

“Tradition does not consist in veneration of the ashes, but the passing of the flame; such is the task that falls to us today: to pass on to future generations a flame which does not belong to us and which we have received, in our turn, as a gift.”

La tradition ne consiste pas à maintenir les cendres, mais à transmettre la flamme; telle est donc la tâche qui nous revient aujourd’hui: transmettre aux futures générations une flamme qui ne nous appartient pas et que nous avons reçue, à notre tour, comme un don.

De traditie is niet dat we de as bewaren, maar dat we het vuur brandend houden. Dit is de taak die ons vandaag toekomt: aan de generaties van morgen een vlam doorgeven die niet van ons is en die wij, op onze beurt, als een geschenk hebben ontvangen.

Brother Emili Turú, Superior General, Marist Brothers

To the English Martyr and saint, Sir Thomas More, is attributed the line, “Tradition does not consist in veneration of the ashes, but the passing of the flame.” The same quote is attributed to the famous composer Gustav Mahler – “Tradition is not the worship of ashes, but the preservation of fire.” I came across the quote a few months ago in a letter from the Superior General of the Marist Brothers, Brother Emili Turú who was writing about the recent news of the beatification of 66 Marist Brothers and 2 laymen who were martyred in Spain during the Spanish Civil War.

After quoting St. Thomas More, Brother Emili writes, “such is the task that falls to us today: to pass on to future generations a flame which does not belong to us and which we have received, in our turn, as a gift.” These words seemed so apropos to me a few months back as I began reflecting on our Congregation at this point in our history – “such *is* the task that falls to us today: to pass on to future generations **a flame which does not belong to us and which we have received, in our turn, as a gift.**” The task and the concept of not letting the flame die in the ashes reminds me of the plea from a previous Superior General of ours who concluded remarks he once gave to a group of Xaverian educators “don’t let the flame go out!” They also bring me back to an image we used in our Charism

Conferences in 2010 – that of being captivated by the Sacred Fire and being summoned to join a Sacred Dance around that fire. In the Introduction to the Working Papers prepared for last July’s International Assembly we read:

Thus, we believe that the Holy Spirit continues to be present with us in human history – never distant, never uninvolved, but always with us, journeying with us, and impelling us... The Spirit continually gives Herself through ineffable (compassion and passion) for all creation, a compassion that triumphs over suffering, a passion that overpowers apathy ... What distinguishes founders (of religious congregations) is not that they established a religious congregation, but, rather that they found the fire of the Spirit’s (compassion and passion) in the midst of sufferings and apathy while their contemporaries could not. They allowed this Sacred Fire to captivate them so much that incarnating the Spirit’s (compassion and passion) became their life passion, the dance that captured their whole being...

Founders of religious congregations are distinguished from (other) women and men of good will because they were thoroughly convinced of a divine summons to incarnate the Spirit’s (com)passion within the Consecrated Life Form...

In initiating this Sacred Dance around the Spirit’s (com)passion, founders facilitated the irruption of new ideas, new forces, new energies. Through this initiative, contemporaries with unrealized religious aspirations see in the founder’s visions an expression of ideas which they interpret as viable strategies through which they could realize their aims. Thus, they joined in the Sacred Dance and enriched the founder’s understanding of the Spirit’s (compassion and passion) with their own gracious good will. (Xaverian Brothers, July 2013, *Introduction to the Working Papers on Xaverian Spirituality, Life Form, Ecclesiality and Mission*, p. 9)

The question for me then is how do we pass on the flame? In many respects, Brothers, I think this has been a major focus of my term of service. Six years ago in Chapter we set this as a priority, making Mission Formation our first directive. I tried my best to respond to this as well as the other Directives of the 26th General Chapter. I sought the advice of the General Council, and I listened for the *deepest* aspirations of our Brothers as I heard them articulated in our older members, men like Brother Bede, or in our younger members in Africa, like those two men,

Brothers Dominique and Raphael, who earlier this month stood before their confreres, family and friends to make their profession for life of the evangelical counsels as Brothers of Saint Francis Xavier.

What I sense within myself and what I hear in the deepest aspirations of our Brothers is a desire to belong to something that has meaning, a desire to give oneself to something that is worth the sacrifice, a desire to be a man of prayer, a desire to be part of a real and vibrant community centered on the “word and worship of God,” a desire to be of service.

It must have been similar aspirations that Theodore James Ryken had within himself and was able to engender in those men whose faces we see in the photographs around the altar in our chapel here when we gather for prayer and Eucharist. In some ways, his task was more daunting. It was not necessarily how to pass the flame, rather it was how to ignite the fire.

