

Irish nun on why she joined an abbey in her early 20s: 'It's an authentic way of life'

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There is a flourishing community of young women dedicating their lives to God - we spend a day at Glencairn Abbey to find out why these women are drawn to a cloistered life.

By Shauna Bannon Ward. 19:46, 09 Jan 2026

The vocation to become a nun has been around in Ireland for over 1,500 years, but numbers are sharply dwindling. The average age of a nun is over 80, yet in a small monastery in Waterford, a flourishing community of young, educated women dedicate their lives to God.

Glencairn Abbey is the only Cistercian monastery for women in Ireland. Following the Rule of St. Benedict, the sisters live in simplicity and silence, working and praying seven times a day. My visit to Glencairn was to witness why young women are drawn to a cloistered life in rural isolation, away from technology, money, travel, and convenience.

The monastery sits back from the road, surrounded by over 200 acres of land and livestock. The isolation nudges you into a slower rhythm even before you park – life here is intentionally removed from the bustle of towns or cities.

Sister Beatrice, 30, joined straight after finishing her studies in Law and German at Trinity College Dublin. Her religious upbringing was “vague”, attending Mass and receiving sacraments at school, but her calling traces back to primary school. “A Mercy Sister did a prayer service at my school. I asked her, ‘How do you become a nun?’ She spoke about faith, but I wanted to know the steps – do you ring, go to the door, write a letter?”

Sister Beatrice kept her faith private through college until World Youth Day in Poland, where she encountered young nuns and friars. “I discovered that it was an authentic way of life,” she says. “It might be strange, but it is my deepest desire.”

Becoming a Cistercian spans nine years: one year as a postulant, two as a novice, and five as a junior professed before making solemn vows. Sister Beatrice has been in

Glencairn for over seven years, while Sister Laura, 33, has been at the monastery for four years. Their days begin at 3.50am and end at 8.15pm, with a 12-hour silence from 8pm to 9am. Throughout my visit, they opened up about their lives and decisions, revealing the depth, challenges, and radical commitment behind choosing a cloistered life in Glencairn...

What drew Sister Beatrice Brady to Glencairn? "I expected my vocation to be in an active order. I'm an extrovert and I like meeting people. I started to visit active orders. There was something attractive about their lives, very beautiful and very inspiring, but I didn't feel like it was my place.

"I had seen the documentary about Glencairn when I was 18 and decided to go and to see if this is what God was asking of me. I was quite amazed by what I found – praying in community seven times a day, living in community, everyone staying and working here, and being a place where God can come into the world. Every time I visited and left, I just wanted to come back – even when I was in Dublin in college. I was preoccupied with the monastic way of life."

Were people surprised that she became a nun? "My friends from childhood weren't really surprised, they were mostly indifferent and not terribly shocked, but my friends from college were surprised, because I had gotten better at having my faith as a 'side gig'."

Is it difficult being away from family, especially around Christmas or occasions? "When I first came here, it was a real adventure for me and a grief for my family. Now, maybe I would feel the loss more after many years of doing it. It's not a novelty anymore. It's beautiful, but it's not my first time seeing it."

Sister Brady says her family have "gotten over it now" and they're getting on with their lives. "That's the thing that happens a lot in religious life with people entering it – the family feels the grief immediately and you feel the grief later. For me, it was an adventure because you've never seen what it's like in religious life. You're going into Christmas not knowing whether you'll really miss your family, if it will be the greatest thing about the monastery so far or if it will be just another day." She doesn't miss the convenience of technology. "Because it's a different type of life, the inconveniences are lessened, but they do exist. We do have to go out sometimes. We are given a phone to go out for Google

Maps and if you get delayed coming back and the gate might be closed. It's very convenient when you have a phone then because we need one, but in my day-to-day I don't actively long for a phone because I don't need it. I'm not trying to double-authenticate my Facebook page."

At the beginning, Sister Brady missed her soaps, but not so much any more. "I used to watch Home and Away and I used to think, 'I wonder what's happening in Home and Away right now'. Now I never think that. It would never occur to me that Home and Away is even a thing anymore. I think your priorities just shift completely and slowly."

The nuns are not totally cut off from technology - they have a social media account and a website. How do they balance that with living in a monastic order?

"There is a tension, but ultimately the witness has to be to monastic life and to our traditions, to our truth and our faith. It's a discernment of it being right ordered. We do have an Instagram account and a website, but we're putting up the post and walking away, it's not a constant thought.

"It has to be very planned and thought-through. To put a post on Instagram, we need to borrow a common phone. We need to set it up, post it and then put the phone back. It's generally not spontaneous. It's about getting the balance in being visible for people to know that it's a valid way of life and a worthy alternative, but to be truly living it we need to be here and not in a virtual community."

Sister Brady had a passion for social justice before becoming a nun, and that same sense is still part of her life, albeit in a different way.

"It's redirected; it's not lost. It's also a trust that if we take our rightful place in the world doing what we should be, then there is a radiating effect. There's not just one form of social justice. There's a misunderstanding of strength being rebellion. Sometimes the quiet perseverance is more effective than the token display of advocacy in terms of debate or marching.

"In the Catholic faith, we talk about the economy of salvation. It means if we take our place, God's plan takes over and righteousness and justice prevail. That's how it

becomes integrated into your life in a much greater sacrifice to God's plans instead of my own ideas of how justice might come about.

Who am I to say to God, 'My interest is in social justice, so you might be calling me to the monastery, but I think I should work in the field of law and pursue social justice that way'. I do not know God's plan and how he will bring that about. If I'm really faithful, really trusting and pursuing my vocation, I can't say I know better, because I don't and that would be a ridiculous thing to think."

What would she say to people interested in the Church, but who have been hurt by issues like the mother and baby homes?

"While we do not have that same history in our monastery, anything that is happening in the Church is happening to all members of the Church. St Paul talks about how if one part of the body is hurting, the whole part of the body is suffering with it. The Church is the body of Christ, if one part of it is broken or wounded, then we are suffering with it. We are a suffering Church, that doesn't mean we stay suffering.

"We journey towards the resurrection, but it does mean that we have to account for our limitations. What I would say, too, is that we have to understand that the Church is an institution made up of human beings that are frail and limited. These great devastations and pains have to be healed and that doesn't mean that those people don't have any place in the Church, everyone has a place in the Church, but to learn how to navigate that we are called to have an open heart."