

Dear Friends and Visitors

Our friends know that the Fourth of July is the one day of the year the monks of Assumption Abbey enjoy a day-long picnic together.

Typically, in mid-morning, some time after the Office of Terce, we load our picnic stuff, meaning the food and drink for the day, and ourselves into the vehicles and drive down Road OO to the Family Guest House across Bryant Creek. We unload under three large oak trees on the grassy hill the house is built on, get the BBQ going, pound into the ground the stakes that define the horseshoe court, pop open a can of beer or a soda, and settle in for a peaceful day together celebrating the vision of freedom and peace our country's founding myth has inspired us to believe in and pursue.

This year, at the last moment, Fr Mark put 8 C batteries in a portable CD player which he also threw into the car, taking along a CD of Mozart and one of Chopin.

The menu was typically refined. Br Simin BBQ'ed curried chicken breast, marinating since the night before. Mark made Caesar salad with plenty of garlic. Dominic contributed baked beans. A neighbor provided fresh peach cobbler. And, as in years past, the Abbot churned up ice cream with real whole cream. This year the flavor was strawberry. A friend who joined us with his young son supplied several bottled of Chimay beer, a Trappist beer from Belgium, one of the best of that country.

This year, besides our friend and his son, who is also our friend, Sr Janet joined us in our meal. Fr Cyprian and Fr Mark played a round of horse shoes, Fr Cyprian winning. We missed Fr Alberic this year. He is in the Philippines at our daughter house. And we missed Fr Anthony who is on leave of absence in Texas. Fr Anthony would always bring bottle rockets to the Fourth of July picnic. He delighted in shooting them off, , whistles and bangs in their fiery wakes which you couldn't see because of the bright blue sky of noon.

After that, July progressed pretty calmly. Not necessarily down hill, just peaceful, with a touch of the peace the world cannot give. Br Boniface continued to recover from his accident in the woods in late June. Our neighbor Gloria continued to cook for us, preparing our noon meal at home and delivering it hot at 11:30 each morning, faithfully. Br Felix, monk of New Melleray, continued with us through the month. We are grateful to him and his abbot and community. To be honest, it seemed no sacrifice to Felix at all be able to spend several month in New Melleray's daughter house, the Little Abbey in the Woods. Our fruitcake bakery continued issuing 125 Assumption Abbey fruitcakes per day, five days a week, save for holidays like the

4th and holydays like St Benedict's Day, July 11.

Last month, June, Fr Mark enjoyed a week at St Scholastica Monastery, Fort Smith, Arkansas, where he gave the sisters their retreat. In July, he visited another monastery of Benedictine women, this time Mount St Benedict in Erie, PA. This monastery, home of a large and old - 150 years - community of exceptional women, was the venue, as it is each year, of the meeting of the board of directors of AIM-USA. Fr Mark was elected to the nine-member board for a term of three years by the superiors of the US Region of the OCSO at their meeting last September.

AIM-USA is the American section of AIM International. AIM stands for Alliance for International Monasticism. AIM started in Holland in 1957. Its purpose then was fostering the implantation of Benedictine/Cistercian monasticism in what we today call third world countries. Today, AIM's primary purposes are the fostering of monastic solidarity between monasteries of the whole world, the distribution of grant monies to monasteries in the third world, the exposure of monastics to various cultures and expressions of monastic life, and the human and monastic formation of young monastics in the third world, especially of future leaders.

The present board of AIM-USA is made up of nine persons, seven Benedictine men and women and two Cistercians. The other Cistercian is Mother Gail Fitzpatrick of Our Lady of the Mississippi. In addition, the prioress of St Benedict's, Erie, participates as an ex officio member, as well as the executive director, the associate director and the secretary, all members of the Erie community.

Just one of the initiatives of AIM-USA is the US Commission for African Women. Started in 1999, its main goal is to send US Benedictine women to African monasteries of women at regular intervals for short-term formation courses. This is a strictly ""woman to woman"" initiative, benefiting Benedictine and Cistercian women in Africa, as well as the Benedictine women from the US who participate in the program.

