

Dear Friends and Visitors

Lent at Assumption Abbey began with the distribution of books for Lenten reading. This took place during a simple ritual on the evening before Ash Wednesday.

With the entire community gathered in the Chapter Room, Fr Donald first read Chapter 49 of the Rule of St Benedict, ""On the Observance of Lent."" This was followed by a brief exhortation by the abbot, who then personally handed to each monk the book the abbot had selected for him. The ritual concluded with a hymn and the dismissal.

The distribution of Lenten reading is a practice that goes back to St Benedict. ""During this time of Lent,"" says St Benedict in his Rule, ""each brother is to receive a book from the library, and is to read the whole of it straight through. These books are to be distributed at the beginning of Lent"" (RB 48.15-16). It is likely that the ""books"" St Benedict had in mind were books of the Bible. With that in mind, Fr Mark has started the custom of presenting to each monk a book of Scripture together with a book from the library by a contemporary author. Each day during Lent, all the monks devote the half hour before Compline to the monastic practice of lectio divina based on the Lenten books they received.

A dominant feature of the Lenten Season is the struggle of life and death, and the entire six-week season ends with the violent death of Jesus on the Cross. Significantly, then, near the end of the second week of Lent our oldest monk made his longed-for transitus from this life.

On February 27 Fr David Blackburn, OCSO, died at the age of 86. Fr David had entered New Melleray in 1946 and came to Ava in 1954 after his ordination to the priesthood. He served as superior of Ava for some years, and later as guest master. Uniquely, he also served as substitute pastor of a small mission parish of the diocese near the Abbey. In all these services and duties, Fr David was noted for his kindness, warmth, and generosity.

In his last years, Fr David suffered from Alzheimer's Disease. When it was no longer possible for the monks to care for him in the Abbey, he took up residence at Mercy Villa in Springfield, MO. He resided there for over nine years, and it was there that he died. His remains were late to rest in the Abbey cemetery, joining those of the eleven monks who preceded him.

Simultaneous with the passing of a monk a possible new candidate took his first steps along the monastic way. A man in his mid-thirties spent the six weeks of Lent with us as an observer. He followed the daily life of prayer and work of any monk. In addition, he also took part in the formation program we offer observers. This consists of three meetings per week with his

mentors who guide him in the investigation of three topics: the monastic liturgy, monastic prayer and lectio divina, and the characteristic values and practices of the Cistercian Order. This particular observer happened to be a musician. His chosen instrument is rather rare, the hammered dulcimer. On a few occasions he played at the Eucharist to everyone's delight.

In mid-March we conducted our first Monastic Vocation Discernment Retreat. This was at the suggestion our Father Immediate, Brendan Freeman, Abbot of New Melleray, made in the course of our Visitation last year. Taking his suggestion, Ava's Formation Committee met several times late last year to work out a retreat suited to our needs and abilities. Fr Cyprian organized the retreat, and was assisted by the members of the Formation Committee: Fr Theodore, Br Tobias, Fr Alberic, and Fr Mark.

The purpose of the retreat was to offer interested men a lived experience of monastic life, along with the opportunity to raise questions and engage in intellectual reflection about Cistercian monasticism. Five men participated in the retreat that went from Wednesday, March 13 to Sunday, March 17.

The five participants were vastly different from one another, yet they were able to meet and appreciate each other on the common ground of their interest in monastic life and their serious pursuit of God's will. The participants attended all the offices with the monks in choir and participated in the work. The group was given conferences each day on topics pertinent to the monastic life, and the five men enjoyed one-on-one conversations with members of the retreat team.

On the final day of the retreat, the participants and the team met together for an evaluation of the experience. It was clear that the retreat met its objectives. We will consider hosting a retreat like this at least once and possibly twice each year.

On Ash Wednesday, shortly after Mass, Fr Anthony drove Fr Mark to the airport in Springfield where Fr Mark began a three-week trip to California and the Philippines. In California, Fr Mark spent eight days at Redwoods Abbey, a lovely monastery of Cistercian nuns, similar to Ava in its size and in its solitude. Abbess Kathy had invited Mark to give some conferences on scripture. The topic was ""Eternal Life in the Gospel of John.""

Leaving Redwoods, Mark met up with Dom John Eudes Bamberger in San Francisco International Airport. From there the two of them flew together to Manila and on the Guimaras, the island of the Philippines where Ava's daughter house, Our Lady of the Philippines, is situated. The purpose of this trip was for Mark to introduce Don John Eudes and

the OLP community to one another. In November of last year, Dom John Eudes, then recently retired abbot of Genesee, New York, was appointed superior ad nutum of OLP. While in the Philippines, Mark paid a short visit to Our Lady of Matutum, the monastery of Cistercian nuns founded by Vitorchiano, Italy, on the island of Mindanao.

Shortly after Mark departed on his journey, Fr Anthony himself left for Rome, Italy. He is one of only twenty-five male and female monastics (including twelve Cistercians) chosen to participate in the international Monastic Formators Program. The Program, running March through June, is run in connection with Sant' Anselmo, Rome. While we miss Anthony, we also know that his experience of Rome, the friendships he will form with monastics from other countries and cultures, as well as the academic material he will be exposed to, will be of great benefit to Anthony personally, as well as to Ava and its future.

On Palm Sunday we joined Christians all over the world as they embarked on the final stage of Lent, Holy Week. It is not in spite of, but because of our small community, our small church, our simple liturgy, and the small group of fervent friends who join us for this journey that the presence of Christ who came not to be served but to serve is all the more evident.

We extend to you, our visitors, our heartfelt wishes for a glorious and joyful Easter.

Fr Mark, Abbot