

Opposition - How Do You Cope?

Imagine yourself just getting home from an especially moving Carmelite retreat. The talks were just great. You've been warmly reassured about your Secular Carmelite vocation, you had some very moving consolations, and you're just bursting to share this all with your family.... But instead, you get ice water on all your joy. First opposition, then heat instead of light, and finally pain and heartbreak. Or if you're more lucky, only a cold indifference.

This is one of the most difficult problems Secular Carmelites have to face, opposition, and it's fairly common. It may come from a husband or wife, or parents, or children, or even someone at church. Since they see our Carmelite vocation only from the outside, it remains a complete mystery to them, a very powerful part of our lives they just don't understand. And any mystery we can't share can easily become a source of irritation, or jealousy, or hostility. Even the thought of this opposition is enough to bring an unpleasant feeling to anyone who has to cope with it. But how CAN you cope?

The basic message is all there in the Gospels, in Christ's example and words, but it's hard to sort it all out. Your emotions tend to blind you. Is it your duty to make your opposition see, like Jesus and the blind man, to straighten out this sometimes stranger who's so close to you? Or should you try to do as Jesus did at the Last Supper, to take off your shirt (your garment of ego and pride) and wash his feet instead? This is a difficult path to walk; but surely it was God, who loves you, who put your feet on it -- and asks you to walk this way.

If you try to avoid this kind of problem by cutting yourself off from the one who causes it, you may also be avoiding God's will. When Peter tried to tell Christ he was wrong to think about suffering, Jesus rebuked him sharply "Get behind me . . . , you're not thinking as God thinks, but as man thinks."¹ It's awfully hard to see at the time, but God uses these conflicts and trials to make us grow. The one who inflicts them is, unwittingly, one of the tools God uses to shape us, to make us pliable, and open, and humble.

Our vocation can be a painful one. St. Teresa and John of the Cross both said that it's not possible to grow spiritually without suffering. But we don't always recognize these trials for what they are. We're stuck in the distorted childhood idea that the only *real* suffering is to be burned at the stake, or to wear a hair shirt. But this opposition, like loneliness and emptiness, is a very real suffering: not the kind we'd ever choose for ourselves, but a better kind. A spiritually mature person would even be able to thank God for these things. Who is more intimate with Christ than one who suffers with Him?

If we want to become like Christ, we have to remember that He too suffered a great deal of opposition. Not only from the religious leaders of that day, the Scribes and Pharisees, but also from acquaintances and friends in His own hometown, and even from His own family and relatives: "When his relatives heard of this, they set out to take charge of him, convinced he

was out of his mind.”² “Going from that district, he went to his hometown ... and began teaching in the synagogue ...Where did the man get all this? they said. And they would not accept him.”³

So if Jesus was opposed by so many of His contemporaries, and St. Teresa was opposed by the authorities in her own Order, and the ones at Rome as well, should we expect to be treated with all possible respect?

So How Do We Respond?

Most of us like to see ourselves responding to opposition like Walter Mitty in one of his daydreams: like a brave captain going down with his ship; with the water just starting to lap about our feet; calm, dignified, spiritual, and noble. But it usually isn't that way at all. We're more likely to be at the center of a great emotional storm: angry, hurt, weak, confused, and filled with inner turmoil. We also have to fight the temptation to “get even,” or to use some other more subtle form of retribution.

Opposition is very hard to handle; how can you fight with a storm and expect to win? But there are a few things that can help.

1. We have to begin by being totally honest. We must be willing to see our own flaws, and be open to the elements of truth in what the other one says. Neither of these virtues come quickly or easily.
2. Try to pray during the “storm,” and afterward. Use only a very short phrase, or even one word alone, like “Jesus.” And don't ask for God's help in beating down your opponent. God loves him too. Just ask for God's help.

This brief prayer, repeated at intervals, will help you make a stand in a truly spiritual direction, at least in the depth of your existence. This stand may seem insignificant, and seem to have no immediate effect on your behavior or feelings, but it will mean that at least one tiny part of you belongs to God, and not to your raging emotions. Very gradually over a long period of time, this stand, your commitment to God in stress, will grow.

3. Try to “respond,” not react impulsively. If you respond to a remark, you try to distance yourself from the first impact of the insult. You weigh the situation. What made him so angry with me? Is he tired? Disappointed? Did he have a bad day? Maybe I irritated him. Perhaps I was overbearing. Would it be wise to answer impulsively, or should I wait and respond when he feels less irritated? As a result of these questions, I gain insight into this person and situation, and I may grow to a wise response.⁴
4. Remember that you're human, and chances are that you'll fail miserably as far as being noble is concerned. Admit this to yourself, and commend your weakness to God. Then

always think in terms of starting over again. As St. Anthony of the Desert said, "Progress consists in making new beginnings."

