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CARMELITE SPIRITUALITY IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

The intent of this reflection about the Carmelite Spirituality in the contemporary world is to show that it is an attempt to live the Christian vocation in the path of love through the practice of theological virtues which is not in tune with the contemporary world of production and consumption, but at the same time can be accommodated without much difficulty due to the contemporary understanding of science. To the contemporary world of technology and production spirituality may seem to be unhinged and unrealistic. We would like to deal with the Carmelite spirituality and its vital importance in the contemporary world, in the context of doubt about the sustainability of the very possibility of a discourse on spirituality in the contemporary world which is dominated by consumerism and relativism. Consumerism is considered in this context because, in a consumerist society even religion has become a thing to be consumed. If spirituality and spiritual experience become something to be consumed, then they lose their mystery element and their lasting and transforming value and reduce spirituality to a thing which gives only a momentary satisfaction. In fact spirituality, as affirmed by St. Paul, is a “life in the Spirit”. The ultimate aim of this life in the spirit is union with God in Christ through the Holy Spirit. A consumerist approach to spirituality, in fact relativizes spirituality. When the transcendental and divine aspects which lead to transformation are forgotten, spirituality becomes one good among many others. The affirmation of Fiona Gardner, “living spirituality is not about being removed from life but about being able to live comfortably with uncertainty while engaging with life in a more creative and holistic way”¹ shows the pragmatic and reductive approach to spirituality.

¹ F. GARDNER, *Critical Spirituality: A Holistic Approach to Contemporary Practice*, Wey Court East 2011, p. 21.

But even in this way of understanding spirituality, the above mentioned qualities of spirituality, namely the mystery element, the lasting and transforming value are present. The mystery element is present because the ability of spirituality to help people to live comfortably is not fully explicable. By presenting spirituality as a mode of living comfortably, Fiona considers it as a lasting value in life. Besides this, spirituality is also transformative, because it helps one to be creative and holistic. What is not explicitly mentioned is the transcendental aspect which is in fact the very essence of spirituality.

This affirmation of mine has sense if we consider the fact that at the beginning of the new millennium, interest in spirituality remains remarkably high. This is evident from the increasing number of books written on spirituality, the ever growing popularity of courses on religion and spirituality, and from the growing number of business leaders recognizing the importance of spirituality in the boardroom and work site. Again it can be observed that more church members are seeking spiritual direction, medical professionals are increasingly aware of the power of prayer in the healing processes, scientists speak more readily about the mystery dimension of the universe.² Thus the dichotomy between the reality and mystery, what can be proved through demonstration and that which goes beyond any rational explanation, science and religion, seem to be crumbling. What is more important is the pragmatic aspect. This is evident in the steady increase of interest in exploring how to incorporate spirituality at work: both from those who have a religious affiliation and those who don't, but have a sense of the importance of the spiritual for themselves and/or their clients. In the west while the rate of attendance at most churches is in decline, interest in the spiritual seems to be increasing. Growth in interest in spirituality is very evident in many surveys conducted in different countries. According to the statistics in 2000, in the UK, 27 percent said they believed in a personal God, but only 8 percent called themselves atheists and nearly 70 percent classified themselves as spiritual as opposed to religious. In the United States it is reported that the national polls show that 40 percent report weekly attendance at church or synagogue, but nearly 95 percent of the US population answer yes to the question, "Do you believe in God?" and 66 percent say they agree or mostly agree with the statement, "Prayer is an important part of my daily life".³ There are many reasons for this change. People want to have a holistic approach to their lives, they want to give more importance to personal wellbeing and a sense for life than be carried away by the powerful current of materialism.

² Cf. J.J. BACIK, *Catholic Spirituality Its History and Challenge*, New Jersey 2002, p. 3.

³ F. GARDNER, *Critical Spirituality: A Holistic Approach to Contemporary Practice*, p. 7.

In our reflection on Carmelite Spirituality in the contemporary world, I would like to present Carmelite Spirituality against the background of post-modern society and post Einsteinian science. Let us try to see why these aspects are important.

