

CLAIRVAUX JOURNAL by Michael Brown
May 30 - 31

The day that began yesterday has still not ended. I left Louisville yesterday afternoon for the short flight to Cincinnati and the eight hour flight to Paris. We flew over New England, then east, just south of Newfoundland and Nova Scotia. Eventually we flew near Cork, Ireland which is where my maternal grandfather's family originated. After landing in Paris, I was able to quickly locate my luggage and customs was a breeze. Charles de Gaulle airport is truly an international airport. It was obvious that people there were from all over the world. Many of them had on the native dress of their home countries. However, the soldiers patrolling the airport with their machine guns were disconcerting. My companion and I went to the spot where we believed our French contacts would pick us up. As the hour for pickup approached and we saw no one, some anxiety was felt. Eventually, my companion figured out how to use the French phone system and we contacted our hosts. Despite the language barrier, he was able to communicate where we were and soon our driver appeared. We were on our way. Our destination was a small, historical town called Clairvaux, France. It was here in the year 1115 that St. Bernard of Clairvaux established a monastery.

The monastery flourished for the most part until the French revolution when it was suppressed and turned into a prison by Napoleon. Today it is still a maximum security prison although there are parts of the old monastery ruins that can be visited. The town of Clairvaux is a 2 ½ hour drive southeast of Paris. When we left the airport with our driver and a couple of other friends from Iowa, we could have been anywhere in America. The highway was busy and there were many cars. Eventually, we were out of the city and into the country side. The land was beautiful and there was none of the usual commercialism found in America. Soon I settled into a happy daze, the miles passed by and I realized I was finally in France. In my mind it was the middle of the night but in France it was a new day. There is a six hour time difference. After what seemed to be an endless drive, we exited the highway and began driving through small villages.

Soon we came to Clairvaux where most of the week's activities would occur. We were at a place called the Grange. Grange is a French word meaning "barn". These granges date back to the time of St Bernard. As the monastery at Clairvaux grew and flourished, the fields where the lay brothers worked were further and further from the center of the monastery. Eventually, many were so far away that the lay brothers could not always get back to the monastery at the end of the day. The granges were built as places where they could live and stay until they could return to the monastery. Our meetings, meals, and prayers would be in these granges. There was also another building with a chapel and other facilities. I silently prayed that I would be open to the Spirit during my stay in France and that the presence of God within the gathering would touch me. Finally, at the end of a very long day, we were taken to our rooms. My companion and I were driven to another small village called Champinot. We were going to stay in a place that houses migrant grape pickers during the harvest season. I realized later that we were in Burgundy, in the heart of wine and champagne country. Our room was very simple. We would be sharing the facilities with other men and women. Everyone in our facility spoke

English.

June 1, 2005

I went to bed last night and quickly fell asleep. An hour or so later I woke up suddenly, wide awake and wondering where I was. I was feeling very anxious. The jet lag, fatigue, different culture and simple accommodations suddenly seemed overwhelming. The reality of being so far from home and no one knowing where I was, including me, stressed me out. I sat up several times and looked out the window in an attempt to calm myself down. I wondered what I had gotten myself into. The week ahead seemed like an eternity. I felt homesick and I thought of my wife, my children, and my granddaughter. An ocean separated us and I felt very alone. However, there was no turning back now. I laid awake in bed and prayed. Eventually, I fell asleep and slept soundly for the rest of the night.

When I woke up this morning, I felt wonderful. I was rested and my anxiety was gone. After showering and getting dressed, I walked through the small village where I was staying. I found a small bakery but unfortunately it was closed. The village reminds me of every World War II movie I have ever seen. It is nothing like the neighborhood that I live in back in America.

The French sure know how to eat. We have wine at every meal except breakfast and bread is everywhere. The meals are basically country French cuisine and tastes fabulous. I have learned not to take seconds because there is usually another course. I must pace myself on the food and especially, the wine.

Today I had two opportunities to hike. My morning walk was along the road and fields behind the Grange and up to the forest. It was a short walk but very enjoyable. I visited the spring of St Malachy. The fields were full of red poppies. I felt like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz story. My hike was with a small group of other Lay Cistercians. When we arrived at a shady place where we could look down upon the town and the monastery ruins, I did a reading from the writings of St Bernard. It seemed appropriate since we were in the land of Bernard.

