

## ***The Teresian Charism***

Just yesterday I was asked: “What do you mean by the ‘Teresian Charism’?” This is exactly the question that someone would ask if he or she were contemplating the possibility of entering the secular branch of Carmel and wondering what exactly is the purpose of this vocation and what is its aim. And this would be a logical question, for the Second Vatican Council told us clearly that all Christians are called to the fullness of charity and to the fullness of perfection in Christian life. If that be so, what more can one aspire to?

Considering what is meant by the charism of Saint Teresa of Jesus, the foundress of the Discalced Carmelites, I think the following distinctions need to be made:

1. First of all, in biblical language, a charism is a special gift given by the Holy Spirit for the sake of building up the Body of Christ, which is the Church. Hence, when we think of the charism given to Saint Teresa, we are not thinking of the charm and vivaciousness that were outstanding parts of Teresa’s character and made her so appealing and attractive to people. This is a natural part of her personality, and few people have been more blessed in this sense of the term. On the contrary, when we use the term “the Teresian charism,” we mean those special gifts and blessings that God bestowed upon Teresa for the good of the Carmelite Order and, even more so, for the good of the Church.
2. Special mission and vocation: God awakened Teresa to the very special vocation and mission to live the life of contemplative prayer for the greater honor and glory of God, for the salvation of souls, and for the good of the Church. She always claimed that she wanted to live the Gospel in such a way that her Order would grow closer to Christ and imitate Him in every way, but, above all, to imitate His prayerful life of union with the Father.

The Second Vatican Council told us that “the first rule” of every religious order must be the Gospel lived in its fullness. But it also acknowledged that each religious family in the Church will be distinguished by its attempt to imitate a special feature of the life of Christ. No order and no person can fully imitate all the features of the mystery of Christ. Thus, Franciscans strive to imitate more closely the poor Christ; Dominicans especially love the preaching Christ. Where do the Carmelites come in? What aspect of the life of Christ do we strive to live more fully? Following the gift the Holy Spirit bestowed on Saint Teresa of Jesus, Carmelites feel drawn to staying close to and imitating the praying Christ of the Gospels. This is our special mission and our special vocation in the Church.

3. To be more specific and spell out the Teresian charism more carefully, the Rule of St. Albert, the Constitutions and the Statutes for the secular members of the Order of Carmel are clear and helpful. It reminds the members that the Teresian charism is made up of the ideal for the life of the Order, and the special graces bestowed on the Order, which are embodied in the spiritual heritage of the Order. Since the members must live the Teresian charism, these points are all important.

To elaborate on each one:

*The Ideal of the Order:* The Order of Discalced Carmelites of Our Lady of Mount Carmel is part of the mystical body of Christ. By choosing the Blessed Virgin Mary as the mother and patroness of our Order, Carmelites place their whole life under her protection. We take the mystery of her interior life and her union with Christ as our ideal of interior consecration.

Besides the Blessed Virgin, we venerate Saint Joseph as the model of attentive service to Christ, to Mary, and to the Church, as well as the “master of prayer” Saint Teresa recommended to us.

Similarly, we esteem the venerable biblical figure, the Prophet Elijah, contemplating the living God and burning with zeal for His glory. Elijah lived on Mount Carmel and is the inspirer of the Order of Carmel because he lived and bore witness to the presence and power of the living God.

*Graces of the Order.* Each religious order is a gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church, and each attempts to live a special feature of the Gospel. We gain a fuller understanding of the vocation of Carmel when we consider the graces given to Saint Teresa. Her life and spiritual experiences were so ordained by God that she became our teacher and the model of our life. Teresa reoriented the life of Carmel toward prayer and contemplation of divine things in a spirit of fidelity to the Gospel. Disturbed by the harm that was being done to the Church and to the priesthood and by the breaches in the unity of the Church, Teresa decided to dedicate her whole life to leading the Order to dedicate its life entirely to the glory of God and the good of the Church, especially of priests and the theologians who work for the good of the Church.

