

BOOK REVIEW

Judith Merkle, *Sensing the Spirit: Towards the Future of Religious Life*, T&T Clark, 2023, 166 pp plus Bibliography and Index
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Roman Catholic ‘apostolic’ communities consist of sisters or brothers living in community under vows, and engaged in service of others, often among the world’s most needy – in teaching, medical work, social service and a wide range of other ways. These communities, because they tend to be families of smallish groups living in various parts of the world, are normally called ‘congregations’. To members of other churches, the numbers of these people look vast – congregations can be counted in their thousands. *Call the Midwife* on British TV gives an example, of a sort, from the Anglican Church. Over the centuries wonderful sacrificial work has been carried on, largely out of the public eye, so that most people are unaware of the scale of this phenomenon. Any familiarity with these communities should fill us with admiration, and they deserve all the support the church can give them. Judith Merkle follows many who in recent decades have written books on renewal of the Religious Life, and such books appear partly because this life is in a great decline, and new vocations are few.

Merkle sets out to identify possible causes and to point to ways forward. If you are looking for a thorough presentation of the present state of these congregations, and the problems found among them, this book is for you. The detailing of this information is exhaustive, and the prevailing picture is one of communities that have changed fairly dramatically in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, in order to live a life more closely aligned to that of other Christians. Habits and veils have tended to be discarded, along with many of the disciplines that once made their lives more similar to that of monasteries. In many cases, the daily common prayer of the offices in choir has ceased to be absolute, and there has been much emphasis on personal flourishing as a reaction against the sometimes pitiless disciplines and sacrifices of the old days. One Superior has said that at one time she could have said to a sister, ‘I’m sending you to Africa next week’, but nowadays you have to sit down with the sister, talk it through and ‘do a deal’. There is much that has been positive in all of this, but it has been difficult to arrive at the right balance between old and new. Greater liberty leads to greater variety and even divergence. In some cases, the

liberty has led to a complete dissolving of the specifics of a religious community, so that members can ask, ‘Am I just living in a hotel?’ In various places, Merkle repeats her analysis of the principal problems: ‘In congregations, the absence of an internally coherent group spirituality, the conflicting life perspectives of generations, the tension between personal autonomy and group identity, the shift from common or singular professional identities, the needs of the extended lifespan of members, and the range of postures towards the relevance of the church escalate the challenge of how to “hold it all together”’ (p.117).

The author relies much on Charles Taylor’s ground-breaking book, *In a Secular Age*, to explore why it is that we are unsure how to live best in a secular society that has no time for God. She responds by detailing the virtues that have characterised the life, in the hope that by holding them before the members of congregations, they will be encouraged to enter more deeply into them. She makes limited but important practical proposals here: some of the common practices, rituals and disciplines that were jettisoned were in fact the stuff of community-building, and of a shared community relationship with God; and communities need to be truly God-centred rather than relying too heavily on human analyses and planning.

If we are looking for any stronger pointers to where the Religious Life needs to go, we shall be disappointed, for such renewal as we hope for cannot be planned – all we can seek to do is enable the right conditions for God to lead us in new directions. There are limitations to the descriptive/analytical approach of the author. Despite warnings about the obsession of our society with self-cultivation, there is still a centring on personal happiness, or ‘fullness’ as she calls it, echoing Charles Taylor; but fullness suggests reaching a satisfying plenitude, while surely at the heart of the Religious Life is a quest for something greater than that? There is a feeling that the life of apostolic congregations can be analysed and corrected in the manner of much sociological writing, in a way that cannot but feel prosaic. Where is the passionate flourish of vocation, the leap into the flames of the divine desire, without bothering about what in my life might be full or empty? Sheer abandon to the divine love, come what may? Where is the acknowledgement that at the heart of it all are things that defy analysis? Much is said more than once, which can ensure that your point is made, but it is all abstract – it would have been greatly helped by illustrations and stories of people. This book will be informative for anyone seeking to know more about the current situation, but those actually living the life may find it difficult to persevere in reading it, even though it is well worth their trying.

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