

A Theology of Commitment in the Context of the Lay Cistercian Movement

As the Lay Cistercian movement¹ continues to grow and to mature, many of those involved, both individuals and communities, lay and monastic, are beginning to ask questions about the structure of Lay Cistercian life. Some of those questions have to do with the promises or formal statements of intent that members might make regarding practices that are associated with living the Cistercian charism outside the monastery: Are such statements necessary? How binding are they on the individual who makes them? How binding are they on the community in which they are made? Before such questions can be addressed, however, there is a more basic question that must be considered: What exactly are these promises? Can they be described in a way that makes it evident that they are statements made in the Cistercian tradition yet accommodates the wide variety of Lay Cistercian communities in the world? Can they be described in a way that allows each Lay Cistercian community to express its own particular embodiment of the Cistercian charism without imposing an unnatural uniformity?

The ancient Christian adage *lex orandi lex credendi*² expresses the dialectic between the experience of God's saving presence in the life of faith and more formal statements of doctrine. The worship of the community expresses the doctrine of the community, and the doctrine of the community rises out of the experience of God's presence in the context of worship. St. Anselm expresses the same idea more succinctly when he defines theology as faith seeking

¹ The Lay Cistercian movement is an international phenomenon of groups of lay people forming around monasteries. These people wish to learn about and incorporate Cistercian spirituality and values into their lives outside the monastery. These people are not "wanna-be" monastics, but people who understand the value of having a deep, contemplative spirituality as the foundation for life "in the world."

² The rule of prayer is the rule of belief.

understanding: Christians reflect on the faith which they live, finding in the world around them apt metaphors for expressing that faith. While the topic at hand is not nearly so profound as the theology of salvation that Anselm developed through a correlation with the feudal system of justice in which he lived, the same method of finding correlation between faith experience and aspects of our broader experience can be fruitful for arriving at a better understanding of what we are doing when we make a commitment to live the Cistercian charism as lay men and women.

What follows, then, is a “theology of commitment” that rises out of reflection on the faith experience of the Associates of the Iowa Cistercians (AIC) over the past ten years as the community developed a practice of “commitment,” of making public statements of intent to live the Cistercian charism as lay men and women. This theology is presented simply as a beginning point for a movement-wide discussion of commitment and promises. What I hope to develop is a framework that is broad enough for a general discussion of commitment in the context of the lay Cistercian movement as a whole and that indicates how more particular discussions within the specific circumstances of individual communities might be embarked upon.

The Associates of the Iowa Cistercians (AIC), a Lay Cistercian group associated with Our Lady of the Mississippi and New Melleray abbeys, has developed a practice that we call “commitment.” For the past 10 years or so, as members complete a set of formation topics that are presented over the course of a three year cycle, they discern whether they are called to make a formal commitment to the Lay Cistercian way of life. For the AIC, the prospect of instituting such a formal step in the life of the community and in the life of each member was filled with anguish and misgiving. We worried that we would end up with a sort of class system that would divide the community into “professed” and “not professed.” We worried that making a commitment would cause members to worry more about following a set of rules than about

living out the spirit of the community. We worried that, should we not be able to live up to the commitment, we were only adding another occasion of sin to our lives.

In the end, three members just said “we need to do this,” and so community leaders worked with them to design an appropriate ceremony. Within a couple years, more members of the community also felt called to make a formal statement of their intention to live the Cistercian charism outside the monastery. Over the ensuing years, the process of member formation in the AIC embodiment of the Cistercian charism has become more intentional and more structured.³ The ritual of commitment has become a community tradition that is celebrated each year and has become part of our AIC identity. In the past year, the community has embarked on a process of

³ While the details of formation as AIC has developed it are beyond the scope of this essay, a brief description may be helpful at this point. As the community grew and it became apparent that something more than random presentations on monastic values and practices was needed, the AIC leadership team, in consultation with advisors from both New Melleray Abbey and Our Lady of the Mississippi Abbey, developed a set of twenty basic concepts and practices that are the foundation for what is now called “initial formation.” Those concepts and practices (e.g. simplicity, obedience, silence and solitude, the Rule of Benedict and the Cistercian patrimony, lectio) are presented in a three-year cycle. Each “teaching” consists of a period set aside for lectio using scripture passages dealing with the topic, a formal presentation by a member of one of the monastic communities or a senior member of the AIC, and group discussion about incorporating the value or practice into one’s own prayer life. “On-going formation,” the teachings presented to senior members, follows the same format and often considers the same topics, but in greater depth. There is no formal assessment of a person’s grasp of a particular teaching. Rather, the community presumes that members will work diligently to internalize the teachings and to incorporate them into the particular circumstances of their lives outside the monastery. Commitment, which signals a move from initial to on-going formation, follows a two or three month period of discernment by the member with the help of one of the monastic liaisons or a senior member of the community. Most members opt to make a commitment after three or four years, but some have opted not to make a commitment even after several years as members.

reflection, a process of “theologizing” about the concept of commitment and how such a step in the life of the AIC might be described more explicitly.

