

The Associates of the Iowa Cistercians Sowing New Seeds of Contemplation

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In terms of the 900-year history of the Cistercian Order, the Lay Cistercian movement is very young. Beginning in the early 1980's, it has spread across the world, and now more than 40 Cistercian monasteries have Lay Cistercian groups associated with them. Many men and women came to these groups after being introduced to contemplative spirituality through the writings of Thomas Merton. Although Merton himself did not anticipate the inception of this movement in his Order, he probably would not have been surprised by it.

For Merton, there was throughout his life a creative tension between being 'in the cloister' and 'in the world'. His own vocation is the story of how he attempted to resolve this tension while living in community and in the hermitage. Had he known lay men and women living in the world who considered themselves part of the Cistercian charism, he may have viewed them in the context of what he had written about the authentic renewal of monasticism.

What is needed is not only new rules, but new structures and new life. The new life stirs, but faintly, incoherently... What is...needed is a new outlook, and a new faith in the capacities of modern men to be monks in a new way... [A]uthentic renewal is going to demand a great deal of variety and originality in experimentation. The true strength of monasticism is to be sought in its capacity for renunciation, silence, prayer, faith and its realization of the cross in our life. All genuine renewal must seek life at the source of life: the cross and Resurrection of Jesus. Fortunately there are signs that such a renewal, though perhaps still tentative and painful, is trying to get underway.¹

1. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (New York: Image Books, 1973), pp. 29, 30.

[T]hose who have been deputed by the Church not only to pray for the world but also to attain a deeper level of experience and understanding should also, at least in some cases, be able to teach the ways of prayer to those living outside the cloister, besides providing them with a place of quiet and rest and interior renewal.²

In the years since Merton's death Cistercian monasteries throughout the world have opened their doors to growing numbers of lay men and women who are eager to apply monastic values and practices to their lives. In this article, we intend to explore some of the characteristics that Lay Cistercian groups have in common and to share the perspective of one particular group, the Associates of the Iowa Cistercians, which is uniquely involved with *two* Cistercian monasteries: one for men and one for women. Throughout, we will turn to selections from some of Merton's writings that in retrospect are relevant to a discussion of the Lay Cistercian movement and the people who are involved in it.

Who Are Lay Cistercians?

When asked what it means to be a Lay Cistercian, men and women typically describe what they believe to be a call by the Holy Spirit to the Cistercian tradition to nourish a long-felt spiritual hunger.

We are men and women, single and married, who feel called to follow the example of Christ as revealed in the Gospels. We have found that the Cistercian tradition flowing out of the *Rule of Saint Benedict* is particularly important and useful to our formation as lay contemplatives living in the world. Over the years we have been blessed by the Holy Spirit in being led to Cistercian monasteries. There we have been gifted with opportunities to observe and to participate in the consistency and harmony with which our monastic brothers and sisters incorporate prayer, sacred reading, and work into their daily routines, and the manner in which they embrace the Cistercian values and practices that shape their lives. We have all been enriched by our contact with Cistercian monks and nuns—those men and women who share in a charisma that supports and nurtures their commitment to a life focused on Christ. Through our participation and our involvement, we have discovered that many of these same Cistercian values and practices are relevant for those of us outside the monastic communities who wish to live in a Christ-centered way in the secular world.³

2. Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, p. 154.

3. Dennis Day, Trisha Day, Brenda Griffin, Jacqueline Rychlicki, Paco Ambrosetti, Mike Johnson, Margaret Radell, Patricia Shine, Thomas McDonnell, Connie May and Jim Andres, 'A Lay Response to the Reflections of Dom Bernardo Olivera on Charismatic [sic] Associations', *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 32.2 (1997), pp. 231-244 (235).

However, this calling by the Holy Spirit to live a life focused on monastic values and practices is not to a cloistered life, but rather to one lived in the midst of the world.

In the spring of 2002, nearly 100 people met in Conyers, Georgia, at Holy Spirit Monastery to participate in the second International Lay Cistercian Encounter. They represented 26 communities of Lay Cistercians from 10 different countries. They had gathered to share the ways they live out their participation in the Cistercian charism, and to draft a letter seeking a word of wisdom from the Abbots and Abbesses who would be meeting later that year at the Cistercian General Chapters in Rome. Amid the diversity of those present, it was apparent that similar values and practices bind together men and women who strive to live the Cistercian charism in the world. Some of the values and practices mentioned in the letter to the General Chapters include the Rule of St Benedict as a guide for living the gospel message, the value of *lectio divina*, an emphasis on individual, communal and liturgical prayer, the cultivation of interior silence and contemplation, and the importance of *conversatio morum* though conscious changes in behavior and lifestyle.

