

Dear Friends and Visitors

I am writing from the restaurant at the Ninoy Aquino International Airport in Manila, the Philippines. It is about 1:00 p.m. here. I am en route back to Ava after three weeks in the Philippines. My flight for San Francisco leaves at 10:30 p.m. I take this opportunity of several free hours to write a summary of my visit here, a letter that will serve also as our “news update” for February.



My purpose for coming here was to conduct the Regular Visitation at our daughter house, Our Lady of the Philippines Abbey (OLP), and to preside at an eventual abbatial election there. OLP is the abbey that our own Fr Alberic belonged to before he changed his stability to Ava. It is also the abbey of Br Fidel, Fr Filomeno, and Br Nemesio (Meme), each of whom spent a year or more with us in the recent past. OLP was founded by American monks in the early 1970's. Since at least the early 1980's, Ava has assumed the role of “mother house” of OLP, Ava's abbot, then, being the “Father Immediate” who has the duty to conduct visitations and preside at elections.



OLP is located on the island of Guimaras in the Visayas, or central region of the Philippines. It is a small island situated between Iloilo to the west and Negros Oriental to the east. The dialect is

llongo. Guimaras is an agricultural-based island, with mangos being the principle crop. Guimaras mangos are esteemed throughout the Philippines as the best of the country. The Abbey itself has large mango plantations. Fortunately, my visit this time coincided with the peak of a mango harvest.

Along with Fr Alberic, who has served as interim superior at OLP the past 2 ½ years, and Fidel, Fil, and Meme, there are 23 other monks at Guimaras, including four novices. The average age is around 46, relatively young as monasteries of the Order go. The Visitation, which takes place normally every two years, opened February 3, and was concluded in the evening of February 14. The following few days were devoted to preparing for the abbatial election, which finally took place, as planned, the morning of February 20. It was a significant election, because the Abbey has been under temporary interim superiors since 2002. It was time to bring this irregular situation to an end, and install once again an abbot as superior, elected by the brothers.



The evening before the abbatial election, the community of OLP decided that the new abbot would serve in that role for a term of six years, rather than for an unrestricted or indefinite term. The next day, after the votive Mass of the Holy Spirit and the office of Terce, the solemnly professed monks of the community gathered together in the Chapter room and scrupulously followed the Order's ritual for the legal and canonical election of an abbot. I presided at the abbatial election. There were present two witnesses from outside the community. These were priests from the local diocese of Jaro.

Shortly before the midday office of Sext and dinner, the election process resulted in one of the monk receiving the required number of votes (at least an absolute majority is needed for a valid election). The monks elected Fr Filomeno Cinco to be their new abbot. Fr Filomeno is known to many of our friends, since he spent two years here at Ava, from the fall of 2003 to the fall of 2005. Fr Fil already served as abbot of OLP from 1995 to 2001. He accept this new charge to the

applause of all the electors and I, as president, declared Fr Filomeno “the true” abbot of Our Lady of the Philippines Abbey.

In the late afternoon, just before the office of Vespers, all the community, including the four novices, the oblate, and the outgoing superior, Fr Alberic, gathered once again in the chapter room for the formal Installation of the new abbot (the election had been confirmed, as required by law, earlier by a phone call to the Abbot General in Rome). One of the monks read chapter 2 of the Rule of St Benedict, “What Sort of Man the Abbot Ought to Be.” Then Fr Fil pronounced the profession of faith, and the oath of fidelity to the magisterium of the Church. It was my role to present to him the seal of the abbey as a sign of his temporal authority, and the pectoral cross, as a reminder to himself and to all that as abbot, Fr Fil holds in the community the place of Christ. Then, beginning with the eldest brother, all the solemnly professed monks knelt before the new abbot, placed their hands in his, and renewed to him their solemn vow of obedience. Singing the Te Deum, we processed to the abbey church, and the new abbot took his place in choir. After a final blessing, the office of Vespers began, and Dom Filomeno assumed full abbatial service in the Abbey.

No event like an abbatial election can pass in the Philippines without some kind of fiesta. So, on the second day after the election, the monks held a picnic at the seaside house of a friend about half an hour’s drive from the Abbey. It was a splendid day, the water was crystal clear, the beaches gleaming white. There was an abundance of fresh fish – oysters and crab included – and the day passed with quiet joy. On the following day I headed south to Mindanao to pay a short visit to the Trappistines there. Theirs is one of the most beautiful monastic sites, and the most beautiful monastic buildings, in the Order. The Abbey was founded just short of a dozen years ago by Vitorchiano, Italy. It has flourished every since, with now a population of six solemnly professed filipina sisters, and four filipina novices together with the seven remaining Italian foundresses. In recent years the sisters have been experimenting with pineapple cultivation, and the project seems to be doing well. The Abbey is in the midst of Dole pineapple plantations.



This morning, February 25, I left General Santos in Mindanao, and am now awaiting my evening flight from Manila to San Francisco. It is the second day of a "national emergency" here in the Philippines. The president of the republic, Gloria Arroyo, declared the emergency yesterday. Coincidentally, yesterday was the second day in the three day memorial of the 20th anniversary of "People Power." Today, the 25th, was to be the climax of the commemoration, but one aspect of the national emergency was the abortion of the "People Power" celebration. I guess presidents can do things like that. I guess abbots can, too, and maybe would more often if they did not have the wisdom contained in chapters 2 and 64 of the Rule of St Benedict. It will be good to get back to Ava. I will arrive, God willing, in time to distribute the Lenten reading to the brothers the evening of the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday, and then, with them and you, begin the forty day journey to Easter.

Fr Mark, Abbot