

LAY CISTERCIAN IDENTITY

Maria! Rabbunni!

Introduction

This is a final synthesis extracted from three previous syntheses, fruit of the contributions of the English-speaking, French-speaking and Spanish-speaking communities.

This document tries to gather the feeling and the way of life of the International Lay Cistercian Communities spread out through the five continents and it is a *martyr text* subject to clarification and finalization at the Encounter of Huerta 2008 by all the assembly reunited there with the fervent hope that as a result we will all form one Cistercian Family.

All the documents have been drawn up in response to the questionnaire written by the International Steering Committee. Although it was only suggested as a tool to facilitate the work, most of the communities adopted it as the structure of their own document, thus allowing us to arrive at a common vision of our cistercian lay identity as well as of the bonds that unite us to the monastic communities with which we are associated.

Therefore this synthesis will follow the same structure to facilitate its understanding.

It should be stressed that the brevity of many of the replies has not decreased the depth in their answers. By means of their Cistercian simplicity, they have gone to the essentials. It is also important to note that many other contributions have been received that were not included here, these being personal testimonies, because of the character of synthesis of this document. We are not including either reflections of a legal or theoretical character because they are not based on the lived experiences of Lay Cistercians and therefore cannot be considered a part of our identity.

MARIA!

Common characteristics

1. Lay Cistercian Vocation

- What are the reasons why you think that the Cistercian charism can be lived in the world by lay people?

1.1 As individuals, we recognize a personal call that it is experienced in community as a gift from God in response to the needs of the present world. Many describe it as a call to be an active witness of Christ and his Church in the midst of the world, providing a prayerful and contemplative testimony in a life defined by the values of the Cistercian charism and guided by the Rule of Saint Benedict as a concrete way to interpret the Gospel. Many describe it as a means of continuous conversion that leads to a rediscovery and a deepening of the grace of our baptism that leads us to the development of an adult faith.

1.2. This personal transformation does not deny communal sharing but rather leads to it. It is important to note that our desire is fortified and illuminated by observing it in others, women and men, with whom we share the same call to Cistercian spirituality. This reality unites us with strong new bonds that are not sought for themselves, but are received as a gift. Although Lay Cistercian Communities use diverse names to identify themselves, in essence these names are all very similar and have a common meaning.

1.3. All agree that it is possible to adapt Cistercian spirituality to the lifestyle of a lay person although it is very clear to all that there are two different ways to live it, monastic and lay, and that both are complementary. This shows us the vitality of the monastic life and the need for lay people to live in the world with greater commitment and spiritual depth. We are unanimous in our belief that the Cistercian charism can be lived in the world in different states of life.

1.4. The documents all expressed that the Cistercian charism is a way to live the Gospel and a way to recognize ourselves as members of the Universal Church. At times lay Cistercian spirituality has been defined as "Advent Spirituality" because of the way it incarnates Cistercian spirituality as *active- contemplation* and *contemplative-action* in the midst of the world.

2. Lay Cistercian Life

- *Reflect and write a description of what it means for individuals within your Lay Community to live their Cistercian vocation in the world. Do not simply list practices (such as lectio, attending Mass, meditation, the rosary, etc.) and values (such as humility, obedience, patience, silence, etc.) but rather describe why these practices and values are important. Is it possible to live a Cistercian lifestyle in the world?*

2.1. There is great diversity in the description of the practical ways of living the Cistercian charism, but, again we found that even if forms are different, all are used for only one aim: the search of God.

2.2. All the Cistercian values, in one way or another, have been incorporated in the life of the laypersons. This is a great blessing and can be summarized as follows:

Living in the world is extremely complex and simplicity is experienced as true liberation.

The incorporation of obedience settles us in a lifestyle in which our goal is not to satisfy our basic impulses, but rather to open us to what is better for all and to accept spiritual guidance.

We wish to grow in humility and to separate ourselves from the worldly tendency of not needing God and turning our own self-sufficiency into an idol.

Simplicity and austerity in our way of life helps us to identify ourselves with evangelical poverty and to separate ourselves from the tendency towards over-consumption.

In a world full of noise that deafens the spirit, we receive silence as a gift.

We experience the communion among us with great intensity and gratitude. We feel that we are fortified by it and healed of the individualism that is prevalent in our world.

In our difficulties and our struggles with faith, we try to find confidence and an abandonment to God that is our aid and consolation.

We adopt a new style in our manner of work in opposition to prevalent worldly activism and the tendency to idolize work. We find in Ora et Labora the best expression of our attitude about work.

