

CARMEL IN THE LATE MIDDLE AGES

II

DECLINE AND REFORM

INTRODUCTOR

Y

The aim of this present chapter is not so much to give a complete history of the Carmelite Order during the late medieval period but rather to present a panoramic view of the decline which afflicted it from the time of the Great Schism until the opening of the Council of Trent, that is, from 1378 to 1545. To put this into its proper context, it will be necessary to preface it with some general observations on the decline of Western Catholicism.

A more detailed account of this tragically vital period is to be found in Huizinga's study, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (1924) or in Monsignor P. Hughes' *Reformation in England* (3 vols.) or in his *History of the Reformation* (1957).

For practical purposes, this chapter will focus attention on one of the great Carmelites of the period, Blessed John Soreth. He was born in Caen, Normandy, in 1394 and died at Angers in 1471 and was Prior General of the Order from 1451 till his death. His life-span, therefore, covers about half of the period under consideration. He was a 'saintly' man and a sincere reformer, described by a contemporary as 'a strong leader of his own Order and of all Mendicants . . . a reformer such as the future will seldom see absolutely bound to God in contemplation and prayer' (Brandsma: *Carmelite Mysticism* p.55).

Since this study has centered on the Carmelite Rule, the period of the Order's decline and eventual reform will be approached from the same angle. It so happens that Blessed John Soreth composed a commentary on the Rule, known as the *Expositio Paraenetica* (or Exhortatory Explanation). Its object was to convey his ideas on reform. In a fatherly and cordial spirit, he addressed himself to his fellow-Carmelites, exhorting them to take the Rule as the foundation of the renewal which he hoped to promote among them. He pointed out that the prescriptions of the Rule constitute the minimum of good

observance but the religious should not remain content with mere externals. The spirit of the Order reaches out to contemplative union with Christ and this must be their ultimate goal.

The commentary was composed when Blessed John was engaged in trying to lift the Order from the slough of indifferentism into a more noble spirit of religious commitment. It is permeated with the living experience of one who strove manfully to be a loyal Carmelite. It was reprinted in Paris in 1625 and a modern version containing a biographical note from Blessed John's secretary and companion, Walter of Terranova, was published in 1894. Part of the present chapter is drawn from this writing and references are to the modern edition.

There is a problem about using sources of this kind. A reforming Chapter or Visitor's report will note the single defector or the one lax member of a community. But it will be rare to find mention of the ninety-nine others who are in earnest about keeping their Rule, both in the letter and in spirit. In addition, a zealous reformer is liable to high-light weaknesses in order to urge those of goodwill to strive after a greater spirit of dedication. A French writer observes: 'The complaints against the growing decadence of the clergy which were liberally heaped upon priests of the *Quattrocento*, were often inspired by the desire for edification' (quoted by Daniel-Raps in *The Protestant Reformation*). Rhetoric of this kind is not absent from Soreth's *Expositio*. On the whole, however, it is well-reasoned and balanced, lacking the passionate eloquence of the *Ignea Sagitta*, but characterized by urgency and pain arising from the distressing condition of the Carmelite Order. Soreth supports his exhortations with several citations from earlier writers, particularly St. Bernard. And he assumes that before the Rule of St. Albert, the Carmelite Order was organized on monastic lines similar to those of St. Basil, whom he refers to as 'our Father'.

Note: A good sample of Blessed John Soreth's style giving an insight into his incarnational teaching is to be found in a passage from the *Expositio* which is now the 2nd lesson for his feast, in the new Carmelite Supplement, July 24th.

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN THE QUATTROCENTO

It is agreed on all sides that during the 15th century, the Catholic Church sank in a state of grave decline. It is also agreed that this decay penetrated into every department of the Church's life, moral, organizational, intellectual and liturgical. Some writers use the phrase 'theopathic' state, an anguish caused somehow by God or his absence, to describe the decadence of late medieval society, a society in which the elements of bygone greatness were in an advanced state of decomposition (cf. Daniel-Rops, *The Protestant Reformation*, p.115).

What was the cause of this deplorable decline? First and foremost, it was due to a crisis within the heart of man himself. 'The destiny of the world is shaped in the secret recesses of the human mind through the hidden confrontation of ideals and passions. The new forces that cause old empires to crumble are the self-same forces which each man encounters in the depths of his own soul' (Daniel-Rops, *The Protestant Reformation*, p.106).

