

Carmelite Beatitudes

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Homily for Sister Agnes Kyungee of Jesus' First Profession
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This morning as we witness Agnes' profession I marvel at the extraordinary journey she has traveled to reach the land of Carmel and all that has happened to bring her from South Korea to our community in Baltimore. Is it any wonder she wants to proclaim in the first reading that it is only by God's loving kindness she has been given a ministry with us and a share in our communal dream so wondrously expressed by Paul: 'For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness", who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.' (2 Cor 4:6).

The glory of God, expressed in the face of Jesus: I cannot imagine a more succinct and profound expression of the desire that marks us as Carmelites. That Agnes has chosen this reading for her profession shows not only how deeply she has grown into her Carmelite identity in three short years but also how this desire continues to draw her forward. Her ability to move into the unknown, the unimaginable, and the unfamiliar, anchored always by the stability and strength of her relationship with Jesus, will always, I believe, be the hallmark of Agnes' particular giftedness to live this life.

Encapsulated here are two themes that Carmelites have always sought to hold in delicate tension and beautiful balance: first, passion for God – burning intensely, manifesting itself as vision, dream, prophecy, radical newness; and then, passion for God's people – coming to life as relationship, grounded in the concrete compassionate humanity of Jesus, which Agnes has invoked with her choice of the Beatitudes as today's Gospel. I want to explore these two themes for Agnes and for all of us today, to elucidate what our contemporary Carmelite spirituality can bring to them.

The passion for God – the glory of God – is expressed in one of our most ancient Carmelite texts as part of the two-fold aim of Carmel, as many of you have heard us say before: "to taste even in this life the power of the divine presence and the sweetness of heavenly glory." This is a passion for union with God, for no less than our very deification, as we take on the beauty of our Beloved One, Jesus Christ. Agnes has spoken to me of how she felt this desire, this passion, unfold within her and awaken to new depths during our formation class study of John of the Cross' *Living Flame of Love*. Such a desire may sound romantic, filled with light and consolation, but anyone who has truly entered into the spiritual journey knows better – don't we(!). Much ado was made recently by the disclosure that Mother Teresa of Calcutta experienced intense spiritual darkness for years. I was amazed to hear this pronouncement made as if her experience were exceptional, not a pattern to be found among the saints, possibly even detracting from her holiness. Our society seems to have a hagiographic need to believe that sanctity is, at least usually, accompanied by ecstatic consolation. The truth is that the ecstasy of our time is often found in silence and dispossession. The passionate desire for God is one

whose fulfillment exacts the most radical undoing of self; it is a journey marked by true joy but also by darkness and obscurity; it is a commitment that asks everything, and takes all. This is the nature, Agnes, of the commitment you make today.

Purification is very difficult, deeply painful, as all of our newer members have expressed to me at one time or another. It is only the graced intensity of one's desire for God and union, for transformation, that allows a person to stay this course. What is happening in the darkness, John of the Cross tells us, is that we are being radically opened to encounter the God who is beyond the limits of our expectations, beyond our constrained imaginings, not defined by our memories or held by our boundaries. We are brought to silence so that we might truly hope, brought to emptiness so that we might be filled, so that we might transcend our very selves. This is why the contemplative life moves into vision and the liminal experience of prophetic imagination, as the mystics know. But our visions and locutions are not manifest in the same way as those of 16th century Teresa of Avila (our foundress/reformer). Today our visions and locutions are the witness we make from living on the edge of the horizon. "Vision" for us is seeing over the horizon; "locutions" are hearing the call forward, for ourselves and others, into the new consciousness that awaits us there, into new ways of being and seeing.

This horizon is one that Agnes has befriended. The movement she had to make to arrive here was a massive leap out of herself, from the theology and life of a relatively conservative Korean Benedictine monastery to life on the cutting edge, pressing the boundaries of ecclesial and societal understanding. In this passage, Agnes foreshadowed the very pattern of prayer development that marks every Carmelite life. She was already living into the practical repercussions of her passionate desire for God. This is not to say that her past is left behind or made irrelevant – in fact, to the contrary, she is called to weave a creative synthesis of all her experience – this is something she uniquely has to offer us, to join her heritage with this culture, in this time and place, indeed to help us transcend our boundaries.

The defining characteristics of a Carmelite's passion for God flow over into her passion for God's people, as it emerges from relationship with Jesus, our second theme. Carmelite spirituality is first and foremost Christ-centered, friendship with Jesus, as Agnes emphasized by her selection for the Second Reading, taken from Teresa's autobiography. This is why the question of Jesus, "Who do you say that I am," resounds relentlessly within us throughout our lifetime. Informed by and imbued with the vision of our contemplative experience, Carmelites are called to interpret Jesus' life and death continually (again and again) through the hermeneutic of the vision of God's glory: that is, through radical openness, transforming darkness and prophetic imagination. If prayer teaches us anything, it is that God is over the horizon, beyond the edge of our understanding. Carmelites err if they are just "pious" people.

