



Carmelite News

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Love is More than Everything

Sr. Robin Stratton celebrated her Golden Jubilee with a joy-filled Eucharist in October of 2008. Her celebration of 50 years of faithful, vowed religious life was shared by her sisters in Carmel, close friends, and nearly 90 members of her family. Her Jubilee reflection follows.

The day after I entered Carmel in May 1958 I suddenly thought to myself: "I've been in Carmel for 26 hours." I was 18. It was Mother's Day and I remembered telling myself some days earlier, before crossing the cloister threshold, "If I make it through May, I will probably spend the rest of my life in Carmel." Those earliest weeks held not only Mother's Day, but the birthdays of my adored baby brother, my sister Ann, and my Mother – no small separations for my deeply feeling self. I went on to mark 26 days when I was permitted to stay up for the night Office. I received the Carmelite Habit in November, 26 weeks into my Carmelite life. The 26's were beginning to stretch out in time.

Twenty-six months arrived shortly after my First Vows, and 26 years followed my Silver Jubilee celebration. I am now within a year of twice 26 and wonder whether I will live to thrice these mounting years. However much time I have, it will not be long enough to sing the mercy and goodness of God who brought me into the land of Carmel wherein I have asked for and received the "the mercy of God, the poverty of the Order, and the companionship of the Sisters."

What can I tell you of these years? That first afternoon when I was introduced to the Sisters, a tiny elderly Lay Sister embraced me warmly, looked up and exclaimed, "Oh, you're such a child." I was so hurt! After all, hadn't I just left everything for God? Didn't that mean I was grown up? Yes and no. It took me years to realize how young eighteen really was. And how much baggage I had carried with me into the monastery, mostly packed into my head and heart. Having learned that it takes a lifetime to

become a Carmelite, I continue to live into the mystery of letting God become the *all* of my being.

What mysteries lie hidden in the seasons of my life? The Spring dance of young love that knows everything is possible. Summer drought when I envied the birds because they were free and I was not. Autumns of ripening and fruitfulness borne of daily life among my sisters. Winter darkness and clinging to God while gazing at the moon, repeating over and over a verse of Psalm 89 "Like the moon that remains forever, a faithful witness in the sky." During Lauds one morning in my Postulancy, I discovered and claimed as my own a verse from Psalm 27: "One thing I ask of the Lord, this I seek; to dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to contemplate God's beauty." I have always known at the core of my being that I want God more than anything else, and that desire has only grown stronger with the passing of years.

As my Golden Jubilee celebration approached a phrase from a homily slipped into my heart and took up residence: "We celebrate, not the tenuousness of life, but the tenacity of God's love taking hold of us for a lifetime." And indeed, that is the heart of the mystery – God's love – not only for me – but for each of us – a love that pursues, haunts, captivates, surrounds – and this, whether at 18 or 88, is the gift I celebrate.

Save this date!

Sunday, September 6 at 9 am

This year marks the 10th anniversary of the death of Bishop P. Francis Murphy. We will offer our annual Anniversary Mass for Bishop Murphy, co-sponsored by the Murphy Initiative for Justice and Peace, on Sunday, September 6, 2009, at 9 a.m. in our monastery chapel. Please plan to attend and pray with us as we remember Frank, celebrate his legacy, and commit to his prophetic vision which continues to speak to us today.

This Is The Way: A Beautiful Quilt

Golden Jubilee Address by Sr. Colette Ackerman, ocd for Sr. Robin of the Blessed Sacrament
(October 25, 2008)

We come together today to celebrate and honor Sr. Robin and her fifty years of Carmelite life. And, even those of us who have lived with her in community and friendship for most of those fifty years, can only guess at some of her life and journey of half a century. Celebrating such an anniversary is like opening a hope chest filled with treasures: there are beautiful brocades carefully folded on top, jewels and mementoes tucked into corners for safe keeping and some little cloth bags on the bottom holding papers and objects that are greyish, crumbly and musty. Symbols of a lifetime... a lifetime of grace, of trust, of struggle, a lifetime of desire for God. In the words of Isaiah from today's first reading, which are Robin's words, *... your name, O God, and your memory are all my soul desires. My soul yearns for you in the night, my spirit within me earnestly seeks you...* And God answers: *Your ears shall hear a word behind you saying, "This is the way; walk in it."* More than fifty years ago, Robin decided on her way and, in her thirst for God, entered the Carmelite Monastery in Loretto, PA. At some point, however, Robin began a re-weaving of her life. She ultimately left her beloved Loretto community because it did not hold the desires for the future that were in her heart. This was a costly dislocation, a real displacement. But it was also a hope, a wish for the future lodged deep in her imagination. And it was a continuation of her commitment to follow Jesus: to Baltimore, or wherever..., seeking a new way of remaining with him. Do you love me? Then follow me. Stay with me.

