

Who are the women entering religious life and what draws them?

In the past few days many people have been asking why there has been a rise in the number of women entering religious life in England and Wales. In almost all the rest of Europe the number of entrants has declined steadily for several decades now, whereas in England and Wales we have gone from an all-time low of seven in 2004 to 45 in 2014, the highest number in 25 years. A wide variety of types of religious congregations is attracting postulants: enclosed nuns and apostolic sisters, habited and non-habited sisters, those with common ministries and those where sisters tend to exercise individual ministries.



Sisters What all these different types of congregation have in common is a clear identity that values community life and prioritises a sister's prayer life. Asked to describe what has led them to the convent, sisters' answers are often ones that Religious of whatever age may relate to. Frequently it is a sense of God's gentle, persistent call; or a feeling that despite having all that they once aspired to – career, house, boyfriend – something is missing. For some, there is admiration for a Religious or congregation they know, or they are inspired by the founder or foundress of a congregation. However, others feel a call to religious life without being attracted to any particular congregation; I've even spoken to a few women considering religious life who have never knowingly met a religious sister.

The vital question posed by the statistics released last week is why so many more women are entering religious life today than a decade ago. Part of the answer can be found in changes in vocations ministry.

In recent years many religious sisters have grown in confidence in sharing their identity and way of life. This can be seen in the increased number of taster weekends where a discernor is offered a first step into experiencing the life of a congregation or enclosed convent. Practically all the congregations that offer such weekends are working with members of other congregations to both foster a culture of vocation and to promote consecrated life in general, not their specific congregation. This encourages discernors to visit different congregations and perhaps to take part in a discernment group or programme. Perhaps counter-intuitively, this emphasis on discernment rather than recruitment has resulted in more women entering religious life.

A watershed moment in the vocations ministry of religious in the UK was the creation of Compass discernment groups in 2004, the point at which England and Wales had the lowest number of postulants in recorded history. Compass is an excellent model of collaborative vocations ministry; the groups are supported financially and practically by more than 50 religious congregations and enclosed convents.

Compass has influenced the start of exploreAway, a similar group in Ireland, and inspired other, less intensive, non-residential discernment groups such as Samuel groups. The past decade has seen a remarkable growth in groups and structures which facilitate individual vocational guidance.

While the numbers of those called to religious life will continue to be a small minority, these practical, collaborative measures ensure that women discerning religious life have somewhere to turn to for support and encouragement.

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