

Brothers



An Inside Look

Larry Schatz, FSC

Saint Mary's Press
Christian Brothers Publications
Winona, Minnesota



Genuine recycled paper with 10% post-consumer waste.
Printed with soy-based ink.

The publishing team included Shirley Kelter, development editor; Paul Grass, FSC, copy editor; Brooke Saron, production editor; Laurie Geisler, art director; cover and inside image by Digital Imagery copyright © 2001 PhotoDisc, Inc.; manufactured by the production services department of Saint Mary's Press.

The acknowledgments continue on page 66.

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Printed in the United States of America

Printing: 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Year: 2010 09 08 07 06 05 04 03 02

ISBN 0-88489-721-4

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Schatz, Larry.

Brothers: an inside look / Larry Schatz.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p. 65).

ISBN 0-88489-721-4

1. Brothers (Religious) 2. Vocations (in religious orders, congregations, etc.) 3. Schatz, Larry. I. Title.

BX2835 .S35 2002

255'.092—dc21

2001005715

*This book is dedicated to my loving parents,
Clemence and Minnie Schatz,
who have shown me what it means
to live a committed life.*

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Series Foreword

An old Hasidic legend about the mysterious nature of life says that God whispers into your newly created soul all the secrets of your existence, all the divine love for you, and your unique purpose in life. Then, just as God infuses your soul into your body, an assisting angel presses your mouth shut and instructs your soul to forget its preternatural life.

You are now spending your time on earth seeking to know once again the God who created you, loves you, and assigns you a singular purpose. Raise your forefinger to feel the crease mark the angel left above your lips, and ask yourself in wonder: Who am I? How am I uniquely called to live in the world?

The authors of the five titles in this Vocations series tell how they approached these same questions as they searched for meaning and purpose in their Christian vocation, whether as a brother, a married couple, a priest, a single person, or a sister.

Christians believe that God creates a dream for each person. What is your dream in life? This is how Pope John Paul II, echoing Jeremiah 1:5, speaks of the Creator's dream and the divine origin of your vocation:

All human beings, from their mothers' womb, belong to God who searches them and knows them, who forms them and knits them together with his own hands, who gazes on them when they are tiny shapeless embryos

and already sees in them the adults of tomorrow whose days are numbered and whose vocation is even now written in the “book of life.” (*Evangelium Vitae*, no. 61)

In spite of believing that God does have your specific vocation in mind, you probably share the common human experience—the tension and the mystery—of finding out who you are and how God is personally calling you to live in this world. Although you can quickly recognize the uniqueness of your thumbprint, you will spend a lifetime deciphering the full meaning of your originality.

There is no shortage of psychological questionnaires for identifying your personality type, career path, learning style, and even a compatible mate. Although these methods can be helpful in your journey to self-discovery, they do little to illuminate the mystery in your quest. What is the best approach to knowing your vocation in life? Follow the pathway as it unfolds before you and live with the questions that arise along the way.

The stories in this Vocations series tell about life on the path of discernment and choice; they remind you that you are not alone. God is your most present and patient companion. In the “travelogues” of these authors, you will find reassurance that even when you relegate the Divine Guide to keeping ten paces behind you, or when you abandon the path entirely for a time, you cannot undo God’s faithfulness to you. Each vocation story uniquely testifies to the truth that God is always at work revealing your life’s purpose to you.

In these stories you will also find that other traveling companions—family, friends, and classmates—contribute to your discovery of a place in the world and call forth the person you are becoming. Their companionship along the way not only manifests God’s abiding presence but reminds you to respect others for their gifts, which highlight and mirror your own.

Although each path in the Vocations series is as unique as the person who tells his or her story, these accounts remind you to be patient with the mystery of your own life, to have confidence in God’s direction, and to listen to the people and events you encounter as you journey to discover your unique role in God’s plan. By following your path, you too will come to see the person of tomorrow who lives in you today.

