News
Religious Life

Sisters of the Community of Our Lady of Walsingham pose for a photo at Mary's House in Walsingham, England. (Courtesy of Community of Our Lady of Walsingham)

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For members of England's newest female religious congregation, the opportunities for outreach and mission are as real today as they've ever been — for all the talk of religious decline and growing indifference toward the Catholic faith.

"We seem to be bucking the trend in this country," explained Sr. Catherine Williams, from the Community of Our Lady of Walsingham, known by its initials as COLW. "We've already expanded and we have new candidates seeking to join, despite our space limitations. Looking forward, there are plenty of hopes for our future."

The 28-year-old sister spoke with GSR as her new religious community, one of very few founded in England over the past century, prepared to open a mission house in Walsingham, close to an ancient national shrine.

She said the Community of Our Lady of Walsingham, officially categorized as an "ecclesial family of consecrated life," had tried to tap into a new openness toward religiousness among young British people, which still remained small-scale but had potential to grow.

Meanwhile, an older co-founder of the Community of Our Lady of Walsingham said the community was pursuing a "preferential option for the young and spiritually poor," and hoped to make its Walsingham mission a "vocational center for all young people."

Sisters of the Community of Our Lady of Walsingham kneel in prayer at the site of what was the chapel for the Franciscan Friary in Walsingham, England. (Courtesy of Community of Our Lady of Walsingham)

"There's a tendency to think vocations only pertain to priests and nuns — but we're helping give young people the tools to make their own discernments," Sr. Camilla Oberding, a former palliative care nurse, told GSR.

"With our contemplative Carmelite roots, we're also supporting those who've already made life choices, including clergy and married couples who can often feel isolated in their vocational journeys. We want to be the hidden yeast which quietly enables this dough of renewal to rise."

Created in January 2004 with statutes approved by Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor, England's then Catholic primate, the Community of Our Lady of Walsingham began running a house of prayer for the Brentwood diocese with the motto "Prayer, Community and Mission woven into each day."

Its first members took vows in 2006, and final vows four years later. In 2014, the community relocated to the Catholic diocese of East Anglia, establishing its first convent and formation house in 2017 at Dereham, near Walsingham.

A new Mary's House was acquired in Walsingham itself this summer after a fundraising appeal to free up places for new novices at Dereham. This is now being readied for occupation, with hopes to build a chapel in its gardens.

The community operates an attractive website and social media channels, using the term "Colwelian" from its COLW acronym. It follows the early 13th-century Carmelite Rule of St. Albert, and devotes several hours daily to prayer and contemplation focused on the Annunciation.

Sisters of the Community of Our Lady of Walsingham pray during the first vows of one of the sisters joining the community in Walsingham, England. (Courtesy of Community of Our Lady of Walsingham)

Its mission, in the website's words, is witnessing to "communion in diversity" in a society that "thrives on individualism" against community ideals. It also aims to maintain an apostolate of "spiritual direction" and "vocational accompaniment," while hosting retreats and conferences and reaching out to young people in schools.

Williams, who joined in 2021 after Britain's first COVID-19 lockdown, said the community is pleased with support offered by local churches. Its mostly young members have given plenty back, with a couple working as prison chaplains and one, Sr. Theresa Weight, serving as a university chaplain.

"We're also doing ever more parish missions in line with our local bishop's pastoral plan — giving talks, visiting the sick and housebound, and helping people develop a prayer life who've been all-equipped for this," the sister told GSR.

"When I joined at age 23, I was really struck and moved by how the community looks for the true good in each person — helping them grow and become the people God has made them to be. This can happen in various ways: It doesn't necessarily lead to a religious vocation."

Sr. Catherine Williams, of the Community of Our Lady of Walsingham in England, joins World Youth Day in Lisbon, Portugal, in August 2023. (Community of Our Lady of Walsingham)

England and Wales are currently home to around 4 million Catholics, with largest concentrations in Greater London and the northwest; 1.2 million routinely attend Mass, according to bishops' conference data.

