



# *Carmelite News*

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## **Sandtown Prayer**

Sandtown: it sounds like a seaside resort, evoking images of a beach, expansive ocean views, seagulls calling in a clear sky, the happy sounds of children at play. But Sandtown is immeasurably distant from these scenes of peace and rest. It is a poor city neighborhood in the heart of Baltimore; it is a place of ironic contrast.

In Sandtown, years of poverty, unemployment and neglect have fostered violence, drug dealing, exploitation, and oppression. It is the kind of neighborhood feared and avoided by those fortunate enough to know a more secure existence. Many will drive through it only as a necessity, and then quickly, trying not to look, trying to hold back the reality from conscious recognition. Yet if Sandtown is ever to raise itself up, those who can help must begin to see.

At the heart of this story of a neighborhood – one like hundreds of others – is our world's desperate need for the profound influence of contemplative prayer. This past Lent, for us and for our people, Sandtown became a simple yet unexpected example of the radical power of contemplative prayer to open one's eyes, to change consciousness. And it served as a lesson that expanding consciousness is critical to our hopes for a world of ever greater justice and deeper love.

For some years now, our community has been offering a service of Guided Contemplative Prayer on Thursdays in Lent, to deepen our people's experience of intimacy with God and to open them to the transformation of consciousness that God can accomplish through prayer. In recent years, the thematic emphasis of our Lenten Prayer has been ecology, the environment and the earth. This past Lent, these themes were focused on our own city of Baltimore -- its ecological needs and efforts, and the causal link between environment and the problems of poverty, violence, and injustice. As in prior years, images and news stories were painstakingly chosen to interface with the next Sunday's Lenten Gospel, thereby bringing Jesus' life and

message into encounter with our contemporary society. Each week's service includes 25 minutes of silent prayer.

For the week preceding the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent, a story about Sandtown was paired with the upcoming Sunday's Gospel about the raising of Lazarus. This pairing was apt because in the midst of Sandtown's desolation, hope blooms – resurrection is happening, and from within. Neighborhood residents are gradually reclaiming decaying blocks by making beautiful gardens, filling the environment with flowers, speaking beauty. And from these small oases, even the drug dealers have learned to stay away. For those with eyes to see, Sandtown is about much more than fear. It is a story of hope borne of faith.

Not long after that evening's prayer, one of the participants, Janet, had an encounter with Sandtown. Her note (see box next page) about this experience speaks of her own transformed vision, how the people of Sandtown were no longer "faceless" to her. Consciousness – an encounter with the real – is indeed the fruit of contemplation, and it holds the power to recreate our world. The shift in view described in Janet's note might seem small, but the changes wrought through prayer are relentless; once begun, they become an unstoppable force.

Some might say that our prayer's thematic emphasis just adds more words to the international debate on the environment, when what is needed is action. But these quiet Thursday evenings in Lent are not at all about the words. Rather, what we are adding is silence – the silence of prayer, from whence true and lasting change will come. The hidden depths of prayer, the hidden fruits, are hardly ever seen; they are not provable. But once in a great while, as this past Lent, a veil lifts to illuminate the growth, just like a seedling shooting up from the dark ground of a Sandtown garden in Spring.

*We received the following letter from a participant in our Lenten Prayer.*

Dear Ones,

I want to share with you how this Lent's Thursday evening guided contemplative prayer has made a powerful impact in my life. Praying for Baltimore has become very real to me.

I think it was Tuesday afternoon March 4 before Mass that a friend from the chapel asked me if I'd teach Excel to a woman she knows. She said it would help the woman get a better job. I said I would. We spoke on the phone and the woman came to my house last Friday morning. She lives in Sandtown in a house rehabilitated by Sandtown Habitat for Humanity and works as a night resident manager at Martha's Place. If you had asked me Thursday night what the chances were that I would go to Sandtown in the near future I would have said slim to none. I went there when I drove her home.

She came to my house again today. Again I drove her home. After I dropped her off I drove around Sandtown a bit. A couple of the streets are lined with tiny pastel rehabilitated row houses. Much of Sandtown bears the scars of poverty and the neglect of slum landlords. It almost appears to have been ravaged by war. I saw people going about their business. The poor people of Baltimore are no longer faceless to me.

I am a believer and cannot chalk these events up to coincidence. Lovingly, Janet

## **When The Morning Star Rises**

*Profession Address by Sr. Colette Ackerman, ocd, for the Solemn Vows of Sr. Monika of Jesus Crucified (October 14, 2007)*

Today's liturgy of solemn profession centers on Jesus Christ, symbolized in our readings as the living water, the beloved one, the morning star rising in our heart. And it celebrates the narrative of two sisters in the spirit: our Sister Ann, who died in July of 2000 and Monika, Sister Ann's descendent in covenant love. The two are bound together with all of us in that great mystery of the Communion of Saints.

