



Religious Life: Discerning the Future

**Research project on the experience of women seeking
to enter religious life in Britain and Ireland
from 2000 to the present day**

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Chapter 1

Project Descriptor and Methodology

One of the aims of the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation is to foster and support the witness, advocacy and action of religious sisters globally in order to increase their capacity in education, leadership and service provision. For this to happen, new sisters are needed. The Foundation is achieving its aims by funding reliable research which will help religious congregations to apply strategic analysis to their vocational and formation programmes in order to foster well-grounded and lasting new vocations to the religious life. Some congregations resist this language of analysis, seeing the receiving and flourishing of vocations as the work of God alone. But the Holy Spirit is present in the development of best practice in religious life today, which includes some analysis overall of what that practice might be. Congregations articulate consciously in word and deed a sense of their own charism and identity. But unconscious cultural and theological attitudes and behaviour can also develop and become embedded among established members. This can prove alienating to newer members seeking incorporation among them from outside the normative perspective. Awareness of such unconscious trends can help to foster a community culture that is more open to changes within the society from which new entrants emerge.

Recent statistics regarding religious vocations in the global north have been discouraging. A report dating from 2013

https://www.hiltonfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/CHF_SistersNarrative_2012-3.pdf

notes that while the number of Catholics worldwide had increased by 14% since the millennium, the number of religious sisters had decreased by 9%. Significant increases in the number of Sisters in Asia (18%) and Africa (26%) were offset by dramatic decreases in Europe (-20%) and North America (-27%). Conflicting and sometimes contradictory reasons are given for these figures, but often debate about the demographic crisis is restricted to theologians or to long-established religious without the voice of vocational seekers themselves. The invitation of that voice into this conversation is consistent with qualitative research's 'avowed humanistic and social justice commitment to study the social world from the perspective of the interacting individual' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). Analytical research enables the formulation of vocations promotion and formative programmes that are in dialogue with the lived experience of those who are still coming forward, seeking a future in religious life.

Qualitative research has variously been described as montage or quilt making in which ‘many different things are going on at the same time – different voices, different perspectives, points of view, angles of vision’. While it is impossible to capture objective reality in such a study, the purpose of this kind of research is to help congregations to hear and reflect on the authentic voices of today’s vocational seekers through ‘a strategy that adds rigor, breadth, complexity, richness and depth to any enquiry’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). In the narratives of the women interviewed here, who have explored their vocation since 2000 in Catholic and Anglican religious congregations in the UK and Ireland, we hear from the differing perspectives and paradigms from which they view religious life. This opens up the meaning that these events hold for them and allows for insight into their experience.

Whatever the outcome of their exploration, the narrators offer rich and vital data on what today’s generation of entrants is seeking and finding in religious life. This anonymised data, combined with equally anonymised reflections from formators and leaders of congregations on their experience of receiving new members, forms the core of a ground-breaking report which will be essential reading for all those committed to the future of religious life. We invite the report’s readers to join us in a collaborative and creative conversation about what will help to build a future full of hope for the religious of tomorrow.

Notes on Methods and Methodology

The narratives in this study tell us about women’s experience of a call to religious life, the challenges they faced while attempting to become part of a community and the support they received from other members. In some cases, entrants subsequently decided or were asked to leave the community they had joined, and we explore the reasons for this. We also consider their opinions on what congregations might have done to support them better and what they think about religious life after experiencing it. To answer our questions, we used open-ended interviews as our main method and in analysing the data we used a narrative analysis approach. In this section, we will discuss our methods and methodology, our assumptions and the challenges found along the way. We will start by talking about the women who took part in the study.

Participants

When the project was first designed, our focus was on the experiences of Roman Catholic women. As it unfolded, we found that many Anglican sisters, former members and congregations were interested in participating in this project.

At their request we decided to include them as well and found that their experiences were very similar to those of Catholic participants. Our initial intention was to have as many Irish participants as British, but we encountered difficulties gaining the support of Irish congregations. Some of this was due to distance, the research team being based in the UK, and to an internal reorganisation of AMRI (the Association of Leaders of Missionaries and Religious of Ireland). In addition, AMRI had commissioned its own research on the fall of vocational numbers in Ireland, so some congregations were understandably reluctant to take part in another similar research project. There were possibly other reasons, connected with the recent history of religious life and of the church in general in Ireland, which made participants and congregations reluctant to come forward. We discuss this in a later section of the report. Nevertheless, the nine sisters living in Ireland who were willing to be interviewed afforded us some thought-provoking and helpful data.

In order to have a better picture of why women enter and stay in religious life or why they leave it we interviewed three categories of participants:

- 1) women who had entered religious life since 2000 and remained as sisters
- 2) women who had entered religious life since 2000 and subsequently left
- 3) women who had been or are still interested in religious life

In total, we undertook fifty three in-depth interviews.

Of the women interviewed, fourteen were Anglican and thirty nine Catholic; at the time of the interviews they were at various stages of religious life. Three had been interested in religious life or were still seeking (one Anglican, two Catholic); twenty seven were new members (four Anglican, twenty three Catholic) and twenty three had entered religious life and had subsequently left (nine Anglican, fourteen Catholic). In addition, some women were not available or did not want to be interviewed but were willing to answer a questionnaire with open-ended questions related to their experience of religious life. Fifteen more responded initially but failed to take contact further. We received twelve completed questionnaires, seven from Anglican women (one enquirer, two new members and four former religious) and five from Catholic women (two enquirers, two new members and one former religious). Tables 1 and 2 show the number and percentages of Catholic and Anglican women that took part in the project:

Table 1: Interviews

	Anglican		Catholic		Total
	Number	%	Number	%	
Interested	1	33.0	2	67.0	3
Religious sisters	4	14.8	23	85.2	27
Former religious	9	39.1	14	60.9	23
TOTAL	14	26.4	39	73.6	53

Table 2: Questionnaires

	Anglican		Catholic		Total
	Number	%	Number	%	
Enquirers	1	33.0	2	67.0	3
Religious sisters	2	14.8	2	85.2	4
Former religious	4	39.1	1	60.9	5
TOTAL	7	26.4	5	73.6	12

Of the sixty five women who took part, fifty six (86 %) live in the UK and have entered or were interested in entering a community in this country. The other nine (14%) live in Ireland. Their nationalities are set out in Table 3.

Table 3: Nationality of participants

Nationality	Number	%
British	39	60
Irish	10	15.4
Asia and Pacific	7	10.7
Rest of Europe	6	9.2
North America/ Australia/ New Zealand	2	3.1
Africa	1	1.5
TOTAL	65	100

Finding women willing to take part in the research was a challenge, for which we followed different approaches. The first one was to contact congregational leaders and vocations promoters by email and by letter, to explain the project; we asked them to pass on the information to new members or to former entrants who had left the community. Our intention was that those interested would contact us directly, bypassing congregational leaders and formators in order to protect confidentiality. Responses varied from the enthusiastic to the wary,

‘Many thanks for your full explanation about your project which I hope will prove useful for the future [...] I do admire your courage in facing this task’[RCCL2]

‘You are a brave lady to continue exploring Religious life and bringing hope to many who have doubts and questions today’ [RCF1]

Several community leaders or formators and former members saw the project in terms of bringing closure to women for whom the process of trying their vocation had been a painful one,

‘We have two women who entered with us since 2000 and left before final profession. I am happy to send the material on to them as it will help bring closure if they should so wish. I have always had doubts around one of them leaving and felt that if things were different in formation at the time, maybe she would not have left.’ [RCCL3]

'I would love to participate in the 'Religious Life: Discerning the Future' project. Had the question been asked even eighteen months ago I believe there wouldn't have been the level of healing that has taken place between then and now and I can look more objectively at the answers to the questions I came with in 2010' [RCL12]

Another community leader passed on the sense from current and former members that looking back at the past was not a worthwhile exercise,

'I have been in touch with all our entrants from 2000 but none of them are willing to take part in this research - sorry. They feel they have moved on and, for those who left, they have done a lot in their lives and do not want to look back. The two who are left in community are very involved with their present workings and lives and, again, do not want to look back.'

[RCCL4]

Another way of finding participants was through the distribution of leaflets during meetings and seminars related to religious life and through Vocations England, the Conference of Religious in England and Wales (COREW), and the Association of Leaders of Missionaries and Religious of Ireland (AMRI). Additionally, we put advertisements in Catholic and Anglican newspapers in the UK and Ireland such as the *Tablet*, *Catholic Herald*, *Church Times*, *Catholic Universe*, *Irish Independent* and *Alive!* As the project progressed some participants who had found it beneficial to share their experiences with us contacted others and encouraged them to come forward for interview.

Narrators look back on an event or experience and organize them into a meaningful whole through telling the story. They also bear the imprint of the narrator's interpretation (Chase, 2005). Interviews with only one participant in what is essentially a group process will inevitably lead to a bias of perspective. The congregations joined or explored by the project's participants initially had no voice in the project, but it seemed certain that they would have important views on how they were affected by the exploration, entrance or departure of potential new members. The bias that not including their voice would introduce into the overall perspective of the report arose as a serious issue which needed addressing.

One of the main purposes of this report is to help congregations to adopt the most effective approaches possible to the promotion and formation of religious vocations. It seemed important to explore how they were promoting vocations and more importantly, what lessons they might be learning from receiving (and in some cases, losing) new members. Consequently, we contacted congregational leaders, vocations promoters and formators and invited them to take part in interviews. Interview questions were general, and we followed the same meticulous protocols for protecting the anonymity of participants and congregations. No particular cases were referred to or individual testimonies repeated.

In total, we were able to interview three congregational leaders (all Catholic) and four vocations promoters and/or formators (three Catholic and one Anglican).

All participants were given the option to be interviewed either by a lay person (Maria Calderón Muñoz) or a religious sister (Gemma Simmonds) according to their preference. Interviews were open-ended and started with a simple question: 'tell me your story'. Averaging 90 minutes in length, interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

General considerations: Consent, anonymity and data ownership

Conscious of the need for informed consent, we explained thoroughly to all participants in our initial contact email what their participation entailed, how the data would be used, who would have access to the interview transcripts and what would happen to the recordings and transcripts after the research was finished. We also sent them an information sheet and a consent form to be signed prior to the interview. We offered additional explanations of the project purpose and data use at the outset of each interview. We reassured participants that they did not have to answer a question if they did not wish to do so and that after the interview they were free to withdraw their consent if they wished. Several participants asked us to delete parts of the interview, especially fragments that were too personal or painful, and in one case a participant asked us to delete the whole interview.

Identity codes

The limited number of new entrants to religious life in a small country makes it possible to recognize voices and stories despite all efforts at anonymity. As responsible researchers we have also been at pains to protect the reputation of congregations through anonymity, taking several measures to prevent recognition either of individuals or of congregations. A congregation was not informed if a member or former member had contacted us.

All transcripts were anonymised: all personal and identifying references were removed from the interviews and only the research team has had access to the raw data. All data, recordings and transcripts will be destroyed on publication of the report. Quoted narrators are identified by letter codes denoting their denomination (or in the case of Irish respondents, who are all Catholic, their nationality) and their status, followed by a number. Thus an Anglican new member would be ANM3, or a Catholic leaver from the UK would be RCL5, and a new member from Ireland INM2, etc. A table of the codes can be found in Appendix 1.

Data analysis

Dedoose, a qualitative analysis software tool, was used for data analysis. Dedoose helped us to organise the material chronologically and thematically and made it easier for us to find similarities, differences and trends in the interview transcripts and questionnaires.

Each interview was analysed as a whole to gain a better understanding of participants' choices and decisions. To interpret the data, we chose to use a narrative analysis approach as these women were using autobiography to talk about their experiences.

In addition, the anonymised transcripts were shared with a group of eight theologians and social scientists, who prepared short papers on key themes they saw emerging from the data. These papers were discussed at a symposium attended by six out of the eight. Their input has been invaluable, and we have incorporated it in our analysis.

Narrative analysis: notes on methodology

Our point of departure was women's subjective experience of receiving a vocation, their response to this call, their journey into religious life and in some cases, their departure from their community. We consciously decided not to focus on statistics and numbers but to seek similarities and differences in these vocational journeys and to explore how the narrators' decisions related to their life experiences, their ideals, hopes and emotions. We also explored their interactions with established community members. Religious life is not lived in a vacuum. It is embedded in a context where there are power dynamics at play that define authority, gender, class, race and age differences among other variables.

We chose to use narrative analysis as we believe that stories are powerful instruments of communication and the creation of meaning. We are all continuously telling stories about ourselves to a real audience or to an imagined other. According to Bruner (1990) narratives are the way in which we make sense of our existence: storytelling is a process of actively defining who we think we are and explaining our actions and feelings to ourselves and others; thus, it is a process of identity construction. The narratives that we build are unique, as they are time-dependent, subjective and tailored to the public to whom they are directed and so they cannot be repeated word by word. The way we tell (or understand) events or experiences will probably change over time (Ricoeur, 1984). This subjectivity makes it impossible to take narratives as objective truths. Rather, we must accept them as descriptions of events or of experiences that are contextualised in time and space and therefore are subject to discourses of power.

Narratives can also be told for a specific purpose. The women who took part in this project did so because they wanted their experience to help others or wanted their opinion heard, so their stories are geared towards these goals. In addition, when telling their stories, they were aware of their audience: Firstly, us, the interviewers: a religious sister and an anthropologist who identifies as a Catholic. Secondly, those interested in the research: most probably religious congregations and academics working on the topic. The relationship established by the interviewees with their intended audience can have a bearing on what they choose to say or not to say, especially when talking about such personal matters that also involve the stories of others.

Our interviews were open-ended, starting with a simple prompter question. Open-ended interviews allow participants to choose where they start narrating their stories and what kind of elements they want to include. In other words, they become the owners of their narrative. However, these narratives do not come out of thin air and are not randomly put together. They are products of socially constructed images and perceptions of how these stories should develop and what should they include. Smith and Watson (2001) argue that there are culturally available templates that we use when we build our stories. These templates are influenced by discourses of power: class, gender, race, age, etc. So, when we analyse narratives, we must take into account that individual experiences are always modelled/influenced by the social and cultural context. Power discourses define subject positions and affect how individuals portray themselves.

When we do narrative analysis, we need to consider the 'Big Story', that is the answer to our question (tell us your story). The big story will probably describe a participant's journey to religious life. This is an event narrative (Patterson, 2013), having a clear beginning, a development and an end; the main character (the interviewee) will probably experience change as the narrative progresses through time; in other words, it is a proper narrative. However, during the telling of the big story, there will also be lots of 'small stories' and these may not correspond to a classic narrative. These small stories will probably be 'experience narratives' (Squire, 2013). Experience narratives can include other types of stories: subjective experiences, descriptions, wishes, hopes, ideas, things the narrator tells herself, etc. These experience narratives may not seem part of the main story, and may even contradict the main narrative, revealing nuances and different layers of meaning. They may be more difficult to find as they do not follow a classic pattern but will give depth to our analysis.

We consider the interviews as narratives of the self or autobiographies. In these narratives women describe their journey into religious life; these stories have a clear beginning, a development where they experience change and an end which is where they currently find

themselves or how they feel about religious life now. These main narratives encompass smaller narratives such as the way in which they experienced the call or integrated into community life.

These small stories cannot be considered in isolation: to understand why women leave or stay in religious life we need to look at the whole picture. The process of looking at small stories should not exclude looking at big narratives. Rather, it is an exercise in searching for commonalities and patterns that help us understand better their experience of religious life.

Using Dedoose to work chronologically with these stories we found five main narratives: the narrative of the call, finding the right place, the journey into becoming, belonging and departure. We also looked at other categories such as how participants feel about the church, what advice they would give to congregations and how they see the future of religious life. We worked in the same way with the questionnaires. Each theme gave us a broad picture of the current state of religious life from the perspective of new entrants.

There is also a parallel story, that of the communities which women enter or leave. We have used the material from our nine interviews with congregational leaders, vocations promoters and formators to create a dialogue between new members and congregations. It is neither the task nor the intention of the researchers (or indeed of anyone else) to pass judgment on any of the narratives here. Our purpose has been to consider both sides of the story in order to come to a better understanding of vocational trajectories today, and we believe that this approach has greatly enriched our research.

Limitations and challenges

When we began our research, we thought that the main challenge would be finding women willing to take part but were surprised by the wide and spontaneous interest in this project from newer members, former members and from congregations themselves. The same response was not forthcoming in Ireland, but the specific cultural context of religious life in Ireland must be taken into consideration here. Recent enquiries and reports into sexual abuse within the Catholic church in Ireland have left many religious feeling battered and demonised (Ryan, 2009). Contrary to some unfortunate responses from within the church in England and Wales, sexual abuse is not a problem particular to the Irish, or indeed to any other local church, as recent tragic revelations in Britain, France, Australia, the USA and elsewhere have made abundantly clear (Plante and McChesney, 2011).

The Ryan Report was felt by some to be controversial in its method of handling abuse allegations, but even where it has been acknowledged that there was a case to be answered within religious life, there have understandably been levels of wariness among religious about putting themselves under the scrutiny of others whose judgement may not be fully informed by cultural or historical awareness. It is perhaps for such reasons also that the Irish response was so relatively low. One recent entrant also suggested that wider cultural shifts might also play a role in a lack of encouragement with regard to vocations promotion,

‘I think in Ireland at the moment, I think there is two reasons it doesn’t happen. One is there are some [...] religious who don’t want to invite people to become religious, if that makes sense. Now it is not a significant number, but there are some who [...] think religious life should disappear [...] For example, [...] the next younger sister to us kind of thing, like when she was in secondary school, which would have been the late 70s, they had [...] people coming to give talks on religious vocation as, “Do you want to consider this kind of thing?” you know? But that has disappeared entirely [...] There is two things: one is [...] I suspect because they, they don’t want to take people at eighteen anymore [...] But the man who was involved in vocations promotion for the [congregation] said, “You need to suggest it while they are still in secondary school, if that makes sense, even if you don’t take them, it needs to be suggested to them.” But because they no longer take people at eighteen [...] it is no longer suggested as a possibility, religious vocation, in secondary school at all. I think too we became very, very private about religion as well, you know? I think [...] that the post Vatican II uncertainty, if that makes sense, people were trying to find new ways of doing things and the, the religious vocation kind of fell through. It wasn’t being suggested actively, you know? I mean [...] in secondary school I never heard religious vocation suggested as a possibility. I went to [name] Convent Secondary School [...] but it wasn’t, it isn’t presented now.

But [...] the problem with suggestion in school is, from my experience of religious classes in school, the pressure to not be interested is significant. Like when I was in secondary school I didn’t attend any of our retreat days because [...] as my mother put it, “[Name], if you go to one of those you will either be angry or else you will get in a row with one of the girls.” So [...] there is a huge kind of pressure within the school to be not interested in God from other students, if that makes sense, you know?’ [INM5]

We are aware that the small number of interviews from Ireland cannot give us a complete view of religious life for women in that country at present. Nevertheless, we found that the experiences of women in Ireland were very similar to those in the UK. This may be because many congregations in Ireland are also present in the UK, so admission criteria, rules and procedures regarding formation are similar in both countries.

Furthermore, similarities between the two countries attest to the transnational nature of religious life, especially now that congregations are undergoing a process of diminishment; new provincial configurations are being drawn and novitiates are being shared across countries. With one exception from a religious who felt that her congregation had been scapegoated by the Ryan Report and who questioned the motives and methodology of the researchers, the reception of the initial project findings among Irish vocations personnel was strongly positive, and generally indicated that the audience found it a useful and helpful exercise.

Another limitation of this study is that it is not quantitative, so it does not provide quick, definite and simple answers to our questions. It could be argued that without measurable data our results are subjective and not representative of the whole. As listeners to the stories of others, we had no way of verifying the objective truth of what they said. But in any human situation and any story which tells of human interactions it is difficult to pinpoint an 'objective truth'. We believe that the richness of this research lies in its being qualitative and providing details and nuances that numbers usually hide.

'The province of qualitative research [...] is the world of lived experience, for this is where individual belief and action intersect with culture' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005).

The stories told here provide us with cause and effect: the decisions that participants make are contextual and related to past experiences, their expectations, their hopes and their dreams. We believe that the voices of 65 women provide a significant account of where and how religious life in the UK and Ireland now finds itself, and the similarities found in the interviews allow us to draw conclusions that we believe will be useful for religious congregations and for women interested in religious life.

Chapter 2

Narratives of the Call

Is there a future for female religious life in the UK and Ireland? Has the age and cultural gap between long-term members of communities and those seeking to join them become so great that integration is no longer possible? These are some of the questions that the Religious Life: Discerning the Future Project takes into consideration by interviewing women who have entered or explored religious life in the Catholic and Anglican churches since 2000. The aim of the research is to understand the present state of recruitment to religious life and strengthen its future. The statistics (given in Appendix 3) are not encouraging. In 2018 a total of 21 Catholic women entered religious life in England and Wales. While a slight rise in numbers on the previous year, there is a clear and fairly steady downward trajectory over the last thirty years from the 79 who entered in 1986.¹ The interviews offer compelling data on what today's generation of explorers of religious life is seeking and how they experience it once they enter the novitiate. Interviews with formators and congregational leaders on their experience of receiving new members enable a collaborative and creative conversation about what might help to build a hopeful future for the religious life of tomorrow.

The principal voice heard in this report will be that of the women whose stories are told in the interviews. Their speech has not been tidied up or made more formal. It is sometimes hesitant and grammatically unstable as the speaker searches for the right words to articulate an experience that escapes easy formulations. Narrative research is qualitative as opposed to quantitative. Quantitative research uses statistical observations to draw conclusions. There are some statistics available to give an idea of the current state of play in religious life in the UK and Ireland, but in a voluntary project of this kind it was not going to be possible to find a sufficiently scientific cross-section of entrants to obtain reliable figures, and this was not the kind of analysis which was being sought. Instead the research relies on verbal narrative to provide personal data offering an overall picture that is open to further analysis.

The National Religious Vocation Conference (NRVC) in the United States has just published its 2020 Study on Recent Vocations to Religious Life

<https://nrvc.net/publication/9180/article/21258-nrvc-overview-2020-study-on-recent-vocations-to-religious-life>

¹ See Appendix 4 and

<http://www.ukvocation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Stats-for-Bishops-Conference-2018.pdf>

While similar in aims to this project, there is a significant difference in tone between a report that concentrates entirely on those choosing to remain in religious life and one which includes a sizeable proportion of those who have tried the life and left. In that sense the aims of the two projects differ significantly, but there is a strong similarity in the positive signs that emerge from both, namely that:

- Women continue to hear and respond to the call to religious life
- They are attracted by the witness of coherent commitment, by prayer and the spiritual life lived in community, by charism and by whole-hearted mission
- They are finding strategies to cope with cultural diversity, including intergenerational cultural differences
- They have a strong commitment to living simply and in solidarity with the poor

There is much in the narratives within this report that offers hope.

A study entitled 'New Measures of Wellbeing' identifies several factors essential for creating and maintaining personal wellbeing (Diener, 2009). These are: meaning and purpose, supportive and rewarding relationships, remaining engaged and interested, contributing to the well-being of others, competency, self-acceptance, optimism and being respected.

Where these elements have been present in the process of vocational discernment and entrance into religious life, respondents have tended to enter a community and remain in it. Narratives of departure from religious life have tended to come from respondents who report that one or more of these elements has been missing to a significant degree. In the early 1970s Rosabeth Moss Kanter undertook a study of nineteenth-century communes which considered why some communities lasted over seventy years and others did not. While her academic method and evaluation techniques have been subject to subsequent academic criticism, she distinguished some categories that are useful for our consideration here. She claimed that in order to join a community and sustain that commitment, a person needs to detach from some ideas, things or people and at the same time attach to others. They need to sacrifice some things or attachments in order to belong to the new community but also to invest in it, in order to gain a stake in the community. In this understanding, renunciation of some relationships leads to communion with others. The narratives we hear are a testimony to how successfully or not such detachments, attachments, investments, renunciations and communion have been mutually negotiated (Kanter, 1972).

The context

Interviewees identify the current times as frightening ones in which to attempt religious life because of the declining numbers of sisters and the paucity of vocations. Nevertheless, they

see religious life as a powerful witness to Christ and his Gospel in an increasingly materialistic and selfish world. A vocation is God's work alone and can transcend figures and statistics that might make the whole venture seem risky.

'Well, thinking about in the context of my life it wasn't what the more active sisters were doing, it was the old sisters loving God, so do you know, attracting people, you know, it's God's work. Obviously, I think we should be with young people and we should be, you know, trying to make doors open to them, but ultimately it is God's work" [RCNM7]

Religious life reminds others of the power of belief, telling the secular world that life can be lived differently and acting as a reminder of a 'larger reality' where prayer is at the centre of lives focused on a personal relationship with God.

'I think there is a lot that religious life has to say to a secular world about committing to one another, about giving priority to values other than selfish ones, about attitudes to wealth and property when we give away or share in common what we own [...] I think it is a way of life that has a lot to say to a society that is fragmentary, busy, hugely, ridiculously busy for many people, void of meaning for many people [...] I think there is a huge amount that is attractive about this way of life, you know, that can be shouted about in wordless silent sort of a way, so yes, I don't think it is dead yet. [ANM2]

Religious life offers 'an alternate view of reality' which contrasts with the values of global materialism,

'I think God desires people God has called to prayer to have the support of the church as a whole and of each other in communities since this kind of "non-productive" life is typically not going to be valued and supported by the surrounding culture. As globalized culture becomes more and more focussed on material security, performance and prestige, it is not surprising that religious life seems to be waning in the "developed" world, and yet the need is all the more pressing for an alternate view of reality represented and lived out in religious life. And the world is in need of people who pray' [AL2]

It is also seen as necessary to the health of the wider church. The following comment is from an Anglican respondent,

'I think it is really important and vital to the health of the church and has a great deal to offer in terms of their ministry to lead a faithful life, committed life and depth and that is missing from many parts of the Church of England to me'. [AL6]

Religious life as a powerful ideal

What emerges clearly from the narratives is that the guiding story or ‘myth’ that religious life represents is still powerfully attractive to many women of today. The word myth here is not being used in the sense of a fiction, but of a narrative which provides a powerful vehicle for reaching an understanding of a deep truth. Founding figures like Francis and Clare of Assisi and more recent figures continue to inspire followers,

‘I saw that radicality of lives given to God. I wanted that, I think I wanted that radicality in a way which a, a kind of an 18, 19-year-old wants it with the, that kind of all consumingness that seemed to be represented by religious life.’[RCNM7]

In this sense, there is no crisis of vocation as such. Women of differing ages and widely varied life experience are still hearing the call to join religious communities. The crisis that appears to exist is one of culture. Many of the narratives suggest that successful entrance and integration into religious life depends on the ‘fit’ between the individual and the community she enters. Where a new candidate finds herself welcomed and her personal autonomy affirmed, she finds the capacity to adapt to a way of life which, even if gladly chosen, presents challenges.

A strong ecclesiology permeates several of the narratives as respondents consider the future of religious life. The question of numbers and future vocations is a concern, but for the sake of the mission of the church rather than simply for the sake of the survival of the institution. Participants see themselves as belonging to an historical chain of people who have passed down something precious through the generations, one to the other,

‘I don’t think our main job is to be visible or our main job is to attract people to join us, our main job is to do what we are doing. You know, the mission is our main job, but we’ve got to kind of also think about if we want this mission to continue then it can’t end with me [...]if the mission is really important and we believe in it we need people to be, to do it with us and we need to pass on what we have been passed, what we have received down in the chain I suppose. [RCNM8]

Hearing the call

Narratives of the call to religious life appear to have changed little over the centuries. Participants describe a strong, all-consuming sense of invitation or even compulsion to respond to an irresistible sense of vocation,

‘This kind of sense of calling to religious life, no matter how much I tried to kind of push it away, it just wouldn’t really leave me alone’ [RCNM3]

‘I was learning all the time and I was also working at various different jobs here and there but unable to settle anywhere because I felt this continuous call and it didn’t go away, it didn’t stop. There was a continuous nagging, in the back of my head’ [RCE1]

For some that sense has been present from childhood, whereas for others it comes unexpectedly, as a bolt from the blue.

