

INTRODUCING THE CARMELITE MYSTICS

Christopher O'Donnell, O.Carm.

It has long been my conviction that the main crisis facing the Church is not a crisis of faith, but a crisis of religious experience. It is not that people do not believe, but they do not see the point of faith. And they drift away. Despite the enormous commitment of the Catholic Church to the renewal of liturgy, there has not been a renewed Church. One may say that the liturgical renewal is patchy and at times very defective. But those of us old enough to remember the pre-Vatican II Mass can only be struck by the contrast today of participation by the congregation, even in the most unrenewed or backward church. In the Tridentine Mass there was no communal participation, except through presence and such movements as kneeling, sitting, standing, and making the sign of the Cross. But where has our renewal brought us? People are wandering off: some to other Churches, a fact that we Catholics do not often admit; some to cults; some to New Age manifestations; some to a cold secularity without any religious dimension.

Yet the sad thing about this modern crisis is that the very thing people are seeking elsewhere is already present in the age-old tradition of the Church. When people seek their deepest self, a power within, a transformation of awareness etc. in New Age offerings, we can answer that what they are looking for, and far more, is already at hand in the Church, but seldom preached and generally ignored, like a trunk containing family treasures reposing in an attic. Amongst the finest riches in the Catholic household are the lives and writings of the Carmelite mystics.

The Carmelite mystics form a group of major spiritual writers in the Church. But as a whole they are more spoken about than known; they are often misunderstood. If you mention St. John of the Cross, people may immediately think of him as hard and inhuman; St. Teresa of Avila's visions and experiences will be thought of as far beyond the ordinary Christian; St. Thérèse of Lisieux, however; is felt to be nice, a bit sugary perhaps, but was she really a mystic? Yet these three are only the best known of a whole diverse category of spiritual authors, all of them different, yet still belonging to an identifiable family, the Carmelite Order.

This article attempts to place them briefly in their background and see some common features as well as some of the differences between them.

Mysticism

But first a word about the difficult term "mystic/mysticism." In a very odd book Matthew Fox gives twenty-one definitions of mysticism, and more or less agrees with them all (*The Coming of the Cosmic Christ. The Healing of Mother Earth and the Birth of a Global Renaissance*. San Francisco, 47-67); I would not. A surer guide is the Jesuit, Harvey Egan, who devotes the first chapter of his fine book *Christian Mysticism: The Future of a Tradition* (New York, 1984) to a discussion of the meaning of the word "mysticism." He and all main-line scholars are agreed that mysticism is not primarily about peak experiences, or extraordinary graces such as visions, ecstasy or levitation. It is the Christianity lived to the full, pursued to its ultimate and all-satisfying fulfilment. Mysticism is a way of living, and not a set of transient or isolated experiences. Mysticism is the result of an unconditional response to unconditional love. The mystic wants and finds God alone, and in God finds and values everything else. What most characterizes mysticism therefore is love.

Christian love is not a simply acquired possession, even though its foundation in the habit of charity is given at baptism. Love is a journey, a search, a pilgrimage. It is also a struggle. Love is not a feeling, for feelings can be present or absent in genuine love. Love is primarily a decision, a commitment to another, in the case of the mystic to God, sought as the All Holy, the Totally Other, the Supreme Good. But total love does not come easy. We all know the three enemies of the world, the flesh and the devil. Powerful forces both inside ourselves and from outside tend to turn us away from the path of total love. So the mystical road is a road of purification. If we are to be united with the All Holy God, then everything that is of sin and selfishness must be surrendered and healed.

When we speak of mysticism, then, we are concerned with the consequences of people falling totally in love with God. Mysticism is a living contact with the living God. But it is a contact ultimately beyond our unaided efforts. The most we can hope to achieve by our own efforts assisted by grace is a well-ordered life in which sin is overcome and virtue seriously cultivated. This corresponds to St. Teresa's Third Mansions and the active nights of St. John of the Cross. Beyond that we cannot go, unless God intervenes and carries us up to a state in which we can experience his deep presence in our lives and above all in our hearts. This experience of God's working within us, of drawing us into himself as Father Creator, Redeeming Son and Abiding and Strengthening Spirit is in turn a still more profound healing of our selfishness which allows God to give still greater blessings.