Clare vanBrandwijk



Introduction

20 January 2001

In today's mail I received a letter from one of my brothers who has just completed a prayer workshop at the Sangre de Cristo Retreat Center in New Mexico. He is in temporary vows—a required time of living religious life before taking final vows—and has been discerning his vocation to religious life. In a beautifully written letter that reflects a sense of peace and resolution, he states that although he has great respect and love for the brothers, he has decided not to renew his vows.

Before I started reading the letter, in my heart I already knew what it would say, but I still hoped that perhaps this young man was going to tell me that he had resolved to take final vows. It is always bittersweet news to get word that someone is leaving the brothers. On the one hand, I am happy that the man departing has a sense of peace and knows that he is being called elsewhere. On the other hand, I am sad and disappointed to lose a family member, for this is what the brothers are in my life—a vast family. I am linked with them not by blood but rather by a common vision and dream. It is hard for me to see someone leave.

A letter like the one I received today forces me once again to examine my commitment to this rather unusual life. There is a lot of mystery to this thing called “a religious vocation,” but one fact I do know. Br. Brian Henderson, FSC, said it so simply a few years ago while sharing his life story with me: “Brotherhood is my way to God.” I realized that in these six words he had captured why I am a brother. I hope to share with you the journey of my life as a brother and why this vocation is my way to God.

I should note here that the letters *FSC* after Brian’s name and mine signify the Latin words *Fratres Scholarum Christianarum*, “Brothers of the Christian Schools,” the official name of the religious institute to which he and I belong. Also known as De La Salle Brothers and in the United States of America as Christian Brothers, the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools was founded by Saint John Baptist de La Salle in France over three hundred years ago. People often use the word *Lasallian*, derived from the founder’s name, to describe the mission, the identity, and the people who share the brothers’ educational ministry. Even though I am writing about my life as a De La Salle Christian Brother, much of what I say about my vocation pertains to all brothers in the church. So, here is my story. . . .



The Call

The Brochure

It all started with a brochure. I was teaching at a girls’ academy in southern Minnesota; while monitoring a study hall one afternoon, I opened my desk drawer to look for a pen and ran across a brochure I had placed there several weeks before. A vocation awareness day for all Catholic youth had taken place at the school, and representatives from several religious orders were present. Someone from the De La Salle Christian Brothers had used my classroom and left some brochures on my desk. I remember wondering why he had done so in a girls’ school, not a likely source of vocations for brothers!

I picked up the brochure and casually paged through it. I remember being attracted by the cover, an image of a man paddling a canoe, and by the words, “If one is a Christian, there is a point. . . .” I was curious: what is the *point*?

The point is that there comes a time when you need to commit to living the Christian life fully. The brochure talked about the Christian Brothers, about living in community, about teaching, about faith. I liked what I read.

In my third year of teaching, I was feeling a nudge to move on and make a change. For the past few months, my final prayer before I crawled into bed at night had been, “God, if there’s something you want me to do, let me know.” I guess that is all God needed to hear because suddenly and rather surprisingly, this brochure spoke to me about things I knew I wanted. I wanted to teach in Catholic schools, and after three years of living alone, I knew I needed others in my life. I was struck by the emphasis on community and the shared life. It was time to start paddling my canoe in a different direction.

“God, if there’s something you want me to do, let me know.”

So, I wrote a letter to the vocation director of the Christian Brothers and asked for more information. I expected to receive a packet in the mail, but what I got instead was much better. One of the brothers called me to ask if he could drive over from Winona and meet me. We could go out to dinner and talk. It sounded good to me!

So began my encounter with a group of men I would come to know very well. Br. Tom Sullivan met me at school, and we had a good long visit. What it came down to was this: because I was already a certified high school teacher, if I was interested in finding out more about the De La Salle Brothers, I could enter the brother candidate program and live in community with them while teaching in a Lasallian school. He assured me that this would not involve any heavy commitment on my part, but it would be a realistic way of experiencing what life is like as a brother.

