

A Modern Presentation of  
Carmelite Spirituality:  
The 1995 *Constitutions* I

*Christopher O'Donnell, O.Carm.*

Carmelite spirituality is one of the most popular in the Church today. Yet apart from specialists there is not much known, especially about the earlier part of our heritage. Many will have read St. Thérèse's *The Story of a Soul* or books about her. Carmelites will have heard about three outstanding 20th century Carmelites: Bl. Titus Brandsma, (1942), St. Edith Stein (1942) and Bl. Elizabeth of the Trinity (d. 1906). But apart from extracts or a few prayers, even the works of these modern Carmelite writers are not well known.

In the earlier period things are not much better. We jump over the centuries to Teresa of Avila (d. 1582) and John of the Cross (d. 1591). People will have read some of their writings, sometime. But not many even Carmelites, will really be at home with these two authors. But what of in between? From the death of Teresa of Avila to the death of Thérèse (1582–1897) little is known. There is little in English from this period of more than 300 years—a time longer than the life of most Institutes in the Church today. To remain with English texts, only four people have made this period available to us: Kilian Healy's doctoral thesis on prayer in the early 17th century Touraine Reform; Robert Steffanotti's thesis on John of St. Samson (d. 1636); Thomas McGinness's popularisation of the Low Countries Marian authors, Michael of St. Augustine (d. 1684), and Mary of St. Teresa, Mary Petyt (d. 1677); Redemptus Valabek's valuable anthologies of Carmelite authors on prayer and on Mary, with biographical sketches.

Before St. Teresa things get worse. Most people will have heard of the late 14th century *Institution of the First Monks* and all will know the *Rule*. But few apart from specialists will have read any texts from the date of the *Rule* (ca. 1208) to Teresa of Avila, a stretch of more than 350 years.

### **Carmelite Identity**

What does all that say about Carmelite identity? Our identity is an old topic, indeed an odd one. I feel at home in any Carmelite house, anywhere. The ethos, the feel of Carmelite life, is different in each province, even from house to house. But there is something that I can identify or at least sense. To a lesser extent I feel at home in the convents of friars, Dominican, Augustinian or Franciscan than in more modern congregations, even when the latter are most friendly and hospitable.

But it is difficult to specify this identity. It goes back to our origins, to the hazy area on Mount Carmel in the last quarter of the 12th century. We know of hermits on the mountain range from about 1180 and of their receiving a *Rule* about 1208. The migration to Europe, forced by Turkish persecution in the 1230s in many ways resembles a re-foundation, with the hermits within a few decades becoming friars. It is largely in the understanding of this migration that our identity difficulties arise: the relation of the foundational experience on Mount Carmel coupled with the sparse documentation during a crucial fifty years from about 1230 when the first migration occurred to the 1282 first extant *Constitutions*.

## Constitutions

In the course of our history there have been many *Constitutions*, that is specific legislation to incarnate our Carmelite identity. Many of these *Constitutions* belonged to a particular area or group of provinces. There have been ten *Constitutions* generally with significance for the whole Order. They were usually produced in times of reform or other major change.

After Trent there were two sets of 16th century *Constitutions* in rather quick succession, followed by one in the following century. After the revitalisation of the Order in the late 19th century *Constitutions* were written under Pius Mayer (1904). The *Code of Canon Law* in 1917 led to *Constitutions* in 1930; the Second Vatican Council gave rise to the 1971 *Constitutions* and the 1983 *Code of Canon Law* occasioned the 1995 legislation.

The first international committee of sixteen members set up in 1986 was given terms of reference, which were inherently contradictory. Firstly, the new text was to be a light revision of the 1971 text incorporating changes demanded by the 1983 revision of Church law. Secondly, we were asked to take into account the documentation issuing from Councils of Provinces, General Congregations and General Chapters since 1971. In practice after wide consultation, we adopted the second term of reference, and respected the first mainly in the fourth part of the *Constitutions* dealing with government. Over the next nine years there was a profound rewriting of the *Constitutions*, which amounts to a restatement of Carmelite spirituality at the close of the second millennium.

