

2013 Reflection on our Spiritual Journey – Lay Contemplative Associates

With the Good Shepherd as our guide we cannot help but be grateful to His constant guidance, never failing to feed us wherever He leads us. We, Lay Contemplative Associates, (LCA) originally called Genesee Lay Contemplative Associates (GLCA), were founded some 17 years ago at Abbey of the Genesee, as a way to meet the needs of those wishing to live a lay Cistercian life, but not living near the monastery.

Fr. Francis Steger OCSO for many years, with the permission of the Abbey of the Genesee, was our spiritual advisor and founder. The community initially grew quite rapidly with annual retreats and members living the life as best they could at a distance. This involved an initial inquiry, then 6 month postulancy where members discerned if indeed they were being called to this life. Members had assigned readings which included the Rule of Benedict and Norvene Vest's *No Moment Too Small* as well as gradual introduction to liturgy of the hours and *lectio divina*. Additionally, growth in contemplative prayer and Cistercian life in general was fostered through Fr. Francis' monthly teachings given to the community and distributed via mail by regional directors to the members throughout the United States.

In the 2 year novitiate members reflected on the book *Preferring Christ* which is a reflection on the Rule of Benedict as well as other readings which have varied somewhat over the years yet generally included the Cistercian Way by Andre Louf, Toward God or Sacred Reading by Thomas Casey OCSO, and Cistercian World by Pauline Matarasso in addition to other Cistercian writings.

Members then made their initial Act of Commitment for one year and renewed each year they wished to continue. In the early days, as now, the focus of living in the spirit of the way of life was emphasized by our monastic guides, attempting to apply the Cistercian charism to our lives as lay persons. We were called to practice daily *lectio divina*, liturgy of the hours or the rosary, contemplative prayer, initially the spiritual communion prayer if we were unable to make daily mass, and frequent attendance at Mass and reconciliation as well as serious commitments to write three reflection papers on readings each year as well as a review of life.

In our infancy, we were so well fed since Fr. Francis personally responded to all letters of initial inquiry as well as reflection papers throughout the years. We grew to over 60 members before this process had to change and we gradually took on more responsibility for our reflection papers going through a committed member director and letters were only responded to as needed. We continued to gather regionally and once a year annually with retreats on specific themes to help our formation. We began taping and videotaping for posterity and it was good we did.

Each year committed members still write a minimum of two reflections on books chosen for that year and a review of life reflection. It seems these reviews of life papers are most helpful as are the others in our call to continual conversion. We are called always to "begin again" in this school of charity. Our committed member director has commented how humbling it is to read everyone's reflections and see how they carry on striving to live the life. Indeed our founder gave us a good foundation from which to build, knowing we need to remain stable, yet obedient and always open to conversion.

We were, and are, also blest to be able to foster community through a newsletter and e-group and regional meetings wherever feasible. On e-group we could communicate daily, weekly or as needed. In addition to mail outs from the secretary monthly with Fr.'s teaching included, we also had a newsletter which included members' reflections, the news in the community such as the development of a formal

way of life and retreats upcoming as well as prayer requests. We often did community study online together as someone would post a section from the Rule and then members would share their reflections, including Fr. Francis sometimes. Later on we developed teleconference meetings for council.

Sometime in around 2007-2008 Abbey of the Genesee informed us they would no longer be able to sponsor us and Fr. Francis would continue to lead the local group but could not continue with us.

This was a watershed experience and we had a discernment retreat to listen to whether God willed us to continue as community. Not knowing how, exactly or where, we believed after this retreat we were indeed meant to continue as Christ himself is the center of the community. While a number of members left the community, those committed, remained and our Way of Life continued. We met for retreats and centered in the Eucharist and our prayer life completely trusting His mercy. We continued checking into which abbeys might consider sponsoring us since we wished to remain both, under the arm of the Cistercian Order and Mother Church.

Amazingly, some time back we had offered to share our retreat with another lay Cistercian who was not now living near her monastery. Long story short, we years later found out she was a founding member of the lay Cistercians at the monastery who eventually agreed to meet with us. At our discernment retreat though lengthy and arduous, we emerged as a phoenix, with committed members realizing we were called to continue.

In 2008, a group of our LCA council journeyed to Abbey of the Holy Spirit after providing one of their members a binder of information on our Way of Life, current membership, formation process, sample newsletters and teachings and desire to be under an abbey. Their Lay Cistercian council met with us and Fr. Anthony suggested in the meeting we be offered provisional affiliation and that we attend the international gathering in Spain. While we were all so humbled and grateful for this beyond belief, we were also blessed with a visit from their abbot, Fr. Francis Michael Stitener, who encouraged us to never stop living our Way of Life. His words were strong admonishment and balm to our weary souls as he encouraged us to live the life always. As he spoke telling us not to let anyone tell us we cannot be community, 'live it in the caves, go underground, if you have to', he said.

Since that powerful encounter, we sent two members to Spain and were present at the historic formation of the ILC and acceptance by the Cistercian order. We also were blessed to have participated in the 5th ILCC held in Iowa in 2011. We continue to live the life under the provisional affiliation with Abbey of the Holy Spirit retreating there annually, though for many members this journey is a difficult one to make due to distance. Nonetheless, a committed few always make it and we work to make it more doable for those who desire to attend. We have gone through many challenges in the committed membership who have suffered many personal losses, illnesses and trials in the last few years. Somehow we carry on, we realize by the sheer grace of God.

Many members are aging and yet committed and some are unable to live as they once did, so we are working on revising the wording of our way of life so as to make sure we remain faithful to our founders' teaching to 'pray as we can, and not as we cannot'. While some members find keeping many of the practices we cherish, very helpful in their spiritual journeys and living their other commitments in their lives, others have found they can only reliably incorporate certain essential elements. We also are in the process of presenting a more eremitical life option for those who can no longer travel for the annual retreat due to age or illness, but are faithful members in addition to an affiliate state for those

who may no longer be able to live the full commitment but wish to remain in the family. We also have already approved an option for making a permanent commitment with additional years living this way of life and continued studies.

While we currently have approximately 19 committed members, we have one 2nd year novice, one postulant and one inquirer who plans to apply in December to the postulancy. Much like our monastic fathers and mothers, we continue to listen as we are led through what sometimes seems like the end, yet becomes a new beginning. The documents on the ***Bond of Charity*** and ***Lay Cistercian Identity*** enlightens, affirms, and inspires us to continue our focus on the examples of our Cistercian Fathers and Mothers as guides. Open to the Spirit, but grounded in our Lay Cistercian way of life and desiring to love God and others as he loves, we carry on trusting, as Fr. Anthony, our current spiritual advisor says, in His Divine Mercy.