

Vita Spiritualis

KEITH J. EGAN (ed.), *Carmelite Prayer: A Tradition for the 21st Century*. 2003, pp. x, 243. Paulist Press, 997 Macarthur Boulevard, Mahwah, N.J. 07430. ISBN 0-8091-4193-0. £13.00.

This modest volume is a collection of papers presented at the Carmelite Forum held in Washington, D.C., in 2000, as Keith J. Egan, the editor, puts it in his foreword, by “a group of scholars whose lives of deep faith and knowledge of the Carmelite classics are truly inspiring” (p. 2). Keith J. Egan also points out in his own paper entitled ‘Carmel: A school of Prayer’: “This book of essays is an effort to share interpretations about contemplative prayer gained by members of the Carmelite Forum through their study of Carmelite classics” (p. 15). The classics referred to here are the works of Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross and Thérèse of Lisieux, with one major contribution by Constance Fitzgerald on Edith Stein and minor references to Titus Brandsma and John Soreth. The contributors are Carmelites, religious and lay, from both branches of the Order, the Ancient Observance (O.Carm.) and the Discalced Carmelites (O.C.D.). The volume is dedicated to Ernest E. Larkin, O.Carm., in recognition of his immense lifelong contribution to Carmelite spirituality.

Whenever the word Carmel is mentioned, it is a fair bet that it is associated with contemplative prayer in the minds of most people. In fact, three of the greatest doctors of spirituality in the Church are Carmelite: Teresa of Jesus, John of the Cross and Thérèse of the Child Jesus. While the spirituality of Thérèse of the Child Jesus attracts many people by its apparent simplicity, sometimes seekers of a deeper spirituality are put off by an undeserved reputation that Teresa of Jesus and John of the Cross are too deep or too difficult to understand. In fact, as Egan points out in this book when quoting Iain Matthew, “prayer in the Carmelite mode... contains an impulse towards simplicity” (p. 8). The aim of this book is indeed to make the works of these three mystics accessible to all. The book also occasionally draws our attention to the thinking on prayer of Edith Stein, John Soreth and Titus Brandsma.

This work is eminently successful in making the rich spirituality of these three Carmelite masters of spirituality accessible to modern readers. It is written in clear, easy-to-understand, contemporary language thus adding a new dimension to the depth of thought and feeling in the writings of these masters. The papers approach Carmelite spirituality from various aspects. Roland E. Murphy, in his usual scholarly and clear manner, examines ‘The Spirituality of the Psalms’. Although Murphy rightly says that “we have no reason to think that Carmelites of old approached the Psalms any differently than their contemporaries” (p. 36), it is also true that the psalms and scripture in general were the mainstay of their spirituality as is evident from the Rule of Carmel. The essays throughout make the link between Carmelite prayer as

found in the three Carmelite masters of spirituality and its significance and relevance to our times. This is brought out especially in the essay by Donald W. Buggert. Margaret Dorgan approaches Carmelite prayer from the aspect of its Christology, Keith J. Egan from the aspect of solitude, Kieran Kavanaugh and Kevin Culligan from the aspect of modern psychology. Vilma Seelaus looks at the transforming power of prayer as found in the three masters of spirituality and Ernest E. Larkin finds strong similarities between the prayer of Carmel in Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross and Thérèse of Lisieux and age-old yet modern systems of prayer such as Centering Prayer, Christian Meditation and *Lectio Divina*. The whole is completed by a beautiful vignette by John Welch on Thérèse of Lisieux and the imagery of the eternal shore in her works. As Egan again puts it: "The prayer of Carmel is then rooted in Christ, shaped by the holy scriptures and lived within the church and is oriented to a contemplative stance before God, waiting for God to do God's work so that one may be transformed into union with God in love" (p. 12). By the time we read these papers, we acquire a clear image of the identity of Carmelite prayer for the 21st century and realise how relevant it is for all those who today are thirsting for a deeper spirituality and, in particular, for Carmelite spirituality. Throughout the work, the Carmelite mystics in practical ways are made relevant to our times.

Every Carmelite, religious and lay, as well as all who wish to pray more deeply, should read and digest this book. It is an invitation to a present day understanding of the Carmelite classics. It is also an excellent aid to all those involved in formation work, religious and lay, within the Order.

ANTHONY SCERRI, O.CARM.

This is a book of immense value for all in search of a deeper prayer life. A collection of essays by members and associates of the American Carmelite Forum, it distils into twelve chapters the accumulated wisdom and experience of the eight hundred-year-old Carmelite tradition of prayer. Not surprisingly, the three Carmelite doctors of the church – Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross and Thérèse of Lisieux – adorn the attractive cover. But other Carmelite figures are also accorded their rightful place as the book unfolds, including Edith Stein, Elizabeth of the Trinity, Titus Brandsma, John of St Samson and Lawrence of the Resurrection.

In 'Carmel: A School of Prayer', Keith Egan, professor of theology at Notre Dame University, introduces the main themes of Carmelite prayer and gives a résumé of some Carmelite classics, recounting their perennial value and their openness to reinterpretation with each succeeding age. This chapter serves as a prelude to the book. It is followed by a splendid exposition of 'The Spirituality of the Psalms'; here, the late renowned Carmelite biblical scholar, Roland Murphy, takes us behind the language, symbols and literary forms of these ancient hymns of praise, faces the problems for the modern mind in trying to pray them, and elucidates the many methods of interpreting them.