

CARMELITE RETREATS, PAST AND PRESENT

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There has been a renewed general interest in retreats in recent years, including Carmelite retreats. Carmelite formators worldwide are feeling the need to develop retreats for those who want to be introduced to the Carmelite way of life.¹ This raises such questions as: Why a Carmelite retreat? Is there a Carmelite Retreat tradition? What makes a retreat a Carmelite retreat? In this article, we try to answer these questions and to present some recent developments.

1. CARMEL, A CALL TO CONTEMPLATION

The Carmelite tradition and its great spiritual teachers have always interpreted the Rule and the Book of the First Monks as expressions of the contemplative dimension of life.² All reform movements went back to this intuition of being called to contemplation. In the 1995 Constitutions and in the formation manual of the Carmelite Order the contemplative dimension is not 'merely one of the elements of our charism. It is the dynamic element which unifies them all'.³

¹ In Europe, Asia and the United States of America several members of the Carmelite Order shared the fruits of their retreat work in the following publications: IVAN CORMAC MARSH O.Carm., *The thirty-day retreat in the Carmelite Tradition*, Carmelite Media USA, 2013; *30 Days Carmelite Retreat Guide*, compiled and edited by SIRENIO JARANILLA O.Carm., Manila z.j.; SANNY BRUIJNS - CHARLÒ CAMILLERI, *Into the Living Flame of Love, Facing the Beloved, Mirroring Divine Love; a proposal for a Carmelite Retreat*, Institute for Spirituality in Asia, Manila 2015.

² JOSEPH CHALMERS, *Prayer and contemplation*, in Mount Carmel, April-June 2008, 30; FELIP RIBOT O.Carm., *The Ten Books on the Way of Life and Great Deeds of the Carmelites [c.1385]*, tr. & ed. By Richard Copsey O.Carm. Faversham/Rome 2005, Book I, ch.2, 9.

³ *Carmelite Formation, a journey of transformation*, Ratio Institutiones Vitae Carmelitanae, Rome 2000, nr 23.

Contemplation begins when we entrust ourselves to God, in whatever way he chooses to approach us; it is an attitude of openness to God, whose presence we discover in all things. Thus, contemplation is the inner journey of Carmelites, arising out of the free initiative of God, who touches and transforms us, leading us towards unity of love with him, raising us up so that we may enjoy this gratuitous love and live in his loving presence. It is a transforming experience of the overpowering love of God. This love empties us of our limited and imperfect human ways of thinking, loving, and behaving, transforming them into divine ways.⁴

A very clear explanation of the unifying power of the contemplative dimension of the Carmelite charism was presented by some Asian Carmelites at an international meeting of formators in Fatima:

The baker needs various elements like flour, eggs, sugar, oil, salt and vanilla to bake a cake. We as Carmelites have prayer, fraternity and service that embody our charism. The baker mixes all the ingredients. In the process of mixing all the ingredients get so integrated that the baker can no longer identify which of them is flour, egg, sugar, oil, salt or vanilla. Likewise, we Carmelites, in the process of integrating these three elements through transformation, cannot say which of them is prayer, fraternity and service. We cannot distinguish which one is primary and more significant for all of them are important. When the mixing is through, the baker puts the cake into the oven and waits. This is the contemplative aspect of our charism: the waiting and the temperature inside the oven are transforming the mixed ingredients into food. The temperature represents a continuous dialogue with the world in fraternity, service and prayer while we are in the process of transformation - tested by fire. Now the cake is baked ... and tastes delicious! At this stage, from the substantial time of waiting, the baker realises that it is the grace of God that inspired him and eventually willed the cake to taste delicious. And he sees himself as God's instrument. The people taste and experience the glory of God on earth in very simple ways.⁵

The Carmelite 'vita mixta' can also be presented in a very clear way in the image of baking a cake. Candidates are active with spiritual

⁴ Constitutions of the Order of the Brothers of the blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel/approved in 1995, Australia 1996. nr. 17; *Carmelite Formation, a journey of transformation*, Ratio Institutiones Vitae Carmelitanae, Rome 2000, nr 26.

⁵ *Carmelite Formation, Proceedings of the International Programme for Carmelite Formators*, Fatima 2001, edited by Alexander Vella O.Carm. and Günter Benker O.Carm., Rome 2002, 122-123.

exercises like praying, celebrating, sharing and working in silence. And they are passive in waiting for a personal encounter with the living God in doing the exercises. All spiritual exercises have the gift of contemplating God's loving presence as a focus. The need for Carmelite retreat work is born in the context of formation in the Carmelite way of life. Unaware of each other, formators in Germany, the Netherlands, Malta and the United States of America have developed Carmelite retreats for those who are called to a contemplative life in a Carmelite context.

