

LAY FRATERNITY OF OUR LADY OF HUERTA (SPAIN) **LOURDES MEETING – 2014**

Considering what the International Committee has asked from Lay Cistercian Communities for the LOURDES-2014 International Meeting, we the Lay Fraternity of Our Lady of Huerta (Spain) have worked together since December 2012, each contributing their own ideas to express what our experience has been as lay people inspired by the Cistercian charism and associated with the community of monks at the monastery of Our Lady of Huerta (Spain).

JOURNEY AS A FRATERNITY

First stage: Desire and first steps (1986-1997)

The real beginning of our Fraternity journey dates back to **1996**, when a seed planted about ten years before started to bear fruit: The **Courses of Monastic Life and Prayer** held at the Monastery of OL of Huerta. From a group of lay people living in Madrid, Zaragoza, and Barcelona, the need arose to deepen and enhance the spiritual ties with the Monastic Community, with mutual respect, while living the Gospel message and the Cistercians values in the world.

Soon, **groups** were born in different cities, and quarterly meetings were organized at Huerta where we shared the liturgy with the Community.

The desire to continue the journey as contemplative lay people in the world led us to write the "**Chart of Confraternity**", combining desire, feeling and commitment to the Fraternity and to the connection to the Monastery of OL of Huerta, individually and as a group. After carefully reflecting on it, praying in light of the Word of God and helped by the Rule of St. Benedict, this Chart was adopted **in 1997** as an expression of those ties between the Monastic Community and our Lay Fraternity.

Second stage: Approval of Statutes and new challenges (2000-2005)

In 2000, the need was raised for the Fraternity to lay out a solid foundation to give us a minimal structure (small groups, coordinators, formation, newsletter,...), on which to rely on to go ahead. We started to clarify what was required: it was not enough just to meet. We started the project of developing our **Statutes** to help us go forward.

In June of this same year, Huerta promoted a **National Meeting of Fraternities**. Members of lay fraternities existing in our country at that time attended.

At Huerta on January 13, **2001**, by the Grace of the Lord, we were able to meet Dom Bernardo Olivera, then General Abbot of the Order. He confirmed us in our journey. He gave us a document that has been very helpful along our path, by giving us plenty of light for our discernment as Lay Cistercians: "*This means that joining the Fraternity will imply some kind of **vocation**.*" We had to find some affinity with the Cistercian way as a vocation. Talking about it was not enough, it had to be an ***inner experience***.

Dom Bernardo also spoke to us about the **institutionalization** of the group. He reminded us that the experiences of the previous years had proved good and positive. He encouraged us in what we had already started: writing **Statutes** for the Fraternity as the foundation for our future growth.

Writing these Statutes was not easy, but with the help of the Lord above all, plus the goodwill and knowledge of some "pioneers and experts" in the field, as well as the subsequent input of others, we were able to come up with a text that expressed our desire. We had to define the nature and purpose of the Fraternity as well as the lifestyle of its members. The document was published on **June 24, 2001**, on the Feast of Saint John the Baptist, after much thought, hard work and, above all, lots of prayer. The **Statutes of the Fraternity of Our Lady of Huerta** were approved unanimously.

On the day when the Statutes were approved, the Fraternity gathered in the presence of the Abbot of the monastery and elected the **General Coordinator of the Fraternity**. A few months later, the **first Council** was created (composed of the Abbot, the General Coordinator, the coordinators of the different groups, the Secretary and the Treasurer). The Council deals with all the matters of the Fraternity. Then, it presents them to the Assembly, which receives the information and votes when required.

This stage had **specific problems**, as in the preparation of the Statutes we encountered differences of criteria affecting the community living and the necessary adaptation and acceptance of others in their diversity. Although gradually, some freely chose to leave, the project was never abandoned. It was not easy, but feeling that the Lord was with us, we went forward, listening to the heartbeat of the Fraternity and to the silent word of the Spirit.

