

Dear Associates and Friends,

The Lord be with you.

A group of volunteers from Whetstone Boys Ranch came to cut and clean out saplings and brush from two areas in our woods. The ranch is run by some men and a family. They have a program for at risk boys. The young men are given experience in community living and sharing, in manual labor with farm and animals. They continue studies at high school level. A tornado devastated their buildings last fall. Thankfully no one was hurt. That set-back was encountered by an outpouring of local support encouraging them to rebuild. They did fine work in volunteering for our needs.

The newly elected Vietnamese abbot Joseph, along with Mother Timothy of the Cistercian Nuns, came to visit his monks with us. This was the first time he traveled in the USA. He then took Fr. Peter as translator with them to meet several groups of Vietnamese laypeople, who give support to his monastery.

Bakery work is more involved when the season for holiday orders and shipping arrives. This year there was an early flood, then a slowing down and finally selling out in mid December.

Fr. Thaddeus and Basil traveled to North Carolina helping out for an Advent retreat at a parish, which has a large number of Vietnamese lay parishioners. Br. Roberto went home to Vietnam, staying at their monastery and visiting his mother who has suffered ill health. All the travelers came back here in time for Christmas.

Two of our family brothers from Texas have been coming regularly, almost monthly, to share in our community life. In mid December John Paul had to stay home and tend to his lawyer's career in court, but his buddy John drove here. Our unpredictable Missouri weather was so mild that he was mowing the lawn in our inner courtyard.

Fr. Alberic and Br. Thomas shared in a pre-Thanksgiving dinner with Br. Boniface at his Heart of the Ozarks nursing home. They also have a pre-Christmas dinner party for the residents. Family members are encouraged to share in the meal and to bring a present for their patient. At our own Thanksgiving dinner this year there were not as many friends and neighbors present as in the past, but it was a large warm family feast in the American pilgrim tradition.

Fr. Paul and his Santa's helpers went out to the woods and found three evergreen trees of suitable size for our refectory (huge) and church (medium) and guest house (modest). Each year he creates a new arrangement for the church. Last year's decoration was so successful that a picture of his crib, was used for this year's Christmas card.



VINE AND BRANCHES

Our Lord says that He is the Vine and we are the branches. His Father is the Vine Dresser. We can apply this agricultural image to the monastic movement in the Church.

The time of the desert fathers and mothers was the time of digging and planting seed. As the Church was coming out of some three centuries of persecution and martyrs, God sent the Holy Spirit anew to call some persons to leave everything behind, and to undertake a desert journey in search of growing union with God. The monastic movement was a holiness movement within the Church. As we listened recently to the sayings of the desert fathers during our noon meals, we recognized that they were pioneers, learning by trial and error. They were gradually developing a wisdom tradition.

The time of St. Benedict in the 500's was the period of solid growth. In his Rule for Monks St. Benedict edited and organized a balanced program of liturgy, *lectio* and labor for daily life in the monastery. He first asks, "Is the candidate seeking God truly?" He also describes a road map, a ladder of humility and a ladder of charity, showing the stages of growth from beginning to the end of the monk's journey.

Then in the 1100's with our Cistercian Fathers the sturdy plant of the monastic movement blossomed into lovely flowers. St. Bernard, followed by Aelred, Gueric, William and the others, elaborated the contemplative dimension of monastic life. Bernard summed up his experience of contemplative prayer and growing union with God by this verse from the Song of Songs, "He makes love grow in right order within me."

At the turn of the 20th century the contemplative monastic movement bore fruit in a paradoxical form: not in a spiritual giant like Antony, Benedict or Bernard, but in the person of Therese of Lisieux. She was not Benedictine, nor a lofty mystic. She recognized and accepted her littleness according to our Lord's words, "Unless you become as a little child, you will not enter the Kingdom of God." She offered her hidden life of love, intercessory prayers and sacrifice in response to God's call for the sake of her brothers and sisters in the world. The Church recognized the fruit of her life by naming her the co-patroness of the missions and a Doctor of the Church.

It seems that the Holy Spirit is giving us today that same message of paradoxical fruitfulness from the 20th century Trappist lives of St. Raphael Arnez, the diabetic oblate in Spain, in Blessed Marie Joseph Cassant, the hopeless case monk in France, in Blessed Cyprian Michael Tanzi, the failure from Nigeria, in the very ordinary imperfect monks martyred in Algeria and the martyred monks during the Spanish Civil War, and in Blessed Maria Gabriella Sagheddu, the rebel patroness of Church Unity from Italy.

The overall history of the monastic holiness movement can give us a pattern for our own life as monk or nun: a time of digging and seed planting, a time of growth, a time of blossoming, a time of paradoxical fruitfulness, on our journey of seeking God truly and preferring nothing to the love of Christ, who leads us by emptying Himself in His Holy Sacrifice and Communion of the Eucharist in order to fill us more fully with His Holy Spirit.

In the Sacred Heart,

Your Ava Monks