

CONTINUING FORMATION FOR MEMBERS AND MENTORS

All members and candidates are strongly encouraged to continually develop both deeper spiritual knowledge and awareness, as well as increase their competency in spiritual discernment through prayer, contemplation, reading Scripture and other spiritual materials, as well as participation in spiritual direction.

The process of continuing formation for LCG members involves the deepening of one's insights and experiences in living a lay expression of the Cistercian charism. Acknowledging our need for continuing formation is a healthy expression of our spiritual development. A healthy continuing formation involves a focus on both the lives of individual members and the corporate life of local LCG communities. A synthesis of individual and community formation fosters healthy spiritual growth in Christ.

In the lives of LCG members, continuing formation involves commitments to our families, our work, and the culture around us. We strive to live out these commitments by the working of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Accepting the love of Christ and sharing that love with others through our attitudes and deeds (Colossians 3:17) is a living-out of the Cistercian charism in the everyday world. We are called not to reflect the world, but rather to reflect God's light into the world by serving as living members of Christ's Body.

Formation in our personal lives will have a direct blessing on the life of our local LCG community, for the deepening of God's love in our own lives will strengthen the community as a whole. The relationship between the personal and the community is part of our Cistercian history, for St. Bernard believed that the faithfulness of each person has a direct relationship on the faithfulness of the greater whole. Because local LCG communities have recurring needs for leadership, the vitality of one's own continuing formation will foster leaders who are deeply formed in the image of Christ.

The topic of "formation" has been a recent focus at both the 2011 International Lay Cistercian Encounter at Dubuque and the OCSO General Chapter in Assisi. The expectation is that the leadership of local LCG communities gives priority to formation and its role in sustaining individual LCG member commitment and in strengthening the local community. Spiritual formation is foundational in the Lay Cistercian way of life, for LCG members' intentional and sincere faithfulness to the Plan of Life provides richness and depth to one's experience in Christ.

The discussions at the Dubuque Encounter resulted in the highlighting of key factors for our consideration on formation:

- Our formation as Lay Cistercians is connected to our identity that was formulated at the Huerta Encounter in 2008. We must be formed in our identity.
- We must recognize that the Holy Spirit is the One who forms candidates and members and works through the community to produce fruits in each stage of formation.
- The Cistercian charism is received through the relationship with a particular monastic community (Gethsemani).

- The Lay Cistercian formation must make use of authentic Cistercian resources and mentors.
- The formation process includes the importance of discernment and of stages of formation.
- We must think of the process of formation as a process of guidance, rather than a program.
- The formation process should call forth the gifts and talents of members of the local Lay Cistercian community.

Practical Considerations

It is highly recommended that LCG local communities utilize the suggestions articulated by Fr. Michael in his paper, “**Toward the Formation of LCG Members.**” In his final suggestion, Fr. Michael writes

“...Formation of the LCG is primarily the work of the Holy Spirit among you, in each group and each member. Formation is what happens when we live the whole of our lives in a Christian way, when this grace of the Holy Spirit is allowed to move through the whole of our lives...LCG members can do as much as anyone in applying early Cistercian texts to our daily lives. This is the work of the Spirit again; and if one begins to read the early Cistercian fathers and mothers, to read them persistently, it won’t be long before they will suggest of themselves how the values they held sacred apply to our own lives...To taste the true richness of the Cistercian charism will demand sacrifice, of being truly honest about one’s Christian priorities...There need to be members of the LCG who work hard at understanding the Cistercian theology and spirituality so as to articulate it to the group...Formation is about experiencing Christ amidst the ritual, the “School of Charity” of our everyday lives. Prayer will always be of the essence; for to be touched by grace, to know how each one of us is especially loved by God, is like rain on a fertile field recently planted. The necessary dying will take place so that the young plant will spring from the earth. Coming back to Christ again and again is to find that it isn’t long and the field is ripe for the harvest.”

Each LCG local community should develop a format for the continuing formation of its community members during regular meeting times. A variety of methods for structuring formation experiences and programs exist so groups have the opportunity to be creative. There are numerous resources available for the community, which include, for example, the listed reading material in Section V of the Formation Guide.

Some common methods used by local LCG community groups include:

- Group reading and discussion of a book or text on a related topic of Cistercian and/or contemplative spirituality. For example, a group might choose to study the contemplative practices by reading Carl McColman’s *Befriending Silence* or *Into The Silent Land* by Martin Laird
- Individual members preparing presentations for the community on a topic such as prayer, silence, simplicity, or *lectio divina*, with reflection questions for group sharing.

- Providing opportunities for community members to share their experiences, successes and challenges of living the Plan of Life. Spiritual companionship should be encouraged among community members. Individual members can meet regularly for one-on-one sharing beyond the monthly community gathering.
- LCG members sharing the content of their own spiritual reading among fellow community members.
- LCG communities participating in days of prayer or reflection and/or annual retreats, as a means of keeping grounded in prayer.
- LCG members are encouraged to consider functioning as Peer Mentors* for each other mutually sharing the content of their own spiritual journey's with fellow community members.

