Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani Abbey

Issue 7 – Season of Advent 2020



The Journal of the Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani Abbey

The stability of the monastic enclosure, combined with centuries of tradition, provides a structure and model for growth that offers support and guidance, as well as rich resources for contemplation.

Non-cloistered contemplatives, however, face different challenges in respect to the environment and the companions with which their search for God takes place. Since they do not live within the walls of a monastic building, they must personally define a comparable place and fashion a practice of prayer, contemplation and spiritual companioning that complements their monastery-without-walls.

The primary purpose of this on-line publication is to contribute to the formation of such an enclosure. Ideally, the *Journal* is a context in which members and candidates explore and share aspects of their spiritual journeys and the role of the Cistercian charism and the monastery of Gethsemani in those journeys.

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Introductory Note

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This issue of the *Journal* offers important perspectives on a number of contexts for Lay Cistercian reflection and practice.

All of the artwork included here belongs to Ray Geers' *Art Bathing Meditation*, each frame providing in itself a visual path, a "focal point of interest for a contemplative experience." The link to Ray's video version of this unique meditation allows the reader to expand the visual setting of the *Journal* to include motion and sound.

Expanding the multimedia scope of options in this issue, Bob Anderson's *Retreat 2020* describes a way to approximate the experience of attending a retreat in person at Gethsemani using video, as well as simply following the daily monastic practice of prayer as structured in the Office of the Hours.

The Joy of New Obedience by Scott Gilliam, Eucharist by Liz Duplaga, and Examination by Linda Boerstler describe personal encounters in the search of God, and the powerful The Oasis in My Desert of Joseph Gentilini explores how the sacrament of the monastery itself provided him with the grace which helped him come to terms with his life as a gay Christian.

Finally, Jim Doyle's *Contemplative Prayer or Looking Out of Plane's Window* describes aspects of "active prayer" and "contemplative prayer" through the use of mental images, taking the reader on an imaginary journey to "total absorption in God."

Once again, the contributors to the *Journal* offer serious material for consideration. Like the articles, poems and artwork in previous issues, the contents of Issue Seven are practical. They are exemplary documents that not only reveal the complexities and beauty of the search for God but also reveal the power of paths nurtured by Cistercian spirituality.

Bill Felker



Art Bathing Meditation

By Ray Geers

The process of creating art and sharing it with others is always a surprising source of joy to me. Art is a whispered promise of the human spirit which says: "Life is more than what merely meets the eye!" There is so much more in store for us, more to be curious about and more to help lead us forward in hope.

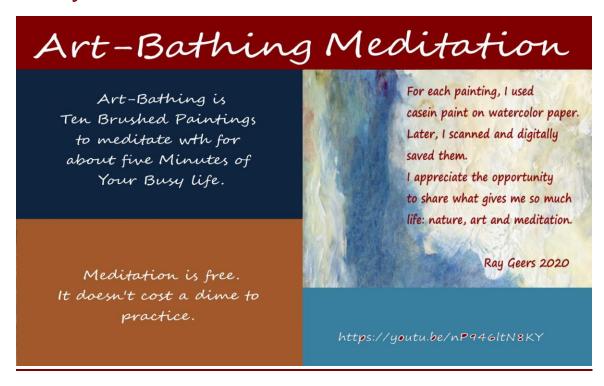
I was in a fine spirit of hope when I put together a guided meditation featuring several of my original paintings. The subjects have been called watery skyscapes by friends, because that is where I drew my inspiration. A couple years ago it dawned on me that the sky is the poor person's ocean. No matter how poor, or "poor in spirit," we might be, we are always near to this sky-ocean. We are even immersed in it, often without conscious awareness.

The video version of my paintings, entitled Art-Bathing Meditation, includes directions on how to use the ten images as focal points for a contemplative experience. I created Art-Bathing Meditation for people who might benefit from a short, informal form of meditation. The video explains how I created the paintings, all strictly from memory and imagination. I hope the work speaks to all who might welcome an oceanic experience that will bathe their minds and soothe their sometimes weary souls. I invite all who are wandering, and maybe even floundering, in a seeming desert of cares: "Come here for a short, mindful, rest break!"

The sky really is the poor one's ocean. No private club of elites here—all are welcome to this water! May we look up and into this great universal sea as if into the very light and love of God as reflected here and all around us. How well-attended we already are in this vision, this viewpoint. Let us keep on

looking, both inward and outward, towards a happier, more meditative life, here now and forever!

