

CENTENARY of the FORMULA VITAE LETTER FROM THE OCARM-OCD SUPERIORS GENERAL

" I kneel before the Father... that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being"

(Ephesians 3:14-16)

1. Introduction

Ten years ago, we celebrated the 750th anniversary of the definitive approval of the Carmelite Rule by Pope Innocent IV with a letter to all members of the Carmelite family.

With this message, we once again address all the different branches of our Family to remember the eighth centenary of the *Formula Vitae*, written by St. Albert, Patriarch of the Church of Jerusalem (1205-1214) for the hermits who lived *near the Fountain (of Elijah) on Mount Carmel*. We have chosen 2007 as the year to symbolise the *treditio* (which occurred sometime between 1206 and 1214) of this *formula vitae* which, with a few changes, became the Rule which we profess today. That initial group of hermits gave life to a varied and rich history, which produced abundant fruit of generosity and productiveness for the Church.

2. Living memory of the origins

All Carmelites can say that *our roots are on the holy mountain*.¹ We also listen to the words of St. Teresa of Jesus: *Fix your eyes always on the ancestry from which we come, those holy prophets. How many saints we have in heaven who wore this habit. Let us adopt the holy presumption that with the Lord's help, we will be like them*.²

Dear brothers and sisters, we wish to symbolically call you to the foot of the holy mountain, to join the multitude of witnesses who, in these eight centuries, have received spiritual vitality from those same springs, to renew the pact of faithful service and total obedience to Jesus Christ. Our Rule is, indeed, a wonderful source of new life.

3. 'In Obedience to Jesus Christ'

The *Formula Vitae* is an expression of the spiritual experience of the first group of pilgrims, who became hermits at the Fountain of Elijah on Mount Carmel; it proclaims the presence of, and living union with Jesus Christ, He to whom we submit our lives in an intimate and lasting friendship. The charismatic identity of Carmel stems from this daily contact with Christ.

Our Rule offers, from the beginning, a life in allegiance to Jesus Christ, and everything that follows is simply a working out of this affirmation: Christ is the centre of the Rule, and of all Carmelite life. Listening to His voice, we willingly offer our freedom and life to the only Lord and Saviour, who gives them back to us in abundance (cf. John 10:10). *Obsequium* is an act of obedient listening, and *living in obedience to Jesus Christ*. It means confessing, in daily life, that *Jesus is Lord* (cf. Romans 10:9), in the awareness that only He can set us free and fills us with His own life. The mystery of Jesus reveals to men and women of all times the profound sense of their own existence.

Answering the call of Christ inevitably becomes a path of transformation in which we become a new creation, and He shows us how to see and love Creation just as God sees and loves it. It takes, without a doubt, a lot of courage and tenacity to pursue these objectives, as the path can sometimes be tortuous and difficult. However, with the testimony of so many Carmelites, with the example of the Prophet Elijah, faithful even in the desert, we are encouraged and driven towards the mount of glory. Mary, our Mother and Sister in faith, who has always accompanied the Carmelites from within, is with us at every moment and watches over us on this path to Christ, Lord.

4. 'At the centre...'

The Rule lays down that an oratory be built in the midst of the cells (Rule 14): every morning each of us is called to *gather* for the celebration of the Eucharist. Carmelites leave their cells and meet at the centre of the hermitage, in a gesture which symbolises a spiritual journey. As members of the community, they leave the isolation of their cells to come together at the centre of their communal activities. The oratory, positioned among the cells, signifies that only Christ the Lord is the true centre of each person, and of the community. This recalls the life of the original Christian community (Acts 2:42, 4:32), which has always been considered the model and pattern of consecrated life.

This daily gathering is like a call to come out from the solitude of the cell, and the dangers of self-sufficiency, to find God in the heart of the community. The space and time dedicated to the search for God in the solitary and contemplative silence of the cell should not stop Carmelites from engaging in relationships with others. The two realities must be interconnected in order for each to be authentic. The fruit of all religious experiences, in fact, is seen in the way we share them with others.

The centre of the *Interior Castle* of St. Teresa of Jesus is where the intimate meeting between God and the human person takes place³. The goal of the inner journey is to reach this centre of ourselves where Christ dwells. This involves overcoming numerous difficulties and temptations. On this subject, the Rule employs the biblical image of the spiritual battle and spiritual weapons, which are chastity, holy thoughts, justice, love of God and one's neighbour, faith, trust in the Saviour and the word of God. The Rule and the Bible remind us that this spiritual battle takes place inside ourselves. With prayer, silence, work and evangelical self-denial, we learn to know the areas of our life which need protection, and to trust in the Lord (Rule 18, 19, 20, 21).

5. 'You shall gather every day for Mass...' (Rule 14)

The hermit's day begins with the daily celebration of Eucharist, the memory of the Passover of the Lord. The precept of a daily celebration of Eucharist is not commonly found for hermits. The first Carmelites, however, understood the importance of this mystery for their lives, and it would be so for the next eight centuries: coming together and communion with Christ are a central moment of Carmelite spiritual life.

