in practice. So easily we give into the tendency to think that everything depends on us. We like to be in control of our lives; to feel that we are in charge. For this reason, we can find it hard to surrender our lives into the hands of another – even into the hands of God. We have a propensity to want to hold on to our lives; an inclination to *cling to ourselves*, if I can put it that way. At certain moments we can cling to ourselves *like grim death*. When we do so, that is exactly what we experience: *grim death!* We hinder ourselves from living as we are meant to: freely... as men and women fully alive; men and women who enjoy true liberty of mind and heart.

A big challenge for many of us when it comes to living in freedom is to accept to *let go* of all we cling to deep within ourselves. We are afraid that if we were to *let go* we would be left feeling powerless. A sense of disempowerment can awaken within us a reaction of fear which most often will lead us to retract. As a result we can find ourselves drawing back from giving ourselves entirely! How readily we give into the temptation of trying to recuperate what we may have previously committed ourselves to give! As long as we do this we are doomed to feel dissatisfied in our calling to live a truly Consecrated Life, for we will know in our heart of hearts that the genuine consecration of our life demands of us that we give our all. Consecrated life, life lived in love, really is an all or nothing affair! With God – with love – there can be no half measures! True love lets go and true love gives all. It doesn't permit the lover to cling to him or her self. Indeed, the very opposite. It leads the lover to surrender entirely to the loved one. The French have a beautiful way of putting things. They employ a word that we don't manage to translate literally. They talk in terms of a *dessaisissement*. The closest English translation we have for the French verb *dessaisir* is *relinquish*. To *relinquish* means to *voluntarily cease to claim or to keep*; it means *to give up*. We should hear the expression *give up* used there in the very positive sense of *handing over, freely offering*. We are called to *give up – freely offer* – not only what one holds in hand, but who and what one is. This is what the love of Jesus at work within our hearts leads us to do. It well and truly leads us into an experience of true and total self-giving.

In today's Gospel passage we heard Jesus say to us: *Live in My love*. A fundamental hallmark of Christian love is that it will reflect Jesus' own humility. Genuine Christian love will reflect

Jesus' own stance of humble obedience. In the Gospel passage read this morning we heard Jesus say: *When you obey me you are living in My love. Just as I obey the Father and live in His love. The greatest love is shown when a person lays down his or her life.* Laying down one's life, humbly and obediently surrendering one's life, demands of us that we let go of ourselves completely. It entails a real *dessaisissement*; a true *relinquishment*.

The late Dom Andre Louf shares with his readers some very beautiful insights into the demands of living the grace of humble love in his book *Tuning In To Grace*. He writes: *Nothing so vividly expresses the character of a human being as his or her capacity to love.* Further on in the same context he states: *We can love only to the degree we have been given the experience of God's love and grace.* Dom Louf says something any of us who have ever loved will know to be true from experience: *Love makes a person needy and poor and even dependent upon another. Love makes us give up to the other, it teaches us to listen and makes us receptive. In this sense love can never be without humility. It is especially love that makes me humble in relation to the one for whom I so intensely long.* Dom Louf goes on to note: *We can understand that many people unconsciously resist love. They resist something that might be considered weak or cowardly, and they will do anything to escape this trial.* Wise abbot and spiritual father that he was, Dom Louf pinpoints one of the escape routes we can be tempted to take to avoid feeling weak in love: *An active and generous service of others is the most obvious way to do this, one moreover that flatters our self-love. A so-called altruistic love may be a way to avoid love, particularly the genuine humility that is an ingredient of love. It is rather easy to be a hero in the love of one's neighbour, [but] external heroism has little to do with genuine love; love that entails vulnerability and weakness.* Louf goes on to put his readers on their guard against taking refuge in the love of groups rather than persons, or of loving distant neighbours rather than those with whom one is called to share one's life. Again this kind of loving can amount to finding ways to avoid or exempt oneself from real love. For Louf to conclude: *Humble love, humilis caritas, is perhaps the greatest of all evangelical virtues. Such love is love in the image of God.*

I am sure we would all agree that people who incarnate the kind of love just described are a great blessing to the Church and to the whole world, Today we celebrate one such person: Bernard Tolomei. As we celebrate the founder of our particular branch of the Benedictine Order – the Benedictine Congregation of St Mary of Monte Oliveto – we are called to remember that our vocation engages us to be such people in our turn. The testimony of the life and death of Saint Bernard Tolomei should bring us back to the essential witness of our consecrated lives: self-giving love. If self-giving love is asked of all the baptised who seek to imitate Christ, it is required *a fortiori* from those of us who have made Monastic or Religious Profession. From our reading of St Benedict Rule for Monks it is clear that the goal of Benedictine monastic life is none other than this: to lead us to live in love – the perfect love of Christ. Such love lured Bernard Tolomei and his companions into the desert of Acona, where they lived first of all a solitary life of prayer, but then were led further still under the inspiration of God's Holy Spirit, to commit themselves together to form a loving fraternal community – an *unum corpus, one body one spirit in Christ*. In this community each member was welcomed and respected and so helped to grow to his full stature in Christ. In his Letters St Bernard Tolomei insists upon the importance of *remaining united with all our brethren wherever they might be called to serve*, extolling what he calls *the most holy love of community*. For Bernard the brethren of our monastic family are meant to live as *brothers to each other* – not just fellow-members of an efficient organisation, living juxtaposed to one another either within their own particular monastery or in regard to those living elsewhere. All the sons of Monte Oliveto are to hold a concern in their heart for each other. It should also be said that in Bernard's vision of things Olivetan monks' love was never meant to end there...

and it didn't. From the outset we see how Olivetan monks were concerned for the wider communion of the Church. Bernard insisted upon real links with the wider ecclesial community, responding to calls to establish Houses of the Olivetan observance in many places. His personal example – nowhere more than in his death – bears an eloquent testimony to his compassion for the suffering people of the world. His death in Siena – ministering not only to his own brethren there, but also to the many who came clamouring for help at the door of the Monastery of St Benedict in that city during the time of the Great Plague – was the crowning of the attitude of self-giving love that was the hallmark of his monastic life.

Praying last week at Abbot Paul's tomb in the abbey church at Bec I would see with my mind's eye in his distinctive handwriting a message he wrote to Fr Eric and myself – a quotation from today's Gospel passage – the line: *Majorem caritatem nemo habet, ut animam suam ponet quia pro amicis suis. No greater love has a man than to give his life for his friends.* As I think of the cross venerated in the Chapel of the Sanctissima at Monte Oliveto Maggiore – the cross which is said to have spoken to St Bernard Tolomei, I imagine Jesus saying to Bernard, as the contemplated His Lord Christ *lifted up from the earth: Bernard, what I have done for you, you must do for those you love ...and for all. Give your life for them!* May this Eucharist celebrated on the Solemnity of our Father in Christ – St Bernard Tolomei – see us renewing the gift of our lives to God and for others.
Amen!