Despite the magnificent achievements of the 12th and 13th centuries, Europe had not fully accepted Christianity. True, the Gospel was universally accepted but it was not universally applied. The culture of the age was basically Christian but an unregenerate pagan element had lingered on underneath to break out vehemently when the Christian spirit decayed. Moral degeneration set in and with it, political and social decline.

The Church of the 15th century was particularly susceptible to ailments of this kind. In the centuries gone by, she had been thrust into positions of responsibility and honour among the rising nations of Europe. The early medieval Popes had acquired certain legal rights to guide those who were entrusted with the government of men. They regarded it as their duty to defend the rights of both God and men, even in the temporal sphere, should secular powers ignore the commandments of God or violate the interests of the Church. Innocent III had written that the Church's liberty is nowhere better secured than in those places where she enjoys full power both in temporal and in spiritual matters. And Innocent IV, the Pope who adapted the Carmelite Rule to European conditions, claimed that Christ,

true King and true priest, had transmitted his kingship as well as his priesthood to Peter and his successors and that therefore temporal sovereigns were in some sense delegated by the Popes.

This teaching conveniently overlooked Christ's words that his kingdom was not of this world; in fact this Papal theory never met' With universal acceptance. Nonetheless, the prestige and wealth of the medieval Church were immense. She was a political power of international renown. In the days of her spiritual vigour, she was able to fill the role with remarkable distinction. But when faith declined, all the worst aspects of her compromised position came to the surface. The human element in the Church showed itself subject to the very same human weaknesses as the human element outside it. A creeping paralysis set in which eventually spread to every department of ecclesiastical life; from the Papacy to the simplest monastery. There were of course, external factors which hastened the decline. The Black Death, the Great Schism of the West, the incessant wars, the 'new learning' tainted by paganism, are all rightly listed as aggravating causes. But first and foremost, the decline must be ascribed to 'a law of nature that can be seen at work time and time again, in the Church's history. When left to itself, the Christian soul sinks into the mire. The salt of the earth loses its savour; the yeast no longer leavens the dough. The confusion of temporal and. spiritual interests paralyses the best intentions' (Daniel-Rops, *The Protestant Reformation*, p.130).

During the period we are surveying, the life of the Church seemed to ebb away and she was left with the shell of externals which more and more became a leaden weight about her neck. The splendid structures which Canon Law had developed over the centuries disintegrated into complex and insupportable burdens. The spirit of the law seemed dead; the letter was constantly being violated by the racket of dispensation. This latter grew into one of the deadly abuses of the age, being a lucrative source of revenue for everyone concerned.

ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS ON SPIRITUAL DECLINE

. It is revealing to read some of the observations of St. John

of the Cross concerning spiritual decline. Like all students of human nature, he too was well aware that the great crises which shake human society and the great battles that are fought out on the stage of history are but the externalization of crises and battles that take place in the human soul. Social unrest and religious decay are simply a translation into deeds of what goes on within. The leading dramatic writers of all ages have also exploited this theme. It is one of the insights that underlies Shakespearean tragedy. St. John of the Cross approaches it in order to diagnose the sources 'of the evils that diminish or extinguish divine charity in man. The first of these is inordinate joy which he describes as 'a certain satisfaction of the will, joined to the appreciation of the object it considers desirable' (*Asc.* III, 17,1). Joy of this kind has several sources, all of which the will of man is liable to use as a substitute for joy in God. 'For the will ought to rejoice in nothing but in that which tends to the honour and glory. of God. To serve him in evangelical perfection is the greatest honour we can show him' (*ibid.* 17,2). All this is but a paraphrase of the great command of Scripture: You must love the Lord with your whole heart and with your whole soul, and with all your strength and with all your mind' and again; 'Set your hearts first on God's kingdom and his goodness; all else will come to you as a matter of course' (Mt. 6,33).

We give here a few extracts to illustrate how this teaching was overlooked and flouted in the Church of the *Quattrocento*, in respect of inordinate joy.

Note: In order to appreciate the implication of St. John of the Cross's teaching, it is 'well, perhaps, to paraphrase 'joy' or 'rejoicing' by 'devoting all one's attention to' or 'being inordinately pre-occupied with' created things.

'If we were to describe all the evils that surround the soul of man when the affections of the will are set on *temporal things*, paper and ink would fail me and time itself would be too short. . . . All these evils have their root in one principal evil, namely withdrawal from God. . . . The characteristics of those who indulge in this kind of joy are a great lukewarmness in spiritual things and a careless observance of them. They practice

them from formality or from compulsion, or out of habit, rather than out of love' (*ibid.* 19,1-6).

