

# CARMELITE SPIRITUALITY AND SAINTS

## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to discuss Discalced Carmelite spirituality, especially as represented by three of the Order's great saints and two of its "blessed." I will of course draw heavily on my two years' experience in the Order, and contact with numerous Carmelites (all Discalced). These figures are: Teresa de Jesús, Juan de la Cruz, Thérèse de l'Enfant Jésus, Élisabeth de la Trinité and Edith Stein.<sup>1</sup>

## Teresa de Jesús

The fundamental factor in the life and spirituality of Teresa is her experience of God's love, felt in a dramatically individual and unmistakable way. In terms of her psychology and spiritual background, it was expressed ultimately as a spousal relationship: in her mystical marriage experience, Christ hands her a nail from the cross and says 'You have heretofore loved and defended me as your Lord; from now on you will look out for my honor as a wife does her husband's; my honor will be your honor, and yours will be mine.' It is this experience of a God who personally has chosen and loved her which motivates all her activities. Her desire is to lead a recollected life with a small, relatively intimate number of fellow nuns, in prayer and contemplative experience of God. We should note, of course, that her image of God is totally Christomorphic, and Jesus' humanity is especially important Christ is not conceived of except in his humanity, similarly to Ignatius of Loyola).

It is always difficult -nay, impossible- to separate nature from grace in the lives of the saints. The nature is there as a given, and doesn't go away, although it may be quite transformed.<sup>2</sup> Teresa was probably pretty confident and certainly strong-willed from childhood, but under the influence of grace, she was imperturbable and unstoppable. She is a totally positive figure; one significant story tells of her charming over a detractor; instead of retreating or putting up defense mechanisms, as most of us would do, she came forward and won the prelate over with genuine kindness and charm.<sup>3</sup> Teresa in fact manifests herself as the most human of saints. Gracián, her protégé to govern the Order until thwarted by Doria, relates that one day he, as Teresa's spiritual director ("confessor"), admonished her about having such an obvious preference for him (he was much younger); the great saint and mystic replied that 'every water has its outlet, and I need to have mine, and you are it' [= my emotional outlet, my favorite]. She was, of

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<sup>1</sup> Teresa de Ahumada (Ávila, Spain, 1515-1582); Juan de Yepes (Fontiveros, Spain, 1542-1591); Thérèse Martin (Alençon/Lisieux, France, 1873-1897); Élisabeth Catez (Dijon, France, 1880-1906); and Edith Stein (Breslau, Germany, now Poland, 1891-1942).

<sup>2</sup> I am reminded of the story about St. Francis of Sales told by my Carmelite novice master, who said that this saint so mastered (more exactly, suppressed) his irascible (or perhaps bilious) character, that when he died, the autopsy revealed his gall bladder had turned to stone!

<sup>3</sup> There is the famous incident when she was appointed prioress at the Encarnación convent, where she had started religious life but which was still technically "unreformed," and found great opposition to her arrival and taking office. She walked in with a favorite statute of the Virgin Mary and declared, 'She will be our prioress,' winning all the recalcitrant nuns over.

course, very strong. In the language and thought of the time, “manly.” Thus, there is that wonderful quote in sixteenth-century Spanish of what a Dominican theologian<sup>4</sup> told Fray Luis de León after meeting Teresa: ‘You have deceived me, telling me she was a woman. In truth, she is a man, and of the heavily-bearded kind.’

We note a *daring* aspect to Teresa’s character that resembles, again, that of Ignatius Loyola (on whose feast day I am writing this). Perhaps it came from the reading of chivalric stories, which they both were heavily into, or from the ambience they lived. This “daringness” translated itself in feats for God; as Ignatius dreamed of outdoing saints Dominic and Francis and the Desert Fathers in what they had done for God, and went to the Holy Land in that spirit, so Teresa can be considered to have had that same spirit during her dangerous trips (I recall the time she had to cross a submerged rickety-bridge in her cart) and as she set up house in dilapidated “convents,” not to mention when facing tremendous opposition from ecclesiastical authority and the Inquisition. This is what is known in spiritual or moral theology as the virtue of courage. Teresa had the “usual” special gifts for founders and persons who are to play important roles in the Church: she was on a mission, and had the requisite energy in which to carry out her task (she is said to have written perhaps over 14,000 letters in addition to her travels, writing, foundations and illnesses). She was also gifted with the requisite practical spirit, with which to administer her convents; she had a keen business sense (her Jewish background helped her here),<sup>5</sup> was an expert in buying real estate, and could acutely judge the real value of an entering nun's dowry.

