



Carmelite News

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Anniversary Edition

Anniversaries abound for us this year. Sr. Judith of Jesus Crucified (Judy Murray) celebrated 25 years of religious profession in May (see back page). In June, Sr. Ignatius Loyola of God our Lord (Martha Reichert) and Sr. Mary Eileen of the Blessed Trinity (Mary Eileen McNamara) had a joint celebration to mark their 70 years in Carmel. August 31, 2011 marked the 50th anniversary of the move to our present monastery, which we wrote about in our last issue. Sr. Colette of the Trinity (Colette Ackerman) was a very new Carmelite at the time of that move. On August 14, 2011, she celebrated her Golden Jubilee, 50 years as a Carmelite Nun, in the presence of family, friends, and our wonderful Sunday congregation. Sr. Colette's dear friend, Fr. Donald Cozzens, presided and delivered the homily, below.

Once upon a time—actually it was a little over fifty years ago—a young woman named Colette set her heart's desire on the Word of God. This desire led her to the suspicion that God's love was drawing her to Carmel—to a life of solitude, contemplation, and deep communion. To some of her friends and family, her move to the monastery made no sense. Others said, "Let's wait and see." A good portion of Sr. Colette's story is complete now...and while it is hardly a fairytale, it is a story of enchantment, as all stories are of grace and fidelity.

So here we are, ready and eager to praise God for Colette's fidelity, witness, and graceful living of the contemplative life—for half a century. To be specific, we praise and thank God for Colette's presence in our lives... and in the life of the church... and for her leadership in the monastic movement in the United States... and for shepherding and guiding young sisters in formation, and for her ministry as prioress.

Now it's right for me to pause here for a word of "full disclosure." I've known Colette not for fifty years, but well on to sixty years! And I have enormous affection for her and great respect for her intelligence, wisdom, and accomplishments. Colette has been dearest of friends, wise counselor, spiritual companion, and treasured correspondent. I know others of you can say the very same thing.

Her letters, I suspect, made Teresa of Avila smile. They reflected the monastic idealism of a young nun, of course, but at the same time a depth and spiritual maturity that went beyond her years. There was something profoundly *real* about them. And surrounded as I was at the time by a good deal of unreality, her letters were a spiritual—and human—lifeline for me. It may be stretch to say I would not have made it through the seminary without the benefit of Colette's letters. But

I certainly would be a different person—and a different priest—without them.

This morning I'd like to take a look at Colette's story through the lenses of today's readings—the short passage from the book of Ruth, the verses from St. John of the Cross' *Spiritual Canticle*, and the post-resurrection lines of Luke's gospel.

Listen again to Ruth's moving words to Naomi.

"Wherever you go, I will go, wherever you lodge I will lodge, your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Wherever you die I will die, and there be buried."

A half century ago, a young Colette Ackerman sought to live a contemplative life as a Carmelite sister. In effect, she said to the sisters:

"Wherever you go, I will go, wherever you lodge I will lodge"...from East Biddle Street to Dulaney Valley Road.

"Your people shall be my people..." from Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, and Therese of Lisieux, to Edith Stein, Mother Mary Magdalen, and Mother Celine. The Carmelite family became her family.

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Also check out www.carmelstream.com, a new resource for Carmelite spirituality.

“Wherever you die I will die and there be buried...” There was no “prenuptial agreement” for Ruth or Colette.

Like Ruth, Colette has not been afraid of commitment. Both Ruth and Colette had the courage to take an enormous, life-changing risk—to leave everything, lose everything, because of an impulse. But it was an impulse not grounded in whim, but in God’s mysterious grace, an impulse intricately intertwined with the deepest desires of their hearts, a desire for holy communion with God and God’s creation.

Naomi’s other daughter-in-law, Orpah, chose to go back to her Moabite people, as Naomi urged her to do. The author of the Book of Ruth says, “Orpah sobbed aloud and wept and kissed her mother-in-law good-by.” While Orpah listened to a different inner voice and followed a different impulse, I believe she was no less faithful and brave than Ruth.