The Carmelite Mystics

In a discussion at the Carmelite general chapter in 1989, someone asked if the Church would have been much the poorer if the Carmelite Order never existed. My immediate instinct was to feel that of course the Carmelite Order, small as it is, is important for the Church; but the question niggled, did we really make any big difference? I pondered the question for weeks and months, and it gradually became clear in my mind something of the nature of the Carmelite contribution to the Church.

The great Carmelite insight, one common to all our mystics, is the supreme value of the spiritual journey, the journey into our heart where we discover God. This journey is a pearl beyond price; it is something worth losing all else to acquire. But it is not an easy journey: the ascent of Mount Carmel to use the expression of St. John of the Cross, later taken over in the liturgy, is a stern task that demands unrelenting dedication over a life-time. Yet the Carmelite mystics know like the Egyptian Jewish mystic, Philo of Alexandria in the first century, that just to embark on this journey is already a great joy.

This we see in a letter of Bl Elizabeth of the Trinity just before she died at the age of twenty-six to her slightly worldly friend, Françoise de Sourdon. Elizabeth was so weak she could only write in pencil. But her mind was crystal clear. From her own deep experience she told her nineteen year old friend:

I truly believe that God wants your life to be spent in a realm where the air breathed is divine. Oh! You see, I have a profound compassion for souls that live only for this world and its trivialities; I consider them as slaves, and wish I could tell them. Shake off the yoke that weighs you down; what are you doing with these bonds that chain you to yourself and to things less than yourself (Complete Works. Washington, 1984 ff. 1:126 / Oeuvres complètes. Paris, 1991: 136)

Four years earlier when she was twenty-two and Françoise would have been only fifteen she had written:

I understand that you need an ideal, something that will draw you out of yourself and raise you to greater heights. But you see, there is only One; it is He, the Only Truth! Ah, if you only knew hint a little as your Sabeth does! He fascinates, He sweeps you away, under His gaze the horizon becomes so beautiful, so vast, so luminous... My dear one, do you want to turn with me towards this sublime ideal? It is no fiction but a reality (Ibid. 122 / 414).

Similar sentiments could be echoed throughout the Carmelite tradition. An obvious example from the male Carmel would be the ecstatic poetry of St. John of the Cross.

But the Carmelite mystics do not only share this conviction of the pearl beyond price with other saints, which they come from a particular perspective, which we shall see if we look briefly at the history of the Order and its Marian tradition.

Carmelite Historical Background

The Carmelites always have a problem about their origins. Other institutes had great men and women as founders: the Franciscan family has St. Francis and St. Clare; the Vincentians have St. Vincent De Paul (Depaul) and St. Louise de Marillac. The Carmelites were originally hermits living on Mount Carmel in the second part of the 12th century. They got a Rule from St. Albert of Jerusalem about 1208. They came to Europe as a result of Saracen persecution. They had great trouble being accepted in Europe: they were of unknown Eastern origin; they wanted to live as hermits and found they could not do so on fresh air; they had a habit which was like the back of a wobbling zebra; the diocesan clergy did not want more competition; the other religious institutes did not welcome rivals either.

For the first hundred years or so, Carmelite writing was almost exclusively defensive: the Carmelites had to justify their right to exist and to minister as friars which they had become. By the middle of the 14th century they were more or less accepted, and soon a major classic in spirituality was written. This work by a Catalan Carmelite, Philip Ribot, after 1370, called *The Institution of the First Monks*, though largely derivative, gives in essence the mystical call of the Carmelite Order. A passage in the second chapter of the first book is rightly famous:

In regard to that life we may distinguish two aims, the one of which we 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 aim we achieve when we become perfect and hidden in charity... The other aim of this life 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.

