



Carmelite News

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Sr. Fran Makes First Profession

Frances Celine Horner gave the following reflection on her first profession of vows, September 11, 2005.

In my Carmelite life of the past two years, a mission has been borne in me: to be a presence of Spirit in God's creation, to communicate Spirit, and even to prophesy Spirit as humankind's future and goal.

Saint Edith Stein has been my inspiration and instructor on this path – she and Connie FitzGerald, one of my formation directors, who taught me how to work with Edith's texts, explaining and elucidating them with wisdom and profound insights from a lifetime of interpreting our great Carmelite saints. But this focus on Spirit is not something I expected or could have foreseen when, on entering the novitiate, I chose my religious title: *of the Holy Spirit*. I was looking for something to represent the "here and now" experience of God's people today, the era and eschatological time in which we are living. Both "Holy Spirit" and "resurrection" were appealing, as they indicated the kind of life that Jesus inaugurated. But I felt a fit of the *Holy Spirit* title during my novitiate retreat as I studied the Gospel of John, where one name for Spirit is the *Advocate*. I have spent most of my adult life as an advocate – certainly in my work as a lawyer, but in other respects as well. In his wonderful *Retreat With John*, Raymond Brown speaks of the *advocate-spirit* as "one who stands alongside", and "one who speaks for." This phrasing was apt for my life, since I am best as an assistant – not the principal myself, but one who stands alongside to help the principal accomplish that to which she/he is called.

I thought this would be the beginning and end of my "title" thoughts, but then along came Edith Stein and her magnificent work, *Finite and Eternal Being*. This text opened up extraordinary new vistas, hinting at depths to the meaning of *Spirit* that will take me years to explore and appropriate. For Edith, the essence of Spirit in its perfect form – God – is a *free and selfless streaming forth*, a total self-giving. We are to make a progressive movement ever closer to this essence of Spirit in order to become a perfect image of God through our free self-gift. Yet, Edith says, Spirit mysteriously *remains within itself even while going out of itself*. This call is not to self-destruction; it is to self-communication.

A wonderful scriptural image for Spirit can be found in Ezekiel 37:1-14a. Ezekiel is called upon to prophesy to the dry bones, to prophesy to the breath, that the bones may live. And this breath is God's spirit, and it is life. *Spirit* can revive dry bones – figuratively, the dry bones of our lives, and literally, I believe, the dry bones of our deaths, even somehow the devastation of the 9-11 terrorist attack whose anniversary was my profession day.

Breathing spirit onto dry bones is a prophetic task, Ezekiel tells us. And I think it is a Carmelite's most important one. I can accomplish it by becoming a vehicle of transformation – first listening to God (prayer), then speaking the word of transformation and life. I can seek to exercise the power we have in God and in the Spirit to marshal the wind (breath), to direct it to God's people, to claim it as our own, as our future, as part of our very nature. It is our promise and even a kind of birthright for all people. When we claim it, we are actualizing the truth of ourselves – that we were made for Spirit.

Edith Stein tells me what it really costs to breathe Spirit onto dry bones. Only my free and full self-gift will suffice. Ultimately, this is an offering to God, by which we attain, says Edith, to *that love which is at once knowledge, surrender of the heart, and free act*. What a perfect summation of how I see my profession. In freedom and self-gift our lives are beautiful. On my profession day, I prayed that I might witness to this beauty, and to the hope of the movement to Spirit that is ours.

Agnes Ahn received into the novitiate

Intimacy with Jesus: this is the measure of life for Agnes Kyungee Ahn, who was received into the novitiate on September 20. With joy we celebrate this milestone with her as she continues her journey towards an ever deepening experience of her one desire, this intimacy without which, she says, "everything would be nothing."

Agnes, who was born in Taegu, Korea, came to Carmel with a yearning for prayer and seeking a way to "be with Jesus entirely." And yet she had her questions – how would life in the monastery be valuable for the world, how could it be shared with God's people? During her postulancy year, she came to realize with strong conviction the significance of her call to Carmel, not just for herself but for others.

