

Is this the end for religious orders?

The Church needs to act urgently to halt the decline of Anglican communities, argues *Barry Orford*

THE RESTORATION of the religious life to the Anglican Church was an enduring achievement of the Oxford Movement. Three hundred years after monasteries were swept away from this country, members of the Church of England felt again the call to serve God in communities.

The early Sisters faced hostility from clergy and laity, who regarded them as agents of popery. Today, members of the religious orders are found in many dioceses and are represented in General Synod. Countless people are deeply grateful to these Anglicans who have followed a vocation to live under vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience.

Religious have provided havens for those living their Christian vocation outside community walls; they have worked in the grimmest parishes; and they have guided individuals through spiritual direction. They have supported the Church by their prayers, and borne witness to the priority of the things of the spirit. They have been both visible and invisible: seen when engaged in pastoral work, and hidden when in community.

Something is now clearly amiss with our religious communities, however. Membership is rapidly declining, average age is high, recruitment is desperately low, and some communities have ceased to exist. Many who come to test a vocation leave before taking vows, and some of those actually in vows have also left.

In at least one community, the number of formerly professed members now exceeds the number of those remaining. A community for women recently had a substantial number of professed sisters leave over a period of 18 months. In other communities, diminishing membership has led to the decision to close branch houses and pull everyone back to a mother house.

The shrinking seems to be accelerating. Within the next ten years, the disappearance of several more of our orders may be expected. As the chaplain to one community has said, the situation is not one of crisis, but of meltdown.

There are, of course, social and cultural factors speeding this decline. Communities suffer from the same forces that cause weakened commit-



Priority of the spirit: the Community of the Holy Cross at Rempstone

ment in the Church as a whole, and Roman Catholic orders are experiencing the same difficulties.

Equally, a Church of England presently over-weighted towards the Evangelical is not fertile soil for community vocations, and the uncertainty and division evident among Catholic Anglicans intensifies the problem. The Church also has a responsibility for the situation through her failure to encourage her members to consider this calling. When did you last hear a priest or bishop speak publicly about the importance of the religious life?

Yet our communities were founded in circumstances even less propitious for their appearance and survival than those of today. Emerging to answer a need, they were fostered by visionary leaders such as Dr Pusey, Mother Marion Hughes, Mother Lydia Sellon, Canon Carter, Fr Benson, and Dean Butler. The call to serve God has not vanished from among us; so why are pitifully few people considering the consecrated life as their response?

ALTHOUGH we still hear sometimes in formal intercessions a prayer "for vocations to the ordained ministry and the religious life", there is little

discussion taking place of what exactly we mean by the religious life. It was inevitable that when the Victorian founders of communities designed rules for their orders, they turned to Roman Catholic patterns, and in particular to monastic models.

Whatever external work was done, the centre of life was to be the daily community offering of the Divine Office and the eucharist. Anglican religious have not departed from this structure to any marked degree, and most of us who are aware of the communities tend to picture them in terms of withdrawal, formal prayer, rules of silence, and a habit either odd or picturesque. Yet this is by no means the only possible model for religious life, as the example of the Jesuits makes clear.

Among religious themselves, there appears to be a faltering sense of direction and purpose, accompanied by an increasingly inward-looking and self-referential approach to community life. One detects in some communities a reluctance to face

squarely the questions: "Have we a reason for continuing to exist?" and "What is our particular charism, the mark printed upon us by our founder which declares God's special vocation for us?"

The result can be a temptation to seek a corporate identity by retreating into a rigid adherence to "our way of doing things", or to adopt a more congenial self-perception. We see the latter when communities that were founded for apostolic work decide, in the absence of obvious work to do, that they should now become monastic or contemplative, even if this flies in the face of their given charism.

A further danger is that while the C of E has too little understanding of the religious life, it also tames religion by drawing them into the establishment. Any sense of the religious life as a vocation lived "on the edge" is emasculated by this, as is the likelihood of religious' becoming a challenging witness to the Church.

AS SOMEONE who is concerned for the future of the religious life, I ask where our communities believe they are going, how they are discerning their purpose afresh, and where they look for help with that discernment. It may be a natural historical process that many communities should be born, flourish, and die, but what will take their place?

Joan Chittister, an American Roman Catholic Benedictine, who did important work in helping her community through the days after Vatican II and its call to the renewal of religious life, writes: "What had sustained us, identified us, secured us for our first hundred years was gone now. Going ahead was the only possible direction left to take if we wanted to exist. . . . But what was the way forward? By what method? And, most of all, with what effect on all our lives?"

