

The Lay people associated with Cistercian monasteries and their recognition by the OCSO

I - Quick historical background

Origin

There have always been lay people who have found a support for their spiritual life by the close association with a monastery of monks or nuns. There were often also groups of various natures attached to a monastery, calling themselves, for example, “the Friends” of this or that community, or groups devoting themselves to the study and the propagation of the Cistercian culture and tradition.

Since a little more than a quarter of a century a different phenomenon appeared and has not ceased growing. It consists of lay people living a great communion with a Cistercian community and feeling the call to embody in their lay life the essential values of the Cistercian spirituality.

Cistercian spirituality being primarily coenobitic, these lay people generally gathered in groups or communities of lay persons attached at a local monastic community.

International meetings

This movement developed to such a point that these groups of Lay Cistercians periodically organized International meetings to share their experiences and to see whether it were possible to receive a certain official recognition from the Cistercian Orders.

There were the meetings of Quilvo in Chile (2000), of Conyers in the USA (2002), of La Grange of Clairvaux in France (2005), of Huerta in Spain (2008) and now of Dubuque in the USA (2011).

General Chapters

The existence of these Lay Cistercians, their regrouping in communities attached to various monasteries, and their periodic international meetings were mentioned at almost all the General Chapters of the OCSO since 1984, and was the object of a thorough study in Commissions at the MGM of 1993 and 2008. The Order always expressed an open and sympathetic attitude in their regards, without however wanting to legislate about them, recognizing the right and the responsibility for each community to have such a group.

Some Lay Cistercians were invited to the MGM de1993 and the members of the *Steering Committee* were invited to the Chapters of 2005 and 2008. A member of the Order was designated by the MGM of 2005 to act as liaison between the Order and these groups and he was confirmed in his function by the MGM of 2008.

All these gestures constituted in an obvious way a semi-official recognition of this movement by the Order.

Huerta 2008

The international meeting of Lay Cistercians at Huerta in 2008 had a particular importance. It had been prepared during the previous three years by a well-coordinated reflection on the level of the Regions or various parts of the Order. The participants prepared an important document called "Lay Cistercian Identity" in which they gave an expression to their Cistercian identity, describing the values that they wished to live and which they committed themselves to live. They expressed also the desire of some form of recognition by the Cistercian Order.

In another document called "Bonds of Charity", they constituted themselves as an International association of Communities of Lay Cistercians. The goal was not obviously to create a kind of Third Cistercian Order, nor even to constitute an International Association of Faithful, which would then ask to be recognized by the Holy See. The goal was simply to have a kind of permanent existence as a moral person, the members of each international meeting only being able to make this commitment for themselves. The constitution of this Association also allowed all the Lay Cistercians, as a moral person, to dialogue with the various authorities of the Cistercians Orders.

MGM 2008

The members of the *Steering Committee* elected at the Huerta Meeting were invited to the MGM of 2008 as they had been at that of 2005. They presented the document on The Lay Cistercian Identity to the meeting, and it was studied by four Mixed Commissions of the MGM.

These exchanges led to a vote acknowledging this phenomenon of the Lay Cistercians as a lay expression of the Cistercian charism. (I will explain in a few moments the scope of this vote). In a second vote, the MGM asked the Regional Conferences to reflect on the document presented by the Lay Cistercians in order to see what the Order could assume.

All the Regions except one were able to carry out this reflection before the meeting of the Central Commissions at Tilburg in 2010. The Central Commissions decided to put the question on the program of the MGM of 2011 where it will be treated according to the ordinary procedure, i.e. by four Mixed Commissions.

The Central Commissions asked me to prepare a document on the work of the Regions on this subject. This is that document.

II - The MGM of 2008 and its follow up

Importance of vote 71

“We recognize the existence of a lay expression of our Cistercian charism in the lived experience of the groups of lay persons associated with a number of the monasteries of our Order” (Yes 132; No 21; Abst 10).

One cannot not insist strongly enough on the importance and the scope of this vote. The General Chapters and the MGM since Holyoke (1983) had given an indirect and semi-official recognition to this movement. In 2008, we have an official and very clear recognition. It is important to weigh well all the elements in the formulation of this vote.

