

THE CARMELITE THIRD ORDER

ITS SPIRIT AND APOSTOLATE

BY

LANCELOT C. SHEPPARD

‘SECLAR TERTIARIES’, says Canon Law, ‘are those who in the world under the jurisdiction and the influence of a Religious Order try to tend to Christian perfection according to a rule adapted to their secular state of life and approved by the Apostolic See.’¹ It is necessary to bear this definition in mind in reading what follows.



The thirteenth century was a period of great expansion for the hermits who had come from Mount Carmel to Europe, but in the same way as the Dominicans and Franciscans they attracted layfolk to them in an organized Third Order little evidence of it has survived. That some people went to live near Carmelite houses as recluses we know, but this was entirely separate from the Tertiary movement. On the other hand recently discovered documents have shown that there was some sort of fraternity at Venice in existence between the years 1280 and 1298 with regular monthly meetings, the saying of Office in common, the wearing of a habit and the rest. More research is needed to establish whether such a state of things was general.

In the absence of evidence one can conjecture that the organization of Carmelite fraternities was probably left to the discretion of local superiors. It was not until the time of the twenty-fifth prior general, Blessed John Soreth, that the Carmelite Third Order was properly recognized by Rome, for in 1452 Nicholas V by his Bull *Cum nulla* gave to the Carmelites the same privileges as the Dominicans and Augustinians for the reception of nuns and tertiaries.

Sixtus V in 1576 confirmed the Rule published at Liège by Blessed John Soreth in 1455. This Rule,² of fifteen paragraphs only, is in many ways similar to that of the tertiaries of other Orders at this period. It requires the recitation of the Little Office of Our Lady, or of a number of *Paters*, the wearing of a regular habit, and certain extra fasting days. It differs in that it imposes a vow of obedience and a simple vow of chastity.

John Soreth's Rule is the basis of all future Rules for the Carmelite

¹ Canon 702. Though much of this article may be applied to the Third Order under the jurisdiction of the Calced as well as that directed by the Discalced Carmelites, it is well to point out that it deals *ex professo* with that of Discalced alone.

² Published in *Analecta Ordinis Carmelitarum*, October 1915, p. 260.

Third Order. In 1673 Fr Theodore Stratus, Prior General of the Calced Carmelites, brought out a *Book of the Rules and Constitutions of the Third Order*. Here, for the first time, is there mention of organized fraternities. Until the beginning of the eighteenth century the Discalced Carmelites had given their tertiaries the Rule which was promulgated by the Calced, though there is some evidence that the Discalced had published a Rule in 1618.³ At any rate, Fr Quentin of St Charles, Provost General of the Discalced, published a Tertiary rule in 1708. It is very much the same as that of the Calced Tertiaries, save that it enjoins one hour of mental prayer daily.

In the nineteenth century some doubt arose on account of the vow of chastity imposed by the Rule. The Discalced authorities defined its scope, consequently, in 1882: 'The vow of chastity enjoined by the Rule obliges according to the present or future state of the person who makes the promise to God'. The vow, therefore, does not exclude married people. All indeed are bound to purity of soul and body according to their state of life, the unmarried to strict purity, the married to conjugal fidelity; by his vow the Tertiary is obliged to the virtue of purity under a new obligation, that of the virtue of religion. If in sinning against it he contracts additional guilt, in keeping it he likewise obtains additional merit. The vow of obedience, says the Rule, is restricted to such things only as are commanded by the superiors in accordance with the Rule.

The Carmelite Tertiary Rule was revised in 1921 consequent upon the publication of the new code of Canon Law. Two changes particularly were made. The period of mental prayer was reduced to half-an-hour daily (a quarter of an hour in the morning and a quarter of an hour in the evening, or the half hour at one time according to circumstances) and the fasting was confined, in addition to the fasts of the Church, to some few vigils and the Fridays of Advent. The Rule therefore was made less strict on some matters, but it did not undergo the transformation that the Franciscan Third Order underwent when Leo XIII revised it to bring it within the capabilities of all fervent Christians.

It will be seen therefore that the Rule of the Third Order Secular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel and St Teresa of Jesus⁴ remains with

³ In the archives of Discalced Carmelites in Dublin is a rule trans. into English by Fr James of St Bernard O.D.C. The translation, which was made in 1719, would seem to be made from the Rule of 1618.

⁴ The Discalced Carmelites add the name of St Teresa because she, as the reformer of the Carmelite Order, virtually founded it in the Discalced branch, and her sons and daughters look to her teaching as the true interpretation of the Carmelite spirit.

that of the Dominican Tertiaries one of the most severe of the Third Orders in the Church at the present day.⁵

No summary of the obligations of the Rule can convey in what the spirit of the Carmelite Third Order consists. The Rule must be known, of course, but the history of the Order must be known too, the circumstances that brought it into being, its periods of decline and its periods of fervour. Together with its history must be studied the writings of its great men and women—the exponents of the Carmelite spirit—and their lives. From such a study the true spirit of the Order may be found—a distillation, as it were, from the whole mass of material.