I have elsewhere dealt with the important issue of the reception of the 1971-1992 documentation.\* It can be argued that the reception has been uneven: some, but not all, of the teaching has been taken on board and found to be life-giving. Nobody would today question fraternity as a Carmelite value. Yet in 1971 it was new; before that people spoke of common life and fraternal charity. The *Constitutions* represent what has been received reasonably widely. A crucial task of formation will always be the attempt to ensure that there is reception of our heritage in each generation. Central in this reception will be the reception of the *Constitutions* themselves.

It would be tedious and unnecessary to go through the *Constitutions* from the beginning, indicating the significance of various articles. I propose to outline the main concerns of the *Constitutions*. It cannot but be a personal exposition. We would all agree on the existence of the various elements, but each one will differently perceive how these might fit together. I can only hope that what follows may be broadly acceptable. In some ways it can be seen too as a commentary on the 1996 Post-synodal Exhortation, *Vita consecrata*. This latter document exposes religious life under three of its elements: consecration, communion and mission (n. 13).

It will help if the exposition of our spirituality is seen in its elements: Firstly, the Christian Call – Allegiance to Jesus Christ; Secondly, the models – Elijah and Mary; Thirdly, the means – vowed life; Fourthly, the Charism – Contemplation, fraternity, in the midst of the people; Fifthly, the values – Desert, prayer, sharing, mission; Sixthly, the criteria for action – Word, discernment, the poor, human values. These can be represented schematically on the following page:

## **Allegiance to Jesus Christ – the Christian Call**

Our *Rule* gives as the Christian call “to live in allegiance to Jesus Christ...serving him with purity of heart and with resolve.” Since Vatican II it has become much clearer that this holiness to which all are called lies not so much in what we do, but on what God does for us, which then leads to a response in an upright and loving life. This view of holiness is profoundly counter-cultural, opposing two dominant ideologies of our world, omniscience and omnipotence. Our world looks to achievement: we can or soon will know all, we will soon be able to do all. The counter-cultural values are weakness in following the crucified Christ instead of omniscience and surrender to Mystery instead of trying to control through knowledge.

Since Vatican II we are more conscious of this call being also Trinitarian and ecclesial. The Trinity draws us in the Church, not as individuals, but with others and also for others. These Trinitarian and ecclesiological values are to be found in the *Constitutions* (## 1-2)\*\* and in *Vita consecrata* (## 1-3).

A final point at this stage: in spirituality as in theology - there are two distinct starting points: we can begin from below, the existential situation of our world; we can begin from God addressing us in our world. These two approaches each have their value. They can be called vertical and horizontal. But Carmelite spirituality will not allow either to be neglected: a too exclusive vertical or horizontal approach would not be faithful to our tradition.

## **Consecrated Life – the Means.**

According to the recent Apostolic Exhortation, consecrated life is a gift of the Spirit, a charism that is marked by the evangelical counsels (*Vita consecrata* #1). Our *Constitutions* take up the same theme: “Among the gifts of the Spirit is the evangelical life which we profess as religious.” The text goes on to indicate both a vertical and horizontal dimension:

*This life is characterised by an intense search for God  
In total adherence to Christ,  
Finding expression in fraternal life and apostolic zeal (# 3).*

This is as yet a generalised expression of religious life. Its elements will be specified later in a Carmelite mould.

The *Constitutions* then go on to outline the vows in a single paragraph, here seen as obedience to God’s will and a conformity to Christ in poverty and obedience (# 4). Unlike *Vita consecrata* which places the vows at the beginning of its theology of religious or consecrated life, the *Constitutions* deal with the vows in part two, which is “Fraternal Life” and significantly, I think, between the chapter 3 on Community and chapter 5 on Prayer.

The papal document follows Vatican II in ordering the vows as chastity, poverty and obedience. Earlier drafts of the *Constitutions* followed suit, but at a very late stage, during the 1995 Chapter, we returned to the traditional Carmelite ordering of obedience, poverty and chastity. You will recall that the *Rule* specified only obedience; chastity and poverty were added in the emendations of Pope Innocent IV.

