

Virtual retreat beyond the veil

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Sister Catherine tweets as @Digitalnun, designs websites, offers spiritual guidance on Skype, and delivers retreats online. **Sarah Meyrick** met her

HABIT aside, Sister Catherine Wybourne probably does not fit your idea of a typical nun. A recent tweet of hers gives a flavour: “Harvesting onions & broad beans in between coding a new website and repairing a tap. Monastic life today is #multitasking.”

A Cambridge graduate and former banker, Sister Catherine is Prioress of the Roman Catholic Holy Trinity Monastery, in rural Oxfordshire. Tweeting as @Digitalnun (where she describes herself as “Benedictine nun keen on God, books, and technology. Likes people, too”), she found her way into social media for practical reasons, as a way of earning a living and raising money for the expansion of the monastery.

“People say the religious life is dying off, but we are living in a house that is far too small,” she says. “We have eight discerners who are keen to join us, but no room. We have a little room for a chapel, and one guest-room that isn’t en suite and is really not suitable. It’s horrible having to turn people away.”

The community grew out of a small group of Sisters who left Stanbrook, in Worcestershire, in 2003, and formed a new and fully independent community in 2004. They are renting a presbytery that, until recently, also served as a diocesan marriage-tribunal centre and a parish office. It is a small community: two women — Sister Catherine and Sister Lucy — and a much-loved dog called Duncan Disorderly.

“Very simply, we’re a new community, and have no money,” Sister Catherine says. “We had to sit down and work out how interpret the teachings of St Benedict on hospitality, when we have no space for a conventional guesthouse. We realised the best thing was to go online.”

In 2004, of course, the web was much less sophisticated. “Church websites tended to be a parish bulletin, perhaps with a few podcasts of the vicar’s sermon. There was not much else going on. We thought: ‘We could make the internet the fourth wall of our cloister, and bring people inside, while still preserving the recollection of a monastery.’ That’s essential, so that you have something good to share.”

BECAUSE she was interested in book design and printing, she “knew about computers”, she says breezily. And what she did not know, she taught herself. “I found out more about blogs and podcasting, and expanded from there. I borrowed a video camera, although we were reluctant to put up lots of images of ourselves, because people seem to have a voyeuristic interest in nuns.”

Their approach was two-fold: sharing what the monastery had to offer with the outside world through the internet; and creating a business developing and hosting websites and offering social-media consultancy.

She saw the potential of recording the thoughts of a founder-member, Dame Teresa, who died last year. “She had spent 57 years in monastic life, and had a lot of wisdom to share. By this

stage she was ill, and not up to writing anything, but she would happily talk for five minutes. The podcasts she did, while a bit formal, reached out to people.”

Since 2004, life has moved on. “Along came Facebook, and everything changed,” she says. “We sat on the sidelines at first. We were not sure how to put across a Christian perspective. There’s a challenge in how to use Facebook well.” Skype, live chat, and web conferencing have added a new dimension. Then there’s Twitter — which she uses extensively — and the explosion of apps.

A recent venture in hospitality, which caught the imagination of the media earlier this year, is the offer of online retreats. Participants are invited to sign up to a range of programmes, with a price tag ranging from £10 to £150, and spend time in prayer, guided and supported by the Sisters.

“Everyone has the need to focus on God, and they need help doing that. We have been struck by the fact that not everybody can get away from family and work commitments to make a retreat. If you’re a mum with children, or a shift worker who can’t plan ahead, you can’t do that.

“The retreat is about spending some time alone with God, and we have various ways of interacting with the person, through live chat or Skype, so that they don’t feel marooned by themselves.”

The retreats were an immediate success. More than 100 people signed up within the first two weeks, and feedback has been very positive. “We were surprised how many men signed up — probably 40 per cent. We know there is a group of people who take part while sitting on the train on the way to work.”

Some people have resisted the idea of paying for a retreat, and argue that there are plenty of free resources. “But if you charge, they stick at it,” she says. “And we had to put a lot of work in to make sure that every bit of the retreat is confidential.”

GENERALLY, Sister Catherine does the coding herself, while Sister Lucy works alongside her. “We keep the roles distinct. She’s very good at rigorously testing from a user point of view. Unfortunately, when you’re dressed like this, people sometimes think either we don’t know what we’re doing, or we won’t charge. But I do say to them they don’t have to pay thousands, and they don’t have to have something glitzy.”

Unsurprisingly, much of the work for other people is done online. “People email in an outline of their requirements, and sites they like the look of. I do ask them to be realistic about that. I’ll give them a proof of concept, and we take it from there.”

Sister Catherine is a huge fan of the internet — “the computer is the modern scriptorium,” she says — but she recognises its dangers. What she calls the “Googlification” of life can be a problem, where people expect to be able to tap out a few questions and get an instant response. We need time for prayer and study and silence. People are beginning to expect this from other people, too, and can be frustrated — and very rude — if they do not receive an instant response.

“It’s difficult to know what limits to set ourselves,” she says. “Although I’m hesitant about claiming success, I think I can say we have become victims of our own success. So we’ve had to get a smartphone, for example. But it’s quite difficult to get other people to accept our limits. When we were in the US recently, we said there would only be a sketchy service, and people got irate.

“It’s something we’re all wrestling with. We also make a deliberate decision about how many people we can follow on Twitter. There has to be discipline.”

There is something very good, she says, about venturing into the new media world at this stage in her life. "It's different for us. It's only because we are all rooted in a life of prayer, silence, study, and work that any of this is possible. That's been the rhythm of everyday life for the past 30 years."

NOVICES, she says, are not allowed to use Facebook or the internet, and those at the beginning of the religious life have only limited access. "They need to be weaned from the internet and social media. There's no other way to encounter God as oneself. But then, you have to give up good things to enter a monastery."

Online, she is keen that users are respectful. "We need to see the internet as sacred space. We need to be respectful, and see Christ in the people we encounter. This is part of the Benedictine Rule, treating guests as though they are Christ.

"So, if people are rude or offensive about other people on our blog, we will take it down, but it's generally self-policing. And if people are rude to us, there's a way we can show tolerance. Even when we get very difficult people, we find if we engage with them, people can stop ranting when you give them time."

Anything can be corrupted for evil purposes, of course. "I'd say, before you blog, pray. Even before you switch on the computer, pray. See your use of the computer as something that requires prayer and discipline and self-control. These are perennially valid concepts."

SISTER CATHERINE does not sign up to the idea that online relationships are invalid, simply because they are virtual. "That would be like saying, in the old days when we had pen-friends, that these weren't real, because you only ever wrote to each other. When I went to the US recently, someone said to me 'You are exactly as I imagined you would be', and that's good."

Sr Catherine notes how many religious concepts are used to describe life online. "I'm fascinated that everyone talks about 'online community'. We're all in the process of working out what exactly that means. There are other words you hear: discipleship, authority, dialogue, sharing — all Christian concepts. I think our model of community is one that might be worth sharing with other people."

WHAT, I wonder, does she think is the next big thing, online? "Google Plus could take over from Facebook," she says immediately. "They've overcome the weakness in Facebook that everyone gets equal access, and the integration with telephony is important."

Apps are huge, too. She's working on three, at the moment. "That takes us back to the early days of the web, and might make us think, 'What do people really want?' If you can't put up video and so on, you are back to meditating on the word. I'm also playing with a jQuery plug-in that allows people to telephone us within the browser, within certain conditions, at times when we'll make ourselves available."

She believes it is important that people of faith are online. "As someone once said to me, 'Don't let's let the nerds run it.'"

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