

# **The Call of Carmel at the Beginning of the Third Millennium**

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Why be a Carmelite at the beginning of the third millennium? An answer that will do justice to this question is not possible here; some might say that it would take a lifetime to answer and even then only the surface would be scratched. Nevertheless, I would like to take some time to begin to formulate an answer from a personal viewpoint, bearing in mind the many limitations which confront me.

## **Religious Life: A Prophetic Stance**

Having undergone continual renewal, development and growth throughout the centuries, religious life has since Vatican II come to understand itself not as a higher or better form of the Christian life, but rather as one way among many of following the Gospel. It is at once both a symbolic rejection of the materialistic values of society and an immersion into the cares of this society; it provides an alternative perspective based on gospel values. The common vocation of humanity, to be free children of God that we may lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters in obedience to God's will, is lived out in a more identifiable vocation of the vowed life as Religious.

Living the evangelical counsels then is a prophetic way of speaking in God's name where one can become free to consecrate oneself to the whole-hearted up-building of God's kingdom. It is a radical choice to love and serve God by loving and serving one's neighbour; a choice that is rooted in a whole-hearted commitment to Christ where one is possessed by the spirit of the living God.

The decision to follow Christ as a religious is an ongoing surrender to the will of God whereby one can continue to discover what one is to do with one's life in a way that will respond to the call of Christ to serve him in the poor and sick, the hungry and naked, the prisoners and the stranger. The New Testament presents this as being with Christ – the call is always to follow him. In this way the religious life is not about what we do or how we do it, but why we do it. It is prompted by the common Christian vocation to be with Christ daily and to get to know him better by pondering on his word and by seeing and serving him in the community.

## **The Vows**

Like other Religious the Carmelite friar professes three vows before God and before the Church: poverty, chastity and obedience. All three vows can be understood as a development of the first, poverty. The meaning of poverty, which I will outline here, will go some way to explaining what I mean by this. Echoing so much the description of the early Jerusalem community as described in the Acts of the Apostles, the Rule of St. Albert presents a way of life which is prophetic to its core, centred around the Word of God, (understood as both Christ and scripture) and lived in the community of brothers and sisters. The communal life is the fullest expression of poverty, positively understood as a gift from God and signifying the commitment to serve Christ in others. When understood in this way poverty is a richness of spirit and a sign of generosity in a life open to God. The one who lives the spirit of poverty to the full has riches beyond measure; the vows

of chastity and obedience become fuller expressions of the life of openness to the service of God in our neighbour and in the community.

Like the two great models of Carmelite life, Mary and Elijah, the Religious chooses to be chaste as a sign of the counter-cultural demands of the uncompromising following of Christ. Just as the mature and happily married person is open to other friendships, so too is the vowed celibate; the freedom that flows from the celibate life has to grow and mature in the same way as has the growth in mutual love and knowledge of the married couple. Obedience too is a sign of this richness of spirit which overflows into generous self-giving. Hence the summary of our way of life: In allegiance to Jesus Christ.

### **The Carmelite Message for Today**

So, back to the original question: why follow a path that is almost 800 years old? Simply put, it is both 800 years old and forever new. The great richness to be found in the Rule of St. Albert has been a source of inspiration for countless numbers of people and is still undergoing a process of reinterpretation. With the Word of God so central to it, the call of the Rule to live a life in allegiance to Jesus Christ is at the same time a call to the weary traveller of the path of life today. Whether it is lived by vowed religious or by the lay Carmelite, the Rule is a practical means of being in the presence of God while at the same time immersed in the daily cares of the wider society. It is a safeguard against a dualistic vision of the world whereby what is “secular” is seen in a negative light while what is “spiritual” is perceived as being on a higher plane. Such a viewpoint that is contrary to all that the gospels proclaim – it was a broken and downtrodden society to which Jesus came and proclaimed freedom. This has to be the vocation of the Carmelite; to continue to proclaim this freedom to a society in which many have gone astray in their search for the Face of the Living God and often have fallen into idolatry. This freedom is proclaimed primarily by the prophetic way of life whereby actions speak louder than words; the contemplation of the Word of God is outpoured into the active seeking of justice in all relationships. And while the tension between the active and the contemplative dimensions will remain, the words of Titus Brandsma are worth remembering: the solution is to remember that we are “leaving God for God”. And in doing so the poverty that we profess will always be a source of riches.