

# Giving your life for the restoration of humanity



Capuchin friars in discussion in Church Street friary in Dublin.



Consecrated life has a unique offering to a world 'broken by hopelessness', **Chai Brady** hears

**P**ope Francis encouraged those who support consecrated life to look to the future with confidence, as he said hope continues to prevail, in a December message to some 60 members of the Vatican Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life at the end of their plenary assembly.

## Future

It could be easy to be negative about the future of consecrated life in Ireland considering the rising age demographic of priests and religious, the lack of

vocations and the closure of many properties belonging to orders.

But speaking to *The Irish Catholic* before the World Day for Consecrated Life on February 2, Capuchin friar Fr Martin Bennett OFM Cap. (Order of Friars Minor Capuchin), who is the parish priest of Halston Street Parish and Director of Communications for the order, says despite dwindling numbers, "we always have hope".

"People living consecrated life are always adapting, one of the core things is listening to the signs of the times and seeing what we can do. I'd say what holds back religious orders at the moment is just the sheer age and illness of the people who are there. If they had younger members, you would see stuff sprouting all around the place," Fr Bennett says.

His focus is on the strengths of the order, the resources they have available and how they can be used to help them further their mission in the future.

Although it's important to acknowledge the reality of the situation for religious orders in Ireland, "let's not get lost in it," he says.

"I'm sure after the crucifixion, when the stone was rolled across the front of the tomb, people thought that was it, it's over, I've prob-

ably wasted my time. And then something extraordinary happened and new life sprung up. So even with diminishing numbers, illnesses, deaths and closures, there's always new hope."

For Sr Julie Doran OLA (the Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Apostles), consecrated life sends a message of hope in and of itself.

**“Women of faith and courage who with commitment to God and neighbour will stand up and be counted for what they believe, living witness of faith like the many religious who have gone before them”**

She says: "As OLA missionaries who have walked with people in their greatest sorrows, we have seen the degradation of human life but have remained hopeful. Our message is never lose hope in God and this hope is manifested through the generosity of thousands of OLA sisters who have given their lives as consecrated sisters to the restoration of humanity and creation in a world broken by hopelessness."

Religious life will always have a place in Ireland, Sr Doran states, because the Ireland of today needs "women of faith and courage who with commitment to God and neighbour will stand up and be counted for what they believe, living witness of faith like the many religious who have gone before them".

She says that today women and men whose lives proclaim the gospel of love are needed and "who through their commitment to live this gospel give hope to those they minister to".

## Consumerism

It is certainly not always easy for religious to be heard, particularly when there are so many other forces driving and distracting people.

In a "consumer-driven world", Fr Bennett says people are always searching for deeper meaning, which is expressed in different ways throughout a person's life. He adds that consecrated life has something unique to offer the world, regarding the Capuchins it is a sense of community, of working together in a common mission which can have "powerful effects in the world, and always has".

"If you look across Irish society, things have changed completely. We had a

particular Ireland where religious observance was very, very strong and it's moved into a different space now but I think at the heart of it all people are always still searching for meaning," he says.

**“Fr Bennett references the Capuchin Day Centre in Dublin, who feed the homeless and impoverished, as a very concrete example of their ministry”**

"I think the credibility of the Church has really been hit and people's trust not only in the Church, but in banks, Government, any kind of institution that's been there and been strong and to the fore over the last 20-30 years has been hit and it's been called into scrutiny. In many ways this has made the Church a better place, a safer place, a more reflective place.

"Now we're moving into the synodal pathway and I have great hope for this. I think it's very much our way of doing business within the Franciscan tradition - try-

ing to collaborate, that's a big word for us: how do we create connections with people? How do we involve people in our ministries and work with people as best we can? We're always trying to have that approach."

Fr Bennett references the Capuchin Day Centre in Dublin, who feed the homeless and impoverished, as a very concrete example of their ministry.

## Negativity

Speaking about the rejection of the Church by many people in Ireland, and the associated negative view, Sr Doran says the sisters combat this by simply giving witness to what they believe. She says this leads people to see "beyond the negativity that the world throws at us to the immense generosity of service that is being lived in care for the poor, the marginalised, the homeless, the migrants and the earth".

