

THE *RELIGIOUS BROTHER'S* VOCATION AS A PARABLE OF RENEWAL FOR THE PHILIPPINE CHURCH

Author's note: The core assertions found in this article were initially presented as part of a talk on the Religious Brother's vocation to a group of students of the Institute for Consecrated Life in Asia [ICLA] on 25 November 1998 and subsequently revised for publication in article form.

MY VOCATIONAL JOURNEY TO RELIGION Since I had a grand uncle who was a bishop and who left a lasting impression on my consciousness of the profound meaning of service and dedication to the needs of the local Church. Two of my elder brothers started as sacristans and later joined the Redemptorist Juvenile. Although neither of them persevered, I know that the prospect of joining myself the priestly vocation became an attractive possibility at a very early

th birthday, priesthood seemed to be THE ONLY OPTION for any young male who seriously considered serving the Church in a full time capacity.

My first encounter with the Religious Brother's vocation came as a result of having to transfer to De La Salle Lipa during the last two years of my primary education. The differentiation between the vocation to join the Religious Brother's vocation as an alternative possibility for me came about because of the si



since for the first time I had to consider seriously four options: diocesan priesthood, religious priesthood, religious brotherhood and the lay vocation. After some time I was able to narrow it down to just two: secular priesthood or religious brotherhood. I wanted to meet the deadline set by my Vocation Director so on the eve of the appointed date, I spent the night in prayer before a crucifix and begged the Lord to show me the way since I was certain that both paths would lead to Him and I sincerely did not seek anything else but to follow His will. My prayers were met with a deathly silence and, since I was pressured to give a definitive answer the next day, I was forced to take a gamble with the silent Jesus. In my immaturity and frustration, I told Him that since He refused to point out to me clearly His will for me, then I will take the invitation from the Vocation Director of the De La Salle Brothers as a sign that this is where He wanted me in the first place and that, if He so wanted me elsewhere, He will have to make this known to me in an unambiguous manner. As far as I was concerned, I have made a decision that day to follow Him as a Religious Brother. While the logic of the choice was unclear, I believed then that the circumstances in my own life seemed to point towards this direction. While I was not fully convinced that this was the right vocation for me, I felt that I had to try out this path. I entered the Postulancy 20 years ago and, two years later, I made my first profession as a Religious Brother. I have been sharing the Lasallian life and ministry as a Religious Brother for the past 18 years. On my desk today, I still keep as my only share of the family heirloom this crucifix where hangs the silent Jesus with whom I gambled. He has been consistently silent these past 20 years but in front of Him I have heard a stronger voice in my heart which convinces me more than ever that this is where He has called me—to live my life in His service as a Religious Brother!

THE STRUGGLES TO OWN AND LIVE A MISUNDERSTOOD VOCATION

After I arrived at the choice to become a Religious Brother, it did not take me long before I realized that very few understood the path I was taking. Since both of my parents were deceased by the time I entered the Postulancy, I had to ask the permission of my legitimate guardians—my maternal grand aunts—who were happy at the thought that I was considering the religious life but who could not understand why my choice was not for the priesthood. I had to explain to them that I really wanted to become a teacher and since the Brothers were educators, this is where I felt God was calling me. That answer seemed to please at least one of them who had spent 43 dedicated years in the teaching profession. But in their silence, I knew that they would have given their full support if I had chosen to follow the priestly path of my grand uncle. When they gave me their blessing then, I knew it was a half-hearted one.

The first real test of how I truly owned my choice came when I went for our first formal exposure. The BEC leaders in our exposure site would ask us whether we were “Brother” seminarians or Cursillo “Brothers”. While I had a basic idea then of the essential nature of the Religious Brother’s vocation, I found it almost impossible to explain in layman’s language the vocation I haUGd(profTd2 I found i werer 1e45-1.16FI0.1023 c 0.1023

“get ordained since their parish is in dire need of priests.” I did try to explain to them that we have as much need for Christian teachers as we have for priests but they would always dismiss my arguments and assert that “anyway, priests can also teach.” It was impossible for me to explain to them that this is the real reason why I chose to become a Religious Brother: that I may put my whole attention and energy on nothing else but to provide Christian education to those entrusted to my care since I was convinced that this ministry to young people is a vocation complete in itself! By this time, I was convinced that while ministering the sacraments were a real need in the Church, there are also other ministries that are essential to its life and which deserve to be given no less than the total commitment of a lifetime.

