

A Talk on Xaverian Life Form, Assembly 2012

By Brother Joe Pawlka

My recent reflections on the “Life Form Dimension” of the Xaverian Charism have centered on the recurring and developing sense of “*place*” in Ryken’s life and in the life of the Xaverian Congregation. I use the word “*place*” not so much in the sense of a physical/geographical location, but as a metaphor for a mode of consciousness and a sense of relationship and belonging. Ryken’s personal conversion is described as one of “powerfully being put in my *place*.” This sense of *place*, no doubt, refers to a fresh experience of his relationship with God and from this initial and ongoing experience arise the aspirations and inspirations that give form to his life as well as to the foundation and development of the Xaverian Congregation.¹²³ This initial experience of *place* gradually finds a home among a group of men who gather with Ryken as a community of “like-spirited” individuals. It is Ryken’s profound concern that these men have a sense of being called to a *place* much larger and more mysterious than their own self-interests.⁴ While Ryken seeks the financial and temporal assistance of “well-to-do” patrons, within the community he welcomes a diverse, rather simple and lackluster band of followers.⁵ What concerns him is their ability and willingness to abandon self-interest and to relate to one another as Brothers, living in harmony at the service of the poor and needy.⁶⁷⁸⁹ Gradually, their sense of living in community takes on a Congregational character and their sense of *place* (relatedness) is colored by the shapes and practices of religious life as it was understood and lived in their day: (the forms of private and communal prayer; the experience and practice of living the evangelical counsels; the forms of communal living; the understanding of ministry and mission; the forms of government and relationship to the wider Church).

And so into our day, we Xaverian Brothers are faced with the challenge and opportunity to find our *place* in the world today - to rearticulate the Xaverian Charism in a manner that acknowledges the gifts and limits of our present situation, and reaffirms our commitment as Brothers in community

¹ ...there is nothing in this world that he loves so much as that one of whom He says: With eternal love I loved you. ... His wisdom usually works steadily and softly, and at the same time strongly and in a hidden way. ... One should plunge into confidence in the goodness of God. *Report*.

² It may suit others to serve God, but it is your profession to be united with God. *Plan*.

³ It is this communion with the living God which is at the heart of your life as son of the Father, disciple of Jesus, witness of his Spirit, quickened member of his Body and brother to the world. *Fundamental Principles*.

⁴ You, young men, who are called by God to this state, we compare you with a small diamond, which wonderfully glitters and is an adornment when it is placed in a golden ring... Yet, if it remains outside its center and alone, it may easily be lost. *Plan*.

⁵ One will try to detect every person’s character and temperament and his natural and supernatural gifts as well as his weaknesses, so that, with good balance, measures can be taken to promote the profitable capacities for which a good inclination has been noted. *Plan*.

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⁷ In Harmony small things grow. *Coin*.

⁸ He who works alone is too much left to his own self. ... to be alone, without any advice, conversation, or help in spiritual and corporal needs; to live in distant places far from others and often in difficult conditions, without belonging to a society of Brothers who mutually help, encourage and edify one another and who work together ... contains many dangers. *Plan*.

⁹ There can be no doubt that one is working according to the plan of Divine Providence, by the establishment of some well-suited institutions, adapting oneself to the need of the times in the Church. *Plan*.

to follow Christ wherever He leads.¹⁰

A contemporary articulation of the Xaverian Charism is an attempt to describe a mode of consciousness, a way of being present and related in today's world.

*... allow yourself to be formed by God
through the common, ordinary,
unspectacular flow of everyday life ...*

*Stand ready to answer God
when He asks you
If you are available for Him
to become more present in your life
And though you to the world...*

The Xaverian Brother is called to live an **ordinary** life. This life is characterized by attentiveness, simplicity and openness to the unspectacular flow of daily life. His way is the “ordinary way.” He is invited to live in gratitude and in awe of all that which typically escapes attention or notice because of its smallness, difference, foreignness, unimportance, brokenness or insignificance. To do so, he must willingly eschew any attitude, behavior or involvement that exalts or promotes superiority, privilege, exclusivity or entitlement. He must be open and hospitable to the unknown and the unexpected, ready to listen, appraise and respond with a spirit of faith, hope and love.

The Xaverian Brother is called to live a **common** life. His attention and concern should address what is shared and held in common by all persons – their humanity, giftedness and sinfulness. In a particular way, he is called to share with his Xaverian Brothers a life lived in common. This common life involves not only the willingness to worship and pray together, to collaborate, to share responsibilities, to enjoy companionship with one another, but even more deeply, a desire to nurture a sense of co-responsibility and communion. The common life is an invitation to each Brother to offer generously the uniqueness of his life (gifts and limitations) for integration within the life of the Congregation.

Living a common life by its very nature involves the Brothers in the ongoing process of integrating and harmonizing diverse and sometimes disparate elements of life in an attempt to gradually realize a more and more consonant form of life. A life lived in common challenges any movement toward grandiosity and individualism. Each day and age; each stage of human life; each culture and tradition provides unique challenges to living the ordinary and common form of Xaverian life. To be unaware of these tensions and to fail to appraise and address (alone and in common) their formative and deformative impact, will lead to patterns of living that will either promote or inhibit the harmony and consonance of Xaverian Life and the witness value of that Life in the lives of others.