'To this class belong those who do not hesitate to subject divine and supernatural things to temporal things, as if these were God. There are many nowadays who belong to the class of persons who serve money and not God, putting first the monetary cost of a thing and not its divine worth and reward' (*ibid.* 19,9).

This description of the evil effects of avarice will be found to apply very aptly to the ecclesiastics of the late Middle Ages. Greed for money was certainly a root cause of the troubles that beset the Church at that time.

Those who rejoice inordinately in the *things of nature* (physical beauty, grace, bodily constitution, good understanding and other things that pertain to reason) fall into lukewarmness and weakness of spirit.

'A man may find the things of God very tedious and troublesome, until at last he comes to hate them. . . and if any spirituality remains, it is of such a gross and sensual kind that it is hardly spirituality at all, consisting in sensible delight more than in the strength of spirit' (*ibid.* 22,2).

'It is impossible to describe with pen or to express in words the lengths to which this kind of disorderly rejoicing in natural gifts can go nor the extent of the misery that arises from it: murders, loss of honour, insults, dissipation of wealth, rivalry, strife, adultery, violence and the ruin of holy men and women. . . There is hardly any man, whether high or low, saint or sinner, who does not drink of the wine from the golden cup of the Babylonian woman . . . And she seizes upon all conditions of men, the highest and the noblest, the service of the sanctuary and the priesthood itself; she puts the cup of her abominations in the holy place' (*ibid.* 22,3-4).

When men put their rejoicing solely in the *things of sense* (i.e. on what can be perceived by the bodily senses or imagination) many evils begin to flourish. 'Among them are an aversion to the poor, which is contrary to the teaching of Christ; a dislike of serving others; a reluctance to engage in lowly work. Such

persons also lose taste for spiritual things and grow remiss about spiritual duties, self-denial and the use of the sacraments of penance and of the Eucharist' (*ibid.* 25,4-8).

An inordinate desire for *things supernatural* (Le. the gifts of healing, miracles, prophecy, etc.) can lead to a serious diminution in the spirit of faith, to such an extent that one may even lose it entirely. In its worst forms it leads to self-deception, to false miracles, to an unholy interest in signs and portents and opens the door to diabolic interventions (*Asc.* III, 31). One of the features of the *Quattrocento* was a morbid sense of the devil's presence, together with an interest in witchcraft, magic and astrology: pseudo-mystics also abounded (see Daniel-Rops, *op. cit.*, pp.111-114; 122-123).

Inordinate joy in *spiritual goods* can lead to an exaggerated cult of saints, pilgrimages, indulgences, relics, processions and the externals of religion (*Asc.* III, 33-45). The spectacular aspects of the Church were very much in evidence in the 15th century. True religion was woefully neglected but people flocked in their thousands to venerate relics or to take part in pilgrimages (Daniel-Rops, *op. cit.* 126-132).

In this morass of debased Christianity, humanism found a fertile breeding-ground. For many Of the devotees of the 'new learning', Christianity was little more than an empty shell. In its place, they put a pagan ideal evolved from the classical writers of antiquity. Their moral teaching had little in common with the standards of the Gospel. But these standards were so little esteemed, even in Papal circles, that one cannot blame the humanists for looking elsewhere for inspiration. They found what they wanted in the newly discovered poets and writers of the classical world. The 'new learning' pandered to man's pride and self-sufficiency and encouraged him to develop his own personality, without any reference to revealed teaching. Nature needed no help from outside. It was the sole criterion which enabled man to appreciate what was right, healthy and honourable. In this way, 'sequere naturam,' follow the instincts of nature, became the norm of conduct, replacing the moral teaching of Christ: 'If any man would come after me, let him go

against himself, take up his cross and follow me' (cf. *Asc.* II, 7,12; III, 28,5).

At this time, the old accusation was renewed that Christianity cheapens and diminishes the life of man. The true revelation, so the humanists held, was to be found in man's own nature. He is called to fulfill himself and live life to the full. The Christian revelation is only a dreary impediment to this. In a subsequent chapter, we hope to examine this charge in the light of the principles of St. John of the Cross (see also *Asc.* III, 28).

DECLINE IN THE CARMELITE ORDER

The various trends of the period, relaxation, indifferentism, an impoverished spirit of faith, an excessive concern for externals, all these find an echo in the Carmelite Order. The general decay which had attacked the Church as a whole found its way inexorably into all her branches.

