



GENERAL CHAPTER 2021 | DISCALCED CARMELITES

Let us walk together, Lord! (CV 26, 6)

Concluding Document

92nd General Chapter of the Order of Discalced Carmelites

Rome, 30 August - 14 September 2021

Forward

1. With this document we wish to offer to the Order the perspectives on the path for the next sexennium which emerged from the General Chapter in continuity with the work of the Order in recent decades. In fact, since the document, *Starting Afresh from the Essentials* (2003), we have been reflecting on how our charism can respond to the many demands of the current social and ecclesial context and on what can help us to revitalize our Carmelite life.

“We are all in the same boat” Pope Francis reminded us in his prayer in time of a pandemic on March 27, 2020,¹ an experience that if it unites us in the bewilderment and limitations of so many of our brothers and sisters, it contains the “obscure” grace of making us aware that only in the care and growth of communion among us lies the possibility of living a good life even in such difficult times.²

We must walk; we cannot fail to do so, but the journey can no longer be only of the individual or of small homogeneous groups: *Let us walk together, Lord!* We can hope to move forward in the fulfillment of our mission, especially in this very special time, by firmly renewing our reference to the Lord: our companion on the road,³ source of communion among us, our friend in whom we are friends among ourselves,⁴ the foundation of our lives. We will be able to do this in truth if we are truly “together” above and beyond the many distinctions and distances that still characterize us. This is what St. Teresa⁵ urges us to do

¹ https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200327_omelia-epidemia.html

² *Tiempos recios*, Teresa would say (*Life* 33, 5).

³ Cfr. 2 *Ascent of Mount Carmel* 22, 5.

⁴ Cfr. *Life* 16, 7.

⁵ Cfr. *Way*, 26, 6; *Life* 22, 7; 27, 2; 29, 5; *Life* 32, 11.

today, and John of the Cross tells us that the Word Son of God was given to us as brother, companion and teacher, price, and reward.

The Declaration on the Charism, or the growing understanding of our identity

2. The sexennium that just ended has led us friars to reflect and work on the Constitutions, the basic text of our legislation, with the explicit intention of arriving at a better understanding of our identity as Discalced Carmelites today. This work was the fruit and natural consequence of what we did in preparation for the fifth centenary of St. Teresa's birth. The systematic rereading of the works encouraged us to find a way to reappropriate and reiterate the richness of our charism in the current context of the world and the Church. "The Constitutions are in fact the concrete expression of the charism in the present time and contain the fundamental elements that constitute it as well as the practical, even juridical, directives that make it possible to live it."⁶ The commitment invested in this re-reading enabled us to highlight the gap between the ideal that the Constitutions propose to us and the concrete and everyday reality of our religious life. The Extraordinary Definitory of Goa in February 2019 found in the instrument of the "Declaration on the Charism" the appropriate way to arrive at the elaboration of a text that would synthetically collect the essential elements of the charism so that it might be a stimulus to the interior renewal that is needed and outline a clear proposal of our Carmelite identity in favor of our young people and of those who come to our monasteries with vocational questions. We need to rethink our way of life so that it may help us to grow towards the charismatic ideal that has been given to us.⁷

3. St. Teresa's own experience gives us an understanding of the charism that we can define as progressive: personal level (the encounter with the wounded Christ), community level (San José), ecclesial level (foundation of the friars and other monasteries), missionary/world level (longing for the salvation of those in America). Each moment of this development involved for Teresa a revision of the practical way of living her original intuition and was accompanied by a progressive maturation of the experience of intimacy with God, up to spiritual marriage. On several occasions in her writings, Teresa offers us pages of reflection on who the Carmelite is, her function in the Church, her attention to the contemporary world, moved not only by the need to explain the new type of life she was inaugurating, but also by the awareness of the intrinsic dynamism of the appropriation of the charism itself.

4. The fundamental elements of our charism (prayer, fraternal life, mission) have a strong principle of unity and mutual interdependence. The challenge before us to be "Discalced Carmelites today" within the different socio-cultural contexts with which the Order is now confronted on a daily basis is precisely that of not losing this unity and of finding

⁶ Cfr. A. Borrell, *Presentation of the Declaration on the Teresian Charism*, Rome, 4 September 2021, p. 3.

