

## Carmelite Spirituality for a Carmelite

Mary Lou Ott, whom I had the good fortune to meet on a workshop in St. Paul, Minnesota, in March, invited me to do a piece on the topic: what does Carmelite spirituality do for me?

I will be 60 years old in August, and since I was 13 years old, my life has been tied up with the Carmelites. So the request is a big order. I had just turned 13, in September of 1935, when I boarded the train in Chicago with 80 or 90 other high school students bound for the prep seminary. There are loads of things I could write about from the intervening years, some of which would prove quite boring to readers of *Retorno*. Instead I shall try to single out what is most significant to me and hopefully pertinent to readers of *Retorno* in my experience of more than 40 years in the Order of Carmel, the Ancient Observance (O. Carm.).

I am going to try to give my experience without a pietistic overlay. It is my experience, not necessarily the Carmelite experience, but one variation on the theme. I will state it with some reference to our traditions; they are what formed me. I leave to others a balanced statement of Carmelite spirituality in general and to God the evaluation of my own experience.

### The Old and the New

The novitiate, which I entered after high school in 1939, and the next 7 years of college and theology were my real introduction into Carmelite life. These were years of tight control, highly institutional living, and they prepared me for 23 more years of the same kind of “observance” in large communities of our Order: two high school communities, graduate studies in Rome, and 20 years in our major seminary in

Washington, D.C. There I was teacher and spiritual director, and for the last 10 years of the time, a professor at Catholic University. They were good years, but to me nowhere nearly as good as the years after 1970 when I worked in Phoenix, Arizona, a newly-established diocese. That is where I learned for the first time about *Retorno* and developed my interest and high regard for this vehicle of marriage renewal.

For the next 12 years I lived in small communities, first as a guest with another religious community in Phoenix, then with small groups of Carmelites in an apartment, a rectory, and finally a residence in the middle of the block. These years were developing ones for me. The previous 30 years (1939-1969) were like a preparation, but each day since has been “the first day of the rest of my life.”

I use these two periods of my life to illustrate the old and the new in my experience of Carmelite spirituality. The difference is a mode, not substance. Yet it is significant. It is the difference between the institutional and the personal, observance and personal autonomy, a life in which I simply put down my head and followed the long brown line in front of me into chapel, classroom, refectory or recreation room versus living quite independently, with surprises, more outside contacts, and doing my own thing in the diocese in tandem with two or three or five brother Carmelites. To oversimplify the difference, it was like moving out of a monastic existence into the free-style, mobile life of the mendicant friar.

### Carmelite

In some ways these two life-styles recall two phases of Carmelite history. Our

Order emerged in the late 1100's. Our marvelous “Rule of St. Albert”—as simple and Scriptural as Taizé—was given the original Carmelites in 1209. At that time we were hermits living a bucolic, prayerful life in little huts on the mountainside of Carmel in Northern Palestine, like so many bees, wrote one medieval traveler, distilling honey for the Lord. With the loss of the Christian control of the Holy Places, the Carmelites fled to England and the continent, some of them to Aylesford in Kent, near London. Within a few decades we were forced to become mendicant friars. This brought in the active ministry with its attendant necessities of entrance requirements, education, and the clerical state. Since that time there has always been the struggle to maintain the contemplative orientation in a very active environment.

Married people with aspirations to a deep prayer life can resonate with the Carmelite struggle. One solution is to recall that prayer is the relationship and quality of one's being, a depth dimension of life, and it is compatible with great activity. Look at Dag Hammarskjöld. But generally this union of opposites happens only if one cultivates a prayer life in solitude as well as on the run. The trick is to maintain dynamic tension between prayer and work. To deny one aspect in favor of the other, saying “My work is my prayer” is self-destructive. Not too many say, “My prayer is my work.” That option is impossible for most married people, but it is a treasured right in the Carmelite Order. Those who want to live a strictly enclosed life with little or no outside ministry are not less Carmelite for that choice. We have a few such men in the Order, but for the most part we are as active as the next religious, all the while holding on to our contemplative ideal.

## Priesthood

The biggest reason for the antinomies or opposites is priesthood. Mary Lou wrote in her invitation: “What drew you, what holds

you in the Carmelites?” My answer to both parts would be priesthood. I do not separate Carmelite and priest; I am happy being a Carmelite and a priest, both together, neither separate, and I doubt if I could hack the life if it were only one or the other.

