

# **CLOISTER OF THE HEART**

**The Association of Contemplative Sisters**

**By**  
**Ann Denham and Gert Wilkinson**

## PREFACE

or

*How this came to be, and some words of appreciation  
From Ann and Gert*

### A Word from Gert

**“Once upon a time...” in the early 1990’s, the history project of the Association of Contemplative Sisters (ACS) was born. A committee of volunteers began, with much enthusiasm, to plan interviews, research...all that would be needed to put together how the Association of Contemplative Sisters was conceived and eventually born. A great deal was accomplished in a few years, with audio interviews transcribed, a timeline set, and the project limped along. I had made promises that I found difficult to keep, partly due to circumstances in my own life, and partly to procrastination.**

**Then, a few things happened. Ellen Alford, of the Western Region, decided to make a video of ACS history. She did interviews at the 1998 General Assembly, in monasteries, in homes...wherever she could find people who had played a significant role in the development of ACS. By 2004, the tape was completed and unveiled at the General Assembly in Wallingford, New York. She accomplished the task with the invaluable assistance of her dear friend, Pat Ballard; they also compiled supplemental material in a large loose-leaf book, which is a wonderful visual resource. We (and all of ACS) are deeply indebted to these two women for their accomplishment.**

**Then, some of the individuals who played significant roles in the early history of ACS passed away: Mary Roman, OCD,<sup>i</sup> Myriam Dardenne, OCSO,<sup>ii</sup> and Ruth Brennan, a former Passionist nun, are the names that stand out. That made me again take up my pen (i.e., turn on the word processor) and resume work. But that was not enough. In the late summer of 2005, Deborah Gephardt, ACS president, suggested that someone assist me with the task: a member who was creative, articulate, and enthusiastic about ACS and its history. The woman who fit the bill perfectly was Ann Denham. This book would not have happened at this time, if Deb had not taken the initiative to give the project a big push and if Ann had not said “yes.” Thanks, Deb & Ann.**

**On a more personal note: I am profoundly grateful to the Redemptoristine Nuns of Esopus, NY, whose love and friendship have nurtured me, not only during my many years in the community, but also since I left in 1973. As I wrote about the early years, especially between 1968-73, I realized how much I had put them through, especially in my frequent absences from the community. (They also kept my letters and travel journals and copied them for me a few years ago. These were of invaluable assistance, as they were written as things were occurring.)**

**And, of course, deep gratitude to the many women of ACS who have nourished me along the way, and whose friendships I continue to treasure.**

**Finally, this would be incomplete without expressing our appreciation to my sister, Dorothy Wilkinson Yentz, who prepared the manuscript for publication. Her experience as secretary to an author made her perfectly suited for the lengthy task. Her suggestions and critique have been invaluable. And, at the eleventh hour, she continued to make changes for us. Thanks, Dodie; we couldn't have done it without you!**

#### A Word from Ann

**Before ACS was real to me, it was the Story. I heard it first at the San Rafael, California Assembly in 1988. Connie Fitzgerald told it that time and I hung on every word. I was one of the laywomen, welcomed to full membership at that meeting. I did not yet know how very at home I would come to feel. My favorite part was how some Jesuits stayed up all night at Woodstock, translating *Venite Seorsum* from the Latin and, how that Vatican text would stiffen the resolve of contemplative women, to deepen their contemplation and take it into the world.**

**At subsequent meetings, I considered the Telling of the Story to be essential. In time I became bossy, seeking out the teller and making sure my favorite parts were included, like how the story of two mothers claiming one living child before Solomon, came to Sr. Lilla Hull in Morning Prayer, and from this image flowed the decision that ACS remain one body, open to all women. I began to attend history project meetings and ask, importunately, when is the book coming?**

**I never imagined being part of the memory myself, but by 2006, I had lived nearly half of the ACS Story. When I flew to Wisconsin in January, I imagined helping Gert with some light writing. But, in Cluster, the day before my trip, Ellen Alford told me: “Be open to what you can give to the Story. You have gifts, too.” The first night, from that Mystery Beyond, I was awakened by a plan and a title. Spacey with jet lag, I turned on the light and wrote it down. After breakfast, Gert and I began to talk. We liked the plan and quickly divided up the work. Agreement from others to write personal essays fell into place that morning. It seemed like a sign.**

**I came to ACS when I had discovered contemplation and given up my Methodist ordination, to follow this path as a Catholic. ACS became my home and its members my mentors. My gratitude to all who have traveled with me is profound. In particular, I name Pat Kelly, who in every turbulent time speaks wise words, and tells me I am real. I also name my late husband, Walter, who supported me in all my spiritual meanderings and commitments, and whose love mirrored that Mystery which holds us.**

**Finally, a thank you to Gert, for her openness, hard work and easy collaboration. Together, we became servants of the Story. Winter and Spring of 2006 was an incredible journey together. I would not have missed it for the world.**

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<sup>i</sup>. Order of Carmelites, Discalced

<sup>ii</sup>. Order of Cistercians, Strict Observance (Trappistines)



# **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

## **CLOISTER OF THE HEART**

		<u>Page</u>
Preface		i
Introduction	In the Beginning	1
<b><u>Section I: Narrative</u></b>		
Chapter One	The Way We Were: The Ground is Prepared	3
Chapter Two	ACS Is Born: Getting Off The Ground	11
Chapter Three	Building Momentum: Inward and Outward	21
Chapter Four	The Fork In The Road: Who Is A Member?	29
Chapter Five	The New Millennium: ACS Today	40
<b><u>Section II: Member Stories</u></b>		
Ellen Alford	So I Took a Leap of Faith	50
Fran Burras	I Had Found a Home	53
Jo Casey, OSC	God-Presence, Meeting and Friendship	57
Myriam Dardenne, OCSO	ACS: A Mythic Container	63
Ann Denham	A Cloister of the Heart	67
Constance Fitzgerald, OCD	Woodstock 1969: Capturing the Metaphor of Religious Life	72

		<u>Page</u>
Deborah Gephardt	Learning To Fly	92
Pat Kelly, OCD	Simplicity, Freedom, and Singleness of Heart	98
Jean Alice McGoff, OCD	Personal Reflections on the Association of Contemplative Sisters	101
Vilma Seelaus, OCD	My Early Years With ACS	105
Gert Wilkinson	ACS: A Web of Relationships	117

### **Appendix**

The People of ACS	119
An Annotated Chronology of ACS	127
Presidents and General Assemblies of ACS	131
Declaration of Purpose (Mission Statement)	134

## INTRODUCTION

### IN THE BEGINNING

*“The Association of Contemplative Sisters evolved out of energy fermented within the deep well of fundamental human needs. It began within the context of cloistered contemplative communities and the recognition that we needed each other if we were to construct solutions that foster maturity and release of creativity towards wholeness and realism within our lives of prayer. This was an energy felt throughout the width and breadth of all communities of contemplative women, much like the heaving of El Nino waters stirring in ocean depths and promising widespread impact on weather patterns. The sequence of happenings that culminated in the Woodstock Seminar that August of 1969, and finally into the creation of the Association of Contemplative Sisters (ACS) deserves to be told.”<sup>iii</sup> Ruth Brennan*

This book is an attempt to capture that story. It is based on documents, transcripts of audio tapes, a video history of ACS, and the memories of individuals who lived through the early days of the Association. “The Association is ourselves” is a truth recognized from the beginning. And so the story of ACS is to be found in the journey with its members, starting with women in cloistered contemplative life, and evolving to the present, with the inclusion of women in many lifestyles and situations.

This is a fascinating tale. It is the story of how women, who weren’t even allowed out of cloister to a doctor’s appointment, grasped the importance and essence of Vatican II and set about enfleshing it in themselves, in their communities and, eventually, in the wider world. It tells how they took on the challenges of translating the old tropes of contemplation and cloister into something new, a vision that took them into the world with a “cloister of heart.” To do this, they pushed out the walls of enclosure and the definition of contemplation to include all women, everywhere, even married women, having sex and bearing babies and living as wives and mothers. All, they said, are open to a contemplative calling.

To birth this vision, these foremothers developed new ways of leadership and community. They educated themselves and learned to translate what was essential across the borders of charism and Order and, in the end, the boundaries of

denomination and lifestyles. They were informed by the needs of the world, yet not conformed to the world. Led by the Spirit, they turned opposition into stepping stones and dreams that did not work out into doors open to a new thing: contemplation, not dependent upon old ways, yet centered in tradition.

Their vision was not some trendy notion of political correctness or sameness, or a watered down version of “the real stuff.” As they journeyed, these women came to the tough-minded realization that all are called to contemplative living. If you name this longing and affirm those who attempt it, they will come; the community will be richer and more alive for their inclusion.<sup>iv</sup>

You will love this story. Like all good stories it begins with “once upon a time,” the words that signal to us that this is no ordinary journey. There are travelers and obstacles and helpers along the way. There are blind alleys, which become open doors, and hidden maps that were there in place all along.

The journey is, of course, a sacred quest, arising from a longing deep within the heart. Many hearts, for this is also a story of connection and finding those heart-companions with whom to make the journey. It is about—well, enough. Let us tell you the story. It was a time and such a time, a time like no other.

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<sup>iii</sup>. **Ruth Brennan, Chair of initial ACS coordinating committee, 1970-71.**

<sup>iv</sup>. **Mission Statement, 1986.**

# SECTION I: NARRATIVE

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Way We Were: the Ground is Prepared

1950 was a time like no other: it had been five years since WWII ended. Europe was still recovering from the devastation wrought by bombings and battles. Monasteries of nuns suffered from hunger and poverty like everyone else. However, they were isolated; each monastery was alone in its autonomy. Against that backdrop, Pope Pius XII issued an Apostolic Letter, *Sponsa Christi*, in which he urged communities of each order (Carmelites, Poor Clares, etc.) to form federations to provide mutual assistance, as well as to strengthen the spirit of their traditions.

Eight years later, in radio talks to contemplative religious women, Pius XII again encouraged the nuns to reach out to each other. His messages initially met with more success in Europe than in the United States. But in the mid-to-late Fifties, the Carmelites and Poor Clares began to gather in regions across the country, to discuss how they could help each other in their response to their vocation. The Spirit was stirring and preparing these women for the winds of change, which were about to sweep through the Roman Catholic Church.

What was life like in those monasteries, about which the Pope was so concerned? For centuries, women in these cloisters had been dedicated to a life of prayer and penance, sequestered behind grilles and walls. They chanted the Divine Office, the Prayer of the Church, in Latin around the clock and knelt in meditation several times a day. Mass was watched through a grille. Infrequent family visits were held with loved ones separated by a double grate.

For the most part, they were self-supporting; they made and sold altar breads, sewed vestments, and tilled vegetable gardens. They lived by rules from another era, usually hundreds of years old. In the United States, most of the young women who entered were barely out of high school; some had not even completed secondary school. A few women who entered were a bit older, and came with career experience or a college degree.

## This Was the Time

The Sixties were a time like no other, not only in the United States, but especially in the history of the Church. American involvement in Vietnam escalated, resulting in considerable division and unrest in the country. There was serious racial tension, as evidenced by the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King; then Democratic presidential hopeful, Robert Kennedy, was fatally shot. The riots between the police and anti-war protesters during the Democratic National Convention in Chicago only added to the country's turmoil.

This charged atmosphere inevitably had a serious impact on the young women in religious life throughout the country. Women in monasteries were not immune from the searching and questioning of this decade. Those who were beginning religious life had been educated to question "Why?" Women of the previous generation had been brought up with the maxim: "Ours is not to question why; ours is but to do or die!"

Probably the most significant positive event in that decade (indeed, in the last half of the Twentieth Century) was the Second Vatican Council, convened by Pope John XXIII in 1962, and closed by Paul VI in December 1965. The document on religious life, *Perfectae Caritatis*, urged an up-to-date renewal, one that "comprises both a constant return to the sources of Christian life in general and to the primitive inspiration of the institutes, and their adaptation to the changed conditions of our time." The section on contemplative religious life affirmed the need for a revision of monastic life "in accordance with aforesaid principles and criteria of up-to-date renewal," while preserving their withdrawal from the world.<sup>v</sup>

About the same time, a School Sister of Notre Dame, Sr. Agnes Mary Burkard (*Innocentia*), an educator and a psychologist, became interested in assisting contemplative communities. She was professor of education and psychology at Mt. Mary College in Milwaukee. Initially, she held a few workshops with some Poor Clares.

The nuns found her assistance so helpful that they asked her Superiors to allow her to work full time with contemplatives. This was granted, and for years Sr. Agnes Mary traveled the length and breadth of the United States and Canada, spending periods of two to twenty days in each of dozens of monastic houses, ministering to

hundreds of cloistered nuns. The two part course she created centered on personality development and spiritual renewal.

After the first five years, she wrote a report to be submitted to Pope Paul VI in 1968. First, she summed up what she had done: “My work with these Sisters has been directed toward raising the level of religious development in the monasteries. To this end, I have taught them the basic facts of personality development, human motivation, and practical spirituality. I have also diagnosed psychological problems, counseled, advised and consoled.”

She went on to describe the plight of monasteries she had visited, and made a number of strong recommendations, based on her conclusions. In particular, she explained the harmful effects that an “enclosure mentality” could have on the contemplative life itself.

These recommendations called for broadened educational opportunities and self-determination (instead of forced dependence on those outside their life for renewal...usually males). Sr. Agnes Mary also recommended encouraging association with other contemplative communities for “educational, inspirational and functional purposes.” Contemplative communities, she urged, must have opportunities to “more visibly fulfill their function of symbolizing for other lay people, the full consequence of their Baptismal consecration.”

In other words, they needed to bear witness to a life of prayer. The contemplative life is meant to be a prophetic voice in the Church, expressed by their way of life and their hospitality. Sr. Agnes Mary devoted many years of her long life to helping contemplative communities. For that they were, and are, immensely grateful. Other women in apostolic communities also reached out to lend a hand, more than could be named here.

### **Initial Efforts**

This was the milieu in which the spirit of renewal began to stir. Superiors knew that they had to establish contact with other monastic communities and share their

concerns; the need for a better education in such fields as scripture, theology, philosophy, and psychology was strongly felt. Thus it happened that two seeds were planted in the mid 1960's.

The first occurred in August 1965, when a meeting was held at the Poor Clare Monastery in Birmingham, Alabama. Five or six Superiors, representing a variety of traditions and geographic areas, met with the Reverend Paul Boyle, a Passionist, who was then President of the Canon Law Society of America. Their purpose was to discuss renewal in light of the recommendations of Vatican II, which urged monastic women to live a more deeply authentic contemplative life, a life that would attract women raised in the mid and late Twentieth Century.

This group, plus a few other nuns, met again the following March in La Crosse, Wisconsin. Again, they shared with Father Boyle what their experience had to say to canon lawyers, while he guided them in interpretation of canon law. During both of these sessions, the participants, from very diverse backgrounds and traditions, realized that they shared the same questions, as well as the same hopes and dreams.

A third meeting of this group was scheduled for July 1966. Before that could occur, Father Boyle was summoned to meet with the Apostolic Delegate in Washington, D.C. There he was asked, bluntly, not to meet with "those contemplatives" again. The nuns, also, were strongly advised to cancel the meeting, which they did. However, the seeds had been sown. There would be no turning back, for 'Unless the grain of wheat dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.'

The second seed to be sown was in the Archdiocese of New York, when the foresight of the Superior of the Sacramentines prompted her to ask for a gathering of Superiors of the diverse monastic communities in the Metropolitan New York City area. This group met with the blessing of the Vicar for Religious in the Archdiocese and included the Diocese of Brooklyn. They have flourished over the years and are known as the Metropolitan Association of Contemplative Communities. (MACC). Both MACC and the nuns who had met with Father Boyle had the same objectives: to foster self-awareness, renewal, dialogue and appropriate education.

The next landmark event occurred at the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky, in December 1967. This came about as the result of contacts which a Franciscan sister at the Birmingham meeting had with Thomas Merton. Hearing of their difficulties, Merton said “Surely they can’t stop you from making a retreat!” About a dozen contemplative religious met with him at the Abbey for five days. They reflected with Merton on the heart of a contemplative life, the demands of their relationship with the Lord, as well as where contemplative communities were in relation to the world of the Twentieth Century. This meeting proved to be beneficial and far-reaching for all who participated. It was another step towards inter-community dialogue and collaboration, which Merton strongly encouraged. A similar group met with Merton in the spring of 1968. After these meetings, Merton wrote to the Sacred Congregation for Religious (SCR) and advised them to pay attention to contemplative communities in the United States. They needed self-determination, and it was his hope that the SCR would facilitate it.

As a result of Merton’s letter, the SCR asked Cardinal Carberry of St. Louis to head a commission of American bishops to look into the needs of contemplative communities of women. This decision was announced in November 1968, when five women from as many different orders had a scheduled meeting with the Bishop’s committee that was working with apostolic communities. The nuns had to scuttle their well-planned agenda and listen while they were told what was going to be done. It was a disappointment to these women, since the Conference of Major Superiors of Women (now the Leadership Conference of Women Religious—LCWR) were more than eager to collaborate with contemplative communities, especially in meeting their educational needs. It was very evident that the SCR just did not want the contemplative and apostolic communities working together under one umbrella. Just a note: Thomas Merton died unexpectedly in India less than two weeks later!

In the meantime, contemplative communities throughout the country were watching with interest the early development of MACC. Some communities sent representatives as observers, although they realized that the high concentration of communities in the New York City-Brooklyn area was a unique situation. Yet, just the fact that an inter-order group was functioning successfully proved an incentive to others to search out possibilities in their own areas. So the Metropolitan Association of Contemplative Communities opened the way to even broader hopes.

## **Plans For A National Seminar For Contemplatives**

The realization of their dire need for help in formation and on-going education, and their experience of their poverty in some isolated efforts, led to another attempt to have an Institute for Contemplatives, modeled on a similar institute for “active” communities. In November 1968, three sisters met at the Baltimore Carmel for preliminary discussions: Constance Fitzgerald, OCD; Ruth Brennan, CP and Gertrude Wilkinson, OSSR. Early in 1969, at a second meeting, they were joined by Patricia Cast, OCD, and Elizabeth Enoch, OSC. These sisters shared a dream of bringing contemplative women together to explore their vocation in relation to the life and mystery of the Church. They decided to do what they could to plan such an assembly.

Sr. Constance knew that George Wilson, SJ, had been instrumental in the success of the earlier institute, and she asked him to meet with the group. An initial meeting with George, Tom Clarke, SJ, Tom Kilduff, OCD, and Sr. Mary Daniel Turner, SNDdeN, was held in early 1969. The ball was rolling, as plans were immediately made to hold a Seminar for Contemplatives at the Jesuit Seminary in Woodstock, Maryland, in August 1969.

In six short months, it was pulled together. Every contemplative community in the country was contacted, beginning in March 1969. Now the wheels were turning! The initial communication was soon followed by others, as the coordinating committee fleshed out its plans.

In the midst of their activity, a letter was sent to all monasteries by Cardinal Carberry, acting in the name of the Commission for Contemplatives established in 1968, “respectfully requesting” that the sisters not attend the planned Seminar. The coordinating committee made a deliberate decision to continue with its plans. The need was evident; interest was strong. It had to go on. Too much was at stake.

One unintended effect was that the Carberry letter strengthened the enthusiasm and commitment of those who had already determined to participate. A few backed down, but some who had been wavering made up their minds to come. The house would be full: one hundred thirty-five sisters from over fifty communities around the US and Canada registered to come.

The purpose of the Seminar was clearly stated in all the communications preliminary to it. The following excerpt from the letter which accompanied registration forms states that purpose very explicitly: *“(It) will confine itself to a study in depth of the aims and overall needs of contemplative nuns in the area of education and formation. In order to clarify these aims and needs, we will examine the fundamental character of the contemplative vocation in the life and mystery of the Church. Principally through a process of mutual interchange, aided by coordinated lectures, we hope to arrive at a communal understanding of and deeper penetration into the heart of our life. From the creative exploration of this theme, our educational goals and needs, as well as proposals for practical solutions, should emerge. This program has been planned by contemplative nuns for contemplative nuns....”*

A blue ribbon group of lecturers and resource persons had been assembled, not only from the United States, but also from Europe. Unless their calendars made it impossible, everyone who had been contacted accepted with alacrity. It was a unique opportunity to help contemplative women from so many orders, assembled in one place; it was probably the first time in history this had been done.

Theologians, scripture scholars, philosophers, psychologists, liturgists, historians...all shared themselves, unstintingly. Those present included Richard Kugelman, CP; Bernard Haring, CSSR; Al Broderick, OP; Norris Clark, SJ; John Gallen, SJ; Thomas Kilduff, OCD; Br. Frank of Taize; George Wilson, SJ; Dom Edward McCorkell, OCSO. Laurence Cardinal Sheehan of Baltimore, who had supported the planning process with his encouragement, celebrated the Liturgy with the group. Bishop Gossman, Auxiliary Bishop of Baltimore, and Bishop Joseph Breitenbeck of Grand Rapids, Michigan also were present, and presided at Liturgies in the course of the two weeks.

A number of sisters in the active apostolate made invaluable contributions. Their over-riding desire was to have the contemplatives profit from their own experience, and many active sisters made generous offers of help. Some of these women were: Sr. Margaret Brennan, IHM; Sr. Thomas Aquinas, RSM; Sr. Mary Daniel Turner, SNDdeN; Sr. Carol Francis Jegen, BVM; Sr. Jose Hobday, OSF.

August 1969, was famous for the gathering in Woodstock, N.Y., with music and activities that sent shock waves through the American culture. Was it more than a

coincidence that at exactly the same time, a much smaller group gathered at another Woodstock, this one in Maryland, and sent shockwaves of quite a different nature through the Church? And those waves were felt to the ends of the earth. Yes, it was quite a time!

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v. Quotations from: Basic Sixteen Documents of Vatican II; General Editor, Austin Flannery, OP. 1996; Dominican Publications.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **ACS Is Born: Getting Off The Ground**

#### **Seminar for Contemplatives**

August 17, 1969, Woodstock, Maryland. It was a Sunday, a bright summer day. By plane, train, car and bus they came: 135 contemplative religious descended upon the Jesuit Seminary in the small town of Woodstock. The women represented 57 monastic communities from across the United States and Canada. They had gathered to reflect on their life as contemplatives and their mission in the Church.

A few days before, some had arrived early to attend orientation sessions, to prepare them to be facilitators of the small group sessions. The Seminar was planned not as a program, but as a process. Active participation by all present was the key to the success of the Seminar. Kathleen Gregg, a Sister of Charity from New York, handled the orientation of the facilitators. It is hard to overstate the importance of what Kathleen did behind the scenes in preparation for and during the Seminar. She had already been working with the coordinating committee to assist them in their communications and their dynamics as a group. The keynote address was given by Connie Fitzgerald, OCD, a member of the coordinating committee. This was a strong statement that the Seminar was not only for contemplatives, but presented by them!

August 18, the work began in earnest, or rather, as Mary Roman, OCD, wrote, “the kaleidoscope began to turn, since it was not until later that we became aware we were working. At first, we were conscious only of exposure – to bright light, to many voices, confirming and contradicting, encouraging and devastating. We were conscious, too, of our own increasing courage in expressing ourselves on an ever deeper level; conscious, finally, of a growing hope that out of apparent confusion, a clearer idea of our identity and witness was emerging.”<sup>vi</sup>

The Seminar was planned as a period of study and exchange, under the over-riding theme: “The Prayer Role of Contemplatives in the Life and Mystery of the Church Today.” The work of the Seminar was accomplished through the creative exploration of this theme, by a single daily lecture, coupled with a process of group dynamics. Small groups met during the day and came back to the General

Assembly to give reports. The coordinating committee met each evening, usually with the group facilitators, to get feedback on the day, as well as to plan for the morrow.

Sr. Marie Augusta Neal, SND de N, a sociologist, had sent out a survey to all contemplative religious in the United States in June of 1968. Over 1300 individuals responded. At the conclusion of the Seminar, a report was to be sent to each monastery in which sisters had participated. The Survey results revealed a national picture of cloistered orders, as well as pictures of each particular Order and of individual monasteries. At the Seminar the results were given for the first time, and the assembled group heard Neal explain them.

Based on the statistics, the Survey results revealed the less-than-healthy aspects of total cloister for many of the nuns. Their hearts and minds were absorbed in the little world within their walls. The Survey also showed the need for the nuns to examine all aspects of their way of life, to evaluate if their practices and customs contributed to a way of life that was genuinely contemplative. With this new information, the participants plunged into the Seminar with even greater resolve. One statement shows the overall spirit of the group.

***Profoundly conscious of solidarity with all men and of fellowship with our brothers in Christ, we, as contemplative religious women, have looked afresh at our mission in the Church. We have asked ourselves who we are, so as to understand better how we might serve. The conviction that we have a gift does not blind us to the realization that we have failed to offer it in a manner visible and credible at our moment in history.<sup>vii</sup>***

### **The Association is Conceived**

For fourteen days, the Seminar participants listened, reflected, dialogued and prayed together. As bonds were strengthened and they saw the value of collaboration, one of the women spoke firmly in her small group: "I'm not leaving here until we form a national association!" That was not on the radar screen of the Seminar's organizers, but neither did it come as a great surprise to them. As the meeting came to a close, consensus papers were developed and submitted to the General Assembly on topics of vital concern to all. Finally, their work was crowned by this concluding statement:

*Four years have already elapsed since the close of Vatican II. Despite laudable attempts in individual monasteries to answer the call to renewal, we realize that our isolated efforts have not been sufficiently effective. The presence of the Spirit among us has been evident in these days. We have seen, we have listened, we have become totally involved. We are no longer able to remain silent but must respond and act. We believe that the Spirit impels us to follow more closely the entire Church, which realizes today that strength lies in union. Without greater mutual support in continuing the process of self-discovery and growth, we cannot be what we are presently called to be for the Kingdom. There is manifest need among us for a deeper study of our mission in the Church. In order to counteract the dangers of isolation, we must have personal interaction among contemplative sisters and more effective communication between contemplative communities and the whole Church.*

*Therefore, the participants in this Seminar do hereby establish a free Association of Contemplative Sisters, auxiliary, rather than legislative in character, broad-based and open to all contemplative women.<sup>viii</sup>*

The seed planted several years ago had broken open, was about to send forth a shoot! The participants asked the five-person Seminar coordinating committee to get the new Association ‘off the ground.’ They also nominated thirty other participants to assist them in the task, a group that came to be known simply as “The Thirty.”

In the midst of these momentous decisions, however, another event occurred, which served to strengthen the women in their resolve. A few days before the end of the Seminar a Latin copy of a document from the Sacred Congregation for Religious (SCR) arrived. It was entitled “Instruction on the Contemplative Life and on the Enclosure of Nuns,” but became popularly known as *Venite Seorsum*, Latin for its opening words, “Come away by yourselves.” Several of the priests serving as resource persons for the seminar stayed up all one night, translating the document for distribution to the participants. As can well be imagined, it was not only the subject of much discussion, but sparked action!

