

Mary the Contemplative: A Biblical Perspective

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Carmelites have always considered Mary as their model in the following of Christ. As early as the fourteenth century, the English Carmelite John Baconthorpe wrote a commentary on the Carmelite rule in which he sustains that Carmel is Marian because the Carmelite way, as proposed in our rule, was precisely the spiritual path followed by Mary. Baconthorpe bases his commentary on the biblical scholarship of his time and on stories taken from the apocryphal gospels that in his day were held to be historically true. Some of his considerations are still convincing to the contemporary reader, others seem far-fetched. But the principle underlying his commentary remains true. Carmelites have always believed that their way of life mirrors that of Mary. It was for this reason that they came to regard her as their sister, calling her rather boldly "the Carmelite Virgin".

I believe that it is possible, even while adhering to contemporary scholarly interpretation of the Gospels, to draw a spiritual portrait of Mary that corresponds very faithfully to the Carmelite way as expressed in our rule. I will concentrate on one characteristic that is admittedly not the only Marian trait presented to us in the Gospels and not even the only value present in our rule. Others may certainly follow different paths in tracing a Carmelite portrait of Mary, but I believe that this is a very promising track to tread: Mary as the one who listens to the Word.

It is Luke who brings out this aspect of Mary's spirituality. In chapter 8, Luke has the parable of the sower. When Jesus explains it to his disciples, he says that the seed that fell in the good soil "are the ones, who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance" (8, 15). Then he goes on to tell the disciples to "pay attention to how to listen" (8, 18). At this point, someone tells Jesus that his mother and brothers came to see him. Jesus immediately replies, "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it" (8, 21). Mary and the other relatives of Jesus are here put forward as examples of the seed that fell on good soil. Jesus insists again on this when, as Luke narrates in 11, 27-28, a woman in the crowd praised his mother. In replying, Jesus pointed out that true blessedness lies not in his mother's physical relationship with him, but rather in her hearing God's word and obeying it.

This is totally in line with Luke's overall presentation of Mary. From the very start he presents her listening to God's word and consenting to it in the annunciation, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (1, 38). Elizabeth then praises her for believing the word that was spoken to her (1, 45).

Later in his infancy narrative, Luke has two annotations of particular importance in this regard. After the shepherds' visit, he says that "Mary kept all these words and pondered them in her heart" (2, 19), and after the finding of Jesus in the temple, at the very end of the infancy narrative, Luke notes, "His mother retained all these things in her heart" (2,51).

In biblical spirituality a great emphasis is laid on listening and remembering. In the book of Deuteronomy Moses exhorts the Israelites: "Take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life" (4, 9). God's works that the biblical authors ask the people to remember are creation, the exodus from Egypt and the other interventions of God in the history of his people. These are works that manifest God's wisdom and those who ponder them become consequently wise. They start seeing things as God sees them. Moreover, considering God's past actions, one learns how to respond to God who is still at work in the life of his people.

Mary was Jewish. She was brought up in this spirituality of listening and keeping in mind. What did Mary retain in her heart? Luke tells us that she kept in her heart "all the words" of the shepherds who referred what the angel had told them about the child (2, 18-19). Later, after recounting Jesus' response to Mary and Joseph when they found him in the temple and how he then followed them obediently to Nazareth, Luke says that Mary "retained all these things".

So Luke pictures Mary keeping in mind words and deeds relating to the mission of Jesus and pointing to his future. It is clearly not just remembrance, the keeping in mind of recollections from Jesus' infancy to treasure them nostalgically. It is keeping in mind mysterious words, strange deeds and trying to figure out their significance. This is precisely the meaning of the Greek verb that we translate as "ponder". It is *synballein* in Greek, a compound word made up of *syn*, meaning "with", and *ballein*, meaning "to throw". *Synballein* then, from which our word "symbol" derives, means to throw together, to put together, to combine various things.

In our case, Mary is putting together what she hears Jesus saying and what others say about him with the message of Gabriel when he announced his conception to her and with the words of Scripture. Thus she followed him day by day, even as she took care of him and educated him with a mother's love, trying to discover who her son really was. Because as Luke points out, when he narrates how she found Jesus in the temple and what he told her, Mary did not understand his words (2, 50). We may assume that there were other events and words that she did not understand as well. At the presentation at the temple, Luke says that Mary and Joseph were amazed at what Simeon said about Jesus (2,33).

