

Dear Friends and Visitors

As was the case for much of the Catholic world, so here at Ava the first half of the month of April found our attention drawn to Rome. Acknowledging the historical importance of the death and funeral of Pope John Paul II and of the conclave to follow, Fr Mark succeeded in having a satellite dish installed the day before the funeral of the late pope. Since the funeral took place contemporaneously with our celebration of the office of Vigils, we dispensed with Vigils that day so all could be present to watch the funeral live on TV. It was an intense experience for us, and the emotion as well as the solidarity we felt with the entire Catholic world spilled over into our own humble but heartfelt commemoration of the late Pontiff in our community Mass immediately following the funeral Mass in Piazza San Pietro.

In his Chapter Talk to the community on Sunday, April 10, Fr Mark recalled Pope John Paul.

Early last week a Catholic journalist called asking if I had any statement to make on John Paul II. His paper was doing a special on John Paul II and wanted various church-related people to contribute something.

My first thought was to say that John Paul II saw the papacy as the largest stage imaginable from which he could continue to do what he felt was his simple and clear vocation, to preach the gospel at all times, even, as Francis of Assisi said, if it meant using words. It was an opportunity not to be passed up. He did this unstintingly for nearly 27 years. He even did it with his painful wordless grimace facing the world at his window that he usually imparted his Easter greeting in dozens of languages flawlessly from. That grimace may have been his most eloquent sermon, next to his standing stooped and silent at the Western Wall in Jerusalem.

I also thought John Paul II made the papacy once again a formidable power in the world, sort of reversing a trend begun by John XXIII and Paul VI who were much less high-profile personalities. Even in the Church, which many thought should be much more collegial and centered in local dioceses, John Paul II made the papacy something to contend with. As Archbishop Timothy Dolan wrote in a recent article, "John Paul II overshadowed the bishops of every country, including the United States. If one wanted to find out where the Church stood on a given issue, one hardly had to consult the bishops...It was as if the Pope has stolen the thunder from [local bishops' conferences]."

But this journalist got more specific about what he was after. He was contacting me as a representative of religious life, and wanted a word about what I thought John Paul II's influence religious life had been. To this I had not much to say. I knew John Paul had a huge esteem for traditional religious life. He was always meeting with chapters general of this or that

congregation and he penned numerous documents on religious life. I know every year welcomed a visit from a few monks from Tre Fontane on the Feast of St Agnes who presented him with a little live lamb in a basket whose fleece would be used to weave the pallia for the next archbishops. But to be honest I never followed what John Paul said to religious or what he said about religious life. Historically monks and bishops have always maintained a respectful distance from one another, and that even held for the Bishop of Rome.

At the same time, I remembered the address John Paul II gave when the members of our General Chapters went to visit him at Castelgandolfo in 2002. Even at that time the Pope's speech was hard to understand, and anyway I think our Abbot General actually wrote the address for him. But there was a printed text afterwards with the pope's name as a signature, so even if our own Abbot General put the words in the Pope's mouth, still, officially they are papal words.

There is a sentence or two from this address to our Order that it would be worth hearing again. The audience took place on September 19, just a week after the first anniversary of 9/11. The Pope alluded to this fact. "Humanity, following up on the recent tragic events whose anniversary we observe these days, seems confused and in search of certainties: it longs for truth, it aspires to peace," the Pope said, and asked, "where should we seek a sure refuge if not in God? Only in divine mercy...can the world find peace and the human person happiness." And then he adds, "Down through the ages, your monasteries have been extraordinary witnesses to this secret."

The Pope described our particular spin on the Benedictine search for God as "mystical passion." The object of the search is not just "God" but "a kiss of God." "This lofty spirituality keeps its full value," he affirmed, "as a witness in today's cultural situation, which all too often kindles the desire for false goods and artificial paradises."

The Cistercian vocation, said John Paul II, "is truly a witness to the high ideal of sanctity which consists in an unconditional love for God, who is infinite goodness, and a love which mystically embraces all humanity in prayer." I would add that Cistercian love also embraces wounded and sick and irritating and faltering brothers in patience, cheerfulness and forgiveness, and that is no less mystical. It is the mysticism of Ava.

