



Our Lady of the Mississippi Abbey
8400 Abbey Hill • Dubuque, Iowa 52003

Phone: 1-563-582-2595

E-mail: anna@olmabbey.org

Website: mississippiabbey.org

Candy phone: 1-563-556-6330

Candy website: monasterycandy.com

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OUR LADY OF THE MISSISSIPPI ABBAY

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monastery news

HAPPY EASTER! One of the delights of a relatively late Easter is having spring flowers in bloom – such a wonderful symbol of the new life we share in Christ. In fact, for Palm Sunday we like to intersperse our palms with our own local greenery – pussy willows, forsythia... This year, even the redbud was coming out with its new blooms.

And this year our sanctuary has been given a bit of a New Look itself. Cistercian churches are noted for their austere architecture, relying on simplicity and light for their beauty. We generally have no statues, no stained glass, little if any color. One of the reasons for this is to keep our attention focused on the invisible reality of God. However, there is one major exception to this minimalism: each of our churches has some kind of image of Our Lady. At the end of each day our communities sing the Salve Regina, and our “Salve” icon is illuminated as we commend ourselves and our world to Mary’s care during the night.

Our own Salve icon dates from 1979 and came from our monastery in Berkel, Netherlands. At that point we were using a reproduction of a Filippo Lippi Madonna as our Salve image, but by 1979 it was time

for something that was original, not merely a copy. One of our Dutch sisters was an excellent iconographer, and we requested that she write for us an image of Our Lady of the Sign. This traditional form, which has been used for centuries,

shows Mary with her arms raised in prayer at the moment of the Annunciation, and the child Jesus in a circle near her heart. The name “Our Lady of the Sign” comes from Isaiah 7,14: *The Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and you shall name him Emmanuel.*

During the 1980’s we made an oil lamp for our Salve icon, to match the oil lamp for our tabernacle. Unfortunately, after several decades of oil smoke, the icon has some discoloration, and we have decided to have it restored. AND to change our method of lighting! Most of our monasteries use electricity for their Salve icon and we will do the same, which will not only protect it better but also make it more visible. And we decided to take it off the stand it’s been on all these years, and mount it on the wall, which is more traditional for an icon.



Palm Sunday



Photo/Bill Witt



Our altar, up in the air. Salve icon on its old stand, on the left.



Salve icon in its new home

At the same time we wanted to make one or two other little changes in the sanctuary. Our church had a major renovation in the spring of 1991, with a new tabernacle, altar and ambo (lectern). One of our own Trappist sisters, Sr Esther of Santa Rita monastery in Arizona, an artist and (before entering the monastery) a church designer, visited us several times and was responsible for most of the new design. However, there were some complications with construction of the ambo and it ended up being too low and flat – even for the short ones among us, to say nothing of tall presiders!

Sr Esther had never visited us after the renovation was done, and we thought this would be a perfect occasion for her to see the results of her labors 25 years ago, and meanwhile to give us some ideas about the ambo and the placement of the icon. Well, the minute she arrived, Sr Esther went to work not only designing, but actually getting the project done. She found a piece of oak in our carpenter shop from a tree we cut down recently, and some wood burls from the base of another recently felled tree. She spend hours chiseling a design on the big piece of oak for the top of the ambo, which is now in place; and the wood burls are now on the wall, where one supports the Salve icon and a smaller one is near it for some flowers – once Lent is over.

At the same time, Sr Esther noticed (as we have, too) that our altar was too low. So Rock People came out with all sorts of equipment to lift the top slab off the altar so we could cap the base of the altar with an additional 4 inches of granite. However, it turned out the top is so well



Christmas Day

glued to the base that the base came up with the top! We had to leave the whole altar suspended in the air for a day, and then a new piece of rock was added below. The whole sanctuary has a better visual balance, and we hope it also functions better. Mercifully, all this was finished in plenty of time for Holy Week, when we celebrate the great liturgies of the church year.

And we have some other exciting news from the candy scene. For several years friends have been encouraging us to make some caramels with sea-salt. Making a new product involves quite a bit of time and money (for packaging, for example), so we have hesitated on this, as flavor fads change so quickly. But the sea-salt caramel craze has been holding steady, so later this year we will make up a



Monday evening Mass, on the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe

FACEBOOK PAGE

Our candy business now has a Facebook page! Check us out at Monastery Candy – and maybe Like us! We are hoping to increase sales this year and you can help us out by introducing our candy to friends.

limited supply of chocolate-coated caramels with sea-salt. If they do well, we may have a new regular product. We've tried a few preliminary samples, and have to admit – there's really something to this sea-salt caramel craze!

As a result of the changes we've been making in our candy business, we had a less stressful season this past fall – mainly, because we had less work to do. We now have some employee crews operating during the “off” season (January through August), so with inventory built up we were able to cut down the number of “sister crews” in the fall. But we still made about 60% of our annual candy production in the fall, and that's mostly about sister crews.

Still, it's a big change from only a year earlier, when less than 20% of the year's caramel production had been done when September rolled round, and as usual we faced a hard push to produce the remaining 80%. This change is especially important as a relief to our older sisters. Our four oldest members will turn 80 in the next 12 months, and since much of the candy work is physically demanding, it's not a moment too soon that we're reducing some of the work load.



Novice director and new novice

We have some lovely news, though, from the other end of the age spectrum – a new novice! Verena Bonitz entered our community as a postulant in June of last year, and on the feast of the Presentation of the Lord, February 2, she received the Cistercian habit, and also a new name: Sr Mary Gabriel. We ask your prayers for Sr Gabriel as she travels along what St Benedict calls the “hard and harsh path which leads to God.”

As indeed, we ask your prayers for all of us. We hold all our friends especially close in this holy season of the Lord's Resurrection. May his life fill your heart with joy!

The Sisters of Mississippi Abbey