To begin this process of reflection, members of the AIC, both those who had made commitment and those who were still in what we call “initial formation,” were asked to fill out a questionnaire about the idea of commitment.⁴ The questionnaire was designed to help our members reflect on the interrelatedness of three realities of the Lay Cistercian life:

- The call to be a Lay Cistercian is a true vocation.
- Each member lives out that vocation in the context of other vocations and commitments such as marriage, family, and career.
- Our promises/commitments as Lay Cistercians have no juridic status; that is they are not binding in a way that would require seeking dispensation from church authority if one were to leave the community.

Responses to the questionnaire reflected the real diversity of the members of the AIC and spanned the whole range of possibilities. Some felt that we needed to set out specific milestones along the path from entry into the community to formal commitment and spell out precisely the obligations of that commitment. Others were happy with rather vague and informal descriptions of commitment as involving accountability and mutual support along the spiritual journey. Each response contained wisdom gleaned from the lived experience of making commitments, both individually and communally, yet the responses were so widely varied that it became obvious that reflection on the meaning of commitment must step back from the level of praxis and search for the common theoretical and theological underpinnings that inform that praxis.

⁴ See appendix A for the questionnaire.

The first step in that reflection, then, is to identify the formal procedures that have become the tradition of the AIC:

- Discernment process for applicants
- Three or more years of initial formation
- Discernment process for commitment
- Commitment ceremony
- On-going formation

With regard to the actual commitment ritual itself, AIC members supplement a uniform statement of intent⁵ that all members use with their own statement regarding personal practices and aspirations. There are still some aspects of the commitment process that need to be settled:

- Should there be a “recommitment” statement? If so, when?
- Should members review and even rewrite their individual amendments? If so, when?
- Should members be allowed to make a life-time commitment? And if so, what preparation would be required?

It does seem, however, as if these details cannot be adequately addressed until a foundational theology of commitment is in place.

The next step is to find common threads among the disparate responses to the questionnaire on commitment. Those responses make it quite apparent that all members regard commitment as a response to God’s call to them as individuals. Our commitment is our “yes” to

⁵ See appendix B for the uniform statement of intent. Each member’s personal statement is intended to be a reflection of practices already in place

God's invitation to intimacy.⁶ It is as truly a call from God as was Jeremiah's call to be God's prophet as a young man and Peter's and Andrew's and James' and John's call to be apostles.

The responses to the questionnaire also make it apparent that members consider commitment to be more than a simple "yes." Members have been saying "yes" in many small ways all along: applying to join the AIC, coming to meetings, incorporating practices into our lives. The "yes" that commitment entails is the culmination of all those small yeses. It is a public profession of our intention to continue to say yes in the context of the Lay Cistercian movement in general and in the context of membership in the AIC in particular.

There are two levels of description in nearly every response to our questionnaire about commitment. One level articulates the fact that being a Lay Cistercian is a manner of being that permeates every other aspect of life, including all of our other relationships; our identity as a Lay Cistercian shapes all of what we do and who we are. A second level recognizes that our commitment as Lay Cistercians who are members of the AIC expresses a particular relationship with a particular community, and through that community with the communities of Our Lady of the Mississippi and New Melleray abbeys and with the order. Note that this relationship is not directly with the monasteries; although such direct relationships sometimes do develop, they are independent from the particular relationship that expresses a person's identity as a Lay Cistercian.

The primary relationship expressed in commitment is our personal relationship with God, yet we come to that relationship in the company of the others who form this community and who

⁶It is also apparent from the responses that members do not regard a desire to be close to the monks and nuns as the primary "call" to the Lay Cistercian life; people who come to the AIC for that reason seldom remain longer than a year.

also are called by God to this particular way of life. Thus, commitment also expresses an often implicit covenant between the community and the individual. Commitment is not only a personal promise to follow a particular way of life; it is also a promise to participate in the life of the community, serving the community as one can and offering encouragement to each member. The community, by participating in the discernment process that precedes commitment and by receiving that commitment, makes its own commitment to the individual, a promise of support and encouragement and formation in the form of Lay Cistercian life that characterizes the community.

