

Restructuring: Is it Worth It?

Richard Thibodeau, CSsR

On June 17, 1996 the Redemptorists of the Oakland and St. Louis Provinces merged into a new province called the Denver Province.

*If a new province
was to emerge
it would happen
as a result of
forging our dreams
for something new
rather than the
result of an
administrative
decision from an
outside force.*

When approached to write an article on the restructuring issue, I was asked to focus on the perspective of a religious community five years after merging two provinces into one province.

After offering the title, “Restructuring: Is It Worth It?,” the editor quickly added that she hoped I would say “yes.” Looking back at it now I’m not sure if the question was directed to agreeing to write the article or saying “yes” in response to the question of the title.

Fortunately I can say “yes” to both. But that doesn’t mean restructuring is an easy process or without continuing challenges even five years after the legal reality has taken place.

At the time of merger there were well over 200 perpetually professed members of the new province in the United States. The province boundaries extend from Detroit to Los Angeles and the new province is responsible for two mission Vice Provinces (Bangkok and Manaus, Brazil), one mission Region (Nigeria) as well as a Vice Province in the United States (New Orleans).

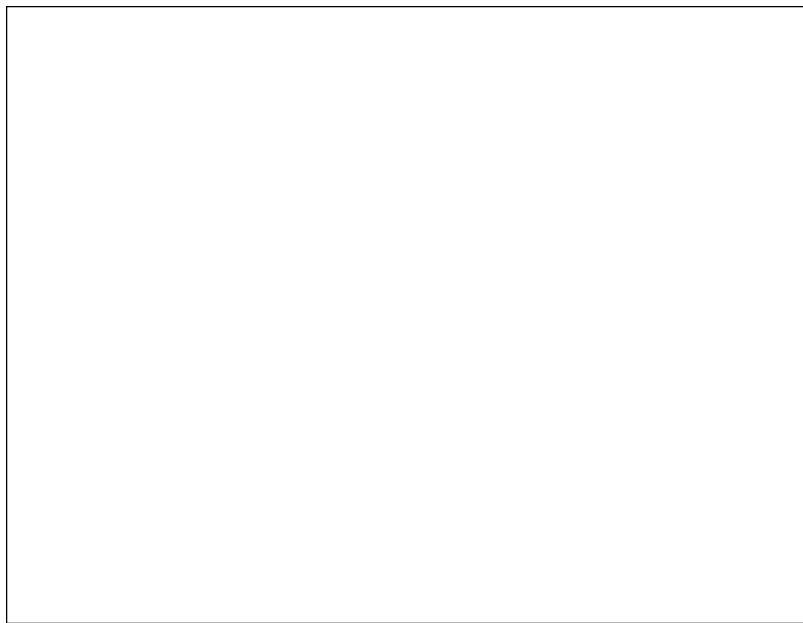
We named Denver, Colorado as a geographically central location for the provincial headquarters.

Before the Denver Province was inaugurated the two provinces spent six years discussing the steps and issues involved in such a merger. This was done by gathering the membership of both provinces separately as well as together in assemblies, chapters, regional and local community meetings.

It was our intent to address all issues as equal partners even though there were obvious differences in resources being brought to the discussion table.

A factor that helped build ownership for the project was that while our General Government encouraged such discussion the impetus came from the leadership of the two provinces. If a new province was to emerge it would happen as a result of forging our dreams for something new rather than the result of an administrative decision from an outside force.

Richard Thibodeau is provincial superior of the Redemptorists Denver Province.



At the Provincial Chapter in 1998, CSSR Lay Missionary Alicia VonStamwitz and Deacon Richard Fisher, CSSR, prepare the table for Eucharist. Photo courtesy Redemptorists Denver Province.

*restructuring ...
has proven to be
a blessing,
although
sometimes in
disguised form.*

Both provinces determined from the beginning that while factors of numbers, age, and other resources certainly encouraged us to investigate merger, the main reason for doing so had to be for the sake of the mission. How could the creation of a new province be more effective in assisting us to live out our mission in the midwest and western part of the United States? It was this question that we kept in front of us in all of our discussions.

One result of our extensive preparation was that when the new Denver Province came into existence we already had commonly agreed upon elements of our mission as well as concrete criteria for each element. This material proved to be essential for the inevitable discussion and decisions affecting community life, withdrawal from ministry sites, new ministerial initiatives, and continuing formation that would surface in

the years ahead.

One other element that was invaluable before the time of actual merger and in the five years since has been bringing in outside expertise for facilitation of various stages of the restructuring process. We often find ourselves too close to an issue involving community life or ministry to be objective. Others have gone through similar efforts and we can learn from them. Although expensive, it has proven to be money well spent in assisting us to get to the heart of the matter in a more direct and productive manner.

We also learned that while there is much to be said for the sake of consistency in using the same outside expertise over the long haul, different outside personnel with expertise in different areas was helpful in our process.

