

Carmelite Spirituality

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The reflections that I wish to share with you are simply that, reflections, offered very simply with the hope that they might help you see with new eyes your charism, from within the experience of living it. I have used five main sources: *The Rule of St. Albert; Carmelite Constitutions, 1995*; the new publication, *RIVC, Carmelite Formation: A Journey of Transformation* (Rome, 2000); John Welch, O. Carm. *The Carmelite Way* (London, Gracewing, 1996); Wilfrid McGreal, O. Carm. *At the Fountain of Elijah* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1999). In addition I have used my own knowledge of you and others of your Order, as Carmelite men who live your charism so profoundly.

Carmelite spirituality is one of the richest gifts of the Spirit to the Church and has been the means of countless women and men down through the centuries reaching a great degree of holiness. It has many faces, enclosed religious women, lay women and men, men living community, saints and sinners. One of the most inclusive texts I have seen of any Order or Congregation is contained in your *Constitutions*.

This family includes ourselves
and our brothers of the Teresian Reform;
the women religious of both branches;
affiliated religious congregations;
the Third Orders Secular;
secular institutes;
individuals affiliated with the Order through the sacred scapular;
and those who by whatever title or bond are affiliated with the Order;
those movements which, though juridically not part of the Order,
seek inspiration and support from its spirituality;
and any man or woman who is drawn to the values of Carmel.
(C.28)

It opens out the gift/charism of the Order to an extraordinary degree. This inclusivity is all the more reason why it is vitally important that each member of the Order not only has a deep understanding of Carmelite Spirituality but also lives it, both individually and in community.

The heart of Carmelite spirituality with its main elements is spelt out at the beginning of your *Constitutions*. It involves:

- an intense search for God, in total adherence to Christ;
- finding expression in fraternal life and apostolic zeal. (C.3 and also C14)

The whole of Chapter II is concerned with the Charism of the Order. It states:

Carmelites live their life of allegiance to Christ through a commitment to seek the face of the living God (the contemplative dimension of life), through fraternity, and through service (*diakonia*) in the midst of the people. (C.14)

These three essential elements are then spelt out, contemplation, (16-18) fraternity,(19-20) in the midst of the people (21-24) Of their nature these elements are interchangeable, depending on the gifting of the Holy Spirit in particular circumstances. It is possible then to read:

Contemplative fraternity in the midst of the people
A fraternity that is contemplative in the midst of the people
In the midst of the people a contemplative fraternity.

The *Ratio* has developed these thoughts further and states:

The contemplative dimension is not merely one of the elements of our Charism (prayer, fraternity, service), it is the dynamic element that unifies them all. (Ratio 23)

The Constitutions tell us that the definition of the charism of the Order is found through the brothers being involved in a process of self-examination. (C.6) This is of particular interest, since it implies that the Carmelite charism is not something written and enshrined but lived in each person. This is as it should be, but it is rather unusual in that such a concept is expressed so clearly in the Constitutions. It implies that each person carries the responsibility both for personal growth and the development of the Carmelite charism.

The early Carmelites lived in small cells, likened to the cells of a beehive. (C7) 'They lived as God's bees', implying they were interlinked and in some way dependent on each other.

The distinctive features of the Carmelites are that they be:

- people who pray with perseverance (C.11)
- men who ponder the law of the Lord day and night in silence and solitude; (Rule 8 and C.11)
- so that the word of God might dwell in their hearts and be on their lips; (C 11)
- and this lived in fraternal communion (C.11)
- in the midst of the people (C14)

Here we note the importance of *Lectio divina*, a tradition rooted back in the hermit life on Mount Carmel and an essential dimension of your daily life. (C.20)

Essential also in reflecting on Carmelite spirituality is the summing up of the first part of the Constitutions (the end of Chapter II). Two characteristic traits: the Elijan tradition and the central place of Mary in Carmelite life, are brought to our particular attention. Elijah, the contemplative and mystic who, 'after a long and

wearisome journey, learned to read the new signs of God's presence': the prophet aflame with a passionate love of God, (C 26) filled with zeal. Mary, who is the Virgin of the new heart, of wise and contemplative listening, who kept and pondered in her heart, the events and words of the Lord. (C.27) Note too in this context the recent letter of John Paul II to the two Priors General (March 25, 2001), written for this Carmelite Marian Year.

