

A Brief Report on the Sixth Meeting of the International Association of Lay
Cistercian Communities

Martha Fessler Krieg

Why is there an international association?

About two decades ago, a new phenomenon spontaneously arose in many locations around the globe near Cistercian monasteries: groups of secular lay people began to meet at the monastery, attracted by the Cistercian charism. Not called to enter the monastery, the members of these groups sought formation in the charism in order to implement as much as possible in a lay life.

The groups sometimes sought a formal attachment to their local monastery, which posed a problem: unlike other orders, the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance had no provision for a third order, or secular branch, and the groups were developing their own ad hoc norms, formation, and requirements. There was no standard for what type of formation or commitment to a contemplative lifestyle would qualify a group to call itself “Cistercian associates.”

In order to develop an association that would provide a stable point of contact between lay associate groups and the Order, meetings of what is now known as the International Association of Lay Cistercian Communities (ILC) have been held at Quilvo (2000), Conyers (2002), Clairvaux (2005), Huerta (2008), Dubuque (2011), and Lourdes (2014). The procedure for a group to follow to become associated with a monastery was defined, as were other necessary organizational

matters. Dom Armand Veilleux serves as the liaison between the ILC and the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance.

In addition, the ILC provides a sort of guarantee: a group that is a member of the ILC is one whose formation and norms are recognized by a Cistercian monastery as meeting an established set of criteria for authentic transmission of the Cistercian charism. The converse is not true: some groups of lay people associated with a Cistercian monastery (or the abbeys they relate to) have chosen not to join ILC.

What was the purpose of the meeting in 2014?

The meetings of the ILC so far have been concerned with legislating the identity of lay Cistercians, and the purpose and scope of the Association.

Building on the documents agreed upon at Huerta in 2008 (“Lay Cistercian Identity”), and at Dubuque in 2011 (“The Bonds of Charity that Unite Us”, “Characteristics of Lay Cistercian Communities”, and “Statute on Membership in the International Association of Lay Cistercian Communities”), delegates to the 2014 meeting approved the final versions of two texts that were presented and revised during the assembly, “The Lay Cistercian Spiritual Journey” and “Statement on the Formation of Lay Cistercians.” The goal is to set standards, while allowing each group to evolve to meet local conditions, similar to the way Cistercian monasteries operate.

The documents approved at the meetings are available at <http://cistercianfamily.org/> under the header International Meetings in French,

Spanish, and English. The English text of the 2014 documents from the website, accessed on August 17, 2014, forms an appendix to this report.

How did the meeting operate?

Many of the member communities sent a delegate, an alternate delegate, and a monastic liaison, usually the monk or nun normally assigned by the monastery to interact with the group. Only the primary delegate votes, but all delegates and the liaisons may speak. Ideally, all communities would be represented, but the realities of finances and politics make that impossible. The input of the liaisons is most welcome and helpful in ensuring that the Cistercian charism accurately informs the ILC's decisions.

All delegates and monastic liaisons were housed at L'Assomption, a large guesthouse run by the Assumptionists in Lourdes. A working day began with optional vigils, followed at 7 a.m. by Lauds and Mass in the chapel, followed by breakfast. Sext, Vespers, and Compline were also normally prayed in the chapel, while Terce and None were sometimes prayed in the Hémicycle, an auditorium ideally suited to the requirements of the group in full assembly, as it had simultaneous translation booths and electronic projection capability. We had been warned that we would need to walk, and that the ground was not always level. In fact, it took about twenty minutes to descend from l'Assomption through our private, gated path down to the street, and then down the hills to the floodplain near the river. Fortunately, the days were almost invariably sunny.

The spiritual journey document initial draft was composed based on the replies of many member communities to a request for information on each community's spiritual journey. All representatives, alternates, and monastic liaisons received the original replies and the initial draft. The steering committee chose three of the replies to read aloud during one of the first general sessions. These were the reports of the Associates of the Iowa Cistercians (United States), Huerta (Spain), and Kopua (New Zealand). The formation document was a continuation of work begun three years earlier in Dubuque.

