



Lush green pastures on the shores on Bantry Bay, in County Cork. Corbis Images

CHAPTER 7



Saint Cannera of Bantry Bay

PATRON OF
CELTIC PERSISTENCE

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable.

2 TIMOTHY 4:2

Pilgrim Diary: Notes Along the Way

The town of Bantry in County Cork is nestled beside Bantry Bay, one of the finest harbors in Europe. On the edge of the Atlantic Ocean, Bantry Bay welcomed fleets from England, Spain, and France, whose captains paid harbor fees to the O'Sullivan clan who controlled the bay in ancient times.

The town of Bantry lies in the center of an age-old region that still bears remnants of megalithic and neolithic monu-

women around the globe. Let us take courage and, like you, let us “walk on water” into the radiant heart of God. Amen.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Saint Paul says, “In Christ there is no Jew or Greek, slave or citizen, male or female. All are one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:28, *Inclusive New Testament*). How can this promise be extended to the present day?
2. Saint Cannera’s persistence and faithfulness to the Gospel is a good example to everyone. How do we show our own persistence and faithfulness to the Good News?
3. Sailors who visited Scattery Island often took pebbles and drilled holes in them to make a necklace. This necklace was presumed to save the wearer from shipwreck. What kinds of protection would be most useful to you at this point in time?
4. Create a “pattern prayer” to celebrate women as equals and partners in the gospel.

ments (wedge tombs, stone circles, boulder burials and the Ogham Stone which is reputed to be the tallest in the world) that pre-date the Pyramids and ancient Greece. Here among palm trees and semi-tropical flowers was born Saint Cannera, a holy virgin and hermitess. At first, we found no evidence of any remains of Saint Cannera's hermitage in the Bantry Bay region. However, we were lucky enough to find out about this spirited woman at a local bookstore. The owner had written a book about the history of Bantry and gave directions to the shore of a contemporary campgrounds where her hermitage is believed to have been located. The rhythm of the lapping waves on the rocks provided a scenic backdrop for picture-taking of yet another soul-filled Celtic spot where God has touched the earth.

Encountering Saint Cannera

Cannera lived in a small hermitage near Bantry Bay. Scholars think she may have founded three monasteries. One night during prayer, she had a powerful vision of fire flaming above all the churches in Ireland. The brightest flames rose from the monk Senan's dwelling on Scatterry Island. With only the light from the fire to lead her, says the legend, Cannera walked upon the sea until she arrived on the island—a distance of more than two miles from shore. Senan welcomed her and advised her to make her home with a nun living on a neighboring island.

"This is not why I came," Cannera replied, "But that I may find hospitality with you on this island."

Senan protested: "Women cannot enter on this island."

"How can you say that?" inquired Cannera. "Christ came to redeem women no less than to redeem men. He suffered

for the sake of women as much as for the sake of men. Women as well as men can enter the heavenly kingdom. Why, then, should you not allow women to live on this island?"

"You are persistent," admitted Senan. So Senan changed his mind and allowed her to stay. After Cannera had received the Eucharist from him, she died immediately. At high water mark, Senan's fellow monks dug a trench on the edge of the shore and buried Saint Cannera. Her grave is identified by a flag off the island and is partially covered by the sea. Safely in heaven, Cannera could cause no more problems for Senan.

Cannera died around 530 A.D. According to custom, sailors invoke Cannera's intercession before embarking on sea voyages. Until just recently, seamen believed that pebbles from Scatterry Island protected the holder from shipwreck. January 28 is celebrated as Saint Cannera's feast day.

