

Constitution and Statutes 2010

Revised 23 July, 2013

The Conversi Way of Life: Constitution

Preface

P. 1 The holy abbots Robert of Molesme, Alberic and Stephen Harding gave the Benedictine tradition a particular form when in 1098 they built the New Monastery of Cîteaux, the Mother of us all, and founded the Cistercian Order. About 1125, Saint Stephen established the nuns' monastery of "Tart", as Cîteaux's own daughter-house, entrusted to the pastoral care of the abbot of this monastery. The Exordium Parvum and The Charter of Charity express the vocation and mission that the founders received from God which the Church has authoritatively approved both in their times and in ours. Under the influence of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux and others the ideal of this reform spread and monasteries of monks and nuns following the Cistercian way of life multiplied even beyond western Europe. From the very beginning the Order received lay members, called conversi. A substantial spiritual heritage was engendered through the lives and labours of innumerable brothers and sisters that found expression in writing, chant, architecture and crafts, and in the skilful management of their lands.

P. 2 In recent decades, more and more men and women have responded to a call from the Holy Spirit to live the Cistercian charism outside the monastery. These persons have been formed into communities that have living bonds with Cistercian monasteries, and through them to the wider Cistercian family.

Today, a lay Cistercian is a person who responds to a call from God to lead a contemplative and spiritual life in the world, a life modeled on the wisdom of Cistercian values and practices, and who seeks a community of like-minded people. The Conversi on-line community was founded by and remains under the aegis of the Associates of the Iowa Cistercians and as such is in association with the monasteries of New Melleray and Our Lady of the Mississippi.

P. 3 For individuals, a face-to-face encounter with monastic life is both vital and life-giving. While members are strongly encouraged to develop a living relationship with

either NM or OLM, if this is not practical/possible, members should experience the liturgical and spiritual life of a monastery in the Benedictine tradition.

A: The Conversi Way of Life

C. 1 The Tradition of Conversi

The Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance has its origin in that monastic tradition of evangelical life that found expression in the Rule for Monasteries of Saint Benedict of Nursia. The founders of Cîteaux gave this tradition a particular form and the monasteries of the Strict Observance strongly defended certain of its principles. In 1995 a group of individuals who felt called to Cistercian values and practices, gathered at the Trappist Abbeys of Our Lady of New Melleray and OLM at the initiative of their abbot, to form the Associates of Iowa Cistercians (AIC). In 2005 AIC decided to establish a daughter community for people who, for various reasons, found it difficult or impossible to gather for the monthly meeting.

C. 2 The Nature and Purpose of Conversi

Conversi is an on-line community comprised of individuals living in the world who, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit seek to order their lives towards contemplation and follow the Rule of Saint Benedict. The organization of the Conversi community is directed to bringing its members into a closer union with Christ since it is only through the experience of personal love for the Lord Jesus that the specific gifts of the Cistercian charism can flower. Membership in Conversi is open to all Christian adults.

St. 2.1 Membership in one community only

Because each religious family (e.g. Franciscan, Benedictine, Carmelite, etc.) possesses a unique charism, Conversi is not able to receive members of other families. Membership in other organizations which are not canonically monastic in origin, such as Larche, etc. does not preclude membership in Conversi.

C. 3 The Spirit of Conversi

The monastery is a school of the Lord's service where Christ is formed in the hearts of its members. While members of Conversi live in the world, it is essential that they maintain a relationship with the sponsoring Abbeys. This relationship is nurtured through regular contact with the sponsoring abbeys, such as faithful participation in monthly formation programs, personal contacts, and retreats at the abbeys. or if this is not possible, at other monasteries within the Benedictine tradition..

For Conversi it is the monastic communities of New Melleray and Our Lady of the M, represented by their abbot and abbess which recognize in us the Cistercian charism, and confer on us our membership in the Cistercian family.

The Cistercian way of life in the world is a consecration to God expressed in prayer, relationships, community, work and a disciplined life. Living in the world and following in the footsteps of the Cistercians of the Strict Observance, members of the Conversi community aspire to that interior quiet in which wisdom is born. Through humility and obedience they struggle against pride and sin.