Now we might explore a little further, what this Carmelite spirituality is which animates your charism and which you are asked to live. Studying the writings of Teresa of Jesus and John of the Cross as well as other Carmelite authors such as Titus Brandsma and Elizabeth of the Trinity, we find a very simple yet powerful approach to the spiritual life, one that is capable of supporting the person in growth to maturity.

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Found in the desert, in the hermit origins of the Order is the sense of profound abandonment of the person to the will of God (*vacare Deo*) that is being free for God. There is a rooting in scripture and what has recently taken once again such an important place, *Lectio divina*. The whole is a path of attentiveness to God needing a certain single-mindedness, purity of heart (*puritas cordis*). Carmel is a rugged place to be. It is for adults, not children or adolescents. It recognises that life begins deep in the heart, and therefore Carmel offers a fundamental call to conversion of heart, to transformation, which is in response to the invitation of the Presence of God found deep in the human person. All this demands solitude, silence and especially the ability to enter and face the strengths and weaknesses of the human heart. Within the Carmelite tradition it is understood that the person is confronted by the false self and false images of God.

If we accept God's invitation to begin this interior journey, we will of course meet with difficulties on the way because we will be brought face to face with ourselves. We will see ever more clearly the motives for our actions. We will see that sometimes even our best actions have selfish motives. This is very difficult to accept and this is why the spiritual journey is so difficult and why many would seem to turn back to a less challenging place. If however we but knew the gift God was offering us, we would continue our journey despite the painful revelations about ourselves which we were offered. On this journey we become less proud, less sure of our own virtue but more reliant on the mercy of God and more aware that all human beings are our brothers and sisters. (Address of Joseph Chalmers, O.Carm. to the Irish Provincial Chapter, 1997)

This is rather like Thomas Merton's use of the image of the dragons within. Self-knowledge is essential and as Teresa of Avila teaches us, this is true humility. There is no place for the false self. (For a full examination see John Welch, O.Carm., *The Carmelite Way*, London: Gracewing, 1996) There is no specific Carmelite method of prayer, but rather the encouragement to pray. Within this context each member of the Order is called to live.

Essentials of Carmelite Spirituality in relation to the Church

There is one particular question that I would like to address before asking you to reflect further on the issues that are important to you as a Province. At times I have noticed a certain confusion in the understanding of the Carmelite call to contemplation and the Contemplation in Action of the Ignatian tradition. Questions around this emerged again during the Carmelite symposium in Boars Hill in January this year that I had the privilege to attend. A large proportion of the developments in spiritual theology, teaching and spiritual direction over the past 30 years have been based on the Ignatian tradition. For example, many of you who have been able to participate in spiritual renewal programmes or long retreats will probably have followed them in centres of Ignatian spirituality. This development in itself has been excellent, but the Church needs to experience as fully as possible the variety of gifts of the Spirit, including the spirituality of Carmel. To clarify the reasons for my raising this question further I would like to note a few differences in approach to the spiritual/apostolic life.

Historically Ignatius (1491-1556) lived just before Teresa (1515-1582) and John (1542-1591) and their reform of Carmel. Ignatius' giftedness for the Church was the new profoundly apostolic way of life he lived. His spirituality is mainly based in the Carthusian tradition. He saw the need for men (and later influenced a vast number of women religious, particularly many of the great movement of the 19th century apostolic foundations in France) to be free to take the Good News to people who had never heard of Christ. Ignatius' insight was of a profoundly Trinitarian and Christ-centred spirituality, which he offered to those who joined him. His vision at Manresa, was an invitation to enter into the life of the Trinity. The other great vision of Ignatius, at La Storta, placed him and his followers, clearly with Christ, as his companions.

The formation of the early members of the Company of Jesus was in a strongly formed group of people on the same spiritual quest as Ignatius. The focus of their lives needed to be strong enough to support them, individually if necessary, to wherever they were needed and in various apostolic endeavours. Francis Xavier offers a good example of this.

The 30 days Spiritual Exercises were meant to be undertaken when someone was making a vital decision regarding the following of Christ and later to confirm the life that they were living. The Exercises were intended to be a support for life that the individual continued to touch back into throughout their life. The culmination of the Exercises the Contemplation to Attain Love, reflects the way in which people are called to go out, ready to discover God and God at work in each person and situation they meet. They go out as companions of Jesus. The very word 'contemplation' has a different nuance. In the Carmelite tradition it has usually been linked with silence, solitude and withdrawal. In the Ignatian tradition it is an act of thanksgiving and at the same time, a discovery of God in all things, wherever those 'all things' will be found.

With reference to community there is also a different nuance. In the Ignatian tradition community is always at the service of mission, and is essential to that extent. Hence the fact that there are men and women of the Ignatian tradition who rightly, for the sake of their apostolic life, live alone. Their formation has or should have created very strong bonds with other members of their community that make this type of apostolic life possible. However, for the Carmelite

community, fraternity has a very different place. It is actually at the very heart of your spirituality. While there is the hermit tradition that informs the life of each of you, there is an essentialness about fraternity. It is through fraternity that the Carmelites live their allegiance to Christ (c. 14) and also express their apostolic life. Again to quote the Prior General: '...one of the most unexpected ways that God chooses to come to us is through our brother with whom we live in community.' (Address as noted above, 1997)

I have made this brief *excursus* into looking at the Ignatian tradition, alongside that of the Carmelites in order to highlight differences rather than make comparisons. Because so much that is written about contemporary spirituality and religious life has a basis in Ignatian spirituality, it could happen that one might lose sight of the richness and importance of the more ancient Carmelite tradition. After all, it holds one of the greatest insights for the Church, into the contemplative life and the life of prayer. The two aspects of abandonment to God (*vacare Deo*) and single-mindedness, that is purity of heart (*puritas cordis*) shed new light on the whole question of discernment and are so necessary for our world today. They may perhaps be summed up in the question: where is your heart?

The Church needs the Carmelite tradition, and needs to see it lived in its variety of ways. It is for this reason that your desire to look again at Carmelite spirituality, at the *Ratio*, at the development of the human person, is essential for your reflection on the Province today and for the future. Such an evaluation is vital not only for yourselves, but also for the life of the Church. It is not for nothing that your Constitutions recommend that there should be a centre of spirituality in each of your Provinces and Regions. (c.68) I say this because of the fact that many of the Centres of study, spirituality and renewal that are available for people today come from the Ignatian tradition, as I have already mentioned. Excellent though this tradition is, it is vitally important for the Church that there should be a balance in spiritual theology from among the various traditions, hence it is important that you, as Carmelites, profoundly continue to live a life of prayer, sharing your own spiritual life with others and your insights regarding the meaning of the contemplative life. In one sense every community and indeed every individual should be a centre of Carmelite spirituality for other people. Clearly how this is worked out depends on yourselves. But the importance of your own living of the contemplative life in fraternity and service in the midst of the people is evident.

Quoting again from the *Ratio*, 'The contemplative dimension is not merely one of the elements of our charism (prayer, fraternity, service) it is the dynamic element which unifies them all. (*Ratio* 23) St. John of the Cross wrote: 'Contemplation is nothing else than a secret and peaceful and loving inflow of God, which if not hampered, fires the soul in the spirit of love'. (*Night* 1:10,6) Contemplation is not a reward for virtue, but the means of living a life of prayer, fraternity and service. Contemplation actually determines the quality of Carmelite life in all its aspects.

Günter Benker recently wrote: 'Contemplation is the most essential and basic value of our vocation because it means nothing less than entrusting ourselves in any situation of our life to the unlimited love of the true God without clinging to any other means of security, so that He may heal our wounds, purify our

motivations, transform our feelings and our thinking according to the principles of His kingdom...' (G. Benker, O.Carm., *Contemplation - the heart of the Carmelite charism*, p.1)

Prayer, fraternity, service, are integral to your life, to your contemplative life (C92) Within this context the type of apostolic work you undertake both individually and as community, are discerned. You are gifted as an Order in that you are offered clear guidelines for the discernment of apostolic mission. These guidelines are:

- a life of brotherhood and prayer in the midst of the people;
- a response to the needs of the local and universal Church;
- a preferential option for the poor and marginalized;
- a special attention to issues concerning women;
- a commitment to justice and peace;
- a care for those who show an interest in the spirit, the spiritual heritage, and the life of Carmel. (C.93)

It is also essential that you remember that your goal as an Order is to promote the search for God and the life of prayer (C 95). Carmelites are to make themselves available to accompany those who genuinely desire to experience the transcendent in their lives or who wish to share their experience of God. (C 96) This is only possible when you yourselves risk, each day, entering the inner journey of contemplation, the journey of transformation.

Through this process, when we come to see reality with God's eyes,
our attitude towards the world is transformed
according to his love,
and the contemplation of the loving presence of God
will be seen in our lives of fraternity and of service. (c.15)

And so I ask you again, as you move forward in your reflection during these days
'Where is your heart?'