

Bearing Witness to the Reign of God: Discipleship as a Religious Brother

by Ernest J. Miller, FSC

In *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's question to his friend, Swiss pastor and theologian Erwin Sutz—what does it mean to follow Christ?—is the essential question of discipleship.¹ It is a question followers of Christ must continue to ask, as Bonhoeffer did until his death. As Brant Himes observes, "For Bonhoeffer, this central orientation to discipleship is the question of what ought to be going on in the life of a Christian and in the life of the church."²

Bonhoeffer's concern with the theme of discipleship finds ground in the Synoptic Gospels. These biblical texts include an account of Jesus's mission with dramatic calls to discipleship. Without preparation or even conversation, Jesus summons the unsuspecting company of brothers to follow him and to join in his work of "fishing" for others. Simon and Andrew drop their casting nets; James and John leave their father, hired hands, and boats. According to the scriptures, all four "immediately" began to follow Jesus. They are ordinary folk who are summoned to begin a journey of discipleship. The story of the twelve apostles—the story of their call to vocation—is told with disarming simplicity but carries the power of instruction and challenge for every believer who has felt the tug of the invitation to mission.

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This Christian story becomes our story. Progressively, God proposes a new story, a future story that invites us to step out of our past. Thus the gospel is for people who have a backstory, or prologue. Meditating on Jesus's summons of the twelve, we can see that the gospel gives us a new story that enables us to fulfill the ministry of Jesus; that is, creating the reign of God in our time. In discussing the summons to Christian discipleship, I aim to draw attention to how this gospel challenge permeates the various levels of consecrated life in the church: personal, historical, and communal.

Hearing My Summons to Discipleship

My story begins as a young boy in New Orleans. It is not a situation in which I heard God's invitation to religious life as a result of encountering a burning bush or falling off a horse. Rather, the call to live and minister as a religious brother came through God's presence mediated through ordinary people. After careful discernment and preparation, my response was *yes—let me step in and give it a go*. Perhaps William J. O'Malley, SJ, articulates best

1 Brant Himes, "Discipleship as Theological Praxis: Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a Resource for Educational Ministry," *Christian Education Journal* 8:2 (2011): 264.

2 Himes, "Discipleship as Theological Praxis," 264.

what I contemplated when I first started my vocational journey, asking: “What will make [me], at least ‘in the going,’ fulfilled? The resolve to keep asking questions—without hankering for definitive answers, grateful we will never run out of *terras incognitas*.”³

I was a church-child. That is, I grew up in the “black” church. Hence, from an early age I was adjusted to faith and religious practice. Like my mother, a very dedicated churchwoman, I was a Methodist Christian until age fourteen. At Trinity United Methodist Church on Valence Street, we experienced a more traditional (“classic”) African American Christianity. Unlike a new generation of black ministers, Trinity’s pastors did not disclose a propensity “to prophetically preaching the message that love and justice are inseparable companions which form the foundation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”⁴ I found myself in a church every Sunday, but my mother did not convey a strict attitude that it was mandatory. Simply, she embodied a sense of discipleship in a way that positively influenced my religious orientation. Yet, my father was not religious. Indeed, he generally had a negative attitude toward faith and the practice of religion; however, he did not allow his stance to thwart my predisposition toward church.

While my parents afforded me the space to nurture this predisposition, my vocation was born as a result of my relationship with the Marianite Sisters of Holy Cross. I encountered them at St. Rita Catholic School on Fountainbleau Drive, the elementary school I attended from first through sixth grade. By the fourth grade, I had befriended the sisters. I was privileged to spend time volunteering to help them outside school hours with various projects: distributing new books to the classrooms, moving desks, cleaning the convent, and assisting sisters moving in and out of the convent. By way of my sustained contact with the sisters, the concept of a vocation was introduced to me.

On a most basic level, as an adolescent, I began to imagine myself living a life similar to the Marianite Sisters—with education as a ministry and fellowship in community with others who shared and vowed commitment to the apostolate. Considering all the Marianites who encouraged and inspired me, Sr. Juanita Wood, MSC, stands out as a witness-bearer to discipleship as a consecrated person. A young, tall and energetic teacher, Sr. Juanita fashioned an amiable classroom environment in which quality teaching and learning flourished. As my third and fourth grade teacher, she was among the first who inspired me to consider becoming a brother-teacher. But, more than anything, she deposited an indelible mark in me by instilling confidence and hope.

Providentially, the sisters at St. Rita introduced me to the existence of religious brothers, in particular the Brothers of Holy Cross.⁵ I learned that these brothers conducted Holy Cross School, a middle and high school for boys. For three summers, I attended the Holy Cross Summer Camp, a dual program of recreation and academic enrichment. While I did not have formal contact with any brothers while in the summer program, I began to learn who they were on campus. During my sixth grade year, having relished my time at the camp, I asked my father if I could continue my education at Holy Cross. He responded favorably, and without much hesitation. Achieving admission into Holy Cross, I had to prepare for a momentous transition from the smaller grammar school with about 300 students to the larger middle and high school with over 1,000 students.