In order to understand the freshness of Cannera's assertion of mutuality and equality in Christ, it is helpful to have an understanding of the role of women in the first centuries of Christianity. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza's *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad, 1986) asserts that women held equal leadership roles and responsibilities in the early Church. The Gospel of Mark, for example, paints a positive picture of female disciples and praises women as true believers. "The unnamed woman who names Jesus with a prophetic sign-action in Mark's Gospel," observes Schussler Fiorenza, "is the paradigm for the true disciple.... This is a politically dangerous story. While Peter has confessed, without truly understanding it, 'you are the anointed one,' the woman anointing Jesus recognized clearly that Jesus' messiahship means suffering and death." Jesus affirms the woman's prophetic gesture for all time by saying, "Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the

society. She presents a paradigm of a strong and loving confrontation with male authority that goes to the heart of the matter: Are women created in the image of God or not? Did Christ die for women? In Christ, are women and men equal or not? Are women indeed *imago dei*?

Cannera spoke her truth directly to Senan. She had responded to God's call. She presented herself as an equal and partner, and this is how she expected to be treated. We will never know if Cannera and Senan would have founded a double monastery and worked harmoniously together for the Gospel as did some of the other Celtic saints. It is probably safe to assume that Scattery Island would never have been the same if the independent-minded Cannera lived there. Certainly, Elizabeth Johnson's description of the feminist agenda applies to the fifth century as much as it does to the twenty-first century: "Christian feminist thinking seeks a new wholeness, a new community of the mutuality of equals.... Mutuality is a form of relation marked by equivalence between persons. It involves a concomitant valuing of each other, a give-and-take according to each one's strengths and weaknesses, and a common regard marked by trust, affection, and respect for difference all this in contrast to competition, domination or assertions of superiority" (quoted in "Jesus and Feminism," Maureen McCormack, *Courage Newsletter*, Loretta Women's Network, Fall 2000).

Celebrating Saint Cannera's Gifts to Our Lives

Cannera is a soul friend and source of encouragement and empowerment. We hope that the glory of God's Presence that led Cannera will be a radiant light illuminating our steps in the journey toward full equality. More than ever, we need dedi-

whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her" (Mk 14:9).

The Christian community was portrayed in the Gospel of John as a community of friends and equals in which women like Mary of Magdala, Martha, and Mary of Bethany played prominent roles. It is clear, for example, from the Gospel of John and the Gospel of Luke that both writers experience a community in which women ministered as eucharistic leaders, preachers, and deacons. In Luke's church, well-to-do Hellenistic women even hosted the eucharistic celebrations in their homes. Luke describes Jesus' reproof of Martha and his affirmation of Mary.

Rose Sallberg Kam (in *Their Stories, Our Stories*, New York: Continuum, 1995) believes that this negative reaction to Martha did not reflect the attitude of Jesus to women whom he treated as disciples and equals. Kam points out, by way of explanation, that the Gospel of John was written around 100 A.D. when the official roles of women were becoming more limited. Yet, the Gospel of John also "places on Martha's lips a profession of faith in Jesus as Messiah that Mark 8:29 assigns to Peter. For the Johannine community, Martha is thus identified as holding no less than apostolic authority." It is no wonder, then, that for several centuries, debates continued to rage over the role of women at the Eucharist and in the Church. This debate leads us back to Cannera who asserted the egalitarian attitude reflected by Jesus and the early Christian communities.

Those who believe in the equality and partnership of women and men as demonstrated from the earliest days of Christianity would relate well to Cannera's story. This spunky, courageous Irish lady would be a great model for twenty-first century workers for equality and justice in Church and

cated advocates like our fifth-century sister, Cannera. In the following ritual, we celebrate Saint Cannera's saintly persistence.

Opening Prayer

Saint Cannera, may we be courageous trailblazers like you, unafraid to afflict the comfortable, name the sin of bias, and live the vision of radical equality at the heart of the Jesus-vision in the Gospels.

May we be advocates for all women and do all that we can to advance the cause of their equal status. With you, we dream a new vision of mutuality and partnership as we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Scripture

"At about three in the morning, Jesus came walking toward them on the lake. When the disciples saw Jesus walking on the water, they were terrified. 'It is a ghost!' they said, and in their fear, they began to cry out.