(For a summary of religious life within the Order during the 14th and 15th centuries, see Benedict Zimmerman; in *Etudes Carmelitaines*, 1934, pp. 155-195. This is yet another area in the history of our Order which needs a good deal more research).

There is little doubt that the prevailing spiritual dry-rot penetrated many houses of the Carmelite Order. Blessed John Soreth, writing about 1450, remarked ruefully; 'Everywhere the Rule and Constitutions of the Order are neglected. Who keeps them? Who even knows them? Anyone who thinks they are being observed is sadly mistaken' (*Expositio*, p. 172). In 1523, another reforming General, Nicholas Audet wrote: 'From many reports, we learned of what deplorable conduct our brethren are guilty, and what a great threat hangs over the Order because of their bad example, unless all of us together come to our sense and mend our ways' (quoted in Smet, *The Carmelites*, p.177).

St. Teresa, in the course of her Autobiography which was completed in 1562, makes a number of severe strictures on the relaxed state of Carmelite houses in her day. They follow standards and amusements which belong to the world, she writes, and receive no proper formation. Religious houses are more fraught with spiritual dangers than life in the world. There are

many false vocations in them:

'Youth, sensuality and the devil invite them and incline them to do things that are completely worldly but they see that these things are considered all right. To me they resemble these unfortunate heretics who willfully blind themselves.' 'Oh, what terrible harm befalls religious people (I am speaking now both of men and women) where the rules of religious life are not properly kept. Of the two paths that can be followed in a religious house, namely the way of virtue and the way of irreligion, the imperfect road is more commonly taken. It is the broad road and is more in favour. The friar and nun who want to go by the true path need to be more afraid of the religious of their own house than of all the devils.' (Peers I, pp. 39-40).

Blessed John Soreth tried to find an antidote. His commentary on the Rule made the simple suggestion that the religious should begin by observing its prescriptions. However, he was not content with encouraging a merely exterior observance. It must be something that had life in it and this can only derive from earnest pursuit of union with Christ: 'Our vocation is to leave the cities and their crowds and to search for solitude. The place makes no difference, provided you follow Christ into the country or look for him in the desert or pray with him alone on the mountain' (*Expositio* p.109). But Soreth remarked plaintively: 'What good is it to know all that,- if the cloisters are there in name only, open to persons<-of both sexes? Who can observe even the essentials of the rule in such noisy and public places?' (*Expositio* p.110). St. Teresa it will be recalled, voiced similar complaints in her own day

Not only did seculars enter but the friars themselves went out. They did not keep to their cells as they had promised when making their profession; they went about doing much useless visiting. Notwithstanding efforts made by General Chapters, a wrong type of social life took root in the Order (cf. *Acta Capito Gen.* I, p.163). Nicholas of Narbonne mentions as one of the current abuses that friars were gadding about until the small hours of the morning. Blessed John Soreth mentions a new breed which

had sprung up in his time, friars who rose early, not to say their prayers but 'to run from house to house, greeting people and . almost forcing their way into bed-chambers where people are still asleep.' Such persons, he points out, persuade themselves that they are acting from motives of religion. They are only deceiving themselves; what they are really in search of is dissipation of one kind or another (*Expoliitio*, pp.132-134).

As might be expected, religious silence sat lightly on the consciences of friars such as these. Blessed Soreth has an eloquent discourse on this topic (*Expositio* pp. 214-217), pointing out that while there are many good reasons for being silent, the one that counts for Carmelites is 'that it compels us to reflect on heavenly things' (*ibid.* p.215). In contrast to this ideal, he draws an unflattering portrait of the friars in the decadent monasteries of the time, who 'pass the day 'curiose agentes' i.e. interfering in other people's business and speculating about useless or futile things, 'What are the Turks planning these days? or What will the King of Portugal do next? What are we having for lunch? What will the weather be like next year?' (*Expositio* 211). The wholesale relaxation of the practice of silence and the useless lives of many friars and nuns are facts which are only too well attested by other contemporary sources. They were still unremedied when St. Teresa began her work. John Soreth too, strove to instill a higher scale of values into the friars of his day. One reason why he instituted the Second and Third- Orders was to shame the others into a better sense of their duty. In addition, he had some sensible advice to offer: 'Train yourself to remain in your cells to discover the divine presence and avail of the three guardians who protect you, namely, God, on whom you depend every moment; your own conscience, to which you must answer; a spiritual guide, to whom you owe obedience in love' (*Expositio* p.115). 'Learn how to meditate for that is your main purpose in being a Carmelite. The cell is a holy land where you meet God. But it is in the inner cell of a pure heart that you really meet him. There are three kinds of meditation that you can use; the first drawn from created things, the second derived from sacred Scripture and the third based on the cultivation of virtue, leading

to a true 'conversio morum' or renewal of the inner life' (*Expositio*, pp.134, 137, abbreviated). Finally, a good friar will never be idle, 'for man is born to work, even as a bird to fly. And a Carmelite should learn to intermingle work with his prayer, all in due order' (*Expositio*, pp.206-212).