When we study chapter 4 on the vows, it is important to note the context in which the teaching is found:

*vows are a radical following of Christ; they are a gift;  
they lead to the gift of ourselves;  
they are kingdom orientated (## 43-44).*

When we look at the treatment of each of them we find, I think, that they are traditional, contemporary and open to development.

Each vow is modelled on Christ. The area of operation of each is love: love of God and love of others. The vows are lived in community and in the world. All three require that we look to the world to discern the signs of the times, to choose for the poor and the little ones. Each of the vows is to be internalised, going within to discern their deepest meaning. Finally in each there is an emphasis on human values: responsibility in the case of obedience; wise use of material things for human and social development in the case of poverty; full personal development and authentic maturity in fraternal love in the case of chastity.

### **Mary and Elijah – Our Models**

After stating in the first articles the Christological basis of our life and its radical expression in our lives, the opening chapter of the *Constitutions* goes on to outline the early history of the Order in eight succinct articles (##6-13). At the head of this section we find Mary and Elijah.

It is a special feature of these *Constitutions* that they contain a profound re-examination of our Marian and Elijan heritage. The 1930 *Constitutions* had little on Elijah except as a contemplative prophet. This same 1930 text stated that the Carmelite Order was Marian, indeed this was its identity and purpose. The 1971 *Constitutions* firmly, if somewhat narrowly, presented Mary and Elijah as models for the Orders search for fidelity in the new situation of secularisation and secularism in which it found itself. It was basically the theological perspective of K. Rahner and J.B. Metz.

The 1995 *Constitutions* go much further. They present what might be called a Carmelite Mary and a Carmelite Elijah, that is Mary and Elijah as seen in our tradition. But they move backwards into a richer biblical and Carmelite picture than we were used to before the 1980 Council of Provinces meeting on Mount Carmel, “Return to the Sources.” But very significantly too they look forwards to the deep problems of our age. It is a mark of these *Constitutions* to recover a new richness of our heritage, to take account of contemporary scriptural and theological scholarship as well as the signs of the times, and to be open to future developments.

The Carmelite Mary was encapsulated in four titles: Mary as Patroness, Mother, Sister and the Most Pure Virgin. Carmel’s relationship was symbolised by the Brown Scapular, which pointed at once to Mary’s care for her brothers and their devotion to, and service of her. Thus

*The scapular is a sign of Mary’s permanent  
and constant motherly care for Carmelite brothers and sisters.*

*By their devotion to the scapular,  
faithful to a tradition in the Order, especially since the 16th century,  
Carmelites express the loving closeness of Mary to the people of God;  
it is a sign of consecration to Mary, a means of uniting the faithful to the Order, and an effective  
and popular means of evangelisation (# 27, § 5).*

But in addition to these traditional considerations, the *Constitutions* draw on contemporary biblical scholarship on Mary and develop a rich picture of Mary as the Virgin who is graced by the Spirit and who then responds to the same Spirit. In this profound reality she is our model (# 27, § 3).

The three elements of our charism are seen also reflected in Mary's life:

*She is the Virgin of wise and contemplative listening who kept and pondered in her heart  
the events and words of the Lord (# 27, § 1).*

She is also a member of the Christian community walking with the disciples, teaching at Cana the need to believe. She is the Virgin who builds relationships among those close to Jesus. She is the Virgin of the good news of salvation.

A sign of consecration to her and a means of evangelisation is the scapular. The picture of Mary reflects not only traditional and scriptural insights, but we see the influence of our Nijmegen confrères, in seeing Mary as the one of the undivided heart, the pure Virgin living inwardly the gifts of the Spirit in her heart. Finally the note of the poor is intimated by the allusion to the *Magnificat*:

*Mary is presented to us  
as one able to read the great wonders which God has accomplished in her  
for the salvation of the humble and the poor (# 27, § 1).*

It is important to note that much more than in previous *Constitutions*, the ideal of Mary recurs again and again, as our legislation deals with different aspects of the life of Carmel:

- \* community life is under her protection (# 70);
- \* prayer follows the example of Mary (## 64, 79);
- \* Mary is the object of special veneration in Carmel (## 85-87);
- \* The scapular is commended as a devotion and an apostolic tool (# 89);
- \* Marian shrines are of special importance (# 90);
- \* Mary is the inspiration of the various apostolates of the Order (# 95).

