

Dear Friends and Visitors

This newsletter is coming from the Monastery of Christ in the Desert near Abiquiu, New Mexico. The writer, Fr Mark, was invited by Abbot Philip to give the community retreat there. The retreat began the evening of Sunday, November 2, but Fr Mark left Ava after Vigils on the first, the Solemnity of All Saints. The retreat will end November 8, and Fr Mark will return to Ava on the 11th. Between retreat conferences, two per day, and visits with individual monks -- and nuns (the small community of Our Lady of the Desert is also located on the same property as the monks, in the spectacular Chama Canyon, but in separate buildings at some distance from them) Fr Mark took time to compose this news update of Assumption Abbey.

The regular canonical Visitation took place at Assumption Abbey October 16 - 24. The Visitation takes place at a monastery every two years. It is normally conducted by the Father Immediate of the monastery, in most cases the abbot of the house that had originally founded the monastery being visited.

In our case, the Father Immediate is Dom Brendan Freeman, abbot of New Melleray Abbey, Iowa. New Melleray founded Ava in 1950. It is more and more common in the Order that the regular Visitor be accompanied by a co-visitor, and such was the case at our Visitation this year. The co-visitor was Mother Gail Fitzpatrick, Abbess of Our Lady of the Mississippi Abbey, Iowa. In fact, Mother Gail assisted at a visitation at Ava sometime in the 1990's. That meant she was known to the Ava community and had a sense of the community's history and particular spirit. The Ava community was unanimous in wanting to invite Mother Gail to assist Dom Brendan in the Visitation.

The outcome of the Visitation was very positive. Without denying the challenges facing the Ava community at this moment in his history, the Visitation affirmed the orientation that the community with Fr Mark has discerned over the last year and a half. This affirmation is concretized in three tasks:

1. Inward looking: rearticulate and reaffirm the criteria for discernment of candidates and the solid formation program already in place.
2. Outward looking: continue to explore ways to make the monastic heritage of Ava more accessible to and inclusive of a broader population than those coming to be professed monks. This might mean expanding our guesthouse, offering retreats on monastic topics, accepting ""temporary vocations,"" establishing, with the help of lay associates, a spirituality center. All of this needs to be explored carefully, but with courage and imagination

3. The establishment of a Commission for the Future to assist and accompany the Ava community and its collaborators. A Commission for the Future would be made up of the Abbot of Ava, another monk of Ava, the Father Immediate, two other Abbots/Abbesses of the U.S. Region of the Order, and a lay person close to the Ava community and chosen by them.

The Visitation was a moment of grace for us. It was an example of the ancient Charter of Charity that the Order was founded on.

The weekend after the Visitation our guesthouse was unusually full. There was a group of six men, a small group of two women, and a few single guests. Over the course of a few days, in the context of the solitude and silence of the Abbey, the round of prayer, the sharing of simple meals, and evening conversations, the groups and individuals, who had not known each other before, bonded together in a profound and unexpected way. One of the guests was invited to write about her experience. Here is what she said:

""While it was still night, way before dawn, Jesus got up and went out to a secluded spot and prayed."" Mark 1:35

And so, in my humble desire to attain a more perfect peace on my personal and stumbling journey, I choose during this time of Now, to daily seek Sanctuary. I long for a place of communion with the Heavenly Father-Mother God and I am Blessed with many places of meditation. One of the most holy earthly sanctuaries for me is located at Assumption Abbey, near Ava, MO. Recently I was to revisit there once more. Overflowing with anticipation and the ever-longing for time of reflection and restoration of balance, I, along with a friend, returned.

Knowing that our Heavenly Father's gifts are gracious and bountiful, I still could not have anticipated the Spiritual fullness and Holiness of God's harvest-filled cornucopia that would await me.

I longed for solitude and I found laughter. I longed for rest, and I received rejuvenation. I desired resolution and I was granted fulfilment. I came to continue seeking the meaning of Life and to receive personal healings and was greeted by a dog named Angel. I had gone searching for the Christ-child, for I had seen the star in the East, and I was visited by wise men bearing gifts. I came longing for communion with God, and I was granted holy communion with the God-spirit through the hospitality of the monks and a nun. I presented myself for purification through acceptance and love, knowing I arrived shrouded in shortcomings and inadequacies, and I was gifted with validation in Cherishment for the child of the Most Holy that I am.

I took walks on the leaf adorned carpets of the Ozarks Hills. I witnessed breath-taking views of the menagerie of the colors of God's visual orchestral. I tasted the soothing of the Holy Spirit in the canonization of the Psalms sung with the monks. I prayed the rosary with new friends made. I heard the voice of God in the wind communing with the trees. I received Baptism from the stars in the heavens before dawn. And I was enclosed in God's illuminating Light of Love during moments shared with a precious friend I am Blessed to call My Brother. All these anointings I received from this Holy Ground at the Abbey.

Many thanks to you, dear Guest, for your personal account, and account that at the same time echoes that of many others. You are a blessing to us.

Fr Mark, Abbot