Carmelite Spirituality: A Pathway to Integral Ecology

By Rijo Jose O.Carm. Ph.D., Assistant Pastor, Pope St Sergius I Parish, Italy

Abstract

In an age defined by environmental crises and an urgent need for sustainable solutions, integrating spirituality with ecological responsibility offers a transformative approach. Carmelite spirituality, deeply rooted in contemplation, simplicity, and mystical traditions, presents a unique framework for addressing humanity's relationship with creation. Inspired by the contemplative insights of saints such as Teresa of Ávila, John of the Cross, and Edith Stein, this study explores how Carmelite principles align with Pope Francis' call for *integral ecology* in *Laudato Sì*. By emphasizing empathy, interconnectedness, and contemplative engagement, this paper offers a pathway for ecological awareness and action. The following analysis delves into the theological and philosophical foundations of Carmelite spirituality and its practical implications for fostering an ecological conversion that harmonizes human life with the natural world.

Introduction

In an era of ecological crises and the challenges of the Anthropocene, a spiritual framework is urgently needed. This framework must address both humanity's inner transformation and its relationship with creation. This paper delves into the theological foundations of Carmelite spirituality, the phenomenological insights of Edith Stein, and their implications for fostering a deeper ecological consciousness. By focusing on theoretical perspectives and practical implementations, the study aims to provide a robust philosophical and theological basis for integrating Carmelite spirituality into contemporary ecological discourse.

Theological Foundations of Carmelite Spirituality

The Carmelites, trace their origins to hermits on Mount Carmel (כַּרְמֶל means God's Garden) in the Holy Land during the late 12th and early 13th centuries. Inspired by the prophet Elijah and deeply devoted to the Virgin Mary, these hermits sought a life of prayer, solitude, and penance.

Their Rule, written by St. Albert of Jerusalem between 1206 and 1214, provided a flexible framework for a life centred on contemplative prayer and community living.[i]

Carmelite spirituality emphasizes the interior life and the soul's union with God through contemplative prayer and transformation.[ii] Saints like Teresa of Ávila, John of the Cross, and Thérèse of Lisieux have profoundly shaped this tradition. Teresa's *Interior Castle* outlines stages of spiritual progress toward divine union,[iii] while John of the Cross's *Dark Night of the Soul* describes the purifying trials encountered on this journey.[iv]

The order's journey from eremitical roots to mendicant life was formalized at the General Chapter of London in 1247.[v] Over time, two main branches emerged: the Ancient Observance (O.Carm.), which maintained the original spirit of the Rule, and the Discalced Reform (O.C.D.), initiated by Teresa and John in the 16th century to restore a more austere, contemplative focus.[vi]

The Carmelite motto, "*Zelo zelatus sum pro Domino Deo exercituum*" (With zeal have I been zealous for the Lord God of Hosts, I Kings 19:10), reflects their mission to integrate prayer, prophetic witness, and active love.[vii] This synthesis of contemplation and action remains central to the Carmelite charism, offering a timeless path to holiness.

Mystics and Creation

Carmelite spirituality finds its roots in the practices of silence, solitude, and prayer, which open the soul to God's presence in creation. These elements, deeply embedded in Carmelite life, reflect the order's heritage from Mount Carmel and its ongoing commitment to contemplative living.

Silence: A Gateway to God

Silence, more than the absence of noise, is a state of attentiveness to God. It creates space for an interior dialogue with the divine, allowing the soul to quiet distractions and attune to God's subtle presence.[viii] St. John of the Cross observed, "The Father spoke one Word, which was His Son, and this Word He speaks in eternal silence, and in silence, it must be heard by the soul."[ix] In this sacred silence, creation's deeper reality – God's sustaining love – becomes perceptible.