Like all saints, Teresa stands for wanting to be with God. That is why she embraced the contemplative life of prayer. Perhaps her greatest lesson for us was one she herself was taught when she was twenty-six by a Dominican, who told her, after listening to the account of her tepid life: ‘Whatever you do, don't abandon prayer.’ She took this to heart, even though it was not until she was forty or so that she finally experienced her first real conversion (some have counted as many as five different events which qualify as “conversions”). Re-reading her autobiography, I discovered that what at first seems like a bland account of peccadillos, is, upon closer reading (and perhaps a bit of reading between the lines) a very honest and not at all bland telling of how she put herself in moral danger for many years. While this may not be unusual in the conversion stories of former prostitutes or worldly women, it is unusual in the life of a Spanish nun though I do not believe one can infer as much as does the author of *Teresa, a Woman* -I don't recall her name- when she says that her ‘ample loss of honor’ means she lost her virginity as a teenager. But Teresa nevertheless emerges as a real life, flesh and blood person, a remarkable woman; I consider her one of the greatest women who ever lived, and a genius. Teresa was of course a master psychologist of the life of prayer and of the spirit, and of community. We cannot go into this now, but she has left us a wonderful small library of writings, including letters, which are truly food for the soul and amply justify her being the first woman declared “doctor of the Church.”

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<sup>4</sup> He was “el maestro Chaves.”

<sup>5</sup> This, of course, is not an anti-Semitic statement. We are proud of Teresa’s Jewish ancestry, as her period was not. She herself, it is clear, was totally more at ease in the city and in the world of learning and commerce than in the farmer’s countryside, a testimony to the fact that her father’s genuine Catholicism could not erase the traditions of his forefathers, including Teresa’s grandfather, who had undergone the “sanbenito” (forced conversion, here apparently earnestly embraced).

## Juan de la Cruz

Juan de Yepes, a short little man, was made into a man of steel by his hard life. Yet he was an exquisite poet -my favorite. He loved nature and was kind to others, but uncompromising in regard to the requirements of the spiritual life.

His childhood was poor and very difficult; his father died and his mother was given no help by her deceased husband's relatives, who despised her lower social condition. Juan worked in a hospital as a poor student, studied very hard, and wanted to be a Carthusian, until Teresa convinced him to join the Carmelite reform.

His association with the reform led to his famous imprisonment in Toledo, in a closet-like prison-cell in which he 'roasted in summer and froze in winter,' and where his unchanged clothes simply rotted off his body. He was scourged regularly, threatened and insulted, and endured this for nine months, until he daringly escaped. Yet it was during this time that he composed -at least in some form- some of his most beautiful poems, including *Noche oscura*, my favorite poem in the world. I was surprised to find out that the Toledo experience really marked Juan de la Cruz; but this is unwarranted: all saints are human beings who can trace their growth to specific events. They are not untouched by their experiences.

Juan was a radical. He would not compromise with the demands of growing in holiness, and acutely examined all the vicissitudes and dangers facing the aspirant to true freedom in Christ. His doctrine seems, as is, harsh; his famous *nadas* jar and disconcert. But is his doctrine any less radical than that of the one who said to cut off your hand or foot and pluck out your eye if it causes you to fall? Juan de la Cruz simply translates this teaching into real, specific terms, and as we become able to identify with what he is saying -as opposed to simply dismissing it as hyperbole, as we tend to do with Jesus- it strikes home, and we recoil and negate. Fr. Crisóstomo was right when he defended Juan de La Cruz as the mystical doctor whose doctrine had never been refuted or validly criticized. Although father Modesto in the Dominican Republic would say it was a bit exaggerated.

