Michael Carlier: A Contemplative in the Trenches

By **John Collins**

In the opening pages of the chapter entitled "A Contemplative Order in Two World Wars," in his 1949 history of the Cistercian Order, *The Waters of Siloe*,[1] Thomas Merton relates the story of Michael Carlier, a Trappist monk who served as a soldier in the French Army from August 2, 1914, the day after the First World War began, until his death from an artillery shell on September 14, 1917. One of the reasons Merton was drawn to Carlier's story is that the French monk left an extensive record through diaries, notebooks and letters about his life in the monastery as well as his military experiences.[2] Merton writes of Carlier:

> There was little out of the ordinary about this postulant. There have been hundreds like him before and since. But, unlike so many thousands of other members of this silent Order, Michael Carlier – his name in religion was Frater Maxime – has left the world a record of himself. After he died, his notes and letters were collected and woven together into a book. It is a narrative of deep significance. The story of the vocation and life and sacrifice of Frater Maxime Carlier gives us a better insight than any other document we possess into the real part played by the Cistercians in the wars that have torn apart the world of our time. (*WS* 191)

Although not stated explicitly, I suspect another reason why Merton was attracted to this French monk was Carlier's ability to continue his spiritual practices, both exterior and interior, even in the trenches of Belgium and France. Carlier's experiences, in an odd way, may be instructive to all who attempt the blending of an active and contemplative life.

Michael Carlier was born in Valenciennes, France on April 25, 1891, the eldest of eight children, among them his younger brother Joseph, with whom he had a particularly close relationship, especially during the war years. The earliest revelation of Michael's spiritual life occurred while he was making a retreat for his first communion when he was eleven years old. He recollected some years later:[3] "The preparatory retreat was delightful. I felt quite enamored of the recollection and solitude, the repeated visits to the Blessed Sacrament, and the observance of silence during meals. I followed this manner of life only three days but it won me over completely" (Daumont 9). Shortly thereafter, Michael confided to his father that he wanted to become a Trappist or a Carthusian, saying, "I want to save my soul . . . and to pray for those who do not pray for themselves" (Daumont 9).

During his early teens Michael attended the Collège [secondary school] of Notre-Dame at Valenciennes, and when he was declared the top student of his class, his parents decided to enroll him as a boarder at the Jesuit College of the Sacred Heart at Antoing. Even as a sixteen-year-old, Michael left ample correspondence that confirmed his happiness at the

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new school which would prepare him for the baccalaureate. His new encounter with the Jesuits is positive: "I am very happy, and the Life of St. Ignatius which I read during the retreat has shown me how utterly untrue is everything that I have been told about the Jesuits" (Daumont 11). At an early age Michael demonstrated his scrupulous nature, a trait Merton notes in his discussion of Carlier (*WS* 193), and his confessor at the school, Father Renard, reprimanded him with the words, "My dear Michael you are deplorably scrupulous." He suffered from "anxieties of conscience" but was chagrined that he was ordered by his confessor to meet with him at least twice a week, perhaps, daily if necessary (Daumont 12). At various times Michael was disturbed that he could not pray and he "began to experience that perturbation which later on was to cause him much distress." On such occasions he consulted with Father Renard seeking instruction and clarification about his current problem with regard to prayer. Feeling powerless to overcome his situation, he prayed that he might again experience the fervor for prayer that he once had known (Daumont 18).

It was evident from an early age that Michael Carlier had a religious vocation, but he kept these thoughts closely guarded until he had finished his studies at Antoing. Carlier was always very close to his father and confided in him about his desire to become a religious. It was an unusual relationship between father and son, as Michael communicated his faults, consulting with him on moral questions and even revealing his temptations. Michael wrote his father at one time stating, "I feel the same self-surrender in your hands as if I was dealing with my confessor" (Daumont 26). Indeed, Michael was close to his whole family, devoted to his mother and feeling "tender affection" for his siblings. Joseph was of an artistic temperament and did not have Michael's zeal for academic studies, but there was a strong bond between the brothers that is evident in later correspondence (Daumont 34-35).

In 1907 Michael received the bachelor's degree with distinction. He vacationed at St. Saulve, in northern France, with his beloved grandmother, Madame Defrenne, who had a large mansion "surrounded by a spacious garden." Here Michael found silence and solitude and had ample opportunity for prayer. He found a terrace where he spent many pensive hours meditating on "Infinity, the Immensity and the Majesty of God." Although Michael's propensity for solitude was "precocious" he did not burden his family and friends with aspects of his secret life and when called upon, he fell into stride with good fellowship and easy conversation (Daumont 36-37).

