

6. CARMELITES

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.

I. 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.

II. 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.

III. 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.

IV. 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.

V. 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?

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.

I. 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.

II. 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.

III. 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 a 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.

IV. 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.