

The future of religious communities in the Church of England

From the Revd Christopher Rowley
Sir, — Thank you for the two stimulating articles about the religious life (Comment, 27 February). Both writers recognised the serious problem of the vanishing monasteries of the Church of England. Both also made helpful suggestions: that the Church should do more to support and encourage its communities (Dr Orford), and the possibility of “short service commissions” in our religious communities (Dr Buxton), if I may presume to summarise.

While I agree wholeheartedly with the main points in both articles, I suggest that there is also another side of the picture which is altogether more encouraging. This time it is a story of growth rather than decline. Throughout very many of the religious communities in the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church, alongside the decline in numbers of monks, nuns, and friars, has been a remarkable growth in numbers of oblates, tertiaries, and associates of these very same communities.

The monastery of which Nick Buxton and I are both oblates (Elmore Abbey near Newbury) has now shrunk to five monks, while the number of oblates has mushroomed to 350. “The call to serve God has not vanished from among us,” Dr Orford writes. I would suggest that this call is being heard and obeyed by an increasing number of clergy and lay people, married and single, who are responding to the challenge of monastic spirituality, but doing so within their own homes and parish churches.

In some ways, it may be that the monastic movement has, rather than disappearing down the drain, actually come of age. Could it be that this is the “monasticism without walls” glimpsed by both Thomas Merton and Dom John Main? At the same time, we still need at the centre strong communities (though perhaps small ones) to witness to the consecrated life, and to be points around which lay members may gather. From those lay members new vocations to monastic life may well appear.

I suppose we should not be surprised that the Holy Spirit is doing a new thing, nor that this should involve death as well as abundant new life. “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains

just a single grain. . .” The Abbot Primate of the Benedictine order, Dom Notker Wolf, has called a world congress of 250 Benedictine oblates to meet at Rome in October this year. I am fortunate to be one of the representatives from the Anglican monasteries. He writes: “A Benedictine community has a life of its own, devoted first and foremost to the praise of God. It is the function of the secular oblate to carry this message to the wider world outside the monastery. It is a real vocation.”

This can surely be true of other communities and their lay members, as the latter reach out in witness to the wider Church and world. As we experience real concern about the future of our religious communities, we can at the same time rejoice that their message is finding its way into the hearts and minds of an increasing number of people.
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From Mrs Sue Johns

Sir, — I read the articles on the possible demise of the religious life with interest, since I and others are currently probing what would seem to be a call to set up a new model of community.

The pull to live in a place where prayerful presence is continuous, but where most are sent out to play their daily part in very secular life, is one that fascinates me.

My suspicions are that it is not new at all — what is in this life? Rather, it is a return to a style abandoned long ago. There is something precious about drawing on the loving, faith-full support of our brothers and sisters while we take it in turns to live out our vocation in the world.

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From Br David Hodges OCSO

Sir, — I would like to offer a slight corrective to the Revd Dr Nicholas Buxton's useful article on monastic commitment.

A monk does not “make a lifelong commitment at the outset”. The practice in our own Cistercian (Trappist) community would not be too dissimilar from that in most others. Someone expressing a serious interest in joining us, and showing

signs of a vocation, would be given the opportunity to live in the community for a month.

After a period of reflection, he would then enter as a postulant for six months, followed by a period of two years as a novice, during which time he is free to leave. There then follows a period of three years of temporary vows (which can be extended if necessary). It is not until then that solemn vows for life are taken, after a period of at least five-and-a-half years in the monastery.

I would like to assure your readers that there are signs of life in many monastic communities. We ourselves had a postulant join us in January, and have the solemn profession of one of our brothers in May. There are four men currently visiting with a view to testing their vocation here.

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