

Dear Friends and Visitors

August 2 is, in the particular liturgical calendar of the Order of Friars Minor (Franciscans), the Solemnity of Our Lady of the Angels. It was on this date, according to the testimony of St Bonaventure, that St Francis of Assisi, in the small chapel of Our Lady of the Angels, initiated the Order that was eventually to bear his name.

It was understandable, then, that August 2 should have been chosen as the official commencement of Our Lady of the Angels Friary, Ava. OLA is an inter-provincial Franciscan prayer fraternity, the first of its kind outside of Europe. The prayer fraternity is established in buildings and on property owned by Assumption Abbey and leased to the friars for this particular purpose. In the afternoon of that day, the monks of the Abbey joined the four friars who comprise the prayer fraternity in the chapel of their newly remodeled house to bless with prayer and praise this creative endeavor. The friars then gave the monks a tour of their house and outbuildings. The fraternal afternoon ended with conversation around sumptuous Franciscan baked goods and sparkling punch. The monks of the Abbey are privilege to be part of this creative and serious endeavor to renew and even revive the contemplative and solitary dimensions of the Franciscan charism.

We enjoyed the presence during August of Jon A., a recent graduate of Evangel University, Springfield. Jon, who is also in the Army reserves, lived in the monastery and took part in all aspects of the monastic life as it unfolds “behind the walls” day by day. Jon, a dedicated member of the Assemblies of God, approached our Catholic and monastic ways with the greatest respect and openness, and with a good dose of frank curiosity. He was an exemplary live-in guest and we look forward to his return when his other duties should allow that.

At the time of Jon’s sojourn with us, we had a pre-arranged visit from a journalism student from Columbia, Mo, Jacob H. Jacob had chosen to specialize in religious journalism, and, for one reason or another, had decided to do a special investigative report on monasticism as it related to contemporary North American culture.

Jacob spent a day and a half at the monastery. He was given free access to all parts of the Abbey, which he took advantage of in the most professional way. He interviewed several of the brothers and observed with the eye of a hawk everything that transpired. Like Jon A., Jacob also was not Catholic, and it seemed that in many ways this lack of familiarity with the Catholic scene allowed his observations and questions be more acute and to the point that they otherwise might have been. Jacob admitted that he was surprised to find the monks so ordinary, plain and unremarkable. He had expected, he said, that in the presence of spiritual

men there would be an unmistakable awe, something fascinating and attractive. Instead, he found only Fr Robert, Fr Donald, Br Thomas, Br Boni, Fr Mark, Br Francis, and so on. In reply to Jacob, it was suggested that maybe his notion of “a spiritual man” needs revision. On the other hand, it can honestly be said that if monks were indeed “holy” already, they probably would no longer be in a monastery. Monks are people who want to be holy, but who also know their weaknesses and limitations. They choose the monastic way of life as the way best to channel their energies and desires toward the goal they hope to reach. Without that channel, they would be “all over the place!”

Early in August we received the surprising news that George Levinkas had died. George, from St Louis, was one of the most dedicated Associates of Assumption Abbey and friends of the monastery. His death from cancer came as an unexpected shock to all but his closest intimates, for George never spoke of having health problems. On the contrary, he always presented himself as trim and agile and full of well-being. George will be missed not only by his family, but also by Assumption Abbey.

On August 15 the Abbey celebrated its patronal feast, the Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary into Heaven. In his homily at Mass the day, Abbot Mark said,

There is a legend from the early days of the Abbey’s foundation. For a long time, supplies were brought down to the Abbey from the motherhouse in Iowa. Trucks were loaded up there and unloaded down here in the Ozarks. Once, when the monks opened the back doors of another truck of supplies newly arrived, out popped Br Isidore. Br Isidore, a novice of the motherhouse, had been helping to load the truck, and then decided at the end to load himself. He was a stowaway.

In many ways, each of us is a stowaway here in Douglas County. Indeed, Assumption Abbey itself is like that truck. We stowed away in her hope we will surely be taken directly into the embrace of a waiting God.

The mystery of the Assumption is the mystery of the contemplative. It’s an open door from this world to the other world. It allows the two worlds to intermingle and to be contemporaneously . Mary herself is the model of the contemplative – and especially of the contemplative of this little abbey in her honor, its monk members, its Associates, its guests and friends.

St Aelred speaks of Mary’s great affliction when her Son withdrew his bodily presence from her, the presence that had been the cause of her total joy. No one, says Aelred, more than she felt the sufferings of this life, had cried more, had more lamented the exile of flesh upon the earth. I believe this sense of absence, of plainness, even of failure and futility, marks any monk worthy of the name.

Aelred goes on to say that today our Savior Jesus Christ has released Mary from the trials of this

life and has raised her to heaven. Today, Mary's joy and her desire have been filled up, so that she can say in all truth, 'I have found him whom my soul loves, I have held him and will not let him go.'

This is our destiny, too. And, in fact, our very quotidian life is an anticipation and foretaste even of that fullness of joy and desire, even if sometimes our taste buds are dull. At the same time, the feast of the Assumption assures us that we have not here a lasting city. Monks die, and also monasteries, not to mention Associates. We just buried George Levinskas. Death is not the end of the world; it is the avenue to fruition.

In the meantime, now, and at the hour of our death, as St Aelred said, 'Our Queen, our Lady, our Mother, she who is bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh, is assumed beyond the choirs to the right hand of her son so to cover us with protection. If, then, she is for us, who can be against us?'

August 20 was another solemnity, the Feast of St Bernard. It was also the 80th birthday of Fr Robert, and the 43 birthday of Br Lazarus.

Near the end of August we were pleased that two Crosier fathers from the Dominican Republic of the Congo chose to make a week's retreat with us, taking a break from a preaching tour they were on. They were kind enough to speak to the monks one evening about the Crosiers, an Order just 100 younger than the Cistercian Order, and especially about the Congo. Coincidentally, this month's National Geographic is devoted entirely to Africa, and the lengthy article on the Congo affirms much of what our visitors told us.

Another visitor was Ron L., an Israeli who splits his time between Haifa, where he teaches philosophy at the Universal level, and Vermont, where he enjoys weeks in a more contemplative mode. Ron has visited us before and in fact some years ago spent six months living on our property as a solitary. Ron spoke to us about the symbolism in the Psalms in the rabbinic and Kabbalistic traditions of Judaism.

The month came to a close with Hurricane Katrina playing heavy handedly with New Orleans and the Gulf. This was particularly worrisome for us because our Br Lazarus is from Biloxi. After a week of waiting with no word, we finally learned in the first days of September that Br Lazarus' family is safe in their home which sustained only minor damage. We continue our prayerful solidarity with the victims.

Fr Mark, Abbot