

Dear Friends and Visitors

Liturgically, May was a continuation of the Easter mystery that began with the Triduum in April. Our fine Ozarks springs contributed to the splendor of the season by calling from the rocky ground, reliably, an array of wildflowers that even now as May come to an end continue to succeed one another and to dazzle and delight in their colors and shape, and even behavior (the "bashful nettle" whose leaves, when stroked, will contract). On Saturdays, our church decorator gathers flowers from the woods and roadsides for colorful and fragrant arrangements in the Church for the Sunday liturgy.

On May 1, our novice Br Lazarus completed the first year of his two year novitiate. In the cycle of guided reading and study that constitutes one part of his formation, Br Lazarus is presently studying the Rule of St Benedict with the novice director, Fr Alberic. He is also beginning to read and appreciate St Bernard, with the accompaniment of Abbot Mark. Later in the year, in preparation for his eventual monastic vows, Br Lazarus will study the theology and practice of religious life and of the monastic vows in particular.

As just said, formal study is just one component of monastic formation. It is not the most important component. As the Order's document on formation says, "It is essentially by living out the various aspects of Cistercian conversatio that a person gradually becomes ever more truly a Cistercian." The document goes on to stress that "the community is the ambience where the transforming action of the Spirit of God takes place." It is, then simply "through the daily practice of the monastic disciplines" that a man learns to become a monk. It is primarily the community and its way of life that forms new members. The community is the more effective in this endeavor the more it has "a unified spirit so that it can impart a single orientation to the upcoming generations."*&rdquo*

We conducted the first of our two annual Vocation Discernment Retreats for the year on the Memorial Day weekend. These retreats are for men between 20 and 45 years of age who want to explore more closely a possible call to our way of life. The retreat opens Thursday evening and concludes mid-morning of the following Monday. It consists of a variety of experiences, including times of solitude and silence, designed to give the participants a taste and feel for the monastic life as lived at Ava. Three men participated in the May retreat. One of them is hoping to return before the year is out for the next step in his discernment, and our, the 6-week long live-in Observership.

Following is the homily delivered by Abbot Mark during Mass on Sunday, May 28, the Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord:

The second century church father Origen asks a question that has a very modern sound to it. it is also kind of startling. in one of his homilies, Origen asks, "what does it profit if I should say that Jesus has come in that flesh alone which he received from Mary, but then not show also that he has come in this flesh of mine?"

Today, the feast of the Ascension, we contemplate the risen Jesus Jesus being taken up. As he said only yesterday in the gospel at mass -- "I came from the Father and have come into the world... now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father...&rdquo

Jesus came into the world the word of god, and the word became flesh of the Virgin Mary. Leaving, Jesus takes that flesh with him. But he also said, and we heard him say this after communion on Holy Thursday: "because I live, you will live...I am in the Father and you are in me and I am in you" (jn 14: 19,20).

Intimately linked to the Ascension of Jesus is the sending of the Holy Spirit. We celebrate that event next week, Pentecost Sunday. "I tell you the truth," says Jesus, "it is better for you that I go. for if I do not go, the advocate will not come to you. but if I go, I will send hiim to you" (jn 16: 7)

It is the Holy Spirit that Jesus sends from the Father that does what Origen says if it didn't happen we would be wasting our time: the Holy Spirit makes our flesh upon the earth and in the history of the world the flesh of Jesus now ascended as Jesus of all times and peoples. "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my martyrs to the ends of the earth," and, we might say, to the end of human history (acts 1: 8). Jesus, the one who came down, is also the one who went up, and doing that he now fills everything. He becomes the pleroma, the utter fullness.

That he might fill everything. What this means is that, in a sense, all of creation is the flesh of Jesus, the divinized and glorified flesh. but especially so the church in each of its members. Each of us, in a measure god only knows, has been given a share of his fullness, gifts, and grace. So much of what we call vocational discernment and discovering god's will for us, is simply discovering the gift of god to us, the contribution we make to the flesh of Jesus in the world, the way we fit into the fullness that is the ascended Jesus's sway over the cosmos.