He also mentioned that a candidate retreat was coming up that I could attend to meet some more brothers and spend time with other guys in my same position. What impressed me the most was that Brother Tom was so friendly and down to earth. Like many other people, I had the tendency to put brothers, sisters, and priests on a pedestal. It was

clear to me that Brother Tom had no desire to be atop a pedestal. Neither did I!

An adventure began that winter evening that continues to this day. Opening their brochure and sharing a meal with one of the brothers led to a fulfilling life full of surprises.

Moving On

By late spring I had secured a teaching job in one of the Lasallian high schools and had decided to live in community with the brothers as a brother candidate. This stage of formation, or preparation for religious life, has several different names depending on the specific congregation and locale. Some orders call this phase the postulancy or the pre-novitiate. I like the name *candidate* because that is what I was, and the term seemed clear to me. I had decided to give the brother’s life a try for at least a year. I was assured that if I changed my mind, I would still have a teaching job, so it seemed to me that I couldn’t lose.

Of course, now the challenge would be what to tell everyone about what I was doing. After all, my decision sort of came out of the blue, and I wasn’t sure what this experience was all about. I just knew I had to give it a try.

I had gone home for Easter, which is when I told my parents about my plans. I couldn’t quite tell what their rather neutral reaction signified. They certainly knew what a religious vocation is. My mom’s two youngest sisters, as well as three of her cousins, are Benedictine sisters. Because I grew up near a Benedictine abbey, my family knew several of the monks, both brothers and priests. One of my dad’s relatives was a brother at that abbey.

Later, I discovered the reason for their rather reserved reaction. The only brothers my mom and dad knew were the brothers from the abbey, and when my parents were growing up in the era before Vatican Council II, the brothers tended to be the manual laborers in the abbey. They generally were the ones who tended the farm and the grounds, and they took care of all the other tasks that kept the abbey going. The priests were the teachers and pastors; they had the college degrees.

What confused my parents is why I would want to become a brother when I was already a college graduate and a teacher. This reaction became clear to me only after they visited my community that fall and realized that the institute I was interested in is a congregation of brothers who are educators. Once that became clear to them, they understood the step I had taken and became very supportive.

Brothers now take on a variety of roles.

I do want to emphasize that things have changed a lot for all brothers, especially those in a monastic community. Brothers now take on a variety of roles in a monastery; many of them are teachers and administrators. For example, at Saint John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, where I did my undergraduate study, a brother currently serves as president of Saint John's University. This appointment might not have happened in times past.

Telling my friends what I was planning to do was more difficult because I wasn't completely sure how they'd react. What I usually told them was that I got a job in a Christian Brothers' school and that I planned to live with the brothers "just to try it out." I generally ended the explanation by saying, "but I'm not sure it will work out." This comment seemed to reassure my friends that I wasn't doing anything rash, but it also gave me an out. However, I had a strong feeling inside that this decision might work out better than I was letting on. I liked what I had seen during my weekend visit with the brothers in Stevens Point, Wisconsin, where I would be living and teaching.

Toward the end of summer, I left the life I knew in Mankato, Minnesota, loaded up a truck with my stuff, and headed to central Wisconsin. I wasn't sure what lay ahead, but I was excited about the change, and I was certainly willing to give this "brother thing" an honest try.

What's in a Name?

Because I had been teaching for three years, I was used to being called Mr. Schatz. The name was hard to accept at first because it seemed so formal; I felt it was more properly my dad's name than mine. Now the brothers gave me the option of being called Brother Larry. Typically, a brother candidate has the choice whether to use the title Brother.

I hesitated at first, but the brother director of the community suggested that I give it a try. He gave me a few rather convincing reasons. The main one was that it would be simpler all around because I was living with the brothers in community, I was new at the school, and the name would help me get a clearer idea of how it felt to be a brother. I wouldn't recommend this step for everyone; I think your decision will depend on where you are in your process of discernment. The choice of the title *Brother* made sense to me at the time because I was new to the school and would be identified with the brothers.