The ultimate consideration for us is the continuing formation of our hearts. Are we putting on the mind of Christ? As St. Paul instructs us, "Be of the same mind of Christ Jesus." (Phil 2:5) Ours is a lifelong process of integrating our Lay Cistercian formation with our continuing Christian formation.

NOTES FOR MENTORS*

As Fr. Michael Casagram shared in his insightful paper, *Spiritual Direction and the Lay Contemplative Life*, "Laypersons seeking to live the contemplative life in the world are seeking the same spiritual development as monks." Perhaps this is one of the driving reasons those seeking commitment as a Lay Cistercian engage in the formation process. Those called by the Spirit to mentor candidates are charged with a unique responsibility. Do they mentor as spiritual directors? As coaches? As friends? The intention of this brief document is to provide a general understanding of what is expected of LCG mentors regarding both purpose and scope.

An LCG mentor is called to serve as a consultant, a guide, and a point-person for someone who is engaging in the LCG formation process. Mentoring is an opportunity for us to provide assistance and support to persons who are discerning whether or not they are called to live the Cistercian charism in their daily lives and serve as faithful members of the LCG community. Mentorship is an opportunity to serve as a channel of God's grace and understanding to the candidate. Above all, mentoring is the process of assisting the mentee in lifting the veil between themselves and God. The purpose of lifting this veil is to assist the candidate in hearing as clearly as possible what God is calling him or her to be.

Sometimes it's helpful to define an ideal by defining first what it is *not*. First, an LCG formation mentor is not, as Benedict writes in Chapter 2 of the *Rule*, to engage in "directing souls." That type of relationship is reserved for the individual's priest or other clergy person. The role of the mentor is not to engage in attempting to convert the candidate to a particular denomination or creed. Rather it is important to respect the

faith tradition of the candidate and assist them in hearing Christ's call through their own tradition.

Secondly, a mentor does not control the relationship with a candidate. A mentor's role is to introduce and guide the candidate through the process of learning the history, purposes, and practical applications of living life as a Lay Cistercian, just as a tour guide engages visitors to a museum or one leads a convert in the RCIA process. A mentor, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, introduces to those in formation a new way of looking at themselves, at God, and at the world around them by helping them discern if the Lay Cistercian lifestyle is something God is leading them to pursue.

Finally, the mentoring relationship does not exist in isolation, but rather in community. Just as Ecclesiastes 4:12 states, "Where one alone would be overcome, two will put up resistance; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken," so the formation process is not about the candidate or the candidate and his/her mentor, but about a triadic relationship and three-way communication between the candidate, the mentor, and the Holy Spirit. The mentor as companion must be open to the flow from the candidate to the Holy Spirit and from the Holy Spirit to the candidate. It is not a mentor's responsibility to determine discernment (that is between the candidate and God). The role of the mentor is to provide Holy Spirit-guided information and direction so the candidate can make a Holy Spirit-guided decision.

An additional aspect to the nature of the mentoring relationship existing in community is the mentoring of candidates existing within the scope of the LCG community. A mentoring relationship must have proper boundaries and stay focused on the candidate's discernment process. Mentors should pray for and with their candidates, and the two of them should pray together both for God's wisdom in this process, for the Gethsemani monks, and the LCG community.

Modeling the LCG charism in the mentoring itself is a way to help candidate process and discern if this lifestyle is for them. Since the goal is discernment from the Holy Spirit, mentors should support and encourage candidates who feel this is not for them as fervently as they support those who move toward commitment. Thus, a successful mentoring experience is when a candidate emerges from this journey it knowing that God has given her/him direction, regardless of what direction that might be.

In summary mentors do not control the candidates' journey. They do not attempt to influence the outcome of this process. They do not tell the candidate what to believe or do. Mentors have a unique opportunity to allow God to use them in helping candidates understand how to discern God's direction for their lives. In that sense, serving as an LCG mentor is both a responsibility and a blessing, for through their efforts, God is glorified.

*** Special Considerations for Mentoring Candidates and Peers**

When working with a candidate in membership formation or aiding a peer with ongoing formation, it is important to highlight to them that although LCG candidates and members are strongly encouraged to increase and deepen both the quality and quantity of their spiritual practices, these practices should not inhibit their commitments to their families, their faith community, and their witness in society. Our spiritual practices should enhance – and not limit – our ability to function as faithful and contributing members of these groups.

Other aspects of LCG life that mentors and peer mentors should share is that LCG members are strongly encouraged to participate in ongoing spiritual direction on a regular basis and to become knowledgeable of and competent in the practice of spiritual discernment.

In closing, let us remind everyone that formation begins when one is a candidate but continues for each member as a lifelong conversion to Christian values and Cistercian charism. In this process we seek to comply with the Christian values of love, compassion, understanding, forgiveness, integrity, honesty, prudence, and humility. To the best of our ability and with help from the Holy Spirit, we incorporate these values in our life. This evolving process is living the Christian and Lay Cistercian life. This ongoing *metanoia* results from an ever-deepening commitment to live the Cistercian charism and Christian values in all aspects of our everyday lives. This constant turning to God is guided by a deep desire to imitate Christ and listen for the guidance of the Holy Spirit in all of our affairs.