

THE OCDS COMMUNITY: PRAYERFUL FRIENDS AND EVANGELIZERS

by Fr. Alzinir Debastiani, OCD

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in the Teresian Carmel:

Peace to each of you here present during this **2013 OCDS Western Regional Congress in Portland, Oregon**. May you be empowered and enlightened in *Seeking Christ through the Interior Castle in Carmelite Secular Life*. May you radiate in your lives the light of the Holy Trinity living within each of you.

I am deeply grateful to my confrere in Carmel in the person of Fr. Donald Kinney, OCD, and to Lee Ann Trunk and Alice Gustafson for their kind invitation to me personally. I also thank the OCDS community of Portland of *Our Lady of the Holy Rosary* who are hosting us, along the other organizers and speakers. May God bless you! With me I also bring the prayers and greetings of our Father General, Fr. Saverio Cannistrà, with wishes for a fruitful Congress.

Allow me to introduce myself briefly:

I am Fr. Alzinir Francisco Debastiani from the state of Santa Catarina, in southern Brazil, a Discalced Carmelite friar of the Province of St. Joseph since 1984 and a priest since 1991. In Brazil I was pastor, teacher, and Delegate for the OCDS for 6 years. In May of last year, I became the General Delegate for the OCDS.

After just over a year, I can say that I am still discovering and assimilating the meaning of this mission. I count on your prayers.

As members of the Order of Discalced Carmelites, we have embarked on a journey of preparation for the Fifth Centenary of the Birth of holy Mother Teresa in 2015. With Teresa we want to deepen our vocation to the Teresian Carmel and our response to the call of the Lord, after the example of our holy Mother: "*I am Yours, for You I was born, what do You want of me?*"

As "sons and daughters of the Church," we Carmelites join in the *Year of Faith* (2012-13) during this Fiftieth Anniversary of the Second Vatican Council. We welcome the proposal of the 2012 Synod of Bishops to collaborate in the new evangelization for the transmission of the Christian faith. Hopefully these events are propelling us to devote more and more of our lives to God so that we may have the missionary zeal of our holy Mother: "[to give] a thousand lives to save one soul." ¹

1. Between the Year of Faith and the Fifth Centenary of the Birth of St. Teresa (2015)

One of the principal objectives which the General Chapter of 2009 proposed for this sexenium was to read the complete works of St. Teresa in preparation for the Fifth Centenary of her birth. This is what the text says:

"The context for this reading of St Teresa is the lead-up to the Fifth Centenary of her birth (2015). **Direct contact with her writings, read in a meditative way, will enable us to share the human and spiritual adventure which she herself lived and which she holds out to us.** We want to wake up again to her spirit, take hold of her wisdom, approaching her writings with a listening ear, as disciples, sons and daughters, so that our lives and our service of the Church and the world will be shaped afresh by her charisma. We want to get in touch with her message as a source of hope in our human, Christian and Carmelite lives." ²

¹ St. Teresa, *The Way of Perfection*, 1:2.

² *I Was Born for You*, n. 3.

The Year of Faith proclaimed by His Holiness Benedict XVI, launched on October 11, 2012 and ending on November 24 of this year, aims at the rediscovery of faith in Christ, especially for those who were baptized but have been away from the Church, bringing about a loving and friendly encounter with Christ, the source of life, the one who leads us into participation in the Trinitarian life.³

At the same time, the "*Year of Faith* . . . is a summons to an authentic and renewed conversion to the Lord, the one Savior of the world. . . . Through faith, this new life shapes the whole of human existence according to the radical new reality of the resurrection. To the extent that he freely cooperates, man's thoughts and affections, mentality and conduct are slowly purified and transformed, on a journey that is never completely finished in this life. 'Faith working through love'⁴ becomes a new criterion of understanding and action that changes the whole of man's life⁵

Saint Teresa is a clear example of how "faith in God's mercy"⁶ leads her to a radical transformation of life—let us recall here the symbol of the silkworm—from the moment that she responded to the graces which the Lord granted her. We can say that **she enters into the castle of the Holy Trinity through the gate of faith and prayer and allows "Christ to live in her."** From this fact and knowing the necessity of fraternal help for growth in the spiritual life, she founded small communities of nuns, who are to be friends, who are to be mutually helpful ("all must be friends, all must be loved, all must be held dear, all must be helped"⁷, who are to share the spiritual life, encouraging one another other in service to the Lord and to his Church.

