

Dwindling religious communities and the Church's well-being

From Sister Anita CSC

Sir, — The Revd Dr Barry Orford's article (Comment, 27 February) highlights some of the difficulties facing most Anglican and Roman religious communities in the Western world. I am sure our communities are grateful to him for raising our profile. There seems an almost total ignorance with regard to our very existence: "I didn't know there were Anglican nuns and monks," is a frequent comment.

The Revd Christopher Rowley's letter (6 March) speaks of the important part played by oblates, tertiaries, associates, and companions. Worldwide, there are probably at least three to four thousand of them. If all those closely associated with us would be proactive in making Anglican religious life better-known, it would make a big difference.

The various orders and communities are at the heart of this clustering of their oblates and associates. What happens if this heart no longer exists? How might those associated with us help to make us more widely known? Some ways could be: making information available, e.g. website addresses, literature, raising aware-

ness among clergy and others, as well as praying for vocations and encouraging those who show interest.

The essence of religious life runs contrary to the cultural climate of our times: its communal aspect seems alien to it. Our culture prizes the individual, having choice and freedom to possess, an emphasis on "me and my rights". It would be hard to find another way of life that was so counter-cultural as the commitment to a life of poverty/simplicity, consecrated celibacy and obedience, lived in community 24/7, *for life*. Yet for those who are called to it, it is the way of freedom and joy.

Being the international leader for our Community of the Sisters of the Church, I have had the privilege of regular visits to our Sisters in the Solomon Islands. There is a strong sense there of living communally: commitment to one's group is in the culture. Activities from praying to cooking and working happen in a group. There is rarely emphasis on the individual. A person is always in relationship to others.

My experience there leads me to comment on Dr Orford's point about the Melanesian Brothers and Sisters, for whom I have great respect. The Society of St Francis and we also have a good number of Sisters and Brothers there, who at the end of their formation make life vows. The short-term commitment that the Melanesian Brotherhood and Sisterhood make does have both advantages and disadvantages. One such is in the area of leadership. Choosing leaders with sufficient experience and the requisite gifts is difficult, especially if there is little stability of membership.

Answering the question where we are going, I would answer that we continue to seek God's will for us in the different countries and circumstances where we live and serve. It is an ongoing process of discernment which we make with the help of others.

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From Gill Russell

Sir, — It seems significant that two good articles on the decline in numbers in religious communities (Comment, 27 February) have followed so recently on the brief Synod report about the struggles experienced by retreat houses.

As an oblate of a contemplative community and a former administrator of the Retreat Association, I find it depressing to observe the gap that looms ahead with the declining number of "bolt-holes" in which people can experience a quality of deep silence — a commodity that is in increasing demand as we succumb to the tide of hyperactivity.

Space and silence often speak more eloquently to those on the edge of church than sermons, missions, and evangelistic campaigns, as well as being oases for those immersed in Christian ministry. Retreat houses and convent and monastery guest houses provide something unique — illustrated movingly in the TV series *The Monastery*.

Where else can people learn something about the religious life, unknown territory for many, and a rich vein of spirituality? It is unlikely that there are statistics to show just how much holy hospitality is valued by the over-busy, as well as by the seeker who gets new glimpses of what faith is about.

With the Revd Christopher Rowley, I am enormously encouraged by the growth in the number of oblates of religious communities,

and tertiaries, and discern God's hand in this as a way forward. What they cannot (usually) provide, however, is a place apart where people can find an antidote to the pressures of modern life, and which is shot through with a rhythm of prayer.

To be without such a resource will greatly impoverish both the ministry and the mission of the Church, which, if it lets go of the priorities of withdrawal, listening, and reflection before action, will become less and less distinguishable from the world.

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From Miss Audrey Aveyard

Sir, — I was a member of a religious community for 17 years, professed for 14, before I left in the early 1970s. During the 14 years of profession, I was moved from one house to another on an average of once every six months. Since then, that Order has changed considerably.

Looking back, I am convinced that I was never really known, and there were things I misunderstood. We were not allowed to have special friendships. Having never heard of lesbians, I thought we were not allowed to make *any* friendships. How, then, can one learn to love?

Because of the vow of obedience, I never thought of making a preference for a job I might do; so I inwardly grumbled at polishing floors and weeding gardens.

Since leaving, I have gained an Open University degree and an MA at Sarum College, and enjoy attempting to read Hebrew. A few years ago, a young sister told me that her vocation was to care for the elderly nuns who had had amazing adventures she would never know. The Mother Foundress would have exploded at that statement. One of my reasons for leaving was that I could not face my Maker on Judgment Day and say: "I did not accomplish that for which you created me because *they* would not let me."

Another angle is closely living in a family that communicates only in silence. It is amazing how disgruntled looks, body language, and mouthed cutting remarks can hurt. Unfortunately, I thought I had to break down my defences in order to be open to God.

Spiritual pain is far worse than physical. The fact that most religious houses are high-church cannot appeal to conservative Evangelicals, a stable I came from. Practices like Benediction should be voluntary.

This morning, I received Letter 57 from the Fellowship of Solitaries. God is calling several people to this 21st-century eremitical life. The religious life has been a vital part of church life since St Anthony disappeared into the desert. He and his fellow hermits, both male and female, fulfilled a need, one desperately needed now. They, however, lived in small groups with a flexibility of time, worship, and work. They could avoid irksome contact. Those who later functioned in the city were honoured for their good works and evangelical zeal; and they had leisure for spiritual exploration.

Cash-flow has always been a problem, even with a vow of poverty (chastity helps). If the Church does not recognise the value of the religious life, it will not lovingly support it either practically or financially. There needs to be a closer bond between religious houses and, through the bishops, the wider Church.

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