

AIMS OF THE SEXENNIUM

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1. In this first meeting with you, the Provincials, Superiors and Delegates from other circumscriptions of the Order, it seems right that I should first explain straightaway the aims of the sexennium, such as I personally conceived them and that we shared, however briefly, at the beginning of the Definitory's term of office.

In a way these aims are found in the Avila chapter document: *Journeying with St. Teresa of Jesus and St. John of the Cross. Return to the essentials* (2003). In effect, this document is the culmination of the work of the previous Fr. General and Definitory, in which the whole Order, thanks to the consultations, had a chance to take part in putting together the said chapter document, which then became the basic document of the new sexennium for everyone. In the practical section, there are resolutions that directly concern the Definitory, but it is clear that the entire document, at different levels, is the object of responsibility of the general government, which must try to put it into action.

We will deal later with the resolutions that particularly relate to the Definitory. For the moment it is important before all else to call your attention to two general aims, which we can also call spiritual, as they refer to cultivating a particular spirit; which is a way of being, feeling, living and working.

These two general aims are Communion and the Experience of God as an experience of the dignity of the human person.

1. Communion

We know that the Church's present self-understanding, i.e., of its message and the reality of Jesus, is to be communion and to create communion. It is an understanding expressed in the well known phrase of John Paul II: "To make the Church *the home and the 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" (NMI 43). Being united, in accordance with this self-understanding, religious life understands itself in *Vita Consecrata*. as a sign of communion in the Church (Chap. 2). "The fraternal life seeks to reflect the depth and richness of this mystery, taking shape as a human community in which the Trinity dwells" (41). "Consecrated persons are asked to be true experts of communion and to practice the spirituality of communion as "witnesses and architects of the plan for unity which is the crowning point of human history in God's design" (46). "The Church entrusts to communities of consecrated life the particular task of *spreading the spirituality of communion*, first of all in their internal life and then in the ecclesial community, and even beyond its boundaries, by opening or continuing a dialogue in charity, especially where today's world is torn apart by ethnic hatred or senseless violence" (51).

Clearly this understanding of our Christian faith remains the basis for our choices and decisions. This theology cannot then remain lifeless without motivating and influencing our thoughts on religious life and on what we have to do. However, when I speak of communion as an aim of this sexennium, I am referring to something in particular.

My experience of the past two years has confirmed for me the need to work on communion, which I now wish to explain to you.

There are two reasons I believe justify this need: one is historical and the second is the present reality.

1. The historical reason

The great division that arose after the death of our holy Mother Teresa of Jesus, is something we all know about. It concerned what was then called the "spirit", and today is called the "charism" of the Teresian Carmel. The division has had different interpretations, but I personally believe that it was something ultimately spiritual, which expressed the depth of our charism and its human and evangelical impact.

In order to recall and demonstrate the reality and size of the division, it is enough to underline the process and expulsion, and the subsequent negative attitude to the re-admission after the papal rehabilitation, of the Carmelite who was considered by Saint Teresa "perfect" in her eyes, i.e., "complete" or "ideal": Jerome Gracian of the Mother of God.

Another decisive factor in this split was the creation of the Italian Congregation, which took place after Gracian's expulsion, in two phases: 1597 and 1600. Thus there were two Congregations of the Carmel founded by Teresa of Avila, with different Constitutions, different superiors and different territories. The Spanish Congregation (of St. Joseph), even though it had an apostolate, had as its ideal a contemplative way of life, and intensified the eremitical element, with an "enclosed" and regular observance. The Italian Congregation, from the beginning (first Constitutions of 1599, not printed at the time) was much more open to an apostolate in both theory and practice. In a rapid evolution, supported by the Pope, the missions were recognized as the work of the charism.

