

Minister's Letter

Sister Helen Julian CSF, Minister Provincial of the First Order Sisters, European Province, writes:

Dear Friends,

I'm beginning to feel like David Attenborough. Not that I'm off looking for gorillas to play with! But David Attenborough has recently concluded that global warming is real, and that our human influence is helping to bring it about. And I've recently concluded that the threat to the future of religious life in Britain is real.

David Attenborough was convinced by two graphs - one of the earth's surface temperature, and one of carbon dioxide concentrations - and by the coincidence of the curves of both with the growth of human population and industrialisation. I was convinced by a pie chart of the size of Anglican religious communities in England, which showed that more than half - 53% to be exact - have fewer than 10 members. Only 18% have more than 20, and thankfully this at present includes both CSF and SSF.

And this is not just an Anglican phenomenon. Catholic Poor Clare communities in Britain show almost exactly the same pattern; 53% with fewer than 10 sisters, 40% with 10 to 19, and only one community with more than 20.

So perhaps it seems perverse that this September the members of C/SSF will be gathering for our General Chapter under the title 'A Future with Hope'. Surely a workshop on dying gracefully would be more appropriate?

And yet ... The impulse to religious life, to that total commitment which one of the participants in the BBC2 programme 'The Monastery' called 'either truly sane or absolutely bonkers', is a universal one. The articles in this edition of franciscan show the truth of this from a Buddhist perspective.

The unexpected success of programmes like 'The Monastery' and its follow up 'The Convent' attests, I think, to more than just a fascination with what goes on 'behind the walls'. Many people who would not call themselves believers, very sceptical of organised religion of any description, yet have a desire for 'more', for something beyond the everyday, the tangible and material. It seems to be in our DNA. And part of the lure of religious life is that it offers a life based on that 'beyond'.

As Sr Aelred of Arundel, the Poor Clare house where 'The Convent' was filmed, said in an interview in The Tablet, 'To refuse might have been to chicken out of an important opportunity of enlightening people who have some spiritual hunger, some openness to values other than the current ones.' And she spoke of working with the four women 'to God's agenda ... We wanted to give them a sense ... that the best things are invisible and that there is a God who loves them unconditionally.'

So, perhaps most of the present Anglican communities in the UK will die, hopefully with some grace. But the urge which brought them into being will not die, and can find new ways of expression.

Global warming is real; the decline of religious life in our country is real. But neither is inevitable, and neither means that God has abandoned us. The future is in God's hands, but we are called to co-operate with God in creating it. For the planet that means reining in our desire for more of the material. As Franciscans, committed to a reverence for creation and joy in simplicity, we have a real gift to offer to a world

threatened by the results of our thoughtless use of the world's resources. For the religious life it means allowing ourselves to believe 'that the best things are invisible, and that there is a God who loves us unconditionally.' And following that desire, deeply implanted in us, for what is 'beyond'. That is at the heart of a 'Future with Hope', and why, after all, I don't believe that the statistics of decline will have the last word.

Please pray for us as we meet in the General Chapter, that we may be open to God's vision of our future, and bold in following it.

Pax et Bonum