



Carmelite News

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Carriers of Communal Life

On May 1, Sr. Colette Ackerman became our new prioress, succeeding Sr. Constance FitzGerald.

Below, a newer member describes the spirit of the community's leadership.

Edith Stein, in a profound reflection on the nature of community, speaks of those rare members who are the community's "core," from which its character is shaped and which guarantees its enduring being." These are "carriers of the communal life...insofar as their personal being is devoted to the community." They are the community's "lifepower," source of its "mighty impulses," its vision. They are "entirely absorbed" in carrying the communal spirit forward.

Edith's words aptly describe the self-gift, vision and dedication to which the leadership of Baltimore Carmel calls itself, and of which our history, both long-standing and recent, bears striking witness and example. The commitment to our communal spirit, to enriching it and passing it on, was powerfully manifest during the days of our community process of discernment to select the new prioress, in the peace of the 3-month transition period that followed, and in the leaders' perspectives.

Sister Colette's reflections as she took office were leavened with the words "collegiality," "consultation," "consensus," "mutuality," and "hope" – words she claimed not as her initiative but as her inheritance. Again and again she turned to the community's long history as the backdrop and context for her leadership. She used the election discernment process, in place for at least 20 years, as one key example. It is now a 3-day in-depth reflection by all our nuns, first on each area of community life over the past 3-year period, and then on our dreams, envisioning the future. Colette speaks of a community solidly rooted in the core of Carmelite tradition yet not afraid of experimentation, allowing for a diversity of expression of Carmelite life. "Our leadership has been beyond ourselves...we have tried to do everything possible to be generative in and for our life," she said. We have inherited a communal spirit founded in deep interiority and contemplative intensity, which then flows outward as we share our prayer with the broader community through spiritual direction and liturgy, by encouraging our nuns to sow contemplation in our culture through writing and speaking, and simply through our presence as a model of just and peaceable living. Colette recognizes the unknown cost of these commitments:

"We cannot calculate how things will turn out. We do stand for something, and we can never know the personal depth of self-giving or what the community will be called to sacrifice."

Sister Constance has embodied these values and truly devoted her "personal being" to them during her six years in office. Connie's "mighty impulse" is a prophetic vision of contemporary Carmelite life drawn from a lifetime of interpreting the Carmelite tradition, history, and saints, in particular Teresa and John of the Cross. She says that the community has been able to develop its contemporary expression of this life by engaging its "habit of dreaming" grounded in our long history, buoyed by a strong sense of communal identity, and nourished by a commitment to education. In the fruitful years of her two terms, some important dreams were fulfilled, foremost the dream for vocations. Six new members received their formation and were mentored into the contemplative life, often at great personal cost for our leaders. But they were "entirely absorbed" in carrying the communal spirit forward. Connie says: "One of my deepest goals has been that this life that I love so much would go on, that

EarthPrayer II: Our Place in the Cosmos

Our second year of Prayer for the Earth, begun at Pentecost, concentrates on our "place" in creation, beginning with the local space that grounds and roots us – our home, our region – and moving to the global and cosmic space to which humanity stretches its reach, and whose very fabric of being we share. We highlighted our "home" with a Blessing of Grounds in May. For the feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel we will give prayerful attention to the ecological needs of our regional treasure, the Chesapeake Bay.

Triduum for Our Lady of Mount Carmel

Friday, July 13 The Magnificent Chesapeake

7 pm: A presentation on the Bay's vital role for our region and its ecological challenges.

Saturday, July 14 Guided Contemplative Prayer

7 pm: We will gather for lectio divina, silent prayer and shared reflections, surrounded by reminders of the Chesapeake and the great gift of water.

Sunday, July 15 Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Celebration

Lauds 8:15 am, Mass 9 am, Solemn Vespers 5 pm

we would survive and live on with passion. Everything has to be sacrificed for this.” Indeed, this was an achievement of the whole community which, she says, underwent “a profound conversion; all have come to their very best” in making a place for the new members. Another fulfilled dream was the extensive renovation of the monastery’s residential wing, which was begun, completed and fully paid for during Connie’s term. And we saw a deepening of support from our wider community, bolstered by a continuing dedication to creative liturgies. There were new dreams, too, including a prayer program for young adults to begin this fall.

As Connie and Colette pass on a contemporary expression of contemplative life to a new generation, both leaders place love at the center. Connie says love is singularly important to effective leadership, and she names love as the gift she wishes to place on the “currents of consciousness.” Colette emphasizes the profound gift of the community’s witness to love above all else in a world often suffering fragmentation and violence, and she prays that we may always have the courage for this. Faithful to the communal spirit Connie carried as prioress, we may then remain, as she hopes, “a community that lives on the horizon.”

Prayerful Gardening

If a walk through a garden on a beautiful spring day is life-giving and invigorating then gardening is even more so. There is something so elemental, so basic, about having one’s hands in the soil, about feeling the tentacles of a root system of even the most common plant in one’s hands, that leads to an inner stillness and invites silence in the face of life’s mysteries.

Gardening is movement around a creative process—actually a co-creative process. It is breath, it is the distinctive fragrances—soil, flower, bristly stems. The body of one’s humanity meets the body that is plant, tree, flower and a cyclical wisdom sweeps

around the place, between those created and alive. One moves into a garden as one moves into a new home. And in that place, a quiet niche, a momentary lull in task and toil, the gardener as co-creator prays. It is not really a recitation or planned sharing or even a minor monologue but often just a smile as one sees new life emerge from the soil on an early spring day—ah—gratitude—beauty—simplicity—yes, my old friend has returned—astilbe, epimedium, lady-fern. These days the tree peonies are blooming and steal the show because these blossoms are enormous and luxurious. Peonies remind us that summer is just around the corner just as each wave of color moves from a “yellow season,” to a “purple season,” to a “pink season.” As each plant performs and then fades, a flash of sorrow touches the one who tends the space. “Oh! A whole year before we pay attention to you again!” but the plant’s own wisdom remains just as the foliage remains to absorb the sun and the rain and to emit a beauty that is distinctive and subtle.

If our God is One who constantly surprises, then certainly one of the most sacred spaces of surprise, of encounter, must be the garden. In this place, such a thing as world peace can be imagined, such a thing as healing of the earth can be envisioned. The spirit can be renewed in the midst of the lush green, the fragrance of fertile soil and sweet birdsong. And that to which we are truly called – praise and thanksgiving – may readily enter the heart. I enter the garden and my thoughts and prayers are that specific desire that each soul on this planet could spend a pilgrim moment in this place and be refreshed.

Save this date! Sunday, September 2 at 9 am

Mark your calendar for our annual Anniversary Mass for Bishop P. Francis Murphy, co-sponsored by the Murphy Initiative for Justice and Peace. William J. Watters, S.J. will preside. Our community continues to hold and honor Bishop Murphy’s memory and to support his vision.