1. SANTA TERESA OF JESUS, MASTER OF PRAYER

Saints are privileged witnesses of God who have "confessed the beauty of following Jesus"⁸: "every saint is like a ray of light streaming forth from the word of God"⁹.

St. Teresa of Jesus is "a Mother of spiritual people." Her word, always relevant in the Church, is that of prayer. She is a mystagogue—one who understands and teaches mystical doctrine. Profoundly aware of what it means to be a human being inhabited by divine grace, of "so rich a nature and the power to converse with none other than God"¹⁰, she compares those who do not pray or who pray badly with the paralytic¹¹, with one who is unable to walk.

What motivates someone to leave this state and undertake the path in search of the Lord except the prayerful faith which makes him a pilgrim?

Prayer and reflection provide the motive to seek the light of the interior castle. It is the search for the Transcendent, the desire for God present in the heart of every human person, which calls him to live the path of exodus from the self and to go in search of the light that "burns in the heart."

³ cf. *Porta Fidei* 1.

⁴ *Gal* 5:6.

⁵ cf. *Rom* 12:2; *Col* 3:9-10; *Porta Fidei* 6.

⁶ *OCDS Constitutions*, 7.

⁷ *The Way of Perfection*, 4:7.

⁸ *Porta Fidei* 13.

⁹ *Verbum Domini* 48.

¹⁰ *The Interior Castle*, I, 1:6.

¹¹ cf. *The Interior Castle*, I, 1:6.

For Teresa:

"...prayer is the door to favors as great as those He granted me. If this door is closed, I don't know how He will grant them. For even though He may desire to enter and take delight in a soul and favor it, there is no way of His doing this, for He wants it alone and clean and desirous of receiving His graces... I, indeed, cannot understand why, unless it is that they want to undergo the trials of life with greater trial and close the door on God so that He may not make them happy. I certainly pity those who serve the Lord at their own cost, because for those who practice prayer the Lord Himself pays the cost since through their little labor He gives them delight so that with the help of this delight they might suffer the trials." ¹²

In order for there to be prayer, reflection must also accompany it, along with a **theological attitude, an awareness that one is talking to God:**

"A prayer in which a person is not aware of whom he is speaking to, what he is asking, who it is who is asking and of whom, I do not call prayer however much the lips move. Sometimes it will be so without this reflection, provided that the soul has these reflections at other times." ¹³

For this reason, the vocational path which we undertake in the Teresian Carmel is motivated by a personal quest for friendship with God, for "Him who, we know, loves us." ¹⁴

It is important that every Carmelite community be a **place of formation in an authentic life of prayer**. "From foolish devotions, may God deliver us," ¹⁵ said Teresa. Such prayer leads to **an ever more profound and true relationship with Christ**. This requires the acquisition of the virtues of "love for one another, detachment from all created things, and true humility" necessary for us to possess inwardly and outwardly the peace our Lord recommended so highly to us." ¹⁶

It is fundamental to keep our relationship with Jesus at the very center of our life. Our Father General, in the Fourth Iberian Congress of the Secular Order in Avila, in April of 2012, stated:

"In Carmel we are for Jesus because He has touched us mysteriously... The first and fundamental manifestation of the Teresian charism is to live all things with Jesus...in an exercise of faith, of theological life, which is only possible if constantly nourished by prayer, understood as a friendly dialogue with the Lord, and in daily listening to the Word of God.

Father General continues: "The other aspect of our vocation is our 'concern for others,' for the community, for the Church. Life with Christ and life in Christ is not selfish, nor self-centered, but a life for others, without reservations or calculations. This is, moreover, the only verifiable sign that we are really with the Lord and not simply ourselves. These characteristics of the charism that animated the life of Teresa can be reproduced in very different states of life, in new ways, and with new riches. Charism is fertile and produces 'the fruits of the Spirit': love, peace, joy, goodness¹⁷. At the same time, it is demanding and occupies the various areas of our lives and makes them its own. So when you choose this vocation with 'a determined determination,' ¹⁸ you discover sooner

¹² *Life*, 8:8-9.

¹³ *The Interior Castle*, 1,1:7.

¹⁴ *Life*, 8:5.

¹⁵ *Life*, 13:16.

¹⁶ cf. *The Way of Perfection*, 4:4.

