

THE MEANING OF LENT
WITH SOME CARMELITE INSIGHTS

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In Catholic liturgy the place to look for the meaning of a feast or a season in the prefaces of the Mass. In the first Lent preface we address the Father in these words:

Each year you give us this joyful season
when we prepare to celebrate the paschal mystery
with mind and heart renewed.

You give us a spirit of loving reverence for you, our Father,
and of willing service to our neighbour.

As we recall the great events that gave us new life in Christ,
you bring the image of your Son to perfection within us.

Lent then is a joyful season.

Memories

In our grandparents time there was a Lenten fast which was taken very seriously: One full meal and two collations. The difficulty that came for an anxious and scrupulous Church was, what was a collation? In the end the canon layers said that the two collations must not, when put together, be as much as the main meal. In one Irish diocese the main meal was based on what an industrial worker or a farmer might eat: two pounds of food, about 1 kg. At that rate each collation had to be less than 500 grams, or half a pound. Then there was the problem of morning coffee, was a biscuit allowed? There was a principle that, yes you could have one biscuit, *ne potus noceat* that is, lest drinking without eating food would be harmful (it was thought to give heartburn, sometimes confused with heart attacks). The bakers in Cork city developed an enormous biscuit, about the size of a burger bun. It was called a “Connie dodger” after the bishop, Cornelius Lucy, known as Connie.

Most of us will have our own experiences and memories of Lent; many will associate it with giving up things. Later the idea gained currency that it would be better to do things for Lent than to give up things. This second idea does not always work. If it is something specific, like going to Mass or saying some prayers, it may work; but if it is in the form: “I will avoid gossip,” then we might as well have no resolution at all.

What should we do? Give up something, or do something special for the forty days? It all depends on how we see Lent and how we see ourselves.

Lent was originally a time of preparation for Easter and for catechumens a final preparation for baptism. By the 4th century it was forty days, recalling Jesus’ forty day fast in the desert (see Matt 4:1-11; Mk 1:12-13; Luke 12:1-13). To get the exact forty – excluding Sundays – a few days were added on, so that it began with Ash Wednesday. In the early centuries people assembled for Mass each day or other prayers, so that Lent became a communal retreat time of forty days for the Christian community.

The idea of giving up something or doing something for Lent needs to be looked at in the wide perspective of asceticism in Christian tradition.

The New Testament

The word “asceticism” is found only once in the New Testament; in Acts 24:16 we have the verb *ascô*, which is translated as “I do my best” (NRSV) or “I train myself” (REB). The reality is not absent; the Christian Church took over the three great Hebrew practices of fasting,

almsgiving and prayer (see Matt 6:1-18 with Tobit 12:8). Even more striking is the games imagery of Paul:

Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one. So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified. (1 Cor 9:24-27—NRSV)

There are some valuable points in this passage for any spirituality of asceticism. Paul is deadly serious about the race for the reward of eternal life. He implies that we should be more focussed than athletes who are only getting a prize that will soon fade. We should not miss the other key to the passage, which is that in this spiritual race there are dangers, and these somehow come from the body. Here Paul uses not “flesh” (*sarx*), which is under sin, but “body” (*sôma*) which a year or two earlier he had given as one of the constituents of the person, “spirit, soul and body” (*pneuma... psychê... sôma*, 1 Thess 5:23). The most profound ascetical teaching in the New Testament involves self-denial, daily taking up of our cross and following Jesus (see Luke 9:23). Paul warns the Corinthians that true wisdom lies in the cross of Christ (see 1 Cor 1:17-25). This teaching about the cross and abnegation implies that there is some disorder in our desires, so that we have to take up a negative attitude towards our inner being. Elsewhere Jesus teaches that what truly defiles a person is not outward contamination, but what stems from the disordered heart, the evil intentions that lead to “fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly” (Mark 7:21-23). The heart is disordered and only God truly knows its depths (Jer 17:9-10).

The New Testament will not, therefore, allow us to dismiss asceticism. Not only the teaching of Jesus, but the Apostolic Letters all point to significant areas to which we must attend. The Pauline letters move from doctrinal considerations to practical morality and asceticism in his letters (e.g. Rom 12-15; Gal 5-6; Phil 4; Col. 3-4; see the whole of James). In these teachings we find both positive and negative advice: there are good things to be done and evil things to be avoided.