In the afternoon I took a much longer walk in the forest to a place called St Bernard's Fountain. It is several miles from town so we were driven to a spot near the fountain. What I didn't realize at the time is that we were going to be left there and would have to walk home. We walked along the road until we were near the fountain which is actually a spring. Legend has it that St. Bernard went to this spring to pray and meditate. After visiting the spring, we walked through the forest for our return hike to town. This was more than some people anticipated. Most were not prepared for a hike in the forest. We helped one another along as we gingerly crossed muddy areas and climbed up and down the hills. The forest was very beautiful, almost magical. I expected to see gnomes peeking out from behind trees. St Bernard himself said "I have no need of books. The fields and woods and streams teach me everything." One of my companions noted how much St Bernard was like Henry David Thoreau in his attitude about nature. An hour or two later, we came to a hill overlooking the village and the ruins of the Abbey of Clairvaux. A very large statue of St Bernard overlooks the Abbey. We sat there for a while before climbing

down the hill back into the village. I returned to the Grange, tired but happy. It was a wonderful hike. It also did my blood sugar good after all the French bread and other dishes I have been eating.

Soon after our return from the hike, other participants began arriving from all over the world. When everyone arrived, there were people from the United States, France, Poland, Holland, Belgium, Cameron, Ireland, Switzerland, Chile, Spain, Indonesia, Italy, and New Zealand. It was great to be among so many different people from so many different places.

Now I am back in my room, very tired but happy to be here. Earlier in the day I managed to get an email off to my wife. It was a challenge. Internet service here is tenuous at best and I was using a French keyboard that is configured differently from my keyboard at home. Grammatically speaking, it was the worst email I ever sent. The good news is that my simple message made it to my wife. Everyone knew I was safe and all was well at home.

June 2, 2005

I slept well last night but woke up with a sore throat and the beginnings of a cold. On top of this, I believe I am eating too much bread and it is affecting my blood sugar. Physically, I am out of sorts and feeling poorly. It is going to be a long day.

After rising from bed, my companions and I walked to the local bus stop to catch a ride to the Grange for the day's meetings. Along the way we stopped to pick up the Spanish speaking participants who are staying in a different facility. They are a very friendly group.

Today was mostly a quiet day. It began with group morning prayer, followed by breakfast. At 10:00 AM we had mass with the local bishop. He encouraged us as Lay Cistercians to return to our homes and be lights to the world. Throughout the day I had many wonderful conversations with all kinds of people. Living and interacting within an international group of people, I realize that we are very much alike and also very different. The differences do not divide us. Rather, the diversity gives much texture and flavor to the group. In spite of the language and cultural differences, we are one in our spiritual journey. We speak a common language of the heart.

By the middle of the day, I was feeling poorly and I had some free time so I found a comfortable chair in a quiet spot and had an afternoon nap. When I woke, the sun was warm and I was in a daze. The warmth of the sun felt wonderful. It is very cool in the mornings and slightly damp. The days are warm but not hot. This wide variance in temperatures is probably why I am sick. The local people drink their coffee from bowls and use warm milk as creamer. At first this seemed strange to me but then I realized that the hot coffee in the bowls made an excellent hand warmer. Suddenly, it seemed perfectly normal to drink my coffee from a bowl.

When I woke from my afternoon siesta, I went to the Oratory (chapel) in the main building of the Grange. I sat there in silence and enjoyed God's presence. I prayed for all my fellow Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani.

In the early evening we had a conference by Dom Olivier, the Abbot of Citeaux.

Today was not busy but I am very tired. I have probably not fully adjusted to the time change and the six hours I lost during the flight. I slept well last night and hope to do so again tonight. My monastic chant CD will make the transition to sleep a smooth one. The frantic pace of my normal life, and the long journey to this place, are temporarily behind me. Tonight I will dream in the quiet of a small village in the French countryside.

June 3, 2005

Most of today has been a blur. I have a full blown head cold. Much of the day was spent blowing and wiping my nose. The day turned hot. In the afternoon, storm clouds gathered and the wind really picked up. A light rain began to fall. I found some shelter in an out of the way place. I sat silently for a couple of hours as the rain fell. It was one of my best moments yet. At the end of the day, the bus ride back to my village and room was peaceful and serene. I slept deeply. I am continuing to slow down and adjust to the pace of the local life.

This evening we had a conference by Paco Ambrosetti on Community. Paco is a member of the Lay Cistercians at the monastery of the Holy Spirit in Georgia.

