

"All my brothers... All of you are brothers"

ER22

A reflection on the 2015 ESC Brothers Convocation

At the height of a California summer, with drought and fires dominating the news, 71 friars minor from 10 entities within the Order of Friars Minor gathered at St Francis Retreat Center in San Juan Bautista California for an historic “brothers convocation”. The meeting was sponsored by the English Speaking Conference (ESC) of the Order and generously supported by a number of provinces involved with the ESC. It was a “first” in many notable ways. It was a gathering of lay brothers who were, to a man, eager to explore their history and experience as friars minor. The meeting brought together friars from 7 provinces in the United States (66 brothers), the Province of the Holy Korean Martyrs (2 brothers), the Custody of St Anthony (1 brother), and Holy Spirit Province (2 brothers).

The first international gathering of lay brothers, these 5 days in August 2015 (10th-14th) proved to be lively, engaging, and enriching for all the brothers. Beyond the historical significance of this gathering, an inspirational highlight of the meeting was the presence of our newly elected Minister General, Michael Perry, who attended with the General Definitor for the ESC, Caoimhín Ó Laoide.

The formal beginning of our convocation began on Monday evening after dinner with evening prayer and a welcome and introduction by John Gutierrez (from the organizing committee) and a welcome from John Hardin (Minister Provincial of St Barbara Province). Beyond the gracious welcome, it was a moment to pray for our brothers from Vietnam who were unable to secure visas to attend the convocation, and for our brother Jim McIntosh, and his family. Jim was unable to attend because of the death of his mother. While there was a natural ebullience as we began our days together, it was especially important, salutary and grounding, to remember those who could not be with us. Monday was a travelling day. Many of the brothers headed off to rest after the first formal session; however, as with any friar gathering,

some saw out the evening with refreshments and conversation while our organizing committee met and refined the events of the next day.

After breakfast and Morning Prayer, Tuesday began with a presentation by our brother Bill Short (St Barbara Province) on the “History of the Lay Brother” within our Order. As is always the case, Bill’s presentation was scholarly, thorough in its scope and yet entertaining and inspiring. Bill began by noting that there are groups of brothers meeting regularly within the Order (in Brazil and Mexico) and that this is a welcome development. Bill expressed his hope that from such regional meetings there would be a truly international “gatherings of brothers in the Order” so that “we (the brothers) would really have an opportunity to speak to each other and speak to the other brothers of the Order about how we see the brothers’ vocation.”

Bill began his presentation by exploring what our Brother Francis meant when he used the term “brother” as he did so carefully in the Rule (see ER n.22). The reality that we are all brothers—both lay and cleric—was one of the most striking aspects of a new way of seeing a committed life. To emphasize the new way that Francis paved in his time, Bill examined the place of lay brothers in various Orders, and highlighted the fact that Francis refused to adopt the Rule of another Order (specifically, the Benedictines, the Cistercians or the Augustinians). Francis insisted on developing a new rule for his new brothers, one that was marked by a new sense of equality in fraternity. Regardless of their ability to read (cleric) or not (lay), Francis implored “All my brothers” to remember that “All of you are brothers.” (ER n.22, cf, Matt 23:8ff). Unlike other Orders where the distinction between lay and cleric was significant, in principle and in practice, and where clerics were the only full members of the Order; Francis insisted on a clear and unequivocal equality between everyone in the fraternity.

In his survey of the history of the lay brother within the Order, Bill explored how an “anti-lay revolution” began around the year 1239 with the election of Haymo of Faversham as Minister General, and was finally legislated with the promulgation of Haymo’s constitutions in 1260. From 1239, no lay brother was elected Minister General. As Bill indicated, despite grand efforts to exclude and legislate against lay brothers (by the Order and the Vatican, through councils and canon law), our history

and current fraternity is replete with friars who have been, and are, committed to advancing a positive vision of the lay brother within the Order.

Throughout the four days there was time for “open mic” and Q&A after each presentation. After Bill’s presentation, discussion focused on obstacles to the vocation of the lay brother, as it also began to focus on the formation of the brothers—both lay and cleric. Should the early years after first vows—common to all brothers—be focused on Franciscan formation, after which formation for a particular ministry (e.g., social work or priesthood) would then occur? We gathered in small groups after which there was another open mic period where the discussion focused on the importance of fraternity, of making our fraternal experience real and supportive, and on the uniqueness of our Order which would be incomplete if there were no lay brothers.

