

### **(Understanding of the Laybrothers' vocation in the Cistercian Order)**

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At the Kalamazoo conference of 1991 I gave a talk on the question of the Laybrothers. Several people asked me to publish it, but this is one of the several things I have written and never published because I never found the few hours necessary to do a final check of my text, and add all the footnotes.

I don't think this text deserves a publication, but I am willing to share it with those who might be interested in reading it, at this point in the history of the Order when the question is raised again. I dare to dedicate it to Brother Conrad Greenia of Mepkin, who also gave a talk at the same Kalamazoo meeting. Although we had rather different opinions on the topic, I had a very great esteem for him and his opinions, and I am convinced that, in his great fairness, he was able to appreciate my own opinions.

### **Introduction:**

The title of this essay requires a little explanation. It reproduces the title of a writing of Burchard, abbot of Bellevaux written at a time when the laybrothers were under a good deal of attack. It is, however, a subtle commentary of all the possible texts of the Scripture speaking of hair and beards rather than a serious study of the laybrothers' vocation. (The context of the "Apologia" is a little humoristic: it is addressed by the abbot of Bellevaux to the laybrothers of his daughter-house, Rosières, where the abbot had threatened the brothers with shaving off their beards if they did not get quiet!)

What I want to do is not to comment that writing but simply to study the evolution that took place over the centuries, in the understanding of the laybrothers' vocation, seeing this evolution against the larger context of the social and economic evolution of the society at large.

Monasticism is a transcultural phenomenon, in that sense that it is not bound to any particular culture and that it is found in practically all the great cultures of history. But even if monasticism is transcultural, it is always lived within the context a concrete culture, limited to a specific time and space. Therefore we should not be surprised to find out that most of the aspects of monastic life, even the most spiritual ones, are affected in their implementation by

the social, cultural and even economical context in which they are lived. This is true for the institution of the laybrothers, as it is true for any other monastic institution.

After the Decree of Unification, a document that suppressed the distinction between two categories in our communities in 1965, the status of laybrothers, if not altogether suppressed in the Order was almost certainly vowed to extinction. Few are talking about re-instituting the laybrothers as a distinct category, but a distinction has been made between the "laybrother vocation", and the "laybrother status", and many are concerned about preserving or re-instating the "laybrother vocation". This concern was explicitly expressed by Dom Ambrose Southey, our former Abbot General, in his last circular letter to the Order.

Personally I have tried hard, over the years, to understand what is meant by "lay-brother vocation", listening to various people who use that expression. And I have always been a little ill at ease with what I have heard. I joined the Order as a choir monk (and I would like to add, a choir monk who has always loved every form of manual work). and I have been a choir monk for several years -- or at least I am trying to become one. Now, everything that is usually mentioned as the characteristic of a laybrother vocation (like simplicity, humility, work) is -- I would certainly not dare to say what I live, but what I aspire to live and what I try to live. So, I decided to research how that vocation has been understood and lived in the Order through the centuries, reading the sources available and the various studies published on the question over the last few decades. It has become clear to me that the understanding of the vocation of the laybrother has changed a lot over the last nine centuries, and that the understanding has changed because the reality itself has changed. And the reality itself has changed because the socio-cultural situation has changed.

Therefore, what I intend to do in this presentation is to look at the evolution that has taken place in the understanding of the vocation of the laybrothers, and see how it can be explained, to a large extent, by the transformation of society at large. Brother Conrad has given us a presentation of the life of the laybrothers in the twelfth and the twentieth century. I will try to show how we passed from the first point to the second and what has happened in between. In order to understand that evolution, we will have to go back in history a little prior to Cîteaux, and maybe we can dare to make some projections concerning the next few decades and possibly even the next century.

