

Drawn to a Life of Prayer:
The Carmelite Way

John Costello, T.O.Carm.

Published in 'Carmel in the World,' 2000, Volume XXXIX, No. 3.

A Return to the Church

Seven or eight years ago I reached a stage in my life when I felt called by the Holy Spirit to make a decision to return to my Church after having been a lapsed Catholic since boyhood days. During all of this time, however, I had never lost my faith. In fact, I had always classed myself as being a really very spiritual person. I just sort of drifted away from the Church somehow. And here I was now wanting to return to my roots so to speak, to renew my sacramental vows that I had chosen to neglect for all those years. In theory this spiritual commitment sounded fine; but to put it into practice, I knew, would prove a very difficult undertaking if I was truly serious with my intentions.

After all I hadn't been to Mass for over forty years, a lifetime really, and the only prayers I had used during all this time were of a very limited nature, gleaned from a lady catechist on the few afternoons I attended her Sunday school lessons. But I had never forgotten them and had actually built my times of prayer around them during this long absence. Then there was the Mass itself. I mean, the last time had taken part in the celebration of the Eucharist had been when it was still said in Latin. There would have been many changes made, which meant I would have to learn everything from the very beginning again. And what would the reaction of my wife and my family be to this spiritual quest I was contemplating? All I knew for certain was that I felt drawn to a commitment to a life of prayer by the Holy Spirit and was secretly asking the Lord's forgiveness for having neglected Him and His church all these years and for Him to guide me in this return journey.

The first place He drew me was to my local Catholic Church for a meeting with one of the priests to discuss my predicament. After patiently listening to me, Father suggested I should make a full confession as soon as possible to enable me to receive absolution for my sins before being given a 'penance' to do to enable me to achieve full pardon for my wrongdoings. Only then could I be sure of forgiveness of God and free to attend Mass, to receive Holy Communion. The sheer joy I felt after celebrating this Mass and to be received back into the Church was unbelievable. The first stage of my spiritual journey had begun.

I will always remember the words: "Come back into Church, John, and just quietly let the Holy Spirit guide you on your way," being offered me by the priest in a form of guidance. I did just that, and, before long felt myself being drawn into meaningful prayer other than those said whilst attending Mass. I needed a disciplined pattern of prayer to follow though and craved to explore further the realms of Christian spirituality; but how to go about it? This was the burning question. Could one be taught this subject? Surely it was within one and needed to be continually drawn out of the depths of one's soul through constant devotion to prayer and worship of our Lord Jesus Christ. So I prayed that our Lord would guide and point me in the right direction.

Sure enough, it wasn't long before I purchased *The Sunday Missal* to assist me in following the order of Mass and all that that entailed. From the various scripture readings in it I found myself turning to the Bible to meditate more deeply upon them, realising as I did so of the awful reality of my total neglect of this book of the spoken word of God through all the years

of my life. My sinful past reared up before me and I felt the need to commit myself to God and His teachings so that I might be able to acquire His saving grace to strengthen and influence me in following a life of Christian spirituality. It was then that I discovered a little book entitled *The Practise of The Presence of God – The Best Rule of a Holy Life – being Conversations and Letters of Brother Lawrence* that was to have a profound effect on me. Here was something I could immediately relate to, these letters having been written by an illiterate person whose entire knowledge was attributed to his very own experience, a very mean and unlearned man before the time of his conversion and entry into the barefoot Carmelites as a Lay-Brother in Paris to devote his life, love and actions to the glory of God. Here was a perfect example of one being led by the Holy Spirit through faith. In his very *First Conversation* he says “that the way of Faith was the spirit of the Church, and that it was sufficient to bring us to a high degree of perfection.” Also “that we ought to give ourselves up to God, with regard to things temporal and spiritual, and seek our satisfaction only in the fulfilling of His will, whether He lead us by suffering or by consolation, for all would be equal to a soul truly resigned” These words were so meaningful and so impressed me deep inside that I just knew that I would have to react to them in a practical way somehow. It was my first encounter with the *Carmelite Order*; and although I did not know it at the time, this was where the Holy Spirit was ultimately leading me during the course of the next few years. Not, I may add, to become a *Lay Carmelite Brother*, but with my eventual decision to making my Profession in the *Third Order (Secular) of Our Lady of Mount Carmel* in a commitment to a life of prayer with fellow tertiaries.