‘After thinking about it and praying about it with no particular reason why it happened, I heard very clearly “Be a nun” and my reaction to it showed really that it did not come from me. I didn’t know any nuns, I hadn’t come across any nuns at all, I didn’t know if there were still nuns in existence’ [RCE1]

‘It was like a flash of lightning or like a light going on, turning on in my head or something. And it was quite shocking but very liberating, and all in a split second I knew that God loved me just as I was and that he wanted me for himself. He didn’t want anything else from me, just me and that was a huge thing because in my search I was trying to figure how I could give myself to God and nothing I could give was enough [...] but in that moment I realised that God just wanted me and that I was enough for him just by being willing to give him myself, that was all he wanted from me, but it was everything [...] And on the other hand, I had to give him my whole self, everything, but in that moment, I felt I could do that. It was probably the freest moment I have ever experienced in my life; do you know what I mean? But it only lasted a split second, but it was enough to be decisive and I came away kind of on a high because like I knew now, I knew what I had to do or what God wanted and it was me’. [INM6]

For some enquirers religious life can seem like an adventure, a different and extreme type of life, full of possibilities. This imagined life is sometimes driven by popular culture and stereotypes of nuns. There may be triggers, such as a Bible passage, a song, a film or a personal encounter which leads to the realisation that a woman has a religious vocation. When talking about their dreams of entering religious life, respondents mentioned films such as *The Sound of Music* and *The Nun’s Story* that had inspired them in childhood.

The religious life imagined here may be seen as simple, reduced to a habit and a convent as this extract from a woman who entered religious life in her sixties shows,

‘I wanted a religious life, which was with a proper veil, a habit and somebody telling you what to do [...], that was the only kind of religious life I had known. I never really went into these things properly’ [RCNM5]

In descriptions of this imagined religious life, there is also a longing for an idealised way of life, with religious communities as places without conflict where the narrator can find security and a surrogate family, or a community where prayer is at the centre.

‘I didn’t really know a lot about religious life, I don’t think [...] I think probably in those days if I’m, if I’m entirely honest it wasn’t so much about vocation it was more about [...] I guess I had some instinctive knowledge that I would need some sort of security and I suppose for me religious life was about security’. [AL4]

‘There was a part of me that was sort of thinking of the religious life [...] with the idea of the retreat house in mind, it just sort of, it feels like a slightly safer place and it feels like a slightly more peaceful place and I was transferring that idea to religious life. But being a sister is not the same as being on retreat and kind of and also because my, my family is quite dysfunctional in various ways so kind of, community life as a sort of replacement for family that was hanging around that as well [...] Yes, yes, kind of, stability I think is probably a good word in a kind of, so feeling stable, feeling safe’. [AE1]

Sometimes the reality does not match their expectations. These extracts from women who entered and left religious life show their expectations as a prelude to the reality they encountered and are here described in hindsight,

‘I had this vague notion about wanting to be part of a religious congregation, wanting a life of spirituality but not really knowing what that was about and the only way for me at the time to explore that was through joining a congregation [...] I was actually 17 and I hadn’t really thought through everything else around it, you know the compromises, the changes, the things that were going to be different to my life as a religious sister as opposed to what it might be as a non religious sister. And I suppose as I explored it, I became more aware of the things that maybe I wasn’t comfortable with, with myself, not with the congregation’. [IL1]

If experienced as an interruption to other life plans this call can prove difficult to accept. Some recipients do not respond immediately, making excuses for why such thoughts are occurring and why they do not have to take them seriously. Others comfort themselves with the thought that this is merely a passing phase, telling themselves that they are only testing the call, if only to prove that it is false. But the call can be as persistent as it is challenging or mysterious.

‘I began to realise that my faith was more important to me than I realised [...] and I said, “No, this is ridiculous this is, this is insane, you know, me even looking at the idea of being a sister” [...] I didn’t really know many sisters and thought, “This, this is ridiculous, absolutely barmy” [...] But I got my qualification, I went down for my first job and I thought,

“Oh this will put it to bed now [...] I am away from it all now, I will forget about it”. And I didn’t forget about it and it was always, it was just there’. [RCL5]

In the case of Anglicans there can be a confusion between the call to religious life and the call to priesthood which makes discernment all the more complicated,

‘I was working in the Anglican Church at the time I began to wonder actually if I was called to ordained ministry. A lot of people around me were kind of suggesting that I explore it [...] So anyway, I began to look at ordained ministry and it was partly to disguise that feeling of, “Well what I really want to do I can’t do because it doesn’t exist so I need to kind of see what I can do and what’s the next best thing.” So I followed that process all the way through and I was actually like accepted to train for ordained ministry but something in me was like, “This is not the right vocation”, and it didn’t matter how I kind of came at it, it just didn’t feel right and I just knew I couldn’t do it, basically. It wasn’t even that I didn’t want to, I was just like, “This isn’t it”. [AL4]

There is often a sense of dissatisfaction with life as currently lived and the various options that the secular world appears to offer. There can be a deep sense of a personal love of Christ, sometimes emerging in early childhood but sometimes striking a person forcefully in adult life either as a development of childhood faith or with the sudden emergence of faith after a life without it.

‘Well, the reason I wanted to join a community was to have like Christ at the centre of my life. I didn’t want it to be just like, going to Mass on a Sunday or just part of my life. I felt like life is a bit fragmented, isn’t it? And I didn’t want it to be just a little box, a little part of me, I wanted it to be the full thing, the thing that everything else in my life springs from and obviously in the monastery I have got that [...] Everything in my life is focussed around Christ. That is kind of what I, that’s what I wanted: a radical life, a distinctive life I suppose’. [RCNM4]

Religious life can seem to offer ‘something more’, a radical option for Christ that is powerfully attractive in its all-consuming totality.

‘It’s the whole of you, it’s not just, as I said before, a hobby or something you [...] do for a time and then you get tired of it and go on to something else. It goes far deeper than that, it, it’s the whole of you and that deep joy right down in your gut, even when things are going completely wrong and you are wanting to run away and pack your bags. Something, something - that deep conviction just holds you, holds you until that storm goes past and you know you are doing the will of God’. [ANM1].

There is a clear pattern of a desire for a relationship with God to be the central and driving force within the narrator's life. Responding to the call is mainly about trusting God's wisdom even if the way forward is not clear,

'Why God wants me to do this I don't know. Maybe it is his only way of, it is his only way to get me to sit down and listen, "This is what I want you to do". Or maybe he is saving me from a worse path in secular life. I don't know, I don't know why he chose me, sometimes I think he might have been mistaken but, but I am glad because he has given my life more meaning and a greater purpose than anything else in the world can give me'. [RCNM15]

'I really trust over the years, I trust God's working and timings and just sometimes you actually have to go through a whole experience in order to know what is and isn't right, and I really trust that now after so many years. Sometimes very frustrating years, but I think at this end of my life when I am pushing 63, you know, all of that, I have really come to trust God's wisdom'[AL1]

Narratives similar to these can act as powerful magnets into religious life for enquirers who hear them. At times they comment on their fascination with others' vocation stories,

'I think when I went to the monastery I just found it so refreshing that they were so themselves and just in such a true and honest way and to see it, like you could see their authenticity, you could see kind of their freedom in their silence to Christ, and sort of they were so uninhibited by their life, [...] and by talking to them you got the sense that they were so real and just so down to earth and so solid in their... in their lives and I had never seen that before and never, like even with the apostolic sisters that wasn't how... that wasn't my perception of them. Like they truly lived their lives in Christ and were truly rooted in him but the authenticity that I sought was there, like they are authentic in their own way'. [IE1]

Sometimes the disillusionment on discovering the reality behind the myth is painful,

'There was no sense of respect for the others, there was no sense of understanding where, you know, the younger generation is coming from, there was no sense of formation [...] I think there was a certain sense of... I don't know, they were not prepared, they were not prepared for bringing in new people.' [RCL2]

But the opposite is also true, when the reality of religious life turns out to be more positive than originally imagined.

'I think one thing that I hadn't expected was, there is just how much fun we would have together, you know? When we [...] were all sat around at recreation after supper and everyone sat behind in the community room and just kind of chatting and laughing [...] that was just [...] tremendous fun and I think I wasn't expecting that at all, you know.

My family wasn't really quite like that growing up, [...] we weren't unhappy but there wasn't that kind of constant fun and laughter and you know, so that was really lovely, so that's been really... [...] It is not always silly and giggles, you know, we do sometimes have more serious discussions [...] and there is chance to really share things at a deeper level as well, you know but [...] I think that's been a real blessing of being here, it's been [...] that really sort of happy family experience'. [RCNM13]

Anticipated difficulties prove to be easy, whereas challenges arise unexpectedly, but the way of life can still prove deeply satisfying,

'I think what I thought I would find difficult turns out isn't and what I thought wouldn't be so difficult is the most challenging; it is a reversal. I thought day after day, getting up really early would be the hardest thing but actually it is not, because the whole clock is turned around so you go to bed very early so you still get your eight hours, if you like, in your cell over the night. And the work and the Office and the Eucharist are just everything that I desired and wanted and felt called to and they are such a joy'. [ANM1].

Chapter 3

Seeking and Finding

Seventy years ago, Catholic newspapers in Britain were discussing the fall in vocations and the need for strong action to foster new vocations among the young. There is evidence that numbers were already falling in the 1940s and 50s (O'Brien, 2017). Energetic efforts were made, and the National Exhibition Centre at Olympia in London hosted several vocations exhibitions (Mangion, 2020). Such an outlay of money and energy in pursuit of vocations would be virtually unthinkable today. One of this project's researchers recalls being dragooned into going to such an exhibition as a primary school pupil and finding a multitude of stands with smiling sisters, brothers and priests doing their best to make their way of life attractive and comprehensible to a new generation. The researcher and her class enjoyed touring monastic cells and seeing mannequins modelling different habits but used the vocations promotion leaflets as paper darts on the journey back to school. Some chord must have been struck nonetheless, for within ten years she had herself entered the novitiate.

Such opportunities for finding information about vocations are no longer available to today's vocational enquirers. Narrators speak of having little idea of where to turn and of congregations being variable in the level of response they offer to enquiries. What can be daunting is when a woman summons up the courage to approach a congregation and receives no response.

'I wrote to the [Congregation] asking if I could visit and they never replied so for me it was monumental writing this letter, could I come and visit, and I got no reply until about a year later [...] but actually writing the letter made an impact on me' [RCNM7]

It is not always clear why this happens, but it would seem that for some congregations which have not had an applicant for many years, there is a sense of bewilderment and a lack of confidence when faced with someone new wishing to explore her vocation. The congregation may not have a novice or vocations director even though it may not have taken a conscious decision no longer to accept new entrants. The use of vocabulary about 'vocations strategies' and the like can prove deeply alien to some congregations, suggesting a business style model that is alien to the scriptural and historical accounts of a Spirit-led, God-given vocation. Nevertheless, the research indicates that the more coherent and confident a structure of vocational nurturing there is, the more likely a woman is to find the courage to pursue an initial approach, especially when she comes from a background where the very notion of religious life itself is alien and unfamiliar.

'There was only one person came to mind that I thought might be able to help me and she [...] had spent many years with the [Congregation] but left and I phoned her and I said [...], "I have this notion that I really want to try religious life", and she says, "Isn't that marvellous, isn't that wonderful!" But I said, "I'm in crisis", I said, "I don't think it is wonderful". [...] She said she knew a priest that, you know, that I could go and talk to. So, I went and chatted to him about it and he didn't really help me around discerning or anything like that, he just literally chatted to me [...] and the only contact he had was with a [Congregation] sister. Now I knew little or nothing about the [Congregation] I hadn't really discerned about, you know, which congregation or anything like that, but anyway, he put me in contact with this sister and I met her and actually if she had been the person that I was to [...] be accompanied by, I don't think I would have stayed. I didn't, I mean she was fine but she wasn't very welcoming, wasn't very open, wasn't very what I considered soft or any, you know, just maybe a hard woman, I thought, and fortunately for me she wasn't, had nothing to do with vocations but she did know the Vocations Director so she passed me on to her'. [INM1]

Making first contact is reported as difficult. Some enquirers choose email because they fear rejection, and email is experienced as more impersonal than the telephone or a personal encounter. The role of the family and friends looms large in some narratives, either as a source of support and encouragement or as a discouraging factor in the vocational search,

'And I said, 'one consideration that I am thinking of is whether I am called to be a sister'. My mum's immediate reaction was, "How could you even consider such a thing?" That hurt, and then I couldn't say anything. I just kept quiet. I couldn't say anything. I was back for one month; for one whole month we did not speak about it at all, no, not at all. I think she didn't know how to deal with it, so our relationship wasn't that good. We didn't talk about it; she pretended it didn't happen.' [RCNM15]

'My dad is an atheist, they didn't really say anything about becoming Catholic, but when I decided to enter the monastery that was a different thing, he wasn't very happy about that. He said, "oh you might as well be in prison, you are just wasting your life", yes but he's okay now.' [RCNM4]

There can be a lack of family support, even within believing families. The pride with which some Catholic families formerly received news of a daughter's religious vocation no longer emerges as an expected norm. Some families react with dismay, expressing a view that religious life is no longer viable and worrying about their daughter's future,

'Mum was quite difficult in the sense that... I suppose like any other mother, they want the best for their daughters really and becoming a religious obviously is something quite... a different lifestyle for people in general, so I think she was a bit difficult in that sense.

She knows that she wants to let me go because it is the right thing to do, especially because it is serving the Lord and she is quite a faithful person as well, but yet, I think she is worried that I might be suffering.’ [RCNM2]

One of the key factors in finding a way forward is learning how to pray in a way that might help an enquirer to discern more coherently. Several narratives show that a sense of being called precedes any conscious experience of personal prayer or understanding of God’s way within the life of the person being called,

‘I used to meet with a sister for kind of spiritual direction and she really introduced me to silent prayer, which I hadn’t really encountered before and taught me a huge amount, actually and kind of took me seriously in my spiritual journey. And gradually I began to wonder if God might be calling me to join that community and at first I kind of followed that’. [RCNM3]

‘I remember talking to her the first day, I was like, “I don’t even know about religious life is what I am after, like it is one of the things that comes up in my head, do you know, but just trying to figure it out.” She said , “Yes, give it a go”, and as time went on we looked at prayer and discernment and I kind came up with a prayer life for the first time ever and the various, you know, there was [...] one weekend a month until it got to six months and by the end of that I felt, “Oh Christ, I am going to have to do this”’. [RCL5]

The generosity of congregations in organizing Come and See events or workshops on discernment is strongly appreciated by those who have experienced them. In the final instance, finding the fit is not a mechanical exercise. It is as much a question of temperament and ‘family likeness’ as anything else. Where congregations or individual religious consulted have felt free enough to understand this and even to counsel a seeker to look at another congregation if that seems to be the better fit, there have been strong positive outcomes both for the congregation and for the individual concerned.

A matter of discernment

The quality of discernment by individual respondents and by the congregations or vocations personnel they approach differs widely. Some respondents speak of finding the answer to which congregation to join while praying. Some report using ‘magical thinking’. They contacted two congregations and entered the one that answered them first. Others think more systematically, researching questions such as a congregation’s founder and history, its spirituality, whether or not it is thriving in a given country, the wearing or not of religious dress, the time a congregation dedicates to prayer and how the sisters live community life.

For others it is a matter of following recommendations from trusted advisers or following God's will, as they understand this. For some narrators the ignorance about religious life was almost total, but despite it they still had a sense of being called to it. This is particularly striking in some of the Anglican responses,

'I phoned up this very nice sister and I said that I was maybe interested in looking at religious communities but I didn't know a lot about it and wasn't sure, and she said, "Well, there is a book." "Is there?" And she said the *Anglican Religious Communities Year Book* lists all of the communities, Church of England communities, certainly in this country and some abroad as well. And it was the getting hold of this book where my journey really began in exploring communities and looking for a community to join. At this point I didn't know what I was looking for, I didn't know what the differences were and I didn't know the different ways that people could live, but finding that there were indeed sisters who lived this life in, in the UK at this time, now, was wonderful. I hadn't come across any before, I didn't know that this way of life was still available and was still lived, but it was, and I worked through, quite methodically actually, the communities in this book'. [AE1]

Given the ease with which an internet search reveals the existence of the National Office for Vocation, Vocations Ireland or Compass, the repeated reports of not knowing where to turn are surprising, but this may be because it never occurs to enquirers that such services exist. When they do come across them there is often strong appreciation,

'So, I went to the open day and yeah. and that was fantastic. Compass was [...] the most helpful thing I think, it really was, because [...] I was a convert, obviously, and I didn't really know any other young Catholics, [...] so it was wonderful to meet young people and see that it's not some like kind of weird idea from books or films or what you imagine it to be like. There, there's real people here that were thinking about it and the input as well, again because I think, because you get these ideas from places and I didn't know any nuns'. [RCNM4]

If the person sensing a religious vocation has little or no connection with religious or even with the wider church in terms of priests or other leaders, there can be a sense of being completely at sea with this pressing question. One narrative from Ireland suggests how far the general religious culture may have come from the kind of instinctive knowledge that might have been the norm several decades ago, speaking of religious life as a 'taboo' which no one speaks about,

'I think I was around fifteen [...] I also didn't really know what to do. Like there was no sort of support, not a support network, but I didn't know even who I could talk to and I remember kind of vaguely being aware that my principal at the high school was a former

religious, so she wasn't a nun anymore but I had heard that she had been in the past and I remember thinking, "oh, maybe I could ask her about it", but I, she [...] wasn't like the approachable type of woman [...] I could feel this, this tug inside me that I really wanted to, to do something for God and to live my life for him and maybe that would transpire into a vocation but I didn't know how to articulate that and I didn't know what you were supposed to do at all, like I don't, at the time I didn't know any priests personally [...] There was nobody who I felt could be, "Oh, I think I have a vocation", or I didn't even know what that was and then so, I could definitely feel like, "Oh, maybe I'd like to be a nun at some point in my life, but I didn't know how to do that" and [...] nobody tells you how to do this, you know, you learn how to do everything else, you know, you are given kind of a structured pathway but, but nobody... until you are like forced into doing it by your own volition or, you really don't know what to do. Like you trepidatiously e-mail a Vocations Director, you cross your fingers that they'll reply, but nobody says, "if you want to discern religious life, e-mail the Vocations Director. If you want to discern religious, life talk to your priest." Like you have to do, you have to like research that and learn yourself to do it and that's fine but it also takes a lot of guts to kind of, there is no door open for you when you are growing up to kind of be like, to question it, it is a kind of a taboo..." [IE1]

Where this ignorance may be surprising but understandable among enquirers, a similar lack of clear processes of discernment on the part congregations themselves sometimes emerges, which is even more remarkable.

'You know there wasn't a good process of actually, "Alright, you are interested in the community, you know, come and visit we will tell you more about, about us" [...] So they invited me a lot and it was lovely [...] but in terms of who they are as a community of [congregation] spirituality or the history or whatever it was... just there wasn't anything there for me to engage with, really. So it felt like I was kind of pushing and they weren't really going for it [...] which is a bit strange, because all of those communities, they want new people to join, so that if you go and say, "I am interested", there is not much coming your way'. [AE1]

A measure of 'survival anxiety' appears to override other considerations or, as one narrator suggests, one enquirer is seen as a useful companion for another emerging vocation, irrespective of the first enquirer's own needs.

'There was a lot of pressure [...] We'd only met maybe three times and she [a vocations director] wanted me to apply to enter and I'd not met any of the other sisters, I'd not visited any other communities and what I, looking back now, I think what part of the other pressure was, you see, there was already somebody else on the scene.' [RCNM16]

‘One of the main reasons why I didn’t leave before because, [...]I certainly felt that [...] the sisters were kind of willing us to stay in community and, you know, because I say it was their choice, their community and they don’t want it to die and you know it needs some new members and they had tried very hard to train, you know to attract new member’ [RCL6]

Another similar narrative suggests that, as an outsider, an enquirer is considered a useful ‘buffer’ between the community and a struggling sister,

‘When I arrived there, they were in quite a difficult situation with one of the younger sisters who [...] had psychological issues about being there. There were actually three sisters who had some kind of mental health problems. [...] What I gave them was me being a buffer between that young sister and the community. She had someone to talk with who was not one of the sisters and she left, actually she left a couple of weeks before, before I left [...] because you know, she’d sort of figured out that she couldn’t, couldn’t stay there. [ANM1]

An enquirer can feel that she is under pressure to join the community of someone she has contacted when she is merely trying to find out more about religious life in a general sense,

‘She kept saying, “Oh, are you sure you don’t want to come and join us?” and that kind of thing. But I had kind of said I didn’t want to join them [...] and it was something else that I was interested in. And [...] it just felt really weird because, it felt like in the olden days, you imagine like they would try and drag you in or something’ [INM4]

Generally, respondents were happy when the period of discernment was over because this brought the relief of having finally come to a decision. The narratives suggest that discernment inadequately done at the outset has significant consequences for the long-term outcome of an attempt at religious life. Some respondents felt that they were being rushed into deciding because it was convenient for the congregation rather than because it was right for them. Some narratives suggest inadequate processes of discernment on the part of the seeker, who appears willing to enter a religious congregation with little or no firm understanding either of its charism or of its current state or indeed what religious life entails,

‘Yes, I didn’t feel, like I don’t really like think that I had a lot of guidance or planning. I just think that I was as small as this with the nuns and they were just like, “oh, what do you think about it, do you want to enter?” It was that sort of thing and I am thinking, “Well, like, I don’t know what I think” [...] but they didn’t say anything to me about it. They said something to me like, vaguely, “Well yes, you seem different to other girls of your age”, that sort of thing, but they didn’t really talk to me about anything that may have helped’ [RCL8]

An enquirer may not be informed about an essential entry criterion which later becomes a distressing issue if it prevents her continuing on a path which she has already chosen.

This may be because the congregation assumes that these criteria are self-evident, but the lack of basic information on the part of a number of enquirers, according to their narratives, suggests that clarity is vital at this stage of the discernment process.

‘I was quite sad that the sister who I was talking to about it, all the years we had had contact had never said a degree is an entry requirement for this congregation. It was only at the latter stages, when it was getting more serious, that she mentioned it and I was kind of, thought, you know, “it would have been nice if you’d said many years ago.” Either I would have discounted it then or given it more consideration if that was the way to go’. [RCL1]

One narrative speaks of the anguish of an enquirer being encouraged to enter a community only to be told after she had done so that the community chapter had decided that she was too old to be accepted into the novitiate after all. This is a rare example which appears to reveal underlying tensions and disagreements on acceptance criteria between the community leader and her council. While unusual, there is evidence that this is not unique. The number of older women seeking entrance to religious life suggests a need for flexibility, but justice also requires that a congregation’s criteria for entrance be made clear to candidates at the outset before hopes have been raised which cannot be fulfilled. There is a cost to a congregation in terms of morale and psychological impact on the established community when someone leaves it or enters only to find themselves unable to fit in with its norms and expectations. It is surprising, then, that some of the narratives suggest that congregations are willing to take such risks.

Exploring a religious vocation emerges as a far more isolated and lonely business than in the past, with obvious support structures few and far between. In both the UK and Ireland, the valuable work of national vocations offices has been crucial in this respect, as has the Compass programme in the UK, but narratives also reveal an important role for diocesan clergy in this respect. In some narratives they emerge as woefully lacking in knowledge or interest in fostering vocations to religious life. For some clergy, the only vocation worth fostering appears to be one to the priesthood, and unless the priest in question has some personal connection with or knowledge of religious sisters, there appears to be little understanding of non-clerical vocations.

‘In the quiet of my head [I] thought about it and eventually found my university chaplain and [...] said to him, “What would you think if” and he said, “I think it is a great idea. Why don’t you go and visit this congregation that I know because I don’t know anything about religious life.” And that was often the answer I got, like my parish priest didn’t know anything about religious life so he sent me to the diocesan vocations guy who equally didn’t know anything about religious life because he was there really to welcome [...] those wanting to be priests.

So they were all very nice, but they weren't... none of them were coming from a position of knowing anything'. [RCNM12]

A similar ignorance appears in one of the Anglican narratives, where an enquiry to the vicar about religious life receives the response that a priestly vocation is a better way forward,

'What I found since then, a lot of times, is that unless the vicar or priest, [...] have had some sort of experience in a religious order [...] they know very little about religious life. So he wasn't really able to give me much indication of what I could do in the church [...] I thought that he knew more about my vocation than I did, obviously this learned gentleman in the Church of England, so being a vicar hadn't, you know, really occurred to me, it was a new thing in the Church of England. So that's the direction we decided to go. Religious life wasn't presented to me really as an option. I wasn't given any contacts like, "Perhaps you would like to speak to this sister who I know", or anything, nothing about religious life. I was and many people still are of the opinion that Church of England religious orders are a best kept secret. Nobody knows these people are around'. [CRCE1]

Where clergy are well-informed about religious life, they can play a powerful role as nurturers of religious vocations,

"I talked to the priest in [...] my old parish and wonderful, wonderful support that I received from my parish priest and also from [...] one of the curates, he was really supportive. And one thing that I remember my old parish priest he told me, and I will never forget that. When he heard that I intended to, I wanted to go to religious life and he simply said, "My dear, go and try. If it is not working, at least you try [...] it is something like you have to try, something that this desire you had before, you have to try; God put this desire in you, you just go and try". [RCNM14]

'He was, he is actually one of my best friends now. He was just the right person to speak to at the right time. He was very supportive, he was always able to talk to me. I would come kind of maybe once a month or so and that lasted throughout my candidacy as well, just to have someone to talk to who was kind of slightly outside but also understood the church and the structures and he, he himself was actually a late vocation to the priesthood. He only went to the priesthood when he was in his early 30s and so he kind of understood me a bit better because he... I think he'd had some similar experiences, you know, having been out and lived a life and then had this call to do something different. And just some of the things that go through your head and some of the experiences that you have, it was really helpful to have him to be able to speak to'. [RCNM13]

Some interviews show a specific idealisation of the monastic contemplative life. Sometimes the seeker herself comes to realise the difference between this idealisation and the reality of her own temperament, leading to more realistic and healthy choices of congregation,

‘I couldn’t have lived in any of those places, I would have killed them all. I could not, now that I know religious life, I couldn’t live with the same, like, ten women for the rest of my life [...] I had [...] ideals and I don’t think... I had not really thought, “what would I need to be able to function as me?”. Well I need space, I need, you know I couldn’t stay in the same place, but at that point I had not thought about that. I just kind of thought, “this is a beautiful way of life”, which it is, so yes I, I’d idealised the other ways of life’. [RCNM7]

Cultural context

What is different for today’s entrants is the cultural context in which the call to religious life is being received. The absence of religious sisters as a regular part of a believer’s background dominates many narratives, speaking of never having met a sister, or of not knowing how to find or approach sisters. For the vast majority the search begins online. The abandonment of monastic styles of dress and living seen as inappropriate by many apostolic congregations since the Second Vatican Council has in some senses rendered sisters invisible to those seeking to join them. This can make it difficult to find role models as a new generation grows up without meeting sisters in school or parish.

