

A STATEMENT OF IDENTITY

(A synthesis of 20 responses from English-language communities)

THE LAY CISTERCIAN VOCATION

Many laymen and women living in the world today experience a deep distress in their constant exposure to secular values. While the Church provides a frontline defense against the lure of living only for one's self, many laymen and women feel a call to a response that goes beyond parish life but for which often they are unable to find an appropriate expression. They resonate with the Gospel's call to live a dedicated and committed Christian life as well as to Christ's instruction to retire to the secret room and to pray to God in private (Matt 6:6).

Today, however, men and women in the Church, as they come to a better understanding of themselves within the context of their faith as well as the world in which they live, have come to a broader realization of their lay vocation. While accepting the call from God to live in the world and to be the yeast of the Gospel, they realize that there are more ways to be in the world than they previously understood.

While leading an "active" life in the Church, many laymen and women feel an affinity for and a calling to a life of "contemplation," and that the source of this vocation is God speaking to them (1 Cor 7:17). At one time not too long ago such a calling would have seemed impossible or the sole purview of the contemplative Orders. However, through an encounter with the Cistercian Charism or a lay Cistercian community, many people feel that God has delivered them from their distress and led them to a way in which they are able to live their lay vocation authentically (Ps 107:6-7). They feel that God has chosen them, for the "Gospel came to [them] not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction" (1 Thes 1:4-5).

LAY CISTERCIAN COMMUNITIES AND IDENTITY

Over 25 years ago, laymen and women who had developed a personal relationship with the Cistercian Charism through individual monks or nuns, or through an affinity with a specific monastery, began to recognize in one another a shared calling and began to meet in small groups of like-minded individuals. This phenomenon appeared spontaneously and independently in a number of Cistercian monasteries around the world. Soon these informal groups became aware of one another and there developed among them a dialogue concerning their identity, their relationship with their individual monasteries, and their relationship with one another.

Today there are a large number of lay communities around the world associated with individual Cistercian monasteries, and more are forming every year. There is no absolute uniformity among them any more that there is between monastic communities within

the Cistercian Order. However, like the monasteries, each lay community “forms a single body in Christ” and in the pluriformity of these lay communities is found a unity of goal and purpose (Stat C.14.1)—namely, a calling to live the Cistercian Charism in the world. Lay Cistercian communities are autonomous but nevertheless rely on the monks and nuns of the monastery with which they are associated for spiritual support, guidance and instruction in the Cistercian Charism.

In order to understand both what these lay communities hold in common as well as their differences, the Steering Committee of the International lay Cistercians began a process by means of which the lay communities shared with one another “the spiritual gifts they have received” (Stat C.14.1) through a series of increasingly synthesized documents that reflected on their identity as lay Cistercians and lay Cistercian communities. Despite differences related to specific issues, as well as those of language and culture, it is apparent to those who participated in the exercise that lay Cistercian communities are “united in the same mind and the same judgment” (1 Cor 1:10) regarding their lay vocation and the call from God to live as lay Cistercians in the world individually and in community.

Lay Cistercians follow the Rule of Saint Benedict and a Cistercian way of life as a means of forming Christ in the heart (Stat. C. 3. 2) and of coming to an experiential knowledge of the relationship between self and God. It is in this sense that laymen and women have come to participate in the Cistercian Charism. Thus, this statement of “Cistercian identity” is not a definition, but rather a description of a process, a “discipline of heart and action”, by means of which they endeavor to “attain purity of heart and a continual mindfulness of God’s presence” (Stat. C. 3. 2.) in their lives.

In their relationship with the monks or nuns of a specific monastery, lay Cistercians experience a sense of family—a place where they feel accepted, cared for, and able to share mutual problems and concerns about leading an intentional Christian life. Through the lay community and its relationship with a monastic community, lay Cistercians are energized to carry the Cistercian Charism back to their homes, their places of work, and their parishes.

This document explores the values and practices described by lay Cistercian communities as central to their Cistercian identity. Although it can never hope to be comprehensive in either breadth or depth, it reflects their serious investigation and deepening understanding of their vocation as lay Cistercians.

LIVING IN THE WORLD

It has been said that for a layman or woman, the most important part of becoming a lay Cistercian is not coming to the monastery, but rather leaving it. Although lay Cistercians find personal acceptance and peace at the monastery, as well as instruction and mutual support, the vast majority of their lives occurs elsewhere in the world—in their families,

in their parishes, in their places of work—and it is in these places and circumstances that their calling to the Cistercian Charism is lived out.

