

Very few people know of Blessed Bernard Tolomei. I was offered lots of food yesterday to take home after the funeral of Father John Fowler in Olney and I said, ‘Oh, that’s good because we are celebrating the feast of our founder tomorrow, and I can use it then.’ To which the kind lady making the offer said ‘St. Benedict?’ ‘No’, I said, ‘ the founder of the Olivetans, blessed Bernard Tolomei,’ to which I received a blank look – as expected. Does it matter? Yes and no. Yes, if it’s a sign that the Olivetans have not borne fruit and, no, if the fruit we bear is one of love, whatever the institutional consequences. And I’m reminded of Father John Fowler’s own journey which took him from England to British Guiana – now Guyana – in South America as a Church of England priest in quite difficult and dangerous circumstances - he met his wife there (to echo some of the great humour in yesterday’s eulogy), and later returned to England where he took the difficult and dangerous step of becoming a Roman Catholic, together with his wife, and son, losing his chance of further ministry and advancement in the Anglican tradition, only to find himself head-hunted, as it were, by Bishop Peter Smith to become a Roman Catholic priest of the diocese of East Anglia and then assigned to a difficult parish in Cambridge.

On his eventual retirement the family moved to Wellingborough. When asked, ‘Why Wellingborough of all places?’ (this told by Deacon Peter, a native of Wellingborough) he said that one place was as good as another (or words to that effect) and found himself ministering in Olney as well, when needed, and hence our own connection.

Now eulogies can, of course, over-egg a person’s good points, but there’s no doubt that Fr. John’s ministry was fruitful despite his institutional profile, - not even a priest of this diocese – can you believe it?, but well-loved because of his love of people. In this, he was true to his original vocation: the vocation we all have and without which the rest is meaningless no matter how high up the ecclesiastical tree one reaches. Or, as Pope Francis said in Paraguay in 2015:

You do not convince people with arguments, strategies or tactics.

You convince them by simply learning how to welcome them.

As he had earlier put it:

Jesus didn’t proselytise, he accompaniedcloseness that’s the program. (p.161) Wounded Shepherd: Austen Ivereigh

And also joy: for without joy we attract no one (p.158)

And so it is with great joy that we celebrate the feast of St Bernard Tolomei today, and hope for something of his original conversion to Christ for ourselves here in Turvey – one place being as good as another.

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