

Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani

FORMATION GUIDE FOR CANDIDATES

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I. Introduction

In 1959, Thomas Merton suggested that lay persons may be called to incorporate the contemplative experience into their lives. He wrote:

“It would seem that for this reason, groups of lay people interested in the spiritual life should be formed in order to protect and foster something of an elementary contemplative spirituality... But as soon as you start thinking in terms of organization, the issue becomes extremely confused. Such groups do not need to be organized. They simply need to form themselves under the guidance and encouragement of priests who are already interested in contemplation.”
(Merton, *The Inner Experience*, p.136-137)

Such a group was established in 1989 by Michael Brown and Michael Johnson in association with the Abbey of Gethsemani. With consultation from Father Michael Casagram (one of the Abbey’s monastic advisors), the **Plan of Life** was written as a guide for this group of seekers – and thus was the beginning of the **Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani (LCG)** (For a complete history of the Lay Cistercians see www.laycisterciansofgethsemani.org). Michael Johnson’s history of the Lay Cistercians gives a complete picture of the Gethsemani LCG. Other groups associated with other monasteries began to develop around the world. These groups of lay people began to associate with other monasteries and each other, and started meeting on a regular basis. In 2008, these groups were officially recognized by the Cistercian Order:

“In the course of the meeting at Huerta in 2008, they drafted a document describing the Lay Cistercian Identity, which was communicated to the General Chapters of the same year. The chapters officially recognized the groups as “a lay expression of our Cistercian charism.”
(O.C.S.O. Website, “Lay Associates” 4)

Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani are devoted to nourishing and supporting individuals who 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 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 life of deep faith. This life is guided by the **Plan of Life** as a way to interpret The Rule of Saint Benedict and apply the Cistercian Charism and, ultimately, the Gospel in our daily lives.

Fr. Michael Casagram has assisted the LCG since its founding in 1989 by identifying many resources that enhance our foundation in the LCG way of life. Most notably he has authored: **“Toward the Formation of LCG Members”** (2001); **“Companioning**

with the Plan of Life” (2007); and “*Ecumenical Considerations for the Lay Associates of*” (2010), which greatly influenced this **Formation Guide**.

II. Considerations for LCG Candidates

LCG has described in its By-Laws (Revised 12/7/2024) the movement from an Inquirer to a Candidate in Formation to a Committed Member, as follows:

- **An Inquirer** is a person who has heard about LCG and has made an initial contact with a local community directly, or, made an indirect contact through the LCG website. If the initial contact was made through the website, the LCG Secretary has referred the person to a local community. The person is interested in learning more about LCG, but is not necessarily sure if he or she is interested in becoming a Committed Member. The person may have attended some meetings at the invitation of the local community, but no mentor has been assigned.
- **A Candidate in Formation** is a person who has completed the LCG “Application for Candidates,” has been accepted for formation by the local community, has been assigned a mentor, and has begun the process of formation as outlined in (this) LCG Formation Guide. The process of formation typically takes 2 years, but may take longer, depending on the needs of the candidate. Throughout the 2 years or more of formation, the candidate evaluates a sense of being invited by the Holy Spirit to participate in the gift of the Cistercian spiritual tradition as a lay person.

Note: A person may not become a member of LCG if they are currently a member of any other lay associate program, such as Benedictine Oblate, Third Order Franciscan, Carmelite, or another Lay Cistercian community from another Abbey. (These types of persons may become Friends of LCG.) However, if such a person determines that they would like to choose to end their membership in the other lay associate program and pursue membership with the Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani, they may do so. In the special case of a Lay Cistercian from another Abbey whose monastery has closed, however, membership in the LCG would likely be an appropriate option. The person’s individual circumstances would be reviewed to see which LCG Attachment Type would be the best assignment.

Special Note #1: Diocesan priests or ministers of other Christian denominations may become Candidates and Committed Members.

Special Note #2: Priests from religious orders that have their own charism, such as the Jesuits or Franciscans, may not become Candidates

or Committed Members. This is the same exclusion as for lay persons associated with charisms such as Benedictine oblates or lay Franciscans. (However, these priests may become Friends of LCG.)

