

Dear Friends and Visitors

The first part of September was spent in profound solidarity with our neighbors to the south in the Gulf. In fact, we were not just indirectly touched. A monk of the Abbey, Fr Anthony Menz, OCSO, who by special arrangement has served for over twenty years as a military chaplain, is currently on the chaplains' staff for the Veterans Administration Hospitals in Biloxi and Gulf Port, MS. It was over a week after Katrina made landfall that we were able to have any news about Fr Anthony. At the time the hurricane hit he was out of state, but returned immediately he was able to resume his ministry to the residents of the Biloxi campus. The Gulf Port campus sustained severe damage, and Fr Anthony's office and the Catholic chapel there were demolished.

Another of our monks is from Biloxi. The days mounted up and the silence grew more disturbing as we awaited any word of the well being of his family there. Finally, again after more than a week, and through the kindness and care of some local contacts, we learned that our brother's family was safe. Their houses sustained only minor damage. It was a special relief when brother was finally able to speak to his loved ones on the phone.

Again this year we held a Vocation Discernment Retreat on the Labor Day weekend. Three men attended, ages 49, 43, and 20. They were exceptional candidates, serious in the participation, intelligent in their questions. The retreat, extending from Thursday evening through Monday morning, is designed to provide the inquirer an introduction to the theory of monastic spirituality as well as a "hands-on" experience of its practice. We have conducted many of these retreats and, because the retreat always ends with an evaluation and critique from the participants, we are able to refine and perfect the good and eliminate or revise the less successful elements. We feel that the retreat, in its simplicity, balance, and depth, accomplishes our objective of communicating the good news of the monastic charism.

The 8th of the month of September is the Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. It is also the anniversary of the solemn monastic profession of Fr Cyprian and Fr Richard. This year, Fr Cyprian marked 50 years of solemn profession, and Fr Richard 49. Two and three years ago we celebrated in a more elaborate way the 50th Jubilee of our brothers' simple profession of vows, a profession which, though temporary, is still a fully serious commitment and oblation of oneself to the monastic way of life. It is a profound grace to have so many witnesses of wholehearted dedication to God.

Our biennial Visitation took place September 15 – 18. Traditionally in our Order, each monastery is "visited" every two years for a sufficient period of time for the Visitor, by listening

to the brothers and observing all aspects of their life, to grasp the true picture of the community at that moment in its history.

The Visitor is the abbot of the founding house of the particular monastery, or someone delegated by him. At the closure of the Visitation, the Visitor leaves with the community a written summary of his experience. This report summarizes the community's view of itself, as the Visitor has heard it expressed. It also contains the Visitor's own perceptions and suggestions for the community's future development.

In his report closing this year's Visitation, Dom Brendan said, "The community is at peace. There is no excessive worry about the future...Everything treated in this visitation has to do with planning for a prosperous future...This tells aspirants that you believe in the future of your community."

Dom Brendan especially encouraged us to proceed with the plan to renovate and expand our guest facilities. We have already met with an architect and have a general idea of how we would like to move forward, though the topic needs further discernment and clarity. The idea would be to reconfigure our present guesthouse, dedicating it entirely to common areas, and such as dining rooms, library, conference rooms, reconciliation rooms, gift shop and so forth. An entirely new structure would be built for the private sleeping rooms, each with its own bath facilities. In order to do this renovation and building, we would need to both set aside Abbey funds as well as initiate a capital campaign.

In the evening of the 28th we celebrated a despedida, a farewell, for Fr Filomeno and Br Nemesio who left the next day to return to their own monastery, Ava's daughter house, Our Lady of the Philippines in Guimaras. Fr Fil was with us for two years, and Br Nemesio for half that time. They proved themselves excellent additions to the monastic environment, men of joy and of prayer, with abundant talents and unbounded generosity in putting them to use. We are grateful to these two brothers, whom we will miss on many levels, and to the monks of their own monastery who sacrificed them for a time.

The departure of Fil and "Meme" reduced our population at home to eight members. In addition, Fr Mark will be away the entire month of October, attending the Order's General Chapter in Assisi, Italy. It seemed a good time to rearrange the furniture and space in our church to accommodate a smaller group of monks, and this we did with imagination and taste. IN addition, we also adjusted the content and style of praying the Divine Office, adapting the opus dei to the abilities of a smaller group.

September 14 was the Feast of the Holy Cross. Fr Mark delivered the homily at Mass that day:

Homily for the Feast of the Holy Cross September 14, 2005

Numbers 21: 4 – 9

Philippians 2: 6 – 11

John 3: 13 – 17

God leading his people into the desert and then killing them with snake bites because they are dying of hunger and thirst there is simply an image of what it feels like to be human most of the time. It is absurd and irrational, and the only one who can help is the one who is against you.

Job is another image: He holds me up for his target practice.

On Sunday (9/11) Fr Fill eloquently painted a picture of humanity flat on its face, a worm and no man, as the psalmist says; and he didn't even have to mention explicitly 9/11 or Katrina because he knew those events were in all our minds and hearts.

The Israelites in the first reading could well have been the people from the 9th Ward taken to the Superdome. "Have you brought us to the Superdome or the Convention Center to die? There is no food, no water, and the gangs are raping and beating and shooting us!"

During Fr Fil's homily Sunday, thinking about a puzzling about all this absurd misery – we cannot simply blame it on FEMA or Bin Laden or the Republican party – the Cross came to mind. Yes, I thought, That's the only...

...What? It's no answer. It's no real solution, because Good Friday was followed by Nero, and then the Black Death, and then the Holocaust, and then Rwanda, and then 9/11 and then the tsunami and then Katrina, and the next to be executed here in the State of Missouri.

So, what is the Cross to all of this? The Preface today says the Cross turned the Garden's tree of defeat into the tree of victory. But it doesn't look like it. In the Gospel today, Jesus says the Cross is an effigy of man's inhumanity to man. Jesus himself becomes on it not only victim, but also the animal-like gang member in the Convention Center, despised and feared above all else.

On Sunday, too, I had a letter from a friend. Without my needing to go into detail, he feels, as he says, "I am losing a lot here, everything I hold dear." Himself not a professing Christian, he

says, "I certainly don't suggest this as in anyway self-identification, but your own role model, J.C., was similarly chastised, and victimized and went down without a fight." My friend asks, "Should that be some solace?"

People do find solace from the Cross, it is true. The solace, though, does not come from me in my sufferings identifying myself with the Crucified. The solace, if there is any, is that the Son of Man who is God's love for the world, loved so much me and the people of the 9th Ward and especially the gang member, that he identified with us, becoming a curse, making himself sin, a snake. We are his role model. To look and see and believe this is the entry into a whole other dimension, eternal life.

Fr Mark, Abbot