We find our strength in praying and giving praise, because by persevering in them we are freed of superficiality and hedonism, walking towards a New Life.

We live in joy as a result of our new path to inner unification-a path that releases our heart from the emptiness and sadness in which the majority of the world lives, a world trying to be palliated with many sensations while forgetting God.

2.3. All describe an inner and outer transformation that can be observed in the frequency in the sacraments, having the Eucharist as the center of life; the prayerful study of Scriptures through Lectio Divina; fidelity to the Divine Office; a filial devotion

to the Virgin Mary; hospitality with our brothers and sisters; a change of priorities; a new way of ordering the day; a new way of loving others through the Love of God; the desire for formation and the necessity of a spiritual guide; and to experience work as collaboration in the construction of the Kingdom of God having our maintenance and not our personal enrichment as its goal.

2.4. The coenobitic dimension of Cistercian life finds its expression in the life of Lay Cistercians in the spiritual union that they experience with all the members of their lay community as well as with the monastic community, through a more ascetic life that allows them to be united in personal and liturgical prayer, as well as in work, although being physically apart.

2.5. This inner unification, this way of conversion, and this desire for incarnation is born and realized in a life centred on Christ and this is emphasized by numerous Lay Communities. It is important "To live in the World being a citizen of Heaven and not to be 'caught' by the world."

2.6. In all the documents there are wonderful descriptions of practical ways to make concrete these realities in daily life, both personal life and family life, as well as in work and social situations.

2.7. Not all respondents agree in their understanding of mission. For some it is merely a committed life, whereas for others it is expressed in diverse actions in parochial life, in volunteering for service to the poor and the marginalized, the sick and/or prisoners.

2.8. All agree in stating that the greatest difficulty is to find a balance between times of prayer and action. The world is indeed tremendously "invasive" and it systematically reduces the time for prayer and drains action of its meaning because its contemplative dimension has been lost.

3. Lay Cistercian Community

- Reflect and write a description of what it means for your members to live their Cistercian vocation together in community. What aspects of community are most important and what contributes most to a sense of one's Cistercian vocation-both when you are together and when you are apart?

3.1. The experience of community is described many times as the birth of a new family in which is received aid and strength to live a commitment to a Christian life with hope and without fear. All agree that praying together creates communion and unites us over distance and fortifies us as well. They state that the greater bond is to be united by the Holy Spirit in a common search: the search of God, and consequently the community provides a personal enrichment through the transmission of values among all its members. Many state that the community makes them feel like members of the Church and helps them to experience being the Body of Christ. To experience

the needs of others encourages charity and teaches humility. For many, the community is a God-given means to their sanctification. Some express difficulties brought about by individualism in our education and that the lay community is therefore a school in which the most fundamental values can be learned, leading to self-knowledge and to the development of true charity.

3.2. For a majority of communities, it is fundamental to formalize their chosen lifestyle with some type of individual commitment, usually made in front of both communities, lay and monastic, that gives voice to the desire and personal decision to respond to the call of God to this specific lay Cistercian vocation.

3.3. There is great diversity in the way that communities organize themselves. In some communities we can say that there is a reluctance to create structures.

4. Bond with the Monastery and the Order

- *Lastly, reflect and write a description of what it means to be in a spiritual relationship with a Cistercian monastery. What are the characteristics of this relationship-individually and as a group? What works well and what does not work so well?*

4.1. Almost all the communities express with certainty that it is not possible to exist apart from the monastic community because it is the source of the charism. It is from monks and nuns that is received light and formation. However, there are differences concerning the concrete bonds of union and in the way to describe these bonds. Some describe this unity as guidance or spiritual direction, while for others it is only a type of support because they think that the autonomy of the Lay Community must be emphasized.

4.2. Many experience both communities, monastic and lay, as a single community with different expressions of life. However, both monastics and laypersons are clearly aware of the difference between being lay and monastic.

4.3. For all the groups, it is the monastic community, represented by the Abbot (Abbess), who gives them their Cistercian identity, whatever the nature of the bonds that unite them. Some Communities are recognized directly by the Abbot or Abbess whereas others by the Conventual Chapter.

4.4. It is common to all the communities and to all their members to experience the monastery as a place where they have felt the call of God to this vocation and all, either individually or in community, experience the monastery as their home and the concrete place where the Lord unites, in a very special way, both communities, lay and

monastic, and the members of both to each other. The hospitality of the monks makes the Love of God present.

Although most lay communities maintain with the monastic community a relationship of total communion and a sense of family, nonetheless some encounter situations of great difficulty in their integration and mutual acceptance. In spite of this, everyone conceives the lay community as belonging to the monastic community.

