Cloister of the Heart

Association of Contemplative Sisters

Ann Denham & Gert Wilkinson

WOODSTOCK 1969: CAPTURING THE METAPHOR OF RELIGIOUS LIFE

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Introduction

For two weeks of the summer of 1969, the first-ever seminar for contemplative religious women of different orders from the United States and Canada was held in Woodstock, Maryland. Though the seminar had other purposes, the turn of events during those historic two weeks led to the founding of the first association for contemplative women in the country, the Association of Contemplative Sisters (ACS). The story of Woodstock and the beginnings of ACS for me centers around the people who took hold of their dreams during those days. It is a story of our sacrifices, our courage and our vision, contextualized by and set against a backdrop of the institutional church, society, religious orders, the Second Vatican Council, and centuries of established customs and boundaries. But truly the people are the story's heart. So many names and faces came back to me, over and over, as I reflected on what seemed to matter most, what I wanted to tell about those days and those times. I realized that it is above all a story of love: our enormous love of the contemplative life, and our desire to have it living and vital within the Church. This love was the binding and uniting force that, fired by grace, brought ACS into being.

I am a Carmelite nun and was one of the founding members of ACS. I am also an archivist and an historian—this is the place from which I write. As an historian, I want to help preserve the facts of that unique

moment in time, when contemplative sisters first joined together and found their voice. It is significant and meaningful to make a record of the lives and contributions of the women and men who birthed this new era, and of the vision that we placed on the currents of humanity. But I also want this story to be recorded and preserved for a purpose, for the sake of the future, for this is history's greatest value. It is knowledge of past events that keeps one's vision from being a mere irresponsible dreaming into the future. The art is to know the past and be grounded by it without being mired in it, to have the foundation of tradition and history that gives one the knowledge, freedom, courage and wisdom to develop new interpretations for contemporary times.

It is difficult to tell the history of any aspect of religious life using the traditional structures and interpretative lenses through which other types of histories can be written, as Joseph Chinnici points out in his excellent article, *Rewriting the Master Narrative: Religious Life and the Study of American Catholicism.*[38] The difficulties arise, Chinnici says, because religious life is a "symbolic life form"[39] that lies both within and without traditional structures. It is present in society, but it is also beyond, based as it is on transcendent religious experience, a direct personalized experience of God. Chinnici therefore suggests that historians use metaphors and analogies to present and analyze religious life, noting three key metaphors in particular: commonwealth, frontier, and performance. These metaphors provide a perfect framework to speak about Woodstock in a way that will allow the current younger generation of contemplative women to learn from our experience, and to use that experience in shaping contemplative life to serve the present time and fit them for the future.

Though using this metaphorical framework, I also want to present the historical facts chronologically, though with some exceptions, to give a better flavor for how events developed. And so, while all three of these metaphors are operative and could be discussed at each phase of the Woodstock story, I have chosen to draw on just one in each of three chronological stages, trusting my readers to see beyond what I have written. I hope that this metaphorical analysis will show the strength of contemplative life and some of the beauty of Woodstock. I want Woodstock to be remembered as a time when, for the sake of love, for the sake of a purpose larger than themselves, a group of women and men were once able to live beyond the constraints of competitiveness, to abandon any temptation toward petty rivalries, and most importantly, to take risks notwithstanding the fear of change, the fear of losing contemplative identity, and the fear of disapproval. The very obstacles intended to block our progress and impede our growth, when submitted to prayer and to the energetic determination of committed individuals, became a source of our strength, the very building blocks that made us who we are, that equipped us to face the future. I will conclude with some brief comments on the ACS legacy.

