



**CURIA GENERALIZIA DEI CARMELITANI**

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To: all Carmelite Nuns

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### **MESSAGE FOR THE CARMELITE NUNS FOR *PRO ORANTIBUS* 2024**

Dear Sisters, once again I would like to greet you and share some thoughts with you on the occasion of the day dedicated to contemplative sisters in the Church and in our Order that we know as *Pro orantibus*. It occurs this year during the Year of Prayer announced by Pope Francis at the Angelus on Sunday, the 21<sup>st</sup> of January, 2024. For that reason I thought I might take prayer as the theme of this letter for 2024, as we look forward to the celebration of the Jubilee in 2025.

This year of prayer has been for all of us a shot in the arm, reminding us, who incarnate the Carmelite charism, to think about our vocation to pray, to pray more intensely ourselves and help others to pray. I am always reminded of the part of *Vultum Dei quaerere* that speaks about the prayer of intercession that is such an important part of your lives. That prayer is needed now more than ever. Every day in our cities we see the success of humankind in the production and manufacturing of all kinds of beautiful things for people to buy, all kinds of beautiful buildings in which to live or to work, all kinds of beautiful hotels to receive visitors from all around the world and all of that exists in the same city where there are people who have no home, or people whose homes no longer afford them comfort, people who have to battle each day in order to survive. Then there are the numerous violent conflicts that either kill people or displace them from their homes and the violence that is committed against our common home because of our inherent greed. Even if we expend all our energy and resources in helping the needy, somehow it will not be enough until our society changes and there is love and justice for everybody. Such love and justice will be the gift of God given to those who trust in his word and are open to his mercy. Such a gift will be the fruit of our efforts and of our prayer, a constant and fervent pray that sisters called to the life of cloister and contemplation know best how to offer.

## **A yoke that is easy and a burden that is light**

In October each year we celebrate the feasts of St. Therèse and St. Francis of Assisi, two very significant saints for our times. In both celebrations the Gospel for the day is the Gospel of Matthew, 11, 25-30.

*At that time Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."*

It is in prayer that God reveals all of these truths to children like us. One who prays cannot stand before God proclaiming his or her own importance. The Pharisee and the Publican were a demonstration of that. We come to pray as children before a loving Father, with the love and receptivity of children in receiving all that God has chosen to give us in answer to our prayers, and, even more, because of his great love for us which precedes our prayer. Prayer is revelation in the way that God reveals God to us and we reveal ourselves to God. Prayer therefore is communication between persons divine and human who are united in love. Prayer then can be seen as our best moment. When we pray, we could not be in a better place, because we are in God's presence. St. Mary Magdalene de' Pazzi taught us the value of that moment after Holy Communion when she began to think about the gospel that she had heard in the Eucharist. There was no better place for her to be at that moment. Therefore when Jesus says learn from me, it is as if he is thinking most of all of learning how to pray with a meek and humble heart. When Jesus says my yoke is easy and my burden is light, it is as if he is saying that prayer is a burden, yes, but a burden that is very light; prayer is a yoke, yes, but a yoke that is easy. The yoke is what guides the horse, the burden is what the horse carries for others. We can see how prayer guides us, teaches us and enlightens us, and the burden that we carry into our prayer is the burden of the world and of our brothers and sisters in the world. It is a burden that is light because the Lord has already carried that burden with us and continues to carry it, with us there to share the carrying.

## **Constitutions**

Our rich tradition of prayer and contemplation is captured for us in the constitutions of the nuns and of the friars. When the friars renewed their constitutions in 2019, the element that got most attention was the part on contemplation. We wanted to be able to be clear on what our Order is saying about contemplation today. This is what the constitutions say in Constitution 16

*"Contemplation begins when we entrust ourselves to God,  
in whatever way God chooses to approach us;  
it is an attitude of openness to God,  
whose presence we discover in all things.*

*Thus, contemplation is the inner journey of Carmelites,  
arising out of the free initiative of God,  
who touches and transforms us,  
leading us towards unity of love with God,  
raising us up so that we may enjoy this gratuitous love  
and live in that loving presence.  
This overwhelming love of God  
leads us to a transforming experience:  
it empties us of our limited and imperfect human ways  
of thinking, loving, and behaving,  
transforming them into divine ways.*