For many, spiritual exercises are linked to Ignatius of Loyola, who developed his exercises in the 16th century. The focus of the Ignatian exercises is on the personal spiritual journey and as such they reflect the spirit of modern time. Right from their start the Ignatian exercises went 'viral'. Their impact on other religious orders cannot be underestimated. At a General Chapter of the Carmelites, held in Traspontine, Rome in the beginning of the 17th century an apostolic visitor presented the Carmelites the wish of the Holy See to practise the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises on an annual basis, according to Falco Thuis O.Carm., who served the Order as a Prior General from 1971-1983. The visitor proposed the Carmelites to add a paragraph into their Constitutions with this obligation. This proposition led to a lot of 'rumor in casa'. Among the friars there was a fierce resistance to introduce the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises because they were already meditating 'the Word of God day and night'.⁶ They considered their *Lectio Divina* as their spiritual exercise to live in God's presence and did not feel the need for an annual Ignatian retreat. This resistance was not strong enough and could not prevent the addition of a paragraph to the Constitutions with the obligation for the friars to have a retreat on a regular basis. One can consider this Chapter decision to be the start of a Carmelite retreat tradition on a formal basis. The real start of this tradition goes back to earlier days.

2. THE CARMELITE RETREAT TRADITION

The Carmelite retreat tradition goes back to the Middle Ages with the spiritual exercises of the Carmelite Rule.⁷ These exercises want to

⁶ Carmelite Rule, chapter 10.

⁷ See for a description of the spiritual exercises in the Rule of Carmel: KEES WAAIJMAN, *The mystical space of Carmel*, Leuven 1999.

cultivate a contemplative way of life. In the beginning of the 16th century a Carmelite, called John Pascha [\pm 1459-1539] developed a spiritual pilgrimage as an exercise to renew the contemplative dimension of one's daily life. This spiritual pilgrimage of 365 days is a meditation on the life of Jesus by making a virtual journey to Jerusalem.⁸ On the 'outward' journey one would reflect on the creation, the fall and on the life, suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Day 1-9	Creation, fall and redemption
Day 10-73	Infancy Gospel
Day 74-82	Preparation for public life
Day 83-176	Public life
Day 177-226	Suffering in Jerusalem
Day 227-236	From the Resurrection to Pentecost

On the 'return' journey one is invited to reflect on the Crucifixion, the last Judgement, redemption and paradise. It might be that our 'Way of the Cross' finds its source and origin in Pascha's meditations on Jesus, carrying the cross on his way to Golgotha.⁹

Day 237-261	25 sorrowful visions of Jesus from the Cross
Day 262-291	Difficult works, sorrows and poverty of Jesus, transformed into glory
Day 292-295	Last Judgement
Day 296-312	17 meditations on the redemption
Day 313-365	The joys of paradise, brought to completion in a Trinitarian perspective

The purpose of this spiritual pilgrimage was to familiarize oneself with the mysteries of faith on a daily basis. Every day had its own biblical reading, a visualization of the reading, meditation and one hour of silent prayer. The daily reading of scripture and the meditation were embedded in the prayer of the Divine Office of the church. Aside from this pilgrimage in the footsteps of the Lord, Jan Pascha also wrote a Pilgrimage of Our Lady, which aimed at an interiorization of

⁸ JAN PASCHA, *Een devote maniere om gheestelijck pelgrimage te trecken tot den heylighen lande als te Jherusalem, Bethleem, ter Jordanen*, Louvain 1563; *Onser Liever Vrouwen Pelgrimage*, Bibliothèque Royale de Bruxelles, ms 21714 (ms A).

⁹ HEIN BLOMMESTIJN, *Pascha*, in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, Tome 12, col.291.

the life, death and assumption into heaven of Mary, the Mother of God. In this Pilgrimage of Our Lady one would reflect on the life of Christ from a Marian perspective.¹⁰

In the wake of the Counter-Reformation and inspired by the Teresian Reform young French Carmelites like Philippe Thibault (1572-1638) and Jean de Saint Samson (1571-1631) wanted to return to the contemplative ideal of the Order. Through exercising the presence of God and through aspiratory prayer they tried to revitalise and reform the province of Touraine in the north of France. In 1604 the Reform of Touraine was formally endorsed by Prior General Sylvius at a provincial chapter in Nantes. In 1612 the Rules and Statutes were laid down and at the chapter of 1615 the Constitutions of the Observantia Strictior came into being. Jean de Saint Samson is a French Carmelite mystic and is sometimes called the French John of the Cross. His mystical texts were edited in two parts in 1651, in which we find his Ten-day spiritual exercises for the receiving of the Holy Spirit.¹¹ He left us thirty meditations for a renewal of the spiritual life during the ten days from Ascension to Pentecost. The structure and content of this retreat is:

- Day 1. On the excellence of the first Human Being, the Fall and the necessary repentance;
On the Nothingness of Humankind; On Sin
- Day 2. On the grace and mercy of God and the necessary repentance;
On the evil of sin and on the excellence of the sacraments;
On Confession
- Day 3. On Penitence both Sacramental and actual;
On Self Knowledge;
On human malevolence and on self-contempt
- Day 4. On the extreme misery of humankind both in soul and body;
On the hardness of the heart;
On the justice of God
- Day 5. On the endless love of God in our redemption;
On the excellence of human desire to love God;
On the actual and persistent esteem of God
- Day 6. On Death;
On Judgement;
On Paradise

¹⁰ JAN PASCHA, *Onser Liever Vrouwen Pelgrimage*, Bibl. Royale de Bruxelles, ms 21714 (ms A) and ms J. Van der Linden (ms B).

¹¹ JEAN DE SAINT-SAMSON, *Oeuvres Complètes* 2, Rome 1993, 15-186.

- Day 7. On Hell;
 On the true devotion;
 On Religion
- Day 8. On zeal;
 On religious poverty;
 On obedience
- Day 9. On Chastity;
 On Purgatory and the love for the martyrdom of religious;
 On Simplicity
- Day 10. On true and false modesty;
 On the authentic active life;
 On the delight in loving God

This Ten-day retreat, with three meditations each day, reveals the typical sixteenth and seventeenth century spiritual vision of human nothingness and contingency contemplated within the backdrop of God's omnipotence and benevolence. To appreciate and understand this retreat it is necessary to place it in the theological framework of the 17th century. The historical and spiritual context of the retreat is that of the French School, called 'École Française' which, starting from the salon of Madame Acarie, dominated the French Mystical Invasion up until the nineteenth century.¹²

Not only in France but also in Italy we see a renewal of the Carmelite life, especially in the city of Florence, where Mary Magdalen de Pazzi [1566-1607] had her mystical experiences in the midst of her community. Thanks to her sisters we have a written report of her *Revelations and Intelligences* which took place during the Liturgical cycle of the Pentecost Octave leading to Trinity Sunday. In this experience Mary Magdalen de' Pazzi shared twice a day meditations and reflections with her community, inspired by the biblical texts proclaimed during the Eucharist. The particularity of her meditations is both reflection on God's invitation to abide in his loving presence and our final goal of sharing in the fullness of the divine life. Charlò Camilleri developed a Ten-day retreat based on the texts of Mary Magdalen de' Pazzi.¹³

¹² Madame Acarie [1566-1618] was born as Barbe Avrillot. She married Pierre Acarie and after his death she became a Carmelite nun and received the name Marie de l'Incarnation O.C.D. At the end of the 16th century she organised faith-sharing meetings in her house to study the works of mystics like John Ruusbroec (+1381), Hendrik Herp (+ 1477 or 1478), Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. She is beatified in 1791.

In the Lower Countries the Reform of Touraine was implemented in the 17th century. The Prior Provincial of the Flemish province Martinus de Hooghe O.Carm. introduced the Constitutions of the Observantia Strictior in his own province in Flanders. He writes to the archbishop of Malines that, according to the witness of many, the Reform of Touraine can be compared to the Teresian Reform.¹⁴ Carmelites like Daniel a Virgine Maria and Michael of St. Augustine were great promoters of the Reform movement within the old branch of the Order. They left us some important books that show a great familiarity with the Carmelite tradition. Daniel a Virgine Maria published a summary of Teresa's teaching on prayer in his 'Konste der Konsten' (Art of Arts)¹⁵ and Michael of St. Augustine left us his treatises on the mystical life in his 'Inleydinghe tot het Landt van Carmelus' (Introduction into the Land of Carmel).¹⁶ It was Michael of St. Augustine, who developed a Carmelite retreat called 'Eensaemheydt van thien daghen' (Solitude of Ten Days). His retreat is structured as thirty meditations over ten days.¹⁷

Day 1. Of the Creation of Humankind; Of Sin; Of Death

Day 2. Of Judgement; Of Hell; Of Divine Glory

Day 3. Of Purgatory; Of Waste of Time; Of Contempt of the World

Day 4. Of Mortification; Of the Sacrament of Penitence; On the Sacrament of the Altar

Day 5. Of the Love of Christ; Of the celebration of Our Lady, the Saints and the Angels;
Of the Just opinion

Day 6. Of the Religious Vocation; Of Regularity; Of Perseverance in what is Good

¹³ SANNY BRUIJNS - CHARLÒ CAMILLERI, *Into the Living Flame of Love, Facing the Beloved, Mirroring Divine Love; a proposal for a Carmelite Retreat*, Institute for Spirituality in Asia, 2015, p.52-55.

