

Methods of Prayer: Reflections on a Recent Book

Carmelites will welcome with enthusiasm Father Kilian's *Methods of Prayer*, the first volume in the "Vacare Deo" series of the Institute for Carmelite Studies in Rome. It is not only a scholarly dissertation of historical interest; it is practical and pertinent for every Carmelite, since it concerns the proven ways of the Reform of Touraine to achieve the contemplative ideal of the order.

The book is a study of the methods of prayer taught in the fourth volume of the official *Directoires des novices* of Touraine. The full title of this volume, usually abbreviated to *Méthode* for the original or *Methodus orandi* in the Latin translation, expresses its content: *Méthode claire et facile pour bien faire oraison mentale et pour s'exercer avec fruit en la presence de Dieu*. Three sections divide Father Kilian's study: the first gives the historical background, the second, the *Méthode's* teaching on meditation, mixed prayer, and the practice of the presence of God through aspirations; a final section investigates sources and parallels.

Section One is both historical and doctrinal. The story of the reform is briefly recorded. The material of this first chapter was originally drawn from many sources, but its publication has been anticipated by Miss Bouchereaux's *La Réforme des Carmes en France et Jean de Saint-Samson* (1950). Father Kilian's contribution, therefore, lies more in his development of the spirit and nature of the reform than in the presentation of its historical facts. He devotes the second chapter to the thesis that the reform was a return, not merely to monastic discipline, but to "the primitive spirit of Carmel—a return to a life that was primarily (but not exclusively)

contemplative wherein the spirit of solitude, silence and prayer would reign supreme" (p. 16). One might wonder why this question is brought up in a study of methods of prayer. The answer is obvious. Only in terms of this orientation of the order to the contemplative life can Touraine's teaching on prayer be appreciated. Every aspect of its methods of meditation and aspiratory prayer is related to the first obligation of the institute, "to attend and stand with God in solitude, silence, and continual prayer" (p. 18). A final chapter in the first section contains the hitherto unwritten account of the authorship of the *Directoires* and establishes Bernard of St. Magdalen as principal author, with the role of Mark of the Nativity reduced to editor.

The analysis in Section Two reveals a body of doctrine that is as timely and applicable today as it was for Touraine. Indeed the same methods are taught in our present *Carmelite Directory*. Since extant copies of the *Méthode* are unavailable for most Carmelites, we are especially indebted to Father Kilian for the details of his synopsis here. His clear summary of essentials is an excellent, brief treatise on the three forms of prayer. It would be worth reading if only for the points of prudent advice which he underlines from the *Méthode*, such as the liberty to be allowed in choosing or changing one's method (though for meditation, the novice is urged to school himself first in the proposed method), the superior value of resolutions and affections, the avoidance of force or artificiality in cultivating aspiratory prayer.

The final section studies the influences outside and within the order that have shaped the *Méthode's* teaching. This involves a

comparative study of the reform's methods and those current in seventeenth century France. It is a difficult task, handled competently, but for the average reader the detailed comparisons and delicate judgments of influence or mere similarity might appear too technical. Yet such an investigation has much to recommend itself. It clarifies concepts and places the Touraine method in proper perspective. While this method of meditation depends on St. Ignatius and his school for certain techniques or on Louis of Granada for the predominance of the will and affections, while its lines parallel St. Francis de Sales' method or that of the Discalced Carmelites, it is Touraine's own, because it adapts and orders common elements of mental prayer toward one purpose, the attainment of an intense, affective union with God. The discussion of John of Saint Samson and Dominic of Saint Albert deserves special notice. Their development of aspiratory prayer adds a great deal of positive doctrine to the elementary considerations of this phase in the *Méthode*. For them aspiratory prayer sums up the true spirit of the order, the affective, continual occupation and conversation with God.

The problem of the contemplative life

From this conspectus one can see that this book does not directly attack the "problem" of the contemplative life. Yet perhaps more than one reader will approach it from this viewpoint, seeking here away to resolve the "opposition" (which is imaginary) or the "tension" (which is real) between the contemplative and active life. What light does the book throw on this difficulty?