C. 4 Committed Lifestyle

By making a personal commitment, Conversi members unite with other members of Conversi, as well as with the monks and nuns of New Melleray and Our Lady of the Mississippi Abbeys, in seeking a sincere conversion of life.

C. 5 Stability of Community

Members of the Conversi community trust in the providence of God who has called them to this community and its members. Without regular and active participation in the Conversi community, it is impossible to be a member of the community. In this sense, faithful participation in the Conversi community is a type of stability not unlike the stability of the monks and nuns within the monastery.

C. 6 Conversion of Life

Through *conversatio morum*, members of the Conversi community make a commitment to live a lifestyle that is shaped by Cistercian values and practices. By following the

Gospel and by adhering to the practice of Cistercian discipline, Conversi members endeavor to live and act on a daily basis in ways that are consistent with the teachings of Jesus Christ as live in the Cistercian tradition.

C. 7 Obedience

By adhering to obedience, members of the Conversi community attempt to live their lives under the Rule of Saint Benedict and in service to one another and the community as a whole. In this renouncing of will, they follow the example of Christ and commit themselves to the school of the Lord's service.

(NOTE: Obedience, *conversatio morum* and stability constitute the vows that Cistercian monks and nuns make during solemn profession. While members of the Conversi community do not make vows, their profession of commitment reflects these three basic building blocks of Cistercian life, but within a life lived in the world.)

C. 8 Humility

Following in the footsteps of Christ ("Learn from me, because I am meek, and humble of heart."), members of the Conversi community pursue an honest understanding of themselves, and seek to live truthfully within the community and their situation in the world. Considering his/her own defects a person willingly submits to God and to others for Christ's sake. Following Sts. Benedict and Bernard we understand humility to be a virtue by which individuals, knowing themselves as they truly are, abase themselves.
[RB 7]

C. 9 Prayer and Contemplation

Through prayer and meditation, members of the Conversi community seek to become one with God through attentiveness of heart. Like silence, prayer assures solitude, fosters mindfulness of God and community, opens the mind to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit. The members of the Conversi community commit themselves to spending time every day in contemplative prayer.

C. 10 Praying the Psalms

The Church has always considered the Psalms her most perfect book of prayer. A great

part of the Divine Office is taken from the psalms. As Thomas Merton said: "In the Psalms, we drink divine praise at its pure and stainless source." Members of the Conversi community are encouraged to pray the psalms daily.

C. 11 Enclosure

Enclosure does not refer solely to remaining within the confines of the monastery. It refers more specifically to guarding one's heart and protecting it against the inroads of the world. In their daily lifestyles, members of the Conversi community put into practice the guard of the heart.

C. 12 Imitation of Christ

Imitation of Christ is the core of the Cistercian life and the goal towards which the School of Charity is oriented. It serves to instruct the soul in Christian perfection with Christ as the divine model. Members of the Conversi community are encouraged to pattern their lives on Christ using the examples and insights of the Cistercian charism.

C. 13 Life of the Community

Members of the Conversi community seek unity of spirit in the love of God through contributing to the mutual building up of the Conversi community. The preservation of unity among Conversi members depends on a sincere and mutual effort to respond to one another's needs on a regular basis.

The members of the Conversi community have the right and duty to participate fully in the community, although this participation is exercised in different ways. All are to be concerned for the spiritual state of the community, which includes a willingness to respectfully share perspectives, ideas and concerns through active participation in the on-line site. Members of the Conversi community bear one another's short-comings with patience, serve one another humbly, and support one another by prayer and by other appropriate means.

C. 14 Liturgical Life

The spiritual character of the Conversi community is especially evident in the celebration of liturgy. The church's liturgy, as well as the liturgical aspects of monastic practices,

strengthen and increase both the inner sense of one's Cistercian vocation and communion among members. Members of the Conversi community are urged to incorporate one or more hours of the Divine Office in their daily schedule as well as other opportunities to participate in the Church's liturgy. (see C. 16???)

