THE EIGHTH DAY
ASSUMPTION ABBEY
Ava, MO
~1950-2010 ~
Cum Christo Regnat

"She Reigns With Christ"

Shepherd's Crook........Abbey
Green Field................Ozark Hills
Horizontal Waves..........Bryant Creek
Vertical Waves............Holy Spirit
Stars and Crescent Moon....Great Sign in Heaven
Blue Banner..................Our Lady's Color
INTRODUCTION

God's plan of creation and salvation has launched the human family out on a great adventure and a challenging mystery and struggle.

Here in capsule form is the story of our community's very small share in God's ongoing history of salvation.

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Our Lady of the Assumption
Joseph Pierson, a newspaperman who started the first overseas edition of the Chicago Tribune at Paris during WWI, offered his 3400 acre property in the rough “hills and hollers” of the Ozarks to New Melleray Abbey for a contemplative monastic foundation. He had seen the ancient monasteries in Europe, and was also inspired by reading Thomas Merton’s *Seven Storey Mountain*. The only conditions he gave were that there be a few rooms for guests and that, if the new foundation failed before sixty years passed, then the property would return to his family.

Six monks arrived on September 24, 1950 to begin life in the three-storey fieldstone Swiss chalet house, which Joe and his sons built during WWII. There was no central heating, no electricity or running water, so the founders had a “pioneering” winter. Several more men from New Melleray were sent down periodically.

The first ten years were spent trying to develop a traditional form of self-support. The founders attempted to raise sheep, and form a dairy herd. Then they tried orchards and a vineyard. Finally, they used the creek’s sand and gravel to make concrete blocks. The monks also used 2 small frame houses and some old army barracks to gradually construct a monastic quadrangle.

The name Assumption Abbey was chosen, since in the year 1950 Pope Pius XII proclaimed the dogma of Our Lady’s Assumption into heaven. In the mid-50’s the monks elected Fr. Romain Payant to be their first abbot. He replaced the floating wooden bridge over Bryant Creek with a concrete low-water bridge. He also built a
350 foot long suspension bridge for monks walking to work in flood time.

Fred and Kathryn Mertens, parents of a Lay Brother, moved into a small trailer. Fred began building a Family Guest House across the creek on a hill with a beautiful scenic view.

Original stone building
Foot washing

Grape picking

Dairy barn
First new wing construction

Low water bridge
Suspension bridge
Young men were attracted to the poor hard-working life of the new monastery. The novices became the building crew of a beginning wing for the permanent abbey. Some younger monks were sent to Rome for further studies. The concrete block plant was developing steadily. Three men made final vows and later were ordained priests.

Then came Vatican Council II with the turbulent growing pains following it. Abbot Romain resigned. A series of five temporary superiors were appointed almost yearly, until Fr. Robert Matter left his hermitage and qualified to become the second abbot of the Ava community in 1971.

During the last half of the 60’s we had lost all our novices and one of the newly ordained priests. New Melleray, our motherhouse near Dubuque, Iowa generously sent additional help when there was a special need here.

We had been saving money from the block plant income. At the end of the decade, we were able to hire an architect and a contractor to design and build our permanent monastery. The fact that we used our own blocks and split-face surfaces for the building gave it more meaning for us.

Fr. John O’Conner became the first founder to die and so began our monastic cemetery. Paul Jones became interested in monastic life. He became a regular visitor under Abbot Robert’s direction, and eventually became a family brother here. He was later ordained a
hermit priest of the Jefferson City diocese, and began living within our community one week each month.
Stacking new blocks

Splitting face blocks
On St. Patrick’s Day of 1971, the monks left the original complex, which had grown like Topsy and moved into their new monastery. This was designed very well functionally. It was cross-shaped with the chapel at the head; one arm was our guesthouse, the other was the monks’ kitchen, refectory, and classrooms. Down the length of the building were the library, infirmary, and nineteen individual rooms for the monks.

There was a day of open house for our friends and neighbors. They liked it so well that the Ava school board hired the same architect to design a new elementary school.

Fr. David Blackburn’s ten-year indult from Rome, which allowed him to care for the small St. Nicolas Church on Highway 14, expired. Our bishop had no one to supply that need, so Fr. David carried on for his little flock there.

