

# **The Carmelite Tradition**

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## **The Searching Heart**

The Carmelite tradition begins in searching hearts. "Where have you hidden, beloved?" writes the Carmelite poet and mystic, John of the Cross. "You fled like the stag after wounding me." (The Spiritual Canticle stanza 1) We fragile humans have an aching heart, a hunger, a desire which we seek to nourish and fulfill. Chasing after our desires in an effort to find happiness and peace, we live fragmented and dissipated lives. We are compulsive about our search, and we compulsively cling to what promises relief.

Our restlessness makes us dissatisfied with our lives. "I wanted to live...but I had no one to give me life..." wrote the Carmelite reformer Teresa of Avila. For many people, the fire at the core of their lives has been poorly tended. We learn to speak with others' voices and see with others' eyes, to the neglect of our own voice and eyes. We often become puppets and functionaries, wasting away, victimized by over-domestication. John of the Cross complained about his ghostly existence, "How do you endure O life, not living where you live...?" (Canticle, 8)

We have a vague idea that somehow God is the answer to our longing. At least we have been told so, and we want to believe. But who is this God? Where is this God?

The Carmelite tradition speaks to those who long to be apart, to separate from a smothering existence. The tradition offers the lure of wilderness, mountain retreat, vast expanses of desert. In solitude, in a place apart, we searchers hope to hear our heart's desires more clearly, to reassess life, to dream, to be nourished by hidden springs, to meet the One whom others speak of with great assurance. Those who are drawn by the Carmelite tradition are often pilgrims to places unknown, trusting the testimony of others who have taken the same ancient path.

## **The First Carmelites**

The first group of people to be called Carmelites made such a journey to a place apart. When history first takes notice of them, they are a group of men living in a valley cut into the ridge of Mount Carmel in Palestine. Arriving just before the turn of the thirteenth century, they had clustered together in caves and huts to live an isolated existence. We do not know their names, nor what precipitated their coming to this remote place. The reasons for such a radical life were probably as numerous as the number of men. Usually such a radical shift in life is not the result of an unpressured decision. In their home countries they may have encountered deep disappointments, personal losses, estrangements of one kind or another. Their decision to come to this mountain may have been the result of years of dealing with slow-healing scars, or gnawing guilt, or the unquenchable desire for a saner life. Perhaps a deep faith drove them to live in a holy place where God might be met more simply. Some of the men may have come from other locales in Palestine which were now unsafe because of Crusader and Moslem warfare. For whatever reason, these westerners from European countries made a pilgrimage to the periphery of society and the church. They

became hermits, living where Jesus lived, knights in service of their liege Lord. They pledged to live in allegiance to Jesus Christ.

We may not know their personal reasons for coming into the wadi on Mount Carmel, but we do know the appeal of Mount Carmel itself. This mountain ridge was the scene of a great contest between prophets of a false god, Baal, and the prophet Elijah, champion of Israel's God, Yahweh. This contest provided an underlying theme for Carmelite spirituality: in which God will we place our trust? On this mountain, and in the confines of this wadi, the first Carmelites took their stand on behalf of the God of Elijah and Jesus.

Crusaders and Moslems fought around them for control of the Holy Land. Within the wadi, the men put on the armor of faith and opened their hearts and minds to an inner warfare. They opened themselves to the full force of their desires. They reflected on their lives. They ruminated on scripture, rehearsing its lines throughout the day. Silence pervaded the valley, as they kept guard against the demons, and listened for the approach of a merciful God.

This desert existence became a key theme in the Carmelite tradition. Carmelites continually described being led by the Spirit into a desert place. In the desert life is met on stark terms; one either succumbs, or finds hidden sources of new life. When lived in, and carefully tended, the desert became a garden, verdant with life.

