

Laurie Graham

Why I'm happy being a Brother

📖 From magazine issue: 02 September 2023



Illustration: John Bradley

Two years ago, without being ennobled in any Honours list or recourse to surgery, I gained a new title. To the list of Mrs Graham, Mum and Nonna, I added Brother. It signified that I had become a resident of the Charterhouse almshouse.

The title is, if nothing else, a conversation piece. If I'm required to attend a party where I'm unlikely to know any of the other guests, I now wear my Charterhouse badge. It catches the eye and, at the age of 75, having my right breast scrutinised is no longer open to misinterpretation. 'Brother Laurie?' they say. 'How intriguing. Do tell.'

When Thomas Sutton founded his almshouse in 1611, he stipulated that the residents should be called Poor Brothers. My own interpretation of his wish is that, unlike most almshouses, where people live in their little cottages and may have no more social contact than a chat over the garden gate, we at the Charterhouse eat together every day. We are, in that sense, a kind of family, a brotherhood. It may also have been Sutton's respectful Protestant nod to the Carthusian monks who lived on the site long before we did and were sent to their martyr deaths by Henry VIII.

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Citizen? I hear the creak of
tumbrel wheels. Messer?
Too military. Friend?
Creepy*

At some point the 'Poor' was dropped but 'Brother' was retained, even when the Charterhouse doors were opened to women six years ago. And so what had been a quaint but charming tradition became a small bone of contention and not just to some of the new girls on the block. There are male Brothers who disapprove of it too.

You might think, in this era of gender-fluidity and proliferating otherkin identities, that no one would give a rat's ass about a female being referred to as Brother. Wrong. 'Brother is a *male* title,' puffed the literalists. 'Why not Sister?' was one lame counter-offer.

So far, no takers for that. Is there a fear, perish the thought, of being mistaken for a nun in civvies? My own objection to Sister is hardly more rational. It smacks of certain factions of the sistah-hood who insist that everyone in possession of two X chromosomes had better think alike. Or else.

At the Charterhouse, as the number of female residents rises – we currently constitute about 20 per cent of the community – the Brother question is up for occasional debate. It's not that we use the title in everyday conversation. We don't, except sometimes with theatrical irony. But it's certainly used in the collective form. We are the Charterhouse Brothers.

The arguments for change run along two tracks: the title is an anachronism; the title has a religious connotation not to everyone's taste. Well, yes and yes. I've been asked more than once if I'm some kind of monastic and I have one benighted acquaintance who's convinced I've been lured into a sinister sect and am in urgent need of rescue.

To be clear, the Charterhouse is an Anglican foundation, but with an ecumenical approach to selecting residents. Our community is also a fair reflection of the state of the Church of England today. Around one-third of the Brothers attend services in our chapel regularly, or sporadically. The remaining two-thirds range from membership of other denominations to those who are firmly atheist. All have their opinions on what, if anything, we should be called.

Which brings me to the anachronism camp. There are those who think we should dispense with all titles. Times change and with them the social niceties. Sir and madam may soon be dismissed as fogeyish, though they do have their uses. They are a bulwark against over-hasty familiarity. I imagine I'm not the only oldster who bristles at being called 'darling' by a total stranger.

South of the Mason-Dixon line I have been addressed as ma'am, which I rather liked. As for Ms, it never really made the grade and deservedly so. It's ugly and unpronounceable. And what in tarnation is Mx?

So, at the Charterhouse we have those who'd prefer not to be called Brother. Our CEO, by the way, has always been known as the Master, even when, 2017-22, it was a she. Tradition, not misogyny. Then there are residents who like the idea of an honorific but would prefer something that is, sigh, gender-neutral and secular. But what?

Comrade? Too Leninist. Citizen? I hear the creak and rattle of tumbril wheels. Messer? Too military. Friend? Creepy. On my family's WhatsApp group I became known, briefly, as Brother Mother. This was soon abbreviated to BroMo, a handle that sounds like a patent cough medicine or a drain cleaner, but I can live with it.

I'm prepared to consider an alternative title but absent any worthwhile suggestions, I remain Brother Laurie. It's my conversational ice-breaker and I'm sticking with it.

WRITTEN BY

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