Before Cîteaux:

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As we all know, the question of the origins of the laybrothers is not an easy one. Of course we should not be surprised by this. Teilhard de Chardin, speaking on a quite different subject, many years ago, reminded us that the origin of anything is not and cannot be the object of science. Science studies phenomena that are already in existence. These phenomena become the object of scientific research once they exist. The process through which they came to existence escapes scientific analysis. Something of that is certainly true of the institution of the laybrothers.

One thing is clear however, and very important; it is that the institution of laybrothers, under all its forms, was, in the beginning, part of a much larger phenomenon. At the end of the eleventh and the beginning of the twelfth century, every monastery, even the smallest and most simple had a rather complex network of relationships with society. First of all, no monastery could be founded without the donation of some property by some landowner, and without some source of income, which was either a complex set of dues that needed to be collected, or through the direct exploitation of the land, which was complicated by the fact that the property of the monastery often consisted of several parcels of land some of which could be rather distant from the monastery.

Just as with any other landowner, or noble person, a monastery had a familia, which was composed of lay persons who performed various duties either at the monastery or, more often, took care of the relationships of the community with the outside world. Kassius Hallinger (whom I had as history professor) and who wrote what was and remains probably the most authoritative article on the early days of the institution of the laybrothers ("Woher kommen die Laybrüder?" defends the position that the laybrothers owed their origin to the fact that some members of the familia were gradually integrated into the life of the community. This is true for the laybrothers or conversi that we find at Cluny and other Benedictine communities before Cîteaux. These were the conversi old-style, as Hallinger calls them, as distinct from the conversi new-style, that we find at Cîteaux and the Charterhouse, and also at Grandmont and in other new Orders of the 12th century.

In the 11th century, many texts speak of monaci conversi and of famuli conversi. In both cases conversi is an adjective. The monaci conversi are those who converted to monastic life at an adult age, as distinct from the oblatis, who had been offered to the monastery by their parents or who, in any case had entered as children or adolescents. The famuli conversi were members of the familia (serfs, hired workers), who were admitted to share the life of the monks in the monastery, and were more and more assimilated by the monks.

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At the beginning of the 12th century completely new types of conversi appear, with the new Orders. One type is found in Orders like Camaldoli, Vallombrosa, Hirsau. At Camaldoli, S. Romuald organized lay servants into some form of association after 1012. Peter Damian did it at Fonte Avellana in the middle of the same century; and John Gualbert did the same in Vallombrosa, giving them the name of conversi. In the German reform-congregation of Hirsau they acquire a still more precise religious status. Another type, that will have a glorious history is found at Cîteaux, and under a very similar form at the Charterhouse. Jacques Dubois has shown that we cannot say about them, as in Hallinger's schema, that they came from the familia. But we can assume that they would never have existed if the familia had not first existed, and if the older type of laybrothers had not existed.

Cistercian monasteries had, apart from the laybrothers, and before the institution of the laybrothers, a familia, mentioned in various Charters, composed of famuli and hired workers (mercenarii). From the evidence available so far it seems that the institution of the laybrothers came only around 1115, about twenty years after the foundation of Cîteaux, but it was from the very beginning an institution sui iuris, and not the gradual incorporation into the community of a few members of the familia, which continued to exist.

The early Cistercian laybrothers:

The main characteristic of the new type of conversi that we find at Cîteaux, is that they form a community. A very interesting and revealing writing, called *Dialogus inter cluniacensem et cisterciensem monachum*, written around 1180 by Iringus of Aldesbach, speaks very clearly of two communities in one monastery: *Nos modo habemus infra ambitum monasterii duo monasteria, unum scilicet fratrum laicorum et aliud clericorum*. It seems important to me to underline that fact, which I will try to analyze later on. In the Cistercian monastery of the 12th century, we don't find one community composed of two categories of members. We do find two communities, autonomous in many ways, living in deep communion and fraternity, under the authority of the same abbot. As we know a large number of the conversi lived most of the time in the granges, but some lived at the monastery itself, and those who lived in the granges normally returned to the monastery for Sunday liturgy. The architecture of the monastery reveals clearly that peculiarity of the Cistercian institution. In many ways the architecture is not different from that of a Benedictine community of the time; but when we examine it closely, we immediately see that there are in fact two monasteries in one. The brothers have their own quarters, and even have a special alley to go directly from their quarters to the church, where they occupy a special place.