¹⁴ "Volgens het getuigenis van velen doet zij niet onder voor die van de Ongeschoeiden." See Letter of 6 nov. 1627 of Martinus de Hooghe to the archbishop of Malines, quoted in G. MESTERS, *Geschiedenis der hervorming van Touraine*, in *Jonge Carmel* 8(1948), 23-78, hfst. 4.

¹⁵ DANIEL A VIRGINE MARIA, *Konste der Konsten*, Antwerpen 1669. A. DONNELLY O.CARM., *Prayer: The Art of Arts*, in *Spirit of Carmel* III(1955-1956) 5-9; 74-79; 146-152; 189-194.

¹⁶ MICHAEL A S. AUGUSTINO O.CARM., *Introductio ad vitam internam et fruitiva praxis vitae mysticae*, ed. G.Wessels, Roma 1926.

¹⁷ MICHAEL A S. AUGUSTINO O.CARM., *Eensaemheydt van thien daghen, oft Dertigh Meditatieen voor d'exercitien van thien daghen*, Brussel 1677.

Day 7. On Obedience; On Purity; On Poverty

Day 8. On Humility; On Meekness; On Fraternal Charity

Day 9. On Solitude; On Silence; On Prayer

Day 10. On God's Presence; On the Love of God; On Conformity with God's Will

The meditations focus on the exercises for acquiring a contemplative way of life. He introduces this Ten-day retreat with the words:

As every discipline knows its own teachers and literature, so the spiritual life knows its own means, customs, books, exercises and methods of prayer leading towards perfection. Thus, the contemplative life uses other means compared to the active life. Even more so, the mixed life demands for prayer and contemplation, and for the exercises of the active life when necessity calls for it. Love wants it and obedience prescribes it.¹⁸ (English translation by the author)

3. TITUS BRANDSMA AND 'THE TEN-DAY SPIRITUAL EXERCISES'

During the first decades of the 20th century, the Carmelites went back to the inspiration of the Reform of Touraine for their legislation as well as for their formation. In 1904, the Constitutions of the Ancient Branch were based on the Constitutions of Touraine. Indeed, the Constitutions of the Ancient Observance breathe the spirit of the Reform of Touraine.¹⁹ Brandsma developed his 'Naar Jezus met Maria. Tiendaagsche Geestelijke Oefening van overwegingen om op te stijgen tot haar innige Vereeniging met Jezus'. (To Jesus with Mary. Ten-day Spiritual Exercise of reflections to raise up to an intimate union with Jesus).²⁰ In the introduction to this retreat he writes:

This time now is for God and for our union with Him. This must be renewed and confirmed. We are dealing here with the highest and most noble side of our existence. God calls. God wants it. Jacques de Vitry tells us in his history of the crusades, about which he writes as a contemporary that a number of crusaders withdrew to Mount Carmel

¹⁸ 'Voorreden', in *Eensaemheydt van thien daghen oft dertigh meditatieën*, Brussel, 1677,

¹⁹ Edison Tinambunan,

²⁰ TITUS BRANDSMA, *Naar Jezus met Maria. Karmelretraites*. Met een inleiding door Sanny Bruijns O.Carm. en verantwoording door Rudolf van Dijk O.Carm. Boxmeer, 2008.

and wanted to hide in the caves and caverns of Carmel, and like industrious bees they gathered honey out of the contemplation of the mysteries, which once took place in the Holy Land for our salvation. They came together around the sanctuary of Mary in silent contemplation of the sublime truth that was revealed to us in that place. Following their example, let us go also into the solitude of Carmel to contemplate the eternal truths of our faith, and for a few days reflect on the meaning of this for our life.²¹ (English translation by the author)

The structure of his Ten-day Spiritual Exercises is:

Day 1	1st meditation	Introduction
Day 2	1st meditation	Elijah on Mount Carmel
	2nd meditation	Elijah feels abandoned
	3rd meditation	The Holy Trinity
Day 3	1st meditation	Offering of Mary in the Temple
	2nd meditation	Mary's engagement with St. Joseph
	3rd meditation	The message of the Angel to Mary
Day 4	1st meditation	Visit of Mary to her cousin Elisabeth
	2nd meditation	Mary and Joseph are looking in Bethlehem for a shelter
	3rd meditation	Birth of Jesus in Bethlehem
Day 5	1st meditation	Adoration of the shepherds
	2nd meditation	Adoration of the Three Kings
	3rd meditation	Offering of the Child Jesus in the Temple
Day 6	1st meditation	Flight into Egypt – Return to Nazareth
	2nd meditation	Finding of the boy Jesus in the Temple
	3rd meditation	The life in the small house of Nazareth
Day 7	1st meditation	Jesus and Mary at the wedding of Cana
	2nd meditation	Mary to Jesus on the Way of the Cross
	3rd meditation	With Mary under the Cross
Day 8	1st meditation	Jesus' Resurrection. Appearance to his mother Mary
	2nd meditation	The Ascension of Jesus
	3rd meditation	Mary with the Apostles united in prayer at the Upper Room
Day 9	1st meditation	Mary on the way of the cross
	2nd meditation	The passing away of Mary
	3rd meditation	Mary's glorification on earth
Day 10	Final reflection	Closing. Dedication to Mary
Day 10. Final reflection for the Renewal of the Vows		

²¹ Ibid., 4

Titus Brandsma follows the life of Mary and Jesus, using biblical and apocryphal texts. In comparison to the programme of the Spiritual Exercises of Jean the Saint Samson and Michael of S. Augustine, this retreat is more biblical in nature.

4. CARMELITE RETREATS AFTER WORLD WAR II

The spirit of the Reform of Touraine found its way in Brenninger's *Directorium Carmelitanum Vitae Spiritualis*.²² This formation manual was published in Latin in 1940 and an English translation followed in 1951. This manual was used by Carmelite formators from the fifties until the seventies of the last century. It was promoted by Prior General Kylian Lynch,²³ who was conscious of the fact that the 17th century's Reform of Touraine had given a new élan to the Order up to the Carmelites in the 20th century. During a visitation in the Carmelite Monastery of Boxmeer in the Netherlands he tried to revive the tradition of the Carmelite retreat by going back again to the Ten-day retreat.

July 27+28, 1954

Visit of the Most Reverend Father General, Revmus P. Kilianus Lynch, in the company of his Assistant A.R.P. Jacobus Melsen.

*Opening of the Visitation with a neatly prepared speech in Latin by the Very Reverend Father General. One of the decrees is, that the annual Retreat must last again for 10 days.*²⁴

His successor Prior General Kilian J. Healy was also aware of the importance of the Reform of Touraine. He studied the methods of prayer in the Directory of the Reform of Touraine.²⁵

²² G. BRENNINGER, *Directorium Carmelitanum Vitae Spiritualis praesertim Novitiis instruendis*, Romae 1940.

G. BRENNINGER, *The Carmelite Directory of the spiritual life*, translated from the Latin, Chicago 1951.

²³ The Irish Carmelite Kylian Lynch served the Order as a Prior General from 1947 to 1959.

²⁴ According to the annals of the monastery of Boxmeer of 1954 it was decided in July 1940 to shorten the retreat to one week: *It has been the decision of the Prior Provincial and the wish of almost all the friars to shorten the time of the spiritual exercises. From now on the retreat will start on Sunday evening and be closed on Saturday with a mass and a renewal of the vows.* See: Annals of the Carmelite convent of Zenderen in the Archives of the Dutch Province in the Dutch Carmelite Institute at Boxmeer.

²⁵ The American Kylian Healy was a Prior General from 1959 to 1971. He wrote a dissertation on: *Methods of Prayer in the Directory of the Carmelite Reform of Touraine*. Roma 1956. Second printing: 2005.

In the 20th century, it became clear that Carmelite formation could not escape the spirit of the time that gave a great emphasis on the moral and ascetic aspects of the spiritual life. While in the Middle Ages prayer was practiced above all as an act of piety and union of the spirit with God, in the 16th and subsequent centuries it was more and more seen as a way of becoming a good Christian by sanctifying oneself. By over-emphasizing their own efforts there was little attention for the gift of contemplation in the lives of the candidates. Before Vatican II the spiritual life was mainly a cultivation of one's own piety. After the Council the Carmelites went 'back to the sources' and rediscovered the 'primitive rule of Carmel'.²⁶ This post-Vatican II return to the sources resulted in a new vision on Carmelite formation, including the Spiritual Exercises. In several Carmelite provinces formators started to study the Carmelite retreat tradition and developed retreat models for formation purposes. One of the questions they face is 'what makes a retreat a Carmelite retreat?'