In the millennium after the New Testament we find the hermits in the desert and monks throughout Europe. In our Irish monasteries there was often a regime of extreme penance. But gradually the idea arose that

Patristic period

In the patristic writings we find this double approach to asceticism. The Christian east knows a *praxis*, which is both positive and negative.¹ Very early they took up a two-fold distinction between *praxis* which for Evagrius was concerned with cleansing the soul, and *theôria*, which is contemplation, the true work of the soul. T. Spidlik concludes, “the union of asceticism and mysticism is the doctrinal foundation of all forms of monasticism.”² Though we may ordinarily think of the East as engaging in extreme asceticism, there were more moderate schools of thought that, such as the Russians who felt that hard work and the Russian climate were the basic asceticism.

Eastern asceticism is ultimately not against the body, but with the body and for it. It is not an end in itself, but is aiming at *apatheia* (dispassion), a difficult concept that has something of

the Western ideas of self-control, sobriety, serenity, indifference.³ Asceticism aims at being able to resist the passions, so that though we can feel pride, covetousness etc. we are not thrown by them. This state of *apatheia* is an indispensable means for genuine contemplation or the mystical life.

In the Patristic period too the two ways of categorising the stages of the spiritual life emerged: purgative, illuminative and unitive (already in Platonism); beginners, proficient and perfect (from time of Origen). Asceticism is present in all stages, but it is more emphasised in the first of these triads: purgative stage, which is that of beginners.

Asceticism and mysticism

Already in the patristic period the reality of asceticism and mysticism, by whatever names, is widely appreciated. The scholastic period saw the emergence of much writing in the early vernaculars which we would today perhaps call ascetical or mystical. There are two aspects to our spiritual journey, the ascetical which is associated with struggle—struggle to do right and avoid what is harmful; and mystical which is more about receiving from God.

It is in the context of this controversy and of contemporary unease about asceticism that the writers of the Carmelite school would seem to have a significant contribution to an ongoing debate.

The Carmelite *Rule*

The Carmelite *Rule* is among the briefest of the great rules.⁴ It is just over 1,500 words. The hermits living on Mount Carmel asked the local bishop, St. Albert of Avogadro (ca 1150-1214), then Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, for a rule or way of life sometime after 1206. These hermits lived in separate cells but were gathered into a fraternity by the *Rule* of Albert.

The Carmelite *Rule* consists of twenty-four short paragraphs dealing with the basic structures of the settlement on Mount Carmel, with liturgical and personal prayer, and with regulations concerning fasting, silence, work and spiritual warfare (based on Eph 6:10-18). A remarkable feature of this *Rule* is the number of times that the legislator inserts moderating clauses that allow exceptions depending on circumstances. The prior is appointed “by common consent;” places are to be “suitable and convenient;” refectory reading is prescribed if it “can be done without difficulty;” there is constant prayer, “unless there is another duty;” goods are to be distributed “according to need;” daily Mass is enjoined if “there is no difficulty.” In the two paragraphs on fasting and abstinence there are eleven exclusions with the reminder, “necessity overrides every law.”

You are to fast every day except Sundays from the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross until Easter Sunday, unless illness or bodily weakness, or other just cause counsels a lifting of the fast, since necessity has no law.

You are to abstain from meat, unless it is to be taken as a remedy for illness or bodily weakness. Since you must more frequently beg on journeys, in order not to burden your hosts you may eat food cooked with meat outside your own houses. At sea, however, meat may be eaten. (nn. 16, 17)

But the main asceticism of the Carmelite *Rule* will be found in the chapter on spiritual armour, based largely on Eph 6:10-17.

Since human life on earth is a trial and all who want to live devotedly in Christ suffer persecution; your enemy the devil prowls about like a roaring lion seeking whom he might devour. You must then with all diligence put on the armour of God so that you may be able to stand up to the ambushes of the enemy.

