

Dear Friends and Visitors

Totally eclipsing everything else that might have happened during the transitional month of March was, of course, the celebration we held in common with the entire People of God and all the churches: Holy Week, and especially the Sacred Paschal Triduum culminating in Easter Sunday. It was a special joy for us that Fr Richard was home for the entire Triduum and the first few days of the Easter Octave. Fr Paul Jones also spent a long week in the monastery. Our celebrations, beginning on Palm Sunday, are typically simple, homey, and unadorned, yet, for all that, almost impeccably transparent to the effects of grace. This year we limped along without the usual "master of ceremonies." He's the guy who makes lists of rubrics, goes through the paces with acolytes and readers and bell ringers before the services, tells the abbot where to stand and when to sit, and generally bears the anxiety of all the liturgical details for everyone else. (Br Fidel, and before him Fr Alberic, had served in this role, but both are now returned to their own monastery in the Philippines.) Following Holy Thursday's commemoration of the Lord's Supper, the first day of the Triduum, our friend J.T. Knoll wrote an article of the experience. With his permission, we reproduce it here. It says so much about the little Abbey in the Woods, its members and guests.

The unlocked door

By J.T. Knoll

AVA, Mo. - You never know who you're going to meet on retreat in the guesthouse dining room here at Assumption Abbey. Had breakfast this Holy Thursday morning with D., a native of Belfast; his wife, M., originally from the Netherlands; and P., who hails from nearby West Plains, Mo.

D. and M. do grass-roots work in Guatemala, helping the poverty-stricken reclaim their communities and livelihoods from the devastation of civil war. Up to 150,000 Guatemalan refugees fled into neighboring Mexico, most of them Mayan Indians, an ethnic majority that bore the brunt of a 36-year conflict that claimed 200,000 lives.

P. worked in a variety of settings over the years - from Missouri conservation to an agency for the severely handicapped - before retiring with ""a bit of a state pension.""

I got to the abbey last evening around 7:15 p.m. Couldn't find my name on any of the guestroom doors, so I consulted Brother Felix, who looked over the reservation book. No name there either, so I found a room with ""Linda"" on it that said her arrival wasn't to be till the next day, parked my things, read awhile, and went to sleep.

Woke at 3:45 a.m., made a cup of instant coffee, and went to sit in a corner of the dark parlor. Around 4, a tall monk (couldn't tell whom because his hood was up) in an ankle-length, white robe glided slowly through to check that the front door was open. As I drifted into silent centering prayer, I realized it was my first visit ever at the monastery during Holy Week. Felt a call to contemplate the mystery of Christ anew.

At 4:30 a.m. I found Brother Thomas in the dining room making fresh coffee and setting out the cereal and juice. Had a short visit about his poetry before going to my room to get a poem by a Vietnamese woman named Ho Xuan Huong titled ""Spring-Watching Pavilion"" that ends with the line, ""Where is Nirvana? Nine times out of ten it is right here."" He folded it into his pocket, hurried back to the cloister, and returned with a sheet of seven of his poems for me.

Later that morning, I took a walk in the woods, stopping to pray at each of the 14 stations of the cross carved in six-foot oak crosses along a path that descends the hill in back of the abbey and travels along a gurgling stream. Saw splendid tree buds, wildflowers, grass and ferns resurrecting from their winter death.

After lunch P., M., D.I and I had a lively and soulful conversation about the Catholic Church, the Third World, America, fundamentalism, the Bush administration, Carl Rove, awe, Herman Goering, indignation, the Rapture, and all things in between.

Intertwined in the discussion was the dilemma of vocation - what are we called by God to do with our lives? P. offered a favorite quote on the subject by author and humorist E.B. White: ""I get up every morning determined to both change the world and have a good time. Sometimes this makes planning my day difficult.""

The late-afternoon Holy Thursday Mass was quite a spiritual experience. Abbot Mark Scott gave a homily on the sacrament of the last supper and the significance of the washing of the apostles' feet. Then, with the assistance of Father Cyprian, he bathed the feet of all the monks as we sang a hymn of praise and redemption. This was followed by the celebration of the Mass and the distribution of Holy Communion.