When we left the old buildings, a group of seven volunteers from four different USA Trappist monasteries moved into that old complex. They were six Americans and one Filipino. Their plan was to live there for about 6 months, in order to get to know each other, and to begin functioning as a community, in preparation for a new foundation in the Philippines.

They settled in the Philippines in 1972, living in native nipa huts. Nipa huts have bamboo floors with bamboo and woven palm leaf sides. They have woven grass roofs and are built above ground on stilts. Theirs was an even more pioneer beginning than Ava’s founders had.
The second newly ordained priest left to become an Army chaplain, and new candidates were rare with no one persevering. Fr. Benedict Clevenger became Block Plant manager. He enlisted Bro. Boniface Domas from cooking and orchard work to become his main worker, producing the different types of block. Bro. Christopher Danz was the mixer and clean-up man.

*Pope John Paul II*  
*and Abbot Robert Matter*
Our Lady of the Philippines
Nipa Huts

Our Lord’s Sacrifice and Sacrament of the Eucharist
Fr. Leon Brockman, one of the Philippine volunteers, felt called to
the hermit life. He remained at Ava, and built a sturdy hermitage
in our woods. Two hermit nuns asked if he would become their
chaplain. In the end, our bishop accepted them as diocesan hermit
nuns, and we gave them 200 acres at a far end of our land. Nazareth
Hermitage became part of our religious neighborhood.

We were still not getting new vocations and the third of those former
newly ordained priests decided to leave. New Melleray continued to
be a true motherhouse by having one or another monk come down
to bolster our thinning ranks.

Our Lady of the Philippines had worked through their early
challenges and elected their first abbot. They were sponsored
by the whole USA region. The OLP monks chose us as their
motherhouse, since we knew each other from their beginning in
our old monastery.

Recession and competition were too much for our concrete block
industry. Abbot Robert thought he was not equipped to lead our
community in the search and start-up of a new industry, so he felt
free not to be open for reelection. He cheerfully returned to his
hermitage.

Dom Flavian Burns spent 2 years as a temporary superior here and
enlisted Fr. Basil Pennington as a helper. Fr. Basil stayed 3 years.
Together with our business manager, Fr. Theodore Koster, and
Louise Salmon and Chef Jean-Pierre Augé, they moved us into the
fruitcake bakery business. For ten years we prepared and baked
the fruitcakes in our monastery kitchen and storeroom. Then the cakes were decorated, packaged, and stored in two trailers parked at our kitchen dock.

Towards the end of the 80’s we were ready to elect Ava’s third abbot, Fr. Cyprian Harrison. Fr. Raphael Stafford, our plumber, died and Bro. Dominic Pitagora, who transferred from Vina, replaced him and was made cellarer.

The Volchok family (Michael, Martha, and four youngsters) had Fr. Robert as Spiritual Director. They built their house and workshop on a level section of our land about two miles from the abbey. They felt called to raise their family apart from the world’s turmoil. Michael developed a thriving herb business and kept extending their buildings.
Kevin Fitzgerald and Fr. Richard Fox

Ave Maria
Fr. David began showing symptoms of Alzheimer’s Disease. He was a pillar of the community over many years. Now he was less and less able to carry on his work as Guest Master and pastor of St. Nicholas Church. Eventually he would be cared for at Mercy Villa in Springfield. He said, “It is very hard to be losing your mind.” However, he was gracious and accepting as long as he could be.

After Fr. Cyprian’s term was over, we elected Fr. James Conner of Gethsemani as our fourth abbot. His father had been in the construction business. We found an architect who was well-read and interested in monastic buildings. For years we had been looking for a way to give our abbey a more traditional form. Abbot James and the architect put a high peaked roof on two wings of our flat-roofed building. They gutted our small infirmary section to construct a truly monastic chapter room. The refectory’s low ceiling was transformed into a cathedral roof.

Two more stalls were added to our parking garage, so that Bro. Thomas Imhoff would have a proper garage for his mechanical work. The final accomplishment was to build a spacious new bakery and storage facility.

The block plant did support the community, but it was divisive. The older members generally were content that we had found a profitable form of manual labor, while the newer monks thought that it disrupted our monastic schedule and contemplative atmosphere. The bakery is a common work involving all the monks in some way. It fits our monastic way of life and unites us as a community.
Abbot James sent Bros. Alberic Maisog and Anthony Sloan, who had each transferred to Ava from different monasteries, to complete their studies and be ordained priests.

