CARMEL AND THE NUNS' CHANGED SELF-UNDERSTANDING

By VILMA M. SEELAUS

'HOW DID YOU GET TO WHERE YOU ARE?' enquired Cardinal Hamer on a visit to Barrington Carmel in 1987. This is a difficult question to answer since the process was complex and diverse, and in an article such as this my response is necessarily limited, leaving much unsaid.

Of all the different forms of commitment in the Church, probably the least understood is contemplative life. The mystique which often surrounds this way of life tends to obscure its deeper significance for the rest of the Church. This is unfortunate, for the great theologian Karl Rahner maintains that Christians of the future will be contemplatives or they will cease to be anything at all.[1] As we prepare to enter a new millennium, the retrieval of human contemplative consciousness seems imperative, and in keeping with Carmel's tradition. In pointing toward a more contemplative Church, Rahner situates both contemplation and contemplative life at the heart of the Church's life.

In restating the universal call to holiness in Vatican II the Church herself laid the foundation for a renewed theology of contemplative life. Contemplation is not for an élite; it is the very warp and woof of the Church's life. This challenge of the Church to the whole community of the faithful found resonance in the hearts of many Carmelites. Since Carmel symbolizes the universal, human hunger for God, should not we, as Carmelites, through the way in which we live our life of prayer, better reflect the contemplative dimension which is inherent in all humankind – a dimension essential to the life of the Church? The desire to mirror this reality more clearly initiated a process of change in the life-style of Carmelite nuns.

Carmelite life focuses on the human capacity for union with God. Its Rule, Constitutions, and the writings of its mystics, all serve to facilitate contemplation and to move the heart toward encounter with Divine Love. The Rule's enjoinder to silence, solitude, continual prayer, community life and worship, forms the ambience of Carmel's 'allegiance to Jesus Christ'. Carmelites are followers of Christ. To the

extent that a Carmelite nun takes on the mind and heart of Christ, she is a good Carmelite.[2] Christ is the one who draws each person into mystical encounter with God. Silence and solitude, rather than practices of asceticism, are inner imperatives for the heart's relationship with God. Asceticism in Carmel is not toward self-mastery or self-determination, but toward freedom from attachments for self-transcendence. Carmel's purpose is mystical encounter with God as the ultimate source of fruitfulness for the Church. As God's overwhelming love annihilates the darkness of self-centred concerns, all things, including structures, are seen anew through the eyes of Divine Love. Structures in Carmel take their meaning from its purpose or charism – continual prayer and the following of Christ.

When we entered the monastery we found a life-style similar in detail to that lived by Teresa and her contemporaries of sixteenth-century Spain. This *was* Carmel, so we embraced the details of the life without question. If questions surfaced, they were quickly buried in the dark earth of the heart. Even now, contemplative life for women continues to be defined in terms of *separation*, especially in church documents. In Carmel, physical forms of enclosure such as high walls, grills and dark curtains dramatically image 'leaving the world'. The words, *God and I alone on Mount Carmel*, frequently greet visitors at the entrance of our monasteries. People are awed before Carmelites and they look upon them as the élite among contemplatives. Fidelity to the traditions of Carmel was, and is, too deeply rooted in the hearts of the nuns for change to happen without a mandate from the Church.

A letter uncovered in the archives of the Boston Carmel illustrates the extremes to which we went to be faithful to these traditions. In 1936 Mother Cyril, the prioress of a new foundation in Newport, Rhode Island, wrote an urgent letter to Mother Beatrix of the Boston Carmel.[3] Mother Beatrix was considered the wisdom of God in all things Carmelite. Mother Cyril, anxious for fidelity to Teresa's way of doing things, presents *forty* questions to Mother Beatrix for clarification. These cover the minutest details of everyday life in Carmel. The *exact* placing of the tuck in the skirt of the habit, the *correct* size of the day veil, whether the nuns incline to the prioress when she performs a mortification at the refectory door – such is a sampling of Mother Cyril's concerns!

Fidelity to our Teresian heritage, easily exaggerated through trivia, threads through our history as Carmelite nuns. At the same time, paradoxically, conflict among the nuns started almost immediately after the death of Teresa. Blessed Anne of Jesus and Blessed Anne of St

Bartholomew were both intimates of Teresa and yet sharp differences arose between them. Teresa trusted and confided in both of them but, after her death, they held strongly conflicting views regarding her Constitutions and those promulgated by the Chapter of Alcalà, as well as other matters pertaining to the newly established Teresian Reform.