Monika attests that when she entered our chapel on the July evening of Sister Ann's wake she knew her life was changed forever. Sister Ann lived a gracious and unpretentious life among us for seventy-two years. And in the end her love mirrored the covenant love of God, the bow in the clouds, a symbol that *your descendants will be as countless as the stars of heaven (Gen 15:5)*. Sister Ann's death fostered a seed of generativity, which is the hallmark of one who has spent a life-time of unselfish devotion and generous service. She lived the kind of love that can be woven into new patterns and is the hallmark of God's desires for us. And in a final moment of self-giving she took into her care Monika's soul. This eternal love is reflected in lines from the writings of Ety Hillesum, a young Dutch woman who lost her life in the Holocaust. *God says: You can see I look after you. All my things are God's and God's are mine.* These words have been precious to Monika for many years. They came true in her connection with Sister Ann.

Coming to this day in October, 2007, Monika knows the deep call to transformation and self-transcendence that a life of commitment to Jesus Christ demands. She has negotiated the years of preparation and has matured in accepting the responsibilities of our Carmelite life. Her journey to this place, this day has been one of searching for the God who reaches deep into one's soul and asks for no less than everything, for our present and for our future, for what we can give and for what we hold back from giving.

The Carmelite reads her place, wherever it is, as a spiritual Mt Carmel. The first hermits delighted in the real Mt Carmel and from this place flowed the symbols of beauty and longing for God that have characterized Carmelite life from the beginning: the mountain, the desert, the flowing stream, the garden, the cave. Wherever we live or are we carry these symbols, this tradition; the hermit seeks for solitude, lives in solitude for the sake of intimacy, communion with God.

Our gospel reading, the story of the Samaritan woman, was a favorite of St. Teresa. Teresa thirsted for the *living waters* and saw her desires mirrored in the symbol of water, water which is the source of life for her garden of prayer. When Teresa was about fifty years old and had begun the Carmelite reform she was asked to write her autobiography. In this story she reveals her search for God. With a great freedom and spontaneity she describes her desires for God and her longings to experience God in prayer. This story of prayer, which Teresa fashioned for us, comes *in a different voice*; it comes to us from a woman, a woman who was able to bring rich life experience to her contemplation and reach into the unexplored depths of the vision of God. And God affirmed Teresa's life with gifts of wisdom and love. Using the symbol of her garden and the water that

flowed through it she showed how the life of prayer can slowly and, for the most part with much labor, be brought to maturity.

Through all the ways of watering which we Carmelites know so well: hauling up the bucket from the well, operating the water-wheel, flowing of the stream or the gentle rain, Teresa found her soul always more deeply rooted in the source of the water, the flower springing from the fertile earth, Jesus Christ. *The soul [she says] is soaked in this water... it is affirmed by God. God, showing the soul deep love, speaks the words: Now you are mine and I am yours (Life, 30: 19; 39: 21).* Jesus becomes companion and friend—the beloved one. In the words of Isaiah: You will be like a well-watered garden, like a flowing spring whose waters will never fail (*Is 58: 11*).

Monika has sought this gift through a lengthy time of formation and preparation which has brought her and the community to this day. It has not been easy. To continue to hold onto the flame of love in solitary prayer, in silence and hope, and in the darkness of purification and transformation is a journey of faith and sometimes doubt. The early documents of the Order tell us to seek for purity of heart and in contemplation. God will come to us with a foretaste of divine glory. We know as Carmelites that somehow all our human imaginings and calculations must be surrendered so that we can gradually be centered in God. This de-centering of self draws us to forfeit what is fixed, definite and calculated and moves us to the wide place of God's love and mercy. It is a journey along the path of unknowing, with only the flame of love aglow. It leads to the living spring, the morning star, Jesus Christ—the fire and the water.

But Monika is not traveling this road alone. Monika's light sits within the circle of a community. For in a community like ours this deep transformation of spirit and life is not happening just to the individual sister in the depths of her prayer. Rather, running along side, the community is changed and transfigured by each person's life. We are held in what Kees Waaijman, a theologian of the Carmelite Rule, calls the *tense triangle of three love-dimensions*, the unconditional love of God, love of neighbor and love of self. This kind of love, deep mutual love, helps manifest the blossoming forth of another garden, the garden of Eden, which recalls the desire of God for right relationships, for mutuality, equality and non-violence. We cherish an inter-generational and a multi-ethnic community, a tender shoot that has slowly grown stronger among us.