5. WHAT MAKES A RETREAT A CARMELITE RETREAT?

In the first place the Carmelite context of a retreat gives it its Carmelite character. When the retreat leader is a member of the Order and the retreat house is run by a Carmelite community with a daily prayer rhythm, this will have an impact on the way the retreat is experienced by the retreatants. Secondly, the focus on the contemplative or mystical dimension can be seen as a Carmelite approach. Although contemplation is the focus of every Christian, this retreat reflects aspects of the Carmelite school of contemplation, like 'meditating day and night on the Word of God' with the inspiration of the Carmelite mystics. Meditating on the Word of God is done with the *Lectio Divina* method and in this the senses, the intellect and the heart, as well as the emotions of the soul, are put to work in this reading method. *Lectio Divina* brings the one who is praying to contemplative consciousness. By using texts from Carmelite mystics to explain the biblical texts, the contemplative dimension of these texts can reveal itself. Thirdly, Carmel deals with 'contemplationem aliis tradere' and not that much with 'contemplata aliis tradere'. Carmelites

²⁶ The so called 'primitive rule' is the Rule of Innocent (1247). Teresa didn't accept the second mitigation of the Rule of Pope Eugene IV in 1432 where it was written that at certain times one was allowed to walk in the neighbourhood of the convent.

do not focus on communication the fruits of their contemplation, but they want to communicate how to contemplate. A Carmelite retreat is by design mystagogical because it is the intention of the retreat that people within the context of their life story become aware of the hidden presence of the incomprehensible God and the working of his Spirit. Mystagogy may be understood as the accompaniment of someone who is initiated in the divine mystery or as the art of midwifery. Mystagogy deals with the opening-up and interpreting of what is happening in the secret of the human soul. A Carmelite retreat is mystagogical because it focuses on raising an awareness of God's presence by the work of the Holy Spirit.

6. A CONTEMPORARY CARMELITE RETREAT STRUCTURE

In the Constitutions of 1995 we read that 'solemn profession shall be preceded by approximately one month of spiritual preparation'.²⁷ By inserting this recommendation the Constitutions follow the advice of a document of the Congregation for Institutes of consecrated life and societies of apostolic life.²⁸ The Carmelite Formation manual follows the Constitutions by saying:

*Candidates shall spend this month in prayer and recollection, reflecting and meditating on the importance of this decisive and crucial act by which religious consecrate themselves forever to God.*²⁹

In the two North American Carmelite Provinces, a thirty-day retreat is part of the formation process since 1997. This retreat serves as 'a spiritual instrument to help Carmelites journey as pilgrims in Carmel'.³⁰ Afterwards, the retreatants comment:

What I take from this retreat is a sense of God's grace and love, and that is what I hope to be able to utilize in my ministry with others. I keep

²⁷ Constitutions of the Order of the Brothers of the blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel/approved in 1995, Australia 1996. nr. 156.

²⁸ *Potissimum Institutioni*, 2 February 1990; *Directives on formation in religious institutes*, nr. 64.

"Some institutes have provisions for a more intense period of preparation prior to perpetual profession, which includes a withdrawal from one's usual occupations. This practice merits encouragement and extension."

²⁹ *Carmelite Formation: A Journey of Transformation*, Ratio Institutiones Vitae Carmelitanae, Rome 2013, 79, nr. 112 Preparing for solemn profession.

³⁰ IVAN CORMAC MARSH, p.4.

seeing my thirty days of Carmelite retreat as God's grace for all my life onward.

The retreat was a wonderful experience which helped solidify my relationship with God and the Carmelite community.