As Carmel spread into France and the Low Countries, this desire to be faithful to the mind of Teresa quickly led to further conflicts, and turmoil was caused by the nuns' seeking to preserve differing specific values. Anne of Jesus was trying to preserve a freedom for the nuns that would protect them against too much interference from outsiders, including the Discalced Carmelite friars. Anne of St Bartholomew thought the best way to keep the nuns united as they went into different countries was to keep them under the jurisdiction of the one Order. Madeleine of St Joseph and Anne of the Ascension were seeking to adapt the Teresian Carmel to their own culture. Alongside the intense desire for fidelity to the tradition are consistent *differences of opinion regarding the mind of Teresa.* This difference continues to our own times and reveals itself in the different decisions for change over the past half century. Today we have two officially recognized Carmelite Constitutions.[4] Desire for fidelity to the tradition, *along with* differences of opinion as to what this means, has always been part of our history, and this reality is present in the life of Carmel today.[5] Years before Vatican II, when the Church herself sowed seeds of change, these fell on the sometimes receptive, sometimes resistant soil of our hearts.

In my early Carmelite life, God initiated a process which prepared me for change. I entered the monastery with a strong sense of God's indwelling presence and a loving awareness of God as my father. During my noviceship I had a powerful experience of God which took me through the Divine Fatherhood into God as ultimate mystery. My capacity for God and for divine realities seemed to expand along with that of my God-image. This experience, and others like it, gave me the freedom of spirit needed to begin sorting out what is the essence of Carmel *vis à vis* the cultural context of sixteenth-century Spain within which Teresa shaped its structures.

While *openness* to change was grounded in personal prayer and in an expanded experience of God, on a broader scale, *actual* changes in various Carmels began with Pius XII. On 1 November 1950 he issued an Apostolic Constitution for Contemplatives entitled *Sponsa Christi.* The document reviewed the status of virgins consecrated to God from the origins of Christianity through to the forms of cloistered institutions

at that time. It described the nature of contemplative life and stressed the primacy of contemplation in canonical contemplative life. He insisted on the need for ongoing formation and observed that even women 'have rendered important services to theology and to the direction of souls'. In several addresses given to cloistered nuns in 1957, Pius XII reiterated the need for more adequate formation. He refuted those who oppose 'the legitimate wishes of cloistered nuns to form a contemplative life in line with their aptitudes'. While he encouraged orders of nuns to esteem their own proper character, he added,

> but they must defend these things without narrowness of spirit or rigidity; much less with a certain obstinacy which would be in opposition to any timely evolution and would refuse to lend itself to any adaptation even when the common welfare demands it.

The document *Sponsa Christi* stressed the importance of work to contemplative life. To offset the financial and other difficulties that many European monasteries faced after the devastation of World War II, Pius XII encouraged, *in fact, seemed to mandate*, collaboration among monasteries, especially through federations and associations. He encouraged the sharing of resources. Competent nuns should be sent to teach skills to needy monasteries, to help in formation, etc. He noted that 'laws of enclosure, often too strict, frequently provoke great difficulties'.[6]

Sponsa Christi offered the first intimation that externals in the lifestyle could change and, in fact, needed to change for collaboration to take place. Forming federations or associations would necessitate leaving the enclosure to meet with nuns of other monasteries. Collaboration meant a lessening of the autonomy many considered essential to our monasteries. To respond to the call of *Sponsa Christi* took courage. Enclosure was, and still is, a major issue. I was elected to a committee which was to facilitate the forming of an association – the first here in the United States. While travelling to another monastery for a planning meeting, my own fears voiced themselves: 'What are you, a Discalced Carmelite nun, doing driving along the Jersey Turnpike?' Fortunately, my hopes for the future of Carmel, stimulated by *Sponsa Christi*, were greater than my fears, so I continued on. Regional and national meetings followed. These helped to break down such fears and established ties of friendship and trust among the nuns.

Vatican II furthered the process. Its call for renewal gave rise to questions regarding styles of leadership and community living, but it

stirred even deeper questions. How can we live our Carmelite life today so that it awakens in others their own intrinsic desire for God? Are there appropriate ways to share our life of prayer with others without losing the essentials of Carmelite life? From such questions, the risk of further change began.

As we studied and prayed with its documents, a broader vision of Church, and of ourselves within the Church, opened up. Our challenge is to remain true to our origins as hermits in community and yet be a more visible presence, in a contemplative mode, to the Church and world. The 1995 Consultation Document from the Carmelite Extraordinary Definitory, addressed to our friars, and entitled *Our Order on the threshold of the third millennium*, urges a spirituality more up-to-date and profound. The hope for a renewed spirituality is integral to the nuns' changed self-understanding. An essential aspect of Carmel today is the strengthening of the Church's contemplative roots.

