

Carmel and its relationship with the Local Church

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My relationship with Carmel

My very first contact with Carmel is a shadowy memory of visiting the Liverpool Carmel with my parents (who would take fruit from their market stall business to the sisters). In secondary school (with the Irish Christian Brothers) we received regular visits from Orders looking for vocations. One such visit was from a Carmelite and, as I had already thought about the priesthood and was attracted to the Order, I came to Aylesford on various vocation retreats.

After a while, I transferred to Whitefriars (Cheltenham) to continue my education. I have to say I was very happy at Cheltenham but after school, for various reasons, did not go on to join the Order. I did however always keep in touch with a number of friars. My next real contact with Carmel came over twenty years later (1992) when, as a student in London, I was appointed chaplain to the Notting Hill Discalced Carmelite Monastery. This was much more than just a passing contact. Through the sisters I renewed my contact with Carmelite spirituality and decided to join the Third Order (Ancient Observance) and was professed in June 1997.

Having been taught by Carmelites (and having enjoyed my education!) I feel I am now repaying that service by teaching Carmelites (among others) at the Missionary Institute in London.

My relationship with the local Church

Apart from the natural relationship through Baptism, I was ordained a priest of the Portsmouth Diocese in 1973. In September 1998 I took up an appointment in a small parish so that I could continue to teach at the MIL and continue other ongoing work with Carmelite Nuns in Britain. But mention of the Portsmouth Diocese brings me back to our theme. On July 4th 1998 the local Church of Portsmouth visited Aylesford on Pilgrimage, as part of its preparation for the Millennium Jubilee. I would like to use the Bishop's sermon to reflect on what the local Church needs from Carmel.

Pilgrimage and Prayer

Bishop Crispian Hollis summed up the reason for that visit in one simple sentence: "I invited you to join me in pilgrimage to this great shrine of Aylesford on this day so that we could pray together as a family." For Aylesford, read Carmel. This is what the local Church asks firstly from Carmel, "a place" to come on pilgrimage to and a place to learn to pray. Carmel knows about these two themes – pilgrimage and prayer and has much to offer to the local Church as it learns (especially since Vatican II) to be a "pilgrim people".

The Vatican Council re-emphasised the Church as a pilgrim people (*Lumen gentium*, Chapter 11) but it is not a new theme for Carmel. "Those who are drawn to the Carmelite Tradition are often pilgrims to places unknown, trusting the testimony of others who have taken the same ancient path ... The first group of people to be called Carmelites made such a journey to a place apart". (John Welch, O.Carm., *Journeying with Carmel*, 1997, p.73).

Neither Carmelites, nor those who follow the tradition, journey for the sake of a journey. They journey to find the desert, to find solitude, to find a place for

prayer. But it is not simply in the past that Carmel has had this role to play. It is in its relationship with the local Church today that Carmel can show the local Church the route to that “ancient path”. Carmelites already on the path are called to guide the local Church along that path; a path of prayer and contemplation. Carmel sees this path as having been trod firstly and in a special way by Elijah.

“Going back through the ages, Carmel will never hesitate to recognise itself in the first hermit whom the Bible describes for us, and to model its life on those vowed to the contemplation of divine things in silence and solitude” (Paul Marie of the Cross, O.C.D., *Carmelite Spirituality in the Teresian Tradition*, 1997, p. 161). Paul-Marie describes “Union with God” as the *raison d’être* and the soul of Carmel. But he sees this union as possible to both the wise and the simple, and through it they can both “intensify their relations with God”.

The advantage of Carmel is that it has no one way, and it recognises its spirituality as a longing for union with God, which it holds in common with all humanity and so it is open to all.

“Characterised by an awareness of the presence within the human heart of the very being of God, the spirit of Carmel also includes a sense of the sacred and a thirst for things divine ... No matter how individual and difficult to analyse this spirit may be, it is to be identified with the most authentic mysticism. At Carmel nothing imitative or esoteric is to be found, and the Carmelite tradition is singularly sober as to the content of spiritual experiences, though their presence is frequently attested. Always objective, it merely affirms the possibility and the reality of direct contact with God and points out the necessity, if this is to be attained, of recourse to a particular kind of life – the eremitic life.” (p. 15 cf. also the *Constitutions* of the Carmelite Order n.15)

There is, of course, no need for me to tell you about the difficulties of living this hermit/contemplative life in the world at the end of the twentieth century.

“Christians are certainly called to pray together; however, they must also draw apart to pray to the Father in secret. The practice of the presence of God, which is a Carmelite tradition, has become increasingly difficult in these modern times. We must therefore make special efforts to help one another to seek God through prayer that is intimately linked with ordinary daily life ... ” (*Constitutions* n.77).

