

Aiguebelle - Friday morning

Presentation of Frédéric - Scourmont's proposal.

After a time of prayer to the Holy Spirit, Frédéric explains the journey of the Scourmont Fraternity. This journey was first of all with Dom Armand. Progressively, the laypeople felt that they were missing some 'roots' When the Abbot changed, Father Gérard took over and he perceived this lack. He made the laypeople rediscover the RB, the Charter of Charity, the founding texts...

The Charter of Charity is a juridical text but also the soul of Cistercian spirituality. It is a major document. How can we strengthen the link between us and between the different lay communities?

For years, the questions asked by the IALCC were painful because, for us, the essential was to live something strong and personal in the monastery. This work of answering questions disturbed us because we did not have the feeling of belonging to a community of communities.

It was the rediscovery of the Charter of Charity and the founding texts that gave us a link. The Charter of Charity is the soul of the relationships. The Fraternity is affected by the CLCs who lose this link. This document is a proposal.

The document that we are presenting today is appropriate for us. Perhaps it can inspire other lay communities. The Charter of Charity, as a founding text, establishes the links between the abbeys. In order for this document to help us as a 'tool', we have been thinking particularly about the principle of regular visits. By means of a visit we can create an image of who we are, at a given moment. By repeating this visit we will be able to see our evolution, our difficulties, our progress.

If we had already done this, we might have been able to anticipate some of the current difficulties or to help resolve some delicate situations.

The visit should provide a link and allow us to see the evolution of the Fraternity. If several CLCs make these visits and then meet again, it would allow us to get to know each other better and work together.

The word 'Rule' inspires us but not in the same way as for the monks. The term 'regular visit' does not exactly suit us. Not wanting to be noted or judged, we prefer to use the word 'charity'; therefore we prefer to adopt the expression 'Charity Visit'.

For Scourmont it is now a matter of implementing this project.

Comments for a time of questions and answers.

In such a 'Charity Visit' an external person, with a fresh perspective, should allow for discernment and evolution for each member as well as for the entire lay community. These visits require a great deal of trust and a certain maturity from the group. It is necessary that all be in agreement. They could be done with religious or lay people. It is important that they be neutral persons, with no emotional ties and without any intention of judgment.

The future of each monastic community questions us. What role and what place should we hold? When we are in difficulty we need from each other.

What is at stake is really charity. We must not legislate before experimenting. What do we need? What connects us? How can we continue to exist if our companions are less and less available?

The closure of Sainte Marie du Désert abbey took a long time. Monks and lay people walked the path side by side. There was a deep feeling of belonging to a family but as everything is still to be invented in such a situation, it is the feeling of abandonment that is strongly present.

The proposal of the 'Charity Visits' must allow for a snapshot of the lay community and not of the people as individuals. What is the lay community? What is visible about this community? The proposal of a visit can give answers and perhaps bring out a Cistercian vision of the communities in their particularities and as a whole.

Behind all these questions is what the monastic communities expect from us and how they perceive us. How can we mobilize the monastic communities on the subject of the lay people if they don't see the importance of them?

At present in Chambarand, the lay people cannot have a document of recognition from the new religious community. What is lived is rather a relationship of adults to adults in perseverance. How do we form ourselves and how do we verify that we are Cistercians? These questions are what we are looking for.

Frédéric became aware of the importance of the link between lay communities. Monique has experienced the rupture, the difficulties and the wound of human support that is missing. We are certainly on our way to maturity and a certain autonomy. Cistercian spirituality, we have it in our bodies and it is now a matter of considering our future.

The unity and charity among us is built in our French meetings. How are we inhabited by the Cistercian charism and how do we live it? How do we evolve and what ways are we going to find and give ourselves to support us?

We are asking ourselves fundamental questions but today, in Aiguebelle, we do not have a monastic representative to listen to what we are saying. The disengagement of the Prioress of Cabanoule obviously leads the lay people to take time to reflect.

To be concerned about the Charter of Charity is to take care of each other without leaving anyone on the side of the road. We are not here for nothing. Between calls and crisis we move forward praying to the Holy Spirit who is certainly working within us.