We ended the formal part of the day at Eucharist with our Minister General, Michael Perry, presiding. Focusing on the second reading for the feast of St Clare, Michael spoke of the injunction that we “should no longer be determined and defined by the past”: by past achievements, difficulties, “patronages”, or “past hurts.” He noted that for St Paul and St John, to follow Jesus means to begin again, to lay down one’s life for the other, placing “the needs of others ahead of our own.” Michael concluded that it is only when “we accept to enter into the mystery of the very humility of God, which is the source and font of [our] lives, and the foundation of our discipleship, and the gift of our vocation, will we be set free to live fully our life in God.” What Paul, John, Francis and Clare all try to tell us is that “...it is only when we allow God to strip us of all that is false about ourselves, all that is false, that we will discover what it truly means to be lesser brothers.”

We began our third day together with Eucharist. Caoimhín Ó Laoide presided and preached for the brothers on Matthew’s discourse on the church, in particular this day on how the church should address wrongdoing in the church. Caoimhín noted that Francis spoke of compassionate ways to deal with wrongdoing, “that move us from murmuring, complaining, from bitching if you like, to actually being honest and authentic with one another.” In telling a story from his own life, he noted that he feels “much safer if people are honest” with him; and happiest when in the

presence of “people who care enough to be authentic and honest.” He noted that in our days together we may need to say some painful and difficult things to each other. He finished by adding that the gospel “encourages us to be courageous, to be trustful” that Jesus is present with us and that he “draws us into authenticity.”

The first session on Wednesday was presented by Seán Sammon FMS, a Marist Brother, clinical psychologist, lecturer, researcher and former superior general of the Marist Brothers. Seán’s presentation developed a “perspective” on the brother’s vocation and explored three significant issues: the challenges facing brothers today; the nature and purpose of a renewed religious life; and, celibate chastity as one clear sign of our identity as brothers.

For Seán, one of the greatest challenges facing brothers today is a confusion about what our vocation represents in today’s church. People understand the nature of priests and also of women religious; but it appears more difficult for people to understand the nature and vocation of the brother. In terms of a renewed religious life, Seán suggested that “if we can discover the heart of brotherhood, we will have the key to the renewal of religious life.” Again in terms of perspective, Seán suggested that celibate chastity is at the heart of the brother’s vocation; it is a way of being sexual person but we need to discover a vocabulary for speaking about it. Our “sexuality is a friend of spirituality” and “both have the same end: union with God and other people”. Our sexuality “pulls us out of ourselves” and “our spirituality pulls us out of ourselves”, both of which lead us towards God and others.

Seán was very clear that there are significant challenges facing us as brothers, especially around renewing our theological understanding of our place within the church. Consecrated religious were never meant simply to be a workforce for the church; nor are we a part of the hierarchical church. Our place is within the charismatic church; we are about being prophetic. For Seán, the beginning point for the renewal of our understanding and of religious life lies in story telling: recounting with each other, and with the world, the narratives of what it means to be a brother. From this retelling will emerge a new understanding. We also need to deepen our understanding of the spirituality that animate us, and this will underpin a “personal and congregational conversion” which is essential for our renewal. Seán added that

to accept the challenge of conversion and renewal means engaging with the Holy Spirit; and that is “dangerous”. Mary questioned God, and then said “yes”, and that “yes” changed the course of human history. Francis and Clare said “yes”; and that “yes” changed the religious and human experience of their time. The beginning of this discovery—of conversion and renewal, and of us committing a new “yes” to brotherhood and mission—is in talking about our experience as brothers; and this requires that we develop the skills that allow us to fully engage in the discovery and the “yes”.

Seán provided an overview of developments in the church in respect of religious life. He reminded us that the “role of religious life is to be the church’s living memory: of what it can be, what it wants to be, what it must be.” The role of the religious brother is to be a “living conscience to the church; by our lives, to continue to remind the larger church, what it wants to be, what it hopes to be, what it must be”. Seán reminded us that this is what people long for in the church.

