

## Brothers Symposium Address

**“The mission and charism of the religious brother: an uncomplicated witness”**

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Cardinal Tobin, Bishop Rhoades, Members of the Brothers Think Tank, symposium organizers, my brothers in religious life, students, friends and family:

I am honored by the invitation to prepare and deliver this address. My hope today will be to highlight – or perhaps clarify or maybe even advance a little – our understanding and appreciation of the charism of the religious brother, or said another way, the non-ordained male religious.

From the outset, I recognize that this task is accompanied by a couple of dangers – one of which I have just stepped into. We brothers are oftentimes sensitive to being defined by what we are not – that is, *non-ordained* male religious. While I completely understand the concern, and would not want to suggest that we are only defined by what we are not, there is no escaping that we are always, at least in part, defined in relationship to those around us – especially those who are like us in some respects, but not like us in others. In the discipline of the visual arts, if you want a figure, a shape or a color to stand out, you place next to it a contrasting or complimentary line, color or shade. Suddenly the figure is clearer. It stands out and has more definition. I similarly tell vocation visitors looking at our way of life that they should visit other communities and investigate other orders – not because I don’t want them to join our monastery, but by referencing something similar, they will come to better understand our way of life. So it is with intention that I will spend some time this morning trying to highlight and add further definition to the charism of the religious brother by speaking of him as a religious whose charism is defined in part by the choice or the invitation not to pursue ordination – not *also to be a priest* in addition to being a religious brother in the Church.

When we begin to define people and roles relative to one another, another trap arises - comparisons. In truth, comparisons are inevitable even if they are not always helpful: “But which is the *better* witness? Which is *more important* to the church? Which is *truer* to the charism of the order or the vision of the founder?” Now, because we are all mature, we laugh at the possibility that we would ever wander into such adolescent territory. And yet we do all the time.

Comparisons such as these probably grow out of our insecurities - perhaps from having felt unappreciated or overlooked at times – maybe even poorly treated in previous eras. Brothers have been heard to complain: “The brothers never get the opportunities the priests do.” “This place would fold without the brothers!” But of course, the right to complain goes both ways and we find ourselves once again arguing over whose grass is greener: “The brothers have no idea what extra work comes with being ordained. I would love to be able to take Sunday off every once and a while or have a job where I don’t have constantly to be in my head, dealing with people or worrying about administrative concerns.” Regardless of our personal perspective, it is probably best to simply acknowledge that we

have felt bruised at times and proceed with an articulation and renewed vision of our life that stands in loving relationship and creative interdependence with our ordained or non-ordained confreres.

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I'd like to begin by telling you about Br. Lawrence Schidler, a late confrere of mine. For over 60 years, Br. Lawrence was a monk of Saint Meinrad Archabbey.

To better appreciate Br. Lawrence, it would be helpful to know that Saint Meinrad is a monastery with a long intellectual tradition, a long tradition in education, and a strong identification with priesthood. This latter association is understandable: priesthood is inextricably tied to our founding mission in the United States. In the mid 1800's with the great influx of German immigrants arriving in central and southern Indiana, a priest from the diocese of Vincennes was appealing to German speaking religious communities in Europe asking if they could send men and women to help minister to the growing German population. The Abbey of Einsiedeln in Switzerland responded favorably to the priest's request and established a foundation which came to be known as Saint Meinrad Archabbey, in the hills of southern Indiana. These Swiss monks came to the US with the mission of not only establishing the monastic life, but also providing pastoral assistance to the German-speaking immigrants, and opening a seminary to help form local men for the priesthood.

Priesthood has always been an important dimension of our Benedictine identity at Saint Meinrad – so much so, that in 2004, the year Br. Lawrence died, the ratio of ordained to non-ordained solemnly professed monks was 80% ordained to 20% non-ordained. Two years later when I made solemn vows as a brother, the nearest non-ordained monk in seniority to me had already been professed 28 years.

Like priesthood, intellectual interests and academic achievement have also become important to our community's identity. Since our primary apostolate has been education, including collegiate and graduate education, it has been important for Saint Meinrad to have monks with advanced degrees: doctorates and terminal masters' degrees. The sought-after jobs in our community have tended to be in the school and positions of leadership have almost always been held by ordained members of the community. There has never been a non-ordained rector or vice-rector of the school. A brother has never served as the abbot or prior or even novice-junior master in the monastery.