‘I thought the religious vocation was something that nobody did anymore because there were no nuns anymore. I never saw them. I was still going to do it, because I thought this was what God wanted me to do [...] We had a celebration in our town for 150 years of the [congregation] sisters being there and during that celebration they had all the sisters up at this special table and I then discovered that two ladies who used to speak to me regularly [...] when I met them in the shops were sisters and I hadn’t known that [...] I just assumed that they were the mothers of somebody’s friend. I had no idea they were sisters, so I always felt that the habit was very important from [...] the point of view of promoting vocations that people can see that religious life still exists. [INM5]

This perceived invisibility is not only at a social level but also an ecclesial level. For some women the call to the religious life is essentially an ecclesial call and if religious do not seem to be a public part of the church this can prove disconcerting,

‘I think one of the things I, I fear is that religious, especially the religious women have lost their place in the church structure, you know. We are not part of the church structure really. [...] we are almost invisible in the church structure [...] we are not there. And I think partly

that's a good thing because it means that we can work at the margins and we can work on things that maybe are not mainstream and, you know, we can be a bit like, a bit prophetic, but I think if we're invisible that nobody is seeing us, then how are people going to join us? And if, you know, if people don't see that there is this life, they are not going to be attracted by it' [RCNM8]

Even among younger members who have chosen a congregation without external signs, the question of invisibility arises as a challenge,

'People don't know I am a religious. I'm living in an area where I don't think the neighbours even know who live maybe, I mean one house is rented so they probably don't know and the other is a housebound elderly lady who knows probably for years, for years there's been sisters in the house but [...] wouldn't know any of us, so yes it is a strange one to fathom and yes we are becoming invisible and disappearing. Okay what do I do now, you know?' [INM2]

Lack of contact can also lead to an element of fantasy on the part of the seeker who has an idealised notion of religious life which she is not able to test against a known reality. Where sisters are accessible, the age gap can make it difficult to connect naturally. But several narratives speak movingly of the impact that a sister's life can have on others, even when drawing to its end. Loneliness emerges as a repeated factor, whether the loneliness of an emerging faith within a non-faith family and background context or the loneliness of seeking help with vocations discernment when a candidate knows no other sisters or approaches clergy or sisters only to be met with a discouraging response.

Again, the age and culture gap can be a significant factor here. As communities dwindle and sisters age those remaining active and responsible within their communities can find themselves with increasing workloads. The relationship with a vocations promoter who can offer close accompaniment and appears genuinely interested in the story and experience of the seeker can be significant, even if that seeker is not seeking entrance into the sister's own congregation.

It requires considerable resilience and generosity on the part of a community to share their life at depth with someone who may then choose not to stay with them, but repeatedly enquirers have found this generosity in one community or another,

'I had been searching for so long and I still hadn't found what I was looking for. I was, if we put in percentages, was maybe 60-65% of me sure, there was another part of me that was semi-blocked off of the maybe, maybe not, you know, so I suppose I held onto the, "well I am 65% sure about this and I am not going to question this time, the rest [...] will all work out. I'll trust in God and it will all work out". But it didn't, it didn't work out.

And I suppose the 'didn't work out', going from the wonderful time I had with them and being able to, to be me and to find myself, to knowing that I could live as a person of faith, spirituality outside the congregation rather than forcing myself into something that probably wasn't 100% me. 65% wasn't going to be enough to sustain me for the rest of my life, only 100%. And I suppose the opportunities, as I said, the opportunities that they gave me to live, to breathe, to come, to go - and the challenges as well. They were wonderful people, women who challenged me, you know challenged themselves, you know, "look at this opportunity for yourself. What if you, what, you are thirty now, you know, do you need to be here, do you need to have children?" You know, these were all the positives and I hated them at the time for it. [...] They wanted me to be sure and they really wanted... and I think they did have my best interests at heart'. [IL1]

Feeling welcome

An experience of being welcome without expectations is strongly remembered by those who receive it,

"They were so welcoming, I mean I couldn't believe it, even on my last day there would be little cards being shoved under my door that were like, "It was so nice to have you, see you again", or even like they were so lovely in saying things like, "Even if you don't want to enter, please come visit or even if you never want to be a nun, please come back."

In contrast to encounters where enquirers feel a subtle or not so subtle pressure, or where they are aware of the survival anxiety of the sisters, this openness of approach helps to lead enquirers to a genuine process of discernment, as honest as it is free.

"They were so open and that's what I found so refreshing. There was never any kind of pressure and it was [...] so clear that I loved it, especially my first live-in, because I was like smiling the whole time, like floating around on a little cloud. But, at the same time, at the end of it, they were like, "Do you really want to come back?" Like no pressure and never was it in any way insinuated that like I should come back, or I shouldn't. It was always like, "What do you want to do?", "This is what". And then only when I asked, like, "What do you think?" did like responses come or kind of encouragement or non-encouragement in some aspects or several things. Like very, just positive and they were oh, yes, so welcoming'. [IE1]

The question of interior freedom operates both for enquirers and for congregations. Practical considerations can prove obstacles, such as when women pursuing a medical career wish to explore a religious vocation but find themselves caught in the tension between what a congregation sees as the essential requirements of the canonical novitiate process and what

the state demands in terms of maintaining their doctor's license. Candidates are quick to pick up elements of freedom or of tension in formation and vocations personnel themselves,

'When I visited one of the houses where I had a conversation [...] with one of the sisters who I think is one of the younger sisters [...] she basically just used the conversation to complain about the other sister she was living with. And I thought, "Really? Really? [...] I live in a community in [charity] and I get community life is frustrating, but this is not a conversation where you kind of pass on your frustration. That's not, you know, very helpful." So [...] that was quite a discouraging sort of moment and I felt generally that there wasn't a good... that just wasn't a good process of welcoming new people in.' [AE1]

If explorers feel they are being 'sold' religious life or where there is no sense of vocational discernment being a reciprocal process or a conversation of equals, it can also be distressing. One former novice speaks of this as being the most devastating part of her experience of her vocational search,

'And it's the bit that [...] makes me so sad about my experience and religious life more broadly, because I have such faith and passion about what it is for some people and what it ought to be, but there's a strong sense that, [...] "What do you young ones know about what religious life ought to be - we've been living it for years," and that's fine but there is an element of, "Actually, if God calls me to this then God has put some of this passion in me." If God says this can be so much more but this could be so different, or this can be relevant for your generation, then maybe there is something in that...' [RCL5]

A congregation's vocations promoter can find herself holding the congregation's anxieties about its own future and that of religious life in general. If the contact sister is herself struggling with discouragement in the face of the fall in numbers, or if she feels alienated from the attitudes of other sisters within a congregation, this quickly communicates itself to potential seekers,

'I do wonder if it was bad timing because [...] at least one sister was really seriously unwell and I wonder kind of maybe they just didn't have the mind space, but also it is the lack of, is the small number of sisters, you know, who does what. So, but I [...] didn't feel like the door was open [...] especially after the conversations with that sister who was kind of so unhappy where she was [...] If the community doesn't feel like it's alive or it's got somewhere to go or they actually want you there or are prepared to have you there, then...' [AE1]

But if a sister has retained a strong sense of the worthwhileness of her life, even if it appears that no one else is joining it, that communicates itself as a trust and confidence in the worth of religious life not only for herself but for anyone else who might be considering it.

Vocational seekers are looking for what might specifically be a good fit for them, but they are also trying to understand what pursuing a religious vocation might mean in terms of the life they will find themselves living. Age is not an insuperable barrier, and younger sisters within congregations speak of a strong sense of love and respect for sisters who have lived their consecration with fidelity and zeal over many decades.

‘[An elderly sister with dementia] made a massive impression on me actually because the goodness kind of shone through this old woman and she was gentle and kind and she loved God and I mean, it, it is hard to say really what was happening but it was quite clear that when she received communion that that was everything to her, that was just, her world was... but in a sense there was a fulfilment of a...of her life when she was receiving communion. So I would be kind of either in the room or I would just be beside when she received communion and it was a, it was awe inspiring really I was, I was partially scared to be in the presence of, of such faith’. [RCNM7]

Identity

As participants consider religious life, they see that its identity is changing and that many of the historical markers of familiarity no longer exist. Sisters are no longer largely in charge of schools, hospitals and other institutional ministries. Those wearing the religious habit are mistaken for Muslims, or provoke initial reactions of wariness, but this changes when contact is made,

‘Some young people like, especially in the school they run in [place] they don’t just see me as a religious Sister, they see me as a friend and I think that’s a stage of some people to go through: first fear, then surprise and then friends. That’s how I experience in my own personal experience as a religious sister when they see me [...] where they accept you for who you are and to know that you gave your life to God, I think that’s beautiful to tell, that you are able to tell that story with the way you live your life’. [RCNM15]

With this shift some participants suggest that congregations have lost their purpose. It is significant that several interviewees assert the importance of a congregation having a central mission and a strongly defined common ministry. They claim that younger people are drawn to the more well-defined setting of a distinct religious habit and clear rules, but these claims tend to come from those who have opted for congregations where this is the norm. It is this that gives them a sense of confidence in the congregation that they have chosen and joined.

'It is probably not very fashionable to say that [...] I don't want to be controversial [...]
Because they had monastic life kind of imposed on them and then at Vatican II they kind of
got rid of their structures, they got rid of the habit, they got rid of like the strict timetable and
they got rid of like the institutions [...] they think that is a great thing and they are all going
off doing their own things and being with the people and all that, which is great but, what am
I trying to say? For me [...] I didn't want my religious life to be just a small part, like. I
wanted it, the whole and I think modern life is so fragmented and I think a lot of active
orders are kind of like that. I mean they are rushing around doing this and fragmented and
like when you look at them, you wouldn't necessarily see that their life was different to
normal people.' [RCNM4]

Questions of age and identity do not follow a single pattern of old-fashioned and modern, or
rigid and flexible. At times what might be the expected stances taken up by old and young are
reversed. Some narratives point to a tension between newer members seeking to assert their
identity as religious through markers such as distinctive dress and older religious who are
strongly opposed to this because of their earlier experience of being stifled by rules they
perceived to be rigid,

'One thing I didn't like was that one of the sisters told me that where she worked nobody
knew that she was a religious sister. And to me that wasn't really what I wanted. I think that
was very common in the past, like it was about being with people and I think people used to
think nuns are, somehow better and so they were trying to get away from that, and try to
kind of blend in. But for me, I was like, "No, I want to be a witness and I want people to
know." So that didn't sit very well with kind of my idea of what I wanted' [RCNM4]

'I think identity is the big thing, looking for identity, it struck me when I, I went to [foreign
country...] and every university I was, I bought the T-shirt and there's this [...] corporate
identity which we never had in [home country]... but I think this, this need to express that
you belong to something, it could almost be anything, that is one of the markers of present
day culture because everything became so liquid. Now that's Bauman's famous 'Liquid
Modernity', that there is a need to say, "well now listen, I am this, I belong to this or there is
a place that I can say, yeah definitely." [...] One of the signs of the times [is] that suddenly the
interest in the habit is back and it is a different way of wearing the habit. I know there is a lot
of old sisters who are quite allergic to it. You know, they come out of [...] a very, very strict
way of religious life that freed themselves a bit, broke out of that system, tried new ministries
[...] it was also the time that we founded ministries in, in Latin America, this option for the
poor, so you could see where they were coming from. And suddenly there is this generation
that says, "now listen, what about the habit?" And they are like super allergic, not realising
that wearing the habit today means something different than to wearing it in 1950.

So I think a lot of dialogue is needed there between the younger generation and the older generation'. [INM3]

The perception of the context in which religious life is currently situated reflects respondents' own worries and experiences of it. They do not talk theoretically; they talk from experience and their experiences are varied so often contradict one another. All the narratives suggest that religious life is in flux and evolving. There is a need for flexibility beyond the old certainties within established congregations with many older members. Newer members can feel that hanging on to old institutional models is stifling the possibility of new growth. Whatever the personal perspective of the narrator, a perceived reluctance to change on the part of the congregation is seen as a threat to the flourishing of vocations.

'Well myself and [names] are all working on vocations at the moment and, you know, I think we are going to do a very good job but [...] I question what are we asking people into because if you came for a weekend here, if I am not here there is no company, no real company.' [INM4].

Upper and lower age limits

Most religious congregations have both lower and upper age limits for receiving new entrants. The question of a prospective candidate being too young rarely arises in these narratives, though some congregations inspire gratitude in their accompaniment of women whom they consider ill-prepared for the realities of their life, insisting on the seeker gaining necessary life or faith experience while still offering much-needed support and encouragement. At least one narrative reveals a former member's realisation that she entered prematurely, before she had a strong enough sense of self to hold firm in an environment and culture that contrasted so markedly with her own inner world as a teenager,

"I suppose the nearest person to me was 40 which was 20 years older than me and I didn't feel there was a place for a young person there, you know, things were always done in a certain way, and I suppose as a 17 year old I wanted to fit in. But yet always that part of me was thinking, "I don't really fit in here, I don't want to fold the tea towels this way," that sort of thing. And the early morning routine were aspects that I loved. I loved prayer life, I loved being part, I loved the music, I loved the celebrations, I loved all that. But it was the fact that I [...] could be part of them and what they did but I couldn't be myself, wasn't part of it. I was apart from it, living their life, and I suppose as a very young person I tried to fit in but there was always, not a conflict but a question, and I suppose those questions (I can see now at this

stage of my life), they were absolutely healthy, normal. But I was questioned from within a congregation, where maybe if I had stayed out a couple of years and maybe even become more aware of what the challenges might be..." (IL1)

The question of an upper age limit is more relevant for today's enquirers. It appears that a religious vocation is increasingly being experienced by some women as a 'second career' move. They have already been in a major life choice, either within a long-term relationship or within a career. They may have experienced a long, low-lying dissatisfaction with their life or a sudden realisation that their relationship with God is pivotal for them and that becoming a sister is a viable option for the rest of their life. For some older women this means that the age gap between newcomers and the established community is not so daunting, but there is a wariness born of experience among some religious leaders and formators about receiving women at an age where they cannot be expected to change deeply embedded habits and attitudes. It can be challenging for a woman in her late teens or early twenties to adapt to the rhythms and expectations of community life. It can prove virtually impossible for a woman in her forties or fifties, who already has an established life pattern, to change it to any realistic extent. A community leader comments on the challenge of obedience in such a case,

'It is not just novices. Beyond that, we have to live that to each other [...] we all live that kind of obedience to each other, really, and I think with some people in today's world, I think it is a really big question for them. Let us say, you know, you have somebody who has been [...] in charge of a government department, and had obvious authority and ability to make all kinds of major, major decisions for other people's lives and for the whole country, but then they may be asked to do something really, really simple, you know, that's not particularly monastic but just human. When you actually have to give in to another person and it, you know, breaks them because they just find that really, really difficult to compute'. [RCCL1]

Others find the age restrictions on entrance meaningless and argue for a more flexible approach towards those who come to discern their vocation, at whatever age,

'I sort of wonder, we have made ourselves a very exclusive group, we set the bar really, really high, you know. We say [...] you have to be Catholic, you have to be single, you can't have dependents, you can't have debt. Now every young woman with a brain has been to university and has debt, you know, this is craziness. We are saying the cut off age is whatever really. Tell that to Elizabeth, you know? If Mary applied to our congregation, she would be too young and if Elizabeth applied, she would be too old so, you know, God chooses who God chooses, you know? I think we have just got to be a bit more, a bit more open" [RCNM16]

The issue of age has multiple bearings on enquirers exploring the possibility of entrance to religious life. Being the only new sister can render entrants special in a way that can feel oppressive because they have nowhere to hide and can feel under heavy pressure to remain in order to keep the congregation alive.

‘One of the things I found really difficult was because the sisters I was with were so pleased that they’d got some people in formation that you had, you felt quite a responsibility to make it work in a way.’ [RCL6]

There is evidence from the narratives that living among older religious who are open to cultural differences and live their life with joy and conviction bridges gaps in age and culture and offers strong and attractive role models. Both newer members and their formators comment that age is largely a matter of mentality and attitude. Having a chronological age gap is not necessarily the issue,

‘I actually personally feel this isn’t an age thing I, I really don’t, because some of our sisters who are quite elderly are very open, so to have an awareness, some of the challenges that I am dealt with, you know, when I say well, you know, we all should be involved in this culture of vocation I get: "well, we are too old" and it’s really what I have been trying to do in my work is to try and, try and sort of break down slowly the barriers’ [RCNM10]

Questions around ‘fit’ not only encompass age and culture but also ecclesiology and ideology. A woman who enters religious life is choosing to make public profession of her faith. There is a sense in which she ceases to be a private individual, as she takes on a way of life which has both private and public implications. Whether she intends it or not, she has become a representative of the church in the perception of many, and this can also present challenges,

‘Then there’s the whole issue of not always feeling in line with what the Catholic church proclaims its truth, which as an individual now I feel quite able to talk about with people, about my own opinions, but I couldn’t then, because I was not just representing myself, I was representing the congregation. I couldn’t open my mouth without representing the congregation. How could I, when I was wearing a habit and had the cross on my neck from the [congregation]? [...] I found it put me in a difficult position because there would be times when people would express opinions contrary to the Catholic church and they would say, “well, how can you believe these things?” And I think, “I don’t believe these things, but I am not in a position, I have to toe the party line,” and that didn’t sit easily at all with me’ [RCL4]

Even people from the same ethnic, religious and social background will experience broad differences in their internalised and often unconscious cultural assumptions, depending on

their age and operant ideology. Where this is not recognised and understood, candidates can find themselves deeply at odds with ideologies that are alien to them.

‘There’s a couple of male friends of mine in [country] who I have known for years and [...] I wasn’t allowed to bring them into the house because they were gay [...] “They can’t come in, it’s disgusting.” And I can, you know... that some people have that kind of opinion and you know you have to be kind of Christian, but for me it was just breaking me down. I thought, “I can’t. I can’t spend the rest of my life...” So, the point I am making is that the older generation were so much more tolerant and open and understanding and non-judgemental and that’s what I tend to be.’ [RCL3]

‘Sometimes the church will come out with something and you think, “Oh my God”. And you somehow feel that you are part of the church because you, you know, you are formally have got a role in the church and yet you really disagree with [...] the spirit of something, so you kind of always feel like you are fighting a battle or you are being a rebel, that’s hard. It is a bit less now, Pope Francis is a great Jesuit you see. [...] I remember the first few, the first few months that Pope Francis [...] had been a Pope, I used to say to people, [...] “This is very strange, I am usually anti-establishment, you know”. [...] Whatever the church does you are a face of the church to people. It’s a challenge. It is also a great, a great responsibility [...] but it is also sometimes when the church does something that’s... you know, like [...] around the scandal of the sex abuse by priests, you know, it is just very difficult to kind of tread that wire between, between saying [...] “I disagree with this completely,” and yet continuing to be faithful to the church that you can see has more than that, there is more to it. I think that’s quite a challenge’. [RCNM8]

The liberalism of generations who emerged against the backdrop of the Second Vatican Council can also clash with the need for the John Paul II generation to find greater anchorage in religious certainty,

‘Well, all I was hearing was, “Oh, you don’t need to go to confession anymore, it is old-fashioned. And I just felt, “Wow [...] am I old-fashioned?” I really did ask myself that question, but then I felt, “No, this is the Catholic church I love. I know that’s not perfect, and there’s a lot of things we need to look at, we need to get right when we haven’t, but I love the Catholic church with a passion because I think that’s where it is at, you know? And I felt really, I was being pulled away from the church that I love and being pulled into this, “Oh well, you don’t need to go to confession.” A few of the sisters said very odd things to me like they didn’t believe in the Immaculate Conception, they didn’t believe that Jesus really performed miracles and all of this, and the things I was hearing were just odd.” [RCL1]

Where the gaps are recognised and efforts are made to bridge them, candidates can find that the powerful attraction of the charism, of the founder or of discipleship in Jesus Christ himself, embodied in older sisters, enables them to adapt even to significant and important differences between them and the group that they have joined.

‘At the centre of their lives was prayer and, and I suppose that’s that was something very big for me: prayer was at the centre [...] and I, I could see, I, I fitted in [...] who I was and what I believed in, you know, there were a lot of matches. There were some of mismatches as well, of course, but it matched maybe what I was looking for then [...], you see it was international and there were lots of people from lots of different countries and had come from a lot of different backgrounds and journeys and experiences and I loved that because I felt normal. I felt, you know, here we are, everyone didn’t just leave school and join the congregation, these are women who have been on a journey and I have been on a journey too. Then I loved the last bit, prayer, because the sacrament was at the centre of their lives and it was, it was in front of the Blessed Sacrament that I first experienced what I felt was my call to religious life. And then they loved life, yes and I felt in tune with my life and they were great fun, great fun, you know, and I loved that, I loved all those combinations and they fitted me, who I was’ [IL1].

Chapter 4

Becoming

More questions of culture

Are religious communities truly open to all? Most congregations would emphatically proclaim their openness to any vocation that God sends them. Their espoused theology of religious life supports this and there would certainly be a conscious rejection of the thought that a candidate might not be welcome because she is not seen to fit in terms of class, race or personal ideology. But several narratives suggest that there is a gap between the espoused ideologies and those unconsciously operative within the group. This may be based on an unconscious sense of what is normal, so that those who differ from the norm are made to feel it in subtle ways.

One of the developments since the mid-twentieth century has been the *embourgeoisement* of religious life. In the early part of the twentieth century there were still large communities of working-class Catholics and Anglicans from which religious vocations emerged. Many congregations, both apostolic and contemplative, had grades within the community, a distinction being made between the sisters who did much of the domestic work and the mothers who sang in choir or taught in the schools, etc. Educated sisters sang or read the Prayer of the Church in Latin, while lay sisters would say the rosary or the Little Office of Our Lady in English. Such distinctions were largely dissolved in the apostolic congregations in the 1950s. But changes in educational and social opportunities also meant the gradual absorption of working-class believers into the ranks of the middle class. With poorer workers within today's society now often coming from overseas, it is notable how few women from ethnic minorities or lower social and educational status appear to find religious life a viable option. This project did not set out to explore the reasons for this, but suggestions emerge from narratives such as this,

'Some monastic communities are quite posh, like [...] I'm from a council estate [...] And I went to university and stuff and got to be a social worker, so I was like professional, but I didn't want to go to somewhere like [name]. [Order] monasteries, like they were private schools and [...] I wouldn't feel comfortable in that environment [...] I have got quite ethical problems with private schools so, but here like everything is really simple, like we try to be simple, try to be frugal and we don't like lots of expensive food and stuff like that, so yes so that suited me [...] I don't know who can sort this problem out, I don't know if anyone can, but this is one of my bugbears about class, because [...] everybody on the Compass

programme with me had got a degree and obviously I'd got a degree but for me it is one of those things that I think well... Because in the olden days there was like lay sisters and choir sisters and like even the [community] where I stayed then, they would run schools and there would be some sisters who would be teachers but there would be sisters who did like the cooking and the cleaning and all that. And then I think because they wanted to make everyone equal, they kind of got one kind of standard now. But to me I don't think there's many people who are kind of like lower class people entering communities. I just don't think there are, and I read a book once and that was saying that in the whole church there is change. Apparently there used to be a lot of Irish immigrants and stuff and the church used to be very working class but now it is, the church is more middle class.' [RCNM4]

While no religious congregation would be likely to make overt and conscious demands on prospective candidates with regard to class-related patterns of behaviour, it is interesting to consider how encouraged an enquirer might feel to try her vocation if she sensed herself as coming from outside the social patterns that are normative within a given community,

'Sometimes we listen, a few of us will listen to music in the refectory and it is always classical music, obviously, but like from my background we wouldn't really listen to classical music [...] I am sorry, I haven't got all the answers to that but I think it is a question that we really need to think because yeah, in the past there was a role for people doing that but now, now I mean if you want to be a chaplain in a school or something or in a hospital then you've got to have some kind of theological training, whereas in the past ordinary people would probably just say the Rosary.' [RCNM4]

If class arises as a question in the fostering and pursuing of a religious vocation, then race and ethnicity are equally factors that raise questions. There is only one testimony here from a young black woman. She was 18 and had just left school when she entered religious life. She left the community after 2 weeks. In this extract the interviewee talks about her ethnicity as a marker of difference and because of that, she has trouble seeing herself as part of the community.

'It was just basically a feeling that I've ever, "what am I doing here? I don't feel like right here, why am I here?" [...] I felt very out of place because like I was in [rural area] and I am from [...] a very diverse area. I stuck out, I think. People looked at me funny [...] There was another thing that happened. Like there was this Bishop and [...] Sister [Name] was like, "Oh look, we have got these new people coming in", and he was like, "have you got any British ones?" [...] because usually most of their entrants are from [European region]. I am a European and I'd say, "I'm from England", and then when I said like, "Oh!", he went, oh yes, I was British, yes [...] So he just kind of looked at me and like he didn't look [...] pleased, like

the sort of British person that he wanted. So, I just felt like really out of place and I just thought, “if the Bishop doesn’t want me here, what am I doing? I just need to leave.” That’s all really, and I just felt like [...] they think that I smell or anything and he just thought that, “Oh yes these people, these people from like different countries are like European and [nationality], they are not as good as if they were home grown British people, like white people”. Do you know what I mean? [...] I felt like, “Well, if I am not even worth anything, what am I doing here?” [RCL8]

Great expectations

Some of the challenges that new entrants encounter stem from their unrealistic expectations of what religious life will provide. Numerous narratives speak of vocational explorers seeking a new kind of family within religious life. This can be one of the dominant ideals pushing forward a sense of religious vocation. Religious and community life will provide the ideal family that has eluded a seeker in her own personal life or possibly a substitute family or nexus of relationships to replace one that has been lost through death or estrangement. There is much that is positive in the narratives about the experience of leaving challenging family and societal dynamics and entering a way of life where the notion of community is at the heart of the endeavour. But inevitably there is a sense of disillusionment and disappointment when communities fail to live up to this idealised vision of what religious life is and entrants find the dynamics within a community all too normally human. Sometimes it is not a question of cultural assumptions but simply of the differing needs of a largely retired community and a working member which have not been noted or provided for,

‘I’d come home from work and they used to have their main meal at lunch time, so I kind of come home from work and there would be like three old ladies and the supper would be like a boiled egg and kind of... I felt [...] “I think I had more community when I was living on my own and I had my own kind of networks and, you know, participation [...] I felt much more part of community in prayer and [...] those things than I did when I was actually living with a community where the sisters were mostly out in the evenings or certainly the younger sisters. It [...] wasn’t clear to me at first, but it kind of gradually became clear to me that this wasn’t what I was looking for. ...there was no sense of community. Like even if we went to the same Mass everyone would sit in different places, you know? [...] I am like, “What does it mean to say that you are a community if you’re, there’s like four people from the community who are at the same Mass and one is over there, one’s there, one’s there and one’s there and they all [...] walk home separately?” you know?’ [RCNM3]

'I imagined it was going to be people living together. [...] Even from when I visited, I hadn't picked up... I'd never realised how isolated life in community is. Now that maybe just be my experience of it but it, it felt like [...] being an isolated item, sort of wrapped in cellophane but in amongst other, other items that were equally ... as a thing and you know realistically, we didn't do things together. You could go whole days and yes, you would see people at mealtimes, you would see people in chapel but in between you didn't see a soul'. [AL4]

The question of community dynamics and the kind of intimacy considered appropriate in a religious community comes up in several narratives,

'It's like they try to ignore the fact that they live together and now I know that there are sisters there who would say that is not true, people do have relationships with each other, but I have to say that my own observation and experience is that it's a whole different understanding of what authentic relationship is or could be. So, I did ask quite a number of times in different ways as I was trying to understand this, "Why, why is this the way it is? Is it something I am missing?" and I did get occasional answers. The Novice Guardian was very good and she said, [...] 'Don't forget that in a community like this it is history and of most women's communities and men's too, is that "special friendships" as they were called were, were highly disapproved of.' [...] I am pretty sure that there's two reasons for it: one is a real fear of lesbian relationships within the community and probably more profoundly or underneath that is the concern that you don't make little "special friendships" and then, you know, stay away from everybody else, you know, in other words kind of flee from community by hiding in one particular friendship, whatever its nature is and, you know, that comes again out of it, out of the community's history [...] And if you put that together with [...] the kind of English reserve that you just don't talk about your private stuff with anybody else, when I am thinking like, "This is now your family. These are your sisters, these are the people you live with 24 hours a day".

