

## **Topic 14: Carmelites: Hermits and Friars, Part 2**

**Overview:** The sixteenth century witnessed a reform of the Carmelite friars and nuns through the life and writings of St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross. In a sense, they represent a return to the earlier asceticism of the hermits of Mount Carmel. The Carmelite reform was part of the larger reform of the Church after the Protestant Reformation. Thus, the emphasis on contemplative prayer, union with God, and solitude resurfaces and is reshaped by Teresa and John. The Carmelite School has produced spiritual giants who embody all of the impulses of Christian spirituality that were present up to the sixteenth century and carried these to new places.

### **St. Teresa of Avila**

- Teresa of Avila lived from 1515 to 1582. She experienced a midlife conversion. Prior to this moment, she lived a more lax form of religious life in a Carmelite monastery.
- Solitude was unavailable to Teresa in the large and crowded monastery. She shaped a new model of Carmelite life with the foundation of San Jose in Avila. She limited the number of nuns allowed to live in the monastery in order to support a life of solitude and prayer.
  - 1) She symbolized her transformation by changing her name, referring to herself simply as Teresa of Jesus after her conversion.
- People began to come to Teresa and ask her to instruct them in prayer. She composed *The Way of Perfection*, in which she presented a schema of the spiritual life and reflected on the mystical manifestations of God.
- She wrote her classic exposition of the mystical journey to God in *The Interior Castle*. In it, she leads the reader through seven mansions, reflecting the spiritual journey.
- Teresa was beatified in the 17th century. In 1970, Pope Paul VI declared her the first woman Doctor of the Church.

### **St. John of the Cross**

- John of the Cross lived from 1542 to 1591.
- Teresa of Avila handpicked John of the Cross to be her collaborator in the reform of the Carmelite Order.
- John was single-minded in his God-centered life. His passion for reform led him to be rejected by his brothers. His Carmelite brothers threw him into prison.

- While imprisoned, he composed many stanzas of his Spiritual Canticle. In it, he reflects the mystical notion of espousal with God. The darkness in John of the Cross is another form of spiritual poverty.
- He later wrote the Ascent of Mount Carmel and the Dark Night of the Soul.
  - 1) In the Ascent of Mount Carmel, John of the Cross returns to the tradition of Elijah, inviting us back into the cave.
  - 2) In the Dark Night of the Soul, he suggests that we find God in the darkness. He urges us to stay in our own spiritual darkness.
- For John of the Cross, the goal of the contemplative life is the transformation of the soul and the union of God in love.
- After Vatican II, especially from the 1980s onward, there has been an emphasis on reading the Spanish mystics.
- Both John and Teresa reflect the movement and development of Carmelite spirituality well into the 20th century.

### **St. Therese of Lisieux**

- Therese of Lisieux lived from 1873 to 1897. She is one of the most widely known Carmelites.
- She was also declared a Doctor of the Church.
- There is a simplicity in her writings and lifestyle that sets her apart from other Doctors of the Church. Because of her extraordinary spirituality and influence on the Carmelite tradition, she is recognized as a key figure in the history of the Church.
- Therese of Lisieux lived and wrote about a spirituality that matured in the crucible of suffering. In the last 18 months of her life, the young nun endured a terrible darkness marked by temptations against faith. Ultimately, her faith protected her against suicide.
- The sources of her spirituality were the Bible, the writings of John of the Cross, and *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis.
- She lived out the Carmelite tradition in a humble convent in Lisieux, France.
- Therese of Lisieux is especially noted for her autobiography, *The Story of a Soul*, which she was commanded to write by her superiors.
  - 1) She wrote a passage indicating that she felt that her basic vocation was to love, which was tied to a spirituality of martyrdom.
  - 2) Therese was on fire with the love of God and a love of the world. She brings the world into her heart from inside the monastery.

## **Modern Carmelite Figures**

- Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity (1880–1906) is noted especially for her Trinitarian spirituality.
- Edith Stein (1891–1942) was a brilliant philosopher who served as an assistant to Edmund Husserl. She published an important study of John of the Cross. She was executed in a Nazi concentration camp.
- Carmelite spirituality has taken on many forms over the centuries. It brings us to new places with its focus on solitude that leads to deeper and reformed ways of contemplation.

## **Review Questions**

1. St. John of the Cross writes about the God we find in the dark moments of life. The next time you feel lonely, anxious or depressed, don't run—stay there and find the God who calls you in those dark places.
2. St. Teresa of Avila writes about the purification that we need to experience before going into the castle of the spiritual life. Think about ways you need to change, to be purified in order to go deeper.
3. St. Therese of Lisieux never left her cloister but has been named patroness of the missions because of her deep love and concern for the needs of the world. As an expression of your love, bring the needs of the world, especially the missions in developing nations, into your prayer.