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L-R) John Neiheisel and Michael Johnson are members of the Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani Abbey, adopting some of its 900-year-old spiritual practices.

Photo By Graham Lienhart

Cheerios, Coffee and Psalms

Suburbanites embrace a 900-year-old monastic path

By Bernadette Cahill

Michael Johnson of Cincinnati stood at the door of the 160-year-old abbey. A former Franciscan friar subsequently married with two children, he was a Catholic seeking something more than the clamor of today's world.

It's a surprising place for Johnson to visit. Inside the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani near Bardstown, Ky., stillness permeates the stones of the buildings. The church bells peal the hours while the monks pray and work in silence -- a stark contrast to the bedlam of ordinary life.

The monks of Gethsemani are Cistercians, with the same Spartan daily community rituals established 900 years ago at Cîteaux. in France, their original monastery.



Johnson's quest since the early 1970s had included researching other traditions, such as Zen Buddhism and Native American spirituality. But now he found himself back where he started: at a religious community; but one completely focused on the individual's inner life -- the part overwhelmed by the chaotic cacophony of the modern world.

'There is a peace'

World-renowned mystic Thomas Merton, also named Father Louis, lived and worked for 27 years at Gethsemani until his death in 1968. His writings praising the contemplative life drew Johnson there to explore what the Cistercians offered.

"I found a similarity between the monastic tradition and ordinary family life," Johnson says.

So he asked Fr. Michael Casagram, then guest master, how he could adapt the Cistercian way to the daily life of a lay person.

For centuries lay associates have attached themselves to Catholic religious orders to enrich their faith, but not in the

For centuries lay associates have attached themselves to Catholic religious orders to enrich their faith, but not in the Cistercian tradition. So, despite the benefits that Johnson felt would flow from adapting the Abbey's practices to a harried schedule, the monks of Gethsemani hesitated.

"How much time can we give to the needs of those associated with us?" Casagram, now novice director, says he wondered. "If they got to depend on us, we would have to give more and more."

But change in the Catholic Church from the 1960s influenced Gethsemani, and the abbey was already considering opening its spiritual retreats to women. With momentous moves already in the air, Casagram brought Johnson together with others asking similar questions. But the monks wanted to make sure it was the lay people themselves who formed and defined what they were setting out to do.

"What we really wanted was to give them some input," Casagram says. "Monks can't dictate to lay people because (our) life is different from theirs, and they have gifts and abilities to form one another."

This happened around 1988. Nearly three years later the original group of six, calling themselves Cistercian Lay Contemplatives, produced a guide to Cistercian spirituality for lay people. With his blessing, then-Abbot Timothy Kelly told them, "Go home to your monastery and live it."

An adaptation of the 6th century Rule of St Benedict, the Plan of Life lists the necessities for focusing on one's inner life: prayer, study, work, silence, solitude, simplicity, stability and service.

Johnson, a social worker now living in Oxford, is coordinator of Ohio's Lay Cistercians. The Plan of Life permeates his outlook and actions.

"It's not a good start to the day without my Cheerios, coffee and Psalms," he says. "I pray the Liturgy of the Hours diligently every day, with an occasional nighttime vigil. I allow more time for solitude. (But) you can't give all your time to prayer, so you make whatever you are doing a prayer."

He quotes Merton, who wrote: "How do I pray? I breathe."

About five years ago Eve Van Sickle, director of mission integration at Mercy Health Partners and a convert to Catholicism, also found herself at Gethsemani Abbey seeking something more. There she learned about the Cistercian Lay Associate program.

"At Gethsemani, the work, the silence, the prayer resonated with me," she says. "I wanted to know how to keep it. Then I discovered the Plan of Life. I don't follow it very well. It's a continual struggle. When I do, there is a peace. It makes everything easier."

'A deeper experience'

Is Gethsemani a well of spirituality from which lay people such as Johnson and Van Sickle can draw to enrich their daily lives?

To an extent, Casagram says. But he adds, "There is a well in each of us. Gethsemani gets people in touch with their own well. It puts them in touch with something deep down inside -- the monk, the nun, the contemplative deep inside."

Johnson also sees a contemplative in every human being. Following the Plan of Life, he is more conscious of every day and every activity in the day.

"I have a greater mindfulness in everything I do in my waking hours, and even sleeping, because it comes up in dreams," he says. "Engaging in the disciplines sometimes can be very boring, but you are challenged to continue with the practice, and it's amazing you can see its fruits. It guides you into more depth, it gives you a perspective on life. I feel calmer, more at peace, have a greater sense of joy. I was seeking a deeper experience of my Christian faith, and I found a freedom that allowed me to become more grounded."

Since starting up -- its formation, the contemplatives discovered, reflecting a national and worldwide development -- the group in the Cincinnati area now numbers 13, unrestricted by gender or Christian denomination. The recent quarterly retreat at the Poor Clares' Monastery in Mt. Healthy responded to their wish for more community by planning a get-together every month in 2006.

In Gethsemani, the monks now embrace the potential of this new shoot growing from their foundation. The new name of Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani Abbey reflects this.

Entry nowadays is more structured. Candidates' training, called "formation," takes about a year. Then, during the fall

retreat at Gethsemani, there follows a solemn commitment in a ceremony simplified from a monk's profession of vows.

So, besides breaking with centuries of tradition, what is the effect of the Lay Cistercians on Gethsemani?

"Insofar as they are seeking to live the Cistercian charism, it helps us to articulate more clearly what this charism is," Casagram says. "They help us to realize that our life isn't just for ourselves, but something we both share."

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