

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

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MY VOCATIONAL JOURNEY TO RELIGIOUS BROTHERHOOD

My vocational search as a young boy must have begun with an initial attraction to the priesthood since I was exposed almost every day to the sacramental ministrations of the Redemptorist Fathers who celebrated the daily Eucharist and who were my regular confessors at the shrine of Our Mother of Perpetual Help in my birthplace of Lipa City. I also had a considerable exposure to the life and ministry of diocesan priests and the hierarchy 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 Juvenate. Although neither of them persevered, I know that the prospect of trying out for myself the priestly vocation became an attractive possibility at a very early age. Up until my 10th 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 priesthood and the Religious Brother's vocation must have come much later but the real option to consider the Brother's vocation as an attractive possibility for me came about because of the significant influence of two Brothers whom I was privileged to have as religion teachers during my first two years of high school. My later involvement as a catechist in the public schools allowed me to discover my own gifts and attraction to the vocation of a teacher. On my senior year, I applied and was accepted into the live-out Aspirancy Program of the De La Salle Brothers although there was not much discernment in this decision—in fact, the overriding motivation for me was to join my group of high school friends who signed up also for the program. I never initiated any contact with the Brothers' community during my initial college years. Instead, I found myself joining the regular prayer meetings of a charismatic group in the university and visiting regularly an Opus Dei study center in Manila. I was clearly in search of something meaningful in my life beyond the career that was promised by my college degree.

The option to seriously re-consider the Brother's vocation came again during the summer of my sophomore year in college when the Vocation Director visited me at home bringing with him the application papers for the Junior Scholasticate (which was then our equivalent of the Postulancy). I was pressured to make a decision soon since he told me that the Orientation Program would open in a few weeks. The choice was a difficult one



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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 had chosen. It would be easy to explain to them that unlike priests we could not preside over the Eucharist or administer sacraments but like them we are vowed to obedience and celibacy (and, like all religious, also take on a vow of poverty). I could not argue with them when they urge me to “go all the way” and

“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 disillusionments 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 bishops, priests, sisters and all Church workers” but inadvertently forgot the Religious Brothers. Sadly, some of our Vocation Directors seem to be totally unaware of the variety of vocations and charisms in the Church and thus are unable to share with their listeners a perspective of vocations that is truly ecclesial. That is why I am most grateful to the liturgists of the Archdiocese of Ozamiz, who ensure that the prayers of the faithful recited in all parish masses never miss

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 has failed to understand her own. A confrere was asked once by a religious sister why he did not "go all the way" and become ordained, to which he responded, "For me, sister, it was a conscious choice not to become a priest. I don't think the same is true in your case." The Brother's response may be a bit uncharitable but in fact it expresses a truth that may be difficult to accept by those religious sisters who have not fully discerned and freely chosen their vocation as religious. One wonders how many religious sisters in the Philippines will apply for ordination if and when the institutional church allows the ordination of women. For those who would, could this be taken as proof that what keeps them faithful to their religious vocation is a canonical impediment for the ordained ministry rather than their free and active choosing of the religious vocation?

A PRIVILEGED PERSPECTIVE AND A GRACED OPPORTUNITY

The struggles of the Religious Brother in the Philippines today are essentially the struggles of any minority group in the church and in society. Those who belong to minority groups are rarely taken into account because many times it is only the strength of numbers which count. However, the rule of the majority is not certainly the Gospel way. We have to admit that many times, the bigger group imposes its will on the weaker ones without taking their concerns and rights into account. Usually, it is also the perspective of the majority which is given prominence and importance. And because their concerns and needs are taken for granted, then they are also misunderstood and many times also misplaced and misjudged. There are occasions when even the most politically correct among our leaders will find it unnecessarily expensive and impractical to make provisions for minority groups because these provisions could not be maximized anyway. Take for example the extra cost of installing ramps for those on wheelchairs or of providing left-handed desks in each classroom. In mixed congregations of priests and Brothers, it is more often the case that the formation program for religious life is ordered towards the ordained ministry especially when there are only a handful of candidates in a particular batch applying for Brotherhood. Many Brothers from these mixed congregations have not had any renewal program for many years since most programs address only the needs of clerics.