It was in this context – this academically gifted and pretty clerically-focused community – in which Brother Lawrence lived his monastic life. Br. Lawrence never went to college (not even our own). He never held a teaching position. He never gave the community an Advent conference. He certainly never taught in our seminary or even offered a retreat in our Guest House. He never held a leadership position in the monastery and to my knowledge, he was never on the abbot's council. He worked quietly in the carpenter shop building coffins, bookshelves, tables, and altars and turning chalices on the lathe. For recreation, he played handball in his younger days and kings-in-the-corner at the card table in the last years before his death. But when Br. Lawrence died, his confreres - priests and brothers alike - said of him: "Now, there was a monk's monk! A *real* monk!"

I've had to ask myself: Why Br. Lawrence? Why was *he* the model Saint Meinrad monk? He was not abbot. He was never the formation director. He held no place of importance in either the monastery or in any of our apostolates. He was "just a brother!"

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If you are a non-ordained, male religious, you are well acquainted with the phrase "just a brother." It is usually encountered in the context of a question: "Are you a priest or just a brother?" As soon as the question escapes the mouth of the inquirer, an apology is typically issued: "That's not what I mean - *just* a brother. I mean . . ." We tend to rescue the unmeaning offender from his or her embarrassment, but not before giving ourselves a moment or two to feel a little put down or irked. Lately, though, I've reconsidered the phrase and have come to the conclusion that we have been wrong to be offended. I think we are being too sensitive and I suspect that our propensity getting our feelings hurt has been getting in the way of hearing what I suspect most people are actually trying to say when they ask: "... or are you just a brother?"

Stay with me. . .

Crofter's is a brand of jelly. Organic jelly – so it must be good! The Crofter's label points out that it is a "Just Fruit Spread."

This is not a paid advertisement for Crofter's – I've never tried it to be honest – but their label opens our eyes to different meaning of the word "just". In this usage, "just" communicates a sense of singleness, of being uncomplicated by other things. Crofter's is "just fruit" – not fruit *and* sugar *and* gelatin *and* preservatives. The use of the word "just", here, is not meant to diminish the identity of this product, but to clarify. Crofter's is just *fruit*. Only fruit. Nothing but fruit. Solely and singularly fruit.

Now let's revisit the question: Are you a priest, or are you solely a brother? singularly a brother? A brother with no additional witness or charism added? Just a brother.

When I was asked to submit a title for the symposium brochure, I wanted to suggest "Just a brother"; however, I didn't think the conference organizers would go along. So instead I proposed: "The mission and charism of the religious brother: an uncomplicated witness". But from this point on, let's call it: "Just a brother: an uncomplicated witness."

In the remarks that follow, I would like to spend some time exploring what it means for brothers to offer an uncomplicated witness to the charism of religious life. My primary point is that there is great value for the Church and for our own individual communities to have men who provide an uncomplicated – and we might even say, unchallenged – witness to the special charisms of our religious congregations. A central thesis I will work from is that religious brothers play an essential role (and therefore carry a significant responsibility) by representing the charism of religious life and the charism of their order

without the additional and sometimes competing identity and demands of priesthood. A brother's witness first reminds the Church at large of the presence and importance of consecrated religious life, and just as importantly reminds all the members of his religious congregation – both ordained and non-ordained members – that before and aside from ordination, their charism and witness is already complete.

In the spring 2008 issue of *Horizon*, the journal for the National Religious Vocations Conference, Fr. Ted Keating wrote an insightful article on some of the challenges associated with our evolving understanding of religious priesthood in the United States. One of Fr. Keating's central points is that among clerical and mixed orders – i.e., religious institutes which include both priests and brothers – there has been a tendency for the identity and demands of priesthood to “over-define the group's sense of mission” (p. 17) and create or contribute to a sense of ambiguity relative to the congregation's founding mission and identity.

Fr. Keating goes on to point out that in recent decades, many religious have become “diocesanized”, drawing a greater sense of identity and purpose from their priestly ministry (often parish ministry) than from the founding mission, identity or charism of their religious order. Keating cites as contributing factors: the growing number of religious priests serving in parishes secondary to the priest shortage, as well as the diffused sense of identity resulting from the changing theology of the laity and the increasing contributions of the laity to the work of the Church since the Council, ministries previously carried out by priests and religious.