However, this spiritual divergence was a phenomenon that remained at the deepest level. As can be seen by the fact that even within the Italian Congregation who's Constitutions and practice gave considerable room to the apostolate as an expression of charity to one's neighbour (as was envisaged in the first Constitutions). In spite of this, when Pope Paul V asked them to take part in a mission to Persia, they first felt compelled first to reflect and decide if the missions were really part of the charism of Carmel (1603-4, 1605). Even more surprising, after being committed to the missions for about three decades, the General Chapter of 1632, presided by the new General who had been a missionary from the beginning, returned to the question regarding the missions and whether or not they belonged to the Carmelite charism. However, there was certainly an element of pressure and influence from the Spanish Congregation and their more contemplative life-style. But the fact that the members of the Italian Congregation, who had already assumed the theory and practice of the missions, with the support and backing of the Pope, felt the need to have a new official decision, demonstrated the great divergence in spirit that existed and the slight anxiety that it created in among the friars, who nevertheless remained secure, vigorous and still joyful in their vocation.

It is known that the theologian of the Italian Congregation who defended the missions was the Venerable John of Jesus and Mary, considered justifiably, the formator of the Carmelites at the beginning of the Congregation. He was a mystical and humanist writer and a model of what he wrote. Of course he was not the only one. In fact, at the Chapter of 1605 and later 1632 all the chapter members were prepared to renounce their offices and go on the missions to express their conviction and missionary will. But the reasons they formulated were those found in the many writings of John of Jesus and Mary. I only wish to recall his argument that ended with the words: "Either we approve of the spirit of our Mother Teresa, or do we not approve of it. From this it follows that we either venerate her as foundress or we do not. Naturally, of course, not to approve of her spirit is dreadful; it would be to deny that she is our foundress, which would be extremely ungrateful. Well then, it is true that the blessed Teresa desired missionary work more ardently than she did martyrdom, and to that end she directed all her efforts and prayers, and those of her nuns, which is to say, those who work for the conversion of heretics may be crowned with

success. Who will deny that her intentions were fulfilled through her sons, the friars, which she could not do through her daughters" (*Tractatus*, c. 2, 11-12).

This is the basis of the argument that John of Jesus and Mary uses in his different writings, as well as other arguments from the Carmelite tradition. You should note here the novelty of the spirit of the charism as a criterion, which is the spirit of our mother foundress. This is something we today consider normal and take for granted, being based on the Church's self-understanding which has, in turn, been reflected in our Constitutions. There is no doubt that Teresa of Jesus was not accepted by everyone as the criterion for our charism, even though beatified, and though her writings and fame from the beginning of the 17th century had crossed boundaries.

It is known that the Spanish Congregation, as a consequence of the vicissitudes of history, ended up joining the Italian Congregation in 1875. Henceforth the only Constitutions of the one Order were those of the Italian Congregation, approved in 1632, and remained as such until the Second Vatican Council.

Today we have the renewed Constitutions following Vatican II, which certainly constitutes a document that the whole Order can own, with its doctrinal depth and assimilation of our charism.

However, experience suggests to me that we still have to advance in understanding and the assimilation our charism.

2. The present reality

The second reason is the present plurality following the extension of the Order and the different places where our charisma is now found.

The Order has grown as never before, extending into different continents, languages and cultures. This phenomenon means that we have to adapt how we understand and fulfill our charism so as to blend with these cultures and new ways of living and interpreting our charism. Besides this, there is no doubt that in today's world we are seeing a fragmentation in the way we perceive our cultural values. There is a plurality in the ways people understand values, and in our case, in the way we understand the charism of the Teresian Carmelites.

This is not a completely new phenomenon. Even in the Provinces that feel united under the one charism there is a diversity between a novitiate, a house of studies, a house of prayer, a mission, a parish where everyone has different jobs and tasks. It is a fact that in the past not everyone was able to incarnate our charism in the same way, in accordance with each situation. This is even truer today. In effect, we need to recognize that in the old way of living our charism, in spite of certain variations, the friars upheld a certain ideal way of living the common life, which was the criterion to which one had to strive; and sometimes this ideal was never expressed. It appears today that this concept of one ideal form of living our charism in community no longer really exists. But then, according to the cultures and different ways of seeing things, distinct ways of living our charism is understood as something to be valued. Therefore, diversity is not only conditioned by external values, but also by a different perception of different values, by which a particular way of living expresses something valuable in one mentality, but another, different, way a value in other mentality.

We should keep in mind that these factors are nuanced. Because no one pretends that the law is arbitrary and no one is suggesting that what is right for one is right for everyone, or that nothing really matters. For this reason we should always be searching for the authentic Gospel and spiritual values. But even when we look in general at the above factors they have a value in confirming the spiritual situation in the modern world.

