

Dear Friends and Visitors

November 1 was All Saints Day. This year, that wonderful Solemnity of the "ingathering" of all God's Holy and Faithful one, took on an added dimension for us at Assumption Abbey. At Mass, our Abbot, Fr Mark, dedicated a new altar for our little Abbey Church. The altar was constructed out of wood by our Family Brother, Fr Paul Jones. In a talk to the community a week before the dedication, Fr Mark described the altar, contrasting it to the altar in use in our church up to October 31:



Both altars are the same in breadth, just short of 30". They obviously differ in length, though. Our current altar is a little over 72" or six feet long. Our new one is considerably shorter, so much so that you can't really use the word length. Its corresponding measurement is just under 43"; or 2 ½ feet shorter than our present one. The new altar is 1" shorter than the current one. The height was decided on by consulting the tallest and the shortest priest, and getting their agreement.

As for shape, I guess you could call our present altar a table, and the new one a box. The current altar's shape highlights the altar as a table of communion; the new altar highlights the altar as a place of sacrifice.

The shape of the new altar is fairly typical. I guess it was inspired by the time when Mass was celebrated on tombs of martyrs. So you can say that the new altar is in the shape of a tomb and represents death and burial with Christ, as well as resurrection, because the tomb was found empty. More personally, I confess that the idea for an altar in this shape really caught hold of me when I was in Aachen, Germany, and



visited the church of Charlemagne. It was a small cube, almost precious. The proportions were perfect for the size of the church. It was not overwhelmingly large. I think the proportions of our new altar will turn out almost perfect for our small church.

Following the ancient rite for the dedication of an altar, we chanted the litany of the saints to the traditional Gregorian melodies. The altar was then anointed with the Sacred Chrism, incensed all around, and then the candles were lit and the altar dressed for the first Mass to be celebrated on it. The altar is a delight. It has changed the feel of our church, adding both a quiet elegance and a sense of order.



On November 2, as we do each year on All Souls Day, the community and guest processed after Lauds from the Church to the cemetery for the blessing of the graves. At each of the graves, as Fr Mark incensed the grave marker, Fr Cyprian offered a brief narrative highlighting a characteristic feature of the brother or the friend we were remembering. There are thirteen monks buried in our cemetery, and half a dozen lay men and women who have had some unique role to play in the Abbey's history. There are our local "saints."

On Thanksgiving Day, about thirty friends and neighbors joined us at noon in our refectory for a splendid holiday meal. This was the largest gathering in recent years for this Assumption tradition.

Much of the midwest was frozen stiff the last week of November. At Ava, we had temperatures in the single digits, with freezing rain and light snow. St Louis, Kansas City, and other places north of us were hit harder still. The result was that we had to cancel the first plenary meeting of our new Lay Advisory Committee for Assumption Abbey, since the participants either could not get out of their driveways, or prudently chose not to drive on iced roads to Ava. We hope to reschedule before too long.

In the meantime, we and our dedicated employees, Vicky, Joseph, Michael and Kathy, are busy taking and filling fruitcake orders. We trust we have an excellent product, and are so happy that with it we can add a particular note of happiness and joy to peoples' holiday celebrations.

Advent is underway, and we long for the peace and comfort of the Son of God. As we wait, with

you and with Mary and Joseph, we offer you these reflections:

Four years ago December there was a spectacular celestial display, the Leonids meteor shower. I don't know how far away these meteors were from the earth's surface. Anyway, they burn out long before you'd have a chance to catch one, even though they are small enough to catch in your hands, too small to have much of an impact on the surface of the earth.

But there are other things orbiting around out there. Asteroids and comets are capable of giving the old planet earth a terrific wallop. About 65 million years ago, an asteroid hit the Yucatan Peninsula. That was the end of the dinosaurs, but a lease on life for the upcoming mammals. So in a sense, by God's design, we are here because of a cosmic collision.