We could add to Keating's list of factors contributing to the diffusion of many religious orders' mission and identity, the historical take-over of many works and founding missions by public agencies as a result of our growing governmental structures. For example, many religious communities, both men's and women's, were founded either in the US or in other parts of the world to provide education or healthcare to the underserved poor. While advancements in public education and healthcare initiatives such as Medicare and Medicaid have greatly served society by extending these vital services to the disadvantaged, the result is that they have in many cases left religious communities without a common apostolate and devoid of their founding mission in the Church. Many communities once founded to provide education to the poor now, in the face of public education, continue their tradition of excellence in education in the service of wealthier clientele who can afford the tuition of private schools. While there is obvious merit in such work, it is far afield from the original intention of bringing Christ to the poor and marginalized, and is often less compelling to young, potential vocations who are looking to spend their lives doing something more radical. Other congregations who were founded to provide healthcare to the disadvantaged have adapted to advancements in public health by diversifying their ministries, sometimes to the extent of having few if any “common works” that help to publicly identify or reinforce the internal identity of the religious community. This gradual diffusion, if not perceived obsolescence, of many communities' founding missions and charisms over the past several decades seems to have occurred despite Vatican II's call for a “rapprochement” or reengagement with each institute's founding charism.

Keating's argument is that where a community's founding charism and mission have grown more diffuse or seemingly unnecessary or obsolete, the pressing needs and often-times clearer charism of priesthood have come increasingly to dominate the identity of many religious priests and, by extension, the identity of many men's orders in the United States. In support of his argument, Keating points to the findings of Nygren and Ukeritis' (1993) comprehensive study of religious communities in the US which found that religious priests had the highest levels of role clarity compared to brothers and sisters; however their clarity and satisfaction appeared to be derived from their priestly identity rather than their identity as consecrated religious. A brief example from my own community might help to illustrate this point.

Less than ten years ago, my community used our annual study days to look at issues related to our work and apostolates. At that time, we had approximately sixteen monks serving out in parishes. Seated at tables of six to eight for ease of discussion, the entire community was asked what "What is appropriate work for a monk of Saint Meinrad?" The response that came back from almost every table was: "Anything that serves the Church." While service to the church is certainly an important criteria in determining the appropriateness of work for any monk, entirely overlooked seemed to be the demands or limits that our monastic charism places on the ways in which we serve the needs of the Church. The next question asked of our small groups was, "For our men serving in parishes: should there be term limits to their parish assignments, and if so, what should the term limit be?" With similar negligence to the primacy of our specific monastic charism, the response from each table was: "Whatever the diocese's policy sets as customary term limits."

Keating's assertion that priesthood has come gradually to dominate the identity of male religious life – particularly in congregations which include both ordained and non-ordained members – finds some support in the statistical research as well. Nygren and Ukeritis (1993) point out that in the thirty years between 1962 and 1992, the number of religious brothers decreased by 43% while the number of religious priests had declined by only 18%. The recent Vatican document on the Identity and Mission of the religious Brother in the Church (2015) points out that at present, religious brothers make up only 20% of the total of male religious in the world. 80% are priests. One fears that brothers are disappearing, and we are left to wonder if brothers are becoming obsolete. Have we "gone out of vogue"? Are we no longer relevant or necessary to the Church's mission in the world? In an interview early in his papacy Pope Francis spoke about the vocation of the brother, stating: "I do not actually believe that the vocational crisis among religious who are not priests is a sign of the times telling us that this vocation has ended. We should rather understand what God is asking us." (Spadaro, 2014)

What is God asking us?

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Nygren and Ukeritis (1993) seem to get it wrong when they suggest that "The vocation of the religious brother awaits a supporting theology that contrasts his vocation with the spirituality of the laity." (p 8). It well may be that religious men (and women) await new *apostolates* or even reimagined *missions* that distinguish them from the laity; but a *theology* of vocation is certainly not wanting. It is very well

established and has been for centuries, and Nygren and Ukeritis' suggestion that religious brothers lack a "supporting theology" only seems to prove Keating's point - that the identity and charism of consecrated life among men has come to be dominated by the charism of priesthood, leaving brothers to be regarded as members who "didn't go all the way" or who failed to "live their vocation to the fullest."

Perhaps Nygren and Ukeritis' uncertainty regarding the theology of the brother vocation is representative of the larger Church's uncertain. Perhaps the entire church has forgotten or failed to recognize the relevance of the evangelical counsels and the eschatological witness that that consecrated religious are uniquely called to provide. If this is the case, one has to wonder if we ourselves have failed to communicate the charism of consecrated life –the beauty, the heroism, the charismatic nature of it – to the Church and the world. Perhaps it is not so much that the vocation of the religious brother awaits a *theology*, but rather a proper zeal and observance of its charism to distinguish his life from that of the laity.