Because commitment is a public statement of intent, one must consider the question of where it fits on the spectrum of other public statements of intention. There is unanimous agreement among those who responded to the questionnaire that commitment is not a vow on the order of marriage or religious profession, but neither is it a mere promise like the Girl or Boy Scout promises. Nor does it seem to be a “devotional promise” such as that described in the Catechism. Commitment in the context of the Lay Cistercian movement has to do more with our identity as persons than with merely performing “this action, that prayer, this alms-giving, that pilgrimage, and so forth”⁷ out of devotion to God. It is, rather, an acknowledgement of *who* God calls us to be that we make in the company of others who are called to a similar way of being in the world. Every response to the questionnaire made it quite apparent that members consider “Cistercian-ness” to be an essential aspect of their personal identity, and members were consistent in describing this “Cistercian-ness” in terms of such values as simplicity of life, solitude, silence, fidelity to a life of prayer, and fidelity to the particular community in which our Cistercian identity is formed. Commitment is both an acknowledgement of the reality of our

⁷ See the Catechism of the Catholic Church §2101. I thank the CSQ reviewer who pointed out that connection.

personal identity, of our vocation in the classic sense of God's calling us into being, and a statement of our intent to be true to that identity in the context of the other relationships and responsibilities that shape our lives. Such a statement is best made in the midst of a community of similarly called people who both affirm one's vocation to the Lay Cistercian life and who make a reciprocal statement of intent to offer support, encouragement and formation in the Lay Cistercian life.

Thus, it seems that what we are doing when we make commitments as members of the AIC is on the order of an oath or a solemn promise such as that made when a person is sworn in as a member of a jury. Such a solemn promise acknowledges that certain values, such as promoting justice, seeking truth, and living by the rule of law, shape our identity as citizens. Even though they are essential to our identity as citizens, such values are not often consciously referred to in our day-to-day life; it is only in certain situations that we bring those values to the fore and consciously refer to them as a guide for our actions. Being called to participate in a jury is one such occasion. Thus, the oath of the juror expresses one's intention to consciously focus on fidelity to one's identity as a citizen charged with promoting justice, seeking truth, and following the rule of law in the particular context of the trial for which we are called, without denying or abandoning any of the other relationships and responsibilities of one's life. The oath that one takes as a juror also entails a presumption that everyone else involved – judges, lawyers, other jurors – is also committed to conscious fidelity to their identity as citizens charged with promoting justice, seeking truth and following the rule of law.

This idea of a solemn promise that is a concrete expression of identity-forming values, borrowed from the American judicial system, may be a category that can help us describe how we experience and live out commitment as a Lay Cistercian. Rather than a statement of intention

to be faithful to one's secular identity as a citizen, commitment in the context of the Lay Cistercian movement can be described as

- a concrete expression of our intention to be faithful to our identity as a person called by God to a life shaped by the Cistercian expression of Gospel values.
- that is made in the context of our membership in a particular Lay Cistercian community,
- that presumes that the community also subscribes to the same identity-forming values,
- and that promises active, intentional application of those values in our particular circumstances.

The identity-forming values of the Cistercian expression of the Gospel include such things as simplicity, a single-minded search for God, and *conversatio morum*. Members expressed this aspect of commitment with words such as “commitment is a reflection of the person that I am; it is a reflection of who I am.” Many described commitment as a promise of steadfast fidelity to the Cistercian way as we learn it from the AIC community and from the monastic communities of New Melleray and Our Lady of the Mississippi.

Members consider themselves to be Cistercian, shaped by Cistercian values and principles of action even though they are not part of a monastic community. Because members individually and corporately subscribe to those same values, everyone who makes a commitment can presume that the community will provide the teachings, the encouragement and admonition, and the fraternal affection that allows us to become ever more mature in our identity as Lay Cistercians. Conversely, commitment is more than a personal spirituality program; it is a promise

of active, intentional participation in community, responding to other members with encouragement and fraternal affection.

Although this theological structure rises out of the particular experience of the Associates of the Iowa Cistercians, it is flexible enough that it may also fit the situations of other Lay Cistercian communities. The first layer, the fundamental values and practices that are the foundation for Cistercian life, is the same for all Cistercians and so provides a point of unity among the various Lay Cistercian communities and also between the lay communities and the monastic communities. This layer also makes the structure theological since all of Cistercian life is oriented toward union with God. Those fundamental values, again, are such things as *conversatio morum*, stability, reliance on the Rule of Benedict, simplicity and silence. Fundamental practices include such things as Lectio Divina, Liturgy of the Hours, and personal prayer. Every Cistercian community subscribes to these values and practices, yet the particular situation of each community, whether monastic or lay, shapes the way that those values and practices are embodied. It is at this second level that each community can develop its own practices with regard to making commitments: required formation (whether it be a formal, detailed process or a more informal imbibing of the Cistercian monastic world view), the form of the statements of intention as well as their duration and frequency of renewal. The third level, the personal statement of the individual Lay Cistercian, also allows for adaptation to each person's circumstances and responsibilities while keeping the whole process within the Cistercian "umbrella." The Cistercian-ness of Lay Cistercian life is meant, not to usurp one's responsibilities and relationship outside the monastery, but to inform, to shape and to provide a solid foundation for living out those responsibilities and relationships, much as the juror's

understanding and integrating the values and practices of justice shape, inform and provide a foundation for one's response to the duties involved in sitting on a jury during a trial.

