

Carmelite spirituality – the life-blood of Therese

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Therese was a Discalced Carmelite Nun. The Carmelites have their origins and roots on the remote and inaccessible heights of Mount Carmel, a prominent landmark in northern Israel. “Carmel” is a word that is repeatedly in the writings of Thérèse to describe her spiritual and religious home. It is a biblical word, derived from the Hebrew *‘karem’* meaning a ‘vineyard’ or ‘garden’. When the suffix ‘el’ is added for the Divine name, it takes on the meaning of ‘the garden of the Lord.’ Most strictly, it describes a type of woodland, adorned with diverse shrubs, small trees and flowers, characteristic of Mt Carmel even today. “Carmel” is also a biblical symbol for beauty and fruitfulness; it is used by the spouse in the *Song of Songs* (7:5) in order to praise the beauty of the Beloved.

Elijah- Father of the Carmelites

The entire recorded history of Mount Carmel is one of a place of worship. Before coming to prominence in the sacred memory of the Judeo-Christian people through the example and witness of Elijah, the great prophet of the God of Israel, it was already sacred to the pagan gods Zeus and Baal, among others. It is on the heights of Mt Carmel that Elijah wages the great battle for the worship of the people of God, whose hearts had strayed to Baal. The story of the contest is told with great drama in I Kings 18. Elijah calls the people of God to stop their wavering and dithering, and to return to the God of the covenant. The prophets of Baal, despite all four hundred of them storming heaven with frantic gestures and wild cries, receive no answer: their sacrifice is forsaken. Elijah prays with calm and quiet assurance. His prayer is heard: God answers with fire to consume the sacrifice. “The Lord is God:

Elijah emerges from this as a great model of the person of prayer, a man who faces the challenge of the encounter with God head-on. He is pursued into the desert by his enemies, and after a forty-day journey he is left in the depths of failure, loneliness and despair. It is at this moment in his life, when the great prophet can see no future but death, that God comes to him. But this time it is not in the mighty wind, nor in the earthquake, nor in the fire that the Lord is revealed to Elijah. No—it is in the murmur of a gentle breeze, like a still, small voice. The one who had called others to conversion now had to experience this himself. It is only after this personal encounter with God in the prayer of silence that Elijah, whose heart is filled with ‘zealous zeal for the Lord, the God of hosts,’ may now return to the ministry of proclaiming God’s holy word.

A community of hermits

Elijah has had such a significant role in the sacred history of the people of God, that it is little wonder that many people across the centuries have been drawn to Mount Carmel, following in his footsteps, and those of his disciples, Elisha and the “sons of the prophets.” In the late twelfth century, another group of hermits were drawn to seek God on the holy slopes of Carmel, and in imitation of the holy and solitary prophet Elijah, lived in solitude in the caves that are to be found there. Over time, these hermits came together in the desire to share their journey to God as a community. They sought the approval of the Church, and received a *Rule from St. Albert*, Patriarch of Jerusalem, sometime between 1206-1214. This Rule of Life codified their original inspiration and the mature, lived reflection and experience. Their principal work was to ‘ponder the law of the Lord by day and night.’

A Rule of Life

Their priority, and the soul of the Rule that still forms the basis of daily life for thousands of Carmelites across the world, was prayer and contemplation. Everything about the Rule is designed to foster and preserve, deepen and express the essential love of prayer and contemplation—silence, solitude, love for one another, self-denial, and work.

Spread into Europe

The Primitive Rule of St Albert was approved by the Pope in 1226. Unfortunately, the often-idyllic life on Mt Carmel was not to last. The Saracen Muslims began to reoccupy those parts of the Holy land that had been captured in the Crusades, and Christians were persecuted. The hermits, now known as Carmelites—the brothers of Our Lady of Mount Carmel—began to drift back to their European countries of origin. The last Carmelites left the area with the destruction of Acre in 1291. The hermits regrouped in the newly emerging cities in Europe, and took their place alongside the other newly emergent mendicant orders, the Franciscans and Dominicans. The Rule was therefore amended and approved by Pope Innocent IV in 1247, to acknowledge that the ancient eremitical [solitary] lifestyle had now been enriched by a coenobitical [community] dimension.

A Marian spirituality

The hermits had chosen Mary as the patron of their first chapel on Mt Carmel. A key aspect of Carmelite life is being consecrated to Mary and being clothed in her scapular as a sign of this religious profession. The desire of many millions of Christians to share in this Carmelite consecration has meant that the scapular has become (with the Rosary) the only other great approved Marian devotion of the whole Church.

Carmelite spirituality is Marian because of a shared intimacy and devotion to Jesus Christ. A Carmelite discovers in Mary the great woman of faith, the first to believe in Jesus Christ, and the first to receive the salvation that he won for us. Like Mary, Carmelites are called to ponder daily the Word of God, that Christ might be born in us, and dwell in us. The Rule challenges us: 'the sword of the spirit, the Word of God, must dwell in your mouths and hearts,' that is, penetrate deeply into the very core of our being. In our Rule and in the vows that we live under, we profess our desire to live, with Mary, a life of allegiance to Jesus Christ.

Teresian Reform

Over the centuries, as the Carmelite Friars [and later the Nuns] lived their lives in the rapidly changing world, some aspects of the original vision of those first hermits on Mt Carmel was slowly lost. Many tried to reform the Order, to return it to its original focus of prayer and contemplation, but none were as successful as the great sixteenth century Spanish mystic, *Saint Teresa of Jesus of Avila*. She received great inspiration from gazing back at the 'holy fathers on Mt Carmel, who in such great solitude and with such contemplation of the world sought this treasure [prayer and contemplation], this precious pearl.' Aided by *Saint John of the Cross*, together they shaped what was to become a new Order, whose reform was marked by a simpler habit and sandals (thus the new Order became known as Discalced Carmelites). The reformed Order rapidly spread across the globe, to encircle it today, wrapped in a rich tapestry of cultures.

St Thérèse of the Child Jesus – Faithful Carmelite Sister

When the life of Thérèse is considered, the degree to which her very being is permeated by the Carmelite Rule and vision becomes clearly evident. Like Elijah, she shared a similar encounter with the small voice of silence on her Confirmation Day and echoes his perseverance in prayer during her dark night of faith. Like Elisha, Thérèse also prays for a double measure of the spirit of Elijah.

When we reflect on the *Rule of St Albert*, we see how fully Thérèse lived out every word. By the constant pondering of the Word of God, Thérèse discovered a place of ever deeper intimacy with her Beloved. The little way that Thérèse lived out is thoroughly Discalced Carmelite. She received profound inspiration in the life and writings of *St Teresa of Jesus* and *St John of the Cross*—her writings are littered with their quotes. 'I want to become a saint. I want to love God as much as St Teresa did.' Perhaps the true greatness of Thérèse is the way that she was able to embrace her desire to imitate Jesus in the hidden life of contemplative prayer and sacrifice that a Carmelite Monastery offers.

"Carmel was the desert where God wanted me to hide."