Carmel can serve the local Church no better than by truly living out the theory presented by the *Constitutions* and to extend these efforts to the members of the local Church, both in teaching and in example.

Elijah and Mary

To ordinary Catholics (who makes up the local Church) Elijah may not be the first association with Carmel; this would normally be the Mother of God. It is true that Carmel finds in the example of Mary, the Mother of God (together with Elijah), “all that we wish to be today” (*Constitutions* n.25) and here we find another aspect of our “prayer life” and daily life where the Church certainly needs some fresh impetus and guidance.

It is Mary’s presence in Carmel and ultimately in the Church which is special to the Order. As with contemplative prayer, there is no “privileged” devotion to Mary.

She is sister and mother always present in the daily life of Carmel from its earliest beginnings and especially honoured as Mother of God.

“As such she had already been foreshadowed as in the little cloud above Carmel; as such she was honoured in Carmel, and as such she has ever been evoked in our Order”. (Titus Brandsma) Blessed Titus, describes Carmelites as “other Marys” ever called to “incarnate” Christ to our world. His essays are rich in their understanding of Mary as the example of Christian living, not only for Carmel but also for the whole Church.

The 1995 *Carmelite Constitutions* present an understanding of and devotion to Mary which, if understood and lived, could open rich treasures for the local Church: “Mary was not only the mother of our Lord; she also became his perfect disciple, the woman of faith. She followed Jesus, walking with his disciples, sharing their demanding and wearisome journey - a journey which required, above all, fraternal love and mutual service.” (27)

Teaching to pray

Contemplative prayer in a busy world, devotion to Mary as a true example of the Christian life (rather than an idealised, unapproachable woman), and these two learned from past saints (and sinners!) and expressed for today is the essence of what Carmel can offer to the local church:

“Here the work of Carmelites is invaluable. They are regarded as the masters of prayer. They can draw upon the accumulated experience of all their past saints, all experts in prayer. I think it is the special vocation of the Carmelite Order to teach people to pray.” (Rosemary Kinman, ‘The Vocation of the Leaven’, in *Carmel in the World*, 1992, Volume XXXI, 1-2)

“...to teach people to pray”. To teach the local Church to pray is an essential element of the relationship between Carmel and the local Church; but what does the local Church want to pray about and how can Carmel be part of those needs? We can perhaps begin to find an answer in Bishop Crispian's sermon.

“We need a focus for our prayer... [I suggest] three areas on which we need to concentrate: Conversion, the Diocese, [and] the World.”

Although he was speaking with special reference to the Jubilee Year, Bishop Crispian called for a new start which has to “begin with ourselves”; “seeking forgiveness of sins, reconciliation with God and one another, conversion of heart enabling us to live more deeply committed to Christ and to the living of His Gospel”. How can Carmel play a role and what role in a Church called to Conversion?

Prayer and conversion

Firstly, like Thérèse of the Child Jesus who prayed for Pranzini (the convicted murderer), Carmelites can pray for the conversion of great (and lesser) sinners, but the Constitutions (1995) go much further (specifically in relation to the local Church). “Let our mission...be one that evangelises and is evangelised within the Church - a mission that is particularly concerned for those who have lost their way.” (99)

Carmelites are called to confess “frequently” their own sins, to be reconciled to God and to the Church (75) within the life of the local Church. The sacrament of reconciliation is so often neglected today but people of prayer recognise continually their need for reconciliation and (I believe) through example can bring others to this recognition of our need for God's mercy, both individually and communally as the local Church. Carmel's ability to recognise the need for forgiveness and at the same time God's infinite love was fully understood by Thérèse of the Child Jesus. Joseph Chalmers describes her as “a prophet sent by God to the Church and to the world to remind us all of the simplicity of the Gospel and to bear witness to the true face of God ... (‘Reflections on the Doctorate of St. Thérèse’, in *Carmel in the World*, 1998 Vol. XXXVII 1-2)

Carmel knows the God who forgives and reconciles God's people. This beauty is expressed by Fr Paul Marie of the Cross OCD: “Without the least shadow of pessimism, the least disdain for the world, Carmelites are deeply conscious of the infinite distance separating the created from the uncreated, God from God's creatures. Prayer gives them an understanding (better still, permits them to acquire a kind of experience) of the absolute. It is also through prayer that Carmelites, as we read in the second chapter of the Book of the Institution of the First Monks, “taste and experience in spirit the power of the divine presence and the sweetness of heavenly glory”. This does not make the spirit of Carmel aloof toward what is created and toward those who live and grow in the earthly and the relative; this experience of God, on the contrary, is the origin of the most active zeal for souls that is characteristic of the action and person of the prophet Elijah...” (Paul Marie of the Cross, O.C.D., *Carmelite Spirituality in the Teresian Tradition*, 1997, p. 21)

