

Homily for September 24, Foundation Day of Assumption Abbey (1950-2007)

Today we celebrate the anniversary of the founding of Assumption Abbey in 1950. The actual date is disputed, though. Some records I found have the foundation taking place on September 25th. I don't intend to settle the dispute in this homily, but only point it out as just one irregularity surrounding the beginning of this Abbey.

It was the law of the Order at the time, as it is today, that foundations were made only after approval of the General Chapter. The General Chapter of 1950 only authorized New Melleray to maintain the land and buildings of the Pearson property in good condition in anticipation of a foundation that would not be possible for another four or five years.

But by February of 1951, less than six months after the (unauthorized) "founding" of Assumption Abbey, there were already twenty-five monks at Ava "faithful to every detail of monastic life." It is understandable, then, that the abbot of New Melleray would have felt a little embarrassed to petition the Chapter of 1951 for a foundation that was already made and so he said nothing about it at that time. In fact, the Chapter of 1951 authorized the abbot of New Melleray "to send six or seven monks to a property destined for a foundation of nuns!"

It was only in 1952 that petition was made for the General Chapter to authorize the foundation of Assumption Abbey which had then been in existence for two years. In his letter of petition Fr Canice, the superior of Ava, wrote of the monks' trust that with Divine Providence and much hard work on the part of the monks the foundation would succeed.

And indeed, the Abbey has succeeded. It is now 57 years later. Some of the first arrivals are in the cemetery a few yards from her: Bernard, Louis, George...It was named Assumption Abbey, partly because the Dogma of the Assumption was defined that same year, 1950. But also, as Trappists the founding monks, even though they were ardent lovers of the place, as we are, knew, as we know, that we have not here a lasting city. Graveyards and "bare ruined choirs" prove that. The Dogma of the Assumption is nothing if not a reminder that more lies ahead, and unfettered birds fly where caged birds don't.

Scholars of the Order used to ask, "When did the Cistercian reform begin to decline?" I believe it was Fr Chrysogonus who answered, "Fifteen minutes before the founders left Molesme!" The point is that the seed of decline is in every new beginning. Decline is natural, and death is no

embarrassment. We have not here a lasting city.

In 1950, I was two months shy of 21/2 years old. It was in that year that my parents, not yet ten years married, bought their first house and moved there with their three small sons. They paid \$1,200.00 for the house, a four bedroom, two storied house with attic and basement set on a knoll on a corner lot of one of the older neighborhoods of Sacramento. Two huge palm trees and a magnificent old oak, all still standing, shaded the front of the large house, a house in need of major repair, but having potential.

My parents raised their family in that house. They lived in that house for forty years. In many ways, the house became the external manifestation of my mother's soul. Whole histories and dramas unfolded under those multi-gabled roofs, and in the front and back yards: Dramas of childhood and teenage and young adulthood, sickness, parties, girl friends, pranks, accidents and death. The house had a life, after forty years, of its own.

But also after forty years, when I had been at Vina for over a decade and my brothers were married and had families of their own, my parents had to realize that they were alone, and that that house no longer fit their circumstances. More and more, they were becoming isolated in their old neighborhood, where their old friends did not come so often. Certainly, there was no hope for offspring to fill the house again with purpose; and even if by some miracle a child or two were born, my parents knew they had neither the energy nor the personal resources anymore to give the young what they needed and deserved. Even though they had the willingness, and a beautiful home, they knew that the life unfolded under that roof had come to an end

I thought it would be wrenching, especially for my mother, to leave that house. But no...With friends,my parentsorganized a few yard sales, relieving themselves of decades of mementos, knickknacks and furniture that they would no longer need, shut the door on the house, and walked toward a new life, first in a rented duplex, then in lovely retirement village where they have been for fifteen years now.

Now we, on the 57th anniversary, knowing we have Providence behind and before us, and hard work, too, can make our own these words of Fr Canice in his letter of 1952: As to our future, we entrust the matter to our Holy Mother Mary...and ask that the Holy Spirit may enlighten us so God's Holy Will is done in regard to Our Lady of the Assumption."

September 24, 2007