TRADITIONS OF SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE

Themes in carmelite spiritual direction

THE PRIMARY source of the carmelite tradition of spirituality is the Rule, or *vitae formula*, written some time between 1206 and 1214 by Albert of Avogadro, Patriarch of Jerusalem resident at Acre. This document was written at the request and following the proposals of a community of hermits already living on Mount Carmel under the leadership of an anonymous 'Brother B'. The Rule of St Albert, as it has come to be called, is remarkable for its brevity, and for the saturation of its lines with both direct and indirect quotations from and allusions to the sacred scriptures.[1] It does not concern itself so much with the minute prescriptions of daily living as with the style and quality of the collective enterprise called 'a life of service or allegiance to Jesus Christ.' The nucleus of the Rule is clearly based on the passages of the Acts of the Apostles frequently referred to as 'summaries' (Acts 2, 42-47; 4, 32-35). Therefore the celebration of the Eucharist, fraternity, constant prayer, and poverty or the common life are the basis for the way of life desired by the hermits of Mount Carmel.

Although the Rule of St Albert is clearly an attempt to be an alternative to the detailed structural models found at the time frequently in the way of life of the monks, yet it is above all else a document of spiritual guidance for those who wish to learn how to live a life 'meditating on the law of the Lord day and night'. Among other general directives concerning work, silence, humility and the proper understanding of obedience as a listening, attentive heart, the Rule underlines the importance of dialogue—on Sundays as a minimum but as often as necessary—in order to preserve the community commitment to a way of life and for the spiritual well-being of all. Conformity to the will of Christ, transformation in Christ, is the principle which the community, and through it the individual, must begin to practise. This includes adapting the way of thinking to the way Jesus thinks, since this truth leads to free service in love and from love. Development in love requires simplicity and sincerity of spirit and a heart constantly becoming more centred on Christ, that is, a heart becoming pure. What a person is and does will reflect whether that person is living in obedience to Christ. To this end also, the cultivation of a good conscience, which is the quality of interior dispositions, will lead to correct love and service of God and consequently to love and service of neighbour. The spiritual guidance of the Rule therefore centres upon the celebration of the Eucharist, recalling the paschal

mystery of Christ's death, resurrection and glorification, and entering into that mystery through faith and love. The presence of God always in the oratory 'in the middle of the cells' is a constant reminder of the call to contemplation and thanksgiving which should reflect something of the joy of Christ. A developing love of scripture and the liturgy through constant pondering of God's living word leads to the practical expression of the ideal of sharing all things together, and makes of it a true witness to the Lord in an apostolic and Spirit-filled sense. The Rule seeks to guide the Carmelite to a real experience of what it means 'to live in Christ'.

The flaming arrow

The constant state of war with its unsettled and unsettling conditions in the Holy Land eventually led to the migration of some of the hermits from Mount Carmel towards the end of the third decade of the thirteenth century. Between 1238 and 1242 settlements were made in Cyprus, Sicily, England and southern France. Circumstances and conditions in these countries led the carmelite migrants and refugees to petition the pope for mitigation of the Rule in order to make adequate adaptations to the changed situation in which they now found themselves. Pope Innocent IV, with the Bull *Quae honorem conditoris* of 1 October 1247, approved some small changes in the albertine Rule.[2] Yet small though these changes may have been, they in fact wrought a profound change in the lifestyle of the hermits, eventually leading to the complete adoption of the Carmelites by the Church as mendicant friars. This momentous event, which took place during the period from the arrival in Europe to the end of the thirteenth century, was not without opposition, and indeed it may be claimed that the subsequent history of the Order has been affected by the continual need to come to grips with its eremitical origins and contemplative status in an ever changing and challenging world.

