

# Running Out Of Nuns

by Barbara Lewis

From oil-field workers to city traders, there has been a blaze of publicity in Britain about the need to bring more women into male-dominated careers. But far less media attention has been devoted to the fact that one of the few all-female callings is under threat. While more and more women are becoming nuns worldwide, the number of novices has fallen in Britain.

According to statistics compiled by the Conference of Religious, an umbrella organization for religious communities, there were only seven novices in 2004 - the most recent year for which data was available. But Judith Eydmann of the Catholic Church's National Office for Vocation, which aims to promote religious vocation, is optimistic. According to her the actual figure could be around double that, as not all communities belong to the Conference of Religious.

"This is a time of change rather than decline... There are many new ways that young women (and men) are dedicating their lives to being living witness to the Gospel," she says.

One approach is through a new religious community which offers an updated version of contemplative life.

Our Lady of Walsingham, founded in 2004, is relatively open to the wider world - as symbolized by its sisters wearing practical denim habits with a hood, rather than the traditional veil. "Our experience is that people feel there is less of a barrier when communicating with us," said Sister Camilla Oberding, one of the founding members of the community.

She was referring to the absence of a veil, but equally she could have mentioned the fact that Our Lady of Walsingham has an email address, a website ([www.walsinghamcommunity.org](http://www.walsinghamcommunity.org)), and welcomes visitors. The sisters also take days off when they can go out for pub meals or to the cinema - balancing "days of silence and solitude". So far, there are only four members - Sister Camilla, another founder member Sister Gabriela, and two postulants (women in the early stage of becoming novices).

In addition, there are three or four women who are seriously considering joining the community. "We hope to grow slowly - we're happy to welcome one or two entrants each year," says Sister Camilla. Growing quickly would be a challenge, not just because few wish to take orders, but because the religious process is very slow. "It takes several years of accompaniment and formation to discern a calling to religious life," she says. For a community to gain official recognition requires even more patience. Although recognized as a religious community, Our Lady of Walsingham is not yet an order. "Every new community needs to show signs of viability, hence the Church, in her prudence, approves communities in several stages. It can take anything between 30 and 100 years to go through these," adds Sister Camilla.

Sister Camilla's own religious development was spread over more than a decade. She was a nun for around 10 years in Italy, but did not take final vows. Instead, she returned to Britain and worked as a palliative care nurse. While establishing her own vocation, she set up the Vocations Group in 1999 to help people considering a vocation of any kind or "vocations at 360 degrees", as she put it.

For her, the most rewarding vocation is that of a nun or monk. "It's the most satisfying life you can have if that is your calling. If young people knew how happy one can be in religious life, there wouldn't be enough monasteries and convents around to respond to the demand," she says. But for now, that is far from being the case.

Our Lady of Walsingham seeks to spread the word in a limited way, but its priority is to use its energy on developing the community. The National Office for Vocation has been more actively seeking to recruit through a campaign, aimed at schools, with cartoon-style pictures of modern-looking nuns and also monks. But the best advertisement is a positive example, or as Eydmann put it, "a religious sister living her vocation as a joyful witness". But the problem for those seeking to expand the sisterhood is that young people are less likely to encounter such examples these days.

Writing in Britain's 'Guardian' newspaper, Joanna Moorhead described her Catholic childhood in the 1960s and 1970s as "positively festooned with nuns", many of whom she regarded as feminist inspirations. She

suggests one reason for their decline is that women, at least in the Western world, now have many more options.

In the past, she wrote, convents were "a convenient repository for daughters who were too bright, too spirited or too ambitious for the only available alternative: marriage". "Over the centuries - and still today in some parts of the developing world - a vocation to the religious life meant a ticket out of poverty and the chance of an education for otherwise poor and illiterate women."

That would explain why many women in the developing world still become nuns, indicating that globally the number taking orders is growing, despite the decline in Britain and Western Europe as a whole. Eydmann is reluctant to give reasons for the lack of European interest. "It is not, of course, any single factor," she says, "Some of the blame has tended towards secularization, but we are trying to move away from pointing our fingers at the beasts of external forces such as consumerism and society's sexualization of young people."

Ultimately, those "beasts" could drive some to take refuge in the spiritual world. There has yet to be a rush, but those who do take the veil are more likely to choose a contemplative order, as opposed to the apostolic orders that send nuns back out into the world to teach, for instance. "A lot of young women choosing religious life nowadays will go into a more contemplative order," says Sister Camilla.

Paradoxically, that could mean less exposure still to those inspiring examples - unless nuns opt for days off in the local community, like the sisters of Our Lady of Walsingham.

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