*Daniel Bonnell — Seeing Shepherds*

# The Lay Cistercian Review

## Advent 2025

# The Lay Cistercian Review

*Advent 2025*

### Mission Statement

*The Lay Cistercian Review exists to serve those called to live the Lay Cistercian way of life. It is not simply a journal, but a common table where we share what nourishes us: silence and prayer, humility and simplicity, work and fellowship. Rooted in the charism of Saint Benedict and Saint Bernard, the Review serves as a place of reflection and formation, a way to remind us that our vocation is to seek God in the ordinary rhythms of daily life.*


### Editorial Board

**Editor:** John Pestian, Ph.D., Cincinnati, OH

**Editorial Members:**

Linda Boerstler, Columbus, OH
Br Gregory Escardo, Trappist, KY
Linda Harrington, Sioux City, IA
Mike Johnson, Cincinnati, OH
Edgar Luna, Worcester, MA
Teresa McMahon, Des Moines, IA
Nick Polaschek, New Zealand
Dan Willis, Iowa


*"Prefer nothing whatever to the love of Christ." — RB 4:21*

# Contents


Welcome to the Lay Cistercian Review . . . . . 1
Mary and the Lay Cistercian Vocation During Advent . . . . . 2
A Midnight Clear: A Utah Trappist Monastery Christmas Eve Story . . . . . 6
A Personal Reflection on Nature as a Teacher of Simplicity . . . . . 9
Advent Poems . . . . . 10
Finding Hope in the Humility and Humanity of Mary . . . . . 12
International Association of Lay Cistercian Communities Meeting — Ávila, Spain 14
About the IALCC and the OSCO . . . . . 17
Contributors . . . . . 20
Editor's Comments . . . . . 21

# Welcome to the Lay Cistercian Review

Editorial Introduction

*John Pestian, Editor*

When Saint Benedict described the monastery as "a school for the Lord's service," he could not have foreseen how widely that school would open over the centuries. Yet its spirit endures. Today, that same Cistercian school stretches far beyond cloister walls—into homes and parishes, workplaces and quiet rooms of prayer, and all the places where ordinary lives meet the desire for God. The *Lay Cistercian Review* rises from that enduring spirit and seeks to offer it a home.

*Gerard van Honthorst,* ***Adoration of the Shepherds*** *(1622).*
YouTube link to *O Come, O Come Emmanuel*

This Advent issue reflects another kind of gathering—one that happens quietly on each page. It offers a small place of stillness where the charism of Cîteaux can continue its gentle work within us. In this way, the *Lay Cistercian Review* also responds to the Church's wider synodal call: to walk together, to listen to one another, and to make room for the Holy Spirit to speak through the lived experience of the faithful.[1] Here, reflection becomes something shared, discernment becomes something communal, and the wisdom of the Cistercian tradition finds new expression in the voices of lay women and men.

The vision behind this Review is simple: that in the ordinary rhythm of lay life, we might hold reflection together. That silence might lean toward insight. That experience might draw on tradition. And that Christ's love might find deeper room in our hearts and in our life with one another.

The writers in this issue remind us that the contemplative life is not a relic but a living response to the present moment. Together, these voices witness to a single truth: the Cistercian vocation—whether lived in a monastery or in the marketplace—springs from the same desire to seek God and to find Him in all things.

As Advent draws us toward the mystery of the Incarnation, may this Review be both a reflection and a companion on the way—a small monastery of the heart, built not of stone, but of prayer, friendship, and the shared longing for God.

Thank you for reading, for contributing, and for keeping vigil with us.

[1] Pope Francis, Address on the 50th Anniversary of the Synod of Bishops (17 October 2015): "Synodality is the path that God expects of the Church in the third millennium." Full text available at: vatican.va/synodality-address.

# Mary and the Lay Cistercian Vocation During Advent

John Pestian

From its beginnings in 1098, the Cistercian Order has lived beneath the mantle of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The early monks of Cîteaux placed their monastery under her patronage, not as ornament but as theology. They called her *Domina et Abbatissa*—their Lady and Abbess—believing that the monastery itself stood as a new Bethlehem where the Word of God would take flesh in prayer, labor, and love.

To the Cistercian mind, Mary is not only the Mother of God but the archetype of the contemplative soul, the perfect embodiment of the *ora et labora* of the Rule of Saint Benedict. She is the model of listening, the pattern of obedience, the dwelling place of the Word. For Lay Cistercians, who live not in cloisters of stone but in the cloister of the heart, Mary remains the surest guide. She teaches how to find God in the silence between tasks, in the poverty of the ordinary day, and in the hope that matures through waiting.

Advent is the season when Mary's vocation and ours coincide most clearly. In her, we see what it means to live by faith: to wait in darkness, to trust without clarity, to let divine life take root in hidden places. Luke tells us that she "kept all these things and pondered them in her heart" (Lk 2:19). That single line, simple yet inexhaustible, became the seed of the Cistercian contemplative life. To ponder is not to analyze but to embrace mystery in silence—to hold the Word as a living presence until it ripens into love.

## Mary's Silence: The First School of Contemplation

Saint Bernard of Clairvaux wrote that Mary's silence after the angel's departure was more eloquent than speech. "When the angel departed, the Virgin remained alone—alone, yet not alone, for God was within her," he writes. "She was silent, and her silence resounded louder than all words" (*Homilia II super Missus est*, §17; *Sancti Bernardi Opera*, Vol. 4, 1957).

This Marian silence is the first school of contemplation. It is not the muteness of fear, but the attentive stillness of love. For Bernard, Mary's pondering is the soul's interior liturgy: a silent *Magnificat* sung without words. She listens with the "ear of the heart," as Saint Benedict commands us (*Rule*, Prol. 1), allowing the divine Word to shape her interior world.

