

The Mystery of Call

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When Br. Peter O'Loughlin, CFC, representing the Religious Brothers Conference board emailed me in December and asked me to present on the annual RBC conference, I panicked. I hesitated. I felt a lot of anxiety. Speaking and giving a presentation is not one of my gifts.

However, Br. Peter has always been so generous in saying “yes” to whatever has been asked of him as a Board member, how could I say “no?”

That is one of the calls that we as brothers respond to: saying “yes” to needs, being generous where there is need. Seeing the generosity in other brothers motivates and inspires me to go beyond my comfort zone, so I said “yes” to reflecting on my brotherhood.

Following the advice of Br. Peter, I hope to reflect on my lived experience of being a brother, be personal, be down to earth, and be real.

Difference Makers

My 45 years since First Profession as a GHM have been full and varied:

- 10 years in mission in NC, GA, MS and KY, mission for Glenmary being in rural, poor, non-Catholic and unchurched areas in the US
- 8 years in Vocation Ministry
- 4 years in Formation Ministry
- 12 years in Leadership
- 4 years in caring for Glenmary Senior and Disabled Members

Like me, brothers often wear many hats over the course of their ministry.

Flexibility and adaptability are qualities and characteristics of a brother as well as responding to the needs of his religious community and the needs in his ministry.

There is a quote from the prophet Isaiah I love: “How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring the good news” (Isaiah 52:7, NIV).

This Scripture passage is especially meaningful for a Glenmarian because we minister in the mountains of Appalachia. But it also applies to every brother, no matter his congregation or apostolate.

- Blessed are the feet of those who teach the young and impressionable.
- Blessed are the feet of those who care for the sick and elderly in a nursing home or hospital.
- Blessed are the feet of those who care for the poor, the vulnerable, disabled, homeless and marginalized on our streets and neighborhoods, in our urban centers and small towns.
- Blessed are the feet of those who devote their lives in prayer for the needs of others.
- Blessed are the feet of those in leadership who support and challenge the members of their community, who envision the future and sit in meeting after meeting after meeting.

Some brothers specialize in a specific field, such as medicine, law, art, social work, or as advocates for peace and justice. Wherever there is a need, a brother responds. That is the makeup of a brother’s vocation – a person for others.

We are privileged to embrace a vocation that reaches out to others and in doing so, we are richly blessed.

In the 1980s—which seems like a century ago—I helped coordinate, with other Glenmary priests and brothers, one week volunteer programs in Appalachia for high school and college students. It was one of the most memorable and challenging experiences of my life.

We slept in a barn, frequented an outhouse and showered at the swimming hole.

We built and renovated homes in the area and visited the elderly in a nursing home.

We learned about the Appalachian culture and people, their music, their struggle.

We sang songs and shared stories around a campfire in the evenings.

We had liturgy at night, in the woods, by a stream, the path lit by candles.

We developed a bond and a sense of community.

Those students left at the end of the week forever changed with a glow in their hearts because they came and they experienced and they made a difference!

Isn't that why we are called to be brothers—to make a difference?

And brothers have made a difference. We have touched the lives of community members and those we have ministered to—not in a flamboyant, self-centered manner but in unassuming ways—easy, gentle, caring—the brother way!

What Do We Seek?

My 45 years as a brother has gifted me with much joy and many experiences but also interspersed with struggle.

I have struggled with community: with members who have differing values, interests, viewpoints and perspectives than me; with members who are too young or too old to relate to; with members who annoy me.

I have struggled with poverty: when I strive to be content with the old, I want the new; when I strive to settle for the least, I want the most; when I strive to accept the ordinary, I want the best.

I have struggled with obedience: when I try to listen to the wisdom or others, I revert to doing it my way; when I abide by the assignments and decisions of leadership, I second guess their decisions and lack trust.

And most especially I have struggled with celibacy: when I am lonely, I crave intimacy; when I am alone, I vision a partner. I long to be that one, special person in another person's life.

Life as a celibate has not always been easy. I have fallen in love, a few times. It has been an experience of joy. It has been an experience of great pain.

I was torn. My heart was divided. Tears were shed. I endured sleepless nights, consulted with friends, and sought counseling. At one point, I took a 1-year leave of absence.

But by the grace of God, I returned. There's a part of me that often wonders what another path or life choice would have looked like with different struggles and joys. I will never know. I will always wonder.

