

Lay Participation in the Cistercian Charism

Introduction

For a quarter of a century now we have seen developing at the heart of the Cistercian Family a spiritual movement that has gradually come to be called “Lay Cistercians”. This movement touches various branches of the great Cistercian Family and from now on it even constitutes an element of this Family. In the present study I will attempt to describe how it came to birth and developed within the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance (OCSO). I will also discuss some questions and challenges that this movement raises in our Order today.

At the General Chapter of Holyoke, in the United States in 1984, a certain Mr. Harvey R. Graveline of New York asked a superior of the Order to present his project of a *Secular Trappist Order* to the Chapter. This request was mentioned briefly in plenary session toward the end of the Chapter that had been completely taken up with the updating of the Constitutions. Even if no one was interested in a kind of “Third Order”, the reaction of the Chapter was rather positive toward the association of lay people with the spiritual life of the communities. It was simply remarked that there was no need to legislate concerning this point and that nothing prevented a community from establishing spiritual ties with a group of lay people. This attitude of the Order is still in practice today. Even if the Order has constantly shown an increasingly positive attitude regarding this spiritual phenomenon, it has up to now refused to legislate about it.

The number of lay groups that consider themselves “Cistercian” and the number of persons connected with these groups continues to grow. The question that is raised more and more concerns the advisability of conferring on these groups a specific “official” status within the Order (or the Cistercian Orders?) or within the Church. Before considering the various forms such a recognition could take or, more generally, the various ways in which this movement could evolve, let us trace its history, if only its main features.

A Glance at the Evolution of the Movement

Such a group had already begun forming at the monastery of the Holy Spirit (Conyers), in the United States, at the beginning of the 1980’s. This group was given a more official existence in 1987 and its first members made their “commitment” *in the presence* of the monastic community and its abbot on March 25, 1990.

In 1992, the Permanent Council of the OCSO prepared for the Central Commissions, which would be meeting at the abbey of Gethsemani, a working paper entitled *The Road to Autonomy: On the Various Ways to Make a Foundation (and Related Questions)*. The Central Commissions put this document on the program for the MGM of 1993, where it was treated according to Ordinary procedure, that is, by four mixed Commissions. One of these “related questions” was one that interests us here. In this document we read the following:

There was never, in our Cistercian Tradition, a Third Order. Neither did our monasteries have “Oblates” like many Benedictine communities have. But a movement is growing somewhat in that direction.

Various monasteries of the Order have in their vicinity people who, over the years, have developed a special spiritual relationship with the monastery and would like to become “Oblates” or “Associates” of the community. They are generally men and women who have found in their contact with the Cistercian monastic community the source of their own spiritual life. In many cases they could have been (or even were) Benedictine oblates or belong to some Third Order. But it is really in the Cistercian spiritual tradition that they recognize themselves. They are lay people, single or married, who continue to assume their family and social responsibilities, but are eager to develop the contemplative dimension of their life. Conyers has such a lay group that gradually grew over the years and that gave themselves their own Statutes and consider themselves a lay community in conformity with the provisions of the new Code of Canon Law. There is also the “Grange of Saint Bernard” group, linked with the Abbey of Cîteaux, and the Italian Institute “Vivere in”. Several monasteries of the Order have something similar.

This is part of a much larger phenomenon. The post-synodal document published by John Paul II after the synod on the Laity (*Christifideles Laici*) has a section (cf. especially N° 29-31) on the importance of such lay communities; and most religious institutes have now some form of lay associates sharing not only in the activities of the community but also – and first of all – in the spiritual life of the community. The Union of Superior Generals (men) and the International Union of Superior Generals (women) in Rome studied this question on several occasions during the last few years. A good analysis of the present evolution, done by Fr. Bruno Secondin, O.Carm, was published in *Informationes* (the periodical of the Congregation of Religious) in December 1991, and reproduced in French in the *Documentation Catholique* of May 3, 1992).

