



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Newsletter of March, 2010,
Lent

Dears Friends,

"ANOTHER boy!" This shout of joy echoed in the home of the Tolomei family, in Siena, Tuscany, Italy on May 10, 1272. Most likely that same day, following the custom at the time, the child was baptized, receiving the name Giovanni (John). He joined two brothers already at home, and would be followed by two more boys and two girls.

Giovanni was born into a milieu characterized by a pronounced taste for money and power. Since the end of the 12th century, his family had been engaged in commercial and banking activities that had become very successful, and that had placed it at the top of the social ladder, among the mighty who wielded the greatest power, both economic and political, in the city of Siena. The Tolomei's were among the pioneers of modern banking, which was emerging just at this time in Italy. Their commercial activities took place in the markets of Champagne, where Flanders sheets and riches from the Orient—silk and spices in particular—were traded. They traveled as far as England to negotiate purchases of wool and loans to the Crown. They likewise were among the Pope's bankers, responsible for the collection and transfer of papal taxes, along with the exchange activities that these entailed. The Supreme Pontiff's favor assured them easy access to bishops, priests, and canons, to whom they granted loans. During the over two century long conflict between the Emperor of the German Holy Roman Empire, supported by the Ghibellines, and the Pope, supported by the Guelfs, the Tolomei family placed themselves firmly with the latter. Around the time of Giovanni's birth, the conflict was resolved in favor of the pope, but for a long time opinions would remain divided.

An accomplished jurist

Italy is known for having spread among the urban elite, during the high Middle Ages, a culture inspired by classical antiquity. From it, Giovanni received the best possible education. From his father and his uncles he learned the basic techniques of business and banking. An ancient account describes him as an "accomplished jurist". His legal abilities certainly gave him the possibility to attain positions of administrative and diplomatic authority in his city. He was also called an "extraordinary knight", that is to say, a member of the small local army necessitated by the permanent low level warfare created

by the conflicts between Italian cities. Spiritually, he knew his weaknesses and considered himself a sinner. Nevertheless, he was inspired by the religious atmosphere of Siena, the city of saints. The Virgin

MARY was the city's patroness, and a "Maestà", an image of the enthroned Madonna, surrounded by apostles, saints, and angels, would be given the place of honor on the cathedral's façade in June 1311. The dedication inscribed at the bottom of the scene reads, "Holy Mother of God, be the source of peace for Siena", where peace refers not only to temporal tranquility for the city's inhabitants, but also to their eternal rest. An entire network of confraternities—that is, lay spiritual associations—assured for their members solid support for the interior life and the practice of charity. Giovanni was probably a member of one such group that gathered in a well-known hospital to assist the sick and the poor, where one cultivated an ascetic spirituality and a love of solitude. A chronicler portrays Giovanni in these words: "Enlivened by the breath of the divine Spirit and moved to his innermost depths by a passionate fervor, one with his noble Sienese friends, Patrizio de' Patrizi, Francesco and Ambrogio Piccolomini, and meditating day and night, they aspired to the heavenly realities. United as strangers to the vanities of the world, they sought to serve the God Who thunders." The reference to the "God Who thunders" is Biblical, alluding to the giving of the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai (cf. Ex. 19 :16-19). Giovanni understood that "true happiness is not found in riches or well-being, in human fame or power, or in any human achievement—however beneficial it may be—such as science, technology, and art, or indeed in



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any creature, but in God alone, the source of every good and of all love" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1723).

One day in 1313, Giovanni and his Sienese friends moved to a place called Acona, which the descendants of the Tolomei had received as an inheritance. It was a completely isolated site, accessible from a single side, but otherwise surrounded by precipices. Inspired by the Spirit of God, these young men left the city with its numerous obstacles to their spiritual aspirations, withdrawing to this solitary spot to begin a new life and seek God more intensely.