Now that you are in the process of renewing your constitutions, last approved in 1988, you too will look at the essential elements of your life and write new constitutions to correspond to the experience of our Order and the language and expectations of the Church and the people of today. In the 1988 constitutions the reader has to visit a number of articles to find the treatment of contemplation and prayer. Somewhat like the Rule of St. Albert that does not talk specifically about contemplation and prayer, your constitutions describe a way of life that is contemplative and built upon prayer, in its various forms, with attention of the Word of God as the central element. Perhaps a good example of the way the constitutions present the contemplative life of the Carmelite nun might be No. 18 which says,

*"Elijah the prophet nurtured his thirst for the one true God (I Kg 17,1) and after a long and arduous journey, learned to read the new signs of God's presence (I Kg 19,1-18). He is the contemplative, burning with passion for the absolute of God (2 Kg 2,1-13). His word burned like a torch (Sir 48,1). On the strength of his experience he commits himself to the life of the people, leading them back to fidelity towards the one God and standing with the poor and marginalised. From him Carmel has inherited the passion for the Lord and the desire to interiorise God's word at the centre of the human heart, in order to give witness to God's presence in the world, accepting that God is truly God in each person's life.*

Now in the consultation of all the nuns that is taking place we see other concepts emerging. New language and new references are being offered in order to give you constitutions that truly reflect your life, hopes and experience in cloistered communities today. Reading the submissions that were made and which now appear in the draft that you are studying, I read the present constitution n. 16 which says,

*Fundamental elements of the spirituality of the Order are contemplation, the Marian character, in the familiarity of life with Mary, of which the title of Brothers and the first church of the Order dedicated to her are eloquent signs, and the Elian inspiration, which the Carmelites have cultivated since the beginning, living in Carmel, the place of the deeds of the great prophet.*

And then the submission that came as part of the consultation which adds,

*Contemplating, therefore, is having in Christ Jesus, whose face is constantly turned toward the Father (see John 1:18), a gaze transfigured by the action of the Spirit, a gaze in which amazement for God and his wonders flourishes; it is having a clear*

*mind in which the vibrations of the Word and the voice of the Spirit resonate like the breath of a gentle breeze (see 1 Kings 19:12). It is no coincidence that contemplation is born from faith, which is the door and the fruit of contemplation: only by entrusting oneself to the "here I am" (see Luke 2:38) is it possible to enter into the Mystery (see VDQ #11).*

In all of this you will be able to recognise the gift of contemplation that is your charism and calling in a way that allows you to live out that vocation yourselves and explain it to the Church of today and to those who will approach you in the future in the belief that they are being called to be contemplative sisters in the Carmelite tradition.

## **Prayer and liturgy**

We pray most of all in the liturgy, because we believe that is the privileged place desired by Christ for our encounter with him. If we take Christ as the motivation for all that we do, we have to be in communication with him, make his wisdom our wisdom, make his desires our desires, making his commitment to the poor our commitment to the poor. Sometimes we have the impression that an interest in good liturgy diminishes our commitment to the poor as if the two could not go together. That may be true when our interest is only in the externals of liturgy and not so much in its essence. Our interest in good celebration, beauty of appearance, beauty of sound is primarily so that we can encounter Christ in the way that Christ wants to be encountered. A celebration of the liturgy that is not beautiful will not give the fullest encounter with Christ where beauty, truth and simplicity unite. A diminished attention to detail, a carelessness about meanings and symbols will not give the full message that the liturgy is intended to give on any particularly day and will therefore leave the participants without the encounter with Christ to which they were invited.