AIM-USA does an impressive amount of work with minimal administrative costs on a remarkably modest annual budget. Monetary contributions as well as books in English and in Spanish suitable for monastic formation may be sent to

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On Friday, July 25, the community of Ava held our monthly "Sharing Process." This is an informal meeting held each month for the purpose of processing important issues facing the community, for listening to one another, and for facilitating good communication, decision-making, and mutual appreciation.

This month the topic was the "precarious" nature of our community at this time.

"Precarious" is by now almost a technical term in the OCSO monastic world, given life and definition at the General Chapters in 2002. "Precarious" communities are, in the words of the Abbot General, monasteries "of the 'technologically developed world,' where the difficulties are: high average age of members, lack of vocations and little perseverance, difficulties in filling positions of responsibility, etc." (Conference to MGM 2002). Ava is precarious in some of these ways. In other ways, particularly in the ways of holiness, goodness, fidelity, charity...Ava is strong; but the strength, clearly, is God's in Christ.

In his Chapter Talk to the community the following Sunday, July 27, Fr Abbot tried to summarize Friday's sharing. He said that the remarks made during the Sharing Process fell into two categories: inward-looking, and outward-looking. As for the second category, Fr Mark said,

The second category of remarks was outward-looking. This was the part of Friday's Sharing that, frankly, mildly astounded me. Someone recently wrote me about our current situation. He pointed out that survivors, while being realistic, also tend to run risks, accept help, and maximize opportunities. But he also pointed out that in the face of the need to move and change, there is always the undue influence in the group of fear, risk-avoidance, and inertia. Friday, I was surprised not to hear one word of fear or risk avoidance, let alone inertia. I heard openness, energy, and great willingness to move forward, even at a cost.

We talked about the climate of inclusivity, diversity, and pluralism in the Order these days. Someone even imagined a double monastery, men and women living out the Cistercian charism under the same roof. Actually, St Bridget of Sweden did that successfully many centuries ago, and she was inspired and helped by Cistercians to do it.

We talked about the impact our monastery has on lay people, and on their desire to be a part of the heritage we keep alive here. Witness, just yesterday, the comments of [a friend in Springfield] that I posted on the board. Both his appreciation for our life and its contribution to his, and his desire to help are part of a growing trend.

The phenomenon of our Associates groups was noted, not only in St Louis any more, but in Arkansas and Springfield, too. We talked about using the monastery as a place of spiritual

formation and renewal. My own thought is to approach local churches and colleges, Catholic and non-Catholic, and invite them to make a part of their curriculum a live-in monastic experience at Assumption Abbey.

Alongside the traditional Cistercian vocation of a novice headed for solemn profession, we heard one of us imagine ""permanent temporary professed"" monks and the fostering of the family brother. These would be people who would not live in the monastery the rest of their lives, but would from time to time contribute to and benefit from the stable monastic life, taking from it into their secular lives a hidden manna and a leaven for the healing of our wounded society and culture. One of my own contributions Friday was the question of our relationship with our neighbors, with the people of Douglas County. Another person I have been in touch with wrote me recently. He asked,

How has the monastic community at the abbey invited research...into ways of expressing the rule of St Benedict that has meaning to those in need today? What has the monastery done lately to increase the perception among the locals and indeed the public that it is part of the local community... to help them bring Christ's peace to others through your works?...In working with the local people you expose your own poverty, brokenness and increase interest, create a fascination in the intangible, that is, the Trappist expressions of the Rule of St Benedict.

Implementing the kinds of ideas you brought up will be challenging and also scary. We can expect to hear things like, ""it's too radical,"" ""that's contrary to tradition,"" ""it's legally and financially dangerous,"" ""we don't have the resources or the time."" These questions have to be listened to and looked at, but they can't be allowed to stop something before it starts. As someone said, ""Those who succeed fail a lot."" Someone else said, ""He who doesn't make mistakes doesn't make anything."" And as Jesus said, ""Put out into the deep"" (Luke 5).

So that is what I think I heard you saying on Friday, given back to you in my own words and through my own filter. Let us be grateful for one another's dedication to our monastery and to our way of life. Let us continue to encourage and support one another with the same openness and hope in the coming months.

Fr Mark, Abbot