Woodstock as Commonwealth: The first movements

Commonwealth, for Chinnici, is "the anthropological and social space that lies between the twin spaces of family and society." Religious life as commonwealth thus "mirrors and critiques relational elements of the family and relational elements of the society . . ."[40] For Americans, the term commonwealth may not be all that familiar and may bring to mind only secular government, in the sense of some of our commonwealth states. But Chinnici means it in the context of religious life to capture the notion of a liminal space, an in-between that is able to combine "the vertical principles of social structure and the horizontal values of personal freedom, familial interchange, and participative government."[41] Thus, religious life as metaphoric commonwealth is a project grounded in relationships that are structured as needed for order and function, yet are radically participative and affirming of each member. Those who participate in such a commonwealth are bound together by the unifying thread of a communal spirit, and a responsibility to steward the commonwealth's assets, to employ them to proper use, to build them up and to help them endure. Woodstock reflected this commonwealth metaphor in its initiating purpose, in the relationships that led to its conception, and in the emergence of bonds among contemplative women from the kindred spirits of their collective religious commitments, their foundational experiences of God, and their lived contemplative life.

The initiating purpose of Woodstock was to provide a forum for collaboration among contemplative women to address formation, with special attention to renewal and education. This purpose reflected the commonwealth metaphor both in object and approach. The object was to build up the precious common asset of contemplative life and its future. The approach was structured and participative collaboration. Woodstock's purpose was, moreover, grounded in a network of relationships that were only awaiting a spark to be energized.

It was in fidelity to the spirit of *Sponsa Christi*, promulgated in 1950, that a number of contemplative orders had timidly begun to explore federation and other collaborative ways of pooling resources to help the orders thrive. The Second Vatican Council gave an exciting new impetus to these efforts, seeming to affirm the call to collaboration and communion with greater urgency. But even before the Council, and certainly by its conclusion, fear had set in about what federating or associating might mean, and the issue proved more and more divisive. It was significant that the Carmelites, the largest of the contemplative women's orders and so a kind of bell-weather for others, had failed in nearly all their early federation attempts.[42] The women's order in the United States had been deeply rent by a 1965 meeting in Saint Louis, even though this meeting was organized for the discussion of Carmelite life and formation, not to support or discuss federation. It was one of the first meetings in which Carmelites in

the United States gathered outside their own monasteries to collaborate with one another. Up to this time, every effort by American Carmelites to meet or federate since 1955 had been thwarted from within the order itself. Even after the Council, our Generalate continued to delay year after year in handling requests for a rescript allowing the nuns to meet and discuss federation.

Notwithstanding these failures, we continued to hear the Vatican Council's clear mandate for renewal and adaptation. This was a mandate that I felt could and should be pursued collaboratively even if we were not able to go so far as discussing federation. It was with this primary purpose in mind that I conceived of a seminar for contemplative sisters. There were several influences that helped shape the idea into a more concrete proposal. The Metropolitan Association of Contemplatives had been founded in New York, and a number of us began to dream about forming a national leadership group for contemplative religious women.[43] Moreover, our community in Baltimore was working closely with Fr. Thomas Kilduff, O.C.D., in formation and renewal since he returned from the Generalate in 1961 at the conclusion of his term as the first American General Definitor, and he consistently encouraged the idea of collaboration with other Carmelite monasteries especially in the area of formation. His effort to interface Carmelite life and spirituality with the documents and theology of Vatican II had a profound influence on us. And our community had closely followed the Search and Service seminars conducted by the Jesuit theologians at Woodstock during the summers immediately following Vatican II. All these gatherings had as their purpose the interpretation and dissemination of the theology of the Council documents, and each year I procured audio tapes of the Woodstock talks from George Wilson, S.J., for our community. We considered these tapes to be an essential part of our theological updating and renewal following the Council. In 1967, as part of this same series of meetings, the Jesuits helped organize a seminar for active sisters at Woodstock. In the months that followed, with all these influences at work within me, I realized that the next step for us should be a similar seminar for contemplatives. Since the Baltimore Carmelites always had a very close relationship with the Maryland Jesuits, I asked George Wilson if Woodstock would host such a meeting.

As indicated above, it was not my intention that the meeting be used for discussing federation or association, although clearly some participants arrived with that goal in mind. The federation issue had proved itself very divisive for Carmelites, as witnessed by the enormous fall-out from the St. Louis meeting. I did not want to provoke further division or have the meeting side-tracked by the issue, particularly since every other federation attempt in our order had met with obdurate resistance from Rome and our Generalate. Instead, the meeting was designed for prioresses and novice directors to collaborate in matters of formation. This was a purpose that seemed clearly in keeping with the dictates from Rome and the Council, and so we should have been on firm

footing in terms of ecclesial support and approval. However, Thomas Kilduff and I were persistently cautious, conscious then and later of the high-level opposition to gatherings of contemplative nuns outside their monasteries. As events turned out, this caution was necessary, and we needed to be discrete, shrewd and strategic as well, for the Woodstock Meeting unintentionally became a lightning rod for submerged fears about the Council reforms as regards contemplative religious women.

