

Dear Friends and Visitors

May was marked by the absence of our Abbot, Fr Mark. The day after Easter Fr Mark left for travels to the Philippines and California. When he left the Ozarks, the dogwoods were not yet in full bloom and the oaks and walnuts and hickory bore only the promise of spring. When Fr Abbot returned to the abbey on May 27, the woods were a rich and wonderful display of hues and textures of green, and wildflowers humbly but confidently stood forth.

The main scope of Fr Mark's trip was to conduct the regular Visitation at Assumption Abbey's daughter house, Abbey Our Lady of the Philippines (OLP). The daughter house is located on Guimaras Island in the Visayas and is the home of 29 monks.

The institution of the Visitation is as old as the Cistercian Order. Each monastery is connected to one other monastery by what we call a filial bond. Usually the bond is between founding house (motherhouse) and foundation (daughter house). It is the responsibility and privilege of the abbot of the motherhouse to "visit" the daughter house every two years.

Technically, Assumption Abbey is not the "motherhouse" of OLP. Ava did not found Guimaras. Nevertheless, for at least two decades Assumption Abbey has served the function of motherhouse to Guimaras. How this came about is another story for another time.

The Visitation lasts as long as necessary, depending on the size of the daughter house. Usually the duration is between one and two weeks. In the present case, the Visitation of OLP lasted from April 27 to May 14.

During the Visitation the Visitor meets with each member of the community privately at least once. He speaks and listens to the assembled brothers. He observes the way of life, the liturgy, the work, the meals, the organization of the day, and so forth. He looks over the financial records and generally gets a feel of how the monastery stands at present, discerning the graces enjoyed and needs and challenges facing the brothers.

As the Order's "Statute on the Regular Visitation" says,

The Regular Visitation is a moment of communion in the common Cistercian grace, an expression of the responsibility of each community to all the other communities of the Order aiming at a living fidelity to the Cistercian conversatio. Its purpose is to motivate the brothers to lead the Cistercian life with renewed spiritual vigilance, and to strengthen, supplement, and, when needed, correct the pastoral action of the local abbot.

The Visitation concludes with the Visitor drawing up and reading to the brothers a brief document summarizing the community's view of itself. The Visitor adds his own perceptions of the community, gives words of advice and encouragement, and notes any decisions that were taken during the Visitation.

Normally, major decisions are not made in the course of the Visitation. The Visitor is very limited in his authority to make changes. One responsibility the Visitor does have, though, is to appoint a superior for the community if the community does not feel ready to elect an abbot. This was the case at OLP during this Visitation, as it was at the last Visitation in 2001.

At the Visitation of OLP in 2001, Dom John Eudes Bamberger, OCSO, retired abbot of Genesee Abbey, New York, was appointed superior of OLP for one and one half years. His term of service ends this August. The community still does not feel ready to elect an abbot. That means that Fr Mark had to appoint another temporary superior. After consulting the brothers, discerning the needs of the community of OLP and projecting its future, Fr Mark appointed Fr Alberic Maisog, OCSO, as superior of Our Lady of the Philippines for a period of up to two years.

As many of our readers know, Fr Alberic is a monk of Assumption Abbey. He is also a former monk of OLP, changing stability to Ava only in 1999. Alberic is one of our youngest monks, our novice director, vocation director, and fruitcake baker. That is enough to explain why the decision to appoint him superior at OLP, though clear enough with the Philippine community alone in view, was excruciating when the needs of Assumption Abbey itself are considered. Ava can scarcely afford to lose a young, strong, intelligent and solid monk. Yet, the decision was made in faith and will be lived in joyful hope.

Still, Fr Mark was not going to let Ava lose one good monk without getting a good monk in return. He made a trade. Fr Alberic will go to Guimaras, and Fr Filomeno Cinco, OCSO, former abbot of OLP, will come to Ava. Filomeno is in his early 50s. A Filipino, he entered the Order in Australia where he did his first formation. Before serving as abbot at OLP, 1995-2001, Fil was novice director. He is a good teacher, a fine homilist, but mostly a solid monk. We are delighted he is willing to help out the ""motherhouse.""

Since late May Br Felix of our motherhouse, New Melleray Abbey, Iowa, has been with us, helping in many ways. He lived here for a longer time in the 1980's/90's and fits in very well. In early June Br Francis Flaherty of New Clairvaux Abbey, Vina, CA, will come to Ava for an indefinite period. Later this summer a man will enter as a postulant, and later still another will come for a period of discernment.

In his homily on the Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord, Fr Mark said,

The Gospel says, ""Jesus was taken up into heaven."" But then in Acts, the angel says to the disciples, ""Galileans, why do you stand looking into heaven?""

It is paradoxical to note this: that though our gaze is drawn upward, to heaven, Jesus' whole concern is what happens on earth. He is taken up, yet - or rather, so - he tells us, ""Go out.""

Because of his vertical movement, up, our horizontal movement out into the whole universe has ultimate value and will meet with success - not the success of prestige or fortune or good health for ourselves, but the success of the advancement of the Kingdom of God...

The Ascended Lord is seated ""at God's right hand in heaven."" In the Bible's way of thinking, heaven is not one thing and earth another and never the twain shall meet. In the Bible, nothing can happen in heaven without profound repercussions on earth. Our recent tornadoes are meteorological signs of this theological reality: one earth as in heaven. If our Risen Lord is seated in heaven, it means he has ultimate, mysterious, into-the-depths-reaching power and presence upon earth. Heaven is not some entirely other reality, but the inner essence of present reality in its fullest potentiality...

Rather than gazing into heaven, the Ascension lets us gaze into our life here and now - into our families, our relationships, into our sin and our pain, even - and see a hope and a light up to now clouded over. Heaven, we can say, thanks to our Ascended Lord, is the womb of the future. It is where God entices us each moment by offering new ways of becoming more real.

The Easter Season comes to an end with the Solemnity of Pentecost. The Roman liturgy during the Seventh Week of Easter keeps insisting on the coming of the Holy Spirit. The collects, typically sober, are yet urgent: ""send the power of your Holy Spirit upon us"" (Monday), ""send your Holy Spirit to live in our hearts"" (Tuesday), ""unite the Church in the Holy Spirit"" (Wednesday), ""let your Spirit come upon us and fill us with his gifts"" (Thursday) and so forth. The Spirit is the Love of God poured into our hearts. It is our Prayer. It is for us to be silent, to be docile, to be moved with Its courage and wisdom love. Let us be moved together.

Fr Mark, Abbot