

Dear Friends and Visitors

News from Assumption Abbey March 2007 They say that March comes in like a lion...That was the case here in the Ozarks, a prime tornado zone at any time of year. A devastating tornado cut through West Plains about forty miles east of us, leaving behind one child dead and much structural damage. We at the Abbey were spared, just as we were spared the crusing ice storms that hit southern Missouri in February, downing untold numbers of trees and leaving tens of thousands without electricity for up to two weeks.



Instead of a tornado, the Abbey was happy to be the venue, early in the month of March, for the retreat of a centering prayer group from Springfield. Eight people, mostly lay, but with one or two women religious, participated in the retreat. Br Francis offered them a few reflections on lectio divina and monastic spirituality. We are always happy to open our guest house to discreet groups who wish to conduct their own religious retreat. More and more, especially in our area of the country,

these groups are interdenominational.

After our noon meal on the first day of Day Light Savings Time, Sunday, March 11, we were alerted that a fire had broken out some miles north of us. We all changed our clothes, through brush rakes and a leave blower in the pickup, and head north on the dirt road crossing Bryant Creek toward Hiway 14. Soon, we came upon the uncontrolled grass fire. It was a windy day, meaning that the fire was spreading wide and quickly. Two or three first responders from the Douglas County volunteer fire department had already begun working on the fire. We joined them with our equipment, clearing wide swaths of brush and grass with our rakes and leave blower to make a fire break where the fire would find no more fuel and die out. The task was done rather quickly, and so we returned home smelling like so many smoked hams and cheeses, with enough time for some of us to take a power hike in the early spring woods.

On the following day, Fr Mark drove to Gethsemane Abbey, Kentucky, where he attended the annual meeting of the abbots and abbesses of the seventeen Trappist-Cistercian monasteries in the US. These monasteries comprise the "U.S. Region" of the Order, and so the meeting is called the Regional Meeting. Fr Mark, with Mother Kathy of Redwoods Abbey, California, was one of the assistant moderators for the meeting, collaborating with the Regional President, Dom Peter McCarthy of Guadalupe Abbey, Oregon. Besides the seventeen "superiors," as they are called, there were also twelve delegates participating in the meeting. These were monks and

nuns elected by their communities to represent the "grass roots" of the Region at the meeting (four of the monasteries of the Region, Ava included, opted not to send a delegate to this year's meeting.). In addition, there were two guest participants from Rome: Dom Timothy Kelly, the Procurator General of the Order, and Mother Angela Toyoda, one of the members of the Abbot General resident Council. The main purpose of the meeting was remote preparation for the Order's triennial General Chapter which will be held in 2008. Particular topics discussed had to do with the service of authority in the Order, particularly the role and service of the Abbot/Abbess; the figure of the Abbot General (a new Abbot General will be elected at the Chapter in 2008), Formation, and Monastic Work. The meeting ran from March 13 through March 20. The heavy agenda was handled with tremendous cooperation, respect, good humor, and, most especially, in a spirit of deep friendship and camaraderie among the participants. Every day, the participants joined the Gethsemane monks in the hours of the Divine Office and at Mass in the wonderful Gethsemane church, and this experience of prayer together more than anything highlighted the strength and joy of the Cistercian vocation.



In the meantime, Spring, that joyful and prankish little girl on roller blades, came gliding into the Ozarks silently. All of a sudden, there were the redbuds, the daffodils, the wild plum and pear blossoms, the catkins of the walnut and the hazelnut, and then the clouds of white dogwoods. (Br Lazarus adds that this prankish little girl also brought the ticks back.) Wildflowers -- Dutchman's Breeches, Pussy Toes, Wind Flower, Wood Flox, Buttercup -- appear like poems dropped from the notebook of a distracted, fertile poet. Spring in the Ozarks is like Spring nowhere else.

On the Solemnity of the Annunciation of the Lord, March 26th this year, Fr Mark delivered the following homily:

Homily for the Solemnity of the Annunciation of the Lord 2007

"A body you have prepared for me.

I have come to do your will." (Jesus in Hebrews, first reading)

*"A body you have prepared for him;
Let it be done to me according to your will." (Mary in Luke, Gospel)*

*"A body from me you have prepared for him,
who comes to do your will." (Mary)*

"Blessed is the womb that bore you, the breasts that nursed you."

