

# Last orders

Migrant worshippers are helping to swell Catholic congregations - and yet the ageing population of British nuns is teetering on the verge of extinction. Is there any hope for the religious sisterhood, asks Joanna Moorhead

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They have been ridiculed and revered; revolutionary and reactionary - but never before have nuns been faced with the danger of dying out. There are probably not many more than 1,100 nuns in Britain currently, and novices can almost be counted on the fingers of one hand (there were just seven entrants in 2004, and 13 in 2005, the last year for which statistics are available).

Father Paul Embery, director of the Catholic church's National Office for Vocations, agrees that, over the past 30 years or so, "the female religious life has taken a bit of a battering". In the modern world, he says, you're swimming against the tide simply by being a church-attending Catholic. How much harder it must be, then, to take the step of dedicating your entire life to the church as a nun. "The danger, though, is that there's a snowball effect, so that young people look at the religious life and what they see is that they would be part of an increasingly elderly community - because the reality for many orders is there are a lot more people aged 50-plus."

In addition, Embery says, for a woman hoping to make the church her life's work, there are plenty of other options - she can be a teacher, work in a diocesan administration office, or for a church charity. What she cannot do, of course, is become a priest.

My Catholic childhood of the 60s and 70s was positively festooned with nuns. There was the redoubtable Sister Mary Edward of the Daughters of the Cross, who ruled my primary with a rod of iron; Sister Stanislaus of the Sisters of Mercy, another tough nut; and Sisters Concepta, Benedicta and Marie de Lourdes, who held sway at my convent boarding school. Even the school holidays were punctuated with trips to Wales to visit my enclosed Carmelite aunt, Sister Mary Bernadette of the Child Jesus.

A generation on, my four daughters, despite having been raised as Catholics and having attended Catholic schools, would barely recognise a nun if she jumped out of the confessional in full habit, brandishing a rosary. It seems almost inconceivable that any of them will do as their great-aunt did and embrace the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Aside from anything else, where would they find the inspiration?

Because nuns can be inspirational. Some live in the toughest of housing estates, opening their door to worn-out mothers, drug addicts and disaffected youngsters. Motorbike-riding sisters work in the remote areas of Africa, running mother-and-baby clinics in areas where postnatal care would otherwise be nonexistent. Through my aunt I have met many enclosed nuns - women who, at a time when possessions dominate so many people's lives, own nothing in their own right, and eschew personal success and fortune.

Even the conservative nuns at my school - who would never in a million years have seen themselves as mould-breaking - did their bit to inspire. While they told us to be good wives and mothers, they themselves could be seen as a child-free, canny bunch, running a successful business without the involvement or interference of any man, save the 80-something priest who was wheeled in once a day to say mass.

There is a strong tradition among the women who have entered the religious life through the years of rebellion and independence. Not surprising when you reflect that, a few centuries ago, they were a convenient repository for daughters who were too bright, too spirited or too ambitious for the only available alternative: marriage. Convents have always been, in their way, little oases of independence, slightly apart from the mainstream, institutional church. Why, then, are so few women becoming nuns?

Perhaps the Catholic church's position as virtually the last bastion of full-blown sexism in the western world has been a factor. Paul Embery thinks not. However, of the women considering the religious life with whom he does come into contact, he says, most tend not to be critical of the church's position on women. In fact, it is a fairly open secret in the Catholic church that it's the oldies who tend to be revolutionaries, while young adherents to the faith are, on the whole, reasonably conservative. Most of the rebellious nuns are the far side of 50.

What is certainly true is that, over the centuries - and still today in some parts of the developing world - a vocation to the religious life meant a ticket out of poverty, and the chance of an education for otherwise poor and illiterate women. Which at least partly explains why, in many religious congregations in Africa, Asia and South America, numbers are stable and climbing, even as they decline in the west (some of the swell in Catholics in Britain - and London in particular - is attributed to migrants, mainly from central and Eastern Europe, but also from Africa, South

America and Asia). Some convents now import nuns from parts of the world that are better endowed with novices, in a neat role-reversal of the situation in the 19th century and earlier, when it was nuns from the west who were sent to build up numbers in the colonies.

But what does being a nun mean today? Sister Jane Bertelsen, 52, has been a Franciscan Missionary of the Divine Motherhood for the past 31 years. She currently works as a diocesan child protection officer, sharing a house in Clapham with a handful of other nuns.

Does being a nun feel like an anomaly? "In fact, it doesn't feel enough of an anomaly," she says. "There's a great history of radical, prophetic living of the gospel in religious life, and in some ways I'd like to think we were more part of that than we perhaps are. But being a nun means I choose to live simply, in a spirit of interdependence, and that I seek to obey the will of God. People tend to see our vows as restricting, but that's not how it feels to me; I feel they give me freedom, not constriction."

Sister Jane says she is not overly concerned by the lack of new recruits. "I do worry sometimes that we're not out there enough, that we're not visible enough. But the main thing, I think, is that God is in charge. God will find a way."

Her faith may not go unrewarded. A few miles across London, Sister Camilla Oberding, 45, has done something that seems truly extraordinary in 21st-century Britain - she has founded a new religious order. Or almost an order; the Vatican hasn't yet bestowed that status. Sister Camilla and her three fellow nuns set up the Community of Our Lady of Walsingham in 2004 with the blessing of Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor, and now run a retreat house in Brentwood in Essex.

"What religions have always done is respond to the needs of the day," she says. "Today's world is so frantic, so noisy, so full of hustle and bustle - and yet people are searching for meaning, for God, for space. We run this house as a place where people of all faiths and none can come just to be quiet, to think and to reflect. We believe we are offering something that's not easily available."

The Walsingham sisters wear a habit but, being made of ultra-practical denim and with a hood instead of a veil, it looks more like a garment fit for a monk. "The hood allows us to withdraw at times to pray," explains Sister Camilla. "Sometimes in the past people saw the full habit as putting up too much of a barrier."

The sisters' day is structured, but more flexible than it would traditionally have been, and there is a definite community life - the sisters have two hours' prayer each day, say the Rosary and have morning and evening prayers, and also take their meals together. But there is an hour's "chill-out" time each evening, and on Mondays they take the day off, leaving their habits at home if they wish, and go walking, shopping or to visit family and friends.

"Our life isn't as rigid as a nun's life was in the past," says Sister Camilla. "In the past it was too often about being part of the group and not an individual. We respect the needs of the individual; but as nuns have always done, we believe in the power of prayer and the importance of Christian witness".