**PLAN OF LIFE**

**for**

**Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani Abbey**

***C****ontemplation is the highest expression of man's intellectual and spiritual life*.

*It is that life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is spiritual*

*wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is gratitude for life,*

*for awareness and for being. It is a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us*

*proceed from an invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant source. Contemplation is,*

*above all, awareness of the reality of that Source.*

 *New Seeds of Contempation*

 **Thomas Merton**

**INTRODUCTION**

In spite of what may seem to be the contrary, there is a deep interest and need expressed

by a growing number of persons in our contemporary society to live their lives in a more

authentic Christian manner. The desire for authentic Christian living leads them to heed

an inner call to adopt a contemplative spirituality and lifestyle.

Many of the psychological and social forces in our consumer society present a distraction

for those who seek a deeper meaning in their life experience. The search for meaning and

authenticity in one's life leads a person on a faith journey to the discovery of his or her

true self, and to a deeper level of insight regarding the meaning of human existence. It

can also lead one to a renewed relationship with God, the source of our existence, with

the Christ, who reveals our God, and with all of humanity, with whom we share God's

spirit, the spirit of God within us.

Throughout the ages Christian tradition has gifted us with persons who have given us a

variety of approaches to spiritual growth. The process of monastic renewal that began at

the end of the eleventh century and continued through the twelfth century resulted in the

founding of the Order of Cistercians, with its characteristic spirituality of monastic

simplicity of prayer and living.

The writings of Bernard of Clairvaux, William of St. Thiery, and Aelred of Rievaulx, for

instance, gave expression and impetus to the development of a Cistercian form of

Christian spirituality. This was an attempt to return to the original simplicity of life and prayer that Benedict of Nursia had envisioned in his rule for monks.

Contemporary Western society has been affected by extremes of materialism and

individualism that was similarly characteristic of the twelfth century. Like the twelfth

century the later half of the twentieth century began a time of religious and spiritual

renewal. This spirit of renewal in our time has been given much thrust by the reforms of

the Second Vatican Council.

The development of a personal spirituality for laypersons had been neglected during

periods of Christian history. Religious literature treating such subjects as methods of

prayer and elements of spiritual growth, for instance, was mostly directed to clergy and to

members of religious institutes. Bonding between laypersons and religious communities

has emerged as a result of new emphasis on spiritual development for all members of

Christian communions. Traditional third order and oblate programs have expanded to

include a growing number of associate programs connected to religious and monastic

communities. This is based on a sense of sharing elements of spiritual growth while

maintaining distinctive lifestyles.

Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani Abbey is one such associate program of Christian women

and men that formed in the late 1980s as Cistercian Lay Contemplatives. It provided a

network of support for those who desire to integrate elements of Cistercian spirituality in

their lives. CLC was formed as a result of a dialogue among like minded individuals who

were connected by a monk of the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky U.S.A. CLC has

evolved into a more structured association with a defined discernment/formation and is

now known as Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani Abbey. LCG has an informal relationship

with the Abbey.

The founding group of CLC members composed the following **Plan of Life** as a rule or

guide for integrating Cistercian values and spiritual practices for its members.

**PURPOSE OF THE PLAN OF LIFE**

The ultimate value of our human existence and the goal of the Christian life is union with

God. This reality has been revealed to humanity in the person of Jesus the Christ. The

Gospels articulate this reality. The Spirit of God enlightens our understanding of this

reality and encourages our response in faith.

Our faith response is given expression through prayer and a commitment to spiritual

growth. Our faith journey will lead us to a discovery of our inner depths where the spirit

of God also dwells. We are challenged to expand our consciousness of God's unique

presence in community with others and in all of creation. In other words it is through

God's call that one is invited to accept the gift of contemplation in which a deeper

dimension of God's presence is revealed.

The purpose of the Plan of Life, therefore, is 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. These elements can be adapted to and are compatible with the demands of a secular/lay lifestyle. It is obvious that personal discipline of time and activity is required.

It is also hoped that the Plan of Life will assist Lay Cistercians become more centered

and quiet as they progress in their spiritual journey. It is expected that the elements of the

Plan of Life may serve as the basis of ongoing dialogue between Lay Cistercians and

members of the monastic community of the Abbey of Gethsemani.