⁷ Cfr. *Evangelii Gaudium* 231-233.

appropriate ways of incarnating it in the different contexts of life. The path is not an easy one since the impulses to define our identity, which start from other instances that are not properly charismatic, are multiple. Who is a Carmelite? What characterizes him? What is his relationship to the mission and the life of the Church? We realized that while on the theoretical level we still have a certain united vision, in the practice of life there are differences in the way we take on commitments (pastoral, apostolic, missionary, social action), organize our life (economy, community structure), and think about the relationship between us at various levels (community, provincial, Order). These differences risk affecting the charismatic level of our true identity and the unity of our religious family.

5. *The Declaration on Charism* is the instrument that the General Chapter offers the Order so that by discussing it and putting it to good use in our communities, we may grow in our knowledge of the charism and propose it to our world today. It is a dynamic document, the starting point for many further discussions. The General Chapter also worked on possible ways of applying the text, for example: reflection at the community and provincial level guided by specially prepared outlines, elaboration of ways for vocation promotion and initial formation, specific in-depth studies of individual aspects by investigating the great patrimony of the writings of our saints, a basic text for reflection on the charism conducted at the provincial or regional level among friars, nuns, and members of the Secular Order, and thinking together about strategies for the inculturation of the charism in homogeneous geographical areas. Regional Conferences of Superiors could play an important role in this work.

6. In his September 11 audience, Pope Francis clearly reminded us of what is proper to us and what the Church expects of us, helping us to find the proper balance and interconnection between the foundational elements of our charism and the proper relationship between contemplation and apostolate. "The Carmelite life is a contemplative life. This is the gift that the Spirit has given to the Church with St. Teresa of Jesus and St. John of the Cross, and with the many Carmelite saints and holy men and women. Faithful to this gift, Carmelite life is a response to contemporary men and women who deep down are thirsting for God, thirsting for the eternal, and often they do not understand it, and thus search for it everywhere. And Carmelite life is protected from psychologisms, spiritualisms, or false updates that hide a spirit of worldliness. You know well the temptation of psychologisms, spiritualisms, and worldly updates, the spirit of worldliness. And on this I remind you: please beware of spiritual worldliness which is the worst evil that can happen to the Church." The Pope told us further: "Friendship with God matures in silence, in recollection, in listening to the Word of God; it is a flame that must be nourished and guarded day by day. The warmth of this interior fire also helps us to practice fraternal life in community which is not an accessory element, but substantial. You are reminded of this by your very name: "Discalced Brothers". Rooted in your relationship with God, the Trinity of Love, you are called to cultivate relationships in the Spirit in a healthy tension between being alone and being with others, against the current of individualism and the

standardization of the world. [...] Holy Mother St. Teresa exhorts us to a “style of fraternity”, (“*el estilo de hermandad*”). It is an art that is learned day by day, to be a family united in Christ, “Discalced Brothers of Mary”, taking as models the Holy Family of Nazareth and the apostolic community.”⁸

The contexts in which we adventure in life⁹

Contexts that require prophetically pursued interculturality

7. The General Chapter is always an occasion to take stock of the Order as a whole. The Chapter assembly reflected this breadth of the Order’s diffusion throughout the world with an ever-increasing participation of brothers from Africa and Asia. Furthermore, a look at the statistics (cf. *Conspectus Ordinis Carmelitarum Discalceatorum OCD 2021*) clearly confirms the growth trend of the Order in these two continents (Africa above all), as the most recent projections on the spread of Christianity on a planetary level also attest.¹⁰

If, as an Order, we look into the mirror, we discover that our face is changing very rapidly, it is now an indisputable fact that the experience founded by Teresa has taken root in places and cultures so distant from the original context in which the charism was born. On the one hand, this fact can only make us rejoice because we are realizing concretely, and with important results, the missionary desire that inhabited the heart of Holy Mother and of those who, since the origins of the Order, have carried out this very concrete and fortunate missionary work (Jerome Gracián, John of Jesus Maria, Thomas of Jesus...). On the other hand, we cannot hide the fact that this rapid evolution also poses the challenge of interculturality to us. It leads us to think of the various cultures of which each of us is a bearer as places where the charism takes shape in the world. This is achieved by overcoming everything that prevents us from fostering true fraternity which is based solely on the Lord’s call and on belonging to the same religious family before and beyond the cultural affiliation of birth.¹¹

8. To date, the Order has not yet been able to enter into a different way of seeing and thinking about itself. The relationship between the respective cultures of origin seems to be realized in the logic of *aut-aut* rather than in that of *et-et*. The challenge of inculturation may appear new in the terms in which we perceive it, but it is as old as Christianity. It is the same

⁸ Address of the Pope Francis to the participants in the General Chapter of the Order of Discalced Carmelite friars, Sala Clementina, Saturday, September 11, 2021: <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/september/documents/20210911-carmelitani-scalzi.html>.

