

Fr. Brendan Freeman
Abbot of New Melleray Abbey
September 23, 2010

Sixtieth Anniversary of Assumption Abbey Mass for the Alumni

If you read your invitation to today's celebration, you noticed that we are having a memorial Mass for all the alumni, living and deceased of the Abbey. In true Ava/Cistercian style, our celebration will be in a low-key fashion. There is no grand entrance procession, no Knights of Columbus with their plumes and swords. There is no Pontifical Mass like the old days. Some of you might remember those grandiose ceremonies of pre Vatican days when the sanctuary was overflowing with deacons and sub deacons of honor and buszi bearers and miter and crosier bearers and whatnot.

No, we are not having anything like that, thank God. In fact, we are having the ferial readings and they do present a challenge for the preacher. "Vanities of vanities, all things are vanity" and thus is silenced any attempt we might have hid in mind for pomposity. But what are we to do with this apparent pessimistic message, the sun rises the sun sets, ho-hum, just another day; the wind blows south, the wind blows north; none of it make a difference. There is nothing new under the sun. What are we to make of all this?

Qoheleth's method is to hold something up and then knock it down. On the surface, he sounds like a depressed individual suffering from Acedia. Nothing makes any sense, so why try to figure it out? What are we to make of all this? One good thing about Qoheleth is that no one has the market on what he is about. Everyone can jump on the bandwagon and offer their two cents.

Here are mine. Popular answers to life's problems are useless; your own industry can bring you only so far; appearances are just that and nothing more. Trying to find the answer to life is like looking for the Holy Grail or searching for the fountain of youth. We have to give up the search altogether, at least in the common way of searching. It is all vain and a chase after the wind. We have this insatiable desire to understand, but the big questions of life elude our understanding. St. John of the Cross says, and I paraphrase, "you should never desire satisfaction in what you understand about (God) the mystery of life but in what you do not understand about it. Never stop with loving and delighting in your understanding and experience of (God) of life but love and delight in what is neither understandable nor perceptible it (God)" Is this what Qoheleth is all about? I think so. There is part of life that is neither understandable nor perceptible and that

is what monasteries witness to.

The final words of Qoheleth's teachings end with the word, (respect) fear God and keep his commandments. This is the secret of life. The rest is vanity.

This monastery possesses the secret. I often think of Assumption Abbey in spatial terms. It looks like someone took this complex of buildings and plopped it down in the middle of a vast forest. There is nothing here but God and trees. It stands here, an island of hope. "God alone" is an old monastic saying. God alone is the life of the monk. This is the answer to all of Qoheleth's problems. The monks have the answer and the answer if there is no answer! The thief taunted Jesus to prove he was God by coming down from the cross was asking the wrong question. If Jesus came down from the cross, it would prove nothing except that this man could bend the rules of nature. By dying on the cross and rising three days later, he proved that he was stronger than death and the reign of death has come to an end. The answer is in dying, not avoiding death. It is the same for us. This is the path of wisdom, this is the path of every Christian, and this is the path of the monk. Dying to the old self, rising to the new self.

Today we are beginning our two-day celebration of the 60th anniversary of this abbey. I think it shows us who these men are by noting whom they invited today. We wanted to begin thanking God for our history by acknowledging and thanking the men who have in one way or another contributed to the building up of this little island of hope in the Ozarks. Thank you for your contribution to our life here.

You know that modern monasticism has disabused itself of the notion that we are self-sufficient-that we need no one but ourselves. When I entered New Melleray in 1958, I reveled in that idea. We could do anything and we did not need anyone to help us. However, Qoheleth's prophetic words of wisdom caught up with us, "When the guardians of the house tremble and the strong men are bent and the grinders are idle because they are few, when the silver cord is snapped and the golden bowl is brokenâ€¦!" Brothers and sisters this is happening to all our monasteries. The silver cord of self-sufficiency is broken and the golden bowl of our hubris is broken-there are not enough grinders and the strong men are bent, and thank God for this. Now we can join the human race! We cannot exist without our friends and former members, our employees, our retreatants, and our associates. Is this new? Qoheleth says nothing is new under the sun. New is a relative term. You would not have the new without the old. In fact, the new contains some of the old or it would not exist. Monastic life is ever ancient, ever new and members of old are new members of our extended family as we move into the future together.

I have been trying to talk as a monk of this monastery welcoming you but now I speak as a guest monk and congratulate the community of Ava. You know, they say that a couple who have been married for 60 years resemble each other even in physical appearance. In a similar way monks do the same thing not so much resembling each other but resembling the landscape of their surroundings. The Ozarks has a distinctive look, a distinctive identity and personality. The monks have acquired those personalities, that look, not by trying but by working honestly in their environment. Again, I think this is the lesson of Qoheleth. Do not try to think your way through life, live your life.