

Merton and the Early Carmelites: Voices Crying in the Wilderness

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In *Disputed Questions* Merton wrote: 'The vocation of the *person* is to construct his own solitude as a *conditio sine qua non* for a valid encounter with other persons.' (1) The role of contemplatives and hermits, he argues, is not to turn their backs on the world but to work for the establishment of the Kingdom of God in the world informed by the new and higher perspective gained through their prophetic vision. In an essay on 'The Primitive Carmelite Ideal' he commends the early Carmelites as 'a solitary, contemplative and apostolic group, with a primitive and "prophetic" character – a voice crying in the wilderness to prepare the ways of the Lord' (2).

One of the texts on which his essay is based is Felip Ribot's *Institution of the First Monks* (or as it is more properly known 'The Ten Books on the Way of Life and Great Deeds of the Carmelites'). The recent publication of the first complete English translation of this work since the fifteenth century seems an appropriate moment to reconsider Ribot's text and Merton's evaluation of it (3). We know a great deal more about Ribot and his text than when Merton wrote in 1960 (4). Ribot (d. 1391) was the prior provincial of Catalonia. He claims that his role in the work was to compile and edit a number of early Carmelite documents, to which he adds quotations from the Fathers and some comments of his own. His main

aim is to provide a history of the order, though (as in Merton's case) later interest in the text has been particularly in those sections devoted to advice on the contemplative life. The longest text, which occupies nearly three-quarters of the whole work, purports to be by John, 44th Bishop of Jerusalem, who died in 412. However, modern scholars agree that Ribot is almost certainly the author rather than the editor of most of his texts, though it is possible that underneath Book I, the most mystical of the books, lies some earlier text which he reworked. Since the *Institution* was largely accepted as authentic until the twentieth century, it has played a major role in defining Carmelite identity, including that of Teresa, who read it in a Spanish translation.

Ribot traces the origin of the Carmelite order to Elijah and his followers (5) and offers Elijah as the model of the contemplative life. Particular devotion was paid to the Virgin and to John the Baptist. Mary was the patron of the Order and, it was argued, gave them their name: 'Brothers of the Blessed Virgin Mary'. Early fourteenth century Carmelite writers such as Baconthorpe claimed that Elijah prophesied the Virgin birth in the little cloud of rain which rises from the sea (1 Kings 18: 44). Ribot extends this by a symbolic reading of the whole incident, in which Elijah instructs his boy to tell Ahab to

mount his chariot and depart lest the rain prevent him, and 'the heavens grew dark, overcast with clouds, and the wind blew and there was a great downpour of rain' (1 Kings 18: 45) (6). The chariot signifies the Son of God, the heavens signify his power, the wind is the Holy Spirit and the cloud signifies the Virgin, in whom Christ became incarnate; the rain is the fountain of grace which his incarnation initiates. Mary is thus linked to Elijah both because she follows him in her pure virginity and because showers of grace fell from heaven through her. Carmelites were distinctive in their use of separate cells, which honour and imitate Mary, who received the Angel Gabriel alone in her room. Her pure body was deemed to be worthy to receive God's son, and so, Ribot suggests, purity of body and heart are necessary to prepare the heart to love God and to receive the love of Jesus. He has Jesus address his beloved:

All these things I urge on you for this reason, that from your "pure heart and good conscience and sincere faith" there may freely arise a love so fervent and powerful, and yet so peaceful, that it may join your heart to me completely, without resisting, so that you feel nothing whatever in your heart contrary to or impeding my love, but your heart rests totally at peace in my love. (7)

John the Baptist is honoured as the last of the biblical prophets in the line of

Elijah, who bore witness to the living God to an often faithless people. Ribot's book includes a history of the Order, including the legendary history through the succession of Old Testament prophets. Elijah's role was to call the people of Israel back to the true God after Ahab and his queen Jezebel led them into the worship of Baal, and his first public act was to foretell the drought in Samaria.

The phrase 'the prophetic life of a hermit' (or 'a monk') is used throughout the *Institution*. Reflecting not only on Elijah but on the sons of the prophets in the time of David (1 Chronicles 25), Ribot observes that a prophet is to be defined not only by the ability to foretell the future but must include also 'those who were appointed to this office in order to praise God devoutly with musical instruments and sing psalms to him' (8). He writes of a monastic community on Carmel, established by the followers of Elijah. They fulfilled both aspects of the prophetic life, worshipping God with psalms and music and warning the people of Israel of the consequences of their actions. Thus Micaiah prophesied the death of Ahab (3 Kings 22); Elisha advised in the war between Israel and the Aramaeans (4 Kings 6); Jonah (son of the widow of Zarephath, according to Jerome) (9) preached to the people of Ninevah (Jonah 3).

This emphasis on the prophetic nature of the Carmelite charisma is one of the distinctive features of Ribot's work. Another is his attempt to put into words the experience of the presence of God. In its almost exclusive use of the Elian model, the *Institution* differs from most

medieval mystical writings, whose models of encountering God are more usually Moses, to whom God appeared in the burning bush and later hidden in a dense cloud on Sinai, Jacob with his dream of a ladder reaching up to heaven and the love of the bridegroom for the Shulamite woman in the Song of Songs.

The first two books of *The Institution* offer a sustained meditation on the life of Elijah as presented in 1 Kings 17-19. There is a sustained 'spiritual' reading of God's message to Elijah: 'Go hence, go against the East; hide in the brook of Carith, which is against Jordan and there you shall drink from the stream and I have commanded ravens to feed thee there.' The first four clauses provide the four steps of preparation necessary to living the life of the eremitic monk:

1. Go hence: forsake all worldly possessions;
2. Go against the East: firstly, crucify all fleshly concupiscence; secondly, abandon your own desires and follow only the will of God;
3. Hide in the brook of Carith: flee the company of men and especially of women. Carith, which is against Jordan is interpreted through the pun on Carith/'caritas', as loving God above all and living in charity with one's neighbour;
4. The final clause gives God's promise: 'I have commanded ravens to feed thee there.' The ravens are the prophets who will provide spiritual food to sustain the eremitic monk until he is offered the fullness of life everlasting.

