
Carmelite Spirituality

Carmel: The Founders and Their World

Around the year 1200, a group of lay hermits gathered at Mt. Carmel in Haifa—a city that still exists today as part of modern-day Israel. They had gathered to follow a formula for communal life given by Albert, Patriarch of Jerusalem. This formula for living included obedience, silence, solitude, prayer (especially praying the psalms), fasting, poverty, sharing of material goods, manual labor, asceticism, fraternal love, service to the poor (in imitation of Christ), and devotion to Christ (especially demonstrated by daily eucharist) (Egan 228). Because of the association of the Old Testament prophet Elijah with Mt Carmel, he was considered to be the group’s model and “founder.” Devotion to Mary (as the model of devotion to Christ) was also part of the charism, and was signified by the dedication of the chapel at Mt. Carmel to her.

Political unrest forced the group to leave the Holy Land and migrate to Europe and England in the 1300s. Concomitant with the move, the formula given by Albert became a rule, and the group became an order. Carmelites were permitted to live in towns in communal dwellings, where they could eat and pray together. These early Carmelites could travel for pastoral ministry and worked as teachers, preachers, and sacramental ministers. Because of the need to travel, monastic practices had to be modified, although the insistence on individual and communal poverty was not changed. The Carmelites

saw the need to embrace both silence and solitude in the midst of their preaching and teaching. Like other orders, over time, the Carmelites became lax in their practices. Reform was needed, and in the 1500s, two persons of towering ability appeared to provide it.

Teresa of Avila

By the late fifteenth century, women had been accepted into the Carmelite order. Teresa of Avila (1515–1582) was a Carmelite whose own conversion was prompted, in part, by a serious illness. According to her own *Autobiography*, Teresa had entered the convent as a boarding student in 1531. Although she was inspired by a particular nun, she was not convinced that she was called to the same life. “All the nuns were pleased with me; for the Lord had given me grace, wherever I was, to please people, and so I became a great favorite. Although at the time, I had the greatest possible aversion from being a nun” (72). After eighteen months there, Theresa became ill and while recuperating, she decided to enter the convent. “This decision, then, to reenter the religious life seems to have been inspired more by servile fear [of damnation] than of love” (75).

Eventually, in 1536, she entered a Carmelite convent, but soon after, although she described her happiness in the convent, she suffered many physical, emotional, and spiritual ailments. Many treatments were tried, and most failed to bring her any relief. During her illness, especially after she returned to her convent, Teresa did much spiritual reading (particularly Augustine’s *Confessions*) and reflection, especially meditating on the suffering Christ and God’s loving presence.

Her *Autobiography* makes clear that, at this time, Teresa was vain, wanting others to think well of her. She realized that her heart was torn in terms of her devotion to God and her devotion to the ways of the world. Her prayer life had become perfunctory. Even within her Carmelite community, Teresa noted that there were many distractions to tempt her, especially visitors to the convent and the social cliques of the outside world that operated within the convent

as well. It took a number of years—and God’s grace—to help her overcome these obstacles.

Over the course of these years, Teresa spoke with a number of spiritual directors about the desire to grow in intimacy with God, but some of these directors completely failed to understand her. When Teresa began having more intense spiritual experiences, she could not speak freely about them as doing so placed her at risk. At the time, inward spiritual experiences and individual reading of scripture were held suspect as being too “Protestant” by the Inquisition.

She eventually received permission to found a new community based on the original Carmelite rule proposed by Albert and immediately set out to do so. Teresa’s new community was characterized by devotion to Christ, prayer, earthiness, healthy human relationships, joy, and warmth; she was highly suspicious of any “holier-than-thou” or gloomy attitudes! Teresa understood that her little community was connected to the larger body of Christ; for that reason, cultivating love among the various members in her community was absolutely necessary.

For Teresa, the more one is aware of the indwelling of God, the more one is eager to serve God and others because one sees God in others. Furthermore, friendship with God permits one to share in the life of the Trinity, which means seeing God in everyone. This was a theme emphasized by Augustine as well. Teresa wrote much about these themes for her Carmelite community. These works include her *Autobiography*, *The Way of Perfection*, as well as *The Interior Castle*. In *Castle*, Teresa describes movement to God by use of an analogy with seven rooms of a castle, with the outermost rooms precluding the spiritual life and the four innermost rooms signifying increasing union with God. Although profound, her writings also contain elements of humor. Teresa emphasized the Prayer of the Quiet, which is profound contemplation. She described it in chapter 31 of *The Way of Perfection*:

Now, daughters, I still want to describe this Prayer of the Quiet . . . as the Lord has been pleased to teach it to me, perhaps in order that I might describe

it to you. It is in this kind of prayer, as I said, that the Lord seems to begin to show us that He is hearing our petition. . . . This is a supernatural state, and however hard we try, we cannot reach it for ourselves, for it is a state in which the soul enters into peace, or rather in which the Lord gives it peace through His presence. . . . In this state, all the faculties are stilled. The soul, in a way which has nothing to do with the outward senses, realizes that it is now very close to its God, and that, if it were but a little closer, it would become one with Him through union. . . .

