

## CONTEMPLATION AND ACTION: ‘TWO MANIFESTATIONS OF THE SAME LIFE’

*The author is a priest of the Secular Institute of Notre-Dame de Vie, founded by Fr Marie-Eugène (pictured left). In this article, translated for Mount Carmel by kind permission of the French review Carmel, he highlights what is perhaps the main message of Fr Marie-Eugène: the possibility of a seamless unity between contemplation and action, which is so needed in our world today.<sup>1</sup>*

### FRANÇOIS-RÉGIS WILHÉLEM

Shortly before his death, Fr Marie-Eugène made this final recommendation to the members of the Institute of Notre-Dame de Vie:

Remain faithful to the spirit of the Institute, faithful to the Order [of Carmel], to this essential thing: action and contemplation well united.

Fr Marie-Eugène was not giving two parallel instructions, but rather a single one which can, it seems to me, be interpreted as follows: it is fidelity to the spirit of the Institute, continually drawing on the grace of the Order, that makes possible the union between action and contemplation. One of the most essential aspects of the charism for Fr Marie-Eugène is the continual search for a life in which action and contemplation are united. The experience of God is at its heart.

### **An experience of God necessary for all**

During the final retreat he gave to the Institute (1966), Fr Marie-Eugène considered with concern the question of how to overcome the influence of certain trends in thinking which, already in his day, were affecting humanity and leading many to a denial or forgetting of God, to the proud autonomy of human intelligence, to the tyranny of the passions, and ultimately to atheism in all its forms.

In a prophetic way, Fr Marie-Eugène thought that only ‘the experience of a living faith’ could resist the power of these influences, ‘that only a certain experience of God [could] strengthen our faith and keep it firm amidst all these interior and exterior waves – and even tidal waves – to which we are all subject. An experience of God which is not extraordinary..., which we find quite simply in prayer and contemplation...’ Forcefully, he affirmed:

I think that the majority of Christians who wish to remain faithful, particularly those who have a mission of apostolate, of encouragement, of guiding, of leavening; those who are required to support a milieu or group of people...need this experience of God as a necessity in order to remain firm. What appeared in the past to be something extraordinary, only for privileged souls, has now

---

<sup>1</sup> This article was first published in French in *Carmel*, no. 126 (*Le Père Marie-Eugène de l’Enfant-Jésus: Un maître spirituel au Carmel*), December 2007, pp. 79-86. It is translated here by Edward Reeves.

become necessary for all Christians who wish to ensure their unswerving faithfulness, and at the same time be of support to all their brothers.<sup>2</sup>

Fr Marie-Eugène was aware that the particular charism of Notre-Dame de Vie consisted precisely in furthering and supporting this experience of God amidst the realities of the world. He described this charism as a grace which progressively arouses ‘attraction to God, the need for God, putting Him at the forefront not only through a purely speculative faith, but through lived experience’ (August 17, 1958). In this way can be put into practice what the Carmelite tradition calls ‘the prophetic spirit’.

### ‘The prophetic vocation’

In this same retreat, Fr Marie-Eugène sought to describe this spirit, this ‘prophetic’ vocation, of which the main point of reference remains, of course, the prophet Elijah.

This vocation ‘makes a person primarily a person of God... At the very start of its vocation, the soul has been touched by God, with an extraordinary grace or sometimes even with ordinary graces, in simple contemplation... The origin of the prophetic vocation therefore entails a certain experience of God, a certain touch of God, conscious or unconscious ... a certain manifestation of the transcendence of God who has revealed to the soul something of the absolute, who has given her a taste for it and moved her to choose this absolute as a way of perfection...’<sup>3</sup>

Fr Marie-Eugène therefore emphasises the importance of this ‘touch’, of this personal and mysterious encounter with God. In the Old Testament, this was often an extraordinary touch, and this can be the case equally in our own times. However, most often it will take an ordinary form, ‘conscious or unconscious’ (or, one might say: ‘felt or not felt’). But whatever form it takes, the heart of this experience remains this secret contact between God and the soul which arouses a ‘taste for the absolute’, and the subsequent choice of it ‘as a way of perfection’. From this point on, a person experiences ‘the need to fix herself in God’ through contemplative prayer; she ‘hungers and thirsts’ to remain in his presence. That is to say: she can no longer do without him! The point of the journey is the constant search for God, and this arouses in a person the need of giving oneself to him: ‘It is in this way that one becomes a person of God.’

The prophetic spirit, as envisaged in the Carmelite tradition, allows one to go beyond the superficial separation, or even the opposition, which some spiritual trends have sometimes established between ‘contemplation’ and ‘action’. Such an opposition is foreign to the thought of Fr Marie-Eugène, just as it was to that of St Teresa.<sup>4</sup> For Fr

---

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in part in Frédéric Lenoir, *Les communautés nouvelles*, Paris: Fayard, 1988, p. 136.

<sup>3</sup> Excerpts from this text can be found in Marie Pila, ‘Le fondateur’, in *Carmel*, no. 51 (*Un maître spirituel: le P. Marie-Eugène*), 1988/3-4, p. 237.