[...] There is a kind of a stiffness and a pleasantness, a politeness that does not permit self-revelation, you know, honest vulnerability with each other and these are things that I deeply value. Now I may learn as I grow older that they are not the deepest value and that I have missed something. I am prepared to learn that but that is pretty much what I would say was the reason I felt I couldn't stay. I felt this is a community that does not want to know me and does not want to be known and if you don't want to be known amongst your human family in your community, do you want to be known by God? Because to me the two are so deeply connected [...] So, I don't mean that it is all intimate and all authentic all the time but at least a kind of a culture where that is understood and so because I did not find that there that's [...] pretty much the core of why I felt I couldn't stay'. [AL2]

This sense of loneliness and isolation can derive from the sense among formators that novitiate is a 'desert period' where solitude is a key factor in enabling the necessary process of personal and spiritual growth and adaption. But the situation of lone novices today is markedly different from the dynamics within which many current formators began religious life and may require a different approach,

'I think I only managed to survive that year because [...] a lot of my good friends were in [place] so we did have one day a week as a free day and I think without being able to go and see my friends I'd have gone crazy. I wouldn't, I wouldn't have survived because it was [...] just so numbing, intellectually so numbing and I just felt very isolated, very isolated in the process and [...] even now reflecting on it I really do not see the wisdom of that year being isolation when our reality is such rapid diminishment. So yeah, we did have a little bit of contact with other communities and other sisters [...] and I was able to make some connection with them and tap into some of their wisdom and experience, but very little. And I look back and think, you know, my days would have been much better spent just sitting and being with them and talking with them because a lot of our history [...] is held orally, I'm discovering and every time I had that opportunity to hear some of that and immerse myself in some of that, that was really life-giving for me' [RCNM16]

New members coming into a community can find themselves at odds with what they understand 'community' to be. They contrast their own hopes with what they see as the distant uniformity of life in an earlier regime,

'The days when they all went to work in school and they all lived together and all lived what they called community and we see it more like kind of communal living: they just all follow the same schedule, you know? My idea of community would be slightly different, but you know it is more about how we relate, the depth of relationship, sharing houses in smaller groups and living and sharing faith. And you know having it, I suppose, common mission or we are all going out to work in different places but, you know, we are about the same thing [...] We commit one evening a week that, you know, we will come together for community. We pray, we have somebody to facilitate, you know, have a longer prayer and then we may share something we have around things... around chapter, to work on that the province send out. And [...] as part of that evening, we will check in where everybody says how it is for them or what is going on for them, you know? Share openly about that, you know? And it is for issues between us, we talk about them. So, I suppose that's how it is different. Our effort is related at a deeper level or more open level rather than just sharing a house and being polite to strangers in the house' [INM2]

Entrance and adaptation

The gap between ideals and aspirations and the lived reality of religious life inevitably attracts much comment. For some new entrants, it is not clear until they arrive within a community quite how stretched that community is in terms of its capacity to deal adequately with new members. It can appear as if the rhetoric of the receiving community, embedded in its own aspirations and espoused theology of religious life and community, does not match its lived reality. But the increasingly transnational nature of religious life also poses particular challenges. The majority of women interviewed were either from the UK and Ireland (75%) or from other Western countries (15%). Only six interviewees come from the global south (10%). We have already heard about their struggles of adaptation to Western culture, but this also happens in reverse when women enter an international congregation and are sent to another continent during novitiate where deep ideological gaps emerge. Again, there can be questions of inverse hierarchy based on age, in cultures where respect is predicated on seniority. Where the formator is younger than the novice, this can raise particular difficulties,

‘So anyway, I went off to [country] and reflecting on it afterwards I think that was a bad move because [...] it was a completely different culture, expressions were different [...] and the formator was younger than me, so even though she was senior, she was younger than me and I think that in, in [nationality] culture that’s basically no. [...] So I, I would be getting quite mixed messages from... from my accompaniment and I [...] was completely oblivious to it [...] it felt a little bit like someone’s hit me over my head with a sock. I mean it didn’t hurt in my head, I just felt very sad. So, I wasn’t noticing the clues and it was different cultural clues as well that would have made me read the situation in the correct way, as in, “this is not right”. In hindsight I can see that was happening. [RCL6]

‘I went into the Novitiate and I found that really hard, that was really tough. The person who was my Novice Director, while she was trained officially, was emotionally immature, was much younger than I was. That’s okay, I am not ageist, but hadn’t a clue and if I made the slightest challenge would be very moody, very difficult.’[INM4]

This is not the only time the question of cultural tensions between an older novice and a younger formator emerges,

‘I was actually told by the Superior there that [the novice director] felt afraid of me because I was older than her. I was more experienced than her, I had higher qualifications than she did, but the main difficulty was basic communication. She had a very strong accent [...] The one person that is essential for a person in formation to communicate with is the Mistress of Novices and I could not understand her. Her accent was just too, too pronounced.

Maria Calderon 20/4/2020 22:03

Comment [1]: Take this quote out?

I was frustrated because I couldn't understand her, she was frustrated because I didn't understand her, and it was very difficult and also the difficulties we had sort of interpreting the meaning of each other's actions on a cultural level' [RCE1]

The previous narrator argues that the culture of the country of origin of a congregation should not be the only culture that is validated and appreciated. She believes that it is necessary to separate ethnic culture from congregational culture, leaving room for different approaches,

"That's helpful always, when one has their culture appreciated, kind of recognised [...] But the sense in the novitiate was that we had to all of us do the same thing together all the time and in the same way. And what I felt was, "okay, let's do things together but maybe people want to approach it differently" [...] I understand the importance in some sort of way of functioning that's kind of within the charism, but not trying to make one size out of people and some communities still do that. I pick up lots of people on, on retreats who are ex-members of communities and [...] they struggle with, they weren't appreciated as individuals. So that, that would be kind of bigger things, cultural adaptations - this is an international community [...] so they really struggled [...] with teasing out, what is the call that we need to keep, but it is actually the, the fingerprint of the spirit of this charism and all the other externals that are just the baggage of the culture in itself. And I think [...] that would be really difficult, you know, so much [...] [nationality] stuff that didn't appeal to British people at all, and again that doesn't make the community attractive in the environment. It is a whole [...] inculturation problem [...] I appreciate it is difficult, it is not like saying, "Oh well, this bit applies and this bit is kind of irrelevant [...] we can change that." It is really hard to tease it out, but there wasn't even a willingness, it was always like, "if we don't do it this way, we are no longer faithful to the charism." [RCL6]

Even within the English-speaking world there can be major cultural differences as discovered by a woman who entered religious life in the UK from a non-British background and met what she detected as vestiges of class prejudice and colonialism within the unconscious culture of the community. She reflects on the social directness and honesty that characterise women in her country of origin, contrasting it with the distant pleasantries of community conversation,

'I came of age at a time when women talked about who they really were honestly to each other and I was blessed with some deeply honest and warm relationships with other women [...] we talked about what was really important to us: everything from our political views to our spiritual struggles to our questions about our families and our history, all those kinds of

things and so, and of course, then also being deeply involved with issues of justice and human rights [...]

What was difficult for me is that when [...] they get together and talk, [...] it reminded me of the kind of tea talk. I recalled it when I was a girl, you know, and at my grandmother's [...] I would be given the honour of being able to carry around little trays with cream and sugar to the ladies that my grandmother had at her house [...] She would get together with other [women] of her class and they occasionally would have tea and they would have tea chat [...] They were pleasant to each other as far as I knew and that's what was happening at the convent and I was appalled because I thought, "When you do talk twice a week [...] surely what you would talk about is something that is meaningful and that people would be able and want to share a little bit about their own story or what they are thinking or struggling with or what prayer is like or..." and they absolutely did not do that, and there was a very, very strong sense that that's deeply inappropriate.' [AL2]

It is not only transatlantic cultural differences that can provoke feelings of alienation, "The other two sisters were very elderly and [...] I kind of lowered the average age of the house quite a lot and [...] they had ideas of what I should be doing probably at that stage of, of my community. And whilst they were lovely and what have you, they weren't comfortable about me going out, you know, I felt I was checked up on. Although, I don't think that is, was their intention, they were just interested, but [...] I just felt kind of quite inhibited really, I think and so I was kind of going through the motions but I wasn't happy at all [...] As I say, whilst lovely, they, you know, it was a very Irish community, you know, like [...] whatever they were discussing was all about Ireland and Ireland's point of view, which was understandable for them and you think, "Hang on, you are living in [town] in England, in the UK not in Eire and, and in the 1950s", you know, [...] because they'd got rose-tinted glasses on about Ireland because they haven't lived there since they joined community and were [...] over here, so [...] it all became a bit unreal, the whole thing. And then I would be going out and they [...] were kind of concerned that a young sister had been out at night [...] and some things I felt were approved of and others not approved of and [...] I felt stifled by the end of time, which is a shame because they were, as I say, lovely women, an amazing set of women and [...] I really felt that my time with them was a very valuable and rich time.' [RCL6]

Fitting in

The researchers were struck by the role played by culture in the capacity of new members to adapt and acclimatize within a given community and within the new identity that they take on as religious. Sometimes cultural issues are not a problem, especially within the European context, but non-European entrants speak of struggling with perceived class prejudice,

colonial attitudes, British 'aloofness' or unconscious 'tribalism' or cliquishness of a given locality or group, even a 'group within a group', so north versus south, alumnae of a congregation's schools or other works versus 'outsiders', etc,

'I never felt I fitted in because one I wasn't an old girl because they, they'd had schools before so a lot of the nuns were from the schools that the order had run, so I wasn't an old girl, I wasn't a teacher [...] I felt as though I didn't fit in some way and when it got to [place] I felt even more so because there were eight of us and seven were teachers and me [...] And I look back and I think it was all those little things that were eating away at me and I was pushing them down and pushing them down...' [RCL3]

Several congregations have new entrants who are ethnically and culturally different from the historically dominant group, and this can be far more of a challenge to the newcomer than they had anticipated. If a community takes as spiritually or behaviourally normative what in fact derives from its majority ethnic culture, then a novice from another culture can feel patronised and gain a sense that western culture is believed to be superior to her own. A narrator from Asia reflects back on challenges she received during her novitiate, which she felt had nothing to do with her vocation. Moderations to her most basic personal habits reduced her to childhood status again,

'In Asia [...] we eat rice with a spoon. It is much quicker but in here you learn that you have to eat with knife and fork because it's the culture [...] in our country we are laughing loudly [...] but in here you have to control your voice, you know, [...] suddenly you have to change and again it's a challenge but it is for your good and then you have to control yourself. This is how you mature, I believe [...] and I am like, "Gosh, to me, you know, this is nothing to do with my vocation but [...] every time I eat people are looking at me and if I hold it the wrong way, I will get scolded in front of the Novice Mistress" [...] Then after that I have just no appetite to eat anymore. So silly things like that, you know really, it really put me off and I thought to myself, "I am just a small kid again"'. [RCNM14]

There are particular challenges for those experiencing novitiate overseas in an international or transnational congregation. This narrator describes being sent to a foreign country as a novice as cruel,

'The sister in charge had a lot of confidence in me. I think she had a lot more confidence, my [language] was appalling but, so I went to [city] and [...] I couldn't understand what anyone was saying, so the apostolate, apostolic stuff in, was hell on earth, which was ghastly. They made me phone people and I couldn't understand what they were saying. I mean really it was... it was cruel. You know it really was cruel [...] So I lived... I lived in the vegetable patch and I read my English books and I got through it.' [RCNM7]

Another narrator recalls how language limitations impact on novice instruction,

‘Even though I spoke [language], I mean I have A-level [language], but it was nowhere enough to take part in conferences, particularly on religious life, because my religious life vocabulary was incredibly narrow, even in English never mind coming at it from the philosophical [language] point of view. So they would ask questions and I would be like, “I wouldn’t even ask that question and because I wouldn’t ask, I have got no idea what... like it is not a question I would even think of asking”. So even in our initial gathering of the [congregation] family, like I had to give a ten-minute presentation in [language] on my view of the world, my view of the church and how I had interacted with both of those and [...] that to me was a struggle [...] The [retreat] was done through English even though the community part of it was done through [language]... and I remember the moment I woke up in prayer just before the [retreat] and was like, “God speaks English - isn’t that great?”’ [RCNM12]

A lack of peers can make novitiate an isolating experience, although being in formation with a peer with whom a new entrant has little in common can be just as challenging. Repeated narratives show that inter or intra-congregational formation programmes can be a lifeline, even if international novitiates pose problems in terms of language and culture, though if structures and expectations differ widely from those experienced in the novice’s home province that can prove bewildering,

‘It was the same congregation but very rigid novitiate and no mobile phones and no... so it was really difficult, because [...] here were finally people of my age and then I couldn’t stay in contact with them because they had no phones and no Facebook and no way of me contacting them. So, they are bringing us together and then, you are saying, “well, you can’t speak to each other for another two years” [RCL7]

Further questions of age

As well as the challenges of cultural adaptation, the theme of feeling disempowered and reduced to childhood during the period of initial formation recurs repeatedly across the whole spectrum of narratives,

‘You don’t come into religious life to get it all your own way, you actually want to be genuinely open to pushing aside things that, you know, you get so attached to [...] you want to do God’s will. But that can only happen if you have got dialogue between you and your superior and you are both discerning. But if it is just your superior and perhaps her council and, you know, maybe or maybe not praying about it, and you are just totally left out of the equation [...]

In my mind, it can't possibly be God's will because, you know the person who this is all about is totally left out. So then that, for me... it just can't be obedience. Now I am very open to coming to the table and saying, "Oh look, this is what I feel drawn to." If the response is, "Well, if you are drawn to it, you're not bloody doing it," then that for me is just so old school. But if the response is, "We actually would prefer if you would do this and here is the reason," just wide open to it. And that's the challenge and the beauty, I think, of religious life and the opportunities that can come out of it and I just, I guess all those things that I was learning [...] over the last four years just weren't happening for me in my situation. So yes, so I got out.' [RCL3]

Women entering religious life at an older age than previously may be seen as an advantage, in that they are more mature in personal terms and have life experience on which to draw, but it can make for difficulties when they feel that their experience is disregarded, and a concept of hierarchy is asserted.

'There was that sense that [...] they all had been treated like [...] naughty little girls if they did something wrong. They'd all had no say in anything and so I know that in, in conversation with some sisters it's been very hard to make the shift and to see that others can come in and not have to go through all of that. And I know this was an issue for one sister, you know, "I have been through all of this, you know, who do you think you are, basically, coming in and expecting to, you know, be an equal part of things when you haven't done the hard slog that we had to do?" And if there's an issue in why people aren't staying it may be that there is still that, that old school way of thinking: you need to come in and you know start at the bottom of the heap and [...] work your way through. Whereas certainly people who have been out in the world, who have had independence, they've had a life, they've had a job, they are not going to come in then and go... go into that kind of place of a much more traditional hierarchical way of being.' [AL1]

'I was much older than the community were used to novices being because I'd had a career and done all those things. [...] and there was still very much a sense of novices being like schoolgirls and everybody else being grown up. And I think that the community struggled with how to, how to accept somebody that they saw as quite capable and able who'd been used to being [...] in quite senior posts, how they coped with that because that didn't fit the model of what they expected'. [AL4]

When a sense is conveyed of there being only one correct way of approaching religious life it can lead to feelings of exclusion. Sisters who are themselves younger than the majority in their community also reflect on the gap between themselves, if they have been in religious life for a decade or more, and those who may come after,

Maria Calderon 20/4/2020 22:24

Comment [2] : I like these two quotes but we might need to choose one.

‘So far I think probably not many communities have had people entering who have really grown up with the internet. We have still got the fag end of the people who are, they can use it for work but it is not actually an element of themselves the way it is for the people who have grown up with mobile phones and things like that. And so I think there is going to be another huge change when we begin to have people coming in for whom simply cutting themselves off from their friends and family in the way that used to be demanded, at least from people going into, into contemplative orders, it’s simply unthinkable because they are used to being monitored and present 24/7 in a way that people of my age or even 10 years younger are still not. And I think that they’re going to do a lot of starting questions about what does it mean to be community’ [AL4]

Enriching differences

Cultural differences can also be an enrichment. The age differences within congregations mean that relatively young women who enter often do not have a peer group within the communities. This can cause loneliness although in some cases, when a new entrant comes from a culture in which multi-generational households are the norm, this is less of a problem.

‘Personally, I don’t have any difficulties with the [...] elderly sisters because [...] I used to live with my grandparents. All my life [...] I live with the elderly people [...] I got on well with them and again with my sisters in our congregation, I get on well with them as well and of course you just have to learn through them [...] because it is the beginning for me. I entered into the congregation where I don’t know much about the life of the congregation, so I need them to support me, to teach me, so I take everything what they give me every day as [...] a lesson, so I don’t have any problem at all, thanks be to God’. [RCNM14].

When genuine relationships of friendship can flourish between generations this also facilitates living in communities where the age gap is wide. New sisters are reassured and encouraged by the open sharing of the experiences of their elders when that is freely offered.

‘It was more important to have friends, doesn’t matter what age. I would obviously want somebody else to join and I hope there will be other people to join at some point. In the main, every sister is my friend, doesn’t matter the age. It is love that binds us together, and also I found sometimes you can get so much from experience if they tell you about their experiences and share things. I think that is important, they can help you with your own experience’. [RCNM1]

Elderly sisters can be seen as the custodians of tradition and as grandmotherly, if eccentric, figures from whom some wise if unexpected lessons can be learned,

‘There was one sister I remember, she died and it was only after she died that I realised how close we were [...] I’ll never forget her. One sister who was the oldest in our community at that time, and I would say to her, “[name], how did you manage, how did you get through, what has kept you here so long?” And she looked at me, and she was as happy as Larry and she was going out and serving and she was working well into her 70s if not 80, and she’d say, [narrator’s name] “Because I broke all the rules”, and I thought, “woman, I like you”. [...] I said, “what do you mean [name]?” and she says “We couldn’t have a bath without wearing a chemise”, she said, “I would throw the chemise into the bath [...] and I would bring it out with me wet after” [...] And she said, “You know, recording your budget [...] you know in your heart of hearts you are living the simple life, you are not extravagant”, she says, “budget, round everything off [...] don’t be spending hours like some accountant for every little receipt [...] you have this money, they know you are not spending a fortune, just divide it up into different categories and [...] there’s your accountability for your money.” [RCL5]

Other respondents reflect on the age gap and see that a person’s outlook and mentality is more important for companionship and good cross-generational communication than chronological age,

‘Some of the more forward-thinking sisters that were [...] certainly on my wavelength, were in their eighties. I don’t think it is about age, it is about mind set [...] I mean there were sisters of my age that were in community and we didn’t have that much in common [...] and it was just so obvious that all of us were so different and [...] we had very little in common other than being [name of congregation].

And so the sisters that I was the closest to were a variety of ages, so I don’t think it was about age, it was just about personalities, really, and, and often it was the old sisters that [...] were often much more forward thinking and like, really encouraging and [...] some of them had done some amazing things. Whereas those in their fifties and sixties had tended to, as I say, more conservative and kind of toeing the party line more [...] I mean one of the old sisters that I lived with was still alive and she’s over 100 now and [...] I can remember her saying, “Don’t ever ask if you want to do something, just do it anyway and tell them afterwards” [...] and that’s obviously how she has got on through her life but yes, she was a very, very spiritual person and I learnt a lot from her’. [RCL6]

Elderly sisters are sometimes categorised as too cautious, afraid of change and new technologies. Younger sisters in contrast, see themselves as decisive, full of energy and ready to embrace change. But some narratives show that patience is needed on both sides.

There is an understanding that community cannot be tailor-made to the needs and requirements of newcomers, and adaptation to the pace of the majority may be the price to be paid for entering a community,

'I sometimes feel we talk about the same thing a thousand times before we make a decision, you know, and I come from a world where, you know, because you have got to get the next funding bid in, you haven't got time, you know, you meet, you talk, you decide. You don't meet and talk and talk and talk and come back. I think that's an age thing as well. I also think maybe sometimes people are struggling to hold information and remember information, you know, things that they just process so much slower, so it's been a test of my patience sometimes to really just stay with the process' [RCNM16].

What emerges in a number of narratives is the development of an internalized theology of the vows and a theology of religious life which develops as sisters learn to adapt and come to terms with its challenges, even when they are a cause of deep frustration,

'It is a different culture. [...] I struggled to understand. When I don't understand something, it is harder to obey, to just follow, to do what you are told, so it's frustrating, so I do have frustrations inside me, like. And it's not just culture; the way each of us do something is different: I will do it this way, you do it that way, doesn't mean I am right, you are wrong or you are right I am wrong. That requires acceptance and training as well, to know that there are other ways to do things, people have other ways. It is still something I am learning. I am struggling with that because I am sure that I know my way is fast, efficient, practical, why not do it like that? [...] It is frustrating when things are not done properly [...] but I learned that in community if I were to [...] let those things control me, I would be miserable every day [...] It's [...] something that I will struggle for because I feel like it's making me a better person [...] I know God... God loves me regardless of [...] my imperfections, but despite me not having a close relationship with him or a religious upbringing I have a strong desire to do what he wants me to do. [RCNM15]

Despite disparities of age, if there is an openness to exchange as equals, without a sense of age-related hierarchy, differences can prove to be a source of enrichment,

'I know it is a bit difficult when I have to speak to sisters from other generations because sometimes they don't really know what I am talking about and I don't know what they are talking about because it is just a different kind of background, really and... but I think it is a chance for us to be open to it and to learn from each other. Being the young generation here means that I can learn a lot from the old ones because they do have more experience than me and also I need to give them my availability to share with them what I have experienced in my life as a young person, from a more modern generation' [RCNM2]

Questions of training

Offering in-depth formation in religious life can be difficult when adequately trained personnel are low in number and novices are few and far between,

‘I visited there before of course and spent time with them there before but from entering as a postulant I was there six months [...] When I asked about going forward, she said that I was not ready and I knew I was not ready, but I was not ready because I was not being taught anything [...] But it was not Mother’s fault, I mean she had no personnel who were able to take on that role. That, that was the problem and a community who is in that situation should perhaps think twice before accepting a person if there’s any doubt at all whether or not they would be able to provide sufficient training and instruction for that person’ [RCE1]

‘One day a week we spent looking at Constitutions and founder documents and stuff like that, but it was being done kind of off the cuff. I mean it’s just one to one and initially other people had said they would like to be involved and it would be an enriching process for everybody and then actually nobody wanted to be involved except the Novice Mistress. So, it was just a one to one thing on a Tuesday and that was literally it.’ [RCL7]

Long-professed religious frequently tell stories of entry into a system of novitiate formation that was markedly rigid and unwilling to making allowances for individual characters and their needs. Possibly there remains in some groups a level of negative reaction to such memories, but some of the narratives, from both current and former members, point to a notable void in formation programmes with new members left to fend for themselves, with few clear indications of what is required of them or how they are to absorb the essentials of the life without a clear plan of study or meaningful ministry,

‘I would have preferred a bit more direction at that point. And then if I’d have said, “look, hang on, I am like really struggling here”, you know [...] I would rather have it that way around rather than... But I could see where they were coming from, so again it was that kind of wrapping you up in cotton wool about, you know, “you decide”. It is there, “it’s your formation”. And we were told that a lot. “That’s your formation”. And you think, “yes, but I don’t know what I am here to be formed in here”, you know? “I do need some direction”. And I mean I did say this to my mentor quite a lot, and [...] she’s saying, “but we’ve been told not to kind of... to lay off you in a way, just until you come up with what it is you want to do.” But I was like a woman in her mid-thirties, and I knew what I wanted to do a lot of the time, but when, you know, it is an alien thing going into a community so you need to have something, you know? They did take that on board, you [...] have got to give some direction because it is so different, we don’t know what we are supposed to be looking, you know, being formed in’. [RCL6]

If this is indicative of an overall loss of a clear sense of purpose within the congregation it is quickly picked up. Some respondents speak of formation content that presented little challenge, and report sensing that they could have learned the same things in a shorter time. For older women coming from a professional background this is particularly frustrating. Having struggled so much to get themselves to the novitiate in the first place, they appreciate a formation programme which feels appropriately challenging. Among younger interviewees some narratives show a strong appreciation of the clear structures and expectations which go with monastic life or with more traditional approaches to religious life in general. Equally congregations willing to try new approaches and catering to the different needs of today's new entrants tend to retain them.

'When I finally got to the [...] European novitiate I had one co-novice who was [nationality] and she had done so much in one year of postulancy compared with what I'd done in nearly two years. No wonder I was stultifying, you know, because yes, she had been really prepared for the novitiate and I hadn't, I really hadn't'. [RCL4]

Although new members mostly report negative personal reactions when they meet rigidity within the congregation, the opposite is also true, and several narratives argue for a stronger sense of structure and purpose within the formation programme and report feeling inadequate to make judgments about the programme content themselves if such decisions are left to them,

'So, we had no programme, we had no classes, we had [...] nothing going on. I mean I spent seven months doing nothing. I watched a lot of Netflix, I am ashamed to say... Because they were [in their eighties and nineties] and then the pre-novice director was much younger, she was about [...70], but she was so busy taking care of them, because they [...] really had a lot of health problems and stuff. One of them has since died. They just took up all her time, it was like, you know, taking care of them and just feeding them and that stuff. Now their provincial has since really apologised profusely to me for it, but the other girl who was in formation with me, there was two others. One was sent away but the other one, she got really bad depression because she just couldn't cope with it. In the end I went to the provincial and I said, "I am either going to leave or you allow me to get a job." So, I got a full-time job then, a really, really nice job and that's how I got through the rest of it. I was fine then because I was out working all the time. I know that's really bad but that's just the reality'. [RCL3]

'They were totally making things up as they went along and [...] the novice mistress she, she really did try hard and she was able to think differently and think outside of the box. But essentially for everybody else they couldn't help but harp back to how it had been for them, so you had, when you finish novitiate you have to go to a different city irrespective of the fact

that you are 37 and you've a job and your family and all of your friends or whatever are here and you are not going to a community, you are going to live on your own, you still have to go to a different city. So [...] no matter how radical I had thought they were and some of them were, in the end it was still harking back to, "This is the way we did it, so this is what you must do", whether it made any sense or not.' [RCL7]

Maria Calderon 20/4/2020 22:35

Comment [3] : Shall we get rid of one of these quotes? Maybe this one?

