

Dear Friends and Visitors

As we "go to press," having entered the winter season and the return of Standard Time, we monks have resumed wearing our cowls at the Divine Office and at Mass. In the old days – that is before 1962 – Trappists wore thick woolen cowls year-round, except when working. But common sense -- and perhaps a bit of pity for those in climates such as southwest Missouri in August -- finally prevailed, and the Order's regulations began to allow some flexibility in the use of the cowl.



For one thing, it is no longer a requirement that cowls be made of wool. A woolen cowl makes a lot of sense if one lives in a monastery such as Tamie in the French Alps. There, cowls are a good 3/16-inch thick, which is desirable at Vigils in an unheated stone church in December. But for those of us in the New World, with central heating and milder temperatures, a cowl of polyester or a very light cotton and wool blend does just fine.

There is something right about Trappist monks in cowls in a dimly lit church in winter. It's almost as if the cowl helps one pray better. The flow of the cowl with its long sleeves is like an unseen prayer made visible. Thomas Merton said wearing the cowl was like being clothed in a cloud. Yes, a white cowl is the distinctive garb of the Cistercian; indeed it is the monastic habit - the garb with which the abbot clothes a monk when he makes his solemn profession and vows. It is the symbol of his consecration.

We will take the cowls off again in May or June, but not our monastic identity, which is deep and indelible.



Our regular visitors and readers will notice that this news update comes uncommonly late. We appreciate your presumed patience and hope you will be pleasantly surprised to find we have indeed moved on since the August update.

Immediately after Fr Mark's return in early September from his sabbatical, the Regular Visitation of Assumption Abbey opened here. (See Newsletter for May, 2003, for more on the nature of a Regular Visitation.) Fr Brendan, Abbot of New Melleray, Iowa, and our Father Immediate, conducted the Visitation. At the request of the Ava monks, Fr Brendan was accompanied and assisted by Mother Gail Fitzpatrick, Abbess emerita of Our Lady of the Mississippi, also in Iowa. The Visitation opened on September 10 and concluded on September 14, the Feast of the Holy Cross.

Every Visitation concludes with the Visitors writing a short report in which they share with the community what they have heard and observed. Almost always the Visitation Report serves as a kind of program for the community, an agenda to work on in the coming few years. In their final report to the community, Fr Brendan and Mother Gail write, "The main issue of this visitation is one of relationships: the relationship of the abbot to community and community to abbot. We all know that communication is an essential part of any relationship, so [we] would like to cast this report in the form of a conversation between the abbot and community."

For its part in this hypothetical dialogue, the community says to Fr Mark, the Abbot: "You have brought clarity to several important issues that affect our community, e.g. our community liturgy, formation of new members, financial stability and the good order in the house. Some say you are the best abbot we ever had; but at the same time we feel you do not trust us enough. We need to know that our opinions matter and that you consult and listen to us."



Fr Mark responds: "Brothers, I want you to know that I hear what you are saying to me. I need the freedom to call you to live the Rule we all profess. I need to be able to remind you that monastic conversion is not just for the smooth running of the monastery but it is to put us at the center of the mystery of Christ living in each of you. There is more going on in our community than just the interaction of personalities; there is the mystery which is our life in

Christ."

This was a uniquely original form in which to frame a Visitation Card. Indeed we are blessed with a very creative Father Immediate, whose Irish literary heritage had clearly been called into play. We are grateful to Fr Brendan and Mother Gail for their careful listening and for their sensitive pastoral care of the community and of its individual members.

Shortly after the Visitation, two men who have a keen interest in joining Assumption Abbey were guests with us for several days. This was an opportunity for them to get to know the community and its way of life a little better. During their visits, the two candidates were invited to engage in some of the interviews which are a normal part of vocational discernment at Ava.

On September 24, we celebrated the fifty-seventh anniversary of the Founding of Assumption Abbey. Fr Mark presided at Mass that day and gave the homily. The homily for this Founders' Day is posted elsewhere on this web site.

