Voices of Sisters
Religious Life



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by Tina Khan

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Years ago, someone said to a group in which I was present that religious life is dying. Since the speaker was a religious, I was somewhat sorry, because if someone actually living religious life believed so, could an outsider say otherwise?

I write, however, in the spirit of "High Hopes," a song about an ant who thought it could move a rubber tree plant, or — more conventionally — I write with faith like a mustard seed.

If it takes a village to raise a child, it must be similar with regards to religious life. Religious life was born within this church of community, and it will also be "all of us in it" that lets religious life die. But can it really die, if its beginnings were a response to the God-call to answer God's people's cry?

The histories of the beginnings of different congregations are re-enactments (ad infinitum) of the Exodus 3:1 call on Horeb. I was reading about the shared heritage of Sisters of St. Joseph around the world who trace their beginning charism to Le Puy, France. The edict from Rome was that "proper nuns" could not leave their convents, yet there was a need in that time outside the convent walls. So local church authorities circumvented that rule by recruiting women who were not eligible to become "proper nuns" but who nonetheless wished to serve.

Of course, this story of responding to the needs of the times would be familiar to admirers of Magdalene of Canossa, Hélène Marie Philippine de Chappotin de Neuville, Louise de Marillac, Jeanne Jugan, Catherine McCauley and, more famously in later years, Mary Teresa Bojaxhiu — just to name a few of the founders of congregations who serve God's needy people.

It is a numerical observation that the numbers are dwindling. There are different contributing factors; could part of it be that the discussion of a "culture of vocations" is limited to ordained priesthood? In more developed nations, work in schools, hospitals and other social-work type positions are now paid professions; those used to be the domain of nuns and religious who worked for little more than love of God and neighbor.

As a brown woman with her origins in Asia, I am also uncomfortable when I read that the areas of growth for vocations are in Asia and Africa. It is too simple to demarcate along the lines of "East" and "West." I grew up in an Asian city that became

prosperous overnight, and there are no hordes of recruitment to religious life there that I have heard of. Conversely, there are still vocations in "Western" countries, though perhaps singly rather than in the battalions of days of old.

Not that long ago, someone joked to me that a religious sister should ask for money from the "third" collection. Even the very nicest, most decent of the faithful have to be informed that sisters have to work to support themselves. Any payment that individual sisters receive goes into a shared fund for basic needs, as well as to fund other areas of need. (And there is no such thing as a third collection.)

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To broaden our understanding, Maria Casey wrote a book, *Breaking From the Bud: New Forms of Consecrated Life*, on the evolution of consecrated life. She orients the subject by quoting an apostolic exhortation by Pope Paul VI: "The charism of the religious life, far from being an impulse born of flesh and blood or one derived from a mentality which conforms itself to the modern world, is the fruit of the Holy Spirit, who is always at work within the Church."

I'll fess up and say that I actually used to worry, until I read some of Mary MacKillop's reflections. In one of them, she advised another sister not to be troubled about the future of the institute, as it is God's mission, and God — whose work it is — would take care of it.

Religious continue to challenge me by their witness as to who it is we say we follow, and how. They are still to be found, where there is a need for courage: sisters like Joan Chittister, my own Sisters of St. Joseph, Patricia Fox, and the sisters involved in ACRATH.

These are only some recent ones, without mentioning the other ministries to which sisters tend daily. I also continue to welcome Global Sisters Report for its featuring the lives and ministries of religious life across international boundaries.

This is not a rose-tinted look at religious life. My own focus and deep regard are for sisters who have been women of welcome, courage, can-do dynamism and Christian love. Le Puy was only one of innumerable examples of responding to needs in service. Whether for sisters "within the walls" or in ministerial religious life, if the life dies, it is because the village of our church with all of us in it — have let it.

But religious life won't die because that's how it all started anyway: women (and men) responding to the God of Jesus Christ in a very particular way, along with those who have supported, and continue to support, them. Meanwhile, I maintain the hope of the ant with the rubber tree plant.

[Tina Khan is a companion in ministry with a religious sister of the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Sacred Heart. She lives in a northern suburb in Perth, Western Australia. Theirs is a contemplative-active ministry in the areas of practical-pastoral support, education, and relationality, including in cross-cultural, multifaith contexts, as well as formation in theology-spirituality in the everyday.]