Your loins are to be girded with the belt of chastity; your breast is to be protected by holy thoughts, for the Scripture says, holy thoughts will save you. Put on the breastplate of justice, so that you may love the Lord your God from your whole heart, your whole soul and your whole strength, and your neighbour as yourselves. In all things take up the shield of faith, with which you will be able to extinguish all the darts of the evil one; without faith, indeed, it is impossible to please God. The helmet of salvation is to be placed on your head, so that you may hope for salvation from the one Saviour, who saves his people from their sins. The sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, is to dwell abundantly in your mouths and hearts. So whatever you have to do, is to be done in the word of the Lord. (nn. 18, 19).

Other ascetical norms are about work and silence. The very last words of the *Rule* are “See that the bounds of common sense are not exceeded, however, for common sense is the guide of the virtues” (*utatur tamen discretione, que virtutum est moderatrix*). The author is strictest not on fasting or other practices, but about work, serious and continual work: “earn you bread by silent work; this is the way of holiness and goodness; see that you follow it.” The broad and compassionate tone of the *Rule* has in a profound way left its mark on Carmel.

The two aims

Within two decades of the *Rule* being given, persecution in Palestine led to the emigration westwards of the hermit brothers, a process which took about sixty years beginning in 1230. When they came to Europe these contemplative had to adapt to a different environment and quickly became established among the friars.

There were many problems in this quite radical translocation. By 1281, and perhaps earlier, the *Constitutions* had an opening rubric or paragraph giving an identity statement of the friars. It stressed the contemplative life of the hermits on Carmel, noting that they lived by the Fountain of Elijah on Mount Carmel “in holy penitence (*in sancta poenitentia*) unceasingly maintained.”⁵ There is some debate amongst Carmelite scholars about the meaning of this “holy penance.” Some would interpret it as reflecting the various groups of penitents that arose in Europe in the 13th century. Others, including the present author, would wish to explore an Eastern source, the state or attitude of penitence (*penthos*) which goes back to the Desert Fathers. For our purposes here it is probably sufficient to note some ascetical dimension in the core identity of the Carmelite friars.

A still more important document comes from the 14th century. It was written by a Catalan Philip Ribot around 1380, but claimed to be a work by John the forty-fourth bishop of Jerusalem written in 412. It is called *The Institute of the First Monks*. St Teresa of Avila knew this text, but not its pseudonymity; she saw it as a very early text, which predated the *Rule* and presented a contemplative ideal of the hermit brothers on Mount Carmel. It was generally accepted as genuine until the 19th century. The importance of this document for Carmelite spirituality can scarcely be exaggerated. It presented a primitive ideal of the Order. The most important passage of the document was the double aim of the Order:

In regard to that life we may distinguish two aims, the one of which we may attain to, with the help of God's grace, by our own efforts and by virtuous living. This is to offer God a heart holy and pure from all actual stain of sin. This we achieve when we become perfect and hidden in Cherith (see 1 Kgs 17:2-4) - that is in charity... The other aim of this life is something that can be bestowed upon us only by God's bounty: namely to taste in our hearts and experience in our minds, not only after death but even during this mortal life, something of the power of the divine presence, and the bliss of heavenly glory.⁶

The first of these indicates what is obtainable through human efforts along with the normal grace of God. It involves both a negative and a positive effort. The aim is expressed as purity of heart, a theme that is very central in Carmelite spirituality. Purity of heart might be seen as another expression of *apatheia*, which results from asceticism

The second aim is clearly mystical. The experiential language of tasting and experiencing is used about intellectual and voluntary faculties. The author is quite clear that it is the result of extraordinary grace, "only by God's bounty." What is significant here is that mystical life is presented as an aim of the life, for which the Carmelite should prepare by seeking purity of heart.

In this text we can see clearly the difference between the two states that St Teresa of Avila calls "ordinary" and "supernatural" and which correspond respectively to Mansions 1-3 and Mansions 4-7 of *The Interior Castle*. Generally we should translate Teresa's *sobernatural* as "mystical."⁷

Once we become aware of this text we can find its echoes in many places in Carmelite authors. It also underlies a question that all the Order's major writers take up, why do more people not come to great holiness?

Asceticism in the Carmelite school

When we look at the writers of the Carmelite school, we can certainly be struck by their insistence on the need of asceticism. But it has its own form or mould. Faithful to the genial spirit of the *Rule* mainstream Carmelite writers do not advocate extreme penances. Moreover, they are much more concerned with purity of heart, the aim of asceticism and with freedom from sin and destructive attachments or passions than with details of ascetical practices. A phrase typical of Carmelite spirituality is *vacare Deo* (empty or surrendered to God).

