

# ALBERT'S WAY

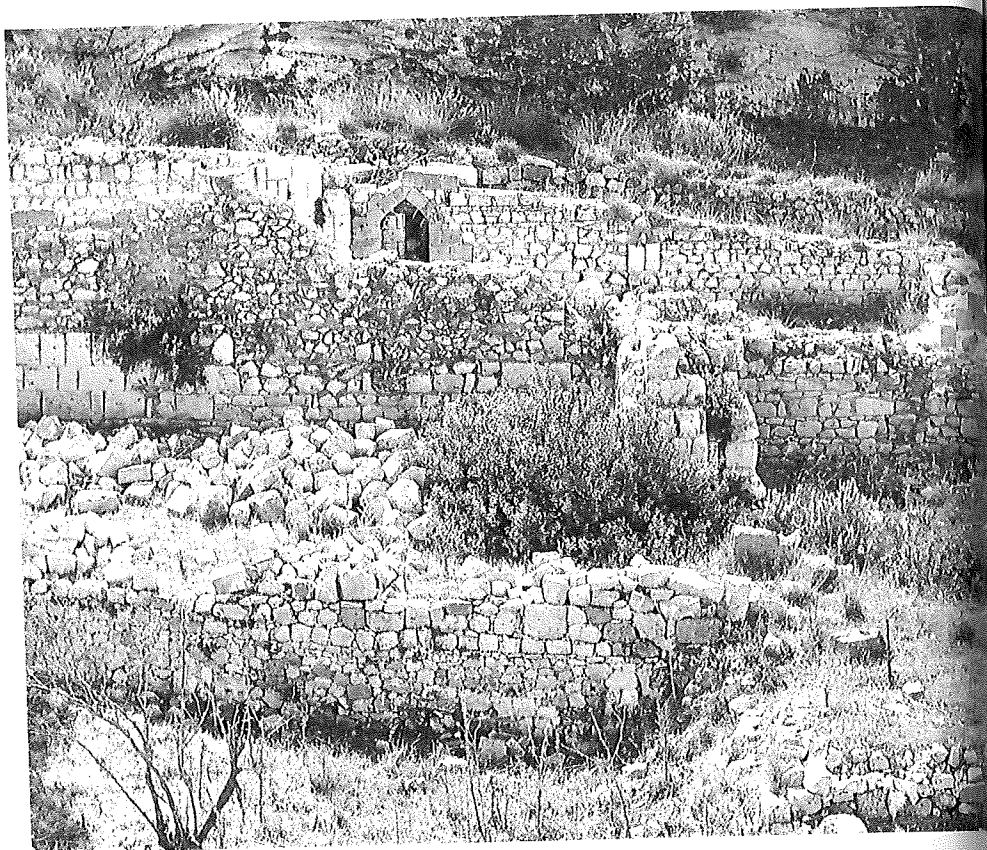
The First North American Congress on the  
Carmelite Rule

Edited by  
Michael Mulhall, O. Carm.

Institutum Carmelitanum  
Rome

The Province of the Most Pure Heart of Mary  
Barrington, Illinois

1989



*An oratory should be constructed in the midst of the cells ...*  
 The Oratory  
 Wadi 'ain es-Siah  
 Mount Carmel

## HOW TO READ THE RULE: AN INTERPRETATION

Constance FitzGerald, O.C.D.



I believe I have been asked to give this paper for three reasons. First of all, The Rule of St Albert has influenced my life for thirty-five years, years before and years after Vatican II. For nearly twenty years, before Bede Edwards, Carlo Cicconetti, Joachim Smet or Elias Friedman produced their studies, I heard the Rule read in the refectory every Friday. Its words and its spirit are burned into my soul as a part of my identity. Secondly, I bring the reflections and experience of a woman, a Carmelite nun, to this gathering. I come from the oldest Carmelite community in the United States – a community that has been willing to change and renew precisely because it embodies and cherishes the tradition.<sup>1</sup> I believe that any genuine vision for the future has to be rooted in a knowledge and love of the past. Thirdly, I am interested in and convinced of the need for good hermeneutics, serious interpretation, in dealing with the classic texts of our Carmelite tradition.<sup>2</sup> I assume that

<sup>1</sup> The first community of Carmelite Nuns was founded in 1790 in Port Tobacco, Maryland. The nuns moved to Asquith Street in Baltimore in 1830. They moved in 1873 to Biddle Street and in 1961 to Dulaney Valley.

