

May 2011
Clarke University
The Goals of This Week's Meeting

You will receive several assignments during the coming week, but perhaps one the most difficult will be that you represent not only your own lay community, but also all lay communities associated with Cistercian monasteries. This does not mean that you should leave behind your lived experiences individually or in community, but rather that you must bring with it a broader perspective that includes not only your local expression of the Cistercian Charism, but also the entire movement of which you are a part. As Paul says, we are no longer Greeks and Jews, but rather we are all one in the Spirit.

Yesterday, both Dom Armand and Sister Gail gave us a perspective on this relatively new movement of the Holy Spirit—a perspective that we do not often get from the Order itself, from individual monasteries, and from individual monks and nuns.

Many of you have asked over the past months: “Exactly what will we be doing at the 2011 International Meeting in Dubuque?” That has been a hard question to answer; the reason is because we do not know exactly what is going to happen here this week. What does happen here will be a product of what you and the Holy Spirit working within you produces. The Steering Committee has put together a series of questions for you to consider, questions that we think are important and germinal to our development. However, we are entirely prepared to go where the Spirit leads—even if that means that we must put aside all our plans for this meeting and go somewhere else.

And so today in the next few minutes I would like to lay out for you the three items that the Steering Committee thinks it is important to consider this week. As you begin to address these items, we will see where the Spirit leads us.

The three goals of this week's meeting are:

1. Reflect on and share the relationships that our Lay Communities have with the monastery with which they are associated.
2. Reflect on and share what formation means for Lay Cistercians.
3. As we decided in Huerta in 2008, establish a permanent Association of Lay Cistercian Communities.

The schedule for the coming week provides time for you to address these three goals. For each goal, we have prepared several questions that we think it is important for each of you, in your specific language-group, to discuss. As at Huerta, we will ask that the secretary for each of your language-groups make a short report back in plenary session. We will consider these summary reports together and those plenary discussions will dictate where we go next. Each evening, the

Steering Committee will meet, consider what has happened during the day, and will create a new agenda for the following day. In this way we hope to be open to the guidance of the Spirit working among us.

Reflect on and share the relationships that our lay communities have with the monastery with which they are associated.

The following two paragraphs are from the OCSO website describing “Lay Cistercians”:

There have always been lay people in a more or less close relationship with a monastic community, finding in it an inspiration and a support for their Christian life, and sometimes a group of friends of a particular community. During the last quarter century something new has developed. Lay people have felt called to integrate into their lay vocations – family and professional life, as well as their social and religious commitments – the most fundamental values of the Cistercian life.

These people are known by different names (oblates, associates, etc.); but in general they are called "Lay Cistercians," and form a group of laity attached to a community of Cistercian nuns or monks.

In the eyes of many monks and nuns, there seem to be **two** types of groups associated with Cistercian monasteries: 1) those **traditional** groups that find in the monastery “an inspiration and a support for their Christian life”, and 2) those **new** groups, called Lay Cistercians that “have felt called to integrate into their lay vocations...the most fundamental values of the Cistercian life.” There is a contrast here between traditional groups such as support groups, friends of the monastery, retreat groups, AA groups, book discussion groups, etc., and new groups such as the lay communities that you all represent. However, since both groups find at the monastery “an inspiration and a support for their Christian life”, it may be difficult from some monks and nuns to distinguish between the two.

In preparation for this meeting, we asked your groups to respond to a survey that focused on implementation of the *Identity* document and the relationship of your groups with your monasteries. In general, the survey provided three interesting insights:

- 1) with regard to the *Identity* document, some groups (generally the larger and older ones) tended to rate its relevance and usefulness as neutral or somewhat low, whereas other groups saw in it an opportunity for self-reflection and growth,
- 2) with regard to the relationship groups have with their monasteries, there was a very wide range of responses reflecting a continuum of very “close” relationships to very “loose” relationships with individual monasteries, and

- 3) with regard to changes in the group's relationship with the monastery since Huerta, most groups indicate that those relationships have improved or remained about the same, while a few indicated that there have been no changes whatsoever.

Before looking at these surveys a little more closely, I would like to provide a summary of what I heard in Dom Armand's and Sister Gail's talks yesterday. The question I would like to answer is: "What is the impact of the relationship between a group and the monastery it is associated with?"