For this reason, there is a concern for communion that has this situation, among other things, also in mind. Between a past on the one hand, which we have already talked about, which in fact lends itself to a deeper awareness and reflection, and a present day on the other, which is culturally multiform, we feel truly in communion as a family. I believe that if we are to have this communion then it is essential for it to be in the soul. When there are different ways of living the charism, the resulting spiritual union is more over-riding.

3. How do you achieve such a communion?

It would help to look at the experience of a normal family. In it the perception of being brothers and sisters depends on experience, on a positive awareness of the family, of living together and showing affection. It is something that endures for life, with the same parents, brothers and sisters. Such a family creates a human-spiritual bond between the brothers and sisters.

In our case, in a similar way, the dynamic union, communion, the feeling of being brothers and sisters of a charismatic family depends on our living together with the same friars. In the past the perception of belonging to the same spiritual community was made easier, and, to some extent, assured by a regular and common lifestyle. The common external forms, including even the way they thought, gave identity to the various religious Orders and Congregations. The way we lived was part of one's identity. And there certainly would have been a spiritual relationship with the forefathers and with the figures of the family history. This spiritual relationship was manifested in traditions and devotions which were expressions of the Carmelite family.

However, today more than ever, we should know and love our forefathers, and be familiar with their experiences, their lives and their teachings, not only to inspire our own spiritual life but also to create communion among ourselves, so that we are in fact a community of brothers. Again, more than ever, as I have already stressed, regarding the cultural differences that are not merely geographical, but also internal, and within societies, differences of religious expression, which barely allow for a common external identity or the same universal lifestyles. The external ways of living Carmelite life in community have fragmented. The issue is therefore, one of a vital awareness, of a spiritual experience, and not in the first place an awareness that is solely intellectual.

The charism which is the spiritual experiences of the Carmelite family is a living reality. Ours is a spiritual culture that can grow with the authentic spiritual life of the family, like a river that has new springs and tributaries. There can be no doubt that the distinguished figures of our history have enriched the charism and spirit of our family. They have inspired us and broadened our spiritual horizons. Teresa of Lisieux and Edith Stein are two examples of this. Not only these religious men and women who have been canonized or beatified but others too, who by their vision and teaching, their life and work, which has been creative and original, have opened new fields and horizons. The awareness of all this creates a spiritual family and strengthens its communion. At the same time, to be unaware of such things lessens and diminishes our horizons.

In general, the awareness of our history is truly helpful, because it increases our human horizons, our energy and depths, and today, more importantly than ever it revitalizes and strengthens our communion.

Finally, an awareness of the present situation of our brothers and sisters, of their intentions and fulfillments, is also important to feel part of the communion of the Order. In a healthy family each one respects the other, no one tries to interfere, or dominate, but rather is interested in the others, is happy, or suffers, and learns from the others, especially in a family that is spiritual.

The plurality that we experience today can be, and without doubt often is, enriching. It means that diversity can be experienced as something that belongs to us. If our mutual belonging should be something more than nominal, then we must take seriously our unity in diversity.

4. Conditions

A. A. Pluralism

This requires that plurality be recognized, that the Teresian Carmel is also a body with different members (like the body metaphor of St. Paul), and as such contains a rich unity, a communion.

B. Identity

Our Carmelite family has an identity, a spirit, and characteristics which are recognized by the members.

One characteristic is contemplation, a felt need to pray, not just theory but also existential, real, and something we naturally want to do (not something we feel is an obligation). And as everyone feels called, a calling that is interior, we know, instinctively, how to create ways and means to pray, as well as a suitable environment in the place where we find themselves, no matter what the circumstances.

A simple fraternity between brothers who are equal is also a characteristic of the Teresian Carmel. Though it reminds us of the lifestyle of the old hermits on Mt. Carmel, because they searched for contemplation and were generous in their capacity for sacrifice, nonetheless the Teresian Carmel has produced something new: a lifestyle of brotherliness and recreation, which together, constitute a "small college" gathered around Christ (this biblical image was an insight of St. Teresa, her theological intuition of our religious life!)