¹⁷ cf. Gal 5:22.

¹⁸ *The Way of Perfection*, 21:2.

or later that you no longer belong to yourself, that you own nothing for yourself, but at the same time, that you possess everything in a new way.”

2. THE OCDS COMMUNITY: A PLACE OF TRAINING IN PRAYER AND IN COMMUNION

Teresa’s charismatic legacy calls us to form communities of “staunch friends of God,”¹⁹ i.e., communities where before all else the members sincerely love one other; then, that the members help one another, that they share and walk together toward one goal: to witness their faith in Jesus Christ, who is present “where two or three are gathered in his name.”²⁰

The community of the Secular Order should be a place where I can refuel and renew my spiritual energies in order to witness the faith and love of Christ in the family, at work, wherever I find myself.

Blessed John Paul II, at the completion of the Jubilee Year 2000, left us a task for this millennium:

“To make the Church the home and school of communion: that is the great challenge facing us in the millennium which is now beginning, if we wish to be faithful to God’s plan and respond to the world’s deepest yearnings ... we need **to promote a spirituality of communion**, making it the guiding principle of education wherever individuals and Christians are formed, wherever ministers of the altar, consecrated persons, and pastoral workers are trained, wherever families and communities are being built up.”²¹

For this, it is necessary first to ponder and contemplate the mystery of the Holy Trinity, the source and origin of the Church and of every human being. The human being is “a substance founded on relationship,”²² who, “*discovering that he is loved by God, comes to understand his own transcendent dignity, to learn not to be satisfied only with himself but to encounter his neighbor in a network of relationships that are ever more authentically human.*”²³

The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (2004) describes the primary vocation of the human person as:

“*The revelation in Christ of the mystery of God as Trinitarian love is at the same time the revelation of the vocation of the human person to love. This revelation sheds light on every aspect of the personal dignity and freedom of men and women, and on the depths of their social nature. ‘Being a person in the image and likeness of God ... involves existing in a relationship, in relation to the other ‘I’, because God himself, one and triune, is the communion of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.’*” (n. 34)

Hence comes the importance of **a reverential fraternal communion, of a warm welcome and of an affectionate, open, and familial relationship** among the members of our communities.

Saint Teresa perceived the need for people who would live the same ideal and would have the same desire for God which she experienced. Despite the fact that at the Incarnation she lived with about 160 other nuns, she could not find the support she needed for the religious life and for prayer:

¹⁹ *Life*, 15:15.

²⁰ Mt 18:20.

²¹ *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 43.

²² Josef Ratzinger, in Paolo Gamberini, *Jesu maestro de relazioni umane*, Religiosi in Italia 391, 2012, p. 138.

²³ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, n.4.

"There is so much sluggishness in matters having to do with the service of God that it is necessary for those who serve Him **to become shields for one another that they might advance...** Of myself I know and say that if the Lord had not revealed this truth to me and given me the means by which I could ordinarily talk with persons who practiced prayer, I, falling and rising, would have ended by throwing myself straight into hell. For in falling I had many friends to help me; but **in rising I found myself so alone** that I am now amazed I did not remain ever fallen. And I praise the mercy of God, for it was He alone who gave me His hand." ²⁴

Teresa understands the need to be "**staunch friends of God**" ²⁵ And here is the secret and the power of the Community:

"I should like the five of us who at present love each other in Christ to make a kind of pact that since others in these times gather together in secret against His Majesty to prepare wicked deeds and heresies, **we might seek to gather together some time to free each other from illusion and to speak about how we might mend our ways and please God more** since we do not know ourselves as well as others who observe us if they do so with love and concern for our progress." ²⁶

To gather as friends for mutual help in spiritual growth is the ideal of community life in St. Teresa. This always requires an openness and respect for others, the ability to dialogue about the spiritual life and share it freely, in order that one may perceive the action of God in the life of another which may promote growth in my spiritual life. Here is also the task of community meetings: mutual help in the spiritual path, to be a place of sharing and of trusting and reciprocal acceptance among the members.

A good **synthesis of the community life in St. Teresa and of her virtues** may be found in n. 30 of the Document of the General Chapter of 2009:

"An ideal community life is defined by these three factors: a community that is before all else a "**college of Christ**"²⁷, after the more radical way of the early Church, because He is present within the community²⁸, He is "the Lord of the house"²⁹, who "gathered us here"³⁰, a community that lives the demands of strict **equality and of true love** ³¹, and where everything is guided by an evangelical style of love that is effective, free, disinterested ³², which sees manual work as the standard³³, a community marked by **humanism**, characterized by special and uncommon elements for its time: culture, human virtues, gentleness, prudence and discretion, simplicity, kindness and joy³⁴.

