

THE APOSTOLATE OF PRAYER AND INTERCESSION

A Carmel in South Africa

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A Carmelite who would not be an apostle would separate herself from the goal of her vocation.¹

Charity gave me the key to my vocation. I understood that if the Church had a body composed of different members, the most notable of all could not be lacking, and so I understood that *the Church had a HEART AND THAT THIS HEART WAS BURNING WITH LOVE!* I understood it was love alone that made the Church's members act, that if LOVE ever became extinct, apostles would not preach the Gospel and martyrs would not shed their blood. I understood *THAT LOVE COMPRISED ALL VOCATIONS . . . MY VOCATION IS LOVE.* Yes, I have found my place in the Church, and it is You, my God, who have given me this place; in the heart of the Church, my Mother, I shall be love.²

CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE IN THE CHURCH was born from the search for God at a time when Christians no longer experienced the challenge of martyrdom and Christianity had become a state religion. What is apostolic about such a life? How can it be a ministry to God's people?

St Anthony the hermit tried to leave civilization behind and escape his fellow men and women, only to find himself at the frontiers of the battle with the evil spirits, enemies of humankind, traditionally believed to inhabit deserts. Attacked by them in every conceivable way he ended up no longer fearing demons, but being feared by them, holding them in bondage and freeing the human city of its tormentors. This was the experience of the desert fathers.

He who celebrates alone in the heart of the wilderness, he is a great assembly. If two together celebrate among the rocks, thousands and ten thousands are present. If three are gathered together, a fourth is

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among them. If there are six or seven together, twelve thousand thousand are assembled. If they range themselves in rank, they fill the firmament with prayer. If they be crucified on the rock, are marked with a cross of light, the Church is constituted. When they come together, the Spirit hovers over their heads. When they end their prayer, the Lord rises to serve his servants.³

All truly contemplative prayer raises the flame of worship and intercession from hearts purified in the spiritual battle and in the purgative action of God. Without their being aware of it, it becomes a ministry to the world.

When St Teresa founded the first monastery of the Reform of Carmel, she made this explicit and planted the flame of apostolic zeal in its heart.

The world is on fire. People try to condemn Christ once again, for they bring a thousand false accusations against him . . . no, my sisters, this is not the time to treat with God for things of little importance.⁴

In the second half of the nineteenth century comes Thérèse of Lisieux, in whom this hidden reality becomes once more visible to the eyes of all, and who gives a clear exposition of it in her life and writings. It is not possible to be a Carmelite today and not share this awareness of being engaged in a vital ministry in the Church and in the world.

South Africa: a journey in faith

Kimberley is a rugged city of diamond mines, in a diocese where 98 per cent of the population belong to the Tswana tribe, living mostly in great poverty; they come from the former 'Homeland' Bophuthatswana (now reunited with South Africa) around the edge of the Kalahari desert. Less than ten years ago the Bishop of Kimberley pleaded for a Carmel, a contemplative presence, in his action-oriented diocese. He was mindful of the injunction of the Second Vatican Council: 'The contemplative life should be restored everywhere, because it belongs to the fulness of the Church's presence'. The call came first to a Carmelite in Austria, who had worked in his diocese for seven years as a Dominican. By providential ways she was joined by two German Carmelites from different Carmels, one of whom had been an active Franciscan Sister. What in the first place had brought these Sisters to Carmel out of a valued and much needed apostolic ministry? It was the lack of the desert dimension in their lives, an experience of futility without it, and the scale of the needs around them which only the

power of God could meet. More providential connections joined two English and one Scottish sister to the group – the latter being eventually replaced by an Irish sister – with another German Sister in an English Carmel who, also as a Dominican, had worked for twenty years in Zambia and Zimbabwe, and whose heart remained in Africa. She became the first ‘victim’ of the new foundation, dying from a brain tumour before the group set out. A Carmelite from Australia and another from a South African Carmel (born a Scot) also felt the call to join this community among the Africans, just before the apartheid era came to an end. There were already two Carmels among the white population of South Africa, from which two more sisters are now with us.

For us it was not a project of our minds, but the call to a journey in faith. We experienced signs of God’s guidance but still there was required of us a leap in faith into insecurity and a totally unknown future. Coming from different countries and different Carmelite traditions, we found ourselves in a position similar to that of the whole of our adopted country. The euphoric revolution taking place before our eyes called for a conversion from apartheid to the welding of a community of multiple ethnic, cultural and religious roots. We became vividly part of the struggle in March 1994 before the first general election, when Bophuthatswana fell to South Africa. The battle in Mafikeng, in which eighty Africans and four whites were killed, raged around our walls, while we were assembled around the Blessed Sacrament in choir: our eucharistic Lord on the paten and the Bible on the floor in our midst – Jesus, the Servant, always coming from below to his creatures. Never did we experience the rightness of our being here more vividly than on that day.

