

# FAITH

## Vows of religious life acquire meaning in community context

By Br. Raymond J. Vercruyse, CFC  
Guest contributor

My first experience with the brothers came when I was a freshman at Bishop Kearney High School. It was the first day of school, second period, room A-7, and the class was freshman science. The brother introduced himself and began talking about Edmund Rice, founder of the Congregation of Christian Brothers, and about the role of the Christian Brothers in the church.

I was in awe. I never knew brothers existed in the church. After hearing his explanation, it all made sense. During the rest of the day I had classes with three other brothers. Each talked about Edmund Rice and themselves. They were normal, average people. As the year progressed I saw their dedication to education and the students.

During my years as a Kearney student, I came to a better appreciation of the brothers' lifestyle in community. They enjoyed each others' company. They joked

with each other, and they also disagreed with each other. In this atmosphere I became more aware that I was attracted to their lifestyle. It seemed to me that the brothers were around for me and others, no matter what time of day they were needed. It was this type of commitment to the mission that impressed me. So when one brother asked, "Have you ever considered becoming a brother?" I was not totally taken aback.

I strongly believe the other part of my life that allowed me to hear the question openly was the faith of my grandparents and parents. Their involvement in church was very important to them. We went to Sunday Mass as a family and did many things together, and I firmly believe that the seed of a vocation to religious life is planted in the home. It was in my case.

Today as vocation director of the Congregation of Christian Brothers, I frequently am asked why I became a brother. I have thought of different ways to explain my reasons, but the same basic reason

comes through: I wanted to serve other people. I thought working with youths was one way to do this. I happen to enjoy being around young people, and I like learning. So I thought education was one way to accomplish my goals.

I was also attracted to community life. The life of sharing my gifts, talents and time seemed to speak to me of something very important. I have never approached the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience as something negative, but rather as something very positive.

The vows make sense in the context of community life. The ability to live a simple lifestyle, sharing my talents and being free enough to serve all people is how the vow of poverty relates to me in my life. The ability to appreciate, respect and love all those I minister to is how the vow of chastity allows me time to be present to all people. The ability to listen to the needs of the church and to be able to respond to those needs as well as my gifts and talents allow me to live out my vow of obedience.

One of the tasks of a vocation director is talking with people who have expressed some interest in becoming brothers. In the past four years I have spoken with many men who look to the brotherhood as an opportunity to serve others in the church. They see themselves doing this in a prayerful, supportive and respectful community.

The Congregation of Christian Brothers looks for men willing to demonstrate their faith in the power and meaning of Jesus in a world that often denies his message. We look for men who are willing to commit themselves to Christian education and to prophetic action on behalf of the materially poor, in confidence that in all our truly human interactions God is transforming us as well as the people we serve. We look for men willing to collaborate with the men and women who share in our mission and are willing to invite them to embrace the challenges of our future with us.

Young men who are accepted into the order go through a period of formation. The first stage of formation is called the Candidacy Program. The components of this program are regularly scheduled

meetings; retreat times; workshops on themes relating to formation issues; a live-in program for periodic visits to various communities of brothers; and some form of apostolic involvement. This program is at least one year in duration.

The next stage of formation is residency. This is the first time the man can move in to a community with the brothers, and it lasts a least one year. At this time, the man is asked to become directly involved in the mission of the congregation.

The third stage of formation is a two-year novitiate program. The first year of the novitiate is spent studying Scripture, the charisma of the founder, and the history and traditions of the congregation, as well as developing a relationship with God in a prayer life. The second year is spent in a community. The brothers testing what was learned in the first year.

At the end of the second year the man is able to profess the three vows for a one-year commitment. He has the opportunity to renew these vows yearly for six years. After six years, the brother is able to profess perpetual vows as a member of the Congregation of Christian Brothers.

Once he has professed perpetual vows the individual brother is responsible for his own ongoing formation. He is encouraged to make a six-day annual retreat, and to attend workshops and lectures on issues that face men and women religious in the church.

When the brothers are asked why they joined religious life, the answers range from, "To follow in the footsteps of the good and smiling brothers who taught me," to a more sophisticated, "To work for the Lord in the church's educational apostolate and fulfill my own personal spiritual aspirations."

Each brother has his own external and internal reasons why religious life is a personally and professionally joyful experience. These brothers join with other members of the Congregation of Christian Brothers in offering themselves freely in vowed commitment with Jesus to the Creator for all humanity, especially the poor.

### Authors offer views on formation

Both of this month's *Insight* authors are Rochester-area natives and graduates of local Catholic high schools. And both have perspectives on the formation process of their respective orders.

Brother Raymond J. Vercruyse, CFC, vocations director for the Eastern American Province of the Congregation of Christian Brothers, will be returning to Rochester this summer to become the principal of his alma mater, Bishop Kearney High School.

Brother Vercruyse, who grew up in Fairport, joined the Christian Brothers in 1973 after graduating from Bishop Kearney, and began teaching in New York and New Jersey high schools. He earned a bachelor's degree in economics from Iona College in New Rochelle and a master's degree in counseling from Catholic University of America.

As his congregation's vocations director for the past four years, Brother Vercruyse has been able to gain insights into the needs of and problems faced by men in formation for life as religious brothers.

Sister Maureen Servas, RSM, is a 1978 graduate of the former Cardinal Mooney High School. She earned a degree in art education from Nazareth College in 1982, and since has taught art at Our Lady of Mercy High School in Rochester — except for two years she spent in the novitiate program.

Sister Servas, who grew up in Greece, joined the Sisters of Mercy in 1982, and took her first vows in August, 1986. She is currently preparing for her final vows, although no date has been set. Still in formation, she offers observations about the process and the questions she still faces about becoming a woman religious.