

Dear Friends and Visitors

With our last new entry for the Year of Our Lord 2002, as we enter 2003, we wish our readers a Happy New Year.

At Assumption Abbey we traditionally devote the month of January to our community retreat and to other events of communal formation. To allow time for this, and time to digest the spiritual and intellectual input, and simply time to rest after eleven months of bakery work and over 30,000 fruitcakes, we also close down the fruitcake bakery for the month of January.

This year, besides our annual community retreat, we had two other "formation events." It is worth saying a word about each of these three. First, though, just what do we mean by "formation," and what does the qualifier "on-going" signify?

Formation. The heart of the word is "form." The aim of monastic formation is to bring a person to assume the form of a monk. This is not just a matter of putting on medieval garb, much less going around bent over with your eyes cast down. The form of a monk is a matter of the heart, in the first place. Monastic formation is to lead a person to the wideness of heart that St Benedict talks about: as we progress in this way of life...we shall run on the path of God's commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love (Rule of St Benedict, Prologue 49).

Monastic formation takes place in the monastery, and it is significant that both St Benedict and our Cistercian forebearers called the monastery a "school." A school is a place where people kick back and give themselves over to doing and pursuing things that really make sense to them and that enhance the pleasure they take in being alive, in being human. For Benedict, the monastery is a "school of the Lord's service." It is where the monk learns to serve, but also where he learns to be served - by the Lord, through the grace and rough give and take of living with other men. For the Cistercian's, this becomes a "school of charity," a school of love, where the monk learns to love in a plurality of ways, each deeper and richer than the former. Our Order's guidelines on formation says:

in this school of love, monks and nuns will grow in humility and self-knowledge. Through the discovery of the depths of God's mercy in their lives, they will learn how to love. Gradually becoming detached from false sources of security and growing in dependence on God, they will run with an open heart in the paths of his service...(Ratio Institutionis 4).

We can understand monastic formation in terms of information, conformation, and

transformation.

Information is putting facts and ideas into the newcomer's head. This is done mostly by the Novice Director and by the Abbot, in the context of classes, discussions, as well as through private reading. Conformation happens when the monk is able to translate the information in his head into the motivations of his will and the behaviors of his body. It is not the kind of conformation that, say, a military man is expected to achieve in boot camp. It is, instead, becoming a new instance of ancient monastic practice and thinking, and especially it is taking on the form of Christ, who humbled himself in obedience and service. Finally, transformation, the ultimate goal of monastic life and pedagogy, is, as the Order's Constitutions say, "the restoration of the divine image in the brothers through the working of the Holy Spirit" (Cst 45.1).

"On-going" formation is the formation that a monk undergoes all the way to his final breath. It is called "on-going" to distinguish this stage of formation from "initial" formation, the education and training provided newcomers to the monastery. Through on-going formation, the brothers "continue to learn the philosophy of Christ" (Cst 58), and a specifically monastic culture is built and maintained in the monastery.

The best formator is the monastic community itself, and their life, the daily rhythm of prayer, lectio divina, manual work, and fraternity among the brothers. The liturgical seasons and the teaching of the abbot also contribute to the formation of the monks.

But occasionally it is good to hear from members of the Body of Christ from outside the local community. This is what we do at Ava during January.

In the first part of January Emero Stiegman gave a series of conferences on the role of Christ in St Bernard's spirituality. Dr Stiegman is emeritus professor of religious studies at St Mary's University, Halifax. In addition, he is one of the foremost bernardine scholars living. Dr Stiegman not only understands Bernard and the bernardine Christ; he has internalized the Cistercian Christ so that his conferences were evidently welling up from his own experience of Christ in prayer and in life. He spoke of "Christ as the Answer to the Question of God;" "Why God Became Man;" "The Carnal Love of Christ;" "From Carnal Love to Spiritual;" and, "The Meaning of 'Imitating Christ'." Jesus teaches us that it is possible to live a sinless life in our sinful nature; in Christ, God makes God lovable, conquering our affections. For this writer, these conferences were among the best of the expositions of Cistercian spirituality he has encountered during his decades in the monastery. Or maybe they were simply the best.

After an interval of a few days, we received Fr Isaac Keeley, OCSO, monk and prior of St Joseph's Abbey, Spencer. Fr Isaac had accepted our invitation to give the community retreat this year. Often, retreat givers will use the same material at different monasteries. But for us, though a seasoned retreat master, Fr Isaac decided to prepare an entirely fresh retreat. It was decidedly autobiographical, but not morbidly so. Isaac could skillfully and agreeable shift the perspective from his own personal world to a general application, inviting us to discover the resonances and implications in our own lives as men and as monks. Fr Isaac would always begin with and return to scripture, often drawing on Genesis 1 and 2, but never far from the Gospels and the example of Jesus. The leit motif of Fr Isaac's message was, "Life is Relationships," and one forms relationships by, to use Isaac's phrase, "showing up" with body, mind, and heart, to the other. This meant that his retreat was profoundly Trinitarian, but more in the manner of La Cugna's presentation of the Trinity than of Rahner's. It was a challenging retreat. There was a lot of squirming among us. But also, no one missed a conference, and at least one who never comes to conferences attended all of Fr Isaac's.