Carmelite

If we consider the main themes in Carmelite spirituality, we shall see that quite a number of them are ascetical. If we seek the values of the Carmelite tradition, we shall see that there is serious self-denial in the search:

- Absolute of God
- Empty for God
- Mountain
- Desert
- Night
- Transformation

- Service
- Humility
- Constant prayer.

We shall examine briefly some key authors, looking to their views on asceticism and its relation to mysticism.

St Teresa of Avila

There are a few points about the 16th century Spanish Church that are important for an understanding of the works of St Teresa of Avila. The institutional Church was very concerned with the Alumbrados, who were so intent on the Spirit that they downplayed the structures and the sacramental life of the Church. Again, there was an extraordinary interest in mysticism—a parallel would be the late 20th century focus on apparitions in many countries. Religious leaders like the inquisitor Fernando de Valdés, and the theologian Melchior Cano, saw great dangers in any except vocal prayer. Books on meditation and mysticism often ended up on the *Index*. It would be the great of Teresa and of Ignatius Loyola to save and restore mental prayer in the Church.

We own the writings of Teresa to two wrote for two reasons. Her confessors and religious superiors had little idea of her profound mystical experiences, and asked her to write these down. As a reformer of Carmel she was anxious to provide instruction for her sisters. In her *Constitutions* written for nuns of the reformed Carmel, Teresa does not notably add to the ascetical practices of the *Rule*, except in the area of poverty. She commends and demands austerity of life-style, accommodation, clothing and a minimum of possessions, and these last are communitarian rather than personal.

Similarly her writings for the sisters do not advocate many penances, and they often warn against excessive asceticism, especially when individually chosen. She sees an inclination to extreme asceticism as a temptation arising from either pride or demons. Permission from the superior or confessor is always to be sought in adopting serious penance.⁸

Teresian asceticism is much more concerned with charity and interior liberty than with negative observances.⁹ Though she does indeed speak continually of detachment (*desasimiento*), she is concerned not much with an absence of things as with the following of Christ in the way of the evangelical counsels. If the title of a key chapter of *The Way of Perfection* is “The great good in detaching oneself inwardly and outwardly from all created things,” her aim is interior freedom to love God totally.¹⁰ The most fundamental ascetical virtue in Teresa is probably humility, which is advocated in each of the seven Mansions of the *Interior Castle*. With humility there is self-knowledge, which however is not so much self-regarding as God centred. She notes:

In my opinion we shall never completely know ourselves if we don't strive to know God. By gazing at His grandeur, we get in touch with our own lowliness; by looking at His purity, we shall see our own filth; by pondering His humility, we shall see how far we are from being humble.¹¹

As she writes of the elevated graces of the Sixth Mansions, she muses:

Once I was pondering why our Lord was so fond of this virtue of humility, and this thought came to me—in my opinion not as a result of reflection but suddenly: It is

because God is supreme Truth; and to be humble is to walk in truth, for it is a very deep truth that of ourselves we have nothing good but only misery and nothingness. Whoever does not understand this walks in falsehood.¹²

But Teresa who is so overwhelmed by the beauty and wonder of our creation in the image of God,¹³ see humility not in pessimism or self-hatred, but as supremely positive:

Let us, my daughters imitate in some way the great humility of the Blessed Virgin, whose habit we wear, for it is embarrassing to call ourselves her nuns. However much it seems to us that we humble ourselves, we fall far short of being the daughters of such a Mother and the brides of such a Spouse.¹⁴

The last pillar of Teresian asceticism, along with the evangelical counsels, humility and detachment, is her coinage, “determined determination” (*una grande y muy determinada determinación*).¹⁵ It is easy to be holy for a short time, in the circumstances we may select, but the only worthwhile search for holiness is continuous.

The asceticism of Teresa is ultimately Christ-centred: many do not reach the end “due mainly to a failure to embrace the cross from the beginning.”¹⁶ It is ultimately a failure to accept the cross and to embrace humility that leaves people in the third or lower Mansions so that they do not progress to the supernatural or mystical life.¹⁷

Lenten themes

The answer can be found in the Lenten liturgies. In the next six weeks there are seven themes that continually emerge in the prayers and readings for Mass and the Liturgy of the Hours.