- **A Committed Member** is a person who has completed the formation process with a mentor, and, at the recommendation of the mentor, has been approved by the local community as ready to make a formal commitment as a Lay Cistercian of Gethsemani. The formal commitment ceremony is usually conducted during an LCG retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani during a solemn Vespers service with the monks.

Note: At the request of the local LCG Community, in the case of extreme hardship (such as health problems or living a great distance from the Abbey), the Advisory Council may grant an exception to the requirement that the Candidate be present at the Abbey for the commitment ceremony. In these cases, the commitment ceremony may be conducted by the local LCG Community.

We recognize that the Holy Spirit is the primary actor in the formation process. We therefore seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit, along with the support of members of local LCG communities and the community of Gethsemani Abbey, as we assist each inquirer in discerning if they are called to the Lay Cistercian way of life. Through prayer, reflection, mentoring, support, and engagement in the community, the inquirer and candidate will be provided the assistance necessary to have a positive discernment process.

This **Formation Guide**, if embraced wholeheartedly, will provide a formative experience for the candidate. Our primary consideration with respect to formation in the Lay Cistercian way of life is to enter fully into the spiritual values and practices that we have defined in the **Plan of Life**. We must let the life that we have embraced form us. Therefore, we encourage candidates for membership from the very beginning of their discernment to enter wholeheartedly into prayer, work, study, silence, solitude, simplicity, and stability.

Although LCG members are strongly encouraged to increase and deepen both the quality and quantity of their spiritual practices, these practices should not inhibit their commitments to their families, their faith community, and their witness in society. Our spiritual practices should enhance – and not limit – our ability to function as faithful and contributing members of these groups. Reflecting both individually and with a spiritual guide/mentor on one’s experience of prayer, work, and study should enhance the candidate’s formation.

In the spirit of consistency, it is expected that local LCG leadership and particularly those involved with formation and mentoring will implement the suggestions in this guide as uniformly as possible across all of the Gethsemani groups. Just as the Heurta

Document (2008) allows for differences associated with each Abbey, the **Formation Guide** allows for flexibility and creativity of use, so that unique gifts and experience within each of the local LCG communities may be maximized.

Formation has to do with awareness of the life of the Spirit growing within the heart of the candidate. The life of grace has constant opportunity for growth within family, faith community, places of work or time of rest as the ear of the heart is open to the presence of God who draws near to us at all times. The Word of God is continually being spoken to us through others and all the events of our daily lives.

The second consideration is to commit oneself from the very beginning to participate in the life of the local LCG community. Cistercian monastic spirituality places much emphasis on communal (cenobitic) life as a major element in growing spiritually. In accordance with this cenobitic spirit, all inquirers, candidates and members are encouraged to become active in the community life of their local group. At the conclusion of this journey they will be eligible to make a lifetime commitment to the Lay Cistercians.

It should be noted that as indicated in the **Plan of Life**, each local group may allow persons to attend meetings and retreats regularly who, while not wanting to become committed members of LCG, desire to live a contemplative lifestyle and seek support of a like-minded group. These persons are designated “Friends of LCG” and are encouraged to be active in the meetings and retreats, and to adopt elements of the **Plan of Life** into their daily routine. However, they are not allowed to vote on leadership positions or participate as leaders of a local LCG group. Finally, only committed members can serve on the Advisory Council.

III. Elements of the LCG Formation Process

The LCG formation process as defined in this document consists of general expectations and areas of study and suggested daily practices. Each candidate in discernment with the Holy Spirit and their mentor will identify what expectations they can implement into their life and how they will study each of the identified areas.

A. EXPECTATIONS FOR CANDIDATES

- **Community Gathering Days:** Lay Cistercians preferably meet monthly in their local community for hours of prayer, study and community sharing. During this time we receive ongoing formation which helps us incorporate contemplative spirituality into our daily lives. Community members are encouraged to seek additional opportunities for prayer and sharing with one another as time, personal and family circumstance permit.
- **Holy Eucharist:** The Holy Eucharist is seen as an expression of our union with Christ and with one another. For Christians of other faiths who are interested in

becoming Lay Cistercians, it is encouraged that they participate in the “Eucharistic Celebration” as practiced in their faith community.