Such groups or authentic communities of lay people finding in the Cistercian spirituality the inspiration for their life must be clearly distinguished from the several lay people who individually are frequent visitors of our communities or of guest houses, as well as from the large family of Cistercian scholars who form a wonderful family of their own and the “friends” of this or that ancient Cistercian abbey.

It is probably too early and perhaps not necessary for the Order to legislate about this; but should not the Order acknowledge in some way the fact that communities of lay people have adopted the Cistercian spirituality as the source of their spiritual life and are giving a new concrete expression to the Cistercian charism?

As a first step, perhaps, the Regional Conferences could be invited to look at all the various ways in which the phenomenon already manifests itself in their Region. Then,

the General Chapter could perhaps provide some pastoral guidance to the local communities on their way to deal with such requests or such developments.

Apart from sharing in the spiritual life of the community, these persons/groups, in many cases, want to help the monks or nuns in practical ways, especially in the more and more complex relationships of the community with the outside world, for example in business, financial and legal matters. One is justified to see in that development something totally consonant with the original form of the institution of the lay brothers in the twelfth century and with the original insight of that institution. (Recent historical studies have shown that the lay brothers in the first centuries of the Order played an important role in the material administration of the Cistercian domains, often signing the important legal documents).

The question of the “lay brothers’ vocation” has never been satisfactorily solved in our Order and will be considered again at this General Chapter. Would it be realistic to think that we can simply return to the situation of thirty years ago? Perhaps this unresolved question can find a solution in two complementary directions, the first one being the use of a well understood pluralism within the communities of the Order (as provided for in our Cst. 14.2) and the other one being the development of such autonomous lay communities living a new expression of the Cistercian charism in the world, in communion with the monastic cloistered Cistercian communities.

This question was studied carefully at the MGM of 1993 by the four Commissions concerned and the MGM came to the same conclusion as in 1984. There was no need to legislate but to allow this spiritual movement to evolve. The Regions were invited to be aware of this.

In the meantime a certain number of groups developed, not only in the United States but also in other parts of the Order, especially *La Grange saint Bernard*, a group that was created at Clairvaux in 1990 in order to study Cistercian spirituality and make it known. In January 1995, after having visited the group at Conyers in the preceding years, Dom Bernardo wrote an important document entitled *Reflections on the Challenge of “Charismatic Associations”*. He invited the groups of lay people to react and a certain number did. Dom Bernardo treated that question again at the end of a conference during the 1996 MGM (Cf.: *Schola charitatis*, p. 16-17). Thus there gradually developed among these very diverse groups a sort of common vision.

This spiritual movement was encouraged by Pope Jean Paul II in the Message that he addressed to the Cistercian Family on the occasion of the 9th centenary of the foundation of Cîteaux. There he encouraged monks and nuns to:

discern with prudence and a prophetic sense the participation of the lay faithful in [their] spiritual family, under the form of ‘associate members’, or, following the present needs in certain cultural contexts, under the form of a temporary sharing of community life and a commitment to contemplation, on condition that the identity of [their] monastic life does not suffer”.

Several groups connected with various monasteries in the United States met at Genesee in October 1999 and drew up a document entitled "*The Bond of Charity*" which expressed not only the common points of their aspirations, but also their efforts to be leaven in the modern world by living the Cistercian charism. The same year, Veronica Umegakwe from Nigeria was invited to come and speak to the Capitulants at Lourdes about the great vitality of Cistercian lay groups placed under the patronage of Blessed Cyprian Tansi.

The International Meetings of Lay Cistercians

Quilvo 2000

During the following years three International Meetings were organized spontaneously by the lay people themselves. The first convened at the monastery of Quilvo in Chili, in January 2000, by a group that had just been founded. Besides the Chilean Lay Cistercians, there were participants from France and the United States, representing seven communities. There a document was drawn up which was published and sent to the Abbot General of the OCSO, Dom Bernardo Olivera.

