

KOPIA ASSOCIATES SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Introduction

Southern Star Abbey at Kopua, Hawkes Bay, New Zealand, was established in 1954 from Mount Melleray, Ireland. Its history reveals difficulties both at the outset and in subsequent years, and monastic vocations have not been easy to come by. The foundation in fact dwindled numerically. Nevertheless it steadily won the loyalty of many visitors and guests (not only Catholic) who found the Abbey a spiritual oasis and began asking for some form of continuing association with it.

The last fifteen years or so have seen a re-invigoration in the monastic community. Its role has developed into being among other things the heart of a Kopua *whanau* (= 'extended family' in Maori) which includes 'Companions' (temporary residents sharing the disciplined spiritual life and much of the work of the monastic community – especially its hospitality to guests), and 'Associates', Lay Cistercians seeking to live out something of the Cistercian charism in their daily lives. Beyond them lie a circle of 'inquirers' and 'friends' who value their own continuing links with Kopua. The monastic community remains Catholic, but Companions and Associates include other Christians. Although the number of monks remains static at the moment, the rest of the *whanau* is growing.

The emergence of Associates

As a new Abbot, Brian Keogh (now in his third term) took notice of the requests of returning guests for some form of continuing association with the monastery. He, another monk, and an (Anglican) diocesan priest researched what was happening elsewhere, especially in the USA, and presented a summary of this information to those interested. Feedback indicated that most New Zealand inquirers were looking for something not too formal; not too demanding; flexible; inclusive; and embracing a range of people.

A foundation document was prepared which covered aims, formation, oversight and some hopes for the future.

"Aims: The Benedictine and Cistercian spirit is extended in a bond of charity through the partnership of the monastic community with associates. The Cistercian founders were described as lovers of the brethren and lovers of the place. These deeply ingrained phrases also translate to those who now seek to be united as associates of Southern Star Abbey. Through the impetus received in this association with Kopua, associates are encouraged to embody this spirit in their own lives, as lovers of the brothers and sisters and lovers of the place in which they themselves live. These and other such themes from Benedictine and Cistercian treasures will provide rich resources for associates' reflection in the time ahead, as they seek to:

- Model their lives more deliberately on the values enshrined in the vows of stability, conversion of life and obedience.
- Make a commitment to a manner of life in which prayer, reflection, work and recreation are expressive of a balanced and healthy life in their particular context.
- Discern appropriate expression for Benedictine and Cistercian values of community, solitude, simplicity and hospitality within their life and apostolate."

'Formation' focussed on preliminary formation prior to recognition as an Associate, though it did point forward beyond that. A central goal was the development of an appropriate personal Rule of Life (and these Rules have been the basis on which the Abbot has formally recognised Associates). A structure for resourcing formation was sketched out, with a national Coordinator appointed by the Abbot, and regular newsletters and study courses foreshadowed, covering the essential Benedictine/Cistercian bases. Retreats and regional Associate groups were encouraged, though not made a requirement. There was little structure or indication of how lay community self-government might develop.

Under *'Ecumenical'* the document stated:

“A high proportion of interest in Kopua associates is ecumenical.

We rejoice in the possibility of venturing further in co-operation with members of churches who recognise in Saint Benedict an ideal and model of ecclesial life whose roots predate the divisions of Western Christianity.”

And from the beginning, the Associate Community has been ecumenical; Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and Presbyterians have shared in exploring and seeking to practise Cistercian spirituality (and members of other Churches have dipped their toes in). As of now, Anglicans slightly outnumber Catholics; this may change tomorrow; no one will notice whether it does or doesn't.

On 14 September 2002, the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, Kopua Associates came into being, and its first National Coordinator was appointed.

The journey since then:

It has been one of:

- steady numerical expansion;
- a slow growth of structure;
- attempts to develop community;
- the effects of geographical dispersion and of the cultural individualism which shaped the earliest years;
- the influence of the International Lay Cistercian Encounters;
- and the emergence of a clear strategy and structure for formation in the charism.

Numerical expansion: there are now fifty recognised Associate, with five more in Preliminary Formation, and several more about to enter that stage, and a steady flow of inquirers – a happy situation, but with logistic consequences and implications. Not least of these is the inability of the monastery physically to accommodate all the Associates simultaneously.

Development of more structure: Notwithstanding the initial reluctance to go down the road of some more elaborately and rigidly structured Lay Cistercian communities elsewhere – a reluctance still very much in evidence – step by step we have had to organise ourselves more intentionally. This development has been impeded by the fact that we do not and cannot meet together as an entire community, and progress in agreement and decision-making is necessarily slow. We have still to create a Constitution and Guidelines, but hope to have them in place sometime in 2015.

Attempts to develop more community: The foundation document did envisage a measure of community amongst Associates, but three things strongly pushed in the other direction:

- A slow start to what minimal structure had originally been envisaged. One early Associate writes: 'I remember asking X what the requirements were he just said to love the Lord and continue doing the good works I am involved in there were no other requirements at that initial beginning....I was asked to write my rule of life which I did and...presented it and not long after that I received an official letter of acceptance from Abbot Brian I can remember thinking there has to be more to this and that took some time [to come through]'
- The basic individualism of New Zealand society. This influences so much of the spiritual and religious life of our Churches.
- The effects of geographical dispersion. Candidates were accepted from all parts of New Zealand, and the mobility of modern society helped scatter us further. The average distance we have to travel to our monastery is 300km – the two furthest over 1000 km (and the two Associates who now live in Australia are not included in this calculation). It's as if the Lay Cistercians of Ste Marie du Désert near Toulouse in southern France had on average to travel from La Rochelle, Lyons, Majorca, or Burgos, some from as far as Belgium or Gibraltar, and two from the other side of the Atlantic.

