

## THE PROBLEMATIC OF THE MALE LAY RELIGIOUS TODAY

("Problematica sul Religioso Laico" for CRIS Plenaria)

In 1984, according to statistics published in a Pro Mundi Vita report, there were some 70,600 Catholic religious "brothers" in the world. At the same time, there were 411,000 priests and 952,000 religious sisters. These figures represented a loss, in comparison with the year before, of 9,000 sisters, of 2,500 priests, and of almost the same number of brothers. There is no indication of how many of the brothers might have been monks (whose situation is clearly very different from that of brothers in "clerical" or "mixed" institutes), but even so, the percentage drop in numbers of brothers (4 percent) is so much higher than that of sisters (one tenth of one percent) or of priests (six tenths of one percent) as to leave little doubt that the statement made on page 27 of the paper Fr Salaverri prepared for this meeting is correct: "The general crisis which the Church has experienced in the last fifteen years seems to have had stronger repercussions on male lay religious." At least that is so if "crisis" is viewed in terms of decrease in numbers.

As the paper goes on to say, of course, statistics must be used very cautiously. But other responses to the CRIS questionnaire attest to the concern prevalent among many religious institutes of men about the current situation of their lay members. This is borne out by other surveys, notably that conducted in 1981-1982 by the Union of Superiors General. The responses to that survey included 87 from institutes where there are both priests and brothers, and 12 from institutes of brothers which have some priest-members.

At least half of the institutes responding to the survey acknowledged problems in the relationship of priests and brothers which go beyond the question of presence or absence of brothers in the government of the institute (though this question is a very real one to many: some thirty institutes have had recourse to the Holy See to obtain particular faculties regarding government functions to be exercised by brothers).

At meetings held in 1982-83-84, among Superiors General, with CRIS, and with the Holy Father himself, the problems and issues seemed to be the same as those which emerged in the USG survey. They return again in the CRIS questionnaire responses. They have been treated at length in the papers prepared as background for this Plenaria, as well as in papers readied for the meeting of the Union of Superiors General held last May. A number of these issues fall under the topics assigned to other presenters at this meeting. After a note of caution about the risks of univocity involved in any discussion of "brothers," I will advert briefly here to some of the issues which seem to call for our attention, as an introduction to a more detailed treatment and, hopefully, a fruitful discussion. In what follows I am indebted especially to Fr Real Forgues, RSV, but also to many others whose reflections have stimulated my own.

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A. We must be very careful about speaking in univocal terms about lay male religious. The impossibility of lumping these men together across their institutional differences is hinted at even by the variety of titles given them in the various institutes:

lay, servants, coadjutors, cooperators, catechists, lay religious, brother. The histories of the various religious families – to which Msgr Luna Tobar will refer in much more detail – show how very different in conception and in practice is the figure of the lay male religious in its various incarnations in the Church. We all know this; almost every commentator restates it; let us be careful to keep it in mind, especially because not doing so makes it very difficult to achieve clear ideas about the nature of the present "crisis." There is no such thing as a "brother ut sic."

B. Some of the issues we will need to consider are the following.

First, those more pertinent to "fully clerical" institutes:

1 The place of brothers in relation to priests. The charism of a religious institute is shared by all, but even the official name given to the lay members often connotes something less than equality. There is a problem of participation, of integrating brothers into the work of the Church (C. 129.2) – inviting them to full participation in the life of the institute. (In the USG survey, more than forty institutes explicitly ask that the perpetually professed have equality of rights in everything except what is derived from Holy Orders.)

2 What are tasks strictly reserved to priests? This question is rendered more difficult by the fact that many tasks traditionally reserved to priests are no longer, in fact, so reserved. It would be opportune to examine in what the difference between a religious and a religious priest consists. The religious priest often does what ought to be done by the brother.

3 The question of jurisdiction restricted to clerics. Is this a question that is necessarily affected by ecclesiological developments? Fr Paul Boyle will certainly have something to say to us about that.