<sup>2</sup> We need, in the Order, something like the *Jerome Biblical Commentary* for our great classical texts.

this, above all, is why I am here and why the uncreative sounding title "How To Read The Rule" was given to my lecture. At the two seminars given by the Carmelite Forum in South Bend I spoke on "How To Read Teresa and John: Interpretation." I hope that those of you who heard me then will bear with me while I try to situate the Rule within the context of contemporary hermeneutical theory. (Hermeneutics is the science of interpretation. The word in Greek means to make clear, to interpret. Thus the hermeneutical task consists in interpreting a text or tradition to understand it. It connotes both the search for meaning in a text and the activity of explaining to others what one has discovered.)

While the text of the Rule is much simpler, shorter, seemingly more obvious and direct in its meanings than the writings of John and Teresa, the process of reading it, or of interpreting it, is not basically different from that of reading them. The same kind of deep or close reading is demanded – a reading that cannot be confused either with one's initial encounter with the obvious meaning of the text, or even with some knowledge of its historical background. Modern critics call this process "discourse." They invite us into an ongoing conversation with the subject matter of the text whereby we actually develop a friendship or an empathy with it. Familiarity with the text can grow to such an extent in this deep reading that we seem to wear the text like our own skin.

In seeing the root of familiarity in family, we realize that the Rule has gathered into a family those who through many years of reading it have developed this familiarity and friendship with it. In the internalization of an almost intangible spirit that both encompasses and surpasses the specific points of the Rule, our collective psyche and/or soul has been irrevocably marked and we have been bonded into a community. This means that those of us who remember the days of this close reading – Friday after Friday, for example – have already embarked upon the first hermeneutical step long ago by reading and rereading the Rule.

What we are trying to do with the Rule is not foreign to us.

"*Lectio*" or reading is as old as monasticism itself and certainly was in the mind of Albert when he wrote and of the hermits when they read of "meditating day and night on the law of the Lord."<sup>3</sup> Moreover, in Teresa's 16th century *interpretation* of the "Our Father" in *The Way Of Perfection* we see an example of *lectio* or deep reading that is, in the words of contemporary hermeneutics, more text-centered or reader-centered than author-centered. The irony of the use of the term 'author-centered' here is a fruitful one because, of course, Teresa's whole reflection is Author-centered and is, in fact, a dialogue with the Author. On the other hand, it is not author-centered in its unconscious concentration on the text itself without concern for nor knowledge of precisely what Jesus meant when he spoke or what his original audience or the original readers of the gospel text understood.

When I entered Carmel, there was little available on the historical background of the Rule. However, through the method of "spiritual" interpretation which was applied to the Rule, we did come to recognize it as a "classic" or a foundational text of the Order. The experience of the "a-temporal" nature of the Rule did in some strange manner prepare the way for the text-centered approach of contemporary hermeneutics.<sup>4</sup> But I knew very little about what the Rule meant in the thirteenth century to Albert who wrote it, to the hermits on Mount Carmel near the spring who received and lived it, or to the church/world at large. However, with the studies of Bede Edwards, Joseph Baudry, Joachim Smet, Rudolph Hendriks, Carlo Cicconetti, Elias Friedman and others, a whole new "world behind the text" was revealed. With these first steps in exegesis and historical criticism, the project of developing a more comprehensive interpretation of the Rule was begun.

<sup>3</sup> For a good description of *lectio* within the context of remaining in the cell and meditating day and night on the law of the Lord, cf. Carlo Cicconetti, O. Carm., *The Rule of Carmel*. (Darien, Illinois: Carmelite Spiritual Center, 1984), p. 201.

<sup>4</sup> See *Ancient Carmelite Texts* printed for private circulation by Carmelite Communities Associated, 1982.