Here we find clearly expressed the ordinary ways of the spiritual life, namely what we can do by our own grace-assisted efforts, and the mystical ("supernatural" in St. Teresa of Avila) which is by God's special gift. The significance of this passage lies partly in the fact that this special grace is one that we should desire and have as an aim of the spiritual journey.

In the middle of the next century Bl. John Soreth founded the Carmelite sisters and the Order henceforth would have a feminine branch. There had been various groups of women associated with the Order before Soreth's foundation in 1452. The first significant woman mystic who wrote, or had her thoughts recorded, was St. Mary Magdalene of Pazzi (d. 1607).

Meanwhile in the century leading to the Reformation, the Carmelite Order, like other orders, was in some decline. There were various reforms, even before the Reformation. But the most significant one was initiated by St. Teresa of Avila in Spain. From being a bit

worldly, but by no means a great sinner, she received the grace of a major conversion in 1555. Seven years later she began the reform of houses of nuns, and later of priests in the Order in Spain. She was later helped by St. John of the Cross, twenty-seven years her junior. After their death, the reformed houses broke away from the parent Carmelite Order to form the Discalced Carmelites, now in some places, even by themselves, called Teresians.

There was a major reform in the parent Order at the beginning of the next century, centred in Touraine in France. Its leading light was a blind lay-brother, the Venerable John of St. Samson, one of the most outstanding mystics in the history of spirituality. His works are only now being published in French. English translations do not yet exist. In the period of 1600-1850 there was a huge amount of mystical writing in both parts of the Carmelite family; this body of material is only in recent decades being studied, and very little is published in modern editions.

With the nineteenth century we have one of the best-known of the Carmelite saints, Thérèse of Lisieux who died in 1897 at the age of twenty-four. Less known is Bl. Elizabeth of the Trinity who died at the age of twenty six in Dijon in 1906. Both were enclosed Discalced nuns. Another remarkable mystic is the recently beatified Edith Stein, a Jewish philosopher and convert to Catholicism, who was martyred by the Nazis in 1942. Also a martyr to German National Socialism was Bl. Titus Brandsma, an authority himself on Carmelite and Low Countries mysticism.

Mystics for the Whole Church

Thus we see that the Carmelite mystics are both men and women, but all were members of the Carmelite Order, either as friars or nuns. The question arises whether these can be said to belong to the whole Church or have a more parochial interest for one religious family. At this stage one can say that the mystics received personal graces to raise them to high holiness. This gracing, however, was ecclesial; it was not only for themselves, but also for the Church. Through their mystical experiences they became teachers in the Church, and some have become authenticated teachers with the title "Doctor of the Church."

Characteristics of Carmelite Mysticism

In the brief outline of Carmelite history, we saw the origins of the Carmelite Order to have been on Mount Carmel, a hermitical life. The change to Europe was traumatic. One Prior General, Nicolas the Frenchman, wrote *The Fiery Arrow* about 1270, a bitter diatribe against those who betrayed the ideals of the Order by leaving the contemplative life to become involved in pastoral ministry. In succeeding centuries there was always a nostalgia for the hermit life of Mount Carmel and a conviction that the Order is essentially contemplative as well as pastoral. At times this nostalgia would appear almost as a schizophrenia between the ideal of Mount Carmel, which was to be no more, and the actual reality of the ministry of friars.

This nostalgia for the hermit life on Mount Carmel gave rise to a characteristic symbol of the desert. We know that the desert is a symbol of purification. It was in the desert that the Israel was purified and made into a people; the prophet Hosea speaks of the desert as a time of special conversion to, and allurements by, the Lord (2:14). The desert, even when not explicit, is never far from Carmelite writers. They sense its solitude, its being a privileged place of divine encounter, its offer of conversion, purification and transforming love.

But the place of the desert is within. I must go into my heart to find the desert, the place

where I meet God. Elizabeth of the Trinity in her final years cites the text of Hos 2:14-16 about the desert where God speaks to the heart (*Oeuvres complètes* 100, 174, 463).

