

Reflection for July 2021

Theme: **The wellsprings of Carmel**

“There is a story that an artesian well had sprung up in the middle of the desert, and it was a marvelous well with clear, nourishing, and copious water. People began to come and to drink and to celebrate their wonderful discovery of a well in the desert. Gradually they built a building over the well. They walled it off. They developed ceremonies to celebrate their good fortune of finding an oasis in the desert. They wrote official versions of how it was discovered. They spun fantastic tales about the effects of the water. But the water, actually, over the next few months, had ceased to flow. But hardly anyone noticed that the water actually wasn't flowing anymore, that it began to diminish and finally it went away. They were so busy building and maintaining the super structure. The water took itself over and burrowed a new channel in the desert, which was just as good, clear and nourishing and life-giving in a totally new and unexpected place. A new group of people found it there and they were also refreshed. But the old group of people just kept telling the story back at the old well, kept maintaining the wall, kept maintaining the building over the well, and actually forgot to realize that the water wasn't there anymore.

(As related by Fr. Richard Rohr ofm)

Thirst is a perfect metaphor for spiritual life and the desire to be satiated is the quest that keeps spiritual life going. Desire is a big word in our spirituality. Saints are ones who have this insatiable desire. Like the people in our story, they have discovered the well (the prized possession). If there is no sighting of the 'well' there is no inward pull expressing itself in the form of longing, an ache, a wound- the desire. However, once she is wounded by this glimpse, the desire to possess and to be possessed by the Wound-er takes over and encompasses every aspect of her life. So, it all starts with a glimpse, an encounter, an experience (we can give it any word of our choice) but it must start there. That is exactly what we did when we answered the call to Carmel; we said 'Yes' because we intuitively knew we were 'wounded' for life. What we do with that 'wound' is our vocation.

Are we ready to pay the price?

When the reform in the Carmel was initiated by Teresa of Avila, her burning desire was to have a foundation which was marked by passionate devotion and commitment to God leading those who chose that way of life to a fervent love for God. This life that St. Teresa called her sisters to, was as she notes in her book, *The Way of Perfection*, to be '*persons of prayer desiring full perfection*'. Though fully aware they were imperfect, she saw the possibility of God being '*loved above all things*' and with a passion '*that makes us entirely forget ourselves*'. This self-forgetfulness is very important. The question that she begs to ask her sisters and each one of us is whether we are ready to pay the price to possess this love; to sell all to have the pearl of great price. The call to become the flame that burns and consumes itself, so that it can set the whole world aflame with God's love; in other words, to be a living

offering (Rom 12:2). Carmel makes sense only to one who has *seen this copious water flowing in the desert*.

Maintaining the wall

The danger that looms large before every Religious Order is the same. We wishfully hope that if we continue to follow the practices as outlined by the founding Mothers and Fathers we will do just fine. However, as time rolls on and years turn into decades and centuries, there comes a time when sadly there are more in the Order who have never really ‘seen the bubbling clear spring’ but only ‘heard the tale’. Since we know there is something worthwhile behind the ‘wall’, we continue to keep the drill going by keeping the letter of our constitutions and even some venerated customs but miss out on the inner vision. Until one day, we wake up to discover, this whole way of life meaningless.

When we look back at our lives, would we describe ourselves as ones who have seen the bubbling spring or have only heard tales about it? Or have we got preoccupied in maintaining the wall?

Fidelity, prayer, and penance

The first step as we saw is to get the vision right. *Without vision people perish* (Proverbs 29:18). However, this vision must be nurtured in fidelity to the One who has called us, the One who has planted that vision within us. This call to faithfulness sounds like Elijah’s cry – With zeal I have been zealous for the Lord God of Hosts. We have examples closer to our times in the likes of Elisabeth of Dijon who offered herself saying ‘*spend all my substance for Your glory, let it distil drop by drop for Your Church*’. Now that is faithfulness, those of us who have read her life know, how she tamed her strong independent spirit and through her fidelity to prayer and penance, became the perfect holocaust. The greatness of our beloved Foundress Mother Veronica lies in her faithfulness to God and her commitment to do His will, in spite of all odds. So many around us are doing the same and may never ever be seen in public eye but ‘*He who sees what is done in the secret*’ will surely reward them. He knows not just the cost (like the disciples) but the value of every sacrifice. He understood the soul of the woman who poured her love out in the anointing at Bethany and He saw the widow who gave her all at the Temple, nothing escapes his gaze. But to the short sighted it is nothing but a ‘meaningless waste’.

How faithful are we in “little things”? How do I give of my time, my talents, or even my ears, when someone wants to talk?

Catching the spring

We must be careful not to make our spiritual disciplines, our methods of prayer or even our Vows - the evangelical counsels – an end in themselves. They are all means to the end. As Dermot Barrett CB, of happy memory, would often tell us, his friends – *nothing separates a man more from God than his piety*. Quite a startling line isn’t it? Sometimes, a line like that can change the course of our whole life. Come to think of it, the very things we hold on to as of immense value in our spiritual life, may be impediments to our goal. The end, the goal is always God, nothing less. Everything in our community and our personal lives should be geared towards this end and we must never lose sight of this.

