

# **Our Lady of Walsingham and her significance for our times**

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AS we celebrate the 950<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham we need to ask ourselves “What has Walsingham to say today to the people of England and beyond?” As a new religious community open to men and women, the Community of Our Lady of Walsingham was founded in the Slipper Chapel on the 6th January 2004 and we believe that Walsingham’s full message has yet to be discovered.

Pope Leo XIII famously predicted that when England returns to Walsingham, Mary will return to England and we are sure that when this happens the country will experience a re-flourishing of Christianity in these Isles.

‘To Jesus through Mary’ has been a common phrase used by countless saints and ordinary people down through the ages. It is Mary who will teach us to be authentic disciples of Jesus. As she is presented to us in St Luke’s gospel, Mary stands for the perfect disciple. Like Israel of old she is chosen and called simply out of love. She has not chosen God; rather God has chosen her and this applies also to us.

We can ask ourselves:

- Do I really believe that I am loved unconditionally by God? That I am his beloved?
- Do I believe deep down that I am chosen by him for a special mission that no one else can accomplish?

Walsingham has been and will need to be evermore in the future a place where people can come for healing at every level: physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual. Recently at a conference in Rome I heard the term ‘liquid society’ used when referring to the society in which we live in the western world. This society produces people characterised by narcissism, sexual ambiguity, the search for

emotional highs and the escaping of reality by living in a virtual world. More and more pilgrims arriving at Walsingham and living in such a world will need to find healing here before they can even begin to hear God's voice and recognize God's call in this digital world of ours.

In my own life I remember having to stop overnight in Las Vegas so as to visit the Grand Canyon. It was part of a round-the-world trip that my parents gave me as a present for having graduated at university. On this journey I didn't go back-packing but stayed in comfort at the Hilton, Sheraton and Intercontinental chains of hotels. In the hotel at Las Vegas I remember that we needed to pass the casinos on going to our bedroom or to the restaurants. There was no avoiding them. These large halls had no windows or clocks. Why? To prevent people realizing what time of the day or night it was and to keep them hooked into gambling once they'd started. It left a lasting impression on me in my early twenties seeing people so disconnected from the reality of time.

Again we can ask ourselves: What is preventing me from recognizing the reality of God's presence in my daily life? Where do I need healing? We see at the heart of Walsingham a specific woman, Mary, who was asked to listen, to love and to bear life. As I experience God's healing in my life I will be able to hear God's call and respond to his love by making loving choices. Love received becomes love given. Mary had to be open to human growth and development. She had to make choices, accept responsibility, and ultimately let her Son go his own way even when she did not understand. This kind of trust implies a readiness to venture into the unknown, secure in a love that is greater than oneself and one's own limited plans.

Our community aims to help promote a vocational culture in the church and in contemporary society by supporting everyone's growth in freedom so that they can follow their unique call in life. Walsingham could become a major vocational centre helping young people make initial life choices and helping all people live fully the call to life and love in their particular vocations. As we make small choices well each day we will make larger choices, for instance, about our state of life, careers, relationships.

Working for several years as a palliative carer in London, I noticed how many people here die alone and with many regrets for choices made during their lives. Instead, on the trip I have mentioned, I also stopped off in Calcutta to visit Mother Teresa's sisters (I had been discerning a vocation with them at the time). I was able to visit Nirmal Hriday, the Home for the Dying, and I shall never forget the smile that a young girl gave me as she was being fed by one of the sisters. She was in peace, experiencing these little acts of kindness although she had been picked up from the streets just a few days earlier. I thought that she was about nine years old – instead I found out that she was fourteen and her slight appearance was due to malnourishment. She died two days later. Her death was in stark contrast to many I have witnessed here in the West, both in Italy and in England. Yes, the choices we make today determine who we become tomorrow, and the way we live today determines the way we will die.

Mary is our vocational model as one who responded totally, allowing God to do with her all that he wanted. Jesus incarnate here present in the Eucharist is an example of this. It was not bearing Christ in the flesh that made her blessed. Her real motherhood lay in her surrender to the Father's will; her 'Be it done unto me' (her 'Fiat', 'Amen', 'Alleluia') in sorrow and in joy, in diminishment and in fullness.

Walsingham exists to remind us of the mystery of Mary's silent surrender, her self-sacrificing love, her joy and humility in bearing and believing the Word of God. The Spirit is ultimate freedom, total unpredictability. God lives not in a 'house made with hands' but in hearts that are, with Mary, ready for anything – *Be it done unto me according to your word.*

When this happens God is born in our hearts, Christianity becomes truly incarnational and Christians can transform society. Otherwise we, claiming to be Christians, will continue to live by non-gospel values.

Again we can ask ourselves: do I really want to become a saint? And face the change necessary for my heart to be purified and transformed?

Cardinal Newman famously said that 'to live is to change and to become perfect is to change often'. Transformed hearts will be the source of real and

effective ecumenical, interfaith, pro-family and pro-life work. It is what each of us is asked to do in our turn as we try to listen to what God is asking of us here and now, so that we may also love God and bear Jesus for the world in and through our own particular calling, whatever that may be.

True joy will only be found in the realisation that each of us can reach the fullness of life by following God's call to love and serve, wherever we find ourselves. Ultimately it is not important what state of life we are in, what we are called to 'do' or what task we are given or asked to do, who we are called to live with, but our relationship with God and how that unfolds, who we are and how we have lived by love.

Then we can truly become a song of praise and thanksgiving to the Glory of the Trinity.

### **Act of Entrustment to Our Lady of Walsingham, Mother of Vocation**

Hail Mary full of grace  
Holy Mary, Mother of our Redeemer  
Mother of Vocation, Our Lady of Walsingham  
With great joy we call upon you  
Remember we are your children  
Called to wholeness  
Called to the fullness of joy  
Called to realise our heart's deepest desire,  
God's dream for us  
Woman of all graces  
Woman of all Amens  
Woman who followed him  
Teach us to live always in the presence of God,  
Who wills us to become holy.  
Sustain us, O Mother of Vocation  
On our pilgrimage of faith  
Help us to live the fullness of the call to life and love  
Wherever we find ourselves.  
Guide us in making Spirit-filled choices  
So that your Immaculate Heart will triumph  
And the Kingdom of God will come in this land and throughout the world.  
To you we entrust ourselves and all peoples with our hopes and fears.  
Joining our 'fiat' to yours  
May our lives become a constant song of praise and thanksgiving to God's glory.  
O clement, O loving, O sweet Lady of Walsingham  
Mother of Vocation we trust in you  
Mother of England, of all nations and of all creation  
Mother of our community/family/parish  
Pray for us. Amen.