

Dear Friends and Visitors

Our friend J. T. Knoll has kindly consented to our reproducing here as our offering for this installment of our News feature his reflections following his stay with us in July. We are grateful to J.T., an accomplished freelance writer living in Kansas City, to his son, and to the hummingbirds.

You will find as well a homily by Fr Mark for the 19th Sunday of Ordinary Time, August 8.

Assumption Abbey hummingbirds

By J.T. Knoll

Man is in himself a little universe: the ordering of his mind and body is as complex as the ordering of the stars. - Alan Watts

I drove to Assumption Abbey (scenic Route 14) with my son last Thursday, arriving around 2 p.m. Stopped at Lili's Cafe in Ava, Mo., for lunch with the ""in crowd"" - flowered blouses, large purses, faded overalls and seed hats - before winding the last 20 miles to the monastery.

After some reading, a nap, supper, and chanting in the chapel with the monks, I sat in the blue-gray fade of evening on the spacious front portico with my son, mesmerized by the frenetic hovering, darting and diving of hummingbirds. One of them was trying to take ownership of the feeder. He waited in a nearby shrub and attacked, my son observed, like a Star Wars X-wing fighter, all other hummers who ventured near.

Soon the night call of the insects and frogs began. The delicate needles of the pines and the flat green leaves of the oaks rustled and chanted along. Our conversation turned from hummingbirds to art and literature's ability to connect us with painful sacred truths inside us. We went on to talk about religious texts and how they too serve this purpose, whether they be Old Testament stories like the one about Job or New Testament ones like Jesus' parable about the prodigal son.

Our conversation eventually came around to the Passion. Specifically, did Christ actually rise from the dead, or is his resurrection simply a metaphor for life's sacred journey? Or both? And if the resurrection is, in fact, a reality, would it change the way we currently live our lives? Needless to say, we did not get it figured out. But we did pass together through the portal of darkness, each carrying an ember of light for the other. And that was enough.

Early Friday morning I started to take a walk down to the creek but it began to rain, so I backtracked to my room, opened the window and meditated to the rumbling of the thunder and steady melody of the rain. After a while I went to the window and looked out over the cemetery's white Cistercian crosses and saw entering the meadow from the deep green of the tree line, three whitetail deer.

Also at the abbey on retreat: Martha, a teacher from Kansas City; Ernie, a retired printer from St. Louis; Father Patrick, a priest from Springfield; and Nick, an open-faced 16-year-old from Benton, Ark., whose parents dropped him off last week and who has been helping out in the bakery with the fruitcakes and doing chores around the abbey.

Mid-morning on Friday, Brother Boniface came smiling up the hall with Nick and said mischievously, "I'm looking for Mother Superior!" I walked through the parlor to the portico where Bridget - who manages the guest house during the week - was filling the hummingbird feeder and called out, "Mother Superior, someone's looking for you. She giggled and said, "Oh that must be Boniface."

At Friday's Mass, Abbot Mark was earnestly delivering a gem of a sermon on mercy when he got a bit tongue-tied and instead of "fig poultice" started to say "pig foulitice" before he caught himself, flashed a grin and continued. Later, when he called for us to share a sign of God's peace, Brother Dominic approached me at the railing of the front pew. He first extended his index finger and, from his hip, pointed at me as if playfully drawing a gun while giving me a benevolent smile. Then as we met and embraced he whispered, "Your name is written in heaven."

After supper Friday evening, my son and I had a long talk with Father Patrick, a Nigerian parish priest who spent his youth in Rome earning a doctorate in philosophy. Said he sees his job as a priest is sometimes to cause chaos in order to bring people back from mundanity to the reality that life is deep and difficult and they need to get honest to grow spiritually.

Friday evening in my room I read this quote by Goethe: "The highest to which man can attain is wonder; and if the prime phenomenon makes him wonder, let him be content; nothing higher can it give him and nothing further should he seek for behind it; here is the limit."

I was pondering Goethe's words when my son came in from the portico and sat on my bed.

"Man, this has been a really great retreat," he said.

""That's for sure,"" I said. ""Some really wonderful and interesting people here.""

""Yeah,"" he said. ""Not to mention the hummingbirds. Those hummingbirds are amazing!""

HOMILY FOR THE 19TH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME, August 8, 2004

Hope is a virtue peculiar to Christians. The virtue of hope goes a long way to explain Christian and Christian politics; Christian economy and Christian medical ethics. I don't think you can really understand opposition to war, to abortion, to the death penalty, without taking hope into account. You can't explain the Catholic insistence on the finality of a marriage vow or a religious profession if you leave hope out of the picture.

Hope does not necessarily make things easy. Instead, it makes living in this city which is not lasting hard. The extreme case is Abraham fully intent upon the appalling act of killing his son. His son was the vessel of his hope. Abraham was prepared to kill hope for hope, Hope against hope, as Paul says in Romans.

And Sarah laughed at the apparent absurdity of what hope held out for her.

Despair – says the British poet Kathleen Raine –

Despair – we approach but never reach
That quiet place.

The suicidal leap

Invokes a mercy earth denies:

It is hope

That wakes to anguish

And will not let us sleep.

In spite of a lot of New Age jargon and insights from the Far East, there is really very little in Christianity, in the Gospel, to support a notion of contemplative repose. Hope is an agitator, unlike despair, and will not let us rest very long.

Hope is based on a promise. No, it is based on the Promiser. Jesus puts the promise this way – “Your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” But what follows from that apparently consoling and certainly firm promise? “Get rid of everything you have held dear and valuable up till now; change the direction of your heart’s affection.”

Hope is not what is seen and at hand, like a bean bag chair to plop down in with a beer, or a Zen cushion. Hope is a journey on stony ground with signposts painted in martyrs’ blood. The journey has an end, but the end is not here, even though hope contains the end as an oak in a seed

St Paul puts it well: “If our hope in Christ is for this life only, we are the most pitiable of people.” That means that Christ is the basis of hope, and it means hope’s object is not entirely coincident with our heart’s treasure. It is more; it is there, not here; and then, not now.

If Christ is the basis of our hope, then hope has to involve something like a death as well as something like a resurrection. In pain of heart hope tells us it’s ok to hang loose to what maybe even our flesh tells us we can’t live without. Hope tells us that true life is more, and that it is sure.

Hope is waiting, not resting; though hope’s end is rest.

Hope tells us that we are more than what we think we are, so even now our choices and our word have value. If a materialistic and comfort-driven culture wants to diminish us, hope rebels. I was recently in a house of religious women. There were many prints of Corita Kent on the walls. Two of them stood out. “We can only speak of hope,” said one; and “Hope is remembrance of the future,” said the other.

A biblical theologian says of hope, “It is concrete confidence in the future, rooted in God’s promise of futures of well-being that are beyond the present condition of the world and that cannot in any credible way be extrapolated from the present.”

The future is assured, not because of any claim we or the earth have, but only because the Promiser is reliable and will act.

A defining mark of our culture is despair – “the suicidal leap.” It is the inability to trust in any new and good future that is not of our own fallible making. War and abortion and unscrupulous economics are just suicide in disguise. In the face of despair, our hope stands there with

dangerous and revolutionary social potential. The Eucharist we are about to celebrate is itself a revolutionary act of hope. It is remembrance of the future, the death of despair, both the repose after waiting and labor, as well as the beginning of living outside of ourselves, full yet unencumbered.

Fr Mark, Abbot