

Dialogues des Carmélites

The Dialogues of the Carmelites

opera in three acts and twelve scenes

music and libretto by Francis Poulenc

adapted to opera with the permission of Mr. Emmet Lavery

The drama was inspired by a novella by Gertrude von le Fort and a script by Reverend Father Bruckberger and Philippe Agostini

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Act one

scene one

The library of Marquis de la Force, Paris, April 1789.

The Marquis's son, the Chevalier, bursts into the library and wakes his father who has been dozing in an armchair. His son has taken the liberty of disturbing him because he is worried about the fate of his sister Blanche, whose carriage he fears may have been held up by a mob. The thought of a carriage and rioting crowds immediately remind the Marquis of his late wife. After giving birth to Blanche, the Marquise died of fright caused by the mob that had assaulted her carriage. The Chevalier's anxiety is aggravated by the fact that his sister is by nature deeply impressionable and easily frightened. While the Marquis tries to alleviate his son's distress, Blanche in person enters, safe and sound. Exhausted by her fear that the mob would attack her, but also by the length of a religious service she had been attending, she asks her father for permission to rest before dinner. While father and son are talking, they are surprised by a scream from Blanche, who has been terrified by the shadow of a manservant's torch projected onto the wall. The girl returns to her father, declaring that she is unsuited and too frail to face worldly life. She therefore begs his permission to enter the Carmelite convent. In this way she hopes that, by abandoning and sacrificing all, she may by the grace of God regain her honour which has until now been stained by cowardice.

scene two

The parlour of the Carmelite nuns of Compiègne, a few weeks later. Behind a screen separating her from the



Mother Superior who is old and ill, Blanche answers questions calculated to test the strength and sincerity of her vocation. Blanche replies that what prompted her to take holy orders was the attraction she feels towards a heroic life. The Mother Superior condemns her view of heroism as illusory, and affirms that the sole reason for existence at the Carmelite convent is prayer. Blanche declares her readiness to stand the most severe trials if she can only enter the convent, for there is no other refuge open to her. The Mother Superior points out that the Rule is not a refuge; it is not the Rule that safeguards the Carmelite sisters, but the Carmelites who obey the Rule. Next, she asks the girl whether she has thought of what name she wishes to be known by if admitted as a novice. Much to the Mother Superior's surprise, the girl answers that she would like to be called Sister Blanche of the Dying Christ.

scene three

The pantry at the convent. Blanche and another novice, Constance, are busy preparing victuals. Constance, an exuberant young woman, chatters incessantly about frivolous and pleasant topics, such as the wedding reception she attended before entering the convent. Blanche chides her for such gaiety when the Mother Superior is on her deathbed. In a fit of generosity, Constance then declares she is ready to lay down her life for God in exchange for that of the Mother Superior, and urges Blanche to do likewise. But the girl dismisses such attitudes as childish. Constance says she is of the opposite opinion and has always wished to die young. Indeed she is certain that her desire will be fulfilled. The first time they met she had a presentiment that they would die together while still young, on the same day and at the same hour, without knowing what that day and hour was. The infirmary at the convent. The Mother Superior is in bed, terrified by death which she feels drawing near. Her assiduous meditations during the decades spent in the convent fail to alleviate her present dejection and dread. She asks Sister Mary, who is nursing her, to take care of Sister Blanche of the Dying Christ, the novice who has been the biggest worry to her. She was struck by the girl's having chosen to be known by the same name as the one she herself had wanted to choose when she entered the convent, but which she had dropped after being warned by the Mother Superior of that time that "those who enter Gethsemane shall never leave it". Having summoned Sister Blanche, the Mother Superior tells her she would willingly have sacrificed her life to save her from the perils to which she is exposed, but at this hour can only offer her own wretched death. After urging Blanche to lead a life of simplicity and trust in God, she blesses her and sends her away. Sister Mary returns with the doctor,



and the Mother Superior asks him for a little more tonic to give her the necessary strength to depart from her sisters. Sister Mary tells her not to worry any more about anyone else but the Lord. To which the Mother Superior retorts that it is not her business to worry about Him, but rather His to worry about her. Sister Mary closes the windows lest the other sisters be scandalized by the now delirious Mother Superior, who immediately afterwards has a vision of the convent chapel desecrated and bloodstained. Sister Mary makes arrangements for life at the convent to carry on as usual, and has the sisters informed that they will not be able to see the Mother Superior during that day. Only Blanche re-enters and stands by the bedside of the dying woman. After telling her not to forget one final thing, and muttering a few more disconnected words, the Mother Superior dies. Blanche drops to her knees, sobbing.