In this regard I am like many other American Carmelites. We are accused of thinking of ourselves primarily as priests and secondly as Carmelites. I think it is more accurate to say that we think of ourselves as “Carmelite priests,” both aspects reciprocally one another and the two names used interchangeably. We speak of “the Carmelite priesthood.” This is not a special brand of priesthood, but the form of life that is ours; we are wrapped up in priesthood, yet we identify as Carmelites. Theoretically this is off the mark, because religious order priests are supposed to be primarily religious, i.e., a community of brothers, and only accidentally either priests or non-clerics. That is good theory, and when push-comes-to-shove, we accept it. But for the priests among us, the priesthood is by no means an appendage. It is why we became Carmelites.

Can we claim anything peculiarly Carmelite for our priestly ministry? I think we can. I think the basic elements in the Carmelite charism mark the way we serve. I must confess that while these Carmelite qualities did not originally draw me to the Order, they have kept me there. I learned them in the Order and they have (again hopefully) become my identity. I would like to reduce these elements to three and discuss them briefly. They are prophecy, contemplation and community.

## 1. Prophecy

Everything in my training tells me to put this as the third point of our charism, the flowering of prayer and community. But in the ecclesially oriented Carmelite Order, prophecy, which means the proclamation of the Word, is the primary function of both the

Church and the Order. Vatican II so described the Church as prophet first, whose duty is to proclaim the Word, and king and priest afterwards, both functions being extensions of the role of prophet.

For John of the Cross prophecy is a function of contemplation. This principle is deep in the Carmelite tradition. Contemplation puts on Christ’s mind-frame, his value system, his priorities, his judgment. Contemplation is not primarily any particular experience, whether a joyful peak experience like being bathed in God’s love (St. Teresa’s *gustos* or “quiet”) and the realization of the nothing, nothing, nothing that better expresses the true God than any affirmation we make about him. He is more than any such affirmation. This is the teaching of St. John of the Cross for whom God is no-thing, and contemplation is the experience of that “I-don’t-know-what.”

The experience of contemplation especially in John of the Cross is the confession of poverty of spirit. Poverty of spirit frees us from lesser concerns and attaches us to the reign of God. One knows God in “spirit and truth” so well that he/she senses what is true and false about the immediate human situation. The contemplative, and only the contemplative, can speak God’s word and this is prophecy.

All ministry flows out of contemplation. My own assignments as a Carmelite have been almost exclusively teaching, and this is an excellent forum for prophecy. It makes possible the contemplation that is the source of prophecy. But prophets are not just hearers; they are do-ers of the word too, and I am happy to find many brother Carmelites actively involved in peace and justice issues. But there are other forums too, less dramatic, but perhaps more long-term, like the high school or college classroom, the parish or the hospital; and these have been opportunities for many of our men to exercise a prophetic role. Our happiest men

are those with a sense of mission as proclaimers of the Word.

## 2. Contemplation

Prophecy is only as valid as its source, which is a personal and corporate prayer life. This is why Carmel is more often identified with prayer than prophecy. If the plant is sturdy, the flower is inevitable.

What has this primordial insistence on prayer in Carmel done for me? It has challenged me in season and out of season, in good days and bad, to be a person of prayer. It has called communities where I lived to daily liturgy, to cultivating a personal prayer life, in spite of the endless demands of ministry. The Order has always said, “Moderate your activity; stop being a messiah, a rescuer; let God be God.” We struggle to find the formula that makes this exhortation possible. But no one in the Order can claim that prayer time was ever denied him. Being called to this ideal is a real grace; our performance falls behind, but as long as we are struggling together to find ways to pray alone and together our failures are not loss; they can be the stuff of our growth in Christ.

I have truly learned—“Too late have I loved Thee”—that a prayer life is the trade-off for family. We have our religious communities, large ones and small; we have our personal friends in the Order and outside, both women and men. Women friends particularly (or male friends in the lives of sisters), while not something entirely new—think of Diana and Jordan, Francis and Clare, Teresa and Gracian, all examples of great spiritual friendships of the past—have become a more widespread phenomenon in the post-Vatican II world. Such friendships are life-giving, but they are a struggle too. They are in no way surrogate marriages for celibates, “spiritual marriages,” as it were, that do not allow expressions of genital sexuality. To call them marriages would lend a note of exclusivity to them which they cannot have.