A new way of thinking

On June 28, 2009, on the occasion of the closing of the year of Saint Paul, Pope Benedict XVI said, "In the *Letter to the Romans*, the Apostle briefly sums up the essential nucleus of Christian existence ... First of all he affirms, as a fundamental thing, that a new way of venerating God—a new form of worship—began with Christ. It consists in the fact that the living person himself becomes adoration, 'sacrifice', even in his own body. It is no longer things that are offered to God. It is our very existence that must become praise of God. But how does this happen? In the second verse, we are given the answer: *Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God...* (12 :2) ... We must become new people, transformed into a new mode of existence. ... Paul makes this process of 'recasting' even clearer by saying that we become new if we transform our way of thinking ... We might have expected instead that this would have concerned some attitude: what we should change in our behavior. But no: renewal must go to the very core. Our way of looking at the world, of understanding reality, all our thought must change from its foundations. The reasoning of the former person, the common way of thinking is usually directed to possession, well-being, influence, success, fame and so forth. Yet, in this way its scope is too limited. Thus, in the final analysis, one's 'self' remains the center of the world ... We must learn to share in the thinking and the will of JESUS CHRIST. It is then that we will be new people."

The friendship that bound Giovanni and his friends flowed from their friendship with God, and the particular tone of the monastic family that was born came from this communion lived by the founders. Patrizio belonged to the group of very wealthy merchants who formed the supreme judiciary of the Republic of Siena. Weary of frequent travel and activity that was deadening to the soul, he joined the confraternity to which Giovanni belonged. He brought the new community valuable help, thanks to his economic and administrative skills. He was the closest of Giovanni's companions. He would die in 1347. Ambrogio came from the same circles as Giovanni. A young man of means having lived in

idleness, he would have to find courage to successfully live the conversion he undertook with his friends. He would die in 1338. It is not known whether Francesco accompanied the group of founders. In Acona, the three friends found a building that they moved into, exchanging their garments of fine cloth for rough habits. They built a place of worship to chant the divine office and have the divine mysteries celebrated by priests of their choice, since none of them had been ordained. Poverty forced them to live by the work of their hands, which they probably were not used to. They grew some vegetables and gathered wild fruit. However, this work alone was not enough to support them, so they supplemented it with the revenues of Giovanni's possessions.

Solitude and friendship

"Assiduous in prayer," a chronicler assures, "constant in silence, they were full of ardor to render praise to God." Their fervor and joy drew other souls and, little by little, the small group grew. "Desirous of devoting themselves in private to compunction of heart (repentance that is full of love) and to prayer—according to that which God deigns to grant each individual—they sought silence and tranquility, some in the forests, others in their little church, some in caves dug into the earth, still others in yet more remote locations. In this solitude, they raised their pure hands to God in prayer, pouring out their souls under the gaze of the Lord their God." This solitude was nevertheless tempered by the warmth of their friendship and by their unanimity.

This foray into monastic life did not go unnoticed, and tongues soon wagged about these sons of wealthy families who were living in the woods clothed in a strange habit. This was the era when groups of Franciscans called "spirituals" had developed who, claiming attachment to the radical poverty intended by Saint Francis of Assisi, formed autonomous groups against which the pope issued severe decrees. The Church sent an official inquisitor to Acona. His conclusions, favorable to the ascetics, urged them to have themselves recognized as religious by their bishop and to adopt a Rule.

One day, Giovanni was alone in prayer when he saw rise before him a ladder made of silver, at the top of which stood the Savior and His Most Blessed Mother, clothed in brilliant white. By this ladder, angels descended to earth, while monks clothed in white ascended to Heaven. Calling some nearby brothers, Giovanni shared with them this vision that foretold the future: the building of a monastery that would be a ladder to Heaven for many white-clothed monks. "The Lord appeared standing at the top of the ladder, clearly showing that He stands ever ready to help those who fight for the Kingdom of Heaven," declared an author of the time. As for the angels, they held the hands of the monks in their