Reflecting on our future we often ask: What has our prayer called us to as we live the third century of Carmelite life in the United States? What is happening in our own desires for communion with God and our attempts to share this with God's people? Perhaps the most important answer to these or any questions about the future is embodied in this celebration today. The fire of love, lived in the reciprocity of community life, does foster generativity, new life, and most critically, fresh hope. *You will be like a well-watered garden, like a flowing spring whose waters will never fail...* The woman in the gospel prays: *Give me this water...(Is 58; Jn 5)*

One of the most important components for a community to continue in being is the gift of new members. Yet for the new members who come this is a costly business. And for the community that has developed a life together, there is a price. Together the two experience constant re-shuffling, re-organizing, renewal.

Having new members is a source of revitalization but it also demands change from older members and changing because of love. The heart of this process is relationship, friendship. Formation and incorporation take time; and the care, support, understanding and love for the newer sisters must be attended to consistently if they are to succeed and stay in the community. The community needs imagination, creativity, flexibility and originality along with deep contemplation and patience. It requires a passionate sense of purpose. The community tries to live in such a way that God's love is *mediated and not merely imitated* (Eileen Flanagan). And while the sisters have not reached the desired final state of this achievement(!), our community can be celebrated today along with the blessing of Monika's vows.

William Lynch, a Jesuit theologian, suggests that *the hope for mutuality is the secret of all our hopes and its absence is what makes us hopeless*. We long for this mutuality, this embrace of God and the gift of sharing love and respect with one another in community. It is a deep call and a hard one but, in our hearts, we know mutual love is the critical struggle—not just for us and our life together but for the sake of our world. Karl Rahner tells us in his essay on theological hope that this hope summons us to be constantly deciding whether we are *to defend the present which we possess or to embark on the exodus into the unforeseeable future*. One of our historical characteristics as a community is that we have not been afraid to change.

We tend to interpret our future in the light of our past. The words of Teresa in the second reading today brim with meaning. She says: *From here on, Lord, I want to forget myself and look only at how I can serve*

you... *From this very moment I am determined to serve you through deeds (Med. on Song of Songs, 4: 11-12).* The life of contemplation, when lived with integrity, leads to freedom and hope and prophetic deeds. The contemplative, through the charism of prayer and solidarity with God's people, can help negotiate the riddles of existence: despair, betrayal, violence and death. Kees Waaijman tells us: *The prophetic eschatology of our Rule takes us past every formula of conduct into an area that cannot be described or regulated. In self-forgetfulness we live in terms of the other. We lose ourselves in the measureless love of God, a love which never adds things up (Waaijman, 252-254).* This prophetic work, this life of ours can then *devote itself in dark trust to a time which lies past the horizon of our time (Waaijman, 210).* This is the contemplative dream, this is theological hope, eschatological hope, God as our future. This is faith.

Jesus, in today's gospel, asks for water from the Samaritan woman in order to begin a new discourse. The hour is coming and is already here when we can come together, live into a new vision. Out of the struggle of worshiping on one mountain or the other, comes new hope: human beings shaping the life of the new community, determined to serve through non-violent deeds, allowing the morning star to rise in our hearts and transform our consciousness. This is our hope today for Monika, for ourselves and for our earth. Again, the prophet Isaiah: *I will pour out water upon the thirsty ground, and streams upon the dry land; I will pour out my spirit upon your offspring, and my blessing upon your descendants. They shall spring up amid the verdure like poplars beside the flowing waters. One shall say, 'I am the Lord's,' another shall be named after Jacob... Fear not, be not troubled... You are my witnesses! Is there any God besides me(44)?*

### **Our Lady of Mount Carmel, July 16**

Please join us as we celebrate our great titular Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel on Wednesday, July 16. Mass will be celebrated at 7:30 p.m. At this liturgy we will continue our prayer for Baltimore and for all cities suffering from increasing violence and poverty. As the original hermits on Mount Carmel committed themselves under Mary's protection to be a fraternity of peace, we will be asking for her intercession that fear will cease to control decisions and actions, that hatred and prejudice will be overcome, and that the poor may find relief and help.

### **Save this date! Sunday, August 31 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. Our community continues to hold and honor Bishop Murphy's memory and to support his vision. At this liturgy we will celebrate the many ways that Frank Murphy's work for the poor and outcast continues in Baltimore today.