

Dear Friends and Visitors

The month of March began with our welcoming Fr Mark back home after his length absence. See our entry for February for an account of Fr Mark's trip to San Francisco and to the Philippines.

Fr Mark returned just in time for the beginning of Lent. For us at Ava, the beginning of this Holy Season is marked not only by the blessing and imposition of ashes on Ash Wednesday, but also by the distribution of Lenten books to the monks in Chapter on the evening before Ash Wednesday. The custom of distributing books to the monks for Lent goes back at least to the Rule of St Benedict, Chapter 48. "During the days of Lent, the brothers should be free in the morning to read until 9:00 a.m...Each one 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." As we have said before in this space, during Lent the monks of Ava devote themselves to *lectio divina* each evening from 7:00 until Compline.

March also saw another, and much more significant, homecoming. On the 24th we rejoiced to welcome Fr Alberic Maisog back home after two and one half years. During that long time Fr Alberic was generously serving our daughter house in the Philippines as superior. The following day, the 25th, the Solemnity of the Annunciation of the Lord, was also the anniversary of Fr Alberic's and Fr Anthony Sloan's ordination to the priesthood. In the evening of that day, the community broke from its monastic fast and celebrated Fr Alberic's return and anniversary with pizza and beer and cake and ice cream, not the most nutritious of diets, but fairly typical monastic festive fare. Fr Alberic has taken up again his ministry as novice director in our community, a charge he held at the time of his appointment to the daughter house. We are grateful to Br Francis Flaherty who ably filled in as novice director during Fr Alberic's absence. Br Francis continues as vocation director.

In November of last year, one of our Associates planted the suggestion that the Abbey conduct two or three theme retreats during the year. The idea, though a departure from the typically unstructured "do-it-yourself" retreats that our guests are used to, seemed worth trying. With two Associates of Assumption Abbey, Loretta Sellers of Cuba, MO, and Marilyn Schultz of St Louis, working with Br Francis and Fr Mark, we settled on a Lenten retreat focusing on Baptism. Trisha Day, an Associate of our mother house in Iowa, who has much experience organizing and facilitating theme retreats at New Melleray Abbey, supplied a structure for the retreat as well as much good material. Mostly, Trisha contributed enthusiasm and confidence to the rest of us.

Because of our small guest house, and because smallness and intimacy are characteristics of

Ava, we limited publicity for the retreat to a narrow area, the western third of our diocese. Six people participated, and Loretta and Marilyn did superb jobs as facilitators and hosts for the retreat. The retreat opened with Friday Vespers with the monks. Then, that same first evening before Compline, Fr Mark conducted a very simple and moving rite of anointing of the ears – the “Ephphetha” rite of the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults. The monastic opus dei served as the basic structure for the weekend retreat. In addition, Fr Mark and Br Francis each gave a conference. There was plenty of time for silent reflection, and also time for group discussions and sharing on a one-to-one basis. Fr Alberic was available Saturday afternoon for the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

All who participated, as well as the facilitators, felt that God was truly present during the retreat. It was a wonderful experience for all, and the monks were honored to share their home in this way. It was immediately urged that we conduct another such retreat before too long, perhaps one in the late summer, and another in Advent. Our appreciation goes especially to Trisha Day, Loretta Sellers, Marilyn Schultz, and to the six participants who cooperated fully with this time of grace.

Spring has come. The lawn in our small cloister garth is brilliant green now, and needs mowing. The tulips are opening, gladiola leaves are getting tall, and the lilies seem to grow as you watch. It is time to plant some annuals, some more herbs for the kitchen, and Sox, the cat, is spending more and more time in the little garden, her hangout full time in the summer, moving from her box in Fr Donald’s desk in the library and roaming the hallways indoors. Easter is also on the horizon. We hope to see many of our friends here for the Triduum, as we celebrate with renewed wonder, awe, and love, the unfathomable abyss of the “poor love of God,” to use a striking phrase of Hans Urs Von Balthasar, the love extended to us in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Fr Mark, Abbot