Act two

scene one

In the chapel. Blanche and Constance keep watch over the Mother Superior's dead body. Constance goes out to look for the sister companions who must now relieve her vigil. Frightened at being left alone with the corpse, Blanche shivers and runs to the door, at the exact moment in which Sister Mary enters. She attempts to apologize for having abandoned her post. But Sister Mary, who attributes the novice's shivers more to the cold than to fear, takes her to her cell and dispenses her from prayers, advising her to get some sleep and not to think any more about failure in duty. Tomorrow morning she will feel sorrow and will be able then to ask God for forgiveness.

interlude one

Constance and Blanche lay flowers on the Mother Superior's grave. With the remaining flowers Constance proposes that they compose a bunch to present to the new Mother Superior. Blanche wonders if Sister Mary likes flowers. Constance would like her to be elected Superior, but Blanche chides her for naively wishing that God should always fulfil her desires. Constance replies that perhaps divine logic consists precisely in what men intend by chance. Reflecting on the Mother Superior's death, it seems to her that her end has been too long and exhausting: as if she had suffered a death that was not her own, or had mistakenly put on clothes made for someone else. That other person, at the hour of death, will be struck by the



calmness with which she faces the end. One does not die each for oneself, but each for others and even one instead of the other. scene two Capitular hall. The whole community are gathered to take an oath of obedience to the new Mother Superior. She is not Sister Mary, as they had all expected, but Sister Mary-Thérèse of Saint Augustine (formerly Madame Lidoine), a woman of humble origins. Using plain words, the new Mother preaches the essential virtues of a Carmelite: good will, patience and a conciliatory spirit. Prayer is their main task and nothing must distract them from it – not even the thought of martyrdom. Prayer is a duty, martyrdom a reward. The whole community then intones the Ave Maria.

interlude two

Someone rings insistently at the convent door. It is the Chevalier de la Force, who, before leaving for foreign lands to fight alongside the counter-revolutionary army, wishes to speak with his sister. The Mother Superior, in view of the exceptional nature of the situation and of the times, grants this break in the rule, but wishes Mother Mary to be present during their conversation.

scene three

The convent parlour. The Chevalier de la Force tries to convince Blanche to come home because her father believes she can no longer be safe in the convent. Blanche replies that she has never felt so safe as now, but her brother, who knows her inside-out, senses that this peace of mind is illusory, the consequence not so much of the fear of external reality, of the world, as of her fear of being afraid. She must know how to risk as one risks death; true courage lies in this risk. Blanche tries to convince him that life in the convent has changed her. She is by now a daughter of the Carmelites who will suffer for him too. She too has a battle to fight, with its risks and dangers. The Chevalier de la Force, before leaving, observes her with a long and puzzled expression on his face. Worn out by this confrontation, Blanche leans against the grating so as not to fall, seized with doubt that she may have committed the sin of pride. Sister Mary advises her to control herself, adding that the only way to defeat pride is to rise above it.

scene four

The convent sacristy. The Chaplain has finished saying his last mass at the Carmelite convent. He intones the Ave Verum which is sung by the whole community. By now outlawed, the Chaplain must go into hiding and disguise. Constance deplores the cowardice of the



French for allowing priests to be persecuted. The nuns struggle to understand in what way fear can manage little by little to gain possession of all consciences. The Mother Superior intervenes, saying that when priests are hard to come by, martyrs will abound, and thus redresses the balance of Grace. Mother Mary seizes the opportunity to propose that the Carmelites vow themselves to martyrdom, so that France may once again have priests. The Mother Superior retorts that she has been misunderstood, and that it is in any case none of their business to decide whether their names should appear in the breviary. Somebody rings and knocks violently at the convent door. The Chaplain has to hide so as not to compromise the frightened nuns, who are huddled together in a corner of the room. Sister Mary opens the door and with cool courage confronts the revolutionary commissars. They order the Carmelites to dismantle the convent by October (1792). When these orders have been given, the First commissar secretly confides to the sister that he is a former sacristan, a foster-brother of the vicar, compelled in these troubled times to climb on the bandwagon. And to demonstrate his good faith, he tells her to beware of the blacksmith Blancart, who is a police informer. The commissars and the crowd go out. Sister Jeanne informs the sisters that the Mother Superior has to leave for Paris. Then she gives Blanche, who has until now remained perched on a high chair like a wounded bird, the statuette of the Little Glorious King, telling her that it will give her courage. Frightened by the word *Ça ira* sung by the crowd outside the convent, she drops the statuette which smashes on the floor, and adds these words: «Oh! the Little King is dead! Now we have only the Lamb of God».

