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The following are some reflections on fact of the Gethsemani Lay Associates being ecumenical in character from the time when groups were beginning to form. It is also to present some suggestions as to how we may effectively maintain this orientation. There are any number of personal influences that led those who first met and drew up the **Plan of Life** to think in terms of being inclusive. Not least of such influences were such persons such as Thomas Merton and Henri Nouwen, each of whom I would like to quote as expressing the spirit of our early gatherings of the Lay Cistercians:

“Genuine ecumenism implies the communication and sharing not only of information about doctrines which are totally and irrevocably divergent, but also of religious intuitions and truths which may turn out to have something in common, beneath surface differences. Ecumenism seeks the inner and ultimate spiritual “ground” which underlies all articulated differences. A genuinely fruitful dialogue cannot be content with a polite diplomatic interest in other religions and their beliefs, but seeks a deeper level, one which religious traditions have always claimed to bear witness to a higher and more personal knowledge of God than that which is contained simply in exterior worship and formulated doctrine.” (From “**Contemplation and Ecumenism**” by T. Merton, May, 1965)

“Once I have become poor I can be a good host. It is indeed the paradox of hospitality that poverty makes a good host. Poverty is the inner disposition that allows me to take away my defenses and convert my enemy into my friend. I can only perceive a stranger as an enemy as long as I have something to defend. When I say, ‘Please enter—my house is your house, my joy is your joy, my sadness is your sadness, and my life is your life,’ I have nothing to defend, since I have nothing to lose but all to give.” (From “**The Poverty of a Host**” by Henry J. M. Nouwen in **Monastic Studies 1974**)

What the Lay Associates of Gethsemani have sought through participation in the Cistercian Charism at Gethsemani from their inception is a “more personal knowledge of God.” Though Merton in the quote above was talking about dialogue with persons of various religious backgrounds, he is speaking for all those who have experienced during a retreat or some brief stay at the monastery “something in common, beneath the surface differences.” Some of these

have been attracted to becoming members of the Lay Cistercians associated with Gethsemani because of a real yearning for the contemplative life that Gethsemani makes available to them.

One cannot help feeling that being associated with the Abbey, living aspects of the Cistercian Charism provides a unique opportunity for bringing the different Christian Denominations together not only for greater mutual understanding but also for an encounter that is unsurpassed in interfaith dialogue. Anyone who does serious study or faithful Lectio with the gospels will soon realize how God's grace acts in unforeseen circumstances and diverse lives. None of us can begin to claim the fullness of truth and love. This leads me to my second quote from Henri J. Nouwen.

Hospitality has been an important dimension of the Benedictine/Cistercian life from the beginning. One has only to realize that St Benedict touches on it in chapters 31, 42, 53, 56, 60, 61 of his Rule. While hospitality is not allowed to interfere with the monks own living of their monastic lives it is to become a means of opening their hearts to divine reality. It provides the monk or nun with a way of learning what it means to live in community but also to live as a messenger of love in a world of which she or he is a part. A real monk will always be welcoming while discerning what is most wholesome for all the parties involved. When a monk learns to become truly poor, truly open to the transforming grace of divine love and detached from all that will hinder his union with God, then he is ready to welcome whoever comes into his life. There is no longer a false self to defend, possessions that he is unwilling to share. Nor is there fear of the other preventing him from seeing Christ, even worshiping the Christ in the person of the stranger knocking at his door. The very vulnerability that serves as the basis of his own community living is to be extended to all those sincerely seeking the truth. To be of valuable service to others means becoming the vehicle of Christ's own love. And it is then that we have "all to give."

Various members of our Lay Associates of Gethsemani who are not of the Roman Catholic tradition have been given opportunity to voice their thoughts on their being members of the LCG. To a person they have highlighted the fact that their interest is making the best use of a

contemplative tradition available to them. There is a personal experience of the divine that draws them to the Cistercian Charism and serves to fill a longing they have not found to be met elsewhere. This is not to say that God could not have used other means but being associated with Gethsemani is the one they have found most helpful.

Those seeking to live the Cistercian Charism out of another church tradition give a variety of reasons for doing so. One of them gave these reasons: 1) This gave him a sense of the Church's history 2) Opened him to the universality of the Church 3) Provided the quality of prayer he aspires to 4) Has helped him deal with a family crisis by providing him with perspective 5) Helps him to be open to religious traditions other than his Christian one 6) Gives him a vision of God as One who draws the whole world to Himself in mystic communion 7) Allows him to be dedicated to God amid all the demands of family life 8) Opens his eyes to the particular in the Universal and to the Universal in the particular.

Others have said that the LCG is important to them because: 1) of the contemplative emphasis, an emphasis not at the forefront of the Protestant tradition 2) it provides a real challenge 3) the LCG has opened the eyes to how the prayer of Christ seeks to pray in us 4) it provides the means for returning to one's early Christian liturgical roots and fresh appreciation of the Eucharist 5) nothing in the Cistercian Charism compromises my faith in order to embrace it. 6) I am drawn to contemplation by God, and I can no more resist it than fly to Mars. 7) the brothers at the abbey reinforce in me the sense that I must turn to God over and over again, that I must renew my commitment to Christ with every sunrise. 8) the monks remind me to keep God first and foremost in every single thing I do, and trust God to guide my heart. 9) the monks impress upon me this single truth—there is no such thing as the secular world. 10) the Rule of St Benedict became for me an impressive document for spiritual growth. 11) I was looking to deepen my sensitivity to the spiritual life. 12) I found in the early Cistercian writers psychological insight long before modern exploration of the psyche. 13) it was the way for me to cultivate the interior life. 14) the early Cistercian devotion to Mary has helped me to appreciate the feminine in God. 15) it has helped me to form and develop self-discipline. 16) I was drawn to give God the undivided time I am compelled to give to the Lord.

Many of these would also represent the motivation for Roman Catholics in joining the LCG. Through the different contacts with those of other Denominations participating in the LCG there were a few fears expressed. Many expressed the fact that in joining they had no intention of wanting to convert to Roman Catholicism and that they would not like to be perceived as doing so. There was concern about getting into conflicts over Church doctrine and being under the surveillance of those demanding close adherence. Some expressed fear about being absorbed into institutional aspects of Roman Catholicism to the detriment of the contemplative search, to the detriment of meeting others on the level of spiritual experience. Fear also was expressed over getting caught in the “political” structure of the Roman Catholic Church even though since Vatican II this person thought there to be little that would impinge on “our substantial theological commonality.”

This last paragraph probably raises some red flags that makes other monastic communities reluctant to accept Non-Catholic Lay Associates. There is thought that in doing so, would lead to unhealthy division within the ranks and interference with living the Cistercian Charism, born as it is from within of a Catholic tradition. So long as the groups associated with Gethsemani have maintained their focus on deepening the contemplative experience and not getting caught up in disputes over differences of doctrine and church policy, there seems to have been very little or no problem about their incorporation. Maintaining the focus may demand real discipline at times within the groups but when accomplished there is not only a fruitful collaboration but a mutual enrichment. And in this one cannot help recognizing a growing appreciation of what it is to be the living Body of Christ.

Is the living of the Cistercian Charism within the Church today a unique opportunity for bringing about the unity among Christians so greatly desired? Is it not the contemplative experience that creates the very climate in which Christians may meet and engage without being defensive? Isn't this atmosphere of contemplative experience what enables us to recognize a common ground on which Christian unity can best be explored and authentically established? I can think

of little that would give greater joy to the early founders of Citeaux than to provide in today's world such fertile soil for the future of our Christian faith.