

Dear Friends and Visitors

March has been a month of changes at Assumption Abbey. You wouldn't call them permanent changes. Better, they were developmental ones, in the case of individuals, and, in the case of the liturgy and the weather, cyclical and seasonal changes.

On the first day of the month, Fr Anthony Sloan left the Abbey to begin a six-month experiment in living as a solitary. He is not far away physically. In fact, he is in our diocese, the guest of a small congregation of semi-eremital religious women. The sisters graciously are letting Fr Anthony use one of their small hermitages. Fr Anthony has long felt a pull toward greater solitude. This seemed to be the best time for him to give it a try. He will be back at the Abbey in September, to confront the holiday fruitcake season.

Fr Anthony, a professed monk for over a dozen years, leaves for the sake of further discerning his monastic vocation. So, I spoke of "development," not permanence. On the heels of Fr Anthony's departure, a man from a neighboring state arrived at Assumption Abbey for the same reason: to begin his Observership among us as part of his own particular discernment of his vocation. This man had made several visits to the Abbey, had spoken at some length with the vocation director and the abbot, had submitted the documents and referrals asked for. Now he was ready to plunge into the life for a month or so. After a week living the daily life of lectio, work, and prayer with the monk, this good man decided to discreetly pack his stuff again and return home. The Observership had its effect. It always does, but not always the one you're expecting, at least not that soon! Development.

Within a week of the Observer's coming and going, we were happy to receive into the community a novice from our motherhouse, New Melleray Abbey, Iowa. Similar to Fr Anthony, this young man wanted to experience the solitary life. To begin with, Brother has joined the community in its full cenobitic expression. He is learning bakery procedures. The plan is shortly to make arrangements so that Brother can live as solitary a life as possible on or in the vicinity of our property, while continuing to work in the bakery for his manual labor and modest remuneration. An experiment of about six months is envisioned.

In the meantime, there was the change of the liturgical seasons. We changed green vestments for purple ones and entered Lent, with Ash Wednesday on March 4. According to ancient Benedictine custom, the abbot distributed books to the brothers for their Lenten reading. This took place in the Chapter room before Compline on the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday. There was the reading aloud of the chapter 49 of the Rule, "On the Observance of Lent." Then the abbot gave a brief teaching before handing each brother his book for this Lent. Finally, we sang

a hymn full of Alleluias, to the melody of Beethoven's "Ode to Joy." As you know if you have read about Lent at Ava in previous years' News Updates, every evening during Lent the entire community devotes the half hour before Compline to Lenten reading. This is a very special time. While the house becomes even quieter than usual, the community is drawn together by our simultaneous contact with the Word of God.

The day after Ash Wednesday, Fr Mark took the southern route for a drive to Kimberling City, east of Branson. The Parish Councils of Catholic Women (PCCW) were holding their Inter-Regional Meeting at Our Lady of the Cove Church in Kimberling City. As part of the meeting, they invite a guest speaker. For some reason, this year they invited me. Admittedly, it is unusual for a Trappist monk, even an abbot, to leave his monastery to attend parochial meetings and such. But this is an unusual Abbey, in an unusual diocese, in unusual times in society and church. So, it seemed a good thing to do. The women wanted to know about monastic life, especially Trappist life. They were especially interested in learning about the Assumption Abbey Associates. They asked excellent questions and there was a lot of good humor. A few of the women looked like they had found the solution to an old, old problem, and asked "Do you take married men?"

From March 11 to the 13th we hosted, as we have done annually for perhaps ten years, the Heartland Monastic Vocation Directors Meeting. Fr Alberic, assisted by Fr Cyprian, planned and hosted the meeting. This year, besides our own vocations personnel, four Benedictine vocation directors attended, three women and one man. They represented monasteries in Illinois, Arkansas, and Missouri. The meeting and agenda are loosely structured. The idea is simply to give the vocations directors a chance to be themselves with one another, to talk about common questions, concerns, hopes, pains, and so forth. On the last evening of the meeting, all the participants got together with the community of Ava for a festive supper.

A week later we conducted our Spring Monastic Vocations Retreat. It was the third such retreat in two years. It lasted from the evening of March 19 through mid-morning March 23. The Retreat is open to as many as five men, Roman Catholic, ages 20 to 45. Three men participated in this year's Spring Retreat. They were fine participants who gave themselves wholeheartedly to the experience. The retreatants join the monks in choir. They work with the monks for part of the day. A few very informal conferences are designed to give the participants some further insight into monastic life. The two Emmaus Walks pair each participant with one or another monk of the Abbey. The two spend an hour or so together just chatting. It is a time for the retreatant to ask about things on a very personal level and talk about his own journey. In one session three or four monks tell their own vocational stories. The last session of the retreat is a time for critique of the experience. All the participants found the retreat satisfying, informative,

varied enough, enlightening, not over-taxing, and all in all enriching. We have put considerable time and effort in designing an experience that would have just that effect!

On March 15 a priest from Washington State began his observership. At the end of the month he is still at it! He seems to be adjusting well and to be taking the life with good humor, generosity, and a holy docility.

The Roman Catholic liturgy gives us two solemnities that almost always occur during Lent, St Joseph, March 19, and the Annunciation of the Lord, March 25. St Joseph makes us appreciate and love the family character of Catholicism. The Annunciation does the same, but with a richer theological content: the mystery of the Incarnation. I think it is George Herbert who wrote a poem about the striking coincidence one year of Good Friday falling on March 25.

Here to celebrate the Solemnity of the Annunciation was Br Martin Jenni, OSB Obl. Br Martin is an Oblate of Christ in the Desert Monastery, New Mexico. He spent a few days with us near the end of the month, have spent a much longer time with us late last year.

In his homily for the Third Sunday of Lent, March 23, Fr Mark said,

The Cross is the way of love. Jews look for signs, that is, power, and gentiles look for wisdom, but the Cross is a third way. It is wisdom, but God's. It is power, but God's. That means, for us, in our world of divide and conquer, the Cross is neither this nor that. It does not take sides. It is, rather, the relinquishing of rivalry. The Cross doesn't eliminate or liquidate. The Cross doesn't, to use military language, neutralize the enemy so that I can stand alone victorious. Instead, to use another image, it breaks down walls, and makes one out of two, not at the expense of the humiliation of the other, but out of my willingness to humble myself. The Cross cuts through entrenched and opposing positions by my willing unilaterally to disarm. The Cross means sinful humanity cleansed of sin, through the sinlessness of him who humbled himself, becoming as all men are, then emptied himself even more, becoming obedient, even to death, death on a Cross.

The last weekend of the month saw the visit to the Abbey of the recently formed and growing ""Arkansas Chapter"" of the Assumption Abbey Associates. It was wonderful having these people here, including a family of four and two married men. There were some fine sharings with them and Br Tobias and Fr Mark. It is clear that the emerging phenomenon of ""Lay Cistercians"" is a blessing not only for the Cistercian Order, but for the lay men and women - and youths - attracted to our spirituality

The other great change that occurred in March, of course, was the gentle glide into Spring. The daffodils around the monastery and in the woods have been blooming for two weeks. The redbuds are breaking out, and soon the dogwoods will whiten our landscape. All of this cosmic activity will be answered shortly by our celebration of the supra-cosmic fact of the Risen One, the Lord Jesus living among us even now, and forever. The monks of Assumption Abbey wish all our friends and visitors all the joy of the season of Alleluia.

To all our friends, may God grant you peace, and may a Little Child always be your best Teacher!

Fr Mark, Abbot