There will be changes in our structures, but first we must bear witness to a real experience. We ask ourselves the question of the lay people who have committed themselves and have received recognition from their monastic communities. What happens to them when these communities abandon them?

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Presentation by Pierre-Alban on the Visits that took place at La Grange St Bernard.

Two experiences of regular visits took place in 2016 and 2021. This is an actual experience.

La Grange St Bernard de Clairvaux was born in 1990 during celebration of the 9th centenary of the birth of St Bernard.

The initial question was: Does St. Bernard still have something to say to us today and can we live from his spirituality? A small lay community was formed and used a monastic barn as its local place. Over the years it became the owner of the place. The laypeople of this place were attached to Cîteaux.

The Charter of Charity is a way of life common to several monastic communities. It seals a pact of life between the communities. The founders of Cîteaux re-read the Rule, looking for ways to apply it as closely as possible. These are procedures for the unity of the Order:

- The General Chapter of the OCSO meets every three years on the same date and in the same place. The abbots meet for a community time.
- The regular visitation brings the abbot of the mother abbey to each monastery every year. The abbots visit the 'daughter abbeys

"The substance of the Spirit is synodality" says Pope Francis. This can be seen and verified in the functioning of Cîteaux.

The Visitation: After the meeting each member and a group meeting, a 'Visitation Card' is given. This gives an idea of the moral and spiritual dimensions at a given moment, gives tracks to remove obstacles and sets points of conversion.

We find common points between Cîteaux and La Grange which is really a community, living in its own place and linked to the monastery by a Charter of Alliance since 2007. The links that exist between Cîteaux and La Grange are links of community.

At La Grange two people are living on the place. The other members come regularly.

Having a place obliges people to work together and also commits to financing.

The project of the visit that took place in 2016 was born out of a necessity. At that time there were difficulties, a crisis between people. To get out of this dead end, we contacted Dom Olivier. He was the one who thought about a visit in the idea of the Regular Visits. He wanted the laypeople to find the solutions themselves and proposed Cistercian 'tools'.

The Visit was a real visit. Dom Olivier and Brother Bertrand came to La Grange to participate in lay community life for four days. For this totally experimental visit, each of the monks met with each member using a grid (tracks and themes to be addressed for the analysis of a community situation). Then Dom Olivier and Brother Bertrand worked for one day to establish a synthesis. They gave back a 'Visiting Card' with a diagnosis and conversion paths presented to all. The people visited committed themselves to work (The card = carta = charter which gives a commitment)

This visit allowed the laypeople to see differently, to go beyond themselves in order to discern more globally the interest of the community. Very quickly we thought that this Visit should take place a second time and not in a critical emergency situation.

Five years separated the two visits. This time Dom Olivier came alone for four days and used the same scheme (sharing of community life, exchanges, Visiting Card). This second visit allowed us to review the

different changes that have taken place. The community has also evolved and has become smaller (departures / deaths). There is therefore a heavier sharing of responsibilities. We had to reconsider our collective life. We had the desire to turn outwards but we needed resources to realize our projects.

To speak of "Visitation" requires a displacement, to take a distance because one cannot visit oneself. The closing of the monasteries raises the question of the place where community life develops. One cannot live alone and proclaim oneself a Cistercian. Cistercian life must be based on a shared work and an outside look is a great benefit.

Last February Denise and Pierre-Alban made a friendly visit to Chambarand for a few days of fraternal life, to bring another perspective and to give some ideas.

Could we, as a first step, develop a kind of friendly visit?

Comments from a question and answer session.

The fact that Dom Olivier proposes Cistercian tools to get through a crisis is very enlightening. We are not in judgment. We need maturity to move forward.

The recognition of La Grange is, with Cîteaux, a reciprocal, mutual recognition, sealed by a Charter of alliance.

We are facing a new generation of abbots who are not all aware of the history of the laypeople and their beginnings. We have to rewrite something new, find a way to continue and express the reality of our communities.

For lay people, what is the substance of community life?

Brother Georges, Prior of Aiguebelle, spoke to us about the new Abbot General of the OCSO who said that we should not be afraid to dream. Let us express our dreams and then we will see what is feasible or adaptable.