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Chicago, Illinois
July 2, 2008

Dear LCG Friends in Christ,

Thank you for the exceptional privilege to be one of your two LCG representatives at the 4th Encounter of International Lay Cistercians, May 31 to June 7, 2008, at Huerta, Spain. Reflect that the Cistercian laity has been rather closely related to some monasteries for, at most 20 years. Over 100 lay representatives from five continents and nineteen countries unanimously affirmed their sense of lay commitment to their local monastery and to the wider Cistercian charism. More, they unanimously requested that the Cistercian Orders “recognize” these expressions of lay involvement.

The meeting affirmed a sense that involvement of lay Cistercians is a new expression of the Cistercian charism, an expression of the Holy Spirit moving among us, and that the Cistercian Orders, as stewards of the charism, may well affirm the presence of lay Cistercians as a part of the wider Cistercian charism.

What can the laity offer the Cistercian Orders with lineage dating over 900 years? And how might the laity maintain continued nourishment from the Orders? Such interrelationships are being encouraged and reformed—we are clearly a “work in progress.” Such was the nature of the 4th Encounter.

DOWN TO BUSINESS

Delegates focused on three items of business and approved three papers to affirm our deliberations which can be found at the following website: <http://www.cistercianfamily.org/#>. Please look at the “coordinating committee” section for a complete exposition of the Encounter.

I direct your attention to:

1. Statement of Lay Cistercian Identity;
2. “Bonds of Charity that Unite Us” to recognize and create an International Association of Lay Cistercian Communities, which will function *ad experimentum* until the next International Encounter, in three years; and
3. Votum: a request for recognition by the Cistercian Orders at General Chapter meeting in September, 2008.

Some background: three years ago in France lay Cistercians met and elected a steering committee to plan for the Huerta meeting three years hence. No specific agenda or direction: plan to meet in three years. Committee members, one from each of three language groups: Spanish, French and English met with OCSO-appointed liaison Dom Armand Veilleux and in September 2006, requested all local lay Cistercian communities prepare a document expressing its perception and practice of their Cistercian vocation (their Cistercian “identity” as it were.) Thus began a lengthy process in which many of you were involved, superbly led here at Gethsemani by Mike Johnson to prepare our LCG response. An amalgam of our response with others in the English-speaking community was prepared and offered for wider consideration with the result of similar community efforts in the French and Spanish language communities. The steering committee offered for delegate consideration a synthesis of the language group identity documents for consideration by Huerta delegates.

IDENTITY: What is it that unites us as lay Cistercians? How do we apply the Cistercian charism in our daily lives? This inquiry of self-identity uncovered the many areas of agreement and unity among those at Huerta and, we sense, reflect a similar unity around the globe. We were challenged, as we considered the Identity document, to consider it a “snapshot” of our current

effort: again, not that things will not and could not change, but we approved the Identity document as an expression of our agreed sense of identity as lay Cistercians. Of course, some disagreement arose as to this or that term, this or that phrasing, what was not included as well as what was included. Over all, however, delegates unanimously approved the paper as our expression of Lay Cistercian Identity.

BONDS OF CHARITY: deftly creates a temporary Steering Committee to interact with Orders and Lay communities through the proposed 5th Encounter, with request to propose some plan of organization and governance to be considered at that Encounter. Delegates voted to retain the current steering committee which did a magnificent job to coordinate and guide the organization through a definitional stage of growth and to encourage continued expression and development of lay involvement in the Cistercian charism.

This paper is a formative document from which may arise a permanent institutional identity: we ask the basic question: “How to run an international movement?” The steering committee elected in 2005 was given no guidance but to plan for a meeting three years hence; operational and substantive questions were not raised or answered such as to whom was it responsible? What were its rules and procedures? Well—such may well be the Holy Spirit working because we all considered the committee effort well done.

Tasks were defined for the next Encounter when consideration is given to our basic organizational elements. Thus, we may consider: who are members; powers and responsibilities of the organization; voting rights; financial considerations; effect on local and regional bodies. Most delegates conclude there must be some permanent representation of Lay Cistercians to effectively interact with the Orders and offer service and guidance to member organizations.

VOTUM: delegates, seeking a closer and more formal relationship with the Cistercian Orders requested “recognition” at the forthcoming General Chapter meetings. Our challenge, as we grow, to better affirm and understand the import of “recognition.”

MEETING CULTURE

Over one hundred representatives from nearly forty lay communities often functioned in one of three language groups—French, Spanish and English (though, English included Holland and others; and similarly French included Cameroon and others; likewise, Spanish included Mexico and others.) Preliminary consideration of basic documents was done in the language groups with synthesis compilations discussed, modified and voted at plenary sessions.

Delegates were able and affable. A warm spirit of common venture pervaded the Encounter. It is comforting to know we have colleagues throughout the United States and around the world “bending” toward the Cistercian charism.