Seán provided an overview of the life cycle of religious congregations and explored briefly each of the stages: foundation, expansion, stabilization, breakdown, transition. Seán spoke of the period of stabilization as being “the most dangerous period for a religious congregation” because “we come to believe that it will all depend on us”. However, as Seán reminds us, the challenges that have arisen since Vatican II—in the breakdown of religious life—have “made us more dependent on God.” We continue to experience some of these challenges today. Confusion and tensions are the most significant challenges: about the future, of whether there is a future to our religious life together. As Seán made clear, the confusion and tension, which can last a significant period, is inevitably about our identity and mission—both past and present. What was secure is no longer secure. What seemed to work in terms of decision making and communication now appears as flawed and less than useful. For Seán, if genuine renewal is to occur then we need to: reclaim our founding charism; be courageous in understanding and responding to the urgent needs of today; and, we need to allow ourselves to experience both a personal and congregational conversion.

Seán indicates that we turn a corner in terms of renewal when we begin to see, as a fraternity, that what we have done—in our life and mission—no longer appears appropriate. Part of the renewal phase must be the conviction within the fraternity that we must search for a deeper relationship with God and new ways to respond to pressing needs. In so doing, we are returning to our origins, the true source of how and why we were founded. Seán’s understanding of renewal in religious life calls us to a transformation that “moves beyond the personal.” As Caoimhín said in his homily earlier in the day, such conversion, such transformation within our fraternity can only occur where there is a deep trust and honesty within the fraternity. And with this trust and honesty, we refine our understanding of our identity—the place where we stand—as individuals and as a fraternity.

For this process to occur, forgiveness and reconciliation are imperative. We can only be transformed where we understand, through honesty with each other, of the need for conversion; and this leads us to reconciliation and forgiveness: “we have to forgive and ask for forgiveness.” For this type of renewal to occur, we may need to develop new skills for community life “appropriate for a group of adults who have come together around the gospel... [as] men who love one another, and care about each other, even in the midst of our differences, even in the midst of people who drive us crazy.”

So what of the future, and what are our key priorities? For Seán, “our job is to help people fall in love with Jesus Christ”, and so our “real identity” as friars minor has two key pillars: “that we fall in love with Jesus Christ; and that we become a living portrait of our founder”, Francis of Assisi. This is what will renew and re-energize the church.

During the open mic and Q&A session a number of issues were raised that focused on: the temptation we face to emphasize our professional role ahead of our place as a friar minor; the need to reestablish our communities as loving fraternities rather than quasi-motels. On this point, Seán emphasized that “communities that learn how to disagree, and to do that in a way that’s Christian, are communities that are wonderful places to live in.” To be truly a gospel community, we must develop compassion, which means being able to find the everyday and sacred humanity

within the brothers. Practicing the “little virtues”, little acts of communal care and kindness, speaking directly and avoiding gossip, and having normal “human conversations” where we practice honesty: these are the simple things that make community life “intentional”, and exemplary of the living gospel.

Seán presentation provided much food for thought and lively discussion both in the open mic and Q&A session that followed, but also in the Table Discussion that occurred in the afternoon. The afternoon sessions focused on the choice to be a brother rather than an ordained friar, and on the contribution made by lay brothers to the church, in the past, now and in the future. Many of the responses pointed to the intentional nature of the choice to be a brother, that the brother’s sacramentalism is other than liturgical, and that the place of the brother—in life and ministry—is in the daily grist that makes up the ordinary lives of the people with whom we are engaged—in the past, now, and in the future.

There were many highlights in this gathering of brothers from various places of the globe; but perhaps the strongest memory we will retain is of our all too brief conversation with Michael Perry, our Minister General. It was striking because of the informality of the encounter combined with Michael’s openness, the candid nature of his comments, and the eloquence with which he invited us to refocus ourselves as friars minor.

To his surprise, one of the first questions taken by Michael was, “Could you tell us a little bit about your vocation story, how you came to the friars?” There was a simple beauty in this moment and question. Beyond the interesting (even entertaining) aspects of his story—of a “wild kid” who ends up a friar minor and minister general—this pertinent question gave Michael a chance to share how the Spirit has moved in his life through his connection with ordinary people and the grit of daily events. What is clear for him is that “the source of vocation is totally unpredictable, as is the response.” Michael was able to explore that idea through his own vocational journey and experience.

