

Dominican sister reflects on women working in the Vatican, St. Thomas and more

In September, Sister Helen Alford was appointed as a new member of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences. Sister Helen is a Dominican and the vice rector of the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas, also known as the Angelicum, in Rome. Beyond her well-respected status in academia, Alford's formation included graduating in manufactural engineering from the University of Cambridge.

In this interview with Our Sunday Visitor, Sister Alford discusses her appointment and whether women are being increasingly recognized in the Vatican.

Our Sunday Visitor: In the pontifical academies, there are numerous female members. But overall, the presence of women in the central institutions of the Church is still very much the minority. Do you think the Church should make more space for women? And in what way?

Sister Helen: It is already beginning, and I think it will continue to go in that direction. I think it is a pretty natural consequence of the changes that we see in society today. And at the foundation of those changes is the idea that men and women are both equally valuable. Remember that we already said that ideas change history. This idea grew to maturity in the West – even if it was not absent from other cultures – under the slow-burning influence of Christianity on our culture, because not many Greeks or Romans thought that men and women are equal. And Christians, too, had to discover the full implications of this Gospel idea slowly, over time, in a complex historical process.

Our Sunday Visitor: You graduated in manufacturing engineering

from Cambridge before becoming a religious sister. The early part of your curriculum certainly does not necessarily look like that of a woman en route to religious life.

Sister Helen: There has been a combination of factors. I had a very good professor who was guiding me in my doctorate, on the topic "human-centered technology." I needed to explain what I meant by the ideas of "human work" and being human. Since I found the best answers I could get in Church social thought, I decided to incorporate ideas from Catholic social thought into it. But the professor did not really know how to deal with it. No one in the department ever tried to stop me, but they would never discuss it with me. So, although it was a very good place to work in many ways, I realized that I couldn't stay there. You can't grow just on your own, you need the help of others.

Meanwhile, I had started going to the house of the Dominican friars in the city where I was at university. I found I could talk about everything with them. At that time, they also had a lay community living with them in their house. I asked to join it and I was accepted. Through that experience, I realized that this could be the life for me, the place where I was being called. Now I belong to the Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine of Siena of Newcastle, KwaZulu, Natal.

Our Sunday Visitor: How does the thinking of St. Thomas Aquinas enrich your daily work and life? And how, in your opinion, can Thomas' thinking and/or inspiration further contribute to the academy?

Sister Helen: St. Thomas gives us a lot of good ideas for living a good life, many of which he transmits to us from earlier thinkers. One of them is that if you really want to be free, you need to grow into it. He would say you need to grow in virtue, using this idea from Aristotle. So, for St. Thomas, freedom is not so much about having as much choice as possible as it is about becoming more and more able to do things that

are worthwhile and fulfilling. We grow into freedom like a musician can become a great virtuoso, being really able to do something great with their skill, through practice and learning. I think this idea really helps us to live a more deeply fulfilled and free life than one that is based on having as few rules as possible and the widest choice of options as possible. This idea is also important in today's world and for the work of the academy, because we need to find better ways of understanding and using our freedom, so it does not lead to the destructive results that we see in the world today – many broken families and relationships, a lot of social exclusion and an unsustainable relationship with our natural environment.

Our Sunday Visitor: The world is currently facing the coronavirus pandemic. On what themes and initiatives do you believe the academy should most focus its efforts?

Sister Helen: The main thing we have to do is to work on good ideas. Let's remember what the great John Maynard Keynes said: "The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed, the world is run by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. It is ideas, not vested interests, which are dangerous for good or evil."

Our Sunday Visitor: What did he mean?

Sister Helen: Keynes understood that ideas allow people to imagine how things could be in the future, and therefore to work toward turning those possibilities into a reality. One of the ideas we need to work on is: how do we understand the human being in economic and political thought? In most social theories, human beings are still seen as individuals who are trying to achieve their individual objectives. But we know from ordinary life, and this is confirmed by current research,

that we are also intrinsically social, and we can't flourish without interacting with others.

Our Sunday Visitor: And what consequences does this entail?

Sister Helen: So, we need to improve the idea of the human being in our theories, including our social dimension as well as our individuality, and work out the implications of this for our economic, political and other social theories. We also need to be in dialogue with a lot of experts from different disciplines and different parts of the world, learning from each other, so that we can improve the current ideas that are circulating about how to deal with the pandemic.

Deborah Castellano Lubov writes from Rome.