Community life appears to have broken down as badly among Carmelites as in other religious Orders. The abuses already mentioned are proof enough of that. Naturally, the Divine Office was not said at all or was said badly. Friars who wandered through the town all day and all night were not concerned about choral obligations. As early as 1345, the General Chapters were passing legislation to ensure that the Office be said in common (*MHC*, p.146). But it seems to have been largely ineffectual because later Chapters return to the theme again and again (see *Acta OCD I*, pp. 88; 13).

A similar breakdown is to be found in regard to the common refectory. Despite many attempts to enforce community meals, they seem to have been more honoured in the breach than in the observance until the reforms inaugurated by Trent took root. It will be recalled that one of the first steps taken by St. Teresa in the reform of the Incarnation Convent was to build a refectory where all could eat together (see *MHC*, 147, 177, 289; *Acta OCD I*, 154, 163; also *Expositio*, pp. 224-225).

One reason for this breakdown in community life was the many privileges accrued by the mendicant Orders over the centuries. Those who possessed degrees in theology or canon law were allowed a large liberty which not even the Superior General could curb. The regrettable feature of this situation was that the Roman Curia, instead of trying to restrict abuses, only added to them by the lavish number of dispensations and privileges it issued. These became a veritable 'ocean' during the years of the Great Schism (1378-1417), when rival Popes were angling for support. In 1476, all the privileges granted to mendicants were in fact codified in one Bull, popularly known as *Mare Magnum* (Great Ocean). It was one of the most ill-advised concessions ever granted and all the Orders lived to regret it.

Blessed John Soreth encouraged his religious brethren to say the office in choir with due dignity and recollection (*Expositio*, p.138-144). 'Don't be lazy, half-sleepy or yawning over it but say the psalms with manly voice and sentiment' (*ibid.*, p.143). The common refectory too, was to be restored (*ibid.*, p.119), and the custom of reading Sacred Scripture is to replace 'the nonsense, the laughing and the words of wind' that were to be heard at mealtime (*Expositio*, p.123). Nor should the friars expect a *haute cuisine* every time they came in to eat. Blessed John does not hide his irony when he speaks of the epicurean habits that had grown up in the relaxed monasteries. 'To mention only eggs,' he writes, 'look at all the ways that they are served up! They are turned and tossed and tumbled and teased. They are done hard today, poached tomorrow and scrambled at other times. Or again, they must be fried or baked or stuffed' (*Expositio*, p.123).

In order to live well and without care for the morrow, money was required. And since the religious of the *Quattrocento* were little concerned with living according to evangelical standards, they provided themselves with money in a variety of ways. Failure to observe poverty was the most serious and widespread defect among religious orders at the time, even among the Mendicants. They availed themselves of every kind of subterfuge. Nominally, as Blessed John Soreth pointed out, the friar owned nothing. But he was so well fitted out with privileges, permissions and dispensations that nothing was lacking to him (*Expositio*, pp. 148-149). Seemingly, there was hardly any limit to the amount of money or valuable objects that a friar could reserve for his own use, provided he was not the owner! (*Ibid.*, p.149). A large part of the *Expositio* is taken up with encouraging reforms in this area, reforms which apparently did not penetrate too deeply in the Order. For when St~ Teresa was writing the *Way of Perfection* in 1563 she could still complain about the property-holding friar who professes poverty with his lips but evades it in his deeds (Peers IT, pp. 167-168). This too is confirmed by the extant literature of the age. Blessed John Soreth continued: 'You have only to examine the appurtenances of an avaricious friar, you will find he has enough commodities to suffice for an entire community' (*Expositio*, p.149). In addition to that, they

dressed in the very best apparel (*Expositio*, 158-160), they lived in cells that were little short of palaces, adorned with cushions and curtains and carpets (*Expositio*, pp.149, 113). By accepting papal chaplaincies, many of them were enabled to leave the monastery entirely and set up house on their own, all the time utilizing the privileges and exemptions that went with membership of their Order. It is hardly to be wondered that when Luther attacked the whole *raison d'etre* of religious Orders, he found many supporters, even among those who did not agree with his theology .