In the gospel of John we have just listened to, the discourse between Jesus and Peter calls forth Peter's profession of love for Jesus, which reverses his threefold denial on the night before Jesus died. The hallmark of John's gospel and John's letters is the power of faith and the example of love. And the ones who have come seeking Jesus become disciples by remaining with Jesus, abiding with him, staying with him. Disciples learn about faith and love by walking in the footsteps of Jesus. John's gospel uses a Greek word that is unusual; it can be interpreted as *"believing into."* It indicates *"not simply intellectual assent but a profound personal attachment (Donahue, 76)."* The first questions Jesus asks the disciples who follow him are: *What do you want? What do you seek?* And they respond by asking: *Where do you live? Where do you stay?* This was Robin's response and these words began her formation process of *"believing into"* the life and identity of Jesus.

One of Robin's favorite novels is the Pulitzer-prize winning, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. Among Thornton Wilder's characters, Madre Maria, an old abbess, is a symbol, one thread of the spiritual search woven into the story. We meet her in the beginning as she worries over her work with the sick and outcast in Lima, Peru. How will the work continue? Who will follow her? Only a tenacious fidelity urges her on like *"the swallow in the fable who once every thousand years transferred a grain of wheat, in the hope of rearing a mountain to reach the moon (40)."* And, when the story concludes, Madre Maria, now even older, reflects on the mysteries she has experienced during a long life---tragedy, fate and what she perceives as divine intervention---and she understands that it is of no importance whether her ministry goes on. Her life was enough; it was filled with faith and the love of God. She commands her spirit, her soul to: *"learn, learn at last that anywhere you may expect grace (177)".* Her willfulness had been transformed into willingness. She was content.

Today we celebrate a real woman whose life is woven into the path of discipleship--- following Jesus in the faith and love of contemplative prayer, drawing her strength from the mystical depths of our Carmelite way of life. And Robin, in her now long life, has learned the truth of the old abbess, which our own St. Thérèse explored and came to understand, that *"everything is grace."* Jesus says: *Follow me, stay with me, abide with me forever. Your life will be sustained by mutual love, equality, shared friendship and service within the community. Do you love me? Follow me. "... learn, learn at last that anywhere you may expect grace (177)".* Formed in faith and love by this grace Robin has slowly put on the identity of Jesus Christ.

Our younger sisters, who never lived in our old monastery on Biddle Street, will sometimes say that *"what they do now was what they did when they lived on Biddle Street."* This little shift from current reality to life in the past, with a certain hermeneutic of mythology, seems to reveal that our identity is at least partly formed by connection to a lived narrative that crosses the boundaries of past, present and future. We remember the stories of our sisters, the lives of our saints, the events of our community. And, at the center, is our greatest story, celebrated here today in the Eucharist---the death and resurrection of Jesus---which liberates and saves us, which

holds us together in communion. The hope chest I mentioned at the beginning, while it was never in the attic at Biddle Street, has traveled within our tradition and is connected to our past as well as our future. And, during a long present, Robin has stitched many beautiful pieces which are still inside the chest or have been given away. This is generous and generative grace. Today when we reach into the middle of Robin's hope chest we draw forth a beautiful quilt containing thousands of stitches. And we see immediately that it is imprinted, applied with her life, her narrative, her story. It is bound together by the strong thread of our Carmelite narrative, our tradition, and edged with some lacey stories of Baltimore. The images of Robin's creativity are there, her patience in long illness is there, her being a spiritual touchstone for her family and friends is there, her "*determined determination*" of St Teresa in prayer, prayer of consolation or dryness, hopefulness or distress... all this is there. And that "believing into" has happened for her; in fidelity and love she has found and possessed her soul. She has followed Jesus and remained with him.