The desire to do away with suggestions of élitism, and to show Carmel's connectedness in prayer with the human and church community, stimulated a process of inculturation. Changes in externals characterize many of our monasteries. Instead of withdrawal *from* the world, enclosure is re-visioned as selective, contemplative presence *to* the world. The 1978 Vatican directive, *Mutuae relationes*, encouraged us in our desire for closer connectedness with the life of the Church. It invites contemplative communities in particular,

> to offer to people of our day helpful opportunities for prayer and spiritual life, thus meeting a need for meditation and a deepening of faith which is acutely felt at present. They should also offer suitable opportunities and facilities for sharing in their own liturgical celebration, without infringement on the laws of enclosure and other rules laid down in this regard.[7]

Enclosure provides sacred space for intense presence to God for the world. To share divine intimacy in silence and solitude is still our privileged role of presence to the world. It keeps us at the heart of things. At the same time enclosure, seen as contemplative presence *to* the world, invites selective participation in the life of the Church. Appropriate, selective visibility of nuns whose lives are dedicated to contemplation holds before the faithful the contemplative dimension integral to their own lives as the living Church of Christ.

Contemporary studies in Mariology offer two models which demonstrate the shift in self-understanding among Carmelite nuns. The first mariological model grew out of early Christianity's interaction with the

then pervasive cult of the mother goddess in the pre-Christian Mediterranean world. As scholars point out, although there are essential differences, the early Marian tradition is a conduit of imagery and language about divine reality flowing from the veneration of the great mother goddess. Mary serves as a bridge for the new converts to the world of Christianity. She helps to image divine mystery in feminine metaphors. Titles for Mary such as Seat of Wisdom, Mother of Mercy, Mother of Divine Grace – familiar from the Litany of Loretto – are attributes which belong properly to God, even though we apply them to Mary for her role in the incarnation. The two-volume *Mariology* of Matthias Joseph Scheeben, the great early twentieth-century German theologian, demonstrates the supreme exaltation of Mary in this model.[8] She is the eschatological, divine-like woman, clothed with the sun, who intercedes for us, her sinful children. This model emphasizes how much different and better Mary is than the rest of humanity.

Vatican II stimulated a shift in mariological discourse and today praxis-oriented theologians further *Lumen gentium*'s teaching on Mary. They offer a different model based on the common humanity believers share with Mary. Unique among the saints is the person of Mary, mother of Jesus, and the mother of God. Because she is a woman of faith and of true discipleship, she becomes a model for Christians in their following of Christ. Committed followers of Jesus unite with Mary in faith and solidarity in living the gospel.[9] Thérèse of Lisieux anticipates this mariological shift. For Thérèse, Mary is more mother than queen. Mary walks with and encourages Thérèse as Thérèse struggles through her night of faith.[10]

The movement reflected in these two Marian models is somewhat analogous to the changed self-understanding of Carmelite nuns: from Mary as the exalted, divine-like woman to Mary as a woman of faith and true discipleship. Before Vatican II, as in the first Marian model, our lives had an almost exclusively eschatological orientation. We left the world and became strictly enclosed to live alone with God on the mountain of Carmel. The mystique of separation shrouded our lives in mystery. We prided ourselves on being the most austere order in the Church. Persons, especially priests, expressed appreciation for our life of prayer, often with the rationale that their busy lives left them no time to pray. This model, at its best, fostered habitual recollection and deep encounter with God. It also had its shadow side. We easily lost touch with important developments in the world that we prayed for, and we could also lose touch with our own humanity as well. Emotional problems were often left untreated, except for doses of faith offered as

cure. The *hidden life*, as ours was known, hid abuses of authority, immaturity among the nuns, lack of adequate formation and pressures of work antithetical to contemplative living.

Communities who listened to the call of Vatican II began to look for better ways to express the tradition. We entered into what today is known as a hermeneutic of suspicion. We began to question our life-style in the light of gospel values, positive aspects of culture and sound psychological principles. Symbols of separation, which enshrine nuns as objects of veneration for some and make their lives irrelevant to others, came into question, along with authoritarian models of authority and unhealthy aspects of community life. A gradual re-visioning and re-shaping of structures took place, especially as these pertained to enclosure. Like the second mariological model, we wanted our lives to image better our connectedness in prayer with the Church as a praying community. Carmelites are not an élite, but are followers of the poor and compassionate Christ and we walk in solidarity with all the members of the Church. Our challenge today is to foster the desert quality of our charism which enclosure supports, and at the same time be a truly human, contemporary, *contemplative* presence to the Church and world. Through all the travails of change, Mary, our sister and friend, stands at the foot of our cross. She keeps our eyes fixed on Jesus and on his gospel of love and forgiveness.

