

Dear Friends and Visitors

A great deal of vocation activity has marked Assumption Abbey during these late summer months. That is, several serious and promising candidates have taken further steps in their exploration of their vocation to the Cistercian monastic life as lived here at Ava.

Beginning in late July and continuing throughout the month of August, a man from the St Louis area made his observership with us. He had previously attended a Vocational Discernment Retreat here at Assumption Abbey, and subsequent to that first taste of our life returned on various occasions. These visits simply enhanced his attraction to the monastic life. After some discernment on the part of the candidate and our Vocation Committee, we welcomed this man into the embrace of the common life for a period of six weeks.

During the observership, the candidate follows the rhythm of life of the rest of the community: the *opus dei*, the work, the times for meditation and *lectio divina*. In addition, the candidate meets three times each week with a different monk each time to explore more deeply the fundamental practices and values of the monastic life. He meets with both the vocation director once each week for spiritual direction, and checks in with the abbot for a casual colloquy.

Overlapping with this candidate's departure was the arrival of another candidate, this time from the Detroit area. This second man had also been in contact with us for quite a while, and had visited two or three times. In fact, in his particular case, he lived as a guest in the monastery for a week earlier this year. His observership followed the same pattern, externally, as already described above.

I say "externally," because the experience of the observership, while very much the same for all candidates in terms of activities and content, is received and processed in highly individual ways. It is the same with mature monks. We all live the same boring life! But for each of us, over years and decades, the life means different things, takes different turns, and leads us in different ways, although always to the same destination: love replacing fear, in the light of the Trinity.

Over the Labor Day weekend in early September we conducted another Come and See Vocational Discernment Retreat. Only two of those who inquired about the retreat were actually accepted, and, as it turned out, only one of those two arrived for the retreat. (The other called at the last minute, saying complications with his employer prevented him from attending.) The retreat extended from Thursday evening till mid-morning on the following

Monday. We have conducted several of these retreats now, and feel it is very effective in providing the candidate in a short time with a good idea of what monastic life is all about, through both theoretical input and discussion, and practical experience. The man who made the retreat was not a total stranger to us. The retreat made his vocation much clearer to both him and to us.

Finally, as September ends, another man will begin his own observership. We hope that by the end of the year, there may be two or even three more men to join Br Dean as a postulant of our community.

August 15, The Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary, was, of course, the patronal feast day of our community. It was not the foundation day, though. That event is observed on the 24th of September. This year marked the 54th anniversary of the foundation of the Abbey.

Many of our friends will be surprised to learn that Br Fidel Manuel has returned to his own abbey, our daughter house, Our Lady of the Philippines, on Guimaras island in the Philippines. Br Fidel had been at Ava for six years. He came in response to a request of the abbot of Ava at the time for assistance from the daughter house. During his stay with us, Br Fidel assisted beyond expectation. He served as guest master, cantor, church decorator, assistant fruitcake baker, then fruitcake baker, assistant accountant and interior guest master. Br Fidel developed solid friendships both within and without the monastery. During the last year, it became apparent that it was time for Br Fidel to return to his own community, which he did on September 13.

In mid August the four junior monks of the Benedictine St Louis Abbey with their junior director visited us for the day. It was striking to see four young, happy, committed, and well-prepared monks from a single monastery. I believe it is unusual even for Benedictines. It certainly is unusual for Cistercians.

In the latter part of August Fr Mark was in St Louis. He spent an evening with several of the Associates of Assumption Abbey, meeting in the home of one of the couples for Mass, conversation, and a wonderful meal. The following day, he led a day devoted to the topic *lectio divina* sponsored by the very active and spiritually mature Contemplative Outreach of St Louis. The event was held at Berger Hall in the campus of the Franciscan Sisters of Mary. Nearly 120 people attended. There was a high degree of interest in the theory and practice of *lectio*.

The Abbey is currently negotiating a lease arrangement with four U.S. Provinces of the Order of Friars Minor (Franciscans). It has to do with an inter-provincial plan to establish a Franciscan

House of Prayer where a core community of four to six friars can live together a life devoted to prayer and simple work, similar to our own Cistercian life, but separate from it and in a thoroughly Franciscan way. The friars have been looking for a house a property to lease to begin their project. Through a providential set of circumstances, the Abbey and the friars came to know of one another, and the Abbey now is warmly disposed to lease our “Volchok” house and acreage to the friars for their house of prayer. We feel this collaboration will be mutually rewarding, and be a model for others of fruitful blend of spiritual traditions. We are at the stage now of working out the terms of the lease. The Friars would be able to move into the Volchok house – which they are thinking of renaming “Our Lady of the Angels” – in the early summer of 2005.

Our fruitcake production is on schedule. We are grateful for our brothers, and for our employee Joseph Reisch, for the fine and dedicated work they do to produce an excellent product.

Finally, those who live in the Ozarks viewing area may like to know that a 30 minute film on Assumption Abbey will be shown November 7 at 1:30 p.m. and again on the 8th at 10: p.m. The film is a production of Ozarks Public Television.

Fr Mark, Abbot