

THE GREAT TRADITIONS OF CATHOLIC PRAYER – PART IV

THE CARMELITE TRADITION – THROUGH CALVERY TO GLORY

I. The Carmelite tradition order began at Mount Carmel in modern day Lebanon in the mid twelfth century. Its current formulation owes a great deal to two of its greatest saints St. Theresa of Avila (1515-1582) and St. John of the Cross (1542-1591). The order, which emphasizes growth in the spiritual life through struggle, through darkness, and through charity in the smallest matters, also led to the profound writings of St. Therese of Lisieux (1873-1897), another doctor of the Church.

A. The order sprang from a monastery on Mount Carmel, which is associated with the prophet Elijah, on or about 1155. The Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem wrote their rule in 1206 and Pope Honorius III gave it final approval in 1226.

B. The order argued that there had been monks there since Elijah the prophet in the ninth century B.C. Although the claim has little historical support, the order certainly did take its inspiration from the prophetic mission of Elijah and his assistant and successor Elisha, who took on the corruption and paganism of the northern Empire, especially in the face of a monarchy that was at best indecisive and at worst positively idolatrous, violent and decadent. As Br Peter Thomas- Rohrbach said, "Carmelites of all ages have read and reread this [Elijah's] chronicle to discover in human form, in flesh-and-blood situations- the nature of the nabi's [prophet's] vocation." Journey to Carith (1966) 24

C. Elijah was with Moses considered the very epitome of prophesy, and Mount Carmel was a central point of his ministry.

1. Most of Elijah's prophetic mission was during the reign of the weak King Ahab and the corrupt and pagan queen Jezebel, who ruled over the northern kingdom.

2. Mount Carmel is the mountain where Elijah defeated the prophets of Baal, and also prayed for the end of the draught God had sent upon the northern kingdom of Israel. See 1 Kings 18.

3. Elijah, along with Moses, is portrayed in the Bible as the quintessential prophet in the Bible, and it was said he would return again to announce the coming of the Messiah. See Mal. 4:5; Sit. 48:10; Matt. 17:9-11; Mark 9:11; James 5:17; see also Rev. 11:4-13. It was Moses and Elijah who appeared with Jesus at the Transfiguration. See Luke 9:30.

4. But the Bible also said that, with the coming of the Spirit all of God's children would prophesy, which was part of the message of Pentecost. See Joel 2:28-29; Acts 2:17-18.

5. The Carmelites seek to continue this prophetic mission throughout the ages. However, this spirituality emphasizes doing so, not by dramatic signs and wonders, much less by shows of power, but rather through the humble willingness to uphold a moral life, deep prayer, and conversion with an acceptance of the sufferings of life. Such a life, joined with Christ's own sufferings, under the guidance of Mary, truly brings the power of heaven to earth, and allows the faithful to travel with Him through Calvary to glory.

D. St. Simon Stock (1165 – 1265) helped for a rule for the order to move into Europe. He is also accredited with developing the devotion to the Carmelite Scapular, which reflects the strong Marian devotion in the Carmelite Order. The monks at Mount Carmel were in fact called "the hermit brothers of St. Mary of Mount Carmel.

- There is a very strong sense of Mary as our Model, our Lady, and our Protector. The scapular devotion involves very much dedicating one's whole life through Mary to Christ.

E. After the fall of the entire Holy Land to the Muslims and the resulting harsher conditions for Christians, the monastery at Mount Carmel had to be abandoned in 1291, although the Carmelites returned in 1631. However, the order spread throughout Europe, and became a mendicant order, as the Franciscans and Dominicans were. There was some debate in the order about how strictly to follow the rule developed at Mount Carmel, and even some opposition to the Carmelites on the grounds that their hermetical spirituality did not fit in with the more active mendicant orders.

II. In the sixteenth century, there was a great reform of the Carmelites led by St. Theresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross. With this reform Carmelite spirituality developed more into its current form. In the nineteenth century, St. Therese of Lisieux described her "little way to perfection" in her autobiography, which has become a classic.

A. St. Theresa of Avila led a reform of the Carmelite order in the sixteenth century after experiences great reform in her own life.

1. After recovering from a nearly fatal illness early in life, she entered religious life at age 20 and, as a Carmelite nun, was

very sociable and popular, but not particularly prayerful. She was allowed a relaxation of the rule to see guests because they liked her, enhanced convent=s reputation and fundraising ability. But at age of 39, she realized the mediocrity of her life and really started living her calling more deeply. The result was that she received more criticism because she strove for perfection but had not attained it. She eventually formed new convent that was stricter in its observance. There was great opposition, but her efforts, along with those of St. John of the Cross, led to a renewal of the Carmelite life, first in Spain and then throughout the world and the branch of Carmelites called Discalced Carmelites (O.C.D.)