Being flexible

Feeling free to ask questions and confident that they will be answered fosters a climate of trust even where a new member finds herself negotiating the unfamiliar territory of what is and is not considered permissible,

'I've heard all these horror stories from other novices and it's just like so far from what they have said, my congregation hasn't done ... so it is just like and if I have any doubts I just ask the question. I am not afraid to ask the question so I just ask and like I have my reception or Rite of Initiation in September and I have been told it's closed, but I would like to invite the sisters who have accompanied me and I wasn't going to ask and I was like, "Well if I don't ask I will regret it, so all I can do is ask and all they can say is yes or no and if they say no, well then at least I know, but they could say yes and then I have people that I feel they are important to me with me" [RCNM11]

Flexibility in allowing a novice space to develop an understanding of what appropriate behaviour is, so that she can make a positive choice for it is also found helpful,

'She allayed a lot of my fears around and let me know what kind of a life it was going to be because for me I was going to be going through it, right? But for my family and friends, they hadn't a clue and I really didn't have that much clue myself, so [...] this was a great help to me to let them know what was the process [...] I rarely go out in the day without putting on my lipstick and lipstick was partly my only make up when I was a lay person, but I went for my interview to [place] and I had put on the lipstick, because I put on every single day, you know, from whenever I started wearing it. And she said to me, "Mmm [name], I see you are still wearing the lipstick", and I thought, "Oh Boy, here comes: gone." She says, "Well done, I'm delighted", and I said, "Well it really is part of who I am at this stage [...] I feel undressed if I don't have it on"[INM1]

A sense of belonging, of taking on a common identity with other members of the congregation and with its history can be a very powerful factor in anchoring a new entrant to the life she has chosen. Learning about the history of the founder and community can lead to a strong self-identification with the bigger religious family.

Sharing the founding stories at inter-novitiate courses can enable the novice to feel a sense of family pride in her congregation. Where a novice has felt accepted as an individual and included as an equal from the beginning, she has the confidence to question her own growth and motivations and develops the freedom to discern the adaptations she needs to make into religious life. Where this flexibility and room for individuality is lacking, there is a sense of being stifled and put onto a formational conveyor belt,

‘That sense of respect that, “OK, God calls you with your gifts, so let’s make the most of it.” That wasn’t very much there in the community. Everyone sort of - it is better now, from what I’ve observed - but everyone sort of went through their kind of sausage factory.’[RCL6]

The support of the principal formator and of the wider community is an especially important factor for novices who are not in their own ethnic culture. It is a common part of the novitiate process for new sisters to experience doubts and sometimes irrational thoughts which need to be rationalised. They can struggle with a sense of unworthiness or of loneliness and isolation, but several narratives speak of feeling that, despite this, they know that this is where God wants them to be. This is the right place for them and where God has called them.

Chapter 5

Belonging

'If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away' (2 Cor.5:17). A dominant part of the narrative within many congregations is about the necessity of shedding the old self and taking on a new identity when a person enters religious life. For some current entrants this is a powerful draw with its connotations of starting afresh, healing, personal renewal and a different way of constructing society in a desired and deliberate rejection of today's secular culture. Narratives come from differing theological perspectives, but having a substantial programme in which a new member can get fully involved and where she can see value and the potential for growth appears to trigger the strongest positive reactions,

'I loved the learning about the liturgy, we had classes, we had classes every morning between 11.30 and 12.30 so we had like, there was scripture study and there was like liturgy, the monastic life, like religious life, the history of the order, that kind of thing so all this kind of stuff, everything, everything I was learning impressed me more and more. And I as a child [...], I always felt that you couldn't love somebody you didn't know, so I always wanted to know more, like to know God more. So, the study aspect of here [...] really, really appealed to me, you know? But I hadn't actually pictured or had any real ideas about what the life, the lived life was like. Looking back, I think that [...] what was very important for me would have been the, the commitment of all of us to seek God, if that makes sense, that Jesus is the most important person. And also what I think what would have been very important for me was orthodoxy, that there wasn't any weird and wonderful beliefs going on, if that makes... you know, so that, that, that these people truly believed that Jesus was really present in the body, like in the Eucharist'. [INM5]

It is inevitable that when a person gives up some of the standard markers of adult, autonomous life such as their own home, freedom of movement and of determining their finances, work, lifestyle and relationships, they will feel a strong initial sense of disorientation and dislocation. This will be all the more true the longer that a person has lived independently, and with most female candidates today being older, this is an important consideration. While entrants generally understand this in the abstract, in practice many speak of hidden hierarchies which foster feelings of infantilization within religious life, both for newer and established members,

Maria Calderon 21/4/2020 19:07

Comment [4] : Shall we move this section about formation to the previous chapter?

Maria Calderon 21/4/2020 19:06

Comment [5] : Maybe get rid of this section as there are a lot of quotes about not being treated as an adult in the previous chapter.

'My impression occasionally with some people in the community and this would apply anyway, they were slightly infantilised by the way they were treated, especially when there was a very strict demarcation of the hierarchy within the community. It is looser now especially here in Britain, because it is just the way how people are here. But there was a real sense that when someone was in charge everyone switched off their brains and it was almost like they became kids and they had to be told what to be doing almost without thinking'. [RCL6]

Entering a group marked by a strong emphasis on silence, recollection and prayer may well require learning how to act and move in a way that fosters stillness. For one new entrant this was reassuring and helpful,

'For an entrant coming in, you were shown how to do things and then once you could do it, you were left to get on with. You know, I did know certain things like how to polish but [...] a person perhaps who may not know that, then they would be spared the embarrassment of asking, you know, so that they didn't have to say, "Well I have never done this before, how do I do it?" They would be spared that; they would be shown how. It was a good approach. I didn't find it at all annoying. I found it friendly and well thought out because the sisters were not overbearing, you know, they didn't hang over me. If I did something, they would make sure that I knew what was to be done. They would come back halfway through to ask if there was a problem or if I wasn't sure of something or where was the polish or something like that and so that everybody coming in would know how certain things were done in that community and I was fine with that.' [RCE1]

For other narrators, the idea that a woman in her forties must to be taught how to wash a mug, hold a fork or sweep a floor because only one way is considered the correct or acceptable way to do so engenders feelings of de-humanisation and disempowerment.

In the process of integrating into an established community, relationships can be intersected by unwritten rules and by differences in age, class, culture and race. Power relations between old and new members and different ways of understanding community life are constantly being negotiated. This is especially true at a time when women are entering religious life later in life. Another important element which occurs in several narratives is how congregations deal with mental health problems, especially depression, both among new and established members. New entrants are aware that as communities dwindle in number, the burden of supporting sick and struggling members can become incrementally heavier. Nevertheless, even though most interviewees would argue that community living is challenging, many stories stress the positive and articulate deep appreciation of supportive communities where they feel at home and able to live the religious life with joy.

Flourishing

New entrants flourish when their talents and gifts are taken into account, when they are included in decision making and when differences are integrated or put aside for the benefit of the whole community. They exhibit pride in their congregation's history and ministries, as well as their current members, and value its capacity to hold together differing theologies and faith perspectives,

'I am proud of my congregation, I am very, very proud... For us, our Mother Foundress wants us to make God's love visible and there's so many ways to do that. I mean, there is no limit to how you can make God's love visible and I love that idea of unlimited... no boundaries for us to carry out our charism, to show our charism. You can walk down the street and smile at somebody, you might be making God's love visible for them so I, that's what I love about our congregation. We don't have to go specifically for certain people, you can go for any group of people, because what we have to do is make God's love visible and there's so many ways to it, you know, ways I haven't think of, so I love that about congregation'. [RCNM15]

'What works for me? Goodness, oh there are so many things. It is extraordinary that we seem to have a collection of people here who fit into all the different niches ... and we all seem to have different gifts and skills that complement each other, it is quite extraordinary. [...] I keep saying I value the fact that we all come from slightly different traditions within the Anglican broad church, of Anglican experience ... and yet we manage to worship together in good will and a sort of willingness to learn from each other's differences and I find that extraordinary and wonderful. That doesn't mean we don't argue. We do. It doesn't mean we don't have different ideas of how things should be done. We do but we, we seem to manage to find a way of respecting each other within that and I think I find that one of the most valuable things here'. [ANM2]

Vocations directors can justifiably be wary of an enquirer seeking the ideal family within a religious community. But when a new member speaks positively about finding family it is not necessarily a projection or a compensation mechanism. If she has a sense of being accepted and integrated into the community on equal terms it is a powerful draw,

'What I love about this congregation? Amazing, I love all about, it's [...] the unity and the family, the life of the sisters as a family, you know what I mean? Everybody is equal. It doesn't matter where, [...] you come from, but you are a sister as soon as you enter into this congregation, you are already part of the sisters, so they treat you as them, as their sisters so in unity and welcoming... [...] To be a sister you have to have that love. If you come into a house where there isn't love, and you stay, because above everything is love, isn't it?

Love speaks more than anything. You feel like you are loved, and you feel like this is my home. I think like with all families as well, families, couples they love each other, and they live, they give everything for their children. That is love. So, it is the same with the congregation, I believe, and that is why I like, I feel good in this congregation. It is because of [...] that love and unity and sharing and rejoicing all the time. Of course, I cannot say there's no... no difficulties that's when I lied of course, every... I believe in everywhere you always find difficulties, but I believe that the joys are more than the sorrow. It is more.' [RCNM14]

Even where there is a strong parallel drawn with family, the religious family is described in ways that are realistic about its challenges,

'Ups and downs, I think, something like family there also have this saying: you can't choose your family, but you can choose your friends. I don't think you can choose your community either (laughing). So, it has been an interesting experience living in a community. There are things that I have to learn and adapt. There's plenty of joy [...] but [...] sometimes there are frustrations, but my community, whether it's here in [place] or in [place] where I was in the beginning, despite the tears and frustration or joys, even joys, they have become my family. I see them as my family, and I will defend them to death in front of anyone. I don't know why I mean, I don't, I've known some of them for two years, three years but it just felt... even as a congregation I have not met most of them but we communicate, I see them through Facebook, social media, I feel that we are one. They might be in [country] they might be in [country, city] but I feel like we are one family. They will speak good of me and I could speak good of them, so living in community is like living with a family. It is not happy-clappy all the time but there's a sense of belonging; there's a sense of love and there's a sense of... regardless of how bad you are, there's a home for you to go back to. So that's how community life is for me at the moment'. [RCNM15]

Sometimes narratives articulate surprise at the freedom that the speaker has encountered within religious life, but this is a different kind of freedom from the *laissez faire*, 'you decide' approach to formation discussed in a previous chapter. Where the formators have taken the time to notice and encourage personal particularities and differences it is met with a deep sense of affirmation and of being encouraged to live religious life as the specific person that the narrator is,

'I feel very lucky where I am at the moment, they have been supportive, they would like let me study, they have let me do things I have wanted to do. Like I trained for a [sports event] last year and I haven't done much training this year and they are like, they were like, [...] "You should be exercising in order ...", so they are encouraging me [...] It is not that they are restricting me but I don't know at the next stage, but I do know that I met with another

mistress and she wants me to exercise because she has a disability where she can't exercise, so she is like, "It's important and if I could do it I would do it, but I can't, so I don't want you to stop because you can do it" and the girl who was last in formation she played an instrument and she did Irish dance and she's still got to do that because they say, "You need your out, you need to still be who you are and not to change", so I do feel very fortunate so far with my congregation'. [RCNM11]

Candidates to religious life are often told that they must have finished with any therapeutic process in which they are involved before entering a community. While this may well prove advisable, it is interesting to note how encouraging it can be for a new member to be reassured that such a process is not inevitably opposed to being in formation,

'I think what really attracted me here was the openness that the community has to kind of individual flourishing, you know, and the fact that we are all individuals [...] Your first vocation is to be the human that God made you to be [...] So like for example in coming here it, it's been okay that I still continue to see my therapist every week, you know, [...] whereas another community that I visited I was told that would not be possible, that I would need to finish my work with her before I could even think about coming, you know? Whereas here there is kind of no expectation that you are a finished product, you know, we are works in progress [...] and various different members of the community have or are currently accessing like counselling, therapy that kind of thing, you know so that is provided for, which I think, you know, which I think is really important and which I also found very attractive, you know in terms that I felt it was a place [...] where I would be able to grow with the support of the community, you know, but I would still be able to kind of do that sort of personal growth work. [...] And I guess just that openness to one another, you know we are an amazingly diverse [...] everybody is very different from each other you know and obviously that causes frictions but ultimately there is acceptance of that'. [ANM3]

'Right from the beginning [...] I had a vocations director who genuinely seemed interested in me, in my journey and in realising that [...] I wasn't coming along to be conformed to what it took to be a [X sister]. It was, "Can I actually... can I personally grow into what it takes to be a [X sister]? So, it wasn't a case of, "As long as we give you enough rules you will become a [X sister]". It was, "This is the [congregation] charism, this is [narrator's name], is there a fit? [...] I think you change much more when you feel called to it as opposed to somebody insists that you change. So I had a vocations director and I had then a postulancy director, excellent spiritual directors, the novice director, so all of those are very personal roles because they are the ones that are like directly involved with your initial entry and they care, they care very much on a psychological level, they care on a religious level, they challenge you but I think mostly they challenge you in love'. [RCNM12]

Inclusion and exclusion

These narratives of joyful inclusion contrast with where a new entrant has not felt integrated or accepted. The examples offered may appear minor when judged out of context from the outside, but within the context of someone trying to integrate within a closed group they have considerable force. An Anglican former novice recalls her longing to be part of the community she had entered and her dawning realisation that she was never going to be fully part of it. She describes this realisation as “the beginning of the end”. She left shortly afterwards,

‘One of the, the very difficult memories of that time was when [name] my fellow novice was life professed [...] Part of the profession service is that you all gather round the person being professed, the professed sits in the middle of the circle and all the professed sisters [...] gather around. But by the time that service was... I was the only novice, so in the whole community I was the only person that was not, I was dressed in my [colour] habit but I wasn’t part of that circle and I wasn’t even [...] allowed to sit with my sisters [...] That was the beginning of the end for me [...] In hindsight, I never was going to belong there. I never... I longed to belong, I longed to be part of that community, but I never was going to be. But [...] again I would say I’d never ever before or since been to a service where I felt so excluded than at that profession service’. [AL7]

A similar narrative highlights the pain of feeling excluded for someone trying to integrate into a community. When this is seen as being part of a hidden sense of hierarchy or the exertion of power on the part of the formator, or when it is seen as contrasting with inclusion processes in the secular world of work or of other institutions, it can be particularly bewildering and painful. This is especially true if acceptance and integration into the community is understood to be conditional, so that the new member has in some sense to ‘earn’ the full acceptance of the congregation that she has joined.

‘The sisters [...] were invited to go out for the staff meal [...] so I asked if I could go, I think I did anyway. Anyway, I was told, “Oh no, this is just for, just for sisters who have a special connection with [institution], this is not really for you. So I thought okay but then as time went on I discovered that actually all the sisters were going and I felt really left out and... everybody was going except me, well maybe one sister was staying behind to look after the older sisters [...] but really it was basically... it was all inclusive. It was not true what she’d told me [...] I knew that she would not be open to discussion, so I talked about it with another sister and she said, “Oh, I can organise to get... for you to come to the meal” and she did, and of course it was cataclysmic because then I’d gone behind my postulant mistress’s back.

She was absolutely furious and but what, for me, she really didn't understand was that whenever I'd entered a, joined a company to work with a company or joined a community or whatever from day one you were included, you were part of the group and for me it was like saying, "Well [...] you've got to, I don't know [...] earn your way into being part of us", or something. And I still looking back on that. I still feel that it was, it was really a big problem for me that I wasn't just part of them from the beginning'. [RCL4]

New entrants understand that when they join a community as novices, they cannot expect to make decisions about things about which they have had no previous knowledge. But given the age profile and life experience of many of the respondents on seeking to enter a congregation, some element of participation might be hoped for. Where congregations welcome the participation of new members it helps with their sense of integration,

'I went there knowing [...] that they were looking for new, new ways to be who they were and that was quite exciting in a way, and some of the things that I was involved in because of that were exciting. But I think also there was a lot of insecurity about and a lot of, of trying to find the way really and of course I was shut off from all that because I was only a novice so I wasn't involved in discussions, I wasn't involved in chapters, I wasn't involved in [...] any forum where that was being discussed or being opened. So it was, so I was in it and it was going on around me, but I was kept separate from it. So yes, and I spent nearly three years washing cars. I had no problem with that [...] I never had any issues with all those things, that was what I went there thinking that I would do'. [AL4]

Under observation

Among congregational leaders and formators there can be conflicting opinions about whether new entrants should simply integrate into an established community or whether the formation community should be tailor-made to their needs. Previous narratives speak of novices finding themselves at sea without structured programmes, not knowing what to do with themselves or being unsure what is expected of them. In contrast to that are memories of the early years of religious life as a time of being under constant observation,

'I had only met the person who became the novice director once before becoming novices and I felt that maybe had I had a bit more interaction with her at different events it may have helped me to kind of ease more into the transition, because I do understand that in the novitiate it is a time of bedding down and getting to know and really kind of getting to grips with what the life will be, but my experience of the community as a candidate was they were living the life. We were taken into a kind of like protected environment to learn about the life and for me what would have been more helpful would have been to just live with people who already lived the life and not feel like I was a goldfish being looked at. [RCL1]

Where new entrants can also find themselves under pressure is when they discover the existence of unwritten rules, known to all established members of the community but not transmitted to new members,

‘I always had a sense that [...] my every move was being charted, and that was borne out on several occasions. You [...] would meet with the novice guardian in the novitiate and there would be something that she’d seen you do that you shouldn’t have done. For example, I once crossed my legs under the dining table, so that was one of my misdemeanours and when I, when I was first there I put butter on my jacket potato because I saw somebody else do so, but I didn’t realise that butter was only allowed on jacket potato if you were one of the older sisters, but the younger sisters were not supposed to have butter on their potato but nobody told me that. [...] You were expected to pick up on them, yes. You know, I get, there were lots and lots of little rules and to try and tell somebody everything in the first week would have been hard but then it seemed a bit unfair to be picked up on it...’ [AL4]

Where these hidden rules of behaviour are transmitted, it can be equally disconcerting when they change in ways that the new member is unable to understand or anticipate. Similarly excluding is when a novice’s talents or experience are not used when she is eager to be of service in a specific way,

‘On my way to the laundry I would have to pass through the guest entrance where there was like a tea bar and sometimes I would, there would be like dirty cups there, so I would just rinse them out and put them to dry. And I got into trouble because that wasn’t my job. That the sister who was in charge of the... the guests should do that, fair enough and I had to stop putting the cushions straight on the chairs in the guest entrance. The next thing I know, at a community meeting it was “If you walk through the guest entrance and there are dirty cups in the sink, would you please wash them up, it doesn’t matter whose job it is”. Well, so I didn’t know where I was, you know, so sometimes I’d walk through and the chairs would look really untidy because the cushions were either on the floor or [...] so I’d stand there and think, “shall I do it, or had I better not or shall I do it?” So, I would be wondering what to do all the time, you know? [...] I think it really came when, when I wasn’t used for the library or the, the accounts to do more when I knew I could do [...] I really felt like I was just being told to go away, you know, and that was the only way’. [RCL3]

Relationships within the community

Respondents reflect that religious community entails opting to live with strangers with whom one might not normally have anything in common in the natural way of things. Yet there is also the sense of needing to play their part in making community life work,

'I think genuinely it is one of the amazing things of religious life, I think, that you can put this random group of women together who probably out of religious life wouldn't be drawn together in any way shape or form and it works. Like somebody once said to me, "How do you know God exists?" and I said, "You look at religious community because it does... like you get women who are willing to put themselves not second always but just put them like, throw themselves into a common project and it works'. [RCNM12]

One narrator acknowledges that, in some respects, community life represents the greatest challenge within a religious vocation, and yet also sees its potential for spiritual growth,

'For me I think living in community is the most challenging thing, where you've got a group of people all being called to this one place and nobody has chosen to live with the other, we've all come from different social backgrounds, different educational backgrounds, we, we are different in character, we are different in temperament and in this community [...] we have a whole spectrum of ages and somehow we've all come together in this place. I think it is a great marvel and wonder that God has brought us all together for this moment in time, in this place and somehow we have to find a way that we can work together, pray together, live together, have fun together and live a full and fulfilling life together and, and resolve difficulties in a way that will, will not demean us but will actually be life-giving for us and show us something more of our character and help us grow deeper, yes. So, I think that is the most challenging thing for me to live with people I haven't chosen to live with'. [ANM1]

Even when members acknowledge the irritations of community life, they also see the human and spiritual value of it in the detail,

'It is infuriating in all kinds of ways and I suppose like for me community is about solidarity rather than something kind of fluffy [...] I mean there are, there are things about community life which are like really wondering and warm and human. I mean for example [...] I had a kind of trial period here and one of the things I had got a really bad cold, [...] and I had been sent to bed early and basically one of the sisters said to me, you know, the Prioress wanted to talk to me and I was like in my pyjamas and dressing gown. She said, "Can you just go into Prioress' office?" and I was kind of like, "Really - like this?" and I mean I did and she just wanted to know did I need any medicine or, you know, she was just kind of being caring. And I, I know that [...] in other perhaps more formal environments that wouldn't happen, but to me that is sisterly and it is the community thing, that if someone is ill yes, you don't have to be like fully dressed in your habit to maybe find out if you need medicine. You know, there is a kind of informality there. Perhaps in small ways but when you live, I guess, in the context of the formality of this kind of life those things make a big difference because they are just kind of human, caring things.

So, I mean there is warmth and there is a sense of caring for one another and in all kinds of details of life. Like yesterday I had a particularly demanding work day, the sister who was in charge of like food had like sent a kind of Fruit and Nut bar to me as like a little treat to kind of keep me going. You know, there's lots of thoughtfulness in the small details of life'. [RCNM3]

The following narrative expresses a sister's sense of being something greater, within a community, than she would be on her own. She contrasts life in her monastic community with the less crucial togetherness of people who simply go to Mass together. This compares interestingly with a previous narrative of a new member who found the simple physical fact of going to church together insufficient to create a sense of community,

'Community life is of course difficult, a lot of it is just not being able to have things the way you would want them, you know like for example having to eat food that I wouldn't necessarily choose or wouldn't choose to prepare in that way or whatever but I, I guess I think these things are like a means to an end spiritually [...] They are an invitation to me to be less selfish and to kind of learn to accept things, that I am not on my own terms. So I think community is very fruitful even though it can be incredibly demanding... so in a sense there's huge opportunity to contribute and to kind of feel that my contribution is valued and actually does make a difference to the running of the community [...] Sometimes the image of like spokes of a wheel are used, like the prioress is in the middle, you know, if my, if I can make my spoke as strong and reliable as I can then hopefully the whole wheel will be able to turn. So in that sense the community is about pulling together for me and about the fact that when difficult things happen [...] you can see people kind of stepping into that gap and pulling together [...] I suppose that is what I mean by community as well, that we are kind of in it together, which is quite different from, to me from like going to Mass but sitting in different places, you know. There is something that is always kind of drawing us together here and I guess that's, that's kind of what attracts me and gives me strength when I am tired because it is, you know we get up at 5.30 every day, it's a pretty full on day until like maybe 8.15 when you get some free time at night, but we don't have free time during the day at all, you know, so you are just kind of constantly having to kind of move from work, to prayer, to meals, to this, to that and juggling a lot of different things ... You know, at times of stress I get this feeling that I am part of something bigger and that everyone in their own way is also kind of doing their best. I think it kind of gives me courage and strength'. [RCNM3]

Dealing with conflict

New members are aware that they need to develop the skills to negotiate relationships and work out conflicts with other community members. Sometimes the narrator comes to

recognize that she herself is the problem; another narrative philosophically accepts the wisdom of not dwelling for long on an argument and the third acknowledges the need to demarcate spaces and draw boundaries. Where a previous narrative has cited lack of open communication among the community as a reason for not being able to stay within it, this one looks at honest communication in difficult situations and sees it as a reason to stay,

‘[If] something about someone annoys you and you have to [...] step back and think, “Actually, is this about them or is it about me?” you know? Because there was one person very early on who I really struggled with and actually that was about me, you know that was more about [...] what I find difficult in myself that I was reacting to in them, you know? You know they’d done nothing wrong at all, they were just being themselves and it was driving me nuts and like that’s about me, you know? So that is kind of for me to work on and for me to think about and reflect on and also to be aware of so that I am not mistreating that person when they’ve done nothing wrong. You know I can’t go around being rude to them just because they annoy me, you know, when they have done nothing wrong, you know. So it kind of makes you aware but equally, equally you know if someone has genuinely done something that’s upset you and they’ve done something then you go to them and you say that, you know, “That upset me”, you know and that’s kind of okay. That is what we do. And equally if you’ve done something to someone else you go and find them and you apologise, you know.

There was a thing in the kitchen this morning where someone bit someone’s else’s head off, you know, because they, they just happened to come blazing in at the wrong moment and expect to be given all the attention. The other person was like bark, bark, bark you know and then, but then later they apologised and that was fine, you know. So [...] I think people here are very realistic about the challenges of living together, you know we know that there are going to be disagreements, [...] and also [...] there’s acceptance that people have a bad day, you know? So, for example [...] there was a thing a couple of weeks ago, so when it was the first day of the new school term and obviously, I wasn’t there, I was here, you know. I got really upset that day, you know, and [...] I had to leave [...] one of the Offices in the morning because I was just so upset, you know, [...] and then I had to apologise for leaving, [...] but equally everyone was absolutely fine with that, you know and I [...] think they’d all kind of guessed [...] what the issue was, you know, and that was fine so I think we are kind of open and honest with each other in that respect as well.’ [ANM3]

Another sister contrasts the mechanisms for successful community relations and her experience of sharing a flat,

'You have your ups and downs, but what I do find fascinating is, I've flatted for years and you could have a disagreement with someone and it could last for weeks, but within community they seem to get up the next day and like not forget that it has happened but they've moved on [...] because they've got a lot more experience of living where you don't know how long you are going to be here for. Like some of them have been here seven years in this house and because you don't know long you are going to be in your community or your region or whatever... So, I find that fascinating how they can just get up and just move on [...] I haven't had any disagreements and I am hoping that when it does happen that I could do the same because [...] they are an inspiration to see how they can do that. [...] They could have quite a big fight or a disagreement but like I say, it has just gone the next day.'

She is inspired by the capacity of community members to find reasons for the challenging behaviour of others and draws comparisons with her own happy experience of family life,

'I said, "Why does so and so still act like that?" and they were like, "But how do you know that's not her trying?" and then like, they always spin it around so that you'd think differently about why someone is doing something, like whatever I ask. And it's a point of view that I have never thought about because I think in the past you have had to be so independent. I've... because I've been here by myself, I have had no family in the UK. I've had a lot of friends come and a lot of friends leave to go back to [country] or whatever, so you have to be strong and you have to be independent and you have to look after yourself, no one else is going to do it, but in community everyone is there for you, which is nice [...] I had that when I was a child growing up. I am the youngest of five so you have always been there for each other and if anything happened they were all there for you, even though we don't live in each other's pockets or anything, country or whatever, if anything happens we are there for each other and that's what community is like. This is how I am experiencing it so far. Long may it continue'. [RCNM11]

The question of living with those one has not positively chosen comes up repeatedly in descriptions of community life, and narrators comment on the uncertainty that this brings, but also see that the community is both an interior and an exterior space in which God is to be found,

'So it was a very, very welcoming experience coming into the community and then of course as you stay longer you begin to face some of the struggles with the spiritual life and the struggles of living alongside people you wouldn't necessarily choose to live with. A friend of mine said just before I took my final vows, she said, "Well, it was difficult enough [...] making the decision to marry somebody I was in love with. What on earth is it like for you when you don't even know who is going to walk through the door next week?"

