

Newer Member Panel Presentation

Given on April 18, 2018

Introduction – Sr. Celia Ashton (Baltimore)

I come before you today full of gratitude for the many ways this assembly has supported and encouraged our Newer Members. Your fidelity to our Carmelite charism over many, many years has widened the pathway through which Carmel will undoubtedly move into a future full of challenge and immense hope. The flame, which the founding sisters of CCA ignited, continues to burn in our Newer Members today.

To our sisters Claire, Hilary, Michaelene, and Monika, I want to express my appreciation for the way you have empowered us as Newer Members to be contributors to CCA. I speak for Cecelia, Maria Fideles and myself when I say that it has been an absolute privilege to work so closely with you during this past term. You were always there to support and guide us, and you gave us the responsibility, and the challenge, of organizing and planning every aspect of the Newer Member Gathering. We are ever grateful for your trust, confidence, and sisterly love.

To each of our CCA Communities and our dear friends in Kirkentilloch, thank you for your overwhelming support in making it possible for nearly all of our Newer Members to participate in the 2017 Gathering. From the bottom of my heart, I thank you! You have given us a wonderful gift, which I believe will continue to bear fruit in each of our communities for years to come.

I want to begin by giving a brief synopsis of the genesis of our Newer Member Gatherings. Many of you will remember the passion with which Sr. Cecelia Kang expressed her desire at the 2014 Assembly that some sort of program be offered to bring the Newer Members of CCA together so that we might have the opportunity to form the same deep bonds of friendship she observed among the wider assembly. In response to her request, the Leadership Team delegated Srs. Carol Sachse and Maria Fidelis Musiko with planning the first Newer Member Gathering, which was held in Darien in 2015.

The purpose of the Darien Gathering “was to provide an opportunity for the newer members of CCA to get to know each other, to learn about the history of CCA in order to build commitment and enthusiasm for our future, to explore the spirituality of leadership in the context of our current realities and to encourage leadership potential among our newer members.”

Sr. Kathleen Pruitt was the facilitator and main presenter. She gave inspiring presentations on “The Grace of Contemplative Listening”, and “The Spirituality of Leadership: Contemplation and Discernment”. She facilitated dialogue among us as we explored our hopes and dreams, as well as the opportunities, challenges and concerns for CCA as we moved into the unfolding future. She led us in the deeper conversation of how we might keep our Carmelite charism alive in light of our current experiences, and the realities of our everyday life, and she taught us the importance of “the why.”

Srs. Marian Steffens and Claire Sokol also gave a beautiful presentation on the history of CCA. Claire used the image of the Visitation to illustrate our current situation. The younger Mary is eager, hopeful, energetic, and pregnant with new life. She wants to learn from and assist Elizabeth who is also very pregnant with the wisdom and insight that only comes after many years of fidelity, perseverance and sacrifice having faced significant challenges and overcome many obstacles.

It was at this gathering that our sisters said, “We choose to rekindle, reclaim, and proclaim our deep passion for our charism.” “If we live our life seriously, we become a sign of God’s presence in the world; and we become a challenge to others.” “We are holding aloft the light of Christ to the world so that people can see, hope, and know God’s mercy and feel that others are in solidarity with them.” “We wake up the world with our prayer and our JOY; our vocation is amazing, limitless, and beautiful.” “We witness to the love of God and we offer a space for all to experience the embrace and the peace of Christ.” “We need to be vulnerable and have our hearts broken open.” I could go on...

At this gathering, we defined a Newer Member as “any sister who joined CCA, either by entrance or transfer, after 2000” and at the suggestion of Michelene, we began to study the Charter of Life.

We agreed that regular meetings and greater collaboration among us was essential as we heeded Pope Francis’ call to “Wake Up the World.” We felt that our meeting together was important as it opened the space for friendships to grow and for deep, meaningful, and relevant dialogue to occur. This first gathering was so successful, we wanted to meet again.