C. 15 Celebration of the Eucharist

Eucharist is the source and summit of the whole Christian life and of Lay Cistercians' communion in Christ. For this reason, members of the Conversi community are encouraged to participate in the Eucharist whenever possible. It is by the sharing of the paschal mystery of the Lord that members of the community are united more closely with one another and with the whole Church.

C. 16 Work of God

In the Benedictine tradition, nothing is to be preferred to the Work of God. While the daily schedules of most members of the Conversi community precludes participation in the entire Liturgy of the Hours, they are urged to incorporate one or more of the hours into their daily life so that each may participate in the Church's official prayer of praise and intercession.

C. 17 Lectio Divina

Careful lectio divina greatly strengthens Conversi members' faith in God. This excellent monastic practice, by which God's Word forms and shapes the human heart is a source of prayer and contemplation where the person dwells intimately with God. For this reason, members of the Conversi community are urged to spend some time everyday in lectio divina.

C. 18 Work as Prayer

Work, especially manual work, has always enjoyed special esteem in the Cistercian tradition since it gives monks and nuns the opportunity of sharing in the divine work of creation and restoration, and of following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ the carpenter. It expresses solidarity with all workers. Moreover work is an occasion for a fruitful asceticism that fosters personal development and maturity. Members of the Conversi community are encouraged to approach their work, whether paid or unpaid, with a spirit

of mindfulness and prayer.

C. 19 Mindfulness of God

By cultivating mindfulness of God, members of Conversi extend the Work of God throughout the whole day. Furthermore, to the greatest extent possible, they should take care to develop an environment favorable for silence and quiet. They should devote themselves frequently to prayer, and seek daily a time for reading and prayerful reflection.

C.20 Silence

Silence is counted among the principal monastic values of the Cistercian Order. It assures solitude, fosters mindfulness of God and community, opens the mind to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit, and encourages attentiveness of heart and solitary prayer to God. Although finding moments of silence in one's daily life may be difficult, members of the Conversi community are urged to create some time each day for silent prayer and loving awareness of God.

C. 21 Asceticism and Simplicity

Following the example of the Founders of Cîteaux who sought an uncomplicated relationship with God, members of the Conversi community are urged to foster a personal lifestyle of simplicity in a manner that is consistent with their personal and family responsibilities. Simplicity is stance toward the world that recognizes both the goodness of creation and the demands of justice. Conversi are called to use the good things of the world in ways that neither distract them from formation in the contemplative life nor from responding to the cry of the poor in ways that are appropriate to the contemplative life.

C. 22 Apostolate of Lay Cistercians

Given their vocation in the world, members of the Conversi community participate in the Cistercian charism in light of the needs of the Church as a whole and the needs of the world. The goal of participation in the Conversi community is not an active apostolate, but rather the development of the contemplative life as a way of participating in the mission of Christ and the Church. To this end, Conversi members are urged to develop a

degree of separation from those cultural values and contemporary standards that are inconsistent with Christian spiritual practice.

B: The Service of Authority

C. 23 The Ministry of the Moderator

1. The moderator is a member of both AIC and Conversi, and is appointed by AIC to give guidance and pastoral care to Conversi. S/he is ex-officio a member of the Conversi Council.

St. 23.A Appointment of the Moderator

It is expected that AIC will consult with the Conversi Counsel regarding any appointment of the Moderator and will do so only with that Counsel's approval.

C. 24 The Council

The council is responsible for

- the general oversight of Conversi,
- assuring the pastoral care of members.

St. 24.A Pastoral Responsibilities

The first responsibility of Council is to foster the community's openness to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The second is to facilitate the Cistercian/contemplative character of the community in all its endeavours. The third is to encourage the members in the development of good zeal (RB 72) in living the Cistercian charism in their lives.

The Council will ensure that the community remains connected to and informed by the Cistercian charism, and the customs and culture of the monasteries of Our Lady of Mississippi and New Melleray.

- Ensure the pastoral care of members insofar as it relates to participation in the Conversi community.
- Oversee the development and coordination of initial and ongoing formation.
- Oversee the planning and facilitation of the Annual Retreat
- Oversee the application for and profession of various levels of commitment.
- The council may appoint members to assist in the administration and pastoral care of members, as needs warrant.

