

## CARMEL: AN EMPTY SPACE FOR GOD

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Sometimes upon entering a building, one may feel openness and space. It seems as if the building invites me: you are welcome. The architecture is pervaded with perspicuity, it provides a view. Other buildings breathe a closed and oppressive atmosphere. They are filled with things. They seem to exclude me: you are not welcome.

Last week we had a meeting of the Society for Spiritual Theology in Würzburg. Würzburg is an old town in the South of Germany. The theme of the three days meeting was Popular Spirituality. Friday in the afternoon we had a guided tour of the old city. The guide, a university professor and a real expert, gave us a full explanation of the different images and buildings. Of course we visited a lot of churches. Entering the churches I felt immediately the atmosphere, before any explanation. Sometimes I did not understand how this building could be a house of prayer. The stuffy and closed atmosphere oppressed me. The space was filled with things and images. No view, no breath, no openness. In other churches I perceived a Presence, beyond the 'things' presented to me. It felt as if the architecture invited me to be open and receptive for God.

Sometimes I visit a monastery, giving a retreat or some days of recollection. Sharing the daily life of the monks or sisters and listening to their stories, I feel a closed atmosphere. Day and night are filled with practices and observances. It seems as if a hidden rule has closed the windows and the doors. The liturgy is correct, but terrified. The conversation is decent and even nice, but without inner space. Observances are more important than spiritual growth. Sometimes, however, I observe the opposite. The community creates an open and fresh atmosphere. They do the things to be done, but are interiorly relaxed and open minded.

These paradigms are meant as preliminary observations introducing the theme I would like to share with you: *Carmel: An Empty Space for God*. My meditation is focussed on the Carmelite rule as the heart of Carmelite experience.

In July 2005 the *Institutum Carmelitanum* organized a conference on the *formula vitae* which Albert of Jerusalem bestowed on the Latin Hermits of Mount Carmel eight centuries ago. From different perspectives scholars examined the text and content of Albert's letter. They reconstructed the historical context of the Latin Hermits on Mount Carmel. They analysed carefully the text of the Rule. They gave a survey of its reception in various commentaries. They investigated the text as a living message for today.<sup>1</sup>

On that conference I tried to unfold a dimension in the Rule that can be characterized as empty spots, gaps, and open spaces. I described six types of open space as articulated in modern hermeneutics and linguistics and elaborated these six kinds of open space in the text of the Rule. I discovered the following open spaces. Firstly, the Rule as a whole unveils different meanings. We can read the Rule as a letter, a juridical document, and an affirmation of lived experience. The rule does not fill up which perspective should be chosen – and perhaps there are more perspectives! Anyway, it is an open space. Secondly, in the spiritual exercises, Albert creates deliberately open spaces: exceptions, adaptations, alternatives, and so on. Thirdly, the Rule itself discloses at the end an open future. Fourthly, particularly the 'more' (*supererogatio*) in the last chapter is a challenging open space. Therefore discernment is needed! Fifthly, the Rule shows a contextual shift from a community in solitary areas into convents in the cities where you are give a site, inviting the Carmelites to enter new contexts. Finally, the Rule has a communicative openness, inviting every reader to enter the mystical space of Mount Carmel.<sup>2</sup>

On the occasion of the inauguration of the Carmelite Institute Malta, I would like to go one step further. I would like to explore the inner space of the exercises in the Rule. In my book *The Mystical Space of Carmel* I tried to explain that the Carmelite Rule as a whole can be understood as the unfolding of a spiritual process.<sup>3</sup> This process starts with the presentation of some basic provisions (Chapter 4-9), followed by the exercises needed for the interiorization of these provisions (Chapter 10-17), oriented on the purity of heart, which receives the armour of God (Chapter 18-19), to be preserved by working in silence (Chapter 20-21). In this way the Rule as a whole unfolds a spiritual way, to be done by the Carmelites. We tried to explain that this way

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<sup>1</sup> *The Carmelite Rule* (Ed. E. GOMES, P. McMAHON a.o.), Roma 2008.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 221-277.

<sup>3</sup> K. WAAIJMAN, *The Mystical Space of Carmel*, Louvain 1999.

is an open ended process giving way to a mystical journey, which leads beyond the Rule.<sup>4</sup> John of the Cross qualifies this open space as follows: 'Here is no longer a way. For the righteous there is no law, he is the law for himself.' Beyond the Rule there is a 'more' and this is the more of the mystical space, into which the Rule guides us. 'Use however your discernment' (Chapter 24).

I would like to share with you that not only the Rule as a whole, but also the particular exercises within the Rule has the same mystical structure.

As all rules, the Carmelite Rule provides a set of practices and exercises to be interiorized: obedience, remaining in the cell, meditating on Scripture, saying prayers, keeping vigil, saying psalms, sharing goods, coming together for the Eucharist, discussing the observance of order and the salvation of the soul, fasting and abstinence, working in silence. These exercises are oriented on the Carmelite configuration of virtues to be internalized: purity and holiness; justice, love, faith and hope.

