

Dear Friends and Visitors

As many of our visitors know by know, Fr Basil Pennington, OCSO, died on Friday, June 3. Fr Basil had sustained serious internal injuries in an automobile accident in March and died from complications due to these injuries. That Friday was the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart this year, and many who knew Fr Basil remarked on how fitting it was that this man of such a huge heart should die on this Feast dedicated to the compassionate and inclusive love of Jesus.

Fr Basil holds a special place in the history of Assumption Abbey, Ava. In the 1980's Fr Basil spent several years at the Abbey, during its transition from the manufacture of concrete blocks to its present fruitcake industry. Later, from February 2000 until his election as abbot of Holy Spirit Monastery, Conyers, in August that same year, Fr Basil served the community of Ava as its superior. Though this was a brief time, Fr Basil used it to advance the plans for the eventual construction of our new infirmary and cloister and, with the help of the brothers, to redesign our formation program for newcomers. In addition, Fr Basil was always a supporter of the Associates of Assumption Abbey, and was always available to teach Centering Prayer.

The monks of Ava are indebted to Fr Basil, and grateful for all he was and for all he did to make Cistercian spirituality available to an every wider audience.

While the community eased into summer – the temperatures remained mild for most of the month, though there were the dramatic thunderstorms normal for this time of year –, continuing its rhythm of psalmody, work and lectio divina, Fr Mark our Abbot headed north and east to Quebec, Canada. The Abbey of Notre-Dame-du-Lac in Oka, near Montreal, was the venue this year for the semi-annual Regional Meeting of the OCSO abbots and abbesses of the U.S. The Regional Meeting took place at Oka June 14 – 23.

There are usually three consecutive annual Regional Meetings, followed by a year with no meeting. Two meetings are held before the triennial General Chapter and one following it. This year's Meeting was the second in preparation for the next General Chapter which will be held in October of this year.

It is not usual for the us to hold our Regional Meeting outside of the US, but these are unusual times not only in the world, but also in the seemingly stable and unflappable Cistercian Order. Last year our brothers of Oka invited us to hold our meeting at their 125 year-old Abbey as a gesture of honor and as a way of bidding adieu to the buildings and to the place as the community of Oka plans to relocate to another site and a new monastery in 2007.

As it turned out, the main concerns of the US Region at this time found a living and dramatic reflection in the present experience of Oka. Oka once was home to nearly 200 monks, but now has a population of around 25, most of them in their 60's, 70's and 80's, and on novice. Like Oka, most of our 17 US monasteries – 12 of monks and 5 of nuns – have, over the years, seen a reduced number, an elevated age, and very low recruitment. These facts have repercussions on our ability to maintain buildings constructed for a much larger number, our ability to care for the sick and the elderly, and our ability to keep a viable economy on the roll. These facts raise questions about the futures of our individual communities, and about the future of the Cistercian way of life in North America. All the US superiors were in admiration at the courage and faith of the Oka community in its decision to abandon its beautiful buildings so redolent with sanctity and oozing memories and to move to construct a new, more modest monastery, at a new location.

The brothers of Oka spoke of their decision:

The project of building a new monastery has had an energizing and unifying effect on the community. Along the way, it has become obvious that the most important element is the construction of the community itself...The weight of habits and ways of doing things acquired over the years is felt in several areas...This challenge is also an invitation to vigilance, that we not lose sight of our monastic values and not invest the best of our energies in material preoccupations. The construction of a new monastery, which includes the never-ending construction of our community, promises to be a stimulating project which will require our best efforts and invite us to conversion: a double challenge for the months and years ahead.

On the Sunday following his return home from Oka, Fr Mark spoke to the community of Ava about the Regional Meeting. That Sunday happened to be a few days after the Solemnity of the Birth of St John the Baptist, June 24, and the coincidence led Fr Mark to view the Regional Meeting in the light of the events surrounding the conception and birth of the Baptist. In part, Fr Mark said,

Elizabeth, for her part, was open both to accepting the practical assistance of the younger Mary, but also to the awkward prospect of getting pregnant at an age when pregnancy can be physically dangerous and socially circumspect. She was, in addition, open to joy.

For his part, Zechariah's masculinity and even his virtue were probably thrown into question by his inability to generate offspring. Nevertheless, he was not overly self-conscious; he certainly was not morbid. Instead, he kept right on offering worship to God; he had the ability to see beyond the facts at hand. In announcing the miraculous pregnancy of Elizabeth, the angel tells him, "your prayer has been heard" (Lk 1:12). As the context suggests, this was a case of Zechariah's "seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness," and everything else being

given him besides (Matt 6:33). As Luke says of both Elizabeth and Zechariah, they “were righteous in the eyes of God, observing all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blamelessly” (1:6).

One of our US abbots said something that Elizabeth and Zechariah said in their own way. Speaking of his community, this abbot said, “Our present fragility leaves us without human security, inviting us to place our hope in God’s mercy.” I wonder if we as an Order, as a Region, as individual communities, can do that as radically and joyfully as that old gospel couple did? It is worth recalling, even then, that they had only one child.

We are happy to share these thoughts, these concerns, and these hopes with our many friends and visitors. We know you love the Cistercian way of life, and we know many of you love a particular Abbey and particular unforgettable nuns and monks. We ask you to join us in prayer that the Holy Spirit may guide us to a renewal of our charism, lead many young women and men to embrace the monastic way as the best way to live their lives, and move you to live the Cistercian values with ever greater clarity in your own particular situations.

Fr Mark, Abbot