

100 Years Young – the Corpus Christi Carmelites

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On 16th July 2008, the Solemnity of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, the Corpus Christi Carmelite Sisters marked 100 years of their foundation with a Centenary Mass in Leicester, England.



Corpus Christi Carmelites greeting old friends and new at Leicester.

It was in Leicester that Clare Perrins – known in religious life as Mary Ellerker of the Blessed Sacrament, or ‘Little Mother’ to her congregation – brought together a small community of women. Clare had been born in Birmingham in 1875 and converted to Catholicism aged 16. Educated by female religious, she tried her vocation with them but felt that God was calling her to find new ways of being at the service of those around her. She gathered a small community of like-minded women and engaged in forms of social work that were considered to be very novel at the time. They got involved in parish ministry, social and health reform, distress counselling, and many other forms of outreach.

The first community house in Leicester was encouraged by the Dominican friars, though after a number of years it became clear to Mother Mary that her community’s spirituality was rooted in Carmel, with its blend of prayer and service nourished by the Eucharist. So the name ‘Corpus Christi Carmelite’ developed, and in 1927 the congregation was affiliated to the Carmelite Order. They took as their patroness Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, who had been canonized just two years earlier.

Inspired by the missionary outlook of Saint Thérèse, and encouraged by clergy who asked for their help, Mother Mary and some of the sisters crossed the oceans to the Caribbean where they set up houses in Trinidad and Tobago, Saint Vincent, Grenada, Dominica, Saint Lucia, Antigua and Guyana. Today there are also two communities in North America, and a mission in the African nation of Liberia.

Though the generalate and noviciate of the Congregation is in Trinidad, the Corpus Christi Carmelites look to England as their place of foundation. Though no longer in their original house, they still have a community in Leicester, as well as houses in

York and Birmingham. Leicester is where the Congregation took root, and so it was natural that its centenary celebrations should take place here.

On 16th July several hundred people gathered for the Eucharist in Leicester's Holy Cross Church, still a Dominican priory served by the Blackfriars who were very hospitable. The sanctuary of the church, an extension of the original building, is built over the site of the first house of the Corpus Christi sisters.



Lay Carmelites from Britain and the Caribbean preparing to process.

The liturgy began with a procession of Carmelites, both the Corpus Christi Sisters and members of the Carmelite Third Order. The Leicester Third Order Chapter meets in the home of the Corpus Christis, and is a thriving group. Also present were Lay Carmelites from York, where the Carmelite Spirituality Group also meets in the home of the Corpus Christis. It was very impressive to see the long line of Carmelites, dressed in religious habits and scapulars, processing through the church.



Sisters in Carmel processed through the priory church.

After the opening hymn, led by an excellent folk band, a word of welcome was expressed to all, especially to the Lord Mayor of Leicester, Councillor Manjula Sood, who attended with her mother and family.

The readings for the Solemnity of Our Lady of Mount Carmel recalled the Carmelite Family's figures of inspiration, Elijah and the Virgin Mary. These texts were the subject of the homily by Fr. Wilfrid McGreal, O.Carm., Prior Provincial, who preached about Carmel's prophetic tradition. He spoke of Mother Mary Ellerker and the Corpus Christi Carmelites as a community willing to take risks, to try new apostolates within the Church, who could reach out to the margins of society with words and deeds of hope. Fr. Wilfrid pointed out the significance of the Corpus Christi Carmelites beginning at a Dominican priory, since it was the Order of Preachers who had helped the Carmelite friars to become an established mendicant order in the 1240s.



Fr. Wilfrid preached to an attentive congregation.

On the altar Fr. Wilfrid was joined by diocesan clergy, the Abbot of Mount Saint Bernard Cistercian Abbey, and Dominican friars, including Most Rev. Robert Rivas, a member of the Order of Preachers who is Archbishop of Castries. He had close connections with the sisters when he was Bishop of Kingstown, and was able to attend the centenary celebrations on his return journey from Rome where he had received his pallium from Pope Benedict.



Many priests concelebrated with Fr. Wilfrid, including Archbishop Rivas (centre).

After Communion some words of thanks were given by Sister Antoinette Dickie, Prioress General of the Corpus Christi. She thanked the Dominicans for their support in the early days of the Congregation, and thanked the Carmelites for their encouragement, their formation, and their welcome into the family of Carmel.



Sister Antoinette Dickie, Prioress General, thanked all those present.

Sr. Ann Parker, former Prioress General and now Prioress of the York community, presented Fr. Wilfrid with a commemorative text declaring that “On the occasion of the centenary of its foundation the Corpus Christi Carmelites extend profound and prayerful gratitude to the Carmelite Friars for their unstinting support and encouragement”.

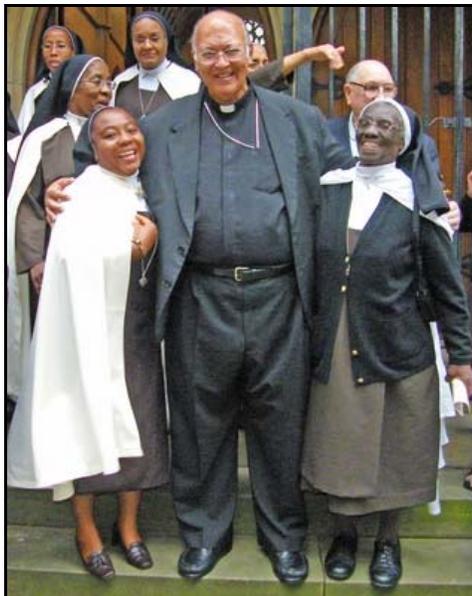


Sister Ann Parker presenting Fr. Wilfrid with a certificate of thanks to the Carmelite friars.

Sister Antoinette thanked the many people who had helped to organise the celebrations, especially the residents in Glen Parva Young Offenders Institution who had made the celebratory posters. A number of them were present in the congregation to support the sisters, especially Sister Teresa Joseph Pegus, superior of the Corpus Christi in England, whose work with the young offenders was recognised by the awarding of an M.B.E. in the Queen's New Years Honours List.



Sisters gathered with the Lord Mayor of Leicester.



Archbishop Robert Rivas flanked by (left) Sister Anastasia of the Liberia community and (right) Sister Mary-Gregory of the York community.

After Mass all those present were invited to a nearby hotel to celebrate with a buffet supper. During the refreshments the Leicester Third Order Chapter presented the sisters with gifts as signs of their affection and thanks.



On behalf of the Leicester Third Order Chapter, Anne Bunyan (leader) and Teresa Cardwell (first councillor) presented gifts to the Corpus Christi Carmelites.

The Corpus Christi Carmelites have some 60 or so members around the world. A good number of them attended the celebrations in Leicester, and are concluding their centenary with a pilgrimage to places in England associated with their foundress. Joining the pilgrimage are two Lay Carmelites from Trinidad. One of them is the Congregation's legal notary for the beatification process of Mother Mary Ellerker. In August the paperwork for her cause will be sent to Rome, once it has been approved by the General Chapter of the Congregation which takes place in Guyana from 11th to 25th August. The theme of their Chapter is *With the Eucharist, centred in Carmel, let us serve the Lord with gladness*. On the agenda will be the election of a new Prioress General (Sister Antoinette has served the maximum two terms), as well as discussion about the future development of the sisters' ministry in terms of prayer, community and apostolate.



Sister Teresa Joseph Pegus and Sister Antoinette Dickie cut the celebration cakes.

As they look back with thanksgiving over their hundred year history, and look forward to the future with gladness, we extend our love and thanks to the Corpus Christi Carmelite Sisters, and assure them of our prayers and support in the next hundred years.

For more information about the Corpus Christi Carmelites please visit their website:
<http://www.corpuschristicarmelites.org/>

