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Religious Life



The northern lights appear over the Carmelite monastery located in Hafnarfjördur, Iceland. (Courtesy of Carmelite nuns of Hafnarfjordur)



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Iceland is famous for being a place where extreme opposites converge in harmony, where active volcanoes and frozen glaciers coexist. Yet the very qualities that make Iceland a wild and beautiful place are causing its lone Carmelite community in Hafnarfjordur to struggle to adapt and survive.

The Discalced Carmelite nuns of Hafnarfjordur occupy Iceland's only contemplative monastery. Most are from Poland, with the youngest postulant coming from Canada. Most Catholics in Iceland are from abroad, with the community consisting of one diocese served by 17 priests and native Icelanders constituting less than 1% of the community.

"It is a fairly young church community," said Sister Miriam of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face, of the Catholic church in Iceland. "It is difficult to count on local vocations in such a reality, especially since the Catholic vision of devotion to God, combined with vows of chastity, obedience and poverty, is difficult to understand for independent descendants of the Vikings."



The Discalced Carmelite nuns of Hafnarfjordur, Iceland, celebrate the first vows of Sister Karolina. The newly professed sister lies on the ground with her hands forming a cross and the community invokes the Holy Spirit by singing the hymn "Te Deum." (Courtesy of Carmelite nuns of Hafnarfjordur)

The small community at Hafnarfjordur, which consists of 14 sisters with three in formation, has been met with support from native Icelanders who respect the Carmelites' spirituality and believe it brings harmony to their island.

"It happens that we hear from Icelanders, and not infrequently, that our monastery here is like those 'righteous' mentioned by Abraham during his bargaining with God, and thanks to them the Island still 'exists,' " said Sister Miriam.

Although life in Iceland — where it is difficult to grow fruit trees without a greenhouse — has always been challenging for newcomers, pressures have been building on Carmelite community.

"For 41 years of our mission in Iceland, we have tried to remedy the most urgent deficiencies, often with our own hands," said Sister Miriam.



The Discalced Carmelite nuns of Hafnarfjordur, Iceland, are shown harvesting potatoes, a task they do every autumn to produce food supplies to sustain themselves each year. (Courtesy of Carmelite nuns of Hafnarfjordur)

Many materials in Iceland must be imported from abroad, which makes basic things expensive for the community to purchase. This also includes labor and construction. While the sisters have attempted to perform most work on their own, it is no longer possible for some of them. "The hard work we did earlier has also had an impact on our health, and we feel that our strength is decreasing," said Sister Miriam.

Iceland's unique environment is impacting the sisters' health. Sunlight is scarce in Iceland year-round, which can cause vitamin deficiency. A Carmelite sister in her 30s developed such fragile bones that she broke both of her feet. Additionally two sisters approaching their 70s have joint-related diseases and require medical care.

This had made the community, housed in an antiquated monastery constructed 80 years ago, painfully aware of their pressing need for wheelchair accessible facilities.



The Discalced Carmelite nuns of Hafnarfjordur, Iceland, work to replace the floor in the main corridor of the monastery. The old floor laid decades ago produced so much creaking that the loud noise was becoming a problem, which has been fixed. (Courtesy of Carmelite nuns of Hafnarfjordur)

"The construction costs in Iceland are so high that we are unable to meet them even though the planned building is the cheapest and simplest possible," said Sister Miriam. "We have been struggling with it for four years but have not managed to collect even half of the necessary sum."

Volcanic eruptions and earthquakes in recent times have acutely exacerbated the situation. In 2021, a sleeping volcanic system on the Reykjanes Peninsula awakened after an 800-year dormition, causing an escalating series of eruptions. In January 2024, fissures in the earth opened that swallowed a worker, who has never been found. In November 2024, a volcano erupted for the seventh time, with flowing magma and a fissure in the earth causing widespread destruction.

Flows of fiery magma destroyed houses and ripped up roads in Grindavik, about half an hour's drive from the Carmelite monastery. The Grindavik eruptions split the earth in many places with enormous fissures. As of this January, the town has been permanently evacuated, and authorities have advised that no travel should take place to the area.

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The Carmelite monastery experienced several thousand earthquakes per year prior to the 2021 eruption. The earthquakes, which have preceded about 10 eruptions since then according to Sister Miriam, have remained an ongoing problem. Religious statues and anything that could fall and break have had to be placed on the ground. The disaster at neighboring Grindavik, although it did not directly damage the monastery, blocked the sun with black fumes for days and filled the air with volcanic gases that made it difficult to breathe at the monastery. The earthquakes also underscored the monastery's need for a reliable upgrade in infrastructure.

"The functionality of the building has been improved only to a certain extent. Within the monastery building, we have already exhausted all possibilities of adaptation and enlargement of the living space," said Sister Miriam.

With a plumbing system built in 1939 and no accommodations for physically handicapped sisters, the monastery requires added construction that can withstand earthquakes. It's something only an Icelandic firm can cope with — with, of course, imported materials.



The Discalced Carmelite nuns of Hafnarfjordur, Iceland, paint candles and religious artwork to support themselves. (Courtesy of Carmelite nuns of Hafnarfjordur)

Additionally, environmental challenges mean that any upgrades to their living space have to be built all at once. Iceland is swept by harsh winds, and because of the fierce ruggedness of its nature, it's impossible to leave construction done halfway.

"With the money we have, it is impossible to start construction and then put it on hold to obtain more funds for further implementation," said Sister Miriam. "This is impossible in Icelandic climatic conditions."

The sisters remain optimistic, prayerful and committed to serving the community. To support themselves, they paint religious artwork, record CDs and decorate candles. They also share information about their life in Iceland through social media to attract vocations.

"We, on our part, not only pray for new vocations, but also use modern forms of reaching people's hearts and minds, providing at the same time information about

our Carmel in Iceland: by our YouTube channel, Facebook page and recorded CDs," said Sister Miriam.

Sister Miriam said that each of the sisters feel themselves drawn to serve in Iceland, even though they could never have imagined living there before.

"The reason we are here is related to our vocation," she said. "The decision to leave everything behind to follow God, beloved above all, especially in a foreign country, still requires determination and courage, and only God can give them."