It is, as it were, in a swoon, both inwardly and outwardly. . . . The body experiences the greatest delight and the soul is conscious of a deep satisfaction. . . . There seems nothing left for it to desire. The faculties are stilled and have no wish to move, for any movement they may make appears to hinder the soul from loving God. . . .

Persons in this state prefer the body to remain motionless, for otherwise their peace would be destroyed: for this reason, they dare not stir. Speaking is a distress to them: they will spend a whole hour on a single repetition of the Paternoster. . . . Sometimes tears come to their eyes, but they weep very gently and quite without distress: their whole desire is the hallowing of this name. They seem not to be in the world, and have no wish to hear or see anything but their God; nothing distresses them, nor does it seem that anything can possibly do so.

Teresa believed that the more one befriended God, the more that God would grant this gift of the Prayer of the Quiet.

John of the Cross

John of the Cross (1542–1591) is considered to be the co-founder of the reformed Carmelite community begun by Teresa of Avila. He is also one of Christianity's greatest mystical theologians. His poem *Dark Night of the Soul* has inspired spiritual seekers throughout the centuries.

John founded a monastery based on the original Carmelite ideal as proposed by Albert, and attempted to correct the laxity that had crept into observance of the Carmelite rule by communities of men. Because of his enormous zeal for God, John was imprisoned by those in his own community who disagreed with his reforms. He later escaped and was hidden by nuns until it was safe for him to re-emerge. Yet, it was precisely his experience of rejection that paved the way for his spirituality with its mystical elements and its poetry. In fact, John is considered Spain's greatest poet. His writings include *Spiritual Canticle*, *Ascent of Mt. Carmel*, and *Dark Night of the Soul*.

This is the beginning of *Dark Night of the Soul*:

On a dark night, kindled in love with yearnings—
oh, happy chance!
I went forth without being observed, my house be-
ing now at rest.
In darkness and secure, by the secret ladder, dis-
guised—oh, happy chance!
In darkness and in concealment, my house being
now at rest.
In the happy night, in secret when none saw me
Nor I beheld aught, without light or guide, save
that which burned in my heart.
This light guided me more surely than the light of
noonday
To a place where he (well I knew who!) was await-
ing me.
A place where none appeared.

Oh, night that guided me, oh, night more lovely
than the dawn,
Oh, night that joined Beloved with lover, lover
transformed in the Beloved!
Upon my flowery breast, kept wholly for himself
alone,
There he stayed sleeping, and I caressed him. And
the fanning of the cedars made a breeze.
The breeze blew from the turret, as I parted his
locks;
With his gentle hand, he wounded my neck and
caused all my senses to be suspended.
I remained, lost in oblivion; my face reclined on
the Beloved.
All ceased, and I abandoned myself, leaving my
cares forgotten among the lilies.

The last two stanzas present ideas that are reminiscent of Teresa: “suspended senses/faculties” and “all ceased and I abandoned myself” seem not to be of this world. Clearly, they are saying something about the same phenomenon: an encounter with God that mere words and normal human experiences cannot describe.

For John, the dark night of the soul is God’s initiative of our liberation from worldly attachments so that we can be totally God-centered. Although God uses the Church, scripture, and the sacraments to reach each person, God also gives each person grace uniquely particular to him or her in whatever life situation that the person finds him- or herself. We cannot achieve a state of union with God intellectually or by our own efforts. We can only love God in a spiritually mature way when we are free of external attachments to the world and attachments to ourselves.

In this dark night, everything might seem to fall apart (as it did for John). It may seem as if God is absent. We seek God, but cannot find any comfort. The God who once seemed so present in our lives seems entirely absent. John felt that this was to purify us so that we will be satisfied with God alone. The dark night is associated

with affliction, confusion, and frustration, as our comfort zones are stripped away. The passive night of the senses is a time when our busyness moves toward contemplation, while the passive night of the spirit is a time when we are purified. We lose possessiveness and gain freedom and maturity. This sounds unpleasant, but the closer one draws to God, the more one can enjoy life in this “night.”

