

Charter of the Associates of Assumption Abbey

In today's post-modern, post-Vatican II Church, many forms of spirituality that were previously expressed only within the confines of formal religious Orders are beginning to find new voice and expression in the secular lives of lay men and women. The Associates of Assumption Abbey (AAA) invite anyone with an interest in monastic spirituality, especially in the Benedictine/Cistercian tradition, to join us in giving this holy charism a renewed and more active voice in the Church and in our world.

The following sections constitute basic guidelines, as developed by the AAA and approved by Assumption Abbey, for living out the Cistercian charism in a secular form. The aim of these guidelines is to form a loose structure of Cistercian spirituality within which each person – as guided by the Holy Spirit – is called to discern and follow his or her own unique spiritual path.

This introduction contains the following sections:

- Frequently Asked Questions
- The Cistercian Charism
- The Role of Lay Cistercians
- The Cistercian Life of the Associates of Assumption Abbey
- Formation in Cistercian Spirituality
- Chapters of the Associates of Assumption Abbey
- Types of Membership in the Associates of Assumption Abbey

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is Assumption Abbey?

Assumption Abbey is a monastic community of men located in southwestern Missouri near the town of Ava. As monks, they seek to live out the communal traditions of labor, study, and prayer as defined by St. Benedict in his *Rule for Monasteries*. As a Trappist monastery, Assumption Abbey follows the Cistercian charism, a reformation of Benedictine life that began in Cîteaux, France.

2. Who are the Associates of Assumption Abbey?

The Associates of Assumption Abbey (AAA) are lay men and women and non-monastic clergy and religious who seek to model their lives after the monastic traditions of Assumption Abbey. Drawn together by the common inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we seek lives of continual conversion to God by individually living out the Cistercian charism in our daily lives. The AAA meet monthly for prayer, spiritual reading, study, and discussion, as well as mutual support of our individual faith journeys.

3. How are the Associates of Assumption Abbey connected to the monastery?

Assumption Abbey does not "own" its lifestyle or the charism by which it lives it out. Indeed, all such charisms are gifts of the Holy Spirit, who invites all of us to a deeper relationship with God. In connecting ourselves with Assumption Abbey, the AAA and the monastery jointly pray for and support each other, as together we seek to witness the Cistercian charism in a more visible form in today's world.

Since we have adopted Assumption Abbey as a spiritual home, many members make regular visits to the monastery. And as a group, we try to make an annual retreat. We also help to support the monastery through prayer, petitions, and financial offerings.

4. What is the Cistercian charism?

A brief history of the Cistercian order and its spiritual charism will be discussed in a later section. Briefly stated, the Cistercian charism is the form of spirituality by which Cistercian monks and nuns live their lives and express God's grace and truth to the rest of the world.

5. What is the purpose of such a lay Cistercian association?

The Cistercian Order, through the action of the Holy Spirit, has come to believe that it is the will of God that their communities should support and acknowledge the growth of a lay expression of their monastic traditions. In discussions about how such a lay form of the Cistercian charism might be expressed, and the role it would play in the overall practice of Cistercian spirituality, each monastery has requested that lay groups associated with them clearly define their identity and the character of their spiritual expression, and make a definitive statement about their practice of these historically monastic traditions.

In a letter reflecting on the challenges of defining and adopting such "lay charismatic associations," Dom Bernardo Olivera, Abbot General of the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance (OCSO), stated: "A clearly defined identity will keep monks from playing at being seculars and these latter from playing at being monks. The experience of our charism as lived by the laity is called to enrich the monastic experience of this same charism."¹

¹ Reflections on the Challenge of "Charismatic Associations." Dom Bernardo Olivera, 1 January 1995

6. Are the Associates of Assumption Abbey "lay monks"?

No. Our members are not engaged in living monastic lives outside the monastery, and indeed the majority of monastic communities discourage such "lay monasticism." For the most part, we of the AAA have been attracted by the simplicity and spirituality of monastic life, and seek to use those traditions to deepen the spiritual centers of our personal lives.

It is important to note, however, that while the majority of our members are laity, we also have non-monastic clergy and religious who have been equally attracted to this spiritual form.

7. What if I am not of the Catholic faith?

While the Benedictine/Cistercian traditions have developed from the spiritual life of the Catholic Church, the AAA are open to all Christians and believers in Our Lord Jesus Christ. God's open arms are ready to embrace all those who seek a deeper relationship with and love for Him.

