News



Customers buy marmalades and cakes made by cloistered nuns, at a market at the Reales Alcazares in Seville, Spain, on Dec. 5, 2023. Women's religious communities in Spain are making and selling items, and renting rooms in their monasteries, to generate income. (AP/Laura Leon)

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Faced with increasing costs, several monasteries in Spain are reinventing themselves to generate income to help maintain their historic buildings and support the resident nuns.

"We had to reinvent ourselves. We cannot live only with charity," said Sr. Mariuca Mesones in front of the Monastery of San Juan de la Penitencia in Alcalá de Henares, near Madrid.

Behind her, several signs indicating Ventanilla — "window" in English — are displayed. They guide visitors from the street into the monastery to a small shop window.

Since last September, the nine sisters — all over 80 years old — sell all kinds of handcrafted items, ranging from crocheted nativity figures to pendants or magnets.

"Our most popular item is the small crocheted cradles in which a figurine of the newborn Jesus is placed. The sisters pray each time they work on a project and also for the person who will receive it. They are very popular because of that," said Mesones, adding that the nativity scene, entirely embroidered with crochet, was also a popular item before Christmas.

Like other religious establishments in Spain, the sisters have had to think of new ways to generate income in the face of skyrocketing maintenance costs for these historic buildings, coupled with a decline in people choosing religious vocations.

"It doesn't cover all the costs, but these sales are a very valuable help for the renovation and maintenance costs," Mesones said.

They also offer tours of their magnificent 17th-century monastery and of the chapel, which has a small museum.

"People love these visits, ask us lots of questions, and are intrigued by these monuments and our way of life," Mesones said.

These sisters are also selling traditional pastries from another monastery in the province of Ciudad Real, which makes shortbread cookies filled with strawberry jam and coated in chocolate. The nuns at the Madrid monastery repackage the pastries with their own emblem.

"We're getting more and more requests. But we don't sell all the time, and it's mostly on order, because as we've just started, we don't yet know what our sales volume will be," Mesones said, adding they already made over 1,000 sales in a few months.

Developing online sales

Twenty-six Spanish convents have recently received for the first time a "Solete Repsol," a local distinction that rewards authentic bakeries or eateries with recipes passed down from generation to generation.

To support them, a Spanish foundation has taken on the mission of creating a large online platform to bring together all the objects and pastries of nearly 100 monasteries.

"We have received many requests from monasteries asking us to help them develop their sales because it was essential to cover their costs and sometimes even their survival," said Alejandra Salinas, director of the Contemplare Foundation. "It's not easy for them to sell online or to develop all the marketing surrounding it."

In addition to the online sales platform, the foundation also participates in various markets across the country to promote its products. A physical store has even opened in Madrid. One of the goals now is to help monasteries make sales throughout the year and not just during major religious events like Christmas.

"The products from the monasteries are sold in the third quarter of the year, so it's very stagnant, and that's a problem because they have to make a provision for the whole year," Salinas said. "It's very stressful for them, so we are trying to develop sales throughout the year with different products to alleviate this burden."

Monastery hotels

Other monasteries decide to go even further, converting part of their historic building into a hotel or dormitories. The monastery of Santa Paula in Seville is finishing construction of a new guesthouse with 11 rooms to diversify its income.

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"The monastery is listed as a protected cultural heritage site, so we have to be very careful in respecting its historical value," said Antonio Mena, the architect behind this project, which should be completed in the coming weeks.

The works will convert a former non-monumental nave on the east wing of the monastery into a separate-entry guesthouse that does not connect with the cloistered areas, preserving the nuns' privacy.

"The area where we are working is where there were ruins of some old dwellings … it has been repurposed for this use. The religious community considered it compatible with cloistered life, which must be preserved," Mena added.

The facility will include a reception area, 11 en suite rooms, a multipurpose room, laundry, storage and support services, and will be operated by a specialist company. The city of Seville, which faces a problem of overtourism, already has several monasteries that took the same gamble.

The monastery of San Leandro opened four rooms last May, which have all the amenities of a hotel. Since then, it has received high rankings on Booking.com and has given tourists from the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom a place of peace and quiet to stay for their vacation.

Mena said that this kind of project could develop even further in the future, even though each religious institution faces different circumstances.

"In this instance, it proved entirely viable — not easy, but feasible — because the convent faces several streets. If this arrangement is located on one side without hindering its use, even if it is some distance from the convent, then it is perfect," he said. "The main challenge is to avoid compromising the primary vocation of the religious community, composed of cloistered nuns, and to avoid disrupting their monastic life."

Romain Chauvet is a French-Canadian journalist based in Madrid.

This story was originally published at Religion Unplugged.