Initial paragraphs of the “Instruction” devoutly captured some of the thoughts which the nuns had expressed in their consensus papers. However, its concluding section was extremely disappointing, as it stated that “papal enclosure...is to be regarded as an ascetical regulation particularly consistent with the special vocation of nun...” This was far from the experience of those who had gathered at Woodstock. It was also interesting that a survey sent out by Cardinal Carberry, from the Commission on Contemplatives in late spring, had not even been completed. So much for consulting the nuns on their way of life!

Participants knew they could not leave until they responded in some way to this document. A small group volunteered to prepare a draft of a response to be presented to the entire Assembly. They got the job done, and the letter was signed by most of the participants, to be sent to Paul VI, as well as the SCR. The concluding paragraph of their letter summed up the message:

*...for the first time we find a voice to express concerns that transcend individual communities. And so, for the first time, we are in a position to present to you reasoned conclusions and understandings of the needs of the prayer life of cloistered nuns from monasteries across North America. We respectfully ask that you postpone the effective date of the ‘Instructions’...until you have heard from us our presentation of the grave reasons for concluding that our contemplative life, which you and we hold in respectful reverence, is grievously imperiled by the particular norms of the promulgated “Instruction.”<sup>xix</sup>*

The vast majority of the participants signed the letter; the Seminar concluded with an outdoor Mass, with Cardinal Sheehan as principal celebrant, and the group began to disband. By bus, train, plane and car they left, forever changed by their experience, and strengthened by the bonds they had formed.

### **Development of the Association/First Programs**

Two weeks after the Seminar ended, the coordinating committee met once more, to make decisions on the first steps to take to develop the Association. It was obvious that ‘The Thirty’ had to be assembled as soon as possible. Sr. Margaret Brennan, superior of the IHM’s of Monroe, Michigan, offered part of their motherhouse for

the meeting. It was scheduled for November 25 – December 4 and immediate steps were taken to contact “The Thirty.”

They were asked to prepare by reflecting on some basic questions that had to be addressed, such as how they envisioned the basic nature of the Association, how individual members could best contribute to the development of ACS, and specific ideas for implementing issues addressed in the consensus papers produced at Woodstock.

After this meeting of the coordinating committee, they (along with about 150 other contemplatives) had an opportunity to meet with the Secretary of SCR, Rev. Edward Heston, The main topic of the discussions with him was, of course, *Venite Seorsum*, and its norms on enclosure. The paramount concern of the meeting, as had been frequently voiced at Woodstock, was the nuns’ concern for self-determination in decisions which nuns felt were best made by those living the monastic life!

Shortly after this meeting, three of the coordinating committee went to St. Louis to meet with Cardinal Carberry, in order to review with him what had transpired at Woodstock, as well as at the meeting with Father Heston. Communication on every level was important so that the ACS could move ahead with the confidence and support of its members.

November 25, 1969, twenty-two of “The Thirty” gathered at Monroe, with the five members of the coordinating committee for the first leadership meeting. They were joined by George Wilson, SJ and Kathleen Gregg, SC, who had been so helpful in planning the Woodstock Seminar, and had played key roles throughout the August gathering. This group worked intensely for over a week. The tangible fruit of their work was a statement entitled “History and Rationale of the Association of Contemplative Sisters.” This statement briefly summarized the history, which was combined with four strong statements, called “The Rationale,” which succinctly stated who ACS was, along with a broad statement of how it would function. Communication and flexibility were stressed. However, the most important words are “The Association is ourselves!” This Rationale, written so many years ago, is as true of ACS today as it was then.

But it was not enough to hammer out a statement, as prophetic as it turned out to be. It was decided also to send out the Woodstock consensus papers (“Harvest in

Gladness”) to every monastery in the country, as well as to all Bishops and Vicars for Religious. There was also much work to be done if ACS was going to achieve its objectives. Membership needed to be broadened. They talked about education. What did that mean? Who? Where? What? The same questions had to be addressed regarding communication, liturgy, and work. Three committees were formed to move forward the insights of the Woodstock Seminar: Prayer-Liturgy, Formation-Education and Work. Two Seminars on the Praying Community were proposed.

On at least a temporary basis, individuals were needed to apply themselves full time to set things in motion. Six sisters from as many communities formed a coordinating committee and lived together for about six months, dividing their time between two larger monasteries in Esopus, NY (Redemptoristines) and Clark Summit, PA (Passionists). Newsletters were sent out periodically, not only to keep members apprised of what was going on, but to involve as many as possible in the process of the Association’s development and to make available their services to the members. They also assisted the committees in implementing their plans, through letters and mailings, as well as handling logistics involved in allowing a seminar to “happen.”

The first of the two ACS-sponsored programs proposed in Monroe was held in June 1970, in West Hartford, CT. It was the “Growth & Development Seminar,” designed as an exploration into prayer and all that is involved in the growth of the person during their early years in a contemplative community. It was organized in two parts: one for those who had been in a community eight years or less; the other section was for those who were involved in (or interested in) integrating new members into a community.

The following August, a second program, entitled simply Prayer/Liturgy Seminar, was held, in which participants addressed probing questions that helped them search into both the communal and personal aspects of prayer. These Seminars were handled in a manner similar to the process set up at Woodstock: presentations by qualified resource persons were combined with ample opportunities for all participants to share their insights and experiences. Small group sessions were followed by general sessions, where all could share the fruits of their discussion and reflection. As had been the case at Woodstock, the keynote addresses were given by ACS members: Mary Roman, OCD and Vilma Seelaus, OCD.

September 1970 was the next key event as ACS concluded its first year: a second leadership meeting. Twenty members of the original “Thirty” assembled in Farmington, Michigan. Membership had increased to about 800 sisters, and it was time both to evaluate the past year, as well as to plan for the future. The coordinating committee presented a report on what had been accomplished since the beginning of the year, as well as objectives that had not been achieved. The Praying Community Seminars had been a success; they had excellent resource persons, were well attended and received high marks from all who participated. It was acknowledged that more effective communication was needed, on all levels. This was probably the greatest weakness of the first year, and it was recommended that more importance be given to it as ACS matured.

A number of important decisions were made at this meeting. A coordinating committee of seven sisters was chosen. The members of this group were to function from their own monasteries, meeting as necessary to carry on the work of the Association. At the same time, it was emphasized that direct involvement in the work of ACS had to recognize the priority of their own contemplative vocations.

Participants at the meeting recognized that the main efforts of the coming year must be at the Regional level. Thus, seven regions were established, in order to involve more members in the vital life stream of ACS and to come to grips more effectively with common challenges and opportunities. Plans were also made for other Prayer Seminars in 1971. In addition, Myriam Dardenne, OCSO, asked for and received support and encouragement for a multi-year program of contemplative studies, with a six-week session each year. When the group dispersed on September eighth, it was with the knowledge that much had been accomplished and decisive steps had been taken to solidify ACS in the year ahead.

A highlight of this leadership meeting was the presence of Father Jean Leclercq, OSB. Although he was undoubtedly the foremost historian on monastic life, he stated that he prefers to be called a ‘futurist,’ since one must be grounded in history in order to look ahead. He spent over a day and a half with the group, in informal discussion, as well as a more formal talk on “The Future of the Contemplative Life.” Summaries of his comments were later published in the *Contemplative Review*.

During 1971, ACS was incorporated as a 501©3 organization, domiciled in the State of New York. It also was included in the National Catholic Directory, an important step when applications were made for educational grants. A Regional Prayer Seminar was held in Louisiana. It was well attended, with excellent resource persons, who not only gave presentations but also made themselves available to the participants during the Seminar.

### **First National Assembly: A Turning Point**

By the fall of 1971, the Regions had been established and delegates had been selected from each region. It was time for the original leadership group, “The Thirty” to step aside and for ACS to have an elected leadership. A meeting was set up for October 28 – November 7, at the Benedictine Abbey in Benet Lake, Wisconsin. Some members of the coordinating committee had an opportunity to meet with representatives of Management Design (MDI), a consulting group in Philadelphia that had helped the Medical Mission Sisters set up an effective governance structure. As a result, David Ruhmkorff, of MDI, assisted the participants the first four days of the Assembly, guiding them in establishing a rather complex organizational structure, in which policy making and implementation of policy were separated.

The elected delegates, led by their elected chairperson, were to shape policies, while the coordinating committee, under the leadership of the President, was responsible for putting the policies into action. This structure was later dropped, but it served ACS well for the next decade. During these ten days, the participants also approved four goals, each with specific objectives, to guide them in whatever activities might be held under the aegis of the Association.

This meeting was extremely important for ACS: it put stability into the organization, and broadened its base of leadership. But it accomplished much more than that. One of the participants summed up what it was for her in an article she wrote for the *Contemplative Review*.

“...as we grappled with and defined goals, objectives, means, we became better organized, yes, but most important we became increasingly aware of who we are - - women of prayer in today’s world, contemplative women who walk together in growing friendship and who share that friendship with

others. The friendship that marked our beginnings was founded on a common love for our calling and on a common search to revitalize our life for today and tomorrow.” Claudette Blais, OCD.<sup>x</sup>

Vilma Seelaus, OCD, the newly elected ACS President, struck the same theme in her first communication with members:

“...The association is more an organism than an organization. Organization is necessary, but unless it has a heart through which the life stream of the whole is kept in circulation, interest soon wanes and commitment to the goals soon withers and dies. Fortunately the ACS does have a heart: FRIENDSHIP: friendship with God and flowing from this, friendship with one another...”<sup>xi</sup>

ACS was just a “toddler”: age two! Already, it had thousand plus members, the vast majority of whom were in traditional monastic communities, although there were a few who were in experimental groups. The seven Regions were active, and setting up their own meetings and programs. The Association of Contemplative Sisters was recognized by a number of national organizations, such as the Conference of Major Superiors and Sisters Uniting. Challenges lay ahead, but now it had the structure and the stability to meet them. The next decade was to be an interesting one!

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **Building Momentum: Inward and Outward**

“Always move from your strengths” was a byword echoed throughout the 1971 Assembly. A great strength of the Association was its desire to involve each member as “fully as she is desirous and able.” It follows that most of the action would be at the Regional level; this has continued to be characteristic of ACS in the ensuing years, throughout all its changes. Nevertheless, there was still action on the National level.

Goals had been set at the 1971 Assembly that were oriented to both personal and communal growth, in order to assist contemplatives in witnessing to the contemplative dimension of all humankind. These goals were a guide to all the Regions, as well as to the National leadership. The National leaders, cooperating with the Regional delegates, tried to participate in as many Regional meetings as possible, to give all members a better sense of the larger picture. The National leadership also made it a point to meet personally with Church hierarchy, and leaders in religious life throughout the country.

### **Leadership Program**

One of the objectives recommended by participants was to have a leadership training program for members, who could then visit monasteries and share the training they had received. A three-part program was set up with Management Design, with about thirty sisters participating in all three sessions. The training was progressive in nature, and involved training in developing goals, conducting meetings, and making decisions.

Part of the training was in-service. Participants visited monasteries under the guidance of a mentor, so that their skills could be evaluated. At the completion of the program, those who had been trained were available to any monastery to assist them in sharpening their listening and communication skills, holding community meetings, setting community goals, and making decisions by consensus. The program was described well by Mary Roman, OCD, one of the participants in the three-phase program:

*...the process, from the exalted ideals of goal-centered living to the down-to-earth details of goal-centered-budgeting, has been called 'glorified common sense'...indeed, it is as simple, refreshing and rare as common sense...it included the development of certain skills in listening, observing, communicating and in group decision making...there was a wide-ranging bibliography offering variety and depth of philosophical, psychological and theological insight...but in the end it was always in Scripture and specifically in the New Testament and the person of Jesus that the ideal of the enabling leaders found its justification and support. ...the training program exposed us to a process that is basically contemplative...<sup>xii</sup>*

At the first general meeting after this program began, it was evident that it had proved useful. One of the participants wrote:

*As the meeting progressed from the initial formal acceptance of the agenda as the basis for discussion...the fruits of the Leadership Training Program became evident in the new skills of tour leaders. Smooth decision-making procedures, balancing the need for informative discussion, with the need to progress through business, kept things in perspective.<sup>xiii</sup>*

Those skills continued to serve ACS through the years that followed. This was the last national ACS educational program, other than the Summer Program of Contemplative Studies.

National Assemblies were held annually, between 1972-1974. These meetings had as their purpose, not only election of National leadership, but also served as a forum to discuss matters of concern to all, and a venue to share the experiences of the contemplative life. Each Assembly had one or two resource persons, who not only gave formal presentations, but also made themselves available to everyone for informal discussion.

The topics presented were always designed for the personal enrichment of each individual, as well as to assist communities in fostering a milieu that promoted a genuinely contemplative life. Occasionally, a public statement was made which reflected the contemplatives' concern about matters of national or international concern. For example, at the conclusion of the 1972 Assembly, a statement on peace and non-violence was approved by the delegates. In addition, all agreed to address the issues of peace and justice on a regional basis. An issue of the *Contemplative Review* would also be devoted to this topic.

Since the first meeting at Woodstock, the seminal event of the Association, concern for process had been an essential element at meetings. This has continued to be true throughout the history of ACS, on both the Regional and National levels. It calls for skills that are characteristic of a contemplative person: the ability to listen, to communicate, and to be flexible. Initially, ACS struggled some with the complexity of its structure; gradually, members became somewhat more comfortable with it. For the first years of the organization, it served its purpose and

enabled the group to grow. As an indication of this openness, and perhaps a harbinger of things to come, one of the early Assemblies had a panel of individuals who had moved out of traditional monastic settings and were living their deep commitment to a contemplative life in non-traditional settings.

At the 1974 Assembly, it was decided to have national assemblies on a bi-annual basis, in order to encourage regional development. It also made a strong statement affirming the Association:

*We, the members of ACS...have experienced in a concrete way the value of ACS in our contemplative lives. We recognize the mutual support, strengthening and enrichment experienced from the close association of our various traditions, both in the unity of our essential values and the diversity of our traditional emphases. We see as fulfilled in a great measure the hopes and vision which inspired our original commitment (Woodstock, 1969), and we discern the growth of our Association as important to the fulfilling of the hopes we have expressed for our future.*<sup>xiv</sup>

### **Gradual Changes**

Membership in ACS had been by individuals since its inception. Individual Sisters who belonged to communities in the Metropolitan Association of Contemplative Communities (MACC) had been ACS members since the beginning. At the 1978 General Assembly, MACC asked for membership as a community to be permitted. Membership of communities was approved, resulting in a significant increase in members.

During the early years of ACS, there was considerable discussion about establishing official lines of communication with the Sacred Congregation of Religious. Some efforts were made in that direction, including an informal dialogue between Archbishop Mayer of SCR and a substantial number of ACS representatives. Although communication was good, it soon became evident that it was not useful to direct ACS resources in that direction and a definitive decision to that effect was made in 1984.

Nevertheless, through all those years, the ACS President did continue to represent ACS with national groups of women religious, as well as with the National

Conference of Vicars for Religious. The Canon Law Society of America also invited ACS to be represented at a Board of Governors meeting in 1975, as well as at their national meeting later in the year. Although nothing that was done impacted Vatican policies regarding all orders of contemplative women, ACS efforts did have a positive impact on federations of individual Orders, such as the Poor Clares and the Carmelites. Moreover, the activities of these years gave the women greater self-confidence in their own ability to articulate their contemplative vocation, as well as the tools to move more and more to self-determination.

### **Organizational structure**

In the Seventies, the Association evolved, as did religious life. By 1980, there were fewer vocations; unmet educational needs, recognized in the Fifties and Sixties, were now being met more at the local level, as communities availed themselves of opportunities in their own geographical areas. The 1980 General Assembly responded to this changing situation by radically modifying the organizational structure on an experimental basis for the next two years.

The positions of Chairman, and the other officers of the Delegate Assembly, were eliminated. The President would now function with two advisors and use the Regional coordinators in an extended advisory capacity. Two years later, the Delegates made those changes in the structure permanent. Over the years, as the demographics of ACS shifted, the number of Regions was gradually reduced: today (2006) it consists of three Regions, down from the initial seven. Through all the changes, ACS remained true to its original directives:

***ACS is a living organism encouraging local initiative and looking for the challenge of new inspiration. Present and future structures are therefore broad-based, flexible and provisional in nature, fully determined by the needs we face. In this light we understand ourselves as a pilgrim community searching and evolving.<sup>xv</sup>***

At about the same time the Association allowed communities to enter as a group, there was also a movement toward allowing more flexibility to each Region in their own membership policies. This first happened in the Western Region, which welcomed religious sisters from the so-called “active” communities, as well as lay women, to associate membership, a category that was later discontinued.

## ACS PROJECTS

References have been made to both the “Summer Program” as well as the *Contemplative Review*. The following goes into more detail about both of these.

### Contemplative Review

This periodical was initiated in February 1968, by the Redemptoristines in Esopus, New York, as a response to a recommendation by Thomas Merton: that contemplative monasteries should have an organ of communication among themselves. *Contemplative Review* was initially sponsored by the Metropolitan Association of Contemplative Communities (MACC), but was also mailed to every monastery in the country. It was “by contemplatives, for contemplatives” in order to share “with many other cloistered communities efforts at a renewal of the contemplative life, so that we may encourage and support one another in our common vocation and thus live it more fully.”<sup>xvi</sup>

The Association of Contemplative Sisters eventually took over its sponsorship after the editorial and publishing offices were moved to the Carmelite Monastery in Barre, Vermont.

*The Contemplative Review* grew in its readership as visitors to monasteries began to read it and then asked to subscribe. The format was changed from a mimeographed 8 ½ by 11 quarterly to one that was professionally printed, in a 6 by 9 format. For a period of time, it included ACS Newsletters, and frequently published formal presentations from ACS meetings. The periodical had a wide appeal.

In 1986, its name was changed to *Living Prayer*. It was published now bi-monthly instead of quarterly, and adopted a more cost-efficient format. Women and men from all walks of life contributed articles; its mission was to help its readers “nurture the contemplative dimension in our lives.” In March 1996, the last issue was published, not for lack of readers (circulation had grown to over 6,000) but because the Carmelite community was no longer able to do the work.

This Contemplative periodical had served a variety of purposes. It was a vehicle of communication within ACS and also an organ in which ACS members shared the riches of their life with literally thousands of others, who were on their own life journeys. Its pattern mirrored that of ACS. At first it was for contemplative communities only, and then for all who yearned to be open to the God who makes a home in us.

### **Summer Program of Contemplative Studies**

*This program began in the summer of 1971, and continued each summer for four consecutive years, ending in 1974. This was a new venture, and one implicitly envisioned in the papers produced at the Woodstock Seminar in 1969. Myriam Dardenne, OCSO, was the visionary and the leader. In making the original announcement to potential participants, she described it this way:*

***...it is part of a long-range plan. The goal: a program which integrates intensive study in an area central to the contemplative life with an actually shared experience of contemplative prayer. The program...is envisioned not so much as an accumulative program of knowledge, but as a process of learning through contact with teachers who ally scientific objectivity with an acquired methodology of integrative learning. The students will learn how to learn while practicing how to live.<sup>xvii</sup>***

The sessions were held at four different sites. Marquette University agreed to be the academic institution which would provide credits for those who met appropriate criteria and issue certificates to those not applying for college credit. The themes for each year were:

- 1971:     *Dialogue with God in the Old Testament and in the Mystical Traditions: East and West***
- 1972:     *Jesus, who are you? Who are you for me?***
- 1973:     *Myths/Symbols/Archetypes***
- 1974:     *Conscience/Contemplative Prayer/Prophecy***

Overall, it was a successful program: Although only seven participated in all four summers, 97 different sisters attended one or more of the six week sessions. One who completed the entire program wrote:

*...I find that these four years have meant a very serious and sustained confrontation with my own inward truth, with my own intuitive grasp of Reality, which, if I am not mistaken, is a definition of contemplation. Several avenues were present to channel this confrontation: 1) the “studies” properly so called... 2) the contacts with outstanding professors who proved to be challenging human leaders; 3) the precious group-community who lives and loves, full of courage and weaknesses, laughing, weeping, supporting, demanding...<sup>xviii</sup>*

The summer program was innovative and demanding, and it enriched all who participated. It had taken much time and effort to plan and present it. It was hoped that future programs similar to it could be implemented. Requests for the Program were made at several subsequent National Meetings, but it was not to be. It had served its purpose, deeply affecting, not only the participants, but also, indirectly, making an impact on their communities.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **The Fork in the Road: Who Is A Member?**

Over the years since the Woodstock meeting, significant energy and focus had been given to governance in the Association. ACS members had seen themselves as providing a common voice for contemplative women in monasteries. These women came from a variety of orders, arising from the charism of diverse founders, at different points in history. What united them was a life of prayer, as well as the need to educate themselves and to find ways to witness to their contemplative vocation in the life of the Church and in the world. How to assure an equal voice and representation in ACS had required the best efforts of all.

By the ninth General Assembly, several things had become clear. ACS was not going to be an official channel for contemplatives, as a whole or in part. The founding of the Association, respectfully announced to the Sacred Congregation for Religious (SCR), in 1969, had still not been acknowledged. The message was

clear, and, in 1984, the Assembly voted not to seek to make ACS an official channel with SCR.

Another concern was criteria for membership. Although there was the original assumption that “all contemplative women” meant women in canonical monasteries, there were now a growing number of exceptions. In the ferment of experimentation that followed the Second Vatican Council, some women, who had been part of ACS in its beginnings, were now living lives of prayer outside of monasteries. Others had left religious life altogether. As the Regions expanded, in size and importance, more and more exceptions to the rule were finding a home under the umbrella of ACS. Especially in the Western Region, which was geographically large, as well as flexible and casual by tradition, such exceptions were often simply “members.”

And so it was that in 1984, at the ninth General Assembly of ACS, a mandate was given to its leaders to involve the total membership in developing a new mission statement and a new membership policy. The time had come to be clear about who was a member of ACS and what the business of ACS had now become.

The tenth General Assembly convened at Dalton, Pennsylvania, in the summer of 1986, with the group singing the Weston song: “Journeys ended, journeys begun. To go where we have never been, to be beyond our past.” The words would prove to be prophetic, as the membership took up the mandate of clarifying membership and mission.

For some the way forward was obvious. Sr. Lilla Marie Hull, MM, spoke of the roots of ACS and challenged all present with the questions: “What is God asking of ACS today? Who is benefiting from ACS? Have we outgrown ACS?”<sup>xix</sup> Sr. Lilla seemed to speak for many members who belonged to canonical communities. Perhaps the time had come for those not in canonical communities to form a separate association that would speak more directly to their needs.

The next day began with a half hour of private prayer and reflection on the question: “What do I hear God calling me to now?” Then, in the afternoon, two members who had left canonical life for an experimental path, shared with the group their experience of contemplative life outside a monastery. Shirley Wishoski and Ginny Manss spoke with the Assembly of their personal, spiritual

journey. Included was an honest, deep sharing of the experience of dying to one form of their contemplative vocation and the birth of a new form, in their House of Sabbath. All present were reminded of the need to be attentive to the call of God, wherever it might lead.

The next day, Sr. Lilla told in her small group session of a scripture passage that had come to her during Morning Prayer. She spoke of the story of two women coming to King Solomon. Both were mothers, but one infant had died in the night. Now each woman claimed the living child and came before Solomon for a judgment. Solomon ordered the baby cut in half and part given to each woman. But the true mother said, “No, give her the child and let it live.” Perhaps those who desired the good of ACS should not call for its division.

By the morning of the fourth day, various issues had surfaced: membership, leadership, contemplative presence and contemplative outreach. Each participant chose one of the topics and the four groups worked, identifying specific suggestions and proposals.

The defining moment of the Assembly came when Sr. Mary Devereaux, OSS, rose to address those assembled. A proposal from the New York region was before the group: that two branches of ACS be established, one for women in canonical monasteries and one for those outside of monasteries. Sr. Mary spoke of the scripture passage that had come to Sr. Lilla in prayer, concerning Solomon’s wise discernment of the true mother of the baby. Then, Sr. Mary said: “We do not want to kill the baby! The New York region withdraws its proposal.” Sr. Dolores Steinberg, OSC, also withdrew a similar membership proposal.<sup>xx</sup>

Cecilia Wilms, of the Western Region, who had led the support for an inclusive Association, walked over to Sr. Mary. She embraced her and said, simply, “Thank you.”<sup>xxi</sup> This was a deeply emotional moment and facilitators urged the members to remain in silence and stay with their feelings. All rose to embrace one another, knowing that this was a spontaneous ritual of grace and reconciliation.

At the evening Communion Service, the consecrated bread was broken by one sister from each Region. Near the end it seemed there would not be enough for the entire group, but as sisters broke their portions and shared with others, indeed the bread was multiplied beyond their need.

Next on the agenda was a reworking of the Mission Statement. Desires and ideas were reported from the four committees, and an opportunity was given to everyone to make suggestions, as to wording and content. Sr. Vera Lea, OCD, and Cecilia Wilms labored over a third and fourth draft, incorporating all the input into the statement. At the end of the day, the new Mission Statement was approved unanimously.

### **Mission Statement**

We, the Association of Contemplative Sisters, exist to foster and support the contemplative journey of our members.

Rooted in the Christian contemplative tradition and inspired by the courage and prophetic vision of the women who formed the Association of Contemplative Sisters, we live, in a diversity of ways, a life of prayer.

We affirm the contemplative dimension of all women and men and support its development.

Through our faithfulness to the movement of the Spirit within, and through action congruent with each one's call, we are a contemplative presence in our broken, yet redeemed world, cooperating in the healing and transforming mission of Jesus Christ.

Sr. Margaret Mary Forster, CP, said that the following summed up the 1986 Assembly:

**God: "Come to the edge."**

**Us: "We might fall."**

**God: "Come to the edge."**

**Us: "It's too high."**

**God: "Come to the edge."**

**And we came, and She pushed us, and we flew! <sup>xxii</sup>**

## **Changes and Consequences**

After the deeply moving experience of reconciliation and acceptance, came the details of membership and goals of the Association. There would be no separation of members as to whether they were in monasteries or not, but there would be new categories. Along the way there had been some men who had given their presence and support to ACS by becoming members. Now there would be no males in the membership.

The Assembly had been divided over including men, and some women felt so strongly that “women” and not “persons” should be the nomenclature, that they could not accept the Statement otherwise. The new category of Friend of ACS was established and men could now be Friends. Women and men who felt an affinity with the goals of ACS, but not the sense of commitment to a contemplative path, could also become Friends.

Another consequence of the decisions at Dalton was the withdrawal from membership by MACC as a group. When the Association was oriented toward monastic women, membership had included entire monasteries. These communities now withdrew their collective membership, leaving the decision to individuals in their communities as to whether or not they would join ACS.

## **Welcoming All Contemplative Women**

The eleventh General Assembly, the first to welcome lay women as full members of ACS, was held in 1988 at Santa Sabina Retreat Center, in San Rafael, California. It was the first Assembly held in the Western Region, with the added attraction of San Francisco. Everyone wanted to come.

