

The Participation of Lay Faithful in the Cistercian Family by Dom Armand Veilleux - 1998

In 1098 a group of monks following the Benedictine Rule left their monastery called Molesme, to continue their monastic life in a more radical form and with a renovated spirit. The new monastery was called Cîteaux. After a slow beginning, it attracted many vocations, and gave birth to several new monasteries following the same way of life. All these monasteries were linked by a bond of Charity and formed a distinct monastic "Order" within the larger Benedictine family. (I stress the word "within", because it would be a mistake to consider the foundation of Cîteaux as a split from the Benedictine family. Even nowadays, there is a large Benedictine family which comprises not only the monasteries belonging to the various Congregations that are regrouped in the "Benedictine Confederation", but also all the monasteries that follow the Rule of Benedict, including the Cistercian monasteries).

Throughout the centuries, the Cistercian monasteries, more and more numerous and belonging to various countries separated by long distances and cultural differences, united themselves in various Congregations that also gave birth to various Observances. At the end of a long and complex process, since 1892 the main trunk of the great Cistercian family is divided in two branches: the so-called "Common Observance", which now uses the Latin name of *Ordo cisterciensis* and the so-called "Strict Observance", which now uses the Latin name of *Ordo cisterciensis strictioris observantiae*. Various groups of nuns who were placed under the authority of local bishops or who were separated from the Order a few centuries ago, but returned to their Cistercian roots, now form autonomous Orders or Congregations, like the Bernardine Nuns of Esquermes and the Sisters of Las Huelgas in Spain (called the Congregation of Saint Bernard in Spain). If we add to this some Congregations, like the Bernardines of Oudenaarde, and a few individual houses, which never belonged to any of the mentioned Cistercian Orders, but were always spiritually affiliated with one of them, we have what we have been calling for a few years the Cistercian family.

Now, when we organized a meeting—or synaxis—of all the representatives of that Cistercian family, at Cîteaux, in 1998, on the occasion of the 9th centenary of the foundation of Cîteaux, we had also with us some representatives of what we called the "Cistercian laity". The 1996 General Chapter of the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance had mentioned in a vote that they should be involved in that celebration, and they were even mentioned in the letter that the Pope wrote to the Cistercian Family on that occasion.

First of all, it was symptomatic that the Pope did not write to any of the Cistercian Orders or Congregations in particular but to the "Cistercian family", thus acknowledging the whole movement of communion that has led us to a renewed awareness of the existence of such a "family", in spite of the differences in our lifestyles and of our juridical diversity. Then it is very interesting to see what the Pope says about the lay Cistercians and in what context.

The larger context is the rediscovered role of the laity in the life of the Church since Vatican II. During a long period of the History of the Church, the spirituality was developed mostly by the Religious and

for the Religious and almost all the ministries in the Church were clerical ministries. Following up on the insights of Vatican II, the 1987 Synod on the "The Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Church and in the World" stressed not only the spirituality of the laity and its role in the mission of the Church, but also the right of lay people to gather into communities of lay people following various spiritual orientations.

What we have seen since then, and even before then, was not so much the development of communities composed only of lay people, but communities or movements composed of Christians of all walks of life, either lay or clerics, married or celibates, united around a same spirituality of a same mission. What we have also seen, was that many lay people found their spiritual support or even spiritual identity in the charism of existing religious communities either active or contemplative. There was a period when many people, mostly young people, wanted to share, at least for a few years, in the mission of a religious community, especially in Young Churches. But gradually lay people wanted to share not only in the mission of a community but also in its spirituality and, to some extent, in its life. This is the larger context in which we have to understand the short mention made by the Pope of the lay faithful in his letter to the Cistercian Family.

The more immediate context is the Cistercian one. The early Cistercian communities, like all the monastic communities of the time, had a "familia", that is a small group of hired workers, distinct from the lay brothers, who were integrated into the community life. Our monasteries have also always had "oblates", that is persons living in the community and sharing fully the life of the community without making vows, for one reason or another. But we did not have traditionally "external oblates". Almost all monasteries however always had a few persons spiritually linked with the community in a non juridical but very real manner, either living in the guest house or near the monastery, as a "family brother" or a "family sister".

More recently, that is during the last few decades, more and more often individual lay people or groups of lay people have asked to become "oblates" or to be associated with our Order or with one of our communities. This is rapidly developing, and in various ways, and this is where we are now.

A first thing must be stressed. Our Order is a "community of communities". One never joins the Order as such. One always become a member of the Order by joining a local community. The Cistercian Order has a specifically cenobitic orientation. Therefore, the Cistercian vocation is never the vocation to a so-called "Cistercian spirit" it is the vocation to a local community or to the Cistercian spirit as it is embodied in the life of a local community.