Commitments are made to God, to oneself and to one's lay community; they are witnessed and affirmed both by one's lay community and by the monastic community with which one's lay community is affiliated. This commitment, much like the oblate's promise,⁸ has no status either in canon law or in civil law. It does, however, allow Lay Cistercians a way of expressing what is already the truth of their existence: that they seek to embody the Cistercian charism in life outside the monastery, in the context of family and work and parish responsibilities.

⁸ See OCSO rituals, p. 96.

Appendix A: The Questionnaire

The AIC has arrived at a point where we need to reflect as a community on just what we are doing when we make a formal statement of our commitment to the AIC and to the way of life that we are learning to live. In preparation for discussion at the July meeting, the council is asking that each member of on-going formation take some time to reflect on just what making a commitment means and then to write out a short description or definition of commitment. Please bring that statement to the July meeting. The following questions and observations are intended as starting points for your reflections; address only those that you consider most important.

1. What does the word “commitment” mean?

2. What is “commitment” as we practice it in the AIC?

A. Commitment seems to be similar to a promise.

1. To whom is that promise made? To God? To the AIC? To oneself?

2. The monastic communities are witnesses to our commitment statements, but do not receive the commitment.

B. The AIC commitment is a public statement of intention.

1. Is that intention focused on a particular set of practices?

2. Is it focused on a particular way of life?

3. Should the statements be more uniform or should we continue to allow members to make their own?

3. As a public statement, how binding is AIC commitment?

A. It is not a vow nor is it juridically binding in the sense that one would need to seek dispensation from church authorities to make changes or to stop observing it.

- B. For what period of time is the commitment made? For one year? For five years? For one's entire life? How often should commitment statements be renewed?
 - C. How should changing circumstances be allowed to influence changes in one's commitment?
 - 1. Is a person's initial commitment statement the only one that can be made?
 - 2. Should commitment statements be reviewed and perhaps changed periodically?
 - D. Should the AIC constitutions be amended with a formal description of commitment that includes qualifications for making a commitment and that specifies the time period for which a commitment is made?
4. Part of our commitment is attendance at AIC meetings.
- A. Are long-time members of AIC who find it impossible to continue active membership because of age, changing financial circumstances, or illness still bound by their commitment statements?
5. As lay people who already have responsibilities to families and other organizations, the commitment we make as AIC members is not our primary commitment.
- A. What is the relationship between the responsibilities in our lives in the world and the commitment we make as AIC members?
 - 1. How do we set priorities?
 - 2. How do we resolve conflicts?
6. Commitment implies a two-way relationship.
- A. What is the AIC's obligation as a community to people who make commitments?

Appendix B: The AIC Statement of Commitment

Baptized into the Life, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, I freely accept His New Covenant, agreeing to live in love of God and humankind. Sensing a call to discipleship in the Cistercian contemplative path, I commit myself for a year to pray daily, to seek God's will for my life, and to expand my service to God and others, including the AIC Community. With Mary's example to guide me – whose response to God's call was born of a humble heart – I especially offer myself to carry Christ light and love to all in my everyday life. To this end I welcome the help of my God and my brothers and sisters in Christ. Today as I come to make this commitment, I count on the prayers of my brothers and sisters of New Melleray, Our Lady of the Mississippi Abbey, and the Associates of the Iowa Cistercians. With their help, I pledge myself to a deepening of my Cistercian calling of prayer, contemplation and work, in order that I might grow closer to what God is calling me to be.

This common statement is followed by the individual's statement reflecting her own practices and life situation. For example, one person's individual statement is

I seek always to “walk in the presence of the Lord in the land of the living” (Ps 114:9). To that end, I will participate in daily Eucharist and I will pray Lauds and Compline every day. More importantly, I will continually seek that conversion that will allow me to recognize God's presence in every person whom I meet and in every situation in which I find myself.

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Biography:

I have been a member of the AIC since January 1996. I have served on the leadership council, the formation team, and I have given several of the monthly teachings. I am also the coordinator for *Conversi*, an on-line Lay Cistercian community sponsored by AIC.

I am also wife of one, mother of four, and grandmother of five. With regard to education, my first degree is in mathematics from UCLA (1970); I worked in information technology for several years as a programmer, systems analyst and database analyst. My graduate degrees are in theology: an MA from The University of Notre Dame (1998) and a Ph.D. in systematic theology from The Catholic University of America (2007). I am currently an Assistant Professor of Theology at Briar Cliff University in Sioux City, IA.