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“ON THE HISTORY AND SPIRIT OF CARMEL”

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On the History and Spirit of Carmel

Until a few years ago, very little from our silent monasteries penetrated into the world. It is different today. People talk a lot about Carmel and want to hear something about life behind the high walls. This is chiefly attributable to the great saints of our time who have captivated the entire Catholic world with amazing speed, for instance, *St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus*. Gertrud von le Fort's novel about Carmel has vigorously directed German intellectual circles to our Order, as has her beautiful foreword to the letters of Marie Antoinette de Geuser.

What does the average Catholic know about Carmel? That it is a very strict, perhaps the strictest penitential order, and that from it comes the holy habit of the Mother of God, the brown scapular, which unites many of the faithful in the world to us. The whole church celebrates with us the patronal feast of our Order, the feast of the scapular, on July 16. Most people also recognize at least the names of "little" Thérèse and "great" Teresa, whom we call our Holy Mother. She is generally seen as the founder of the Discalced Carmelites. The person who is a little more familiar with the history of the church and monasteries certainly knows that we revere the prophet Elijah as our leader and father. But people consider this a "legend" that does not mean very much. We who live in Carmel and who daily call on our Holy Father Elijah in prayer know that for us he is not a shadowy figure out of the dim past. His spirit is active among us in a vital tradition and determines how we live. Our Holy Mother strenuously denied that she was founding a new Order. She wanted nothing except to reawaken the original spirit of the old Rule [of St. Albert].

Our Holy Father Elijah succinctly says what is most important in the first words of his that the Scriptures give us. He says to King Ahab who worshiped idols (1 Kgs 17:1), "As the Lord the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word."

To stand before the face of the living God—that is our vocation. The [p. 2] holy prophet set us an example. He stood before God's face because this was the eternal treasure for whose sake he gave up all earthly goods. He had no house; he lived wherever the Lord directed him from moment to moment: in loneliness beside the brook of Carith, in the little house of the poor widow of Zarephath of Sidon, or in the caves of Mount Carmel. His clothing was an animal hide like that of that other great penitent and prophet, the Baptist. The hide of a dead animal reminds us that the human body is also subject to death. Elijah is not concerned about his daily bread. He lives trusting in the solicitude of the heavenly Father and is marvellously sustained. A raven brings him his daily food while he is in solitude. The miraculously increased provisions of the pious widow nourish him in Zarephath. Prior to the long trek to the holy mountain where the Lord was to appear to him, an angel with heavenly bread strengthens him. So he is for us an example of the gospel poverty that we have vowed, an authentic prototype of the Saviour.

Elijah stands before God's face because all of his love belongs to the Lord. He lives outside all natural human relationships. We hear nothing of his father and mother, nothing of a wife or child. His "relatives" are those who do the will of the Father as he does: Elisha,

whom God has designated as his successor, and the “sons of the prophets,” who follow him as their leader. Glorifying God is his joy. His zeal to serve God tears him apart: “I am filled with jealous zeal for the Lord, the God of hosts” (1 Kgs 19:10, 14; these words were used as a motto on the shield of the Order). By living penitentially, he atones for the sins of his time. The offence that the misguided people give to the Lord by their manner of worship hurts him so much that he wants to die. And the Lord consoles him only as he consoles his especially chosen ones: He himself appears to Elijah on a lonely mountain, reveals himself in soft rustling after a thunderstorm, and announces his will to him in clear words.

The prophet, who serves the Lord in complete purity of heart and completely stripped of everything earthly, is also a model of obedience. He stands before God’s face like the angels before the eternal throne, awaiting God’s sign, always ready to serve. Elijah has no other will than the will of his Lord. When God bids, he goes before the king and fearlessly risks giving him bad news that must arouse the king’s hatred. When God wills it, he leaves the country at the threat of violence; but he also returns at God’s command, though the danger has not disappeared.

Anyone who is so unconditionally faithful to God can also be certain of God’s faithfulness. He is permitted to speak “as someone who has power,” may open and close heaven, may command the waters to let him walk through and remain dry, may call down fire from heaven to consume his sacrifice, to execute punishment on God’s enemies, and may breathe new life into a dead person. We see the Saviour’s predecessor [p. 3] provided with all the graces that he has promised to his own. And the greatest crown is still in reserve for Elijah: Before the eyes of his true disciple, Elisha, he is carried off in a fiery carriage to a secret place far from all human abodes. According to the testimony of the Book of Revelation, he will return near the end of the world to suffer a martyr’s death for his Lord in the battle against the Antichrist.

