

Wrangler Sisters

Written by Joanna Moorhead

It's a busy Friday evening at Heathrow's Terminal 5, and BA air stewardess Katie Colbran, 32, has just stepped off a flight from Milan. She's had a busy week that's already taken her to Paris and Amsterdam; tomorrow, she'll be off to Oslo. That's the nature of her amazing job, she says happily: constant travel, a different city every night, and great camaraderie with other flight crew.



But, much as Katie loves her job, she's handing in her notice. In September she'll hang up her BA uniform for the last time, and in its place she'll put on a powder-blue scapular and become a sister. Katie is of the Community of Our Lady of Walsingham in Brentwood, Essex. Instead of the fast-moving, hard-living, dizzy world of international travel, she'll embrace the contemplative, peaceful surroundings of the mother house of what has the makings of the first new order of British Roman Catholic nuns in the twenty-first century.

They're not a fully-fledged order yet, of course, but the Community of Our Lady of Walsingham has certainly got the seal of approval from officials at the Curia, who have examined and given their blessing to its statutes and Carmelite-based rule. The woman behind the community is Sister Camilla Oberding, though she eschews the old-fashioned 'Mother Superior', preferring instead to call herself 'community servant'. Sister Camilla, who's forty-seven, grew up in south London and travelled the world before becoming a nun in Italy. But she left before her final vows, in search of something more contemplative – and after a lot of soul-searching, she decided that

the work she was being called to do involved setting up a brand-new community which would combine, as she describes it, 'the poverty of the Franciscans with the zeal of truth of the Dominicans and the liturgy of the Benedictines'. It was while she was praying one day in the Slipper Chapel at Walsingham that she felt the community should take its name from the Norfolk shrine. 'I think of Our Lady as our real foundress,' she says.

The community was officially launched five years ago, when Sister Camilla and three other sisters took their first vows and put on their denim habit for the first time. 'We're known as the Wrangler sisters,' she jokes. 'But denim is a great fabric for a habit – it's cheap, and it's very hard-wearing. We're unusual for nuns in that we have hoods, not veils – but that's an important symbol for us because we put up our hoods when we want to be alone with God in prayer, and when we're working with other people and talking we have our hoods down. In a way it's a sign of the fact that we're both contemplative and apostolic, which is central to our ethos.'

Of those other three original sisters, only one – 37-year-old Sister

Gabriella, who grew up in Poland – remains. But Sister Camilla isn't downhearted – as well as Katie, there's another aspirant due to join them later this year, and several more young women are watching them keenly from the sidelines and may well decide to become novices in due course. Equally excitingly, several men are also regular visitors to the community, and Sister Camilla recently sought, and was granted, permission from Rome to take male novices into the community. If and when men join, it will make them the first mixed Catholic community in Britain since the Reformation – a sign, says Sister Camilla, that amidst what seems like general despondency around the future for religious orders, there are some green shoots.

If and when they come, the brothers will join the sisters at their House of Prayer, a large, detached Edwardian residence in the leafy suburbs of Essex. It's the Brentwood diocesan retreat house, a comfortable mansion where Sisters Camilla and Gabriella

host groups from schools and parishes from across the south and east of England. The sisters' living space is a cottage in the grounds; male novices will have a separate accommodation wing, probably on a corridor in the main building.

The *raison d'être* of the new community is to provide a sanctuary for those who seek to discern their true role in life: Sister Camilla believes that in these turbulent, credit-crunch times there are likely to be more people than ever before wondering about what is truly valuable in the world, and how best to live out the truths they hold dear. Discernment, she says, is a central part of the journey of life for each one of us, not only those who go on to join religious orders: and a place away from the world which can be used for contemplative searching – always traditionally part of the purpose of a monastery anyway – is more needed now than in the past. 'In a world of constant mobile phone calls and texts and with continual interruptions from modern technology, a space

'Amidst what seems like general despondency around the future for religious orders, there are some green shoots.'

where you can be still and silent and pray and think is absolutely vital,' she says.

So the House of Prayer at Abbotswick is a place drenched in what are perhaps the greatest luxuries of all in Britain in 2009: space, and peace, and time. There are plenty of places for thought and prayer: the Stations of the Cross are arranged around the perimeter

of the front garden, and there's a sign on the grass which politely reminds visitors of the need for silence. Both

Sister Camilla and Sister Gabriella, though they exude the professionalism of experienced hotel managers (and Sister Gaby is an amazing cook), always seem to have time to talk; and there is always time, of course, for prayer. A bronze plate in the hall is a reminder of the central truth at the heart of the community – it is emblazoned with the engraving: 'Bidden or not bidden, God is present'.

Abbotswick is, through and through, a Catholic religious house: there's no mistaking that, with the statues in the corridor and the cosy

chapel at the end of the hall. But there's a feeling of something new and different here too: something exciting and mould-breaking in religious life, a community that's truly of the new century. It might be something to do with those Wrangler habits, or it might be the fact

that the sisters have each Monday 'off', when they get back into civvies and go for a day out somewhere. It might be that, while they certainly aren't slaves to the Internet or the mobile phone, they do have a website and a Facebook presence, and Sister Camilla is an avid texter. It might be, too, the possibility of the mixed community that gives the sense that this place is like fresh air wafting through the religious life; it might be the candidness with which Sister Camilla and Sister Gabriella are happy to chat. 'I can live without men,' says Sister Camilla. 'But I don't particularly want to. Men bring a different dimension, they add something. And having men alongside us would also be a witness to the fact that men and women are able to live a healthy life chastely, together – in an age that's obsessed with the sexual relationship between

'I can live without men,' says Sister Camilla. 'But I don't particularly want to.'

men and women, and forgets there are other dimensions to their relationship.'

And today's nuns, unlike nuns in the past, are more likely to have had experience of intimate relationships. 'I've had romantic relationships,' says Katie. 'When I first started visiting Abbotswick and felt drawn to the life there, I had a boyfriend. But gradually I realized this place was my heart's desire, rather than this man: I thought, I've got too much love inside me for just a family, my vocation is to love everyone.'

Sister Camilla talks warmly of the man who was her boyfriend at university. 'We're still in touch to this day,' she says. 'I did feel very drawn to marriage, and there was that possibility in my life of a good marriage: but embracing a celibate life is about making yourself available to new people all the time.' Giving up the chance of children, though, was a harder choice to live with. 'In your twenties you don't really grasp what that's going to mean. And then in your mid-thirties

it can be a lot more painful – but it's part of the sacrifice and you have to hold firm to what you are doing and to struggle on through, just as you do in a marriage when the going gets tough. All choices involve sacrifices of one sort or another.'

Like most nuns, Sister Camilla and Sister Gabriella are sad about the decline of the religious life. But they believe their formula could be the way forward for some aspirants. One of the things people don't realize, says Sister Camilla, is how incredibly happy a nun's life can be. 'There's this stereotypical image of the nun, the image you see in the movies and the media. It's a woman who's been let down in love, who doesn't seem quite real: and there's a lot of concentration on what's lacking in her life – men, children – and not so much emphasis on what she's gaining.

'But the truth is that if young women realized how happy life is as a nun, communities like ours would be overflowing. There simply wouldn't be enough convents to fit them all in!'

'But the truth is that if young women realized how happy life is as a nun, communities like ours would be overflowing.'