But for some reason, asteroids and comets don't collide with the Earth so much any more, although as recent as in 1908 one exploded over a forest in Siberia. It leveled 700 square miles of trees. That asteroid was estimated to have been about 300 feet in diameter. Asteroid 1997XF11 is a mile in diameter. It will pass within half a million miles of us in 2028. Just a few years ago an asteroid missed us by only three million miles. But consider that the earth travels that same distance in two days. That means that if this asteroid had arrived just 48 hours earlier it could very well have caused on Earth what scientists call an Extinction-Level Event.

The Near-Earth Asteroid Tracking Project, funded by NASA, has discovered 5000 asteroids. They say hundreds of these pass within five million miles of the earth, but they've only completed 10% of their research. Last year an asteroid estimated at 1.8 miles in diameter was discovered approaching the earth. An asteroid that large hitting Earth would mean global destruction. The asteroid Eros is 13 miles in diameter. That's no star to make a wish on. It crosses our planet's orbit about every hundred years or so. It probably won't hit us for another 200,000 years, if every, but if it does we're just a memory.

That's asteroids. Comets are another story, but not so different in result. They could come out of nowhere, like an airliner approaching a skyscraper in Manhattan when all were saying, "Peace, peace" and there we'd be. The Book of Revelation seems to know about asteroids and comets and the damage they can. All through, you see stars falling to earth, as "When the third angel blew his trumpet, a large star burning like a torch fell from the sky. It fell on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water," causing many people to die (8:10-11).

A kind of asteroid once struck in Palestine. It was in the first half of the second century, but it burned itself out before doing much damage. This was the Bar Kokhba Revolt, 132-135 AD. It was the second and final demonstration of armed resistance in Judea against Roman rule, after

the one in the year 70 that saw the destruction of the Temple. The revolt was led by a certain Jewish patriot whose name was Simon bar Kosiba.

Simon was thought by many to be the King Messiah. He would bring final and lasting liberation from Rome and peace to Israel. The revered teacher at the time, Rabbi Akiba, called Simon, "Bar Kokhba," "Son of the Star." The reference was undoubtedly to Numbers 25 and the wonderful oracle of Balaam:

I see him, though not now; I behold him, though not near:
A star shall advance from Jacob...
Israel shall do valiantly, and Jacob shall overcome his
foes (vv.17, 18-19).

But like so many before him, this rising star was extinguished and crushed by the Roman machine. About a century and a half earlier, and still in a Palestine under Roman rule, yet another star signaled the end of the world. "We saw his star at its rising..." "And behold, the star that they had seen at its rising preceded them until it came and stopped over the place where the child was. They were overjoyed at seeing the star and on entering the house they...did him homage. And they departed for their country by another way" (Matt 2).

This child would grow up to say,
the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
and the stars will be falling from the sky...
Amen I say to you, this generation will not pass away until these things have

taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away but my words will not pass away. (Mk 13.) But this star, too, the Romans extinguished. They put the cold cinder of his body in the black hole of a tomb. This was Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Mary who would later be described as the woman clothed with the sun and wearing on her head a crown of twelve stars. Unlike the Son of the Star a century later, the Son of Mary came back again, a paradoxical star not falling to but rising out of the Earth, but causing as much and even more chaos and confusion as any city-sized asteroid whamming into the planet's crust.

"I am the root and offspring of David," is how he described himself, "the bright morning star," (Rev 22:16), and he held in one hand the seven stars which are all the men and

women that ever were or will be forming clusters and constellations around him soaking up and reflecting back his inexhaustible light, to whom he promises that "whoever conquers I will give the morning star (Rev 2:28)..."

At one point in chapter 10 of 1st Corinthians St Paul says, as by way of explanation, that we Christians are the ones upon whom have come the ends of the ages. What he means is that with the comet of the Gospel colliding with the flow of human time, the old order and way of doing things is passing away and behold, I make all things new (Rev 21:5). As the prophet Isaiah had said centuries before, "Cease to dwell on days gone by and to brood over past history. The old has come to an end and the new is emerging sure as the dawn." Upon us have come the ends of the ages.

