

**Sandwiching in History  
Carmelite Convent and Chapel  
(The Carmelite Monastery of St. Teresa of Jesus)  
7201 W. 32<sup>nd</sup> Street, Little Rock  
June 2, 2017  
By Revis Edmonds**



**Good afternoon, my name is Revis Edmonds, and I work for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program, which is an agency of the Department of Arkansas Heritage.**

**Thank you for coming, and welcome to the “Sandwiching in History” tour of Carmelite Convent and Chapel. I’d like to thank Sister Lucia Ellender for allowing us to tour this amazing piece of Little Rock’s religious history!**

**This tour is worth one hour of HSW continuing education credit through the American Institute of Architects. Please see me after the tour if you’re interested.**

**The Carmelite Monastery of St. Teresa of Jesus is the home of the Discalced (barefoot) Carmelite Nuns of Little Rock (Pulaski County), a cloistered community**

of women in the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>1</sup> The monastery is autonomous (independent) but belongs to a worldwide order composed of both men and women. The principal mission of the Carmelites is service of the Church through a life of union with God in prayer.

According to Sister Therese Stewart, the Carmelite Order traces its history from the twelfth century with a group of hermits living on Mount Carmel in Palestine where St. Elijah the prophet had lived in Old Testament times. In 1204, they received a rule that expressed clearly their charism “to meditate day and night on the law of the Lord and to watch in prayer.” In the thirteenth century, they transferred to Europe. There, the order was “reformed” in the sixteenth century as a result of the Council of Trent and the many spiritual gifts of St. Teresa of Avila. The Carmelite nuns settled in La Plata, Maryland in 1790. During the post–World War II era, as St. Teresa had wanted the number of nuns in each Carmelite community not to exceed twenty-one, it was necessary to form a new foundation, thus the Discalced Carmelite Nuns were born. They choose to live as hermits in their communities, following the inspiration of St. Teresa of Jesus, reformer of the Order during the 16th century.

The Carmelite nuns in Little Rock were founded in 1950 from the Carmel of Loretto, Pennsylvania in response to an invitation from the bishop of Little Rock, Albert Fletcher. Mother Mary Barrett, the prioress (superior) of the Carmelite nuns in Loretto, Pennsylvania, was seeking a diocese that did not have a contemplative

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<sup>1</sup> Therese Stewart, OCD, “Carmelite Monastery of St. Teresa of Jesus.” *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture* <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=4331>

monastery. She received a favorable response from Bishop Fletcher, who wrote to her on January 30, 1950, “The Church—bishop, priests, sisters and the laity, in this missionary diocese, are all in great need of the prayers and sacrifices of a contemplative order like the daughters of Saint Teresa.”<sup>2</sup>

Barrett, accompanied by Sister Teresa Huver, a member of the council of the monastery in Loretto, visited Little Rock in February. She then chose five members of the Loretto community to accompany her to Little Rock in June 1950. They arrived on June 17. A house was being prepared for them near the Cathedral of St. Andrew in downtown Little Rock. Until this house at 812 Louisiana Street was ready for the new community, they stayed at St. Joseph Home in North Little Rock, which was staffed by the Benedictine sisters of Fort Smith. Several applicants joined them when the monastery was formally established on September 12, 1950, when the first mass for the new community was celebrated.<sup>3</sup> One month later the Carmel (the church’s definition for a monastery of the monks and convent of the nuns of the Carmelite religious order) was canonically erected.

Out of deference for Bishop Fletcher, the monastery was named in honor of Saint Teresa of Avila, to whom he had a special devotion. Monsignor Thomas J. Prendergast, editor of the diocesan newspaper at that time, was instrumental in making the community known throughout the state.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Carmel of St. Teresa of Jesus, “Our Carmel: History.” <http://www.littlerockcarmel.org/>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Therese Stewart, OCD, “Carmelite Monastery of St. Teresa of Jesus.”

The community remained at the Louisiana Street address for eleven years. During the early years the young community had its full share of trials living in a temporary house not suited for a monastic way of life. They also had the disadvantage of being located next door to the School Board offices that were actually bombed in 1959 during that volatile period of the equal rights movement. Although the house and grounds had become inadequate for the sisters' needs, the immediate cause of their move to a larger place was the "Labor Day Bombing" of the Little Rock School Board building in 1959, which was part of the continuing community unrest arising from the Little Rock School desegregation crisis. The monastery building was a small parking lot away from the school board building, and was damaged in the attack.<sup>5</sup> This act of violence, though unrelated to the nuns, led to the decision to relocate the community.<sup>6</sup> In the summer of 1959, the community moved into their new monastery built on property donated by the diocese on 22 acres of wooded land. The diocese gave the sisters two acres of land on a large tree-covered property. Ground was broken in October 1960 at their present address at 7201 West 32nd Street in southwest Little Rock, and the sisters moved there the following year. The completion of the chapel was made possible by a sizeable donation by the family of Carl E. Koch, a financier who established a well-known scholarship foundation at the University of Notre Dame and lived part of the year in Eureka Springs. Since that time, the sisters have been given eighteen more acres of land. A small infirmary wing was built in the fall of 1999.

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<sup>5</sup> Carmel of St. Teresa of Jesus, "Our Carmel: History."

<sup>6</sup> Site Visit and Conversation with Sister Lucia Allender, May 10, 2017.

