

PRESENTATION BROTHERS

To Call and to Nurture

Vocation and Formation Ministry Today



Letter of the Congregation Leadership Team

September 2006

Dear Brothers,

As we gather to compose this letter, four young men in Ghana are a few days away from making first profession of vows. We hold John, Fidelis, Luke and Sebastian in prayer at this time.

Each of us has his own personal memories of early moments on our vocation journey, perhaps the morning we received the religious habit, or took first vows or earlier still the day we arrived at the novitiate.

Most of us were very young and inexperienced. We may have been naïve, or lacking awareness of who we were or how mixed were our motives. Yet we can say now that somewhere in most, if not all, young men who arrived at the door of our novitiate was a gem of pure generosity. We desired to give ourselves totally to an ideal greater than ourselves. Somewhere in all the mix of our life experience and culture we had sensed the call of Christ. We desired to follow him and to be with him in saving the world.

Starting Afresh from Christ

As we matured, of course, our understanding of ourselves changed, along with our understanding of call and mission. The reasons why we joined the Brothers are not necessarily the reasons why we continue on the journey. As with marriage, or any other vocation in life, commitment is hard work and our reasons for staying mature and deepen.

We now wish to invite each Brother to reflect on that gem of pure love and idealism which brought you to the door of the novitiate. There you will find the grace of call, something truly mysterious and beyond oneself. There you will find an energy which will continue to sustain your vocation journey today, whether you are 28 or 82. The most powerful analogy we can offer for this experience is that of falling in love. It is used in the Vatican document, “Starting Afresh from Christ”, which we have quoted to you in previous letters. Here we offer this challenge again:

“Consecrated persons can and must start afresh from Christ because he himself first came to them and accompanied them on the path. Starting afresh from Christ means once again finding one’s first love, the inspiring spark which first gave rise to the following (of Christ) ... If ‘we love’, it is ‘because he first loved us’ ... Consecrated persons cannot be creative, capable of renewing the Institute and opening new pastoral paths if they do not feel loved with this love. It is this love which makes them strong and courageous which instils fire and enables them to dare all.”

Called in Love

In this letter we wish to speak to you about vocations and formation in our Congregation, mainly the challenges we face in the area of initial formation. However, we do not wish to do so in a theoretical way. We invite you personally, and together with your Brothers in community, to pray and reflect on your own call. We invite you to come in touch again with your first love, with your youthful idealism which still offers a source of energy for our lives today. We can only invite and accompany new vocations if we can again experience the love, the mystery and the enthusiasm of our own personal call in Christ.

Who do you say I am?

This brings us to the question of identity. Who are we? Again, our answer need not be theory alone, but should really reflect the lived experience of who we are as human beings, as men, as Christians and as Religious. In ‘Speak the Truth in Love’ (Presentation Day Letter 2005), we wrote the following:

“Exploring the question (of identity) and arriving at a common answer is an important part of our journey today. We need to know who we are and what we stand for. This rediscovery of self, of our charism, of our identity as Presentation Brothers is crucial. And it is not only we ourselves who need to be clear about our identity but other people too. More than ever, we need to communicate who we are, if we are to be a leaven, a witness in society.”

Many Brothers, while knowing in their hearts, the value of their vocation as Brother, are not articulate on the question of identity. In our experience, many of our associates and lay colleagues, while appreciating our vocation, are equally unclear in articulating it. The weakness of our tradition in the area of professional training in scripture and theology inhibits us here. Today, we need to be clear about our vocation, our charism and our mission. We need to be able to witness to the hope that is in us. Those around us and those who would join us say: “Speak to us of your life in Christ!”

Identity

We offer the following model which may be helpful as you articulate your answer to the question: ‘Who am I?’

Who am I?

Human Being

- Mystery
- Seeker of Meaning

Follower of Christ

- Life inspiration from Jesus
- Living gospel values

Religious³

- Contemplative-in-action
- Prophetic

Brother

- Vows, Community, Prayer
- Brother of all
- A ministry of Brothering

Imbued with the Charism of Edmund Rice

- He “opened his whole heart to Christ present and appealing to him in the poor”
- Zeal for the mission of Christian Formation, especially of youth and, in particular, of poor young people

Sing to the Lord a New Song

We need to continually reflect on who we are, what we are doing and why we are doing what we are doing. The grace of our chapter is in the call to “Sing to the Lord a New Song”. The key insight is to re-appropriate in a deeper way the truth of the presence of God in *all* of life. Can I truly find God in the fragility of the Congregation and in my own personal fragility? Can I really see God in the diversity and the newness of the world in which I live? Do I own the truth of the presence of God in my brothers and sisters?