<sup>4</sup> The insistence of Teresa on contemplative prayer does not prevent her from valuing the active vocation, which she does several times. On this theme, see François-Régis Wilhém, *Dieu dans l'action: La mystique apostolique selon Thérèse d'Avila*, Venasque: Éditions du Carmel, 1992, pp. 133ff., 155ff. & 281ff.

Marie-Eugène, action should not be merely the ‘overflow’ of contemplation. He explains:

One used to speak about action following on from contemplation: it was the overflow which spilt over, while contemplation stayed nicely in its vat. No! Contemplation is not a vat, a beautiful plenitude which God, the angels and people lean over to admire! It is a torrent: everything flows! God is at its source, and this torrent will always flow. One returns to it continually, precisely because it flows and because one is emptied at each instant.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, far from considering the apostolate as a sort of ‘residue’ of contemplation, an ‘overflowing of superabundance’ (IADC, p. 199),<sup>6</sup> Fr Marie-Eugène prefers to present it as the fruit of a real hold which the Spirit has on the apostle. Such is the heart of the prophetic vocation! Nevertheless, for this hold to become more and more effective, it is necessary to have created in oneself the habit of seeking God by the practice of silent prayer.

### **Towards a harmony between contemplation and action**

#### **– ‘Apostles of the first rank’**

One of the original messages of Fr Marie-Eugène’s two-volume work – *I Want to See God* and *I Am a Daughter of the Church* – is to show how, in Teresian spirituality, ‘contemplation and the apostolate are solidly united; they are fused into one life of the soul and happily complete each other.’ For Fr Marie-Eugène, these are, in effect, ‘two aspects of a harmonious whole, two manifestations of the same profound life’ (IWSG, p. 134).<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the apostolic counsels which are given at each stage of St Teresa’s *Mansions* are ‘so exact..., so luminous,’ he continues, that ‘one could...prepare an excellent treatise for the formation of apostles who, remaining contemplatives under the action of the Holy Spirit, would for that very reason be only the better apostles’ (IADC, pp. 639-40). Fr Marie-Eugène was convinced that contemplatives formed by the *Madre* ‘become apostles, and apostles of [the] first rank, for she makes of them perfect instruments of the Holy Spirit’ (IADC, p. ix).

Different passages in Fr Marie-Eugène’s great work describe, from various angles, the connection between contemplation and action. At the end of the work, in the fifth part, a synthesis is proposed. The progression through St Teresa’s *Mansions* is looked at again, from the perspective of the active life. There, Fr Marie-Eugène shows that, in the first three mansions, it is human action and reason, assisted by the grace of God, that dominate (cf. IADC, pp. 640-5). As from the fourth mansion – the beginning of the mystical life – this activity is led to an ever greater degree by the Spirit, until it becomes completely adjusted to the Spirit in the final two mansions. The true growth of the Church depends on the quality of such an adjustment. On these summits are

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Marie Pila, *op. cit.*, p. 246.

<sup>6</sup> IADC = Fr Marie-Eugène of the Child Jesus, OCD, *I am a Daughter of the Church: A Practical Synthesis of Carmelite Spirituality*, vol. 2, Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press (Christian Classics), 1998.

<sup>7</sup> IWSG = Fr Marie-Eugène of the Child Jesus, OCD, *I Want to See God: A Practical Synthesis of Carmelite Spirituality*, vol. 1, Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press (Christian Classics), 1998.

realised ‘the perfection of contemplation and the perfection of the apostolate’, the latter then appearing as ‘the fruit of perfect love’ (IADC, p. 651; cf. pp. 652-3).

We cannot detail here the individual stages of this progression. Instead, we may be content with pinpointing some aspects of the harmony which is realised between contemplation and action in the sixth and seventh mansions, since these two form a unity (cf. IADC, pp. 650-67). Fr Marie-Eugène described as ‘perfect’ the apostolate which is accomplished in these last two mansions. We can now turn our attention to what that signifies.

### – ‘The perfect apostolate’

Fr Marie-Eugène’s use of the expressions ‘perfect apostolate’ or ‘perfection of the apostolate’ does not mean that the true apostle no longer has any faults or that all his undertakings are successful. Rather, it means that his activity is essentially animated by charity, in a fundamental docility to the Holy Spirit. In fact, when this union is realised, the soul which is ‘united to God and transformed in Him’ ‘can no longer separate itself from Him; it accompanies Him everywhere that His merciful love draws it. With Christ, it turns back to the world and finds in the Church the fullness of its object: God and neighbour’ (IADC, pp. 225-6). Indeed, the apostle then perfectly integrates the double movement of the love of Christ for God the Father and for all; he ‘lets [himself] be led by the good pleasure of the Holy Spirit’ (IADC, p. 660). When he is involved in action, his activity is illumined by contemplation, and when he devotes himself to contemplation, his prayer is particularly effective because it is conformed to that of Christ. This is the point at which ‘action and contemplation are united and merged’. Fr Marie-Eugène gives an admirably clear description of this synthesis:

In order to remain with God, the soul must obey the impulse of the Holy Spirit, who leads it here or there to accomplish His work. And everywhere the Spirit leads it in this manner, it finds God; for it bears God within and enjoys Him in the sweet light of its inner experience. It is never more active nor more powerful than when God keeps it in solitude and contemplation; it is never more united to God nor more contemplative than when engaged in works to do God’s will, under the impulse of the Holy Spirit. (IADC, p. 661)

Evoking the figure of the prophet Elijah, Fr Marie-Eugène insists on the fact that this harmony between action and contemplation does not proceed simply ‘from merely a wise balance of external occupations and spiritual exercises, from an equilibrium established by prudence, which would both satisfy the aspirations of the soul for divine intimacy and allow for the needs of the apostolate. Balance and synthesis are realised in the life of the prophet by the very God who has seized him and moves him’ (IWSG, p. 449). It is this progressive influence of the Spirit that allows the spiritual life to grow, as much in contemplation as in activity.

### **The true contemplative finds God everywhere**

In various teachings, Fr Marie-Eugène vigorously defended the idea that the development of the mystical life depends fundamentally on our fidelity to the gift of God, and not on the exterior setting where it is deployed. He explains:

When we speak of mystical experience (experience of the life of the Trinity, of God), we are accustomed to subordinating it to many conditions: solitude, silence, a particular temperament, etc... Is it that we must ignore solitude and silence which are indispensable according to spiritual authors? No, these elements are necessary in a certain measure, but the essential condition is fidelity to grace... Whoever is obedient<sup>8</sup> must await the manifestation of God (cf. Jn 14:21).<sup>9</sup>

He insists:

In your life, whatever your worries may be, whatever occupations may absorb you, whatever the bustle amidst which you may live, if you remain faithful to the word of God which has been spoken to you... God will make himself known to you.<sup>10</sup>

For Fr Marie-Eugène, God therefore reveals his presence as much in contemplation as in action, and this presence is always nourishing for the spiritual life. The important thing is to know how to find it in all circumstances. It is from this perspective that we must understand Fr Marie Eugène's insistence, even intransigence, on the necessity of a life of prayer because, for him, this has precisely as its main function an encounter with God himself:

What is the point of prayer? Is it to find light or strength? These are worthwhile goals, but the most important thing is to find God.<sup>11</sup>

By refining the virtue of faith, the practice of prayer orients the soul towards a continual quest. Of course, turning from prayer time to 'absorbing occupations' may leave one with the painful impression of a certain spiritual loss. Fr Marie-Eugène, however, is encouraging:

The plant which one transplants may lose a few leaves; but others will grow, provided there is life. The soul needs to adapt. It used to seek God in silence; now it seeks him amidst the noise.

This is the time to 'practise finding God everywhere: in work, in times both easy and difficult, in joys and in sorrows... To seek God in the active life, that is what the true contemplative does; his gaze is so simplified that he finds him everywhere.'<sup>12</sup>

This perspective contradicts certain caricatures of the active and contemplative life, 'the one reserved to devoting oneself to one's neighbour and being deprived of spiritual experience, the other avoiding action in order to preserve contemplation.'<sup>13</sup> Fr

---

<sup>8</sup> Obedience may be understood here in the wider sense of faithfulness to the commandments of the Lord and communion to his will within a specific vocation.

<sup>9</sup> 'They who receive my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father; and I will love them and make myself known to them.'

<sup>10</sup> Conference of August 9, 1945.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Conference of August 20, 1949.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Conference of August 9, 1945.

Marie-Eugène demonstrates here that a fundamental correspondence to the movements of the Spirit is a source of enrichment for both, which, in a certain manner, have become united. St Vincent de Paul used to say that one needed to know how ‘to leave God for God’, that is, to leave provisionally the exercise of contemplation in order to find God in one’s neighbour, for example in the sick or the poor.<sup>14</sup> Fr Marie-Eugène was of the opinion that anyone who hesitates on this point ‘does not understand the laws of God’. Certainly, such availability might be ‘a source of worry or bother, but God will give himself in abundance which will be more refreshing and sanctifying than in hours of prayer,<sup>15</sup> and this is worth all felt mystical experiences.’<sup>16</sup> The following quotation captures this thought well:

The contemplative who wishes to ‘climb up’ towards God, by losing interest in the world, may be a contemplative but will not be a saint. The active person who wishes to do exterior work without worrying about the search for union with God or about developing charity, can be an apostle and do good, but will not be a saint.<sup>17</sup>

In the saint, love of God and love of neighbour ‘diverge only apparently’; in reality, ‘they mutually sustain one another’, and ‘their diversity is profound harmony and riches’ (IADC, p. 621).

---

<sup>14</sup> See, in this sense, Teresa of Avila, IC V:3:7-12.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. F 5:16.

<sup>16</sup> Conference of August 9, 1945.

<sup>17</sup> Conference of August 21, 1953.