Conyers 2002

A second International Meeting took place at Holy Spirit (Conyers, USA) from April 24-30, 2002 with about one hundred participants coming from 26 groups of Lay Cistercians associated with monasteries in Canada, Chili, France, Ireland, Nigeria, Norway, Spain, Switzerland, United States and Venezuela. A Coordinating Commission of five representatives was created in order to prepare another International Meeting that was totake place in 2005 at Clairvaux in France. Another Commission, Communication Commission, was established with seven persons, whose task it was to maintain open dialogue and to manage the Website (<http://cistercianfamily.org>, in three languages: English, French and Spanish). A letter was composed and sent to the General Chapter. Here are several extracts from it:

"We are lay men and women who feel deeply the call to be seekers of God within the Cistercian tradition. We accept the Rule of St. Benedict as our guide for living the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Through Cistercian spirituality, we seek to make our own the Rule of St. Benedict and to live its precepts in order to unify our lives. From the richness and the diversity of our groups, similar values and practices bind us together. These include:

- *lectio divina*
- individual, communal and liturgical prayer
- simplicity of life

- *conversatio morum*
- interior silence and contemplation
- work as a way to holiness.

The growing numbers of new communities and individuals seeking our help in following

The Cistercian way present us with some challenges [...] We believe that the moment has come to ask you for a word of wisdom and encouragement for our endeavors to live the Cistercian charism in the world. Thus we ask the General Chapters to discern the authenticity of this work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The fraternal help and prayer of the Order is an important element in our authentic response to the presence of Jesus in our hearts and to the renewal of the Church in this new millennium.”

Bowing before an evident call from the Holy Spirit, through the flowering of these groups of lay people wanting to live the Cistercian charism, the General Chapter accepted, on September 24, 2002, to give this desired word of wisdom. Referring to the words of the Pope in his Message of 1998, the General Chapter wrote:

“[these words] will be for you as for us a reference point in order to discern how each of us will participate in the same charism. Our differences are evident and yet we have the same spirit. In respecting these differences, our unity will be able to grow on solid and lasting foundations. We don’t know what the future holds for us, but our vision of the Cistercian Family recognizes you as authentic witnesses of the Cistercian vocation fully engaged in the world. We are moved and profoundly grateful to the Spirit working in you. The Spirit is the master and guide of our unity in the diversity of our states of life. Even if your oldest groups have already some years of experience, it is a question of a new situation for you as for us. Each of our communities is autonomous and will respond to you according to its cultural context, its own rhythm and the sensitivity of its members. Know that your interest in our monastic life encourages us to lead it ever more faithfully. Continue the path to which you are committed, sharing with us the tradition that gives us life.”

The Grange of Clairvaux 2005

Although the guest house of a monastery was not available, the group known as *The Grange of Clairvaux* welcomed, from June 1 -7, 2005, the third International Meeting of Lay Cistercians: about 130 persons (of whom 20 were monks and nuns) representing 34 groups around the world. This meeting, in which the Abbot General participated, confirmed that these lay persons had in common the search for and practice of values such as *lectio*, personal, communal and liturgical prayer, simplicity of life, *conversatio morum*, interior silence, contemplation and finally work as a way to holiness. Also it was confirmed that each person and each group was rooted and found strength in devotion to Mary, Queen of Cîteaux; that

they were developing a growing sense of community and actively living their mission in the world. Far from wanting “to play at being a monk or a nun” their aspiration is to incarnate in their lay life – in their family and professional life – the fundamental values of Cistercian spirituality, that the monks and nuns incarnate in their cloisters.

At the Clairvaux meeting an International Committee was elected, responsible for creating a bond among all the Cistercian lay groups in the world as well as establishing relations with the Order as a whole. To this effect and at the request of the lay people themselves, the MGM decided to name an abbot of the Order to make this connection between the Order and this Committee. This structure’s goal is to promote exchange on common elements and distinct points and to make spiritual resources available to the groups, new as well as old. It is not a question of coming to uniformity, but of finding the foundation that all Lay Cistercian groups share. Today about sixty groups exist throughout the world, in the five continents, but more in the United States and France, and also in Spain and Latin America. We must clarify that they are not only connected to the Cistercians of the Strict Observance. Some fewer groups are associated with monasteries of the Cistercian Order or with the Bernardines of Esquermes.