Love and service of the Kingdom sustains our Teresian Carmel. It is the prayer and mission of Jesus: "thy Kingdom come". And for this reason Carmelites feel from the beginning, as did St. Teresa our Mother, an "inclination" to pray, which was a gift to her from the Lord (a calling) and was as ardent as her need of prayer (understood as dedication). The stamp of the Teresian Carmelite is to have a clear sense of belonging to the Church, and a feeling for humanity in the eternal darkness (according to Teresa's imagery) until it produces tears and distress.

C. Three attitudes

The proper attitudes that I wish to share with you are at the same time conditions that make communion authentic, and are the result of a correct relationship with our historical charism, such as, for example, acceptance of plurality.

A Positive attitude: tends to see straightaway the positive aspects in whatever is new, or different, which can be questioned and, always asks what can be done, both from one's experience and from one's reading of scripture, to make the right response. This relates as much to the social, cultural or ecclesial situation as to the different experiences of the Carmelite charism.

An integrated attitude: has a feeling for what is essential and authentic, is aware of the whole picture, tending to see that what is different makes me whole, enriches me as a person, and it is what I myself should do as well as others. It is the mature fruit that sprouts from our Carmelite roots. The integrated spirit, therefore, is inclusive, coming to fulfillment in different fields and lifestyles of Carmelite life. It also affirms. It widens the horizons.

A creative attitude: he that has this vision of the charism has a creative attitude, is happy with new times and places. He is not obliged to repeat past ideas, is truly and sincerely open to new incarnations but also discerns from past experiences. The past that has been inspiring, becomes for him life-giving, it leads to the fullness of life, with joy and imagination.

In so far as we really try to assimilate in our formation (initial and on-going) these attitudes and visions, with an awareness, that is both loving and alive, of our great witnesses and the other witnesses, who have not been formally recognized by the Church, but who witnessed to Jesus, I believe that we will strengthen our communion from within. This common spirit is what we need today. If we have this spirit, in different circumstances, and are also happy with different kinds of vocation, we will be capable of living in such a way that our lives will be authentically inspired by the Teresian Carmelite charism, and we will feel united with other Carmelites by a strong interior spirit.

II. The experience of God as an experience of the dignity of the human person

Like communion that we have just dealt with, in its widest, and at the same time, specific sense, the present theme is not only an aim of the sexennium but a way that leads into the depths, which the whole of humanity must follow.

What does this mean? The Teresian Carmel is considered, though not exclusively, but perhaps in a particular way, as a sure place to experience of God. With this word "experience" we are referring in general to the presence, importance and experience of prayer that the Carmelite spiritual tradition offers to the Church. Prayer that unites us to the specific experience of God; from the God who lets himself be seen in the great Carmelite witnesses, to the God who relates through friendship and love, and also through faith and hope; which can be a hope against hope and a faith that is dark (as in the "nights" so much a theme in Carmelite writings).

Certainly, as our Constitutions and the Avila Document point out, leading people to this experience of God, above all in prayer, is a natural mission for Carmelites. This mission also includes, as expressed in the same Constitutions and Avila Document, and in other Documents of the Order, a commitment to a pastoral ministry especially that of spirituality.

For this reason I would now like to suggest that, today more than ever, perhaps, we need to explain always what an experience of God means (and then what does it mean to have a relationship with him, and also to explain what exactly is prayer). I would like to refer to the title of this section: the experience of God as an experience of the dignity of the human person.

The authentic experience of God (i.e., a real or true experience, which can be adequately expressed) has been of necessity an experience of the dignity of the human person. There is no dichotomy in Jesus, it cannot happen. But speaking of experience, and experience that is expressed, we happen to have in Carmel models of this unity.

I would like to refer to St. John of the Cross, as he was radically focused on God and on union with Him. He was deeply theological. In his writings, in the ways he expressed his spiritual journey, which we have inherited, we see that he is not concerned to show us the dignity of the human person, but rather the union of that person with God. Certainly, he could have also been concerned with other aspects, with those that concern the Church and ourselves. But being concerned vertically with our union with God, he makes an incomparable explanation of the dignity of the human person. His writings not only describe God, but also the human person. And what he writes is so elevated that a few of the faithful or even many do not believe him, do not believe that what he teaches is possible, that the human person can be so dignified, and his destiny, that these things really happen. Therefore the reader can be as cynical about God as he is about the human person. The person in John of the Cross is defined by a union of love with the Infinite. The person, as a subject of psychology or sociology as well as from our constant experience, seems to have little or nothing in common with the dignified person we find in John's writings. In order to perceive, therefore, something of the dignity of the human person we have, for example, the writings of St. John of the Cross, which is an inexhaustible treasure.