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nP946ltN8KY&fea ture=youtu.be



Retreat 2020

By Bob Anderson Spiritus LCG Community

As an ordained deacon of the Roman Catholic Church I am required to make a retreat every year. This year was difficult because of the Covid-19 Pandemic; the Abbey, where we always go for our annual retreat, was closed; and by the time I received notice that our retreat had been canceled it was too late to schedule ourselves for the local diocesan deacon and wives retreat. What to do – what to do.

We decided to do our own private, silent retreat – at home. In doing so we decided to attempt (operative word) to create as much as we could the atmosphere at Gethsemane. Our decision was to disconnect all the phones, turn our cell phones off, leave the TV off and follow the monks daily schedule as best as we could; and we did.

We began our retreat at 2:00 on Tuesday, the time we would check in at the Abbey – OK, so we were a day later but we also "stayed" a day later. On our last retreat at the Abbey I recorded the three daytime hours, Terce, Sext and None, on my cell phone. In addition, YouTube has videos of Terce, Sext and Compline so we decided to use these as much as we could – everyday. That first day/evening we prayed together Vigils at

5:30 PM and Compline at 7:30 PM using the video on YouTube. Then we began the Great Silence. Each subsequent day we arose at 3:00 AM to pray together Vigils at 3:15, the same time the monks were praying. We tried to schedule our daily prayer time using the hours at the same time the monks would be in the Abbey Church. Every time it was possible we used the YouTube videos or the recordings I made at the Abbey ending each day; for the other hours, Vigils, Lauds, None and Vespers, we prayed using the Benedictine Breviary. Each night we were in bed by 8:00 PM entering, again, the Great Silence.

We are fortunate; we have a small cluster of woods behind our home, on our property, where we have created a small St. Francis, prayer garden. Each day we would spend our silent time either on our land or out in the St. Francis Garden in quiet, and in prayer.

We had prepared several meals in advance so we wouldn't have to worry about cooking; all we had to do for the main meals was to warm up the food. The other meals were kept to a minimum, soup, salad, veggies and dip, etc.

Each day we watched a spiritual conference, again using videos available on YouTube. The first day we watched a video by Bishop (at that time Fr.) Robert Barron (my favorite) on the passage from John's Gospel about the woman caught in

adultery (again, one of my favorite passages in scripture). The second day we watched a video by our November Day of Reflection presenter, Judith Volunte; the third day we watched a video by Fr. Richard Rohr, OFM, on the Universal Christ.

Each day we included the televised mass from EWTN. Finally, on Saturday, we finished the retreat with Vigils at 3:15 AM, Lauds at 5:45 AM, Terce at 7:30 AM and the mass from EWTN.

Anyone can make this kind of retreat; I encourage everyone to even take a day and commit it to silence, prayer and meditation. Use your surroundings and environment to create the atmosphere; and definitely use every audio/video opportunity available to you on YouTube or other media. You will be greatly rewarded.



THE JOY OF NEW OBEDIENCE

By Scott Gilliam | Haiku Poet September 26, 2020

Over the past few days I've found a "new obedience," which was heavily influenced by my devotion to Thomas Merton and the many graces I have received as a Lay Cistercian of Gethsemani. And like Thomas Merton, I figure things out by writing about them or in this case, by writing a haiku poem with several stanzas. I think my "new obedience" epiphany was also influenced by what Judith Valente has described as "our time of pan-deepening" in the face of the pandemic. I hope you enjoy this composition from my heart, "The Joy of New Obedience."

"The Joy of New Obedience"

Like a brittle leaf Which crunches under my foot On a cool, fall night.

My desire to wage War of any kind has been Vanquished from my soul.

My change of heart was
Swift and mighty and struck like
A bolt of lightning.

Prompted by a stark And jarring revelation That all was not well.

An earthquake-like shift Which shattered my desire to Battle and protest.

A blunt wake up call That what mattered in my life Was passing me by.

All of which triggered A quick and brutal audit Of my heart and soul.

My zeal to protest The causes of others was Controlling my life.

I'd become deaf, dumb And blind to my worship of Me, myself and I.

What joy I felt when I let it all go and tuned Into my graced life.

