

Dear Associates and Friends,

The Lord be with you.

This is the winter of the Big Flood. Only a minimum amount of freezing weather, ice or snow, but Goliath poured enough rain to give us an old-fashioned super-flood. The high waters gouged out a trench across one end of our concrete low-water bridge, and they demolished a fiberglass telephone post, which marks and protects underground wiring.

Dom Stan Gumula of Mepkin Abbey, SC, gave our community retreat in January. His conferences developed the Ladder of Humility in St. Benedict's Rule for monks. He closed traditionally with a talk on the Blessed Virgin based on St. Bernard's sermons. The next day Dom Stan and our Fr. Alberic left for the U.S.A. Regional Meeting of Trappist superiors at Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky. Three Family Brothers (two from Texas and one from Louisiana) shared our Retreat.

No baking fruit cakes during January, so that gave time to do a thorough cleaning and waxing of floors. Also we operated a high rise rig to replace burned out florescent tubes in the ceiling light fixtures of the bakery and warehouse parts of the building.

Ash Wednesday came early this year. Each monk chose a book he wanted to use for Lenten reading. Fr. Alberic gave us our books at the Wednesday evening Chapter meeting, while the ashes were still on our foreheads. Every evening at 7:00 p.m. the bell rings for a half hour of Lenten reading. We do this at the same time, but not in the same place. Sundays, of course, are free from that Lenten observance. A Family Brother from Kansas shared the first beginning of Lent with us.

A group of Assumption Abbey Associates gathered here for a weekend retreat the first Sunday of Lent. The weather was mild when they came, but that Saturday night a freezing rain coated everything with a heavy layer of ice. Yet it was melting a bit Sunday afternoon, and by Monday afternoon all was melted. Wait fifteen minutes and Missouri Ozark weather changes.

Fr. Paul and Family Brother Jim built more book cases for our Family Guest House basement, and filled them with Fr. David's books (our Family Guest House Master). Many of the books had languished in boxes on the floor. He discovered some reference books of his which had remained hidden till then. That was a real move forward. Now Fr. David can arrange and classify his library.

We continue to move ahead with our program of transfer from an American Trappist community to a Vietnamese Cistercian monastery. Four Vietnamese monks have lived with us over two years and we all are satisfied to have four more monks come here. USCIS has approved the first application for Religious Worker visas for those next four monks. In a couple of months the final processes should be completed, and we will welcome Brothers Bruno, Ambrose, Gabriel, and Alphonsus.



BLESSED HUMBELINE

Our Lord Jesus told the Syro Phoenician woman, "It is not right to give the bread of the children to the dogs." She replied, "Yes, Lord, but even the puppies eat the scraps which fall from their master's table." St. Bernard refused to visit his only sister Humbeline, when she came to the guest house dressed in noble finery. She sent word, "If I am a sinner, Christ died for me," so Bernard relented and did come over to visit.

St. Bernard's sister lived up to her name *Humbeline*. She humbled herself, and won over her brother. But she won more than Bernard's acceptance. She won God's grace of conversion. Humbeline entered the convent of Jully two years later. Eventually she became abbess. When she came to the end of her life, Bernard again came to visit her, along with two of their other brothers.

The Cistercian reform and renewal returned to the original simplicity of St. Benedict contemplative monastic life. St. Benedict's twin sister Scholastica had a convent of nuns at the base of Monte Cassino, but there is no record that Benedict associated his monastery with a community of nuns. St. Stephen Harding made no provision for convents of nuns in his Charter of Charity, yet in time Citeaux did take on guidance of a community of nuns. Later on the nun's monastery of Tart became the first true member of the Cistercian family.

So many men were entering Cistercian monasteries that their sisters and wives, mothers and daughters also wanted to embrace the same School of the Lord's Service/School of Charity. The Cistercian convents were accepted as full members, yet the nuns were governed by the General Chapter of Abbots, which legislated for both the monks and nuns. Only during the years of renewing our Trappist Constitutions from 1969-1990 did the Trappistine Abbesses begin meeting together in their own General Chapter. Rome told them that we are living in a time of women coming into their own, so they could now form their own Order. The nuns replied, "No thank you. Historically we have been members of one same Order, and we want to continue as one Order." Rome approved our new Constitutions, which recognizes two branches, monks and nuns, of the one Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance.

During the turbulent years of renewal (spiritual adolescence) after Vatican II, when many priests, brothers, and sisters left the religious life—including Trappist monks—our Trappistine nuns lost very few sisters. They are among the most faithful in wearing the religious habit, including the veil. Our Trappistine sisters have also maintained a gracious, friendly relationship with the monks' branch of the Order. The fruitful cooperation of our two branches has led Rome to approve our abbesses and abbots to meet together in one functional General Chapter.

The old folk wisdom has it, "Never underestimate the power of a woman." The story of Blessed Humbeline, and her Cistercian Trappistine sisters in the following 900 years, gives rise to the question. Perhaps our nuns have persevered in living out the ideals of our Cistercian Fathers more faithfully than our monks have?

In the Sacred Heart,

Your Ava Monks