The typical format of a working day after the first introductory presentation on Saturday was the reading of the initial draft (sometimes called a martyr text, as it was not likely to emerge unscathed) in a plenary session in the hémicycle in all three working languages, followed by lunch at l'Assomption. The afternoons were then spent in separate rooms at l'Assomption by working language, hammering out the desired revisions. The next morning, delegates returned to the hémicycle and read all the revised versions, then turned those over to a committee to merge, and to translate the final version into consistent English, Spanish, and French texts, for voting the next day. The activity of the Spirit was noticeably evident: The English group took the martyr text of the spiritual journey document and completely reorganized it, as well as significantly rewriting the sentences, while keeping the general intent. The next morning, when the results of all the group sessions' work were read, the Spanish and the English revisions were very close to each other, though the French text remained close to the original.

The spiritual journey document that addressed the process of growth of the individual communities was split into a short document to be presented to the General Chapter of the OCSO, with the numerous details of individual group journeys to be revised later as a separate document and perhaps presented to the next meeting of the ILC for approval. The formation document addressed basic requirements for Cistercian formation.

Dom Pierre-André Burton of Ste. Marie du Désert, the host community, addressed the group, as did Dom Armand Veilleux.

Friday elections were held for the three members of the Coordinating Committee. Alberta (Tina) Parayre was reelected for the Spanish group, Teresa McMahon (elected in 2011 as Dennis Day's alternate) was elected in her own right for the English, and Pascal Sonzogni elected for the first time for the French. As each group proposed two candidates, the remaining candidate serves as alternate. The assembly agreed that the alternates should be kept informed of ongoing matters, the location of computer files, etc., in case an orderly transition is not possible. In addition, Dom Eamon Fitzgerald, Abbot General of the OCSO, joined us for lunch, the afternoon session (in an internationally borrowed habit, as his luggage had been lost), and the following dinner. During the afternoon, the abbot general was kind enough to speak to us.

Talks Given to the Assembly

Dom Pierre-André Burton studies the writings of Aelred of Rievaulx. He spoke to the delegates on the stages of the spiritual journey, noting that the journey

is a part of human growth, belonging to the field of anthropology; the search for God forms the spiritual portion. The early Cistercians observed this journey, and described it with the image of ascending, following Christ. We are now creating a common identity and consciousness, transmitting an experience, not just an academic study. Our formation/conformation is situated within a history with a communitarian dimension, traveling together. He noted that the synthesis of the spiritual journey of the groups was useful, but not a prescription for all. The presentation was a detailed analysis of the ways in which participation in a lay associate group helps each member to grow spiritually, while at the same time the group itself matures. There is a need to structure and organize each group, and also this association of groups. This maturation and mutual engagement in following the same charism will produce love, a just reciprocity, and unity of spirit. It is a transformative journey from being concerned only with one's self to being concerned with one's self and each other member of the community. We gradually learn to recognize others as similar to ourselves, meriting the same mercy we have learned that we need.

Dom Armand Veilleux said that the Cistercian charism belongs to the Church. Those who live the charism do not own it; they are its guardians. Since the twelfth century, it has taken different forms, until in the twentieth century a new form arose: "Lay Cistercians." Like many movements in the history of monasticism, there is no single founder. In 2008, the OCSO chose not to legislate or suppress these groups. Rather, the abbot general, Dom Bernardo Olivera, wrote that the Order recognized a new expression of the charism. It is important that the monasteries

give us the name of Cistercians because we *are* Cistercian. At Huerta, the decision to accept the lay group was made by the community, not just the abbot or abbess, which makes it harder to change the decision. If a monastery dies, the group should pass to another monastery, especially in countries where monasteries are not very far from each other.

Dom Eamon Fitzgerald noted that the statement on formation mirrors the Cistercian ideal of autonomy within a group of monasteries. The spiritual journey gets to the heart of living life, and more and more he has become aware that the heart of our life is about meeting Christ. When we do, we find that God loves us, which means we are lovable and acceptable, and this knowledge frees us to love one another. It is easy to get sidetracked; the Gospel is primary. We can be scholars of Christianity or the Cistercian charism and not live it. The biggest challenge is to love the people we live with; testing our own contribution to our environment we can ask ourselves do I leave people feeling better after I have been there? He reminded us that Pope Benedict brought an awareness of the importance of the theological virtues, for hope, a sense of God's mercy, leads us on.

Non-legislative activities

Good fellowship was an important part of the working relationships, as we had celebratory dinners both the first Saturday and the final Friday night, and communal meals in the dining room. Some representatives and liaisons had been at previous ILC meetings, and it was very nice to see each other again.