POSTMODERNISM AND ITS VIRTUES

Even though postmodernism has various characteristics, I would like to concentrate more on the question of consumerism and relativism. Any talk of consumerism reveals two aspects of human being: man's technological capability to produce and his never satisfied desire to consume. In the first we have intellect which is concerned about the do-how; and in the second, the will, which has almost degraded to the level of a pleasure-seeking faculty by transforming man to a desiring machine. In fact production and consumption are two sides of the same coin. One is linked with the other. The desiring machine is coupled with the producing machine.⁴ To keep the flow of production and consumption going, the producer has to produce not only objects but also the desire to consume.

In this process of production, consumption and progress, what is more important are the intellectual virtues. Intelligence, scientific knowledge (*epistèmè*), wisdom and even prudence are used in view of *techne*, the understanding of being that leads to production; and, "making", understood as a producing or leading forth by the hand, as abetting, is technology in practice.⁵ When intellect is reduced to knowing-how, there is an ever increasing production that leads to endless consumption that is produced by the never ending quest for the new that comes from a will reduced to a desiring faculty seeking momentary happiness. In all these what we see is the triumph of the Nietzschean idea of the necessary shift from reason to passion, from intellect to will, from Orpheus to Dionysius.

In this idea of life as a continuous chain of production and consumption one feels secure. This is because the present and the future fall under the range of our powers, possibilities and potentialities. Here things are manageable because they are proportioned to our knowledge. It is enough to be self-possessed, bright, best and strong to be successful in this competitive world. This is the sphere of the human virtues; prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance,

⁴ Cf. G. DELEUZE; F. GUATTARI, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis 2000, p. 5.

⁵ Cf. R. ROJCEWICZ, *The Gods and Technology: A Reading of Heidegger*, New York 2006, p. 65.

which are like for hinges keeping human life in place.⁶ This is the Aristotelian *phronimos*, the practically wise man who has *phronesis*, which is a form of knowledge, and it is *phronesis* that enables him to make correct decisions about what he should do. What the *phronimos* is excellent at, because of his *phronesis*, is practical wisdom. But when faced with mystery, that which goes beyond his power and potentialities, he feels unhinged, reaches his limits. When one is exposed to something that cannot be managed or foreseen, it is then that one is overwhelmed and experiences the limits and the possibility of the impossible. It is here that the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity enter in to enable us to face the impossible. We believe that which seems to be incredible, hope when all seems hopeless; we dare to love even when love is impossible. Moving from Aristotelian virtues to theological virtues is moving from what is possible to what is impossible, from security to adventure. This is the sphere of spirituality, a journey to the incredible, insecure and impossible.

CARMELITE SPIRITUALITY AND THEOLOGICAL VIRTUES

It is in this context we want to present the Carmelite saints and their emphasis on theological virtues. We may understand the greatness and actuality of their contribution, if we compare the unending search of contemporary man for transitory satisfaction and enjoyment with the search of everlasting happiness seen in the lives and writings of Carmelite saints. They were able lead such a life and hold such a world view because of their understanding of the human being as image of God and as called to union with God in Christ through an ever growing transformation under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Due to this transcendental dimension the modern man should realize that life is not just a process caught between the never ending chain of production and consumption. He has to go beyond the virtues of the contemporary world which is limited to knowing-how in the process of production and self-enhancement, to union with God, the ultimate end of human existence. For this another set of virtues is need.

It is here the great saints of Carmel come forward with another set of virtues, faith, hope and charity, as a way which constantly transforms human being in the direction of the very origin of these virtues, God. The great role of the Carmelite saints in this world view is very relevant. The very goal of a virtuous life is to become like God (cf. CCC 1803). Along with the intellectual virtues they speak about the importance of theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. These virtues relate directly to God. They dispose Christians to live in a re-

⁶ Cf. J.D. CAPUTO, *On Religion*, London 2001, p. 12.

relationship with the Holy Trinity. They have the One and Triune God for their origin, motive, and object (cf. CCC 1812).