Our God is breaking old boundaries and stretching new ones, enabling us to see deeper and further. In so many ways the challenge of the Christian life is about letting go, about moving away from security, about “launching out into the deep”. Many Brothers are finding God in experiences of the Cross, in dislocation and in direct ministry with poor people. Many are “singing the new song”, some dramatically so. **We appeal to each Brother not to let this grace pass you by. How are you called to “sing the new song”? To ignore the grace and call of the Chapter is truly to ignore God.** “The word of God is alive and active”! There is a call to conversion, to change behaviour. We are called to a deeper way of praying, to a deeper way of relating to one another and to respond in ministry to more urgent needs. If there is no change in behaviour over time, then there is no growth. If there is no growth, have we blocked out the God of all life?

To see deeper and further.....

Brothers, a key question is: How do you see the world, the Church and the Congregation at this time? At a rational, humanist level, in certain parts of the world, you might see the Congregation, or even the Church itself, as dying. We need a deeper vision to see the God of all life doing a new thing. We need to be open to the God of surprises, to remember that when we run out of resources, God acts best – “my power is made perfect in weakness”. We need to see the fragility and diversity of our times with the eyes of faith and we need to witness to the hope of brotherhood, a hope for our world.

Vocation and Formation Ministry

We hope that our efforts in vocation and formation ministry will not be the fruit of a ‘survival anxiety’. This ministry is not about attracting candidates in order to keep our apostolates going or to ensure the survival of the Congregation. We are called to a deeper journey. Engaging with the vocations issue does uncover an unconscious ‘death wish’ among many religious. Some have given up on the objective value of religious life or on the subjective value of their own lives. We see the world not as it is, but as we are. That is why we spoke earlier of the need to re-discover our first love, of the need ‘to fan into a flame the gift of God’ given to us.

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Vocation ministry is primarily a ministry of accompanying people as they try to listen for God in their lives. It is a service to the whole Church. We need to move beyond a preoccupation with performance and numbers, and look at the beauty of accompanying even one person as they try to follow the Lord.

The Jesuit theologian, Michael Paul Gallagher, says that young people coming to religious congregations today, are searching for three interconnected experiences:

- A personal encounter with God in Christ (authentic prayer)
- A sense of belonging (an experience of community which is deep and intimate)
- Some involvement in the work of justice (a mission which is urgent and relevant)

As Presentation Brothers, this is what we say we are about in our Constitutions and Chapter Vision Statement. Our challenge is to take the hard decisions which will facilitate the ideal becoming a reality in more and more of our communities. There is an urgent need to build communities where new members will experience a depth of faith, joy, sharing, life and mission.

Formation in the past was often seen as taking young candidates and moulding them to our design. Sr. Gemma Simmonds, an English

theologian of religious life, says that people arriving at the doors of novitiates today are “NPLUS” – “not people like us!” They come from a very different culture and life experience to that of most religious. In engaging with these new candidates, we certainly face the challenge to engage with diversity! Hence the need to re-think and re-shape our formation programmes. A spiritual director looking at a beautiful mature oak tree said: “It grew because it was given the space to become what it was meant to be”. Formation is about giving people the space to grow and become who God intends them to be.

“To Call and to Nurture” – Our theme for the Year 2007

As a CLT we invite you to reflect on the theme “**to call and to nurture**” as our theme for 2007. The Congregation Leadership Team and the Province Leadership Teams will be launching many initiatives in the area of vocations and formation in all three Provinces. What is most crucial, however, is what happens in each of our hearts.

May this year lead to a deepened appreciation of our personal vocation and an openness to the call to grow and change. At the end of this letter we list a range of initiatives across the Congregation connected to vocation and initial formation ministry. Some may say we are launching these efforts at the worst possible time, certainly in the so-called ‘first world’. We ask you to reflect on Jeremiah 32. God calls Jeremiah to buy land when Jerusalem is under siege! There is a war on and yet God calls Jeremiah to buy land. All his intuition tells him that this is foolish and yet Jeremiah heeds the call of the Lord who tells him “there will be buying and selling of land in this place again”. Jeremiah is called to a counter-intuitive act of fidelity. We, too, are called to an act of faith in the future, in God’s future, in “the one who can do infinitely more than we can ask for or even imagine”.

What you can do for Vocations ...

Brothers, you know what you can do to promote vocations. You have heard this many times before. You can pray. You can invite. You can promote vocations locally. You can support our vocation directors. We say this to you: It is God who gives the increase! We are not necessarily called to success, but we are called to fidelity. So live the gift of each day. Appreciate, as much as you can, the gift of the present moment. Listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd who never revokes his choice. By our faithful living each day, we can point to the beauty of God. This is the best vocation ministry. The call is now. Live each day with interest, humanity and faith. Rejoice in the Brethren and speak positively of the Congregation. Let God be God. We do what we can do and the Kingdom grows. Look beyond our own horizons to a wider world where there is much beauty but also much pain, suffering and injustice. As followers of Jesus, in the path of Edmund Rice, it is our privilege to be called to be ministers of joy and hope in that world. May Mary of the Presentation, the woman who nurtured Jesus’ call and gave him the space to grow, accompany us on the journey.

