

The Lay Cistercian Experience

Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani Abbey

A Program of Reflection and Sharing



"We are convinced that it is possible to adapt Cistercian spirituality to the lifestyle of a lay person though it is very clear that there are two different ways to live it, monastic and lay, and both are complementary. This shows us the vitality of the monastic life. Lay people have found in Cistercian spirituality a way to live in the world with greater commitment and spiritual depth. We are unanimous in our belief that the Cistercian charism can be lived outside the monastery..."

**Lay Cistercian Identity
Fourth International Lay Cistercian Encounter
Santa Maria de Huerta, Spain
June 2008**

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February 2020

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Note: Six documents that are contained in the OCSO *Experientia* program were copied into 'The Lay Cistercian Experience' (LCE) program. [Readings 1, 7, 12, 13,14, and 15] You will notice a variation of spelling of some words in the original OCSO texts. Due to copyright concerns, the reading selections from the *Experientia* where copied into the LCE program without making any text changes.

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Unit One

Introduction

FOREWARD

In 2017 the General Chapter of the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance (OCSO) approved a formation project for use by Cistercian monastic communities worldwide. The formation program that was developed was given the title, *Experientia*. In the Foreward of the program OCSO Abbot General, Dom Eamon Fitzgerald, stated regarding the *Experientia* program that “...It is aimed at enabling monks and nuns of today to reflect on their lived experience of monastic life and then to confront that experience with texts chosen from the Cistercian and monastic tradition. In this way, the long experience distilled in our tradition can shed light on our present-day experience and offer us encouragement, motivation and direction in living the Cistercian grace in our contemporary world.”

The monastic advisors of the Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani Abbey (LCG) have encouraged the LCG Advisory Council to utilize the *Experientia* program as a model for Lay Cistercians to reflect on their experience of the Lay Cistercian way of life. The LCG Advisory Council has given spiritual development of LCG members high priority in its mission and function. The importance of ongoing formation of Lay Cistercians has been endorsed by the LCG monastic advisors, the Gethsemani community, and the International Association of Lay Cistercian Communities (IALCC).

Therefore, since Lay Cistercians are now considered members of the Cistercian family, they likewise can benefit from reflecting both individually and communally on their experience of Lay Cistercian life. The newly formed Spiritual Development Working Group of the LCG Advisory Council has taken on the task of drafting a modified version or adaption of the OCSO *Experientia* program for use by LCG members.

The LCG version is given the simple title, “**The Lay Cistercian Experience.**” The format for this program will follow a similar one as *Experientia*, however, the LCG version will title individual units in the program based on the Lay Cistercian experience and tradition. Also, selected readings will mostly be ones developed by the LCG and those produced at the International Encounters of Lay Cistercians from 2002 through 2020. The LCG version will use some writings and documents from the OCSO that are considered essential to Lay Cistercian development.

Short texts from Cistercian mothers and fathers will be inserted in individual units that support the theme or topic of that unit. Also, brief written reflective responses by LCG members to themes of Units 2-10 will be included in a future addendum to the program.

As LCG members proceed through the “Lay Cistercian Experience” program, they are encouraged to be familiar with the *Experientia* program. It is a good resource to accompany one’s reflection and broadening one’s understanding of the Cistercian tradition. [The OCSO’s *Experientia* can be accessed at: www.ocso.org/formation/experientia.]

Introduction

A. Purpose of Program

Lay Cistercians can benefit spiritually from reflecting both individually and communally on their experience of Lay Cistercian life. The program, “The Lay Cistercian Experience,” has the primary focus of allowing LCG members a unique opportunity to reflect deeply on their experience of Lay Cistercian life. The program is also a means for ongoing formation for LCG members.

Therefore, the main objectives of the program for LCG are:

1. to help LCG members reflect on their own experience of the Lay Cistercian way of life and to find words to express that experience.
2. to hear echoes of our experience in the texts of the Cistercian tradition.
3. to compile the elements of a simple Lay Cistercian autobiography for our own further reflection and expansion.
4. to discover affinities between what we have experienced and the experience of other Lay Cistercians.
5. to build capacity and confidence among individual LCG members to share some of their experience with other members of their local communities and the broader LCG membership.

We suggest that each LCG local community implement this program in a way that meets both individual and local community timeframes and needs. To bear fruit this program will demand substantial time and energy from LCG members in order to sustain their commitment to meet the stated objectives indicated above. Support by one’s local LCG community will be essential.

B. Method of Study and Reflection

The program is divided into 10 Units. It is intended that the program should be flexible in how it is used by each LCG local community, in that each community creates their own rhythm.

After the Introductory Unit, the structure of each Unit in the “The Lay Cistercian Experience” will follow the same format:

1. A brief orientation giving an overview of the theme for each Unit to be studied and reflected upon.

2. A series of questions for personal reflection. It is not necessary to answer the questions in sequence, but the different questions can be used to stretch your field of awareness.
3. Documents to be accessed for study within the “Lay Cistercian Experience” will mostly be those developed over the last thirty years from the tradition of the Lay Cistercian development. The Lay Cistercian documents were compiled during International Encounters of Lay Cistercian Communities created for and by LCG members. Most notable are documents written by Fr. Michael Casagram, monastic advisor, for LCG members. A few documents from the Cistercian monastic tradition will be included.
4. Brief quotations from Cistercian authors of the 12th and 13th centuries that may complement and illuminate the theme of each Unit.
5. Short reflections written by different LCG members, giving their response to a text in light of their own experience.
6. An invitation to write a short personal synthesis of what individual LCG members have discovered in their work on each Unit. This is primarily for one’s own personal enrichment.

For “The Lay Cistercian Experience” to bear fruit, it will be necessary for each LCG member to invest time for formal reading and reflection. As Fr. Michael Casey, OCSO, states in the Introduction of the *Experientia* program, “...The optimal way of deriving fruit from the program is not merely to dedicate a period of time to it, but to live with the questions throughout the day, ordering them in the heart, allowing them to serve as a background and context for *lectio*, prayer and liturgy...Sharing your experiences and memories with others may help to make them part of your own self-image.”

Further, it is recommended that each LCG member keep a journal that captures one’s insights, reflections, new learnings, and experience participating in the program. Journal entries in which LCG members feel comfortable to share with fellow members will enrich the growth and connections within the local LCG community.

[Note: Reading selections will be numbered throughout the 10 Units of the program. An appendix inserted in the Index will list the number, title, and page location of each selection. To assist in their study and reflection on the readings from the Cistercian tradition that are contained in The Lay Cistercian Experience program, it is recommended that LCG members read in the *Experientia* program the introductions to the Cistercian readings.]

C. Reading 1: “The Cistercian Approach to Experience”

[Since the overall focus of this program of reflection and sharing is our experience of Lay Cistercian Life, the first reading selection is one that addresses experience from a Cistercian perspective. Dom Bernardo Bonowitz, abbot of Novo Nundo Abbey in Brazil, authored the article titled, “The Cistercian Approach to Experience.” As Lay Cistercians assess their experience embracing the Cistercian charism, we also need to drink from the well of the Cistercian tradition.]

For the Cistercian Fathers, religious experience is not the goal of the spiritual life, especially discrete religious experiences, so-called “peak experiences.” The objective of the spiritual life is the full carrying out in human lives of God’s saving plan, set out by Saint Paul:

For those whom God knew before ever they were, he also ordained to share the likeness of his Son, so that he might be the eldest among a large family of brothers and sisters; and those whom he foreordained, he also called, and those whom he called, he also justified, and those whom he justified, he also glorified. (Rom 8:29-30.)

We feel God’s love as he works to realize this plan: we become conscious of it, we open ourselves to it, attempt to collaborate with it and are moved by a love for God that echoes and responds to the love God has for us. This is our primordial experience, of being affected by God’s love and of yearning to return this love (redamatio.) Within this experience is always the awareness that “It is God who has first loved us” (1 Jn. 4:19; continually cited by the Cistercian Fathers.).

Because the spiritual life has to do above all with the fulfilment of God’s plan, metaphors used to describe this process, especially those drawn from the Song of Songs (the “three kisses” of Bernard’s SC 1-8, for example), should not be interpreted in the first place subjectively and emotionally but theologically, as referring to the history of salvation being accomplished in the Church and in each of us. The famous paintings of Saint Bernard in ecstasy do not accurately translate the meaning of his texts.

The Cistercian Fathers were keenly sensitive to and interested in the organic, dynamic nature of this working out of our salvation. All of them constructed developmental schemes to describe this evolutionary process. One of the best examples of such a scheme is found in Bernard’s *Sermons on the Songs of Songs* where he speaks of the three kisses and the three ointments. The three kisses describe the transforming action of God in Christ in three great stages:

1. God's forgiveness of and reconciling of the sinner, wherein God's mercy triumphs over his justice.
2. God's renovation of pardoned sinners in holiness of life, permitting them to recuperate their true humanity.
3. God's gift of the Holy Spirit to the mind and heart of restored human beings, enabling them to share in – and act out of – God's own wisdom and love.

The three ointments, on the other hand, focus on the experiential resonance and response to what God is accomplishing in these three stages:

1. A sense of fear and inward disturbance provoked by the awareness of our sins and the punishment they merit, giving way to compunction and the joy of being forgiven.
2. A spirit of habitual thankfulness and praise for the new creation that God is gratuitously realizing in us.
3. An abiding in and outpouring of love (the love we have received in the gift of the Spirit), that directs itself both to God and to his Church.

In this evolution, the movement is always towards ever-greater union between the God who saves and the person being saved. The fullness of this union in the present life is the "union of Spirit", in which the human person, continually inspired by the Holy Spirit, constantly welcomes and appropriates the Spirit's inspirations, and where an individual life becomes an ongoing consent to and implementation of what has been received, in a life that is simultaneously total obedience and complete liberty. Here the distance between divine salvation and the human experience of salvation is almost completely overcome.

One of the most interesting insights of the Cistercian Fathers is that the experience of God never occurs in isolation but is always related to an experience of oneself, an experience of the neighbour and an experience of community. The experience of self is typically described as "self-knowledge". Receptivity to the action of God in one's life has two apparently opposite effects: humility and dignity. When we make ourselves accessible to God we gradually experience ourselves as dislodged from the centre of the universe (the universe in general and our own universe), and is diminishing. We become progressively smaller and less important. At the same time, we grow in the experience of ourselves as made in the image and likeness of God: endowed with liberty and rationality, entrusted with the governance of God's creation, open to transcendence. There is a humility in this dignity that reconciles the opposites: the recognition that our humanity is not an independent, self-contained reality, but that it arises out of and depends on our relationship with God. Without this relationship continually renewed and embraced, our humanity is unimaginable. This is one of Thomas Merton's great themes.

The humility that results from our exposure to God leads us to the most significant discovery imaginable with regard to the neighbour: that of their proximity and their equality. Prior to experiencing ourselves in our littleness, we did everything possible to distance and distinguish ourselves from the neighbour; we denied and refused the notion of our being partners with the rest of humanity in a single human nature (*socii naturae humanae*). The discovery of our likeness to our brothers and sisters leads to an experience of communion with one's fellow human beings. We can say, adapting the text of the Epistle to Hebrews that they are like unto us in all things including sin, and especially sin. Beginning as a lowly communion in fallen human nature, this experience of oneness with others, particularly in the context of a monastic community, comes to flower in a communion of grace and finally in a communion of glory (Baldwin of Forde).

The humility and fraternal charity that are the result of living in God's presence end up leading us back to God himself. Humility creates an eye capable of seeing ourselves for what we are. Charity and the exercise of charity purify this eye and make our gaze less and less distorted. A degree of clarity and purity is reached which allows God to lift persons into the divine mystery and enable them to "see" God. Here we are talking about extraordinary experiences of the kind usually termed mystical. According to Bernard, such experiences are rare, they are brief and they are always completely the result of a divine initiative. There is no degree of ascetical, moral or fraternal excellence that can ever "earn" us the right to such an experience.

So, just as the impress of God is for the Cistercians indispensable to the experience of authentic self-knowledge, so this self-knowledge joined to the loving knowledge of our neighbour is indispensable to the experiential knowledge of God.

It is important to underline that the experience of God is not solely, and perhaps not primarily, something that takes place in the lives of individuals, but in the life of a community as well. For writers such as Baldwin of Forde, a Cistercian community is not a loose assembly of persons each having a particular experience of God. The Holy Spirit is poured out on the community as a whole rather than on a series of persons. Whatever is bequeathed to one member, is bequeathed with the intention of it being communicated to the other members. This ongoing circular movement is facilitated by the infusion of charity that is an intrinsic part of every gift that is bestowed. It might be said that, for Baldwin, this total communion of gifts among the brothers and sisters – including those that we might consider strictly personal spiritual gifts – is the essence of the experience of God.

Finally, a word might be said about the abbatial experience of God. Aelred's Pastoral Prayer is completely taken up in describing the cleansing and renewing effect of God's "seeing" an abbot into becoming a genuine abbot and how being seen in this way generates a stable experience in the abbot, not only of holding the place of Christ in the monastery but of experiencing as his

own the sentiments of Christ for the members of the community. Bernard, for his part, says something similar in describing the effects of the third kiss, that of the Holy Spirit. Whoever has been kissed in this way is made both bride and mother, and interiorly experiences in an abiding form the obligation, the desire, and the capacity to nourish and bring to maturity the persons that have been entrusted to his care.

Reflection Questions:

1. Write down three points in this essay that seem most important to consider.
2. How does Dom Bernardo's remarks compare to your experience of Lay Cistercian life?
3. What do you expect to gain or achieve through your participation in "The Lay Cistercian Experience" program?

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Unit Two

Who Are We?

WHO ARE WE?

In this Unit we want to reflect on our identity as Lay Cistercians. Groups of lay people who desired to embrace contemplative spirituality and develop a relationship or an affiliation with Cistercian monastic communities began forming in the mid-1980s. The original group that formed an affiliation with the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1989 was Cistercian Lay Contemplative which in 2005 became known as Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani Abbey (LCG).

It took several years of reflective experience and dialogue with the monks at Gethsemani Abbey and through both regional and international meetings to achieve clarity of identity as Lay Cistercians. Finally, in 2008 at the Fourth International Encounter of Lay Cistercian Communities held at Santa Maria de Huerta Monasterio in Spain a document was formulated that was a collective effort among Lay Cistercian delegates at the Encounter representing approximately 55 Lay Cistercian communities worldwide. The document was titled 'Lay Cistercian Identity.' Prior to the 2008 Encounter members of existing Lay Cistercian communities had an opportunity to provide input regarding their experience of being a Lay Cistercian. All of this input was compiled and synthesized by each language group and submitted to the coordinating committee of the International Association of Lay Cistercian Communities. The final synthesis document extracted from the three language groups was formally presented to the OCSO General Chapter in September 2008. It was positively received by the General Chapter.

The first reading selection in this Unit is the 'Lay Cistercian Identity' document from the Huerta Encounter, June 2008. It is a statement that included a collective understanding of the Lay Cistercian vocation, way of life, community, and the bond with Cistercian monasteries. The phrase 'Cistercian family' was being referenced with more frequency that now included the Lay Cistercians as the newest branch of the family.

The second reading selection is titled, 'Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani: Our Spiritual Journey,' written in 2014 by Mike Johnson of the Cincinnati LCG to commemorate the 25th year of the founding of LCG. An extended history of the Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani had been written previously and is posted on the LCG website. It provides a detailed account of the development and experiences of LCG. Both documents chronicle the LCG experience.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How does your identity or vocation as a spouse, parent, single person, member of the clergy, etc., embrace your identity as a Lay Cistercian?
2. What were you seeking when you chose to become a Lay Cistercian?
3. How does your reading of and your reflection of the 'Lay Cistercian Identity' document strengthen your commitment to Lay Cistercian life?

4. Assess your own spiritual journey as a Lay Cistercian of Gethsemani. Do you feel a real bonding with your local LCG community and with the Gethsemani community? What more do you desire from this relationship?

Reading 2: “Lay Cistercian Identity”

[This is the final synthesis document extracted from three previous syntheses from Lay Cistercian communities (English, French, Spanish) and finalized at Santa Maria de Huerta, Spain, during the 4th International Encounter of Lay Cistercians on June 6, 2008.]

1. Lay Cistercian Vocation

As individuals, we recognize a personal call that is experienced in community as a gift from God. We define it as a call to be an active witness of Christ and his Church in the midst of the world, providing a prayerful and contemplative testimony in a life defined by the values of the Cistercian charism. This life is guided by the Rule of Saint Benedict as a concrete way to interpret the Gospel, and by our Cistercian Fathers and Mothers. This personal call is a means of continuous conversion, one that leads to a rediscovery and deepening of the grace of our baptism and the development of an adult faith.

2. Lay Cistercian Life

2.1 We are convinced that it is possible to adapt Cistercian spirituality to the lifestyle of a lay person though it is very clear that there are two different ways to live it, monastic and lay, and both are complementary. This shows us the vitality of the monastic life. Lay people have found in Cistercian spirituality a way to live in the world with greater commitment and spiritual depth. We are unanimous in our belief that the Cistercian charism can be lived outside the monastery.

2.2 There are many ways to live the Cistercian Lay life – but although the forms may be different all have only one aim: “ to seek God”.

2.3 All the Cistercian values and practices, which are a means of liberation and internal conversion, can be incorporated in the life of laypersons:

Prayer and praise	Silence and solitude
Humility	Work
Obedience	Hospitality and service
Poverty	Simplicity
Chastity	Joy
Austerity	Confidence and abandonment to God
Simplicity of life	Stability
A balanced life	

2.4 This interior unification, this way of conversion, this desire for incarnation, is born and is realized in the choice of “preferring nothing to Christ” (RB 72), living in the world without being of the world (cf. John 17, 9-16).

2.5 We experience an inner and outer transformation (*conversatio morum*) which can be observed in the frequent reception of the sacraments, having the Eucharist as the center of our lives; the prayerful study of Scripture through *Lectio Divina*; fidelity to the Divine Office; filial devotion to the Virgin Mary; hospitality with our brothers and sisters; a change of priorities; a new way of ordering the day; a new way of loving others through the Love of God; the desire for formation and the necessity of spiritual guidance, and the experience of work as collaboration in the building of the Kingdom of God without our personal enrichment as our goal.

2.6 The coenobitic dimension of our Lay Cistercian life finds expression in our life in the spiritual union we experience with all the members of our lay community as well as with the monastic community. A more ascetic life allows us to be united in personal and liturgical prayer, as well as in work, despite being physically apart.

2.7 Our Mission as Lay Cistercians is realized through a life of witness, independent of whether we participate in pastoral and/or social activities. The fundamental element of our life is in finding balance between times of prayer and action.

3. Lay Cistercian Community

3.1. The experience of community is described as the birth of a new family which gives us aid and strength to live a commitment to Christian life without fear and with hope. We believe that praying together creates communion which unites us over distance and fortifies us as well. We believe that the greater bond is to be united by the Holy Spirit in a common search: the search for God. Consequently the community provides a personal enrichment through the transmission of values among all its members. Our discovery of community helps us experience ourselves as the Body of Christ. To experience the needs of others encourages charity and teaches humility. The community is a God-given means to our sanctification.

3.2. For a majority of communities, it is fundamental to formalize our chosen lifestyle with some type of personal commitment, made in front of both communities, lay and monastic, that gives voice to the desire and personal decision to respond to the call of God to this specific Lay Cistercian vocation.

3.3. There is great diversity in the way that communities organize themselves. In some communities we can say that there is a reluctance to create structures.

4. Bond with the Monastery and the Cistercian family

4.1. The monastic community is the heir of the Cistercian charism in its present form. Lay Cistercian communities, through their communion with a monastic community, receive light and formation from the monks and nuns. However, there are differences concerning the concrete bonds of union and the ways to describe these bonds.

4.2. We experience the two communities, monastic and lay, as a single family with different expressions of life. However, all are clearly aware of the difference between being lay and being monastic.

4.3. For all the groups, it is the monastic community, represented by the Abbot or Abbess, that recognizes in them the charism and confers on them their membership in the Cistercian family, according to the nature of the bonds that unite them.

4.4. It is common to all our communities and members to experience the monastery as our home and a place where the Lord unites, in a very special way, both communities, lay and monastic, and the members of both to each other. The hospitality of the monks and nuns makes the love of God present.

4.5 Being Lay Cistercians does not confer on us privileges in our relationship with the monastic community, but makes us aware of our duties and responsibilities.

4.6. Our lay communities have, with different frequencies, meetings in the monastery in which we receive formation and learn to love one another in a new form of relationship centered on Christ, to which all the members have been chosen and called by God.

4.7. Monastics and laypersons learn fraternal life from one another, persevering together on the path to holiness.

4.8 Many members of lay communities go to the monastery individually. But all agree that in order to be Lay Cistercian it is not enough to simply feel attracted to a monastery, but that it is necessary to belong to a lay community.

5. Epilogue

5.1 We believe that Lay Cistercian communities are a work of the Holy Spirit, and, with little communication among ourselves, we have striven to live and experience the Cistercian charism in total communion. We believe that in the lives of Lay Cistercians, by the grace of God, the Cistercian charism that has been exclusively monastic for nine hundred years has found a new expression.

5.2 There exists in all Lay Cistercian communities the desire to respect and maintain diversity in all things that do not break the communion: to live the same charism with all the diversity of expressions while being strongly united in what is essential.

Reading 3: “Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani – Our Spiritual Journey”

[This paper was written by Mike Johnson, Cincinnati LCG Community, November 2014.]

The vision of our founders, who came to the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1987 to engage in a dialogue in response to an impulse to embrace a lay contemplative lifestyle, has continued for twenty-five years. The dialogue was among themselves and with a monk, Fr. Michael Casagram, who has served as the original monastic advisor and continues to do so, along with two other monks. The dialogue resulted in the development of a founding document, the Plan of Life, and the formation of an association known as Cistercian Lay Contemplatives (CLC) in 1989. It was not the intent of the founders to establish a formal organization. However, the founders challenged themselves and those who would be joining them to live simply the elements and values of the Plan of Life for lay contemplatives as best they could; given individual circumstances. It was their intent to live out in their ordinary lives the wisdom of the Rule of St. Benedict and the Cistercian tradition.