While on the verge of this transition, sixth grade also stands out for a vocational reason. For the first time, I met with a vocations director. Br. Michael Brickman, CSC, who was serving in that role for the Holy Cross Brothers Southwest Province, visited me one day after school in the St. Rita Convent. While he encouraged me in my desire

3 William O. Malley, SJ, “The Wisdom of Oz: Taking the Long Way Home,” *America* 212, no. 11 (2015): 21.

4 Trinity United Church of Christ, “Our Pastor,” <http://trinitychicago.org/>.

5 Blessed Basil Moreau is the founder of the sisters, brothers and priests of Holy Cross. Today, the sisters constitute three independent congregations: the Marianites of Holy Cross, Sisters of Holy Cross, and Congregation of Sisters of the Holy Cross. The Congregation of Holy Cross is comprised of the brothers and priests.

to become a religious brother, Brother Michael informed me I was too young. It can be said that I was maladjusted: a black Protestant adolescent thinking about consecrated life in the Catholic Church.

In a way similar to my time at St. Rita, arriving at Holy Cross School brought me into direct contact with the Brothers of Holy Cross who ministered there. Before officially starting the school year, I reached out to the newly appointed headmaster, Br. John McLaughlin, CSC, to talk about the brothers' work, community life, and learning about his journey. A seasoned educator who witnessed the brothers' vocation with joy, he connected me for the first time to an African American brother, Br. Roy Smith, CSC, then serving on the Holy Cross Brothers' Midwest Province provincial team. Eventually, Brother John served as my tenth grade math teacher, debate cheerleader, and confirmation sponsor. In eighth grade with the support of my parents, I made what I now call a lateral move from life as a United Methodist to life as a Roman Catholic. For this occasion, the sisters at St. Rita hosted my First Communion/Confirmation liturgy in the convent chapel. I invited Brother John to be my confirmation sponsor because, in just a short period of time of knowing him, he impressed me as an exemplary religious brother. Throughout my discernment about entering the consecrated life, I imagined following in his footsteps.

Interestingly, during my seventh grade year, I met Br. Andre Lacoste, FSC, the first Brother of the Christian Schools with whom I became acquainted. At the time, he was studying for a doctorate in English literature at Tulane University. Our encounter resulted from his answering the phone when I called the De La Salle High School community one day to inquire about his religious community. The fact that Brother Andre willingly invited me over to talk with him left a positive impression in my mind; namely, that the Brothers are an inviting group of men. This meeting started my long interest in this all-brothers community.

At the same time, my curiosity about the brotherhood increased as a result of my contact with the Holy Cross Brothers over the course of six years on the beautiful riverside campus of Holy Cross School. Attentive to the Spirit's direction in their lives, they were ordinary men devoted to God through their ministry and community life; they freely and joyfully offered their life for others as a sign of hope. As it is stated in the *Constitutions of the Congregation of Holy Cross*: "The footsteps of those men who called us to walk in their company left deep prints, as men carrying heavy burdens. But they did not trudge; they strode. For they had the hope."⁶⁶ In varied and wonderful ways, the Holy Cross Brothers I encountered and admired were witnesses to the deep-rooted legacy of a Holy Cross education in the faith. They were, indeed, walking in the footsteps of the first Brothers of Holy Cross who established their Institute's charism and mission in 1849 in New Orleans.

As an undergraduate student in New Orleans, I joined the aspirancy program, a space designed to help discern if a vocation to the Brothers of the Christian Schools is one's life path. When I graduated in 1991, it seemed clear that the Spirit was summoning me to brotherhood. Accepted into graduate school to study international affairs, I left New Orleans for Washington, D.C. During that two-year period, my reasons for considering the consecrated life came to maturity. With the grace of God and the guidance of my aspirancy director, I decided to give the Brothers of the Christian Schools, or De La Salle Brothers, a try.

Moving into the next stage of my journey, I acquiesced to three facts that intensified the appeal of this religious community: the historical distinctiveness of the Brothers of the Christian Schools; the sole dedication to the wide mission field of Christian education and evangelization; the global presence of the Brothers and other Lasallians in more than eighty countries, educating and evangelizing across a vast landscape of peoples, cultures, religions, languages, and geographies.

6 *Constitutions of the Congregation of Holy Cross* 8:122, <https://www.holycrossusa.org/spirituality/constitutions/>.

After twenty-one years as a Brother of the Christian Schools, I have been privileged to minister at three Lasallian secondary schools and serve five years in provincial administration. Indeed, it is a grace to be a brother-educator inside and outside the sacred classroom. This powerful Negro spiritual keeps my original response to the summons to become a religious brother vibrant: “I Can’t Tarry” – “I’ve got to keep running, running, running as I ascend to the kingdom.”

De La Salle and His Brothers: A Spiritual Adventure in Evangelization through Education

The task of building the reign of God, a commitment to which Jesus calls us, never ends. The Holy Spirit moved John Baptist de La Salle (1651-1719), a wealthy French priest, educational innovator, and saintly founder of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, to step into the world to take up this task through Christian education. He was more than ready to take a distinguished career in ecclesiastical circles. He was a canon in the Reims cathedral. He had earned a Doctor of Theology degree with top honors. He had plenty of money at his disposal. He had an influential network of family and friends.

Yet, disturbed by the social realities faced by children from economically poor and working class families in late seventeenth- to early eighteenth-century France, De La Salle “came to discern, in faith, what God wanted the mission of the Institute to be.”⁷ The *Rule* of 1705 states: “The end of this Institute is to give a Christian education to children.”⁸ Central to De La Salle’s spiritual discernment about God’s plan was the creation of a community of Brothers to conduct Christian Schools oriented toward bringing salvation⁹ to the whole world. In their work of education, the Brothers undertake to bring about the coming of that new kind of world . . . begun with the Incarnation and the paschal mystery of [Jesus Christ.]¹⁰

Thus, it is in the mission field of Christian education and evangelization that De La Salle’s Brothers (and now all Lasallian educators) acquit themselves for this apostolic ministry.

