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Despite steep decline, brothers see hope for their vocation's future

by Robert McClory



Holy Cross Br. Paul Bednarczyk: "We are not part of the hierarchical structure. A brother by definition is on an even level, on the same plane with everyone he encounters."

There are three things you need to know about today's religious brothers.

First, their numbers are continuing to decline at an alarming rate. In 1978, I attended a meeting of the National Association of Religious Brothers in Dayton, Ohio, and wrote an article for *NCR* on the state of the brotherhood. Although the population of brothers by then had dropped by 33 percent since 1965, there was a sense of optimism at the meeting -- a feeling that the overall decline of religious vocations had just about bottomed out and the downward trend was about to be reversed. Said one enthusiastic attendee, "I believe we are entering the age of brotherhood."

The euphoria was due in part to the prevailing spirit of Vatican II. In this new era of the layperson, the brothers were laymen. At a time when clericalism was under siege, the brothers were involved exclusively in nonclerical ministries. And as many vowed religious sisters and priests were trying to balance the signs

of the times against the outmoded regulations of their orders, the brothers were relatively unconstrained by canonical rules.

But now, 32 years later, the age of the brotherhood has still not come to pass. The precipitous decline of the 1970s rolls on unabated. The 4,700 religious brothers in the United States in 2010, as reported by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), represent a 62 percent drop from the 1965 figures. The brother decline is far steeper than that of priests in this country and is almost as steep as that of religious women.

It's clear the brotherhood has not been able to totally reject the popular belief that brothers are really would-be priests who just couldn't meet the requirements of priesthood. The tired, old question, "Why didn't you go all the way?" still lingers, veteran brothers sadly acknowledge. Nor have the brothers been able to toss aside the even older image of the brother as a simple soul who answers the phone, sweeps the hall, mows the lawn and takes on all the menial tasks no one else wants.

Meanwhile, Cardinal Franc Rodé, prefect of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life and the man behind the Vatican's controversial investigation of women religious, is preparing a document on religious brothers. He indicated concern about the decline in vocations and the "lack of attention on the part of the church to brothers." Their vocation, he said, "has its own reasons and a particular mission in the church." Brothers contacted for this story declined to speculate on where Rodé's concerns might lead.

The brothers are extremely proud of who they are and what they do, and they resent suggestions that the brotherhood is a second-class vocation.

That image is "just ignorance," said Br. Thomas Osorio, president of the Religious Brothers Conference (the new name of the former National Association of Religious Brothers). "Many of our members are better educated than most priests. We are teachers and doctors and university professors and scientists." As examples, he cited a brother-psychiatrist who heads a hospital in South Korea, and he spoke of the skilled brother medics who run a hospice in China. "The vocation of the brother is very different," said Osorio. "It's not like that of the priest who is called to administer sacraments. Ours is a vocation of the heart. We [brothers] are called to be in a relationship, to be one with the people we serve and with all who are suffering."

Paul Bednarczyk is a Holy Cross brother who sensed the unique nature of the vocation early in life. He attended a high school in Connecticut run by the Holy Cross congregation and was struck by the dedication and competence of the teaching brothers. "They were among the most significant men in my life," he said. But when he approached his parents about sensing his own religious vocation, they sent him to see the pastor of the local church, who quickly directed him to the local seminary. He was a senior at the time, and he tried to go along with the advice of his elders. "But I just wasn't excited about going to a seminary," said Bednarczyk. "I remember getting up one night, going downstairs and thinking for a long time. I decided that this was a mistake." Yes, it seemed clear to him he had a vocation to the religious life, but it was as a teacher, as a brother, not as a priest. So after graduation, he began studies at Stonehill College in Massachusetts, run by the Holy Cross congregation, and formally entered the order as a novice in 1979.

Instead of feeling inferior to priests, Bednarczyk said he felt comfortable as a brother from the beginning and has never lost that sense. In fact, he said, his status as a brother provides him a kind of freedom the priesthood cannot give. "We are not part of the hierarchical structure, strictly speaking," he said. "We are not above anybody. A brother by definition is on an even level, on the same plane with everyone he encounters." That doesn't mean brothers cannot hold positions of authority, he explained, but it's

authority in a different way, "a brotherly way." During his career, Bednarczyk, now 53, has had ample opportunity to exercise his brotherly authority, as vocation director for his province, as director of campus ministry at a Holy Cross high school, as director of student life at an international high school in Rome, and in his present post as executive director of the National Religious Vocation Conference, which includes among its active members priests, bishops, sisters and brothers.

That a lay brother oversees such a body may seem an anomaly, since the Vatican long ago ruled that only a cleric, a priest, may hold a top position in any church organization that includes clerics among its members. As a result, congregations like the Franciscans and Dominicans, which have both priest and brother members, are prohibited from electing a brother as provincial or regional superior. However, two such congregations, the Marianist and Holy Cross orders, were exempted from the prohibition by Rome in the 19th century. Thus, Benarczyk finds himself in an exceptional situation. He said he's had no problems during his five years heading the conference but admitted he is careful to do background research on priest-related issues when they arise.

