

abdijsgroep koningsoord - arnhem - the netherlands

SPIRITUAL JOURNEY IN THE LIGHT OF THE CISTERCIAN CHARISM

Introduction

On the third of November 2001 Abbess Benedict welcomed about thirty persons in the abbey of Koningsoord in Berkel Enschoot at the beginning of the meeting of lay people interested in the Cistercian lifestyle. Via the Abbott of Cîteaux a Dutch lady, connected with that abbey, together with Mother Benedict, organised a meeting for people interested in the Cistercian spirituality in the Netherlands and the Dutch speaking part of Belgium (Flandres). Invitations were sent to persons who regularly visited one or more abbeys for retreat, attending offices or as a regular guest in the guesthouse. We noticed there was a real longing for more spirituality in our daily life and for sharing these feelings with other fellow-thinkers. At the end of that day we decided to meet each other twice a year in turn in one of the six abbeys who took part.

After a couple of years a few people wanted more meetings a year and if possible closer to their hometown. So in most of the connected abbeys regional groups started, each in their own way and with their own programme. With a liaison from the monastic community of the abbey, the Lay Cistercian Community abbey group Koningsoord started in January 2004 with eight participants, including a monastic representative appointed by the Abbess. Since then the original regional meetings were reduced to once a year until now.

Programme of the abbey group Koningsoord

From the beginning on we came together in the abbey eleven Saturday afternoons a year and we started studying the Rule of St. Benedict. In turn two members prepared the subject of the meeting, during which they lead the discussions. After more than three years we choose publications of Thomas Merton as a guideline during our meetings. The next two years we studied and discussed the Exordium of Fr. Michael Casey. From January 2011 we started a psalm project, in every meeting one chosen psalm is central. We also study and discuss a chapter from the book 'Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict' by Esther de Waal. This project will continue until the end of 2014.

Six years ago we added an abbey weekend to our programme. We arrive at Friday afternoon before the Vespers and leave on Sunday after lunch. Apart from the regular programme during these weekends one topic is central such as: Does the (Cistercian) Way choose me or do I choose the Way; Cistercian Spirituality; Ora et Labora; Simplicity; The fifth International IALCC meeting; Stabilitas; Religion and Art. Most of these weekends we invite a Sister of the community to give a presentation about that subject.

The Divine offices are involved in the programme of our meetings, so we pray and sing together with the Sisters. We even are able to follow all over the world the offices via the website of the abbey <http://www.koningsoord.org/>

Leadership

When we started we did not have a formal leadership, but one person became leader in a natural way, he coordinated also practical activities. Together with the representative of the abbey he made appointments with people who asked for more information and/or who are interested to join our

group. At the next meeting they report about that conversation and propose a trial of two meetings. If the reaction of the group is positive the new participant will be invited.

Last year the chairman of the first hour announced his resignation at the end of December 2012. We decided to organise an election for a new chairman and a vice chairman because the leader's experience was that this task was too heavy for one person and it should also be better to share responsibilities.

On the day of his resignation he thanked his wife, who also is member of the group, as his 'vice chairman behind the scenes'. After having made a tasks list for both chairman and vice chairman a formal election was held with the result that two members who got the majority of votes were chosen as chairman respectively vice chairman for the term of three years with a maximum of two terms. The chairman represents the abbey group in the annual meetings of regional chairmen and is also the international contact person (ILACC).

The monastic representative of Koningsoord continues her activities within our group and keeps involved with the introductory appointments.

Membership

Several years we had about twelve members as a maximum, some people left the group but there was always someone to take the free place. In the course of the following years more people became interested, so we decided to develop a formation programme for newcomers. One of our members was appointed unanimously to be leader of the formation programme.

In the meantime the Sisters of Koningsoord moved from the southern part of the country to the middle eastern part to a new built abbey in Arnhem amidst a forest. For many of us this meant a much longer travel time so we decided to meet each other on six whole Saturdays instead of eleven afternoons. So in practice we come all together after the Terce and discuss general information for half an hour and then we split into two groups. After Sext, lunch and None the afternoon programme with the chosen psalm as subject is plenary.

