

“Talking Philosophy: a Carmelite Perspective”

Reading & Discussion Zoom Group

Open to All

My name is Jane Horton. During 2019, I decided to read some of Edith Stein’s writings, and had not got very far, when I realised it was going to be a challenge! I did a Politics and Philosophy degree many moons ago, and vaguely recalled some of Edith’s ideas, but all had faded into a general mire, and I was distinctly rusty at grappling with complex (and logical!) thought.

Heather Ward, the formation Director of our Carmelite Group, explained how Philosophy is actually a perfectly natural part of human experience, but one that we often feel is too difficult – sometimes simply because of the way writers (dare I say Edith?!) formulate ideas. In Heather’s words:

“In the French play, ‘The Bourgeois Gentleman’, a newly rich man wants to learn to be upper class: a gentleman. His freshly appointed tutor, hearing him speak, praises his use of prose, and he responds delightedly, ‘To think I’ve been speaking prose all my life and didn’t know it!’ .

I love this story because it shows how often we don’t give names to what we do and how we can be influenced, for good or ill, by the names we do attach to what we do. It’s like this, I think, with philosophy. All of us, at some time or other, ask ourselves: ‘What’s real?’, ‘What’s true or truth?’, ‘How do I know it’s real, or true?’, ‘What’s right?’, ‘How do I know what’s right?’ . Children can sometimes ask, ‘What happens to the world when I’m asleep: is it still there?’ . These are all philosophical questions, but we don’t often identify them as such: we don’t realise ‘I’ve been doing philosophy all my life’ and get put off by the word ‘philosophy’, seeing it as something beyond us, or as nothing to do with actual life.

The answers given to these questions we ask, and many more, in their own day, helped to shape the way our Carmelite saints understood, and wrote about, their world and the human person. Our understanding of their teaching can be deepened and expanded when we come to appreciate how they heard and used the philosophy of their times. Such an appreciation may also help us to listen and respond to the philosophical ideas that can challenge or inform our communication of faith today.”

James Hunter joined our Nottingham Secular group in April, 2020, and has a lot of experience in teaching both Theology and Philosophy in schools, and as a Deacon, so he and I exchanged a few emails. From this (and the Covid communication revolution) came the idea of a Zoom group for Carmelites who would like to ‘discover, grapple with, and ultimately conquer’ (his words) some of the more philosophical Carmelite writers.

Here’s an introduction by James:

“I took my Final Promises, as a Secular Carmelite, on 28th June, 2008, with the ‘St Edith Stein’ Community in Derby.

During the course of my Diaconal ministry, I have been promoting the practice of Contemplative Prayer to adults, from all kinds of backgrounds and beliefs, and been active in the Secular Discalced Carmelite Order. Whilst investigating St John of the Cross and St Edith Stein, amongst other writers, it seemed that their ‘philosophical background’ was an important part of understanding their ideas: for example, the ‘scholastic Thomism’ of St John of the Cross and St Edith Stein.

Similarly, when exploring the ‘Cloud of Unknowing’, the ‘apophatic’, or ‘via negativa’ (ie ‘praying without mental images’) thinking of the ‘Cloud’ author is clearly influenced by Denys the Areopagite, who also influences St John of the Cross and St Edith Stein.

Again, the ‘faculty psychology’ (ie ‘memory, understanding, will’) language of St John of the Cross, St Teresa of Avila and St Edith Stein is influenced by the teaching of St Augustine, who, in turn, is much influenced by Plotinus, Philo, and Plato.

All this made me wonder if it is time for us to offer a chance for Secular Carmelites, and anyone else who may be interested, to investigate the ‘history of ideas’, and the thinking and philosophical input which informs much of Carmelite ‘mystical theology’? This would be in a friendly, intimate, non-threatening group, assuming no previous knowledge, and also open to non-Carmelites, non-Catholics, Christians of any denomination, contemplative tradition, or, indeed, anyone, of any faith, or none.

Hence, ‘Talking Philosophy: a Carmelite Perspective – Reading & Discussion Zoom Group – Open to All’, which we are suggesting, as a way forward.”

After wider consultation, with Fr Yamai Bature OCD, at Boars Hill, Oxford, we have decided to start with “History of Philosophy” materials, to lay a broad, general, foundation, together, before moving on to Stein, etc. Please see attached “Talking Philosophy: Reading List & Further Information”, for details.

We do hope you will join us!

If you wish to enquire further, please contact us as follows:-

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