

SPRINGS OF CARMEL

Phase I Formation Lesson 4 Required Reading

By Peter Slattery

Jesus and Prayer

Fr. Galilea notes that the following of Jesus is revealed to us as a gift from God. This gift grows in us by the contemplative dimension of the Christian life and the way we pray. The gift of God comes to us in a special way in prayer, in which we put on Christ. Prayer communicates to us the experience of Jesus, a contemplative experience which is necessary for our fidelity. In prayer we fathom the depths of what it means to follow him in contemplative prayer, leading us to the Father, Son and Spirit.

Prayer is also inseparable from the following of Jesus because of the motivation behind it. What gives quality to any commitment are the motives which inspire it. In all Christian spirituality, and especially Carmelite spirituality, our motivation comes from the Word of Jesus and not from ideologies. When we personally experience Jesus, we develop the motives for our mission.

Fr. Galilea says that there are some in today's world, and even some Christians, who ask if prayer still has any relevance. This is more pressing a question as the world becomes more secularized and technology takes over so many functions of our daily life. Some are tempted to see prayer as an evasion of responsibility to protect the environment and bring technology into the service of people. Others think that prayer reinforces a dualism in our daily lives and our religious lives—like encountering God in prayer as opposed to encountering God in the service of human beings—a dualism which many do not hold in today's Church.

Any principles which seek to answer these questions of some modern Christians would assume that the *way* we pray changes, although prayer itself has a permanent value in Christian spirituality. The way we pray changes not only with eras, but with different cultures and different times in our life. We need to adapt constantly our way of praying and integrate it to the demands of our day-to-day lives.

For Fr. Galilea the first principle in our need for adaption is to recognize that Jesus prayed and was known as a person of prayer. This prayer was and is for the renewal of humankind and influences what neither technology nor ideology can influence: sin, freedom, faith, love and resurrection. When we pray we pray the prayer of Jesus and he prays in and through us. God wants us to join with him in the renewal of the universe and the liberation of all men and women.

The second fundamental principle in understanding Christian prayer, according to Galilea is the belief that our God is a personal God who speaks, listens, and communicates with us, and with whom we can have a relationship as we can with any other person. The God of revelation, the Father of Jesus Christ is not a philosophical proposition, but a real person who has decided to enter our history in order to invite us to participate in his life, to listen to us and to act in us and through us. Prayer is, for the person of faith, a response to God's call, a need of love, a need to dialogue and become friend in the sharing in salvation.

The third fundamental principle in appreciating Christian prayer is to realize that people, by their very nature and by the seed implanted by baptism, are called to get to know God. We can certainly meet God through meditations, like our neighbor, our work and events of our daily lives. However, we are also called to meet God as he is, to contemplate him as he is as a person who loves us, and wants to be with us. If we deny this call to contemplation, we will be incomplete human beings, just as St. Augustine realized that our hearts are made for God and will not rest until they rest in him. Even with the darkness of faith, we can meet God "face to face" as St. John of the Cross said. The manner in which we meet God in prayer is on a different level than that of other encounters (neighbors, etc.) and we cannot refuse it without diminishing our own development and destiny. At the same time, prayer is our guarantee that we will really discover Christ in our neighbor, the events of our lives and of our society.

The ability to find Christ in others does not come from our own psychological resources or ideological motivations, but rather from our contact with God in prayer, the fruit of faith nourished by prayer, and the urgings of the Spirit of Christ

living and acting in our hearts. While contemplatives are called to use technology, statistics and all the human knowledge and resources at their disposal and to put them at the service of people, their inner motivation comes from Christ, his grace and his Spirit. There is no competition here, but a collaboration between a gracious God, people and all creation working together to liberate men and women both interiorly and from exterior oppression.

From this we see the need of basing our prayer on firm convictions, rooted in faith. Often, if our need for prayer is merely psychological need, we will be tempted to abandon its practice and claim a lack of time. But when we come up against the difficulties of our interior life and of the apostolate, we will realize that we need special graces from Christ. However, there are great helps that come to us only from Jesus in prayer. It is here, in an encounter with Jesus renewed each day, that we develop a oneness with God to see things in the light of the heart of the Gospel. The lack of prayer in our lives, if it is culpable and habitual, leads us into a sort of spiritual and apostolic anemia with the accompanying powerlessness to remain faithful to all the demands of the Gospel.