But theology is there and I would like to spend a little time this morning trying to whip up some zeal for our distinctive and compelling charism which defines and distinguishes our life as brothers.

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### **Celibacy**

We'll start with celibacy because it's probably the least understood and most often misinterpreted of the counsels which define our life as consecrated religious. I've spoken to many religious men and women about celibacy formation, and when I ask them why they chose to be celibate, the overwhelmingly most common answer is: "because it came along with the territory of religious life." (Definitely not inspiring!) When asked for their theology of celibacy, if they have one it is usually tied to the notion that by not marrying and bearing children, they will have more time, energy available to serve and therefore love more broadly. This is a good start, but the beauty and true value of celibacy extends far beyond a simple economy of time and energy.

A more ancient and I think more compelling theology of celibacy – if we can get past our initial stereotypes and overly pietistic associations – is spousal. The entire church is the bride or spouse of Christ, and, as consecrated men (and women) we occupy this particular facet of the Church's identity and relationship with God in a special way and with expanded intentionality. It means for us the pursuit of a relationship with God that is deeply personal and intimate, one that is not mediated through husband or wife and children. Rather, the religious brother's relationship is an unmediated intimacy with God and, in order to pursue it, he is afforded the time and space and expectation to pray, meditate, adore, and develop a relationship with the Word of God in our *lectio divina* and our praying of the Liturgy of the Hours – time and activities that our married, parenting and oftentimes diocesan counterparts wouldn't find possible with all of their holy obligations. In turn, the entirety of the Church relies on our having this special relationship with God. Proof is on the bulletin boards found in every religious community in the world. They are universally littered with small scraps of paper with prayer

requests printed on them: *Please pray for my husband who has just been diagnosed with cancer. Please pray for my daughter who is suffering from depression. Please pray for me because I have lost my job and I have three small children.*

It may embarrass us that people ask for our prayers because we have “a special relationship with God”, but we do and the structures of our life allow it. It is a gift we receive from the Church and one we give back to the Church. It is our charism, our responsibility. The rest of the Church knows and expects that if we have been living the charism of consecrated celibacy zealously and as intended, then – on behalf of the entire Church – we have been afforded the privilege of pursuing the kind of relationship with God in which petitions become personal favors asked by one who endears himself in a particular way to the heart of God.

And this is not dependent on ordination.

Of course, this life of the celibate can be lonely, but even this is by design. By agreeing not to marry and not pursue romantic and physical intimacy, the brother invites a greater share of loneliness upon himself – first to drive him toward a relationship with God, the only one who could know any of us as deeply and completely as we desire, but then – and especially – to remind those who are lonely *but not by choice* – i.e., the widow, the sexually marginalized, the unhappily married, those who so desperately wish to be in love, but have never found anyone – that there is the possibility of happiness, meaning and joy in life even without sex and without belonging to one other person, despite what the rest of the world seems to say.

### **Poverty**

As with celibacy, the point of poverty is not mere asceticism. Nor is it a means of shaming the rich and the wealthy into giving more of what they have to the poor. Poverty – voluntary poverty as adopted by the consecrated religious - is meant to give hope to those who are involuntarily poor. A brother who agrees to live poor reminds everyone, but especially the poor, that contrary to what most people in our pretty materialistic world think, it is possible to be happy, joyful and even fulfilled if you don't have a lot of money. The consecrated man's witness of poverty says to one who struggles financially: “I find joy and fulfillment in life without having a lot, and I find it in Christ!” (Of course, this means that the brother really does have to live *poor* and *joyfully!*)

Imagine the potential impact that a young, caring, cool religious brother in pair of Walmart sneakers could have on the poor kid who has the Walmart sneakers but who, until meeting you, has felt he had to have the same expensive shoes as his more advantaged peers in order to fit in and feel good about himself. Then imagine the relief that child's mother might feel because until now, she has worried that her son won't be happy unless she can give him “the best”. Imagine the bit of hope restored to the man about to suffer a pay cut or who is worried about his job upon hanging out with a brother who has even less than he has, but is still full of life and satisfaction.

I had a colleague recently apologize to me for the junkiness of his car. He seemed embarrassed. I looked at him and said: "I'm a monk! You think I care? This is great." He smiled and maybe he was a little more grateful and unashamed for what he had.

We have some wonderful models in our Church of consecrated men and women who have voluntarily taken on poverty in order to ease the burden of the poor: St. Francis, St. Vincent de Paul, Mother Teresa Br. Andre Bessette, St. Jean Baptiste de la Salle. Their great gift to the poor was not to give the poor all the money and possessions they had, but rather, to live happily, contentedly, gratefully and faithfully with little or no more than what their comrades in poverty had. And when someone wondered or asked what accounts for their joy, their answer could only be Christ – Christ in our hearts, and Christ in one another.