Solitude: The Divine Encounter

Solitude, central to Carmelite life, mirrors Elijah's experience on Mount Horeb, where God's presence was revealed in a gentle whisper. For Carmelites, solitude is not isolation but a

withdrawal from distractions, fostering immersion in God's presence.[x] The Rule of St. Albert encourages hermits to "dwell in their cells, meditating day and night on the law of the Lord."[xi] In this space, Carmelites cultivate an awareness of the interconnectedness of creation, aligning with contemporary reflections on integral ecology, where solitude deepens reverence for the natural world.[xii] Nicholas of Narbonne, the former Prior General of the Carmelite Order (1266 – 1271), explores the relationship between solitude and the natural world in *Ignea Sagitta* (*The Flaming Arrow*).[xiii]

Prayer: The Heart's Encounter with God

Prayer, the core of Carmelite life, transforms both silence and solitude into profound encounters with God. Carmelite prayer is contemplative, aiming not merely to express devotion but to rest in God's presence. St. Teresa of Ávila described it as 'an intimate sharing between friends,' fostering awareness of God's presence within and around us.

Through prayer, Carmelites come to see creation as a reflection of God's love. St. Thérèse of Lisieux viewed nature as a book revealing God's attributes, from the grandeur of the heavens to the simplicity of a flower.[xiv] In this contemplative gaze, prayer becomes a response of awe and gratitude, nurturing a deeper connection to creation.

Carmelite Heritage and Nature

Elijah, the spiritual father of the Carmelites, embodies simplicity and trust in God, often expressed through his relationship with creation. On Mount Carmel, he called the people to worship the true God, emphasizing humility and dependence on divine providence (1 Kings 18:19–39). After his encounter with the prophets of Baal, Elijah retreated into solitude, finding God not in dramatic phenomena but in a "gentle whisper."[xv] This illustrates the reverence for creation's subtlety as a medium of divine revelation.

The early Carmelites, inspired by Elijah, lived in simplicity on Mount Carmel, cultivating the land and embracing a life of prayer. Their Rule encouraged them to dwell in cells and meditate on God's law, fostering a contemplative lifestyle intertwined with nature.[xvi] This harmonious existence reflected their view of creation as a testament to God's providence and care.

St. Teresa of Ávila often used natural imagery to describe the soul's spiritual journey, likening it to a garden requiring cultivation.[xvii] St. John of the Cross, in his *Spiritual Canticle*, employed imagery of mountains, rivers, and flowers to express the soul's longing for God.[xviii] Similarly, St. Thérèse of Lisieux's "Little Way" found God's presence in the small

and ordinary, reflecting creation's sacredness. She wrote lovingly of flowers as symbols of souls, each uniquely reflecting God's glory.

Carmelite Spirituality and Integral Ecology

Integral ecology, as defined in *Laudato Si*, is a paradigm that acknowledges the interconnectedness of environmental, social, economic, and spiritual dimensions of life. Pope Francis writes:

> We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature.[xix]

This vision challenges humanity to see creation not as a collection of resources for exploitation but as a web of relationships that reflect God's love and creativity.

Carmelite mysticism, with its contemplative gaze, fosters this awareness. St. John of the Cross celebrated creation's beauty as a mirror of God's glory, urging a reverence that inspires care for the environment. Besides, humility, a cornerstone of Carmelite life, also underpins integral ecology. The early Carmelites modelled this through their simple, sustainable lifestyle. St. Teresa's teachings on detachment and gratitude emphasize seeing creation as a gift to be cherished, not exploited.

Carmelite Ecclesiology: A Model for the Church

The communal spirit of the Carmelite tradition offers a powerful model for the Church's mission of unity and care for creation. Rooted in shared life and prayer, this spirit reflects the interconnectedness Pope Francis envisions. The early Carmelites practiced communal discernment and accountability, reflecting synodality's principles of inclusivity and dialogue.[xx] Their shared life, where resources served the common good, exemplifies the Church's call to solidarity and ecological stewardship.

Carmelite mystics viewed union with God as a foretaste of the eschatological harmony at the *Parousia*, where all creation will be reconciled in Christ (Revelation 21:1). This vision inspires a journey toward holiness, marked by personal transformation, communal solidarity, and cosmic care.[xxi]

In living simply, praying deeply, and caring for creation, the Carmelite tradition offers a profound witness to the Church's mission. It invites all believers to journey together toward

the fullness of God's Kingdom, embodying the harmony and reverence that define both Carmelite spirituality and integral ecology.

Edith Stein's Phenomenology of Interrelatedness

Edith Stein (1891–1942), also known as Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, was a German-Jewish philosopher, Carmelite nun, and martyr. Born in Breslau, she studied under Edmund Husserl, earning a doctorate in philosophy with a focus on empathy. After converting to Catholicism in 1922, she combined her intellectual pursuits with her faith.

In 1933, Stein joined the Discalced Carmelites, adopting the name Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. During World War II, she was arrested by the Nazis and sent to Auschwitz, where she was martyred in 1942. Canonized in 1998, Stein is celebrated for her integration of faith, reason, and her profound reflections on human dignity and interconnection.

The Foundations of Stein's Phenomenology

Edith Stein's philosophical system is deeply rooted in phenomenology, especially in Husserl's school of thought, emphasizing direct experiences and the structures of consciousness.

Stein's Carmelite spirituality profoundly influences this understanding. Her religious life grounded her philosophical inquiry in a deep sense of divine interconnectedness. The contemplative life, focused on prayer and silence, allowed Stein to perceive the world not just through empirical or rational lenses but as a reflection of divine presence. In this sense, her philosophy can be seen as a meeting point between phenomenological inquiry and theological insight, integrating secular and sacred perspectives into a unified vision of human and cosmic interrelatedness.[xxii]

Interrelatedness of Persons and Creation

In Edith Stein's thought, human beings are not isolated entities but are inherently relational. Stein critiques Cartesian individualism and the modern reductionist approach to the subject, proposing instead that the human person exists within a network of relationships, both human and divine. She draws on Thomistic metaphysics, especially Aquinas' doctrine of divine providence, to frame her understanding of the human person. According to Stein, every person is related to God and to other creatures in a complex web of relationships. This relational aspect is central to her concept of *personhood*, which she believes is realized not in isolation but in communion with others.[xxiii]

She follows Thomas Aquinas in seeing the human person as a composite of soul and body, with the soul being the spiritual principle that makes the person capable of receiving God's

grace and participating in divine life. Yet, Stein diverges from a purely Thomistic framework by emphasizing the phenomenological experience of intersubjectivity, where the person's relationship to others, and the recognition of the other's subjectivity, becomes a pivotal aspect of ethical and metaphysical understanding.

This relational framework challenges the prevailing individualism of modern philosophy. Stein's approach compels an understanding of the human person as a communal being, existing for and with others, and situated within a cosmic order that reflects divine intentionality. As such, human beings must be understood not in isolation but as intrinsically connected to both each other, the cosmos, and God. Thus, the ethical implications of her thought involve recognizing the relational nature of all being, emphasizing love, care, and respect for others as foundational to the moral life.[xxiv]

A Phenomenology of Creation

Stein's philosophical exploration of creation is deeply influenced by both her phenomenological approach and her Christian faith. Creation, for Stein, is not a collection of discrete objects but a dynamic web of relationships. Each being, whether human, animal, plant, or inanimate, participates in the divine order and reflects God's providence. Drawing on her Thomistic background, Stein stresses that all creatures, regardless of their complexity or apparent significance, exist because of God's will and are sustained in existence by God's ongoing creative act. This divine order imbues the universe with meaning and structure, and each created entity has its role within this broader system.

For Stein, this vision of creation challenges anthropocentrism – the tendency to view the world through the lens of human interests and needs. She critiques this approach, which often leads to exploitation and disregard for the inherent dignity of non-human beings. Rather, she advocates for a view of creation where each entity, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant, has inherent worth. This view aligns with Stein's phenomenology, where the dignity of each being is not dependent on its utility to human beings but on its participation in the divine plan. The ethical implications of this are far-reaching: humans are called to respect and care for the environment, recognizing the intrinsic value of all creatures and their interconnectedness within the cosmic order.

Stein's rejection of anthropocentrism is not a call for a radical egalitarianism but rather an invitation to understand the unique place that humans hold within the created order. Humans are, according to Stein, the only creatures capable of reflecting on the divine plan, and thus

have a special responsibility to care for the earth and all its inhabitants. This holistic view of creation underscores the interconnectedness of all beings, suggesting that the flourishing of human life is inextricably linked to the flourishing of all creation.[xxv]

Implications for Integral Ecology

Pope Francis' *Laudato Sì* calls for an ecological conversion, a transformation of the human heart that leads to a renewed respect for creation. In many ways, Edith Stein's phenomenology of interrelatedness provides a philosophical and spiritual foundation for this call. At the heart of *Laudato Sì* is the recognition that human beings are not separate from the world but exist within a web of relationships that includes the natural world, other people, and God – the ultimate "Absolute" – the foundation of all beings.

Stein's work emphasizes the importance of empathy, which is central to *Laudato SI*'s call for ecological awareness. The relational vision of creation is particularly relevant in light of the global environmental crisis, as it encourages a radical shift in how we relate to the earth.

In a nutshell, Edith Stein's philosophy offers a profound basis for the ecological principles articulated in *Laudato Sì*. By emphasizing the relational nature of all being, she provides a framework for understanding creation as a unified whole. Her critique of anthropocentrism and her call for empathy and respect for all beings resonate strongly with Pope Francis' ecological vision. Through Stein's lens, we are invited to see the world not as an object for human domination, but as a divine gift to be respected, protected, and cherished. Her thought provides a theological basis for environmental justice. Every being's dignity, from the smallest creature to humanity itself, reflects God's creative love and calls for a shared responsibility to protect life.[xxvi] Initiatives such as Carmelite NGO programs promoting ecological education and justice embody this vision of relational integrity.[xxvii]

Pastoral Initiatives: *Pope St. Sergius I* Parish as a Phenomenological Hub

The author of this document currently serves in the Carmelite parish of *Pope St Sergius I* in Palermo, Sicily. Stein's emphasis on relationality offers a framework for parish-based ecological initiatives integrating faith, education, and action. Grounded in her understanding of interrelatedness, these programs transcend mere activism to become transformative expressions of ecological solidarity. These efforts echo Wendell Berry's philosophy of

"community economies,"[xxviii] where local engagement fosters ecological health and social well-being.

Fostering Ecological Awareness

- Various homilies on *Laudato Sì* and ecological education reflect Stein's pedagogical focus on forming individuals who understand their relational nature.
- Collaborations with local environmental organizations align with Stein's vision of shared responsibility in building a sustainable world.

Faith-Based Sustainability Projects

- Parish gardens and tree-planting initiatives are practical acknowledgments of creation's sacred character, embodying Stein's call to recognize the intrinsic value of all creation.

Caring for the Vulnerable

- Outreach programs for migrants and families resonate with Stein's view that human dignity is inseparable from the relational web of creation. These initiatives show that ecological care and social justice are intertwined.[xxix] At *Pope St Sergius I* Parish, over 100 families receive material assistance monthly through Caritas Europe, with efforts tailored to each family's needs.[xxx]

Youth and Family Engagement

- Eco-camps and workshops for youth reflect Stein's emphasis on education as a means of fostering relational awareness. Family-centred ecological practices begin within homes and radiate outward.[xxxi]
- Parish youth actively participated in a city-wide initiative to collect plastic waste across Palermo, fostering environmental stewardship and communal responsibility.[xxxii]

Through Edith Stein's phenomenology, Carmelite ecology gains a robust theoretical foundation, enriching its practical dimensions with profound insights into relationality and divine interconnection. This framework not only inspires personal and communal ecological conversion but also highlights the theological significance of integral ecology as a response to humanity's vocation to care for creation.

Challenges and Opportunities in Integrating Spirituality and Ecology

Integrating spirituality and ecology presents both challenges and opportunities, especially within the Carmelite tradition. Rooted in contemplation, simplicity, and community, Carmelite

spirituality provides a unique framework for ecological renewal. However, aligning spiritual practices with ecological concerns is not without difficulties, largely due to the materialism, consumerism, and fragmentation of modern society. Despite these obstacles, Carmelite spirituality offers powerful opportunities to inspire both cultural and ecological transformation.

Challenges to Integration

Materialism and Consumerism

A major barrier is the pervasive materialism of modern society, which prioritizes possessions and consumption over spiritual values. This mindset leads to ecological harm, as nature is often seen as a resource to be exploited. Carmelite spirituality, with its focus on simplicity, calls for a shift away from this materialistic approach and towards a deeper awareness of our interconnectedness with the environment. Pope Francis' *Laudato Sì* echoes this call for a lifestyle change that resists consumerism and embraces sustainability.[xxxiii]

Resistance to Change

People often resist lifestyle changes, especially when they challenge comfort and convenience. The Carmelite emphasis on simplicity and detachment can be seen as countercultural in a society focused on efficiency and excess. For ecological transformation to take root, Carmelites must demonstrate how sustainable living can be practical and spiritually fulfilling, aligning everyday practices with ecological responsibility. This transformation is also intellectual and personal, involving a change of heart, as Edith Stein suggests in her reflections on conversion and interrelatedness.[xxxiv]

Societal Fragmentation

Modern society's fragmentation – marked by individualism and weakened community bonds – hinders collective action, which is essential for addressing environmental issues. Carmelite spirituality can counteract this by promoting relationality, both with nature and with one another. Building stronger communal ties helps foster collective responsibility for the earth, a key tenet of both ecological sustainability and Carmelite life.

Opportunities for Renewal

Contemplative Engagement with Nature

Carmelite spirituality's contemplative nature provides an opportunity to reconnect with the earth. Through silent prayer and reflection, individuals can cultivate a deep respect for nature, seeing it as a reflection of divine beauty and wisdom. This contemplative approach encourages ecological action by fostering a reverence for creation as a sacred gift. Pope Francis' *Laudato Si* also calls for a spirituality that sees the earth as part of God's divine presence and encourages a deeper connection to creation.[xxxv]

Simplicity and Detachment

In a world driven by excess, Carmelite spirituality's call to simplicity offers a practical path for ecological renewal. By embracing modesty and stewardship, Carmelites model a lifestyle that reduces ecological footprints and focuses on what is truly essential. This approach not only aligns with sustainability but also invites a deeper awareness of our relationship with all life. Stein's philosophy of simplicity and detachment further emphasizes how personal transformation can contribute to broader societal change.

Community as a Source of Action

Carmelite communities, with their emphasis on mutual care and shared responsibility, offer a model for collective ecological action. These communities can create local initiatives like parish gardens, recycling programs, and sustainability projects, serving as examples of how living in solidarity can benefit both the earth and the community.

Advocacy for Ecological Justice

Finally, Carmelite spirituality provides a foundation for advocacy, particularly for marginalized communities most affected by environmental degradation. By combining care for creation with care for the poor, Carmelites can advocate for ecological justice, raising awareness about the disproportionate impact of environmental harm on vulnerable populations.

Conclusion

Carmelite spirituality, with its emphasis on silence, solitude, and contemplative prayer, offers profound insights for cultivating a deeper ecological consciousness. Edith Stein's phenomenology of interrelatedness further enriches this vision by highlighting the inherent dignity and connectedness of all creation. As humanity faces ecological and social challenges,

the Carmelite tradition provides a spiritual and philosophical foundation for integral ecology, encouraging simplicity, humility, and communal solidarity. By embracing these principles, individuals and communities can foster a renewed relationship with creation, grounded in reverence and care. Ultimately, the Carmelite path invites a holistic conversion, calling for a life that reflects harmony with creation and a deeper union with God, echoing the vision of *Laudato Sì* and offering hope for a more just and sustainable future.

Endnotes

[i] cf. Smet, *The Carmelites: A History of the Brothers of Our Lady of Mount Carmel*, 1:15–20.
[ii] cf. Waaijman, *The Mystical Space of Carmel: A Commentary on the Carmelite Rule*, 55–60.
[iii] see. Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle,* ms. iv-vii.
[iv] see. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, bk. ii.
[v] cf. Copsey, *Carmel in Britain: Studies on the Early History of the Carmelites*, 45–47.
[vi] cf. Rohrbach, *Journey to Carith: The Sources and Story of the Discalced Carmelites*, 89–95.
[vii] cf. Waaijman, *The Mystical Space of Carmel: A Commentary on the Carmelite Rule*, 23.
[viii] cf. Waaijman, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods*, 356–60.
[ix] John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, 531.
[x] cf. Obbard, *The Rule of Carmel: A Contemporary Interpretation*, 27–30.
[xi] The Rule of St. Albert, ch. 10; Smet, *The Carmelites: A History of the Brothers of Our Lady of Mount Carmel*, 1:30–33.
[xii] cf. Waaijman, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods*, 700–710.
[xiii] cf. Nicholas of Narbonne, 'Ignea Sagitta: The Flaming Arrow', chap. 11. A personal rendition of his words goes as follows:
In solitude, all things aid us joyfully.
The firmament, adorned with stars and planets,
invites us to behold higher truths.
Birds, angelic in nature, sing for our delight,
while silent lights whisper warnings.
Shrubs offer shade, and creatures,
in their quiet presence, refresh our souls.
They proclaim wonders,
beckoning us to praise the Creator.
[xiv] see. Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, 119–22.
[xv] Rohr, *Silent Compassion: Finding God in Contemplation*, 42.
[xvi] cf. Smet, *The Carmelites: A History of the Brothers of Our Lady of Mount Carmel*, 1:20–25.
[xvii] see. Teresa of Ávila, *The Way of Perfection*, 95–98.
[xviii] see. John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, ss. 4–6.
[xix] Pope Francis, *Laudato Sì*, 139.
[xx] see. The Rule of St. Albert, ch. 15; Smet, *The Carmelites: A History of the Brothers of Our Lady of Mount Carmel*, 1:28–30.
[xxi] see. Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, 194–196.
[xxii] cf. Jose, *The Ultimate Sense of the Human Being*, 233.
[xxiii] see. Stein, *Person and Community: Edmund Husserl and the Community of Persons*, 54.
[xxiv] see. Stein, *Ethics: The Problem of the Person and the Problem of Empathy*, 72–73.
[xxv] see. Stein, *The Science of the Cross: A Treatise on the Spiritual Life*, 152.
[xxvi] cf. Sawicki, *Body, Text, and Science: The Literacy of Investigative Practices and the Phenomenology of Edith Stein*, 145.
[xxvii] see. Stein, *The Hidden Life: Essays, Meditations, Spiritual Texts*, 77.
[xxviii] Berry, *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*, 243–48.
[xxix] cf. Baseheart, *Person in the World: Introduction to the Philosophy of Edith Stein*, 133.
[xxx] see. Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being*, 170.
[xxxi] see. Stein, *The Hidden Life: Essays, Meditations, Spiritual Texts*, 79.

[xxxii] cf. Sawicki, *Body, Text, and Science: The Literacy of Investigative Practices and the Phenomenology of Edith Stein*, 146.
[xxxiii] see. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, 28.
[xxxiv] see. Stein, *Philosophical Essays*, 115.
[xxxv] see. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, 89.