

Dear Friends and Visitors

With our last new entry for the Year of Our Lord 2002, as we enter 2003, we wish our readers a Happy New Year.

While November is the traditional month for Thanksgiving, gratitude from the heart has spilled over into the entire month of December here at Assumption Abbey.

First, we are grateful for the good health and the peace in the community.

Second, we have been overwhelmed by the generosity of so many friends and fruitcake customers. With our annual fruitcake-order mailing in October we included a one-time-only ""Appeal for the Abbot"" for help in paying off the loan we took on for our recently completed building project. The response to that Appeal has been deeply moving, all the more so when we consider the unhappy state of our nation's economy these days, the many other worthy causes, and, frankly, the disaffection with which many, even Catholics, regard the Catholic Church in the U.S. at the present time. Please know how humbly thankful we are for your affirmation of our way of life, your encouragement and trust.

Another motive for thanksgiving is the fact that, once again, we sold all of our fruitcakes. Unlike last year, though, we did not sell out too quickly! We were able to meet most orders for cakes for Christmas and New Years. But by the third week of December, we had to begin asking people to be content with a fruitcake in February, and most were. Remarkably, we sold over 30,000 fruitcakes with virtually no advertisement. A timely AP article began appearing in early December and that helped a great deal. But we know most of our ""advertisement"" is the product itself, a quality and tasty cake the people learn about directly from experience in the homes of friends.

During December a lot of extra work is needed to ship out the thousands of cakes. We hired two people to take telephone orders and enter them into the computer. Fr Anthony put in long hours receiving internet orders, double checking orders, troubleshooting on the phone, and printing out mailing labels. Br Tobias organized the packaging and shipping crews. A long-term guest was an invaluable help, as were other guests of shorter duration who offered to put in a few hours a day. Br John O'Driscoll, OCSO, a monk of our motherhouse, New Melleray Abbey, in Iowa, extended his stay with us through the month of December. He gave generously of his time and talent whenever and wherever requested.

The background and context of this business activity was, of course, the rich liturgical season of

Advent. The liturgy, particularly the readings and prayers at Mass each day and the prophecies and patristic readings at Vigils, once again taught us how to desire and what to desire. The candles of the Advent wreath before the altar in the church gave symbolic expression to our quiet, patient, intense expectation of He Who Comes. With profound intuition, the church gives us the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception in the midst of Advent. This is an opportunity to reflect on the mystery of God in the bowels of human history, moving us from within, even before we are aware.

On Monday, December 23, we held the first Mass ever in our new infirmary chapel and so blessed and dedicated it and the altar. After Lauds that morning, the monks and the three guests present processed from the main church to the chapel by way of the new cloister garth. There was just enough room for the 18 of us to sit on chairs placed around the perimeter. It was a simple warm intimate liturgical gesture in a most stunning Cistercian environment. This small act, carefully planned, orderly and graceful, went far to heal the bad taste and memory left behind by the ugly vandalism that we suffered in our church and refectory the night of December 21.

In his homily for the Mass of dedication, Fr Mark took his lead from the opening line of a fresh poem by Br Thomas put on the bulletin board earlier that morning: ""What causes a burst or rage?""

Like a work of exquisite art - a painting by Monet, an oratorio by Verdi, or a poem by Br Tom - a burst of rage is only the end point and fruit of a more or less long and deep pre-history. Like art, but in a twisted and perverse way, a burst of rage brings to light and puts there so you can see it clearly the hidden history and movements of the heart and soul. And as the work of art complete is the occasion of endless joy for the beholders and deep satisfaction for the artist, so the burst of rage standing there in the concrete can bring the beholders and the victims to reevaluate their position, and the raging person to repentance: Did I do that? Is that me?

Substantial snowfalls December 23 and 24 meant a splendid white Christmas in the Ozarks under a clear and brilliant sun-filled sky. Because of the snow, the only people present at Midnight Mass and the Day Mass were our four overnight guests already in the guesthouse. It was a quite intimate Christmas. In his homily at the Midnight Mass, Fr Mark lingered over the fact of God coming as a child: A Child is Born for us. Some ideas, in a sketchy way:

A child is born for us. A child is our teacher: a little child shall lead them. A child shall teach us the way to salvation, the way to peace. A child teaches us to renounce the compulsions and desires of ""the world,"" the ""system of domination"" that our politics, our economy, our

interpersonal relationships are so much in bondage to.

A child is born for us: This is God: useless, purposeless, dispossessed of all power, except the power to melt hearts and make even the most entrenched Scrooges among us laugh when he laughs and keep on laughing to make him laugh more, and the power of endless hope.

A child

Wonder-Counselor: how wonderful if the councils of government and war, the Bushes, the Rumsfelds, the Saddams, the Sharons, would invite children to their meetings, babies, especially orphans of war and refugees. Let them make their plans as the children play on the floor around them;

Mighty-God: if the various religions would see in the child and the baby what they have in common, and that the true God, like an infant, is not jealous and jockeying for power and allegiance;

Eternal Father: how many of us are still fighting our finite and mortal fathers? How many of us consider ourselves stuck with only the little they were able to give us? But an eternal father who is also a child for ever will teach us what we most need to know in life, not be a ""man"" in charge, but a child in wonder that everything is ours just because it's there, and everything can be shared without loss.

The Prince of Peace. A child needs endless care and attention; a baby quickly turns an egoistic young man into a father and a self-absorbed young woman into a mother. Peace happens when people go out of themselves looking not simply for their own well-being but for the good of the other.

Fr Donald, Br John, and Fr Paul Jones erected in the and decorated in the refectory a tall and rotund cedar freshly cut by Br Thomas. Br Thomas and Fr Paul put a small tree in the church and encircled the tabernacle with a cedar wreath studded with small white lights. Br Fidel arranged fresh flowers and poinsettias around the altar and the ambo. Fr Mark accompanied the Psalms and the Invitatory of the offices on the zither. And so our Christmas celebration proceeded throughout the Octave to the celebration January 1 of the Solemnity of the Mother of God.

To all our friends, may God grant you peace, and may a Little Child always be your best Teacher!

Fr Mark, Abbot