Ryken was very much aware of some of the tensions involved in trying to live the religious life that

¹⁰ You are called to a life of constant searching. Let the developments and changes of your times be a source both of confidence and challenge to you. ... May you discover in God's own time ways to incarnate anew the vision of Theodore James Ryken and the charism of the Xaverian Brothers of Saint Francis Xavier in the life of the world. *Fundamental Principles*.

he envisioned. For example, far from being discouraged about the difficulties involved in harmonizing the active and the contemplative aspects of his envisioned form of life, he rejoiced that his Brothers would have the opportunity to participate in both the active and contemplative life.¹¹ The Xaverian life form has always been faced with the challenge of harmonizing the simplicity of contemplative presence (prayer) with more active forms of private and public prayer as well as with the opportunities and challenges that arise as a result of our participation in community and in ministry.

The Xaverian Congregation has always welcomed men of simplicity and integrity who evidenced a capacity and willingness to share the uniqueness of their own lives by living in community, in service of a common vision — a vision that includes personal and communal formation as well as the witness value of a life lived in common by men of diverse talents, temperaments, nationalities and cultures. Hospitality and brotherhood (fraternity) have always been hallmarks of the Xaverian Life Form.

The Xaverian expression of the life of the evangelical counsels has always included a consciousness of living **ordinary** lives in **common**. Our sense of **poverty** inspires us to live ordinary lives, appreciative and grateful for the gifts of creation with a consciousness of living with less rather than more so as to share in the prodigality of God's love.¹² It challenges us to care for the gifts that we hold in common and to carefully confront any movement toward preoccupation with possessiveness and autonomy. Our spirit of **consecrated celibacy** calls us to live as Brothers to one another in community as well as to all those lives we touch. This fraternal love invites us to appreciate the fundamental uniqueness of each person and to challenge any movement toward exclusivity, manipulation or possessiveness. It calls us to attend to the lessons that are taught in the experience of solitude and aloneness and to the formative influences that come through the challenges, joys, and sufferings that constitute a life lived in common. The spirit of **obedience** invites us to listen attentively to the directives that arise in the course of our ordinary, everyday lives — some within our own consciousness; some as a result of our interactions with others; and some that emerge from the situations that we encounter and from the world in which we live. This same spirit of obedience invites us to appraise these directives both individually and communally and to let these appraisals guide us toward decisions and actions that will promote and serve the life and mission of the Congregation. The mission and ministry of the Xaverian Brothers have always been directed toward ordinary people.¹³ We continually face the challenge of finding ways to have our life in common (and not so much our talents and resources) be the witness to the Gospel that we offer to those we serve. To live in solidarity and availability among those we serve, we need to live ordinary lives that share in the common elements of life — gifts and limitations, grace-fullness and sinfulness. We need to actually live as Brothers in order to give an authentic witness to those we serve.

¹¹ Consider two excellent qualities which will be found in this Congregation ... namely the contemplative and active lives. *Report*.

¹² "The gift you have received, give as a gift." *Fundamental Principles*.

¹³ "... participate in the Church's mission of evangelization through a life of gospel service lived in solidarity and availability among the people. It is through your life of gospel witness lived in common with your brothers that God desires to manifest His care and compassionate love to those who are separated and estranged, not only from their neighbors, but also from their own uniqueness; to those who suffer from want, neglect, and injustice: the poor, the weak, and the oppressed of this world. *Fundamental Principles*.

To give a contemporary articulation of the Xaverian charism, I think it would be helpful to be explicit about some of the challenges that we face as Brothers today. Our diminishing numbers; our increasing age; the diversity and nature of our ministries; the growth and development of our Congregation in Africa; the financial condition of the Congregation; the reduction in number of larger communities; the diminishment in opportunities and willingness to engage in ongoing formation; all these and many more factors have influenced our experience of being Xaverian Brothers. In many cases, our sense of communal prayer is no longer found in our religious community but in a local parish. Our spirit of poverty and communal life have changed dramatically and brought to light concerns that deal with the Brother's growing sense of autonomy, individual ownership, lack of connection and concern with the larger congregation. A centralized and efficient government structure has had an effect on our sense of fraternity, diminishing quite powerfully our sense of "*belong-ing to a society of Brothers who mutually help, encourage and edify one another and work together.*" While the need for a sense of connection among the Brothers has grown, financial constraints, the ability to travel due to age, and distances between Brothers has made it difficult to provide opportunities to experience fraternal contact and consciousness. Lacking a sense of community, a sense of home and belonging, there has grown among the Brothers problems with overwork; with concerns for family and friends, with proper life and relational boundaries. Our ministries have diversified and become less visible as shared communal ventures. Less and less do we have the experience of being Brothers who "*help, encourage and edify one another and who work together.*" As our lives become more and more individualized, independent and autonomous, our fraternal, communal consciousness diminishes and any request or opportunity to serve the wider Congregation is taken as an imposition and burden. All these challenges face us as a Congregation and I believe that they need to be addressed in common. They are daunting challenges that involve the future of our Congregation. Still, I believe that if we are faithful to and hopeful in the call that we have been given, and to the Xaverian charism that is the gift entrusted to us, they can lead to renewed life for ourselves and those whose lives we touch.

*You are called
to a life of constant searching.
Let the developments and changes
of your times
be a source both of confidence and challenge to you.
For as your Founder wrote:*

*The Holy Spirit
does not let himself be bound
by rules and models
but works where and as He wills.*