4 The very notion of a "clerical institute." Some religious families in this category do not see their nature and purpose adequately expressed by this title. Could some of them pass to the category of "not fully clerical"?

Then, issues more pertinent to "mixed" or "non-differentiated" institutes:

5 In the USG survey responses, a number of institutes ask that the Church abandon the dual classification "Clerical Institute – Lay Institute", and find another name, especially for apostolic institutes.

6 Such institutes include many whose founders neither demanded nor precluded the clerical state, but which became "clerical" later by reason of legislation rather than by explicit intention. The questions raised in their regard center around Canon 588. I leave it to His Eminence Cardinal Jubany to speak about them with much more expertise than I could.

Finally, issues about lay male religious which seem to cut across all categories of institutes:

7 The crisis of vocations. Lay institutes have lost more members than clerical institutes; within clerical institutes, the number of brothers is decreasing consistently.

But is it possible that the crisis of religious life regarding brothers makes more visible the crisis of religious life itself, which priesthood seems to mask? How many religious priests live exactly like diocesan priests? Furthermore, should religious families not speak of religious vocations as such, according to the charism appropriate to themselves, and leave the further problem of priest-brother to a further discernment?

8 The lack of understanding of the vocation of brothers. Male lay religious life is often neither understood nor appreciated in the Church at large. Familiar characterizations of it as "second class" or "non-priest" persist. This despite the definition given it by Vatican II as "a state of the profession of evangelical counsels complete in itself" (PC 10). In fact, the Church thinks primarily in terms of priests and laity, secondarily of religious men and religious women; it rarely mentions brothers explicitly. How then assure that a brother, in no matter what type of institute, thinks of himself as fully a "religious" (living in a state complete in itself), in no way intermediate between priesthood and laity?

9 A pastoral of vocations. We must: always take the brother into consideration — never speak of a "non-priest" — insure the participation of brothers in the life of the local and universal Church — recognize the brother himself as the best instrument of publicity.

10 The exercise of ministry by brothers in the Church. Can brothers, ought brothers, have "ecclesial" ministries in a way different from that possible to lay persons who are not "consecrated?" If so, are brothers in danger of being "clericalized?" On the other hand, does the Church currently exhibit tendencies which minimize the vocation of the brother: e.g. the promotion of the laity and the insistence on the importance of priesthood (symbolized by the impossibility of obtaining a reduction to the lay state, at the same time as dispensation from vows is fairly easy) — ? If monks are currently looking to rid themselves of clericalism, should clerical institutes revise their own legislation about their lay members? Is there a kind of "presence" to some work which a brother can have, while a priest cannot?

11 Authentic religious life — and certainly ministry — demands formation, both initial and ongoing. The kind which brothers ought to receive includes cultural formation, theological formation, etc. — but not "clericalization." It is important especially if, as some insist, the brother is to be seen as a privileged interlocutor in the dialogue between faith and culture. There are regions of the world like India, where primary evangelization is still in full flood, which report a greater need for brothers than for priests.

12 A theological vision. This has to embrace the notion of the priesthood common to the baptized, and the spiritual sacrifice involved in a brother's life lived existentially and radically according to the mission specific to a religious family. The life of a brother is not the religious life in its pure state, but it makes that more clearly evident. There is a complementarity involved: the brother reminds the religious priest that he cannot be a priest like the diocesan priest, while the priest reminds the brother of the plenitude, the pastoral dimension, of his calling.

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I make no claim that what I have singled out exhausts the list of important issues. It certainly does not detail adequately the various ways in which the current situation of male lay religious has been described and analysed in the growing corpus of studies on the subject, to which the background papers distributed for this meeting are very helpful contributions,

I expect that, in the course of our deliberations, other substantive issues will be raised and alternative points of view put forward. In any case, I see the issues I have mentioned as among those which need exploration in any attempt at renewal of the vocation of the lay male religious.

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