

Dear Friends and Visitors

Several of our visitors and friends responded positively to the contents of the July Newsletter. We appreciate your support, your ideas, your love for monasticism and the Cistercian expression of it, and your esteem, in particular, for Assumption Abbey.

One initiative taken by Abbot Mark was to write to over twenty Benedictine Abbots in the US, extending an invitation to Benedictine (OSB) monks to enjoy a sabbatical at Assumption Abbey, or simply to join us for an extended experience of contemplative Benedictine life lived in an extremely simple manner.

In his biography of St Bernard, the Vita Prima, Bernard's friend William of St Thierry describes Clairvaux at the time of Bernard. It is as though he were describing Assumption Abbey, Ava:

The loneliness of this place, hidden among the woods and closed in by the surrounding hills...

William goes on to describe the style of life the monks lived there:

Among men whose lives are under the stabilizing influence of the rule in silence and unity of purpose, the way of life itself helps to establish an inner solitude in the depths of the heart.

We feel that we at Ava are blessed with this solitude, this silence, and the stabilizing influence of a tradition at once strong and clear, and capable of adapting itself to the needs and inspirations of young men and the Church of the 21st century.

Because we feel that way about our place and about our way of life, we hosted once again our Labor Day Come and See Vocational Discernment Retreat, August 28 - September 1. The retreat is open to single Roman Catholic males, ages 18-45. The goals of the retreat are three: to learn something of the theory of monastic life and spirituality; to experience first-hand how this theory is lived in practice by a real monastic community; and to get some guidance in vocational discernment.

This time, five men participated. The retreat began Thursday afternoon with Br Francis welcoming the men as they arrived. After Compline, prayed with the monks in choir, Br Tobias gave the participants an overview of the days to come and facilitated their talking to one another about what they were looking for on this retreat.

On the following days, the men had a variety of experiences. They attended the entire Opus Dei

in choir with the monks. They engaged in conferences on vocational discernment and monastic spirituality. They were introduced to the theory and practice of lectio divina, including doing lectio in the Chapter Room after Vigils with the abbot and other monks. They contributed to our manual labor, listened to and asked questions of several monks who told their own vocational stories, and enjoyed leisurely one-on-one walks and talks with members of the Ava community. On Sunday, the retreatants attended Chapter with the monks. After the abbot's customary spiritual talk, the monks and the retreatants introduced themselves to one another, and then the retreatants were invited to ask any questions they might have about monastic life and about things they had observed and experienced during the retreat thus far.

With all of that activity, there was, remarkably, abundant time during the retreat for the men to be by themselves, alone or as a group, to ponder, pray, and digest what they were experiencing. The retreat ended with the retreatants and the monk-staff getting together for an evaluation. The retreatants said that the retreat broke their stereotypical images of what a monk was. They referred to the many TV ads that depict monks as always silent, naive, out of touch, silly, clumsy and so forth. Instead, the retreatants discovered that monks were real people -- "humble," as they said, humus meaning earthly, real, plain and true. They experienced peace. One of the men said so beautifully how he saw that the men of Ava "draw life off of one another." Once again, the words of William of St Thierry describing Clairvaux come to mind: People who come there for the first time are struck by an awareness that God dwells there, for the simplicity and unpretentiousness of the buildings in the quiet valley betrays the lowly and simple life led by the monks for the sake of Christ.

The five men who participated on the retreat were precious in themselves. They gave themselves wholeheartedly to the experience, as each was able, with respect for one another and for the monastic home they had come to share. It was, by all accounts, a mutually enriching experience.

Earlier in August we celebrated our patronal feast, the Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary into Heaven. As always, several of our Associates from St Louis were with us for their annual retreat during the week of the Solemnity. In his homily for the Feast, Fr Mark commented on the "great sign" depicted in the first reading for the Mass of August 15 from the Book of Revelation:

In this sign, we don't have to think of two individuals, one, the male Child who was taken up to God, the other, the Woman, Its Mother, who fled into the desert. The Child and the Woman are not two Persons; they represent, rather, the situation of each Christian, and the Church at large, in the present age, the long intermezzo in the symphonic drama of God. As Jesus said in

his inimitable brevity, "On earth, you will have tribulation; in heaven, I have overcome."
These are simultaneous concurrent facts. So Jesus' final word, "Be of good cheer!" (Jn 16:33)
The Assumption did not have to wait until Mary died to happen. Already at the Visitation Mary
has been "assumed:" "God my Savior," she says, "has cast the mighty from their thrones
and lifted up the lowly." Assumption is an act of a gracious God on behalf of those who have
not the power -- nor even the bootstraps -- to pull themselves up. It is not for nothing that our
abbey is called Assumption Abbey. Assumption is God's victory, not our achievement: and it
happens where there is nothing left but only Yes!

Entering September, the air has turned that delicious autumn blend of cool-warm. There is
something about the light, and one can already almost smell the snow and imagine the woods
mystically bare and icy.

Fr Mark, Abbot