Despite the drastically different landscape of Ireland today, Sr Doran believes Ireland showed its best face during the Covid-19 pandemic, expressing values such as dedication and commitment. She also described the response to the murder of the young primary school teacher Ashling Murphy in Tullamore on January 12 as "prayerful", and that the Irish



Sr Julie Doran OLA congratulating Rev. Dr Yusef Bamai on his graduation at St Patrick's College Maynooth.

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people showed “bravery” after the tragedy.

Sr Doran works with the Irish Episcopal Council for Immigrants which serves as the centre of a network of diocesan and parish personnel who minister to various ethnic groups and people on the move throughout the country.

**“The council aims to develop and foster initiatives between the Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference and the dioceses and parishes in relation to the pastoral care of immigrants”**

It is tasked with increasing pastoral awareness, cultural sensitivity, and the dynamics of outreach, welcome and support throughout its network. The council aims to develop and foster initiatives between the Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference and the dioceses and parishes in relation to the pastoral care of immigrants.

Sr Doran says many people came to her, even during Covid, to see how they could help migrants, adding that

“even if Covid held us down we still had the ability to continue to reach out”.

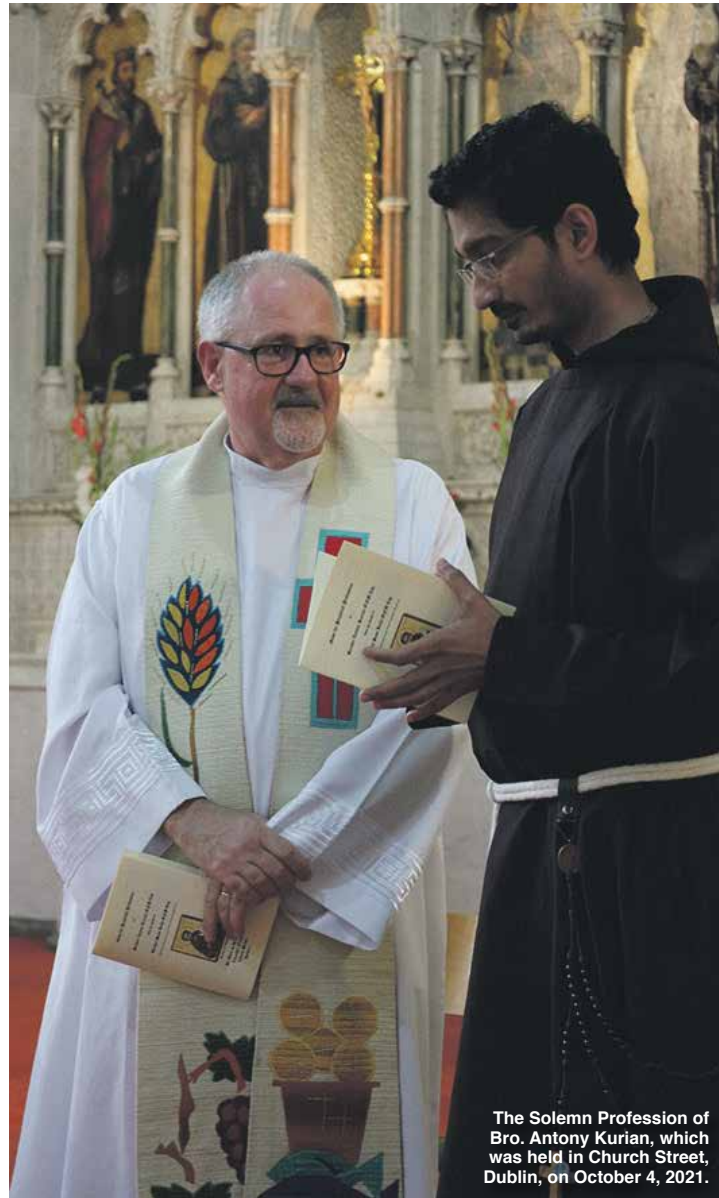
**Feminism**

Asked about feminism and what it means to the OLAs – considering it is a very popular ideology with many different beliefs attached to it depending on the individual – Sr Doran says in its Christian context feminism is the “recognition of the giftedness of women”.