The spiritual orientation De La Salle acquired, inspired by Sulpician spirituality,¹¹ informed and formed his new understanding of church and mission in the post-Tridentine period. Reflecting on the founder’s spiritual discernment, former Brother Superior General Alvaro Rodriguez Echeverria, FSC, notes:

At a historical time marked by doctrinal tensions such as Jansenism and Gallicanism, our Founder did not enter into theoretical discussion, but his concern was that children and young people achieve salvation. Surely the legacy of the French school of spirituality will mark his decisions that would be carried out little by little, as he himself confesses, *from commitment to commitment*, to get involved in a very different world: the world of teachers without resources and with little preparation for their role, abandoned children and young people, the families of workers, young people without greater goals.¹²

7 *Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools Generalate, 2008), no. 2.11. Note that “Institute” is the designation in Canon Law for a community of consecrated religious men and women.

8 John Baptist de La Salle, *Rule of 1705*, 1:3, in *Rule and Foundational Documents*, trans. and ed. Augustine Loes, FSC, and Ronald Isetti (Landover, MD: Christian Brothers Publications, 2002), 14.

9 For De La Salle, “salvation” has a double meaning: wholeness in this world and in the next.

10 Christian Brothers Conference, *The Brother of the Christian Schools in the World Today: A Declaration* (Lincroft, NJ: La Salle Provincialate, 1997), no. 37, http://lasallian.info/wpcontent/uploads/2012/08/The_Declaration_Revised_English_Translation_1997.pdf.

11 An expression of the French School of spirituality as lived and formulated by Rev. Jean-Jacques Olier, founder of the Society of St. Sulpice.

12 Alvaro Rodriguez Echeverria, FSC, *Consecrated by the God of the Trinity as a Community of Brothers: Messengers and Apostles Sent by the Church to Make Present the Kingdom of God* (pastoral letter) (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools Generalate, 2009), 26–27.

Moving from “commitment to commitment,” De La Salle brought to bear on the practical decisions of the Brothers’ apostolic life the light of Christian faith. This dynamic coheres with this current articulation of theological reflection: it serves “both to interpret life’s experiences in light of God’s purposes in Jesus, and to understand the Christian story about God in the light of what we are experiencing day to day.”¹³ The social location and vested interests of late seventeenth-century/early eighteenth-century France differed in many respects from the world of late twentieth-century United States, for example. Nonetheless, De La Salle’s movement from “commitment to commitment” signified his apostolic sensitiveness¹⁴ to the social realities around him. While he was quite knowledgeable in the fields of education, catechesis, spirituality, and theology, most consequentially, he kept his focus on the book of life: the community life of the Brothers and the children they served.

The Historical Character of De La Salle’s Brothers

With creativity and innovation, De La Salle entered into the world of the children whom Jesus called “the least of these.” Though the words “creativity” and “innovation” are not words De La Salle used or would have easily understood in 1680, it is nonetheless important to recognize the “fundamental creativity which led De La Salle . . . by a series of commitments to the foundation of the Brothers as a group of laymen, a community, a society and finally an Institute approved by the Church.”¹⁵ De La Salle established a community of unmarried men who are neither “seculars” nor “clerics.” In his vision, they were to be dedicated to the ministry of education and evangelization as “Brothers.” Br. Gerard Rummery, FSC, observes: “Here is the prototype of all teaching brotherhoods which, in the mid-19th century, became the fastest growing movement in the Catholic Church.”¹⁶ By the particular Lasallian vow of association for the educational service of the poor, De La Salle envisioned his Brothers remaining united in a collective witness against all odds for the reign of God. Association represents the unifying element in the identity of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. For us, it integrates the various other elements of the Brothers’ identity: consecration, community, and mission.

Reflective upon the letters of Paul, De La Salle identifies his Brothers as “ambassadors of Christ,” “builders of the church,” and “ministers of grace.” “Minister” is a biblically rooted vocational term, which integrates the three constitutive elements—religious consecration, community, and mission—of the Brothers’ life. The term minister conveys a distinction that arises from the founder’s theological reading of scripture, but especially the theological itinerary of Paul. De La Salle appeals to his Brothers in these words:

that you look upon yourselves as ministers of God . . . you are the ministers not only of God but also of Jesus Christ and of the Church. This is what St. Paul says when he expresses the wish that everyone should regard those who announce the Gospel as ministers of Jesus Christ.¹⁷

The ministry the Brothers undertake continues to build the church’s foundation “which has been laid by the apostles.”¹⁸ Positively, he sees heuristic value in the image of his Brothers as apostles. Like them, he associates his Brothers with “the living God who calls, who chooses, who sends on mission.”¹⁹

13 Richard M. Gula, SSS, *Ethics in Pastoral Ministry* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1996), 54.

14 I am grateful to Howard Thurman who wrote *Meditations for Apostles of Sensitiveness*, from which I conceive the term apostolic sensitiveness.

15 Gerard Rummery, FSC, *Creativity: The Hallmark of Lasallian Education* (Christian Brothers Conference, Washington, DC, 2011): v.

