

Dear Associates and Friends,
The Lord be with you--

Pope Emeritus Benedict had a very unexpected answer to the traditional question, "What are you giving up for Lent?" God provided outstanding men to carry out Peter's burden of shepherding the Church through the violent conflicts since 1900. The popes were human and inevitably fell short in some area. Still, Christ's promise to Peter that the powers of evil would not prevail continues firm. We must pray for the next Bishop of Rome, who will hopefully have more positive growing pains to deal with in the Church, without neglecting the work of purification begun in the 2000's.

Dom Francis Michael of Holy Spirit Abbey gave our retreat the final week of January. Our monks usually listen to spiritual conferences with eyes down, or looking up high, but even the most hard of hearing and attention deficit among us were looking straight at our retreat master, as he became enthusiastic and voluble in presenting his thoughts.

February meant back to the bakery. John O'Shaughnessy spent some days here fine-tuning and evaluating the end of year financial statement. Fr. Alberic asked him to give a report to our monks. John was clear and decisive, saying that we are in a good and steady economic condition with a versatile and loyal staff. Just so long as we continue producing a good product, our fruit cake industry has proven to be a satisfying and compatible way for monks to earn their living.

Ran Lahav and Dick Ortez spent a couple weeks with us during January. Both had hoped to share in our retreat but they were not able to arrange their schedules accordingly. Mike Cronin came and spent most of February living with the community and working in our bakery. We were a bit short-handed because of Fr. Alberic attending the USA Trappist Regional Meeting at New Melleray. These family brothers find a fulfillment for their inner spiritual life by sharing closely in our monastic life and relationship periodically. They give us monks a refreshing experience also, by their presence and active contribution. Then they are renewed to continue their calling to live as monks in the world.

Years ago, a pleasant well-fed man showed up at our guesthouse with a toolbox. His name was Matthew Flatley and home base was St. Louis. A graduate of a top chef's school, he had developed his own catering business. Matt had lived with our monks at Snowmass Colorado, where he became a friend and a follower of Fr. Thomas Keating. Returning to St. Louis, Matt helped direct the Contemplative Outreach people there. Ava is closer than Snowmass, so Matt returned for visits here with his toolbox (which carries/conceals his assortment of chef's knives.) Of course, he prepared a very professional dinner for us as part of the visit.

Six years ago, Matt began priestly studies for the diocese of Jefferson City as a late vocation. Ordained a priest in December, Fr. Matthew offered a First Mass for us on Sunday, February 10, the Chinese New Year. A very soul-satisfying experience for all concerned. However, he neglected to bring his toolbox, but promises that he will prepare an Ordination Banquet next time.

A number of our Associates from our several groups in Missouri came for their biannual retreat the following weekend. One made a first temporary commitment and two made lifetime commitments. A group of Springfield Contemplative Outreach people was slated to come the next weekend, but a storm of freezing rain, sleet and ice cancelled their plans.

Friday, March 1, Kristen Nash received the sacrament of Confirmation from Fr. Robert (appointed by Bishop Johnston). All the members of our little Catholic enclave–Nazareth Hermitage, Our Lady of the Angels Franciscan Friary and Assumption Abbey attended the Mass. Kris took the name Dorothy in honor of her mother, a single mother who started bringing her six children here in the early years of this monastery’s foundation. Kris’ Razzle Dazzle Pie was well received in the refreshments afterward. But the greatest experience for her was being a part of the Body of Christ, personified by the really varied communities united in welcoming her, as she received the sacrament of anointing of the Holy Spirit for Christian maturity.

So on we go in our forty-day desert journey with Christ to celebrate His Paschal Mystery.

**Benedict XVI, Pope Emeritus
(You are giving up WHAT for Lent?)**

Holy Mother Church starts off Lent with a flourish--the sign of the cross in ashes on our forehead, Our Lord’s forty days in the desert and now His Transfiguration.

What did Abraham see when God told him to look up at the night sky? There was a great formation of bright stars looking like a cup with a bent handle, and a little distance away, another formation of stars not quite so bright which also outlined a smaller cup with bent handle. He saw a cloudy smear of stars stretching across the heavens, and in the midst of the starry path was a square of bright stars with a tail of three stars going off on an angle from one corner. As his eyes adjusted more to night vision, Abraham saw that the whole sky, from horizon to horizon, was sprinkled and clustered with lesser twinkling stars.

Abraham saw the identical magnificent display, which we see now at nights. The same arrangement of night stars as the shepherds saw before the angels sang, “Glory to God in the highest. Peace on earth to men of good will,” and which our first human parents saw. This abiding beauty and marvel of God’s creation could have inspired St. Paul to write, “Jesus Christ--the same yesterday, today, and forever.”

God told Abraham, “Your family will be as numerous as the stars in the heavens.” Ninety-nine year old Abraham, who had no children from his aged wife Sarah, must have hesitated, but then, “This is God giving his word, so alright, Lord, I can’t see how You will do it, but I believe what You say.” Abraham’s obedience of faith made him right with God. The Lord God made a covenant with Abraham, and he offered a covenant sacrifice to God.

When the twelve apostles expressed the conviction that Jesus was the Messiah, then Jesus began teaching them that the Son of Man must be rejected, suffer many things, be killed, and rise on the third day. That bad news following on good new was too much for them. “Lord, that will never happen to you.” Jesus led Peter, James and John up a mountain to pray. As He prayed, His divine glory shined through his humanity. Moses and Elijah appeared there. St. Luke tells us they were talking about His Exodus, which Jesus would accomplish in Jerusalem. Then God’s voice came from a cloud of heaven, “This is My chosen Son, listen to Him.” God was asking the same thing from Peter, James and John, as He had asked from Abraham...this is the word of God--take God at His word. St. Luke simply says that they fell silent and said nothing to anyone in those days about what they had seen. St. Luke may be echoing the lack of faith, which St. Mark describes, when the angel tells the women at the empty tomb that Jesus of Nazareth has risen as He said--go and tell His apostles. But, the women ran off and said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

St. Paul writes to the church at Philippi, which was a Roman colony established for retired soldiers. The Christians there seem to have been favorites of Paul. He deplored the lack of faith of worldly people. He says they behave like enemies of the cross of Christ. Their god is their belly. They glory in their shame. Their end is destruction. They think only of earthly things. More than once Paul had shown that he was proud of his Roman citizenship, yet here he says, "However our citizenship is in heaven...and from heaven we also await a savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will change our lowly body to conform with His glorified Body, by the power which enables Him to bring all things under subjection.

The liturgy joins St. Luke's version of the Transfiguration with passages about Abraham and from the epistle to the Philippians on the second Sunday of Lent in order to focus on the lesson of faith. Abraham believes God and God justifies him. The Father's voice tells Peter, James and John, to believe in His Son's teaching, and St. Paul urges at the end of his passage, "therefore in this way (of faith) stand firm in the Lord."

Pope Benedict appointed this as a Year of Faith. His first two encyclicals were on love and on hope. He has been working on a third encyclical about faith. There is much unfinished business to deal with, but Pope Benedict has heard the word of God speaking, both through his own increasing weakness, and also through the Church's great need of vigorous good leadership now. Our Holy Father is convinced and believes that it is God's will for him to resign now. He (and we) can pray and trust that God is pleased with him, and that God will bless his act of faith with good fruit in his own life and in the life of the Church, just as God blessed Abraham, the apostles and St. Paul, and of course first of all, as the Father blessed His own chosen Son. Our pope emeritus has said he intends to live within Vatican City and that his role is to pray. He once said that the contemplative life is the purifying heart chamber of the Church.

In the Sacred Heart,
Your Monks of Assumption Abbey