She found that the life of contemplative prayer made her “see the world differently.” She speaks of a transformation of vision that connects her intimately not only with Jesus but with all people and with the world. This is a vision she expresses in terms of solidarity. “In Jesus’ heart,” Agnes says, “we can share *all*, with all people.” With those who are in sorrow and suffering, Jesus is present and bearing their burdens – and through prayer Agnes knows that she, too, stands in the same posture with those in need. She wants to “live out this world reality,” to announce and share the vitality, strength and love that is found through intimacy with Jesus.

Agnes brings many talents, bright joy and beautiful images to our community life. She communicates delicate grace and deep feeling through her liturgical dance and gesture, and also through wonderful floral arrangements for our chapel. In the “wilderness” of Carmel, as she calls it, she shares the companionship of her sisters and of the larger community that gathers here weekly. “They are our witnesses,” Agnes says; “they take us outward.” She also has a message for anyone who may be discerning their call to the Carmelite way of life. “Come, but only if you have a sincere desire to meet God and to love God. A bit of fear is a good sign. But know that a person is here who has gone through that same journey, who has been led to Carmel, and who has found love.” She is Agnes Kyungee of Jesus,

Sr. Barbara Jean Celebrates 50th Anniversary of Religious Life

*The following reflection was given by Sr. Constance FitzGerald
at the Mass of Thanksgiving for Sr. Barbara Jean LaRochester's Golden Jubilee on August 13, 2005.*

The story of a life: one sees it differently at various stages, chronological ages, milestones. On this great day of jubilee celebration, as she stands on the young end of her 7th decade, the age of the wise crone, Barbara Jean, in her liturgy readings, has chosen to separate the bright, white, lightsome prism of her life into a very specific but striking array of colors to illustrate her story. The Word splashes these colors across our vision (before our senses, across our souls) - in images so rich, so transparent and yet so subtly textured we can never grasp their full meaning, their poignant beauty: the human heart, human desire, the desire to be cherished, to be called by name, treasure but treasure found in darkness, wealth and dispossession, a tree of love and a fruit called abandonment. We see, we hear, a variety of images but a coherent testament emerges for us today as the text of one woman's story, the witness of her long, rich life, interfaces with these texts of scripture and Carmelite poetry.

The Testament: The quest for God, the never to be completely satisfied longing for God, is worth one's life. Do not be afraid to forfeit whatever owns you, whatever idols capture your heart. This is your joy. A single-minded focus on Christ will help you to survive and give you courage and insight even in darkness. Those choose and possess the treasure, who can hold on to God, as their source of security and affirmation not only in joy but even when their great desire seems disappointed by life.

Barbara Jean's intuitive selection from the gospel of Luke, especially when read in light of its parallel passage in Matthew, gives us, in fact, a deliberately complex and profound analysis of this desire* that has directed her life from her childhood in Brooklyn when she decided to be a saint - a canonized saint, no less, through her teenage and early adult years when she sometimes danced the night away with her friends, during her precious formative and professional years with the Sisters of Nazareth - 17 years in all, while she participated in that heady, courageous era of the founding of the Black Sisters' Conference until finally, 33 years ago, Barbara Jean came to Carmel, the perfect fit, where passionate desire infuses the entire ethos.

While the ancient *Carmelite Rule* cautions moderation in everything, in all the major texts and personalities of the tradition beginning with its basic Elijah myth and moving through the life and writings of Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Therese of Lisieux, Edith Stein and others, one encounters magnificent passion bordering on excess. The way the Carmelite prayer tradition helps and educates is by showing us how passion for God matures, that is, how desire grows in ardor, how communion and being God's partner in love comes about in our lives - and indeed what this passion costs.

Desire: this is exactly what characterizes those marked by the Carmelite spirit --- the ardor of their desire to love and be transformed in love and the intensity of their contemplative experience of God in darkness where all desire is purified and transformed. Nothing is so expressive of the passionate desire we find in the Carmelite prayer tradition as this simultaneous intertwining emphasis on love and self-dispossession which we see elegantly portrayed, for example, in the poetry of John of the Cross and more simply demonstrated in the writings of Therese of Lisieux.

