Grace and blessing: the unfolding story of a new Catholic community

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Introduction

To those who are called and give their life to God in total surrender and self-abasement, the Consecrated Life can bring freedom and unimaginable joy. However, such joy does not mean unmitigated worldly happiness. The Religious Life can immerse us into an ocean of trials, tribulations and unremitting challenges. But we can never outdo God in generosity. In return for our self-offering, God offers us showers of blessings and graces in abundance. Tribulations; these arise at times and places we are not expecting and God uses His inexhaustible treasury to surprise and delight us in ways and through people we least expect. I speak from the recent experiences of my own community, the Sisters of the Blessed Virgin Mary (SBVM).

I am going to share something of our unfolding story. I have spoken elsewhere, of the beginning of our story; how twelve Anglican Sisters became Catholic Sisters. Today, I will describe something of how our journey has continued; how our physical journey of trying to find a building to live in has impacted upon our spiritual journey of making a spiritual home for a new community and how the corporate journey has affected each sister’s personal story. Finally, I shall seek to draw out from it all, our experience of God’s grace and blessing and what this reveals about the loving God we believe in. But let me begin with a brief recap.

Our Catholic community is known as the Sisters of the Blessed Virgin Mary. It was officially erected as a Public Association of the Faithful within the Personal Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham when we were received into the full communion of the Catholic Church on 1st January 2013. We were then twelve sisters. Eleven of us were from the same community.

Our former community, the Community of St Mary the Virgin (CSMV) based in Wantage, Oxfordshire, was one of the oldest Anglican communities in the world. It had been founded in 1848 as part of the Oxford Movement – a movement of High Church Anglicans who sought to reinstate Catholic traditions in Anglican liturgy and theology. We wore a traditional Habit, sang Gregorian plainchant, reserved the Blessed Sacrament, took vows for life of poverty, chastity and obedience and basically sought to replicate the practices of a traditional Catholic monastic community – except for the fact that we were Anglicans.

Within the Anglican Communion there is no Vicar of Christ and no Magisterium. In the Church of England decisions which have profound theological implications can be taken by an elected synod, some of whom may not have had any theological or other appropriate training. Some aspects derived from the wider Church of England over which we had no control, impacted upon our community. Some sisters who sought a return to the authentic understanding of consecrated religious life looked to the Catholic Church.

The Ordinariate

In 2009, when Pope Benedict issued an invitation for groups of Anglicans to come into full communion with the Catholic Church, sisters came to speak to me as Mother, about their sense of call
to take this route into full communion; to become Catholics as part of the Personal Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham ("the Ordinariate") whilst also remaining members of the Community.

There was inherent within this sense of call to full communion, the call to remain together. This is the reason that a number of us, me included, were being drawn into the Catholic Church by this particular route. The Ordinariate opened the possibility for groups of Anglicans to remain together, and the structures were specifically created to welcome Religious, in groups.

The whole Community had hoped at the outset that an agreement would be reached to allow some sisters to become Catholics – the two distinct groups sharing a large convent respecting our different ecclesiastical allegiances but continuing in fraternal love and charity to live together and care for our frail and more vulnerable members, Anglican and Catholic. In fact, in the midst of the processes the time came for the usual election of a Reverend Mother and the whole community, those with a sense of call to remain Anglican and those feeling called to become Catholics re-elected me, who they knew wanted to be received as a Catholic.

There followed a long, laborious and painful process of negotiations between the Anglican and Catholic Church authorities. This involved a combination of canon and civil law, and necessitated the intervention of specialist ecclesiastical lawyers. It became clear that two self-governing communities would be required and the Catholic Community would have to relocate; a painful time for the whole community as we accepted the reality that we would not be able to remain together.

At this point there were significant legal issues. In a nutshell, the worst case scenario was that from the moment a sister was received into the Catholic Church she would be homeless and penniless. Catholic Code of Canon Law 702 (which instructs religious institutes to observe “equity and evangelical charity” towards members who separate from it) does not apply to Anglicans where, in effect, each community makes its own provisions according to its own constitutions.