Thus, although lay Cistercians often use a “monastic” vocabulary to describe their lives in the world, these words have a different meaning for a person who is living, often alone, in the world than for the monk or nun. It is sometimes a point of confusion, both for the layman and woman as well as for the monk and nun, when they use similar words to describe different experiences.

Separation from the World

Monks and nuns “prefer nothing to the love of Christ” and “make themselves strangers to the actions of the world” (Stat. C. 29. 1.). Their life is characterized by a physical separation that finds symbolic expression in the enclosure walls.

It is important to understand that “separation from the world” is the most important characteristic of the Cistercian Charism that monks/nuns and laymen/women **do not** share in common. By definition, laymen and women live *in the world* and it would be inappropriate to their vocation for them to attempt to separate themselves from the world. It is true that lay Cistercians try to distance themselves from the values of the world in which they live, but they do not separate themselves from the world the way monks and nuns do.

There are many Cistercian values and practices that aid in effecting a distance between lay Cistercians and the world in which they live. For the lay Cistercian, “separation from the world” is better understood in the context of a conversion within the world—namely, *conversatio morum*. In this way there is less confusion that the monastic and lay vocation are in some way equivalent, or that laymen and women are attempting to be monks and nuns.

Conversatio Morum

Conversatio morum is “fidelity to monastic life” in “the practice of Cistercian discipline” (Stat. C. 10.) and constitutes one of the vows postulants make when joining a monastic community.

Although lay Cistercians do not make vows, their attempt to live the Cistercian Charism is in essence the daily and on-going re-formation of their lives. This conversion occurs in the world, the parish, the workplace, and the home, rather than in a monastery. Their vocation to the Cistercian Charism is the fundamental and radical calling of the Gospel to lead an authentic Christian life in their place in the world, “transformed by the renewal of [their] mind” (Rom 12: 2). Theirs is not a fidelity to a “monastic” way of life, but rather to a Cistercian way of life that has its source in the monastery, is lived outside of the monastery, and that calls them to an all-encompassing change of focus and

orientation. There is an on-going exploration of their vocation and is viewed by them as a life-long commitment (Eph 4: 15, 22).

Poverty and Chastity

Part of the vow of *conversatio morum* for the monk or nun includes the renunciation of “the capacity of acquiring and possessing goods” and “a profession of continence and celibacy” (Stat. C. 10.). Lay Cistercians do not give up their possessions and are not required to practice celibacy. Nonetheless, both of these opportunities for “fidelity” are meaningful and relevant for laymen and women living in the world.

Lay Cistercians are learning to question the values of a secular culture that encourages consumerism and materialism. Amidst the demands of making a living and providing for the needs of family members, they strive to simplify their lives and reject societal attitudes that promote the philosophy that “more is better”. Like their monastic brothers and sisters, lay Cistercians recognize that happiness is not found in accumulating wealth, status and material possessions, but rather in the place that God occupies in their minds and hearts. While they are not called to practice a life of poverty, lay Cistercians understand that they have a responsibility to be mindful of the quantity and quality of what they own and use, as well as to be responsible stewards of the world’s resources.

Likewise, although lay Cistercians have not promised to live lives of continence and celibacy, they understand that they, like all Christians, have been called to practice chastity no matter whether they are living in the single or married state. The gifts of sexuality and intimacy are meant to be used responsibly and in fidelity to one’s state in life. For lay Cistercians this means rejecting societal norms and attitudes that devalue the place sexuality plays in the lives of men and women. It means recognizing that chastity enhances relationships because without it, sex can result in manipulation, exploitation, and abuse.

Silence

In a monastery, silence is the natural outcome of a community of people living together and pursuing the same spiritual goals. In the world, one finds very little silence, but instead a constant intrusion of sound and activity in all places and at all times. Except within their own environment, individuals have little or no control over this constant intrusion.

For the lay Cistercian, then, who seeks silence in which to experience the presence of God in “attentiveness of heart and solitary prayer” (Stat. C. 24), a great effort is needed, and often this effort requires negotiation with others with whom they live and work. For some it means rising early or staying up late, creating a personal space for prayer and meditation, or traveling to a quiet place in the woods or in a church. Because silence is

feared in the world, to actively seek it on one's own is seen by many, even at times by family and parish members, as countercultural.