16 Rummery, 2. Note that the historic periods he references are the French Revolution and early-twentieth-century anti-church laws in France that prohibited teaching on every level by religious institutes. The 1904 law caused the dispersal of thousands of Brothers of the Christian Schools from France to countries around the globe, internationalizing the Institute.

17 *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle*, trans. Richard Arnandez, FSC, and Augustine Loes, FSC, ed. Augustine Loes, FSC and Francis Huether, FSC (Landover, MD: Christian Brothers Publications, 1994), no. 201.1

18 *Meditations*, no. 200.1.

19 Miguel Campos, FSC, “Introduction for the Meditations for the Time of Retreat,” *Meditations* 415.

Picking up on the language of the *Rule* of 1705, “instructing them in the mysteries of our religion and inspiring them with Christian maxims [principles of Christian living]” and “to procure this benefit for the children of artisans [working class] and the poor was the reason that the Christian Schools were instituted.”²⁰ De La Salle’s use of “to procure” and “this benefit,” among other things, points to the theological underpinnings of the ministry of the word. The founder beautifully articulates the force of God’s appeal to procure this benefit:

Every day God calls you anew by the appeals of these youngsters and the needs they have. It is his own work that God entrusts to you; your presence among young people is the way that Jesus brings salvation to them. That is how Christ can make a reality for them his salvation, the freedom that has been their destiny as human beings and sons of God ever since their birth and baptism. In you, and throughout all your teaching ministry, these youngsters can encounter Christ, the Good Shepherd....²¹

In De La Salle’s view, the Christian education and religious instruction the Brothers are missioned to deliver leads to the benefits of salvation, of freedom—the historical effects, to use Groome’s characterization²²—produced by the Spirit that flow from the grace of the Incarnation and the Paschal Mystery.

The Brother-teacher and the Christian Schools procure God’s glory by providing a Christian education and religious instruction of “the poor children and youth that the Lord placed in our hand and, starting from them, other children and young people.”²³ With this set purpose to procure God’s glory, the Institute and Lasallian education serve as instruments of God’s liberating salvation, to use Paul VI’s metaphor. This “integral salvation . . . encompasses the whole person, all persons, but with a . . . primary option for the poor, the excluded, the abandoned and young people in search of meaning.”²⁴

In cooperation with Jesus Christ and his Spirit, the ministry of De La Salle and his first Brothers sought to make salvation accessible to all, especially children who were far from it as a result of the distressing social realities of the time.²⁵ Hence we have the capacity of Christian education and evangelization situated in a gospel context not merely positioned to adapt to the world. Rather, De La Salle’s hope was that this capacity would serve to remedy the obstacles to salvation by way of quality teachers who, together and by association, maintained Christian Schools. In being specifically scriptural, the purpose of the Lasallian mission is both human and Christian: it centers its attention on the real needs of those entrusted to the care of Lasallian schools, and it announces the good news—the “maxims of the gospel” in Lasallian language—and accompanies students in living it.

Gradually, De La Salle became an educational pioneer. Together and by association with the first Brothers, the Institute inherits a rich history of innovations in the educational service of the young, especially those who are impoverished and excluded within society, including:

A Practical Curriculum – The educational program addressed the practical educational and spiritual needs of those entrusted to the Brothers’ care. The average student in the Christian Schools (this is what the original Lasallian schools were called) could not stay more than two or three years, since by age fourteen many of them had to work.

20 La Salle, *Rule of 1705*, 1:3, 5, in *Rule and Foundational Documents*, 14.

21 Michel Sauvage, FSC, “The Gospel Journey of John Baptist de La Salle (1651-1719)” (presentation, Center of St. Louis of the French, Rome, Italy, December 11, 1984), accessed December 29, 2014, <http://www.lasallian.org.au/public/resources/results.cfm?loadref=0&strm=The+Gospel+Journey+of+John+Baptist+de+La+Salle&clsf=&styp=-fdoc%2Cdoc%2Cpdf%2Ctxt%2Cxls%2Cxlsx&searchbutton.x=26&searchbutton.y=15>.

22 See Thomas Groome, *Will There Be Faith?: A New Vision for Educating and Growing Disciples* (New York: Harper One, 2011).

23 Alvaro Rodriguez Echeverria, “A Song of Hope for the ‘Regrowth’ of the Founding Charism” (presentation, 45th General Chapter of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, Rome, Italy, April 23, 2014).

24 Echeverria, “A Song of Hope.”

25 See *Meditations*, no. 2.1.

In the Vernacular – Students needed facility in reading and writing the everyday language of catechesis, business, commerce, rather than a language without practical import.

Under Simultaneous Instruction – In seventeenth-century France, teachers customarily would privately engage one student at a time in a classroom of dozens of students. Instead, the Brothers’ new method prescribed dividing a large class into small groups based on their level of learning and to involve whole groups in lessons. The goal was to engage every student every day in multiple ways.

By Skilled, Educated Teachers – De La Salle initiated pedagogical education for the Brothers, but he also established pedagogical centers for other teachers serving in rural parish schools.

In Gratuitous Schools – The Christian Schools charged nothing, accepted no gifts, and allowed no distinctions between the children who came from families who could afford to pay and those who could not. De La Salle balanced two primary convictions now called the “double-contemplation”: from a theological point of view, God wanted everyone to achieve salvation by coming to know and live their Christian religion; from a practical point of view, the children of “artisans (working class) and the poor needed to receive an education that enabled them to live life well.”