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Brothers' general exclusion from superior roles in congregations that include priests is irksome to many brothers. The issue came to a head in 2009 when the Maryknoll missionary order elected a brother as superior for the U.S. region. The Vatican immediately vetoed the election, citing the old prohibition and claiming governance by a layperson would diminish the distinctive character of the priesthood. The Maryknoll superior general commented afterward that the order had hoped Vatican officials by then had "moved beyond" such distinctions, though obviously they had not.

A man who has not been inhibited in any way by his vocation is James Zullo, a 52-year member of the De LaSalle Christian Brothers. With a doctorate in psychology, he taught for many years at Loyola University in Chicago and is a recognized expert on the psychology of life transitions, both individual and institutional. Zullo has addressed groups of priests, sisters and brothers all over the world on issues of coping with change and believes his role as a brother enables him to be frank in ways that most priests cannot be. "We are free," he said, echoing Bednarczyk. "We don't have to support the clerical culture. Many priests are trapped by diocesan policies and are unable to move freely." Asked if he had ever been banned from addressing a Catholic group, Zullo said, "I'm not on any bishop's blacklist, and I think it's because, as a brother, I operate beneath their radar screens."

Zullo said the future of the brotherhood may look bleak in the United States, but the numbers are doing much better elsewhere, especially in Africa and Asia. CARA figures support his contention. Worldwide, the number of brothers declined by only 32 percent between 1970 and 2008, with the ongoing 62 percent loss in the United States accounting for much of the decrease. He spoke of the work of the Alexian, Marist, Patrician, Irish Christian and other brother congregations in the Third World. "There's exciting growth happening," he said. "We weren't seeing that 10 or 15 years ago." One major obstacle in these mission fields, said Zullo, is cultural misunderstanding of church's regulations on celibacy and other matters. "Sometimes a brother who is doing well will return to his village when there's a crisis of some kind, and he never comes back."

Third, some brothers look to a new day dawning.

Free (mostly) of internal church politics, brothers are pondering the status of Catholicism and visioning what they might contribute to the church of the future. Prominent among these visionaries is Br. Sean Sammon, who recently finished a four-year term as superior general of the worldwide Marist

congregation. Now on a sabbatical, he is hoping to establish a center for the renewal of religious life during the next few years. He is not thinking of another typical retreat facility but a kind of think tank and laboratory for developing religious renewal in ways never before conceived.

“The old models of religious life have fallen apart,” said Sammon, 62. “People don’t understand its nature. It most certainly has not been effectively communicated to young people. We have got to redefine what religious life is.” The Second Vatican Council told the church to observe the signs of the times, he noted, “but the signs of the times present during the period of the council were gone 10 years after the council. The world had changed completely.”

In talks, articles and in his 2002 book, *Religious Life in America: A New Day Dawning*, Sammon speaks of “the latchkey kids” who have grown up in this era. They define family without relying solely on blood ties because of their high experience of divorce, he said; they trust friendship over all other relationships; they are slow to make long-term commitments; and they long for institutions that live up to their claims. These people, he noted, are sometimes bitter and angry with the church, more often indifferent to it. But the post-Vatican II population is not lost, declared Sammon -- and this is his major point: “They hunger for spirituality.” The mantra of younger Catholics, “I’m not religious, I’m spiritual,” is a foundation for genuine development, believes Sammon, adding that any renewal of religious life must tap into this hunger. As lay, vowed religious, he sees the brothers playing a key role in the development.

As Marist superior general, Sammon traveled the world and said he encountered significant developments in France, Australia and Latin America. He spoke of new “movements,” whose lay members are not obsessed with the failings of the church but are “on fire for Jesus Christ” and live the Gospel in some form of community setting. He quickly pointed out that these movements are not to be confused with those familiar, reactionary, conservative thrusts that promote rigid obedience to authority and revel in the church of the past. Rather, said Sammon, these newer expressions of religious life function more “as a conscience for the church, modeling what it should be like, and are not always in sync with the hierarchy.”

Bednarczyk also discussed the challenge of touching Catholics who grew up with Vatican II as remote to them as World War II. This generation knows Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI, he said, and they’re not as vehement about fighting church battles as are older generations. “But they are the signs of these times,” he said, and must be taken seriously. He believes religious life as practiced by the brothers can provide a “prophetic dimension” to them and to the larger church, both through its emphasis on community life and in reaching out to the poor and suffering.

Perhaps then, “the age of the brotherhood” isn’t as odd an idea as it seems.

[Robert McClory is a longtime *NCR* contributor.]

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