

## Where are they coming from?

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The pace of change is so rapid in 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Britain that the culture from which I entered Carmel six years ago no longer exists. It has already evolved into something else and it will continue to develop in different directions. Since the culture in which we grow up is a factor in shaping the people we become, we should try to be informed of aspects of today's culture that may influence those who will enter our monasteries in the future.

The *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* states "At all times the Church carries the responsibility of reading the signs of the time and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel", and "we must be aware of and understand the aspirations, the yearnings, and the often dramatic features of the world in which we live" (*Gaudium et Spes* §4). While Carmel is counter-cultural and to a certain extent 'set apart' from mainstream culture, we still exist within that culture and are called to learn about it and dialogue with it. In what follows, I will consider five aspects of contemporary culture in Britain which may present new questions to us.

### **Technology and communications**

Technology may be one of the biggest issues we will have to face in Carmel during this century. Most young people now have daily – or even 24-hour – access to the internet and e-mail. Most will own an iPod or other digital music player, a personal computer and a mobile telephone which can send text messages, take and receive photographs and videos, and also access the internet. The extent to which we use such technology ourselves (or not) will obviously challenge those who may want to enter the monastery. However, considering the ways in which the internet has developed in recent years, other issues could be even more significant.

For young people, the internet has become more a means of communication than an information resource. Current trends are an interest in blogs (like an online diary), 'social networking' websites like Facebook, and personal video websites such as YouTube. Internet 'chat rooms' are an older invention but they are still popular and have become more sophisticated. Through these media, people share the most intimate things about themselves, but it is done at a safe distance and in an artificial context. Those who engage in this kind of communication on a daily basis may find that they have difficulty in sustaining or even in forming real relationships. On the other hand, this is not true of all users. Most young people would say that they mainly use the internet for keeping in closer contact with real friends.

While I believe it is important in this day and age for our Carmels to have a presence on the internet, I think that there could be some value in at least limiting our own use of it. Traditionally, one of the main counter-cultural signs of Carmel (from the perspective of the nuns) has been the enclosure. For the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, perhaps enclosure may no longer be defined materially by grilles and walls but by our attitude to how we relate to the culture around us. Use of the internet can be a subtle 'escape' from enclosure or a subtle incursion into it. Holding back from it can be a way of witnessing that Carmel is a particularly sacred space, where silence and solitude are cultivated to allow God to be heard.

## **Community**

Social networking websites like Facebook are a forum for friends or people with similar interests to develop a 'virtual community'. At face value this desire to build community is encouraging and is perhaps a backlash to the predominant individualistic culture. However, it could be seen as a way to set up a community 'on my own terms'. I can choose who to include or exclude, and in a context like Facebook I make all the major decisions about how the community is administered. Literally millions of people in Britain are registered to Facebook and it is not the only website of its kind. Most young people engage in this type of 'community'.

In his book *Finding Sanctuary*, Christopher Jamison (former Abbot of Worth Abbey) draws attention to the corruption of the word 'community' nowadays. Mainly through its misuse in the media and in politics, it has come to mean any loosely affiliated group of people, even groups of individuals who have never met but share a common interest. He gives the example that simply by owning a bicycle, I become a member of the 'cycling community'. "By buying a bike", he says, "I can claim to have joined a community without having to do the more demanding work of engaging personally with other people."<sup>1</sup>

If peoples' experience of community now means a convenient organisation of isolated individuals, or a network centred around oneself, what might be their expectations of Carmelite community? I think perhaps there is a fear that to be a member of a true community where everyone works together for a higher ideal, one must sacrifice one's individuality. However, we know St. Teresa always recommended that in her communities, individuality should be fostered rather than suppressed. She understood that individual sisters would have different needs and that they would not all be led by the same path in their spiritual life. The contemporary novelist Ian McEwan pictures what he calls the 'dream of community' as a group of musicians who together produce something beautiful and "give us a glimpse of what we might be, of our best selves, and of an impossible world in which you give everything you have to others but lose nothing of yourself."<sup>2</sup> This could well describe St. Teresa's vision of Carmelite community – not an impossible world, but a graced reality.

In these times when so many people seem to be seeking community but are actually becoming more isolated, perhaps we have a responsibility to find ways to share our experience of community with others. We can witness to the values of true community not only to those who may wish to join us but to anyone we come into contact with. I think we can do this simply by being ourselves and by providing hospitality and welcome to those who come to us. I will return to this point later.