*"Blessed are they who hear the Word of God, and do it." (Dialogue between a woman
and Jesus)*

*"I have come to do your will..."
"In this will, we have been made holy
by the offering of the body of Jesus --
the offspring of the body of Mary --
once and for all." (Hebrews)*

*Through baptism into his death,
we have been borne anew...Newborn babes
who drink the milk of the Spirit," (Peter)
the Spirit that overshadowed Mary (Gabriel).
We are vessels of God...Temples
"Do you not know that your body
is a Temple of the Holy Spirit?" (Paul to Corinthians)*

*There is a huge organic symphony in full play
and we, like Mary and Jesus, are players in it.*

The Annunciation:

What was announced?

"The Lord is with you..."

This is Emmanu-el, God is with us, made very personal and pointed.

Emmanu-el -- "The virgin shall conceive and bear a son and you shall call him

Emmanu-el, God is with us."

"The Lord is with you" -- Mary --Emmach-el --

you are that virgin.

"You have found favor with God."

This was his greeting: highly favored one.

Mary needed this affirmation.

A woman married 30 years needs to be told everyday, "I love you."

*This is the full Gospel: There is no asking "why?" God's favor is God's grace;
it is gift; he finds it where he put it.*

Can we accept it? "I love you." That's all.

"You will conceive and bear a son."

But this is the prophecy of Isaiah.

*This, then, is the fullness of time; time pregnant with the Symphony of god\
that began when light was made.*

Mary is the first chord of the final movement,

the resolution of that sustained tension since the time of the prophets;

yet a resolution that gives birth in turn to yet further tension --

"a sword will pierce your soul," and,

"he shall be set for the rise and fall of many."

"Who do people say I am...?"

"You shall name him Jesus."

Who do we say he is?

Is he our savior?

Do we want to be saved?

Do we want to pay the price of being free?

"He will be king over Israel, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

And so Mary is Queen Mother.

An endless kingdom is a universal one.

Nothing is excluded.

Nothing and no one else has power any more. Sin and death included.

What clashing dissonance on Good Friday

*when Pilate will affix above his head on the Cross not the Announcement,
but the charge,*

The King of the Jews.

Did Mary understand that his kingdom was not of this world?

Do we understand that?

An neither are we, if we are under that same charge.

"The Holy Spirit will come upon you."

"Even while Peter was still speaking,

the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word...

even upon Gentiles was the gift of the Spirit poured out...

the Holy Spirit...God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts

making us sons,

crying out, 'Abba, o Father.'" (Acts and Galatians)

*The Annunciation is the whole gospel and magnum opus of God
played out in one -- in Mary --*

so that we can see ourselves in her.

We, too, are Mothers of the Word, with pierced hearts,

oozing the Spirit's grace, washed in blood:

and we have barely even said yet, as she did without reserve,

"Let it be done to me."



The month of March concluded with a visit by Tobias Meeker. Toby was once a monk some twenty-five years ago, and has been very attached to the brothers and to the place ever since. Toby also serves on the Abbey's Committee for the Future, the only non-monk and lay member of the Committee. In two informal sessions, Tobias presented to the monks some facts -- especially, the costs, the benefits, and the strategies -- about living in a "virtue-based community" such as a monastic community is. A virtue-driven community is one that "is in the business of changing persons' lives." The members of such a community are necessarily involved with one another at a deep level. This is a form of intimacy that wears the face of trust and trustworthiness. Life in a monastic community costs: hurt feelings, anger, disappointment.

But there are benefits, too: personal and communal enhancement, enjoyment of the other, the opportunities to converse about more than sports scores and weather, and the conviction that your life has meaning. Tobias Meeker's presentations were part of a process the community is engaging in this year in preparation for the abbatial election in December (Fr Mark completes his six-year term December 8 this year). Other parts of the process will be a three-day discernment in May to identify the needs of the Abbey at this point in its history, a two-month sabbatical for Fr Mark in July and August, and the biennial Regular Visitation in October.

We are happy you have visited our site this Easter season, and appreciate our communion with you in prayer.

Fr Mark, Abbot