

Dear Friends and Visitors

The first day of June was Sunday. We celebrate the Ascension of the Lord on that day and in the last news, for May, 2003, there was a quotation from Fr Mark's homily at Mass on the Solemnity of the Ascension.

Near the end of that week, on June 5, Br Francis Flaherty, OCSO, professed monk of New Clairvaux Abbey, Vina, California, arrived at Ava and we were very happy to receive him. Br Francis has been a monk of Vina for over thirty years. Desiring a monastic life of even greater silence and simplicity, he felt moved to ask to come to Ava for an indefinite period of time. Br Francis' first month at Ava has been mutually positive one. He has adapted quickly and happily to our way of life in all its aspects, and the Ava community has felt itself enriched and blessed by his fine monastic spirit and good humor. We are grateful to Dom Thomas Davis, abbot of Vina, and the community there, for letting Francis come to us.

Francis, by the way, is the third monk from Vina to join Ava. The others are Br Dominic and Fr Mark, our abbot. In addition, Fr Alberic Maisog, a monk of Ava, did his priestly studies at Vina. He lived in the California community for four years, 1996 - 2000. This exchange of monks is not so much fudging on the vow of stability as it is the exercise of the primary Cistercian document, the Carta Caritatis, the Charter of Charity. In that document, Abbot Stephen Harding envisioned charity being expressed in the concrete in monasteries of the Order helping and assisting one another on all levels.

On June 8, Pentecost Sunday, Br Simin Preap made his first commitment as an Oblate of Assumption Abbey. The simple ritual took place in the Chapter Room of the monastery during the office of Terce. Br Simin pronounced his formula of oblation, expressing his desire to live "in the spirit of the monastic vows," obedience, stability, and conversion of life, for a period of one year. Then, as Br Simin knelt, Fr Abbot removed from him the cloth cincture and white scapular of a novice and clothed him with the black scapular and leather belt. Br Simin will renew his commitment two more times before finally committing himself as a permanent oblate of the Abbey.

Br Simin came to Ava from Philadelphia, but is originally from Cambodia. When he came to Ava he had lived in the US for 15 years. He completed his novitiate in January of this year. During the second year of his novitiate, it was discerned that Br Simin would be an Oblate of the Abbey rather than a professed monk of the Order.

In our Order, an Oblate is a man or woman who resides in the monastery and follows the life of

the monks in all things. Oblates can receive income, such as pensions and so forth, and can retain possession of goods, though their use of them is suspended in the spirit of the monastic way of life. Instead of vows, Oblates make a commitment to live "in the spirit" of the vows. An Oblate is not a member "of the Order," but of the monastery where he resides. Not canonical, and so not binding like vows are, nevertheless the Oblature is a serious step, and can be broken only for serious reasons. Br Simin will continue his formation in philosophy and theology in a way similar to a simply professed monk.

Addressing Br Simin, Fr Mark said,

As an oblate, you offer yourself to God and to this community. "Oblate" means "one who offers himself." An "oblature" is the act of offering. An "oblation" is the thing offered, a sacrifice, a gift, a victim. Today, you are the one making the offering, but you are also the gift that is offered, the victim. When I say you are a victim, I don't want to make you paranoid. You are not a victim to be used and abused by other people, much less by the monks of your monastery. You are a victim of the love of God who chose you before you were born, called you, personally, when you were a refugee, and who led you miraculously to the Catholic Church and to this monastery and this day. To be a victim of this love is not to suffer abuse, but rather to know true freedom, peace, boldness and security.

In the evening of Pentecost, following Vespers and meditation, we all gathered in the refectory for a simple, convivial, *gaudeamus*. We rejoiced in Br Simin's oblature earlier that day and in Br Francis' arrival a few days earlier, and we gave thanks for and bid adieu to Fr Alberic as he prepared to leave for the Philippines.

As many of you know, Fr Mark in May appointed Fr Alberic Maisog, monk of Ava, the new temporary superior of our daughter house, Our Lady of the Philippines Abbey, Guimaras, Philippines. See the Abbey News for May, 2003. Fr Alberic left Ava on June 17, spent a week or so on California visiting Vina and some relatives, and finally arrived in the Philippines on June 27.

On June 9, Fr Mark once again left Ava, this time for two weeks. He attended the annual "Western Superiors Meeting," June 9 - 14, in Santa Barbara, CA, and then went to Fort Smith, AR, to give the retreat to the Benedictine sisters of St Scholastic Monastery, June 15 - 21.

