

Perfect joy: Sister Celia Ashton makes final profession as Carmelite

Lying prostrate in the chapel of the Carmelite Monastery in Towson as a throng of family and friends chanted the Litany of the Saints over her, Sister Celia Ashton thought of all the women who came before her and the others who will follow as Carmelite nuns.

The special moment was a part of her May 12 solemn profession as a Carmelite nun, her community's 137th sister to profess final vows of poverty, chastity and obedience since its foundation in 1790.

The 42-year-old **former dentist**, who gave up two flourishing practices to join religious life six years ago, wore the mantle - a kind of cloak - of Baltimore Carmel's 18th-century founder, Mother Bernardina Matthews, as she extended her arms in the shape of a cross during the litany.

Recounting the powerful invocation of the saints a few days after her profession, Sister Celia said she felt a close connection to Christ and an awareness of all the places in the world that need the light and love of Christ.

It was an experience of being "grafted" onto the crucified Christ, she said, who poured out his love into "all the darkest places of our hearts and over all creation."

"This is the love that we believe is transformative for the world," said Sister Celia, whose full religious name is Sister Cecilia of the Cosmic Christ.

During her profession, the alumna of The Seton Keough High School in Baltimore placed her hands into those of the community's prioress, Carmelite Sister Judy Long. She also signed a written copy of her profession and received a crucifix.

In an exhortation, Carmelite Sister Constance FitzGerald said Sister Celia has discovered over her six years of formation that Carmelite life is "essentially about being grasped by God and having the familiar boundaries of your soul stretched and stretched so that you do become more and more capable of holding within yourself

the full relational life of Jesus Christ.”

The Baltimore Carmel was the first community of nuns established in the original 13 states. First located in Port Tobacco, it moved to Baltimore in 1831, established initially on Aisquith Street, then relocating to Biddle Street in 1873. It has been in Towson since 1961.

Sister Celia is one of 17 sisters and one postulant in her community, 15 of whom live at the monastery and two of whom live at Villa Assumpta in Baltimore. They range in age from 37 to 99.

Carmelites are contemplatives who devote their lives to prayer, both in solitude and with other sisters. Sister Celia estimated that the sisters at her monastery each devote up to five hours or more to prayer and meditation every day. They believe it has a profound impact.

“I think we hold up for the church and for the world the abiding presence of God and the sacred within each one of us,” she said.

The divisions experienced at all levels of society and the failures that have been brought to light in the church reveal the “brokenness of humanity,” she said, and the “need for a renewed church to be born.”

“As contemplatives, we have a crucial role to play in continuing to work with the Spirit to widen a groove whereby this renewed church and a more peaceful society can emerge,” Sister Celia explained.

Since joining her community, Sister Celia said her prayer has become less about the recitation of set words and more about being present to God and receiving and “opening a space for God to work.”

The sisters frequently receive requests for prayer from the wider community and are happy to oblige, Sister Celia said. Many visitors join the sisters for Mass.

“It’s been a great support to see their desire for God and their hunger for Carmelite spirituality,” said Sister Celia, noting that she first stepped foot in the monastery 12 years ago at the invitation of some of her dental patients. The liturgy she attended

that day happened to be on “Vocations Sunday,” and it was during that celebration that she felt a call to the Carmelite way of life.

It was fitting that her final profession also occurred on Vocations Sunday, said Sister Celia, who assists her community with its website, library and archives.

In closing remarks at the profession Mass, Monsignor Joseph Luca said Sister Celia has been filled with love, joy and kindness throughout her life. The longtime pastor of St. Louis in Clarksville has known Sister Celia since her childhood and became one of her dental patients.

Monsignor Luca recalled that Sister Celia’s patients constantly commented that she treated them like family. Her co-workers said the same.

“What they were really saying is you were bringing us the love of Christ to them in a world that doesn’t know or feel it,” he said.

Sister Celia, who grew up in the parishes of Immaculate Conception in Towson and St. Mark in Catonsville, called her final profession the happiest day of her life. In preparing for it, she read Pope Benedict XVI’s “Jesus of Nazareth,” and was struck by the former pope’s assertion that what God wants for each person is “perfect joy.”

“I feel like that’s what I’ve found here,” she said.

*Video clips of Sister Celia’s solemn profession may be found **here**.*

Also see:

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