Countless burdens were Lifted from my shoulders with Great sighs of relief.

The world is still a Messed up place with battles yet To be fought and won.

> Discrimination, Poverty, justice for all And other isms.

All these things still wreak
Havoc on the soul of our
Nation and world.

But like a novice Monk inside the walls, I've found

New obedience.

It's the same thing
Which guided Merton and King
In their saintly work.

It goes by many
Names, but the one I like best
Is nonviolence.

It now calls me to Retire my sword, breathe peace and Embrace solitude.

Contemplation and Prayer and providence will Be my new weapons.

My focus will shift To silent acts of service And the written word.

But my journey to Serve and embrace "the other" Will not miss a beat.

Instead, my good deeds
Will be done with quieter
Resolve and focus.

Few may understand.
But the One who gave me the
Courage to act does.

Now I must reset
My compass and tune my heart
To nonviolence.

Oh yea, if you need To find me, I'll be at the Edge of Walden Pond.



Eucharist

By

Liz Duplaga
Cleveland LCG

Resting of the spirit

Gentleness time suspended

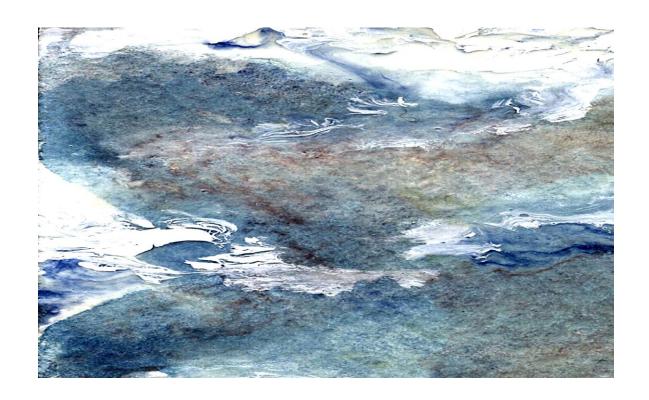
Stillness of the heart

Between heaven and earth

His eyes are upon me

Mercy understanding

Love unites us both



THE OASIS IN MY DESERT

By Joseph Gentilini, Ph.D.

Something intrigues me about a monk and a monastery. A monk is one who leaves society, with its social comforts of marriage and family, to find his true self and God. The monastery is the place where he does this. It is his wilderness, his desert; a place devoid of worldly comforts. The monk stands alone before God and asks for mercy.

As a gay man, I identify with the monk. Society tells me that I am a criminal. The church tells me that I am an abomination. People tell me that my natural feelings are

abnormal. Without the benefit of social or religious approval, I stand alone before God and ask for mercy. To a great extent, I have learned to do this at the Abbey of Gethsemani, the oldest Trappist-Cistercian Monastery in the United States. I have been coming to this spot, about 52 miles southeast of Louisville, Kentucky, several times a year since 1971. My journal reminds me of how important this place is for my spiritual pilgrimage.



Being a gay man and a Catholic Christian is probably something that seems impossible to many; it certainly did for me. Early in grade school, when I began to realize that I was gay, I buried that thought and emotion deep within. I never

wanted to think or to feel it again. Forced to face it in college, I didn't know what to do. I refused to acknowledge my true self because I thought that God would not love me as gay. I could not love myself as gay. I believed that I had to be heterosexual to save my immortal soul. Filled with anguish, I sought change through psychotherapy and prayer.

When I first visited the monastery, I immediately found a place of refreshment. It was not the desert or wilderness, but an oasis. The world, where I could not be true to my feelings or to myself, was my desert. The monastery was a place of rest, a place to heal and to re-group my inner forces before going back to the charade.

In my journal I wrote, I am sitting on top of the stone wall at Dom Frederick's Lake. It is still and stagnant with a few ripples every so often. Some birds are chirping as are the crickets and other creatures. A dog on the nearby hillside is scrounging for food. It is overcast -- gray sky with some low fog or mist. But how quiet and peaceful. The wind blows at times, moving the leaves and they whistle along. The trees are all colors --- just beginning to change into reds and oranges and yellows. I feel contented and peaceful and alone -- not lonely -- because I feel in relationship with myself, with my God, with Nature. Along with this I feel a void, something I cannot

grasp. Maybe that is just Being, the life-force flowing through, or just existing. I want to be united with that force, this God, who is personal and with whom I have a peace-filled and frightening relationship. I cannot picture Him, even in my imagination, but I know He is here. I feel His presence.

