

TOWARD THE FORMATION OF LCG MEMBERS

August 2001

INTRODUCTION

These guidelines assist LCG members enter into the Cistercian charism. LCG members themselves are the best ones to determine what from the Cistercian charism may be adopted and fruitfully lived in their lives. What is equally sure is that only by receiving and living the charism, which will involve discipline and sacrifice, will they experience the fruits of it. But it is for the members themselves to determine just how the charism is to be lived in the context of each life.

The goal of every Christian life is to be centered and grounded in Christ Jesus, to allow his Spirit to imbue every aspect of our lives. The early desert Fathers and Mothers spoke of the two goals of the monastic life: the immediate and the ultimate goals. The immediate goal is purity of heart or perhaps better expressed in more understandable terms, the living out of gospel values. The ultimate goal is the Kingdom of God, an everlasting sharing in the divine Life. Whatever formation we undertake must be an effort at freeing our hearts from all that stands in the way of Christ living in and through us.

This will be a faith journey, and only those ready to grow and deepen their faith will continue on the path. Attempting to incorporate aspects of the Cistercian charism in the context of our lives seems simple and basically it is, but it will demand the same faith that marked the lives of the early Cistercians. Faith, though it may never be separated from hope and love, serves as the point of entry for all the rest.

Guidelines are only guidelines. They will need to be adapted to each group and to each member of the group if they are going to be effective. We all need structure and discipline in our lives but only in so far as these support and foster the life of the Holy Spirit.

The goal of the LCG is expressed in the Plan of Life a number of ways: "Union with God," "a discovery of our inner depths where the spirit of God dwells," "to develop in their secular life experience, a contemplative spirituality according to the Cistercian tradition," "becoming more centered and quiet on their spiritual journey." As a presentation of what the LCG is about, the Plan of Life wears well, as the responses to the Spring 2001 survey indicated. There is the sense that all that is necessary is to put it into practice, to find ways of putting flesh and blood on what is carefully laid out there.

The following sections will draw freely from the *Ration Institutionis*, a document for the whole Trappist/ Cistercian Order that sets up Guidelines on Formation. Ultimately, this should all lead to the awareness expressed so well in the Merton quote at the very beginning of the Plan of Life: "Contemplation is life itself, fully aware, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is spiritual wonder, spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being." Ultimately all is grace but we want to do all we can to be open and receptive to it.

LCG AND THE SCHOOL OF THE LORD'S SERVICE

There is one area of our lives where we are always learning, that is the spiritual life. We all need an ambient, an environment where we can learn and grow into mature sons and daughters of God. Just as St. Benedict sought to set up a school for the Lord's service in the Monastery, the LCG members are also creating a support system whereby they may live out, in the most fruitful manner, the grace of their baptism. The need to create a consistent support system was mentioned time and time again in the recent LCG Survey and Needs Assessment. We hope our monasteries can continue to help to strengthen this support system; but I think it is among the LCG members themselves, through meetings, the LCG Newsletter, the sharing of reading material and tapes, the use of the Internet, being present to one another in whatever way, that this support system is made real. Just as monks and nuns have a Community, you must find a way to have your own; and as is true for monks and nuns, what you put into it is what you will receive from it. There is no support system that just happens but only one that is the fruit of constant effort. A good support system will also challenge us continually.

An effective School of the Lord's Service will do the following:

- 1) Help us grow in humility and self-knowledge.
- 2) Help us discover the depths of God's mercy in our lives.
- 3) Help us to become detached from false sources of security.
- 4) Help us to grow in dependence on God so that we will run with an open heart in paths of God's service.

Our everyday lives are a School of the Lord's Service; and this is the brilliant insight of the Second Vatican Council, that the world is now the Lord's workshop if we have the eyes to see and the courage to collaborate. One is reminded here of something in Merton's Journals for May 5, 1958, where he says: "Thinking of the new and necessary struggle in my interior life. I am finally coming out of a chrysalis. The years behind me seem strangely inert and negative, but I suppose that passivity was necessary. Now the pain and struggle of fighting my way out into something new and much bigger. I must see and embrace God in the whole world." This is far from saying everything in the world is good, but if one brings to it a pure heart one is quick to discern. This is what the *Ratio Institutionis* says about Community as formative. The words speak for themselves and LCG groups have only to apply them to their own situation. "All who live in the community share responsibility for its unity, its dynamic fidelity to the Cistercian Charism, and its capacity to provide all its members with the conditions needed for the human and spiritual growth that leads to the fullness of love."