Charismatic isn't it? This is the theology of our life. And it is not dependent on ordination.

### **Obedience**

Obedience is about power and self-determination, and the consecrated religious, by vowing obedience, surrenders these goods. He does so partially because he knows that accountability to another (or to a community of others) places him on the path to conversion; but he also does so, once again, to align himself with those whose power has been taken away or limited by life's circumstances: the oppressed, the imprisoned and alienated.

I am waiting for a monastery to spring up just outside the walls of a prison. Think of the questions and then the hope that might arise among and within the inmates confined there. So many parallels after all: cells, uniforms, lots of rules, a single-sex community, limited freedoms, limited possessions. The difference of course is that one group renounces their self-determination and freedoms, their money and their access to human and romantic intimacies voluntarily. And the result if done freely, zealously and joyfully by the consecrated volunteers, is that their incarcerated counterparts might be reminded or taught for the first time that their life still has value – even in prison – and that happiness and meaning do not depend on having the freedoms, money and relationships that others have. The witness of the brothers should proclaim that there is a joy, a life, a meaning that comes from a relationship within – within the walls of an enclosure, and within the cloister of the human heart.

Recently, a young Dominican brother ministering in a prison asked me what he was supposed to say to an inmate who wondered why – as good looking as he was – he would ever choose to give up sex and not marry. After some theological reflection, we agreed the best answer he could give would be to express a hope that by his celibacy and his presence, he might prove to the incarcerated gentleman that life and joy are possible without sex and without having another single person who belongs to us and to whom we belong. In so doing, he might offer that gentleman in prison some hope, especially during his time of confinement, while he is separated from those he loves or hopes to love once he gets out.

These evangelical counsels of celibacy, poverty and obedience are the theological centerpiece of our life as consecrated religious. They are *charismatic* – not only in the sense that they define and distinguish our life from that of the laity and the diocesan priest, but charismatic also in the sense that they are compelling: that when lived with proper zeal and conviction they have the capacity to attract others to



us and to make us irresistible to God. This is a complete charism which has stand-alone value for the Church, one which does not await ordination to complete it.

Pope Francis has reminded us over and over what the Catholic Church has been telling us for centuries: that there is a prophetic dimension to the lives of consecrated religious. This means that by the evangelical counsels, by the charism and theological meaning in our state of life, consecrated religious men, regardless of whether or not they are ordained, point to what much of the rest of the world is not accustomed to seeing. We are called in the words of Pope Francis to “wake up the world” to a reality – a *joyful* reality – which requires no money, sex or power to participate in. That reality is the Kingdom of God, and while we will be totally decked out in it in the life to come, we can begin making it real and tapping into its great promise amid the struggles and challenges of this current world. It’s the eschatological witness.

Finally, brothers: fraternity.

Both *Vita Consecrata* and the recent Vatican document *On the Identity and Mission of the Religious Brother in the Church* are careful to emphasize the communal nature of consecrated life and the brother vocation. By coming together to live in community, in a way that is distinct from family and diocesan life, consecrated men not only pattern themselves after the communities formed by the twelve apostles and the disciples of early church as described in the Acts of the Apostles, but also strive to stand as a sign of the kingdom to come, when we in all of our differences will be gathered together as one in God.

We give testament to this reality with greater success some days better than others, but our goal as brothers should always be to live closely and carefully with one another in such a way that people are reminded of something otherworldly – as if a little peninsula of the Kingdom of God had actually reached down and planted itself in our midst. Visitors to our communities and those who become acquainted with our way of living should walk away scratching their heads a little, wondering: “So many characters! Such a variety of personalities! How does it possibly work?” Of course, it shouldn’t work, except for Charity and by the grace of God.

The fact is that people do come to our communities searching for something, for some kind of witness, and when we get it right, they say: “*It’s heavenly. There’s something special there. I sense the real presence of God in that place.*” And what greater gift can we give the world than, by striving to live with one another as equals in perfect charity – not dominating one another, not punishing each other for one another’s weaknesses, not competing with one another except (as St. Benedict admonishes us) to be first to show respect to the other – we provide a glimpse of the Kingdom and renew the world’s hope that the new Jerusalem is not only possible but already on the horizon, coming together in our midst.