The founders witnessed to the Holy Spirit’s work in their lives. It was out of that spirit that drew them to the Abbey of Gethsemani seeking support and nourishment from Cistercian monastic spirituality. They developed the primitive framework that would allow future CLC members to follow in their footsteps. Although CLC’s affiliation with Gethsemani was an informal one for many years, CLC was always blessed and affirmed by some members of the monastic community in its call to live a lay expression of the Cistercian charism. CLC was always aware that it was important to become familiar with the Cistercian monastic tradition and apply it to the ordinary spiritual lives of its members. [Note: In 2004 the CLC lay associate program affiliated with the Abbey of Gethsemani became known as Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani Abbey (LCG).]

As with the development and growth of any human organization, no matter how small or large, CLC/LCG experienced over the years many times of gifted insight and resource enhancement, but also times of challenge and lack of clarity of identity. In hindsight we can now identify important factors that were pillars of our development: community, formation in the Cistercian charism and leadership/accountability.

Community

From the beginning of our spiritual journey, the importance of community life was highlighted by our monastic advisors as one of the key elements of Cistercian spirituality. Community life as lay contemplatives within the Cistercian tradition requires much creativity and effort to sustain the monastic impulse. Initially, the Cistercian Lay Contemplatives formed two geographic local communities; one in Louisville, Kentucky, and the other in Cincinnati, Ohio. Cultivating community growth required a minimal level of structure that included the necessity of attendance at group meetings at least monthly for shared prayer and formation work. Tools of one-on-one mentoring and individual and group spiritual companionship were essential in sustaining the health of CLC/LCG communities.

Within a brief time the number of individuals seeking membership with CLC increased significantly. This created a challenge that was not resolved until many years later. It was difficult to set a limit on the number of CLC/LCG members. If it was perceived that an individual was sincere in seeking support and resources for living a lay contemplative lifestyle according to the Cistercian tradition, it was difficult to refuse them. There were attempts to maintain connections among CLC members and local communities through a newsletter and CLC retreats at Gethsemani Abbey. Additional local communities were eventually formed in Indianapolis, Columbus, Michigan, Chicago, Tennessee and the Northeast.

By 1998 there were at least eight other Cistercian lay associate programs in the United States. All of the groups greatly benefited from the many regional meetings of these groups. The topics of community and formation were at the forefront of dialogue and reflection at these meetings. All benefited individually and collectively from such sharing. The "Bond of Charity" (1999) document was the first shared expression of what the groups held in common.

With the onset of international Lay Cistercian meetings in 2002 that expanded dialogue among diverse Lay Cistercian communities worldwide and with the General Chapter of the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance (O.C.S.O.), there emerged a greater sense of mission, identity and continuing vision that positively impacted both individual Lay Cistercian communities worldwide and an alliance among them. In like manner, the Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani has strived to support and nurture local or regional LCG communities, as well as create a collective community that maintains a link with the Abbey of Gethsemani through an Advisory Council. In 2012 LCG was recognized by the community chapter of Gethsemani as a lay associate community affiliated with the Abbey. It should be noted that there has not always been agreement with the LCG structure that has emerged. However, a consensus has occurred that supports a level of autonomy for local LCG communities within the parameters set by the LCG Advisory Council. The current structure is supported by Gethsemani Abbey. It should also be noted that the Lay Cistercian Identity document developed at the International Association

of Lay Cistercian Communities Encounter held in Huerta, Spain in 2008 had significant impact on the spiritual development of LCG. Much needed clarity was achieved among Lay Cistercians and served as the basis of our relationship with the Abbey of Gethsemani.

The spiritual bond that LCG has with the Abbey of Gethsemani is one of collaboration and sharing in the rich spiritual life of the Cistercian charism. It has been important that LCG members respect monastic boundaries. There have been a few incidents over the years when the boundaries were not respected. Open dialogue has resolved any concerns. The relationship between LCG and the monastic community of Gethsemani is currently strong. We feel the relationship is similar to that of extended family.

Formation in the Cistercian Charism

As noted above, the Plan of Life was the founding document that provided implicit formation suggestions. As CLC/LCG evolved and grew in size, more explicit formation guidelines were needed. In 2001 Fr. Michael of Gethsemani provided CLC with the first formation document that supplemented the Plan of Life. It was titled, "Toward the Formation of CLC Members." A more comprehensive LCG formation curriculum and guide for candidates was developed and approved by the Advisory Council in 2005. A revision of the formation guide was completed in 2011 that expanded to include formation for ongoing spiritual growth of LCG members. LCG has developed extensive formation resources over the years that now include several chapter talks by Abbot Elias that are made available to LCG members. Over the years Fr. Michael has provided LCG with several papers and homilies on a variety of spiritual topics. An extensive spiritual reading list that includes numerous resources for the study of the Rule of St. Benedict, Cistercian spirituality, contemplative life and prayer and the works of both LCG members and monastics is available for LCG members.

LCG acknowledges that it is in active participation in the life of the local community and within the context of one's daily practice of prayer, silence, lectio divina, work and service that the Lay Cistercian is formed in the lay expression of the Cistercian charism. Thus, the Lay Cistercian is equipped to share the fruit of the charism in the world.

Leadership/Accountability

The function of leadership in the LCG is primarily exercised by the decisions made by the LCG Advisory Council whose membership is composed of representatives of the local LCG communities. Three monastic liaisons provide spiritual advising and serve as a link to the Gethsemani community. It is the responsibility of the Advisory Council to develop and approve guidelines for formation, to set criteria for the recognition of local LCG communities, to secure financial resources and to encourage and support the spiritual life of the local communities.

It is the unique leadership function of local community coordinators or leadership teams to insure compliance with established guidelines approved by the LCG Advisory Council. If the Cistercian charism is to flourish and produce fruit in the lives of LCG members and within the local communities, both leaders and community members must hold themselves accountable.

Conclusion

The Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani like so many other communities have found a model for leadership within the Rule of St. Benedict itself, as well as for community and insights for formation. The visible functions of community, formation and leadership can provide the structure or rich soil for the cultivation of the Cistercian charism. The charism is strengthened and flourishes well when the individual Lay Cistercian internalizes the spirit of St. Benedict and the Cistercian tradition in his or her life. The spiritual journey of the Lay Cistercian of Gethsemani Abbey is now aligned with that of the monastic community of our affiliation, the Abbey of Gethsemani. We draw nourishment in living the Cistercian charism from both Gethsemani and fellow LCG sisters and brothers with whom we share the journey.

SHORT TEXTS

1

[Bernard] had in his heart the need to be constant in following his vocation, so that he constantly said in his heart, and even often on his lips, “Bernard, Bernard. What have you come for?” (*Bernarde, Bernarde, ad quid venisti?*) William of St-Thierry, *The First Life of Bernard of Clairvaux* 19; (CF 76, p.22.)

2

Oh, if only we knew ourselves to be human, and so understood that we were made to the image and likeness of God. My brothers, what follows from this dignity? We humans are made with two natures. We have a body, we have a soul. In the bodily nature, we are like beasts; the image and likeness of God is not there. For it is in the soul that we are made to the image and likeness of God. Let each one see if he lives according to [the soul] where the image and likeness of God is or according to that in which there is a likeness to the beasts. I say, let each see whether he cares more for those things that sustain the body or for those that sustain the soul. Aelred of Rievaulx, *Sermon* 34:8; (Cf. CF 77; p. 53.)

The Lay Cistercian Experience

Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani Abbey

Unit Three

Discernment

DISCERNMENT

A basic element of our initial consideration of choosing a spiritual path is the process of discernment. What are the intellectual, psychological, spiritual, and health/wellness tools that need to be utilized in discerning our response to God's call to holiness in our lives? In other words, how does the whole of our humanity, body and soul, come into play in the process of listening to the call of the Holy Spirit in following a call to discipleship as a follower of Jesus Christ along the spiritual path of the Cistercian charism.

This unit provides an opportunity to consider more deeply the importance of discernment in our spiritual life. Hopefully we will value more the significance of what St. Benedict exhorts in the beginning of the Prologue of his Rule, "Listen carefully, my son, to the master's instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart. This is advice from a father who loves you; welcome it, and faithfully put it into practice..."¹

The reading selection for this unit is the text of a presentation on a topic of discernment that Fr. Michael Casagram, the LCG monastic advisor, gave to a group of CLC members (later LCG) in September 2000. In his talk Fr. Michael outlines the criteria of discernment in which he provides insights one needs to use in order to discover and respond to the working of God's grace or Christ's presence in our lives. He concluded his remarks by giving "...a few concrete examples of how these criteria apply, how important it is to keep them in mind in our everyday lives...Discernment is what allows Christ's life to shine every more forcefully in each of us."

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What is authentic Christian living and how do you experience it?
2. How do you experience the faith journey that helps you realize your true self?
3. What does the call of God mean to you?
4. How do you experience the call to union with God in the context of your daily life?
5. How have you found prayer changing the very meaning of your Life?
6. What does the Person of Jesus Christ mean to you as you face the challenges of your life?
7. Assess your ongoing discernment in the Lay Cistercian way of life. When do you experience moments of grace?

¹ RB 1980: *The Rule of St. Benedict in English*: The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota (1982).

Reading 4: “Discerning the Movements of Grace In Our Lives”

[Presented at Loretto Motherhouse to a gathering of CLC Members by Fr. Michael Casagram, LCG Monastic Advisor, on September 16, 2000.]

The last time we were together we talked about spiritual direction, the role this plays in your lives as Lay Contemplatives. Today I would like to share with you something of the discernment process that goes on in Spiritual Direction, the tools that are used so as to more clearly understand the working of God’s grace in our lives. St. Bernard has said on more than one occasion that we do not stand still in our lives as Christians or Monks but move forward in response to God’s grace or backward in neglect of it. We are in a living and vital relationship with God and like any relationship worthy of the name, it develops or declines, depending on the give and take of those involved. God is calling each one of us gathered here into an ever deeper and thorough involvement with his own divine life.

I had been seeking how best to follow up on what we discussed last time when I went off to a convocation of people involved in vocation ministry up in New Jersey. There were some 540 vocational directors and ministers from all parts of the States and Canada. The main topic was bridging the gap between generations, especially between the aging members of our Communities and the younger people considering entry into religious life. There was talk of what is happening in the Church today, the tendency toward polarization where on one side you have a relativism (where the sacred and profane become blurred) and on the other a fundamentalism (where the sacred becomes so set in concrete that it loses its vitality). To make your way through these two extremes and not get caught in their seductions we need a middle path of discernment, a way of interpreting events around us that will keep us faithful to God in the midst of all that is going on. It was even suggested that we need to create a culture of discernment so that not only are religious not led astray but that we can help others to respond to all that Christ is asking of us today. For in whom alone will we find the real meaning of our Christian life.

Out of this I thought there was nothing better that I could share with you than some insights in what criteria one needs to use in order to discover and respond to the working of God’s grace or Christ’s presence in your lives. I think you have an advantage in this discernment process by the very fact that you are CLC members, persons who desire to take the Cistercian charism into the marketplace, to allow the contemplative consciousness of monks touch all the aspects of everyday life. As you are all too aware we are living in a fast moving world, where you are exposed to lots of voices, lots of influences. To feed your interior lives, to grow spiritually where there is so much to distract you from what is important for spiritual growth demands a sharpened sensitivity to the movements of grace and all that is contrary to them in your lives. Developing this sensitivity is what you and monks are trying to do all the time. I have shared with you in the past the Desert-father story where one of the early monks described the major work of the monk as standing at the door of his heart and watching his thoughts as they arise. There he will begin to

recognize what comes from God, from himself or from the evil on. The monk's life deepens and matures as he learns to accept his own weakness and humanity, learns to struggle with what is evil and gradually to open himself to all that is of God. The key to all this is standing at the door of his/her own heart, becoming familiar enough with what is going on there so that he/she becomes truly discerning.

In your own lives, I don't know that you are any busier than monks but you are exposed to a diversity of influences and situations the monk is preserved from for the most part by being in the monastery. I am not saying these are either good or bad, only that I suspect you need to be even more discerning than the monk if you are going to keep your spiritual lives steadily on course. The added pace of communication today, the widening variety of interpretation of what is communicated makes it hard for us all to maintain our Christian focus so that it is in view of this urgent need I present some criteria for discernment of good and evil as these touch our lives.

Criteria of Discernment

First let me mention that I will be drawing heavily on a small book by Segundo Galilea, translated by Stephen-Joseph Ross called *Temptation and Discernment*. The page numbers indicated below are a reference to his book. Off and on in my study of Spiritual Direction and the spiritual life I have read material on discernment but his is certainly one of the most concise and uncluttered I have come across. What Segundo Galilea does is take a quick look at the role of temptation in our lives, present some criteria of discernment in regard to temptation and then through a description of concrete temptations show how these criteria of discernment apply. To situate what he is going to talk about he says this: Temptation is commonly related to sin and the tendency to oppose deliberately the will of God who is our true good and happiness. People with a dependable and stable spirituality generally overcome the temptation to intentional evil without great difficulty. They recognize where the evil lies and usually have enough spirit to reject it.

However, the invitation to a mediocre Christian life is also a temptation. This form of temptation is characteristic of people who are already spiritual. Mediocrity, tepidity, and stagnation are not necessarily tied to one particular sin or another, or to a deliberate consent to evil, although with time they can lead to this. Neither is temptation to mediocrity explicitly perceived. It is a subtle temptation. At first it does not look like temptation, but instead it appears neutral or even good. What the person does or doesn't do, the way it is done, and one's habitual attitudes appear normal and reasonable. Nevertheless, people who have fallen into the temptation of mediocrity, tepidity, and stagnation do not experience true Christian fervor or progress. Faith, hope, love for God, prayer, fraternal charity, and ministry have become set in mediocrity. (p.9)

When I raise the question of temptation to mediocrity here I want to be careful not to imply that this is any more likely in the world in which you live than in a monastery. Monks know all too well their inclination to laziness, toward settling-in and can become quite ingenuous at

avoiding the real rub of their monastic life so what I say here is out of a sense that we are engaging a common enemy when we deal with mediocrity.

There is, Segundo Galilea reminds us: “a more specific form of discernment, particularly applicable to our concern here with the subtle, deceitful temptations that lead to mediocrity. Tradition calls it “discernment of spirits.” Here it is not so much a matter of distinguishing the explicitly evil from the good, but of differentiating the good and what is temptation. Even with good will, the spiritual person easily confuses the two spirits. On this level, when we are dealing with spiritual people, the temptations are subtle; at first glance they do not seem bad and could even be taken as inspirations from God.

The discernment of spirits is much more complex than any other type of discernment. It requires experience, sound doctrine and counsel.”(p.11)

This discernment has a long history, all the great mystics and spiritual masters speak of it. And what Galilea does is draw on texts from St Ignatius of Loyola and St. John of the Cross to present the criteria of just such a discernment. He points out a real difference in St. Ignatius’ approach saying his discernment is directed primarily toward making a choice in how one is to serve Christ. The criteria that St John of the Cross presents on the other hand, are “toward purifying and bringing to maturity a choice already made.”(p.12) Ignatius is much more into discernment in view of active ministry whereas John of the Cross is dealing with persons already in the religious life who are seeking to live as authentically as possible. They are different but complementary. What both hope to accomplish is a discernment of spirits that allows the soul to adopt attitudes and make decisions leading toward a greater surrender to God through love. Both “...present discernment as a process of illumination that purifies and confirms one’s capacity for loving and serving God.”(p.12) I see this as what your own lives are about, a desire to use your own gifts and capacities for loving and serving God to the full.

But let’s talk about the criteria of discernment themselves. These criteria are lined up very clearly and concisely in the book I’ve mentioned:

1) Both John of the Cross and Ignatius “agree on a fundamental criterion: discerning the good spirit from the bad (temptation) requires a predisposition of interior freedom, a progressive interior liberation from sins and deliberate faults, from inordinate affection and attachments, and from passions and tendencies that generally obscure and condition discernment. “

2) They agree also on a second fundamental principle: “the most subtle and dangerous temptation in spiritual persons is that which occurs under the appearance of good.” Here Segundo backs up his criteria with two quotes from Ignatius and John+. Ignatius writes: “It is a mark of the evil spirit to take on the appearance of an angel of light. He begins by suggesting thoughts that are suited to a devout soul...Afterwards, he will endeavor little by little to end by drawing the soul into his hidden snares and evil designs (The Spiritual Exercises, 332). John of the Cross says: “It should be noted that among the many wiles of the devil for deceiving

spiritual persons, the most common is deceiving them under the appearance of good rather than of evil, for the devil already knows that they will scarcely choose a recognized evil.” (Precautions, 10)

3) “The criterion of “consolation-desolation” plays an eminent part in Ignatius’ doctrine...The criterion is essentially this: What comes from God causes consolation in the soul; what comes from the evil spirit, from temptation, causes desolation. Consolation is peace, inspiration toward the good, intensity of faith, confidence in the love for God. These signs of consolation are not always accompanied by relief felt in the senses. What gives consolation is not necessarily what the person likes most. Interior aridity and sacrifice at times can accompany peace and inspiration toward the good. On the other hand, desolation is the condition contrary to consolation: confusion, anxiety, sadness, lukewarmness, etc. Likewise, sensory pleasure sometimes accompanies the signs of desolation. Desolation as well as consolation are experiences rooted in the depths of the soul, not in perceptions of the senses.”

John of the Cross speaks of these same experiences in terms of “nights” and “the aridity and trials of the dark night of the soul...(For him), the night is essentially the presence of God’s actions, a process in which the soul, in spite of everything, must keep itself faithful and at peace. (In this sense the night has affinities with Ignatian consolation and not with desolation.) The night is an experience of profound purification of spirit through aridity and trials. In his doctrine, the Carmelite saint seeks to help souls discern if this experience of the night is accomplishing the sanctifying end that God requires of it, or if the devil is taking advantage of aridity to make these persons believe they are evil because they do not “feel” the things of God, and thereby lead the soul to discouragement and mediocrity. John’s goal is to discern if the night is rooted in consolation or moving toward desolation, to use Ignatian language. John of the Cross’s criteria for discerning if one is in the night that comes from God or in the desolation of the evil spirit are twofold. In the night from God, one maintains the fundamental choice and faithfulness to God in all aspects of practicing the Christian life. In the desolation from the evil spirit, faithfulness progressively declines. In the night there is no sensible consolation, but there is fidelity. What is important is not what one feels, but what one does.

4) Related to this, in those cases where the evil spirit disguises himself with consolation and by that means leads the soul to desolation, both Ignatius and John+ have a similar criterion of discernment: “The way to discern true or false consolation is by the fruits that ultimately prevail in the soul, and whether or not they belong to the spirit of God.”(Ref. see today’s gospel--Lk 6:43-49)

5) One final criterion on which they also both agree is this: “Because of the deceitful nature of temptation and our lack of interior freedom, personal discernment often runs the risk of error even in using the traditional criteria. Therefore, in the process of discerning matters of evident importance, one must consult with competent people and ask their advice.” Quoting Ignatius to confirm this Segundo adds: “When the enemy of our human nature tempts a just soul with his wiles and seductions, he earnestly desires that they be received secretly and kept secret. But if one manifests them to a confessor, or to some other spiritual person who

understands his deceptions and malicious designs, the evil one is very much vexed. For he knows that he cannot succeed in his evil undertaking, once his evident deceptions have been revealed. (Spiritual Exercises, 326). (pp. 14-19)

Struggles in Ministry and Prayer

I would like to give a few concrete examples of how these criteria apply, how important it is to keep them in mind in our everyday lives. Many of us have learned to respect these criteria mentioned above through our own experience. How often we may find ourselves coming away from a phase of our lives thinking we ought to have done this or that differently, realizing how our own egos or selfishness got overly involved and messed up something of what we intended to accomplish. In applying the above criteria I am very aware that I will use them differently in the monastery than you will in your own lives. Nonetheless, I feel they are as applicable to your lives as to mine. But some examples may be helpful.

In regard to the active side of our lives we can all fall into one form or other of what Segundo calls "messianism". He describes it this way as "a faulty attitude concerning God: 'I am the pilot, and the Lord is the assisting copilot.' Those who fall into this temptation do not ignore God nor do they fail to pray and appeal to the Lord with problems. They do so, however, so that God may help them in the ministry they plan and direct. Ultimately, what we are dealing with here is incorporating the Lord into our work, and not incorporating ourselves to the work of God. Following the temptation, we unconsciously substitute our personal messianism for the messianic ministry of Christ, the one evangelizer."(p. 23) I think we all know something of this, from those times we let ourselves get ahead of God with our plans. Often enough this is manifest in the faulty attitude we have toward others with whom we collaborate. We may have a hard time delegating responsibilities, fail to really trust people except for a few who we find in full agreement with ourselves and our programs. A failure to collaborate in a truly inclusive way is a sure sign of being into this kind of messianism.

In the area of prayer our temptations may often center around being sufficiently motivated to pray. The demons can keep our motivation on a rather superficial level so that our prayer becomes weak and sporadic. Insufficient motives for prayer are those of a psychological nature. Segundo describes it this way: "Too many praying people have fallen into this temptation. Psychological needs, not faith, lead them to prayer. The psychological needs that lead us to prayer should not be undervalued--they can be a valuable aid--but they are insufficient: to feel devotion, to have desire and fervor, to cope with difficult moments that cause one to run to God, to obtain something, and so on."(p.48) But once the psychological mood has changed one can forget about prayer, feel that there really is no need for God. The "ultimate, persistent motivation for prayer and its solid foundation is the conviction that God loves us and offers us the gift of liberating friendship."(p.48)

One could give a number of other examples of how we are tempted to abandon our Christian commitment in one way or other. Segundo Galilea offers a number of everyday experiences

where the criteria of discernment come into play. I highly recommend his book for your own lives of discernment. In reality we are all making decisions with various degrees of importance every day of our lives. If one has a real feel of the above criteria one will find these decisions a lot easier to make and a lot more profitable for the spiritual life. Added to this I think the CLC groups can become centers of discernment. When a group reaches a certain level of maturity and inter-action, what can be raised and discussed broadens and deepens. I feel your groups also should be places where confidentiality can be respected so that members will feel free to raise some of the more delicate but important issues that touch your lives. It is amazing what can happen in groups like yourselves if this respect and maturity is there. I mentioned last time that much is being done today in terms of group spiritual direction. I have personally been involved in this kind of work and I never cease to be surprised at the variety of angles with which one can approach a particular problem. Each one of us has our gift, our particular life experience to bring to this kind of discernment. Each member of your groups should feel free to raise issues that really mean something to her or him and find just how much wiser she or he will be walking away from an honest sharing of one another's lives.