A final fundamental principle of Christian prayer is, Fr. Galilea believes, that it is an answer to God's initiative—a God who reaches out to us. It is not people who take the initiative in prayer; but there is a supernatural element to it. God calls us first and we answer him. Christianity is, above all, a religion of a God who seeks out people, a God who takes the initiative in sheer love, to liberate them, and to share a life with him.

Galilea says that the liturgy, the teacher of prayer, by its very structure, embodies this mystery of call and response. In the prayer songs, readings, silences of the liturgy of the Word, there is a response of human beings to the Word of God spoken to them. This structure of the liturgy reveals the basic meaning of Christian prayer.

Based on these principles, Galilea contends that Christian prayer has its own anthropology. It follows the physical, emotional, social and spiritual exigencies of the human person. This Christian anthropology of prayer has often been forgotten, both in liturgical prayer and in private prayer. We have to remember that it is the whole person who relates to God, and so we have to use our culture, art, history in all the signs and symbols of prayer. The affective side of a person, the vocal expressions which nourish prayer, the age of the person, the stage of their faith and intellectual development must all be taken into account when conducting the liturgy and helping people to pray.

Therefore, the problem of prayer in our modern world is very much related to the way we live our life. Each Christian needs to establish an inner discipline in their lifestyle, in order to have the freedom for the authentic contemplative dialogue with God—the destiny of all Christians. Some have the daily Eucharist and Prayer of the Hours to nourish them, some have time for daily reading of the Scriptures, some choose a quiet time in each day for reflection, while others concentrate on their breathing and posture in silence. Whatever one chooses, one needs to introduce a certain discipline to have a daily contemplative encounter with the Lord.

The anthropology of prayer needs to take into account what we used to call “distractions.” What is important is the work of the Holy Spirit working in us. So called distractions have to do with the affective side of our nature, and during times of distraction, many things come to mind which help us to know ourselves better. Galilea suggests that what we call distractions may help us to discover our motives, and those people and events which are really concerning us. Many spiritual writers have recommended that we quietly hand over our “distractions” to Jesus as part of our prayer.

Finally, Christian prayer is the prayer of the Church. This means that Christians never really pray alone, even when praying by themselves; they pray as part of a whole, which is the Church, always in union with people, and always “with the Church,” and celebrating the sacraments.

These principles and reflections on Christian prayer enunciated by Fr. Galilea, a great lover of the Carmelite tradition, lead to a redefinition of the Christian contemplative. Contemplation is not a dualistic notion present in some of the traditions of the Church; it is not fidelity to practices and methods of prayer. The contemplative in today's world is one who has an experience of God, who is capable of meeting God in history, in the social system, in our brother and sisters, and through prayer. As Karl Rahner says, you will not be able to be a Christian in the modern world without being a contemplative, and you cannot be a contemplative without having an experience of Christ and his kingdom in history. In this sense, Christian contemplation will guarantee the survival of the faith in a secularized and political world of the future.

A Carmelite Synthesis

Carmelites of today, in dialogue with the Spirit of the Lord in the Word of God, listening to the call of the Church today, and attentive to the cry of the poor and the powerless, are called to renew their tradition and spirituality. They have something to offer today's world, and men and women of the now have much to offer the Carmelites. For centuries Carmelites have faced the challenge to live faithfully their tradition of the call to contemplation and mysticism in every epoch of history. No matter how successful, they can report to people that the struggle is worthwhile.

Among the elements of contemporary theology, the theology of liberation seems to dialogue well with the Carmelite tradition.

Many of our people live and are working in countries where there are extremes between the rich few and the poor majority. In countries like Latin America, Africa, the Philippines, for example, conferences of bishops, theologians and local Church people talk in terms of liberation. They say that it is the Church's duty to help liberate people from poverty and injustices. The Carmelite tradition is challenged to enter into dialogue with this kind of thinking and help develop a spirituality applicable to this context.

In summary, the Carmelite tradition offers a spirituality of personal and interior liberation. This requires first and foremost a commitment to Jesus, his person and his message which can give men and women the only true liberation. The Gospel of Jesus calls men and women to use Gospel values in order to create a new heaven, a new earth, and so become the new creation.

Second, to liberate, we must be liberated. This means that we must be continually concerned about being free from our own inner idols before we can free people of injustices and poverty. Without a parallel concern for inner conversion, our efforts at social liberation will be in jeopardy.

This can be seen by the early pilgrim-hermits on Mount Carmel who were free of the entanglements of Church and society. We can learn this also from St. Teresa and St. John who would have us abandon all ambitions so as to be free not only for Jesus, but for our neighbor. Their language can be quite easily adapted into the more contemporary language of liberation, and some of our writers see them as great supporters of a liberation spirituality.

