

A Modern Presentation of
Carmelite Spirituality:

The 1995 *Constitutions II*

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In a previous presentation we have seen our Carmelite calling sketched in broad terms. From the general call to all Christians to live in allegiance to Jesus Christ, we are called in a vowed life to following the inspiration of Mary and Elijah our models with a life-style identified as a contemplative fraternity in the midst of the people.

We now look at the values that underpin, and give expression to our charism and we examine the criteria, which govern our choices in this way of life. Though there will be some overlapping, there is an advantage in considering primarily as four values—the desert, prayer, sharing and mission, and in seeing as criteria four other elements—discernment, the Word, the poor and human values. Even though other people might place these somewhat differently, reordering or resetting, these eight elements which we will consider as values and criteria, are important for our identity. When we search for identity we should not look for what is exclusively Carmelite, just as we would not look for a physical distinguishing mark between a Scotsman and an American: one would have a finger that the other did not have; one would have nails growing on his ears. It is the one human nature that is variously found among peoples. It is the one mystery of Christ that is reflected differently in each religious family. One could perhaps go further and suggest that it is here in what we call values and criteria that we will find those old things and new that enable us to suggest that in the *Constitutions* we have a viable, contemporary expression of Carmelite spirituality.

OUR VALUES

The Desert

We owe the development mainly, but not exclusively, to the Nijmegen school. It gets behind the notion of asceticism, which developed in the 17th and 18th centuries in treatises on ascetical and mystical theology. Though the terminology is not always consistent, we can say that generally asceticism refers to what we do with the help of grace, whereas mysticism is a further development in which the initiative is largely God's. There is the possibility of some confusion arising from the fact that purification can be both ascetical and mystical, as in the active and passive nights of St. John of the Cross.

The *Constitutions* leap over this post-Tridentine development and look to a much more ancient tradition, namely the desert. Here I suggest we are reaching back to our primitive heritage that was formed on Mount Carmel. We also touch into a spirituality that belongs much more to the Christian East than to the Latin West. I am agreed in principle with the basic orientation of the doctoral thesis of Elias O'Brien, which attempts to show the Palestinian background of the *Rule*. Be that as it may, the desert spirituality emerging in Order documents and in studies of the Elijan tradition since 1971 has also a profound contemporary relevance. It is noteworthy where the desert is placed in the *Constitutions*, that is, just after the historical outline of our origins and at the beginning of the treatment of charism (# 15). The importance of the desert value is that it is seen in some sense to unify and underpin the new expression of our charism. The desert experience is described firstly in Christological terms: it is a commitment to Christ crucified. It is a self-emptying of everything that could block perfect charity. Two Latin phrases from our tradition encapsulate this desert experience: *puritas cordis* (purity of heart) and *vacare Deo* (being

empty or available for God). This process of purification—though the word is not used—leads to a new vision of reality, a fresh and transformed attitude towards the world that we now see with God’s eyes. As our gaze is purified, healed and transformed through contemplation, the desert experience then allows us to be profoundly committed to fraternity and service (# 15).

This desert theme reappears in various places in the *Constitutions*. It is echoed in the reference to “the long and wearisome journey” of the mystic Elijah (#26 with the resonance of forty-day journey to Horeb in 1 Kgs 19). From Elijah we learn to be “people of the desert” (# 26). The *puritas cordis* idea is found in Mary being called “the Virgin most pure” (# 27). The fine article on daily conversion to the gospel is perhaps best seen within the perspective of the desert (# 40), as well as the radical following of Christ in the evangelical vows (## 43-44), and specifically the interiorisation of these vows (## 46, 53, 61). The cultivation of silence and of the solitude necessary for prayer to flourish is another desert virtue (# 67), as well as the daily living of the Paschal Mystery (# 78), and living the mysteries of Christ along with Mary (# 86).

The desert is a place in which one journeys without excessive baggage. But we empty ourselves in order to be filled. In the tradition of the East *praxis* (ascetical effort) is a necessary preparation for *theôria* (contemplation).

The desert notion is profoundly counter-cultural. Our world respects people for what they have, for what they achieve. The desert experience ultimately makes sense only in the context of love—a love expressed in the crucified Lord and coming to us from him. The desert notion will take much reflection to be fully grasped in our time.

