



The World Community for Christian Meditation

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Canonisation

It is, when you think about it, an extraordinarily daring claim to declare a saint. To be convincing it requires the creation of a lot of atmosphere and visible authority. Keeping the hubris and the humility in balance is perhaps the art of all external religion.

The Pope sits in the solitude of his ancient primacy on an elevated cathedra in front of St Peter's. His supreme power is tempered by a sense of his personal loneliness. He looks down on the terraced ranks of the church, clergy, religious and laity strictly segregated in the hierarchical order that is the visible form of this part of the Body of Christ. Theology says all the parts are equal. But sacred theatre is not democratic – no one wants it to be, actors or audience.

Two superior acolytes permanently beside the Pope hold up his vestments when he walks and hold the book he reads from. Two cardinals sit symmetrically below him, too close to the daily politics of the church to be too close to him in the sacred time and space of the liturgy. Everything visible represents something implicit. There is a deeply satisfying sense of order that, in liturgical time anyway, overrides the many questions it raises. There is also a unique kind of beauty that our secular age has otherwise lost.

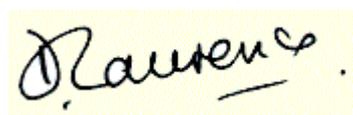
The Roman aristocracy carefully protect their ancient privileges wearing many ornate signs of it. Their presence is irrelevant to the main event but asserts that the main event is part of something bigger. Ambassadors, military, politicians, all sit obediently in their right place. Here a few women with mantillas come close to the pinnacle of power. The almost invisible Swiss guards impassively ignore the attention they receive. On the other side of the altar, the ecclesiastical hierarchy are ranked in descending order, cardinals, bishops, abbots, monsignori, each scrupulously identified by his vestments or robes. Less impassive, they look around at those looking at them, smiling graciously at friends, looking through strangers. In the square the people stand as they must have done in ancient Rome, awed, excited, looking up, eager to be part of the sublime liturgy of public worship. Between the highest and the lowest, more crowded and less comfortably seated the monks, priests and members of the religious orders whose founders the Pope is today inscribing among the saints of the Holy

Roman Church. Bernardo Tolomei, the founder of the Benedictine monastery of Monte Oliveto Maggiore, the motherhouse of the Olivetan Congregation was born in Siena a city of saints, in 1272. His noble family was a pillar of the economic and political system and served as the Pope's bankers. He was a brilliant lawyer and joined a confraternity, part of the great devotional movements that swept Italy at his time. Suffering from damaged eyesight, a canonical impediment to ordination, he decided to withdraw from the world and settled with two companions in a remote part of his estates, the crete senesi on which the beautiful monastery still rests today. They lived in the spirit of the desert monks and the simplicity and sincerity of their life led inevitably to the growth of the community. Obedient to the local bishop, Bernardo gave structure to their life and integrated it into the church's institution by taking the Rule of St Benedict. Later the Avignon Pope Clement VI recognised them formally. For some years Bernardo declined to be abbot.

In 1348 the plague that was to devastate Europe, often reducing the population by two thirds, struck Siena. Bernardo with some of his monks returned to the city to be with and care for the sick. He died with them and his body disappeared into a common grave. The absence of relics impedes your causa.

Hagiography aside, it is difficult not to feel moved by Bernardo Tolomei. He seemed averse to power even in the world he created in his monastic family. Born to privilege he was freed from the prison of hierarchy. Yet however intense his detachment he lived it in the institution of the church. Like Francis of Assisi and Catherine of Siena – and Italians today – he could see the dysfunction while loving the family.

In St Peter's Square last Sunday we did the same. A curial Cardinal once told me that only a sense of humour, renewed by frequent visits home, enabled him to survive Rome. In the sacristy before the ceremony the priests at the base of the hierarchy were being told the protocol for giving communion. "You may even have a cardinal or bishop come to receive from you. Do not be frightened, give it to them in just the same way.' The priests laughed aloud reminding us that the church in her wisdom recognises that hilaritas is also a part of holiness.

A handwritten signature in black ink on a yellow background. The signature reads "Laurence" in a cursive script, with a horizontal line under the name.

Laurence Freeman OSB

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