

Synthesis: Spiritual Path of Lay Cistercian Communities

“In you is the source of life, by your light we see the light”

Psalm 36, V 9

Synthesis of the texts presented by English-language Lay Cistercian communities who are members of the International Association.

The International Coordinating Committee of the International Association of Lay Cistercian Communities (IALCC) proposes to prepare this document in preparation for the International Meeting to be held in Lourdes (Fr) in June 2014. The "Spiritual Path" is the central theme of this international meeting. Fifteen of the 23 English-language lay communities who are members of the IALCC presented their community spiritual journey.

1. abdijsgroep koningsoord
2. Associates of Iowa Cistercians
3. Kopua Associates of Southern Star Abbey
4. Cistercian Lay Associates of Ave Maria
5. Cistercian Lay Associates of Bethlehem Abbey
6. Conversi
7. Fr. Tansi Lay Cistercians
8. Lay Cistercian Associates of Assumption Abbey
9. Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani Abbey
10. Lay Cistercians of Holy Cross Abbey
11. Lay Cistercians of Holy Spirit Monastery
12. Lay Contemplative Associates (Holy Spirit)
13. Oblate *Community Zisterzienserkloster Langwaden*
14. *Ecumenical Lay Associates of the Holy Spirit*
15. Weggemeinschaft St. Benedikt Zisterzienserkloster Langwaden

The texts have been prepared on the basis of this proposal:

Could your lay Cistercian community reflect on the milestones and stages that have marked the rhythm of your progress? How has your community been able to overcome periods of crisis?

Thinking about the benefits of sharing these experiences, we offer you the opportunity to share at the next encounter. With this goal we ask you to write your common experiences (not individual) of your lay Cistercian way – difficulties, benefits, resources to face crises, evolution, light (easy) and dark (difficult) times. In summary, all which makes it possible to incarnate the lay Cistercian life in the world. To assist, it may be important to refer to the lay Cistercian document adopted unanimously in Huerta (2008), the ILC statutes adopted in Dubuque (2011), as well as the work on formation that was started in Dubuque and which will continue with this encounter.

The International Committee, having read and reflected on all the submissions received, extract from each of them embodied examples of Lay Cistercian values given in the Identity document. This will create a joint document that will be submitted so it can be worked on by your lay communities in preparation for the meeting. This same document will be worked in Lourdes by language groups.

Importantly, virtually all lay communities, before entering the reflection on the spiritual path, have made a reflection of their journey. This historical part will not be collected in this synthesis as the Spiritual Path is our focus as a result of this journey. It should also be noted that all the work has been done communally, so the result is the sum of the Spiritual Path of each of the members of the Lay Cistercian Communities.

We can say that in all the works you can see clear progress towards the values that make the core of our vocation show the importance of formation.

The four sections in the *Lay Cistercian Identity* document (Huerta 2008) are: 1. Lay Cistercian Vocation, 2. Lay Cistercian Life, 3. Lay Cistercian community, and 4. Bond with the Monastery and the Cistercian Family. We will develop this synthesis starting from these sections and in the same order, identifying the values contained in section 2 of the document, and signifying everything related to the formation and incorporation documents of the Association.

1. Lay Cistercian Vocation

Men and women have described the initial seeds of their vocation as Lay Cistercians as a “quiet and humble response” to the prompting of the Holy Spirit which led them to seek out resources and opportunities for strengthening their own spiritual growth. Within the prayerful environment of Cistercian monasteries where they were welcomed with warmth and hospitality, they soon found themselves drawn to the Cistercian Charism and its emphasis on contemplative prayer, simplicity of Life, and loving trust in God as modeled by Jesus Christ. Many experienced a sense of healing and peace which they understood as an invitation to recognize the face of Jesus in others, especially the poor and homeless. For many men and women, what began as an attraction soon grew into the desire to learn more about Cistercian life – not just to study it, but more importantly to live it as lay men and women in the world.

At the same time they were discovering others like them who shared the same yearning. As one person remarked, “We noticed there was a real longing for more spirituality in our daily life and for sharing this longing with others.” This yearning did not escape the notice of monks and nuns in the order and thanks to their generous response, the Lay Cistercian Vocation began to take shape as small groups of men and women from diverse backgrounds gathered together to be supported in their attempts to apply monastic values and practices to their lives outside the monastery.

Lay Cistercian groups have needed to develop workable leadership structures without becoming overly prescriptive while at the same time providing what was necessary for groups to sustain themselves. In most cases Abbots and Abbesses were clear that “the lay community should develop on its own, seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit, rather than to be established by the Monastery.” This has been a major task. At first many newly emerging groups were able to depend on the natural skills of individuals among them who took on leadership and planning responsibilities. “*One person became leader in a natural way, he coordinated the activities, but over time the task became too heavy for one person and it became apparent that it would be better to share those responsibilities.*” In response to these kinds of challenges, Lay Cistercian communities have created a variety of different approaches to leadership (most of which involve electing members to positions on councils or committees.) In addition most groups have developed, or are in the process of developing Constitutions, Statutes and Guidelines modeled on those of the monastery.

