

CARMELITE COMMUNITIES ASSOCIATED – GENERAL ASSEMBLY

May 4-9, 2025
Marriottsville, MD

NARRATIVE REPORT

BLESSING FOR THE PLACE BETWEEN

When you come
to the place between.

May it become
for you
a place to dream.

When you have left
what you held
most dear.

May the pain
that has pressed itself
into you

When you are traveling
toward the life
you know not.

give way
to vision
to knowing.

When you arrive
at the hardest ground.

May the morning
make of it

May it become
for you
a place to rest.

an altar,
a path,
a place to begin
again.

—Jan Richardson

“We are experiencing the ‘change of an era.’ And we are in a place with some doors closing and others partially opening. We long for the Risen Christ to lead us on the path of what will come. We hope for the Wisdom to craft our future together. We ask: What shall we be? Who shall we be? How will it happen?” With these words Sr. Colette welcomed participants to CCA’s General Assembly of 2025.

We were all acutely aware that this meeting would be radically different from others in our 55-year history. For one thing, the online participants outnumbered by far the 20 or so onsite participants. Kevin Nelson’s expert technological skills enabled the smooth running of the meeting, enabling the sisters online to participate as fully as their circumstances allowed.

United in hope and expectation with the whole Church as the cardinals gathered in Rome to elect Pope Francis' successor, we began each day with prayer for the Conclave. One of the desired outcomes of the meeting was to have *white smoke*. And so it happened! Shortly before lunch on Thursday, May 8, our OCD brothers, Fr. Steven Payne and Br. John Mary, arrived and announced that White Smoke had been seen! We immediately gathered around the television in the meeting room where, in spirit, we joined thousands of people gathered in the plaza awaiting the announcement of the new Pope. After nearly an hour, it was announced and the room erupted in joy. Cardinal Robert Francis Prevost from Chicago, USA, was proclaimed Pope Leo the XIV! And thus our meeting resumed with wonder and thanksgiving.

The presence of our guests, Sr. Nancy Reynolds SP (our canon lawyer) and Fr. Michael Berry OCD (who presided at several of our daily Liturgies), as well as Srs. Virginia Marie and Dolores from Port Tobacco (representing St. Teresa's Association), contributed greatly to the meeting. Sisters from Scotland, Australia, the Netherlands, and the U.K. made heroic efforts to attend online. Sr. Rebecca from New Zealand arrived looking bleary-eyed, having risen at 3:00 a.m. her time to be with us! The presence of our international sisters was a further expression of the bonds that unite us, as expressed so simply, "we are sisters without borders."

Daily Eucharist was celebrated in "the Oratory," a small chapel that provided an intimate setting for our group. The liturgy booklets for Easter season were joyful, simple, prayerful, and truly Carmelite, thanks to Sr. Robin and Sr. Mary Fleig.

Once again we had the great gift of Sr. Nancy Schreck, OSF, as our presenter and guide. Nancy has accompanied CCA since our general assembly in 2023, directing our discernment of the future of CCA. The honest and faith-filled participation of our sisters at the four online retreat days with Nancy that preceded this meeting had prepared us well for the present days.

Each session began with an inspired song and images, creating a natural flow that directed our discernment of the future of CCA. Nancy invited us to focus our discernment through the lens of *liminality*. We are embarking on a new journey with new dreams for the association, and although we came to the meeting unclear about the outcome of our decisions, we had confidence in each other and trust in God's Spirit that our discernment would bear fruit for the future of the association. Nancy acknowledged that these are challenging times for contemplative religious life. She stressed that we are part of a larger liminal reality: the search for spirituality and longing for God.

Again and again we were reminded that we would only reach a place of holy indifference through respect for one other and courage to let go of non-essentials, through attentive reference to our rich history, and placing our full attention on the core values that we hold in common. There was deep sharing on our experience of liminality—personally, communally, and

within CCA. In our small groups Nancy continued to challenge us, in her gentle, persistent style, to go deeper and fearlessly ask the important questions.

We viewed a presentation by Margaret Wheately, *Staying in the Middle of the River*, each segment of which enlightened, challenged, and spoke to our own present experience.

*Wisdom be attentive;
Wisdom open our hearts.
Wisdom that operates in the liminal time.*

We arrived at the point where Nancy introduced the proposal put forth by the leadership team: that we hire an Executive Director to replace our current Leadership Team. The assembly spoke honestly of the consensus that was emerging; namely, that the care of the sisters is of paramount importance. Whatever structure we choose will emerge from that premise. The structure, whatever it may be, must be flexible enough that we can take the risk of making honest mistakes. Our emphasis now is on sisterhood and our experience of being one community rather than separate monasteries. Do questions remain? Yes. Is there total clarity as to how our new model will work? No. Can we trust each other? Yes. Can we trust the Wisdom that has guided us this far? Yes.

Nancy concluded her presentations with the parable of the Sower and the Seeds. Our seeds are planted. Now is the time to cultivate. Nancy has taught us well – and it was with deep gratitude and warm affection that we blessed Nancy and sent her forth to plant other seeds of hope as she has in us these past two years.

One evening both the “in-person” and zoom participants gathered for a discussion regarding ongoing formation. This produced a number of interesting options for further consideration.

Another evening we played “Carmelite Bingo,” which was a big hit and took us down memory lane! This involved matching photos of sisters from the first days of CCA through every year of our history with pictures on our Bingo cards. Dollar Store prizes were awarded – and sometimes exhibited in the midst of much hilarity!

