

Dear Friends and Visitors

After a week of severe heat and a prolonged dry spell, the Ozarks were refreshed at the beginning of the month by abundant rainfall and lower temperatures. The cicada and the tree frogs and the crickets sing their summer cantatas, while the oaks and hickories and walnuts turn their darkest and richest green preparing for their annual display of autumn colors.

Our readers will know that the July Newsletter also included events of August. Our News this month, dated August, actually spills over into September, and will be devoted to a letter from Fr Mark just as he was concluding his two month sabbatical in California. At this writing, and at the time of your reading, it is already nearly mid-September, and Fr Mark has been home for two days. This second week of September will see the beginning of the biennial Visitation of the Abbey, about which you will read in the September issue. Now, for Fr Mark's letter:

Monday, 3 September, Memorial of St Gregory and Labor Day

Dear Brothers

I am at New Clairvaux Abbey, Vina, CA [this is the Abbey Fr Mark entered in 1978 and was a member of until his election at Ava in 2001], arriving here Saturday afternoon after moving out of Forest Ranch earlier that day[see newsletter for July 2007].

I should not have been surprised that, when, before leaving, I took some moments to sit on the porch of the little cabin I slept in, prayed in, and said Mass in each day, I began to weep a little. It was not that I was unhappy about leaving Forest Ranch, but rather that I was very happy and grateful for the privilege of having spent so much time there. I reviewed my activities during the several weeks I was there, the sights and sounds; the sitting on that porch each early mornings under the stars, facing the awesomely large Big Dipper balancing on top of Mount Lassen; the companionship of the animals, the presence of Bill and Dorothy and Joe Schaeffer in the little cemetery in the woods beyond the front of the house, the Presence of God in the silence; and I cried, and that felt like a good way to close the door, so to speak, on that experience.

The afternoon before, Friday, Peter Schaeffer, his wife Jenni, their two small children, and two close friends of the Schaeffer family, came to the property in Forest Ranch to bless the marble marker for Bill's grave. Pete arrived with the grave marker a little earlier than the rest, so he and I put the stone in position in the cemetery. When everyone had arrived we celebrated Mass in Bill's house, then walked to the cemetery where everyone took a turn saying a prayer and sprinkling the gravestone with water, using a sprig of rosemary from the shrubs around the house. We then prepared a fine meal of barbecued lamb, red potatoes, green beans, salad, wine and rhubarb pie with whipped cream and freshly grated nutmeg. We sat around the

dining room table reminiscing and just enjoying one another's company. This, also, was a great way to bring closure to my stay.

As you know, last week I was one of six other US Trappist superiors who were at Holy Trinity, UT, to support the community and the new abbot on the occasion of the latter's abbatial blessing. The other superiors were Damien of Gethsemani, Thomas from here, Damian of Spencer, John of Genesee, and Miri of Santa Rita.

The Utah trip consumed three days of my final week at Forest Ranch, and, frankly, I regretted a little having to leave Forest Ranch for those three days, but was glad I went. I know it meant a lot to the monks at HT that we were there. It was a fairly simple blessing ceremony, but the catered lunch afterwards in the shade of the huge trees on the lawn in front of the church balanced the spare quality of the liturgy. In the afternoon of the blessing, Fr Casimir, the outgoing abbot, offered to take us visitors to Promontory Summit, the place in the Utah desert where in 1867 (I think) the Golden Spike was pounded in the last rail and tie as the track of the Central Pacific railroad line coming from Sacramento met the track of the Union Pacific coming from Omaha. The Utah desert is magnificently beautiful, as indeed all of that are of northern Utah is. We were all impressed by the beauty of the setting the abbey is in, with the green alfalfa fields at the base of the ochre hills and all under the immense blue sky with its blindingly white clouds.

The monks here at Vina began today the second and last week of the prune harvest. I was very happy when after Mass this morning Br Pierre approached me and asked if I would help lay out and pick up fruit bins in the orchards. This is the job I did for all the harvests I worked at Vina, since the first one I participated in in 1979. It was fun to be back on the "bin carrier," getting dirty with dust and prune juice under the brilliant, hot morning sun. In addition to the prune harvest, they are also harvesting grapes. I believe the monks hire some workers to help with the grape harvest. And not only do they harvest the grapes, but they have immediately to crush the harvested grapes, too. It's a pretty busy and intense place.

I was happy to preside at Mass yesterday, Sunday, and deliver the homily [for the text of the homily, see the drop down menu "Homilies"].

[A certain member of our Advisory Committee] informed me last Saturday that he will be meeting with [a local contractor] at the Abbey this coming Sunday. They will be going over the various options for guest house improvements that have surfaced in order to come up with some idea of what each option might cost in terms of time and money.

Our biennial Visitation will begin Monday, September 10. As far as I know [Dom] Brendan [Freeman, Abbot of New Mellery, IA, and Father Immediate of Ava] and [Sister] Gail [Fitzpatrick, former Abbess of Our Lady of Mississippi, IA], will arrive around noon on the 10th and open the Visitation that evening.

Tomorrow, Tuesday, I will leave Vina for Carmichael where I will spend the rest of the week with my parents there, departing California finally Saturday morning, September 8, the Birthday of Mary. I look forward to being home with you all again. I may even drop a few tears of happiness on my arrival!

Below are some prayer requests posted on our web site.

Fr Mark, Abbot