Midway through the service, a thunderstorm rolled in. Not a big blow but a deep rumbling thunderstorm that baptized the monastery and surrounding hills with a burst of heavy rain before moving off to the east.

After Mass, as is the tradition in the Catholic faith on Holy Thursday, the Blessed Sacrament was

transferred by holy processional from the chapel altar to a repository located in the cloister.

The holy processional was more spiritual than it might otherwise have been because it was full of missteps. Abbot Mark knelt down to start it before Father Paul had a chance to share the final reading. This sent the monks scurrying to get the processional vestment, incense, and carved processional crucifix, only to be told - when the abbot was informed of his mistake - they would have to return them until the reading was completed.

When the processional did commence, Boniface came out holding the crucifix backwards and the postulant candle bearers got separated. The abbot did his best to communicate - by nods and eye gestures - to the monks, postulants, and faithful in the pews when and where to join in, but to no avail.

It was quite a pageant, made all the more healing and poignant by the child-like sweetness of the stops and starts, our a capella singing that wandered on and off key, and the fact that no one appeared to be the least bit concerned about its organizational lapses, instead focusing on Jesus and the substance of the ancient ritual.

Afterward, I went to browse in the abbey gift shop where I found a collection of poems by Rumi, a 13th century Sufi poet from Afghanistan. Looking through its index, I discovered several he'd written about Christ. One of them, which is said to be carved in stone over the door of a Christian church in Iran, spoke directly to the character of Assumption Abbey:

Where Jesus lives, the great-hearted gather.

We are a door that's never locked.

If you are suffering any kind of pain,

Stay near this door. Open it.

The week before Holy Week, Postulant Brother Dean, Br Nemesio, and Fr Mark attended the annual Chrism Mass at St Anne's Cathedral, Springfield, with our diocesan Bishop, John Leibrecht, and most of the priests of the Springfield area. This is always a moving experience of the local church. The brothers returned with substantial quantities of the Sacred Chrism, the Oil for the Sick, and the Oil for Catechumens, all consecrated in the course of the evening celebration. These oils remain on display throughout the year in glass vessels in our infirmary chapel, and the Oil for the Sick is frequently used to anoint ill and ailing brothers, or brothers

who may be going for surgery.

Earlier in the month accomplished iconographer Sr Nancy Lee Smith, IHM, of Monroe, Michigan, spent a weekend with us. She spent one afternoon with the postulants and a few other monks explaining and demonstrating the theology and technique of icon writing. The following morning, she gave a shorter presentation to the entire community. She brought with her a small icon she had made of the Mother of God; she wanted it to be available for devotion and prayer in our lovely infirmary chapel during the course of her visit.

On March 31, David Haenke visited the Abbey to meet with Fr Mark and his Council, and Br Boniface, the Abbey forester. David is a local forester and manager of Alford Forest not far from us. We have been in touch with David over the past few years working toward an eventual transition of our forest management. We like David's philosophy of sustainable forestry practices that respect the native environment and promote the long-term health and viability of the woods.

From Fr Mark's homily at the Easter Vigil:

NO WONDER THE WOMEN WERE AFRAID. FROM ST PAUL'S POINT OF VIEW, THE WOMEN, LOOKING AT THE TOMB, WERE LOOKING AT THEIR OWN GRAVE; AND ENCOUNTERING IT EMPTY, THEY WERE CONFRONTED WITH A NEW DEFINITION OF WHO THEY WERE. YOU CAN NEVER REALLY EXPLAIN TO PEOPLE WHO DON'T KNOW, AND THE DISCIPLES, ACCORDING TO LUKE, THOUGHT THE WOMEN'S STORY WAS NONSENSE (24:11).