Looking back to my experience in the Order, I realize that Juan de la Cruz had a tremendous influence on it, despite the fact that his "reformed" brethren followed in the footsteps of the "Ancient Observance" friars and likewise persecuted Juan in his last days. Juan's ideal of utter simplicity, dependence of God with a sometimes seemingly-improvident disregard for material things, and radical and drastic action has left a strong mark on the Order. I remember a novitiate "desert experience" where we were just left in an open field, in the hot Dominican Republic sun, with a bag containing one or two sandwiches and some fruit, but no water! We were simply to spend the day in prayer and meditation. We were taught not to be solicitous for the morrow, and it went against the grain of one raised in the U.S., where everything is pre-planned and provided for. I learned not to worry so much, to rely more on God, to do without the superfluous -and to be able to better discern what is superfluous and what is really indispensable.

The greatest contribution made by this doctor of the Church to the spiritual life is the concept, described so thoroughly and well by him, of the "dark night of the soul." This is a concept really capable of shedding light on many of our sufferings, and explaining how they are really purifications used by God to perfect us. We humans are constantly concerned with our suffering, and seek answers in regard to it; we know that in

many cases, it serves to better us, make us more sensitive, more open to God and to others. There is so much suffering: it is important to try to understand what it is and what good it can do. No one has, like St. John of the Cross, broken down the elements of this suffering and the roles it plays in our spiritual improvement. His theoretical basis therefor is tremendous. We are supposed to grow on this earth; we cannot see God until we are pure; it is like metaphysically impossible to behold God with impaired vision, without being able to see him or ourselves clearly. This purification, in Catholic theology, must take place previously. Juan states that it must take place either here -where, believe it or not, it is easier- or in purgatory. Therefore, although at times there is a risk that reading him is like reading a medical book -having your diseases described is not heart-warming, to say the least- this self-knowledge and spiritual road-mapping is indispensable for all who take their spiritual life seriously. And, of course, as in all great writing and thinking, what speaks loudest, best and most convincingly is the voice of *experience*. And Carmelites are big on experience. Perhaps this sets them apart from all the other “theoreticians.” Juan de la Cruz was and is a model for this.

### **Thérèse de l'Enfant Jésus**

At the heart of this paper, as she is in the heart of the Church and of the Carmelite Order, is the “Little Flower of Jesus,” as she is known only in the English-speaking countries. Called the greatest saint of modern times by Pope Pius XI, she is perhaps the world’s most popular saint, and her statue is found even among bedouins in the desert.

Thérèse is a very special person, but she is also like the distillation of the Carmelite ascetico-mystical life. Her own terminology, though it may seem candy-coated, often best expresses the reality of her life and calling: she was indeed a flower transplanted from good soil -that of her earthly family- to the Garden of Mount Carmel, where it did not take long for her to blossom to full maturity. This special saint was watched over, providential: her sisters and family were around, and sure enough, she was able to write her story, which first came out in edited form, but perhaps even this was providential, since indeed it sold extremely well, and made her known throughout the world. (It actually is said to transmit her message better than the “Autobiographical Manuscripts” which seek to be more “critical.”) As a result of this dissemination of news about this “little saint,” she became known in Cuba -perhaps also because of her canonization in 1925- and my father was one of the many persons struck by her image, and perhaps her story. He later visited her sister Céline in Lisieux.

Why is Thérèse so popular? She is a young, innocent, feminine and beautiful saint, who wrote a beautiful account of her life, full of insight and love for Jesus. She was also under the sign of the cross, and testified to her Christian vocation and commitment by intense suffering heroically borne. Without this latter, hers could be just a simple story of a cloistered life, full of girlish anecdotes. Witnessed to (I have in mind the Greek *marturía* = testimony) by her “constancy” when put to the test, she was found to be authentic;<sup>6</sup> she really did love God after all, even if she at times found the suffering very

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Sirach 2:5: “For gold is tested in the fire, and those found acceptable, in the furnace of humiliation” (NRSV); Wis 3:5b-6: “because God tested them and found them worthy of himself; like gold in the furnace he tried them, and like a sacrificial burnt offering he accepted them” (NRSV); 1 Pe 1:7.

great (as Jesus did in Gethsemane). Her life thus ended, she was seen to have lived a life of complete oblation to God. Another reason for her popularity is her reputation as a powerful intercessor, a miracle-worker. This may have as much to do with how people pray, and with what faith, when they pray to her, as with any real influence she may have in heaven. All the same, she works a lot of miracles.

