

GOD-SEEKERS: LAY CARMEL IN HOLLAND

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The years after Vatican II gave the Church in Holland a very different face: secularisation, increasing rationalism and individualism caused a severe decline of members of the Church as well as in the Carmelite Order. But not only from the outside were things changing: people changed too. They searched for a new way to let their spirituality adapt to the changes in Church and society.

In the early 1990s we recognized the fact there were many lay people who had a steady, enduring relationship with the Carmelite Order. Its spirituality appeared to be good soil for their daily life. But there was hardly anyone who had formalised this personal way of living. But yet it became clear that more and more lay people were developing a personal way of living a Carmelite way of life or at least longed for consolidation.

In 1993 we started to talk together in order to discover a way to bring all these different people together in Carmel. Our question was: how could we find a way to give people the opportunity to encounter Carmelite spirituality? A further question was: how can we encourage people to develop this spirituality in the way they live? Difficult questions, difficult answers. In the meantime, after Vatican II, the former heritage of the Third Order in Holland had totally disappeared because of the developments of secularisation in Church and society. But this really was not a problem; on the contrary, the desert, the 'emptiness' challenged us to develop a new way of discovering an architecture of spirituality, a model of living, which gave people the opportunity to grow in a personal spiritual way as well as growing in a community of lay Carmelites. During these years, a few lay people already had developed a new way of membership: they were *associated members* on an individual basis, committing themselves to the Rule of St. Albert. But this was not the need for everyone: many lay people still longed for a community of lay Carmelites. So both ways of living for lay Carmelites developed in their own particular ways.

Thanks to the authorities of the Dutch Carmelite province who gave a *carte blanche* to develop an organisation and structure for a community of lay Carmelites, we were able to take the time to let it grow from inside. But then we discovered that the development of a new Carmelite branch appeared to be a spiritual process in itself as well as an organisational process. Every 3 or 4 months we met together and shared our dreams and hopes, our visions and disappointments. We told each other about the different ways we live and how each one of us tries to find our unique way to express personal feelings and spirituality.

We discovered that it was not important to develop one normative structure to guarantee a single Carmelite way of living. We felt that any organisation had to be subordinate to the purpose of each one of us: to live more and more in God's Presence. Each life, each place in which we live was a possible place to grow in God's unconditional love. Any organisation should give space for this purpose, for lay spirituality is mostly characterised by the fact it is life itself that is the place for experiencing God. After all, living the beauty of life itself seems to me a very ancient Carmelite value.

After two and a half years of preparation, we found our own way. We formalised our shared inspiration in an organisation of lay Carmelites as an expression of our spirituality, which we called *Karmelbeweging*, the Carmelite Movement. We discovered ourselves as men and women growing in the notion that we were Carmelites and lay people as well; we were both contemplative and apostolic; we found ourselves living as lay people in the space of the Rule of St. Albert itself.

All this was due to our own longing, but also due to the Dutch Carmelite friars who supported us in finding our own way of expression in connecting ourselves to Carmelite spirituality. They supported us by recognizing that there are so many ways of living in God's Presence, and most importantly they welcomed us as brothers and sisters, bearers of the same shared source of inspiration.

To us this seemed to be essential. Carmel in the Netherlands was growing, but not in a traditional uniform way, but as one house with different rooms, as one tree with different growing branches, where people could grow in their own different ways, but nourished by the same source: the love of a God who invited us to live with a contemplative attitude in a secular context.

In October 1995 we founded the Carmelite Movement as a new canonical third order: a new organisation, with the minimum of normative obligations according to Canon Law and adapted within a secularised Church and society in the Netherlands. Dutch people want to feel free; they do not want to interfere or to let anyone interfere in their personal freedom. So we needed our own independent organization.

Therefore lay Carmelites are members of Carmelite Movement. They are not members of the Order of the Carmel. As an organisation we now have our own articles of association, our own board with its president, secretary, treasurer and members. In October 1995 we started with 27 lay Carmelites. Now we have 43 members and 33 interested people, and some of them intend eventually to become members. (Considering the fact that the 1st and 2nd order counts about 210 people you can understand we are just a pin-prick on the map of the world, but we always tell each other that it is the quality that counts, not the quantity.