Maria Calderon 21/4/2020 19:18

Comment [6]: Is she the novice from New Zealand? Maybe it would be better to delete the names of the countries?

So, there is that sort of level of uncertainty and to the commitment which perhaps folk coming wanting a pattern of life that offers a certainty haven't perhaps anticipated. I think some people find that quite unnerving, when everything changes because someone new has arrived and it is not the normal way of society, even. You choose your friends and you choose who you share a house with, you choose your place of work and some of those choices go when you make the choice to be in here. But that [...] opens up other possibilities. It is about creating a bounded space, a cloister if you like, and that space becomes then say a clear space in which the encounters with God for ourselves and for our guests and our visitors can take place [...] Both, both an interior space and an external space in which one explores one's own [...] personal spiritual journey and in which one explores with [...] sisters who enrich that exploration because everybody is different'. [ANM2]

Hidden or unconscious hierarchies concerning age, ethnicity, class and culture or concealed decision-making and power dynamics embedded within a community can cause new entrants to perceive themselves as excluded and prevents their developing a sense of belonging. Where new entrants have found a community which enables them to develop a deeper sense of themselves in relationship to God and to others, there is true joy and a sense of having 'come home'. That sense of religious life as homecoming is strongly marked and chiefly appears in the narratives of sisters who have remained in their congregation.

'... and I was like, "This is the missing piece of the jigsaw!" So almost from that moment I knew I had found where I belonged'. [RCNM12]

'It hit me as soon as I walked through the door there that however... it was all so specific when I walked through that door. It was: "In a year's time you will be here", and I felt, I felt at home there'. [RCE1]

'And then every time I met them, I was like, "This is where I belong", and so every time I had to leave I cried and cried and cried, because I felt like I was leaving part of me behind'. [RCNM12]

This sense of belonging can take new members by surprise, especially when it contrasts with their prior expectations of having to conform to rigidly applied norms,

'I suppose when I first visited it just felt as if there was a [name]-shaped hole that fitted, and I fitted into it and I felt very much that this community was very accepting of the folk who arrive here, including, in that case, me. There seemed to be a very, very great willingness to sort of bend around people and for us to make mistakes and get things wrong and explore, which perhaps I hadn't been entirely expecting. I think I perhaps expected to conform to a norm a lot more than maybe we have to'. [ANM2]

The ideal of community emerges strongly as one of the major attractions to a religious vocation even where in reality it proves difficult to live up to. Anyone who has lived religious life over the long term is likely to say that while life in community is one of the primary ideals it can also present one of the primary challenges. New entrants value community life and it is frequently mentioned as one of the prime initial attractions into religious life. Those interviewed speak of their appreciation of shared joy, the fun they have and the support they receive. They are united by the same goals of prayer, community living and ministry and can experience a deep connection with other sisters even where there are no obvious points of cultural convergence. Clashes of personality or of culture exist, especially where there appears to be a 'right' way of doing day to day tasks and where unconscious mechanisms of control flourish or close relationships are not encouraged. Community can feel like a family that one has not chosen, with the challenging adaptations that this requires, but where this family proves to be the context for genuine personal and spiritual growth into maturity, religious vocations flourish.

Chapter 6

Leaving

Both current and former sisters have generally been at pains to put a positive construction on their recollections. Even when discussing aspects of their experience which remain deeply painful, they have often expressed a desire to protect their congregations from criticism and offered their own rationalisation of why such events took place. Former sisters emphasise their gratitude to the congregations which welcomed them and,

‘And I want to say within the context of all of this I am deeply, deeply grateful to the sisters. They looked after me superbly for a year, they allowed me to come into their midst and test my vocation to see if it was right. They were incredibly generous. They sent me, you know, on this, to this place and that training and this, that and the other... I will always be deeply grateful to them.’ [AL1]

Some present or former sisters can look back on their novitiate and early religious life with ironic humour but not in all cases. There are as many reasons for leaving religious life as there are for entering it, but there is no doubt that the majority of leavers’ narratives display a sense of lasting sadness and in some cases, of deep trauma.

Discernment and struggle

The vocabulary of breaking or being broken appears in some narratives, whether those of entrants or formators, as an expected part of the process of becoming a new person in Christ. Life may present any adult with experiences that engender a sense of brokenness, but some narratives suggest an implicit theology within a congregation, or on the part of a formator, of ‘breaking’ a person as part of the asceticism of religious life. In this case there appears a disconnect between the espoused, conscious theology of the group, which is positive and holistic in its self-expression, and the theology which new entrants find actually operating within it, predicated on the need to mould them to a predetermined pattern at whatever cost.

‘My former novice director asked to meet with me, so I trotted up to [place] because she said she was interested in what had happened [...] so we met for lunch and I think this was out of everything the worst thing, because I said to her, and this is true, that when I arrived at [place] I was broken, completely broken. And she said to me, “Yes, and you needed to be broken and I was the one who needed to break you”. And that was the worst thing anyone has ever said to me and I was just struck dumb’. [RCL1]

What is the difference between going through a traumatic phase in a challenging vocation and realising that this is not in fact the life to which one is called after all? Some entrants take years to discern this before admitting to themselves that it is time to leave. This can happen even when they still feel called to a life of personal dedication, and this can prove deeply bewildering but also liberating,

“I don’t think I am in the right place”, and it was the moment I said that that the tension lifted, and it was almost like the moment I admitted it to myself. I had this incredible sense of relief. It was like a massive weight lifted off me and they became much more relaxed and gracious. It was almost as though they could feel it too and we were able to sit down together and just agree that this had been an important time and something to test out but actually it was clearly, it was becoming clear that it wasn’t right...” [AL1]

A woman wavering in her vocation may try to make herself stay for a variety of reasons, including that of not wishing to disappoint members of the receiving congregation, and the trigger for deciding to leave may come quite unexpectedly.

‘You get into close relationships with people and you don’t want to [...] hurt people and I was so grateful to them and I didn’t want to disappoint them but in the end I had to do what was right’ [AL1]

The same narrator came to realise that she needed to leave when she saw the radiance on the face of another sister,

‘One of the sisters there had [...] left to go to this other community, and she welcomed us at the door. And it was like the joy on her face for where she was and what she was doing. She was absolutely radiant, and I just knew I didn’t feel that... I started to begin to wonder and I think I particularly wondered when I saw the joy on this sister’s face, and I realised that I didn’t have that at all. I was willing to do whatever God wanted because I know that, in the end, I am most at peace and most fulfilled when I am on God’s path’ [AL1]

The decision to leave religious life is never taken lightly, but where there has been a well-supported departure, former members are deeply grateful,

‘It was very difficult, even though it was just four years and I was quite bewildered because I was pretty sure that I had sensed a call. It was enormously helpful to me that the sisters really did communicate to me, “We do think you have a call to a life of prayer, it’s probably just not here.” And so, I didn’t feel pushed out by any means. I think they would have put up with me, you know, for quite a long time. So, I felt, as I left, that I was being blessed into whatever, you know, wherever God would take me on my journey, to understand where my call might fit.’ [AL2]

When a sister is asked to leave it can feel like a rejection. Most narratives of departure say that the decision to leave religious life felt harder than that of joining. It feels like a bereavement. Respondents report feeling grateful for being given time to come to terms with this decision, thankful that they are not pushed out of the community before they have processed what their departure means and relieved when they have finally made the decision. Among the reasons for departure listed by respondents are:

Having entered when the individual was not ready fully to adapt to the life.

Feeling that she could not be herself in religious life, or that she was in the wrong place to find her true vocation and identity.

A lack of connection with the group overall.

Feeling like a child, stripped of power and not listened to.

Problems of depression and mental health.

Realising that the community will not change for her and that it would be unfair to ask this of them

Discovering a 'vocation within a vocation' or falling in love.

Support

Where there has been personal, psychological or financial support for a departing sister there has been immense gratitude. Where no such support has been offered, departing members have expressed a sense of fear and panic or of assumptions being made that they will be able to manage when in practical terms this is not the case. Sometimes they have not asked for help, either because they feel they do not deserve it or because they have no wish to continue being dependent on the community. Interviews report sadness on the part of the rest of the community and of older members expressing a desire that the departing sister would stay. While this can provide a comforting sense of having been loved and wanted, it can also add the burden of guilt to an already difficult decision. Most of the former members interviewed have kept in touch with their congregation and still feel connected to them.

Looking back on their time within religious life some former members stress that their congregation had their best interests at heart. Their time in religious life helped their self-awareness, shaping them and making them who they are. They miss the shared life and the prayer, seeing their time in religious life as having built their character and identity.

Religious life has added to the quality of their life even if they left with more questions than they began with. For some, the hardest part was losing the other sisters.

A number of congregational leaders and formators raise the issue of weak catechesis in relation to the challenge of accepting new members today. This is echoed in comments of former members about their current membership of the church. For some it is a hit and miss affair in which they see themselves as living their faith shallowly and yearning for the common prayer which anchored them in a relationship with God. For some their central spirituality has changed. God is experienced as being everywhere and not necessarily in the church, so they have ceased regular formal worship, seeing that a personal spirituality requires neither religious life nor vows. One former member reports that being asked to leave religious life felt as if it was God who was rejecting her although she later tried her vocation again.

Moving on

For some departing members it becomes clear that they did have a vocation but perhaps not to formal religious life or they had one to another congregation and after some years they try again. The immediate years after departure can feel deeply disorientating with the former sister feeling that she no longer fits anywhere or has anywhere to go. Some search for another type of community, possibly outside the church, while others join the single consecrated life. Leaving can feel like losing one's identity and this can be especially powerful when losing the habit or other strong external signs of belonging. When the congregation offers therapeutic help to a leaving member it can prove a much-needed bridge back into secular life. The researchers found the project respondents to be deeply self-reflective women. Among former sisters, some have been able to look back on their time in religious life with gratitude. They may not have been able to live it in the long term, but they have felt a sense of growth and achievement, seeing their time in religious life as one that is crucial to the person that they now are,

'I remember when I made the announcement to the community that I would be leaving, and they all were upset and one of them cried [...] and I just thought, "Why have you never ever shown me that you care about me, why do I have to leave before you show me that you care about me?" But we still have a good relationship, we meet up sometimes and I think that honestly in terms of the final outcome it couldn't have been better, because I have maintained a good relationship with the [congregation] which I never want to lose. It is just I couldn't live it in that way, so I have to be able to live it in a different way.' [RCL4]

Others carry an abiding sense of loss, shame and regret. Their sense of not being accepted for who they are at the outset, of not 'fitting the mould' has left them with a deep sense of rejection,

'I feel that religious formation infantizes in a way and takes one away from the experience, the knowledge the life that one has had into this world of, "Well, you have to learn how to do things because we are going to train you to be a sister" [...] When I look back now, and it is only with a lot of hindsight and I have done a lot of work on this as well, [...] I do still feel that formation is more geared towards how people lived about fifty, maybe even a hundred years ago. Because I feel that I came into the community with a whole wealth of experience of gifts that I felt... that weren't used and weren't acknowledged' [RCL1]

Where this regret has been anticipated or understood by the congregation, there has sometimes been considerable compassion and generosity, with congregations investing time and financial resources to ensure that a former sister has had every opportunity to process her experience. At other times, exiting sisters have been left with a sense of being cut off from their family and their deepest religious identity,

'I just felt them as conflictions within myself. This whole thing [...] around, "Are my values accepted or do I, or am I being asked just to take on a totally new set of values to fit in?" [...] I went through a quite serious period of depression. [...] I was devastated because I felt there was no support, no kind of... no one really [...] there to walk with me through that journey [...] I felt a bit like I was in the way, because [the novice director] didn't really know what to do with me [...] I felt like I had lost my family as well, because [...] I felt like I'd got to love these women. They were my family and suddenly nothing." [RCL1]

While the notion of the 'spoiled nun' has thankfully disappeared in general Catholic culture, women leaving religious life speak of a sense of relief, but also of failure and guilt on departure. For some, entering a congregation and then leaving carries heavy consequences in terms of mental and spiritual health. While narrators often stress their appreciation for the generosity and support of congregations for exiting members, others indicate a limited understanding of the cost of departure to the individual.

At the same time there are very few indications from the project's cohort that they appreciate the personal cost to established members and the sense of rejection or abandonment involved in their investing emotionally in a new entrant only to see her subsequently leave. On both sides, departure is a painful business.

Decision making and power: a question of relationship

Wherever new entrants are treated like adults and their autonomy is respected, it is recognised with gratitude. Where decisions are made without consultation or explanation, or the skills and desires of the individual sister are not taken into account, those in formation experience themselves as infantilized by arbitrary decisions which appear to depend on the mood of the person in authority. This is particularly challenging for those who have previously felt themselves to be in abusive relationships of power,

'The heart of it was losing power. I felt like I lost all my power and I'd spent a long... a lot of my adult life regaining my power as a woman. I'd been in some pretty abusive situations and through a whole load of personal growth and healing and counselling, I'd really regained a sense of self and power and I felt like I was having to go back to being a child again [...] and there was an explosion and all of a sudden it was like I, I hit the wall emotionally and I just burst into tears. I just thought, "I am losing my, my sense of self in all of this." [...] It was the feeling like I had no say and I was having to do what I was told and when I didn't I was a naughty girl and being punished and I think that I really, really wasn't ready for that.' [AL1]

'I have felt my whole time with them, they don't listen, they are not interested in anything that you did before you joined the [congregation name]. All they are interested in is you are their youngest recruit, so you need to learn all the time to be a [congregation name...] They didn't have any respect for your skills, so I feel they have just systematically de-skilled me the whole way through [...] There is a lot of what I would call [...] disguised coercion is the word I would use [...] The other thing I got a shock about was they are so hierarchical [...] There is an undercurrent all the time [...] of not being trusted to do anything, even though we are very experienced women in life. I came with a life half lived; completely ignored virtually [...] it is almost like they were trying to bring me back to the year zero'. [INM4]

Where communities have tried to be open and democratic it is immediately noticed and strongly appreciated. The question of autonomy and power plays a major part in the decision to leave religious life. Interviews reveal a pattern whereby new entrants identify obedience as being principally about listening to God rather than the congregation. More mature entrants may be able to accept decisions which they consider questionable, but they want explanations, and this can prove problematic in groups with underlying hierarchies.

One of the key relationships in early religious life is with the novice director. Whether the relationship was easy or difficult, all the narratives that mention this relationship do so in strong terms. A sister in her 30s from overseas tells of difficulties in adapting to a new culture, especially because she was separated from her family and her novice director was in her eighties.

Maria Calderon 21/4/2020 22:31

Comment [7] : Maybe keep just one of the quotes although I like them both. Leave the first?

Her interview mentions how she felt her culture was not valued by her formator who tried to impose British culture on her. To compound the problem, she felt unsupported by the leadership team and was very lonely during her formation. She puts the fact that she made final vows down to prayer and to the support of her mother, whom she secretly called once a week.

‘Novitiate was very, very difficult I have to say. It was the most like difficult period in my life, I have to say... I think that was because I had a lot of conflicts with my novice mistress, yes. I think it is because of the generation gap and also the different ways of thinking like, because I am the new century woman and then my novice mistress is like eighty plus.’ [RCNM9]

Another narrative of novitiate from an overseas sister is also coloured by the relationship she establishes with her novice director, but in a more positive way, despite which she subsequently left the congregation,

‘When I began my novitiate there was one other woman roughly my age, maybe a bit younger. I was 50 and or almost 50 and she left within a few months and then, so then I was a single novice with a very good novice mistress she was, she is a lovely woman and a woman whose, sort of, own life with God is an inspiration to me, it was and still is. She is now the Reverend Mother to [community] and so it was a good novitiate, as good as I guess it can be when there is only one novice. And I found that the community was relatively warm and encouraging to me as much as any silent community can be and I was a little surprised at that because I knew that the history of that community, like so many others, is that the novices are barely a part of the community. In the olden days when there were more novices, they had their own kind of culture and their own life almost separate from the professed sisters and it could be just because there was only me that they sort of let me join them and were relatively welcoming’. [AL2]

A key point is made here of a model which, when there was a group of novices, could sustain a separate way of life for newcomers within an established community. When that model continues, but there is only one novice, or very few, the sense of separation easily becomes one of alienation and rejection. Experiences during formation differ widely, but many narratives contain similar elements relative to the relationship established with the novice director and the presence or absence of fellow novices. Narrators also speak of their relationship with older sisters and of their sense of how well-prepared or not congregations are to take on new members.

Directing the novices

The figure of the novice director is key to the women who enter religious life. She may become a mother (or stepmother) figure and adopts or has projected onto her many of their typical qualities. Narrators comment on the levels of control they encounter in the novice director, and on the sometimes sizeable age gap between her and the candidate. They comment on her level of experience and on the extent to which she has or has not changed with the times. In extreme cases the influence of the novice director is cited as the reason why a sister leaves religious life, or leaves feeling broken.

'Most of my sisters are in their seventies, eighties or yes so, so and she used to be the novice mistress for those sisters when they were very, very young. So of course, her school... her thoughts are the olden way of doing things. Yes, so when I came in, I asked her about using the computer and she tell me I can't use the computer and then I tried to explain to her about technology and she said, "No technologies", and I am like, "What?" So [...] there were conflicts like that anyway and then also, I don't know why, in the novitiate I was very outspoken, I didn't like when she said to do certain things. If I think it is not right, I will tell her and then so she would say that I am very disobedient because I am not listening to her. So, now I am thinking, "What's obedience, then?" because of the three vows, right? So [...] the feedback that I get is that I am always very disobedient because I can't listen to my Novice Mistress. But to me obedience to God and obedience to a human being is different, separate. Yes so, so anyway I always got into trouble'. [RCNM9]

The question of power in relation to the novice emerges in several narratives and can engender deep feelings of conflict or alienation in novices, whether they are older or younger than their formator. They comment on levels of insecurity which they detect beneath dominating exteriors and on being infantilized by formators unable to cope with question or challenge,

'The sister who was looking after us at the time [...] was very dominating, she was very under cutting, now she worked in a school and unfortunately sometimes some people are teachers and they forget that when they are living with adults they are not six year olds, so they never ask you, they tell you what to do and I found that difficult [...] And there was never much room for discussion about stuff. It was almost, "What's your problem now, why have you difficulty with this?" and this kind of stuff, and because I was in social work and had done some training and experience of working with people this I felt really hard, that she had none of these skills at all, really. Oh, she said she had, and she had trained and all this kind of stuff, but she actually was difficult to live with in the house as well, she made life difficult for everyone, that kind of person'. [IL2]

'The formator was [nationality] who came to Britain in her formation, when I was already lurking around for a few years and in hindsight she felt threatened by me - she was younger than me and I am pretty convinced she felt threatened because it was coming apparent from the behaviour, from the way she was putting me down [...] Looking at it logically in hindsight, the person who was the formator just wasn't equipped for it and from that came insecurity and I think that was the basic mistake also, for them to [...] land her with someone who was older than her and has had a lot more life experiences [...] So to put that on her I think was unfair for her. I mean it was unfair to me as well in that situation.' [RCL6]

The issue of ethnic, age or other culture-related clashes with the formator emerges in several narratives,

'My novice director was [nationality], you know and [...] they just live religious life differently, they have a totally different mind-set and it was just hard because, you know I never really said anything to her because I didn't feel that I was able to talk to her about anything. But when [...] she would hear other novices say things she would be quite disgusted and she would comment on them afterwards, so it made me feel, "Well I certainly couldn't sit in spiritual direction and say anything about what is going on for me because you just wouldn't get it". But I actually came to terms with that and realised we are just different cultures - not even cultures - I don't know what it is, we are just different [...] So, the communication broke down and I wasn't able to share anything with her about the reality of my situation'. [RCL3]

The inability to develop a relationship of trust with the novice director can have consequences for the future if it means that a novice in doubt about her vocation is unable to articulate her doubts when it matters,

'I didn't really get on with my novice mistress, but I think everybody says that. But I had quite a, quite a strong personality of a novice mistress, someone who was very, very articulate [...] very intelligent but underneath very, very insecure, I later realised. So there were difficulties there, you know, she once accused me of doing something and she wouldn't even hear it, I hadn't done what she said I'd done but she wouldn't hear my side of it, she just said, "You've done it", and that was it. And I thought that was really unfair and I thought, "Well, that's not even Christian, really, to do," you know [...] I got accepted for my first profession and I remember saying to her, "You know, I am not really sure I want to, I maybe need more time," and she just said to me "Oh, you are being silly," so I thought, "Well, maybe I am," you know, but I went through my first profession, although it was a lovely day and my family were there and it was lovely and we had this big celebration, but underneath I think I was thinking, "I don't know if I am doing the right thing here"'. [RCL3]

Maria Calderon 21/4/2020 22:42

Comment [8]: This can go; there were similar examples in chapter 4. Maybe it would be better to move novice mistress material to chapter 4.

More constructive narratives about the relationship with the novice mistress show that it is possible to overcome gaps of age and culture when the dynamic is right,

‘Even though at times I thought, “I am not quite sure what’s going on here,” you know, she actually realised I was of a certain age and experience and so I feel very blessed to have had the person I had, because she allowed me to grow where I was, whereas, you know, some of my friends who entered and they had [...] a very different experience and I suppose, you know, my frustration some of the time was I wanted more structure but then, you know it was, it was given to me really to actually look at, “What do I actually need?” and go and find it, do you know, so I had a bit more leeway than a lot of, a lot of religious really. Yes, I mean the age gap is 35 years, the difference yes, yes. So, I did my two years down in [place] and loved it, loved it, loved it’. [RCNM10]

‘I think I really valued my Novice Guardian when I was in community, Sister [name], she was [...] a massive support and she, she just seemed to understand me, understand my limitations as they were then’ [AL8]

‘We do have, obviously we need the Novice Mistress to guide us, yes but she is really supportive, she’s really supportive for me. She is [...] like a sister for me and a mother as well because what she does for us is, is just amazing because she fought, she fought for us, she fought to find priests, to find yeah, most of the priests to help us with our spiritual learning, you know and other vocation... So, I feel like it is really good to have her as our Novice Mistress, yes, and of course she teaches as well about the congregation, about how to live in the life, life in the community. Yes, it was really good, I can’t complain about it’[RCNM14]

If a wide age gap can be problematic it can present different challenges when novice and novice director are age contemporaries, especially if the novice detects a level of ambiguity on the part of her formator towards the role that the novice director is required to play. The following narrative explores issues of power within the dynamic of the novice/novice director relationship. The narrator reluctantly uses the term abuse in her description of the relationship, but also seeks to find excuses for what she implies is unreasonable behaviour. She picks up a repeated theme in these narratives about formation, about older sisters relying on patterns from the past which no longer serve well for the current time,

‘First of all, I had, I had a Novice Mistress who was not much older than I was, who I had actually known when she was a novice because when I first went to visit she was, she was a novice and that worked fairly well. But I always had a sense that she didn’t quite know what we were supposed to do. [...] I wasn’t the first novice she had because there were these other two when I got there but of course they, they left so, so there was that again, you know.

When you look back you can appreciate that here's this person that's having to deal with a job that she perhaps doesn't really necessarily want, doesn't really know what to do with [...]

And then I had a new Novice Mistress and that, that really was the disaster because it [...] didn't work for want of a better term [...] It is such an odd relationship, isn't it, because this person has power over you, tremendous power over you. And I mean, I, I still find it hard to use the language, but I accept that when somebody misuses their power over you that is abuse and [...] that's hard. But I am guessing that that person had had some sort of traumatic life and that there were probably reasons why she behaved towards me in the way that she did, and [...] there was very much a sense of, "This is how it was when we were novices and therefore this is how it must be for you," without recognising that many of them were novices at eighteen, having left school and not knowing anything else, and here was I at thirty, having had a career and [...] I had had experience and I had responsibility so to, to lose that and yes I know, I willingly gave that up in leaving my job and going off to community but... So I think it, I think it's a very, a very strange relationship and I would like to think that it may have changed and that maybe those of us who experienced that [...] at that time actually managed to crack the windows open a bit for those who came after us and I mean [congregation] has had novices since who have gone right through to profession' [AL4]

When the dynamic works it can lay down the foundation to a happy and lasting vocation, 'Formation, well as a candidate you have a candidate director and she was just, I would just go and see her periodically and chat to her about how things were going and she was lovely, she was very supportive. And then I had a novice director, there were three of us who were novices and we all lived in a house in [place] and I have, I have to say I [...] absolutely loved the woman and I think that was really important that I, I kind of really respected her, respected her spiritual wisdom and I respected her as a person, and that actually really did matter to me. I think I would have struggled had I... hadn't been such congruence there between, you know, that mattered to me'. [RCNM6]

Mental health

Both the World Health Organization and the British National Health Service speak of one in four people in the population experiencing mental health difficulties
https://www.who.int/whr/2001/media_centre/press_release/en/

Expectations of religious life as a refuge from problems and issues that exist in secular life can only be disappointed. If the statistics quoted above are correct, mental health problems will arise with the same frequency within religious congregations as they do elsewhere.

If they are not recognised and addressed, especially in a small enclosed community, this can have a major impact on all members of the community. Interviewees who have left religious life cite mental health issues of their own or of other community members as a contributing factor to their departure, speaking of communities appearing not to deal proactively with significant cases of anxiety, depression and psychosomatic illness,

‘But then the people in the community already, who had been there ten, fifteen, thirty years... I had seen the same problem in every country I have been in with them, where in the initial stages years ago they didn’t pay so much attention to croakiness and in later years that croakiness became serious mental health issues.’ [RCL2]

The following narrative points to a vulnerability or being ‘open’ that is natural to a novitiate formation process where one is trying to open oneself to the possibility of growth and change, but this carries risks if that formation process is being done in company with someone who is clinically unwell and unable to cope with the process,

‘Trying to cope with the newcomer as well, who I think did have some mental problems, made it very difficult. The lady who arrived was somewhat psychotic in the clinical sense. That was not her fault, I don’t blame her for that, but obviously religious life wasn’t suitable for her and it made her very, very difficult to live with, and I too was affected by that and began to perhaps see things the way she did [...] because I was being continuously bombarded with it.

When you are in formation you are very open, you have to be, because you are listening to the Lord and [...] you spend quite a lot of time in quiet, silent prayer [...] and also you are receiving instruction on top of your work, so you are open, and being open with a person who has problems isn’t good and it did affect me [...] and she then left. The community breathed a sigh of relief because it really was not the right place for her but it was decided that it would be better for her if she made the decision to leave rather than being asked to leave because of her previous experiences. She eventually did make that decision [...] and it was then very difficult for me. I spent a lot of time actually with the person who came to speak to us, trying to sort out how this had affected me and to separate what was her and what was me and what was her opinions that she had put on to me and that was very difficult. But I, I stayed there, you know, she was, she was gone now.

It was time for the community to pick themselves up and get on with things, especially me, because I had been quite badly affected by it, but I carried on and in the novitiate. And then another person came, the community held its breath then, started to relax, she seemed like more or less a nice person but she claimed that she had visions of things and knew what was going to happen before it happened, sort of thing.