2. Some of her great works are: The Interior Castle, which uses an extended allegory of the spiritual life to advancing through a castle; The Story of Her Life, the autobiography in which she, among other things, uses an extended analogy of the spiritual life as allowing grace to work as water to a field; and The Way of Perfection, with its great commentary on the Our Father.

- She says that one should not insist on quick results. God works when, and perhaps especially when, one does not see how it is being done. She draws the analogy between a soul at prayer and a noble in the court of a king. The king may address the noble directly only at times, but his performance of duties is always noticed.

3. Her favorite image was that of water as representing the effects of prayer and grace on our lives. (Sin, by contrast, is sometimes symbolized by poison in the water.) In the most extensive analogy, she compare the workings of prayer like four ways of watering a garden: (1) carrying water from a well with a bucket; (2) using wheels and an aqueduct to convey water from nearby source of water to the garden; (3) having the garden near a stream so that it is watered continually; (4) or having a consistent rainfall. In all cases, God=s action (represented by the water) is primary to making the soul fruitful, but the abundance varies as He become more naturally a part of one=s life.

4. In The Interior Castle, she also compares the advancement of a soul to proceeding on to greater mansions within the castle of God. Souls not even trying are like those outside in the darkness. At first, souls are in poorer circumstances, but still in the presence of God, while still struggling against the vermin of sin. Gradually, they advance to come closer and closer to the king. It should be noted that advancement, especially to the higher levels, is not simply a matter of leaving one mansion behind and moving on. One must gradually often go back to more basic matters to improve them.

C. St. John of the Cross, a Spanish priest of the sixteenth century, and with St. Theresa led the Carmelite reformer, suffered

greatly in his life and emphasized the need for suffering as we advance to overcome sin and allow God to work in our lives.

1. He was ordained at the age of 25 and offered a position as a university professor. But he felt called to a contemplative life. Along with St. Theresa of Avila, he tried to promote a more strict observance of the Carmelite rule. For a while, he enjoyed the support of the papal nuncio (ambassador) of Spain. But when the nuncio died, some of the opponents within his order condemned him for insubordination and imprisoned him for two years. In 1580 he escaped and received the support of Pope Gregory XIII as he became abbot of one of the more prominent monasteries. But he continued to face opposition for the remaining 11 years of his life.

2. His most famous works are The Dark Night of the Soul, The Living Flame of Love, The Ascent of Mount Carmel, and The Spiritual Canticle of the Soul.

3. Like St. Theresa, he very much describes the primacy of keeping moral laws and of accepting sufferings as central to advancement in the spiritual life. He begins The Dark Night of the Soul by warning about how the seven capital vices can infect prayer and how to purify oneself of them.

4. But he emphasizes more the dramatic moments in spiritual advancement as one struggles to go higher levels of prayer. He especially describes what he calls the active and passive dark nights of the senses and of the spirit, the latter two being fairly rare even among the devout.

5. The idea in all cases is to recognize that struggling through sufferings is necessary and to allow God to develop deeper levels of prayer, even if those deeper levels are not at first attractive.

D. St. Therese of Lisieux was a virtually unknown Carmelite nun in her life, but her autobiography became a classic after her death.

1. She was born in Bordeaux, but when her mother died young, the family moved to Lisieux. The family was very strongly Catholic and St. Therese received much support from her five sisters. After considering various vocations, she became very determined to enter religious life, as two of her sisters had already done (and the other three would soon do), so that she could pray for all vocations. In 1888, at the age of 15, she received special permission to enter the nearby Carmelite convent where her sister, Agnes, was also a sister. Agnes soon became prioress, and, recognizing Therese's deep prayer

life, which attracted little notice, she asked Therese to write a spiritual autobiography. As she wrote this autobiography, St. Therese became very ill and died at the age of 24. At the time of her death, she was known in the convent as a very joyful, but not particularly important person. However, soon after her death, the autobiography, The Story of Her Soul, would become a central text in popular devotion.

2. In her autobiography, she described what she called her Little Way, the attempt to combine love with every action, even and especially the least ones. For she deeply understood that any action done with a love for God and neighbor brings God's love to earth and, therefore, has an infinite value. Because all true callings are meant to be carried out in the context of the love of God, acting with this love taps into them all.

- The idea is that all things are guided by the love of God, and the crucial thing is to make that love a continual part of one's life. And doing so is in many ways easier when one has less important tasks, for then one does not have as many worries and can focus more on acting with love.