HE COMES

Have you not heard his silent steps?
He comes, comes, ever comes.
Every moment and every age, every day and every night
He comes, comes, ever comes.
Many a song have I sung in many a mood of mind, but all their notes have always proclaimed,
He comes, comes, ever comes.

In the fragrant days of sunny April
through the forest path
He comes, comes, ever comes.
In the rainy gloom of July nights
on the thundering chariots of clouds
He comes, comes, ever comes.
In sorrow after sorrow it is his steps that press upon my heart,
and it is the golden touch of his feet that makes my joy to shine.
From Tagore, Gintanjali

For Your Information

CLT Co-ordinator

for Vocation/Formation Ministry

Br. Andrew Hickey

Ghana Province

Director of Novices

Br. Edwin O'Sullivan

Director of Postulants

Br. Raphael Toodle

Director of Vocations:

Br. Joseph Wegru

The Novitiate is located at Mount St. Joseph, Logre.

The Postulancy is at Our Lady of Africa Formation House, Navrongo.

Anglo-Irish Province / North America-West Indies Province

Director of Novices at Mount St. Joseph, Cork

Br. Francis Agoah

Director of Vocations – Anglo-Irish Province

Br. Andrew Hickey

Asst. Dir. of Vocations – Anglo-Irish Province

Mr. Andrew O'Connell

Director of Vocations – North America/W Indies

Br. Robert Fanovich

The 'Come & See' Community for the Anglo-Irish Province is at Glasthule.

The 'Come & See' Communities for the North America/West Indies Province will be in Florida and St. Lucia/Grenada.

The Novitiate for these two Provinces will be at the new Mount St. Joseph, Cork, and will commence in October '06. Br. Francis Agoah will co-ordinate a Team approach to Formation and will be seeking the assistance of Brothers in the Cork area in accompanying novices who come to us.

It is the desire of the CLT that Br. Andrew Hickey should be as fully available as possible to co-ordinate and lead the new vocation ministry efforts in the Anglo-Irish Province.

Young Brothers

There are 24 young men in our formation programmes at the moment from pre-novitiate to temporary vows.

The next final profession will be that of Br. Francis Sebo. It will take place in Holy Redeemer Church, Kissimmee, Florida on Saturday, 25th November. Please keep Br. Francis and all those in formation in your prayers.

Conferences/Training Programmes

A Congregation Conference on Formation will take place in St. Benedict's Retreat Centre, St. Lucia, December 3 – 9, 2006.

We will be represented at "Called to A Deeper Journey" – a conference on vocation ministry in collaboration with the Christian Brothers which takes place in New Zealand, April 11 – 17, 2007.

We will continue to urge Brothers and others to participate in the Ferdinand Vocation Ministry Training Programme in the United States.

The Way Ahead

During the coming year new websites and vocation literature will be designed and launched. In each Province, Vocation Directors and their Teams will seek to involve more and more Brothers and lay people in this ministry with us.

The Challenge of our Chapter Vision Statement

Vocation Ministry

We believe that our Presentation way of life is an authentic response to God's call and we are called to invite other people to join in our mission.

We call on each Province of the Congregation to make vocation fostering a priority. Each Province will establish a vocation team that will include Brothers and lay people. The team will be co-ordinated by a full-time vocation director where feasible.

Formation

Our new song challenges us to form disciples of Jesus Christ imbued with the spirit of Blessed Edmund Rice in the world of our time.

We believe that appropriate preparation for formators is a priority.

We commit ourselves to Team building and formation programmes for Leadership teams at all levels.

We will organize suitable formation programmes to meet the needs of Brothers of different age groups.

We will hold a Congregational Conference on Formation to discern and examine future directions in this area.

May we have the vision of God for our time as Edmund Rice had for his: "No one hoping in God as Edmund Rice hoped could fail to have a vision of something wonderful ahead". (Positio)

Questions for Reflection, Prayer and Sharing

1. Recall your own arrival at the Novitiate. *What was it like?*
2. ‘Starting afresh from Christ means, once again, finding one’s first love, the inspiring spark which gave rise to the following (of Christ) ...’
What might this mean for you?
3. ‘We need to know who we are and what we stand for.’
What is at the core of your life and mission as a Presentation Brother?
4. ‘In many ways the challenge of the Christian life is about letting go, about moving away from security, about “launching out into the deep”’
What do you need to let go of?
How are you called to launch out into the deep?
5. ‘We appeal to each Brother not to let this grace pass you by.’
*How are **you** called to “sing the new song”?*
6. ‘Our challenge is to take the hard decisions which will facilitate the ideal becoming a reality in more and more of our communities.’
What can you do?
7. Pray and share on Jeremiah 32.

RESPONSE

We invite you to pray about this letter and to discuss it with your Brothers in community.

The CLT would welcome responses from individual Brothers or Communities. Written responses can be forwarded to Mount St. Joseph, Cork or emailed to:

presgen@eircom.net

Thank you.