Teresa was aided by Saint John of the Cross, who clearly expressed the spirit of Carmel by his life, achievements and doctrine. Both Teresa and John of the Cross have been officially declared Doctors of the Universal Church as a sign that the contemplative vocation is the most universal and fruitful for the good of the Church (Pius XI). In addition, the Church is blessed with two other canonized saints: St. Teresa Margaret of Florence and St. Thérèse of Lisieux, “the “Little Flower,” and St. Teresa Benedicta (Edith Stein).

*Heritage of Carmel:* The heritage of Carmel is made up of the living traditions that have come down from the time of Saint Teresa and even beyond. It is the living charism of Saint Teresa and is found chiefly enshrined in her life and writings, and has been expounded in a wonderful way in the life of Saint John of the Cross and in his mystical writings. In our own century, three members of Carmel have been raised to the honors of the altar by canonization. The saintly Teresa Margaret, whose life was hidden with Christ in God, was a perfect reflection of the Teresian charism. The more popular Carmelite, St. Therese of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face, was canonized and her autobiography, the *Story of a Soul*, has helped millions of people, and St. Teresa Benedicta.

One of the great blessings of the religious orders is that they have marvelous traditions of holiness that are enshrined in the spiritual writings of their saints. Since these have been approved by the Church and have stood the test of time, we know that we are safe in following them and that they will lead us to Christian perfection.

## **The Principal Elements of Our Life**

All Carmelites must live in “allegiance to Jesus Christ” and follow in His footsteps. Teresa always told us that because in the world there are so many enemies of Christ and He has so few friends, at least those of us who live this life must strive to be His tried and true friends. This is central to our life. We are an Order founded in honor of Mary, and we know that she was the perfect follower of Christ, the one who loved Him most perfectly and received and lived His teaching more than any other.

The way we strive for union with God is by a way of life in which prayer and the fostering of contemplation are very closely allied. By virtue of our vocation, we are called to prayer, which leads us to filial and friendly conversation with God as a way of life rather than merely in formal times of meditation. We strive to be a witness to the world of the transcendent values of the Gospel, and especially of prayer as it was taught by Christ. Saint Teresa did not only love the words of Christ concerning prayer, but above all, she loved to stay close to the praying Christ. Her favorite scene was that of Christ praying alone to the Father in the garden before His death.

## **Teresian Secular Communities Today**

So far I have tried to explain the Carmelite life to you as well as I can, basing it on the legislation of the Order. You will say to me, all that is well and good, but my question is what is the value of joining such a secular Carmelite community? What would it do for me? How would it help improve my life?

One is called to become a secular member of a religious order only if one has been blessed by God with a vocation. “You have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you,” we read in John’s Gospel. And those few words tell us what a true spiritual vocation is—it is a gift of God. If you are called by God, He will give you all the graces and helps needed to live that vocation.

If one has a true vocation, it must be tested for several years before one may make a life-long commitment by the Promises to live according to the evangelical perfections of the Gospel. But one of the advantages of life in a secular branch of the Order is that the members have the Rule of St. Albert, the Constitutions and the Statues which have been approved by the highest authority of the Order of Carmel and also by the Holy See. This guarantees that this legislation fully reflects the traditions and charisms of St. Teresa and that it can lead one to the fullness of the life that the Church expects of the sons and daughters of Our Lady of Mount Carmel.

The members wear no distinctive garb, but they all wear the scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. The scapular is a sign of our consecration to Mary and that we strive in our daily lives to reflect her virtues in our lives for the good of the Church.

The Secular Constitutions also assures the members of a regular life and of fidelity to the spirit of the Order. Many people today want to live a spiritual life, but often find that they do not know how to organize their lives in a regular way. The Rule of St. Albert, the Constitutions and the Statues

help create a setting of constancy of purpose and of disciplined, orderly living. They are a protection against inconstancy and haphazardness, and assist one's concentration on the goal of prayerful union with God. It also helps the members to "carry into the world the distinctive Carmelite witness—to be those who stand for God and for His holiness in this life and who are pledged to a daily life of prayer for the spreading of the kingdom of God."