When Father Cicconetti writes of his aim to place "the background of the Rule of Carmel, both in its entirety and in its regulations, in a legislative and historical context" and thereby to rediscover "the original meaning of the Rule," he shows his awareness of the importance of historical criticism in the work of reading and interpretation.<sup>5</sup> We know by experience how the Rule has come alive with new and more profound meanings as we have been able to understand its original meaning, its precise and comprehensive historical context, as well as the evolution and vicissitudes of Carmelite life in the first hundred years of its existence. There is no substitute for the foundation which these historical and archaeological data provide.

What we have to realize, however, is that classic texts which have come to us out of the past do not find their *only* true interpretation of meaning in the past, as Cicconetti seems to suggest.<sup>6</sup> It is obvious to us that there is one exciting level of meaning in the Rule that will be accessible only to those who study, reflect upon and appropriate the historical background that is available and thereby attempt to understand what Albert must have meant and what the hermits must have understood. But there are other possible meanings in the Rule which may be even more significant, which are not dependent on or at least go beyond the standpoint of Albert or the first hermits and which will be discovered when *our* issues, concerns, questions and experiences are brought into a dialogue with the Rule.

We cannot now know the mind of Albert. Moreover, what the Rule meant to the first hermits is only the beginning of the history of its interpretation. It has long survived both Albert and the hermits and the world that produced it. By means of interpretation, it now addresses people and human situations which they never envisioned. What must be discovered and

<sup>5</sup> Cicconetti, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

appropriated in interpretation is not so much where the text of the Rule came from, therefore, as what it helps us to understand.

The hermeneutical perspective of this presentation emphasizes, therefore, a text-centered approach which is, in the end, illuminated by and correlated with the historical research of others, but which privileges always the primacy of the actual text of the Rule. Privileging the text demands that the critic make a contemporary and sometimes personal application of the text. In other words, my theory of critical interpretation focusses on the text of the Rule itself and on the contemporary Carmelite's response to and conversation with that text.

As a woman in the church and in the world today, I come with the perspective of a woman. I come seeking to understand, interpret and evaluate the Rule and the history of its interpretation, in such a way that both its oppressive and its liberating power are clearly recognized. I come asking if this text can honestly operate for Carmelite women as a model of transformation for us and for the Order.

Unless we can discover vital values in the Rule that help us to live in and contribute to our world today, unless this Rule projects a vision for the future congruent with the needs, fears, hopes and dreams of humanity, it is a dead historical document even if we pretend it is living. Furthermore, unless this text is alive in us, it is not alive at all. If the Rule is indeed a spiritual classic, as its survival through nearly eight hundred years suggests, then it has new meanings for our age and it is up to us to discover them by a profound and disciplined reading of or dialogue with the text that is not afraid to employ the various methods of contemporary hermeneutics (*e.g.* semiotics, structuralism and even deconstructionism) to carry on the dialogue.

### Pre-understanding the Text

But let us not deceive ourselves. We do not come neutral to this text of the Rule. We are influenced by centuries of interpretation – by healthy, legitimate developments and by destructive distortions.<sup>7</sup> If we are to be free enough to discover in dialogue with the text the new, prophetic meanings that address the questions, conflicts, issues, sorrows and joys of humanity in our time, it may be necessary to find ways of reading as well as modes of interpretation that can not only retrieve these new and genuine meanings (what is known as the “hermeneutics of retrieval”), but also to uncover the negative realities or distortions in the Carmelite tradition that *still motivate* our living, or operate as a religious justification for or ideological legitimization of oppression, marginalization and control – (the hermeneutics of critique and suspicion).<sup>8</sup>

If we can risk our present horizon or mind-set in new interpretation, then both the *text* of the Rule itself and our contemporary Carmelite *experience* will be challenged. This means that while we will be transformed by the values and wisdom of the text which we discover, we will also shape and enlarge the future of the text, the future of the tradition, by asking it questions neither Albert, nor the first hermits, nor previous generations of Carmelites could have posed.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Avery Dulles has written best about this: “The Church may be seen as a variety of traditions undergoing constant developments and adaptation. In the course of this development the traditions are sometimes enriched, sometimes impoverished, sometimes contaminated and sometimes purified.” *Models of the Church* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1974), p. 182.