Ultimately, coming to the Abbey did not protect me from facing my true self because my struggle accompanied me within its walls. It did, however, provide a place where I could process the struggle internally and pray about it before God. In spite of everything, at the monastery I was able to foster a relationship with my God and to share my pain and frustrations.

I remember praying very much that God would make me heterosexual, that He would help me not be who I was. Interestingly, I was praying to God and at the same time, refusing to face the gay identity that God gave me. While I was still trying to change, the battles became more painful. The idea that I was truly gay would send me into an unbearable inner panic. I could not easily say the word "homosexual" or "gay" and used euphemisms instead. I wrote, Jesus, Where am I? I have felt bad all day; not bad, but lonely, closed off, hostile, angry, frightened; separately and all together. Will I ever be at peace, be at happiness? Will I ever see You, Jesus, and love

You? Please don't lose me ---- Joe

By 1974, my life radically changed. Despite my best effort throughout six long years of very painful weekly psychotherapy, it became obvious to me and my therapist that I was not going to become heterosexual. Instead of fighting my gay orientation, I needed to accept it as an integral part of my identity. This required major changes in my life. Before this moment, I attempted to be celibate. Although unsuccessful, I was generally supported by the notion that I was trying to be faithful to the religious "rules" which prohibit the physical expression of being gay. Charting a new course for myself, I was totally without social or religious supports. I was no longer sure what was really right or wrong. I was still searching for God. I did not want to lose Him even if I would have to find a way of living my Christianity without the approval of my Church. I stood alone before God.



The Abbey was still my oasis amidst the dryness of the desert. In the monks' soothing chants, my heart rested. Through the monks' lives, I felt that God was present. I wasn't sure I knew how God was going to answer me, but I believed that He would. I began to understand, however, that God was not going to change my sexual orientation. My life was shaken; the foundations cracked and destroyed.

In despair, I prayed to God as my Father and asked for some stability: I thought, Lord, that I could understand. I had a system where everything fit, or almost everything, and then I find that maybe I don't understand. You are beyond all systems, all structures, and yet somehow connected and united to

me. Father, show me – blow my structures if You must – but please lead me to You, to others, to myself; where You and others and I are one. Make me a saint... Father-God, who am I and where am I going? Maybe I'm not really Christian. Maybe I don't really believe in Christ or want to. Don't lose me, God, and don't let me lose You. I want You, wherever You are. I want me, whoever I am.

I continued visiting the Abbey as I began to integrate my sexuality with my spirituality. Many of these times, however, found me more at odds with the church than before and I realized how difficult this task would be. There seemed to be no "place" within my traditional spirituality to be actively gay, even within a relationship. The desert was still very much around me and yet, I still believed that God was with me in this journey. I cannot say that this new direction towards homosexuality is bad or immoral. Maybe all I can say is that this is where I am now. I trust, Jesus, it will not lead me from God. I want You, God. I want me, the true me. Dear God, don't lose me (please) for I am Yours.

As I gradually learned to accept myself as a gay man, I embraced myself with my sexuality and celebrated my identity. I learned to stand before God as I was. I learned to do this best of all when at the Abbey of Gethsemani for periods of

reflection and relaxation and prayer.

I entered these words in my journal: I am at peace inside for I am who I am. I can be before my God and say, "Here I am, as I am, and I come before You, My God. Bury me within Yourself so that I may live within Your Sea of Love. Throughout those years of pain, struggle, joy, acceptance, and fulfillment, I have not lost my desire for God, my desire for union with Him. I want to be MESHED with this Being, interwoven with the very 'stuff' of this God. I can't bring it about on my own but the desire is there. It is a conviction, a yearning that I have deep down.

By 1978, I was at peace inside. My whole stance toward myself had changed and I believed that I had finally discovered my true self before God. I had learned to accept myself as gay and Catholic and good. As my relationship with myself developed, I stood before my God as a free and whole man. My relationship with God deepened and I continued to identify him as Father and I as son: When I first came to this monastery years ago, I hated myself as a gay man. Today, I sit here and thank God for His gift to me, His gift of gayness. I thank Him for His gift of my unique personality, my counseling skills, my attitudes, and outlooks. I am at awe that I was able to break through the barriers. Help me, Father, to use Your gift with dignity for myself and for others.

