



Women at the Well: Visioning Carmel for the 21st Century

Women at the Well-Project Narrative

“The future of our Carmelite family depends on the capacity to assume creatively the challenges that this historical, cultural moment presents us.

Only then can we give a living and authentic witness adequate to the world in which we live.”

Fr. Saverio Cannistrà, Superior General, Discalced Carmelites

1. The request

The Carmelite Communities Associated (CCA) seeks funding support of \$400,374 in order to complete program design and inaugurate program delivery in July 2018 for the initial benefit of our twelve member communities and the future of Carmel in America. This three year program is designed to respond to the current realities faced by its members and to meet the need to enliven, re-articulate and ensure the transmission of the Carmelite charism to the next generation, in light of today's challenges.

2. The Challenge/Issue

Carmelite Communities Associated (CCA) comprises twelve US Carmelite monasteries dedicated to God in a communal life of intercessory prayer for the Church and the world. Five hundred years ago our Order was founded by St. Teresa of Avila, and has since been a witness to the thirst for God at the heart of every person and every civilization. Carmel has a quiet but crucial role in the life of the Church and society. Our monasteries stand as beacons of light in the darkness; as oases of peace and prayer for a world made discordant by violence, oppression and growing secularization. Today more than ever, people of all beliefs and from every part of society seek meaning in their lives and a deeper relationship with God through prayer and contemplation. They are welcomed to our monasteries to experience prayer, liturgy, spiritual direction, private retreats and special lectures. Without the contemplative space Carmel provides, a unique gift to our world would be lost.

Today we are at a critical crossroads. Our communities are aging and new membership is diminishing. The very existence of our monasteries is in doubt. If we cannot re-articulate the beauty of our charism, making it relevant to both the new generation and our culture, Carmelite life could die out. The need is urgent and the time is now. With Pope Francis and our Superior General we believe a strong ongoing formation program focused on developing future leaders and engaging *“the challenges that this historical, cultural moment presents us”* will help us to re-articulate our charism today, reigniting the spark St. Teresa lit 500 years ago.

3. Description of the Solution to Challenge/Issue:

Through Divine Providence, our quest brought us to the Ministry Leadership Center (MLC). Embued with their unique methodology, we have outlined a strong formation framework to revitalize our Carmelite tradition and draw new vocations to our monasteries.

The CCA Leadership Team (LT) appointed a Visioning Steering Committee (VSC) to begin the

development of a leadership program for ongoing formation particular to Carmel. We have created a program that blends 9 face-to-face formation sessions (see Appendix A) over 3 years with web-based learning and collaboration in small group forums between sessions. Our goal is threefold: to help the sisters to deepen their relationship with their God, to apply their formation experience to the exercise of leadership and decision-making within their own communities, and to deepen their capacity to address creatively the challenges of our time that face all Carmelites.

The *Women at the Well* program will encompass a process of ongoing assessment of the its processes and content to ensure that the above goal and related objectives are being met. Evaluative individual sessions will be programmed at mid-point and end in which participants will reflect on their formation experience focused on positive changes in community life that they attribute to their participation in the program.

The CCA leadership team will engage in regular communication with its members, soliciting input and encouraging participation. The anticipated launch date of July 2018 depends on funding. We view this as a pilot, and envision that it would be transferable to other congregations, contemplative or apostolic, facing similar issues in the United States, Canada or other areas of the world.

4. What are the assets that CCA can bring to the project?

CCA's strongest contribution of in-kind assets is its own human resources and relationships. Since its founding in 1970, CCA has been a grassroots organization, honoring the diversity of expressions of the Carmelite charism as lived within our member monasteries. Collaboration with the whole Carmelite family is a strong value for CCA. We have strong relationships among our 4 associations of nuns, our 3 provinces of friars, our secular Carmelites (OCDS) and the Carmelites of the Ancient Observance. CCA is a board member of the Carmelite Institute of North America (www.carmelstream.org) which is made up of the leadership of the nuns, friars, and lay leaders of the whole Carmelite family in the USA.