Huerta 2008

The fourth International Meeting is scheduled for May 31-June 7, 2008, in Spain at the monastery of Huerta. This Meeting was prepared these past years by the Steering Committee elected at Clairvaux in 2005, in collaboration with the group associated with the abbey of Huerta, which is taking care of all the particular logistics of this meeting.

As for the preceding International Meetings, the first goal of this Meeting will be to give the participants coming from several countries and cultures the opportunity to share their experiences, to mutually help and enlighten one another. But the meeting will also have two important tasks. The first will be that of formulating a common vision of what these “Lay Cistercians” want to live and what they consider the essential elements of their vocation as “lay people” and “Cistercians” to be. In effect, it is not at all for them “to play at being monks or nuns” but to incarnate in their lay life the essential values of Cistercian spirituality.

The second task at Huerta will be to discern if the time has come for these groups to request an official recognition, either on the part of a local monastic community, or on the part of the Order or the Church.

A related and important question will be for the group to decide if it should give a definite place to the international group so as to be able to give a precise mandate to an international coordinating group.

In the following paragraphs I would like to elaborate a little on these three challenges to which the participants of the Huerta meeting should respond.

What the Lay Cistercians Live

In spite of considerable differences in the way they function, the Cistercian values chosen by all the groups of Lay Cistercians are pretty much the same. They are the ones already mentioned in the letter of the Lay people to the General Chapters of 2002, that is, *lectio divina*, personal and liturgical prayer, simplicity of life, interior silence and contemplation, work as a way to holiness.

The Cistercian life being essentially cenobitic, there is a certain consensus that, in order to be considered a “Lay Cistercian” it is not enough to be individually attached or connected to a community of monks or nuns nor to live a life inspired by the Cistercian spirituality or tradition alone in the world. One must belong to a group of Lay Cistercians. According to the sensitivities proper to each linguistic area, some spontaneously call these groups “communities”; others prefer the name “fraternity”; others hold to the more neutral term of “groups”. Probably this is simply a difference in cultural sensitivity. In certain cultural contexts the name of “community” is given to every group of persons who have a profound relationship and above all have a mutual care for one another whether they live together or not or even in the same place. In other cultural environments the name of community is reserved for groups of persons living together under the same roof.

Some of these groups are limited to occasional meetings for prayer and sharing, in general at the monastery with a nun or monk. Others place a much stronger accent on teaching given either by other members of the group or the monastic community. Some even have an elaborate process of discernment of “vocations”, of formation and introduction into the group. For others everything is much simpler

A more important question is that of association with a community of monks or nuns. For the great majority of groups this association is considered as essential. Thus they are organized in reference to the situation of the monks or nuns. No monk or nun is attached to the Order if it is not through a local community. If the lay people want to be recognized as “Cistercians”, this can only happen through their connection with a Cistercian community. But for some this connection is not essential. The lay community is itself considered to be Cistercian because of what it lives. Thus, it can itself engender other communities of lay Cistercians or amalgamate them. You can already see here the question of timeliness – or not – of an official “recognition”.

The Question of an Official Recognition

First of all let us ask what a “recognition” means, before asking what types of recognition are possible.

To clarify this question, let us again make the comparison with the situation of the monks and nuns. It is clear that any person in the world can live all the spiritual values that

constitute the monastic or consecrated life in general. People can unite in order to live these values together. No permission is necessary for this. The hierarchy or the authority of the Church has never founded monastic or religious communities; but she “*recognizes*” a certain number in approving their Constitutions. When ecclesiastical authority approves a community or a congregation, she says to the entire People of God that she guarantees the spiritual value of this form of life and of its aptitude for leading others who enter there to meet God.