The Western Region had always included some women outside the monasteries, and with the meeting close to hand, large numbers of lay women attended for the first time. The space was adequate, but there could be no private rooms, and new members were sometimes assigned as roommates of monastic women. ‘Getting to know you’ was a first order of business.

The theme chosen for the meeting, “Networks of the Heart,” was based on an article by Armand Veilleux, OCSO, who said that “the common denominator of the persons that we would call ‘monastics’ is the fact that they are all people who in their search for God, go through the path of their own heart.” Mary Lavin, OCD, the President, opened the meeting with an expression of ‘oneness’ with each member, old friends, as well as new ones. ACS, she said, was like Ezekiel’s vision. Dry bones were taking on new flesh and new spirit, with women from many paths forging new bonds of support. She urged that the new membership policy be recognized as development rather than as change.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Several presentations echoed this theme. Constance Fitzgerald, OCD, challenged the women to form “not only networks of the heart, but networks of the mind.” “We need,” she said, “not only to share our feelings and our experiences, but we must reflect on and interpret our experience and be able to articulate it.” Sarah Koelling, an ordained deacon in the Episcopal Church, observed that participants were, approximately, one third members of monastic communities, one third long-standing members, now outside traditional communities, and one third new members, attending their first General Assembly. “Our unity,” she said, “is in embracing our diversity, and this is already a message, if we are truly united with our differences.”<sup>xxiv</sup>

Cecilia Rose Sprekelmeyer, OSB, spoke of freedom, particularly from the viewpoint of her study of Eastern practices. “The more we do not know about ourselves,” she said, “the more it controls us.” Finally, Wendy Wright, wife, mother and author, spoke of being able to pray from the “silence beneath the present reality,” so necessary in the combining of motherhood and contemplation. She left the group with two images: the heart, a connection to the heartbeat of the living God, and the womb, primal image of blood, newness and life.<sup>xxv</sup>

Joe Conwell, SJ, observer of ACS from the beginning, now a Friend, said that he had “experienced ACS as reaffirming itself, alive and well. It is not yet sure what it will become, but the union between the members legitimates and affirms both the cloister and the world. We all need and complement each other.”<sup>xxvi</sup>

Mary Devereux, OSS, longtime member of ACS and a canonical monastic, affirmed: “The ‘generic contemplatives’ realize the pain the ‘standard brands’ have come through. We may be fragile and vulnerable, but we are vital. Networks

of heart prevailed at this meeting and that is where most of the action took place.<sup>”xxvii</sup>

And so, lay women were welcomed as full members of ACS. But the times were changing. In 1990, in Clyde, Missouri, two events would confirm this. At the Twelfth General Assembly, Joan Bourne OCD was elected president. Joan was to be the last ACS President from a contemplative monastery (to date).

Also present at the meeting was The Reverend Sarah Koelling, now ordained an Anglican priest. What did this mean for an Association almost entirely Roman Catholic, with a tradition of inviting priests, invariably male, to celebrate Eucharist? How to keep to tradition and at the same time respect the office of one of its members?

### **ACS in the Nineties**

In 1992, at Madison, Wisconsin, ACS elected its first president who was a lay woman, Ginny Manss. Members saw Ginny as a bridge, between the old and the new. Ginny Manss had lived in both worlds: in a cloistered religious community for twelve years and, now, the life of a committed lay contemplative. “I wasn’t that surprised,” said Ginny, “as I had some hints about that possibility, but I did feel honored by their choice. It seemed to me that nurturing the creative energies between the lay and canonical groups was [my most important work.]”<sup>”xxviii</sup>

Some differences in leadership soon became apparent. When the ACS president was a member of a canonical community, the monasteries had generously subsidized ACS in a number of ways. The president was usually released from many of her duties in the monastery; numerous expenses, such as postage, long distance calls, duplication of materials and even travel costs were often picked up her community.

Another difference lay in communication. The canonical contemplatives had an active network among themselves and news traveled quickly, from monastery to monastery. An ACS president located in a monastery would stay in touch with ACS members. Email had not yet become a ubiquitous tool. How could a president, outside the monastery, keep a finger on the pulse of the Association?

The Thirteenth General Assembly in 1992 had formulated forty-six organizational directives to chart the course of the Association over the next few years. These directives included such things as: expanding the ACS newsletter, updating the ACS brochure, publishing a national directory and encouraging the formation of “clusters”, small groups of women on the local level, in each Region. There was also the major work of updating the governance structure of ACS to reflect its present reality, including the restructuring of by-laws, a process complicated by the fact that ACS was an organization with non-profit status. This extensive work would involve the efforts of three presidents.

Another project was the pursuit of a grant from the Lilly Foundation, to finance the development and publication of a book on lay contemplatives. This book, *The Lay Contemplative*, edited by Mary Frohlich and Ginny Manss, combined articles on contemplation, testimonies from lay contemplatives and information on retreat houses and other places that lay contemplatives could receive formation. In addition to the book, a companion video, containing photographs of the sites, was produced by Deb Gephardt. The project was completed in 2000 with the publication of the book and video.

In 1994, at Nazareth, Kentucky, one hundred and twenty members gathered to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of ACS. For approximately one third, this was their first Assembly, an indication of the rapid growth of ACS at this time. This number included ACS members from beyond U.S. boundaries, from Canada, Peru and Uruguay.

A truly united membership listened to speaker Beatrice Bruteau describe the contemplative journey as a “Dance of the Seven Veils,” as the contemplative dies to old ways—removes a veil—and rises anew, with new objectives and understandings of the journey. Edwina Gately, also, spoke of her work with women on the streets, surfacing the contemplative dimension even in these raw encounters. Members were also welcomed at Gethsemani, visiting the grave and the hermitage of Thomas Merton, who had befriended some of the founders of ACS, before it became a reality. (Merton had died in 1968.)

Ginny Manss was followed in 1996 by the election of Barbara Scott, also a “bridge president.” Barb had begun her contemplative journey in a religious order, but was now living in an experimental community and working as a hospital chaplain.

Barb continued working on the directives, especially the work of the book, *The Lay Contemplative*, and the updating of the bylaws.

### **Growing Pains**

In 1998, at the General Assembly in Toronto, several issues converged to produce the most contentious meeting of ACS history. Perhaps it was predictable; it certainly was painful. And, in the end, wisdom and tolerance prevailed; ACS survived and grew.

The original Association was contained within a network of monasteries, where women knew each other over time or at least knew other women from the same communities and trusted community process. With the movement of ACS into the world and the rapid expansion of membership outside monasteries, members with diverse views saw ACS now as “their Association,” supporting their needs and experiences.

Probably there was also more than a touch of a phenomenon noted by sociologists in the women’s movement as a whole, the “be nice” factor. Groups, especially women’s groups, may go along for quite awhile, with everyone making nice and differences unspoken, while below the surface, perceived injustices and injuries go unaddressed. Or, as one of the ACS founders put it: “We know that every group has a shadow side and it certainly erupted this week!”

The sixteenth General Assembly began with “Sing a New Church Into Being” and a prayer for vision. Eighty members introduced themselves, individually; there were Catholics and Protestants, monastic women, and lay women, single and married; there were gregarious pastors and consecrated Virgins and Hermits from rural retreats. Women came from South Carolina and California, Vancouver and Maine, from Indiana and Ohio, and, of course, Ontario, Canada. One Western Region Cluster of eight sent five members. Each participant received a puzzle piece to create one picture during the week. American and Canadian flags were waved and the national anthems of both countries sung.

Five women shared their stories over the week, and in small groups there were more stories, as women shared about: How do you find support for your contemplative journey? What helps you? What hinders you? Sr. Catherine

Martin led a daily program of meditative water coloring, where the talented, the art-challenged and the fearful learned that with art as prayer, all are at the same level. Along with the art time, in music-filled silence, there was a booklet of quotes from women mystics to take home.

It was during the Business Meeting that emotions erupted. There were two particularly contentious issues. The first involved the bookkeeping for the Lilly Grant: was the grant money being spent appropriately? There was some heated discussion on this topic, generating more heat than light. Much of what was said was based on ignorance of the situation and misunderstandings. There were no decisions to be made on this topic, but clarification was sought, and ultimately reached a few months after the meeting, when a thoughtful and objective interpretation of the numbers was given. It was abundantly clear that everything was in order.

The second issue pertained to whether or not men would be allowed to attend the General Assemblies. One might admit to a lack of knowledge of the financial workings of grants, but everyone had an opinion on ACS and men. From the inception of ACS, they had been on the periphery: as advisors, resource persons, and presiders at the Eucharistic Liturgies. In a word, men had been invaluable. The question of their full participation in General Assemblies began to bubble up prior to the 1998 meeting, from a Region where men participated in Regional gatherings. Correspondence on the topic prior to the meeting, added to the emotional undertones when the issue was introduced. Again the heat generated far exceeded the light!

Although the mission statement clearly recognized the contemplative dimension of all women and men, membership was still restricted to women. Was this exclusionary and an injustice? Time ran out on this discussion, and a decision was deferred to the 2000 Assembly. At that time, it was agreed that the attendance of men at General Assemblies would be decided on a case by case basis, depending on particular situations, including availability of space, after all members have been accommodated. Regions could make their own rules. However, full membership would remain restricted to women.

The election for President that followed, at the 1998 Assembly, was evenly divided between two candidates and went into extra innings. When initial voice voting

was not decisive, it was decided to adjourn until the following day. Written ballots were used and Rosalie Bertell was selected as the new President. In the liturgy of commissioning, each former president spoke of her ACS dreams and blessed Rosalie. Then all those assembled invoked the Spirit upon her and themselves. Rosalie challenged all to “hang in” and to remember that passion was a sign of life. For all the emotion and stress, it was a good meeting.<sup>xxix</sup>

The election of Rosalie Bertell as president continued a trend. Although Rosalie was a member of a religious order, the Grey Nuns of the Sacred Heart, it was not a monastic order. Indeed, Rosalie’s story resembled that of a lay woman. She had earned a PhD in Biometry and taught at university and written several books in the field of environmental epidemiology. Dr. Bertell was, perhaps, best known internationally as an expert witness on the harm done by nuclear materials. The most obvious thing about Rosalie was her activism, nourished by a profoundly contemplative spirit.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### The New Millennium: ACS Today

**“California, here we come, right back where we started from!”** The year 2000 found ACS members gathered in Southern California at Sierra Madre, ‘mother of mountaintops,’ for the Thirtieth Anniversary Assembly. A Western Region chorus of cowgirls, movie stars and members in bikini-painted-on tee shirts, greeted the group, with a medley, including “Don’t Fence Me In” and “California, here I come!” “Here we are!” they sang, “where east meets west. Open up that Golden Gate! Here comes the new millennium!”

An extensive program of inter-faith workshops had been arranged, with each participant having an opportunity to attend two of them. These included Buddhist Insight Meditation, a method of uncovering experiences hidden from awareness, and Jewish Spirituality, which considered “co-creating the world with God.” There was Sufi Prayer, with its emphasis on prayer beyond words, through stories, poetry and music. There was a Hindu Ashram Experience called a “pilgrimage to the cave of the heart.” And there was Western Contemplation, seen through the

lens of John of the Cross, and the dark night of contemplative transformation, understood through the lens of Sophia-Wisdom.

Carole Marie Kelly, OSF, wrote: “While it is impossible to capture and relate the depth of spirituality which these women shared with us from their own profound experience of contemplation, perhaps a few comments will allow you to share the sacred fire which they enkindled in our hearts.”<sup>xxx</sup> The tradition of women’s stories continued, with one from a canonical woman in a monastery and one from a divorced lay woman, now a member of an active order.

Local arrangements were coordinated by Fran Burras and Lillian McGee, including an article in *The Los Angeles Times*, which resulted in many inquiries about this Association of Contemplative Sisters. It was a peaceful time, sharing lives and learning about the paths of other traditions.

This Assembly 2000 saw the completion of some long-range projects. The book, *The Lay Contemplative*, edited by Ginny Manss and Mary Frohlich, was published, along with a video of sites offering lay formation, produced by Deb Gephardt. In other business left from the previous Assembly, the question of men was addressed. Male attendance at General Assemblies, it was agreed, would be decided on a case by case basis by the Leadership; Regions would make their own policies. With high hopes for the future of ACS, Rosalie Bertell, GNSH, was elected to a second term as President.

The year 2000 proved to be disastrous for Rosalie’s health. On a trip to Bangladesh, she contracted an E.Coli infection the tropical disease center in Toronto had never seen before. During her four and a half months in the hospital, Joanne Kelly and Deb Gephardt, the Secretaries of ACS, kept members informed, carried on business and, with the help of the Regional Coordinators, prepared for the 2002 meeting.

### **Another Milestone**

Rosalie Bertell’s health continued to be fragile, but the Leadership Team functioned well and plans went forward for the Eighteenth General Assembly at Rochester, Minnesota, in the summer of 2002. A focus on Native American Spirituality had been agreed to, since it was not included during the Assembly

2000. Arrangements were made at Assisi Heights, a Franciscan Spirituality Center.

The Leadership had hoped to have as the main speaker, Paula Underwood, but she died suddenly before the meeting. ACS was able to reach her assistant, Virginia (Prinny) Anderson and Sister Jose Hobday, a Native American, and to secure them as speakers. Jane Brown organized the local arrangements, helping to plan a series of rituals and gathering a display of Native American artifacts.

The Assembly coincided with an unexpected heat wave. The Center was built for Minnesota winters, with only a few meeting rooms air conditioned. The halls took on the look of college dorms, as members borrowed fans, left doors and windows open and slept in as few clothes as possible. Once again the flexibility of contemplatives was in evidence, as participants crowded into the climate controlled meeting room or took turns being small groups in hot rooms, waiting a turn in the cool ones.

The election of a president once again followed a trend. Deb Gephardt, who had kept the work going smoothly during Rosalie's illness, was elected President. Deb would be the first ACS President who was a lay woman and was married, with children and grandchildren. Deb had never been a member of a religious order. An association, born of the needs of women in monasteries, had become one functioning in the world, open to all women, and dedicated to the needs of its members, with their diverse lifestyles.

ACS still found its center in the monasteries and in an understanding of contemplation formed in those traditions. Decisions to move forward, into new territory, and to see all women as its province, had not diluted the original mission. Writing in "The Rationale" in 1971, ACS had spoken: "We believe the Spirit impels us; we understand ourselves as a pilgrim community, searching and evolving."<sup>xxxix</sup>

### **The Way We Are**

If the Sixties was a time of hope and experimentation in the Church and of new movements for freedom and justice in the world, today is a time of hanging on tight, lest rapid change blow us away. Geysers are discovered spouting water on a

moon orbiting Saturn. The Hubble Telescope sends back pictures of—almost—the moment of Creation, and scientists talk of growing organs from stem cells. Armaments and violence and disregard for the ecology of the earth threaten the future. And we know it all, in an instant, through the Internet, our iPods and All-News-All-The-Time.

In reaction, fundamentalists in every religion seek shelter and relief from ambiguity in literal interpretations of sacred texts. If only people will follow the rules, believe the right things. If only experimentation can be halted. But there is no putting the genie back in the bottle. Laity in the United States is better informed than ever before. Many women now have degrees in theology and are better educated than their parish priests.

A trip to a bookstore reveals the largess in volumes on contemplation, centering prayer and esoteric spiritualities. Or, one can simply go Online and type in a credit card number. Or, one can attend a class in a church basement or a private home. Information that was once protected and available to only a few, under the supervision of mentors, can now be found in paperback, at the local Safeway.

All institutions have suffered a loss of authority. The Roman Catholic Church has been rocked by the scandal of priests molesting children and a cover-up of their crimes by bishops. Vocations to the priesthood are few. Monasteries and active orders, after an exodus of members, find entrance of new ones slowed to a trickle. Their ranks are dwindling and gray. In all of this, where is ACS? Where is the vision of its founding women?

### **Where Is ACS?**

It is easy to imagine that ACS is a one time only event. Women in monasteries followed their vision of contemplation for all, into the world, and those with ears to hear, heard them and responded. Today is another time and, like other institutions, the Association of Contemplative Sisters is dwindling and gray. Except: ACS is not an institution.

For nearly forty years, ACS has held that a contemplative approach to life and prayer is a possibility anywhere, subject always to change and new forms. As Wendy Wright puts it, in *The Lay Contemplative*, “*The contemplative approach*

*orients us to reality not as a problem to be solved, analyzed or manipulated, but as a mystery that elicits our reverence, claims our deepest desires and calls forth responsive love. It is a dynamic approach, one that teases us into transformation and asks us to be remade over and over . . .*”<sup>xxxii</sup> No one ever said that being remade is easy.

In forming ACS, canonical contemplatives have created a new kind of cloister, where women can come together to share, to support, and to be energized and strengthened by one another’s journeys. This Mystery is at home on Mars, or on the run or at the local Laundromat. Connection is organic. But ACS is Vision and Connection. It will be harder to sustain the Vision, if there are no monasteries.

When the history of late Twentieth Century spirituality is written, ACS will be noted for its contribution to the valuing of women’s lives and experiences. This movement, which never claimed to be focused on liberation, in the end freed women, inside and outside monasteries, to hear the call of Spirit and to follow that call, wherever it might lead. These women, vowed to exacting paths of prayer and self-giving, recognized in the world its contemplative possibility. Their vocation was and remains the container of ACS. Canonical sisters are the prophetic witness to a source of Being which flows out to embrace and name us all. Contemplation can be seen in all our lives, because it is made highly visible in their path. From diverse ways, we all look to the Mystery they embody, to find our bearings and sustain our calling.

So, is monastic contemplation more authentic than a path followed in the world? Yes and no. The monastery, if it becomes detached from real life, can stifle. But, in going forth to be remade, we are pulled and pummeled by all sorts of forces. And so we return, again and again, not only to Source, as that Mystery lives in us, but also to the Wisdom of those who have followed this path before us. The norm of tradition contains us and sustains us, from losing too much or straying too far. The container of ACS is the monastic life.

This issue of authority and self-authority was addressed early on. Not just who is a contemplative, but who decides? It is the genius of ACS that there is no entrance exam. No one must vouch for another’s contemplative call. The Association exists to support the journey of its members. The rest is between the member and the Call. But always there is reciprocity, between those vowed in communities

focused on contemplation, and those who are bound in other primary ways, to spouse or child or profession, who live a life of prayer by stealing moments and creating silence in the noise. The contemplative journey involves both cloister and the world. Between these poles is found new life and tested wisdom. One is lost without the other.

### **ACS Snapshots**

It is a foggy morning. A pale sun hovers over the fields of rice and almond orchards. Traffic is heavy and Tita is not an early riser. But here she is, among the trucks and pickups, on her way to Manteca, to rendezvous with Pat and Ellen. Ellen's father is losing his struggle with Alzheimer's and they are stuck in this Sacramento Valley town for the duration. For a precious space of time, a freeway McDonald's will become a place of prayer and blessing. Any talk is holy; the trio ignores the cell phone, willing it not to ring.

In Indianapolis at the Carmelite Monastery, the morning is well begun. Communal prayer, rooted in centuries of contemplation, under-girds the day. Therese turns on the computer and composes her response for Carmel's web page, PrayTheNews.com, which offers glimpses of monastic life and a contemplative response to world affairs.

Deb, in Cincinnati, returning from the birth of her grandson, Thomas, also goes Online. As President, she deals with posts concerning the next General Assembly and notes from far-flung members, sharing moments of their lives. There is mail. Paula writes from New York to ask for prayers for sisters injured in an accident. Seventy women on the ACS One List will be quick to respond with support.

Meanwhile, in Milwaukee, a plane descends, bringing Ann from California. Gert is waiting. Their plan is four days of face to face, organizing a history of ACS. They are acquainted, this lay woman and foremother, but have no real shared history. Time is short, but they talk about their lives, between the challenges of selecting and shaping the material. The condo in Oconomowoc is palpably a holy

place. In stacks and folders, Newsletters and reports, pictures and documents, lies the evidence of response in love and connection of heart.

### **ACS Today**

Across North America, such vignettes are repeated, in women drawn together by contemplation, as a shared vision and approach to life. Today, women in monastic communities may open liturgies to those outside or offer classes, something like formation, in various prayer practices. They may serve as spiritual directors. Sometimes small groups of women meet regularly at the monastery, and support for traditional contemplation is co-mingled with new energies of those experimenting with new lifestyles. It is all part of this daring experiment which is ACS.

But not every member lives near a monastery and canonical women have other claims on their lives. Benefit and life flow both ways. To enable this rich confluence, the structures of ACS have been created and adapted.

Early on, when members came from monasteries, the General Assembly was of paramount importance. Today, the Regions are equally important. The Association is divided into three Regions: the Eastern Region, the Central Region and the Western Region. Each Region elects a Coordinator and delegates to the General Assembly. These women become the National Leadership Team, along with an elected President and others chosen by her.

Biennial meetings at the Regional and National levels facilitate communication. There are also newsletters from both the Regions and the National Leadership. In addition, the ACS Email List and Web Site make interaction simple and instant. Word of illness and joys, deaths and prayer requests, moves through cyberspace and around the world.

The development of Regions has made it possible for more women to be involved. Meetings take place in different parts of the Region, tapping local energy and talents, and allowing women who cannot travel to be a part of the larger group. The ACS President attends Regional meetings and other members are invited, as well. The theme of a meeting may open new possibilities as the group focuses on: solitude; Native American spirituality; spiritual practices from other religious

traditions. In these meetings, Regions develop a flavor of their own, often reflecting the terrain and culture of the area.

General Assemblies also take place in different Regions, with program and logistics the responsibility of the different Coordinators. In a time of rising costs of travel, someone will raise the question of meeting at some centralized place, perhaps an airport hotel. But this is always dismissed as too costly in other ways. It is important that the members of the Northeast experience the Southwest or the milieu of Los Angeles. It is important that the members of the Western Region, with its wide spaces and frontier casualness, return to the experience of the traditional monasteries or the international flavor of meetings in Canada.

The Cluster has been an important addition to the Region, as women come together several times a year at the local level. Such a gathering of local members for prayer and sharing has long been fostered through the generosity of women in monasteries. In recent years, Regions have encouraged the intentional forming of Clusters and, in some cases, seeking out women who may desire such membership. It is here that seekers find support for contemplation that may not be available through other channels. Bonding and mutual support is intensified by relationships that are extended over time. It is not altogether whimsy, that “Cluster” sounds like it might be derived from “cloister.”

Many traditions simply arise out of something that is ventured and valued. A Region may have a prayer shawl that is used in meetings or mailed to members during times of serious illness or bereavement. Assemblies, both National and Regional, conclude with healing ceremonies, with the wrapping of the shawl around each member, in turn, with all laying on hands and prayers spoken before departure.

Clusters may also develop their own rituals. In one, when a member dies, floating candles are lighted and placed in a large container of water, like Japanese floating lanterns to guide the dead, while the Cluster remembers and celebrates the life now transformed. *Para-rituals* of bread and wine may be used, at meetings and in clusters, or actions from other spiritualities may be adapted for the use of members.

ACS is not an organization that takes stands or sponsors projects, although many members are involved in social justice or ecological concerns. ACS members are

also active in other organizations and major workers in their parishes or have other affiliations. But the Association exists to support its members, contributing to work and witness, through those members.

An exception to this are the projects previously mentioned. There is the book, *The Lay Contemplative*, edited by Virginia Manss and Mary Frohlich. It contains articles on contemplation, as well as essays by lay contemplatives and information about places where laity can obtain formation in contemplative practice. There is also a video, developed by Deb Gephardt, which contains pictures of the various sites.

Another project has been the video interviews of the women involved in the founding of ACS, which was produced by Ellen Alford, with the assistance of Pat Ballard. Ellen and Pat traveled to various sites to talk with foremothers of the Association and edited the material into two video cassettes. Another part of the ACS History Project will be this book, which is an effort to tell the ACS Story, by examining the present nature of the Association and the history of how it came to be.

Meanwhile, the Metropolitan Association of Contemplative Communities (MACC), which was the first inter-community organization successfully established, continues. The Church has been blessed with a rich variety of contemplative communities, and twelve of them are active members of MACC today. Established four decades ago, MACC is a response to Vatican II, as well as an answer to John Paul II's invitation to "cast out into the deep." Members seek a renewed understanding of individual charisms, as well as a share in the richness of each other's communities. It is important to note that, while ACS has moved in a different direction, there remain vital contemplative communities, who give communal witness within the Church to the contemplative dimension of their lives.

The current (2006) Chairperson of MACC, Sr. Moira Quinn, OSSR, writes of their structure and activities today:

***Our Leadership Team is comprised of five Sisters from different communities, who share the responsibility of organizing the semi-annual meetings. We average fifty Sisters at each gathering, which is held in a centrally located retreat house. The day-long meeting includes a guest speaker, as well as times of***

*sharing our hopes and dreams, trials and sorrows, and whatever may support, encourage, enrich and celebrate with one another our contemplative lives. The celebration of the Eucharist is the summit of our time together. In collaboration and unity of mind and heart, we seek to live the adventure of the Spirit in the faithful following of Christ.*

### **The Journey Will Go On**

Historians tell us we are living at the end of something. In these early days of the Twenty-First Century, it is not clear just what is ending or which of a dozen, dozen trends will evolve into the Future. No one knew that monasteries, cooperating after World War II, would foster the contemplative practice of housewives or touch the lives of hermits, via cyberspace.

Today, the whole world is in upheaval; on pilgrimage and wandering, but still searching. Contemplatives, wherever they are, must be the “still point of the turning world.” If ACS continues its exploration of the Real, it will go on, in some form.

The Association is gray and its membership is small: three hundred and ten members, with a ratio of lay women two to one. Perhaps, like an individual life, an organization has a shape and destiny, passing into winter and silence, as its members complete their individual journeys.

But winter is known for its hidden possibilities. It is a time of darkness and unknowing; a time of Mystery and dreaming. There are seeds that only split and germinate because they have endured the bitter cold. There are vital places in the heart that exist because they are carved out by loss; the heart grows in compassion by breaking. Contemplatives live and grow whole, by dying and rising. ACS is not done with its changes.

## **SECTION II: MEMBER STORIES**

### **SO I TOOK A LEAP OF FAITH**

Ellen Alford

When I was 19 years old, I entered an English order called The Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. After four years, I chose to leave and eventually, I left the Catholic Church altogether. After many years of struggling to "find myself," I gradually got back in touch with my spirituality, even though I walked my path in tiny baby steps and didn't feel I was covering much ground.

1992 was a turning point in my life. Two major events occurred. The first was that my partner, Pat, retired. As we both longed for a simpler, less expensive lifestyle, we decided to sell our house and all our earthly possessions in order to live full time in an RV.

