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*"Let the holiness of God shine forth" (cf. Mt 5, 16)*

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item 387

## O Brother, Who Art Thou?

**new Vatican document gives religious brothers a moment in the sun**

Back in the late 1980s, I briefly flirted with the idea of a religious vocation. At one stage I thought I might want to become a Catholic brother, largely because I wasn't sure about the priesthood.

As any formation director worth his or her salt will tell you, that was a terribly immature way to approach a vocation. One shouldn't commit to a way of life simply because of what it's not; there has to be some positive attraction to what it is, because otherwise the vocation won't sustain itself.

As it turns out, meeting my wife took the whole idea off the table, so I never had to ponder what the positive attraction to life as a Catholic brother might be. That's too bad, because it means I never really broke through the wall of silence that often surrounds what is possibly the least-known, and least-appreciated, vocation in the Catholic Church.

All this comes to mind because on Monday, the Vatican's *Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life* — generally known by its less unwieldy nickname, the "Congregation for Religious" — presented a new document entitled "**Identity and Mission of the Religious Brother in the Church.**"

Like most Vatican texts, the document has been a long time in the making, and to be honest, it doesn't pack much punch in terms of news value. It's more a spiritual meditation, among other things reflecting on the communion of the Trinity as the model and inspiration for the fraternity lived by brothers with one another and with the world.



**SAC professed and novice brothers – Sydney – 1959**

Neglecting the document would be a shame, however, because if there's any constituency in Catholicism that deserves its day in the sun, it's arguably the brothers.

Worldwide, there are about 55,000 brothers in the Catholic Church today, a much smaller total than either priests (415,000) or nuns (705,000), though roughly comparable to the number of permanent deacons (42,000). In the United States, there are about 4,300 religious brothers, down from more than 12,000 in 1965, and 2,000 of those brothers are retired.

Holy Cross Brother Paul Bednarczyk, who leads the National Religious Vocation Conference in the States, calls brothers “one of the Church’s best-kept secrets.” Benedict Abbot Jerome Kodell has called brothers the “most invisible group in the Church,” warning that their way of life “is in danger of disappearing from public consciousness.”

In truth, most ordinary Catholics in the pews have only a vague awareness that religious brothers even exist as an option. When Catholics talk about vocations, they’ll generally do so in terms of “priests and nuns,” leaving brothers (and deacons, by the way) more or less out of the picture.

Catholic officialdom sometimes restricts leadership opportunities open to brothers, arguably contributing to a climate of neglect.

For example, in 2002, the Vatican told the Capuchins in the States they couldn’t elect a brother as a provincial superior; in 2009, Rome vetoed an effort by Maryknoll to elect a brother as its US superior. That’s because technically brothers are laymen, even though most Catholics don’t really think of them that way, and Church law prevents laity from being superiors.

(The new Vatican document acknowledges this issue, but doesn’t resolve it. Spanish Archbishop José Rodríguez Carballo, secretary of the Congregation for Religious, said Monday at a Vatican news conference that Pope Francis will be asked to create an ad hoc study commission to ponder the participation of brothers in local, regional, and general governance.)



So, what is a brother, really?

Here’s more or less what you’ll find if you look up the term “brother” in a Catholic encyclopedia: “Laymen who take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. They belong to communities comprised of brothers only, or of both brothers and priests. Religious brothers are dedicated to the particular charism of their community, expressed in service and prayer.”

That’s true so far as it goes, but it really doesn’t get to the heart of the matter. The new Vatican document addresses the subject at some length, but three brief points are worth making here in terms of why a Church without brothers would be significantly impoverished.

### **brothers as part of a family**

First, as most priests who belong to religious orders will tell you, the priesthood is a critically important but, to some extent, secondary aspect of their lives. They see the basic thing as being a brother in their community, such as the Benedictines or Franciscans. They’ll say that the core of their

identity is as a Benedictine or a Franciscan, and that the priesthood is the specific way they express that identity.

Whether a brother, deacon, or priest, the fundamental thing for all male religious is that they live their vocation as part of a family devoted to their vows and the specific mission of their community. Brothers do so in a unique way, because there's no clerical overlay on top of their core commitment.

In other words, if the brothers go, a key element of Catholic understanding of religious life goes with them.

### **witness to the essentially lay character of religious life**

Second, brothers are unique among male religious in that they're not a part of the hierarchy of the Church. At least in theory, that gives them more freedom to speak and to act, especially to commit to ministries to those most in need.

Through the centuries, Catholic brothers have been on the front lines of the Church's most demanding forms of service — feeding the hungry, comforting the sick, teaching the young, caring for the poor, and so on. You'll still find brothers doing those things today, often with a spirit of total commitment that priests, partly because of the other demands on their time, aren't able to replicate.

Related to that point, brothers are often able to minister to people in a different way — as one of them completely, without any trappings of authority or power. Many brothers report that the people they work with tell them, "I'd never say this to a priest, but I feel okay saying it to you."

(Carballo indirectly referred to this point in presenting the document on Monday, saying that brothers witness to the essentially lay character of religious life in the Church.)

### **a reminder of the value of community**

Third, brothers are testament to the value of community in a hyper-individualistic age. Without the trappings of the priesthood, they make the point that giving one's life to a religious community, all by itself, is a key part of authentic Catholic spirituality.

The Rev John Pavlik, a Capuchin priest and executive director of the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, says brothers are a reminder that Catholics aren't supposed to be "independent operators," but rather part of a family.

As Brazilian Cardinal João Braz de Aviz, prefect of the Congregation for Religious, put it on Monday, at its core the vocation of a brother is simply the Christian vocation.

In the United States, Catholic brothers have been meeting in a think tank for three years to brainstorm ways to raise the profile of their vocation. They've had eight sessions to date, and they're understandably hoping that release of the new Vatican document will generate momentum. There are plans for a national symposium at Notre Dame to invite brothers to interact with Church leadership, both clerical and lay, to discuss the document.

Christian Brother Robert Berger, a religious studies professor at Manhattan College, says that once upon a time, brothers were seen as extraordinary men doing an ordinary thing, since there were plenty of brothers around and Catholics typically put their way of life on a pedestal.

Today, he said, the situation is reversed; brothers now will be seen, he said, as “ordinary men doing an extraordinary ministry.”

Here’s hoping Monday’s document will help ensure that those “ordinary men” finally get their due.



**John L. Allen Jr.**  
Associate editor - **CRUX**  
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## sac asia oceania e-bulletin

### you commented...

- on #203** Thanks...it spurred me to Google the original address by Pope Francis, it makes very interesting reading. **DM 18.01.16**
- Hallo and thank you so much for the interesting bulletin. I wish you and all around God’s blessing for the year 2016! **SC 20.01.16**