

**The Importance of FUNDED,
In-depth Community/Apostolate
Experiences
For Discerning Candidates
(1/2)**

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Sharing in the lifestyle and ministry of Religious Life leads to decision making. It enables the candidates to choose and decide the answers they believe to be in conformity with God's Will in their regard. Providing a program for discerning candidates that is personal, sharing, and experiential is of paramount importance. The following article will cover the advantages of an in-depth program over the standard discernment process; identify the necessary elements of such a program; establish the rationale for a FUNDED PROGRAM; explore the financial costs and source of funds; and conclude with a few suggestions on how to start such a program. Why would Religious want to invest energy and money in candidates who have yet to make a clear commitment to their Religious lifestyle? I believe Jesus' invitation, «Come and see,» is the best rationale for justifying so much time and expense. It's not possible for a «discerning candidate» to fully accept an invitation to Religious Life without really understanding its value and perceiving the richness and joy found within. Here is the method used by the De La Salle Christian Brothers of the New York Province to enable young men to find meaning, significance, and satisfaction in their possible vocations as De La Salle Christian Brothers.

A high school graduate who is considering the Brother's vocation as a possibility among his many options is invited to join our CONTACT PROGRAM. This program provides a simple structure of **discernment** based upon **prayer, reflection, regular interviews, and association** with the De La Salle Christian Brothers and the candidates' peers. Depending on the age and academic level of the candidate, this program can last from one to four years. Being a **program of discernment**, when the candidate no longer sees the vocation of a De La Salle Christian Brother as an option for himself, he «graduates» from the program. The time spent in this ministry of vocation discernment is profitable whether the

individual chooses to join us or some other Christian lifestyle.

The CONTACT PROGRAM seeks to provide a young man with the opportunity to examine **his life in relation to the Brother's life**. In this way the young man grows through prayer, reflection, and participation in the awareness of God's call in the people and events of his daily life. The level of commitment that is asked of the young man is **NOT a decision to become a Brother**, but a willingness to **explore the POSSIBILITY of becoming a Brother**. What occurs, then, during the CONTACT PROGRAM is a process of discernment centered on the individual and his life at that particular moment.

There are four related elements of the CONTACT PROGRAM in which the candidates are encouraged to participate: interviews with the Vocation Director once or twice a semester; visits to the Communities/Schools of the DLS Brothers; January and June Retreats; living in Community and ministering with the Brothers in one of their summer apostolates. Since this article deals with **FUNDED EXPERIENCES**, attention will be given only to the Retreats and summer Apostolates which are financed by the De La Salle Christian Brothers of the New York District.

Besides the introductory retreat held in June for incoming candidates to our NEW YORK CONTACT PROGRAM, our retreats are held twice a year during May and January when colleges are not in session. The intent of these retreats is to give some basic ideas about the meaning of vocation as a «call and response» process; to promote a prayerful attitude of listening and searching for God's Will; and to explain the vocation of the Brother in the Church today. It is hoped that this process will be an effective and explicit catechesis leading to commitment on the part of the discerning candidate.

For practical reasons and for the encouragement and support of our candidates (you can imagine the impression made on the young men when they see a number of others discerning their vocations), the May retreat is a gathering of the candidates of our three Eastern Districts (Provinces). There is no cost to the participants who, in most cases, could not afford to pay for the travel expenses and room and board (and something «free» is always enticing). Because of the recognized value of such a gathering, each District willingly absorbs the expense. The Formation Director of the New York District solicits donations from individual Brothers and FSC Communities (each year the donations have totaled between \$4,000 and \$6,000) and whatever remainder is needed to meet the expense is supplied by the District's Vocation/ Formation Budget (chalk it up to the necessary and important Ministry of Vocations). Actually the Contact Program is seen as an extension of the Catholic school which, by its very nature, must encourage interest in vocations.

The January retreat is even greater in the numbers attending and in its impact on the participants who come from all six of our USA Districts and the District of Toronto. Our one Afro-American candidate (N. Y. District) now sees he is not the only one of his culture and background in a process of discernment. The same can be said of our two Hispanic candidates. This year's assembly of 95 participants was especially notable for its mix of cultures, age groups, and presentation. The choice of topics, the presenters, the planning and execution of the prayer services and liturgies are all in the hands of the candidates. Candidates, postulants, novices, and Brothers with annual vows share the stories of their journeys. This gathering helps the discerning candidate to personalize his faith, to build up his Christian identity, and certainly helps him in his decision-making process to possible commitment to the service of the Kingdom of God. The openness, affirmation, and bonding that takes place in such a gathering as this is well worth the cost to our Districts. Again, the FUNDS are obtained by donations of the Brothers and from the annual budget for Vocation/Formation.

Another FUNDED experience provided for our candidates is a month's sharing in the Community Life and Ministry of the Brothers. Our candidates, who are mostly products of our schools, KNOW WHAT WE DO...we are educators. But WHAT WE DO does not include all that is to be said about the vocation of a Religious Brother. Integrated with our MINISTRY are RELIGIOUS CONSECRATION and COMMUNITY LIFE. The totality of our person transcends our activity (educators). WHO WE ARE is best expressed by living out fully the three constitutive elements of the Brother's vocation. It is not in words or books that young people meet most forcefully the God Who calls them by name, but rather in the person of the Brother who gives witness to his Brotherhood. Pope Paul VI states, «People today listen more willingly to witnesses than to teachers; and, if they do listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.» (EVANGELII NUNTIANDI - Article 41) To be sure that our candidates have a fuller understanding of the vocation they are discerning, they are invited to see first hand what it means TO BE BROTHER. It is the invitation of Jesus as stated in the Gospel, «Come and see.»

During the candidates' stay in Community, they are expected to be «full-fledged» members, sharing in the Brothers' prayers, Liturgies, meals, meetings, recreation, and community chores. Through observation, dialogue, and lived experience the candidates are exposed to the vowed life of the Brothers' vocation. In addition to experiencing

Community living, the candidates also participate in the Brothers' Ministry. They will take part in supervised teaching, and direct sports activities and fine arts programs for inner city children. In this way the Brothers accompany the candidates on their journey of discernment. This experience helps the candidates to enter progressively into a deeper life of prayer by initiating them into meditative prayer and into a more regular and richer sacramental life. It also gives them the chance to develop a taste for the ministry of Christian education, especially among the disadvantaged.

The duration of the Summer Work Programs is four or five weeks determined by the organizers of the program. Whatever the length of the program may be, the candidate receives a stipend of \$200 per week (to be used for his education) and free room and board. FUNDING these programs falls into two categories. A «fundless» inner city program sponsored by the Brothers obtains its money from our Vocation budget and from donations by individual Brothers, Communities, and schools (anyone can get «into the act» of supporting this important vocation ministry). Some of our programs have a source of income (State/City funds... Parish funds... a corporation grant... a tuition fee) so they become responsible for paying the stipend.

There are also options for covering the cost of room and board. If the candidates live in one of our existing Communities that has a summer program, that Community graciously picks up the cost as their donation to the District Vocation Program. If the candidates form a community of their own with several Brothers, using a facility donated by Manhattan College, then the District covers the cost of their room and board.

The two remaining financial concerns are transportation and health insurance. All transportation costs are covered by our District vocation budget. Health insurance coverage depends on whether the summer program has its own source of finance, and then it pays, or whether the summer program is without a source of income, and then the District vocation budget pays.

Perhaps the importance of the summer programs is best seen through the eyes of the candidates who participated in them. The following two questions and their answers are taken from the evaluation sheets administered at the end of each program.

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