

Dear Friends and Visitors

A refrain in our January newsletters is the fact that the monks of Assumption Abbey pretty much hibernate during this first month of each year. We suspend our fruitcake baking, using the time to thoroughly clean the bakery, to do inventory, and devote ourselves more leisurely and intentionally to personal and communal formation.



Every January we receive a scholar or some other expert in a field pertinent to the life and prayer of a Christian monk. This year our guest was Rabbi Charles Arian. Rabbi Charles belongs to the Conservative branch of American Judaism. A graduate of Hebrew Union College and of Georgetown University, Rabbi Charles is currently the ministerial rabbi of Beth Jacob Synagogue in Norwich, Connecticut, where he lives with his wife and daughter. He was most recently the Jewish staff scholar at the Institute for Christian and Jewish Studies. Rabbi Charles has an unusually deep and detailed grasp of and respect for Christian tradition, especially its Catholic variety. He has extensive experience in religious education and, in particular, in the theory and practice of Jewish-Christian dialogue.

Rabbi Arian was with us for three full days during which he delivered five conferences. His conferences dealt with diverse topics, all serving to give the monks some fresh insights into Judaism as a religion roughly contemporaneous with Christianity, into Jewish religious thought and practice, and into the concerns, gifts, and challenges of contemporary Jews and Judaism, especially as they come into contact with Christians and Christian thought in the United States and the West. A decade ago, Rabbi Charles spent nearly a year as resident scholar at the Cistercian Abbey of New Clairvaux, California.

Specifically, Rabbi Charles discussed with us these four topics:

- 1.) The post-Holocaust context for Christian-Jewish dialogue, and understanding Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism as twin/rival successors to Biblical religion.

2.) A study some rabbinic texts together (two sessions with talmudic texts translated by Rabbi Charles)

3.) The contemporary state of American Judaism.

4.) Tough issues between Jews and Christians and the future of the dialogue.

Regarding topic #4, Rabbi Charles isolates these "tough issues:"

Abrahamic vs. Noahide Covenant: Christians do not see themselves merely as heirs of Noah; they see themselves as heirs of Abraham as well. Can Jews move away from Noahide language and towards Abrahamic language when talking about Christianity? Can Jews agree with Rabbi Irving Greenberg that Christians can be seen as part of the Abrahamic covenant?

One Covenant or Two?: What is the nature of the Christian covenant with God? Rabbi Greenberg sees Jews and Christians as two branches of the one people Israel. Are Jews and Christians indeed two parts of one overall covenant, or are they two distinct covenants? Non-supersessionist Christians have tended to say the former, where Jews have tended to say the latter.

Primacy: Assuming Christianity and Judaism are two parts of one overall covenant, is the Christian covenant with God derivative of the Jewish one?

Conversion: While most rabbis would say that Christians have no need to convert to Judaism, they would welcome Christians who said they felt they could serve God better as a Jew. But the same rabbis would not endorse Jews feeling that they could serve God better as Christians. Perhaps a resolution of this dilemma will hinge on the fact that one is not actually born a Christian in the way in which one is born a Jew. Perhaps it will remain an area where Jews and Christians will simply continue to disagree.

Land and Incarnation: The sanctity of the Land of Israel and the Incarnation are in some sense parallel ideas that one community has seen as central to its identity and that the other has seen as idolatrous or, at best, unintelligible. Can Christians agree with, or at least suspend judgment on, the Jewish assertion that the Land of Israel has special sanctity and is central to Jewish identity? Similarly, is the Incarnation totally alien to Jewish thought and sensibility? How did such a seemingly un-Jewish idea arise in such a Jewish milieu?

The sharings with Rabbi Charles were marked by frankness, deep respect, intelligence, and

broadened out, in the end, to friendship.

Our other January tradition is the annual Community Retreat. This year the retreat was held from January 22 to 28. Typically, monks' retreats are given by other monks or nuns of the Order, or by priests or other religious.



But Ava is not a typical monastery. Our retreat giver this year was a Catholic layman, Dr. Robert Kiely, of Cambridge, Massachusetts. Dr. Kiely author of *Still Learning: Spiritual Sketches From a Professor's Life*, is professor of English and American literature at Harvard University where he has taught since earning his doctorate there in 1962. He is father of four, and grandfather of as many. The accompanying photograph shows Dr Kiely and his wife Jana on a trip to Gubbio, Italy.

We learned of Dr Kiely from an article by him published in *America Magazine* in July of 2005. In the article, Dr. Kiely speaks of his students and his experiences teaching them the Christian Classics. Dr Kiely wrote,

I have been teaching classics of Christian literature for several years. We begin with Augustine's *Confessions*, Teresa of Avila's *Autobiography* and Martin Luther's *Preface to Latin Writings*, all as examples of Christian autobiography. Then we read letters of the early Christians, and move on to Gregory of Nyssa, Hildegard of Bingen, Catherine of Siena, Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King Jr. Benedict and Calvin are paired under the heading *government of souls*; Julian of Norwich and C. S. Lewis under *pain and suffering*; John Donne's great sermons and sonnets and Gerard Manley Hopkins's poems as samples of the metaphorical imagination; and finally, *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis*, John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and selected short stories of Flannery O'Connor as examples of Christian narrative. I had long loved the texts and wished to help students consider their spiritual and ethical qualities by means of the complex beauty of their language and structure.

For our retreat, Dr Kiely led us to reflect together on selected parables of Jesus from the Gospel of St Luke, and some of the stories of the American writer Flannery O'Connor. In the course of the retreat, Dr Kiely shared with us much about his own spiritual journey as a husband and father, an educator, an Oblate of St Benedict, and an member of the international Community of Sant' Egidio. Fr Mark said to Dr Kiely at the end of the retreat that for monks the impact and

enduring value of a retreat come as much from the person of the retreat giver as it does from the material he or she presents. This is true, and was especially so with this year's retreat giver. It was a deeply moving experience of God's living Word in the life of others, in Scripture, and in fiction.

Between the visit of Rabbi Charles and the retreat with Robert Kiely, Fr Mark and our External Oblate Joseph Reisch took a whirlwind drive to New Melleray Abbey, Iowa, and back, January 19 – 21. The occasion was a meeting of the Directors of Cistercian Studies Quarterly, of which Fr Mark is one. It happened that as the Directors meeting was beginning, a ten-day seminar on St Aelred of Riveaulx was just concluding at New Melleray. The seminar was conducted by Australian Cistercian Michael Casey, and by American scholar and expert in the life and writings of St Aelred Dr Marsha Dutton of Ohio University. Dr Dutton is also the Assistant Editor of CSQ.

January ended with a snowfall, a light one, but the first of the season, and so noteworthy.

Fr Mark, Abbot