

Welcome to this first in a series of four presentations in preparation for our 27th general chapter in July 2013. The purpose of these presentations is to engage the members of our congregation in a continuing dialogue regarding the living out of the charism of our congregation. The presentations will be centered on issues emanating from the coordinates of the congregational charism:

1. regarding the Congregational Spirituality, we would look at our congregational spiritual exercises;
2. regarding our Life Form, we will look at the summons to live in common;
3. with regards to Ecclesiality, we will look at our brotherhood vis-à-vis the institutional church; and
4. concerning our Mission, we will examine the challenges and new avenues for educating in a networked and globalized church.

Each presentation is subdivided in three parts

1. the first is an invitation for us to SEE how we are living out or challenged by the issues;
2. the second is an invitation to EVALUATE these issues in the light of the words of our founder as well as other sources of wisdom in our traditions; and
3. the third is an invitation to DISCERN and PROPOSE practices that would enable us together to live the deeper challenger of our congregational charism.

We would like to invite you, as individuals and as communities, to share and reflect on the questions given after each of these parts and to send your responses to the Coordinating Committee for our coming General Chapter.

The following presentation on Xaverian Spirituality invites us to consider our congregation's spiritual exercises.

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The characteristics of prayer life in Xaverian communities prior to Vatican II were not that different from those followed by other religious congregations. Our spiritual exercises were regular, as well as regulated, and possessed a certain external tangibility. Thus, the times and places for prayers were strictly defined; the text for every communal prayer had to be legitimate and known by heart – not only the rituals of the church, but also those that are said by the brothers from their rising to sleeping and before and after communal activities; demeanor during prayer was prescribed to all; and devotional prayers were added to supplement the rituals observed in communities – even to the point that more emphasis was given to the exercise of these pious activities.

In essence, Xaverian prayer life before the Council can be characterized as being conventional to the point of being overly-formal, routine to the point of being monotonous, compartmentalized to the point of being seemingly disconnected from the ministerial life of brothers, and ceremonial to the point of scrupulosity with forms and details.

Most of us know that the Council ushered a renewal in religious life. This updating or *aggiornamento* was heralded by the council's summons that religious congregations “faithfully hold in honor the spirit and special aims which their founders had set before (the members), as well as the congregation's sound traditions.” (PC, 2b) However, we must also bear in mind that the Council understood that this renewal in religious life – particularly in those that we now call as apostolic communities – should not only take place in their updating of ministries.

“It should be constantly kept in mind, therefore, that even the best adjustments made in accordance with the needs of our age will be ineffectual unless they are animated by a renewal of spirit. This must take precedence over even the active ministry.” (PC, 2e)

The renewal of spirit in the mind of the Council can be best understood by its renew understanding of the religious nature of each human being. We are different from all other creations of God by virtue of our capacity to lead our lives in communion with God.

“The dignity of human beings rests on the fact that they are called to communion with God. This invitation to converse with God is addressed to people as soon as they come into being.... They cannot live fully according to truth unless they freely acknowledge that love and entrusts themselves to the creator.”  
(*Gaudium et Spes*, 19§1)

How can a congregation facilitate the renewal of its life of prayer and the conversation of its members with God? In the mind of the Council, this renewal would occur through a transformation of the understanding and practice of private and public prayer in religious communities.

In the private arena, the trajectory that the council pointed out was toward a renewed appreciation for contemplation among religious. Thus said the council:

“Seeking God solely and before everything else, the members of every community should join contemplation, by which they fix their minds and hearts on Him, with apostolic love, by which they strive... to spread the kingdom of God. (PC 5)

In the public arena, the renewal was to take place by an act of reclaiming the liturgies of the Church. Before the council, the effectiveness of the Mass depended solely on the priest who “says” it

while the congregation “attended” it. The Council brought about a change in our understanding by emphasizing that the Mass is the highest prayer of all the faithful, a celebration that involves not only priest but those participating in it as well. The place of the Word in the Mass was also highlighted as an essential aspect of the Mass. The renewal of liturgy for the entire church was also expected to take in religious communities. Thus, we were counseled:

Religious should have recourse daily to the Holy Scriptures...They should celebrate the sacred liturgy, especially the Mass, with both lips and heart as the Church desires and so nourish their spiritual life from this richest of sources. (PC 6)