These practices and virtues are interiorly oriented on the purity of the heart, creating in the Carmelite a fundamental openness for the indwelling of God. Purity of heart is *vacare Deo*: widening the soul out of its narrowness, deepening out the soul of its superficiality, broadening the soul by entering in the infinite space of God, becoming an empty space for God. This is not only the inner orientation of all these exercises and virtues together, as a whole, but also the inner dynamic and perspective of every exercise and virtue.

I would like to demonstrate this thesis at the hand of three exercises: meditation, work, and silence. They are meant as paradigms by which you may understand the mystical way of every exercise, realising an empty space for God.

## I. MEDITATING DAY AND NIGHT ON THE WORD OF THE LORD

This exercise can not be understood literally. It is impossible to meditate day and night literally. We need to sleep, at least four, five hours. But even to meditate the whole day on the Word of the Lord is impossible. There are other commandments to be performed: hearing Mass, discussing the preservation of order and the salvation of the

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 259-279.

soul, working in silence, and other lawful activities. It is absolutely clear: this commandment cannot be carried out literally. Using our common sense is enough to understand the neurotic craziness which would be the effect of such a literal understanding. It would lock up the Carmelite in the closed area of a biblical prison. But what may be the meaning of this exercise, if it is not a one-dimensional commandment, leading to narrow-mindedness? I would like to present two strategies of interpretation leading to an empty space for God. The first way follows the intertextual signal of the commandment: the exercise is a quotation of psalm 1. The second strategy follows the way of the old tradition of spiritual Bible-reading: *lectio divina*.

*The biblical background: Psalm 1*

How blessed is anyone who rejects the advice of the wicked,  
and does not take a stand in the path that sinners tread,  
but who delights in the Word of the Lord  
and meditates day and night on his Word (Ps. 1,1-2).

Psalm 1 portrays the person steeped in Scripture and living out the Torah. An essential element in his spiritual practice – living in the world, not as a monk but as a father with his family and doing his job – is what has been translated by ‘meditation’. The Hebrew word, however, *haga* means ‘murmuring’. The torah-mystic repeats the words somatically, sighing them out in order – deeply immersed in them – to follow their innermost movements. This performance – remembering the Word of God by steadily memorizing – is sustained by a deeply emotional involvement: the reader feels a deep need for instruction and delights in it: ‘My lips move oozily in celebration, yes, you teach me your rules. May my tongue mouth your promise, all your commandments are upright (Ps. 119,171-172).

In the performance of the text not only the directly touched strings – the words that are murmured – vibrate but other strings vibrate along with them. ‘How caressing is your promise to my palate’, the psalmist cries out (Ps. 119,103). The murmuring of the words caresses the palate. Sometimes the psalmist’s somatic reaction is quite intense: ‘My flesh trembles before you, your judgements fill me with fear’ (Ps. 119,120). At the same time deep insight and understanding of the Word of God break through: ‘Teach me to taste and feel, for in your commandments I find solidity’ (Ps. 119,66). With all its love he focuses on the instruction of the Lord: ‘I open wide my mouth and pant, yes I need your commandments’ (Ps. 119,131). The psalmist is

yearning for God. Doing so – waiting for his Word (Ps. 119, 81) – the psalmist is interiorizing his belonging to God: ‘I am yours (...) Your servant am I’ (Ps. 119, 125). The torah has so deeply immersed itself in the inmost of the psalmist that it lights up from within: ‘The unfolding of your words gives light and makes even the gullible understand (Ps. 119,130). The world of God establishes itself in the heart of the psalmist and he himself is led into the world of God. The presence of God draws near to the servant who exerts himself to interiorize the Word of God in all its respects: learning, looking, questioning, understanding, watchful and cautious. A sense of God’s Presence which speaks to the human heart is prompted by this process of interiorization. The human heart is thoroughly enlarged (Ps. 119,32). Touching the depths of the heart, widely open to God, the Word of God gives direction to the course of life from within. It is a lamp for our feet and a light on our path (Ps. 119,105).

Psalm 1 compares the torah-mystic, deeply rooted in the Word of God, with a tree transplanted on water courses.

He is like a tree transplanted near streams;  
it bears fruit in its season  
and its leaves never wither,  
whatever he does, it succeeds (Ps. 1,3).

The tree is surrounded by water: the torah mystic is surrounded and penetrated by the Word of God, being the source of his fertility and his freshness. Being transformed by the water of the Word of God, the torah-mystic himself is a growing water course. Listen to the words of Jesus Sirach, completely transformed in the word of God.

And I, like a conduit from a river,  
like a watercourse running into a garden,  
I said, ‘I am going to water my orchard,  
I intend to irrigate my flower beds.’  
And see, my conduit has grown into a river,  
and my river has grown into a sea (Sir. 24,30-31).

Transformed by the river of the torah, Jesus Sirach became a conduit arising from the river, he became a watercourse running into the garden of his life, watering the orchard of his deeds, irrigating the flower beds of his virtues. And what happened? The small conduit received the width and the depth of a river, the Word of God. But see! The river has grown into a sea: God’s infinite love.

