

CONSTRUCTING MEANING FOR OUR LIVES – BASED ON THE VALUES OF THE CARMELITE CHARISM

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As Carmelites, we define ourselves as *contemplative men and women, living in allegiance to Jesus Christ, forming praying communities at the service of the people of God*. This definition puts together values and attitudes that are irrevocable truths for us. They are what mark us out and the symbols that identify us.

Sometimes we are satisfied with these words and we repeat them and proclaim them as universal truths of which we are the owners, or at least we believe that we know their precise meaning. If, however, we were to stop for a moment and give it some thought, we would realise that we are not owners of these words. They express truths and theological-spiritual values of the Religious Life, and indeed of the Christian life in general. If we look at the *Rule* or *Constitutions* of any religious family in the Church, we will encounter these same elements that we claim as our own.

What is it that makes us want to claim these values as our own? Why do we want to hold on to values as giving meaning to our lives as Carmelites when we talk about these essential elements? What parts do we emphasise when we focus on these realities and make them fit our specific way of life?

The way to find the answers to these questions is undoubtedly to examine our spiritual heritage. Starting from that basis, we can see that these words, concepts and realities in fact have a universal scope and make a connection with the followers of Jesus in any state of life. At the roots of the Carmelite way we find a lived vision of life that is experienced, shaped and made concrete. It is a spiritual force that gives energy and challenges people throughout history. It is a powerful vision of life, built by real people and is marked by a kind of DNA that gives a sense of permanent identity and produces a kind of restless and creative nostalgia when it is absent in certain moments in history.

This concrete vision of life must ground us and it provides us with the touchstone to which we must constantly refer back in order to understand or recover a sense of what we really are. Therefore, to understand what it means to call ourselves Carmelites, we must never lose sight of our original vision and the many meanings that emerge from it. Only then, the original vision becomes a life-giving force for renewal and creativity that inspires our hearts. The various movements of reform and renewal all had their point of departure in this original vision.

We can list some of the symbolic references of the Carmelite vision that are not just historical facts, people, places or situations, but become transformed into paradigms for interpreting and understanding of our own existence. These are realities with which we identify and use to speak to the world without words.

1. **Pilgrimage.** The first Carmelites were pilgrims. They did not go along with the prevalent model for living the Christian life but they were moved by the desire to follow Jesus in a more radical way. They sought the Holy One in the Holy Land. They were prepared to construct something new, and to take risks in order to be faithful to God. Carmelites are by nature restless pilgrims; they do not conform themselves to what everyone else does but constantly seek the Absolute.

2. **Group.** In Carmel there is no one charismatic leader, a founder in the strict sense of the word. Instead there is a group that, moved by a common desire to be faithful to the Gospel, come together and construct a common way of life. For Carmelites, their *raison-d'être* is in community and they are by nature necessarily directed towards the construction of fraternity.

3. **Hungry hearts.** We do not know the names of the first Carmelites, but we can know their hearts that are marked by a hunger. They were touched by a profound experience of conversion, and leaving the bustle of the cities to live in solitude, they began a life together in order to satisfy the deep hunger of their hearts.

4. **Mount Carmel.** The Carmelite way passes necessarily over the mountain, with all the significance that biblical spirituality gives to this reality. This is the place of rest for pilgrims, of ascent, of the journey into

communion with the Lord, etc. This mountain gives the group a name, an identity, a land. They will take it to all the corners of the earth, making their homes other Carmels, places which evoke the original adventure.

5. **The well of Elijah.** The stopping point of the first Carmelites is the well of the Prophet, which brings to mind the great works of Elijah. Around the well they slake their most intense thirst and, in imitation of Elijah, allow themselves to be consumed by burning zeal for the Lord God of hosts.

6. **The Cell.** This is the space of solitude and encounter with God, where one cultivates intimacy. It is the place where one's inner life is nourished by means of *lectio divina*; it is the place of struggle against all forms of personal slavery and where inner freedom is achieved.

7. **The Oratory.** This is the centre of the life of the community, the place of common worship that transforms life into the sacrament of God's presence. It is the space for the celebration of the Eucharist, the encounter with Christ living and present in the bread that is shared. This presence becomes the centre of life.

8. **The Lady of the Place.** The first chapel was dedicated to the Virgin Mary and the first Carmelites consecrated themselves to this Lady. Mary is at the heart of the Carmelite vision of life, as a source of inspiration for those who call her sister and contemplate in her the one in whom they see their desire to be faithful to the message of Jesus come to fulfilment.

9. **A way of life.** They lived in a pleasant and solitary place, which gave them sufficient space for their lives. They devoted their time to prayer and reflection; they read the Scriptures and tried to fix it in their hearts; they fasted; they worked and marked the passage of time by the sound of silence; they met together daily for the celebration of the Eucharist and weekly to review their lives in the light of their common purpose; they lived a life of poverty. Their leader was elected and lived at the gate of their dwellings; they welcomed and served those who knocked at their door. Life on Mount Carmel centred their scattered lives and calmed their confused minds, freeing their hearts from the noise and compulsions of their times. For about 100 years they lived this rhythm of life.

10. **A Rule of Life.** Their way of life was codified in a *Rule* that became a permanent reference and a source that contains concrete indications towards faithfulness and is always open to those who wish to do more. Not just a set of norms, the *Rule* is a charismatic powerhouse for life.

11. **Journeying home.** In the face of difficulties and persecution, the Carmelites returned to where they started but they were not the same, they were transfigured. They left Carmel but Carmel never left them. They forged a new vision of Carmel as the spiritual reference point for their lives. Carmelites are those who have drunk from the well and are made able to go back from where they came and recount their story from experience.

12. **Mendicancy.** The thrust of the Mendicant Orders was adopted by the Carmelites on their arrival in Europe. It was a difficult moment with all the conflicts that emerge at any time of change. The *Rule* was adapted to the new situation and another note was added to the initial symphony of Carmel. Other elements were incorporated, like the itinerant life, simplicity, service of the people of God in the challenging circumstances of the new cities, openness to the unexpected, etc.

These points are like impressions on the heart of every Carmelite and they form part of our spiritual DNA. They are like symbolic archetypes of the special gift which Carmel is to the Church. In every context, as in our own, they continually provoke in us the desire to remain faithful to our fundamental identity in all our plans and choices and they help us to face the challenges by which we are confronted and so we recreate the meaning of our lives and of our presence in the Church and the world.

It is necessary to read these truths and fundamental reference points starting from the reality of our lives. Words, symbols and archetypes acquire a significance according to the measure in which we appropriate them and in which we allow our way of living and our choices to be questioned by them. We live in a healthy tension, which is the constitutive movement of our history and of the creative dynamic of the Order throughout the centuries.