Some like to think of our mission as consecrated religious as being counter-cultural; I prefer placing the focus on love and its ability transform and call forth the very best from our culture. I am reminded of the words of a celebrated dancer, Pina Bausch, who is reported to have said: “For a long time I thought the artist’s role was to shock audiences. Now on stage I want to give people what the world, which has become too hard, no longer gives them: moments of pure love.”

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Let us return now, to the central thesis introduced at the beginning of this talk: that there is not only a great value, but indeed a great need to have men in our Church and in our communities who are “just brothers”, whose singular vocation it is to provide the uncomplicated witness to the charism of the consecrated life, and to the more specific charisms of our religious congregations. In making this argument, I am not suggesting that we should not have priests among us if our specific charisms allow. Nor do I want to suggest that religious priests cannot live the witness of the evangelical counsels and community in just as effective a way as non-ordained religious. Still, we must acknowledge that the addition or superimposition of priesthood to the consecrated life adds a specific charism and demands that sometimes compete with the identity, charism and mission of consecrated life.

Nygren and Ukeritis have reminded us that when individuals assume multiple roles, one role tends to assert dominance over the other; and our recent Vatican (2015) document acknowledges that, “Over the centuries, this goal [of living the evangelical counsels in imitation of Christ], has run the risk of taking second place in male religious life, in favour of priestly functions.” (section 9). This dominance of one charism or mission over another – of priestly functions over the charism of consecrated life – what Keating has labelled the “diocesanization” of male religious – is evident in the presently lopsided ratio of ordained to non-ordained religious among men. And at what cost?

### **Specific Charisms**

The Church’s documents pertinent to consecrated life are shot-through with references to the importance of respecting the specific charism of each religious institute. The Church does so out of recognition that each charism, inspired by the Holy Spirit, plays an essential role in the larger mission and building up of the Church. In the opening paragraphs of *Vita Consecrata*, for example, we hear:

*Whereas the Second Vatican Council emphasized the profound reality of ecclesiastical communion, in which all gifts converge for the building up of the Body of Christ and for the Church’s mission in the world, in recent years there has been felt the need to clarify the specific identity of the various states of life, their vocation and their particular mission in the church. Communion in the Church is not uniformity, but a gift of the Spirit who is present in the variety of charisms and states of life. These will be all the more helpful to the Church and her mission the more their specific identity is respected. (VC 4)*

In words a little more poetic, the point is made again:

*In the unity of the Christian life, the various vocations are like so many rays of the one light of Christ, whose radiance ‘brightens the countenance of the Church.’ (VC 16).*

Later references in *Vita Consecrata* to the Mystical Body, make clear that the Church is less herself, and her progress more impeded when the rich charisms and proper contributions of the many Institutes are diminished or are absent altogether. Where founding charism takes “second place” to priestly functions, there is greater risk that the Church at large, and even we ourselves, misunderstand or fail to perceive the true nature of our calling and what it is that we are called to contribute to the building up

of the Body of Christ in the world. In a recent conversation with a number of Marianist friends, one of the ordained members made what I considered an insightful, if not prophetic statement in relation to his own community's identity: "If our number of priests grows larger than the number of brothers, then we have lost our charism."

### **Vocations**

Of related concern are the implications that unclear or "second-seat" charisms have for the attraction and retention of new vocations to our religious institutes. If indeed the evangelical counsels of poverty, celibacy and obedience and the fraternal witness of living in community are the defining, theological centerpiece of our charisms, then any additional obligations that weaken or make these less apparent to others (as honorable as they might be), may ultimately diminish our "charisma" or our ability to draw others to join and persevere in our way of life.

This goes for each of our Institute's more specific charisms as well. A young man, for example, who has been moved by the Holy Spirit to pursue a more contemplative life of work and prayer is less likely to join or persevere in a monastic community whose manner of living more closely resembles that of diocesan priests or missionaries than men living together as brothers, sharing meals, prayer and work, and competing with one another in charity and mutual obedience. Similarly, a man looking to join the Franciscans, attracted by its mission of poverty may become discouraged if he finds the majority of friars engaged in parish work, pursuing a standard and style of life that is more consistent with upper middle class Americans than the poor and marginalized that Francis so deeply identified with.