Thus we have in the *Constitutions* a portrait of Mary which is at once traditional, rooted in the scriptures, and alert to contemporary problems especially in the life of faith, in service of the poor and in the discernment of God's will for herself and others.

When we come to Elijah we find the same three elements that we have indicated in the case of Mary. We have what might be called the Carmelite Elijah. Up to 1980 the prophet was seen primarily in terms of our motto: "With zeal I have been zealous for the Lord God of hosts." He was the one who stood before God, a contemplative figure. This view was seen to be inadequate in the 5th very important Council of Provinces meeting "A Return to the

Sources” (Mount Carmel, 1980). Notably under the leadership of the Brazilian exegete, Carlos Mesters, a much richer biblical picture of Elijah emerged. Also from 1980 there was a rediscovery of our Carmelite tradition, particularly from medieval times. Scholars like our Italian confrère, Emmanuel Boaga, shared this richness of the patrimony

Thirdly, the picture of Elijah was influenced by the contemporary Church:

- \* He is a contemplative;
- \* A mystic who read the signs of God’s presence; He was in solidarity with the poor and the forgotten, as when he defended those who endured violence and injustice;
- \* Elijah is also seen through the prism of the Nijmegen school as a desert figure of undivided heart.
- \* He displays the three key elements of the Carmelite charism:
- \* He is called a contemplative who teaches us to be led by the Spirit and formed by God’s word;
- \* He belonged to others of a like mind, a school of prophets;
- \* He became involved in the lives of the people.

Again as in the case of Mary, the figure of Elijah is found elsewhere in the Constitutions:

- \* Community life is to be lived in his spirit (# 30);
- \* his feast is to be celebrated with great solemnity (# 88);
- \* he is a model for the contemplative (# 79);
- \* he is cited in the context of our prophetic charism (## 92, 115);
- \* he teaches us to read the new signs of the presence of God, to be people of reconciliation, to be open to dialogue with Jews and Muslims (# 96);
- \* he is a model for our commitment to justice and peace (# 115).

## **Our Charism**

In the period from the 1968 Extraordinary general Chapter which gave us a *Delineatio vitae* (Outline of life) there has been a lot of attention given to our identity and charism. There were three main influences at work. Firstly, there was a substitution of the theme of fraternity for common life and charity; this substitution dates largely from the 1971 *Constitutions*. There was a rapid reception of the language of fraternity, even if the reality has been more problematic. In particular the fraternity language raises expectations among our younger members for a style of life and sharing that is foreign to and beyond the energies of many older members, who are more used to coded love in the way they relate. We have to avoid unrealistic expectations in the area of fraternity and we have to counsel patience, but at the same time we cannot give up on an important value. Here as elsewhere an important feature will be the growth into maturity through, and sometimes despite, fraternity.

Secondly, there was a renewed emphasis on the contemplative dimension of the Order, this being due mainly to Nijmegen, especially Kees Waaijman and Hem Blommestijn.

Thirdly, there was the liberation perspective of the service of the poor, which developed especially in the generalate of Falcp Thuis (1971-1983). The influence here was significantly

from the Philippines where we had a Dutch presence, and from Brazil, again with a Dutch influence.

There are several contemporary parallels to our rediscovered charism. From the early 1960s the Calvinist Hoekendijk encapsulated the Christian task in three New Testament Greek words, *kerygma*, *koinonia*, *diakonia*. Though these do not exactly correspond to the expression of our charism as “Contemplative fraternity in the midst of the people,” there are profound similarities. Likewise, we have noted the trilogy of *Vita consecrata*: consecration, communion and mission (# 13).

When we look at the three keys of our charism, we should note two significant features of their treatment in the *Constitutions*. Firstly, they are interlocking values: we can begin with any of them and must necessarily arrive back at the other two. Thus we are:

- \* a *contemplative* fraternity in the midst of the people;
- \* a *fraternity* that is contemplative in the midst of the people;
- \* *in the midst of the people* we are a contemplative fraternity.

