



SUPERIOR GENERAL OF DISCALCED CARMELITES
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*...Straining ahead for what is still to come, we are
racing for the future,
for the prize to which God calls us upwards
to receive in Christ Jesus
(Phil 3,13-14)*

My Dear Brothers and Sisters of the Secular Order,

We have come to the conclusion of the sexennium 2015-2021, six years marked by joys, tribulations and so much hope. Now, on the threshold of our General Chapter, I want to thank the Lord for everything He has allowed us to experience and achieve, but also to thank each of you as you supported us with your prayer and solidarity. At the same time, I would like this letter to express my prayerful and affectionate closeness to all those who are sick and who have lost family members and friends during the pandemic or are suffering from situations caused by it. May the Lord strengthen and support you with His grace and faithful love.

1. In my letters to you during the past six years I have sought to underline various aspects of your OCDS life that I consider essential. I recall some of them here to keep our memories alive and avoid a characteristic flaw of our times, which Pope Francis refers to as “a growing loss of the sense of history, which leads to even further breakup” (Cf. *Fratelli tutti* [=FT] 13-14).

The OCDS letter in 2016 presented a report of the suggestions sent from the various Provinces as a contribution to the reflections of the 2015 General Chapter. They referred to the possibility of establishing an international Council of OCDS, further development in formation in the Teresian Carmelite charisma and an improvement in communications between OCDS and the Friars and Nuns. These are still valid suggestions and continue as on-going projects for the future. In 2017, we reflected on the manifold possible expressions of the mission of secular Carmelites. Mission is an essential factor in the OCDS vocation and is first and foremost the right and duty of every baptised and confirmed Christian. We note the necessity of a greater and more active collaboration of our secular members with the Friars and Nuns of the Order, where this is possible. According to his/her personal vocation everyone is called to promote the spiritual life as friendship with the Lord and this is manifested in specific works for the good of others. Then in 2018, I dealt with some particular aspects

of the identity of OCDS members. I made specific reference to the necessity of prayer and silence, being aware of the Lord dwelling within us (cf. *The Way of Perfection* 28,8-10) and overcoming the temptation of being satisfied with a sterile superficiality, exposed to mundane conditioning. The following year I insisted on the role of local and provincial Councils. It is in these that the vitality of the community/province becomes evident, in regard to fraternal care, formation and missionary witness. Insofar as I have been able to ascertain during this period of the pandemic, many provincial Councils have organised congresses and meetings on formation and prayer on line. Despite their limitations, these have proved invaluable in supporting and accompanying the members of their communities.

Lastly, in 2020 I recalled the 50th anniversary of the Doctorate of our Holy Mother Teresa and the 20th anniversary of the II international Congress of OCDS, referring to certain achievements but also pointing out the challenges that had still to be confronted in various provinces. This was a year marked by the spread of the Covid 19 pandemic. The upsets we have had and are still going through have allowed us to experience our extreme impotence and fragility. Let us grasp it as a precious opportunity of learning to adopt an attitude of humble and trusting hope in God's infinite love, certain that "His mercy is everlasting" (Psalm 136).

2. With regard to the general situation of the Secular Order, I report the following statistics (updated to 6 May 2021). The total number of members with promises (temporary and definitive) is 28.824, present in 92 countries. There are 775 canonically erected communities with an additional 341 groups or communities of formation. 97 communities have been canonically erected during the past six years. These are very significant data, not only registering the numerical increase of OCDS, but even more importantly, underlining its vitality and effectiveness.

3. I also wish to refer to some worries and perplexities regarding certain attitudes that are surfacing here and there among some members of OCDS. Particularly I refer to the emergence of polarizations and radicalizations. It appears that some characteristics of today's world have begun to penetrate our ranks. Pope Francis called them particularisms, populisms and fundamentalisms. If these are fostered "ancient conflicts thought long buried break out anew... myopic, extremist, resentful and aggressive..." (FT 11). They are signs of selfish individualism, masked as zeal for some forms of apparent orthodoxy. In practice, these attitudes manifest themselves as support for polemical personalities in the Church, not fully in agreement with the Second Vatican Council, remaining doggedly attached to a Church that is definitively outdated. Unfortunately such attitudes and conduct create conflict and useless divisions and become a counter-witness to the expressed will of Jesus that His disciples be united in love and truth (Cf. John 15,17; 17,23). St. Teresa has already warned us of