1) Physical Impact

a) Impact on physical resources

[Any group associated with a monastery demands a certain amount of resources. And yet some monasteries are very small; some have aging communities; some are lacking resources to form their own novices. A lay community may simply be "too much" for a monastery to take on. What is a lay community to do?]

- i) Physical resources: space, time, etc.
- ii) Personnel resources: monks and nuns to act as liaisons, spiritual directors, teachers, etc.

b) Impact on enclosure

- i) A lay group can disturb the peace and prayer of the monastery
- ii) A lay group creates demands of time and energy and this may distract a monk or nun from his/her contemplative vocation
- iii) A lay group can make demands on hospitality when a "special relationship" with the monastery is assumed

c) Impact of personalities

- i) Strong lay personalities can "mis-lead" the development of the group

[For instance, a lay leader in a lay community may have definite preconceptions about what it means to live the Cistercian Charism. However, at times these ideas may not conform to the shared experience of other lay communities.]

- ii) Strong monastic personalities can "mis-form" the development of the group
[In some monastic communities, the lay community is seen as the purview of one particular monk or nun. At times, the ideas, hopes and aspirations of this monk or nun may not conform to the shared experience of other lay communities, or may not be shared by his/her brothers and/or sisters.]

2) Spiritual Contact

- a) The lay community, as well as the monastic community, can be enriched spiritually by the relationship between the two
- b) The Charism of contemplation and conversion can have a positive impact on laymen and women and the world they live in

3) Formation

- a) There is a perception among some monks and nuns that lay communities need to have a formation plan

[Because formation is one of the goals of this meeting, I would like to return to it a little later.]

- b) Lay identity must be maintained and distinctions between lay and monastic communities should be emphasized. Lay groups should embody the spirit of the Rule/Charism, but should not emulate monastic structures.

[Many groups indicate in their Constitutions that they base their structure, processes and decision-making on the Rule. This is seen by most monks and nuns as appropriate. However, for some there may be an over-dependence on monastic models. Blurring the distinctions between monks and nuns on one hand and laymen and women on the other has the potential of diminishing both.]

- c) Need for confidence and perseverance

4) Structure

- a) Lay groups should structure and administer their own needs

[There are two assumptions in this statement. The first is that some sort of structure is required for a lay community to exist. Structure is sometimes a difficult concept to work with, especially when a group is young. For some groups, structure is seen in extremely negative terms, almost as a betrayal of the call one feels from God. However, as one Associate once said: "What makes us think that we can be structure-less when we are associated with a Cistercian monastery? What is a Cistercian monastery if not highly structured?"

The second assumption is that this structure needs to be generated by the lay community itself, not imposed by a monk or nun, and that the day to day leadership of the group should be in the hands of laymen and women. This may be a challenge for laymen and women who lack confidence in themselves or for some monks and nuns who believe that what is done in the monastery can be easily replicated in the world of the

layman or woman.]

- b) What's in a name? Should groups associated with a monastery call themselves "Lay Cistercians"?

[One of the things that the Steering Committee has learned is that it is necessary to be precise about the words we use and the meaning of those words. For instance, although we all call ourselves Lay Cistercians, none of us are actually "Cistercians" at all. A "Cistercian" is a monk or nun who is a member of a coenobitic community that lives in a specific monastery. Lay Cistercians, on the other hand, are laymen and women living in the world and who have chosen to base their lives on the values and practices of the Cistercian Charism. Thus, for monks and nuns, the word "Cistercian" is a noun; for us, laymen and women, the word "Cistercian" is an adjective that describes the foundation upon which we have chosen to base our lives. The question arises then: is it appropriate that we call ourselves "Lay Cistercians"? Should we find another word that describes who we are?

Sister Gail suggested the word "Associates" might be a better description of who we are—for instance, the Associates of some monastery, the Associates of Genesee, the Associates of Gethsemani, etc. For us here in the United States, the word "associates" has the right meaning and connotation. However, I understand that in certain countries, the word "associate" has a negative connotation, and that a word like "fraternity" would be more appropriate. In the United States, however, the word "fraternity" has a negative connotation. And so, if we decide to address this issue, I suggest that we not focus on finding one word that fits all in all languages, but rather that we find the right word in each language that describes our relationship with our monastery.]

That concludes my summary of what I heard Dom Armand and Sister Gail say yesterday. Inevitably I have overlooked some details that are of importance to some of you. Please note these and take them with you into your language-group discussions.

