



FINAL MESSAGE OF THE GENERAL CHAPTER OF THE BROTHERS OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY OF MOUNT CARMEL 2019

“You are my witnesses” (Is. 43:10)

From one generation to the next: called to be faithful to our Carmelite charism

We, Carmelite Friars, gathered in General Chapter at *Il Carmelo*, Sassone, Italy (10-27 September 2019), from all over the world, greet our brothers and sisters of the Carmelite Family: grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

A global Order

We rejoice in our coming together as brothers in Carmel. The general Chapter is the principal sign of the unity of our Order, in all its diversity. It is the fraternal gathering in which we listen to the Holy Spirit and our Lord Jesus Christ, so as to know God’s will for this generation so that we best serve the Church (cf. Const. 255). Every Chapter is, as our brother Archbishop Filippo Iannone reminded us, an ecclesial event.

In his address, Carmelite Archbishop Antonio Muniz challenged us with a question from our own tradition. He helped us to hear the Lord’s question to Elijah, ‘What are you doing here?’ as one addressed to members of the Chapter: ‘What are you doing here, Carmelites?’ In the following days we attempted with the help of the Holy Spirit to give an answer to this question. As a truly universal gathering, unity in diversity has been very evident at this Chapter. While varying parts of the Order experience a decline in membership, many parts of the Order are experiencing steady growth. In the balance, demographic studies show a strong future for the Order.

We have rejoiced in the presence of many brothers from the emerging areas of the Order, grateful to the ever-creative Holy Spirit, to our missionaries, past and present, and to the founding provinces for their far-sightedness and generosity. The diversity in our Chapter has enriched our discussions and deliberations, our fraternity, and our prayer.

Passing on the tradition

Through talks, personal reflection, and group sharing over our days together, we have reflected on the theme of the Chapter, passing on the tradition from one generation to the next. We thank God for the charism and rich tradition that have been handed down to us throughout our history. We recognize, however, that “Tradition is alive as long as it is being passed on from one generation to the next” (from the talk of Fr Michael Casey OCSO to the Chapter). This responsibility challenges us to a deeper knowledge and more enthusiastic living out of our tradition. We cannot pass it on to new generations unless we own it, interiorize it, and make it our way of life. As the summary of the answers to the

Instrumentum laboris presented by the Preparatory Commission of the Chapter attests, we ourselves are aware that “There is a gap between the Carmelite ideal we are called to live and the reality of our lives.”

In addition, the reports by members of the outgoing General Council drew our attention to the urgency of prioritizing formation, both initial and ongoing. This awareness was echoed throughout our discussions. It has been emphasised that Carmelite formation cannot be limited to the novitiate but must be continued steadily all through the initial formation process and throughout our life. We often speak of formation as being our priority but for this to be so, concrete and clear decisions have to be taken.

The theme of passing on the tradition was amply and profoundly developed by Fr Saverio Cannistrà, superior general of the Discalced Carmelites, in a talk that he gave on the day dedicated to the Carmelite Family. Fr Saverio insisted particularly on the need for formation not to be limited to passing on concepts and information. It should aim, above all, at transmitting a life-style. It should transform hearts, not only minds. This can only be done by religious and communities who have truly made Christ the centre of their lives and radiate, often unknowingly, their experience of Him. Formation takes place in sincere personal dialogue between the formator and the person in formation, in the meeting of the questioning heart of the person in formation with the experience of a disciple who has been on the way of following Christ already for some time. In this encounter of two spiritual experiences both are enriched as each continues to grow in discipleship.

The Chapter affirmed that community is essential to our Carmelite way of life. Our communities are called to be a counter-cultural sign of hope to a fragmented and highly individualistic world. Despite our diversity on many levels we witness to the possibility of forming community. This is especially true in the case of international communities. The Chapter encourages the formation of more international communities within the Order. We discussed the number of Carmelites needed to have a healthy community, a community capable of sustaining a regular structure of liturgy, community meetings, and common meals. The suggested number of members for a community varied, but the concern for a vital community was shared by all. The Chapter encourages all communities to take the renewal of their quality of life seriously, working on the building up of truly fraternal relationships.

Tradition ever-new

In his talk to the Chapter, Fr Michael Casey OCSO discussed the dynamism of tradition. We are aware that

Tradition remains itself by constantly changing. It is ever new, yet it loses nothing of what it was. Tradition is a process of on-going re-formation of whatever is received in accordance to the emergent situation. Re-formation is not an occasional necessity; it is an integral component of the

process. The shape of this re-formation is not determined exclusively by what has previously existed; it is a response to new challenges.

The various reforms that have enriched our tradition witness to this development of tradition. But so does the publication of new constitutions and their revision throughout our history. At this Chapter, after much reflection and discussion, we have approved revisions to the 1995 Constitutions in order to update them in accordance with the more recent documents of the Church and the Order. Also, revisions were needed to address new situations and challenges that the Order is facing in today's world.

We thank the commission which over the past six years worked on the preparation of proposed revisions of the Constitutions. We hope that we all become familiar with the revisions which have been approved at the Chapter, so that they truly become guidelines for the Order.

New conditions in our world

The dialogue between our tradition and the context in which we live is particularly urgent in the new cultures in which the Order is now present, but it is not limited to them. As we enter a new period of history, inspired by the Spirit at work in every age and in the Church, we seek to adapt our way of life to new conditions.