From a study of the authorities cited and the author's commentary the following conclusions can be drawn on the nature of Carmelite life according to Touraine. For Carmelites prayer is not only a means, even the most important one, to Christian perfection; it is a proximate end, the primary

and principal goal. Prayer—actual, affective union with God—must thus become the atmosphere which a Carmelite breathes, the spirit which animates his every action, the form in which his love of God will primarily express itself. The order is contemplative, because this goal is not subordinated, i.e., ordered, to apostolic activity, as is had, for example, in the Jesuits. Certainly the active apostolate is also a goal and an obligation, and for this reason we are a mixed order. But the second purpose of the order remains secondary; it is not even of coordinate importance. Thus the Constitutions of Touraine refer to "internal conversation with God" as that which "beyond all doubt constitutes and makes the true Carmelite" (p. 17). "Prayer, silence and solitude are the principal engagements for the Carmelite"; all else is secondary and "accessory," so that the only valid reason for entering the order is to become "a spiritual man, a man of prayer" (p. 18).

This was not, and is not, a new doctrine, except perhaps in the vigor and singleness of purpose with which it is proposed. Nor is there anything new in the problem it raises of fulfilling this vocation in the demanding and distracting milieu of the active life. The double life has been a problem endemic to the order since its transplantation from the simplicity of Mount Carmel.

One might say that there is only one answer to the problem, and it is the one developed inspiringly in Father Kilian's book: the Carmelite must be a man of prayer.

Speculative answer

But it seems that, while this is the basic answer, it is not the complete one, at least from a speculative point of view. Admittedly, speculative definitions and distinctions are not going to make us one whit better Carmelites. But they should be able to clarify our obligations and make our task

intelligible. Toward this end I would like to propose a distinction suggested by certain passages of the book, but not developed to any great length or applied to the present problem.

The distinction is between the contemplative life as a means and as a goal. In the first meaning the contemplative life is a state of life adapted to fostering continual occupation with God, a *modus vivendi* or way of life that promotes and leads to contemplation. It includes prayer and silence and solitude as means to an end. In fact it includes all the exercises of the interior life, both community and private, that are directly ordained to union with God.¹ According to Abbot Butler the designation of such activities as the “contemplative life” has been traditional in the Church down to fairly modern times. St. Francis de Sales, for example, after listing a number of spiritual exercises, makes this comment: “Those who practice these exercises are called contemplatives, and the occupation itself a contemplative life.”² Today, however, the term contemplative life seems to have taken on a more restricted meaning, one that I would define as the contemplative life in the sense of a goal achieved. In this sense contemplative life is synonymous with contemplating or contemplation. According to the distinction, then, the contemplative life (the means) is ordered to contemplation (the goal).

Now contemplation is surely prayer, and generally a high degree of prayer attained only after long practice. It is, moreover, relative, and like terrestrial perfection (with which, as we shall see presently, it is identified), it can always become more perfect. In its lowest common denominator the term contemplation is applied to any mental prayer in which the soul has moments of actual union with God, culminating points of knowledge and love. But it is more accurate to call contemplation only those moments in mental prayer when the soul gazes with actual charity on God; any *discursus*

which would precede this act of affective charity is properly meditation. Thus today spiritual writers generally make a sharp distinction between meditation and contemplation, reserving the latter term for higher degrees of prayer, whether acquired or infused, which consist almost entirely in this simple gaze of love. With this sense of contemplation, then, there is no anomaly in the statement: prayer (a means) leads to prayer (the end). As a means, every prayer merits, impetrates and disposes for an ever deeper knowledge and love of God. But every mental prayer worthy of the name is also its own end, insofar as it is the expression itself of one’s knowledge and love of God. As an end, prayer is the actualization of our habitual union with God that is had through sanctifying grace and the virtues. It is an act of affective charity and, therefore, essentially identified with perfection itself.³ But only relatively perfect, this act can always be purified and increased, to which purpose the contemplative life ministers. Contemplation, then, which is nothing else than actual affective charity, momentary or prolonged, is like the distillate of many acts of the contemplative life. It is this contemplation I would identify with Carmel’s purpose, occupation with God (*vacare Deo*), internal conversation with God. This is the “contemplative spirit” that ideally is to pervade a Carmelite’s life, to be so frequently expressed as to be continual.

In fairness to Father Kilian it must be repeated that the distinction as developed here is only suggested in his book. Many remarks that he makes presuppose the distinction between means and end; at least once he equivalently defines both members in the way we have done above:

The reformed religious of Touraine... actually followed a mode of life that was conducive to contemplation, and they were indoctrinated from their novitiate year to dispose themselves to receive the gift of infused contemplation. This contemplative mode of life in itself, regardless of whether the religious

attained contemplation, is sufficient to demonstrate that the religious of Touraine lived according to the primitive spirit of Carmel (p. 20).