At a celebration like this I am reminded of our theologies of hope which tell us that we come to the possession of our soul through the possession of our own wishes for commitment. For the Carmelite these desires, these wishes are actually the dimensions of the mystical life, the contemplative life. Our plunge (willing or unwilling) into the dark embrace of God leads us step-by-step to insight, to conversion and to a new wisdom. And this experience of growth and change and development—the movement from the chaos and anxiety of willfulness to the humility and detachment of willingness—is not an achievement but rather a gracious and precious gift of God. It is the transformation of the soul and of the person. Robin has walked in the footsteps of Jesus for a lifetime. She has, like the bride in the Song of Songs, followed the "*tracks of the flock*" (*Song of Songs 1:8*) to find the shepherd, the beloved. Robin now, like the old abbess, Madre Maria, knows that her life is enough. She has been surprised to find in the folds of her quilt the pearl of great price and the glowing crystal of St Teresa which symbolizes the rooms of prayer and transforming love she has traversed during life. Love is everything, it is enough. So, let us celebrate. And let us carry away today the generous and gracious love of Jesus which dwells in each of us through the power of the Holy Spirit. Robin's soul and our own souls can echo the little, old abbess who says just that: *...love will have been enough; all those impulses of love return to the love that made them. Even memory is not necessary for love. There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning (Wilder, 180).*

Celebrate Edith Stein on Sunday, August 9

All are welcome to join us for Eucharist at 9 a.m. This reflection is offered in anticipation of the feast, and speaks of Edith's understanding of the human person before God.

Edith Stein, a German Carmelite who died in the gas chambers of Auschwitz, spent her lifetime in an intense search for truth. She found her search fueled by her in-depth studies in philosophy, and fulfilled in her deeply personal encounters with God in contemplative prayer. A primary focus for her intellectual and spiritual journey was understanding what she called "the place of [human beings] in the order of the created world". She pondered over the "being" of the human person as one in intimate relationship with a loving God who offers mutuality and divine union as the ultimate goal. Her insights were grounded in the philosophy/theology of her time and place – the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, renowned German philosopher, and the scholasticism of Thomas Aquinas. But she also transcended these grounds. While formed by her place and time, she was not bound by them. In fact, her ability to transcend her time is key to her understanding of the human place in the cosmos, and the reason why her thought continues to inform and enlighten all who search for truth and for God today.

Edith articulated and celebrated a "personal core" in each human person, an individual "form" that makes each of us distinctly ourselves. She agreed with the philosophy of her day that every person is an individuated member of the human species, so that we share a deep commonality. But she also asserted, contrary to the mainstream (Aristotle and Aquinas), that what makes you "you" is far more than just being an individual example of humanity. She believed that each person has a more foundational gifted uniqueness that makes her almost a species unto herself. This unique "form" is given by the Absolute, God. It is this personal core, Edith felt, that is truly eternal.

Here is an example: with no “personal core”, Julius Caesar transported to a different time and place would cease to be Caesar at all. With no personal core, it is only circumstance and conditions and geography and historical time that make you who you are. But Edith believed Caesar would be Caesar, in essence, in any time or place, though temporal conditions would influence the degree to which his personal core would blossom. So place and time are important, but we are not bound by them; they are not “all.” Each person’s individual unique “core” allows him or her to transcend temporal limits even while being formed by them.

Some contemporary scholars have been disturbed by Edith’s position, feeling that it might contradict the inherent equality among people. Her radical belief in a non-common personal core would mean, for instance, that we do not all share the same potential; we do not all have the same possibilities. But surely this is true. We are not all capable of singing like Pavarotti, no matter how hard we practice. For Edith our equality derives not from our sameness but from our interdependence. We need each other to fill in the gaps of our own potential, and also to actualize – bring to fullness – the very gifts and talents we do have.

Let us then celebrate the radical individual character of each person, and not try to remake the other in our own image. Let us instead be grateful for our awkward diversity, which not only softens each shortcoming but also calls forth each gift, and gives us power to transcend all our bounds.

Our Lady of Mount Carmel, July 16

Please join us as we celebrate our great titular Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel on Thursday, July 16. Mass will be celebrated at 7:30 p.m. At this liturgy we will continue this year’s focus on the prophetic call to hope in a time of economic instability and personal insecurity for so many people in our own country and around the world. 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, and that those in need will receive the help they need.

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