

Presentation to the General Chapters (2011)

[Greetings]

Introduction

In this short presentation, we would like 1) to give you a very brief update about the lay groups associated with Cistercian monasteries, 2) to tell you a little about the outcomes of the International Meeting held in Dubuque earlier this year, and 3) to let you know how you can assist lay groups, both those that have already formed and those that are still in a process of being formed.

Cistercian Lay Communities

Currently there are 53 Cistercian monasteries that have one or more associated lay groups. The total number of lay communities is 63. 33 of these are English-speaking, 18 are French-speaking, and 12 are Spanish-speaking. There has been a slight increase in the number of groups since we last spoke to you in 2008. However, in the case of some of the individual groups, membership has continued to grow. Note also that the number of lay communities that have participated in International Meetings has remained fairly constant: 34 groups at Clairvaux in 2005, 36 at Huerta in 2008, and 34 at Dubuque in 2011. However, we should not overlook the effect that world economics have had, and continue to have, on participation in International meetings.

The International Meeting at Dubuque

The 2008 International Meeting at Huerta was memorable for the development of the “Lay Cistercian Identity Document”, a unanimously accepted description of the purposes and goals of Lay Cistercians and the communities of which they are a part, and the fruit of the work of all of the groups that were present. However, that meeting was also memorable in that it drafted and accepted a document that established *ad experimentum* the International Association of Lay Cistercian Communities, the organization that we represent here today. Whereas the meeting at Huerta focused on a practical and spiritual description of Lay Cistercians and their communities, the Dubuque meeting sought three “organizational” outcomes:

1. First, the ratification of a document entitled “The Bonds of Charity that Unite Us” that officially established the existence of the International Association of Lay Cistercian Communities. With the unanimous acceptance of this document, the organization that we represent here today officially came into existence.
2. Second, having officially created the International Association, it was necessary to ask two questions: 1) **who** (what lay groups) could become a member of the Association, and 2) **how** would this membership come about?

- a. In order to answer the question “who could be a member” of the Association, a *Statute on Membership* was developed and approved. This document recognizes two levels of membership:
 - i. **Provisional** Lay Cistercian Communities: Before the time when a lay group receives official recognition from the monastic community it is associated with, there is a period of establishment, growth and development.
 - ii. **Recognized** Lay Cistercian Communities: After a period of discernment, a monastic community “represented by its Abbot or Abbess” (*Identity Document*, 4.3) may decide to recognize a lay community as an “expression of the Cistercian Charism” (MGM 2008, Vote 71).
 - b. In order to answer the question “how does a group become a member” of the Association, it was decided that a one-time application, signed by the Abbot or Abbess, must be sent to the Steering Committee.
3. A third outcome of the meeting at Dubuque was a list of “common characteristics” of lay communities. Lay Cistercian Communities, by their nature, share a great deal in common with one another and with the monasteries with which they are associated. They are all united by a bond of charity, a bond of fraternal love and support, and a bond of fidelity. There exists a frequent bond of prayer that deepens the love and respect of one for another.

The Dubuque meeting developed the following list of objective characteristics of Lay Cistercian Communities:

- a. Lay Cistercian Communities receive written recognition from the Abbot/Abbess of the monastery with which the lay community is associated.
- b. Lay Cistercians communities are assisted by a liaison from the monastic community appointed by the Abbot/Abbess.
- c. Lay Cistercian Communities recognize and adopt the Lay Cistercian Identity document approved in Huerta in 2008.
- d. Lay Cistercian Communities have a Charter and Statutes, approved by its members that outlines the spiritual goals of the group as well as its functioning and the link it has with the monastery.
- e. Lay Cistercian Communities have a leadership council, comprised of lay members, that is responsible for the administration of the group.

- f. Lay Cistercian Communities have developed a formation program comprised of a curriculum of topics and learning activities that address the values and practices of the Cistercian Charism.

Note that this list of characteristics is not prescriptive in nature. The International Association does not judge the quality of a Lay Community nor take this list of characteristics into account when a group applies for membership. Rather, it is in all cases the Abbot or Abbess of the monastery with which the group is associated that determines whether a lay community may become a member of the Association and at what level. This is, rather, a list of minimal and ideal characteristics that Lay Cistercians themselves have identified as worthy of emulation—a list that may prove valuable not only to the groups themselves as they reflect upon their development, but also to the Abbots and Abbesses who must determine whether a lay group associated with his/her monastery should be a member of the Association and at what level.

How Abbots and Abbesses can help

The Steering Committee is happy with the work that the lay communities have accomplished over the past six years. They have coalesced spiritually and have created real bonds of charity that unite them. They have created a “Lay Cistercian Identity Document” that not only helps them convey their identity to individuals and groups outside of the Cistercian family, but also acts as an internal checklist as they continue to grow and develop. They have created an International Association and established an official mechanism by which it is able to communicate with the other members of the Cistercian family. They have identified a good list of characteristics by which to judge themselves and to be judged by the monasteries with which they are associated. They have established realistic levels of membership that recognize the spiritual and organizational development necessary to become and remain associated with a Cistercian monastery.

This growth has occurred rapidly over the past six years. It is now necessary to give the Holy Spirit, and the groups themselves, time to assimilate and incorporate these developments.

Over the next three years, it will be one of the goals of the Steering Committee to establish the formal mechanism by which the individual lay groups may apply for membership in the International Association. With 63 groups, this will be a “large work”. What it means for you, the Abbots and Abbesses of the Order, is that sometime in the next few months you will receive from a representative of your lay community an application form. You will be asked to check whether the group is “provisional” (this is, in formation) or “recognized”, and then to sign the application. In 2014, only those groups who have completed this form will be invited to the 2014 International Meeting.