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Our modern mentality is easily shocked by that presence of two distinct communities in the same monastery, and therefore, we usually try not to see that aspect. But, as I will show later on, this can surprisingly be seen in a very positive manner.

Now, the question is obviously: Why did Cîteaux institute the laybrothers? An explanation is given in a text of the Exordium Parvum that is often quoted, and well known. "Since they realized that without their help they would be unable to fulfill perfectly the precepts of the Rule day and night, they decided to admit, with the permission of their bishops, bearded laymen as conversi, and to treat them in life and death as their own, excepto monacatu.

On the basis of a superficial reading of that text it is often said that the laybrothers at Cîteaux were instituted because the monks felt that they could not fulfill all the obligations of the Rule, especially the Divine Office and still do the amount of work that was necessary for their subsistence. This is a biased reading of the text, The problem was not the amount of work, or the time available to do it after reciting all the Divine Office. In fact the choir monks of Cîteaux worked, and worked hard. They built their first monastery, at the time when the laybrothers were not yet in existence, and it is probable that most of the building in all the first foundations at least was done by the choir monks. The brothers were needed for some specific form of work -- the work that had to be done away from the monastery, in granges and on far distant properties, which, therefore, did not allow the brothers to return to the monastery every night, let alone for every office. This is in fact clearly stated by the Exordium Parvum.

The laybrothers were not instituted simply in order to have a work force. If that had been the problem, it could have been solved easily by hired workers. We know, in fact that the Cistercians had hired lay workers and famuli, and that they had them all along, before and after the institution of the laybrothers. They are mentioned in the Exordium Parvum itself, and in many statutes of the General Chapter, during the 12th century and later. Here are just a few examples: the G.C. of 1157 prescribed that the hours of work of the hired workers employed within the cloister be so arranged as to conform with the monastic horarium. The Chapter of 1164 mentions an agreement with the Gilbertines about not hiring each other employees... and the Chapter of 1195 prescribes that relatives of monks or conversi should not be hired.

The laybrothers became necessary because of an important choice made by the Cistercians concerning their form of subsistence. From the 9th century on, monastic property had grown enormously. Early medieval monasteries, including Cluny, drew their subsistence from the

properties given to them by rich and noble landowners. They adopted the system of manorialism, and assigned agricultural work to the rural population. This, of course, gradually involved the monasteries in worldly political affairs. For generations it had become normal for monastic communities to live from the revenues of properties worked by serfs and from tithes and other revenues attached to the ownership of titles.

Moreover, Cîteaux came at a time when that patriarchal manorial system had reached an impasse. Properties in Europe were divided into smaller and smaller parcels, according to the laws and customs of inheritance. There were fewer and fewer large pieces of land, and the properties given to the monks for their subsistence, were no longer large pieces of cultivated land, as they had been in the past, but rather several small tracks spread around. Monasteries who received such properties became, as landowners, part of the feudal system.

Cîteaux, in line with a general movement of return to poverty made the very important decision to reject any such type of income and to earn its life through its own work. It rejected "churches, altar-revenues, burial fees, tithes or victuals furnished by the labor of others, villagers, serfs, land taxes, incomes from oven and mills and similar other things contrary to monastic purity..." They wanted to "live from the fruit of their own manual labor, from the toil on their own land. To take care of the direct administration of its properties, most of them away from the enclosure, Cîteaux needed brothers who would not only be exempt from strictly monastic obligations, but who would also not be bound by the canonical obligations to which any cleric was bound.

The brothers were needed most of all for the administration of the distant properties, the granges. As for the work at the monastery itself, even the farm work, it was done by everyone. The "Dialogue..." mentioned above says: "We do agricultural work... all together, we and our brothers and our hired servants... and we live from the fruits of that work..."