This is what meditating in the Word of the Lord spiritually means: it is a process in which the soul of the torah-mystic is widened and deepened. As the psalmist says: 'I run the way of your commandments, for you have widened my heart' (Ps. 119,32). By the river of the torah my heart has become an empty space for God, receiving the sea of his infinite love.

This is what the exercise of pondering the Word is all about: creating an empty space to receive the infinite love of God. It is not an exercise of being boxed up in his bible, being imprisoned in a text, being enclosed by letters. It is not a neurotic behaviour fuelled by anxiety. On the contrary, meditating in the Word of the Lord is a spiritual way, leading to *vacare Deo*, leading to the emptiness of the channel to receive – through the river of his Word – the infinite love of God.

## II. LECTIO DIVINA

Let us now follow the second reading strategy: the way of *lectio divina*. To understand the spiritual discipline of *lectio divina* I choose the so-called *Scala Claustralium*, a letter written by Guigo II, the Carthusian, to his friend Gervasius. This letter, written twenty years before Albert wrote the Carmelite Rule, is an admirable summary of the essence of *lectio divina*. Let us read one passage of this letter.

Reading comes first, and is, as it were, the foundation; it provides the subject matter we must use for meditation. Meditation considers more carefully what is to be sought after it; it digs, as it were, for treasure which it finds and reveals, but since it is not in meditations' power to seize upon the treasure, it directs us to prayer. Prayer lifts itself up to God with all its strength, and begs for the treasure it longs for, which is the sweetness of contemplation. Contemplation when it comes rewards the labours of the other three; it inebriates the thirsting soul with the dew of heavenly sweetness. Reading is an exercise of the outward senses; meditation is concerned with the inward understanding; prayer is concerned with desire; contemplation outstrips every faculty.<sup>5</sup>

Guigo understands *lectio divina* as an exercise, but this exercise is in itself a spiritual way, encompassing four main steps. 'The reading comes first.' But reading needs the 'exercise' of the meditation oriented

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<sup>5</sup> GUIGO II, *The Ladder of Monks. A Letter on the Contemplative Life and Twelve Meditations*, Kalamzoo (MI) 1981, XII.

on 'the inward understanding'. Meditation 'directs us to prayer'. And prayer receives 'the sweetness of contemplation'. Let us look more carefully to these four steps, attending on the empty space for God, *vacare Deo*.

The first step is the *lectio*: the senses are touched by the text from without. That is why the *lectio* is called 'an external exercise'. The reader 'cleaves to the surface'. The reading conveys the bunch of grapes that still contain the juice, and brings solid food to the mouth.<sup>6</sup>

The second step is the *meditatio*: seeking out the interior of the text. 'Meditation does not remain on the outside, is not detained by unimportant things, climbs higher (up the mystical ladder), goes to the heart of the matter, examines each point thoroughly.'<sup>7</sup> The one who meditates is like a cud chewer: first ingesting the food (*lectio*), then regurgitating everything in morsels – returning again and again to a verse, a word, a phrase, or a paragraph.

But meditation is not the end. The third, and most important step is *oratio*. Guigo says: 'In my meditation the fire of longing, the desire to know you more fully has increased.'<sup>8</sup> Meditation feeds prayer: 'The more I see you, the more I long to see you.'<sup>9</sup> Longing is the basic movement of prayer, evoked by meditation: the soul is 'consumed with longing'.<sup>10</sup> Longing is sighing, weeping, thirsting, painfully lacking.<sup>11</sup> Longing is the empty space for God. The outgoing prayer of the soul draws the soul out of itself: 'God makes the soul forget earthly things; by making it die to itself He gives it new life in a wonderful way'.<sup>12</sup>

This is the fourth step: *contemplation*. As the soul treads outside of itself in prayerful yearning, the Beloved himself enters the soul: 'But the Lord, whose eyes are upon the just and whose ears can catch not only the words, but the very meaning of their prayers, does not wait until the longing soul has said all its say, but breaks in upon the middle of the prayer, runs to meet it in all haste.'<sup>13</sup> The empty space receives God's presence. His presence is the flip side of longing. Guigo calls this an *antiphrasis*. He says: 'Can it be that the heralds and witnesses of this consolation and joy are sighs and tears? If it is so, then the

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, III, IV, V, XII, XIII.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, V.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, VI.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, V.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, V, VIII, XV.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, VIII.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, VII.

word consolation is being used in a completely new sense, the reverse of its ordinary connotation. What has consolation in common with sighs, joy with tears, if indeed these are to be called tears and not rather an abundance of spiritual dew, poured out from above and overflowing, an outward purification as a sign of inward cleansing?<sup>14</sup> The empty space is a sign of God's presence! Two contrary meanings – tears and joy, absence and presence, emptiness and fulfilment – are domiciled in a single sign. This is what Guigo calls an antiphrasis: 'a new antiphrasis and uncustomary meaning' (*nova est antiphrasis ista et significatio inusita*).<sup>15</sup>

On the basis of the intertextual relationship with the torah-psalms and on the basis of a spiritual analysis of *lectio divina* we may conclude, that meditating day and night on the Word of the Lord is an exercise which organises in its centre an empty space for God, an emptiness as a sign of God's presence, *vacare Deo* as the antiphrasis of God's fulfilment.