When a name – such as “Benedictine” or “Cistercian” or “Dominican” – has been connected to a form of life officially recognized by the Church for a long time, even for centuries, it is not at all appropriate that someone who has no institutional connection with this officially recognized institution should assume this title. This is why when it happens that a monk or nun, even with all the permissions, takes it upon him/herself to found a community not assumed by his or her own community, the Order (and the Church) is always opposed to the qualification of “Cistercian” or “Trappist” being given to this community, no matter what the quality of the religious life this group practices. This does not concern defending a title deed but avoiding that the eventual candidates be received erroneously under the official “guarantee” that such a group may have received, or not received (no matter what its objective value).

You can see immediately how this reflection should be applied to groups or communities of Lay Cistercians. Up to now we can only rejoice in the quality of life of all the groups; but any mistake is possible (as in monastic communities themselves!). Thus it isn’t suitable that the name “Cistercian” be used to designate a group, without it having received *a certain recognition* that what it is living has a truly Cistercian character.

The attitude of the OCSO (and, it seems, other branches of the Cistercian Family also) has been, up to now, to leave it to each local community with its superior to allow a group to become associated with it. Strictly speaking, whatever the quality of this group’s practice, it is associated with the local community without becoming a part of it. Thus it does not belong to the Order but is indirectly associated with it by its association with the local community.

Canon law allows a lay association to become recognized as a Diocesan Association. Groups have requested and obtained such an association. However, it does not seem that a local bishop has the authority to give the title – or the character – “Cistercian” to a local group, given that it concerns the name of an Order – and even Orders – of Pontifical right.

However an enormously more important question is a recognition of the unity of the groups constituting this great spiritual movement that has continued to grow this last quarter century. Two clearly different ways appear for such a recognition: either the recognition is requested of the Holy See, or it is requested of the Order. In the first case one must obtain from the *Pontifical Council for Lay Persons* an official recognition of an association of all the groups of Lay Cistercians as an “*International Association of the Faithful*” following the example of “Chemin Neuf”, of “Communities of Emmanuel”, of “Sant’Egidio”, of “Communion and Liberation”, etc. Such an International Association would have its own government and would

in no way be dependent on the Cistercian Orders, even if it existed in great communion with it. This option is certainly not to be rejected but it does not seem to be very popular among present groups.

The other way is that of recognition given by the Order (i.e. by the OCSO in our case” along the lines set down by Canon 303 of the CIC. There also are theoretically two options. The first option would be that the Order recognizes the existence of a sort of a Cistercian Third Order composed of lay communities. This Third Order would probably have its own government and would be directly responsible to the General Chapters of abbots and abbesses (while waiting until we have our single Chapter). If I’m not mistaken, this option is still less popular than the preceding one. The option that remains is that of recognition through the bond with a local community of monks or nuns.

This last option can happen in varying and probably successive degrees. Up to now the Order has been content to say – but only implicitly – that nothing prevents a local community from establishing spiritual links with a group of lay people. So that there be a true “recognition” even if only of the existence of these groups, it would be necessary that the General Chapters, in an official decision inscribed in its Acts, recognize that each community of monks or nuns may be associated with a “community of lay persons” in the sense given by Canon Law to these lay communities associated with a religious Institute. Evidently, in this case, the General Chapters should establish certain minimal conditions so that such a recognition will be possible in each case.

It is in this sense that the Lay Cistercians meeting at Huerta will try to formulate a “common vision” of their vocation in order to present it to the discernment and eventually to the approval of the General Chapters at Assisi next September.

But it seems that this evolution of its nature could go farther. In effect, these lay people associated to the Order through their association with a local community are not really *members* either of the Order or of the local community with which they are associated. What would it take for them to belong to the Order and be called in the full sense of the term and in all truth “Cistercians”? It would suffice if the Order would slightly modify its juridical description of the “Cistercian community”. A slight addition to Constitution 6 would suffice. It would read as follows:

“The community is composed of sisters/brothers who have made profession in it, novices and others who have been admitted to the community on probation, oblates **and lay persons belonging to the community of Lay Cistercians associated with the community**”.