Those who come to the Carmelite tradition are often people who have been thrown into the desert, who have had to face life on stark terms, who found nourishment and support where none was expected, who no longer fear being in an isolated, vulnerable place, and who, on the contrary, want to go deeper into the desert to find the One who awaits them. "And then we will go on to the high caverns in the rock...." (Canticle, 37)

### **Life with Others**

A hermit rarely lives entirely alone. As an early church writer observed, "If I live alone, whose feet do I wash? If I live alone, compared with whom am I the least?" Medieval hermits often lived with others in communities of solitude. The early Carmelites clustered together, much as the first Christian communities described in the Acts of the Apostles: "They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers." (Acts 2:42) The first Carmelites lived in proximity to one another, and took responsibility for one another. When they asked Albert the Patriarch of Jerusalem to draw up their way of life in a Rule, the relationships among themselves and with their leader, the prior, played an important part. They are reminded to celebrate the Eucharist together each day in an oratory located in the midst of the cells. They are told to gather regularly on a weekly basis to correct and encourage one another. They are to elect and reverence a prior, and he is to see to the needs of each, according to their individual situations. What they owned, they owned together. These independent hermits were encouraged, eventually, to pray together and take their meals together. The fraternity dimension of Carmel strengthened over the first decades of Carmel's existence.

The contemplative prayer of the Carmelites resulted in an ever renewed appreciation for those with whom they lived and for those whom they served. The human tendency to over-estimate, or under-estimate, one's virtues and gifts is

continually corrected through a prayer which undermines such judgments. True prayer continually dislocates the one who prays from a judgmental stance which perceives others as lower or higher, and inserts that person back into the circle of humanity as one equal with the rest. The one who prays begins to see others through God's eyes, and learns to appreciate and value what had previously gone unnoticed.

Teresa of Avila reminded us that Carmelite communities are meant to be communities of friends who are friends with Jesus Christ. Distinctions which create divisions or hierarchies, whether secular or religious are to be vigorously shunned. Carmelite life undermines any claim to privilege other than the supreme privilege of being loved by God. Teresa challenged her sisters to strive for a high ideal: "all must be friends, all must be loved, all must be held dear, all must be helped." Philip Thibault, leader of a 17th century reform of Carmel, offered as his motto: "More unity, less perfection!"

Whether one lives in a religious community, or in a marriage, or in another lifestyle, the grand gesture is often not the most difficult. The magnanimous, admirable service of one's neighbors may not be the hardest task. The truly heroic actions often involve accepting and appreciating the small, daily inconveniences necessarily involved in life with others. The most difficult assaults on one's patience, time, energies, forbearance, do not usually come from strangers, but from loved ones, friends, colleagues with whom we share the struggles of daily existence.

The Carmelite nun from Normandy, St. Thérèse of Lisieux, gained many admirers when she identified a little way to God. One may or may not be able to do great things in the world's eyes; most of us live small, undramatic lives. But, we can live those lives with love, a love which expresses the truly great drama of God's nearness and care for us. With loving eyes, our mundane existence opens to its depths revealing a dynamic, healing Presence in those lives. The "allegiance to Jesus Christ", sworn by Carmelites, is lived out among the "pots and pans" of everyday life.

### **The Prayer of the Carmelites**

If Carmel has anything to say to a contemporary world, it is about prayer. All humanity is on a spiritual journey, acknowledged or not. The writings and structures which make up the history of Carmel were the result of attending to the Mystery met deeply within searching lives. Attentiveness to this Presence has been the continual goal of Carmelites.

The first Carmelites carried the lines of Scripture in their minds and hearts and regularly rehearsed them, opening themselves to the One whom they met through their mystical reading. They eventually prayed this scripture together as they took on the obligations of the Divine Office.

When this community moved to Europe and took its place among the mendicant Orders who were serving the poor and others in the emerging cities, the prayerful beginnings on Mount Carmel were never forgotten. Carmelites understood themselves to be a contemplative Order. Whenever they attempted to define themselves, or re-define themselves when reform was needed, they claimed contemplation as their primary activity and greatest priority.

