

of our Salve icon, together with mold from high summertime humidity, seriously damaged it after only a few decades.

The Dutch sister had died not long after writing our icon, so last year we sent it off for inspection to another iconographer, Mary Barrett, the blood sister of our Sister Nettie. Mary had already written for us two icons of the form known as “Our Lady of Tenderness,” which shows Jesus on Mary’s lap, looking up to her as she looks down to him, with their faces touching. One of these icons is in the prayer room of our candy building; the other, outside our Blessed Sacrament infirmary chapel. We borrowed one of these icons to put in church during the months while our Salve icon was in the repair shop. Actually, we did not have much hope that it could be salvaged – and indeed, the verdict was that it was beyond repair.

So we asked Mary to write new icon for our church, and this spring it arrived – another icon of Our Lady of the Sign. On Pentecost Sunday, after the Midday Office, we installed it, and our Father Immediate, Fr Mark Scott of New Melleray, blessed it. Just this year Pope Francis instituted a new feast, “Mary Mother of the Church,” to be celebrated every year on the day after Pentecost. It was especially fitting to have our new icon blessed on the day we celebrate the Holy Spirit being poured out on the early church, united in the presence of Jesus’ Mother.

And in case you are worrying about that lamp smoke – we now have a beautiful and subtle spotlight!

Wishing you a most blessed Advent and Holy Christmas,

The Sisters of Mississippi Abbey



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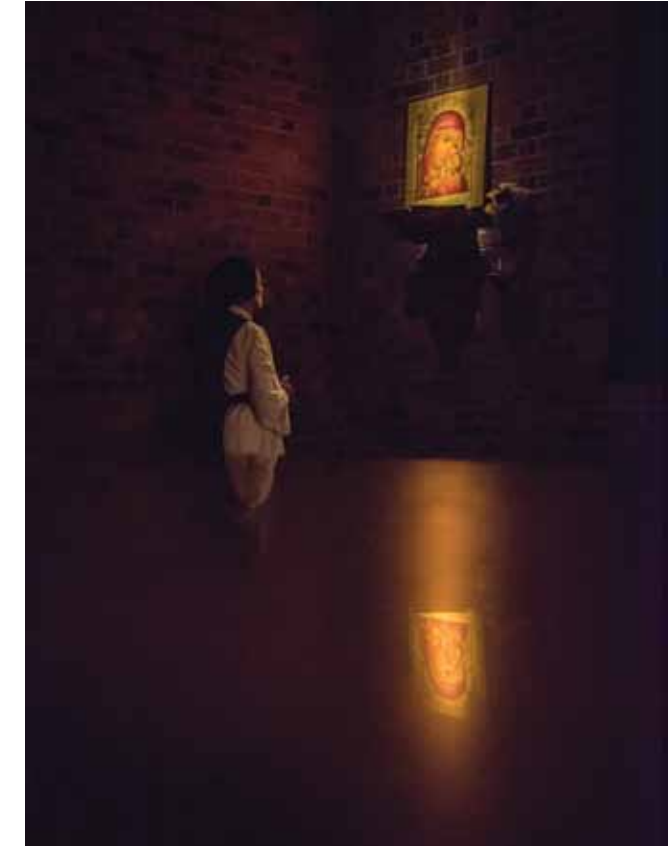
Mothers and daughters

Did you know that monasteries have family trees? They do, and we have both a mother house – Mt St Mary’s Abbey, in Wrentham Massachusetts, from which our founders came in 1964 – and a daughter house, Tautra Mariakloster, which we founded in Norway in 1999. We maintain close relations with the monasteries in our Order but especially those in our own family.

Each of the American sisters of Tautra comes to the States once every 5 years, to visit family but of course also to visit their old community and renew the bonds between us. Last year sisters GilChrist and Marjoe stayed with us 3 whole weeks. Sr GilChrist had just completed a 6-year term as superior of Tautra, and the trip was planned both to give her some rest, and to make space for whomever the Tautra community would elect as their new superior.

As it turned out, that new superior, the third sister to be prioress of Tautra, is Sr Brigitte Pinot, who is not only the first prioress of Tautra not from Mississippi, but also the first non-American. Sr Brigitte is French, and for many years was a nun of our monastery of Clairefontaine in Belgium. She had transferred to Tautra a few years earlier, not long before Clairefontaine was closed because of long-standing difficulties.

And so this year when Sr Rosemary (who was the first prioress of Tautra) came for her regular 5-year visit, along came also the new prioress, Sr Brigitte, for her very first – and we hope, by no means the last! – visit to the “mother house.” She was with us only a week – too little time, from our perspective! But Tautra is not large and the two sisters were needed back home. It was a beautiful opportunity for us to come to know this woman whom God has put in charge of a place so dear to us that we gave away a quarter of our own personnel to bring it to birth.



Our Lady of Tenderness icon, in our church

It was also an opportunity for Sr. Brigitte to experience the monastery which had given shape to the community she now has in her care. While our Order is a united whole in many ways, there are also lots of ways each house has its own feel and its own customs. And these tend to travel up and down the “filiation” line from mother house to daughter house and grandmother house...

Then in September we had the joy of seeing another familiar face: Sr Lisbeth of Tautra, who was for many years our housekeeper – in charge of all the maintenance and buildings. She was only the third woman to enter Mississippi and persevere, arriving just 10 years after we were founded.

Our Lady of the Sign depicts the Theotokos (Mother of God) and the Christ child at the moment during the Annunciation when she says, “Be it done to me according to your word,” and he is conceived in her womb. The icon’s name refers to the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14: “Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign: Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.”

There is a long tradition behind this icon. In the 4th century catacombs of Rome there is an image of the Theotokos with hands raised in prayer and the infant Jesus sitting upon her knees. By the 11th or 12th century icons of the “Virgin of the Sign” appeared in Russia.

