

## **Feasting on God's Word**

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I recently returned from a thirty-six-hour visit to "Our Lady's house in Kent". Aylesford was graced with a weekend of almost uninterrupted winter sunshine and the waterfowl on and around the pond were swaggering in their best breeding plumage.

Third Order members from several Chapters gathered for a retreat (March 2002) which was directed by Fr. Michael Cox, O.Carm. who was ordained only a year ago, on the Feast of the Presentation, by the Bishop of Nottingham. With youthful wisdom, Fr. Michael chose as his theme: 'Nourished by Word and Sacrament' and his guidance was informed, clear and gentle.

Fr. Michael spoke of the value of "wasting time with God". In today's world, more than ever, we seek and expect instant results but the life of prayer is not like that. The word of God seeps slowly and silently into our lives and our attitude to it must be like Mary's, pondering it with a pure heart, and, like Elijah, listening to it in stillness.

### **Praying with Scripture**

We need to read, study and pray with Scripture, in other words to use *Lectio divina*. Father Michael spoke of the use of Scripture made by the poor and uneducated who see the Scriptures in terms of the history of God's people and relate it directly to their lives. They practise *Lectio divina* quite naturally.

Father Michael described the four stages of *Lectio divina* as taught by Hugh of St. Victor in the 12th Century. Of the sequence - *lectio, meditatio, oratio* and *contemplatio* - *oratio* is always flow from the heart to the greater glory of God. The following stage, *contemplatio*, is a point at which God may choose to respond. It is out of our hands and in God's; it is for us simply to make space for a possible response (*vacare Deo*). *Lectio divina* can shake us out of our complacency, shattering our plans and compelling us to consent to God's plans for us. We are challenged to cast off into uncharted waters.

There is a fifth stage in the *Lectio* sequence - *operatio* - when, having seen and judged, we are called to act. This is how *Lectio* is often practised, instinctively, in simpler communities. This stage falls outside the formal prayer time but forms an integral part of it.

Fr. Michael spoke of the flexibility of the *Lectio* sequence, of how, as individuals, we may move back and forth through the stages, returning to *lectio* as often as we need to re-focus. Where *Lectio divina* is practised in groups, it is necessarily more likely to be followed sequentially but there is gain in the added richness of the sharing.

### **Becoming still**

In other Christian traditions, methods of Scripture study may be more analytical, comprising research into dating, authorship, contemporary cultural influences and other factors. The market is flooded with commentaries if we are interested in such an approach. The Carmelite way is to be STILL with Scripture. Teresa of

Jesus and Thérèse both had limited access to the Scriptures, using only what was in their breviaries, but they made the most of the little they had. Carmelites have always gravitated towards the Psalms which, as we know, encompass the whole range of human experience and emotion.

Fr. Michael made some interesting comments on the use of Scripture in the Early Church, how the Psalms were introduced and used more and more to counter certain heresies and showing how Scripture foretells Christ and is also Christ's prayer. The *Glory be...* was prescribed at the end of Psalms by the time of St. Benedict (Sixth Century) to emphasize that the object of all praise is the Trinity.

### **The Prayer of the Church**

With the reform of the liturgy under Pope Paul VI the *Divine Office* was amended to become *The Prayer of the Church*, as we know it. With change to the vernacular, editing and some appropriate omissions, the *Office* became more accessible to all and the whole Church is now encouraged to use it.

### **A rich experience**

Father Michael spent one session demonstrating in practice with us the use of *Lectio divina*. I found this of special value and, although we were not attuned to sharing at the stage of *meditatio* (this, I imagine, takes time and the development of confidence) it was clear that this could be a rich source of sharing in prayer in any group willing to make the effort to try this ancient and very "Carmelite" method of prayer.

Many Lay Carmelites may already be using *Lectio divina*, knowingly or unknowingly, and I suppose I have done so myself at times without recognizing it by name but Fr. Michael gave me a clearer understanding of this exciting method of prayer which, in God's grace, I hope to pursue.