

CARMEL

A Stark Encounter with the Human Condition

By RUTH BURROWS

TO MANY PEOPLE, INCLUDING CHRISTIANS, the enclosed contemplative life seems like escape from the rigours of the human condition. Having lived as a Carmelite for over fifty years, I affirm that, on the contrary, lived authentically, it is the starkest encounter with the experience of being human. Firstly, I must dispel any illusion that the enclosed nun – of course I speak only from my knowledge of Carmel – knows little or nothing of the material anxieties that beset most people at some time or other. A Carmelite community is entirely self-supporting, relying exclusively on its own resources. I doubt if there is any community which has not, in its history, experienced dire poverty. A Carmelite community does not enjoy legal status as a charity. Gradually, over the years, by means of dowries, legacies and occasional gifts, a modest capital is acquired. However, remunerative work is not only a prescription of the Rule, but a matter of necessity. We have to find ways of earning money and this is not easy from within an enclosure. Industries are laboriously and often painfully established with all the precariousness and vulnerability of small businesses everywhere today. We have to learn a great deal of self-reliance and know what it is to work hard, for along with earning money go the ordinary labours involved in maintaining a large household and family, burdens which not all members, by reason of infirmity, are able to share. A prioress, and other officials more directly acquainted with financial facts and more closely involved in the running of the house, know many a sleepless night.

The community depends for its existence on a steady intake of new members. It is autonomous and cannot, as a matter of course, be reinforced from elsewhere. Vocations are God's business. We can only wait on divine providence, never wholly blind to the possibility that the time may come when we are no longer viable as a functioning Carmel and must close.

If the community as such is no stranger to insecurity, neither is the individual religious. She does not hand-pick the companions with

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whom she spends her entire life, yet vows herself to them for better or for worse; bound as stringently as a married person. If things are not to her liking, if trouble strikes, she is not free to change residence but must remain dependent on this particular group for every material need as well as for love and emotional support. A Carmelite has to learn to trust God blindly through the sacramentality of her community.

These more obvious concerns which emphasize our dependency, pressing as they are, far from exhaust its extent. Basic to human experience is the awareness of limitation, of helplessness even, of how little control we have over our life, the events that overtake us, the circumstances that surround us and even over that intimate part of us, our body. And what about our psychic, emotional life? How inexorably that reflects our inheritance, our conditioning. We have been worked on before ever we were born, with no awareness, no consent of our own. Age brings not lesser but deeper awareness of dependency and insecurity.

I suggest that our most powerful drive as human beings, what absorbs our attention and energy, is to diminish our helplessness, gain more control over our life. No one can deny that this, in itself, is a healthy thing and essential, but given all our efforts, we shall meet with defeat after defeat. Fear is our most pervasive emotion deriving from the experience of contingency. One way or another, we are always striving to reassure ourselves, keeping fear concealed or at bay. We have countless ways: incessant activity, discussing, creating noise and diversion, seeking the person or persons who will provide an illusion of safety or mitigate our feeling of personal inadequacy, to name but a few. We may lull the inner anxiety but never get rid of it.

Assuming the basic correctness of this diagnosis, we shall discern how important it is for our well-being, our maturation and contentment, our genuine ability to love and support others and play a positive role in the human community, to come to terms with inner anxiety. This means, in effect, coming to terms with our fundamental helplessness, uncovering its meaning and using it creatively.

As Christians we have the blessed certainty through Jesus Christ of unshakeable security in divine love. Each of us is loved by God with a limitless, unconditioned and unconditional love which we can never destroy or even diminish. We are loved into existence, cherished in our existence, affirmed absolutely in death and beyond. This love is independent of our merit or demerits. Nothing whatsoever can separate us from this love; for it is the breadth, it is the length, it is the height and it is the depth – there is nowhere beyond it, above or below it. It is

