

Experiencing the Charter of Charity :

how do we move forward?

The Charter of Charity is one of the strong points of the Cistercian charism. After the Rule of St. Benedict, it is one of the pillars of the structure of Cistercian monastic orders. Lay Cistercians (LC) already live it, each in his or her own way, each community of lay Cistercians (CLC) in a particular way. But wouldn't it be possible to go a little further, without upsetting what already exists? Our community of lay Cistercians would like to embark modestly on this path, and we would like to share with the other CLCs what we are doing at the moment, even if there are still many questions to be answered.

It is not a question of denying all that exists already, and even less of denigrating it, both at the level of the communities and at the level of the international association, but of moving forward, and continue to progress. Sharing our ideas and projects can also strengthen the bonds of unity among us all.

1. At the CLC level

We think that an element of the Charter of Charity could inspire our way of life: it is the "regular visit". In a monastic community, it is carried out periodically by the immediate father, to support the abbot in his office, and, from there, to help the whole community to live the Cistercian life in a more authentic way.

In a CLC, we could imagine, in an analogous way, a periodic visit that would have as its goal to evaluate what the community is living in relation to its identity (cf. document by Huerta, 2008, "Cistercian Lay Identity"). To distinguish it from the "regular visit", which is proper to monastic communities, we could call it a "community visit", or better still a "visit of charity", or another name to be found. The concrete modalities for the implementation of such a visit would obviously have to be defined. Here are some of the questions to be answered:

- who makes the visit? Among the possibilities: the abbot of the monastery, the accompanying monk, a member of the LC community, a lay person from another CLC, or another person. Who would make this choice?
- frequency of the visit? every year? every two years? or else?
- how would the visit be conducted: would each member meet individually with the visitor, or would they all meet together with the visitor and then each one could speak to all?
- would there be a debriefing? If so, who would do it (the visitor, someone from the group?) What would be done with the debriefing? would it be shared with others? Would it be shared with others? Would it be reviewed together as a periodic evaluation of the community's experience?

A more precise document is being prepared to specify what this visit would consist of.

2. At the international level: International Association of Lay Cistercian Communities (AICLC) and the 3 language groups (English, Spanish, French)

We know that the General Chapters of monastic orders spend part of their time evaluating what communities are living. It is not a question of copying what the monks are doing, but we could be inspired by it. In an AICLC assembly, one could imagine spending some time looking at these reports of community visits. This could help communities in the difficulties they are going through. It could also help to get a more accurate picture of what CLCs around the world are experiencing. Eventually, it could be a guide to propose general orientations for all CLCs.

There is a concrete difficulty in implementing such a project at the AICLC level. A pooling of all the reports of community visits in a meeting would take a lot of time, and the plurality of languages (3) would require a lot of preparatory work in translation, so that everyone could have the text in their own language.

To overcome these difficulties, one could imagine that the sharing of the reports of the community visits be done, not at the level of the AICLC, but at the level of each of the three language groups during meetings whose periodicity remains to be defined. From this pooling, each language group could develop a detailed summary for the CLCs in the group. These three detailed summaries could then be shared at an AICLC meeting.

3. Experiencing the Charter of Charity

Thus, if we were able to implement a project of this type, we would certainly be able to better live what the Cistercian Fathers wanted when they drew up the Charter of Charity for monks: "In this decree, the aforementioned brothers, wishing to prevent a possible shipwreck of mutual peace, made clear, ruled and transmitted to their descendants by which pact of friendship, by what way of life, or rather by what charity to weld together indissolubly in spirit their monks corporeally dispersed in abbeys in various places of the region" (Charter of Charity, Prologue, 3).

4. Project to be discussed with possible implementation

Our goal in this sharing is not first of all to have such a project approved, which has yet to be clarified on many points, but to stimulate reflection so that each CLC may progress in the implementation of its lay Cistercian identity in the spirit of the Charter of Charity.

We think that the CLCs that feel inspired by such an approach could begin to implement it, at the level of their community, when they wish : nothing prevents them from doing so. And the sharing of these first experiences could then give consistency to the project at a more general level.

We leave the distribution of this text to the judgement of the various bodies of the Cistercian laity : International Association of Lay Cistercian Communities, linguistic groups. We are happy to be able to contribute in this way to the vitality of CLCs.

November 2021

The Lay Cistercian Community
of the Abbey of Scourmont (Belgium)

A Proposal for Lay Cistercians (continued)

This document completes the document " Experiencing the Charter of Charity ".

Experiencing a "visit of charity".

Spirit and modalities

1. Introduction

In the Charter of Charity, the regular visit has a special place. It is one of the means foreseen by the Founders of Cîteaux to maintain charity in the communities and between the communities

2. Purpose of the Charity Visit (CV)

The purpose of the CV is to foster the union of hearts and the spiritual growth of individuals according to the Cistercian spirit.

3. The Visits and the Visitor

Visits will be made at regular intervals (probably around 2 or 3 years). The frequency will be provided for in the statutes of each CLC.

The visitor will preferably be a member of another CLC or a monk or nun. He will be chosen by each CLC. Someone who does not have a regular connection with the CLC will be chosen. The accompanying monk will be consulted. The abbot of the monastic community must give his consent. In case of disagreement, the choice of the abbot will prevail (to be discussed), or the immediate father of the monastic community may be called upon to settle the matter. His decision will then be accepted by all in a spirit of obedience.

