

**Spiritual Journey of the Lay Cistercians of Our Lady of the Holy Spirit
Conyers, Georgia, USA
January 2014**

It is difficult to chart the spiritual journey of members of our community since everyone journeys within himself or herself to the heart of God. We can, however, describe a common response to the prompting of the Holy Spirit present and growing from the beginning. Since the establishment of the International Committee in 2002, we have continued to discover the common bond of contemplative prayer finding expression in the Cistercian charisms. We can describe the structures and supports within our Cistercian family which also allow for diversity of expression within each community. The Lay Cistercian Identity Document, 2008, and other writings illustrate how personal spiritual journeys, within a common contemplative purpose, are spreading to other lands. In our communal journey, we continue to respond to the voices in our community so that the community can support the needs of all.

Historical Development of the Community

The spiritual seeds of our Lay Cistercian vocation germinated in many gardens and now bear fruit at the Abbey of Our Lady of the Holy Spirit (OLHS) in Conyers, Georgia. In the 1970's, Father Anthony Delisi served as chaplain at the Monastery of Abakaliki and also assisted in novice formation at Awhum, where he noticed a movement among lay persons who gathered to draw inspiration from the way of life in those monasteries and he carried those ideas back to his home monastery in Conyers.

At the same time, several individuals associated with OLHS in various capacities were also responding to the urges of the Holy Spirit as they sought a spiritual life of contemplative prayer, guided by Cistercian charisms. In 1987, five individuals with similar desires came together to establish what they then called the Associate Oblates of Our Lady of the Holy Spirit, the first U.S. Lay Cistercian community. The founders were drawn to seek the Lay Cistercian community as the result of their individual quests played out over a period of years as they responded to an inner call that seemed to resonate with the Cistercian charisms lived at OLHS. Even at an early age for some, the dimly understood choral chanting of the office in a monastery or convent continued into adult years. Our founders (and many others since then) have expressed a sense of healing and peace transformed them into responding to a divine invitation to recognize the face of Jesus in others, especially the poor and homeless. All these emotions and expressions of faith led them to seek the prayer of quiet and contemplation that was encouraged by the monks of OLHS.

The peace and contemplative spirit emanating from OLHS as well as the fidelity of the monastic community further suggested the need for formal commitment of public promises and a community of likeminded individuals. With the counsel of Dom Armand Veilleux, abbot of OLHS at the time (1983 – 1990), the five began their formation by searching for the will of God among themselves under the guidance of Father Anthony Delisi and Dom Augustine Moore, retired abbot of OLHS. It was important to Dom Armand that the lay community should develop on its own, seeking the guidance of the

Holy Spirit, rather than to be established by the Monastery and handed to them. Our founders struggled to develop their own community but in retrospect recognized Dom Armand's wisdom that it was preferable that the founders ultimately discern for themselves what it meant to live as laity in the spirit of Citeaux.ⁱ After two and half years of instruction, on March 25, 1990, Dom Armand received the promises of the five founders in the Abbey church.

Purpose and Statutes

The continuing spiritual journey of the OLHS community started by these five founders is best reflected through the evolution of our statutes and our formation processes. As the founders' vision of a lay community grew, they expressed their understanding into a set of statutes that would solidify the community and preserve it for those who followed. Our founders firmly ascribe their formation and the development of the initial statutes to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit as the fruit of prayer and honest sharing over a prolonged period of time.

The central expression of our spiritual journey is reflected as "Purpose" and "Way of Life" written into the Statutes to define those practices on which we rely as the living expression of Cistercian life in the lay environment.

The Purpose and Way of Life in the Statutes from the 1990's to the present show a remarkable consistency of intention and our current Statutes and Way of Life define practices which continue as the basis for our way of life. The Statutes focus on a way of life in that "we see these observances as instrument for a life of contemplative discipline;" namely, daily reception of Holy Eucharist, praying one or more hours of the Divine Office in union with the Church; at least twenty minutes of *lectio divina* or meditation; development of a contemplative dimension through silence and solitude; devotion to the mother of God through the rosary and *Salve Regina*; special devotions and frequent reception of the sacrament of Reconciliation. The statutes also emphasize the importance of attending the monthly Gathering Day and the annual contemplative retreat.ⁱⁱ

In 2009-2010, the community extensively reviewed the statutes and, while changes were made in many aspects, the Purpose and Way of Life remained virtually untouched. Similarly, in reviewing the Lay Cistercian Identity Document from Huerta, 2008, as well as other international Cistercian writings, we are pleased that our Purpose and Way of Life are consistent with the wider Cistercian world. As we invite new members into the community, these are the practices we teach as the way of fidelity to the Cistercian way of life.

Journey through Initial and Ongoing Formation

As the community developed and grew, initial formation in the OLHS community followed several formats. In the early 2000's, it appeared that many members joined the community, followed the two or three year novitiate period, but then stopped participating after completing initial formation and making lifetime promises. The Lay

Cistercian Council was concerned that the revolving membership was contrary to the stable community called for in Cistercian life and sought ways to prevent loss of membership. In 2007, the Council requested a formal visitation from Dennis Day, as a leader in the Cistercian family in the United States and as the English language representative to our international organization. The visitation report noted a concern for the members who did not attend meetings as well as concerns among younger members that on-going formation was not very well structured or planned.

