Collaborative US Brothers’ Think Tank Applauds the First-Ever Vatican Document on the Vocation of Brothers

SILVER SPRING, MARYLAND (January 12, 2016). For three and one-half years, leaders from the Religious Brothers’ Conference, the Religious Formation Conference, the National Religious Vocation Conference, and the Conference of Major Superiors of Men in the United States, have met twice yearly to strategize about raising awareness of the long-admired but rapidly disappearing witness of religious brothers within the American Catholic Church. Renowned for education and health care, often highly skilled in administration and undaunted by labor, willing to mission both in foreign and domestic places, brothers have been a highly effective force, along with sisters and religious clergy, in building and sustaining the American Church.

The newly issued (dated October 4, 2015) and recently published Vatican document, entitled “Identity and Mission of the Religious Brother in the Church,” rolled out in a Vatican press conference at the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life on December 14, 2015 and became available in English only after the text reached the Vatican Bookstore in late December. The text expresses strongly the values and ideals central to the relationship of religious men and women to the mission of Christ and to our common communion in the Church. The publication comes as the Church concludes its Year of Consecrated Life focusing on the gifts that the Holy Spirit calls forth from religious women and men for the good of many.

Over many months the members of the US Brothers’ Think Tank awaited this publication, having learned of Pope Francis’ personal interest in the development of the document, of various brothers who contributed to the composition of the text, and of the arduous task of producing accurate translations into English, German, Spanish, and French.

Speaking as a founding member of the Think Tank, Br. Jack Henn, president of the Religious Brothers Conference and a member of Glenmary Home Missionaries, comments that the document has the potential to reawaken brothers “with the challenge and importance of their call and to inspire others to consider this great way of following and serving Jesus Christ.”

The text, numbering only twenty-seven pages in one printed version, presents a renewed vision of consecrated life or religious life of which “The fraternity of religious brothers is an encouragement for the whole Church, because it makes present the Gospel value of fraternal relationships of equality in the face of the temptation to dominate, to search for the best place or to exercise authority as power.” [7] The values represented seem to echo others put forth by this Papacy. The document also asserts the common heritage of our Church-Communion as a place in which “all are
fundamentally equal, in common dignity and in common rights and duties,” the brother lives out an ancient form of discipleship in profound unity with lay Christians explicitly and at the same time witnessing “in an integral and prophetic way the mystery of Christ and the Church within consecrated life, as a service to the entire People of God.”

Br. Ignatius Perkins, OP, who has served the Dominican Friars in spearheading an unprecedented world-wide consultation and review of the life of “cooperator brothers” in the venerable Dominican Order, reflects that this new “document is not prescriptive but its grounding in the Gospel Message of communion and mission, fraternity and love, and caring for and about our brothers and sisters who are forced to live on the fracture lines of life and are found in our created cultures of waste, is a strong call for the life and mission of Religious Brothers in the Church and global world. In many places, the document is naming that the renewal of religious life is the work of Religious Brothers, the prophetic memory of Jesus, himself. The identity of the Brother at whose center lies fraternity, mystery, and communion is extraordinarily powerful [for our contemporary world].”

Most forcefully, the text asserts that “Brothers are a permanent reminder of ‘the fundamental dimension of brotherhood in Christ’” [11]. Brothers stand like the Son of Man with the least ones, live faith in communion, witness to the sublime value of work, and seek out the lost. The Think Tank is planning a national symposium on the vocation of the brother to be held at a major Catholic university in the autumn of 2016.

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The Conference of Major Superiors of Men (CMSM) supports and offers resources for U.S. leaders of Catholic men’s religious institutes. CMSM promotes dialogue and collaboration on issues of religious life as well as peace and justice issues with major groups in church and society. There are more than 17,000 religious priests and brothers in the United States.