A significant factor in change has been ongoing personal and community formation. As early as 1950, *Sponsa Christi* emphasized its need, which is confirmed in all recent Carmelite documents.[11] Serious study is not a luxury in Carmel. With today's rapid expansion of knowledge, it is integral to a holistic, contemplative way of life. Programmes sponsored by federations and associations help to foster ongoing formation and they open avenues for personal study. An important focus is rightly our Carmelite heritage. Like the great classics of world literature, the writings of our saints contain an abundance of meaning for future generations. Their texts await a new hermeneutic for a spiritually hungry world. Qualified Carmelites need to assume the task of a contemporary interpretation which speaks to today's religious experience – often one of void and absence.[12] Concern for the earth's ecology, encounter with world religions, the complex of personal and societal injustices toward women, the poor, persons of colour – these are issues which can be illuminated by the timeless radiance of Carmel's spirituality.

Ongoing formation inevitably affects prayer. At the heart of Carmel is the experience of God. Jesus on the mountain, praying to his Father,

is the traditional inspiration for contemplative life. The special tenderness of the father–son relationship in Jewish society communicates itself in Jesus' prayers to his 'Abba'. Jesus invites us into this experience. But Mary is also our teacher in prayer. Her gift, especially to women today, is to reveal the maternal face of God. The maternal God, revealed in the Scriptures and reflected in the writings of the mystics, resonates in the hearts of many Carmelite women. In the depth of our prayer experience, Mary, Mother of God and Mother of Divine Mercy, points to *God* – Divine Mother of Mercy. With Thérèse of Lisieux, we affirm that truly, 'God is more tender than a mother'.[13] As Carmelite nuns become sensitive to women's concerns, and as divine Sophia reveals herself in the depth of their prayer, they seek to be more inclusive in both human and God-language in community prayer and worship.

Within the limits of Carmel, some communities have become local centres of prayer where persons come for quiet space to participate in the eucharist and liturgy of the hours and for occasional presentations on Carmelite spirituality. Today, many nuns are competent spiritual guides. Our friars' efforts toward a renewed spirituality would be enriched by closer collaboration with the nuns. Such collaboration would support the wish of the Generalate, 'for a new type of relationship between friars and nuns'. Well-educated women enter our monasteries today. Our search is for creative ways in which friars and nuns can collaborate to bring about quality in initial formation, and possibly in ongoing formation.[14]

As we embody a renewed vision for Carmel in a changed life-style, the need for a hermeneutic of suspicion holds true. Within the context of fragile humanity, everything has its dark side. Enclosure as *separation*, along with its benefits, can both generate and also hide serious problems. Enclosure as contemplative presence *to the world* has its own potential for diminishment of the charism. Presence to the world means presence to all aspects of culture, including those that are not life-giving, which are deleterious to authentic Carmelite life. Individualism, consumerism and noise pollution surround us, as does media over-stimulation and an environmentally destructive, throw-away society. Without critical awareness, Carmelite communities themselves can become polluted with such toxic contaminants. Contemplatives can use to advantage technology and the communication media, but these can also be used to avoid solitude, or to escape the pain of God's purifying presence, or as a way of withdrawing from the challenge of community life.

We may have responded to the Church's call to change, but *renewal* is always gift. It is a matter of the heart, and it calls for continued conversion and inner transformation. God's invitation to personal and communal conversion daily confronts us as the limitations of change stand exposed. In the dark night of faith, in unknowing, often in disillusionment and in pain, God moves the heart beyond human projects, ideas and concerns to a place of sheer surrender where God alone matters. Many would say that dark night engulfs our entire world and the times in which we live. Religious communities face problems of ageing members, ill health and lack of vocations. But as our tradition assures us, God is in the night. The future is present in this disconcerting moment in time. Carmelites are called to be bearers of hope for all who suffer the travail of violence, poverty, injustice and oppression. As we allow God to free us from our attachments to what is not of Christ and his Gospel, we are re-connected in love to all that formerly held us in bondage. Love is the eye of God. In God, we see that we are truly members one of another, regardless of our differences. Today, women continue to be attracted to the traditional Carmelite way of life while other women seek a more contemporary expression of Carmel.

