

In Mary a Dawn of Hope: In Mary Our Way of Praying

*A joint letter for the Year of Prayer
and the Solemnity of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, 16 July 2024*

The joy of the Magnificat

With the joy of Mary's Magnificat, we greet you, dear brothers and sisters in Carmel (O.Carm and O.C.D.): Peace and Hope!

Together we pray

The two general superiors, Míceál O'Neill, O.Carm, and Miguel Márquez, O.C.D., have spent time together in prayer and conversation with a sense of Mary in our midst. We recognize the grace of this moment in our history as a family in the Church, and we ask her, Flos Carmeli, to continue to cover us with her mantle, warm us with her gaze and take us by the hand, as her brothers and sisters, to begin again today the adventure that began on Mount Carmel, in the shadow of that "little cloud", an unbreakable promise of fruitfulness.

Mary and the Year of Prayer

The celebration of the Solemnity of Our Lady of Mount of Carmel in 2024, coincides with the Year of Prayer announced by Pope Francis as a time of preparation for the celebration of the 2025 Jubilee. As Superior Generals of both traditions of Carmel, we have thought that this would be a very good opportunity to address a joint letter to you, in line with the tradition that has existed since 1998 of the two Generals writing a message to the entire Carmelite family. We do so with the desire to recall and relive the great traditions of Carmel in relation to prayer, and in relation to Our Lady of Mount Carmel. Instead of attempting to offer a theological treatise, we would like what we say to be the fruit of our personal experience of the Carmelite charism, especially our heritage and seal of prayer and our love for Mary, the Mother of God, which we share with all of you, our brothers and sisters in Carmel.

A well-established Tradition

There is a firmly rooted conviction in the history of our family: Closeness to Mary and intimacy with her have always been for us a source of motivation, renewal, and fruitfulness and the paths that lead us through the night and strengthen us in times of crisis. Mary has been "Stella Maris" in the turbulent waters of each passing generation. Our trust in her loving and effective care for us is alive now more than ever.

In the womb of Mary

Carmel was born in the womb of Mary, from the inexhaustible Source of the God who called her to be the Mother of his Son, under the shadow of the Holy Spirit. We have been woven and shaped in the image of Jesus, as sons and daughters in the Son. We feel that in this constant being gestated and given birth in Mary, the vocation of every Carmelite becomes more and more authentic every day.

She meditated all these things in her heart

As it was for Mary, being Carmelite means being trained to listen to the Word. We are inspired by the Carmelite Rule, which urges us to do everything in the Word of God (19). We take inspiration also from the teaching of Saint Therese of the Child Jesus, whose love for the Blessed Virgin was inspired by the way Mary is found in the pages of the Gospel. (Poem "Why I Love You, Mary"). The gospels present Mary as a person "who pondered all these things in her heart", as someone who enveloped everything in prayer, whose prayer was a permanent response to the Word of God in her life and whose prayer showed the dignity of the human person, created by God, inhabited by divine Presence and capable of knowing the love of God in her life.

Contemplative, Virgin, Pilgrim and Servant

Mary set out at that time and went as quickly as she could. (Lk 1,39) From the earliest times, the Carmelite tradition looked upon the icon of Mary on the journey, carrying Jesus in her womb, as the best model of contemplation for someone on the journey – a perfect synthesis of contemplation and action, uniting Martha and Mary. "Believe me, Martha and Mary must join together in order to show hospitality to the Lord and have him always present and not host him badly by failing to give him something to eat." (Teresa de Jesús, 7 Moradas 4,12. Cf. Maria Magdalena de' Pazzi, Probationes 2, 176-178).

Mary went as quickly as she could (*meta spoudes*), as if to say, she went with a lively heart, and a burning love, to the hill country to visit her cousin Elizabeth. The angel had told her about her cousin. Nazareth was a long way from that hill country, identified today as Ain

Karim, not far from Jerusalem. In Mary prayer became acceptance, availability, pathway and service. It began with the word of the Angel and now it is the expression of a love that is freely received and freely given, with no limits, love that is the root of what we are and what we seek. Four words describe this grace: rejoice, do not be afraid, the Spirit will come upon you, for nothing is impossible to God. The beauty of God is given to Mary, by the same Holy Spirit that is given to us. It is like a garment of holiness that God gives to Mary at the Annunciation, like a living scapular that we have received in Carmel, Mary's garments and Mary's life.

When we pray the Hail Mary, we have a doorway to the experience of the Incarnation, in that moment when Mary received the Word, and the grace and presence of God became flesh. Each time we pray the Hail Mary, that miracle of grace and the heart of the covenant that was in Mary is reproduced in us. The prayer of the Hail Mary opens us to a statement of love that God makes to her and to each one of us, waiting for our yes to that same love of God, without excuses, without defences; no thinking about our unworthiness, but simply accepting joyfully the gift that comes from God. Mary, knew that God loved her, and recalling the words of Saint Teresa of Jesus, her prayer "was nothing other than conversation in friendship, remaining frequently alone with the one whom we know loves us" (Life 8,5). This kind of experience and consciousness is the root and foundation of our prayer. We, like Mary, are full of grace.