The second major event was a visit by my novice mistress, Sr. Anne, who came to the States from England. It was a wonderful visit. It was after seeing her that I started thinking about my Catholic roots. Thus began a journey that took me not only back to my Catholic beginnings, but into my very soul in search of my authentic self. I had ample time to read, pray, journal and delve within. I became more in tune with the contemplative yearning of my soul. The free-wheeling RV life style was perfect for seeing the world and discovering my heart's desire, to live a contemplative lifestyle.

The Christmas of 1992, I received a letter from my friend, Ann Denham, who just happened to mention her involvement in ACS. I was immediately drawn to the idea of a contemplative group of women. Pat and I decided to attend the 1993 Regional meeting in Santa Cruz, CA. Not knowing what to expect, but thinking it would be a quiet, spiritual experience, I was dumbfounded at all the energy swirling around the entire meeting. I wasn't sure what hit me, but in the end I wanted to join ACS. Later I became a member of a Cluster in Sacramento.

In 1995, Pat and I were drawn back to the Sacramento Valley; my dad was diagnosed with Alzheimer's and needed my help. Now we could touch base more often with our Cluster. After my dad died in 1997, we began anew our RV travels, but still made an effort to attend our Cluster meetings. It was at one of these gatherings that we discussed the fact that at every meeting, be it a regional or a national, one of the founding mothers would give a brief history of ACS. I found their presentations most interesting and always left the meetings wanting to know more.

It was after one of our discussions that I came up with the idea of buying a video camera and doing a video history tape of ACS. Because I knew nothing about using a video camera and was a complete novice about photography, I was a little nervous about taking on such a project. But my friends in the Cluster asked me: "If not you, who else will do it?" I had no answer, so I took a leap of faith and followed my heart. I decided my motto would be: "Just do it!" I organized my project quietly. I didn't want to approach the Association in a formal way, for fear I would get their hopes up. Also, I didn't want the pressure of committing to a project that I might not be able to complete.

Someone suggested that I attend the 1998 National meeting in Toronto, where many of the women who helped form the Association would be. What better reason to go to Toronto? So, Pat and I took a road trip in our brand new little red Toyoto truck, and what a trip it was! Once in Toronto I was able to film numerous people. They were all so willing to talk and share their experiences. It was a tremendous joy and privilege to hear their stories and to be able to film them.

After the filming was completed, I struggled to figure out how to get from filming, to a finished, coherent product. At one point I didn't think I could move beyond the basic filming. But I decided that even if I didn't actually produce an edited version, the interviews themselves were an important contribution to the history project.

But God had other plans. I was notified that ACS had granted me \$2500 for completing the project. At the 2003 Western Regional in Seattle, Deb Gephardt, who was president of ACS at the time, came up to me and asked if I could have my project completed and ready to present at the 2004 National Meeting to be held in New York? Without thinking, I calmly said, "Yes." But all the while I was thinking: "Now I've done it! I've committed to finishing this project, so I'd better get with it."

I moved forward with a renewed sense of excitement and energy and did complete the project, using a professional video company. The result was two one-hour videos, Part One and Part Two, of the "History of the Association of Contemplative Sisters." It was a wonderful experience. I gained a deep respect for the women who founded the Association. I also learned a lot about myself,

through the special process of creating a visual history of the organization I have come to love so dearly.

ACS is a cherished gift for me. The women who are drawn to the Association are authentic, real and very sacred friends. I have been deeply touched and have grown in many ways, because of my experiences with the women of ACS, both the monastic women and the lay women. The story of ACS is an incredible piece of Catholic history. Being a part of this wonderful group of spiritual companions is a blessing in my life.

### **I HAD FOUND A HOME**

Fran Burras

In 1988, I made the trip to Santa Sabina Center, a Dominican retreat and conference facility, in San Rafael, California. Lillian McGee, my dearest friend, was my companion on that journey, where we experienced the first ACS meeting after it had opened its membership to non-canonical women. It was an historical event, and I was there, not only to witness it, but also to be part of it. The people, the talks, the many experiences of that week brought me to a place that I was very ready for, a place that I never knew existed, yet where I felt at home the minute I walked through the doors of the retreat center. The deep sharing of the canonical and non-canonical women in the mixed groups was the beginning of the breaking down of the walls that had kept us apart for centuries.

As a married woman I yearned for the contemplative life and had attended many excellent retreats and workshops since my early thirties, searching for the guidance and awareness I needed. Thanks to the wonderful Carmelite friars, who ran the high school where my three sons attended, I was introduced to contemplation as a way of being for all people. I was blessed with excellent spiritual direction during those early years, though it was more painful than joyous, for I had layers and layers of past life experiences that had never been dealt with. It was while being plunged into silence and solitude that the memories could surface and the healing tears could flow, always with a compassionate and supportive guide nearby.

I grew up Catholic, very, very Catholic. In fact, everyone in my world was Catholic. I attended twelve years of Catholic schools, the first eight in St. Louis, Missouri, and then high school in California. There are three priests in my family, one uncle and two first cousins, and one nun, a cousin. That tells you what kind of a family I came from. When, at eighteen, I met and married a non-Catholic, my life took a very different turn. One of the good things that came out of this is that it was the instrument that began to break up my rigid Catholic thinking. I had no trouble embracing the Vatican II changes and welcomed them into my life.

My parish was in no hurry to make any changes, so the doors to contemplation did not open until I met the Carmelite friars, but the seed was there from my very beginning. Somehow, in my traditional Catholic background, I knew there was something deep, special and unknown to me, within the womb of the tradition, something that had been alluded to but not taught. Perhaps it was seeing my priest-uncle slipping away during family celebrations to pray the office; perhaps it was seeing the Carmelite women in full habit taking care of my mother when she was in their sanitarium; perhaps it was the compassionate mother superior, the principal of my high-school, ministering to me when I got the news of my mother's leukemia. Whatever it was, wherever it came from, I knew the Church had a secret that it seldom shared with lay people.

Contemplation, what is it? When I first heard about it I must have been in my early thirties. I seemed to be in the right place at the right time, for my teachers appeared, and I went through the open doors, to learn as much as I could. My dear high-school friend Lillian seemed to have the same thirst as I; we pulled each other along, which eventually led to our entrance into the ACS.

I could not come up with a better description of the contemplative life than the one Wendy Wright wrote for our ACS brochure. To me, she says it all: ***“The contemplative life is that radical and risky opening of self to be changed by, and in some way into, God’s own self. It is a formative life; it changes us and our perceptions. It causes us to see beyond our present seeing. Thus it is a life of continual dying, of being stripped over and over again of the comfortable and familiar, a life of letting go and allowing a reality beyond our own to shape us. From another perspective, it is a life of emerging spaciousness; of being made wide and broad and empty enough to hold the vast and magnificent and excruciating paradoxes of created life in the crucible of love.”*** I reflect on this

over and over again, each time finding new meaning relating to whatever is going on in my life.

From the time I walked into that meeting at San Rafael in 1988, I knew I had found a home, a place of support for one struggling to live a contemplative life. Because of ACS, I've come to see that being a contemplative is a very normal thing, a way of being open to all of humanity, with all of its diversity. I also believe that without embracing a contemplative outlook, humanity will cause great violence to the world, something we are now witnessing. ACS offers the structures to call forth and sustain a contemplative life, especially because it is rooted in monastic tradition.

The task for non-monastic women is to translate the monastic tradition into contemporary life, and I believe we in ACS do that by sharing our stories. I never tire of hearing the stories of our founding mothers, women who struggled to emerge into full personhood during the turbulent post-Vatican II days. From the very first meeting, I saw my life as a parallel story, just one of the many women's stories that had not been told. These women role-modeled for me what a contemplative looked like: women who were whole, strong and wise. They had a way of listening and being present that birthed me into life.

Lillian and I embraced ACS and together we have journeyed to almost every Regional and National meeting since 1988. ACS became our spiritual community, as we both felt the overwhelming love and support from the members. Lillian was the first married woman to accept the role of Regional Coordinator, and I followed her in the office; the truth was, we co-coordinated with each other, for neither of us could have done the job alone. Our gifts and strengths are in our diversity.

Together, we acted as the on-site coordinators of the 2000 National Meeting in Sierra Madre, California, which was another historical moment in ACS history. It was our Thirtieth Anniversary, and ninety women from all over the United States and Canada came to celebrate. Our theme was to explore the gifts of Christian Mysticism and four other mystical traditions. It was a daunting task for all of us involved, but one filled with blessings.

For the past eighteen years, ACS has been an integral part of my spiritual life and, as I pass through each stage, is there to support, listen and encourage me. Each

year this sisterhood means more to me, as other structures evaporate. As my circumstances change, I am constantly challenged to see things through the eyes of a contemplative. I know I have the tools to face what life brings me by living in the present moment and listening, as I have been listened to. The silence and solitude that I have craved is very elusive to me now, especially with a retired husband. I have had to learn how to make my monastery in my home, to appreciate the rare moments when I am alone, and to always remain in the now, lessons that my ACS sisters model for me.

As I live my life in my mountain home outside of Los Angeles, ACS is always there. It is difficult to meet with the other members, but I am still able to get to all of the Regional and National meetings, which seems to sustain me. There is always communication through email; there is always someone to share with, to pray with, and to celebrate one's life and death moments.

## **GOD-PRESENCE, MEETING AND FRIENDSHIP**

### **ACS 1984-1986**

Jo Casey, OSC<sup>xxxiii</sup>

I know how to whistle! Very, very LOUD! I learned how as a child in order to outdo, or at least be noticed, in our two-boys-before-me-in-birth-order family. I used my whistle to rouse compassionate sisters in their rooms to open the door for the group of us locked outside on a night at St. Vincent's on the Hudson, ACS Assembly 1984. Then I was the one whistled at to become ACS President.

I tell it lightly, but in many ways it was the hardest of times. ACS needed to deal with our membership issue and the way members had changed. We were an Association of Contemplative Canonical Religious women, but many ACS members had been dispensed from their religious vows. Who are we now? Monika Hellwig, our main resource person, addressed the 1984 Assembly with a summary of "current trends in the Church and in women's issues and ecumenism; Gospel values for our times, dealing with tensions, i.e. living both under the law and following the Spirit; a call to greater integrity and to more extensive outreach."

She did not address the issue of how does a Canonical Religious System stretch and change? Canonical systems for Cloister were already stretched to meet and accept ACS. Could they, and we, integrate yet another step by embracing sister members, who were contemplative but not in public religious vows? Will asking the Question only create division? Is there restructuring that is for Life?

When the Assembly arrived at the time for choosing leadership, and Sr. Annamae Dannes, OCD, was not renewing her position as President, there was no sister called forth who agreed to leave her name on the candidate list, until Clare Adams, OSC, was called...and Jo Casey, OSC. Now, we are sisters from the same Community. We called home. It was OK. So we allowed our names to be on the list.

I never thought of being President. I left my name there solely to accompany Clare, whose expertise I knew ACS would benefit from, in this time of hard decision making and life discernment. Mine was a statement, with Clare, that God is Alive in life. Accepting the nomination, I named myself a candidate from the *Anawim*. I acknowledged what I felt was true and a disqualifying attribute at that special time of ACS's need for astute leadership and decision-making. I was truly shocked in being wrong, and being elected by ACS. The following two years became for me a Graced time, teaching me about shock and change and Love's capacity to integrate these.

Change was the very name of the ACS Agenda.

Many, many people helped carry life along on our elected course. Courage and Forgiveness and Risk are qualities of Love I particularly name as denoting the spiritual journey of that change-embracing time. Sr. Clare was near to me, with self-giving knowledge and wisdom that aided me, and she truly made Present the Graced Patience of God in our formulation and carrying out of the ACS Assembly 1986.

Change is a scary reality, shocking and challenging. It really is constant in life, and yet quite opposite of how we render institution or tradition. Incarnation is God taking Change into God's Own Unchanging Being. I can remember sharing in my President's Report, the words of insight given by a laicized priest friend and historian at a Eucharist once: "You (each) are an event. And an event is not only a

happening, but history's interpretation and re-interpretation of the happening." I am an event; my election was an event.

Today my interpretation/reinterpretation sees it as a contemplative event, a God Event that asked for authenticity regarding the changes that had happened and would happen. History is the place of God's Coming – and God's experience of change, and God's Saving Forgiveness.

Courage: Everyone has their story. Stories are from the heart and soul and for life. I fell upon the word-image "*Anawim*" when I introduced myself, and I opened up that story further in the graced symbol I chose to encourage my commitment to ACS and the challenge of Change. In prayer and art I simply made a line-drawing of Mary and Elizabeth, like the icon ACS sponsored Sr. Joan Tuberty to take, in friendliness, to an Orthodox Contemplative Monastery of Nuns in Russia at the time of our 1984 Assembly. This image of God-Presence and Meeting and Friendship and the awesome Changes that were growing inside each of them, carried me the two years of Meeting work. And I kept that drawing present to the view and soul of the Association, preparing for the Assembly.

The issue of our membership had to be addressed and kept in mind, with questions and proposals to stimulate thought. And the image of two Gospel women embracing had its story for the heart. This was simply for the support of grace and energy, regardless of any outcome. I knew personally how very big a challenge it is to embrace change – in fact, how impossible it is without Grace.

The Mission Statement was another way to acknowledge membership. Who is ACS Today? That question applies anew to every day. ACS was alive and present at the Religious Conference of LCWR.<sup>xxxiv</sup> ACS views were presented to the Assembly of American Bishops, as input for their work on a Pastoral on Women. Sr. Marcie Malone, OCD, brought ACS art and prayer to the Peace Ribbon Social Awareness Event and Walk of Love. ACS gave itself to the tasks of the time.

We were approached by Eileen Storzer, and extended her a welcome. She was a lay woman and contemplative, set on her hermit-like course by an Environmental Disease caused by human misuse of chemicals on the land. She stretched our awareness with her life and desire for our ACS Community connection. This was

akin to the input our Sr. Rosalie Bertell, GNSH,<sup>xxxv</sup> gave at the 1986 Assembly, calling for community life with our Sister, Mother Earth, and all people.

Another person reaching to ACS came to me: Trish Hampl, an author writing of her life experience and spiritual awareness. She asked for live-in time with a Catholic contemplative community, as she wrote of her call/search for God. *Virgin Time* is the book she wrote. We were ACS as we risked fostering consciousness in life's individual story.

I chose our close-working ACS Leadership team to be representative of multi-consciousness in ACS: beside me was Joanne Kelly, a contemplative, dedicated outside monastic tradition, and Sr. Dianne Short, OSC, a member of MACC and my Poor Clare friend. Sr. Jean Alice McGoff, OCD, was ever my support in time of need.

The Mideast Regional Meeting was geared to show a decision-making process and aid people's readiness for 1986. At the Assembly, Sr. Lilla Marie Hull, MM,<sup>xxxvi</sup> would present the Religious Life issues in ACS history from its beginning, and ask relevant questions for this time we are in. I asked Ginny Manss and Shirley Wishoski to share their life story and dedication. Threads of ACS agreement, as to who we are and how we know a mission statement of our call, stretched out in paper questions/answers across the postal avenues.

Then we Assembled. In the wonderful setting of Dalton, Pennsylvania, and with the grace of Meeting there, in the well-planned opportunities to Be together and to Listen and to share in small, base groups and in assembly, we met. We used circles of colored paper to write out our hopes and dreams and souls, and to search out together the circle of unity that is GOD TODAY in us.

What a lot of work and miracles Jean Alice and the word-workers, Cecilia Wilms and Vera Lea Verant, OCD, employed to bring forth the statement that was born in unanimous approval on the Fourth of July! And what courage was present to stay the course of communal labor and to formulate policies for membership! There was soul-work risked and broken open on every level at that Meeting: proposals for how ACS might become two Associations. And there was left-brain and right-brain work to aid our openness to see God's nudging in our midst. Images from Scripture were shared for interpretation: the greatest impact being Sr. Lilla's

image shared with Sr. Mary Devereaux, OSS,<sup>xxxvii</sup> about how the true mother in the story of Solomon was she who trusted to let go of her child, rather than see its life divided up.

We celebrated together at Eucharist and daily prayer; we ministered at Communion Services. What everyone who was there knows is that GOD ministered to and embraced us at that Meeting! We know that from how we experienced the grace and acceptance and Change that was expressed at the end of that very full day before July 4 when Sr. Mary Devereaux, OSS, (an Official of MACC) and Cecilia Wilms (ACS Member, no longer a Trappistine) simply and honestly embraced. From East to West and up and down, we felt that embrace, knew it in our souls. ACS is us and at that time it was an “us” that said yes to change and diversity, and to forgiveness and joy.

We cannot give/share consciousness. Our part is to receive and meet and embrace consciousness...and say yes...and let life happen, and be happy. As Mary and Elizabeth did in the very presence of Christ Who IS, and as forgiveness does, in the presence of what IS NOT, until we acknowledge and embrace it. “Let us begin to do good, now,” say Franciscans. “Where there is no love, put love and you will find love,” say Carmelites. “Choose life, let go of fear” says Jesus, in the Gospel – and says our experience of Jesus at ACS during 1984-1986. And says God, anywhere, with and without words, in contemplative experience.

Today I have another Scriptural image for that ACS Meeting EVENT. It is the image and story of many friends, who in faith took a needy friend (i.e. ACS) to the top of a house, where they took off the roof and with all their might, safely lowered this friend down to where Jesus could touch and heal and forgive.

I still want to end with part of the poem our Assembly 1986 began with, a poem by Thomas Merton.

### ***The Quickening of St John the Baptist***

The day Our Lady, full of Christ,  
Entered the dooryard of her relative  
Did not her steps, light steps, lay on the paving leaves like gold?

Did not the eyes as grey as doves  
Alight like the peace of a new world upon that house,  
upon miraculous Elizabeth?  
Her salutation sings in the stone valley  
And the unborn John  
Wakes in his mother's body,  
Bounds with the echoes of discovery.

O burning joy!  
What seas of life were planted by that voice!

### **ACS: A MYTHIC CONTAINER**

Myriam Dardenne, OCSO  
Redwoods Monastery, May 17, 1991

*Myriam Dardenne, a Trappistine, was actively involved with ACS in its early years, then became a rather inactive member between 1975 and 1990. She was asked to help with this history project back in 1991. Much to her regret, her other commitments caused her to decline. However, she wrote down her reflections on ACS, as a challenge as well as a commentary on its history at that time. Myriam passed away in 2002, so she is not able to answer questions I may have. However, I pass along the last half of her paper, with some editing to condense it slightly. Gert Wilkinson.*

### **(Introduction)**

I project that a history of ACS will provide a necessary perspective on contemplative life in the second half of the twentieth century. It will help to separate much of the wheat and chaff which invariably become part and parcel of any group in evolution. It will also tell us, ACS members, our strengths and our growing edges. Moreover, it will bring to the surface unknown questions and myths woven through its existence.

## **II. The Question: Can we recognize/name the mythic container which nourishes us as an Association of contemplatives?**

I am stumbling and limping along as I toss my words to the four winds of the living Spirit, and to you. Is ACS an “aside,” while our real concern is our immediate living context, or if ACS is vital, is it enlivening individuals and local communities? How shall I sketch briefly the context out of which the Woodstock Seminar, August 12-31, 1969, emerges?

The Association of Contemplative Sisters evolved out of energy fermented within the deep well of fundamental human needs. Given an environment that allowed it to seek its own solution, it broke through the layers of history in a remarkable self-assertion to blossom into a new beginning, a painful process of re-birth. The power born of personal choice and communal self-evolution did not begin there but it achieved an affirmation much like the famous genie-out-of-the-bottle, and would not be repressed. (*Ruth Brennan, a few words, underlining mine.*)

What was the genie-in-the bottle that would not be repressed (for an abbreviated version of the tale, see C.G.Jung, Alchemical Studies, vol.13, p.193-4)? It was an energy “fermented within the deep well of fundamental human needs.” What are these fundamental needs? What did become of the genie once it emerged out-of-the-bottle?

One of its manifestations was the exercise of one’s own inner authority. “Why don’t you judge for yourselves what is right?” (Lk 12:57.) The whole contemplative mode of perception and living, its approach to life, to God, to the world was earth-quaking. ACS 1969 was questioning modes of government in their local communities and their whole relation to the Sacred Congregation of Religious. At the same time -- this must be emphasized -- here was a group of women who in no way claimed to be feminists, who felt empowered by the living Spirit, by the encouragement of the Second Vatican Council and by their very nature as praying women, who claimed a sane life, guided by the necessities of living their traditional vocation in a given time and culture. At the root of their search at the time, was the perception that fundamental human needs in contemplative cloisters had to be integrated rather than repressed or suppressed. Sweet piety was not enough; heart, soul, minds, body, were called to a passionate exploration into God. Knowledge and love had to embrace. (from Connie

Fitzgerald's talk at 1988 ACS meeting in Santa Sabina) Education was seen as a priority. This group of women, even though they did not use the words system, organism, ecology, knew that their relational life in their local communities, their world, their worship, their solitude, their spiritual quest could no longer indiscriminately submit to the far remote Roman administration of the Congregation of Religious. They expressed openly their fundamental needs to this organization. The 1969 document "Venite Seorsum" was its response. Yet, no longer could a patriarchal set of laws, issued for the most part by men for women, regulate the intimacy, the fervor and the trials of spiritual life.

What was the shadow of this "remarkable self-assertion," of this new beginning in this painful process of re-birth? I leave this question for your own reflection. Vatican II advocated a return to the sources while engaging in a dialogue with the contemporary world. What happened to the "power born of personal choice and communal self-evolution," present at Woodstock, in the ensuing years? Did it evolve? Did it lose its focus?

### **III. The Myth**

Let us return to the genie-in-the-bottle. What is a myth. Norman Perrin writes: "The truth is that myths are the narrative expression of the deepest realities of human experience. Myths are ideas people live by and for which they are prepared to suffer, to kill and be killed." (The Resurrection, 1977, p. 9) As Michael Tournier has written: "A myth is a story that everybody already knows." (The Wind Spirit, 1988, p.151) I want to add, a story that everybody likes to hear over and over again.

I believe that at this moment, many members of ACS are eager to hear the narrative which expresses ACS's fundamental story. Not in its beginnings only, but in the totality of its existence. The genie-in-the-bottle in ACS's case was like the serpent shedding its skin, in need of rebirth, renewal, a never ended spiral of vitality, imagination, dark nights and pitfalls, creativity in ways of contemplation, prayer, ritual, meditation, ecology, plain ordinary living.

At the root of the creation of ACS, I believe, is the never ended tension between law and life, between homeostasis and process, between inertia and love. It is also the ever renewed need in the evolution of human organisms which tend to maintain

*status quo* for their healthiest members to question their self-definition, to find processes which foster maturity in relationships, not only between themselves but between humans and the whole eco-system which supports life on this planet. This implies periods of darkness, errings, encounters with the shadow. The need for *aggiornamento*, for constructive self-determination in service to the other never ends.

As mentioned earlier, the containing myth of ACS was already a woman's movement. In no way was it anti-men. Each tradition was confined to itself and lived in isolation. Canon Law supported an unhealthy *fuga mundi* (flight from the world) while the founding members of ACS wanted a differentiation from world economies, politics, activism, legalism. These women experienced the need in their isolated local communities for a constructive networking. They wanted to find ways to ensoul their lives, their relationships, their worship, their prayer. They wanted to learn anew the art of healing and being healed. Today it seems that many who resonate with ACS find in it a networking community. Not being in physical proximity to each other, are they creating a new type of historical and symbolic support system?

You probably will discern several mythic themes in the making and evolution of ACS. One which speaks to me is the story of the genie-in-the-bottle... Who or what is imprisoned in me, in ACS. Who or what genie longs to come out of the bottle? Shall we lend it a hand?

A history of the ACS movement might help us to find our reconciling, containing myth, allowing each of us to relate to this myth from the archetypal depths of our souls and from the total soul of creation. Who will tell the story? Who will hear it?

## **A CLOISTER OF THE HEART**

Ann Denham

When I discovered ACS it was serendipitous. I had been through a tumultuous time and was wondering where I could connect. A class in prayer and meditation introduced me to contemplation, and this opened up yearnings and recognitions I

had not known were there. This was what I had been seeking all my life, yet, how to connect?

I was raised “low church,” as a faithful Methodist. I had attended seminary and been ordained, the committed path my tradition offered me. I knew I was “called to preach,” the mark of a Protestant minister. But contemplation and the Catholic mass I attended at a Newman Center opened to me a journey beyond words and action, even social action.

In all the confusion one thing was sure: my marriage, and my life as a wife, mother and grandmother. Was the contemplative way a ruse? I knew I was not destined for a cloister and monastery. So why wouldn't this yearning go away?

Then I met Mary Lavin at Women Church in Cincinnati and found ACS. It was like a miracle. Here was a woman from a monastic community, speaking of contemplative community, open even to women like me. I could not believe it, but Mary assured me it was true. I joined ACS immediately and received a letter of welcome to the Western Region from Cecilia Wilms.

The very next General Assembly was at Santa Sabina Center, in San Rafael, California. All I had to do was drive to the Bay Area from my home in Sacramento. It was a meeting well-attended, the first Assembly in the West, and with San Francisco as an added attraction. No private rooms. If you declared no roommate, you were assigned one. Which is how I found myself rooming with Joan Bourne, OCD, directly from a monastery in Pennsylvania.

After the full, stimulating days, it was hard not to talk, bed to bed, after lights out. Joan allowed she had not had a roommate in many years. I did not realize then that she was a Superior in her community. The thing I did realize at once was that I was accepted. My desire, my contemplation, my lifestyle, Joan affirmed and apparently valued. I remember how she laughed at how large her suitcase was and how small mine was, and she was the “professional contemplative.” I laughed and pointed out that I came in my car and had many other things in the trunk, just in case I needed them.

Other names come back to me from that Assembly. Meeting Mary Frohlich; greeted first by Janet Benish; meeting the Poor Clares from Duncan, Dawn and

Clare; and Myriam and Godlieve from Redwoods Monastery. I sat beside Godlieve at the picnic and heard her say: “The lay women are the key to the future.” It seemed like a dream. Barb Scott and I talked late into one night, with a meeting of hearts and minds. “Did not our hearts burn in us?” she said. I met Jan Strong and Jody Henreken, who did the cooking. I remember Cecilia Wilms dancing and Connie Fitzgerald, who told the ACS story. My favorite part, as always, how the Jesuits stayed up all night to translate *Venite Seorsum* from the Latin, revealing the true position of the Vatican toward monastic women.

Santa Sabina is where I met Lillian McGee and Fran Burras. We had a theme to which we returned periodically: Were we contemplative enough to be a part of ACS? Were we faking it? I remember Wendy Wright, one of the speakers. Because I had a car, I was sent to pick her up at the bus stop. One wrong turn and it took forever to get her back to the Center. I felt like such a klutz, but she was very gracious. She was a wife and mother, too. In her presentation she spoke of mothers and mothering. Even more astonishing, Wendy spoke of blood and its connection with women and with nurturing and bringing forth new life. What a time it was!

I remember when we gathered for prayer and Eucharist in the Prayer Room. We sat in an oval, encompassing the room. With almost a childlike wonder at being present, I felt the weight of many years of contemplative praying descend. The energy was palpable in the room. It settled on us like a shawl, not oppressive, but definite. I tried not to think or make judgments, and to open my own grateful heart. You are accepted. You belong.