**CISTERCIAN SPIRITUALITY**

Since the thirteenth century founders of religious orders have developed a variety of

spiritualities, such as Franciscan, Benedictine, Carmelite, Dominican, or Ignatian (Jesuit),

for the purpose of enhancing formation in the Christian life. Lay persons in turn have

adapted elements of these spiritual charisms to their ordinary life as Christians. It is in

this same vein that the characteristics of Cistercian monastic spirituality have recently

attracted laypersons to explore the integration of some elements of Cistercian spirituality

with their own Christian formation.

The basis of formation in the Cistercian/Benedictine tradition is the Rule of St. Benedict.

Although the Rule was written in the sixth century as a rule of life for Christian monks in

the Western Church, laypersons have found portions of the Rule applicable to them in

their secular lifestyle.

For persons who choose to adopt a contemplative spirituality according to the Cistercian

tradition, it is suggested that they become familiar with the Rule of St. Benedict, attain a

general knowledge of Cistercian history, and develop an understanding of Cistercian

spirituality. The following list of reading material is recommended for one's initial study

and reflection:

*Rule of St. Benedict*

*Spirituality for Everyday Living: An Adaptation of the Rule of St. Benedict.* Brian Taylor (Liturgical Press,

1992)

*The Cistercian Way.* Andre Louf (Cistercian Publications, 1989)

*Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict*. Esther de Waal (The Liturgical Press, 1984)

*Wisdom Distilled from the Daily: Living the Rule of St.Benedict Today*. Joan Chittister, OSB (Harper

Collins Publishers, 1991)

*A School of Love: The Cistercian Way to Holiness*. M. Basil Pennington, O.C.S.O. (Morehouse

Publishing, 2000)

*The Way of Simplicity: The Cistercian Tradition*. Esther de Waal (OrbisBooks,1998)

*The Waters of Siloe.* Thomas Merton (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers,1949)

**ELEMENTS OF THE PLAN OF LIFE**

The Plan of Life for Lay Cistercians parallels elements that are characteristic of

Cistercian monastic life. However, it is understood that persons who follow this guide are

immersed in the cares and concerns of life in the secular world. By living their lives

according to these guidelines, they would give a contemplative witness where they reside,

work, pray, and share community.

Adopting the Plan of Life demonstrates a commitment to daily prayer, lectio, study, and

time for silence. It also suggests that a person develop a disposition that is conducive to

contemplative spirituality, as well as engage in some form of service or ministry in one's

community. The Plan suggests the minimum commitment a person would make. The

four major elements of the Plan of Life are:

**PRAYER**

Prayer is essential for spiritual growth. Prayer must be valued as an expression of our

relationship with God, a relationship that is nurtured by a transformed consciousness of

the presence of God in our inner depths. Our private contemplative prayer and

participation in liturgical worship should be mutually supportive. One should include the

following types of prayer in their daily/weekly prayer experiences:

**Eucharistic Liturgy -** One should prepare for and more attentively enter into the

celebration of Sunday Eucharistic liturgy. Previewing and studying the Scripture

readings for Sunday liturgy is recommended. (Note: For those Christians who are not

Catholic but are interested in adopting the CLC Plan of Life, it would be expected that

they participate in the Sunday public worship service of their primary faith community.)

**Liturgy of the Hours** - The celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours (Divine Hours) has

been a part of monastic liturgical tradition. The reforms of Vatican II have encouraged

the restoration of the Liturgy of the Hours for all faithful as public prayer of the entire

Church. It is not necessary that the hours be prayed in common. However, it should be

understood that when The Hours are prayed, it is from the stance that the entire Church is

praying. The minimum recommendation is that Morning Prayer (Lauds) and Evening

Prayer (Vespers) be prayed. The monastic/clerical form of the Office is not appropriate

for everyone. A simpler version, consisting of a couple of psalms, a Scripture reading,

and a prayer of petition or thanksgiving is sufficient.