### III. THE WAY OF WORK

Our second paradigm will be the work to be done, as presented in Chapter 20 of the Carmelite Rule: 'Some work has to be done by you...'. What kind of work Albert does have in mind? There are lots of models available in the history of Christian spirituality. The desert monks viewed work as something which accompanies, structures, and undergirds the life of prayer.<sup>16</sup> Augustine, in his work *De opera monachorum*, states that physical work must be done with a view to the spirit and wellbeing of the community.<sup>17</sup> He refers to Paul's Second Letter to the Thessalonians, as the Carmelite Rule does. It is not clear just what attitude the new religious movement of the eleventh and twelfth centuries assumed toward working, but we do know that the hermits and early Franciscans gave priority to working for the livelihood and only reverted to begging where it was necessary. It was not until later that they made their begging into 'work'.

Nicholas the Frenchman, who lived on Mount Carmel, witnesses that the friars distinguished two kinds of work: spiritual work (read-

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, VIII.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Cf. JOHN CASSIAN, *Institutiones* 1.10.7-8.

<sup>17</sup> AUGUSTIN, *De opere monachorum*, PL 40: 547-582.



ing, meditation, prayer) as well as physical work (copying codices, agriculture).<sup>18</sup> The distinction itself throws an interesting light on 'work'. Even spirituality (spiritual reading, meditation, and prayer) is 'work'! Back in Europe, the Carmelites decided, like all other mendicants, to live from the gospel, which they viewed as 'work', the work of apostolate.<sup>19</sup> The shift to the work of apostolate was formally accepted, from the moment Innocent IV bent the Letter of Albert in the direction of a mendicant Rule, by a number of modifications: having houses in the cities, eating together in the refectory, praying the hours, going around begging as a form of apostolic life.

These preliminary observations are looking to 'some work' from an outside perspective: activities to be done, kinds of work, job descriptions, priorities, and so on. But does the Carmelite Rule provide some information about work as a spiritual way, even a spiritual way leading us to an empty space for God? To find an answer to this question we start with the last words of Chapter 20 in the Rule of Innocent IV (1247), suggesting that work is much more than completing an assignment or doing one's share. It is a process-in-motion, a way, as we will see. The Rule states, concisely summing up the essence of work:

This way is holy and good,  
walk in it.

These concluding words contain three intertextual references to the Bible. They can help us to learn more about the spiritual way of work and about the empty space for God unfolded in it. The first biblical reference points to the wisdom spirituality: *this way is good*.<sup>20</sup> In wisdom literature 'the way' is a familiar motif. The good way leads to life (Prov. 2,1-22; 16,2-9.25-29). The evil way leads to death (Prov. 2,12; 28,10). The way (*derek*) is: our way of life, encompassing everything which has to be lived through. The second quotation, melted into the Rule, comes from Isaiah: 'A highway shall be there, and it shall be called *the holy way*' (Is. 35,8).<sup>21</sup> The holy way is a road such as only the most holy cities know: a splendid road leading into the holy city and the central sanctuary (Is. 35,8-10). From within the

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<sup>18</sup> NICHOLAS GALLUS, *Ignea Sagitta*, (1270), VIII; ed. A. Staring, in *Carmelus* 9 (1962), 237-307.

<sup>19</sup> THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, 2a 2ae, quaest. 187, a. 3, especially ad 3 um.

<sup>20</sup> In the Vulgate the *via bona ac recta*.

<sup>21</sup> In the Vulgate: *Et erit ibi semita et via, et via sancta vocabitur*.

sanctuary a holy way unwinds on which the pilgrims walk in. The third Scriptural given stems from Isaiah as well: 'This is the way, walk in it' (Is. 30,21).<sup>22</sup> Past Israel's self-determination God's teaching will come through to it pointing the right direction. The three references to Scripture may disclose the way of work, leading to the empty space for God.

#### IV. THE GOOD WAY

Wisdom spirituality is reflected in the hundreds of proverbial sayings collected in the book of *Proverbs*. About forty percent of these proverbs are related to the area of work: building the house, caring of the fields and the cattle; doing justice at the gates; assuring security and so on.

The central value is the 'good' (*tov*), encompassing the virtuous, the pleasant, the joyful. The good is an atmosphere: safety, prosperity, and peace. The good is life itself, a thriving tree located by a spring, bearing fruit. From within the sphere of the good its ferment affects everything: proper speech, true witness, prudence, care, friendly association with one's neighbour, love for wife and children.

Work as the good way of life can be improved by an attitude of receptivity and deference: a tactful approach of God's creation, no defamation, no lying, no collaboration with injustice, promoting the good, pursuing peace and mutual respect (Ps. 34, 9-15).