Full participation in the life of the local Church

God's faithful people are made present in the local Church, in the Diocese. “The local gathering of Christ's disciples ... bishop, priests deacons and laypeople”. The local Church is called to prayer, to conversion and so “We are a communion of people, we share one faith, one Lord, one Baptism; we are sisters and brothers in the Lord.” What does this local Church, the Diocese request - need - from Carmel? Again, nothing more than what is set out in the *Constitutions*.

“By fostering a deeper grasp of the contemplative dimension of life, of fraternity and concrete commitment to justice” (97); “formation of young people in schools and elsewhere; preaching of retreats, study, spiritual direction, guidance about spiritual problems and other initiatives...”(98); “we shall encourage lay people to develop their own particular gifts and charisms” (99).

This sets quite an agenda, summed up as “being fully involved in the life of the local churches” (97). The Carmelite who most faithfully fulfilled this agenda in his death for the local Church, but also in his life, was Blessed Titus Brandsma (an ideal patron for Carmel's service to and in the local Church).

“Just as Elijah had often to leave the solitude of Carmel in Palestine to convert his people to Yahweh, so Father Titus had often to leave Carmel in Nijmegen to bring God to me. As he poignantly expressed it ‘to leave God for God’. In reality he simply left God in the solitude to find him again in man. He laboured for every man because every man is a member of the mystical body of Christ or is

potentially a member.” (Breij, ‘A Life in the Spirit’ in *Essays on Titus Brandsma* (1985) p.98)

Called to solidarity with the little ones

It was to these “potential” members of the mystical body, in the World, that Bishop Crispian directed the Local Church of Portsmouth.

“We are not a ghetto community living in isolation and defended from the world about us. We belong to the human family, although we are a pilgrim people with our sights set beyond the here and now, we are children of our time.”

He describes the Church as a community where “We hunger and thirst for justice with no thought to the cost to ourselves”. While in a deep sense this is true of the Church, we also know that it is not yet true. It is only through prayer, through absolute conversion and in the reality of unity as a diocese that the local Church is able to be the divine presence that it is called to be. Carmelites recognise this call and see in their own life “a transforming experience of the overpowering love of God. This love empties us of our limited and imperfect human ways of thinking, loving and behaving, transforming them into divine ways.” (17)

Christ did not bring about the salvation of the human race as an outsider (110). It is our (Carmelite) duty to be in solidarity with ... the marginalised (111), the little ones (112) and rediscover Jesus Christ as the liberator from all forms of oppression (113). Social reality challenges us (114); our Elijan inspiration calls us to walk with the little ones (115).

None of this is new to Carmel. It is present already in the *Rule* of St Albert: “Put on the breastplate of justice so that you may love the Lord your God with your whole heart and your whole soul and your whole strength and your neighbour as yourself.”

“This is a profound insight. We can best protect our own deepest integrity by treating others as we should. Personal fulfilment is best served not by a refusal to turn in on oneself, thus tremendously cramping one's possibilities but rather by a resolute effort to reach out to all others. In another valuable insight, St Albert says that the process of self-fulfilment through attention to others will blossom into love for God and neighbour. How much could be made of the insight that true love and charity must be based in justice (the ramifications of this in the context of social justice are immense).” (Redemptus Valabek, ‘The spirituality of the Rule’, in *Albert's Way*, 1989, p.171)

Third Order Carmelites

Hopefully the ideas presented here apply to Third Order Carmelites but we will need the assistance of the friars to be able to fully understand our vocation “of healing and developing human society through the leaven of the Gospel”. We are in special way members of the Order and members of the local Church.

Conclusion

Let me end with an exhortation to all members of the Order, whatever their vocation or choice of life and equally to members of the local Church:

“My dear Brothers and Sisters, as we continue the search for the answers to questions and reactions, we should fearlessly go on, improving and developing very time. We should continue to search for and build a Church that is responsive to the needs of the people, a Church where rank and distinction would not matter, a Church that continuously makes alive its prophetic ministry, whatever the cost, whatever the implications ... Let us join hands with all peoples of goodwill, regardless of religion and ideology and race and sex, in building a better world. Let us look forward to a Church that truly cares for and serves the inhabited world, that life may be led to the fullest.” (Carcellar-Amano, ‘A Prophetic Witness’, in *Carmel in the World*, 1992, Vol. XXXI, 1-2. p.177)