

Vocations Day for the Religious Life

Fr Peter CSWG on an initiative designed to give people a hands-on experience of religious life

The posters, adverts and flyers brandishing photos of religious in traditional monastic garb had been asking through the summer: 'Ever wondered what it's like to be a monk or nun?' enticing anyone with an interest to register. This fresh initiative, inspired by the ACS Vocations Conference and sponsored by three members of RooT, was promoted to give people a hands-on experience of religious life for a day.

This is all happening at a moment when for the first time ever in the Church of England, religious life has been singled out from the top as being vitally important for the Church.

'Monks and nuns are those who have committed themselves to Jesus in radically and costly ways – without whom the Church would be diminished both in depth and breadth.' Those words from Archbishop Justin, alongside the news from Lambeth of an initiative for young people in the Community of St Anselm, underline his serious intention to make the religious life and prayer leading components of his outreach to the Church.

Fresh venture

The venue for our occasion on 18 October 2014 was the glorious Comper church of St Mary's, Wellingborough, with its 'stunning architecture,' kindly

made available by the parish priest, Fr Robert Farmer. Five additional religious came along to help host the day. A fair balance of male and female participants made up the group, agreeably almost entirely from the younger age range.

The morning session was given over to a theme of prayer, integral to monastic life and perhaps the obvious place to begin: prayer in the monastery or convent is to become the very substance of life, no longer simply one aspect of it. The discussions moved forward to wider horizons, awakening a desire for a deeper understanding of the significance of the Divine Office.

Following the midday office, Fr Darren Smith from ACS, in attendance to support this fresh vocational venture, celebrated the Mass and the gathered assembly were treated to an inspiring homily for St Luke.

The afternoon gathering turned to tackling the decisive issue of the Vows, the building-blocks of religious life. This turned out to be largely a learning and receiving session. A final question and answer session gave the opportunity for participants to ask whatever they wished, and the religious present, representative of both apostolic active and enclosed contemplative, took their turn to respond.

Range of questions

Questions ranged from a straightforward enquiry: how to know God is calling someone to the religious life as distinct from a particular vocation in the world; to how we know which community to join; and then the more searching questions about opportunities to see family, whether loneliness might be a problem, or whether anyone ever had doubts about their call. Priest-religious were asked how their priestly life was affected by life in community.

Meeting with religious on 'neutral ground' with the opportunity to ask anything, without any expectations imposed or subliminal pressure of convent or monastery walls, provides a more relaxed ambience and easier stepping-stones for what can for many be a major hurdle, and that was seen as a plus in the eyes of at least one participant.

On both sides there was general assent that this was a positive venture, and the project has certainly awakened sufficient interest in religious life and concern for its future to merit a further effort next year, perhaps in London or in the North. Should it become established as a regular event, we can look to it also to serve as something of a catalyst for greater interaction and involvement between our parishes and monastic houses. **ND**