THE WORLD, AFTER EASTER, HAS EVER MORE BEEN DIVIDED INTO ETERNAL LIFE AND LIVING DEATH, INTO FREEDOM AND LIGHT, AND THE DARKNESS OF COMPULSION AND SELFISHNESS, INTO PEACE AND GLORY AND CHAOS AND SIN.

WE ARE IN THE THIRD DAY OF THE PASCHAL TRIDUUM. WE HAVE GONE THROUGH THE DEATH, THE BURIAL, AND THE RISING OF JESUS MESSIAH. WE HAVE NOT BEEN AND WE ARE NOT NOW MERE SPECTATORS, STANDING OFF, AND LOOKING ON. IN A MOMENT WE WILL BLESS THE WATER, AND RENEW OUR BAPTISMAL PROMISES. ST PAUL COULD NOT BE MORE CLEAR: WE HAVE NOT JUST READ ABOUT CHRIST DYING: IN OUR BAPTISM WE HAVE DIED WITH HIM.

AND YESTERDAY, WE HAVE NOT JUST IMAGINED CHRIST IN THE TOMB: IN BAPTISM, WE WERE BURIED WITH HIM. "WITH HOW GREAT A DESIRE HAVE I DESIRED TO CELEBRATE THIS PASSOVER WITH YOU," AND WE NEED TO HEAR THE FULL WEIGHT OF THAT WITH. "WE HAVE BEEN BURIED WITH HIM," SAYS PAUL. IT IS A REALITY. "AS CHRIST WAS RAISED" IS ANOTHER REALITY. SO THEREFORE, WE MUST WALK IN NEWNESS OF LIFE. THIS IS ENTERING THE

UNKNOWN REALM OF AN UNKNOWN WAY OF LIFE.

THE NEWNESS OF LIFE PAUL SAYS WE MUST LIVE NOW, IS RESURRECTION LIFE THIS SIDE OF THE GRAVE. NO DOUBT THERE IS A FINAL RESURRECTION, WHEN OUR PHYSICAL BODIES WILL BE TRANSFORMED INTO COPIES OF HIS OWN BODY OF GLORY. BUT EVEN NOW, IN OUR FAILING FLESH, RESURRECTION HAS TAKEN HOLD. IT CANNOT BE CONTAINED. AND SO, NEWNESS OF LIFE, AND BEING ALIVE, NOW, TO GOD.

“HOW, THEN, OUGHT WE TO LIVE?” THIS IS PAUL’S QUESTION IN THE LIGHT OF THE RESURRECTION. THAT IS WHAT RESURRECTION FACES US WITH. CHRISTIAN MORALITY MAKES SENSE ONLY BECAUSE OF THE UPHEAVAL OF THE RESURRECTION. IT MEANS CHRISTIANS LIVING NOW LIKE WE WILL LIVE FOREVER, LIKE CHRIST LIVES NOW.

YESTERDAY THE MONKS AND OUR RETREATANTS HEARD FROM THE 4TH CENTURY BISHOP JOHN CHRYSOSTOM. HE SAID IN AN EASTER HOMILY,

“HOW SHALL I RECOUNT FOR YOU THESE HIDDEN REALITIES OR PROCLAIM WHAT SURPASSES EVERY WORD AND CONCEPT? HOW SHALL I LAY OPEN BEFORE YOU THE MYSTERY OF THE LORD’S RESURRECTION?” THE BEST THING YOU CAN DO, I THINK, IS WHAT WE HAVE DONE. WE HAVE LOOKED UPON THE ONE WE HAVE PIERCED, AND WE HAVE BEEN CONTENT THROUGH THIS HOLY WEEK NOT TO KNOW WHAT WAS GOING ON, BECAUSE OF THE PROMISE THAT AFTER IT WAS ALL OVER WE WOULD. MAY THIS FINAL DAY OF THE HOLY TRIDUUM, WITH LIGHT AND WATER, COMMUNITY, AND BREAD AND WINE, DO WHAT CHRYSOSTOM COULD NOT DO AND LAY OPEN BEFORE US THE MYSTERY OF THE LORD’S RESURRECTION.

Fr Mark, Abbot