And now I would like to provide a brief overview of the types of relationship with monasteries that appeared in the surveys that you returned. As I read over the surveys you provided, it seemed to me that our relationships with monasteries can be described using a continuum with "close relationship" at one end and "loose relationship" at the other. Remember, however, that most groups fit somewhere "in between"—somewhere along the continuum and not at either extreme. However, there is an implied bias in this—a bias that suggests that a "close" relationship is better or more authentic than a "loose" relationship. Here are some of the characteristics of our lay groups:

“Close” Relationship

- Some meet regularly at a monastery
- Some have an appointed liaison from the monastery who meets with the group’s leadership
- Some receive guidance and instruction in the Cistercian charism from monks/nuns
- Some have received official recognition from their monastery

“Loose” Relationship

- Some meet occasionally or only once a year at a monastery
- Some have no monastic input to their group’s leadership
- Some receive no guidance or instruction directly from monks/nuns
- Some have not received any recognition from their monastery

Most of us would agree, I think, that a “close” relationship with a monastery is, when it is possible, the ideal. And some might conclude, at first glance, that there is a qualitative difference between these two types of relationship. However, I do not think that is true.

Many groups, like the monasteries with which they are associated, must face constraints—constraints such as members’ distance from the monastery, the size of the group, the resources the monastery and the group have available, etc. Lay communities are nothing if not creative. Let me give a few examples of some of the ways groups have tried to overcome some of these constraints. When members of a group live a great distance from and are not able to have their meetings at the monastery:

- Some groups have community retreats at the monastery at least once a year and have more regular meetings at a location that is convenient to the membership but away from the monastery;
- Some groups meet regularly, but away from the monastery, either in person or on-line, to listen to an audio recording or to read a letter from a monk or nun, and to discuss that material;
- Some groups invite other Lay Cistercians to visit and make a presentation to the community;
- Some groups read material such as Michael Casey’s course on the *Exordium* and, using the questions provided by Fr. Casey, discuss it in community;
- Some groups periodically have a “visitation” by the group’s monastic liaison in which the liaison meets with the group’s leadership as well as with individual members of the community;
- Some groups invite a monk or a nun from a monastery other than the one with which the group is associated to make a presentation or to act as liaison;

These are all creative ways of overcoming some of the constraints of distance and size that groups face.

However, the last characteristic on our list, recognition by a specific Cistercian monastery, does not seem to be open to interpretation. Either a Lay Cistercian community is recognized by the monastery with which it is associated or it is not. The only question here is the form that recognition might take. The *Identity* document puts it this way: “For all the groups, it is the monastic community represented by the Abbot (Abbess) that recognizes in them the charism and confers on them their membership in the Cistercian family, according to the nature of the bonds that unite them.” For some groups, this takes the form of a verbal recognition conveyed by the Abbott, for others an implied recognition by the assignment of a monastic liaison, and for some it takes the form of a letter from the Abbot/Abbess and/or his/her Council.

A little later, we will have some questions about the relationship of lay groups with a monastery for you to consider in your language-group discussion.

Now I would like to move on to the second goal of our meeting here this week.

Reflect on and share what formation means for Lay Cistercians

In 2008, *A Survey Relative to the Formation and Transformation of Persons in the Cistercian Charism* was distributed to all the Lay Cistercian communities and summaries from each of the three language groups were published on the ILC web site in 2009.

Once again, it is important to understand what the terms used here mean. As the title of the survey indicates, the words *formation* and *transformation* are seen as synonymous. A short description of *formation* can be found in the Order’s *Ratio Institutionis* (approved by the General Chapters in 1990):

It is essentially by living out the various aspects of Cistercian conversatio that a person gradually becomes ever more truly a Cistercian. The [monastic] community is the ambience where the transforming action of the Spirit of God takes place. Through the daily practice of the monastic disciplines and under the pastoral care of the superior and those who share in the superior's ministry, this conversatio provides the means for personal and communal growth. (Ratio 6)

Formation, or transformation, in the Cistercian Charism is not a course of study and it is not the completion of an orientation of three or five year’s duration. It is rather the daily and personal lifelong journey one makes “*called to follow Christ along the way marked out by the Gospel, as interpreted by the Rule of St. Benedict and the tradition of Citeaux*” (Ratio 1).

Nonetheless, individual groups (and monasteries) assist their members along this path of transformation by providing a variety of resources—such as introduction to basic Cistercian values and practices, reading from the Cistercian Fathers, articles and books about the Charism, presentations, courses of study, etc.