- **Liturgy of the Hours:** Praying of both morning and evening Hours of the Divine Office each day allows us to participate in the prayer of Christ for His Church.
- **Lectio Divina and Contemplation:** To encounter the Word of God we *suggest* a period of at least 20 minutes a day for lectio divina and contemplation.
- **Silence and Solitude:** As Lay Cistercians we strive to develop a Contemplative dimension within our lives by seeking opportunities for silence and solitude.
- **Special Devotions:** Lay Cistercians have a special devotion to Mary, our Blessed Mother; Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament; the Holy Trinity; Our Lady of the Assumption, Patroness of the Cistercians; St. Benedict and the Saints of the Cistercian Order; as well as personal patrons.
- **Continuing Conversion:** Lay Cistercians are encouraged to participate in penitential rites of reconciliation as practiced in their local faith communities. This is consistent with living a life of continuing conversion.
- **Annual Retreat:** Lay Cistercians are encouraged to spend one weekend every two years in a contemplative-style LCG-organized retreat. Individual members are encouraged to schedule additional retreat time throughout the year as their personal time permits.
- **Work, Material Goods and Supporting the Church:** We strive to approach our work in the world with an attitude of reverence, balance, and thanksgiving. We care for all material goods entrusted to us as gifts from God. We are associated with the Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy of Gethsemani Monastery. Lay Cistercians are encouraged to contribute to the Church and the poor according to their means.

B. AREAS OF STUDY

The LCG candidate will begin to deepen his or her knowledge of Cistercian history and formative documents. The candidate will review and study the history of the Lay Cistercians, including The Rule of St. Benedict and other foundational documents.

1. The Rule of Benedict

The Rule of St. Benedict is the foundation for Benedictine/Cistercian life. As a Lay Cistercian an adaptation of the Rule will address its characteristic values that may easily be applied within the context of the LCG lifestyle, such as: hospitality; conversion; humility; a balanced life; stability; and community.

It is recommended that the candidate and mentor select a commentary on the Rule of St. Benedict for the candidates reading. What does prayer, work, study, humility, obedience, stability, silence, hospitality, community, etc., mean to a candidate as he or she strives to live the Lay Cistercian way of life?

2. Cistercian Foundational Documents

Candidates should read and discuss with his/her mentor the following foundational documents:

Charter of Charity
Exordium Parvum
Exordium Cisterci

3. Cistercian History

Candidates should read at least one of the following histories and discuss with his/her mentor:

The Three Founders of Citeaux tr. by Nicholas Groves
The Cistercian Way by Andre Louf
Waters of Siloe by Thomas Merton

- **Cistercian Studies**

A review of Charism and fundamentals of Cistercian spirituality will acquaint the candidate with the Cistercian tradition. The writings of at least one of these authors is recommended:

St. Bernard of Clairvaux
Aelred of Rievaulx
William of St. Thierry

- **Lay Cistercian Identity**

Continuous study of the history and growth of the Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani, is recommended. The candidates should read the following documents and discuss with his/her mentor:

- ***Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani Abbey Plan of Life (1989)***
- ***Towards the Formation of LCG Members (2001)***
- ***Companioning with The Plan of Life (2007)***
- ***History of Lay Cistercian of the Abbey of Gethsemani by Michael Johnson***

The candidate should become aware of the emergence of the International Association of Lay Cistercian Communities, which serves to focus and unify the widening application of the Cistercian charism. It is therefore suggested that the candidate review the following documents with their mentor:

- ***Lay Cistercian Identity (Huerta, 2008)***
- ***Ecumenical Considerations for the Lay Associates of Gethsemani (2010)***

- **Statement of Formation of Lay Cistercians (Lourdes 2014)**

It should be noted that the Abbey serves as a hub, with the LCG local communities as spokes around the hub. The Advisory Council, in conjunction with Abbey representatives, is entrusted to assure the continued integrity and devotion by members and our local communities to the Gethsemani Abbey and the Cistercian charism.