Although no regular record is kept of memberships, the country is also home to 130 female orders and congregations, running around 1,000 houses, including 26 enclosed communities mostly of Benedictines, Carmelites, Cistercians, Franciscans and Poor Clares.

Only 17 women entered formation to become nuns or religious sisters nationwide in 2024, all aged between 19 and 50. Yet the numbers, though small, have shown signs of rallying, with a total of 231 joining in the 10 years up to 2023, compared to 189 over the previous decade.

Connections with Walsingham could prove valuable.

The village's pilgrim connections date from 1061, when the Virgin Mary reputedly appeared to a local noblewoman, Richeldis de Faverches, asking her to build a replica of the Holy Family's house at Nazareth.

Known as "England's Nazareth," it became one of medieval Europe's four major pilgrim destinations alongside Rome, Jerusalem and Santiago de Compostela, after an Augustinian priory of the Annunciation, housing a simple statue of the enthroned Virgin holding the child Jesus, was established there in the mid-12th century.

Sisters of the Community of Our Lady of Walsingham gather on the Abbey Grounds in Walsingham, England, site of the original Shrine to Our Lady of Walsingham. (Courtesy of Community of Our Lady of Walsingham)

The Catholic shrine was robbed and destroyed under King Henry VIII in 1538, when its subprior and 10 others were executed for alleged high treason. It was restored, however, in 1897 and recognized as a minor basilica in 2015.

The Anglican Church of England established a separate Marian center in 1931 in the village, which now also boasts an Orthodox church and chapel.

Walsingham is home to other religious houses too, and sees regular gatherings of Hindus, Muslims and other faith groups.

In her GSR interview, Oberding said the aim of the Community of Our Lady of Walsingham members will be to "act as bridge-builders" for the growing number of pilgrims and visitors now coming to Walsingham — reliving the joy felt by the shrine's noble founder almost 1,000 years ago.

Oberding added that a "unifying presence" was increasingly important as more people from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds converged on the shrine, along with those "secular and searching" who needed an "opening to the Christian vision."

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"This is a great place for evangelization, and we hope to provide pastoral guidance as a praying community at the village's heart," said Oberding, who took first vows with a Marian Institute in Italy in 1987, but later left in search of a "more contemplative life."

"If people can understand and imbibe the Walsingham message, and begin living by it in their homes and communities, this will help bring closer the country's future conversion."

With its emphasis on silence and the word of God, the community maintains close links with Carmelite houses in London and Oxford, as well with a nearby convent that has been at its site in Quidenham in Norfolk since 1948.

The Community of Our Lady of Walsingham began admitting lay members in 2023, and is looking for women aged 18-35 who wish to try out vocations.

And since its statutes as an ecclesial family allow it to recruit male members, it's also seeking young men with a vocation to religious life who may wish to join as future brothers and priests.

The annual Community of Our Lady of Walsingham Family Gathering includes sisters and lay members celebrating together. (Courtesy of Community of Our Lady of Walsingham)

The Community of Our Lady of Walsingham will hold "Come and See" days for men aged 18-40 in January and July 2027 and has put forward an open website invitation to "interiorly strong and determined young men" who might have the courage and calling to initiate a men's branch of the community.

Born and bred in East Anglia, Williams describes herself a "cradle Catholic," and says she first got to know the Community of Our Lady of Walsingham sisters while working in youth ministry for the local diocese.

Her vocation took time. In a June 2024 BBC interview, she recalled heading to Austria as a student home-help, with no clear idea about her future.

"While I was there, I realized it was God whom I really longed for in the deepest part of myself — so I came back, took a leap of faith and joined the sisters, planning to

stay for three weeks," Williams told GSR.

"Six years later, here I am, still wearing the habit. A lot of my own ministry now is simply one of listening. Mary herself did great things through her own hiddenness in the Lord. And if we can stay faithful to our charism and allow the Lord to work through us, then the faith could grow exponentially here without our even knowing it."