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Robin Stratton, OCD

What It Means to Me to Be a Carmelite

During a community “Learning Festival,” four of us were asked to address the above topic. What follows is my reflection as it was addressed to my Carmelite sisters.

MY MOTHER DELIGHTED IN TELLING visitors that on my second Christmas, just before I was two, I was so excited over a pair of fuzzy slippers that my whole body shivered with delight. My passionate self expressed itself quite early on.

Early Religious Experiences

When I was eight, I had a gentle and wonderful experience of God. Though at the time I had no name for it, the experience has remained with me all my life. It occurred as I sat on the warm grass by a spring runlet in a little ravine across the street from our government housing project in Charlestown, Indiana. I was lost in a sense of wonder, oneness, and goodness that held me for I don’t know how long. My contemplative sense of life was established that day.

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The summer I was ten, I discovered personal prayer—not saying prayers but an undifferentiated experience of a loving relationship with the person of Jesus. I also had my first conscious desire of being a nun, which I assumed at that time would be a teaching sister.

During high school, I taught catechism and worked as a camp counselor with poor little kids from broken homes. Both of these experiences were formative. When I was sixteen, and first thinking about becoming a Carmelite, I had many desires. I wanted to be a teacher or a social worker or a missionary. I had great dreams of what I would do with my life. Although I don’t really remember reading Thérèse at that time—but I may have—I distinctly remember realizing one day that prayer was the universal vocation, that through prayer I could reach the whole world.

Carmelite Vocation

My first understanding of religious life was that I could live my life as a spouse of Christ, and my first understanding of Carmel was to be a spouse of Christ and pray for the whole world. Sometime during novitiate, I discovered that my longing for motherhood could be fulfilled by living out Thérèse’s words: “To be, by my union with you, the mother of many souls.” Once, in a very dark time before my solemn profession, I received a letter from a friend who was also in formation, though about ten years my senior. She wrote, “You are not in Carmel for yourself. In fact, you are there less for yourself than for any of God’s people.” So, in Carmel, I am called to be “a mother and forget about myself.”

In my early thirties, after I came to live among you and began to relate to people outside the monastery, the symbol of motherhood shifted to that of midwife. In prayer and relationships, my role was to assist the life already present in another and allow it to grow away from me. I left center stage and discovered that to be a Carmelite was all the things I have mentioned. It was, however, to be part of something so much larger than myself—like being a voice in a symphony chorus, blending with others who share this great mystical tradition we call Carmel.

To be a Carmelite is to be part of a community that cherishes the mystical tradition in the Church, a tradition that encourages intimacy and union with God as goals to be sought—as goals worthy of the human endeavor. As our sister St. Edith Stein prayed, “Please help me to be worthy of living at the heart of the Church’s holiness and to offer myself for those whose lot lies in the world.” Carmel gives full scope for my passionate being to yearn toward the All and

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allows me to fail only because I have such infinite desires. To be a Carmelite is to have a lifelong love affair with God in silence, solitude, and community. It is to sing the praise of God—the Good God who remains Infinite Mystery even when encountered in the human face of Jesus. It is to share God, given and received, wherever I am and with who I

am. It is to seek the face of God all the days of my life and to invite others to such intimacy by the way I live, pray, worship, and relate.

Being a Carmelite means belonging to—or perhaps belonging with, in one of my sister’s favorite phrase of the moment—“a group of hermits.” It is to be invited and challenged to bring and offer my extroverted passionate self and my introverted passionate self—each held in tension with the other (and that itself is no small feat)—to God and to community, both local and extended.

Spousal Relationship

The great secret of my life—and I suspect it is no secret at all—is that I am still deeply and passionately in love with God, and I believe God is still deeply and passionately in love with me—but not only with me. God who is love is passionately in love with all creation, and my love affair is a sacrament of this universal love. Spousal theology, despite the bad rap it gets at the present time, remains at the heart of my life. For me to be spouse is not to be special—it is to be sign and sacrament. In the same way that our being contemplatives bears witness to the deep reality that all are called to attend to their own contemplative depths, so with spousal theology.

We are each called to the most profound intimacy with God—an intimacy that alone can satisfy our infinite desires, an intimacy the mystics symbolize in the language of marriage. This image is inadequate, as are all images, but spouse is who I am at my core.

