

## **A Pilgrim People** *Damian Cassidy, O.Carm.*

*O God, you are my God, for you I long for you my soul is thirsting.  
My body pines for you like a dry weary land without water.  
So I gaze on you in the sanctuary to see your strength and your glory.*  
(Psalm 62)

The author of Psalm 62 conveys the depth of longing for God that is at the heart of pilgrimage. For centuries men and women have journeyed to distant places known for their holiness, so that they might become closer to God. In this year of the Great Jubilee there is a new desire to tread this ancient path in our search for the sacred.

The condition of a pilgrim was very popular in medieval times. The reasons for undertaking the pilgrimage varied from person to person. For some it was a penitential exercise; absolution from their sin would only happen at the journey's end. Other pilgrimages were undertaken in thanksgiving for a favour obtained or to seek healing from disease. Often the reason for the pilgrimage was just to be in a place associated with Jesus, or where some of the great saints of the Church had ministered. The physical closeness of these icons of holiness nourished the faith of the pilgrim. But being a pilgrim is more than just setting out to reach a significant destination, To be a pilgrim is also an attitude that requires a certain state of mind and heart. For the Christian, a pilgrimage is an intense lived experience of baptism. The pilgrim's journey is a symbol of the desire to follow Christ, to walk the way of holiness.

From the pilgrim tradition a new spirituality was born - Carmel. Numbered amongst the early hermits on Mount Carmel were those who had come to the holy places as warriors and pilgrims. Something happened in their experience and from this was born a call to solitude and prayer. The yearning that the psalmist speaks of found a home in these people and continues to resonate in our experience today. The Carmelite tradition builds upon the spirituality of the pilgrim: service, prayer, life in common, and at the heart of this, a deep thirst for God.

A pilgrimage is an acting out of the journey we undertake towards intimacy with God. The desire for intimacy with God is at the heart of the Carmelite vocation and paradoxically this intimacy has its genesis in community. The pilgrim soon learns the benefit of sharing the journey with others and in this need community is brought to life. A moment of profound encounter with Christ is often realised in the word, embrace or concern of a fellow pilgrim. We could say that growth cannot be achieved in isolation, but in dialogue and relationship. If Carmel can teach society anything it is rooted in this. We are all people of worth. John of the Cross and Teresa of Jesus learned to revel in the fact that God *delighted* in them, that they were people of immense worth and dignity; simply that they were precious to God. Community or - to put it more generally - Church is a celebration not just of the reality of my own worth but of the worth of the whole of creation. The language of this celebration is prayer, and the action or *liturgia* of this celebration is service.

Pilgrims today are not so different from the pilgrims of yesteryear. Our ways of travel may be more sophisticated, making the modern pilgrimage easier, but the lessons to be learnt by the pilgrim remain the same. A pilgrimage is not just the action of an individual, but of the Church. The pilgrim seldom undertakes the journey alone, but journeys with others. The pilgrim has a ministry to others on the way: a ministry of attentiveness to fellow pilgrims, a ministry of prayer for the needs of all. Above all, the pilgrim is called to share the gift of their personhood, seeking authentic relationship with Christ and one another. The pilgrim also seeks solitude for those moments of prayer that nourish faith, that affirm and challenge, that quench the thirst we have for Christ but leave us wanting a more intense experience of encounter with him. A pilgrimage is an expression of the joy that comes from knowing Christ, and of the hope that we have in our future with him.

The terms *relationship*, *solitude* and *attentiveness* are familiar to the Carmelite family. It is upon these foundations that we can speak of our experience of God.

The *Constitutions* of the Order place before us two models of pilgrim - Mary and Elijah.

*From Elijah, Carmelites learn to be people of the desert, with heart undivided, standing before God and entirely dedicated to his service, uncompromising in the choice to serve God's cause, aflame with passionate love for God. Like Elijah they believe in God and allow themselves to be led by the Spirit and by the Word taken root in their hearts in order to bear witness to the divine presence in the world, allowing God to be truly God in their lives. (§26)*

*Mary brings the good news of salvation to all men and women. She is the woman who built relationships not only within the inner circle of Jesus' disciples, but, beyond that, with the people ... Looking at her, and living in spiritual intimacy with her, we learn to stand before God, and with one another, as the Lord's brothers [and sisters]. Mary lives among us, as a mother and sister, attentive to our needs; along with us she waits and hopes, suffers and rejoices. (§27)*

The Great Jubilee of the year 2000 is a celebration of the freedom we have in Christ, but true freedom implies responsibility and concern for one another. In this year of Jubilee we celebrate the Word that became flesh, and we are called to en-flesh the Gospel for society today. If society doesn't know Christ it is because we don't proclaim Christ. To be a pilgrim is to proclaim Christ in our midst. The destination of our pilgrimage is immaterial, for if we desire to follow Christ, Christ is our destination. Let this year awaken within us the desire to be a pilgrim people, journeying together, sharing talents and needs, as we seek the Christ in our midst, he who is the beginning of our journey and its end.