

Carmelite Life Renewed

A few years ago a fantasy on monastic life appeared called *Brother Petroc's Return*. Brother Petroc went to sleep in one age and woke in another to find things in the monastery completely changed. In place of the old *disciplina*, the leisurely, relaxed, reflective atmosphere of the Middle Ages, he found exercises and bells, examinations of conscience and meditations, introspection, subjectivism, and individualism.

If a Carmelite had fallen asleep in the seminary in 1945 or 1955 and awakened now, what would he find? More important, what should he find, according to the ideals of renewal in Vatican II and the General Chapter, 1965?

First, the present situation: the winds of change have left their mark at every level in the seminary. I speak only for the major seminary. Instead of the shift from *disciplina* to observances, there has been a change from exercises to attitudes. These attitudes are impossible to define and difficult to describe. They are summed up in a new vocabulary that is meaningful to the younger generation and equivocal to their elders. These new words are: interpersonal relationships, love, freedom, collegiality, authenticity, responsibility, commitment, and involvement. Actually these are fighting words in student-faculty relationships because they mean different things for the two groups. But whatever their meaning, the young see these new values as incompatible with the old forms in seminary life. To most of the students, it is impossible to pray "authentically" in Latin or to cultivate personal responsibility if one's *horarium* is set out for him. We are still stuck with the old system; as a result we have a generation of questioning, critical people.

Very briefly, this is a summary of the young Carmelite today. He is anxious to attain

and preserve the values of personalism but he is at sea in the old structures of religious and seminary life.

Now to the second question: what image is projected by Vatican II and our General Chapter? Both the Council and the Chapter try to state the religious and Carmelite ideal in terms of the modern mentality. They describe the Carmelite of the future in personalist characteristics. I single out three such qualities: he must be authentically Carmelite, truly human, and above all a man in and for the church.

Authentically Carmelite

The first quality refers to our identity as Carmelites. This is an old subject, and one not always satisfactorily resolved, but it seems to me that our identity crisis is well on the way to resolution through the documents of Vatican II and the General Chapter.

Vatican II describes the forms of religious life in the recent *Decree on Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life* (October 28, 1965). By a process of elimination we can find where we belong in the mind of the Church. We are not among the exclusively contemplative orders lauded in n. 7; therefore, we belong to the communities devoted to the apostolic life in n. 8. But we are partly monastic (n. 9) because we join "the apostolic life to choir duty and monastic observances" (n. 9). The decree wisely avoids abstract terms like active life and contemplative life or mixed orders, as did our General Chapter in delineating the Order's purpose. The concrete terms provide a more practical and real definition of our life. The Council approves our "way of life" and urges us to be faithful to, it even as we adapt its

“manner” to the demands to the apostolate (n. 9).

To list these two basic elements in our life is, not to solve the old problem of the integration of the apostolate and religious observance. Both the Council and the Chapter attempt to solve the tension between these two by emphasizing positive attitudes toward the apostolate.

The Council’s Decree speaks of apostolic *love* rather than apostolic *action*. This serves to place the apostolate squarely in the very structure of our religious life, which according to *Lumen gentium* is an evangelical and ecclesial witnessing. Religious are followers of Christ, but dynamic doers of the Word in imitation of Christ. In this way they mirror Christ “contemplating on the mountain, announcing the kingdom of God to the crowds, healing the sick and the maimed, converting sinners to a better life.” (*Lumen gentium*, n. 46). The actual works are less, important than the holiness the works manifest (*Decree on Adaptation*, n. 2, e). In fact, the works are charisms, or they are worthless (n. 8). The community must be flexible enough to adapt itself to the various apostolate and the work chosen must be in accord with the genius and vocation of each community. This means that the “ministries” of the Order should be constantly updated, pruned, revised (n.20).

The decree thus underlines the one consecration of our religious lives with its two facets of apostolate and community life. But is this a viable definition? Can apostolic involvement and faithfulness to religious practices live in unison? The decree obviously thinks so, with the necessary adaptations which it leaves, to the communities (nn. 3 and 4). Happily our General Chapter has taken some steps to update our practices.

The Chapter recognized that a detailed and demanding schedule of exercises must give way to flexibility (*Relatio*, prop. 306). It teaches that individual absences from

community functions, which are often necessary in a busy house with different apostolates, must be compensated for by a strong emphasis on an “affective” community life. Perhaps the Chapter should have spoken out more clearly on the necessity of “effective” community, on the necessity of physical silence and solitude and community exercises. It preferred to stay with essential principles, so it emphasizes communal charity (prop. 301, 302, 303). The hope of the Order is this deepening of fraternal unity and charity in our communities (prop. 303). New forms must be created to encourage exchanges, reduce “secrets,” promote mutual trust and love. Group discussions, for example, or the technique of “revision of life,” which is, an adaptation of Jocist Catholic Action procedure, might well take the place of the old *culpa* (prop. 5).