Mary reached her destination. Elizabeth's joy knew no bounds. This was no ordinary visit. Elizabeth too knew the Scriptures and the story and now she was seeing the fulfilment of a great promise. The child in her womb leapt for joy, the same as the child in Mary's womb. If Elizabeth sang the praises of Mary because she believed, Mary could do the same for Elizabeth. They were not evangelising one another as such, but rather, confirming the truth of the Gospel in the way that each of them had received it. Mary continues, in poetic language, to rejoice in this truth as she had received it. A great part of our devotion and much of our contact with other people comes down to this, a confirmation of what each one of us has received and a desire to live in such a way that others will know the truth of God in the way that God reveals that truth to all those who are open to his word. Saint Titus Brandsma saw this when he said, The object of our devotion to Mary is that each of us should be another Mother of God, that God might be conceived in us and offered by us to the world (Beauty of Carmel, 66).

Magnificat, the Carmelite charism

Carmelite prayer is woven with humility (land that waits), thanksgiving, voices that sing of the wonders that God has done in human history, a movement that is for

us like an exodus, a liberation, a willingness to serve and to give totally of ourselves. Mary's canticle is like a summary of human history. It captures the essence of the spirituality of Carmel. It is possible to sing this canticle only when there is sincere communion among brothers and sisters, each one recognising in the other the presence of the Saviour. Authentic prayer comes about in the encounter we have with the dignity of the other person in whom God lives, and the respect we have for that dignity.

Today there is an invitation to Carmel to move away from complaining and negativity into an ability to recognise the shoots of life that sometimes are hidden from the clever and learned and penetrate the hearts of the poor and humble who know how to trust in the promises of God. A dawn of hope has come, and it is far more powerful that all our arms and armaments in this world that today is so deeply abused and wounded.

The disciple received her into his home

Mary stood at the foot of the cross. What was she doing there? We ask what kind of pain did she suffer, as a mother, seeing her son in agony, an innocent victim of the injustice and superficiality of the political and religious systems of the day? She stood and did not go away. She was silent. Somehow she knew this was not the end. Her prayer could unite her with the mind and heart of God that she knew from within, now more than ever. Here again she pondered these things in her heart. She more than anyone could understand that what was happening was a great act of love on the part of her Son. Now as her Son hung on the cross, the love that would not allow him to step back now extends to all the earth and does so in every generation and in every place. When we think of the love of Jesus and Mary, we see a love that is total giving of self.

Then something happened that she was not expecting. From her Son's blood-stained lips she heard the words, "Woman, this is your son", followed by the words addressed to the beloved disciple, "Son, this is your mother". The mother remains the same, the son is different. All that the Son was for her is now in the disciple. The relationship can change, but love will always be the best possible relationship between people who take care of one another in the way that mother and child live for one another.

What is essential in prayer stands there, on the cross and at the foot of the cross. It is a communion in suffering that makes the history of all who have been crucified integral to the plan of salvation. Jesus, from the most vulnerable of places, achieves the greatest work of salvation. Saint John of the Cross recalled how Jesus had to cry out, "My God, My God why have you abandoned me" (Mt 27,46). He added, "This was the most extreme abandonment, in all that he felt, that he had suffered in

his life. By it he accomplished the most marvellous work of his whole life, surpassing all the works and deeds and miracles that he had ever performed on earth or in heaven. Thus, He brought about the reconciliation and union of the human race with God through grace. (Ascent, II, 7,11)

The effectiveness of prayer may be seen mysteriously in the act of giving life. Love that stays right to the end. Mary, is a prayer incarnate that has become present in the most terrifying moment in people's lives, she is the mother of all those mothers who nurture and care for life, cherish life and offer it to the Father, even when it is broken and trampled upon. In this way new life is born. Humanity's pain and suffering becomes a cry and a prayer in Jesus and Mary. There is nothing that is not touched by prayer. True prayer can never be an escape. True prayer cannot be any form of self-centred, comfort seeking, mystical feeling that is deaf to the cry of humanity all around.

In the moment of greatest suffering, Jesus left us the best possible inheritance in gifting us his mother. The disciple received her into his home (eis ta idia), into the intimacy of his home, as the most precious gift not only for his home but for the depths of his interior life. This kind of intimacy is known to many Christians and many Carmelites, as the treasure of their lives. We live with the desire to awaken and renew this intimacy each day, as the source of unfailing light.

They persevered with Mary in prayer

Jesus rose from the dead and appeared to a certain number of disciples. He ascended into heaven, leaving his disciples with the promise that when he ascended to the father he would send the Holy Spirit. The disciples waited for the promise to be fulfilled. Mary was with them, and she too waited. Our spirituality, we know, is a spirituality of waiting. We have known the love of God and now we wait for that love to be complete when he comes again and Christ will be all in all. Our Rule ends with the idea that we are to do all that is recommended in the Rule and that if we do more we will receive our reward when He comes (Rule 24) The more that we can do is the more that is given by the Holy Spirit. When Mary asked the angel: How can this be? She heard the answer, the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and for God nothing is impossible. All that Mary pondered in her heart now comes to fruition. It is light, accomplishment, Church and family journey into God.