Finally, the last days of the January and the first ones of February saw the presence of William Cavanaugh, Ph.D. Cavanaugh, like Stiegman a husband and father with two small children and one on the way, is also a theology professor at St Thomas University, St Paul, MN. He did his doctoral studies and dissertation at Duke University, NC, under Stanley Hauerwas. The topic Dr Cavanaugh chose for his conferences was the Eucharist. The title of his published dissertation is *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ*, 1998. The book was inspired in part by his experiences as a student living in Chile under the dictatorship of Pinochet. For us, Bill chose specifically monastic categories for talking about the Eucharist in fresh, attractive, though and sometimes disturbing ways. The categories were: Chastity, Poverty, Obedience, Silence, and Stability. Bill's style was disarmingly humble, making the solid meat of the material all the more striking and able to stand on its own. If other monasteries of the Region are looking for an excellent presentation and first-rate theology, I heartily recommend William Cavanaugh.

On the work front, Br Fidel Manuel has retired as chief fruitcake baker. Br Fidel, a monk of our daughter house, Our Lady of the Philippines Abbey, Guimaras, has been at Assumption Abbey for nearly four years now. He has served as chief baker for the past two years. He is a meticulous worker, thoroughly responsible, impeccably clean. He managed last year, with his assistants, to produce over 31,000 Assumption Abbey Fruitcakes, to the delight of our ever-increasing number of customers. But two years, five days a week, is tough work. In December, we decided to offer Br Fidel and break, and he gratefully accepted. Now he puts in time injecting, decorating, and wrapping the cakes, less demanding aspects of fruitcake production. We are grateful to Br Fidel, and to OLP for letting him be with us for so long.

Taking Br Fidel's place is Fr Alberic Maisog. Fr Alberic also serves as Novice Director. Thanks, Fr Alberic, for your ready willingness and good work.

The bakery had to start up again a little sooner than usual. That is, we recommenced baking still in January, between our retreat and William Cavanaugh. The reason for this was the backlog of orders we had received during December. Our inventory was depleted before Christmas, but orders still flooded in. Not wanting to disappoint people, Fr Anthony squeezed in several extra days of baking to meet the demand.

On Sunday, February 2, the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, Br Tobias, Bill Cavanaugh, and Fr Mark met at 5:00 a.m. in the precious new infirmary chapel for an intimate early Mass. After Lauds, Br Tobias drove Dr Cavanaugh and Fr Mark to Springfield, where Cavanaugh caught a flight back to Minnesota, and Fr Mark took off for Genesee Abbey in New York. Fr Mark had been invited by that community to direct their annual community retreat, February 3 - 9.

In his homily for the Sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time, February 16, Fr Mark said:

Leprosy was a huge stigma. Leprosy was the plague par excellence. It was what God struck sinners with. The result was isolation, excommunication, and having to go around defining yourself as "unclean, unclean." As Adam and Eve were driven from Eden clothed in animal skins, the leper was forced to live on the margins of society clothed in rags. Apparently, for the early writers of the Bible, God's ability to draw glory from human beings stopped at lepers' sores and puss.

In North America, we don't see many lepers. We see AIDS...But there is still another modern form of leprosy, though not so apparent, much more diffuse and contagious than even AIDS. Mother Teresa used to talk about the dreadful loneliness and self-isolation of the people of the affluent north and west. The modern leprosy, more than AIDS, is a soul sickness. It takes the form of competition. It is the frantic compulsion to achieve and excel, winning, and so making someone else a loser, because we are deeply distrustful of our goodness. We don't really believe we are worth much, and, if we believe in a God, we believe we are proof that God, on a day not recorded, made at least one piece of junk.

The modern leprosy results in people choosing to live on the margins, isolating themselves, even as their bodies inhabit the same house of the same monastic enclosure with others.

Jesus, sinless in our sinful nature, heals this leprosy, too, and in the same way he healed the man in the Gospel. What did he do? He "showed up," to use the phrase of Fr Isaac, our retreat

director. He showed up totally:

He was moved with compassion, and so his emotions showed up;

He stretched out his hand and touched, and so his body showed up;

And he said, "I will," and so his will and intellect showed up, too.

Going further, Jesus even traded places with the leper. He took the leper's place on the Cross, bearing any fear and stigma that was left himself.

Where does that leave us? With the invitation and the challenge Paul gave the Corinthians. In the face of the leprosy around you, in all its forms, "become imitators of me, as I am of Christ, seeking not my own advantage, but that of everyone else, that they may be healed." In short, showing up completely.

To all our friends, may God grant you peace, and may a Little Child always be your best Teacher!

Fr Mark, Abbot