Does this mean that Father Kilian subscribes in his book to our distinction? In spite of the argument which could be drawn from this passage, it is difficult to say. In the opening pages of his introduction he uses two phrases, contemplative life and contemplative spirit, and without forcing his words we can identify them with the contemplative life as means and goal respectively. Elsewhere, on the other hand, he seems to use both phrases interchangeably, identifying both with solitude, silence, and prayer. In a word, he does not seem to be writing with this hard-and-fast distinction in mind, being intent on the fundamental issue of Touraine's spirit in general and the exact delineation of its methods of prayer. It is hoped, however, that at least he will not reject our development and its application to be made presently.

Application of the distinction

If we agree, as we must, that the contemplative life is the *pars principalior* of Carmelite life, we must also agree that in fact the contemplative life must have primacy both as means and as goal. This primacy, however, will be realized differently in each viewpoint. The end has to do with intention. As a goal, contemplation will be first in the Carmelite's intentions: an evermore perfect prayer, an ever-higher expression of affective charity will be his aim, his preferred expression for his love of God. His other aim, too, the apostolate, the secondary end of his order, will also express his love of God, but because of the particular spirit of his order this laudable and necessary ambition, in itself a not inferior expression of love of God, will take the second place. First and foremost, the Carmelite will want to become a man of prayer; he will orientate his life toward "the contemplative spirit of the Order—continual

and intimate occupation and conversation with God" (p. 174).

This intention satisfies his obligation with regard to the contemplative life as goal. Its practical effect will be felt in the contemplative life as means. The individual Carmelite, by the demands of his vocation, must put the principal emphasis on the exercises of the interior life. How much is "the principal emphasis?" Not the least of the consolations of religious obedience is the fact that the kind and measure of the means to an order's end are fixed by rule, constitutions, and superiors. The individual religious need but conform to this pattern and he will be putting the stress where it belongs. It is not a question here of willing the end, which allows no measure or limitation, but of using certain, determined means. These means are the rule of life set down, the *formula vitae*, for example, which St. Albert handed down and which has been further specified by superiors. In practical terms the Carmelite's duty to strive after contemplation is fulfilled by faithfulness to community exercises and to the necessary private practices, especially the presence of God. To say this is not to minimize his exalted vocation. The fervent Carmelite will bend every energy to achieve perfect contemplation, because his desire for this goal knows no bounds. But he will do this first in the framework of his concrete obligations of obedience—this much he must do. What he does over and above this, "the Lord himself, when he returns, will reward" (*Regula*, ch. 18).

The norm, then, for the proper emphasis is objective. Because it is concerned with means, it does allow exceptions, both for a whole community and for an individual, the task of determining the justice of such exceptions in given circumstances being the difficult and delicate role of prudence. But if this norm is followed, the Carmelite's emphasis on the contemplative life will not be mere lip service or velleity. The emphasis

need not be a quantitative one on formal prayer, except, to repeat, in intention. *Continual* occupation with God in the midst of activity is possible but, it would seem, only for the highest mystic. We aim at this high goal. But meantime, far from being a hindrance, the active ministry can and should contribute, not only to the fulfillment of our secondary goal, but even to our primary one. The apostolate is bound up with self-sacrifice; it provides genuine inspiration. This is not to deny the tension involved in trying to live a double life. It is merely to underline the fact that, even in trying circumstances, the primacy of the contemplative life can be maintained by Carmelites of good will.

Perfection and state of perfection

Perhaps the reader has recognized the relationship between the ideas proposed in these reflections and traditional Catholic doctrine concerning the state of perfection and perfection itself. The proposed distinction is little more than an application of the latter doctrine to a specific form of religious life. It may help to recall that doctrine briefly.

Religious life is a state or way of perfection. This means that religious life, by making the way easier through the evangelical counsels, is peculiarly adapted to the acquiring and achieving of Christian perfection. It does not mean that every religious is actually perfect, or even that a religious as such is actually more perfect than the layman who does not belong to the state of perfection. In other words religious life points to actual, internal perfection as its goal and only justification.