It is here that the individuals who gathered around the Woodstock meeting become the story. Woodstock was willing to host the seminar I had proposed if I could get three or four contemplatives from other traditions to work with me in the endeavor. Shortly thereafter I met Gertrude Wilkinson, the Redemptoristine superior in Esopus, and invited her to join. Gert was already in touch with Ruth Brennan, superior of the Passionist Sisters in Clark Summit. And Elizabeth (Betty) Enoch, abbess of the Bronx Poor Clares, along with Patricia Cast of the Bronx Carmel, came through the Metropolitan Association. These women and I became the core planning group for Woodstock, along with Thomas Kilduff. Thomas Clarke, S.J. and George Wilson also participated as theological advisors and representatives of Woodstock, and Kathleen Gregg, S.C., later joined the group as facilitator. We were aided immeasurably by Sister Mary Daniel Turner, a woman of profound vision, who at the time was provincial of the Notre Dame de Namur Sisters at Ilchester, Maryland, near Woodstock. She hosted the meeting to plan our seminar, and much more. In her many leadership capacities over the years—provincial, general of her congregation, and executive director of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), she collaborated in our efforts to find our voice in the Church and to renew contemplative life for women in this country. She and I have walked a long journey together from relative youth to mature age.

This group of individuals from different traditions was able to come together after years of virtual isolation to undertake a collaborative process and to form relationships which strengthened us and those we touched for a generation. Natural affinities and deep kinship seemed to spring up almost effortlessly, as if we had known each other for a very long time. In this we saw the force of an underlying commonwealth that, while hidden and unspoken, had been present all the time. It was not as narrow as any one religious order, nor indeed as broad as religious life in general. It was a commonwealth of the contemplative life. Our experiences as contemplative religious women gave us a basis of relationship that immediately grounded all our dealings with each other, notwithstanding our various traditions. These were far more than work relationships, and yet still different from friendship, at least in the beginning. Our bonds were not for personal gratification, but for a great purpose, an alliance of women helping women to achieve something nearly unimaginable, on the frontier of religious life.

Woodstock as Frontier: New horizons

Frontier for Chinnici represents the impulse of those in religious life to "live in the borderlands,[44] and to transcend institutional and social boundaries."[45] He beautifully describes the phenomenon of religious life as frontier: "It represents a geographical, interpersonal, imaginative space where the embodied human spirit, compelled by love, reaches out to cross inherited boundaries between civilization and barbarism, the citizen and the alien, the familiar and the unfamiliar, the worldly and the heavenly."[46] In his research he found a "dominant and startling pattern of professed men and women performing a religious identity which . . . moves outside the boundaries of the established ways of thinking."[47] In his examples, he speaks of how the frontier for some active religious sisters was quite literally the American frontier. Their impulse to the borderlands was concretized in actual physical, geographic terms: going out to a "zone of encounter" where traditional modes of behavior and thought do not necessarily operate, where perspectives and even actions must adapt to an unknown landscape.

For the contemplative, there is a deeper kind of frontier, the boundary of consciousness and imagination on which the mystical life is always lived. Throughout history, contemplative religious orders have pushed the boundaries of the institutional church and lived on the margin of ecclesial and societal structures, issuing calls to reform, looking to and over the horizon, imagining radically new futures. The impulse to live in the borderlands is engrained in our very way of life. Our unknown landscape, our zone of encounter, is the prophetic frontier where God is met.