So, while we may walk different paths—single, monastic, married, ordained—all of us have made promises or vows or commitments of one kind or another. Colette’s readiness to walk with us in friendship and love has helped us stay close to the path. Like Ruth and Orpah, Colette has been faithful because of God’s grace, of course, and because of the fidelity of her Carmelite sisters who have shared her journey, in good times and bad, into the Interior Castle of God’s transforming love.

I’ve referred to Colette’s story as an enchanted story—for how else can we describe ecstatic union with God? But Colette’s story of fidelity includes staying the course when she was gripped by the dark night of the senses—when she felt lost and confused, without consolation or the comfort of intimacy. Contemplatives come to understand that the flame of fidelity is kept burning only through silence and solitude. In his *Spiritual Canticle*, John of the Cross could write:

The tranquil night
At the time of the rising dawn,
Silent music,
Sounding solitude,
The supper that refreshes, and deepens love.

Carmelites know that sometimes the answer to life’s loneliness is found, paradoxically, in silence and solitude. But as the writer Pico Iyer reminds us:

We have to earn silence. . . to work for it: to make it not an absence but a presence; not emptiness but repletion. Silence is something more than just a pause; it is that enchanted place where space is cleared and time is stayed and the horizon itself expands.

And Thomas Merton said simply, “One who loves God necessarily loves silence.”

I sometimes think the seventeenth century philosopher Blaise Pascal was a closet Carmelite. Who but a Carmelite could write, “All the evil in the world can be traced to our inability to sit still in a room”? At least at some level, Pascal is right. The seeds of violence are sown in endless noise... the noise of racket and chaos... the noise of abuse and trafficking... the noise of oppression and war... the noise of poverty and starvation.

I tell my students taking Christian Spirituality at John Carroll University that one of the goals of the course is to help them learn how to sit still. It makes them nervous. I know some of you in this assembly come often, perhaps daily, to this monastery so that you might learn how to sit still. Believe me, you’re on to something.

More than any other spiritual companion, Colette has taught me how to sit still. She has taught me, in the words of John of the Cross, about “silent music, sounding solitude, the supper that refreshes and deepens love.”

Let me speak to the Carmelites for a moment... It seems to me that in recent years your contemplative, monastic life is *leaking*...and slowly seeping into our collective consciousness. I hope to God that is true. There are signs that it just may be true...We hear reports of a revolution in spiritual consciousness occurring across the planet. Recently I heard that courses in contemplative leadership are being taught in our military academies.

Do you remember the movie, *We Were Soldiers*? It was based on the life of General Hal Moore, a hero of the Vietnam War. He was raised in Kentucky, a short distance from the famous Abbey of Gethsemani where visited often. After graduating from West Point, Moore made a retreat at the abbey before reporting for his first assignment. He believes

his experience of contemplative monasticism made a lasting mark on his soul. Years later, as a highly decorated, retired soldier, General Moore wrote, to the surprise of many, about the importance of contemplative leadership.

And I hear that some members of Congress meet regularly for contemplative prayer. And, as you no doubt know, numerous parishes, crossing denominational lines, sponsor contemplative prayer groups and contemplative retreats.

Sisters, as we celebrate Colette's jubilee, it's right for this assembly to thank you for helping so many of us discover the monk within us and the art of contemplative living.

Many Catholics, myself included, believe our church is on the brink. I can't bring myself to recite the litany of scandals and crimes. But there's no need. We know we are a hurting, wounded and wounding church and that we have possibly lost our way. More than anything else, I believe our bishops and church leaders need to learn contemplative leadership and the art of humble authority. It would change everything.

Think back to our gospel reading. In the midst of the apostles' panic and fright, the evangelist Luke reports Jesus saying, "Peace to you... Why are you disturbed?...Touch me...a ghost does not have flesh and bones as I do. Jesus asks, "Have you anything to eat? They gave him a piece of grilled fish which he took and ate in their presence."

We have more than a piece of cooked fish here today of course. We have God's Word. We have Bread for the journey, we have the Cup of the covenant. And we have God's promise that we are God's beloved people—no matter what.

