



Conference of Major Superiors of Men

Research Summary: CMSM Focus on Brothers in Formation in the United States

Overview

Research was conducted between September 2013 and April 2014. Information was gathered through phone interviews, online surveys, and a review of literature that was submitted by various men's religious communities. Respondents to both surveys and interviews were overwhelmingly from mixed communities. For the purposes of this report, the term "Brother" specifically denotes lay religious men.

Summary of Attitudes & Issues affecting Brothers in Formation

- Brothers are sometimes seen as acceptable but not essential to the life of the community or its mission.
- Communities may have difficulty identifying relevant and appealing ministry opportunities for Brothers in formation. This may be especially true where the mission of the institute is closely bound to sacramental or parish ministry.
- The lack of a clear vision of the Brother's role and contribution to the institute complicates the development of a plan of formation.
- The absence of an established formation plan and opportunities for worthwhile ministry for Brothers can be seen as a signal that Brothers are no longer relevant to the community.
- Brothers may feel alienated by a formation program that seems to mimic priestly formation or which fails to address lay religious identity.
- Brothers in formation may have fewer opportunities for peer support with those who share their vocation and fewer role models to whom they can relate.
- In some mixed communities the Brother's identity as lay religious is conflated with that of seminarians. As a result Brothers are sometimes seen

as men in a permanent state of transition and may feel that their vocation as lay religious that has little or no value in itself.

Significant Findings

1. In their interviews a number of Brothers in formation and their formators expressed frustration with the post-novitiate formation process for Brothers or a perceived lack thereof.
2. The most frequently mentioned causes of this dissatisfaction were the lack of a written or well-defined formation plan for Brothers, uncertainty about the goals of formation for lay religious men, and a sense that formation for Brothers is sometimes indistinguishable from priestly formation.
3. One reason for the general absence of a formation program for Brothers is a lack of resources and/or guidelines that reflect contemporary reality of the Brother within the Church and within consecrated life.
4. Brothers in the early stages of formation are sometimes unable to identify their ministerial interests, goals, and opportunities. In some cases their formators and vocation directors are also unable to articulate worthwhile ministry opportunities. This lack of a clear path to ministry is a source of frustration for Brothers and their formators.
5. One major superior remarked that their community no longer needed members who could not perform sacramental ministry.
6. There appears to be no shared standard within or among communities with regard to academic preparation for Brothers in formation. This complicates the process of developing a formation program and results in "custom" formation that emphasizes flexibility over consistency.
7. Formators and vocation directors frequently described the difficulty of promoting Brother vocations. Among the obstacles named were the fact that Brothers remain largely unknown or misunderstood in the Church, a persistent cultural bias towards priesthood as more worthwhile vocation, and an atmosphere of clericalism within religious communities.

8. In many mixed communities Brothers are required to attend the seminary or live in an environment in which *priestly* rather than *religious* formation may be emphasized.
9. A strong majority of Brothers in formation expressed a desire for appealing ministry opportunities.
10. When asked whether Brothers were essential to the life of the community over half of professed seminarians in mixed communities indicated that the community and its mission could continue without any lay religious members.

Recommendations

1. All who promote vocations within the Church should have access to resources to help them understand, articulate, and promote the Brother's vocation. This is especially true at the diocesan level. Without resources or training that portray lay religious life as worthwhile and as an essential part of the Church vocation promoters will continue to focus exclusively on priestly vocations.
2. Trends in Church culture which contribute to portrayals of religious Brothers as irrelevant or as men who are in a state of transition to priesthood must be countered with Church-wide education.
3. Although the majority of Brothers who contributed to this research described ministry as an important part of their vocation there continues to be much confusion within the Church about what Brothers do. Articulating a clear path to ministry apart from the sacraments and affirming the value of lay religious ministers would boost Brother's self-confidence and help their formators develop a formation plan that addresses their identity.
4. Although the Church has produced many documents which address the formation of religious and diocesan priests there remain very few guidelines or resources for those responsible for the post-novitiate formators of religious Brothers. Even though men's religious communities require flexibility in designing their formation programs it may be helpful to identify some areas of formation that are universal and to address issues related to Brother's identity.