Among the many examples known to us, we can cite that of St. Teresa of Jesus, who maintained that a foundation was not complete unless Mass was first celebrated and Sacrament reserved in the tabernacle.

Almost all of the ecstasies of St. Mary Magdalene de'Pazzi occurred after Communion, and Blessed Titus Brandsma, when he was beaten in the concentration camp of Dachau, took strength from the Blessed Sacrament, which he kept in his glasses' case.

The Eucharist is the centre of our prayer, the mystery of Christ crucified on the cross, risen from the dead and living among us once again. It is the eschatological celebration of the divine gift of peace, to be shared with all.

6. 'Meditate day and night...' (Rule 10)

The Rule invites us to find Jesus Christ in his Word. We *live alone in the cells* to allow Him to speak to our hearts (cf. Nicholas the Frenchman, *Fiery Arrow*).

Meditation on the Lord's law and watchful prayer are two moments of *Lectio divina*: meditation and prayer fill the entire day.

The reading of the Bible is followed by pondering (*ruminatio*) and repetition, so that the words are well rooted in the mind, heart and mouth. (Rule 19) It is however the Spirit that gives us a taste for things spiritual, and the gift of contemplation: *we inhabit the Word so that the Word inhabits us. We live in Christ, but Christ by our faith lives in us.*⁴ (Rule 10 and 19) The invitation to remain in the cell, although referring initially to physical solitude, above all means spiritual solitude, because solitude is inhabited by Christ, the Word of the Father. The life of a Carmelite is a *life in Christ* (Rule 18).

Personal and communal prayer enables us to hear the voice of God, and to see His face in that of others. The solitude of the cell, and above all of the *intimate being of the soul*⁵ is the place where our hearts can be in tune with the heart and voice of God.

7. 'The word of God must abound in your mouths and hearts' (Rule 19)

This is a reference to the biblical word and, in a deeper sense, to the redeeming will of the Lord, and above all to the mystery of Christ, the only Word of the Father, heard in the *inner silence, in silent music, in resonant solitude*⁶. The Word becomes comfort and strength for the prophet Elijah, burning with passion for God, defeating the depression and surrender within him. Thus could he serve the people, remain faithful to the covenant and continue to care for the weak and oppressed.

St. John of the Cross says: *The Father spoke one Word, which was His Son, and this Word He always speaks in eternal silence, and in silence he must be heard by the soul*⁷. *In giving us His Son, His only Word, for he possesses no other, He gave everything to us at once in this single Word, and He has no more to say.*⁸

The Rule wishes us to be *hearers of the Word*, like Mary, icon of our *lectio divina* and true patron: *Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart* (Luke 2:19). She placed herself entirely at the service of Jesus and at the plan of God with words which sum up her whole life: *Behold the servant of the Lord.* (Luke 1:38)

This single Word continues to speak to us today in the depths of our conscience and faith; it continues to speak to us from the depths of the events and the tribulations of humanity.

8. 'In silence and in hope is your strength' (Rule 21)

Our *formula vitae* combines *silentium* with hope, inasmuch as this can also mean *rest, calm, tranquillity*, attitudes which are based on a faithful submission to God, and are connected to hope. The Carmelite Rule requires solitude (Rule 5, 6, 10), and prescribes silence and peace (Rule 21), the education of the intellectual and imaginative faculties by means of holy "thoughts" and, we can add, images and holy symbols (Rule 19): all this gives inner strength.

We note in our time, with pleasure, signs of attention to and a widespread need for these spiritual gifts, and Carmel, strengthened by its ancient tradition and testimony, is able to take these needs and make them bear fruit.

All that is asked is the courage of a creative faithfulness to the charism which we carry inside of us, so that the Spirit of the Lord may continue to operate even in a sick and wounded world.

Hope is the strength of the Spirit which touches each person, but also the important events of history, fulfilling God's secret design for humanity. Christians have a vocation to hope, for themselves and for the world. They cultivate justice in truth and they never allow themselves to be overwhelmed by ideologies, propaganda or empty words. We try to view the reality in which we live with the eyes of God. Listening to the Word of God transforms thoughts, aids discernment and reinforces personal conviction. Even in the darkness of life, the last word of history is not one of death, but of God's grace in the fullness of the Resurrection.

9. 'On the paths of the world' (Rule 17)

A relationship with Jesus Christ is the defining influence on the spiritual life of the consecrated religious, and indeed of all the faithful, and for this reason we wish to underline the importance the universal call to holiness. Our experience as Carmelites, marked by our intimacy with God, on one hand expresses a great passion for the Church, and on the other, an attentive and generous consideration of the individual. Our Saints hand down to us this double mission, which is the result of a mystical experience, that enlarges the heart and makes the proclamation of the Word efficacious.

St. Teresa of Jesus is prepared to give her life a thousand times for a single soul, encourages the sisters to pray, and tries to *inspire them with love for the wellbeing of souls*. Their life in the Carmel is for the Church and for humanity.⁹

For St. Thérèse of Lisieux, Doctor of the *Science of Love* and patron saint of missions, the vocation to love in the heart of the Church-mother is one of the most astonishing and decisive discoveries of her personal sanctity.