5. Try not to plan your strategy of conflict. Let the Holy Spirit work freely and don't get in His way. What seems like a defeat to us is often a victory.
6. St. Thérèse of Lisieux admits in her autobiography that she had a very bad temper. You might want to imitate one of her solutions to opposition and conflict. When she was just about ready to explode and couldn't hold back any longer, as a last resort, she always ran. "I did not have enough virtue to permit myself to be accused without saying a word. My last plank of salvation was in flight.... No sooner thought than done. I left."⁵

Try also to keep the correct attitudes, or outlook, toward him. We tend to fall into the trap that our ego sets for us in many ways:

- Be sure you're not being overbearing. Don't preach at him. This is usually only your own pride swelling up and making noises at you. Jesus sent us to serve, not to straighten others out (except by our loving example)."When I am willful and noisily busy about my holiness, I am unable to listen to either the egocentric rumblings within me or the silent voice of grace at the core of my being. I lose sensitivity to this voice. Nor can I listen quietly to the subtle message of the situation. My willfulness chains me to only one thing, my idealized self-image of religious perfection."⁶
- Don't cut him out of your life and affection because of your powerful "religious" interests. In time, selfless (not selfish) love conquers all.
- When the storm subsides, always remember to forgive him, both inside in your attitudes and outside in the way you respond to him. Remember what Jesus said when Peter asked if he should forgive the one who opposes him up to seven times. "No. Not seven times, but seventy times seven times."⁷

Jesus also said "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." We forgive one another's trespasses, or sins, by being open to one another; by being willing to hear, believe, and respond to the truth in what someone else says, even if what he says is temporarily made obscure by anger or harshness.

- Finally, be aware that, as strange as it may sound, this is part of your purification. If you try to respond correctly, it will bring you closer to God and to His "Suffering Servant."

Remember the fable about the lion with the thorn in his paw, and the young man who pulled it out? The lion was converted by this kind act from an enemy to a loving friend. So can it be with you and the one who opposes you. If he just can't feel secure with this overpowering interest of yours, your loving responses will show him that you love him unconditionally. This is the total love Jesus asks us for. We, especially, should try to hear him.

All of us are a lot more sensitive and vulnerable than we appear to be on the outside. Think

of the one who opposes you like our four-footed friend in the

Prayer of the Porcupine

*Lord,
let them know my protection is also my isolation.
Help them to look beyond my appearance.
I am truly soft underneath.⁸*

What If It Interferes With My Vocation?

Another very puzzling question that can cause you a great deal of distress is “What can I do if this opposition interferes with my vocation?”

Obviously, to be a Carmelite, you must be able to find the time in your life to pray and to live the Carmelite way of life. Fortunately, when God gives a vocation, He also gives us the means and the grace to follow it. But He doesn’t say it’ll be easy. God uses the storms and conflicts in our lives to make us grow spiritually. As St. Teresa says “Everything is a grace to him who loves God.” Or should we say “everything *can be* a grace, if you make use of it properly.”

To say that you should pray about this opposition is so obvious that it sounds silly to mention it. But too often we don’t think about it in the right way. We shouldn’t be praying so much for the opposition to be taken away, but so we may be able to find and follow God’s will in it. We may have a lot of “inner fences” (wrong or harsh attitudes, pride with a tendency to dominate, etc.) that need mending, and God may be using this opposition to point them out to us and repair them.

Be sure also that you respect the beliefs of your opposition. There is probably a certain amount of truth in what he says; in your quieter moments, look for it. Many of the saints were purified of imperfections in just this way by harsh novice masters. The harshness isn’t good of course, but the purification is. And don’t expect to see the whole truth (and what *he* sees) quickly; it’ll take a long time.

And finally, if you have these proper attitudes, there are a few practical things you can do too.

First, try to keep a low profile. It’s important that you live the Carmelite way, but it’s not important that you be *seen* saying the Office or at prayer, etc. If your beliefs and way of life antagonize someone close to you, make that part of your life as invisible as you can to him. He’ll be moved much more positively if, instead, you try to stress the things you share in common. Hopefully, in time, he’ll begin to see that your Carmelite way of life is making your love grow instead of being a threat to him.

Try to use those times of the day and the week that he and the world around you don’t

want for your prayers and your Office. There's even a sense of poverty in your use of these castoff pieces of time, and also sacrifice. If it's difficult to find a time for prayer, how about early in the morning before anyone else gets up, as Jesus did. "In the morning, long before dawn, he got up and left the house, and went off to a lonely place and prayed there."⁹ Your lonely place might be your own living room, or just a quiet corner somewhere.

