

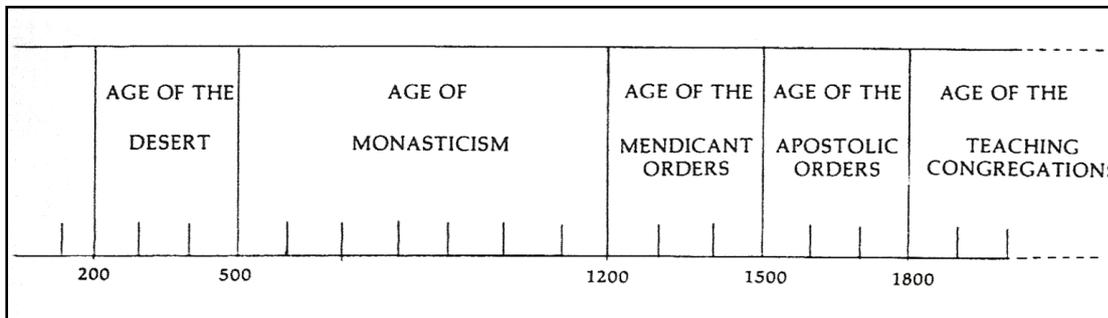
IS RELIGIOUS LIFE IN IRELAND MOVING TOWARDS CLOSURE? Liz Murphy, R.S.M.

The title of this article given to me by the Editor of *Doctrine & Life* could just as easily read: Is Religious life in Europe Moving towards Closure? Indeed, it could also read: Is Religious Life in the Western World Moving towards Closure? Thinking about ‘closure’ or ‘end times’ one automatically recalls ‘beginnings’ believing with T.S.Eliot (1959) that

Here between the hither and the farther shore
While time is withdrawn, consider the future
And the past with an equal mind. (*Four Quartets*: ‘The Dry Salvages’)

Many of the apostolic religious congregations that are now searching their way forward into the next two decades were founded around 200 years ago. Nano Nagle founded the Presentation Sisters in 1775, Edmund Rice founded the Christian Brothers in 1802 and Catherine McAuley founded the Sisters of Mercy in 1831. Patricia Wittberg (1994) states that almost 80% of the religious communities existing today began in the 19th century. In 1850 there were 1,344 Sisters in 19 congregations throughout the United States; by 1900 there were 40,340 in 45 congregations. In 1800 in Ireland there were 11 convents with 120 Sisters from six different congregations. In 1900 this had grown to 8,000 Sisters living in 368 convents, representing 38 congregations. The expansion continued into the 1960s when the number joining religious congregations in Ireland peaked.

This diagram by Raymond Hostie et al (1980) illustrates the Ages in the History of Religious Life showing the Age of the Teaching Congregations reaching from the early nineteenth century, and covering a span of 200 years moving into the millennium of 2000 and now well into the 21st century.



It is indeed timely to look at the reality of these times for apostolic religious, particularly in light of Isaiah 58:12 which says:

You will rebuild the ancient ruins,
Build up on the old foundations (*Jerusalem Bible* translation)

This is put even more starkly in *The Message* (2003,2006) translation:

You'll use the old rubble of past lives to build anew,
Rebuild the foundations from out of your past.

Writers such as José María Vigil (2005) in his article: "The Crisis of Religious Life in Europe, A Call to Religious Life Worldwide," stated some 15 year ago that religious life in Europe had 'collapsed' and that the situation had reached a point of no return due to the scarcity of vocations, lack of flexibility in relation to change, inability to adapt to new circumstances, the problem of age, institutional captivity, lack of prophetic leaders, and overall indifference and apathy. He concluded:

Everything indicates that Western Europe is approaching the time when religious life will disappear as a relevant and vigorous protagonist in society and the church. Indeed religious life as we have known it is disappearing.

A few years later in 2012, Archbishop Joseph Tobin, (who subsequently held the role of Secretary of the Vatican Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, CICALSAL), at a symposium held at Heythrop College, in his reflection on the role of religious following Vatican II stated:

A good majority of bishops were opposed to including a special section on religious life because there was a belief first that religious life was not a fundamental structure of the church but was rather a beautiful decoration that had developed over the course of centuries. They thought that while it beautified the church, it wasn't essential to the church. You could dispense with it and the church would still stand" (Simmonds, ed. 2014, p. 20).

He added: "the diminishing numbers or ageing of religious has to be a concern of the church. It is an ecclesial question, an ecclesial vocation, and therefore an ecclesial worry." (Simmonds 2014, p. 27)

The late canon lawyer, Fr Frank Morrissey OMI, has guided many congregations in rewriting their Constitutions and establishing new juridical structures for schools and hospitals. He was instrumental in helping to establish Canadian Religious Stewardship (CRS) in 2010, a new Public Juridic Person (PJP), which is also a civil corporation known as Canadian Catholic Congregational Management involving the collective properties and health care management of twelve congregations. In his paper (shared with this author) *Planning for the*

Demise or Diminishment of Canadian Religious Institutes (2013) he said

Many religious institutes in North America and Western Europe have had, in recent years, to re-examine their internal governance structures, and to foresee the eventual disappearance of their provinces and regions, if not that of the institute itself. After many years of sustained growth, their numbers have now diminished considerably, and the sponsorship of their apostolic works has often already passed to others, or the transfer will happen in the near future.

COMPLETION

All of this is by way of background to work diligently carried out by Konferentie Nederlandse Religieuzen (KNR) in the Netherlands where, according to Gemma Simmonds (2014)

The Episcopal Conference of The Netherlands is reported as predicting that within a decade contemplative/monastic religious life will have ceased to exist in Holland. It is possible that a similar demise of sectors of religious life will have followed in the global north by the time we celebrate the diamond jubilee of the Council. (p.17)

Br Cees van Dam (2010) caused quite a stir in The Netherlands, but even more so at CICLSAL in Rome, when he published a paper in 2010 on Religious Institutes and the '*Ars Moriendi*'. In 2012 he co-authored with Br T Sponselee and Dr Ad Leys a detailed study - *Explorations on the 'Completion' of Religious Institutes* that resulted in the establishment of a special unit within KNR to support over 20 congregations that were either in the space of 'completion' or moving in that direction.

LANDMARKS FOR IRELAND

In 2014/2015, having visited The Netherlands and talked to Br van Dam and Dr Ad Leys I conducted a study of apostolic religious in Ireland as part of an M. Sc. in Executive Leadership with Ulster University. This resulted in a dissertation entitled: Organisational Demise: Survival, Terminal Decline or Graceful Surrender of Apostolic Religious Congregations in Ireland today. Based on a questionnaire used in The Netherlands and subsequently adapted in Germany and other European countries I explored:

- the stages in the life cycle of organizations with particular focus on the final stages;
- the current reality of Catholic religious congregations, particularly in Ireland, and the challenges to be addressed at this time of transition;
- a model of 'completion' as a roadmap to inform future practice for the situation in Ireland;

- the role and responsibilities of leaders at this time of ultimate change;
- a new and creative future as succeeding generations are challenged to receive and sustain a significant heritage.

I interviewed fourteen leaders of congregations who held key roles at congregational, provincial or regional level -10 were female and four male. While some had members outside of Ireland the focus of the study was on the numbers in Ireland in 2014. The size of the congregations ranged as follows:

Very Small (Fewer than 100)	Small (100-200)	Medium (200-300)	Large (500+)
4	7	2	1

In drawing together the findings from the 14 Leaders who willingly agreed to be interviewed and who shared honestly their responses to a prepared questionnaire the following themes emerged and are addressed in detail in my dissertation:

- 1. Demographics;**
- 2. Founding Purpose: apostolic work and changing scenarios;**
- 3. Structural developments;**
- 4. Spirituality and sustainability;**
- 5. Leadership: Roles and responsibilities;**
- 6. Strategic Planning: Management of Property and Stewardship of Finance**
- 7. Passing on the legacy;**
- 8. Survival, Terminal Decline or Graceful Surrender?**

Some brief snippets from the research are included here. In terms of **Demographics** the age of members ranged from 75 -79.8 years giving an overall average of 77.4 years. It is easy to project the figures forward since 2014 and the impact of Covid-19 this year will add considerably to the declining numbers. The daily newspapers and the list of deaths on rip.ie indicate an average of two deaths of religious per day.

NEW VOCATIONS

One of my questions to the congregations interviewed asked about entries into the

congregations. Only one of the 14 congregations had any new member entering in Ireland and staying in the previous 15 years. The general response to the question **How many entrants have you had in the Province in the past 10, 15, 20 years?** included

No one came and stayed in the past 20 years; people came and may have stayed a short time but left.

In querying about actively promoting recruitment or having a formal programme of formation the following replies were elicited - varying from limited active promotion to total negativity:

There is a group actively involved that never gave up, but we have to ask the questions: is it fair, is it just, is it right? We would have to have further training if we had candidates.

There is a certain amount of controversy about this in terms of fairness to the person. If someone called we would say something like: Think of somewhere where there is more life.

We are not actively involved in vocation promotion. We respond to contacts. Most who call come through the internet.

We are not recruiting as such. It shouldn't be about recruiting but about discernment. We have not said no to vocations.

No one is panicking to get new numbers. No one has entered in the past 20 years. We would actually be worried if we got new members. We are not involved in vocation formation at all.

We had conversations in 2009 around recruiting and it was felt the gap was too big. It is a different time, it is the age of the laity now, and if we can pass on whatever we have to the laity and enable them to live the faith view of life that is the work of today.