God is the soul and sculptor of the good. When a person stands in 'fear' of the good, that person stands in awe of God. Awe teaches a person to read life down to the level of the good in the light of God. God is the centre of creation, the origin of good, the father of wisdom, the source of fertility, the giver of the life partner, the helper before the court. Awe leads into the awesome goodness of God.

The good way of work is threatened by the evil way, leading to death. It is undermined by laziness, addiction to drink, despondency, dishonesty, bearing false witness, blackmailing, theft, and criminal assault. Every human being is placed in the everlasting choice between doing his work well, and the wrong way of the evil doers.

The majority of parents and teachers saw the good way of work in the perspective of God's creation. To the psalmist of Psalm 104, for

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<sup>22</sup> In the Vulgate: *Haec est via, ambulate in ea.*

instance, work is a way of joining God in creating things based on his wisdom (Ps. 104,23-24). Psalm 8 views human beings as God's steward: humanity manages the creation on God's behalf and in the name of God. But there are also other voices. In Genesis work is seen as a punishment imposed on humans by God (Gen. 3,17-19). And Qohelet considers work as a vexation and vanity (Eccl. 2,18-23). But whatever may be the colour of appreciation – more joyful and optimistic or more sad and pessimistic – all parents and teachers consider the way of work to belong to the order of creation.

The Carmelite Rule places itself within the wisdom spirituality by saying: 'This way of work is good.' And it seems to have a more positive and optimistic view by using the word 'good', which includes, as we have seen, the pleasant and the joyful.

The question, however, remains: is this good way of work an open space? I think that this is not the case as long as we look to work from the perspective of wisdom spirituality. Doing our work well we are connected with God's creative power; being fertile we receive God's blessing, building our house we are the hands of God, protecting his creatures we are his steward, but it is not adequate to say: this way of work is an empty space for God. On the contrary, human life is filled with work, we live in our work, the danger always being that our work overwhelms us (Ps. 127).

But the good way of work is not the end of the story. The good way of work provides us, so to say, the 'material' in which the two other ways of work – the 'holy' way and the way 'to walk in' – take shape. In the fullness of our daily work the 'holy' way creates the open space of a sanctuary and the prophetic way 'to walk in' orients this open space completely on God's unconditional coming.

## V. THE HOLY WAY

The Carmelite Rule does not only refer to wisdom spirituality. By calling the way of work 'holy', Albert is quoting Isaiah: 'A highway shall be there, and it shall be called *the holy way*' (Is. 35,8). The context speaks of the exiles' joyful return home through the desert. The desert, seeing the exiles going home, dresses itself in delight and blankets itself with flowers.

(Is. 35,1-2). The exiles who are returning need not to be afraid, they will without trouble survive the wilderness journey (Is. 35,3-7). A paved way will be constructed through the desert, a road such as only the most holy cities know: splendid roads which lead into the

sanctuary, therefore a 'holy' road (Is. 35,8-10). Essentially this holy way is the coming of God in his people: 'He will come and save you' (Is. 35,4). The holy way is God's coming: eyes and ears will be opened, strength enters people's legs, streams break forth (Is. 35,5-7). One may say, the holy way is the openness of sanctuary, receiving the coming of God. As psalm 24 says to the gates of the sanctuary:

Lift up your heads, o openings,  
and be lifted up, o ancient doors,  
that the King of glory may come in.  
Who is the King of glory?  
The Lord of the hosts,  
he is the King of glory (Ps. 24,9-10).

Applied to 'some work to be done' what does this mean? The holy way of work is receiving God's coming in the sanctuary of our work. 'Some work' (*aliquid operis*) in the Carmelite Rule is therefore, not work that does not matter much, work that is more or less routine in nature (*aliquod opus*). Work is: doing something in such a way that it receives God's coming, doing your work with attention and concentration. Whether it is working the land, making implements, building and restructuring, the care of animals, copying codices, studying sacred texts or the apostolate, the work in question requires such a concentration, that God can coming in and 'the devil may always find you occupied.'

Some work creates an open space for God, in which the soul is protected against 'idleness' giving the destructive forces (the devil) an easy entrance into the soul. Remaining in the cell, remaining near it, being occupied on lawful activities (Chapter 10), being occupied by some work – all these practices belong to the same spiritual strategy: building up a protected area for our soul, so that the destructive power is not able to enter this sanctuary. The spiritual function of work is to open up the inner person and to unfold interiority – welcoming God's presence. Indeed it is a holy way. Not the devil but God is invited to enter this sanctuary.

What may be the connection between the 'good' way and the 'holy' way? The wisdom teachers consider the good way of work as co-creation with God our Creator, giving us the material in which and through which we live and experience the goodness of life. In this material the holy way creates a sanctuary: a space opened for the coming of God. This twofold way can be seen as two steps on a spiritual path. The first step is the performance of work as the participation in creation, being an essential part of our life, whatever

may be the kind of work we are doing and whatever may be the colour of our feelings. The second step is: to create in this work, which in itself already is a vital relationship with our Creator, a holy space giving way to the coming of God. The third step is the way to walk in: emptying the holy space from every self-centeredness, and receiving exclusively God's future.