<sup>8</sup> It seems to me we could examine harmful interpretations of solitude and the cell, of silence, of the prior's role and his responsibility for decisions regarding visitors, of obedience in terms of “the one who hears you hears me,” etc.

<sup>9</sup> See Constance FitzGerald, OCD, “How To Read Teresa And John: An Interpretation,” presented at St. Mary's College, South Bend, Indiana, June, 1985, and June, 1986. These are two different papers on the same topic.

### Applying Hermeneutics to the Text of the Rule

In the second part of this presentation, within the context in which I live as a Carmelite nun, I want to try at least to hint at the application of this critical hermeneutical praxis to the Rule. One interesting way to begin to analyze the text is to ask WHO, WHERE, WHAT, WHEN/HOW, WHY?

Physical place or WHERE stands out in the text. It appears to be, by its prominence, more important than the specifics of WHEN or HOW the hermits do things. The text is written by Albert of *Jerusalem* to “B. and the other hermits...near the spring on Mount Carmel” who live a life of allegiance to Jesus Christ. The hermits are described or named, not in reference to a human person, nor even with reference to a mystery of God or Mary, but only in reference to a specific place – a spring and a mountain called Carmel.

A mountain, in symbolism, is situated in the heart or in the middle of the world. Rooted in the earth, yet rising into the skies, it reaches upwards, joining heaven with earth, and in its majesty is expressive of the deepest longings of the human heart for completion, for unity and for integration. It suggests both solitude and panoramic unity. Yet this mountain has not the majestic height of the Rockies nor the incomparable grandeur of the Himalayas. It has its own specific topography. It is Carmel, a garden, with a spring.

The text materially associates the hermits with the land. When one puts this beside the “allegiance to Jesus Christ” of chapter 2<sup>10</sup>, one realizes that this land is the habitation of the human person Jesus Christ, the place where he became a citizen of this earth. The *Holy* land is *his* land; and in the light of the armor-warfare imagery of chapter 15, allegiance to him

<sup>10</sup> The enumeration being used throughout this talk is that given by Bede Edwards and Hugh Clarke in *The Rule of St. Albert* (Aylesford and Kensington, 1973). They chose to call the Prologue chapter 1. According to the copy in the Vatican Registers the Rule begins with a Prologue. Thus, chapter 2 is there enumerated as chapter 1.



can easily be read as an allusion to feudal oaths.<sup>11</sup> But it can also be read in terms of present day oaths of allegiance or citizenship.<sup>12</sup> Both assume relationships and responsibilities.

This metaphor makes the hermit a citizen tied to the place of Carmel and to the liege, Christ, whose patrimony the land is. (See chapter 6 where the word used is *locum* instead of *cellulam*.) It implies a political reality in terms of dual citizenship in the nation of physical birth and in the nation of spiritual birth. The second citizenship transcends national boundaries but is earthly and material and implies solidarity with and responsibility for the land and, by extension, for the one or ones (the people) to whom the land belongs. However, this solidarity is achieved, the text shows, first of all through "pondering the Lord's law day and night" in one's cell: the separate, solitary cell allotted by the prior with the agreement of the brothers. This more precise establishment of place links chapters 5, 8, 10 to chapters 1 and 2.

Embedded in this notion of political solidarity is a paradox; for in order to establish these outward bonds with one's fellow citizens, in order to struggle against the powerful destructive presence of evil (chapter 15), one must seek solitude and be faithful in prayer/service. The text does not say that there is only this solitude, since it admits of journeys both on land (in the "primitive" Rule) and on sea (in the Innocentian revision) and does not exclude preaching or relationships outside the hermitage; but it does indicate solitary prayer as primary.

### The Internalization of Images

What happens when we internalize this material relationship to place? First of all, through the ages since the Carmelites left Palestine, Mount Carmel and the spring have been taken inside our collective heart as the great archetypal sym-

<sup>11</sup> This is suggested by both Cicconetti, *op. cit.*, pp. 15-17, and Edwards, *ibid.*, pp. 78 and 87).

