

Lay Cistercians of Holy Cross Abbey

Milestones on Our Spiritual Journey

November 2013

The Call

Our journey began in January 1996 as the call of one person on retreat at Holy Cross Abbey who asked if there was a third order for lay persons to live out the Cistercian way of life. Fr. Mark Delery, spiritual director at the guesthouse, replied, “No. And we don’t have bake sales or car washes either.” By the end of the week, Fr. Mark did share information left by a visitor from a lay group forming at Holy Spirit in Conyers, GA. And a second contact came from a flyer at a Merton conference. In May 1997 an invitation to attend a Cistercians Associates Conference at Conyers led to contact with representatives from many groups in varying stages of forming around different monasteries. Hearing others you have never met express your own heart’s yearning was a strong confirmation of this call to form a lay group at Holy Cross Abbey. Fr. Francis Steger, from the Abbey of the Genesee, urged us to “Let the Spirit lead,” which became our underlying guidance to this day.

Perseverance

After Fr. Mark heard about the conference, he arranged a meeting with his Centering Prayer group (who, he believed, wanted “more”), two people hearing the call to form a lay group, and the Superior of Holy Cross Abbey, Br. Benedict Simmonds. Br. Benedict listened to our desire and what we had learned from the conference; then he rose and before walking out of the room said, “Go and live the life. Fr. Mark will know when you are ready.”

Monthly meetings began on June 7, 1997. People heard about the group and came, bringing their own desires. Some wanted to spend an afternoon at the monastery; others thought this was a Centering Prayer group; for some it was seen as an inside track to meet the monks. But a crucial few were drawn by the desire to adapt and live out the life shown to us by the monks.

A year later we held an all-day session at the monastery and tried to define who we were. Using our best business style, we wrote on flip charts and gathered our thoughts, working down to what we held in common. Here we found our differences: We were more than a Centering Prayer group, although using that prayer form was fine. We wanted to learn the Rule of St. Benedict, not write our own rule or copy a third order. At the end of the day Br. Benedict stopped by and asked for a summary. His encouragement was a significant factor for us to persevere in our desire to live the Cistercian charism, even though some in the group would soon begin to drop out.

In September 1998, Fr. Robert Barnes became the abbot of Holy Cross Abbey and asked to meet with us. From our definition meeting we had written a draft document of who we were and our desire to adapt and live this life. When Fr. Robert reviewed it, he made only two changes: he changed our “high” value of transformation in Christ to “supreme,” and to our desire to support the Abbey added “as requested.” He also told us we were not ready yet.

In January 2000, Fr. Robert named Fr. Joseph Wittstock, as our monastic liaison, and Fr. Joseph began to teach us the Rule. The group's size and regular attendance continued to fluctuate. Personality conflicts, as well as strong opinions, kept us balancing and accommodating, trying to look like a well-functioning group to the monks. Some people asked to come only to hear Fr. Joseph's teachings. We refused, for building a community meant a commitment to the whole, not a selection of parts. Fr. Mark, whom we saw on retreat, advised us that we must write Constitutions and Statutes and have a Formation Program in place similar to that of the monks before we would be ready. In May 2001 we held our first annual community retreat at the Abbey.

Structuring the Call into Being

Finally in September 2001, we decided to close the group and not allow the "walk-ins" who appeared each month. We committed ourselves to develop a form of governance, a Formation Program, and write Constitutions and Statutes. We thought we could complete this in a few months. However, we would learn that it takes time to find the structure we needed and live into it. Working closely together brought out more aspects of community life, including disagreements, need to control, inability to talk without interrupting each other, resentments and even anger. But we kept trying to write our documents, and in the process learned firsthand about life together and what we must be willing to accept and live through in love in order to become a community.

One of the most difficult challenges was deciding on a governance structure. After several failed attempts, one person suggested a way that has worked well for us. Annual elections are held by the Professed members, and every Professed member is on the ballot to elect the five members of the Council. The five with the greatest number of votes will form the Council, with any ties broken by another vote. Then from those five Council members, the Dean, or leader of our group, is elected by the greatest number of votes. Again the Spirit has been present in our elections, and we trust the outcome.