Prayer

Closely allied to the notion of the desert is the challenging gift of prayer. The sixth chapter is a rich and accessible exposition of prayer in our life. It shows the characteristics that we have been noting in these *Constitutions*: it is traditional, drawing deeply on our heritage; at the same time it is quite contemporary. We can outline the *Constitution’s* teaching on prayer by a number of questions.

What is prayer?

There are several converging answers to the question, what is prayer? Prayer is first of all a gift, “the fruit of the action of the Holy Spirit in us and in our lives” (# 64). Prayer is “nourished by the constant search for God” (#66), which is also the highest expression of community life (# 66). Prayer is said to be “the centre of our lives” (# 64); it is a celebration of the mysteries of Christ (## 72, 78). It involves, or gives rise to, the practice of the presence of God, which is described as being a Carmelite tradition and as having “become increasingly difficult in these modern times” (# 77). In three splendid articles prayer is described as both a basis for, and an expression of, contemplative life (## 78-80). Finally we are told that prayer is ecclesial; it is not purely individual, but must be engaged in along with and for others:

It is the Spirit who gives us words when we can find no words;

who leads us to unity with the entire Church...

In the Our Father Jesus taught us to pray in a way that unites heaven and earth.

*Thus in our spirituality we integrate our love for the world
and our experience of the transcendent (# 64).*

What is the place or role of prayer?

The second question asks about the role or place of prayer. Here several themes come together. The *Constitutions* survey our history and state: “From the beginning, the Carmelite Order has taken on both a life of prayer and an apostolate of prayer” (#, 64). Prayer is an essential part of the life of Carmel and of its mission. The mission of prayer is both praying for others - the ecclesial dimension just mentioned - and an apostolate of prayer to others,, which involves sharing our prayer. Thus the *Constitutions* recommend:

- centres of spirituality, retreats and of study for members and for others (# 68);
- the celebration of the liturgy of the hours with others of the faithful (# 74)
- sharing our values with the Carmelite family (## 28, 106, 109);
- study of our spiritual authors (# 83, 31e);
- promotion of prayer and the search for God (# 95; see 98).

Another role for prayer is in building community, especially through the Eucharist (# 70). We are further to make “special efforts to help one another to seek God through prayer that is linked to ordinary life” (# 77). Our communities are to be marked by a spirit of prayer (# 31). Finally, the role of prayer is to enable us

*to view the events of our own lives and of the world around us
in the light of God.*

*Thus our whole life must be deeply contemplative,
So that we may come to see all that happens as if with the eyes of God (# 78).*

Two comments might be made at this point. What is described here as a contemplative vision is seen by a mediaeval tradition as an exercise of those gifts of the Holy Spirit which are called wisdom and knowledge, seeing things from God’s perspective and in relation to him.* This faith vision is the ability “to see-through” a transparency, the *Durchsichtigkeit* of Von Balthasar. We are not therefore primarily dealing with skills of analysis that can be taught, but with an openness or alertness so that we can be taught by the Holy Spirit, who may, of course teach us mediately, that is through others. When we act by word or deed on the basis of what we contemplate or see, then it is appropriate to speak of our prophetic charism, which again is not an acquired or learned skill, but a gift.

What are the main kinds of prayer?

The *Constitutions* indicate two traditional divisions of prayer: liturgical prayer (##69-76) and personal prayer (## 77-84). The two are brought together in a succinct article:

*As in the primitive Church, as religious we are called
to celebrate together the Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours.*

Liturgical prayer is the highest form of communal encounter with God, and brings about what it celebrates.

*Personal prayer is intimately linked with liturgical prayer;
one flows from the other (# 69).*

The articles on the Eucharist are traditional, reaching back to the *Rule* (## 70-71). Though various provinces may have different customs, and particular communities may have particular difficulties, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the *Constitutions*, no less than the *Rule*, demand a daily coming together for the Eucharist (see ## 70-71). Already in the key article on the special moments of community there was a strong statement:

Our life has moments of particular intensity and importance.. .in the shared participation in the Eucharist, through which we become one body, and which is the source and the summit of our lives, and therefore the sacrament of brotherhood (# 31a).

