

Dear Friends and Visitors

On Sunday, May 1, the Sixth Sunday of Easter, our senior postulant received the habit of a Cistercian novice as well as a new name, Brother Maria Lazarus. The simple but moving clothing ceremony was preceded by the future novice making a five day private retreat, a time both of final discernment before entering into this new phase of his engagement with monastic life, and of deepening his capacity to love and listen to the Lord who first loved him and called him from the tomb of his former life.

The clothing ceremony traditionally takes place in the monastery Chapter Room with only the monastic community present. Following is the structure and content of the ceremony for receiving a novice.

Abbot: What do you seek?

Postulant: The mercy of God and of the Order.

Abbot: May the Lord be your support.

Reading from the Rule of St Benedict. Then the Abbot addresses a brief homily to the postulant. Finally, the Abbot says,

Are you prepared to join the battle line of the brothers of this monastery, so that under a Rule and an abbot you may follow Christ and so arrive at the perfection of faith, hope and love?

Postulant: With the help of God's grace, I hope and desire to do battle for the true King, Christ the Lord.

Abbot: May God bring to completion what he has begun in you. AMEN.

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Prayer for the New Novice

Br Novice kneels before the Abbot.

Abbot: Brothers, Saint Benedict admonishes us, "every time you begin a good work, pray to the Lord most earnestly to bring it to perfection." Let us, then, together beg the Lord in his goodness to supply to our brother Maria Lazarus what is lacking to us by nature.

Listen, Lord, to the petitions we make for your servant Maria Lazarus: May it please you that he remain faithful in your church and so merit to lay hold of eternal life. Through Christ our Lord. AMEN.

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Conferral of the habit.

Abbot: May the Lord guide our hearts and our bodies in the Love of God and in the patience of Christ. AMEN.

In his address to the new novice, Abbot Mark said,

IT WAS NOT YOU WHO CHOSE ME BUT I WHO CHOSE YOU (Jn 15:16). WE HEARD THESE WORDS MORE THAN ONCE AT MASS LAST WEEK. THEY WERE LIKE BACKGROUND MUSIC FOR YOUR RETREAT. JESUS WAS TALKING TO HIS FRIENDS. "I HAVE CHOSEN YOU." HE WAS TALKING TO EACH OF US. BUT IN A SPECIAL WAY, AT THIS SPECIAL TIME, JESUS WAS TALKING TO YOU, BROTHER MARIA LAZARUS.

YOUR BEING HERE IN THIS MONASTERY AND PRESENT AT THIS CLOTHING RITUAL CAME AS A SURPRISE TO ALL OF US; I HAVE NO DOUBT IT IS AT LEAST AS MUCH OF A SURPRISE TO YOU. BUT THIS IS THE ACTUAL SHAPE, FOR NOW, OF THE "CHOICE" OF YOU THAT JESUS MADE.

THIS HABIT, MADE BY A BROTHER OF YOURS WHOM YOU NEVER imagined knowing, IS GOD'S gift-WRAPPING OF YOU, HIS GIFT TO HIMSELF THIS DAY THAT HE HAS MADE. IT IS HIS SHENANIGANS; YOU HAVE ONLY BEEN HOLY FOOLISH ENOUGH TO GO ALONG, TO BE FOUND, AND HERE YOU ARE.

WHEN DID HE CHOOSE YOU? AND WHERE? ...DID HE FIND YOU IN THE DARKNESSES LIKE TOMBS THAT YOU THOUGHT ONLY YOU KNEW ABOUT, BUT THAT HE WAS NOT AFRAID TO ENTER WITH YOU? DID HE FIND YOU IN QUIET MOMENTS AND WIND, IN A WELCOMING VOICE AT THE END OF A PHONE LINE, IN PEOPLE WHO ASK NOTHING OF YOU BUT THAT YOU BE YOURSELF?

HOWEVER AND WHEREVER AND WHENEVER, HERE YOU ARE, BROTHER MARIA LAZARUS, WITH THE SURE CONVICTION THAT IT WAS 'NOT YOU WHO CHOSE ME BUT I WHO CHOSE YOU,' AND IF YOU LOOK AROUND THIS ROOM THIS MORNING OR AROUND THE ALTAR LATER, YOU WILL FINALLY SEE THE FACE BEHIND THE VOICE.