Woodstock took our group of contemplative women straight into this frontier, as resistance to our project began to intrude. This was not surprising. We were beginning to introduce concepts and ideas outside the boundaries of established thinking, new ideas to fit the new time we were entering, the new place where the old boundary lines no longer seemed relevant. And our work was not just on the periphery of contemplative life but rather affected two principles that had become identified with contemplative life: strangely enough, not contemplation but enclosure and the lack of an active ministry. We were beginning, albeit gently, to push the boundary on the question of enclosure by the very fact of our meeting and collaboration. In time, after ACS was founded, we also reinterpreted ministry, by setting as our first goal to help *all* people touch the contemplative dimension of their lives. It was a very radical step because it implied that contemplative life would have a ministerial component, and some thought this could only mean active ministry. But our intent was to develop the concept of *contemplative prayer ministry*, a ministry that was not only prayer for the people but prayer in the midst of the people, helping them to pursue their desire for God and move towards contemplation from within

their own life circumstances. And one last frontier cannot be overlooked: as women, we were beginning to find our voice.

It was not too long before the official Church took steps to discourage the Woodstock seminar, when we had barely even begun to speak, long before we ventured into reflections on the nature of contemplative prayer ministry. Even in those early days, there was significant apprehension that our work, our seminar, might destroy the vital pillars on which contemplative life had been based. This is quite ironic, really, because the meeting was conceived not as an ecclesial challenge but as a means to carry out precisely what Church leaders had asked in the Vatican Council. We had been living in a time when the contemplative orders had the approval of the institutional church, and we deeply valued that approval. It was nearly unthinkable to proceed without it. But we knew that we simply had no choice but to continue, and so we had to step outside the familiar and comfortable realm of church favor and the security of long-established concepts and perspectives.

The early resistance crystallized about a month after we had sent out the initial invitation letter for the Woodstock meeting. Cardinal Carberry sent a letter to all contemplative communities "respectfully requesting that our contemplative religious abstain from attendance at such gatherings (symposia, workshops, etc.) while the question of their renewal and adaptation is under study." This was a defining moment for all that was to come. The conflict over our efforts of collaboration, renewal and adaptation had been publicly joined, and both the motive (fear) and the consequence were to be repeated time and again as we worked through the challenges and trials. The consequence that we found repeated was this: opposition actually brought about the very thing it was trying to prevent. In other words, the very efforts that were exerted to stop the Woodstock meeting, to render it ineffective and to diminish its significance, actually caused it to shine all the brighter.

In the case of Cardinal Carberry's letter, this ironic consequence occurred because the letter was phrased as a request rather than an order under obedience to refrain from attending the meeting. It took a great deal of sophistication in those days to differentiate between a request and a command, and so those who decided to attend Woodstock were very courageous and insightful women, high-powered in terms of intellect and judgment. And so it was precisely because of the Cardinal's letter that those who gathered in Woodstock in the second half of August, 1969, were such a beautifully distilled collection of smart, savvy and wise individuals, an assembly only those circumstances could have joined; a singular group in a singular moment of time, perfectly equipped for the task and ready to give fully of themselves to achieve it.

We were, of course, not the only ones operating at the boundaries of ecclesial acceptance and the contemplative life. The fact that the meeting could go forward at all was due to the courage of Baltimore's Ordinary at

that time, Cardinal Lawrence Shehan. After receiving Cardinal Carberry's letter, I had gone to see Cardinal Shehan, to learn whether he would still support our proceeding with the meeting in his archdiocese. With an economy of words, he made clear that we should continue, that we would have his support if this became necessary, and that he believed the meeting to be important for our renewal and adaptation in light of the Council. It was only years later that I learned that Cardinal Shehan was questioned in person by the Apostolic Delegate in the days prior to Woodstock about his decision to let the meeting go ahead. He reportedly told the Apostolic Delegate that the meeting was important, that it should and would proceed, and that he did not want interference on the matter. Cardinal Shehan himself never told us about this courageous effort that allowed us to remain on the frontier, where as contemplatives and as religious women we belonged.[48]

I now look back on the planning process for Woodstock as the art of creating a climate where a vision could be articulated and chosen. As the atmosphere of this climate, we needed those few truly prophetic individuals, people to dream, imagine, and communicate the frontier vision—what Edith Stein might call *carriers of the communal life*.[49] But just as importantly, we needed a large number of people who could choose, implement and follow the vision articulated by others, to own the vision, to see it as coming not just from the prophetic voices but from within themselves. We were graced and fortunate that just such an assembly of contemplative women came together in Woodstock, due in part to the effect of Cardinal Carberry's letter, but also due to the very nature of our invitation, which would naturally attract those with a desire to participate in the great venture of rearticulating a vision for contemplative life in light of the Council.