Nicholas of Narbonne, General Prior from 1266 to 1271, wrote a passionate defence of the eremitical-contemplative tradition in his *Ignea Sagitta*, a letter addressed to all the brothers of St Mary of Mount Carmel. This prophet of a return to the sources addressed his impassioned plea to a fidelity to the spirit of the Rule of St Albert. If you want to guide people on the road of holiness, he says, then you must first be holy and learned yourself in the sphere of knowledge and love of God, and only then can you presume to pass on to others what you have known and experienced yourself. What Nicholas objected to was not involvement in the apostolate, since he acknowledged that such was a part of life on Mount Carmel from the beginning, but that the lure of immersion in apostolic activity was attracting men who were not properly prepared intellectually or spiritually.

> Where among you, tell me, are to be found preachers, well versed in the word of God, and fit to preach as it should be done? Some there are, indeed, presumptuous enough, in their craving for vain glory, to attempt it, and to trot out to the people such scraps as they have been able to cull from books, in an effort to teach others what they themselves know neither by study nor by experience. They prate away before the common folk—without understanding a word of their own rigmarole—as bold-faced as though all theology lay digested in the stomach of their memory, and any tale will serve their turn if it can be given a mystical twist and made to redound to their own glory. Then, when they have done preaching—or rather tale-telling—there they stand, ears all pricked up and itching to catch the slightest whisper of flattery. But not a vestige do they show of the endowments for which, in their appetite for vain glory, they long to be praised.[3]

Strong words are these, and they become even stronger when Nicholas turns to the subject of hearing confessions and the giving of spiritual counsel. And yet the letter is not just a negative catalogue of woes. Beautiful passages express the joy and delight of contemplation, the direction of the Holy Spirit in the lives and hearts of people called to praise God in union with all creation, and the example of the solitude of Mary's chamber being the place where the Word of God became flesh. Many commentators have seen in the letter of Nicholas of Narbonne the seed of the doctrine of St John of the Cross, and many of his expressions are echoed in the sixteenth century doctor's works. Above all else, Nicholas of Narbonne is concerned to be faithful to the spiritual guidance of the Rule of St Albert, which teaches the necessity for study, both intellectual and spiritual, of the following of Christ, as portrayed in the scriptures, and, especially, experience. The ascent of the Mount of Carmel, which is Christ, is both personal and communal, and true solitude is found in the fraternal living out of the Rule. This contemplative attitude both gives personal direction and enables such a soul to be a vehicle of guidance for others.

The institution of the first monks

Nicholas resigned his office in 1271 and was succeeded by the Englishman Ralph de Fryston who, on his death in 1276, was buried at Hulne in Northumberland—a foundation which remained very much a contemplative one until its dissolution in 1538. The Carmelites appear to have heeded the warnings and advice of the *Flaming Arrow* however, for Carmelites began to become known as learned and holy men by the end of the thirteenth century. This period coincided with a problem about origins: the marian character or patronage of the Virgin Mary was with

the Carmelites from the beginning, and it is with little difficulty that this was adequately upheld and well defended. But the claim of a link with the prophet Elijah was quite another matter, and much ink was spilt in the fourteenth and succeeding centuries attempting to prove direct succession from Elijah, Elisha and the 'sons of the prophets' to the hermits who received the Rule from St Albert of Jerusalem at the beginning of the thirteenth century. Among the many works written in defence of this succession was a four-part classic of carmelite spirituality by a Catalan, one Philip Ribot, in 1370. Ribot claimed to be editing and commenting on four works from antiquity, the first of which, called *The book of the institution of the first monks,* was held to be the rule before that of St Albert, and written by John, the forty-fourth Bishop of Jerusalem. The value of this particular work is certainly not historical; but its spiritual influence has been extraordinarily profound and pervasive, including among others St Teresa of Jesus who had access to a copy in the library of the monastery of the Incarnation at Avila.