For Michael, “the fact that [his vocation to the friars minor] came through two lay couples tells [him] that the laity in the church speak very loudly.” He went on to

reflect that as a result of his various experiences—in the USA and in Africa—he firmly believes that “from the very beginning of [his] experience the laity, for vocation and for ministry, have been central.” He recalled how his introduction to the friars minor was through a gathering of Methodists youth who were involved with *Habitat for Humanity*. His conclusion is that lay people and “the ecumenical, and beyond that, the inter-religious, are essential for my faith and for my Franciscan life. They’re not optional; I have to be involved in these areas” and that he must be “promoting the vocation of the laity.” The capstone of his reflection on his own vocation was that we have a powerful document that guides our thinking—*Evangelii Gaudium*—which he refers to as “the Franciscan document” because at its heart it gives us a “Franciscan ecclesiology” as it “reflects the values of who we are as friars minor.”

In leading us to reflect on *Evangelii Gaudium*, Michael articulated the central question for him at this “privileged moment” in our history. We are at a moment “where we can reclaim the values that we believe are central to our lives.” For Michael, “the question is: are we going to be willing to reclaim those values; are we going to be willing to pay the price in reclaiming those values? Because if we do, we are going to have to change the way we live.” So we need to understand that “no matter what ministry one might be doing, what are those central core values to being a friar minor?”

Michael was asked how “we as brothers” can be involved in “renewing the church”. In responding to that question, Michael was very clear that our “central vocation” is that we “have to re-believe that we are friars minor. I can cease being a priest tomorrow, because that is not my central vocation. My central vocation is to be a friar minor.” In exploring this idea Michael pointed us to a Franciscan document published in 2014. The document—*Ite, Nuntiate*—was developed by several groups of friars who are attempting to return to a lived experience of the “values that are central to our lives” as friars minor. These values are to be found in the Earlier Rule, the Later Rule, The Testament and the Admonitions. The document of which Michael spoke outlines a “list of elements [for our life] to be always kept in mind” and Michael spoke on a number of those elements. First and foremost, “the primacy of God in our lives. To be in love with Jesus...and to communicate that love to the world.” Second, and significantly for our lives as friars minor, “we have to love the brothers...” and

“make our lives completely available.” We need to “get back to believing that we have to sacrifice ourselves for one another.”

That brought Michael to an important point in this conversation—a reflection on not grasping things, our vow of *sine proprio*, and of living simply. His fear is that the longer we are in religious life the more “we become slaves to so many things and yet we are called by our tradition to be free and available.” He observed that “celibacy is supposed to free us for availability” and yet some friars have become “the least available of anybody.” Michael acknowledged that we all need time for prayer, and to take care of important matters in our own lives, but the aim of our life is to be engaged with our fraternity and with the people around us: “to be a friar minor, a minor with others, and to promote their wellbeing.” To do this, to get back to our core values, we need to change. And so “if we believe in this thing called the Franciscan movement, then let’s help each other move.”

Fraternity is central to being friars minor and Michael developed several points around this theme. A core question for Michael is, how would such a return to the sources, to our values, impact on our fraternity in mission? Michael spoke about how it is easy to respond to the request of every bishop, to fill every vacancy, respond to every urgent need. But he likened this to being a “race to the bottom”, the easiest course of action; but this approach can impact negatively on our central values and on who we are as friars minor. The critical point for Michael is that when we go on mission, we go as a fraternity, as friars minor, regardless of our role. So in any request that comes, if there is no place and role in the request for the fraternity—both lay and cleric—then there is no place for the friars minor: “Fraternity is central... [so] we can’t go [to a mission] as anything else but friars minor. We go as fraternity in mission.”

Michael then turned to another central issue pertinent for our fraternities at this time. He said that “one of the greatest threats or challenges to the life of the Order today, and you have said this, not just here, 1408 of you said this from across the whole world, that one of the greatest challenges for future Franciscan life is trust.” He mused that perhaps we don’t trust each other because we don’t believe in God’s promise. The absence of trust diminishes fraternity.