Illness brought Abbot James to resign. We were not ready for an election, and Fr. Robert was again called out of his hermitage to become temporary superior. He showed that flexibility is a most useful monastic virtue.
Retreat House Hospitality

Bro. Boniface Domas, Forester
Peaked roof construction

New bakery construction
When Fr. Robert turned 75, he had served a grand total of over 17 years as Superior. Abbot Brendan Freeman of our motherhouse appointed Fr. Basil Pennington as temporary superior. He also asked if Fr. Mark Scott of Vina might come for added support. With his usual enthusiasm, Fr. Basil entered into the role of spiritual father.

It happened that the number of new candidates trying our life at that time filled every available room. There was still a sum of money left in our building fund, so the question came up about starting the second stage of the building project. This involved putting up two new wings, (infirmary and novitiate), which would complete the inner cloister courtyard.

A local architect continued the design of our first stage and we hired a contractor. Out of the blue the news came that Holy Spirit Abbey in Georgia had elected Fr. Basil as their new abbot.

Fr. Mark Scott was appointed to replace him and was afterwards elected fifth abbot. Not too long afterwards, Fr. Theodore died and Fr. Richard Fox’s brain tumor was taking its toll. This left everything piled onto Fr. Mark. New construction, bakery and finance, choir, liturgy and music, formation, studies and candidates were his duties. He took it all in stride, and in addition got a web site up and running for our abbey. This web site makes our little abbey in the woods known anywhere and generates inquiries from far off to Bro. Francis Flaherty, our vocation director.

All the earlier candidates gradually left after Fr. Basil went to Holy
Spirit Abbey. A veteran Mississippi State Trooper, Dean Mansi, entered as a novice and then became a junior professed under Fr. Mark. He took the name Bro. Lazarus.

Abbot Mark decided not to be open for reelection. Dom Brendan was convinced our community needed to experience a time of solidarity before we would be ready to receive novices or hold an election, so he appointed Fr. Cyprian as temporary superior. The General Chapter of Abbots in 2008 agreed to continue his proposal until the next Chapter of 2011.

Fr. Donald Hamilton, 88 graduated from our infirmary to Ava’s Heart of the Ozarks Nursing Home, when his infirmities needed 24/7 care and attention. In his typical, cheerful way, Fr. Don said, “I’ll tell you a secret. I kind of like it here.” Wally Kendrick, our 87-year-old family brother, moved into our new infirmary and continued the hermit life in his infirmary room, defying all the odds of diabetes, broken pelvis and a heart condition.

![Bro. Francis Flaherty and Fr. Paul Jones](image)
Abbot Mark Scott caring for Fr. Richard Fox

New inner cloister
THE SEVENTH DAY

~2010~

God rests from His work of creation.

We have fourteen monks in our cemetery who have completed their work, and have entered into God’s rest.

Fr. John O’Conner- One of our founders, he had been a parish priest in New Mexico before entering New Melleray. In spite of a heart condition he delighted in fighting wild fires.

Fr. Alberic Gersbach- Built like a stump, he built fences and bridges. He gave himself the title Pontifex.

Bro. John Gonser- A family brother, he lost his mother early and took Mary to replace her. A very simple brother.

Bro. Bernard Fitzgerald- From Omaha, NE, he grew roses in summer and made whiskey jelly in winter.

Bro. Andrew French- From County Wexford, he lived the Beatitudes during life, and now the kingdom of Heaven is his.

Bro. Ailbe Collins- He said the Rosary was great company. Former head of the Cork Brigade of the IRA, he learned Our Lord’s carpenter trade.

Bro. Louis Hanick- One of the founders, he had heart surgery when there was a 50% survival rate and lived to tell of it.

Fr. George Layeux- A congenial and obliging cook, librarian, master carpenter and wood worker.

Fr. Raphael Stafford- God’s fisherman, he said the Book of Nature was his Gospel. His hobby was making rosaries. A plumber by trade.

Bro. Stan Smith- An accomplished organist and CPA, he entered late, bringing his organ. (Memorial Cross)

Bro. Christopher Danz- A paratrooper in WWII, he was devoted to Our Lady of Sorrows. He delighted in his guitar and “hillbilly” songs. A hard worker.

