

# **Journeying Together**

*Anne Pass, T.O.C.*

*This article was written following the Carmelite Forum of Britain and Ireland event held 2<sup>nd</sup> - 4<sup>th</sup> November 2001.*

It was All Souls Day when Maura Lockyer and I met to travel together to Gort Muire, the Carmelite Centre in Dublin, for a Carmelite Forum. *How do I pray today?* and *How Does Carmel help me to pray today?* were questions we had all been asked to ponder in the heart on our Carmelite journey listening and responding to the Word of God.

As the plane lifted us through cloud we shared a squashed sweet from the depths of a rain coat pocket. We laughed at the sticky unwrapping as we recalled past experiences. We had not met in the flesh till this moment. We knew of one another through praying with mutual friends. Our lives had run along a busy, parallel course. Here, now, was the person fully present in spirit, journeying on the same mission, aiming for the same destination. It was to be a joyous Emmaus experience.

At Dublin's busy terminal the familiar faces of Miceàl O'Neill and Francis Kemsley welcomed our arrival. This gesture touched us both deeply. Gort Muire, "Mary's Field", also provided the warmth of Irish hospitality as we shared the teapot and hot scones with our brother friars round the table. It felt like coming home.

## **Journeys of faith**

Gradually from different directions, the other members of the Carmelite family arrived, Carmelites and Discalced Carmelites, sisters from enclosure and parishes, lay folk, brothers and priests. Getting to know one another, we exchanged what had happened on our individual journeys. A sense of excitement and expectation was growing inside all of us. The commission that had brought Carmelites from many different communities and backgrounds together revealed that the Spirit was moving.

Fr. Jimmy McCaffrey, OCD, opened the Forum by reminding us that though the year 2001 had been bad for the world with September 11th it had been a good one for Carmelites with a Marian year, the visit of St Thérèse to Ireland and the anniversary of the Scapular.

The arrival of the feminine and secular presence to the Forum came as a natural development from the first meeting. Mary was the woman of prayer. For ecstatic mystic or stumbling sinner alike, prayer would reach perfection only in the balance of heaven but for now personal witness would help us to support one another in following the Virgin's way of pondering till the Word filled our heart.

Recalling Edith Stein's insight that prayer is missionary and expands the heart and mind, Fr. McCaffrey introduced three women who humbly and courageously shared the intimacy of their journey in faith and the everyday methods of formation and spirituality that led them forward.

## **From fear to trust**

For Alacoque O'Reilly, a busy wife, mother and secondary school teacher from Meath there had been a transformation from fear to trust, through a gradual

awakening to Jesus through experiences of her brother's death in childhood, her own school life, family illness and daily trials.

Growing in prayer through other people, a prayer diary, silence, and waiting for help and answers in trust, God through the years had come to be not a remote disciplinarian distant and above but a presence praying within her. She felt loved, just as she was, rooted in the reality of daily life but open to a God of surprises. After 34 years of marriage and raising children together she realised she had not asked her husband before which was his favourite prayer. Hearing his litany of saints was a truly intimate and sacred moment bringing the couple closer than they ever had been before.

She invited us all to think about the God of surprises in our own lives and to ponder Jesus' words to the Samaritan woman, "If you only knew what God is offering". What experiences of the Lord as surprise have you had in life? Do you know what God is offering you?

### **A gentle relationship**

Sister Mary Brigeen of the Holy Spirit from the Carmelite Monastery in Stillorgan, Dublin also warmed hearts with the simplicity of her gentle relationship with Christ. She found the rich teachings of the saints illuminated her way. Brigeen, sandwiched between Mary and the Spirit, made us ponder on the significance of her name.

For her the Spirit was elusive and flowing, a living and growing relationship, a glowing sensitivity made keener through the liturgy of the Pentecost sequence, through being still, the Eucharist, through personal and shared Lectio divina, just being there in faith, poor, tired and broken, a very Thérèsian experience.

For her the best meeting place with the Lord was at life's lowest ebb, the point of real prayer when littleness in poverty gave birth to rediscovery, the soul of Carmel. For Elijah it was the moment sitting under the furze bush.

She invited us all to put out into the deep and recall our own personal "furze bush" experiences and their impact on our lives while remembering Our Lord's question to the disciples: "Who do you say I am?"

Breaking into small groups to do this was a fruitful experience. Inspired by the courage of the speakers, people felt able to launch out in trust to share their own moments of brokenness - physical and mental illness, despair, dryness in prayer. Listening to the darkness of Gethsemane made bright by Our Lord in the individual circumstances of each life was humbling and uniting, building a communion of witness. There was much to meditate on as the corridors fell silently into sleep that night.

### **Unifying**

Refreshed through the Carmelite way of a hearty breakfast, Eucharist and morning prayer together we listened to Rosemary Kinman of *The Leaven* Secular Institute recalling her faith journey which began as a little girl's prayer made with her mother in wartime, misheard as "Suffer me to come to 'tea' ", instead of 'thee'.

Rosemary's journey was of unifying prayer with behaviour, she found her motivation was being painfully purified in the process and her dawning

realisation was that she was, indeed, loved and invited to tea. She asked us to consider: What was the first prayer you remembered hearing or saying? Was this prayer the beginning of a relationship with God? while reminding us that "The person who prays can be the best or worst advertisement for prayer".

### **A language of love**

The friendly guidance of Pat Mullins, O.Carm., led us to *Lectio divina*. This was again a special moment when the Spirit flowed in silence from the Word and through our groups of four reflecting on Luke 14:1, 7-11. The Carmelite family at this point began to realise its responsibility towards finding a language of love that would reach out to others to encourage them to know God.

This love would be manifested through getting to know one another, through working together on joint projects on training, formation, publications or prayer groups and social action. Drawing into unity of heart wherever and whatever the individual circumstances. Every individual listened to bring ideas to birth, alternating discussion and silent prayer. We all found the room was a furnace with the warmth of intent and a walk in the breezy grounds alone or with a companion provided fresh insights. Even the corridors provided meeting places for the realisation of new attitudes and perceptions.

What is it? How do we belong to it? How do we share it? were questions to be pondered about the charism of our family of Carmel. They are ones we can all consider at this special time as we seek to understand what it means to be a Carmelite in this contemporary world and how we can most effectively serve others through the individual ways that charism is expressed.

### **Reaching out**

One can speak of a mysterious breath of the Spirit sensed at Gort Muire, that activity of reaching forward, opening out to know one another and God as creation groans in giving birth, the generating movement of love, that same love that makes the universe dance or the leaves turn gold. At this time of desolating war there is also a new spring of hope as people from all walks of life find discipleship whatever their situation as priest, mother, brother or sister in Christ and a common humanity of purpose as the Spirit moves.

Providence provided the gospel story of Zacchaeus for Mass on the morning of our departure. Maura and I recognised the significance of Jesus calling Zacchaeus to come down from the tree - having climbed hard to get a better look at Him - Jesus called him by name to join the Saviour down among the people and to make a home for the Lord in his own heart and life. "This day salvation has come to your house." In the rugged journey up Mount Carmel one finds the Lord at the humblest point, at grass roots level.

Jack Welch's question in *Seasons of the Heart* provides a good challenge for our Carmelite family as we attempt to make space for love and listening and we put out into the deep: "Have I become compulsively active? More of a functionary of an institution or a disciple of the Lord?"

At Mary's Field, Maura and I agreed that it was the simplicity of warm kindness that bore witness to the presence of God - the knowledge that we were all held in prayer wherever we were on the road. Those little moments of welcome, of sharing a cup, scone, word or silence and a hug of farewell on the journey.