

Dear Friends and Visitors

The Lord be with you.

The General Chapter at Assisi has completed their work. The heart of the meeting is the review of the House Report of each community. Mixed commissions of men and women superiors, organized according to language groups, treat a dozen or more reports, apiece.

Our commission had an English abbot as president, a Canadian monk as secretary, an African abbess, an African monk, a Dutch abbot, an American abbess, two Chinese, and an Irish abbot, besides myself. A marvelous mix and we worked together well.

Since our Abbot Mark did not feel free to accept a second term, Dom Brendan of New Melleray, our mother-house, decided our monks needed to develop a stable relationship between abbot and community as a favorable atmosphere helping new candidates to persevere. Therefore, he appointed me as temporary superior and said we should not receive novices until the coming General Chapter.

The mixed commission, who reviewed Ava's House Report, sent a recommendation to the whole assembly that we continue those two decisions of Dom Brendan until the next General Chapter. They were concerned that no one has entered and continued to persevere here since our founding in 1950. We have also had six superiors in the past forty years, with four of them being from outside of our community. Finally, that our small community of monks in their seventies and eighties, with just one monk in his sixties, one in his fifties, and one in his forties, would not be able to provide a suitable monastic formation to new men.

I was given the floor for a response. I first said that New Melleray, all through our long, lean years, has given us more than good support both financially and with personnel. Our House Report began, "For us this is the best of times and the worst of times," (with apologies to Charles Dickens' Tale of Two Cities).

The best of times, because over the years we have built and paid for an attractive and truly monastic set of buildings, and our fruitcake bakery gives us a steady and compatible form of manual labor for self-support. We have a solid monastic formation program and both a good novice master and vocation director. Our community has a good spirit united in charity, without strong conflicts or divisions. The worst of times, because of the negative realities mentioned above.

I pointed out that Gethsemani was founded in 1848 and New Melleray in 1849. The first American to persevere at Gethsemani was Bro. Joachim, the Man Who Got Even With God, some fifty years later, and the first choir monk to persevere was Dom Mary Frederic Dunne, Thomas Merton's first abbot. As for superiors, when I entered New Melleray in 1950, they still had an Irish abbot. It was 100 years after founding, before they elected an American abbot from their own community.

I did not mention the well-known anecdote about Dom Edmond Obrecht of Gethsemani making visitations at New Melleray and Valley Falls (later Spencer) in the early 1900's. He advised that they blend their two small communities of aging monks together. Each monastery replied, "Good idea. When will the other come?" If he had gone back to the General Chapter and persuaded the assembly that those old monks cannot give a satisfactory monastic formation to newcomers, there would be no New Melleray or Spencer today.

I did tell our General Chapter that our monks hoped that they would leave the discernment of when a stable relationship had been established between superior and community up to Dom Brendan, rather than prolong it until the next General Chapter in 2011.

Having had my say, I ended by telling the abbots that we would accept in faith what they decided, and that either way our community would continue moving forward with a good positive spirit.

The results of their first vote for prolonging the situation of not receiving novices until the next General Chapter was: 58 yes, 21 no, 16 abstentions. Therefore, there was a majority, but not a strong consensus. Their second vote for keeping a temporary superior did get a strong positive tally.

After my response, Dom Brendan was clearly pleased, and told me that although we could not give the novice's habit to new men, we can still invite, and interview candidates, and allow them to make a live-in Observership of a month or six weeks. If the observership is satisfactory, then we can have them come back and live within the community on a long-term basis.

Fr. Justin Trinidad, a 47-year-old priest, has done his Observership successfully, and is now applying for an American visa, since he is a Canadian citizen. He says, "I don't care what they call me. I just want to live the monastic life in your community." Another candidate heard rumors that Ava might close. He said to Bro. Francis, our vocation director, that he was applying here, since he figured we needed help. Therefore, our sequence of initial entrance will be Candidate, Observer, Oblate, until the next General Chapter. New men will be following the

usual Formation program of studies, personal direction and living the Trappist-Cistercian community balance of: liturgy, lectio, and labor, so they will be ready to receive the novices' habit in 2011, after a short postulancy.

At the end of our General Chapter, the State of the Order report said that in 2003 the focus of that General Chapter was on the precarious state of many new and old monasteries. In 2005, there was the sense that superiors were facing up to their situation realistically and beginning to work for solutions. The main thing, which emerged this time in 2008, was a spirit of courage, so that we were moving forward, not wavering fearfully.

Needless to say, we need and value your prayers, as we pray for your needs also.

In the Sacred Heart,

Fr. Cyprian