## VI. THE WAY TO WALK IN

Isaiah says: 'This is the way, walk in it' (Is. 30,21). The context of this statement is the prophetic critique accusing the Israelites of 'carrying out a plan, but not mine' (Is. 30,1). They go their own way to a goal they have set for themselves (Is. 30,2). But this way does not receive God's future (Is. 30, 3-7). Self-determination has blinded Israel, closed its mind to God's instruction, which comes from outside its own self-made future (Is. 30,8-11). This way, by which Israel seals itself off, destroys itself (Is. 30, 12-14). The only thing which can help is for Israel to seek its point of gravity in God and to expect in silence everything from him and no one else (Is. 30, 15-17). But even past Israel's self-isolation and self-destruction, God's voice will come through to it saying: 'This is the way, walk in it' (Is. 30, 20-21). Then everything will change between God and his people: prosperity will prevail (Is. 30, 22-26).

By quoting this prophetic text of Isaiah, the way of work gets its critical point: in all work the pivotal question is whether or not we isolate ourselves in our own plans. Work that locks itself up in itself, ruins itself. Work that permits itself to be directed from Beyond receives the right direction: 'This is the way, walk in it.'

The prophetic way of work is completely oriented on God's work which is beyond every I-centred planning. It is a way of working 'in silence and hope' as Isaiah says (Is. 30,15), an essential quotation in the next chapter on silence, and about which we will speak in the next paragraph of this article. For our understanding of the prophetic way of work it is important to see how work can be completely transformed into waiting and hoping in God, who frees us from every self-centeredness in our way of working. This prophetic insight precisely, is the very reason why Albert extensively quotes Paul's Second Letter to the Thessalonians. Paul sees all human work from the perspective of God, coming in the End – past the horizon of time – to meet us in Christ. This is the perspective in which Paul situates work.

Some Thessalonians draw their own conclusion: they quit work. They were of the opinion that the End-time (in the strict sense) was already in effect (2 Thess. 2,2). And End-time means: the restoration of the paradisaal state. An essential element of this paradisaal restoration was the lifting of the necessity of work. No longer are humans obliged to eat their bread by the sweat of their brow (Gen. 3, 17-19). These Thessalonians broke with 'the good way' of work, they broke with the 'order' of creation. Therefore Paul says: they are dis-order-ly' (*atattos*).<sup>23</sup> They violate the divine order of work, the intrinsic bond between labour and livelihood: 'Anyone unwilling to work should not eat' (2 Thess. 3,10). This order – the divine order for this Age – may not be violated under the pretext that the End has come.

The position of Paul is clear. The 'good way' of work, co-creating with God's creation, should not be stopped in favour of the 'eschatological' way of work, expecting all from God's redemption, in hope and silence. No, the Thessalonians should do their work in a way that corresponds to the order of this Age, and at the same time live totally in terms of the coming of God's kingdom in the End. This is precisely the practice and the teaching which Albert quotes at length. Paul practices the tentmaker's trade (the order of this Age) and at the same time devotes himself to preaching the gospel (the order of the End).

What does this mean for our theme of empty space? The prophetic way of work, especially the eschatological way of working, empties itself from every self-determination. In hope and silence it devotes itself to God's work. The prophetic way of working abandons the prospect of personally experiencing the outcome of my work. It is hidden – past the horizon of our time – in the time of God. Prophetically working exceeds the boundaries of one's own time. This way of working is an empty space for God 'walk in it, this is the way'.

Listening to the intertextual relationships in chapter 20 of the Carmelite Rule – references to Proverbs, Genesis, Isaiah, the Second Letter to the Thessalonians – we discovered work as a spiritual way: the good way, the holy way, and the prophetic way. In the Rule they are intrinsically connected. They are one way: 'This way is holy and good, walk in it.' This way starts – every moment anew – with the good

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<sup>23</sup> For background information about the order of creation, including work and the order of End-time redemption see M. MENKEN, Paradise regained or still lost? Eschatology and disorderly behaviour in 2 Thessalonians, in: *New Testament Studies* 38 (1992), 271-289.

way of God's creation, in which we participate. This is our life. In this material of our life, we pave the holy way, being the coming of God in the sanctuary of our work. This open space becomes an empty space for God when we walk in prophetic way: in hope and silence opening our work for the grace of God – beyond every self-centeredness. These three steps of just one spiritual path belong together. This is the reason why the Rule so emphatically features Paul as teacher and example. Both in his teaching and as an example he endures the tension between working in this Age – co-creating with God – and working from the End – unconditionally waiting on God's grace – mediated every moment by the holy way of a prayerful life: the sanctuary of our work, paving the holy way of God's coming, the coming of God alone.