If the participants were the climate's atmosphere, then the climate's soil was comprised of about 40 resource people whom we invited to assist the assembly. This was one more boundary being crossed. In 1969, the notion of resource people for a meeting was relatively rare anywhere, and certainly in ecclesial circles. We drew experts from all relevant fields—theology, philosophy, psychology, sociology, civil and canon law, liturgy, history, monasticism, the House of Prayer movement and more, expressing an underlying humility by the participants. Even though we were intelligent and had years of experience in contemplative life, we were well aware that our education was very uneven, and that despite our best efforts, we needed experts to assist us in the processes of renewal, updating and education ahead of us.

Among these resource people we were extraordinarily fortunate to have Margaret Brennan, IHM, a leader in the House of Prayer movement. As Superior General of the Immaculate Heart Sisters in Monroe, Michigan, and a pioneer in the higher education of religious sisters, Margaret quickly became a key figure for us in ways small and large. She began by having her

congregation host the first organizational meeting of the 30-member leadership group (which we simply called *the 30*) of ACS. Her support of other important events followed. Even more significantly, Margaret used her impressive spiritual, intellectual and scholarly gifts diligently to promote the cause of renewal and development for contemplative women. Her exceptional address to the Canon Law Society in 1975 was a bold and courageous statement to educate canon lawyers in the United States about the state of contemplative life and the multiple barriers to the renewal of the contemplative orders of women. She fearlessly carried the concerns of contemplative women to Rome as President of LCWR. Margaret understood well what it cost us to find our voice, as reflected in her moving address to Carmelites at the time of our 1990 Bicentennial Symposium, *Contemplation and the Rediscovery of the American Soul*. Like Mary Daniel Turner, Margaret has been a close lifetime friend and a true companion in fashioning the dream of contemplative women.

So we had all the elements in place as our meeting began to handle the historic moment in time that was presented to us. This was to be the performance of our religious identity and convictions.

Woodstock as Performance: The founding of ACS

Performance as Chinnici understands it is the demonstrative enfleshing or embodiment of the interior dispositions of religious life, including those dispositions metaphorically indicated by commonwealth and frontier. He says more specifically that performance constitutes the behaviors and acts of public visibility that give "visual, auditory, and bodily form to a transcendent religious belief in its intersection with human experience," performance that allows God to become incarnate and "encounter human beings where they are."[50] Thus, performance is the way that those in religious life express their experience of who God is and their own identity. Chinnici's examples include, for instance, religious men and women who have courageously engaged in civil disobedience, who have marched in Selma, who have opened houses of prayer. Performance is metaphorically bringing the giftedness of commonwealth to the frontier and there steadfastly expending that giftedness, pouring it out, transforming the liminal space, refusing to run back to the center for fear that the commonwealth will be lost. Performance is witness.

Our witness at Woodstock became much more than we had at first expected. Though in the very fact of the meeting, we knew we were pushing a boundary, we probably would have left Woodstock without creating an association if we had been left to our work without further intervention from Church leadership. However, the Vatican's promulgation of *Venite Seorsum* during the meeting changed our agenda irrevocably. *Venite Seorsum*, a rigorous interpretation on the subject of enclosure for contemplative women, stunned our assembly. As this document seemed very strongly to discourage meetings such as the fruitful one in which we were then engaged, and seemed to us not sufficiently reflective of what has been called *Sponsa Christi's* "apostolic viewpoint"[51] on cloister, we collectively knew we must respond, both with voice and act. In many ways this is the heart of performance in religious life: people who have no choice but to act, driven by their rootedness in God to respond to the reality of their lives and the circumstances of their time. It is the encounter with religious mystery that is being newly expressed in a language accessible for the times, and yet *always beyond*, a mystery beyond the visible and beyond the person herself. For Chinnici, this transcendent yet accessible expression is what gives religious life its historical vitality. Our assembly's response to *Venite Seorsum* was precisely this metaphorical performance in its essence.