A panel of sisters from Baltimore, Boston, Carmelite Communion, Latrobe, and Reno presented updates related to what their communities had shared during CCA’s zoom meeting in April 2024. This included the many changes that affect our lives, events that seem to confront us in rapid succession. Several of the communities provided PowerPoint slides to accompany their presentations.

On Wednesday afternoon we welcomed Sr. Mary Elizabeth Goeckel, president of the St. Joseph Association and a member of Flemington Carmel, who is the U.S. representative on the International Commission for the Revision of the Nuns’ Constitutions. She gave a firsthand

report on the initial meeting of the Commission, whose nine members met in Avila recently. Mary Elizabeth strongly encouraged our communities to enter into the proposed work of the Commission and to communicate with its members regarding our questions, comments, suggestions, etc.

When, on Thursday, we arrived at the business of the meeting, Stephanie presented the three proposals submitted for consideration:

- That we lift the designation for the Thomas Kilduff Interest Fund Account.
- The proposal from the Carmelite Communion was considered as a modification of the Leadership Team's proposal for a new model of governance and was considered a part of the following proposal.
- That we hire an Executive Director.

Each proposal received individual consideration. Before voting, great care and time was given to discussion, small and large group sharing, areas needing clarification, and suggestions. Once again, we acknowledged that the discernment retreats of the past year and Sr. Nancy Schreck's presence, input, and process at this meeting prepared sisters for the meticulous, respectful, and open discussion of the proposals.

The third proposal, because of its significance, received the most attention. Time and attention were given to discussion of an oversight board, particularly to the make-up of the board.

Although questions and implications remain, details will be worked out as this new model unfolds. Again and again, concern was expressed for non-incardinated sisters: their care, oversight, inclusion, and membership in a community.

There was an excellent intervention by Sr. Roz—no doubt nudged by the Holy Spirit—that Sr. Barb Losh, as local leader of the Cleveland community, be included as a member of the Governance Board. The Cleveland Sisters have contributed very much to CCA through Barb's appointment as CCA treasurer and the various delegations that others in the community have accepted. Adding Sr. Barb as a member of the Governance Board was unanimously accepted.

After a lengthy discussion with the entire assembly, the Delegate Assembly unanimously affirmed the institution of a CCA Governance Board, made up of the current prioresses, Cleveland's local leader, and the three past presidents: Judy Long, Claire Sokol, Mary Wild, Barb Losh, Bernadette Therese, Colette, Marjorie.

The ten delegates unanimously accepted the three Goals for 2025-2027. As a priority for Goal #3, CCA will develop a Vision Statement. This was in response to a call for a more positive, inspirational statement, focused less on our fragility and more on hope, with an expression of

our solidarity with all humanity. Connie agreed to draft a statement with assistance from her community, especially Robin.

It was suggested that this might be a time to consider a revision of CCA's Mission Statement. We were encouraged to reflect on the Mission Statement which is posted on CCA's website.

www.ccacarmels.org

Sr. Barb Losh announced that she will be stepping down as CCA treasurer. We expressed gratitude for her excellent service, competency, and dedication. Barb graciously offered to continue for two months until a new treasurer is named.

With the support of their communities, the leadership team has generously offered to remain as a transition group until September 1, 2025 at which time the new Governance Board will begin its service.

The leadership team and Margie have accepted the role of search committee for an Executive Director, with the hope of hiring an Executive Director by September 1.

Many delegations will remain with an additional delegation of contact with the International Commission for the Revision of the Nuns' Constitutions, which Claire graciously accepted.

The meeting adjourned with thanks to all who did so much to facilitate its success – from its planning to its conclusion. We expressed special thanks to Stephanie Hauge for her commitment to and love for CCA, as witnessed through her skills of facilitation and generous gift of self in so many ways. Both Sr. Nancy Schreck and Stephanie have been instrumental in preparing CCA for this historic meeting.

Fr. Steven celebrated Mass with us for the Election of our new Pope Leo XIV. It was evident that the Holy Spirit had been working in our midst in the same way that the Spirit guided the Cardinals who elected Pope Leo XIV just hours earlier. With grateful hearts we prayed for Pope Leo XIV and the Church. God surprises us beyond our hopes and dreams!

Participants gathered on Thursday evening for a prayer service prepared by Marita and Margie. They could not have known just how the meeting would unfold and what decisions for governance would be made. Rather than prepare the Ritual of Installation of New Leadership, they prepared "CCA's Unfolding Future: Prayer Service to Empower and Embrace the Newness." After acknowledging our gratitude for the work of the Leadership Team these past two years in a *Prayer of Gratitude*, Colette, Mary, Shirley, Jeanne Marie, and Roz were each presented with the gift of a beautiful puzzle, along with encouragement to relax and enjoy a much-needed rest.

All recited a blessing on those who will guide CCA during the next two years. Colette, Bernadette Therese, Claire, and Margie received the blessing as representatives of the Governance Board. The evening ended with the singing of the Easter antiphon, "Regina Caeli."

CCA's meeting this year had a tone of history and newness about it. While we marvel at all the Holy Spirit has worked in us throughout our 55-year history, we realize that everything has led to this moment. By adopting a governance model to serve the hopes and needs of our diverse membership at this time in our history, we chose something totally new. We move forward with deep confidence in God and trust in each other as CCA's future continues to unfold.

THE JOURNEY

Where are you going, I asked.

To places I have never been was the answer.

What do you plan to do, I asked.

My purpose will be evident at journey's end.

Who has planned your itinerary, I asked.

Its plan will be revealed at times most unlikely.

Why would you consent to such a vague plan, I said.

I accepted the challenge when I accepted life was the answer.

—Mary Eleanore Rice

Sr. Marjorie Robinson, OCD

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