In the meantime three years were to pass by, during which time I attended Mass regularly, and, since I was now retired, my worshipping became an everyday occurrence. It was wonderful to be celebrating once again in all the Church’s various *feast days*, praying the holy rosary and the Stations of the Cross both individually and in a group. I began to read various periodicals dealing with spirituality, which in turn led me to discover renowned spiritual writers and their works. Writers such as Baron von Hugel, Leo Tolstoy, Cardinal Newman, Thomas Merton, Thomas & Kempis, Julian of Norwich; also St Thomas Aquinas, St John of the Cross, St Francis de Sales. From their offerings I was to gain knowledge of different methods of prayer, such as *meditative and contemplative prayer*; which gave me insight also to the *Sulpician and Ignatian* approaches whereby I could ponder more deeply on particular Scripture readings and settings, religious poems, hymns, paintings, nature, using my spiritual imagination to the full as I began to find God all around me in everything and in everyone. I also learned of other traditions and Christian ways of prayer, among these being the *Franciscan*, the *Jesuit*, the *Benedictine*, the *Quakers*, and, last, but not least, the *Carmelite*. I was also to read books on theology by theologians of both the past and the present. I was eager to learn, and, indeed, to experience as much as I possibly could on this subject of Christian spirituality.

Seeds of Faith

However, the time eventually came when I realised a deeper commitment to our Lord, to His Church and to a life of prayer was needed on my part if I was to fulfil these desires. I didn’t know quite what I was searching for, but then late one Sunday evening while listening to a radio programme called *Seeds of Faith – Prayer and the Carmelite Tradition* – the answer was given me in the form of a discussion concerning the *Carmelite Friars* and of their Priory, *The Friars*, at Aylesford in Kent. I sat intrigued as I gained knowledge of the history of this Order

which began as a group of hermits nearly eight hundred years ago in the caves on Mount Carmel in the Holy Land. They became known as *The Brothers of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel* dedicating their little chapel to her. After being given a Rule by St Albert, Patriarch of Jerusalem, between the years 1206-1214 and because of the political situation, they began emigrating to western Europe, and consequently, in 1247 one of the places they settled was Aylesford. Under the guidance of their Prior General, the Englishman St. *Simon Stock*, a change of lifestyle took place as they became friars to live in community which enabled them both to be alone with God and to also serve the needs of the people. They would never forget their origins as hermits though. *Prayer which leads to intimacy with God is the ideal of the Carmelites but prayer drives us into the active apostolate to tell others of God and to show them His love in practise.* In dedicating their first church to Mary the hermits demonstrated her importance to the Order. For Mary “*treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart*” (Luke 2:51). As I listened I learned that “*The tradition of Carmel has been one of contemplative prayer*” and “*the role of the Virgin Mary has been to challenge her Carmelite brothers and sisters into a deeper discipleship.*” On hearing these two statements I felt immediately drawn to this Order. Indeed, I felt compelled to journey down to the county of Kent to visit Aylesford Priory on a spiritual quest to find out more about these Carmelite Friars because I believed that the two dimensions mentioned above were what I was seeking in my religious life. I was looking for a deeper commitment of my faith to my Church and to our Lord. And with a further utterance, “*Contemplation for Carmelite brings them to commitment,*” from our radio speaker, I realised that this commitment might possibly be in the direction of the Carmelites committing “*themselves to the poor and marginalized in prayer The AIDS victim, the political prisoner, the sick, whoever society fails to reach is the love focus of their prayer of intercession.*” I needed to investigate this contemplative aspect of Carmelite prayer further.

Aylesford Priory

Arriving at the *Friars* in Aylesford, I was immediately impressed by this Carmelite Priory that dated back to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The present structure, with its very impressively built shrine to Our Lady, was, in fact, rebuilt in the 1950's. I spent a whole day just browsing around the different chapels and scenic views soaking up the spiritual atmosphere, with occasional glimpses of the Brothers of this Community attired in the brown habits of their Order as they went about their business. The quiet peacefulness of the place was overwhelming. I was alone, yet not on my own, for I could feel the presence of God all around me. Toward the end of the day I came to realise I had spent it in comparative silence; but this silence had, in fact been my first experience of contemplative prayer, almost without my knowing it. It proved to be a very spiritual awakening for me, and the reason for my presence at Aylesford Priory. Before leaving though I did pray the holy rosary on my walk round the *Rosary Way*, stopping to recite the mysteries in front of the beautifully depicted ceramic sculptures that hung from the garden's wall in their wooden holders, and also joined in with the community in Evening Prayer in one of the splendid chapels. This particular way of disciplined prayer was entirely new to me; but I felt myself being drawn to it with deep reverence. Indeed, it was what I was seeking, and, as my day at the Priory drew to a close, I can't remember having prayed so openly and with so much conviction ever before in my life, and I knew beyond a doubt that a life of prayer was opening up for me and that Aylesford and the Carmelite Order would be playing a big part in my life in the future. In what capacity,

