

# The Carmelite Charism and the Third Order in Britain

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## Part I

### About charism

Before we get into talking about the nuts and bolts of the Carmelite charism in its relationship to lay Carmelites in Britain today, we might talk about the charism itself as a source of energy and inspiration. The energy is the power of the Holy Spirit, also known as grace. The inspiration is the sense of what needs to be done out of obedience to God. To paraphrase Saint Paul we might say, 'You are Carmelites, now be Carmelites'. The charism makes us Carmelites and the charism sustains us as Carmelites.

The Holy Spirit gives gifts to individuals and to groups for the building up of the body. By reason of our creation we each have charisms of some kind. My way of being is the collection of my charisms. These charisms are also channels by which God communicates; a charism is a capacity for doing what is demanded by the kingdom of God.

We recognise our charisms in different ways, first of all by the way we live, by the way we find peace in doing the things the charism enables us to do, and by the way the charism in me resonates with the charism in other people and makes us come together to share a common purpose in a community of some kind. People join a group because the charism in them resonates with the charism in the group and the individual thus finds a spiritual home.

Saint Paul in the *First Letter to the Corinthians* gives an extensive treatment to the subject of charisms when he writes:

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be uninformed. You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to idols that could not speak. Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says "Jesus be cursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit.

It is the belief of Christians that every good thing that we do is influenced by the Holy Spirit. Every sincere act of faith is influenced by the Holy Spirit. Every form of engagement that is intended to help others is influenced by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, like Jesus and the Father, is at work all the time [*John* 5:17]. It is with the help of the Holy Spirit that we are able to do the things we want to do, or feel called to do, as followers of Christ. Saint Paul continues:

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are inspired by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills. [1 Corinthians 12:1-7]

This is a list of important gifts; it is not intended to be exhaustive, but simply makes the point that there is a variety of gifts and in so far as they are to serve in the building up of the body of Christ, they are all given and sustained by the Holy Spirit.

### **Unity in diversity: The growth of the community in *Acts***

The variety of gifts does not take away from the unity of the community of believers. *The Acts of the Apostles* is the story of how people, moved by the Holy Spirit, sought baptism and became part of the community of believers. Through the action of the Holy Spirit the community came together and lived in such a way that their witness to the resurrection and their care for one another attracted many who were also moved by the Spirit, and so the community grew with great speed. The community grew because of the unity of the members. They were of one mind and one heart. Still there was a variety of gifts. The unity was founded on the marks to which all the members assented: the teaching of the apostles, prayer, the breaking of bread and the sharing of their goods so that no one was in need:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. [*Acts* 2:42-47]

The early Carmelites understood clearly that the Jerusalem community would be the foundation of their unity. They built their community upon these same pillars, the word of God to which they listened individually and in community; prayer in their cells and in the community; the breaking of bread and the sharing of their goods so that no one would be left in need. To this they added the elements that would allow each one to flourish and to grow as part of the community: discernment in community, silence, work and obedience to a prior chosen from among themselves. Looking at the founding experience we can see that it is the way that Carmelites lived from the beginning that reveals the nature of the Carmelite charism.

## Charism and spirituality

I take 'spirituality' to mean both what motivates a person from inside and the way of life that results from that motivation. Insofar as everyone is moved to act by some kind of motivation everyone has a spirituality. We talk about a Christian spirituality because we believe that we are moved by Christ. Christian Spirituality is the domain of the Holy Spirit. It is what happens to us when the Spirit speaks in our hearts. Belief in the reality of a Christian spirituality depends on the belief that God's Spirit acts in the world.

We can see that Christian spirituality is motivation, which comes from Christ, but we still have to recognize that each one of us experiences Christ in a different way and learns from him in a different way. Different Christian spiritualities are different ways of ordering the values of the Gospel to form a way of life that is recognizable, describable, and transmittable: Carmelite, Franciscan, Patristic, Desert, Feminine, social, charismatic and so on. Carmelite spirituality is the synthesis of Gospel values that reflects the values by which Carmel has existed for eight hundred years.

## Part II

### About the Carmelite charism

The charism that is given to Carmelites, for the building up of the body, is a charism of living in allegiance to Jesus Christ, in prayer, community and service, following the examples of Elijah and Mary. We share much of this definition with other religious traditions. All Christian life is a life of allegiance to Jesus Christ. Albert in the first chapter of the *Rule* reminds the hermits:

Many and varied are the ways in which our saintly forefathers laid down how everyone, whatever his station or the kind of religious observance he has chosen, should live a life of allegiance to Jesus Christ – how, pure in heart and stout in conscience, he must be unswerving in the service of his Master. [*Rule*, Chapter 2]

Albert then goes on to propose a way of life that builds on the life that the hermits had already been living in allegiance to Jesus Christ, which they described in their communication to him.

