The Carmelite Monks of Wyoming

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The New Mount Carmel Chapter House in the Fall.

Having received Jesus in the Holy Eucharist, we now continue to peer behind the monastery’s tall walls to explore the Carmelite happenings on an altogether ordinary morning. After a time of thanksgiving, the Prior makes a knock upon the wooden choir stall signaling the monks to rise following a prostration. The cantor intones a psalm singing, “May God have mercy on us, and bless us,” while the monks—beginning with the youngest—file to the center of the chapel to make a genuflection, kiss the Brown Scapular, and bow to one another before slowly processing. A procession of monks thus emerges each morning from the chapel as the rays illumine the interior chapel and the monks with their brown woollen habits and hoods continue to alternate the verses of the psalm on the way to the monastery’s dining room known as a “refectory.”

In the Carmels of St. Teresa of Jesus and John of the Cross, the refectory takes on a special importance as the counterpart to the chapel. Fed with the Bread of Angels in the chapel, the monk is fed with monk bread in the refectory. The refectory is a sparsely furnished room with wooden tables lining the two parallel walls and the superior’s table at the front of the room under a cross or crucifix. There is never any speaking in the refectory, but rather the monks eat lunch and dinner sitting two by two and facing towards the center of the room with no one on the other side of the elevated table. Here the monks enjoy a hearty sustenance, albeit needless according to Carmel’s ancient penitential discipline enshrined in the Rule.

After the monks arrive at the refectory, bowing to the central crucifix and finding their places lining the refectory tables, the weekly celebrant or “hebdomadary” leads a concluding prayer asking the Lord to grant all the heart’s desires on behalf of God’s Holy People. The monks are now hungry; it is breakfast time. Breakfast in Carmel is simple, especially during the Great Fast from...
calls to mind the fire of divine love that God wills to enkindle in souls. Contemplating the beans inside the roaster before him, the monk prays for souls in the many nations from which these beans originated and who perhaps helped to harvest the green bean crop; may God set them all on fire with the ardor of His love.

In the cloisterwalk, we find still another monk alone and solitary. Over his woolen habit, the Father has tied a brown apron to keep his habit clean. He slowly, methodically sweeps from one end of the long walk to another collecting the dirt and dust into an orderly pile. The swooshing of the broom’s bristles, however, in no way deters our monk-priest from contemplation as he begs the Paraclete to sweep from his soul all vice and viciousness that his soul might become a fitting dwelling place for the Most High cleansed of the filthiness of sin. As the sun casts its rays through the many gothic windows painting shadows as it were across the tile floor, the Father makes his way down the hallway leaving the floor tidy and more importantly conversing with his God.

Yet another monk can be found with a companion high atop the monastery’s scaffolding that surrounds the chapterhouse amid the monastery complex. Having exchanged the flowing habit for the necessary safety of workclothes, hardhat, and reflective vest, the two monks quietly mastermind the day’s masonry progression as one stone is gradually stacked upon another. They speak sparingly and only of what is necessary. One reads the stones and grout while another operates the crane to heave each stone into its perfectly planned spot like Lego blocks, one after the next. Their feat is impressive, but more praiseworthy still is their prayer. From the scaffoldings’ heights, the first little brother catches a glimpse of the surrounding mountains that act as a rampart for this solitary life; he beholds the fresh snow on the peaks and a coyote running through the field while a melodious bird sings a sweet song just nearby. All of creation reveals its great order as designed by God and prompts our monk covered in masonry dust to praise the Creator as the monastery wall slowly rises.