

Dear Friends and Visitors

July has been an eventful month at the Abbey. There were several festive occasions, such as the Solemnity of St Benedict on the 11th, Independence Day on the 4th, and Fr Anthony's return on the 7th from his four month in Rome. There was an unusual and poignant memorial service on the 3rd of July for a woman none of us knew. Finally, Fr Theodore's heart surgery on the 11th with the subsequent difficult recovery, the therapy, and recuperation has set the tone for the bulk of the month.

As many know by now, Fr Theodore Koster underwent coronary bypass surgery at St John's Regional Medical Center in Springfield. The surgery went well enough, but shortly after emerging from surgery, Fr Ted went into ARDS, Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome. Ted was kept on a ventilator for the better part of a week, his respiration and heart rate monitored closely, and was kept in ICU at St John's for about 10 days. It was a stressful time for Fr Ted, and a worrisome time for us at the Abbey. Of course, one or more of us visited Ted every day.

While Ted's illness was difficult for all, it also was the occasion of a tremendous outpouring of love for Fr Ted. Friends and family came from far-flung parts of Missouri and even from out of state to be with him. They lodged in Springfield motels for days at a time. Members of the ICU staff at St John's were always gracious and helpful to all of us visitors and never failed to take the time patiently to explain the nature and progress of his illness to Fr Mark and Fr Cyprian, the abbey's infirmarian.

We believe that it was due both to the quality medical care given Ted at St John's as well as to the great love shown him by so many people that Ted recovered from ARDS much earlier than at first hoped for. At month's end, Ted was discharged from the hospital. He went to the Rehabilitation Center of a hospital in West Plains. He will spend a week there regaining his strength and recovering from the damage done by the invasion of the ventilator tube in his trachea for so many days. We look forward to having Fr Ted back in the abbey by the first week of August. Please know how touched we are for the concern many of you have shown during this difficult time.

While we are delighted and consider it an important expression of monastic hospitality to receive guests and visitors into our church for the celebration of the liturgy, still, our Abbey Church is not a parish church. We do not open our church for weddings or baptisms or funerals or the like. So it was unusual to say the least that on July 3 we held a memorial service in our little Abbey Church for a woman who had died some months earlier of cancer.

Shortly after this woman's death, her daughter contacted Fr Mark saying that her mother, in planning her death, requested that her memorial service might be conducted at Assumption Abbey. The woman was not a Catholic, and no one of us knew her. Yet as it turned out she frequently came to the Abbey for services and for prayer. She considered the Abbey a sacred place and her spiritual home.

Fr Mark suggested that a simple memorial service be conducted in the context of the regular daily Mass of the monks. The woman's family could be present and the woman's cremated remains placed near the altar. The suggestion was acceptable, and so it was realized. The remains were received with a prayer and holy water on the afternoon of July 2nd and placed in front of the altar. After the homily at Mass the following morning, Fr Mark incensed and sprinkled the urn and said a prayer from the Catholic Ritual for the Deceased. At the end of Mass, before the dismissal, a prayer and blessing for the mourning family concluded the memorial service. It whole thing, simple as it was, was a terribly satisfying and moving moment, and fittingly coincided with the Feast of Thomas the Apostle who, on the Octave Day of the first Easter, touched the Risen One and said, ""My Lord and my God!"" We consider this anomalous experience a one-time-only occurrence, and so we prize it all the more for its uniqueness.

On July 4th we held our annual Independence Day picnic. Novice Br Simin prepared the chicken for barbecuing, which Br Dominic executed to perfection. Earlier in the week Br Boniface picked several quarts of blackberries growing in the old peach orchard. Using some of these Fr Mark churned up a couple of gallons of wonderful rich ice cream. The ice cream was so good and so appreciated that he did the same thing again on the following Sunday for dinner at home.

After more than four months in Rome Fr Anthony Sloan arrived home July 7. On the following Sunday he spoke to the community about his experience as a participant in the first Monastic Formators Program. There were 24 other participants, Benedictine and Cistercian monks and nuns from Africa, Asia and Europe as well as from North America. (Another of the participants was Br Iñaki, novice master of our daughter house, Our Lady of the Philippines on Guimaras, Iloilo.) The Program consisted of a variety of courses and workshops on various monastic themes and excursions to the monastic sights of Rome and the surround area, including Norcia, Benedict's birthplace, Subiaco, and Monte Casino. As in most experiences of this kind, the most meaningful feature was the interpersonal one, the meeting of other men and women who share your values and aspirations, the cooperation, the appreciation of differences of culture and point of view. We are delighted to have Anthony back home. On his own initiative Anthony has thrown himself into the maintenance of our newly landscaped cloister garth.

The Solemnity of St Benedict is celebrated each year on July 11. In his homily at Mass on that

Day, Fr Mark said that in his Rule St Benedict keeps bringing up two themes, the first positive, the second negative.

The positive one is Christ...

Christ is the goal of the monastic journey.

Christ is the atmosphere the monk lives in...

the criterion the monk uses in making his decisions.

The monk prefers nothing to Christ,

because Christ preferred nothing to him...

The Christ Benedict loves

Is the Crucified Christ.

It is the foolishness of God

that is wiser than men.

The wisdom of the foolishness of God

is truth in the heart as well as on the lips:

no flattery,

no grudges,

bearing wrongs patiently,

loving the enemy,

and attributing to God, not to yourself,

whatever good you think you have.

The second thing Benedict hits on a lot

is negative: Do not murmur.

Murmuring is the sign of discontent.

It is the attitude of the monk who is always at odds with the flow of things.

It is the groan of the small soul and the constricted heart.

The murmuring monk has no room in his life for foolishness...

Here, murmuring can be used to a positive end.

When I find myself murmuring,

then I know I am that far from preferring

the foolishness of Christ to everything else.

Murmuring can remind me to ask God

that he be pleased to give me the help of his grace.

Then, in faith and not by reason only,

I can run, and not plod,

along the ways of God's commandments,

the senseless babble of sweet love on my lips,  
the big soul, the expanded heart.

Finally, on the weekend of July 19-21 Fr Mark participated as one of the staff in a Life Awareness Retreat in the diocese of Tulsa. The weekend, sponsored by the Tulsa Serra Club and the Vocations Office of the Diocese, was for men and women wanting to explore religious life and diocesan priesthood as possible vocations for them. A little more than twenty men and women, mostly in their early 20's, attended the retreat. Besides Fr Mark there were about ten other staff members. There were women and men religious and diocesan priests, deacons, and seminarians. It was a very positive experience, well planned and executed. Before leaving Oklahoma, Fr Mark paid a brief visit to the Benedictine monks at Clear Creek. He was informed he was the first Cistercian abbot to visit them.

With August on the horizon, we look forward to our patron feast day, August 15, the Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary. We will mark in a modest way the Golden Jubilee of monastic vows of five of our brothers. Mostly, we eagerly look forward to Fr Theodore's homecoming. We greet you in God's love>

Fr Mark, Abbot