



The Holy See

LETTER OF POPE JOHN PAUL II TO THE OLIVETAN BENEDICTINES

*To The Most Reverend Father Michelangelo Riccardo M. Tiribilli
Abbot General of the Olivetan Benedictine Congregation,*

1. This year marks the 650th anniversary of the death of Bl. Bernard Tolomei, an impassioned “God-seeker” (cf. *Benedictine Rule*, 58:7), which this monastic congregation is joyfully preparing to celebrate. On this happy occasion, I am pleased to send you, Most Reverend Father, and the entire monastic congregation of the Olivetans my best wishes, while gladly joining in the common hymn of praise and thanksgiving to the Lord for the gift to his Church of such an important Gospel witness.

By a providential coincidence, this anniversary falls in the second year of immediate preparation for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, the year dedicated to the Holy Spirit. The shining figure of Bl. Bernard, who established “schools of the Lord’s service” (cf. *Benedictine Rule*, Prol. 45), is a remarkable example of the presence and action of the Holy Spirit, the source of the great variety of charisms on which the Bride of Christ lives.

In the heart of Bl. Bernard, “God’s love was poured out ... through the Holy Spirit” (cf. Rom 5:5) in abundance, and it thus made him a sign of the risen Lord. As a result, he was able to excel “in the life to which God has called him, for the increase of the holiness of the Church and for the greater glory of the one and undivided Trinity” (Dogm. Const. *Lumen gentium*, n. 47), by “striving to become a bearer of the Cross” (cf. Ap. Exhort. *Vita consecrata*, n. 6), as is significantly shown in the name of Monte Oliveto which he gave to the wilderness of Accona. By “preferring nothing to the love of Christ” (*Benedictine Rule*, 4:21; cf. 72:11), Bernard entered with dynamic fidelity into that uninterrupted tradition which has proven the nobility, beauty and fruitfulness of Benedictine spirituality.

2. His extraordinary experience of the dead and risen Christ was an “experience of the Spirit lived and transmitted” (cf. *Mutuae relationes*, n. 11) to the monastic congregation founded by him and which is present today in many countries of the world.

With the approach of the third millennium of the Christian era, the Olivetan Benedictine spiritual family, looking with hope

towards the future, intends courageously to strengthen its vocation to the service of the Gospel. It feels the urgent need to “present to the divine majesty a service at once humble and noble” (Decr. *Perfectae caritatis*, n. 9), while joyfully accepting “the blessing of obedience” (*Benedictine Rule*, 71:1), “practising fraternal charity” (ibid., 72:8), progressing in the “conversion of life” (ibid., 58:17) and the practice of humility (cf. ibid., 7).

It is precisely through a careful and deeply contemplative celebration of the *Opus Dei*, even in the midst of many trials, that over the centuries the Olivetan monks have been able to make their communities ever greater places of silence, peace, brotherhood and ecumenical sensitivity. In this way Olivetan monasteries have become an eloquent witness to communion, hospitable dwellings for those who are seeking God and spiritual realities, schools of faith and workshops of study, dialogue and culture.

3. The 650th anniversary of the death of Bl. Bernard is therefore an appropriate occasion to emphasize with renewed vigour the timeliness of this order's charism. In recalling the founder's radical witness of monastic life, it will not be difficult to identify the reasons for the choices suggested to him by the state of monasticism in his day and used by him in founding a new Benedictine congregation that differs from the others by “its own structure, in which the monks make their profession in the hands of the Abbot General or his delegate and, even if living in different monasteries, are so united to the Archabbey of Monte Oliveto Maggiore that they form a single family by a juridical bond in addition to one of charity” (*Olivetan Constitutions*, 1).

I am aware that attention to his “rereading” of the Rule of St Benedict will be the subject of reflection and discernment in your forthcoming General Chapter, an important examination of your charismatic identity. I firmly hope that, through everyone's efforts and collaboration, the historical memory of your origins may become a living memory that imparts new vitality to your apostolate.

Because it is important to distinguish the charism from the contingent forms in which it was expressed in the past, it will be opportune to revise it in a balanced and realistic way, following the principles of solidarity and complementarity already acknowledged by your Constitutions, but which perhaps are in need of new clarification to better suit the contemporary situation of your congregation.

4. Let us thank the Lord that in the over six centuries of its existence your congregation has experienced how divine Providence guided the monks on the ways of authentic religious perfection. In particular, the congregation has always known how to keep alive that typically monastic apostolate of hospitality, by offering a “loving welcome” (cf. *Benedictine Rule*, 53:3) to those who feel the need for an ideal place to become reconciled with themselves, with others and with God. It is important that the monks be for their guests witnesses of the theological virtue of hope, thus helping them in the daily task of transforming history according to God's plan.

My heartfelt wish is that, while faithfully observing the Constitutions, the legitimate diversity of each monastery may enrich the spiritual wealth of what the Olivetan tradition calls “*unum corpus*”. This tradition makes your congregation a fraternal agape of community and is at the origin of that special bond between monks and monasteries that distinguishes your contemplative family.

In this regard the Capitulars will be called to search for suitable ways to express in updated forms this indispensable characteristic of their monastic identity, both on the basis of the current, now international, situation of the congregation, and because of the profoundly altered historical and ecclesial circumstances in which they are called to make it present.

May the Holy Spirit revive in every member the specific gift which God has entrusted to your contemplative family, by a wise and prudent reformulation of the intentions that guided Bl. Bernard when it was founded.

5. I implore upon all the Olivetan monks the maternal protection of Mary, whose name shines in the official title of your religious family, called precisely the Benedictine Congregation of St Mary of Monte Oliveto. I ask her, a pilgrim in the faith, to guide your steps towards the third millennium, while continuing to imbue the congregation with the gifts of spiritual fruitfulness which have distinguished its glorious past and will continue, I am sure, to mark its future.

With these wishes, while I invoke on the congregation the heavenly protection of Our Lady and of Bl. Bernard Tolomei, I affectionately impart a special Apostolic Blessing to you, Most Reverend Father, to the Olivetan monks and to all who seek your daily religious and spiritual ministry.

Castel Gandolfo, 1 August 1998.

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