

Camera inside a cocoon

THE door to the sanctuary of Tyburn Convent is just steps away from what must be one of the busiest intersections in the world: where Bayswater Rd meets Marble Arch, London.

Wanganui-born photographer Anne Noble first took those few steps out of curiosity, intrigued that a contemplative order of nuns might live, work and pray, cocooned in silence right there in that bustling hub.

The day she first crossed the threshold into the sanctuary, separated from the rest of the chapel and convent by a symbolic white grille, she sat for an hour or more "in that atmosphere of silence."

Curiosity quickly jelled into resolve and Noble wrote to the head of the Order of the Benedictine Adorers of the Sacred Heart. She requested, without much hope, that she and her camera be admitted behind the grille

to make a photographic essay on Tyburn Convent life.

To her surprise and delight permission was granted, and over the next year she spent six to seven weeks at the convent.

"I was able to take photographs of anything I wanted," she says. "Once they said I could do it,

BERNADETTE RAE meets a New Zealand woman who went behind convent walls to take photographs 'in the presence of angels.'

they were completely open. I think the sisters were quite amused. They just carried on regardless. I never felt like an intruder."

The head of the order, Mother M. Xavier, even turned out to be a fellow New Zealander, from Tauranga.

Noble originally envisaged a series of photo-

graphs suitable for a magazine. But she encountered "prejudices and preconceptions that made me sick," particularly when she approached the editor of a leading English women's magazine. "Are they all this ugly?" the editor crowed.

Says Noble: "There is a sense of awe for the man

surrounding space, the light..."

None of the convent photographs was posed.

DURING her visits to the convent Noble was given a room "outside the grille," one of several reserved for "re-treatants."

At 5 a.m. daily the sisters would come to get her. She attended Divine Service with them, ate, prayed and worked with them and was taken back to her room after Compline at 8.30 each night.

Noble confesses to prolonging the work as her project, which had already expanded beyond a magazine feature, drew to an end.

"I was still incredibly curious. It was difficult to leave. The life there was compellingly attractive."

The result of Noble's work at Tyburn is a series of 53 "compellingly attractive" images entitled *In The Presence Of Angels: Photographs Of the Contemplative Life*.

They will be displayed at the Fisher Art Gallery, Pakuranga, from Saturday until February 27. Exhibitions in Gisborne and Christchurch will complete the New Zealand tour, which began in Wellington and Palmerston North last year.

Tyburn Convent is on the ancient site of Tyburn Field, a place of turbulent



● Anne Noble ... life in the convent was "compellingly attractive."

PICTURE: DAVID WHITE

history. Public executions were carried out there for 600 years and 105 Catholic martyrs died there during the Reformation.

But the focus of the nuns who now occupy the Convent is prayer.

DURING the hours that fall, like segments, between the shared prayers in the chapel, the Tyburn sisters pursue a meditative study life in which they read, write, learn and reflect.

"This study is to feed their prayer life," says Noble.

"I was photographing one afternoon in a little room off the cloister," writes Noble in the catalogue for *In the Presence of Angels*. "The rota cards allocating each sister her time for adoration was leaning against the wall."

"There was an image here that I was trying to frame. Rows of little white cards handwritten with the sisters' names were placed alongside cards on which were written each hour of the day and night. The light was gentle and the hours looked luminous.

"Mother Juliana caught sight of me bent over and stopped to see what on earth I might be pointing my camera at next. What she said stuck in my mind, because she put into words quite simply what it was I was trying to photograph."

"'Yes,' she said, 'make a picture of that, it will bear witness to the work we do.'

"For the most part I was trying to photograph things you cannot see — prayer and silence," says Noble.



● The ceremony of Final Profession ... a sister lies before the altar while the community and congregation say a prayer of intercession.