Lent is a time for *penance*. We need to be prepared to what we do not feel like doing. There are certain features of our lives, of our personalities that we would be better without; there are aspects of our personalities that are not beautiful or helpful for ourselves and others. Some of these are quite simply sins. Sin? Not an in-word today. At penitential services in Lent and before Christmas I frequently hear people say, “It’s six months—or even several years—since my last confession. I do not have any sins.” I feel like saying, ask your husband, wife, children, parents, or work colleagues if you are really without sin. The person may not have committed murder or adultery, but they will probably have many features of their lives which are not adding to the sum of human happiness or indeed to their own well-being. So there is firstly a need for penance, which is a matter of seeing what road we are on. We go astray in many ways, and strangely the smaller the faults, the more difficult it can be to eliminate them. Penance is being alert to our failings and a willingness to do something about them. The second theme is *conversion*. This means turning away from what is sinful or dangerous. The other side of conversion is a third theme of *returning to God*. We should view our behaviour and our lives in the mirror of the teaching of Jesus. Fourthly, we have to have an attitude to our failings and sin. This is *sorrow*. A feature of contemporary society is the lack of sorrow for evil-doing. Politicians and Church leaders hate saying sorry we know, but many people go around doing harm, even if in small ways, without any regrets. Sorrow for sin and for the evil in our lives is essential for spiritual health.

However, these four themes of penance, conversion, returning to God and sorrow for sin are not fully within our power. The Christian view is that we cannot really do much that is of value except with God’s help. Our spiritual health depends on God’s gift. Hence the fifth theme is *redemption*: God saves us. He will not do it without our co-operation. To recall an earlier text, we have to be willing to allow God to recreate our hearts and cleanse our inner

being. The redemption we need arises from the sixth Lenten theme, the *passion of Jesus Christ*. Jesus came to save us; he taught and healed, before dying for us. The passion of Jesus is a truth that teaches God's love for us, the reality of sin. Contemporary spirituality neglects too much the Cross of Christ; the Stations of the Cross are not nearly so popular today. The seventh Lenten theme is *baptism*. The weeks of Lent are a final preparation for the sacrament. They are also a time when we should reflect on our own baptism. What does the sacrament mean to us? Three ideas might be noted: baptism brings us into the family of God, with relationships to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Baptism then brings us into the Church, the Christian community, with an obligation to love and serve. Thirdly, baptism draws us in imitation and discipleship of Jesus.

These seven themes found in the Lenten liturgy can give us a new vision of ourselves. Once they are pointed out, then we can hear them with new ears: penance, conversion, returning to God, sorrow for sin, redemption, the passion of Jesus and baptism will feature in the prayers and readings, with ever new lights and insights. But we will not plumb their depths without reflection. A lot of teaching is about facts; we can with more or less difficulty process information. There were two world wars in the 20th century: 1914-1918 and 1939-1945. Anyone who does not know this is ill-informed. Anyone denying them is plain wrong. But a lot of education is about attitudes and values. Generosity and open-mindedness have to be communicated in education, but these involve owning and valuing them, similarly with the values of Lent. You could have a page for noting these themes as we hear them at Masses during Lent. They could be the subject of prayer and reflection so that we have a new acceptance and esteem for them.

The Lenten trilogy

Well, how are we doing? There seems to be an awful amount to Lent; it may seem quite complicated on the page. Over the centuries the Church has simplified the Lenten observance to three: prayer, fasting and almsgiving.

Prayer is coming before God in our creatureliness, in our beauty and our disfigurement to seek a relationship with our Father, with Jesus our brother and Son of God, with the Holy Spirit who gives life to all our activity. Without reflection and prayer, our Lent will not go anywhere. We need to seek God in silence so that we may listen to him and to the truth of the Gospel, to respond to it and to gaze on its challenge or beauty,