The renewal of the church’s understanding of liturgy also brought about another palpable and, at that time, very radical change in religious congregations. For centuries, the praying of the Divine Office was a privilege given exclusively to members of what were officially known as “religious orders” because their religious vows were seen as elevated and truly perfect in value. Those who were members of “religious congregations” in “simple vows” – like the Xaverian Brothers – were forbidden to pray the Divine Office and, instead, they were permitted to pray the so-called Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary every day. Vatican II threw away the concept of solemn and simple vows – emphasizing that they were vows of the same value and dignity before God and the Church. In so doing, it also gave to religious the right to pray the Divine Office:

“Although religious who recite a Little Office truly approved, perform the public prayer of the Church, it is recommended that religious institutes should recite, in full or in part, the Divine Office, instead of a Little Office. They will thus share more intimately in the liturgical life of the Church.” (PC 20)

And so changes began to take place in religious congregations. Some of us may even remember how these changes took place in Xaverian communities after the Council ended in 1965. Indeed, our leaders sought to implement these changes. However, the jury is still out as to whether our members were properly formed to understand and implement the changes idealized by the Council.

On the other hand, it is also clear that something happened to many religious, including ours, after the Council. There was an observable movement for many to move gradually – if not immediately – from one form of prayer life before the council to another form after the council. In some communities, the life of prayer moved from being communal and mandatory, to one that became private, individual, and voluntary. Some of us became convinced that a life of prayer needs not to be sacramentalized or ritualized. Yet we also had communities wherein the Mass and Divine Office which the Council encouraged us to reclaim devolved into rituals and exercises that, unfortunately, became conventional, routine, detached and ceremonial. In short, the problematic dispositions toward prayer life that existed in our communities prior to Vatican II were simply continued in postconciliar times.

The challenge before us is to describe how we as Xaverians pray today. At this point in time, fifty years after the Council, we are faced with the possibility that we as individuals and as communities may not have measured up to the call to be in communion with God. That would be a sad state for, as the theologian Sandra Schneiders pointed out so well, “every Religious is called to the contemplative life, not as an accompaniment of other activities or as one feature among others, but as the very meaning and end of the life they have undertaken. A Religious Life which is not contemplative – at whatever stage of development at a given time – is a contradiction in terms and tragically pointless.”

So at this point, let us pause for a while and reflect on the following questions:

- 1) Describe your prayer life today as a Xaverian. What do you do to establish “communion with God”?
- 2) In what ways have your spiritual exercises changed from the time you joined the Xaverians to the present moment.

We will resume the presentation after you have done your personal reflection and sharing.

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Welcome back.

The Second Vatican Council rightly proposed that any work at congregational renewal should always take into consideration the spirit and special aims of the founder for the members of his congregation. It is for this reason that we will now look at Theodore James Ryken and see what he believes would be the most suitable exercises for one that would journey with him in this religious family. We will also look at how these counsels of Ryken became further developed in the tradition of the Congregation through the Manual of Customs and Advice.

In the last few years, we Xaverians have come to a deeper understanding and appreciation of the Founder's understanding and living of what he called "the ordinary way."

"Which person who has some experience of spiritual matters would desire that an angel come from heaven in order to make known God's will, when it is possible to know it by following the ordinary way?... God does not have to give an account to anybody of His actions. If His Majesty wants to use an ordinary, simple and uneducated person – yea, a sinner; if God wants to make this person turn toward Him in view of a special work; if God does not take the direction which people think He usually follows. In all this His Majesty is completely free and nobody is entitled to disapprove God's actions, let alone oppose them."

Essentially, "the ordinary way" that our Founder referred to reflected the subtle influences of Middle Dutch mysticism on his spiritual life. For the mystics of that religious tradition, "the ordinary way" was a means of entering into communion with God through a complete acceptance of the graced person that one already possesses. Ordinary persons find contentment in resting on their ground, which is

also God's ground. In that place, they find the gifts with which God has already graced them – both those they can accept and those they cannot. In coming to accept both these gifts through the grace of God, they gradually come to an awareness that they don't have to be anyone else but themselves.

The Founder, as most of us already know, was very far from being a faultless man. But we know that, like most of us, he strove hard and with good intention to be faithful to his commitment, despite the many times he had to struggle hard to do so. In embracing his graced self – his ordinariness – Ryken was able to turn toward God and fall in love with God.