The image of Mary with the disciples all waiting for Pentecost shows us something of the beauty of living in community, opening the heart of each member gathered in prayer a space for communion among people who are differently gifted. The gift of Pentecost is a common language among the riches of many different languages and races. This communion among

brothers and sisters in openness to the Holy Spirit offers us a future that we can barely imagine, a way of life that is able to break through all fear, and sin and suffering. Is this not a moment for us to live together in community in communion with Mary and with renewed intensity in our prayer of supplication, that we might see in our lives the Carmel that Mary wishes to offer to her Son?

Conclusion

1. A Symphony of Prayer

We are enriched by the many possible different ways of praying. Prayer with different notes, different colours, different places and times helps us to understand what Pope Francis was thinking when he expressed his desire to see a symphony of prayer throughout the world. People at prayer, Carmelites at prayer is a blessing for all, without exclusion. Our prayer will be part of this symphony. We share in the prayer of our great saints, of Mary, Elijah, Teresa of Jesus, Mary Magdalene de' Pazzi, John of the Cross, Titus Brandsma and so many others in whom we see the one common thread of a relationship with God and communication with God in our different languages and customs.

2. The Dignity of the One who Prays

We can see the dignity of the person who prays when we take Mary as our model. The best image we have of the dignity of the human person is creation in the image and likeness of God. Prayer makes this image come alive as a true and vibrant covenant giving full expression to the dignity of the human person as the person created in God's image and likeness who is in friendly communication with God continuously. It is the dignity that we see in Mary first of all. She was attentive to the Word of God, she trusted totally in God and gave to the people of her time and to all the generations since then an understanding of the closeness of God to those whom God loves. The Lord is with you. You are full of grace. We like to think of Carmel as a school of prayer, a school in which people will discover their true dignity as people in whom the Holy Spirit lives and prays with cries too deep for words. (Cf. Santa Teresa, Libro de las Moradas, prólogo).

3. The renewal of prayer among Carmelites

We would love to see this time in our lives as a time of renewal in all that has to do with our prayer in Carmel. We have the sensation that although we talk a lot about Carmel's tradition of prayer, our daily practice of prayer does not always reflect the beautiful truths that we proclaim. What are we to do? We have to see prayer as a constant characteristic of our lives, a presence, a conversation that is continuous, intimate, simple and friendly, with a sense of God being present at all times, in our prayer that is silent, individual and communitarian, and liturgical, prayer with the Bible on

our laps, prayer in moments when we are gathered at table and other moments when together we give thanks to God and ask for his blessing.

The renewal of our prayer will come from our will and desire to pray and to put prayer at the centre of our lives. This will mean paying attention to those times when we find that we are too busy, that we have so many things, good things to do and there seems to be no time left, to pray, to think about God, no way of changing the rhythm, of slowing down, pausing, allowing ourselves simply to be and to think about what we are doing, in the light of God's will. Sometimes, there is no time to join together in liturgy, in community prayer or in those simple moments when two or three might be gathered together at home or at work, in moments of joy, or moments of sadness.

Challenge and hope

1. We are on a journey that is real and full of hope, but we do not know what it will be like. Mary points the way for Carmel. The way ahead is not what we imagine. We believe that in Mary we will find all that awaits us in Carmel, the newness of the Gospel. There is a Carmel that is about to be born and it is now being nurtured as if by a mother in the heart of each one of us, if we accept this leap of faith, the challenge to believe in the word of the angel to each one. Sisters and Brothers, this is an invitation to Carmelites, wherever they are, in whatever circumstances they find themselves, full of good health or suffering from illness, full of energy or in a moment of difficulty or crisis, in strength or in weakness, joy or temptation, to open ourselves straightaway, in humility to the grace of this moment, placing this new birth of God in our land, in the hands of Mary.

2. Sing the Magnificat. Would it not be wonderful to see this moment in our history as a Magnificat. We are witnesses to the fruitfulness of the Spirit, in the day or in the night, in time of war and persecution. Our eyes have been educated to be able to see the way the prophet saw the tiny cloud. In this time that we often feel is a time of desert and dryness, we are called to believe that this time will bring us the spring of water that God has in store for us. It is for us to be people of daring faith, who are both realistic and full of hope, people who are positive in their outlook.

3. Just as it was at the first Pentecost, today the Holy Spirit draws us into prayer, in communion and diversity, which is the foundation of the community that is the Church, our mother and sister. This prayer builds the community and the Church. Mary our mother and sister is part of that communion. In a world so threatened by division and conflict, wastefulness and exclusion, Mary, our mother and sister reminds us again of the prayer of her Son, "that they all may be one" so that this world may believe. Let us be people who spread our communion with Mary.

Through Mary and in Mary, on the solemn commemoration of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, we extend our prayer and good wishes to the whole Carmelite family: O.Carm and O.C.D.

Happy Feast day to one and all!

Rome, 13 July 2024

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