When the Carmelites came to Europe in the middle of the thirteenth century they were hermits, and as such they remained for some years. In adapting their Rule to European life they became one of the mendicant orders but they kept, none the less, many of their eremitical characteristics. Choir Office, studies, preaching and teaching became now part of their daily lives, but the emphasis is ever there, expressed in the words of the Rule of St Albert, and left unchanged by the Dominican revisers of 1247, *maneant singuli in cellis suis vel juxta eas die ac nocte in lege Domini meditantes, et in orationibus vigilantes*. Every reform of the Order has been a return to this principle, every period of relaxation has been caused by its neglect, and St Teresa in founding the Discalced Carmelites returned to the Primitive Rule for she understood that all 'who wear the Carmelite habit are called to prayer and Contemplation'. (*Castle*, fifth mansion, chapter 1).

Prayer then is the very life of Carmel. Such prayer is of course developed in each one according to his gifts and abilities, yet for all it must be as St Teresa says, 'being on terms of friendship with God, frequently conversing in secret with him, who, we know, loves us'. (*Life*, VIII, 7).⁶

All the regulations of the Tertiary Rule, therefore, are combined towards that one end, a discipline of life conducive to a life of prayer;

⁵ Until lately little has been heard of it in this country. There is a certain number of isolated Tertiaries, but no organized fraternity, and beyond the publication of the *Manual* (Carmelite Priory, 41 Church Street, Kensington, London, W.8) little has appeared to explain it to English Catholics. For this reason one can welcome the publication last year of the *Way of Perfection for the Laity* by Fr Kevin, O.D.C., the present provincial of the Anglo-Irish Province (Pp. xvi, 318: Brown and Nolan Ltd, 8s. 6d.). It gives a detailed and practical commentary on every paragraph of the Rule. The instruction on mental prayer is indeed more than a commentary; it is a complete treatise in small compass and gives all the essentials of the teaching of St John of the Cross and of St Teresa. In reading this book one can discern what is the Carmelite spirit, and, of equal importance, what is its application to modern times.

⁶ Cf. Sister Elizabeth of the Trinity, Carmelite of Dijon: *on vient tout simplement à Celui qu'on aime, on se tient tout près de Lui, comme près de ceux qu'on aime, et on laisse aller son cœur.*

for the whole end to which the Carmelite life is directed is contemplation. St Teresa (*Way of Perfection*, XIX-XXI) describes carefully the conditions and dispositions we should have in striving after such an end. Not all indeed attain the end in view; but all must dispose themselves to it. As St John of the Cross says: '... To attain and be united to the Supernatural is impossible with natural ability alone. The truth, I repeat, is that God must place the soul in this supernatural state; but the soul, as far as in it lies, must be continually preparing itself; and this it can do by natural means, especially with the help that God is continually giving it'. (*Ascent*, Book iii, ch. 1).

A contemplative life such as the Carmelite Rule (including that of the Third Order) supposes, produces an ardent love of God, and such a love does not remain fruitless. The apostolate of the Carmelite must be, in fact, the overflowing of his contemplative life. St Teresa saw this (*Way of Perfection*, chapter 1) when she spoke of the needs of the Church and of the many souls hastening to perdition. 'This is your vocation', she cries, 'these are your affairs'. (In the third chapter of the *Way* she returns more strongly to this point). Priests, preachers, missionaries, in a word, all who labour for the Church, must have the benefit of prayer and sacrifice.

To this apostolate the Carmelite Tertiary should join that of example, of word. The Rule says that those who are qualified to do so should 'take an active part in works of charity and zeal . . . as being not only in accordance with the intentions of the Church, but also in perfect harmony with the Carmelite Rule, which is inspired by the twofold love of God and our neighbour'. (*Rule*, number 72.) All Carmelites venerate the holy prophet Elias as their patriarch, and it is under his banner, with the device *Zelo zelatus sum pro Domino Deo exercituum*, that their double apostolate of prayer and work is carried out.

Such then roughly sketched is the spirit of Carmel and its purpose. Nor is it confined to the friars and nuns, for the Tertiaries have their part. That fact is made clear in the *Instructions for Directors of Fraternities*: 'The end of our Third Order is the same . . . namely in the first place the contemplative life, and secondly the active life, springing from and overflowing from the first'. Tertiaries whose life must be in the world cannot of course follow the same rules as the friars and the nuns, but they can seek God and dispose their souls for the grace of contemplation, according to their circumstances, by solitude, silence, prayer, the living of their whole life in the presence of God, and in filial union with our Lady, *Decor Carmeli. Totus Marianus est* was ever the boast of Carmel, and much could be written on the rôle of our Lady in the spiritual life of the Order, her formation

of its saints, and its tender devotion for its Queen. The scapular which the Tertiary wears (it represents of course the complete habit) is truly her livery; it occupies much the same place in the devotion of the Order as, for example, does the Rosary with the Friars Preachers.

With their brethren the Discalced Friars and their sisters the daughters of St Teresa, Carmelite Tertiaries can make their own *illius*; not least of the fruits of Carmel is the grace of its spirit.