In this way, it is made clear that one can only hope to attain a sense of the presence of God in the soul by a life of rigorous self-discipline. The first three clauses in the message commend a monastic discipline of poverty, chastity and obedience and withdrawal into solitude:

With the greatest zeal, therefore, seek those things which draw you to the ardour of my love, such as the precepts of my law, and those things which I urged on you above, namely poverty and the crucifixion of bodily desires, obedience and the renunciation of your own will, continence and the solitude of the desert. (10)

Ribot defines the two-fold aim of the contemplative. The first goal may be reached by our own efforts and the grace of God. The second, the experience of the presence of God, is sheer gift:

The goal of this life is twofold. One part we acquire by our own effort and the exercise of the virtues, assisted by divine grace. This is to offer God a pure and holy heart, free from all stain of sin . . . The other goal of this life is granted to us as the free gift of God, namely, to taste somewhat in the heart and experience in the mind the power of the divine presence and the sweetness of heavenly glory, not only

after death but already in this mortal life. This is to "drink of the torrent" of the pleasure of God. (11)

God may respond to our love with his delights, but such encounters are necessarily transient, limited by the infirmities of the human condition:

These delights are truly called "a torrent" because with the force of a torrent and with great abundance of pleasure they flood the mind of the prophet. As it is written: "The fountain of wisdom is an overflowing stream". But just as a torrent quickly dries up with the heat of the risen sun, so this spiritual abundance, when carnal passions arise, soon vanishes from the mind of the prophet and dries up. They are indeed torrents of gold, they shine both with the ardour of the love of God from whence they flood into the mind of the prophet, and with the bright knowledge of God to which they secretly lead the prophetic man (12).

Elijah's early followers so 'raise[d] their minds upwards to the contemplation of God, that they were thought to have been translated into the heavenly choirs, and "with unveiled face beholding the glory of God", enjoy[ed]

converse with God to whom they clung with pure minds. (13)

Ribot reminds his contemporaries of the importance of their individual cells. Drawing on the work of William of St. Thierry, he writes:

When heavenly pursuits are continuously practised in the cell, heaven is brought into close proximity to the cell by the reality which underlies them both alike. ...Neither does the spirit at prayer, or even when it takes leave of the body, find the way from its cell to heaven difficult or long. (14)

When Merton wrote his essay, Ribot's text was quite inaccessible. What he actually read were selections translated into French (15). We are fortunate to have Father Copsey's translation and Father Chandler's thesis, with its complete Latin text. The second text on which he focuses is *The Fiery Arrow*, with its sharp reminder of the dangers of abandoning the life of solitude. We may now read this work also both in a modern edition and in an English translation (16). Since Merton wrote there has been a reassessment of the relative influence of these two texts, suggesting that *The Fiery Arrow* may not have been as influential as was once thought (17).

Merton calls upon us to reconsider how we balance the inner life of prayer with a commitment to establishing the kingdom of God in the world. What he

found in Ribot's *Institution* was a call to seek in our own times ways of life in which eremitic groups, committed to solitude and contemplation, engage with the world through their prophetic vision (18).

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Notes

1. *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy [1960]), p.xi.
2. *Disputed Questions*, p.263.
3. The new translation is by Richard Copsey, O. Carm., *The Ten Books on the Way of Life and Great Deeds of the Carmelites* (Rome: Edizioni Carmelitane and Faversham: Saint Albert's Press, 2005). I have used Father Copsey's translation in this essay. In the early fifteenth century the work was translated into English by Thomas Scrope, who lived as a hermit in a cell attached to the Norwich Carmelite house. I am preparing an edition of this translation for Middle English Texts, from the only extant manuscript copy, Lambeth Palace Library Ms 192.
4. In addition to the introduction to Father Copsey's translation, see Paul Chandler, 'The Book of the First Monks' (Ph. D. University of Toronto, 1991), sadly, as yet unpublished.
5. Such extravagant claims were not uncommon in the Middle Ages.
6. John Baconthorpe, (d. 1348), Carmelite theologian, English provincial 1326-1333, taught at Oxford, Cambridge and Paris. For his works, see Staring, pp. 184-253. For this passage, see 'Laus religionis Carmelitanum Cap. IX, Staring, p. 226.
7. Copsey, p. 18.
8. Copsey, p. 29.
9. Jerome, *Commentaria in Jonam prophetam*, PL 25, 1118.
10. Copsey, p. 17.
11. Copsey, p. 9.
12. Copsey p. 19.
13. Copsey, p. 53.
14. Copsey, p. 50.
15. In *Les plus vieux textes du Carmel*, trans. Francois de Sainte-Marie (Paris, 1945). There was a second edition in 1961.
16. The edition is by Adrian Staring, 'Nicolai Prioris Generalis Ordinis Carmelitarum Ignea Sagitta', *Carmelus* 9 (1962), 237-307. The translation is by Michael Edwards, Vineyard Series 2 (Dartington: Teresian Press, 1985).
17. See Richard Copsey, 'The *Ignea Sagitta* and its readership: A re-evaluation', *Carmelus* 46 (1999), 164-73.
18. A fuller account of Ribot's text may be found in Valerie Edden, 'The prophetycal lyf of a heremyte': Elijah as the Model of the Contemplative in *The Book of the First Monks* ', in E. A. Jones, (ed.), *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England: Exeter Symposium VII* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004), pp. 149-61.