Part one of *The institution of the first monks* consists of nine chapters which present the carmelite call as the eremitical-contemplative ideal lived out after the example of the prophet Elijah. In the manner of the day, the interpretation of the scriptures is largely allegorical but the spiritual values are clearly universal:

> The goal of this life is two-fold. One part we acquire, with the help of divine grace, through our efforts and virtuous works. This is to offer to God a holy heart, free from all stain of actual sin. We do this when we are perfect and in Karith, that is hidden in that charity of which the wise man says: 'Charity covers all offences' (Prov 10,12). God desired Elias to advance thus far, when he said to him: 'Hide yourself by the brook Karith'. The other part of the goal of this life is granted us as the free gift of God: namely, to taste somewhat in the heart and to experience in the soul, not only after death but even in this mortal life, the intensity of the divine presence and the sweetness of the glory of heaven. This is to drink of the torrent of the love of God. God promised it to Elias in the words: 'You shall drink from the brook.'[4]

Further chapters reveal how important it is to achieve detachment, purity of heart, conformity of the will with God, in order to reach perfect charity. This journey or movement of the soul is, however, crowned by the absolutely free gift of God which lifts it into divine union. The spiritual life is never a static affair; the soul must constantly strive for humility and total detachment so that it may be more disposed to receive God's grace and his gifts. The truly prophetic vocation becomes one of

abandonment to the Lord which itself has to be learnt; the prophet Elijah in the Books of Kings provides the proper example of abandonment and subsequent filling by God with his presence. Elijah's experiences therefore are the model of carmelite spiritual guidance both in terms of the spiritual preparation of oneself and in learning how to prepare and guide any other soul who is seeking deeper union with the Lord.

A recent study has brought out more fully the importance of the liturgy given by the author of *The institution of the first monks* to a fully integrated spiritual life.[5] The proclamation of the scriptures, the singing of the psalms, the centrality of the oratory among the cells (continued according to the author by St Albert) all point to the necessity for the interiorization of liturgical texts as the principal sources for meditation and contemplation. It becomes clear that the spiritual journey of the soul is both personal and communal, which follows closely the pattern of both the Rule of St Albert and the letter of Nicholas of Narbonne. Guidance for the soul then is not something spasmodic or a matter of chance, but directed according to the sound principles of the Church throughout its journey of discipleship. In this way, the idols which lead people astray from true worship of God may be combated with the prophetic zeal of Elijah, the contemplative in the service of the living God, and in communion with other disciples of that same God.

Practice

It has been said that the heritage of these three principal sources of carmelite spirituality, together with various editions of the Constitutions and other less well-known works, has been to make carmelite history a constant series of reforms and calls to renewal. In 1413 was the first organized reform which grew into the Congregation of Mantua, and at the end of the same century a renewal movement in France, centred at Albi, returned to a strict observance of the Rule.

The twenty-year generalate (1451–1471) of the french Carmelite Blessed John Soreth saw the establishment of monasteries of contemplative nuns within the Order, and the consequent development of the need for good spiritual directors for these enclosed groups of women. The monastery at Vilvoorde in Belgium, founded by Soreth in 1468, is still in existence and maintains the link with its founder's reforming activity of renewing and strengthening the commitment to prayer in the Order. Soreth felt that in addition to communities of men in Carmel, the many groups of beguines and other women associated with the churches of Carmelites, should be placed on a surer footing. His reasoning was that while the communities of men needed to be constantly alert to the retention of pristine observance, and while too a healthy tension between the eremitical-contemplative basis and the active apostolate contributed to a constant dialogue with the Order's origins, nevertheless groups of enclosed

women associated with the Order would be a necessary reminder of the first duty of the Order as being contemplation. It is possible to discern in the writings of Soreth a similar inclination to the values of his predecessor Nicholas: the absolute priority which must be given to prayer and personal development and maturity in the spiritual life, before ever presuming to direct others or lead them 'to the holy mountain, Christ our Lord'. The idea of a journey or pilgrimage to God is present in Soreth as with so many other early carmelite writers, perhaps reinforced by the facts of their early history when they became refugees from persecution on Mount Carmel, and had to discover the value of adaptation to changed circumstances and conditions. In adapting they also discovered the value of renewal of life and apostolate as well, claiming Mary's *fiat* (Lk 1,38) at the example and model.