And although I accept these things do happen, some people do experience these things [...] to keep going on about it I felt was [...] a little bit odd. And then she started [...] doing certain things to manipulate certain people and it wasn't picked up, really, until she left, what she'd been doing [...] And then she started saying things like, "I had a vision and I went into the novitiate and I was a novice but you weren't here," which was a really difficult thing to deal with as she came across like a nice person, it became too much.' [RCE1]

The question of serious mental health issues manifesting themselves in new entrants begs the question about psychological screening of applicants prior to entering what at the best of times is a very pressured process. Such screening appears not to be universal, and manifestations of incipient mental illness are not always picked up effectively prior to entrance into the novitiate,

'The community for a lot of people is [...] a safe place to go and once you are in a safe place then it feels like it's, it's possible to let down whatever guards or kind of things held you together until then ... If mental health levels go to that sort of station you cannot expect the community to hold that for you, then you need kind of proper, proper care for where there is professional support [...] I think it has to do as well with kind of joining for the wrong reasons and then finding you are in a place that you, that you are not well in. [...] I think [...] that has some sort of potential for mental health issues in some people who have maybe more kind of the tendency towards it, and if you put yourself in a place that it is really not good for you and you find it very difficult and if maybe because you have taken a vow it will sort of cope within you until it gets really, really unhealthy and it will just explode at some point.

[...] There is a certain pressure then that comes with living in community and one of the sisters in that community she had anorexia, for example, and I think that had been ongoing for a long time and [...] probably had as much to do with, with herself and [...] whatever has been in her life before she came to the community as much as being there now and knowing that she is not in a good place. They were trying to [...] figure out whether or not she can be with the community or whether the community is part of the problem for her, and I think she left in the end [...] But the other, the younger sister who left [...] I think she was psychologically... she was in a very, very bad place [...] When she [...] decided she wanted to leave the community [...] she felt quite guilty about deciding it, I think, and then she wrote about it to the prioress and then she didn't appear back in the community in the evening and I had the prioress knocking on, on my room door and saying, "There [...] is light under one of the rooms downstairs, I am sure she doesn't want to see me right now, can you go check?" So, I went there to check, thinking, "What if she's tried to kill herself again and I would walk in on that", you know?

And she was, she was okay, you know but that's the sort of level of unhealth they had in the community for all the various reasons that come with people being complex, complex human beings, you know? [...] and I think that of a lot of communities [...] deal with quite a lot of that sort of difficulty within the community, so the happy/clappy peaceful community I am not sure it exists. I am sure there are healthier communities than that, though, I hope, you know. But I think [...] they are trying so hard to not put people off by being too restrictive about the novitiate and all that sort of thing, that they leave it so wide open that I am not sure that is actually novitiate anymore, you know?' [AE1]

Established and new members speak of perceiving a greater psychological fragility in today's generation and the question of mental health issues and how they are dealt with emerges in a number of narratives. Historically, large communities of religious were able to carry members who were frail in their physical or mental health. With communities now generally being older and more fragile, such issues can prove harder to absorb and support than in earlier generations.

'I was never more lonely than when I was in religious life [...] but actually the loneliness drove me to look at what that's about and in hindsight, you know, that was a good thing. The thing that came out of religious life for me was realising that I'd probably always been to some degree quite lonely all my life... if I am honest, probably I never found them particularly life giving' [AL7]

Lone novices facing an uncertain future

The pressures of being a lone novice can be eased by international or inter-congregational encounters, but it still leaves the one younger sister feeling under a microscope during formation and presents her with serious challenges for her future within her congregation,

'They are also lonely years because I was on my own... as a novice and of course you are on the centre stage if you are the only one, the formation team around you. And my Novice Director actually said it once to me [name], "I know this is hard, you know, we were fifteen novices in our set and of course the attention is spread evenly, one of fifteen, it is different if you are one of fifteen people or the only one." [...] Yes and also you can't do anything unnoticed....Not that you wanted to, but of course [...] I think if somebody did see, not check up on you, but see, "Is this for her or is it not, and are we okay with taking this person or not?" and I think ultimately they want you to be happy, because [...] there is no point in taking somebody who will be desperately unhappy and making everybody else unhappy, so...

But of course, you are in the focus all the time, there is no break from it. I think that that's the difficulty for so many who are on their own'. [INM3]

It has already been commented that religious life is becoming increasingly transnational, and internationality is seen by some to be the way forward for a future where there are so few new vocations, but this cannot always be carried through concretely by general leaderships who are under pressure from different parts of the world. Where an entrant can see no viable future for her congregation, it can seriously challenge the decision to persevere,

'I suppose I did (have expectations of other women joining) and when I initially made the decision... to be fair I didn't have that expectation and then somebody else did join for a while and, and you think, "Oh, this could be..." and then people [...] started to get interested in it and a friend of mine was expressing an interest and in the end she got married but [...] you could feel a little buzz created around it and I think they could probably feel that too and then was part of the disappointment. But then it didn't work out with the other woman and [...] I don't know what they have decided but [...] I know that they were really looking to build an international community in the UK and that was, you know, that was really frustrating as well. So they had this idea which I thought was a brilliant idea because they [...] are constantly sending young women from [overseas] to the UK to learn English and to have a community experience in the UK. So, we had said to them from this end, "Well, that is brilliant, wouldn't it be great if we could have an international community formed, so we have one community which is actually living under the same roof in community of people from different countries?" [...] So I said, "Oh, this is going to be great," and then the, the generalate just said no and they were like, "This is not an area of priority; Africa is the area of priority blah, blah, blah," and then I kind of felt [...] "Where is this going if [...] the generalate are not willing to support other ways of bringing in life into the UK, am I just going to be left on my own here?" [...] and it just, was desperately disappointing for everybody [...] and I think I just found that really sad and it was just kind of like, "Oh, that was one way it could have been reinvigorated," because then if you do see younger people living together in community it might inspire other people to join. It might inspire... if there is nothing there to join, what are you going to join? And so it [...] felt like [the general team] was just letting it die in the UK in some ways and I think now all I can see is the only way it can live is through the lay association because unless they build the international thing I don't see how they are going to get people joining.' [RCL7]

The reasons for leaving religious life that emerged from interviews were very varied. These are precarious times for the nurturing and development of religious vocations, but even that fragility does not completely daunt those who do opt to stay, while looking at a fragile future,

‘We have the opportunity to be in touch with friends and family outside the community, so there is that support as well. We all have spiritual directors, spiritual friends outside, that we see in a formal capacity or the possibility of that. Not everybody chooses to so I, I make sure I nurture those friendships at the moment, especially when there are relatively few women in the community because I think that’s quite important’. [ANM2]

Even when someone has decided that they can no longer remain in religious life, it can also leave them with powerful positive memories that transcend cultural and generational differences, reminding them of the ‘one thing necessary’ for which they entered in the first place,

‘One day I went into the living room and Sister [name] was sitting there and she just had tears pouring down her face. I sat next to her and she took my hand, she just needed that human companionship. She couldn’t tell me why she was upset, she couldn’t tell me what was wrong, all she needed was someone and I was... I felt, “Wow! There is something very powerful going on here. It is that connectedness of the heart speaking to another heart. That’s a language you don’t... I mean we didn’t say anything we just sat there [...] It was beautiful. It was a very profound moment for me. I understood so much about God, that he communicates that way with us and sometimes we complicate things with words’ [RCL1]

Chapter 7

A View from the Bridge: Experience of Leaders, Formators and Vocations Personnel

Receiving a new entrant into a congregation is not a neutral experience for those in charge of religious communities or working in vocations promotion or initial formation of new members. There is adaptation on both sides, as the new entrant explores and discovers both the conscious and the unconscious cultures into which she has entered. At the same time, the established community, which may not have had a new entrant for some time, finds itself having to adapt to her cultural expectations and possibly her very different social, political and theological understandings of what it means to be a follower of Christ today. Established religious tend to base their own expectations on their conscious, espoused understanding of Christian discipleship and the meaning and purpose of religious life today. They may also display unconscious expectations, based on a deep collective memory of their own formation and congregational identity and on ingrained habits of thought and behaviour whose implications are no longer obvious to those for whom they are not the norm.

Discussions with religious leaders, formators and vocations personnel reflect considerable patience and resilience in the face of multiple disappointments as new sisters have come and gone. It is not only the new entrant who invests a great deal of herself in pursuing a religious vocation. For any congregation to open itself to new life, long established sisters will need to be open to challenge and the possibility of adaptation and change. It requires intense energy and self-giving for a small or diminished community to welcome a different person into the group. Forming genuine relationships of close sisterhood and companionship requires people to go beyond surface politeness and the friendliness of strangers. The level of personal investment can be as demanding as that required within a family when welcoming a new member. This can have many positive consequences for both new and established members of the community. But it can also produce trauma on the part of the established community when a welcomed and cherished new member subsequently leaves. At a time of scarce vocations, the psychic energy required to continue holding open the door of welcome can be considerable. It is a sign of the health of religious life in both Britain and Ireland that so many doors remain resolutely open and so many congregations continue to look to the future with hope and generosity of heart.

Effective vocations work

Extensive resources have been made available at national levels and that of individual congregations to help today's women in their vocational search. Narratives from vocations enquirers and new members quoted here suggest that it remains a challenge to get the right information to the right people. In Ireland, which was formerly considered a 'Catholic country' where the prevailing culture was deeply embedded in the majority Catholic faith, it is no longer possible to assume that young people having any effective connection with the church or with religious at all,

'Feedback at career fairs and from guidance counsellors is that students today do not know anything about sisters and religious life. Most have not even met a sister.' [VP2]

Through personal contacts and in group activities such as Samuel Groups young adults are asking for help with discernment and spiritual direction, but evidence suggests that group activities requiring regular commitment are no longer working well with a generation used to making decisions about how to spend their time on the spur of the moment. Getting the message across is not only a question of reaching the right audience. According to vocations personnel it is also a question of informing clergy and congregational members and ensuring that their energies are positively engaged,

'As far as the bishops are concerned, which is the feedback from young people as well as from my experience, they are mostly eager to promote priesthood rather than religious life. So where the normal experience of a Catholic in the church would be to go to their parish priest for help, when it's somebody thinking about religious life or [...] anything vocational it is difficult for them to, to find the next place to go. So one of the issues is the visibility of religious, because although religious do a very good job in making themselves available to young people and young people reportedly have said that they would like more help in discerning and thinking about what to do with their life [...] it is difficult to get the two groups to meet. And I think that's because of the lack of visibility of what's religious and the priests not really very much focussed on promoting religious life.' [VP1]

If it is difficult to engage the well-informed support of clergy for clear vocations guidance for women, vocations personnel also find themselves struggling with a level of apathy or negative thinking among older religious in the face of vocational decline,

'We had a religious sister doing a presentation in our parish church. She was an older sister and she was essentially asking for money for mission, which was fine, but if I spend my, my weekdays trying to promote vocations in the church and then in the second sentence this sister stands up in front of the parish and says,

“Well of course we all know there are no, there are no vocations anymore,” I was really quite upset with it, because it doesn’t promote the right kind of thing. But it shows you that within religious communities there is, there’s a lack of hope that doesn’t help the situation. [...] I think we can all recognise [...] that more of our work, or our energies has to be put into transforming our communities than does promoting religious life outside. [...] I can do positive work there [but] you can actually have people within the community which work against it. [...] I know some religious sisters who will say, “Apart from the fact there are no vocations...”, or, “Our community shouldn’t accept any more vocations. They should just die out.” [VP1]

Where this sense of apathy or resistance to new vocations exists within a congregation it is quickly intuited by enquirers themselves,

‘I think the congregation itself were split [...] between huge enthusiasm and didn’t really want to be bothered, and [...] I now know that some people had to be persuaded that this was a good idea to even... because it was like a twenty year gap between the next person and me when I had entered, and I think they were kind of battenning down the hatches in some ways’. [RCL7]

The resistance may be rooted in fear, as suggested by one narrator, who herself entered religious life as a mature woman,

‘I don’t want to be judging, but I sense that some people, because it is scary, don’t want to be in touch with what is today [...] My training twelve years ago was very different to training of forty or fifty years ago and I think there has to be more collaboration and I [...] know you can’t... trying to change the mind-set, you know? Again, I say, I don’t think it is age because [...] I work with those who are younger as well and that is just as challenging.’ [RCNM10]

Several narratives comment appreciatively on one congregation which has decided that it can no longer accept new vocations for itself but has put its resources and energy at the disposal of women seeking a new kind of life commitment around the model of religious life. This might be commendable for other congregations where the energy to promote vocations within its own ranks is no longer forthcoming,

‘I keep saying to them, “Let’s try and do something, let’s try and reach out”. No interest whatsoever, no energy whatsoever. All we get in messages of people just wanting to connect and being with us and I am having to like beg people to get in touch with these people. Even now, like last week I am like, “Right up here, this woman who lives around the corner from you, she knew people years ago, she used to go on retreat. Can somebody get in touch with this woman?”

And it's like, "Oh well, we'll, you know, we'll decide who is best placed to make a phone call." Yes, so the energy... and they are really happy by and large for me to just get on with it and I feel like I'm trying to promote something that's not being desperately supported some of the time.' [RCL7]

Generational cultures

Narratives from new members and enquirers suggest a need for a greater awareness of the role of culture in the promotion and nurturing of religious vocations. This is true of the racial and social but also of the generational cultures that newcomers encounter within established communities, as a recent major study of new entrants in the United States has pointed out,

'Generations are also subcultures, each with its own distinctive preoccupations, memories, and expectations that will render a given religious institute more or less attractive to that generation. The appeal of membership in a given institute will wax and wane as the desires and preoccupations of succeeding generations of Catholics change.' [Johnson, 2014, 80]

This can prevent religious vocations from flourishing and, in some cases, can crush them altogether. If there is poor inter-generational dialogue it can lead to negative judgements about crucial areas of religious life like the living out of the vows,

'There is such a fear of change. There is such a fear of transformation and it's, if I heard it once I heard it a million times, "This is how it has always been done", you know? The younger generation is coming in, it is like there is this idea that we are going to come in and destroy it because we are going to live such [...] immoral, sinful lives. There just seems to be a lack of understanding that, you know, we, we also have a lot to offer and [...] just because we talk openly and express opinions about grey areas and that we don't have an issue talking about things like homosexuality or [...] abortion and all these very difficult subjects. That doesn't mean that we are [...] too liberal [...] Or the fact that we have loads of male friends and that being in male company, to us, if we are living a chaste life, it is the same as being in female company. You know, we are not off having these sordid affairs and bringing down the name of the holy congregation, you know? It's about trusting that we have come here in really good faith.' [RCL3]

But there is also strong evidence that cultural gaps can be bridged. Narratives quoted here show that where there is awareness of cultural difference and a willingness on both sides to bridge the gaps, age and cultural differences do not inevitably play a negative role for younger religious. Evidence shows that younger seekers and entrants are inspired by the vocational stories and lives of older sisters when they are willing openly to tell their story,

'Some people are just so far removed from young people today or engaging with people out... you know, it is kind of like they have got institutionalised. So, we are afraid of the outside [...] there are communities whose apostolate doesn't allow such an easy engagement with the real world, if you like. It makes it more difficult for them and they are more fearful of engaging with it, they just... it is like kind of unknown world [...] We want to tell them that young people are not afraid of the age difference, they are not, the reports are they are not afraid. [...] Obviously we have other people who have said otherwise, but some people, they say it is not such a big thing, the age difference and also the numbers aren't, so don't worry them if they are only small communities. That isn't [...] a big thing either. If you have been keeping the trend of young people today, they are not so interested in big giant institutions. Much of the culture is more personal, so they like small groups. So, there is no problem with the bigger numbers. And I find that the older people are actually quite inspirational. They have got interesting lives, if only they would have the courage to tell them that.' [VP 1]

Vocations promotion is not only a matter of giving a specific training to one or two chosen members of a community. Every member of an established community needs to be exposed both to the skills of modern vocations promotion but also to the questions and issues raised in this report. The evidence within it clearly shows that responsibility for the promotion and nurture of a new religious vocation lies with every member of the community. Vocations personnel suggest that much of their work needs to be with their own sisters as well as with those on a vocational search,

'Community members struggle with how to talk with young people today. They are fearful of having to enter into discussion with the young people who may have had sexual experiences or have questions regarding pornography. Communities are also fearful about the IT and social media experience of young people' [VP2]

If there is confusion within a congregation about vocations, or disconnection from the whole question of new membership it communicates itself to seekers,

'I think, looking back, what attracted me at the time was this sense of being able to be who God made you to be, but yet being part of a community where we could share and maybe walk together on the same path of being for God alone. And it was a great dream, and a dream that didn't last too long. My friends and I - there were about five of us who joined at the same time - and meeting the community for events was great, it was all, "Ha ha ha, he he he, hello", you know, "smile", and then getting to know them closer there was an awful lot of mental issues with the community in [place]. And I think, I don't know, was it because they were going through mid-life crisis or what? Or was it just the way the structure of the community was? It was very individualistic - not quite what we were expecting.

We thought, you know, as we get to know each other, we could create a community where there's two or three of us living in the same house or, you know, that we don't have to be so far separated. But what ended up happening is all of us left because there wasn't a space for young people to join.' [RCL2]

Challenges to vocations promotion

Vocation directors struggle with promotion due to a lack of clarity from the congregation on how to assess candidates or what formation programmes they have in place to offer candidates. Reports speak of a lack of formation in congregations to help with the integration of younger people into the community.

'So we have to work a lot with the people inside the communities to convert them, make them open to something that is different and also understand [...] the differences within cultures [...] Today's culture and tomorrow's culture is radically different, so to begin to open up people's minds and tell them in a logical, in a practical way, "This is how it's different", and [...] when I have been [...] talking to my own sisters in my own community and I have been explaining some of these things, they are actually really enthusiastic about it. It is as if you have given them a key to understanding something.' [VP1]

Given the strong emphasis on community life that features in many narratives from vocational enquirers, the reality of what they find on visiting religious communities can prove disappointing.

'Some young people found when visiting communities that there was no sense of community, the sisters did not pray together, and the only community experience seemed to be watching TV [...] Some young people were asking why some sisters live alone yet the congregation say community life is important.' [VP2]

At the same time as mature women seeking entry into religious life reveal their struggles when feeling that their skills and expertise count for nothing in their new community, there are comments from congregational leaders and formators about their difficulties in dealing with new entrants whom they identify as inflexible and unwilling to adapt to a community setting not tailor-made to suit their personal preferences.

One vocations director points to research from the United States which looks at members of 'Generation Me', born in the 1980s and 90s and brought up to consider themselves unique and special, with all their dreams reachable. This contrasts with preceding generations whose instincts would still be towards a level of social conformity and prioritizing of the needs of wider society (Twenge, 2014).

'Fitting in' is no longer a major value for Generation Me, which treasures 'I did it my way' above all. However we consider these generational shifts, it appears essential to take them into account when looking at the question of successful promotion and retention of future vocations. Anecdotally among religious there is often a perception that it is the more structured and traditional congregations that are currently attracting new vocations. Research based studies tell a more nuanced story, with choices differing from one generation to another, but the question of identity and seeking strong community has emerged across the varied narratives cited here in earlier chapters (Johnson, 2014, 60-78). It has an impact not only on the approach to vocations promotion but also on the way in which the future for religious life is envisaged,

'Actually, what was a real eye opener to me, I was very much like, "What I have got in common with people in enclosed orders?" And I remember meeting a group of women who were I think [congregation]. I had never come across them before and I had all these pre-conceptions. Oh my gosh, they were amazing, and so genuine [...] And I was like, "Okay, that's a real challenge to me because I would not have perceived that". And then I was with particularly some young [male order]. I just could not believe that they were obsessed with their robes and their garments and their [...] trappings and really quite unpleasant towards the women as well in the room, and I was like, "you are just real sexist pigs, basically" [...] My previous experience with [male order] had been very positive and they had been much older men who were just fabulous, so I was kind of shocked by some and surprised by others. So, I think the answer to the future of religious life is going to be quite polarised, I think. And I do see it, it seems that it is the traditional orders that are attracting young people and it doesn't necessarily seem anything to me, anything that I would be vaguely interested in or that I think is even very healthy. But that's just my perspective, we will see. And I think it is with sadness that I think of... the congregations that I hugely admire don't seem to be the ones that are attracting people. And I think that maybe is because they are real and they are down to earth and then people just feel, "Well, there isn't a significant difference, so why do I... why I need to take vows to be part of the..." And that's a real problem. It is part of the attraction and yet [...] the same thing that attracted was the thing that in the end made me think, "Well no, actually", and it was the other half of the same thing, and that's really sad [...] I have been aware of my age group, people are searching for a sense of [...] shared community and spirituality, not necessarily religious vows and I have seen with the [congregation] and I have seen it with other friends looking in those areas and I think [...] for the progressive form of religious life there needs to be more in the future, more maybe fluidity, more looking at different models and different patterns and lay religious mixed communities. To me that's the way it has to go, and people may want to spend part of their life [...] but maybe not the whole of their lives lived in that particular way.' [RCL7]

Chapter 8

Expert reflections

The Religious Life Vitality Project, funded by the Conrad N Hilton foundation, was researched by some members of the same team that has produced the present project (Sexton and Simmonds, 2016). The earlier project greatly benefited from the involvement of a group of theologians, historians and social scientists who had expert knowledge of religious life, either being religious themselves or having considerable collaborative experience with religious. Members of a similar group were involved in reflecting on the material that emerged from the current project. The team was ecumenical and differed in academic expertise. This enabled the researchers to hear the voices of the women interviewed with fresh ears and to have confirmed or challenged the patterns they saw as emerging. The findings of this project are therefore a truly collaborative endeavour, involving the women interviewed themselves, vocations personnel and community leaders, and experts who have reflected on the material from the perspective of their own academic speciality.

The majority of Catholic congregations involved in this study have their roots within the broadly apostolic religious life tradition, with similar stories of historical birth, flourishing in their first century of existence, expansion overseas, *aggiornamento* experience in the conciliar period and moving to a contemporary decline in numbers and ageing. Even where the founding story of Anglican congregations is significantly different, this makes the context for exploration reasonably comparable across the two ecclesial traditions, allowing for some parallels for assessment of the material. Where differences between congregations and the experience of the candidate (e.g. the impact of internationalism on the one hand and cultural homogeneity on the other) is striking, it has the potential to deepen reflection on the emerging common themes. Reflectors acknowledge that the material for their consideration speaks from only one side of a dialogue and needs to be heard with that in mind,

‘We only have one side of the picture and so we cannot know the sense of loss or hurt or exhaustion that formators or community may have felt, especially if they had a succession of arrivals and departures over the years.’ [R4]

They are struck by the seriousness with which respondents are caught up in the search for God within the framework of a religious vocation. Vocations enquirers may be attracted by the apostolic dimension and a desire to serve through a passion for social justice, by a current member of a congregation, the historical figure of the founder or by a deep aesthetic sense of the numinous and the symbolic in a hunger for the transcendent. Whatever the

cause, the archetypal story of the long journey towards life engagement with the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* has by no means died and is being lived out today in the stories that are under consideration here [R8]. Our commentators compare and contrast the hopes and expectations of new entrants with the reality that they find, especially when hopes and disappointments appear to be based on cultural and intergenerational norms and expectations,

‘The Millennials’/younger generations’ lack of experience of community and consequent longing for it is well attested, and some recent literature on religious life mentions both the draw of community [Gilbert, 2012] and the danger of unrealistic expectations of an intense and fulfilling community life [Schneiders, 2001]’. [R3]

From the perspective of psychology one reflector sees the transcripts as expressing ‘deeper questions about the meaning of life [...] of exploring that “there should be a greater meaning in life”, that is, living life to the full and an authentic life, [asking], “What am I about? What am I doing? What does it matter?”’ [R8]

Visibility

Reflectors also note the difficulty some enquirers find in gaining adequate information about a religious life which seems no longer to exist in the form that they expect. Some narrators speak of the ‘invisibility’ of religious and associate the visibility of religious life with seeing it as an option. Forms of visibility that have significance within religious life (e.g. wearing a congregational cross or emblem) do not communicate in the same way to those outside. Issues of visibility are highly contentious among religious themselves. Both for established and newer members, desire for greater visibility carries an ideological significance, put down to ‘young people needing structure’ or ‘young people being conservative’. But this is not reflected in these transcripts,

‘The interviewees who comment on wanting to wear a habit/see religious in their habits do not have a sense of a habit as connoting a higher status within the church, just a distinctive one. Religious may want to reflect on the extent to which perceptions of religious, and religious dress, have shifted over the course of the last fifty years’ [R3].

Expectations of religious life are formed by the differing ways in which congregations present their life and vocation and by the influence of the media. The structures and ways of operating of apostolic life are far less visible to enquirers than those of monastic life. This leads to misconceptions about apostolic religious life and a possible need for clearer articulation and revitalisation of its essential elements of prayer, community and apostolate.

This is particularly the case, given that it can no longer be presumed that candidates have had much education in catechesis, faith formation, the life of prayer or moral and ethical theology. How, then, are religious consecration and the life of the vows communicated and understood and how is authority understood and conveyed? [R6]. A similar reflector notes the increasing role played by communications media in introducing seekers to different possibilities for a religious vocation,

‘This should just reinforce the need for an alive and credible web presence for those congregations who are open to new entrants and perhaps, where the congregation is no longer in a position to accept vocations in that province/geographical area, a clear statement to this effect.’ [R3].

The same reflector notes the then-and-now difference between a vocations enquiry when religious life was still part of the familiar landscape for Christian women, and the current distance that can lie between a seeker and her goal,

‘In the past, potential entrants had several years of “looking from afar” on religious, perhaps from different congregations, and were therefore able to ponder over a number of years, perhaps in a diffuse, on-and-off way, whether or not they were attracted to this way of life, before declaring a positive interest. There was a long period of less focussed, “low pressure” discernment, before a more intensive “high pressure” discernment. Today, entrants are not culturally familiar with religious life: they are increasingly unlikely to have encountered religious in their parish or school, and their first contact with religious is likely to be through expressing a positive interest in a religious vocation. It is only then that they are able to consider religious life in the concrete, and this may be a meandering, diffuse journey with periods of “on-and-off” interest and engagement. This means two things: first, it is important that religious congregations provide “low pressure” opportunities to encounter them, and low-pressure accompaniment of people discerning their vocations; second, it is important for congregations to be patient with discerners who may remain in touch on an “on-and-off” basis for lengthy periods.’

There is a further reflection that religious vocations personnel may find themselves involved in accompanying a search for a different kind of ecclesial vocation,

‘Lay people who are deeply serious about living their baptismal vocation may end up understanding that, at least initially, as a vocation to religious life. So religious congregations can expect to find themselves accompanying people, perhaps for long periods, as they discover that their vocation is not to religious life, but to lay life.’ [R3]

In terms of visibility reflectors also question what appear to be inadequate initial processes of discernment on the side of both enquirers and congregations, especially where congregations tend to be over-eager to have new entrants. This is despite so much discussion about selection and processes in the literature related to religious life of the 1980s and 1990s and so many training sessions given to religious congregations. The issue of 'fit' is particularly highlighted, where superficial processes prior to entry can later give way to an unconscious welcome of 'only people like us', and the parallel rejection of those who do not appear to fit an institutional mould that is not initially apparent to outsiders [R7]. Reflectors highlight the importance of dealing with a potential entrant in a way that makes sense to her, not just within the rationale of the congregation's processes and procedures [R5]. Given that the cohort interviewed stretched across twenty years it is possible that some were doing vocational searches in an 'in between' era and therefore bypassed more recent activities of the Catholic vocations offices in Britain and Ireland and the 'new monasticism' focus in the Church of England [R4]. But reflectors were surprised to read comments of this kind,

'I worked alongside so many congregations without really understanding charism, spirituality or even the work that they did. In hindsight I don't know what I was thinking, really, because I was so blind. Religious life was religious life. But I certainly think that the congregation met me and thought, "Oh great, come on, let's go."' [RCL3]

Formation

New entrants seeking values such as authenticity and growth articulate a clear desire for the structures that will enable formation at depth to happen [R6]. The reflection group perceives a tension within the narratives between the need for person-centred formation, especially with older entrants, and novices going through the formation process alone, and the need for clear structures as a framework in which the complex work of building an identity for oneself as a religious can take place. Given the rarity of religious vocations today, a delicate balance is to be struck between being flexible enough to cope with candidates as individuals and being sufficiently clear and structured within the formation process. There is a major challenge in formation processes suited to school-leavers when applied to independent adults [R5]. One reflector comments on the need for coherent programmes of formation, adequately resourced,

'It does not help people to be part of an "experiment". A depth of formation is wanted (and needed) and this is not always achieved. What is inhibiting it?' [R6]

The transcripts suggest that congregations need to be 'open for business' in terms of having in place personnel and structures for formation before potential entrants arrive on the scene. Given that most entrants now come from a professional background, their previous job history will often lead them to expect basic structures (roles, tasks, input, processes, expectations, clarity on who takes what key decisions and when etc.,) to be reasonably clear, and not constructed *ad hoc*. When these appear not to be in place, it has an adverse effect on entrants' trust in the congregation, and commitment to the formation process.