Contemplation commits a person to complete confidence and trust in the love of God which is continually breaking into our lives. The contemplative stance is an openness to that love and the demands it makes on us to change our lives. To be a contemplative is to be a watch in the night for the approach of Mystery. And it is a readiness to be transformed in an engagement with that Mystery.

Carmelites offer no single method or approach to prayer. They learned that prayer was the Spirit's work in us. God speaks us into life, and continually addresses us in our lives, for greater life. Our effort, then, is one of listening. All our words are an attempt to speak the one Word which is God's.

Carmelite saints and writers are compelled to express their experience of prayer. Teresa of Avila described it as conversation with a friend, with one who loves us. Thérèse of Lisieux spoke of simply gazing at God. Lawrence of the Resurrection spoke of an habitual turning of his eyes to God. John of the Cross encouraged a silent attentiveness to where our heart is struggling and experiencing exhaustion. This "dark night" is an experience of transforming love which first deeply unsettles.

The challenge for Carmelites and other Christians is to become regularly aware of this loving Presence, in good times and in bad. Teresa of Avila pictured her Friend alongside her, or inside her in one of the scenes from the Gospel, especially where He was alone and might welcome her approach. She also spoke of using a book, or flowers, or water to draw her into the presence of God, who is offering friendship, freedom, and greater life.

### **Elijah and Mary**

Carmelites continually drew inspiration from the two great biblical figures of the prophet Elijah and Mary, the Mother of God. In the Bible, Elijah is the solitary figure who is not only true to God and defeats the prophets of the false god, Baal, but he is also the defender of the poor and disenfranchised. He stands with the dispossessed and against the oppressor. In the Order's mythical memory of Elijah, he is also the one who gathers other faithful servants of Yahweh into a community. He settles the community on Mount Carmel where they live a peaceful and just existence. In the Order's myth of its origins this prototypical Carmelite community eventually responds to the preaching of John the Baptist and the first disciples of Christ. The "carmelites" become Christian and, in time, form the Order of Carmelites.

The Order remembers that Elijah foresaw the coming of Mary, the spotless virgin whose faithfulness would lead to the birth of the long-awaited Messiah. Carmelites remember Elijah and Mary as the first man and the first woman to take a vow of virginity. This "purity of heart" meant they were free from the enslavement of idols, and fertile ground for the seed of the Spirit.

The first chapel in the wadi on Mount Carmel was dedicated to Mary. The Carmelites became known as the Brothers of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. Mary is the contemplative who ponders in her heart. She is the disciple who follows her Son, the Wisdom of God. Her surrender to the working of God's Spirit in her life is captured in her Magnificat, a song of praise and thanksgiving for the mercy of God which raises the lowly of the earth. The scapular, a brown cloth worn over the shoulders, is a traditional Carmelite expression of devotion to Mary and, in imitation of her, our surrender to God's salvific plan.

## **Serving God's People**

Carmelites seek the face of the living God not only in prayer and fraternity, but also in service. The Carmelites' primary pledge is "allegiance to Jesus Christ". This allegiance, then, takes the form of continuing the mission of Christ to tell of the nearness of God's love and to celebrate the inestimable worth of every human being. Carmel has taken seriously the Gospel imperative: go to the ends of the earth and there proclaim the last are first. This mission has been expressed in innumerable pastoral situations through the centuries of Carmel's existence. Even on Mount Carmel men would occasionally leave the wadi to preach in adjacent areas. In Europe they were called to take their place with the mendicant communities who were ministering in various levels of society, teaching in universities, and crossing national boundaries in missionary efforts. No ministry has been judged incompatible with Carmel's charism. But any ministry is suspect if not anchored in a contemplative openness to that which God is bringing about.

In particular, it is the contemplative dimension of Carmel which impels the community to pay special attention to the "little ones" of the world, those left out of the world's attention and care. Contemplation leads one into an awareness of one's own poverty of spirit and the need to wait on God. From this self-knowledge it is possible to be in solidarity with and have concern for all who have to wait in hope for God's mercy and compassion. Contemplative prayer should be the deepest source of concern for the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized of our world.

