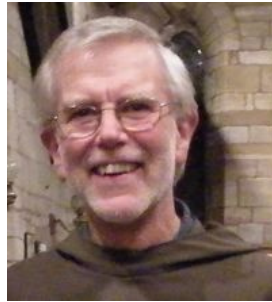


## **The Advisory Council - Recognition of the religious life in the Church of England**



***Damian SSF***

Spiritual growth doesn't happen best by becoming dependent on elaborate church programmes but through the age-old spiritual practice of prayer, Bible reading and relationships. So declares Ray Simpson in his interesting new book, *High Street Monasteries*, which explores fresh expressions of committed Christianity.

I have been privileged to be a member of a Committee of General Synod for Canterbury and York, known as the Advisory Council of Bishops and Religious Communities, over its last three terms: we are five bishops and nine elected members of the religious communities based in the two Provinces. We meet twice a year with the defined joint functions of providing advice to bishops about matters that concern us both, and to give guidance to incipient communities.

In fact the Council, which constantly reminds itself that it is advisory, has in my time revised and expanded the *Handbook of the Religious Life* (Fifth Edition, 2004 and published by SCM-Canterbury Press). It has created a Trust Fund to support new ventures in the Religious Life out of donations or other funds from communities that are winding up. It has also given a lead for those who feel called to make vows within a context of the Single Consecrated Life. Indeed, there is now an official register with a monitoring service to encourage those so called.

As many have begun to notice and as was featured in the *Church Times* a year or so back, the religious life in most Western based religious orders is in serious decline. Communities are down-sizing, amalgamating or simply disappearing. Certainly, the average age is generally providing a selection of winter fuel allowances and pension prospects. Our Advisory Council has responded to this, hoping that it might in practical ways help to assist the promptings of the Holy Spirit where new expressions of monasticism are emerging or are in their formative years.

But how are these new expressions to be measured? What are the criteria that allow the church to recognise them as the successors of the religious orders of the last century? Are they to be seen as groups living together, and under a vow of celibacy - for life?

Some would suggest, rather, that the measure should be more targeted as to where a person or group is being drawn to be more of a disciple of Christ, and so is enabled to love God more and love people more. Is it more about the deepening of a commitment to Christ within his church and not through a rule-centred response? Our Third Order sisters or brothers often enquire whether they are members of a religious community.

Not wishing to hinder the work of the Holy Spirit the Advisory Council has recently widened the categories of Religious Life (previously simply as 'recognised') which now includes Acknowledged Religious Communities. - allowing groups to form, experiment, test and grow into what may become 'recognised' as the religious life of our time. In so encouraging these incipient groups it may be that what is authentic, fully dedicated and 'of God' will be fairly discerned and our present emphasis on life vows, or commitment or living in community (the criteria we have tended to use to authenticate this life) is properly replaced or may stand alongside in our post-modern culture.

I have lived on Holy Island for seven exceptionally happy years. St Aidan and the Irish monks who gave Northumbria its Golden Age have provided many with an inspiration to renew their Christian commitment - albeit as interpreted by a popular Celtic spirituality and written about by many of our contemporary Christian authors. Popular indeed, though not entirely in line with the original way of life assumed by Aidan's austere religious dedication as witnessed to the people of Northumbria. To tell the truth, any twenty-first century Christian way could never fully recapture the single-minded responses of those pioneer monks of the seventh and eighth centuries. But neither could one expect to emulate such a punishing routine today or live by their rule, as Franciscans today also beg for some relaxing of St Francis' rule of poverty. Rather, the call now is definitely for greater flexibility and mutual accountability and some tolerance towards our well practised independence. Yet we cannot have it all our own way or it would be a worthless pursuit. The Christian call to prayer, to belong, to serve, to prophesy, to protest, to die to self, to live in Christ, when it is translated into a sign of a holy place where salvation is to be found, will provide full evidence of the forward monastic movement which, under the call and guidance of God's Holy Spirit, will be known and recognised to be an established part of Christ's own Body, the Church. *f*

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