

Dear Friends and Visitors

In early November, the fourth of our candidates completed his six-week Observership. He will be entering as a postulant in the middle of December. In fact, all four of these men will have entered by the end of this year. We rejoice with them that they have found at Assumption Abbey the place to be for God.

Our bakery continues its fine work, with a dedicated and happy staff. This time of year finds the office staff particularly busy taken orders, and the shipping staff busy directing the cakes to their destinations. For the first time, we are using professional services to assist with the order taking. Previously, because our office at the Abbey closes at 4:30 p.m., customers calling our toll-free number would have to leave a message on our voice mail, then wait for us to return the call the next day. With the new service, our customers who use our toll-free number will be able to place their order immediately, any time day or night. If our customers which to talk directly to Abbey personnel, they can call our regular number. As always, fruitcakes can be ordered on line. See the link on this page, or go to [trappistmonks.com](http://trappistmonks.com).

On Thanksgiving Day, about twenty neighbors, guests, and friends joined the monastic community in the monastery refectory for our traditional Thanksgiving Dinner at noon. Br Boniface produced a magnificent spread, the customary Thanksgiving fare of turkey, ham, candied yams, mashed potatoes, stuffing, and a full array of traditional holiday deserts. Fr Mark, as in the past few years, brought a California flavor to the feast with pans of freshly constructed enchiladas. Guests and monks both remarked at the joy of the occasion, and the experience of true community. They were right.

Fr Mark's Homily at Mass, Thanksgiving Day, 2004

Thanksgiving Day is a national holiday. It takes us back to the beginning of the American story. We think of Pilgrims and Indians and Turkeys and trumpet-barreled muskets. The native people of the new land brought winter provisions for the newly arrived Pilgrims, so the story goes simply told. For the native people, the meaning of their gesture was, "What I have is yours, too – for no one owns this land or its products. It's all gift, for all..."

For the European settlers and their ancestors, Thanksgiving came to mean, "Yes, what is your is ours, and we will take it by hook or by crook." And then they sanctified their rapaciousness by calling it Manifest Destiny, from sea to shining sea.

The other night I spoke to the community about thanksgiving in the Rule of St Benedict. What

he proposes would not be a bad plank in the platform of a new administration; it would be nice if it became a part of renewed foreign and domestic policies.

For St Benedict, the act of giving thanks is a response to quantity, but not in the way American consumerism would make you think. For Benedict, we thank God when our needs are few (RB 34:3), and we bless him when our wants are unfulfilled (RB 40:8).

Our desires are superfluous to our needs. Our desires are the source of rapaciousness, envy, and greed. Our needs, on the other hand, are God's responsibility to fulfill, who created us needy. We thank God for his fidelity, while we bless God for checking our tendency to manipulate things and people to fulfill our desires.

For Benedict, thanksgiving is the antidote to sadness, and the cure of our discontent. Who can be sad when she is being thankful? Who can complain, when she has a grateful heart?

Will America ever return to being satisfied with simple needs met, so we can use our abundance to meet the needs of others, to whom as well as to us the goods of this land are lent? St Bernard says, "we see many people who insistently ask for what they need but we know very few who give thanks for what they receive." For Bernard, thanksgiving is the highest form of prayer, "and all the more precious being the more infrequent." I would add, too, that the ability to say "Thank you" to another is an achievement of human maturity. Thanksgiving is the attitude of the pure heart and truly humble, who understand that their neediness is what attracts love and makes them attractive to love.

At First Vespers for the First Sunday of Advent, we introduced a new chant for the commemoration of Our Lady for the Advent Season. I think we sang it very well, and, as someone said after, Mary was certainly pleased.

I say it is a new chant. I mean, our use of it is new. It is really an old Cistercian chant in the Gregorian style. The text is the first part of the traditional "Hail Mary," in Latin.

The first phrase of this chant is Ave Maria, gratia plena. It is the greeting of the angel Gabriel to Mary of Nazareth. In English, we say, "Hail, Mary, full of grace," which is an exact translation of the Latin.

The Greek original, though, is a little different. The way St Luke transcribes the angel's greeting, it comes out, literally, "Rejoice, you woman who have been graced and still are graced." In the Greek, the angel did not address Mary by her name, Mary. He did not say, Hail, Mary. Instead,

he says, "Hail, woman who has been graced and still is graced." It is as if the angel is giving Mary a new name, "the Graced One."

