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Clarke University

The Hopes and Fears of the monks and nuns of the Order concerning Lay Cistercians

I recall the last time I was with the Lay Cistercians of our Order was at Conyers in 2002. It was a very happy occasion for me and for all of us who were with you at that time. It was only the second meeting of the international group of associates and there was an air of foundation – a beginning that no one could predict into the future. Much has evolved in your history as Lay Cistercians since that time.

Now the steering committee for this meeting has asked me to speak about the hopes and fears of the monks and nuns of the Order regarding this movement that is taking place. I accepted but very quickly I realized it was an impossible task. How could anyone know what all the monks and nuns of the order think about anything?

It is extremely difficult to reach everyone in the Order and even more difficult to get monks and nuns to answer a questionnaire. But with the limited resources I have I will give you what seems to be on the minds of many. These thoughts or opinions have been gleaned from several sources.

The main source is my own experience, along with our communities of Mississippi and New Melleray. In response to a few questions I circulated among both of these groups, they spoke with me about what they think and feel. This is obviously valuable but limited. Dubuque, Iowa in the middle of the United States is wonderful, but limited.

In answer to a short questionnaire I send to 26 houses of the Order I received 16 responses. That is about 62%. That was a high rate of return and I am grateful to all those who responded to my e-mail. The responses I received represent North America, France, Africa, Ireland, and Holland. I would like to begin with this more global picture and then come down to our local experience at the end.

The first question I asked each community was: ***In general is your community supportive of the groups of Associates or Lay Cistercians that have begun to form in relation to individual monasteries.***

All the communities answered Yes with one exception. The community that said No, also said that the groups that are already formed should continue.

It was understood that an affirmative to that question did not necessarily mean that those communities all had groups associated with them...or that they would choose to have one.

That is pretty overwhelming when you think about it. There was a similar proportion just within the New Melleray and Mississippi communities. All were supportive of this movement with two exceptions. I find that very heartening.

So there is strong support of the Associates that have formed in relation to communities of the Order and this movement is seen by many as the work of the Holy Spirit. The vote taken at the General Chapters in 2008 had already indicated that direction.

Just in case you have not memorized this historical vote I will repeat it for you. When things get confused and a little crazy you might want to ruminate this text like a mantra. I personally think it is very important and I might even say, extraordinary. Not having been at that meeting I may hear that vote with ears that are not bogged down by a lot of preliminary dialogue.

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 abstain– 0 (over 86%) Wonderful!

The second question I posed to the communities in the questionnaire was: ***In general does your community have difficulties with these groups? and if so, for what reasons.*** I join to that the fourth question: ***Can you express any fears you may have for these groups?***

So in summary what follows are the fears and/or difficulties raised by communities concerning the Lay Cistercians. Before we proceed further we need to remember that fears are, by their nature, hypothetical. They do not necessarily correspond to reality. Some may, and others may not.

1. These groups may involve communities in pastoral ministry that is not ours and for which we do not have resources or training.
2. Hosting meetings involves distraction, time and energy as well as possibly disturbing peace and prayerfulness of monastery.
3. Some groups can seem to intrude into the community life, or even “take over” and speak as the authentic voice of Cistercian spirituality. There is a concern that a group, or individuals in a group, may divide a community. (This can be unconscious and as much the responsibility of the community members as the associates.)
4. No standard formation program is in place yet so it is left up to individual groups. Can formation and ongoing development happen in that case? Are there objective criteria by which a group can be considered Associates of Cistercians?
5. Some groups are larger than the community. Not easy to find liaison or teachers.
6. There can be too much copying of religious life, ex. postulant, novice, vows, etc. When that happens boundaries can be blurred.
7. Will they become just another therapeutic group or intellectual reading club? Or will they be a forum for gripes with the institutional Church?
8. The fear or concern that was voiced most often is one that was also mentioned in the discussion at the MGM. In the future will a community be forced to accept a group of associates against its better judgment.
9. Groups that accept non-Catholics have to deal with the difficult situation of reception of Eucharist...also how do groups deal with the controversial issues of abortion and gay marriage, etc. or should they?

10. The second most often mentioned fear is that of the name. Several prefer that “Cistercian” not be in the official name as a noun. So Associates of Iowa Cistercians would be okay, but not Lay Cistercians of Iowa.
11. It happens that the Abbot/Abbess is sometimes called upon to resolve tensions in the group. That can be an added burden for the superior.

Well, all that sounds a bit heavy, doesn't it, but remember the resounding affirmation of Vote 71.

What follows are the responses to the third question: ***What are your hopes for the Lay Cistercians or Associates?***

Many were of a spiritual nature:

1. That members continue to be enriched spiritually by being associated with Cistercians.
2. That their own faith life will deepen and that they can be a leaven of love in society as well as a source of support to each other.
3. That their presence in their own family and community can raise awareness and appreciation of the function of Contemplative life and of ongoing conversion to Christ in the Church and in the world.

Others spoke of the structure of the groups themselves.

