

# **My Journey in Carmel**

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*This article was published in the year 2000.*

My journey in Carmel began through personal contact with Carmelites. As a child - and later as a member of the Third Order - my mother was a regular visitor to Aylesford after the return of the friars fifty years ago. My own personal involvement with the Carmelite family began in 1997, when I went to university at York. The Catholic Chaplain on campus, Fr. Tony Lester, was a Carmelite living in community with several other friars. Tony's direction has challenged me to mature in ways I never envisaged.

## **A moment of conversion**

My decision to join the Carmelite Third Order was closely linked to a moment of conversion in my wider Christian life. I was brought up a Catholic and continued to practise as a teenager. However, like many churchgoers I often attended Mass out of habit, rather than because I really wanted to be nourished by God's word, sacrament and people.

It was on a student retreat, organised by Tony and Sr. Juanita of the Corpus Christi Carmelites, that I began to look afresh at some of the important questions about my faith. During the retreat, we meditated in front of an icon of Christ, considering Jesus's question to Peter; Who do people say that I am? I asked myself that question for the first time. Who is Jesus? Is he a real person for me or a distant concept? Do I believe this man is the Son of God? Does it actually matter whether I pray or not? What does it mean to go to church?

Answering these questions honestly, made me realise that I was not allowing Jesus a central part in my life. But I knew that I wanted to be His disciple and that it must be a serious and committed undertaking. My relationship with God changed. Instead of simply talking at Christ, I began to listen more to what he had to say to me, and to spend time just 'being' in silence.

*Lectio Divina* also became an important form of meditation in my life. Reflecting upon scripture, picking out particular phrases which spoke strongly to me, and then asking why those phrases should be significant was an illuminating process. Listening to God's word, I began to feel a yearning I had never experienced so strongly. I wanted to let myself be led by this man called Jesus. I felt shaken by the whole experience, yet calm and deeply loved by God at the same time.

## **Belonging to the Family**

It seems natural now that after the student retreat I thought about joining the Third Order. After all, the Carmelite spirit of prayer, fraternity and service are the Gospel values of the Jesus I had decided to follow. I was so bowled over by the Carmelite figures I had met - who seemed to be authentic witnesses and followers of Jesus - that I asked Tony if I could join. After a period of discernment, I was received into the Order in 1998 and made my Profession a year later. At twenty-one, I believe I must be the youngest member of the Order in the country!

In theory I am an isolated Carmelite, not part of a chapter. However I don't feel isolated at all. I am definitely part of the Carmelite family. Not only is there the Carmelite community in York, but the Discalced nuns at Thicket Priory down the road. I also relish the sense of fellowship in the Province as a whole and the fraternity of the wider world. One of my experiences as a student was to go on an exchange to the University of Rome, where I met the Prior General, Joseph Chalmers and ate at a restaurant run by the Donum Dei community! To me, the friendship and diversity of people are the most important and attractive gifts Carmel has to offer, where everyone feels a sense of acceptance and belonging.

### **Growth and grace**

One of the things that attracted me to the Carmelite charism was the people I saw living their everyday Christian lives. I used to think that being a Christian was about being terribly pious and doing 'holy things'. I learnt gradually that instead of walking with my head in the clouds, I should pay more attention to the world around me, because that is where God is. It's good to have my feet on God's good earth. I used to make a big effort to 'reach' a God on a white cloud far above me. I learnt from Carmelites I met that this image was quite wrong and that God had come down to reach me! That was a revelation - to know that God loves me immeasurably for who I am, not only for who I could be. God loves me not because of anything I can do, but because He can't do anything but love. I have learnt to 'let go, and let God' and allow God to be him- or even her-self instead of the God I make in my own image.

Becoming a member of the Carmelite Family has not been the solution to all my life's problems however. Simply wearing the scapular doesn't make it any easier to follow Jesus. Soon after my Carmelite reception, I went through a period of uncertainty. Not only did I question matters of faith, but I felt despondent about my relationships, my attitudes towards others and my own self-worth. Yet throughout this period of confusion, I held onto the belief that God was in the mess somewhere and that things would resolve themselves if I trusted in God and worked with Him. I am grateful to the Carmelite friends who helped me through this time. Looking back, I see that period as a time of growth and grace. And I had a lot of resources and experiences from other Carmelites to draw on; in particular, the poetry of John of the Cross and the reflections of St. Thérèse. One thing I learnt was that it's natural to ask questions and express fears and that sharing one's problems with others is not a sign of weakness but of strength. Being a Carmelite has helped me to be more fully myself - more aware of my humanity and my capacity for God.

### **Diverse and unique**

What I have discovered in the last few months is how diverse Carmelite spirituality is. Walking through life's journey in the footsteps of Elijah, guided by the *Rule of Saint Albert*, each person is encouraged to discover and nurture her or his own gifts, following the example of Our Lady, who - as our mother and sister - shows us what it means to respond to God's call. No one has to conform to a fixed concept of 'Carmelite-ness', because each Carmelite is unique. The original concept of Carmel - hermits gathered in a community - is an ideal arrangement, allowing individual growth supported by communal life.

Elijah was the first of many prophets in our family. I've been attracted to the Carmelites by the challenges they offer - by the questions which they are obliged to ask as Christians. For me, an exciting facet of our task as Carmelites is to be

prophets in our time. God still needs people to work with. Being a tertiary must be more than a social or pious thing. We have to be prophets speaking God's word in a world crying out for meaning, social justice and peace.

The calling to the spirituality of Carmel comes not from ourselves, but from God, and leads to God. Not everybody is meant to be a Carmelite. But because it is so diverse, many people feel they belong in the Carmelite family. It is not an Order made up solely of friars or nuns, but also of lay people. That is why I believe the Third Order has a special part to play in the development of the Carmelite family and why the laity are becoming increasingly aware of their rights and responsibilities within the Church at large. God is at work here. Many people today seek a spiritual element in their lives and many young people in particular want to commit themselves to Christ and the Church. But many do not have a vocation to the life of a consecrated religious. Being in the Third Order allows me to make a deep commitment to the Church through the vows of the Order, whilst maintaining the freedom to fulfil my potential as a lay person and a student. I think that Carmelite spirituality has a lot to offer young people. I would like to see us attracting more youth into the 'family' of Carmel. I was very pleased last December to meet with other young people in the Carmelite family, on a day of reflection organised by Fr. Brendan. I would like to ask your prayers for the growth and success of this group.

### **New paths, new hopes**

I think it is important as followers of Jesus never to take anything for granted, and to constantly review our opinions and practices. If we trust in God's Spirit to guide us, then we will find ourselves led into all sorts of places - some of which will be uncomfortable and even frightening. But Carmel gives us the strength and fellowship to tackle that. I have great hopes for the future of the wider Carmelite family. I think that this Jubilee Year allows us the opportunity to look again at the very roots of our spirituality and to plan for the future development of the Third Order. Personally, I believe that we need to develop our identity as a group of consecrated lay people. This may involve at some stage a lesser degree of dependence on the friars. They have guided and supported us well for many years and the First and Third Orders are closely bonded. But I feel we have the mandate to emerge more fully ourselves. Time will tell and the Lord will guide us if we let Him.

I graduated from York this summer, and am now looking for further direction in my life. I'm sure that God had a purpose in my coming to York, and making contact with the Carmelites. I trust He will continue to support me on the path up Carmel ahead. God bless and hold you, and may you be enjoying many of God's abundant blessings.