Then, we are not in the presence of a class of monks who dedicate all their time to prayer and lectio divina and a class of brothers who do the manual work. We are in the presence of a division of functions that corresponds to the social structure of the 12th century, and to a particular relationship between the clerical and the lay orders. This brings to light another aspect of the question. It has been said that at Cîteaux the choir monks belonged to the upper classes of society, while the brothers belonged to the lower classes. That does not seem to be entirely the case, at least not at the beginning. Among the monks there were people from every class of society, including freed

slaves, although it is true that the laybrothers were in most cases from the class of the illiterati. There are a few cases of nobles who chose to join the laybrother state out of humility, but these seem to have been exceptions, since these cases are reported as something very edifying, and for various reasons the General Chapter of 1188 told the nobles that they would be more useful to the Order as monks. But the "illiteracy" of the laybrothers should not be exaggerated. Many of them had very important roles in the material administration of the monasteries, they were grange masters, they negotiated important contracts. They are often mentioned as witnesses in the Charters (30 times between 1163 and 1182, at Cîteaux).

We should not speak so much of classes as of "orders". "Orders" were immensely more important to people in the Middle Ages than they are to us nowadays; and, in this respect some profound transformation was going on in society at the time, that has certainly influenced the rapid development of the institution of the laybrothers, and the understanding of their role.

In the Church, for several centuries, a distinction among various states of life or ordines fidelium had become classical: the clerici, the monaci, and the laici. These orders were distinguished from one another by their relation to the christianization of society. Once society was, at least ideally converted, another schema appeared, that of the oratores, the bellatores and the laboratores. Then, within each new ordo, two sub-groups appeared, one in which the temporal function received a spiritual consecration, and one in which social functions continued to be exercised only on the temporal level. The bellatores were the first to receive a spiritual consecration, through the rituals of knighthood and later on the blessing of the crusaders and the foundation of the Orders of knights. The next order to receive a spiritual consecration was that of the laboratores. This is what the institution of the laybrothers actually did.

It has also been said at times that the laybrothers were needed at Cîteaux because the monks had become clericalized and therefore could not work or did not want to. As we have seen before the monks were not afraid of work and they did work manually. But it is a fact that by the end of the XIth century, all the monks were clerics, although relatively few of them were priests. They all received the tonsure that introduced them into the clerical order. Monasticism, which originally began as a lay movement very reluctant to let any cleric join its ranks, never-the-less initiated very early a long process of clericalization. By some strange evolution, that we can not study here, monasticism became reserved to clerics. Cluny still had a few monaci laici. But at Cîteaux, right from the beginning, all the monks were clerics.

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Here however we have to be careful. We should not transpose our modern notion of clericalism into the past. There were two orders in the Church: the clerical and the lay. True, the first order was considered to be superior to the second one; but each had its own rights and obligations; each had a role to play and its own dignity. The exercise of justice, the administration of the temporal world was reserved to the lay people.

With our modern mentality and our modern biases, the institution of the laybrothers by the early Cistercians could be seen as a way in which the monks, who were clerics, provided themselves with lay servants. But it can also be seen in a very different light. At a time when monastic life had been practically reserved to clerics, or, if you prefer, when all the monks were made clerics, the institution of the laybrothers by Cîteaux made monastic life accessible again to the lay people. In the strict canonical sense the laybrothers were not monks; in a deeper sense, they were monks, monks who were allowed to live the monastic way of life while performing the tasks that were proper to lay people, that is the administration of property and all the relationships entailed with the various levels of civil administration. The presence of two communities within the Cistercian monastery did not shock the men of the 12th century. On the contrary it was a new recognition of the specific character and dignity of the laity.

