

Carmelite Spirituality

Carmelite spirituality is basically contemplative. It originated on Mount Carmel in northern Palestine in the early thirteenth century among a group of ex-crusaders turned penitent hermits. The group, whose leader is known only by his initial, “B,” requested guidance from Albert, the Latin patriarch of Jerusalem (1204–1216), who gave them a “formula of life.” This formula became *The Rule of St. Albert*. Its centerpiece is chapter 10: “Each one of you is to stay in his own cell or nearby, pondering the Lord’s law day and night and keeping watch at his prayers unless attending to some other duty.”¹

The foundation on Mount Carmel was threatened and eventually abandoned by the breakup of the Latin kingdom in the Holy Land. The hermits had to migrate back to Europe from as early as 1238 A.D. Their simple lifestyle on the holy mountain had to be adapted for their new location. Changes were introduced with papal approval, and the definitive approbation of Innocent IV in 1247 turned the formula into the canonical *Rule of St. Albert*. Though the changes seemed small, they transformed the solitaries into a cenobitic community, eventually a mendicant order in the style of Francis and Dominic. The hermits became friars. Now the three elements of prayer, community, and ministry constituted the Carmelite charism. Henceforth the challenge of Carmelite spirituality was to balance the contemplative life of prayer, silence, and solitude with the demands of the common life, studies, and pastoral ministry.

The contemplative dimension is the centrifugal force that calls Carmelites back to their deepest identity. The opposite pull, the centripetal force, is the apostolic life of community and ministry. Solitude and ministerial community thus stand in dynamic tension. The numerous reforms over the centuries witness to the difficulty of

maintaining the two poles in balance. The Discalced Reform in sixteenth-century Spain under the leadership of St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross was only the most famous (and the most successful) of these reforms. Teresa and John brought the original Carmelite charism to a new perfection and organization. Unfortunately after the death of the two saints the reform broke away from the trunk, so that the influence of these two giants in the mystical life penetrated the parent order only gradually. Another reform, however, the Touraine Reform, began in France in the next century and spread through the entire old order. It espoused the same high ideals and produced the same fruits as the Teresian Reform. Today there are two branches of the one family of Carmel, the old order, sometimes called the Ancient Observance (O.Carm.), and the Discalced or Teresian Carmelites (O.C.D.). Juridically the two are separate entities, but they follow the same rule and pursue the same spirit.

Prayer, community, and ministry are today’s ways of living out the charism of the Order. The Carmelite promises “a life of allegiance to Jesus Christ”² to be expressed in different modes according to particular vocations. Cloistered Carmelite nuns of the Second Order cultivate contemplation and close-knit community more obviously than is apparent with the friars of the First Order or active congregations of the Third Order, whether religious or lay, whose apostolic activity may be more manifest. But authentic Carmelite spirituality is a combination of all three elements with prayer life at the heart of the charism.

Elijah and Mary

This interior life is described magisterially in a second important document

in the Order's history, *The Institution of the First Monks*, written in 1370 by Philip Ribot, a Catalonian Carmelite who sought to crystallize the Carmelite vocation primarily in the person of Elijah and secondly in Mary, the Mother of Jesus. Elijah was regarded from the beginning as the "father" of the Carmelites. Ribot tried to justify this identification by presenting a symbolic life of Elijah, drawn from the biblical accounts and the traditions of the desert monks and fathers of the Church and suitable for imitation by contemporary followers in the new context of life in Europe. He created an Elijan myth that was to inspire and shape Carmelite identity for succeeding centuries.

In one exceptionally important chapter Ribot sketches out the purpose of the Order in language drawn from John Cassian's first conference and given a strong mystical turn in this document. In Ribot's words the aim of the Carmelite Order is twofold: "1) to offer to God a heart holy and pure from all stain of sin...and 2) to taste in our hearts and experience in our minds, not only after death but even in this life, something of the power of the divine presence and the bliss of heavenly glory."³ These two goals are the blueprint of Carmelite prayer, which organically connects purification and union with God. The two features are the work of the same one Spirit in each person. Here is the seminal description of the Carmelite way, an understanding that has guided writers ever since, including Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. It is the desert spirituality of Carmel, the search for emptiness and fullness, *kenosis* and *plerona*.

Elijah pioneered and modeled this life for all Carmelites. While Carmelites have long since abandoned the claim to material succession from Elijah that Ribot affirmed, Elijah remains father and founder of the Order in the specialized sense of being inspiration and ideal.

The Blessed Virgin Mary also figures prominently in the *Institution of the First*

Monks. She is the other living symbol of Carmelite life. She soon became "the lady of the place," Our Lady of Mount Carmel, whose chapel was built on the original site "near the fountain of Elijah." The very early Carmelites called themselves "the order of the brothers of Our Lady of Mount Carmel," thus making her their sister as well as their patroness and mother.

Her role in the order underwent significant development in the next centuries and from the fifteenth century on the Brown Scapular was the livery of all who were attached to the order.