2. Lay Cistercian Life

When people describe what is important to them about their Lay Cistercian life they often mention their desire for a solidarity in faith that is hard to find in today's world where it can be difficult to live an authentic Christian life. They discover that they have found a spiritual home when they become members of Lay Cistercian communities and begin to make important changes in their lives as Christians.

Lay Cistercians continue to count on the guidance and support of their monastic brothers and sisters in order to discover how the wisdom of the Cistercian Way can enable them to live more fully in the spirit of the Gospels. "It is an ongoing challenge to make sure that we all focus on the application of the charism to life outside the monastery and not allow the focus to become theoretical." This is one of the benefits of traveling the Cistercian Path in the company of others who are also being led in the same direction. Not only do Lay Cistercians come together to learn from the monks and nuns, they are also learning from one another as they share their insights and experiences about what it means to apply Cistercian values and practices to everyday life outside the monastery.

As Lay Cistercians explore what is at the heart of Cistercian spirituality they are constantly being challenged to find practical applications in order for the Charism to bear fruit in their lives. Through dialogue and discussion with others in their Lay Cistercian communities, men and women are given opportunities to benefit from the insights of others, share one another's joys and sorrows and help one another strive to be faithful and accountable. Lay Cistercians recognize the importance of helping one apply what they are learning when they come together to the life they are living when they must go their separate ways.

3. Lay Cistercian Community

While many people are initially drawn to monasteries for personal reasons, Lay Cistercians have discovered that their call to be a particular expression of Christian spirituality as embodied in the Cistercian Charism is not merely a call for themselves alone. "What keeps us coming back each month is the realization that no one follows Jesus privately. We do so together. It is this emphasis on the communal nature of the Lay Cistercian vocation that enables us to build and sustain relationships with one another based on mutual respect, trust and cooperation." It involves responsibilities to the community as a whole and that often bring with it unique challenges. "It has not been smooth all the way through," said one member from a Lay Cistercian Group in Africa, "but the difficult times made the entire process worthy."

Other Lay Cistercian communities agree that their fraternal bonds are strengthened by confronting problems openly and directly. "From time to time personality conflicts have arisen. We have 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 Christian, compassionate, and consistent with our relationship with the monasteries." Meeting volatile issues head on has proved to be a blessing for communities because it has taught them that they can handle problems constructively and deal with inevitable challenges as people of diverse needs and temperaments endeavor to build a community of respect based on the Rule of St. Benedict. "Working closely together brought out more aspects of community life, and in the process we learned firsthand about life together and

what we must be willing to accept and live through in love in order to become a community. 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."

Strong Lay Cistercian communities have enabled men and women from diverse backgrounds to build and sustain relationships with one another based on mutual respect, trust and cooperation. It can be characterized by what Dom Bernardo Olivera calls a "spirituality of communion" which he has described as *"sharing the joys and sufferings of our brothers and sisters; sensing their desires and attending to their needs; offering them true and profound friendship. . .it implies the ability to see what is positive in others, to welcome it and to prize it as a gift from God."*

4. Link to the Monastery and the Cistercian Family

Lay Cistercians are indebted to their monasteries for the important roles monks and nuns continue to play in supporting and guiding those who are called to a Lay Cistercian vocation. The monastic communities have been generous in their support, not only by identifying monks and nuns to serve as monastic liaisons and formators, but also in the hospitality they have shown whenever possible by providing space for meetings and retreats. Lay Cistercians are deeply grateful for the warmth and affirmation they have received from their monastic brothers and sisters. "It is not only that they 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 must live out in the world." It has also been a source of great joy to know that most Lay Cistercian groups have been formally recognized in written statements of acceptance. "Having the recognition of the monks changed our lives and our relation with the abbey forever. We were indeed accepted."

The relationship between the monastic community and their associate communities is one of mutual respect and understanding, an embodiment of the Cistercian charism, joined together spiritually as members of both communities continue to pray for one another. "Prayer links us to the monastic community and forms the links between the lay members too."

And while the example set by the monastic community continues to be a source of encouragement and inspiration for the Lay Cistercians, "we have frequently heard our monastic brothers and sisters say that our fidelity to the Cistercian charism as we adapt it to our lives outside the monastery has strengthened them in living their own vocation."