All, the limitless ocean which encompasses our tiny, threatened, fragile yet infinitely precious selves; not merely impersonal, protective benevolence but a love that gives self, that offers inconceivable intimacy and seeks reciprocity. We can never define, draw a line around what God will do for each one of us: we are exposed to the infinite. Against this truth what matters our sense of impotence? In genuine faith which must, of course, be worked for, and the surrender of self which is faith in act, we begin to discern that, far from our helplessness being a human misfortune, something which ought not to be, it signals a limitless calling, is the other side of a vocation that goes beyond what can be perceived by mind and sense, and that to accept it is to assent to our vocation, to becoming who we truly are, to being truly human. We are made for union with the divine, nothing less, called to share the life of God. Our restlessness, our insatiable longings, our discontent and the experience of helplessness are to be traced to our divine destiny. Commitment in faith to this truth is to destroy existential anxiety. Faith alone can overcome the world and the threat the world imposes. It does not follow that we lose the feeling of anxiety and fear – we would be the poorer for that – but these now play a role that is creative, not destructive. Fear can cripple, paralyse, prompt us to shirk and evade life. Faith enables us to live with reality, braving its challenge.

Living myself within the enclosure of Carmel, accepting its discipline, trying to understand its living spirit and this to begin with in the old regime when the customs, assumptions and attitudes of past centuries remained virtually unchallenged, through to an evolution in the spirit of Vatican II, has left me with the conviction that Carmel offers an extraordinarily effective means for experiencing the reality of our humanity. To claim this is at the same time to claim that it is a most effective means of surrendering the whole person to God. So convinced am I of this that I am ready to define Carmel as an intense experience of human existence and its innate poverty, with the summons of faith not to evade but to enter through it into a total trust, a leap of the self into divine love which is the essence of union with God. I cannot claim that what I have described is universally true, that Carmel has always been or is always understood in this way. Hagiography would give the lie to such a claim. To use an image from horticulture, Carmel is a forcing house and as well as offering to choice plants the perfect conditions for sturdy growth, it offers the same to noxious weeds. Blatant vice will not be found within a Carmelite community and if it should appear would be eliminated quickly, but too easily the roots of vice pass undetected because the manifestations are on so small a scale as to

seem insignificant, merely 'being human', and if generally accepted as normal, only a very enlightened, very directed heart will see them for what they are. Both St Teresa of Avila and St John of the Cross, with their keen vision of God and of the human heart, have much to say about these seemingly small faults which have their roots in our pervasive selfishness. They understand Carmel as a way of life in which this selfishness can be purged. The abundant literature concerning St Thérèse of Lisieux affords a lively picture of the reality of life within her Carmel and how it proved a forcing house in which she herself, through her understanding of the charism of Carmel and her surrender to it, made rapid progress in sanctity. But an honest appraisal of the evidence reveals how the same conditions fostered weeds in others. Thérèse, young as she was, swam courageously against the tide. She knew the rule and kept it, regardless of others' carelessness; recognized evil when she saw it and was prepared to wield her sword even when the powerful figure of the prioress was involved and, more painfully, her own beloved blood sisters.

The danger of narrowness and myopia, fostered among a small group of women dependent on one another for stimulation and challenge, is not the only one in the 'forcing house'. Concentration on spiritual things, a hallowed tradition, the inherited vocabulary and manners of the community, the religious habit and name, can encourage a 'saintly' posing. The 'saintliness' can be impressive and it would be temerity to deny it all reality. By general standards the subject may be virtuous and generously self-denying. At the same time one detects a self-consciousness, a somewhat complacent awareness of being spiritually interesting and beautiful in spite of constant protestations to the contrary, and a concern for a spiritual image rather than for the gift of self to God and the self-forgetfulness it engenders. Such a spirituality seems to deny the raw stuff of humanness and what are generally termed negative emotions such as anger, jealousy, hatred, resentment. As these emotions feel besmirching and sinful, they are automatically repressed. In particular, sexuality is denied its full, wide-ranging reality. A mistaken notion of Carmel's ideal to live for God alone, 'alone with God alone', leads to a harmful rejection of created and human values.

The pitfalls of the enclosed Carmel are the inevitable risks involved in a life-style that offers immense creative possibilities provided it is understood and organized wisely. Strict enclosure is, of course, a dominant feature. Carmelites leave the enclosure only when really necessary and, in practice, this largely means for medical attention.