While we had thought of our Carmel as being a Carmel for Africans, we soon realized it had to be multi-racial to reflect the reality of the new South Africa, the rainbow people called to live in reconciled variety – as yet far from being achieved. The scars of generations will take a long time to heal. Like our country, and as a part of it, we found ourselves working hard at forging a new identity, which did not fall into our laps. We had to dig deep through pseudo-community (everyone being nice to each other) to chaos (each one revealing her real thoughts) to listening, dying to self, and beginning to build a true community. And this process had to be repeated, each time at a deeper level. We gratefully acknowledge the excellent help we received in this from our well-trained, loving, devoted active sisters in South Africa who gave us their friendship. It took two years to formulate our mission statement:

God who uses the weak has drawn us into the mystery of his burning heart, to be a sign of his love, unity and freedom, his victory in the conflict with evil. In the desert of Carmel Thapelong (house of prayer) we open ourselves to the dynamic Presence within the Burning Bush. We are here for this, with and for God's people, especially in this part of Africa.

Carmel is universal. We can never concentrate exclusively on one particular country or diocese. But our being here roots us particularly in this diocese and country. The problems faced here, apart from the shortage of vocations to the priesthood and religious life, are violence and an increasing crime rate, unemployment, lack of housing, water etc., a low standard of education, corruption, selfishness and greed, lack of experience and a sense of responsibility at a time of transition to democracy. Our people are disorientated, already long uprooted from their tribal culture; families are unsupported. Fear has brought about a new emergence of witchcraft and satanism, tangible all around us. The early euphoria has given way to disillusionment and disappointment. But there are also positive signs and splendid people, particularly the confident women who carry heavy burdens and are the backbone of our parishes, a power to be reckoned with on such issues as, for example, abortion.

Contemplative life has been successfully implanted in other countries of Africa. In our diocese it is new. It is only slowly that an appreciation is growing for our real role. But our people are becoming gradually aware that we are not automatic providers of answers to prayer, but a place where one finds peace, where sorrows and joys – mostly sorrows and problems – can be brought, are listened to and carried in human hearts, offered to God and transformed; where a community of women tries to be a beacon of light, of hope, love and solidarity, pointing to the kingdom of God wanting to grow among us, believing in love and forgiveness.

Some of the structures of European enclosed life have had to be dropped – there are no grilles, we are seen at Mass (our Sunday Mass is a parish Mass) – or our presence would not have been understood at all. We do not sit or move according to rank, and people far more at home with vocal prayer than Europeans can join us for the Divine Office. But the essentials of our charism are all there: silence, solitude, prayer, community and much hard work.

A point always challenging us is poverty. Though we live simply, we shall never be as materially poor as our people. Our charism which includes enclosure demands enough space, scope, formation etc. to be

healthily and fully lived. When the situation becomes serious, there will always be someone to bail us out. Moreover Africa demands a different approach to poverty: our people want to be lifted out of their destitution; poverty is not an ideal for them. The aspect that is valued is sharing. The gospel beatitude of poverty is appreciated and is a corrective to the greed for money, the tendency to bribery which exists among our people. The awareness of this is our form of poverty.

The question of inculturation of the gospel – and of our charism – is very much in everyone's thoughts. The African Synod made it a priority 'for the firm rooting of the Gospel in Africa. It is a requirement for evangelization, and one of the greatest challenges for the Church on the Continent on the eve of the Third Millennium.'⁵ It is a very sensitive area and something the people themselves have to create, if it is not going to be superficial. We can do no more than provide the space for it, try to get to know their values and their way of seeing things, what has meaning for them. The starting point is the present moment, not their tribal culture of a hundred years ago. We must mentally be where the people are. What do we want to become, so that we and our message are relevant to our people? This needs a lot of listening and learning (apart from the language which we are also trying to learn). What are our candidates looking for? Family, hospitality, origins are important for them. They are looking for a new family, a sense of belonging which will strengthen their commitment. We must allow each one to go back to her roots; no one is the same as another. We should not try to be Africans if we are not, but each should be in touch with the beauty of herself, happy to be what she is. The family is important: 'I am because we are'. The limitation of it, the clan mentality which sees every other clan as an enemy, must be evangelized. Hospitality is the sense of welcome, an attitude, as one African Sister made clear during a formation meeting at Nairobi for the English-speaking Carmelites of Africa; what we call 'western culture' is often human culture. Cultures enrich each other, there is interaction, and what I freely appropriate becomes my own. An African greeting is more than a courtesy, it is recognition and can take five minutes.

