

THE LIVES OF THE BRETHREN

ON BEING A COOPERATOR BROTHER

Joe Trout, O.P.

While most men who profess vows in the Order of Preachers today join with the intention of becoming ordained priests, some join intent on serving the Order as consecrated men without seeking holy orders (known today as cooperator brothers). Br. Joe Trout, O.P., of the Province of St. Albert the Great, is one such friar preacher.

Br. Joe, could you describe your calling to the Order as a cooperator brother? What made you decide to become a brother and not to pursue ordination?

It's a reasonable question. I get it a lot, which means it would be extremely useful to have a simple response. If it looks like time is short and I only have a moment to answer, I generally respond with one of two answers: "I felt called to religious life but not called to be a priest," or "The name brother versus father fits how I believe I am called to live out my faith. It's a different kind of relationship, but one important in the world." Both were insights that helped me discern, but neither one really answers the question. Why did I become a brother? Somehow the vocation to be a brother got ahold of me, caught my eye, sought after me, captured me, and took me beyond what I imagined. After all, Jesus does claim "It was

not you who chose me but I who chose you . . . ” Why did I become a brother? God spoke, I fell in love and here I am.

Of course, this is still a bit of an evasion. Why a brother? The mystery of relationship with God rarely fits well into passing conversations. However, I often feel that the question is the wrong one altogether. While it is superficially interesting, it often prevents us from getting to the one that is genuinely interesting: Why on earth, in this day and age, would God want young men to enter religious life and not be ordained? After all, don't we really need priests? So what is it that God is really calling us to? For me, it's a given that I am called. It's hardly interesting. The real intrigue is entirely in the vocation itself.

So what accounts for the cooperator brother's vocation today, particularly with respect to our American culture?

As much as I cherish my vocation, I can hardly imagine that it is a particularly attractive vocation in American society. It carries no honor, no real rank in the Church, and no highly prized function. A brother is not useful: he doesn't ordinarily administer any sacraments to the people of God, and he isn't eligible for any number of offices clerics hold in the Church. For example, in the Dominican Order we are not eligible to be superiors of our communities. Not long ago the vocation meant a lifetime of manual labor in the kitchen, laundry room, etc. To the casual observer a brother cannot really do any more in the church than a layman. If experience means anything, it also means repeatedly explaining why someone capable of being a priest would choose not to become one (though I can happily point out that my dad has the same talents and I am personally delighted that he is not a priest). The vocation of the Dominican brother just does not seem to be worth much.

Perhaps this is exactly the point. American pragmatism is simply incapable of identifying the true measure of a vocation. Our vocation is not about what we do but about who we are; this has

been echoed over and again by cooperator brothers throughout the world.

With respect to the vocation of the cooperator brother, could you share some insight into the foundational identity of a brother? Who are the brothers?

Brothers are first and foremost religious men who are called to the radical witness of following after Christ in poverty, chastity, and obedience. We witness to the Gospel in our common life, making us preachers by that self-same way of life. We are a direct, visible rebuke of seeking worldly power and prestige. We are reminders to our own priest brothers that they too are more than what they do.

We also offer evidence that merely participating at Sunday Mass does not exhaust the Christian way of life. By not being priests, we remind the church that ordination is not a privilege for men who want it, but a call for those whom God chooses according to His own designs. We are reminders that the vocation to non-ordained religious life is not a second tier option for women, but a joyful call for anyone who receives it. We proclaim the joy of vowing your life to something beyond yourself.

What then do the brothers do?

The brother's vocation, that's to say who we fundamentally are, is a beautiful identity, but, my remarks thus far weren't intended to dismiss the question, "what do the brothers *do*?" It seems difficult to imagine that God would continue to call men after 800 years to this vocation if it were nothing but a sign. What we *do* is certainly outside the normal framework of American careerism, but I personally have more aspirations than being the spiritual equivalent of a traffic sign.

I have been blessed in recent years to meet and work with cooperator brothers from all ends of the earth. They are holy men

who teach, preach, study, cook, clean, repair, pray, visit, minister, administrate, listen, nurse, engineer, design, write, and so on. They make present the reality which St. Paul taught to the Romans, saying:

For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; he who teaches, in his teaching; he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who contributes, in liberality; he who gives aid, with zeal; he who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness. (Romans 12:4-8)

They serve endlessly. They have reminded me what it meant for St. Martin de Porres to be a porter: he was the bridge between the community and the world. St. Martin gave food to the hungry and care to the sick. He was the arms of the body in ways the priests could not be.

Through all this, I believe I am beginning to glimpse why God wants young men to become brothers. Together we are the Body of Christ, and that Body needs a lot more complexity to function well. The vocational vision of the American Church is often reduced to dividing the people of God into the two categories of priests and laity. But what about religious sisters? What about the brothers? The monks? The nuns? Priests and brothers are as different as arms and legs . . . Together we preach *Veritas* (Truth), but in harmony rather than unison.

How does that harmony play out in practice? How do you see the vocation of a cooperator brother building up the Church today?

Ultimately, our work does not fit into the one-dimensional mode of a simple career path because the vocation itself

responds to the needs of the day. Sixteenth-century Lima needed someone to care for the poor, and God answered with St. Martin de Porres. Fifteenth-century Bologna needed to see the beauty of the Gospel, so God responded with a Dominican cooperator brother who made stained-glass windows—Bl. James of Ulm. The answer is simple in concept, if somewhat imprecise in practice: believers and non-believers alike benefit from men and women who are engaged in the non-sacramental preaching of the Gospel who have their feet firmly planted in poverty, chastity and obedience.



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Witnesses who take up ministerial duties through their total consecration to God speak a different sort of message than the world is accustomed to hearing. Men and women everywhere need teachers who evoke transcendence and social workers who hope for the life to come with their entire being. The world needs to be caught off guard by people who do not make any sense to them, and it needs those people to relate to them as a brother or sister. It needs true radicals who have nothing to gain in this world,

who will not even have the joy of administering the sacraments. It needs the little who rejoice in being little, the weak who rejoice in being weak, all the while daring to the greatness of the saints.

In 1984 George Orwell prophesied the coming of “Big Brother” who would tyrannically watch our every move—some suspect this has become more fact than fiction in our day. If Big Brother is a threat, perhaps a little brother is the solution. The world begs for someone to be present and listening; someone rooted in scripture and prayer to sit at their level; someone to sit beside people at Mass, listen to their struggles, serve food at the soup kitchen, and teach their kids fractions, Spanish, and Jane Austen. Our communities need some members to pray with priests and keep them in touch with the non-ordained; someone to listen to their homilies over and over again and challenge them to be better; someone to design the websites where they post their homilies and to add their own reflections; someone to call them back to their life of prayer when careerism threatens; maybe even someone to do a little extra housework sometimes. Our world needs people who do little things with great love, and cooperator brothers have a special home in this.

To be fair, this is but my narrow glimpse at a wondrous vocation. Cooperator brothers themselves are a complex and varied lot. Enchanted by the many ways God uses all believers to bring men and women to deeper union with him, we look towards the future and—with joyful, confident hope—wonder what God will bring about.

Joe Trout, raised in a large family, was naturally drawn to the community of religious life. He met the Dominicans at Purdue University, and, after a year of teaching middle school, he entered the Order of Preachers (Province of Saint Albert the Great) in 2010.