CCA has a dedicated, experienced and talented Leadership Team (LT) that has empowered and delegated a Visioning Steering Committee (VC). This LT and VSC have received the mandate and full moral support of the member communities of the CCA. Additionally, CCA has focused attention on its newer members to empower them to help shape the future of CCA. We anticipate that these women, committed to serve CCA, will be among the chief beneficiaries of the leadership formation program. With financial support from CCA, they are already collaborating in the development of programs which meet their specific needs.

CCA is incorporated in the State of Maryland. We have succeeded in attracting financial support for our bi-annual national meetings and our various programs primarily through small grants. Our member monasteries provide a generous share of financial support to the organization for the benefit of all our member communities. Currently, our fiscal agent is the member community of Beacon, NY. Our leadership has become increasingly familiar with forms of technology and uses Zoom for video conference calls. Google Drive is used for document sharing and archiving. CCA has live-streamed portions of its last two bi-annual meetings to its member communities. The communities themselves have a variety of technological assets as well as their own respective websites. The CCA has a working website used for communication both external and internal to the Association: www.ccacarmels.org. Each member monastery has access to personnel who give assistance with a variety of specific needs.

Many of these same resources could be used for the program. Some of the sisters have significant scholarship and experience to offer as potential presenters for the program. Also, the sisters have a ready list of local presenters from such institutions as Boston College, Loyola University - Maryland, LCWR, NRRO and the Resource Center for Religious Institutes (RCRI). Additionally, CCA has benefited from the pro-bono services of an experienced facilitator who has worked with the organization's leadership over the years and continues in this role.

5. Why now?

"As an expression of pure love which is worth more than any work, the contemplative life generates an extraordinary apostolic and missionary effectiveness." (Vita Consecrata 59)

It was St. Teresa's desire to support the Church's apostolic mission through constant prayer and the total gift of self in community life. In *Vultum Dei Quaerere* (2016), Pope Francis asserts that "women's contemplative life has always represented in the Church and for the Church, her praying heart, a storehouse of grace and apostolic fruitfulness... ". In truth, our lives as contemplative nuns undergird the apostolic mission of the Church thereby offering it an indispensable service.

Pope Francis exhorts contemplatives to challenge the contemporary mindset dominated by power and wealth, by bearing witness to the transcendent dimension of the human being. The contemplative life is not a refuge. It is a total openness to the pain and suffering of the world following the example of Jesus. At this juncture of history, Carmel is at a crossroads. If we do not find a way forward, Carmelite contemplative life could become irrelevant and possibly die out. We cannot go quietly into this dark night. Instead, we are proactively choosing the path of renewal by engaging in this ongoing formation program. The *Women at the Well* program has the potential to empower new leadership, new vision and a new flourishing for the next generation of Carmelites in CCA as well as for other Carmelite and contemplative associations. It ensures the transmission of the Carmelite charism to those who will follow after us. We have great hope that this enterprise will ensure the viability of our communities into the future and safeguard Carmel's crucial apostolate for the Church and the world.

6. Progress to Date

Phase 1 of the *Women at the Well* program began in the fall of 2015 with the VSC meeting with the MLC (at their cost) in Sacramento to explore working with them and to learn about their methodology. In April of 2016, the go-ahead was received from the CCA Delegate Assembly and work in earnest began on the design of the program. The site for the program has been scheduled (Bon Secour Conference and Retreat Center) and deposits made for the first three sessions. Phase 2 for final design, selection of presenters, program delivery, and evaluation will occur as funding is obtained.

Communities of prayer, especially contemplative communities, ...constitute an instance of and a summons to the service of the whole Church. Indeed, they are a signpost pointing to a journey and quest, a reminder to the entire People of God of the primary and ultimate meaning of the Christian life. - SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Decree Perfectae Caritatis, 5.