After he was awarded his degree, Michael was required to complete a last trimester at the collège at Antoing in October of 1907. He easily grasped the complexities of philosophy and through his examination results, Michael was rated as the number two student out of a class of twenty-one. Michael's happiness over this academic success was short-lived, however, as his health began to fail due to severe headaches and feelings of mental fatigue. After the Christmas holidays a more prolonged period of rest was recommended as he was unable to read or engage in any kind of academic activity. Soon thereafter, he was forced to leave his beloved school and be separated from his many friends. However, the ties with his comrades were not to be severed completely as many of them corresponded with Michael. Excerpts from these letters demonstrate a loyalty and respect for Michael that was extraordinary. For a man who loved solitude and silence, the passages from the letters portray Michael as open, very communicative and always ready to counsel or encourage a friend. One correspondent remarked, "We sometimes look round for that smiling countenance which made us so communicative" (Daumont 38-40).

In January 1909, Michael traveled to Châtillon-sur-Seine in Burgundy to restore his health, staying with a relative of his mother, Monsieur Maître-Bernard. His new place of residence featured a large estate of over four hundred and fifty acres. He lived with this large family of thirteen children, easily fitting in as the fourteenth, as Madame Maître-Bernard noted. Michael adapted easily to the rustic environment and took many strolls throughout the countryside. Commenting on the solitude of his new environs in a letter to his family in Valenciennes, Michael wrote:

> What affords me most pleasure is the strolls which I take in the park all alone in the midst of the beautiful scenery. Even with dog and gun I could enjoy myself: but what is more to my liking is to be in a position to meditate. No one is present to interrupt my thoughts, so I give myself up to them completely. Before setting out I adopt some idea or other which I ruminate for whole hours. How excellent meditation it is! (Daumont 42-43)

However, Michael's headaches persisted and on the advice of his physicians to go to the seaside, in April, 1909 he arrived at the coastal town of Wimereux, just north of Boulogne. Hoping the seaside would assist in restoration, he took many solitary walks along the beach. In the summer Michael once again decided to change location and he moved to Thuin in the Belgian province of Hainault to stay with an aunt and cousins. One day, while walking along the banks of the Sambre River, Michael ventured into the "retired district of Thierarche" where he discovered the Trappist Abbey of Saint Joseph, known as Chimay or Scourmont, just over the French border in Belgium. Once he caught sight of the monastery, Michael was determined that this would be his eventual home. Henceforth he would keep this goal in focus even though there were hurdles still ahead. On a trip to Rome, where he briefly visited galleries of Christian art, he had a short visit with a "Trappist Father" who reinforced his desire to become a Cistercian (Daumont 47-51).

Near the end of 1909, Michael was feeling better, although not completely restored to health. He visited the abbey at Chimay for a few days to convey his desire to become a member of the community after his required military service. At the time France, like other European countries, required mandatory military training of two years (Daumont 54 n.). Michael reported to the military unit, the 43rd Line Regiment stationed at Lille, near his home in Valenciennes. Barracks life was a difficult transition for this pious and sensitive youth. In a letter to the Abbot of St. Joseph's he termed his current life "the purgative way." In the same letters he declared: "Throughout the whole day we hear nothing spoken but the language of hell. . . . And besides this, the conversations are generally unsavory. These unfortunates scarcely ever converse except on one subject. As for myself I knew nothing of this society until I joined the regiment" (Daumont 56-57).

Abbey of Chimay, Belgium

Michael revealed in his correspondence that he was experiencing a dryness in his prayer life, but recalling the blessings of his short stay at Chimay he was better able to accept his present situation (Daumont 57). In his diary, Michael wrote about the sheer boredom of barracks life but

he had moments of solitude which he treasured: "What blessings does not solitude afford! I am supremely happy when alone. . . . [N]obody is near, neither officers nor comrades" (Daumont 68). When he corresponded with a monk at St. Joseph's, where he evidently had made some friends during his short stay, Michael received the following reply: "In choir at the termination of each office we implore the divine assistance for ourselves and we pray that the aid of the good God may attend our absent brethren" (Daumont 71). Eventually his trials in the army drew to a close, and on a joyful note Michael wrote his mother about leaving the army and entering the monastery: "I have now only to await the happy moment when I shall be able to depart for Chimay for ever. Yet sixty-four days and my military service shall be at an end" (Daumont 73).

At long last, on November 21, 1911, Michael Carlier, age twenty, entered the Abbey of Notre Dame de Saint Joseph at Chimay. In correspondence with his family during the two-year novitiate, Michael employed the word "saint" on numerous occasions. In a notebook entry Michael wrote: "It is absolutely necessary for me to keep ever before my eyes a lofty ideal. God wants me to become a saint. We Religious have no option. We have received the immense grace of a monastic vocation in order to become saints" (Daumont 83). At another time his desire to become a saint was recorded in his notebook: "Eradicate my pride; humble me; abase me. How I long to be the last of all! . . . To be completely, absolutely thine! . . . Make of me a saint; this is thy promise" (Daumont 111).[4] On December 8, 1911, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, Michael received his religious habit and henceforth he would be called Brother Mary Maxime. "'My God, since it is Thy Holy Will, may it be done!' was a constant prayerful petition emanating from the heart and soul of Brother Maxime" (Daumont 83-84).