Secondly, as in the case of Elijah and Mary, we have to show the roots of these elements in our tradition, and to draw more deeply from this same tradition that we may have been accustomed to up to recently. There is moreover an attempt in the *Constitutions* to give a contemporary expression to these values, especially in the way they interconnect and interact.

A consequence follows which is important for formation and indeed for the future of the Order. Each person will have a different lived expression of this complex charism. Each one will tend to give special prominence to one element and make this the focus from which the remaining elements spread out. Similarly, provinces, even houses, will have different emphases. This brings up the very difficult issue of pluralism. There are very many different ways of being a Carmelite today. Again, young people coming to us may see the charism in a new perspective. We need to be genuinely open to other ways of living our charism apart from our own preferred one. To use language I have already employed: there are two starting points for spirituality and theology, the vertical and the horizontal. In the case of the Carmelite Order there are I think three possible starting places: contemplation, fraternity, service in the midst of the people. These points will emerge if we look briefly at the three elements of our charism.

## Contemplation

Contemplation is in many ways what in modern English we call a weasel word, that is, a word with profound ambiguity. The longest article in the fifteen volume *Dictionnaire de spiritualité* is the 600 column one on Contemplation.” The word is loosely used in our society. The basic meaning is that of gazing, looking, seeing, beholding, and reflecting. The Greek word *theōria* has the same range of meaning. The *Constitutions* were faced with the wide usage in the history of spirituality, and with an extensive range of meaning in the Order, especially among those who may be more at home with the third element of our charism, “in the midst of the people.” The *Constitutions* make some helpful points.



Firstly they state the contemplative style as part of the founding charism of the Order and point to its importance in the Rule (# 16). The Rule is cited not only for its seventh chapter about continuous dedication to the Word of God, but also in its ascetical chapters: spiritual armour (ch. 14), work (ch. 15) and silence (ch. 16).

Secondly, the *Constitutions* give some hint about what contemplation means (# 17). They describe it as “the search for the face of God;” an inner journey which is undertaken in response to God’s love; a transforming experience of the overpowering love of God.

Thirdly, the *Constitutions* helpfully demythologise some previous notions of contemplation, which would see it as being for experts or some specially chosen saints:

*Contemplation begins when we entrust ourselves to God,  
in whatever way he chooses to approach us; it is an attitude of openness to God, whose presence  
we discover in all things (# 17).*

Fourthly, there is the note of conversion. What sets Christian contemplation and mysticism apart from other experiences of heightened awareness is the need for transformation; contemplation and mysticism are not a matter of techniques that can be learned:

*This love [God’s] empties us of our limited and imperfect human ways of  
thinking, loving and behaving,  
transforming them into divine ways (# 17).*

Fifthly, contemplation is not a purely individual search. It has an ecclesial value, since it determines the quality of our brotherhood and of our service in the midst of the people. It enables us to read more profoundly the signs of the times (# 18). Two points seem to be made here: contemplation develops a faith vision so that we can see reality from a prophetic perspective; the purity of heart that is demanded for contemplation will also allow us to see more profoundly the reality in which we are immersed. The teaching of the *Constitutions* on contemplation is summarised in a rich article from the chapter on prayer:

*Contemplation in the Carmelite tradition is truly a free gift from God.*

*God takes the initiative, he reaches out to us  
and fills us ever more deeply with his life and his love; we respond to him by allowing him to be  
God in our lives.*

*Contemplation is an attitude of openness to God, whose presence we discover everywhere.*

*In this way we follow the example of the prophet Elijah, who ceaselessly looked for God, and of  
Mary, who pondered all things in her heart (# 79).*

## **Fraternity**

I have already stressed the major shift in our community life as being from a focus on common life (seen mainly in vowed poverty and prayer), marked by fraternal charity. One could live the common life in a very formal and impersonal way: one could do acts of charity without feeling or caring. The change to the value of fraternity is a huge shift. The *Constitutions* at this point give us five or so points that can help us to grasp the significance of fraternity.