Needless to say, those of us who became part of the Ordinariate Community had done everything in our power to try to stay to be able to care for our elderly or infirm Anglican sisters. We devoted considerable time to ensuring that, without the Ordinariate sisters, the remaining sixteen sisters would be well cared for: spiritually, physically, emotionally as well as financially. It was particularly hurtful therefore to receive hate mail accusing us of having “abandoned” the frail and elderly.

On a practical level, the Ordinariate sisters themselves would need somewhere to live once we were received. We were not in a position to buy nor even to rent ourselves, as we literally did not have a penny. We kept knocking on doors and just when we thought a door might open wider, it would firmly close. There was a sense in which God used the numerous disappointments to draw us closer together as a new community.

I and another sister made a visit for the inside of a day to the Benedictine sisters of St Cecilia’s Abbey on the Isle of Wight principally to discuss monastic music. We had never met before but we shared with Mother Abbess some of our story and mentioned in passing our desperate hope of being received into the Catholic Church which could not be realised unless we had somewhere to go immediately afterward. She told us that they had been preparing cells for twelve Paraguayan sisters who were coming in the New Year for a year’s formation. However, there was now a delay. “How many of you are there?” she asked. “Twelve” we replied. She turned to her Prioress and both of them gently wondered aloud whether the Holy Spirit had led us to each other at this particular timing. Twelve
empty cells, twelve sisters! No more was said that day but the generous, open hearted Abbess consulted her community and they unanimously agreed to open their home to us.

It was arranged that the day following our reception into the Catholic Church, we would temporarily leave our convent to stay for six weeks with these Benedictine nuns for the opportunity for formation as a newly formed Catholic Benedictine Community. This information was conveyed to the Anglican authorities at a formal legal meeting. We, our lawyers and the two Catholic priests present all understood it was agreed that after six weeks, we would return to our former convent temporarily as guests, whilst we sought a new permanent home.

However, shortly before we were received as Catholics, the Anglican authorities informed me by email that it would be best for the remaining Anglican sisters if we did not return. This came as a considerable shock not only to us but also to Anglican sisters at the Convent who were telling us that they wanted us to return. But at least there was absolute clarity – once Catholic there could be no return.

I warned the whole Community that each sister wanting to be received as a Catholic had to be prepared to walk down the drive with just what she could carry in a bag in her hand, leaving everything else behind, without any guarantees for the future, just going forward in blind faith in accordance with her conscience. I said that any sister whose conscience was calling her to take this step was welcome to come with us – none would be excluded.

Of the eleven sisters, three were in their seventies and three were in their eighties. None of the eleven sisters turned back, including two who were then living on the Convent infirmary wing. None of the older sisters imagined that for some of them, fifty years after they had left behind family, friends and everything for Christ, God would call them once again to leave behind their convent home, their sisters in Christ, their security for their old age – everything. But He called, and once again they responded in the spirit of the Blessed Virgin Mary with their “fiat”.

We were received into the Catholic Church on 1st January 2013.

The morning after our reception, we made our communion as Catholics for the first and last time in the Convent which until then had been our spiritual home. After Mass the twelve of us, with our essential personal possessions, boarded a coach and set off rather like Abraham, in faith, not knowing what the future would hold.