## **Consumerism, choice and commitment**

Christopher Jamison writes that "British society now defines a person as a consumer." He explains: "This is neatly illustrated by the transition in announcements on the rail system by which travellers have ceased to be 'passengers' and have become 'customers' instead. Even schools and hospitals (and not only private ones) now treat pupils and patients as customers. We are all customers now."<sup>3</sup> It could be argued that people now expect to be treated as consumers; to have a wide range of choices and opportunities open to them in any given situation. In this worldview it can seem as though life itself can be arranged according to personal preferences. This is unreal and can only lead to disappointment.

I think there is a close connection between consumerism and the difficulty that many people in our society have in making and sustaining a lifelong commitment. Consumerism ensures that countless choices and options are available to the consumer. Lifelong

commitment depends upon making a single definite choice and thereby excluding other options. It is a frightening concept to many people, simply because they have rarely – if ever – seen it work.

Instead, it is more common to see people making a series of short-term commitments to which they are extremely dedicated for a time, but which are left behind when it is felt they have run their course. Fulfilment then seems to lie in another direction. This approach to life plays itself out in a succession of careers, projects, ambitions and even relationships. Sandra Schneiders suggests that Religious Life is deeply counter-cultural in this context: "This is not merely because it espouses some values that are not popular in an individualistic and consumerist society ... but because the very idea of such a unifying life project is barely comprehensible in the contemporary context of fragmentation."<sup>4</sup>

Society seems to believe that wholeness consists in variety: the more we have to choose from and the more we experience, the more rounded we will be as human beings. It is clear from the fragmentation we see all around us that the opposite is true. The wholeness that people are searching for lies not in trying everything the world has to offer, but in making a definite commitment. Each person has their own unique calling and it is in accepting this that fulfilment is found. It is not easy and perhaps the struggles involved in maintaining a commitment are just too much for people today in a culture that generally avoids suffering. Indeed, in a wholly secular culture without reference to Christ or to God it is difficult to find any meaning in either suffering or a lifelong commitment.

Our dedication in Carmel to the 'one thing necessary' is a witness that we find in Jesus the fullness of life. We, too, are fragmented and fragile human beings, but God makes it possible for us to grow towards true wholeness. As Timothy Radcliffe puts it, "A vow is not a statement of confidence in our strength, but of hope in God's providence"<sup>5</sup>.

### **Litigation**

Perhaps another effect of consumerism is that justice has become something I can 'buy'. There is a high incidence of litigation in Britain today. There seems to be a sense that if one suffers anything, it must be somebody else's fault and there is no such thing as an accident. This has been seen in cases of lung cancer sufferers who have (successfully) sued tobacco companies on the grounds that advertisements seduced them into their addiction. Only this year a young man who had lost £2.1 million in six months through gambling brought a lawsuit against his bookmaker for failing to ban him. There have even been burglars who have sued home-owners due to injuries sustained whilst stealing from their homes! Obviously these are extreme examples, but they do point to a general diminishment of personal responsibility. The situation is not helped by the aggressive sales tactics of compensation companies, who seek out people having suffered injuries in order to take legal action on their behalf.

The response to such widespread litigation has been hyper-defensiveness. We see an excess of new laws and regulations, warnings on virtually every product and, of course, a higher demand for insurance. Everyone seems to be covering their own backs. In such a world, I wonder how it is possible to learn to trust.

We also see defensiveness in the area of equal opportunities. Of course, any real discrimination is wrong and it is good to have safeguards. However, we seem to have reached a point where any distinction between differing groups of people is seen as discrimination. As Sandra Schneiders points out, "the Western mind can understand distinction or specificity only in terms of superiority and inferiority"<sup>6</sup>. She is writing of Religious Life in relation to the Lay Vocation: it is distinct without being superior. She also

considers the issue of membership in religious congregations and particularly that of lay associates wanting to be recognised as 'full members'.<sup>7</sup> Since full membership consists in perpetual vows, this is not possible for associates (the situation is different for members of the Third Order who by their promises and vows are indeed full members of the Order), yet it is clearly a case of distinction rather than discrimination. In a culture where such distinctions are misunderstood, there could be issues for new members of our communities who may feel excluded from the Chapter.

I would suggest another reason that people today find commitment difficult is that it is based on an act of entrusting. Any true commitment demands that we let go of safety nets and props and really trust someone else. In the present climate of distrust and suspicion, this is hugely counter-cultural. We see from the use of 'pre-nuptial agreements' that sometimes even those who do make commitments are reluctant to go the full distance in trust.

