

A Guide for the Perplexed: The Conversi Newcomers Manual

Welcome to Conversi! We are very glad you are here with us. You probably have some questions about how to be a fruitful member of Conversi, and this is designed to answer them. If you have other questions, please contact the mentor who has been assigned to you. Don't be shy about asking, because we will be glad to work on improving this manual to make it easier for people who join later.

Most lay associate communities meet in person at a monastery every month, and they may make use of a website for communicating with members and attracting newcomers. Conversi is unique because except for the annual retreat our entire community life is conducted on line. To be in Conversi by definition means spending time every week "in community" through the website.

1. What should I use the website for and how do I navigate it?

For a swift overview of the functions of the website, go to www.conversi.org, then click on **Get Help** in the upper right just to the left of the Logout button, then **Overview**. The website developer narrates a video that takes you through almost everything you might want to do. Take some time and browse through all the menu options. (If the items don't work, perhaps you forgot to close the video page!) Come back to browse again in a few weeks, because there is a lot of information to absorb.

2. How do I change some things in my profile?

Go to www.conversi.org, then click on **Your Profile**. Make the changes you want to make, then scroll down until you see the red **Update** button. Before you close that window, be sure there is no error message from the update that needs to be resolved. You should see a message that the update was successful.

3. Is there someone who can help me?

Yes, every new member is assigned a more experienced member as a mentor. This person can answer your questions about the web site, member expectations, etc. The mentor/mentee relationship can last up to about 6 months, until you feel comfortable with participating in Conversi. The mentor is not a spiritual director, but someone who can make it less frustrating and lonesome when you first join. If you find you do not get along well with your mentor or the mentor is consistently unavailable when you need help, please contact a member of the Formation Committee or the Council; the formation@conversi.org address is forwarded to all members of the Formation Committee.

4. Who am I talking to?

It's important that you feel comfortable sharing in the chat rooms and the journals. That's more likely if you know something about the rest of us. On the website, click on the Community Items choice, then pick Member List. You will find photographs of most members, along with biographical and contact information.

5. How important is it to participate in the journals, the formation chats, and the forums?

Absorbing the formation talks (either through the audio or the text version, when the text is available), participating in the associated chats, and answering the forum questions are critically important for you as a member of Conversi, and for the Conversi community as a whole, as are writing journal entries and posting comments on the entries others write. **The online life of Conversi is not optional.** It is the core of our community life. Your private prayer practice and the way you conduct your life will be shaped in part by your experience in Conversi; conversely, what you bring from that life into the online community helps us all to grow as individuals, and to grow more united as a community.

6. How do I track my progress through the formation sequence? It seems random.

The entire initial formation process is intended to take three calendar years. During that time, the eighteen “core” topics will be covered. The order is not fixed within each year’s set, and depending on when you join, you will find you are beginning at a different place. Eighteen other topics will also be presented during that time; on the calendar, the core topics are in bold type. You keep track of your own progress by editing your record under My Profile and clicking the box beside the topic you want to record. As part of the introductory packet, there is a hard-copy tracking sheet as well, where you can list the date and presenter.

Please note that although previous topics are available in the Formation Topics section under Community Resources, it is not possible to speed through the formation process by reading the topics you have “missed” in order to “catch up”. Instead, ponder the topic for this month and let it roll around in your head and heart; pushing in too much new information in a short period of time tends to prevent the mulling over of the ideas which is what allows you to assimilate the ideas and be changed by them. Along the same lines, it is important to participate in the chat room and the forum discussions, to function as part of this community, rather than alone. Many of us come to Conversi after being rather isolated as the lone contemplative we are aware of, so it bears repeating: the goal is to stay with the community as we all study the topics, not to attempt to set a speed record for finishing them.

7. May I contact other members privately?

Member contact information is available in the member list. Yes, it is acceptable to correspond by email with others, to telephone them, or to chat on another electronic platform. It is polite to ask the other person if they are open to continued communication. Some of us are also on Facebook, but please be advised that privacy on Facebook can be an issue, and messages on Facebook will be deleted by Facebook if one party passes away.

8. Do I really have to journal? What should I say?

Yes, you really need to participate in the journaling – many people find it somewhat easier than the chat rooms, because you can type at your leisure. What you talk about, how long your entries are, and how deeply you share are up to you, so long as you conform to Conversi customs (see below). Read what others write and see how different people differ in what they share. It is not necessary to put an overly pious face on what is going on. We are real people, with real struggles, real doubts, and we are all also sinners. If you have a really lengthy entry, you may want to type it in TextEdit (Mac) or Notepad (Windows), then paste it in. Microsoft Word even in .txt mode may add characters/character sequences that are problematic when pasted in. The website now has tools to format the text. If you see a little “p” at the lower left, it’s just a paragraph formatting code, not a bug.

9. Conversi customs

All monasteries have customs, some of them written, some passed on by word of mouth. These differ from one monastery to another even within the Cistercian order and give each monastery a particular flavor. Conversi also has customs, including the following. More may be added as Council sees a need.

- a. Always speak or write to and about other Conversi members with courtesy and Christian charity. Act as though God were a part of the conversation – because He is.
- b. As the bumper sticker says, “Do not assume I share your prejudices.” This includes political, religious, and gender issues. Please refrain from making derogatory comments about members of another political party, another Christian sect or another religion, or about the hierarchy of any church. Members of Conversi come from a wide range of Christian denominations, and may have very conservative through more liberal views. Conversi exists to foster our mutual growth in contemplative prayer and union with God, not to promote one particular version of church organization or other views.
- c. If you feel offended by something someone else has said, please refrain from intemperate, sarcastic, or offensive language in your replies. Often the best reply is silence. If you feel you must reply, a private message may be next best, or you may ask Council to intervene if you feel it is serious enough.
- d. Refrain from inappropriate personal advances to others in Conversi.
- e. Do not expect that Conversi will be a source of spiritual direction. That requires a face-to-face relationship and special training. If there are clergy (active or retired) who are members, please remember that they are members of Conversi, not consulting staff.

10. Is there a basic reading list?

Yes, there are certain books that are basic. If you have not read them, or read them more than a year ago, the following are strongly recommended:

- a. The Rule of Benedict. This is the foundation of Benedictine/Cistercian monastic life. The Rule is available in an inexpensive paperback called *RB 1980* containing only an English translation, as well as in versions with commentary or exercises.

- b. André Louf, *The Cistercian Way*.
- c. Trisha Day, *Inside the School of Charity*
- d. If you have read all these, there is a more extensive list on the website under **Resources / Reading List**.

11. Praying the Liturgy of the Hours

Many members of Conversi pray some part of the Roman Catholic Liturgy of the Hours. It is not necessary to invest a large sum of money to acquire books to do so. Under **Resources / Liturgy of the Hours**, there are links to several resources. The document “An Introduction to praying Liturgy of the Hours” has information about other on-line resources for these prayers.