I was as of yet unsure. All I knew at this stage was that I couldn't wait to return to this beautiful Priory and to the *Shrine of Our Lady* to pursue this calling of the Holy Spirit further. I discovered that reservations for retreats at the *Friars* could be made at the Reception Office, so I booked myself in for one for the following week and before departing to make my way home after having spent a very spiritually rewarding day at this Carmelite Priory.

The Third Order (Secular) of Our Lady of Mount Carmel.

I returned to Aylesford to attend my week-end retreat with eagerness. After settling in to my quaint little room, I went quietly about exploring the Priory, noting the Mass and Prayer times for the duration of my stay there. It was during these times that I became acquainted with other retreat guests, and also the Brothers and Priests of the *Order*. Over supper after Night Prayer on the Saturday, I gained knowledge of *The Third Order Of Our Lady Of Mount Carmel* through its secretary. I listened with avid interest to this charming lady as she explained to me its origins and guidelines, and before the week-end was over I just knew that I was being drawn to this life of prayer in Carmel by Our Lord through his holy Mother. She invited me along to her office where she presented me with some literature to assist those wishing to join the *Order*. Hidden among the sheaves of paper was a small, hard-backed book entitled *The Little Office*. Looking back now, I believe it was this book that led me to full commitment and of my eventual Profession in the *Order*. In its pages I found the disciplined prayer I was looking for with its *Call to praise and worship*, its *Office of Readings*, its *Morning and Evening Prayer*, its *Prayer During the Day I and II* and *Night Prayer*. This prayer would lead me ever closer to God and his Church, from which I had strayed over the years. I needed to commit myself to this "high calling with great responsibility" to "turn to Christ and His Blessed Mother in prayer, using the psalms and canticles they used in praising the eternal Father" Also, by reciting the *Little Office* I would come to know that it was "not just an individual prayer, but the prayer of Christ and the prayer of the whole Church." It would become "a foretaste of the heavenly praise sung unceasingly before the throne of God and the Lamb." In the pages of the *Guidelines* was a general Introduction to The Third Order which I read and pondered on over the weekend. The sanctity I was trying to acquire in my religious life could, it appeared, be found here. I, as an ordinary lay person could attain this by simply trying to imitate Our Lady. After all, she had "opened the way for the coming of Christ and of the Church, of which; she is Mother." What better example of leadership and guidance? I realised this would prove to be a difficult task and that to become a Lay Carmelite meant by necessity to be a life of prayer. In fact, during the first year of entry into the Third Order, I learned that the Lay Carmelite is requested to recite Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer from the *Little Office of Our Lady of Mount Carmel*. and to recite the Rosary daily. I read of the history of the *Order*, which I have briefly written of earlier.

The Brown Scapular

As a sign of consecration in their *Order*, the Carmelites dressed themselves in a habit of simple rough brown cloth. A scapular formed part of this and was made of the same material. Members of the *Third Order Secular* on being received into the *Order* as Tertiaries are presented with a smaller version of this and wear it for a minimum period of one year. If they then wish to become a full member and are accepted at the profession ceremony, a larger one is then

given them for life. Little did I know that six months after my initial visit to Aylesford I would be taking part in a ceremony to be received into the Order myself as a Tertiary and that within the year I would also make my Profession into it with my promise “to follow the Rule of the Third Order until death.”

Prayer and Meditation

In the meantime, however, it meant raising my mind and heart to God and to ask Him to guide me on this journey. I knew it was what I wanted, but more important, it was what God wanted of me, of this I was more than sure as I began to live continually in His presence and came to realise that “*it is the hallmark of the Carmelite, as a member of a contemplative order to pray without ceasing...*” I hoped to acquire this ability, and also to be brought to quiet meditation through it. I found that a good subject for meditation was the Our Father, and over the pursuing months I learned to take time to actually ponder the words that Christ himself gave to us to pray in this beautiful prayer, and not just to recite them as I had done in the past without really thinking about them. I also re-discovered the devotion of the holy Rosary, finding through these mysteries that I was indeed being led by the holy Mother to her son, our Lord in so many ways. None other than the late Pope Paul VI in his exhortation ‘*To Honour Mary,*’ said: “*...the Rosary should be considered as one of the best and most efficacious prayers in common that the Christian family is invited to recite*” (n.54). And a predecessor of his, Pope Pius XII, called the Rosary “*the compendium of the entire Gospel.*”