Liturgy

How does Carmelite spirituality relate to the liturgy? Like all authentic Christian spirituality it finds its source and summit in the public prayer and worship of the Church.

But there are several reasons why Carmelite spirituality has a special affinity with the liturgy. One reason is that prayer and community are defining acts of this way of living out the Christian life. They feed into liturgical participation and appropriate and prolong the graces received in liturgical celebration. Personal prayer is not individualistic; contemplation is less a private *tête-à-tête* with the Lord than the objective assimilation of the mystery of Christ, who comes to us in the liturgy. Prayer life is not about experiences, but about transformation in Christ. The word and sacrament of the liturgy are the way in Christ to the Father. The personal prayer life continues that encounter.

Something similar can be said about the community dimension of Carmelite spirituality.

Community life is itself a domestic church and mirrors the mystical body of Christ gathered around the altar or the font or the ambo. *The Rule of St. Albert* presents a communal lifestyle that goes beyond the practice of fraternal charity. The organizational structures of the life are democratic. All are called to participate; there

are no permanent superiors, only leaders chosen by the group for a limited term; decisions are to be taken by dialogue and consensus so that weekly meetings and community exercises assume great importance. The emphasis in the *Rule* on community and its peak expression in daily Eucharist is so strong that some observers think that these values are the root and primary integrating features of the life rather than the call to continual prayer of chapter 10, described above as the centerpiece of the rule. Community life is foundational in Carmelite spirituality, a perspective that relates well to the larger community at liturgical prayer.

A second feature common to both Carmelite life and the liturgy is the biblical character of the *Rule* as well as the Order's earliest traditions and that same quality in the liturgy itself. The Bible has shaped the Carmelite ideal. Albert's *Rule* is a pastiche of Scripture quotations. The word of God is the constant mentor and companion of each Carmelite, supplying the armor for the spiritual warfare of the converted crusaders.⁴ The call to continual prayer is the invitation to *lectio divina*, which is the actualization of the word of God. Ribot's description of the life is thoroughly scriptural. Carmelite spirituality, therefore, builds many bridges between itself and the liturgy through the biblical mindset and language.

The clearest indication of the primacy of the liturgy in Carmelite spirituality is the daily Eucharist and the Divine Office. These are the pillars of the life. Daily Eucharist was an innovation on Mount Carmel. The Byzantine custom of having only Sunday

Eucharist was prevalent among the many other hermits in the Latin kingdom. Albert chose a new path; he also encouraged the recitation of the psalms privately. In Innocent's revision this practice became the Divine Office in common.

The liturgy of Carmel followed the rite of the Holy Sepulchre, which was of French origin and adapted to the sacred places of the Holy Land.⁵ The original rite underwent changes over the centuries but it maintained its own identity as the "Carmelite Rite" until Vatican II, when the Ancient Observance opted to follow the Roman revisions of the Missal and breviary. The Discalced Reform had given up the rite at the time of the separation. The Carmelite rite had an abundance of Marian feasts and a special commemoration of the resurrection at the end of the Church year, celebrated like a second Easter in honor of the place of the resurrection, the Holy Sepulchre. Reform-minded superiors of the old order promoted the chanting of the Divine Office, as did the Touraine Reform, whereas Teresa of Avila recommended recitation of the psalms in order to give more time for mental prayer.⁶ Whatever the manner of celebrating, there is no doubt that liturgical prayer in the Carmelite tradition is a key structure in the contemplative life.

Carmelite spirituality is thus in service to the liturgy of the Church. The Carmelite way would be a frail instrument for sanctification, a betrayal of its Christian character, if it did not culminate in a vital, daily liturgy.

¹ *The Carmelite Rule*, ed. Bruce Baker, O.Carm. and Gregory L. Klein, O.Carm. (New Jersey: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 2000).

² *The Carmelite Rule*, ch. 2.

³ *The Institution of the First Monks*, book 1, ch. 2. The translation is by Paul Chandler, O.Carm., who is preparing a critical edition of the text.

⁴ See especially chapters 18 and 19.

⁵ James Boyce, O.Carm., *Praising God in Cannel, Studies in Carmelite Liturgy* (Washington, D.C.: The Carmelite Institute, 1999) especially chapter 10, entitled "Carmelite Liturgical Spirituality."

⁶ Redemptus M. Valabek, O.Carm., *Prayer Life in Carmel* (Rome: Institutum Carmelitanum, 1981) 22–25.

“Carmelite Spirituality,” in *Liturgical Ministry*, 10 (Fall, 2001) 201-203.

Carmelite spirituality finds its “source and summit” in the public prayer and worship of the church. Fr. Larkin traces the Order’s “special affinity” with the liturgy in its historical development from the Order’s eremitical origins to its contemporary structure. Community life and personal prayer prepare for and continue the encounter with Christ in the liturgy. Daily Eucharist and the Divine Office have the same biblical character as the Rule. “Carmelite spirituality is basically contemplative” and the author sees liturgical prayer in the Carmelite tradition as culminating in the contemplative life.