

A Letter to the Associates of Assumption Abbey

Sunday, November 17, 2002

Dear Associates of Assumption Abbey,

By now I hope you all have seen the letter "To the Groups of Lay Cistercians" drafted by the Members of the MGM of the OCSO meeting in Rome in September. As Abbot of Assumption Abbey, I want you to know that I fully endorse all that the letter says and implies.

In fact, it says and implies a great deal. Hopefully, each of you will recognize yourself in the letter. By reading and praying over the letter, and by talking to one another about it, a clearer understanding will emerge of where your attraction to the Cistercian charism comes from and where it might be leading you, both as individuals and as local and international networks of fellow Cistercian friends.

It is useful to read the letter in the context of the entire Mixed General Meeting (General Chapters).

In the first place, the reality of "Lay Cistercians" as part of the Cistercian Family was simply taken as given at the Meeting. You were there throughout the Chapter. You were there in the persons of your representatives Paco and Malika Ambrosetti. You were also there in various interventions of Abbots and Abbesses from around the world, including my own. These latter testified to the dedication, the sincerity, the creative independence, and, yes, the timeliness of the groups of Lay Cistercians connected to their Abbeys.

Second, the phenomenon of the Lay Cistercians was one of several phenomena that dominated the Chapters.

—One of these was, to use the buzzword of the Chapter, the reality of "precarious or diminished communities" of monks and nuns, especially in North America and Northern Europe.

—Another was the fact of monks and nuns leaving their vocations very shortly after making solemn profession. This raised the questions of vocational recruitment and of formation.

—Still another theme running through the Chapter was the realization that, as the summary document of the Chapter said, "our charism is life-giving not so much in the continuance of life within a particular community, but rather in other...forms of ecclesial

life." "We experience an openness to the new, even though we do not exactly know yet what that" will be" (*Vision of the Order, 2002.*)

Finally, the letter to Lay Cistercians was one of several significant documents presented at and issuing from the Chapters. Others were the Letter to Young Solemnly Professed, the Abbot General's conferences on "precariousness" and on formation, and the final document, *Vision of the Order, 2002.*

It was not hard to begin to see the connections among the various themes of the Chapter and to wonder about their implications: precariousness, young monastics leaving, the Lay Associates, openness to new forms of the Cistercian charism.

For what it might be worth to you, I would like to highlight parts of the letter To the Groups of Lay Cistercians that struck me as important for the Cistercian Family at this moment in its history, and for Assumption Abbey and the Associates of Assumption Abbey in particular.

First, you are addressed as dear "brothers and sisters." This is not a mere formality. These are family words. They say unmistakably that you really belong to what John Paul II called "the Cistercian Family."

Next, the letter immediately invokes the primary and unshakeable foundation of the communion between lay (you) and consecrated (vowed) Cistercians. True communion is not grounded in the first place on "the Cistercian patrimony," but on **our common Baptism** into Christ and into the Church.

Many of us, especially the older "cradle Catholics," are used to thinking of the Church as a pyramid. In this model, "vocations" or states of life within the Church were ordered in a hierarchy. On the top were the priests and bishops, on the bottom were the lay folk, and in the middle were the monks and other vowed religious.

But that model changed in the middle of the last century. Then, the Second Vatican Council took place. The Council received and articulated in profound and far-reaching ways a new way of being Church that had been coming to birth in the preceding half-century. The model of Church that Vatican II has bequeathed to us is not a hierarchical order, but one of *communion and mission*.

This fresh model is based on the fact that all Christians - "Christ-believers" - possess, **by virtue of their baptism**, a vocation to holiness, rights and duties, gifts and tasks, and an indispensable place in the communion and mission of the Church. (See John Paul II, *Christefideles Laici*, 55, quoted in Antonio Maria Sicari, **Ecclesial Movements: a New Framework for Ancient Charisms, Communio** Summer, 2002, 286-308,

289. I draw greatly on Sicari's article who has given theological expression to my own ruminations.)

In this fresh model there are still different vocations and states of life in the Church. There are still, obviously, lay people, consecrated people (religious), and clerics (priests). But these are not distinct from one another in a hierarchical way; they are rather "ordered to one another" for mutual, complementary service. The different states in life are inter-dependent. All the vocations and states of life have their own specific contribution to make, their own distinctive gift. But all are in service of the single mission of the Church, a vocation **that derives directly from their common Baptism.**

The Letter goes on, in the third and fourth paragraphs, to talk about the Cistercian charism. The Chapter Mothers and Fathers ask, "how far does the openness of the Cistercian charism go," and then openly acknowledge that one and the same charism unites us, lived one way by you in the world and another by us in the monastery.

This means that, just as **before** "we" in the Abbey are religious, and "you" in the secular world are lay, we are in the first place **baptized Christ-believers**, similarly, before you are lay Cistercians and we are consecrated Cistercians, we are both recipients of the same **Cistercian grace** that lies, so to speak, where the trunk of the Church digs into the ground.