There is a certain vulnerability to living in community for which people coming from today's culture may be unprepared. Community is often imagined as a safe haven, not a place where one's weaknesses will be exposed. One of the aspects of novitiate is a building up of trust between the new member and the community. This is fundamental but it does take time to develop. Defences need to be let down on both sides; we have to allow ourselves to be seen to be vulnerable. Perhaps these days the process of integration into community may need more time and more understanding of where candidates are coming from.

I think there are ways in Carmel in which we can counter the litigation culture. The way we deal with conflict in community shows forth the values of compassion, mercy and forgiveness. St. Teresa's counsels of detachment, humility and love teach us acceptance and warn us against judging others. The vow of obedience involves both trust and personal responsibility. Most importantly, our prayer can be a channel of peace in this divided world.

### **Achievement, success and happiness**

People of my age group and younger can find it difficult to receive correction or criticism. I think this could be partially due to the way we have been educated. The National Curriculum was introduced in 1989, the year I started secondary school. At the same time, the Department of Education set up the National Record of Achievement. I do not know if this still exists, but each pupil had to keep a personal record of achievement in every subject throughout each school year. The emphasis was on affirmation and encouragement, and so both teachers and pupils were only permitted to write positive comments. Such policy is now common in the workplace as well as in the classroom.

The culture in which I grew up was geared towards personal success, which was measured in terms of qualifications, wealth and status. I think that the drive for success still motivates young people, but the emphasis seems to have shifted. Now, personal happiness is the goal rather than wealth or achievement as such. Young people are encouraged to follow their dreams, to do whatever makes them happy.

I have found that those of my friends and relatives who do not share my faith can only understand my vocation in terms of my personal happiness. Being unable to appreciate the value of Religious Life in itself, my cousin (aged 27) wrote to me shortly after my Solemn Profession, "If it feels right for you then that is all that matters. Life is about choices and finding a system that works for you emotionally and physically." I am sure that many young people would share this philosophy, so obviously shaped by our consumer culture.

I believe the current quest for happiness gives us a glimmer of hope. Our society is beginning to wake up to the fact that wealth does not necessarily bring happiness. There is a thirst for true fulfilment and people are beginning to realise that this fulfilment is of a spiritual nature. The sections of bookshops once labelled 'Religion' are now usually called 'Mind, Body, Spirit' and their popularity shows that people are searching for some kind of spiritual guidance. The widespread interest in the BBC television programmes *The Monastery* and *The Convent* perhaps illustrates that people are fascinated by Religious Life and perceive that it holds something they are searching for in their own lives. We should be aware, however, that the consumerist culture has also spread into the spiritual sphere, meaning that people are much more likely to pick and choose from different spiritual traditions rather than follow one particular way.

I think this spiritual search calls upon us to be more open, perhaps to take some risks. It may just mean for us to be welcoming to those who would like somewhere to be quiet and pray; for us to be prepared to discuss Carmelite life and spirituality with individuals and groups who are interested; for us to share our prayer with other Christians of all denominations and, if there is an opportunity, with those of other faiths. Maybe there are other, less conventional, ways of sharing our way of life with others that could be explored. I am not suggesting that we actively seek ways to promote ourselves, but that we should respond positively to all those who wish to learn more about us or to deepen their own spiritual lives.

## Conclusion

Aspirants today and in the future will be coming from a different culture to ourselves and we should try to meet this challenge with understanding. I believe that our tradition already holds the key to addressing these issues but we may have to find new ways of interpreting it for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. At this time I feel that we are also being called to be open to peoples' spiritual searching, to share what we can of our rich spirituality whenever we have the opportunity, and to witness through our life of prayer in community that true and lasting fulfilment can always be found in Christ, who is our Way, Truth and Life.

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Jamison, *Finding Sanctuary: Monastic Steps for Everyday Life*, (Weidenfield & Nicolson, 2006), p. 112 -13.

<sup>2</sup> Ian McEwan, *Saturday*, (Vintage, 2005), p. 171.

<sup>3</sup> Jamison, *Finding Sanctuary*, p. 16.

<sup>4</sup> Sandra M. Schneiders, I.H.M., *Religious Life in a New Millennium Vol. I: Finding the Treasure*, (Paulist Press, 2000), p. 118.

<sup>5</sup> Timothy Radcliffe, O.P., *I Call You Friends*, (Continuum, 2001), p. 96.

<sup>6</sup> Schneiders, *Finding the Treasure*, p. 33.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 41-98.