Not least in all this is the simple fact that we all need community, the help of others to realize our own vocation and gifts. Discernment is what allows Christ's life to shine ever more forcefully in each of us.

SHORT TEXTS

1

In a very real sense, laypersons seeking to live the contemplative life in the world are seeking the same spiritual development as monks. They are doing it differently but the end result is the same. Abba Moses said that the immediate end of the monk's life is purity of heart, the ultimate end is the Kingdom of Heaven. All that are gathered here today are basically seeking the same ends, living as authentically Christian day in and day out as possible which is purity of heart. And your ultimate hope is what every monk has, that this will lead to eternal life in God...Getting to know ourselves, getting to know the subtle ways the Holy Spirit speaks to us and equally subtle way the world speaks to us through a thousand attachments is critically important for our spiritual growth. [Michael Casagram, OCSO, "Spiritual Direction and the Lay Contemplative Life," text of a presentation to CLC members on July 9, 2000. (p. 1)]

2

The mentoring process is an opportunity for us to provide direction and support to a discerning candidate, specifically for their spiritual life within the context of the Cistercian charism...The process involves developing a relationship and three way communication between the candidate, the mentor and the Holy Spirit. The mentor as companion must be open for the flow from the candidate to the Holy Spirit and from the Holy Spirit to the candidate...During the discernment period we seek to adapt Cistercian spirituality to the lifestyle of a lay person though it is very clear that there are two different ways to live it, monastic and lay, and both are complementary... [“LCG Mentoring Guidelines,” revised and adopted by the LCG Advisory Council, April 2010 (p. 1)]

The Lay Cistercian Experience

Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani Abbey

Unit Four

Our Journey So Far

OUR JOURNEY SO FAR

In this Unit you are asked to reflect on your own experience of Lay Cistercian life. What has been your story? What were the circumstances that led you to apply to be a candidate for membership in the Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani Abbey (LCG)? What has occurred in the intervening months or years? Can you sense a movement in your life, a direction that manifested itself only with the passage of time? Perhaps this exercise in retrospection will lead to wisdom and a sense of gratitude. The selected readings for this unit provide some historical context for the evolution and development of the Lay Cistercians beginning in the late-1980s.

The first reading selection for this unit is a homily given by Abbot General Bernardo Olivera during an early international meeting of Lay Cistercians held at the Monastery of the Holy Spirit in Conyers, Georgia in May 2002. He expresses receptive sentiments of welcome and gratitude to the gathered Lay Cistercians for their response to the call of the Holy Spirit to live out in their lives a new form of the Cistercian charism. Dom Bernardo's remarks provide much insight and guidance to Lay Cistercians, as they are being welcomed as new members of the Cistercian family. His homily offers a validation of the authenticity of Lay Cistercians as lay persons in their efforts to enter into the mystery of the Cistercian charism. Further, Dom Bernardo includes in his homily a list of questions for the Lay Cistercians to critically consider, as they assess their ongoing development. He asks them to identify necessary supports and organizational structures that will sustain their commitment in living the Cistercian charism. What is needed both individually and communally that will produce the fruit of Lay Cistercian life for the benefit of the Christian community. The seeds of the charism have been planted by the Holy Spirit in the rich soil of the hearts and minds of the Lay Cistercians. How do we nurture that growth toward maturity?

The second reading selection for this unit contains a report detailing the work of the delegates at the Fifth Meeting of the International Association of Lay Cistercian Communities that occurred nine years later in 2011 in Dubuque, Iowa. This report contains what was presented by the IALCC Coordinating Committee to the OCSO General Chapter of Abbots and Abbesses meeting at Assisi, Italy in September 2011. The members of the committee had also been invited to attend the OCSO General Chapter in 2008 at which they presented the 'Lay Cistercian Identity' document that had been developed and approved at the 4th International Meeting of Lay Cistercians held in June 2008 in Huerta, Spain.

Even though the primary focus of this unit addresses our individual growth as Lay Cistercians, it seems we must recognize the significance of our communal and organization growth as Lay Cistercians. Our relationship with Gethsemani Abbey, with the LCG Advisory Council, with other LCG local communities, with the International Association of Lay Cistercian Communities, and with the OCSO and its General Chapter need to be considered and valued.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What was I seeking by applying for candidacy for LCG membership? Have I found in LCG what I was seeking? Have there been pleasant surprises? Have there been moments of grace? Have there been periods of confusion or decline in my commitment as a LCG member?
2. Have I experienced times of disappointment with efforts to fully embrace the spiritual values and practices of the LCG Plan of Life? With my local LCG community? What were the elements? What were the outcomes? Have these experiences left traces (positive or negative) in my life?
3. Are there areas in my life which remain under-developed? Do I feel unsatisfied? Has this led to my feeling frustrated or envious? How have I expressed these negative feelings concretely with fellow Lay Cistercians and with my local LCG community?
4. How have I dealt with disappointments? Do I have any enduring resentment? Has this ever led me to feel alienated from the LCG community?
5. Where am I today? At this time, in what place do I feel most at home, most myself as a Lay Cistercian? How has my commitment to spouse, family, work, and faith community benefited from my being a Lay Cistercian? To what extent is my personal identity defined by my Lay Cistercian identity and experience as a LCG member?
6. Has there been a transformation in my expectations? What do I now hope for in my continuing journey as a Lay Cistercian?
7. Have I made an effort to familiarize myself with the evolution of the Lay Cistercians since the mid 1980s, its history, organizational structures both locally at Gethsemani and that of the International Association of Lay Cistercian Communities?

Reading 5: “Beyond Our Borders”

[Homily presented by Dom Bernardo Olivera, OCSO Abbot General at the 2nd International Meeting of Lay Cistercians, Monastery of the Holy Spirit, Conyers, Georgia on April 25, 2002.]

Our Cistercian monastic life may be considered a charism, that is to say, a gift of the Spirit for the Church of God. This gift was given at a precise historical moment, within a given culture, as a way of responding to special challenges, and perhaps also in reaction to particular situations.

There is no doubt about any of this. However, time has had a two-fold effect on the charism, both shedding light on it and clouding it over. Time clouds over the charism because it arose within a local context at a given moment. Time sheds light on the charism precisely because the passing years free it from the bonds of the particular circumstances in which it arose.

The historicity of our charism makes it necessary and imperative to bring it up to date (*aggiornamento*) and inculturate it. Inculturation is concerned with more than just geographical placement or placement in time. It also has to do with gender (masculine and feminine), generations (youth, adults, seniors), different societal groups (country or city dwellers, laborers, professionals...), and with states of life (clerical, consecrated, lay...).

The renewal brought on by the Second Vatican Council was a privileged moment in this process of *aggiornamento* and inculturation. The post-conciliar period brought yet another new thing: groups of lay men and women who want to share our charism in the world, in the midst of human affairs and activities. This means, in other words, a new kind of inculturation of the Cistercian charism.

But careful! We do not need you to be "copies" of the monastic version of Cistercians. Rather, we need you to embody the charism, to speak about it in different language, to discover new ways of living it out, to re-inculturate it. And you have no need to ask our permission to do this. The charism is a gift that we have received and embodied in history, but we are not the exclusive owners. I invite you to continue to take the risk of going beyond our borders.

In reality, however, I am not the one inviting you. It is the Spirit speaking in your hearts that has invited you to re-create our Cistercian charism and to give it a new form. Questions such as these come to mind:

- What would be the basic criteria for discerning a Lay Cistercian vocation at its beginning and in the various stages of its growth?
- What are the *exercitia corporalia et spiritualia* proper to Lay Cistercian *conversatio* that is meant to be lived out in the world while not being of the world?
- What fundamental elements would be needed to draw up a program of formation that would help give shape to Cistercian values in the lives of lay men and women Cistercians?
- What sort of relationships and services are needed among members of a Lay Cistercian group to enable its life to grow and spread?
- By what kind of commitment should Lay Cistercians bind themselves to the Lord, to the other members of the group, to the host monastery, to the Order?
- What kind of union or association might there be among groups in the same region or among the various regions themselves?
- What is expected of the host monastery and of the Order as a whole?

Many of you have already answered many of these questions. In some cases, the answers have withstood the test of time, have proved to be of lasting value and have been compiled as

statutes. Today we are in a position to share and compare our discoveries in order to carry on seeking and finding. May the Lord help us with his creative Spirit. Amen.

Reading 6: Report to the Lay Cistercian Communities, September 24, 2011

[The following is a report to the members of the International Association of Lay Cistercian Communities (IALCC) prepared by the IALCC Coordinating Committee following the 5th International Meeting of Lay Cistercians held in Dubuque, Iowa in 2011. The report was shared with IALCC membership and presented to the OCSO General Chapter held in Assisi, Italy in September 2011.]

1.1. Presentation to the General Chapter

1.1.1. The International Committee made a short presentation to the General Chapter on September 22, 2011. Because of the lack of time, there were only a very few questions. (The presentation is included below.)

1.1.2. These are the votes taken by the General Chapter:

1.1.2.1. Re-confirmation of the vote of recognition of 2008: “We recognize the existence of a lay expression of our Cistercian charism in the lived experience of the groups of lay persons associated with a number of the monasteries of our Order”.

1.1.2.2. Reappointment of Dom Armand Vielleux as liaison between OCSO and the International Association of Lay Cistercian Communities.

1.2. Membership in the International Association

As indicated in the presentation made to the General Chapter (see below), membership in the International Association depends upon a response that the Abbot/Abbess of your Lay Community sends to the International Committee. This form answers the questions: 1) what type of membership best describes the lay group associated with the monastery, and 2) whether this lay group will become a member of the International Association. A form has been developed that will be sent to you before the middle of November 2011 and which should be given by you to your Abbot or Abbess. When the Committee has received the response from your Abbot or Abbess we will know whether we are to consider your group a member of the International Association. It is very important therefore that your Abbot or Abbess respond to this form as soon as possible.

1.3. International Meeting 2014

1.3.1. Goals may include:

1.3.1.1. Through our shared experiences of the Cistercian Charism both on the mountaintop as well as in the depths, discover how our relationships of

communion infuse our Christian lives.

1.3.1.2. Building on the excellent work begun in Dubuque in 2011, develop and approve a *Statute on Formation* to provide a foundation for the on-going transmission of life to individuals and groups within the Cistercian Charism.

1.3.1.3. Other Business

1.3.1.3.1. Election of International Committee based upon a proposed election procedure that will have been approved by the membership of the Association.

1.3.1.3.2. Discussion of providing formation resources on the ILC website

Report to the General Chapter Assisi, September 22, 2011

[Greetings]

Introduction

In this short presentation, we would like 1) to give you a very brief update about the lay groups associated with Cistercian monasteries, 2) to tell you a little about the outcomes of the International Meeting held in Dubuque earlier this year, and 3) to let you know how you can assist lay groups, both those that have already formed and those that are still in a process of being formed.

Cistercian Lay Communities

Currently there are 53 Cistercian monasteries that have one or more associated lay groups. The total number of lay communities is 63. 33 of these are English-speaking, 18 are French-speaking, and 12 are Spanish-speaking. There has been a slight increase in the number of groups since we last spoke to you in 2008. However, in the case of some of the individual groups, membership has continued to grow. Note also that the number of lay communities that have participated in International Meetings has remained fairly constant: 34 groups at Clairvaux in 2005, 36 at Huerta in 2008, and 34 at Dubuque in 2011. However, we should not overlook the effect that world economics have had, and continue to have, on participation in International meetings.

The International Meeting at Dubuque

The 2008 International Meeting at Huerta was memorable for the development of the “Lay Cistercian Identity Document”, a unanimously accepted description of the purposes and goals of Lay Cistercians and the communities of which they are a part, and the fruit of the work of all of the groups that were present. However, that meeting was also memorable in that it drafted and accepted a document that established *ad experimentum* the International Association of Lay Cistercian Communities, the organization that we represent here today. Whereas the meeting at Huerta focused on a practical and spiritual description of Lay Cistercians and their communities, the Dubuque meeting sought three “organizational” outcomes:

1. First, the ratification of a document entitled “The Bonds of Charity that Unite Us” that officially established the existence of the International Association of Lay Cistercian Communities. With the unanimous acceptance of this document, the organization that we represent here today officially came into existence.
2. Second, having officially created the International Association, it was necessary to ask two questions: 1) **who** (what lay groups) could become a member of the Association, and 2) **how** would this membership come about?
 - a. In order to answer the question “who could be a member” of the Association, a *Statute on Membership* was developed and approved. This document recognizes two levels of membership:
 - i. **Provisional** Lay Cistercian Communities: Before the time when a lay group receives official recognition from the monastic community it is associated with, there is a period of establishment, growth and development.
 - ii. **Recognized** Lay Cistercian Communities: After a period of discernment, a monastic community “represented by its Abbot or Abbess” (*Identity Document*, 4.3) may decide to recognize a lay community as an “expression of the Cistercian Charism” (MGM 2008, Vote 71).
 - b. In order to answer the question “how does a group become a member” of the Association, it was decided that a one-time application, signed by the Abbot or Abbess, must be sent to the Steering Committee.
3. A third outcome of the meeting at Dubuque was a list of “common characteristics” of lay communities. Lay Cistercian Communities, by their nature, share a great deal in common with one another and with the monasteries with which they are associated. They are all united by a bond of charity, a bond of fraternal love and support, and a bond of fidelity. There exists a frequent bond of prayer that deepens the love and respect of one for another.

The Dubuque meeting developed the following list of objective characteristics of Lay Cistercian Communities:

- a. Lay Cistercian Communities receive written recognition from the Abbot/Abbess of the monastery with which the lay community is associated.
- b. Lay Cistercians communities are assisted by a liaison from the monastic community appointed by the Abbot/Abbess.
- c. Lay Cistercian Communities recognize and adopt the Lay Cistercian Identity document approved in Huerta in 2008.
- d. Lay Cistercian Communities have a Charter and Statutes, approved by its members that outlines the spiritual goals of the group as well as its functioning and the link it has with the monastery.
- e. Lay Cistercian Communities have a leadership council, comprised of lay members, that is responsible for the administration of the group.
- f. Lay Cistercian Communities have developed a formation program comprised of a curriculum of topics and learning activities that address the values and practices of the Cistercian Charism.

Note that this list of characteristics is not prescriptive in nature. The International Association does not judge the quality of a Lay Community nor take this list of characteristics into account when a group applies for membership. Rather, it is in all cases the Abbot or Abbess of the monastery with which the group is associated that determines whether a lay community may become a member of the Association and at what level. This is, rather, a list of minimal and ideal characteristics that Lay Cistercians themselves have identified as worthy of emulation—a list that may prove valuable not only to the groups themselves as they reflect upon their development, but also to the Abbots and Abbesses who must determine whether a lay group associated with his/her monastery should be a member of the Association and at what level.

How Abbots and Abbesses can help

The Steering Committee is happy with the work that the lay communities have accomplished over the past six years. They have coalesced spiritually and have created real bonds of charity that unite them. They have created a “Lay Cistercian Identity Document” that not only helps them convey their identity to individuals and groups outside of the Cistercian family, but also acts as an internal checklist as they continue to grow and develop. They have created an International Association and established an official mechanism by which it is able to communicate with the other members of the Cistercian family. They have identified a good list of characteristics by which to judge themselves and to be judged by the monasteries with which they are associated. They have established realistic levels of membership that recognize the spiritual and organizational development necessary to become and remain associated with a Cistercian monastery.

This growth has occurred rapidly over the past six years. It is now necessary to give the Holy Spirit, and the groups themselves, time to assimilate and incorporate these developments.

Over the next three years, it will be one of the goals of the Steering Committee to establish the formal mechanism by which the individual lay groups may apply for membership in the International

Association. With 63 groups, this will be a “large work”. What it means for you, the Abbots and Abbesses of the Order, is that sometime in the next few months you will receive from a representative of your lay community an application form. You will be asked to check whether the group is “provisional” (this is, in formation) or “recognized”, and then to sign the application. In 2014, only those groups who have completed this form will be invited to the 2014 International Meeting.

SHORT TEXTS

1

[Bernard] had in his heart the need to be constant in following his vocation, so that he constantly said in his heart, and even often on his lips, “Bernard, Bernard. What have you come for?” (Bernarde, Bernarde, ad quid venisti?)
William of St-Thierry, *The First Life of Bernard of Clairvaux* 19; (CF 76, p. 22)

2

The noble creature was created in the region of likeness, made to the image of God. But when he was in honour he did not understand. He descended from likeness to unlikeness. Great indeed is the unlikeness, from paradise to hell, from an angel to a beast, from God to the devil. Furthermore, a cursed conversion has taken place of glory into misery, of life into death, of peace into struggle, in constant captivity. A damned descent from abundance into poverty, from freedom into slavery, from rest into labour.
Bernard of Clairvaux, *De Diversis* 42:2 (CF 68, p. 228.)

3

Worldly desires are threefold: vanity, sensuality, and ambition. Thus, worldly desires are the desire for meaningless [things], for sensual pleasures, and for honours. These are the three things that worldly people desire. They desire meaningless trappings, such as the beauty of their garments, the speed of their horses, the flight of their birds of prey, the keen senses of their dogs, the spectacle of their games. These are all vain things, void of permanence and truth. They desire also sensual pleasures, such as delicacies at the table, different kinds of drinks, satisfaction of their appetites and such like. They desire also the honours of this world, such as a kingdom, a retinue, episcopal status, and such like.
Aelred of Rievailx, *Liturgical Sermons* 31:20; (CF 77. P. 20.)

The Lay Cistercian Experience

Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani Abbey

Unit Five

Cistercian Mysticism

CISTERCIAN MYSTICISM

The theme of this unit addresses a deeper dimension of the Christian and Cistercian charism. You are asked to explore both individually and communally the richness of mysticism in our faith life. What tools do we need to go deep within us or draw from the well of the Christian and Cistercian tradition in our search of and our journey to God.

The reading selection is the address that Dom Bernardo Olivera gave to the assembled Lay Cistercian delegates to an early International Meeting of Lay Cistercians at their meeting in April 2002 in Conyers, Georgia. He hopes that the Lay Cistercian way of life will be enriched "...in the deeper experience of the Christian mystery."

It is hoped that as Lay Cistercians mature and grow within the context of their lives they will through their reading, meditation, participation in the Eucharist/worship, and spiritual practices make use of both classic and contemporary resources of the Cistercian mystical tradition. The writings of such classic Cistercian authors, as Bernard of Clairvaux, William of St-Thierry, Aelred of Rievaulx, Beatrice of Nazareth, Isaac of Stella are very accessible. Numerous commentaries on their writings and sermons are available in such publication as, *Cistercian Studies Quarterly*.

In the 'Short Texts' section at the conclusion of each unit in this program, you will find a sampling of classic Cistercian authors. Many are excellent texts for one's practice of lectio.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What does the term mystery in the spiritual context mean to you?
2. Given your understanding of mystery in your response to question one above, how do you see the connection between the mystery of your personhood and the mystery of God communicated to us by Jesus in the Gospels?
3. In his remarks at the Conyers meeting Dom Bernardo Olivera provides a link to the mystical dimensions of the Cistercian charism to the lives of Lay Cistercians. From your perspective and experience living the Lay Cistercian way of life, what thoughts do you have regarding this topic?

Reading 7: “Towards a Renewed Cistercian Mysticism”

[This presentation was given by Dom Bernardo Olivera, OCSO Abbot General, at the 2nd International Meeting of Lay Cistercians, Monastery of the Holy Spirit in Conyers, Georgia on April 25, 2002.]

Perhaps you are wondering what the title of this conference means. I hope we will be finding the answer to this question little by little. Nevertheless, I can already tell you this much: if Cistercian mysticism is a Christian mysticism, the root of its renewal is in the Mystery of God, which is concentrated in Jesus Christ.

The mystical experience of Christian life has a **central place** in the Cistercian tradition. This statement is so obvious that it requires no proof. The early Cistercians tried to live in the presence of God and in communion with God. This declaration of purpose still retains its full value today. As we read in our Constitutions: our Order is *a monastic institute wholly ordered to contemplation* (Const. 2).

We might wonder, however: what are the **consequences** of the present day existence of lay men and women associated with monks and nuns with regard to the mystical dimension of our charism? Once again I anticipate an answer: the consequences will involve mutual enrichment in the ever deeper experience of the Christian Mystery.

I would like to situate my words in a very specific context: John Paul II's urgent **invitation** to *contemplate the face of Christ*, as offered in his Apostolic Letter, *Novo millennio Ineunte* (NMI). Such contemplation is the absolute foundation of all the Church's pastoral action in this new millennium. This program of evangelization is addressed to everyone: clerics, religious, lay. We would be poor and insignificant witnesses if we were not at the same time contemplators of his Face.

Two thousand years after these events [the Passion and Resurrection], the Church relives them as if they had happened today. Gazing on the face of Christ, the Bride contemplates her treasure and her joy. "Dulcis Iesus memoria, dans vera cordis gaudia": how sweet is the memory of Jesus, the source of the heart's true joy! Heartened by this experience, the Church today sets out once more on her journey, in order to proclaim Christ to the world at the dawn of the Third Millennium: he "is the same yesterday and today and for ever" (Heb 13:8). (NMI 28).

This mystery of the Church, the Bride of Christ, becomes true and **incarnate** in those who experience prayer as affective fervor, as *the heart falling in love* (NMI 33). This *contemplative experience* is a heritage common to all Christians (NMI 34).

Here, then, is the **road map** we will follow in this meditation. First, we will draw back the

curtain of the Apocalypse in order to meet Christ the Bridegroom. Second, following the Pope's invitation, I will say something about the great mystical tradition of the Church. This will lead us to say something about Cistercian mysticism. By way of conclusion I will propose a possible way of enriching our mystical charism in service to the Church.

1. The Bridegroom and his Bride in the Book of Revelation

The book of Revelation reveals to us Christ the Spouse, jealous of the love of his Spouse, the Church. From the very beginning, the Risen Lord is presented as *he who loves us*, or more literally, *he who is loving us* (Rev 1:5). This love accompanies our lives from its beginning to the very end. In the messages sent to the *seven Churches* (Rev 2-3), we can notice how this caring and passionate love closely follows the vicissitudes of each and every community. The language used, full of delicate affection and passion, is that of a fiancé in love and jealous of the love of his fiancée. In the messages to the first and last of the seven churches, we find words of great significance.