Firstly, they link fraternity with the contemplative aspect of our vocation (# 19). Secondly, they highlight indications of fraternity to be found already in the *Rule* (# 19). Thirdly, they outline human values necessary for fraternity: growing in communion, overcoming privileges, participation and co-responsibility, caring for one another's spiritual and psychological well-being, walking the way of dialogue and reconciliation (# 19). These ideas are developed throughout the second part of the *Constitutions*. Fourthly, they give great importance to Scripture, Eucharist and prayer in the development of fraternity (# 20). These too are developed later. Fifthly, it is through being a contemplative fraternity that "we seek the face of God and we serve the Church" (# 20).

Thus as in the case of Elijah, Mary and contemplation, the articles on fraternity seek to show our heritage, develop it beyond what we may have been accustomed to consider, and indicate contemporary perspectives of fraternity both from the side of human development and ecclesial mission.

### **Service in the Midst of the People**

The third aspect of our charism as developed by the *Constitutions* is an even more radical restatement of our life than fraternity was. The language itself derives to an extent from Third World liberation perspectives that emerged from the 1970s. But it also came about through a deepened historical awareness of the friar vocation in the Middle Ages.

In the religious congregations founded after Trent, community is in view of apostolate: people come together in order to live together and engage in an apostolate. The friar or medieval concept is different. Here fraternity is a prior value or a subsistent one. We gather in community to seek the face of God, which of course involves love and service of others. The friar vocation in some ways spans the monastic ideal of contemplation and liturgy, and the apostolic ideal of later Institutes that were founded primarily with a view to some specific apostolate or apostolates.

The consecrated term in the past was "apostolate." In recent years this word has largely given way to "mission." Our chapters five and six speak of apostolic mission. But in identifying our charism, the word "service," with the rich biblical overtones of *diakonia*, is used, along with the important specification of the friars' life, "in the midst of the people."

The treatment of this service in the midst of the people in the early part of the *Constitutions* tends to be more in contemporary language (## 21-24), but more traditional expressions are found elsewhere especially in the sections on prayer including shrines (ch. 5) and the chapters on mission (chs. 6-7).

What we find in the *Constitutions* can be helpfully supplemented by two apostolic exhortations. Firstly, *Christifideles laici* which shows both the urgency of mission in the Church today (n. 23) and specifies the sacramental basis of mission—baptism and confirmation for all, priestly ordination for some (nn. 22-23). The second is *Vita consecrata* which gives new perspectives for mission by religious today under the rubric, *Servitium caritatis*, "Consecrated Life: The Manifestation of God's Love in the World" (nn. 72-105).

Whereas in the past the ideas of apostolate were largely based on what we had to give, now there is a new emphasis on listening, on discernment, on hospitality, of journeying to where people are. We do not come with ready-made answers. This is a truth that some of our young people, especially those of a new, more conservative mindset, will find difficult. The neo-conservative mentality conceives of a set of eternal verities mainly encapsulated in the Magisterium, to which one can immediately turn for an answer. Another tendency for this group is pietism: pray your troubles away. Against both excesses we have to offer an experience of fraternity in which all is far from ideal and in which there is needed a daily struggle for authenticity. We also have our search for authentic contemplation in which we seek the face of God and are alert to the needs of others. Our flawed prayer and our insecure achievements in serving the living God can be an important corrective. We do have something to offer, both from our heritage, and from our living the Carmelite charism, but we must first listen with and discern with people before we offer them anything.

A key aspect of being in the midst of the people is solidarity, that is, being with them as well as serving; indeed at times the only service may be solidarity.

As one might expect, there is a clear preference for service of “the little ones” (the *minores*). Who the little ones are in a particular place is a question for discernment. Our sense of poverty, our commitment and allegiance to Jesus Christ will guide our choice of service:

*It is the very purpose of our apostolic brotherhood to be present among the people (# 32).*

## Notes

\* See “Modern Carmelite Legislation 1971-1995” in *Journeying with Cannel*. Edited K. Alban (Middle Park: Carmelite Communications, 1997) 61-71 at 65-66; see further “Reception” in C. O’Donnell, *Ecclesia: A Theological Encyclopedia of the Church* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press-Glazier, 1996) 400-402.

\*\* Unless clearly specified otherwise, all numbers (#) refer to the 1995 *Constitutions*.