In as much as her “doctrine” is known,<sup>7</sup> -often referred to with her words as “the little way (of spiritual infancy<sup>8</sup> [or abandonment]),” it is a useful and inspiring way of thinking and living the Christian faith. Thérèse reached new and bold heights in her urging to completely confide in God’s mercy, even to utter audacity. We are here at or very near the heart of the mystery of the “Godhead,” of the Trinitarian essence of love, of the theologoumena resulting from our meditation and reflection on Christ’s sacrifice. Helping us to conceive, visualize and experience God’s unqualified love for us is the most important religious, spiritual or theological task that can be performed. Her teaching on the Father’s love, prepared for by her real-life father-experience, and later, by her own maturing in the experience of God’s love, is a good basis for declaring her a doctor of the Church.

Closely related to the above is her insistence on confidence and abandonment. Trust is the most important faith-attitude.<sup>9</sup> Thérèse is a modern saint, even a saint for existentialist human beings, beset with psychological problems, loneliness, misunderstanding, lacking faith and comfort. Thérèse went through these trials, she despaired of there being a heaven, of there being a loving God, of surviving into the afterlife. Indeed, in her case if ever there was one, Paul’s dictum of 1 Co 15:19 (“If we have hoped in Christ only for this life, we are of all humans most to be pitied”) applied. She had staked all on this hope of resurrection. She had forgotten about dating and all worldliness at age 15, and had entered a convent where there were probably some pious souls, but, to judge from the group photo that’s in high circulation, there must have been some real vamps, too. This poor little girl had to endure a lot, even with the help of her family. Then her dear father -when she lost her mother at age 4, she was despondent and psychologically hurt- came down with a distressing, humiliating mental condition, and this was torture for his *reine*<sup>10</sup>. She underwent a terrible dark night of the soul -which sorely tried her faith- at about the same time she came down with tuberculosis of the lung, and received medical attention rather late and ineffectively. She went through terrible pain and suffering, both mental and physical. This is the stuff that saintly “Little Flowers” are made of.

The Church could never doubt that Thérèse was in heaven, with the Lord now perfectly as she had been as far as possible in this life. The Church -and even those not formally in it- lavished praise and attention on her, convinced and moved by such a life. It has brought out the best sentiments -and surely conversions and “good deeds,” if only as a result of the encouragement and comfort she gives- in and to many in the Church. No wonder that a theologian of the stature of Hans Urs von Balthasar could say that the two

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<sup>7</sup> As of this writing in early August, 1997, there is talk that Pope John Paul II will declare Thérèse to be a doctor of the Church. [She was thus declared on October 19, 1997.]

<sup>8</sup> Cf. the importance given by Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew to *hoi microi* = the small/little/trivial/mean/young/poor/short ones: 18:1-7, 10, 14; cf. the different *elahistoi* = the smallest, least, shortest, in 25:40, 45.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Mk 5:36: “Do not be afraid, just have faith” (NAB).

<sup>10</sup> I.e., “queen.”

spiritual beacons which heralded the twentieth century were Thérèse of Lisieux and Charles de Foucauld. One might think that the formerly rambunctious -and perhaps partly for this reason not yet canonized- Charles had little to do with the Carmelite, but this is seeing only the surface. The two were modern-day radicals, consumed with the love of Jesus. The two were miserably poor and little, the least, and are now among the great in the Kingdom of Heaven.