Picking up on a number of Michael's comments, one of the questions raised the issue of friars living alone in "lone ranger" ministries. While he concurred that we should be concerned about such an approach to fraternity in mission, Michael said that "what disturbs [him] more than friars going off and living by themselves, are the five friars who live together, in complete isolation and loneliness. The friar going off on his own disturbs me as well.... I spoke about it at the general chapter. We really need to develop hotel ministries for our friaries, because some of our friaries are hotels." This is not an authentic way to be Franciscan, and this is a great challenge for us: to come out of our isolation, to live authentic fraternal lives, to have conversations that are real and honest, to really live the values we espouse.

Michael finished the Q&A—and his time with us—by speaking to us about the convocation and about the lingering issue of the canonical status of the Order. He said, "what you're doing here is normal. This is normal. This is great. Do it every year if it will help us deepen our collective identities, and help us re-center the core values of our lives, then do it; but don't let it stop here. Take it back home. Keep talking to each other. Encourage each other. There's no reason for permission to be given for this. There's no reason to have to justify why you are doing it. This should just part of who we are as friars. We're getting together and talking about what matters to us. This is wonderful. Please continue. The friars in Brazil have been doing it every second year, for financial and other reasons; but every two years, the lay brothers in Brazil get together. They issued a very challenging document to the Order two years ago. And they are the ones who keep raising the question of the *mixed institute* with the Pope.... Every time we see the Pope we will ask him, please, fulfil the promise made in article 61 of *Vita Consecrata* to do the work and try to help us. Let the church integrate something which it has not been able to integrate: the authentic identity of mixed institutes like the Franciscans. If you don't, you are stopping us from realizing who we are." At the conclusion of conversation, each brother was presented with parchment on which was written the blessing of Brother Leo. The conversation and Michael's courage and openness were an inspiration to us all.

Our last day together focused on our experiences and aspiration on formation—past, present and future. We began the day with a lively *fishbowl* where six of the friars were asked to share about their experiences, their hopes and their

ideas around the issue of formation. There were a number of significant points that were raised in that session: the deficits in past formation, the positive experiences of friar mentors, the intellectual input, and exposure to new and even international experiences. There were a significant number of suggestions made regarding future formation. Following on from Michael's presentation and from other earlier conversations, we again returned to the thought that all friars should be formed as friars minor, first and foremost, with consideration of role (e.g., teacher, priest, or nurse) being delayed until formation as a friar minor is completed. We broke into small groups with the aim of capturing, more precisely, the ideas of the assembled brothers on formation of the lay brother. Group reports tabled our ideas and the task of the Planning Committee will now be to synthesize those ideas into formal recommendations emerging out of the convocation.

We completed our final full day with Eucharist, a wonderful dinner and a festive social gathering. Friday was a travelling day and many of the friars headed to airports from early on Friday morning. It was a full week, an inspiring week, and a challenging week. We went away with Michael's words—and those of each one of the brothers—as food for the journey and the challenge ahead of us: to live more authentically our vocation as friars minor.

Gratitude for God's gifts to us as brothers was central in our thoughts as we departed from St Francis Retreat Center in San Juan Bautista; but gratitude to others was also deep within our hearts. To the Planning Committee: their commitment and care of us was evident at every point of the convocation. To the host fraternity at San Juan Bautista: they welcomed us and helped make our stay such a pleasant experience. To the staff of St Francis Retreat Center: their hospitality warmed us and their food enriched us, though I have no doubt many of us headed straight for the treadmill once we reached our homes! To the province of St Barbara and to John Hardin: we felt welcomed, supported and encouraged in our efforts to explore our stories as brothers. To the ESC and to the provinces and custodies who supported the event, and encouraged their brothers to attend, some coming great distances: we are grateful for your support that allows us to explore and tell our stories. To Caoimhín Ó Laoide, General Definitor, and Michael Perry, our Minister General: your availability to us, and your support of this convocation, have given us inspiration and

energy to commit ourselves anew to live this precious life as friars minor that has been given to us as gift. “Brothers! May the Lord give you peace!”