



Carmelite News

Vol. 17, No. 2

www.baltimorecarmel.org

410 823 7415

July – Sept 2010

This Is What I Want

Mary Fleig joyfully professed her solemn vows on June 13, 2010. Her reflection on her Carmelite vocation follows.

It is hard to put into words the depth of my Carmelite vocation. I'm not someone who always dreamed of being a nun; in fact, I have to say, I never really considered it. I am of the generation of women who had the opportunity to do anything with our lives, and being a nun seemed so limiting to me. I made my way to Baltimore Carmel quite by accident at the urging of a Jesuit friend of mine, the late Clem Petrik, who brought me to Sunday liturgy. At the time I was actively seeking a deeper relationship with God; I was involved in my downtown parish, attending annual retreats, and working with a spiritual director. I told the sister who greeted me at the door very clearly that I didn't want to be a nun. As I began to regularly attend Sunday liturgy at Carmel I felt a strange attraction deep in my heart to this community of vibrant, intelligent, and passionate women. As a logical thinking person, this strange, silent voice seeming to come from deep inside me was confusing and I tried desperately to resist it.

I have always been on a spiritual quest, always been a seeker, always been in love with God. Though I was happy in my career as an attorney, with my lovely condo in the city, my friends and family, my life in general, I kept looking for something more, something deeper.

One day I showed up for what I thought was a normal daily liturgy at Carmel to find out it was the first vow ceremony of one of the sisters. I was struck by the line on her profession program: *There you will show me what my soul has been seeking.* It seemed to be blinking neon just for me and I remember saying to God very clearly, "You mean *This*? You mean *Me*?" Then, when touring the community's archives, I was filled with awe at the vibrancy of this Carmel with its incredible history and charism. I was deeply moved by the richness of this life.

This time the voice said, "I need to be here." Once I said it out loud to others, "This is what I want," it was as if the way was paved.

Rather than being limiting, this life provides great opportunity, though in a different way. There is great space for my soul here. The thing that most nourishes my soul is tending our beautiful grounds. Whether I am raking leaves, weeding, pruning or planting I feel most close to God when I am outdoors listening to the birds, breathing in the fresh air, and getting covered with dirt.

Artwork from Baltimore Carmel
for Sr. Mary's Solemn Vows



*The breathing of the air,
the song of the sweet nightingale,
the grove and its living beauty
in the serene night, with a flame
that is consuming and painless.*

*Spiritual Canticle Stanza 39
St. John of the Cross*

There is an area of our property that was overtaken by invasive vines and weeds which were killing all the young trees. One day I just started pulling out the weeds (without chemicals), on my hands and knees, a little at a time. The project took several months, but after weeding I planted grass seed and the area is now covered with beautiful green grass which I mow regularly. It was a spiritual undertaking for me, as much as anything, and it is one of the things I've done in my life that I am most thrilled with. I am now starting phase 2 of the project.

When I look back at my life before Carmel, it seems obvious that I had a vocation. I worked hard trying to fit God into my life. What a wonderful thing it is to live a life that is centered around God. I am grateful that I have found this community and way of life. To quote our St Thérèse of Lisieux: I find all the aspirations of my soul are fulfilled in this Order.

Save this date!

Sunday, September 5 at 9 am

We will celebrate our annual Anniversary Mass for Bishop P. Francis Murphy, co-sponsored by the Murphy Initiative for Justice and Peace, on Sunday, September 5, 2010, at 9 a.m. in our monastery chapel. Please plan to attend and pray with us as we remember Frank, honor his legacy, and commit anew to his prophetic vision.

Choose the Light of Your Own Nature

Profession Exhortation by Sr. Fran Horner, ocd for the Solemn Vows of Sr. Mary Rose of the Grace of God (June 13, 2010)

O dwellers of earth, awake and sing for joy! A party is taking place in heaven today, co-hosted by two people very special to Sr. Mary Rose of the Grace of God, who were instrumental in leading her to this moment. They have a right to celebrate, and I want to acknowledge them at the very start. The first is Rosemary Fleig, Mary's beloved mother, who died not long after Mary came. I understand that Rose loved to entertain, so I suspect the heavenly party was all her idea. It was from Rose that Mary received her faith, her commitment, and her strong love of God. If you ask me, Rose is really behind this whole thing. The other heavenly co-host is Clem Petrik, a Jesuit priest who was so good a friend to Mary, a trusted advisor and spiritual guide. It was Clem who brought Mary to us. Some of you will remember his exuberant celebration of the Easter Vigil here – if so, you know he is in our midst asking us to join him in shouting Alleluia!