Common experiences of our Lay Cistercian Way

Our Lay Cistercian Community recognized and adopted the Lay Cistercian Identity document approved in Huerta 2008. One of our members and our monastic representative assisted the 4th. International Meeting in Spain.

On January 30th. 2010 the Abbess of Koningsoord signed the application form that:

1. Abdijsgroep Koningsoord has been formally recognized by the conventual chapter of our monastery as an expression of the Cistercian Charism;
2. We would like this group to become a member of the International Association of Lay Cistercian Communities.

So our group was officially invited for the 5th International Meeting in 2011 in Dubuque. Again our monastic representative and this time another member of the group went to this meeting in the USA. During that meeting the ILC statutes were adopted and the work on formation was started and will continue in Lourdes next year.

With all the official texts now turning to the practice of every day.

Although the process of growing in daily life is a very personal one, we notice however that we sometimes need less words to explain our thoughts and feelings of course only when the level difference is not too high.

The fact that we all are willing to incarnate the lay Cistercian Life in our own being and our own surroundings gives us a feeling to be on a collective way. In our daily life Ora et Labora for instance is growing more and more obviously as well as the Rule of St. Benedict as our guideline. But we

recognise at the same time that this is not always a very easy way. Mutually misunderstandings can influence the collective process negatively so we have to solve such problems carefully.

Difficulties

A few years ago we faced the problem that there could be too many candidates to join the group. We solved that problem as mentioned before and we are glad with this solution. The newcomers are making quick progress in their introduction programme and during the psalm project they participate at the same level as the other members.

An unexpected difficulty arose when a member, after having left our group to join another Cistercian abbey group, a year later wanted to come back to our group. Although we admitted her again in our midst, we realised that having no written internal guidelines it should be good to think thereabout. *Stabilitas* of course has to be one of the priorities of our individual members. So we are preparing an official statute to make agreements for the future. A similar problem appeared when one of the participants said farewell with the message that she probably should come back after a year joining another non-Cistercian group. We decided to offer her a comeback after a new intake interview. So we have some topics to consider thoroughly for our statute.

Another problem occurred when a member fell ill and she knew already that it would take more than a year to recover. During that time she wanted to have all our texts and reports so she should be able to follow our programme at a distance. Every now and then she told us about the mixed feelings receiving these papers, glad to be involved and sad to have to be absent for another time. So we stopped the mailing.

A next member who was very interested and eager to get more acquainted with the Cistercian spirituality left after almost a year because in spite of studying he was unable to understand the texts also due to a brain disease. Saying farewell is difficult after having spent a good time together.

In the meantime in the Roman Catholic Church a discrepancy arose between the official ecclesiastical leadership and those who understood Vatican 2 and are working in accordance with these directives.

Benefits

As regards the benefits we share in our group we want to mention first of all the contacts with the Sisters, starting with our monastic representative. She is both our contact person and participant of the group. She also is a representative of the now-a-days Cistercian charism as it is lived in daily life. The relationship between the monastic community and our community is one of mutual respect and understanding. In the past years the contacts intensified by helping during the whole project of the removal of the Sisters, also by being host or hostess during open days. The members of the group are invited by special events such as the profession of a Sister, the consecration of the new church or the funeral of a Sister. Perhaps most of all, feeling part of the community happens with the communal praying and singing during the Divine offices in the abbey church.

Besides these benefits we enjoy the mutual contacts within the group, when we prepare texts, learn from each other and deepen our social and spiritual communication. Also we are often impressed by the creative way of presenting the chosen subject during our meetings. Everyone does his or her utmost to exchange their experiences with texts and hymns we discuss and to share the feelings they imply. A lifelong learning is not only limited to study, work and social contacts in daily life, but above all in growing during our Spiritual Journey.