

Dear Friends and Visitors

This time of year we are especially busy receiving and filling fruitcake orders. Many people are kind enough to write telling us how much they appreciate our product. It makes us happy to know that the two pound confection that is the work of our hands throughout the year contributes to the holiday warm and cheer of so many people.

As you will see from what follows, our cakes are made fully by hand. This helps maintain quality and consistency. Nevertheless, we know that a cake can slip through our quality controls. We are also grateful, then, to our customers we let us know if they received a cake that was less than the quality they have been used to from us and should rightly expect.

Our Bakery produces 125 two-pound cakes five days a week, February through December. This amounts to somewhere around 30,000 cakes per year. Many monastic hands are involved in producing an Assumption Abbey Fruitcake.

Beginning after Mass each workday morning Brother Baker prepares the batter. He mixes together the flour and sugar, the spices, the whole eggs, and the butter. With the help of Brother Assistant, he dumps the batter into the pan containing the fruits and nuts measured out for this batch of cakes. The fruits and nuts have been marinating in burgundy wine for at least four days. The Baker and Assistant mix together the batter and the fruit mixture by hand, just until blended.

Then, using a hand scoop, Br Baker dispenses a little over two pounds of the cake mixture into each round, paper lined, cake pan. Br Assistant smoothes the surface with a spoon and sets each tray on a rack.

When all the pans are filled, Br Baker puts them in the oven. The cakes bake at a low temperature for two and one half hours. When time is up, Br Baker removes the pans from the oven and when the cakes have cooled removes the cakes from the pans. The puts the cakes on a curing rack and leaves them over night in a protected area.

Next morning, the decorating crew goes to work. This consists of two or three brothers. The brothers first inject each cake with Puerto Rican rum, eight injections placed around the cake for a total of one ounce of rum per cake. Then they apply the glaze and by hand decorate each cake with four pecan halves and four cherry halves.

The decorators' final operation is to wrap each cake in cellophane and seal the wrapping. This,

too, is done by hand. In the afternoon, the packaging crew puts the freshly baked and wrapped cakes into the white tins and boxes and seals the tins for shipping.

In the meantime, several times a week one brother sorts through the bulk pecan halves. He separates the broken pieces from the whole ones. Only the whole pieces are used to decorate our cakes. Another brother cuts into halves each red and green cherry that will be used to decorate the fruitcakes.

Taking orders -- by phone, post and email --, printing shipping labels, and getting the boxed cakes ready for UPS or U.S.P.S. are other operations that make up the work of Assumption Abbey Bakery. It is work that goes hand in hand with our monastic contemplative life. We are not a Bakery that happens to be run by monks. We are monks who produce fruitcakes as a way of supporting ourselves, of being in solidarity with other workers, and of creating and maintaining bonds of friendship and appreciation among us. We trust that our work and our product communicate to our patrons something of our life of Christ-centered peace and humble love.

As our Advent feature, we offer Fr Abbot's chapter talk to the monastic community on the First Sunday of Advent.

#### Chapter Talk – November 30 2003 Advent I

Last week I received the winter edition of Santa Clara Magazine. This is the quarterly magazine for alumni and friends of the University of Santa Clara in California. Santa Clara is a Jesuit institution, and I graduated from there with a BA degree in 1970. In this issue there is an article by the president of Santa Clara, Fr Paul Locatelli, S.J. It is called, "Academic Excellence: Educating the Whole Person."

As I said, this magazine came last week, and that is when I read it. The Feast of Christ the King had just been celebrated, and the liturgical year was coming to an end. In the liturgy we were hearing about kingdoms collapsing right and left and nations at war one. In the news we were reading about suicide bombers killing civilians and soldiers dying every day in Iraq. Two local women called asking for financial assistance for such basics as heat and electricity. Advent was just around the corner when the whole church world-wide would be singing over and over, "Come, Lord Jesus, come to save us!" And we were still figuring out how to care for Fr Richard while contemplating how true it is that, as St Bernard never got tired of recalling, "the mortal body weighs down the soul."

It was, then, in light of all that, or in its shadow, that I read Fr Locatelli's article on "educating the whole person."

"The education of the whole person," he said, "has been the ideal of Jesuit colleges from the time of Ignatius of Loyola." That is a good 450 years. The number of whole persons issuing from Jesuit institutions during those 500 years is beyond counting. From Santa Clara alone, in its 100 plus years of existence, there must be at least tens of thousands of whole persons.

I am one of them. Maybe I am not a good example of a Jesuit

education. At any rate, whatever I or anyone else might have thought, when I was at Santa Clara over thirty years ago, I was not a whole person. I was really messed up. I was confused, angry, fragmented, and emotionally out of control. And frankly, with a few exceptions that I still treasure, I rarely had any sense that anyone at Santa Clara was very interested in trying to fix my brokenness. Nor did I expect them to be. I probably hid my brokenness pretty well which is just another feature of brokenness: not to let anyone know.

And I hid it from myself. So I cannot agree with Fr Locatelli. At least in this one particular instance, Jesuit education failed in educating a whole person. I left Santa Clara as broken and fragmented as when I entered there.

Close to a decade later, I entered another educational institution. This was the monastery at Vina. The monastic school did not pretend to educate the whole person. What it did promise was to finally lead you to the insight that you were not whole at all, but really were broken.

According to Locatelli, the Jesuit way of education includes bringing the whole person into solidarity, and goes on to say how solidarity is achieved: through personal involvement with innocent suffering and with the injustice others suffer.

The Jesuit student, then, is a whole person in solidarity with victims of injustice and innocent suffering. An early patristic homily might have used the same rhetoric giving reasons for the Incarnation of the Son of God.