Our friend Sr Rachel Dietz, OSB, visited for three days. Sr Rachel is a nun of St Scholastica Monastery, Fort Smith, AR, and has worked closely with the monks of Ava for the past 15 years. Sr Rachel currently performs the service of psychological assessment of our candidates. During this visit, Sr Rachel conducted a workshop with the new novice and the two postulants. The theme of the workshop was “the desert experience” and the integration into it of the assets and liabilities we bring to it from our family of origin and other pre-monastic experiences. In June, Sr Rachel marks her 50th jubilee of solemn monastic vows. In anticipation, we celebrated this wonderful event in the life of our friend with a special evening meal the night before her departure.

For the past two years or so we have been in touch David Haenke, the manager of Alford Forest, Inc., in nearby Brixey, MO. After patience discernment and consideration on the part of the monastic community, we have decided to invite David to collaborate with us in the management of our extensive forestland. David received his own forestry training at Pioneer Forest, the largest privately owned forest in the state of Missouri, and truly a pioneer for over 50 years in the field of sustainable, environmentally sound forestry. At this stage in our relationship, we are still working out how the collaboration with David will shape up. For now, he is helping us make GPS maps of our property, which will help us be more accurate in defining our boundaries. With David, we will eventually work out a short-term and long-term forest management plan for Assumption Abbey Forest, a plan that will involve the monks, and maybe the guests, in much of the work involved.

The reception of a new novice was followed almost immediately by the decision of one of his fellow postulants to terminate his engagement with us. While it is always disappointing to see a man depart, nevertheless we are consoled by the assurance that he and we both made a wholehearted attempt “to make it work,” and that the discernment to terminate was honest and right. At the end of the month, another postulant returned to his home. He will be away for a period of from two to six months in order to evaluate his five-month experience in the monastery and to decide whether or not he will resume his formation here at Ava.

We had the joy of Fr Richard’s presence with us in the monastery from the 20th till the 24th of May. Fr Richard is doing well, or at least he continues stable. His dispositions of humility, patience, and humor not only make it easy to care for him but also deeply edify us and endear us to him more and more. Fr Richard, in his weakened condition, is an icon of the mature and transparent monk.

On May 21 Fr Mark went to Cuba, MO, to speak to a gathering of interested lay folk about the Abbey and about Cistercian spirituality. The day was held at Holy Cross Church, Cuba, and

attended by 30 or 40 people. A first morning conference was followed by Mass in the parish Church. Lunch followed Mass, and then there was a second conference with time for questions. As we hear so often, so it was confirmed at this well-organized event: there is genuine hunger among the People of God for a deeper spirituality, a spirituality that the monastic charism is in a position to offer.

The month of May ended with the Solemnity of the Body and Blood of the Lord. After Mass, we conducted a simple procession that made its way from the church, through the cloister garden, along the infirmary corridor, under the covered walk-ways of the outdoor cloister, and then back to the church. Exposition and Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament was held throughout the day until Compline. In his homily at Mass, Fr Mark said,

THE EUCHARISTIC BREAD AND THE EUCHARISTIC WINE ARE THE BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST; THEY ARE HIS LOVE, HIS GIFT OF HIMSELF, HIS ETERNITY, HIS GLORY, HIS LIFE WITH THE FATHER, HIS CALL TO US AND HIS COMPANIONSHIP ON THE WAY, TOTALLY COMPLETE AND WITHOUT ANY REDUCTION. IN HIS OWN HOMILY FOR TODAY'S SOLEMNITY, THE BISHOP OF ROME, BENEDICT XVI SAID, "YOU CANNOT 'EAT' THE RISEN ONE, PRESENT IN THE FORM OF BREAD, LIKE A SIMPLE PIECE OF BREAD. TO EAT THIS BREAD IS TO COMMUNICATE, IT IS TO ENTER INTO COMMUNION WITH THE PERSON OF THE LIVING LORD. THIS COMMUNION, THIS ACT OF 'EATING,' TRULY REPRESENTS AN ENCOUNTER BETWEEN TWO PEOPLE; IT MEANS ALLOWING ONESELF TO BE PENETRATED BY THE LIFE OF THE ONE WHO IS LORD." RIGHTLY DID ST AUGUSTINE SAY, "NO ONE EATS THIS FLESH WITHOUT FIRST ADORING IT."

Fr Mark, Abbot