The recognition relates to **groups**, not on individuals. It relates to **groups attached to monasteries of our Order**. That obviously does not imply any value judgment on what can be lived by individuals not attached to any specific group, or by groups not attached to any monastic community. What is limited here is quite simply the breadth of the field on which the Order can make a decision and about which indeed it decides. The MGM OCSO could obviously not make decisions about the groups attached to monasteries of other Orders.

What the MGM, i.e. the two General Chapters of Nuns and Monks affirm in this vote goes beyond all that which the fervent promoters of this movement could have hoped for. The MGM affirms that “We recognize the existence of a lay expression of our Cistercian charism in the lived experience of the groups of lay persons associated with a number of the monasteries of our Order”.

Such an approach presupposes an attitude which it is important to mention. This attitude, that one finds in various documents of the Order since the Vatican II Council, consists in conceiving that the “Cistercian charism” is larger than the whole of the institutions officially recognized as Cistercian. This charism does not belong to the Cistercian Orders, nor even to the whole of the present monks and nuns. Like any charism, it belongs to the whole Church, that is, to the whole of God's people. If God wanted this new expression of the Cistercian charism to appear, as He had caused several

other expressions to appear in the past, it is our responsibility “to recognize it”.

Once this recognition was affirmed, the question which followed logically was: “What attitude should the Order (and more precisely the General Chapters that made this recognition) take vis-a-vis this new expression? ”. The discussions made in Mixed Commissions of the MGM on the document “Lay Cistercian Identity” were not concrete enough to allow the Commission of Coordination of the MGM to formulate votes on this subject. It limited itself to formulating a vote (nº 72) asking the Regions to continue the study of this document “so as to see what we as an Order can assume”. It should be recognized that the last part of this last vote is not completely clear, and the Regions hardly touched this question.

The position of the Regions

A good synthesis of the reflection of the Regions is to be found in the Minutes of the meeting of the Central Commissions at Tilburg in 2010.

As a whole, the Regions take for granted vote 71, even if all do not seem to have perceived all the scope of it. In any case, nobody calls this vote into question.

A certain number of Regions -- about half -- think that we should limit ourselves to this declaration of 2008 and not to legislate more. The others think that it would be necessary or convenient to establish criteria for the recognition of a group of Lay Cistercians attached to a given monastic community. In any event, all the Regions raise sufficient questions for the Central Commissions to decide to put this whole question (and not only such or such aspect) on the program of the next MGM (“We wish to place the topic of Lay Cistercians on the programme of the MGM of 2011”).

In what follows I will try to describe, starting from the minutes of the meetings of the Regional Conferences, the questions which still arise and to which the MGM of 2011 will have to endeavor to give an answer.

III - Questions and concerns

A) The question of the Cistercian Identity

This question had been raised and lengthily discussed at Huerta within the context of the formulation of the document “Lay Cistercian Identity”. Within the framework of this discussion it had become obvious that it was not a question, for anyone, “to confer” this Cistercian identity on a group, but simply “to recognize it”.

One or the other Region suggests that one do not speak any more of “lay Cistercians”, but of *Associates* of such or such monastery. To that one can answer that the MGM of 2008 already went beyond this problem, by recognizing explicitly the Cistercian character of the lived experience of such groups.

As the MGM speaks explicitly about groups attached to a monastic community, the fact of belonging to a group and the relationship with a monastic community seem essential for this recognition.

The role of the monastic community

All that was said at the General Chapter, in the discussions in Mixed Commissions as well as in the Plenary assembly seems to go in the following direction: it belongs to the local monastic Community to recognize or not to recognize the “Cistercian” character of what a group attached to the community lives.

The Order is a community of communities, within which the important orientations are made in a collegial manner at the General Chapter. During approximately a quarter of a century the Order let the movement known as of the Lay Cistercians evolve freely, counting on the responsible attitude of each community. But from the moment when the Order, in an official and collegial way, recognized the Cistercian character of the lived experience of such groups, it is normal that the Order establish certain criteria for this “recognition” which it chose to assume. This is why several people think that the Order should at least establish some criteria for the whole of the Order to be able to assume the recognition made by the local community.