Anglican religious need to grapple with such questions in a radical exploration of religious life's principles and possibilities. They need to engage in serious dialogue with in-

formed, sympathetic but critical outsiders, if they are not to fall into the traps of complacency or despondency.

Communities need to hear a prophetic voice spoken to them, if they are to recover their own prophetic voice. They must ask why those coming to try religious life do not find what they seek and so leave. They must ask why those already committed feel they can no longer stay. And, like the Church, communities need to recognise that the Spirit blows where it wills, and is not restricted to established patterns.

THE CHURCH must embrace its duty towards the religious life. The Advisory Council on the Relations of Bishops and Religious Communities needs overhauling in both its membership and its brief. It is not enough for it to be merely advisory. It must become the organ through which the Church exercises its ministry towards religious, and can call them to give an account of themselves to the Church. At present, communities have little sense of that accountability.

The Advisory Council must also take responsibility for helping some communities to recognise their approaching end, and must assist them to give a Christian example of preparation for a good death. (I know one community of Sisters which is an inspiring demonstration of how this can be done.)

In addition, all members of the Church of England need to ask: "Do we believe that religious communities are a vital part of our Church?" If we say yes, then we must ask how a Church that seems to have bought entirely into committees, careerism, and management techniques will find the knowledge and spiritual depth needed for it to give our religious the guidance and support that they deserve.

If our reply to this question is a frank no, it will show us starkly that the spiritual health of the Church of England is in more disturbing decline than even the most pessimistic among us dared to think.

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'Do we believe communities are a vital part of our Church?'

Commitment seems a problem

OVER THE PAST 25 years, the number of novices in Roman Catholic religious orders in England and Wales has fallen from 217 in 1982 to just 29 in 2007. The situation for Anglican communities is, if anything, even more desperate. Since 2000, overall membership has fallen by about one third, and many communities have not had a single novice in the past ten years.

In response, some monasteries and convents are now offering "monastic experience weekends" to give people a taste of the religious life and the chance to explore the possibility of a vocation. Downside, Worth, Ealing, and Pluscarden Abbeys all offer such opportunities, and others — including Anglican orders such as the Community of St John the Divine and the Society of St Francis — welcome people to live alongside them for an agreed period of time.

Perhaps the best known of those offering tasters is Worth Abbey, whose brethren are presumably used to this sort of thing by now. In the BBC2 programme *The Monastery*, they not only offered an experience of monastic life to the five participants (of whom I was one),

Cultural changes have created hurdles for would-be monks, says *Nicholas Buxton*

but also made that experience available — albeit at one remove — to the three million people who watched the series.

The thinking behind these taster weekends is based on the reasonable assumption that there are people out there who may have a vocation to the religious life, but do not know how to go about testing it. I should know: 15 years ago I was in exactly that position myself. But if monasteries were running experience weekends back then, they were not advertising the fact. Today, as so many communities face an uncertain future, it is hardly surprising that they are keen to bring themselves to our attention by any means available.

Ironically, while communities struggle for survival, interest in contemplative spirituality

seems to be greater than ever. And we are not just sitting at home reading books about it. More and more people are going on retreats, clearly recognising that monasteries have something of value to share. The fact remains, however, that if people do not actually join religious communities, there will not be any communities left for the rest of us to visit on retreat.

The monastery with which I have been associated as an oblate numbered 12 monks in 1996, when I first knew it. Now there are only five, and they are not getting any younger. In spite of a steady trickle of novices over the years, none stayed long enough to take final vows. When so few novices are coming forward, and even fewer are staying the course, a significant number of religious communities are likely to disappear within a generation. The monastic life in Britain is dying out.

PERHAPS surprisingly, some orders remain stoically unperturbed by these gloomy predictions. They would maintain that, whatever the future holds, it is all part of God's plan. They might even see the provision of

taster weekends as a frivolous distraction from the fundamental requirement to devote themselves to prayer.

Most monks and nuns with whom I have discussed these matters are, however, somewhat less fatalistic. When I press them to venture a possible explanation, one of the most common responses is that we live at a time when — for a variety of reasons — commitment in general seems to be a problem for many people.

We no longer expect to stay in the same job, house, or marriage for life. How much less likely are we to commit ourselves to a lifetime of poverty, chastity, and obedience? We do not envisage doing anything "for life" — there are simply too many options on offer, and keeping our options open is the overriding priority.

In a BBC news report earlier this month about these monastic-experience weekends, one interviewee stated that, although he was finding it helpful in his process of discernment, he had to admit that the discipline — specifically the requirement to get up at the crack of dawn every day — was "not exactly a selling point".

Even if early mornings are not a problem, the chances are that the prospect of lifelong celibacy will be more than enough to put the rest of us off. Our culture not only values

Continued on page 28