One sister wrote: “It was never going to be easy. We had to leave our Anglican Sisters, though we had wanted to stay and care for them. It was a cold January morning. The coach stood on the tarmac outside our Convent door, packed with our necessities… suitcases, some duvets, and so on. Our dear brothers from the Oxford Oratory had gone the extra mile, being with us for early morning Mass, and breakfast, then carrying our suitcases down from the cells which we had to leave forever. They stood around the coach, smiling, to wave us off. We climbed on board, and the huge vehicle swung out of our Convent. We wove our way through the market of the town we had known all our lives as the Sisters of Wantage, knowing it was good bye. We would always love those Sisters who had chosen to remain Anglican and whom we were unlikely to see again. God's call is to leave all… as individuals we had already done that in order to enter the Community of St Mary the Virgin. Now we were doing that again. We were going to the Benedictine Abbey of Ryde, across the Solent. I glanced around the coach. There were Sisters of all ages, twelve of us. We had agreed that once on the road we would say the rosary together in silence. So the silence settled. As the driver wove his way through the early traffic, the coach rocked gently from side to side. We were in the arms of God. We had no money, no
home. But we were being gently carried forward upon our path, and the rocking motion expressed His consolation, His love.”

We left with no financial settlement from our previous community, no endowment, just a firm conviction that becoming Catholic was our response to Our Lord’s continuing call to: “follow me”.

There are simply no words that adequately pay tribute to the wonderful sisters of St Cecilia’s Abbey and their exceptional Abbess. They have been the vehicle God has used to shower us with grace upon grace. I shall let one of the sisters continue our story with our arrival at Ryde:

“Saint Cecilia’s Abbey has Papal Enclosure, and our entrance into this enclosure was huge, both for us, and possibly also for our Ryde sisters. Let us pause to appreciate this remarkable situation. A Benedictine community under the leadership of its wise and open Abbess, had agreed to give refuge to a community of twelve, having only met two of them. This was under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, in obedience to the radical Gospel injunction and in the spirit of their motto. The vote to receive us in their sanctuary on the second day of our erection as a new community in the Church, had been unanimous.”

When we arrived at St Cecilia’s Abbey, Ryde on the Isle of Wight, the first words we heard from a beaming sister who met our coach in the drive were, “Welcome home!” These remarkable, loving sisters offered twelve strangers a refuge but truly gave us a ‘home’ in every sense of the word. We lived in effect as one extended Community; worshipping God together as the original six weeks’ proposed stay turned into eight months.

There were times when we wondered whether we were being called to remain with these wonderful sisters. We loved them and felt their own love for us and yet our own corporate discernment was that God was calling us to continue our journey. But where and how would it be possible? Despite the fact that we had no money with which to acquire a suitable property, in faith, I and another sister scoured estate agent’s particulars and visited promising possibilities. We and others prayed fervently for a home. The answer to all our prayers came in the following way:

A new home

An American Dominican sister from Nashville, Tennessee, on route to Maryvale Institute in Birmingham, visited us on the Isle of Wight staying a couple of nights outside enclosure in the Guest House. As I waved her off on the hovercraft my last words to her were, “As soon as you get to Maryvale, go straight to the Chapel, and beg Blessed John Henry Newman to find us a home.” She did as requested.

That same night she emailed me that as she left the Chapel she had bumped into one of her supervisors and explained that she had been visiting a new Catholic community of ex Anglican nuns who were now homeless. “Do they know there is a convent up the road that is about to be put on the market?” came the reply. This was Wednesday evening. By Friday evening I had tracked down the Sister Superior and phoned her. She told me that she had already moved into the Presbytery across the road and a firm was about to remove all the furniture and sacred items that they could not take with them. “How soon do we need to view?” I asked. “As soon as possible” came the reply.

Next morning, I was on the first hovercraft that left the Isle of Wight. Accompanied by another sister we raced to Birmingham to view the convent. Sister Superior showed us around and explained the
convent had been purpose built for them fifty years before but they needed the sale proceeds to pay for the fees of their elderly sisters in care homes. They had desperately not wanted it to be sold to developers but could not imagine that any other religious community would come forward to buy it.

Because of the times of the tides on the Isle of Wight, if we were going to get back that night, we had just over an hour to view before having to set off on the return journey. Within minutes of arriving we knew it was the right place. “It’s perfect” we said to a clearly delighted Sister Superior. “Very good” said a beaming Sister Superior. “But we have no money to pay for it”. I continued. “But we’re convinced that if the Lord wants us here, He will provide what we need.” Her expression did not change. This mighty woman of faith agreed and we continued with the tour. As Sister Superior opened the cleaning cupboard full of mops, rags and cleaning equipment, she declared, “We’ll get rid of all this before we leave”. “Stop!” My companion exclaimed. “We have nothing. Everything you don’t need just leave – I mean everything – we will be able to make use of it all.”