To be a Carmelite is to hear the cry at the heart of the world—the cry of yearning for God—and to suffer that cry in my own skin. It is to utter that cry with my whole being before the face of God in prayer. It is to be, as was said of the monk Caedmon, “a humble and joyful singer of songs.” To sing my life for God is to give God everything: “better and worse, richer and poorer, sickness and health.” It is to say, in the words of a doggerel verse I learned when I was very young, a verse that sometimes sings in my being even now,

Lord, I would give my life to Thee
Not solemnly, not grudgingly,
No, I would take my life and fling it at Thy feet
And sing and sing
That I could give Thee this small thing.

To be a Carmelite is to have been lured by God into the desert, into solitude, into community, and into the heart of the world. It is to say to God sometimes, in the words of Peter, “It is so good to be here;” and at others in the words of Jeremiah, “You duped me, Lord, and I let myself be duped.” It is to stand before the immensity of God, experienced as a pool of fire, and be commanded to leap in, knowing full well that the leaping will mean death to some cherished illusion. It is to sit in emptiness and sometimes know the breath of God so gently that it raises the hairs on the back of my neck. It is the rhythm of life and death, light and darkness, arctic cold and desert heat, spring blossoms and autumn decay. It is life in its fullness and emptiness, and being able to say through it all, in the depths of my being, “Be still, my soul, for all of this is but a vestige of God whom you cannot see, whom you desire.”

Community of Carmel—Past and Present

Being a Carmelite is living with each of you whom I love passionately. It is being part of a worldwide, centuries-old tradition that embraces communities who died together as did our sisters of

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Compiègne; communities who let their sister go alone, as did Teresa Benedicta's; communities who lived with a Thérèse or an Elizabeth of the Trinity in their midst; as well as those who refused to expel a Fra Angelico, despite his paternity, and whose chronicler wrote in his necrology only that the monk was a great painter. Carmel is comprised of communities that are a microcosm of the world from which we come and in which we live—communities of men and women full of desire, both celestial and terrestrial.

To be a Carmelite is to live in the infinite mercy and goodness of God. It is to recognize that I live from mercy received to mercy given—mercy being another name for the compassionate love of God. It is to live in my flesh what I hope for everyone: to be free to be for God and God's dear people; to be free *for* God; and to give God a heart and skin in which to act freely. It is to love everything that is beautiful, true, and good—to be able to see everything in God and God in everything. And, it is to know in my own flesh and bone the sin of the world and to believe, as Paul Claudel wrote, that "in the deepest places of the soul festering with sin and evil, a sanctuary lamp still burns."

To be a Carmelite means walking in the light of St. John of the Cross's invitation to the soul "to become God by participation." It is living by St. Teresa's admonition, "The purpose of prayer, sisters, is good works, good works." It is being "Love in the heart of the Church" with Thérèse and moving inexorably toward "Life and light and love" with Elizabeth. "It is walking with God among the pots and pans" and "frying my little omelet for the love of God" as did Brother Lawrence. To be a Carmelite is to experience abandonment, hatred, death, chaos, and loss of meaning as they are evidenced in the world's pain. To be a Carmelite is to become prayer.

Love for My Sisters

One night, when I was in the hospital, I told the infirmarian something I've known for a long time but have never said aloud (perhaps grave illness gives one the freedom to make such an utterance). I said, "I know I'm frail, I know my weaknesses sometimes hurt others,

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I know I'm not what I would wish to be, but I love the sisters passionately—with every fiber of my being—and I want to give myself to them even when I cannot do so." Even when my poverty, my selfishness, and my insecurity get in the way, I still know in my soul that giving myself to you is one very important facet of giving myself to Christ. It's part of the marriage pact. When my sinfulness gets in the way of my loving, your forgiveness enables me to go on; when I am able to be of service, I am full of joy.

I'm deeply grateful to have been asked to share with you, my sisters, what being a Carmelite means to me. I hope you know that you are the dearest people in my life. You are they who have stood with me in my temptations. You are the face of God in my daily life. Your love has nurtured me, challenged me, and grown with me. You risked accepting me, and I risked accepting each of you. You have walked with me, as I have walked with you, in dark and lightsome days. You bore with me as I grew up in this house. You gave me roots and wings. I came to you with great desires for God. You watered my desires and gave them space to flourish.

I've never gotten over the grace of God's having brought me to this house, and not a day goes by that I am not profoundly grateful for each of you. All my dreams have not been fulfilled. Some have died in the service of something greater. But my deepest desire—to be God's woman in this house of prayer—continues to be realized year after year. My life would not be half so rich were it not for each of you.

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Secular Order Discalced Carmelites are lay persons and clerics called to intimacy with Christ according to the spirit of the Teresian Carmel. We invite you to contact us by writing:

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