The Cistercian charism, given to the Church by the Spirit, has somehow marked each of us with a certain charismatic identity. It has made us both fall in love with the same "Cistercian Christ" (*Vision of the Order*, 2002, 3) and gathered us into the same "spiritual homeland," the Cistercian Family. This, after our baptism, is our primary and common identity. Only later - logically, if not chronologically - can this identity be specified according to the different states in life, lay for you, consecrated for those of us in the monastery.

In the words of the Letter to the Groups of Lay Cistercians, you, the Associates of Assumption Abbey, are "authentic witnesses of the Cistercian vocation fully engaged in the world." This is the work of the Spirit. Both of us, you lay members and we in the monastery, are convinced and fascinated by one and the same original Cistercian charism.

I write to you now with the memory of the visit of several of you to the Abbey this past August still very much alive. I have already told some of you how much it meant to me to meet with you then. You were here both to be with one another and to celebrate at "home base" the patronal feast of the Abbey. Your wanting to be here and your actually making the effort to realize that desire spoke more than mere words could of the

significance this place and this small community of consecrated Cistercian holds in your affection and in your unique spiritual journey as lay Cistercians.

Our meeting in August, I said, meant a lot to me. I have met with the Associates on other occasions. I have attended your meetings in St Louis and enjoyed meals with you. You were kind enough to invite me to give some input during a day of recollection you organized and carried off at Florissant.

Yet the meeting here last August was a turning point. I experienced in a new way that you are really serious about being lay Cistercians. I saw that you really are a part of Assumption Abbey. I saw that I, as abbot of the Abbey, have a role to play in the Associates of Assumption Abbey, just as the Associates of a role to play vis-à-vis the Abbey. At that meeting I knew that I wanted to be more involved in the life of the Associates.

Do not misunderstand me. By "involved" I do not mean "directive." Much less do I mean "interfering." Rather, I merely want to be at your service. I know that at this moment in your history you are still trying to discern and understand how, concretely and in practical ways, you will live your Cistercian vocation. For our part, we consecrated monks of Assumption Abbey are challenged more deeply than ever to do you the service, in ways compatible with our vocation, of placing at your disposal the whole wealth of our monastic-contemplative experience with the Cistercian charism. Furthermore, we hope in our own homely way to give you, the lay Cistercians, an example of radicality and holiness along the Cistercian way.

Not long after our meeting in mid-August I met with the Monastic Council. This is the small group of brothers constituted to advise the abbot on various matters he might bring to them. At this particular meeting, I raised the question of the future of the Abbey. The question was framed in terms of the age and numbers of the present community, and in view of the 50-year history of vocations to the Abbey of the classical type.

By vocations of the classical type, I meant relatively young, single, Roman Catholic males who pass through the formation process established for religious institutes and who eventually become solemnly consecrated monks, publicly professing to live the rest of their lives in this monastery, under a Rule and an abbot. As a matter of fact, all of the monks at Ava are examples, and good ones, of this classical model of vocations.

But, as I pointed out to the Council, all of the monks of the Abbey at the present time passed through this "classical process" in some monastery other than Assumption Abbey. They came here already "finished." In its more than 50-year history no such classical vocation has begun and persevered here at Ava.

We pray for "an increase in vocations," I told the Council, and it is this classical model of vocation we have in mind and hope for. When they are not forthcoming, we either pray harder, or begin to lose hope, or blame the culture we live in, or blame Vatican II, the novice director, and the abbot.

But, I went on to point out, while we don't have much luck with the classical model, there is nevertheless something going on. There are enthusiastic and eager people "in love with the Cistercian Christ," and these are the Lay Cistercians, the Associates of Assumption Abbey. Who's to say that you are not the answer to our prayers?

In fact, I believe you are an answer to our prayers. As one person said, "the truth is that there is no crisis of vocations, if by vocations we mean a response to the charismatic call of the Spirit." (Antonio Maria Sicari, 296)

For that reason alone I feel compelled to encourage you to explore all the more creatively just what sort of Cistercian vocation yours is. What does the Cistercian grace look like incarnated in single and married laymen and -women, and even youths, engaged responsibly "in the world?" What does a layperson look like who is in love with Christ in the specifically Cistercian form of romance? As you explore, I offer my personal assistance insofar as you would find that helpful.

As for "vocations of the classical type," consecrated Cistercian monks and nuns, I have no doubt that these will come. But now I have a new image of their origin. I can imagine them being fostered by and generated from within the ranks of the Associates and the other Lay Cistercians throughout the world, the lay vocation being the seedbed of the consecrated Cistercian!

As we approach the end of the Liturgical Year and prepare to enter Advent, my hope for all of us is that we will allow the Spirit to prepare our hearts to hear the Word of God, to receive it with joy, and to let it once more become Incarnate in our personal and communal conversion.

In God's Love,
Fr Mark, Abbot

Assumption Abbey