In our gospel Jesus, himself, speaks of desire, of love, but also of ambition, personal striving, and self-dispossession in terms of *treasure*. Here treasure is not simply *what* we possess; it is what we love, what we

* The interpretation of Luke in this reflection is gratefully acknowledged as owed to scripture scholar Sandra Schneiders, RHM.

cherish, what captures the human heart.

Our treasure, whether God, another person, pleasure, reputation, status, wealth is that which we trust, what we count on, where we place our security. The treasure is that for which we will sacrifice all other good, sell all, making it the preeminent value that has no equal in our lives (see footnote). All human striving is directed, whether we recognize it or not, to finding this treasure.

Carmelite life and prayer begin with the intuition that this yearning can be satisfied only in and by God. Its very purpose in the Church is to make prophetic, radical witness to this belief. A Carmelite bears that witness first by committing to hand over what she has and is, as best she can, following the stark demand by Luke's Jesus for radical detachment from all that would impede the disciple's relationship with Christ in love and her dedication to the Reign of God. Initially this handing over and detaching is often experienced as a wonderful freedom, and the first intuition about the fulfillment of desire is affirmed in prayer and lived experience. However, sooner or later we are led more deeply into the contemplative process where limitation, our own and others, looms large and the pain of all we have held back or not been capable of turning over invades our spirit. All the great people of our tradition have known this purifying darkness which undoes the self, deconstructs the identity and leaves only disorientation where firm ground had formerly been. Desires are disappointed, even good spiritual desires, since to find the treasure we cannot cling to our own notions of God, who is, the Carmelite mystics tell us, beyond anything we can imagine. John of the Cross speaks of a purification of the memory in which our imagination is freed from its cherished expectations and lifelong projections so that we might be truly open to the unfathomable possibilities of God.

One's ability to be transformed by this experience depends on whether a person stands firm in the dark Mystery of God and allows it to happen. The most natural response is to flee, to refuse the process and life circumstances that undo us, even if they are freeing us for God and God's people. I know Barbara Jean has seen desires disappointed and some important expectations unfulfilled and she has stood firm. So you can see that it is no small feat for her to make it to 50 years of religious life - 33 of them in Carmel - to persevere, to hold fast to the commitment of her youth, made before she could even begin to know what the commitment would cost. This achievement is the fruit of contemplative prayer to which Barb has shown a consistent and steady fidelity throughout her life with us. Only through prayer has she found the strength to accept this stripping away as necessary in order for what remains to be that one singular treasure: God who fills her heart. This is why she is so joyous today and why we rejoice with her and love her.

And as God fills her heart, so too do all God's people. Authentic contemplative prayer always blossoms forth as outpouring love; it is the architect for deep relationships and the foundational grounding of creative interconnectedness. As contemplatives we hold the world in our hearts; the point of our prayer is to infuse love-energy into the world, onto the currents of consciousness, to extend our intimacy with God through contemplative presence to the world far and near, writ large and small. This relational disposition bubbles over, not just in sincerity but in passionate joy celebrating the goodness of creation, of all that is, a joy that is infectious and that brightens the days of all whom it touches. And so it will come as no surprise to anyone here that in our Carmelite community, Barbara Jean is a wonderful, funny, and at times even crazy presence. She can find happiness in the simplest things, like the sound of the word *mozzarella*, which she has been known to repeat like a mantra to the sisters in formation, who love to tease her. You see, she is a great mimic and likes to pretend she can speak many various languages. She also can be a great practical joker, using a straight face to convince someone of the most unlikely event, like when she told Leah, after she entered, that the Novitiate undertook a 2 a.m. prayer vigil every night. She is a wonderful and much loved community member, a sister to us all. And I can testify to the fact that she is a faithful friend.