### Allegiance to Jesus Christ

The story of Carmelite allegiance to Jesus Christ is characterised by the way we seek the face of the living God, we become that face, and it is the face that is revealed in the humanity of Jesus. Saint Teresa of Jesus (of Avila) learned this the hard way after she had explored other avenues. She wrote in her autobiography:

It is clear to me that if we wish to please God and to receive graces in abundance from him, it is God's will that these graces should come to us through the hands of Christ in his

most holy humanity, that humanity in which his Majesty has proclaimed that he is well pleased. [*Life*, 22]

Our allegiance to Jesus Christ allows us to come to know God revealed in the humanity of Jesus and to come to union with God through that same humanity. It is then that we can see what John of the Cross meant by teaching that it is not this way, or that way, or any of the many ways that may be on offer, but only through accepting and cherishing Christ in his humanity that we come to union with God. In this growing union we become Christ-like and God-like. Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to remind us of all that he said and did, and to lead us into the fullness of truth. Our life's mission then is to seek all that is to be known about Jesus, and to allow that to shape our lives as we grasp more and more what he was and what he did.

### **Prayer, community and service**

Every Christian life is made up of prayer, community and service. It is difficult to imagine a Christian life from which any one of these might be absent: no prayer, no service, no community? Different expressions of Christian life lay different emphasis on these elements but no Christian life can exist without any one of them. A life of community and service without prayer will lack the dimension of transcendence. A life of prayer and service without community will lack discernment and support. A life of prayer and community without service will become sterile and self-seeking, lacking the essential element of giving our life for others.

Our description of life that is made of these three elements becomes distinctive because of the addition of Elijah and Mary as the examples of our way of life. Our way of living in allegiance to Jesus Christ is coloured by their example. What also distinguishes the Carmelite tradition is its story. Our story is different from the story of any other group in the Church. It is when we tell the story that we can see what our distinctive contribution to the life of the Church has been and will continue to be.

Our story began on Mount Carmel and continues throughout the centuries right up to the present day. This story reveals the particular way in which the Spirit has guided people who possess the Carmelite charism to live out their lives in allegiance to Jesus Christ in a variety of circumstances and in a variety of cultures. It is a story of prayer, community and service with a particular flavour and style!

### **About Elijah and Mary today**

By looking at the people who have made up this story, and the language they use, Carmelites have been able to identify what is the heart of the Carmelite way of life, what is the particular combination of gospel values that has become essential to Carmelite identity. Much of this identity is associated with Elijah and Mary from the very beginning. Over the years there has been a development in what Carmelites say about the two great figures. This age has continued the development and attempts to offer its own particular slant.

### **About Mary**

Among other influences, the writings of Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus have inspired us to return to the Gospels to find a very simple approach to Mary, removed somewhat from the great and majestic titles that we have applied to her in the past. In her poem, *Why do I love you Mary?*, Thérèse uses words and images that allow us to see that the Mary that this saint loved is the Mary of the Gospels.

Further reflection, supported by the experience of Carmelites in such places as Latin America, has allowed us to see Mary as a woman of the people, close to her own people, sharing in their hopes, joys and sorrows; a woman who listens to the word of God, who is educated in the ways of wisdom and the prophets; a prophetic woman able to call people to conversion by her own words and example; our older sister in faith; a mother giving birth to and caring for new life; a woman who is obedient to God's will; a woman who is always a woman, who ponders what she sees in order to come to the deepest possible acceptance of God's will and to give the best possible response; more Mother than Queen.

Three characteristics stand out for me in the way we talk about Mary today: her attentiveness to the word, which comes alive for us as we Catholics return to the written word of God in the Scriptures after long years of absence; her purity of heart, as we the people of the modern age deal with that melancholic pursuit of mediocrity that marks this age; and her motherly care, as we today follow the doctrine of competition and competitiveness that makes us so cruel and uncaring at times.

### **Attentiveness to the Word**

Mary's life was guided and shaped by her attentiveness to the word. She listened to that word, pondered it in her heart, accepted it and allowed it to shape her life. She was attentive to the spoken word but even more to the word as it unfolded before her eyes; the birth of her son, the finding in the temple, the wedding couple in need, her son dying on the cross and rising to new life, the coming of the Holy Spirit. Here Mary sets the example of one who has the sense that the work of God is going on all the time, and is being revealed to us in the written word and in the events of daily life.