Fasting is a most ancient form of penance; many of us have been impressed by the dedication of Moslems to fasting. Fasting can serve as a symbol of what we are determined to do or avoid in Lent. What should we do for Lent? Which is better to give up something or to choose something to do? It depends. We need to go back to our check-up. Each of us could have a different result of a medical examination. The doctor might prescribe medicine for some people, recommend diets or activities for others. When we look at the various areas of our spiritual lives, which I put under the headings of head, heart, chest, stomach and limbs, we will see where our weaknesses are, and then we can choose what is most beneficial for our spiritual growth. There are more Lenten practices than giving up sweets, smoking or alcohol, or attending Mass more often in the week. What would be good for you? Fasting will cover what we need to do or avoid that will make us more spiritually healthy; it will necessarily involve what may be somewhat unpleasant, difficult or painful. That saint of common sense, the 16th century Teresa of Avila spoke of those who claimed that their health would suffer if

they fasted; she said that to keep in what should not be said, was a fast that everyone could practice. Lenten practices need some imagination.

Finally, *almsgiving* is the aspect of penance that invites us to look after those who are poor in any way. We are familiar with giving money for charity. School charities are surely a most important feature of education. It invites pupils to look to the needs of others. It gives very important possibilities for bonding between pupils and with their teachers. The commitment to a charity is more than the money that may be raised. We learn about the situation of others for whom we may be raising funds. We may not have much money and may not be able to give much to charity, it is important to give at least a little. But there is something that all of us have to give, which is our time. I know that people say that our society is time poor. Yes. But all could give some time to others, over and above our duties. It might be as little as an hour or two per week that we commit to some needy people, to an organisation or group that serves the community or Church

So this Lent invites us to look at our lives, to see what our weaknesses are. Then we can engage in the three classical forms of penance: prayer, fasting and almsgiving in accordance with our possibilities.

Light from St. John of the Cross

So what about a joyful season? Yes. But how? Is repainting the kitchen joyful? It is fine when the job is done, we will take pleasure in the freshness of everything. But the process can be trying. However, if we look deeper, we can realise how good Lent could be for us. The areas that need attention in our lives, the results of our annual check-up, are matters that damage us and hurt others. All sin is slavery; all weakness takes from our lives. It is only by changing our attitudes and lives to God's way that we find a new peace, a fresh beauty in ourselves and others. The most accurate doctor of spiritual disease is probably St. John of the Cross, a Spanish Carmelite mystic who died in 1592.

He examined the human condition and realised that we have two sources of weakness and sin in our lives, failings that drag us down, so that we are less able to love God, to love others and to love ourselves. These boil down to the areas of feelings and the dispositions of our minds. Feelings are facts. They may be positive or negative. The main ones are fear, joy, anger and hope. When these are rightly aligned, then our lives can easily be in order. But whereas we need to pay attention to our feelings, they are not always reliable guides. Indeed emotional maturity is marked by the ability to act irrespective of feelings. Pupils need to study whether they feel like it or not. We go to work irrespective of how we feel. John of the Cross teaches very clearly that our feelings must not determine how we live.

The other problems arise from the way we think, the way we desire, the way we remember. Each of us values being in control. But our thinking can so often be askew. We don't get the whole picture; we make poor judgements; we are blind and prejudiced. The cure for our intellects is faith. God's word leads us into areas of truth that are beyond our human capacity. We are invited to walk in faith and to surrender our intellectual pride. Again, our willing and our desires are often selfish. The big *me* controls so much of what we think, say or do. St. John of the Cross offers us the therapy of love. We need to set aside selfishness in order to love God and to love others.

The third problem arises from memory. We are very often in slavery to memory. Hurts can linger for years. In addition memory may cripple us, as when we do not want to face what is new. We rely on what proved good in the past and we won't take fresh steps. St. John of the Cross points us in the direction of hope. Hope is for the future; it is not limited by the past. We can do much more than we dare think. The past can be a form of slavery. Christian hope is assurance that God will be with us in the challenges of the future.

The most important teaching of John of the Cross is, however, that we cannot get right by ourselves. God must not only work with us in our struggles with our feelings and with the limitations of our minds, desires and memories. Not only do we need grace for every spiritual advance, but there are serious limitations to what we can do even with normal grace. The further stage comes only when we really surrender to God's will, when we lay ourselves open to his healing. In the end what we will find most difficult is surrender, abandoning the control freak that presides within us. St. John of the Cross sings of the joy and blessing of darkness. It is only through an ever greater yielding to God's love that we will come into wholeness.