Africans are notoriously religious, totally so. Though there are no records of religion, it permeates reality. Before we teach them to pray we should ask: who is God for you? Listen, respond. God is already there. What we are saying must be addressed to these people here and now. What we are doing must answer their questions.

Either tacitly or aloud – but always forcefully – we are being asked:
Do you really believe what you are proclaiming? Do you really preach

what you live? The witness of life has become more than ever an essential condition for real effectiveness in preaching. Precisely because of this we are, to a certain extent, responsible for the progress of the Gospel we proclaim.⁶

Those who are aware of the need for prayer are those active in the mission field: not all, but many of our priests, particularly our young priests and seminarians, who feel their weakness and want to be accompanied by prayer. Our only African sister so far joined us from the Franciscan Order. She felt interiorly compelled to back up with a life of prayer the manifold and often frustrating pastoral work of the diocese in which she was deeply involved. Our youngest entrant sees herself as closely linked to active religious in the direct apostolate: it is the same field of mission, the same task, carried out in solidarity with others by different means. If one or other individual member of an active congregation feels the pull of the contemplative life, this does not, of course, question the need for the active apostolate.

St Thérèse of Lisieux, whose first centenary we are celebrating this year, has been the inspiration of many of those who, after her, entered Carmel. In her life and writings she made explicit what the apostolate of prayer and intercession means in the Church. Her call to Carmel, no doubt inspired and nurtured by two of her sisters entering before her, was genuine and personal.

I had said to Pauline, one day, that I would like to be a hermit and go away with her alone in a far-away desert place . . . Then you explained the life of Carmel to me and it seemed so beautiful! When thinking over all you said, I felt Carmel was the *desert* where God wanted me to go also to hide myself. I felt this with so much force that there wasn't the least doubt in my heart; it was not the dream of a child led astray, but the *certitude* of a divine call; I wanted to go to Carmel *not for Pauline's sake* but for *Jesus alone*.⁷

But Thérèse was then still a weak, oversensitive, wounded child, circling around herself. Her 'Christmas grace' liberated her to maturity.

More merciful to me than He (Jesus) was to His disciples, *Jesus took the net Himself*, cast it, and drew it in filled with fish. He made me a fisher of *souls*. I experienced a great desire to work for the conversion of sinners, a desire I hadn't felt so intensely before. I felt charity enter my soul and the need to forget myself; since then I have been happy.⁸

We use a different vocabulary today from that of Thérèse. We no longer 'pray for sinners' but pray from our place among all sinners, in

solidarity with all our brothers and sisters, for God's gracious mercy which still wants to pour itself out, as Thérèse had experienced in herself. Though the eternal destiny of human beings is still Carmel's primary concern, we do not merely pray for 'souls' but people of soul, body and spirit, who have to work out their salvation in their life on earth with its heights and depths.

We see that in Thérèse's attitude to her fellow human beings the contemplative dimension was prominent. Her love was unified in Jesus, in him she found all else. Missionary work attracted her. During her trip to Rome she laid aside missionary magazines because this attraction was so strong. But with the intuition of one truly called, she never doubted that her call was to Carmel. This was not an escape but the realization that she could give herself more fully and directly in this way. How often have I heard this from my sisters: 'If I did this or that . . . I could help a few. I came to Carmel because I felt in this way I could reach all.' This, of course, is a matter of calling. Contemplatives find it difficult to answer the question: what on earth do they do? What we do, the ordinary day in Carmel, is unspectacular. It can be very bare and simple, giving no nourishment to a sense of achievement. Its main aspect is living in the presence of God. 'I wanted Carmel as soon as I knew about it. I find all aspirations of my soul fulfilled in this Order,'⁹ the fourteen-year-old Thérèse declared to her bishop. And on entering Carmel she said, 'I have come to save souls and to pray for priests'. To pray for priests soon becomes 'big business' for her, wholesale trade, for through them she can reach out to many more.

Why does Jesus say: ask the Lord of the harvest that He send workers? Ah it is because Jesus has so incomprehensible a love for us that He wills that we share with Him in the salvation of souls. He wills to do nothing without us . . . Our mission as Carmelites is to form evangelical workers who will save thousands of souls whose mothers we shall be . . .¹⁰

By entering Carmel she cast herself into the vast interior dimension of the world. The task of saving souls is often referred to in her autobiography and letters. It may sound naïvely enthusiastic, but she is concerned with a deep and ultimate reality. She realizes that the more fully she surrenders to love, the more effective she will be. This is her fundamental attitude; in the question of means she passes through an evolution.