The community's mission remains the same: prayer. They also publish a quarterly bulletin. The main external work of the nuns is the distribution of communion breads to churches, both to Catholic churches and those of other faiths in Arkansas and beyond. As of April 2007, the monastery has fourteen sisters, none of whom are native Arkansans. They also have a male branch of the located at Marylake in Saline County <sup>7</sup>

The most outstanding feature of the monastery is its rather large chapel with its steep roof situated against a backdrop of pine and oak trees. The first mass was offered there on September 19, 1961. Bishop Fletcher and his successors, Bishop Emeritus Andrew McDonald and Bishop Peter Sartin, have all been true pastors to the community giving guidance and helping in many other ways. Most recently Bishop Sartin blessed the entire building and the grounds upon the completion of the renovation. <sup>8</sup>

The chapel was designed by Little Rock Architect Jim Wellborn of Swaim, Allen and Wellborn, and is in the Contemporary Folk design with A-Frame construction. Churches were in fact the original sources of A-Frame designs in the United States before they became more common in residential construction in the 1950s and 1960s. These designs demonstrate modern architecture's focus on utility and function. The chapel was built as a pyramid with a pine wood frame. The pyramid commonly results in less surface material to maintain. The front frame at the entrance, though, was constructed of redwood, which unfortunately deteriorated

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<sup>7</sup> Therese Stewart, OCD, "Carmelite Monastery of St. Teresa of Jesus."

<sup>8</sup> Photo album highlighting the Chapel's development provided by Carmelite Chapel.

due to climatic conditions about 15 years ago, and today is covered by a metal facia to mitigate any further damage.<sup>9</sup>

On the east interior wall, a series of plaques on the wall signify the Stations of the Cross, also known as Way of Sorrows or Via Crucis, which refer to a series of images depicting Jesus Christ on the day of his crucifixion and accompanying prayers. The stations grew out of imitations of Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem which is believed to be the actual path Jesus walked to Mount Calvary. The object of the stations is to help the Christian faithful to make a spiritual pilgrimage through contemplation of the Passion of Christ.<sup>10</sup>

In front of the chapel to your left you will see a half-grate, which is the separator between the congregation and the cloistered sisters during mass. The grate originally covered this opening all the way to the top but this changed with the advent of the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) from 1962 to 1965.<sup>11</sup> This change was intended to signify Separation from the world, necessary for all those who follow Christ in the religious life, is especially evident in their case, as contemplative sisters, by the cloister, which is the inner sanctum of the Church as spouse: “a sign of the exclusive union of the Church as Bride with her Lord, whom she loves above all things.”<sup>12</sup> In both of its incarnations, the grate still

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<sup>9</sup> Photo album highlighting the Chapel’s development provided by Carmelite Chapel.

<sup>10</sup> Site Visit and Conversation with Sister Lucia Allender, May 10, 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> CONGREGATION FOR INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE

AND FOR SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE :“VERBI SPONSA: Instruction on the Contemplative Life and on the Enclosure of Nuns.”

[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccsclife/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccsclife\\_doc\\_13051999\\_verbi-sponsa\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsclife/documents/rc_con_ccsclife_doc_13051999_verbi-sponsa_en.html)

represents the cloister, symbol of the sisters' separation from the world.<sup>13</sup> Also, the outside courtyard wall symbolizes this separation as well. Called the "preau" (inner courtyard) in French, the rock design is meant to imply a rustic back to nature theme in keeping with the sisters' simple lifestyle and vows of poverty.

Much of the furnishings, like the chapel itself, are donated such as the pipe organ in the upper balcony above the entrance. The confessional booths in the rear are also a reflection of some of the changes in church policy in the wake of Vatican II: the booth occupied by the confessional priest is in the center, and the booth to the right is shrouded between the priest and the confessor. The booth to the left allows the priest to be seen by the confessor.<sup>14</sup>

In front of the altar are the prayer benches made of marble. If you will notice, on the right side the bench contains the inscription, "Pray for Maurice-Marie Schafer." It is believed that the Schafers were another faithful couple of the Diocese who contributed to the chapel's refurbishing in 2005. About 10 years ago, the gardens in front and at the entrance were renovated, and shortly afterward, the pebble walkway with the Carmelite Shield was added. In the shield there are five distinguishing features: A mountain, its tip reaching to the sky, referring to Mount Carmel, the Carmelites' place of origin; three stars each with six points, the lower star representing Carmelites still on the way to the top of Mount Carmel, while the other two stars higher up, represent Carmelites who have ended their journey "by reaching the top of the holy Mountain; a crown,

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<sup>13</sup> Site Visit and Conversation with Sister Lucia Allender, May 10, 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

representing the Kingdom of God; an arm and a hand bearing a fiery sword and a banner bearing a biblical text; and the twelve stars which symbolize the Marian nature of the Order.”<sup>15</sup>

Thank you all for coming today! Please join us for our next Sandwiching in History tour of 2017 on Friday July 7 at the Albert Pike Hotel at 701 Scott Street in Little Rock. We will begin at Noon. Also, if you'd like to take a road trip, come visit us in Russellville for our Walks Through History tour of Arkansas Tech University on Saturday June 10 starting at Caraway Residence Hall at 1403 North Arkansas Hall beginning at 11 AM. Hope to see you there! And if you're dining out after the tour, we encourage you to patronize our incredible local establishments! You'll love the taste, and you're building a better Little Rock!

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<sup>15</sup> Carmelite Shield, "The Shield." <http://ocarm.org/en/content/ocarm/shield>