We worked many long hours preparing a letter critiquing parts of *Venite Seorsum*, aided by the experts from many fields who were present with us. We also decided that we could not leave Woodstock without forming an association. Thus the Association of Contemplative Sisters was born. From today's perspective, in a culture that knows greater alienation from the institutional church, in a society that has lived through and been formed by the era of ardent individualism and focus on the self, it is difficult to imagine just how radical these steps were, how much courage they required, just how deeply this was performance grounded in the *beyond* of our religious conviction about God and contemplative life in the Church. Because participants had come to Woodstock without any instructions from their communities on forming an association, and likewise could not agree to a statement on *Venite Seorsum* on behalf of their communities, we had to act in personal capacities, to sign the letter in our own individual names, to be individual members of ACS. We had to stand up and be counted ourselves. These first steps were followed by more. I remember particularly the trepidation with which we signed our coordinating committee's first letter to all the communities after the Woodstock meeting. We were raising our heads, an act that was previously beyond imagination.

We were all to be burnt many times along the way, but the strength of this group did not falter; we carried on, despite the forces and power inclined against us. True, a few fell along the way or opted out, and some did not even make it to Woodstock, chastened by previous struggles like the Saint Louis meeting, and for some there was simply a failure of imagination. But most persevered—and to do so in the prevailing climate became a stunning witness to the Woodstock participants' profound care for contemplative life and our confidence in the future vision we were able to imagine.

I cannot overstate what a sociological wonder this perseverance represented. To have a group of 135 women and some men step so quickly and so visibly beyond the realm of unquestioned acceptance of Church pronouncements—and to do so individually—was a breakthrough without precedent. It was our first

time on the high trapeze, and we had no net. I imagine that lay Catholics have been going through a similar experience in recent years as they have begun truly to find their voice, to be constructive critics of the Church they cherish. We, too, were staking our position not because we hated our life but because we cherished it, and cherished the Church of which we were a part. We simply knew that we had to update and collaborate to survive and to be vital for the Church.

It was through a sense of the transcendent that our group was able to perform as it did, at the frontier, with attention to our commonwealth gifts and needs. We were somehow able to move beyond the competitiveness that commonly impedes or poisons leadership by the most talented individuals, to move beyond self-interest to make the best choices for our project. Personal gain and personal comfort did not figure in the dynamic of this group. And perhaps most significantly, we were able to let go of our fears, or at least to proceed despite them. I do not remember any of us pausing too long over the question of losing our contemplative identity; we knew rather that we were intimately engaged in shaping it.

There are three stories of performance that I want to recall to convey better the spirit of self-gift that was both the grace and lesson of Woodstock and the formation of ACS. The first involves Mother Francis Clare, abbess of the New Orleans Poor Clares and President of the Mother Bentivoglio Federation. She was a wonderful and wise woman who would have quickly been tapped for a leadership role in the fledgling association. When the discussions opened on who should be named to the coordinating committee, she took the floor and, to our surprise, passed the torch to others. She said that the assembly had before it the five individuals who had already proven themselves capable of coordinating and organizing the seminar, of doing what had never been done before in bringing together contemplative women from the different traditions. Why, she asked, should we look any further for the new ACS coordinating committee? We were elected by acclamation. Mother Francis Clare would surely have been named herself had she not made this magnanimous gesture. But she had the greatness to hand over that to which she might have clung, for the sake of the future of contemplative life.

The second story concerns the assembly's election of *the 30* for ACS. Ordinarily, one might expect personal preferences and political agendas to play into such an election, but instead, in this case, the assembly voted for the most truly capable individuals, so that the group comprising *the 30* was nearly the same as what might have emerged if one single, wise and discriminating person had hand-picked the group. There was no temptation on the part of the participants to disempower others, to claim position and status for oneself, or to assume exclusive or excessive control. This was a model of shared governance at its best, where for the most part those with the more relevant skills and talents

exercised leadership collaboratively, and those not in leadership provided input and stood ready to support and implement the decisions made. It was a grass roots effort that was able, without abandoning egalitarianism, to recognize and follow leadership. It was in fact a commonwealth as we described at the outset, structured as necessary for order and function while being radically participative and affirming to the members.

