

Of a quite different order

The new religious Community of Our Lady of Walsingham is the order that likes to say ‘yes’ – obedience, silent prayer, poverty and the rosary are in, but so are chilling out and trips to the movies. A distinctive departure from other orders, its statutes are designed to use the gifts of women more fully

Sister Camilla Oberding was in the hands of a dressmaker when I arrived at the House of Prayer in Brentwood, Essex. New habits were being made for the fledgling community of nuns that Sr Camilla has founded. Dressed in a long light denim dress with white trimmed scapula and hood, she greeted me. “We’re hoodies now,” she laughed. “Young people will be able to understand us.”

It is early days for the Community of Our Lady of Walsingham (COLW), launched with a founding Mass in the Slipper Chapel at the Marian shrine of Walsingham, in Norfolk, on 6 January 2004. There were four sisters at the start but two have left to get married. Sr Camilla, 46, who is British, and Sr Gabriela, 35, from Poland, remain with two postulants – Johanna, 34, from east London, and Karen, 38, from Woking in Surrey.

But what this little community is doing is historic. Only a handful of orders have been founded in Britain since the Reformation and the statutes of the COLW are quite radical. Yes, they take vows of obedience, poverty and chastity – but their interpretation is different from that of other orders and their plans for the future are groundbreaking.

Armed with a decree establishing the community from the Archbishop of Westminster, and the approval of the Vatican, Sr Camilla now seeks to establish a new expression of religious life for women. “I feel that in the old model of religious life the gifts of women are not being used fully. Women’s role in society has changed in the last 70 years.

“It’s not right to deny our femininity and dress us in habits that make us look like sacks of potatoes. Yes we need rules, but they had multiplied ridiculously in religious life to the point where in one order a sister had to ask Mother Superior for permission to have a shower. It is abusive when the rights of the individual are so thwarted.”

The COLW does not use the term Mother Superior – instead Sr Camilla is the “community servant”. There is a timetable, with the community gathering for adoration, the divine office, silent prayer, Mass and the rosary, but much of the afternoon is left for the individual to organise and there is “chill out” time every evening. Monday is a day off when the sisters may leave their habits in the wardrobe and visit friends or family, or go shopping, or see a film – whatever they choose.

The order is Carmelite rooted and the sisters wear the hood during silent prayer as a sign of “being hidden with Christ”. Their charism is vocational and incarnational, and their aim, explained Sr Camilla, is “to help people to say yes to God’s work in their lives”. They run the diocesan retreat centre called Abbotswick which is open six days a week from 10.30 a.m. until 8 p.m. for parish groups, Alpha courses, confirmation groups, and for individuals who need peace for a few hours. They also hold conferences on issues connected to religious life and other vocations. On the weekend of Friday 18 to Sunday 20 May the community will host “Ever Ancient, Ever New”, for women thinking about entering an order. There is one planned on celibacy for priests and another on parenting.

Radically, the COLW is open to the idea of becoming a mixed community of men and women, or working and worshipping alongside a community of brothers.

“We are aware of the necessary formation and maturity needed for such a venture. And yet, if God wants it, the people and the means will come,” said Sr Camilla, adding – with a dollop of her mischievous humour – “But I haven’t met the right man yet.”

They are encouraged by Fr Herbert Alfonso SJ, their mentor and former dean of spirituality at the Gregorian University in Rome. He has advised them to see where the Spirit leads them.

An attractive and effervescent woman, Sr Camilla admits that she often thought she would marry and have 10 children. “I have loved and been loved and there was someone who wanted to marry me but I did not feel called to marriage. The calling to religious life is deeper.” After finishing a degree in nursing at Chelsea College, London, she joined an order of nuns in Italy. She shaved off all her hair and wore a full wimple but after 11 years decided not to take final vows and left. In 1997 she came back to England and worked as a



The charism of the order is vocational and incarnational, and the community fosters an atmosphere that gives peace to those who visit

palliative care nurse. She was in search of a contemplative life but not an enclosed life and in 1999 started the Vocations Group with the help of Mgr John Armitage in London. The idea was for young people to support one another as they discern their vocation in life. Of the 150 or so young people who have frequented the group to date, 17 have entered existing orders, many have married, a couple chose the single life and Sr Camilla – having firmly resisted the call to start a new order at first – founded the COLW.

It has not all been easy. Sr Camilla said that losing two members from the community so quickly was difficult and they have had a few money worries. “We have to remember that the founding years will be the first 20 years. We already feel part of something much bigger,” she says.

She has been inspired by the writings of Fr Ronald Rolheiser OMI (Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate) and has published his article “Searching for a New Maturity” on the community’s website: “Someone needs to found a religious community with no rules because, for its members, none would be needed,” he wrote. “The community would be mixed, men and women together, but strong enough to affectively love each other, remain chaste, and model friendship and family beyond sex and without denigrating sex. The community would be radically immersed in

the world ... The world needs mature Christians who, like Jesus, have the strength to walk inside the world, right inside the chaos of sin itself, without sinning themselves."

"When I read that," said Sr Camilla, "I thought 'Yes! This is what we want to do.'" She plans to have the mother house for the COLW in Walsingham and to serve the shrine but still keep a community working and studying in Brentwood.

"I would like women who feel they have a calling to religious life to try it. But it is not the place for someone looking for security. Being a nun is not an escape. The interior journey, as one of the desert fathers said, is one inch long and one thousand miles deep."

The COLW needs help gathering the essentials and it lists requests on its website, which is in itself a free gift from friends. They certainly need a bell. At midday Sr Gabriela rang a tinkling little bell for the Angelus which no one heard on the other side of the house. They need a dress-maker, too, who will donate his or her services, they need gardeners to tend the large grounds of the House of Prayer and they need a second-hand estate car.

At lunch I met Karen, 38, a postulant who joined the community three months ago and hopes soon to become a novice. If the COLW is the right place for her she will take first vows in about two and a half years. She has already served two years as a novice in another community in France.

"I felt strongly I needed to be in England. I went abroad with romantic ideas about changing the world but then felt there was so much to do at home." Karen worked as an optical assistant and joined the Vocations Group where she met Sr Camilla. "I thought what Sr Camilla was doing was very fresh and exciting and my cup of tea. It appealed to me to work in the House of Prayer and welcome people searching for God."

Karen believes that there is an atmosphere of holiness about Abbotswick which gives peace to people who visit. The door is always open and regulars include a couple of long-distance cyclists who stop to rest and to pray in the chapel or gardens.

The rain was coming down hard when I left but the sisters were resolved to walk the Stations of the Cross that afternoon with a young Swiss woman who was interested in the community. But first Sr Camilla had her birthday present from the community to enjoy – a back massage with hot stones at the local health club. A cheery thought crossed my mind as I watched Sr Camilla pull on a cape and dash across the courtyard – "At last, I have found a nun who reminds me of Maria from *The Sound of Music*." I do, however, believe that she will not end up marrying a captain with seven children and that the COLW is here to stay.

■ Victoria Combe is a freelance journalist.
To find out more about the Vocations Group visit www.vocationsgroup.org.uk.
To learn more about the Community of Our Lady of Walsingham visit www.walsinghamcommunity.org/index.html