The Cistercian Charism

In general terms, a charism is any gift or favor given by the Holy Spirit in order to build up and renew the Church as the Body of Christ. For Christians, any vocation or form of authentic Christian life is a life in and of the Spirit, and thus is a charismatic life or reality. What we refer to as the Cistercian charism is one gift of the Spirit that "has its origin in that monastic tradition of evangelical life that found expression in the *Rule for Monasteries* of Saint Benedict of Nursia" (CST 1)².

Benedictine monasticism began near Rome in the early sixth century when St. Benedict of Nursia, dissatisfied with current monastic practices, wrote his *Rule for Monasteries* to effect a reform in the practice of monastic life. In 1098 in France, a small group of Benedictine monks decided that contemporary Benedictine practice had moved away from the initial spirit of the Rule. Setting up a new reformed monastery in Cîteaux, France, they adopted a lifestyle that more equally balanced the elements of work and study with prayer and liturgy. This was the origin of the monastic reform that came to be known as the Order of Cîteaux or Order of Cistercians (OC).

In the 17th century, Armand de Rance, abbot of the monastery of La Trappe in France, spearheaded a reformation of the Cistercian observance. The monks involved in this reform came to be known as Trappist Cistercians, or Trappists. Other smaller reforms aligned themselves with La Trappe, and in 1892, at the invitation of the Holy See, three Trappist congregations united under one Superior General to form the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance (OCSO)³.

In his book *The Cistercian Way*, André Louf described the heart of a monk's life in the Cistercian charism: "He cultivates a taste for a life that is interior, for as St. Bernard says, the more interior it is the more attractive he finds it. The monk must build an interior mansion or cell in his heart, to which he ceaselessly returns in order to find the hidden presence of God. And having found it he remains there in loving contemplation. The Cistercian monk tries to live in deep peace even amid the distractions of the common life."⁴ Though the charism has traditionally been expressed in this uniquely monastic lifestyle, through the movements of the Holy Spirit it has now developed a definitive secular character, with many monasteries of the Cistercian Order having lay associates living in the world.

² Constitution and Statutes of the Monks and Nuns of the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance, Section 1

³ History as suggested by Chapter 2 of *The Cistercian Way*, André Louf, ©1989, Cistercian Publications.

⁴ *The Cistercian Way*, André Louf, ©1989, Cistercian Publications, p. 38

But why would lay people be drawn to spirituality of such a monastic character? The 2nd Vatican Council renewed and expanded the roles of the laity in the life of the Church. Lay men and women are taking more active roles in their parishes and in the development of their own personal spirituality. As a result, either separately or through new lay movements, many have sought a connection or link with institutes of consecrated life.

But what are the hallmarks of life lived in the Cistercian traditions? This way of humility and conversion, born of the spiritual traditions of St. Benedict and Cîteaux, invites us to live the Gospel in a more radical way. Regular reading of the Rule of St. Benedict, and other writings about monastic and Cistercian spirituality, inspires us to live our lives in simpler yet deeper ways. This is reflected not only in our personal lives, but also in relation to our natural communities – family, friends, and work colleagues – helping to establish balance and harmony between the spiritual and secular in this post-modern world.

Such a lay inculturation of Cistercian spirituality is not and should not be an attempt to duplicate or recreate monastic-style communities in a secular setting. The lives of lay Cistercians and monastics are distinctly separate spiritual paths. Only by allowing them to remain so can the lay expression of Cistercian spirituality flourish and take on greater clarity under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. However, while we are not monastic, our spiritual expression still retains many of the same elements, and is most often manifested through the following common patterns:

1. Life centered in Christ
2. Participation in the liturgical life of the Church, especially the Eucharist and the Divine Office
3. Simplified lifestyle inspired by the Rule of St. Benedict
4. Dialogue with a monastic Cistercian community
5. Formation and education in Cistercian spirituality
6. Emphasis on silence, simplicity, and affective prayer
7. *Lectio Divina*
8. Fraternal communion with one another
9. Work as service, with a disposition of reverence and gratitude
10. Annual retreat
11. Devotion to Mary our Blessed Mother

The Role of Lay Cistercians

Lay Cistercian groups first approached the Mixed General Meeting (MGM, or General Chapter) of the OCSO to receive formal recognition in 1999. Subsequent to that initial inquiry, the International Lay Associates held a meeting in Conyers, Georgia in April 2002 to draft a formal letter to the Order (www.ocso.org/net/letlaics-en.htm) requesting recognition of their part in living the Cistercian charism. This was presented to the OCSO at their General Chapter meeting in Rome in September 2002.