Sixteenth-century reform

Undoubtedly, St Teresa of Jesus (1515–1582) of the spanish monastery of the Incarnation, Avila, brought the renewal of Carmel to unprecedented heights of awareness of the primacy of contemplation. With the encouragement of John Baptist Rossi, General Prior from 1564 to 1578, she restored the commitment to the true spirit of the Rule of St Albert, influenced certainly by *The institution of the first monks* and probably also by The *flaming arrow*. From the point of view of spiritual guidance, St Teresa's most important cry was for good and wise directors for her nuns. She herself had suffered much from the unlearned and the unwise, and she was emphatic about the need for discerning, wise and proper direction for those seeking to make progress in the spiritual life. She was not prepared to accept holy men if they did not know what they were talking about or dealing with in terms of experience along the spiritual path. Her own works were written at the request of others and they provide a guide in themselves to correct spiritual awareness of the variety of developments which can occur to the soul on its journey to the Lord of all. Teresa clearly understood fully the ramifications of St Albert's Rule, and is in sympathetic continuity with Nicholas of Narbonne, Ribot's *Institution of the first monks,* Soreth and others like them. For her, the awareness of the humanity of Christ, and the experience of suffering in the spiritual life, brought the soul to the dimension of love of God as Father, and linked the life of grace to the natural growth occasioned by deepening knowledge of the mystery of Christ, saviour and redeemer. But the need for good direction is paramount:

> I beg every superior, for the love of the Lord, to allow a holy liberty here: let the bishop or provincial be approached for leave for the sisters to go from time to time beyond their ordinary confessors and talk about their souls with persons of learning,

> especially if the confessors, though good men, have no learning; for learning is a great help in giving light upon everything. It should be possible to find a number of people who combine both learning and spirituality, and the more favours the Lord grants you in prayer, the more needful is it that your good works and your prayers should have a sure foundation.[6]

St John of the Cross (1542–1591), associated with St Teresa in the reform of Carmel, with his poetic soul has given to the Church a depth of understanding of what it means to be a follower of Christ the true shepherd and guide. His poetry relates the mosaic pattern of a soul's experiences on the journey towards the liberating, transforming union in Christ. The desire of which he wrote as being the kernel from which spiritual development ensues found form and expression in his poetic genius. Comprehension of the poetic art form was however difficult to realize by those with whom he shared his spiritual itinerary. Therefore, at their request, John of the Cross wrote his theological commentaries on the poetry to expound the principles from which the poetic revelatory experience grew. Again the idea of pilgrimage is evident, not only in the psychological development, but even more in the spiritual growth towards a deeper life of grace. John is sometimes seen as a highly complex theologian, too profound and indeed advanced for ordinary souls seeking further guidance along the spiritual paths. But his works, while theologically complex, are still comprehensible to those who really take the journey of the spiritual life seriously. Poetry must be savoured meditatively; his maxims are pithy, relevant and very much down to earth; his letters are replete with practical guidance for the individual and related to the concrete situation. The commentaries explain for the soul wandering the paths of darkness to light the different phases of transforming union and the activity of grace on nature. Applications may vary, but the essential is the same. John of the Cross realized that sometimes written guides are needed in the absence of good and holy learned directors.

