

## ***Identity of Brotherhood in a changing world - Reflection***

It is interesting to me to know that in Australia Identity did not seem to be an issue as the work of our predecessors had already forged one with their dedicated hard work for the poor and marginalised over the last 150 years. It was as if we were standing on the shoulders of those who had gone before us. The church in Australia is as familiar with the vocation of brotherhood as it is with the priestly vocation. Both are centred on the person of Jesus who is our brother but the brothers express their call through the particular charism of their founders. We, the Christian Brothers by the Charism handed down to us by blessed Edmund Rice. Namely: Education of youth who are both poor and marginalised. Yes we were identified through our work, through our schools and hopefully through the way we lived our vows and we have a lot to thank God for.

### **But what of today?**

More recently the emphasis is on the way we live our lives as brothers, I would suggest, and less on what we do. I guess the reason for this is we no longer have a high profile in our own schools as we went through the difficult task of handing them to others. The risk we took here was that we lost something as present generations no longer saw us and therefore probably don't know of us or even who we are. The upside of all this is the emergence of a new awareness of Blessed Edmund Rice and his charism in our schools. "We decrease as he increases" may well be the new call. The letting go of our Schools has been a painful process and the process by its nature is continuing today as our numbers decrease. The interesting thing is, though some brothers chose to remain in our schools doing marvellous work and others chose to make the move and go out to third world countries, each group continues to respect and more importantly accept the choices made by the other. The obvious blessing here is that those left at home are supporting to an extraordinary extent the work of those in the missions. Was this God's plan all along for Australian Brothers to move out into the third world with the blessing of those left behind?

### **What of the Philippines?**

Here in the Philippines the concept of brotherhood is not so well defined. The average catholic knows what priesthood is all about. One cannot assume this in the case of the brother's vocation. Given the clericalism in the Philippine church, the brother's role here has never been clearly defined. In the minds of most Catholics, a man who chooses to take vows has only one choice, namely, that of being a priest. There is this notion that: why would you opt for brotherhood when you can become a priest? There are teaching brothers in the Philippines but they seem to be confined to the big cities and in wealthy and well established schools. There are some individual brothers who are trying to answer the call to the margins but like us the letting go is oh so difficult. Br Carl Gaspar (CSSR) and Br Mauricio Zuyco (OMI) are just two people I know who have answered the call and made a huge impact here in Mindanao. The Christian Brothers are now on Negros in Kabankalan. These four Christian Brothers have already, in the short time they have been there, made an impact in that Diocese. We will shortly follow their example and start a mission here in the Philippines. We will be the first brothers to work in the Island of Leyte as far as I know and in time we will get to be known and so an identity will be forged. These are small beginnings and we don't minimise the mountain that has yet to be climbed

### **My final thought**

Br Gaspar, a visiting lecturer who inspired me to write this short article, wrote a book called "To be poor and obscure", which is worth a read by the way. He says: "Poverty is a way of life for the majority of Mindanowans and in past years it has become more intense. Corporations have exacerbated the situation by paying low wages, displacing the indigenous groups, and depleting the rainforests." This is the sad picture and unfortunately it's the same throughout the Philippines. I don't have the answer to this situation and the Government doesn't either so you might ask what can we do? What we can do is our little bit and so we have chosen to move to a very poor area of the Philippines, to a place called Hilongos in the Diocese of Maasin. We look forward to the challenge ahead (To be in solidarity with them). We hope to be a presence bringing hope and Edmund Rice's spirit to this corner of the globe. The school there is very poor and has only been operating for a relatively short time so there are many obstacles ahead of us. The Parish invited us to share in its work of educating the poor, and the local catholic Community has already shown us that we are welcome as we have heard there is already a banner above the main street with Carls, Franks and my name emblazoned with the traditional welcome sign attached. I will end this reflection by quoting a little more of Br Gaspar's work as he also has a lot to say about this idea of the brothers Identity. He says "Religious Brothers are Brothers because Jesus is their Brother and He wants us to be "Brother" to everyone especially the poor" He goes on to add "To live a life of selfless service to others means to be in solidarity with the poor and the weak. To show compassion for those who suffer and feel marginalised." Edmund Rice could have said these very words. I remember reading this exhortation somewhere and it's well known "Choose to live simply so that others may simply live". What a great piece of advice and of course it's a call to every one not just religious. Let's hope all of us take this to heart; truly words to live by. .