ascent to their home in Heaven. Strengthened by this supernatural revelation, the hermits of Acona chose to place themselves in the school of Saint Benedict. Giovanni took the name Bernard, after the 12th century abbot of Clairvaux who sang the praises of the Blessed Virgin MARY. Accompanied by Patrizio, he went to see the bishop in Arezzo. The bishop responded with kindness and generosity, and on March 26, 1319, granted them a charter bringing the Benedictine monastery in Acona into existence. The foundation was dedicated to the Virgin MARY and adopted the name "Saint Mary of Mount Olivet", commemorating not only the natural aspect of the spot, which was planted with olive trees, but above all of the Garden of Olives where JESUS went with His disciples. The new religious had received permission to distinguish themselves from other Benedictines by wearing a white rather than black habit. They were in fact the monks dressed in white that had appeared on the mysterious ladder.

A responsibility feared, then accepted

On March 29, Bernard, Patrizio, and Ambrogio were officially clothed in the monastic habit, and made their religious profession at the hands of a monk from the abbey of Sasso, who had been delegated by the bishop for this ceremony. The building of the monastery was yet to be undertaken. A priest appointed by the bishop went to Acona to choose the best site, plant a cross in the ground, lay the first foundation stone, and make the customary blessings. The next day the community gathered to determine some particular aspects of monastic life. The length of the abbot's term was set at one year, in contrast to the usual practice in Benedictine abbeys of electing an abbot for life. The first abbot elected was not Bernard, who wanted to be in the background and stressed his poor eyesight, but Patrizio. The next two years Ambrogio, and then Simon di Tura were elected. In September 1322, however, Bernard Tolomei accepted the duty of abbot, on his brothers' entreaties, and then from year to year was continually re-elected.

The monastic days were divided between chanting the divine office, manual labor, which for the new monks occupied an important place, and reading. The construction of the church and monastery required hard work, the brothers firing the bricks themselves. They also devoted themselves to planting a vineyard and other agricultural labor intended to feed the community. The abbot especially sought to maintain silence, even during work. Poverty was apparent in their dress, their meals, and their beds, which were only sacks filled with straw. This monastic regime was patterned after the living conditions of the poor of the time.

The spiritual instruction of Bernard Tolomei after his election as abbot stressed the virtue of humility, to which he gave central importance in the life of a monk.

His personal conversion to monastic life had led him to the antitheses of the values embraced by the world. In a letter, he wrote that accumulating virtues without humility amounted to throwing dust into the wind. But he also recalled that the mother of humility is charity, which only Christ can give. Thus, above all it is important to adhere to Christ, Who gives in abundance. Charity was to be put into practice especially in the "most holy love of the community", which Bernard practiced to an exquisite degree. He was attentive to each of his brothers, especially to the youngest; he governed as the father of a family, aware at once of his responsibilities and his limits, trusting in the aid of the Holy Spirit, which revealed itself in particular by the counsel of the brothers gathered in chapter. He signed his letters "Brother Bernard, Abbot albeit unworthy, of the monastery of Saint Mary of Mount Olivet."

The preservation of unity

Soon, bishops and lay lords, moved by the fervor of the new monks, asked for foundations. The first was established in Siena in 1322. Within twenty years, there would be ten, often located near cities, but sometimes completely isolated in the country. To preserve the organic unity of the rapidly growing new monastic family, the monks considered themselves to be all a part of a single monastery in multiple locations, each one remaining connected to and under the Mother House like limbs attached to the head, making up a single body. Thus there was a single abbot, that of Mount Olivet. The other communities were governed by priors, and added the name of Mount Olivet to their names, so the monastery in Siena became, for example "Saint Benedict of Mount Olivet of Siena." Each year the general chapter gathered the prior and two delegates from each foundation to the Mount Olivet community. The abbot began by rendering his resignation, then everyone turned to listening to the Holy Spirit, to take stock of the life of the Congregation. Once the abbot had been elected or re-elected, he presided over the chapter and appointed the priors and those responsible for the principle offices in each house. Between chapters, the abbot visited the various monasteries, or had a representative visit them. To carry out his duties, the abbot had to make many trips, and it was certainly painful for Bernard Tolomei to leave his solitude. In addition, he had to bear the burden of corresponding with the benefactors and solicitors and, of course, taking fatherly care for his brothers. To obtain approval for his monastic family, the saint sent two representatives to the French pope Clement VI, himself a Benedictine monk, residing in Avignon. On January 21, 1344, the Pope granted Bernard's petition. The Pope's approval marked the official birth of this Congregation, which at that time comprised 160 monks spread out among the Mount Olivet monastery and ten foundations.