Our world is rich in possibility and in opportunities. It is in a state of constant growth and evolution, but it is also full of contradictions, yet we rejoice in the accomplishments that are achieved within the world. We seek to understand the signs of the times and to examine them in the light of the Gospel, of our charism, and of our spiritual heritage, so that we may incarnate this way of life in different cultures (Cons. 13).

In the face of prevailing injustice, of violence, of abuse, of the rejection of those who are different, of the degradation of the environment, we all need to return to believing in solidarity, standing for the truth, and risking our own comfort. We were saddened to hear about the suffering of the people of Venezuela and Congo and moved to respond with concrete acts of solidarity. Similarly, in revising the Constitutions and issuing a decree, the Order strengthened its commitment to maintain safe environments for minors and vulnerable adults. In her inspiring talk, Professor Bruna Costacurta reminded us that the prophetic testimony we are called to give, in imitation of Elijah (1 Kgs 19:5), arises as a bulwark against the temptation to slumber or admit defeat.

As Fr Casey challenged us, in order to be prophetic, we need to shake off the constraints of capitalism, consumerism, and exploitation. "But there is more. We need to allow the grace of our charism to flourish and bear fruit in our individual and corporate lives. To be what we are meant to be in the midst of banal everyday realities."

Mystical dimension

Over the course of our Chapter we emphasized the need to achieve a balance in our charism. During the day of recollection before electing our new leadership, our sister of the Dutch Province Anne-Marie Bos reminded us that Bl. Titus Brandsma received the Carmelite tradition, studied it, loved it, and interiorized it. He lived it out in a very personal and creative way, remaining a true contemplative in a very active life.

Bl. Titus understood mysticism as a call directed to all and spoke of an everyday mysticism, convinced that God is the ground of our being and can be encountered always and everywhere and especially in our neighbour. He is a model of the new synthesis of the elements of our charism that each generation is called to make in order to keep our tradition alive and relevant. The example of Bl. Titus also spurs us to share our tradition with all.

In his message to the Chapter members and representatives of the Carmelite family, newly elected Prior General, Fr Míceál O’Neill, spoke of the beauty of Carmel:

The name Carmel conjures attractive and fascinating images of mountain, loving encounter, fraternity and justice. It suggests beauty, and dwells on what is most essential in the life of the human person. Carmel has a way of speaking about God that helps people to know more and more that the Lord is our God, there is no other, and we are to love God with all our heart and mind and strength and our neighbour as our selves. There is a beauty in Carmel that can inspire us. We have a feeling that Carmel might be the very thing that people everywhere are seeking today.

Pope Francis’ message

In an audience with Pope Francis, Carmelites were encouraged to seek the face of the living God through prayer, fraternity, and service. The Pope identified what he called “three lines of action” for the Order:

Fidelity and contemplation

The Pope reminded us that when the Church thinks of Carmel she thinks of a school of contemplation. Carmelites need a personal relationship with the Lord, nurtured through solitude, contemplation, and detachment. This Carmelite way allows

Carmelites to serve God’s people in any ministry or apostolate. It calls us to give particular attention to the spiritual journey of people.

Accompaniment and prayer

The Pope quoted Saint Mary Magdalene de’ Pazzi who warned about the danger of routine and “lukewarmness”. We have to live more “inside” ourselves in order to be able to go “outside” and accompany people in their journey to God. Serenity and joy should be hallmarks of our work with the people.

Tenderness and compassion

Especially, we need tender and compassionate hearts in order to remain sensitive to the sufferings of people around us. When we are not faithful in our interior life, we may no longer see this suffering. The Pope quoted Bl. Angelo Paoli who said, “Whoever loves God must seek him in the poor.” And Pope Francis said tenderness “in the style of Jesus” will keep us away from “pseudomysticism”, and “weekend solidarity” which tempts us to stay away from the sufferings of the Christ’s body. “The wounds of Jesus are visible today in the bodies of our brothers and sisters who are stripped, humiliated and enslaved.”

Carmelite Family

On one of the last days of the Chapter we had the joy of welcoming among us various members of the Carmelite Family, both religious and lay, and listening to some of them as they shared their experience of witnessing to the Carmelite charism.

The Prior General asked us to consider what it is that brings us together as a family:

People in all different sectors of the Carmelite Family recognize in themselves the values of the Carmelite Family and identify themselves as Carmelites in their lives today. The Carmelite in me, speaks to the Carmelite in you, resonates with the Carmelite in you and because of this resonating of the gift of the Holy Spirit, people draw close to one another, want to be nourished by one another and want to shape their lives together in accordance with this gift.

Journeying in hope

We would like to end our message by sharing with you, our brothers and sisters, the challenge posed to us by Archbishop José Rodríguez Carballo, OFM, secretary of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. In his homily to the Chapter, drawing from the story of the prophet Elijah in 1 Kgs 19, Carballo called us to follow the three divine injunctions addressed to Elijah: Get up, eat, and journey on. We cannot surrender to discouragement, but we need to get up in hope, convinced that God is still at work in Carmel, in the Church, and in the world even in these difficult times.

Nourished by the Word of God, by the Eucharist and the sacraments, we continue our journey, faithful to our Carmelite identity and to the Church, ever ready to continue our witness.

May Mary, our mother and sister, Star of the Sea, show us the way and journey with us, as we continue to live in allegiance to Jesus Christ, her Son, and transmit from one generation to another the joy of living the Gospel in the Carmelite way of life.

Issued on this, the 27th day of September 2019, at *Il Carmelo*, Sassone, Italy