Throughout his novitiate Brother Maxime was under the spiritual direction of the novice master, Father Anselme le Bail.[5] Thomas Merton describes him:

> The master of novices, Father Anselme le Bail, was a man of deep spirituality and learning who had penetrated far into the theology of the Cistercian writers of the twelfth century. Taking them as his commentators on the Rule of St. Benedict, he had evolved a clear and well-ordered spiritual doctrine, by the light of which he was able to give his novices a more thoroughly Cistercian intellectual formation than they could find anywhere in the Order, except, perhaps, at Sept-Fons, where Dom Chautard was abbot. (*WS* 192)

Merton elaborates further on the climate and culture of the monastery affecting the young novices at the time of the apprenticeship of Brother Maxime: "The novitiate at Chimay was filled with a spirit of balance and sanity: a spirit of simplicity, of clarity; it was eminently Benedictine, and one thing dominated all: the love and service of Christ." Had Brother Maxime served his novitiate in another environment, his scrupulous nature and propensity to harshness and rigor might have formed him "into one of those distressed, nervous monks who say many prayers and do many acts of penance" but to little avail or spiritual fulfillment (*WS* 192).

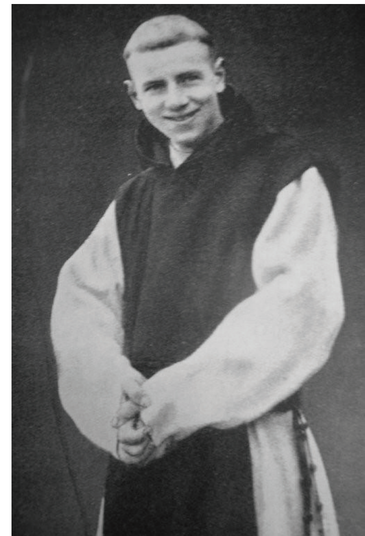
During his brief monastic life, Brother Maxime did, indeed, have his trials through an overly zealous nature. His brother monk Octave Daumont explains that Brother Maxime's fervor for prayer was sometimes extreme: "This ardor, this tendency to excess never completely left him in the exercise of the monastic virtues. He was always somewhat immoderate in this respect, inclined to go a little beyond the determined limit, after the manner of a child with the springing impetuous

soul of youth which cannot contain its enthusiasm" (Daumont 93). Brother Maxime recorded in his notebook that he had "sinned more than any of [his] brethren. . . . They are saints. . . . [God] has led me into the company of saints in order to keep my heart free. . . . I am not worthy to behold the least among them" (Daumont 123-24). The feelings of unworthiness consumed Maxime to the point that he regretted his commitment to be a choir monk, which would have enabled him eventually to become a priest. He admired the life of the lay brothers who engaged in "rude and mortifying work" which impersonalized them so that their whole being could be directed towards God. Brother Maxime flirted with the thought of being a lay brother up to the time of completing his novitiate as a choir monk (Daumont 125).

Daumont maintains that the zealous nature of Brother Maxime brought him the admonition of his superiors:

> He sometimes lacked judgment. Even in the exercise of obedience he was prone to interpret the orders in too literal and mechanical a manner. In this way he was contracting habits of excess. He lacked moderation, the reasonable, happy mean, the golden mean which endows virtue with that exterior charm which renders it so attractive. Seeing him act on certain occasions one might have considered him an intractable, dour character. (Daumont 126)

Brother Maxime felt that the *Rule* of St. Benedict was not rigorous enough, and he continuously tried to create new penances and privations for himself. He wore a hair-shirt, an iron girdle, got permission to sleep on the floor, received approval to rise at night to pray "with his arms extended in the form of a cross," often abstained from food at mealtime and knelt during long prayers while his brother monks were sitting. These penances finally hospitalized Brother Maxime and he found himself humbled because he was forced to the follow the regulations of the infirmary, which became a source of joy for him as it was a means of submitting himself to the divine will (Daumont 134-35). At one point his brother novices took Brother Maxime to task at a chapter of faults. His superiors and finally the abbot declared "before the whole community that he was the novice who caused his Superiors the most trouble." Brother Maxime evidently got the message, and in a way the admonitions were a blessing in disguise, as now "he was the last of all. God had heard the prayer of his heart" – that is, to be the least of all his brethren (Daumont 127-28).