With regard to nourishing prayer life, the first source must be Sacred Scripture and Liturgy. This is one of the basic insights of Vatican II, repeated in many decrees, including the one on *Adaptation* (n. 6). The Chapter applies this principle in many ways: by its postulation for the vernacular in choir, for a more fruitful exposure to the word of God (prop. 320); its principle of *veritas temporis* for the hours of Office, hence the postulation for the private recitation of two little hours, (prop. 318); its insistence on the central place of community Mass, (prop. 322). On the other hand, the Chapter encourages the private fulfilling of private devotions like meditation, examination of conscience, and the various forms of *lectio divina* such as spiritual reading or visits, thereby giving a vote of confidence to individual responsibility and freedom.

But, you may say, what has happened to contemplation in this *aggiornamento*? Have we become a modern congregation? The Chapter spoke but little about contemplation and the contemplative life, but not because it wished to minimize prayer. It wished to avoid

the old dichotomies of the *pars principabor* and other abstractions that have become red herrings in discussions of Carmelite life. The *Relatio* does not abandon our tradition; it departs only from an excessively theoretical and artificial statement of that tradition. Carmelites must be men of prayer, deep prayer like contemplation. Carmelites of the Twentieth Century must seek “to present a pure heart to God ... and taste even in this life the sweetness of the divine presence” (*Institution of the First Monks*). They must put growth in union with Christ in the first place, but they must do this in the concrete conditions of the apostolate and community life. Prayer and contemplation is the soul, the life, the center of all that they do. It means finding God, and for Carmelites of the Ancient Observance in the mid-sixties this will take place less in the silence and solitude of the desert than in the apostolic involvement of city monasteries.

Truly Human

The second two qualities of the Carmelite of the future can be treated more summarily. The human quality means that he is seeking and finding self-fulfillment as well as sanctity. The spirituality presented by the Decree on Adaptation is both this-worldly, and incarnational spirituality, as well as other-worldly, an eschatological spirituality. The document makes every attempt to integrate culture and sanctity (n. 18), psychological development and spirituality. Adaptations, for example, are to take psychic as well as physical needs into account (n. 3). Emotional maturity and a right understanding are presupposed for chastity, and even then “true brotherly love in the common life of the community” is demanded for a successful outcome of celibacy (n. 12). Poverty must be real poverty, for the individual as well as the community, exemplified in one’s daily labor for his own support and the rejection of a legalistic reduction of poverty to getting

permissions (n. 13). Obedience is a service, both on the part of superior and subject, and it demands mutual responsibility for decisions taken (n. 14). But above all the common life is the very heart of religious life. Religious, life is not even Christian if it is not a community of love and adoration, a reflection of the one life of the Mystical Body (n. 14). This ideal of the Decree is concretized in our *Relatio* by the constant appeal to brotherly love, the attempt to equalize the position of the brothers with the clerics, in the community, and the philosophy that a deep community sense can supply for the lack of some of the lost monastic structures.

Man of the Church

When all is said and done, however, the Carmelite of the future is especially a man of the Church. His religious family was born in the Church and for the Church, and is nourished by the Church’s wisdom and grace. But over the years, centuries perhaps, a religious order can become a church within a church, especially where there is mistrust between the order and the hierarchy or the order and the secular clergy. The existence of real tensions in these areas, was brought to the floor of the Council by the Marist General, Father Buckley. In Holland today attempts are being made for closer collaboration in the apostolate between the orders, and the seculars through conferences between provincials and bishops—something we might hope for in our land. The fact of the matter is this: whenever an order separates itself from the Church, even psychologically, it starts to think small, to be more concerned about its privileges than the great movements of the Holy Spirit in the Mystical Body. Have we involved ourselves sufficiently in the liturgical, biblical, ecumenical and social renewals going on in the Church today? Are we implementing these main thrusts of the Church’s action today in the schools and parishes and works that are our daily tasks? One might wish that our

General Chapter had spoken at greater length about the great movements going on in the Church today. There is only one number (and it was an afterthought) on the ecumenical movement; there are only vague references to the other trends.

Lumen gentium in its chapter 6 on Religious has taught us to see ourselves as servants in the Church, men dedicated anew by their vows to the promises of their Baptism, hence Christians above all. Religious witness is special, but essentially it is the witness of the one calling all Christians have in Christ Jesus. The *Decree on Adaptation* repeats these perspectives. Religious bent on renewal are called upon to go back to the authentic sources of Christian life (Bible and Liturgy) and back to the original inspiration of their founder. Constitutions, by-laws, customs, even Canon Law are not normative for renewal; only origins and present-day needs, are to spell out the new image of the religious (nn. 2-3). A sign of this identity with the

Mystical Body is, the fact that religious are urged to share their material wealth, not only within the order, but with the local Church itself (n. 13). I submit that the way we react to this suggestion is a good indication of how “ecclesial” our thinking really is. We can be grateful to the Chapter for moving in the healthy direction of “ecclesiality” when it declines, to emphasize exemption and underlines our disponibility in the Church (n. 1) and when it decrees that our youth should be schooled in the idea that we are in the service of the church (prop. 217).

Such then is the Carmelite of the future, the ideal we must strive to implement in ourselves and in our aspirants. We should not fear to develop an American brand of Carmelite. One of the most obvious trends of Vatican II and the General Chapter was decentralization and local differentiation. But however “American” he is, our Carmelite of the future must be the genuine article, a real man, and a man of the Church.