## VII. SILENCE

The third paradigm is silence. In religious traditions silence sometimes has been understood as the absence of sound. On particular times and places there should be complete silence: the absence of every noisy thing. Or silence is conceived as cessation of speech: no words, no communication. Sometimes religious traditions were extremely rigorous in their enforcement of silence. Particularly the night silence was sometimes a neurotic obsession of absolutely no sound and no conversation. The Rule seems to support this rigorous attitude, saying: 'at other times, however, although you *need not observe silence so strictly*, you should nevertheless be all the more careful to avoid much talking' (Chapter 21). But this strictness of the night silence has, as we will see, a function in itself: the purification of our consciousness from all the impressions of the day, to become free for God. The silence of the day does not have this kind of strictness. Even a superficial reading of the Rule can support the opinion that Albert is looking for a golden mean somewhere between *not-talking* and *much-talking*. In fact, this quantitative and objectivising approach, fails to do justice to the qualitative difference between the silence of the night (*silentium nocturnum*) and the silence of the day (*silentium diurnum*), as they come to expression in the Rule.

The qualitative dimension of silence, day and night, is silence as a spiritual way. This way is leading to an empty space for God. This is particularly true in case of the silence of the night, but also the silence of the day is deeply motivated by the longing and waiting for God's presence.

As in the case of meditation I follow a twofold strategy. Firstly, I listen to the biblical silence which is obviously present in the many biblical quotations in the chapter on silence. Secondly, I would like to present to you the spiritual dimension of silence from the viewpoint of the history of Christian spirituality.

### VIII. BIBLICAL SILENCE

Famous is the silent voice, heard by Elijah ( 1 Kgs. 19,13).<sup>24</sup> This so-called gentle breeze, as the Septuagint understood it, was in reality, however, much more prophetic. In reality, Elijah was battered into silence by the divine voice. This silence, cultivated in the school of Isaiah, ripened into the tranquil hope of the exiles. Silence became a mystical-prophetic path. I will try to describe the main phases of this way.

The first step on this way is: being perplexed, touched by the silence of death, as Elijah was on mount Horeb. It was a bold step in the Elian tradition to link the silence of the death of Israel with a new theophany of Yahweh (1 Kgs. 19,11-12). The divine voice following Breath, Earthquake, and Fire, battering Elijah into silence, announced a new presence of God. The beginning of the way is: to be touched deeply by the silence of death. Time and again, we see in the Bible, how people grow silent, suddenly hit by a disease (Ps. 31,18) or a disaster (Ez. 26, 15-18). Death renders one silent (Is. 6,5; 38,10). This silence is a completely natural organic reaction. It happens automatically, as when a person gets gooseflesh.

The second phase, however, is maintaining this spontaneous reaction. This occurs when the silence of being shocked becomes a ritual to be conducted. This silence has been performed by the friends of Job. Seeing how the life of their friend Job is marked by death they stop talking, they enter the space of silence. They tear their robes, throw dust upon their heads, and sit down in silence by Job. Remaining in silence is going into the depth of life, which is death. Remaining in silence is living speechless through the crisis of death. A great deal happens in this silence, as we can hear in psalm 39, cited by the Rule. The psalmist remains in a furnace of silence in which all false illusions and fixations are melted down (Ps. 39,3-4). This is not the end of the way.

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<sup>24</sup> See K. WAAIJMAN, *Elia*, Nijmegen 1985, 17-19; 64-69.



The third phase is: quiet expectation. The furnace of silence, emptying my soul of every illusion, leads me to a place where I become imbued with the awareness of my own nothingness (Ps. 39,5-7). I am neither externally nor internally able to give stability to myself. The only One who can give my life solidity is God. Apart from God 'my world is nowhere' (Ps. 39,6). The transient creature I am turns from within to the Source of my life: 'In You alone I hope' (Ps. 39,8-9). The furnace of silence is inwardly transformed into the quiet glow of expectation: 'In silence I wait for the One who wills my deliverance' (Lam. 3,26). The furnace of silence transforms us even more deeply. For though my fixations were already melted away and my trust in God had already been born, it was still *my* quiet expectation that sustained me. I was still clinging to *my* lack which *I* projected on Him. Dare I admit that God could possibly be quite different from what *I* am silently expecting Him to be? Here *my* yearning is touched at the roots and hence uprooted (Ps. 39,10-12). Now silence frees me from the fear of death. The focus of *my* silent expectation shifts to *Him*. This is the 'silence and hope' which the Rule recommends us, quoting Isaiah (Is. 30,15).

The last phase is becoming silent in God's silent presence. The one, who became anchored in God, has nothing left to lose. Silence has become his identity, his strength. He is the guest of God (Ps. 39,13). Everything, and particularly my own existence is a gift of God. I have nothing, but possess everything. 'Silence has become a celebration' (Ps. 65,2). It is silent triumph of a Presence which was no longer silently manipulated by my expectations. In this silent presence God is life in its imagelessness. Here the silence of hope of our Rule is rooted in God's incomprehensible and immediate Sovereignty.

If we interpret the silence of the Carmelite Rule from this biblical perspective, silence is a completely empty space for God's incomprehensible Presence.