<sup>12</sup> See Cicconetti, *ibid.*, pp. 15-17; Edwards, *ibid.*, p. 78, note 5.

bols of the Order. At different epochs they have said different things to us and perhaps now we need to probe them anew in the context of our *place*.

Secondly, if to be a hermit was, as the text demonstrates and Cicconetti proves, a form of *earthly citizenship* which could include struggle for the protection and liberation of the land, the Rule may address some challenges to our lives. For example, to be a Carmelite is to be bound to the land; it is to live an *earthly life*, not a so-called "spiritual" life on the fringe of the human. It implies a *dedication to the earth*, an involvement in the world where Jesus Christ lived as a human person, and where he continues to be embodied in people. Perhaps the symbol of PLACE calls us to be *conscious* world citizens who struggle against the annihilation of this earth and the destruction and oppression of its people (the devil who prowls around like a roaring lion looking for prey to devour). This kind of rootedness in the world with the political awareness and sophistication it implies is the experience of some communities of Carmelite women today, and is the other side of the coin of solitary prayer. We have not just decided to be this way! Rather, the experience of solidarity and the shape it has taken is a prayer experience into which we have grown out of the fullness of our life. *Place* is an apt symbol!

### Application to the Cloistered Life

There is a strange irony here though. Because of cultural and historical circumstances, the nuns for five hundred years have privileged contemplation and the solitary cell which in turn has set up certain relationships with God, with self, and with one's sisters. *Precisely because we are women* we have had **no choice** but to privilege the eremitical and community side of the charism and a material understanding of place. The text has, therefore, in one sense, functioned for our oppression and subjugation. But in consequence some of the nuns seem today to be in better possession of the charism and more able than the men to renew it in a distinctive way. The challenge for the

nuns is how to appropriate freedom and equality (canonically) and yet remain autonomous enough to privilege the place of continual prayer and deep relationship.

But *place* as a symbol has its dark side. Wherever it is used to confine people in immature relationships, to deprive them of knowledge, of information and of freedom to choose and to grow, wherever it saps them of personal autonomy and responsibility for their own lives and decisions, we see a destructive interpretation of the Rule. Wherever, in the name of solitary prayer, the *material place* becomes a refuge, a place to hide, and a place where one is deprived of human relationship and contact with the world, the symbol of *place* functions destructively for Carmelite nuns no matter how it is idealized in the language of theology, spirituality, canon law or even in the lives of our saints—who are part of the history of the interpretation of the tradition/Rule.

In the concept of relationship, the WHERE or PLACE intersects with the WHO in the text. While the Rule begins with the Patriarch's salutation to his beloved *sons*, and looks back at the example of "our saintly *forefathers*" in chapters 2 and 9, the text is not situated within a father/child context. In fact, in view of the whole monastic tradition up to this time, the absence of any reference to parental relationships speaks volumes. Not even God is named Father in the text, except when the "Our Father" is mentioned in chapter 9. Instead, the Rule sets up relationships of equality and proposes a model of brotherhood, dialogue and consensus. With the exception of the greeting, the hermits are called "brothers" throughout the text. Although Albert hurries to establish leadership in chapter 3, he situates it within a community of equals. There is no reference, except by initial, to the first prior, who certainly does not give his name to the new group and who is a "brother" chosen *from among the brothers* by unanimous consent, or at least by the greater part of them.

## The Organization of the First Community

Although the brothers are to promise obedience to the prior, important internal decisions are made *together*: "If the prior and brothers see fit you may have foundations " etc. (chapter 4a); the separate cells "allotted by the disposition of the prior *with the agreement of the other brothers*," (chapter 5); or "You (plural) should discuss matters of discipline and your spiritual welfare" and lovingly correct the failings of the brothers (chapter 12). Even though some decisions are left in the hands of the prior, particularly those concerning visitors from outside the community, one suspects this is not by way of privilege, since the only ideal of leadership urged upon the prior is the gospel text "Whoever wants to be a leader among you *must be servant to the rest*." When this text of being a servant and a slave is put beside the admonition, "You other brothers too, hold your prior in humble reverence," we can grasp the degree of mutual respect and accountability that is urged upon all the brothers (chapters 18, 19). Nor should we overlook the fact that in the all important area of forfeiture of ownership and the consequent distribution of the common goods, delegation by the prior is expected (chapter 10).

