“Brother”

IN A CABLE SERIES ENTITLED ROME, the hardy veterans of the 13th Legion often refer to each other as “brother.” We see the word used in such varied material as the Bible and “golden oldies” music. De La Salle Christian Brothers sometimes are asked, “Why a Brother, not a priest?” In some ways, the answer remains a simple one. The Archdiocese of Philadelphia has begun an advertising campaign based on “answering the call.” Every person has a “call,” a vocation as it were, in both employment and relationships. Brothers were “called” to be Brothers. Perhaps our introduction to the term may come from another television series—in a most real sense, we are a “Band of Brothers.”

John Baptist de La Salle, the Founder, looked at 17th-century France and saw religious schools for the wealthy. He acutely observed that the need in that time and place remained for a group of teachers to focus on middle- and lower-class boys and their academic and vocational upbringing. He called his teachers “Brothers” for many reasons. I suspect the fact they lived in a community or family (never to be fewer than three, according to the rule), and served as mentors, teachers, and “big brothers” to their students, were important factors then as now.

At first, De La Salle wanted to have a few of his followers ordained, to provide priestly services for his communities, but when his first choice died unexpectedly, the Founder took that event as a sign from the Lord that his Order was to remain lay.

When we think of the best traits of an “older brother,” in our families, I suspect, we reflect on someone who is a listener, present for us, and an example. In the late 1960s at Calvert Hall College High School in Baltimore, the student government focused on a one-word theme, “respect.” “Brothers” in our families or as members of the Order “respect” us and others, and by their leadership and diligence, show us how to respect learning, maturity, and life at all levels. Curiously, members of the larger community often refer to Brothers by shortened first names, Brother Tom, Joe, etc., as a sign of familial respect, not familiarity.

Moreover, the mission of the Christian Brothers always has included other members of the “family”; as a “big brother” involves other siblings in activities, the Brothers share responsibilities with dedicated associates, both lay and religious.

The largest male religious order of Brothers in the Church, the De La Salle Christian Brothers have focused on one mission: education. While that view has broadened to include the myriad of activities outside of actual classroom instruction, the primary purpose has remained the same. In the face of at least two crises that threatened the existence of the Order in France, during the French Revolution and late in the 19th century, the commitment of the Brothers to both “faith and zeal”