The General Chapters of the Order have little enough to say about violations of the vow of chastity, a fact which may indicate that the Carmelites had a better record in this area than others. But abuses were not absent. The case of Fra Filippo Lippi is notorious. Blessed Soreth speaks reprovingly of friars. 'who indulge in spiritual and carnal fornication and are not ashamed to touch the sacred flesh of the Immaculate Lamb with hands that shortly before were defiled by prostitutes' (*Expositio*, p.89). St. Teresa mentioned a similar case in her own experience (Peers ed., p.181, Letter 74). She was not shocked at the weakness of human nature, she added, but could not understand how such People continued to say Mass (cf. Peers I, p.28). When pressures mounted, especially in Germany, England and Denmark, a large number of Carmelite friars left the Order and married. Some of them apostatized in order to obtain a benefice in one or other of the Protestant Churches (Smet: *The Carmelites*, pp.235 foil.: 249,261 foil.). In Mediterranean lands, there were fewer apostasies but the type of friar who remained was often one of the biggest obstacles to reform, as St. Teresa was to discover to her cost. 'They are the kind of men', wrote Soreth, 'who can hardly walk from old age but they would still condemn Suzanna and praise Jezebel' (*Expositio*, p.153).

Concerning the vow of obedience, Soreth said bluntly that it was very little understood or practiced. To this vow too, he devoted a long section of his *Expositio* (pp. 74-87; 218-225), pointing out that obedience is one of the basics of any society, 'But alas! how few obedient men there are today' (*Expositio*, p.79).

St. Teresa has the same kind of lament about the Spain of her day (cf. Peers II, 75; III, 22-26).

Soreth made one particular observation which we find also in the records of other reformers. When the authentic religious spirit grows cold, a travesty replaces it, a kind of lowest-commondenominator which is merely a caricature of the reality. Easy habits and relaxations are accepted and even promoted, 'Thus, avarice comes to be called frugality and meanness is regarded as sobriety. Moroseness is said to be silence, and remissness a form of discretion. Extravagance is termed liberality and much talk is supposed to be sociability. Guffawing is accounted joy of the spirit. Fastidiousness in dress or in bed-coverings is considered decency and cleanliness. And those who encourage slack habits are said to be acting out of charity. And yet', he added, 'this is the kind of thing I see in many of our houses today (*Expositio*, pp. 120-121).

All this makes gloomy reading but the essential facts cannot be denied. By 1500, abuses were so entrenched in the Church and in religious Orders that no one knew how or where to begin to remove them. St. Bernadine of Siena (1380-1444), himself an outstanding reformer, is reported as saying: 'Even if you had a Pope as holy as your wildest dreams, he would not be able to rid the Church of all the evil priests and prelates' (quoted in Daniel Rops, *Protestant Reformation*, p.130). It took the Lutheran revolt, the defection of northern Europe and 18 years of painstaking work in the Council of Trent to turn the tide and purify the Church. And even after all that, the work of renewal must go on continually within her (cf. *Lumen Gentium* 8).

RENEWAL II { THE CHURCH

In the 8th century, St. Boniface wrote, 'The Church is like a great ship sailing the sea of the world and in this life, tossed by the waves of temptation. But it must never be abandoned' (see *Breviary II* p.185*). The storms that assailed it in the 15th and early 16th century were among the fiercest and most protracted it experienced. And if ever the Church proved that the principle of divine life was within her, it was in working herself

out of this calamity. Of a certainty, no merely human institution could have survived it.

One could write a completely black history of the Church during these centuries. Such accounts have in fact been written. But they overlook an important aspect of her existence which every genuine historian must take into account. It was the struggle of the divine life in the Church against what was evil and diabolic. For many decades, it must have seemed that evil was triumphant, particularly when worldliness and immorality invaded even the Papacy. But in the end, Christ's promise proved true; the gates of hell did not prevail.

