News
Religious Life



Sisters pray in the chapel at the Monastery of the Poor Clares of Perpetual Adoration in Mymensingh, Bangladesh. (Justin Gomes)



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In a small chapel within a cloistered convent about 120 km north of Dhaka, Bangladesh, 18-year-old Maria Manda kneels in silence before the Blessed Sacrament, embracing a life few in her generation choose.

Manda, who entered the Monastery of the Poor Clares of Perpetual Adoration 14 months ago, was the only new aspirant to join the community in 2025 — a sign of a vocation crisis facing contemplative religious life in Bangladesh.

"Few nuns now manage the work that was previously carried out by several hands," said Sister Mary Dominica, the convent's superior.

Two decades ago, the monastery in Mymensingh, northern Bangladesh, had about 50 nuns. Today, only 20 remain.

The pattern is mirrored at the country's only other cloistered convent in Dinajpur, where only 15 nuns maintain a similar life of prayer, silence and enclosure.

Together, the two houses form a contemplative presence in a nation where vocations to this life are steadily declining.

A rare calling, a changing society

Manda's decision was not easily accepted by her family, who initially resisted the idea of a life cut off from the outside world. Over time, they relented.

"I feel peace when I pray," she said, reflecting on her first year of formation, which has involved adapting to strict routines, silence and separation from her family.

Another young woman, 20-year-old Purobi Rema, joined as an aspirant six months ago — again, the only entrant after Manda.

Vocations to cloistered life are becoming increasingly rare.

Advertisement

"Many young women visit, but only a few stay," said Sister Mary Rose, a former superior. "Those who remain usually have a clear sense of commitment."

Fr. Peter Rema, 80, the monastery's chaplain, said that the reasons for the decline are obvious. Increasing access to education, more diverse career options, and changing social expectations are transforming how young women see their futures.

"People are more focused on education and a comfortable life," said Rema. "The discipline of monastic life can appear difficult in comparison."

Smaller family sizes also play a role. With fewer children, parents are often reluctant to support a vocation that permanently removes a daughter from family life, especially in economically fragile households, the priest said.

The monastery's enclosed nature adds another layer of challenge, Rema said. Fewer young people are willing to accept limited interaction with the outside world as a life commitment, he noted.

Fewer hands, heavier life

Inside the cloistered convent, the impact of declining vocations is immediate and tangible.

Where five sisters once handled specific tasks — such as making hosts for the Eucharist — only two now manage the same workload, even as demand for hosts from parishes has grown.

Such a reduction is evident in every other engagement of nuns. Fewer nuns now rotate through daily assignments — sewing Mass vestments, preparing altar cloths, making hosts and wine for Mass, gardening, and caring for elderly members.

"Each hour is scheduled. There is little unstructured time," Sister Mary Dominica said.



Sister Mary Dominica instructs the sisters on making a stole for use by priests when they say Mass at the Monastery of the Poor Clares of Perpetual Adoration in Mymensingh, Bangladesh. (Justin Gomes)

The strain is particularly evident at night. Continuous prayer requires sisters to take turns in the chapel, often interrupting their sleep several times a week.

"Earlier, night adoration was done in pairs," said Sister Mary Catherine, who has lived in the monastery for nearly 30 years. "Now, sisters often take turns alone. It increases both responsibility and fatigue."

An enclosed life, sustained by faith

The rigors of cloistered life — silence, enclosure and limited personal freedom — can deter even those initially drawn to it.

Lucky Florence Corraya, a teacher who once explored the vocation through a "Come and See" program, ultimately decided not to stay.

"Life in the cloistered convent centers on discipline and sacrifice," she said. "The structure allows very little personal freedom, which can be difficult."

For older sisters, the shrinking community brings additional challenges. With fewer members, caregiving becomes more demanding and companionship more limited, said Fr. Biolen Bernard Chambugong, chancellor of the Mymensingh Diocese.

He said elderly and sick sisters sometimes face additional challenges. With fewer members available, providing care is more demanding.

"One of their needs is someone to talk to," Chambugong said, pointing to the quiet loneliness that can accompany aging within enclosed communities.

The Poor Clares of Perpetual Adoration trace their origins to a contemplative Franciscan tradition founded in France in 1854. It was brought to Bangladesh in 1933 by missionaries from Kerala, southern India.

Despite dwindling numbers and other challenges, "the structure of prayer continues," Sister Mary Dominica said.

For those who remain, the vocation is sustained by conviction.

"This life is not easy," Sister Mary Rose said. "But it continues because of faith."