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A NEW BRANCH

by Bryan J. Karvelis

Almost 40 years ago, in the year 1959, I was part of the first Fraternity of Jesus Caritas formed here in the USA. I remember so well that graced moment. We had formed a group of young priests who met each month to pray and support one another spiritually. We were all experiencing the shock of losing the seminary supports for spiritual life in the hurly-burly of parish life.

At one such meeting one of our members came in and tossed a book on the table - *Seeds of the Desert* by Ren Voillaume. "I am going to join this fraternity even if none of you guys want to. It is about a French priest, Charles de Foucauld, who wished to be a contemplative while being immersed among the poorest of people." In an instant I knew that this was my vocation. I was already trying to live that kind of life. I was trying to live contemplative prayer and was deliberately becoming one with our poor Puerto Rican immigrants who were just arriving. This Charles de Foucauld had developed a whole spirituality on that basis and I knew that it was my vocation within a vocation. We all joined that fraternity and Jacques Leclerc came down from Montreal to visit us.

In those days before Vatican II, Jesus Caritas was on the road to becoming a "secular institute" (understood very differently from the way it is understood today). Our Month of Nazareth was very much in line with a novitiate. We took vows which I have always struggled to keep and enlarge over the years. The Directory was detailed and demanding, e.g., permissions were required for any large expenditure of money so as to keep us always little brothers among the poor.

After Vatican II and during the upheavals of the 60s, Jesus Caritas took a sharp turn in a different direction. Detailed structures and norms were toned down and great emphasis was placed on being supportive and inclusive. This has been a real gift to so many priests and is a real charism of Jesus Caritas today. My vocation, however has always inclined me to the life of the strict observance. Yet I remain eternally grateful to Jesus Caritas for its gifts to me, especially its gift of the spirituality of Brother Charles.

My calling has pushed me along the path of formation of a new religious community within the spiritual family of Brother Charles. The Little Brothers of Jesus strive to be contemplatives immersed among the poor but without any direct apostolate. The Little Brothers of the Gospel strive to be contemplatives immersed among the poor but they do accept an apostolate that is direct but avoid formal involvement in running a parish or diocese. Our LITTLE BROTHERS OF THE WORD strive to be contemplatives immersed among the poor but we do choose to accept parish work and a diocesan assignment and to work side by side with our brother priests and religious.



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Thirty years ago I began to live the life of a Little Brother of the Word. Two of us began in a small tenement apartment in the poorest area of our parish. Our lives as Little Brothers developed and two years ago we drew up the Constitutions of the Little Brothers of the Word. I sent them to the Bishop of Brooklyn, my ordinary. He expressed pleasure and blessings. At this point we are simply a private pious association of the faithful. If we grow, we will ask the Bishop for a higher stage of recognition. Similar steps were also taken with the Cardinal of the Archdiocese of New York.

In the neo-pagan atmosphere in which we are living today, even within the Church, it seems more and more difficult to live a life of truly contemplative prayer. There are so many programs, so many new methods and so much individualism. The contemplative prayer life of the Little Brothers of the Word demands much more than a daily hour of Adoration and it is deeply conscious of the crushing demands of parish life, e.g. life in my inner-city immigrant parish. A true community life that is deeply connected with the poor who are also our family is an essential part of our lives as Little Brothers. This simply expresses the classical two pronged spirituality of Brother Charles: - presence to God and presence to people especially the poorest.

We enter the 21st Century and face the extraordinary shrinking number of priests and religious. We also face the constant bombardment from an increasingly inimical society and the attacks by the mass media obsessed with sex, violence and the affluent life style. I hope that the Little Brothers of the Word can offer a sure road of Gospel living for those who would choose to give their lives to serve the Church in parish or diocesan work. If any one of you should feel that this might also be your vocation or simply that you might want more information, please feel free to contact me.