A year later, I wrote, I cried at Gethsemani. I was able to pray and yes, I wept, in joy maybe, relieved that I was not lost or out of touch with God. Yet I also felt that God was asking more of me: a deeper relationship with Him. At Gethsemani, I am far more aware of my blind spots, of how I sin and misuse others and so fall short of the mark. I am also far more aware that Life, God, is mercy upon mercy upon mercy.

Many years have passed. My inner peace has deepened, as has my relationship with God, a Person I still identify as Father. Both have occurred in large part because of my relationship with my spouse, Leo, a man who has given me the experience of unconditional love. In 1998 I wrote in my journal: Because of my relationship with Leo, I have learned to love, to be emotionally and physically intimate with another human being and because of that, I am more intimate with God. I am far more centered and calm; far more selfless and giving; far more in awe at the goodness of God and creation. At the same time, I am far less compulsive and driven. I have come to the conclusion in my life that God is very much present; I am far more at peace. These are, for me, the actual fruits of the Holy Spirit and proof of the goodness of this sexuality for me as a gay man. These have also been witnessed by others looking at the relationship between Leo and me. We are blessed by God.

I still live in a society that devalues gay love and gay relationships, including my own committed relationship. I still live within a Church that calls my sexuality "objectively disordered" and "intrinsically evil." The official Church still teaches this emotional suicide and dysfunctional living. As I continue to walk this societal and ecclesiastical desert, I have a place of refreshment where I can enter into silence and solitude and safely surrender myself to God. The Abbey of Gethsemani remains for me an oasis where I continue to discover my true self and my God

Copyrighted (From my personal journal, February 1994, revised January 2001. Published in *PASSION: Christian Spirituality From A Gay Perspective*.)

Joe Gentilini has a Doctorate in Counseling and Guidance and retired from the State of Ohio as a vocational rehabilitation counselor. He lives in Hilliard, Ohio with Leo Radel, his spouse of 39 years. Both are active in DIGNITY/USA and value their Christian spirituality.



Contemplative Prayer or Looking Out of a Plane's Window

By Jim Doyle

Spiritus LCG Community

I wish to speak about two forms of prayer: active and contemplative prayer.

Let me begin by sharing my idea about what prayer is (i.e., the turning toward God) by differentiating between the use of **Concepts** or **Mental Images**.

The first is what I call **Active Prayer** (i.e., the use of words, images, actions, rituals, etc.; in other words, concepts or mental

images). The second type is **Contemplative Prayer**, which is prayer **without** concepts (i.e., **Contemplative Prayer** is total **silence** seeking only to be in the presence of God).

Let us turn to Luke's gospel to describe this distinction:

In the course of their journey he (i.e., Jesus) came to a village, and a woman named Martha welcomed Him into her house. She had a sister called Mary, who sat down at the Lord's feet and listened to him speaking. Now Martha who was districted with all her serving said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister is leaving me to do the serving all by myself? Please tell her to help me." But the Lord answered: "Martha, Martha," he said, "you worry and fret about so many things, and yet few are needed, indeed only one. It is Mary who has chosen the better part; it is not to be taken from her."

In this passage of Luke's gospel (Luke 10: 38-42), we see the two forms of prayer. First, we see an example of prayer as presented by Martha, a form of service to our Lord in getting the house ready for His presence, the food ready for His sustenance, and all-around preparing to serve not only Jesus but all others who came with Him. Here we see an example through Martha's behavior of loving others as you would love yourself (or as St. Paul said in Romans 13, "You must love your neighbor as yourself").

But wait. Jesus rebukes Martha (calling her out by name – that is twice) by saying that Martha should not "worry and fret about so many things, and yet few are needed." Jesus goes onto say that, "Mary has chosen the better part [and] it should not be

taken from her." It is the second part that I wish to call true Contemplative prayer.

Now imagine (yes, use your mental images spoken above) that you have just boarded a plane and comfortably seated yourself in the window seat on a very, very rainy day. (Got the image in your mind?)

Good!