Br. Maxime Carlier

Merton states that Brother Maxime was encouraged by Father le Bail to read the works of St. Gertrude,[6] from whom he learned "a doctrine that can be summed up in two words: confidence and love" (*WS* 193). In a letter to his mother, Brother Maxime explained that he was reading *The Life and Revelations of Saint Gertrude*: "Oh! how edifying and delicious I find it! I feel the grace of the good God penetrating me while I turn over the pages. . . . What deeply impressed me in this life of Saint Gertrude is her wholly confiding abandonment to Jesus" (Daumont 87). Daumont writes that Brother Maxime never

wearied of reading St. Gertrude and that he was not seeking doctrine or a method of prayer but rather found in her a model of a saintly life, striving for union of her soul with Jesus. The "freshness of expression" in the *Revelations* evidently captivated Brother Maxime and provided guidance in his desire to live a more balanced life in the monastery while maintaining a simplicity, humility and fervency modeled after his newfound saint (Daumont 94-95). Eugene Boylan asserts that the "reading of the life of the great Cistercian mystic, St. Gertrude, brought a providential light to [Brother Maxime's] soul, and in the holy familiarity which the Saint used with her Divine Spouse, he found encouragement to fly all formality in his intercourse with Our Lord" (Boylan 34-35). Brother Maxime was gradually beginning to outgrow his rigidity, and his spiritual progression was due primarily to the spiritual guidance provided by the *Rule* of St. Benedict, which focused on the "greatness and nearness of God" (*WS* 193) rather than the miseries of self that he often experienced. In his new "spiritual climate" Brother Maxime felt like "a new man" as he abandoned himself to God and relied less on "his own efforts" (*WS* 193). Merton writes that Brother Maxime was beginning to experience the love of God and began to love God in his "neighbor." Indeed, through the assistance of the Holy Spirit Brother Maxime was entering the "long road" to sanctity by means of "infused prayer." Merton writes: "[I]nfused contemplation is only the beginning of a long road. . . . [I]t is a powerful, perhaps even an essential, means to help us attain sanctity" (*WS* 194). Through "a state of passive purification" Maxime was experiencing the life of the contemplative who finds difficulty in prayer, yet a hunger for a "union with God" (*WS* 194). Merton continues: "Unable to understand his impotency, he nevertheless remained at peace, was held in a state of confused, obscure resignation" (*WS* 195).

According to Merton, Brother Maxime was guided by "a strong sense of the actual presence of the Blessed Virgin, who played a dominant role as [his] spiritual guide and took charge of his mystical formation: an office which belongs to her, above all others, as the Queen of Contemplatives" (*WS* 195). Boylan echoes Merton's sentiments about the role of the Blessed Virgin in the spiritual development of Cistercian contemplatives: "The Cistercian will yield to none in his devotion to Mary. Her Office always accompanies the Canonical Office in Cistercian monasteries, and her feasts have a special place in the Calendar of the Order" (Boylan 35).[7]

Throughout his life, Brother Maxime manifested a love for the Blessed Mother and dedicated his monastic life to her from the first day of his novitiate (Daumont 105). Daumont describes notebook entries by Brother Maxime for the month of March of 1912 and 1914 and comments:

> We can observe that at this distance of two years his devotion to the Blessed Virgin has not changed; it is not therefore the result of a casual access of emotion nor the momentary effect of the sensitiveness of his heart. Far from it. In loving Mary he has one sole object in view very precisely stated: union with Jesus. . . . [H]e considers in Mary "the model of the life of union with Jesus, the pattern of the monastic life." (Daumont 107-108)

Continuing in his notebook entries, Brother Maxime petitioned the Blessed Mother: "Make of me a saint; this is thy promise" (Daumont 111).

Maxime's spiritual maturity was certainly enhanced through his devotion to St. Gertrude and the Blessed Mother, under the guidance of his able director Father le Bail. That Brother

Maxime was realizing a flowering of his contemplative life is indicated by signs noted by Octave Daumont, who declares that St. John of the Cross revealed the difficulties one encounters upon entering the dark night of the soul. Afflictions, not consolations of prayer are to be experienced by the contemplative, and a dryness of prayer creates a sense of aridity, bareness and desertion. It was evident that Maxime was troubled, as he entered in his spiritual diary first a description of his former state of happiness: “Without clearly understanding the situation, my soul found itself in a state in which all its desires seemed fulfilled. It reposed with delight in a feeling of secure happiness.” He then articulated the change accordingly: “How I regret the absence of this now! I am ready to endure anything – suffering, humiliations, and mortifications – in order to recover that blissful state.” Daumont comments that having tasted God, one has only to “weep and sigh after Him when he perceives that He has disappeared” (Daumont 137-38).

Through this state of darkness Maxime suffered some of the same trials as before and had serious doubts about his vocation. There were brief respites of enlightenment when through his union with the Blessed Mother he would be “possessed of a love, ardent, unknown or at least not experienced until then – a love which holds him during hours as if lost in God.” Commenting on Maxime’s spiritual trials and an aridity of prayer life interrupted by brief experiences of the love and union with God, Daumont writes: “Thus we have unfolded to our view the history of the prayer of this soul – a prayer which is quite classic, and whose phases succeed one another methodically according to well-known principles and, and in harmony with the usual procedure of God in the ascent of souls to Him” (Daumont 141-43).

