



CARMEL:
A PLACE AND A JOURNEY
INTO THE THIRD MILLENIUM

The General Chapter of 1995 was the last to be held this century and it launched the Carmelite Order towards the new millennium. At the Chapter we tackled three principal tasks:

- 1) To examine and approve new Constitutions;
- 2) To elect a Prior General and General Council and
- 3) To examine the theme, "Carmel: A Place and a Journey into the Third Millennium - Our Mission Today - *'Get up and eat lest the journey be too long'* (1 Kg. 19,7).

For many years and at many international meetings the Order has focused on our Carmelite identity. It was felt now to be time to reflect on Carmel's mission. The "place" mentioned in the theme is for us of course Mount Carmel which stands for the fundamental values of our Carmelite life. These values are well expressed in the new Constitutions.

The concept of journey speaks to us of a dynamic reality. We are on the way but to where? Towards the third millennium certainly - towards the future but what will the future hold for us? We are invited into God's future who alone knows what that will be and who is already constructing the future out of our present. We are laying the foundations now for what we will be in the future.

We are told in the new Constitutions (art. 14) that Carmelites follow Christ above all by committing ourselves to searching for the face of the Living God (the contemplative dimension of life), to community and to service in the midst of the people. These values are intimately related to one another. They are united by means of the experience of the desert. Carmelites are committed to make of Christ crucified, naked and emptied, the foundation of our lives. We are to destroy every obstacle which prevents us from being perfectly dependent on him and every obstacle which prevents us loving God and others perfectly. The process of stripping away everything that is not God, which leads to union with God, is called in our spiritual tradition "puritas cordis" and "vacare Deo", concepts which express total openness to God and a progressive self-emptying.

When, through this process we arrive at the point where we can see the whole of reality with the eyes of God, our attitude towards the world will be transformed and this changed view will be incarnated in our life of community and service. The two figures who inspire us above all to follow Christ in this way are of course the Prophet Elijah and Our Lady, the Mother of Carmel.

The Call to be Contemplative

The Carmelite is called to be a contemplative. Contemplatives do not only live in enclosed monasteries. There are many contemplatives who live in the midst of a very busy world. There are contemplatives in every neighbourhood and in every area of life. The word "contemplative" does not refer to a state but a way of relating to God. By our Carmelite vocation, we are called to be contemplatives but what does that mean in practice?

What does it mean to seek the face of the Living God? Surely we have been taught from our earliest years that God is everywhere and therefore does not need to be sought? However it is also true that God is very elusive. God cannot be grasped by the human mind. We know by experience that God alone can ultimately satisfy us

since we have been created with a capacity for God. God's desire is to unite with us in a way which is beyond the power of human words to describe. This is God's gift but it will not be given to anyone who does not wish to receive it. I think that what God wants to give us is beautifully summed up in the following reading from the letter to the Ephesians:-

"This then is what I pray, kneeling before the Father from whom every family whether spiritual or natural takes its name, that out of His infinite glory He may grant you the power, through His Spirit, for your hidden self to grow strong so that Christ may live in your hearts through faith and then planted in love and built on love, you will with all the saints have strength to grasp the breadth and the length, the height and the depth; until knowing the love of Christ which is beyond all knowledge, you are filled with the utter fullness of God. Glory be to Him who wants to do far more for us than we could ask for or even imagine. Glory be to Him in the Church and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. Amen" (Eph. 3, 14-21).

The writer wants us to be filled with the utter fullness of God. To be filled with the utter fullness of God is to be a mystic. Mysticism or contemplation is not for an elite few: it is for everyone. Remember the prophetic words of Karl Rahner, "The Christian of the future will be a mystic or will not be a Christian at all." To be a mystic means to become an intimate friend of God. This is the call which we receive in baptism and mysticism or contemplation is the full flowering of the baptismal grace. In our world we are witnessing a thirst for prayer, a thirst for God. Carmelite spirituality can lead people to the source of living water where their thirst can be quenched. As Carmelites we are not only expected to be good parish priests or teachers but also and above all we are expected to be able to lead people in their search for God. We are expected to speak of God from our own experience.

