

## **Solitude in Carmel's Tradition**

*Elizabeth Ruth Obbard, Carmelite Solitary*

*All we who wear the holy habit of the Carmelites are called to prayer and contemplation. This was the object of our Order, to this lineage we belong. Our holy fathers of Mount Carmel sought in perfect solitude and utter contempt of the world for this treasure, this precious pearl of which we speak, and we are their descendants.*

So wrote Teresa of Avila in the Interior Castle, as she bade her sisters remember the beginnings of the Carmelite Order. The first hermits on the holy mountain had sought a life of prayer and solitude, and all who would look to them as their forebears must also be people who learn to love and to live in solitude, for 'to accustom ourselves to solitude is a great help to prayer' as she writes elsewhere, and since we are called to pray 'we must learn to like what promotes it.'

Solitude is not loneliness, although loneliness may be one of the components of the discipline along the way. Solitude is a spiritual way of being that has links with the desert experience of Israel, and the desert experience each one of us must come to grips with as we walk the path of growing intimacy with God.

So much in today's world militates against being alone. Everywhere there in music, noise, talk. These are not wrong, but they can deflect us from facing God and ourselves. To do this in earnest we need a certain amount of quiet. The ability to be alone, without constant distraction, is a sign of maturity. It doesn't happen in a day; like all things the love of solitude takes time to develop, but in Carmelite spirituality it is seen as an essential component of the love of God.

To be alone with the one we love is the way a relationship grows. 'Lovers must have solitude, a heart to heart lasting day and night' sang St. Thérèse in her poem *Living on Love*. Thérèse writes of Carmel as the desert where she felt God was waiting for her, and the Church uses for her feast the text from Deuteronomy that speaks of Israel's desert sojourn as the time of testing, when God carried his people, caring for them as the eagle cares for her brood in the crevices of rock, enabling them to fly under her guidance. (Deut. 32:10-14) A deep hunger for God and the experience of his love permeated every aspect of Thérèse' life. It enabled her to take responsibilities for her choices and to find God at each moment. Whether she was with others or alone in her cell she wanted only to 'please Jesus'.

Not every Carmelite is called to the enclosed life, or the life of a hermit in actual solitude, but everyone who is linked to the Order must live in ways that welcome elements of silence and aloneness as components of daily living. Accepting moments of quiet as opportunities to turn to the Lord as our companion and friend is one way of showing a desire to spend time with him and to choose him above all the other things that clamour for our attention. Such times may be when on a journey, waiting for a bus, doing the housework, as well as prayerful moments in church or countryside. Gradually our times of silent waiting upon God will not seem barren; they will turn into a garden of solitude, where the desert blossoms (Is 35:1-2).

Today's hermits are found in high rise flats, in semis, in hospital wards, in old people's homes, as well as in remote places. Wherever we turn to God, wherever and however we choose him in the opportunities that come our way, we are embracing solitude as a place where he can 'speak to our hearts'. (Hos. 2:14)

Carmel is not so much an actual mountain as an interior disposition within the soul that is ready for moments in which to encounter the living God. John of the Cross, that unsurpassed lover, saw that solitude is the ambience in which we prove our love. Conversely, it is in solitude that God has the chance to prove his love for us, for 'inasmuch as the soul has desired to be alone, far away for his sake from all created things, [the Lord] has been enamoured of its loneliness, has taken care of it, held it in his arms, fed it with all good things and guided it to the deep things of God'.

*In solitude she lived,  
And in solitude she built her nest,  
And in solitude alone  
Has the Beloved guided her.  
In solitude also wounded her with love.*

(Spiritual Canticle 35)