The Rule of St Benedict as a Guide for Living the Gospel Message

In observing monks and nuns whose lives are formed by the Rule of St Benedict, Lay Cistercians see how important a guide it is for those striving to put the gospel message of love, forgiveness and compassion into practice. Studying and discussing the Rule with one another in their associate communities gives them insight into how the Rule can help shape their own lives in union with Christ and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The Benedictine ascesis of silence, obedience, solitude, humility, manual labor, liturgical prayer, is all designed to unite us with the Mystical Christ, with one another in charity, and its aim to bring our souls under the complete dominance of the Holy Spirit. The Benedictine way of humility in the common life is precisely the best way to help us walk in the Spirit. . . . St Benedict makes it quite clear that the whole aim of the Benedictine life is to form Christ in us, to enable the Spirit of Christ to carry out, in our lives, actions worthy of Christ.⁴

While Benedict originally wrote his Rule for monks living in community, in recent years Lay Cistercians outside the monastery are finding it an invaluable guide for living a Christ-centered life.⁵ With its emphasis on

4. Thomas Merton, *The Monastic Journey* (Kansas City: Sheed Andrews & McMeel, 1977), p. 26.

5. A non-exhaustive list of books based on the Rule includes: Esther de Waal,

prayer, self-knowledge, mutual respect and concern for the needs of others, the Rule speaks as significantly to those who live outside monasteries as it does to those inside.

Lectio Divina in Everyday Life

Many people, especially Catholics, have grown up with only a passing familiarity with the Bible. And so it is not surprising that the first monastic tool most Lay Cistercians take from the monastery into their everyday lives is the ancient practice of *lectio divina*.⁶ Encountering Scripture and responding to the deeper meanings in images, symbols and metaphors nourishes the spiritual life of Lay Cistercians and makes it important for them to carve out pockets of time in which to read, listen and prayerfully reflect on the Word of God.

Individual, Communal and Liturgical Prayer in a Lay Setting

The desire to pray more authentically is why many Lay Cistercians are drawn to monasteries in the first place. And guidance in how to make prayer a central part of life is what keeps many of them coming back. Besides individual prayer, they quickly develop a genuine love for the Liturgy of the Hours and look forward to joining monks and nuns in this ancient prayer of the church. While it may be unrealistic for people who live outside the monastery to organize their family and work schedules around the entire Liturgy of the Hours, most Lay Cistercians incorporate some part of it into their daily prayer.

Interior Silence and Contemplation in the Midst of the World

Besides various expressions of prayer, Lay Cistercians also appreciate the importance of silence and solitude as a means of nurturing the

Seeking God: The Way of St Benedict (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1984); Norvene Vest, *No Moment Too Small* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1995); Joan Chittister, OSB, *Wisdom Distilled from Daily Living: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991); Julian Stead, OSB, *Saint Benedict: A Rule for Beginners* (New York: New City Press, 1993); Denis Huerre, OSB, *Letters to my Brothers and Sisters: Living by the Rule of St. Benedict* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994); Charles Cummings, OCSO, *Monastic Practices* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1986); Michael Casey, *Sacred Reading: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina* (Liguori, MO: Triumph Books, 1996).

6. 'This excellent monastic practice by which God's Word is heard and pondered, is a source of prayer and a school of contemplation, where the monk speaks heart to heart with God. For this reason, the brothers are to devote a fitting amount of time each day to such reading'. *Constitutions and Statutes of the Monks and Nuns of the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance* (Rome, 1990), p. 18.

contemplative dimension of their lives. Many of them credit the works of Thomas Merton on contemplative prayer with awakening their own desire for a more authentic interior life.

Let there always be quiet, dark churches in which men can take refuge. Places where they can kneel in silence. Houses of God filled with His silent presence. There, even when they do not know how to pray, at least they can be still and breathe easily. Let there be a place somewhere in which you can breathe naturally, quietly, and not have to take your breath in continuous short gasps. A place where your mind can be idle and forget its concerns, descend into silence, and worship the Father in secret.⁷

There must be a time of day when the man who makes plans forgets his plans, and acts as if he had no plans at all. There must be a time of day when the man who has to speak falls very silent. And his mind forms no more propositions, and he asks himself: Did they have a meaning? There must be a time when the man of prayer goes to pray as if it were the first time in his life he had ever prayed; when the man of resolutions puts his resolutions aside as if they had all been broken, and he learns a different wisdom: distinguishing the sun from the moon, the stars from the darkness, the sea from the dry land, and the night sky from the shoulder of a hill.⁸

But Lay Cistercians are in the world and they must contend with the distractions that come from living and working in a culture permeated with noise and activity. The stresses and responsibilities of family life do not usually provide spouses and parents with opportunity for solitude, and most people's workplaces are rarely quiet.