CISTERCIAN CONVERSATIO

The Cistercian vow of Conversion of Manners or Modification of Lifestyle as it is spoken of in the Plan of Life lies at the heart of the Cistercian charism. This is all about "putting on Christ" or what the Desert Fathers called "Purity of Heart." It is the daily receptiveness to the Holy Spirit who is constantly inviting us as baptized Christians to walk in the footsteps of the Lord. If we are going to give witness to the world that we are a new creation, persons buried and risen with Christ, then we have to begin with where we are and with what is going on right now in our lives. How then does the LCG member let himself or herself be formed by the Modification of Lifestyle?

- 1) By becoming obedient to the demands of the moment, whether these come from family, work, the needs of others, etc.
- 2) By accepting the limits imposed on us by the circumstances of our lives and the relationships to which we are committed.
- 3) By embracing the asceticism or discipline that caring for a family or making our living demands of us.
- 4) By not allowing our thoughts or interests to be trivialized by reason of the values of the entertainment world.
- 5) By noticing and appreciating silence when it is given us.
- 6) By not running from experiences of loneliness or solitude incumbent on every human life, especially in times of sickness, a bruised relationship, or by other hardships.
- 7) By sacrificing our own interests when charity asks as much.
- 8) By being faithful to prayer when we would just as soon turn elsewhere.

So often we are inclined to think of formation as some form of intellectual pursuit or a retreat or some other event that focuses our beings on receiving new information or some new technique in prayer or living the spiritual life. In truth, it is the whole of our life that is formative, where we have the occasion to exercise our faith in such a way that we live by grace rather than any merely human ingenuity. What the monastic life will do if a monk lets it, what the Cistercian charism will do if anyone will let it, is call us beyond ourselves into the realm of "awe at the sacredness of life," as Merton expressed it. The key to Christian living is letting Christ be in control rather than ourselves to go where love abides and is relished. The Contemplative way is "life itself." We live in a fast-moving world where the opportunities are daily more diversified; but there is only one thing really necessary, only one that will satisfy the human heart, and that is to live for God and others, to live as Jesus lived.

LEARNING TO PRAY

Prayer is basically very simple, often described as conversation with God. Persons like Br. Lawrence and his *Practice of the Presence of God*, St. Teresa of Avila in her *Interior Castles*, and Merton in his *Contemplative Prayer* have done much to make us aware of

just how present God is to us. Prayer is a simple turning to God in faith, knowing we will be answered even if in a way we never expected. What prayer will demand is that we give up control of our lives, and that does not mean letting them be carried along in any and all directions. It will mean that we explore what the will of God may have in store for us at any given period of our journey. This, of course, must be discerned and sometimes carefully sought after, for only in becoming receptive and ready to do God's will can we see it become manifest. Prayer is a willingness to surrender wholly to the working of God. It engages what is deepest in ourselves with what is most dear to God.

Learning prayer will involve:

- 1) Simply praying, giving time to it.
- 2) Staying with a method we find to be the most helpful.
- 3) Making use of the Church's Liturgy on Sundays and weekdays whenever we can do so while maintaining a balance in the day.
- 4) Not letting our moods interfere with prayer but praying in and through them.
- 5) Learning more about prayer and its different stages, especially through the classical treatises that have been passed on to us.
- 6) Having a time and place for prayer where we come into the presence of God. The Eucharist may be very helpful for some.
- 7) Sharing with a group or at least with one other what happens to us in prayer. Voicing the experience can reveal a lot to us.
- 8) Learning how to deal creatively with distractions in prayer.

When the spiritual journey gets rough, prayer is often the first thing to suffer; and yet isn't it at this moment that we are most in need of divine help and mercy? God asks us sooner or later just how serious we are about the journey.