It is important that we remember that, when we use these words *formation* and *transformation*, we do not use them to refer to both the end goal (union with God) and to some of the means we use to reach that goal. In our discussions this week, I suggest that we use the words *Formation* and *Transformation* to refer to that lifelong journey we have all undertaken, and use the phrase *formation program* to refer to the variety of resources groups may draw upon to assist their members in achieving that goal.

In Sister Gail's presentation yesterday, she mentioned a misgiving that some monks and nuns share: *Because there is no standard formation program in place, it is left up to the individual groups. Can formation and ongoing development happen in that case?*

It seems apparent that one of the challenges that face us this week and in the future is the issue of formation of laymen and women in the Cistercian Charism. In order to live the Cistercian Charism in our lives as laymen and women, we must first of all have access to that Charism—and the only way to have access to that Charism is through a Cistercian monastery. In fact, when seen in this way, formation is one important aspect of the relationship that associates have with their monastery.

And so, what did you tell us about Formation? Forty groups responded to the survey on Formation. Some general observations can be made:

- 1) Groups range from large (the largest with 66 members) to very small (the smallest with 5 members).
- 2) Larger groups tend to be older—the oldest group is over 35 years old and the youngest less than a year.
- 3) There is discrepancy among the groups with regard to formation programs. Some groups have a well-structured and formal formation program, whereas others have no formation program at all.
- 4) Nonetheless, the majority of groups indicated that a formation program is very important for the members of your groups.

Given Sister Gail's remarks and these findings, I would like to add one last item to our list of characteristics of a community associated with a monastery—namely, the place of Formation or Transformation, that is, *conversatio morem*, in the life of the associate community.

“Close” Relationship

- Some meet regularly at a monastery
- Some have an appointed liaison from the monastery who meets with the group's leadership
- Some receive guidance and instruction

“Loose” Relationship

- Some meet occasionally or only once a year at a monastery
- Some have no monastic input to their group's leadership
- Some receive no guidance or

- in the Cistercian charism from monks/nuns
- Some have received official recognition from their monastery
- **Some have a formal, structured formation program**
- instruction directly from monks/nuns
- Some have not received any recognition from their monastery
- **Some have an informal and unstructured formation program**

The following conclusions seem logical, even though they suggest that we, as an Association, have some problems relating to formation programs, especially formation programs for small groups, new groups, and groups that exist a great distance from the monastery with which they are associated:

1. The greater the distance a group is from its monastery or the fewer times it meets at the monastery, the weaker its formation program is likely to be.
2. The larger the monastery and the greater the monastery's commitment to the lay community, the stronger the group's formation program is likely to be.
3. Therefore, the strongest formation programs are likely to be found in groups that have regular contact with a monastery, a monastery that is able to commit resources to the lay community's development.

Later this week, we will come back to a discussion of formation programs. Br. Pierre Andre will give a talk on "Formation: what it is and what it is not". His talk will focus on formation for Cistercian associates with an emphasis on the *Ratio Institutionis* and the Cistercian tradition. That talk will help guide our discussions for the rest of the week.

However, a note of consideration: although the *Ratio* was approved by the General Chapters in 1990, we should not assume that it has been regularly and evenly adopted throughout the Order. Some of the problems that have arisen are 1) some monasteries are too small or lack resources to implement a formation program, 2) cultural differences make it extremely difficult to agree upon any one formation program that will be valuable for all monasteries, and 3) finding resources that will be of use to all, even within a single region, is very difficult. I mention this because I want you all to know right from the beginning the Spirit has not given us an easy task. I am sure we will not be able to bring our discussion to a conclusion this week. However, perhaps we can, in our discussions, take our first steps.

That brings us to the third goal for this week.

As we decided in Huerta in 2008, establish a permanent Association of Lay Cistercian Communities.

We will take this issue up as the first item of business in our business meeting on Friday. Once you have ratified a permanent Association, we will move on to the election of the Steering

Committee. We will also provide you a financial update. At that time, we will also discuss the next meeting in 2014, where it should be held, and the topic(s) that we should address at that meeting.

[Questions and answers]

We will take a little break now and will reconvene in our language-group rooms at 4:30 pm. A member from the Steering Committee will meet with you briefly at 4:30 pm, will distribute the discussion questions, and will give you a little direction in terms of how to get started.