

Dear Friends and Visitors

The name February comes from Latin roots meaning expiation and our month was named for a Roman feast of purification. No doubt the ancient Romans had much to be purified from and forgiven for. This pagan fact may partially at least account for the Christian fact of celebrating the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple on February 2. Before the revision of the liturgical calendar in the middle of the last century, the Feast on February 2 was called The Purification," and the Gospel of the day, Luke 2: 22 – 38, begins by referring to the "days of their – that is Mary's and, strangely, Joseph's – purification." But the focus of the gospel passage is the presentation of the child Jesus to the God of Israel, and, through Simeon, to Israel and to the world as light and glory. February 2 is, then, a Feast of the Lord, and not of his parents. In its own way, though, this scene of the child in the Temple functions like the scene of the adult on the Cross, Luke 24. There, as in the earlier scene, Jesus undergoes "all that the law requires," however unjust and personally undeserved; and, as the veil in the Temple is torn giving full access to all, the Lord Jesus makes the final and complete "presentation," this time offering himself with the words, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." And certainly his words, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do," effected an expiation and purification that all human rituals have never even closely approximated.

Late last year Br Francis and Fr Mark met with our architects in Springfield to brainstorm together about a renovation of our guest house and the construction of some new features. From that brainstorming session, the architects went to work and early in February visited the Abbey with initial plans for a new guesthouse at Assumption Abbey. The plans include an entirely new structure that would house the ten private guest rooms, each with its own bathroom, plus a guest suite. The interior of the present guest house would be reconfigured to provide two dining areas, one for speaking and one for meals in silence, a new library, and ample space for group meetings and presentations. There would also be an expanded gift shop and guest master's office. A cloister garth surrounded by open covered walk ways, similar to the new garth in the monastery, is the unifying center for these two architectural features, plus an eventual new church to be situated on the north side of the garth. The business office for the abbey and the bakery, currently at one end of the present guest house, would be removed to an entirely new building to be erected for that purpose near the bakery itself.

A ruling idea for the guest house renovation is to keep distinct and provide for the differing needs of our two kinds of guests, that is, our overnight retreatants who come here for silence and prayer, and our visitors who stop in for only a short visit and for other reasons. Several of the monks, with Bridget, met with the architects to critique and improve the plans. In early March two revisions of the original plans arrived at the Abbey. The revisions honor the

suggestions generated at this session, and so the process continues. We are not in a position to begin this project in the very near future, but we hope that within five years our dreams for a refreshed and expanded guest house will be realized.

Coincidentally, a benefactor in Arkansas has offered to have a hermitage built here at the Abbey in honor of Fr Louis (Thomas) Merton, OCSO, the monk, writer, and later hermit of Gethsemani Abbey, Kentucky, who died in 1968. The hermitage would be for the use of guests as well as of monks for longer engagements of solitude. The architects are incorporating this generous and creative idea in their master plan for the Abbey.

Fr Paul Mark Schwan, OCSO, veteran novice director at New Clairvaux Abbey, Vina, CA, spent a week with us this month conducting a seminar on the Conferences of John Cassian for our four postulants. Fr Fil and Br Meme also followed the seminar, as did Fr Mark for two of the eight sessions. After an initial orientation session, the group met each afternoon for six consecutive days, reading and discussing six of Cassian's Conferences. Fr Paul Mark included as part of the experience a viewing and discussion of the movie A Beautiful Mind.

On February 26 Fr Mark attended an all-day meeting of the Associates of Assumption Abbey. The meeting was held at the historic St Ferdinand Shrine in Florissant, MO. Parenthetically, in the early 19th century, three Cistercians of the Reformed Observance (later known as "Trapapists") served as pastors for brief periods of time at this little shrine where St Philippine Duschene also lived. The Associates of Assumption Abbey had invited Dennis and Trisha Day, founders and leaders of the Association of Iowa Cistercians, a lay Cistercian community affiliated with both New Melleray Abbey and Our Lady of the Mississippi, to help them in their own growth as lay people living the Cistercian charism. The Days, from Madison, WI, did a superb job presenting focused and practical points for our own Associates to consider. The Days' personally modelling their own understanding of themselves as Cistercians and their commitment to the Cistercian way for lay folk were perhaps the most significant contributions they made. Following is a letter Fr Mark addressed to the Associates after the meeting.