Although he did not write a manual for directors, and his remarks on the role and duties of the spiritual guide are often indirect and frequently negative, yet it is possible to find a positive picture of the spiritual director in his works. Experience, wisdom and discretion are the three principal characteristics of a good director:

> Certainly experience and knowledge, deep faith and wisdom are necessary in spiritual direction, but in the actual direction situation it is the virtue of discretion that surfaces. In a specific case the discreet director can draw on his knowledge and personal spirituality to judge and communicate with the person who comes for counsel. Therefore, for John of the Cross the spiritual director 'needs to be wise, discreet and experienced'.[7]

Renewal in the seventeenth century

When, in 1593, after the death of Teresa of Jesus and John of the Cross, the reformed monasteries and convents asked for and received complete autonomy, becoming two juridically distinct discalced carmelite congregations based in Spain and Italy, once again the Carmelites began the renewal process in conjunction with their historical roots. The heritage of Nicholas, Soreth, Teresa, John and others began to coalesce in a new movement centred upon a group belonging to the french Province of Touraine. The guiding lights of the movement were Philippe Thibault and Pierre Behourt who developed the stricter observance which spread throughout all the french Provinces, the Provinces of Belgium and Holland, Germany, Poland, Russia, Lithuania, Italy and finally to Spain and Portugal via the Provinces of Brazil. Thibault, Behourt and their companions were influenced by the earlier reform movements in Carmel, including the teresian, and one of the aspects of considerable importance to them was the desire to have well-trained religious who would not only be committed to the development of their own spiritual life, but would also be qualified to teach and direct others. Therefore, we find much of their apostolic activity taken up with spiritual guidance, not only of the carmelite nuns, but indeed of many different types of people, from princes to the workers in the towns where they were established.

The spiritual heart of this renewal movement was the blind brother, John of St Samson (1571–1636). A gifted musician, blind from the age of three, he spent most of his life in the novitiate of the Province, where his influence on the novices was profound. A mystic with a strong emphasis on the practice of the presence of God through the aspirative approach to prayer, his advice and guidance were sought by many, both within and without the Order. He was consulted with regard to the case of possession in connection with the community of Ursulines at Loudun, and Maria de'Medici sought his guidance among others in her various political schemes. But it was in regard to the general trend of spiritual renewal in France that John of St Samson was most widely influential. His guidance of bishops, priests and laity was based on his own deeply experienced methods of prayer and union with God. He never ceased to repeat to the novices the need for proper spiritual awareness based on the knowledge of scripture and tried and tested spiritual masters.[8] John's effect was most pronounced and obvious in the large numbers of holy men who, as his disciples, propagated and developed his teaching. Dominic of St Albert, who wrote the manual for correct direction and training of novices for the Stricter Observance, stressed constantly the primary duty of anyone seeking to be apostolic to have a profound and constant life of prayer. Maur of the Child Jesus and Mark of the Nativity among others spent much time in the direction and guidance of souls, but always from within the framework of personal awareness of the action

of grace in souls derived from constant meditation and reflection on the scriptures. Such meditation and reflection must be in the first place applied to one's own personal spiritual life and corrected and refined by reference to the spiritual masters.

With the spread of the renewal movement into the Low Countries, a blossoming of holy men and women noted for their learning and piety, and consequently their importance in the realm of spiritual guidance, arose especially in Flanders. Among the most notable of these was the many times Provincial Michael of St Augustine (1621–1684), whose activities were most widely acclaimed in the area of direction of souls. His many written works included a treatise on maturing in the spiritual life, and an interesting example of the trend of seeing the Virgin Mary as the prime examplar and model of christian faith, hope and love. Michael of St Augustine saw Mary as the true contemplative who spent her life pondering the words and deeds of her Son and growing in her love for and appreciation of God's all-powerful actions in history. His interesting book on the mariform life of devotion and spiritual slavery or service to the Virgin predates the better known work by St Louis-Marie Grignion de Montfort by some twenty years, probably both being the inheritors of an earlier tradition. One of Flanders' greatest mystics, Maria of St Theresa Petijt (1623–1677), attained the highest peaks of transforming union with Christ in her prayer life, and is remarkable in that she was not a nun but a lay woman—a member of the carmelite Third Order. In contact with Michael of St Augustine, whose penitent she was, she advanced towards perfection with the assistance of the saintly priest who encouraged her to write down her experiences. As with so many great spiritual friendships, influence was a two-way affair, the one helping and encouraging the other. Maria was primarily interested in proclaiming that the importance of the real spiritual director for souls is God, in Christ, through the action of the Holy Spirit. Her awareness of the activity of the triune life within and also without, led her to an increasing certainty of perfection and well-being based on fidelity: an absolute trust in the caring presence of the Lord in all spheres of life.