It should not be thought strange, then, that we understand, reach out to and stand with theologians who are challenged for their Christology on the edge, on the margins. I think most recently of Roger Haight, Jacques Dupuis, and Jon Sobrino (and earlier women theologians). Their images (or interpretations) of Jesus present us with challenge, question, darkness, doubt, loss, undoing: a healthy deconstruction that wants to clear away the limits of expectation so that a truer understanding can emerge for our time. These are two sides of one coin – they see Christ as theologians and we as contemplatives, but our vision is mutually confirming. For example, the question and doubt articulated by the theologian finds a parallel in the contemplative's experience when to all appearances Christ recedes from consciousness and loses significance, God is beyond reach, and belief is threatened. And the contemplative's experience of memory's deconstruction and darkness in prayer finds expression for theologians in a courageous attempt to articulate a new image or interpretation of Jesus, and in the silence into which they are thrust by the withering assaults against their efforts.

And so the contemplative's relationship with Jesus is often challenging and disturbing; it is not static or complacent, it changes profoundly and it often questions the prevailing world view, the existing order – as Jesus himself did. All this we bring to our understanding of the Beatitudes as the concrete expression of how relationship with Jesus flows into our world in service, compassion and love. Let us hear the Beatitudes, then, with new ears, in a Carmelite way.

To be poor in spirit is to suffer the darkness of prayer development – John of the Cross' dark night of spirit, which is experienced as such a painful dispossession of soul and loss of God.

To mourn is to carry the sorrow and burden of our world's pain as one's own, in one's very heart. It is solidarity in its most profound meaning. It is the moment, Agnes, that you can say, I, too, am the mother of the disappeared and slaughtered; I too am the victim of human trafficking and war; and the perpetrator. On Good Friday, truly this is MY body.

To be meek is to let yourself be led by God without fighting for a return to what was comfortable and consoling. For a Carmelite, meekness often means learning to love the darkness.

To hunger and thirst for righteousness is to live out the passion for God's people by giving every person their place, through a silence that does not allow the self to disturb the right ordering of relationships. As our *Rule* says, silence is the service of justice. We are to leave an empty space into which the other may step.

To be merciful is to sit at the table of sinners, to invoke an image from St. Thérèse. Agnes, it is to see yourself as among all the broken of the world, to claim them as your own and yourself as one of them, and therein to find true compassion – and the capacity not only to be graced by union with God, but also to bring along to God all the others among whom you sit.

To be pure in heart – this is the other of the two-fold aim of Carmel – is to desire the true God, not one that I form according to my own expectations, life experience and need. To be pure in heart is to be undivided and undistracted by our own constructions, but open to the mystery of God. This is why the pure of heart can see God.

To be a peacemaker is to live in a community of non-violence, to reject retaliation and commit to reconciliation even in the smallest interactions of ordinary life. It is to turn from brutal competition because you know by experience the intrinsic interconnectedness of all people and all creation, and our responsibility within this creation. Indeed, the non-violence and mutual interdependence lived by the first community of hermits on Mount Carmel make this call to be a peacemaker central to our charism. Agnes, when we fail in this, we truly fail.

To be persecuted for righteousness sake, to be assaulted and reviled for the sake of Jesus: this brings us back to living on the edge and taking controversial positions. Agnes, I challenge you to dare to imagine the unimaginable, the mystery, and not be intimidated by the fear of criticism from those who want to rest in the security of unchallenged assumptions. Do not look for persecution, but do not shy away from it by cowardice or flight – whether in the material world or in prayer, even if you might experience doubt and darkness, or one day even the spectre of atheism. Stand and witness!

And so, Agnes, I have prepared for you these Carmelite Beatitudes:

Blessed are those who journey through darkness, for they shall find light and the great joy of union with God.

Blessed are they who hold the sorrows of the world in their heart's prayer, for they shall open the way for humanity's glorious transformation.

Blessed are those who learn to love the trials of the spiritual journey, for they shall be purified.

Blessed are those whose silence allows a place for the "other", for they will receive the blessings of human relationship and learn to see all things in God.

Blessed are those who sit at the table of sinners, for they shall be redeemed and given the power to redeem.

Blessed are those who open themselves singularly to the fathomless mystery of the true God, for they shall look on the beauty of God's face.

Blessed are those who choose the way of non-violence and recognize the mutual interdependence of all creation, for they shall be given a new consciousness fit for the future.

Blessed are you who have the courage to leave the boundaries of your experience, and to suffer pain, rejection and isolation from living on the prophetic edge. Rejoice and be glad, for you shall light a path to eternal life.

For Agnes, the heart of these Beatitudes, the Sermon on the Mount, is to take Jesus' mission as her own. It is the stipulation of God's covenant with her – with all of us, a covenant background beautifully expressed in the words of Hosea: *I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you in right and in justice, in love and in mercy, I will betroth you in fidelity, and you shall know the Lord.* Agnes, as this betrothal comes to its first fulfilment today, I hope that these Carmelite Beatitudes that I am giving you will accompany and encourage your journey, for all who learn to live out this covenant shall truly see God.