Or you could pray during the night. Maybe you're awake or up briefly sometimes during the night anyway, and a night-time vigil, when the world all around you is silent, is an excellent time for prayer. The silence itself makes you feel closer to God, and the distractions and cares of the day seem far away. Maybe you can make up for the lost sleep with a new habit of getting to bed a little bit earlier, or a short nap at some other time of day.

These are not the only private times available, of course. Only you can find all the quiet times in your own life. There may be regular times when you have your home all to yourself, or a coffee break you can give up for some quiet time by yourself at work, or even a church that you can stop in when you're out shopping or on the way home from work. Look carefully for these times—Our Lord is waiting for you there. Let your silence melt into His silence, and your love melt into His love.

You might also have trouble getting to the meetings. If this is the case, the first thing to always keep in mind is "don't worry about it." Leave it in God's hands. This too may be part of your purification, and the sacrifice it entails may even be a big spiritual help to you in the long run. Tell the President or the Spiritual Director of your Chapter about this, gently, without bitterness or harshness, so they understand why you can't always be there. And if you have to stay away almost all the time, have them list you as an Extended Member. Again, don't worry. God can see your spiritual path, even when you can't. Trust Him.

And finally, if you can't share your spiritual ideals at home, it's important that you share them regularly with your fellow Carmelites. If you can't get to the meetings, write or phone one of your Carmelite brothers or sisters regularly. You don't have to say anything profound; just making the contact and saying a few words lets you know that the rest of us care, and this will make a big difference to you. Care and support are part of the gift you received with your Secular Carmelite vocation. Just ask, and you'll receive.

Some Closing Thoughts

It's a constant temptation, but don't judge the one who opposes you. Look at what you've been given:

Our Carmelite vocation is a gift, pure and simple. It asks us for a profoundly personal response to a divine call, a response that leads us ever more closely to a total commitment to God, who also commits Himself to us. Be aware of this tremendous gift, a personal call to divine intimacy, and be aware that most of the others you meet don't have it. In my poorness and yours, and with all our faults, we never earned it. And for all we've been given, it's so easy to find others with little or no formal religion at all who are so much kinder and more charitable

than we are.

The one who opposes you may have had a difficult time earlier in life that halted his religious and person-to-person growth before it was able to fully mature. He may need a great deal of love and tolerance, a loving person who, with great resources of love and infinite patience, can make up for what he missed and give him the help he needs. He may try your patience in unreasonable and even mean ways, and make you suffer because he is so distrustful of the love and care of people, and has never once in his life experienced that someone else can care for him unconditionally. Only when he really experiences that he is still accepted, faults and all, will he be able to go beyond himself to a real, giving love and tolerance.¹⁰

Continue loving, despite differences. The love will gradually bring you and him closer together in areas where there is a difference. If he sees this love on your part, he will be changed, *but only in his own time*. We all can only grow and flourish in the atmosphere that love provides. St. John of the Cross said “Where there is no love, put love, and you will find love.” We are all called to love and serve others with Christ, in a life of prayer, sacrifice, and divine intimacy. Shouldn’t we begin with this one who opposes us, and still is so close?

Remember that the truly religious man or woman is not the willful, ethical superman, but the humble shepherd of the sacred. This is what you and I are called to. It is our job to sanctify our little piece of the universe, not by conquering it, but by guarding its sacred dimension. As the shepherd peacefully tends his flock, so should we see the divine presence in all the people, things, and events in the world around us.¹¹

It is our place to see that this vision of the divine doesn’t perish. May we do it well. May our lamps remain lit, and our love light up the dark places in the world around us. May we learn to be patient, and humble, and begin in that hardest place of all: at home, with those who are closest to us.

Epilogue

“They Come From Everywhere”

*Lord, why did you tell me to love all men?
I have tried, but now I come back to You, frightened.
Lord, I was so peaceful in my house.
I was sheltered from the wind, and the rain, and the mire.*

*But You found a crack in my defenses, Lord.
You made me open my door just a little bit,
and like a cloudburst full in the face,
the cries of men awoke me; like a gust of wind,
a friendship shook me; like a ray of sunlight,
peeping unexpectedly between the shutters,*

*Your grace had disturbed me -
And I left my door ajar ..¹²*

References

1. Mark 8:31-32.
2. Mark 3:21. 3. Mark 6:1-3.
4. "Religion and Personality," Pg. 121, Adrian van Kaam C.S.Sp., Doubleday Image Books, 1968.
5. "Story of a Soul, The Autobiography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux," Pgs. 223, 224, John Clark O.C.D., ICS Publications, 1975.
6. "Religion and Personality," Pg. 117.
7. Matthew 18:21,22.
8. Desert Call magazine. Summer, 1973.
9. Mark 1:35.
10. "Religion and Personality," Pg. 146.
11. "Religion and Personality," Pgs. 134, 135.
12. Spiritual Life Institute of America

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