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Sister Danielle Lussier, left, and Sister Theresa Aletheia pose for a portrait on the front porch of their home on April 27, 2026, in Mt. Sterling, Ky. (RNS/NPR/Natosha Via)

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Sister Theresa Aletheia and Sister Danielle Lussier stand out at daily Mass at the Cathedral of Christ the King in Lexington, Kentucky. Their heads are covered in waist-length teal veils, and black canvas work aprons cover their gray habits. The aprons feature an embroidered image of Jesus on the cross, alive and gasping for air.

"It is an important moment for us, when Jesus calls out to the Father, 'My God, my God, Why have you forsaken me?' " Aletheia said. "That's the moment that we enter into with the people that we serve."

Aletheia and Lussier call themselves the Sisters of the Little Way of Beauty, Truth and Goodness. They spend most of their time praying for and meeting with people who have experienced abuse of various kinds, including emotional, financial, spiritual or sexual. It's a daunting and complex mission: serving the Catholic Church by caring for people harmed by it. Right now, Aletheia and Lussier are the only community of religious sisters in the Catholic Church fully dedicated to serving abuse victims.



Sister Danielle Lussier, left, and Sister Theresa Aletheia, Sisters of the Little Way, sing morning prayers in the chapel next to their home on April 27, 2026, in Mt. Sterling, Ky. (RNS/NPR/Natosha Via)

And they have more plans for the future. The two sisters are working to establish themselves as an official, full-fledged order in the Catholic Church — a long process that depends on the cooperation of the local bishop, the growth of the order and, as the women say, "God's timing."

Catholic researchers say there are nearly 2,000 orders of Catholic nuns in the world, though the exact number is hard to know for sure. These communities of women devote their lives to becoming more like Jesus by living out vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.

"In modern times, members of religious orders often have a ministry where they still are devoted to prayer and dedicate themselves to God, but that they also serve their fellow citizens through responding to the needs of the world," said Kathleen Cummings, a history professor at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana.

The Franciscans, many of whom serve in ministries devoted to caring for poor people and the Earth, were founded in 1209. Other orders were founded more recently, such as Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity, which started in 1950.

Cummings said religious sisters have dedicated their lives to serving vulnerable people as everything from battlefield nurses to inner-city educators.

"What we're seeing here is really just a modern manifestation of that, a group of women who recognize a need in the church and want to dedicate their lives to fulfilling it, and to not do that part time, to make that their entire life," she said.

Aletheia's and Lussier's mission is borne of their personal experience. In 2022, they left the Daughters of St. Paul, a different order they'd both been a part of for at least 10 years. They learned that their spiritual director, a priest, had been accused of sexually assaulting one of their sisters in 2017, and suspected he was grooming them for abuse as well. In their suffering, the sisters say that God called them to help others who had experienced harm at the hands of leaders in the church.

"How do we help the people in church to be aware of these patterns without going through the experience of being hurt?" Aletheia said. "Because that is the clearest education. But can we avoid that education for most people? Obviously we believe that you can, but we're trying to figure out what that means concretely."

Right now, the two sisters are a private association of the faithful, which is the Catholic Church's first formal step toward becoming a recognized religious order. The length of time that journey takes depends on how the community grows and takes root over time. It's not a simple process — before his death, Pope Francis established rules making it more difficult to establish a new order. He was trying, in part, to prevent future abuse. In 2019, [he publicly acknowledged](#) for the first time that priests and bishops had sexually abused nuns.



Sister Danielle Lussier and Sister Theresa Aletheia, Sisters of the Little Way, explore different properties for their new convent as they consider all of the elements they are looking for and potential modifications to fit their needs on April 27, 2026, in Lexington, Ky. (RNS/NPR/Natosha Via)

Last year, the sisters moved just outside Lexington, where Bishop John Stowe of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Lexington gave the two women permission to set up their mission.

"I think a group of sisters who have experienced a form of abuse themselves, a spiritual abuse, who can identify with the victims and also be non-threatening, and take seriously what they hear from victims," Stowe said, "I think that is very relevant."

Most of the sisters' meetings with survivors happen online. People reach out to them on a form on their website. They said they've spoken to people across the U.S.

John Bellocchio reached out to the sisters via their online form. He said he was abused as a young teen in New Jersey by Theodore McCarrick, a former cardinal who was defrocked in 2019 by Pope Francis after being convicted of sexual misconduct in a canonical trial.

"They just listened, and having somebody in a habit listen helped," Bellocchio said. "I had to rebuild my faith life, and I'm doing that bit by bit, and the sisters are a big part of that."

The sisters said it's both deeply meaningful and harrowing work.

"It is the fringes of the church that will heal the church, that are needed for her renewal in this present moment," Lussier said. "We're desperate for what they have to say. What they see that we can't see is what we need to be able to live most authentically who we are in this moment as the church."

This summer, the sisters are expecting to meet with a few women who have expressed interest in joining their community.

The first step is the same it's always been for anyone thinking about joining a religious order in the Catholic Church: Come and see.

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