⁹ Cfr. *Life*, 21, 4.

¹⁰ Cfr. Report by Father General Saverio Cannistrà.

¹¹ One thinks of the importance of the family of Nazareth in St. Teresa: cf. *Life* 32, 11; 36, 6.

challenge of thinking about the mission of the Church in its relationship with the outside world (pagan world and Jewish world of origin) and within itself (first Council of Jerusalem).¹²

9. The Order undoubtedly has to its credit some positive experiences of interculturality, but most of the time these unfortunately lead to unsatisfactory results: collaboration between brothers coming from a different cultural area has not yet ordinarily become a fruitful resource.¹³ In the West, it is often thought of and lived under the restrictive logic of “help in a difficult situation” (and this indifferently for communities of friars or nuns). This “utilitarian” approach prevents a true process of cultural re-elaboration and thus remains too exposed to being a simple juxtaposition that fails to find its element of generative synthesis. The same challenge of interculturality is also present in other parts of the world where dynamics extraneous to the logic of religious life (such as tribalism or the maintenance of the social structure of castes) risk just as seriously wounding the fraternal fabric and causing people to lose their sense of belonging to a single new family, that of Carmel. This reflection on interculturality conducted *ad intra*, that is, within our community dynamics, can offer us precious tools to bring a word *ad extra*, to our societies that are struggling more and more to manage the challenge of inculturation and integration of those who are felt to be foreigners.

10. There is a further horizon of interculturality in which we are immersed, and which closely concerns us: the change of times that is affecting the entire Church.¹⁴ It is not only the delicate updating/adjustment of existing structures; it is not only the generational shift between the elderly and the young —something that each institution and society has always experienced—, but it is something much more profound and, in some ways, dramatic. It is the challenge of not letting our lives become completely mute, incapable of saying a word and therefore, within a short time, condemned to absolute inessentiality. How can we engage the young people of today’s world? What proposals can we make that they can grasp? How can we renew the categories within which we think of the Christian and Carmelite experience so that they can find true nourishment and meaning for the new generations of our globalized, digital, and desolately standardized societies? Accepting the challenge of interculturality means having the courage to ask ourselves these questions and to try to find answers, partial and fragile, but always answers that resist the dominant common thought to witness that there is Someone who gives meaning to life and directs the steps of man to the good. The good fortune of the Teresian reform lies, in large part, in having succeeded in intercepting in the ecclesial and social crisis of her time, words, categories, ways of proposing anew to her contemporaries the model of a new possibility of a redeemed life that she herself had painstakingly earned by allowing herself to be drawn into a spousal relationship with the Lord.

¹² Cfr. Acts 2, 34-46; 15, 1-35.

¹³ Compare the indications of *Evangelii Gaudium* 235-236.

¹⁴ Cfr. See the Holy Father’s audience to the Roman Curia on the occasion of his Christmas greetings 21.12.2019.

Priority areas of existential application

Formation

11. At various times during the Chapter discussions, it became clear that the resource that can help us on this journey that we have to make together among ourselves and with the Lord is that of formation, that is, instruments of growth (intellectual, spiritual, human) that closely and constantly accompany our lives, that can stand alongside the indispensable confrontation with “the friends of God,” as Teresa called them. In fact, to live a path of real ongoing formation means not only to educate oneself but also to move with ever greater determination from self-referentiality, as John of the Cross clearly taught us: “The virtuous soul who is alone and without a teacher, is like an isolated coal, which, instead of lighting up, cools down” (*Sayings of Light and Love*, 7). The purpose of ongoing formation is to light the fire and help us make progress on the slow journey of conversion and interior transformation of which our saints speak powerfully, which today is perhaps the first corrective to the spiritual worldliness of which Pope Francis spoke to us.¹⁵

12. The young friars (with only a few years of profession and/or ordination) who were invited the third day of the Chapter, unanimously told us that one of the needs they personally feel and see around them (and therefore in our communities!) is that of a serious journey of ongoing formation that can help us recover a lucid and prophetic look at the present, and increasingly overcome the inconsistency between what we say we are and what we are in practical life. Although they came from different parts of the world, their voices were united on this point. It was interesting, and very provocative, to have had the opportunity to listen to them!

