

Sister Máire Brid O'Driscoll becomes the newest nun in Ireland

She is the second woman to join the sisterhood this year after numbers fell from more than 13,000 in 1966 to fewer than 4,000 today

[Patrick O'Donoghue](#)

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Sister Máire Brid O'Driscoll makes her final profession of vows for the Redemptoristine Nuns in Drumcondra, Dublin

BRYAN MEADE FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

“It’s final. There is no turning back from today,” said Sister Máire Bríd O’Driscoll as she became only the second nun to be confirmed into the sisterhood in Ireland this year.

O’Driscoll will spend the rest of her life cloistered behind the tall stone walls of the Monastery of St Alphonsus in Dublin, only leaving to see a doctor or a dentist, to vote or to visit religious congregations abroad. She and her 14 fellow sisters will make jam, cards and altar bread and paint pictures to earn a living. Her family will be permitted to visit her once a month.

Ireland's newest nun invited The Sunday Times to witness her solemn profession of vows ceremony, the completion of an eight-year journey to fully join the Redemptoristine order, known as the red nuns because of the colour of their habits. "It's like marriage. You receive so much and you give so much. It's about love, being rooted in love," she said. "Of course there's rough days and you go through the rough days, but underneath there's deep peace."



A key part of the ceremony involved O'Driscoll lying prostrate before the altar as the congregation stood for the litany of saints

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O'Driscoll's new home is among the bustling streets of Drumcondra in the north of Dublin's inner city, but it is worlds away. Stepping into the quiet grounds of the monastery is like stepping back in time to a hidden oasis of stillness and peace.

Inside the chapel, as final preparations took place last weekend, there was a palpable giddiness among the mostly elderly congregation as all the curved benches filled with family and friends to witness this increasingly rare ceremony. The choreography of the ritual, the ancient hymns and the faint smells of frankincense in the air evoked centuries of Catholic tradition.

O'Driscoll, who is 35 and originally from Enniskeane in Co Cork, trained as a primary school teacher at Mary Immaculate College in Limerick before entering training to become a nun at the age of 27.

Aware that she is taking a path less trodden, she said: "It's so different and I suppose this is why we are doing this interview now; it's different. It attracts attention. Young people now are not making this choice, so it attracts attention, which I don't particularly like, at all. But I see that it's important and it might touch someone's life and someone might think of this path or wonder why. Why would I choose this?"



The ceremony concluded with the placing of a ring on her finger by Sister Gabrielle Fox, centre, the prioress at the monastery

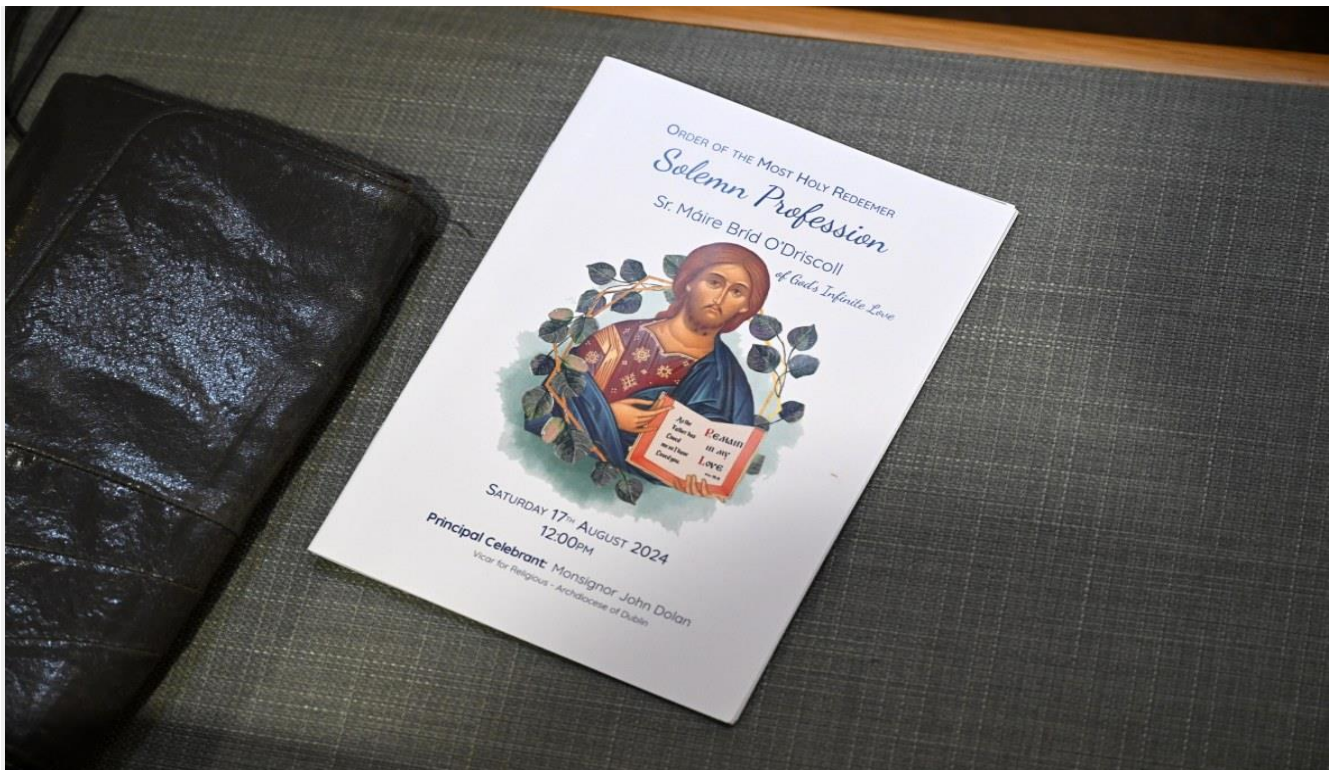
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"It starts with faith. If you believe in God, if you have that relationship. For me, it was just a draw and I followed that draw. I couldn't ignore it, so I just kept following it. It led me to here and each day has been a day of listening to that draw. It's just the path for me. It's not for everyone," she said, adding that she would encourage other young people to "open their hearts" and be conscious of the "deep meaning" that a religious life can bring.