Fortunately, I do not believe that there is a deliberate scheme to ease out the Brothers from the community or any real manipulative move to dismiss their vocation as irrelevant to the present times. If at all, the vocation of the Religious Brother is not appreciated nor understood because there are many other concerns and needs of the Church and of its religious leaders which seem to be more urgent or important. Unfortunately, this lack of real concern for the vocation of the Religious Brother is more difficult to raise since we cannot pinpoint any real enemies of the Brother's vocation but at the same time, there seems to be no real and concrete support on the part of the Church and its leaders to promote the vocation of the Religious Brother. It is this shared reality and connection with minority groups in the Church, in the Philippines and in Asia which

give the Religious Brother's vocation a privileged perspective and graced opportunity. I see in the experiences and struggles of every Religious Brother a real opportunity to understand the experiences and struggles of all those who do not have the strength of numbers and therefore are taken for granted: special children, those with physical or mental disabilities, indigenous communities, peoples from minority religions, etc. In a very real sense, I see a deep bond shared among other groups in society and in the Church who may not necessarily be few in number but who are nevertheless excluded from the mainstream: women and children, laborers, farmers, the laity, the poorest of the poor, etc.

THE CHALLENGES FACING RELIGIOUS BROTHERS AS A WINDOW TO THE CHURCH'S OWN SEARCH FOR AUTHENTICITY AND RENEWAL

I am convinced that the very issues which face the vocation of the Religious Brother are those which the Church will have to deal with in this post-Vatican II era. The difficulties and threats to the vocation of a Religious Brother in the Church today are also symptoms of the difficulties and threats which are facing the Church in the modern world. What threatens the vocation of a Religious Brother today brings us also into the heart of the Church's own struggles to live authentically its calling especially in Asia. Below are listed some of those challenges facing Religious Brothers and the light they shed on the mystery of the Church and the call for *aggiornamento*.

The challenge to evolve a new understanding of the Religious Brother's vocation. Our new understanding of the role of the laity in the Church may present itself as a serious threat to the vocation of a Brother. The increase in the number of these new lay groups—charismatic communities, mandated organizations, secular institutes, etc.—especially those who also use the nomenclature “Brother” further adds to the misconceptions about Religious Brotherhood. Since most of these groups are also engaged in ministries and other activities similar to the apostolates of Religious Brothers, this could also be seen as having a negative effect in the vocations to Religious Brotherhood. There could be very little differentiation between a Religious Brother and a single layman who is a member of a charismatic community. Despite these perceived threats to the vocation, it could also be a real opportunity for the Religious Brothers to re-discover the essential elements of their religious consecration. Stripped of the traditional external signs which differentiate and define the vocation of a Religious Brother, he is now called to return to the real roots and constitutive elements of his religious consecration. The insights he discovers in this journey can become a window for the whole Church towards a greater understanding of the essential nature of consecrated life.

The challenge to recover the real value of the Religious Brother's ministry. In the Philippines, the image of the Religious Brother is still someone who is involved in *domestic duties, blue-collar jobs, or technical skills*. In the medical profession, there is a tendency for us to describe the work and role of *nurses* with reference to that of the surgeon. In a school setting, the term we use for *non-teaching personnel* already defines what they are not qualified to do and thus reinforces our view of this group as below the rank of teachers. Some qualified office administrators are given *faculty status* even if they have no desire to teach in a classroom setting—otherwise, they cannot be given the same benefits as those given to regular teachers. Religious Brothers share the same predicament with these groups because their ministry in the Church is never seen as complete in itself. There is a tendency to put things in a hierarchy and to overemphasize the sacramental

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.