Sister Superior explained that the property was due to go on the open market in two days time – “first thing Monday morning” but I asked her to contact the estate agents and tell them not to do it. “Just give us time to raise the purchase price.” I asked. This wonderful, faith filled Sister agreed to do just that.

Subsequently she told me, “The night we spoke on the phone that Friday, I told the other sisters you were coming to view tomorrow morning but I said to them, it’s only prayer that’s going to bring this about. I’m going to keep an all night prayer vigil. You’re welcome to join me!” But the other sisters were too exhausted so Sister Superior stayed up most of the night praying that we would agree to buy their convent. Eventually, after most of the night without sleep, when she felt too tired to carry on she told the Lord, “Jesus, I’m going now. It’s up to you!” She now describes the whole event as a miracle of faith.

The next day, we were unequivocal in our desire to purchase it albeit that we didn’t have any money with which to do so but we were certain that the Lord would provide, if it was the Lord’s will, and so was she. She cancelled the house clearing company, stopped the estate agents putting it on the open market and waited. Within a couple of days we had confirmed that a benefactor (who wants to remain anonymous) had heard of our plight and decided to buy the convent allowing us to live there paying rent. It was indeed a miracle.

We had come to appreciate the meaning of God’s grace and blessing as we experienced it in the loving embrace of the Ryde sisters. God gave us a great gift in them. We can never out do God in generosity. We had been forced to leave our Convent and the sisters there. We were given our beloved sisters at Ryde. It is not an exaggeration to say that we found a shared kinship with them which we never experienced with some of our former Anglican sisters. We grew to love each other deeply and truly. We shared the same spirit and as such had formed an unbreakable bond. But the time had now come for us to depart.

I shall let one of the sisters take up our story with our departure from Ryde:

“The experience of leaving St Cecilia’s Abbey, Ryde I would liken to the mystery of being brought to birth. A child remains safe and cherished for nine months in the womb; we had had eight months of being sheltered, loved and cared for within the enclosure of St Cecilia’s Abbey. But now the time had come for God to call us forth to step out in faith once more on the next stage of our journey. As with all birth there was plenty of pain and tears, as well as thanksgiving and joy as we prepared to leave.
our beloved sisters who had taken us into their home and their hearts. The reality of our departure gradually grew as did the pile of luggage that began appearing at the bottom of the main stairs.

When the day itself dawned it was perhaps a good thing that the coach arrived earlier than expected as the practicalities of loading belongings and picnics and rounding up sisters took charge of those dreaded final minutes. The coach driver was our old friend who had brought us to the Isle of Wight from Wantage all those months ago. Did he remember us? He certainly did and he also had vivid memories of getting the coach stuck when attempting to bring us up the Abbey drive when we had arrived! Thankfully this time all was well as the coach had been brought to the back entrance and loaded there. The two communities gathered together for the last time to say farewell aware that in God we were now united forever by the bonds of love and prayer that had been forged between us. The Sisters of the Blessed Virgin Mary slowly walked out of the enclosure door to board the coach, turning to give that final wave until the last face was out of view and the door closed behind us. Once again we were off on a journey of faith across the water to what was to become our new home.”

Seven or so hours after our boarding the coach, we arrived at our new home. The first thing we did was to gather in Chapel for a brief time of prayer and thanksgiving to God for His provision in bringing us to this place. This convent had been prayed in for fifty years and indeed the Tabernacle had never been empty. In recent years it been adapted for elderly religious so there were hand rails and walk in showers suitable for the needs of our more disabled sisters already in place. The sisters had left us beds, sheets and furniture so we had a fully functioning convent and our kind sisters on the Isle of Wight Ryde had arranged for a large delivery of food so that we would not need to worry about the first few meals. We truly felt God’s goodness.