Our proposal was accepted by the assembly and Cecelia Kang, Maria Fidelis Musiko, and I were delegated by the Leadership Team to plan our next gathering. Our experience of the 2015 Gathering, our study of the Charter of Life, and our collective desire to internalize and live deeply the values of our life guided us in selecting the theme of the 2017

Gathering – A Reflection of the Beauty of Carmel: Embracing our Contemplative Identity and Articulating our Carmelite Charism for the World Today.

We gathered at the Mt. Alvernia Retreat Center in Wappinger Falls, NY for five of the most energetic and spirit filled days you could imagine. The input given by Srs. Connie FitzGerald, Carolyn O’Hara, and Fr. Daniel Chowning was phenomenal. We worked hard, and the group was so attentive and engaged; there is no question that the Spirit was “leaning in” on us. We studied the History of CCA and the Charter of Life. We spoke of our own lived experience of Carmel -- the graces, challenges and beauty of our life. We discussed theopoiesis, Christ consciousness, morphogenetic fields, emergence, beauty, union, transformation, the dark night, and the Trinity. We dove deep into the texts of Teresa and John focusing on union with God. It was fantastic!

One of the highlights of the 2017 Gathering was the time we spent with our sisters in Beacon. They welcomed us with open arms, made numerous runs to the airport in torrential rain at all hours of the day and night, provided us with ample Halloween treats, and invited us for Eucharist and a delicious dinner. I know we will always remember with great fondness and love the time we shared together. On behalf of us all, I would like to thank Sr. Marjorie Robinson and all of our sisters in Beacon for your warm welcome and generosity. It was just superb!

The 2017 Gathering opened the door for international participation and we were delighted that Srs. Johann, Jenny, and Dorothy from Scotland accepted our invitation. As a newer member, I feel that continued international collaboration is vital to the future of Carmel. Regardless of the particular association or federation, Carmel is faced with a similar reality – our communities are fragile and median ages are high. And yet, God continues to call new members to Carmel.

As newer members, we can be isolated from other newer members, people who share a similar experience and whose lives have been shaped by a common historical background. As a newer member who is standing on the threshold of solemn profession and looking forward to what I hope will be a very long life in Carmel, I recognize now the importance of developing relationships with other newer members in the US and abroad. While it has always been the strength of our Association to cultivate collaboration and communion among associations and federations at home and abroad, I believe these relationships are necessary now more than ever as Carmel becomes smaller. And to do this at a time when countries throughout the world are pulling back and adopting a “me first” nationalistic attitude is perhaps the best prophetic and countercultural witness we can offer our world today.

Despite our current reality, our future is full of hope, but we must continue to be bold, daring, and courageous. We need to take risks and forge ahead, cooperating fully with the Spirit who is at work shaping Carmel in ways we can't possibly imagine.

It is our hope that our proposals for both another Newer Member Gathering in 2019 and the formation seminar will be accepted and that we will have even greater participation. We feel that our coming together in one location is the best way to mine the depth of contemplative wisdom among us. Hearing the same input from renown Carmelite presenters, having time for contemplative dialogue and prayer, and the opportunity to deepen the sisterly bonds between us will help to ensure that the foundational values of the contemplative life will be maintained and that the Carmelite charism will continue to be transmitted in ways appropriate for our time.

When asked if they felt that the Newer Member Gathering helped to build relationships among us for the purpose of serving CCA in the future, 100% of those who attended said "Yes!"

At one point in our gathering we provided an opportunity to break into our respective cohort groups. By definition, a cohort is a "group of people who have something in common." We will hear more about cohorts in Sr. Mary Johnson's presentation; however, following this idea, Teresa Susan will present the thoughts and unique challenges of the sisters who have made solemn profession. I will speak on behalf of those of us in initial Carmelite formation, and Johann will convey the experience of the International Sisters. Carolyn, who was our facilitator at the 2017 Gathering, will end by sharing her own experience.