This need for structure also refers to some kind of progression after initial formation into the period of full ministry. As one narrator puts it, 'It's not all about the wedding' [AE1]. As well as getting an entrant to the point of vows, there also needs to be a clear trajectory afterwards, so that she does not feel adrift, especially within a congregation that is no longer involved at corporate level in its perceived 'traditional' ministry. Age-related issues can form part of this dynamic: some congregations have given up their traditional work, with their members moving into other ministries, but many have since retired from these as well. This may mean that potential entrants lack a clear sense of what the congregation is 'about', because there are few if any examples of members in active ministry and this can be perceived as having lost a sense of purpose. Potential entrants may not be able to see anyone within the congregation living what looks like a viable way of life and may perceive congregations with a high age profile as lacking the energy and personnel for new apostolic initiatives. They may be drawn to a congregation's spirituality and vision of ministry (or historic ministry), but in practice be unable to see where they and their ministry could fit in. [R3]

Returning to the categories of Rosabeth Moss Kanter referred to in an earlier chapter, we might reflect that to join a community and sustain that commitment, a person would need both to detach from some ideas/things/people and at the same time attach to others. For Kanter, Sacrifice (giving up things to belong to a community) goes hand in hand with Investment (gaining a stake in a community). Both have to be achieved for a successful integration in the new context. In the same way, Renunciation (giving up competing relationships) goes with Communion (establishing meaningful contact with the community). This idea of detaching and attaching could be helpful in considering these transcripts.

Narratives about suspicions over contemporary relationships and modern communications (mobile phones, social media, etc) may reflect a congregation's belief that detachment is the main demand of a novice. Only once accomplished can 'attachment' begin. This can amplify the pressure on novices to disconnect from their familiar world, which is very different from the world experienced by most professed sisters at the same age. This may mean that sisters are not fully appreciating either what they are asking the novice to surrender or the extent of the younger person's lack of understanding of the older sisters' mindset.

Regarding issues of attachment, the larger the detachment congregations demand from the newcomer, the larger the investment that ought to be made in creating attachment. But this does not seem to be the general pattern within these narratives. The lack of balance here can make it very hard for a novice to remain, though where we do see newer members making life profession it tends to be where the community has made attachment a strong element in formation whilst being gentle about detaching from the previous way of life. A sense of continuity with new members' previous life is not a distracting attachment but an enhancing factor. This ability to retain older attachments as well as make new ones within the community appears as a strength in the development of vocations.

Communities within the so-called 'new monasticism' can go in the opposite direction, with a great emphasis on attachment, making the newcomer feel part of the group and engaging them in activities and responsibilities at a very early stage. The person soon has a 'stake' in the community. On the other hand, little is asked of the newcomer in terms of detaching from their existing networks and way of life. There are few demands to sacrifice income or romantic relationships or their own autonomous decision-making. This can result in an eventual drift away from community life parallel to that of celibate communities.

Many new communities have a revolving membership with a few long-term leaders. Some make short-term commitment the model for belonging to the group. It is for a 'season' not for life. Vocations to religious life are about a seeking of God and a radical living out of the baptismal vow. Creating and maintaining the context in which such a call can flourish may well be one in which the issues of attachment and detachment prove crucial [R2].

Clashing cultures

All commentators note the clash of social and cultural attitudes and values when it was present in the narratives,

'I would say this was a fairly serious cause of upset and that it took the candidates by surprise, not least because of their assumptions that "everyone" had similar values to themselves. They were all serious Christians who have a contemporary outlook on the importance of open discussion about serious issues. What they [...] found [...] were perspectives that they thought were "old-fashioned" or even bigoted when it came to such aspects of life and society as sexual orientation, sexuality in general, gender roles, deference towards priests, racial attitudes. Dissonance of social and cultural outlook disconcerted all of the women: they hadn't expected it and it undermined their confidence in the women who should have been their role models for religious life. In some cases, the dissonance was a

consequence of age differences; but in others it was not. The transnational mix of members and cultures was another significant cause [R4].

Today's candidates for religious life expect to be able to raise questions and discuss issues of faith and belief because they are embarking on this vital and radical new life in which the nature of their own being and of ultimate truths are at stake. Used to questioning and debating with their friends and work colleagues, they expect the same from their new community, where they see such questioning as intrinsic to being a mature, modern person.

'I didn't like the fact that I couldn't question anything. I like thinking and questioning things, even just for fun...Like why can't you think about it differently? But I was not allowed to do that.' [RCL8]

'I found it really difficult coming from quite a scientific background and going in community and the way people reacted to me as being confident and willing to say things in meetings, whereas [...] it felt being in the novitiate that we should be seen and not heard, and preferably not seen either and that we were there only to be formed into their idea of what a sister was, rather than necessarily developing our own particular charism and gifts and talents and things like that [...] It just struck me I didn't really fit in to what was expected and I sort of kicked against it quite a lot, while still very much desiring the life and the vocation, the journey with God and ultimately union with God in prayer and that sort of thing.' [AL6]

It is not surprising that new entrants also expect to be asked for their own views and to have these considered when it comes to making decisions about and for them. They believe they have skills and experience that could be used for the mission and the community. [R4]

Because there are missing generations, with large numbers in the age group of seventy and above and few if any younger members, a 'natural shift' of attitudes, practices, culture etc. may not have taken place gradually over time. This means that independent-minded, mature new entrants can be experienced as presenting a challenge to the embedded culture of a community which had coalesced and rigidified over the years, when in their own judgement they are simply expressing what is normal in the world from which they come. [R3, R7]

Part of this intergenerational imbalance may also be reflected in ecclesiological terms. Reflectors detect among new entrants a conscious and unconscious communion ecclesiology which they expect to find in religious life: that the church, while inevitably made up of institutional structures, finds its ultimate basis in relationships: between people, with God through Christ and in the Holy Spirit. This contrasts with their perception of the culture within the communities they have joined, which they may experience as hierarchical and deferential rather than *communio* or having a primarily personalist understanding of relationship and human development. [R4]

'I was having less and less faith in obedience and the whole notion that, you know, God speaks through your superiors....There was a huge amount of blind obedience going on around me, I felt, and I was being asked to participate in this which just, maybe it is generational, it just didn't make a huge amount of sense to me'. [RCL3]

Where a community has engaged with group therapy/facilitation surrounding some intergenerational issues it is perceived very positively by reflectors who see it as a major help for new entrants. It is also wisely pointed out that while candidates will disclose their previous life experience in the discernment process before entering the community, no one is ever totally transparent, so emerging questions and tensions will be part of the natural process of formation. Ultimately the question here is one of how, out of the life experience and subsequent experience of new entrants to religious life, a congregational charism might be re-born as a genuine re-discovery and re-birth, while ensuring the 'change of life' or 'conversion of life' that religious profession implies. [R7]

Departing in peace

We speak of 'trying a vocation' because the early years in religious life are years of exploring, to see if this is a call that will last the test of time. It is not a negative judgement about a new member or her congregation when they come to a mutual agreement that this is not the right context for her to grow in her personal and spiritual life. The process of departure, when well-handled on both sides, can be one of growth and gratitude,

'We had a conference for five days on contemplative prayer and that was a powerful time for me and actually confirmed a sense of calling to contemplative prayer. And when I was pondering this afterwards it struck me actually that it doesn't have to be in the context of community, a monastic community, it can be very much in daily life [...] it confirmed to me that my vocation was not to the religious life but to contemplative life. And so I carried on, I stayed there for the whole year living alongside and it was wonderful and I got a lot from living with the community and they got a lot from me as well, but it was a much better ending when I left, you know. It was a celebration of the year and I left with a sense that I still had a vocation and the clarity of what that was.' [AL6]

Reflectors ask questions when the process of departure seems less healthy, based on the unresolved pain that remains with a number of narrators, even when prior to novitiate they have been mature women in mid-life, with good experiences of changes or challenges in their working lives,

‘All my novitiate went or were either sort of told to go or went from there and it wasn’t, it wasn’t sort of life-giving in the bigger sense [...] I had a review and they said they felt there were various things I needed to work on and to go out and work on them and then, if you want, to come back. Well that was absolutely mind blowing [...] I wasn’t expecting that [...] I just sort of howled, you know, it was just the pain, it was the most terrible, terrible pain because you know [...] I thought that somehow this, this call of God is true. Yes, I mean it was awful [...] I was diminished, and I know a number of people who’ve gone out diminished by it and that’s something I believe we shouldn’t be doing.’ [ANM5]

‘It was really tough, and it was very much like a bereavement and felt partly grieving the loss of the people, also grieving perceived loss of vocation as well. And there wasn’t much in the way of sort of looking after people who had left [...] it was like an amputation.’ [AL6]

Departure from a community need not be traumatic. Some respondents who have tried their vocation in more than one community report learning a considerable amount in their first experience in a way that leaves them well able to discern the second time around. The point about the centrality of spirituality or spiritual ‘fit’ comes through many interviews and is a central element in the process of discernment, even where congregations share the same charismatic root in a given spirituality, but then manifest this in such different ways,

‘From my experience one of the key components that you have to be clear on when you go into a congregation is the spirituality they are built on [...] if that doesn’t fit, it’s never going to work [...] you need to explore spiritualities [...] people need to be aware there are different spiritualities and very different charisms, particularly in women’s congregations.’ [RCL3]

One reflector puts the process of departure from religious life into the context of secular personnel management and raises a challenging question,

‘As someone who has been a senior manager in a large institution, handling many different kinds of difficult and uncomfortable staffing issues, I squirmed reading how some of these important matters related to identity, self-esteem and future direction were handled so very recently.’ [R4]

It is notable, however, that even those who recall a painful departure from religious life remain strongly supportive of the vocation in a general sense,

‘I think religious life is really important and vital to the health of the church and has a great deal to offer in terms of their ministry to lead a faithful life, committed life and depth, and that is missing from many parts of the Church of England [...] Religious community is one of the places that is keeping the flame lit and can teach that and provide space for people to explore in a very open and hospitable way [...]

Knowing they are there and seeing and being able to talk about God, spiritual things in depth is really incredibly valuable to me and you don't get that very much at church [...] you wonder, isn't this just what church is, should be, more than Sunday, meeting together regularly, doing things for each other? [...] It is just for me there is something very powerful about a vowed life' [AL6].

Chapter 9

Summary and conclusions

Despite the relatively small number of women entering religious life in Britain and Ireland today, this way of life clearly still retains the power of attraction and remains a viable option for women seeking the radical following of Christ. In many cases religious congregations have made heroic efforts to remain open and generous in the face of women of very different ages and cultures coming forward to try their vocation. The fragility of structures in today's religious life can prove a challenge both to those seeking to enter it and to those seeking to maintain it in a sufficiently healthy way for new entrants to find viable. National Vocations Offices are working with remarkable creative energy and imagination and are an invaluable part of today's vocations scene in Britain and Ireland.

Nonetheless the signs are clear that a more acute appreciation of the culture from which today's applicants are emerging is needed if religious life is to survive and flourish. Religious congregations have re-invented themselves several times in history, springing to life again after being reduced to a tiny number of members or even only one. Participants are aware of this as they look into what the future holds for them, but they are able to look forward in faith,

'I made my life profession knowing that I might be the last one to, you know, lock the door, but I felt it was absolutely right to stay here [...] I daily pray for vocations and we all have a very real hope for new life and, you know, people can sort of laugh at us and think, "Well, why would anybody want to?" but I [...] really believe there is new life somewhere that God is going to provide. [...] I am praying for it [...] but whether there is or isn't, I certainly believe we live it faithfully to the end [...] God is full of surprises, so who knows?'[ANM4]

Implicit suggestions that new members need to earn their place in a community in order to be accepted is rejected by all interviewees who discuss this issue. One sees it as symptomatic of a way of life that is dying and perhaps needs to die in its present form,

'If there's an issue in why people aren't staying it may be that there is still that, that old school way of thinking, "You need to come in and [...] start at the bottom of the heap, and [...] work your way through", whereas certainly people who have been out in the world, who have had independence, they've had a life, they've had a job, they are not going to come in then and [...] go into that kind of place of a much more traditional hierarchical way of being. However much [...] traditional religious communities think they have changed and believe they have moved to accommodate new people coming in at the other end, I think the gap is still too wide." [AL1]

A former member reflects that enquirers coming forward now appear to be seeking something very different in religious life from her own generation. This is an opinion also found among established religious looking at current enquirers and new members,

‘When I speak to young Catholics who are twenty years younger than me, they seem to be looking for something quite different from me. They seem to be looking for something very structured and very giving you the answers, which is quite different from me. So, they might fit into that quite happily. You know, they’d quite like to be told how to do things and what to do. I don’t know. For me I think that’s a shame, but maybe it’s a backlash, you know, from throwing everything out, throwing all the rules out, but now everybody wants rules again.’
[RCL4]

This project finds no reason to despair about the future of religious life, but the future may look very different from the immediate past or even from the present. Vocations promotion processes based on regular commitment of a weekend a month or a meeting every few weeks over a year are having less success with a generation averse to making even such regular time commitments as these. More successful are ‘Come and See’ events which enable seekers to create instant communities of support which demand nothing immediate of them but offer opportunities for peer to peer exploration. Where congregations have had the courage and the capacity to open up parts of their larger communities to house a vocations community this has given supportive and successful opportunities for discernment while creating and experiencing community based around prayer and the common life.

Emerging communities styling themselves on the concept of religious life but with different characteristics may be one answer. Communities like Chemin Neuf, the Fraternity of Jerusalem or the communities of Taizé or Sant’ Egidio live a consecrated life with distinctly different structures and concepts of commitment, ministry and membership. Different patterns of commitment and belonging are emerging in the new monastic communities, such as the Community of St Anselm at Lambeth Palace. Different ways of living and sharing the original charism or a mixture of charisms outside the structure of vowed membership may be another characteristic in the future, where the charism is re-born in the life and experience of lay groups, deriving from their baptism rather than ‘handed down’ from the traditional religious community. The specific charism of apostolic religious life and its re-expression in the church today is an underlying issue in these transcripts [R7], and some who have tried religious life and left see this as a possibility,

‘I would really like to see the apostolic orders opening up a bit more and recognising that you don’t need the rigidity of necessarily vows to live for a portion of the time according to the charism of the orders and living the spirituality of the orders which is the heart of it to me,

rather than vows or canon law [...] Because I think people are searching. I don't think it is any different now, particularly, but they are not going to be forced into a mould anymore [...] I just think there needs to be a meeting [...] between the maybe lay people with a desire to live in community or to share a charism and the vowed religious, there needs to be some sort of coming together of that' [RCL7].

For some who have left religious life 'the yearning was still there' [IL1] and reflectors wonder if congregations might investigate more flexible models of vocation along the lines of affiliated lay groups or third orders, or even temporary admission to address what seems a peculiarly 'postmodern' sense of vocation [R8]. Meanwhile newer members who see themselves as part of a rapidly evolving future point to the unchanging, essential element of religious life,

'The future of religious life [...] I suppose a lot of religious are fearful of the dying of it. Not of themselves, but of the dying [...] I was at a meeting four, five years ago, and we were talking about the apathy which is around religious and [...] we were saying until that apathy is addressed and looked at it is going to be very difficult for a new life to come up [...] A lot of sisters are dying [...] Religious need to be invited to let go of what was for something to come up, because it has to come up. Okay I have only been in twelve years, but it won't be the same in twelve years' time. How I live my life today may be very different to how I live it in twelve years' time, but the elements are still very fundamental: the prayer life, the community life etc. Without that, you don't have community, without Christ at the centre. [...] and I think community life in the future has to have the elements [...] I think there needs to be a point where all the things which are not helping a community to be a community need to be looked at and addressed instead of being hid under the carpet. That has been my experience. [...] I suppose the difference when I first entered, I had these ideals of what I thought religious life would be and now twelve years in, there's that saying, isn't there, "trust the process"? [...] And for me it's about... especially in the little things of life, in the mess of life, it's having that total abandonment, that total trust." [RCNM10]

Other respondents continue to see the value of religious life for themselves, but not necessarily for the future, in its current form,

'I don't believe God has called me here to turn the lights off. I don't believe that, I don't think God's got a sick sense of humour but, but I might be the last sister in the UK, but I believe the charism will continue [...] I sense things will happen, but it will be more fragile, maybe, more temporary. I am not sure people are going to be offering to commit for life to anything [...] My sense is people want to journey together. People have a real desire for community,

solidarity, prayer, spiritual reflection [...] I don't sense religious life is on [their] agenda at all but being a faithful Jesus follower is really on [their] agenda and that's exciting. [RCNM16]

Newer members, former members and formators are often united in their apprehension about the future,

'I think there is a future, people are always looking for something radical to live, intentional communities. I think there will be lay and mixed communities and I would like to see that. I think the way of life that we have, while it has served its purpose, you know, during the time that it existed [...] Well, the church is like that and religious life seems to be like that and I have spoken to other people in other congregations and they are the very same, people of my age group. And they are like, "we are the same", you know, "they won't change", you know. They just won't modernise. I don't know what they are afraid of, but it is going to change dramatically, and they are all going to be dead. We are dying at twelve a year [...] so in the next ten years we are going to be dying to very little [...] and we are not preparing for that.' [INM4]

The difference in aspirations regarding community life is also reflected in the thoughts of newer members about a future in which they are very much the youngest,

'We all sat round in a circle, in silence, looking at scarves or whatever we were looking at and that was it [...] then they were all tired because it had been a long day and then they'd just go home in the evening or to the hotel and that would be it, and I was kind of like, "I am not feeling this idea of community" [...] They had already built their relationships, because they had lived in community years ago. So, they were able to live separately and still have that sense of community because they had built up those relationships. But as somebody new coming into it yes, I did have relationships with some people, but I didn't have the opportunity really to build up those relationships because there wasn't that opportunity [...] You would have just been on your own and essentially trying to make community. If I had found a job, on an evening, these were elderly ladies by now and they were, you know, ready to turn in, so you'd be coming home from work and trying to make some sort of social contact with people who were just going to go to bed.' [RCL7]

But if there is apprehension there is also a sense of potential within it,

'I am excited about it, and I can get frightened, there is a sadness... We had a Come and See day and one of the women who was interested she said, "what is the most difficult thing in religious life?" and I think she wanted to hear something about celibacy or something. So, I said, "I think the most difficult thing is, they all die" [...] It is a constant feature and I think it didn't hit me really yet because my friends are still there. But I am aware that the sister who I

met first in [place], she is eighty, late eighties I think, she will be ninety now. I will be devastated the day she dies. There are so many in that age group, really fine women, so that's a constant feature. And I think you have to be able to deal with that. But I think I am excited because we have to reinvent ourselves. If we don't do that, we can't just... can't carry on the way, the way we were. [Change] will happen, and I hope we are not only driven by necessity. Of course, it will change, you know. We are suddenly down from one hundred and seventy to six, boy will it change! But I hope that it will be... there will be creativity around it'. [INM3]

While the few younger members in a congregation understand the need to be realistic about the future, it can also be difficult for them when the focus is entirely on the death of the congregation while they themselves still feel alive,

'The whole way of life [...] is dying away and the talk in that congregation is, you know, "we have to face reality, we are dying", and you know, I find myself thinking, "okay, that's true, but I like to think maybe, you know, I still have however many years to live", you know? So it, it's spoken of: the death and diminishment and the dying. It is old folk now [...] This is our reality and I find that difficult because I find myself thinking, "okay, but it is a reality for the majority, the vast majority, but it's not the complete story, it is not my story" [...] It's a really, really strange time. I find myself wondering why [...] was I called to join a group at the tail end of it? And that's a big issue for me.' [INM2]

The attraction that a number of newer members feel to a community life based on more than sharing a living space together can feel threatened by the increasing tendency for religious to live on their own and the desire for intentional community remains, despite numerical diminishment,

'I lived by myself with another sister next door, but we had very little interaction [...] and people were talking about living singly, why were they doing that? I had that... I had my own house. If I'd wanted to do that I'd have stayed where I was, you know? And I was thinking, "Community is difficult, but that is a big part of why I've come, you know, to live this way of life" and, you know, that was to share the prayers, the spiritual side of it but also the practical day to day of living. That's something I found very strange because it is becoming [...] more and more unusual that there are communities [...] I notice more and more [...] of my own age group choosing to live by themselves.' [INM2]

When a sister's faith in the meaning and purpose of her life is strong, the worrying statistics are not the main issue. It is how sisters react to those statistics that matters,

'I think they are going to be small and I think that is something we need to stop being scared of, because I think if we become scared of the fact that we are going to be small there is a risk

that we, that our fear will put people off [...] For me the number isn't the problem, it's whether is each person living the best version of their life that they can, because if they can and God is calling them, that will attract them anyway. I think, I think it is more about the authenticity with which we live our life as opposed to how, sort of how well known we are' [RCNM12].

The figure of Rachel weeping for her lost children is indicative of the fragility of today's religious life, but she is not a figure of tragedy and mourning. Even though she is connected in the Gospels with the loss of children and a future, through the eyes of faith she remains a figure of prophecy and hope for those prepared to rebuild the structures of religious life and re-envisage its culture anew.

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Appendix 1

Participant Category Codes

Quoted narrators are identified by letter codes denoting their denomination (or in the case of Irish respondents, who are all Catholic, their nationality) and their status, followed by a number:

A	Anglican
CL	Community Leader
E	Enquirer
F	Formator
I	Irish
L	Leaver
NM	New Member
R	Reflector
RC	Catholic
VP	Vocations Promoter

Thus an Anglican new member would be ANM3, a Catholic leaver from the UK would be RCL5, and a new member from Ireland INM2, etc.

Appendix 2

Information Sheet and Questions

Religious Life Discerning the Future Participant information sheet

About the Research Project

The goal of the project is to understand more deeply the expectations and challenges of religious life for new entrants. We want to look specifically at the experiences of women who have entered, left, and/or are considering entering congregations since 2000. This project is implemented by three organisations: Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology, Cambridge; the Centre for Catholic Studies, Durham University and the Religious Life Institute, Heythrop College and is funded by the Conrad N Hilton Foundation.

Contact for further information

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About your participation in the Research Project

There is no obligation to take part in this study. Likewise, if you decide to participate and then withdraw you can do it at any time by contacting us via the above email addresses. If you agree to take part, you will have the choice either to answer a written questionnaire or to be interviewed face to face. We think either option should not take longer than one hour. If you choose to be interviewed, you will again have a choice between talking to a member of a religious congregation (Sr Gemma Simmonds) or to the project's research assistant (María Calderón Muñoz).

There are no incentives for participation apart from helping us understand better the expectations of women seeking to enter religious life and the challenges they face. We also hope that the experience of taking part will be a positive one for you.

Your participation in this project will be kept confidential. No one will know if you decide or not to take part, including any relevant religious congregation, nor will Sister Gemma Simmonds, as director of the RLI, know the names of any participant unless the participant herself chooses to deal directly with her. We will anonymise any identifiable data and we will not keep records of any personal information about you as an individual.

About the research results and data collected

The anonymised material collected from the questionnaires / interviews will be analysed to look for common themes / patterns. We will then ask a group of theologians to reflect on the research findings and give us an overview of the implications for the future re-configuring of religious life. The final report will be publicly available under the same restrictions of anonymity. You will be given a copy of the report. All raw data will be destroyed at the end of the project.

YOU WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS TO KEEP, TOGETHER WITH A COPY OF YOUR CONSENT FORM

Appendix 3
Participant Ethics and Consent Form



HEYTHROP COLLEGE UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Ethics Committee Consent form for participants

(Boxes will expand as text is entered)

Name of Participant:	Address:
Email:	Phone:
Title of project:	
Brief outline of project, including its purpose and the activities for participants:	
Name of researcher:	
Position of researcher:	
Contact address for researcher:	
Contact number for researcher:	
Email for researcher:	
Address and telephone number of the College: Heythrop College, University of London, Kensington Square, London, W8 5HN, 020 7795 4164.	
Signature of researcher (this must be an actual or scanned signature, not a typed name):	Date:

Statement to be signed by the participant:	
I confirm that I have read the information sheet dated _____ for the above study, have had the opportunity to ask questions about this project and have had these answered satisfactorily.	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time during the project, without having to give a reason.	<input type="checkbox"/>
I agree to take part in this project.	<input type="checkbox"/>
I consent to the sound recording/videoing of the following activity (please select) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ focus group <input type="checkbox"/> ❖ interview <input type="checkbox"/> ❖ other (please specify) <input type="checkbox"/> ❖ not applicable <input type="checkbox"/> 	
I agree that my observations/comments/contributions may be anonymised and quoted in any report (private or published) arising from this research.	<input type="checkbox"/>
It has been explained to me that if I return this form by email, with my name entered below, this will be equivalent to my signing the form and will be understood as signifying my consent to participate.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Signature, electronic signature or typed name of participant:	Date:

APPENDIX 4

Entrants into Religious Communities in England and Wales 1986-2018

Year	Enclosed Nuns	Other Religious Sisters	TOTAL WOMEN	Order Brothers	Order Priests	TOTAL MEN	TOTAL
1986	21	58	79	5	54	59	138
1987	23	55	78	4	56	60	138
1988	12	38	50	1	48	49	99
1989	20	31	51	3	49	52	103
1990	24	30	54	3	49	52	106
1991	14	25	39	1	54	55	94
1992	9	28	37	1	39	40	77
1993	17	17	34	3	45	48	82
1994	12	22	34	1	38	39	73
1995	19	16	35	2	36	38	73
1996	13	13	26	0	32	32	58
1997	10	12	22	3	24	27	49
1998	10	12	22	1	23	24	46
1999	10	12	22	1	20	21	43
2000	10	12	22	1	19	20	42
2001	10	12	22	0	16	16	38
2002	9	10	19	0	15	15	34
2003	12	8	20	2	10	12	32
2004	4	3	7	1	11	12	19
2005	9	4	13	0	18	18	31
2006	6	8	14	2	12	14	28
2007	7	9	16	1	13	14	30
2008	11	15	26	2	12	14	40
2009	9	6	15	0	19	19	34
2010	9	10	19	0	19	19	38
2011	8	17	25	0	19	19	44
2012	11	23	34	0	30	30	64
2013	13	17*	30	0	22	22	52*
2014	18	27	45	0	18	18	63
2015	10	19	29	0	25	25	54
2016	9	22	31	0	29	29	60
2017	9	6	15	0	20	20	35
2018	8	13	21	0	16	16	37

These statistics are provided by the Conference of Religious and the National Office for Vocation.

*This figure does not include the 10 former Anglican sisters who established an autonomous monastery within the Personal Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham.