



Joining a religious order could be the best decision you ever make, writes **Colm Fitzpatrick**

There's an old, well-known joke about how different religious communities are constantly competing with one another, vying to decide which order is the best. It goes something like this: a Franciscan and a Dominican were debating whose order was the greater. After months of arguing, they decided to ask God for an answer when they died. When finally meeting in heaven, the two men went to God to resolve their disagreement. God seemed a bit puzzled about the question and told them he would reply in writing a few days later. After much deliberation, God sent the following letter: "Please stop bickering about such trivial matters. Both orders are equally great and good in my eyes. Sincerely, God, SJ."

While the joke is quite funny, it does betray the erroneous assumption that there is a rivalrous relationship between different orders. Rather, much like in the way St Thomas Aquinas argued that all creatures great and small reflect the beauty and goodness of God, so to it seems that different religious communities have distinct roles in reflecting and sharing the Gospel message.

Lovely image

"There's a lovely image of the Church as kind of like a garden, there's different flowers, and you get cross-pollination between different flowers. Some will be very distinctive, some will have their own characteristics," Bro. Martin Bennett OFM Cap. tells *The Irish Catholic*, adding that the Capuchin Franciscans are no different from this rustic image.

Arriving to Ireland in the early 1600s, the order has been dedicated to touching the lives of people in concrete and practical ways through personal encounter and accompaniment. This mission harkens back to St Francis of Assisi and his followers who wholly devoted themselves to the service of the Church.

"Our vocation is what they call active contemplative, so we're founded as contemplative, we're founded as hermits, but we live and work actively in the world, so rather than living in a monastery, or whatever, the prayer, meditation, the Eucharist is central to our lives, and then we bring that out into our ministry and our experiences in our ministry comes back into our fra-

A garden full of



The Capuchin Vocation Team at the World Meeting of Families stand with Killaloe's Bishop Fintan Monahan. (l-r) Bro. Richard Hendrick, Bro. Martin Bennett (Provincial Promoter of Vocations), Bro. Bryan Shortall, Bishop Fintan Monahan and Bro. Seán Kelly.

ternity or prayer life," Bro. Martin explains.

"What probably makes us unique in a sense is that we don't have any particular ministry that we do. You can go to Capuchin places around the world and we'll be doing completely different things."

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The community in Ireland is best known for its praiseworthy work in the Capuchin Day Centre for Homeless People, but Bro. Martin says that the friars "can turn our hand to

much anything", including ordinary ministries like offering pastoral care in schools and hospitals, to chaplaincies in Dublin's port.

"So, it really doesn't matter what we do, it's all about how we do it. And that's kind of, in a sense, the number one thing, being brothers to each other and trying to act in a kind of brotherly way to those to whom we minister."

This type of life may sound enticing to some, but it doesn't come without its challenges. Only through the process of discernment, can candidates learn about the lived reality of being a friar and decide then whether it's for them.

"They have to have the capacity to live our way of life, as well, and living a life that's centred in brotherhood and with people who you

wouldn't choose to live with, living with people who could be a radically different age. The house I live in in Rochestown; I'm 42 years of age and the next closest in age to me is 38 years older than I am, so it's almost a whole lifetime of a difference. So that's part of our reality, as well," he says.

"So, it's the capacity to be able to kind of work with that, learn from the wisdom of these older guys, but also face the challenges that that presents. We'd be really looking for people who are open, people who have their feet on the ground. I've always found that when I met Capuchins, they're kind of ordinary, grounded people in a sense, and I think that's a quality we would look for in somebody."

This desire to be firmly rooted in the world and make a tangible difference to those in need is also present among other religious communities in Ireland, often in unique ways. Sisters of the Medical Missionaries of Mary, for example, serve in 13 countries around the world, offering vital health services to the sick.

The group was founded in 1937 by Glenageary-born Marie Helena Martin who devoted her life to bringing comfort and health to others, and this charism has been central to the order ever since.

"One of our priorities is to go to people on the margins, and I know other groups do that, it's nothing different really, but we do try to go to places where there are, again, needs

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opportunities



The Medical Missionaries of Mary celebrate 50 years of presence in Brazil and the perpetual vows of Sr Nilza dos Santos this year.



Fr Alan Neville MSC, Vocations Director of the Irish Province Missionaries of the Sacred Heart.



Ursuline Sr Karen Kent in Rome with Sr Moekti Gondosasmito, Indonesia General Councillor.

that aren't being met," Sr Carol Breslin says, noting that some of the sisters are offering their services to the displaced in South Sudan.

"But other places we go, for example, we're in Brazil, where there's a lot of urban violence and families are affected by this violence so we work a lot with women's groups to empower them and it's a sense of giving hope. We have another sister who works in Africa and with people who have been affected by trauma, you know in the conflict war situation, so it's not just a handout, it's giving people skills to deal with the situation in which they live and very much working with them."

It's this particular emphasis on health-related life that attracts people to the flourishing community, which has about 100 members based in Drogheda and Dublin today. The sisters are drawn to holistic healing, which includes not just physical mending, but also "healing people's spirits and minds". In doing so, they respond to the needs of our time, but as Sr Carol points out, this also requires that religious orders change and adapt to new surround-

ing and urgencies.

Different times

"My take on it is that religious life is changing. There's no doubt about it. It's evolving. But I believe, and many people believe, the spirit is there and it's not for us to tell God what to do.

"At different times, religious life will take different forms, and I think part of what we need to do is listen to what people are saying, to see what's happening around us, and again, when we talk about meeting a need, what is the need of people today?" Sr Carol says.

"I would say to them to look at the gifts they have. Talk to people. Many groups now have open days"

"And I know there's this thing of I'm not religious I'm spiritual, but it's searching for where God is calling me today. Whether you call that spirituality or religion or whatever, it's changing. It's not going to be the same. I joined over 50 years ago,

and religious life isn't the same as when I joined. But it's still religious life and it's still God calling. It's not easy but it's being open and listening to what God has to say today. So that isn't any different for a young person today than it was for me."

For those people who feel they are being called into consecrated life, but are overwhelmed by what seems like a maze of different orders to choose from, Sr Breslin suggests that listening to the stories of others and being patient is key to making the best decision.

"I would say to them to look at the gifts they have. Talk to people. Many groups now have open days. If some spirituality seems to attract you, talk to the people. Spend time, and it does take time. It's trying to be open to what God is saying."

While there is an eclectic mix of young people in different orders across Ireland today, there's no question that this demographic has been dwindling in recent decades. A general apathy towards not only religious life but religion itself is

pervasive in today's culture, leading to a pointed decline in young people joining spiritual communities.

"I think they don't see it. And you can't be something you can't see. The vast majority have little connection to the Church or faith, and unless you do, you're not going to encounter God and to want to go deeper into some kind of relationship with God. It has to start with the relationship with God," says Sr Karen Kent, of the Ursuline Sisters. Founded by St Angela Merici in 1535, the group has no explicit apostolic ministry, and is centred on realising the abundance of love God has for each of us and sharing this love with whoever we encounter.

"It is a contemplative life at one level, that has an overflow into a ministry, but the centrality of it is the prayer life, and the ministry doesn't get in the way of the prayer. Your day isn't focused around ministry, your main focus is your relationship with God and nourishing it, and out of that you go into ministry."

The community has traditionally been involved in providing education in Ireland, Kenya and Wales, but more recently mediate God's care for the world through additional ministries like health-care; prayer and retreat ministry; and counselling. While these services create huge differences in the lives of those who avail of them, Sr Karen stresses that the focus of order isn't so much about 'doing' but 'being'.

"The struggle for Catholics in the modern world is attempting to overcome this destructive norm, and making a leap of faith"

"And when you do meet people, they ask what will I be doing, and it becomes all about what I'll be doing, rather than how will I be. A relationship is about being, it's not about doing. And the being has to come first, the relationship with Christ has to come first and then for us, the doing will come from that."

By developing a strong relationship with God, the giftedness of each person will naturally flow out of this new way of being. Through communal living, the sisters also find a place of belonging, inspiration and encouragement where they can gain a better sense of who they are and where God is calling them.

"I think the young people that are exploring religious life today quite firmly want community life. They want to live in groups. They are looking for community and communal prayer, and some kind of communal expression of the life.

"They're not looking to be free to do whatever they like, they actually want to see that in making this commitment that we do it together and that community is central for them. That's what I'm hearing," Sr Kent says, adding that there are a number of young people discerning with the order in Kenya and in the wider congregation.

Also extolling the importance of communal life is Fr Alan Neville MSC, Vocations Director of the Irish Province Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, who says that this particular

style of living not only deepens one's faith, but also one's humanity.

"Living in community is incredible, but it's not the easiest thing in the world – it's like family life. You have to compromise, you have to live together, you have to gather around the altar, but you also have to gather around the sink. And that's really life-giving."

The community, however, don't just remain around the sink, but travel to different parts of the world offering humanitarian aid as well as fighting off illness and hunger.

"We were raised up 150 years ago to be missionaries, to go out and proclaim the Good News and even now, and when you think of mission these days, I think of mission in Ireland, as well as abroad.

"We ministered in Ireland – traditionally you would have been in school and hospitals – so now we've got guys lecturing in universities on ethics, we've got men working with other men who are involved in domestic violence, you would have guys who are doing what I would call liminal ministry because that's where the need is now," Fr Alan explains.

"There is need for us to move into a space where you're reaching out to refugees and asylum seekers in a creative way, or you're reaching out to people in prison in a creative way and you're trying to kind of help people get their lives back together after experiencing disaster."

By addressing the fears, woes and pains of a global people through Christ-centred mission the congregation live up to their call "to be on earth the heart of God". Without doubt, there is a strong desire for people of all walks of life to embody and live out this calling, but according to Fr Alan, today's society attempts to suppress this deep and radical yearning.

Knowledge

The struggle then for Catholics in the modern world is attempting to overcome this destructive norm, and making a leap of faith, with the knowledge that God will guide them on this transformative journey.

"I actually think we have a load of people out there who would consider a vocation but for whatever reason, they're maybe a little bit anxious or a little bit fearful. I mean these days, if you want to be counter-cultural, put your hand up a say you're Catholic. You know that's counter-cultural these days, that's witness.

"And I just think for people, this is where they're going to be truly happy and what I'd say is explore it, and if it's for you fantastic, and if it's not, then you'll know," he continues.

"But it's like my own vocation experience. The last thing I wanted to be was a 40-year-old accountant staring at a window wondering what if. Now I'm a 40-plus missionary currently working between Ireland and England, and South Africa and Venezuela and I love it.

"It's where I'm meant to be and I think for a lot of people, that's the very least that I would hope for them, that if they think this is where they're meant to be, we can journey with them and see in fact if that's true. And if it's not, then they'll know, and if it is, it's the best decision they'll ever make."