While on retreat, what I realize about the Carmelite who ministers is that if he is to be a good minister, he must be a prayerful religious.³¹

In some European provinces, a contemporary structure of a Carmelite retreat is offered to candidate-members of the Carmelite Family. The following structure originated in the context of Carmelite programs for initial formation, particularly from the experience of discernment processes during retreats and days of recollection leading to the decision on whether to embrace Carmelite life or not. Thus, it could be stated that these schemes are the result of a phenomenological and experiential approach in leading candidates for Carmelite life to grow and mature in their call to follow Jesus Christ in consecrated Carmelite life. This 21st century proposal of Carmelite Spiritual exercises, is the result of a joint effort to integrate the models used by Sanny Bruijns (Netherlands), Günter Benker (Germany) and Charlo Camilleri (Malta) in the formation programs of their respective provinces. Rooted in the Carmelite tradition we developed in our own national context a 'carmelite retreat' and discovered that our retreat models were very similar in their approach and in their underlying theory. This gave rise to the idea of putting together the various experiences and forms of 'spiritual exercises'. The intent is to use a Carmelite system of discernment and prayer built upon a period of three weeks, as an alternative to the much more popular model of the Ignatian four weeks. It stands to reason that the "weeks" are not to be understood rigidly as three periods of seven days, but as three thematic stages leading to a progressive journey of vocational discernment. Thus, in line with the Carmelite tradition, these three periods can be seen as "stages" which can be flexible, shortened or lengthened to the needs of the candidate for Carmelite life and the purpose of the exercises. The basic structure of three stages follows the traditional division of the spiritual journey with a purgative, illuminative and unitive stage. This tripartite division exerted a lasting influence on the Christian tradition and it was endorsed also by such Carmelite mystics as John of the Cross. Each stage is then divided into three other steps aiming at reaching the goal of whatever stage one is in.

³¹ Ibid., 149-159.

6.1. *Into the Living Flame of Love*

The first stage of this retreat is focused on opening oneself for 'the Living Flame of Love' (purgation). The aim of the first stage is to delve into self-reflection and to dispose oneself to undergo purification from the experienced divine love and to help the retreatant to come to terms with one's own fragility and sinfulness. At this stage the retreatant will embrace fragility within the self and in the relationship to God and others. However, self-knowledge on this level is only possible by accepting God's generosity. During this first stage the retreatant is encouraged to ponder on the way one is corresponding or replying to the God-given gifts of life itself and of the Christian and Carmelite life as a call from God to arrive at human fulfilment. Whilst meditating on the call to live in the presence of God, the retreatant is encouraged to become aware of the way how God's love touched one's own life and to realize how and why one did not always collaborate with God along the way. Therefore, this first stage aims at enabling the retreatant to develop an integrated vision or understanding of one's own personal history in the light of God's love. The texts for personal meditation help the person to grow in gratitude and to ask the gift of healing and forgiveness to be able to remove interior and exterior obstacles from one's heart. Spiritual guidance, the sacrament of reconciliation and other forms of coming to terms with one's life might be helpful to the retreatant in the healing areas of one's own personal history. As an aid toward this end one should reflect also on the fragility of life itself experienced in brokenness and death against the backdrop of everlasting life in Christ.

Day 1. Awakening in God

The awakening in God is experienced as an awareness of birth and rebirth. Part of the vocational experience is the notion of being created in God's image and likeness. Life is experienced as a gift. The gift of Christian life and the gift of Carmelite life are also received. The friendship with God needs articulation and sharing in one's social and ecclesial context. The focus is on the receptivity of the human-divine identity.

Day 2. Embracing His gifts

Embracing the gift of contemplation out of a desire to be loved and to love is a lifelong process. Through this process, we are awakened to the awareness of being the objects of God's love. This love penetrates the whole being, including the shadows and the dark areas of our personalities. The need is felt for healing.

Day 3. Healing from selfishness

Facing our true self will lead us to face death, extinction, personal and social sin. This pushes us to surrender ourselves to undergo the process of healing by letting go of our resistances, unhealthy attachments and self-centeredness. In a process of discernment purification will take place.

6.2. Facing the Beloved

After meditating on oneself, and one's own fragility, in the light of divine love, and with the aim for which God created us, the retreatant will hopefully experience the interior sentiment of the need for salvation. This leads to a second stage, called 'Facing the Beloved' (illumination). At this stage the retreatant will have experiential knowledge of the fact that nothing can separate one from God's love in Christ. Thus, during this second stage the retreatant is encouraged to reflect and focus on the person of Jesus Christ while contemplating the Beloved in the hidden mystery which was revealed to us through the Incarnation of the Word, the public life of Jesus and the mystery of his death and resurrection. A meditation on the human-divine life of the incarnated Word will enable the retreatant to deepen one's intimate relationship with Christ, and to choose him as our life model by living in conformity with him. The aim of this stage of the retreat is to open oneself to God's presence as it is revealed in the face of Christ. Thus, one should approach this stage with a proper disposition, with a humble heart and an openness to receive divine illumination.

Day 4. Dwelling into the mystery

Pondering on the Word of God we become receptive to God's presence. We grow in contemplation which enables us to mirror the divine life.