I thought that these misconceptions about the Brother’s vocation came only from the laity since they may not have had a real background on the theology of religious life. One of the greatest disillusion in my life is to discover that among priests and members of the hierarchy, there is a general lack of understanding or even awareness of the vocation of a Religious Brother. It is not uncommon to hear bishops address their “brother-priests” and the “religious sisters” when speaking before an assembly and miss out on the Religious Brothers even on occasions when the Brothers are visibly present. I am especially irked when I receive an official document from the diocese addressed to “Reverend Fathers and Sisters”. On one occasion, I gave this feedback to a diocesan chancellor who promised to do something in his succeeding communications but who also tried to console me by saying that their use of the term “Reverend Fathers” also included the Religious Brothers. I would have accepted his explanation except that I was painfully aware of the fact that many times, these typographical omissions are not only a cause but also a symptom of the neglect and failure on the part of the institutional church to address the needs and concerns of the Religious Brothers. It is heartening to note, however, that PCP2 (Acts 494-497) acknowledges these struggles of the Religious Brothers and seeks to promote and encourage this vocation in the Philippine Church (decree 72). One of my confreres love to tell the story of an archbishop who, wanting to flatter him, invited him openly to transfer to his diocese so he could ordain him since he was “good enough to become a bishop someday.” Of course, we also have a great friend among the bishops who speaks openly of his spurned application to our institute and is not afraid to describe himself as “not good enough to become a Religious Brother and that is why they ordained me a bishop instead.”

I have attended several convocations where the Vocation Directors of mixed congregations promote the priestly vocation without any reference to the Religious Brother’s vocation. I was an active member of a diocesan vocation team and was in fact on stage wearing my religious habit (which does not look at all like a cassock) when the emcee started to acknowledge the presence of almost every sector represented except the Religious Brothers. I have also attended at least one parish vocation mass wherein the petition prayers remembered “our beloved bi

out to pray for Religious Brothers (even if there are only three Religious Brothers working in the Archdiocese).

If there is one group in the Church whom I expect should be able to understand and appreciate the vocation of the Religious Brother, it would be our counterpart, the religious sisters. It is such a disappointment when a religious sister fails to grasp the essence of a Brother's religious consecration because I cannot help but conclude that she

ministries to the detriment of the *other* ministries in the Church (cf. 1 Cor. 12:4-31). The temptation for the Religious Brother is to devalue the sacramental ministry or to aspire for some privileges in the Church given only to clerics. In the end, the Religious Brother will be able to truly appreciate his own ministry and role in the Church if and when he is able to see his apostolate or work as complete in itself and worthy of the dedication of a lifetime. The Religious Brother's recovery of the value of his particular ministry in the Church can become a window for the whole Church in its search to become an authentic servant of God's people.

The challenge to live authentic Brotherhood in community. The scandals of division even in multi-racial and multi-cultural Asia bring to the fore the prophetic witness value of a community lived in authentic brotherhood. Almost all forms of violence in the region are hatched and perpetuated by a male-dominated military or pseudo-military organization which corrupts the true meaning of fraternity. Societal and Church structures are too hierarchical and tend to emphasize power more than service, work more than relationships, accomplishments more than personhood. It is very easy for Religious Brothers to fall into this same trap. I know of some Brothers' congregations who are strongly anti-clerical but who promote the worst forms of clericalism in their own communities. The struggles of the Religious Brother to live in true brotherhood with his confreres is a counter-cultural statement against the prevailing view of masculine aggression, dominance and indestructibility and can point towards the possibility for male bonding, friendship and fraternity which are essential aspects of Christian intimacy, maturity and commitment. A community where no one is called *Father*—because they are *all Brothers* and *they have only one Father who is in heaven* (cf. Mt 23:8-9)—can become a window of the Church as a real community of believers.

The story of the vocation of a Religious Brother is a simple one but it points towards profound truths about the life, vocation and mission of the Church. It is my hope that the sincere attempts of each Religious Brother to follow Christ in the simplicity of his vocation will be an opportunity to truly participate in the renewal of the local Church in the Philippines.