

## **Associates of Iowa Cistercians - Spiritual Journey      November 2013**

### **Brief History**

New Melleray and Our lady of the Mississippi Abbeys have warmly welcomed and supported the AIC at every stage of our spiritual journey as a lay Cistercian Community. Our journey began in 1994 when Abbot Brendan Freeman asked two monks and two laypersons to meet with the Oblates of Holy Spirit Monastery in Georgia in order to discover how that group had set about to embody the Cistercian Charism in their lives outside the monastery. The meeting led to discussions about the possibility of forming a similar group to be associated with New Melleray and Our Lady of the Mississippi Abbeys. Men and women who had indicated a desire for deepening their understanding of contemplative life outside the monastery were invited to a meeting in January of 1995. It was the first meeting of the Associates of the Iowa Cistercians and since then we have continued to meet together on the second Saturday of every month.

### **Determining who we are as a community**

From the beginning, the question of whether lay people have been called to the contemplative life and whether there really is such a thing as a lay Cistercian vocation has been in the background of how we view ourselves as a community. As we sought to define ourselves we began by describing what we were not: not a support group; not an excuse for getting close to monks and nuns; not a prayer group; not a gathering of people who enjoyed socializing. We were not “want to-be monks” but rather a group of people who were learning to respond to the Spirit’s call, and to do so as a community. What brought each of us to the AIC was a desire to learn how to apply Cistercian values and practices to our lives outside the monastery; what keeps us coming back each month is the realization that no one follows Jesus privately. We do so together with others. It is this emphasis on the communal nature of the AIC that enables us to build and sustain relationships with one another based on mutual respect, trust and cooperation. It can be characterized by what Dom Bernardo Olivera calls a “spirituality of communion” which he has described as *“sharing the joys and sufferings of our brothers and sisters; sensing their desires and attending to their needs; offering them true and profound friendship... it implies the ability to see what is positive in others, to welcome it and to prize it as a gift from God...”*

### **Determining our formation structure**

New Melleray and Mississippi Abbeys have been generous in extending hospitality and space for our monthly meetings as well as in making it possible for members of both their communities to serve as teachers, formators, liaisons and mentors. We have relied heavily on them to help us learn about monastic values and practices that can be applied to our lives outside the monastery. In the beginning a planning committee was chosen to work with our monastic liaisons in order to identify monks and nuns who would be willing to teach topics related to Cistercian spirituality. Eventually, with the guidance of our monastic liaisons, a list of twenty-two core topics was developed and a three-year cycle of presentations was put into place. These included monastic values such as silence and solitude, humility, and obedience as well as monastic practices such as lectio, liturgy of the hours and asceticism.

As our community matured those who had been with us for several years began to inquire about strengthening their commitment to the AIC and what they had been learning about the Cistercian Charism. There was a great deal of resistance to what many members felt would divide the community into the ranks of “professed” and “unprofessed.” Yet, at the completion of the three year initial formation program, many members felt a deepening call to formalize their commitment to the AIC and to the changes they need to continue making in their lives as a result. The commitment process enables them to make a public statement, in the presence of all three communities (New Melleray, Mississippi Abbey and the AIC) of their intention to be faithful.

Formation does not end once we have made our commitments. With the guidance of our monastic liaisons we have developed a separate on-going formation program for those who have made their Commitments in order to help them deepen their attempts to apply what they are learning to their daily lives. In addition we depend upon them to become more involved in opportunities to be of service to the AIC community.

We recognize that formation is not primarily an intellectual process. According to the *Ratio Institutionis* of the Cistercian Order, “it is essentially by living out the various aspects of Cistercian *conversatio* that a person gradually becomes ever more truly a Cistercian.” Similarly, it is through our lived experiences that we are formed in what it means to be a Lay Cistercian. Thus, our formation as members of the AIC depends on our prayerful efforts to make significant changes in our lives as a result of what we are learning about Cistercian values and practices, and to support one another in our efforts to be faithful.

### **Determining our leadership structure**

From the beginning, we were reluctant to adopt any of the various organizational models being followed by other Cistercian lay communities, preferring a less structured approach; we assumed that in time we would “evolve” into a cohesive group, shaped by our association with the two Abbeys. However, we soon learned that such a casual approach would not keep our community functioning effectively. The now famous remark by one of our monastic liaisons that we were behaving like “children of the sixties” helped us realize that we needed to get better organized. We created a council style of governance with council members elected from our on-going formation group and assisted by a formation team, a bi-annual community retreat committee, and a process for enabling members to be involved in helping out with the many details that need to be attended to each month when we gather for our meetings.

In addition we developed a formal application and acceptance procedure for prospective members as well as an orientation process that included assigning mentors to assist newcomers during their first year.

As one of our monastic liaisons has pointed out, we have achieved an important milestone in our development because we have moved into our 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> generation of leadership. It is an indication that our community will continue to thrive, maturing and changing as newer members of the AIC take over governance responsibilities and bringing with them fresh perspectives and new ideas.