The program was well planned. We also met in small sharing groups. But one of the best parts happened spontaneously. It is my memory that it was begun by Connie Fitzgerald. Other long time ACS members were involved, too. In some small space of unscheduled time, perhaps right after dinner, we gathered in a large circle, both canonical women and lay women, to hear the stories of the lay women, at this first meeting where they were welcomed as full members. The stories were involved and fascinating and we did not finish. So we assembled again, in the big circle, to hear the rest. Single women and mothers; women who had left religious life; women ordained in Protestant traditions; women like myself, discovering contemplative prayer and looking for a place to belong. I had never imagined such a welcome.

I remember we spent a lot of time on nomenclature. This was a new thing, the mingling of these groups. The Western Region had been flexible about membership, and, because the meeting was in the West, there were a large number of lay women, both women in experimental situations and coming from different lifestyles. Somehow it seemed important to get the labels right. I do not recall this ever again at a meeting, but at Santa Sabina, we kept coming back to it. Not in an exclusive way, but in terms of description. It was as if we could not let go of the differences we were experiencing and felt there must be some neutral language we could speak without causing harm.

We tried canonical women and lay women. But, of course, canonical women are lay women, too, and all religious weren't necessarily canonical. So we tried vowed women and church women, meaning, I think, parish women. But not all the lay women were churched and some vowed women were active in churches. Then someone pointed out that married women are under vows, too, just different vows. Eventually, the issue faded away. We were simply contemplatives, on a variety of paths, in different walks of life.

I still remember the energy of that meeting. We were a large group in a small space. I had imagined that contemplatives would float in a sacred silence, but we also sang and danced and played loud music. The dining room was especially noisy and some women would bring their trays out into the courtyard, where we sat in silence, drinking in the beauty of the garden, and feeling a part of each other just the same. I remember a comment from one of the staff of the retreat center. She said of all the groups they had ever had there, the ACS women were the most individualistic and independent, yet also the most tolerant of differences. Yes, I thought. Yes. I want to be a part of that.

And so I was. I attended the Regional Meetings and many General Assemblies. At the Western Region's Santa Cruz meeting, I pledged to form a Cluster in the Sacramento Valley. We started with five women. Many years later, we are a group of nine, still a Cluster after all these years, and growing. Eventually I was a delegate and helped to plan a Regional Meeting. In Toronto I told my story, along with several other women. When I spoke of sexual union in marriage as a locus of prayer and contemplative growth, monastic women thanked me for my insights.

Slowly, we were all coming together. We were contemplative women, sharing a journey, both the same and different from our sisters' journeys.

Meetings and Assemblies brought me training in different prayer practices. I learned about different kinds of spirituality. Sometimes, as with Beatrice Bruteau, there were heady, intellectual concepts. Other times the focus was on silence or solitude. I listened to the stories of other members. I attended workshops on religious traditions beyond Christianity. Women I met recommended books or offered ideas or simply witnessed by their presence.

I began to worry less about being the right kind of contemplative and to turn loose of phenomena or traditional writings that spoke of favors and graces. I began simply to live my life, which was grounded in my role as matriarch, with an aging mother and mother-in-law, and rapidly arriving grandchildren. What was most healing and nurturing in ACS arrived by osmosis, a kind of knowledge that depended mostly on being and becoming. I no longer noticed differences. I no longer worried so much about understanding the path I was following. It was just--my life. I was no longer yearning for something out of reach, as much as I was moving forward, held in a mystery that revealed and promised enough to keep me on the way.

Years ago when I made a retreat to discern giving up my ordination and becoming a Catholic, which was really my moment of choosing contemplation, my spiritual director had said to me: When you get home, look and see what is given back to you. A lot was not returned: my ordination, certainties around my Protestant heritage, the possibility of preaching. But one thing was given: my marriage. The wonderful milieu of love and joy, pain and work, disappointment and fulfillment, around the love of one man and the family we had created. This was the center of my life and my contemplative journey. ACS and the women I met there confirmed and celebrated this truth. This was who I was. It was the cloister of my contemplative path.

When Walter died suddenly, I might have been torn from my moorings. My faith, my sense of who I was, the locus of my contemplative journey, was all bound up in my love for this man and the life we had created together. How to go on? What did my life mean now? There was my family, of course, and friends, and my church community, who surrounded me with love and care. Connecting with ACS

seemed harder to manage. The logistics of selling my house kept me from a Regional Meeting. Family obligations meant I could not attend the next Assembly. The Region's prayer shawl, often sent to members in pain and loss was, rightly, with a member who was dying. But the sustaining presence of ACS was still there.

Beyond the cards and notes of condolence and love, there also came to me from years of traveling together, the unspoken support of strong and courageous women, who understand that contemplation is about a connection to what is real. This does not change with altered circumstances. Yes, I have to learn anew who I am, without the daily pattern of the old relationship of love. Yes, having seen my faith in the faithfulness of that love, I have to find some new ways and metaphors to make my meaning.

But I have some models close at hand. Women, faithful to a particular kind of journey and a radical view of reality and love, who are out there, going before me and with me, in ways that hold me up and beckon me on. The contemplative life is about dying and rising. It is about opening in ways that only happen because much is loved and surrendered, to be loved anew in a different way. My sisters have taught me well. Everything will be all right. Like ACS, I am not done with my changes.

## **WOODSTOCK 1969: CAPTURING THE METAPHOR OF RELIGIOUS LIFE**

Constance FitzGerald, O.C.D.  
May 10, 2006

### **Introduction**

For two weeks of the summer of 1969, the first-ever seminar for contemplative religious women of different orders from the United States and Canada was held in Woodstock, Maryland. Though the seminar had other purposes, the turn of events during those historic two weeks led to the founding of the first association for contemplative women in the country, the Association of Contemplative Sisters (ACS). The story of Woodstock and the beginnings of ACS for me centers around the people who took hold of their dreams during those days. It is a story of our sacrifices, our courage and our vision, contextualized by and set against a backdrop

of the institutional church, society, religious orders, the Second Vatican Council, and centuries of established customs and boundaries. But truly the people are the story's heart. So many names and faces came back to me, over and over, as I reflected on what seemed to matter most, what I wanted to tell about those days and those times. I realized that it is above all a story of love: our enormous love of the contemplative life, and our desire to have it living and vital within the Church. This love was the binding and uniting force that, fired by grace, brought ACS into being.

I am a Carmelite nun and was one of the founding members of ACS. I am also an archivist and an historian – this is the place from which I write. As an historian, I want to help preserve the facts of that unique moment in time, when contemplative sisters first joined together and found their voice. It is significant and meaningful to make a record of the lives and contributions of the women and men who birthed this new era, and of the vision that we placed on the currents of humanity. But I also want this story to be recorded and preserved for a purpose, for the sake of the future, for this is history's greatest value. It is knowledge of past events that keeps one's vision from being a mere irresponsible dreaming into the future. The art is to know the past and be grounded by it without being mired in it, to have the foundation of tradition and history that gives one the knowledge, freedom, courage and wisdom to develop new interpretations for contemporary times.

It is difficult to tell the history of any aspect of religious life using the traditional structures and interpretative lenses through which other types of histories can be written, as Joseph Chinnici points out in his excellent article, *Rewriting the Master Narrative: Religious Life and the Study of American Catholicism*.<sup>xxxviii</sup> The difficulties arise, Chinnici says, because religious life is a “symbolic life form”<sup>xxxix</sup> that lies both within and without traditional structures. It is present in society, but it is also beyond, based as it is on transcendent religious experience, a direct personalized experience of God. Chinnici therefore suggests that historians use metaphors and analogies to present and analyze religious life, noting three key metaphors in particular: *commonwealth*, *frontier*, and *performance*. These metaphors provide a perfect framework to speak about Woodstock in a way that will allow the current younger generation of contemplative women to learn from our experience, and to use that experience in shaping contemplative life to serve the present time and fit them for the future.

Though using this metaphorical framework, I also want to present the historical facts chronologically, though with some exceptions, to give a better flavor for how events developed. And so, while all three of these metaphors are operative and could be discussed at each phase of the Woodstock story, I have chosen to draw on just one in each of three chronological stages, trusting my readers to see beyond what I have written. I hope that this metaphorical analysis will show the strength of contemplative life and some of the beauty of Woodstock. I want Woodstock to be remembered as a time when, for the sake of love, for the sake of a purpose larger than themselves, a group of women and men were once able to live beyond the constraints of competitiveness, to abandon any temptation toward petty rivalries, and most importantly, to take risks notwithstanding the fear of change, the fear of losing contemplative identity, and the fear of disapproval. The very obstacles intended to block our progress and impede our growth, when submitted to prayer and to the energetic determination of committed individuals, became a source of our strength, the very building blocks that made us who we are, that equipped us to face the future. I will conclude with some brief comments on the ACS legacy.

### **Woodstock as Commonwealth: The first movements**

Commonwealth, for Chinnici, is “the anthropological and social space that lies between the twin spaces of family and society.” Religious life as commonwealth thus “mirrors and critiques relational elements of the family and relational elements of the society...”<sup>xl</sup> For Americans, the term commonwealth may not be all that familiar and may bring to mind only secular government, in the sense of some of our commonwealth states. But Chinnici means it in the context of religious life to capture the notion of a liminal space, an in-between that is able to combine “the vertical principles of social structure and the horizontal values of personal freedom, familial interchange, and participative government.”<sup>xli</sup> Thus, religious life as metaphoric commonwealth is a project grounded in relationships that are structured as needed for order and function, yet are radically participative and affirming of each member. Those who participate in such a commonwealth are bound together by the unifying thread of a communal spirit, and a responsibility to steward the commonwealth’s assets, to employ them to proper use, to build them up and to help them endure. Woodstock reflected this commonwealth metaphor in its initiating purpose, in the relationships that led to its conception, and in the emergence of bonds among contemplative women from the

kindred spirits of their collective religious commitments, their foundational experiences of God, and their lived contemplative life.

The initiating purpose of Woodstock was to provide a forum for collaboration among contemplative women to address formation, with special attention to renewal and education. This purpose reflected the commonwealth metaphor both in object and approach. The object was to build up the precious common asset of contemplative life and its future. The approach was structured and participative collaboration. Woodstock's purpose was, moreover, grounded in a network of relationships that were only awaiting a spark to be energized.

It was in fidelity to the spirit of *Sponsa Christi*, promulgated in 1950, that a number of contemplative orders had timidly begun to explore federation and other collaborative ways of pooling resources to help the orders thrive. The Second Vatican Council gave an exciting new impetus to these efforts, seeming to affirm the call to collaboration and communion with greater urgency. But even before the Council, and certainly by its conclusion, fear had set in about what federating or associating might mean, and the issue proved more and more divisive. It was significant that the Carmelites, the largest of the contemplative women's orders and so a kind of bell-weather for others, had failed in nearly all their early federation attempts.<sup>xliii</sup> The women's order in the United States had been deeply rent by a 1965 meeting in Saint Louis, even though this meeting was organized for the discussion of Carmelite life and formation, not to support or discuss federation. It was one of the first meetings in which Carmelites in the United States gathered outside their own monasteries to collaborate with one another. Up to this time, every effort by American Carmelites to meet or federate since 1955 had been thwarted from within the order itself. Even after the Council, our Generalate continued to delay year after year in handling requests for a rescript allowing the nuns to meet and discuss federation.

Notwithstanding these failures, we continued to hear the Vatican Council's clear mandate for renewal and adaptation. This was a mandate that I felt could and should be pursued collaboratively even if we were not able to go so far as discussing federation. It was with this primary purpose in mind that I conceived of a seminar for contemplative sisters. There were several influences that helped shape the idea into a more concrete proposal. The Metropolitan Association of Contemplatives had been founded in New York, and a number of us began to

dream about forming a national leadership group for contemplative religious women.<sup>xliii</sup> Moreover, our community in Baltimore was working closely with Fr. Thomas Kilduff, O.C.D., in formation and renewal since he returned from the Generalate in 1961 at the conclusion of his term as the first American General Definitor, and he consistently encouraged the idea of collaboration with other Carmelite monasteries especially in the area of formation. His effort to interface Carmelite life and spirituality with the documents and theology of Vatican II had a profound influence on us. And our community had closely followed the *Search and Service* seminars conducted by the Jesuit theologians at Woodstock during the summers immediately following Vatican II. All these gatherings had as their purpose the interpretation and dissemination of the theology of the Council documents, and each year I procured audio tapes of the Woodstock talks from George Wilson, S.J., for our community. We considered these tapes to be an essential part of our theological updating and renewal following the Council. In 1967, as part of this same series of meetings, the Jesuits helped organize a seminar for active sisters at Woodstock. In the months that followed, with all these influences at work within me, I realized that the next step for us should be a similar seminar for contemplatives. Since the Baltimore Carmelites always had a very close relationship with the Maryland Jesuits, I asked George Wilson if Woodstock would host such a meeting.

As indicated above, it was not my intention that the meeting be used for discussing federation or association, although clearly some participants arrived with that goal in mind. The federation issue had proved itself very divisive for Carmelites, as witnessed by the enormous fall-out from the St. Louis meeting. I did not want to provoke further division or have the meeting side-tracked by the issue, particularly since every other federation attempt in our order had met with obdurate resistance from Rome and our Generalate. Instead, the meeting was designed for prioresses and novice directors to collaborate in matters of formation. This was a purpose that seemed clearly in keeping with the dictates from Rome and the Council, and so we should have been on firm footing in terms of ecclesial support and approval. However, Thomas Kilduff and I were persistently cautious, conscious then and later of the high-level opposition to gatherings of contemplative nuns outside their monasteries. As events turned out, this caution was necessary, and we needed to be discrete, shrewd and strategic as well, for the Woodstock Meeting unintentionally became a lightning rod for submerged fears about the Council reforms as regards contemplative religious women.

It is here that the individuals who gathered around the Woodstock meeting become the story. Woodstock was willing to host the seminar I had proposed if I could get three or four contemplatives from other traditions to work with me in the endeavor. Shortly thereafter I met Gertrude Wilkinson, the Redemptoristine superior in Esopus, and invited her to join. Gert was already in touch with Ruth Brennan, superior of the Passionist Sisters in Clark Summit. And Elizabeth (Betty) Enoch, abbess of the Bronx Poor Clares, along with Patricia Cast of the Bronx Carmel, came through the Metropolitan Association. These women and I became the core planning group for Woodstock, along with Thomas Kilduff. Thomas Clarke, S.J. and George Wilson also participated as theological advisors and representatives of Woodstock, and Kathleen Gregg, S.C., later joined the group as facilitator. We were aided immeasurably by Sister Mary Daniel Turner, a woman of profound vision, who at the time was provincial of the Notre Dame de Namur Sisters at Ilchester, Maryland, near Woodstock. She hosted the meeting to plan our seminar, and much more. In her many leadership capacities over the years – provincial, general of her congregation, and executive director of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), she collaborated in our efforts to find our voice in the Church and to renew contemplative life for women in this country. She and I have walked a long journey together from relative youth to mature age.

This group of individuals from different traditions was able to come together after years of virtual isolation to undertake a collaborative process and to form relationships which strengthened us and those we touched for a generation. Natural affinities and deep kinship seemed to spring up almost effortlessly, as if we had known each other for a very long time. In this we saw the force of an underlying commonwealth that, while hidden and unspoken, had been present all the time. It was not as narrow as any one religious order, nor indeed as broad as religious life in general. It was a commonwealth of the contemplative life. Our experiences as contemplative religious women gave us a basis of relationship that immediately grounded all our dealings with each other, notwithstanding our various traditions. These were far more than work relationships, and yet still different from friendship, at least in the beginning. Our bonds were not for personal gratification, but for a great purpose, an alliance of women helping women to achieve something nearly unimaginable, on the frontier of religious life.

### **Woodstock as Frontier: New horizons**

*Frontier* for Chinnici represents the impulse of those in religious life to “live in the borderlands,<sup>xliv</sup> and to transcend institutional and social boundaries.”<sup>xlv</sup> He beautifully describes the phenomenon of religious life as frontier: “It represents a geographical, interpersonal, imaginative space where the embodied human spirit, compelled by love, reaches out to cross inherited boundaries between civilization and barbarism, the citizen and the alien, the familiar and the unfamiliar, the worldly and the heavenly.”<sup>xlvi</sup> In his research he found a “dominant and startling pattern of professed men and women performing a religious identity which ... moves outside the boundaries of the established ways of thinking.”<sup>xlvii</sup> In his examples, he speaks of how the frontier for some active religious sisters was quite literally the American frontier. Their impulse to the borderlands was concretized in actual physical, geographic terms: going out to a “zone of encounter” where traditional modes of behavior and thought do not necessarily operate, where perspectives and even actions must adapt to an unknown landscape.

For the contemplative, there is a deeper kind of frontier, the boundary of consciousness and imagination on which the mystical life is always lived. Throughout history, contemplative religious orders have pushed the boundaries of the institutional church and lived on the margin of ecclesial and societal structures, issuing calls to reform, looking to and over the horizon, imagining radically new futures. The impulse to live in the borderlands is engrained in our very way of life. Our unknown landscape, our zone of encounter, is the prophetic frontier where God is met.

Woodstock took our group of contemplative women straight into this frontier, as resistance to our project began to intrude. This was not surprising. We were beginning to introduce concepts and ideas outside the boundaries of established thinking, new ideas to fit the new time we were entering, the new place where the old boundary lines no longer seemed relevant. And our work was not just on the periphery of contemplative life but rather affected two principles that had become identified with contemplative life: strangely enough, not contemplation but enclosure and the lack of an active ministry. We were beginning, albeit gently, to push the boundary on the question of enclosure by the very fact of our meeting and collaboration. In time, after ACS was founded, we also reinterpreted ministry, by setting as our first goal to help *all* people touch the contemplative dimension of their lives. It was a very radical step because it implied that contemplative life

would have a ministerial component, and some thought this could only mean active ministry. But our intent was to develop the concept of *contemplative prayer ministry*, a ministry that was not only prayer for the people but prayer in the midst of the people, helping them to pursue their desire for God and move towards contemplation from within their own life circumstances. And one last frontier cannot be overlooked: as women, we were beginning to find our voice.

It was not too long before the official Church took steps to discourage the Woodstock seminar, when we had barely even begun to speak, long before we ventured into reflections on the nature of contemplative prayer ministry. Even in those early days, there was significant apprehension that our work, our seminar, might destroy the vital pillars on which contemplative life had been based. This is quite ironic, really, because the meeting was conceived not as an ecclesial challenge but as a means to carry out precisely what Church leaders had asked in the Vatican Council. We had been living in a time when the contemplative orders had the approval of the institutional church, and we deeply valued that approval. It was nearly unthinkable to proceed without it. But we knew that we simply had no choice but to continue, and so we had to step outside the familiar and comfortable realm of church favor and the security of long-established concepts and perspectives.

The early resistance crystallized about a month after we had sent out the initial invitation letter for the Woodstock meeting. Cardinal Carberry sent a letter to all contemplative communities “respectfully requesting that our contemplative religious abstain from attendance at such gatherings (symposia, workshops, etc.) while the question of their renewal and adaptation is under study.” This was a defining moment for all that was to come. The conflict over our efforts of collaboration, renewal and adaptation had been publicly joined, and both the motive (fear) and the consequence were to be repeated time and again as we worked through the challenges and trials. The consequence that we found repeated was this: opposition actually brought about the very thing it was trying to prevent. In other words, the very efforts that were exerted to stop the Woodstock meeting, to render it ineffective and to diminish its significance, actually caused it to shine all the brighter.

In the case of Cardinal Carberry’s letter, this ironic consequence occurred because the letter was phrased as a request rather than an order under obedience to refrain

from attending the meeting. It took a great deal of sophistication in those days to differentiate between a request and a command, and so those who decided to attend Woodstock were very courageous and insightful women, high-powered in terms of intellect and judgment. And so it was precisely because of the Cardinal's letter that those who gathered in Woodstock in the second half of August, 1969, were such a beautifully distilled collection of smart, savvy and wise individuals, an assembly only those circumstances could have joined; a singular group in a singular moment of time, perfectly equipped for the task and ready to give fully of themselves to achieve it.

We were, of course, not the only ones operating at the boundaries of ecclesial acceptance and the contemplative life. The fact that the meeting could go forward at all was due to the courage of Baltimore's Ordinary at that time, Cardinal Lawrence Shehan. After receiving Cardinal Carberry's letter, I had gone to see Cardinal Shehan, to learn whether he would still support our proceeding with the meeting in his archdiocese. With an economy of words, he made clear that we should continue, that we would have his support if this became necessary, and that he believed the meeting to be important for our renewal and adaptation in light of the Council. It was only years later that I learned that Cardinal Shehan was questioned in person by the Apostolic Delegate in the days prior to Woodstock about his decision to let the meeting go ahead. He reportedly told the Apostolic Delegate that the meeting was important, that it should and would proceed, and that he did not want interference on the matter. Cardinal Shehan himself never told us about this courageous effort that allowed us to remain on the frontier, where as contemplatives and as religious women we belonged.<sup>xlviii</sup>

I now look back on the planning process for Woodstock as the art of creating a climate where a vision could be articulated and chosen. As the atmosphere of this climate, we needed those few truly prophetic individuals, people to dream, imagine, and communicate the frontier vision – what Edith Stein might call *carriers of the communal life*.<sup>xlix</sup> But just as importantly, we needed a large number of people who could choose, implement and follow the vision articulated by others, to own the vision, to see it as coming not just from the prophetic voices but from within themselves. We were graced and fortunate that just such an assembly of contemplative women came together in Woodstock, due in part to the effect of Cardinal Carberry's letter, but also due to the very nature of our invitation, which would naturally attract those with a desire to participate in the

great venture of rearticulating a vision for contemplative life in light of the Council.

If the participants were the climate's atmosphere, then the climate's soil was comprised of about 40 resource people whom we invited to assist the assembly. This was one more boundary being crossed. In 1969, the notion of resource people for a meeting was relatively rare anywhere, and certainly in ecclesial circles. We drew experts from all relevant fields – theology, philosophy, psychology, sociology, civil and canon law, liturgy, history, monasticism, the House of Prayer movement and more, expressing an underlying humility by the participants. Even though we were intelligent and had years of experience in contemplative life, we were well aware that our education was very uneven, and that despite our best efforts, we needed experts to assist us in the processes of renewal, updating and education ahead of us.

Among these resource people we were extraordinarily fortunate to have Margaret Brennan, IHM, a leader in the House of Prayer movement. As Superior General of the Immaculate Heart Sisters in Monroe, Michigan, and a pioneer in the higher education of religious sisters, Margaret quickly became a key figure for us in ways small and large. She began by having her congregation host the first organizational meeting of the 30-member leadership group (which we simply called *the 30*) of ACS. Her support of other important events followed. Even more significantly, Margaret used her impressive spiritual, intellectual and scholarly gifts diligently to promote the cause of renewal and development for contemplative women. Her exceptional address to the Canon Law Society in 1975 was a bold and courageous statement to educate canon lawyers in the United States about the state of contemplative life and the multiple barriers to the renewal of the contemplative orders of women. She fearlessly carried the concerns of contemplative women to Rome as President of LCWR. Margaret understood well what it cost us to find our voice, as reflected in her moving address to Carmelites at the time of our 1990 Bicentennial Symposium, *Contemplation and the Rediscovery of the American Soul*. Like Mary Daniel Turner, Margaret has been a close lifetime friend and a true companion in fashioning the dream of contemplative women.

So we had all the elements in place as our meeting began to handle the historic moment in time that was presented to us. This was to be the performance of our religious identity and convictions.

### **Woodstock as Performance: The founding of ACS**

*Performance* as Chinnici understands it is the demonstrative enfleshing or embodiment of the interior dispositions of religious life, including those dispositions metaphorically indicated by commonwealth and frontier. He says more specifically that performance constitutes the behaviors and acts of public visibility that give “visual, auditory, and bodily form to a transcendent religious belief in its intersection with human experience,” performance that allows God to become incarnate and “encounter human beings where they are.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, performance is the way that those in religious life express their experience of who God is and their own identity. Chinnici’s examples include, for instance, religious men and women who have courageously engaged in civil disobedience, who have marched in Selma, who have opened houses of prayer. Performance is metaphorically bringing the giftedness of commonwealth to the frontier and there steadfastly expending that giftedness, pouring it out, transforming the liminal space, refusing to run back to the center for fear that the commonwealth will be lost. Performance is witness.

Our witness at Woodstock became much more than we had at first expected. Though in the very fact of the meeting, we knew we were pushing a boundary, we probably would have left Woodstock without creating an association if we had been left to our work without further intervention from Church leadership. However, the Vatican’s promulgation of *Venite Seorsum* during the meeting changed our agenda irrevocably. *Venite Seorsum*, a rigorous interpretation on the subject of enclosure for contemplative women, stunned our assembly. As this document seemed very strongly to discourage meetings such as the fruitful one in which we were then engaged, and seemed to us not sufficiently reflective of what has been called *Sponsa Christi*’s “apostolic viewpoint”<sup>li</sup> on cloister, we collectively knew we must respond, both with voice and act. In many ways this is the heart of performance in religious life: people who have no choice but to act, driven by their rootedness in God to respond to the reality of their lives and the circumstances of their time. It is the encounter with religious mystery that is being newly expressed in a language accessible for the times, and yet *always beyond*, a mystery beyond

the visible and beyond the person herself. For Chinnici, this transcendent yet accessible expression is what gives religious life its historical vitality. Our assembly's response to *Venite Seorsum* was precisely this metaphorical performance in its essence.

We worked many long hours preparing a letter critiquing parts of *Venite Seorsum*, aided by the experts from many fields who were present with us. We also decided that we could not leave Woodstock without forming an association. Thus the Association of Contemplative Sisters was born. From today's perspective, in a culture that knows greater alienation from the institutional church, in a society that has lived through and been formed by the era of ardent individualism and focus on the self, it is difficult to imagine just how radical these steps were, how much courage they required, just how deeply this was performance grounded in the *beyond* of our religious conviction about God and contemplative life in the Church. Because participants had come to Woodstock without any instructions from their communities on forming an association, and likewise could not agree to a statement on *Venite Seorsum* on behalf of their communities, we had to act in personal capacities, to sign the letter in our own individual names, to be individual members of ACS. We had to stand up and be counted ourselves. These first steps were followed by more. I remember particularly the trepidation with which we signed our coordinating committee's first letter to all the communities after the Woodstock meeting. We were raising our heads, an act that was previously beyond imagination.

We were all to be burnt many times along the way, but the strength of this group did not falter; we carried on, despite the forces and power inclined against us. True, a few fell along the way or opted out, and some did not even make it to Woodstock, chastened by previous struggles like the Saint Louis meeting, and for some there was simply a failure of imagination. But most persevered – and to do so in the prevailing climate became a stunning witness to the Woodstock participants' profound care for contemplative life and our confidence in the future vision we were able to imagine.