This gets support not only from the Spanish mystics, but from our 20th century saints, like Blessed Titus and St. Teresa Benedict (Edith Stein). These have shown that martyrdom is the ultimate liberation. This prospect is facing many of our men and women praying and working in those contexts. Thus, the spirituality of martyrdom had been emphasized in this century in the Carmelite tradition. This gained support from St. Teresa who saw martyrdom as a grace that comes from a life of daily abnegation and love—and cannot be fabricated or improvised.

Another element in the spirituality of liberation is a radical poverty. This implies both simplicity of lifestyle, but also a poverty of spirit in the sense of a detachment from prestige, honors and positions. St. Teresa supports this. She sees poverty as freeing us for service—not so much free from this and that—but freeing us for.

The God-question

Today the theological discussion of liberation also raises the God question. What kind of God do we follow? What is the authentic God of revelation? Who is the Father of the Jesus of the Gospels—the Jesus we have committed ourselves to?

This too is a matter for our personal and inner liberation—we need to abandon any imperfect notion of God and convert ourselves to the one, true God—the one who cannot be manipulated, nor domesticated, nor the one who will allow us to remain comfortable and cozy. We are called to the God who challenges us to conversion, flexibility and creativity, the God of mercy, justice and solidarity. Only if we believe in and follow this God, will our spirituality develop our commitment to peace and justice in the world. St. John of the Cross is someone in our tradition who liberates God. He teaches us to let God be God, and to allow God to mold us according to his Spirit. Since there can be no liberation without our liberating ourselves from false notions of God, the Carmelite tradition has much to say to liberation theology

in the spirit of humble dialogue. John's Dark Night is the itinerary which helps us find God without deforming him. In John's spiritual synthesis, we liberate God from our imperfect ways of believing in him and our imperfect ways of loving him.

One of the difficulties of understanding St. John of the Cross today stems from his poetic language. One concept which may help translate St. John to the contemporary Church is the notion of our inner liberation from false notions of God. This will lead us to a clearer understanding of his symbols of night and nothingness. We can also take his notions of solitude, desert and retreat and adapt them to modern spirituality which sees the need for quiet reflection, alone with God. The desert is a form of liberation, as St. Thérèse understood, because it forces us to face the truth about ourselves, our lives and our relationships. In the desert and retreat, we are stripped of all our illusions about ourselves—we are set free.

Carmelite Spirituality

Carmelite spirituality can help modern people to step aside and reflect. Busy people are often oppressed with the deceptions of mass media, consumerism and passing pleasures. These people can be helped in their search for freedom for a life close to Jesus and service of those in need.

Finally, Carmelite spirituality can help people to pray. These are a series of constants in the tradition of Carmelite prayer. They are:

1. *The practice of the presence of God.*
2. *The immersion in the mystery of God, which means prayer—a gift from God.*
3. *A prophetic awareness of the Word of God as found in Scripture and the signs of the times.*
4. *An immersion in Sacred Scripture—as a nourishment of prayer.*
5. *A firm anchoring in the liturgical prayer of the Church.*
6. *A prayer which blends the intellectual and affective dimensions of dialogue with God, but with a stress on the affective side, which is comfortable with both western and eastern influences.*
7. *Prayer considered as an anticipation of our activity in the eschaton.*
8. *We take Mary as the beloved model of contemplative prayer.*

For the Carmelite today, contemplation is the experience of God in all the dimensions of human life—experiencing God both transcendent and incarnate. The contemplative hears the Word of God in the cry of the poor, in the voice of the Church (the community of the disciples of Jesus). The contemplative is one who has an experience of Jesus in the Paschal Mystery—in a succession of deaths and resurrections which form a spirituality of change. This Jesus continues to set free from all that prevents us from rising—he lifts us up to follow him on risky unknown paths. Part of the Paschal Mystery for the contemplative is that we gain our freedom when we are prepared to be identified with Jesus present in his little ones—the anawim.

Our song is Mary's *Magnificat*.

If you want a summary of this book, I would say Carmelites are:

PILGRIMS
POETS
and PROPHETS.

For reflection: individuals or groups

1. How do you integrate your commitment to the world and your ministry with your prayer life?
2. How do you react when you read that you are called to be a mystic or a contemplative? How do you live this call to holiness?
3. What areas of learning do you need to undertake to follow the path that Jesus points out to you?
4. How is your spiritual journey a liberating experience for you? Write about a genuinely liberating experience that is important in your life?