### **Élisabeth de la Trinité**

This beatified Carmelite is not that well-known outside of circles interested in the spiritual life, but in these, she is highly regarded as one of the greatest mystics of modern times. In typical Carmelite fashion, she died at twenty-six after only about six years in the Carmel. Again typically, she died of a disease –Addison’s- which today is treatable. Her spirituality is based on the doctrine of the in-dwelling of the Trinity; a Dominican confessor, Fr. Vallé, told her her name meant “house of God,” thinking that since “beth” is house and “El” is God in Hebrew, her name must mean that. Actually, “Elisabeth” in Hebrew means “my God (is) an oath (by whom one must swear),” or perhaps, “my God is fullness.”<sup>11</sup> But this of course didn’t stop Élisabeth from developing her amazing spirituality. She saw her life as being to the glory of the Trinity; here, she focused on Ephesians 1:12, in the Vulgate translation: *in laudem gloriae ipsius*, “praise” being in the dative case, but this did not stop our mystic from calling herself “Laudem gloriae.” Which shows how important grammar and philology are for holiness.

Élisabeth -I am tempted to call her “ET” for short- decided to completely devote herself to the mystery of our being a temple of the Trinity, dwelling in us since baptism. As a true Carmelite contemplative, she sought and obtained perfect peace and imperturbability. She achieved this not by denial and suppression and repression -mostly- but by faithfully responding to this grace and calling of God. She was thus affable, natural, but perfectly at peace, even in the midst of her long and painful illness. Her writing is not that remarkable; she reflects her desire to be high above,<sup>12</sup> and longs for retreats where she can perfect this state. It is perhaps less endearing than that of Thérèse, but nonetheless uplifting and encouraging, since it is authentic and very lofty in a real way. A Carmelite once began answering my request that he tell me the difference between these two saints by saying rather decisively: Thérèse is a princess, Élisabeth is a queen; Thérèse supported her sufferings, Élisabeth went out to meet them with full command. Well, there is something to this. It is often difficult to compare saints, they each have their own gift. Élisabeth is one of my favorites because she is a true Carmelite, daughter of Teresa, sister of Thérèse, and quite an example and comfort to us.

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<sup>11</sup> אלישבע; cf. Ex 6:23 (she was Aaron's wife). Thus, the Hebrew name does not even have the word “beth” in it, but שבע, “to swear,” or the number seven. It is the same ending as in Bathsheba.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Col 3:1-3.

## Edith Stein

And we now come to the last “saint,” and we end with another Carmelite of Jewish ancestry, quite appropriate for an Order who, according to the legend, traces itself back to the prophet Elijah, and which was indeed founded in Mount Carmel. Edith Stein is a totally modern -almost contemporary- Carmelite. She was raised in a relatively non-practising Jewish family, and excelled in her studies, obtaining the doctorate in philosophy under Edmund Husserl, the greatest philosopher of his time (pre-Heidegger) and the founder of phenomenology. Edith belonged to a circle of academic friends - several of Jewish background, like Husserl- who sympathized with Christianity. One night, at a friend’s house while on vacation, she picked up a copy of the autobiography of St. Teresa, and began reading its several hundred pages. She could not put it down, and at dawn, as she finished it, exclaimed to herself, “*This* is the truth.” Not long later, at the age of thirty-three, much to her mother’s dismay (her father had died long before), she converted to Catholicism. She studied St. Thomas Aquinas, and as the climate was not favorable either to women or to Jews, she taught high school with the Dominican sisters in Spira. She was much beloved, though pictures of her portray a rather quiet, introspective and perhaps even somewhat unhappy unmarried woman. In 1933, as the Nazis took power, Edith, at the age of 41, became a Discalced Carmelite in Cologne, taking the name (in Latin) *Teresia Benedicta a Cruce*. The German nuns quite understood what a gifted sister they had, and enabled her to continue her academic work - she wrote, among other things, a book on St. John of the Cross- and it is clear life was very harmonious. In 1941 or so, things were so bad for Jews, even converts, that, after attempts to transfer Edith to Switzerland had failed, Edith and her natural sister Rose, who had also converted, were moved to Echt in Holland. There, in reprisal for a letter from the Dutch bishops denouncing Nazi persecution, massive arrests of Jews, even or especially those who had become religious, began, and Edith and her sister were among those rounded up. Edith tried even from the train -she wrote “They are taking us to the East”- to arrange passage to a neutral country. According to investigations by the Red Cross and others, they were taken to Auschwitz-Birkenau and gassed; there were many Jews among them “dressed” in religious garb.