March 1, 2005

Dear Associates of Assumption Abbey I returned to the Abbey from our meeting with Days just in time to be present at Compline and was delighted to see two of you who were at the meeting earlier here, too! Their presence at the meeting in Florissant during the day and then at the Abbey's service bringing the day to an end seemed to embody perfectly what the Associates and other Lay Cistercians are all about: a life of spiritual depth shared with other lay friends and drawing tangibly from the reality of a living monastic tradition.

I felt the same thing at work during our day together in Florissant. The understandable but regretted absences a few key members were all the more conspicuous because of the presence of nearly every other Associate of Assumption Abbey. It was clear to me that the Associates are really a community of friends and caring people open to including others, like _____ and _____, in its embrace. The sharings were marked by candor, warmth, patience, support and respect. Everything was planned so well and carried out so simply, the Morning Prayer, the snack and introductions, the Days' presentations, the Eucharist, the meal. During Morning Prayer, I became aware of the coffee maker gurgling in the background, the musical accompaniment to our psalmody. This struck me as deeply Cistercian, the mystical in the mundane, as Trisha Day put it later, but especially as mysticism in the truly human fabric of community.

It seemed to me that Dennis and Trisha Day zeroed in on the very concerns that the Associates have been expressing to one another and to me over the past four or five years. These have to do with identity: what is a "lay Cistercian?" They have to do with membership: how do you know someone is an Associate of Assumption Abbey? They have to do with formation: how do we incorporate newcomers while not holding long-time members back? They have to do with leadership and accountability: who makes decisions, and in whose name? And they have to do with structure and commitment. Some of these you have already begun to address, such as rotating moderators for the monthly meetings. In time, and now with the tools provided you by the Florissant meeting, you will address the others as well. For now, I would like to offer my own two cents about just two of these concerns.

First, membership. It became clear to me that for there to be community in the true Cistercian sense, there have to be some defining lines, and that one of the most observable of those lines is simply attendance at the monthly meetings. Let's say you typically have ten monthly meetings a year. Membership would be attendance at 8 of them, with accountability to the membership for missing the other two. And let's say that there is an annual meeting or retreat at the Abbey. Membership would mean being present for that. That would be a minimum for constituting membership as an Associate of Assumption Abbey. The idea of an annual dues, say \$5.00 per meeting, is very realistic and gives weight to your stated desire.

Second, leadership. You might consider a three- or four-member leadership team, elected by all the Associates. The team might have a one-year or a two-year term, but it would probably be good that, after the first team, the membership of no leadership team is entirely new with respect to the previous one, for the sake of continuity. The team would have a chairman who would oversee the drawing up of the agenda and facilitate meetings of the team. In general the leadership team's role would be to facilitate communication among the Associates and

between the Associates and the Abbey. Specifically, the leadership team could arrange the calendar of Associate meetings for the coming year, work out a system for collecting funds, decide how reading materials are selected and made available, help the Associates review the way monthly meetings are conducted and make adjustments when desired, invite special speakers, take suggestions for and help plan special events, and so forth. The leadership team would also be important in helping the Associates begin to look at the various features of Cistercian Associates as the Days presented them to us.

As I said in my brief remarks at the end of our day together in Florissant, that the Associates embraced the suggestion to invite Dennis and Trisha Day to meet with them, and carried that suggestion through to realization, says a tremendous amount about the sincerity, the unity, and the maturity of the Associates of Assumption Abbey. I am grateful to you all for being such genuine examples of the Cistercian grace.

With deepest respect,

Fr Mark Scott, OCSO

Abbot

Assumption Abbey, Ava

Wishing all our readers the inexpressible joy, bordering on the grotesque, of the Easter Mystery.

Fr Mark, Abbot