

Charisms in cyberspace

More and more religious orders now offer online courses sharing their spirituality and heritage.

Johan Bergström-Allen browses the mendicant, monastic and other resources available at the click of a mouse

Distance-learning courses in theology have been available for years from centres such as the Maryvale Institute in Birmingham, the Priory Institute in Dublin and the virtual university run by the Dominicans (www.domuni.eu). Likewise, a number of Catholic universities offer online courses in major academic disciplines.

Various websites offer free online courses in ecclesiastical history and theology, making use of video recordings, audio downloads and chat rooms, but few of these allow for interaction, scholarly feedback or the structure of an academic programme in the specific area of religious orders and their charisms.

Among the first formally structured courses to be offered online by a religious order were those of the Carmelite Institute of Britain and Ireland, or CIBI, established as a joint project of the Carmelite and Discalced Carmelite Friars. In its inaugural year of 2006, CIBI enrolled 90 students in two Carmelite studies programmes: an adult education diploma for mature students returning to study, and a diploma equivalent to the first year of a bachelor's degree.

The modules offered by CIBI touch on the major themes and personalities of the



Graduates of the Carmelite Institute of Britain and Ireland celebrate their academic success

Carmelite tradition, such as the order's Rule of St Albert, the history of Carmel from 1200 to the present day, the significance of the patronal figures, Elijah and Mary, as well as the life and writings of figures such as Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Thérèse of Lisieux, Edith Stein and Titus Brandsma. These programmes can be surveyed by enthusiasts who are simply interested in the Carmelite tradition, but for students seeking a formal qualification in Carmelite studies, assessment is carried out using questionnaires and essays, with tutors providing feedback via email. The programmes are accredited by the Milltown Institute in Dublin, a recognised college of the National University of Ireland, and have pontifical award status. The popularity of the courses was such that last year CIBI launched a suite of postgraduate programmes accredited by York St John University.

Since its launch, CIBI has regularly attracted new students, some 110 being enrolled at the start of the 2013-14 academic year. A mix of laity, Religious and priests – Catholic and Anglican – are taking the courses. Laypeople are the biggest group, the majority being professed members of Carmel's third/secular orders. A number of the Religious who have enrolled do not belong to the Carmelite Order or its associated congregations, but want to know more about "Carmel" and to study in a systematic and supported way.

The Carmelite Religious who have enrolled are predominantly enclosed nuns; since they rarely leave their monasteries, the online nature of the course is ideal. The modules are also recommended for friars entering the novitiate or seeking ongoing formation, as well as for those candidates discerning a vocation to the religious life.

More than 40 scholars have written the different Carmelite Studies modules in CIBI's various programmes, and there are more than 20 tutors who take regular responsibility for correcting and giving feedback on students' work.

CIBI is developing partnerships with

academic projects in other parts of the English-speaking world, including the Carmelite Institute in Washington DC and the Carmelite Institute of Malta. A pilot scheme is being developed by the Carmelite Centre in Melbourne that will allow Australasian students to enrol as students of CIBI programmes, but also gather together for study in local community groups. In France, the Institut Jean de la Croix and Institut Catholique de Toulouse have recently launched a three-year distance-learning programme in Christian and Carmelite spirituality.

The Carmelites are among the Church's mendicant orders that have been engaged in academic study and frequent interaction with the laity since the thirteenth century. Perhaps this patrimony accounts for why, among religious orders, the mendicant traditions are the front-runners in the field of online study. The Franciscans, for example, through their International Study Centre at Canterbury, offer a distance learning award in Franciscan spirituality and discipleship. Since 2007, the University of St Francis in Joliet, Illinois, has offered a certificate in Franciscan studies that provides an overview of the Franciscan tradition and prepares students to form "Franciscan experiences" in their personal and professional lives. Similar courses are offered by the California Divinity School of the Pacific and Saint Francis University in Loretto, Pennsylvania.

Monastic orders have also developed online study programmes. Courses in spiritual formation and monastic studies are offered by various Benedictine communities in the United States. A non-academic, more experiential course leading to a distant learning certificate in monastic spirituality is offered by Monos, a Leicestershire-based charity that seeks to foster a monastic spirit within the Church and society. Monos course director Anthony Grimley says around 30 students have enrolled, adding: "In an age that is seeing more people turn to ancient and modern forms of spirituality for direction and nourishment, this course has created an educational platform from which students can explore monastic spirituality in terms of a lived Christian expression, assisting individuals and groups in their attempts at integrating a monastic spirituality into everyday Christian living."

The Church's younger religious congregations are also beginning to offer opportunities for online learning. An internet-based programme in Salesian studies is offered by the Salesian Center for

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Faith and Culture at DeSales University in Pennsylvania.

Negotiations are under way for an Ignatian spirituality course to be offered online by Heythrop, the specialist philosophy and theology college of London University run by the Jesuits (see *Michael Walsh, page 57*). Heythrop's Religious Life Institute hopes to launch an online course on the theology of religious life, currently part of the college's MA programmes.

The format of online courses offered by religious orders tends to be modules of lecture-style materials delivered over the internet with assigned readings from various hyperlinked articles, and document-sharing, that can lead to discussion with tutors and the submission of written assignments. Prices vary but many programmes are subsidised by sponsoring orders and congregations, some of whom also offer bursaries. Since most courses are modular, students can pay for their studies over a period of time, and most enrol on a part-time basis with flexible study patterns.

The convenience of online learning and the growing interest in religious charisms shown by laypersons and people outside the Catholic Church suggest that more such programmes are likely to develop in the coming years. However, online learning does present particular challenges. While study is a vital component of formation, engagement via a computer can never give tertiaries, oblates and associates a fully-lived experience of a religious charism.

Distance learning can be notoriously lonely, and online forums and student discussion groups on social-networking sites, though useful, have their limitations. Likewise it is often not easy for those studying online to access the libraries of monasteries, priories and convents.

Experience has also shown that although online learning can offer study opportunities to people around the world, often much more cheaply than "on site", its effectiveness is sometimes hampered in economically developing countries by poor technology, intermittent electricity supplies and restricted internet access.

Since the majority of English-language online courses are offered from Britain and America, Religious offering study and formation resources to students in Africa and Asia also have to consider issues of inculturation, be aware of a broad range of approaches to learning and encourage those whose first language is not English.

Despite the challenges facing religious orders in their use of this nascent technology, online learning is allowing a new generation of Religious, clergy and laity to engage with some of the richest and most enduring spiritual traditions of the Church.

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