

Associates of Assumption Abbey, Ava, Missouri, USA
Spiritual Journey

The first group of monks sent from New Melleray Abbey to establish a monastery near Ava, Missouri in the winter of 1950 faced a real pioneer style of life. The three story Swiss dwelling which awaited them had no central heating, no electricity and no running water.

The rugged terrain did not lend itself to their agrarian pursuits. Elizabeth Hanick, sister to Brother Louis Hanick, rallied a group of women in St. Louis to bake goods to raise funds to assist the struggling community. These first "Friends of Assumption Abbey" were the fore-runners of Abbey Associates who would come forth forty-five years later.

By the beginning of the 70's a concrete block plant had become a thriving source of income. Some blocks were used to build a new monastery complete with guest house. Over the next three decades many changes occurred within and outside the monastery to affect the lives of the community. Father Robert Matter and Father Cyprian Harrison were elected as second and third abbots with Dom Flavian Burns and Father Basil Pennington as interim superiors between the two terms. During these years several additional buildings were constructed and the concrete block plant gave way to the fruitcake bakery bringing a radical change in the method of manual labor.

Beyond the walls a major event which had a tremendous impact on the monastery was the Vatican Council II in the late 60's and beyond. Of more immediate influence was the growing interest in the writings of Thomas Merton. A group of the International Merton Society met monthly in St. Louis to read and discuss his works. From this group came many of the first Associates of Assumption Abbey. The presence of Basil Pennington at Ava was another popular draw as he frequently gave workshops on Centering Prayer in St. Louis which were instrumental in the formation of a chapter of the Contemplative Outreach Organization there in 1989.

The Associates of Assumption Abbey traces its actual date of origin to a day of reflection conducted by Ava's fourth abbot, Father James Conner in January, 1995 at Kenrick Seminary in St. Louis. Father Conner told a receptive audience that the Abbot General, Dom Bernardo Olivera, convinced of the workings of the Holy Spirit, had expressed a desire to allow lay men and women to share in the Cistercian charism. Subsequently, under Abbot Conner's guidance, a group of eighteen began to meet monthly for prayer, reading (Lectio Divina), study and discussion. Dom James encouraged attendance at an annual retreat to be held at the Abbey and a monthly newsletter was inaugurated to keep lines of communication open between the group and the monastery.

Illness prevented Dom James from completing his term and he returned to Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky. Former abbot, Father Robert Matter, served as interim superior for a short while until Abbot Freeman of the Mother Monastery appointed Basil Pennington as superior and invited Father Mark Scott from Vina, California to assist him. Meanwhile, the young group of associates continued to persevere with great encouragement from the Order. On July 4, 1999, Dom Armand Veilleux of Belgium, who had been one of Holy Spirit's first abbots, addressed a gathering of associates. He informed them that the Order recognized the call of the Holy Spirit in drawing lay persons throughout the world to the Cistercian charism. A great deal of time had been spent on this very topic on the occasion of the 9th Centenary Cistercian celebration held at Citeaux the previous year. A congratulatory letter from Pope John Paul II to the gathering on that occasion referred to the lay groups as members of the Cistercian family.

At the second International Meeting of Lay Cistercians held in Conyers, Georgia in 2002, Dom Bernardo Olivera delivered a paper entitled Beyond the Borders. In that document he called upon the various groups to try to realize and describe their identity, to discuss their expectations, and to draw up programs of formation. Buoyed by the demonstration of the Order's wholehearted acceptance, the Associates of Assumption Abbey proceeded to carry out these objectives. With the assistance of Brother Francis Flaherty, a Charter was drawn up and made available to all the members at the August 2004 meeting. Father Mark Scott had now been abbot for a few years, having been elected with the departure of Father Pennington to assume his role as abbot of Holy Spirit in Conyers. Dom Mark was very supportive of the Associates and made it a point to attend their meetings both at the abbey and beyond. He presided at a Formation Workshop held in Florissant, Missouri in February 2005. Trisha and Dennis Day from the Iowa Associate group of the Mother Abbey were invited to share some key concepts they had developed. A short time after that meeting Father Mark gave permission for two members to form a group in Cuba, Missouri, a town 100 miles west of St. Louis which was that much closer to the Abbey. This second group quickly tripled in size.