At plenary sessions, simultaneous translation was provided (we each had earphones) and we read from papers earlier translated into the various languages. The process of creating a final document was, of course, burdened by language differences: inapt phrases, idioms and some words that could not be translated—whereat another word, more easily translatable, was used. Microphones were offered for those speaking: we were frequently reminded: speak slowly, in brief phrases, to allow, for simultaneous, translation.

Not lost amid the constant chatter and discussion (ironically for an organization given to the blessedness of silence, contemplation and prayer) were the daily hours. Mike Johnson and I began our day at Vigils, continued at the other hours and Mass, ending at Compline. Challenge to me: I don't know Spanish. Our hosts thoughtfully had prepared booklets for many of the offices so I could better “read” along in Spanish (and, attained some comfort in ‘speaking and singing’ the Spanish *sotto voce*.)

Huerta (really Santa Maria de Huerta) is a small town of about 400 people some two hours drive northeast of Madrid with only one or two “main” streets which extend, at most, for four blocks.

But with a magnificent monastery and church! The church apse is like no other Cistercian apse—baroque-filled with life size sculpture of angels, saints, cherubs, many gold-leafed (I almost needed sun glasses for all the glow and glitter.) Spain has endured many regimes, religious zealotry and persecution, exceeding wealth and poverty. Now the monastery buildings are state-owned (and undergoing renovation as tourist destinations) with monks residing and worshipping within.

Sightseeing: our hosts arranged for a Thursday trip to either Toledo or Avila. Opting for the latter (one of my favorite Saints) a bus took us door to door where we walked the walled city (thick, thick, thick doors, high walls, again thick, thick, thick.) And numerous churches and chapels. We prayed where Theresa of Avila prayed, walked where she walked and stood in awe at her birthplace. What an effective person! Again, well-organized and event-filled. Other than travel to Avila we were kept close to our work: hosts picked us up at the Madrid airport and delivered us back there at the end of the Encounter. Sadly, no Prado.

We slept, dined and held meetings in a school dormitory some two blocks from the monastery. The local committee arranged for excellent meals, family style, with eight or ten at a table. Breakfast lunch and dinner our tables were adorned with: magnificent baguettes of bread and, at lunch and dinner two bottles of wine. Our hosts were so helpful and gracious!

Word of the week: SCRUTATOR. Think “scrutiny.” Referred to Dom Bernardo Olivera who, with utterly beautiful good cheer and humility, was entrusted to count the paper ballots for various votes.

Handyman of the week: our own Dom Elias Dietz. Stopping along the way from Rome to investiture at Gethsemani, with notable good cheer and humility he was selected to serve as moderator for the first several days of meeting. Later, “promoted” to pinch-hit for a departed simultaneous translator—note the importance of communication: translator trumps moderator. Ah, what grace and skills!!!

WHERE WE HAVE BEEN/WHERE WE ARE GOING

Sense of history: at several points we were reminded of Cistercian history. Dom Armand (be sure to read his paper *Lay Participation in the Cistercian Charism* at the above website) referred to the many monastic Orders founded at the time of Citeaux. Most have foundered. Why have Cistercians survived? He suggests we owe great debt to Stephen Harding who organized and institutionalized the Cistercians—giving stability and affording notable balance between demands of a unified Order with autonomy and devotion to the local community. Second, he reflected on OCSO in 1969 when a document without juridical authority was agreed entitled Declaration of Cistercian Life. This, he opines, is a basic text from which the Constitution and statutes followed. Like the Declaration he sees a parallel in the Identity document approved by Huerta delegates: an act of faith in our values.

Overall: again, honored and humbled to be one of your representatives; exceedingly thankful for your generous financial assistance which allowed Mike Johnson and I to attend; impressed by our international lay leadership—devotion, dedication and ability to organize; impressed with Dom Armand’s leadership (btw, he knows well many languages and sat before three computers, typing the various translation documents—English, French, Spanish;) Dom Bernardo, Abbot General, is one of the most humble leaders I have ever met—and alert: he suggested at plenary we needed a “primary” Identity document should translation difficulty arise at a later date—we opted to defer to the steering committee to settle on three co-equal documents.

For Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani: our composition is unique among lay groups. Our number (some 200) and geographical spread are unmatched. Yet, other groups (and here I speak primarily of US groups) share in questions of: how best to organize; who can be eligible for

membership; continuing program development; mentoring; how/if to involve more distant members; and relationship with the local monastery. Both Mike Johnson and I expressed at Huerta satisfaction with our current cordial relationship with Gethsemani Abbey; further we do not feel need for any change. Yet, should changes be desired either by the Abbey or LCG we trust the Holy Spirit will guide to a felicitous relationship. Some groups fear domination by the monastery, and, indeed, fear domination by the International Association of Lay Cistercian Communities. The unique bonds that exist at Gethsemani suggest continued affirmation and nourishment of the Cistercian charism in our lives.

Your servant,
Robert V. Johnson