The first Saturday there was a Mass at the Grotto in Lourdes celebrated by the bishop of Tarbes and Lourdes, concelebrated by the priests among the monastic liaisons.

Tuesday we boarded two tour buses and headed from Lourdes to the Monastery of Ste. Marie du Désert, near Toulouse. In a land that saw the birth of the Cistercian order in the eleventh century, it was something of a surprise to find that this brick monastery dates from 1852, not much later than New Melleray (1849), though it sits beside a small pilgrim chapel built in the Middle Ages. Sainte Marie Desclassan was a woman whose male relatives all died in the Crusades; she withdrew to a hermitage in this isolated place in 1099. Although pilgrims still visit her church, the monastery is better known now in the wider Church for having been the home of Blessed Marie-Joseph Cassant in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. We had the opportunity to pray in the chapel dedicated to Blessed Marie-Joseph Cassant, as well as to descend to the crypt containing his sarcophagus. The pilgrim chapel contained an extensive exhibit of artifacts of Cistercian life during the time of the Blessed, including a monk's sleeping chamber and refectory setting, with completely original items, and some of the liturgical books brought from Aiguebelle at the foundation. As it was Blessed Marie-Joseph Cassant's feast day, we attended the Mass celebrated in the abbey church by the archbishop of Toulouse. The lay associates of Ste. Marie du Désert were in charge of running the meeting at Lourdes, so following Mass a remembrance of Blessed Marie-Joseph Cassant was presented to the primary delegate of each group. We continued the celebration with an elegant picnic buffet outside the enclosure.

Thursday evening those who wished had the opportunity to participate in the candlelight procession in Lourdes; the ILC was formally listed as the group for this day. We gathered with our candles, white tapers with the bottom end dipped in a layer of medium blue and the flame shielded by a paper windscreen printed in blue with the Salve Regina and other prayers in Latin, behind the palanquin of the Virgin until dusk, while the sick formed up on the bridge across the river. At the appropriate time, the bearers led out with the Virgin, singing prayers and hymns in many languages one after the other, and we held back while the sick, walking, on crutches, in wheelchairs, or in the blue Lourdes rickshaws accompanied by white-uniformed attendants followed. When the last of the sick had crossed the bridge, we joined the procession, looping around the curved end of the long plaza in front of the church, then back and forth, making a turn around the young men holding long poles with candles at the top, until we reached the point where the previous pilgrims had packed the chairs, the wheelchair/rickshaw positions and the first few rows of standing pilgrims. Further prayers and hymns followed, and those who wished could proceed to the grotto. Due to the crowds and the fact that we had had previous opportunities, most of us went straight back to l'Assomption.

What is coming in the future?

As the Association grows and matures, more areas that need definition and agreement will emerge. The Coordinating Committee is charged with developing the agenda and determining the location of the meeting in 2017.

One topic that was discussed at some length was the question of who should be permitted to attend the meetings. Dom Armand commented that some people have thought of the meeting as “a lay Cistercian happening” and wished they could attend. Some felt allowing others in would contribute to openness in the organization, and understanding of how the decisions were determined. On the opposing side, another delegate quoted the old saying that there are two things you never want to watch being made: law and sausages. Though the final ruling will be up to the organizers of the given meeting, the general feeling is that these ILC meetings are not primarily social in nature, but legislative. It is difficult to find at a reasonable price venues large enough to house the delegates and the meetings, with translation facilities. Adding people who are not participants would strain the resources. Additionally, the meetings are intense, and much of the ability to work smoothly comes from the time over meals, as there is very little recreational time built into the schedule. The presence of others at the meals and in the corridors, especially spouses, would dilute the ability of the delegates to focus on the task at hand.

Perhaps it will be appropriate to consider whether an international social gathering can occur, though it is clear that there are serious financial considerations. Many delegates could not afford to travel if they had to pay their own way, and most communities might not be able to afford to send someone more often than every three years, especially if their ILC participation is subsidized already. This could lead to an elitist situation where the wealthier groups or individuals became close friends, while others were left out.

The ILC meeting participation of groups from countries that are typically not fully able to support sending their own delegates and liaisons needs consideration as well, to avoid decisions made with insufficient input from those areas. Even groups from wealthier countries may find it difficult to raise the necessary funds, especially if the groups are small or consist largely of people on fixed incomes. These factors may also limit the amount such groups can donate toward subsidies.

A few personal observations

Talking with other delegates to the meeting, it became clear that the traditional expectation that a lay Cistercian group consists of people who live close enough to a willing monastery to meet there monthly is being stretched. In some cases, this has occurred because a monastery that formerly had a liaison capable of handling several groups has had to scale back, and one or more of the groups has affiliated with a monastery at some distance from the original. In the case of Conversi, the group was originally formed to address the needs of those who live too far from any Cistercian monastery to travel there monthly; indeed, there are Conversi members in Africa, Australia, and from coast to coast in Canada and the United States.

When the charism springs up far from a monastery, or when no local monastery has the capacity to be primarily responsible for the formation of a group, what happens? Conversi was founded with help from the Associates of the Iowa Cistercians, yet its members have considered themselves bound to New Melleray and Our Lady of the Mississippi, rather than to AIC. The ILC documents assert that in

order to be a member of the ILC, a group must be associated with a particular monastery. Should it be the case that lay associate groups may have “daughter houses” and that the connection between the first associate group and the second is sufficient to allow membership in ILC? If so, what criteria of maturity and ongoing existence would qualify a primary group to have a daughter house reporting to it rather than to the monastery? Would it be desirable for as many members as possible to meet at the primary group’s associated monastery annually?

One of the Spanish representatives asked what stability consists of when the group meets at the monastery only once a year. I can only answer from first-hand experience with *Conversi*. *Conversi* aims to be a community, with most of its interactions online. Members grow to know each other through the hour-long chats held to discuss the monthly formation talks, through the prayer requests posted on the website, and through the journal entries and comments made on them. Members receive their formation by listening to (or reading a transcript of) talks that in most cases were given by monks or nuns of the associated communities over the years to the Associates of the Iowa Cistercians, so we become acquainted with the life of the communities as well as the theory. During the annual retreat, those who are able to come experience the full monastic rhythm of the days, arriving by Vespers on Friday, and attending the Offices and Masses through Sunday morning – a total of forty-two hours on site. The elected *Conversi* Council consults with the monastic liaisons on knotty matters in the development of the community, and the liaisons attend at least part of the annual retreat, maintaining a two-way link. Discussions of

stability within Conversi have identified several ways in which stability can be considered in lay life:

1. Commitment to a single lay associate group, which by definition is allied with a given monastery (or for the Associates of the Iowa Cistercians and Conversi, one monastery of monks and one of nuns).

2. Stability within family relationships.

3. Stability of employment where possible.

4. Stability of practice, defined as regularity in prayer and attendance at community meetings (on line for Conversi, in person for other groups).

5. Stability in local church life, participating where possible within one parish or congregation.

All of these are somewhat counter-cultural. Commitment to a single lay associate community means members need to work to resolve differences, to grow in self-awareness and charity rather than to keep looking for the perfect associate group or monastery with no problems. The same tools are useful in family and work contexts. We have found that when we do meet, it is like a family reunion, where people already know each other well.

There is a certain amount of tension inherent in the relationship of a monastery and the lay associate group linked to it. The monastic community needs to preserve its enclosure, yet in order to help form the lay associate community, there must be contact with the living tradition beyond viewing robed figures in the choir. The monk or nun serving as liaison usually knows the members of the associate community, but other members of the monastic community may not.

When monastics feel they can allow the lay group to rely on previously recorded talks by the monks and nuns, it does reduce the burden on the monastic community—but it also deprives all but the liaison of contact with the associates. This may cause other monastics to feel detached from the associate community, though the associates have received their formation from the monastic community and feel connected to the community and its members.

Appendix: The Content of the Documents Approved

Statement on the Formation of Lay Cistercians

Introduction

We recognize the need for a common statement on the formation of Lay Cistercians that respects the autonomy of individual communities. This formation is necessary to build the Lay Cistercian identity as adopted at Huerta in 2008.

It is important to recognize the difference between formation and a formation program. True formation takes place through on-going conversion of life. Our openness to be formed, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is an expression of our desire to embody the Cistercian values. Within the framework of this statement, each community develops its own formation program.

Content of Formation

Among the basic elements that can foster our conformation to Christ through the Cistercian charism, we recognize the importance of the following resources:

- Lectio Divina
- The Rule of St. Benedict
- The Cistercian Patrimony
- The Divine Office (Liturgy of the Hours)

By incorporating these elements into our lives, we open ourselves to the transforming grace of the Spirit.

The content of a formation program will be adapted to the specific circumstances and needs of the individual community and its members. Every member needs a basic grounding in Christian faith. It is important to emphasize that formation is furthered within the lay community itself, by the mutual relationship with the monastic community that accompanies them, the example offered by that monastic community, and the co-responsibility of the two communities to be a living expression of the Cistercian charism.

One of the roles of the **International Association of Lay Cistercian Communities** is to encourage its member communities to share their own formation resources through encounters, exchanges, forums, websites and other means.

"For with you is the fountain of life; in your light do we see light." Psalm 35:10

The Lay Cistercian Spiritual Journey

1. The Beginning: the call

Christ calls us into a contemplative way of life lived in the light of the Cistercian charism, and into a relationship with a particular monastery. The principal aspects of the call can be summarized as follows:

- Awareness or deepening of an inner life
- Desire for a prayer-centered life
- Recognition of the intervention of the Holy Spirit
- Awakening of reciprocity with God

The awareness of the existence of an interior life takes a particular form: the discovery of our *capacitas Dei* (our capacity to be transformed into the likeness of God).

This call to the Cistercian way of life requires discernment. It is lived out in community with others who have received the same call to the Lay Cistercian journey.

2. **The Response: Seeking to embody *capacitas Dei***

This encounter with the Cistercian spirituality embodied in a particular monastic community, leads us to seek to integrate the Cistercian values into our daily lives.

3. **The central place of community, lay and monastic, as a means of spiritual growth**

Our response to the call of Christ leads us into a Lay Cistercian community where we are mutually enriched in relationship with each other and with the monastic community. The monastic community recognizes the presence of Cistercian values in the lay group and authorizes it to be called a "Lay Cistercian Community."

Walking with others brings richness, as the sharing and communion experienced are sources of support and joy. Community also creates constraints, requiring patience and listening, and could cause suffering. We recognize that community is an essential and indispensable element of our journey, a necessary means of spiritual growth. We must learn to love those who are called to the same community, sharing with each other with honesty and humility. Thus, we learn to see Christ in one another and to love as Christ has loved us.

This spirituality is not disembodied. It strives to meet the challenges of stability in spite of geographical distances and the difficulty of maintaining the spirit of community outside group meetings.

The difficulties are never considered only as obstacles, but are also a means of spiritual growth, which is made possible by grace and community support.

4. **Formation/Transformation: its importance for spiritual growth**

Formation within the Lay Cistercian community is a lifelong journey into the richness of the Cistercian charism. Formation must be both personal and communal.

It includes the following:

- The practice of lectio divina and prayer
- The Rule of Saint Benedict
- Knowledge of the treasure of Cistercian literature
- The Divine Office (Liturgy of the Hours)
- Self knowledge
- The importance of the Eucharist and other sacraments
- Spiritual accompaniment

The practice of both exterior and interior silence and listening is emphasized in living the Cistercian charism. The annual retreat is a means of reinforcing community and relationship with God.

5. **Life in Christ**

The Lay Cistercian's road is one particular way of living the universal journey of human beings into God. The presence of Christ is the heart of our journey: "He is the way, the truth, the life." It is necessarily a journey accompanied by others. It is the quest for the encounter with Christ who transcends us and abides in us. Our greatest hope is that the gift of discovering Christ in one another will be the path of holiness and joy for us. Our journey is inspired and nourished by the sisters and brothers in the Cistercian family; for this we will be eternally grateful.

After reflecting on our identity (Huerta 2008) and working on our formation (Dubuque 2011), we as Lay Cistercians sought to go to the heart and source of these two realities. We discovered an encounter with a Presence: Jesus Christ, the source and summit of our journey. Jesus calls us through our brothers and sisters to be witnesses of the Gospel in the

world, enlightened and supported by the Cistercian tradition as it is embodied in the nuns and monks who accompany us.

May Mary, Queen of Citeaux and model of obedience, show us the way to our full transformation into the image of her Son.