Edith was always an idealistic woman, a feminist in early stages of the movement, an active woman thinker in the Catholic Church. Not too much has been circulated about the details of her life in the Order, though she herself wrote her autobiography. It cannot be said she exudes warmth or even holiness, in a sense that Teresa, Thérèse or Élisabeth. She has even made seemingly insensitive remarks about the reasons for the Holocaust, attributing to her people’s lack of faith. Yet she is a fascinating figure -I “discovered” her in 1973 as a Dominican novice, and was completely overtaken by her story. And is that the bare facts speak for themselves in a fascinating way: here was this brilliant Jewish philosopher, an atheist, a total academic, who suddenly discovers that she has found “the truth” (in such a “natural” and spontaneous, but seemingly unlikely writer as St. Teresa), and becomes not just a Catholic, but a cloistered contemplative Carmelite. Without more, the Christian sees the hand of God heavily in all this.

Once a Carmelite, faithfully living that life, there is a lot of good will simply there; the cloistered Carmelites are among the most loved persons in the world, full of joyous simplicity. Edith became one of them, putting somewhat aside her philosophical

pursuits. And then she gets caught up in the inhumanity of the Shoah.<sup>13</sup> She adds a particular voice and presence to this singular example of how evil, arrogant and mad members of the human species can be. Even such a one as Edith -good, studious, prayerful, harmless certainly, and with so much to offer- became just another Jewish victim for the Nazis. There is no doubt Edith's great popularity, due to the fascinating attraction she exercises, owes a great deal to the context in which she died: the “context” of the tremendous, unimaginable sufferings the Jewish people endured in the Holocaust. We Christians must be extremely sensitive, honest and careful to not claim Edith simply as “one of our own:” she died for being Jewish. However, she did embrace Christ, and is fully our sister in the faith.

### **Carmelite Spirituality**

These persons -all except one are women- were remarkable, although each is different, unique. Teresa was emotional, but a “woman of action” as well as a mystic who had many unusual experiences. John of the Cross was a poet and a mystic who disdained extraordinary “spiritual” manifestations, and who appears as somewhat inhuman in his demands, whereas Teresa is always very “human.” Thérèse appears sentimental, but never mediocre in her love and commitment to the Lord. Élisabeth was “a queen,” high above human frailty, or so it seems, but rarely if ever accusable of being affected or disingenuous. Edith is a person whose “facts” speak for themselves, but whose life did not belie those facts, but gave quiet testimony to them.

What can we say about Carmelite spirituality? Here I will also draw on my experience as a Carmelite, and try to tie it in with the teachings of the writings of its founders and saints.

Undoubtedly, Teresa and John of the Cross were part of a Counter-Reformation reform movement wherein “discalced” signified poverty and simplicity. Both were reformers; Teresa wanted to return to the primitive eremitical ideal of the first Carmelites in Palestine, and John of the Cross had been convinced from an early age that the road was narrow which led to eternal life, a conviction which he honed after his many experiences both personally and as spiritual director. This poverty and simplicity, I think, as requirements and enablers of the contemplative life, are the keystone of Carmelite spirituality.

Teresa manifests it in her embrace of very precarious living conditions, although she balks at the extremes John of the Cross went to in Duruelo (cf. the *Foundations*). She can avail herself, for example, of the best writing instruments and materials, when the occasion requires (she sometimes wrote to the king, often to nobles, etc.) But she recommends austerity; she says, for example, that we should not worry too much about our health, and abstain from doctor's visits if at all possible. This philosophy apparently was followed in the case of Thérèse.<sup>14</sup> And in fact I think that a hallmark of Carmelite spirituality is the lack of provision, of waiting it seems until the last minute before acting

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<sup>13</sup> The word comes from Zephaniah 1:15, part of his description of the “Day of the Lord” which became the basis of the medieval lament *Dies Irae*. Our verse reads: “Day of wrath, that one, day of distress and anguish, day of ruin [shoah] and desolation” יוֹם שַׁעֲרָה וְיָמֵי שׁוֹאָה וְשׁוֹמֵם.

