

sexual liberation to our heathen shores. Neil McKenna meets its converts

Sister Solicitation's gospel of Universal Joy

SISTERS of Perpetual Indulgence, read the notice in *Gay Times*. "Order of gay male nuns meets last Sunday monthly. Contact Sister Solicitation, mistress of Postulants and Novices..."

Sister Solicitation does not exist. "It's a title role shared between us," explains Mother Fecundity of the Mass Uprising brightly. "Sister Solicitation is whichever sister opens the post." Mother Fecundity is shepherding a small flock of the sisters into the grandiloquently misnamed "East Wing" of the London Lesbian and Gay Centre, which is in fact a single Portakabin with a view across the tracks of the Metropolitan and Circle lines.

"We are the fastest-growing order of nuns in the country, worldwide, in fact," says Mother Belladonna, a slender young nun clad only in a rumpled scapular and a pair of denim shorts surmounted by the full regalia of gimp, wimple, bandeau and the black veil of a mother of the order.

Founded in San Francisco in the late Seventies by the legendary Sister Boom Boom — now supplanted by Sister Vicious Power Hungry Bitch — the order has spread rapidly to Australia, France, and latterly to these heathen shores where 25 sisters have taken the veil in the past year.

We have the vision of Mother Abyss, Mother Inferior of the Sydney order to thank for this blessing. Eighteen months ago Mother Abyss entrusted Mother Ethyl Dreads-a-Flashback with the task of establishing the sisters in Britain. Mother Ethyl is an ageless, ample nun, immaculate in crisply laundered linen and tailored, iron-grey tunic and scapular. Soft of speech, he exudes an air of authority, of gravitas, and is prone to contemplative silences and Gioconda smiles.

Mother Ethyl and the sisters are "not a religion", nor are they Christians, although they exhibit a high level of tolerance to religious convictions. The sisters preach a simple but radical gospel of sexual liberation, the most visible element of which is the widespread promotion of safe sex. Their professed mission is two-fold: the Expiation of

Stigmatic Guilt and the Promulgation of Universal Joy, two sides of the same carnal coin.

"Stigmatic Guilt is the guilt that people — especially gay people — are taught to feel about their sexuality by the Church and the state," says Mother Fecundity. "We're a very sex- and sexuality-positive group of nuns. We're looking to change people's feelings about themselves and about sex."

"The Promulgation of Universal Joy is about revolution," says Mother Ethyl. "It's about saying to people you must decide what is good for you, that there is such a thing as keeping everybody happy all the time and, very simply, that's what we're aiming at."

Both the expiation and promulgation are realised through the Rite of Public Manifestation and no Aids demonstration or radical gay protest is nowadays

complete without the sisters. In September, they canonised Derek Jarman, the gay film-maker, transforming him into St Derek of Dungeness of the order of Celluloid Knights.

For a novice to become a nun he must "manifest" (appear in full habit in

'We're the fastest growing order of nuns in the country, worldwide, in fact'

public) three times with the sisters. Manifestations are a useful way, too, of recruiting new nuns. Many aspirants spontaneously realise their vocation at the arresting sight of half-a-dozen sisters in full manifestation mode.

It was at the OutRage Mass Queer Wedding held in Trafalgar Square in June that the scales fell from the eyes of 19-year-old Sister Dominatrice Des Hommes, the youngest nun in the order and its self-styled "fashion guru". "Everybody has to take their fashion in strictures from me!" he says firmly.

Some of the older sisters purse their lips at Sister Dominatrice's insouciance. "I must admit that there are a number of nuns who are a bit of a hand full," sighs Mother Ethyl. "This has certainly been a trial. I'm in constant correspondence with the mother house back in Sydney. Mother Abyss has been a guiding light."

The question of Mother Abyss and the exact nature of the power he wields from down under is vexed. For all their frankness, the sisters are strangely disinclined to discuss the ugly rumour that

swept through London in the spring of schism in the order. There was talk then of the establishment of a new London house, free from Mother Ethyl and, by extension and implication, from "the ending light" of Mother Abyss.

An awkward silence descends. Cigarettes are hurriedly lit (nearly all are chain-smokers), gimpes are juggled and enclures tightened. All eyes turn to Mother Ethyl who is conveniently rapt in apparent ecstatic contemplation. "Schism! What schism?" exclaims Mother Fecundity. "We would prefer to term it a healthy debate within the order and that is all," plainly manifesting his desire to bury the subject.

The sisters are not universally appreciated. The Conference of Major Religious Superiors, a body representing a

wide range of religious orders in Britain, has described the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence as "most peculiar" and "objectionable". "I don't suppose they mean to offend," said a spokeswoman, "but it doesn't stop what they're doing being offensive."

'People are interested; they want to know why we're handing out dental dams and condoms'

The sisters are robust in their rebuttal. "I don't hold with the view that people see us as shocking or blasphemous," Mother Fecundity says, "and that's not actually our experience. About 90 per cent of people who come up and talk to

us in the streets are very interested in what we're doing. They want to know why we're handing out dental dams [protection for oral sex] and condoms. When we explain who we are and what we're doing, everyone seems very interested and appreciative."

Despite Britain's well-earned reputation for homophobia, the sisters attract surprisingly little hostility. "Just two weeks ago," says Mother Belladonna, "as Fecundity and I were walking through King's Cross underground station, out of the blue we were serenaded over the Tannoy by a very masculine rendition of the song 'Sisters'."

The *chanteur* turned out to be one of the station controllers. "We were invited into the control room for a chat," says Mother Belladonna. "We had a whale of a time, and we got to fiddle with their instruments."



Devoted to Perpetual Indulgence: Sister Moses of the Parting Cheeks (right) in Trafalgar Square and Mother Ethyl Dreads-a-Flashback (above), responsible for establishing the order in Britain Photographs: Dennis Donan