Guerric of Igny, one of Bernard's disciples, deepened this understanding in his *Advent Sermons*. "The Word is conceived first in the hearing of faith, then born in the confession of the mouth and the work of the hand" (*Sermo I in Adventu Domini*). Faith begins by listening, and Mary's faith is pure listening—*fides ex auditu*. She believes before she understands; she obeys before she sees. In her, the contemplative learns that the most fruitful act is sometimes to wait.

In the contemplative life, silence and listening are intertwined; in Mary, they reach perfection. Her stillness is fertile. The Cistercians saw her as the *hortus conclusus*, the enclosed garden of the Song of Songs, where divine love flowers in secret (Song 4:12). William of Saint Thierry called this inner garden "the soul at peace in the presence of the Word" (*De natura et dignitate amoris*, c. 6). That peace, he said, is the condition for fruitfulness: "When the soul is silent, then the Word speaks."

For Lay Cistercians, this Marian silence becomes a way of living in a noisy world. It is not retreat but transformation: a way of listening beneath the surface, discerning God's voice in the unplanned and the unfinished.

## Mary's Fiat and the Contemplative Yes

At the center of the Annunciation stands Mary's *fiat*: "Let it be done unto me according to your word" (Lk 1:38). This phrase has been called "the seed of all monastic vows," because in it we hear the total surrender of self-will to divine love.

For Bernard, Mary's *fiat* was not a single moment but a continual disposition—a lifelong openness to the Word. "Her yes was the root of all our salvation," he writes, "and her consent became the wedding of the divine and the human" (*Sermo in Adventu Domini*, §3). William of Saint Thierry echoed this when he described love as the soul's perpetual *fiat*: "Love says always yes, because love is the will united to God's will" (*Epistola ad Fratres de Monte Dei*, §3).

In Mary's obedience, the Cistercians saw the perfect harmony of contemplation and action. Her yes was interior, yet it bore fruit in the world. She demonstrates that the contemplative life is not a withdrawal from responsibility, but its transfiguration. To say *fiat* is to become available—to let God's purpose unfold through one's own hands.

For Lay Cistercians, who balance work, family, and prayer, Mary's *fiat* is not an unreachable ideal but a pattern for daily conversion. It is the quiet consent that sanctifies the routine, the willingness to serve even when unseen. Her faith, grounded in trust rather than comprehension, illuminates the Lay Cistercian path of hidden fidelity.

## Mary's Poverty and the Cistercian Spirit of Simplicity

Advent reveals another of Mary's virtues: her poverty of spirit. She brings nothing to the mystery but herself. In this, she mirrors the Cistercian commitment to simplicity—the stripping away of all that is unnecessary to make room for grace. Aelred of Rievaulx, reflecting on Mary's humility, called it "the ladder by which the Word descended and by which we ascend" (*Sermo de Assumptione B.M.V.*, PL 195).

Aelred's insight touches the core of the Cistercian ethos. Poverty, simplicity, and humility are not external renunciations but interior freedoms. Mary's humility is not self-denigration; it is pure transparency to God. She does not think less of herself; she simply does not think of herself apart from God. This is the heart of contemplative poverty: to live without the clutter of ego, open and available to the divine presence.

The Cistercian Statutes describe the monastic vocation as "a return to simplicity of life and heart." For the Lay Cistercian, that same simplicity must be lived in the midst of complexity—homes, workplaces, and relationships. Mary demonstrates that such simplicity is not withdrawal from life's demands but integration: the unification of the heart in love.

William of Saint Thierry wrote that "the pure heart is one that wills only one thing: the will of God" (*De Natura Amoris*, c. 14). In Mary's purity, this singleness of purpose is complete. Her Advent poverty teaches Lay Cistercians how to clear inner space for the coming of

Christ—by gentleness, detachment, and peace.

## The Advent of the Heart: Mary's Inner Journey

Advent is not only a historical remembrance but an interior drama. Mary's journey from the Annunciation to Bethlehem traces the soul's own pilgrimage from promise to fulfillment. She travels through darkness and uncertainty, bearing divine light that the world does not yet see.

Saint Bernard reflected that "faith is the traveler's lantern; it does not dispel all the darkness, but it guides the feet of the faithful" (*Sermo de Adventu Domini*, II). Mary's faith was such a lantern. She did not know where the path would lead, but she walked it with confidence born of love.

In her, the contemplative learns that waiting is not wasted time but creative participation in God's work. Her waiting is active, not idle. It is filled with prayer, service, and song—the *Magnificat* of the poor who trust that God's promises will be fulfilled.

Thomas Merton saw this same dynamic in the contemplative life: "The silence of Mary is not emptiness but plenitude. She is silent because the Word is speaking within her" (*The Silent Life*, 1957, p. 52). For the Lay Cistercian, this means that Advent is not about doing more but about allowing more—making room in the heart for the Word to dwell and act.

## Mary and the Lay Cistercian Vocation

The Marian dimension of Cistercian spirituality is not ornamental—it is structural. The Cistercian is Marian not only in devotion but in method. The monk, the nun, and the Lay Cistercian all learn from her how to listen, how to trust, and how to bear fruit in hiddenness.

For Lay Cistercians, who live their vocation amid family and work, Mary's example gives flesh to the Rule's call to *conversatio morum*—ongoing conversion of life. Each day brings opportunities to echo her *fiat* in small acts of love, patience, and mercy.