Nevertheless, Lay Cistercians work hard to find periods to be alone to nurture that quiet place within where contemplative prayer arises. They often rise early, getting up while the rest of the family is still asleep to have some time for quiet prayer before the day's schedule starts to unfold. Many have persuaded their families to cut back on television and radio and some have succeeded in eliminating them altogether. Many find ways to create brief moments of silence within their workdays. Some are aware of the times the Little Hours are being prayed at their monastery, and pause in the midst of what they are doing to join their monastic Brothers and Sisters in Terce, Sext or None.

Conversatio Morum as Conscious Change

Conversatio morum is one of the vows Cistercian monks and nuns make at their solemn profession. It represents a complete break from the ways of

7. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1967), pp. 82-83.

8. Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1955), p. 260.

the world and is rooted in gospel behaviors and lifestyle choices that are contrary to the world.

Conversion of manners means striving to change one's whole life and all one's attitudes from those of the world to those of the cloister. By conversion of manners we definitely consecrate our whole life to the service of God as monks, men who have turned their backs on the world, who have substituted the humility, chastity, poverty, renunciation of the cloister for the ambitions, comforts, pleasures, riches and self satisfaction of the world.⁹

Lay Cistercians do not make formal vows, but they do take to heart what they learn about Cistercian spirituality, consciously choosing to make significant changes in the way they live and relate to others. One of the first apparent changes is their approach to acquiring and possessing the various trappings of an overly indulgent materialistic culture. Many Lay Cistercians have made a conscious effort to simplify their shopping habits and to stay alert to the way advertisers lure them into buying things they don't need. Most Lay Cistercians also try to simplify the pace of their lives in order to introduce more balance into what they do with their time, energy and creativity. For most of them this involves conscious decisions about television and other forms of media, including the Internet. For many, one of the biggest changes in their lifestyle is the way they relate to people in their families, parishes and workplaces. They strive to be tolerant toward those who make demands on them, compassionate toward those who need their forgiveness, and patient with those who annoy, offend and irritate them.

The Associates of the Iowa Cistercians

It can certainly be argued that it is not necessary to be associated with a monastery to learn about monastic values and practices. Lay Cistercians, on the other hand, believe that it is not simply a matter of acquiring *information* about the Cistercian charism, but of *living* it. This is why it is important for them to have the guidance, support and example of Cistercian monks and nuns and why they associate themselves with particular monasteries. The Associates of the Iowa Cistercians (AIC) is especially fortunate in that it draws upon the wisdom of *two* Cistercian Communities: New Melleray and Our Lady of the Mississippi, both south of Dubuque, Iowa.

The AIC was founded in 1995 at the instigation of the Abbot of New Melleray. Today there are about 55 members who meet monthly at the monastery. Besides practical teaching sessions from the monks and the

9. Merton, *The Monastic Journey*, pp. 30-31.

nuns, the Associates pray the Little Hours of Terce, Sext and None as a group in addition to gathering together for half an hour of *lectio*, a period of silent meditation, a short business meeting, and individual and small-group interaction. Members eat together in silence while one of the group reads aloud—a practice suggested by the monks and nuns. Each meeting ends with a period of silent and then intercessory prayer.

Once a year, the AIC welcomes interested new members to an orientation and invitation to join the community. In addition, in the spirit of monastic *labora*, the AIC schedules an annual 'monastic workday' in which they work together side by side in silence, experiencing the balance and the interplay between work and prayer.

Encouragement and Support of the Two Communities

Founded in 1849, New Melleray takes its name from its motherhouse, Mount Melleray in County Waterford, Ireland. Over the past century and a half the monks of New Melleray have seen growth, hardship, loss and renewal. Built solidly upon traditions and observances steeped in centuries of Cistercian austerity and silence, the monastery today is home to 38 monks, many of whom can still recall the days before Vatican II. When New Melleray celebrated its one hundred and fiftieth anniversary in 1999, Our Lady of the Mississippi was scarcely 35 years old. Founded from Mount St Mary's Abbey in Wrentham during the period of change following Vatican II, Mississippi Abbey is steeped in newness and growth. Its identity has been shaped by the acceptance of new challenges despite risks that may have been involved. Initially it meant turning a ranch-style country home into a cloistered monastery and was followed by building an industry to support the women who lived there.