At times I still experience loneliness and miss the intimacy of touch. But the support and love of my fellow community members, prayer and the joys of ministry sustain me. I have also come to realize that loneliness is a part of life, whether celibate, single or married. I am always reminded of Augustine's often quoted wisdom, "You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."¹

Maybe you had a similar experience. At sometime in your journey, you questioned your vocation. You fell in love. You've seen classmates and friends leave. You stayed. I stayed. Why? There is something deep inside us, a call, a call to community, a call to service, a call to Church, a call to sacrifice for the other, whatever it is, we are here. We are fighting or have fought the good fight. We are strengthened by our prayer life, by the love and witness of our congregation, by this desire to make a difference in the lives of others. What a gift! What a cross!

And so I remain a brother, committed to this wonderful, mysterious call that few people understand—a call that sometimes I don't understand. A call that is gift, a call that is grace. A call that opens up opportunities of service, of giving of self, of dying to self, of intimate moments with people in need, times of silence to ponder our following of this man named Jesus, this God of mercy and love and compassion.

And living out my life as a brother—and the living out of any brother's life—as mentioned earlier, is grace.

Brothers are blessed by community. We are inspired and challenged by our fellow brothers, priests and lay people we are associated with. Living poverty brings us a new awareness of the value of simplicity and that enough is enough. Obedience brings us new insights, stretches us and brings us out of our comfort zones (sometimes kicking and screaming) and enables us to develop talents that we

¹ Augustine, *Confessions* I.1, available at <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/110101.htm>.

thought we never had. Celibacy opens up a new world and new possibilities for friendships, for having time for others, and time for prayer.

Being brother enables us to be a witness to the world, of noble values, as flawed as we are, as imperfect as we are in living them out.

Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us, "The treasure we seek requires no lengthy expedition, no expensive equipment, no superior aptitude or special company. All we lack is the willingness to imagine that we already have everything we need. The only thing missing is our consent to be where we are."

Thomas Merton also says, "All we need is to experience what we already possess."²

The "aah" moment, when we experience an inner peace and contentment and joy on the path we have chosen in life. The moment that has occurred in our 20's or 40's or 60's or 80's. Or that moment of consciousness that we still seek.

The Future is In Our Hands

Brotherhood has a rich history. Brothers stand on the shoulders of saintly men, men we have read about, men we have heard about, men we have lived with and young men who recently join us with so many gifts and talents and passion.

That is what I experience in my association and lived experience with brothers: generosity, men of prayer, witnesses to their faith, passionate in their love for the poor, the sick, the downtrodden.

These same brothers now march into an unknown future.

What is the future of the vocation of brother? Statistics and trends reveal that we lose about 100 brothers per year when one factors in new professions, deaths and departures.

We need to reverse this trend. We need to instill new energy into the life and story of a brother. Vocation ads in diocesan newspapers, national magazines, booklets and glossy pamphlets have not proven productive

² This is from a talk Merton gave at Our Lady of Redwoods Abbey in September 1968. Br. David Steindl-Rast, OSB took notes on Merton's talk and eventually published them in *Monastic Studies* in 1969. Excerpts from that article, including this quote, can also be found at <https://gratefulness.org/resource/recollections-of-thomas-mertons-last-days-in-the-west/>.

Personal encounters are what moves hearts. Conveying joy is contagious. Standing up for peace and justice inspires. St. John of the Cross said, "God measures our perfection neither by the multitude nor the magnitude of our deeds, but by the measure in which we perform them."³

We need to re-engage, re-orient and re-define our traditional vision of brotherhood, not as a re-living of the past, but something new, something fresh, something that will motivate, something that will touch the deepest recesses of hearts.

What will emerge with this great and noble and humble vocation of brother?

I read the following on a greeting card:

"He came singing Love,
He lived singing Love,
He died singing Love,
He rose in silence.
If the song is to continue,
We must do the Singing!"

We have a rich and storied past. We have a future laden with opportunities. May God continue to gift us with creativity, with courage when we become disheartened, with strength when we feel weak, with the insight to pursue goals, and with patience to take one step and then the next step, one step at a time.

You may find the original posting of this essay, as well as the author's biographical and contact information, at <https://www.reviewforreligious.com/essays/the-mystery-of-call/>.

³ Attributed to St. John of the Cross, from "Living With Christ," March 7, 2009.