

FUNERAL MASS FOR
DOM BERNARDO BONOWITZ OCSO

25 January 2025

My soul is bereft of peace;
I have forgotten what happiness is;
so I say, "Gone is my glory,
and all that I had hoped for from the Lord."
The thought of my affliction and my homelessness
is wormwood and gall!
My soul continually thinks of it
and is bowed down within me.

These verses from Lamentations speak aptly of what Fr. Bernardo so often felt in his final years. He was 70 years old, a gifted spiritual leader and writer, a sought after teacher with years of friendship, travel and fruitful ministry still ahead, when suddenly it was all swept away. He was struck by the sudden and violent onset of a brain disease (Lewy Body Dementia) that quickly took over his life. Imagine your muscles growing stiffer and more rigid with each passing day so that even walking grows difficult. Imagine your mind in the throes of a nervous breakdown... that instead of passing in a month or two goes on and on. When it becomes too much, as it often does, your whole body and mind clenches up like a fist and you freeze, paralyzed by a crushing dread. Your symptoms fluctuate wildly between panic and inertia, and the few good days are quickly swallowed by a relentless apathy. On top of that: imagine undergoing all this far from the community and culture you had made your own, among relative strangers...

While I would be the last one to sugarcoat what Fr. Bernardo endured it did seem over the years that while his outer nature, in Paul's phrase, was clearly wasting away, there were subtle signs of an interior renewal, day by day. Over five long years, the panic became less frequent and extreme and he grew somewhat content. He couldn't focus to read or to pray, and often was unable to speak, but he spent many hours just sitting: alert, patient, powerless himself but "waiting quietly for the salvation of the Lord."

To find God in the midst of great suffering we have to look with faith. To look not at what can be seen, but at what cannot be seen; or, we might say, to look at what can be seen in the light of the unseen...like the centurion in the gospel who saw Jesus' terrible dereliction and declared, "This man was God's Son." Even if Fr. Bernardo often found it hard to have much hope or to call to mind the Lord's goodness, even if he felt at times forsaken, like Christ on the cross, the Lord's steadfast love for him never ceased and his mercies have not come to an end even now. That faithfulness is seen more clearly as our outer nature wastes away since power is made perfect in weakness. In Jesus crucified God has entered right down into the

furthest reaches of our misery and estrangement that we might know his love through and through, to the roots.

The Lord's mercies come to us "day by day," fresh and new each morning, never stale or predictable, and impossible to store up for the future. We can't hold on to past mercies or get stuck on expectations of what future ones should look like. God's grace is always the grace of the moment, this moment, right here and now—even when that means a devastating affliction... an affliction that somehow, by God's mysterious design, is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory.

Fr. Bernardo himself told me that the symptom he found most difficult was the "mutism" which left him unable to speak. More than once I saw him chatting away on the phone with a friend or loved one—conversations that brought him so much joy and encouragement—then just a few minutes later speechless and filled with dread. He was such a talker—a charmer, a storyteller, a comedian—that losing the ability to speak was especially painful. Once when he had said barely a word for maybe six or seven months, he indicated that he'd like me to read to him and selected Wordsworth's Prelude. I started to read and paused after some time to see if he wanted me to continue. He gestured for me to read on and after about forty-five minutes, he began to speak. It was like a kind of miracle. He spoke for three hours touching on all that was most delicate and difficult in his condition.

He had a keen sense of the absurd and a terrific sense of humor. Early on in his illness he began talking about "Oblamov." Oblamov, it turns out, is the anti-hero of a 19th century comic Russian novel by Goncharov about an extremely lazy Russian aristocrat who can't do anything or make even trivial decisions. He is the embodiment of the superfluous man. It takes him the first fifty pages of the novel to move from his bed to a chair. That Bernardo was comparing himself to Oblamov struck me as very funny—both ridiculous and yet in a way apropos. A friend of Oblamov at one point tells the protagonist he's suffering from "Oblamovitis"—and Bernardo and I liked to puzzle his various doctors by suggesting we thought that might be his problem—what did they think: acute Oblamovitis? Had they heard of the condition? More than just an endearing personality trait, Fr. Bernardo's sense of humor—part of what made him such a sought after speaker and retreat master—was a spiritual resource, and sometimes, at least, allowed him to transcend even very bitter anguish.

Born Jewish, the gifted son of a troubled and demanding father, Bernardo converted to Catholicism in his teens, a decision which created a terrible rift—both with his father and within himself. One of his main preoccupations during his illness was how to reconcile his Jewishness and his Christianity. In fact in our last real conversation, just a few weeks before he died, this was what he spoke about. While he may not have been able to resolve this tension he did, many years ago, reconcile with his father, and cherished the friendship that developed between them. That he chose forgiveness instead of resentment, despite so much suffering, strikes me as a clear sign of both the grace at work in his life and his basic goodness as a man.

After some years as a Jesuit he entered St. Joseph's Abbey in 1982 where he served as novice director for a time before his election as superior of Novo Mundo, Genesee's daughter-house in Brazil, a daunting and lonely mission, especially at the outset. He served there for 24 years, planted the seeds of good monastic practice and touched many people's lives. Just hours after Fr. Bernardo's death, Novo Mundo successfully elected its first abbot—a watershed moment in their life—and the vitality and devotion of that community is the best testimony to Fr. Bernardo's generosity and dedication. As one monk from Novo Mundo wrote: "Dom Bernardo was sent to a community that without his presence would have closed... he immersed himself in the life of the Brazilians. He learned their language, culture, sensibility, humor, and heart. Through great dedication, suffering, and self-giving, he led us to become an abbey."

Even in the midst of great hardship, *especially* in the midst of great hardship, the Lord's mercies are new every morning, always fresh. In a sometimes hidden and subtle way, he renews our *inner* nature as our *outer* nature wastes away—his grace allows us to be fully present to affliction, our own and others... to seek the Lord there, right in the heart of suffering, and "wait quietly for his salvation."

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