

Dear Friends and Visitors

St John Chrysostom was one of the greatest biblical scholars in the ancient Church. The liturgical memorial of St John Chrysostom is September 13, five days after the Feast of the Birth of Mary, and the day before the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. St John, Bishop of Constantinople, was also a great preacher, thus his name, Chrysostom, "Golden Mouth." Happily, his work is well preserved, and much of it is available in English.

For a man so much in love with the written word, with the Word of God that is Scripture, it seems at first surprising to notice how Chrysostom chooses to begin his extended commentary of the Gospel of St Matthew. "We really wouldn't need the written word at all," he says, "if we but lived a life so pure that the grace of the Holy Spirit took the place of books for our souls." After all, says Chrysostom, God spoke to Noah, to Abraham, to Job, and to Moses, not by writings, but directly, "finding their minds pure."

He goes on to explain that "since in the passing of time we made shipwreck" of the gift of God's friendship, God finally gave us the written word as a way to remember what we were continually in danger of forgetting. And he concludes, "Reflect then how great an evil it is for us, who ought to live so purely as not even to need written words, but to yield up our hearts, as books, to the Spirit, should fail again in using this secondary remedy -- the written Word -- for the purpose it was given."

St John Chrysostom's insight is a wonderful call to all of us, professed monk and monk-inspired lay person, to renew our dedication to *lectio divina*. We go to *lectio*, knowing that the Word in the book is first of all printed on our hearts. We approach the reading of Scripture with at the same time the readiness to read our hearts, and to let our hearts be read back to us, as a reflection in a mirror.

On the weekend of September 8/9, a group of five people from southwest Missouri met at the Abbey with one of our senior Associates and Br Francis for an orientation to Associates of Assumption Abbey and to Cistercian life and spirituality in general. The participants returned on their own a few weeks later to continue their introductory experience. There is a great deal of interest among lay men and women in the Cistercian-monastic heritage, and we are happy to be able to offer them living examples of this heritage, and to give them some concrete suggestions on how they might incorporate it into their lives. It is envisioned that the community of Associates will grow, expanding from the "mother" community in St Louis to the central and southern parts of the state.

The Associates of Assumption Abbey is one way to participate in the life of the Abbey. Another way, of course, is by becoming a monk. During the latter part of August and most of September, a man was with us exploring that possibility more closely. He was making his "observership" with us. During the observership, a candidate, after several visits to the abbey and discernment interviews, is welcomed into the monastic community for a period of six weeks. He lives the daily rhythm of the monks, shoulder to shoulder with them in choir, in the refectory, and at work. There are some special classes offered, explaining a little more in depth the theory behind the experiences he is living and observing. The observership is designed to let the candidate feel with his blood and bones what it is like to be a monk. It is the final stage before finally entering as a postulant.

Still other ways of participating in our life were very much in evidence during September. Two men moved into the monastery for extended stays as long-term guests. They do not have the intention of becoming monks; they simply feel that, at this time in their lives, the monastic way would be beneficial for their personal and spiritual development. One of these men is a recent convert to Catholicism. The other is a dedicated member of the Assemblies of God. Finally, this month we inaugurated our External Oblate vocation. Please see a description of the External Oblate under "Living" on this web site's home page.

On Sunday, September 10, a group of twenty music majors and their teacher joined us for Mass and for a brief period of sharing and discussion after words. These students and their teacher were from Ozarks Community College near Branson, MO. They had been studying medieval music and the monastic contribution to music in that period, and wanted to experience a 21st century expression of monastic liturgy and musical style. Anyone who has been to Ava knows that we are somewhat musically challenged; but they also know that what we lack in talent and repertoire, we make up in honest devotion. For the students, it seems, the latter is what touched them, while the former did not elicit too many wincing and groans. They were eminently polite and respectful.

Ava's Commission for the Future convened at the Abbey September 19-21. This is a small group of Abbots/Abbesses and one lay member who meet with the Abbot every two years. Its purpose is to advise and to accompany the abbot and the community as they proceed into the future. Questions such as leadership, accountability, charity among the brothers, aging and vocational recruitment were talked about. There was some attention given to our fruitcake industry, and to the use and condition of our guesthouse. The Commission found the community happy and at peace, and this is very much the truth. We live in the Ocean of Happiness, the Lord God, and everything we touch has also been touched by happiness. There were some concrete suggestions, particularly with regard to preparing for an abbatial election

in December of 2007.

Near the end of the month Fr Mark attended the annual meeting of the Bishops of Missouri with the "major superiors" of religious congregations in the state. The topic of the meeting was immigration, and what the bishops and religious can do to foster more humane and gospel responses to the reality of migration, immigration. One bishop did not hesitate to use the word "racism" to describe the actual response on the part of some citizens to the presence of "the alien," the stranger, in our midst. Fr Mark's homily for Sunday, October 1, was inspired, in part, by this discussion.

That homily is posted on this web site.

Finally, for those interested in our forest, we are happy to say that we are proceeding with our agreement of April, 2005, to turn the oversight of our forest to a local forester. He works closely with the community and the abbot. At present, we are considering a modest improvement harvest in the interior of our forest. Here are the general guidelines we are following in managing our forest:

#### General Forest Management Provisions.

1. Conserve and protect the natural condition of the Oak-Hickory-Pine type forest, and its native forest species and character.
2. Conserve and protect the highest quality of the forest ecosystem including its native fauna and flora, including old growth and riparian stands.
3. Conserve and protect significant water resources and their water quality, including any springs, spring branches, and riparian corridors.
4. When harvesting is carried out as part of long-term management, maintain and improve the capacity of the forest to produce high quality native timber in an uneven-aged condition through the use of long-term, sustained yield practices.
5. Prohibit any use of the forest which will impair, degrade or damage the forest or conservation values of the forest.

#### Desired Conditions.

1. A natural mixture of dominant tree species including Oak, Hickory and Pine with various associated species including Gum, Ash, Walnut, Elm, along with other naturally occurring native tree species appropriate to site.
2. A multi-story forest with a canopy of variable densities managed to allow for gaps occurring due to natural disturbances, such as mortality, timber harvesting, wind-throw, etc.; an exception would be for any such special areas such as savannas or glades which are managed as

open land.

3. Uneven-aged stands, i.e. a full range of age classes throughout the forest, and in any given stand of trees, with the overall median age of the trees increasing.

4. Healthy old growth trees and stands identified and maintained.

5. Sufficient volumes of standing dead trees, down logs and large woody debris on the forest floor as is the normal condition for natural Pine-Oak-Hickory type forests.

6. Various ecosystem types with their biological diversity are preserved.

7. The forest is retained and maintained in its defining character and functions.

8. Identified and located threatened and endangered species are protected.

9. Highest and best use of harvested trees and other species of the forest is made.

10. Markets for less commonly utilized species and grades of logs or lumber are found.

Fr Mark, Abbot