BEING FORMED BY LECTIO DIVINA

The way the early Cistercians learned to pray was often through their reading; and there is reason to believe we Westerners have our own technique for prayer. We need only make better use of it. Turning to Zen or other Eastern techniques has become common and there is much we can learn from these, but do we appreciate those our own tradition has passed on to us? To the early Cistercians lectio divina never meant just reading, but a reading that led into meditation and prayer. The Scriptures or any classical treatise of substance imparts the wisdom and experience of its authors. Reading, at least what was called lectio divina, is a way of coming into the Presence of God's Word and the transforming power it will convey to those open to receive it.

The power of the word has been lost by much of modern communication. To regain its sacredness is a great blessing. One may do so:

- 1) By setting apart time daily for sacred reading.
- 2) By letting oneself enter a sacred space before beginning.

- 3) By reminding oneself regularly that the Scriptures are truly the Word of God.
- 4) By not letting the power of the word be trivialized by the mass media.
- 5) By slowing the pace when you do sacred reading, giving yourself time to meditate.
- 6) By being aware of your own use of words, not abusing them especially to the harm of others.
- 7) By not letting oneself become addicted to periodicals and news stories that captivate the passions but communicate nothing that is life-giving.
- 8) By letting your words come out of a silence that renews the spirit.

The monks of Gethsemani have long had a guideline on silence for this is the climate for listening to the Word. Real silence is about relationship, and comes out of respect for others and our love for them. If our silence is the expression of love, how much more ought our words be if they are going to build up rather than tear down. If we use the word, not to create a certain effect but to communicate life, we will have learned much about how God's own Word has come and is coming to us each day.

THE FORMATION OF OUR WORK

Manual labor was always an important part of the Cistercian charism. Our work is a lot about service to our families, our communities. Work has a lot to do with accepting the limitations of our human condition. Depending on the type of work, it can put demands on us like nothing else in the ordinary run of the day. Often it will mean engaging in relationships with other people with whom we would ordinarily have little or no contact. This means moving beyond ourselves and learning a great deal about respect for other persons and their limits as well as our own. Any relationship is like a mirror where we will observe a great deal about ourselves if we are attentive to what is going on in it. If self-knowledge is a key to spiritual growth, then we all have many opportunities to advance along the spiritual path by the relationships in which we are daily involved. One can say the same about our relationships with family and friends. Work will do much to deepen our lives if we let it work on us. Here is how we can do that:

- 1) See our work as a helpful service in the world. If it is not, then what ought we to do about it?
- 2) If our work involves physical effort and stress, realize that most of humankind bears this burden just in order to survive.
- 3) Realize that our work serves to balance our day, allowing a certain distance from and perspective on the other aspects of life.
- 4) Accept joyfully the penitential aspect of work, the fact that we are purified by it so as to be prepared for God's everlasting kingdom.
- 5) Allowing it to expand the use of our talents, to bring a more creative use of our gifts for the good of all.
- 6) Be honest about just how much our work is an extension of God's plan for our world and its development. Is the world a better place because of it?

- 7) Help others to benefit by the talents we have learned: share our gift.
- 8) Realize that it is often the best means we have to spread the gospel.

We are not a lot different in how we work than in how we pray. Attitudes we carry to and from the work place reflect to a large extent our attitudes in prayer. Work can allow us to see ourselves more honestly than we do at prayer. A common joke at Gethsemani is that if you want to evaluate a candidate, carefully observe how he wraps cheese in the farms building. Work provides us with a wonderful learning opportunity, a chance to take a honest look at aspects of ourselves we don't normally observe but which are always there. The workplace is also often the place where we exercise those signs of the Spirit that tell others what our Christianity is all about.

COMMITMENT

One of the things LCG is always going to have to struggle over is commitment to living the Cistercian charism in secular life. The reason for this is that the community the LCG is committed to is so complex. It is the community of family, of the work place, of one's parish and the whole society with which we are in constant interplay. Of course most are committed primarily to family, but living the Cistercian charism touches all the other aspects of our life. What does accountability mean in the sense of living this charism? To whom are we accountable? For the monk or nun this is clear and taken for granted every day, for the Community in which he or she lives is clearly defined. Ways of deepening one's commitment include:

- 1) Spelling out in one's personal life what one wants to do daily in terms of commitment to silence, solitude, simplicity, and service.
- 2) Discussing in each group what can be expected of members and encouraging one another in being faithful.
- 3) Having a spiritual director or someone to whom one is accountable.
- 4) Discussing in each group those areas where there is difficulty in being faithful to commitments.
- 5) Developing a sense that one is continually in God's presence and that one is accountable to him/her at all times.