But it is hard to imagine the fullness of the ascended Jesus being divided up, a little here, a little there, as if you have to put it all together, to get a total fullness. Rather, each of us, as members of Christ and infused with his Spirit, contain and bear in our very flesh the full fullness of the ascended Jesus, and so the courteous honor and unquestioned respect we owe to each other,

and not less to ourselves.

You might have heard of what are called transhumanists. or maybe not. it don't think there are too many transhumanist here in the Ozarks. Anyway, These are people who want to take full advantage of what technology and science make possible for us. It seems that transhumanists think we can and should overcome human limits in all their forms. According to them, we will be able to extend our lifespan, augment our intelligence, perpetually increase our knowledge, and gain the ability to leave the planet.

In many ways, these goals of the future achieved through science sound like what happened to Jesus in his Ascension through the gracious spirit of God.

But transhumanists go further, or, rather, fail to go far enough. For they believe that we can and should become other than human. Human intelligence will merge with artificial intelligence to such an extent that all that is purely biological about us will be transcended and rendered obsolete. Transhumanism is the idea that new technologies are likely to change the world so much in the next century or two that our descendants will in many ways no longer be "human."

We might ask, is this an advance? Is this desirable, even granted it were possible? In any case, the Ascension of our Jesus means that, far from become other than human, or less than human, or somehow transhuman, it is precisely our humanity that in Christ ascended has finally reached its apotheosis, its perfection, its deification.

Listen to what Cyril of Alexandria said. He lived in the 4th century. the monks heard him this morning at vigils. "The Word," affirms Cyril, "has ascended as a man...a member of our race. Since he became man, it is as one of us that he sits at the right hand of God...as one who is in all respects like ourselves" (Commentary on John book 9).

It was sin that had prevented us from realizing our destiny...Sin is what Paul calls living according to the futility of our minds and our darkened understanding. Sin is being alienated from the life of God because of ignorance disguised as wisdom. It is the old self – the old man – corrupted by deceitful desires. You can say that the men of Shinar in the book of genesis who built the tower of Babel were the transhumanists of prehistory. with the aid of their technology alone, admirable in itself but the product of their darkened minds, they set to work to make a name for themselves. It is the old story of humans wanting to control our own destiny. But this is failing to understand that our destiny is the gift of the same gratuitous act that resulted in our being here in the first place. it is grace, and not human achievement. Human achievement alone can never be more, and is often less than, the humanity behind it. The Jesus's Ascension

provides the right perspective for us, though a humble one: for it is not we who make a name for ourselves, but God who gives us a new name along with a divinized humanity.

The Ascension gives us the hope, because actually realized in the one man, Jesus, of the new humanity, after the mind of God, created in holiness and in truth. This is what Origen meant by Jesus coming to be incarnate in my flesh.

Before his passion, Jesus said, "a little while you will not see me, and again a little while and you will see me." this sounds like advanced particle theory, if not like Houdini. Jesus is an early Einstein. Matter is there, and is not there, and is there again. our vision is just too slow to catch the movements. Even a camera's shutter is too slow. "A little while and again a little while, because I go to the Father."

"I have come as light into the world." Nothing in our world is faster than light. But the light that comes from the Father as light of the world is faster even than that in its own realm. A little while, and again a little while. It is the same little while, from his point of view, and a while only from our point of view. It is we who are slow to believe, and what vision is in the quantum cosmos, that belief is in the realm of the ascended one.

We'll never touch, said a poet, the empty space inside

the center of an atom, settle on

a singularity, or stand astride

event horizons – there, but really gone;

no commonsense can comprehend extremes

in mass, velocity and time.

***&hellip***

***&hellip***

but I can hold what numbers can't depict

***&hellip***

a sum that calculations can't predict:

the self who walks beside me down this path *&ndash*

no quantum formula accounts for you. (Robert W. Crawford, "The Observer," First Things no.164, 32.)

Fr Mark, Abbot