In the present distress of the modern world, it is a blessing to be able to get together with others who have the same faith and who believe in the primacy of union with God and the outstanding excellence of a life of contemplative prayer. One strength of the religious orders is that people with the same ideals are able to get together and support one another.

One of the greatest privileges of being a member of the Order of Carmel is knowing that we belong to an Order that has been raised up by God to emphasize the life of the praying Christ and to try to live this mystery of His life. It does not take much imagination to reflect on the evils that are afflicting the world and, at the same time, to reflect on how the world could be improved if people would take time out each day to contemplate the life of Christ and strive to be transformed by His light and love.

Members of an Order are inspired by knowing that they belong to a worldwide Order; that they are struggling in all countries to make this a better world and to bring all to the light and love of the Gospel. And it is also a great source of assurance to know that the other members of the Order are pouring out their hearts to God on our behalf each day.

### **Praying With All Our Heart**

If one contemplates entering the Order of Carmel, it is important to weigh carefully what you will receive and what you are expected to give. I have already outlined the advantages of what you will receive. Now I want to stress what you must be prepared to do:

*Give Your Life to God.* You may wonder if that will take you away from your family, your loved ones, your efforts to work for the betterment of this world. No, this vocation will not interfere with that, for since this is what God wants of those whose vocation is to live in the world, the living of the Rule of St. Albert, the Constitutions and the Statutes of the secular Carmelites can only strengthen you in your obligations. We are told that "our determined efforts to conform our lives to the challenges of our charism, while gradually extinguishing our egotism and selfishness, will bring us to the freedom of the children of God which is found in the fullness of love."

There is an old saying of golfers that one hears on the tour: "No guts, no glory!" Christ phrased it differently when He asked us to deny ourselves and take up our crosses daily and follow Him. But this is the way that leads to divine glory.

In an Order, we are expected to live and to love. True love means to love without counting the cost. So when we are expected to pray for the good of the other members of the Order, for the good of the mission of the Order and for the needs of the Church, we are expected to pray for these

intentions with all our heart. Thomas Merton gave his last sermon on prayer in India. There he told his audience that one never knows what prayer is truly all about until one prays as though he were praying with his back right up against a wall, as though his very life depended on it, or as though he needed to pray for fear that he would go down for the last time. If you pray for those intentions in that way, there can be little doubt that your Carmelite life will be truly worthwhile and glorious.

One final point: In our prayers as Carmelites, we need to pray not only to Mary but also with her. Father Frederick Jelly, O.P., in a meeting of the Catholic Mariological Society of America, made the point that the Scriptures do not primarily stress that we pray to the Mother of God and to the saints for favors. They encourage this, it is true. But what they stress more than anything else is that we pray with Mary and with the saints to God. Did you ever notice in the Mass that we are told that we have been gathered together as one in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit and that we pray to God with Mary, the Mother of God; with Joseph, her husband; and with all the angels and saints. This tells us so much about the beauty and the power of a life of prayer in the Order. We are always aware that she is the mother and the queen of the Order of Carmel. We know that in praying in this way and in living our life in imitation of her, we are merely carrying out her orders in the Gospel when she said, "Do whatever He tells you to do." When the servants did what Mary told them to do, Jesus multiplied the wine and the water. When we pray with her, organize our life so that it has the beauty and strength of her life, we know that Christ will multiply His graces and blessings in our lives and in the lives of our families, and that we will be instrumental in helping the Church and the world today.

Teresa knew that if we live this program of life, we will be following Christ perfectly and living in imitation of Mary, the mother of the Order, for the good of the whole Church and of all mankind.

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### **Discussion points for the Teresian Charism:**

*What is a charism?*

*What is the first rule of every religious order? Why?*

*What aspect of the life of Christ do Carmelites try to live most fully? What are some ways we try to*

*do this?*

*What is the ideal of the Order? Which saints are particularly ours?*

*What are the major graces given to Teresa and, through her, to us?*

*What are the principal elements of the life of a lay Carmelite? What is a vocation?*

*Why must I wear the scapular? Why can't I wear a real habit?*

*What does the Admission to Formation liturgy say about the Carmelite spirit?*