Meanwhile, Fr Leon Brockman, OCSO, a member of Assumption Abbey and founder and permanent resident of nearby Nazareth Hermitage, underwent medical tests for shortness of breath and fatigue. The result was Fr Leon's being admitted immediately to ICU at St John's Hospital, Springfield. There, on October 1, Fr Leon underwent quintuple coronary bypass surgery. Following surgery, he remained in St John's for two full weeks. Happily, the surgery was a success, and Fr Leon returned to the Hermitage where he continues steadily to recover.

Twelve members of Ava's Lay Advisory Committee assembled at the Abbey on Friday afternoon, October 5, for a full-day meeting the following day. The meeting addressed many topics, among them abbey business and income, vocational recruitment, guest house renovation and guest house management. The monks are more than fortunate to have these wonderful women and men so dedicated to Assumption Abbey and to the monks' way of life.

Shortly thereafter, Dan Gray and a photographer from the Fox News channel in St Louis (Channel 2) spent a day with us. They interviewed and filmed extensively, capturing something of the entire fabric of Assumption Abbey and its particular flavor of monastic life. Their final product will be aired November 18 as that week's episode of Dan Gray's weekly "In Good Faith" series.

Also in early October, Dane Clement, a candidate from Arkansas for our External Oblate vocation, had his first live-in experience in the monastery. After his stay with us, Dane was kind enough to write: "My stay at the Abbey was wonderful. Please accept my gratitude for allowing

me to be a part of the life for that short moment I was there. It seems everything I was introduced to, and participated in, invited me to an elevated awareness of being loved. The quiet of the chapter room in the morning, filled with longing, during lectio divina; the silence that made eating meals such an obvious reason for thanksgiving; the sense of purpose and joy experienced during the Divine Office; the inspiring example of other men living a life 'on purpose'. All these experiences, as well as others, seem to tell me how important it is to REMEMBER that we are always present to and in God. I have found myself more "present" to my self, family, friends, and co-workers since returning. Again, please accept, and extend my gratitude to the community, for all I received during my recent visit." Dane will be returning in November. Another External Oblate candidate, this one from Oklahoma, will do his second live-in experience in November as well.

In mid-October, Fr Mark went to Erie, PA, to participate in the annual Board Meeting of AIM USA -- Alliance for International Monasticism, USA Office. AIM is an international monastic (Benedictine and Cistercian) initiative to funnel funds, material and personnel to monasteries of Africa, the Far East, Latin America and the Caribbean (see July 2003 Newsletter for more information about AIM).

Many of our readers and friends will remember that in December of 2001 the community elected Fr Mark to a six-year abbatial term. That term concludes this coming December 8. On Sunday, September 30, Fr Mark notified the community of Ava that he will not stand for reelection after his present term. He had informed the Monastic Council, a smaller body of senior monks, a few days earlier. Fr Mark said he understood his decision would come as a surprise to the brothers, but assured the community that he had gone through a lengthy discernment process to arrive at this decision -- a discernment assisted by three or four wise confidants.

As a result of Fr Mark's decision, it seemed wise to have our Father Immediate, Fr Brendan, return for a few days -- even though he had just been with us a month earlier for the Visitation. During the course of a week in the latter part of October, Fr Brendan met with the brothers individually and as a group to help the community discern the way forward come December 8 when Fr Mark's term as abbot expires. There are, realistically, two options: either proceed with an election; or, postpone the election until a later date and ask the Father Immediate to appoint a temporary superior until the way becomes clearer. We invite you, our readers, to hold us in prayer and, with the monks, embrace the suspense as the next few weeks unfold.

Meanwhile, prior to Mass on November 2, and graced by the mystical glow of early dawn, the monks and guests assembled in our monastic cemetery for the blessing of the graves of those

buried there -- thirteen monks and six lay men and women. The remembrance of the dead is a way of preserving hope and confessing our belief in the resurrection -- indeed, in the Risen One.

Fr Mark, Abbot