The Virgin personifies the Church who contains within herself the living God. With her hands in the liturgical gesture of prayer which the priest adopts during the Eucharist, and with Christ displayed in the round (host-shaped) mandorla upon her breast, she is a visual representation of the Church mediating the presence of Christ in the sacraments, particularly in the sacrament of the altar.



Our new icon



image from catacombs

Wikimedia Commons



Bill Witt



Saying goodbye to Tautra sisters

The Charter of Charity

All this mutual support is an expression of something at the heart of the Cistercian charism. Back in the twelfth century, a new monastery named Citeaux (from which we get the adjective “Cistercian”) started a major monastic reform which soon spread like wild-fire: within 20 years Citeaux had founded seven new monasteries, and some of those had already made new foundations of their own. The early Cistercians wanted each monastery to be autonomous – that is, self-governing. But they also wanted to help one another stay true to the way of living the Gospel they all found so life-giving. How could they integrate autonomy with real mutual accountability?

Citeaux’s third abbot, the Englishman St Stephen Harding, had a brilliant solution, which he wrote down in the “Charter of Charity” (Carta Caritatis). This document went through several editions whose precise dating is disputed; but the year 1119 has traditionally been considered the year of its composition. It was a path-breaking document in many ways, and two of its most important features would influence many religious Orders in the future. The first was a system of General Chapters: an annual gathering of the abbots of all the Cistercian houses, to support one another and to deal with any problems. (At the early stages only men Cistercians were involved; and it was not until 2011 that the abbesses became full-fledged members of our General Chapter.) The second was the “Regular Visitation,” that is, the visit of the abbot of each mother house to all his daughter houses. During the Visitation he has authority – within carefully defined limits – to



Abbot General Mauro Lepori O. Cist. and Abbot General Eamon Fitzgerald O.C.S.O. at the Colloquium



Our farm fields in spring

make necessary corrections to the superior’s governance or to the direction the community is going.

As you may have noticed, 1119 is exactly 900 years ago, so there have been celebrations of this anniversary in various parts of the world. In the 1890’s our Order split in two, one part still called the “Order of Cistercians”, and the other part (our part, the Trappist bunch) known as the “Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance” (it’s a long story). Here in the US our two Orders got together and organized a Colloquium on the Charter of Charity, with scholarly papers, panel presentations of present-day situations, and small group discussions for all the participants, all of it hosted by our O.Cist. brothers of Our Lady of Dallas.

In addition to the Dallas monks and a few lay scholars, there were about 35 monastic participants, from both our Orders. Most were from the US but Vietnam, Switzerland, Ireland, Hungary, Hong Kong,



Praying together at O.L. Dallas

Germany, Australia, and Austria were also represented. (To our disappointment, two Ethiopian brothers were unable to get visas – not on the US end, but on the Ethiopian!). Two of our own sisters attended, as did the Abbots General of both Orders. The break between our Orders has been a painful point for us all – quite contrary, one might say, to the spirit of the Charter of Charity. This Colloquium was a beautiful expression of the deep unity we share, and a wonderful time for forging new bonds between us.

While he was in the US for the Colloquium, our Abbot General, Dom Eamon Fitzgerald, took the occasion to visit a number of Trappist houses in the States – visiting our monasteries is a major part of the Abbot General’s job. This time he included Mississippi, and our brothers nearby at New Melleray, in his circuit. Dom Eamon has informed the Order that he will resign as Abbot General at our next General Chapter (in 2020), after 12 years of service; so this was a particularly meaningful visit for us, his last as our Abbot General.

We got to know Dom Eamon long before he became Abbot General. As abbot of Mt Melleray in Ireland, the mother house of New Melleray, he would be in Dubuque every other year to make their Visitation, and always stopped over to see us, too. His secretary, Fr Simeon of Spencer, who accompanied him this year, is also an old friend of ours – having given us our retreat back in 2014!

Bill Witt



Making Monastery Candy

Bones and blessings

This summer was a summer of orthopedic surgeries for us: a back surgery in May, a knee replacement in June, and a hip replacement in July. So for months we had walkers going around the monastery as sisters went through recovery and therapy. We are happy to tell you that all the sisters have recovered well; we are down to one cane. Of course, there is also our sister Joan, one of our two remaining founding sisters, who has been living in our senior wing for over 5 years and uses a walker. But that is just business as usual!

It’s amazing how many wonderful medical procedures have become commonplace in recent decades. In all the debates and complaints about health care, it’s easy to lose sight of how much we have to be grateful for. Our three sisters are humming along like New Women.

The full text of the Charter of Charity can be found at: ocso.org/resources/foundational-text/charter-of-charity.

“...so that there may be no discord in our conduct, but that we may live by one charity, one Rule, and like usages.” – Charter of Charity



“Is it straight?” – mounting our new icon

Our Lady of the Sign

Every evening the last sound to come from our throats before we retire for the night is the Salve Regina, a hymn to Our Lady. This chant, composed in the 11th or 12th century, was adopted by the Cistercian Order in the 13th. For centuries now there has been a tradition of singing the Salve after Compline. It is a beautiful way to end the day! We light up an image of Mary, the Mother of God, and stand together in the dark facing that image and entrusting ourselves and our world to Our Lady’s care.

In 1979 our monastery commissioned a sister from one of our monasteries in the Netherlands to make an icon to be our Salve image. Icons come in various forms which all have long traditions, and the form we chose is called “Our Lady of the Sign” (see last page). Icons are very carefully and prayerfully made; the person “writing” the icon, to do it well, must consider herself or himself an instrument of God, not an artist seeking personal glory or self-expression. The finished product will normally endure for many centuries; but to our dismay, the smoke from the oil lamp we burned in front