With O’Driscoll’s family assembled in the chapel’s front row and proudly watching on, the ceremony had the atmosphere of a wedding. Her mother Ina, sister Siobhán and father Patrick travelled the 140 miles from Cork for the Mass, while her brother Séamus travelled from New York to be there.

“I am ready to give my life completely to God. There is a deep peace and joy underneath. That’s how I feel right now, I am just ready to do this,” O’Driscoll said.

However, the joyous mood was tempered by the weight and significance of the vows that she made, including poverty, chastity and obedience. Silence and contemplation of God will be at the centre of her life in the monastery.



An order of service for the ceremony, for which O’Driscoll’s family joined her from Cork and New York.

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Hundreds of nuns joined the various religious orders each year in the 1960s, the heyday of vocations. In 1966 there were 13,409 nuns in Ireland but now there are

fewer than 4,000. With only about 15 trainee nuns at various stages of their eight-year formation process, that number will continue to fall.

In his sermon, Father Peter Burns told the congregation that O'Driscoll's future would entail "living a simple detached life, based on Gospel values."

A key part of the ceremony involved O'Driscoll lying prostrate before the altar as the congregation stood for the litany of saints. After lying face down on the floor of the chapel for about 10 minutes, O'Driscoll rose to her feet and professed her vows before the ceremony concluded with the placing of a ring on her finger by Sister Gabrielle Fox, the prioress at the monastery. A round of applause followed before a rendition of *Nessun Dorma* was played. Then, each of the nuns lined up and embraced O'Driscoll, one after the other, some with tears streaming down their faces as warm sunlight gently poured into the room through a stained glass window.

Rachel Sweetnam, an old school friend of O'Driscoll's, said it was "wonderful to see her so happy."



O'Driscoll greets a member of the congregation, many of whom were elderly nuns, some with tears running down their faces during the ceremony.

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Throughout the ceremony, a circle of fellow “red nuns” were gathered on benches around the altar and beamed with happiness as they watched O’Driscoll intently. Once she had professed her vows, O’Driscoll took her own seat among them.

Afterwards, an emotional elderly nun from the Carmelite order, who had visited the monastery especially for the Mass, said the ceremony brought back memories of her own profession. The nun said she would choose the same life course even if she had “ten more lifetimes”, her conviction giving an indication of the certainty required to become a nun.

Ger Gallagher, secretary-general of Amri (the Association of Missionary and Religious Leaders Ireland) said the numbers of women interested in or seeking a committed religious life were no longer comparable to previous decades.

“There are huge cultural challenges to young women exploring this option. We need to reimagine a church that allows for the exploration of vocation. It would appear that some prefer to explore the life in a monastic setting. This is kind of counter-cultural,” Gallagher said.

He said some religious sisters from countries such as America and Canada, mainly aged in their late 20s and early 30s, have been invited to Ireland by local bishops to lead projects in their dioceses.

“I have seen a few Irish missionary orders set up new pastoral outreaches in some of our large urban areas. These religious sisters are missionary and come from countries in Africa and Asia where there has been a tradition of Irish missionaries. Their mission is now to reach out to all people here, bringing the message of the Gospel and living it in communities. It will be interesting how this will unfold,” he said.

Mother Marie Fahy, abbess of St Mary’s, the Cistercian monastery in Glencairn, Co Waterford, said two women, who entered in their 20s, were in formation with

the order. She said the process of formation to become a nun was a long one. It begins with at least one year in discernment, followed by a year of postulancy. Then, after two years of novitiate training, prospective nuns take their first vows. After another four to five years in temporary vows, they complete the journey by making a solemn profession of the faith, “which is for life”.

“Our culture does not lend itself to encouraging vocations to monastic life. We live in a materialistic, consumer and entertainment-centred culture. Allowing the Lord to speak to one’s heart and to [hear that inner voice we need some degree of silence](#), an awareness of an inner call, maybe even an awareness of an inner emptiness and a desire to know God and know oneself at a deeper level,” she said, adding that a number of women were making inquiries and attending the abbey’s guesthouse to learn more about the nuns’ life at the abbey.

Anne-Marie Whelan, evangelisation and vocations officer for the Sisters of Bon Secours, said young adults were grappling with their identities in a growingly secular world with less visible religious sisters. However, she remained optimistic that religious instincts will continue to find other forms of expression.

“Young adults in Ireland today are flocking to young adult retreats, gatherings and places where they can meet other young adults. At these gatherings, religious, and lay people like myself who work with religious congregations, are a presence among them to pray with and for them, and help them grow in faith. Religious life is not dead, it is changing, and moving forward by accompanying our young adults,” she said.