

Dear Friends and Visitors

After a pretty unusual (Fr Mark's long absence for the General Chapter) and emotion-charged (Fr Ted's death, funeral and burial) late summer, the month of October has been marked principally by the gracious, warm hues and tapestry patterns of the Ozarks woods and hills in autumn.

We also enjoyed the visit of Br Martin Jenni, OSB Obl.

Br Martin is a Benedictine Oblate of the Monastery of Christ in the Desert in New Mexico. At the same time, he is a Monastic Associate of New Melleray Abbey, our motherhouse in Iowa. Br Martin was with us for the better part of three weeks in October at the suggestion of our mutual friend Dr Marsha Dutton, Assistant Editor of CSQ and professor of English at Ohio University.

Martin has his doctorate in musical composition from Stanford University and taught at the University of Iowa from 1968 to 1999 where he was department head of Theory and Composition for nearly ten years. During his time at Ava, Br Martin resided in the monastery and took full part in the daily monastic life. He devoted part of his daily work, usually the morning period, to editing a new book for Cistercian Publications. In the afternoon he helped in the fruitcake bakery, or raked leaves of which there is no end this time of year. In addition, several times a week Br Martin conducted a simple chant practicum with the monastic community. Br Martin is kind, professional, good-humored, quiet and intelligent, qualities that helped make for a relatively painless, even enjoyable, musical experience.

As he did last year at this time, Fr Mark went to Lawrence, KS, for five days to participate in the fall Busy Students Retreat hosted by St Lawrence Catholic Campus Center at University of Kansas. We hope that our relationship with St Lawrence will continue to grow and are open to establishing a similar relationship with other university campus ministries.

Since his return from the General Chapter this summer, Fr Mark has devoted his Sunday conferences to the community to the General Chapter itself. We would like to reproduce for our friends and visitors part of his conference for October 20. This excerpt will afford them both a small glimpse of the concerns of the General Chapter, and a taste of what goes on in the Chapter Room of Assumption Abbey every Sunday morning.

Chapter Talk - October 20 2002: General Chapter Part III

One of the things I am currently using for lectio is the letter to the Galatians. At one point in chapter 4, St Paul quotes the prophet Isaiah. He had been talking about Abraham and the promises God made to him and Abraham's faith and things like that. By a string of association, Abraham made Paul think about Abraham's wife Sarah, and Sarah suggested Hagar.

Hagar was Sarah's slave girl. Sarah let Abraham "go into her," as they used to say in the Bible, and Abraham had a son by Hagar because Sarah was sterile. This all happens four or five chapters before Sarah has the last laugh and miraculously gives birth to Isaac in her old age.

Paul's point will be that, in contrast to the offspring of Hagar who was born in a thoroughly natural way, we Christians are like Isaac, born of Sarah the sterile woman by grace and by promise.

To give some kind of authoritative weight to this idea of his, Paul quotes Isaiah, 54:11:

Rejoice, you barren one who bore no children;  
break forth and shout, you who were not in labor;  
for more numerous are the children of the deserted one  
than of her who has a husband.

When I read that, I thought of one of the main themes at the General Chapter. As we saw a couple of weeks ago, the buzzword at the Chapter was "precarious communities." Looked at in one way, a precarious community is something like Sarah, withering because of age and not begetting any offspring.

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In his talk to the Chapter on this subject, the Abbot General characterized as precarious communities that, for instance, have a high average age, a lack of vocations, little perseverance, and difficulty filling positions of leadership and responsibility.

Specifically, the Dom Bernardo offered fourteen characteristics of precarious or diminished communities. Listen to these, and I'll ask if you heard any that apply to Ava. At the same time, see if any apply to you personally:

- The last solemn profession was more than 12 years ago
- The average age of the community is over 70
- There are less than 12 members
- More than 5 need special health care
- The community's attitude is more resigned than hopeful
- There are no plans for the future
- Rather than unity, there is tolerant coexistence
- Those in positions of responsibility hold two or three offices
- There is a lack of means and personnel for formation
- At the Opus Dei, attendance is low and quality poor
- Conversatio is mostly a matter of will-power and/or is lightened by various dispensations
- Services and livelihood depend on lay help
- The economy depends on pensions
- The buildings are disproportionately large.

