

The Call of Carmel

Katie Rock invited me to be part of the project to reclaim the history of the St. Therese (D.C.) chapter of Lay Carmelites. She also suggested this topic. I am delighted to offer this spiritual reflection in the context of the chapter's history and membership.

"We members are such a divergent group," Katie wrote: "we are every kind of Catholic really. Yet we found common ground in Carmel. What is that call?"

I love the question. I think it is Katie's question in a special way. She often used her considerable journalistic gifts to paint word pictures of our chapter for the public press or in talks to inquirers. She would seize on the rich variety of our membership and the commonality of the things that brought us together.

The question of Carmel's call was asked more frequently in the early days than it is today. I served as director of the chapter in the decade of the '50's. In those early years *Carmel's Call* was the name of the manual of our prayers and practices; it was also the burning question of our identity and our reason for existence.

We were always trying to figure out what made us different. I suppose that was in order to justify our existence. After all, if we were not different, why should we be a Carmelite and not ("just") Young Christian Workers? Or why be Carmelites and not Dominicans? It was important to us to distinguish our third order from other lay organizations and from other third orders.

We were quite doctrinaire in our convictions. Maybe this was because our chapter was associated with Whitefriars Hall, the major seminary of the First Order, where such theoretical questions were the object of study and surveillance. It was also in the spirit of the times. We like to have neat, boxed-in

answers for all our questions. Today in the era of the experimental and the subjective we are more comfortable with individual differences, even in the same organization.

In accord with the traditions of the Order we identified our spirit as contemplative and Marian. We still do so. This is Carmelite identity. We spent a great deal of time and energy trying to figure out practical ways these ideals could be lived out in lay life. We also gave attention to other Carmelite values like asceticism and the lay apostolate, as the Christian life and the universal call to ministry were called in those days. These things were our priorities, and we were right on as far as Carmelite values are concerned. I do think we could have been more creative in our search for the implementation of these things. We sometimes became a bit legalistic and easily got hung up on the Little Office or the big brown scapular. That was in the spirit of the times.

With the winds of change in society and in the church in the '60's questions of identity tended to raise more in terms of human experience than ideology. We became more concerned about being good human beings than a particular kind of human being. We went back to basics and our Christian vocation became the focus of our efforts.

In the process Carmel's call has broadened out. We have been discovering new values, new aspects of the Carmelite charism, things that were there all along but in an implicit, taken-for-granted way. Some of these values are community and friendship: usually these values are called fraternity today. Our prophetic role is likewise highlighted: we are committed to establishing the kingdom of God on this earth. This puts us in touch with Elijah the prophet, our father and founder. Prayer and solitude and the struggle to allow full-

play to the Christ life within us are still the priorities in the Carmelite scheme. But today these values are like jewels set in the rich embodiment of Church. We are called to prayer, but also to community and to prophetic word and action. We are called to a full Christian life.

The whole family of Carmel, women and men, cloistered and active, calced and discalced, first, second and third orders find their places in, the one seamless mantle of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel. Each segment specializes in one or other gift, but each mirrors all the gifts, because on the level of spirit it is one order. That at least is the vision of Carmel that we find expressed more and more among

Carmelites of all persuasions in the English-speaking world. It flourishes elsewhere too. It is the ecumenical reality of Carmel.

It gives me great pleasure to reflect on all the wonderful lay Carmelites of the last four decades. How many friends we have in heaven today because of our association together in the old Whitefriars Chapel or the big barn of a library! Thank God for all of them. And may Our Lady bring a rich new harvest to Carmel. My prayer for now and the future is the Pauline sentiment borrowed into the old reception ceremony: May God who has begun a good work in us bring it to perfection in Christ Jesus Our Lord. God bless you all!