The Rule's expectation of equality and consensus is both an encouragement and an affirmation to some communities of nuns today. For those of us who have, over the last twenty-five years, slowly moved from a more matriarchal-hierarchical type of governance to what we call a "feminine, participative way of living together," it is a challenge to continue the effort to establish that kind of bondedness which makes consensual living and decision making possible.

It is interesting to note that both the Rule of the distant past and the contemporary feminist ideal of social structures call into question a hierarchy of relationships founded on levels of power rather than a network of relationships founded on bonding – on love and respect and care. When we Carmelites return to the sources, as our church after Vatican II directs, what we find, contrary to the expectations of some, is not an

authoritarian framework but a situating of leadership within a community of equals and an affirmation of communal discernment and egalitarian relationships.

This egalitarianism, however, is very different from that radical socialism that aims at each person's having an *equal share* of the common goods. Rather, each is to receive from the common goods "whatever befits his age and needs." The first hermits, the text shows, were far removed from the idea of equal shares of everything, which "is itself an unrecognized product of modern bourgeois culture in which self-esteem depends on catching up with those ahead and staying ahead of those on your heels. [This] is an ideal created and fostered by a culture founded on anxiety and competition...[which teaches] its members to pull up the ladder at the same time that it helps them to 'get ahead.'" <sup>13</sup>

The Order is challenged in all this. It will, moreover, be strengthened when its women can openly bring into the mainstream of its life of governance and community their experience and interpretation of the Rule given to the Brother hermits of Mount Carmel, that is, their valuing of relationship and dialogical community over achievement, power, competition and control.

Looking back to Mount Carmel, looking ahead to a future where the survival of humanity may well depend on our capacity to accept diversity and profit by its richness, and standing in a present that sees a sign of the times in the mushrooming of small "base communities" all over the globe, there are some communities of American Carmelite women today who, in their attention to a community of egalitarian relationships and individual diversity and autonomy, are consciously prophetic. They realize that the movement in the world toward dialogical communities as a basis for survival, liberation and peace, in the words of philosopher Richard Bernstein,

<sup>13</sup> Joseph L. Walsh, in a book review of Kai Nielson's *Equality and Liberty: A Defense of Radical Egalitarianism* in *New Catholic World*, (September-October, 1986).

"gains 'reality and power' only if we dedicate ourselves to the practical task of furthering ... solidarity, participation and mutual recognition...in (actual) dialogical communities."<sup>14</sup>

### Reconsidering Our Own Use of the Rule

On the other hand, in the light of the text of the Rule we need to question the recent past, and in many cases the present, where great authority over people's lives is given to or taken or held on to by the "Mother Prioress" or the "Father Prior;" where a mother-daughter relationship is descriptive not of bonding, but of power and control and the destruction of personal autonomy and consensual living. We might ask ourselves what we mean and what message we are giving if we have a father and/or mother of a *Carmelite* community.

It is precisely here where leadership and community intersect with personal autonomy that we come to the Rule's pivotal texts regarding *solitude*, which urge each one to stay in his/her own cell pondering the Lord's law day and night (chapters 5, 8). One of the greatest travesties the Rule has been used to protect is the bondage of others in the name of solitude and prayer; the usurping of another's responsibility for herself by the withholding of information, or contact or relationships. (While I do not think the text taken as a whole suggests this, I am afraid that chapter 7, which directs that the prior is to meet all who come, and everything to be done as he disposes, has sometimes functioned in the tradition for the control and domination of others.)

Solitude is the PLACE of the hermit. Five of the text's chapters are about the cell. There is no HOW to the cell except keeping watch at prayer; there is no WHEN to prayer but always. I recognize that the original text directs the hermit who

<sup>14</sup> Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science Hermeneutics and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1983), p. 20. Quoted in Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).



can read to say the Psalms according to the custom of the church, and the one who cannot read to say the *Our Father* a specific number of times; but in allotting to each brother a cell where he is to remain "unless attending to some other duty," the text gives permission to be oneself before God. The trust is complete. The brothers are left on their own and the call to personal autonomy is inescapable. Just as certainly as the brothers are called to community, the hermit is called, within the very parameters of the Rule, to own his own life.