On his feast, which we celebrate on July 20, the priest goes to the altar in red vestments. On this day the monastery of our friars on Mount Carmel, the site of Elijah’s grotto, is the goal of mighty bands of pilgrims. Jews, Moslems, and Christians of all denominations vie in honouring the great prophet. We remember him in the liturgy on still another day, in the epistle and preface of the *Feast of Mount Carmel*, as we usually call the feast of the scapular. On this day we give thanks that our dear Lady has clothed us with the “garment of salvation.” The events providing the occasion for this feast did not occur until much later in the Western world. In the year 1251 [according to tradition] the Blessed Virgin appeared to the general of the Order, Simon Stock, an Englishman, and gave him the scapular. But the preface reminds us that it was our dear Lady of Mount Carmel who bestowed this visible sign of her motherly protection on her children far from the original home of the Order. It was she who manifested herself to the prophet Elijah in the form of a little rain cloud and for whom the sons of the prophets built the first shrine on Mount Carmel. The legend of the Order tells us that the Mother of God would have liked to remain with the hermit brothers on Mount Carmel. We can certainly understand that she felt drawn to the place where she had been venerated through the ages and where the holy prophet had lived in the same spirit that also filled her from the time her earthly sojourn began. Released from everything earthly, to stand in worship in the presence of God, to love him with her whole heart, to beseech his grace for sinful people, and in atonement to substitute herself for these people, as the maidservant of the Lord to await his beckoning—this was her life.

The hermits of Carmel lived as sons of the great prophet and as “brothers of the Blessed Virgin.” St. Berthold organized them as coenobites, and at the instigation of St. Brocard, the spirit they had received from their predecessors was laid down in our holy *Rule*. Around 1200, it was given to the Order by St. Albert, the patriarch of Jerusalem, and authorized by Pope Innocent IV in 1247. It also condenses the entire meaning of our life in a short statement: “All are to remain in their own cells..., meditating on the Law of the Lord day and night and watching in prayer, unless otherwise justly employed.” “To watch in prayer”—this is to say the same thing that Elijah said with the words, “to stand before the face of God.” Prayer is looking up into the face of the Eternal. We [p. 4] can do this only when the spirit is awake in its innermost depths, freed from all earthly occupations and pleasures that numb it. Being awake in body does not guarantee this consciousness, nor does the rest required by nature interfere. “To meditate on the Law of the Lord”—this can be a form of prayer when we take prayer in its usual broad sense. But if we think of “watching in prayer” as being immersed in God, which is characteristic of contemplation, then meditation on the Law is only a means to contemplation.

What is meant by “the Law of the Lord”? Psalm 118, which we pray every Sunday and on solemnities at Prime, is entirely filled with the command to know the Law and to be led by it through life. The Psalmist was certainly thinking of the Law of the Old Covenant. Knowing it actually did require life-long study, and fulfilling it, life-long exertion of the will. But the Lord has freed us from the yoke of this Law. We can consider the Saviour’s great commandment of love, which he says includes the whole Law and the Prophets, as the Law of the New Covenant. Perfect love of God and of neighbour can certainly be a subject worthy of an entire lifetime of meditation. But we understand the Law of the New Covenant, even better, to be the Lord himself, since he has in fact lived as an example for us of the life we should live. We thus fulfil our Rule when we hold the image of the Lord continually before our eyes in order to make ourselves like him. We can never finish studying the Gospels. But we have the Saviour not only in the form of reports of witnesses to his life. He is present to us in the most Blessed Sacrament. The hours of adoration before the Highest Good, and listening for the voice of the Eucharistic God, are simultaneously “meditation on the Law of the Lord” and “watching in prayer.” But the highest level is reached “when the Law is deep within our hearts” (Ps 40:8), when we are so united with the triune God, whose temple we are, that his Spirit rules all we do or omit. Then it does not mean we are forsaking the Lord when we do the work that obedience requires of us. Work is unavoidable as long as we are subject to nature’s laws and to the necessities of life. And, following the word and example of the apostle Paul, our holy Rule commands us to earn our bread by the work of our hands. But for us this work is always merely a means and must never be an end in itself. To stand before the face of God continues to be the real content of our lives.

Islam’s conquest of the Holy Land drove the hermit brothers from Carmel. Only for the past 300 years has our Order again had a shrine of the Mother of God on the holy mountain. The transition from solitude into the everyday life of Western culture led to a falsification of the original spirit of the Order. The protective walls of separation, of rigorous penance and of silence fell, and the pleasures and cares of the world pressed through the opened gates. The Monastery of the Incarnation in Avila, which our Holy Mother entered in the year 1535, was [p. 5] such a monastery of the mitigated Rule. For decades she endured the conflict between the snares of worldly relationships and the pull of undivided surrender to

God. But the Lord allowed her no rest until she let go of everything that bound her and really became serious about recognizing that *God alone suffices*.