Their entire life is passed within a defined area and in consequence they are deprived of manifold means for the development of the human person. It is God's will that we become sexually integrated, mature persons and we may not, in God's name, neglect this basic obedience. Therefore we must ensure that our enclosure holds within it the possibilities for human development. The principal means are, I suggest: real, warm relationships, genuine intimacy and friendship, a wide range of reading matter to further intellectual and emotional expansion, and informed awareness of the processes of psychological growth, the exercise of personal responsibility. Enclosure is not meant to cripple us but to foster a high quality of life, allowing for deep reflection, for the 'experiencing' of experience. Constant exposure to sensory, emotional and intellectual impressions can lead to a diminishment of actual experience. Undigested experience is not experience; events, encounters, one's feelings and reactions float through us leaving no trace. Enclosure, with its built-in censorship, enables us to sift, garner, absorb, conserving energy for what matters. Awareness and sensitivity are likely to increase, perhaps to painful proportions, and we are far from immune to the sufferings and cares of others.

Within the desert of enclosure, a Carmelite lives her life with a community, and here is another powerful agent of self-revelation as a human being and stimulant to growth. A Carmelite community is carefully organized: built into the daily life are periods of solitude, and silence is the order of the day, though, of course, the silence is not absolute. There are exchanges essential to work and the smooth running of things, attending to needs and offering and receiving spiritual and emotional support. Each evening we all gather without fail for an hour's chat, attaching great importance to this friendly exchange. There is constant, wordless communication at liturgical prayer, when dining together or meeting in passageways; ideally this silent communication emits warmth, gentle courtesy, respect and concern. However, no matter how high the level of genuine charity, the fact of individuality makes some friction and misunderstanding inevitable. The rule does not allow for 'on the spot' explanations and sorting out of differences and this calls for trust in one another. Our only recourse is to take our little smarts, our fears, our loneliness and feelings of being undervalued and perhaps unloved into solitude and face them with our Lord. It is such a human tendency when our self-esteem is wounded and our confidence undermined to run to someone who will give us the comforting assurance that we are the nice person we thought we were!

This fine balance of solitude and community living allows a keen self-knowledge to emerge and we are challenged to confront dark, painful areas within ourselves. There is nowhere to run if we would escape. We experience keenly that we are weak and sinful. Of course, self-love can, even in Carmel, find bolt-holes but the chances are minimal. We can find peace and contentment only in accepting our human indigence in loving trust in God. If I may put it so, 'success' in Carmel lies precisely in facing up to and peacefully accepting the unlovely reality of our human nature – unlovely only to us and our proud expectations.

Entering Carmel, we have deliberately chosen a situation where helplessness is accentuated. It is a common experience for a postulant to seem to regress. Hitherto she has probably shown competence in her profession, achieved a certain status and poise and enjoyed the independence of her own house or flat. One step through the enclosure door and all that is left behind and with it the persona that has not been recognized as a persona. Of course, each person is different and not all experience the shock with such intensity, but the fact remains that everyone, sooner or later, has to be stripped down to who she really is. Needless to say, no one sets out to do this for the entrant. On the contrary, the superiors and the community in general are full of solicitude and understanding of her 'overthrow' and the pain involved. It is the reality of the life-style that effects it and it is meant to do so. It can happen that a woman, seemingly mature and able to support and counsel others, now finds herself reduced to tears over 'nothings', craving for appreciation and affection. Not surprisingly there can be a temptation to run away, convinced that it is a crazy way of life and certainly not the way of life for her! 'I was not like this outside', is the common moan. Her superiors will gently insist that she was, but that the immaturity and weakness were covered over; she had found countless ways of hiding them from herself and from others. In Carmel she must face them and this is a blessed grace. Much depends on the community's attitude. If the community is composed of people who live within their own truth and who recognize the action of God in such experiences, the postulant or novice will be given every chance to grow gradually into her own reality; there will be no harmful repression. Through prayer, fidelity to the rule and with the loving support of others, she will learn to live from her own centre and not be governed by innate fears, inner compulsions and the expectations of others. Carmel undoubtedly offers a hard but healthy regime, and time and time again we see those who have embraced it finding contentment and

a sense of meaning such as they never knew before. In a short time they discover themselves strangely changed in outlook, no longer longing for the good things they formerly appreciated and enjoyed but aware that they hold within themselves a gift that surpasses them all. This can continue even in the midst of turmoil and affliction. Growth in self-knowledge is not over and done with in the first few months but goes on. To my mind, we cannot sufficiently stress the importance of understanding this painful phenomenon, welcoming it, exploiting it to the full as that which, if truly accepted, opens us fully to divine love. In theory this is understood, but the actual reality is so ugly that the temptation to baulk it in some way is inevitably strong though often subtle.