Now imagine yourself taxiing toward the main runway as you stare out your window at all the rain drops sheeting across the window pane. You feel the plane coming to a halt at the end of the taxi, then the plane slowly moves to the main runway as the engines rave up to full power, the brakes are released, and you shoot down the runway as the sheets of rain begin to streak more horizontally because of the rushing wind. And you lift off, you feel the plane start to move ever upwards and the rain droplets move ever more horizontally across your paned window. You are headed for the dark, gray clouds above.

You have used your imagination (i.e., words and images or mental constructs) to conjure up this mental scene.

The section of your imagination is likened to what I call active prayer. The use of mental imagery (i.e., Active Prayer) is like looking out the window at the rain drops across the window rushing against the outside air flow like "mad monkeys." Our present distractions from the sunlight above.

Whether we are attending a liturgy, saying private or public prayers or *Lectio Divina*, or using a form of meditation as in Ignatian imagery or restricting our mind's ever-present images as in Centering Prayer (i.e., by the use of a sacred word), we all have to deal with our mind's constructs (some may call them the "mad monkeys") or, back to our looking out of the plane's window pane. We know that we should rid ourselves of these distracting images and turn our attention solely toward God but we are only human and turning them off is no small feat; it takes years-and-years of practice and perseverance.

As we move further along on our flight (i.e., use your imagination here) we leave the rainy weather and enter dark grayish-cloud banks where the rain becomes less attentiongetting as we move and leave the rain somewhat below. The clouds are described by a 14th century, anonymous monk in his *The Cloud of Unknowing* (i.e., the mental place where we lose all behind us, such as the "mad monkeys," and move ever closer to a break out, a break-through of the brilliant sun light above the rain and clouds below – we have arrived at true contemplation, true contemplative prayer.

As the psalmist tells us: *Be still, then, and know that I am God.* (Psalm 47: 11)

Let's leave the image of the rain streaking across our window as we move through the ever-present clouds to the brilliant sun light in our minds and permit me to turn my attention to the second form of prayer, **Contemplative Prayer**, with a story. A story that I once was told – by whom I don't know, and when I first heard it, I also don't know. But here it is.

Someone was watching day-after-day a monk sitting by himself, just sitting for long periods of time, just staring and doing nothing else. One day as the monk sat simply staring, this person approached him and, begging his pardon, asked what the monk was doing, simply sitting and staring.

The monk, without moments pause, said, "I'm looking at God, and God is looking at me." Here is an example of true **Contemplative Prayer**. No words, no images, no actions; in other words, no concepts or mental images, only completely and totally absorbed in God's presence. A true form of **Contemplative Prayer**, in other words, Contemplative Prayer is a grace **given** to us by the Holy Spirit.

I have nothing else to say about **Active** (Martha's fretting behavior) or **Contemplative Prayer** (Mary's silent listening), except as you leave the rain on your window and pierce the clouds above, through perseverance, you will receive (hopefully) a very special gift from the Holy Spirt of true **Contemplative prayer**.

May you all be blessed and keep moving through the rain on your windows, through the ever-present clouds, and finally to your total absorption in God.

Let me end my presentation with an active prayer composed by Thomas Merton.

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone. (Thomas Merton - Thoughts in Solitude)



Examination

By Linda Boerstler

Examine me o Lord
Even though I know the weight of your scrutiny
Will crush me.

Far better am I to enter
The gates in broken pieces
Than to not enter it at all.
Your judgment is so pure
And hotly executed
That it consumes my flesh
And my ever-increasing sinfulness
Into nothing

Into nothing.

May I be no more
Than molten lava
or anything that could

Attempt to stand in your presence. Your examination is distress to my humanity But a comfort to my weak and dying soul.

If I must decrease so that you May increase yourself within me Let it be made so.

A CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS The Journal of the Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani Abbey

The *Journal of the Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani Abbey* invites different forms of reflection through essays, poetry and other written narratives, as well through art, photographs or video presentations. The *Journal* also encourages book reviews and scholarly submissions, such as studies and reflections about Cistercian writers or themes. Monks of the Abbey are also invited to submit their works to the *Journal*.

An editorial committee reviews submissions, may make suggestions for corrections or changes, if needed, and attempts to compose a balanced selection of material for each issue of the online periodical. The *Journal* will be posted when sufficient material has been accepted. Volunteers to help shape the *Journal* and assist with editorial committee reviews are welcome!

For further information or to submit work for consideration, contact Bill Felker, Journal Committee Coordinator, at wlfelker@gmail.com or (937) 767-7434.

