

(Unexpectedly) From the BBC – ‘What is life like as a nun in a Norfolk Convent?’

Would you give up the chance to have a partner, children and a choice of career? Probably not, but some take a very different path. Just 85 women in England and Wales became nuns or religious sisters between 2018 and 2022, according to the most recent statistics. Sister Catherine is one of them. While faith has always been important to Catherine, 26, she did not always plan on joining a religious order....Yet here she is, part of a small group of women in a convent on the edge of Dereham, a small Norfolk town. Growing up a Catholic and working for the local diocese, she had spent some time with the women she now sees as family. She initially had doubts about joining them, working instead as an au pair in Austria. *“There were lots of moments on my day off I'd go exploring some of the beautiful surroundings,”* she says. *“And I can remember those times where I'd come across a chapel or a church and have that real sense of deep peace - almost a sense of being held - in God's presence. And so I realised this desire to belong totally to God was still there.”*

Shortly after the first Covid lockdown, Sister Catherine joined the convent of The Community of Our Lady of Walsingham, based in a converted barn. *“I thought I'd give it three weeks. Almost four years later, I'm still here,”* she says. A typical day involves at least three hours in prayer and silent contemplation. But Catherine and the other sisters are also involved in the community, giving talks in schools, working in prisons and also with university students. They also maintain the convent and its grounds, as well as its website and social media channels.... Sister Catherine firmly believes in the life she has chosen, although she still has the option to leave her habit behind. *“I have not yet made permanent vows. You have about seven years - maximum of 10, really - to decide if this is something you want to commit to for life,”* she explains. *“Which is really quite generous; even engaged couples wouldn't take that long to decide. That's an option that's still open.”*

Sister Theresa joined when she was a little older than Catherine. Now 39, she has been with the community for almost 15 years. *“I had an inkling when I was about 18 that God was saying 'You know, you could be a sister.' And, at first, I thought 'Oh no Lord, surely not,’”* she explains. *“But the funny thing was when that thought came to me in prayer, I did feel a sense of joy, even though I was a bit scared. (But) I did feel happy. I thought 'I need to explore this.’”* She went on religious retreats, meeting other young Catholics. On retreats, she got to know herself better but still did not know many women who had chosen the life she now leads. *“I didn't know if you could be happy as a nun. I knew people that were happily married, so that was the idea I was clinging to, really.”* A further retreat to Walsingham, a small village in north Norfolk and one of England's holiest, helped make her mind up. She met *“some really joyful sisters”* and says that, through prayer, she came to trust that what God wanted *“is what's best for me”*. That led her to become a religious sister. Although the terms are used interchangeably, sisters are more active in the wider world than nuns, who tend to lead much more enclosed lives. She still feels the decision was right. *“I suppose, like any choice in life, you have moments where it's a struggle,”* she says. *“I loved the idea of marriage and children, so sometimes I think 'Oh gosh, I missed out on children. You do have those thoughts sometimes. I think what has happened is that desire to be a mother... I'm able to show that in different ways. I do work, like being an assistant chaplain at one of the local universities. And I love seeing the young people grow in their faith. So there's that idea of nurturing others and helping them to grow and really flourish. I think that motherly desire that is in my heart; the kind of natural, biological thing. To be able to live that through helping others still helps me to feel fulfilled.”*

Surrounded by fields and under big skies, the convent was once a family home. Bought and converted in 2018, it is now known as House of the Divine Will. Most of its fittings and fixtures, including Ikea furniture, either came with the property or were donated, like the Apple Mac used for admin and updating the community's social media. High property prices in north Norfolk drove them to search for a new place to live and worship. A sister for almost 40 years, Camilla helped oversee the move to *“this wonderful property on the edge of the town, overlooking the moors”*. Formerly a palliative care nurse, she explains that joining a religious order was a different expression of the same vocation - *“the love of God and love of people. I think if I had been a nurse and got married, I would have had a similar kind of freedom,”* she says. *“But the possibility to serve others - and the breadth of experiences I've had because of this life - has made it even more beautiful in many ways.* While the community remains small, there are potentially plans to expand, with the possibility of men living and worshipping on the site. *“We are seeing more women interested in this kind of life and also some men approaching us, with an idea of becoming brothers in the future,”* says Camilla. *“And that's why we're hoping to have an extension to our property here, to allow our first brothers to come. I do believe that if young people knew just how beautiful this life is, many more would choose it. It's almost a sense that people just don't know how beautiful the interior peace is when you have a life and relationship with God.”*