

These are my notes...

Francisco Ambrosetti

These are my notes from my trip to Rome to the General Chapter on behalf of all the Lay-Cistercians.

I arrived in Rome 9/12/02. Father Andrew Johnson, from Spencer MA, was waiting for me at the airport. He took me directly to the Generalate of the Brothers of Christian Schools to have lunch. Here I met several abbots and abbesses of the Order. I ate at the same table with the Bishop Edouard Mununu Kasiala OCSO of the Democratic Republic of Congo. He was very interested in Lay Cistercians.

The Sinaxis meeting took place 9/14/02 at the Aula Magna. I made the presentation of the Letter during the morning session. Malika was allowed to accompany me to the podium for the presentation.

I had to make translations into Spanish and English of my presentation to facilitate the work of the simultaneous translators, and copies to be distributed. The introduction was made in my native language, Spanish, and the presentation went like this:

The presence of Lay Cistercians began to be evident around 1987 in multiple, but independent situations. At the time there were significant questions as to whether it was possible to authentically apply the principles of Cistercian life to those living in family or individual settings, with demands of employment or apostolic responsibilities. There was concern among monastic and diocesan clergy that this interest in contemplative prayer and lifestyle might be an avoidance of one's proper duties, an escape from difficulties or an unhealthy imitation of the life of Cistercians. Much of that has been resolved and we have begun to move into another stage of interaction with one another as Lay Cistercians and with the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance.

The letter of Pope John Paul II to the branches of the Cistercian family on the occasion of the 900 anniversary of the founding of Citeaux makes reference to the emergence of the laity seeking a relationship of formation. He welcomes the development and encourages continuation with prudence to safeguard the states of life of both the monastics and the laity. In this occasion, at Citeaux, two lay people participated in the dialogue with representatives of five branches of the Cistercian family, during the week before the celebration of the liturgical celebration of the 900 years.

In October 1999 an encounter of Lay Cistercians from different American groups took place at the monastery of Our Lady of Genesee. On this occasion a document was issued called the Bond of Charity. In this document not only are presented the points that we have in common, but

also that we strive to be a leaven within the contemporary world through living the Cistercian charism.

In January 2000 the First International Encounter of Lay Cistercians took place in the monastery of Our Lady of Quilvo, Chile. Invited by the Chilean Lay Cistercians, there were participants from France and the United States representing seven communities. A document was issued and sent to the Abbot General, Dom Bernardo Olivera. At this time it was decided to have a second International Encounter in Conyers, USA.

Finally, in April 2002, the Second Lay-Cistercian International Encounter took place in the monastery of Our Lady of the Holy Spirit. The work done at the Encounter was the first stage of establishing structures between and among the Lay Cistercians internationally. A Coordination Committee with five representatives was created with the function to coordinate the next Encounter that will take place in France in 2005. A Communications Committee was created with seven persons: as the name indicates, their function is to keep the dialogue open and to administer the Web Page (Cistercianfamily.org). On the last day of the Encounter an invitation was issued for one Lay Cistercian to participate in this General Chapter, at this Sinaxis. A letter was written to be delivered in this occasion.

At this point I read the letter in its original language, English. In closing I said in the name of the Lay Cistercians I thank you for the invitation to this event and I thank you for keeping alive for 900 years the Cistercian Charism, may the good Lord bless you all!

There was a powerful applause, followed by two questions:

- Question: In what consists the diversity of the different groups of Lay Cistercians?
Answer: The groups are autonomous. For example there are groups with statutes and others without any. Also, some include non-catholics. But the spirit is the same.
- Question: Are lay Cistercians groups associated to other Cistercian Orders beside the Strict Observance?
Answer: Not to my knowledge.

At this point the following people expressed the need to prepare a response to the Letter. They were: Dom Olivier Quenardel, Abbot of Cîteaux, France, Rev Mother Gail Fitzpatrick, Abbess of Mississippi, USA, Dom Armand Veilleux, Abbot of Scourmont, Belgium, and an Abbot from a Spanish monastery whose name I did not receive (Dom Isidoro M^a Anguita, Abad de Sta. María de Huerta, España).

During the afternoon session it was decided to form a commission of five persons to work on the answer to the Lay Cistercian's Letter. They chose two from the oldest monasteries and two from the youngest plus one person to have an odd number. They are: Dom Olivier Quenardel, Abbot of Cîteaux, France, oldest abbey of men, Rev Mother Andree Grollier, Abbess of Les Gardes, France, oldest abbey of women, Rev Mother Stella Venezia, Superior of Juigalpa,

Nicaragua, newest foundation of women, Dom Samuel Lauras, Abbot of Novy Dvur, The Czech Republic, newest abbey of men, and Dom Ambrose Southey, Mount Saint Bernard, Abbot General Emeritus.

Finally, several Abbots and Abbesses requested information about the Lay-Cistercian associations. The address of the Web page (cistercianfamily.org) was provided. In informal conversation at least a dozen Superiors from around the world personally asked for information. We were also asked in one conversation to describe how our daily schedule of life incorporates the Cistercian Spirituality.

We were received with great charity, and we felt like we were in a family among the 220 Abbots, Abbesses, Brothers and Nuns that participated in the General Chapter.

Let us be grateful and respond with the same love and generosity to this historical event in the life of the Cistercian Order and the Church. Personally I am very grateful for your prayers in preparing for the meeting and during my time at the General Chapter.

Francisco Ambrosetti