St. Teresa gives us some valuable advice: "Those who really love God, love every good, desire every good, favor every good, praise every good. **They always join, favor, and defend good people.** They have no love for anything but truth and whatever is worthy of love."³⁵

²⁴ *Life*, 7:22.

²⁵ *Life*, 15:5.

²⁶ *Life*, 16:7.

²⁷ cf. *The Way of Perfection*, 13:5, note 2.

²⁸ cf. *Life*, 32:11.

²⁹ WP, 17:7.

³⁰ WP, 1:5; 3:1.

³¹ cf. WP, 4:7.

³² WP, 4:11; 7:6.

³³ cf. Constitutions of St. Teresa, n. 28.

³⁴ cf. WP, 41:7-8; 42; NMI 43; "I was born for You," n. 30.

³⁵ cf. *The Way of Perfection*, 40:3.

In light of all these texts, **to grow in fraternal communion** is a constant need of every community, because individualism is one of the characteristics of our current society which most easily seeps into our communities.

When there is true love among the members of a community, it becomes a source of evangelization because of this testimony of communion, as Jesus said: "all men will know that you are my disciples" ³⁶ as happened to the early Christians.³⁷

3. "APOSTOLIC ACTIVITY IS THE FRUIT OF PRAYER"

This statement comes from no. 26 of the *OCDS Constitutions*.

It reflects that earnest desire which led St. Teresa to try to do something about the ills of the Church and of society in her time³⁸. Her great love for Christ and for the Church's mission led her to undertake the work of the foundation of monasteries for the nuns and convents for the friars, without fearing the work and persecutions that would come³⁹.

For the secular Carmelite, apostolic activity exercised individually or in community is part of your vocational identity, as described in part IV of the Constitutions. And the apostolic activity of the laity in the Church is one of the great achievements of Vatican II, which devotes Chapter IV of *Lumen Gentium*, expanded in *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, on the apostolate of the laity. This was one of the great achievements of Vatican II, but which, unfortunately, after 50 years is still far from being put into practice.

The 1987 Synod of Bishops, with its exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, makes a fundamental statement for our understanding of the lay apostolate in light of the Church as a mystery of communion:

"... Only from inside the Church's mystery of communion is the 'identity' of the lay faithful made known, and their fundamental dignity revealed. Only within the context of this dignity can their vocation and mission in the Church and in the world be defined." ⁴⁰

It is a mission that is accomplished through personal witness, where

"Every person must walk unhesitatingly according to his own personal gifts and duties in the path of living faith, which arouses hope and works through charity. All Christ's faithful, whatever be the conditions, duties and circumstances of their lives—and indeed through all these, will daily increase in holiness, if they receive all things with faith from the hand of their heavenly Father and if they cooperate with the divine will. In this temporal service, they will manifest to all men the love with which God loved the world." ⁴¹

With regard to the apostolate, we should be careful not to fall into two temptations, about which John Paul II spoke in 1988:

"... the temptation of being so strongly interested in Church services and tasks that some fail to become actively engaged in their responsibilities in the professional, social, cultural and political world; and the

³⁶ Jn 13:34-35.

³⁷ cf. Acts 2:42-46; 4:32-35.

³⁸ cf. *The Way of Perfection*, 1-3; *Foundations*, 1.

³⁹ cf. *Foundations*, 18:5.

⁴⁰ CL 8, cf. LG 31.

⁴¹ *Lumen Gentium* 41.

temptation of legitimizing the unwarranted separation of faith from life, that is, a separation of the Gospel's acceptance from the actual living of the Gospel in various situations in the world." ⁴²

Therefore, we can say that the identity of the lay vocation in the Teresian Carmel is to build holiness in the world, which means living faith, hope and love where I am, without separating faith and life or only within the Christian community.

I like this phrase of St. Teresa: "**The true lover loves everywhere and is always thinking of the Beloved**"⁴³. In social life, family, work, entertainment, ministry, interpersonal relationships, we see always with the eyes of faith, hope and above all charity, as the *OCDS Constitutions* state:

"To give particular importance to prayer which, nourished by listening to the Word of God and by the liturgy, is conducive to relating with God as a friend, not just in prayer, but in daily living. To be committed to this life of prayer demands being nourished by faith, hope, and above all, charity in order to live in the presence and the mystery of the living God." (9,c)

St. Teresa, by means of an example, invites us to do something for those in need:

"Suppose we were to see a Christian with his hands fastened behind his back by a strong chain, bound to a post, and dying of hunger, not because of lack of food, for there are very choice dishes beside him, but because he cannot take hold of the food and eat, and even has great loathing for it; and suppose he sees that he is about to breath his last and die, not just an earthly death but an eternal one.

Wouldn't it be terrible cruelty to stand looking at him and not feed him? ⁴⁴

Give food to those who are dying of hunger ... Of which hunger? Physical hunger, certainly, but also other forms of hunger, such as the lack of meaning in life, which many attempt to satisfy through drugs, pleasure, consumerism, and many others things, as you know. Jesus came in order to give being and meaning to everything. We must lead people to Him.

In the same vein, it is significant what Carmelo Dotolo, theologian and professor at the Pontifical Urban University in Rome, suggests:

"If we accept the idea that our joys and hopes, doubts and questions characterize us in our quest, then, **the vocation and identity of the lay Christian is to be a companion in the search for meaning**, knowing that the salvific figure described in the Gospel inserts Himself into the question that belongs to each person, and guides uncommon perspectives marked by the unpredictability of God's love."⁴⁵

The *Message to the People of God* of the Synod of Bishops in 2012 on the *New Evangelization for the transmission of the faith* points us in the same direction:

"It is up to us today to render experiences of the Church concretely accessible, to multiply the wells where thirsting men and women are invited to encounter Jesus, to offer oases in the deserts of life. Christian communities and, in them, every disciple of the Lord, are responsible for this: an irreplaceable

⁴² *Christifideles Laici* 2.

⁴³ *Foundations*, 5:16.

⁴⁴ *The Interior Castle*, VII, 1:4.

⁴⁵ www.carmelodotolo.eu/vocazione_laico_in_chiesa_oggi.html (p. 3).

testimony has been entrusted to each one, so that the Gospel can enter the lives of all. This requires of us holiness of life."⁴⁶

In Carmel we have an immense wealth in the writings of our saints: they are an inexhaustible well that inspires so many lives and leads us to communion with the Triune God who lives in each of us. Teresa's response of faith led her into communion with the Mystery of the Trinity:

"The soul knows in such a way that what we hold by faith, it understands, we can say, through sight—although the sight is not with the bodily eyes nor with the eyes of the soul, because we are not dealing here with an imaginative vision. Here all three Persons communicate themselves to it, speak to it, and explain those words of the Lord in the Gospel: that He and the Father and the Holy Spirit will come to dwell in the soul that loves Him and keeps His commandments." ⁴⁷

But she tells us that the fruit of prayer is the realization of works. The Church asks us for a New Evangelization through works because "the love shown to those in spiritual and material need, which is expressed in works of fellowship, solidarity and assistance, speaks louder than words." ⁴⁸

As our holy Mother in her own time, doing "the little within her power," ⁴⁹ the question that she asks of the Lord must apply to each of us: "***What do You want of me?***"

What can I do to improve "the little within my power" in my community, my family, my work?

CONCLUSION

Dear brothers and sisters, among the many fruits that will certainly proceed from this Congress, I ask especially that it may prompt us to advance on the path of friendship and union with Christ, in fraternal communion, in truth, humility, and love of neighbor. May the experiences and reflections which have taken place during this Congress help you to grow as people, as Christians, and as Teresian Carmelites. May they be lived with faith, for "faith commits every one of us to become a living sign of the presence of the Risen Lord in the world"⁵⁰.

May Our Lady of Mount Carmel, our Mother and Sister, intercede for us and teach us to do what Jesus teaches us.

Thank you very much!

Fr. Francisco Alzinir Debastiani, OCD

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⁴⁶ http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20121026_message-synod_it.html (no. 3).

⁴⁷ *The Interior Castle*, VII, 1:6.

⁴⁸ *Instrumentum Laboris*, The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith, n. 124.

⁴⁹ *The Way of Perfection*, 1:2.

⁵⁰ *Porta Fidei* 15.