Ultimately, all differences are one in God. Modern science itself affirms what the mystics have always known: that all of creation is bound together with an invisible but powerful web of interconnectedness.[15] We humans, in whom the universe becomes conscious of itself, know the bonding of creation as the energy of love. We need to contain our differences in a heart large enough to hold love for the world, too often in conflict with itself, so that all may indeed be one in God. Whatever our way of life in Carmel, we cannot escape the call to conversion with its invitation to surrender before the mystery of God. It is God who purifies attitudes of self-righteousness, and opens us to one another. In our midst is Christ who encourages us to accept the limitations of our best efforts. Christ will turn the swords of destructive criticism into ploughshares of open listening to and respect for one another in our differences. Sincere efforts toward peaceful presence to one another, gospel compromise in our local communities, mutuality between friars and nuns, all carry a message of hope to our struggling world that peace and mutual respect is possible. The most important thing we offer our world is a heart transformed by faith, hope and love. The inner dynamic of faith, hope and love connects us with the creative, transforming energies of God who, in each one of us, shapes the future of Carmel. Carmel will go on – whatever its form – as long as Carmelites willingly plunge themselves into the depth of God.

NOTES

[1] Karl Rahner, *Theological investigations* (New York: Seabury Press, 1971). Karl Rahner has made a major contribution toward understanding the presence of God to human life. See 'Experience of self and experience of God' in *Theological investigations* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1961–1976), vol 13, pp 124–125.

[2] In a paper entitled 'The twofold aim of Carmel', given at a Carmelite study week held at the Washington Theological Union, 22–26 September 1996, its author, Hein Blommestijn OCarm, maintained that 'because God is not an ultimate "goal of man" [*sic*] but the permanent inflow of irresistible creative love, no Carmelite can say that he *is* a Carmelite . . . but incessantly *becomes* that which God – incomprehensibly and apart from man's input – works in him'.

[3] The Newport Carmel was founded in 1930 by the Carmel of New Orleans LA. In 1957 the community moved to its present location along the Narraganset Bay in Barrington RI.

[4] In May of 1992, Sister Mary Kathleen Kuenstler PHJC submitted a thesis to the Faculty of Canon Law of the Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas in Rome toward her Degree of Licentiate of Canon Law based on the Discalced Carmelite Nuns' Renewal since Vatican Council II. In it she traces the developments which led to the approval of the two Constitutions of 1990 and 1991. See following article, 'The fractured face of Carmel'.

[5] Kieran Kavanaugh OCD has done extensive research in this area of Carmelite history.

[6] See *Addresses of Pius XII to cloistered religious*, given July and August 1958 (St Paul Editions).

[7] See *Directives for mutual relations between bishops and religious in the Church* (SCRSI, 23 April 1978).

[8] M. J. Scheeben, *Mariology*, trans T. L. M. Beukers (St Louis MO: B. Herder Book Co., 1946).

[9] See, for example, Elizabeth Johnson, *Mary and the image of God*; also, by the same author, 'Reconstructing a theology of Mary' in Doris Donnelly (ed), *Mary, woman of Nazareth: biblical and theological perspectives* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1989); also Anthony J. Tambasco, *What are they saying about Mary?* (New York/Ramsey: Paulist Press, 1984).

[10] See 'Why I love you, O Mary!' in *The poetry of Thérèse of Lisieux*, trans Donald Kinney OCD (Washington DC: ICS Publications, 1996), pp 211–220.

[11] See *Nuns' formation in the Teresian Carmel* (Rome, 1996).

[12] Here in the United States, a small group called the Carmelite Forum does just that. It began as a ground-breaking collaborative effort between Calced and Discalced scholars and includes two Discalced nuns. Its work is well known.

[13] Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a soul*, trans John Clarke OCD (Washington DC: ICS Publications, 1972), p 174. See also Vilma Seelaus OCD, 'Thérèse and the maternal face of God' in *God in the human story* (Canfield, Ohio: Alba House Communications, 1996), audiocassettes.

[14] See Consultation Document, *Our Order on the threshold of the third millennium* (Rome: Casa Generalizia Carmelitani Sclazi, 1995). In the New England area new members of both friars and nuns have classes together, since a number of these monasteries are in reasonable proximity. Both Calced and Discalced friars and nuns successfully collaborate in an intensive summer programme for persons in formation.

[15] See books like Thomas Berry, *The dream of the earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988); *Thomas Berry and the new cosmology*, ed Anne Lonergan and Caroline Richards (Mystic CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1987).