### **Her purity of heart**

It is not enough to say that Mary was the sinless virgin. To this passive gift we add her pursuit of holiness through her welcoming of God's word. Mary's heart knew no other richness. She showed no other interest. Her assent to God embraced her whole life. If she was able to say to the servants at the wedding, "Do whatever he tells you", it was because she herself had accepted to do whatever came from the hands of God. Here Mary sets the example of one who has the willingness to accept whatever comes from God. If something comes from God and by prayerful discernment we know that it does, we will accept it whatever it is.

### **More Mother than Queen**

Carmelites have discovered Mary in the simplicity of the Gospel and in their own experience as the constant Mother, the icon of the tenderness of God, a title used some years ago for a congress organised by the Carmelites in Italy on the subject of Mary. If we are to imitate Mary in this aspect of

her of life, we have to put the idea of caring for all that is vulnerable before any doctrine of a rising tide that will bring all ships with it. We see everyday that some ships are not equipped to rise and especially not if the tide is too strong. Like any good Mother, Mary is the Mother of all her children and wants all of them to succeed, but knows that some need more care than others.

### **Elijah: an opponent of idols**

Our tradition has taken Elijah to be our spiritual father, inspiration and model. For generations the ideal Carmelite, Elijah was the solitary prophet, standing in the presence of God, burning with zeal for the Lord. A new approach which is emerging in recent times sees Elijah more in terms of the biblical Elijah, the prophet who stands in opposition to the idolatry of the Kings and strives to rebuild the peoples' standing and identity after the destruction wrought by the Kings. The prophet proposes the way of justice, in opposition to idolatry and oppression, the mystical way as the way to full human dignity, and the way of solidarity as the way for neighbour to treat neighbour so that no one is left in need.

As the prophet we see in Elijah a man like ourselves, called again and again into action, and who throughout his life stood and lived in the presence of the living God, even in that moment when he lay down under a tree and wished he were dead. This man found his strength by being intensely involved with God and intensely involved with people. Through this involvement he knew them both and could be the prophet who could speak to both and for both. His intense involvement with God is what we might see as his prayer. His intense involvement with people is what we might see as his obedience to God and his commitment to the salvation of his people. Can we say that we live with a deep commitment to the salvation of people? In days gone by we would have prayed for the salvation of souls. Today through the works of love, expressed in a commitment to the work of justice, we show our care for people and for their well-being. In his lifetime Elijah saw the destruction of the people resulting from the idolatry of the kings. They lost their sense of identity, they lost their hope and they lost their ability to care for one another. In his work as a prophet Elijah restored all three.

## **Part III**

### **Contemplation, the heart of the Carmelite way of life**

This reflection on the elements of the Carmelite charism leads us to a consideration of what lies at the heart of our way of life. The formation document of the Carmelite Friars called the *Ratio (Ratio Institutionis Vitae Carmelitanae)* made great strides in clarifying what is this heart. From a stage when the thinking of the Friars was that the desert, and our openness to God, were at the heart of the *Rule*, the latest thinking sees contemplation itself as the heart. The contemplative dimension is not merely one of the elements of our charism (prayer, fraternity and service): it is the dynamic element which unifies them all. The desert on the other hand is the process by which we become more open to the gift of God.

Contemplation and open attentiveness go together. There is so much going on in an average day. We are never able to pay attention to everything. We try perhaps to pay attention to what is most important. In prayer we pay attention to the things of God and relate them to our own lives. We

might give the name cry to all that relates to our own life. The Scriptures in different ways assure us again and again that God hears the cry. In specific terms it says that God hears the cry of the poor. In this context the poor are clearly those who turn to God in prayer, honest prayer, unpretentious prayer, humble prayer that recognises that we are sinners and God is God. This is a way of understanding our open attentiveness to God. It bears the marks of some desire to be heard, some urgency in wanting to know.

Once we have established this relation of prayer and attentiveness between ourselves and God, we then begin to see that my being attentive is not entirely my own decision. I am not in a position to say that now I will be attentive, now I will contemplate. Somehow we recognise that there is something else going on. It is the action of God. It is in the nature of God to be working all the time. It is in the nature of the Holy Spirit to be offering communication to us all the time. The more we accept that communication the more we become God-like. This then is our understanding of contemplation: God's action that transforms us and leaves us transformed as little by little we grow into god-likeness. The *Ratio* puts it this way:

Through this gradual and continuous transformation in Christ, which is accomplished within us by the Spirit, God draws us to himself on an inner journey which takes us from the dispersive fringes of life to the inner core of our being, where he dwells and where he unites us with himself. (*Ratio*, 23)

The Ratio goes on to say:

The inner process which leads to the development of the contemplative dimension helps us to acquire an attitude of openness to God's presence in life, teaches us to see the world with God's eyes, and inspires us to seek, recognise, love and serve God in those around us. (*Ratio*, 24)

### **A contemplative way of life**

One of the contemplative processes of attention with which we have become more familiar in recent years is the process called *Lectio divina*. We have now learned to use this method of prayerful attentiveness as we pray with the Scriptures. What if we apply this same method to the rest of our lives, particularly the way we deal with situations and people? We are talking to someone: will we listen attentively to what they are saying? Will we ask ourselves, what does this mean for them, and for us? Will we accept the truth of what they say? Will we allow that to change our mind, our life, our decisions in some way? Will we believe that this encounter has something to do with ongoing salvation? There are situations that we look at everyday in our lives. Will we look at them attentively so that we can see what is really going on? Will we ask what this means for us? Will we accept the truth of what we see and allow it to change or influence our minds, our lives, or our decisions? Or will we apply to every situation that confronts us the ideas and categories and prejudices that are already in our minds and so lose the opportunity to grow? A line I remember from a talk I heard some time ago goes as follows: Be present, pay attention, make connections, speak your truth and release the outcome. This is a contemplative way of life.

## **A life of deepening motivations**

The more we grow into the contemplative way of life we recognise that in every human life there are different levels of motivation in our lives. Today we live with a much heightened sense of the importance of spirituality. Everyone has a spirituality. Everyone has a spiritual life that is worthy of attention and care. Our spiritual growth may be understood as a process of deepening motivations.

The conflicts in our lives indicate that there are different motivations at play within us. These motivations are not all of the same depth. There are clearly different levels of motivation in the human person ranging from the very superficial to the very profound.

The spiritual doctrine of Saint John of the Cross suggests ways that help to distinguish deeper levels of motivation from the more superficial. The Dark Night of the senses, The Dark Night of the Spirit, and Union mark stages in the purification of motivations. Growth into the maturity of the Christian life is a growth into deeper levels of motivation.

Take any aspect of our lives and examine the motivations that shape it. For example, an examination of how we pray will show that it is possible for people to pray simply because they like to pray. They like the words they read, the songs they sing, the people who share their prayer, the feeling of goodness it gives them, the encounter with God in peace. To pray in this way is a great gift, but prayer is not always like that. It does not give us immediate satisfaction. It can be very dry.

Some people pray because they are convinced of the value of prayer. They believe that prayer is effective: it changes their lives, it brings them into a relationship with God, and it moves them beyond themselves. They believe they have a duty to pray, even when it is dry. To pray in this way is a great gift. It can give meaning and direction to life, but it can also become a source of pride, a system of defence or a false source of security.

Some people pray because God prays in them. It is no longer simply their own desire, or their conviction that is at work. God speaks words to them and draws them into such union with him that all their own faculties are caught up in God. They come to something deeper than all that they like, and deeper than all that they believe. They come to union of mind and will with God. This is the contemplative dimension that is capable of affecting every aspect of human life and shapes all human faculties and endeavour.

This same kind of thinking applies to all that we do: our life in community, our commitment to the poor, our work for justice and peace. It is helpful to know why we chose to get involved in the Carmelite family, just as it is important to know from where our energy comes for this work. The deeper our motivations, the more long-lasting and enduring will our commitment be. The Dark Night of the justice and peace worker comes from the need to grow from more superficial motivations into deeper and deeper motivations.

**A prophetic way of life: intense involvement with God, intense involvement with people**

The Second Vatican Council speaks very clearly of the vocation of the lay person as a call to live out the gospel in the midst of the affairs of daily life in the world and by so doing to transform the world and harness it for Christ. The document on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et spes*) from Vatican II was a statement of a Church that wanted to engage with the world because of its engagement with God, and to engage with God because of its engagement with the world. The prophets of old engaged with the people because of their engagement with God, and with God because of their engagement with the people. In the lives of our saints we see the same dynamic which leads us to two conclusions: (a) that those who believe in God and know God must come to have the same care for the world that God has, in so far as that is humanly possible, and (b) the only voice that can ultimately help the world is the voice of the one who knows God. Every other voice, on its own, will fall short because of its partiality. But in the community of believers, with each member supporting the others and all members open to the gratuitous, generous, overflowing and transcendent nature of God's justice, there will be a voice that is capable of bringing peace and hope to all. The world needs to hear the Gospel as told by Carmelites.

**Statements to think about:**

- I have the Carmelite charism.
- The grace of God has transformed me.
- The world needs to hear the Gospel, told by Carmelites.