

Bernard Tolomei at first refused to be the one in charge of his small band or followers in the desert of Acona a few miles east of Siena. There were three, possibly four, of them when they left Siena in 1313 to begin a new life together as hermits. Bernard, then known as Giovanni, from a rich family of bankers, Patrizio di Francesco Patrizi from a rich family of merchants, Ambrogio Piccolomini, whose family had provided the Church with two popes in the previous century and possibly Francesco, of whom we know little, and is only mentioned once in the records. In 1319 they were given official approval to establish a monastery, to follow the rule of Saint Benedict and to wear white habits in honour of Our Lady, and the first Abbot to be appointed was Bernard's close friend Patrizio. Unusually, rather than choose an Abbot for life, they had decided to elect an Abbot for one year only, and it wasn't until three years later that Bernard was finally persuaded to take over. He had to lead by his deeds as well as his teaching and in his letters, he frequently refers to his own humility. Now this may seem strange to our ears and perhaps reflects something of the culture or religious sensibility at the time, but there's no doubt he was well loved by his brothers and his example drew many more followers in subsequent years. Indeed, he himself writes that love is the mother of humility and that only Christ can provide his faithful with such a virtue – so he writes of humility not simply as a convention but from his own experience of dependency on Christ for his ability to love and serve his brothers. One of his biographers goes on to say:

*“We get the sense that for Bernard, obedience, chastity, poverty and all the monastic virtues are nothing other than the flowering in the monk's heart of the circulation of love that is in God, that is God. Like every Christian, the monk is called to be divinised in his humanity”.*

(p51 Bernard Bouchard)

This is to breathe the life of God, to allow God to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves or in Paul's words to the Philippians:

*“It is God for his own loving purpose, who puts both the will and the action into you”*

This is God remaking us in God's image, so full of God that we share in God's joy, become friends of God rather than mere servants, remain in God because God remains in us and it's this divination that we will carry us through death, as we breathe out God breaths in, or in this beautiful short poem by the Dominican Paul Murray to a dying friend:

*“Now as your spirit  
fails, you can  
with your last breath  
breathe deep  
and feel another's breath  
inhale and breathe  
within your breath.”*

God is closer to us than we are to ourselves.

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