When one wishes to attain a goal, one must use the means. Jesus made me understand that it was through suffering that He wanted to give me

souls, and my attraction for suffering grew in proportion to its increase.¹¹

We know what the sufferings were which she covered with the veil of her lovely smile: the severe training she received from her prioress who recognized her metal; the mental illness of her beloved father, then still regarded as a disgrace for the family; the presence of her sisters to whom she refused the continuation of the former family intimacy in Carmel; the lack of breeding, of tact, and the physical and spiritual ailments of many of her sisters in Carmel; the most absolute aridity in prayer which finally became a dense night, added to her physical passion and death. She felt seated at the table of unbelievers, tempted to blasphemy, and made it an act of solidarity with them.

Thérèse was greatly attracted to the foreign missions and martyrdom for the sake of Christ. Had she lived longer she would probably have been sent to the newly founded Carmel in Vietnam. The nineteenth century saw a veritable explosion of missionary activity. It was a sign of the times. Pope Pius XI, who beatified Thérèse, declared her Patroness of the Missions with St Francis Xavier in 1927.

Today we have lost some of that confidence of her time in the concept of foreign missions. The second Vatican Council has affirmed that all human beings who live guided by their conscience already belong to the Church in an implicit way, and are on the way of salvation. Why trouble them, especially when we are faced with so many problems today? The first missionaries frequently followed in the footsteps of the colonialists and transmitted not only the Gospel but also western culture. Today we have a deep respect for human freedom and dignity which must not be coerced. We are inspired by the desire for Christian unity and work for the co-operation of all good people of other religions and none, to solve the grave global challenges that face us all. Thérèse was a child of her time, an age to which these preoccupations were foreign. She was not concerned with methods of evangelizing but, like all great apostles, with the perennial call of mission which is not only rooted in Christ's mandate (Mt 28:19-20) but also derives 'from the profound demands of his life within us'.¹²

If our problems today are great in an ever more complex world, it is perhaps even more urgent to present them unceasingly to the Lord. The battle we are engaged in of good against evil rages more fiercely than ever all around us and in our own hearts. One of my sisters explained her vocation to Carmel in these words: 'I had no thought of Africa, but I always wanted to be a missionary, to be at the frontier between light and darkness'. And another, quoting Thérèse: 'He made me understand these words of the Cantic of Canticles: "Draw me, we shall run

after you in the odour of your ointments". The simple statement "Draw me" suffices. When a soul allows herself to be captivated, she cannot run alone, all those she loves follow in her train.'¹³

We try to keep that space toward eternal life open that today tends to get cluttered up and almost closed by materialism, the ephemeral, the ungodly values of the world. There are many other apostolates and fields of mission which claim our attention today.

We suffer with Christ in the poor, and try to kindle a light of hope and joy in their midst. We stand in for others who cannot or do not want to pray. Our voice of prayer is a poor human voice, its strength lies solely in Christ's prayer in us. Most of the time we do not see the results of our prayer. Adding a tiny flicker to the flame of love needed to confront and consume hatred in South Africa and the world at large is a positive contribution to the healing of our present-day ills. One political prisoner in South Africa wrote to a Carmelite community: 'During my darkest days you were there to send me comfort and proved beyond doubt that love and care still exist among brothers and sisters'. A student freedom fighter in Latin America begged Carmelites: 'Go on doing what you are doing, live your vocation, that is what we want from you'.

According to St John of the Cross, contemplation is knowing the world through God. Intercession is not a matter of words, but a kenosis in faith. Someone once said, 'The solitude of contemplation is where one meets most violently with the world . . . what is needed is kenotic existences, broken with the eucharist in eternal sharing, overflowing with the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit'. All other results of our contemplative presence here or anywhere else are secondary.

Give testimony to the beauty and missionary fruitfulness of your hidden life with Christ in God. Show the value of the prayer of intercession and of silent immolation around the Eucharist, centre of the universal Church and of the individual Churches, in order to be as Thérèse of Lisieux so ardently desired – love in the Mystical Body. Continue offering to the Christian community this example of straightforward and joyful shared life, which is proverbial amongst the daughters of St Teresa.¹⁴

NOTES

Abbreviations SS = *Story of a soul* (ICS Publications); LT = *Letters of St Thérèse of Lisieux* (ICS Publications)

¹ LT vol 2, p 1011, quoting St Teresa.

² SS, p 194.

³ Ephrem the Syrian.

⁴ St Teresa, *Way of perfection* ch 1.

⁵ The Church in Africa, *Postsynodal apostolic exhortation* 59.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁷ SS, p 58.

⁸ SS, p 99.

⁹ SS, p 101.

¹⁰ LT vol 2, p 753.

¹¹ SS, p 149.

¹² *Redemptoris missio* 11.

¹³ SS, p 225.

¹⁴ John Paul II, Prologue to the new Constitutions of Discalced Carmelites.