

Topic 13: Carmelites: Hermits and Friars, Part 1

Overview: The Carmelite tradition developed in a different way than Franciscan and Dominican spirituality. It began as a group of lay hermits in the thirteenth century. They modeled themselves on the prophet Elijah who lived in caves and found God not in the thunder but in the tiny whispering sounds (1 Kings 19). Elijah became the archetype of these early hermits who, following his example, lived on Mount Carmel. Early Carmelite life was lived in caves where solitude, silence, and prayer were the order of the day.

The History of the Carmelite Movement

- Hermits made a pilgrimage to Israel, joining other hermits living around Mt. Carmel. By 1206, they had a primitive structure and a leader. They asked for approval for their way of life.
- The Rule of St. Albert was established in 1214. The Carmelite life was to be marked by solitude, continuous prayer, silence, fasting, perpetual abstinence from meat, manual work, vocal recitation of the Psalms, and attendance of Mass.
 - 1) Initially, their way of life resembled the monastic structure.
- By 1237, a revised rule was approved by the Pope, establishing the Carmelites in Europe. They shifted from rustic hermits to highly educated priests.
 - 1) The first Carmelite nuns were admitted around 1452.
 - 2) Carmelite history is filled with minor and major reforms.

Carmelite Spirituality: The Carmelites were a blend of hermits and mendicants. Following the example of Elijah, the Carmelite school teaches that one must master one's sinfulness by going into the desert and be purified by God.

- 1) Solitude, self-denial, and devotion to Mary are significant themes in Carmelite spirituality.
- Since the 15th century, Carmelites have integrated a stark lifestyle with the promotion of an affective spirituality and mystical prayer.
 - The Carmelite tradition has a prophetic edge, which is attached to their identification with Elijah.

The Carmelites Become Mendicants

- At the time that the Carmelites were establishing hermetical houses throughout Europe, the Franciscans and Dominicans were meeting the pastoral challenges of the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. Carmelites were living in a time of reform within the Church.
 - 1) The purpose of the Council was to deal with heretical movements and decadence within the Church.
 - 2) Faced with these pastoral concerns, the Carmelites sought papal approval for a revision of their way of life that would make it possible for them to follow in the footsteps of the Dominicans and Franciscans.
 - (a) They received approval for their revised formula, and the Carmelites became friars.
 - (b) The hermits from Mt. Carmel were now allowed to settle in towns and to live a more communal life.
- Despite internal and external opposition, the Carmelites entered into the ranks of the Mendicants in the 13th century.
 - 1) There was a fundamental tension to Carmelite spirituality. Vital Carmelite reforms always returned to this tension.

Symbols in Carmelite Spirituality

The Prophet Elijah

- 1) Elijah holds a significant place in Carmelite spirituality. Elijah had been a model for monks and hermits long before the Carmelites came onto the scene.
- 2) Elijah is an archetype for Carmelite spirituality. He is looked upon as a symbol for the community.
- 3) “I am zealous with zeal for the Lord God of hosts.”
- 4) Elijah found God in tiny whispering sounds.

Mary

- 1) The chapel around which the hermits on Mt. Carmel situated their hermitages was dedicated to Mary.
- 2) They are called the Brothers of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel.

3) Towards the end of the 13th century, the Carmelites stated that their Order had been founded to honor Mary.

4) In the 15th century, devotion to Mary crystalized around Simon Stock's vision of Mary. The wearing of the brown scapular came to symbolize a dedication to Mary. The scapular has become a sign of affiliation with the Carmelite Order.

5) In the 17th century, Carmelites developed a Marian mysticism.

6) Up until the present day, the Carmelites continue the medieval custom of making their vows to both God and Mary.

Reform

- Reform is an important aspect of Carmelite spirituality. The founding and development of the Carmelite tradition indicates a sense of unrest. The tradition embodies desert spirituality, monastic spirituality, and mendicant spirituality. The convergence of these three traditions results in an ongoing tension in the Carmelite Order.
- By the early 15th century, Carmelites in northern Italy initiated a reform that came to be known as the Congregation of Mantua. The Mantuan reform sought to restore solitude, community life, and poverty.
- John Soreth was the most important Carmelite reformer prior to the 16th century. After his death, his reform was not sustained. Other reform movements sprung up.
- The reforms of the Carmelite tradition reached a deeper level when women were brought into the Carmelite community.

Review Questions

1. Devotion to Mary is at the heart of Carmelite spirituality. Pope Paul VI proclaimed that Mary is the "Mother of the Church." Reflect on the place of Mary in your spiritual life.

2. The early hermits of Mount Carmel were called out of their caves into the world when the papacy included them among the newly emerging mendicant orders. These early hermits changed to respond to the needs of the Church. What are some of the needs of today's Church that call us to new and creative forms of spirituality? And what might these forms be?