## **The Mythical Land of Carmel**

From the very beginning Carmelites had to live within tensions. They may have preferred to stay in their quiet, isolated valley, but it was impossible. They wound up in the middle of the mendicant movement in Europe, but describing their life as though they were still living in the valley. Nicholas the Frenchman, an early general of the Order, admonished them to abandon the noisy, dirty city streets where they were ministering, and retreat to the quiet beauty of pastoral settings for contemplative prayer. This admonition, too, was impossible to follow.

Carmelites began to understand themselves as inhabitants of two homelands. One homeland was where they lived in community and ministered among God's people. The other homeland became a metaphorical place where God pursued humanity in love. Carmelites lived on the border, and carried dual citizenship.

The initial threads of Carmel's story were woven from the memory of Mount Carmel itself and the biblical imagery which surrounded the mountain. In that late 14th century foundational myth of Carmel, The Institution of the First Monks, Carmel's story was no longer a story confined by historical conditions and a specific time. It was a mythic story, truer than a mere recitation of facts. It traced its outlines back to the source of all stories, a plot in God's mind. It was a story told, as it were, through God's eyes.

And so the story of Carmel stretched back into pre-Christian history where the community witnessed the emergence of the one true God of Israel. Carmel's story also projects forward to a future time on the mountain when God's peace will reign, men and women will live justly, and all will gather at an eschatological banquet. Later Carmelites confirmed the essential truth of the vision: "My beloved

is the mountain," wrote John of the Cross, "the supper that refreshes, and deepens love." (Canticle, 14)

To "enter Carmel" is not simply a matter of entering a building, joining a community, and taking on a ministry, whether of prayer or apostolic mission. It is that, certainly, but "entering Carmel" is also entering a drama playing out deep within every human life. That drama of the human spirit encountered by God's Spirit is essentially inexpressible. Carmelites are explorers of an inner place of intimacy with God, a fine point of the human spirit where it is addressed by Mystery. Carmel honours that pristine, privileged relationship between creature and Creator. Carmelite mystics have used bridal imagery to capture the intimacy of this encounter. Some Carmelites told of visions and voices which they experienced as momentary forms of grace. Sometimes, even their bodies reverberated to the impact of God's love.

The Carmelite imagination describes a landscape whose topography has become a primordial wording of the soul's adventure.

Carmel is a land of paradox, exposing the Carmelite to living within tension. It is a land of desert and garden, of heat and cold, of dark and light, of hunger and abundance. It is a place of God's absence which surprisingly reveals a compassionate presence. It is a place of suffering, a suffering which is healed by the same flame that hurt. It is a starless, trackless space in which the pilgrim is somehow led unerringly home.

The pilgrim plunges more deeply into an empty vastness, and arrives at the heart of the world. The world, seemingly left far behind, becomes fully present and truly known for the first time. The "cell" of the Carmelite becomes more and more spacious.

This tradition gives words and images to the hope that is constitutive of being human. "The soul's centre is God," wrote John of the Cross. Carmelite saints and mystics experienced transformation in engagement with that Centre. They thought they were seeking God, but learned that the Centre had been approaching them all along. Humanity's story is not the story of our search for God, but of God's pursuit of us in love. Carmel's saints concluded that everything is a grace. The love they encountered deep within their searching lives invited them more deeply into their own life, gave them freedom from their idols, drew them into a divinizing union, and propelled them outward in service of their brothers and sisters.

## **The Constitutions**

The 1995 Constitutions of the Carmelite Order are a rather remarkable testimony to 800 years of wrestling with identity, values, and world view. Battered by the winds of history, and at times in danger of extinction, this community has not only survived but now finds itself energized to live into the next phase of its story. Time has only deepened Carmel's ability to identify its core values and find an expression satisfying not only to Carmelites but perhaps to all who look to this tradition for help on life's journey.