We live, then, now, both in a world that is falling apart and in a realm unshakeable and firm. Biblical theologians of some decades ago used to talk about "the already and the not yet." The new order is already here, yet it is not fully realized. That is why St Paul, for instance, on the one hand, can confidently tell the Philippians, that they are "blameless children in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom they [already] shine like stars in the world," (vv.14-15), while St Peter, on the other, tells us to hold fast to the word of God "until day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts" (2 Pet 1:19).

We are the ones upon whom the ends of the earth have come. It is already, because of the Son of Mary who holds the seven stars in his hand; it is a sure thing. It is not yet, because of "the star that had fallen from the sky to the earth," opened the abyss, and let loose upon the earth the pent up powers of Satan (Rev 9:1ff). Like any self-respecting asteroid on a collision course with planet Earth, our Lord Jesus himself said, "I am coming not for peace but for chaos." Let us hold that in mind as we begin a new Advent season. Let us be aware of the woe we pronounce upon ourselves every time we sing or say, "Come, Lord Jesus!"

In fact, as all of you know, a huge part of monastic life is watching our little planet up-heave and disintegrate before our helpless eyes. It is the destruction caused when the orbit of our life and the orbit of the Gospel crossing at the very same point. Even though the Gospel is only a mustard-seed-sized meteor while in our own eyes our life is big as the sun, we know which of the two will of necessity have to yield to the other.

During this Advent season, let us renew our intention to forget what is behind and stretch out to what lies ahead. Let us let the one age pass and the new age take on larger definition in our

thoughts and in our behaviors. When I was a child, St Paul said in an astounding moment of self-disclosure, I acted as a child. But the Gospel has made things different. I do not have to think now as I did 60 years ago. However my upbringing may have been, and however I have accommodated myself to my fears and dug my feet into my posture of defense before the world, that does not have to determine my values and choices now. As Paul will say in chapter 13 of 1st Corinthians, "when I became a man I put away the things of my childhood." This is the end of the age, the second coming, the extinction of dinosaurs and the advent of a New Man.

An Advent Homily from Assumption Abbey

Could not God have redeemed us in some other way?

That is, instead of the "Word became flesh?"

In Genesis 1, God creates man, like all other things, with a word:

"Let us make man," and there we were.

Could not God have redeemed us in a similarly clean and efficient way?

"Say but the word," says the centurion, "and my servant will be healed."

"I, too, am a man under authority, with men under me."

We want God to be like us, to behave like us.

Why doesn't God act like we do, and so confirm the ways we relate to each other:

Boss and employee, landowner and serf, captain and soldier, even abbot and monk?

It would be nice of God to do that.

But God is not nice, in the way we count niceness.

God is not made in our image;

he became Man to show us what our humanity is really capable of,

to become like god;

to show us that we are not what we think we are, much less what we feel we are,

and neither is God.

Ancient gnosticism, and modern, too,

would have had God passing through Mary as through a conduit,

taking nothing of the Virgin herself.

"If that were so," says John Chrysostom,

"He has nothing in common with us; his flesh is some other kind,

and not our own."

In the incarnation, God is not like God in Genesis 1,

but like Yawhew in Genesis 2.

who got his hands dirty in the mud -- in our mud.

"I rejoiced when I heard them say..." This is today's Responsorial Psalm.

Who is speaking? Who is rejoicing?

"Let us go to God's house, to the Holy City."

Jerusalem, in the Psalms, is the whole cosmos;

it is the city of man; it is humanity entire.

The Word rejoiced at the divine plan, the divine idea,

"Let us go to their City."

And the feet of Jesus stood in our streets, in our homes,

and said, and says still,

"For love of you, my brothers and friends,

and for love of the House of God,

I say peace upon you."

So let it be, through Mary, our flesh.

Fr Mark, Abbot