The Abbot and Abbess of both communities warmly welcomed and supported the formation of the AIC. They have been generous in extending hospitality and space for monthly meetings as well as in making it possible for members of both their communities to serve as teachers, formators, spiritual companions and mentors. They indeed are following Merton's suggestion that monks and nuns should 'teach the ways of prayer to those living outside the cloister'.¹⁰ For the 50 men and women of the AIC, however, some of whom drive over 400 miles to attend monthly meetings, what is most important about the things they learn at the monastery is what they take with them when they return home again. Learning about Cistercian values and practices from those who live the life changes the way AIC members live, pray and interact with

10. Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, p. 154.

others in their own families, parishes, workplaces and communities.

We believe the involvement of two separate Cistercian houses in the formation and support of the Iowa Associates is especially significant. Representatives from both monasteries are members of the AIC Leadership Council and help in planning monthly meetings and retreats, and in overseeing the formation program.

Monks and nuns play a major role in supporting every aspect of the AIC's spiritual growth. There are always at least three monastics present for AIC monthly meetings.¹¹ However, perhaps the most important contribution of the monks and nuns is in the area of formation. While much of the monthly meeting is spent together as a group, membership is divided into two formation tracks. Each of these meets separately for teaching presentations and discussions led by monastic formators from each monastery.

'Initial formation' is a program for new members to learn about core monastic values and practices and to begin discussing how they can be applied to their lives outside the monastery.¹² Towards the end of the initial formation period, which usually takes about three years, new members are encouraged to meet with the monastic formators to discern whether to continue pursuing a contemplative lifestyle outside the monastery as a *committed* member of the AIC. While members of the AIC do not take vows or enter into formal commitments with the two monasteries, they do have the opportunity to acknowledge publicly their personal resolve to apply Cistercian values and practices in their individual lives. They write their own commitment statements to reflect values and practices to which they will be faithful and they share these with the AIC and the communities of New Melleray and Our Lady of the Mississippi Abbeys during a simple ceremony.

On the advice of the monks and nuns, 'ongoing formation' continues as an essential component of AIC membership. Working under the direction of a monk or nun, those in ongoing formation study more deeply the work of early and contemporary monastic writers and continue their

11. AIC meetings are typically held at New Melleray inside the monastic enclosure at the invitation of the Abbot. The lack of space at Mississippi Abbey makes it impossible for the group to meet there.

12. Initial formation provides opportunities for learning about core monastic values and practices, including the Rule of St Benedict, *lectio divina*, Liturgy of the Hours, history of the Cistercian Order, and other topics that are fundamental to an understanding of Cistercian spirituality such as work, silence, prayer, meditation, etc. Ongoing formation makes a more in-depth examination of monastic values and practices and focuses increasingly on group interaction, application of monastic practices in the world, and support and encouragement of one another.

efforts to support one another to deepen attempts to apply what they are learning to their daily lives.

Along with the monastic formators and other monks and nuns who teach during the formation process, the Abbess and Abbot of both communities have been generous in sharing their time with the group. In addition to 'chapter talks' for AIC retreats and occasional monthly meetings, they preside at the AIC Commitment Ceremony and meet annually with the AIC Leadership Council.

The monks and nuns from both communities show their support of the AIC in countless ways. For example, one of the Sisters designed a logo for the AIC which combines visual elements from both monasteries' church windows. And New Melleray's liturgist has provided the Associates with copies of the antiphony and hymnal for praying the Liturgy of the Hours at home. At each meeting he distributes copies of that month's Ordo to the group.

In speaking with members of the AIC, it is apparent they are grateful for the support and guidance they receive from both monasteries. The nuns at Mississippi Abbey as well as the monks at New Melleray teach invaluable lessons about what it means to be men and women of prayer.

Learning from the Diversity of Two Communities

While Our Lady of the Mississippi and New Melleray are both Cistercian houses, there are a number of differences between them such as the physical layout of their monasteries, their means of support, the age of the community members, and other aspects of their communal life. It is this diversity that lends each community its own vitality and makes them both such a rich resource for the AIC.

Physical Layout of the Monasteries. Known as 'lovers of the place', Cistercians have been recognized from earliest times not only for the simplicity of their lifestyles but also for a strong awareness of the environment that is reflected in the relationship between their abbeys and their physical surroundings. Our Lady of the Mississippi Abbey, whose grounds extend across rolling hills and deeply wooded valleys, is located on a quiet bluff high above the Mississippi River. The original farm estate has been converted, remodeled and expanded to provide a church, scriptorium, refectory, infirmary and sleeping quarters for the Sisters. Fifteen miles away, New Melleray Abbey is situated amid grain fields, pastures and woodlands. Unlike Mississippi Abbey where the Sisters made a monastery from buildings not originally intended for that purpose, New Melleray was built on the model of a traditional European Benedictine Abbey with four large rectangles forming the walls of an

enclosed cloister garth. Remodeled in 1974, the monastery's church is filled with light that streams through tall arched windows and is reflected on sandstone walls, the solid oak of the choirstalls, and the smooth simplicity of the granite altar.