Five years later: Sources of hope

We continue to learn a lot about restructuring. It has proven to be a blessing, although sometimes in disguised form. Regardless of the approach, I can guarantee you that there will be surprises along the way.

Restructuring has allowed the possibility of continuing some ministries that one province alone would not have been able to do. It is difficult to see true charism based apostolic initiatives end because a province no longer has the resources to continue its involvement with them.

Together we have been able to determine in a more pro-

active way what to want to re-commit to and what to let go. While we could have done this by maintaining two separate provinces and agreeing to a collaborative approach, it often comes down to who will sacrifice what to allow something else in the other province to continue. For us that approach sounds better in theory than in practice.

This process has offered us the ability to mobilize personnel more easily in order to expand an area of ministry. Where each province may have had a few men involved in an apostolate, together we have more men who can work as a broad ministerial team. They are drawing strength from their renewed numbers and can now more easily look creatively at new ways of developing a particular ministry.

We have been able to build community life. By setting a minimum number of five men for a local Redemptorist community, we have made an attempt to revitalize community life. Beforehand communities of three, and sometimes only two men, struggled to maintain some semblance of the common life.

Restructuring helps us come to grips with the reality of religious life and our life as religious. Religious life and the way it is lived has changed tremendously since Vatican II. Many of the external support systems are no longer in place.

The merger has assisted the possibility of looking anew at religious life by pooling personnel to develop programs. In preparation for our merger some of our men developed a program called ReVision. This

program, lasting one month, was conducted at one of our retreat centers.

Each session had participants from both provinces. Enough sessions were held for the entire membership to participate. It offered a holistic approach to life which included Redemptorist as well as outside speakers on contemporary religious life, our Redemptorist roots, the history of our two provinces, and proper physical and mental health. It included a four-day retreat and community building outings. This program proved to be an essential foundational experience for the membership of the new province.

Since then a 10-day program called NewVision attempts to identify the individual virtues we bring to life and community as well as reviewing how we are facing or have faced the challenges of each decade of life.

Lay collaboration is an area that we have now been able to emphasize in a new way. Whereas our two provinces had different experiences of lay collaboration, we have been able to draw upon the experience of the more developed province in this area and we continue to promote the value of such partnership over a greater part of the United States.

This process has offered us the ability to initiate new things because of our new reality. It is difficult to stir up lots of enthusiasm among a group that has worked within the same paradigms and limitations for many years.

The new province has given us the incentive and possibilities for looking at things anew. It has also given our province and

Restructuring helps us come to grips with the reality of religious life and our life as religious.

**Restructuring
challenges the notion
of “sacred cows” ...
The new province
has put
everything on an
equal playing field.**

local community leadership a lever to promote new initiatives.

Restructuring has offered the possibility of renewing relationships. Many of our members had spent formation together only to be separated afterwards because of province affiliation. The new province has provided the opportunity to renew old relationships. Some members for the first time in many years are able to live and minister together.

It has afforded a better expression of Redemptorist identity in the United States. In a country that boasts of over 280 million people, it is hard to understand how a rather small number of Redemptorists could have a bigger apostolic impact separated than united.

Restructuring challenges the notion of “sacred cows” as we look at everything from a new perspective – ministry sites, government, community life.

The former provinces had become quite set in their ways. Many issues were becoming non-negotiable; some ministry sites could not be discussed.

The new province has put everything on an equal playing field. Everything can be challenged, everything can be discussed.

This effort has assisted vocation recruitment. Vocation recruitment is now more coordinated and has renewed drawing power since we can point to more ministries in various parts of the United States as well as renewed community life. We see these factors as being further incentives to join us.

Finally, making this move has been a source of encouragement to other Redemptorist provinces as well as other religious communities. Since becoming a new province we have received numerous inquiries from other parts of the Redemptorist world as well as from other religious communities as to how we went about the merging process and what advice we might share from our experience.

While these areas of renewed hope are surely part of the restructuring story we continue to be challenged by other elements.

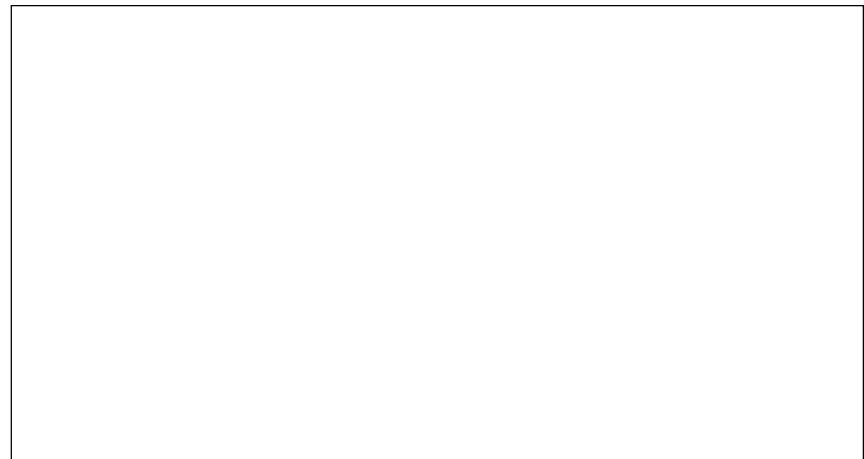


Table discussion at the CSSR Provincial Chapter: Facing the camera are James White, CSSR; Richard Mevissen, CSSR; and John Hacker, CSSR. Photo courtesy Redemptorists Denver Province.