Humility and Obedience

Perhaps the two values that are least understood and considered most countercultural in the world are those of humility and obedience. The emphasis in the world is not on coming to know one's self, but rather in assuring that one's self is gratified, accepted and honored. And with no deep understanding of self, the idea of obedience is meaningless and contradictory.

Although it often takes years of living the Cistercian Charism, lay Cistercians often come to a greater and deeper understanding of themselves and their wills, and how these manifest the relationship they have with God. There are countless opportunities in daily life for renouncing one's own will (Stat. C. 11)—especially in family and community life—and often at times when only the individual is aware of the act (Eph 5: 21).

Simplicity and Poverty

Those in the world often judge one's place by the amount and extravagance of personal possessions. Thus there is great emphasis on commercialism and ostentation.

For lay Cistercians, who often take steps to seek "an uncomplicated relationship with God" (Stat. C. 27), the challenge is less on removing superfluous possessions or a dedication to conservation of natural resources, but in resisting the constant harangue to buy more and to use more. Most of the world's economy is based on satisfying the cravings and urges of the self. As lay Cistercians experience humility and simplicity in their lives and "aspire to live quietly" (1 Thess 4: 10-11) and "to be content" (Phil 4: 12), they find themselves increasingly estranged from the world and what the world demands of them.

Stability

For the monk or nun, stability is often the hardest Cistercian value to understand in the context of living in the world. However, although lay Cistercians are not bound by stability of place, they do feel that the "providence of God has called" (Stat. C. 9.) them to a particular Cistercian monastery, to a particular lay Cistercian community of laymen and women, and to a specific way of living their life in the world in harmony with the Gospel. In addition, there is a constancy and perseverance required to live the Cistercian Charism in the world day after day that constitutes a "spiritual" stability within a society that often finds their lifestyle strange and disturbing. Through prayer and a shared lifestyle, lay Cistercians experience a sense of solidarity, not only among themselves, but also with the monks and nuns of the Order and the Church as a whole.

Lectio Divina

Many lay Cistercian communities originally formed around the practice of *Lectio Divina*, and in individual and group participation “God’s word is heard and pondered” and one comes to speak “heart to heart” (Stat. C. 21) with God. Many lay communities include *Lectio* as a part of their meetings, and all communities emphasize letting “the word of Christ dwell in your richly” (Col. 3: 16) through spending time with the Scriptures every day.

The Work of God

“Nothing is to be preferred to the Work of God” (Stat. C. 19. 1.), and the lay Cistercian is often drawn to this regular celebration of the monk’s and nun’s communion in Christ when at the monastery.

Although most lay Cistercians do not lead a life that allows them to participate fully in the Divine Office, most introduce some aspect of it in their daily lives. This often means rising before the rest of the family or staying up later in order to find an uninterrupted quiet for prayer. Some couples pray Lauds in their car on the way to work, some individuals pray the Little Hours during work breaks, and some invite other family members to pray in the evening together. Many lay Cistercians indicate that they are mindful, at certain hours of the day, that the monks and nuns are praying the Divine Office and that this gives them a feeling of solidarity and encouragement.

Work

“Work, especially manual work, has always enjoyed special esteem in the Cistercian tradition” (Stat. C. 26), and for the layman or woman living in the world, work is a necessary component of existence. The challenge for lay Cistercians is twofold: 1) maintaining a balance between work and other aspects of a spiritual life so that one does not impede the other, and 2) in a society of specialization, maintaining an appropriate “spiritual” view of work that is most often not manual in any sense of the word.

However, the balance that laymen and women seek in their lives is not the same as for monks and nuns within the monastery. Work is the means by which lay Cistercians maintain a life in the world and it requires of them much more time and effort. For many, supporting oneself and one’s family leaves little time for pursuing spiritual practices such as *lectio divina*, meditation, prayer, etc. Nevertheless, lay Cistercians do seek the means of making their work sacred in their relationship with God, and many Cistercian values find an appropriate expression in the workplace. The balance that lay Cistercians seek often must give work the greater emphasis.

Mindfulness of God

As in the monastery, the requirements of daily living and supporting oneself often preclude the “ample leisure to give [oneself] to reading and prayer” (Stat. C. 20). Nonetheless, lay Cistercians endeavor as much as possible, given the circumstances they find themselves within, to carve out times and places for prayer and reading. For most lay Cistercians there is a daily goal of spending quiet time with Scripture in *lectio divina*; but many extend this into their work time where, instead of taking breaks, they pray the Little Hours. In most cases, although the activities of daily living often militate against it, lay Cistercians seek to remain aware of Christ as the center of their daily lives, of the Cistercian Charism as the model for their daily lives, and of God’s presence as the goal of their daily lives.

