

Dear Friends and Visitors

August was a special month for Assumption Abbey.

""Well,"" you might wonder, ""isn't that what any monastery is for...to live the monastic life? What else would you expect?""

First, August is the month of the patronal feast day of the entire Cistercian Order, and of Assumption Abbey in particular, the Assumption of Our Lady into Heaven, August 15. This year, as in past years, a number of the Associates of Assumption Abbey were with us for a few days of retreat. They met one afternoon with Br Tobias and Fr Mark, and participated in the Eucharist on the 15th.

Second, August 20 is the Solemnity of St Bernard. Bernard was of the second generation of Citeaux. Without him, it is doubtful that the Cistercian reform would have survived into the 13th century, let alone into the 21st. Most important, Bernard articulated the spirituality of the reform. Cistercian spirituality is simply the experience of transforming grace doing its job in fully human persons. It is grace making human beings into fully human and fully divinized persons.

Third, it was a year ago, August of 2000, that Fr Mark began his ministry as superior of Assumption Abbey.

Finally, Br Ronald Fogarty was with us from August 6 to August 18. Br Ronnie is a Marist Brother from Australia. For thirty years or more, Ronnie has been working with dioceses and religious communities throughout the English-speaking world. His particular mission is to open up to bishops, formators, and individual religious and priests the importance, the theory, and the practice of achieving emotional literacy and psychological maturity.

Ronnie has been coming to Assumption Abbey for nearly ten years. During his two-week visit, we adjust our work schedule to accommodate Ronnie's material. Typically, this year we reduced our work from 5 hours per day to 2.5 hours. That allowed us to benefit from two conferences by Br Ronnie each day, leaving time for private study and preparation. Of course, Ronnie was available for private interviews, and was kind enough to meet with the Monastic Council on two occasions.

If you wanted to sum up with a single word Ronnie's theme this year, the word would be "consciousness." The Sunday following Ronnie's last conference was the 20th Sunday of Year C. The second reading at Mass was the beginning of chapter 12 of the Letter to the Hebrews. At

the time, the day after Ronnie's last conference, it was easy to interpret these verses through the lens of Br Ronald's presentations.

Hebrews talks about a "great crowd of witnesses." This cloud is made up of people who have passed from one degree of consciousness to another. They have gone from the egoism of Phase I consciousness to the self-sacrifice of Phase IV. They are people in history or in the news. They are the saints in the liturgical calendar. They are our parents, our teachers; people we have known; people who stood out because of their freedom, their lack of egoism and selfishness, their humor, playfulness and generosity. This "cloud" gives us hope, and practical example, of how we, too, can go beyond ourselves.

The "weights" and the "close-clinging sin" of the Letter to the Hebrews are the "flaw" that Ronnie used as a metaphor. Flaw, in fact, means a mistake, it means the same as sin; it means to miss the bull's eye. Sin, then, is not insurmountable, not irreversible. With practice, we can learn to get closer to the bull's eye. In any case, we can "lay aside" the "close-clinging" weight that has burdened us for all our lives.

Ronnie made it clear that we are not born with this weight. But neither do we know where it came from. So we just assume it has been "there" all along, and that there is nothing to be done about it. "The 'Flaw,'" we think, "is us." But that fatalism is just the heart of the matter. It is close-clinging. It is like the suffocating dependence of a child or friend, and like us when we are dependent on someone too much. We cannot imagine life any different. We cannot imagine ourselves without this dependency.

Ronnie's point was that we can be free of the "weight," of this flaw, even though the flaw in fact may not ever "go away." Let's name the flaw. For some, it is a crippling self-doubt, or fear of trying new things, or the certainty that everything we attempt will fail. For others, the "flaw" is our compulsion. Its symptom may be drinking too much, or harmful or uncontrolled sexuality, or severe and numbing depression.

Whatever it is, we do not have to continue to be burdened by the flaw, even though the flaw, like a fly in the summer sun, will not go away.

