So You're a Brother, Father

Mixed with the humor of continual misidentification is the sad fact that religious brothers are little known and less understood

by

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"I am not a priest. I am not a student for the priesthood"

LIKE a few other Orders of Brothers, the Brothers of the Congregation of Holy Cross wear the Roman collar as part of their street dress. In the center of the collar is a black band, meant to signify that the wearer is an unordained religious. So few people are acquainted with the Brother's vocation and the meaning of the band that on its slender blackness hangs many a ludicrous tale.

After the final examinations of one school year were corrected, the grades turned in to the office, and my bags all packed, I set out blithely for the railroad station, off for my summer appointment. The cab honked; I said hurried good-bys and scrambled into the rear seat.

"Where to, Father?" asked the cabbie.

"Union Station." I replied, and sat back in a way that implied I wanted no conversation.

When I was younger by several hundred "good morning Fathers" I would have primly told him I was a Brother, a Holy Cross Brother, stationed at such-and-such high school. But now the cabbie looked so innocent and cheerful I didn't have the heart to confuse him. It was just a short ride, anyway, hardly time to clear up half his misconceptions. Every young Holy Cross Brother, and probably every young Brother of several other Orders, has been frustrated many times in making his status clear. Indeed, I have heard it more or less seriously suggested that each religious carry a little bundle of cards with him. The message would run something like this:

"How do you do? I am not a priest; I am a Holy Cross Brother. I am not a student for the priesthood. You know what a religious is. Well, a Brother is the male equivalent, consecrated to God by the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. The black band in the collar signifies this state. Thank you. Pray for me."

Now that is an idea. When our status is wrongly diagnosed, we could whip out one of these cards, present it to the erring person with a tip of the hat and a cheery good morrow, and be on our way.

Not having any of these cards, I responded with a how-do-you-do to a chorus of "good afternoon, Brothers" inside the station, picked up my ticket and headed for my waiting train. As I passed through the gate I heard a cheery "Good afternoon, Brother. Hope you have a nice trip." I turned back with a glad cry, and belatedly recognized in the ticket checker a former student whom I vaguely remembered as having failed my English class. I hope that I did not fawn on him too much, but he was like an oasis in a strange desert.

Every wearer of the Roman collar knows the strange attraction it has for people, especially talkative people. On a train it seems to be an unusually powerful magnet that keeps the wearer from loneliness and deprives him of any privacy. Has anyone ever thought of a religious congregation devoting itself to the apostolate of the railroad? Its members could perpetually ride upon trains, answering questions, being apologists, giving advice, and hearing confessions. It seems that here is an exceptionally fertile field that has somehow been overlooked by religious founders. But again, perhaps the field is well covered by the chance travelers who frequent the rails.

As I relaxed in my seat and arranged my paraphernalia for the trip, a small, gray-haired man in a brown suit came down the aisle, spotted the collar, and came bounding over.

"Good morning, Father!" he cried, taking my hand and shaking it heartily, almost violently.

I replied in a restrained voice, wondering whether I should leap into my explanations and carry on the apostolate of explaining the Brother's vocation. No need yet, I decided. Besides, I noticed that his "one for the road" was just enough to make

him friendly, with only(103,37),(890,996)

I sat down, scrutinized his collar for a black band (there was none) and said hello.

"Where are you stationed, Father?" he asked, finishing up his ice cream.

"Pardon me," I said, "my name is Brother Francis. I am a Holy Cross Brother."

"Oh. When are you going to be ordained, Brother?" he asked, apparently remembering that the Carmelites and a few other Orders called their seminarians Brother.

"I won't be ordained. I am simply a religious."

"Oh."

He was a little nonplussed by all this. A Brother who wasn't going to be ordained! Brothers were a little uncommon in his diocese, and though he knew there were such people, he was a little unsure about them. He finished his coffee in uncomfortable haste and left. As I in turn got to my ice cream, a big, booming man took the seat vacated by the Roman collar.

"I have a son who is a priest," he informed me loudly. "What parish are you at, Father?"

Now be it said that I am not a quitter. I went into my act with the alacrity of a trained seal.

"Are you a Catholic?" he asked suspiciously when I had finished.

That did it. The zeal seemed to flow from me as from a gashed artery. I finished my meal in gloomy silence while the big man looked at me now and again with mixed puzzlement and hostility. It was with relief that I felt the train grind into South Bend, where soon I would be a member of a large religious family and would be greeted by an occasional "Good morning, Brother."

As a sidelight, it is interesting to note how everyone tends to say "Good morning" to priests and religious, no matter what the hour may be. I suppose it is a tendency carried over from childhood days when we paid morning greetings to our teachers and greeted the priest coming out of the sacristy door after his morning Mass. At any rate, rare is the day I do not have the opportunity to say "Good Afternoon" while looking at my watch to some student who passes me with a greeting in the corridors during the afternoon periods.

As the Brother goes down the street each day from home to school, or back again, he is recognized in his white collar, black habit, and encircling black cord by the students, their parents, the "old boys" and neighbors. Strangers in the vicinity, however, are thrown off.

So each day the Brother goes and returns from school with a mixed chorus of "Good morning, Brother," and "Good morning, Father."

Going to school one morning, I saw coming toward me a young mother guiding her little daughter to the school building. As we neared each other, the mother swooped over, and I could hear her instructing her offspring to greet me.

"Good morning, Father," the little girl said bashfully.

I smiled my answer, certainly beyond trying to disguise the little one of her errors. When I was a step or two past, I could hear the mother correcting her child.

"He's not a Father. He's just a Brother."

We Brothers, little known and less understood, have learned to be philosophical. All of us have read articles about the glories of the priesthood and Sisterhood and vaguely wondered if the writer included Brothers in the Church. At educational conferences we have turned up in full force, some of our members even on the platform, only to hear speaker after speaker begin his address, "Reverend Fathers, dear Sisters, friends."

The cruellest cut of all, though, is inflicted by the graduation speaker. We stuff him with food before the commencement; we pay his fee. Yet on the stage he will say, "Reverend Fathers, ladies and gentlemen. After the ceremonies, I take it on myself to remind him that Brothers teach at this school."

"In fact," I say, "I am a Brother myself."

"Oh," he says, taking another hors d'oeuvres. "So you're a Brother, Father?"