

Dear Friends and Visitors

In a community meeting sometime in August, the idea emerged for us to articulate in a brief but clear statement what it is that Assumption Abbey has to offer people. The background of that idea:

We sometimes hold “Come and See” retreats. These retreats are for men who think that becoming a monk might be a good thing for them to do. On the retreat, we give the participants both something of the theory of monastic life, and the experience of actually living the theory in practice for a few days. These are always wonderful experiences, for the participants as well as for the monks.

The retreat always ends with an evaluation and critique of the experience, and consistently the men who made the retreat remark on how well organized the retreat was, how varied the content, how insightful and clear the presentation of monastic life was. They almost always say how touched they were by the honesty, simplicity, and dedication of the monks. All of this positive feedback certainly makes us happy that we planned a good experience. But it sometimes takes us by surprise, too. That is because we just do what we do. We are not trying “to be monks.” We just do what we do, without looking for any kind of affirmation, necessarily. We are glad that what we do speaks to people, and glad, mostly, that what we do is not an reflection of us, but of the God whom we love and who calls us and whose fidelity is much greater than our own.

Still, in reflecting a little on these “Come and See” retreats, the question arose, “just what is it that we are inviting people to come and see?”

It is not that we are in doubt about who we are as monks and what the Cistercian life is all about. After more than half a century of Cistercian monastic life at Ava and a dozen monks who persevered till a holy death took them and are now at rest in our cemetery as testimony to a solid tradition, there is little doubt about what it means to be a Cistercian monk in the Ozarks at the beginning of the 21st century.

But we are aware that in our small community of a dozen monks, there is a variety of monastic lifestyles that would be hard to find in the same proportion in other monasteries of our Order. There are, for example, professed monks and oblates; hermits and cenobites; a family brother who lives in the monastery and one who lives in the woods alone. There are monks who are priests and monks who are lay; monks who are dedicated to the choir office and others who are dedicated more to manual work.

We who live here and are part of this community understand this variety. It works, there is wide mutual comprehension and acceptance and support. There is no problem. On the contrary, “how good and how pleasant it is when brothers live in unity” that is not compromised by legitimate plurality due to temperament, formation, and a variety of gifts of nature and grace.

But we wonder if a potential newcomer to our life would find such a variety a little puzzling, if not out and out confusing. On any account, monastic life is different. Newcomers are prepared for that. But we don’t want to make things more “different” than they already are. We feel, probably based on our own experience of once being newcomers to the monastery, that men coming to the monastic life for the first time need, to use a metaphor, to hear a new song sung in unison rather than polyphony, however harmonious the blending of rhythms, descants and counterpoints.

And so the question: We invite people to come and see. But what is it we are inviting them to? We know the answer instinctively, but the newcomer does not. So, there emerged the idea to formulate in a clear and succinct way what it is we are about as monks; what we actually do to express that; and how we are going to be accountable for that to one another.

As Abbot Mark told the community, it is not a question of reinventing the monastic wheel. We have the Rule of St Benedict; we have the Constitutions of the Order; we fifty years of local tradition. Monastic life is in our blood and bones. It is merely a question trying to put all that in a form of words that can be understood by newcomers at this moment in our history, and matched by what they actually encounter and observe.

In his Chapter Talk to the monastic community on Sunday, September 7, Fr Mark proposed six elements that could contribute to such a formulation Cistercian monastic life at Ava:

1. The personal and vocational history of each of the monks.
2. The 53-year history of grace at the Abbey.
3. Our physical location: the solitude; the ecology of the woods.
4. The Desert Tradition of monasticism.
5. The Order’s documents of Renewal.
6. The Lay Cistercians (Associates of Assumption Abbey) and the interest and support of the wider Church.

One thing is clear: Assumption Abbey continues to be a place where God lives and is

experienced in life-changing ways. The monks somehow are involved in this, if only for being like the hem of Jesus' garments.

The month of September saw an arrival and a departure. The arrival was that of Fr Filomeno Cinco, OCSO. Fr Fil is a monk and abbot emeritus of our daughter house, Our Lady of the Philippines (OLP), Guimaras. When last May Fr Mark appointed Ava's Fr Alberic Maisog superior of OLP, he proposed that Fr Fil would come to the mother house in exchange. Fr Fil and Fr Alberic generously agreed to this, and after negotiating US immigration hurdles, Fil was finally granted his visa and arrived at Ava September 26.

The departure was that of Br Aidan Rachford. Br Aidan, a novice of our mother house in Iowa, was on a leave of absence at Ava for seven months to experiment with living the solitary life (another instance of the variety of monastic expressions at Ava!). During this time, he worked as an employee in our bakery. He has now returned to New Melleray to complete his novitiate in the community there.

An abrupt end to the summer's heat and humidity brought an early autumn to the Ozarks. As October matures, the woods are turning warm and flaming hues of orange, yellow, and red. You can almost smell snow on the air! We look forward in October to our biennial Visitation, conducted by our Father Immediate, Dom Brendan of New Melleray. This year, Brendan will be accompanied by Mother Gail of Our Lady of the Mississippi Abbey, Dubuque, as assistant Visitor.

Fr Mark, Abbot