Based on these and other criteria, there are at present 15 communities of monks and 10 communities of nuns that may be considered precarious or diminished communities. Is Ava one of them...?

Remarkably, I don't find one of these characteristics at Ava. Sure, technically there has been no solemn profession in the last 12 years; but there have been two or three changes of stability, even four, if you count me. Our average age is a low 64. No one needs special health care. And with Br Martin's help our celebration of the Work of God is better than ever.

On the other hand, as the General also pointed out, ""no one can insure that my community will still exist on the day of the Parousia! For being so true, we often tend to forget that. In other words, cenobitic ars morendi is just as important as cenobitic ars vivendi.""

For ourselves here at Ava, even if we cannot pin one of the fourteen characteristics of precariousness on ourselves, I think we would be unrealistic to say that we are totally in the clear. We need continually to strive for accurate self-knowledge. It was said at the Chapter that ""some communities are unwilling to acknowledge their precariousness, even when community members or others in the Order have tried to point it out to them. This denial empties precariousness of its capacity to stimulate a return to the essentials and leaves it simply as a harbinger of demise.""

For all the talk at the Chapter about precarious or diminished communities, though, the accent

ended up not on Sarah as sterile and barren, but on Sarah as the beneficiary of the promise, the woman of hope. Again, in the words of Dom Bernardo, "realism in the face of life and death must go hand in hand with a deeply evangelical and radical attitude of hope...Let us leave aside our nostalgia for the past or our complaints about the present in order to dream and build our future with creative genius and willingness to risk. Our fragility and need should not prevent us from being generous and magnanimous in spirit..."

The summary document of the Chapter, *Vision of the Order*, 2002, picked up these companion themes of hope, creative genius, and risk. "Many," it said, referring to the communities' House Reports, "see the present situation as a grace, a time of change, a favorable time - at the deepest theological level, a liberation within the context of the Paschal Mystery...There is a desire to return to the essentials, to radical evangelical simplicity which is made all the more possible by the fragility of our circumstances." The document goes on to say that "there is no question that we have arrived at the moment when substantial changes in our lifestyle are necessary...[T]he weight of [trying to maintain] things just as they always were impinges negatively on the Cistercian equilibrium." Rather, we have constantly to "go back to the gospel and its simplicity as the criterion for [our] decisions as to how to express the essential elements of our monastic life."

I am reminded here, incidentally, of something that came out of the Monastic Council meeting just before I left for Rome. The Council said, talking about Ava, "we need to examine the present quality of our monastic observances both as a community and as individuals; to support and encourage what is good, to purge and correct what is less than good."

The Council also was open to our making room for a small number of live-in guests, men who would give themselves seriously for a time to the monastic values and practices, and at the same time assist in daily work" (minutes for Aug 23, 2002). Both of these proposals, it seems to me, are in the spirit of the Chapter's call to return to essentials, on the one hand, and to a creative spirit and willingness to risk, on the other. Suggestions like these will call for the magnanimous spirit of each of us. As the 11th Mixed Commission said, "the vitality of the communities isn't necessarily due to numbers or recruitment but to openness and availability, which can find forms adapted to living the Cistercian life."

One of the Mixed Commissions at the Chapter concluded its report by stating frankly, "it seems to us that a certain type of monastic life...is on the way out. But through this 'death' something else is being born, and we are not yet sure what it will be!" This statement is all the more remarkable for being from a group of mostly French monks and nuns. The First Commission formulated the question in this way: "We notice that most houses in Africa, Asia

and Latin America are flourishing more than those in Europe and North America. We wonder if one reason for this is that they are newer and not bound by old traditions of monastic and Trappist life...We think that it is important to maintain a sense of our traditions, but not to cling to them."

I have wanted to give communicate to you some of the trajectories the Order might be taking in the near future. They are trajectories of hope. The Order, at this period of its long and varied history, is frankly asking itself hard questions, but doing that in the framework of hope. Let's understand hope as that virtue that ""invites forward expectation above and beyond the toils and trials of the present. [Hope] brings a perspective and a horizon which can transform the constraints of a present situation."" Even out of our communal and personal precariousness and diminishment, it is this hope that causes us to say,

Rejoice, you barren one who bore no children;  
break forth and shout, you who were not in labor;  
for more numerous are the children of the deserted one  
than of her who has a husband.

Fr Mark, Abbot