Looking Backward, 
Looking Forward

Religious life, as we know it, is over, or dying across the world. I’m more than ever convinced of it. In some parts of the world it is just over. There is absolutely no one joining.¹

This view was offered in January 2011, by the Indian brother Philip Pinto, who heads the Congregation of the Edmund Rice Christian Brothers.² While it provides sobering food for thought, he was speaking specifically in relation to Catholic teaching religious brothers only. In the context of the overall history of religious orders within the Catholic Church, this particular group is of recent origin.³ Thus, while their future may not be assured, it is important to view recent developments in context and to point out that it certainly does not mean we are witnessing the disappearance of a great number of other religious orders.

The religious way of life commenced way back with the ascetics of the desert, who are primarily associated with the period 250 A. D.–500 A. D. This was followed by the monastic movement, between 500 A. D. and 1200 A. D., with the Benedictines and the Cistercians being especially prominent. Over the next three centuries, from 1200 A. D. to 1500 A. D., the mendicant orders, most notably the Franciscans, the Dominicans, the Augustinians, the Carmelites, and the Servites, emerged and grew. The next group to flourish, from 1500 A. D. to 1800 A. D., consisted of the apostolic orders, which included the Jesuits.

The final group to emerge, primarily from the middle of the 1700s, comprised those orders deemed to be especially involved in “institutional ministries.” The orders of religious teaching brothers that have been the focus of attention throughout the book belong to this last era in the age of religious life within the Catholic Church.
It has been indicated that, like religious orders of nuns, these orders of religious brothers can be distinguished from priests in that their members are not ordained clergy. Attention has also been given to another distinguishing feature, namely, that, like nuns and religious orders of priests, but unlike diocesan priests, they live in community. Furthermore, up until the Second Vatican Council, religious orders of brothers, like most religious orders of priests, had “domestic brothers,” who usually assisted with domestic work, maintenance, and farm work, as did “lay sisters” in convents.

Historically, religious orders of brothers have been involved in work of different types, including nursing and social work of various kinds, but they have been primarily involved in teaching. The most central characteristic of their way of life for most of the period under consideration is that, while they worked in the world, they also had to divorce themselves from the world as much as possible. It is this characteristic of teaching brothers that has been foregrounded as the principal theme running throughout this book, the argument being that they were religious first and foremost, and that teaching, while deemed to be a very important role, was always in accord with and, where necessary, took second place to, that life. Indeed, the expectation in this regard was made crystal clear to all aspiring to be brothers ever before they took one step over the threshold of the cloister. Once inside, the message continued to be reinforced among recruits of the orders, with great regularity, and with increasing intensity from year to year, as they proceeded through the various stages of the brotherhood. In this way, they became more and more socialized into what Goffman has termed a “total institution.”

Goffman defined a “total institution” as “a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time together lead an enclosed formally administered round of life.” Religious brothers certainly lived a life that conformed to this definition. It was distinguished from the basic social arrangements in modern Western society whereby the individual “tends to sleep, play and work in different places with different co-participants, under different authorities and without an overall rational plan.” For brothers, the barriers separating these various spheres of activity were broken down, so that, as with members of other total institutions, their life conformed to the following characteristics identified by Goffman:

First, all aspects of life are conducted in the same place and under the same single authority. Second, each phase of the member’s daily