This seems to have been the original insight of the Cistercian founders. As we know it had an extraordinary success, although most of the figures given concerning the laybrother population in 12th century monasteries are subject to caution. In any case, it is a fact that the rapid and amazing development of the Cistercian Order in the 12th century was due to a large extent to this very special and delicate balance of two communities in one, each having a specific role and, at least for a while, living in perfect harmony.

The dark ages:

Now, how is it that the golden age of the institution of the laybrothers was so short. For, short it was indeed. Already in the last quarter of the twelfth century, there were a lot of trouble all through the Order. See James. S. Donnelly, "The Decline of the Medieval Cistercian Laybrotherhood", N.Y. 1949). The General Chapter was more and more often busied with revolts of laybrothers in various houses, and the decisions of the General Chapter, as well as the Visitation cards, (even of Visitors who cared for the laybrothers) are more and more negative towards them ("contra Conversos"). From the thirteenth century on, their number decreased rapidly, and they became practically extinct, not only in the Order of Cîteaux with the

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exception of a few houses like La Trappe and Sept Fons, but in all the other Orders that had adopted a similar institution.

In history golden ages are always very short. Before such a golden age, there is a period of tension, of search and trial, and confusion. Those periods of tension are very creative and productive. Then comes suddenly a period of great harmony in which the tensions cease temporarily and great beauty appears. History seems to be holding its breath. Great productions appear: Gothic art, Cistercian art... The sad thing is that those periods are always short. Then begins a period of disintegration, that eventually leads to a new period of tension and much later to a new golden age of another kind. The grace and perhaps the curse of Cîteaux was not only to come to birth at such a golden age, but to be one of the most beautiful fruits of such a golden age. Its own golden age however was short.

Cîteaux's foundation was part of a movement towards greater simplicity and poverty; but by the end of its first century of existence, Cîteaux was extremely rich. One could say that this was the reason for its decadence and for the rapid dissolution of its large and beautiful communities of lay-brothers. However, although there is a good part of truth in this, the above analysis would be too simple.

In fact the fabric of society changed rapidly through the 12th century and the very special situation that had made the institution of the laybrothers to flourish was rapidly disappearing. At the time of Cîteaux's foundation the disintegration of the traditional manorial system had already begun. A growing population could no longer be absorbed by those static and antiquated agrarian units. The disturbed equilibrium set a considerable portion of dependent peasantry in motion, searching for a better life and more promising employment. Such conditions drove tens of thousands into the crusading armies, and thousands to the monasteries, but also lured others into the growing and prosperous cities, and furnished the masses for the drive toward the east. By the end of the 13th c. serfdom had practically disappeared from Western Europe. The peasant had become free leaseholders, whose property steadily improved through intensive cultivation and the sale of agrarian produces to the ever growing cities. The grange system of Cîteaux and the laybrothers institutions had been an alternative to something that was disappearing. The alternative also gradually disappeared. In fact the successful large estates of the Cistercians were now seen by society as a competition and a threat.

These social developments were accompanied by social unrest and revolts of the peasants. At the same period the Statutes of the General Chapters reveal similar revolts in several monasteries. And,

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finally, Cîteaux was gradually resorting to the leasing of the land rather than to direct cultivation.

Another aspect was that during the first few generations, the number of laybrothers was limited and corresponded to the needs of the communities. They were not an anonymous crowd of workers. Most of them would have important responsibilities in the administration of the domain of the community. They were heads of the granges, they negotiated and signed important contracts in the name of the community. They were messengers of the abbots. Some were even used as bullatores by the popes. At the granges themselves, during periods of heavy work, like ploughing and harvesting, they used hired workers. When the number of the laybrothers increased rapidly -- partly due to social conditions (as it was the case also for the monks) -- they became large crowds of anonymous workers, many of them probably without any real spiritual call, and were therefore easy preys to discontent, murmuring and revolt. They felt exploited.