Once the Statutes in place, **new difficulties** appeared and therefore new challenges: we were a fairly large Fraternity, with various groups spread across our whole country. There were also lay people who did not belong to the Fraternity, but came to the monastery and asked to get closer to the Fraternity. We had to learn to live within a minimal structure (Statutes) without closing the door to those who showed interest and curiosity towards the Fraternity. The balance is not always easy, and there were sometimes difficulties and errors in the **hospitality**, caused by differences of opinion.

As a Fraternity, we have always felt we belonged to a larger family. In **2002**, we were present at the Second International Meeting of Lay Cistercians in Conyers (USA) and in **2005** at Clairvaux (France). During that last meeting, Huerta was chosen to host the following International Meeting in **2008**.

Third stage: 2006-2008 International Meeting at Huerta

We had the great opportunity to host the **IV International Meeting in 2008**. As early as **2006**, we started a deep reflection on Hospitality, to open ourselves in a very special way to a communion of Love with all the Lay people who would be gathering at Huerta, representing so many other Fraternities of different countries. The involvement of the members of the Fraternity was unconditional, each bringing their gifts and working for the smooth running of the Meeting.

The year and a half preceding the Meeting opened up for us a **new understanding of hospitality. Our bonds as a community strengthened** as well as our **openness** to those who would come in the future.

We set up the conditions and times of formation that should be required from new applicants, before they would commit to membership in the Fraternity. They consist in:

- Having completed the Course on Monastic Life and having manifested to the Abbot interest and willingness to be part of the Fraternity.
- Being linked to the monastery of OL of Huerta in a spiritual way, and to a local community of the Fraternity, by participating in the prayer and formation meetings both locally and at Huerta.
- Receiving specific formation through the group coordinator for a period of two years. Having completed that time and having shown perseverance, keeping in touch with the Abbot to help in one's discernment.

After this process and the acceptance of the candidate by the Fraternity Council, their commitment is formalized by signing the Charter of Confraternity.

Fourth stage: From the Huerta 2008 Meeting to this day.

The Fraternity remains "alive". Half of the fifty members it is currently made up of joined since 2006.

In 2011, we participated again in the International Meeting, this time in Dubuque, thus expressing our interest, as a group, for these meetings that bring us closer to each other as members of the same Cistercian family. In November of that same year, with the welcoming and acceptance of our Fraternity by the Abbot and the monastic community, we joined the newly formed "International Association of Lay Cistercian Communities."

In April **2013** at Huerta, took place a meeting of the Fraternities of Spain belonging to the "International Association", to prepare for LOURDES-2014. These were busy days to share, to discuss and to build roads together, hoping to promote and facilitate future meetings with other fraternities of Spain which are not yet part of the International Association, to live thus in communion with all those following the same Cistercian way .

RESOURCES FOR OUR JOURNEY

After the first Council of the Fraternity took place, the Abbot assigned a monk with the **Formation**. He prepared a three-year plan of work and study made up of two elements: one pertaining to the Bible (Christology, Ecclesiology, Sacraments), and the other to Monastic Spirituality (Cistercian Values, Rule of St. Benedict, and Cistercian Tradition). At each **quarterly meeting** at the monastery we share on these, then we reflect and integrate them in the monthly meetings of the various groups.

The dynamics is as follows:

1. **Every month**, there are group meetings (five groups right now) where we pray, we reflect and share, thus creating a good community life. It helps us to know one another better and to join in sorrow and in joy because, as a community, we are nurtured by both.
2. **Every quarter**, the entire Fraternity meets at the Monastery of Huerta, where we share Prayer (Liturgy of the Hours) and the Eucharist with the **Monastic Community**. In addition to the common time of formation, we meet in small groups to share and experience community life with others.
3. **Every year, Monastic Experiences Meetings** are taking place in small groups. They are three-day retreats to deepen one's personal experience of the Cistercian charism. In these "retreats-experiences", led by a monk appointed by the Abbot, and primarily focused on prayer and listening to the Word, we live, experience together, and create a greater connection between components from different local groups.
4. **Every year**, we choose a **Cistercian monastic value** that fosters both the personal and the community spiritual growth. Each member of the Fraternity tries to incorporate it into their daily life and to deepen it personally through meditation, readings, prayer, etc., as well as and sharing, if applicable, with his/her local community.
5. **To support the Lay Cistercian vocation**, to engage the realities of pain and insecurity in our society is crucial. Among our members, there are many volunteers who give of their time to assist in various church activities and social work: parish, Caritas, catechesis, marriage preparation, Manos Unidas, Cotelengo, social canteens, hospitals, Food Bank, Proyecto Hombre, Hogar de Jesús Caminante, and other associations. We have received in the monastery a treasure that leads us inevitably to share with the world, each in their lives and their circumstances. Thus, Lay Cistercian witness to the spirit of Jesus.
6. **Prayer**: To live this way, we recognize the need to remain faithful to personal prayer, the **Eucharist** and the **Liturgy of the Hours**, which we seek to live not only individually, but also in groups or with the whole Fraternity, as much as we can:
 - Individually and daily, we pray at least one Office, we spend time in **Lectio Divina** (e.g. on the daily Mass readings), and we conclude the day by invoking the Virgin Mary saying the Salve Regina. We have a common list in which every day we pray especially for a member of the Fraternity or the Monastic Community.
 - The monthly group meetings and the quarterly meetings of the Fraternity, where both communities celebrate together the Eucharist and Vespers, in union with the universal and the local Church --as mentioned in our Charter of Confraternity-- are also pillars of our Cistercian identity.

7. **Communication** between one another is also a part of the life we are seeking, with the help of new technologies: emails, **FRATERNUM** (Journal of the Fraternity), a private FACEBOOK group, optional for the members of the Fraternity, etc. We also want to be attentive to communicate with those who show interest towards us, through the **Webpage** of the monastery, where the Fraternity has a specific space.

OUR SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

The spiritual journey as a Fraternity implies growth in the personal spiritual journey of each members. Opening ourselves and walking together leave behind individualism to make us feel connected to others of the same mind. The life of the Fraternity gets **incorporated**, so that even when we are not together, we are united in prayer. We maintain open ways of communication to facilitate and enable us to remain united on our journey, each in their personal circumstances.

With constant **care and mutual support** among the members of our group, and experiencing its "fraternal dimension" in permanent joy, the appreciation arises spontaneously as brothers and sisters, each where the Lord has placed us.

We live with a vocation to **welcome** the "other", particularly those who come closer to the Fraternity either directly or through the web, just as we were ourselves welcomed to the monastery by the monks.

We value and integrate in our lives the **ongoing formation** that transforms us as individuals and as Christians. It unites us and creates links with other brothers and sisters. It enriches and nourishes us deeply. It is a point of communion, as the theme of our reflections, our studies, and our shared life style.

A large place is given to the Fraternity: we adapt our own times of prayer, study, and reading to those of the Fraternity. They are moments that we experience as a Fraternity, even when we are alone and in silence.

All your usual environment (family, friends, parish, etc.) know about our membership in the Lay Cistercians Fraternity and they very often bring up experiences, texts, history, that are a fundamental part of our **identity**.

Finally, we want to highlight something of vital importance: throughout our journey as a Fraternity, we have been **supported by the Abbot and the community of Our Lady of Huerta**. They have also journeyed in relation to the lay people who have been getting closer to the monastery. They have generously engaged in the hospitality, formation and spiritual care of the Fraternity. We recognize and deeply appreciate the work involved in their hospitality, and we give thanks to God as we recognize his presence in their midst.

CONCLUSION

The Fraternity of Our Lady of Huerta wants to keep deepening its inner journey, that is, its experience of God and conversion, offering our

inner experience as "good news" to other seekers; making present the reality of God through the Gospel in our everyday life and through our active commitment. There is a long road ahead, and we are encouraged to continue moving forward together.

...and may God bring us all together to everlasting life. (RB) Amen