In order to be able to lead people to the Source of living water, we must know something of the desert which is a necessary and integral part of our vocation. The desert can take many forms. It may come in the form of an illness or an appointment to some difficult position or the failure to be elected to a position of authority, or removal from some apostolate which we have made our own, or from a community where we have become very comfortable and so on. God uses the ordinary things of life to challenge us to grow, to move from where we are to where we can be. This is a difficult journey which we really do not want to make and so God gives us a push to get us moving and to continue our journey when we get stuck.

The desert is where God erupts into our comfortable little world and knocks down some of the things which have provided our security in the past so that we might learn by experience that our security can only be based in God. The desert never comes in a way that we expect so that we cannot control what is happening.

The faith to which we are called is very radical since it goes to the roots of our existence as we are gradually transformed to become what God knows we can be. We are asked to take the risk of letting go control of our own lives and allowing God to take control. Mary, our Mother and our sister, points the way for us. She allowed God to have full freedom in her life and she challenges us to do the same. Too often we make Our Lady into a plaster cast statue and say lovely prayers to her but we ignore what she says to us through the pages of Scripture. Remember what she said to the servants at the wedding feast - "Do whatever he tells you". (Jn. 2,5)

Called to form community

We seek God alone not as isolated individuals but as a community which needs to be continually built up because it does not grow naturally. We have been called to live as members of a community. Living fully this very important element of our vocation is prophetic in that it points out that the love of Christ can break down the walls of division which human beings use to separate themselves from others. Community is God's gift to us because relationships are essential to our growth. We can all be very good at loving our neighbour if we never have to meet him or her. Community living can at times be difficult but it is through close interaction with other human beings that we grow.

We are unique individuals but we share a common heritage. We seek the face of God together and we find God in and through one another. Community is an important element of our way to God. Our love for God is proved by the way we treat one another. Do you love God? If you really want to know the answer to that question, just ask the members of your community.

The value of building community is very much connected with the first value of being a contemplative because how we relate to other people depends very much on how we relate to God. If we can begin to look on creation and see things as God sees them, then our relationships with others will bring them life and freedom. Until God has purified us, our tendency is to manipulate people, very subtly at times, to conform to what we desire. Love must be unconditional or it is a form of manipulation. God's way of loving is unconditional ; our way is conditional on the response we get. So our way of loving must be purified and the only way this can happen is if God does it. God respects us totally and will only do accomplish this if we co-operate.

We need to consent daily to the presence and action of God in our lives, remembering always that God's ways are not our ways. God will act in our lives to purify us in ways that may seem very strange to us. If we are to recognise the presence and action of God at work in our lives we must tune into God's wavelength. The only way of doing that is by spending time, quality time, alone with God and seeking God together with the members of our community.

Called to serve

The third fundamental Carmelite value is to serve in the midst of people. We know that the Carmelites at a very early stage changed their lifestyle from hermits to mendicant friars. The fundamental idea of the mendicant movement was to provide a different model of following Christ than that of the monks. The mendicant ideal was to find God at the heart of the world and to serve people where they were.

We know that what makes the Carmelite is not the particular work but the underlying attitudes with which the work is approached. If we truly have tasted God in our prayer, we will want to share this love with the people whom we are called to serve. We know that love cannot be just words but must be very practical.

The choice which the early Carmelites made to become mendicant friars has deeply marked Carmelite spirituality. The desert and the mountain top, where one can be alone with God, still exercise a fascination for the Carmelite. There is a need to find space where one can be alone with God but the desert is often to be found among people.

St. John of the Cross once said that a single drop of divine love is worth far more than all the good works. This means that much more is accomplished through a life which is totally surrendered to God than by many good works which are vitiated by egoism. When our lives are totally surrendered to God, we are like God and we love as God loves. Therefore our very being brings life to others. The work of surrendering our lives to God totally is truly the work of a life time and is the hardest work we will ever do.

Our prayer, our work and our community lives are to form a seamless whole. Our prayer will make us more involved in the service of our neighbour because the point of prayer is not to feel good but to see with the eyes of God and to love with the heart of God. In turn our apostolic work will force us back to prayer as we see that we can do nothing without God but that with God all things are possible. Our community life is a fruitful source of our apostolate and is also a proof that the Gospel really works when people see that we can truly live in harmony with one another.