With Rose and Clem as witnesses, I want to tell you a little of Mary's story, to capture better the fulfillment of this day. It finds its context in the Gospel passage she chose, so I will interlace her story with that of the Samaritan woman. It was around noon one day. A Samaritan woman came to draw water. *It was the 14th of December, 2001. Mary Fleig came to attend Mass at the chapel of Baltimore Carmel.* When she approached the well, little did she know that her whole life would be changed by what she would encounter. *When she walked in the door, little did she know that it was Sr. Leah's first profession ceremony. It was definitely a set-up.* Jesus said "Give me a drink!" *Mary responded by saying to one of the nuns, "Clem thinks I'm one of you, but I'm not!" "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" I'm not one of you. I can almost hear Mary saying to Jesus, "give YOU a drink? I'm the one who came here thirsty. And besides you should have a better system for dispensing water."*

Jesus was not intimidated. He was determined to reveal to the woman at the well, to Mary, the wonder that had just broken through to her world. He said, "if you knew the gift of God and who was asking, you would ask him, and he would give you living water, gushing up to eternal life. You would never be thirsty again." The woman answered, "then give me this water – I do not want to keep coming here." Mary did not want to keep coming either. She expressed it this way: *"I do not want this for my life!"* Does the word "alarmed" come to mind? Mary was wrestling with a sudden, deep knowing that she was being called to give Jesus a drink, and to drink herself from the spring of Carmel. *There you will show me what my soul has been seeking.* All of us are familiar with this experience: Something within me knows more than I do; something within me sees what I cannot. What Jesus promised Mary that day was beyond her comprehension.

Like the woman at the well, Mary had to grasp God's will for her by entering deeply into the reality of her own life. Mary, I suggest this was the characterizing and shaping experience of your years in formation. Again and again, you were asked to plumb the depth of who you are, in complete and utter trust. Our first reading (Isaiah 26:1-4, 7-9, 12-14) speaks of this. It so well captures the struggle and the passion that has delivered you to this day. You have had to resist other lords that would seek to rule over you. You have known the bread of adversity and the water of affliction. Mary, your time in formation has involved the Cross, and I want to acknowledge that. It has cost you to come to this day. The reading speaks of a suffering. It also speaks of courage and what St. Teresa of Avila would call a determined determination that we your sisters have witnessed during your formation years.

The struggles *and* the joys of this time have come precisely from an ongoing experience of being the woman at the well: Jesus proceeded to tell you everything about yourself. In comparison the Samaritan woman was lucky, she got it all in a few moments. Mary's has come daily – the daily grind of what Teresa says is essential for union with God. Our Senior Young Adult Prayer group is here, they will know what I mean: what is essential for union with God is the arduous task of growing in self-knowledge. When God starts to work on us, we have to face the truth of who we are (as the Samaritan woman did).

As Mary uncovered her truth, there were challenges and some joyful surprises too. She didn't know she would be so attracted to caring for our grounds, so nourished by her own efforts to nurture the earth. She didn't know the depth of her creativity. You, the Sunday congregation, have watched this gift mature. Through video slideshows and other unusual things, like building a Chesapeake Bay lighthouse in our chapel, Mary found provocative ways to bring insight into our prayer, to help us hear the Word of God freshly. She followed a call to break outside the bounds of the ordinary. This was really the invitation the Samaritan woman received, too.

To accept this invitation, to break outside the bounds of the ordinary, Mary, you must be secure enough in yourself to be peaceful in making mistakes, and always open to other perspectives. With your talent, quick mind and self-reliance, your natural desire to be right and on target, I challenge you to embrace those moments and times when you are not right, when you need help, when you are uncertain or anxious or afraid. When Jesus spoke to the woman at the well, he wasn't affirming her "rightness." It is hard for any of us to accept the common lot of human limitations. But these limitations can be softened – we can let them be softened – into something Christ transforms. Mary, I know you have learned that the only true security is found in God, who is not bound by our human definition of accomplishment and success. From that place of security, your best self can manifest in all you do.