Instilling Civility and Manners – In addition to teaching reading, writing, math, and religion, pupils in the Christian Schools learned social and civil virtues.²⁶

Thus, three foundational principles are evident in De La Salle’s vision, principles that have informed the Lasallian educational mission for 335 years: strive to answer the needs—physical, spiritual, and intellectual—of those entrusted to your care by creating a relationship of being “older brother” to them; by an attitude of openness to all who wished to come to the Christian Schools, strive to help each member of the group to acquire literacy, numeracy, manners, and the skills (e.g., writing) needed to obtain and develop employment in a particular society; strive to find ways of helping those who, for one reason or another, have become “outcasts” in their society.²⁷

The Lasallian World Today

At the time of De La Salle’s death on Good Friday, 7 April 1719, his Brothers numbered only about one hundred in France, except for a contingent of two men in Rome. Today, the Institute and the Lasallian world encompass seventy-seven countries on six continents—Lasallian association is international. This includes about 4,100 Brothers and more than 91, 000 Lasallian Partners (lay men and women, men and women from other religious institutes, and secular priests). The Brothers and Lasallian Partners conduct over 1,000 schools and other centers of education in service to more than 1 million students. In the United States, Lasallians conduct 98 schools and other educational centers (secondary schools is the single largest type of ministry) serving over 72,000 students. Of all religious charisms in the global church entirely dedicated to the mission field of Christian education, Lasallians have the largest footprint.²⁸

The Lasallian educational mission is exercised in a striking variety of educational ministries: pre-school, elementary, secondary, higher education, catechetical centers, technical training, and agricultural teacher training. There are residential centers for young people of various age groups; programs for the illiterate, migrants, itinerants,

²⁶ See “The Founder and His Mission,” *La Salle Magazine*, Winter 2006-07, 6, <http://www.lasalle.edu/univcomm/delasalle/pages/fullseries.pdf>.

²⁷ See Rummery, *Creativity*, 2.

²⁸ See Christian Brothers Conference, http://www.lasallian.info/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/RELAN_2014_2015_Statistical_Report-26Feb2015.pdf?c7fb5e. See also Institute statistics, <http://lasallian.info/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Institute-Brothers-Statistics-as-of-Dec-2013.pdf?c7fb5e>.

physically and mentally handicapped, learning disabled, and juvenile delinquents; pastoral centers offering a variety of religious and apostolic activities. The Lasallian educational service is offered not only to Catholics, but also to thousands of students who are Buddhist, Confucianist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Orthodox, Protestant, Shintoist, members of traditional religions, and of no religion. Brothers and Lasallian Partners work in countries that are extremely poor, in countries tormented by oppression and even war, and in countries with political orientations ranging from highly favorable to wholly opposed to Christian education and evangelization. Indeed, we continue to meet De La Salle and his first Brothers in places and contexts they could never imagine.

Considering the long roster of schools and other educational centers in the Lasallian world, only a brief consideration of four Lasallian educational ministries should suffice in telling the story of how the rich inheritance De La Salle and the first Brothers deposited still prospers today. These ministries signify the persistent response undertaken by Brothers and Lasallian Partners to emerging educational and spiritual needs of young people. Each account offers an acute awareness of the challenges in our contemporary world, which can seem overwhelming. These are but a few stories in which the prophetic witness of Brothers and other Lasallian educators embodies the Lasallian founding story and vision.

One ministry is Bethlehem University (BU) in the West Bank, Palestinian Territories. At the invitation of Paul VI, following his historic pastoral visit to the Holy Land, the Brothers established BU, the first university located in the West Bank, on the highest hilltop in the little town of Bethlehem. Now in its fourth decade of service to Palestinians of all faith traditions, the university serves more than 3,200 students. The student population is majority women (77.1%) and majority Muslims (74%), in interreligious communion with a smaller number of Christians.²⁹ The Brothers who minister at the university come from Australia, New Zealand, Palestine, and the United States. As it continues to respond to the educational and spiritual needs of Palestinians, the university demonstrates a tremendous resilience and sense of purpose in a difficult socio-political environment.

A second ministry is the Education Base Centers along a 250-kilometer stretch between Abong-Mbang and Mesok, in Cameroon, West Africa, a network of educational centers connected by roads and trails throughout the forested terrain. These fourteen centers, in addition to a residential school, provide elementary and secondary education to children from the Baka ethnic group, a devalued and persecuted people living in the virgin forest of Cameroon. The Brothers developed the ORA method of teaching (Observe, Reflect, Action) that permits the students to learning writing, literature, and mathematics based on the realities in which they live. This unique method of education represents an innovative pedagogical approach that takes into account the Baka seminomadic way of life and traditional numerical system. Given the difficulty for the Baka children to adapt to the public education system, the Brothers' pedagogical approach enables the children to successful complete their elementary and, in some cases, secondary education.

A third ministry is La Salle School in Albany, New York. Founded in 1854, its wide array of programs testifies to how it is purposed as an "agent of healing." La Salle aims to achieve positive and lasting impact in the lives of young people and families by providing these services: therapeutic residential treatment, day education, outpatient counseling in mental health, substance and sexual abuse and trauma, and the juvenile and justice reporting center, an alternative to detention for youth and families experiencing trauma. What brings young men to La Salle School is not important. Rather, what is important is the school's support system, a network of individuals who see the potential for greatness in those entrusted to their care, helping them set new goals and make better choices in their life.