This is a sensitive area among some of our younger members. We must remember that our *Rule* was unusual for its time in its emphasis on daily Mass. The *Rule* of Benedict has eleven chapters (8-18) on the Liturgy of the Hours, but is rather silent on the Eucharist. Again, unlike modern congregations that have a deep sense of devotion to, and practices concerning the Eucharistic presence, our tradition has the Mass as its Eucharistic focus. But we cannot presume that these essential values are self-evident to people today. By example, by instruction and by the excellence of our liturgy, we have to help our younger members to grasp this core value of our life. The *Constitutions* add a fine note when they ask that:

*In addition to a diligent preparation of our liturgies,
we must grow in love for liturgy and in our concern for its renewal.
In this way, we hope to deepen our contemplative participation
in the mystery which we celebrate (# 71).*

This notion of love of the liturgy will be a helpful corrective for those whose tradition was excessively juridical, seeing liturgy as an obligation; it was not only the work of God (*opus Dei*) but the burden of God (*onus Dei*).

The articles on the Liturgy of the Hours basically incorporate the vision of the revised breviary, from which it quotes (see ## 72-73). It is recommended that we celebrate the Liturgy of the Hours with the faithful (# 74). Here the same problem can arise that we have noted in the case of the Eucharist. The Liturgy of the Hours is not a self-evident value; people need to be led to an understanding of it. The fine articles 72 and 73 could be an excellent introduction to this prayer.

The common celebration of liturgy has deep roots in our psyche. Few members of modern congregations would find it meaningful for two persons to gather several times a day for communal prayer.

Before moving to personal prayer, we should note the two articles on the sacrament of reconciliation (## 75-76). The emphasis on conversion throughout the *Constitutions*, and the need for reconciliation in community and in society, make these important reminders.

There was much discussion about the title “Personal Prayer” (## 77-84). Expressions like “meditation,” “private prayer” were felt to be misleading or to have too much acquired or negative baggage. The treatment is traditional, incorporating important elements of our tradition. One might note a few points:

- prayer should be integrated into daily life (# 79);
- it should lead to authenticity (# 81);
- it is about the search for God (# 77);
- the community should support the prayer-life of the individual (# 77, see 33);
- prayer is of great assistance in developing a contemplative stance towards the world (## 78-80);
- prayer needs to be nourished by the reading of spiritual books, especially Carmelite authors (# 83);
- the ideal of the Lord “pray at all times” is inculcated (Lk 18:1; # 84).

What about new forms and in particular Lectio divina?

New forms of prayer are commended in the *Constitutions* and in particular, *Lectio divina*.

This method straddles both community and individual prayer.

The *Lectio divina* has its roots in the patristic style of reading scripture found in the West in the Benedictine and monastic traditions. It was formalised about 1180 by an Italian monk, Guido II in a letter sometimes called *The Ladder of Prayer*. It is found in all circles in the medieval period; the 14th century *Cloud of Unknowing* describes it. By the time of the Reformation it had faded a bit from sight and is not explicit in Teresa. She had to learn a somewhat similar Prayer of Recollection,** in which one goes inwards to listen, to speak and to gaze, which are three of the four elements of the *Lectio*. It would seem that even before the Reformation, we had to an extent lost contact with our authentic tradition, and we became eclectic, taking elements from other schools, including the Ignatian. The *lectio* made a comeback in Europe in the 1970s and 1980s, as it emerged from the Benedictine tradition, which had preserved it. It began to come into Carmelite writing in the mid-1980s, though a new emphasis on the Word of God in communities was discernible in meetings from about 1972.

The statements of the *Constitutions* on the *Lectio* are really very strong:

- prayerful listening to the Word is an important feature of community life (# 31c);
- *lectio divina* is a support for a variety of prayer forms (# 66);
- *daily lectio* is to be made by all (# 82, § 1 – quote);
- common *lectio* is to be practised regularly (# 82, §2 - quote).

Notes

* See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1-2ae, q. 68.

** *The Way of Perfection*, chs. 26-29.