Mary's life was a pilgrimage of faith, just like ours. She did not see things clearly from the beginning, but she had to learn how to read the signs that God was giving her. Her eyes and ears wide open, Mary was careful not to lose anything, but she retained everything in her heart. In the silence of her inner life she kept pondering everything, putting things together, to discover ever more fully who Jesus was. This was particularly important for her. The more she understood Jesus, the more she understood herself and her mission, since as from the moment she had said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (1, 38), her life became interwoven with his.

In biblical spirituality, people are asked to keep in mind God's works so as to keep steadfast when their faith is put to the test. When everything shows that God is far and silent, the remembrance of his past interventions helps them to continue to believe that this time also God will stand by his word. Likewise,

Mary's attitude of keeping everything in her heart and pondering it, prepared her for the test of Jesus' rejection by his people that reached its climax at his death on the cross. As Simeon had foretold her, a sword would pierce Mary's soul also (2, 35). But Mary kept the faith and became part of the first Christian community of Jerusalem (cf. Acts 1, 14). The attitude of pondering everything in her heart, which had characterised her pilgrimage of faith, could not but help the early Christian community to delve ever more deeply into the mystery of Christ.

Does this spiritual portrait of Mary find an echo in the Carmelite way? It certainly does. Our Order was founded in the beginning of the thirteenth century as a community of hermit-brothers focused on the Word of God. In fact, the main occupation that Albert of Jerusalem, the author of our rule, envisages for Carmelites is that each "remains in his cell day and night pondering the Law of the Lord and keeping watch in prayer". Here Albert is quoting Psalm 1, 2. The psalm is a blessing of the righteous person. It describes two opposite "ways", the way of the righteous and the way of the sinner. The sinner associates with scoffers and follows the advice of the wicked, whereas the righteous finds "his delight in the Law of the Lord, and on his Law he meditates day and night". The Law (Torah) here as elsewhere in the Bible does not stand simply for precepts and commandments, but is synonymous with divine revelation, God's Word. The holy person is the one who is familiar with the Word of God, seeking in it a sure guide so that he can say, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Ps 119, 105). The Hebrew verb *hagah* which is used here and which is translated as "meditate" or "ponder", indicates reading in a low voice, murmuring. It is used in relation both to the Torah (Josh 1, 8) and to God's works (Ps. 77, 12; 143, 5). It means murmuring and repeating to oneself the Torah or God's works with the intention of keeping them in mind so as to live by them. This is very close to the Lucan picture of Mary pondering everything in her heart.

In Albert's age, *meditantes* (meditating, pondering) had a similar meaning. It was not the mental exercise that we call "meditation", the type of prayer proposed for example by St Ignatius of Loyola in his Spiritual Exercises. It was the repetitive reading, aloud, of Scripture, until the Word was learnt by heart and got to the centre of the heart. There it becomes prayer, a heart to heart dialogue with God. The classical image for meditation is rumination: you keep chewing the words of Scripture just like the cows do with the food, in order to "bring out the hidden truth of the text" (Guigo the Carthusian). As Augustine says, "The person who hears but then forgets out of negligence is similar to one who swallows what one has heard.... The person who meditates the Law of the Lord day and night is similar to one who chews and savours the word with the palate of the heart" (Enarrationes in Psalmos, Sermo 149; PL 38, 801). Repetition of each phrase, pondering every single word to assimilate the deeper meaning of the text: this was meditation in medieval monastic circles and this how Albert understood it. It is an exercise of the mouth, which murmurs the words, of the memory, which tries to fix them, of the intellect, which strives to understand them, and of the will, which desires to put them into practice.

Nourished by Scripture in this way, it comes natural for the Carmelite to be fortified by reverent reflections or holy thoughts as the rule exhorts him, for the Scriptures "dwell abundantly in his mouth and heart". In this phrase we have a vivid, almost plastic, description of what Albert orders earlier when he says, "each is to remain in his cell, day and night pondering the Law of the Lord". This is what meditation meant for Albert and the first generations of Carmelites: that

"the Word of God dwells abundantly in your mouth and heart". You can almost see the hermit-brothers in their cells, mumbling the words of Scripture and savouring them in their hearts. This practice of meditating assiduously the Word of God has a very specific goal. God's Word is above all the revelation of his will. Therefore the aim of having it in one's mouth and heart is that "whatever you have to do be done according to the Word of the Lord", as the rule says.

Perhaps the challenge for us Carmelites today is that we become more aware that God's Word is not only contained in the Scriptures. God continues to speak to us in the great and small events of our world and in our everyday life. It was precisely there that Mary encountered God's word as she pondered on what was happening around her in the life of her Son.

Yes, Baconthorpe was right. The Carmelite way is truly Marian. Following her, Carmelites live by the Word of God. They listen to it, believe it, receive it, ponder it and strive to accomplish it.