

Dear Friends and Visitors

August began as July ended, with our great and tender preoccupation about the condition of our brother Theodore Koster. Fr Theodore underwent coronary bypass surgery on July 11. His recovery was difficult, but finally the hospital released him to a rehabilitation facility closer to the monastery. By August 1 our hopes were high that Theodore would be back home within a week.

In fact, however, on August 5 Fr Theodore experienced renewed respiratory problems. On the 6th, the feast of the Transfiguration, he returned to the hospital in Springfield. In the late afternoon of August 8 he breathed his last. With him were two close friends from Arkansas and their son, and Fr Mark, his abbot. As Fr Ted was dying, the four guardians stood around his bed holding hands and offered a grand prayer of thanksgiving for the life of this dedicated monk and faithful and true friend. Fr Theodore, who came to Ava in 1954, was 76 years old.

The funeral and burial were held on August 10. The turnout for these services was overwhelming. People from every economic and social level and every religious tendency, or none at all, were present to mourn, to remember, to console, to hope. All were invited, at the graveside, to put a spade-full of earth of the cowl-clad remains of Fr Theodore, and most did, with great simplicity, sobriety, in silence. A bountiful reception followed the services.

Much can and has been said about Fr Ted. The letters and notes sent by friends and relatives revealed a man with an uncanny ability to touch people by his mere simplicity, kindness, silence, and honest humor. He was an unquestioned pillar and mainstay of the Ava community. With his death, truly an era has ended. One now wonders, with a certain wide-eyed anticipation, what the new era opening up might look like.

August 15, the Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary, is the patron feast of our Abbey. As they have done in past years, so this year a number of the Associates of Assumption Abbey spent the week surrounding that feast on retreat in our guesthouse. On the feast itself, during Mass, we honored the Golden Jubilee of Monastic Profession of five of our members. These were Fr Donald, Fr Leon, Fr Robert, Br Boniface, and Fr Cyprian. After the homily each jubilarian read and signed a formula of renewal of vows. Then the abbot presented each with a walking staff, saying this as he did so:

Receive this staff.

May it remind you of your dignity as a son of God,  
and of your authority as an elder in this monastery.

May it renew your resolve to leave all to follow Christ  
so that in your life given to God alone  
people may see a living Gospel and the first fruits of the Kingdom of God.  
May this staff, finally, remind you of the constant presence of the God who made you,  
redeems you and refashions you,  
the God who is your light and your courage  
as you pass through this valley of the shadow of death.

In his homily Fr Mark quoted Thomas Merton who said, "Christ lives in us if we love one another. And our love for one another means involvement in one another's history." Fr Mark concluded by saying,

I would like to see this Feast of the Assumption, and this honoring of our seniors, as the beginning of a new way of approaching contemplation: contemplation as the fruit of grace ripening and enjoyed on the tree of love that is acted out in historical and personal involvement. Is this not, after all, what the Eucharist is: the prolongation of the concrete history of One Man who showed the depth of his love by washing historical dust from the feet of real men and women?

Another feature of our Assumption celebration was the blessing and installation of a new icon for our new infirmary chapel. The icon, Our Lady of Tenderness, was written by Sr Robert Cusak, OSF, of St Louis. The icon was blessed at 1st Vespers of the Solemnity and stayed in the Abbey church until 2nd Vespers. At that office the monks and the several guests carried the icon in procession to the intimate infirmary chapel as we sang the Song of Mary. The icon was hung, and we recited together a prayer consecrating ourselves, our abbey, our friends and associates, and the entire Cistercian Order to Mary the Mother of God. We are grateful to Sr Robert for the care and love she put into her exquisite work, and to the woman who wanted to be the patron and benefactor for the project.

August 20 we celebrated the Solemnity of our Father St Bernard. The Gospel at Mass was the parable about salt and light, Matthew 5:13-16. In his homily the abbot said,

This monastery is the custodian of the light of the Cistercian heritage. We must not keep it hidden. The thing is, though, you put a lamp on a lamp stand and the light goes everywhere! You cannot control its direction or effect, except only in a self-deceiving way, by blindfolding yourself or closing your eyes. We need to risk putting our light on the stand while keeping our eyes open. We need to risk things seeming to get out of control, knowing that what is really happening is that the heritage is taking on a different modality from the one we are used to and

comfortable with.

In anticipation of the First Anniversary of 9/11, the community has reflected on appropriate ways to commemorate the events of that day. The Liturgy Committee—Fr Alberic, Br Fidel, and Fr Anthony, with the abbot—used the community's suggestions to fashion a Communal Commemoration of 9/11. Our next Assumption Abbey News will tell about this commemoration.

The month of August ended with Labor Day Weekend. We chose that weekend to host a "Come and See" retreat. The retreat was designed for men who want to know more about Cistercian life by experiencing something of our life first hand. Five men, ages 20 to 53, participated in the retreat. During the retreat, lasting from Friday evening, August 30, to mid-morning September 2, the participants joined the monks in choir for the liturgy, and took their main meal in the monastic refectory. They learned about monastic history and about the Cistercian charism, and were introduced to the monastic practice of lectio divina by actually doing lectio with the monks in the Chapter Room after the Office of Vigils. Perhaps the most important features of the "Come and See" were the meetings of the participants, both as a group and individually, with several of the monks.

On September 3, Fr Mark departs for Rome, Italy, to take part in the Order's triennial General Chapter. The Chapter lasts until September 24. Mark will be home, God willing, on October 3. We ask our visitors and friends to pray for him and for all the abbesses and abbots of the Order gathered in Chapter.

Finally, we are making an appeal—"An Appeal from the Abbot"—for generous monetary gifts to help us settle the loan we have taken to finish our new buildings. You may send your gift to

Fr Mark, Abbot