The "Western Superiors Meeting" refers to the informal weeklong get-together of the superiors of the nine Cistercian (OCSO) monasteries "west of the Mississippi." These include Gail (Mississippi), Brendan (New Melleray), Mark (Ava), Joseph (Snowmass), Casimir (Holy

Trinity), Miriam (Santa Rita), Thomas (Vina), and Kathy (Redwoods), and Peter (Guadalupe). The purpose of the meeting is to allow each superior frankly to talk to other superiors about their ministry, and to get feedback and support. The format of the meeting is straightforward enough. There are two working sessions each day, one in the morning nine to noon and one in the afternoon from three to 5:30. Each of these sessions is devoted to a single participant. First, the abbot or abbess whose turn it is makes a presentation. The presentation usually has three parts: something about the community in general, something about particular individuals, pastoral challenges and issues facing the community at this time, and something about the superior himself. Then, the others can ask questions, make suggestions, and so forth. It is an extremely rich experience of Jesus' healing and wisdom among us. There is good humor, and deeper friendships are formed and consolidated.

On Sunday, June 30, Fr Mark gave a report to the Ava community about the Santa Barbara meeting. As part of the report, he offered the following reflections on "the future of monastic life."

Where do I put my hope? In God? I am not sure. What I mean is, the existence neither of monastic life, much less of Assumption Abbey, Ava, is essential to God's bringing his plan of salvation to fulfillment. To put my hope in God would to presume it was.

On the other hand, God has inspired the Cistercian charism in the church. The Cistercian charism is a gift of the spirit. If I put my hopes for our future in God, it is in this sense. I put my hope in the Holy Spirit working in the soundness of Benedictine-Cistercian spirituality.

But I think of hope going the other way. We do not need hope, but the world at large does, and the Church, too. I like to think that we monks, and monasteries, are not so much in need of hope, but sources of hope that others need. Instead of seeing hope as a matter of "our survival," we can see our presence as hope for a shattered world.

Ours is a very focused way of living the Gospel. Especially today, when people are so lost and hate themselves so much, a spirituality like ours that trusts and honors human nature, human experience, and human relationships as the place where we find, know and love the truth is, perhaps, the way God will save the world, or at least a lot of people in it.

I am reading an article by Stanley Hauerwas. He quotes another author who says, for Christians, "the desire to create an alternative culture and alternative structures is unavoidable." Hauerwas adds, "for faith to be the Christian faith, it must be embodied in the practices of a community that will inexorably find itself in tension with the world." (Stanley Hauerwas,

""How Risky is The Risk of Education,"" *Communio* Spring 2003, 77-94, 87; quoting Luigi Giussani, *The Risk of Education: Discovering Our Ultimate Destiny*, trans, Rosanna Frongia, New York, 2001, 117.) I believe a monastic community is, or can be, this alternative culture and community, and is, or should be, in tension with the world, and so the world's hope.

If the values of stability and enclosure are still affirmed for professed Cistercians, nevertheless at this time in our history the Cistercian grace itself has clearly gone over the wall. It is being claimed by lay people, men and women, Catholic and non-Catholic, and even by other religious. I think we need to look at this phenomenon and be even more receptive of it than we already are.

I can imagine the monastery and the monastic life as a center of human and spiritual formation; the monastery as a school that people would enroll in not for life, but for a time. In church our choir stalls are almost always two thirds empty, while the guests are scattered in their distant pews. I can see the guests and the monks praying the *Opus Dei* more obviously as one. I can see small groups of university students living with us as part of a course in religion or sociology or western civilization. Undoubtedly, there would be not a few of our Benedictine brothers in this country who would benefit from a simpler, more contemplative way of living the Rule who both have in common.

On Tuesday, June 24, the Solemnity of St John the Baptist, Br Boniface, our cook and also our forester, was injured when a tree he had just cut fell on him. He was able to drive back to the monastery, but his condition warranted his transport by helicopter to St John's Hospital in Springfield. Happily, his injuries were, as one nurse said, obviously conscious of HIPPA watching over her shoulder, ""nothing that can't be fixed."" Boni returned home June 30 and is doing well. He sustained rib fractures and a fractured clavicle, as well as an injured vertebra. He can walk fine, wearing a torso brace, and will be back in the kitchen within a few weeks.

Having our cook suddenly taken from us resulted in our contacting a neighbor who does part time catering. She has been happy to prepare in her kitchen each day simple monk-like meals and deliver them warm to our kitchen just before the noon meal. This has proved a good experience from many points of view.

Summer is here, but the weather stays pretty cool. The woods, though, and the roadsides are spectacular, with full and thriving trees and abundant wildflowers. The ticks and the chiggers we will acknowledge, too, for they are dear to the Creator, if to no one else.

Fr Mark, Abbot