After praising the virtues of the Church of Ephesus, the words that follow require an answer, for love alone can repay love:

But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then from what you have fallen, repent and do the works you did at first (Rev 2:4-5).

The Spouse is saying: you no longer love me with the love you had before! The *first love* refers not just to a moment in time, but to a high quality of love. It means the immaculate love of the moment of conversion, similar to the love with which the Lord loves, that is, total love.

The situation of the Church of Laodicea is more dramatic. The Lord is fully aware of this and forces the Church to face its own mediocrity.

I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth (Rev 3:15-16).

The Christians of Laodicea are playing with two loves, and therefore neither love nor cease to love. To answer the absolute love of the Risen Lord with this kind of love can only provoke vomiting. Nevertheless, conversion is still possible. The Risen Lord continues to love and therefore *reproves and chastens*. He advises them to buy *white garments* as befit a bride worthy of her Lord, and above all, repentance and *fervent love*. All is not lost: *Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me* (Rev 3:20; Cf S of S 5:1-2).

Throughout the history of humanity the chaff is being separated from the good grain. The day will come when opposition to God and his Christ, as represented by the *great Harlot*, will be reduced to nothing but ruins and ashes (Rev 17-18). Christ the Lamb has conquered also on

account of the *good deeds of the saints*. These *works of justice* are the fulfillment of the two-fold yet single commandment of love. This love has made the followers of the Lamb a Bride clothed in *fine linen, bright and pure*. Thus the Bride is invited to *the wedding feast of the Lamb* (Rev 19:1-10).

We will all be at this banquet together, united among ourselves and with Him. The Church-Bride is also the Church-City, a two-fold metamorphosis symbolizing nuptial consecration to the Lord and transparent social coexistence (Rev 21:9-14).

Although we are happy because of the invitation, the wedding banquet has not yet taken place. While that glorious day is on its way, the Spirit inspires us with prophetic words suitable for calling upon the Lord. Christ the Bridegroom always hears the sighs of love arising from his Spirit-filled Bride: *Come, Lord Jesus!* And he is never slow to answer: *Surely I am coming soon!* (Rev 22: 17,20).

2. The Church's great mystical tradition

To speak of mysticism is necessarily to speak of mystery and this for two reasons. The first is a simple matter of grammar: the word 'mystical' is an adjective derived from the noun 'mystery'. The second reason is more important: mysticism is experience of mystery. Today, however, the term 'mystical' can take on a variety of meanings. The same can be said about 'mystery'. We therefore need to provide some clarifications.

Christian mysticism is the fulfillment the Mystery of Christ in us. To repeat once again, Mystery and mysticism do not stand on their own as two things with a separate existence. Mystery-mysticism exists as a single reality, that is to say, Mystery at work in us. In this Mystery fulfilled in us, we find both the subjective and objective dimensions of all Christian mysticism. The experience is two-fold: Christ living in us and we living in Christ.

In his Apostolic Letter, John Paul II emphasizes our call to the fullest possible union with God. Let us look at three fundamental passages on this subject.

The Pope begins by speaking of contemplation as a gift of God's grace. Spiritual theology would call this infused contemplation, that is, a form of mystical experience in its clearest and most precise meaning. Commenting on Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi, a confession arising from faith and attaining the depths of Christ's mystery, the Pope tells us:

We cannot come to the fullness of contemplation of the Lord's face by our own efforts alone, but by allowing grace to take us by the hand (NMI 20).

This mystical grace rests on a very clear anthropological basis. John Paul evokes the traditional patristic doctrine of the divinization of the human person through incorporation into Christ:

Jesus is "the new man" (cf. Eph 4:24; Col 3:10) who calls redeemed humanity to share in his divine life. The mystery of the Incarnation lays the foundations for an anthropology which, reaching beyond its own limitations and contradictions,

moves towards God himself, indeed towards the goal of "divinization". This occurs through the grafting of the redeemed on to Christ and their admission into the intimacy of the Trinitarian life. The Fathers have laid great stress on this soteriological dimension of the mystery of the Incarnation: it is only because the Son of God truly became man that man, in him and through him, can truly become a child of God (NMI 23).

Starting from our condition as redeemed creatures and ever counting on the help of God's grace, we reach the highest summits of God's Mystery. This is the place of transforming or conforming union with Christ. The Pope reminds us of the great tradition in the Church centered on the Lord's loving promise. He thus invites us to embrace God's mysterious action, uniting us as spouses with the Lord.

The great mystical tradition of the Church of both East and West has much to say in this regard. It shows how prayer can progress, as a genuine dialogue of love, to the point of rendering the person wholly possessed by the divine Beloved, vibrating at the Spirit's touch, resting filially within the Father's heart. This is the lived experience of Christ's promise: "He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him" (Jn 14:21). It is a journey totally sustained by grace, which nonetheless demands an intense spiritual commitment and is no stranger to painful purifications (the "dark night"). But it leads, in various possible ways, to the ineffable joy experienced by the mystics as "nuptial union". How can we forget here, among the many shining examples, the teachings of Saint John of the Cross and Saint Teresa of Avila? (NMI 33).

It is easy to notice two different but complementary mystical currents in this passage: a current of trinitarian and filial mysticism, which implies being possessed by Christ, being moved by the Spirit, and being welcomed by the Father; and a current of christological, nuptial mysticism, in which Jesus' manifestation reaches its high point in spiritual marriage. In both cases, Christ's promise is fulfilled: I will love him and show myself to him.

3. Mystical tradition and Cistercian asceticism

John of the Cross and Theresa of Avila's doctrine is based on earlier witnesses and precedents. The golden era of Spanish mysticism, by way of the explosion of Flemish mysticism, drew on the depths of the medieval and Cistercian mystical current.

In medieval Christian mysticism it is possible to distinguish between two aspects of the experience:

- **essential** or unitive mysticism: union with God in God's Unity and deep integration of one's own soul.
- **love** mysticism or relational mysticism: union with the divine Thou in terms of nuptial, covenant love.

Both aspects are found in the doctrine of our Fathers, either accentuated as different or seen as united one to the other. William of Saint Thierry presents this two-fold reality within the unity of a single experience: *To love is to be and become one spirit with God (Contemp 11; cf. Ep fra 257-258, 263).*

In Cistercian commentaries on the Song of Songs, it is the bridal dimension of encounter and union with the Lord that prevails. Knowledge and love come together in this union: *we know to the degree that we love and we love to the degree that we know.* Love shines forth when it attains its fruit: *The love of one who has fruition is wholly in the light, because fruition itself is the light of the lover (William, Cant 76; 60; cf. 57).*

Just as Cistercian mysticism is centered in love, so is ascesis. Ascetic effort and exercise consist in conforming our will to the will of God. When there is deep communion of wills, there is conformation, unity, marriage.

Such conformity weds the soul to the Word, for one who is like the Word by nature shows himself like him too in the exercise of his will, loving as she is loved. When she loves perfectly, the soul is wedded.... Truly this is a spiritual contract, a holy marriage. It is more than a contract, it is an embrace: an embrace where identity of will makes of two one spirit.... He and the soul are Bridegroom and Bride. What other bond or compulsion do you look for between those who are betrothed, except to love and be loved? (Bernard, SC 83,3)

To sum up, spiritual marriage is the high-point and destination of our Christian pilgrimage on the pathway of ascesis and prayer. It is not a matter of "mystical phenomena," but rather of the possibility of our nature, created in the image and likeness of God, enabled by God's grace. It all comes down to an unconditional and ongoing "Yes" to God and God's will. Translated into daily practice, this means not to seek one's own good, but rather to seek the glory of God and the good of one's neighbor.

And let us not think that this intimate union with Christ is only for a privileged few. The Holy Father invites all Christians to this union. Bernard of Clairvaux said the same centuries ago in a way that awakens and gives dynamism to our hopes and desires.

Every soul, even if burdened with sin, enmeshed in vice ensnared by the allurements of pleasure, a captive in exile, imprisoned in the body, caught in mud, fixed in mire, bound to its members, a slave to care, distracted by business, afflicted with sorrow, wandering and straying, filled with anxious forebodings and uneasy suspicions, a stranger in a hostile land...every soul, I say, standing thus under condemnation and without hope, has the power to turn and find it can not only breathe the fresh air of the hope of pardon and mercy, but also dare to aspire to the nuptials of the Word, not fearing to enter into alliance with God or to bear the sweet yoke of love with the King of angels. Why should it not venture with confidence into the presence of him by whose image it sees itself honored, and in whose likeness it knows itself made glorious? Why should it fear majesty when its very origin gives it ground for confidence? All it has to do is to take care

to preserve its natural purity by innocence of life, or rather to study to beautify and adorn with the brightness of its actions and dispositions the glorious beauty which is its birthright (SC 83:1).

4. Enriching of our tradition

Cistercian mystical tradition, in its monastic form, may be enriched in different ways by century-old mysticism. I will dwell on only one of them, looking to Saint Bernard for inspiration. I am referring to the last spiritual "itinerary" the Abbot of Clairvaux left us. Commenting on the verse of the Canticle, *Upon my bed I sought him whom my soul loves*, he presents seven reasons why the soul seeks the Word. The fifth has to do with acquiring *beauty*, that is to say: *simplicity of soul, which is concerned to keep the innocent reputation with a good conscience*. The soul that clothes itself with this *beauty of purity* and with this kind of white garment of heavenly innocence reclaims for itself a glorious likeness to the Word (SC 85,11).

The soul which has attained this degree now ventures to think of marriage. Why should she not, when she sees that she is like him and therefore ready for marriage? His loftiness has no terrors for her, because her likeness to him associates her with him, and her profession of love is a betrothal. This is the form of that profession: 'I have sworn and I purpose to keep your righteous judgments' (Ps 118:106). The apostles followed this when they said, 'See, we have left everything to follow you'(Mt 19:27). There is a similar saying which pointing to the spiritual marriage between Christ and the Church, refers to physical marriage: 'For this shall a man leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they two shall be one flesh' (Eph 5:31); and the prophet says of the Bride's glory: 'It is good for me to cling to good, and to put my hope in the Lord' (Ps 72:28). (SC 85,12)

What Bernard is saying can pass by unnoticed, but it is of utmost importance. The Abbot of Clairvaux is saying that both religious profession and marriage can help understand the characteristics of the nuptial union of the soul and the Word; religious profession, as a sworn promise to leave all to follow Christ; marriage, as a sign of the union between Christ and the Church. Both vocations, each in its own way, realize the marriage bond with Christ the Spouse. How this takes place and through what mediation it is done may change, but the ultimate objective is the same.

When a monk, a nun, a married man or woman reach the point of being able to say: *For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain*, we can be sure that this person is already a bride and has already conceived through the Word (SC 85,12).

We tend to think that the married person has a "divided heart" (Cf. 1Cor 7:34), and is consequently unable to make a total self-offering to the Lord. This is a serious mistake. Paul is not laying down a principle, but simply pointing something out. Any one of us can also point to the fact that there are celibates and virgins with divided hearts! The only thing that divides the heart—or even kills it—is sin, which is always a lack of love.

We are also accustomed to thinking that monks and nuns relate directly with God whereas married lay men and women relate with God by way of marriage and the family. We are forgetting, it seems, that monks and nuns have vows of obedience to a superior and stability in a community. The conclusion of Saint Benedict's Rule is not an idle wish: *May Christ bring us all together to eternal life!* (RB 72,12). Faith, hope, charity, and the Gift of the Spirit alone can bring us into direct union with God, and these gifts or virtues belong to all the baptized. Even solitude, whether in a monastic or lay context, can be filled with people, for better or for worse: for better when it allows us to be in true solidarity with all, for worse when emotional immaturity turns us in on ourselves.

Cistercian monastic life, as a way or system of life, has to create the best possible climate to foster a certain type of Christian experience. The married life and family life of Cistercian lay men or women also has to create the most suitable climate for another kind of Christian experience. Each has a charism, a gift of the Spirit of God, and all of us partake of the common charism of the Cistercian grace. In what does this charismatic grace consist fundamentally? From the mystical point of view I have adopted here, I would say that the Cistercian charism consists in:

- Ordering our scale of values in such a way that religious values are the highest guiding principles. More explicitly, all of life has to be directed and oriented to seeking and finding God in the face of Christ.
- Clinging to Christ, the Bridegroom of the Church and of each Christian. Through the Incarnation, Easter and the Eucharist, he teaches us the intimate nature of what it means to be bride or bridegroom: gratuitous, total, ongoing and life-giving love that invites reciprocity.
- Giving concrete priority to prayer understood as gratuitous giving and receiving, experienced as loving faith anticipating the visit of the longed-for Bridegroom. This likewise applies to all forms of prayer: liturgical and devotional, private, within marriage, family, or community....
- Striving to work at the discipline of love, understood as a common will shared with God and neighbor: love based on truth, truth that opens us to self-knowledge and mercy in the face of one's own misery and the misery of others.

I conclude by addressing a word to Lay Associates, or better said, to our Cistercian co-brothers and sisters, especially to those united in the sacrament of marriage. Christ is found in your conjugal experience itself. Your "divinization," as spouses, comes about when *conjugal love is taken up in divine love*, when there is a *fusion of the human and the divine* (*Gaudium et Spes* 48, 49; cf. John Paul II, *Catechesis* of July 4, 1984). In this context, the wish expressed by Bernard of Clairvaux in his letter to the Duke and Duchess of Lorraine is eloquent: *that they may so rejoice in a pure and mutual love that only the love of Christ is supreme in them* (Ep 119).

Conjugal experience is a way of living out the spiritual marriage we have been speaking about. Consecrated virginity and celibacy is another. The dialogue between them is called to enrich our mystical and Cistercian experience of the nuptial Mystery of God.

SHORT TEXTS

1

I have ascended to the highest in me, and look! The Lord is towering above that. In my curiosity I have descended to explore my lowest depths, yet I found him even deeper. I looked outside myself, I saw him stretching beyond the furthest I could see; and if I looked within, he was yet further within. Then I knew the truth of what I had read, 'In him we live and move and have our being.'

Bernard of Clairvaux. *On Loving God*. 1; CF 13:93.

2

Father, Son and Holy Spirit are names of goodness, names of gentleness, sweetness and love. Who is more gentle than the Father, who so great, kind and merciful? Who is dearer than Jesus Christ? Our savior is all healing, all goodness, gentleness, sweetness. Who is more loving, dear and holy than the Holy Spirit? He is the love of the Father and the Son, and by him all who are made holy receive sanctification.

A twelfth-century Cistercian. *Spiritual Tractate* 13; CF 41:131.

3

You are he who is supremely good, goodness itself, the life of the hearts of men and the light of their inward eyes.

William of St.-Tierry. *Sermons on the Christian Year*. Sermon 4.11; CF 11:32.

4

God is the meditation of my heart and my inheritance, that I await, long for and delight in. He is the objective I have set myself, the whole reason for my efforts. He, God himself, is the inheritance I plan to bring to a home of right-ordered love, that he may sup with me and I with him. He is ever in my thoughts, he is my heart's delight. I seek him, the transcendent, for his own sake. By him, the immanent, I feed on him. He is both the field I work and the food I work for. He is both reason and reward of all I do, my beginning and end without end. Forever he is mine; eternally my inheritance.

Isaac of Stella. *On Contemplating God* 13; CF 3:63.

The Lay Cistercian Experience

Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani Abbey

Unit Six

Community

COMMUNITY

The theme of this unit is of particular importance to our Lay Cistercian way of life. The spiritual value of community is one of the pillars of the Cistercian tradition and its characteristic charism. Humanity is in desperate need of authentic human community in its various forms.

As Lay Cistercians, our active participation in the community life of one's local LCG community and a consideration of the needs of the broader network of LCG communities and the LCG Advisory Council are essential in our commitment to our way of life. Also, our relationship with the monastic community of the Abbey of Gethsemani is of much importance, especially our respect for the monastic boundaries.

The reading selections for this unit provide broad perspectives for our consideration. Our primary consideration obviously is the intimacy of our local LCG community life where we experience spiritual companionship and close bonds and support. Within the context of LCG community life we have the opportunity to practice the skills and virtues of listening, obedience, conversion, simplicity, stability, hospitality, humility, and balance living in our unique 'school of love.'

The 'LCG Covenant of Unity' (Rev. 2019) document articulates the importance of the extended community bonds among the LCG network of local communities and with the LCG Advisory Council. 'The Lay Cistercian Identity' (Huerta 2008) document is our link to Lay Cistercian communities around the world through our membership in the International Association of Lay Cistercian Communities.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Do you feel personally included, your talents used, in the context of your Christian community? Within your local LCG community?
2. Do you feel a real bonding between your local LCG community and the Gethsemani community? What more do you desire from this relationship?
3. What are healthy ways to invite new members into your LCG local community?
4. How does contact with the Gethsemani community enrich your Lay Cistercian life?
5. What do I hope to share with my spouse and family by living the Cistercian charism?

6. How do you experience the Spirit of God within community?
7. As Lay Cistercians we are called to practice hospitality as directed in the Rule of St. Benedict. How do you do so as member of your family and natural community, your faith community, and your local LCG community?
8. In what ways does various social media help create community ties for you? How do they hinder forging real community? How might you use them more wisely?
9. How can the monastic practice of consensus apply to decisions that need to be made within your local LCG community? Within the LCG Advisory Council?
10. What are some practical ways I can bend a little in order to make relationships within the community life of family and my local LCG community stronger?

Reading 8: “COMPANIONING WITH THE PLAN OF LIFE”

[Talk given by Fr. Michael Casagram during the Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani’s Annual Retreat on September 30, 2007. The theme of the retreat was “Walking With Another On the Journey.”]

Reading of St. Aelred about his understanding of friendship, I was made aware of how central this whole notion is to human and spiritual growth. Having a friend, a companion along our spiritual journey is the way most of us come to union with God. For the monk it has all to do with living in a community and having a spiritual father, whether this is the Abbot or another person, with whom one can pour one’s heart with all one’s struggles. It is a matter of being where you can be completely, unabashedly you before God. The Rule of Benedict is said to revolve around chapter seven on humility and what is this but learning to be who we truly are before God and our brother or sister with no cover up, no evasions.

The more I live the monastic life, the more I realize that it has less to do with what I know than with how I live, how I am with my brothers day after day. I can have all the theory in the world but unless I am an example of the love about which the theory has been written, my knowledge becomes just a noisy gong, one more empty set of words. I feel several books could be written about that first sentence Mike Johnson has given us from Aelred’s treatise on *Spiritual Friendship*, but what is most valuable is to let myself enter into this experience. Aelred says to us: “Here we are, you and I, and I hope a third, Christ, is in our midst. There is no one now to disturb us; there is no one to break in upon our friendly chat, no one’s prattle or noise of any kind will creep into this pleasant solitude. Come now, beloved, open your heart, and pour into these friendly ears whatsoever you will and let us accept gracefully the boon of this place, time, and leisure.”

Much could be said or written about the way Aelred experienced Christ being present as he joined a friend in conversation; much could be written about our need to be free of disturbance if we are to enter into such a deep and meaningful communion with another person, the many ways we find ourselves distracted from such an intimate and life-changing encounter. Much could be said about our use of words, the subtle ways they may prevent us from dealing with what is most important in our lives. Much could be said about our ability to enter into a pleasant solitude so as to actually hear what the other is saying. Much may be said about the art of opening one’s heart to another, the enormous amount of trust it takes in our culture if one is going to be this vulnerable, this naked and free. Much could be said about having perceptive ears that are able to hear not only the words of another but to hear between the lines. What the other most want to share. There is still far more in this paragraph, but let’s touch on two matters; the importance of a listening companion and the transformative power of this sharing and how these related to the **Plan of Life**.

First, the importance of a listening companion according to Aelred needs to be considered. You have heard it said so many times that where two or three are gathered in Christ’s name, there he is in the midst of us. We get use to hearing this or even praying it but what is the saying actually meant to convey? To begin to open your heart to a friend in the

effort to share who you truly are is to own yourself before God, it is to discover your Christ-self, the one who he or she truly is as a child of God by reason of his or her baptism. It is also to enter into your own vulnerability where an abundance of grace is most likely to flow, it is to own your own dependence on the love God has for you. The reason the sacrament of reconciliation has been so powerful for many Catholics is because, in their admission of sinfulness, the tremendous gift of divine grace can flow. Humility opens the gates to the influx of divine life because in it there is no longer any separation between you and God. This has its example, par excellence, in the person of Mary who was looked upon in her nothingness and thus became the Mother of God. When Jesus says that where two are gathered together in His name he is talking about coming together into a holy place, in a spirit of love and trust, in a mutual search for God in their lives. To meet on this level of a common desire to please God is to already please God and even to share in the divine presence.

We live in a highly individualized world, where meeting one's own needs and becoming independent is greatly esteemed. A rugged individualism is thought to be the Real Self. In seeking God, wanting to become participants of the Divine Life, we must be willing to experience something very different. We must be willing to see just how deeply interdependent and interrelated our lives really are. Each of us has a certain inalienable right, a personal freedom that no one can take from us. At the same time and here we have, I think, the great mystery of the human person, we are equally defined by our ability to relate to the other, especially to God. What St. Aelred says so clearly is that we only become who we are in relationship, in learning to love, in learning to love deeply. He goes so far as to say, rephrasing the first letter of St. John that "God is friendship." "For Aelred there can be no conflict between love of our friends and the love of God, since all love is one and has its course in God. The love of neighbor is no derogation (no lessening) of our love of God, but rather is necessary for us if we are truly to love him...Since the monastery is a school of love, there can be no possibility in the monastery of love causing factions. Cupidity can indeed be divisive and false friendships, based on cupidity instead of charity, are even more dangerous for a monk than for people in the world, but true love builds up the community and can only serve to unify, not tear apart." (Douglas Roby) Aelred sees friendship or any serious spiritual companionship as the sure path to God and the discovery of the fullest meaning of human life.

What of friendship's **transformative power**? I have already hinted at this in what I've said about letting ourselves become vulnerable with another so as to come to know the true self. Real love never fails to undermine the illusion of the false self or the self-centered self. The subtleties of the false self are manifold. Just when you think that you are really doing something for God, you notice some hidden agenda for you all know as well as I, there are no short cuts in the spiritual life. It takes a life-time to come to an authentic humility, to the point of living continually by the grace and new life that God gives. Recently a priest psychologist shared with us twelve principles of **Attitudinal Healing**, a copy of which I am glad to share with all of you. The first of these principles is that the essence of our being is love. I am reminded once again of those beautiful words of St. John of the Cross where he says that at the evening of life we will be judged on our love. Our true identity has all to do with living in a loving openness to the other and to do so as free as possible from self interest. To come to this, as St.