In response to concerns about continuing membership and productive formation practices, the community adopted a documented plan of formation to be consistently followed by whoever led initial formation. We established an inquiry period followed a five year initial formation process consisting of a two year novitiate and a three year Juniorate. As a result of this process, we believe that from the beginning of the process, inquirers get a realistic understanding of what is expected of Lay Cistercians. Furthermore, as we have implemented the structured initial formation process, we have seen much greater on-going participation among those formed through that process and most of those whose participation has decreased can be explained by unavoidable family and work issues.

At this time, the formation process begins with a three month series of inquiry conferences aimed at describing the Lay Cistercian way of life and encouraging prayerful discernment, including participation in a three day inquirers' retreat. Novice formation involves both monastic and selected Lay Cistercians serving as instructors under the guidance of the monastic advisor. The first novice year reflects on Cistercian charisms as described for the benefit of young monastics in *The Cistercian Way* by Andre Louf. (Cistercian Publications, 1983) and the second novice year focuses on the Rule of St. Benedict itself. The three year Juniorate is taught by monks and revolves around fundamental monastic practices and original writings of the Cistercian fathers and mothers; namely, *Monastic Practices* by Charles Cummings (Cistercian Publications) for one year; writings of Bernard, Aelred of Rievaulx, Guerric of Igny, William of Saint Thierry and others for one year; and fundamental Cistercian documents, such as the current Cistercian Constitution and Statutes, the *Exordium Parvum* and Charter of Charity as well as the Lay Cistercian Identity document from Huerta.

It might be noted that each of these texts (except the LC Identity document) was written for the formation of monks or nuns but we encourage Lay Cistercian novices and juniors to reflect and discuss the texts in a way that applies Cistercian charisms and the Rule of St. Benedict to the life of Lay Cistercians in the modern world. It is an ongoing challenge to make sure that we all focus on the application of the charisms to lay lives and not allow the focus to become theoretical.

We do not consider the current novice / junior formation process as the complete answer to continuing engagement by professed members. Hence, we are challenged to continue developing formation programs for the fully professed members so that all remain engaged in the community and in the growth of their spiritual lives. We understand Cistercian formation for all members to be broadened and deepened

beyond monthly classes, conferences or readings. The entire gathering day is part of spiritual formation for all members of the community – novices, juniors and fully professed. We continually stress that formation does not stop with completion of the formal formation process and profession of lifetime promises but formation is a life time process. Hence, our Gathering Day includes prayer shared among our community (Communal Lauds, Mass and silent prayer), prayer shared with the monastic community (Midday Prayer and optional Vespers), and community sharing during lunch and as part of discussion on texts read by the whole community. Nonetheless, challenges remain for a community which meets only one day a month and which is otherwise geographically spread out.

Lessons Learned

1. Gratitude to our founders for their faithfulness and patience in discerning Cistercian charisms that still resonate.
2. Patience in making changes so that we make changes (as in our statutes) to respond to the needs of the community in the light of Cistercian charisms but make those changes with prayer, not necessarily with haste.
3. Importance of focusing on fundamental Cistercian charisms, such as through the texts we study. Although asked at times to incorporate other traditions into Gathering Day, it is important to keep the Cistercian focus.

ⁱElsewhere, Dom Armand has observed: “What I have always suggested, personally, is to form around a monastic community a community of lay people having its own identity and its own life. I firmly believe that this is the best way of discovering gradually new ways of incarnating the Cistercian spirit in the daily existence of normal lay people. It is the best way of avoiding the danger for lay people of playing monk or playing nun in the world.” Dom Armand expressed his understanding that, in addition to the unique characteristics of each lay community, one can only become a “Lay Cistercian” by establishing a personal bond of communion with a concrete local Cistercian community, either of monks or of nuns.” (“The Participation of Lay Faithful in the Cistercian Family” 1999) Development of the Lay Cistercian charism requires “both the autonomous life of a lay community and a constant communion and dialogue with the monastic community.”

ⁱⁱ An early version of our Statutes show that Lay Cistercians offered emphasized elements of a way of life directed to those Catholics who:

Accept the purposes of the association: (a) for personal sanctification within the demands of their vocations; (b) to pray for the spiritual and physical needs of priests and religious; and, (c) to encourage growth of contemplative prayer among the faithful. [And] seek a lifestyle that includes daily reception of Holy Eucharist, praying one of more hours of the Divine Office, praying the rosary, allotting at least twenty (20) minutes for *lectio divina* and meditation and ending the day by praying the Sale Regina and Receiving the sacrament of Reconciliation frequently, at east monthly. (See also 1996 letter from representatives of groups associated with five United States monasteries in to Abbot General Bernardo Olivera as a response to his *Reflections on the Challenges of “Charismatic Associations.”*)