When a Lay Cistercian listens in silence before Scripture, Mary listens beside them. When they labor faithfully in their daily work, she labors with them. When they wait in prayer for God to act, they share her Advent faith. In her, the Cistercian charism—simplicity, silence, stability—takes on its most human and encouraging form.

In this sense, every Lay Cistercian community is Marian by nature: a small Nazareth where the Word can dwell quietly. Mary is the contemplative of the Church, and the Lay Cistercian is her student.

As Bernard wrote, "Every soul that believes conceives and brings forth the Word of God. Let each soul be Mary, that Christ may be born in all of us" (*Homilia in Adventu Domini*, §3). The Lay Cistercian vocation is precisely this: to become a living Advent, a place of expectancy where the Incarnation continues.

When the Church sings, "Come, Lord Jesus," Mary's voice is the first and last note. Her Advent never ends. It continues in all who wait in faith, in all who ponder the Word in silence, in all who give their lives as vessels of divine mercy. In her, the Lay Cistercian sees both origin and goal—the beginning of contemplation and its perfection. Her life is the Advent of God

within humanity; our life is the Advent of God within the world.

**References** Biblical quotations in this article are taken from the New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition (NRSV-CE). Copyright © 1989, 1993 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. All rights reserved worldwide. References to the Rule of Saint Benedict (RB) follow The Rule of St. Benedict in English with notes. Edited by Timothy Fry, Imogene Baker, and Timothy Horner. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1981.


- Sacred Scripture: Luke 1:38; 2:19.New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition (NRSV-CE)
- *Rule of Saint Benedict*, Prologue 1.RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict in English with notes. Edited by Timothy Fry, Imogene Baker, and Timothy Horner. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1981.
- Saint Bernard of Clairvaux: *Homiliae super Missus est*, II.17; *Homilia in Adventu Domini*, §3; *Sermo in Nativitate B.V.M.*, §7; *Sermo de Adventu Domini*, II. In: *Sancti Bernardi Opera*, Vols. 4–5. Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1957.
- William of Saint Thierry: *De natura et dignitate amoris*; *Epistola ad Fratres de Monte Dei*. In: *Opera Omnia*, ed. H. Bogaert. Turnhout: Brepols, 1976.
- Guerric of Igny: *Sermones in Adventu Domini*. In: *PL* 185.
- Saint Aelred of Rievaulx: *Sermo de Assumptione B.M.V.*, PL 195; *Speculum Caritatis*.
- Thomas Merton: *The Silent Life*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1957; *New Seeds of Contemplation*. New York: New Directions, 1961. Page numbers may vary based on edition.
- Cistercian Order: *Statutes of the General Chapter*. Rome: Order of Cistercians, 2015.

# A Midnight Clear: A Utah Trappist Monastery Christmas Eve Story

Michael Patrick O'Brien

Once when I was a boy, my family and I found ourselves stuck in our car in a deep snowbank on the side of a mountain on a quiet and lonely Ogden Valley road. A major snowstorm was just ending, and the skies were as clear as an open window. It was beautiful outside, but it was treacherous. And it was nearing midnight.

We should never have been out on such a road on such a night, but it was Christmas Eve. On Christmas Eve, we always went to Midnight Mass at the Utah Trappist monastery where I grew up. On the frosty night we got stuck, we felt compelled to try to attend Midnight Mass again, despite the big storm. So we started the long drive from our apartment and up the narrow, two-lane road, thinking, *How bad can it be?* As we drove through the blizzard, snow flew horizontally at us, battering the windshield with frozen pellets and reducing driver visibility to just a few feet. Our windshield wipers struggled heroically to repulse the unrelenting snow, but we could not even see the road.

At one point, a few hundred yards past Pineview Dam, the car suddenly veered to the right, smashed into a patch of accumulated snow and ice, and started to skid. We careened sideways into the mountain and thudded to an abrupt stop. A wave of snow washed over us and covered half the car, a sort of meteorological exclamation point punctuating our plight. We sat there stunned. The only sound came from the car radio, which pretended that nothing had happened and continued to blissfully chirp out happy holiday tunes that praised the winter wonderland weather that entrapped us.

*Advent is a Journey.*

Thomas Merton once said, "Happiness is not a matter of intensity but of balance, and order, and rhythm and harmony." Trappist liturgies have a simple beauty, especially at midnight on a snowy Christmas Eve. But we were far away from that order and harmony, stuck in a mountainside snowbank, overlooking a frigid and foreboding Pineview Reservoir. If our car had slid the other way, we might have landed on, or more dreadfully in, the cold waters of that half-frozen lake. Because I was the "man" of the house, my mother and sister Karen immediately looked to me to help, but I did not have much to offer. By now a bit of a self-absorbed teenager, I was annoyed just to have to leave the warmth of our golden Ford Maverick to try to kick snow away from the back of the car to see if we could get moving again. As I made my half-hearted efforts, I berated my sister, who had been behind the wheel during the slide off, with a not-so-helpful comment, "What kind of driving was that?"

Just as it was becoming clear that I was not going to be able to rescue us from our plight,

headlights appeared from out of the surrounding darkness.

They belonged to an old pickup truck, which in turn belonged to a grizzled old Huntsville farmer. He pulled next to us and rolled down his window. We shared a moment of fear and uncertainty until a friendly and distinctly Western voice cut through the cold air and asked, "You gals need some help?" Self-conscious (and male) teenager that I was, I hoped he was not referring to my long hair and instead was talking to my sister and mother, not to me. Perhaps sensing my embarrassment, Mom immediately responded, "Oh yes, please. Thank you!"