In my experience, nothing so characterizes the Carmelite nun as the inclination toward solitude. It distinguishes her even from other contemplative nuns. Embedded in the collective psyche, it has, as it were, almost archetypal power and is symbolized above all by the mountain of Carmel and to some degree by the spring. What is worthy of note today is that as the nuns have recovered the emphasis on community and have developed new methods of interpersonal communication, the life of solitary prayer has also matured and deepened. Far from being competitive, the two are complementary. I think this means that when one loves and is loved in community and is affirmed as a valuable, participating member of the group, one is at peace in solitude, one is at home in one's own house. Meditating day and night etc. assumes love! Conversely, it also assures it.

To the degree that one has found God and oneself in solitude, one is uncompetitive, loving and open in community. Furthermore, if one does have deep bonds in community, one is even more liable to experience oneself as personally loved by God, which is the only experience that gives meaning to "pondering the Lord's law day and night and keeping watch at prayer." If we bring anything to the story of renewal, it is certainly this learning about the relationship between solitude and community which the texts themselves validate.

Over the past twenty years it has been interesting to me to notice how often, though not always, the desire for a permanent eremitical life emerges in a person's experience when

community breaks down. Moreover, in a world where the poor and crowded and oppressed cry out across the earth, we need to be certain our separated cell is the place of existential solidarity and communion, and not the place of a luxurious privacy and peace unavailable to most people.

At a more philosophical and theological level, the genuine solitary who is in real possession of her own life, understands that the true nature of our equality and community lies in the simple, human fact that we are all mortal and that we all harbor under the surface of everyday life the same existential fear of loss and dissolution and inevitable death. In the prefigurement of this death, in the solitary encounter with the abyss, the madness and the darkness, the hermits are empowered to declare themselves for the unbreakable community of final human destiny. Here in identification with the cross of the human Jesus who lived and walked, anguished and died on this earth, the *obsequium Jesu Christi* of the Rule reaches its deepest expression. It is this experience, from which the Carmelite cannot escape, that effects a solidarity – not only with one's sisters in community, but with suffering, dying humankind all over the world. Here "meditating day and night" coincides with *obsequium Jesu Christi*. Here we have circled back to some of the societal conclusions we first reached when developing the importance of PLACE in the text.

Before going on to the last section of this paper I want to mention the new phone system we have recently installed. It is a small PBX, expensive by our standards, that we foresee will not only enhance our communication among ourselves and with others outside the monastery, but will also enhance our solitude. Since everyone has a phone, the need to leave one's cell or office to communicate about community business and everyday administration is very much lessened. It removes many excuses to run around the monastery and exacts a definite discipline. We have decided this is an interesting application of the Rule.

### The Rule as Living and Developing

The last point I would like to look at in the text is its flexibility, brevity and lack of detail. In this it can be compared with the Rule of Augustine but certainly differs in genre and intention from the Rules of Benedict and of Basil, and from the Rule of Pachomius – although many of the phrases and ways of saying things in the Carmelite Rule are characteristic of other rules.

WHAT the text expects is, by and large, simple and straightforward. (Perhaps chapter 15 is the only real exception with its abundance of scriptural symbolism.) The Rule establishes precise values but seldom specifies structures: that is, WHEN or HOW these values are to be lived out. Rather, the text continually recommends elasticity. First of all, in chapter 5, concerning the important issue of "separated cells," the text suggests flexibility "by subordinating this requirement to the natural terrain of available land."<sup>15</sup> Even the directive for "foundations in solitary places" is qualified by "or where you are given a site that is suitable and convenient for your observance" (chapter 4a—note the mendicant shift in the Innocentian revisions, according to Cicconetti). Scripture is to be read in the common refectory "where this can be done without difficulty" (chapter 5a) and each one is to remain in the cell in continual prayer "unless attending to some other duty" (chapter 8). We must be careful to note that not even these duties are delineated nor WHERE they are to be performed – viz. inside or outside the place where the hermits live. Even the admonition to gather *each morning* to hear Mass is qualified by "if it can be done without difficulty" (chapter 11). In terms of prayer, the text, as I noted earlier, is more specific only in speaking about the canonical hours and the number of *Our Father's* that must be said by those who cannot read (chapter 9).