Over the next few months we started the process of putting down physical and spiritual roots. There were then twelve of us and our only regular income was eight basic old age pensions but the Lord provided. Members of the parish brought us gifts of food and it soon became a regular practice that after a lunch club on Tuesday, left over sandwiches would be brought to us the same evening for our supper. A member of the Parish kindly decided to provide us weekly with tea, coffee and sugar. Another generously brought us the ingredients every week for a main meal.

My spiritual priority had been concerned with how we might have a daily Mass. Before we came, I discovered that although the Parish Church was two doors along, the custom had been that Monday to Saturday inclusive the daily Parish Mass was held in our Convent Chapel. So I sent a message that we would be very glad to continue that custom. The Parish then didn’t need to heat, light and organise the opening of the Parish Church building and we would have daily Mass in our Convent.

One of the most special features of the Convent was there was a prayer room, accessible to sick and infirm sisters, on the floor upstairs where the cells are. Glass windows which slide open or shut, overlooked the sanctuary thus allowing any sister not physically able to come downstairs, to see and hear Mass and the daily Office. This has indeed been a great blessing but we have faced some huge spiritual challenges.

Within two months of our arrival, two of the younger, physically fit sisters separately discerned a call to other communities. One of the sisters felt God was calling her back to the community on the Isle of Wight with whom we had lived for eight months. The other, who had originally come from a different Anglican community in Walsingham, felt drawn to a Catholic community which has a house there and is dedicated to Our Lady of Walsingham. We discerned that it was right to let both sisters test their sense of calling but inevitably there were serious implications. It meant that we were a
community of ten sisters with only myself and another sister below state pension age. We just had to trust that God would somehow take care of the future. Confirmation, if any were needed, that God has His eye on our long term future came when we were suddenly informed that the Ordinary had received the necessary faculty to erect the community as a monastery of Benedictine spirituality of “diocesan right” under the jurisdiction of the Personal Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham from the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. We could thus now be erected as an autonomous monastery within the Personal Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham.

These official processes can take years but we were thrilled beyond measure at this official recognition of our new community. A Sister writes:

Account of 1st January 2014

“It was the first of January, the first day of a new year. Exactly one year before, we had set off for the Oxford Oratory to be received into the Church by means of the sacrament of Confirmation. On the same day in 2014, thanks to the generosity of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI’s Anglicanorum Coetibus, we were to be erected as an Institute of Consecrated Life, make our Solemn Profession according to the Benedictine form, and be consecrated by the Church.

Friends of the Community, Diocesan and Ordinariate Priests, and representatives of Maryvale parish had gathered in the chapel. The principal celebrant of the Mass was Mgr Keith Newton, the Ordinary of the Ordinariate. As the procession entered the chapel, the Community sang the Introit Salve Sancta Parens in English from the Sarum text. Other musical texts were also drawn from the rich heritage of the Community. After the homily, the Ordinary read the Decree of Erection and appointed Mother Winsome as the first Superior of the new Institute.

The Rite of Profession followed next. We made this solemn act in the order in which we had originally been professed, including two Golden Jubilarians. Three frail Sisters were in a small upstairs gallery and reached through the interleading window to place their hands in the hands of the Ordinary just like the rest of us. The vow formula was based on the form we had all used previously, but with the Benedictine ‘stability, conversion of life and obedience’ instead of the three evangelical counsels. We well understood the relationship between the two vow formulas and it was and is an entirely natural progression. We each signed our Charts of Profession which were placed upon the altar. Then, following Benedictine tradition, we sang our Subtus – in English, three times, each time at a higher pitch – just as had been sung over each of us when we made our original Profession. The Litany of Saints followed, using the Sarum text, with the addition of each of our confirmation saints from the year before.