Act three

scene one

The Carmelite chapel completely devastated. In the presence of the Chaplain, the whole community has assembled, except for the Mother Superior, who is busy in Paris. Sister Mary proposes to the sisters that they all together vow martyrdom, in order «to merit the survival of the Carmelites and the salvation of their Country». She adds however that, given the importance of their individual commitment and responsibilities, the vote will be held by secret ballot, and must be unanimous: a single vote against the motion will suffice to render it invalid. The Chaplain offers to act as teller. After



collecting their ballot papers, in a low voice he communicates the result to Sister Mary, who declares that there is one vote against. All eyes are fixed on Blanche, whereupon Sister Constance affirms that she is responsible for the vote against taking the vow, but now wishes to withdraw it and to join their common decision. The Chaplain accordingly decides that to sanction their intention, all the Carmelites should pronounce the vote, two at a time, swearing by the Bible and beginning with the youngest. Sister Blanche and Sister Constance take the oath first, after which Blanche, taking advantage of the confusion among her sisters while they also take the oath, makes her escape.

interlude one

A revolutionary Officer congratulates the Carmelite nuns, who are leaving the convent in lay clothing, on their sense of discipline. He warns them that the nation will be keeping an eye on them and that they must have no contact with members of the clergy or with counter-revolutionaries. The Mother Superior, who is alone now with the sisters, dispatches one of them to the Chaplain to warn him that it would be too dangerous to celebrate mass in secret, as had been arranged. Sister Mary, urged to express her opinion, reminds the Superior that all these precautions ill befit a community vowed to martyrdom. To which the Superior replies that, if each of them shall fulfil her vow in the face of the Lord, then she shall answer for them all and that it is her custom to keep matters under control.

scene two

The library of the Marquis de la Force, pillaged and transformed into a large multi-purpose box room. Blanche, dressed in secular clothes, has become a maid to the new tenants, and is busy cooking. Sister Mary enters suddenly. She too is in lay attire and has come to try to arrange for her safety. Blanche replies that she feels safe where she is because, having fallen so low, no one will take any notice of her any more. Sister Mary's questions have distracted her attention from the meat sauce, which nearly burns. Sister Mary intervenes in time, but Blanche succumbs to a fit of nerves. The only person who could have understood her was her father, and he has been guillotined. Born in fear, she finds it right that she should now repay her weakness of character through other people's contempt. Sister Mary replies that her distress derives not from other people's contempt, but from that for themselves. Addressing Blanche by her adopted religious name, which at once shakes her out of her anguish, she invites her to take refuge temporarily in Paris with some trusted people



whose address she leaves with her. The voice of the new mistress of the house is heard ordering Blanche to do the shopping. After which Sister Mary goes out, convinced that Blanche will follow her advice.

interlude two

A street in Paris. The voices of passers-by, among which is heard that of an Old woman who speaks of the arrest of the Carmelites of Compiègne and then asks Blanche whether she has any relatives down there.

Blanche says she hasn't, but is visibly shaken by the news. Then, with the air of one who has taken a desperate decision, she goes off hurriedly.

scene three

A cell at the Conciergerie.

The Mother Superior tries to console the Carmelites after their first night in prison. She affirms moreover that she shares their vow to martyrdom, which they pronounced in her absence, and that she now personally assumes responsibility for its fulfilment. Sister Constance asks her if she has any news of Blanche. On hearing there is none, she says she is sure she will return, because during the night she had a premonition of it in a dream. The other sisters, with the exception of the Mother Superior, burst out laughing. The Jailer now enters to inform them that the Revolutionary tribunal has sentenced them all to death. When he goes out the Mother Superior blesses the nuns and consecrates to God the vow by which they are now all bound.

interlude three

The Chaplain meets Sister Mary in a Paris street and tells her that all her sister nuns have been sentenced to death. Sister Mary now wishes to join them at once to die with them, but the Chaplain reminds her that it is not she, but God, who has decided on a different fate for her, by which she must abide by mortifying her pride.

scene four

Place de la Révolution.

The Carmelite nuns get down from the condemned prisoners' cart and go up to the guillotine chanting the Salve Regina. Each time the blade falls, the chorus diminishes in intensity. Constance, who is the last to bow her head, catches sight of Blanche among the crowd below. She stops for a moment and her face



lights up with happiness. Then she walks up to the guillotine. Blanche in her turn climbs the steps and takes up the chorus, watched by a now silent crowd. For the last time the blade is heard falling, after which the crowd begins to disperse.

(traduzione di Rodney Stringer)