C. SUGGESTED DAILY PRACTICES AND RESOURCES

The following resources for daily practices are suggested for your consideration:

1. **Contemplation:** The candidate should become familiar with the practice of Christian Contemplation. There are many fine books on contemplation including:
 - ***Into the Silent Land*** by Martin Laird
 - ***Christian Contemplation*** by James Finley
 - ***The Inner Experience*** by Thomas Merton
 - ***A Sunlit Absence*** by Martin Laird
2. **Lectio Divina:** A basic knowledge of the history of Lectio Divina as well as its fundamental principles is recommended. There are many fine books on Lectio Divina including the following:
 - ***Praying the Word*** by Enzo Bianchi
 - ***Lectio Matters: Before the Burning Bush*** by Mary Margaret Funk
 - ***Lectio Divina: Renewing the Ancient Practice of Praying*** by M. Basil Pennington
 - ***Praying With Thomas Merton*** by Wayne Simsic
 - ***Sacred Reading by Michael Casey, OCSO***
3. **Cistercian writings:** Reading and discussing at least two of the following authors should assist the candidate in understanding simplicity, silence, solitude, and obedience as important Cistercian values
 - ***Aelred of Rievaulx, The Way of Friendship*** edited by Basil Pennington
 - ***The Way of Simplicity*** by Esther De Waal
 - ***New Seeds of Contemplation*** by Thomas Merton
 - ***The Cistercian Way*** by Andre Louf
 - ***Monastic Practices*** by Charles Cummings
 - ***Strangers to the City*** by Michael Casey, OCSO

IV. ASSESSMENT AND COMMITMENT

ASSESSMENT

To complete the mentoring process, the mentor and candidate -- in discernment with the Holy Spirit -- will review the candidate's progress and readiness to make a life commitment. This will include the identification of the candidates understanding of the expectations and obligations of membership in the Lay Cistercians.

In order to evaluate the spiritual growth and completion of the discernment process, it is recommended that the candidate and mentor discuss the questions listed below:

1. What has been most challenging with your initial efforts to live the **Plan of Life**?
2. In view of your initial interest in the LCG, what practices are the most useful to you? (Often it is very helpful to build on what the candidate is already good at doing.)
3. How has your life been impacted by following the spiritual path as presented by LCG?
4. What disciplines and supports do you need to sustain your commitment in living the Cistercian charism as a LCG member?
5. What commitments are you willing to make to support your local LCG community?

The candidate and mentor will consult with the local community to affirm the candidate's readiness for membership into the Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani.

COMMITMENT

The attainment of full membership is a personal spiritual milestone and is marked by a solemn event at the Abbey of Gethsemani during one of the LCG semi-annual retreats held in June or September. This commitment ceremony is held at the Saturday's Vespers service. On the following Sunday afternoon a reaffirmation ceremony is held and all LCG members are invited to renew their commitment to the Lay Cistercian way of life.

V. Recommended Readings and Resources

Primary

- A. *"The Rule of St. Benedict"* RB 1980: *The Rule of St. Benedict in English*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1982.
- B. *"LCG Plan of Life" (1998)*
- C. *"Toward the Formation of LCG Members" (2001)*
- D. *"Companioning with the Plan of life" (2007)*
- E. *"Lay Cistercian Identity" (Huerta 2008)*
- F. *"Ratio Institutionis: Guidelines on Formation" (OCSO General Chapters 1990)*
- G. *"Ecumenical Considerations for the Lay Associates of Gethsemani" (2010)*
- H. *"Statement of Formation of Lay Cistercians" (Lourdes 2014)*

LCG Formation

- Casagram, Michael, OCSO, "Discerning the Movements of Grace in Our Lives," September 2000.
- _____. "Spiritual Direction and the Lay Contemplative Life," July 2000.
- _____. "Toward the Formation of LCG Members," August 2001.
- _____. "Companioning with the Plan of Life," September 2007.
- _____. "Ecumenical Considerations for the Lay Associates of Gethsemani" (2010)

