

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

What Is A Monk Or A Nun?

If you're watching the series on *The Convent* (BBC) you'll have been fascinated by the way in which four very different women have faced the challenge of sharing the life of nuns. So far they seem in various ways quite foxed by the strangeness and difference of the Convent's life.

Following Christ

Every Christian is called to follow Christ and to seek the perfection of life he describes in the Gospels. We must *all* be perfected in love, as the Father is perfect. Not all, however, are monks, or nuns. For those whose lives are so consecrated, the following of Christ involves three promises: of a chaste life lived in *celibacy* - which simply means that they resolve never to marry (Chastity is an obligation for all Christians; but celibacy isn't.) Secondly, consecrated persons accept the conditions of *poverty* - living simply without personal possessions; and thirdly *obedience*: expressed in clear structures, with a written Rule of life approved by the Pope, and with a strong relationship with a religious Superior. For most monks this means belonging to a monastery or convent, under the authority of an Abbot/Abbess or Prior/Prioress, or, for recently-founded congregations, a Father or Mother Superior. There are other consecrated persons who live alone, seeking God in prolonged prayer and solitude. These hermits - male and female - may also take solemn vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, and are under the care of an appointed Superior nominated usually by the local Bishop. In November this year a hermit in Market Rasen will make her promises before our Bishop. These binding promises - called *solemn vows* - will declare that she is not a loner, but totally integrated into the community of the risen Lord.

Religious Life

From the first Christian centuries there have been communities of religious life. It is practiced within institutes canonically erected by the Church. It's a liturgical way of life; you'll have seen how the Arundel Poor Clares find in their liturgical sharing the well-spring of their life. The four visitors sometimes fail to understand this, and ignore the invitation to take part. Viewers will also notice the close relationship between the different nuns, and their holding of all things,

even affection, in common: the urge emotionally to separate or abscond from the community is quite foreign to them. One senses the vital importance of a heart that is open to all, in a family built not on physical kinship but on spiritual sharing. There may be nothing uniting any two nuns in the convent except their faith in Christ; but that faith will be quite enough to bond them and make them sisters. Thus *obedience* is not just a formal obedience to Christ in the Superior, but an obedience to all one's sisters in the community: their needs, their personalities, and the way they find to belong together, to be faithful to each other. The nuns have recognised Christ in their visitors: the visitors are only just beginning to respond to this amazing news.

A Bit Like being Married

It is quite like what happens in a marriage, once the froth has blown off. I mean, when a couple has got past the first excitement of being together, and they really take up the burdens of one another's life: when the hard business of sympathy and forgiveness and healing the other person takes centre stage, and the couple are really and truly levelling with each other, showing their true colours, warts and all, and when they still find each other moving, and funny, and loveable, and worth the gift of another person's life. That's when the words "I love you" start to rev up to full power, and a husband and wife start to hear the voice of God in each other: creative, loving, and redeeming.

Not Part Of The Hierarchy

Religious aren't authority-figures in the Church. They are called *brother* or *sister* for that reason. The habit, which these days can evoke costume drama, was designed to express simplicity and poverty. The authority to which they witness is the authority of Christ; they show by their submission to him and to their Superior that the kingdom is near. As Jesus submits to the Father's will, Religious submit their own freedom to the Rule and to the Superior; and it is clear that the wielding of authority within a religious order is about vital fidelity to God. An abbot on an ego-trip is as much of a contradiction as a monk out for fame and influence. Pray that this humbly prophetic way of life is preserved in our Church!

Fr Philip