Of course none of us are able to be our best selves all the time, or even most of the time. Mary is no different. What is different about Mary is this: when she IS her best self, she is absolutely extraordinary. A smile that lights up the room. A charm that could convince even the most die-hard car driver to park in the back lot. A generosity of spirit so deep and full that it leaves one speechless...a love so profound that it forgets all past hurt for the sake of the present. So even as you grow in the embrace of your own imperfections, Mary, I hope you will always remember this beautiful truth, which I want to underline with a little fairy tale (*Parabola, Spring 2010, Barbara Berger*). It is the story of a knight who was obligated to marry an old hag in order to save the life of his king. On the wedding night, summoning all his courage, the knight kissed his ugly bride, and then standing back saw a beautiful lady, standing tall and straight, flowing hair shining in the firelight, eyes glowing with a smile. Of course she was victim of a nasty spell – another lord had ruled over her, to revisit the first reading. The spell was half-broken, she said. She could appear beautiful either by day or by night, and asked the knight to choose which he wanted. At the last he said, "My lady, it is for you to choose." Her joy overflowed. "Now the spell can no longer bind me. For you gave me the most precious gift: sovereignty over my own soul." She stood before him more radiant than before, lit from within, as if a confining vase had shattered and set free all the splendor hidden inside. "I choose the light of my own nature," she said, "both day and night." Edith Stein tells us that it is only from a place of freedom, of sovereignty, that one's unique personal core can blossom forth in all its beauty. Mary, choose the light of your own nature, both day and night. Set free all the splendor hidden inside. Make your best self ever more present, for it is precious and rare.

I wanted a special way to mark this day for you, Mary, and also to help you recall these words. So I borrowed an idea you used to enhance our community prayer this past year: totems. A totem is a non-human part of creation that watches over or assists a group of people. I have chosen four to be Carmelite totems. In keeping with Mary's love for the outdoors, they correspond to the seasons, and the four elements earth, air, fire, water. I asked Sr. Leah to express them artistically for us, and you see the result on your program cover today (*see front page of newsletter*). Let me say just a word about each:

Our first totem, Night: The season is winter, the element fire. This is John of the Cross' night of purification, the night whose fire is longing and desire, which you know well, Mary. Always let the fire of your desire give you the strength to persevere, and to undergo the transformation that is the truest sign of God's love.

The second totem, Garden: The season is spring, the element water. Here is the garden of the soul and the water of prayer, borrowing imagery from St. Teresa. Mary has been above all dedicated to her prayer, and has learned that giving Jesus a drink also quenches her thirst with the living water. This totem is meant to remind you always to tend the garden of your soul, and to bring the water of life to others.

Our third totem, Heron: The season is summer, the element earth. Earth is to remind you of self-knowledge, who you are in your humanity. Of course for this theme we chose the heron. The heron has always been a sacred image for Mary, deeply symbolic of the heart of her spiritual life and her affectivity. I looked up what heron means, and discovered that it starts in one place, and leads to another. The character begins with aggressive self-determination and self-reliance. At times it is prone to melodrama and a passionate expression of emotion. Heron is excellent at effective time management and always seems to have time to do what is asked. And here is where Heron leads: It learns the value of patience. It learns to find balance, and in particular it learns the balance between relating and standing alone. Mary, always be mindful of this balance, and as you use your gift to break out of the ordinary, remember not to be so far out front that others cannot see you, but be patient in bringing us along.

The last totem, Mountain: The Season is autumn, the element air. Here is the sacred space of Carmel, the space where we are exalted, where we see God's glory and beauty, and can likewise see our own. This is your reminder to know yourself as someone deeply loved, and to accept that you are beautiful, exactly as you are.

As I conclude, I want to return to the earthly party. Though offered by all of us, it is particularly hosted by Sisters Colette and Connie. They were Mary's formation directors and also shepherded the last four of us into permanent commitment with our community. They have poured their life's blood into this formation work, so that this community will continue. We are more grateful than words can say.

It is no small thing that this day has come. Mary, we your sisters know this, and we celebrate it. For in your daily surrender, in embracing the solitude and darkness of purification and the challenging engagement of human relationships, you have become a Carmelite in its truest meaning. The poet Mary Oliver has written words that you might claim as your own today: *Was I lost? No question. Did I know where I was? Not at all. Had I ever been happier in my life? Never.*

"Clem thinks I'm one of you..." Now the sentence has a different ending. *Clem thinks I'm one of you, Mary says, and I am.* Mary you are one of us. Today, at last, you become one with us forever. With the joy of the Easter Vigil, let us shout out with Clem and with Rose, "Alleluia!"

**Please join us to celebrate Our Lady of Mount Carmel
Sunday, July 18**

Our Order's great titular Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, July 16, falls on Friday this year. To allow more of our people to share in the feast and in our prayer, we will give particular attention to Mary of Mount Carmel on Sunday, July 18, at our 9 a.m. Mass. At this liturgy we will ask for Mary's intercession for a solution to the continuing environmental crisis in the Gulf of Mexico, for her help and strength for those seriously affected by this tragedy, and for her protection and care of all wounded parts of our earth.



RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

Carmelite Monastery
1318 Dulaney Valley Road
Baltimore, MD 21286-1399

Non-Profit Org.
US POSTAGE PAID
Baltimore, MD
Permit No. 2152