The full story of the Catholic counter-Reformation and its antecedents has been written elsewhere. Here it must suffice to note that there was never a time when goodness was totally extinguished. The *quattrocento* was an age of intense anguish. Of a certainty, the main cause of this was the resistance put up by the divine "in the Church against the stranglehold of decay and death. One of the surest proofs of Christ's presence is that she did not entirely succumb. But the presence of evil was all too obvious and good Catholics in every land agonized over their Church and prayed for her purification and emancipation: 'Two concepts of life seemed to co-exist in her, virtually side by side; one attracting all man\'s highest and noblest feelings; opposing this, an unrestrained urge to self-indulgence.'

One could fill a volume with instances of the strange paradoxes that were to be found in the Church of that age, sometimes in the same individual: Two examples must suffice.

It is generally agreed that the reign of Pope Alexander VI marks the nadir of the ~papacy. He has not found a single Catholic apologist. And yet his *Acta* shows that in spite of his disedifying life, he had the concerns of the Church and humanity at heart. It was he who arranged a peaceful settlement between Spain and Portugal when they were in danger of going to war over their rights in the New World. It was he who first planned to send missionaries to the Indies. It was he too who introduced the custom of saying the *Angelus*. Even more remarkably, he gave official approval to the supernatural origin and authenticity of a Fatima-type apparition of Our Lady, in which she predicted

disaster f~ the Church unless Christians and especially ecclesiastics mended their ways.

In 1557, a certain 'Father Francis, who was once Duke of Gandia but had entered the Society of Jesus' came to Avila. He was the first to assure St. Teresa that she was indeed being led by the Holy Spirit and that she should no longer fear to follow the lead of that Spirit. This man was St. Francis Borgia, a great-grandson of the unworthy Pope. St Teresa speaks of him with the highest regard (cf. Peers I, pp.154, 328, II, 129). It was he, in fact, who redeemed the name of Borgia.

We have already met Philip de Mezieres as the devoted friend and biographer of St. Peter Thomas. He was a layman, ~ scholar and a Crusader. As Chancellor of the Kingdom of Cyprus, he was in a position to influence the policies of nations. From being a rough knight, he reformed his ways under the influence of St. Peter Thomas, and henceforth his ideal was Sir Galahad and the Knights of the Round Table. He was convinced that the revival of the old crusading spirit would be the salvation of Europe and of the Holy Land. He worked for the reconciliation of the Churches of the East and West: at his behest, the Pope introduced the feast of the Presentation of Our' Lady as a step towards re-union. He planned to found an 'Order of the Passion', made up of a hundred thousand peerless knights and their spouses, all bound by strict vows to live upright lives and fight for the Holy Sepulcher. He wrote it all _down in a book entitled *The Dream of the Ancient Pilgrim*. It was men like de Mezieres, and other dreamers of quixotic dreams that kept the Church from sliding into the abyss in these dark centuries.

RENEWAL IN THE CARMELITE ORDER

The same anguish that tore at the heart of the Church of the 15th century was also felt in the Carmelite Order- On the one hand, it was rapidly falling into decline; on the other hand, there were loyal and heroic men in almost every community who were determined to be loyal to the promises they had made on their profession day. The *Ignea Sagitta* is an early witness to the nostalgia for the desert which is the shape the

anguish took in the Carmelite Order. The yearning asserted itself again and again as the century advanced; at almost every Chapter, it expressed itself in some form. To do full justice to the reform movement in the Order would take us far a field. A brief outline must suffice.

In the year 1413, a group of Florentine Carmelites, of whom the best-known is Blessed Angelus Mazzinghi, opened a house of strict observance in a convent known as Le Selve, Our Lady of the Woodlands, not far from Florence. From that moment it can be said that the history of the Carmelite Order, for more than two centuries, is predominantly a history of reform, an honourable effort to restore the spirit of the ancient Carmelite way of life.

PRIORS

GENERAL

The first name among the great reforming Generals was Blessed John Soreth whom we have already met. He was a saintly, humane but firm man, who based his reform on the common life, poverty of spirit, withdrawal from the world and a conscientious observance of the Rule. For twenty years, he worked untiringly to infuse new life into the Order (see Smet, *The Carmelites*, pp. 92-118; 134; also *Santi del Carmela*, pp. 324-325).

He was not too fortunate in his immediate successors (Mortignoni, Ponce Renaud, Peter Terasse, Baptist Spagnoli and Bernadine Landucci). None of them was opposed to reform but they lacked the zest and the gift of leadership which shone out in John Soreth. In the case of Baptist Spagnoli, he was too old to achieve much when he was elected Prior General.

