

Communications N. 292

28/05/2015

Special Edition

Interview with the ocd Superior General, Father Saverio Cannistrà

This past May 7, the General Chapter reelected you to the office of Superior General. At the moment of election, what did you feel?

Saint Paul says that the desires of the flesh are opposed to the desires of the Spirit. I have lived some of that within myself. I do not hide the desire I had of fleeing tiredness, the fear of not having enough strength for another six years of service, the temptation to take my life back into my own hands. But above all that, a basic logic prevailed: if six years ago I said “yes” because I saw in the election by the brothers, an expression of the will of God, I cannot behave in a different way now. Therefore, I ended up by accepting this new call with much peace.

After six years of governance of the Order, I imagine you face this challenge in a different way than six years ago. How can the experience you have gained help you?

In effect, today I see the work that awaits me from a different perspective. The point is to try to continue the work already begun with a better understanding of the difficulties that will arise as well as the reasons that motivate us to carry it out.

It is clear that one cannot make a global assessment of the Order without considering the characteristics of each circumscription. However, if you would permit me, I would like to ask about the Order in general terms. How is its health?

The order is alive and has a richness and fertility of which perhaps we are not fully aware. I would almost respond with the words of Jesus in the Gospel of John: the Order is fruitful, but precisely because of that, it needs to be pruned and nurtured so that it will bear more fruit.

In old Europe, the vocational crisis is a challenge. From the Discalced Carmel, how is that challenge met?

There are, naturally, different reactions in the face of this crisis. In my point of view, the healthiest reaction is to work on what depends on us, as Saint Teresa said: to do that little bit which depends on us, which in reality is not such a little thing, since it means trying to live deeply, within the circumstances of today’s world, our vocation of prayerful and fraternal communities. As far as we are able to do this work in ourselves, I am sure that we will also be capable of facing and overcoming the crisis that religious life in the western world is undergoing.

Without a doubt, the message of the Carmelite Saints help us do that.

Yes, our “reality,” that is, our relevance in the world, actually depends precisely on the specificity of our charism. Rereading the works of Saint Teresa has made us discover, I believe, that many of our problems have their answers in the experience of a woman who lived five centuries ago. They are not answers provided as an afterthought; they are original; they oblige us to dig deep into ourselves and into our way of living as individuals and as communities.

Conversely; the Order is growing elsewhere ...

Yes, the growth of the Order is heady, especially in Africa and some parts of Asia. And in other regions it has, in any case, a good atmosphere and a particular stability.

Certainly, it is a challenge to reach the youth. How can that be carried out in this society in which their attention is claimed by so many messages?

I think the first thing that must be done is to listen attentively to the young people; listen in depth, beyond the first superficial impressions that their manner of speaking or communicating calls up in us who are more advanced in age. I see clearly that when a religious has this capacity of empathizing, the young people notice him or her, or respond with greater interest and openness.

Changing the subject. The relationship with the Discalced Carmelite nuns has been the focus of several days of the General Chapter. You have dedicated several documents on this topic over the last six years. What steps will be taken in the next six years?

The presence of our Carmelite sisters for two days of the Chapter has not only been an act of courtesy; it has been a genuine encounter that has given place to a true dialogue in which convergences and divergences have come to light. In the end, the sisters have invited us to continue this exchange, most especially in the face of a common work toward permanent formation which is, in my opinion, one of the most important challenges in contemplative life.

As in the case of the Discalced Carmelite nuns, the seculars have also been heard in the Chapter. Yet another challenge for these six years ...

We dedicated one day of the Chapter to the OCDS, with the participation of some members from different countries. The reality of the secular Carmelite is very varied. To belong to the Secular Order has very different implications based on regions and cultures. I believe, however, that in all of them the challenge of seriously taking up the responsibilities proper to secular members of the Carmelite family is present. It is necessary that seculars find their own, specific way of living the different dimensions of the Carmelite charism, which is obviously different from the way a community of friars or nuns lives them.

We spoke previously about how to reach lay youth. Now I will refer to those under formation. Specifically, about the importance of the formative stage.

We have to persevere a lot on human and Christian formation if we do not want Carmelite formation to be some type of superficial varnish. It is necessary, in a way, to find the Teresian Carmelite style of forming the person in a human and Christian way. I am convinced that in the charismatic heritage of the Teresian Carmel there are sufficient elements to engender this

process of maturation on the levels of self knowledge and relationship with the Lord Jesus, and to assume the commitments proper to religious life.

I am not forgetting ongoing formation. There is also a journey to undertake regarding that.

We have to distinguish between permanent formation and being up to date. Sometimes we confuse those two things. Permanent formation is what I prefer to call “self care” – caring for our own vocation, our own soul, our own being. Its opposite is *acidia*, which etymologically means precisely: neglect of oneself. In this sense, permanent formation is a personal commitment that is carried out day by day on the occasions that arise during our personal experience of ordinary life (prayer, community, work). Putting oneself up to date is a different matter which implies a commitment to study, read, and inform oneself. During the last six years we began projects of this type, organizing Biblical-spiritual formation courses in Stella Maris (Haifa) and formation for formators, community leaders, and spiritual directors in India. The Chapter has requested that these projects continue during the upcoming six years.

Focusing now on the General Chapter. In your closing document “es hora de caminar” (it is time to walk, to be underway) you extend an invitation to reread the Constitutions. In summary, what is the main objective of this rereading?

We have decided to begin rereading our *Constitutions* to give continuity to the journey of the past six years with the reading of the works of Saint Teresa. We do not want to turn the page. Instead, we want to continue asking ourselves the question, “what kind of persons ought we to be” as sons of Saint Teresa. From that premise, our rereading of the *Constitutions* has as its goal the comparison of our life today with the model set forth in the *Constitutions*. On one hand, that means examining our life in the light of the *Constitutions*; on the other, it means reviewing the *Constitutions* in view of the experience lived by religious and communities in the last 30 or 40 years. There have been great changes. It seems to us that the moment has come to try to answer many of the questions those changes pose.

During the Chapter there was also much talk about the ocd missions. The missionary spirit of Saint Teresa lives. In these next six years, how will help for the missions be channeled from the Generalate?

We have to work on several levels. First of all, we have to define more clearly what we mean by mission in order for all of us to feel that we are involved in this commitment to be missionaries and evangelize, which, as Teresian Carmelites, is part of our being. Pope Francis is strongly exhorting the entire Church to come out of itself, avoiding the risks of closing itself up and of self-absorption. Then there is a very concrete problem that refers to economic support for the new missions. I am very happy that the Chapter has opted for the “communion of goods,” choosing to create a fund to help the missions which will be administrated by the Generalate. I hope we can respond, at least in part, to the many requests for help we receive.

Another important aspect is communication. In your presentation on the state of the Order, you used the word “communicate” many times. How are we lacking in this area and how can we walk together to improve it?

Communication is an essential dimension of human life, and even more so of life in community. Sometimes we spiritualize the concept of community a bit. We speak of communion and thereby exempt ourselves from the commitment to incarnate the gift of

communion in a concrete experience of communication. Communication is above all, that which is lived with the brothers who surround us. Today we run the risk of communicating over distance too often, in a virtual manner, and too little with those who are nearby. Communication implies many things: capacity to listen, capacity to express oneself, trusting the other, committing to the relationship. These are all values we should center on if we truly want to be brothers who know each other and are friends, such as Saint Teresa wanted.

We conclude this interview by asking you for a message for all the Teresian Carmelite Family.

I find no better message than the one we have chosen as the title of the Chapter document, “es tiempo de caminar” (it is time to walk, to be underway). We cannot stay still; we cannot allow ourselves to be blocked by fears or false security. We have to begin a journey through the Church and today’s world placing our trust and hope not in ourselves, but in the Lord who has promised to walk with us. It is time to walk, to be underway, but knowing that “let us both go together, Lord.”