Many lay communities state their desire of not disturbing the monastic life, although some would wish to have greater presence of monks/ nuns in their meetings. There is a general recognition of the fact that being a lay Cistercian does not give one more rights in relation to the monastic community, but it makes us more conscious of our duties and responsibilities as Christians and that leads us to a greater humility.

4.5. Most of the communities have, with different frequencies, their meetings in the monastery in which they receive formation and they learn to love one another in a new way of being in relationship with one another that has nothing to do with social life. It is a concentric union with Christ to which all the members have been called by God and chosen not in a natural but a supernatural way. Some groups also meet outside the monastery when, due to distance, they cannot travel to the monastery more frequently.

4.6. Monastics and laypersons learn from one another, and in doing so become better monks and nuns and laypersons in their sharing together their path to sanctity.

Many members of lay communities go to the monastery individually besides attending meetings. But all agree that in order to be lay Cistercian it is not enough to simply feel attracted to a monastery, but that it is necessary to belong to the community.

5. Difficulties

- *Which are the greater challenges or difficulties?*

5.1. Many state that the greatest difficulty they experience is the distance that separates them from the monastery.

5.2. They also note the difficulty there is in finding a balance between work, prayer, family life and one's social life, in order to remain true contemplatives "*in the world without being of the world*".

5.3. Some describe the difficulties that they confront in living in the world and being honest and faithful to their vocation.

5.4. Some also point out the difficulty that they sometimes encounter in understanding some monastic terms and as well as terms that can lead to confusion when applied to their lay lifestyle.

5.5. Some also mention their difficulty in accepting non-lay members—namely, those from active religious institutes or deacons and priests.

6. Challenges

6.1. It is a challenge to unify the diverse forms of Formation and Initiation and Entrance.

6.2. Many express their desire to have this lay Cistercian charism recognized by the Order.

6.3. Others live as a challenge the need to transmit this treasure to others.

RABBUNNI!

7. Conclusion

7.1. A slow and deep reading of all the documents submitted shows a great unity and communion among all of the lay Cistercian groups in their experience of the charism as well as a great diversity in the way they make this unity concrete. It shows a great richness within the Cistercian lay vocation that is not exhausted in a single way of living the life. The infinity of God's gifts are multiplied in every member.

7.2. It is exciting to discover the parallel development of lay communities in their relationship with the monastic communities. Although there are obvious differences, the lay communities and the monastic communities share the same charism in their diversity. Without losing their own personality, they experience communion and a bond all together forming one Body of Christ.

7.3. Many of the lay communities are less than 10 years old. At times this youthfulness causes a certain fear of commitment and insecurity in the way to

organize. But the Cistercian lay communities are a work of the Holy Spirit, and, with little communication among them, they have striven to live and to experience the Cistercian lay charism in total communion.

7.4. We all believe that the Cistercian charism that has been exclusively monastic for nine hundred years has been enriched by God with a new lay form. This challenges monks and nuns to be better monks and nuns, and laypersons to live bravely as contemplatives and Christians *in the world without being of the world*, sharing the same charism in different ways, in a shared path of sanctity, all searchers of God.

7.5. It is possible to say that the lay Cistercians live Stability by their fidelity to their bond to a lay community associated with a specific monastery. They live Obedience in their desire to submerge their life in the Gospel, to be formed according to the Rule of Saint Benedict, and by a sincere respect for the advice of the abbot and of their spiritual guide. They live Conversatio Morum by their increasing desire for sanctity and by developing in their lives the values of the Cistercian charism—poverty, fleeing from materialism and consumerism. They live chastity, living love in purity and fidelity in their diverse states, having the Love of God as their origin and only aim.

7.6. Although it is essential for formation and spiritual growth in the lay Cistercian life to come to the monastery, what is truly important is to be witnesses of this charism in the world in our diverse personal situations.

7.7. There exists in all lay communities, unanimously, a strong desire for communion among all the International Communities as a visible expression of the communion with the Universal Church. At the same time, as in the monastic communities, there exists in all lay communities the desire to respect and to maintain the diversity in all things that do not break the communion: to live the same charism with all the diversity of expressions while being strongly united in what is essential.

7.8. All the Lay Cistercian Communities unanimously show the desire and the hope to be approved and recognized by their General Chapter of the branch of the Cistercian Order to which their own monasteries belong.

This synthesis only tries to describe the Cistercian lay identity according to the contribution of the different communities. In no way does it try to define it.