St. 24. B Governance/Community Life

The Council will maintain good order and the common good.

- Develop policies, procedures and guidelines in the spirit of the Constitution & Statutes, for the good of the community and oversee the application of them, drawing on the resources, experience and advice of New Melleray and Mississippi Abbeys.
 - Establish [and enforce] such statutes, etc. as may be necessary for the good of the community.
 - Periodically review all governance documents. Proposals for revisions of or amendments to the Constitution must be approved by the membership. Other documents may be amended and/or revised by the Council.
 - Oversee the financial health of Conversi and appoint the treasurer.
- oversee the development and maintenance of the website and associated resources.
- Plan & oversee the election of Council members
- Develop, maintain, and use appropriate channels of communication with the membership, other organizations, and the monasteries.
 - Every six month a summary report shall be sent to the Abbot and Abbess of New Melleray and Mississippi Abbeys.
 - A monthly report of the activities of Council shall be sent to the monastic liaisons inviting their guidance and advice.

- There shall be regular communication with the members, advising them of any announcements, or business regarding the welfare of the community.
- Represent Conversi at regional and international lay Cistercian meetings and to other monasteries and associate groups.

St. 24.B.1 Composition of Council

- The Council is made up of four elected senior members and one appointed junior member, plus the coordinator who is a member ex-officio. The head of the formation committee is also a member of Council ex officio, but not required to attend portions of Council meetings where nothing of concern to Formation is to be discussed. Members ex officio by definition have voice but no vote.

St. 24.C Formation Committee

There shall be a Formation Committee responsible for developing and supervising the program of formation of members.

Specific areas of responsibility are:

- Overseeing and recommending the admission of new members,
- Overseeing the formation of members,
- Planning and scheduling of formation topics.

Members of this committee are appointed by the Council, which designates the head of the committee. They should be senior members in good standing, as a strong foundation in the Cistercian charism is required to discern the suitability of applicants, and to implement the formation program. Members are asked to serve an initial term of two years. After the first two years, the head of the Formation committee shall approach each member annually and inquire about their ability and willingness to serve on the committee. The committee should consist of a minimum of four members including the head, and a maximum of five. A member of the Formation Committee who is consistently unable to attend meetings and does not resign may be replaced at the Council's discretion, after due discussion with the member.

St. 24.B.2 Term of Council

Senior members of Council serve for four years. Junior members serve until the next election, or until such time as they make their senior commitment, whichever comes first.

St. 24.B.3 Requirements for Council Eligibility

1. In order to be eligible for election to Council a senior member must:
 - have made his or her senior commitment.
 - have demonstrated consistent active participation in Conversi as required in Statutes 26.A through 26. E.
 - Is willing and able to participate consistently in Council meetings and the work of Council.
 - Note: If there are fewer than ten (10) members of Conversi, eligibility for election to Council requires at least three years active membership and junior commitment.

2. In order to serve as the appointed junior member on Council an individual must:
 - have participated in the community for at least one year,
 - have made a junior commitment but not the senior commitment,
 - have been recommended to the Council by the Formation team.

St. 24.B.4 Election

1. Council elections will take place every two years, beginning in September 2011, at which time two senior Council members will be elected for a four-year term. Thereafter, two senior positions will be available each election, so that Council terms are staggered.

2. The junior member will be appointed by the Council in the month following the election. It will be the Formation Committee's responsibility to recommend suitable individuals for appointment.

St. 24.B.5 Eligibility for voting

Any member who has made at least two junior commitments is eligible to vote in elections for Council.

St. 24.B.6 The process of election

1. The Moderator will serve as scrutator¹ of the election.

2. At the June Council meeting, Council will identify both those eligible to stand for election and those eligible to vote. Within two weeks of that meeting the Moderator will notify individuals eligible for election and ask them if they wish their names to stand. Early in August the Moderator will notify members by email of the election date and the list of candidates. The Moderator will also post the slate of candidates on the Announcements section of the Conversi website. Ballots will be sent out to eligible voters by individual email on or before September 1st, and must be returned no later than September 8th by reply email. Each person may vote for two distinct candidates.

