

SPIRITUAL JOURNEY
LAY CISTERCIANS OF GETHSEMANI ABBEY
Trappist, Kentucky, USA

Beginning in 1987 a few laypeople, gathered occasionally at Gethsemani monastery, were welcomed by a sensitive monk who consistently and joyfully offered support. This Father Michael, then guest master now Prior, sensed the visitors' spirit was consistent with that of his monastic brothers seeking God.

These laypeople, nourished and linked by the Gethsemani hospitality and charism, loosely formed a community gathered annually to share their sense of wonder at this opening of God's grace in their lives. The community organized to create greater stability as they helped each other to apply their desire for simplicity and daily prayerful devotion in lives outside the monastic enclosure. Fr. Michael, other monk advisors, and lay representatives affirmed the *Plan of Life*, our founding document which aspires:

to serve as a guide for Lay Cistercians in their efforts to develop, in their secular life, a contemplative spirituality according to the Cistercian tradition. The Plan of Life reflects elements that are characteristics of the Cistercian monastic regimen of prayer, work and study. There is an emphasis on a modification of lifestyle that is similar to monastic conversion of manners.

A decade followed with enhanced appreciation, devotion, and practice of the Cistercian way. Others learned of the lay endeavor at Gethsemani and with bountiful energy and evangelist spirit the core inspired first two, then three, and four independent local communities (now eight) of six to twenty-five persons meeting monthly in Midwest USA cities, hundreds of miles apart yet bound to and inspired by Gethsemani and the Cistercian charism. Devoted laypeople organized each local community to meet monthly in prayer, lectio divina, exploration of the Cistercian charism, and in common devotion as lay people in a secular world. Support emerged for expanded communication among the communities: newsletter editors, web site managers, all with continued encouragement from Gethsemani.

Blessed with an open spirit of welcome LCG encouraged interest and applications from throughout the United States and Canada. Devoted leaders in 2008 expanded an Advisory Council to include representatives elected by each of our eight local communities, and empowered to encourage greater devotion, depth, and understanding of the charism in our local communities and maintain an abiding affinity with Gethsemani. Reflecting generous Cistercian hospitality, many people were attracted to LCG to participate in a life of prayer, study, and work, consistent with living the Rule of Benedict. Receiving many requests to affiliate, the Council reluctantly concluded that first we needed to assure good practice in our existing eight communities consistent with the Cistercian conversion of manners. Thus, in a pivotal moment, we voted to enhance our journey within and paused adding new local communities.

A principle goal: nourish our members and train candidates. Many inquire, drawn by a friend, the experience of Abbey visits, or browsing on the internet. By application and colloquy we share our vision of an important life commitment to the Cistercian charism and that of the applicant. Our basic "Plan of Life" guides our inquiry, training, and practice of prayer, study, and work as laypeople, to discern and

apply the Rule of Benedict in our lives. Greater specificity was added after extensive discussion by our Advisory Council. Our recently revised program for good training/mentoring expands a 2005 *Formation Guide* now expressly supplementing the “Plan of Life” with more detailed modules whereby candidates in a two year study period are exposed to Cistercian history, prayerful practice, the Rule of Benedict, and Cistercian writers. But for our existing members, formation continues within our local communities as members share their life experience in monthly meeting, with community Lectio Divina, common community readings, and prayerful silence. In community we find increased sense of shared comfort and shared journey—the challenges of applying the Cistercian charism as laypersons.

What holds LCG together? Geographically separated but united by affinity with the Gethsemani monastery and “our” monks. Also, we are a common enterprise bound in our *Plan of Life*, gentle guidance from our monastic advisors (yes, Fr. Michael continues with his gracious suggestions), and our Advisory Council gently offering LCG unity amid local community diversity. The Council in 2011 adopted our Covenant of Unity setting forth duties and responsibilities in four broad areas: 1. Relation with Monastic community; 2. Responsibilities in our local communities; 3. Duties as Members; and 4. Role of Advisory Council. We are not monks but look to them for inspiration in our daily lives. And not only to them but the enduring Cistercian Order which, as the banks of a living stream, afford guidance and support as we live our worldly lives.

LCG early on learned from monastic advisors and others that laypeople around the world also experienced affinity with the charism and similarly gathered at monasteries. The 2008 OCSO Votum observed lay communities gathered at several monasteries. We are inspired that laity around the world also seek to live the Cistercian spirit; and we actively support and applaud development of the IALCC. Sensitive to encouragement from lay brothers and sisters around the world and with leadership and support from our monastic advisors and Abbot, LCG was recognized in 2012 by the Conventual community. Our members gained increased nourishment and sense of common journey from the act of recognition. LCG gains greater stability and inspiration by shared elements of Gethsemani life as we receive and distribute to our 300 members and friends the weekly Vigils non-scriptural readings, Abbot’s Chapter Talks, selected homilies, and audio tapes of lectures at Gethsemani. And more: a sense of maturity and comfort and respect for the monks of Gethsemani who graciously include LCG Commitment Promises by new members and the Abbot’s blessing as the assembled monastic community does God’s work during the Vespers hour.

Our journey has been gently guided by our monastic advisors and by several monks at the Abbey. We have personally shared with the monks in conference how the charism increasingly informs our lives. Our monastic brothers offer us so much—reinforcing in vivid fashion the important element of prayerful attentiveness and life with the Rule. But, just perhaps, we laypeople give as well. Only two months ago five new LCG members made their solemn promise during Vespers in the Abbey church, the brother monks looking on. As the conjoined Vespers and the Ceremony ended, a visitor observed a departing brother’s broad smile—embellished with several tears of joy. We are so bound to the Abbey the better informing the Cistercian charism.

Chicago, Illinois USA
November 29, 2013