June 4, 2005

I woke up at 3:00 AM. I made plans to catch a ride back to Clairvaux for 4:00 AM Vigils in the Oratory. Because of the transportation challenges, usually only a small group makes it each morning. Today is my first time to be there. It was a quiet and prayerful experience. The chanting was in French and led by Father Bernard, a quiet man with a beautiful voice who is from the Abbey of Citeaux. The drive here through the dark countryside and being awake at this hour has given me a different appreciation for this place. When Vigils were over, we quietly went downstairs for a silent breakfast of coffee and bread. The room had a large fireplace with a warm fire blazing. I sat quietly in front of the fire and the bread and coffee seemed like a great feast. It was a perfect moment and one full of grace. After breakfast, we drove back to Champinol where I am staying. One of my companions and I decided to take an early morning walk to the outskirts of town to visit an abandoned 9th century Roman church. The walk through the narrow streets and along the fields was a joy. Dawn was breaking. Rosters were crowing and the sounds of peacocks also filled the air. The early morning air was cool and refreshing. The Roman chapel sits on a small hill. It was locked but we could still see into the church. It was like looking back in time to the Middle Ages. Soon the morning sun began to rise and, as it rose, the stained glass windows filled with color. A little later, I found a stone bench where I sat for a while bathing in the beautiful French morning.

This morning I gave a brief presentation to the large group explaining the history and evolution of my Lay Cistercian community at Gethsemani. The schedule was already behind so I didn't have a lot of time. I had to talk slowly so my words could be translated into French and

Spanish.

It is now afternoon and I am tired. All of the participants pray together and eat together. We interact throughout the day in personal and small group conversations. We are probably talking more than contemplatives normally do. By nature, we are usually silent types. This interaction is necessary and good but can be exhausting for an introvert like me. The best parts of my day are the quiet, contemplative moments in the countryside and other hidden places. I am happiest in my silence and solitude. I am sure most, if not all, of the other participants feel the same.

Now I am going to my secret hideaway for an afternoon siesta. I need to rest because my cold is dragging me down.

This evening we had a conference by Denyse Guerber on the Rule of St Benedict. She is one of our local hosts and the woman who coordinated many of the week's activities.

June 5th, 2005

Once again I rose from a deep sleep at 3:00 AM so I could attend Vigils. Since it Sunday, today's Vigils were long. To the average person, the idea of getting out of bed at this hour to pray is not attractive. Admittedly, I do not do it in my regular life. When I am in a monastic setting, I always try to attend. One quickly realizes that it can be, and usually is, the best part of the day. It is dark and quiet. Morning has not yet arrived. Soon, however, the dawn breaks upon the land and the darkness transforms into daylight. You can watch the sunrise. You are waiting for the day instead of catching up to it.

In spite of the slow pace of the week, it is going quickly. I only have two full days left here before the long journey home on Wednesday. Tomorrow we will visit the ruins of the Abbey of Clairvaux.

We have received news that Fr. Basil Pennington has died from injuries he received several months ago in an automobile accident. I am greatly saddened by this news. Fr. Basil is a long time monk, writer, and spiritual master. I began reading his books in the early 1980's and he has been a huge influence on me. I finally met him in 1999 at the Abbey of the Genesee in New York and I saw him again at another international gathering in 2002 at Holy Spirit monastery in Georgia. He was also at the blessing of Fr. Damien as Abbot of Gethsemani. I have a picture of the two of us on my desk at home. I am not a small person but Fr Basil dwarfs me in the picture. He was a large man, at least 6 foot, six inches tall and, in many ways, larger than life. He is a tremendous loss to the monastic community and to the world. Even though I am only one of thousands of people he probably knew, I feel a personal sense of loss with his passing. He was a great friend of Lay Cistercians.

June 6th, 2005

I slept this morning until 5:00 AM. I have found it more convenient to shower at night than in the morning. The facilities where I live are shared between four men and five women so mornings can be hectic. After I got out of bed, I did all the things necessary to be ready, and having some extra time, I laid on my bed and listened to some music. Soon it was time to catch the bus to Clairvaux. A very light rain was falling and the sky was overcast. The bus rides to and from Clairvaux are some of my favorite times of the day. Another favorite time is anytime I can sit in front of the fire and write in my journal. Since I have been suffering from a cold most of the week, the warmth of the fire is soothing.

We have finished Morning Prayer and most people are now having breakfast. At 9:00 AM there is a meeting to make suggestions for the location of the next international gathering. So far, there have been three gatherings. The first was in Chile, the second was in the United States, and now we are in France. It is most likely that we will return to a Spanish speaking country. I have also heard there are a large number of Lay Cistercians in Africa who could not afford the trip to France. There is some talk of a meeting there so it will be easier and less expensive for the Africans to attend a gathering. The challenge for any gathering is to find a place that can accommodate 100+ people. Most monastic settings cannot handle a group that large.

Tomorrow is my last full day in France. I am ready to go home. I have been totally isolated from my regular life for the last week. I have heard no news and have no idea of any events outside this small village. Each day I think of my wife, my children, and my granddaughter. It keeps me in touch with my reality. Returning to the United States will be more of a culture shock than my arrival in the French countryside. Although I have missed a few comforts from home, I have quickly and easily adapted to the French pace of life in this rural area. Although I am an American, there is much about the American culture that is difficult for me.