3. A person must receive a simple majority of votes to be elected to Council.
 - a) If only one candidate receives a majority of votes on the first ballot, that person is elected to Council, and a second ballot will go out containing the names of the top three remaining vote getters. Members will vote for only one candidate for the second position.
 - b) If only two candidates receive a majority of votes on the first ballot, those two are elected.
 - c) If three candidates receive a majority of votes on the first ballot, the top two vote getters are elected.

¹ The monastic term for the person who counts the votes and monitors the election.

d) If the first round does not give a majority of votes to any candidate, the names of the top four vote getters will be submitted for a second round. Each voting member may again vote for two distinct candidates.

4. In any case, if a second round of voting is needed, ballots will be sent only to those members who voted in the first round. This second ballot will be sent out on or before September 10th, to be returned no later than September 18th.

5. If after the second round, two candidates have not been elected, a third round of elections will be held. If it is necessary to fill both Council positions, the names of the top three vote getters from the second round will be on the ballot.

6. If it is necessary to fill only one position, the names of the top two remaining vote getters will be on the ballot. Voting members may vote for one candidate only.

7. If after three ballots, two candidates have not been elected, the moderator will draw lots from among those whose names appeared on the third ballot.²

St. 24.B.7 The need for special elections

If, for any reason a member of Council resigns or is otherwise unable to serve his or her complete term, a special election shall be called within two months, in order to fill the position vacated.

St. 24.C Formation Committee

There shall be a Formation Committee responsible for developing and supervising the program of formation of members.

Specific areas of responsibility are:

² Following the procedure by which the initial Council was chosen.

- Overseeing and recommending the admission of new members,
- Overseeing the formation of members,
- Planning and scheduling of formation topics.

Members of this committee are appointed by the Council.

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St. 24.D Membership Fees

Council is responsible for setting, and collecting the annual membership fees. As of June, 2009 membership fees are \$75.00 annually. If this creates extraordinary difficulty for any member they should contact the Coordinator.

St. 24.E Interaction with other organizations

Council alone is responsible for official interaction with other organizations and communities.

C: The Process of Formation

C. 26 Members of the Conversi community participate in a structured formation process during which time they explore Cistercian values and practices, and are supported in their efforts to apply these to their lives. We recognize the communal nature of formation, and in this regard support each other through our regular and faithful participation.

St. 26.A Participation in Chats:

Each month, there are four chat sessions (three synchronous and one asynchronous) based on that month's topic. Members must participate in at least one of these chats each month. These sessions are important not only for processing the teachings each month but also for building community; participation benefits the not only the individual, but the whole community as well.

St. 26.A.1 Asynchronous Chats

The asynchronous chat is intended for:

- a) Those members who, from time to time are unable to take part in a regularly scheduled synchronous chat in any particular month,
- b) Those members who due to time constraints, inability to access the web-site, or who are overwhelmed by the speed of interchange on the synchronous chats, cannot meaningfully contribute to the chat.

St. 26.B Topic discussions participation:

Members must make entries in response to the discussion questions each month. These need not be elaborate theological treatises, but we would expect that some thought be given to the topic of the month and that some of those thoughts would be shared with the community. Again, this would be viewed as a pattern of activity over several months.

St. 26.C Journal entries:

Members are expected to make at least one journal entry each month (or respond to another person's entry). Journals are a place to discuss topics/issues beyond the monthly topics; they need not be intimately personal. Both the forum entries and the journal entries are ways that we can learn from each other and encourage each other in our journey. It is important that the whole community participate. This also would be viewed as a pattern of activity over several months.

St. 26.E Expectations of Participation

While there are always exceptions, any member whose pattern of activity over several months is less than what is expected will be contacted via email and asked about their intentions regarding Conversi. If there is no response, a letter will be sent to the member and if the person indicates they cannot meet the requirements, ***or fails to respond***, that person will be dropped from the current active members list for a period of six months. At the end of six months they can apply to be readmitted without prejudice if they so wish.