At the same time we also realised that organisation alone could not guarantee the spiritual growth of the members. Therefore we dedicated ourselves to the guidance of the Carmelite Rule. We needed to keep on meeting each other and so we did. Two times a year we have national meetings of a day, and also twice a year we meet in the three regions of the province. In these meetings we discuss, meditate and celebrate aspects of the Carmelite Rule. For example: what does it mean to you and to us to live in our own cells? or what is the meaning of daily work as proposed by the Rule? what does it mean to you to live with the example of Jesus himself? It is very fruitful to meet each other; it is also an inspiring way to grow in Carmelite spirituality. It encourages people to unfold more and to be involved in more activities in their region. For example, they spontaneously started little groups who frequently meet for studying the Rule, for praying and service.

The last two years have shown another interesting development. The Carmel Movement, once accepted as a new way of Carmelite life, participates increasingly in the Dutch province in a structural way. On a very regular base our board is in contact with the Council of the province because of the growing notion that each one of us is *Carmel*. Together we are the present face of Carmel, but together we are also the future of Carmel, together we bear Carmelite spirituality. More and more we share Carmel as a whole community. We collaborate on an equal basis in the organisation of Carmel Days: yearly meetings of the whole province with all her different sections. We participate in every commission that advises the Provincial Council, for example Justice and Peace, Charism and Identity, Health Care and so on. We participate in the Formation Program of the Dutch province. And more and more we participate in the life and tasks of the different local Carmelite groups of friars and sisters. For example our Carmelite parishes are sometimes built up with teams in which members of the first order and lay Carmelites work as equal partners. We contribute to our scientific institute: the Titus Brandsma Institute in Nijmegen. And more recently one of our members is a member of the national Chapter.

All these latest developments show a very striking spiritual process: the acknowledgement of each own's particular way of living seems to be the spiritual space for building up the Carmelite Province as a whole - and so it is done from the inside as well as from the outside. More and more we develop as communities existing of people of the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Order and of the Associated Members as well. At this moment we have 13 Associates.

Karmelbeweging is growing and flourishing, due to our own contribution, but also due to the open mind of the friars and sisters of the first and second order. This openness was our opportunity, but it was also a basic

condition for us as lay Carmelites to become bearers of Carmelite spirituality itself and not merely as a sympathising presence without any obligation or engagement. This attitude was a necessary condition for us to express our own intention: to dedicate our lives to the spiritual room that our shared inspiration, the Rule, offers each one of us. Each one in their own way, with their own talents, but also with their own limitations.

It is clear there are lots of limitations. We have our own families, we have our own jobs, we have our own ways of living and this is our first responsibility. But it also means that we are not unconditionally available for the work of Carmel as a whole.

Another problem is what we call our second-generation problem. The formation and profession of the first 27 members wasn't a problem. For many years they participated in several Carmelite communities before the time of their profession. But the people who became members after 1995 are dealing with the fact we cannot offer them a formation program. For some people it works out well, for some it doesn't. It really is a point for careful consideration, but in our situation it is also very difficult. As I said before: we cherish our personal freedom very much.

And yet, despite these problems we keep alive our deepest Carmelite identity: to let our lives be guided by God's invitation to enter the adventure of the devotion to this unconditional love. We need to discern this Presence in the present context of Church and society, and of our personal lives. This is a challenging adventure, of course, but it is also a spiritual adventure of devotion - whatever the future may bring.

On this journey we feel deeply connected with the intention of the spirituality of the first lay Carmelites on the mountain range of Carmel: to live in a way that our own place will be God's place - with God's Spirit as our final guide. This is what we need to learn: to trust ourselves to this guidance, and to me it seems to be a never ending story.

So may it be; so let it be. May God's Spirit be our guide - unconditional, for therefore we can be what we want to be: God-seekers forever, instead of God-finders. For our strength will be found in keeping our own desires and longings alive, to keep us going on in creating space for God's Presence, to live our lives and keep the Carmelite Movement moving forward.