the risks of “indiscreet zeal” (1 *Mansions* 2,17) that damage communities so much and dampen and diminish charity. Today we are called to build communities that demonstrate the Good Samaritan’s concern for the world, shown by gratuitousness (cf. FT 139), by tenderness (cf. FT 194) and by the art of encounter (cf. FT 215). True fraternal relationships bear the seal of respect and of behavioural traits such as “approaching, speaking, listening, looking at, coming to know and understand one another, and to find common ground: all these things are summed up in the one word ‘dialogue’ ” (FT 198).

Another problem can arise from the harmful use of social networks if they diffuse disrespectful and false news about the magisterium (Church and Bishops), or slander the good name of others. I ask myself if anyone behaving in this way can really be part of our Order and a true child of our Holy Mother Teresa. We must make use of these modern facilities with prudence and in an effort to build bridges. If there is need of discussion, let us do so in a search for truth, without ever being lacking in respect or love. We should be constantly mindful of St. Paul’s lesson: “Do all you can to preserve the unity of the Spirit by the peace that binds you together” (Ep 4,3).

A further worry would be the tendency in some circumscriptions to revert to clericalism or passive submission of lay persons in the ranks of OCDS. The relationship that we want to establish between OCDS and our Religious is one of collaboration and mutual respect of their legitimate autonomies. With regard to the Secular Order, you must remember that you have autonomy for your government, for your formation and for the organization of your activities, in accordance with the norms approved by the competent authority. We must not take backward steps in time. This would mean not being attentive to what the Spirit is asking of us today. We are called to journey together (*syn-odos*) as pilgrim people of God in history, recognizing that we complement each other in our vocation in the service of the same charism. Your lay vocation implies a dedication to building up the Kingdom in the midst of the world (cf. LG 31-32; ChL 15).

4. In conclusion, I would like to leave you with some thoughts for reflection on how you might persevere with dynamic fidelity on your journey in collaboration with the other branches of the Order and the Teresian Carmelite family. All of us, in fact, are called “to be mission” in a world that keeps changing and suffering, while garnering our strength from our relationship of friendship with the Lord. This will be possible if you confront your troubles and difficulties from within, finding light in that faith that never forgets God’s fidelity throughout the course of history. In this sense, “the believer is fundamentally one who remembers” (EG 13). We are immersed in a digital ambience where our inner selves are at constant risk of being inundated with waves of information and images that do not concern us and that only leave us with superficialities. Hence, our urgent need of rediscovering those spiritual dispositions outlined in our Rule. This is especially true in regard to meditation on the Word

of God instructing us to safeguard our memory and keep our hope alive, constantly renewing our covenant with God in Christ.

This was the example set by Sts. Teresa of Jesus and John of the Cross during their lifetimes: although immersed in the current problems of the Church and of the Order, their hearts were always fixed on their Trinitarian fatherland. Like them, in a humble and trusting relationship with the Lord, we must seek to find the inspiration and strength to work in the service of the Church and our Order. Again, like them, we must journey and work together. Teresa sought allies among religious and lay people who would assist her progress in making foundations according to the charism she had received. In this way, it is essential that every member of our Order feels co-responsible for that area of the Church to which he/she belongs, as well as building up their own Carmelite community with active and mature involvement.

All this calls for an openness to and docile acceptance of formation. We must be trained especially with a view to achieving a theological perspective on life, in a concrete faith that is open to hope and to “expressing itself in love” (Gal 5,6), a faith like that of Mary and Joseph, centred on the Word of God becoming incarnate in our daily necessities. An integral part of such formation is an assimilation of the writings of our Saints from the point of view of a lay vocation.

May the light shining from the Risen Crucified illumine your lives and hearts so that you can live in its fullness your vocation and your mission in the Church and world of today. May you be sustained especially by the intercession of Mary, Mother of the Church and by St. Joseph her spouse, Patron of the whole Church and the “most generous Protector” of our Order.

May the Lord bless and protect your families and your communities!

Fraternally in Carmel,



Fr. Saverio Cannistrà
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Superior General

Rome, May 24, 2021 - Feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church