So it came to be. I was Brother Larry, a name that to me is now so familiar and important that I hardly recall anymore what it was like being Mr. Schatz. But at first when I would hear the word *Brother*, it would take me a moment to realize that I was being addressed. Students must have wondered about my delayed reaction; however, it didn't take me long to adjust to the name.

I noticed one thing: although I was comfortable with that name in my new school and community, everywhere else I was still just Larry. I almost felt at times as if I had two identities: I was Brother Larry in one part of my life and Larry Schatz in the other. It took some time for the two to meld into one. Looking back, I have no regrets about adopting the title of Brother when I did; the name helped me better understand what being a brother is all about.

I quickly grew to cherish the title of Brother. What I like is that the name implies a unique and special relationship that is very different from Father, for example. Having a big brother and having a dad are two distinct realities. Although I do not have an older brother, I do understand what it means to be a brother to my two sisters.

I also understand and appreciate now what it means to be a brother to my students. I am not in a parental role so much as in a fraternal one. I am called to be a big brother to the students I serve. I like what this relationship implies. A big brother is someone who looks out for you, cares about what happens to you, and can be both a mentor and a buddy. Every now and then, someone will address me as Father Larry, an honest mistake because the title of Father in Catholic circles is much more common than Brother. I always gently correct the person who has spoken. It is important for people to know that I am a brother and not a priest; the two roles are quite different. (I will speak more about the difference later on.)

Brother is far more than a title.

The identity of brother and the relationship it implies, particularly with young people, are very rich. *Brother* is far more than a title; it challenges me to be in relationship with others and not to take the relationship for granted. As someone once said rather cleverly, "You cannot spell *brothers* without spelling *others*." I like that!

My New Life

So, how was my life different now that I was living in a brothers' community? There were two big changes, for sure. I prayed more, and I spent a lot more time at the dinner table. There were eight of us in the community that first year. All were involved at Pacelli High School, which the De La Salle Christian Brothers had staffed since its beginning in the mid-1950s. I was a full-time English teacher with the extra responsibilities of moderating the school paper and developing a debating and public-speaking program.

Because of our different morning schedules, the community chose to pray together in the late afternoon, before dinner. My congregation requires every community to gather at the beginning of the school year to determine its Community Annual Program, or CAP as we call it. The meeting is important because the community establishes the daily rhythm as well as everything else: from discussing the annual budget to figuring out who will take care of the various household tasks. One key decision is what prayer time will work for everyone.

One key decision is what prayer time will work for everyone.

Herein lies a distinctive difference between what are called *monastic* and *apostolic* religious communities. In a monastery such as Saint John's, a Benedictine community, the prayer times are set. The rest of the day revolves around them. A contemplative congregation such as the Trappists gathers for prayer five or six times throughout the day, from early morning to early evening. Prayer and silence are the primary features of their day.

In an apostolic congregation of brothers whose focus is a ministry of education or health care, the prayer times need to be determined by the necessities of the daily schedule of professional work. Typically, in an apostolic community, especially one with education as its primary mission, the brothers gather for prayer in the morning and in the late afternoon or early evening.

Whenever possible, brothers participate daily in the eucharistic celebration. In times past, when priests were more abundant, some large communities would have a chaplain in residence. A priest would live in the community house with the brothers and be available to celebrate the Eucharist daily. Today, such a situation is rare; the brothers generally go to a local parish for the eucharistic celebration or invite a priest to their

community once a week. The demands of the school schedule sometimes make it impossible for the brothers to attend Mass every day.

Although the institute to which I belong, the De La Salle Christian Brothers, consists only of brothers, some men's congregations in the Catholic church have both brothers and priests as members; one or more priests are often part of their local community. I will speak more about this point later because the many different orders and customs in religious life may seem confusing to you.

How do brothers pray together?

How do brothers pray together? There are several options. The most familiar and commonly used form of prayer is the Liturgy of the Hours. This set of prayers, drawn mainly from the Book of Psalms in the Bible, is a four-week cycle of prayers based on the liturgical seasons of the church. Prayers, psalms, and other selections from the Scriptures are read or chanted in two alternating choirs, or groups. These prayers and readings are also called the Prayer of Christians, a traditional prayer form available to all believers.