The findings of the NRVC/CARA study looking at recent religious vocations (Brendyna & Gautier, 2009) have made it abundantly clear. Young men and women who have joined or are looking to join a religious community are motivated first by the desire to live in community: to live, work, eat and pray together with others, and preferably in larger groups of eight or more. A particularly striking result was the inverse, direct correlation found between the number of the institute's members living out on one's own, and the likelihood of that community's ability to attract new members. A tool recently published by NRVC (Falkenhain, 2014) designed to assess the "internal culture of vocation" within religious communities, identifies clarity of charism as the first criteria for determining whether the culture within a congregation or institute facilitates the attraction and retention of new members.

### **Challenges**

I would like to conclude my remarks today by offering some challenges or recommendations we might consider in moving forward. I will try to address them to the various groups present with us today.

#### **Religious Institutes and Leaders**

Religious institutes and their leaders are encouraged to promote and facilitate the presence of brothers or non-ordained members within their communities as a partial means of preserving a primary focus on the charism of consecrated life and of their own proper charism. The larger Church benefits by having "uncomplicated witnesses" to the charism of consecrated life, and our own communities are in great

need of those who remind us of the completeness of our institutional charism prior to or aside from the charism of priesthood.

In some cases, institutes and communities may need to revisit their apostolates and the structures of their life in order to provide meaningful and attractive roles for young men not pursuing ordination. Limiting roles for brothers within our apostolates and works to support staff and tradesmen may significantly limit the appeal for new members to pursue the consecrated life as a non-ordained member. While these are noble and meaningful labors, many young men are approaching religious life without these particular skill sets and interests, and arrive instead with considerable education and professional experience in other arenas. If we have not prepared roles for intellectually, academically and professionally gifted individuals which do not require ordination, then these men may find it difficult to imagine a place for themselves among us and either leave our communities or pursue ordination simply in order to find work and ways of contributing that make good use of their talents and gifts.

The recent Vatican (2015) document strongly encourages institutes of brothers only to “develop new structures and initial and continuing formation programmes which can help new candidates and current members to rediscover and value their identity in the new ecclesial and social context.” (Section 39) While I would agree that increased levels of structured formation for non-ordained religious is a great need, I would argue that the need is probably greater in our clerical or mixed communities, than in institutes of brothers only. In communities and congregations in which seminary has become the norm for the temporary professed once they have completed novitiate, newly professed members not pursuing ordination are at risk of finding the rest of their initial formation abruptly cut short or comparatively poorly thought-out. Problems likewise arise when communities leave important dimensions of initial formation (e.g., celibacy formation) to the seminary. When this is the case, the formation of brother candidates suffer neglect and, even those in seminary may find the distinct meaning and theology of consecrated celibacy underrepresented if not left entirely unaddressed.

Religious institutes may wish to strongly consider delaying seminary formation until after the profession of final or solemn vows. Where formation for priesthood competes with, substitutes for, or even replaces initial formation for the consecrated life, there is a greater likelihood that the charism of priesthood will dominate the religious charism. To gain some perspective, leaders may wish simply to compare the amount of time, energy and resources their community devotes to initial formation for the consecrated life with that allotted for priesthood formation. A community whose initial formation program includes only one or two years of religious formation (novitiate) followed by four or five years of highly organized and rigorous priestly formation should not be surprised if that they discover that the role and charism of priesthood has come increasingly to dominate the community’s identity. Delaying priesthood formation until after final profession guarantees the same religious formation for all new members and communicates to the entire community that a complete and intentional formation in our particular way of life is the foundation upon which a secondary charism of priesthood is overlaid.

Men who are not pursuing ordination for priesthood should be encouraged and provided the resources to continue their theological education and training by means appropriate to the individual and the

community's resources. A growing understanding of ecclesiology, Christology, Scripture, religious canon law, and the theology of the consecrated life equips brothers with the theological knowledge necessary not only to grow in holiness and derive greater meaning from their life as consecrated religious, but also prepares them to be credible leaders within the institute.

Along these lines, current leaders of Institutes are encouraged to cultivate leadership among non-ordained members. If not allowed by canon law to serve as provincials or abbots, brothers may be able to serve as priors, assistant provincials, members of leadership councils, and perhaps more importantly, formation personnel and directors of our apostolates. Community governance that overlooks or minimizes the voice of non-ordained members robs itself of a perspective that reminds us in a particular way of the demands of the community's charism and tradition.

Communities wishing to be creative may even consider promoting brothers as special conductors of the institute's charism and find formal ways for non-ordained members to study and explore the history, tradition and charism of the institute. This type of intellectual and spiritual engagement with the charism may come to be recognized as part of the responsibility of the brother's vocation and help sharpen the intentionality with which they provide the "uncomplicated witness" of brotherhood. To take this one step further, brothers would then be well positioned for greater inclusion in the ongoing articulation of the charism and mission of the community over time.

