

How can Religious life continue?



The Sisters of the Holy Family of Bordeaux and the Institute of Our Lady of Mercy are pulling out of running nursing homes, the Jesuits are closing Heythrop College and the Daughters of Charity of St Vincent de Paul are looking for a lay director to lead some of their activities. Sr Maura O'Carroll asks, what is going on?

There are many challenges facing Religious life today, forcing some orders to take difficult decisions. How do we understand what is going on? Is it simply that religious life is on the wane because of a lack of vocations? What is behind this realigning of priorities? What is the best way for an order to preserve its charism?

In no way can I give answers, except two: firstly, the economic pressures on religious orders have never been harsher, with the resources diminishing. And secondly, the best way for an order to preserve its charism is to use it. But we have to search for ways appropriate for today, and these need prayer and discernment.

Heythrop Ageing is one of the biggest realities facing religious communities. This brings its own changes, pleasant or otherwise, and can lead to significant modifications of ministry, especially if ministries are based on numbers that were available 70 years ago.

Meanwhile the opportunities for women in theology and related areas have expanded massively. Women do not have to be in an order to live the apostolic life: many women by their commitment to parish in catechetics, in pastoral care and through ongoing education are making real the mission of the Gospel.

Economic pressures on orders are not only massive but constraining. Communities' cost of living has risen with the need to pay for 24/7 care their older members.

The Jesuits' Heythrop College is an example of an apostolic venture an order has been sustaining for centuries, but that order has many responsibilities other than the college, including supporting the Church in the developing world. Changes in law, in employment control, in salaries, in the deliberate lack of public funding mean that the order cannot continue its financial generosity. (Theology is not

regarded by certain elements in UK higher education as relevant and worth prioritising.)

The very public sample above of religious orders having to make harsh choices could be multiplied. It also begs a question. If the Church in England and Wales still wants some of the ministries religious orders have provided, then a corporate enquiry and response is needed. It is a question similar to the question of the ordination of married men.

In UK the need for vocations requires us not to look for a replication of the past but to be open to a different future. Christ promised the Church, his mystical body, survival to the end of time, but its “institutions” for example the Roman Curia and some of its “organisations”, such as religious orders, do not have the same assurance.

The religious orders that are most necessary to the wellbeing of the Church are the contemplative ones. The apostolic orders are bound to change because of the redirection given to the Church by Vatican II. Ministry is not confined to special groups; all baptised members of the Church are called to it. The growth of lay involvement in recent years has been great, though not always accepted as valid by a certain out-of-date clericalism that is a hangover from earlier times.

Nevertheless the growth is there, and the new ministries of Christian service exemplified by some young people are a work of the Holy Spirit. Francis, our first pope from outside Europe for many centuries, is calling us back to the Gospel – not to Canon Law – and how life-giving that call is.

Do we have the courage to hear, listen and follow?

Sr Maura O'Carroll SND is a former lecturer at Heythrop College (pictured above). Her views do not necessarily reflect those of her order

Sr Maura O'Carroll- The Tablet