Generally, the prayer leader in a community will alternate weekly and is free to design the format of the prayer. Whatever form it takes, community prayer includes the Scriptures, music, and an opportunity for shared prayer.

The format of the prayer is not as important as the fact that the brothers gather for prayer. Praying together is an essential support in a brother's life. The prayer may be in a chapel in larger and more traditional communities, in a special prayer room set aside in the brothers' residence, or in the living room of a small community of two or three brothers. The place is not as important as the fact of gathering and praying.

I look forward to times of community prayer because of the great sense of support and peace in knowing that we are centered on God

together. Christian Brothers around the world all begin prayer with the same invitation in whatever language they speak: "Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God."

Another highlight of community life for me is having dinner together at the end of the day. After three years of living alone and making my own meals, often eating them while watching television, I enjoyed the treat of gathering around a table with several others and sharing a meal. Often our meals together take an hour or more simply because we are busy conversing and enjoying one another's company. For me it is a sacred time.

Shared meal times . . . are a vital part of community life.

I am sure that Jesus spent much time at the table sharing meals and conversation with his followers. It is important to remember that Jesus comes to you and me in the form of bread and wine. He nourishes us spiritually with food and drink. Shared meal times, which are becoming rare in busy families and homes, are a vital part of community life and have always been one of my favorite times with the brothers.

Another conclusion that struck me during my first year of living in community is how good it felt to be with others who shared my values, ideals, and profession. Everyone in that community was an educator and a brother united by the vision of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, our Founder. This powerful support system is especially helpful for a new teacher in a school.

In spite of their quirks and idiosyncrasies, I quickly learned to enjoy these men with whom I was living. After all, they had to put up with me as well! Because we varied in age from twenty-one to sixty-three, the

community certainly enjoyed a variety of backgrounds and temperaments. All things considered, this was a great place for me to begin my adventure as a brother. I am thankful that God led me to this community and school. I learned much and realized that I was even more content than I had ever thought I would be.

Promises to Keep

What kind of commitment did I make that first year? I was living with the brothers, sharing fully in community life, and yet I had not taken any formal vows to be a brother. I will say more about the vows later on, but I tell you now that clearly there were some expectations placed on me as a brother candidate. I would try to live as much like a “real” brother as possible. In practical terms this commitment meant that I would not date, I would share my earnings with the community, and I would make significant decisions within the context of the men with whom I lived and shared my life. Because only a brother who has completed the novitiate (the stage after candidacy) can profess vows, I was actually making a promise to live the vows as fully as possible but without any legal requirement to do so in the eyes of the church.

In early October of that first year, we had a special Mass at our house during which I made promises to my community to live the vows as best I could for one year as a brother candidate. I invited my parents down for the weekend to be present to witness my promises and to meet the brothers of my community. This visit is when they realized that the Christian Brothers are different than the brothers they had known in the past. Because all the brothers are educators, it made perfect sense to them that I was considering becoming part of this group. My parents felt very much at home with the brothers.

I often hear this same comment: when people visit a brothers’ community, they feel welcome. Visitors immediately notice the spirit of hospitality, perhaps because they never know quite what to expect in a “religious” house, and they enter with more than a few apprehensions. In times past, religious houses were generally off limits to outsiders. Family members were welcomed in a front parlor or visiting room, but the rest of the house was a cloister, closed to all but community members.

Because the De La Salle Christian Brothers belong to an international institute, they have community residences in eighty countries around the world. I have visited a few brothers’ houses outside the United States, mainly in Europe and Mexico, and I have always felt welcome. My friends often say to me, “Join the brothers, and see the world.” Well, there is some truth to that comment. It’s nice to know I have a family and a place to stay all over the world.

Now I had promised to try to live the life of a brother for one year and see how it fit. So far, it fit just fine!

*When people visit a brothers’ community,
they feel welcome.*