Father Mark involved members of both groups in a Lay Advisory Council he created. He also assigned them a task of organizing theme retreats to which they were to invite folks from parishes throughout the diocese. This was an attempt to make more people aware of the monastery hidden away in a secluded valley in the Ozark Hills. It was a rewarding endeavor. A member of the Cuba group took seriously a statement from a document published by the General Chapter of 2002. In the Statute on Lay Cistercians, a martyr text, she read that it was hoped that each group would on its own be able to form teachers to pass on the special characteristics needed to live the Cistercian charism within the world. Writing on a wide variety of pertinent subjects she produced a three-year Formation Program consisting of 36 articles. These have been shared with the now four groups associated with the abbey. Though the groups meet monthly in areas miles apart, the great unity that exists among them is evident at the twice yearly meetings at Assumption Abbey.

Alas, it became clear to the powers that be that although the harvest was plenty, the laborers were all too few. To our deep sorrow and chagrin two events came unexpectedly crashing down simultaneously. Father Mark announced that his term was drawing to a close and he would not seek reelection. The Father Immediate, Dom Brendan announced that no further applicants were to be admitted to the abbey since the monk population had declined to less than six and those were aging. These factors, it was deemed, made it impossible to provide the adequate formation that was demanded by current young men.

Father Cyprian, former abbot, was appointed superior ad nutum. Under his leadership, Father Paul Jones, a family brother, was given the task of liaison between the monastery and the associates. Father instituted the concept of covenant commitment. Each associate is lead with indirect counseling to create a rule of life which will incorporate the Cistercian charism and yet be practical and doable in the secular world in which each lives. The rule is written out induplicate and each promises in the presence of the monastic community to strive to live this rule. The associate signs the copies and the acting superior or abbot countersigns. One copy is kept at the monastery while the other is taken by the associate. Promises are made for two six month periods followed by a one year stretch. After that the associate may choose to promise for another year or may opt to make promises for life.

Though covenant commitment is not imposed on anyone, most members of the Assumption Abbey Associates have availed themselves of this option. All seem to agree that this has made for a deeper

sense of community among the groups. Because of the six month renewals, the members now meet twice a year at the monastery. The meetings with Father Paul are akin to group spiritual direction. All openly discuss success and failures in meeting their commitments. Partners encourage each other and the whole group is supportive of each and every member.

Despite our appreciation of all the graces we receive as members of this family, we are aware of the suffering and share the concerns of the community. The General Councils of 2008 and 2011 have refused the appeals to make it possible to avoid the inevitable results of a closed novitiate and the lack of donor monks. After the 2011 Council meeting Father Cyprian was replaced by Father Alberic Maisog as superior ad nutum. Father understands the unwillingness of the monks to leave the monastery of their stability where some have labored for sixty years. A variety of options have been pursued and it has been decided that the best offered is the reception of Vietnamese Cistercian Monks of the Regular Observance. In phase one of the "Vietnamese Project" four Vietnamese monks will live as guests of the Trappists. After two or three years if their stay works out well, the Vietnamese community will send an additional three or four monks. In phase two, at such time it is sensed that the leadership has tilted toward the Vietnamese and there is a mutual readiness, the process of transferring the ownership of property and assets will begin. Assumption Abbey will become a Vietnamese foundation. The remaining Trappist monks will then be the guests remaining until their demise at which time they will be buried in Assumption Abbey cemetery alongside their Trappist brothers.

What does this mean for the Associates of Assumption Abbey? We understand that we will continue our relationship with the abbey. However, we are aware that recognition has been given us by the General Councils of the Order of the Cistercians of the Strict Observance which cannot speak for the Cistercians of the Regular Observance. Will members formerly recognized be able to continue to attend International meetings with voting privileges or will they be welcomed henceforth as guest members of the greater Cistercian family?