The next outstanding personality among the reformers was Nicholas Audet, a Cypriot who was Superior General from 1524-1562. He is one of the important figures in the history of Carmel and with admirable fortitude, he steered the Order through one of the most critical periods of all, when it lost almost half of its provinces and many of its members. He has been accused of rigorism (cf. *Etudes Carmelito.ines* 1934, pp.191-192), but it is more than likely that he took the view that lax friars were no asset to the Order and if they chose to leave it was no great

loss. It is worth noting that a number of the run-aways returned to the fold later on, sadder but wiser men (see *Acta Cap. GenI*, pAIO).

Nicholas Audet represented the Order at the Council of Trent from the very inception of the Council. His interventions were scholarly and balanced (see *Acta Cap. Gen. I*, P~Q.; also Smet, *The Carmelites*, p. 176 foll.).

After Audet's death, he was - succeeded by John Baptist Rossi (often called Rubeo by Spanish writers). He too was a saintly man, zealous for the spiritual betterment of the Order. During a visit to Spain, he met St. Teresa and approved of her work. Later on, unfortunate misunderstandings - caused a rift between the two but neither of them was to blame for that. Each in fact had the highest regard for the other (see St. Teresa's two famous letter to him, Peers' edition, Vol. I, pp.1.78 and 220; nos.74 and 91).

GENERAL CHAPTERS

In addition to the efforts of these reforming Generals, the records of the various General Chapters reveal a deep yearning for renewal. Between 1456 and 1548, there were in all ten reforming Chapters which dealt with various abuses and encouraged improvements. It is not possible to say how effective these ordinations actually proved to be, since local reports have been only sparsely published. But there can be no doubt that throughout the century, the more sincere were clamouring for a renewal of life (see *Acta Cap. Gen. I*, pp. 229 foII.).

REFORMED CONGREGATIONS AND HOUSES IN THE ORDER (given in chronological order)

1. Le Selve, 1413
2. Mantua, of uncertain date, but undoubtedly about 1423
(see Smet, *op. cit.* p.87). This reform eventually developed into the Mantuan Congregation, 1442.
3. The Reform of Albi, 1499. It was begun by a local bishop, Louis d' Aubeis.e. It had a chequered history until its suppression in 1584.

4. Mount Olivet, near Genoa. It lasted from 1516 to 1600 and was a return to the hermit form of life.
5. Reform of St. Teresa, 1562 for nuns, 1568 for friars. Reform of
6. Tourraine, France, begun about 1608.
7. There were also a number of local reforms, in Sicily (1619), Naples (1631), Piedmont (1633).

x x x x x x x x x x x x x x x x

THE COUNCIL OF TRENT

During the closing weeks of the Council of Trent, when the essential teachings of the Church had been defined, and a decree on the reform of the clergy passed, the Papal Delegate, Cardinal Morone introduced a text on the reform of religious orders of both men and women. It ran into considerable difficulties, so much so, that some were in favour of abandoning it entirely and turning the matter over to the Pope and General Chapters. Eventually, it was decided to formulate a number of general principles which would be binding on every Order and which eventually would be incorporated into the Constitutions of each Order. In other words, the Council approved of a kind of skeleton law which would be the basis of future religious law. Negatively, this reform set religious life free from the suffocating burden of privileges and dispensations which was the 'cancer of religious life' and had brought it almost to death's door during the previous two centuries. Positively, it set out to restore the *vita communis* which had all but died out in most religious houses. It laid down stringent laws regarding poverty. It closed up escape-routes by which religious could leave their houses to render service to a prelate, prince, university or any other person or body. Legislation was provided to control the movements of wandering monks and friars who were amongst the greater scandals of the time. Within convents and monasteries, regular community life was to be restored (see Council. Trid IX, 1035-1044).

These reforming decrees were an answer to Martin Luther who had declared that religious life was one of those 'good works' which were a blasphemy before God (cr. Luther's *Opinion on Monastic Orders*, 1521). It was this very attack of his which made possible the renewal for which religious leaders had been agitating for many decades. . The work of the 15th century reformers which in their lifetime often seemed frustrating and unproductive, now began to bear fruit. Moreover, 'the Decree on Religious Reform which was accepted in Session XXV of the Council, contained almost all the underlying ideas of the pre-Tridentine reforming movements, especially those of the Augustinians and the Carmelites' (Jedin, *Crisis and Closure of the Council of Trent*,

pp.167-168).

Blessed John Soreth and Nicholas Audet must have rejoiced in their glory, when the Fathers of the Council set their signatures to this decree.