

Religious communities look ahead at Lambeth

Madeleine Davies attends a gathering drawn from religious communities, hosted by Archbishop Welby

THE decline of religious communities is an "alarm call to the whole Church", the Archbishop of Canterbury warned last week. He predicted that there would be no renewal of the Church without the flourishing of communities that were too often sidelined by the mainstream.

Archbishop Welby expressed his personal commitment to the survival of these bodies in a strongly worded address delivered to 125 of their representatives, who were gathered at Lambeth Palace on Friday.

"That decline is . . . not a mere loss of a sideline, as if ASDA were to stop selling petrol," he said. "Renewal of confidence in the gospel, which will be at the heart of the renewal of our Church, is impossible to imagine without renewal in religion."

His expressed his admiration for those present: they had made "the ultimate wager on the existence of God", and had acted, throughout history, as the "engine-room of renewal and conversion". Yet they had been treated "like trainspotting compared to commuting: the mainline of the Church has busily gone to and fro, occasionally aware of those who stand on the platform, doing something esoteric and different."

Representatives from a number of communities had plenty of ques-



tions for the Archbishop, who readily acknowledged failings in the Church. He agreed, for example, that "our understanding of vocation often only encourages vocations for parochial ministry."

Those present were impressed. "I was encouraged by his valuing the religious life, and his desire that the Church as a whole should recognise the contribution of the religious life to the mission of the Church," said Brother Simon Jarrett OSB from Salisbury Priory.

Brother Simon said that he did not know the answer to tackling the decline in numbers: "If we knew that, we would not be a community of four, when we were in the 30s in the 1960s."

Sister Jean Raphael of All Saints' Sisters of the Poor, described herself as "learning all the time", and said that she was in favour of the

New and old monasticism: members of communities meeting at Lambeth Palace last Friday

diversity evident at the event, to which members of new monastic communities were also invited.

"If we are going to be encouraged



to use God's gifts, then we will be doing different things in different ways, but you do need the core of prayer and the gospel to nourish us;

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to make us able to do things we would not have imagined."

Among those representing the new communities was Jonny Spoor, who helps run the cafe at Moot, based in St Mary Aldermary in the City of London. "We have so much to learn from them [traditional communities] in terms of discipleship and spiritual practices."

He said that he understood the concerns expressed in the meeting about dispersed communities' becoming diluted, but suggested that it was a question that should be tackled "openly and honestly".

The star speaker of the day was Fr Étienne Veto of the Chemin Neuf, a charismatic Frenchman, who was uninhibited in combining scripture with a PowerPoint presentation. He challenged his audience, saying that the only way to renew religious life was "to become better Christians".

Holy Trinity, Brompton, could teach traditional communities about vocation, he argued. Also, young people belonged to a different culture, and sought emotional connection.

Perhaps his most demanding message was when he said: "Sometimes, we have to accept that a community is not going to live." He suggested that "sometimes beautiful things happen" when those who were dying passed the baton to the new.

There was hope, however, Fr Veto said. "There is huge potential because there is a huge need. So many people are in deep financial difficulty; so many are lonely, isolated, and there is also a deep spiritual search and thirst. The treasure we have is expected and asked for."

He admitted that many communities were in crisis, but argued: "We have to be able to present religious life as an adventure."