The sole criterion for the distribution of the common goods

<sup>15</sup> Cicconetti, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

is, as I have already said, "whatever befits his age and needs." The meetings of the community are to be on Sundays "or other days if necessary," while the correction of personal faults depends on "if any be found at fault" (chapter 12). "You are to fast every day except Sunday," the text says, *unless* bodily sickness or feebleness, or some other good reason, demands a dispensation from the fast; FOR NECESSITY OVERRIDES EVERY LAW!"

Abstinence from meat always applies *unless* one is sick or on a journey or at sea (chapters 13, 14). Although the command to work is categorical, *the kind of work* is not specified in any way (chapter 16). In the original text silence is to be kept "from Vespers until Terce the next day, *unless* some necessary or good reason, or the Prior's permission, should break the silence." At other times, "the brothers are to be careful not to indulge in a great deal of talking, *although you need not keep silence so strictly*" (chapter 17). It is not *total* silence that is recommended during the day. Rather rash, careless, unbridled, superficial speech is condemned as destructive of the *quality of the communication* expected of the brother-hermits. Even though the text assures a reward to those who do more than is required of them, it cautions in the last number: "See that the bounds of common sense are not exceeded, however, for common sense is the guide of the virtues" (chapter 20).

What is my conclusion here? While many of the conditioning phrases used in the Rule are to be found in the older rules (e.g. the Rule of Saint Benedict) and in the documents of the period, it remains significant that these phrases are written into this short, concise text in such abundance. Furthermore, when one unites the attitude they convey with what the text does *not* say, does *not* describe nor demand, the values of *freedom, flexibility* and *trust* are set in bold relief. Although some interpretations of the Rule in our past history seem to have had oppressive power, this text out of which we Carmelites are born can function more than I have ever before realized for the liberation of people. In this it is truly a mystical text coming, one would guess, out of an experience of God

that realized there was no need to constrain or control the others who also experienced God. No wonder the Rule has lived so long in the collective soul and imagination of Carmel as its foundational myth. No wonder it is felt more deeply by so many of us even than Teresa's constitutions (at least the adapted Constitutions we read for many years). The text of the Rule can take its place beside the classic mystical texts of Teresa and John even though it is so different in genre from their writings.

The ultimate aim of reading the Rule is the appropriation of the meaning or life-direction it gives to us. In interpretation or deep reading we discover possible new ways of being and new forms of living which give us a capacity for new self-understanding. I have come to the conclusion that although this text was written in the thirteenth century by a *man* for *men*, on the whole it can be appropriated by women. Undoubtedly, as I have suggested, some of its interpretations have served through history to make Carmelite women invisible and marginal, and have legitimated their subordinate role and secondary status (the *second* Order). However, the text itself is not basically patriarchal but is, on the contrary, on the side of flexibility and freedom, community and quality, personal autonomy and respect for experience – specifically, personal experience of God. It is on the side of contemplation. For these reasons, the text of the Rule can operate as an open-ended paradigm or model that not only validates our experience as women, but challenges it and sets it in motion or structures it for further transformation.<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, with this text as the basic foundational document of our lives as Carmelites, the Order as one community of brothers and sisters should be inescapably challenged to listen carefully to the experience of its women in order to make their meanings, values, insights and visions integral to the

vision of the Order. Then this simple Rule might empower all of us in the Order today, women and men together, to explore deep and radical developments in community and in contemplation in response to the cry of humanity, the cry of God's people, for survival, peace, equality, justice and communion on this earth – the PLACE where we live out our allegiance to Jesus Christ.

<sup>16</sup> I am indebted to Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's book, *Bread Not Stone*, for some of my ideas and language here. See her "Introduction."