

Whatever happened to the religious life?

Nicolas Stebbing CR on the nineteenth-century revival of the religious life and the need for its renewal today

Back in 1833 when the Catholic movement in the Church of England is reckoned to have started (that is an oversimplification but will do for the moment) the Church of England was a very Protestant-looking place. There were no vestments such as we know them, no candles on altars unless it was dark, no incense, no plainsong and of course the sacrament of the Eucharist was celebrated only a few times a year, and the sacrament of confession hardly ever.

Changes in the CofE

Within a very few years things had changed. Newman and his colleagues had an extraordinary impact; people began to look on the church with new eyes, to see in it the Body of Christ and themselves as citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven. Prayer, fasting and self-examination became increasingly important in their lives. Several began to look to Rome and beneath the strangeness of Latin liturgy and unfamiliar rites began to see not the Scarlet Woman of Rome but earnest Christians seeking God. They began to ask, 'Why can't we do the same?'

Several began to ask, why can't we have the religious life? In 1841 Sr Marion Hughes made her profession. During the 1840s several communities of sisters struggled into existence. More came in the Fifties, though it was not until 1865 that the first community of men (SSJE) was founded. By now there were hundreds of sisters around England. They had different sorts of lives, different ways of praying, but it was very clear they all came out of the Tractarian tradition. It was only a few years from the first flames lit by Keble, Newman and Pusey to the foundation of the sisterhoods and their spectacular growth.

Why did this happen?

It is easy to attribute much of this to romantic fervour, and the revival of gothic enthusiasms. Some vocations

were romantic and they did not last. Most did last, and they expressed the longing for a new way of Christian living which the Catholic vision gave to people, especially to the young.

At the heart of this was the desire for a life of prayer, sacraments and the large vision of God's goodness which the Catholic view of Church encouraged.

At the same time people began to see more and more clearly that the desperately poor, illiterate, uncared for masses in town and country were also their brothers and sisters, children of this same generous God. They needed help in the form of schools, orphanages, hospitals and material goods. Sisterhoods were one of the ways in

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which Victorian women could leave their stuffy homes and do real good in the world.

Then as the century went by they became more aware of the needs of mission in England and throughout the newly created British Empire. Catholic faith, being of course all about Christ, was never designed to be kept locked up in a church. It drove people out to the fringes, to places where Christ was not heard or had never been recognized.

Where has all this gone?

Religious life in the Anglican Communion is not in a good state. To some extent this reflects the state of religious life in the Western Church. There are all kinds of external reasons. Few young people come to church, especially to Catholic-minded churches. Young people have so much choice of work, careers, sexual relationships; religious life is one not very attractive option among many. The divisions in the Catholic movement between those who do and do not accept the ordination of women have fatally weakened our sense

of mission. The last few years have been a struggle for survival, with many teetering on the brink of departure for Rome, and thus not a good time for long-term commitment.

It is easy for us to point fingers at the young and say, 'They have no commitment. They are too self-indulgent, unwilling to give of themselves in the total way religious life demands.' We who actually live the religious life have to ask ourselves: are we setting them an example they may wish to follow? Do we seem to have settled for a comfortable, middle-class life with no particular sacrifice in it? Does our life reflect the passion for God which has always been the driving force behind

growing forms of religious life? We make excuses of course, but the fact is that we are failing. If the young do not see in us a way of following Christ which is attractive, compelling, loving and obviously full of Gospel values, then of course they will not come, and they would be right not to come. It is we who must change, not them!

How should we change?

That is the question whose answer has been evading most religious communities for the past 40 years! It may be we will not find the answer to that question until young men and women come and challenge our middle-aged and elderly views and point out what is missing. But I suspect the answers will lie in the areas of prayer, mission and Scripture.

Prayer must be at the heart of the life. It must be the clear, first commitment of everyone in the Community. It will be public and corporate in the offices. It will be private, too, in meditation, intercession and study. We must not be shy of talking about it. A person who is not drawn to religious life by a longing to pray, will not last.

Mission takes many forms. Some are not appropriate to religious communities. Yet sometimes we can offer ways of experiencing God that

parish churches cannot. Then, too, it is our job to pray. St Thérèse of Lisieux in her tiny Carmelite convent felt a mission to pray for mission priests. In mission one longs for other people to come to know God, to be set free in Christ, to be enriched by the Holy Spirit. The faith is never for us alone; it needs to be shared.

Scripture is at the heart of our life. This may surprise those who see religious life as men and women drifting round in exotic medieval habits chanting plainsong in a foreign tongue. In fact plainsong is almost all Scripture-based. The life of the Gospel is the life which the brothers or sisters try (usually

quite badly) to live. Each of us should be following Jesus just as the first disciples followed him round Galilee.

Listening for God's call

Jesus in fact is our model. He lived in communion of prayer with his Father; his mission took him through Galilee

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and Judea to the Cross; and the Jewish Scriptures appear constantly in his teaching, showing how soaked he was in

them. Somehow we have to ask Jesus to renew our religious lives, so that others today will see him in our midst, and come and join.

In the end it is up to God, of course. Only he can call people to the life. Only he can make a Community flourish. But all of us need to listen for his call, both we who are in the religious life and the young women and men out there looking for a full-hearted, generous, even crazy adventure with God. It's not a sensible choice. It is not one the world approves of. Even the majority of Christians think it is a stupid, life-rejecting choice. But if it is the one God is offering you, you will love it. **ND**