Let me end this introduction by saying that CCA has stretched and has opened a space in trust and love where the creative and life-giving energy of its Newer Members can be brought forth for the benefit of the entire assembly. Among our Newer Members there is a strong sense of dedication and commitment to live our Carmelite charism to the fullest and to keep the spirit of CCA alive for future generations, not to mention lots of energy, passion, enthusiasm and joy!

Solemnly Professed Sisters – Sr. Teresa (Susan) Dreyer (Eldridge)

We, as a group of Carmelites who are not yet ready to retire, and who have had formation and growth in Carmel, have some unique gifts to share and also some unique interests and needs. We think of ourselves as emerging as "midwives" to the future of Carmelite life and we are pleased to see ourselves in this valuable role at this time in the life of Carmel in America and in the world.

We felt the support and understanding of one another in this group, since our roles are very much the same, from monastery to monastery. We, therefore would like to continue in a tangible fashion to continue to support one another, and we would like to be able to meet together once a year and support each other, and discuss and develop the emerging, new expressions of modern Carmelite life, as well as maintaining the important and necessary aspects of our beautiful Carmelite charism as we see it lived out today. We know we are on a “middle way” and that much more is to be learned and known, but we are also able to lead and to teach important concepts and attitudes for a good quality Carmelite expression in our communities. We are experienced, and yet have a great way to go and we see this clearly. In that, we are very useful and important to the stage of renewal we see evident in our times and in our Carmelite life.

We need a sense of “freedom” in order to shape the future. We do not know exactly what that will mean for us, but it is a freedom not absolutely bound to the past, and yet not forgetting the essential goodness of the past. It is a finding of the new, from the past, and a finding of a way that will speak to the spiritual realities of this time in history. We need to develop “our own voice” in order to be able to offer our “midwifery” to the needs of Carmelite life as it changes and emerges at this time in history.

“We need to be wise, but with a new voice.”

“We need to rely on the Holy Spirit” in order for our future to come about. We wish to offer a mature openness of self in the Holy Spirit in order to give witness to Carmelite life.

It is important that we have broad and high quality educational experiences, and that these may be made possible for all Carmelite sisters who want them, perhaps similar to the input that Baltimore and Boston, Concord and Barrington have had. We would like to provide very good quality historical presentations, understandings of prayer and all matters that are taken up in formation; both for the newly formed and onward in Carmelite life.

We want to protect our sacred prayer life, and not let it get taken over by work or other needs, good and necessary as they are. We want to base our life on prayer and service, with a definite and healthy balance of each.

We note that the membership of this unique group ranges from those professed in 1966 to 2014. We come from various countries of origin and have been solemnly professed for various lengths of time, with one member for many years. We come from various regions of the United

States. We were able to talk openly and helpfully and spiritedly with one another, and the feeling of true and vital sisterhood was very evident.

Sisters in Initial Formation – Sr. Celia Ashton (Baltimore)

The sisters in initial Carmelite formation expressed a desire to supplement the formation we receive in our monasteries with some sort of common formation program. We agreed that we have wonderful formators and we would like the opportunity to study some aspect of Carmelite spirituality together and to learn from the other formators. With technology like Zoom in place, could a new model of formation study be possible? Could the formators work together so as not to overburden any one of them? Our thought was to start small, give it a try, and see how it goes.

International Sisters – Sr. Johann MacLeod (Kirkintilloch)

First of all, we would like to thank for the possibility of attending the newer members meeting and for the assistance we received and for the kindness and the welcome we experienced wherever we went. A great deal of work went into its organization (which was excellent) and we were very much the beneficiaries. We couldn't have been there, of course, without the encouragement and acceptance of our own community which, I feel holds a prophetic vision of Carmel's future. We were truly blessed.

It was almost by accident that three of us were able to attend from the one community as the invitation was given to the British Association and we were the only community to respond. It was, however, providential as the energy we brought back was transformative in a way that only a group can accomplish.

So was it worth the expense and the time? Did we and our community benefit? How did we benefit?