Maria Petijt was an outstanding example of the direction or spiritual guidance of lay people which was carried out by the development of the carmelite Third Order—which enabled them to develop full spiritual lives according to their own circumstances. Primarily the guidance of the Third Order was communitarian, that is, there were frequent meetings with the priest who was spiritual director, at which aspects of spiritual development were expounded. Particularly important were the Third Order groups in Portugal and Brazil, where these lay Carmelites grew to be very strong and had a wide and influential following. During the periods of suppression and exclaustration of religions in the nineteenth century, carmelite churches and chapels in Brazil and Portugal often

remained open in the hands of dedicated groups of these lay Carmelites. The most important element in the development of the Third Order was the emphasis on periods of quiet prayer based on knowledge of the psalms and other scripture passages and explained to the members by the director. The idea of groups of lay people attached to religious orders is not unique, but what was somewhat novel was the emphasis on the communitarian aspect of spiritual progress. This was no doubt due to the idea that being enrolled in the scapular made a person a part of a much larger group or family, with commitments to God, through devotion to the Virgin Mary, and commitments to the group or confraternity within which this devotion was carried out. Scapular confraternities emphasized personal holiness to be sure, but yet it was always in the context of a group; the group or community dimension was essential.

The disaster of the suppressions of the late eighteenth century, and the nineteenth century, reduced the carmelite Order to little more than a remnant. But fidelity to the primitive tradition remained with the few survivors and brought about a further renewal in the twentieth century. The outstanding example of Titus Brandsma (1881-1942), martyred at Dachau concentration camp, is one which, in continuity with those ancient principles, reawakened Carmel's commitment to spiritual guidance in line with its prophetic and marian roots.

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NOTES

[1] Recent excellent studies of the Rule of St Albert include: Secondin, Bruno, O. Carm.: *La regola del Carmelo* (Rome, 1982); Steggink, Otger, et al.: *Carmelite rule* (Almelo, 1979).

[2] Smèt, Joachim, O. Carm.: *The Carmelites: a history of the Brothers of Our Lady of Mount Carmel* Vol I, (Rome, Carmelite Institute, 1975), p. 13. Many of the historical details of the present article are taken from this work, and vols II and III, (1976; 1982).

[3] Staring, Adrianus, O. Carm.: 'Nicolai Prioris Generalis Ordinis Carmelitanus Ignea Sagitta', *Carmelus,* 9 (1962), pp. 237-307.

[4] 'Liber de Institutione Primorum Monachorum', Ch 1-9 reprinted in *Analecta Ordinis Carmelitarum,* 3 (1914-16), pp. 346-367. For an excellent study of the place of the prophet Elijah in carmelite tradition, see Joseph Chalmers, O. Carm.: *The prophetic model of religious life: the role of the prophet Elijah in carmelite spirituality* (Rome, 1982) (pro manuscripto).

[5] Valabek, Redemptus Maria, O. Carm.: *Prayer life in Carmel* (Rome, Institutum Carmelitanum, 1982), pp. 32-35.

[6] St Teresa of Jesus: *The way of perfection* ed. by E. Allison Peers (London), Ch V, p. 23.

[7] Graviss, Dennis R., O. Carm.: *Portrait of the spiritual director in the writings of St John of the Cross* (Rome, Institutum Carmelitanum, 1983), p. 197.

[8] See, among others: Bouchereaux, Suzanne-Marie: *La réforme des Carmes en France et Jean de Saint-Samson* (Paris, J. Vrin, 1950); Healy, Kilian, O. Carm.: *Methods of prayer in the directory of the carmelite reform of Touraine* (Rome, Carmelite Institute, 1956).