

Does religious life have a future? Yes.



Many religious orders in the West are declining and ageing, but there's actually plenty of good news as well

Those of us who entered religious life just after Vatican II will probably remember it in the words of Wordsworth after the French Revolution: "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive".

Those were exciting years. In February 1968, aged 19, I entered an Irish Cistercian monastery. It was just three years after the Council ended and a few months after the Cistercian general chapter met to implement the decisions of the Council. I left six years later, in 1974, just before I would have made my solemn profession. But I still regard the community as friends and brothers.

By the time I left some major changes had taken place: the adoption of English in the liturgy, the end of the very strict silence (we had communicated by sign language), the move from sleeping in dormitories to our own rooms, and a more relaxed attitude towards trips outside the monastery. Then there was the introduction of newspapers and even the radio (later television and the internet were also allowed).

Those were the years of "dialogue" (encouraged by Pope Paul VI): with each other, with the superior, with the outside world. The question was: how to be monks, true to the original charism of our order, in the 20th century?

Undoubtedly some of the changes were necessary (eg the rule of silence); others were adopted too hastily and carelessly (the loss of the Latin liturgy and Gregorian chant – the Council had asked monks especially to preserve this).

As the Church's Year of Consecrated Life has just ended, it is worth reflecting on what has happened to religious life in general in Western countries over the past 50 years and whether it has a future.

At first sight it is a rather grim picture. Most religious orders in the West are declining numerically and ageing. This makes them less attractive to young people. Since most of the active orders no longer wear the habit, they have become almost invisible to wider society.

Community life has also changed. Many Religious live in apartments or small houses rather than the

large convents and monasteries of the past. But there is also greater individualism and searching for personal fulfilment. The vows, especially that of obedience, have been given new interpretations.

These are just external features that may seem unimportant. But they also reflect theological and ecclesiological choices, some of which have not in fact been faithful to the Council. The Church strongly affirmed the importance of religious orders in its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, and in the Decree on Religious Life *Perfectae Caritatis*. The Council Fathers saw Religious as a witness to aspects of Jesus's own life – his material poverty, his obedience to the Father and his celibacy (which St Paul also emphasised). Religious life should be a clear counter-cultural witness to a world marked by the quest for wealth, selfish individualism and sexual licence.

Wearing the habit was one way in which this witness could happen. The Council did not abolish the religious habit but did recommend that it be simplified. The Council also spoke of the ecclesiological character of religious life. The Council did not distinguish between the “Church” as some kind of invisible body of believers and “the institutional Church” – which is in fact a Lutheran concept. All the myriad forms of religious life – active and contemplative – and the many charisms are meant to express the manifold richness of the Church.

Sadly, the great vision of the Council with regard to religious life has not been borne out, at least in the West. A recent research project led by Sister Gemma Simmonds and Catherine Sexton, examining the “vitality” of women's congregations in Britain and Ireland, illustrates the problem. The report shows a rather individualised approach to religious life and reveals some interesting attitudes of the Sisters. The authors highlight the disjuncture between the Sisters' lifestyle choices and what they call the “institutional Church”. Many of them seem to have a greater interest in “eco-spirituality” than in the traditional devotional practices. It is likely that some of these congregations lost their *raison d'être* when the state took over many of the services they were founded to provide. This led them to search for new activities and forms of spirituality.

Let me end with the good news. Religious life has not disappeared and, in some cases, even in the West, is thriving. The English Dominicans, for example, have recently had a steady supply of vocations. Some new orders have been founded: the Monastic Fraternities of Jerusalem, Monks and Sisters of Bethlehem, and the Community of St John, among many others.

What is striking about these success stories is that they have not neglected the external features of religious life: living a strong community life, attention to praying the liturgy in community, wearing the habit. This gives them a strong sense of identity, but also a visibility in the world. On the more interior level, it is worth noting that they emphasise loyalty to the Magisterium, fidelity to the vows, and cultivating an intense prayer life according to our own Catholic traditions.

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