The meeting itself was an explosion of energy. It was international, but it was, above all, a Carmelite meeting, we recognized the charism in each other and the group came together in a way which I have seldom experienced. We were sisters, relationships were formed, friendships established. I think Teresa herself would have been delighted – perhaps this is the type of growth she foresaw for her sisters.

There was a real sense of being of one mind and one heart (not of course always on the one opinion- that would be unreal). It had the feeling I think of the first Christian communities

which we are reading about in this Eastertide; reservations and fears were quickly overcome. The energy which pervaded the meeting, the level of participation, the willingness to explore new areas of the charism and the superb quality of the inputs challenged us intellectually but it also deepened our love for the charism, strengthened our hope for the future and inspired a real desire, if not a need, to continue to grow together. It infected us with an enthusiasm which we brought back to our community because it changed something in the three of us who participated, it answered a need which we didn't even know we had - and more than a need a deep yearning of the heart. Returning home, we had a real sense that now is the time to work more closely together knowing (to quote Aristotle rather loosely) that the whole is more than the sum of its parts.

What does the future hold? What are our dreams and expectations? How can we build on the experience? The how's and the where's have perhaps to be worked out but the whys seem clear. We as a community feel that we have much to give and much to receive and we desire this exchange, we want to continue to grow together.

Sr. Carolyn O'Hara (Beacon) – Facilitator for the 2017 Newer Member Gathering

(I am a bit of an outlier on this panel – definitely not new. I guess my cohort is the “old ladies” - those who were there from the beginning of CCA, which is almost 50 years ago.)

My experience of the meeting:

It was extremely well planned and organized, and the liturgies were moving, creative and prayerful: kudos to Celia, Cecilia, and Maria Fidelis. This prior planning and the energy of the group made this about the easiest facilitation I've ever done!

There was a wonderful, positive energy in the group. As one of the participants said in her evaluation, the group seemed to just “click”. The interaction was spontaneous and, for the most part, joyful. The sharing went very well, and diversity seemed to be welcomed and valued. The meeting in cohorts was very positive, and the sisters who follow me will say more about what was shared in those cohorts.

If you remember, the genesis of these newer member meetings was the perception that those of us older had formed bonds around CCA programs, and the desire to give that opportunity to younger/newer members. I think that desire was fulfilled.

The group evidenced a passion for Carmel, for our life and spirituality, and a desire for quality input on that. They very much appreciated the lectures.

So...we have a group of committed, passionate, enthusiastic sisters. And as I was writing that, I was aware of the etymology of the word, "enthusiastic". It is, as I'm sure you know, from the Greek, "en theos", referring to a god within. So perhaps God within these sisters is calling us, CCA, to something.

And so, the question that arises for me is what are we going to do, what are we willing to do to support them? What are we willing to do – or not do – to take on or give up – to ensure that they are able to live the vibrant life of prayer they feel called to? (Given the fragility of our communities, the same question could – and should – be asked in relation to ourselves.)

As I was thinking about this, it seemed to me that CCA is now in some ways in a position similar to where we found ourselves around 1990. (Benefit of being older!) In a 1989 meeting of prioresses and formation personnel, we departed from the agenda and began to talk about what was going on in our communities: the increasing age, increasing medical needs, lack of vocations, stretching of resources, etc. The 1991 CCA meeting was designed around these concerns: Fr. Kevin spoke of Dark Night, Sr. Joana of the Netherlands spoke about the process the nuns in Holland were going through, and Sr. Mary Ellen Butcher spoke about what resources were available to us. A process of visits was initiated to help us get to know each other better in view of future help.

In 1995, four of our communities, after having visited each other, met and asked themselves the questions I mentioned above. And every sister in every community said she would be willing to give up her community as she knew it, give up her monastery and geographic location, in order to bring Carmel into the future.

Are we in CCA less courageous now? Less willing or able to think outside the box? Be creative? To listen to what the Spirit might be saying as we search for "new wineskins"?