He could have fulfilled his aspirations and ignited the fire in a number of ways. He could have joined up with Canon Triest in Ghent, he could have continued to pursue a partnership to co-found a religious congregation with others, he could have taken the opportunity to return to America as a lay missionary. These, however, would not be the way he would kindle the fire, that flame we received as a gift. No, inspired by the Holy Spirit and in discernment with his spiritual director, he tried to incarnate his spiritual aspirations in a *way of life*. That *way of life* was far more important to him than the projects he wanted to undertake.

We know that Ryken, like most of us, was not always successful or faithful to that way of life. As our Brothers Jan Devadder and Harold Boyle wrote 25 years ago in their book marking the 150th anniversary of our foundation: “The conversion he alluded to in his short autobiographical sketch had been a momentous and decisive reality for him. Yet, a conversion has to be an ongoing process and, historically speaking, there is evidence that during a long and painful period Ryken lost sight of this essential aspect of his conversion.” (The Xaverian Brothers: 1839-1939, p. 52)

Nevertheless, Ryken did strive to incorporate his spiritual aspirations into a way of life, a way of life that placed at its center communion with God – the kind of surrender into the love of God we have spoken about in our study of the Middle Dutch mystical tradition. He sought to establish a way of life that was

incorporated into a life form, albeit one not recognized or approved canonically at the time, but as our charism study has shown, a life form that tried to integrate the lives of Martha and Mary, that placed a heavy emphasis on the continual formation of its members and the development of their gifts. Ryken sought to establish a way of life that was in communion not just with the local church of Bruges, but with the universal church of Rome as his plan from the outset had a wider frontier and vision. That expansive sense of mission was another aspect of how Ryken tried to incorporate his aspirations into a way of life.

Our charism study these past few years has enabled us to look again at these critical elements, these 4 coordinates of the way of life that Ryken sought to establish: spirituality, life form, ecclesiality and mission. We have been able to examine some of Ryken's and the early Brothers' original intent in these areas. We have also seen how at a certain time in our history – during what we have called an *institutionalization phase* – some of the essential elements were compromised. We've seen how, perhaps due in part to his lack of education, or the exigencies of the day, Ryken was not clearly able to articulate a special spirituality, and over history, a kind of generic form of lay religious life was imposed upon us. Perhaps a spirituality identified more with our function – that of Teaching Brothers – rather than on Ryken's original spiritual aspirations for the way of life.

Historians of religious life tell us that this experience is not uncommon. Benedictine Cuthbert Michael Whitley describes this kind of phenomenon as one “involving the evaporation or fossilization of the Founding Charism,” where followers “are only carrying on a dress rehearsal rather than living their religious life as a spontaneous, exhilarating and creative experience.” Later he writes, “the Founding Charism has been changed into a pile of cold ashes, … (where) the community loses its sense of purpose and identity, and its service to the church becomes haphazard, lacking direction.” (Cuthbert Michael Whitley, OSB, *Review for Religious*, 36 (1977), p. 70-77, as cited in Xaverian Brothers Charism Conferences Sourcebook, Nairobi edition, p. 30)

Since Vatican II, we like so many other religious congregations have been trying to re-appropriate our Founding Charism. We are indebted to Brothers Jan Devadher, Harold Boyle (and even before them, Aubert Downey) for the research and writing they did on our history. In 1966, we held an extraordinary General Chapter here in Rome at the Marist Brothers Generalate, which had a second

session in 1968 at Malden Catholic. A goal of that Chapter was renewal in light of the call of Vatican II. We were to look at those essential elements of our life in light of our Founding Vision and Charism. Unfortunately, according to Brother Thomas Spalding who served as the historian for that Chapter, we were never able to come to agreement on some of these essential elements, opting instead to leave it up to each individual province to address these elements.

Subsequent General Chapters made significant strides in this regard, like for example, the approval of our *Fundamental Principles* and revised *Constitutions* in 1983. The Fundamental Principles and the research, prayer and discernment that went into the writing of that document, helped to give us some language to capture our spiritual aspirations. Phrases and expressions that not only speak to us as Brothers, but that have taken on significant meaning for many of the administrators, teachers and students in our schools. Although we have embraced the *Fundamental Principles*, accepting them as a true reflection of our Charism, I do not believe that we developed the necessary practices as a Congregation that enable the *Fundamental Principles* to be **THE** guiding document for us to form and re-form our way of life, to renew our lives.

In 1995, at the 24th General Chapter, we made a significant step at renewal when we changed our organizational structure and eliminated canonical provinces and regions and when we redefined ourselves as an international missionary congregation and adapted the following statement as the Call of the 24th General Chapter:

With lives rooted in Gospel values, the example of St. Francis Xavier and the vision of Theodore James Ryken, the Xaverian Brothers are called personally and congregationally to a contemplative stance in the world and to mission among the poor and marginalized.

