

Dear Friends and Visitors

The liturgical rhythm of our Catholic life gently moved us from the year of Our Lord, 2005, into a new year, 2006. The transition took place, as it always does, in the context of the liturgical Season of Christmas. The beginning of the new calendar year coincides with the Octave Day of Christmas and the Solemnity of the Mother of God. That means that the year 2006 is truly another “year of Our Lord.” It means that the new year is placed firmly in the protective and loving arms of His Mother, Mary. We do well, then, to sing as we do at Vespers throughout the year the ancient hymn to Mary, *sub tuum presidium confugimus*, “we take refuge, Mother of God, in your protective care.”



Sister Nancy Smith, IHM, in her studio

Spanning the transition from the old year to the new was the sojourn of Sr Nancy Smith, IHM, in our monastery guest house. Sr Nancy is an iconographer. She devotes her time, her talent and her prayer to producing icons in the Russian style, using traditional methods and materials. During her two weeks with us, Sr Nancy produced a large icon of Christ Pantocrator, Christ the All-powerful. Our Lord is depicted facing the viewer, his right hand raised in a blessing and holding open in his left



Sister Nancy and Father Mark blessing the icon
Christ Pantocrator



Sister Nancy presenting her icon in Chapter



Father Robert with the icon
Christ Pantocrator
by Sister Nancy Smith, IHM

hand a book with the text, "I am the light of the world; whoever follows me will have the light of life." In the evening of January 3, Sr Nancy presented her freshly completed icon to the community in the monastery Chapter Room and Fr Mark invoked a solemn blessing upon it. The icon was then installed on a wall in the monastery cloister, right across from the monks' entrance to the monastery church. Now, with a simple oil lamp burning before it, the icon is a holy presence in the monastery, an invitation and a blessing. We are grateful to Sr Nancy for her gracious gift to us.

In the middle of the month Dr Michael McClymond of St Louis University delivered a series of five conferences to the community on the topic of religious renewal and revival in the United States. Dr McClymond, a professor of theology, led us to appreciate the action of God's Holy Spirit in the personal and communal

lives of Christians outside the recognizable boundaries of the Roman Catholic Church. His theme was timely, for it coincided with the annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, an event that we observe with some intensity at Ava. It was appropriate, too, given the Christian diversity of southern Missouri, an area of the country where Catholics are clearly in the minority.

Michael McClymond, besides being a serious scholar and abundantly published author and editor, is also a rock and blues musician. One evening, in the very place where Sr Nancy had shortly before presented her icon, Dr McClymond accompanying himself on his electric guitar, sang for us some of the classics of the rock and blues world, as well as a few of his own compositions in those genres.



Mosaic donated to the Abbey

The final week of the month of January was devoted to our annual community retreat. This year our retreat director was Dom John Denburger, OCSO, abbot of Genesee Abbey, New York. Over the course of seven days, Dom John developed the theme of the “heart” as the symbol of our growth in the spiritual life. He began each conference by drawing our attention to one or another person in the Gospels who was emblematic of a particular kind of “heart.” Then, Dom John would apply the insights derived from his meditation on that Gospel figure to our life specifically as Cistercian monks living out the Gospel in an intensely communal way. Dom John’s humor and honesty, as well as his wisdom and kindness, won the “heart” of each of us, and several of the brothers agreed that this was one of the best retreats we have had.

for the Philippines. There, he will conduct the biennial Regular Visitation of Ava’s daughter house, Our Lady of the Philippines Abbey (OLP), on the island of Guimaras, and preside at the election of its next abbot. The election is scheduled for February 20. We ask our readers and visitors to pray for God’s guidance at this special moment in the life of OLP.

A spiritual classic probably too little known is Dom Augustine Baker’s Holy Wisdom. It is a treatise on contemplative prayer. On Page 106, Dom Augustine writes

Immediately following the retreat, Fr Mark left



Dr Michael McClymond of St Louis University

It is a proof of the abundant riches of the divine goodness to all his servants, that this state of contemplation should never be enclosed only in caverns, rocks, or deserts, nor fixed to solitary religious communities, nor appropriated to the subtlety of wit, profoundness of judgment, gifts of learning or study, etc.; but that the poorest, simplest soul living in the world, and following the common life of good Christians there, if she will faithfully correspond to the internal light and tracts afforded her by God's Spirit, may as securely, yea, and sometimes more speedily, arrive to the top of the mountain of vision than the most learned doctors, the most profoundly wise men, yea, the most abstracted confined hermits.

Fr Mark, Abbot