As part of their response to the Lay Associates letter, the OCSO asked each associate group to define the unique character of their group and their approach to and role in living out the Cistercian charism. Fr. Mark Scott, in his monthly newsletter of November of that year, also addressed this question, and composed an open letter to the members of the AAA (www.assumptionabbey.org/friendsletter.html).

Part of the question of having lay men and women intimately connected to a form of spirituality that has traditionally been expressed uniquely through monastic communities is what the Spirit may ultimately be intending for the future of the charism. As with many religious orders, Cistercians from North America and Europe have been witnessing a significant lack of "classical" vocations: young, single, Roman Catholics who pass through a formation process to become solemnly consecrated monks or nuns, publicly professing to live the rest of their lives in a monastery under a Rule and an abbot or abbess. In the same way, in the wake of Vatican II, the Church as a whole has been undergoing a paradigm shift in how it sees and understands vocations. To quote Fr. Mark's letter:

"Many of us, especially the older 'cradle Catholics,' are used to thinking of the Church as a pyramid. In this model, 'vocations' or states of life within the Church were ordered in a hierarchy. On the top were the priests and bishops, on the bottom were the lay folk, and in the middle were the monks and other vowed religious.

But that model changed in the middle of the last century. Then, the Second Vatican Council took place. The Council received and articulated in profound and far-reaching ways a new way of being Church that had been coming to birth in the preceding half-century. The model of the Church that Vatican II has bequeathed to us is not a hierarchical order, but one of communion and mission.

In this fresh model there are still different vocations and states of life in the Church. There are still, obviously, lay people, consecrated people (religious), and clerics (priests). But these are not distinct from one another in a hierarchical way; they are rather 'ordered to one another' for mutual, complementary service. The different states in life are interdependent. All the vocations and states of life have their own specific contribution to make, their own distinctive gift. But all are in service of the single mission of the Church, a vocation that derives directly from their common Baptism."

Even as the future of the Church is a mystery that we must wait to see unfold according to God's plan, the ultimate intention of the Spirit in creating this new involvement of laity in Cistercian spirituality is equally unknown. In the new model of the Church described by Fr. Mark, where laity and consecrated religious and clerics are ordered to one another in a new and dynamic way, perhaps lay Cistercians are meant to be the sustaining form of the charism until the Spirit calls forth new vocations. Or perhaps lay Cistercian groups, witnessing to the joys of the charism in the secular world, will be the conduit through which future vocations will be drawn to the monasteries.

In any event, it is the Spirit that has drawn us to undertake this unique journey to God. Our task is simply to follow, trusting in His Providence and Divine Mercy to guide our steps.

The Cistercian Life of the Associates of Assumption Abbey

Just as each lay Cistercian group must find its own unique expression of the Cistercian life, so must each member of those groups. The following general examples, as suggested by the lives of our members, are only some of the ways we find to live out this charism. Other ways certainly exist, and these do not constitute firm rules or universal practices of AAA members. They do, however, suggest the "flavor" of our approach to Cistercian spirituality.

We, as a group of lay men and women, clergy, and religious, seek to model our lives after the monastic traditions of Assumption Abbey. The Rule of St. Benedict offers a spiritual path to HUMILITY, OBEDIENCE, SILENCE, REVERENTIAL LOVE OF GOD, HOSPITALITY, and JOURNEY TO GOD. So we of the AAA strive to model these aspects of Benedictine spirituality in our daily lives.

- ❖ We seek HUMILITY through the Benedictine traditions of labor, study, and prayer, so that through lives that bring us to know our real self, our true nature as God knows us and made us to be, we may come to know and love Him more perfectly.
- ❖ We find OBEDIENCE through faithfulness to Christ's teachings as professed by His Church, to our bishops, priests, and religious as they bring the Gospel message to us. We strive to be active members of our church families who contribute our gifts to our neighborhoods and communities.
- ❖ We come to SILENCE in the cultivation of lives of prayer. Even in the midst of busy schedules and secular commitments, we make each day prayerful, uniting our prayers with and for the monastic community. With a love of the Eucharist and Scripture, especially the Psalms and New Testament, we make the practice of *lectio*, meditation, affective prayer, and spiritual reading a regular part of our lives.
- ❖ We cultivate a REVERENTIAL LOVE OF GOD as we participate in a frequent examination of conscience and study of our lives. We use the Beatitudes as a guide to live out the Gospel Message.
- ❖ We develop Christian HOSPITALITY by extending Christ's peace to all whom we meet and receiving each person as Christ, whether the stranger on the street, our colleagues at work, or friends and family in our homes.
- ❖ We travel our own personal JOURNEY TO GOD with spiritual guidance from a regular confessor, spiritual director, Trappist prayer partner, or mentor, who assists us in bringing the Cistercian charism more deeply into our lives. Through this guidance on our journey, we seek to manifest a fuller measure of holiness and love.