This might have been due to a flaw in the original Cistercian institution of the lay- brothers, beautiful as it may have been. Before Cîteaux, the laybrothers were officials of the familia who where admitted to live within the community. At Cîteaux, they were lay workers admitted to form a community within the enclosure of the monastery, under the authority of the same abbot, while working most of the time outside the enclosure. They were essentially workers who attended to the administration of the material domain of the monastery. Gradually, they were considered by the monks just that: workers. And they rapidly ended up considering themselves simple workers at the service of the and claiming their rights like any decent worker would do.

It was a great institution, but one that corresponded to a relationship between clerical and lay states, between the spiritual and material orders, that was rapidly being trans- formed. With the Gregorian Reform the Church had strongly claimed its autonomy; now the social order as a whole was claiming its own autonomy. The institution of the lay- brothers was too much bound with a specific organization of society to be able to survive as such. One of the last blow may have been demographic. The black plague that killed one third of European population within three years (between 1347 and 1350), following other epidemics and wars, diminished considerably the pool from which vocations came to the laybrotherhood as well as to the choir.

Although a good number of holy and humble men and women continued to enter monasteries in the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries because of a strong personal call or for other personal reasons, the system of two

communities, one at the service of the other within the same enclosure was too alien to the mentality of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, to attract more than a few highly motivated persons.

#### 19th and 20th century evolution

There was a revival of the institution of the laybrothers in the nineteenth century, both in the Benedictine and the Cistercian Order; but, as Hallinger has shown, the lay-brothers of the nineteenth and twentieth century are a species quite different from those of the twelfth century, in spite of the great apparent similarities. In a Cistercian monastery of the twelfth century, there were two communities, well articulated, united in charity, living the same spiritual values, but fulfilling different functions, and remaining two communities, largely autonomous, although one being subordinated to the other. In the monasteries of the nineteenth and the twentieth century, up to the Decree of Unification, there was one community composed of two categories or two classes. That was quite a radical difference.

This revival was part of the 19th century monastic reform, which was to a large extent a nostalgic effort to return to the ideal of Christendom. It became normal for a Cistercian as well as a Benedictine monastery of the 19th century and the beginning of this century to have a large number of laybrother vocations. It was the return to a vision very similar to that of the 12th century: a community of monks consecrated to the service of God, especially in the Divine Office, and a group of laybrothers humbly and generously dedicating themselves to the manual and administrative tasks, in order to allow the choir monks to perform their spiritual functions. But there was an enormous difference between this new situation and that of the 12th century, in spite of the apparent similitude. The brothers were now much more integrated into the life of the community than they had been in the past. Although they formed a strong sub-group in the community, with their own master, there was now only one community composed of choir monks and of laybrothers. This was in many ways a progress; but there was a negative aspect to it: that one community was composed of two classes or two categories, one being subordinated to the other and not having the same rights as the other.

Hundreds of holy men and women chose voluntarily that humble condition of service and sanctified themselves beautifully in it. The situation was very different from one part of the world to the other. In the old continent, still sensitive to the class division of society, most of the laybrothers were persons who for various reasons could not make studies, and usually had much less formal education than the choir monks. In America, it was quite different. Many of the laybrothers had

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college or university degrees and simply wanted a simple monastic life of prayer, service and penance.

In a real way that situation was a step forward in the line of what the first Cistercians had done. They had constituted a community of lay workers who lived with them as brothers within the same enclosure, while not being monks. At a time when to be a monk was to be part of the clerical order, they had again allowed lay people to live the monastic way of life, like them and with them. To make them part of the same community was a step forward, even if that community was divided into two categories with different rights. The next logical step was to create a new situation in which the community would be neither clerical nor lay, but simply monastic, as it was in the first centuries of monasticism, and in which the diversity of functions would not entail a distinction of classes or categories. This is the step that the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance made in the early 1960's, considering that it was totally in line with the movement started by the Cistercians of the 12th century, while corresponding to a new social and ecclesial sensitivity. (This is not to say that everything was done as well as it could have been, and that everyone's rights were respected as well as they could have been; but that's a different question.) And neither is this to say that the evolution is finished.