Then followed the Solemn Prayer of Consecration, with its Eucharistic structure; it was the same one prayed over us at our original Anglican Professions and had been drawn largely from the Catholic Rite of the Consecration of Virgins.

After this each Sister was presented with the Rule of S Benedict and a copy of the Constitutions. Then, as we have always done at the Installation of a new Mother, we placed our hands between hers as a sign of our obedience and loyalty to her; she on her part received the commitment and offered her own faithfulness and support. It was a joy to sing the Sub Tuum Praesidium after Communion and the Salve Regina at the end, both in Latin. These two texts seemed to seal our identity as a new Institute of Consecrated Life, under the patronage of the Blessed Virgin Mary.”
A joyous grace–filled day to start a new year and a new chapter in our life as a community. But there have been other less happy days, days of trials and tribulations. An 84 year old sister who has been in Religious Life for sixty years writes how it has been for her:

**Physical and spiritual challenges**

“When I was in my mid-fifties, I visited a wise old sister in our infirmary, and I asked her ‘What advice would you give someone of my age about preparing for death?’ She thought for a moment and then said, ‘Practise letting go.’

In leaving Wantage, we all had to let go so much that belonged to our personal as well as our shared past. I certainly had to let go of interesting work and many pastoral contacts. For all of us, the Convent had been our home, for some of us, including myself, for more than fifty years. But it was only through letting go of the old life that a new life became possible for us.

I knew that having to let go was an unavoidable aspect of getting old. I used to think that with the onset of old age, there would be a gradual progression from ‘doing’ to ‘being’. In fact, it was not gradual for me. There was a sudden and rapid loss of mobility, bringing with it the loss of independence. It has been a case of one challenge after another, and of learning in ways not immediately clear to me, God is working in my life and asking me to trust Him. So I find myself thinking that if this is indeed the will of God for this stage of my life and for what is to come, then it is not enough to accept it. I must learn to embrace it, and that in itself is the next challenge.”

She is not the only sister who has had to embrace the challenges that have faced us in these past months. Shortly before Christmas, a sister in her eighties was diagnosed with breast cancer and had to have a mastectomy followed by a course of daily radiotherapy for weeks. Another sister spent three weeks in hospital over Christmas with heart failure. As I stand here today, a sister is in hospital with a suspected broken hip. These three sisters are all in their eighties. But we still feel we are living in grace filled days.

As one explains, “I read recently about the foundress of a religious community in the nineteenth century who, after a wonderfully strenuous and influential life, found herself in old age a nobody, set aside and forgotten. She confided to a priest who visited her: ‘I think when you have lost everything you have in the world, as I have, such a wonderful new life comes into you.’ I think about her words, and admire – and hope!”

We set off into the unknown with no guarantees for the future. Do we regret it? No! No sister has regretted the step she has taken.

We gave up a beautiful, historic convent with a 24 hour staffed infirmary – we have been given a beautiful purpose built convent, we look after each other with additional support from NHS carers. We had to leave behind our Anglican sisters – we have been given Catholic sisters and brothers who have by their love and affection shown us what it means to be part of the Catholic world-wide family; we have truly ‘come home’ in the Church. We have all lost friends – we have discovered who our true friends are.

We have confidence for the future because we have confidence in our loving God. We feel that there is grace available for every challenge and that even our challenges come down upon as showers of blessings.
Let me end with a small illustration: one evening immediately before supper the sister responsible for coordinating our meals came to me. “Mother, we don’t have enough bread for tomorrow morning’s breakfast.” There was nothing for it but to suggest that after supper, she or I ran out to the nearest open shop and buy some bread. During supper, the doorbell sounded. It was a parishioner who we didn’t know, who had brought us a carrier bag full of shopping that she thought we might need. In the bag were two loaves of bread! The Lord gives us all we need. We truly feel that we are living in special days: days of grace and blessing.

*Talk given to Diocese of Arundel & Brighton Day for Religious on 30 April 2014 at Worth Abbey.*