"Jesus hastened to reassure them: 'Don't worry, it's me! Don't be afraid!'

"Peter spoke up and said, 'If it is really you, tell me to come across the water.'

"'Come!' Jesus said.

"So Peter got out of the boat and began to walk on the water toward Jesus. But when he saw how strong the wind was, he became frightened. He began to sink, and cried out, 'Save me!'

"Jesus immediately stretched out his hand and caught Peter. 'You have so little faith!' Jesus said to him. 'Why did you doubt?'

"Once they had climbed into the boat, the wind died down.

Those who were in the boat showed great reverence, declaring to Jesus, 'You are indeed God's Own!'"

MATTHEW 14:25-33 (INCLUSIVE NEW TESTAMENT)

A Prayer Celebrating Courageous Women

- V. Cannera, as one gutsy Irish woman, you believed that women were also friends of Jesus, and you gave voice to your vision.
- R. May all who see us, see Jesus Christ.
- V. Cannera, accompanied by the fire of the Holy Spirit, you knew God was with you. You experienced God's glory in your vision. You insisted to Senan that you came to live in mutuality.
- R. May we see the glory of God in each person.
- V. Cannera, you knew that your experience revealed God. You did not return to your hermitage and pout when Senan rejected you. Rather, you hung in there and persistently made your case.
- R. May we speak the truth with love.
- V. Cannera, show us the way to Passionate Love. May we act as if our vision of the future is now a reality.
- R. May we experience the joy of the Risen One in our waking and sleeping, in our dreams and desires.

Now be silent and still. Be aware of God's dream for you. Let the heart of God speak to your soul. Is it time for you to "walk on water"? Are you called to be a "courageous" person in quest of some good?

Scripture

"But Jesus said, 'Let her alone. Why do you criticize her? She has done me a kindness. You will always have poor people among you, and you can do them good whenever you want, but you will not always have me. She has done what she could. She has anointed my body and is preparing it for burial. The truth is, wherever the Good News is proclaimed throughout the world, what she has done will be told in her memory.'"

MARK 14:6-9 (INCLUSIVE NEW TESTAMENT)

In Memory of Mentors

On a piece of paper, make a list of women who have been a special blessing in your life, women who have inspired you, women who have challenged injustice, women whom you wish to remember. You may wish to take a few minutes and write a special message to one of the women on your list, expressing your feelings of appreciation and offering a prayer of thanksgiving for them.

In Memory of Holy Women

From your list, chose one woman whose story you want to remember. If you are in a group, pass a candle around. The person who has the candle shares why she/he chose a certain woman. If the group knows beforehand that they will be sharing these stories, each person could bring pictures, symbols, mementoes to share with the group and place in a memory book. After sharing, the person then places the candle on the table. As each person puts a candle on the table, the group says together: "We will remember you. We will give thanks for your gifts to us."

Intercessions

- V. For ordinary women who open their hearts to others, we pray.
 R. We behold the image of your creation, O God.
- V. For women who work hard to nourish and nurture others, we pray.
 R. We behold the image of your creation, O God.
- V. For women who live as true partners and equals with men in Church and society, we pray.
 R. We behold the image of your creation, O God.
- V. For those like Cannera whom history forgot, and those like Senan whose virtue was remembered, we pray.
 R. We behold the image of your creation, O God.
- V. For those who are restructuring our world and our Church into a more just and inclusive family, we pray.
 R. We behold the image of your creation, O God.
- V. For women leaders especially (*name women for whom you want to pray*), we pray.
 R. We behold the image of your creation, O God.
- V. For women who minister in all walks of life, especially (*name women for whom you want to pray*), we pray.
 R. We behold the image of your creation, O God.

Closing Prayer

Saint Cannera, we remember you. You didn't take "no" for an answer. You knew that women were equal and that in Christ all are one. May we be strong and persistent in our work to lift the second-class status of