A man who enters this state pledges to strive after perfection. What does this require of him? It demands that he make perfection his goal, unlimited perfection like that of the heavenly Father (Matt. 6:48), a love of God that is total (Matt. 22:37-39). Indeed the willing of this end is an obligation for every Christian; the religious re-affirms his will by

undertaking special, supererogatory means (the vows) to achieve the goal. But his acceptance of the call of Christ does not mean that he must already possess perfection, except in the minimal sense of being in the state of grace—less than this would contradict the genuineness of his willing perfection as his goal. But the striving after perfection does demand the fulfillment of his rule; its prescriptions are the means he must take to implement his will to be perfect. Nor need he do more, because to fulfill his rule is to strive after perfection.

It is obvious that this doctrine has found application throughout our discussion. But can we validly apply to the contemplative life what is said of Christian perfection? It seems that we not only can, but that we must. The Carmelite life, as one form of religious life, must involve the same basic relationship between perfection as, a state and as an end. Contemplation—acts of affective charity—is the principal, concrete expression of Christian perfection for the Carmelite. This goal must specify his daily religious life, making it a contemplative mode of life, as we have explained.

But does this conception agree with Touraine? This is a large, historical question, far beyond the limits of a review that has already exceeded its original intentions. This much, however, we can say: none of the documents of Touraine cited in this book would deny the distinctions we have drawn. Some statements at first sight might seem to contradict our propositions. According to Touraine's Constitutions, for example, "internal conversation with God ... constitutes and makes the true Carmelite." The former is thus the formal cause of the latter. We, on the other hand, have constantly referred to internal conversation with God as contemplation, the final cause of Carmelite life and the Carmelite. But there is no contradiction here. Without entering into a philosophical discussion about the relations between final and formal causes in human acts, we can say

simply that Touraine rightly demands at least the minimum of contemplation in the Carmelite and makes a degree of contemplation the formal constituent and criterion of a Carmelite's stature. True, the Carmelite strives after contemplation, perfect contemplation, but by this very token he must already contemplate in some basic degree, just as the person striving after perfection, perfect charity, must possess at least the minimum of charity, or the state of grace.

Another example of a possible objection to our presentation is the emphasis of Touraine and Father Kilian on the primacy of prayer in Carmelite life and the insufficiency of mere monastic discipline, as if to say that Carmelite life demands more than the faithful observance of the regular life. Above, however, we have made the obligations of the contemplative life as means co-extensive with the Rule and Constitutions and dispositions of superiors. But again there is no contradiction. Monastic discipline, as a shell of external observances, even perfect observances, is not enough. They must be animated and inspired by the soul of Carmelite

life, a strong, effective desire for a more perfect affective union with God.

These, then, are reflections that occurred to one reader of Father Kilian's book. Some may think that they have taken an excessively legalistic and uninspiring turn. Perhaps they have. Admittedly, speculative considerations such as these give only light, not fire, and in the ascetical struggle we need the latter as much as or more than the former. Father Kilian's *Methods of Prayer* has the great merit of supplying both light and fire. His study should stir every Carmelite to renew and increase his desire for a greater spirit of prayer and to assess his own present methods of achieving this goal. The reflections are unpretentiously submitted as a tribute to this book; it is hoped that they will not preclude other communications of *Sword* readers on this important subject, including clarifications or corrections of ideas presented here. May we close as we began, congratulating the author and recommending this excellent study to every Carmelite.

¹ These exercises would be prayer in all its various forms, such as the liturgy, meditation, the practice of God's presence, vocal prayers, the rosary, exams, even conferences, days of recollection, spiritual reading, retreats. Such exercises are certainly contemplative and directly fulfill the continuous meditation commanded by chapter 7 of our rule. But what of the other actions of the day, the sum of which, materially speaking, certainly takes up its greater part? Such actions are community meals and recreation, theological studies in preparation (remote or proximate) for the apostolate, works of like apostolate like sacramental administration, teaching, preaching, etc. These activities, I believe, are part of the active life, although a strong case might be made for the contemplative nature of some of them, such as theological studies. The opinion of the Salmanticenses is that these latter are part of the contemplative life. All of them, in any case, can be and should be related to the contemplative goal, so that they become contemplative *quoad modum*, much as natural acts ordained by charity to a supernatural end are supernatural *quoad modum*. The acts are so ordained when, negatively, they are not allowed to "de-emphasize" the exercises of the contemplative life, and positively, when spiritual profit, such as the mortification or inspiration they frequently offer, is drawn from them and they are performed with the good intention and practice of the presence of God.

² St. Francis de Sales, *The Love of God* (St. Louis: Herder, 1930), with introduction by Abbot Butter, O.S.B., p. 6.

³ Healy, *Methods*, 39, note.