Aelred knew very well, we must go through a slow and often long process of purification or inner transformation. What a spiritual companion does is encouraged us along this journey. He or she keeps reminding us or showing us the path, strengthening us in patience and the willingness to endure what ever hardships may appear along the way. It is here, it seems to me, that we find the transformative power of spiritual companionship or friendship.

The PLAN OF LIFE: Many of you have already had experience of what I am talking about. This retreat has helped you to focus on the value of another to strengthen you in your desire for God. The Plan of Life provides an easy reference for both the journey and its destiny. It summarizes the Cistercian charism as it is to be lived out in the world, in ups and downs of your everyday lives. During this retreat Mike Johnson has suggested a number of “Questions for Reflections.” While not touching on the many tools outlined in the Plan of Life, they have allowed you to look closely at some central values of being Lay Cistercians. They have encouraged you to take a careful look at your prayer life, what is happening there, at your use of Scriptures, at being in touch with your thoughts and feelings as these arise. To focus in on these with a spiritual companion, a friend in your desire for God, is to allow yourself room for the movement of the Spirit, opening yourself to the transformative power of Christ’s Spirit. It is good to review your living the Plan on your own but doubly valuable to review it with another of similar interest. It is in this way, it seems to me, that our Cistercian charism will become fully alive for you.

READING 9: “Characteristics of Lay Cistercian Communities”

[This statement was compiled and approved by the delegates attending the Fifth International Lay Cistercian Encounter in June 2011 held at Clark University in Dubuque, Iowa.]

Lay Cistercian Communities, by their nature, share a great deal in common with one another and with the monasteries with which they are associated. They are all united by a bond of charity, a bond of fraternal love and support, and a bond of fidelity. There exists a frequent bond of prayer that deepens the love and respect of one for another.

The following is a list of objective characteristics of Lay Cistercian Communities that the Association recognizes:

1. Lay Cistercian Communities receive written recognition from the Abbot/Abbess of the monastery with which the lay community is associated.
2. Lay Cistercian communities are assisted by a liaison from the monastic community appointed by the Abbot/Abbess.
3. Lay Cistercian Communities recognize and adopt the Lay Cistercian Identity document approved in Huerta in 2008.

4. Lay Cistercian Communities have a Charter and Statutes, approved by its members, which outline the spiritual goals of the group as well as its functioning and the link it has with the monastery.
5. Lay Cistercian Communities have a leadership council, comprised of lay members, that is responsible for the administration of the group.
6. Lay Cistercian Communities have developed a formation program comprised of a curriculum of topics and learning activities that address the values and practices of the Cistercian Charism.

Note that this list of characteristics is not prescriptive in nature. The International Association of Lay Cistercian Communities does not judge the quality of a Lay Community, nor take this list of characteristics into account when a group applies for membership. Rather, it is in all cases the Abbot/Abbess of the monastery with which the group is associated that determines whether a lay community may become a member of the Association and at what level. This is, rather, a list of minimal and ideal characteristics that Lay Cistercians themselves have identified as worthy of emulation.

READING 10: The Bonds of Charity That Unite Us

[This statement was also approved by the delegates attending the Fifth International Lay Cistercian Encounter in June 2011 in Dubuque, Iowa.]

Lay people, desiring to embody in their lives the essential values of Cistercian spirituality, have gathered together in communities attached to monasteries of Cistercian monks or nuns. The spirituality that inspires these Lay Communities is formulated in the document “Lay Cistercian Identity.”

In order to foster communion among themselves and with the Cistercian Family and, in the spirit of the Charter of Charity, these autonomous communities have united together in an *International Association of Lay Cistercian Communities*.

The present document describes the functioning of this Association.

The Association will hold a Meeting every three years.

At each International Meeting a Steering Committee composed of three members representing English, French and Spanish languages will be elected by the delegates. The main role of the

Steering Committee will be to serve as an interface between the Lay Communities on the one hand and the Cistercian Orders and Congregations on the other. The Steering Committee will develop the necessary means required to maintain the Association. In addition, it will organize the International Meeting every three years.

Representatives of Lay Cistercian communities that are members of the International Association and who have been elected by their Lay Cistercian community will participate in this International Meeting. In addition, monastic representatives from the monasteries with which the communities are associated may participate.

In order to allow the proper functioning of the Association and its autonomy, each Lay Community that is a member of the Association will make a financial contribution. The Steering Committee will be responsible for managing the Association's accounts. A written financial report will be submitted to the membership at each international meeting.

Other expressions of the bonds of charity between the Lay Communities are, for example, regional meetings of the Lay Communities, sharing of resources, documents, reports, etc., and possibly joint meetings.

READING 11: "Look How They Love Each Other"

[Approved unanimously in Avila, Spain during the VII International Encounter of the International Association of Lay Cistercian Communities on June 22, 2017.]

I. Cistercian lay community:

1. Nature and Purpose

That we form community is the desire of Jesus himself for all of us who want to follow him.

A Community of Lay Cistercians brings together baptized men and women who seek God through the Cistercian charism. The attraction to a particular monastery brings us together and makes us part of a family.

Community is a grace by which the Holy Spirit unites us as a family, with Christ at the center. The members sacrifice their own will in favor of the common good. Community is for us a privileged place to journey together, respecting each one's rhythm. It is a true school of charity, a process of ongoing conversion, and a search for holiness in our daily lives and in the world. With our personal and community life we will be witnesses to the love of God and it could be

said of us, "Look how they love one another."

One characteristic of our lay Cistercian communities is that we do not live together. This does not present an impediment; on the contrary, it is a great opportunity to deepen the challenge of being a spiritual community.

The greater the appreciation for prayer, work, and fraternal charity, the less we are disturbed by the differences in personalities, decision-making processes or spiritual practices.

Putting Jesus at the center of our lives causes us to grow in freedom, generosity and fraternal love. Whenever we are faithful to these values, we are building our community in spite of any type of distance.

In the Cistercian context, the call to communion with God manifests itself in the community and promotes unification, both personal and between members.

2. Mutual Responsibility

a) Among ourselves

For us to be mutually responsible within the community of Lay Cistercians is to listen (RB), to help and care for one another, encouraging each one to live their commitment, to walk together, to pray for one another. The Rule of St Benedict is an essential guide for our lives.

We exercise mutual responsibility in the life of our lay community: by fulfilling the commitment to what is agreed upon, by our active presence at scheduled meetings, by making our contribution, bringing our ideas and by accepting ourselves as we are.

In living our commitment, we are not only responsible for ourselves, but also for others in the sight of God.

Through our witness we encourage each other in our journey in faith. Following the example of the monastic community, we seek to exercise a collegial form of authority, even if there are elected leaders.

The development of a Charter can be a good way to define the responsibilities of each one, at both personal and community levels.

b) With the monastic community

What must be prevalent in the relationship between lay and monastic communities is the balance between the bonds of companionship and autonomy. This, of course, requires mutual understanding.

The shared responsibility between monastic and lay communities is reflected in the requirement of an association with a particular monastery and the presence of the monastic liaison in the group. Knowing that the way we live the Cistercian charism is recognized and encouraged by the monastic community commits us to seek together new ways to embody this charism.

The role of the monk or nun who is the monastic liaison is of utmost importance within the lay community.

II. Communication: a relationship of love

Community life is a life in relationship, based on communication among its members.

Any type of communication must have a foundation of love. Love is seeking the good of the other for the sake of the other (Pope John Paul II). Christian communication is never between two, it is among three – the one who transmits, the one who receives and the Holy Spirit who enlightens.

Communication between members of a community manifests itself as much through silence as through the word, provided that these are lived with respect, benevolence and reciprocity. To respect the silence of the other(s) is to care for them. What must prevail between us is love! Important occasions, as well as work done together, shape our community and establish strong bonds.

We recognize our International Association as a means to facilitate community, mutual responsibility and communication.

The language-commission, regional, and international meetings are experienced as a way to improve the vitality of our communities.

Lay communities are nourished by close spiritual bonds and frequent communication with the monastery with which they are associated. Monastic advisors provide spiritual and institutional guidance as we seek to translate the Cistercian charism into our lives as lay Cistercians. Each community commits itself to open and honest communication among its members and between the community and its associated monastery. In addition, lay communities commit themselves to open and honest communication among themselves within the IALCC.

A simple and efficient channel of communication, which respects the two vocations, and does not disturb the monastic life itself, should be established.

SHORT TEXTS

1

Add your light to the sum of light. To me, that is the dream – and promise – of Benedictine community. To make wherever we land a “holy city,” where suffering meets solace, and the lonely encounter an outstretched hand. Community is never going to be perfect, as no marriage is perfect, and no family is perfect. The first community of Christians, the twelve apostles, makes that abundantly clear. They remained a rambunctious, competitive, duplicitous and tin-headed group right up to the Last Supper and beyond. Still, Jesus stays at the table. He keeps breaking the bread and passing the cup. We too build community by staying at the table. We add our light to the sum of light.

Judith Valente. *What the Rule of St. Benedict Teaches Us About Happiness, Meaning, and Community.* Hampton Road Publishing Company, Inc., Charlottesville, Virginia. 2018 (p. 96)

2

As often as anything important is to be done in the monastery, the abbot shall call the whole community together and himself explain what the business is; and after hearing the advice of the brothers, let him ponder it and follow what he judges the wiser course. The reason why we have said all should be called for counsel is that the Lord often reveals what is better to the younger. The brothers, for their part, are to express their opinions with all humility, and not presume to defend their own views obstinately. The decision is rather the abbot's to make, so that when he has determined what is more prudent, all may obey. Nevertheless, just as it is proper for disciples to obey their master, so it is becoming for the master on his part to settle everything with foresight and fairness.

RB 1980 The Rule of St. Benedict in English. “Chapter 3.” The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 1982. (pp. 25-26)

The Lay Cistercian Experience

Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani Abbey

Unit Seven

Prayer

PRAYER

“The thirteenth century witnessed a rich flowering of mysticism among Cistercian nuns. Contemporary hagiographical accounts of several of them exist, but – apart from Saint Gertrude – they did not leave much in the way of teaching. Beatrice of Nazareth seems to have written several treatises on aspects of monastic life but mostly they were destroyed after her death to avoid the scrutiny of the Inquisition. We have only traces of most of them preserved in the posthumous *Life* written by a chaplain to the monastery. By good fortune, however, her treatise *On the Seven Modes of Love* survived.

Although Beatrice seems to have had a good education and a sound knowledge of Latin, her work was written in the vernacular. This gives an originality and an immediacy to her teaching, even though it is clear that most of it is in continuity with the great Cistercian authors of the previous century. The whole purpose of Beatrice’s treatise is to demonstrate that the lifelong experience of prayer is not homogeneous. In the normal course of events, a monk or a nun will experience something of the variation about which Beatrice writes, perhaps not with the same intensity. In most cases, however, the journey of prayer begins with desire and culminates in union.” *[from the OCSO Experientia program, Vol. 2, Unit 6, p. 3, Fr. Michael Casey, Editor]*

In this Unit we are asking you to reflect on your own experience of prayer and the different forms that it has assumed during your years of Lay Cistercian life. Reflecting on your present practice may, perhaps, lead you to make some changes that might make prayer a more vibrant component of your everyday life.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. I always have time to eat, sleep, to chat, to follow the news and check my email but do I sometimes say that I cannot find time for prayer?
2. How did my relationship with God develop after I became a Lay Cistercian? What role was played by my worship with by faith community? By lectio divina? By personal prayer?
3. Was there a person who initiated me into a more intense interior life at the beginning of my Lay Cistercian life or before? Is there someone now with whom I can, on occasion, freely discuss my experiences in prayer?
4. What criteria do I use in evaluating my prayer life? Is it a question more of feeling comfortable with my life, feelings of devotion, or of being constantly challenged to live more in accordance with the Gospel?

5. What different forms does prayer assume in my life today? Has there been development or change? On average, how much time do I give to personal prayer and lectio divina? To what extent has my prayer developed from periods of prayer into a more diffuse prayerfulness throughout the day? Do I find that there are obstacles to continual prayer in every day life?

6. Do I experience Liturgy of the Hours and Sunday worship as a real source of prayer and life? Is my interior life enriched by my participation in the liturgy prayer?

7. To what extent have I experienced Lay Cistercian life as providing an ambience for contemplative prayer? Does my LCG local community offer the opportunity for ongoing formation in prayer? Do I think that continual prayer is a realistic ideal in modern Cistercian life?

Reading 12: Beatrice of Nazareth: The Seven Modes of Love

In love there are seven modes that come from above and work their way back to the heights.

The First Mode of Love

The first mode is a desire that comes forth from love with great energy. This must reign in the heart for a long time before it has the power completely to drive out all its adversaries. It must work at this task with strength and skill and find its fulfilment in so doing.

This mode is a desire that surely comes forth from love. That is, the good soul has the will loyally to follow and truly to love so that she is drawn forth in the desire to receive and to exist in purity and freedom, and in the nobility in which she was made by her Creator, according to his image and likeness. This tendency is to be loved and nurtured.

Here she desires to lead her whole life in this desire, to cooperate with it, to increase it and to climb to a great height of love and to closer knowledge of God until she attains that fulfilment for which she was made and to which she is called by God. To this end she aspires, day and night; to this pursuit she gives herself completely. This is her prayer and her endeavour, this her supplication to God.

Her thought is how she can come to this goal, how she might receive the gift of a near likeness to love in the total adornment of the virtues and in the full purity of the highest nobility of love.

All the while, this soul earnestly seeks to know what she is and what she should be, what she has and what is lacking to her desire. With all her efforts, with great desire and all possible skill, she strains to prevent and to shun all that might hinder or harm such working. Her heart never resists or desists from seeking, supplicating, learning, or drawing to herself and holding onto, all that might help her and bring her further towards love.

This is the greatest concern of the soul at this point. In this she must work and labour much until, by her diligence and fidelity, she receives from God the possibility of placidly serving love with a free conscience, a pure spirit and a clear understanding, no longer held back by past misdeeds.

This mode of desire, characterised by such great purity and nobility, certainly comes from love and not from fear. The effect of fear is dread of our Lord's anger and the judgement of the just Judge leading to eternal torments or temporal chastisements. This causes us to work and endure, to do and to leave undone. But only love works and strives for purity and loftiness and for the highest nobility. For this is what love is in its essential self. And love itself teaches this work to those who give themselves to love.

The Second Mode of Love

Sometimes there is also another mode of love. This is when the soul undertakes to serve our Lord without payment, but only for love, without any other motive and not for any recompense of grace or glory. She is like a lady in waiting that serves her lord without payment but out of great love. For her it is enough that she is able to serve and that he suffers her to serve. So from love the soul desires to serve love without measure and above measure, above human sense and reason and to serve completely and loyally.

When she is thus, the soul burns with desire. She is ready to serve. Labour seems light. She bears with difficulty and rejoices in troubles. With all that she is she desires to please the Lord. What gives her pleasure is to find something to do or endure in the service and to the honour of love.

The Third Mode of Love

Sometimes the good soul has another mode of love that involves many pains and miseries. She desires to make satisfaction to love and to follow love in all honour and service, in obedience and submission. From time to time this desire storms in the soul in such a way that she is aware of a stronger desire to do all things and follow every virtue, to suffer and to bear all things and to accomplish all her works in love, without sparing and without measure.

In such is she well prepared for every service and is willing and without fear in every work and in pain. Still she remains unsatisfied in all her works. Her greatest pain, however, above everything else, is that she cannot do enough for love according to her great desire. So much is lacking to love. She knows well that this is above human works and above all her might to do, since what she desires is impossible for all creatures and beyond their capacity.

What she desires is that she could serve, love and honour in accordance with love's worthiness and by herself to do this as much as and countless times more than all people on earth, all spirits in heaven and all creatures above and below. With her whole will she strongly desires also that the many deficiencies in her works will yet be realized. She knows well that this desire is far beyond her might to accomplish, above human reason and all insight. Even so, she cannot act measuredly or restrain herself or be still.

She does all she can. She thanks and praises love. She works and labours for love. She seeks and desires love. She delivers herself entirely to love. And all this gives her no rest. And this is her one great pain: that she is unable to receive what she is obliged to desire.

And here must she remain in agony of heart and dwell in dissatisfaction. For her it is as if living she dies and dying she feels the pain of hell. And all her life is like hell. There is torment and frustration from the horror and dread that comes from a desire she cannot do enough to still or satisfy.

In this pain she must stay until such time as our Lord consoles her and sets her in another mode of love and desire and in still closer knowledge of himself. Then must she act according to what is given her by our Lord.

The Fourth Mode of Love

Our Lord usually gives still other modes of love, at times bringing great well-being, at times great sorrow. It is of this that we will now speak.

Sometimes it happens that love is sweetly awakened in the soul. Joyfully it arises and makes itself felt in the heart without anything to do with human works. Then the heart is so deeply touched by love, so desirably drawn into love, so heartily seized by love, so strongly overpowered by love and so lovingly held by love that it is altogether vanquished by love.

Here she inwardly feels a great nearness to God, clarity of understanding, a wonderful blessedness, a noble freedom, a delightful sweetness, a great rush of stronger love and an overflowing fullness of great satisfaction. She feels then that all her senses have been made holy in love, her will has become love. It is so deeply sunk and absorbed in the abyss of love that it becomes love.

The beauty of love devours her. The power of love consumes her. The sweetness of love drowns her. The greatness of love absorbs her. The nobility of love holds her. The purity of love adorns her. The height of love has drawn her upwards and makes her one. So she must exist totally for love and is unable to love anything else.

When she thus feels herself to be in this overflowing well-being and in a great fullness of heart, then her spirit sinks totally into love and her body is drawn after it. Her heart melts and her might is as nought. She is so overcome by love that she can scarcely stand up and often loses control over her limbs and senses.

A full vessel, if it is moved, quickly overflows and spills. In the same way, the fullness of her heart is such that she is quickly moved and overcome and often beyond her control, she must break forth.

The Fifth Mode of Love

Sometimes it also happens that love is powerfully aroused in the soul and rises turbulently, with a great roaring and frenzy, as if violently to break the heart and to draw it out of itself and above itself into the exercise of love until love is exhausted. And boldly is she drawn in the desire to perform great works in the pure works of love, or to acquire the multiplicity of things that are required of love.

Alternatively, she desires to rest in the sweet holding of love, in the desired well-being and in the satisfaction of having, so that her heart and her sense desire and earnestly seek this and heartily aspire to it.

When she is here, she is so strong in spirit, comprehending so many things, so more vigorous in body, more prompt in works and very active both externally and internally, that she considers herself busily engaged in all her tasks even if she is quite still externally.

In addition, she feels such a strong drawing from within, such great suspense in love, many uncertainties in desire and all sorts of pain from being greatly unsatisfied. Or she feels pain from a great feeling of love itself, either without any reason, or from what she has particularly asked for with desire for love, or from dissatisfaction at being deprived of love.

Meanwhile love becomes so immoderate and so overpowering in the soul that she burns fiercely and furiously in her heart. She thinks her heart has been seriously wounded in many ways and that the wounds are daily repeated and rendered more grievous by sharper pains experienced again and again. She thinks that her veins have burst and her blood boiled, her marrow dissolved and her limbs enfeebled. Her breast burns and her throat is so dry that her face and all her members feel the inner heat and the tumult of love.

She feels also at this time that an arrow has pierced her heart up to her throat and even up to her brain, so that she loses all sense. And like a devouring fire that draws all it touches into itself and consumes it, she feels love working furiously within her, sparing nothing and, without measure, drawing everything into itself and consuming it.

And by these means she is much wounded and her heart is much bruised and all her might comes to nothing. But her soul is fed and her love is fostered and her spirit is suspended. This is because love is so lofty, above all capacity to understand, that she cannot ever attain the enjoyment of it. Because of the suffering she sometimes desires to break the fetters, but not to rupture the union of love. She is so much held by the bands of love and so overwhelmed by the abundance of love that she cannot hold to measure or reason. Nor can she exercise reason intelligently, nor act moderately and within measure, nor remain quiet and discreet.

The more that is given her from above, the more she demands. The more she is shown, the more she experiences the suspense of desire to come nearer to the light of truth, to purity, to nobility and the enjoyment of love. And always she is more and more goaded and drawn. She never has enough. She cannot be satisfied. The same thing that makes her whole and heals her is that which also brings the wounds that alone give health.

The Sixth Mode of Love

When our Lord's bride has come further and ascends higher into greater piety she feels another mode of love in a closer understanding and a higher knowledge. She feels that love has overcome all her opponents within her and has made good her defects. Love has mastered her knowing and allowed her to receive the free disposal over herself without opposition so that she holds her heart in safety, she experiences it in rest and she does what is to be done in freedom.

When she is here she thinks all things small and everything that belongs to the dignity of love is light to do or leave undone, to endure or to suffer. It is pleasing for her to exercise herself in love. Then she experiences a God-like power, bright purity, a spiritual sweetness, delightful freedom, an understanding wisdom and a pleasurable affinity with God.

Then is she like a housewife who governs her house well. She arranges it wisely and orders it beautifully. She concerns herself with it providently and prudently keeps it, working with understanding. She acts inside and outside, doing or leaving undone as she wills. So it is with such souls. Love powerfully and effectively rules within, working and resting, doing and leaving undone, outside and inside as it wills.

She is like a fish that swims in the breadth of the water and rests in the depths. She is like a bird that flies in the spaciousness and height of the sky. Thus, she experiences her spirit as walking unbound in the depth and spaciousness and height of love.

The power of love has drawn and led the soul, has guarded and protected her. It has given her the prudence and wisdom, the sweetness and courage of love. Nevertheless, it has hidden the

power of the soul until the soul has come into greater heights so that she is totally free from herself and love reigns more powerfully within her.

Then love makes the soul so bold and free that in doing and not doing, in working and in rest she does not act from fear of any human being or demon or angel or saint or even from fear of God himself. She experiences well that love is within her and is effectively working as much in her bodily rest as in many works. She knows well and experiences that where love reigns there is more to it than work or suffering.