Not until September 2003 was the Formation Program sufficiently developed to invite the first Observers to come. To our surprise the waiting list of over 40 people that had been collected since we closed the group, dropped to only eight coming as Observers, and of those only one became a Postulant. We soon found weaknesses and made corrections, including annual meetings with those in Formation to correct misunderstandings or manage obstacles early on, and to provide more support to those trying our practices of lectio, praying the Office, and reading the Rule.

Each year in the Formation Program is marked by discernment that one is being called to move forward, not simply choosing to. Observers are asked to discern whether they are called to become Postulants; to help them with discernment, they are asked to make a retreat and pray over and answer discernment questions for themselves. After that point the annual discernment to move to deeper commitment as a Novice becomes mutual discernment – both the candidate and the Professed discern the readiness and the call to move forward. Discernment became most difficult when we lost our focus on the calling to live the Lay Cistercian life, and relied instead on our own personal feelings about the candidates or our own vision of what the community should be. The request to move forward is subject to the approval of two-thirds of the Professed

members, a high bar. We trust the Holy Spirit to be active in mutual discernment, and only the presence of the Holy Spirit can explain some of the outcomes.

The Constitutions and Statutes and the Promises took the longest to write. Not until 2005 were the Constitutions approved by the monastery, and then the Statutes were written. A small group took on this task, but only when the Constitutions and Statutes of the monks became our model did the document take coherent shape. The Promises also took time to become clear to us; we followed the monks' example closely here, too. Promises are made and re-affirmed annually in the presence of the Abbot and members of the monastic community by making this statement of profession:

I (name) promise my stability, my fidelity to the Lay Cistercian way of life, and obedience in accordance with my state in life, in accordance to the Rule of Saint Benedict, Abbot, and the Constitutions and Statutes of the Lay Cistercians of Holy Cross Abbey. I do this before God and all his saints, in this Abbey of Our Lady of the Holy Cross of the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance, constructed in honour of the Blessed and ever Virgin Mary, Mother of God, and in the presence of Dom (name), abbot of this monastery, (name) Dean of the Lay Cistercians of Holy Cross Abbey, and all the brethren.

At last we were ready. On June 11, 2006 the Conventual Chapter (the professed monks) of Our Lady of the Holy Cross voted to recognize permanently the Lay Cistercians of Holy Cross Abbey. On August 19, 2006, we made our Promises. Many people had contributed to forming our community and only seven people remained to make the Promises. We believe the Spirit was working. Holy Cross Abbey is a small abbey so it was appropriate that only a small number were called to make the Promises. All seven continue today.

Living Out the Promises

We like to say that after making the Promises, we then spend the rest of our lives trying to live up to them. Having the recognition of the monks changed our lives and our relation with the Abbey forever. We were indeed accepted. In fact, right after their vote, Br. Michael, the cellarer, came to our meeting to show us how to turn up the thermostat in the parlor. We felt trusted with the monastery's resources.

We also felt the responsibility we had for our community and maintaining its integrity. We rely on the community's daily practices to bring us together in the mystical cloister when we are back at our homes, and to keep us faithful to this journey. Our daily prayer intentions for our monks, and their prayers for us have bound us together.

When one Professed member recently moved to New York to live closer to her daughter, we modified our Statutes to include a permanent relocation (in addition to infirmity or disability) as a reason to request to become an Associate Lay Cistercian. An Associate continues to follow the daily practices, and may attend the annual retreat to re-affirm the Promises, but does not attend or participate in our monthly meetings.

To continue their formation, each month the Professed members read and discuss writings from the Cistercian Fathers and most recently from John Cassian. They have also read together the Life of St Anthony, St Basil's Long Rule, and sayings of the Desert Fathers. Their formation never ends.

Professed members also prepare Chapter Member teachings about subjects they have studied or on Novitiate topics, such as lectio or the Office, when these will not be covered in the Novitiate teachings for that year. They also know that there is no guarantee that we will always have a monastic liaison to teach us; should the monastery not have the resources, the Professed would teach the Novitiate.

We are now looking at an annual reflection for the Professed members before they re-affirm their Promises each year. Keeping on this journey and going deeper is our desire, and we know we need the community's support and discipline to stay on the path. The Lay Cistercian journey never ends.