Having arrived at an advanced age, Bernard longed to retire from his leadership duties, but on May 4, 1347, the general chapter elected him yet again, "with full confidence that, on account of his holiness, he would not stray from the will of God, nor from the salvation of the souls of his brothers and sons"—a precious testimony left to us by his contemporaries.

At the beginning of 1348, the Black Plague, which would strike all of Europe, spread throughout northern Italy with devastating speed. The fear of contagion led people to abandon the sick. "The disaster," wrote one author at the time "had cast such fear into the hearts of men and women that brother abandoned brother, uncle abandoned nephew, sister abandoned brother, and often, even wife abandoned husband. Even worse and scarcely believable: fathers and mothers, as if their children were no longer their own, avoided going to see and assist them." Faced with so great a calamity, Bernard Tolomei, far from sheltering himself from contagion, left the solitude of Mount Olivet and went to the monastery in Siena where his monks were in greatest danger, to give them the aid of his presence and his spiritual assistance. It is likely that, along with them, he also cared for the isolated and abandoned sick of the city. But he in his turn contracted the disease. On August 20, surrounded by a few surviving brothers, and reaching with all his faith toward his Lord Whom he knew to be at his side with His glorious Mother, he rendered his soul to God. His body, quickly buried because of the contagion, has never been found, as if the saint wished to tell us not to turn our gaze to him, but toward Christ.

The saint's monastic family was hit hard by the scourge, considering that 80 brothers—roughly half of the actual total—died at the same time as their Father.

Let us ask the Lord to help us recognize the fullness of His love. May Christ live in our hearts and make us new men and women, witnesses to the truth in charity!

But its vitality was such that within twelve years, the family had recovered and continued its development. Today, it is present well beyond Italy's borders, with foundations as far away as Korea, Hawaii, and Ghana, a circumstance that has modified the community's organization but has not undermined its members' deep communion, passed down from its earliest days. It is also open in several forms to women, thanks to Saint Frances of Rome (1384-1440).

Strengthening the interior person

Bernard Tolomei was canonized by Pope Benedict XVI on April 26, 2009. His life reminds us of the essential message already taught by Saint Paul (Eph. 3:16) and taken up again by the Holy Father: "The inner person must be strengthened—this is a very appropriate imperative for our time, in which people all too often remain inwardly empty and must therefore cling to promises and drugs, which then result in a further growth of the sense of emptiness in their hearts. This interior void—the weakness of the inner person—is one of the great problems of our time. Interiority—the perceptiveness of the heart—must be reinforced; the capacity to see and to understand the world and the person from within, with one's heart. We are in need of reason illuminated by the heart in order to learn to act in accordance with truth in love. However, this is not realized without an intimate relationship with God, without the life of prayer. We need the encounter with God that is given to us in the sacraments. And we cannot speak to God in prayer unless we let Him speak first, unless we listen to Him in the words that He has given us" (Speech on the occasion of the closing of the Pauline year, June 28, 2009).

*Dom Antoine Marie
— o.s.b.*

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Abbaye Saint-Joseph de Clairval (English ed) ISSN : 1956-3906 - Dépôt légal : date de parution - Directeur de publication : Dom Antoine Beauchef - Imprimerie : Traditions Monastiques - 21150 Flavigny-sur-Ozerain.

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