We spoke of an authentic experience. Today the difference is that this must be expressed explicitly, as much in one's own personal and community experience, as in pastoral communication, in a way that there is no place for a dichotomy. In such a dichotomy spirituality, the experience of God, does not speak about the human person, per se, nor the world or real life. This is, it is suggested, the work of other disciplines, and other minds, not spirituality. We should not doubt that if we do not speak of man as he is, then neither do we speak of God (as He really is).

Speaking of man and God, the document of Avila states quite appropriately: "The contemplative and prayer dimension of Carmel ought to be lived and presented as an opening to the transcendent, as a source of commitment and hope in efforts to transform the world, as a way for ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue according to the various social and cultural situations" (61). "Our communities, centered on God as the Absolute, should be *schools of prayer* which continue to transform their members into true contemplatives, capable of discovering God's intimate presence both in what happens in people and in our world, in what is positive and negative a God who questions us and pleads with us" (65). "Living and witnessing to *an experience of God* will take place in the midst of the challenges of each social, cultural and ecclesial environment. We need to give help in discovering God as a source of plenitude, as a liberator, as the God of hope, as a Father-Mother, as somebody always near" (ditto).

So today, as these references to the Avila Document have already suggested, spirituality must discover the dignity of the human person with all the consequences: it must be concrete, incarnate, historical, real, centered on the individual and at the same time social. It is the spirituality of the future Kingdom, which infused and fulfilled Jesus in the Sacred Scriptures. This spirituality is dangerous and includes persecution, to the very degree that is true of the Gospel. It is a spirituality that must transform the person and society.

We can be sure that this spirituality is a long road that never ends in this life. As I pointed out at the beginning, this theme is more than an aim of the sexennium it is a constant goal for the future. It is the awareness that our theology (what we say about God), and our prayer (what we say to God) have to make us more fully and truly human. But we see that it is necessary aim or objective, and as such it should be clearly seen. Like everything else, it is the duty of the whole Church; it is all part of the spreading of the Gospel of Jesus. All the same, we Carmelites, the first inheritors of a spirituality of outstanding witnesses, cannot exempt ourselves from this special duty, that affects the very soul of our experience as a family.

III. Formation

If the two above mentioned aims are more for a long duration, something for the future, for the present Definitory a concrete and immediate aim (though also something that will last long into the future) is Formation. It has been an aim since the beginning, in the planning of our visits, congresses and meetings. And this aim has been confirmed following the experience of our pastoral and fraternal visits and our better awareness of the state of the Order, with its hopes and problems.

The theme of formation is linked to communion, to which I have referred, and is also linked to the concept of prayer, spirituality and the mission of the Order. It should be seen in the context of those who leave the Order, which is one of the two themes we are to reflect on in this Extraordinary Definitory. We have no doubt that the reflection should conclude with the real and urgent conviction of the decisive importance of formation. It includes both Initial and on-going formation, and follows the lines of *Vita Consecrata*. We are content with the Order's expansion and are directing our energies to this end. But it seems to us to be even more important, if that's possible, to form those who are already Carmelites. We are referring to formation on a personal

as well as a community level. We have to take seriously the statement of the Council that the future of consecrated life depends on the formation of its members. Experience fully confirms this. I only wish to indicate here that formation as personal and community assimilation, besides manifesting in itself as over-riding, is also, and at the same time, the immediate practical aim that flows into the first two aims of communion and the experience of God.

It is certain that much as we carefully refine the means, this does not guarantee what will happen in the future. In the end we can only hope in the Lord. But in any case, formation, personal and community assimilation of the Gospel of Christ, the experience of Carmel, the personal and responsible response to new situations, has to grow out of our formation, so that it is both natural and familial and no longer depends on circumstances, but rather continues to be something that is always in the depths of our being.

Santiago, Chile, 4th October 2005.

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