²⁹ See <http://www.bethlehem.edu/facts>.

A fourth ministry is CasArcobaleno in Scampia, a suburb of Naples, Italy, which Pope Francis called a “periphery” neighborhood³⁰ during a recent visit. Francis acknowledges his “[familiarity] with the generous and active commitment of the church, present with her communities and her services in the living reality of Scampia.”³¹

Here the Brothers live in a huge housing complex in a community ravaged by high unemployment and infested by the Camorra (Italian mafia). CasArcobaleno gives meaning to the educational relationship with socially marginalized youth including the Roma living in slum encampments. Many of the young do not attend school—either because their families are not interested in educational opportunities for their children, or because their families are so distressed by life’s circumstances. In the case of Roma youth, they have never attended school because their families are not citizens. This Lasallian community is also working to help young women exercise a newfound agency in their lives in a place where they are otherwise considered subordinate.

Blessed Ambiguity: Considering the Future of Brotherhood in the Church

One of the most significant contributions to an understanding of the brothers’ vocation is the collection of essays in *Blessed Ambiguity: Brothers in the Church*, a tremendous volume that offers critical reflection on the authenticity of religious brotherhood in the church. The Brotherhood Seminar³² convened sixteen brothers from both all-brothers and mixed religious institutes to dialogue about the reality of what religious brothers experience in the church. They first assembled in September 1992, at Mont La Salle in Napa, California, and gathered again in April 1993, to discuss each participant’s essay before its final form.

Blessed Ambiguity is divided into two parts: the first explores foundational dimensions of religious brotherhood, while the second considers its future. While it was composed more than twenty years ago, the results of the seminar project—its deliberative essays—remain pertinent for continued reflection and study of religious brotherhood in the ecclesial community. Collectively, the essays still compel us to earnestly consider removing the cloak that renders “brothers . . . among the church’s ‘invisible people,’”³³ writes Br. Sean Sammon, FMS, former Superior General of the Marist Brothers of the Schools.

The upheaval in ecclesial life that erupted after the Second Vatican Council serves as the backstory for *Blessed Ambiguity*. It is evident in the post-Vatican II period that both female and male religious communities have increasingly similar challenges, including diminishing members active in the apostolate and fewer persons stepping into initial formation. The ferment in the wake of *Perfectae Caritatis* (1965), the Decree on the Renewal of Religious Life, precipitated an unintentional eclipse of the brothers’ vocation, according to Br. Bruce Lescher, CSC.³⁴

At the practical level, the demographic transition that is affecting all of consecrated life in the church is affecting religious brothers even more. Based on the CARA statistical survey,³⁵ in the United States from 1965 to 2014, the

30 Francis, “Visit to Impoverished Area of Naples,” *Origins* 44, no. 44 (2015): 715.

31 Francis, 716.

32 Christian Brothers Conference (FSC), the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, and the National Assembly of Religious Brothers (now called the Religious Brothers Conference) jointly sponsored this project.

33 Sean Sammon, FMS, “Being a Brother Is What Brotherhood Is All About,” in *Blessed Ambiguity: Brothers in the Church*, ed. Michael Meister, FSC (Landover, MD: Christian Brothers Publications, 1993), 112.

34 See Bruce Lescher, CSC, “A Prologue to Brotherhood,” *Blessed Ambiguity*, 15–16.

35 CARA Religious Life Research, Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, Georgetown University, <http://cara.georgetown.edu/CARAServices/rellife.html>. See http://cara.georgetown.edu/caraservices/requested_churchstats.html for world data: from 1970 to 2014, the world data shows the following: the number of religious priests went from 148,804 to 134,752; the number of religious sisters went from 1,004,400 to 705,529; the number of religious brothers went from 79,408 to 55,314. Note that 2014 statistics are 2012 data based on how the Vatican’s *Annuarium Statisticum Ecclesiae* (ASE) releases data. As a result of the increasing gap between priests and brothers, lay brothers within the Dominicans and Franciscans (OFM), with the support of their general leadership, have initiated a process of reflection and dialogue within their respective communities about the growing disparity. Indeed, it is a prompting of the Holy Spirit.

number of religious priests decreased from 22,707 to 12, 010; the number of religious sisters decreased from 179, 954 to 49, 883; and the number of religious brothers decreased from 12, 271 to 4, 318.³⁶ Between 1970 and 1985, the precipitous decline of religious brothers becomes palpable. In 1970, there were 22,701 religious priests; in 1985, there were 21, 920, a decline of 2 percent. During the same time period, the number of religious brothers went from 12, 271 to 7, 544, a 35 percent drop. These statistics are more than just numbers. They should disturb us. They should awaken the church's attention on the future of religious brotherhood's commitment in continuing the mission of Jesus.

In 2010, when Cardinal Franc Rode, former prefect of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, was interviewed on Vatican Radio about a document the Congregation was preparing on religious brothers, he observed:

While the numbers of religious in every category have dropped in the last 50 years, the number of religious brothers has decreased most drastically, he said, citing the example of the [De La Salle] Christian Brothers who had 16,000 members in 1965 and have fewer than 5,000 today.