Among all my 'things to do', is my goal always God? What are the secret goals-appreciation, moral uprightness, insecurities... that I carry in my heart even while doing all the right things?

Prayer as Sr. Ruth Burrows OCD intriguingly says, '*is not what I do but what God does in me*'. Read those lines again, it changes everything. The onus is not on me, the onus is on God – the Prime-Mover as Thomas Aquinas would say. The initiative in prayer is God's. Mine is to respond, to be present, to be available, to show up or as the Benedictines say, 'to sit' (before Him). Mine is to show up in prayer, even when nothing apparent seems to happen, when everything within me faces a bronze wall and my prayers seem to go no further than my ears. In times like this, St. Teresa of Avila in her wry humour would call Jesus, the Absent One. The One, True Love of her life was absent and what is her response to him – *I will still smile at You*. Now that is fidelity, that is real penance. To paint a different metaphor, our call is to be the good earth which receives the sun, the rough ploughing and trotting of the bulls, and eventually the rain but having endured all in openness and trust, in due season, produces the harvest, thirty, sixty and hundred times. *How do I deal with dryness in prayer? With distractions, thoughts and emotions that well up in prayer?*

Penance - Hiddenness of Spiritual life

It is the glory of God to conceal a matter (Prov 25:3). Nothing attracts God's attention more than hiddenness. All great works of God are done in secret, whether the transformation of an acorn into an oak or that of sinner into a saint. The Carmel is a call to this hiddenness, this life fostered in secret, hidden behind the various roles and hats we don during the day and years of our lives as teachers, caregivers, administrators, superiors etc. Experiences of pain, brokenness, misunderstanding, loneliness, emptiness and meaninglessness, hidden even from those with whom we share the common life. This is the penance of the highest order, the bloodless sacrifice, the unsung martyr seen only by the One who is the Lamb, looking as if it had been slain (Rev 5:6). The Church understood this clearly when she declared with such disarming clarity through the Vatican Council '*Institutes which are entirely ordered towards contemplation in such a way that their members give themselves over to God alone in solitude and silence, in constant prayer and willing sacrifice... have a hidden fruitfulness. No matter how pressing the needs of the active ministry, they must be left in solitude. (Perfectae Caritatis)*' These lines should be read as God reminding us and calling us back when we are tempted to give up our times of prayer and solitude in favour of the much-needed activity. Our call is to balance both; and where there is a conflict between the two, to always unwaveringly choose Him in silence and prayer above our activity.

Let us hear now from the master

'This (to be occupied with His love) He prizes and esteems to such a high degree that He reproved Martha because she wanted to withdraw Mary from His feet so as to occupy her in other activities in the Lord's service considering that she was doing everything and Mary was resting with the Lord, the truth being just the contrary, there is no better or necessary work than love' John of the Cross

The goal as stated is to live our life to the full and to be possessed by this Divine Lover.

Where do I find my greatest joy and sense of fulfilment- in prayer or in ministry?

The Apostolic motive

The Essence of the Carmelite Charism (our roots) is Prayer and Contemplation leading to Union with God. Carmelite Spirituality is characterized by an intense thirst for a direct experience of God and acceptance of His Will. Our seeking, our desire to possess and to be possessed is in fact ultimately for the benefit of others and as St. Teresa would put it as 'the principle reason' the Lord has called her and others to Carmel. From Contemplation flows Action. An incident from her life is worth retelling. A Franciscan friar who had just returned from the Indies reported to her about 'many millions of souls perishing for lack of teaching'. It so distressed her that she went into one of the hermitages and cried her heart out to whom her soul loved. This continued for days till the Lord gave her a word of comfort. Fired with zeal she sends the Friars to be the messengers of Good News and save souls amidst resistance; Carmel's Apostolic Dimension thus becomes evident. This telling episode shows her fervor and love for Mission. Her calling would be in today's parlance 'apostolic religious'. If this were true of Teresa why should it be any less true for us as we celebrate our Feast day.

St. Teresa speaks through images and she draws the vision of her religious being in the office of the standard bearer. It was a military analogy where the standard bearer is the one who carries the flag in battle. She envisaged her nuns likewise to be in the thick of this battle, not striking blows or wielding weapons but being available and prepared to be cut to pieces rather than let the standard fall. In a battle, the standard bearer should stand at all cost, no matter what happens around, else the soldiers would lose heart and faint in confusion. This brings us to the core of the call to Carmel. A life lived in such love and fidelity that it radiates hope and courage and strengthens feeble arms and weak knees (Heb 12:12) proclaiming to the Church and to the world, it is still possible to follow Him - to love the unlovable, to pardon the unpardonable, believing even when it looks impossible and hoping when everything seems hopeless.

So as we celebrate the Feast of Our Mother of Carmel, let us be enthused by this cloud of witnesses of known and unknown Carmelites who have gone before us and who beckon us not to give up but rather to encourage one another, reminding of the very soul of our calling: "I will allure her, and will lead her into the wilderness; I will speak to her heart" (Hosea 2: 14); knowing fully well *the One who has called us is faithful and He will do it.*

Happy Feast!

Questions for Reflection-

When was the time we first saw the bubbling spring?

Who among the many 'cloud of witnesses' encourages me in my journey at the Apostolic Carmel?