Within the Carmelite tradition, asceticism is not a value sought for itself. Nor are extremes of asceticism generally found. It is indeed not easy to identify the ascetical practices of the authors when reading the Carmelite classics. The demanding but balanced asceticism of the *Rule* is presumed, and there are only occasional passing references to disciplines or instruments of penance. One could signal three major contributions of the Carmelite school today in the study of mysticism. Firstly, they have a wholesome doctrine of the Cross, which they speak more often about than about ascetical practices. Secondly, the great Carmelites are supremely focussed not on themselves but on God. The path to God is through unselfish loving. Thirdly, they have realism about the human condition, which contradicts the superficial optimism of much contemporary spirituality. Though human nature is good, and creation is to be celebrated, sinful and selfish tendencies lurk deeply within us, so that union with the all-holy God requires profound purification or healing. Purification, or the nights, are ultimately not harshly negative, but are to be embraced in a journey of love. Some contemporary denials of the need for asceticism can forget that the Paschal Mystery into which we are being inserted is a journey from Calvary to Easter to Pentecost.

It is in this way that we will really appreciate the meaning of Lent:

Each year you give is this joyful season
when we prepare to celebrate the paschal mystery
with mind and heart renewed.

You give us a spirit of loving reverence for you, our Father,
and of willing service to our neighbour.

As we recall the great events that gave us new life in Christ,
you bring the image of your Son to perfection within us.

Endnotes:

- ¹ See T. Spidlík, *The Spirituality of the Christian East: A Systematic Handbook* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1986) 177-305.
- ² Ibid. 180.
- ³ Ibid. 270-277.
- ⁴ Recent commentaries are: K. Waaijman, *The Mystical Space of Carmel: A Commentary on the Carmelite Rule* (Leuven: Peeters, 1999); M. Mulhall, ed., *Albert's Way* (Rome: Carmelite Institute, 1989); R. Girardello, ed., *Le origini e la Regola del Carmelo* (Rome: Edizioni OCD, 1989).
- ⁵ "The *rubrica prima*" in A. Staring, ed., *Medieval Carmelite Heritage: Early Reflections on the nature of the Order* (Rome: Carmelite Institute, 1989) 33-43 at 40.
- ⁶ Text in B. Edwards, trans. and ed., *The Institutes of the First Monks* (privately published by Carmelite Friars, Boars Hill, Oxford, 1969 [book one only]) 1:2, pp. 3-4. A critical Latin edition and a translation in the Classics of Western Spirituality series by Paul Chandler, O.Carm. have been long awaited.
- ⁷ E.g. *Interior Castle* 1 M 2:7; 4 M 1:1.
- ⁸ On these points see *Interior Castle* 1 M 2:15.
- ⁹ See J. Castellano, "Espiritualidad teresiana: Rasgos y vivencias" in A. Barrientos, ed., *Introducción a la lectura de santa Teresa* (Madrid: Editorial de Espiritualidad, 1978) 105-201 at 179. See also P. Marie-Eugène, [Henri Grialou], *I Want to See God: I Am a Daughter of the Church*. 2 vols. (Chicago: Fides, 1953, reprint Allen, Texas: Christian Classics, 1997) 1:80-96; J. Welch, *Spiritual Pilgrims: Carl Jung and Teresa of Avila* (New York-Mahwah, Paulist, 1982) esp. chapter 4, "A Map for Life's Journey" 85-110.
- ¹⁰ *Way of Perfection* 8 (title) and 8:2 in *Collected Works* 2:71-72.
- ¹¹ *Interior Castle* 1M 2,9 in *Collected Works*, trans. K. Kavanaugh and O. Rodriguez. 3 vols. (Washington DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1976-1985) 2:292.
- ¹² *Interior Castle* 6 M 10,7 in *Collected Works* 2:420.
- ¹³ *Interior Castle* 1 M 1:1; Epilogue 2-3 in *Collected Works* 2:283-284, 451-452.
- ¹⁴ *Way of Perfection* 13:3 in *Collected Works* 2:86.
- ¹⁵ Passim e.g. *Way of Perfection* 21:2 in *Collected Works* 2:117-118.
- ¹⁶ *Life* 11:15; *Interior Castle* 4:2,9 in *Collected Works* 1:82; 2:326.
- ¹⁷ See *Interior Castle* 3 M 2