There are other aspects of monastic life in the Benedictine/Cistercian traditions of Assumption Abbey: the IMAGE AND LIKENESS OF GOD, SELF-KNOWLEDGE, the LOVE OF BROTHERS AND SISTERS, the MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE, and DEVOTION TO MARY. We also seek ways to bring these aspects of the Cistercian charism into our lives.

- ❖ We seek the IMAGE AND LIKENESS OF GOD in ourselves and one another as we meet monthly to pray and discuss spiritual reading materials suggested by the Abbot. Enriched by these encounters, we go forth to more readily see God's image in those we encounter in our daily lives.

- ❖ We come to **SELF-KNOWLEDGE** through daily prayer, spiritual reading, and retreats. We come away from the world that we might come to know our true selves through better knowing God, and make Assumption Abbey a true spiritual home that it might become a haven where we may truly be at peace and united with the Trappist community.
- ❖ We come to a **LOVE OF BROTHERS AND SISTERS** by seeking to be united with all peoples in Christ, including the poor and outcast. We hold them in prayer, and embrace their poverty through lives of spiritual and material simplicity, as well as by directly supporting those who serve these least of our brothers and sisters.
- ❖ We join the table of **MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE** by joining our prayer lives to that of the Cistercian community, through affective prayer in the Cistercian tradition.
- ❖ We seek to grow closer to Jesus through **DEVOTION TO MARY**, His Most Blessed Mother, through her special role in Cistercian spirituality. As their patroness, all Cistercian communities are dedicated to her, and each day ends with a hymn to her. Her very life embodies the Cistercian virtues of chastity, humility, charity, and above all, obedience. Acknowledging her special place of honor at Assumption Abbey, we pray frequently to our spiritual Mother under the title of Our Lady of the Assumption.

Formation in Cistercian Spirituality

Growth in knowledge and love of Cistercian spirituality is a primary consideration of the AAA. Through shared study of texts and writings on the Cistercian charism, and frequent contact with the community at Assumption Abbey, we have attempted to make this spiritual expression an ever more integral part of our lives. The following bibliography consists of books that have been useful to us for basic and ongoing formation in Cistercian life and spirituality. The majority of these texts have been suggested to us by the abbots of Assumption Abbey. They are presented in alphabetical order, with no attempt to devise a suggested reading "schedule" for a reader to follow.

1. *The Cistercian Way*
André Louf, Copyright © 1989, Cistercian Publications
2. *The Cistercian World: Monastic Writings of the Twelfth Century*
Translated and edited with an introduction by Pauline Matarasso, Copyright © 1993, Penguin Books
3. *In the School of Love: An Anthology of Early-Cistercian Texts*
Edith Scholl, OCSO, Copyright © 2000, Cistercian Publications
4. *Living in the Question*
M. Basil Pennington, OCSO, Copyright © 1999, Continuum Publishing Company
5. *Monastic Practices*
Charles Cummings, OCSO, Copyright © 1986, Cistercian Publications
6. *The Practice of the Presence of God*
Brother Lawrence (Translated by Robert J. Edmonson, edited by Hal M. Helms)
Copyright © 1985, The Community of Jesus, Inc., Paraclete Press Publishing
7. *The Rule of Benedict: Insights for the Ages*

Joan Chittister, O.S.B., Copyright © 1992, Crossroad Publishing Company

8. *Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict*
Esther de Waal, Copyright © 1984, The Liturgical Press
9. *Thoughts Matter*
Mary Margaret Funk, Copyright © 1998, Continuum Publishing Company
10. *The Undivided Heart: The Western Approach to Contemplation*
Michael Casey, OCSO, Copyright © 1994, St. Bede's Publications
11. *The Way of Simplicity: The Cistercian Tradition*
Esther de Waal, Copyright © 1998, Orbis Books
12. *Why Not Be a Mystic?*
Frank X. Tuoti, Copyright © 1995, Crossroad Publishing Company
13. *William of Saint Thierry: The Way to Divine Union*
M. Basil Pennington, OCSO, Copyright © 1998, New City Press

