When I was asked to write about an aspect of religious life that interested me, one thing came to mind. For me, this one thing is perhaps the least understood aspect of religious life today. The ironic thing is that this one thing is the very backbone of men’s religious life: the lay brotherhood.

When I first began to realize that I was being called to a religious vocation, I was at a loss. I knew that I was not called to priesthood and my only other understanding of vocation for a man was that of monastic life. Like many people in the Church, I had no knowledge of there being something called the lay brother. My understanding of holiness for a man was priesthood or cloistered prayer. When I discovered the lay brotherhood, however, everything made sense. I had a distinct sense that my vocation lay in that way of life.

For centuries in the Church, the lay brotherhood had a very distinct vocation: we were the servants of the priest friars. We did the menial tasks while the priests did ministry. We were the cooks and workmen and tailors and janitors. We were questers and porters. We were the backbone of the praying community and the core of the fraternity. We were also, in many ways, second-class citizens relegated to separate formation programs and separate recreation areas.

This stigma is still attached to the brotherhood in places today. Some religious orders place great pressure on their young men in formation to be priests because they feel it is the “real” ministry. A lay brother can often be seen as someone who isn’t a priest... yet, or a failed priest; someone not intelligent enough to do the priestly ministry. We have been asked why we only want to be “half a man.” And these questions can all come from other religious.

The faithful can be just as misunderstanding. They ask, “Don’t you want to be a priest?” “We need priests. You should be one.” “Why don’t you go ‘all the way’?” When we try to explain to them they say “I’ll pray for you,” meaning they’ll pray we get with the “real” vocation of being a priest. The first time someone was talking to me and, realizing my vocation, said, “Oh, you’re just a brother,” I was devastated.

One of the causes of the issues in the life of the religious brother came with Vatican II and a desire to make the religious brother an equal member of his order. For many brothers, it meant that everyone in the order took to calling himself “brother” whereas before there was always a distinction between the fathers and the brothers. It meant getting an education equal to that of the priest candidates. It meant being allowed to partake in other ministries such as preaching and spiritual direction, teaching and administration. I would never say that these are bad things. These changes did, however, cause the religious brother to lose a sense of identity. He used to

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be the servant of the servants of God and took delight and strength and purpose in that designation. What can he say when everyone is equal but that he isn’t ordained? That the difference between him and a priest is that he doesn’t do sacramental work? How does it affect a person when the only way he can define himself is by what he doesn’t do compared to someone else? Even calling ourselves “lay brothers” is a misnomer. We are not laymen, we are religious, but we are caught up in a lay/cleric dichotomy.

This sense of reclaiming an identity is perhaps the central issue for religious brothers all over the United States. I can’t speak for religious brothers in other countries about their major issues, but I know that in some countries for a man to enter religious life and not be ordained is a source of great shame, not only for himself, but for his family as well.

So who is the religious brother? We keep asking ourselves this question. For me, it means that I walk with the people around me: my brothers and sisters, as an equal or even a lesser person. I don’t get put on a pedestal like a priest does. I have no authority granted me by the Church by nature of my vocation. The only authority I have is any God-given authority that my brothers and sisters in the Church recognize in me. Unlike a priest or a married man I am not called to a vocation of fatherhood whether spiritual or biological. I am called to be brother to the world. I’ve tried to explain all this to other people before and I more often than not get a look of total incomprehension. The ones who get it, though, are often on the same vocational path that God has chosen for me.

The struggle to find our identity, or maybe more exactly, our lack of a distinctive identity, may be our greatest strength. We have a possibility to forge new ministerial ground by not being caught up in old expectations. We are a present in search of a future.

I wouldn’t change my vocation for anything. I’m blessed that God has chosen me to serve him and those he loves in this way. I like being a brother. It’s the Church’s best-kept secret and I hope the word gets out.