The third story is more personal, but the inner deliberations it highlights were almost surely not unique to me. We were given a day to decide if we would each accept a position on the committee. I can still remember walking that evening, thinking/praying, and realizing that acceptance would mean that my life would change irrevocably, that it would never again be the same. I was standing on the brink: in a way it was my own encounter with the question of contemplative identity—would I somehow lose my Carmelite life by continuing in this course? But it came to me that prayer could not be so constrained, that contemplation was something much deeper, something that could be sustained at least for a time in the midst of the hectic period that was about to open for me. This was certainly the case of our order's founder/reformer Saint Teresa of Avila, whose work in making foundations consumed much of the time she might have preferred to give to quiet encounter with God. I also realized that an important mission was being handed to me; for the sake of the contemplative life I was ready to sacrifice something of that life for a time.

I give these examples to illustrate that we were all somehow able to transcend ourselves, in some ways to let a kind of new self emerge, because we knew that the project at hand was so much bigger than all of us, and we were willing to stake our lives on it. The contemplative life was a cause that demanded all our passion, and so we mutually used each other's giftedness to best advantage for our common goal. We were bonded, as I said at the outset, by our love for the contemplative life, the commonwealth asset that we were responsible for tending and nurturing. This self-giving love was the foundation of the vitality and energy that came together at Woodstock in the summer of 1969 and from which ACS emerged.

ACS and its Legacy: Finding our voice

ACS and the Woodstock experience have given a generation of contemplative women a wonderful legacy to pass on to those who are following us. I am very conscious in particular of the continuing influence of the invaluable leadership training program that was part of ACS' first collaborative educational efforts. This program helped many of us and our communities to develop leadership skills that have served us for a lifetime. It was a very intensive program taking place over two years with three lengthy sessions. Many of the planning, group facilitation, goal-setting and consensus building techniques that were taught

in these sessions continue to be extremely effective for us in the Baltimore community today. Our next generation is learning these techniques by example, by experiencing them in action—they are being *caught* as well as *taught*. I am convinced this leadership training contributed greatly to the ability of ACS women to renew their communities, to have a voice, to articulate a vision, and to help bring the vision into reality.

The challenges and resistance we faced in those early days also strengthened us, as I have already suggested. In some ways, the struggles and trials we had to bear might seem a waste, because they took energy that we could perhaps have channeled more positively. But at the same time, the opposition to our growth and development actually and ironically forced us to grow and develop—we had no other choice, if we were not to abandon our vision. And so we gradually found our competency, self-assurance, and an inner security. Everything that happened, positive and negative, developed our group as leaders and as contemplatives.

In terms of our vision for the future, it is important to say that we saw only a part of it at any one time, and it moved and expanded and changed. For example, as ACS evolved, the decision was made to permit those no longer in canonical communities to be associates and later full members. This decision eventually led to the admission of lay women as full members, a development that might at first seem consistent with the initial ACS goal of helping people realize the contemplative dimension of their lives. However, the admission of lay women as full members decisively changed the direction, purpose and vision of ACS, though perhaps unintentionally. As lay members grew in number, the association indeed became one way to share contemplative life with the people. On the other hand, it lost much of its ability to serve as a forum for contemplative communities to collaborate and to speak and act in the Church. Meetings thus became more concentrated on personal spirituality and were less concerned with the programs and processes of contemplative communities. Full lay membership almost certainly would not have emerged had ACS been formed as an association of religious communities rather than of individuals within communities, as might have happened if *Venite Seorsum* had not forced us to act so quickly. Lay membership was certainly prophetic in its own way, and so it did not detract from the Association's visionary stance and importance. However, it did represent a change in function fundamentally different from that which we had first dreamed.