Members of the AIC frequently schedule personal retreats at both Abbeys. At New Melleray, they stay in the 22-bed guesthouse where meals are taken cafeteria-style in the comfortable dining room. At Mississippi Abbey they sleep and prepare their own meals in farmhouses that have been converted into quarters for retreatants and guests. A retreat at Mississippi Abbey provides more of an opportunity to enter deeply into the silence and solitude of the monastic environment than is often possible at New Melleray, where close proximity to other visitors and guests can sometimes be a distraction. But there are other differences as well. Because of the design of New Melleray's church, retreatants can see as well as hear the Brothers which makes it easier to participate in the Divine Office. At Mississippi Abbey, the Guest Chapel is situated out of sight of the community. On the other hand, the Sisters make a point of inviting guests to participate in the Liturgy of the Hours by providing Psalters and printed hymns so they can easily follow along. They also invite guests to read at Mass and to come into the Sanctuary for the Liturgy of the Eucharist on weekdays.

Members of the AIC, like their monastic Brothers and Sisters, are 'lovers of the place'. Often at a loss for words to describe the sense of reverence they feel when walking through the woods and along the roadsides at one or the other of the monasteries, Associates understand why many of Merton's journal entries and poems have to do with his feelings for his physical surroundings.

Yesterday afternoon I went out to the woods. There was a wall of black sky beyond the knobs, to the west, and you could hear thunder growling all the time in the distance. It was very hot and damp but there was good wind coming from the direction of the storm... First I stopped under an oak tree on top of the hill behind Nally's and sat there looking out at the wide sweep of the valley and the miles of flat woods over toward the straight line of the horizon... Gethsemani looked beautiful from the hill. It made much more sense in its surrounding. We do not realize our own setting as we ought to: it is important to know where you are put, on the face of the earth.¹³

For the Associates, whether at a monthly meeting, a personal retreat or just a visit, there is a strong sense of 'knowing where you are put' at New Melleray and Mississippi Abbey.

13. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Image Books, 1956), pp. 198-99.

Means of Support. *Labora* is one of the three pillars upon which monastic life is based. It is necessary for monasteries not only to be self-supporting, but also to be a place of balance between work and prayer.¹⁴ The monks and nuns at New Melleray and Mississippi Abbeys are busy people with full schedules and their prayerful approach to work has been a source of inspiration for AIC members who are trying to develop healthier attitudes about their own work.

New Melleray is an agricultural community that supports itself through the careful use of its natural resources. The monks are farmers, committed to using agricultural methods that will protect the ecology and health of the environment. In addition to 1700 acres of farmland, the monastery contains 1200 acres of red, white and black oak, walnut, ash, cherry and pine. In recent years the monks have begun an industry of their own—using wood from their forests, they craft simple, inexpensive but beautiful caskets. At the same time they are involved in planting thousands of young trees each year as a means of renewing the forest and providing for future community members. As men whose primary means of support is agricultural, the monks are used to working independently in the fields and woodlands—unlike the Sisters at Mississippi Abbey whose candy industry requires that they work together in a candyhouse where they cook, wrap, package, market and ship their Trappistine Creamy Caramels. In addition to candy production—their major source of income—the Sisters also work their own organically certified farmlands. They rent some of the land to neighboring farmers for pasture, but raise their own soybeans, corn and oats, as well as all their own vegetables in the summertime.

In the Cistercian tradition, manual labor 'gives the monks [and nuns] the opportunity of sharing in the divine work of creation and restoration, and of following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ... This hard and redeeming work is a means of providing a livelihood for the brothers [and sisters] and for other people, especially the poor. It expresses solidarity with all workers'.¹⁵ In addition to providing a living for themselves, there is a long list of chores that monks and nuns need to do inside their monasteries as well. The monastery's buildings and grounds need to be maintained and laundry must be done. There is shopping and kitchen work to do, the books must be kept in order and bills paid, the liturgy

14. 'When embraced with faith, work is rich soil for the spiritual life...the monk acquires the freedom of self-forgetfulness as he learns to serve others with the talents God has given him', from *New Melleray Abbey*, a brochure published by the monastery for guests (Dubuque, Iowa).

15. *Constitutions of the Cistercian Order*, p. 20.

needs to be planned, the sick and infirm require care, and guests must be welcomed. The entire community shares the responsibility for the work that needs to be done and it is not uncommon to see the Abbot loading trash barrels onto the back of the pick-up or the novice master checking the wiring in the guesthouse. Nor does a person's educational level or training determine work assignments. Women with PhDs in computer science may find themselves doing the spring planting at Mississippi Abbey, and men with no culinary training can end up cooking the monks' meals. The spirit of mutual service with which monks and nuns support one another in their daily tasks and jobs helps Associates recognize how important it is to willingly be of service to others in the family, work-place, parish and community.