Formation Itinerary

Drawn to monasteries because of a longing to share in the Cistercian Charism, individuals need to be provided with guidance and support in order to understand what is involved in living that Charism on a day to day basis. "It is through our lived experiences that we are formed in what it means to be a lay Cistercian. Thus our formation depends on our prayerful efforts to make significant changes in our lives as a result of what we are learning about Cistercian values and practices, and to support one another in our efforts to be faithful." Most groups are able to begin working towards this goal by meeting regularly at a monastery for monthly meetings that involve opportunities to pray together, listen to a teaching presentation, share a meal, and support one another through dialogue and discussion. In addition, some groups spend time in silent meditation, participate in the Eucharist, do Lectio Divina together or say the Rosary. However, geographic constraints make it impossible for every Lay Cistercian Community to gather

together on a monthly basis. This has posed a number of challenges that are being met creatively including the prayerful use of technology including Skype and the internet, as well as the opportunity for members to come together throughout the year for retreats.

Each Lay Cistercian Community has, with the guidance of its monastic liaisons, worked tirelessly to create a workable formation program that meets the unique needs of that particular group in order to help members acquire values, practices and spiritual disciplines that are at the heart of Cistercian spirituality. In addition to using the Rule of St. Benedict as a guide, most communities have developed programs of initial formation in order to focus on core topics such as contemplative prayer, lectio divina, Cistercian documents, the Liturgy of the Hours, ora et labora, humility, and other foundational elements of the Cistercian way of life.

Most groups have found it important to provide a means for members who have completed their initial formation to make a formal statement of their resolve to be faithful to a way of life based on what they have learned. Sometimes called promises or commitments they are not intended to be vows, but rather to serve as a public statement of fidelity in the presence of their associate community and monastic brothers and sisters.

Groups have been challenged to continue developing on-going formation programs to support the needs of members who have made their commitments. In addition to providing them with opportunities and resources for deepening what they have been learning, they are often asked to take on more leadership within the community and are sometimes called upon to take on teaching roles in order to avoid taxing the resources of the monastery. Those responsible for formation in their Lay Cistercian communities recognize that it is not an intellectual process. According to the *Ratio Institutionis* of the Cistercian Order, "it is essentially by living out the various aspects of Cistercian conversatio that a person gradually becomes ever more truly a Cistercian." It is through his or her lived experiences that a person is formed in what it means to be a Lay Cistercian. It involves prayerful support of the community in helping individuals apply what they have learned so that they can make important changes in their lives. "The entire gathering day is part of spiritual formation for all members of the community. We continually stress that formation does not stop with the completion of the formal formation process and profession of promises. It is a lifetime process." Or as one Lay Cistercian has said, "we like to say that after making the Promises, we then spend the rest of our lives trying to live up to them." Thus, Lay Cistercians, like their monastic fathers and mothers continue to listen as they are led through what sometimes seems like the end, yet becomes a new beginning. "The documents on the Bonds of Charity and Lay Cistercian Identity enlighten, affirm, and inspire us to continue our focus on the examples of our Cistercian Fathers and Mothers as guides."

Membership in the Association

Since the establishment of the International Association, Lay Cistercians have continued to discover the common bond of contemplative prayer that finds expression in the Cistercian charism. "We are pleased that our purpose and way of life are consistent with the wider Cistercian world and we cherish being a part of the Cistercian family.

Conclusion

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 in

community. Through the impetus received in this association, members 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 treasuries will provide rich resources for members' reflection 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.

We are varied but two commonalities stand out: personal vulnerability and richness of ministry. In the gracious dispensation of God, vulnerability and ministry are intimately linked. And authentic spiritual community is slowly building as we become more vulnerable to one another and pray for one another more and more, both systematically, and in response to urgent needs.

We aim at bearing witness and shaping the world in faith and responsible action.

Testimonials

As we look back on our journey together these past years, we are grateful for how the Spirit has guided us along the way. We have grown from a handful of like-minded men and women interested in contemplative spirituality to a community of over 50 people whose common vision is being shaped by Cistercian values and practices.

We were blessed with a visit from an Abbott 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. He told us not to let anyone tell us we cannot be community, "live it in the caves, go underground if you have to" he said.

We aim at bearing witness and shaping the world in faith and responsible action. Following the Cistercian Charism we want to live the Gospel in the middle of the city. To us it is a life-giving way and a vital way of evangelization in today's world.

Our group is characterized by a quiet and heartfelt loyalty to each other, supportive of each other in sickness or problems, we cannot look to any major crises or extremes of darkness or light but to a gradual, evolution of growth in the spirituality of the members. We are grateful for the fellowship with each other, spiritual nourishment and the generosity of the Abbot who gives his time and wisdom to the group. From this we find the resources and grace to face the difficulties of life and to follow God's providence in all things.