

Carmelite Conference Celebrates 25th anniversary at Saint Mary's College

BY CATHERINE M. ODELL

NOTRE DAME — For 25 years straight, Carmelites and those attracted to Carmelite spirituality have been gathering at Saint Mary's College at Notre Dame for the June summer conference on Carmelite spirituality.

But the 2010 event, held June 16-20, may have been more like a large family reunion. There were clusters of people updating each other, plenty of good food, laughter, shared family stories and favorite music, such as the "Salve Regina" traditionally sung to close Carmelite prayer. Even tentative first timers at the seminar seemed to feel welcomed as "part of the family." This year's conference focus was "Carmel's Quest for the Living God."

Dr. Keith J. Egan, a professor of theology emeritus at Saint Mary's College and the founder of the Carmelite summer gathering, told the group that a record number of religious and lay people — over 250 — had come to the 25th anniversary celebration, "Carmel's Quest for the Living God: A Conference of the Carmelite Family and Friends."

For the first event, Egan had invited a core group of Carmelite scholars and leaders he named the Carmelite Forum. Faithfully continuing to share and teach at the



Carmelite women from around the country got to know one another at the four-day Carmelite Conference at St. Mary's College, June 16-20.

event each June were Carmelite teachers Daniel Chowning, Kevin Culligan, Constance FitzGerald, Kieran Kavanaugh, Patrick McMahon, Steven Payne, Vilma Seelaus, and John Welch.

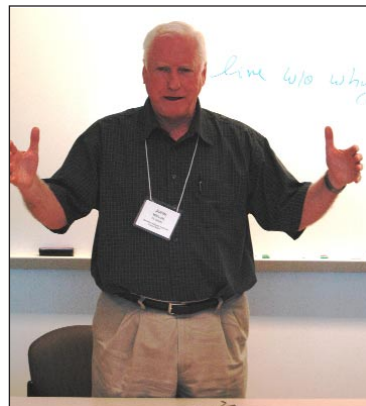
This year's conference lay and religious participants, Egan explained, were mostly from the U.S., but also from England, Japan and the Philippines. Hands proudly shot up when Egan, a Third Order Carmelite and a Forum member, asked how many had attended the first Carmelite gathering in 1985.

Carmelites do indeed treasure their spiritual tradition, agreed the first plenary speaker for the conference, Father Camilo Maccise, a native of Mexico and the former superior general of the worldwide order of Discalced Carmelites, one

of the two major branches of the Carmelite order.

In fact, Father Maccise, a theologian, suggested that the Carmelite order, which dates from the Middle Ages, might now have a special and growing mission for the Church and world. Within the last 25 years, he noted, the Carmelite charisms — prayer and contemplation — have been highlighted in remarkably dramatic and global ways.

People are deeply moved when they learn about Teresa's own struggles with prayer, pointed out Carmelite Father John Welch, a speaker at one of the seminar's 17 workshops. Father Welch, a popular Carmelite author and theologian at the Washington Theological Union, is a member of the other



PHOTOS BY CATHERINE ODELL

Father John Welch, popular Carmelite author and theologian at the Washington Theological Union, is a member of the Carmelites of the Ancient Observance. He spoke at one of the 17 workshops offered at the Conference.

main Carmelite branch, the Carmelites of the Ancient Observance. Father Welch said that for 20 years St. Teresa of Avila herself was "at sea" — or lost — when it came to prayer.

Teresa, Father Welch said, couldn't seem to commit herself to prayer and a deeper relationship with God. "When she was with the things of God, she wanted to be with the things of the world. When she was with the things of the world, she wanted to be with the things of God."

This spiritual ambivalence plagued Teresa, he said, until "they brought this statue of the scourged Christ into the convent. She fell down on her knees and said, 'I'm not getting up until I'm healed.'"

"She got up and a few years later, she was reforming Carmel. Her life was changed. She became single-hearted and single-minded. She never said what happened to her in that experience. I am guessing that she saw in that statue that this (Christ's suffering and death) was done out of love for her. The realization struck her that she was loved and that this was something that was done for her."

"St. Teresa of Avila discovered that she was desired, loved and valued by God," Father Welch concluded. "Teresa said that Jesus accepts us where we are in our life. Our challenge is to accept that acceptance — and it's hard to accept it."

Accepting and exploring that love of God, understandably, is the work of a lifetime. Still, the chance to gather with so many who are happily exploring God's love was clearly a four-day joy for conferees.

"Carmel," as Father Welch summed it up, "is about having an interior life." And that interior life is what people around the world need more than ever.