#### Directions for the future

History never goes back. What is past is past. To my mind any attempt to undo what was done in 1965 would be futile. We need to be creative while remaining in touch with our past -- not with a frozen segment of our past, but our past seen as a whole and in all its dynamics. I don't think personally that the preservation of the laybrother vocation will consist in re-establishing two categories or several categories within our communities. It should consist in two directions.

One of these two directions is the line of pluralism initiated by the Decree of Unification itself. A Statute on Unity and Pluralism voted by the General Chapter of 1969 allowing each community to find its own identity, its own way of realizing in concreto the same Cistercian values and the same commonly accepted basic Cistercian observance. Several communities of our Order, especially in New Churches, but not only there, correspond much more to a community of laybrothers than to a community of choir monks, if we want to use the categories of the past. Then our new Constitutions (voted in 1984) establish the possibility of a good deal of pluralism within the community allowing for the presence within each community of not various categories or classes, but of a great diversity between individuals in term of the

concrete realization of the equilibrium between work, common prayer and private prayer. And we must stress the fact that in reality the Order has developed over the last 25 years a new type of monk. The way of life of the choir monk of the past has changed as much as that of the laybrother of the past.

The other line of evolution, which I think is rich in promises for the future has to do with the relationship of the monastic community with the larger Christian community. I mentioned at the beginning that each monastery in the 12th century was part of a complex network of relationships with the surrounding society, and that Cistercian monasteries, like other monasteries, had a familia composed of lay people who served or helped the community in various ways. Next to the laybrothers, according to the Exordium Parvum itself were the familiarii, and even Cistercians could not do without hired workers.

Nowadays, a quite generalized phenomenon in the monastic world, as in the religious world in general, is that we find many lay people who feel called to a life of prayer and to a more complete dedication to God. They don't feel called to abandon their family, their job, their responsibilities in society. But they feel called to a deeper life of prayer and communion, and they feel the need to form small communities with other lay people. They also often find a support and a nourishment for their spiritual life in a close relationship with a monastic community. They acknowledge themselves, spiritually, as Cistercians, or Benedictines, or Carmelites. Dozens of our Cistercian monasteries have such groups of lay people who want to be acknowledged as Oblates or Associates of the community. There is also a large number of people who, after an early retirement would like to offer their expertise or their work to a community and to belong in some way to that community while remaining in the world.

The first Cistercians were very creative in opening up monastic life again to lay people. I want to suggest that the challenge offered to the Cistercian Order nowadays, in a line of continuity with that original insight would be to find ways to open not only the wealth of Cistercian spirituality but also the participation into the Cistercian communion to a post-Vatican II laity more and more aware of its dignity as laity and of its call to incarnate the contemplative ideal in the world of today.

After centuries when the role of the laity was seen only as servants to the clergy, the important and irreplaceable role of the laity in society and in the Church is now stressed. John Paul II's post-synodal document on the laity has stressed the importance of the creation of communities of lay people. In that line, a solution faithful to the original insight of the laybrother institution would be not so much to

Document extrait du [site de l'abbaye Notre-Dame de Scourmont](#), qui se trouve sur le territoire de Forges, à sept kilomètres au sud de la ville de Chimay, en Belgique. Notre-Dame de Scourmont est une abbaye de l'Ordre Cistercien de la Stricte Observance.

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create a form of "Oblate Program" in which individuals would be allowed to become "extern oblates" of the community, but to encourage the formation of autonomous communities of lay people who would adapt the Cistercian ideal of contemplative prayer and search for God to the conditions of secular life, and to establish close links with such communities. In the same way as the institution of the laybrothers in the 12th century contributed very largely to the amazingly rapid growth of the Cistercian Order, so also the openness of Cistercian communities to sister communities of lay people wanting to drink from the Cistercian well and to give a new expression of its spirituality in the world of today, could mark the beginning of a profound new renewal.

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