**Lectio Divina -** Lectio Divina is the prayerful and reflective reading of Scripture or any

inspired writing with a view of letting God speak to us in and through the Word (divine

reading). In lectio divina God speaks to and addresses each person individually. It

requires a discipline which allows us to enter our own heart, that place where we can

truly hear and welcome the Word of God. Lectio is an effort to place ourselves in the

presence of God. We must free our minds and hearts for this encounter so that God can

draw near to us and we can hear his word.

**Contemplative Prayer -** At least a half hour a day should be spent in quiet prayer and

meditation. It is suggested that this time be divided between morning and evening. This

is the time to make a conscientious effort of quieting and centering oneself in prayer so as

to celebrate God's presence within.

**STUDY**

It is recommended that a person spend time each week reading and studying Sacred

Scripture and engaging in spiritual reading. This activity is an integral part of one's

spiritual development. Scriptural and spiritual reading support one's prayer experience.

**Scripture Reading** - There are several biblical commentaries and study guides available

for use in studying Scripture. Particular attention should be given to the Gospels.

**Spiritual Reading -** There are numerous spiritual writers, both classical and

contemporary, whose topics include methods of prayer, spirituality, elements of spiritual

growth, the contemplative experience, etc., who are sources for spiritual reading. The

writings of the Cistercian fathers and mothers should especially be considered.

**Supplemental Sources -** One should also consider resources such as media, workshops,

and lectures that treat relevant spiritual topics.

**WORK**

Manual labor has always been a valued part of Cistercian monastic life. Early Cistercian

writers developed a theology of work whereby they considered human persons as cocreators

when engaged in authentic work activity. Although manual labor is not always

possible for everyone, it should be the attitude of one to engage willingly in productive

manual labor when the opportunity is available. Work should be approached with a sense

of dedication, praise, and thanksgiving. One should perform his or her work duties as best

as possible.

**MODIFICATION OF LIFESTYLE (CONVERSION OF MANNERS)**

Those who feel they have received the gift of the Cistercian charism and have been called

to live a contemplative lifestyle according to the suggestions of the Plan of Life are not

attempting to escape the realities of secular life. While recognizing the responsibilities of

marriage, family and employment, they are embracing these commitments from a

contemplative stance, integrating silence, solitude, simplicity, stability and service into

their lives.

From one's inner self a person is able to connect with others and become more open and

responsive to their brokenness and poverty. From this disposition one would be expected

to share oneself, both spiritually and materially, with others in a spirit of building

community. It is the task of the contemplative to build authentic human relationships.

**Silence** - One should make a genuine effort spend time in silence during the day. The

amount of time will vary given one's availability. Silence will allow one to be more

centered and to discover one's inner depths.

**Solitude -** Likewise, one should also regularly spend time alone that allows for deeper

reflections and meditation.

**Simplicity -** A natural outcome of growth in the spiritual life is a desire to live more

simply. Moderation and discretion with respect to food, clothing, entertainment and

material goods are suggested. Simplicity is a virtue that is difficult to acquire in our

materialistic culture. The virtue of simplicity is very prominent in early Cistercian

writings.

**Stability -** A sense of stability keeps us grounded and committed to the spiritual path we

have chosen. It also enhances our disposition to be faithful to our vocation in life and our

love of God in all things.

**Service -** Living the Christian life to its fullness should challenge one to serve others.

This is how Gospel values of Christian love and justice are demonstrated. A person who

grows in the contemplative life is sensitive to the needs of others and is moved to serve.

Therefore, engaging in ministry and/or community service is expected.

**CONCLUSION**

The following suggestions supplement the **Plan of Life** for Lay Cistercians:

**Annual Retreat -** It is recommended that one spend a few days annually on a spiritual

retreat. An occasional day of reflection or prayer is also suggested. During these times it

is important to assess one's spiritual growth.

**Spiritual Direction/Mentoring** - A vital aspect of Cistercian spirituality is forming a

trusting relationship with a spiritual mentor or guide. One should be open to receive

spiritual guidance or direction.

**Spiritual Companioning -** It is also recommended that one seek out others (spiritual

friends) with whom to walk the spiritual journey. These relationships offer opportunities

for mutual sharing of personal experiences, spiritual insights, and challenges to spiritual

growth