

BROTHER COLUMBA'S GIFTS

— *brother Elias*

IN THE MONTHS AFTER BROTHER COLUMBA'S DEATH MANY PEOPLE have spoken and written to us sharing their memories and stories about their interactions with him. A significant number of people have related that he was the very first brother they met when they came to our monastery in Weston.

Brother Columba was usually working out-of-doors in front of the monastery, either in our large vegetable garden adjacent to the front pond, at the nearby cross/perennial/flower garden, or with the dozen or so apple trees that greet visitors on the right side of Priory Hill Road as they near the top of the hill. He was sometimes referred to as our "front man" because of where he nurtured our mother earth and her gifts most of his years here at the priory.

Brother Columba had a very disarming manner of welcoming people, making them feel right at home, and O.K. to be just who they were. With a bright smile that lit up his whole face he would reach out his hand and say "...and your name is?" With characteristic warmth and lack of any pretensions he easily put a new-found visitor at ease and made lasting friendships.

A guest who had met Brother Columba in the garden one morning shared with another brother in the afternoon that he considered himself very fortunate to have spoken with the "abbot" who was working in the garden. His conversation with the "abbot" had helped him spiritually and had been very insightful for him.

This was the gift that Brother Columba offered to the many people who came upon him doing what he liked best: working the soil, caring for all that was planted, and being available to whoever came by to say "hello." His gift worked like a charm.

In the months before brother Columba's death (April 30, 2015) his struggle with the burden of Alzheimer's became more difficult to navigate. By that point it was already two years that he had been living with a significant manifestation of the disease. He struggled to touch an awareness that would break through the enveloping veil of Alzheimer's which was a source of so much confusion and bewilderment. His struggle was partially articulated in his many questions such as: What time is it? What's next on the schedule? Am I dressed right for going to prayer in the Stone Chapel? What is the name of that brother? Did I eat breakfast yet or not?



In my memory his most frequent question was "What's next?" Sometimes his tonality conveyed irritation or desperation. Sometimes it came across as a cry of feeling lost. And, yes, every so often it came with a bit of Boston-Irish wit. Hearing his question a few times each day I began to wonder if it had two levels of meaning, one for brother Columba and one for me. Often we think we know what a person is saying or what they mean by the words they use. So we delve no deeper. A question began to arise in my heart: Is brother Columba also asking "What's next for you, Brother Elias?" It came unexpectedly. It came as a surprise — another of Brother Columba's unexpected gifts.

I have been holding that question in my prayer and turning it over and over since we placed brother's ashes in our cemetery in early May. Am I prepared to accept "what's next"? What lies within the fertile soil of my heart? What gift can I offer to my brothers and humankind today? And as I ponder the question and these reflections I can see brother's face in a full smile — followed by a wink! ■