I feel that in our order today there is a movement to recover and enhance our rich liturgical tradition. In the last few days I have seen the publication of a volume entitled "The Role and Place of Liturgy in the Carmelite Order", proceedings of the Carmelite Liturgical Seminar, April 2018, (Edizioni Carmelitane, 2024) a long awaited publication, containing articles on the history of Carmelite Liturgy, Liturgy and Spirituality, Mystagogical elements, and Liturgy and Formation among many others. In the same vein, just last week we received the notice from the General Commission for Prayer and Liturgy of an event to be held next May, during the Jubilee Year, in Rome, with the title, "Encountering the Risen Lord: Liturgy and prayer in Carmel today." The letter of invitation goes on to say, "The primary focus of the congress is more pastoral than academic. It is open to all members of the Carmelite Family, that is, friars, enclosed sisters, members of the affiliated congregations and lay Carmelites and all those interested in knowing more about Carmelite Liturgy. The Liturgy and Prayer Commission welcomes Pope Francis' call for a serious, dynamic and authentic liturgical formation (*Desiderio desideravi*, 31, 62) noting in particular the essential relationship between "formation for the Liturgy and formation by the Liturgy" (*Desiderio desideravi*, 34). The letter continues, "the congress is for all those who have an interest in exploring and understanding the beauty of Carmel's prayer and liturgy so that it can be authentically carried forward in this generation as a means of transformation." While the Congress will begin by positioning ourselves within the broader ecclesial perspective, the

commission's hope is that participants will grow in their understanding of the particular Carmelite characteristics of liturgy and prayer under various themes. The themes that will be explored include the role of liturgy within a synodal church, celebrating the Word of God, celebrating Mary and the saints of Carmel in their feasts and the art of celebration of the liturgy (*ars celebrandi*). The way in which these various aspects are inculturated in the different geographic areas of the Carmelite Family will also be explored.

As we listen to God's word, as we listen to the Church's preaching, as we unite in praising God and asking for his help and forgiveness, and as we enter into Communion with Christ at the table and with one another in the assembly, we know that what is filling our minds and our hearts is the communication that will save us and send us out with a message of salvation. We know that this gift has been given to us by the Source and has been discerned by the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit.

Throughout the Jubilee year we will celebrate many liturgies. The Jubilee is a time of enlightenment and reconciliation. Our liturgies have the possibility of contributing to that enlightenment and moving us to seek reconciliation in families, in the Church, in communities and in this way to be a prophetic sign and foretaste of reconciliation in the world. Let Jubilee mean that we are more conscious of the gifts we have received, not for ourselves but for the service of building up the people of God, and let our liturgies remind us of those gifts, bring together those gifts, celebrate those gifts, principally the gift of our friendship with Jesus Christ, and send us out with those gifts to be agents of truth and peace in a world riddled with falsehood and corruption, that leaves little space for the dignity of the human person whether that person be very rich or very poor.

### **Prayer and community**

The Carmelite prays alone in her cell and in the community of sisters. Prayer helps the sister to grow, both in the cell and in the community. We grow to maturity in Christ, through our prayer, listening to his word, and pondering it in the cell and in the community. Both have to be places of growth and salvation. Growth, however, does not take place in the cell, or in the chapel or dining room. It takes place in the movement between solitude and community, in the willingness of the Carmelite to leave the community and go to the cell to be alone and the willingness of the Carmelite to leave the cell and go to the community in order to be in communion.

Prayer is discernment, discernment alone in the cell, nourished and completed by discernment in the community and vice versa. A community that comes together to pray and to engage in communal discernment is a community that is capable of growing in maturity and responding each day, more fully, to the call to holiness which is union with God. Union with God does not exist without union with neighbour, union with our families, union with our religious community.

Jubilee 2025 will be a strengthening of union among sisters, among sisters and brothers in community and outside, a strengthening of union in the Church and in the world. This will be so because in the Jubilee the hearts of many people will be more open, many will be pilgrims, many will pray more deeply and the desires of God's heart will be more and

more the desires that rest in the hearts of those who seek the face of the living God and those who seek the peace which Christ gained for us as he hung on the cross.

May the day of *Pro orantibus*, be for you an experience of joy in your vocation, and a moment of renewal of your love for prayer in which you learn what is the will of God and bear the burden of a complex world that will be saved only by the revelation that comes from God.



Rome, 20<sup>th</sup> of November 2024

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mícheál O'Neill", followed by a long horizontal flourish.

Mícheál O'Neill, O.Carm  
Prior General