I cannot overstate what a sociological wonder this perseverance represented. To have a group of 135 women and some men step so quickly and so visibly beyond the realm of unquestioned acceptance of Church pronouncements – and to do so individually – was a breakthrough without precedent. It was our first time on the

high trapeze, and we had no net. I imagine that lay Catholics have been going through a similar experience in recent years as they have begun truly to find their voice, to be constructive critics of the Church they cherish. We, too, were staking our position not because we hated our life but because we cherished it, and cherished the Church of which we were a part. We simply knew that we had to update and collaborate to survive and to be vital for the Church.

It was through a sense of the transcendent that our group was able to perform as it did, at the frontier, with attention to our commonwealth gifts and needs. We were somehow able to move beyond the competitiveness that commonly impedes or poisons leadership by the most talented individuals, to move beyond self-interest to make the best choices for our project. Personal gain and personal comfort did not figure in the dynamic of this group. And perhaps most significantly, we were able to let go of our fears, or at least to proceed despite them. I do not remember any of us pausing too long over the question of losing our contemplative identity; we knew rather that we were intimately engaged in shaping it.

There are three stories of performance that I want to recall to convey better the spirit of self-gift that was both the grace and lesson of Woodstock and the formation of ACS. The first involves Mother Francis Clare, abbess of the New Orleans Poor Clares and President of the Mother Bentivoglio Federation. She was a wonderful and wise woman who would have quickly been tapped for a leadership role in the fledgling association. When the discussions opened on who should be named to the coordinating committee, she took the floor and, to our surprise, passed the torch to others. She said that the assembly had before it the five individuals who had already proven themselves capable of coordinating and organizing the seminar, of doing what had never been done before in bringing together contemplative women from the different traditions. Why, she asked, should we look any further for the new ACS coordinating committee? We were elected by acclamation. Mother Francis Clare would surely have been named herself had she not made this magnanimous gesture. But she had the greatness to hand over that to which she might have clung, for the sake of the future of contemplative life.

The second story concerns the assembly's election of *the 30* for ACS. Ordinarily, one might expect personal preferences and political agendas to play into such an election, but instead, in this case, the assembly voted for the most truly capable

individuals, so that the group comprising *the 30* was nearly the same as what might have emerged if one single, wise and discriminating person had hand-picked the group. There was no temptation on the part of the participants to disempower others, to claim position and status for oneself, or to assume exclusive or excessive control. This was a model of shared governance at its best, where for the most part those with the more relevant skills and talents exercised leadership collaboratively, and those not in leadership provided input and stood ready to support and implement the decisions made. It was a grass roots effort that was able, without abandoning egalitarianism, to recognize and follow leadership. It was in fact a commonwealth as we described at the outset, structured as necessary for order and function while being radically participative and affirming to the members.

The third story is more personal, but the inner deliberations it highlights were almost surely not unique to me. We were given a day to decide if we would each accept a position on the committee. I can still remember walking that evening, thinking/praying, and realizing that acceptance would mean that my life would change irrevocably, that it would never again be the same. I was standing on the brink: in a way it was my own encounter with the question of contemplative identity – would I somehow lose my Carmelite life by continuing in this course? But it came to me that prayer could not be so constrained, that contemplation was something much deeper, something that could be sustained at least for a time in the midst of the hectic period that was about to open for me. This was certainly the case of our order's founder/reformer Saint Teresa of Avila, whose work in making foundations consumed much of the time she might have preferred to give to quiet encounter with God. I also realized that an important mission was being handed to me; for the sake of the contemplative life I was ready to sacrifice something of that life for a time.

I give these examples to illustrate that we were all somehow able to transcend ourselves, in some ways to let a kind of new self emerge, because we knew that the project at hand was so much bigger than all of us, and we were willing to stake our lives on it. The contemplative life was a cause that demanded all our passion, and so we mutually used each other's giftedness to best advantage for our common goal. We were bonded, as I said at the outset, by our love for the contemplative life, the commonwealth asset that we were responsible for tending and nurturing. This self-giving love was the foundation of the vitality and energy that came together at Woodstock in the summer of 1969 and from which ACS emerged.

## ACS and its Legacy: Finding our voice

ACS and the Woodstock experience have given a generation of contemplative women a wonderful legacy to pass on to those who are following us. I am very conscious in particular of the continuing influence of the invaluable leadership training program that was part of ACS' first collaborative educational efforts. This program helped many of us and our communities to develop leadership skills that have served us for a lifetime. It was a very intensive program taking place over two years with three lengthy sessions. Many of the planning, group facilitation, goal-setting and consensus building techniques that were taught in these sessions continue to be extremely effective for us in the Baltimore community today. Our next generation is learning these techniques by example, by experiencing them in action – they are being *caught* as well as *taught*. I am convinced this leadership training contributed greatly to the ability of ACS women to renew their communities, to have a voice, to articulate a vision, and to help bring the vision into reality.

The challenges and resistance we faced in those early days also strengthened us, as I have already suggested. In some ways, the struggles and trials we had to bear might seem a waste, because they took energy that we could perhaps have channeled more positively. But at the same time, the opposition to our growth and development actually and ironically forced us to grow and develop – we had no other choice, if we were not to abandon our vision. And so we gradually found our competency, self-assurance, and an inner security. Everything that happened, positive and negative, developed our group as leaders and as contemplatives.

In terms of our vision for the future, it is important to say that we saw only a part of it at any one time, and it moved and expanded and changed. For example, as ACS evolved, the decision was made to permit those no longer in canonical communities to be associates and later full members. This decision eventually led to the admission of lay women as full members, a development that might at first seem consistent with the initial ACS goal of helping people realize the contemplative dimension of their lives. However, the admission of lay women as full members decisively changed the direction, purpose and vision of ACS, though perhaps unintentionally. As lay members grew in number, the association indeed became one way to share contemplative life with the people. On the other hand, it

lost much of its ability to serve as a forum for contemplative communities to collaborate and to speak and act in the Church. Meetings thus became more concentrated on personal spirituality and were less concerned with the programs and processes of contemplative communities. Full lay membership almost certainly would not have emerged had ACS been formed as an association of religious communities rather than of individuals within communities, as might have happened if *Venite Seorsum* had not forced us to act so quickly. Lay membership was certainly prophetic in its own way, and so it did not detract from the Association's visionary stance and importance. However, it did represent a change in function fundamentally different from that which we had first dreamed.

Another problematic decision point occurred when it was suggested at the first meeting of *the 30* in Monroe, Michigan, that the members of the coordinating committee live together, away from their own communities for a year or more to facilitate the development of ACS. I had significant reservations about this step and decided that I could not participate. Then as now, I was convinced that even while we live at the frontier and are pushing boundaries, it is essential to retain the heart of our identity within our own traditions. Taking members out of their monastery for more than just occasional meetings had the potential to undermine that identity and also to lead to some disaffection, both for the individuals involved in the living arrangement and for their communities back home. For some communities, the living arrangement signaled the potential for a loss of their unique traditions, and these fears were then, to some extent, sealed when some of our key founding members left their communities and exited religious life. This was a blow to communities' faith in the process and organization that our coordinating committee represented. Those who had believed in us were shaken. Over time, the memory of these painful losses led some communities to have less enthusiasm and more caution in assessing whether their members would participate in ACS. Again, the ability of ACS to function as a forum for contemplative communities was undermined.

But even as its vision changed, ACS remained the seed for other associations of religious women. Its very formation seemed to unblock action on our rescript request, which came within three months after Woodstock. Shortly thereafter we formed Carmelite Communities Associated (CCA), the first U.S. Carmelite association (though the last to be approved). And ACS also contributed to the work of other groups, notably Sisters Uniting, founded in February 1971 as a group

representing six national associations of sisters. It was a personal privilege for me to participate with Vilma Seelaus, O.C.D., as ACS representatives in this prophetic effort of religious women in the United States.

Even as ACS moved in a different direction, its early vision and dream was picked up and continues to be pursued by others – by some communities including my own in Baltimore, and by individual contemplatives around the country. It was from the initial ACS vision and dream to share contemplation with the people, for instance, that some of us developed a desire to undertake a contemporary interpretation of our Carmelite tradition. This desire issued in the creation of the Carmelite Forum, which now meets every year in South Bend to provide one-week in-depth lectures and workshops on Carmelite spirituality. It was also one key inspiration for my community’s decision many years ago to create a contemporary contemplative life in the here and now, even if circumstances unfortunately precluded this type of renewal on a broader scale within the order. All these developments have led to incremental advancements in collaboration and dialogue. For example, following the creation of the Carmelite Forum, the two branches of our order – Discalced (O.C.D.) and Ancient Observance (O. Carm.) – jointly formed a forum for collaboration, the Carmelite Institute, which offers a week-long educational conference every two to three years. There has also been some international exchange by having nuns from one country attend association meetings in another – for instance, CCA had five international guests at its last meeting, and I was invited to attend a recent meeting of the Association of Carmelite Sisters of England and Scotland. Many ideas for greater international collaboration are now being pursued, even at the level of our Generalate. I feel that these advances are rooted in the earliest associations of contemplatives, including ACS.

### **Conclusion**

Although ACS turned out differently than we had perhaps expected, it has surely been prophetic in its own way. Its story is one of women in the church pursuing a dream – one dream that, having been spoken, blossomed into many other dreams that we continue to live to this day. Woodstock and ACS at its founding helped those of us who lived those days to develop an almost biological trait for contemplative women that is now part of evolutionary development: something engrained in the nature of our communities and being inherited by our next

generation. Something special has been placed at the community's core. With Edith Stein I believe that every community has a spirit, a current of consciousness or lifepower, and everything placed on that current, whether positive or negative, is passed along.<sup>lii</sup> The current of any community is defined by the choices its members make – to be governed by fear, or to step forward courageously with vision.

All the women of the Woodstock era who chose the path of courage, offering their lives fully to a project larger than themselves, gave a performance of their convictions that will always be a part of the fabric of religious life for contemplatives in the United States. I see our younger members in Baltimore receiving their spirit; I see our current community living from it as if it were a natural part of them. The people of Woodstock and ACS made a difference, and telling their story – this history – is so important. The new generation of contemplative women is living in a new time; their phase of renewal, very different from ours, will call for new things. But the traces we have left them of our sweat, toil, and most especially our love, will give them the basic materials for success. Our story shows that a passion for God leaves no room for anything but a full-hearted and courageous commitment to the future, to the transformation that only a complete kenotic offering can allow. Then a new self, that new consciousness for which we yearn, can emerge at last. There are indeed many beautiful ripples still stirring the waters from that first rock thrown in more than 35 years ago.

## **LEARNING TO FLY**

Deborah A. Gephardt  
President, Association of Contemplative Sisters  
2002-2006

It is said, “When the student is ready, *The Teacher* will appear.” I believe equally that when the teacher is ready, the student will appear. For both are two sides of the same reality.

In 1990 it seems that both, teacher, ACS, and I, as student, were ready to meet. What a wondrous meeting, which I truly believe, enriched both. For as one is stretched and affirmed in one's own

being, one's deepest creative, spiritual gifts and capacities flow outward in an ever expansive circle. Thus that gift of teacher also grows and expands outward.

That year, 1990, I happened to meet a woman in my hometown who, with her friend, had a lay contemplative house of prayer. I had heard about this person in various ways through several people over the last 10 years, so I decided to call and introduce myself. She happened to be a member of the Association of Contemplative Sisters. As we met a few times and talked about prayer and the spiritual journey, I mentioned the difficulty in finding others of like mind, that it was an extremely lonely journey. She asked if I had heard of ACS. I had not, so she gave me a brochure and invited me to a few local gatherings at their home and at the homes of other members in the area. I believe this was before the formal concept of ACS clusters was introduced.

As I look back on those early days together, I recall such a warm and wonderful sense of being at home with these women, deeply at home with others, in a kith and kin sense beyond words that I had never before felt in my fifty plus years of life. The paradox was that I barely knew them, knew nothing of their lives. Yet I **KNEW** them.

I joined ACS that year. I didn't know then that my friend, Ginny Manss, would become President of ACS two years later, nor even dream that I, too, twelve years later, would also become President of ACS; the first wife, mother, grandmother and later, widow, to become so.

My life was going through some major changes and adjustments, both externally and inwardly. I had reached a point of searching less and appreciating more. ACS was also adjusting to some major changes. Only four years before, the Association had voted to include laywomen into its membership. This was a huge adjustment, a reaching out into unknown territory.

For my first few years I was interested only in being a student, in learning and in getting acquainted. After a few years I became a Regional delegate.

In 1996, I was asked to be a member of an ACS team to research sites across the U.S. offering lay Christian contemplative formation. The research results and other offerings would culminate, we hoped, in publishing a book on the subject of lay contemplation. That year of travel and interviewing founders of sites across the country was a gift I will always cherish. The book, *The Lay Contemplative*, was published in 2000 by St. Anthony Messenger Press. It has nearly sold out its

printing, garnered several new members for ACS and contributed royalties to the ACS treasury.

In 1998, becoming more active on the National level, I was asked to be the registrar for the Assembly to be held in Toronto, Canada. I bought a computer that year and spent three months flailing and learning to use it enough to keep track of the registration. That experience was another gift of *The Teacher* (actually the Holy Spirit), for it gave me an opportunity to work with the leadership of ACS and to become more personally acquainted with the entire membership. I found that I loved “the big picture” of ACS, the history and vision of the Association, the geographic breadth of it. I began to feel that my own gifts were more suited in some ways to a national role than to a regional one and, frankly, that awareness surprised me.

That same year, in 1998, Rosalie Bertell was elected president. It was quite amazing when she asked me to be the recording secretary. She and I had only met at the Toronto Assembly, had only spoken once or twice, and she had absolutely no idea of my competence or lack thereof. What Rosalie didn't know (and I never told her!) was that as a child and young person, I absolutely loathed anything having to do with detail and precision. I wanted to be a free spirit and hated duty. But life itself and, as a wife and mother, does teach one some things. One cannot teach unless one first learns. So I had learned through the years.

I found my four years as Recording Secretary to be quite rewarding. I loved pulling together threads from the Leadership meetings into concise and understandable reports. It was stimulating being a part of the Leadership Team that worked together, shared ideas, occasionally disagreed, and came to consensus. After having been a loner much of my life, at least inwardly, this was a new challenge and a fulfilling experience.

Rosalie was/is supremely organized, so in those years of 1998-2002, she brought into fruition the suggestions of Barb Scott, her predecessor, and began the updating of the ACS Articles of Incorporation and By-laws. Some of this had not been done since the founding and was quite necessary. It involved a lot of writing, rewriting and approval from the membership. It took nearly four years, but it was a great gift to the Association when the work was completed.

Each President brings to the Association and the Presidency, her own particular gifts. One of Rosalie's great gifts was her outward vision, her work in the world, which reflects her inward vision. She brought her passion for the world, her hopes for the world, into her Presidency. She was surely a contemplative in the marketplace and kept us ever aware of the marketplace and its needs.

In 2002, as Rosalie's term as president ended, a new president was elected, and I found myself the President of ACS. I was not totally surprised, for during some of Rosalie's illnesses while President, I had stepped in to carry out some of her duties. As Secretary and, with no job outside the home, I had some time and the necessary information to fill in for her. I knew that members might want that continuity. Yet at the same time as I looked back over those twelve years in ACS, I was amazed at the unfolding of my life.

Twenty-five years before my election, I had not known what the words contemplation or contemplative meant. I had asked a Little Sister of Jesus once early in my journey what was meant by contemplation? Her answer puzzled me for years: "Contemplation doesn't look for results." In my culture at that time, as wife of an editor of a prominent newspaper, that certainly became my own paradoxical Koan, as the Taoists say. Her answer and my subsequent search changed my life.

So here I was President in 2002. In those twenty-five years, my definition of God had evaporated, my sense and definition of my own self had changed, my understanding of both contemplative and contemplation had evolved until there was little to say. For words tend to slice and separate. The contemplative vision tends to unite, to see through barriers, to see from "*sub species aeternitatis*," from the view of eternity. Almost as part of a pattern, my closest friend and soul mate had recently died, and my husband was to die within four months of my election.

In those years ACS had also changed. It had elected, in 1991, a wife and mother to be the Western Region Coordinator. It had elected two women as Presidents, both former canonical sisters but now lay women. The membership was changing from predominately canonical. We laughingly gave the name to the groups as brand name and generic. And the generics were catching up. This, in itself, became an immense, but perhaps unconscious change of emphasis. Earlier members all had

monastic backgrounds, whereas newer members had less understanding of monastic silence and prayer.

The dominant lay culture was, and remains, almost in opposition to a monastic culture. Laywomen with families are bombarded by the advertising on children's programming and are themselves tempted by the newest "toys." Working women, single or married, are increasingly drawn into the frantic pace of the day. Monastic cultures still order their days more consciously, even though they, too, are increasingly pulled by the needs of their ministry. So an association of lay and canonical seems quite a paradox. Yet through sharing that which is deepest within, this wonderful mix of women has succeeded, through nearly forty years, in evolving and re-creating ACS to fit the needs and demands of the present, hectic times.

As a result of this evolving, my Presidency of ACS from 2002-2006, as a laywoman, wife, mother, grandmother and recent widow, does not seem at all surprising or out of place considering the breadth and depth of the original vision of our founders. ACS has always known that the contemplative call passes easily beyond superficial grilles and cultural barriers. One who knows the truth of her own self, recognizes it in another. Mystery calls to mystery.

Today and for the future of contemplation, whether in ACS or whatever form in the world, it is imperative to follow one's vision and calling, no matter the external circumstances or vocation. One will learn gradually, or perhaps dramatically, where one is called, if she is truly searching for her deepest self and the Divine imperative of her life. The Hound of Heaven just cannot be ignored, if one wants to open that door. There will always be those who answer, no matter the externals, as long as human life exists. It is a call built into the human psyche that cannot be resisted.

My own desire eventually was to seek Truth at any cost. Simone Weil once said, "If one has a choice between seeking truth and seeking Christ, one should seek truth, for sooner or later one will fall into the arms of Christ."

As I look back on my sixteen years in ACS, it seems at that stage of my life, in 1990, I was ready for the vision and purpose of ACS and for sharing the gifts it offered. Had I been introduced years earlier, perhaps I would not have been ready

for it. There was much I had to learn in my life as wife and mother. There was much polishing to be done on the part of the lathe of heaven. When I was ready, ACS appeared.

At the same time I am not sure that ACS would have been ready for one like me in a leadership role earlier. The historic concept of a contemplative, frankly, did not universally include those like me until very recently. ACS was making momentous changes and, earlier, I am not sure that I, as a laywoman, wife, grandmother, would have been seen as acceptable or even considered in ACS in a leadership position. Growth takes time and time for growth was needed in both the personal and collective sphere. So, indeed both teacher and student must be ready for the next step. Gratefully, as I was ready for the next step, so was the Association of Contemplative Sisters.

On a personal note, my time of Presidency was filled often, as were that of other presidents before me, with some grief, emptiness and letting go. I regretted that and felt in some ways as if I had less to give than I once had. But it was as it was. I recall a line from a character in one of Shirley MacLaine's books, "As an artist I see the beauty; as a human being I see the poverty; but as a spiritual being, I see that all is as it is meant to be."

There is emptiness or sorrow at times in all of our lives, individually and within a wonderful Association like ACS. It is not the whole of our lives, though it may seem so at a given moment. But it, too, has a place and is to be respected as a sacred part of the whole. At seventy years of age (today!) one tends to look with more equanimity on all of these sacred parts. My life continues to be a rich learning experience, and ACS has been one of my greatest gifts. *Deo Gratias.*

At my favorite retreat house near the Trappist Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, there was a saying:

*"When we walk to the edge of all the light we have*

***And take that step into the darkness of the unknown,  
We must believe that one of two things will happen ~  
There will be something solid for us to stand on,  
Or, we will be taught how to fly."***

~P. Overton

I will be forever grateful to the wonderful women I have known in ACS who have shared their stories, their vision, their lives.

**Together we are learning to fly.**

## **SIMPLICITY, FREEDOM AND SINGLENESS OF HEART**

Pat Kelly

The Evolution of ACS parallels, in so many ways, the evolution of my own Contemplative Life. ACS traces its beginning to 1969, which was an electric time. It seemed the whole world was open for discovery by those with the vision, the daring, and the willingness to do what seemed called for to be as conscious and free as possible.

Following the Second Vatican Council, Scripture Study was alive and well, and the paradigm of Salvation History was the backdrop against which reality played.

Woodstock was an event of which I was well aware. Three sisters from our Community in Morristown, New Jersey attended. They were blessed with great integrity, commitment, skills and intelligence and were good ground for the top rate teachers and scholars, who were happy to share of their abundance.

Marie Celeste was elected to the leadership team called simply THE THIRTY and in that company shared the dream some of the Morristown sisters had of living in a small, psychologically healthy community, where one worked for a living and Prayer was the goal toward which contemplative life was oriented.

Contacts made with Sisters Teresa Hahn and Lauren Grady, from Reno, who were also part of THE THIRTY, paved the way for the petition of Sisters Marie Celeste Fadden, Joan Antisdale, Maria Ahearn and I, from Morristown, to join the Reno Community in 1970. Our goals seemed the same and a better quality Contemplative Life seemed more easily available, since we could be part of a community already “working for a living” and we could join in the existing Community, Liturgical and Prayer life as well.

When ACS offered the PRAYER SEMINAR in Monroe, Michigan, I was encouraged to attend, with Sisters Jean Macy and Betty Reid. It was a formative experience, and the first of a series of meetings I would attend over the next many years.

And, yes, the face of ACS did begin to change, as the individual members were challenged to change, sometimes seeking new life styles, in and out of the Monastery.

ACS became a broad-based entity to which woman from different Communities began to write for help. They found a sensitive response and lives were changed. The suggestion was made to two such individuals that they visit Reno, Katherine (Tappy) Welling, OP, from the Dominican Monastery in Nairobi, Africa, and Cecilia Wilms, OCSO, who came from Belgium as one of the Founding Mothers of Whitethorn Monastery in California. These women were able to find Community and Direction at a time when their own Communities no longer provided it.

Cecilia's journey led her to become a "hermit" in Spokane, Washington, where she lived until her death on May 13, 1998. Her journey also paralleled ACS' evolution and is chronicled well in the Video of the History of ACS. Cecilia was always grateful for the welcome and direction she received from the Leadership of ACS when she left Whitethorn, which had been her only American home. She manifested that gratitude by working hard for ACS and sharing her vision of authentic Contemplative living beyond cloister.

Having used the phrase "authentic Contemplative living," perhaps this is the place to try to clarify what I mean by that. I am reminded of two examples of how Thomas Merton has explicated this for me, obliquely, as it were. The first is in the tiny volume *Day Of A Stranger*. The second is in the account in *Song For Nobody*, written by Ron Seitz, about the conversation and actions of "Tom" the day he drove Merton to the Louisville airport for the first leg of the journey that would eventually take him to Bangkok. I will quote just a few lines:

***"true hope is trusting that what we have, where we are, and who we are is more than enough for us as creatures of God. To appreciate this, you've got to know that revelation is all around you all the time. – Revelation expressing itself as***

*beauty, truth, goodness, and especially love! ...Creation is lit up with the numinous.- Numinous: that's God saying Hi!"*

The focus is not on the “contemplative.” The more real the “contemplative,” the more simple and integrated they are. The focus is on the awareness of the presence of God and the holiness in all that is.

Wonder, Gratitude, Praise are some of the characteristics of a “contemplative.” They are clearly not dependent on a certain life style, yet I think they can be enhanced by a certain way of life that provides bedrock structure.

“Speaking off the top of my head,” I would say those structures include Simplicity, using but not being over dependent on “things”; Freedom from anxiety, based on a firm trust in God’s ability to help us handle whatever comes into our lives; and Singleness of Heart, along with the ability to love wholeheartedly.

Laurence Freeman, OSB., speaks about a contemporary expression of the traditional religious vows of Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience, being examined under the aspects of Silence, Stillness and Simplicity. The words we use to describe the reality of the base structure for a life given over to God do not matter. The understanding can be the same with a variety of articulations.

I did not intentionally mean to claim the three vows as the base structure needed for contemplative life, but it seems that is exactly what I expressed above, using the words Simplicity, Freedom and Singleness of Heart.

My contact with the women of ACS is very life sustaining for me. I recognize in so many of those I have known a long time or observed for a long time, the qualities I’ve outlined above. Seeing these qualities enfolded is a re-affirmation of my own commitment and a chance to marvel at God’s work in them.

## PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON THE ASSOCIATION OF CONTEMPLATIVE SISTERS

*Sr. Jean Alice McGoff, OCD*

I was invited to come early to the meeting of Contemplative Sisters at Woodstock, Maryland, in August of 1969, in order to get some quick but excellent training in moderating small group discussions. These small groups functioned all during the meeting, and each evening the moderators met with the meeting staff to report on the general flow of the discussion. The ongoing planning of the meeting came out of this living dynamic and indicated the themes of the position papers that were approved by the assembly and eventually published, including the declaration of the formation of the Association of Contemplative Sisters.

I was elected as one of the thirty members who were delegated to give shape to this new association. I knew then that the fear I had felt, when I traveled to Woodstock by bus, was justified. That fear was that the safe and comfortable aspects of my life were going to be altered. Growth is painful and facing the big task in front of us was a major endeavor. I felt totally inadequate but was relieved when each one of us honestly said what we thought we could do and our individual contributions formed a picture of a good beginning.

*My Carmelite Community of Indianapolis and others with whom we were in communication were eager to form an association of Carmelites, so that we could share and plan together for the renewal of our life according to Vatican II. Up until this time the General of the Carmelite Order and many of the Carmelites in the United States had resisted the formation of a federation or association of Carmelite Nuns, fearing that such a step would militate against the essential spirit of the Order. Realizing that so many Carmelites were involved in the new ACS, "the powers that be" unexpectedly gave a rescript for Carmelites in the United States to meet to form their own federation. Fr. Christopher Latimer, OCD, was appointed by the Sacred Congregation for Religious in Rome to organize a meeting for this purpose. He called on the Carmelites who had been trained as facilitators in Woodstock to help create the same kind of self-directing and spirit-filled meeting.*

*I remember processing the final approval of our statement of goals and purpose. We by-passed the usual structure of Federations because it simply did not fit us. We had learned that structure needs to flow from goals. We called ourselves the Association of Carmelite Communities (later renamed Carmelite Communities Associated). The sense of freedom and creative newness that was so powerful at Woodstock overflowed into this meeting, and for many years ACS had a strong*

*influence on the life of the new Carmelite Association. Several of us who had been at Woodstock formed part of the interim committee that continued the impetus of this new association and prepared for its first meeting.*

*I helped to organize the Midwest Region of the ACS and was its first coordinator. The delegates and members from all the regions met at Benet Lake, Wisconsin, in November of 1971. We had many intense days of input by David Rumkorph of Management Design, Inc (Cincinnati, Ohio) on organizational theory and planning. Out of this our goals and structure emerged. David and the other founders of MDI were men of Spirit and reflection, and the wisdom of what we learned is still with me today. It still guides me in my community life and the leadership I have exercised here. At this meeting I became the first Chairperson of the Delegate Assembly (1971-1973). Following this, I became President (1973-76). For many years our national meetings were similar to the Woodstock meeting in that each day flowed from the preceding. The planners gathered in the evening to discern how to outline the next in the spirit of the group's emerging insights. Several years of such planning became a formative experience of contemplative listening that opened me in a new way to the biblical concept of Wisdom "reaching from end to end and ordering all things sweetly."*

*I was baptized a Catholic as an infant and grew up in a Catholic world. My education through high school and two years of college was Catholic. As a Carmelite, I immersed myself in the Carmelite tradition, and was shaped anew by a deeper liturgical life and the study of Scripture. My inner life became an adventure, but I did not expect much change in the externals. The coming and the arrival and the aftermath of Vatican II changed all that, and I felt alive in a Church opening up to a new wind of the Spirit. My participation in ACS only increased this.*

*I represented the association at a meeting of Vicars for Religious, at the 1974 LCWR meeting in Milwaukee and again in 1978 in Kansas City. I attended meetings of a new organization named Sisters Uniting. This group met yearly to share agendas and to find areas of mutual support. It included representatives from LCWR, NAWR, NSVC, Las Hermanas, The Black Sisters Conference, NCAN and ACS. During my leadership years the Board of Governors for the Canon Law Society invited leaders of church groups across the country to meet at Notre Dame to help set their future agenda. Again I was privileged to represent ACS. I felt the*

*dynamic vision expressed in the documents of the Council moving through these groups.*

*The last time I officially represented ACS was in 1986 with the group of US Bishops commissioned to write a pastoral on Women in Church and Society. I was joined by Sr. Helen Wier, OSC, (at that time Abbess of the Poor Clares in Chicago). A prime part of the input we gave concerned the development of the animating myth of contemplative nuns in the Church from the melding of enclosure with the life of contemplation, to that of “contemplative presence.” Drawn instinctively to the kind of silence and solitude that prepares for this gift and helps it to deepen, we had come to realize that sharing our contemplative life in some way beyond the cloister is part of its deepening. Like many women in the Church, we were seeking greater self-determination and freedom from old canonical restrictions. Our experience confirmed that this movement was a response to the call of the Spirit.*

*During my years as President, the membership question in ACS began to come to the fore. Among the many canonical contemplative nuns at Woodstock, there were some who had branched out from their monasteries to start what we then called “experimental groups.” Therefore, in defining our membership we used the term “open to all contemplative women” and avoided canonical language. Not long after this, a significant number of ACS members asked for a leave of absence from their communities, to live alone as contemplatives or in smaller groupings. ACS became in a special way their community of support, and they remained very involved.*

*By 1986 membership had broadened to include those in any walk of life who were on a contemplative path and accepted the goals of the group. Today, in 2006, women in communities are the minority, but the spirit of ACS is alive and well. I somehow see the dynamics of what has happened connected to what Vatican II called “The Universal Call to Holiness” (Chapter 5 of Lumen Gentium). Contemplation is no longer tied to cloisters and hidden nuns. There is a great hunger for the spiritual life. Numerous books have the word “contemplation” in the title, and the “centering prayer” movement is widespread; lay people are training to be spiritual directors and retreats are back in style.*

*Our efforts to open up and deepen our contemplative life was joined to a greater Divine Purpose. As Pierre Teilhard de Chardin put it, “Everything that rises must converge.”*

## **MY EARLY YEARS WITH ACS**

Vilma Seelaus, OCD  
Carmelite Monastery  
Barrington, R.I.

Two interconnected realities come before me as I reflect on my early years with ACS. First, memories of specific steps taken to help make such an Association become a reality, second, and most important, the belief in and commitment, not only to the renewal of Contemplative Life, but also that the Church herself become more contemplative. I see the later inclusion of lay women who integrate the contemplative dimension into their ordinary lives, as an important means toward fostering a more contemplative Church and world.

### **Part One**

Before reflecting on deeper issues, I begin with a bit of chronology. In March of 1969 in a phone conversation, Sister Mary Elizabeth Stanton of the Boston Carmel and I mused together on the possibilities of beginning an association of Contemplative Sisters here in the New England area. We were aware of the Metropolitan Association in New York City and we were impressed with what we had heard. Sister Elizabeth (Betty) Enoch, OSC subsequently invited the two of us to attend their next meeting, which we did. After the meeting Sister Lilla Marie Hull, MM invited the two of us to the Maryknoll Cloister to see the work that was being done toward forming statutes for their association.

As Mary Elizabeth and I, together with Lilla Marie reflected on the variables between New England Monasteries and those in the Metropolitan region, we soon

saw that their advantage was that all the monasteries in the Metropolitan area were under the jurisdiction of the same Ordinary while in New England, each monastery had its respective Bishop, which could create difficulties. Our thoughts quickly broadened. To think nationally was a logical next step. With a cross section of Monasteries in such a small geographic area, and with a few phone calls, by the next day we had a gathering of nine Contemplatives Nuns representing six different traditions.

Present were:

Sr. Lilla Marie Hull MM

(Others from the Maryknoll community also joined us)

Sr. Gertrude Wilkinson, OSSR from Esopus, N.Y.

Sr. Ruth Brennan, CP from Clarks Summit, Pa.

Sr. Betty Enoch, OSC from Bronx, N.Y.

Sr. Mary Alfred, OSC President of the Holy Name Federation

Sr. Frances Clare, OSC President of the Bentifoglia Federation

(Sr. Frances Clare from the New Orleans Monastery was visiting her sister in the Boston area and responded immediately to our request that she join us.)

Sr. Martin Dominic, Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, Yonkers

Sr. Mary Elizabeth, OCD Boston, MA

Sr. Vilma Seelaus, OCD Barrington, RI

After an animated discussion, we began to see the realization of our vision for a national Association of Contemplative Sisters as possibly arising at a meeting being organized by a group of contemplatives in the interest of more adequate formation for contemplative nuns. The meeting was to be held at Woodstock, MD in August of that year. That meeting was a historic event and the idea of an association permeated the atmosphere. Much could be said about this meeting but I limit myself to recalling the election of 30 participants to get an association off the ground. We met at Monroe, Michigan at the Motherhouse of the IHM Sisters in 1969. I reflect upon that meeting in my keynote address given at our first Prayer/Liturgy Seminar held in August, 1970. Earlier that year 'the thirty' met at Farmington, Michigan where we planned the Prayer/Liturgy Seminar and a seminar for new members and for those who guided them.

At that time I began publishing articles in Contemplative Review on issues relative to contemplative renewal. In 1971, I was elected chairperson of the New England

Region of the budding Association. At our first national meeting at Benet Lake, Michigan, to my surprise, I was elected first president of our newly formed Association. Voiced as a priority by the group was communication regarding changes taking place in contemplative life, consequently much of my time was given to meeting with Bishops, Vicars for Religious, national associations such as LCWR, (Leadership Conference of Women Religious) NAWR, (National Assembly of Women Religious). Representatives from these groups formed Sisters Uniting, which included NCAN, (National Coalition of American Nuns) and ACS. During my first term as president, one of my forms of communication with the membership was through articles about issues of importance to contemplative living. Contemplative Review, initially an inter-monastery publication, proved a good vehicle for this purpose.

In August 30, 1972 a group of contemplatives from different traditions met with Archbishop Mayer. I have an audio tape recording of some of the proceedings of this tense, eventful meeting. In this year of 1972 we also planned a leadership training program which proved helpful to many of our member monasteries. At the second national meeting in October, 1972, I was re-elected president. At our third national meeting in November 1973, in my opening presentation, I addressed the theme of our meeting: *Contemplation, Reconciliation and Inner Freedom* and later published it in Contemplative Review for the broader membership.

I remember with pleasure the enthusiasm of the members during the regional meetings that I had the opportunity to attend. The Western Regional Meetings in Portland, Oregon hold special memories with opportunities to visit the Trappistines in Redwoods, CA, the Sisters of the Precious Blood in Vancouver and the Poor Clares in Vancouver Island, the Benedictines and the Carmelites in San Diego, CA., etc., in the process of also connecting with dignitaries open to helping our newly formed association. I think back on the many other monasteries that I had the privilege to visit during my terms as president and each one continues to have a special place in my prayer. At that time the then Allegheny Airline (which became US Air) offered clergy a half-price fare. The hitch was that one had to fly stand-by, consequently as I traveled to meetings across the country, I never knew if I would be able to get a seat on my next connection! To my amazement, as I look back on the experience, in all of those years of travel, only once did I have to wait for a later flight.

After my service as president, I represented ACS for several years at meetings of Sisters Uniting and on two occasions represented ACS at the Canadian Conference of Religious in Montreal. I was invited as a resource person to the Ten Year House of Prayer evaluation held at Monroe, Michigan in 1974. In Boston, MA that same year, I met with Fr. John Finnegan, President of the Canon Law Society of America. We discussed many issues relative to contemplative life, especially those pertaining to changes taking place in the area of enclosure. In September, 1976, Sister Marian Steffens, then Chairperson of our Carmelite Association, and I had the opportunity to meet with Sister Benedicta Geebelen, at the Trappistine Monastery in Wrenthen, MA. Sister Benedicta had wide experience as former president of the Union of Contemplatives in Belgium. I was invited to give a presentation on contemplative life at a CARA meeting, (Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate) and I also gave a presentation at the National Sisters Vocation Conference and at our New England Regional meeting at Regis College. Among other important topics, I often spoke on contemplative presence and the integration of contemplation with social awareness.

In 1977 we planned an international colloquium on Prayer with the intent of opening up the Christian prayer tradition for people today. This ambitious project never became a reality for many practical reasons. The following year, 1978, Sister Jean Alice McGough of the Indianapolis Carmel and I were invited to speak at the Merton Commemoration held at Columbia University in New York City, and in 1981 I was invited to be a panel respondent to a presentation by Sister Teresa Kane at Columbia's Barnard College, addressing the topic of contemplation and conflict.

The strong competitive spirit seemingly present among the women professors at Barnard surprised me. I envisioned them as women being more supportive of each other. In my naivety, I expected women to model a more collaborative style of working together. It reminded me of the disillusionment I experienced before entering the monastery as I became exposed to the moral life of some of the professional musicians with whom I associated. This seemed incompatible with their ability to create such beauty of sound through their musical talents. I have since become at home with human fragility - including my own - as the privileged place of God's transforming action in our lives.<sup>liii</sup>

But back to ACS. In 1978, at the Association's National Meeting, sensing the need for a recognized leadership group who might have a stronger voice with authorities in Rome regarding renewal of contemplative life, ACS being a grass-roots organization, I proposed forming a leadership conference of contemplative nuns that would be a branch of ACS. This proposal was discussed and then rejected precisely because of its grass roots nature. So in June of that year, I met at the Passionist Monastery in Clark's Summit, PA with a representative group of Contemplatives who supported the project. They encouraged me to pursue the idea. Subsequently, I sent letters proposing the project to all the Contemplative Monasteries in the country, to their respective Bishops, and to The Congregation for Religious to inform them of the initiative. The Congregation for Religious in Rome was open to the possibility and appointed Sister Mary Lindscott, SND, then a member of the Congregation, as our liaison with the Congregation for the project.

180 monasteries, representing 14 different traditions, responded to my letter. 45 of these expressed enthusiasm for the project, 7 expressed interest and wanted to be kept informed, and the rest were not in favor. As I reflected on the responses, with less than half responding in the affirmative, I decided to drop the initiative lest it become a divisive element among us. As an increasing number of Contemplative Traditions became Federated, or formed Associations, the need for a recognized representative to communicate with Rome was to an extent, eventually realized.

In 1980 I was invited to participate in an International East/West Conference entitled *The Monk as Universal Archetype* with Raimondo Panniker as the main presenter. Sister Myriam Dardenne of the Redwoods, CA monastery was a panel respondent and other ACS members participated. I continued to publish articles pertinent to contemplative life, and to actively participate in ACS regional and national meetings, but by the time we made the decision to broaden the meaning of 'Sister' to include women living a contemplative spirit in their lay lives, other opportunities to foster the Church's contemplative dimension presented themselves for my consideration. In 1982 I was invited to come for a year as a resource person at the Hope Center for Interfaith Understanding in Israel. Not wanting to be away from my community for that length of time, after consultation with the necessary persons, I accepted to go for three months. This unique experience was unforgettable and was indeed an opportunity of a lifetime. At the recommendation of my Provincial, on my way home I spent several wonderful days in Rome. After

arriving back at my monastery, I wrote an account of my experience for the ACS Newsletter.

An invitation in the early 80's to collaborate with a small group of Carmelite Scholars, both of the Calced and Discalced branches of the Order, led to what became known as, *The Carmelite Forum*. Our intent was and is, to re-interpret our Carmelite mystical tradition in order to make it more accessible for persons today. The opportunity to offer a Seminar at St. Mary's College, Notre Dame, Indiana, evolved into an almost yearly event. Through the years, many of the seminars were taped by Alba House Publishers, and some of the lectures by the Institute of Carmelite Studies. These two resources make available a valuable tape library on Carmelite Spirituality. Because of my involvement with the Carmelite Forum, which I saw as consonant with the goals of ACS, and because of my community responsibilities, I realized that I could no longer actively participate in ACS.

## **Part Two**

But now, having skimmed the top of what I actually *did* during those early exciting years of Vatican II, with the Church's invitation to renew, I turn to that which motivated me to give time and energy into balancing my unwavering commitment to my Carmelite life of prayer with the events that called me forth. Important to me through these years was the need to remain faithful to what was deepest within. Because of the inner pull back to my monastery, I would jokingly say, that having traveled to many cities around the country, I saw only what could be seen driving between the airport and the place of meeting. In my inner need to return to the rhythm of solitude and community that characterizes the Carmelite way of life, rarely did I take extra time away for sightseeing, enjoyable and educational as this can be.

## **BEING CONTEMPLATIVE IN A POST MODERN WORLD**

Dissatisfaction with our consumer society, and hunger for the more of life, is an increasing contemporary phenomenon. Seeming endless possibilities for career choice and for human service are before us, but the meaning of it all can be evasive. Frequent career changes in the hope of finding happiness, as we know, can end in disillusionment. What is it that has drawn some of us, either to commit

ourselves to membership in one of the Church's Contemplative Orders, or to integrate the contemplative dimension of the human into our varied lives?

I think back on myself in my teens and early twenties, as someone, 'eating, drinking and sleeping music,' as I used to put it. What caused me to leave behind what I knew as the ecstasy of music and enter a Carmelite monastery? What attracts persons today to become members of ACS? We may not describe it as such, but I suspect that each of us, at sometime in our life, had the personal experience of Divine Mystery within that draws us; of hearing in our heart, 'the echo of God's eternal self disclosure in Christ.'<sup>iv</sup> Often I remind myself that *each person* is a 'self disclosure' of God - that created in *the image and likeness of God* each of us mysteriously mirrors something of the God who is both incomprehensible mystery and yet is intimately present as abiding offer of love. At the heart of contemplative awareness is the profound realization that the word of love first spoken to us by God is *ourselves*. That each of us is infinitely loved by God - that this word of love constitutes our being and sustains us in existence - elicits a quality of mindfulness that is at the heart of contemplative living.

John of the Cross describes contemplation as *nothing else than a secret, peaceful and loving inflow of God which if not hampered fires the soul in the spirit of love*. [DN1 Ch 10.6] To be fired with love, to be a loving presence in a world of hatred and violence is our challenge. In this way, the God of incomprehensible mystery reveals something of Godself to our world through us, thus making the Christ event an ongoing reality.

As Christian women, I always assumed that our spirituality would be Christ centered. My years as one of the two ACS delegates to Sisters Uniting alerted me early on, not only to women's alienation from the institutional church, but also of alienation from Christ. I came to realize that the Christic mystery, 'which I bear sketched deep within my heart,'<sup>iv</sup> needs reclaiming through contemporary reinterpretation. In those early meetings of Sisters Uniting, we had painful experiences of Sisters declining to attend the Sunday Eucharistic Celebration because we had to import a 'male' celebrant, someone whose presence, they believed, was alien to the bonds created among us through our interaction over the weekend. I have since come to know many women who have left the church over painful experiences that did not reflect the compassionate Christ of the gospels. The centrality of Christ and of Eucharist in my Carmelite Tradition, and in my own

life, led me to ponder why daily Eucharist continues to be so important to me regardless of troublesome issues surrounding it for so many women.

In considering the modes of God's presence, John of the Cross gives the first as God's presence by essence. In this way God is present not only in the holiest souls, according to John, but also in sinners *and all other creatures* (emphasis mine). Thus foundational to the reality of Christ's Eucharist Presence, is the creating, sustaining presence of God in all of matter. The entire universe is sacramental, and God communicates Godself through it. Looking at the mystery of the Eucharist through the eyes of contemplation takes me beyond the purely external into the heart of its reality. The secret, peaceful inflow of God that is contemplation, offers a spiritual vision that compellingly draws me to the celebration of Eucharist where the sacramental nature of the church, and the sacramental nature of the world itself, unite in a solemn moment. The ecological theologian, Sally McFague envisions the universe as the body of God.<sup>lvi</sup> I can only stand in awe as the universe gives of itself the humble substance of bread and wine to become energized and transformed into the body of the Crucified/Risen Christ.

Matter is essentially holy through God's sustaining presence, and because of Christ's Eucharistic presence, it is also revelatory of God. In receiving the Sacrament of Christ's body, I, and all of us, can have the daring trust that inner transformation is happening through the paschal energies of Christ's abiding Presence. Contemplative awareness of the dying/rising mystery which embraces all of existence - human suffering, the cycles of nature, the chaotic birthing of new stars and galaxies, etc. - can help to put into perspective personal experiences of suffering, sorrow and loss. While the celebration of Eucharist opens a faith perspective beyond important issues such as the ordination of women, lay participation, justice issues, clergy abuse, etc., in other context, these need to be addressed.

Paul 'makes up what is wanting in the sufferings of Christ for His Body, the church.' I trust this reality to become true for me; that the simple everydayness of my life will bear fruit for others. The desire for this is grounded in an ever deepening passion for God, through a living, loving intimate relationship with the Risen Christ of the Eucharist. I believe that union with Christ in prayer places the praying person at the very heart of the world where the energies of the Risen One slowly, silently, persistently transform everything from human to cosmic existence.

The groaning of creation for ultimate transformation echoes in the hearts of each of us as moment by moment we encounter 'the God of our daily drudge.'<sup>lvii</sup> Ours, and the world's sufferings and struggles, take place within the womb of a universe pregnant with the Cosmic Christ. If we truly believe in the risen Christ, every dark event in our lives, and in our world, becomes a privileged place of encounter with the Christ whose divine presence permeates, and silently realizes from within the heart of the universe, a transformation that has already taken place.

If we accept that 'Christ is the heart of the world, - its ultimate finality and most secret strength,' as the theologian Karl Rahner asserts,<sup>lviii</sup> can we not then dare to believe in the redemptive possibilities within every human situation: from the very ordinary to the most desperate? My ACS years of service were years of change and turmoil and I had to struggle to understand what it meant to be a contemplative woman of faith in the Church of post Vatican II. I went through a process of putting into perspective things like lack of inclusive language in worship, finding ways to appropriately dress as a contemporary woman, not of 16<sup>th</sup> century Spain, who is also a dedicated Carmelite Nun. My experience with these and other issues are reflected in an interview by Carole Giribaldi Rogers. (The results of her interview with me appear as Chapter 7 of her book entitled: *Poverty, Chastity and Change: Lives of contemporary American Nuns.*<sup>lix</sup>)

In 1997, for the centenary year of the death of St. Therese of Lisieux, I was asked to contribute an article for a special issue of *The Way* focusing on Contemporary Carmelite Women.<sup>lx</sup> My topic of reflection was the meaning of changes taking place within Carmel. I entitled my contribution: *Carmel and the Nuns' Changed Self Understanding.* I concluded the article by stating the belief that: 'Carmel will go on whatever its form, as long as Carmelites willingly plunge themselves into the depth of God.'

I suspect that these words are equally true of ACS with regard to its future. My own experience as a member of ACS is understandably influenced by my Carmelite identity. The mystical tradition of Carmel is Christo/Eucharistic centered. According to our primitive Rule, walking in the footsteps of Jesus, living His gospel and having the hermits gather for daily Eucharist, is of its essence. Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, and all of our more contemporary saints and mystical writers continue in this tradition. ACS members today, as in the past, represent various spiritual traditions in the Church. Today we are also

influenced in our spiritual journey by insights in psychology, the new physics calling us to recognize our global connectedness, issues of ecology, care for our planet earth vis a vis consumerism, gender issues, etc. How do we integrate these into our lives as contemporary contemplative women? How do we sustain passion for God, a spirit of mindfulness, being present where we are, etc., in the midst of so many distractions and divergent forces which easily contaminate the soul?

Teresa of Avila has much to offer us for contemplative living today. Through the years I have approached her various texts following a specific theme, as titles of my printed works and audio tapes by Alba House, etc., indicate. Several years ago I focused on distractions both in prayer and in life, as Teresa reflects on them in her *Interior Castle*. I found that each of her dwelling places had something unique to say about the distractions that keep us from contemplative living. I title it: *Distractions in Prayer: Blessings or Curse. - St. Teresa of Avila's Teachings in The Interior Castle*.<sup>lxi</sup> Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD, encouraged me to put into book form this material on distractions that I had initially presented as a workshop at our Carmelite Seminar at St. Mary's Notre Dame and he graciously wrote the Introduction.

The focus of the book is contemplative living in our contemporary world through moral, intellectual, and religious conversion, to a falling in love with God as Bernard Lonergan puts it.<sup>lxii</sup> Teresa's seven dwelling places name the human experience in its journey of discovering all things in God. I interpret these as moving from a place of superficial living (first dwelling places), hearing the invitation to the more of life (second dwelling places), to the room of complacency (third dwelling places), and on to the surrender of contemplative prayer (fourth dwelling places), to rooms of creativity and experiences of union (fifth dwelling places), into the dark night with its deconstruction of god-images, where we truly learn through the truth of humility to prize, not only God, but also the mystery that is ourselves (Sixth dwelling places), until completely united with God, we find both peace and our true home in Christ. Teresa's dwelling places offer us a guide to deeper self-knowledge precisely through our distractions. Her insights alert us to the meaning of our distractions. Our distractions, if properly attended to, disclose hidden sources of the attachments that keep us bound and resistant to the depth of surrender that frees the heart for God.

Since the book's publication, spiritual seekers who follow different life paths, and even different religious traditions, have assured me that God/Teresa speaks to them through this book. While I dedicated the book to the Carmelite Forum with whom I collaborate, I now offer it to you, my contemplative sisters in ACS, in the hope that it will be of help to you in your own spiritual journey. Along with that of Teresa, my own story is there. It reflects much of what I have pondered since that first opening talk at our Prayer-Liturgy Seminar at Monroe, Michigan, August 17, 1970. My passion for God - incomprehensible mystery, yet intimately present - continue to be what ACS represents.

### ACS: A WEB OF RELATIONSHIPS

Gert Wilkinson

It was 1966 when I first put my toe in the water and ventured out of the Redemptoristine cloister in New York, to meet in the Midwest with about ten other nuns from a variety of contemplative communities. The year before, two of us had attended a Seminar with active sisters, but as we wrestled with adapting to the young women entering monasteries in the post-Vatican II era, it became evident that we needed to dialogue with other contemplative communities. That 1966 meeting in LaCrosse, Wisconsin, was a first step in that direction and changed my life, in ways that became evident only years later.

A web of relationships began to be woven, which eventually led to the Woodstock Seminar for Contemplatives, whose participants established the Association of Contemplative Sisters. The web kept growing in the years that followed: first the early years of ACS, then my departure from the cloistered life, and years when I was more or less inactive within the Association. But the web continued to be spun, especially through my involvement on the editorial staff of **Contemplative Review/Living Prayer**. As time went on, I realized that many had been disappointed and/or hurt when I left monastic life, but my life could not be based on the reactions of others, although it pained me to cause that pain or disillusionment. And it did not shake that web of relationships that had developed.

Retirement (from income-producing work) enabled me to resume more active participation in the ACS. The call to a contemplative life, which had led me to the Monastery in 1950, never left me; it is how it is lived out that has changed. Back in 1969, no one could have imagined how ACS would become an organization of women in all states of life, who have recognized their call to a contemplative life. ACS has endured because of that web of relationships, weaving in and out. They are relationships that have led to deep friendships, as we walk together, often through darkness, into the light. ACS has meant reaching out a hand, as well as reaching for a hand.

A number of those who were early partners in the web have entered into that Light: Ruth Brennan, with whom I first shared hopes and dreams back in 1966 and whose friendship has embraced me for four decades; Myriam Dardenne, OCSO, challenging and inspiring us to be true to ourselves; Mary Roman, OCD, a woman of wisdom, and guide to so many. That list continues to expand. In the meantime, I appreciate what ACS is, and how it continues to enrich and expand my life. The web continues to be spun.

## APPENDIX

### THE PEOPLE OF ACS

In writing the History of ACS, we have mentioned a number of women who played vital roles over the past 40+ years. These are individuals who played significant roles either in the years prior to its organization, or in the decades since it was established in 1969. As the list was prepared, a decision had to be made whether to do it chronologically or alphabetically. We decided on the former, to give a better idea of how ACS evolved, and individuals moved in and out, as in a dance. A very few who were in on the ground floor remain active in varying degrees. They are many who must remain forever anonymous. These are the ones who prepared the ground that made it possible for leaders to emerge. There are also those who remained in the background, providing support through their prayers, their encouragement, their empathy, as well as their generosity in allowing members of their communities the time and space to help in the early development of the Association.

It will be noted that there are a number of sisters mentioned from the so-called “active” communities. They were extremely important in assisting individual monasteries, beginning in the early 1960’s, as well as in implementing the Woodstock Seminar. Their congregations provided hospitality to the leadership group on more than one occasion, and they continued to work collaboratively with ACS, especially in the first fifteen years or so.

There are also a number of men listed, primarily priests who gave invaluable help and encouragement to those who laid the groundwork, and continued to be available during the early years, particularly up to 1980.

So, here they are, with a few lines about each one.

**Sr. Agnes Mary (Innocentia) Burkard, SSND.** She was a psychologist, and professor at Mt. Mary College in Milwaukee, when she first began to hold workshops in monasteries. Soon, as a result of a multitude of requests, she received permission to devote herself full time to this ministry among contemplatives. She was a real pioneer; contemplatives from dozens of monasteries benefited from her wisdom and professional expertise, as well as her spiritual guidance. She herself was a woman of deep prayer. Deceased.

**Mother Angelica,** of the Poor Clare Monastery in Birmingham, Alabama. In 1965, she hosted what was probably the first “inter-Order” meeting of contemplative nuns, at a meeting with Rev. Paul Boyle, CP. She became well known as a speaker and founder of EWTN.

**Rev. Paul Boyle, CP,** who was President of the Canon Law Society of America in 1965, when he spoke with contemplative nuns at both the Poor Clare Monastery in Birmingham and the Dominican Monastery in LaCrosse, Wis. He became Superior General of the Passionist Fathers, and was consecrated Bishop of a diocese in Jamaica.

**Mother Mary Paul,** Sacramentine, of Yonkers, New York. In 1967, she took the initiative in gathering nuns from contemplative communities in the Metropolitan New York to form what became the Metropolitan Association of Contemplative Communities. (MACC). Now deceased.

**Thomas Merton (Father Louis), OCSO,** of Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky. He spent two sessions with contemplative nuns in Dec., 1967 and May, 1968. His conferences and discussions helped those who attended to find the inner strength to move ahead and adapt their lives in a way that would help them foster a life that was genuinely contemplative. Died, Dec. 1968.

**Sr. Elaine Baine, OSF.** Member, for many years, of the cloister of the Allegheny Franciscans. She was instrumental in arranging first meetings with Thomas Merton, through her contacts with St. Bonaventure University. Semi-retired in ministry with her community.

**Sr. Marie Augusta Neal, SNDdeN.** Sociologist who conducted the National Survey of Contemplatives in 1968, and reported on it at the Woodstock Seminar. She was very helpful to ACS, as well as individual communities, especially in the 1960’s and 1970’s.

**Sr. Constance (Connie) Fitzgerald, OCD,** of the Carmelite Monastery in Baltimore. One of the five who organized the Woodstock Seminar. Connie served as ACS Chairman for two terms (1973-76), when it had both a President and a Chairman. (See personal essay.)

**Ruth Brennan**, a Passionist nun (Clark Summit, PA) for many years, was one of the five who organized the Woodstock Seminar. She was part of the small group that gathered in Birmingham for the first inter-community meeting. Ruth served as National Coordinator for the first 2 years of ACS, until the first General Assembly was held in 1971. After she left her community, she remained in touch with ACS members, and resumed active participation after her retirement. Died in January, 2005.

**Gert Wilkinson**, a Redemptoristine (Esopus, NY) for many years, was President of MACC, in 1968, and was one of the five who organized the Woodstock Seminar. She served on the leadership team in various capacities for the first several years of ACS. She kept in touch with ACS members after she left her community and resumed active participation after her retirement. Also started *Contemplative Review/Living Prayer* in February, 1968 and remained an editor until it ceased publication in 1996.

**Sr. Elizabeth (Betty) Enoch, OSC**, of the Poor Clares in the Bronx, NY, and Wappinger Falls, NY, one of the five who organized the Woodstock Seminar. She was also very active in MACC and served it in a leadership capacity. She was President of ACS from 1978-80 and remained quite active through the 1980's. Passed away in October, 2005.

**Pat Cast**, a Carmelite (Bronx, NY) for many years. She was on the original committee that planned the Woodstock Seminar. She spent her last years in retirement in Santa Fe, NM, where she died February 1, 2007. She was faithful to the many gifts God had given her.

**Rev. George Wilson, SJ**. A theologian who taught at Woodstock Seminary, and without whom the Seminar for Contemplatives would not have happened! He had facilitated a Seminar for active communities in 1968, and then built on that experience in working with the Committee to plan the 1969 Seminar.

**Sr. Kathleen Gregg, SC**. Psychologist who helped the Woodstock committee plan and implement the group dynamics before and during the Seminar. She trained small group leaders before the Seminar. For the first couple years of ACS, she worked with the leadership group in facilitating their own group dynamics.

**Rev. Thomas Clarke, SJ**. A theologian at Woodstock Seminary who participated in the original planning meetings for the Seminar. "Tom was the wise theologian/churchman, who quietly insured the solidity of the choices that were being made." (G. Wilson) His support, encouragement and participation were invaluable at the Seminar and in the early years of ACS. He periodically attended ACS Assemblies and gave a major paper in 1976. Deceased.

**Rev. Thomas Kilduff, OCD**. A Carmelite priest who was a great support to the Committee that planned the Woodstock Seminar. He attended a number of programs and national meetings, giving presentations and presiding at Eucharistic liturgies. Deceased.

**Laurence Cardinal Shehan**, Baltimore, MD. Cardinal Shehan has to be included in this list, for with his encouragement and support in the critical time prior to the Seminar, those who planned it had the courage to go ahead. He also presided at one of the liturgies during the Seminar. Deceased.

**Bishop Joseph Breitenbeck**, Grand Rapids, Mich. Another member of the hierarchy who was at the Woodstock Seminar; he presided at one of the Eucharists, and continued to provide counsel and encouragement in its early days. Deceased.

**Sr. Mary Daniel Turner, SNDdeN.** Past Provincial of her Congregation in Maryland and also served as President of LCWR. Hosted meetings of Woodstock Committee, and provided invaluable support and advice in the planning as well as implementation of the Seminar. That support continued through the early years.

**Sr. Margaret Brennan, IHM.** Past Superior General of her Congregation (Monroe, Mich.) as well as Past President of LCWR. A leader in House of Prayer movement among active congregations. She attended Woodstock as a resource person; she hosted the original leadership group of thirty at her Congregation's motherhouse for ten days. Margaret remained close to ACS, especially during its first ten years and several times addressed the group at its programs and national assemblies.

**Sr. Lilla Marie Hull, MM,** as Superior of the Maryknoll Cloister, Maryknoll, NY, was active in MACC from its inception and served as its President at one time. She attended the Woodstock Seminar and was selected as a member of "The Thirty" to help make ACS a reality. She served as ACS President from 1976-78. She is now in ministry at the Maryknoll Motherhouse, and she remains part of their contemplative adjunct, which now has sites in several missionary countries as well as at Maryknoll.

**Sr. Jean Alice McGoff, OCD,** Indianapolis, In. Jean Alice has been intimately involved with ACS since the Woodstock Seminar. She was a member of "The Thirty," served two terms as ACS President (1973-76) and is probably the best repository of its history from 1969 to the present. (See personal essay.)

**Sr. Claudette Blais, OCD,** Concord, NH, was one of the six sisters who lived together for six months in 1970, to provide a communication and program hub which enabled ACS to quickly get off the ground. In the 1970's, she also helped produce a recording for the ACS Music Co., which was ultimately dissolved in the late 1990's.

**Sr. Rose Page, OCD,** Barre, VT, was also a member of that small committee. She served on the editorial staff of *Contemplative Review/Living Prayer* from 1975-96. She now lives an eremitical life in SW Vermont. Sr. Mary Gehring, OCD, Barrington, RI, served as secretary of this coordinating committee. Karen Pamperin, a Poor Clare from Hickory Hills, IL, was also part

of this group. She died in 1978, a few years after she left the Monastery. (Ruth Brennan and Gert Wilkinson completed the committee.)

**Sr. Vilma Seelaus, OCD**, Barrington, RI. She was one of “The Thirty,” and was chosen president of ACS at its first General Assembly, and served two terms in that position (1971-72). (See personal essay.)

**Sr. Mary Roman, OCD**, Barre, VT. One of “The Thirty,” Mary was very active in ACS during its early years, and provided leadership through her wisdom and counsel. She served on the editorial staff of *Contemplative Review/Living Prayer* from 1975-96. Passed away in August, 2003.

**Sr. Myriam Dardenne, OCSO**, Redwoods, CA. One of “The Thirty,” Myriam, with a prophetic stance which marked her life, planned and implemented the four year Summer Program of Contemplative Studies. (cf Chap. Three.) Her other commitments caused her to take a low profile in ACS from 1975 until she reconnected with it in 1990. Although her active participation after that was sporadic, she maintained a lively interest in it. She died in 2002.

**Cecilia Wilms**, Spokane, WA. Cecilia was a Trappistine in Redwoods, Calif. for many years. She left the Monastery to pursue her contemplative vocation in a different milieu. Through her persistent advocacy, she was instrumental in advocating a change in the ACS mission statement to allow lay women to become full members of ACS. In the early years of ACS, she also was a strong advocate of raising the consciousness of ACS members in regard to social justice issues. Deceased.

**Sr. Patricia Kelly, OCD**, of the Reno Carmelite Monastery. Active in ACS since 1979, Pat did much to foster the development and stability of the ACS Western Region from its inception up to the present. (See personal essay.)

**Sr. Mary Devereux, OSS**, Yonkers, NY. Active in both MACC and ACS. Her influence at the 1986 General Assembly had a positive result of changing the tenor of the meeting. See Chapter Four.

**Sr, Angela Collins, OCD**, Savannah, GA. Angela was Chairman of ACS 1976-78.

**Sr. Joan Williams, OCD**, Reno, NV. Joan was the last person who served as Chairman of ACS (1978-80). That position was eliminated in 1980.

**Sr. Annamae Dannes, OCD**, Cleveland, OH. Annamae served two terms as President, 1980-84)

**Sr. Jo Casey, OSC**, Bloomington (Minneapolis), MN. Jo was ACS President from 1984-86, a critical time in ACS history. (See personal essay.)

**Sr. Mary Lavin, OCD**, Cleveland, OH. Mary served as ACS President for two terms, 1986-90. During that time laywomen became full-fledged members of ACS.

**Sr. Joan Bourne, OCD**, Elysburg, PA. Joan was President from 1990-92. She has served as Coordinator of the Eastern Region for a number of years, and helped organize ACS archives, which are now part of the University of Notre Dame's archives.

**Ginny Manss** was President of ACS from 1994-96, the first laywoman to serve in that position. She had attended the Woodstock Seminar as a member of the cloister of the Precious Blood Sisters in New Riegel, OH. Through Ginny's efforts, ACS received a grant from the Lilly Foundation that enabled Ginny to lead research for a book, *The Lay Contemplative*, which was published in 2000, by St. Anthony Messenger Press. A video was also produced in conjunction with the book. She now balances her contemplative life-style with part-time work at the Carmelite Monastery in Indianapolis.

**Barbara Scott** served as President from 1994-96. She had been in the Dominican Monastery of the Perpetual Rosary, and left them for a semi-eremitical life in the woods of Northern Wisconsin. She received her CPE as a hospital chaplain, and now works part-time as a hospice chaplain.

**Sr. Rosalie Bertell, GNSH**, was ACS President from 1998-2002; she has the distinction of being the first member of an "active" congregation to serve in that capacity. Rosalie has long been drawn to a contemplative life style, and blends that beautifully with her work as a scientist, speaking worldwide in her efforts to free the world from the menace posed by nuclear weapons and the damage done to the environment by the residue from producing nuclear energy.

**Deb Gephardt** served as President from 2002-06. One of her claims to fame is that she was the first wife, mother and grandmother to hold that position! Prior to becoming President, she had helped in the research of *The Lay Contemplative*. (See personal essay.)

**Lillian McGee**, of Oceanside, CA, was the first laywoman (wife, mother, grandmother) to hold the position of Regional Coordinator (Western Region), thereby paving the way for those like her who have since held that position.

Assembling this list has been very difficult, because there have been so many who played vital roles in ACS history who are not included. Regional Coordinators, editors and publishers of the ACS Newsletter through the years, advisors to the Presidents...the list is endless! Their omission in no way diminishes the contributions they made to its development. "The Association is ourselves;" each member has, in some way, helped to foster the contemplative journey of the others. They continue to travel together.

All of these, and the hundreds unnamed are integral to the history of ACS, a history that is treasured.

“...A people without history is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern of timeless moments... We shall not cease from exploration and the end of our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.”

*T.S. Eliot, Little Gidding in Four Quartets.*

That place is a “Cloister of the Heart.”

## ANNOTATED CHRONOLOGY

### Of ACS History, including events leading up to its formation

**1950:** Apostolic Letter, *Sponsa Christi*, issued by Pope Pius XII.\*

**1955: (and following years): Carmelite Nuns and the Poor Clares** in the United States began to meet regionally and explore possibilities of establishing Federations and/or Associations. Subsequently they held meetings on formation and renewal.

**1958: Pius XII**, (radio talks in July/August) urged recognition of diversity in cultural and educational needs among contemplatives, and again spoke of the benefits of mutual assistance.\*

**1962-65: Vatican II:** Call to renewal of religious life.

**1963: Sr. Agnes Mary Burkard, (Innocentia), SSND**, began holding seminars within contemplative communities.\*

**1965: First inter-community meeting** (at Poor Clares in Birmingham, AL) of a number of contemplative nuns from across the country. Second meeting held in March, 1966.\*

**1967: Metropolitan Association of Contemplative Communities (MACC)** was formed, including communities in Archdiocese of New York as well as the Brooklyn Diocese.\*

**1967: Contemplative communities forbidden** (by Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop Vagnozzi) to belong to conference of major superiors of women.

**1967-68:** Two small and informal meetings at Gethsemani, KY, with **Thomas Merton**, to discuss renewal in monastic communities. Participants came from half a dozen traditions.\*

**1968: Cardinal Carberry** (St. Louis) appointed liaison with Sacred Congregation of Religious for contemplative communities of women in the USA.

**1969: (January) Initial planning meeting** (at Baltimore Carmel) for Seminar for Contemplatives, to be held at Jesuit Seminary, Woodstock, MD

**1969: (July)** Apostolic Letter, *Venite Seorsum*, promulgated for contemplative nuns, stressing importance of physical cloister in monasteries of nuns. Latin Text received at Woodstock in Aug., 1969.\*

**1969: (August 17-31) Seminar for Contemplatives** held in Woodstock, Md. Established ACS at conclusion of meeting.

**1969: (Nov-Dec) First Leadership Meeting** of ACS held at IHM Motherhouse, Monroe, Michigan.\*

**1970: (June) Seminar for Young Contemplatives & Formation Personnel**, held at Holy Family Retreat House, Hartford, CT.

**1970: (August) Prayer-Liturgy Seminar**, IHM Motherhouse, Monroe, MI.

**1970: (Sept.) Leadership meeting**, Motherhouse of Srs. Of Mercy, Farmington, MI.\*

**1971: Regional Development** began across the country, with meetings held in various places.

**1971: (2/4/71) ACS Incorporated as not-for-profit (501©3) organization** in state of New York.

**1971: (June) Summer Program of Contemplative Studies**, held at Jesuit Retreat House in Monroe, NY. First of a 4 summer program.

**1971: (Aug/Sept) Praying Community Contemplative Seminars (2)** held at St. Joseph Abbey, St. Benedict, LA, near Covington.

**1971: (Oct/Nov) First ACS National Delegate Meeting** held at a Benedictine Abbey, Benet Lake, WI. First National President was elected, goals set.\*

**1972: Leadership Training Program**, in three progressive sessions, held between Feb. and August.\*

**1972: (Oct.) Second National Meeting** at Dominican Motherhouse, Adrian, MI.

**1974: Fourth National Meeting**, Paola, KS. Decision to hold biennial meetings instead of annual, to allow time for stronger regional development.

**1978: Sixth National Meeting:** Regions allowed to set own criteria for membership.

**1980: Seventh National Meeting:** Experiment with simplified structure approved.

**1982: Eighth National Meeting:** Simplified leadership structure adopted as policy.

**1984: Ninth National Meeting:** Mandate given to leadership to involve total membership in developing a new mission statement over the next two years.

**1986: Tenth National Meeting:** Membership opened to all women (lay or religious).\*

**1988: Eleventh National Assembly:** First national gathering where lay women had full participation.

**1992: Thirteenth National Assembly:** First laywoman elected President.\*

**2002: Seventeenth National Assembly:** First married woman elected President.

## Notes:

1. Dates marked with an asterisk (\*) are discussed in the main body of the book.
2. Mention is made of meetings of Carmelites & Poor Clares, since their participation in those gatherings made the early meetings in ACS history more comfortable for everyone, since many of the Poor Clares and Carmelites already had met and were more familiar with each other.

## ACS PRESIDENTS & GENERAL ASSEMBLIES

<u>Year</u>	<u>Location of Assembly</u>	<u>Presidents/Chairman</u>
<b>1969-71</b>	No Assembly held Coordinator	Sr. Ruth Brennan, CP, Natl.
	Selection of coordinator at leadership meeting of “The Thirty.”	
<b>1971</b>	Benedictine Abbey Alice Benet Lake, WI	Sr. Vilma Seelaus, OCD/Sr. Jean McGoff, OCD
	(This was the very first General Assembly. Elected delegates from seven regions chose national leadership for the first time. They also accepted a rather complex organizational structure.)	
<b>1972</b>	Dominican Motherhouse Alice Adrian, MI	Sr. Vilma Seelaus, OCD/Sr. Jean McGoff, OCD
<b>1973</b>	Dominican Motherhouse Connie Adrian, MI	Sr. Jean Alice McGoff, OCD/Sr. Fitzgerald, OCD
<b>1974</b>	Ursuline Motherhouse Connie Paola, KS	Sr. Jean Alice McGoff, OCD/Sr. Fitzgerald, OCD
	(Decision made to hold General Assemblies bi-annually, so more emphasis could be put on regional programs.)	

- 1976** Regis College  
Weston, MA Sr. Lilla Marie Hull, MM/Sr. Angela  
Collins, OCD
- 1978** Xavier Center Sr. Betty Enoch, OSC/Sr. Joan  
Williams,  
Convent Station, NJ OCD
- 1980** Mercy National Center Sr. Annamae Dannes, OCD  
Potomac, MD  
(Assembly agreed to suspend Delegate Assembly and elect a President,  
who would choose her own advisers.)
- 1982** Mt. St. Joseph College Sr. Annamae Dannes, OCD  
Cincinnati, OH  
(Simplified leadership structure begun in 1980 adopted as a new policy.)
- 1984** Mt. St. Vincent-on-the Hudson Sr. Jo Casey, OSC  
Riverdale, NY  
(Assembly formally voted not to seek to have ACS become official  
channel to SCR. Also gave the new President a mandate to work on new  
mission statement, which would recognize the changing times.)
- 1986** St. Pius X Seminary Sr. Mary Lavin, OCD  
Dalton, PA  
(A turning point in ACS. A new mission statement was formulated and  
accepted, bringing lay women into full membership, instead of associate  
membership.)
- 1988** Santa Sabina Center Sr. Mary Lavin, OCD  
San Rafael, CA  
(Complementarity of diverse life-styles of members was stressed,  
whether members lived in community, as hermits, single or married, or  
.... all united in a common search.)
- 1990** Conception Abbey Sr. Joan Bourne, OCD  
Clyde, MO

<b>1992</b>	St. Benedict Center Madison, WI	Ginny Manss
<b>1994</b>	Catherine Spalding Center Nazareth, KY	Ginny Manss
<b>1996</b>	Marywood College Scranton, PA	Barbara Scott
<b>1998</b>	Queen of Apostles Retreat Center Toronto, Ont.	Sr. Rosalie Bertell, GNSH
<b>2000</b>	Mater Dolorosa Retreat Center Sierra Madre, CA (Revision of By-Laws and Articles of Incorporation accepted.)	Sr. Rosalie Bertell, GNSH
<b>2002</b>	Assisi Heights Rochester, MN (Deb became the first married woman, mother, grandmother, to be elected President.)	Deborah Gephardt
<b>2004</b>	Mt. Alvernia Retreat Center Wappinger Falls, NY (Now there were three regions, gradually consolidated from the seven original regions.)	Deborah Gephardt
<b>2006</b>	Catherine Spalding Center Nazareth, KY	Jo Balsamo
<b>2008</b>	Mercy Center Burlingame, CA	Mary Killeen Lyon

## **DECLARATION OF PURPOSE**

### **(MISSION STATEMENT)**

We, the Association of Contemplative Sisters, exist to foster and support the contemplative journey of our members. Rooted in the contemplative tradition and inspired by the courage and prophetic vision of the women who formed the Association we live in a diversity of ways a life of prayer. We affirm the contemplative dimension of all women and men and support its development.

Through our faithfulness to the movement of the Spirit within, and action congruent with each ones call, we are a contemplative presence in our broken yet redeemed world, cooperating in the healing and transforming mission of Jesus Christ.

(May, 2008)

**CLOISTER OF THE HEART** tells the story of the Association of Contemplative Sisters: its gestation, its inception in 1969, and what has transpired since then. In those forty years ACS has developed from an organization which served only monastic communities into an Association of women, both religious and lay, who live in a diversity of ways a life of prayer. Its three sections include a narrative history, followed by eleven essays written by individual members, describing their experience of ACS. It concludes with an appendix of important data.

### **About the authors**

Both **Ann Denham** and **Gert Wilkinson** have been active members of the Association of Contemplative Sisters for many years.

**Ann Denham** was formerly a minister in the United Methodist Church. Her contemplative prayer path brought her into the Catholic Church in 1982. She was among the first lay women to join the Association in 1987. Ann teaches Scripture at St. Francis of Assisi Parish in Sacramento, CA. Her husband, Walter, died suddenly in 2002; she cherishes time with her children and grandchildren.

**Gert Wilkinson** was a Redemptoristine nun for 23 years, Along with a few other nuns, she helped contemplative communities come together to assist each other in implementing the directives of Vatican II. Gert was founding editor of **Contemplative Review/Living Prayer**, and was on the editorial staff from 1968 until it ceased publication in 1996. Since her retirement she has volunteered in her local parish as well as in a residential hospice in Oconomowoc, WI.

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- vi . **Sisters Today, November, 1969.**
- vii . **Harvest in Gladness, 1969.**
- viii . **Harvest in Gladness, 1969.**
- ix . **Signed on Aug. 31, 1969.**
- x . **Contemplative Review, February 1972.**
- xi . **Ibid.**
- xii . *Contemplative Review, November 1972.*
- xiii . **Ibid.**
- xiv . **Paola, Kansas, October 1974.**
- xv . **The Rationale, Monroe, Michigan, November 1969.**
- xvi . *Contemplative Review, Vol. 1, No. 1.*
- xvii . **December 1970.**
- xviii . Laetitia Yang, OCSO, in *Contemplative Review*, November 1972.
- xix . Tenth General Assembly Report, Mary Lavin OCD, 1986.
- xx . **Ibid.**
- xxi . **Ibid.**
- xxii . **Ibid.**
- xxiii . East Meets West At The Eleventh Assembly, Therese Boersig, OCD.
- xxiv . **Ibid.**
- xxv . **Ibid.**
- xxvi . **Ibid.**
- xxvii . **Ibid.**
- xxviii . Reflections. . .First Lay Woman President, Ginny Manss.
- xxix . Narrative on Toronto Assembly taken from a Report by Joan Huff.
- 1. ACS Western Region Newsletter, Summer, 2000, Page 5.**
- xxxi . **ACS Rationale, November, 1971, Formulated at Delegate Assembly, Benet Lake, WI.**
- xxxii . **The Lay Contemplative, St. Anthony Messenger Press, Cincinnati, OH, Page 91.**

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## 1. Order of St. Clare (Poor Clares)

<sup>xxxiv</sup>. Leadership Conference of Women Religious

<sup>xxxv</sup>. Grey Nuns of the Sacred Heart

<sup>xxxvi</sup>. Maryknoll Missionaries

<sup>xxxvii</sup>. Sacramentines

<sup>xxxviii</sup>. American Catholic Studies Vol. 117, No.1 (Villanova University, 2006):

1-20. Joseph Chinnici's use of the *commonwealth* metaphor traces to his research in the Archives of Carmelite Monastery, Baltimore, at the time of the Bicentennial of Carmel in America in 1990 (coinciding with the foundation of my community, the first community of religious women in the original 13 colonies). Chinnici found the term in foundational documents of Baltimore Carmel, and he realized that it actually was an interpretative key for many of the other writings expressing the religious life of that community.

<sup>xxxix</sup>. Ibid., p. 3, citing Sandra Schneiders, *Finding the Treasure: Locating Catholic Religious Life in a New Ecclesial and Cultural Context* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000).

<sup>xl</sup>. Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>xli</sup>. Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>xlii</sup>. Federation was successfully accomplished for the French Discalced Nuns under the leadership of Father Marie-Eugène, O.C.D. in 1955.

<sup>xliii</sup>. This was suggested by Archbishop Paul Philippe, Secretary of the Sacred Congregation of Religious, as early as 1963.

<sup>xliv</sup>. Chinnici, *Rewriting the Master Narrative*, p. 15.

<sup>xlv</sup>. Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>xlvi</sup>. Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>xlvii</sup>. Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>xlviii</sup>. I learned about this event from Bishop Joseph Breitenbeck, later Bishop of Grand Rapids, MI. Bishop Breitenbeck retired in 1989 and died last year, in March, 2005.

<sup>xlix</sup>. Edith Stein, *Treatise on Individual and Community in Philosophy of Psychology and the Humanities*, Basehart and Sawicki, trans. (ICS Publications, 2000): pp. 279-283.

<sup>l</sup>. Chinnici, *Rewriting the Master Narrative*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>li</sup>. See, e.g., *Cloister: Historical-Juridical-Spiritual Origin and Development*, Case Generalizia Carmelitani Scalzi (Rome 2002).

<sup>lii</sup>. Stein, *Treatise on Individual and Community*, pp. 201-206.

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<sup>liii</sup>. See *Crisis and Transformation: Turning Over the Compost Heap, The Way*, (London, Heythrop College, January, 2004).

<sup>liv</sup>. 'We bear within us the echo of God's eternal self-disclosure in Christ' See: *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner*, edited by Declan Marmion and Mary E. Hines (Cambridge University Press, 2005). While I cannot re-locate the page, this quote undergirds Rahner's spiritual theology.

<sup>lv</sup>. O Spring-like crystal!  
If only on your silvered-over face  
You would suddenly form  
The eyes I have desired,  
The eyes I have desired,  
Which I bear sketched deep within my heart

John of the Cross. *Spiritual Canticle*, Stanza 12. Collected Works of St. John of the Cross, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD, & Otilio Rodriguez, OCD, (ICS Publications, Institute of Carmelite Studies, Washington, D.C., 1991) p. 515.

<sup>lvi</sup>. Sally McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993).

<sup>lvii</sup>. Karl Rahner, *Spiritual Writings*, edited with an Introduction by Philip Endean, (Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 10545, 2004) p. 45.

<sup>lviii</sup>. For entire quotation see: *The Great Church Year, The Best of Karl Rahner's Homilies, Sermons, and Meditations*, ed. Albert Raffert, (Crossroad, New York, 1993) p. 194.

See also: Vilma Seelaus, *Praying The News: Carmel's Response To World Events*, in *Mount Carmel: A Review of the Spiritual Life*, (Boars Hill, Oxford, UK, April – June 2004) pp. 48-54, where this citation is woven into the article.

<sup>lix</sup>. Published by: Twayne Publishers, An imprint of Simon & Schuster, Macmillan, New York, 1996.

<sup>lx</sup>. The Way Supplement 1997/89.

<sup>lxi</sup>. St. Paul/Alba House, 2005.

<sup>lxii</sup>. See: *Method in Theology*, (New York: Seabury Press, 1972) p. 240ff.