Age of Community Members. The diversity in the ages of the monks and the nuns is worth noting. At New Melleray a majority of the monks joined the order in the years prior to Vatican II, about the same time Merton did. Many of the nuns at Mississippi Abbey, however, have only a vague memory of the pre-Vatican II Church and were children the year Merton died in 1968. There is special value for the AIC in knowing people whose lives are so closely connected spiritually even though they come from different generations and have been shaped by dissimilar forces. Families used to provide that kind of opportunity. When grandparents, aunts, uncles and relatives of all ages lived in close proximity they were able to weave strong bonds of identity and continuity, to learn from one another's experiences, and take pride in the values and traditions they shared. Today it is increasingly difficult for many people to experience what it means to be part of an extended family. In a very real sense this is what the New Melleray and Mississippi Abbey Communities – like the Cistercian Order as a whole – have become. They are a family of men and women whose ages vary considerably and who, despite differences in gender, background and experience are nonetheless united in their common desire to 'prefer nothing to Christ'. It is no surprise that participants in the Second International Lay Cistercian Encounter named their website CistercianFamily.org.

Communal Living. Visitors to Mississippi Abbey notice amenities they are unlikely to find at New Melleray – rocking chairs in the visiting parlors, colorful quilts on the beds in the guesthouse, a simple bowl of flowers freshly picked from the little garden outside the front door and carefully placed near the altar. It is also true that on any given day it is possible to see one of the Brothers in New Melleray's pick-up truck on his way to

Mississippi Abbey to fix a broken candy machine or solve a plumbing problem.

This is not to suggest that monks are from Mars and nuns are from Venus. It is to be expected that men who live in community together will relate to one another quite differently than a community of women. But it would be absurd to suggest that monks as men lack warmth, are out of touch with their feelings and clueless when it comes to figuring out how to relate to one another. It would be just as ludicrous to claim that nuns as women can't solve problems, are impossible to reason with, and incapable of rational thought. Sweeping generalities about 'gender differences' undermine the real value of what it means to be men and women before God.

The Associates are learning from the monks of New Melleray and nuns of Mississippi Abbey that the journey to God involves being true to the way we have been created by integrating both the 'so-called' masculine and feminine sides of human nature, a nature that has been created and bestowed upon us by a Creator God who is

...at once Father and Mother. As Father He stands in solitary might surrounded by darkness. As Mother His shining is diffused, embracing all His creatures with merciful tenderness and light. The Diffuse Shining of God is Hagia Sophia. We call her His 'glory'. In Sophia His power is experienced only as mercy and as love... Sophia is Gift, is Spirit, *Donum Dei*. She is God-given and God Himself as Gift... Sophia is God's sharing of Himself with creatures. His outpouring, and the Love by which He is given, and known, held and loved... Sophia is the mercy of God in us. She is the tenderness with which the infinitely mysterious power of pardon turns the darkness of our sins into the light of grace. She is the inexhaustible fountain of kindness, and would almost seem to be, in herself, all mercy. So she does in us a greater work than that of Creation: the work of new being in grace, the work of pardon, the work of transformation from brightness to brightness *tamquam a domini Spiritu*. She is in us the yielding and tender counterpart of the power, justice and creative dynamism of the Father.¹⁶

The monks and nuns who meet regularly with the AIC are comfortable with both the masculine and the feminine aspects of who they are as persons created in the image of God. Their identity as men and women is rooted in the selfless love of Christ.

To say that I am made in the image of God is to say that love is the reason for my existence, for God is love. Love is my true identity. Selflessness is my true self. Love is my true character. Love is my name. If therefore I do

16. Thomas Merton, 'Hagia Sophia', in Thomas P. McDonnell (ed.), *A Thomas Merton Reader* (New York: Doubleday, 1974), pp. 509-510.

anything or think anything or say anything or know anything that is not purely for the love of God it cannot give me peace or rest, or fulfillment or joy.¹⁷

Let us live in this love and this happiness, you and I and all of us, in the love of Christ and in contemplation, for this is where we find ourselves and one another as we truly are. It is only in this love that we at last become real. For it is here that we most truly share the life of One God in Three Persons.¹⁸

[T]he monk is important more for what he is than for what he does... He is a friend of God, a man of God, one who lives in God and for God alone. By this we mean, he is one for whom charity is his whole life, and for whom every action is another step toward living in closer intimacy with the indwelling Spirit of God.¹⁹

It is because of who they *are*, as well as the things they *do*, that make monks and nuns role models for those who live in the world. The Associates have had the opportunity to learn from the example of good people – monastic men and women who have committed themselves to a way of life that is based on choices, attitudes and behaviors that reflect their commitment to live a life focused on Christ.