Benedict

- The Benedictine Handbook*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2003.
- Casey, OCSO, Michael. *Strangers To the City: Reflections on the Beliefs and Values of the Rule of Benedict*. Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2005.
- Chittister, Joan, OSB. *Wisdom Distilled From the Daily: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990.
- Dean, Eric. *Saint Benedict for the Laity*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1989.
- Derkse, Wil. *A Blessed Life: Benedictine Guidelines for Those Who Long for Good Days*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2009.
- de Waal, Esther. *Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1984.
- _____. *Seeking Life: The Baptismal Invitation of the Rule of St. Benedict*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2009.
- Fry, OSB, Timothy. ed. *The Rule of St. Benedict*. New York: Vintage Spiritual Classics, 1998.
- Holdaway, OSB, Gervase *The Oblate Life*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2008.
- Jamison, OSB, Christopher. *Finding Sanctuary: Monastic Steps for Everyday Life*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2006.
- Pratt, Lonni Collins and Homan, OSB, Daniel. *Benedict's Way: An Ancient Monk's Insights for a Balanced Life*. Chicago: Loyola Press, 2000.
- _____. *Benedict's Way of Love: Radical Hospitality*. Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2002.
- Robinson, David. *The Family Cloister: Benedictine Wisdom for the Home*. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 2000.
- Taylor, Brian C. *Spirituality for Everyday Living: An Adaptation of the Rule of St. Benedict*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1989.
- Vest, Oblate OSB, Norvene. *Preferring Christ: A Devotional Commentary and*

Workbook on the Rule of St. Benedict. Trabuco Canyon: Source Books, 1990 and Valyermo: The Ravens Press, 1990.

Ware, Corinne. *Saint Benedict on the Highway: A Rule of Life for the 21st Century.* Nashville: Abington Press, 2001.

Cistercian Studies

Cistercian Studies Quarterly: An international Review of the Monastic and Contemplative Spiritual Traditions. Published by the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance, US Region
Costello, Hilary, Studie ed. *A Gathering of Friends: The Learning and Spirituality of John of Ford.* Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1996.

Cotheret, Nicolas. *Annals of Citeaux: Outlined From the French Original.* Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1982.

de Waal, Esther. *The Way of Simplicity: The Cistercian Tradition.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998.

Diemer, OCSO, Paul. *Love Without Measure: Extracts from the Writings of St. Bernard of Clairvaux.* Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1990.

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Leclercq, OSB, Jean. *Bernard of Clairvaux and the Cistercian Spirit.* Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1984.

Louf, OCSO, Andre. *The Cistercian Way.* Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications

Merton, Thomas. *The Waters of Siloe.* New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1949.

Pennington, OCSO, M. Basil. *The Cistercians.* Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1992.

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_____. *A School of Love: The Cistercian Way to Holiness.* Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing,

_____. *William of St. Thierry, The Way of Divine Love.* Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1997.

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Sommerfeldt, John. *The Spiritual Teachings of Bernard of Clairvaux.* Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1991.

Squire, Aelred. *Aelred of Rievaulx: A Study.* Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1981.

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Thomas, OCSO, Robert. *Passing From Self to God: A Cistercian Retreat.* Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2006. 20

Van Damme OCSO Jean Baptsite, *The Three Founders of Citeaux* Kalamazoo: Cistercians Publications

Contemplative Spirituality

The Cloud of Unknowing. Edited by William Johnston. Garden City: Image Books, 1973.

Casey, OCSO, Michael. *Fully Human, Fully Divine: An Interactive Christology.*

Liguori, MO: Liguori/Triumph, 2004.
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 Davis, Bruce. *Monastery Without Walls: Daily Life in the Silence*. Berkeley: Celestial Arts, 1990.
 Day, Trisha. *Inside The School of Charity: Lessons From the Monastery*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press (Cistercian Publications), 2009.
 Deignan, Kathleen, ed. *Thomas Merton: A Book of Hours*. Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2007.
 Downey, Michael, ed. *My Song Is of Mercy: Writings of Matthew Kelly, Monk of Gethsemani*. New York: Sheed & Ward (sub. The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group), 1994.
 Finley, James. *The Contemplative Heart*. Notre Dame: Sorin Books, 2000.
 Jaoudi, Maria. *Christian Mysticism East and West: What the Masters Teach Us*. New York: Paulist Press, 1998.
 Kline, OCSO, Francis. *Lovers of the Place: Monasticism Loose in the Church*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1997.
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 Mullins, Edwin. *Cluny: The Search for God's Lost Empire*. New York: Bluebridge Books, 2006.

Prayer

Emery, Pierre-Yves. *15 Days of Prayer with Saint Bernard*. Liguori: Liguori Publications, 2002.
 Higgins, SJ, John. *Thomas Merton On Prayer*. Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1975.
 Howard, Katherine. *Praying with Benedict*. Winona: St. Mary's Press, 1996.
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Gethsemani. Video produced by Morgan Atkinson (Running time: 60 minutes)