Saints of Carmel

I started to read various works by the Saints of Carmel which helped me enormously in my life of prayer. Commencing with St Teresa of Avila, I came to know of her devotion to St Joseph who “*was the first person to know love and honour Mary as the Mother of God.*” To those experiencing problems in their progress in the life of prayer she advises them to “*take this glorious saint as their master and they will not go astray.*”

Another great mystic of the Church was St John of the Cross. Born in 1542 in a humble home in Spain, he eventually became a priest after entering the monastery. He became renowned for his spiritual poems, and *The Spiritual Canticle*, a series of dialogues between God and the soul. His commentary on the work is regarded by many as being “*one of the world’s richest sources of meditation.*” Then there is that great Carmelite saint of the nineteenth century, St Thérèse of Lisieux, teaching her “*Little Way.*” Those who have imitated this “*have found themselves advancing along the path of perfection faster than they realised. It is only on looking back that you can see the progress you have made.*” Great works, indeed for me to study in days to come, along with numerous other Carmelite saints works which it is impossible to comment on in the small space available.

The Spirit of the Rule

Guidelines are set out in the Third Order Manual for those entering or considering becoming members. “The spirit of the rule is that of our Blessed Mother. Mary is the beginning and the end of all the Carmelite Order stands for (p. 16). That I had been led to this Order, to have been both received and professed in it seems almost unbelievable to me

now looking back on the events following that Radio programme that had led me to it initially. Here I was, part of a formation of Cannel in the World and following their Rule, which is a sure guide to holiness. At our monthly meetings at Aylesford I was asked to serve on the altar with the priest, to lead the congregation in prayers of the holy Rosary, to proclaim the Readings of the Day from the Lectern. Consequently, this also led me to do the same back in my own Parish Church, and, occasionally when no Priest was available, to officiate at Holy Communion. Services for the parishioners. I find this is such a spiritually rewarding experience for me, knowing that our Lord has asked me to administer his Bread of Life to his faithful followers. Being a Eucharistic Minister also means I get to offer his Blood for our sins in the wine from the chalice.

Life of Prayer

The tradition of Carmel is to develop prayer in *“all its forms; mental prayer and aspirational prayer, as well as the traditional practises.”* I was learning through the Virgin, and especially in the celebration of the Rosary,... *“how to praise the Lord and to rejoice in God my Saviour”* (Luke 1:46-47). Imbued with spirit of the Order, Lay Carmelites... *try to live its charism in a silent listening to the Word, making their whole life into one of prayer...* However their spiritual life is not entirely devoted to only the liturgy: they are continually being asked... *“to enter their rooms and pray to the Father in secret”* (Matthew 6:6). Lay Carmelites are being asked... *“to share with people the knowledge of salvation”* (Luke 1:77).

Prayers at the Monthly Meeting

After a general monthly meeting of the Chapter at Aylesford, members of the *Third Order* discuss matters arising and review the minutes of last meeting. Then a Carmelite Priest whose position it is to Chair discusses the Gospel Readings of the day and also other items of a spiritual nature before celebrating Mass with us in one of the delightful Chapels. He also welcomes any newcomers into the Order by way of the reception or profession ceremony with the *Brown Scapulars* close at hand near the Altar and Holy Water to bless them when presenting them to the individual members concerned, after they have vowed *“to live for ever in the service of God in the Third Order of the Blessed Virgin of Mount Carmel.”* The *Scapulars* are then sprinkled and placed over the shoulders of each new candidate by the priest as he says: *“Receive the gentle yoke of Christ and His burden which is light in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”*

Prior to this, however, are the opening Meeting Prayers with the *Leader* asking the Holy Spirit to come upon us all. This is then followed by the *Litany of Our Lady*. Prayers for the *Observances of our Promises* are then offered. Then prayer to *St. Joseph, to the Saints of Carmel, for the Sick* before concluding with prayers for the deceased members of the Order.

Invariably, I will offer up a prayer on the Main Shrine to Our Lady before leaving Aylesford. And invariably, I thank Her for having drawn me to commit myself to a Life of prayer in this way.

The following phrase is attached to the heraldic crest of the Carmelite Order. The words are of the prophet Elias:

‘I am filled with jealous zeal, for the Lord, the God of Hosts’ (1 kings 19:14).