

Minister's Letter



*Brother Clark Berge SSF,
Minister General of the First Order Brothers , writes:*

Dear Friends,

I write this letter from the Solomon Islands. A young brother has just left me. He brought me a plate of fresh baked rolls--cooked by fire in an oil drum converted into an oven. Baking here is a hot, smoky business. The rolls are superlative. I am astonished by the brothers' skills, how they create a beautiful life under difficult circumstances, at least as I perceive it.

The baker brother is a novice. When he came to the community he could neither read nor write, but now he is the proud possessor of both skills. The brothers have been patiently tutoring him and now the four religious orders in Solomon Islands' Church of Melanesia are holding literacy classes for brothers and sisters. My young brother has been quoting Scriptures to me, chapter and verse. He is exhilarated by reading and has found a verse in Jeremiah he thinks applies to him too: "I chose you before I gave you life" and then: "Do not say you are too young, but go to the people I send you to...(Jeremiah 1:4ff)." His eyes gleam with joy as he reads haltingly to me. The Scriptures are written for us and in a way about us, I tell him.

In April I had the joy of visiting the Bose Community in northern Italy and then the San Egidio Community in Rome. During both visits I asked the brothers what was the most formative experience of their religious formation. In both cases I learned it was encountering Scriptures and reflecting on them as a community.

These words were ringing in my ears as I prepared for a historic "first" which took place in New York at Little Portion Friary in July. Representatives gathered from all our provinces, five SSF, two CSF and we included the Community of Divine Compassion in Zimbabwe: fourteen brothers and sisters. Our task was to create an international formation curriculum, with the hope that no matter where a man or woman joins the community they will be able to follow the same "road map" in their formation. I asked the group if they wanted to include Bible study in our working process, and they did. Thus we studied Scripture in small groups every morning, wherever we happened to be; this wasn't your ordinary stationary conference. We travelled all over listening to what I called "parables of formation" from diverse groups: environmental activists, people working with the poor, ecumenically minded Roman Catholics. Our Bible studies provided an element of consistency and the different experiences jolted us into searching, radical personal reflections on what we felt God was calling us to do. It was an exceedingly intense three

weeks, but I think we succeeded admirably. We were desirous of providing some consistency to the formation process. We listed topics and expectations, gave suggestions about process and methods. But each province must develop the course topics in ways that best suit them and their skills and resources. We all feel specially challenged, yet I am sure we will all be able to create something beautiful in our circumstances. Scripture study is an integral part of it all.

May God bless us all as we discover and entrust ourselves to the Gospel life.

Peace and all good!