In terms of **Founding Purpose** the major change was from communal ministry in schools, hospitals and child care to 'diverse ministries' which is in keeping with a statement by Sandra Schneiders (2014) at a conference in Dublin where she said that it was now the 'new normal' for individual religious to be engaged in a variety of works, and also living in diverse ways, rather than in traditional convents or monasteries. Such changes had many implications as seen in this statement from one leader:

Very few religious now earn a formal salary due to being past the age of retirement. Many work in a voluntary capacity in areas such as out of school supportive education, resourcing various projects, in retreat centres, working in areas of homelessness, in parishes, with immigrants, in counselling and psychotherapy, chaplaincy, caring for the earth, and mission effectiveness co-ordination.

In relation to formal education and health care the general response was “we have given our schools to a Trust” and “our hospitals are in companies.” The overall conclusion showed that the days of paid active ministry are over for most members, and work/ministry is now carried out on a voluntary basis by individual members. This shows the absence of any distinctive corporate identifying characteristics of any congregation.

STRUCTURES AND SPIRITUALITY

In terms of **Structural Developments** huge energy was devoted to amalgamations of Provinces mainly at European level. Two congregations had ‘merged’ into one. Where there were significant changes there was some lamentation at being downgraded from a Province to a Region or a Mission Area. Other institutes were moving towards some form of restructuring as numbers declined, properties were no longer suitable and many were closed. The huge psychological impact of such closures burdened many leaders, knowing the elderly were deeply grieving and younger members did not wish to be carrying forward burdens relating to property and finance.

In questioning the **Spirituality** of the members there were some very interesting revelations in terms of the dominant God image and the forms of prayer sustaining individuals and communities.

Our spirituality is cognisant of the differences between us, different ways of living together and different ways of praying. We live in diverse situations. The variety reflects the image of God and the underlying theologies. We talk about mission for immobility instead of the former mission for mobility. We go to Mass now using our Tablet or iPad. That is becoming a pattern for us.

and

We were quite monastic up to Vatican 11 with prayer and the Eucharist in common. There is a great shift now to a spirituality of communion. Stillness is practised at

least once per week and some do fifteen minutes daily. Some have a strong leaning towards justice and advocacy.

When asked if people from outside join the community for prayer the honest reply from one leader was “we are poor at that, it happens in small groups. People ask us to pray when they are in need, but we will be remembered for our schools rather than for our prayer.”

LEADERSHIP AND STEWARDSHIP

Examining the role and responsibility of **leaders** in guiding the future of apostolic religious life in Ireland raised many concerns including

- The availability of people to take up such roles
- Administrative responsibility - legalities, charity compliance, safeguarding
- Facing the reality of diminishment together
- Ageing, sickness and death of members
- The shadow of abuse

One leader wondered if ‘shared leadership’ has become ‘shared avoidance of leadership.’

Another had no option but to ask an 82 year old and an 84 year old to take on local leadership! Leaders at Provincial/Regional level were now forced to take on problems normally sorted at local level.

The national newspapers regularly feature the large number of properties owned by religious congregations or the amount of money received for the sale of land. One section of my questionnaire was based on **Management of Property**. Property featured strongly for the congregations involved with Redress 2002 and the Ryan Report 2009 when the Government called on religious to supplement offers of compensation with significant transfer of valuable property. This, in addition to the transfer of school and hospital properties to Trusts consumed much time on the part of Leaders in dealing with property management, personnel and solicitors. It was heartening to hear that

We don’t have any spare community houses. We have very little spare property that could be disposed. We are looking at what is short, medium and long term; putting resources into what is long term, modernising them and making them comfortable for older members.

while acknowledging the reality that

We have properties where we were – some are listed buildings and have problems re ownership/title deeds. Smaller houses are saleable. While good, they are costly because of their size.

Stewardship and Financial Management highlighted the loss of salaries, dependence on investments, entitlements to State benefits, and dependence on the expertise of advisors, which comes at a cost. Then there are requirements to be faithful to all that is required as registered Charities while trying to anticipate an unknown future.

A section on **Passing on the Legacy** will be explored in detail in a subsequent article together with addressing ‘end times’ or what I called ‘Survival, Terminal Decline or Graceful Surrender.’

CROSSROADS

Apostolic religious life in Ireland is at a crucial crossroads now. The known past is yielding to an uncertain present and an unknown future. There is a legacy of past times as a door opens into new vistas which require further exploration:

Now the day has dawned and the lamp that lit my dark corner is out.
A summons has come and I am ready for my journey.
(Tagore, from *Gitanjali*, LXXXVI)

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In her three-year term as Secretary General of AMRI – Association of Leaders of Missionaries and Religious of Ireland – she guided the integration of CORI and IMU. She currently serves on several boards and trains Board members in all aspects of Governance and Charity legislation.

