

**Carmelite Institute Symposium, July 2017**  
***Witnessing to an Integral Ecology in Carmel***  
**Part 1**

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1.

If I were to refer to “The Malaise Speech,” most of you would probably know what I’m talking about, either right away or after a little jog to the memory. I’m referring, of course, to the televised speech that then-president Jimmy Carter gave in the summer of 1979, a speech in which he never actually used the word “malaise.” But the speech got branded with that word, perhaps as a way of suggesting a certain unAmerican quality to it. And then the country’s ruling economic and political interests, with the willing participation of the news media, moved in and began to disparage, dismiss, even belittle what President Carter was asking us as a nation to consider acting on in concert.

In my view, this rejection of Carter’s message was kind of the beginning of the end for me. I was a young man at the time, in my mid-20s, and was rather moved by the speech. As I saw it, finally a political leader—indeed, the highest, most important political leader in the land, the president—was inviting us to grow up as a nation by accepting some limitations on our lifestyles and some realism in our expectations. The way we are living and consuming now—in other words, our status quo as a society—can’t go on forever. We need to live more reasonably, more maturely, and with greater respect for our world. We need to live more—in a word—*sustainably*, that is, with an eye to others and to our collective future as a nation.

But, as I said, and as you too no doubt remember, the president’s invitation was thoroughly rejected. In fact, in less than a year and a half we would elect Ronald Reagan, an out-and-out instrument of the present power arrangements in our society, and a spokesman for a kind of unbridled you-can-have-it-all, it’s-morning-in-America attitude. Of course, it was all as phony as could be. What we got was a mix of worshipful militarism, excessive financialization of the economy, and the enactment of supposed trickle-down tax policies that started us on the road to where we are now, to where our nation’s wealth and labor trickle up, not down, into the hands of the few, of the 1%.

Of course, the 80s were also a time when white privilege, white resentment, and supposed white victimhood sought to reassert itself following the changes towards greater equality won during the 60s and 70s. The same can be said for gender relations; it was a time where many sought to reassert male privilege and *its* supposed victimhood at the hands of evil feminists and liberals.

Thus, when I say, it was the beginning of the end for me, I mean that this refusal to attend seriously to what President Carter was saying, to refuse to change and grow up as a nation, and, most importantly, to refuse to step outside that bubble of deep denial and blindness that so infects national spirit.

[Here I’m referring to the fact that we live in a nation founded on, well, the ideals we tell ourselves and celebrate as Americans. Meanwhile, in the real world, we are and always have been a nation—or, more correctly, an empire—founded on slave labor, on free land had through the genocidal clearing away of the Native American peoples, on the notion of “whiteness” used to marginalize and dehumanize the Other, to name three decisive and determina-

tive evils that permeate our history. Yet we as a people, as a nation, simply can't face and admit these truths, let alone own up to them and allow them to influence and reshape our national identity. Thus, we are stuck in the mud; we remain perpetually adolescent, unable to live in the real world.]

What happened in 1979 and 1980 has, in my view, led slowly, but inexorably, to our present situation, in which, faced with major crises needing an adult response, we deny it all and seek rather to fortify our walled in bubble; indeed, we proceed as a nation to elect as our leader a Narcissist-in-Chief, somebody mentally, attitudinally, spiritually infantile.

You know, to give a simple example of our inability as a nation to step away from the imperialism and triumphalism that lies at the core of our national psyche, let me cite a few words from *Laudato Si*. Pope Francis is quoting his predecessor, Pope Benedict, from that Pope's encyclical letter *Caritas in Veritate*:

To manage the global economy; to revive economies hit by the crisis [the recession of 2007-2008]; to avoid any deterioration of the present crisis and the great imbalances that would result; to bring about integral and timely disarmament, food security, and peace; to guarantee the protection of the environment and to regulate migration; for all this, there is urgent need of a true world political authority. [Chapter V., I., n.175]

Now, then, can you imagine how such a passage would be received and reviewed on Fox News, by Sean Hannity, say, and what sort of experts he would bring on to comment on how it fatally mixes politics and religion, or fails to give due place to American Exceptionalism, or would lead inevitably to socialism, that great enemy of the American way?

## 2.

Well, that's a grim note to start with. I guess, though, that I am pretty grim about my country's ability to respond meaningfully and maturely to our present crises. But let me switch gears and move to something more hopeful and pleasant, something more inspiring.

I would like to take as a starting point for my reflections these words from *Laudato Si* [Chapter III., II., n.112]: "When the desire to create and contemplate beauty manages to overcome reductionism through a kind of salvation which occurs in beauty and in those who behold it."

I know it's not a whole sentence or a complete thought. But that makes it all the more evocative. Ideologically so much of what ails us, as I see it, involves some sort of reductionism. I think that's also the approach taken by Pope Francis. For that's the approach, overcoming reductionism, necessary to cultivate any growth of the human spirit; and the crises we are facing today certainly entail a crisis of the human spirit. Indeed, faced with the ecological crisis of our time, our hope lies first of all, before we get to the matter of implementing policies, in calling forth the capacity of the human spirit—empowered by the Holy Spirit—to overcome reductionistic attitudes and world-views of any kind, grounded as they mostly are in fear, insecurity, possessiveness, selfishness, and instead to inch towards ever greater transcendence, grounded in an experience of ecstasy—that is, of standing outside ourselves and being spiritually present to the Other.

We must, if our individual and collective spirit is to grow, seek to find ourselves through some sort of going out to the margins and horizons of the individual, isolated self—an experience that is cleansing, healing, salvific, revelatory, transformative, holy. In a word, we are to become contemplatives, both in the intimacy of prayer and in the abiding, staying power of a lifestyle, of a character of being.

Of course, when I say “contemplative,” I mean it as a Carmelite means it. But, as a devotee of St. John of the Cross, let me gravitate towards another word. The word I have in mind is “beauty,” which word is a way of referring to that *draw* the Other can have on us, the draw of other persons, of creatures, of the divine, the ultimate, the Other which awakens in us the human spirit.

To return to the quote of Pope Francis—“When the desire to create and contemplate beauty manages to overcome reductionism through a kind of salvation which occurs in beauty and in those who behold.” Well, whenever this desire triumphs, what then happens? What comes next? I would say, in a word—*spirituality*. Our spirit awakens to an honest, heartfelt, often heart-wrenching reexamination of our way of being in the world, in our relation to ourselves, to others, to the events unfolding around us, to potentially all creation and beyond, the divine, the eternal, to what we can know of the ultimate. These are the dimensions of our human spiritual existence, always transcendent to us because ever drawing us on into a real, living relation to the real world, not to some imagined or conceptualized one.

As Pope Francis says on two occasions in *Laudato Si*, quoting his own prior exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel*: “realities are always greater and more important than ideas.” Just as, I would add, spirituality is greater and more important than theology because it is about our lives in the real world, our real lives, as it were, and not those lives we imagine in our heads.

Further, I would say that it's not a huge leap, nor just a play on words, to go from the term “spirituality,” as we in Carmel would commonly understand it, in all its richness, to a term that takes us into the heart of the message of *Laudato Si*. The term I have in mind is, as you may have guessed, “ecology.” Pope Francis defines “ecology” thus: “Ecology studies the relationship between living organisms and the environment in which they develop.” [Chapter IV., I., n.138] Moving, then, specifically into the realm of human life, human ecology might be called a kind of *spiritual anthropology*, and the environment in which we develop can, of course, be looked at from a variety of perspectives and interests. But spiritually, religiously, it is the environment of grace, of sacrament, or—as in spirituality—of the immanent, yet transcendent, the already, not-yet environment of the Holy Spirit.

The notion Pope Francis develops in *Laudato Si* that seems to me closest to our Carmelite notion of spirituality is, finally, his expression “an integral ecology.” Let me quote a passage that captures this notion well. Pope Francis writes:

An integral ecology includes taking time to recover a serene harmony with creation, reflecting on our lifestyle and our ideals, and contemplating the Creator who lives among us and surrounds us, whose presence must not be contrived but found, uncovered.

We are speaking of an attitude of heart, one which approaches life with serene attentiveness, which is capable of being fully present to someone without thinking of what comes next, which accepts each moment as a gift from God to be lived to the full. [Chapter VI., IV., nn.225-226]

In my work with members of the Discalced Carmelite Secular Order, giving retreats and days of recollection, whenever I speak with them about the practice of recollection and the experience of contemplation in our prayer lives, I usually try to move the discussion, after giving due attention to prayer, from prayer to how prayer changes us, transforms us, if indeed it is authentic. One way I try to get a handle on that question of prayer's effects is to ask, in so many words, Okay, we practice recollection, we receive brief moments of contemplation; but are we becoming recollected and contemplative persons, as a way of being, as a matter of character? In doing so, I've struggled to come up with a simple, concrete, and easily graspable understanding of what being a contemplative person might mean. Well, upon reading Pope Francis's understanding of a truly integral ecology, as quoted above, it seemed to me that I'd finally found the best such statement, precise and expressive, that I've run across. Let me read it again, and you ask yourselves if you don't agree:

An integral ecology includes taking time to recover a serene harmony with creation, reflecting on our lifestyle and our ideals, and contemplating the Creator who lives among us and surrounds us, whose presence must not be contrived but found, uncovered.

We are speaking of an attitude of heart, one which approaches life with serene attentiveness, which is capable of being fully present to someone without thinking of what comes next, which accepts each moment as a gift from God to be lived to the full.

3.

So, there you have the profound spiritual underpinnings of *Laudato Si*, and what ultimately is the spiritual crisis of our age which it strives to address, a crisis manifest in our abuse and looming destruction of God's creation on this planet.

Personally, I'm not at all optimistic about the willingness and spiritual capacity of my generation, the baby-boomers, to respond to the ecological crisis, both individually and collectively, by initiating some movement, some simple gesture towards an integral ecology in the vision of Pope Francis. In *Laudato Si* he writes:

Although the post-industrial period may well be remembered as one of the most irresponsible in history, nonetheless there is reason to hope that humanity at the dawn of the twenty-first century will be remembered for having generously shouldered its grave responsibilities. [V., I., n.165]

While I share his first sentiment, I have my doubts about the second, at least in this country. But as the saying goes, Where there's death there's hope. It is with the millennials, I believe, that one finds hope. Of course, the jury is still out. But that's where we who are associated with a religious Institute and with the charism it embodies—alongside those many others who are leading an intentional, counterculture, spiritually purposeful lifestyle—that's where we come in. While we may not be able to do a whole lot ourselves on the big stage, we can still give at least personal witness to the younger generation by seeking to inspire and en-

lighten them out of a spiritually vital, contemporary, and authentic lifestyle, of which Carmel is a prime example. Or is it too pollyannaish to think that?

Be that as it may, *Laudato Si* itself offers a simple example of how Carmelite spirituality might be reinterpreted in terms of our present ecological crisis. Pope Francis sums up nicely the “Little Way” of St. Therese in these words:

Saint Therese of Lisieux invites us to practice the little way of love, not to miss out on a kind word, a smile, or any small gesture which sows peace and friendship. An integral ecology is also made up of simple gestures which break with the logic of violence, exploitation, and selfishness. [VI., V., n.230]

And just as St. Therese sought to believe firmly that these hidden, out-of-the-way acts of love can have universal import, helping to keep alive that Love that is the pulse beating at the Heart of the Church, so Francis wants us to believe that our meager personal acts on behalf of the environment, as insignificant and seemingly pointless as they may appear, will not in the end count for nothing. He writes:

[Personal acts of trying to live simply and sustainably] benefit society, often unbeknown to us, for they call forth a goodness which, albeit unseen, inevitably tends to spread. Furthermore, such actions can restore our sense of self-esteem; they can enable us to live more fully and to feel that life on earth is worthwhile. [VI., II., n.212]

4.

I want to continue along this line of reflection. How can the simplicity of life and detachment of heart that characterize our lives as contemplatives in Carmel give living witness to an integral ecology, such as the human race is called to if it is to survive? Or, better yet, if it is to be itself—that is, to be human—in its God-given vocation to cultivate the earth? By the same token, this connection, between simplicity/detachment and an integral ecology, might give some indication of how the call of Pope Francis to take up the vision of an integral ecology could serve us Carmelites as a way of reinterpreting our contemplative lifestyle in terms relevant to the ecological crisis we face today.

Of course, any evangelical lifestyle—any lifestyle that is born of the grace of God’s coming Kingdom—has simplicity and detachment as essential aspects of it. Pope Francis, in *Laudato Si*, acknowledges this fact, of course, as well as its relevance for how Christians are to play their part in the spiritual renewal humanity must either undergo or perish. He writes:

Christian spirituality proposes a growth marked by moderation and the capacity to be happy with little. It is a return to that simplicity which allows us to stop and appreciate the small things, to be grateful for the opportunities which life affords us, to be spiritually detached from what we possess, and not to succumb to sadness for what we lack. [VI., IV., n.222]

But in Carmel simplicity of life and detachment of heart have a certain specific Carmelite tenor to them. They flow from and receive their place and purpose through a spe-

cific central, defining reality at the core of our spirituality. I mean, of course, contemplation. As Carmelites we are contemplatives, or at least we're called to be, and everything else comes from and returns to that vital center. Thus, for example, our practice of detachment is not fundamentally an ascetic practice, but a contemplative one, and between these two there's a difference of some importance.

Here is how St. Teresa defines detachment in *The Way of Perfection*. Detachment is the “grace to give ourselves to the All entirely and without reserve.” [WP 8.1] Interestingly, she takes what is at root a negative idea, of letting go or casting away, and she defines it in a positive light, as a giving of ourselves over to and living a life of steadfast relationship with, the transcendent All of our existence.

Likewise, Teresa sees detachment as part of a living whole, all of which has to do, finally, with the love of God and neighbor. “I cannot understand,” she writes in *The Way of Perfection*, “how there can be humility without love or love without humility; nor are these two virtues possible without detachment from all creatures.” [WP 16.2]

Both of these two—the positive orientation and the holistic setting—seem to me essentially Carmelite and derive from that living root of our spirituality, contemplation. So, with that in mind, instead of talking about Carmelite detachment, simplicity, and humility, in more or less conceptual terms, as if these words represent abstract ideas, I wish to take another route in order to approach this aspect of our tradition as I try to understand and reinterpret it through the lens of *Laudato Si*.

By “another route” I have in mind, of course, poetry. Our spirituality is captured as much in poetry as it is in treatises on the spiritual life or expositions on this or that issue in the life of prayer. So, to give expression to our Carmelite tradition, I'm going to look at a few poems, one, by John of the Cross, as you'd expect, but, two, by Teresa, as you might not. And then I want to conclude with a poem by that wonderful, American-Carmelite poet, Jessica Powers.