All those that will to come to love must seek it with fear and follow it faithfully and exercise it with desire. They must not spare themselves in great works and in many sufferings and in enduring difficulties. They must deem all small things great until they come to the point where love reigns within them and becomes so powerful that it makes all things small and all works easy and every pain is softened and debt is paid.

This is freedom of conscience, sweetness of heart, goodness of mind, nobility of soul, lightness of spirit and the beginning of eternal life. This is already an angelic life and after it follows eternal life. May God, in his goodness, give it to us all.

The Seventh Mode of Love

Now the blessed soul experiences a mode of higher love that from within gives her much to do. She is drawn beyond the human into love, beyond human sense and reason and beyond all the works of our heart. She is drawn by eternal love alone into the eternity of love and into the incomprehensible wisdom, the inaccessible loftiness and the deep abyss of the Godhead that is all in all things and remains incomprehensible beyond all things, unchangeable, all-being, all-powerful, all-intelligent and all-vigorous in working.

Here she is so strongly sunk in love and so strongly drawn in desire that her heart is violently moved and inwardly restless. Her soul melts and pines away from love. Her spirit is held in furious suspense by strong desire. All her senses are drawn to this that she may will to be in the enjoyment of love. For this she asks God so earnestly and this she seeks so heartily of God. This is what she desires so much. For love will not allow her to be still or to rest or to be at peace.

Love draws her up and holds her down, comforts her a little and torments her, gives death and brings life, gives health and makes her feeble. Love makes her mad and wise again. In this manner love draws her to a higher level of being.

Thus, does she come in spirit beyond time into the eternity of love which is timeless. In love she is lifted up above the human mode and, in her desire for transcendence, above her own nature. That is her being and her will, her desire and her love in certain truth and in pure clarity, in

noble loftiness and in splendid beauty and in the sweet companionship of the supernal spirits who all abound with overflowing love and who live in the clear knowledge and possession and enjoyment of their love. Her desire is to have business with these spirits above and especially with the ardent seraphim whose lovely resting place and satisfying abode is in the great Godhead and in the high Trinity.

The soul seeks him in his majesty. She follows him there and with heart and spirit gazes upon him. She knows him and loves him and desires him so much that she pays no heed to any saint or human being or angel or any other creature except to love them in him with the love that is shared by all. Him alone she chooses in love, above all and under all and within all. With all the desire of her heart and all the strength of her spirit she desires to see him and to have him and to enjoy him.

Therefore is earth for her a vast exile and a strong prison and a heavy burden. She regards the world as of little value. Earth holds no charm and earthly things bring no calm or satisfaction. What is her greatest pain is that she must exist so far away and seem so foreign. She cannot forget her exile. Her desire will not be stilled. Her longing torments her piteously and afflicts and torments her beyond measure and without relief.

Therefore she lives with great longing and with the strong desire to be freed from this exile and unbound from this body. And so with sorrowful heart she says, as did the Apostle who said, "Cupio dissolvi et esse cum Christo." That is: "I desire to be unbound and to be with Christ." Likewise the soul has a strong desire and an unhappy restlessness to be freed to live with Christ. Not from sadness of this present time, nor from fear of future trouble but only from holy love. From eternal love does she desire eagerly and passionately and with so much longing to come into that landscape of eternity and to enjoyment in glory.

The longing in her is great and strong and her restlessness is severe and hard. The pain that she suffers from desire is great beyond words. Nevertheless she must live in hope and hope makes her yearn and languish.

O holy desire of love! How strong is your power in a soul's love. It is a blessed passion and a sharp torment and a prolonged malaise: a death that kills and a life that dies. She is unable to come to the heights and unable to find rest or endure here below. She cannot bear to think of him because of yearning, and to be without him makes her ill with desire. So must she live in great discomfort.

Thus it is that she does not will to be consoled. As the Prophet says, "Renuit consolari anima mea et cetera." That is, "My soul refused to be consoled." Thus often she refuses all consolation from God himself as from his creatures. For all the relief that comes to her from them strengthens her love more and draws her desire to a higher state of being. This renews love's ardent longing for the enjoyment of love, living as she does without satisfaction and in exile.

And so she remains unsatisfied and unsettled in all gifts until she obtains what is lacking to her love. This is a hard and laborious life since she does not will to be consoled unless she obtains what she seeks so urgently.

Love has drawn her and led her and taught her the ways that she has faithfully followed. Often in great labour and in many activities, in great infirmity and in strong desire, in frequent impatience and in great dissatisfaction, in adversity and in prosperity, in great pain, in seeking and asking, in lacking and in having, in climbing and in hanging suspended, in following and in striving, in need and anxiety, in fear and concern, in great faithfulness and in many unfaithfulnesses, in pleasure and in pain, is she ready to suffer. In death and in life she commits herself to love. Though she feels many sorrows in her heart yet, because of love, she desires to attain that land.

Because of all she has sought in exile, she finds her refuge in glory. This is the real work of love, that she desires what is nearest to love and that she most pursues what most leads to most love. Therefore will she always follow love, know love and enjoy love. This cannot happen to her in exile. Therefore the soul wills to journey to the land wherein she has made her dwelling and where her love and desire find rest. There will every hindrance be removed. There will she be welcomed lovingly by the beloved. There will she eagerly gaze upon what she has so tenderly loved. She will have for her eternal blessing the one whom she has so faithfully served. She will enjoy with full satisfaction the one whom she has so often held within her soul. Then shall she enter into the joy of her Lord, as Saint Augustine says, "Qui in te intrat in gaudium Domini sui et cetera." That is, "O Lord, whoever enters into you enters into the joy of his Lord." She will not be afraid because she shall have him best who is the best.

There the soul will be united to her bridegroom and become one spirit with him in indivisible faithfulness and eternal love. She who worshipped him in the time of grace will enjoy him in eternal glory where there will be nothing except praise and love. And may God bring us all to this. Amen.

SHORT TEXTS

1

Therefore, raise up, O soul, your two arms of prayer and meditation. Lift them up toward the hidden places of heaven, where Christ is seated at God's right hand; insist in and out of season, so that you may regard his face, so that he may come down to you or draw you up to him, so that you may taste how sweet he is and experience how mild and merciful he is. And so, if the fire of heavenly desire breaks out in your prayer or meditation, if the pricks of love should burst into flame, if heavenly feelings stir you, making you burn and gasp, and you sometimes sense the presence of what you love as though you possessed it, and at other times, after it escapes from your hands, you ache and sigh for its absence, then this is the spiritual wrestling match.

Aelred of Rievaulx, *Oner 13:34*: (*Homilies on the Prophetic Burdens of Isaiah*: CF 83, pp.131-132)

2

Some people, I notice, occasionally experience dryness and a certain dullness of mind in prayer, as though praying with the lips only; they don't pay enough attention to what they say or to whom they speak. That is because they have come to prayer out of a certain habit rather than worthy reverence and concern.... It behoves us to enter into the heavenly court at the time of prayer, that court in which "The King of kings sits on his starry throne." ... Therefore, with how much reverence, how much fear, how much humility should a common frog approach the heavenly court as he comes forth crawling from his swamp? How much trembling, how suppliant, how humble and finally how concerned and intent with one's whole soul can a wretched little human appear before God's majestic glory?

Bernard of Clairvaux, *Div 25:7*; (*Monastic Sermons*): CF 68, p. 145)

3

As for private prayer, you know from daily experience that it too is better at the end than it is at the beginning. This is so that you may have confidence in the advice of the Lord, given so often and recommended by so much example, to be persevering in prayer.

Guerric of Igny, *Sermon 22:5*; (CF 32, p. 6.)

The Lay Cistercian Experience

Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani Abbey

Unit Eight

Work and Study

WORK and STUDY

“Manual work was one of the signature observances of the early Cistercians. The first generations willingly adopted the contemporary practice of clearing and cultivating previously underutilised land, a practice made possible by the Warm Medieval Period (950-1250). Such work was necessary for the building of the newly-founded monasteries and for the material support of the community. To some extent it also assured the independence of the reformed communities from undue influence on the part of benefactors and donors. Although the monks continued to bear part of the burden of manual labour (especially at harvest time), the major portion was carried by lay brothers, assisted by hired hands (EP 15:10) and various specialists. It was not long before monks had to be reminded not to take books to read during work (EO 75:26).

Meanwhile, from the beginning, some monks were engaged in more sedentary occupations including work in the scriptorium. As the material condition of the monasteries improved, ascetical reasons were given for continuing the practice of manual work. It was seen as necessary, not so much for its material benefits, but as a means of generating virtues such as humility. In later centuries when the notion of “doing penance” prevailed; it was the penitential aspects of work that was emphasised.

Following the work of Abraham Maslow (1908-1970), the late twentieth century witnessed a growth in the appreciation of the importance of self-actualization as the highest of human needs. This led to the expectation that the ideal form of work, even in monasteries, would be that which contributed most to the self-actualization of the workers, providing them with the opportunity for the utilisation and development of their creative talents and skills. As a result, monks and nuns began to hope for “meaningful” work – beyond its function of contributing to community support. There was also a dawning recognition that celibates often feel the lack of the opportunity to be generative, to imprint their personal character on the universe, to leave something behind them when they die, beyond being an anonymous part of a corporate enterprise.

We who live at a time when the nature of work is constantly changing through technological innovations and bureaucratic regulations need to be reminded that our main work is to live the monastic life fully and to persevere in it. The way of wisdom is to live carefree rather than careless. Guerric’s insistence on stability is a reminder that we need to persevere with the common monastic observance if it is to accomplish its magic on us. One of the best aids to perseverance is to understand how work and other observances serve our spiritual purpose. Clearly, in our history, there have been different understandings of the role of work, not all of them mutually compatible. This means that it is probably necessary for our generation to consider our own experience of work and its effects and to enter into dialogue with our tradition in the hope of reaching a fuller and deeper understanding of its role.”

[from the OCSO Experientia program, Vol. 2, Unit 6, page 3, Fr. Michael Casey, Editor]

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. In the Cistercian tradition work has been seen as a counterpart to prayer. What role does it play in my life? How much of my work is manual work? To what extent do I see work as a tool of the spiritual life? Have I experienced work as an occasion for spiritual growth?
2. How does my work contribute to my identity? To what extent does it contribute to my personal well-being? Am I slave to my work?
3. Is my work a free gift of self in service to my family and to the community where I live? To what extent does my work contribute to the community life? Do I feel that all share equitably in bearing the burdens of community existence? Do I appreciate the work of others?
4. What is the role for personal study in my life? Do I find spiritual reading, homilies where I worship, and ongoing Lay Cistercian formation useful in my spiritual growth? In what ways does my family and faith community share in the fruits of my personal study or interests?
5. How do I understand contemplative leisure? What activities are or are not appropriate to a time of leisure? How does the exercise and development of personal, artistic or cultural interests benefit my family and community? Do I spend time rejoicing in natural beauty?
7. How have I received the Cistercian charism? In what ways do I feel able to communicate my experience of the Cistercian tradition and to transmit life to new LCG members in my local community?

Reading 13: GUERRIC OF IGNY SERMON 22: THE FIRST SERMON FOR ST BENEDICT

1.

“HAPPY IS THE MAN who shall abide in wisdom and shall meditate on holiness and shall be mindful of the all-seeing eye of God.” How fittingly these words may be sung in praise of St Benedict each of you will easily recognize; his words and teaching are not unknown to any of you. How aptly they may be applied to the improvement of our own lives is obvious from the words themselves. Promising the reward of happiness, they commend to us wisdom, holiness, and the fear of God; nothing in life is of greater benefit than these.

“Happy is the one who will abide in wisdom.” In other words, this is happiness, this is wisdom, if you continue in wisdom, holding fast to it to the end. For mortals become happy not immediately upon finding it, but only by holding it fast. Scripture does indeed say: “Happy is the

one who finds wisdom." But it does not finish there. On the contrary it adds: "And who is rich in prudence." This it does lest we think that merely to have found wisdom is enough for happiness. The truth is that when you have found it, you must continue with it and in it, and, making it your intimate companion, take your delight in it. Nor must you depart from its schooling until, by meditating on holiness and being mindful of the all-seeing eye of God, you have made it possible for prudence to abound in you. Solomon certainly found wisdom. But prudence did not greatly abound in him and he did not guard himself with sufficient prudence, in that he did not protect himself from the pagan women. For that reason, not only did he lose wisdom but he fell into the extreme opposite of wisdom, idolatry. And so also with the wise ones of the world who clearly saw the invisible things of God from the creation of the world through their knowledge of things created; they seemed to have found wisdom. But because prudence did not abound in them and because when they knew God, they did not glorify him as God, they did in fact become fools and their foolish hearts were given over to evil thoughts and shameful lusts.

2.

Others, also, like these have rejected the wisdom they had found because of their proud hearts. Some like Solomon have been enticed away by the lusts of the flesh. Others because of inconstancy and frivolity of mind abandon it as soon as they meet the slightest set-back. These are they who believe for a while and in the time of temptation fall away. But why do they fall away? Because they have no roots that can hold them. And how can they take root unless they stay in one place? What plant ever takes root unless it is left in the place where it was planted? Just so, the good person, planted in the house of the Lord, cannot take root nor be founded in charity unless he abides there with stability of place. And if he does not put down roots, he will never flower nor bear lasting fruit. Even if he should give some sign of hope by flowering at the beginning, it may be said of him: "Before the harvest it was flourishing but it has budded without coming to ripe maturity." And another Prophet says in like manner: "if it should yield fruit strangers shall eat it." But do you want to know why stability of place is so necessary if you are to continue in wisdom, take root and eventually bear fruit? Ask your holy Father Benedict and he will tell you that "the cloister of the monastery and stability in the community" is the proper place to cultivate nearly all the virtues. He gives a long catalogue of them. And what does Solomon say of instability? "As a bird that wanders from her nest, so is the man who leaves his place." A turtledove finds a nest where she can put her chicks; she begins to warm it and be warmed by it until the chicks are about to come to birth. Then, lo and behold, she flies away and leaves the work thus begun unfinished. Why, whence or whither she flies she will understand either when she comes to make good the many losses she suffers in the meantime, or when she offers some reason to excuse her violation of her first commitment. For myself, I

would not think it a wise plan to suffer certain loss for a hope that is uncertain even if the progress of some individuals bids me refrain from too hasty a judgment.

3.

Most certainly there is a great difference between those who become discontented out of love for wisdom and those of whom I have just spoken, who, made restless by some light and frivolous matter, recoil from wisdom. Just as one must remain patiently under the discipline of wisdom in order to learn wisdom, so they who readily lose patience, we read, lose little time in casting wisdom from them. But what the Scriptures say just before this might strike them: "She shall be to them as a mighty stone of trial." For they have stumbled over the stumbling stone and the rock of scandal. It was a heavy trial that rebuked and taught the unwise and tested their hearts. They considered the might of wisdom to be the hardness of stone and they maintained that everything was hard: its discipline, its appearance, its teaching. "This teaching," they said, "is hard." Yes, this teaching is hard. Does that mean it is not true! The stone is hard. Does that mean it is not precious! But why is truth hard for you? Is it not because your hearts are hard! If your heart were to be softened by love, the rigour of truth would please you more than the emptiness of falsehood or the oil of adulation. "This saying is hard," they said, because the testing time for wisdom was to them like a mighty stone. For that reason, they lost little time in casting it from them and returning to their former state. They did not reject this precious stone chosen by God for any other reason save that they thought it was hard. Now the fact is that the stone was Christ, a stone of might, but without hardness. He was the rock, but a rock that could be changed, and indeed is changed, into pools or fountains of water whenever he finds faithful hearts that are softened and humble. Into them he pours himself. For if they who drew back so quickly at the mere appearance of hardness had remained with the Apostles they might well have drunk with them from the Rock which followed after them. They might have drunk of the streams of living water flowing copiously from the Rock who was struck on the Cross so that today also "the people and their cattle may drink." They might even have sucked honey out of the rock and oil out of the hardest stone. Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona, the Father revealed to you the sweetness of the mystery so that it was seen hidden under the hardness of the saying. When the Twelve were asked if they too wanted to go away you answered firmly: "Lord, you have the words of eternal life; to whom shall we go?" You are indeed blessed. You decided to abide with Wisdom and to be nourished with the Bread of the Sacrament at his own table along with the members of his household, until, after you had progressed from faith to full knowledge, he might feed you with the Bread of Life and understanding, and give you to drink of the waters of the wisdom of salvation. And blessed are you also my brethren, who have enrolled in the study of wisdom, the school of Christian philosophy. But you will be blessed only if you persevere, so that when his teaching seems very hard because commands are difficult and corrections stern, there will be in none of you the evil

spirit of unfaithfulness to take you away from the living God. Instead with all steadfastness you will say with the Apostle: "You have the words of life; to whom shall we go?" You might imagine there is weariness in his precepts, hardness in his teaching; but we know how great is the multitude of your sweetness, Lord, which you have hidden from those that fear you and will grant in abundance to them who hope in you. And I shall always hope, even if you were to kill me. Indeed, I shall hope all the more when you scourge, lash, burn, kill all that lives in me, so that not I but Christ may live in me. Most certainly we do not depart from you, for you give us life even as you slay, heal us even as you strike. Blessed indeed is the one who continues in wisdom with this steadfast faith; who bears trial patiently and with all confidence becomes obedient even unto death; who never leaves his place no matter how often the spirit of him who has power may come upon him. He knows that the cure of discipline will heal the greatest sins.

5.

Now to achieve this wisdom of continuing in wisdom, it is most important, I think, not readily to allow restlessness or any kind of slight provocation to keep you away from any of the exercises of wisdom: the divine office, private prayer, lectio divina, the appointed daily labour or the practice of silence. For the praises of wisdom are sung at the completion of the office. "My lips will rejoice," says the Saint, "when they shall have sung to you." And in another psalm you have it in so many words: "You make the outgoings of the morning and the evening joyful." As for private prayer, you know from daily experience that it too is better at the end than it is at the beginning. This is so that you may have confidence in the advice of the Lord, given so often and recommended by so much example, to be persevering in prayer. Again, when you sit down to read and you do not really read, or if before you even begin to read you put the book down again, what good do you think that will do you? If you do not continue with the Scriptures so as to become familiar with them through assiduous study, when do you think they will open themselves to you? He who has love of the word, we are told, to him shall understanding be given and he will abound; but he who has not, what knowledge he may have by way of natural endowment, will be taken away from him because of his negligence. Then with regard to manual work, surely you have learned enough about this, have you not, to know that, like the wage given to the workers, consolation is often reserved to the end of the work. And of course when we come to silence a promise is given by the Prophet when he says: "In silence and in hope shall your strength be." For if you cultivate holiness in silence and, following the advice of Jeremiah, you wait in silence for the salvation of the Lord, then secretly in the midst of the silence the all-powerful word of God will leap down to you from his royal throne. The waters of Siloe which flow silently will inundate the valley of your quiet and peaceful heart like a gently-flowing stream. And this you will experience not once but many times, if only your silence is the

cultivation of holiness, that is, if you meditate on holiness so that you may continue in the Scriptures as I have suggested and in your mind consider the all-seeing eye of God.

6.

Meditate on these things, continue in them so that your progress may be made manifest. For if you devise iniquity on your bed, evil thoughts that the Evil One sends or imaginings that your own heart devises or empty philosophies or deceptive theories which are no more than the dreamings of a sick mind, then surely is not your silence more the cultivation of unholiness than of holiness? If therefore you want to continue in wisdom meditate diligently on holiness. "You have desired wisdom," he says, "keep holiness and God will give her to you." But if horrible thoughts rush in on you as if by force, set a strong and trusty guard on yourself, one that will guard your heart with all care. I mean the fear of God, which overlooks nothing and allows nothing to enter without careful examination, often questioning even an angel of light: "Are you one of ours, or from our adversary?" It looks about on all sides as though it were aware at every moment of the all-seeing eye of God whom it contemplates without respite and it takes care to search human hearts. It is well said: "He shall be mindful of the all-seeing eye of God," for obviously that man has no mind nor heart who neglects to keep the fear of God before him, who does not feel the weight of such great majesty and of the judgment that hangs over him. It is also well said that God is all-seeing; all things, past as well as future, are present to him so that he does not look backwards to the one or forward to the other, but sees both in the same way, for he sees all in one simple glance. For him eternity is as a moment, the centre of all time; to his unchangeable simplicity the whole wheel of time as well as its moving finger is always equally present. Fear of the Lord which turns away from evil, not only in deed but in thought also, is ever aware of this eternal eye that sees without ceasing and judges all things; it spurs itself on by its own reflections, teaches us to meditate more on holiness, restrains us so that we will continue with wisdom. So gradually it comes about that a man who at first was held back by the fear of judgment and punishment is afterwards upheld by the love and meditation of holiness and at last finds his rest and delight in the intimacy and embrace of wisdom. This not only casts out fear from the soul through an outpouring of love, but weariness and distress also through an inpouring of gladness. As one man who dwelt with wisdom said to her: "When I go into my house I shall find repose with her; for her conversation has no bitterness nor her companionship any tediousness but only joy and gladness." May he make us partakers in all these things who was pleased to become partaker of our nature, May he make us partakers in all these things who was pleased to become partaker of our nature, the Wisdom of God, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen.

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SHORT TEXTS

1

And so, brothers, according to what we have said our soul has become a castle. It is right that two women live in it, one who sits at the feet of Jesus and hears his word and the other who ministers to Jesus and feeds him. See, brothers, if only Mary were in the house there would be no one to feed the Lord. If only Martha were there would be no one to delight in the discourses and presence of the Lord. Therefore, brothers, Martha signifies that activity by which a person labours for Christ. Mary [signifies] that rest by which a person is free from bodily labours and delights in the sweetness of God through reading or prayer or contemplation. And so, brothers, while Christ is a poor man and walks around the earth on foot, while he hungers and thirsts and is tempted, it is necessary that both of these women be in the one house, that is, that both these functions be present in a single soul.

Aelred of Rievaulx, Sermon 19:18-19 (See CF 58, p. 269)

2

Then some work – even manual labour – that has been prescribed should be done, not so much for the sake of the pleasure it gives and the relaxation it affords the mind as to preserve and nourish the taste for spiritual things. It should bring the mind some passing relaxation, but it should not dissipate it. The mind should have no difficulty in detaching itself from it as soon as it decides to return to itself, without any opposition on the part of the will clinging to it, without any contamination from the pleasure it has given or the images it leaves in the memory.