But they are or can be beautiful friendships in continuity with the long Christian tradition of spiritual friendship. Celibate men and women have foregone the relationship of a spouse and the extension of that unique companionship which is children and family. We have no family, no place where we so identify with other human beings that our life is their life and their life ours. This is an immense deprivation that only a faith perspective can justify and a living response to a sensed call from God can make attractive.

Only communion with God can assuage this loss. Obviously we are dealing with two different thrusts in two states of human life—one of them family, the other prayer. These two are basic thrusts establishing priorities and life-styles, but they are not mutually exclusive concerns of one state or the other. The laws of growth in religious life ultimately center around dealing with solitude, whereas the law of growth in families is interaction, rubbing shoulders day and night, and entering into ever deeper sharing of life. But religious also grow through community as married people do through prayer. When a Carmelite tries to live without a vigorous prayer life, it is exactly the same loss as when a married couple tries to live without growing in intimacy.

### 3. Community

To say that Carmelites are not a nuclear family is not to deny family in any sense. We are a religious community bound by our own laws, inspired by our own dynamism. Carmelite religious communities are a particular species. They are marked by democracy, dialogue and consensus, at least as proposed goals. Although hermits in origin, from the beginning we were hermits in community. Our rule brings this out in a marvelous way: “Let each one remain in his cell day and night meditating on the law of the Lord.” (Ch. 7). That is the heart of the Carmelite life; I love it. It authorizes solitude

and prayer; it explains why Carmelites thrive so easily on their own. But the call to fraternal sharing is no less striking. Our superior is not “Father Abbot,” but one of the brothers elected to serve all; he calls community meetings for dialoguing together and attempts to achieve a consensus of the brethren. This too really happens among the Carmelites, and I love that too. We are a bunch of “little guys,” who have no airs, who are down to earth folks interested in other little people. What gives worth to this earthiness is the quality of friendship that characterizes our communities and ministry.

People have picked this up about us. We take great pride in claiming it. Teresa of Avila, who is not the founder of Carmelite spirituality but its foremost exponent, managed to synthesize the whole spiritual life around the symbol of friendship. Mental prayer, the keystone in her system, is “nothing else than an intimate sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with him who we know loves us.” (*Life* 8:5). It is not surprising that our communities, which are the sacrament of our union with God, yearn after this same deep friendship. It is part of our charism. Sometimes we achieve it, sometimes it remains a challenging ideal. Friendship depends on transparency and sharing, and while this is a matter of choice, it is not always possible to every individual. It is hard to be personal and interpersonal. But both elements are the secret of life, whether in marriage or religion. I think Carmel calls married people to that kind of intimacy, and married persons challenge us by their authentic struggle to become themselves. Becoming ourselves, on the bottom line, is all that we have to do.

### Marian Order

Elijah is one scriptural symbol that evokes the best of what we hope to be. Mary, our mother and our sister, is another crystallized ideal. We are the Order of the

Brothers of the Blessed Virgin Mary, not the Brothers of the Order of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and we fought hard to keep that title straight.

We are a Marian Order, because Mary is the first and greatest contemplative who did relatively little in her life, yet was all that the Church hopes to be (Vatican II, *Decree on Liturgy*, n. 108). She pondered and reflected on God’s word as she heard it expressed in the events of her life and the words from the angel or Jesus. She lived in mystery, in profound Biblical faith, waiting on the word of the Lord and absolutely committed to its execution.

We Carmelites are Marian to the core. You will hear us talking frequently about her, some more, some less. In the post-Vatican II Church we have tended to talk less about Mary as we struggle to re-experience and rearticulate the basic lines of the Carmelite experience.

But in these transitional years we are living in hope like Mary, whose life was not

as idyllic as it might seem. She had few answers, but she pondered and struggled as a searcher in faith. The old institutions have largely passed away, and the new ones are not yet born. The time “between the times” is one of crisis. It looks like chaos, but really it is opportunity. Our hope must not be the sickly sedative of “Cheer up; things could be worse.” Or “Cheer up; things will get better.” Real Christian hope hopes against hope and believes with Elijah that “the Lord lives, in whose presence I stand.” Our present weakness is a moment of grace, an opportunity for trust in God and in each other. Married persons must feel the same challenge in their lives today and resonate to the same response. Somehow I have that experience. And I thank God for the sense that the whole church is growing, moving from the ways of children to the adult life of faith, hope and love. We are, I hope, on the threshold of a quantum leap in Christian spirituality.