

Dear Friends and Visitors

For a week in June, from the 21st to the 29th, and extraordinary encounter took place here at Assumption Abbey. It was a timely encounter in terms of the world situation, and you could even say a prophetic one. Some would call it an event not without its potential risks. As it turned out, the encounter and event that took place here during that otherwise ordinary week in early summer has left seventeen people deeply affected and, in some ways, forever changed.

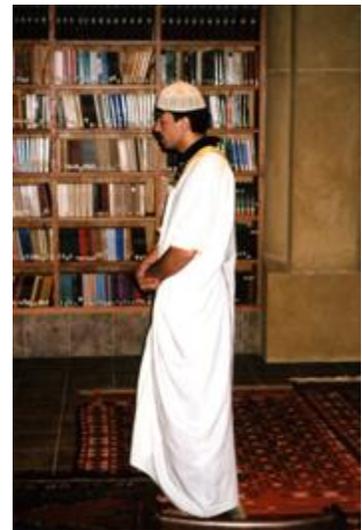


Several months earlier Br Robert Lentz, OFM, contacted Abbot Mark proposing that a group of Muslims he was friendly with in Houston, TX, come to the Abbey for an extended retreat. These were Turkish Muslims, disciples of the Turkish intellectual and Islamic scholar Fethullah Gülen. Gülen and his followers, while not calling themselves "Sufis," practice a form of Islam inspired by the Sufi tradition

represented by, among others, Mawlana Jalaladdin Rumi. It is an Islam of the heart, a contemplative form of Islam emphasizing interiority, prayer, love, peace and devotion. As Gülen says,

"Sufism is the path followed by an individual who, having been able to free himself or herself from human vices and weaknesses in order to acquire angelic qualities and conduct pleasing to God, lives in accordance with the requirement of God's knowledge and love, and in the resulting spiritual delight that ensues."

Any Cistercian would feel right at home with that, recognizing, even, echoes of St Bernard. In addition, Gülen and his followers are convinced of the value and necessity of Muslims engaging in interfaith and intercultural dialogue. Br Robert wanted his "contemplative Muslim" friends to meet "contemplative Christians." He thought that Assumption Abbey would be an ideal venue of that meeting, and that the monks of Assumption Abbey, if not ideal, at least authentic examples of "Christians who pray."



The monks of Ava, none of whom had ever met a Muslim nor known much about Islam, were nevertheless immediately receptive to Br Robert's proposal. In response to the Muslims' request that a space be provided them to serve as a "mosque," the monks of Ava offered the

monastery's Chapter Room, a space which, after the church, is the most sacred in the monastery. It was agreed that the Muslims should feel at home in their "mosque," located in the monastic enclosure, not only for their five daily periods of prayer, but also at any other time during the day and night.

Seven young Turkish men along with Br Robert arrived on June 21, after an overnight drive from Houston. The youngest of the men was fourteen, the oldest were in their thirties. The guest house of the monastery was reserved for them for the entire week.



On that first evening an initial meeting between our Muslim guests and the monks of Ava took place, an opportunity for each to introduce himself to the others. In spite of the many levels of contrast and strangeness – Turkish and American, monk and lay, Christian and Muslim, youth and age – there was an

immediate response on the part of all of good will, respect, and acceptance, a response that by the end of the week blossomed into profound love and friendship.

During the week of living together, there were no theological or theoretical religious discussions at all. Instead, there was a sustained and respectful sharing of prayer and presence. The Muslims spread their prayer rugs on the tile floor of the chapter room and set up placards with Arabic calligraphy. There they met five times each day, beginning at 5:00 a.m. and ending at 10: p.m. One of them, Mustafa, was the iman, or prayer leader. With deep concentration and in an enchanting voice he would lead the chanted prayer, based on the Holy Qur'an. Always, there was at least one monk present, kneeling or sitting on the prayer rug, praying in his own Christian way, or simply letting the beauty and mystery of the chant wash over him. As well, the Muslim guests participated faithfully at the seven prayer times of the Christian monks in the monastic church.

In addition, on three occasions Muslims and monks met together to listen to and silently reflect upon texts from one another's tradition. Each would simply read a text, whether from the Bible or from the Qur'an, from St Bernard or from Rumi, from Hafiz or from Merton, with a period of silence between each reading. No discussion took place, merely deep listening.



Finally, our Muslim guests took over the monastic kitchen three days running. They prepared

magnificent Turkish meals which we all enjoyed together in the monastic refectory.

One afternoon during the week of encounter, Br Robert and the Muslims spent visited Fr Leon and the Sisters at nearby Nazareth Hermitage. This was another profound moment of intimate sharing, due largely to the candor, simplicity and authenticity of both the Muslims and the contemplative Christian women. On the final day of the retreat, monks and Muslims met for one last time to reflect together on what the experience of the preceding week meant to each one. There was an exchange of gifts, the Muslims presenting the monks scrolls with Qur'anic verses about peace in Arabic calligraphy, and the monks presenting the each Muslim a medallion with on one side an image of St Benedict, abbot, and on the other the simple word, "Peace." The tears and the smiles and the warm embraces that marked this final meeting underscored the deep effect the experience had on everyone. Ava's Br Francis wrote a poem expressing what the encounter meant to him. His words undoubtedly speak for all, Muslim and monk alike:

I know we shall meet again,  
And when we do our love will be renewed.

We became so close in a oneness of love that was palpable.

Our togetherness sprang from the heart and tears burst forth in joy.

May Allah be praised...

The Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful. Amen.



Earlier in June Fr Mark was in Nicaragua. He spent a week at the Cistercian monastery of Our Lady of Peace near Juigalpa, a three hours drive from Managua. Our Lady of Peace is a monastery of Cistercian nuns founded about seven years ago from Hinojo, Argentina. There are seven professed nuns, all foundresses from Hinojo, and four postulants, young

"Nica" women. The monastic buildings are quite lovely in a strikingly remote and austere setting of sharply rising hills. Fr Mark delivered nine conferences on the theme "eternal life in the Gospel of John."

On a Saturday in early July Fr Mark was in St Louis attending the monthly meeting of the

Associates of Assumption Abbey. Fr Mark was again absent for nearly two weeks in July. He attended the annual "Western Superiors Meeting" in Montecito, and then visited his parents in Carmichael. The "western superiors" are the abbots and abbesses of the nine Cistercian monasteries west of the Mississippi River. These include, moving west, Our Lady of the Mississippi near Dubuque, New Melleray, also in Iowa, Assumption Abbey, Ava, Santa Rita in Arizona, Snowmass in Colorado, Holy Trinity in Utah, Guadalupe in Oregon, and finally Vina and Redwoods in California. The meeting, as it has developed, is a sort of group spiritual direction. There is not agenda and there are no decisions to be made. Rather, it is a time for the participants to open their hearts to their peers, to talk about such things as their own spiritual life, their health, the challenges and rewards of their ministry as abbot or abbess, and the needs of their communities and of the individuals in them. There is frank exchange, wise counsel, and lots of good humor. This year a new member was welcomed, Mother Nettie Gamble of Our Lady of the Mississippi in Iowa, who has succeeded Mother Gail Fitzpatrick as abbess there.

Fr Mark, Abbot