A de facto culture of individualism took root, within which relationships among Associates were slow to develop (and not significantly shaped or supported by structure). This in turn meant the inhibition of authentic Benedictine/Cistercian formation, which best takes place in community because the Rule of Benedict is all about 'community' (amongst other things).

The tide began running more in the direction of community when two things happened: (a) some Associates began advocating it, and (b) the influence of the International Lay Cistercian Encounter became felt, after Clairvaux 2005 and especially after Huerta 2008. (Kopua Associates have been represented at the three Encounters from 2005.)

The influence of the International Lay Cistercian Encounters: The great light of Huerta was the unanimity around the concepts of 'call' and 'charism' and what that charism meant for Lay Cistercians. We are *called* to live out that *charism, together*. A survey questionnaire among Kopua Associates revealed a majority desiring more 'intentional community', and discerning their own spiritual identity as lying within the Lay Cistercian Identity document.

Since then, we have formalised our relationship with the monastic community as a 'Community of Associates', not just as individuals; formed local/regional groups of Associates (to counter our geographical dispersion); and focussed on formation strategy, structure and resources. We have been able to see ourselves in much wider context. The present National Coordinator has been able to draw on resources and personal contacts in the world-wide Lay Cistercian community to enrich the Community of Kopua Associates, both directly and indirectly.

A continuing double path: There is nevertheless a perceptible difference between those Associates who seek to participate in and foster community, and those who prefer the de facto individualism established at the beginning. The difficulty with the latter is that it is not easy to distinguish between those who are heroically living out the charism alone from

those who have fallen by the wayside. In particular, it is difficult to establish who has embraced the call to continuing formation from those who has not. A generous inclusiveness nevertheless continues to be characteristic of Kopua Associates as a Lay Cistercian community.

Those Associates embracing community are shaping a culture which is becoming the norm for inquirers now entering Preliminary Formation. The ambiguity of the double path will continue, but will be resolved over time.

Formation: The last three years has seen increasing attention given to formation, aided by the clarity about Lay Cistercian identity achieved at Huerta (2008) and the discussions about formation before, at and after Dubuque (2011). We have developed email study courses (based on a sort of group lectio facilitated by the National Coordinator), and have established a clear statement of principles and practice in three documents approved by the Abbot (*Rationale of Cistercian Formation; Guidelines; & Stages of Formation*). The first document drew on international discussions before during and after Dubuque; the second on a Gethsemane document; and the third from reflection on our own context. The four local groups are becoming more intentional about formation, which means that community is increasingly formative for a majority of Associates. One potential strength is the presence among us of a number of spiritual directors, in a ratio of about 1:8.

The essential structure of the Associate Community will most probably emerge out of the structure needed to support formation in the charism.

Vulnerability and ministry: We are a varied bunch of people, but two commonalities stand out. One is personal vulnerability, and the other is richness of ministry. A high proportion of Associates experience continuing illness (physical or psychological) within themselves or within their immediate family circle. Sometimes this is the reason why they sought out the healing oasis of Southern Star Abbey in the first place. The second, richness of ministry in their daily lives (whether as lay people or clergy), is equally evident. If Associates ceased their quiet anonymous ministry, many fine things would grind to a halt at one level or another of the society around them. It is humbling for the National Coordinator to have some privileged insight into this, as he also has in the pastoral care of the vulnerable.

In the gracious dispensation of God, vulnerability and ministry are intimately linked. And authentic spiritual community among Associates is slowly building as we become vulnerable to one another and pray for one another more and more, both systematically, and in response to urgent needs. In particular, the devastating Christchurch earthquakes of 2010-2011 brought Associates together in prayer and mutual care, both nationally and in Christchurch itself. On the face of things, it was ironic that during this period a number of us were participating in our formation study on 'Stability'. Yet doing so was hugely relevant; our Christchurch Associates were living the values of 'stability' in their response to the urban tragedies around them and touching them, and the reflections they shared were real and precious.

The generosity of the monastic community

Kopua Associates are very blessed by the monastic community they are linked with. It is not only that the monks consented to be part of the journey from the beginning; they have gone on to embrace the venture, and to model for us, in their deep hospitality to us, the spirit which we Associates must live out in the world beyond enclosure. Our next formation study - yet to be prepared – will be on precisely that: hospitality. Rightly understood, this goes to the heart of the Benedictine/Cistercian charism, as it is being lived out in Aotearoa New Zealand.

A poet speaks

James K. Baxter (now dead) is an iconic New Zealand poet. A Catholic convert and a controversial prophetic figure who was no friend of the Establishment (secular or ecclesial), he experimented with alternative communal living, and interacted with and learned from the monastic community at Kopua. These words he wrote (*A Cast-Iron Programme for Communal Activity...*) resonate with the spirit of Kopua:

“Feed the hungry;
Give to the thirsty;
Give clothes to those who lack them;
Give hospitality to strangers;
Look after the sick;
Bail people out of jail, visit them in jail, and look after them when they come
out of jail;
Go to neighbours’ funerals;
Tell other ignorant people what you in your ignorance think you know;
Help the doubtful clarify their minds and make their own decisions;
Console the sad; reprove sinners, but gently, brother, gently;
Forgive what seems to be harm done to yourself;
Put up with difficult people;
Pray for whatever has life, including the spirits of the dead.

When these things are done, Te Wairua Tapu [*the Holy Spirit*] comes to live in our hearts, and doctrinal differences and difficulties begin to vanish like the summer snow.”

‘Kopua’ in Maori means ‘deep pool’.

Pray for the Kopua whanau.

Peter Stuart, National Coordinator, 2014