

Carmel: From the Desert to the Garden

by Janetze Hart, T.O.C.

In March 2008, the theme of our annual regional lay Carmelite retreat was *Symbols of Carmel*. Our retreat master, Rev. Francis Amodio, O. Carm., Provincial Delegate for Lay Carmelites for the North American Province of St. Elias, commented that one of the Carmelites in formation at his community had chosen the Carmelites because we “have no founder”. Unlike the Franciscans, Benedictines, and Dominicans, we do not have a single founder that we are known by. Later, someone commented that we were actually founded by a “community”, the hermits on Mt. Carmel in the 13th century. This strikes me as somewhat ironic that the monastic communities were founded by single individuals and our eremitical order was founded by a community. Later in the evening as the symbol of Mt. Carmel itself was discussed, our retreat master quipped that Mt. Carmel is our foundation, that we were founded by “dirt”. I was not sure if he said this in jest or seriously, yet it seemed to me to have a lot of truth. Dirt is a common feature of two important symbols of Carmel, the desert and the garden. I would like to reflect on our foundation of dirt and the difference in the barren sand of the desert and the fertile soil of the garden.

The primary characteristic of dirt is its lowliness and its “dirtiness”. The book of Genesis tells us that we are indeed founded from dirt. “The Lord God formed man out of the clay of the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and so man became a living being.”¹ But for the breath of God, we would be just dust. Each Ash Wednesday we are reminded of this: “For you are dirt, and to dirt you shall return.”² Isaiah also tells us that we are humble clay to be molded as the potter desires.³ The good news in all this is not that we are dirt, but that despite our being lowly dirt, with God’s touch, he can make glorious works of us. When Jesus healed the man who was blind from birth, he used the ordinary dirt of the ground and added his divine spittle to make a healing mud to rub on the man’s eyes.⁴ And it is Christ’s writing in the dirt that softens the hearts and turns away those who are about to stone the adulterous woman.⁵ In each of these passages, the goodness comes from God’s action, not the humble materials he employs. In this there is a message of hope: Although without God’s grace, I am lifeless dust, with his grace, God can do good work in and through me.

The primary characteristic of the desert is barrenness – nothing to sustain life, no consolations or comforts. It is hot in the day and cold at night. The desert is place of total reliance upon God. It is like our souls before God has breathed his life and grace into us. The ground in the desert is sandy and devoid of organic nutrients. There is no water which all life needs to survive. Thus when the Israelites wandered for forty years in the barren wilderness, they were sustained only by God’s providence, first with manna and quail and then water at Meribah. The desert is central to Hebrew Scriptures history because of God’s care for his chosen people there. The psalmist draws upon the desert for his imagery of the soul longing for God and some of these are key passages in the Divine Office. In Week I Sunday morning prayer, we hear “O God, you are my God, for you I long; for you my soul is thirsting. My body pines for you like a dry, weary land without water.”⁶ And from Tuesday’s night prayer, “Like a parched land my soul thirsts for you.”⁷ In the New Testament; the desert is the place where Jesus goes to fast and pray as he begins his public ministry. Carmelite tradition speaks of the desert being the place of the heart, a place of solitude where we can dwell with God. But I do not think it is just about being *alone* with God. It is about *relying solely* upon God. When we are in the dark night of the soul, like the desert, we have nothing to sustain us or console us and are left to rely on God’s mercy and action. If we receive consolations or grow in grace it is not through our wandering in the solitude of the desert, but through God’s patient providence in the waters of the sacraments and his breath of grace upon our desert souls. There is comfort in this, for as we acknowledge our emptiness and own inability and barrenness, then we are open to God’s work in our souls. My prayer in the desert is one of humility and trust.

¹ Genesis 2:7 (All scripture quotes are from New American Bible translation unless otherwise specified)

² Genesis 3:19

³ Isaiah 45:9

⁴ John 9:6

⁵ John 8:6

⁶ Psalm 63:2 (Grail Psalter Translation)

⁷ Psalm 143:6 (Grail Psalter Translation)

The primary characteristic of the garden is its fertility – life giving, nourishment and growth – whether a vegetable garden or a flower garden, a garden is the epitome of fertility. It is the opposite of the desert. The references to gardens in scripture abound. The obvious examples are Eden in the Hebrew Scriptures and Gethsemane in the New Testament, but a garden is also the setting for Song of Songs, which is literally the greatest of Songs. This book portrays poetically the love between God and his people as a two lovers in a garden. “Let my lover come to his garden and eat its choice fruits.”⁸ The book of Psalms begins with a description of the contemplative with fertile, verdant imagery: “Happy the man... whose delight is in the law of the Lord and who ponders his law day and night. He is like a tree that is planted beside the flowing waters, that yields its fruit in due season.”⁹ As Carmelites, we know that the name “Carmel” means “garden” and Nave’s topical concordance defines it as “a fertile and picturesque mountain in Palestine.”¹⁰ Carmel is referenced poetically in the Song of Songs¹¹ and Isaiah¹² and is also the historical setting for key events in Hebrew Scriptures such as when Elijah has a showdown with the four hundred fifty prophets of Baal showing that the God of Israel is the one true God.¹³ Just as the desert is the soul apart from God, the garden is the soul with God’s loving action. He nourishes, cultivates, and weeds the gardens of our souls to make a beautiful place from what was just dirt. My prayer in the garden is one of Thanksgiving for God’s blessings upon us.

And what is the difference in the sand of the desert and the fertile earth of a garden? Mostly, it is the organic matter, living things that have died and enriched the soil with their nutrients as they decay. Before there is life giving fertile soil, there must first be death. How does God make the desert of my soul into a beautiful verdant garden? It is with the sufferings and losses of this life. He takes the refuse and compost of our life and plants beauty and goodness and glory. The theology of the Cross teaches to value the opposite of what the world values. There is good in all things for those that love God. In addition to the good soil the other obvious difference between the garden and the desert is water. Even with good soil, a garden will not thrive without water. And thus God waters us with his grace. It is no coincidence that water, so rich in symbolism is used in many aspects of our liturgies.

When we stop and spend time in God’s presence, in solitude and silence, we allow God to water and tend the garden of our souls. We pause in our day knowing that we are just dust and can do nothing but sit patiently with him while he tends to our souls planting, pruning, watering. He works in his mercy and love to save our souls like the gardener in Jesus’ parable works to save the barren fig tree with loving cultivation¹⁴. As Isaiah writes of Israel’s deliverance: “The desert and the parched land will exult; the steppe will rejoice and bloom. They will bloom with abundant flowers, and rejoice with joyful song. The glory of Lebanon will be given to them, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon; they will see the glory of the Lord, the splendor of our God.”¹⁵ Thus the Messiah will transform the desert to a garden. The way of the desert hermit is the way to the garden of Mt. Carmel.

⁸ Song of Songs 4:16

⁹ Psalm 1:1-3 (Grail Psalter Translation)

¹⁰ *Nave’s Topical Bible, A Digest of the Holy Scriptures* by Orville J. Nave, Moody Press, 1974

¹¹ Song of Songs 7:6

¹² Isaiah 35:2

¹³ 1 Kings 18:17-46

¹⁴ Luke 13:6-9

¹⁵ Isaiah 35:1-2