Ryken's conversion should not be seen as a one-day event. Throughout a life of continuing acceptance of his ordinariness, the Founder understood that the best way to respond to God's unconditional love was to render to God what is due to God. To do this, according to the Founder, a Xaverian should have "sufficient time" for maintaining communion with God through spiritual exercises.

"It should be well established that the Brothers have sufficient time for their own religious perfection and spiritual exercises. They should therefore not undertake any new house or mission unless it is possible to do so according to this established way. This is indeed an important item, which should be given special attention. Wise stipulations should be made in the Constitutions to maintain this provision, because it is indeed important and there is always a great danger of losing sight of it.... Look at Jesus Christ himself spending thirty years in solitude and only three in preaching.... One should not tell us that we do not need all this so badly.... Let us keep all this in mind, even when we have a good number of such Brothers, so

that the care for one's personal perfection may remain constantly alive.” [Scheme, 10th and 11th means]

A few years after founding the congregation, Ryken began to elucidate further on the spiritual exercises that he recommended for his brothers. In the “Rules” he composed for the community in 1841, he mandated everyday practices for reorienting a Xaverian Brother’s daily life:

Art. 6. Everyone shall use with the utmost zeal in the Lord the time which is prescribed to examine his conscience twice a day, as well as to pray, to meditate and to read, and also to renew often during the day the affections of the morning’s meditation.

Art. 7. Let the Brothers, together, hear Holy Mass every day with proper devotion and, in addition, the sermon or spiritual reading when they will be performed in church or house. (1841 “Rules”)

To these, the 1846 Constitutions would add the provision that “outside of recreation, (the Brothers) shall observe silence” (art. 31).

Putting together all his counsels on this matter, Ryken would then highlight these exercises: common prayer, celebration of the Mass, observance of silence, spiritual reading, retreats, and examination of conscience.

As you can see, none of the exercises that the Founder recommended are novel – they are, so to speak, tried and tested means which are very customary... truly “ordinary” in every sense of the word. Because of that, one can rightly consider them as ordinary spiritual exercises for ordinary persons.

As the Congregation evolved after Ryken's death, the spiritual exercises he recommended would be further elaborated. With the implementation of the Manual of Customs and Advice, devotional prayers were introduced which, at times, offset the ordinary exercises Ryken recommended to his Brothers. But most of these would eventually fall away from the common practice of the brothers, probably because the Spirituality embedded in the Congregation spontaneously would eventually weed them out. Although the Manual of Customs and Advice is no longer used in the congregation, it would be good to look back at several of its counsels which deepen the spiritual exercises recommended and lived by Ryken and the early brothers:

Take the monthly retreat seriously, Brothers; it is the prop of your labors. Remember, you are first spiritual men; teachers secondly. The teaching depends upon the man, the man depends upon the spirit, and retreats will foster that spiritual growth... (Advice IX.12)

...See that prayers are said with due reverence, check any tendency toward hurry. "Haste," says St. Francis de Sales, "is the destroyer of all devotion." (Advice XI.9)

... The time devoted to the prescribed and to private spiritual reading is of such great importance *for the spiritual nourishment of the souls of the Brothers.* (Advice XI.19)

... The Religious who is well-read in things spiritual nurtures his inner life, hears God's voice, stores up thoughts for the time of meditation and prayer, and likewise becomes better equipped to instruct his students to become better Christians. (Advice XI.21)

It is the atmosphere of silence that distinguishes the religious from the secular home. (Advice XIV.5)

The religious man is one who is united to God in heart and soul, and this union is effected by silence. Where there is no silence, there is no Religious. *As silence is necessary for intense mental work, so it is necessary – even more so – for God to work upon the soul. Distraction in prayer, the inability to meditate, may well come from the want of union with God due to the lack of a silent heart.* (Advice XIV.6)

Twice daily you are reminded in the examen of conscience that you should often elevate your heart to God, and sanctify your labors by offering them to Him. Lead a life of devoted prayer, dear Brothers. (Advice XVII.8)

The Constitutions do not permit extraordinary exterior mortifications without permission because, through a mistaken fervor, some might injure their health, or be led away by self-love to think that they do more than their Brothers. *This prohibition... ought to show the Brothers that they should practice, as much as they can, interior mortification.* (Advice XX.3-4)

In bringing back these counsels from the Manual of Customs and Advice, we hope that Xaverians today would not only see the constants in the congregation's spiritual exercises but also considerations for living a life that is truly "centered on the word and worship of God" while rooted in the memory of Theodore James Ryken.