Most of the challenges articulated so far are probably more pertinent to mixed communities, and communities of brothers and priests probably have much to learn from institutes of brothers only, especially with respect to models of initial formation and ways of articulating and expressing religious charisms that depend less on priestly identity and ministry. Institutes of brothers only also play a special role in reminding the larger Church that the charism of consecrated life is already complete without the presence of priesthood. Again, this is not to say that priesthood is not a valuable dimension to many religious communities; however, the presence of communities like the Christian Brothers, the Alexian Brothers, the Franciscan Brothers of the Poor and many others stand as a witness the completeness of the charism of consecrated life. To do this most effectively, members must be visible, identifiable, and compelling in their fidelity to their vocation and its demands.

To my all fellow brothers, regardless of type of institute, I challenge you not only to be aware of the dignity of your call as consecrated religious in the Church, but to strive each day to live it with the greatest zeal. As I have tried to communicate above, your gifts of voluntary celibacy, poverty and obedience (made perhaps a little more striking by the absence of the status of priesthood) are a great gift to the Church and a sign of true hope to those who are lonely, marginalized, poor, oppressed, and without social status themselves. To be a generator of hope, of course, you must live your vows – these evangelical counsels – with great seriousness and conviction, and then you must commit yourself to a deeply intimate relationship with God who will bring the joy, meaning and fulfillment that others need see in your lives and which they desire so very much for themselves. If you can do this, then your life is truly charismatic and you will be, as the recent document from the Vatican has pointed out, the memory of Jesus in the world. Jesus is the prototype, the one who lived to ease the burden of and give hope to the lonely, the poor and the oppressed through his own sacrifices.

Brothers, do not assume that just because we do not have the competing demands of priesthood, that we are automatically more available to give an “uncomplicated witness” to the charisms of the consecrated life and our specific institutions. Our own identities as brothers are just as vulnerable to being dominated by over-identification with our work and professional life, by the myriad opportunities that can draw us away from the center of community life, and even by our occasional desire to hold on to the idea of ourselves as victims in a hierarchical church. If the true fruits of our vocation and sign of hope for others are our joy and our capacity to love, then nothing is more inconsistent with these than unbridled ambition, selfishness, and bitterness.

I urge you, brothers, take every opportunity to advance your spiritual and theological education. While your mission as non-ordained religious is more likely to be played out in the temporal realities of life, this does not mean that you are any less responsible for cultivating a deep and rich theological and spiritual life. Be sure to practice and master the art of theological reflection – the setting aside of time to allow your specific experiences of ministry, celibacy, poverty, obedience and community to come into conversation with your theological knowledge and your knowledge of the charism of religious life. It is only when we take the time to apply *what we know* to *what we are living* that the meaning of our lives becomes apparent and we are sustained by that meaning. This mining of our consecrated lives for its meaning leads to greater knowledge of God and ultimately to gratitude for our vocation.

Finally, Brothers, don't forget to express gratitude for your ordained brothers who often find the strain of priestly ministry a burden and an added challenge in their attempts to live out the demands of religious life. Not only do they need our witness to what is foundational, but they also need our support, encouragement, and prayers as we strive together to add our particular ray to the one light of Christ.

To the laity present, please allow me to express, on behalf of all of us who strive to offer the witness of the consecrated life, our deep, deep gratitude for the many ways you support us. We are grateful for the trust and hope you place in us, and never forget the power of your witness. Just as we hope that you will continue to look to us to be shining witnesses to the kingdom to come, know that we draw great inspiration from your ability to keep Christ at the center of your lives amid the oftentimes overwhelming demands of family life, care for elderly parents, economic challenges, social obligations and social consciousness. Equally as critical are the encouragement and positive models of commitment you provide us by your marriages and your dedicated obedience to your children and family members. I am discovering in my own life that I have learned most about perseverance in the monastic way of life from the example that my parents have given in their 55 years of marriage.

Finally, to any young people considering a religious vocation in the Church, allow me only to say that the consecrated life is rich, challenging, beautiful, difficult and, above all, a great privilege. This is true of all vocations in the Church if they are lived with zeal. I do not hesitate to tell you that life as a brother can be challenging, gritty and tough as well as rewarding and sweet, because I know you are looking to do something extraordinary and heroic with your lives. Know that you are invited to point to the kingdom with us and, in Pope Francis' words, to “wake up the world” to realities that we are not yet accustomed to seeing, but are too magnificent to be missed.

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