St. John of the Cross takes particular care to explain how the theological virtues are necessary to prepare and purify the faculties of the soul, understanding, memory and will for union with God. The theological virtues are necessary because understanding is perfected in the darkness of the faith, the memory in the emptiness of hope; and likewise the will must be buried by withdrawing and detaching every affection so that the soul may journey to God. This is done so that one may walk securely on this spiritual road. The reason is simple and clear. The soul is not united with God in this life through understanding, nor through enjoyment, nor through the imagination, nor through any sense whatsoever; but only through faith, according to the understanding; and through hope, according to the memory; and through love, according to the will (cf. A II, 6, 1). St. John of the Cross highlights very much in his writings the role of theological virtues in the life of a soul. According to him the soul in this life is united with God only through the practice of the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. The theological virtues are closely united with the divine life and divinize the actions of man, elevating them to the “actions of Christ”. That is why they are called “theological” or “divine virtues”. “These virtues void the faculties: faith causes darkness and a void of understanding in the intellect, hope begets an emptiness of possessions in the memory, and charity produces the nakedness and emptiness of affection and joy in all that is not God” (A II, 6, 2). Faith renders the person capable of knowing and judging reality as Jesus knows and judges it; hope orientates all his desires to where Jesus is waiting for him, i.e., to the glory of the Father; and charity makes him love what Jesus loves and as Jesus himself loves. St. John of the Cross attaches a good deal of importance to the practice of the theological virtues because their growth marks the growth of divine life in a Christian, whether in his intimate relationship with God or in its more external and visible manifestations.

The theme and content of the doctrine of St. John of the Cross is the attainment of so high a state of perfection, spiritual marriage, which requires the purification of all the imperfections and the stripping of the old self (Eph. 4:22–23). “This spiritual marriage is incomparably greater than the spiritual betrothal, for it is a total transformation in the Beloved, in which each surrenders the entire possession of self to the other with a certain consummation of the union of love. The soul thereby becomes divine, God through participation, insofar as is possible in this life” (SC 22, 3). The whole spiritual path, according to John, is nothing other than continuous growth in the theological virtues. Thus the concern is not the empowerment of man or his wellbeing, rather it is losing oneself so that Christ may live in and through him.

St. Teresa too insists on the practice of virtues in the spiritual journey both in the ascetical and mystical stages. She dedicates chapters 11–13 of her *Life; Interior Castle Mansions* 1–3; almost all the teaching of the *Way of Perfection* and many of her letters to it. According to Teresa, the determined determination of the will to turn to God is to be accompanied by the struggle to do good and practice virtues. Apart from the trilogy of indispensable human virtues – love, detachment and humility – which she proposes in the *Way of Perfection* (4, 4) she considers the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity as the height of the virtues. They pertain to the essence of the Christian life. They are important as the foundation of the ascetical life. Yet they reach their highest tension in the heart of the mystical life.⁷ This is evident in her definition of prayer, “mental prayer, in my view, is nothing but friendly intercourse, and frequent solitary converse, with Him Who we know loves us” (L 8, 5).

St. Teresa does not deal with theological virtues as a particular theme. But they are found explicitly in her explication of spiritual dynamism. Faith appears as the basis of the ascetical life, under the form of humility, which is the fundamental theological attitude before God. Hope relates to confidence in the mercy of God, experienced in the conversion and knowledge of oneself, but above all in the hope of enjoying Him perpetually (eschatological dimension of hope). Charity is present in all the stages of spiritual life; it is the basis, the path and the culmination of the Christian spiritual dynamism in which the new state of man in Christ is expressed. In a way we can say that, faith and hope include a personal relation of love with Jesus here and now, and at the same time a waiting to enjoy Him eternally in the definitive encounter in glory. This is the nucleus of Teresian spiritual experience.⁸

Theological virtues are not disconnected virtues, rather they are three operative principles which implicate mutually. We cannot have love without faith; we cannot have faith without hoping for something after death, and hope cannot exist without translating it into love. In this perspective we can say that theological virtues are the indispensable “three in one” virtues which facilitate our Christian existence.⁹ Their mutual implication can be found in Teresa’s understanding of prayer as a “friendly intercourse, and frequent solitary converse, with Him Who we know loves us”. Since faith is realized in prayer and prayer is the expression of faith, without love no faith is possible. In the same way one who has hope understands all that happens in his life as a part of his loving

⁷ Cf. T. ÁLVAREZ, *St. Teresa of Ávila 100 Themes on Her Life and Work*, Washington, D.C. 2011, p. 92.

⁸ C. GARCÍA, *Santa Teresa de Jesus, Nueva claves de lectura*, Burgos 1998, p. 125.

⁹ Cf. G.F. SANZ, *Fe esperanza y caridad*, “Vida Religiosa” 91(2001), p. 22.

relation with the Lord. In this sense all the three theological virtues are focusing on the relation of love with God.

