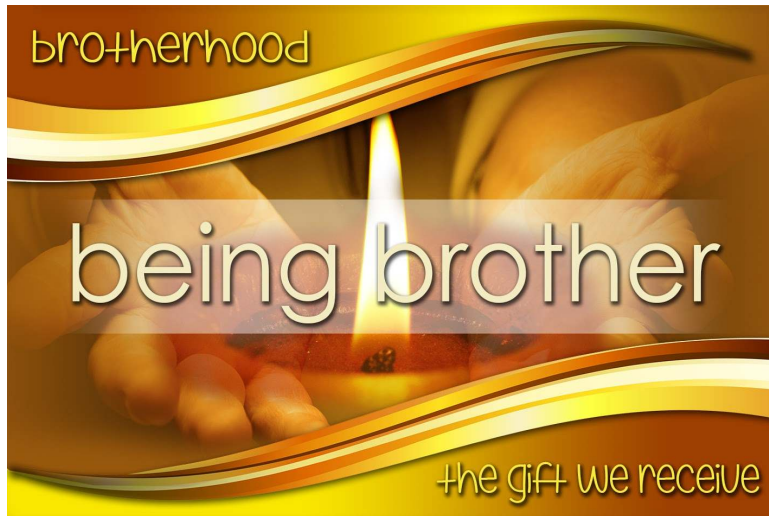


CIRCULAR LETTER
GENERAL COUNCIL FIC



Being a religious Brother, a gift we receive

(Const. art. 117)

Maastricht, April 2017

Dear Brothers and Associated Members,

As we are still in the Easter season, on behalf of the General Council, I would like to wish you a very Happy Easter 2017. May the spirit of the resurrection strengthen our spirit to continue the ministry of salvation which reaches its culmination in the death of Jesus on the cross.

As you might have heard we, religious Brothers, have for a long time been waiting for the official document of the Church concerning our vocation as religious Brothers. We think it is necessary for the Church to publish such document which would be of value, not only to ourselves but to the Church in general. This kind of document is at the same time an official recognition by the Church on the unique vocation of religious Brothers. It is a reality that many people do not understand this sort of vocation. There is no denying that lay religious life for men has not always been understood in the Church, by either the hierarchy or the laity. In many cases religious Brothers are seen merely as a sort of hybrid: neither priest nor lay-persons, but something “halfway in between”, ill-defined and incomplete. Brothers themselves have sometimes been more concerned about defending it than deepening their own understanding of it.

We are happy that finally the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life on October 4th, 2015 published an official document on the vocation of Religious Brothers entitled “Identity and Mission of the Religious Brother in the Church”. What is the document talking about?

Lay Religious

Vatican II, in its document *Perfectae Caritatis*, says that “Lay religious life, for men and for women, is a state for the profession of the evangelical counsels, which is complete in itself. The Holy Synod holds it in high esteem, for it is so useful to the Church in the exercise of its pastoral duty of educating the young, caring for the sick, and in its other ministries” (art. 10a). Next to this we read in *Lumen Gentium* that: “This form of life has its own place in relation to the divine and hierarchical structure of the Church. It is not a kind of middle way between the clerical and lay conditions of life. Rather it should be seen as a form of life to which some Christians are called by God, so that they may enjoy a special gift of grace in the life of the Church and may contribute to the saving mission of the Church” (art. 43).

“Brother” is the name traditionally given to male lay religious in the Church since the beginning of consecrated life. This title does not belong to him exclusively, but it represents a significant way of being in the ecclesial community. The title also

reminds us of the saying of Jesus to his followers: “And you are all Brothers” (Mt. 23:8). It was said by Jesus in a context in which Jesus speaks out against the hypocrisy of those who used religion to gain privileges and glory in the eyes of others. The title of Brother underlines the common dignity and fundamental equality of all believers. We, Brothers, are sons in the Son of the same heavenly Father. We are called upon to form a universal brotherhood in Christ, the first born of many Brothers (cf. Rom. 8:29).

The Identity of the Religious Brother

It is stated clearly in the document that the origin of the vocation of the Brother is the experience of God’s love. “We have known the love God has for us and put our faith in it” (1John 4:16). This statement is basically the same with the message of the 2012 General Chapter entitled “The experience of God is the foundation of our being religious”. During the 2012 Chapter we renewed our awareness that the real source of our trust and happiness is the experience of God’s continuous loving call to each one of us. This is the foundation of our being religious. Therefore we need to reflect every now and then on our experience of God’s love in day to day life. In the message of the 2012 General Chapter it was emphasized that this experience needs to be renewed and deepened constantly by a contemplative attitude in our life. This kind of attitude however requires regular times of silence and solitude in order to continue growing in our sensitivity for God’s reality. The

question is now for us individually and as a community, whether we really have regular times of silence and solitude to make ourselves sensitive to God’s presence in our day to day lives. “Prayer demands courage and faithfulness; prayer demands regularity” (Const. art. 63).

According to this document the heart of the identity of our being Religious Brother is the gift of fraternity expressed among others in the way of living together in a community. The authentic community life represents a living sign of the essential reality that the Brothers have to announce. The love that God has shown to humanity in Jesus Christ becomes a uniting principle for human beings among each other. “May they all be one, so that the world may believe” (John 17:21). For Brothers the community is not merely a place, but rather an experience; an experience of giving and receiving love. This experience of love should be the criterion of discernment in each community of Brothers, above and beyond the effectiveness of their work. In this way we would like to follow the ideal of the first Christians, to be “of one heart and one soul” (Acts 4:32). From this standpoint we Brothers organize our apostolic actions.

Another visible identity of the Brothers is their mission. In Vita Consecrata we can read that “Religious Brothers provide valuable services of various kinds, inside or outside the community, participating in this way in the mission of proclaiming the Gospel and bearing witness to it with charity in everyday life. Indeed, some of these services can be considered

ecclesial ministries, granted by legitimate authority” (art. 60). The document stressed the importance of the mission of the Brothers especially to the poor and to the least (cf. Mt 25:40).

Conclusion

Consecrated life has always been a story of grace. We have to be grateful that we are called to be a religious Brother. Being a religious is a gift to us (Const. art 117). The question is whether we are grateful and proud of being a religious Brother? How do we enrich our vocation and make it bear fruit abundantly? To whom do we become Brothers actually? What does it mean for me to be a Brother today? These are questions for our reflections following the publication of the document. In later days we still have to go deeper into the document, so that we continue growing toward the mystery of our vocation as a religious Brother.

With fraternal love and prayer,
also on behalf of Guido, Raphael and Theo,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Martinus Handoko', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Bro. Martinus Handoko
General Superior FIC

17-118/o/MH