Day 5. Ascending into the Cloud

In contemplation we experience the darkness of faith while being overshadowed by the Spirit, who transforms us and enables us to interiorise the life of Christ in the ordinariness of our life. Contemplation enables us to enter a silent and solitary life, in which we experience the overflowing love of the divine presence in daily life.

Day 6. Hiding in God with Christ

Embracing the mystery of the Incarnation in daily life makes one transparent to the presence of divine life in the human person. Interiorization is the fruit of making the life of Jesus one's own. God's enlightening presence becomes visible in our lifestyle and the choices we make, opening the way of contemplation for others.

6.3. *Mirroring divine life*

The third stage is called 'Mirroring divine life' (union). At this stage of the retreat one is encouraged to be aware of the new way the risen Lord is present in the community of believers and in people of good will. We do not live our Christian lives on our own but in communion with God's friends on earth and in heaven. In the life of the church, we do not only receive the grace of God but we contribute to the establishment of God's reign on earth through our witness and given charisms. The texts chosen for personal meditation aim at helping the retreatant to meditate on the significance of the paschal mystery and the consequences brought about by this salvific event. One can say that Christ lives in his church and is present in the world to the extent his disciples live in his footsteps. Journeying with others until the final coming of the Lord, are the virgin Mary, the prophet Elijah and the Carmelite saints. They journeyed before us along the mystical path towards divine Union. As we journey in their footsteps we are nourished by the Word of God and by the Eucharist.

Day 7. The mystical way

Surrendering to the will of God leads to a leap into the desert of love. One is overwhelmed there by a spirit-filled emptiness. This leads to an awareness of life in the Spirit, which is a source of hope. The mystical way transforms our purely human vision of the world into a spiritual vision, which becomes the source of new life.

Day 8. Journeying with others

In this new life we are supported and encouraged by the lives of such Carmelite mystics as John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, John of St. Samson, Mary Magdalen de Pazzi, Edith Stein and Titus Brandsma. Journeying themselves into the desert, they became witnesses of God's presence in the joys and sufferings which are part of the human condition.

Day 9. Love in the heart of the church

The spiritual journey empowers us to discover our true self and to become brothers and sisters who accompany others on their journey. Mystical contemplation transforms our broken-heartedness into mirrors of divine compassion and merciful love.

For the three stages an ample selection of biblical and mystical texts from the Carmelite tradition are given to help the retreatant in the practice of *Lectio Divina* underlying the retreat. Each day will centre around a morning and afternoon *Lectio Divina*-exercise starting with a reading of a chosen biblical text. In prayerful silence, then, one explores

in oneself which word or words from the text resound most in the one's own life experience. This is followed by a short meditation by the retreat companion or retreat leader to allow the spiritual meaning of the text resonate with the retreatant's life experience. This schematic structure leaves ample room for flexibility in its application. The space allowed to dwell upon the stages and steps can be expanded or shortened to days or weeks in accordance with the needs of the retreatant and the purpose of the retreat itself. Thus, in a ten-day retreat a whole day can be dedicated to each step. This allows for a stage to be covered over three days. However, when the structure is used for the preparation to solemn profession, a whole week can be dedicated to a stage.

7. JOURNEYING WITH MARY AND JESUS

With this contemporary retreat structure and the traditional Carmelite retreats in my mind I designed and developed a retreat model with the title 'Journeying with Mary the Mother of Jesus'. The central goal of this Marian retreat is to appropriate for oneself the Word of God while following the way of Jesus and the way of Mary.³²

- Day 1. Introduction
- Day 2. The conception of Mary; the conception of Jesus
- Day 3. The visitation; the birth of Jesus
- Day 4. The presentation in the Temple; the Flight to Egypt
- Day 5. The Finding in the Temple; the silent years
- Day 6. The public life; the last supper
- Day 7. The Way of the Cross; the Crucifixion
- Day 8. Easter; the Ascension of Jesus
- Day 9. Pentecost; the Assumption of Mary
- Day 10. Final reflection for the Renewal of the Vows

In the past years I worked with this retreat-model in a very flexible way. As a formator I offered it as a Ten day retreat. As a spiritual director I worked with this model on an individual basis for a Thirty day retreat. And on a diocesan level it meets a growing desire for spiritual renewal among priests and parish-leaders. A Carmelite retreat can be offered as a way to open ourselves to Gods love and to be transformed into instruments of this Love.

³² SANNY BRUIJNS, *Weg van Jezus en Weg van Maria, een karmelretraite als een vorm van geestelijke begeleiding*, Boxmeer 2007.