According to St. Paul among these three theological virtues it is love that remains forever. So love can be taken as the definition of religion. This may be why Jesus asked Peter “Do you love me?” before making him the rock on which the Church is built. Love is the only thing that leads to endless transformation. When one is in love with Jesus, Jesus becomes for him the door that opens him to the mystery of God. This aspect is evident in all Carmelite Saints. The love that bound Elizabeth of the Trinity to Jesus was so deep that she felt God had made a chasm in her heart which only God could fill it. St. John of the Cross understood the real value of that love. That is the reason why he was able to say *nada* to everything else which is not God. St. Teresa understood the preciousness of that love that was the reason she was able to say “*solo Dios basta*” So the real religion is love. So the unhinged life of love, hope and faith is saltier and more passionate and more worth living than that of Aristotle’s well-hinged *phronimoi* who swing back and forth effortlessly and make it all look easy (even if it takes a lot of training).¹⁰

CONCLUSION

To sum up our reflection on the relevance of spirituality in the contemporary world let us consider present day physics with a pragmatic view to show that there is no reason in keeping spirituality aside because of its mystery element. Cartesian and Newtonian science led to the fabulous capacity of mankind to manage things. Science based on the Newtonian classical mechanics claimed that we have understood the secret of nature. All those who followed him one way or another, followed this concept of science and all technological progress of this time is based on his principles. It is the possibility of determinability and measurability in science that made religious experience something unacceptable due its ambiguous and mysterious nature.

But the Einsteinian and post Einsteinian physics is exposing the subjective element in science, challenging its claim to pure objectivity. According to Niels Bohr it is wrong to think that the task of physics is to find out how nature is. Physics concerns what we can say about nature. Therefore the world as we present is a construction of our perception, of our sensation, of memories. In the same way spirituality is our basic quest for cognitive understanding of ultimate meanings and values in life. We seek explanations for how we have come to be who and what we are. Spirituality is also a felt-sense; an inner, intuitive knowing

¹⁰ Cf. J.D. CAPUTO, *On Religion*, p. 18.

of who we are; a deeper awareness about place in relationship to the world of our senses; and an awareness of how we fit into a vaster world beyond our physical selves and sensory reality.¹¹ Modern physics, the most basic of material sciences, appears to be bringing us full circle back to a mystical view of the cosmos based on the uncertainty principle in modern physics. Exploration of quantum physics of the essence of physical reality appears to be verifying many of the observations that mystics have been reporting for millennia. Uncertainty and unpredictability are not weakness but they show the greatness of reality whether it is physical or spiritual and thus become the common element present both in the contemporary understanding of science and in traditional spirituality.

STRESZCZENIE

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Duchowość karmelitańska we współczesnym świecie

We współczesnym świecie mówienie o duchowości i praktykowanie jej stało się bardzo powszechne. Nawet w biznesie i w systemie opieki zdrowotnej istnieje coraz większe zainteresowanie duchowością. Jednak bardzo często okrojone i pragmatyczne rozumienie duchowości degraduje ją do techniki dobrego samopoczucia. W dzisiejszym świecie konkurencji i technologii, cnoty intelektualne są zredukowane do wiedzy praktycznej na temat, jak zwiększyć produkcję, a wola stała się maszyną, która pożąda dalszego rozwoju produkcji i konsumpcji. Gdy intelekt jest ukierunkowany na „wiedzieć jak”, człowiek jest w stanie kontrolować wiele przestrzeni życia oraz czuje się pewny i dobrze osadzony. Tymczasem duchowość karmelitańska opiera się na praktyce cnót teologicznych, które wiodą przez niewiedzę w ciemnościach wiary, przez pustkę posiadania w nadziei, przez brak przywiązania do wszystkiego, co nie jest Bogiem, w miłości. Życie oparte na tych cnotach zostaje jakby wytracone z równowagi i niepewne, ale jednocześnie otwiera człowieka na tajemnicę, która nie jest obca współczesnemu światu, w którym nawet nauka utraciła swój charakter absolutny.

Tłumaczenie z j. angielskiego Grzegorz Firszt OCD

¹¹ Cf. D.J. BENOR, *Personal Spirituality: Science, Spirit and the Eternal Soul*, New Jersey 2006, p. 7.