In this, our own time of panic and fright, what can we do to minister to our troubled church? Most of the time I think we feel pretty helpless. But this we can do:

We can strive to be as faithful as Ruth,

We can learn to sit as still as a Carmelite in prayer,

We can feast at the table of the Lord.

We can bear witness to contemplative living.

Finally, let me tell you of one of Colette's favorite films, *Babette's Feast*, a film I suspect many of you are familiar with. Babette enfleshes the fidelity of Ruth and the contemplative spirit of Carmel...and she knows how to cook fish. She really knows how to cook.

At the end of the great meal that marks the climax of the film, General Loewenhielm, who has chosen a military career over marrying his life-long love, Martine, has a moment alone with her. It's a moment of exquisite intimacy.

What the General says simply astounds me. It is nothing less than a preface to a theology of religious vocation. Loewenhielm takes Martine's hands in his and says almost in a whisper:

"...Grace takes us all to its bosom and proclaims general amnesty. See! That which we have chosen is given to us, and that which we have refused is, also at the same time, granted us. Ay, that which we have rejected is poured upon us abundantly. For mercy and truth have met together and righteousness and bliss have kissed one another."

Well, I've come to the end of this story, a story we might call *Colette's Feast*. There are other chapters, of course--chapters known only to Colette—chapters of breathtaking consolations and crushing desolations. We suspect she smiles now at them all.

I can't say Colette and her sisters will live happily ever after. We hope to God they will. But what matters is that Colette and this Carmel keep proclaiming the liberating feast of the Gospel... a general amnesty for us all.

For a moment or so now, it's right for us to sit still.

God Delights In Us And Hears Our Little Prayers

On May 5, 2011, Sr. Judy Murray celebrated her Silver Jubilee, the twenty-fifth anniversary of her profession of vows as a Carmelite. Below we share an excerpt from her reflection for that day about her journey to Carmel.

The August before I was to report to Physician's Assistant School, I asked a good friend if she, I and another friend could spend some time together at her family chalet on Beebe Pond in Vermont. I anticipated, correctly, that for the next two years I was going to have to work my tail off without any major breaks. One evening, the sunset promised to be spectacular so I hiked up to Eagle Rock to watch the display of colors. It was absolutely gorgeous with red tinged clouds mirrored by red tinged maples. It was so beautiful that I heard myself praying to God, "Someday, may I be as pleasing in your sight as this sunset is in mine." To my astonishment, I thought I understood God to say something akin to, "You already are." It blew me away. I would never have thought to claim that my life was particularly noteworthy in God's sight. I was just someone struggling to do the right thing at any given moment.

I still can't comprehend how much God really delights in us, loves us, and desires our affection. What we do everyday seems so ordinary to me. Using Colette's metaphor, we just lay one stitch at a time in the tapestry of life. In the divine condescension, God adjusts the colors, tweaks the tension of the threads, and snips out the mistakes to make the results even more pleasing to him. God delights in us and hears our little prayers.

Earlier we heard John of the Cross' exalted words about high prayer. I chose that text because it had inspired me when I first read it long ago and not because I have managed to get to the 9th rung of the ladder. No, far from it. It is only the prayers, strength, and love of my sisters that carry me along and prop me up. I could never do this on my own. It is you who show me what God's love looks like. I am filled with gratitude to God for you and for this vocation. Thank you so much for all of your affection and for allowing me to share this "vanity of habitation" with you. I look forward to growing in holiness together with you as we continue the journey bringing Carmel into the future. Where we shall sing forever that God delights immensely in us and always hears our little prayers.

**Please join us to celebrate
Thérèse of Lisieux and Teresa of Avila
Sundays October 2 and October 16**

The feast days of our Order's great doctors of the Church, Thérèse and Teresa, fall on Saturdays this year (October 1 and 15). To allow more of our people to share in these feasts and in our prayer, we will celebrate:

**Thérèse of Lisieux on Sunday, October 2, at our 9 a.m. Mass, and
Teresa of Avila on Sunday, October 16, at our 9 a.m. Mass.**

We would be so glad if you could join us!