- One should also recognize that God uses our own imperfections and inability to carry out our desires to overcome our self-centeredness and make us focus on His much greater plan of salvation. Overall, whatever we can do with the greatest love, not what seems most important, is our calling.
- Pope Benedict XVI recently emphasized this point in his encyclical Caritas in Veritate, where he says that one should practice charity should be "the overriding principle" in all aspects of life, without exception.

III Carmelite spirituality thus emphasizing bringing the wisdom and holiness of God to earth through this deep prayer, even and especially when it is difficult, and through a willingness to be purified through suffering.

A. The emphasis in prayer is in the offering and openness to God, a willingness to let Him work in one's life. Consolations are a good reward, but not the essence of prayer.

1. For example, although she received great spiritual consolations, including visions of Jesus and of angels, she warns against placing primary value on such consolations. In chapter 18 of The Way of Perfection, she says, "Perfection and its reward do not consist in spiritual delights, but in great love and deeds done with love and truth." Spiritual consolations are the first promise of what will be the final reward in heaven. She maintains that there should always be openness to a sense of God's presence, but that sense is a special gift that cannot be demanded. She also spoke of a nun who was fairly simple and never got beyond basic vocal prayers; but she could tell this nun was advancing in holiness by her way of life and dedication to prayer and to other nuns.

2. As prayer advances, there is more and more a willingness to allow God to work in one's life, rather than insisting on one's own way. One is still active in the sense of controlling desires and desiring God, but God's grace is primary. The analogy of water from St. Theresa brings out this point. Likewise, St. John of the Cross focuses more on abandonment of will as a sacrifice than on more external sacrifices, although those are needed fully to be open to God. That, not feelings, is the essence of prayer. As he said at one point, "Many individuals think they are not praying when, indeed, their prayer is very intense. Others place high value on their prayer, when it is little more than nonexistent."

3. Thus also St. Therese did not sense God at the end of her life, until the final days, but strongly desired His presence. That struggle, like a similar struggle of Blessed Mother Theresa of Calcutta, is generally viewed as her crowning triumph.

B. There is a great sense that the moral life and prayer are needed for each other.

1. The two work together. We need a deep prayer life to advance in morals, but we also must be striving for greater moral perfection, even a desire to sacrifice for God, in order to advance in real prayer.

2. Not only keeping the moral law, but a willingness to suffer with Christ, even eventually a joy at suffering with Christ, see Acts 5:41; Col. 1:24, is needed to advance in prayer.

3. Thus, St. Theresa of Avila says in The Way of Perfection that three things are needed for contemplation for anyone: love for one another; emotional detachment from all created things; and true humility. She argues that a moral life and life of penance gives one the freedom for a life of prayer. Thus, the first three of her seven famous mansions focus mostly on purifying oneself of vices and distracting desires.

4. But she also says that growth in prayer leads one to be more human and compassionate because it fills one with the love of God and of neighbor. Thus, for example, at one point she says that, if a sister knows that another sister needs her help right now and continues in prayer instead, what she is doing is not prayer. She also points out that there is an initial joyfulness at turning toward God, but that it will not last unless it is put into action.

C. There is also a need for renunciation of desires in prayer,

1. St. John describes the dark nights as a part of this purification. The active night of the sense occurs when a person first resolves to live a life of virtue and engages in asceticism to reduce dependency on pleasures and ordinary consolations. The passive night of the sense occurs when a person is deprived of the spiritual consolation from prayer. This night purifies the soul from the need for such consolations and leads to the illuminative way and the beginning of contemplation. There are also the dark nights of the spirit, which God gives only to a few, not because he does not want all to come to perfection, but because only a few can deal with them.

2. St. Theresa of Avila also speaks of the purifications through suffering (physical, emotional, and even more difficult at time of popular opinion or success) that God guides one through to get to the fourth through sixth mansions of the Interior Castle. There is peacefulness at the end, but it comes in God's time not ours.

3. There must also be patience in advancement. God works in His time, not ours. Near the beginning of The Dark Night of the Soul, St. John writes, almost comically, of people who act foolishly because they are grasping for greater spiritual perfection than God wants to give them now. Likewise, St. Theresa compares God to a king, who may call us to seemingly great service, or seemingly little. What matters is performing it well.

D. There is a great notion that all people are called to that perfection, to give that prophetic witness, as St. Therese's Little Way shows. But, as her life also demonstrates, that perfection may not show up in success in our lifetime. For, as Jesus says, "No prophet is honored in his hometown." Luke 4:24. Rather the honor we seek, for ourselves and all others, is the glory of God.