"We think one of the reasons for the decline in these vocations is due to a certain lack of attention on the part of the church" to brothers, who are mentioned only in passing in the documents of the Second Vatican Council and Vatican documents published later, he said.³⁷

At the pastoral or ministerial level, the invisibility of religious brothers is all too apparent, for we are often effectively forgotten. Looking closely, most discussions about church ministry tend to focus on parish life, and religious brothers have largely ministered in other apostolic spaces. As an example, Brother Lescher points to the Cushwa Center for the Study of American Catholicism's study published with this revealing subtitle: *Transforming Parish Ministry: The Changing Roles of Catholic Clergy, Laity, and Women Religious*.³⁸ He comments:

The title reflects ministerial issues which are rightfully receiving a great deal of attention: the changes occurring within the priesthood, the expanding role of lay ministry, and women religious' adaptation to the post-Vatican II era. Yet these topics bypass brothers. . . . As full-time male ministers, brothers could make an important contribution to the ongoing discussion of ministry, but generally they are not doing so.³⁹

Though the Cushwa Center study is over twenty-five years old, its subject still holds currency, for I contend that brothers remain mostly forgotten in continuing discussion of church ministry. And this contention, similar to Brother Lescher's last point, begs the question: why are men religious who are not ordained generally out of sight and out of mind?

36 Suspicion exists regarding the number of religious brothers. It is believed that the statistic on brothers includes numbers from those mixed institutes who unfortunately call their members "brothers" or "fraters" until diaconate ordination. It is a practice that corrupts having a more accurate count, but more importantly, it obfuscates who are vowed lay brothers.

37 Cindy Wooden, "Vatican Preparing Documents on Prayer, Brothers," *National Catholic Reporter*, February 2, 2010, <http://ncronline.org/news/vatican/vatican-preparing-documents-prayer-brothers>.

38 Jay P. Dolan, R. Scott Appleby, Patricia Byrne, and Debra Campbell, *Transforming Parish Ministry: The Changing Roles of Catholic Clergy, Laity, and Women Religious* (New York: Crossroads, 1989).

39 Lescher, 16-17.

One point is that historical research projects tend to focus on religious priests and sisters. While this article does not allow a fuller account of the absence of religious brothers in the research and endeavors, these examples illustrate the point: the Cushwa Center's American Catholic Studies Newsletter⁴⁰ maintains a section called "History of Women Religious." In the spring 2015 issue, two titillating articles appear: "Sister Builders in Chicago" and "Preserving the History of Catholic Women Religious," a recap of a 2014 symposium. The same issue presents a recap of a 2014 conference, "Crossings and Dwellings: Restored Jesuits, Women Religious, American Experience, 1814-2014." My review of *U.S. Catholic Historian*,⁴¹ from Winter 2007 to Winter 2015, discloses only one article in which religious brothers are a focal point. In the same time period, articles featuring religious priests and sisters are multitudinous. Finally, in May 2015, the University of Notre Dame London Centre hosted a symposium titled "The Nun in the World: A Transnational Study of Catholic Sisters and the Second Vatican Council."⁴² Indeed, the lack of historical research projects on religious brothers points to a continually missed opportunity for theological reflection on the ministerial role of brothers in the church, and inspired by the Holy Spirit, to ignite a revitalized, revived view of brotherhood.

A second point is the general invisibility of religious brothers in the mainstream Catholic and secular media. One might argue that the scanty attention afforded brothers in media reporting converges with a wider question of what kind of future is in store for a church that continues to promulgate only a partial view of consecrated discipleship. I will cite only two examples from Catholic media, though I could include many more. A perfunctory search in National Catholic Reporter (NCR) using "religious brothers" yields forty-eight articles.⁴³ A similar search using "religious sisters" yields 146 articles, in addition to the "Global Sisters Report," a special NCR project.⁴⁴ This NCR article on immigration opens this way:

The coalition of Catholic leaders pushing for immigration reform—a triumvirate of the nation's bishops, nuns and university presidents—need to address the matter from the pulpit to help get reform passed in Congress, a Catholic member of the House judiciary committee said Thursday.

"Everyone takes notice when their priest speaks to them, when their nun speaks to them," said Democratic Congressman Joe Garcia of Florida. "It has impact and it tends to deflate these phony arguments about the fear of the stranger, the fear of the traveler, and this fear of the outsider."⁴⁵

A column by Fr. Thomas Reese, SJ, is another example: "The positive side of the priest shortage is that the few remaining priests (and sisters) can't do everything."⁴⁶ Here are but two examples of the priest-sister binary that is ubiquitous in Catholic and secular media. In "Being Forgotten and Forgetful: A Subtle Clericalism," Br. Michael

40 See *American Catholic Studies Newsletter*, Cushwa Center for the Study of American Catholicism, University of Notre Dame, <https://cushwa.nd.edu/publications/american-catholic-studies-newsletter/>

41 See *U.S. Catholic Historian*, https://muse.jhu.edu/journals/us_catholic_historian/.

42 Heather Gary, "'The Nun in the World' symposium gets underway this Thursday at the London Global Gateway," Cushwa Center, University of Notre Dame, <http://international.nd.edu/about/news/57644-the-nun-in-the-world-symposium-gets-underway-this-thursday-at-the-london-global-gateway/>.

43 The search engine produced 31 articles, 15 blog posts, and 2 book reviews from 2006–2015. Note that many of these items are not wholly focused on brothers.

44 The *Global Sisters Report* is an independent, nonprofit source of news and information about Catholic sisters and the critical issues facing the people they serve. Our network of journalists report about their lives and works, and sisters write commentary from their perspective. See <http://globalsistersreport.org/content/about-global-sisters-report>.