Both the Latin and the English use an adjective and a noun, full and grace. But the Greek uses only one word, and it is a verb: "having been graced and still graced."

The Greek, then, makes you ask a question that the Latin and the English don't. The Greek makes you ask who the subject of the verb is: Who graced this woman, and keeps her graced? and the answer is without any doubt, God. Unlike the Latin, then, *gratia plena*, and the English, full of grace, the Greek version puts this woman in direct and intimate contact with God: You who have been graced, that is, by God, and still are graced, by that same God.

The second phrase of this chant is *Dominus tecum*. That is the Latin, and it is the briefest and best, as far as I'm concerned. The original Greek is four words compared to the Latin's two. The English is a direct translation of the Greek, the Lord is with you, the longest of the three versions because English almost always has to use the verb "to be" where you can drop it out in Latin and Greek.

So the Latin, with two words only, is the briefest of the three versions: *Dominus tecum*. It means the same as the Greek and the English: The Lord is with you. For me it is the best of the three versions for two reasons. First, the very fact of its being only two words long makes you experience even with your eyes, with your mouth and with your ears what it means for the Lord to be with. *Dominus tecum*. It is that close. *Dominus tecum*. You would almost think it is one word.

Which is the second reason I like this briefer Latin version over the longer Greek original and English translation. If *Dominus tecum* sounds like one word – you could never make "the Lord is with you" sound like one word – the word *tecum* is one word. It is made up of two particles, *te*, meaning you, and *cum*, meaning with. Again, this Latin way of expressing "with you" by one word almost paints a visual illustration of what it means for God to be "with" this person. I note, too, finally, that whereas in the Greek and English phrases, "The Lord is with you," the Lord is at one end and you is at the other, in the Latin's *Dominus tecum* there is nothing coming between the *Dominus* and the *te*, the Lord and the you.

Mary is God's creation. She has been graced by God, and rejoices in grace still and forever. She is one assured that God is with her. In the mid 5th century, a brilliant and eloquent priest gave a sermon in Antioch. His name was Anastasius. He was the theologian of the newly appointed patriarch of Constantinople, Nestorius. In his sermon he said, "Let no one call Mary *Theotokos*,

that is, Mother of God, for Mary was but a woman, and it is impossible that God should be born of a woman...No," he continued, "Mary was not the mother of God. For 'that which is born of flesh is flesh: and that which is born of Spirit is spirit.' A creature [Mary] brought not forth Him who is uncreated."

Without a doubt, Mary was but a woman. She was, and remains a creature, and not a goddess. And she was flesh, like every child of Adam is flesh. Still, as the Council of Chalcedon affirmed not long after Anastasius gave his sermon, Mary is the Theotokos, the true Mother of God, "because God the Word became incarnate and was made man, and from the very conception united to himself the temple taken from her."

This explains, at the same time, why Mary's new name is "woman who has been graced by God and is graced still," and why we can say truly, Dominus tecum. I may be another heretical Anastasius or Nestorius in saying this, though I don't intend heresy, as neither of them did, either. But it seems it is true to say that Jesus Christ is not the Incarnate Word because of who Mary is, or because of any prerogatives she had before hand; rather, Mary is who she is because the Son of God became her Son by virtue of God's prior choice and will in her regard. She is graced, and it is God who graces her, and the Lord is with her because he has chosen to become that close, Dominus tecum.

It is not too much to say that each of us, as Christians, has been graced by God, and that God has chosen to come near us. Mary, this Advent, is both and window and a mirror. She is a window through whom we can see the face of God in her Son; and she is a mirror in whom we can see the grace and the embrace of God reaching out and coming near to us.

A new poem of Br Thomas Imhoff, monk of Ava: Tint of Light

Fading shadow of the night,

fading light of day

still with color display

in the tint of light,

in a space of ground,

a tree's crown,

or the far horizon,

a tint of light

indicating what occurs,

telling what the day went through.

To all our friends and visitors, which extent our warmest wishes for holy and Christ-filled Advent and Christmas seasons.

Fr Mark, Abbot