This desert of the heart has all the connotations of the Exodus experience in which the Israelites were purified of their idolatry. It is in the desert too the Carmelite mystics learned to let go of the many idols that block the way to God. There are many names for this desert: it is the nights of John of the Cross, it is the surrender of Thérèse and Elizabeth of the Trinity, it is the journey inwards of Teresa of Avila, it is the cell of the heart corresponding to his prison cell for Bl. Titus Brandsma. Above all the desert is where we learn to leave all and travel light to meet the One who satisfies all our desires.

Mary and the Carmelite Mystics

In the extensive writing about the Carmelite mystics there is, I think one major lacuna. Not nearly enough attention has been given to the place of Mary in the mystical journey. On its coming to Europe in the mid-13th century, the Carmelite Order developed over a period of about 300 years several images of the Virgin. Firstly, she was Patron. The hermits chose her on Mount Carmel as their Patron by the medieval symbolism of dedicating their first church to her. Henceforth they would serve her as a feudal Lady, and she would protect them as her vassals. The second image developed was Mother. The Lady of the Order was also its Mother. Thirdly, the idea of Sister developed. The Brothers of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, to use the ancient title of the Order, realized that their Patron and Mother was also Sister. Finally, the Carmelites focused on Mary as Virgin, but not so much in terms of chastity or physical integrity, but as the Virgin of the Most Pure Heart. Mary was the ideal fulfilment of the programmatic aim of *The Institute of the First Monks*, “to offer to God a heart holy and pure from all actual stain of sin.”

But behind all these four images of Mary – Patron, Mother, Sister and Virgin of the Most Pure Heart – there is a deeper reality: Mary is the gentle, loving presence for Carmelites. But she is more: she is the Teacher and Guide of the mystics. This is an area seldom averted to by authors on the Carmelite mystics, be they from the Order or not.

Marian Mysticism

A significant element of the Order’s tradition is that of Marian mysticism, a term which is not univocally used by all scholars. Its main exemplar is the Flemish Carmelite tertiary Mary Petyt (Petijt – Mary of St. Teresa, 1623-1677). After some years of searching out her vocation she met the Carmelite, Michael of St. Augustine, who became her director and summarized some of her experiences in a little volume on the Mariform Life (Latin text edited G. Wessels Rome, 1926; others in R.M. Valabek, *Mary: Mother of Carmel*. Rome, 1987, vol. 1:269-289).

Two questions arise about Marian mysticism: the first is the role of Mary that is ordinarily to be found in the contemplative – mystical life of Carmel; the second is the more difficult area of examining the reality and validity of a specifically Marian mystical experience.

In general we can answer that in the Carmelite Order contemplative life and mystical experience are very frequently seen to have Marian characteristics. Mary accompanies Carmelite contemplatives on their journey to divine union. Furthermore, very many Carmelite mystics have had experiences in which Mary had a part. These are too commonplace to need much elaboration; one can take one example from St. Teresa of Avila. It was on the feast of the Assumption 1561:

I was reflecting on the many sins I had in past confessed in that house and many things about my

wretched life. A rapture came upon me so great that it almost took me out of myself. It seemed to me while in this state that I saw myself vested in a white robe of shining brightness, but at first I didn't see who was clothing me in it. Afterward I saw our Lady on my right side and my father St. Joseph at the left, for they were putting that robe on me. I was given to understand that I was now cleansed of my sins...

The beauty I saw in our Lady was extraordinary, although I didn't make out any particular details except for the form of her face in general and that her garment was of the most brilliant white, not dazzling but soft... (Then it seemed to me I saw them ascend to heaven with a great multitude of angels. I was left in deep loneliness, although so consoled and elevated and recollected in prayer and moved to love that I remained some time without being able to stir or speak, but almost outside myself I was left with a great impulse to be dissolved for God and with similar affects. And everything happened in such a way that I could never doubt, no matter how much I tried, that the vision was from God (Life 33:14-15).