Just as telling of her soul's disposition, I think, is the energy, love and interest Barbara Jean brings to her many other relationships – her beloved family, her precious friends, those who come to her for help, retreats, spiritual direction, talks, and the wider community that gathers around us here. When a nephew gets married, when a niece graduates or gets a first job, BJ's excitement and joy are so tangible; she cannot wait to share the news with the rest of us. And have you ever seen her with children, for instance here in our chapel on a Sunday morning? They seem to gravitate towards her – actually, I think *she* gravitates towards them! – perhaps in each other they sense kindred spirits, she with her uninhibited love and straightforward talk, and maybe even her occasionally wacky (and only half-serious – I think) ideas. This ability to be present to and communicate with children was not new in Carmel. I want to read you an excerpt from a letter I received recently:

I have known Sr. [Barbara Jean] since I was a child and a resident at St. Mary's Home in Ambler, PA. That was a very difficult time in my life, and Sister, who was very young at the time, was a beacon of hope and solace to me. The children knew that she would listen to and console us. It must have been difficult for a young sister to try to be a mother and teacher to a bunch of kids. Yet, that is what she was to us...We laugh when we remember her teaching us to sing and tap dance for a play, teaching us baseball, and getting us to sing in harmony in the choir. We

remember the many hours when she stayed up with the sick kids, repaired our clothes and helped us with our school work...I feel that the life I have now is partly due to God's plan to put Sister into my life [many years ago].

This is another kind of testament to Barbara Jean's life. The one with which I began reflects the hard-earned wisdom of her life's journey to this point; this last one, from the past, is a window onto that wisdom's source, the living that has been both its cost and fruition. These two testaments together aptly depict where Barbara Jean stands today, which puts me in mind of an experience described by Marilynne Robinson in her novel *Gilead*:

I thought I saw the sun setting in the east; I knew where the east was, because the sun was just over the horizon when we got there that morning. Then I realized that what I saw was a full moon rising just as the sun was going down. Each of them was standing on its edge, with the most wonderful light passing back and forth, or as if there were great taut skeins of lights suspended between them. I wanted my father to see it [and] I said, "Look at the moon." And he did. We just stood there until the sun was down and the moon was up. They seemed to float on the horizon for a long time, I suppose because they were both so bright you couldn't get a clear look at them. [We] were exactly between them, which seemed amazing to me at the time, since I hadn't given much thought to the horizon.

Today Barbara Jean, and we with her, are caught in the wondrous skeins of light passing back and forth between her two horizons, that from which she came, that to which she is headed. It is a privileged place to stand; today we stop to notice the beauty with which these horizons and all the space in between are flooded. It is a comfortable and familiar place for contemplatives. We are always trying to look over, beyond the horizon, to keep our sight on the most promising future horizon toward which God is always alluring humanity, our world, the universe, to live in a steady movement towards it, to witness the magnificent hope and boundless possibilities that await all who make transformation in God the center of their life's project. This horizon is not just, or even particularly, for Carmelites, but for all people who through prayer seek that singular treasure of intimacy with God. Today with Barbara Jean we say with joy, "look at the sun, look at the moon."

Mary Queen of Carmel Community

A Chapter of the Secular Order of Carmel meets each month at our monastery. Three members of this Chapter, Kaye McGill, Mary Lee Reeger, and Ann Stipe, made their First Promise in the Mary Queen of Carmel Community on May 1st, 2005. The Spirit of Jesus continues to draw individuals interested in experiencing a deeper spiritual life to find an answer to their quest in Carmelite spirituality. Please contact Debbie Ventre, 410-686-2132 or James Peleska, 410-452-5334 for further information.

🕊 Calendar 🕊

Saturday, October 1, St. Thérèse of Lisieux

Lauds 7:30 am, Mass 8:00 am, Vespers 5:00 pm

Saturday, October 15, St. Teresa of Avila

Lauds 7:30 am, Mass 8:00 am, Vespers 5:00 pm

?, Fall Clean-up Day

Thursday, November 24, Thanksgiving Day

Mass 9:00 am

Fourth Monastic Weekend, February ?

For single women 20 to 35 years old, this program is part of our continuing deep desire to nurture vocations to Carmelite life in our community. Please help us by telling others about this opportunity.



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