45 Joshua J. McElwee, "Congressman: On Immigration reform, Catholics need pulpit speak," *National Catholic Reporter*, July 25, 2013, <http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/congressman-immigration-reform-catholics-need-pulpit-speak>.

46 Thomas Reese, SJ, "The Church is More Than Just the Pope," *National Catholic Reporter*, January 10, 2015, <http://ncronline.org/blogs/faith-and-justice/church-more-just-pope>.

McGinnis, FSC, aptly captures this incessant reality: “being forgotten will seem a familiar experience to brothers who frequently hear people list the celibate vocations in the church as priests and sisters.”⁴⁷

This “priests and sisters” binary is also pervasive in public speeches delivered in church circles. Brother McGinnis recalls a noted woman theologian’s address at a major Catholic university to church folk engaged in theological and ministerial education. She never once acknowledged religious brothers and their role in the church. McGinnis observes: “Her silence on the matter spoke volumes about her unconscious perceptions and her lived experience of the ways brothers typically have not impacted on the structures of the church.”⁴⁸ Recently, I attended a talk at a Catholic university delivered by a diocesan bishop who holds two doctoral degrees. He employed the binary twice, further echoing Brother McGinnis’s point about “unconscious perceptions.” After the lecture, I pointed out to him his exclusion of brothers. He gave a courteous but sanctimonious reply.

A third point, and perhaps most incisive, is that religious brothers “tend to insulate and isolate [themselves] to such an extent that we fail to develop effective and imaginative” paradigms that would enable “both ourselves and ‘the world’ [to] come to a more wholesome understanding of [who] we are.”⁴⁹ Put differently, many brothers are disposed to self-enclosure, caught in the web of subsisting primarily, or even exclusively, in the local ministry and community where they are assigned. Notwithstanding the number of brothers in the United States, we cannot individually disown a level of responsibility for the paucity of stimulating historical research projects about brotherhood, the lack of engagement in discussions about church ministry, the scarcity of media coverage about brothers and its fixation on the priest and sister binary, the conspicuous absence at ministerial, educational, and theological conferences as presenters and participants, and the dearth of authors of articles and books.⁵⁰ Perceptibly, Br. Thomas Grady, OSF, comments “that one can sometimes observe an intellectual laziness among brothers.”⁵¹

Thus, it is vitally important for all brothers to assume a level of responsibility for the ambiguity amplified by Brother Sammon’s assertion that brothers are among the church’s invisible people. The beginning of wisdom is admitting that brothers, individually and collectively, must create a fresh, bold reality of the multifaceted and pluralistic nature of religious brotherhood. The emergence of a newfangled image and consciousness of the brothers’ vocation, to counteract any negative perceptions of brothers intellectually and ministerially, would constitute a signal moment within the church.

Closing Thoughts

The task of building the reign of God compels us to ponder Jesus’s invitation to share in the gift of creativity and imagination, to question and to dream fresh and anew like brothers in earlier times. These holy but ordinary men, as Br. Edward Coughlin, OFM, asserts, witnessed in their time how the gospel could be fruitfully lived. “The witness of their lives enabled others to ‘assume responsibility for a broader vision of themselves as people gifted for new as well as old tasks in their lives.’”⁵² Brothers today must constitute a new “company of witnesses” who, “individually and together, set our imaginations free to discover transformed religious lives that meet the challenges and opportunities of the new millennium while preserving the essential charisma of Christ.”⁵³ Otherwise, we risk

47 Michael McGinnis, FSC, “Being Forgotten and Forgetful: A Subtle Clericalism,” in *Who Are My Brothers: Cleric-Lay Relationships in Men’s Religious Communities*, ed. Philip Armstrong, CSC (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1988), 152.

48 McGinnis, 153.

49 Louis DeThomasis, FSC, in “Summary of the Discussion,” in *Blessed Ambiguity*, 251.

50 *Blessed Ambiguity* identifies some of these issues.

51 Meister is recalling a remark by Thomas Grady, OSF, in “Summary of the Discussion,” 262.

52 F. Edward Coughlin, OFM, “Religious Brothers: Blessed Ambiguity, Future Possibility,” in *Blessed Ambiguity*, 145.

53 DeThomasis, “Change and the Future: A New Paradigm for Religious Life,” in *Blessed Ambiguity*, 227.

neglecting, even disinheriting, the legacy bequeathed to us by William Joseph Chaminade, Marcellin Champagnant, Edmund Rice, Andre Coindre, John Baptist de La Salle, and Basil Moreau, among other holy founders.

In Pope Francis's Apostolic Letter to "All Consecrated People," he says: "I am counting on [consecrated persons] 'to wake up the world' . . . to be prophets who witness to how Jesus lived on this earth."⁵⁴ This is discipleship. It corresponds to Bonhoeffer's theology to ascertain "what Jesus wants." Thus, to uncover and recollect the prophetic nature of religious brotherhood demands a rearticulation of *being* brother today. The summons "to wake up the world" compels us to ponder Francis's new theological deployment of discipleship for consecrated persons to hear the voice the prophet Ezekiel heard: "Stand up . . . I wish to speak with you . . . I am sending you. . . ." (Ezek. 2:1-3).

54 Francis, *Apostolic Letter to All Consecrated People*, November 21, 2014, no. 2, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco_lettera-ap_20141121_lettera-consacraati.html.