One of the results of that Chapter and the work that followed it was a renewed emphasis on mission and the reestablishment of a formation program in East Africa. In 2007, at the 26th General Chapter and in its pre-Chapter preparation, we looked at the renewal of our life as Brothers in the key areas of mission formation, community, the contemplative stance, solidarity with the poor and marginalized, internationality and discerning direction. We have made some strides in the past 6 years in our response to these directives. One of the major accomplishments, I believe was the formal creation of our Associates Program in

the US (and for this I am indebted to Matthew and Bonaventure who promoted this back in the 1980's and 90's, as well as to Cosmas, Rich and Gwen Costello, Cornie Hubbuch and Paul Murray who really worked to get the program off the ground – not to mention the Brother Coordinators and Chris Irr who serves as the director of the program now.) In other respects, like in the areas of community, solidarity with the poor and marginalized, the contemplative stance, I believe we still have a ways to go.

Our work on our Charism Study, however, does give me hope that the insights we have gained and the Description of the Charism we have drafted will assist us in coming to agreement on the fundamental elements of Xaverian life – Xaverian Spirituality, Xaverian Life Form, Xaverian Ecclesiality and Xaverian Mission. As we turn our focus now in Chapter to developing the practices that flow from our Description of the Charism, I hope that we can speak honestly about the reality of our lives, the challenges we face, the ways we are called to conversion and renewal. I think we made a good start on this in our dialogue yesterday evening with Rob Faesen, as well as with the challenges that Brother René placed before us this morning. I hope that our dialogue can continue in the Working Committees that we'll soon be convening – the Community Life and Spirituality Committee, Governance, Ministry, and Associates. In the days ahead, with the insights we have gained from these first days of Chapter, can we address these areas again?

I am convinced Brothers, with all my heart and my soul, that the fire ignited in Theodore James Ryken's heart and soul continues to burn in our Congregation today. I am not as sure, however, that we are doing everything we can to pass that flame on. A description of a charism is just that, it is a description – it describes some experience, some aspirations. We can read it, and say, "well, that's nice." We can embrace it and feel some momentary warmth or enthusiasm. We can even be cynical about it and mock it. I, however, believe that the process of drafting such a statement, endorsing, affirming it, embracing it, can be a defining experience for us, if we move from embracing the Gift, to living the Gift and passing it on.

I am not going to provide you a detailed report of my perspective of the state of the congregation – there will be time for that later, and, in fact, I think from some of the conversations we had yesterday and today, we are well aware of the state of the congregation and the issues before us. I think it is more important that

we look at the Description of the Charism, because as Brother Joe Pawlika said in his reflections last night at our Eucharist, our Charism is the gift we have received and the gift that we are called to pass on or as Brother Emili of the Marist Brothers writes:

“Tradition does not consist in veneration of the ashes, but the passing of the flame; such is the task that falls to us today: to pass on to future generations a flame which does not belong to us and which we have received, in our turn, as a gift.”

In order to re-introduce the Description of the Charism that was first drafted after the International Assembly last July, and was later revised last March after suggestions and comments from throughout the Congregation, I have asked Chris to put together a video presentation that reintroduces us to the Description of the Charism. For those of you watching via livestream, Chris will post this video for you to view later.

SHOWING OF THE VIDEO – APPROXIMATELY 17 MINUTES.

PROCESS TO AFFIRM THE DESCRIPTION AND TO MAKE SUGGESTION AS TO EDITS/REVISIONS REWRITES

1. Take 15 minutes to sit with the March revision – underlining or marking those things you find significant or those things that speak to you?
2. Review the document a second time, thinking now of any insights you have into the document based either on our sessions on Middle Dutch mysticism or in light of the challenges presented by Brother René Stockman.
3. Finally, call to mind some of the statements you read from the Brothers in the pre-Chapter process that relate to this Description. Are there any elements of the Description you think need revision in light of those comments?
4. Having done these two reviews can you affirm the Description in principle? If not, what specific suggestions do you have for changes?

In your small group –

1. Designate one person to serve as a facilitator/reporter for the group.
2. Spend some time allowing each Brother to talk about the statement or any new insights they have into it based on the Middle Dutch mystics or Brother Stockman's presentation.

3. Allow time for each Brother to say whether he affirms the Description or if he has suggestions?
4. If there are suggestions, do the other members of the small group support the suggestions? (We are not necessarily talking about "wordsmithing" the document, but about adding certain specific points)
5. The reporter will present a brief summary of the insights/comments members of the group had. He will also present any suggestions for revision that the group agrees with, or let the Chapter know if the group affirms the Description.