Here though Mary is central in the experience, it is a vision that is from God and leading to deeper union with God. Again, St. Teresa of Avila in a mystical vision on 8 September, 1575, renewed her vows in the hands of Our Lady. She notes: "This vision remained with me for some days, as though she were next to me at my left" (*Spiritual Testimonies* 43).

The healing of St. Thérèse of Lisieux through the smile of our Lady on Pentecost Sunday 1883 is another example of a Marian vision, but one which is seen as a divine mercy, the beginning of a process of healing which five years later would allow her enter Carmel (*The Story of a Soul*, ch. 3).

Such mystical experiences are extremely frequent in the history of spirituality, and need not be taken as distinctively Carmelite, even though also found in, and arising from, the life of Carmel.

The second kind of experience is more specifically Carmelite, and as yet not sufficiently studied by spiritual theologians. It is, however, occasionally detected apart from the Carmelite Order, for example in the Jesuit Pierre-Joseph de la Clorivière (d. 1820) and in the life-long collaborator of Cardinal Suenens, Veronica O'Brien (b. 1905). It is most elaborated by Michael of St. Augustine and Mary Petyt, and texts in modern languages are not widely accessible; significant material remains unpublished. There are a few initial observations to be made. Mysticism is about a journey to God, divine union with the Trinity. Hence there will inevitably be a need of contextualization of the writings of both these authors, since sentences taken apart may seem to indicate a distorted focus on Mary in place of God. Further difficulties arise from the highly symbolic mystical language used by them.

The basis of the Mariform life is the spiritual motherhood of Mary and her mediation, both of which can be seen as deeply embodied within the Carmelite tradition. The Mariform life consists in "having one's eyes open on God and his most blessed Mother, so that one promptly and joyfully does what one knows is pleasing to them, and avoids what one recognises as displeasing to them" (Michael of St. Augustine, *De vita Mariæ-formi et mariana*, ch. 1 - ed. Wessels p. 363). Thus one lives a life which is at once divine and Marian; the reign of Jesus and the reign of Mary coincide so that "Jesus and Mary unanimously reign in it (the soul)" (Ibid. 364-365).

Thus it is clear that the central intuitions of this mysticism are fully orthodox. The expressions which it takes are explicitations of this insight of the identity of the will of Mary

and Jesus. Where the teaching becomes specific and original is in the way that Mary is seen to accompany and instruct the person on the whole journey to profound divine union and mystical marriage. Still more distinctive is the notion of union with Mary as the way in which one comes into union with her Son and the Triune God. Thus Michael of St. Augustine uses several images.

Firstly, there is life in Mary:

As by the diligent exercise of faith and stable love one acquires the habit or practice of having the presence of God always and everywhere in mind, and there is such a sincere affection flowing with such facility towards God, it therefore appears impossible to forget God: in a similar way the one who loves Mary by constant exercise acquires the habit or practice of having her as loving Mother present in mind, so that all one's thoughts and affections terminate both in her and in God, and the person can forget neither the loving Mother nor God (Ibid. ch. 2, pp. 366-367).

This, he says, is not something infantile or innocent, but a very mature, rational and valiant (*yin/ion*) movement. It is a work of the Spirit to lead the person to an awareness now of Mary, now of God, without any conflict or division of heart (Ibid. ch. 3, pp. 368-369).

Secondly, the person lives for Mary. Here the author is again careful to show that service of Mary in no way detracts from God.

Just as in Mary everything is for the divine pleasure, and in eternity she lives for God for his pleasure, love and glory, so too every life and death for Mary must serve and be directed for God, and hence we do not live or die for Mary as our ultimate end, or with any reflection that would adhere to anything outside God for our own convenience; rather by life and death in Mary and for Mary we more perfectly live and die in God and for God in the cause of his pleasure and love, and the perfect reign of Mary in us also at the same time consists in the perfect reign of Jesus in our souls. Nothing of the reign of Mary contradicts the reign of Jesus, but is totally ordered to it (Ibid. ch. 5, p. 371 with ch. 4, p. 369).

