

**RELIGIOUS INSTITUTE  
OF BROTHERS  
in the light of  
*VITA CONSECRATA* (1/2)**

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**Article published in the Osservatore Romano  
June 15th 1996**

In *Vita Consecrata* Pope John Paul II devotes four full pages to the vocation of the religious brother. This extraordinary attention is not, however, surprising: the religious brother has been in focus throughout every step of the long "journey" of the Synod on *Consecrated Life and its Mission in the Church and in the World*.

Four years ago the *Lineamenta* raised a number of salient issues concerning the vocation of brothers, and invited bishops, women and men religious, and other interested persons to express their concerns and opinions. The Synod secretariat received an impressive number of responses. The *Instrumentum Laboris* reported these responses and proposed concrete questions for the consideration of the Synod participants. The result was a striking number of interventions, and, finally, the formulation of two propositions.

The vocation of religious brothers has to be considered within the context of one of three specific forms of consecrated life: there are brothers in "clerical" institutes, brothers in "mixed" institutes, and brothers in "lay" institutes. This particular article is concerned only with the vocation of members of "lay" institutes or "Religious Institutes of Brothers".

### *Lineamenta*

The *Lineamenta* (19b and 21) recognizes the importance of the presence of religious brothers in the Church and expresses esteem for the quality of their service in a "rich diversity of apostolic and social works on behalf of humanity". Through these services Brothers bring the love of Christ to all and, inspired by the title they bear – *brother* – they contribute to the establishment of peace, justice and communion.

But the *Lineamenta* acknowledges that often the "character of the lay consecrated life for men is not clearly perceived, given that many of the faithful think that it should be joined to the priesthood, while in fact it represents consecration in its utter simplicity".

Consequently, the document declares, "it seems necessary" to examine thoroughly and evaluate the lived experience of Brothers in both clerical and lay institutes, taking into consideration questions concerning their "dignity, formation, participation, and apostolic service".

### *Instrumentum Laboris*

Responses to the questionnaire confirmed the position expressed in the preliminary document that the vocation of religious brother is not well understood and appreciated. Although consecrated life was predominantly lay in its origins, and although Vatican II affirmed positively and clearly the vocation of religious brothers, "many people" continue to think that the vocation of the religious who is not a priest is somehow incomplete.

The responses called for "a reaffirmation of the value, fullness, and importance" of the religious life of brothers, together with a recognition of the contribution brothers make to the life of the Church through the witness of their total consecration to God and through their apostolic services. While brothers should recognize and show respect for the diversity and complementarity of vocations in the Church, they are encouraged to share their heritage and spirituality with their lay collaborators. Other responses insisted that brothers be provided the opportunity for a formation that is human, theological, pastoral, professional, and integral.

### *The Synod*

In the early days of the Synod and in response to the invitation of the Synod secretariat, the late Brother José Pablo Basterrechea, former Superior General of the Brothers of the Christian Schools and at the time Secretary General of the Union of Superiors General, made a special fifteen minute presentation entitled *The Vocation of the Brother in Lay, Clerical, and Mixed Congregations*. This intervention served to bring the vocation of Brothers into clear focus.

Brother Pablo expressed his appreciation of the "special attention" given to the vocation of brothers in both the *Lineamenta* and the *Instrumentum Laboris* and voiced his hope that the synod participants would address, in an adequate and effective manner, the widespread ignorance and lack of understanding concerning the identity of religious brothers. He spoke at some length of matters concerning brothers in clerical and mixed institutes and of the crisis of vocations to religious brotherhood.

It is worth mentioning that the Holy Father's appointment of eight brothers as auditors, one of whom he named Assistant Special Secretary, was another manifestation of esteem for the vocation of the religious brother.

Numerous participants addressed the subject of brothers. Although the major focus of most of these interventions was the question of brothers in "mixed" institutes, many bishops and auditors expressed appreciation of the vocation of religious brothers in general. Discussions in small groups resulted in the formulation and acceptance of two pertinent propositions for consideration of the Holy Father.

### *Vita Consecrata*

Pope John Paul II writes directly and explicitly of the vocation of lay religious in paragraph 60 – entitled *Religious Brothers* – and in paragraph 61 – entitled *Mixed Institutes*. He begins paragraph 60 by recalling that

"according to the traditional doctrine of the Church, the consecrated life by its nature *is neither lay nor clerical*. For this reason the 'lay consecration' of both men and women constitutes a state which in its profession of the evangelical counsels is complete in itself. Consequently, both for the individual and for the Church, it is a value in itself, apart from the sacred ministry."

In that unambiguous reaffirmation of the position clearly expressed in *Perfectae Caritatis* (10) and in Canon 588, the Pope, accepting the recommendation of the Synod fathers, links the vocation of religious sisters and religious brothers. This linkage is very appropriate in that their vocation is essentially the same. Furthermore, according to the *Instrumentum Laboris* (8), sisters and brothers constitute 82.2% of the members of institutes of consecrated life and societies of apostolic life (72.5% sisters, 9.7% brothers). It is relevant to observe that people do not frequently ask whether or not the vocation of sisters is "complete in itself". It is rather the vocation of brothers that is questioned. For this reason religious brothers can be grateful for this reaffirmation.

The document then expresses "great esteem" for the valuable services rendered by brothers and by their participation "in the mission of proclaiming the Gospel and bearing witness to it". Given the importance of

these services, some of which can be considered *ecclesial ministries*, brothers must receive "an appropriate and integral formation: human, spiritual, theological, pastoral, and professional.

At this point the Holy Father, making his own a recommendation of the Synod fathers, provides a new orientation. Institutes which have a proper function which does not include the exercise of sacred orders are called in Canon 588 "lay institutes". Nonetheless, the Pope writes,

"the Synod pointed out that this terminology does not adequately express the particular nature of the vocation of the members of these religious institutes. In fact, although they perform many works in common with the lay faithful, these men do so insofar as they are consecrated... For this reason the Synod Fathers, in order to avoid ambiguity and confusion with the secular state of the lay faithful, proposed the term *Religious Institutes of Brothers*".

The Holy Father states that this proposal is significant because the term "brother" suggests a rich spirituality. He repeats the beautiful words of his General Audience address of 22 February 1995:

"These religious are called to be brothers of Christ, deeply united with him... brothers to one another... brothers to everyone, in their witness to Christ's love for all, especially the lowliest, the neediest... brothers for a greater brotherhood and sisterhood in the Church."

At this point the Holy Father offers a helpful clarification of paragraph 10 of *Perfectae Caritatis*, which states that there is no objection to the ordination of certain members of Religious Institutes of Brothers for the priestly service of the religious community, provided that the General Chapter approves such a policy. But, very significantly, the Pope reiterates what he declared in that same General Audience last year:

"However, the Second Vatican Council does not give any explicit encouragement for this, precisely because it wishes Institutes of Brothers to remain faithful to their vocation and mission."

Brothers can be grateful, therefore, for the appreciation and esteem for their vocation which motivated the Holy Father to render this authoritative interpretation of *Perfectae Caritatis* 10.

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