## IX. MYSTICAL SILENCE

In the history of Christian spirituality silence is leading us to an imageless naked surrender to God who is imageless and inexpressible, completely in line with the biblical silence.<sup>25</sup> Silence is the night of

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<sup>25</sup> See for this mystical silence *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* 14 (1990), 845-851.

God's unknowable and unfathomable Presence. On this point the entire mystical tradition – from Gregory of Nyssa and Dionysius the Areopagite to Eckhart and John of the Cross – is unanimous. John of the Cross sings:

La noche sosegada,  
 en par de los levantes del aurora,  
 la música callada,  
 la soledad sonora,  
 la cena que recrea y enamora.<sup>26</sup>

Night, silence, solitude, music – these are the keywords which open up the empty space of silence for God, the incomprehensible present One, living as a silent music in my silenced soul.

Let us listen to John Climacus. In his *Ladder of Divine Ascent* (around 680) John Climacus described how the soul ascends in thirty steps to the love of God. Silence is the eleventh step.

Silence that is lived through  
 is the mother of prayer,  
 freedom from exile,  
 custodian of zeal,  
 a guard on our inner movements,  
 a watch on our enemies,  
 a prison of mourning,  
 a friend of tears,  
 a sure recollection of death,  
 a painter of punishment,  
 a concern with judgment,  
 servant of restlessness,  
 foe of licence,  
 a companion of stillness,  
 the opponent of dogmatism,  
 a growth of knowledge,  
 a hand to shape contemplation,  
 hidden progress,  
 the secret journey upward. (...)  
 Lovers of silence draw close to God.  
 They talk to Him in secret  
 and God enlightens them.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> JOHN OF THE CROSS, *Cantico Espiritual*, 5<sup>o</sup> ed., Madrid, Editorial de Espiritualidad, 1993, 586.

<sup>27</sup> JOHN CLIMACUS, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 11,3.5, New York 1982, 158-159.

This poem on silence is like a diamond reflecting the colourful richness of silence. It is a summary of what spiritual tradition says about the practice of silence. Looking to this beautiful diamond, I see four interrelated elements of the spiritual way, composing together the empty space for God.

Firstly, silence takes away from us noise and obsession, bondage and exile, threatening enemies and depressive powers. In one word: silence is freedom from destruction and death.

Secondly, silence brings to the fore our desire. As a mother she gives birth to our prayer, as a custodian she cares about our zeal, as a guardian she protects our drives, as a servant she helps our restlessness, she keeps us away from narrow-mindedness and dogmatism. In one word: silence frees our desire and our longing.

Thirdly, silence guides this process of longing and desiring, of praying and restless search. She paints our strivings. In her hands our discernment grows. She canalizes our mourning and tears. In one word: she is the companion on our journey toward God.

Fourthly, silence unities us with God. As a divine artist she shapes contemplation and opens up our mind to know God. She draws us passionately close to God. She is the one who speaks secretly with Him. She is so transparent that God enlightens us. In one word: the empty space mediates the fullness of God.

Understanding Carmelite silence from the spiritual perspective, we may say, that it is an empty space for God, it frees from every obsession, as Basil says: 'Silence makes it possible for us to forget old habits.'<sup>28</sup> Silence pulls me away from the world of fixed patterns. Silence is not only freeing me, it leads me to an imageless naked surrender to God who is imageless. The empty space of silence is the 'silent music' of contemplation as John of the Cross explains it: 'The soul calls this music "silent" because it is tranquil and quiet knowledge, without the sound of voices. And thus there is in it sweetness of music and the quietude of silence. Accordingly, she says that her Beloved is silent music because in Him she knows and enjoys this symphony of spiritual music.'<sup>29</sup> The empty space of silence remains empty and silent. This is precisely what silence does. This empty space is only filled by the music of God's silent presence.

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<sup>28</sup> Cited in *Silence*, in: *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* (1990), 838.

<sup>29</sup> JOHN OF THE CROSS, *The spiritual Canticle*, o.c., 472-473.

On the base of intertextual biblical references and on the base of our spiritual tradition we may conclude that silence in the Carmelite Rule is an empty space, waiting in hope on the imageless presence of God.

## X. CONCLUSION

Our objective was to interpret the exercises and virtues as presented in the Carmelite Rule, from the perspective of spirituality, that is: we try to understand, them as articulations of a spiritual process.

In order to explore this perspective, we chose three paradigms: meditation, work and silence. Using intertextual strategies (in our case: quotations from Scripture) and listening to the history of spirituality (in our case: the history of dedicated life), we discovered that the commandments on meditation, work and silence are invitations to enter a spiritual way.

If we understood these ways well, they lead Carmelites to an empty space: meditation on the Word of God ends up in a deep yearning for God's Presence, silence initiates us into an unconditional waiting for his Presence and work looks for a way of doing which receives God's unpredictable future. These are the empty spaces we discovered.

These empty spaces themselves, however, are not the end of the way. They are an empty space for God, in the double sense of the Word: as purity of the heart and *vacare Deo* they realize an unconditional openness for God, but at the same time they are for God the way he communicates himself in his imageless Presence.

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