

Feast of Bernard Tolomei 19/08/2026

There's nothing like staying at home to broaden one's horizons. I am reminded of Henry David Thoreau, who spent a year or so as a sort of hermit in a hut in a wood on the edge of a lake at Walden near Concord in the States. At the end of his life, he was able to say, *"I've travelled far in Concord,"* (no connections there, with Air Force or British Airways - that comes later.) and his writings do indeed show him to be an acute observer of nature and of himself. Once done, he returned to Concord and never left it or, as Emerson comments,

"As soon as he had exhausted the advantages of that solitude, he abandoned it." (xi intro to Walden)

Something of this coming and going, whilst staying put, is present in today's readings and in the life of Blessed Bernard Tolomei, our founding saint or we could as well say something of this staying put whilst coming and going is present in today's readings and in the life of Blessed Bernard Tolomei. For the staying put is a spiritual quality, a stability of the soul which remains wherever one is and whatever one is doing or is being done to you. It's a quality of focus, of faith, of trust in something or someone larger than oneself, a relationship of love and friendship which sustains one whether alone or in company, or in crisis or in the humdrum affairs of everyday life. Abraham discovers it as he steps out, Paul too, and Bernard Tolomei, and each attracts others as they do so. There's a dynamic at play which words alone fail to capture, which may make sense of those puzzling words at the end of the passage from John's Gospel:

"I am commissioning you to go out and bear fruit, fruit that will last; and then the Father will give you anything you ask Him in my name",

which could sound like earning one's way to heaven, something given as a reward for one's own hard labour. Paul struggles to express this dynamic of work and grace also:

"Work for your salvation in fear and trembling,"

but qualifies it immediately by saying

"It is God, for his own loving purpose, who puts both the will and the action into you".

And there we have it: it's not a before-and-after thing; one steps out in faith and one finds it. One leaves home and finds oneself at home, wherever one might be; one trusts, not knowing what or who will come next, and one finds oneself trusted, loved, at peace. It's a work and a reward that never stops. Bernard Tolomei escapes to the desert of Ancona to live the life of a hermit, with two other friends as hermits nearby. Inevitably, because it's an action of faith, of trust in the unknown, he attracts others. A new monastic order begins. He travels far in Monte Oliveto only at the end of his life, to be called back to his nearby native city of Siena to help his brothers in their battle with the plague, only to die of it also and to be buried in an unmarked grave. But his legacy lives on in the many other monks and nuns who have travelled far in their monasteries - a staying put which is really a going out and a witness that God is all in all. Or can be.

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