The Example of the Two Communities

All Lay Cistercians live in a culture that is driven by priorities, values and behaviors that are often out of sync with the gospel message. For this reason men and women who do not live in monasteries have much to gain by following the example of men and women who do. The AIC, for example, has observed how intentionally the monks of New Melleray and the Sisters from Mississippi Abbey work at being humble, patient, and accepting of one another. Associates recognize quickly that the notion that cloister-life is all peace and tranquility with no problems, few responsibilities and nothing to be concerned about except one's personal spiritual development is not what monastic life is all about. And while monks and nuns live with others who are trying to follow the teachings of Jesus Christ, those teachings are not always easy to put into practice – even in the monastery. One has only to read the journals of Thomas Merton to get a glimpse of how hard it is to deal with the stresses and tensions of communal life.

Dom James...typical of a certain mentality. He is incapable of doing and seeing things in a really new way. He never really listens to anyone else, is convinced of his own rightness, is secure – now more than ever – in his

17. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, pp. 60-61.

18. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, pp. 67-68.

19. Merton, *The Monastic Journey*, p. 55.

own ideas, despises, secretly and openly, everything he does not agree with.²⁰

Sunday afternoon, out walking in the sun...and thinking of all that has been going on I realized how much good there really is in this community—not only in so many individuals (this I have never doubted or questioned) but in the community itself as it is organized. I know this is a 'good community' and a fortunate place in which to be today. A place where there is real spiritual life, and hope and charity and love for God. An honest monastery, with all its shortcomings and failings and for some of the failings, I am perhaps myself to some extent responsible. But I count myself lucky to be here. There is really no other place in the Church now where I would rather be. I see so evidently that my hermitage is my true place in the Church. And I owe this to my community. Also, let's face it, to my Abbot, of whom I am so easily critical.²¹

When it comes to handling the frustrations and challenges of living with other people, we all have some exceptionally good advice from St Benedict (quoting Rom. 12.10): 'They should each try to be the first to show respect to the other'.²² And for people in the world today, those whose impulse would be to do just the opposite, it is a remarkably practical way to deal with difficult people.

Monastic values such as these do not fit contemporary sensibilities. In a culture where people are encouraged to affirm self and assert individual rights, concepts such as humility and obedience seem demeaning—even psychologically unhealthy. And yet, as a result of their interaction with monks and nuns, Associates are discovering that monastic virtues have nothing to do with degradation and self-abasement. Monks and nuns do not deny their dignity as persons created in the image and likeness of God, but rather choose to be aware of the dignity of others who have also been created that way. Instead of seeking affirmation and admiration for their own abilities and achievements, they have learned to appreciate and value the talents, contributions and successes of others. And because they believe that self-knowledge is a necessary part of the spiritual path, monks and nuns endeavor to confront their own faults and weaknesses with honesty and integrity, admitting when they have made mistakes and accepting responsibility for times when their words or actions have hurt others. They recognize that to live a life that is

20. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom* (ed. Christine M. Bochen; Journals, VI, 1966-67; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), pp. 163-64.

21. Merton, *Learning to Love*, pp. 145-46.

22. *The Rule of Saint Benedict* (ed. Timothy Fry, OSB; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1982), p. 94.

centered on their own selfish desires is to ignore what it means to be a follower of Christ.

To consider persons and events and situations only in the light of their effect upon myself is to live on the doorstep of hell. Selfishness is doomed to frustration, centered as it is upon a lie. To live exclusively for myself, I must make all things bend themselves to my will as if I were a god. But this is impossible.²³

If we have the Spirit of God in our hearts, we will live by His law of charity, inclined always to peace rather than dissension, to humility rather than arrogance, to obedience rather than rebellion to purity and temperance, to simplicity and quietness and calm, to strength, generosity, and wisdom, to prudence all-embracing justice, and we will love others more than ourselves, for it is the commandment of Jesus that we should love one another as He has loved us.²⁴

The opportunity to interact with members of New Melleray and Mississippi Abbeys, and to observe the way they live the Cistercian charism teaches Associates much about what it means to live a Christian life. Monks and nuns put the concerns and well-being of others ahead of their own desires to have things go their way. They try to recognize when their egos need to be held in check. They apologize when they have offended or hurt someone. They try not to judge other people or criticize them for the mistakes they make, but to forgive them sincerely instead—even when it is hard. They do their best to be loving and charitable—even when it would be much easier not to be. They are *good* people, and the most important thing Associates learn from the monks of New Melleray and the sisters of Mississippi Abbey is how to be good people themselves.

