

# Simplicity in the Garden of Carmel

BY CINDY PERAZZO, T.O.CARM.

I remember being in my grandfather Joseph's garden as if it were yesterday. As a child, I spent many an afternoon in the summertime watching him under the shade of his fruit trees, and when I was old enough, I could help move the watering hoses or pluck berries for dessert that night. My grandparents are really never far from my mind and I recently went back to my hometown just to check up on what was once their home. It was poignant to reminisce on those times spent in his garden during the days of my childhood, but I wanted to see if the spot looked anything like I remembered it from years gone by.

My grandfather was a first generation Italian-American who learned to garden in the old Italian way from his mother and father. If only I could adequately describe his garden to you. I guess I will just say it was a piece of simple perfection. Every tomato plant and grapevine was looked after in the most intimate detail. The vines were clipped where they needed to be and trained in such a manner that they would produce the most fruit. The peppers, squash, and fruit trees always blossomed when they should, and the bountiful harvests were shared with many families. However, the one thing that especially stands out in my mind is that without exception this little piece of land was thoughtfully and exquisitely planted in the simplest way. His simple attitude and gardening practices were what made his garden perfect. There was no fussiness in his efforts and the garden itself reflected my grandfather's own stance of peace and tranquility. So as you might guess, the Carmelite symbol of the Garden is easy for me to visualize and relate to.

I believe that our prayer life and in fact the whole of our spirituality, the Carmelite Way, is meant to reflect a simple yet precise garden. We have simple prayer practices which include the basics of Eucharist, scriptural reflection, meditation; most of which must be executed in the silence and solitude of our hearts. We are looked after in the most intimate detail, cultivated and pruned during prayer and in the response that follows, so that we will grow and bloom as God has envisioned us; in the reality of who we truly are. We are trained slowly but surely through the seasons of our life.

There are no elaborate exercises, no spiritual calisthenics; no set formulas molded one for all. We have been given simplicity itself in our Carmelite vocation. And yet there are times when we look for more. I am sometimes dismayed that we find it hard to settle ourselves into this routine of simple perfection that has been followed for over eight centuries. Why do we not always allow ourselves to rest in its shade?

The great Carmelite saints can show us the way in our own personal garden by giving us concrete details in the simple nature of our way of life. Known as "the Little Flower," Saint Therese of Lisieux pointed out the value of being the simplest of violets serving at the feet of our Lord when she says, "I understood how all the flowers He has created are beautiful, how the splendor of the rose and the whiteness of the lily do not take away the perfume of the little violet or the delightful simplicity of the daisy. So it is in the world of souls. Jesus willed to create great souls, lilies and roses, but He has created smaller ones to give joy to God's glances when He looks down at His feet" (Story of a Soul, p 14.), while Saint Teresa of Avila shared with us the garden theme throughout her great works in simple yet profound thoughts including the watering of a garden and the help that visualizing herself as a companion with Jesus praying in the garden gave her. Saint John of the Cross used in his poem, The Spiritual Canticle, the vision of wildlife and nature, all reminiscent of the garden: "O woods and thickets, planted by the hand of my Beloved! O green meadow, coated, bright, with flowers, Tell me, has he passed by you?" (Stanza IV)

We are learning every day how to cultivate our own garden. We have the freshness of the spring rain when we celebrate Eucharist whenever we can. We enjoy the simple summer breeze when our thoughts are never far from God and His presence within us. And we bask in the sun of Christ Jesus who can heal every wound. All these things and more are experienced when we care for our garden of Carmelite life. Will we ever achieve the perfection we desire? Every year we learn more with each experience and circumstance whether with failure or success.

Oh Lord, simplify the garden of my soul; complete me as you will, in Carmel. ✞



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