4. Duration and purpose of the VDC

The visitation will last as long as necessary. In particular, it will examine:

- the functioning of the CLC, the role of the coordinator and those who provide other services in the CLC;
- the meetings : frequency, proceedings, minutes, etc. ;
- the role of the monastic companion;
- relations with the abbot and the monastic community;
- relations with the AICLC and, more broadly, with other CLCs;
- the implementation of the statutes and their adequacy to the life of the CLC;
- the implementation of what was recommended during the previous visit;
- and all the questions that the CLC, as a whole or a particular member, or that the the Abbot deems useful to examine.

5. Conducting the CV

The visitor will be welcomed with charity. There will be a time of prayer together.

The visitor will meet in particular with each member of the CLC, as well as with the abbot and the monastic companion. If a member is unable to attend, he/she may send a written report to the visitor, so that he/she receives it before the end of the personal meetings.

The visitor will prepare a report on the spot of what he has heard and the suggestions he makes to the CLC. This report will be immediately brought to the attention of the CLC, as well as to the abbot and the accompanying monk.

6. Spirit of the visit

The Visitor "will proceed with extreme caution and diligence: with fidelity and prudence, he will set himself the goal of correcting excesses and preserving peace" (Rules of the Visitation, I). "He is not to be trusted with any spirit. In a matter which he does not know, he will inquire diligently" (RV, 8).

The LCs will suggest and propose with fidelity and confidence what they think should be corrected (cf. RV, 3). They will not go back on points that they know have been properly corrected; they will not indulge in uncontrollable hypotheses; they will not trouble the minds of other members with vain suspicions (cf. RL, 8). One should not keep in reserve until the visitor comes what one thinks should be amended (cf. RV, 8).

7. Sharing of visit reports by different CLCs

The report of a visit, with the agreement of the CLC, may be shared with different bodies :

French-speaking CLCs, IALCC. If the report contains confidential elements, the community can remove the confidential parts. The transmission is done by the visitor, or by the community (point to be discussed).

November 2021 The community of lay Cistercians of the Abbey of Scourmont (Belgium)

In Appendix: Document "*De forma visitationis*" quoted several times in the above

APPENDIX

Rules of the visitation

(De forma visitationis) (between 1152 and 1175)

Purpose of the visitation

1. When he is to make the visitation, the Visitor is to proceed with extreme care and diligence: with fidelity and prudence¹ he is to aim at correcting excesses and preserving peace.² 2. Being mindful of the discipline of the Order, he is to do his utmost to bring the brothers to a greater respect for their own abbot and to the grace of mutual love in Christ.

Duties of the visited abbot

3. For his part, the abbot visited will take care to be obedient and devoted to the visitor according to the rules of the Order and to do all he can to improve his house as one who must give an account to the Lord³. 4. Therefore, on the arrival of the visitor, the abbot of that house or, if he is absent, the prior or whoever takes his place, will promptly warn the brothers, invite them and instruct them to suggest and propose with fidelity and confidence, in public or in private as they deem best, what they think should be corrected. 5. On the other hand, he is to be careful not to put any obstacle in the way of this being done or, once it has been done, to take any formality about it. 6. In the presence of the visitor or after his departure, he is to refrain from any measure of retaliation, reproach, or indignation against any brother. 7. On the contrary, if someone speaks with less reserve, less discretion, he is to defer willingly to the visitor's advice without complaint.

Duties of the Abbot Visitor

8. As for the visitor, of course, he does not have to rely on any spirit⁴. In a matter which he does not know, he will inquire diligently and, once the light is shed, he will put it in order with a lively ardor to serve the Order and with feelings of paternal charity. 9 He will also prevent the brothers from going back on points that are known to have been properly corrected, from indulging in uncontrollable hypotheses, from troubling the minds of their fathers and brothers with vain suspicions. 10. If anyone does so, the Visitor will reprimand and rebuke him⁵ as he deserves. 11 He will also prevent a brother from deferring and holding back until the visitor comes what he thinks should be amended, as if to aggravate the scandal, - which is most detestable. On the contrary, cases that arise will be proclaimed and amended in due course.

Sanctions

12. If the visitor violates this rule, he will be punished as he deserves by a superior abbot or by other abbots of his rank, or even he will be punished by the general chapter. 13. Likewise, if the abbot visited does not hasten to observe this same regulation, he will be gravely guilty before God and worthy of sanction by his abbot-father or the general chapter.

Appendix: th confession

14. No guest abbot, not even the visitor, unless he is the father of the house being visited, is to receive confessions. 15. Moreover, if the case is serious, the father of the house being visited is to refer the one who confesses to him to the abbot of that house and, with the loyalty that is proper, he is to do everything possible, with all diligence, to ensure that the brother, as is his duty, reveals his conscience to his own abbot.

1 Cf. Mt 24:45 and RB 64:22.

2 Cf. RB, Prol 47.

3 RB 2,38.

4 1 Jn 4:1; cf. RB 58:2.

5 Cf. RB 2:25.

6 Cf. RB 46:5-6; 7:44.