

# Carmelite Spirituality Marks Our Lives

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Carmelite spirituality 'marks' our lives, but it is sometimes difficult to describe what those marks look like in practice, especially as a lay person. Father Ernest E. Larkin O.Carm., in his article *Carmelite Spirituality for a Carmelite* published in *Retorno*, (a journal on *Married Spirituality*, Volume 7, 1982, Pages 9-12), has written about how his Carmelite identity 'marks' his priestly ministry. I found in those explanations a practicality that I could transfer to my own lay vocation. All the references in my article refer to that publishing.

## The First Mark

The first mark in *Carmelite Spirituality for a Carmelite*, is **prophesy**. As the Carmelite seeks union with God, he gradually "puts on Christ's mind-frame, his value system, his priorities, his judgment...One knows God in 'spirit and truth' so well that he/she senses what is true and false about the immediate human situation. (Larkin 34)"

We have been trying to unite our thoughts and values to Christ all day, every day, for years. This persistent effort should naturally give us a leg up on discerning infusing God's values in a confusing situation.

As a lay person, I find that this has gradually affected my conversations and how I make decisions. Discussions with friends that would in the past have been exclusively secular and mechanical are now full of spiritual 'yeast' since even the most mundane household decisions have a palpable spiritual element to them. Small daily sacrifices grease the tracks for larger ones; daily practice looking for God among the 'pots and pans' has greased the tracks for seeing Him when the bigger situations have come along.

## The Second Mark

The second mark, of course, is **contemplation**. "Prophesy is only as valid as its source, which is personal and corporate prayer life (Larkin 34)." I understood the 'personal prayer' component. Carmelites are all about 'mental prayer.' But, what does corporate prayer have to do with contemplation?

**"The word and sacrament of the liturgy are the way to Christ. (Larkin 460)"**

I think we sometimes forget to hear the word liturgy in 'Liturgy of the Hours'. For seeking union with God outside of sacramental liturgy, there is nothing that compares with graces received through the Liturgy of the Hours. Sacrament #1, Divine Office #2.

**"The personal prayer life continues that encounter. (Larkin 460)"**

Liturgy is the vine, personal prayer is the branches. "Personal prayer is not individualistic; contemplation is less a private tete-a-tete with the Lord than the objective assimilation of the mystery of Christ, who comes to us in the liturgy. Prayer life is, about transformation in Christ. (Larkin 460)" There is a tendency to focus exclusively on mental prayer, but without the lifeblood of liturgy, our mental prayer will be anemic.

**"The word of God is the constant mentor and companion of each Carmelite... (Larkin 461)"**

After the Liturgy, in all its forms, our next stop in seeking union is scripture. We read the gospels, we pray the gospels, and we reach for scripture as our 'vitamins' between liturgical experiences.

Maintaining a contemplative heart out in the midst of a busy lay vocation is challenging. It is important to understand from where my energy comes and the most direct route to it. If I need refreshment, it is the liturgy and the word that will be the most effective. Honestly, I more often see this mark in the consequences of not honoring it and instead making a go of it on private prayer alone. It is like driving a car with no gas. I end up pushing it down the road rather than riding in it.

## The Third Mark

The third mark, Larkin mentions is **community**. "Carmelite religious communities are a particular species. They are marked by democracy, dialogue and consensus...friendship

characterizes our communities and ministry. (Larkin 35)" There is a strong 'hermit' element to our vocation, but we are not meant to be entirely isolated from each other or the world. Our charism expresses itself in a reliance on each other for support, formation, and perspective. A completely solitary Carmelite is not going to grow properly. We just are not made that way.

As a lay person, I find that my life is substantially marked by this need for community. Though I am technically out-in-the-world, I have spent the better part of the last ten years in my own home. Adult interaction is a rarity. And if I do venture out, I find that the world is much busier and frantic than I remember it. There is a strong sense of being alone in the crowd. I need my Carmelite community. They understand what I am trying to do with my life. Being with my Carmelite community gives me strength and formation I get nowhere else.

## Conclusion

After reading Larkin's thoughts, I feel now that I can begin to discern the marks of Carmelite spirituality in my own lay vocation. My life blood is the Sacraments and Divine Office. I can privately pray myself to pieces, but if I do not go to the liturgical springs of Divine Life, I will get off kilter. Between drinks from the spring, God has given me scripture to sustain me. Persistence in this union is gradually bringing a prophetic element to my conversations and decisions. And though much of this activity seems solitary, I will not be whole unless I am regularly engaging my Carmelite community. ☞



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