4. They hope that the groups move forward to develop a viable formation plan for themselves and clarify expectations concerning membership.
5. That the groups come to consensus about their own leadership without undue dependence on their contact monastery or on the Order.
6. That their **lay** identity be maintained at all times.
7. **And a final note of care:** that they be granted the grace of perseverance! As you know, that is the last word of Saint Benedict also: May He bring us all together to eternal life. I think Saint Benedict would be happy to be in our midst today and just smiling and saying, yes, yes, what a wonderful Spirit. May the Spirit bring us all together to everlasting life!
8. One more point: three of the communities (of nuns) said “we enjoy the lay associates”. I thought you'd like to hear that.

Now I would like to turn to our local communities. The concerns expressed by New Melleray and Mississippi are pretty much the same as have been mentioned in the above responses from the Order at large, but here I had the advantage of listening to individual monks and nuns.

I won't repeat the concerns or hopes that are exactly the same as above, but there were a few new ideas that seem worth mentioning in addition to what has already been voiced.

1. There was a concern mentioned by both of our communities that our Associates might expect too much from the monks and nuns, and that they could become disillusioned. In other words our humanity begins to show the closer you get to us. The lovely white robes up in the choir stalls all of a sudden have spots and wrinkles. That's a risk for all of us, isn't it?

There is a flip side to that which was also mentioned. Associates can grow in compassion towards the very people they look up to and especially if they see that monks and nuns try to be compassionate towards one another's weaknesses.

2. Someone asked: do our associates experience real acceptance or mere tolerance? For him that was a concern.
3. The last concern is about us. Monks and nuns can use lay groups as an escape from the challenges of community life and the demands of the hidden life. I would add: we can use other things, too.

It was in the hope for Lay Cistercians that I thought some creative ideas emerged. The brothers and sisters also understood this question to mean **values** both for the lay associates and for the monastics. How are these groups valuable for the lay members themselves and for the monastics?

1. The presence of the lay group is a valuable support to the monastery. They help the monastics to remember who we are called to be in the church. They enrich the Cistercian charism by witnessing to its Spirit in lay life. The lay group can also be an avenue for vocations to the monastery directly or indirectly. (this has actually happened here)
2. Sharing our charism deepens the prayer life of the associates and of the monastics by the constant challenge to be what we say we are. This mutual support in prayer is not measureable but it is palpable.
3. For the lay members it is a bond that assures them they are not alone in their search for God and faithfulness to prayer. (this one touched me very much). It refers both to their bond with each other and their bond with the monastic community.

As I listened to these thoughts from the communities and monks and nuns who spoke with me I have a strong sense that most recognize the Spirit of God creating something beautiful in our midst and something important. It is new – new for us as an Order and therefore there are many unknowns involved, but it is consistent with our history. For me this work of the Spirit is a clear sign of life and hope for the future.

I believe the fears expressed a sense of our own inadequacy to meet the challenge of formation and of accompaniment rather than fear about the validity of the movement itself. One of our monks wrote: I have the same concerns for the Lay Associates that I would have for any new adventure in the Holy Spirit.

Before closing I'd like to share a brief conversation I had recently with a woman who joined our Associates in initial formation just over a year ago. She told me that a mutual friend who celebrated Eucharist in our monastery many times over the years used to tell her that we were not always on the cutting edge of liturgical changes, and we would be catching up on the latest liturgical changes a little

after the rest of the universal Church. She said with a smile, now I want to tell Father that after a year in the Associates I'm getting to be the same way.

So be careful, you may pick up some of our bad traits as well as a few good ones. Association does create likeness.

For myself, I have witnessed the evolution of the Lay Associates of our two monasteries from the very beginning. It seems to me to have been a continual movement into authenticity and depth. There have been many challenges and difficult situations to face. I believe that wherever "community" is taken seriously there will be challenges. Jesus understood that very well. He told us it is especially when we are gathered together that he is in our midst. Jesus understood the human heart well and how difficult human beings find it to live together in harmony and dynamic hope. So He promises to be with us in a special way when we gather to pray together. (Mt. 18:20)

Over the years questions of leadership, accountability, the basics that create membership, the need for written Constitutions (or not) etc. arose in our AIC (Associates of Iowa Cistercians). These were not easy questions to sort through. The older members of our AIC will be the first to tell you that for years they were allergic to rules and designated leaders within their own ranks. But life together has demanded both in some form.

I don't know the precise questions you will focus on during this meeting but based on what I have heard from the Order and experienced in our own local Associate group, I would like to make one observation and suggestion.

Communities are like people. They change. They grow and they diminish. And then often enough communities have a way of resurrecting, and then they move on again with new life. This can happen in a short span of time.

This is true of the monastic community with which you are associated and it is also true of your own associate community. So it seems to me that the center of gravity in your community has to be within yourselves, not in the monastic community you love and support. **It is the Christ in you who is your life.**

Practically that would mean that gradually your formation, your leadership, your decisions will be marked by the Spirit in you as you integrate monastic principles within your own lives as lay persons. In saying this I am not recommending a break with the monastic community. That association with a Cistercian community is essential for maintaining the Cistercian charism. It is vital. But in whatever way the lay associates can maintain that contact while also maintaining their unique call...that is the particular challenge you face, in my view.

Trust God. If this is of the Spirit, as we believe it is, this movement will flourish.

My prayer for you is the prayer the Abbess prays for a novice as she receives the Cistercian habit: May God bring to completion in you that which he has begun.