Another problematic decision point occurred when it was suggested at the first meeting of *the 30* in Monroe, Michigan, that the members of the coordinating committee live together, away from their own communities for a year or more to facilitate the development of ACS. I had significant reservations about this step and decided that I could not participate. Then as now, I was convinced that even while we live at the frontier and are pushing boundaries, it

is essential to retain the heart of our identity within our own traditions. Taking members out of their monastery for more than just occasional meetings had the potential to undermine that identity and also to lead to some disaffection, both for the individuals involved in the living arrangement and for their communities back home. For some communities, the living arrangement signaled the potential for a loss of their unique traditions, and these fears were then, to some extent, sealed when some of our key founding members left their communities and exited religious life. This was a blow to communities' faith in the process and organization that our coordinating committee represented. Those who had believed in us were shaken. Over time, the memory of these painful losses led some communities to have less enthusiasm and more caution in assessing whether their members would participate in ACS. Again, the ability of ACS to function as a forum for contemplative communities was undermined.

But even as its vision changed, ACS remained the seed for other associations of religious women. Its very formation seemed to unblock action on our rescript request, which came within three months after Woodstock. Shortly thereafter we formed Carmelite Communities Associated (CCA), the first U.S. Carmelite association (though the last to be approved). And ACS also contributed to the work of other groups, notably Sisters Uniting, founded in February 1971 as a group representing six national associations of sisters. It was a personal privilege for me to participate with Vilma Seelaus, O.C.D., as ACS representatives in this prophetic effort of religious women in the United States.

Even as ACS moved in a different direction, its early vision and dream was picked up and continues to be pursued by others—by some communities including my own in Baltimore, and by individual contemplatives around the country. It was from the initial ACS vision and dream to share contemplation with the people, for instance, that some of us developed a desire to undertake a contemporary interpretation of our Carmelite tradition. This desire issued in the creation of the Carmelite Forum, which now meets every year in South Bend to provide one-week in-depth lectures and workshops on Carmelite spirituality. It was also one key inspiration for my community's decision many years ago to create a contemporary contemplative life in the here and now, even if circumstances unfortunately precluded this type of renewal on a broader scale within the order. All these developments have led to incremental advancements in collaboration and dialogue. For example, following the creation of the Carmelite Forum, the two branches of our order—Discalced (O.C.D.) and Ancient Observance (O. Carm.)—jointly formed a forum for collaboration, the Carmelite Institute, which offers a week-long educational conference every two to three years. There has also been some international exchange by having nuns from one country attend association meetings in another—for instance, CCA had five international guests at its last meeting, and I was invited to attend a recent

meeting of the Association of Carmelite Sisters of England and Scotland. Many ideas for greater international collaboration are now being pursued, even at the level of our Generalate. I feel that these advances are rooted in the earliest associations of contemplatives, including ACS.

Conclusion

Although ACS turned out differently than we had perhaps expected, it has surely been prophetic in its own way. Its story is one of women in the church pursuing a dream—one dream that, having been spoken, blossomed into many other dreams that we continue to live to this day. Woodstock and ACS at its founding helped those of us who lived those days to develop an almost biological trait for contemplative women that is now part of evolutionary development: something engrained in the nature of our communities and being inherited by our next generation. Something special has been placed at the community's core. With Edith Stein I believe that every community has a spirit, a current of consciousness or lifepower, and everything placed on that current, whether positive or negative, is passed along.[52] The current of any community is defined by the choices its members make—to be governed by fear, or to step forward courageously with vision.

All the women of the Woodstock era who chose the path of courage, offering their lives fully to a project larger than themselves, gave a performance of their convictions that will always be a part of the fabric of religious life for contemplatives in the United States. I see our younger members in Baltimore receiving their spirit; I see our current community living from it as if it were a natural part of them. The people of Woodstock and ACS made a difference, and telling their story—this history—is so important. The new generation of contemplative women is living in a new time; their phase of renewal, very different from ours, will call for new things. But the traces we have left them of our sweat, toil, and most especially our love, will give them the basic materials for success. Our story shows that a passion for God leaves no room for anything but a full-hearted and courageous commitment to the future, to the transformation that only a complete kenotic offering can allow. Then a new self, that new consciousness for which we yearn, can emerge at last. There are indeed many beautiful ripples still stirring the waters from that first rock thrown in more than 35 years ago.