

Dear Friends and Visitors

To all our visitors and friends, the monks of Assumption Abbey wish a blessed Christmas season and a happy new year.

Some of our readers will be familiar with St Ephrem the Syrian. Ephrem lived in Nisibis and then in Edessa in the middle of the fourth century. Ephrem was a deacon and a theologian. More than many theologians of his time or later, Ephrem expressed some of his most profound insights in poetry, in hymns. He was known, in fact, as the Harp of the Holy Spirit. There exists a collection of Ephrem's Nativity hymns, and one could choose worse ways to spend the latter days of Advent, and the time between Midnight Mass and the Day Mass of Christmas, than reading and meditating upon Ephrem's hymns. Ephrem says, for instance, in Hymn II,

This is the month which brings all manner of joy; it is the freedom of the bondsmen, the pride of the free, the crown of the gates, the soothing of the body, that also in its love puts purple upon us as upon kings.

This is the month that brings all manner of victories; it frees the spirit; it subdues the body; it brings forth life among mortals; it caused, in its love, Godhead to dwell in Manhood.

In this day the Lord exchanged glory for shame, as being humble; because Adam changed the truth for unrighteousness as being a rebel; the Good One had mercy on him, justified and set right then that had turned aside.

Because the Good One saw that the race of man was poor and humbled, He made feasts as a treasure-house, and opened them to the slothful, that the feast might stir up the slothful one to rise and be rich.

For his part, St Bernard, commenting on the verse, "I am black, but beautiful," in his sermon 28 on the Song of Songs, says,

It is better that one be blackened for the sake of all, than for the whole of mankind to be lost by the blackness of sin; that the splendor and image of the substance of God should be shrouded in the form of a slave, in order that a slave might live; that the brightness of eternal light should become dimmed in the flesh for the purging of the flesh; that he who surpasses all mankind in beauty should be eclipsed by the darkness of the Passion for the enlightening of mankind; that he himself should suffer the ignominy of the cross, grow pale in death, be totally deprived of beauty and comeliness that he might gain the Church as a beautiful and comely bride, without stain and spot.

The monastic way allows the monks, individually and as a community, to steep themselves in the Mystery through the liturgy, through the practice of lectio divina, through silence, a silence made so real and present by our particular situation in the Ozarks.

Within this rhythm of liturgy, praise, meditation and wonder, we continued making and shipping our wonderful fruitcakes. We are so grateful to our customers. We are grateful, to for our fine employees, our permanent ones, and the few we hire in the fall of each year to help take orders and ship them out. To show our appreciation to our employees, on December 8, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, we invited our guests to dine with us in our refectory. Fr Mark prepared a simple meal of shrimp braised in lime juice and garlic, and brown rice topped with fresh spinach, with oven-warm pecan pie for desert. It was a family affair which everyone enjoyed.

The Franciscan friars of the nearby Our Lady of the Angels Friary joined us for the Christmas Mass at Midnight. More than joining us, Br Mark accompanied our singing on the organ, and Fr Michael acted as cantor. Sr Nancy Smith, IHM, a guest of the Abbey at Christmas, performed a soulful rendition of *Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming* after Communion at the same Mass. After Midnight Mass, our guests gathered in the guesthouse to enjoy the first moments of the Feast with each other, around home made eggnog (Fr Mark) and cinnamon rolls (Br Dominic). At a little after 5:00 a.m., Fr Mark celebrated the Dawn Mass in our lovely infirmary chapel, while Fr Cyprian and Fr Donald joined to do the same in the main church just after Lauds of Christmas. As usual, the day after Christmas, St Stephen's Day, is a non-work day for the monks and employees, a wonderful day to rest, but also to take a long walk in the still woods, listen to the sounds of the earth and the trees singing out their joy to the Lord.

A friend of the monastery who is also an accomplished icon writer came to the Abbey just before Christmas, set up a temporary studio in the room next to her sleeping room, and put to work writing an icon for the Abbey, her gift to us. It will be a large icon of Christ Pantocrator. We feel blessed by her presence and her work, and know that the icon, installed in the cloister at the monks' entrance to the Church, will have a positive, but still unknown, influence on our life as monks.

The more one lives at Assumption Abbey the happier one is about his monastic vocation, and the more grateful he is for the brothers who share it with him. At the same time, though, there is sadness that so few men are willing to embrace this way of life any more. It is a sadness for those unwilling or willing but too timid or simply unaware individuals, but also a sadness for our culture that seems to have turned so gloomy and pessimistic about the value of human being as to reduce its value to material gain and possessions. As St Ephrem says in the same hymn, "Lo!

The First-born has opened unto us His feast as a treasure house. This one day in the whole year alone opens that treasure house: come; let us make gain, let us grow rich from it, ere they shut it up." Sometime it seems that "they" have already succeeded in shutting up all avenues to this treasure house opened once for all in the Incarnation.

Fr Mark, Abbot