It is in the quiet moments here that I most experience God's peace. The group meetings and frequent conversations, even with other spiritual people, can be exhausting for me. I think part of the reason for this is the effort to keep up with all the translations. It requires a lot of mental concentration. When opportunities present themselves, I sneak away by myself and simply sit in silence.

Earlier today we had a wonderful tri-lingual mass. All the different parts were in French, Spanish, and English. I did one of the English readings. The planning was a challenge. I had been asked to be part of a liturgy planning committee. There were six people and three languages involved. Near the end of the mass, we had prayers of thanksgiving in all languages represented by all the participants. It reminded me of the universality of the church.

I sat with a wonderful group of people during lunch today. They were from France, Ireland, Poland, and the United States. The conversation was stimulating. The day was damp and rainy so the inner warmth generated by a glass of wine was comforting.

We have a meeting this afternoon with the Abbot General. He is a wonderfully warm, kind, and humorous man. Yesterday I gave him a note to deliver to a mutual friend in Rome. Rome is

where the world wide Cistercian order offices are located.

This afternoon we visited the ruins of the Abbey of Clairvaux. Within minutes of our arrival, one of our group, an older lady from Ireland, fainted. Fortunately, another member of the group was a doctor. The lady had to be taken by ambulance to the local hospital. It turns out that she was diabetic and didn't know it.

The abbey ruins were interesting. At times, I closed my eyes and imagined all the monks and lay brothers of old. I thought of all the history that occurred right where I was standing. Part of the old monastery is now a maximum security prison. I am told some of the worst criminals in France are in this prison. However, I saw no sign of them and never felt unsafe. This monastery was founded by St Bernard in the year 1115. At the time of his death the Cistercians had spread throughout Europe with 352 abbeys, 169 of them affiliated with Clairvaux. The Abbey of Clairvaux was suppressed during the French revolution and turned into a prison by Napoleon.

June 7, 2005

Today we visited the Abbey of Citeaux. It was here in the year 1098 that a small group of monks began what has become the Cistercian order. Our hosts had provided a nice tour bus for us. It is a two hour drive from Clairvaux to Citeaux. It is south of Clairvaux near the city of Dijon. It was a pleasant drive in the early morning light. When we arrived, the abbot of the monastery, a charming man that I had met a few days earlier in Clairvaux, met us at the gate of the monastery. Shortly after our arrival, we gathered in the church for a welcoming ceremony. It was very moving. Twelve members of our group, representing the number of the Apostles, had been chosen in advance for a foot washing ceremony. These foot washings were done by the abbot. Afterwards, we had some extra time so many of us checked out the gift shop. Later in the morning we had mass with the entire monastic community. I felt very privileged to be at Citeaux and to be able to share in the prayers of the monks.

This abbey is considered the motherhouse of all Cistercian abbeys around the world. It is steeped in history. After mass, we gathered in a dining hall for a French "picnic". It included wine, cheese, eggs, apples, and the most wonderful fruit tarts baked by one of the monks. Later in the afternoon we were able to tour some parts of the abbey that dated back to the French revolution. I also met the local bishop. When I introduced myself and told him I was from Kentucky, he responded with one word, "Chicken!" At the end of the day, we prayed Vespers with the monks before getting back on the tour bus for the drive back to Clairvaux. We all arrived back to our beds tired and happy with the beautiful sound of the French monks of Citeaux chanting in our heads.

June 8, 2005

Today was a fast paced and stressful day. We were roused out of our beds at 3:00 AM to pack and stop for a light breakfast in Clairvaux before our 2 ½ hour drive to the Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris. Our French hosts greeted us warmly. We drank our coffee, and ate our bread in

front of the wonderful fireplace at the Grange. Afterwards, there were many hugs and kisses. This warm send off was followed by great confusion as we discussed in three languages who should be in which van in order to get to the right destination. After moving our luggage around two or three times, we finally got on the road for the long drive. It was an enjoyable drive. I looked out the window and soaked in the beauty of the French countryside for the last time.

Soon enough we arrived at the airport. God smiled on us and we made it to our flight with little trouble. The long eight hour flight home wasn't too bad. When I landed in Cincinnati, I knew I was home. As soon as I stepped off the plane, I could feel the heat and humidity. The flight from Cincinnati to Louisville was short and pleasant. My wife was waiting to pick up my companion and me up from the airport. It was great to be back in the city where I live. Soon I was back in the comfort of my home, sitting in my favorite chair. It had been a wonderful journey and experience but there's no place like home! I will be reflecting for a while on this trip and its meaning, not only for me personally, but for all Lay Cistercians. Where will the Holy Spirit take us next?

Michael Brown
Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani
June 2005