William of St-Thierry, *The Golden Epistle* 84; (CF 12, pp. 39-40)

3

Work, especially manual work, has always enjoyed special esteem in the Cistercian tradition since it gives the monks the opportunity of sharing in the divine work of creation and restoration, and of following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. This hard and redeeming work is a means of providing a livelihood for the brothers and for other people, especially the poor. It expresses solidarity with all workers. Moreover work is an occasion for a fruitful asceticism that fosters personal development and maturity. It promotes health of mind and body and contributes greatly to the unity of the whole community.

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The Lay Cistercian Experience

Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani Abbey

Unit Nine

The Energy of Hope

THE ENERGY OF HOPE

“In our journey towards God, our first experience is something like desire but, unlike other desires, it has no clear focus. This tendency is expressed by metaphors such as “seeking God” and “yearning for union with God”, but what is meant by these traditional expressions is beyond logical explanation. Eastern theology distinguishes between the “divine essence” and the “divine energies”. In this life, the divine essence is beyond human comprehension: it is through contact with the divine energies, made present through God’s agency in the world of space and time, that we can enter into a relationship with God and be transformed by it. God cannot be considered as one object among many and, so, cannot be the direct object of our knowing and loving. Our relationship with God is intersubjective. We interact with what God is doing in our midst. “I will be your God and you will be my people.”

As far as our ordinary intellectual and affective faculties are concerned, God is absent from our sphere of existence. Though God is everywhere present, the intimate divinity is hidden from our gaze. Through God’s ongoing self-revelation to the world, we gain glimpses or intimations of a transcending reality, but the experiences are brief and rare. *Rara hora et parva mora*. Reflecting on the alternation between our perception of God’s presence and absence, Bernard uses terminology common among the first Cistercians: it is as though the Word comes to visit the soul, but then – alas – departs. Most often spiritual desire manifests itself as a keen sense of the absence of God. Most of us have to remind ourselves that this experience of absence serves a purpose in our ongoing spiritual development. It is not fortuitous. It is not counterproductive. It is a normal component in our spiritual maturation. Saint Augustine reminds us that desire deferred only grows stronger.

Coupled with this is an awareness of the obstacles to union within oneself. To overcome the distance between us and God two simultaneous gifts come to us through Christ: truth which reveals our true status before God, and grace which energises us with hope so that we gain confidence to cooperate with the good work begun in us so that it will be brought to completion. These themes find expression in this eloquent and evocative response to the text of the Song of Songs.”

[from the OCSO Experientia Program, Vol.2, Unit 9, p. 62, Fr. Michael Casey, Editor]

In this Unit you are asked to reflect on your own experience of God’s perceived presence and absence, in your prayer and in your Lay Cistercian life, and to find enlightenment in Bernard’s reflection on this topic.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. I became a Lay Cistercian to deepen my relationship with God. To what extent has this hope been realized?
2. How have I experienced the normal alternation between positive and negative experience? Between fear and hope? Between darkness and light? Presence and absence?
3. Have there been times in which the desire for God has seemed hopeless? Why? Have there been times in which I have been conscious of a lack of spiritual energy: restlessness, tedium, tepidity, sadness, distaste, boredom, acedia?
4. How was this situation resolved? Were there members of my local LCG community or a monk of Gethsemani Abbey who helped me? How? Was efforts to be more faithful in living the Plan of Life an element in finding a way out of the darkness?
5. Do I welcome each day as a moment of life or is it shrouded in routine? Do I live the present as a road to eternal life?
6. How optimistic am I that living the Christian life as a Lay Cistercian will lead me to find God in this life and the next?
7. Do I ever think about the end of my life? What feelings does such reflection inspire?

Reading 14: Bernard of Clairvaux: Sermon 74 On the Song of Songs

*The Bride speaks: Return, my loved one;
be like a roe or a young hart on the mountains of Bethel.*

1.

"Return," says the bride. It is clear that the one whom she is calling back is not present, though he was here a little time ago. This is why she seems to be calling him back while he is yet in the process of moving away. Such an urgent summons to return indicates great love in one and great loveableness in the other.

Who are these followers and tireless pursuers of the art of love? One is pursued and the other driven on by such restless love. It devolves on me, as I remember promising, to interpret this text by applying it to the Word and the soul. I confess, however, that even to begin such a task worthily, I need the help of the Word about whom we speak. For such discussion is suited to one more experienced than I, who is knowledgeable in the holy secrets of love. But I am not set aside my duty or ignore your wishes. I see the danger yet I pay no heed, for you compel me.

You force me to walk in great matters and in marvels that are beyond me. Alas! I am afraid I shall hear the words, "Why do you narrate my delights and fill your mouth with my mystery?" Therefore, listen to me as one who hesitates to speak yet cannot remain silent. Perhaps my very hesitation will make amends for my daring as, even more, will any profit that you may gain. And maybe even these tears will be viewed in the same light.

"Return," says the bride. So the bridegroom was going away and now he is called back. Who will unseal for me the mystery of this changing scene? Who will give me an adequate explanation for this going and returning of the Word? Is the bridegroom here acting from caprice? How is it possible that the one who fills all things can be said to come and go? What movement in space is possible for one who is a spirit? Indeed, is any movement possible for God, who is subject to no change?

2.

This is surely a case in which the principle holds, "Let one who can, grasp it." For our part, let us walk simply and carefully in the explanation of the sacred and mystic language and follow the lead of the Scriptures which, in mystery, impart a hidden wisdom by human words. In this way, God gains some entry to our experience through the use of images. These propose to human minds the unknown and unseen realities of God by means of familiar likenesses to visible things, as it were offering us what is precious in vessels made of humble materials.

Following the pattern of this chaste language, let us affirm that the Word of God, who is himself God and the soul's bridegroom, comes to the soul and departs from it according to his will. This comes about, however, in the soul's experience rather than because of a movement on the part of the Word. For example, when the soul experiences grace, she recognizes the presence of the Word; otherwise she complains of his absence and again seeks his presence, saying with the Prophet: "My face has sought you; your face I seek, O Lord." And why not? After the withdrawal of such a pleasing bridegroom, surely the soul has no will to desire or even to think about anything else. It follows that she seeks the absent one and calls him back as he moves away. It is in this sense that the Word is called back. He is called by the soul's desiring, but only the soul who has already experienced his sweetness can have such a desire. For surely desire is a powerful cry. As Scripture says: "The Lord hears the desire of the poor." When the Word leaves the soul, the enduring desire for him becomes a single, sustained call of "Return," until he come.

3.

Now, give me a soul whom the Word is accustomed to visit often, one whom such familiarity makes daring, such tasting makes hungry, and such delightful dallying renders scornful of other pleasures. Give me such a soul and I will unhesitatingly attribute to it both the name of the cry

of the bride. I do not think the present text will seem strange to her. It is certainly such a soul who speaks thus. She has, no doubt, shown herself worthy of the presence of the one she calls, even though not worthy of his permanent presence. If this were not the case, she would have called him rather than called him back again, since the use of the word "Return," indicates that it is a matter of calling him back.

Perhaps the bridegroom withdraws for this reason: that he might be sought with greater eagerness and held even more tightly. On one occasion he pretended to go on further. This was not what he wanted; what he wanted was to hear them say: "Stay with us, for the evening is far advanced." On another occasion when he was walking on the sea and the Apostles were in the boat having difficulty with the rowing, he made as if to go past them, not because he wanted to do so, but to test their faith and to draw prayer from them. Eventually, as the Evangelist tells us, they became upset and cried out, thinking that he was a ghost.

This sort of kindly pretence, adopted by the Word as part of his saving plan when he was in the body, he continues now that he is spirit. The same zealous activity is performed in a spiritual rather than bodily manner in souls devoted to him. When he passes by, he wishes to be held. When he goes away, he wants to be recalled. For this is no irrevocable Word. He goes and comes as he pleases, visiting in the morning and putting to the test. His departure is part of his plan, but his return is always entirely voluntary. Both actions are done for a reason and that reason he keeps to himself.

4.

Now it is clear why there is always this sort of change in the soul. It is caused by the coming and going of the Word. He himself has said: "I am going and I am coming to you". And: "A short time and you will not see me, and a short time and you will see me." A short time and another short time! How long such a short time is! O good Lord, tell me how can any time be short in which we do not see you? With all due respect for this saying of my Lord, this time seems to me long and unduly extended. Yet both viewpoints are correct. The time of his absence is short for our deserts, but long for our desires. Both aspects can be found in the Prophet's saying: "If he delays, wait for him; for he will surely come and not be late." How can he not be late if he delays? It must mean that what is more than sufficient for our merits is not enough for our desires. A loving soul is borne along by her wishes and drawn by her desires. She pays no attention to merits and closes her eyes to majesty. Instead she opens herself to delight, leaving everything to the Saviour and trusting in him.

Thus, fearless and without shame, the soul calls the Word back; boldly seeking his delights and with easy freedom calling out to a lover rather than to the Lord, saying: "Return, my loved one." Then she adds: "Be like a roe or a young hart on the mountains of Bethel." More of this later.

5.

But now you must bear with my foolishness for a moment. As I promised, I wish to speak of how this happens in my own case. It is for your benefit that I speak about myself even though it is not good to do so. If you derive some profit from my foolishness then I shall feel better about it, if not, then I shall plead guilty to foolishness. I admit, in all foolishness, that the Word has visited me many times. When he enters I do not usually advert to his coming. I sense that he is present and I remember that he had been absent. Sometimes I have been able to anticipate his entry, but I have never been able directly to experience either his arrival or departure. I confess that I am ignorant of where he comes from when he enters my soul, and where he goes when he departs. I do not know the manner of his entry, nor how he leaves. This is in accordance with the text of Scripture, "Nobody knows whence he comes or where he goes to." This should occasion no surprise since he is the one of whom it is said: "Your footprints shall not be known." He does not come in through the eyes, for he has no colour; nor through the ears, since he makes no sound. It is not through the nose that he comes: he does not mingle with the air, but with mind, to the atmosphere he gives being not odour. Nor does he gain entry through the mouth, because he is not food or drink. He cannot be experienced by touch, since he is impalpable. How then does he find entrance? Perhaps he does not enter at all as he does not come from outside and is not to be identified with any external object. On the other hand, he does not come from inside me: he is good and I know there is nothing good within me.

I ascended to what was highest in me and, behold, the Word loomed loftier. Earnestly I explored the depths of my being and he was found to be yet deeper. If I looked outside, I saw him beyond myself. If I gazed within, he was even more inward. It was then that I realised the truth of what I had read: "In him we live and move and have our being." Happy are they in whom dwells the one by whom they live; happy they who live for him and are moved by him!

6.

You might ask how it is that I know the Word has arrived, since all his ways are beyond scrutiny. I know because the Word is living and active. As soon as he arrives within he shakes to life my sleepy soul. He moves, softens and wounds my heart which previously had been hard, stony and unhealthily intact. The Word begins to root up and destroy, to build and to plant. He waters the arid lands and brings light to the gloom; he opens up what was closed and sets fire to what was frigid. The twisted roads he makes straight and the rough ways smooth. All this is done so that my soul may bless the Lord and all that is within me may bless his holy name.

When the bridegroom comes to me, as he does sometimes, he never signals his presence by any indicator: not by voice or vision or the sound of his step. By no such movement do I become aware of him. He does not enter the depths of my being through my senses. It is only by the movement of my heart, as I have already said, that I perceive his presence. It is by the expulsion of my vices and the suppression of carnal desires that I recognise the power of his might. I am lost in wonderment at the depth of his wisdom when he subjects my secret life to scrutiny and correction. It is from some slight improvement in my behaviour that I experience his gentle goodness. It is from the reformation and renewal of the spirit of my mind, that is, of my deepest humanity, that I perceive his beauty and attractiveness. From the consideration of all these together I am overwhelmed by his abundant goodness.

7.

When the Word departs it is as though you were to remove the fire from beneath a boiling pot. Immediately the water becomes lifeless and lukewarm and begins to cool. For me this is the sign of his departure and my soul necessarily feels sad until he comes back. The usual sign of his return is that my heart within me begins to warm.

Because this has been my experience with the Word, what wonder that I use the words of the bride in calling him back after he has gone away. I am moved by the same sort of desire as she, even though mine is imperfect and less intense. As long as I live, my habitual manner of recalling the Word will be that word of recall: "Return." Whenever he slips away, I will not cease to call out, my cry following him as he goes. And with the cry is the burning desire of my heart that he return, that he come back to give me the joy of his saving help, to give me himself.

I say this much to you, children. As long as he is absent, who is the only source of my enjoyment, nothing else can bring me pleasure. I pray that he will not return empty-handed, but that he will come back in his usual way, full of grace and truth, just as he did yesterday and the day before. It seems to me that this is why he shows himself like a roe and a young hart: truth has the eyes of a roe and grace has the joyfulness of the young hart.

8.

I stand in need of two things: the truth from which I cannot hide, and grace from which I do not want to hide. The visitation will be incomplete if either factor is deficient. Truth on its own is so severe that it crushes, and the happiness which grace brings will appear to be without substance if it is not complemented by truth, Truth is a bitter thing if it is not sweetened by grace. If it is not restrained by truth, devotion is superficial and prone to excess and often leads to overconfidence. For many there was no profit in receiving grace because they did not receive in like measure the moderating influence of truth. So they became too pleased with themselves

and lost respect for the gaze of truth. They had no regard for the maturity of the roe, giving themselves entirely to the carefree happiness of the young hart. The result was that eventually they were deprived of the grace which they wished to enjoy in isolation. Even at such a late stage, it could be said to them: Go and learn what this means, "Serve the Lord with fear, and trembling pay him your homage." When that holy soul said in the midst of her good fortune, "I shall not be moved", all at once she sensed that the Word had turned away his face. So was she not only moved, but quite upset. Thus she learned that it was her task to cultivate not only the gift of salvation but also the burden of fear.

The fullness of grace is not to be found in grace alone nor in truth alone. What does it profit you to know what should be done if the will to do it is not also given? What use is the will if power is lacking? I know many persons who have been made sadder by the recognition of the truth. They can no longer excuse themselves on the ground of ignorance; they know what the truth teaches, but still do not do it.

9.

Because such is the case, neither grace nor truth is sufficient on its own. I have said only a little about this and that is not right. How do we know about this? Scripture says: "It shall be reckoned as sin when the good is known and not done." And again: "The servant who knows the master's will and does not do the right things will be severely whipped." This is from the side of truth. With regard to grace it is written: "After he received the morsel, Satan entered him." The text refers to Judas who, having accepted the gift of grace, would not walk with the Master of truth, or rather with the Master who was himself the Truth, but made room within himself for the devil. Listen to this text: "He fed them from the fullness of wheat, and honey flowed abundantly for them from the rock." For whom? "The enemies of the Lord acted falsely in his regard." Those whom he fed with wine and wheat acted falsely in his regard and became his enemies since they did not add truth to grace. About them we read elsewhere: "Foreign children have acted falsely in my regard; they have grown old and limped away from their paths." They limp because they walk on one foot, being happy with grace alone and not and not concerned to have truth as well. Their time [of punishment] will last forever, like that of their leader who also departed from truth and acted falsely from the very beginning. It was because of this that he heard the sentence: "You have lost wisdom through your own beauty." As for myself, I do not want any beauty which would deprive me of wisdom.

10.

You may ask, what is this beauty which is so baneful and pernicious. The beauty which is your own beauty. Are you still without understanding? Listen to a plainer statement. It is the beauty which is self-centered and selfish. I do not blame the gift itself, but the use which is made of it.

Not that it was written that he lost wisdom through his own beauty, not through beauty itself. Unless I am mistaken, the beauty of the angel is like that of the soul. Without wisdom only rough, formless matter remains. Human beings are both formed by wisdom and made beautiful by it. To appropriate this beauty is to lose it. To claim either beauty or wisdom for oneself is to lose wisdom. It is selfishness which causes this. Those who were wise in their own eyes gave no glory to God. They were ungrateful for grace and did not walk in it according to the truth but distorted it to suit their own wills. This is both the reason and the means by which wisdom is lost. To be wise in such a manner is to lose wisdom. As Scripture says: "If Abraham were justified by works, then he would something to boast about, but not in God's eyes." I say "Nothing is safe. I have lost whatever I possessed apart from God." What is death if not the deprivation of life? Nothing is as lost as that which is alienated from God. "Woe to you who are wise in your own eyes and discerning in your own estimation." About you it is said: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the prudence of the prudent I will reject." They have lost wisdom because God, in his wisdom, has destroyed them. What can they avoid losing who are themselves lost? And surely they are lost whom God does not acknowledge.

11.

Such foolish virgins are foolish only because they claimed to be wise and in so doing became senseless. They are the ones who must hear the Lord say: "I do not know you." The same goes for those who would divert the grace of miracles to serve their own glory; they will hear the words: "I have not known you." From these it becomes clear that grace is of no avail when truth is lacking in the intention; instead it becomes an obstacle.

Both grace and truth are present in the bridegroom. John the Baptist proclaimed: "Grace and truth came to be through Jesus Christ". So, if the Lord Jesus knocks at my door with one of these attributes and not the other, he who is the Word of God and the bridegroom of the soul will enter not as a bridegroom but as a judge. God forbid that this should ever happen! May he not enter into judgement with his servant. Let him come in peace with joy and gladness. But let him also be sober and grave because, when he reproves my overconfidence by the stern face of truth, he renders my joy purer. Let him enter as one coming down from the mountains of Bethel, clad in splendid festal array. Let him enter as one who is gentle and mild, coming forth from the Father and not disdainful to be called and to be the bridegroom of the soul who seeks him. For he is God, blessed above all ages and forever. Amen. [Editor's translation.]

SHORT TEXTS

1

It happened sometimes (*aliquando*) that when she gave herself to prayer with her customary love she experienced a certain wonderful sweetness that quenched all the movements of her soul, all operations of thought and even every spiritual affection (*affectus*) that she had concerning her friends. At once her soul, as it were, bade farewell to the burdens she had in this world and was snatched above herself (*rapitur supra se*) and having been flooded with a certain light that is beyond understanding and description she saw nothing except that which is and is the being of all. That was no bodily light or any bodily likeness; it had no extension nor definition so that it was seen everywhere; it was not contained but it contained everything [within itself]. In a wonderful manner that is beyond description, being holds [within itself] whatever is and truth whatever is true. Flooded with this light she began to know Christ, not according to the flesh as she had known him before, for Christ Jesus, a spirit before her face, has led her into his truth.

Aelred of Rievaulx, *Oner* 2:18-19; (See CF 83, pp. 35-36.)

2

For there, where there are no rational arguments or lines of thought to lead one on and upwards step by step, up to the torrent of your delights and the full joy of your love – there, I say, he to whom you grant it, he who seeks faithfully and persists in knocking, there of a sudden he may find himself arrived already! But, Lord, when something of this joy falls to my lot – and it is all too seldom that it happens – but when it does, Lord, then I cry aloud and shout: “Lord, it is good for us to be here! Let us make here three tents, one for faith, one for hope and one for love!” Do I ever know what I am saying when I say: “It is good for us to be here!”? But then forthwith I fall to the ground as one dead and when I look around me I see nothing. I find myself just as I was before, back in my sorrow of heart and affliction of soul. Till when, O Lord, till when? How long must I seek counsel in my soul and be vexed in my heart every day? How long will your Spirit thus come and go in mortal men, never remaining with them, blowing where he will? William of Saint-Thierry, *On Contemplating God* 5; (CF 3, pp. 42-43.)

The Lay Cistercian Experience

Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani Abbey

Unit Ten

The Cistercian Tradition

THE CISTERCIAN TRADITION

“Aelred of Rievaulx was in no doubt about the goal of the Cistercian vocation; it is the promised land of contemplation (S. 82:14). He is equally clear about the means by which we arrive at this desired outcome: it is by the ordinary living of everyday Cistercian conversatio. “What I wish to insist on is that you cannot come to this point through slackness or indolence, but by labours, vigils, fasts, tears and contrition of heart” (S. 34:29). As a good pastor, however, Aelred recognised that different elements of the monastic lifestyle were given priority by different people. It is unrealistic to expect that all will be perfect in everything. “In temptation each one should take refuge in that exercise in which he finds the most grace” (S. 8:17). He had confidence in the efficacy of the Cistercian life.

Tradition is more like a verb than a noun. It is not so much a body of teaching and texts and the transmission of something; it is the act of passing on what we have received – accepting that what we hand on will be modified in the process of its being received by another. The Cistercian tradition is accepted when we live the Cistercian conversatio. It is strengthened when we deepen the meaning of our observance through internalising the beliefs and values expressed by the great exponents of our tradition. It is handed on when we transmit to a new generation both a way of acting and the beliefs and values that animate it. Ideally the texts of tradition become for us a mirror in which we learn to recognise the dynamism of the vocation to which we have been called.”

[from the OCSO Experientia program, Vol. 2, Unit 10 (p. 83), Fr. Michael Casey, Editor]

In this Unit you are asked to reflect on the impact that knowledge of the Cistercian tradition has had on your personal development as a Lay Cistercian. We are asked to share with the OCSO the responsibility for the flourishing of the tradition in the contemporary world. On a more practical level, we are asking whether you have any suggestion about how your local LCG community, the LCG Advisory Council, and the International Association of Lay Cistercian Communities, might foster a greater enthusiasm for the Cistercian tradition

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Have the texts from monastic tradition given in this program helped you to recognize, understand, appreciate and deepen your experience of Lay Cistercian life? Which texts spoke strongly to you?
2. Has this program changed your perception of the Cistercian monastic tradition? Do you have a desire to pass on the Lay Cistercian tradition that is affiliated with the OCSO tradition to those LCG members who follow you.
3. Does the Cistercian tradition provide answers for the questions of today’s world?

Reading 15: Aelred of Rievaulx: Sermon 82

1.

Blessed (*Benedictus*) be God who has poured into you so much devotion that, coming together with joy and fervour, you expect not the delights of the flesh but those of the heart. Indeed, in this way, you worthily celebrate your feast days not in feasting and drunkenness (Rom 13:13), but in listening to the word of God. So you ought to know that the word of God is food for our soul, consolation in our misery and medicine for our illness (*infirmitas*). But you ought to know that medicine has a double power: one that prevents illness and the other cures it. A good physician instructs those who are well so that they do not become sick, and those who are sick [he instructs] about how to recover their health.

2.