Monastic education also results in an experience of solidarity, but it get there by another route. In my own experience, anyway, what monastic life does is to bring you to the horrendous realization that it is you who have been inflicting suffering on others. It is you who are the cause of injustice, heartache and sadness all around. Far from being in solidarity with victims, the pedagogy of the monastery shows you up as a thug.

This process and insight are all summarized by the biblical word “conversion,” a word and a reality central to the monastic way of education. Conversion, through compunction. First, you know your misery. Then, you experience God’s mercy. Finally, you have the humility and the wisdom to show that mercy to others. At this stage, you reach the solidarity of the saints without losing the awareness of being in league with sinners, too.

It is a long course of study. You don’t finish in four years, and when you finally do finish, if you ever do, you don’t get a degree. You get, maybe, spoon fed, and so don’t look anything like what you would think a whole person should look like, even though you are one.

The optimism of Paul Locatelli’s article about educating whole persons made me reflect on my own experience. Coming, as it did, along with Fr Richard, collapsing kingdoms, and Advent, the article’s optimism failed to convince me.

Fr Locatelli’s article concludes, “What we hope our students will become are people of well-educated solidarity using their considerable talents to heal the world.” Healing the world, he explains, results from a constructive use of knowledge to make the world more human and just.

For Locatelli, human reason and actions can be media of divine grace. Again, this sounds very much like the way the Catechism talks about the sacraments. Anyway, the healing of the world is going to come about by the reasonable actions of educated whole persons.

By definition, whole persons don’t need healing, and there is never a hint in Locatelli’s article that Jesuit students are in need of healing themselves. Instead, they are the healers.

The phrase, “to heal the world,” is from Jewish spirituality, the article explains. Yes, and in that tradition, “to heal” means the same thing as “to save.” And so at this juncture of liturgical seasons, I think of the Israelite prophet who said, “Your wound is incurable” (Jer 30:12; see Micah 1:9), and those other Jews who said, Besides Jesus, “there is no other name under heaven by which we are to be saved” (Acts 4:12), and , “God [sent his son] that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:17). St Paul says a few times, “by grace you have been saved” (Eph 2:5, 8), but I know he didn’t mean the grace that is mediated by the human reason and activism of even 500-years-worth of Jesuit-educated whole persons.

After putting down Locatelli’s article, and feeling puzzled and doubtful, I picked up a volume of the complete works of Arthur Rimbaud. Rimbaud was a rude and ribald writer of late 19th century France. I don’t think anyone has every claimed he was a theologian. He may, though, be

a saint.

I read, "The sun was still hot; nonetheless, now it barely illuminated the earth; like a torch placed before gigantic vaults casts no more than a weak glimmer."

Rimbaud, I thought, was right. In the face of the gigantic vault that is the incurable wound of the world, even 500 years worth of Jesuit educated whole persons are only a weak glimmer. All the grace of them, however real, is ineffective, swallowed up in a dark hole.

If it were not so, I thought, what would be the point of Christmas? If Jesuit reason – or any human reason and action – can heal the world, what was all that stuff in the Psalms and prophets about, and in the Gospels? What is Advent about? And why, last night at first Vespers, did we sing,

Thou, grieving that the ancient curse,

Should doom to death a universe,

Hast found the med'cine, full of grace,

To save and heal a ruined race? (Conditor Alme Siderum)

Putting down Rimbaud, I next picked up Gregory of Nyssa. Gregory is speaking to neophyte Christians. Gregory was a monk before he was a bishop. He was a student before he was a teacher. He was not a Jesuit, but he was a teacher still. Here is what he said.

Sick, our nature demanded to be healed; fallen, to be raised up; dead, to rise again...Closed in the darkness, it was necessary to bring us the light; captives, we awaited a Savior; prisoners, help; slaves, a liberator. Are these things minor or insignificant? Did they not move God to descend to human nature and visit it, since humanity was in so miserable and unhappy a state? (Orat. Catech. 15.)

Rimbaud's realism and Gregory's honesty helped me get over my crisis of confusion provoked by Locatelli's jovial optimism in the ability human reason and human action to bring light, healing, and liberation where it is most needed. Without really saying it, Locatelli believes that well-educated whole persons are real Messiahs. Or maybe, all Jesuit alumni are, collectively, the Messiah. Nowhere in his article could you find the only name under heaven by which we can be saved, except embedded in the word Jesuit.

I admit I am probably reading more into Locatelli's article than he intended. And I certainly don't mean to denigrate Jesuit education -- I have benefited from two of their best institutions -- or even human reason and action. I just want to reaffirm that it is our faith, as much as it is our experience, that we cannot save and heal ourselves.

There is a growing trend in secular culture and even in theological circles that would make you think we really can. Instead, on this First Sunday of Advent, I want to affirm that Advent really is about something non-negotiable and Christmas is about something irreplaceable. As St Bernard says,

God became incarnate to enrich us by his poverty, to raise us up by his humility, to make us greater by his self-abasement, to unite us to God by his Incarnation, and to enable us to begin to form one single spirit with him. (Ann 3.8.)

If we come to a point where we believe that we ourselves are capable of healing the world, then we are going to have to end up underestimating the gravity of the wound in the first place. If we end up looking to ourselves for solutions, rather than to the mystery of the Incarnation, it will be because, as Bernard again says,

Who can investigate this [Mystery], who can reach it, who can grasp it? The well is deep and I have nothing that lets me draw from it. (Ann 2.1.)

Advent is the time for us gradually to get use to those depths while at the same time preparing a bucket we can use to draw from them life-giving waters.

Fr Mark, Abbot