



The People Behind the Programs

Sr. Mary Barron, OLA

People Behind the Programs interviewed Sr. Mary Barron, OLA, Superior General of Our Lady of Apostles, one of the founding congregations of The Anna Trust and a member of The Anna Trust Steering Council. Sr. Mary has been part of the development of The Anna Trust almost from the first conversations in 2023.

We all come to our place in life from many different experiences. How did you come to consecrated life?

I grew up the third of nine children and the oldest girl in a deeply Catholic family in a very rural area of Donegal, Ireland. My parents really lived out our faith. They were always volunteering and reaching out to others as the hands and feet of Christ. There was an elderly man in our parish who created the Donegal Leprosy Fund for Africa. He had never been to Africa, but he was so compassionate. He made little boxes for each school for donations. I remember how selfless he was. I attended a convent school and many of the sisters had ministered in Africa as well. That awareness of others, and especially of the needs of children in Africa, was a deep part of my life.

I was always drawn to mission work in Africa, but I was not so sure about religious life!

My Dad died of cancer when I was 17, so I went to university to get a degree as a speech and language therapist, then went to work to help my Mother and my family with financial support.

But Africa was always on my mind, and the kindness of Catholic sisters to my Dad through his illness and to my family was extraordinary. So, in addition to Africa, my growing experience with sisters really kept me thinking. It so happened that the sister of my parish priest was the Superior General of Our Lady of Apostles. When I talked to him he said, talk to my sister! And I was so impressed by her and by the ministry of Our Lady of the Apostles. It was beautiful. Because I had a university degree, she said that I could carry out my discernment in Africa, and so I went. And the rest is history.

You have had so many experiences in ministry and now in leadership of your Our Lady of the Apostles. Was there one moment in which it all came together for you, a point at which you said Aha! So, this is truly where I am supposed to be.

I remember early on in my time in Africa accompanying a young woman in Tanzania who was dying of HIV/AIDS. She had deep faith, but she truly believed that this was her punishment from God. We talked about suffering, and I said, "Do you think that Christ's death on the cross was God punishing him?" We talked so much, and it was a relief to work with her through this. A sister said to me that this one moment of consolation affirmed my life.

But last year, oh my, last year confirms God's will in it all.

You know, we all live this imposter syndrome, always asking ourselves: are we where we are supposed to be?

I never expected to be elected to leadership of my congregation, never expected to be the President of the UISG, never expected to be a member of the Dicastery of evangelization, never expected to be involved in all of the contacts that come with congregational and global leadership. I never sought out any of this with any purpose.

Last year I had just arrived in Ghana for a congregational meeting. I woke up the next morning to word of the kidnapping of 303 students and 12 staff members by terrorists at St. Mary's Catholic Primary and Secondary School in Nigeria, which is one of our congregation's schools. It was a tremendous shock. All those children and teachers in such danger. But I was able to reach out to all these global networks that those leadership positions had created. The response was tremendous, so much prayer, support, financial help, from everywhere, from every religion. Ultimately the students and teachers were all released, I think, because of all that prayer and support, from all over the world, from every walk of life.

And suddenly it clicked. All of those roles that I had never sought, never wanted, this moment, this crisis, was why God has led me to and through all of this.

HIV/AIDS in Africa, global leadership, kidnapped children. How do elderly sisters fit into this. How did you become so committed to the future of elderly sisters.

Even when I joined the congregation, there were not many young sisters in Ireland. Now of 35 sisters in Ireland, 5 are under the age of 70. I remember that when I was discerning, older sisters questioned bringing young sisters in because, in their view, the young would just end up caring for them when they were old. I never thought of it that way. We are all sisters. We are all valuable. We all have a role in life, whatever stage of life we are in.

When I came into leadership, aging of our sisters was a growing concern even in Africa. Fortunately, most are healthy. But that will not always be the case. The ministry of our congregation does not generate the resources or financial strength that we may need. So, the needs and roles of elder sisters have always been a constant in my life. But it has never struck me as a burden.

You have been part of the deliberations and development of The Anna Trust almost from the beginning. Suppose that it is 2035. The Anna Trust has been working for a decade. What would you want to say in 2035 about what has been accomplished? Where can or should The Anna Trust be?

There is a theology of aging, of the values that underpin aging. At this moment, as we speak to one another, I am at an elder care facility in Canada. We have several sisters here among the 200 elderly in this home. Our sisters are the joy of this place. They bring such peace and positiveness to others.

But, even they sometimes question their value. Not because of what they think intrinsically about themselves, but because of what they know society says about the elderly. Society tells them that they are vulnerable, that they are old, that they only belong with one another and, at best, at the bingo table. The narrative of how society sees the elderly infects how the elderly see themselves.

Yes, in 2035 I want The Anna Trust to point to successful grants, to many sisters trained, to growing capacity within the Global Sisterhood. We must grow all of these programs.

But more than that, I want to be able to say that The Anna Trust has helped to change society's narrative about aging. I want The Anna Trust to help the world appreciate the richness of aging, to transform the narrative from one of being aging as a problem to one of the elders as treasures, from the view of aging as a loss to a view of beauty.

We Catholic sisters can model that change for society, and by modeling that change become the force for change itself.