Seeking a Word of Wisdom and Encouragement

Although Thomas Merton died before the emergence of groups of Lay Cistercians, he most likely would have been supportive of the agenda discussed at the Second International Lay Cistercian Encounter. The meeting was convened at the request of the Abbot General, Dom Bernardo Olivera. Dom Bernardo has played a pivotal role in encouraging dialogue within the Order regarding the issue of a shared Cistercian charism. In a homily preached at Holy Spirit Abbey, he reminded those present that a charism is a gift of the Spirit for the Church of God. Previously, in a 1995 letter to the monks and nuns of the order, he had

23. Merton, *No Man Is an Island*, p. 24.

24. Merton, *No Man Is an Island*, p. 61.

emphasized that since the Cistercian charism, like all charisms, is a gift of the Spirit for the purpose of building up the Church as the Body of Christ, it is not something that belongs solely to monks and nuns, but rather to the Church as a whole.

Is it possible to conceive of the Cistercian charism as a charism shared with lay persons in the world, thus making room for a secular Cistercian form...? I believe that the fact that lay people today feel attracted to the Cistercian charism and recognize themselves in it, can be understood as a sign that the Spirit also desires to share it with them, so that the charism receives an added secular form at this moment in history.²⁵

We believe that Thomas Merton would have agreed with the Abbot General's words. Indeed, much of *Contemplation in a World of Action*, written in 1965, can be read in the light of a shared Cistercian charism.

For the contemplative, life is not merely a matter of escaping the world, singing psalms, or mastering traditional techniques of meditation: it is also and above all a personal charism. Thus there are contemplatives not only in monasteries but also in the mist of secular life. But in all contemplative tradition it has been found necessary that those who have attained to some depth of religious insight should to some extent guide others who seek to attain the same experience of truth in their own lives.²⁶

What the church needs is for contemplatives to share with others their privilege of silence, worship and meditation, their ability to listen more deeply and more penetratingly to the Word of God, their understanding of sacrifice, their inner vision.²⁷

A year before he died, Merton was asked by Pope Paul VI to write 'A Letter on the Contemplative Life'.²⁸ Merton confided in his journal that he was uneasy about writing such a letter not because it was unrealistic to expect contemplatives to teach the ways of interior prayer to the rest of the world, but rather because '...the illusion that we are somehow specialists, know the "secrets of the interior life", and can easily formulate them in a document that will make sense and be "safe" at the same time'.²⁹

Thirty-five years later, the men and women of the Second International Lay Cistercian Encounter asked for a word³⁰ of wisdom and

25. Dom Bernardo Olivera, 'Reflections on the Challenge of "Charismatic Associations"', *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 32.2 (1997), pp. 223-232 (228, 230).

26. Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, p. 180.

27. Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, p. 154.

28. Merton, *The Monastic Journey*, pp. 169-73.

29. Merton, *Learning to Love*, pp. 280-81.

30. 'The brethren came to the Abba Anthony and said to him, "Speak a word; how are we to be saved?" The old man said to them, "You have heard the scripture. They

encouragement from the Order. They were not asking to have the secrets of the interior life revealed, but rather for affirmation of their conviction that they have been called by the Holy Spirit to share in the gift of the Cistercian charism to the world.

We believe the moment has come to ask you for a word of wisdom and encouragement for our endeavors to live the Cistercian charism in the world. Thus we ask the General Chapters to discern the authenticity of this work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The fraternal help and prayer of the Order is an important element in our authentic response to the presence of Jesus Christ in our hearts and to the renewal of the Church in this new millennium.³¹

One can only surmise that if Thomas Merton were alive today, he would have voiced his support of the reply received from the General Chapters in September 2002:

We don't know what the future holds for us, but our vision of the Cistercian Family recognizes you as authentic witnesses of the Cistercian vocation fully engaged in the world. We are moved and profoundly grateful to the Spirit working in you... Continue the path to which you are committed, sharing with us the tradition that gives us life.³²

should teach you how". But they said, "We want to hear from you too, Father". This snippet from the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1975) is a good example of the monastic tradition of 'speaking a word'. It began with the earliest forms of monasticism, and has survived down the centuries. A person, seeking and open to direction from God, asks the advice of a monk or nun.

31. 'To the General Chapters of the OCSO, Rome, September 2002', letter published at <http://cistercianfamily.org>, under *Documents, Letters, Presentations* (4 September 2002).

32. 'To the Groups of Lay Cistercians from the members of the MGM of the OCSO', letter published at <http://cistercianfamily.org>, under *Documents, Letters, Presentations* (23 September 2002).