Two years had elapsed since Maxime entered the novitiate and he was ready to don the habit of a professed monk with the happy prospect of eventually being elevated to the priesthood. He was resigned to the dark night of his soul and in his diary he wrote: “I understand my state, and I accept it” (Daumont 146). On this important day of his religious profession he wrote to his family that he did not want them or friends to be present. He counseled them to rejoice with him on the day, even though separated by distance, and declared that the day would be reserved “wholly for God” (Daumont 147). On the morning of December 8, 1913, Brother Maxime prostrated himself on the floor of the chapter room to hear the exhortation of Dom Anselme, his spiritual mentor, now abbot. Without hesitation, Maxime unconditionally “gave himself to God with all his heart” (Daumont 148-49). Even though not yet a priest, he would hereafter be addressed as “Father.” During the next nine months, Father Maxime’s prayer continued with long spells of “trying aridity tempered at times with rare moments of joy” (Daumont 151). But the brief monastic life of Father Maxime was drawing to a close, as the dark storm clouds of war approached.

On August 2, 1914, Father Maxime, soon to be called Sergeant Michael Carlier, left the cloistered walls of St. Joseph’s and knelt before his abbot, Dom Anselme, who gave him a final blessing before he headed to the trenches of Belgium and France. Father Maxime’s monastic diary entry includes these commentaries while his Father Abbot accompanied him outside to catch the bus:

> I should have gladly wished to ask the Reverend Father Abbot for some maxims to direct me in my new career in order that I might remain in spirit and heart under his obedience. . . . One word only I heard from him: “Be a good soldier.” Under a torrential downpour and in the midst of a roaring tempest I took away his parting

fatherly advice: "Never forget that sanctity consists in the entire accomplishment of the will of God in one's regard at every moment. Life in the Cloister and life on the battlefield are each adequate to make one a saint." The bus was approaching. On my knees on the road-side, a last blessing. That was all. (Daumont 155)

When Father Maxime left his beloved monastery on that fateful August day in 1914, he became Sergeant Michael Carlier, a soldier of the 43rd battalion.

Merton explains why Carlier, a Cistercian monk, had to serve in the military: "The Church in France and Germany had not wished to insist on the rights of clerics and religious to be exempt from military service, because such an insistence would only mean trouble, suppressions, expulsions" (*WS* 195). About fifteen monks, including Carlier, had been conscripted into the army from the Abbey of Chimay. Merton notes that not all of the French monks during World War I were soldiers bearing arms; some who were priests served as chaplains and others served in the medical corps. In fact, more Cistercians served in the medical corps than were combatants (*WS* 200). Why then did Michael Carlier serve as a combatant and not in the medical corps? I would conjecture that Carlier's strong sense of obedience deterred him from questioning the military superiors regarding his assignment, which was determined by prior military experience of combat training before he entered the monastery.

Can a man "be a true Christian and at the same time a good soldier" is the question raised by Captain J. M. Feehan in his Introductory Note to Eugene Boylan's *Mystic under Arms*, examining various attitudes toward war with an eye toward the morality of a Cistercian monk going into battle. In contrast to the extreme positions of those who glorify war on the one hand and pacifists who view all war as an evil to be avoided at all costs on the other, Feehan asserts that the Church is not pacifist although her mission is peace. He states: "War has been defined as the act by which a nation resists injustice unto the spilling of its blood. . . . Injustice has no place in the law of God, and war when it is used as an instrument in resisting injustice is redeemed from the atrocity which it is." Feehan cites the example of Joan of Arc as a soldier and a saint who with peace in her heart beseeched her enemies "to come to terms – but to no avail." After she "dried her tears" Joan of Arc marched into battle with her soldiers. Captain Feehan discusses the role of Michael Carlier as a monk, a man of peace, who became a soldier because "he was fighting for what was right." Carlier remembered the words of his abbot that one could become a saint both in the cloister and on the battlefield. Becoming a saint was Carlier's ideal and as he trudged towards the trenches of Belgium and France, he believed in his heart and soul that his mission was to "resist injustice" (Boylan 8-10).