Chapters of the Associates of Assumption Abbey

The AAA are organized in local chapters that are formed in geographic regions to facilitate regular meetings. The initial group formed in St. Louis, Missouri in 1995, and is now the St. Louis Chapter. A second chapter formed in Arkansas in 2002 as the Arkansas Associates of Assumption Abbey. (extant)

A new chapter may form when two or more people join together within a particular area and meet on a regular basis to share Cistercian spirituality. It is recommended that they first visit Assumption Abbey and meet with the monk who is assigned as the Associates' contact person for assistance and resource help. In addition, members beginning a new chapter may find it helpful to visit an existing chapter if one is close enough to make such a visit feasible.

Some individuals may wish to be connected with Assumption Abbey yet are unable to join with other Associates, due to their inability to attend chapter meetings. It is suggested that these individuals "affiliate" with an existing chapter to receive ongoing help and formation assistance in living the Cistercian charism in the world.

To facilitate the growth of our members in the Cistercian charism, our study of Cistercian texts, and to share Cistercian spirituality as a small faith group, each AAA chapter meets on a regular basis. The general format of a meeting is as follows, although it may vary for each chapter:

1. Greeting and welcome, sharing of current news
2. Group prayer with spiritual reading or reflection
3. *Lectio divina* and quiet meditation
4. Discussion and sharing on current book or study materials
5. Setting of readings for the next meeting
6. Communal closing prayer

Besides our regular meetings, we also have opportunities to attend days of prayer (especially involving guest speakers from Assumption Abbey) or other events on monasticism or spirituality. Each chapter holds an annual retreat at the monastery. Fr. Mark Scott, abbot of Assumption Abbey, also

publishes a monthly column of reflections on Cistercian spirituality on the monastery's website at www.assumptionabbey.org, so even when we are unable to make personal visits we can still be connected to the abbey community in a very real way.

Types of Membership in the Associates of Assumption Abbey

Just as each of us has come to the AAA from different spiritual backgrounds and following different spiritual paths, so there are different types of membership in the group. This does not denote members who are "more" or "less" Cistercian than others, simply a reflection of the reality of the separate paths to God we are each following. Each membership type is briefly outlined below.

1. Friends of Assumption Abbey

Some members of the AAA attend our group meetings only for the benefit of the fellowship and spiritual discussion, and do not necessarily participate in any of the deeper aspects of Cistercian spirituality that define the unique character of the AAA. These members are referred to as Friends of Assumption Abbey. Friends attend meetings as they are able or wish to, and there is no minimum number of meetings they must attend. Friends are free to receive the group newsletter and news of other activities or related area events that we feel may be of interest.

2. Associates of Assumption Abbey

Associate members are those members who are seeking to deepen their relationship with God by living out the Cistercian charism in their personal lives. Associate members may come in two "flavors." They are equally counted as Associates, but have one distinct difference.

Affiliates are those members of the Associates who have an attraction to Cistercian spirituality and desire a connection with either the AAA and/or Assumption Abbey, but cannot physically attend chapter meetings or other group activities. They are essentially Associates who are not directly involved with any particular chapter. This may be due to personal circumstances that limit their ability to travel, even locally, or because they do not live near a chapter of the AAA and can only communicate electronically or by mail. Affiliates receive the newsletter of whichever chapter they are affiliated with, are kept abreast of the group readings so they can join in, and are encouraged to access the Assumption Abbey website as a direct connection to the Cistercian spiritual life. We especially ask them to contribute to the group by praying for the AAA, for Assumption Abbey, and for the growth of the Cistercian charism.

Associates are those members who make a firm commitment to Cistercian spirituality through a particular chapter. Associates try to attend all regular meetings, and personally commit to modeling their lives after the spiritual traditions of the Benedictine/Cistercian charism at whatever level they deem appropriate.

All Associates try to maintain some distinct personal connection with Assumption Abbey, either by physical, financial, or spiritual means. Physical connections include making personal visits to the monastery and/or participating in the group's yearly retreat. A financial connection means supporting the monastery through direct monetary contributions. Spiritual connections mean praying for the community and their well being, asking the Holy Spirit to bless the monastery and increase its vocations.