

The Gift and Grace of Community

BY KATHLEEN RICHARDVILLE, TOC

An early Saturday morning. Gentle fog lifting on the straight-as-an-arrow divided highway from Orlando to the east coast. The trip takes me through “old Florida” pasture land, swamp areas, coastal lowlands where rented airboats serve tourists’ fantasies over a sea of grass. Then South on I-95 to my “farthest South” community for elections and visitation. The journey of 75 miles takes an hour and a half or so. Lots of time for reflection. As a Regional Coordinator I have grown in the understanding of what the grace of “community” means.

When I first attended a Lay Carmelite community meeting in 1995, I immediately felt at home, I felt like I had belonged with this prayerful group of people all my life. Nevertheless, through the first year of formation, I had an “intellectual” grasp of “community” but I still thought of the monthly meetings as “meetings.” As I settled into the familiar rhythm of daily Christian Prayer and the continual beauty of monthly community meetings that seamlessly followed the consistent pattern of antiphonal prayer, *Lectio Divina*, small group discussion on a shared Carmelite focus, and a deepening mutual respect and love for one another, I came to understand that we were not “meeting,” but we were truly coming together as a community. We are bound together through commitment to our desired way of life, centered on Jesus Christ, the Source and End of our pilgrimage. Knowing the history of the Carmelites and our own community’s history (chartered by Rome in 1974) reinforced this sense of timeless connectivity with like-minded pilgrims searching for the Beloved.

“Community” is not “meeting.” It is caring deeply for one another. It is listening to each voice as we say Christian Prayer and adjust our own pace or volume so that our words blend in unison—in a communal offering of praise in *one* voice made of many individual voices. It is appreciating the beautiful imperfections that shine forth in each one of us so that our love is rooted joyously in reality and in the beauty of true humanity. It is praying with our homebound or infirm community members even in their physical absence and visiting them, perhaps taking prayer requests to them so that they know how fruitful their prayers are and so that they deeply feel that they are always inseparable from their community. It is in joining with other Lay Carmelite communities for retreats, feast day celebrations, convocations or international gatherings so that we

never forget that Carmelites form a worldwide community of pilgrim brothers and sisters.

On that long Southbound interstate, traveling alone, I saw the many beautiful faces of all the Lay Carmelites in “my” region and beyond. I heard the varied voices of all who had spoken the words of reception and profession in my presence; I was profoundly aware of my servant role as one among the many.

Arriving at my destination, warmly welcomed, I was completely at home in Carmel—graced at being able to serve as a “regional” and full of the grace of our charism of community. 



Kathleen Richardville is a Lay Carmelite Regional Coordinator from Orlando, Florida. She is a wife, mother, grandmother and teacher of more than 40 years. She has been a Eucharistic minister for 25 years and finds greatest joy in taking the Eucharistic Christ to the elderly and homebound. The heart of Carmel has taken her into the heart of Christ.

Carmelite Pilgrims

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sacraments, and they were offering programs, and they were offering events, and the people came only if they felt they wanted to consume that product. The staff produced and the congregation consumed. And the more the staff produced, the more finicky and demanding became the congregation.

After reading about a model of parish that he read in *The Purpose-Driven Church* by Protestant Pastor Rick Warren, Father Michael wondered if that model would work in the Catholic Church. In *The Purpose-Driven Church*, Rick Warren first decries ‘consumerist Christianity’ he finds in the Protestant Church and says that Christianity is a call to discipleship, not consumerism. Consumerism is about being served; whereas, discipleship is about serving. Consumerist parishes are failing parishes, but discipleship parishes are thriving parishes.

So Father Michael began to ‘mission’ his congregation to evangelize, which basically meant to go out and invite your unchurched coworkers and colleagues to come to church. But this meant first making the parish more visitor-friendly. This is when he met a lot of resistance. The parishioners did not want newcomers or visitors. They wanted the status quo and were going to resist any change.

A big part of the book involves the slow and painful transition from consumerist to discipleship. But that in the end, it resulted in a dynamic parish filled to a large extent by Catholics who had long ago stopped any regular practice, and by the unchurched who first felt welcomed, then connected, and then missioned, and then became Catholics.

Last Sunday, I witnessed firsthand that the claims made in *Rebuilt* are obviously working. The book gave me a lot to think about and seeing the parish firsthand gave me even more to think about. I heartily recommend this book to anyone involved in parish ministry — especially pastors. You may not agree with everything the authors are doing, but the proof is sitting in the pews. 