Fr. David Blackburn- A sergeant in General Patton’s tank corps, he was the most gentle of men. He won a bronze battle star.

Fr. Theodore Koster- He enabled us to build once by managing the block plant, and to build again by organizing the bakery.

Fr. Richard Fox- Blessed with a beautiful voice, he led the praises of God for decades and was always available for work.
There are also a few close friends of the monastery buried in our cemetery.

**Joseph Pierson** - The donor of our land and original buildings. Half of his ashes are buried beside his first wife Josephine (Lily) in Oklahoma. Half of his ashes are buried here.

**Ruby Geary Pierson** - Joe’s second wife was a respected local teacher and is buried next to Joe. They adopted a daughter, Marla.

**Edward Geary** - Ruby’s first husband, whose grave is on the other side of hers, had been the linotypist at the Douglas County Herald.

**Fred and Kathryn Mertens** - The builders and hosts at our Family Guest House for 30 years. Kathryn died of Lou Gehrig’s Disease. Afterwards Fred married Frieda Kutter, and lived into his 90’s.

**Sally Mertens** - Wife of Fred and Kathryn’s son, she was devoted to the poor and died during a flu epidemic.

**Clayton Fountain** - A posthumous family brother, who died in solitary confinement at the Springfield Federal Medical Center. God’s mercy changed him from a violent killer to a true Christian hermit under Fr. Robert’s direction, and with Fr. Paul’s and Fr. Donald’s encouragement and support (Memorial Cross).
Fr. Theodore Koster

Bro. Andrew French

Fr. George Layeux
Bro. Bernard Fitzgerald

Fr. Raphael Stafford

Bro. Ailbe Collins
THE EIGHTH DAY

*God continues His work of the New Creation.*

The early Church spoke of Christ’s Resurrection as the Eighth Day.

Assumption Abbey’s 60th anniversary is a watershed. Joseph Pierson’s gift of land and original buildings has been brought to fulfillment. Our community has no monk who first entered Ava and persevered...except Bro. Lazarus, whose final vows coincide with this 60th year. We have three or four transitional oblates here, who say they do not care what we call them...they only want to live the monastic life in our contemplative community. They look forward to receiving the novice’s habit.

As part of their renewal, the Franciscans in the USA wanted to make available for their friars a prayer fraternity. Francis of Assisi would periodically leave his ministry among people to retire to a place of solitude and prayer. At Abbot Mark’s invitation, they decided to remodel and move into the Volchok’s buildings. A small prayer community of friars now lives at Our Lady of the Angels Friary, and receives others for a longer or shorter time of spiritual renewal.

This spiritual neighborhood has Assumption Abbey at the center. Nazareth Hermitage of diocesan nuns is west of it. Our Lady of the Angels Friary is to the east. Fr. Robert’s hermitage is to the north and the Family Guest House is to the south of our monastery.

The newly arrived monks were strange birds for the people of Douglas County. Their hard work and concrete blocks earned respect. Then their fruitcakes were something even better. Now we are just part of the community. One neighbor said a visitor could not believe Ava had such a nice monastery in its area.
Sometimes it is asked, “What good is it for an independent monastery to belong to an Order?” We have experienced that the network of motherhouses and daughterhouses, which form the fabric of our Trappist-Cistercian Order over the entire world, functions as a true family in spirit and practice. It gave us our beginning as a new foundation, formed us in the spirituality of our monastic ancestors, provided personnel, funds and counsel in difficulties, and continues to guide us on the way of following Christ and His Holy Spirit.

Our Lord has given us a healthy share in His Paschal Mystery. We find ourselves a small and aging community, with a devoted staff, a Lay Advisory group of professional friends, and two Lay Associate groups. Our fruit is not in a satisfying large number of monks. What we do have is a community united in charity, which has a positive outlook to the future. All we want is God’s Will and we know His game plan is to fashion a New Creation in His ongoing history of salvation. The Mystery of the Cross and Resurrection is all so impossible for men, but our Lord Jesus carries us day by day as Redeemer and Savior.
Left side: Jim Hofbauer, Bro. Boniface, Fr. Alberic, Fr. Paul, Brian Beckett, Br. Francis, Fr. Cyprian,