She says “the OLAs value the life, contribution and ministry of women in the Church and society. I would prefer to say that the OLAs have a profound regard for the lives of women whether married, single or in consecrated life”.

The Church, Sr Doran feels, is a very welcoming place for women. Having visited many parishes across Ireland, she says that from the point of view of being accepted as a woman, “with the bishops, the priests, the people they were always delighted to hear a woman’s voice in the Church”.

“I have not encountered any antagonism against women in the Church, maybe once, but other than that, old, young, religious people, all love to have



The Solemn Profession of Bro. Antony Kurian, which was held in Church Street, Dublin, on October 4, 2021.

you. I always felt there is welcoming and positivity towards a woman in the Church.”

**Vocations**

When it comes to someone considering a religious vocation today, it can be a daunting concept as it’s not considered a “viable option” by many, according to Fr Bennett, but if someone is feeling a call to consecrated life, “go for it”.

“I’d say if you’re feeling it in your heart, if you’re feeling a curiosity, if you’re feeling in some way interested, want to know more, or even stronger than that, well then that’s the Holy Spirit moving in your heart and your heart is not going to rest ultimately until it spends some time reflecting upon this,” he says.

Fr Bennett has been involved in vocation ministry for more than a decade and served as vocations director

for the Capuchins. He has found that God is still calling people, but sometimes they are “frightened” and are concerned about what others will think of them.

At times they also receive contact from people in their 40s and 50s who are more comfortable with who they are in themselves and wish they had looked at a vocation to religious life much earlier.

**“Having been a chaplain in a secondary school in Cork, he noticed that religious life was not promoted as a vocation”**

“I met a priest from our area the other day and he says ‘I’m fully convinced that God is calling people to the priesthood and religious life, because I’ve met

them, and I hear the way they talk and hear what they’re interested in, yet there is something in them that holds them back from committing to it’. So again, I think we have to make it ok for people to do this, that it’s not such a big deal,” he says.

Having been a chaplain in a secondary school in Cork, he noticed that religious life was not promoted as a vocation.

“I’d love to see at careers fairs, that priesthood and religious life genuinely being seen as a viable option for somebody,” Fr Bennett says, adding: “Look at all the young people who travel and help out over in Lourdes with the pilgrimage every year. Experiences like that are life-changing they are real encounter-with-Christ experiences but oftentimes we’re not good at helping them when they

come back. They come back to a bit of a vacuum and we’re not good at saying, ‘right, you’ve had this experience what do you want to do with it? Where do you want to go from here?’”

He insists that those who feel a calling should go out to meet people in religious orders to get an experience of what it is like, for Fr Bennett it was only when he visited the Capuchins in person he knew for certain and felt a “sense of peace inside myself”.

“All of this is spiritual stuff, it’s really hard to put your hands on, and oftentimes this puts people off when it comes to vocation because it’s so hard to put it into words.

**“The order currently has two postulants in their postulancy programme in Raheny, with about five others who are in contact with them at the moment”**

“Vocation is almost like a foreign language, you have to learn the language of vocation because we’re not brought up in households generally where this stuff is discussed,” he explains, “We’d have a language of sport much more readily available to us, but with vocation we have to learn that language and it takes time.”

The order currently has two postulants in their postulancy programme in Raheny, with about five others who are in contact with them at the moment.

“I would say to people if you’re feeling it inside, if there’s any curiosity, remember that phrase from the Gospel: Don’t be afraid. You’re only going to receive a welcome from the people that you make contact with and I know from my own experiences because I joined the Capuchins when I was 32, I came from a background in financial services.

“Even looking at religious orders and looking at the websites, you have to find a place of peace in your heart with regard to them, you can be overwhelmed by how many there are and what they all do.”

Fr Bennett adds: “The best piece of advice I got; one priest said, ‘listen, get two or three of them, almost print them out and have them in front of you and sit there, and in prayer, look at them. And whichever one you feel more at peace with maybe there’s something in that for you to go and explore.”