Our rescuer was tall, had a weathered face, and wore a denim jacket and worn leather gloves. Of course, he had on a cowboy hat. I do not remember his name or if he even shared that sort of information with us. He obviously was much better prepared for the storm than "us gals." He quickly pulled two snow shovels from his truck and kindly said, "Your boy can help me." Given his earlier greeting, I was relieved to hear my gender acknowledged. We shoveled away at the embankment of snow that had trapped our car. His snow flew farther and faster than mine, no doubt because I was in church shoes and he wore cowboy boots. He also put his back into the task. He got us out of the fix rather quickly, and soon our car was on the side of the road again, ready to continue its journey.

Mom thanked him, and tried to pay him, for his help. He politely declined, wished us well and left almost as quickly as he had appeared. I'd like to say he tipped his hat as he departed, but I don't remember for sure. We drove on to the monastery, uneventfully, and even made it there in time for Midnight Mass. The monks delivered their usual simple but impressive Christmas service. They had decorated their church with a Nativity scene, and a half dozen or so recently cut evergreen trees, one more than fifteen feet tall. Brother Isidore or Brother Carl, the forester monk, had probably hiked up the side of one of the Trappist foothills to obtain the lovely branches. White lights adorned a few of the trees, with the occasional addition of some simple red ribbons. The scent of fresh pine filled the chapel.

As bells rang out at midnight, the monks sang "Angels we have heard on high." The Christmas readings included the prophet Isaiah's poetic lines about the "Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace," and Luke's lovely Gospel narrative of the Nativity. At the end of Mass, the thirty or so monks raised their tenor and baritone voices in two or three verses of the classic carol, "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear." This song, based on a poem written in 1849 by Massachusetts Unitarian pastor Edmund Sears, tells how in the darkest moment of Christmas Eve, the angels announced the birth of Jesus.

It was a most memorable night, but I probably only understood its significance years later, after I outgrew my teenage funk. The monks helped me to understand that, whether we celebrate it as a Christian holiday or not, the meaning of Christmas is that some 2,000 years ago, a force for peace, goodness, and joy was reintroduced into the world. Our task is to recognize and incarnate that force and give it meaning in the lives of our family, our friends and, as Charles Dickens once put it in *A Christmas Carol*, our "fellow passengers to the grave."

Several decades ago, on that snowy Christmas Eve near the small town of Huntsville, Utah, I think the Christ child came to my mother, my sister, and me. Instead of wearing swaddling clothes and laying in a manger, he arrived in leather gloves, cowboy boots, and an old pickup.

And yes, he came upon a midnight clear.

*(Editor's note: This is an excerpt from **Monastery Mornings**, published in 2021 by Paraclete Press and used with permission of the author Michael Patrick O'Brien. Monastery Mornings tells a story about growing up at the now-closed Trappist monastery in Huntsville, Utah. Used with the author's permission)*

# A Personal Reflection on Nature as a Teacher of Simplicity

Michael Johnson

THEREis much agreement among Cistercian authors, both traditional and contemporary, that the spiritual value of simplicity is fundamental to one's understanding of the Cistercian charism. The values that characterize Cistercian spirituality—silence, solitude, community, stability, prayer, manual labor—are all rooted in simplicity of life. The Cistercian reform of the twelfth century sought to restore the simple monastic life of the Benedictine tradition.

As I live daily my commitment to the Lay Cistercian way of life, I have come to recognize more fully that nature is also a teacher of my ongoing formation. My wife and I have been blessed to live in a rural area where farms and woodland areas fill the landscape.

My daily prayer includes quiet walks and time of stillness in our woods. I have become more in tune with the rhythms of creation and hear what it teaches in its simplicity. Nature invites me to join its praise of the Creator. In prayer, I give thanks for water, food, oxygen, and the warmth of the sun—gifts that sustain body and soul.

Nature reminds us of birth and death, showing how all things share in creation's unfolding under God's providence. The concluding days of nature's season of Autumn remind me of my own dying. As I enter the liturgical season of Advent, I embrace again the mystery of the Incarnation and the coming of the Light and Life of all Creation. Everything in nature has a purpose in the Creator's design. It teaches humility and trust. I am reminded to respect its beauty and quiet strength. In its simplicity, nature shares silence, stillness, and stability. It has become a spiritual companion on my Cistercian path. I find joy in the Psalms that celebrate nature, like Psalm 65:9–11:

*The ends of the earth stand in awe*
*at the sight of your wonders.*
*The lands of sunrise and sunset*
*you fill with your joy.*

*You care for the earth, give it water;*
*you fill it with riches.*
*Your river in heaven brims over*
*to provide its grain.*

*And thus you provide for the earth;*
*you drench its furrows;*
*you level it, soften it with showers;*
*you bless its growth.*

## Advent Poems

### I Found My Cistercian

Raymond Geers

I found my Cistercian today.
She was buried under the debris of my life—
smothered by papers and books, projects and concerns,
choked by busyness and wrong-headed decisions.
There she sat beside the dusty Bible and languished near a stale bag of potato chips.
How old she seemed!
A crowd of crumbs at her feet in this cell that was once so devoted to the work of God.
O God, come to my assistance. Lord, make haste to help me...

It is fall, of course, and the world outside is growing cold.
Advent draws near, that holy season when a single light dares to shine in the darkness.
Yet I have been neglectful again—
like a grown-up who neglects both family and friends,
and so easily forgets the One who waits.
I found my Cistercian today only by discovering how long she has been lost.
Or rather—how long I have been lost,
dead and buried in a foolish adherence to unlikeness.
O Saint Bernard, you could explain it better than I. In any case, here I am, Lord.
You have called me back down to earth—
down from the heap of dreams that were never Yours for me,
and from desires that led only to pitiful, desolate places.
Here now, next to Your hidden tabernacle within my heart,
I wait upon You.
This servant child, wearing only an ephod,
has come to do Your will.

A silence rises over the soul-scape—
deep and expectant—
like the swelling of the pregnant Mother
whose quiet presence interrupts the sterile surface
and overwhelms the doubting deep.
One candle is lit in Advent devotion,
and gradually the whole world becomes a vision of peace.

In the quiet, everything else shrinks.
The stage is cleared—ready for the spotlight of grace.
And what does it bring?
A sort of word-picture, touched and scented with Someone wonderful.
Whatever it is, it convicts me back to myself and to You, Love,
and to all who are mine and Yours.

Such a simple moment.
And lo!—here she is again.
She was here all along. I found my Cistercian.

# O Winter Dawn

Frederick Wise

*This hymn, intended to be sung in late Advent, is written in iambic dimeter, or a meter of 88.88 (long meter), which fits many of the hymns sung in the monasteries with which we are associated.*

*Gari Melchers, The Nativity, c. 1891, GMHS Gari Melchers Home and Studio/University of Mary Washington.*

O Winter Dawn, O Coming Light,
creating out of darkness
the colors of our deepest yearning,
and of our hearts' Unknown Desire.

In silence we have kept the watch,
our eyes wide open in the night,
with unwearied lovers' longing,
the Bridegroom's coming to behold.

O Christ, You are that Morning Star,
whose advent ever nearer looms
Upon horizons pregnant with new hope,
the waiting world now to renew. *Amen.*

# Finding Hope in the Humility and Humanity of Mary

Frederick Wise

Among Among the many rich and evocative motifs of the Advent Season, none surpasses that of the figure of Our Lady. Singularly, she is the symbol of so subtle a silence, so mild a meekness, that she can receive the Word's whisper and conceive in her waiting womb the fullness of Love's manifestation—the very Incarnation of the Living God. This littleness, this emptiness of self, makes possible the moment that has become the central mystery of salvation. For all Christians—and, in particular, for those of us who seek God in the Benedictine and Cistercian way—humility is fundamental, as evidenced by the weight we give to Chapter 7, *On Humility*, in the Rule of St. Benedict.

It could be said that the first seven "Steps of Humility" describe the ascetical program for the demolition of the false self, while the latter five express the fruits of that process—its humiliation and death: the emergence and flowering of the True Self. At first glance, we might conclude that Mary does not need the first seven steps. After all, in her Immaculate Conception, is she not, from the very moment of her existence, perfectly and entirely her True Self, and therefore always radically open to receive the Divine Love and to bear the Fruit of Love's Incarnation?[2]

If such a vision of Mary's humility seems to flow naturally from her being without sin, it risks failing to honor the humanity of Mary, of Jesus, and of ourselves. The human need for psychological and spiritual growth is hardly one rooted in sin (though sin does make that growth especially confusing and painful). Rather, it is grounded in the very natural process of becoming human.[3] Indeed, we see this process unfold in various moments of Jesus' life. One instance is his encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mk 7:24–29), described with fresh insight by Michael Casey. As Casey observes, Jesus appears to move beyond the cultural boundaries of his time toward a more radical inclusivity.[4] This development does not imply sin or moral deficiency in Christ;[5] rather, it belongs to the natural human capacity for experiential learning. He is invited by experience to an expansion of consciousness, and, in humility, he consents to it.[6]

Becoming fully human is about awakening to our real identity, which is Christ. This is true both by grace and by nature. By the sacramental grace of Baptism, we are incorporated into Christ's very Body (see 1 Cor 12). At the same time, simply by being created human, we are made in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:27)—which many early Cistercians understood as the image of Christ himself. Yet we are ever becoming what we already are. Merton describes this journey as the discovery of the True Self;[7] Bernard speaks of the restoration of the Image of God within us. In Marian language, we could speak of one who continually

[2]Immaculate Conception understood as Mary being preserved from original sin (CCC 490–493; *Lumen Gentium* 56).

[3]Human nature grows and develops even without sin; see CCC 374–379.

[4]Michael Casey, *Fully Human, Fully Divine: An Interactive Christology* (2004).

[5]Christ is sinless: CCC 467; Heb 4:15.

[6]Casey, *Fully Human, Fully Divine*, on experiential growth.

[7]Thomas Merton, writings on the True Self, esp. *New Seeds of Contemplation*.

cultivates an interior space that both is and is becoming full of grace (cf. Lk 1:28).

This learning to become who we are is intrinsic to being human. Again, though sin obscures our awareness and impedes our growth, the need to be in the "school of humility" is a natural, positive human experience—not merely a reaction to sin. If Jesus himself grew in this way—an experiential growth, and not a moral correction—then Mary too must have undergone, in the language of St. Benedict, such an expansion of heart.[8]

This truth affirms our human struggle to grow in wholeness and holiness, offering a profound source of hope. Divine though Jesus is, and immaculate though Mary is, their humanity is truly our humanity. Thus, our focus need not be on Mary's being impossibly distant from us. Her holiness—her fully integrated humanity—is a grace given, differently yet genuinely, both to her and to us.

This grace flows from Christ's Death and Resurrection. Still, it is also intimately connected to the mystery of the Incarnation, which reveals something deeper than the classic dualistic description of divinity "taking on" humanity. The Incarnation reveals not only that divine and human natures are united in the one Person of Christ,[9] but also that human nature itself is, by design, capable of communion with the divine.[10] Heaven is wedded to earth; they become one flesh in Christ.

Similarly, Mary's Immaculate Conception manifests what is, in a certain sense, true of our essential humanness: that we really are fully enough, fully ready, fully prepared to receive, conceive, and give new birth to Christ, the Fullness of Life and Love. Though wounded, our nature remains, in the words of our Cistercian Fathers and Mothers, truly capable of the divine—*capax Dei*.

Yet being capable is not the same as being immaculate. She is fully fair; we are fully fallen. We struggle with much greater difficulty than Mary in the school of humility. To learn, as she did, to surrender every trace of the insubstantial, illusory ego that the Rule calls self-will is a daunting task for us. Nevertheless, with Mary, we are called to that lifelong journey of humility that frees us to be ever more actively receptive to the Word becoming flesh in us. "Behold, the handmaid of the Lord. Be it done unto me according to your word" (Lk 1:38), we respond with her in humble hope, both graced and able to do so—not in spite of, but because of, our shared humanity.

[8] On Benedictine humility as expansion of the heart: RB Prol. 49.

[9] Council of Chalcedon (451): one Person, two natures.

[10] Early Cistercian concept of the human person as *capax Dei*, "capable of God."

# International Association of Lay Cistercian Communities Meeting — Ávila, Spain

Ávila, Spain — June 2025

The IALCC Coordinating Committee is pleased to share this summary of the VIII International Encounter in Ávila, where our theme focused on synodality through the lived experience of lay communities.

A total of 59 participants attended, representing communities from France, Belgium, Spain, the Netherlands, the United States, New Zealand, and Mexico. Eight monks and nuns from various branches of the Cistercian Family also joined us, including members of the Congregation of Saint Bernard, the Bernardines of Esquermes, and the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance (OCSO). We were honored by the presence of Monsignor Jesús Rico García, Bishop of Ávila, who presided at the opening Eucharist.

To foster a contemplative rhythm, breakfast was taken in silence—a practice warmly welcomed by all. Each day included shared Mass, Lauds, Vespers, Compline, and meals. The synodal vision proposed by Pope Francis framed our reflections, resonating with the *Rule of Saint Benedict* and the OCSO *Charter of Charity*.

The Holy Father reminds us that the purpose of the Synod is not simply to produce documents but to

> "make dreams germinate, stir up prophecies and visions, make hopes blossom, stimulate confidence, bind wounds, weave relationships, resurrect a dawn of hope, learn from one another, and create a positive imagination that enlightens minds, inflames hearts, and strengthens hands."

These words inspired our work together, guiding us as we deepened mutual understanding, shared good news, and sought common solutions in a spirit of authentic Cistercian fraternity.

Each language commission organized its own conferences, group sessions, and round tables, reflecting the diversity of our communities. Dom Armand Veilleux reminded us that the Cistercian charism belongs to no one group alone; while the monks and nuns are its guardians, the laity participate in it fully through their lived bond with monastic life.

**Mission of the IALCC**

The mission of the International Association of Lay Cistercian Communities (IALCC) is to unite and support lay groups throughout the world who seek to live the Cistercian charism within the circumstances of daily life. The Association fosters communion among communities, strengthens their relationship with the Cistercian monasteries, and safeguards the authenticity of the Cistercian tradition as expressed in the *Rule of Saint Benedict* and the *Charter of Charity*.

# Community Reports

## Language Commissions: Themes and Highlights

**French-speaking communities**
*Strengthening unity, vitality, and belonging; responding to monastery closures; renewing links with monastic communities.*

- **Charter of Charity Visits:** Regular contact with lay communities by a monk, nun, or designated lay delegate.
- **Friendship Letters:** Written reflections exchanged to sustain fellowship.
- **Journal of the Presence of Saint Bernard:** A lay publication renewing the charism.

**Spanish-speaking communities**
*"Listening from the Heart"—attending to the varied realities of lay Cistercian life.*

- **Novelty:** Arsconditus in Granada continues the mission after its monastery's closure.
- **Difficulty:** Communities grieve the loss of monastic reference points.
- **Renewal:** Communion with monastic life brings new strength.
- **Uniqueness:** Annual gatherings sustain unity despite distance.

**English-speaking communities**
*Inclusivity and accessibility.*

- **Ecumenism:** Living the charism across Christian traditions.
- **Virtual Communities:** Online gatherings linking those unable to meet in person.

# Featured Presentations

- **Dom Bernardus Peeters, OCSO —** Offered a powerful reflection on living synodality and moving "from acedia to joy."
- **Dom Armand Veilleux, OCSO —** Provided a historical overview of the lay Cistercian charism and its development.

All presentations and documents may be found at:
**Ávila 2025 – International Association of Lay Cistercian Communities (IALCC)**.

## Statutes and Commitments

The assembly unanimously approved amendments to the Statutes, including an updated method for electing the Coordinating Committee and renewed responsibility for accompanying lay groups whose monasteries have closed.

The Association emerges strengthened—committed to communication, solidarity, and accompaniment for all lay communities as we continue on our synodal path.

## Possible Themes for the Next International Meeting (2028)

- Spiritual friendship in light of the Charter of Charity
- Developing a common charter and deepening commitment
- Reciprocity between lay and monastic communities
- The Cistercian influence on prayer and mission in the Church

**In gratitude and peace,**

*Teresa McMahon for the Coordinating Committee of the International Association of Lay Cistercian Communities (IALCC)*

www.cistercianfamily.org

# About the IALCC and the OSCO

## Order of Cistercian Strict Observance

The Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance (also known as "Trappists") is a Roman Catholic contemplative religious order, consisting of monasteries of monks and monasteries of nuns. We are part of the larger Cistercian family, which traces its origin to 1098. As Cistercians, we follow the Rule of Saint Benedict, and so are part of the Benedictine family as well. Our lives are dedicated to seeking union with God, through Jesus Christ, in a community of sisters or brothers.

The International Association of Lay Cistercian Communities (IALCC) unites lay groups across the world who live the Cistercian charism in the midst of daily life, in close relationship with Cistercian monasteries (OCSO, OCist, and other branches of the Cistercian family). The Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance (OCSO, "Trappists") recognizes and supports these lay communities as a significant expression of the wider Cistercian family.

## A.1 English Commission Communities

- Weggemeinschaft St. Benedikt – Zisterzienserkloster Langwaden (OCist), Germany
- Abdijgroep Koningsoord – Abbey Koningsoord (OCSO, nuns), Netherlands
- Cisterciënzer Groep Sion – Klooster Schiermonnikoog, Netherlands
- Cistercian Associates of Southern Star Abbey, Kopua – Our Lady of the Southern Star Abbey (OCSO, monks), New Zealand
- Fr. Tansi Lay Cistercians – Our Lady of Mount Calvary Monastery (OCSO, monks), Nigeria
- Cistercian Fraternity of Gdansk – Abbaye Notre Dame d'Aiguebelle (OCSO, monks), Poland
- Lay Cistercians of Our Lady of New Clairvaux – Abbey of Our Lady of New Clairvaux, Vina, California, USA
- Associates of the Iowa Cistercians – New Melleray Abbey (OCSO, monks), Peosta, Iowa, USA and Our Lady of the Mississippi (OCSO, nuns), Dubuque, Iowa, USA
- Lay Cistercian Community of Our Lady Undoer of Knots – Holy Spirit Monastery (OCSO, monks), Conyers, Georgia, USA
- Lay Cistercians of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart of South Florida – Holy Spirit Monastery (OCSO, monks), Conyers, Georgia, USA
- Lay Contemplative Associates – Holy Spirit Monastery (OCSO, monks), Conyers, Georgia, USA
- Lay Cistercians of Holy Spirit Monastery – Holy Spirit Monastery (OCSO, monks), Conyers, Georgia, USA

- Lay Cistercians of Holy Cross Abbey – Our Lady of the Holy Cross Abbey (OCSO, monks), Berryville, Virginia, USA
- Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani Abbey – Abbey of Gethsemani (OCSO, monks), Trappist, Kentucky, USA
- Ecumenical Lay Cistercians of the Holy Spirit – Holy Spirit Monastery (OCSO, monks), Conyers, Georgia, USA
- Conversi: An Online Community – Our Lady of the Mississippi Abbey (OCSO, nuns), Dubuque, Iowa, USA New Mellery Abby (OSCO, monks), Peosta, Iowa
- Cistercian Lay Contemplatives of Spencer – St. Joseph's Abbey (OCSO, monks), Spencer, Massachusetts, USA
- Ave Maria Cistercian Associates – Holy Spirit Monastery (OCSO, monks), Conyers, Georgia, USA

## A.2 French Commission Communities

- Laïcs Cisterciens de Notre-Dame d'Orval – Abbaye Notre-Dame d'Orval, Belgium
- Laïcs Cisterciens de Scourmont – Abbaye Notre-Dame de Scourmont (OCSO, monks), Belgium
- Les associés cisterciens de l'abbaye Notre-Dame du Sacré-Coeur de Westmalle – Abbaye Notre-Dame du Sacré-Coeur (OCSO, monks), Westmalle, Belgium
- Grange Saint Bernard de Clairvaux – Abbaye Notre-Dame de Cîteaux, France
- Groupe des Flandres – Monastère Notre-Dame de la Plaine (Esquermes, nuns), France
- Fraternité cistercienne Notre-Dame de Timadeuc – Abbaye Notre-Dame de Timadeuc (OCSO, monks), France
- Fraternité Cistercienne d'Aiguebelle – Abbaye Notre-Dame d'Aiguebelle (OCSO, monks), France
- Laïcs Cisterciens Notre-Dame du Val d'Igny – Abbaye Notre-Dame du Val d'Igny (OCSO, nuns), France
- Laïcs cisterciens de Notre-Dame de la Paix – Abbaye Notre-Dame de la Paix de Castagniers (OCist, nuns), France
- Près de Cîteaux – Abbaye Notre-Dame de Cîteaux (OCSO, monks), France
- Fraternité des Laïcs Cisterciens de Koutaba – Monastère Notre-Dame de Koutaba (OCSO, monks), Cameroon

## A.3 Spanish Commission Communities

- Familia Cisterciense de Santa María – Santa María la Real de Villamayor de los Montes (Congregación de San Bernardo, nuns), Spain
- Fraternidad de Laicos Cistercienses de San Clemente – Real Monasterio de San Clemente

(Congregación de San Bernardo, nuns), Sevilla, Spain

- Fraternidad de Laicos Cistercienses de Santa María de Sobrado – Santa María de Sobrado (OCSO, monks), Sobrado dos Monxes, Spain
- Fraternidad de Laicos Cistercienses del Monasterio de Santa María de Huerta – Monasterio de Santa María de Huerta (OCSO, monks), Soria, Spain
- Fraternidad de Laicos Cistercienses – Santa María de Curutarán – Monasterio Cisterciense Virgen del Curutarán (OCSO, monks), Michoacán, México
- Nuestra Señora de la Divina Providencia – Holy Spirit Monastery (OCSO, monks), Conyers, Georgia, USA

# Contributors

**John Pestian, Ph.D.**
John Pestian, Ph.D., is a Lay Cistercian of Gethsemani in Cincinnati, Ohio. He is a medical scientist whose work in pediatric neuropsychiatric research is devoted to understanding and healing the suffering of children and families. A contemplative by vocation, he grounds his life in silence, prayer, and the wisdom of the Cistercian tradition. A husband and father, he seeks to bring that same spirit into the ordinary rhythms of daily life.

**Ray Geers**
Ray Geers has been a Lay Cistercian of Gethsemani since 2004. He works in as a therapist in physical medicine in an acute care hospital in Cincinnati, Ohio. He is married to his wife Jeanne with three adult children and a grandson. Ray first visited the Trappist Abbey of Gethsemani in 1981 as a high school student and entered the postualancy in 1986 and the novitiate the next year. The time spent there profoundly shaped his love for life and, more specifically, for community. He is a member of several of them, including The Oratory of Saint John Vianney at Saint Anthony Church and Bethany Center for Nonviolent Theology and Spirituality. Ray loves to share his expressions of the mind and heart through writing, music, and occasionally through illustrations.

**Michael Johnson**
Mike Johnson has been a Lay Cistercian of Gethsemani Abbey for thirty-six years. He and his wife reside near Oxford, Ohio. He is a retired social worker who was employed in public child protection services as a field worker and manager for thirty-two years. Mike serves on the Board of a community interfaith center in Oxford and as a lay pastoral minister at his parish.

**Michael Patrick O'Brien**
Mike O'Brien is a writer and attorney living in Salt Lake City, Utah. Paraclete Press published his book **Monastery Mornings** in August 2021. The League of Utah Writers chose it as the best non-fiction book of 2022. Mike's new holiday novel, tentatively titled **The Merry Matchmaker Monks**, will be published in time for Christmas 2026. Author website: michaelpatrickobrien.com.

**Teresa McMahon**
Teresa McMahon has been an associate of the Cistercian communities of New Melleray Abbey and Our Lady of the Mississippi Abbey (both in Iowa) since 1996. She currently serves as the English Commission Representative on the Coordinating Committee of the International Association of Lay Cistercian Communities. She is an attorney who spent her career in public service.

**Fredrick Wise**
Frederick Wise, D.Min., is a Lay Cistercian of Holy Cross Abbey, Berryville, along with his wife Elizabeth. He has taught Theology in Catholic schools for 35 years, along with being an experienced leader of prayer, worship, and retreats.

# Editor's Comments

**About the Cover Art** Seeing Shepherds — Daniel Bonnell → Bonnell's shepherds capture something the Cistercian tradition knows well: when God breaks through, joy refuses to stay hidden. Their bodies open as if receiving a light they never expected, wholly taken by surprise. It is the *gaudium monasticum* Bernard describes—the quiet sweetness of a soul realizing that God is near.

These are rough men, shaped by weather and hard living, yet they become the ones entrusted with revelation. The same is true for us. The monk—and anyone seeking God—comes with weakness, confusion, and a heart still learning how to listen. Yet grace arrives anyway. Joy does not rise because life is easy, but because God leans toward the humble.

Here, joy is not noise or spectacle. It is revelation—the shepherd's first cry becoming the echo in the contemplative heart: *"To us a Savior is born."*

**Generative Artificial Intelligence** Generative AI has become an integral part of modern life, a tool many of us use without even thinking. In preparing this issue of the *Lay Cistercian Review*, we used it gently and intentionally—only to support the practical work that helps present each author's writing with clarity and care. Within our typesetting system, Overleaf, it assisted with formatting, layout consistency, and troubleshooting LaTeX quirks, helping us maintain a clean and contemplative look for the journal.

Generative AI also supported our authors by checking grammar, punctuation, clarity, and, at times, raising possible theological questions. Even so, the final work belongs entirely to the authors. Whenever a passage touched on doctrine or deeper meaning, they reviewed it personally and refined or clarified their intent. We chose not to use generative AI for poetry, as it struggles with nuance, symbolism, and metaphor—qualities central to contemplative verse. This approach allowed each writer's true voice to shine while safeguarding the accuracy and integrity of the *Lay Cistercian Review*.

For example, in writing *Mary and the Lay Cistercian Vocation During Advent*, I (John Pestian) used ChatGPT as a helpful companion to tighten the prose, check for clarity, and identify potential doctrinal or theological inconsistencies. The ideas, structure, and spiritual direction are mine, but ChatGPT helped smooth the language and ensure the article read cleanly. It remained simply a practical tool—much like an editor—that supported the work while keeping the heart, intention, and authenticity of the writing fully my own.

Our use of generative AI follows the Church's guidance on emerging digital tools. The Vatican's *Ethics in Internet* urges "serious reflection" and "careful and ethical evaluation" of new technologies,[11] and teaches that technological tools "should serve people's good and the moral truth."[12] Similarly, the Dicastery for Communication's more recent reflection, *Towards Full Presence*, calls for the prudent use of digital tools in ways that foster "truth, beauty, and the

[11] Pontifical Council for Social Communications, *Ethics in Internet* (2002), §4. Full text available at: vatican.va/ethics-in-internet.

[12] Ibid., §5.

good."[13]

**Errata** As we begin the work of publishing the Lay Cistercian Review, we recognize that mistakes may occur. If you notice anything that needs correction—whether in language, references, or theological clarity—we would be grateful to hear from you. Your attention and generosity help strengthen our mission and support the prayerful work of this journal. Please send any corrections to `info@laycistercianreview.org` ↗.

[13]Dicastery for Communication, *Towards Full Presence: A Pastoral Reflection on Engagement with Social Media* (2023), §77. Full text available at: vatican.va/towards-full-presence.