

*"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."*

*(from the Conversi Constitution, 2010)*

Conversi was formed in 2005 as a daughter of the Associates of Iowa Cistercians, as an online or 'virtual' community, a notion which seemed odd when we began, but which makes more and more sense as we continue to grow and develop. We have drawn members from five countries on three continents.

Unlike other lay Cistercian groups Conversi's monthly meetings are not face-to-face, but rather take place on-line. Formation talks consist of 18 core topics cycled over a three year period (six per year). The remaining 18 topics during the cycle are chosen to contribute to the spiritual growth of the Conversi community.

Formation takes place by means of regular on-line chats, both synchronous and asynchronous discussions of the formation talks, prayer, and regular journaling. Just as an abbey's daughter house moves away from relying on the mother abbey for its formation and sustenance, Conversi is currently using AIC presentations for most of the core formation topics and using other sources (chapter talks, presentations by a Conversi member, external presentations) for roughly half of the annual topics list.

At one time our membership was over thirty-five. We found that number exceeded our ability to maintain a strong sense of community, and in 2009 we reduced the maximum number of members to 30. We currently have 24 members as well as a coordinator seconded from AIC and two monastic liaisons, one each from New Melleray and Our Lady of the Mississippi.

Being an on-line community has provided some challenges. In a recent questionnaire and conversation with members two broad concerns were identified:

- Technical difficulties – from time to time members experienced difficulties connecting with the website. While this was not at all a common occurrence, it has occasionally caused frustration on the part of members. Of somewhat greater concern was,

- The limitation of communication by text. Frequently members felt that subtleties of thought or intent get lost in print, particularly during real-time chats. Subtleties of speech are lost in print, and members have had to be conscious of the danger of misunderstanding. For some time we have been providing an alternative to text-based chats by means of voice over internet resources such as Skype. This has helped reduce misunderstandings, and as members become more comfortable with this medium we expect its use may well increase over time.

At the same time members identified a number of benefits to the on-line nature of the community:

- Daily contact and interaction between members was frequently cited as a tool that fostered community.
- The on-line accessibility of formation talks and ongoing discussion allows members to reflect on the topics and more fully integrate them into their daily lives.

One member summed up what seemed to be the consensus of the community:

“It is wonderful to be able to connect with the members of the community at any time of the week or several times a week, rather than just once a month. There is a more ongoing weaving of our lives and reflections. As an introvert, it is nice to have a format to ponder and then express what you have been pondering.”

In its time Conversi has had to address a few challenges. We began with no particular criteria for acceptance other than submission of an application. This led to two difficulties:

- The expectation of some new members that Conversi should adapt its charism to meet their idea of what they wanted Conversi to be, which led us to define with more clarity our particular charism and filiation. Doing so was painful but necessary, and we believe that we are a stronger community as a result.
- During our first few years we experienced an unacceptably high attrition rate as members found that, for several reasons, Conversi was not a good fit. In order to address this, we instituted an application-and-interview process. Additionally, we adopted a program of initial discernment and formation, which lasts a minimum nine months. During this time new members are introduced to the foundational Benedictine practices, and assigned an experienced member to shepherd them through their initial formation.

From time to time personality conflicts have arisen. Conversi learned to deal with crises by encountering them, and adapting our procedures and expectations to prevent further occurrences of the same crisis. We discuss them in Council, pray about them, and when necessary involve our monastic liaisons, to ensure that our handling of the problem is as Christian, compassionate, and consistent with our relationship with the monasteries as possible. Every year we hold a gathering in Dubuque, Iowa, for members who are able to attend. Members stay at the Abbey of New Melleray, and attend talks at both New Melleray and Our Lady of the Mississippi. Participation by our monastic liaisons, as well as the Abbot and Abbess strengthen our filial bonds with both houses.