At this point, let us pause for a while and reflect on the following questions:

- 1) On looking back at the words of the Founder, what is your impression about Ryken with regard to the choice of spiritual exercises he recommended to his followers?

2) Have these spiritual exercises been helpful to you in your own journey to be in communion with God? Do you think that they are sufficient or insufficient exercises for your own spiritual journey?

We will resume the presentation after you have done your personal reflection and sharing.

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Welcome back.

Ordinary persons render to God what is due to Him by giving “sufficient time” for doing spiritual exercises, in the hope that they would foster simplicity, solitude and reverence within him or her. Ryken specified exercises for his followers – common prayer, the Mass, silence, spiritual reading and examination of conscience. These are exercises that are “ordinary” in every sense of the word. Ironically, what are seemingly and supposedly easy exercises to follow are what our restless hearts and minds rebel from observing and staying with.

We belong to a period in time that has benefitted from tremendous advances in technology. These have made life more comfortable, information more accessible, and people more connected with each other. On the same time, however, these advances have developed in us a strong craving for instant gratification, quick fixes, and immediate results in anything – including the spiritual life.

We are part of – if not among – a generation of followers of Christ who are growing ever more restless, hyper-active, and compulsive. Sitting quietly before God, remaining reverent in our worships, reading patiently, examining ourselves attentively – all of which would have been in the imagination of Ryken for his followers – all of these are difficult for restless hearts to do. God is present to us, but we are unable to be present to God so long as we are not restful.

For us Xaverians, it is neither in exercises that are innovative or trendy that we are called to encounter God. Rather, our communion with God is supposed to grow when we intentionally and properly take on the simple spiritual exercises that have been passed on to us from Ryken and his early followers.

However, we should not think that following these ordinary exercises would instantly make us in communion with God. Likewise, they don't promise to give us a quick spiritual "high." These exercises do demand from us patient waiting and presence of mind – an ordinary awareness that would make us ready to turn toward God when He unexpectedly comes before us like a flash of lightning.

For some of us, several of these exercises may no longer be appealing to our personal preference. Perhaps part of the problem is that we have not fully heeded the Second Vatican Council's invitation to reclaim public worships like the Mass and the Divine Office. When we reclaim these worships as our own, we do our best to bring out the deeper beauty and somehow to make manifest the Mystery that underlie these public worships.

What this means is that we do not become satisfied when we as individuals or as communities celebrate these public worships in a manner that is tepid and lifeless. For those who are consecrated brothers, what this means is that we should not be simply satisfied by doing these liturgies because we are expected to celebrate them. Just like silence, spiritual reading and examination of conscience, the Mass and the Divine Office could become moments of effective personal as well as communal encounter with God. If they are not, then something must be wrong in the way we celebrate them. Or perhaps we are also expecting some immediate spiritual experience when we celebrate them, when, rather, we should simply be open to the possibility that we would encounter God in the worship we render to Him. Perhaps it also means that we become more intentional in recreating these public worships in a manner that is suitable to our life form as Xaverians. This is not an unusual step to take as several congregations have recreated the Divine Office in order for this prayer to be better appreciated by the members

and in order for this prayer to become a space to also hear the words of their Founder.

The coming chapter invites all of us to consider in a deeper way how we can become more faithful to the congregational charism that we have been able to describe thus far. To effectively do this, each of us are asked to examine how – as individuals and as communities – have been responding to the graces that already reside within the congregation as a result of the attentiveness of the Founder to the Spirit's inspiration. We are also asked to propose ways through which Xaverians today could reclaim and re-appropriate the spiritual exercises that Ryken believed would enrich the spiritual life of his followers, men and women who, in being ordinary, are able to accept all that they are as fully graced children of a loving God.

We end this presentation by asking you to reflect and share on the following questions:

- 1) Given my current situation and context, can I and my community reclaim the spiritual exercises that Ryken encouraged his followers to take? Why or why not?
- 2) What do I think should I and my community do to revitalize these spiritual exercises?

Don't forget to send the results of your reflection and discussion to the Coordinating Committee for the 27th General Chapter. Thank you very much for your active participation today. We hope to see you in our next presentation.