Asceticism

As lay Cistercians begins to experience “the fruit of purity and simplicity of heart” (Stat. C. 25), there begins to arise a “willingness” to accept life as it occurs and less a need to fight the exigencies of daily living. It is at this point that lay Cistercians begin to experience a conversion of heart that integrates more and more of life, even life in the world, into a personal experience of God.

Although lay Cistercians fast and perform other acts of penance, it is in the “bite” of their lives lived as lay Cistercians that they experience asceticism. Theirs is a countercultural and, for many who know them in the world, disturbing focus on deeper and more important aspects of being in relation with God. It is in the very attempt to live this Cistercian lifestyle in the world that the lay Cistercians “walk by the Spirit” (Gal. 5: 16) and encounter the heart of asceticism.

Liturgical Life

The liturgical life of the monastery is an outcome of the coenobitic community that lives there and that has dedicated itself to a life of prayer in the presence of God. It has both a public and a private expression, and “strengthens and increases both the inner sense of monastic vocation and communion among the brothers” (Stat. C. 17. 1.). While present at the monastery, lay Cistercian communities participate in this liturgical life when they join their monastic brothers and sisters in singing the office, in celebrating the Eucharist, and in expressions of community prayer.

However, lay Cistercians also participate in the liturgical life of the monastery when they are in their homes. Many lay Cistercians make daily Eucharist a high priority, and many more pray one or more hours of the Divine Office in a spiritual union with the monks or nuns of their monastery. Lay Cistercians are also active in the Liturgical Life of their parishes. Many of them are members of parish liturgical committees and music ministries as well as serving as lectors, cantors, choir members and Extraordinary

Ministers of Communion. At home, lay Cistercians pursue various personal prayer practices ranging from saying the rosary, litanies and novenas, to daily periods of quiet sitting and meditation (Stat. C. 22.).

Community Life

Lay Cistercian communities are not coenobitic. Nonetheless, the members of these communities follow a “common life” characterized by a “unity of spirit in the charity of God [and] the bond of peace in the mutual and unbroken love of all the brothers [and sisters]” (Stat. C. 13. 1.). Lay Cistercians seek one goal—to experience God while living an intentional life in the world based upon the Cistercian Charism. However, like monastic communities, lay communities are comprised of diverse individuals, and the success of any lay community is based upon a foundation of patience and obedience. Members of lay communities look to one another for understanding, support and accountability (Phil 1: 27). For this reason, formation consists not simply of instruction, but rather interactive discussion of the challenges of trying to introduce Cistercian values and practices into one’s everyday life. In most cases, no matter how a lay Cistercian meeting may be structured, the purpose of community is to encourage perseverance and consistency in living a Cistercian life in the world.

The Apostolate of lay Cistercians

For monks and nuns, it is “the contemplative life itself that is their way of participating in the mission of Christ and his Church and of being a part of the local church” (Stat. C. 31.). Although the Church often defines the apostolate of the laity in much different terms, many laymen and women have come to recognize in their Cistercian lifestyle a *valid* way for them to be members of the Church as a whole.

Lay Cistercians are called to structure their lives in the world in such a way that the primacy of God’s love is quietly evident to those with whom they associate every day. This does not mean that they ignore or shirk their responsibilities as laity or the active apostolate. Indeed a great number of them are involved in parish and community-wide volunteer activities designed to reach out to people in hospitals and hospices, prisons, homeless shelters as well as participating in efforts to call attention to our responsibility to work for peace and justice throughout the world. Nevertheless, lay Cistercians recognize the importance of balancing the contemplative with the active dimension of spiritual life and it is in this way that these laymen and women explore and demonstrate a whole new way of being Cistercian, not only within the Order, but within the Church as well.

INITIAL AND ON-GOING FORMATION

Although the appearance of lay Cistercian communities around the world occurred spontaneously and rapidly, they did not emerge from a vacuum. Two conditions were

required before their advent: 1) a personal attraction and interest in the Cistercian Charism on the part of laymen and women as it became known to them through contact with Cistercian monks and nuns around the world, and 2) a personal willingness on the part of individual monks and nuns to begin teaching and guiding laymen and women who came to them for instruction. However, neither of these prerequisites can adequately explain the growing interest on the part of laymen and women in living a Cistercian lifestyle in the world. Many monks and nuns, as well as laymen and women, have expressed confidence that the appearance of lay Cistercian communities associated with specific monasteries has been the work of the Holy Spirit, and indeed it would be difficult not to see the will of God being acted out in this time and place in this developing relationship between Cistercian monks and nuns and laymen and women.