Along with the structure that has evolved has come the need for articulating membership guidelines, and community goals and customs. We have developed our own AIC constitutions and statues which are open to review from time to time in order to reflect the evolving needs of our community. We hope that these, along with the Rule of Benedict, the *Exordium parvum*, and the Charter of Charity will continue to ensure that the particular incarnation of Cistercian values and practices that we find in the AIC will remain true to the call of the Holy Spirit.

### **Responding to our challenges**

As early as our second meeting, the AIC was faced with a problem that could well have prevented us from moving forward had it not been for the help of our monastic liaisons. A young couple wanted to join us, insisting that they be able to bring their small children and newborn infant with them to monthly meetings. With the guidance of one of the Sisters from Mississippi Abbey, who led us in a monastic discernment process, we were able to resolve the issue. As a result we established our first membership requirement – members must be Christians who are 21 years of age. (We do not require that they be Catholic.) Meeting such a volatile issue head on proved to be a blessing because it taught us that we could handle problems constructively and deal with the inevitable challenges that arise as people with diverse needs and temperaments endeavor to build a community of respect based on the Rule of St. Benedict.

Additional challenges arose as we began to define expectations and articulate membership requirements. Those who came to the AIC for personal benefit have not always been willing to undertake the communal responsibilities involved in membership and over the years we have lost some members as a result. However, we have discovered that our call to be a particular expression of Christian spirituality as embodied in the Cistercian Charism is not merely a call for ourselves alone. It involves responsibilities to our community as a whole, beginning with the importance of being present to one another. For this reason we have always stressed the importance of regular attendance at our monthly AIC meetings instead of choosing to attend only on those days the teaching topic interested us personally. We have discouraged people from “coming and going” throughout the day - arriving late or leaving early – missing out on opportunities for dialogue and discussion, or for participating in our communal prayer and meditation periods. We have emphasized the importance of being of service to one another through the various tasks and responsibilities that need to be shared in order to function efficiently.

As our community’s leadership structure and formation groups evolved, there have been the inevitable rumblings of “insiders and outsiders”, cliques and perceived imbalance of power. In response we strive to be as transparent as possible by holding community dialogues, house meetings and providing opportunity for community input when there are decisions to be made.

We are also aware that while we continue to place a high priority on the communal nature of the AIC this is not something that happens automatically. Unlike monks and nuns who live together day-in and day-out, we spend most of our time separated from one another. Listening to monastic presentations about Chapters 4 (The Tools for Good Works) and 72 (the Good Zeal of Monks) of the Rule of St. Benedict has

provided us with important insights into what a Gospel driven community looks like. But it has not been easy trying to figure out how to create and nurture that kind of community when we are only able to be together for six hours once a month. We continue to be challenged by the need to help one another recognize that membership in the AIC is not simply an opportunity for personal spiritual growth but also a commitment to accompany and support others as they strive to apply the message of the Gospel.

As we move closer to our 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary we are aware of the need to avoid taxing the resources and energies of New Melleray and Our Lady of the Mississippi Abbeys. Both communities have been generous in their support of our AIC community; not only have both communities identified monastic liaisons who serve as advisors to our leadership council and formation team, but over the years monks and nuns have played a major part in shaping and teaching our formation programs. In recent years we have begun to call upon members of our ongoing formation group with teaching expertise in order to reduce our dependency on monks and nuns who have so many other obligations within their own communities. We continue to depend on the hospitality the monasteries have shown us by providing space for our meetings and while we have tried to impress upon our members the importance of respecting monastic enclosure, we know that the noise and activity we bring with us on our meeting days often disrupts the quiet and orderly pace of their daily routine.

### **A spirit of Gratitude**

As we look back on our journey together these past 19 years, we are grateful for how the Spirit has guided us along the way. We have grown from a handful of like-minded men and women interested in contemplative spirituality to a community of over 50 people whose common vision is being shaped by Cistercian values and practices. Despite differences in background and perspective we have learned that it is our common vocation to embody the Cistercian charism individually and as a community. We are indebted to both New Melleray and Our Lady of the Mississippi Abbeys for the important role they continue to play in supporting and guiding every aspect of our spiritual growth. Both communities have formally affirmed their association with the AIC in written statements of acceptance and support, recognizing the AIC as a community of lay men and women drawn by the Holy Spirit to live as fully as possible the Cistercian Charism. Each community – New Melleray, Mississippi Abbey and the AIC – is an embodiment of that charism, joined together in our prayers for one another. And while the example set by the monastic communities continues to be a source of encouragement and inspiration for those of us in the AIC, we have frequently heard our monastic brothers and sisters say that our fidelity to the Cistercian charism as we adapt it to lives outside the monastery has strengthened them in living their own vocation as monks and nuns.

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