During the campaign in Belgium in the Fall of 1914, Sergeant Carlier records in his diary the cordial relations with his men and the opportunities he had to converse with them about his life as a Trappist. Since they were all constantly close to death he certainly had a receptive audience. Carlier was quick to note that he was not sermonizing or trying to make converts of some non-believers, but rather speaking of the "supernatural or on the love of God" (Daumont 171-72). The notes on his war experiences are graphic and detailed, certainly lending credence to Thomas Merton's words: "If he had wanted to do so and had lived long enough, Frater Maxime Carlier would have been capable of writing one of the greatest books about that war" (*WS* 197). During a retreat after a firefight with the Germans, Sergeant Carlier wrote:

[We] halted on the summit of a hill and reckoned their numbers. Each one then

> gave his own account. Poor Sergeant Humez! It was worth his while, indeed, to put a coat of leather on his breast; he flapped with his arms as a bird does with his wings; he stumbled, fell and rolled along the ground like a ball of lead – "Is he dead ?" – "I think so." I raised him up, but he fell again downright. He must have a bullet in the loins and also has been shot through the shoulder. (Daumont 178-79)

As Sergeant Carlier and his unit moved towards France, an almost miraculous event occurred. Carlier suddenly realized he was going through the forest of Chimay and stood on the approximate spot where he used to cut timber with fellow monks. "There it was! And on the left was the bell tower whose pale steeple recalled many happy memories." Unfortunately Sergeant Carlier was unable to visit because the Germans were close behind, and with a sense of sadness he wrote, "And for a long long time until we arrived at the summit of the hill I kept my eyes fixed on the Abbey in which I had so confidently hoped to die" (Daumont 189-90).[8] Merton observes that this moment made Carlier realize the extent of his sacrifice and "the greatest thing he had to give: the security of his monastery . . . and even his hopes of becoming a saint as a contemplative monk." But God, according to Merton, requires sacrifice and suffering "from the ones whom He means to lead to perfection by the contemplative road" (*WS* 196). As Merton explains, Father Maxime was not destined to be a contemplative in a monastery, but rather, he "was to become a contemplative in the trenches by living his Cistercian life, as best he could, on the battlefield." This monk of the trenches of Belgium and France was ordained to live an "apostolate of example" as a soldier in accord with "the spirit of a monk of St. Benedict" (*WS* 197).

Octave Daumont cites a number of examples of Sergeant Carlier "exercising his apostolate." Carlier demonstrated a special tenderness towards comrades who were allegedly non-believers. On one occasion Carlier explained the plight of a fellow soldier:

> I admired exceedingly . . . the extraordinary courage of one of my men; he had been a law student, and was unfortunately an unbeliever but his unbending determination was superb. . . . [H]ow could he endure so much suffering without complaint or ostentation? His feet were covered with blood, his limbs were tottering and he could scarcely breathe. Several times I said to him: "See, my friend, you had better rest yourself." "Oh! A little farther, Sergeant, if you will allow me." So he continued to limp along leaning on my shoulder. At last he stopped by the roadside and I never saw him after. . . . Is it possible, Lord, that this man did not come to Thee when the last hour arrived? (Daumont 194-95)

Sgt. Michael Carlier

Carlier reflected on his unfortunate comrade who was an exemplary human being and speculated that near the end of this soldier's short life God granted him the graces to see "Thy light." Carlier conjectured that this soldier would surely have been a saint had he received all the graces showered upon himself by God (Daumont 194-95).

The Battle of the Marne, fought between September 5 and 12, 1914, was recounted by Sergeant Carlier in a letter to his brother, Joseph, also a soldier fighting in the trenches of France. He described a German

convoy, a "long train of wagons at a distance of a mile or so, escorted by cavalrymen." Suddenly the French seventy-fives (cannons) opened fire on the convoy and soon soldiers, horses and wagons were devastated by the exploding shells. Carlier describes the grim scene of destruction: "[T]he distant sound of the explosion reached us and when the smoke had disappeared there were large dark spots on the meadow: soldiers, horses, wagons were lying there promiscuously" (Daumont 202). One is reminded of Thomas Merton's opening words in *The Seven Storey Mountain* where he describes the world into which he was born on January 31, 1915, shortly after the first Battle of the Marne, as the "picture of Hell," where "[n]ot many hundreds of miles away from the house where I was born, they were picking up the men who rotted in the rainy ditches among the dead horses and the ruined seventy-fives, in a forest of trees without branches along the river Marne" (*SSM* 3). He may have been reading Carlier's vivid account of the battle at approximately the same time as he was penning his autobiography.

While Sergeant Carlier was a man of deep faith in God, paradoxically he actively engaged in the ultimate evil of warfare, killing the enemy. He was an excellent marksman and he described shooting one of his "Prussian" enemies. After cocking his rifle, Carlier fired upon the enemy soldier, wounding him in the shoulder and as he started to flee, Carlier chased him, cocking his rifle again, but there was a misfire because the rifle chamber was empty. The wounded German soldier escaped and Carlier had to retreat because of overwhelming numbers of approaching enemy soldiers (Daumont 206-207). Sergeant Carlier's prowess as sharpshooter earned him the status of a sniper. He described an occasion when he killed enemy soldiers, followed by his justification for the act and a petition to the Blessed Mother for the salvation of the dead soldier. He wrote that after taking the telescope from a comrade and then spotting a German soldier:

> This veritable man-hunting which looked so much like sport, a mere pastime, amazed me. "Now it is your turn" said the adjutant, handing me his rifle. "You are a little too much to the left." . . . "Good! That bullet went right through . . . again . . . again; right through!" How many unfortunates did I send into eternity? I took the most accurate aim, saying to myself: "It's my duty." But each time that I pressed the trigger I said: "Good Holy Virgin, have pity on him." This new method of war did not appeal to me at all. (Daumont 249)

In *My Argument with the Gestapo*, written before Merton entered Gethsemani in 1941 and published posthumously in 1969, "Thomas Merton," the main character in the book, meets a German officer in a Paris bookstore. Their conversation leads to the movie, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and the officer recalls a scene in which a French sharpshooter kills a young German soldier portrayed by actor Lew Ayres. Just before his death at the hands of a black-bearded French sniper, Ayres, as the German soldier, recalls "spring, home, woods and villages." He reaches out to a butterfly, a symbol of beauty, and "[h]e longs to take it in his hand." As his hands are about to gently grasp the butterfly the French sharpshooter tightens his finger on the trigger and the German soldier dies. "You see the hand, the poor hand of Lew Ayres, fall limp, and lie open, and the tiny, lovely butterfly flutters by, winging away like life itself, out of his grasp." The Merton character replies to the German officer after hearing his narration of the movie, "I remember this extremely touching moment myself" as he edges away quietly.[9] Perhaps Merton in his monastic setting recalled the touching scene in this book as he read about Sergeant Carlier's life as a sharpshooter.

Sergeant Carlier grew closer to his younger brother Joseph, whom he called "little Joe," and they frequently corresponded. On June 3, 1915 he received a letter from Joe who was heading out to the Argonne. Joe asked for his brother Michael's prayers and expressed his petitions to the Blessed Virgin and the "good angels" for his protection at the front lines. Joe wrote, "I am going into action from which I shall probably never return. Still I am confident, and, in a measure, courageous." When Joe arrived at the Argonne Forest he wrote to Michael that "he is already familiarized with danger and hopes to serve through a long and successful campaign." A month later, in July, 1915, the letters had ceased coming and Michael wrote in his diary, "No news from my little brother Joseph. Something has happened, I am quite sure." Michael prayed and made sacrifices for the safety of his brother and lamented, "My poor parents!" Daumont explains that Joseph was part of "a desperate attack" on the Germans during a "sultry July afternoon." With fixed bayonets Joseph and his comrades attacked the German positions. After the battle, during the evening hours, little Joe's body was found "riddled with bullets, on the conquered ground." When Michael heard the news he "wept for his little Joe with the heart of a mother" (Daumont 268-70), an experience of loss that Thomas Merton would share when he lost his own younger brother, John Paul, who died in World II after his bomber crashed into the North Sea on April 16, 1943, the Feast of Our Lady of Sorrows (*SSM* 402), memorialized in the poem "For My Brother Reported Missing in Action, 1943," with its haunting words: "And Christ weeps in the ruins of my spring: /. . . / The silence of Whose tears shall fall / Like bells upon your alien tomb" (*SSM* 404).

Merton describes Carlier's deep interior prayer life that allowed him to remain faithful to God in spite of the "seventy-fives [that] were blasting all around him and German machine guns [that] were making the earth jump and dance before his feet." Merton declares that Sergeant Carlier was always faithful to the two foundation pillars of Benedictine spirituality, "obedience and the presence of God." An "insatiable" thirst for prayer drove Carlier into partially ruined churches where he would sit in silent meditation. Yet Merton notes that Carlier was tested with an "aridity and helplessness" (*WS* 198) of dark contemplation. In his own words, Sergeant Carlier lamented, "My soul is a prey to severe temptations . . . and the sad aspect of the matter is that I can no longer pray" (Daumont 280). Boylan states that the Michael Carlier story is testimony to the fact that man can maintain the primacy of the interior life amidst the turmoil of the exterior drumbeat of the world, including the extreme circumstances of war: "Now here is a monk and a man of God, living the life of high contemplation in the midst of the surroundings and duties calculated to make such things impossible" (Boylan 58). That Carlier was a contemplative searching his inner self for the presence of God is evident: "I often meditate on the monastic life with a view to conforming my present mode of existence to it. And I endeavor to belong completely to God, to be filled with the thought of Him and so to dispose of myself, that the state of my soul may be a continual offering: 'Lord, my God, behold me ready to accomplish Thy will. I am Thy servant, unreservedly at Thy disposal'" (Daumont 281).