We get rid of it by looking to Jesus. He embraced his "flaw" – see Gethsemane, and Jesus' fear and doubt in the face of his Father's Will. He embraced the flaw, "heedless of its shame," because of the "joy that was set before him." That "joy" is a certain degree of consciousness. It is the consciousness that breathes freely, sees acutely and loves in a way that gives life to others, because it knows itself loved beyond measure.

Jesus is the man who lives on the highest levels of consciousness. With him, there is no slavery to fear and doubt. There is no slavery to needs and compulsions; in fact, no compulsions. Jesus is the luminous sky that holds the "cloud." He is our hope beyond hope that we can transcend ourselves, in spite of the "hostility" of our negative emotions and patterns. But it will mean, for most of us, going to the "point of shedding blood." Again, see Gethsemane.

From August 5th through 12 Fr Anthony Sloan attended a Spiritual Direction Intensive conducted by Sr Margaret Funk, OSB. The Workshop took place at New Melleray Abbey in Iowa. Several other Cistercians of the U.S. Region also attended. While he was in Iowa, Anthony was able to join with members of his family who gathered to honor the memory of Anthony's uncle who had recently died.

Several men interested in learning more about monastic life at Ava as a possible life choice were here for weeklong retreats. Coincidentally, the Abbey's Formation Committee has just put together a three day Monastic Vocational Discernment Retreat for men who feel drawn to the monastic life. The first Retreat will be held in the spring of 2002. In the meantime, we welcome interested men any time during the year.

In last month's news, there was a brief description of our Formation Program. Three words were used to describe the monastic journey of the young monk: conformity, identity, and internalization. Since no further comment was made about these words, it would not be surprising if they raised some questions.

In particular, the notion of conformity may be difficult for people of North America to appreciate and accept. It will be good to say a word or two about what "conformity" means to Cistercians, and here at Ava in particular.

Significantly, St Benedict, the 6th century author of the Rule for Monasteries that Cistercian monks follow, says this about the abbot of the monastery:

He must conform and adapt himself to the condition and intelligence of each brother in such a way that he suffers no loss to the flock entrusted to him, but rejoices in the growth of a good flock (Rule of Benedict, chapter 2).

So, for Benedict, among the brothers, it is the abbot who sets the example of "conformity."

Conformity is another name for evangelical conversion. When a person has a religious

conversion, he knows the conversion is authentic when his habitual thoughts and behaviors start to change. In scriptural terms, the converted/converting person begins to “put on the mind of Christ.” Ultimately, the converted person can say with St Paul, “I live now, but not I; it is Christ who lives within me.” In other words, the person who has a religious conversion begins, willingly and rightly, to conform himself to Christ. Christ is the “form” “with” (=con) whom he wants to identify his own life.

Monastic life is entirely structured to foster and aid this kind of conformity to Christ. Monks need to be autonomous, independent people. But, like all Christians, they also see the value of lending their independence to the service of interdependence. “Conformity,” in the monastic sense of the word, is precisely this “interdependence.”

In the very first stages of monastic life, the person in formation will want to do what the senior monks do. The seniors are “professionals of the Cross of Christ,” as the 12th century Cistercian Aelred of Rievaulx said. The beginner will want to learn monastic, Christ-like behavior by attempting to conform his behavior to theirs.

So, in the early stages of monastic education, a newcomer demonstrates his good will and the sincerity of his conversion by showing that he is able to live the rudiments of the monastic life; that he is able to live interdependently. He willingly participates in the monastic liturgy, cooperates in common work projects, attends community meals and meetings; he is able to follow the schedule of classes, get along with his novice director and fellow novices, and manage his free time well.

The August heat allowed the building project to move along quickly. All the columns around the cloister garth are erected. The framing of the lower level cells has been completed. The exterior masonry walls of the infirmary are practically finished. In the second week of September the roof rafters will arrive and be installed.

As always, we let our friends and visitors know that we are in need of their financial help. Please contact Fr Mark at: frmarkscott@catholic.org, or call at 417-683-6510.

Fr Mark, Abbot