The Pope concluded his short address with words he had used in another place, quoting Luke's Gospel: "Put out into the deep (Lk 5:4)...May difficulties and trials not discourage you, dear Brothers and Sisters...[Your charism] constitutes a richness for the entire Christian people... Go forward without fear on the road already begun...preferring absolutely nothing to Christ (RB

72).”

Still early in the month of April we were blessed with the week-long visit of Abbot Christopher Zeleinski, OSB, and Fr Sam Dennis, OSB, both of Our Lady of Guadalupe Abbey, Pecos, New Mexico. Abbot Christopher, and American, entered monastic life in Florence, Italy, joining San Mineato Abbey there when still quite a young man. He lived his entire monastic life in Italy before coming to Pecos just a few years ago. Fr Sam, the senior of the two, had been a monk of our motherhouse, New Melleray Abbey, Iowa, before transferring to Pecos and to the Olivetine Benedictines several years ago. When still a Cistercian, Fr Sam spent two years here at Ava, years that forged unbreakable bonds of affection between him and us. It was an inspiration to have these two mature, wise and contented men in our midst

The day before Abbot Christopher and Fr Sam departed to return to Pecos, Br Francis and Fr Mark took off for New Orleans. While it is true they heard a little live jazz there, visited the French Quarter, and toured the Audubon Zoo, the real reason for the journey to Cajun country was to preach the monastic gospel to select students of the Jesuit Loyola University. Over the course of two days, Francis and Mark met with two groups of students. They were deeply impressed with the Catholic zeal of these young women and men, and with their intelligent and challenging questions and answers. The Jesuits of Loyola extended our two brothers the most open and warm hospitality imaginable.

Accompanying Francis and Mark back from New Orleans was our friend Martin Jenni, OSB Obl. Martin spent a week with us, participating fully in our daily life, and was gracious and generous enough to meet several times with our cantors and with our postulants to coach them in the theory and mechanics of monastic singing.

Another visitor this month was our beloved and faithful bishop, John Leibrecht, who spent a leisurely afternoon with us. After a private conversation with Fr Mark, Bishop met with the community in the Chapter Room for the office of None, and then for free ranging conversation. He spoke frankly and affectionately about his own ministry and about the state of the US Church. Bishop Leibrecht succeeded Bernard Law as Bishop of Springfield-Cape Girardeau, and, with his mandated retirement in a few years, will be the only bishop of the diocese to have spent his entire episcopal career here, an achievement that Bishop had hoped for from the day of his episcopal ordination, and one that the entire diocese is the better off for. Bishop's visit ended in the refectory over fruitcake and soft drinks.

April is the first month of Spring and the warm weather and budding dogwoods and flowers signaled to Fr Mark that it was finally time to tend to the cloister garth after the long but mild

winter. This meant uprooting the remains of last year's annuals, pulling out weeds, planting new flowers and plants, and giving the thick grass its first mowing and trimming. That little bit of effort, and some fine April rains, have brought our cloister garth to a brilliant freshness. It is an inviting place to sit on evenings between Vespers and Compline, or on Sunday mornings before Mass.

With the aid of our satellite-fed TV we watched the announcement of the new pope, and also the inaugural Mass of Pope Benedict XVI. We note with satisfaction the name "Benedict," and indeed the new pope in his inaugural homily stressed as his primary objective to invite Christians and the entire world "to prefer nothing whatever to Christ" and to the love of God.

In the final week of the month our senior postulant entered into retreat in preparation for his receiving the novice habit and being embraced by the Ava community as a novice monk. The retreat was five days in duration. The postulant was assigned a single work period each day, instead of two; the obligation to attend community prayer and meals was mitigated; and he met with the Abbot for a few minutes each morning after Mass for a brief teaching on what it means to be a novice monk. Brother was to receive the habit in a simple rite on the Sixth Sunday of Easter, May 1, and that will be the first bit of news in the next installment of News from Assumption Abbey.

Fr Mark, Abbot