Daumont observes that Sergeant Carlier never missed an opportunity to visit churches when possible, and cites a visit to Montmartre "to spend the night in adoration." When he was wounded in October, 1916, Carlier spent a month at the Cistercian Abbey of Sainte-Marie-du-Désert living a life of prayer and penance. The ever-zealous Carlier believed that his difficult life in the trenches was not enough penance and on occasion he sought "permission to perform self-imposed

penances."[10] Daumont reports that Carlier would sleep on "the bare ground . . . and wear an armlet with iron points. . . . He would deprive himself of sleep . . . in order to devote himself to prayer" (Daumont 283). Longing for death became for Carlier a more frequent occurrence during 1916 and he wrote, "[W]hat urges me to long for death is the assurance that I shall be no longer able to offend God" (Daumont 303). At the close of the year 1916, Sergeant Carlier was in the trenches of Champagne and had just been appointed a battalion observer whereby he noted troop movements of the enemy and calculated the range of enemy artillery fire. He remarked that these "[i]mportant duties. . . [are] full of danger . . . but at the same time a good preparation for death if God calls me. I am more than ever abandoned to His will" (Daumont 302).

In January, 1917, Sergeant Carlier joined the 73rd Company which would take him from the front in Champagne, to Verdun, and Flanders at the Yser. Also in May of the same year, he was promoted to the rank of sub-lieutenant which he accepted, albeit in the past he had turned down promotions to the rank of officer "through humility and bashfulness" (Daumont 304). Throughout 1917, Carlier once again experienced the horrors and devastation of trench warfare. Finally, a "relief day" came on September 14 when his troops were to be replaced for a period of rest and recuperation. Lieutenant Carlier was scheduled for a short leave of absence, which he postponed until all of his men were able to leave the trenches. Just as his troops were to be replaced by another company, an enemy bombardment suddenly began. One of the first enemy shells struck the protective shelter of Sergeant Carlier and he was instantly killed (Daumont 312). Merton describes Carlier's contemplative journey amidst the ravages of war:

> It was the dark night of a perfect sacrifice – the dark night of a contemplation too pure for human taste or sight, too pure for emotion, and God was supporting him constantly in the most difficult circumstances by what could only be a moral miracle. When the work of this purification was done, and when God was content to call the sacrifice complete, it ended in one swift and merciful stroke. (*WS* 198-99)

Lieutenant Carlier had previously been wounded twice and awarded the Croix de Guerre for bravery.

So it was that Michael Carlier, Father Maxime, lived as a Cistercian monk for three years experiencing the dark nights of a contemplative and for another three years as a soldier travelling the "long road" to sanctity while attempting to follow the *Rule* of St. Benedict under the most trying conditions of trench warfare. According to his preference, Michael Carlier now reposes in the cemetery under the steeple of Notre Dame de Saint Joseph monastery, within earshot of the monks' "slow devotional singing of the 'Salve'" (Daumont 314).

1. Thomas Merton, *The Waters of Siloe* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949) 191-99; subsequent references will be cited as "*WS*" parenthetically in the text.
2. The diaries and letters are quoted extensively in the book *Le P. Maxime Carlier, O.C.R.* by Octave Daumont, OCR (Chimay, 1921) (ET: *Life of Lieutenant Michael Carlier*, *Trappist Monk-Soldier*, trans. a priest of New Melleray Abbey [New York: P. J. Kenedy, 1927]; subsequent references from this translation will be cited as "Daumont" parenthetically in the text). Merton evidently used the original French edition, listed in the bibliography of *Waters of Siloe* (354). See also Eugene Boylan's reference to this work as the major source of knowledge about Carlier in his *A Mystic under Arms* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1945) 13-14; subsequent references will be cited as "Boylan" parenthetically in the text.
3. The date of this event was May 15, 1902, recorded in Carlier's diary some years later. Most of the correspondence and

diary entries are not dated, but approximate time periods can generally be discerned.

4. One is reminded of the Thomas Merton/Robert Lax conversation while both were walking down Sixth Avenue, New York shortly after Merton's conversion to Catholicism. Lax challenged Merton to become a saint. Merton asked, "How do you expect me to become a saint? Lax replied, "By wanting to" (see Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* [New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948] 238; subsequent references will be cited as "*SSM*" parenthetically in the text).
5. See Armand Veilleux, OCSO, "A Great Monastic Formator: Dom Anselme Le Bail," *Cistercian Studies Quarterly*, 38.1 (2003) 27-34, and Dieudonné Dufrasne, OSB, *Dom Anselme Le Bail: Abbot of Scourmont 1913-1956: A Monk, An Abbot, A Community*, trans. Elizabeth Connor, OCSO (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2010).
6. See Thomas Merton, "Saint Gertrude, Nun of Helfta, Germany," ed. with a note by Patrick Hart, OCSO, *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 38.4 (2003) 449-58.
7. The Little Office of the Blessed Virgin was discontinued in Cistercian monasteries in the mid-1950s.
8. Merton quotes the same passage slightly differently in his own translation from the French (*WS* 196).
9. Thomas Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo: A Macaronic Journal* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969) 218-19.
10. It is not clear when and from whom Sergeant Carlier sought permission for these penances.