Is this a very theoretical point of view? I don’t think so; even though a long evolution remains to happen before coming to this and a Statute needs to clearly determine the conditions and modalities of such a recognition and membership. We could take inspiration from our Order in the 12th century where the *family* of each local community consisted not only

of monks (or nuns) but also of lay brothers (or sisters), oblates and “familiaris” of various categories.

One thing is certain; the Holy Spirit is giving a new expression to the Cistercian charism, after all the greatly diverse expressions that were given through the ages, in the various Orders and Congregations belonging to the great Cistercian Family. It is up to us to find a juridical form allowing this new expression of our charism to develop and bear its fruits. To give a juridical form to the charism is one dimension of the Cistercian charism anyway. It is thus that our first Fathers, through the genius of Stephen Harding and the Charter of Charity allowed the Order to spread with such energy.

The Practical Management of an International Movement

Parallel to the canonical question of the timeliness of a certain form of official recognition of the Cistercian laity, there is that very practical one of the management of the relations between the groups. Very soon people belonging to various groups felt the desire and need to meet in order to share their experiences, to learn from one another and be mutually enriched. It is thus that the first international meetings were organized spontaneously. From the second meeting at Conyers, those present at this meeting chose several persons to organize the following meeting. It wasn't a question of a “mandate”, since there was no legal entity to give this mandate. In effect, this meeting at Conyers was an open meeting of individual persons belonging to some groups.

It was the same at Clairvaux in 2005. The assembly elected a committee called the “*Steering Committee*” to coordinate the communication among the Cistercian lay groups and with the OCSO and eventually the other Cistercian Orders. The members of this committee did not receive a very precise mandate put into writing and voted by the assembly. Thus it is normal that their mandate was interpreted in different ways. In the organization of the following meeting at Huerta, they had to make decisions on concrete questions such as: who should be invited and who can be accepted at this Meeting? Everyone who wanted to come, whether they belong to a group or not? How many people from each group? What groups can be recognized as groups of “Lay Cistercians” – only those who are connected with a monastic community, or every group that wants to be given this name? It could be said that, strictly speaking, the *Steering Committee* has no official mandate to make these decisions; but there are decisions to be made and no one else is better indicated than it is to make them. Not only does this group not have any document or authority to refer to in order to find an answer to its questions, but it has no one to give an account to of its management, since the persons meeting at Huerta will not be those who were at Clairvaux for the most part.

All this shows that if the groups of Lay Cistercians want to continue to *organize* the communication among them and above all the international meetings, they should be given a kind of collective existence as a *legal entity*. Then they could create an “International Association of Lay Cistercians”. It is important to clarify that it is not at all *a question of a canonical reality*, but of a group that gives itself a structure for functioning in order to be

efficacious. Such an association should then give itself at least elementary statutes to determine who can join the group and to elect a managing or coordinating committee for a determined time and with a precise mandate. To do this would be faithful to the spirit of primitive Cîteaux that, while emphasizing the autonomy of the communities, gave itself structures developed to serve the exercise of charity.

Conclusion

The movement of “Lay Cistercians” has developed admirably in the last decades. It has taken on dimensions that no one would have been able to suspect twenty years ago. The fruits are visible in the life of lay persons and the communities that accompany them. There can be no doubt that this is a movement under the influence of the Holy Spirit.

The Order has certainly been inspired to allow this spiritual reality to evolve without any premature intervention by directives and rules. However, the importance (if only one looks at its numbers) taken by this movement in the life of the Order, makes it imprudent to postpone a type of official “recognition” any longer...and to establish certain minimal norms as a condition of this recognition.

At the same time, independently of this recognition of a juridical or canonical nature, but parallel to it, it also seems urgent that the ensemble of those who want to be “Lay Cistercians” – if they desire to continue to function at the world and inter-Orders level where they function at present – constitute themselves as a “legal entity”, able to give precise mandates to those of whom they request services.

Scourmont, Easter Sunday, 2008