

Dear Friends and Visitors

Early in November two monks of St Benedict's Abbey, Atchison, Kansas, spent a week in our midst. Fr Bruce Swift, OSB, is novice master at that venerable Benedictine abbey, and Br Leven is just completing his year-long novitiate. Both canon law and the particular law of monastic institutes prudently and graciously provide for a seven-day retreat prior to a young religious making vows. Br Leven chose to make his retreat among us: he wanted to retreat at a "Trappist monastery." The two monks, mentor and disciple, had rooms in the guesthouse, but they joined the Ava monks in choir for the hours of the opus dei, and in refectory for the main meal at noon. Br Leven, in his early 20s, as a true Benedictine was eager and generous in his willingness to integrate manual labor into his retreat. He was a welcome help both in the bakery and in grounds keeping. We hope both Fr Bruce and Br Leven will return, and that other monks of Atchison will choose to visit us, their younger brothers – fellow followers of St Benedict. Br Leven will make his vows on December 8.

In the middle of the month, Elizabeth Zeller of Independence, MO, conducted a "Pre-Advent Icon Retreat" in our guesthouse. Elizabeth is an accomplished writer of icons. Visitors to the Abbey during the past year will have contemplated her icon of Our Lady of Tenderness venerated in the Abbey Church (see Newsletter for December, 2006, for an account of the dedication of this icon). Through images, words, silence, and the senses of hearing and touch, Elizabeth invited the retreat participants to fresh avenues of prayer and theological depth. Fr Mark, Abbot of Assumption Abbey, gave a conference to the participants on the Cistercian spirituality of emptiness and prayer without images. He spoke about St Bernard's "prohibition" against the use of color in the monks' manuscript illuminations as an example in craft and art of what the monk should be in the depth of his heart: not so much colorless, as pure and authentic and



transparent, like the Cistercian "grey glass" that allowed the pure light to enter their unadorned churches. We hope Elizabeth will repeat her retreat in 2008.

It was mentioned in our last letter that a man pursuing the External Oblate vocation at Ava would be spending ten days living in the Abbey. A resident of Stillwater, OK, our candidate arrived the day before Thanksgiving and departed on November 30. He participated in all aspects of our daily life, and even cooked for us on the weekend of Solemnity of Christ the King. This was the second visit for this Oblate candidate and, as he himself said, the experience was "very, very good."



Thanksgiving Day arrived with the aromas of baking turkey and ham, of sweet potatoes and cranberry sauce, and the anticipation of fresh pumpkin, pecan, and cherry-apple pies. As usual on this special national holiday, about twenty friends and guests joined us in the Church for Midday Prayer and then in the monastic refectory for a prolonged festive meal. During the meal James Zifferman of Cape Girardeau, a concert pianist, detached himself from the good conversation, steaming food and robust wine at his table, sat at the small electric piano we had put in the refectory for this very purpose, and enchanted us with his fluid performances of several pieces by Chopin. The meal ended with all praying together the office of None.

On November 30, the Feast of St Andrew, Pope Benedict XVI published his encyclical letter, *Spe salvi*. Fr Mark drew from this rich meditation on the virtue of hope for his homily at Mass on December 2, the First Sunday of Advent. We wish all our visitors and readers a blessed Advent Season and a Holy and Peaceful Christmas.

Fr Cyprian, Abbot