In the life of a monk or nun, the superior or spiritual director play a major role in the formation of each religious. There is a process of discernment and evaluation that goes on at regular intervals as the monk/nun moves through the stages of postulancy, novice, junior professed and on into solemn vows. Obedience to God is often mediated through another human being in the mysterious design of grace. Without this, as one sees even in the very early desert fathers / mothers, the inner transformation cannot take place. Often it is a simple matter of humility, of learning to surrender one's own will so that God's may be accomplished. Accountability is a major step toward spiritual maturity.

The LCG needs to set up a plan of formation in their living of the contemplative life. When a person seeks to become a member, some discernment of the motivation for this

needs to take place. Only those sincerely interested in practicing elements of the Cistercian charism should be admitted and encouraged. There needs to be a real respect for group dynamic just as one expects respect for community dynamic in a monastery. If one is there to do his/her own thing, there will be little group or community unity and cohesion. New life and growth happen when there is unity of purpose and an abiding sense of one another's dignity.

FINAL SUGGESTIONS

Formation of the LCG is primarily the work of the Holy Spirit among you, in each group and each member. Formation is what happens when we live the whole of our lives in a Christian way, when this grace of the Holy Spirit is allowed to move through the whole of our lives. Formation probably depends on how much faith we bring to the beginning of each new day, to whatever it may have in store for us. God is the principal actor or formater in all this and can use the smallest of things to teach us the greatest lessons. Noticing the hand of God, moving with all its gentle persuasion, is how transformation takes place.

LCG members can do as much as anyone in applying early Cistercian texts to our daily lives. This is the work of the Spirit again; and if one begins to read the early Cistercian fathers and mothers, to read them persistently, it won't be long before they will suggest of themselves how the values they held sacred apply to our own lives. These were men and women who were spiritually inspired, and their writing will continue to inspire everyone who exposes himself/herself seriously to them. Their writing will not easily reveal its riches, as if to ask the person approaching it if they really want what is there hidden or contained. As any of the great spiritual writers remind us, the path to inner transformation cannot be easy, does not yield itself to the one who dabbles in it. To taste the true richness of the Cistercian charism will demand sacrifice, of being truly honest about one's Christian priorities.

There need to be members of the LCG who work hard at understanding the Cistercian theology and spirituality so as to articulate it to the group. Another thing that can be done, for example, is take an early treatise, such as St. Bernard's work *On the Love of God*, and read it in the group meetings, a section at a time, and discuss what each one has found there. The group could agree on certain sections of this treatise or other writing being read in preparation for the next meeting, that notes be taken so that when the group gathers it is ready to share what was pondered there. There are some excellent articles in *Cistercian Studies* that could be used as the basis of discussion. It is important that you get not only an intellectual grasp of these writings but a prayerful one so that they affect the way you live your lives.

Formation is about experiencing Christ amidst the ritual, the "School of Charity" of our everyday lives. Prayer will always be of the essence; for to be touched by grace, to know how each one of us is especially loved by God, is like rain on a fertile field recently planted. The necessary dying will take place so that the young plant will spring from the

earth. Coming back to Christ again and again is to find that it isn't long and the field is ripe for the harvest.

As the Plan of Life begins with a Merton quote, this will end with one:

"Today, in a moment of trial, I rediscovered Jesus, or perhaps discovered Him for the first time. But then, in a monastery you are always discovering Jesus for the first time. Anyway, I came closer than ever to fully realizing how true it is that our relations with Jesus are something utterly beyond the level of imagination and emotion. His eyes, which are the eyes of Truth, are fixed upon my heart. Where His glance falls, there is peace: for the light of His Face, which is the Truth, produces truth wherever it shines. His eyes are always on us in choir and everywhere and in all times. No grace comes to us from heaven except He looks upon our hearts." (The Intimate Merton, his Journals--Jan. 27, 1950).

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