<sup>14</sup> Though it is true that Teresa and even John of the Cross urged that the sick be taken care of even with the costliest of medicines, and the strict prohibition against meat-eating was waived in case of ill-health.



a tendency countered by the norm of religious life, were the practice is toward great precaution and making sure that there is plenty of everything). John of the Cross in fact writes that if we are asked to do something for someone, we should not make a special effort to remember the request; if it is of God, it will come to mind when necessary. This may be quite questionable; an important request may not readily come to the mind of someone who's absent-minded, or who is in an administrative post and received far too many requests to remember them. But the idea is to counter the tendency toward over-provision, of worry about what we shall eat and how we shall be dressed, and of the morrow generally. As training in countering our natural inclinations -exacerbated at times by the security and abundance of religious life, with its "vow of poverty!"- it can produce many good fruits, as I experienced in the Order, specially (or almost exclusively) in the Dominican Republic.<sup>15</sup> Depending on God, then, letting him act when convenient and opportune, and not worrying, is thus the Carmelite *ideal*, in any case. I think it would be lived quite faithfully in the African missions, for example.

Not unrelated to this pauperial barrenness is the typical Carmelite silence and self-effacingness, or humility. It is also called simplicity. At times it results in the annihilation of the personality, but more often than not it is a fount of good-will among the people, who love their Carmelites (I'm speaking of the men; the women are cloistered and are justly legendary for their simple, authentic joy). However, I found a lot of mediocrity in the Order, and it was partly due to a weeding-out process whereby those who stood out were made to feel like outsiders who didn't belong. This is what I mean by the annihilation of the personality. It is also sociologically related to the fact that, at least in Spain -to give the example of a prominent place in the Order, where it all started, a European nation with scholars, etc. - most members came from small Castilian towns, and little diversity was tolerated. But still, Carmelite lack of pretension endears the friars to their parishioners, although at times the feeling is that that they are not friendly -for example, the Spanish Carmelites in Cuba- or not dynamic enough.

Lastly, Carmelite spirituality, again not unrelated to the above, is to the point and down to earth when it comes to deciding what is important in life and in the spiritual life. Rather than complicate itself with theories and methods, Carmelites zero in on the essentials, and stick to them: prayer, determination, confidence. We are nothing, God is great and infinitely merciful, we should not look back and keep at it little by little until, miraculously, the flowers of our life of prayer and virtue will blossom; we *do* come out of the dark night of the soul into the light of "The Spiritual Canticle,"<sup>16</sup> as a Carmelite once told me. And this most important aspect of their spirituality can be summed up with a

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<sup>15</sup> The pantry in Spain was overstocked to the max. There was so much fruit (much donated as surplus by the European Community to Orders such as the Carmelites who housed young students) that it would spoil; everything was purchased with great anticipation. I counted as many as four meat dishes for dinner at times. In Madrid, it was customary to pass around fine whiskies and other liquors (often, but not always, gifts, after meals. Not so, for example, the Missionary Oblates of Mary immaculate; when I was invited to lunch at their main house near Madrid (in Pozuelo de Alarcón), they were hard-pressed to serve wine. I had been expecting the same standard of living as with the Discalced Carmelites, and was disabused of this notion. Also when purchasing vehicles a lot depended on the style, wishes and resources of a community, but generally, the idea was that "it pays to buy the best."

<sup>16</sup> John of the Cross describes the *via purgativa* in the poem and its accompanying treatise "The Dark Night of the Soul;" the *via illuminativa*, in general lines, when one comes out of the ascetic purifications to enjoy a predominantly freed life of contemplation, is described in the likewise treatise-poem "The Spiritual Canticle."

phrase from the primitive Carmelite Rule written by Blessed Albert of Jerusalem), based on the Vulgate version of Isaiah 30:15: *in silentio et in spe erit fortitudo vestra* = “in silence and hope shall be your strength.”