Carmelite prayer is apostolic. It is compassion and the impulse to give the wealth which comes from a relationship with God to others, particularly to the very young and the poor. Sharing the gifts of Carmelite spirituality contributes towards the building up of the world of God's children. The God we contemplate is the one who hears the cry of the poor, and becomes their defender. (Exodus 2:21, 3:7; Psalms 113:7). Today the world needs hope and transformation, and we can help to build it up in the strength of the Spirit.

Pope Benedict XVI reminds us that we can love *in God and with God even the person whom I do not like or even know. This can only take place on the basis of an intimate encounter with God, an encounter which has become a communion of will, even affecting my feelings. Then I learn to look on this other person not simply with my eyes and my feelings, but from the perspective of Jesus Christ*¹⁰.

It is thus that a passion for Christ inevitably becomes also passion for mankind, from the moment that He came to save all humanity, regardless of culture, race or language. The Spirit of Jesus, received in contemplative silence, gives us freedom and urges us to leave behind the securities of life and go to our brothers and sisters who are in need of hope.

10. *Enlarge the site of your tent* (Isaiah 54:2). Fraternity (Rule 4, 5, 7, 9, 12)

The *formula vitae* is addressed to "B and the other hermits" (Rule 1). Jesus Christ is the reason for their being together, and is also the motive of their voluntary obedience to a brother, who they accept as the guide of their life plan. This looks to the future, though inspired on the past: to the fathers of the Church (*sancti Patres*) (Rule 1), to the Church of Jerusalem, through its Patriarch, and by it to all churches and to those who *come to us* (Rule 9), until the Lord returns.

We do not walk alone, but together with our brothers and sisters we seek the face of the living God. These are the great saints who illuminate Carmel and the Church, and all those with whom we share life today, finding in their communion the strength and the joy of the charism.

11. 'With the prophet, let him watch his ways...' (Rule 21)

Together with so many witnesses from the past who are a source of inspiration to us, the Spirit has given us in more recent times great prophet-martyr figures in the context of the significant events in human history: Bl. Titus Brandsma, who encouraged the communication of freedom and of the truth and took a stand against racism; St. Edith Stein who spoke up for women's dignity, the intelligent quest for truth and fostered the relationship between Judaism and Christianity; other Carmelites, martyrs, missionaries and proclaimers of the faith and the love of God. Carmel's contemplative attitude has often led to a direct participation in the fate of many brothers and sisters in the bitter trials of life. The theological silence of Carmel takes as its own *the joys and the hopes, the sadnesses and the anguishes* (*Gaudium et spes*, 1) of men and women of every age, to build a new and fairer world.

11. Conclusion

Carmel fascinates us with the beauty and splendour of Mary, the book *in which is written the Rule, because in Her is written the Word*.¹¹ The Rule is Jesus Christ, sole Word of the Father: in Mary we find its most perfect realisation. Disciple of Christ, Mary encourages the incarnation of the divine Word in us. This is what Blessed Elisabeth of the Trinity also longed for, as an incarnation of the Word in her soul.

The conviction that our Rule should be read in Mary and in her life dates back to the first Carmelite writings. The venerable Father Michael of St. Augustine writes: *Our Rule (that is, our way of life) "symbolises" with Mary, Mary is like the other part of the "symbol" which allows mutual recognition*.¹²

St. Thérèse of Lisieux, who rediscovered the heart of the Gospel, rediscovered at the same time the fact that Mary is more mother than queen, that her life is like ours, and for this reason she draws us to Jesus from within, in faith and in service¹³.

Celebrating these 800 years of Carmelite history, we express our gratitude to God for everything that His grace has brought about in the life of the Church.

We praise the Lord for all the saints, whether known or not, of our Family.

Remembering *our holy fathers*, we pray to be filled with love and passion for the Lord and that our Rule continues to inspire those who seek to live in obedience to Jesus Christ, in the living Carmelite tradition.

The memory of this eighth centenary is for us a call of grace to the joyous faith in the present moment of the Church and of humanity.

Faternally,

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(Prior General)

Luis Aróstegui Gamboa OCD
(Superior General)

NOTES

¹ Jean de Cheminot (1337), *Speculum Fratrum Ordinis B. Mariae de Monte Carmelo*.

² *Foundations* 29,33.

³ *Inner Castle* 1,3.

⁴ Cf. John 15:4-7; Galatians 2:20.

⁵ St. John of the Cross, *Canticle* 1,6.

⁶ *Canticle*, 14 and 15.

⁷ *Sayings of Light and Love*, 99.

⁸ *2 Ascent of Mount Carmel* 22,3.

⁹ *Way of Perfection*, 1,5; 3,4. *Foundations* 1,6 and 7.

¹⁰ Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, 18.

¹¹ *Constitutions of the Carmelites of the Monastery of St. Mary Magdalene*, Florence 1981, n. 22.

¹² *De Regula Carmelitarum*, in *Introductio ad vitam internam et fructiva praxis vitae mysticae*, Romae 1926, 183.

¹³ *Last Conversations*, 20-21 August