Five year later: Struggles that continue

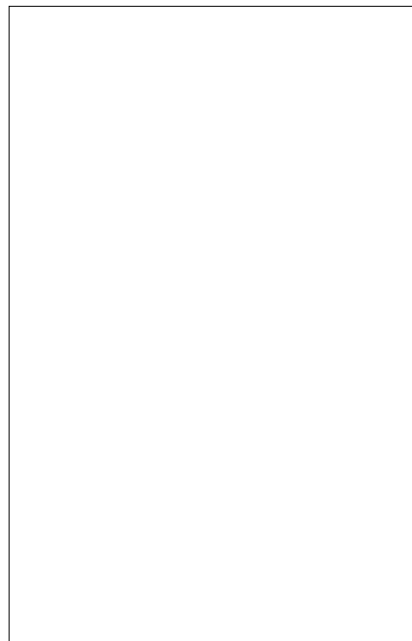
Restructuring is not a panacea in itself for correcting or renewing religious life. Despite renewed efforts, we continue to struggle with living authentic Redemptorist community life, the contemporary understanding of the vows, and attracting solid vocations.

This process can create unrealistic expectations. In the years of preparation for restructuring we had lengthy discussions that encouraged our membership to look at everything anew.

Some believed that as a result of such encouraging discussions the new province would be a revitalized, energized, and creative reality. Some also felt that by merging two provinces there would be an abundance of personnel to meet all present and future needs. Such expectations were too high and a bit unrealistic.

This has created for some a sense of disappointment with the present reality. Province rejuvenation takes time. Even five years later we more easily see what we have given up; what is new and life giving is still in the early stages of growth.

Making such a move doesn't guarantee a new approach. We easily fall into familiar ways of doing things. Even though we are a new province, we fall back into the ways we used to do things. While we are in a position to develop new policies with renewed thinking it is easy to simply take policies from one of the former provinces and



Richard Thibodeau, CSSR, presides at Eucharist during a Pre-Chapter Regional Meeting in Glenview, IL. Photo courtesy Redemptorists Denver Province.

make it the policy of the new province. We even talk about how “we” approached things years ago without realizing that “we” only started five years ago.

Restructuring has to be aware of the “culture” of the former provinces. A matter that continues to surface is the religious “culture” that each province brings with it. Even though we are all Redemptorists, each province had subtle differences in approach, attitude, and practice regarding finances, community life, government, and accountability. All of these issues eventually come to the surface. While one can attempt to surface such issues early, some are so subtle and often so personal that they did not come up until the membership of the two provinces began living together in the local community setting.

Open communication and a process for continuing to educate one another in these

**Even five years later
we more easily see
what we have
given up;
what is new
and life giving
is still in the
early stages
of growth.**

**Regardless of being
a new province
you still have
the same men
you had before.**

differences is the ongoing challenge. The question arises, what is the “culture” of our new province and is it something that will bring us forward?

Mobility remains an issue. Despite our mission statement and the obvious ministerial or community needs that are present, some find it extremely difficult and will offer very creative reasons why they have to stay in a particular city or familiar part of the country.

This process doesn’t soothe the difficulty of withdrawing from some places. While everyone knew that the new province would have to make decisions about where we would be located, and even though there was unprecedented involvement by the entire membership in crafting ministerial decisions, many thought the ultimate result

would affect other places, not theirs.

Regardless of being a new province you still have the same men you had before. Many of these men are very dedicated and hard working. But you still have a number of men who are limited for a variety of reasons and will not be able to really participate in aspects of the new vision that has generated so much enthusiasm in some members. This lack of ability will disappoint those who wholeheartedly bought into the process that produced such a vision and expected everyone else to be as committed to it as they are.

So, Is It Worth It?

Having said all of this, I return to the question, “Is restructuring worth it?” And looking at everything that has transpired among the Redemptorists of the Denver Province these last five years I can honestly say, yes, it is!

Restructuring has offered us a unique opportunity as Redemptorists to return to our roots as well as to discuss how we can be more faithful to our charism today. Very importantly, it’s been an opportunity to creatively look at today as well as the future: Where do we want to be in five years, in ten years?

What is the role of leadership during this process of transition? There is the obvious role of encouraging membership to see themselves as one entity rather than two former entities.

Restructuring is not a panacea: Struggles that continue

- Living authentic community life, understanding the vows, attracting solid vocations.
- Facing unrealistic expectations.
- The tendency to rely on familiar ways of doing things.
- Continuing the conversation about our differences.
- Dealing with the difficulty of withdrawing from long time ministries.