This is the way that the word of God acts with us. We were healthy when we were in paradise. [God] gave us a counsel, or rather a precept, which would have maintained our health if we had observed it. We neglected the precept and so we experienced sickness (*aegritudo*). Our physician did not abandon us, even though we were sick. He gave us a precept by which we may recover our health. The children of Israel were as if healthy while they remained in Jerusalem and kept God's precepts. But because they sinned, by divine judgement they were led off to captivity in Babylonia. Why there rather than elsewhere? Doubtless because Jerusalem was a sign of their health and Babylonia a sign of their illness. Just as health and illness are opposites, so are these two cities.

3.

Jerusalem signifies "peace", Babylon "confusion". In so far as health flourishes in the body there is a certain peace in all its members. But immediately illness springs up, there occurs a certain disturbance and confusion in its members. The same thing takes place in the soul. As long as the virtues are flourishing, the soul (*animus*) is healthy and suffers no confusion. Instead it rejoices in a delightful kind of peace. But if vices rush in, all is disturbed, persons are in dispute with their own consciences and so [the conscience experiences] disturbance and confusion.

4.

Now let each one of you think how we were in that spiritual Babylon, how we were afraid, how we were confounded, how much confusion was in the mind of each one of us when on one side anger disturbed us and on another we were constrained by cupidity; here lust burned and there envy twisted us out of shape. Before we have consummated a pleasure we burn with desire, but after its consummation we are wearied by disgust. Out of this confusion God is calling us

saying, "Flee from the midst of Babylon" (Jer 51:6). But to what place shall we flee? Maybe to those well-fortified cities of refuge that our Moses, [our] legislator, that is Saint Benedict, has set up for us. For holy Moses instituted particular carnal cities for the carnal children of Israel.

5.

It is written in the Law that Moses set apart for the children of Israel three cities beyond the Jordan River outside the promised land, and three others inside the promised land, so that whoever unknowingly killed someone could flee to one of these cities where there was the promise of peace and security. Nevertheless by the same law there was to be no departure from that city until the death of the high priest. For if someone were to go off in any direction before the prescribed term, it would be legitimate for a relative of the homicide victim to avenge the blood of his kin. But if the murderer were to wait until the death of the high priest then there would be a opportunity to depart and there would be no further permission for the victim's kin to take vengeance.

6.

The carnal Jews kept this law carnally. We who are spiritual seek the spiritual meanings within the letter. With manifest reason we can show that if there is nothing spiritual in this law then it can never have been given by God. What do we think? Could God have given this law that would last for such a short time? Could God have given some law in which supreme reason did not exist? But what reason can there be for punishing a like sin with an unlike penalty so that those whose sin was the same should suffer a penalty that was very different?

7.

For it could happen that somebody might kill a person the day before the high priest died and then flee to one of these cities, and another might do the same deed many years before his death. And so, brothers, let us seek the spiritual meaning of this law and then we shall see how just it is, how eternal, how worthy of God. For the Apostle says openly, "All these things happened to them figuratively: they were written for our sake for whom the end of the ages has arrived" (1 Cor 10:11). Thus [we can interpret as figures] that the children of Israel were in Egypt and that they crossed the Red Sea. Why can we not understand [figuratively] that the cities of refuge were also instituted for us?

8.

Why did the children of Israel not have cities of refuge when they were in Egypt? Let us see the reason they had cities of refuge after they fled from Egypt. Cities of refuge were set up for them so that if someone killed another person through ignorance he could flee to one of these cities

so that his enemy could not kill him and he would be safe. They did not have these cities in Egypt not because they did not kill but because they killed knowingly and not through ignorance. Now let us see what is it to kill a person spiritually, for it is possible for someone to kill in a good way or in a bad way.

9.

Once when St Peter was hungry the Lord showed him a linen container full of unclean animals and he heard a voice saying, "Peter, kill and eat" (Acts 10:13). Those unclean animals signify sinful people. Such as those the holy person should slay with the sword, that is the word of God, so that they should not be what they were before, that is, sinners. Hence Solomon said, "Turn sinners and they will not be" (Prov 12:7), that is, convert "the ungodly from their ungodliness" (Ez 3:19) and they will not be ungodly. After he has killed them he must eat them, that is he must join them to his members, that is to good and holy people to whom the Apostle says, "You are, each of you, members [one] of another" (Rom 12:5).

10.

On the other hand, the Lord finds fault with those who kill in a bad way when he says through the prophet, "They were putting to death the souls that were not dying" (Ez 13:19). You know well enough that sin is the death of the soul. Whoever sins puts the soul to death, for Scripture says, "The mouth that lies brings death to the soul" (Wisd 1:11). Likewise, the eye that sees a woman to lust after her brings death to the soul. The hand that sheds blood and the foot quick [to do] evil; the belly prone to lust, the ear [open] to detraction. All of these bring death to the soul. Therefore, whoever sins brings death to his soul. Whoever provokes another to sin by word or example murders the soul of the other.

11.

Such homicides we were often committing in Egypt. But we did not have cities of refuge because we were not sinning from ignorance but knowingly and voluntarily. But now we have come out of Egypt and are already approaching the promised land, that land which the Lord promised to Abraham and his issue. But not to his issue according to the flesh but according to the spirit. Now we are not without cities of refuge. Yes, brothers, we are greatly in need of such cities. But who has set up such cities for us? Who else but our holy Father Benedict through whose ministry the Lord has led us forth from the spiritual Egypt?

12.

But now let us see what are these cities. It is very useful for us to know them so that we can take refuge in them and remain in them until the death of the high priest. Even though we [still]

commit murder at this time, that is we sin — for there is no human being who does not sin — nevertheless it is from weakness or ignorance that we sin, not from pride. These six cities, so it seems to me, are a sign of the six observances (exercitia) that our holy Father Benedict has set up for us. The bodily [observances] are manual labour, vigils, fasting. We may safely flee to these cities hoping to find there mercy, even though we sometimes sin, and hoping also to find protection so that we do not sin [in the future].

13.

I think that none of you will doubt that if someone after sinning takes refuge in this labour of penance, the devil who speaks ill of us because of the homicide, will not be able to wreak vengeance on us. But there is something else that pursues us because of the homicide, namely the delight experienced in the sin. For when we sin through some delight even after [repentance and] doing penance the memory of the sin comes back to us and from this memory is born a certain delight and by that we are tempted. So it necessary that we flee to these cities so that the bitterness of the flesh might overpower the delight. But these three cities properly concern those who are still outside the promised land.

14.

The promised land is contemplation and the taste of divine sweetness. Some of the children of Israel were living inside this land, others outside. Those who have already come to such great perfection that their flesh is subdued and their carnal passions are under control and [live] in a certain tranquillity of spirit and flesh and are able very often to think about heavenly realities and to penetrate and taste the divine sweetness: these live in the promised land. This is the land which flows with milk and honey, [offering] a double refreshment — the Lord's humanity and divinity.

15.

Outside the [promised] land are those for whom there is still a certain struggle with the flesh, the world and the devil. These do not lift up their heads in the excellent [practice of] contemplation, but drinking from the flooding torrent of trouble cry out with blessed Job, "If I were godless, {woe to me; and if I were just, I will not lift up my head}... (Job 10:15). These the devil pursues for homicide, that is for sin, suggesting to them the memories of the vices with which they were previously involved. Delight pursues them; the more they previously enjoyed it the more sharply it pursues them afterwards. Therefore it is necessary for them to flee to these cities, that is the bodily observances so that by the tribulation of the flesh they may conquer the delight of the flesh.

16.

It is commanded to flee to one of these, since all are not equally able for everything nor do they have equal grace for all observances. So it is right that when the enemy pursues us, that is when we are tempted, we flee especially to that observance in which we experience the greater grace. There are many who flee to the cities out of fear but there are few who persevere in them for as long as they should. Too quickly they become secure and they usually calculate their religion according to the time since their conversion and so if they have been in religious life for many years they think themselves perfect. But whether they have lived [there] for a long time or only briefly it is necessary for us to remain in these cities until the death of the high priest.

17.

It is not necessary to reveal to you who is our high priest. He is the one who “entered once for all into the sanctuary, not with the blood of goats and calves but with his own blood, finding an eternal redemption” (Heb 9:12). But how do we wait for his death in these cities? Brothers, Christ has died once and he dies every day. Once in himself, every day in us. He dies in us whenever, after the example of his death, we mortify ourselves. In the meantime we must remain in the cities, that is in labours, vigils and fasts, until all our passions die within us and we can say with the Apostle, “Always carrying around in our body the death (mortificatio) of Christ” (2 Cor 4:10).

18.

And so, those who are more perfect and have a greater liveliness of mind cross the Jordan, that is [they go beyond] all that is passing (fluit) and transitory, and in mind, heart, love, and thought [already] live in that heavenly dwelling which is truly the promised land Antiphon Iste sanctus). These, although they are so perfect that they are not assailed by carnal passions, nevertheless consider it a great persecution when their hearts, even for a short time, wander and occupy themselves with frivolous and temporal things. And although [the perfect sometimes] spend time in the other three cities and sometimes those [less-than-perfect] of whom we spoke previously spend time in these [cities], they [the perfect] properly belong to these [cities] just as [the others] belong to the other [cities]. All are moving towards the death of the high priest, that is [the less-than-perfect] tend towards the death of their evil passions, [the perfect] tend towards the death of wandering thoughts.

19.

Brothers, these are the cities which our holy Father Benedict has set up for us. Let us flee to them, let us remain in them so that from them, by his assistance, we may be able to cross over into the eternal tabernacles. May our Lord Jesus Christ grant this, who lives [and reigns] with the Father and the Holy Spirit for ever and ever. Amen.

SHORT TEXTS

1

Our ordo is a well-endowed city, surrounded by the ramparts of good observances like walls and towers so that our enemy may not deceive us or turn us aside from the army of our Commander. Oh, what a wall is poverty, how [well] it defends us against the pride of the world, against harmful and blameworthy frivolities and superfluities. What a tower is silence which damps down the assault of contention, dispute, dissension and detraction. What about obedience, humility and cheap clothing? What about rough food? These are walls, towers against the vices, against the attacks of our enemies. Aelred of Rievaulx, *Sermons* 3:7; (CF 58, p. 93).

2

The desire for an authentic monastic life acting in different ways through the centuries continues to inspire the monks and nuns of the Order to work hard to renew their way of life. In obedience to the principles of the Second Vatican Council they strive to come to a deeper understanding of their origins and at the same time show themselves docile to God's action in the present. In 1969 the General Chapter, by its Declaration on Cistercian Life and Statute on Unity and Pluralism, reaffirmed the Order's commitment to the Rule of Saint Benedict as its traditional interpretation of the Gospel and gave guidelines for the faithful observance of this Rule in the changed conditions of the world. In these documents the General Chapter made a distinction between the orientation and fundamental observances of the Rule, which constitute the Cistercian way of life, and those details that can be modified according to the local circumstances. Constitutions and Statutes OCSO, Preface 3.

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Epilogue

LA TRADITION CISTERCIENNE²

A treasure has been entrusted to us, a gift of the Spirit for the Church and the world. Hidden in the field of history, our fathers discovered it more than nine hundred years ago. To acquire it they left everything, even Molesme, preferring a desert to a place where they didn't feel completely free to run on the paths of the Gospel with an enlarged heart.

In joy they set our
These men with hearts on fire
To live the Rule of Benedict
Such was their desire.

They chose the narrow road
With Abbot Robert at the head
As the Spirit led them
To a new location.

They opened a glade
Heaven descended in the forest
Their hand built the house
For the poor of Christ.

In the silence they formed
A place flowing with love
As Alberic and Stephen wait
The brothers will come.

They kept the vigil in praise
And carried the weight of the day
From trials grace flourished
The tree of Citeaux.

(Francophone Cistercian Commission, Hymn for the Feast of the Holy Founders)

² Transposed from the OCSO *Experientia* program. Vol.Two, Epilogue, (pp. 99-100)

This treasure does not belong to us but it belongs to us to make it bear fruit. Each monk, each nun carries the responsibility. Each community, even to the eventual lay extension linked to it, might find the grace to affirm and renew its Cistercian identity. Each congregation, each order brings forth a color a reflection, an update for the good of the large Cistercian family and its witness at the beginning of the third Millennium. Thus it can be said that our treasure is “polyhedral” in nature, according to the image that is dear to Pope Francis. It reflects the convergence of many diversities which safeguard the originality. Nothing is lost, destroyed or overwhelmed, all is consolidated. (These lines are inspired by the Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* §236.)

This treasure contains an interior spring: “the living link of charity” allowing the tree of Cîteaux to bloom through the centuries. The number is less important than the flame. The extension or diminishment of its branches is less important than the perseverance in conversion of heart. From pain to grace, buffeted by the storm or renewed by the sun, we maintain the course.

But where does the fruit of charity taste best? In prosperity or in scarcity, in growth or decline? God alone knows! It is not out of place to ask if the fruit of recovered communion in the great Cistercian family has a more excellent flavour for the Easter Christ than those of the finest years of the Golden age, when Saint Bernard commented on the Song of Songs, or when Cîteaux and its daughter houses were multiplying one after another?

The paths of the Lord are not our paths and His thoughts are not our thoughts. *Experientia* has awakened in us the élan to come together. May the Virgin Mary, our Lady and Queen be more than ever at home in our communities, our orders, and our large family! More than ever may we unit with her to give homage to God.³

[Note: May the Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani Abbey be inspired by the words of the above Epilogue to the *Experientia* program, as we join “...the larger Cistercian family and its witness at the beginning of the third Millennium...” in living a lay form of the Cistercian charism.]

³ Translation: Father Thomas McMaster (new Melleray).

Appendix I

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Appendix II

To the Groups of Lay Cistercians⁴

**MGM OCSO Rome,
September 23, 2002**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Baptized into Christ and wanting to prefer nothing to Him, we are happy to address you in this way, for it is in Him that we find our true communion. This is the second time that we have received a representative of the Lay Cistercians at our MGM. At Lourdes, in 1999, we were happy to hear Veronica Umegakwe, of Nigeria, speak to us about the great vitality of the lay Cistercian groups placed under the patronage of Blessed Cyprian Tansi. On September 14th of this year, in Rome, we had the pleasure of receiving Paco and Malika Ambrosetti on the day of the Cistercian Family. Paco retraced for us the recent history of the lay Cistercians and in the name of all those who participated in their second International Meeting at Conyers last April, he read us a letter, which touched us deeply.

The hour has come in which our Order, as the Church herself, is called to look with courage and faith at the new paths opened up by the Spirit to give witness to the Gospel. We see blossoming on the Cistercian trunk a branch different from all that has appeared up to now: men, women, married or celibate, who are receiving from the Lord a call to serve Him in the school of love, according to the Rule of St. Benedict and the Cistercian tradition. How far does the openness of the Cistercian charism go? Something has developed that is becoming more and more evident: the flowering of all your groups around the world. The values and common practices such as lectio divina, individual and liturgical prayer, simplicity of life, conversatio morum, interior silence and contemplation, work as a means of sanctification, bind you to one another and to us. We welcome this new phenomenon as a sign of the times and willingly place it in relation to the role that lay people taking increasingly in the life of the Church.

Today, you ask us for "a word of wisdom and encouragement, since you must live the Cistercian charism in the world." To answer you, it is good to remember the words of Pope John Paul II in his letter of March 6, 1998, addressing the entire Cistercian Family. He encouraged us "to

⁴ During the OCSO General Chapter this letter was sent to the Lay Cistercians in response to a presentation by Lay Cistercian representative to the General Chapter following the 2nd International Lay Cistercian Encounter held in Conyers, Georgia in June 2002.

discern with prudence and a prophetic sense the participation of the lay faithful in our spiritual family, under the form of 'associate members', or, following the present needs in certain cultural contexts, under the form of a temporary sharing of community life and a commitment to contemplation, on condition that the identity of our monastic life does not suffer." These words of the Pope will be for you as for us a reference point in order to discern how each of us will participate in the same charism.

Our differences are evident yet we have the same spirit. In respecting these differences, our unity will be able to grow on solid and lasting foundations. We don't know what the future holds for us, but our vision of the Cistercian Family recognizes you as authentic witnesses of the Cistercian vocation fully engaged in the world. We are moved and profoundly grateful to the Spirit working in you. The Spirit is the master and guide of our unity in the diversity of our states of life. Even if your oldest groups have already some years of experience, it is a question of a new situation for you as for us. Each of our communities is autonomous and will respond to you according to its cultural context, its own rhythm and the sensitivity of its members. Know that your interest in our monastic life encourages us to lead it ever more faithfully. Continue the path to which you are committed, sharing with us the tradition that gives us life. May Mary, Our Lady and Queen of Citeaux, be your Mother as she is ours. We recommend ourselves to your prayer and keep you fraternally in ours.

Members of the MGM of the OCSO

Biographical Sketches

Saint Aelred of Rievaulx (1110-1167) was born in Hexham, Northumberland, England. He was a writer, historian, and outstanding Cistercian abbot who influenced monasticism in medieval England, Scotland, and France. His feast day is celebrated by the Cistercians on February 3. Of noble birth, Aelred was reared at the court of King David I of Scotland, whose life story he later wrote and for whom he was royal steward. He entered the Cistercian abbey of Rievaulx about 1134, and from 1143 to 1147 he was abbot of Revesby in Lincolnshire. In late 1147 he became Abbot of Rievaulx. Despite poor health, Aelred led a severely ascetic life and made numerous visits to Cistercian houses in England, Scotland, and France. His spirituality, his Christocentric doctrine, and, in particular, his writings—considered among the finest produced in England during the Middle Ages—highly influenced the Cistercians and earned him the title of “the Bernard of the north” (after the celebrated reformer Bernard of Clairvaux). By 1166 illness halted his writing. Aelred’s surviving works deal with either devotion or history. *Spiritual Friendship*, considered to be his greatest work, is a Christian counterpart of Cicero’s *De amicitia* and designates Christ as the source and ultimate impetus of spiritual friendship.

[Source: wikipedia.com]

Blessed Beatrice of Nazareth (1200-1268) was a Dutch Flemish Cistercian nun. She was the very first prose writer using the Dutch language, a mystic, and the author of the notable Dutch prose dissertation known as the *Seven Ways of Holy Love*. She was also the first prioress of the Abbey of Our Lady of Nazareth in Nazareth near Lier in Brabant, Belgium. The *Seven Ways of Holy Love* is a work of early mystic literature that describes seven stages of stages of love, as it is purified and transformed, before it can return to God. It has a simple and balanced prose style. Beatrice came from a wealthy family, but when her mother died she was sent to become a nun. At the age of seven she went to live with the Béguines. She afterwards joined the Cistercian nuns where she was sent to commence the new foundation at Nazareth, Belgium.

[Source: wikipedia.com]

St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) was a French Cistercian abbot and a major leader in the reform of Benedictine monasticism that caused the support of the formation of the Cistercian order.

"...He was sent to found a new abbey at an isolated clearing in a glen southeast of [Bar-sur-Aube](#). According to tradition, Bernard founded the monastery on 25 June 1115, naming it *Claire Vallée*, which evolved into *Clairvaux*. There Bernard preached an immediate faith, in which the intercessor was the Virgin Mary." In the year 1128, Bernard attended the [Council of Troyes](#), at which he traced the outlines of the Rule of the Knights Templar,^[a] which soon became the ideal of Christian nobility.

On the death of Pope Honorius II on 13 February 1130, a schism broke out in the church. King Louis VI of France convened a national council of the French bishops at Étampes in 1130, and Bernard was chosen to judge between the rivals for pope. By the end of 1131, the kingdoms of France, England, Germany, Portugal, Castile, and Aragon supported Pope Innocent II; however, most of Italy, southern France, and Sicily, with the Latin patriarchs of Constantinople, Antioch, and Jerusalem supported Antipope Anacletus II. Bernard set out to convince these other regions to rally behind Innocent.

In 1139, Bernard assisted at the Second Council of the Lateran. He subsequently denounced the teachings of Peter Abelard to the pope, who called a council at Sens in 1141 to settle the matter. Bernard soon saw one of his disciples elected Pope Eugene III. Having previously helped end the schism within the church, Bernard was now called upon to combat heresy. In June 1145, Bernard traveled in southern France and his preaching there helped strengthen support against heresy. He preached at the Council of Vézelay (1146) to recruit for the Second Crusade.

After the Christian defeat at the Siege of Edessa, the pope commissioned Bernard to preach the Second Crusade. The last years of Bernard's life were saddened by the failure of the crusaders, the entire responsibility for which was thrown upon him. Bernard died at the age of 63, after 40 years as a monk. He was the first Cistercian placed on the calendar of saints, and was canonized by Pope Alexander III on 18 January 1174. In 1830 Pope Pius VIII bestowed upon Bernard the title "Doctor of the Church". [Source: wikipedia.com]

Guerric of Igny (c. 1070/80-1157) was a Cistercian abbot. Little is known about his early life. He may have been educated at Tournai's cathedral school, perhaps under Benedictine monk, Odo of Camrai. Guerric appears to have lived a life of prayer and study near Tournai Cathedral. His monastic formation was directly influenced by Bernard of Clairvaux, who praises him in several letters. In 1138, he became abbot of Igny Abbey, in the diocese of Rheims, a house dependent on Clairvaux. Here Guerric ruled as abbot until his death on 19 August 1157. It was here that he composed the 54 liturgical sermons that constitute his surviving works. His spirituality was said to be influenced by Origen.

[Source: wikipedia.com]

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⁵ The listed works under IALCC heading can be accessed at www.cistercianfamily.org.

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The Spiritual Development Work Group formed by the LCG Advisory Council in June 2019 developed the “The Lay Cistercian Experience” program. The program was adapted from the *Experientia: A Program for Reflection and Sharing* that was developed and approved by the OCSO General Chapter for the purpose of ongoing formation of monks and nuns of the Order. We are grateful to Fr. Michael Casagram, LCG Monastic Advisor, for his encouragement and invitation to develop a LCG version of *Experientia* to be used by LCG members to similarly engage in reflection and sharing of their experience of living the Lay Cistercian way of life.

We are grateful to the LCG Coordinator, Jane Endriss, and the LCG Advisory Council for their leadership and prioritizing the need to focus on the spiritual development of LCG members. Also, we are appreciative in advance of those LCG members who will volunteer to compose short personal reflections of their reading of the fifteen selected readings for this program.

Catherine Poland, Chair

Allen Thyssen

Mike Johnson