13. If formation is the principle means by which one safeguards our vocation, paths of human and spiritual growth are even more necessary for us today in a world now invaded by the social media which has a strong pervasive power that is subversive with respect to the basic structures on which our lives rest (silence, prayer, fraternal life, time for study and work). Being constantly connected not only leads us into “other worlds” than the one we physically inhabit, but in the long run it risks rendering meaningless those simple and ordinary gestures through which we build our lives as Discalced Carmelite friars. In this respect, the aim of formation should not only be an intellectual knowledge and an appropriate use of these resources, but rather making us aware of our place in the digital society, from which we cannot withdraw, but before which we are called not to abdicate submissively.

¹⁵ Cfr. John of the Cross, *2 Ascent*, 5, 5-7; *2 Night* 21, 6-8.

14. The revision of our *Ratio Institutionis* should be a commitment for the next six years. Although the text was approved definitively in 1992 and helped to form a large generation of Discalced Carmelites in the post-Council years, it requires a thorough revision because it was written before the Church's extensive reflection on religious life during the last 30 years and because it was drafted before the advent of the internet and cell phones, which inevitably mark an important watershed between the world that existed before and the world that came afterwards. We can no longer think about the path of initial formation without acknowledging that the young men and women who come with vocational questions are digital natives.

15. The chapter discussion on the *Ratio* allowed us to broaden the horizons within which to understand the document and its use. It provided not only indications for the correct development of the stages of initial formation (from vocational discernment to solemn profession), but also resources for the organization of activities of vocational promotion and suggestions for specific formation programs for young professed and for all members of the Order. All the new issues to which the Church asks us to pay particular attention in our time, such as attention to the safeguarding of creation for an integral ecology and the prevention of any form of abuse, especially of minors or vulnerable adults, should also be integrated into the *Ratio*.

16. The commitment to a reflection and a revision of the *Ratio* should help us to rediscover the value for formation that can enrich, not only our individual lives, but also whole communities. We know how important the commitment to initial formation is in the Order, but the challenges are just as great, such as initiating life-experiences that can truly help our young friars to grow; the investment of qualified friars for formation ministry; the creation of communities who know how to form through life practice. Reworking the *Ratio* can allow us to prepare ourselves adequately for these challenges because we see that young people who are poorly formed will be unable to sustain fully what they will be asked to live, and friars who are poorly formed will not know how to respond to the expectations of the Church and the challenges of the globalized world.

The Unity of the Order

17. Limitations related to the pandemic prevented inviting to the Chapter a representation of our sisters, nuns, and laity of the OCDS, and this was felt as a loss along the path of common reflection on the journey ahead of us as an Order. We are one family composed of friars, nuns, and seculars (CC 103), and this aspect, especially today, must be brought to the forefront once again. At a time when human experience seems to be reduced to a simple succession of disconnected pieces, the witness of a profound unity based on the experience of God that is articulated in different states of life is a formidable witness to our world. To recover the true and profound sense of this journey together to which we have been called,

we must once again free ourselves from a short-sighted and too “sectoral” understanding of who we are and of the relationships among the three branches of the Order.

18. For some time now, the Church has been encouraging us to think about forms of communion that are more explicit among our realities, about new ways of living our relationships, and looking to the future in a collaboration of projects and closer mutual knowledge that makes us look beyond the boundaries of our individual reality, which at times have become too narrow. This is the path proposed to the monasteries with the latest documents dedicated to feminine contemplative life, *Vultum Dei quaerere* and *Cor Orans*, which have prompted the monasteries to unite in Federations to have a place of interchange, of mutual help, and common thinking. The Secular Order, too, has begun paths of communion in various linguistic regions of the world that have borne important fruits in the past six years, such as the development of formation programs common to several Circumscriptions. In the Chapter there was an initial discussion on how to make greater use of the activities of the regional Conferences of Superiors to foster communion among the various Circumscriptions of the Order and with the center of the Order.

19. Our society, which has made a myth of personal autonomy and of absolute and untouchable self-determination, does not help to recover the sense of belonging to a family, of a broader community bond within which the person can find a true place in life.¹⁶ Yet this is precisely where the challenge of Teresa’s reform lies: to build communities of friends, where people not only come to know each other, but also help each other to progress in their personal response to the Lord (V 16,7).

20. There are different diverging pressures that are increasingly jeopardizing this basic unity of our living environment, and in the short term, they have often led to a weakening not only of the bonds between people within the same community, but also the bonds of communities within the provincial context and of the Circumscriptions with the Center of the Order. It seems that reference to the superior institution is ordinarily felt as a bond that bridles, that offers no possibility of expression, that takes away space for life. The subtle but constant weakening of these bonds of mutual belonging is a further impoverishment that we are unfortunately experiencing. The reflection that we carried out during the previous six years on our Constitutions was aimed precisely at reoffering us the possibility of understanding the fruitful interconnection witnessed by our laws, which exists within the male branch and then extends to the other two branches of the Order, to the Carmelites (OCarm) and to all the many religious and lay experiences that have arisen over the years from the root of the Carmelite charism.

A special occasion

¹⁶ Cfr. *Fraternal Life in Community*, 1 §2.

21. 2023 and 2025 mark the 150th anniversary of the birth of St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face and the centenary of her canonization, two important anniversaries for our Order. These events give us the opportunity for a very special confrontation with the contemporary world. UNESCO, in fact, has accepted the request of the French government to include St. Thérèse's name among the personalities who have made a significant contribution to the development of humanity, and whose birth anniversary UNESCO will celebrate worldwide (2023). UNESCO is an international non-denominational body and asks that cultural events be organized around the person of St. Thérèse that can show her contribution to the role of women in religious institutions, in the fight against poverty, and the promotion of inclusion. These are new perspectives and reflection on the figure of St. Thérèse with respect to how we have ordinarily thought of her, but which offer us the possibility of a broad comparison with our contemporary world.

Conclusion

22. "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (1 Kings 19:9a.13b). We began the General Chapter with this question posed to us by the reflection of Msgr. Libanori, S.J., a question posed to the man of God in a moment of his greatest inner bewilderment, when his perspective had been revolutionized by the harsh and unsuccessful confrontation with history. It was a word addressed to Elijah so that he could listen to it, come to his senses, and thus find the strength for a fruitful journey, no longer solitary but in deep communion with many other friends of God.

Pope Francis himself has called us back to this primacy of listening in order to rediscover the fire of our origins: "Listening is the fundamental attitude of the disciple, of those who place themselves in the school of Jesus and want to respond to what He asks of us in this difficult but always beautiful moment, because it is God's time. Listening to the Spirit, in order to be able to discern what comes from the Lord and what is contrary to Him and, in this way, to respond, starting from the Gospel, to respond to the signs of the times through which the Lord of history speaks to us and reveals Himself. Listening and discernment, in view of the witness, of the mission carried out by the proclamation of the Gospel, both with words and, above all, with the example of life. In this time, in which the pandemic has confronted us all with so many questions and which has seen the collapse of so many certainties, you are called, as children of Saint Teresa, to safeguard your fidelity to the perennial elements of your charism. This crisis, if it has anything good —and it certainly does— is precisely to bring us back to the essential, not to live distracted by false certainties. This is also a favourable context in which to examine the state of health of your Order and nurture the flame of your origins."¹⁷

¹⁷<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/september/documents/20210911-carmelitani-scalzi.html>.

23. As always, the Chapter was an important time of listening. Some young friars of the Order spoke to us, four religious brothers who had been invited to participate as auditors in all of the Chapter's deliberations spoke to us; we listened to each other in the assembly hall and in the linguistic or geographic work groups, and we always returned to the ancient question addressed to Elijah: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" The question of who we are, what we do, and how we think about being witnesses of the Lord in the world. The journey that lies ahead of us in the next sexennium can begin by humbly taking up this question which, as for our father Elijah, was the origin of a fruitful life journey.

24. Let us listen to St. Teresa: "O Lord of the world, my true Spouse of my soul! How is it that you have been reduced to this state? My Lord and my Love, is it possible that you want to receive such poor company as mine, for I see by your expression that You have been consoled by me? Well then, how is it Lord that the angels leave You, and that even your Father doesn't console you? If it's true, Lord, that You want to endure everything for me, what is this that I suffer for You? Of what am I complaining? I am already ashamed since I have seen you in such a condition. I desire to suffer, Lord, all the trials that come to me and esteem them as a great good enabling me to imitate You in something. Let us walk together, Lord, wherever You go, I will go; whatever you suffer, I will suffer." (CV 26:6). And so, with Teresa, let us continue walking together in the company of those who have trodden this same path and are our models, let neither our poverty nor the magnitude of the challenges frighten us: let us walk together, Lord! In darkness but secure (*Dark Night*, verse 2), grateful for the "sheer grace" (*dichosa ventura*) that has been given to us as a gift.

Rome, September 14, 2021