

GENERAL CHAPTER OF THE BERNARDINES OF ESQUERMES

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Sunday 10th August 2008

Introduction

At the end of 2007 we sent out the official invitations for the Fourth International Meeting.

The Bernardines of Esquermes accepted our invitation and Mother Josephine-Mary, Prioress General agreed to take part in the meeting. As the French representative of the international committee, I received an invitation from the generalate of the Bernardines to speak about the meeting at Huerta, during their general chapter at Notre Dame de la Plaine on the outskirts of Lille.

Having been elected as the French speaking member of the international committee at Huerta, I accepted this invitation in the name of the committee.

This exchange between us will demonstrate the Bernardines' lively interest for the lay Cistercian movement. A lay group is in existence alongside the Bernardines: the *Groupe de Flandres*.

Mention must also be made of the help given by these sisters in the person of Sister Mary Philippa who was present for the whole meeting as French-English simultaneous translator

The Meeting

I arrived in Lille on Saturday 9th August at 1.00pm and was met by Soeur Marie-Josèphe, one of the three sisters who accompany the *Groupe de Flandres*, the others being Soeur Marie-Christiane and Soeur Marie-Simone. The first contact, simple, friendly, caring, made me feel very much at home. I was already feeling that interior peace, so necessary, but often not easy to come by in the ups and downs of everyday life. As soon as I arrived I was introduced to Sister Mary-Helen, the new Prioress General, an Englishwoman who had just been elected by her sisters for a mandate of six years.

I was able to make the most of this peaceful afternoon to learn more about the history of our Bernardine sisters, which I did not yet know. My limited experience, marked by the Trappist family left me somewhat surprised to learn that genuine Cistercians ran schools. And I discovered the history of these “*strong women on the Gospel*” as I dared to call them!

In 1799, they were able to come together again to continue their Cistercian life. In the wake of the tormented period after the French Revolution, under pressure from a priest, (with the connivance of his local ordinary) who wanted to make of them an apostolic Congregation and impose on them a rule of life different from the Rule of St Benedict, they lived their Cistercian life clandestinely. The teaching activity was required. Their incessant appeals to Rome for recognition as Cistercians were not heard until the middle of the 20th century.

This fidelity touched me profoundly; all the features of this independence which cost them so dearly marked my stay...and have pursued me ever since.

Foreseeing their expulsion at the start of the twentieth century, they made foundations in England, Belgium, and from there the Congo, Japan, Burkina Faso.

On Sunday morning after Mass celebrated in the lovely church which has been recently constructed, I was welcomed by the Capitulants. The other houses had sent elected members and there were about thirty sisters in all. A representative

of the Common Observance, Mère Hildegarde of Mariastern (Austria) was present. Dom Guillaume and Mère Inès of the Strict Observance had been present the day before; their contribution was greatly appreciated by the Chapter.

In front of such a gathering, and in the presence of a Cistercian spirit of such quality, I felt unafraid. My 'littleness' was in itself a help, strengthened by all I had received at Le Desert, at the heart of the International Committee, during my stay at Huerta.

So my presentation of the Lay Cistercian movement was the account of an experience, of my experience. Even if I had wanted to present a well-constructed account I didn't have the time since returning from Huerta, so I decided to speak without notes, truly to open my heart, to rely on my memory.

Mother Josephine-Mary, Soeur Marie-Josèphe and Sister Mary Philippa who had all been at Huerta were present.

Mother Josephine-Mary intervened to say to what extent she had witnessed among the Lay Associates at Huerta the desire to live authentically monastic values such as the praise of God, fraternal support, stability in commitment.

The sisters listened deeply; in all we spent an hour and a half together. One sister spoke of a veritable Pentecost; several stressed the action of the Holy Spirit, one spoke of a veritable plantation to bearing fruit in the world.

Sunday afternoon was the moment to meet the members of the Flanders Group, gathered in this holiday period with Soeur Marie Christiane. We read, or reread the Huerta documents, which afforded the opportunity to stress the independence of each Lay Community. It was an opportune moment to underline the complete absence of any authority on the part of the Steering Committee for the life of these communities and to share thoughts on the document "The Bonds of Charity which Unite Us" of the ad experimentum Association which had come

out of Huerta . The exchange was frank and free, not afraid to state views which are perfectly legitimate in their differences if they do not trouble the communion which unites us, and which is finally what is essential. I have to say I felt this communion and I was very happy with these discussions.

After Vespers, Soeur Marie-Simone and I carried on talking in a discussion which informed me even further about the beauty of the lives of these sisters.

The self-service evening meal gave an opportunity to talk further. I was able to meet the sisters from the Congo and Burkina. "Marvel" is not too strong a word to describe what I feel in the face of such courage and faith.

Monday morning: free time afforded the opportunity for fresh exchanges, particularly with Soeur Benedicte of St Bernard du Touvet and Soeur Marie-Josèphe.

The echoes I got were pretty well unanimous. The Lay Cistercian Movement is welcomed as a sign of the times, which it is up to us to learn to read, to respond to God's desire. I was overcome on hearing several times and richly expressed, "You laypeople you are referring us back to our own vocation! We want to live even better our Cistercian spirituality!" I see in that the extraordinary gift of friendship which is being offered to us all, one in which we do not know who is giving and who is receiving!

As I was taken back to the station by Soeur Cecile-Marie of the La Plaine community, I was able to enjoy further exchanges about our Cistercian links, before rejoining the TGV, and, beyond, everyday life.