At the least, an explicit intervention of the Superior in the name of the community is considered necessary. From this point of view it is not enough that a group be formed around a monk or of a nun, even if it is with a kind of implicit agreement from the superior. There must be at least a degree of intervention by the superior so that one can speak about a recognition made by the community.

Out of a preoccupation of justice towards the whole monastic community as well as towards the lay community, some Regions suggest that such an official recognition be made not by the superior alone but by a vote of the conventual Chapter. On the one hand that would ensure that the decision is not made without a serious examination and, on the other hand, this Community decision could not be cancelled easily.

Not recognized groups and isolated people

It is clear that the “recognition” given by the Order in its vote 71 of the MGM of 2008 does not apply to groups of sharing, prayer, etc., which are not connected with a specific monastic community and are not explicitly recognized by one. This not-recognition does not imply any value judgment on what these groups live. It does not seem however legitimate on their part to give themselves the title of “Cistercian”.

It is the same thing with the isolated persons who live -- or consider that they live -- the Cistercian spirituality, even in a close union with monks or nuns or with a community. What they live corresponds rather to the situation of oblates. The oblate situation is a primarily an individual membership, even if several oblates of a monastery can meet for common exercises. The reality recognized by the MGM of 2008 is a primarily Community reality.

Some additional questions

Responsibility: One or the other Region said that the Order as such should not assume responsibility vis-a-vis the movement of Lay Cistercians. To that one can answer that by inviting representatives of Lay Cistercians to the meetings of the MGM and especially by the vote 71 of the last MGM, the Order already assumed its responsibility in their connection. It could give it up only by going back on that decision. Would this be responsible?

Cistercian family: One Region asks that we do not recognize Lay Cistercians as belonging to the *Cistercian Family*. On this subject one must clarify that the concept of “Cistercian Family” is not a legal concept. It is simply a beautiful expression permitting to cover as a whole all the Orders or Congregations or other institutions in which the Cistercian Tradition and Spirituality are lived. The Blessed Jean-Paul II himself spoke about the Lay Cistercians as pertaining to the Cistercian family, in his message with the Cistercian Family in 1998.

The question of Association

With the passing of years Lay Cistercians held various meetings, as I mentioned above. At each one of these meetings the participants present could speak only in their own name and in the name of their respective groups. Even if a team was elected to prepare the following meeting, the group which had elected them ceased existing at the end of the meeting and this team did not have any moral person to whom to give an account of its work. Even the *Steering Committee* elected at meeting of La Grange in 2005, at the suggestion of Dom Bernardo Olivera, did not represent any moral person. In Huerta, the participants decided to constitute themselves, on an experimental basis, as an International association of the Communities of Lay Cistercians. This Association is not an International association of Faithful in the canonical sense, which would be approved by Rome and which would be

an autonomous lay branch in relationship to the Chapter of the Abbots and with that of the Abbesses. It is simply an organisational structure that the existing groups give themselves in order to manage the communication between them and with the Order.

Conclusion

At the time of the next General Chapters, or MGM of Assisi 2011, the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance will have:

- 1) to take note that it has already recognized the groups of lay Cistercians attached to communities of the Order as a new expression of the Cistercian charism. Nobody suggested calling into question this decision of 2008.
- 2) to confirm that it extends this recognition only to the groups (and not to the individuals) clearly attached to a local community, unless it wants to decide differently on this point which does not achieve the unanimity.
- 3) to decide if it wants to establish criteria or conditions which will have to be applied so that a community of Lay Cistercians can be actually regarded as being really attached to a monastic community.
- 4) to decide if it wants to recognize the Association of the communities of Lay Cistercians and the Coordinating Committee (Steering Committee) as its interlocutor in all that relates to the relations between Lay Cistercians and the OCSO.
- 5) to decide if it again wishes to elect a member of the Order as a liaison between the Order and the Lay Cistercians.

Here are as many questions about which Lay Cistercians meeting here in Dubuque will perhaps like to make suggestions or to present requests to the General Chapters.

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