Some Challenges

What then are the challenges which we face as we move into the third millennium? The principal challenge of course is what it has always been - to become what we are called to be. However, among others, I would like to underline the following four concrete challenges:-

- 1) Vocations and formation
- 2) The quality of community life
- 3) A renewal of our commitment to prayer
- 4) New evangelisation

1. Vocations and Formation

All of us have the serious duty to work and pray for vocations. The best way to attract new vocations is simply to be what we are called to be. The Carmelite ideal has lost none of its attractiveness throughout the centuries. We must of course be where young people are. It is not necessary to be a specialist in this field. Young people are looking for people who will listen to them, without always feeling the need to preach. We do not need to know all the answers. It is essential to have a good policy for vocations ministry and to have communities which will truly be places of welcome for young people who wish to "come and see" (Jn. 1,39) and where they can experience what our life has to offer.

When vocations do come to us, we have the sacred duty to form them according to the Carmelite ideal. If we provide an excellent formation for our new vocations this will pay off very well in the years to come. Then whatever sacrifices we have had to make will have been worth it.

Obviously our spirituality is not only for the friars or nuns but is shared by all the groups which make up the Carmelite Family. The charism of an Order is a gift of God for the Church and the world. Therefore an important element of the work for vocations and formation is to share our Carmelite ideals with anyone who is interested. I am thinking here of the many groups which are attached to the Order and also of individuals who are simply attracted by our spirituality. All of these could be said to be members of the Carmelite Family even though the connection might be very loose. In order to share our Carmelite ideals we must not only know them but have interiorised them and live them.

2. The quality of community life

It is very clear that we have been called together as members of a contemplative family and the witness we give is truly prophetic. One of the challenges we have for the future is to work on the quality of our community lives.

We need to examine ourselves individually and as communities. How much time are we willing to give to building up the community? Each of us must ask, "Does my presence add to the happiness of my sisters and brothers or am I a difficulty for them?" It is not enough just to say prayers together or to eat together. Are we willing to talk about and be open about the issues which really matter and which affect the community? People are thirsting for real community. The building up of community requires a lot from us but equally will give us a great deal in return.

3. A Renewal of our commitment to prayer

Prayer is not just words that we say; prayer is our relationship with God. Our vocation is to be transformed - to become a new creation. This is not something we can bring about. It is God's work but it requires of us a total commitment. The way of prayer is very demanding and so there is a great temptation to settle for much less.

By calling for a renewal of commitment to prayer I am not asking for us as individuals or as communities to say more prayers. What I am calling for is a re-commitment to consent to God's presence and action in our lives however that is manifested. Obviously we need to set aside adequate time for personal and community prayer. We need the space and the silence to listen to God who speaks in the depths of our hearts with a still, small voice. If our lives are filled with too much noise, we will not be able to hear this voice. I believe that a renewal in our commitment to prayer will have a profound impact on our personal and community lives and also on our apostolic work.

4. New Evangelisation

We know of the Church's call for an era of new evangelisation as we approach the third millennium. We mentioned in the final document coming from the General Chapter 1995 that we could see in the experience of Elijah an example for ourselves. He was deeply depressed because he believed that, despite his wonderful victory over the prophets of Baal, they had in fact won. He believed that he was alone but God pointed out to Elijah that there were very many who had not bent the knee to Baal. Like Elijah, we are asked to look at our reality with new eyes, to see the good things which are there despite the counter signs. We are to be like the watchers on the towers of the city who are the first to see the dawn. There are signs of light everywhere heralding a new dawn to those with eyes to see.

It is not allowed for a Christian to be a pessimist! We are to be optimists because Christ has already won the victory over sin and death. We are the heralds of Christ. Even when we cannot see any reason for optimism, we are asked to believe in the power of God who is creating even now a new heaven and a new earth.

Perhaps one of the big problems for us in this work of evangelisation is to find a new language to express the unchangeable truths of the faith. Perhaps the traditional language no longer speaks to modern people. In order to find a suitable language it is necessary to soak ourselves in the Gospel message. The best language is a life which has been transformed in God. If we are "filled with the utter fullness of God", we will speak very powerfully to people of the love of God or rather God will speak very powerfully through us and, using our hands and voices, will touch the hearts of many. Love is not an abstract ideal; it is very practical. If in our apostolic work, we can show people in practice what the love of God is and what it feels like, they are more likely to believe it.