We have not done with the impoverishment and sense of helplessness to which Carmel is meant to bring us. There is a deeper dimension still and this encircles prayer itself. Carmel, we say, is a life of prayer, prayer is our primal duty to which all else is subordinated and directed. Most of us cherish the illusion that to give oneself up to a life of prayer will, sooner or later, bring returns. We shall, we imagine, become more spiritual, feel better about ourselves and human life in general; we shall be, at least to some degree, lifted out of the common rut. As I have already suggested, this illusion can be fostered by a whole community and to some extent can seem reality. In her perceptive study of St Thérèse, *The hidden face*, published in 1959, the Austrian writer, Ida Görres, demonstrates how Thérèse resisted, with all her passion for truth, the temptation to 'saintliness' pressed on her by her milieu to her dying day: to be careful of her image, to say saintly, edifying things, to pretend. If proof were needed of this pressure we have only to consider the censoring of her writings and of all witnessing to her life, carried out after her death by those who thought they understood her best. Everything that was 'too human', that did not quite fit the common image of holiness, was carefully suppressed. We came to understand Thérèse fully in all her splendid humanity and glorious truth only when the well-meaning, venerable guardians of her image were dead. A genuine life of faith of necessity destroys illusion. It needs none. It seeks the truth with passion.

Carmelites have no external apostolate. It is our faith-informed conviction that a life given wholly to God is the most effective apostolate. One for whom God matters supremely and who is deeply concerned for others, keenly aware that love for God is inseparable from love of the neighbour, will not find acceptance of this apparent non-contribution easy. It will demand a constant reaffirmation of faith

in her own vocation if she is to resist the temptation to compensate in some way. It might not be so difficult to accept if there were a sense of doing one's own job well, being a successful pray-er! This is unlikely. What if we feel we do not pray, that our prayer is hardly prayer, so poverty-stricken, lacking all comforting feedback, all high sentiment? How often one hears the anxiety voiced: 'I feel I do nothing for God. As a person vowed to a life of prayer I am a failure' – and so forth. Now this, I believe, is where we touch the very heart of our vocation in the Church and the point where it is the witness to the truth that all must come from God, all is pure gift; as human beings we are there only to receive Love, to be 'done unto' in gracious mercy and love. In this way we glorify the pure, totally gratuitous love of God. Unless every Christian's heart lies thus at the feet of divine Love, humbly waiting, trusting, claiming nothing, relying only on what Love will do, the Love which has shown itself as such in Jesus, he or she may be religious but not truly Christian.

A Carmelite is called to live out this human vocation – synonymous with the Christian vocation – in an absolute way; glad receptivity for all in a radical renunciation of every spiritual claim, every reassurance coming from the self. Thus it reminds all of what is the heart of the matter. It is no easy vocation. I recall how, as a young religious, suffering acutely from the feeling that as a Carmelite I was an utter failure, having nothing whatever to offer to God, I gradually perceived that this is precisely the vocation, its very heart. I was to receive and believe I received without any token thereof. I was to accept to have nothing to give, to live always with empty hands. My giving could only be in allowing God to give. I recall with emotion and deep gratitude how I found this insight wonderfully confirmed by Thérèse in her letters, an English translation of which had just been published. Since then it has grown until it has taken over completely and I realize how careful we must be, if we would be true to our vocation, not to evade, not to seek in any way to overcome this profound awareness of spiritual inadequacy or pretend it is not there.

The form of 'saintliness' that held glamour for the contemporaries of St Thérèse is hardly likely to be ours, but we shall not lack the urge to find, somehow, ways and means of making the life-style more interesting, ourselves more satisfactory, of 'doing it better'. Perhaps our lure lies in unrealistic expectations of what ongoing formation can achieve, in more obvious involvement in church affairs, in mental and emotional awareness of the world's sorrows. Obviously, these must have their place but everything depends on the motivation, on what we are

hoping to achieve by them. Nothing must be allowed to take from us or even to mitigate our poverty, our helplessness, our 'nothingness' – not a lovely spiritual ideal but an experienced reality that can be loved and must be loved only because it opens ourselves and the world to the purifying, transforming, beatifying love of God.