BOOK OF THE MONTH CLUB

This month's featured selection:

"No Turning Back: A Witness to Mercy" By Donald Calloway, MIC

Reviewed by Kay Cozad

"No Turning Back: A Witness to Mercy," by Donald Calloway, priest of the Congregation of Marians of the Immaculate Conception (MIC) is *Today's Catholic's* book of the month selection.

Have you ever wondered what sort of personal history a man brings to the priesthood or how he received his calling? Most stories reflect typical boyhood experiences with support and guidance from parents, Catholic religious and laity. Not so for Donald Calloway, the author of this month's book selection.

This engaging autobiographical tome, written in first person, is a difficult book to review, packed as it is with the melodrama of the author's deviant young lifestyle. It is a book that must be experienced. In it Calloway offers a detailed account of his own life journey from innocence to a life of crime and deceit with an intense conversion experience thrown into the mix.

We first meet the 15-year-old Calloway during a failed attempt to escape the Japanese and military police as they arrest him for robbery in Japan, where he and his military stepfather, mother and younger brother were stationed. The near-unbelievable real-life drama that unfolds has the reader weaving back and forth through Calloway's misguided youth of drugs, alcohol, heavy metal music and women.

Early in his youth, following the departure of his biological father, Calloway and his mother were very close. But after his mother suffered another failed marriage to an abusive alcoholic and a move to California, this young man became jaded to the possibilities of decent living. Calloway's mother finally married a military man who would love her and support her children, though

Calloway himself was so immersed in his own turbulent life that he was unable to embrace the grace of this new family.

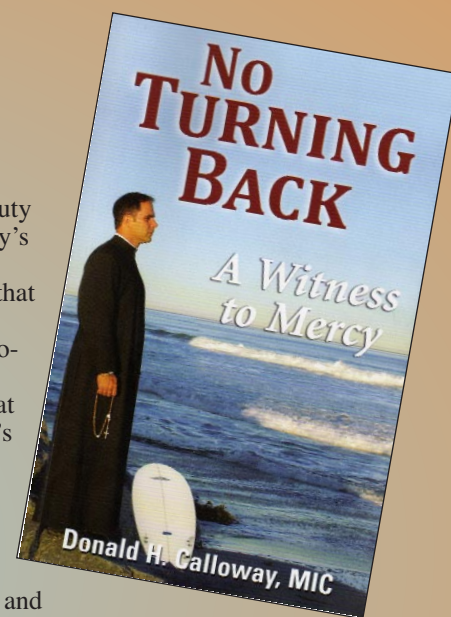
With no apparent guidance or influence, the young Calloway rejected any semblance of law abiding behavior, even after his mother and stepfather converted to Catholicism. The young surfer boy, wearing heavy metal T-shirts and long hair, who had no foundation in any religious tradition, had no knowledge of the Bible and its truths when his conversion took place.

The antics of the young rebel, from stealing and lying to failed rehabs and running away from home, fills the pages almost to exhaustion. But if the reader stays with the book, an inspired turn finally clears the path. Through all the experiences of deceit, drug and alcohol abuse, and more, the author's quest for fulfillment culminates in the truth of the Gospel.

His conversion story is an amazing tale, even with that compulsive element that pervades this man's life blood. Becoming enthralled with a Catholic book on the Blessed Mother he stumbled upon in his parents' home, Calloway began his journey toward the God who loved him in spite of his past. His encounter with the Blessed Mother, the Church and the Eucharist all led him to purge his life of reminders of the past. Prayer became foundational in his developing faith and he eventually investigated several religious orders in hopes of joining a fraternity of priests.

After much study and service Calloway, now with a college degree, was ordained into the priesthood of the Congregation of Marians of the Immaculate Conception in May of 2003 and continues his ministry of retelling his conversion story to audiences that include prisoners, alcoholism conference attendees and more.

The beauty of Calloway's tale is his admission that his conversion is ongoing. He believes that his mother's prayers were finally answered in his conversion and his gratitude for his family's support speaks volumes in the final chapters. A final note from the author's mother will bring a sense of grace to any heart. The book closes with color photos from the author's life that offer an interesting illustration of his painful journey to joy.



Questions for reflection

- Calloway was a callous, long-haired rebel in his youth. Would you have had the tenacity and patience with him that his mother did? Why or why not?
- Calloway led a destructive life before his conversion. Can you identify in any way? If so, how did that keep you from your faith in God?
- Calloway's conversion started with a book but is reported to be ongoing. What is your conversion story? How has it developed over the course of your life time?