The great schism of faith that was tearing Europe apart during her time, the loss of so many souls, aroused in her the passionate desire to stop the harm and to offer the Lord recompense, whereupon God gave her the idea of taking a little flock of selected souls and founding a monastery according to the original Rule and of serving him there with the greatest perfection. After innumerable battles and difficulties, she was able to found the monastery of St. Joseph in Avila. Her great work of reform grew from there. At her death she left behind 36 monasteries of women and men of the strict observance, the new branch of the Order, the "Discalced" Carmelites. The monasteries of the reform were to be places where the spirit of the ancient Carmel was to live again. The re-established original Rule and the Constitutions drawn up by the saint herself form the fence by means of which she intended to protect her vineyards against the dangers from without. Her writings on prayer, the most complete and most animated presentation of the inner life, are the precious legacy through which her spirit continues to work among us (I have published a very concise presentation of her life in the collection "Kleine Lebensbilder" [Freiburg (Switzerland): Kanisiuswerkes, 1934].) It is the ancient spirit of Carmel. However, influenced by the battles over faith raging in her time, she gave stronger emphasis than did the primitive Cannel to the thought of reparation and of supporting the servants of the church who withstood the enemy in the front lines.

As our second father and leader, we revere the first male discalced Carmelite of the reform, St. John of the Cross. We find in him the ancient eremitical spirit in its purest form. His life gives an impression as though he had no inner struggles. Just as from his earliest childhood he was under the special protection of the Mother of God, so from the time he reached the age of reason, he was drawn to rigorous penance, to solitude, to letting go of everything earthly, and to union with God. He was the instrument chosen to be an example and to teach the reformed Carmel the spirit of Holy Father Elijah. Together with Mother Teresa, he spiritually formed the first generation of male and female discalced Carmelites, and through his writings, he also illumines for us the way on the "Ascent of Mount Carmel."

The daughters of St. Teresa, personally trained by her and Father John, founded the first monasteries of the reform in France and Belgium. From there the Order also soon advanced into the Rhineland. The great French Revolution and the Kulturkampf in Germany tried to [p. 6] suppress it by force. But as soon as the pressure abated, it sprang to life again. It was in this garden that the "little white flower" [i.e., St. Thérèse of Lisieux] bloomed, so quickly captivating hearts far beyond the boundaries of the Order, not only as a worker of miracles for those in need, but also as a director of "little souls" on the path of "spiritual childhood. ' Many people came to know of this path through her, but very few know that it is not really a new discovery, but the path onto which life in Carmel pushes us. The greatness of the young saint was that she recognized this path with ingenious deduction and that she followed it with heroic decisiveness to the end. The walls of our monasteries enclose a narrow space. To erect the structure of holiness in it, one must dig deep and build high, must descend into the depths of the dark night of one's own nothingness in order to be raised up high into the sunlight of divine love and compassion.

Not every century produces a work of reform as powerful as that of our Holy Mother. Nor does every age give us a reign of terror during which we have the opportunity to lay our heads on the executioner's block for our faith and for the ideal of our Order as did the sixteen

Carmelites of Compiègne. But all who enter Carmel must give themselves wholly to the Lord. Only one who values her little place in the choir before the tabernacle more highly than all the splendour of the world can live here, can then truly find a joy that no worldly splendour has to offer.

Our daily schedule ensures us of hours for solitary dialogue with the Lord, and these are the foundation of our life. Together with priests and other ancient orders of the church, we pray the Liturgy of the Hours, and this Divine Office is for us as for them our first and most sacred duty. But it is not for us the supporting ground. No human eye can see what God does in the soul during hours of inner prayer. It is grace upon grace. And all of life's other hours are our thanks for them.

Carmelites can repay God's love by their everyday lives in no other way than by carrying out their daily duties faithfully in every respect—all the little sacrifices that a regimen structured day after day in all its details demands of an active spirit; all the self-control that living in close proximity with different kinds of people continually requires and that is achieved with a loving smile; letting no opportunity go by for serving others in love. Finally, crowning this is the personal sacrifice that the Lord may impose on the individual soul. This is the "little way," a bouquet of insignificant little blossoms that are daily placed before the Almighty—perhaps a silent, life-long martyrdom that no one suspects and that is at the same time a source of deep peace and hearty joyousness and a fountain of grace that bubbles over everything—we do not know where it goes, and the people whom it reaches do not know from whence it comes.