St. 26.F Voluntary withdrawal of Members

If a member's personal circumstances change and she/he cannot commit themselves to regular participation in the formation process of Conversi they may voluntarily withdraw from active membership for a period of six months without prejudice.

C. 27 The role of the Conversi community in the process of formation is to help each member to assimilate the essential elements of the lay Cistercian way of life.

C. 28 The focus of formation is to develop Cistercian spirituality in individual members. Topics of formation include but are not limited to the following:

Asceticism

Community

Contemplation and prayer
Conversatio morum
Divine Office
Discernment/Commitment
Enclosure/guard of the heart
Formation
Humility
Lectio/Scripture
Obedience
Imitation of Christ
Rule of St. Benedict
Silence and Solitude
Stability
Work as prayer
Simplicity/poverty
Cistercian documents and history
Living the charism in the world
School of Charity

C. 29 The purpose of Conversi is to build a community of people committed to the lay Cistercian way of life.

St. 29.A The Stages of Formation

- Upon entry into Conversi individuals will begin a period of mutual discernment with the community. There is no formal act of commitment at this time. This stage will last for a minimum period of nine months, and may last for eighteen months. It will terminate when there is (a) mutual agreement that the person is committed and suited

to the Conversi mode of living the Cistercian charism, or (b) a decision on either side that the person should not be a member of Conversi.

St. 29.A.1 If, after mutual discernment, an individual formally becomes a member of Conversi, that person

- makes a commitment to faithful participation in the continuing formation process. This commitment can be renewed annually for from 3 to 6 years. The purpose of this time is for the member to develop in the Cistercian charism (through the Holy Spirit) over time.
- This initial commitment is posted on the web site, and may become part of the member's on-line profile
- This annual renewal is the result of the ongoing discernment by the member in consultation with the Formation Committee based on a review of the applicant's pattern of fulfilling regular monthly criteria as stated on our website.

St. 29.A.2 At the end of this 3 to 6 year period, and upon completion of the formation program (including all initial formation topics), an individual may apply to become a senior member of Conversi. Upon application, the member will be asked to write a reflection paper under the guidance of the formation committee. The formation committee will then make a recommendation to the Conversi Council, who will decide to accept (or not) the applicant to senior member status. The member will then make a formal commitment for a five year period to faithfully observe all requirements and expectations of a member of the Conversi community. At the end of each five-year period, the member may recommit for a subsequent five-year period. Normally this commitment will take place at the annual retreat; however if this is not feasible, alternative arrangements may be made.. Normally this commitment takes place at the annual retreat; however if this is not feasible, alternative arrangements may be made.

- It needs to be recognized that these commitments are MUTUAL between the individual member and the Conversi community. It is the responsibility of the Council to ensure that the entire community is involved in this process, particularly those individuals who are active senior members of the community. It is clear that these commitments are in no way juridically binding. Rather members make them as statements of intent regarding their Cistercian lifestyle, values and practices. These statements of commitment are made with the support of the membership of Conversi and the communities of New Melleray and Our Lady of the Mississippi Abbeys.

St. 29.B Membership size

The number of members is set by a vote of the Coordinating Council. As of February 2009 membership is limited to thirty active members.

C. 30 The demands of such community life make it necessary to restrict membership to adult Christians who are able to participate regularly in the on-line life of the community. Technology and leadership availability may limit the size of membership.

C. 31 Each year, the Conversi community will be provided an opportunity to participate in a retreat either at New Melleray or Our Lady of the Mississippi Abbey. These retreats will be organized by appropriate members of Conversi and will normally include formation presentations by members of these monastic communities. Because personal contact is so helpful in forming community, members are strongly encouraged to attend the annual retreat.

St. 30.A Scholarships

Scholarship/travel assistance is normally available upon request.

C. 32 In the Joy of the Holy Spirit

These are the Constitutions of Conversi, a community of Lay Cistercians. May God grant that through the Holy Spirit, they may observe them in charity and fidelity to the Gospel,

and so joyfully make their way to the fullness of love with the help of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Queen of Cîteaux.