Therefore the only way one can become a "lay Cistercian" is not by some kind of juridical bond with the Cistercian Order; it is by establishing a personal bond of communion with a concrete local Cistercian community, either of monks or of nuns.

There are basically two way of doing this. An individual may develop with a community a personal relationship. He/she may find a spiritual support in the fact of praying with the community, or participating in the Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours. He/she may receive from one of the sisters

or one of the brothers the service of spiritual guidance or accompaniment. This has always existed, although it may be more frequent nowadays, and I don't see that it needs to be structured in any way.

When people express the desire of something new in this area, what I have always suggested, personally, is to form, around a monastic community a community of lay people having its own identity and its own life. I firmly believe that this is the best way of discovering gradually new ways of incarnating the Cistercian spirit in the daily existence of normal lay people. It is also the best way of avoiding the danger for lay people of playing the monk or playing the nun in the world.

A charism does not belong to any person or any group in particular. It belongs to the Church, that is, the people of God. Those who live according to that charism at a specific moment in history, are the stewards of that charism. The Cistercian monks and nuns of today do not own the Cistercian charism; they are its stewards. I firmly believe, from what I have observed over the past decades, that the Holy Spirit wants to give a new expression of that charism in our days, in the life of lay people. Only lay people who receive that charism from a monastic community and develop it within a lay community can gradually find out, in their concrete experience, what "the Spirit is saying to the Church" in that regard.

That requires both an autonomous life of the lay community and a constant communion and dialogue with the monastic community.

The dialogue with the monastic community can be done in various ways. Apart from the sharing in prayer and in liturgical celebration, and maybe the sharing in some type of work or apostolate, mostly in the guest house, it can be a dialogue with the abbot or with a few monks appointed by him, or even with the whole community in some occasions.

The discernment within the lay community itself must be an ongoing discernment—a constant listening to the Spirit. You should not ask the Order to tell you what you should be. You must find it for yourself. At present groups of "lay Cistercians" associated with various communities, have developed in many different ways. I consider that diversity as something very positive. Each group, while keeping its own identity should remain open to change and growth, and learn from the others. I think it is too early to try create common patterns. If common patterns are needed, they will develop on their own. One important difference between groups in the USA is that some groups accept non-Catholics in their membership, other don't. The two options seem to me legitimate. Just as there are a few Lutheran Cistercian communities in the large Cistercian family, and just as there are a few or our Cistercian monastic communities who have or have had one or another non-Catholic in their midst, there might be something positive in our time of ecumenism in having non-Catholics belong to a lay Cistercian community. But that, of course, should not become a norm. That example shows that this is not the time to establish common rules; it is the time to establish communion between communities that respect each other differences.

Concerning the size of the group, I don't think that it should be a problem. Of course, you don't handle a group of 60 or more the way you handle a group of 10 or 12. There might be some point in having sub-groups within the larger community, for example on a geographical basis; but I can hardly see the point of dividing the group into two distinct and autonomous communities, since part of your identity is related to the same monastic community.

I have stressed what seems to me the challenge of you, lay people who feel called to live the Cistercian charism out in the world. Maybe we could now, for a moment, see also what the Pope gave as a challenge to our Cistercian monastic communities.

After a few paragraphs on our Cistercian patrimony, the Pope mentions the renewed interest in that patrimony in today's world. He mentions the importance of hospitality, saying: "For many people essential spiritual questions can be expressed and deepened thanks to the hospitality which they receive in monasteries". By hospitality, he certainly means the one that is given to people who come to the guesthouse either for a retreat or for a meeting with a spiritual guide. But he also means what he mentions immediately after this, about the "associate members" and the temporary sharing in community life" (quoting *Vita consecrata*, 56): "I encourage you according to your circumstances to discern with prudence and a prophetic sense, the participation of lay faithful in your spiritual family, under the form of "'associate members' or following the present needs in certain cultural contexts, under the form of a temporary sharing in community life", and a commitment to contemplation, provided that the special identity of your monastic life is not impaired.

So, the Pope reminds the monks that, whatever they do, they should not lose their identity as monks, but he invites them to open themselves to a greater hospitality. He mentions two special forms of that hospitality: the sharing in community life (what has been called "temporary monasticism") and the "associates", stressing that in both cases a commitment to contemplation is implied.

So, we all have our homework laid out in front of us. For us, monks, there is the call not only to remain open to hospitality, but also to open ourselves to new forms of hospitality, including the sharing of our charism with associate members and for you, the associate members, the challenge gradually to give a shape to the new Cistercian expression of the Cistercian charism that you represent.