The remaining chapters of the work are a bold exposition of a genuine Marian mysticism. On the unquestionably orthodox basis just indicated, Michael of St. Augustine, drawing largely on the experiences of his directee, Mary Petyt shows a way to union with God which is by 'way of union with Mary. There is growth in this mystical journey, and initial experiences of God and Mary may need to be purified. The Marian mysticism of these two spiritual authors is described as "contemplative life of God in Mary, and of Mary in God." (Ibid. ch. 7, p. 374) But they do not allow confusion between Mary and God; the analogy used is that of the Incarnation in which the two natures are united but not fused (Ibid. ch. 7, p. 376). Union with Mary is a love union with God:

*In this way we can understand the fruition of Mary in the soul, the melting (*liquefactio*) of the soul in Mary, the union of the soul with Mary and its transformation into Mary; this is because love tends to what resembles it and so inclines the soul, for the nature of love is to tend to union with the loved one (Ibid. ch. 11, p. 383).*

The heights of mystical union with Mary are described in language which is indeed somewhat obscure, but has a haunting drawing power:

Consequently the memory, the intellect amid the will are then so quietly, simply, and intimately occupied in Mary and simultaneously in God, that the soul can scarcely detect how these operations are transformed. In a confused way it knows well and feels the memory to be occupied

with some most simple remembrance of God and Mary, the intellect has a naked, clear and pure awareness of God present and of Mary present in God, the will has a very tranquil, intimate, sweet, tender and spiritual love of God and of Mary in God and a loving adherence to God and to Mary in God. I say “spiritual love” because love is then seen to shine and operate in the highest part of the soul with abstraction from the lower and sensitive powers, so that it is more proportioned to intimate melting, absorption in God and in Mary and union with God and at the same time with Mary. For when the powers of the soul are virtuously (nobiliter) and perfectly occupied in the memory, awareness and firm adhesion of the whole soul with God and Mary, so that by a loving melting or influx of love seem to make one with God and Mary, as if these three God, Mary and the soul are melted together. This seems to be the extremity and supreme realization that a soul can reach in this Mariform life, and it is the principal activity of this exercise and spirit of love towards Mary (Ibid. ch. 12, p. 384).

As we have already noted, the mystics have their experiences not only as special and personal gifts from God, but also in order that they might teach the Church. The Mariform mysticism of Mary Petyt is not something eccentric in the history of spirituality, but teaches the whole Church something important about the journey to God. What may not be explicit in other mystics is very clear in Michael of St. Augustine and in Mary Petyt, namely that divine union comes about through a person becoming more closely clothed with the virtues of Mary, and through her continuing presence and accompaniment. Theirs is the most dramatic and the most sublime expression of the truth continually expressed in all Carmelite Marian writings, namely the motherly presence of Mary accompanies the Carmelite always, and growth in holiness is found through opening oneself to this presence and motherly care.

Though from a different culture, the Flemish mysticism of these two Carmelites is another expression of the theological truth proposed by Hans Urs von Balthasar: adopt the need for the Church to be truly Marian if it is to be authentically Christian. It also predates, and is a much more profound exposition of the truths expounded in the better-known book on the slavery of Mary, *The Treatise on the True Devotion* by St. Louis Marie Grignion de Montfort (d. 1716). For many people the “True Devotion” is a form of piety, an approach which they choose to Mary. Marian mysticism, on the other hand, is the result of the way God intervenes in a person’s life.

Conclusion

The Carmelite mystics are sufficiently homogeneous to be a distinct family in the Church; yet they are diversified enough to find in them models and teachers that will be suitable to different people on the spiritual journey on which the Spirit leads them.

But we must remember that the Lord has a special plan for each one of us. Some people are indeed drawn to the Carmelite way. But it is only one, amongst many. There is an abundance of spiritualities in the Church. If we as Carmelites are right in thinking that the Carmelite mystics have something important to say today to all in the Church, especially perhaps to women, we are no less convinced that there are many other ways. We could not think otherwise, for our very first document, our 13th century Rule, begins with the opening words of the Letter to the Hebrews: “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways.