

Background information regarding the International Lay Cistercians – Dennis Day - 2008

There are some important things to know about the International Lay Cistercians. This is especially true as each of the Lay Cistercian Communities around the world begin the task of reflecting on who a Lay Cistercian is, what a Lay Cistercian Community is, and what is the relationship of both to the local Cistercian monastery.

First of all, the International Lay Cistercians is not an organization, nor is it even a federation of Lay Cistercian Communities. It is an ad hoc meeting of Lay Cistercian Communities from around the world. These meetings are planned and coordinated by a Steering Committee (to which I was elected in 2005); however, the Steering Committee has not power or authority over any of the Lay Cistercian Communities in the world. The Steering Committee exists to plan international meetings and to act as a point of contact between the Order (OCSO) and the Lay Communities as a whole.

The Lay Communities began meeting internationally in 2000 in Quito, Ecuador. At that first meeting, only a very few Lay Communities were represented. At the end of the meeting, most of which was spent getting to know one another, a letter was drafted to be sent to the General Chapter of the OCSO. This letter recognized certain elements that the Lay Cistercian Communities held in common, and suggested that the time might be right for beginning some communication between these Communities and the Order itself. The letter asked for, and soon received, a blessing on this endeavor.

The next meeting of the Lay Cistercian Communities was held at Holy Spirit Abbey in Conyers, Georgia, in 2002. At this meeting there were 26 Communities represented. Once again much of the meeting was spent getting to know one another. And once again a letter was drafted to be delivered to the General Chapter of the OCSO. This letter also listed some elements held in common by the Lay Communities, and asked for, and soon received, a word of encouragement.

The third meeting of the Lay Cistercian Communities was held at Clairvaux in France in 2005, and there were thirty-four communities represented. The purpose of this rather loosely structured meeting was to elect a new Steering Committee, and to charge the Steering Committee to send a letter to the General Chapter of the OCSO asking it to appoint an Abbot or Abbess as an official liaison between the Lay Cistercian Communities and the Order. This letter was delivered to the General Chapter and, as a result, Dom Armand Veilleux, Abbot of Scourmont in Belgium, was appointed.

And now the fourth international meeting of Lay Cistercian Communities is being planned. It will be held at Santa Maria de Huerta Abbey in Spain in 2008. The Steering Committee would like to make this meeting more substantive than those in the past, and hopes that most, if not all, of the fifty-four existing Lay Communities will be in attendance. The purpose of this meeting will be to draft a document for the monks and nuns of the Order that addresses three exercises:

- Reflect and write a description of what it means for individuals within your Lay Community to live their Cistercian vocation in the world. Do not simply list practices (such as lectio, attending Mass, meditation, the rosary, etc,) and values (such as humility, obedience, patience, silence, etc.) but rather describe why these practices and values are important. Is it possible to live a Cistercian lifestyle in the world?
- Similarly, reflect and write a description of what it means for your members to live their Cistercian vocation together in community. What aspects of community are most important and what contributes most to a sense of one's Cistercian vocation—both when you are together and when you are apart?
- Lastly, reflect and write a description of what it means to be in a spiritual relationship with a Cistercian monastery. What are the characteristics of this relationship—individually and as a group? What works well and what does not work so well?

Each Lay Cistercian Community is asked to reflect deeply on these three exercises, and to write their own document reflecting on these issues. These will all be sent to the Steering Committee by September 2007, and each language group (English, French and Spanish) will prepare a synthesis for discussion at the 2008 meeting at Huerta. Out of the meeting at Huerta will come one single document that will be delivered to the General Chapter of the OCSO when it meets later that year in Assisi.

The Associates of the Iowa Cistercians and the Conversi are both being asked to participate in this exercise, and to prepare and submit their documents by September 2007. Rick Brown and Connie May are coordinating the AIC response, and Linda Harrington is coordinating the Conversi response.

Lastly, each of the Lay Communities, the AIC and Conversi, are asked to send one or two representatives, along with a monastic representative from their monastery, to the meeting at Huerta. Those who attend will either have to be supported by their Lay Community or pay their own way. Because Communities from western countries tend to be much more affluent than their brothers and sisters in Africa and South America, we are also asking those Communities that can afford to do so to underwrite a scholarship for a representative from other Lay Communities to attend the meeting.