Unlike other lay vocations associated with Orders like the Benedictines, the Franciscans and the Dominicans, lay Cistercians seek their identity not in *individual* relationships, but rather in *communal* relationships. Within the context of the Cistercian Charism, there is great significance in this emphasis on the “common life.” Although lay Cistercian communities are not coenobitic, they are founded on a “unity of spirit” and a “bond of peace...and love of all” among the members (Stat C.13.1).

As laymen and women seek the grace to express the Cistercian Charism in their everyday lives, they rely upon the prayers, guidance and encouragement (Gal 6:6) of their monastic brothers and sisters in the “school of the Lord’s service where Christ is formed in [their] hearts” (Stat C.3.2, RB Pro: 45). This is accomplished by variously realized relationships between the lay and monastic communities. As in the Order as a whole, it is this “filiation” of lay communities with individual monasteries that assures the consistent formation of individuals in Cistercian values and practices, and of their groups as Cistercian communities, and addresses the unique challenge of translating these from the monastery into their daily lives (Phil 1:27).

There are two types of relationship lay communities have with Cistercian monasteries—one primary and one secondary. The primary relationship is characterized by a “unity” created by “a bond of charity” through which both the lay and monastic communities come “to a more complete understanding and practice of their common patrimony” (Stat C.4.1).

The second relationship is characterized by a reliance on the monastic community for direction in initial and ongoing formation of the members of the lay community in order that they may “so advance” in their way of life “that they progressively attain the full measure of the stature of Christ” (Stat C.45.1, Col 2:28). Many lay Cistercian communities receive guidance and instruction from monks and nuns in the Cistercian Charism and the Rule of Saint Benedict through prepared talks and discussions during the lay community’s meetings; some lay communities are invited to participate in the Abbot’s Chapter Talks or in other presentations arranged for the monastic community; many lay Communities are invited to participate in important events at the monastery

such as professions, funerals, and special liturgies; and some lay Communities are invited into choir to share in praying the Divine Office. In its interaction with a lay Cistercian community, the concern of the monastery is whether the members of lay community “truly seek God and whether they show eagerness for the work of God, for obedience and for trials” (RB 58:7).

THE SERVICE OF AUTHORITY

Most lay Cistercian communities, after a few years of growth, recognize the need for some sort of internal structure, a statement of identity, or an expression of membership expectations. There is no one administrative structure that has been adopted by all lay Cistercian communities.

Many lay Cistercian communities, following the model of the monastery, elect a leader or a Council of experienced members to attend to the needs of the community. Besides planning the meetings of the community, this group often has the responsibility of being in communication with the monastic community, of addressing any problems that may arise, and of assuring members’ participation in formation. Often, these groups are assisted by non-voting liaisons from the monastic community who provide insight and guidance.

POINTS OF DIFFERENCE

There are a number of areas in which lay Cistercian communities differ from one another. At this time, lay communities approach these issues through a prayerful discernment with the monastic community with which they are associated. (“Each one must do as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion” (2 Cor. 9: 7).

For instance, not all lay Cistercian communities are self-supporting or collect dues, and rely instead on member contributions or the monastery to cover expenses. Other communities collect monthly or annual dues in order to cover the costs of community expenses such as materials, contributions to the poor, travel expenses, etc. In some cases, the lay community associated with a monastery is actively involved in supporting the monastery through work and by assisting with whatever industry the monastery has developed to support itself.

Not all lay communities meet the same number of times each year. Sometimes the number of meetings is determined by distance to the meeting site. Many communities meet one day each month; others meet for two or three days two or three times each year. However, it is important to note that all meetings of lay communities have a common purpose: namely, to learn about the Cistercian Charism from monks or nuns, and to discuss ways of introducing and/or supporting aspects of the Charism in one’s everyday life. However, not all lay communities have attendance expectations and in some communities members may be absent for months at a time.

Some lay communities do not restrict membership to the laity, but accept priests and Religious from other Orders as members as well.

Some lay communities do not restrict membership to Catholics alone, but welcome Christians from other traditions. In this case, certain accommodations have to be made with respect to the Eucharist, but in all other ways these non-Catholics are treated as full members of their communities (Eph 2: 14, 18).

LAY CISTERCIAN COMMUNITIES AND THE MONASTERIES

At this time there are over 50 Cistercian monasteries that have lay Cistercian communities associated with them. Because these lay communities have arisen spontaneously, there is no single model of relationship between the lay and monastic community. In some cases, the entire monastic community is actively involved in supporting and forming the lay community; in other cases, only one or two monks or nuns interact with the lay community. And some communities, especially those at a great distance, rely on printed or audio materials they receive from the monastery for their formation.

All lay Cistercian communities, while remaining autonomous and seeking not to be a burden to the monastic community, realize that they do not and cannot stand by themselves. It is only in a relationship with specific Cistercian monasteries that lay communities become “Cistercian” and participate in a shared patrimony. For this reason, many monasteries, after discerning their relationship with the lay community, choose to officially recognize the lay community. Sometimes this recognition comes from the Abbot or Abbess, and at other times from the Conventual Chapter.

Over time, as laymen and women meet together and share formation, lay Cistercian communities develop their own recognizable characteristics and grow to reflect the unique character of the monastery with which they are associated. Just as all Cistercian monasteries share common norms but are nonetheless different from one another, lay Cistercian communities are easily identified as Cistercian despite different points of emphasis within their communities.

Most monastic communities recognize the need to provide instruction and guidance in the Cistercian Charism. Although monks and nuns may not be aware of the particular challenges of trying to live a Cistercian lifestyle in the world, they are for laymen and women the source of the Cistercian Patrimony as it has evolved over the last 900 years. Together, laymen and women and monks and nuns explore ways in which the laity can find expression of the foundational values and practices of the Cistercian Charism. They do not rely on the Cistercian patrimony as a source of established concepts and conditioning, but rather as a means of being sensitive to finding appropriate ways to express the Charism in the lives of laymen and women living in the world today.

In many lay communities, after a period of initial formation, laymen and women seek to make a public commitment to their Cistercian lifestyle. These are not vows, but constitute a promise that one makes both to oneself and to one's community to be faithful to the community and one's lifestyle in the world. In some cases, these promises are made before both the lay and monastic communities, thereby strengthening the spiritual ties between them. The preparation time for making promises varies from one community to the next; nonetheless, in all cases there is a time for formation and discernment before making a commitment. After initial commitment, some communities provide a later opportunity for making a "life-long" commitment as well.

For all lay communities there is a sense of place and relationship with a specific monastery. Just as among the monasteries, there are variations within lay communities that appeal to some people more than to others. For this reason, most lay communities endeavor to meet at their monastery whenever possible and look forward to the instruction and guidance provided by the members of the monastic community. In most cases, the monastery provides a place for the lay community to meet, and occasionally provides meals and over-night rooms. However, the relationship between the two communities always goes beyond simple hospitality.

As the number of lay Cistercian communities has grown and a desire for regional and international meetings has risen, it has been important at times that not only the lay communities be represented at these meetings but occasionally the monastic communities as well. For some monasteries, especially smaller ones, there is the additional burden of travel and time away from the monastery for one of its members.

In many lay communities, especially those that have been in existence longer, there has developed a spiritual relationship and bond between the lay Cistercians and the members of the monastic community. In some cases, the monastery is viewed as housing two communities—one monastic and living within the enclosure, and the other lay and living in the world. When together, they pray as one, when apart they each seek to live the Cistercian Charism within the circumstances of the life they have been called to live.

CONCLUSION: CISTERCIAN IDENTITY

The purpose of this paper has been to provide a synthesis of identity statements prepared by individual lay Cistercian communities and to describe the way in which large numbers of laymen and women have chosen to live their lives in the world based upon what they have learned, observed and experienced of the Cistercian Charism. It is not possible to define a "lay Cistercian" in a way that includes all the variations found among those who call themselves lay Cistercians or the communities of which they are a part.

Nevertheless, it is hoped that this description of lay Cistercians, based upon input from 20 English-speaking lay Cistercian communities, provides the monks and nuns of the monasteries that support lay Cistercian communities a sense of what lay Cistercians feel they share in common. It is the “common life” that makes them one and all Cistercian.

It is the fervent hope and prayer of all lay Cistercians that, formed and molded by the Cistercian Charism, they be recognized as belonging to the Cistercian family.