John believed that there were three spiritual stages: the purgative way, when we realize the wrongs we have done and express sorrow; the illuminative way, when God continues to reveal more about himself to us; and the unitive way, when we move toward union with God. In the end, how we love one another and how we love God are reciprocal, and we need an experience of human tenderness to move us toward God. The closer we come to God, the more compassionate we become to others.

Hallmarks of Carmelite Spirituality

Carmelite spirituality is devoted to Christ.

For a Christian, Christ is the beginning and the end of the spiritual life. His love for us was demonstrated through his incarnation and his passion and death on the cross. His desire to become one with us and his continued desire for intimacy with us should evoke a profound desire on our part for greater intimacy with him. He chose us; he loved us *first*.

Carmelite spirituality is devoted to Mary.

In Mary’s assent to God, she is a model of perfect obedience. In her giving birth to Jesus, she is the first disciple, bringing Christ to the world. In her faithfulness to her Son at the cross, she is a model of living in the hope of things to come. These are all important attributes for Carmelites.

Carmelite spirituality seeks God above all things.

Everything that exists does so because God wills it to be. Although all things are not God (pantheism), all things reflect something of God in their being. If we open our eyes (and hearts), we

begin to encounter God in everything, even in the ordinary things and tasks of life. If we pay attention to the people and creatures around us, we encounter the God who loved them into existence.

Carmelite spirituality is aware of the indwelling God.

“The Kingdom of God is within,” Jesus said. We need to come to terms with the reality that God is both transcendent (totally other) and immanent (within us). In other words, God is beyond anything that we can fathom, but God is as intimate as our next breath. As we gain greater appreciation for God’s indwelling, we respect others and love them more perfectly. After all, if God lives in us, then God lives in others. If God has chosen to love others into existence and to make his dwelling in them, who are we to treat them shabbily?

Carmelite spirituality values compassionate listening to others through loving service.

Just as God listens to us, so, too, are we to listen to others compassionately, to suffer with them, serving them in whatever way we can. In all this, we are to be humble in our encounters with others, being with them without trying to “fix” them or without having the (erroneous) impression that we know best what others should do. In every encounter with others, we recognize that God is also present and act accordingly. In this way, we live Matthew 25: “Whatever you did to the least of these, you did to me.”

Carmelite spirituality encourages listening to God through silence, solitude, and contemplation.

Because God is gracious and listens to us, we must resist the temptation to be the ones constantly speaking, telling God what we know, what we need, what others should do, and what God should do! In humility, we must be silent, still, and patient and let God be God. We also need to ask for God’s help in overcoming anything that prevents us from achieving stillness.

Carmelite spirituality commands: Love always!

God loves us first, and that is why we are here. Christ loves us and died for us, securing our redemption. The Spirit loves us,

accompanying and guiding us every step along the way. Showered with so much love, we are to love God and others without holding back. Even—and especially—when others are difficult or choose to act in evil ways, we are to love. After all, God loves us when we sin against him, especially when we are difficult or treat others badly.

Other Well-Known Carmelites

Thérèse of Lisieux (1873–1897): A Carmelite nun who was also known as the “Little Flower.” Because she could not do great things (in the world’s estimation) for God, she resolved to do little things with great love. True to her Carmelite tradition, she is both mystical and full of love, as evidenced in the words from her own autobiography:

“But I will look for some means of going to heaven by a little way which is very short and very straight. . . .” (114) “I am a very little soul who can only offer very little things to God.” (143) “I have found my vocation. My vocation is love! . . . I will be love.” (155)

Love proves itself by deeds, so how am I to show my love? Well, I will scatter flowers, perfuming the divine throne with their fragrance, and I’ll sweetly sing my hymn of love. Yes, my Beloved, that is how I’ll spend my short life. The only way I can prove my love is by scattering flowers, and these flowers are every little sacrifice, every glance and word, and the doing of the least of actions for love. I wish both to suffer and to find joy through love. Thus will I scatter my flowers. (156)

Edith Stein (1891–1942): A Carmelite nun (Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross) who was a Jewish convert to Catholicism. An excellent teacher and writer, she wrote extensively on philosophical and

theological matters. She was arrested by the Nazis (because she was Jewish) and executed at Auschwitz.

References for Learning More about Carmelite Spirituality

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