

Message of the 91st General Chapter of the Discalced Carmelites

(Avila, 2 to 24 May 2015)

Dear Brothers, Sisters, Secular Order Members, and Members affiliated to the Carmelite Family

1. “This Chapter that we are celebrating during the V Centenary of the Birth of Saint Teresa of Jesus, has a feature that sets it apart from all others: it is not just a Chapter; it is also a pilgrimage to the places of Teresa: the house where she was born and grew up; the cell in which she closed her eyes to this life to open them to the much desired true Life; the monastery in which, for years, she searched for the meaning of her life and finally found it in a simple look that wounded her heart”. These words, spoken by Father General in the church of St. Joseph's, Avila, where “the wound of love created a new reality”, describe well the meaning of the event we have been experiencing over the last three weeks. At the same time, thanks to the numerous reports prepared in view of the Chapter and the sharing and dialogue during its sessions, everyone has been able, as it were, to go on pilgrimage also to the countless “living places” (people, communities, provinces, institutions, apostolic and missionary works) where the Order gives witness to the vitality of our charism. We experienced its richness as we listened to representatives of Secular Institutes and to others who, inspired by Teresa of Jesus, form the great family of Carmel. Of particular significance was the meeting with the group of our Discalced Carmelite Sisters: they told us about their life and what they expected of us. We also had the joy of hearing the words of Msgr. José Rodríguez Carballo, Secretary of the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, and Fr Fernando Millán, Prior General of the O. Carms. In this spirit of communion, we constantly prayed to the Lord for the many of our Christian brothers and sisters who also today suffer persecution because of their faith.

2. With joy we remember that the centenary year was introduced and accompanied by the fatherly and authoritative word of Pope Francis: the Message to the Bishop of Avila (October 15, 2014) and the Letter to Fr General (28 March 2015). His appeal to the essential elements of the Teresian doctrine and experience – joy, prayer, the way of sisterly and brotherly communion, as well as passion for the Church and the world – are matters for reflection for the whole of Carmel, not only during this particular moment of grace, but also in the future. By a happy coincidence, the Centenary and the Chapter coincide with the Year of Consecrated Life (cf. Letter to all the consecrated by Pope Francis and the Message for the Year of Consecrated Life by the O. Carm Prior General and the OCD Superior General) and as we prepare for the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy. The theme of the Jubilee finds a special echo in Carmel, since Teresa acknowledges that her whole life was marked by the richness of the Mercy of the Lord (cf. Life, 4, 3-4.10; 14,10; 19,5.15; 3M 1.3; 7M 1.1).

3. It was in this grace-filled context that we lived the Chapter as a review of life of our whole Order:

To rejoice in the works that the Lord has done and is doing in and through us.

To rejoice at the universally recognized witness of holiness, like that of Mary of Jesus Crucified – the “little Arab”, canonized in Rome precisely during the Chapter – or the humble and hidden holiness of so many of our brothers and sisters in Carmel. To take note of our unfaithfulness to what the Lord asks of us.

The following words of Fr General’s report at the opening of the Chapter express synthetically the work we have tried to carry out: “The task we felt we were called to accomplish was to make constant reference to the essential elements of our Teresian Carmelite being, to cherish them once more, lacking any other riches saving that of ‘having known the gift of God’, that is His friendship”.

4. Our self-examination took place in the light of the courageous decision taken by the Chapter, after the steps taken in the past sexennium with the systematic reading of the works of Holy Mother Teresa, to tread “a path of re-reading our Constitutions and Norms, in view of their possible revision for a renewal of our life”. The Working Document prepared for the Chapter stated that, “the meaning of a work on the Constitutions is to regain strength, love and wisdom with regard to our charismatic identity. The intention is not that of a legalistic re-reading, which is limited to pointing out lack of observance of the written norm. It is rather to once again provide motivation for the norm and to find once again its meaning, possibly expressing it in a form more appropriate to our time”. Confirmation of this view is already present in the Epilogue of our Constitutions: “Let all of us, both individually and in our community meetings, with gratitude for the God-given grace of our vocation to the Teresian Carmel, make a thorough study of the principles and norms outlined above, and follow them faithfully in the spirit of the Gospel. (...) Without being slaves to the letter, let us have due regard for these laws. In this way we shall never resist the Spirit (cf. 1 Th. 5:19), but docile to his gift to us we shall put it fully at the service of God’s People (cf. 1 Cor. 12:7)”.

5. During these three weeks we have therefore launched this long process, which will involve the Order, Circumscriptions and Communities, for the entire sexennium. Following the outline of our Constitutions we have reflected on some fundamental issues, bearing in mind two objectives: 1) to verify whether and to what extent the life of our communities is as specified and required by the Constitutions; 2) to take note - almost three decades after they were formulated and promulgated, and in the light of the profound changes that have occurred in the life of the Church and the Order - of any formulations of the current legislation that are in need of some corrections, additions or even a profound rethinking.

6. As we face the long and complex work ahead, it is natural that fears and resistance appear. Keeping in mind the great renewal of the Second Vatican Council, the 50th anniversary of the closure of which is this year (8 December 2015), can help us overcome our fears. In the Decree *Unitatis Redintegratio* we read sentences that can be applied also to the way that the Chapter has decided to take: “Every renewal of the Church essentially consists in an increase of fidelity to her vocation (...). The pilgrim Church is called by Christ to that continual reformation which, as a human institution on earth, it always needs “(n. 6). It is evident to all that we too want to be true to our “vocation”, that our Order is a “pilgrim” and in need of “continual reformation”.

7. The future of the Order will depend largely on our ability to attract new vocations in virtue of a joy and beauty that emanates from the life and works done in union with Jesus, the “Living” and “unforgettable beauty and majesty“ (Life, 28:9), ”a beauty which embraces all beauty” (Way, 22:6). St Teresa of Jesus and St John of the Cross accompany us on this path, the same one that Christ taught his disciples: “Let your light before others, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Mt 5:16). “Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples” (Jn. 15:5,8). So we begin this sexennium animated by the exhortation of Pope Francis to religious: “Wake up the world, since the distinctive sign of consecrated life is prophecy” (Letter to all the Consecrated, II: 2).

8. On 27 September 1970, Blessed Paul VI proclaimed St Teresa of Jesus Doctor of the Church. We can listen again and still be moved by what he said in his homily: “The mere fact of uttering the name of this singular and great Saint, in this place and in this circumstance, raises a ferment of thoughts in our souls: (...) we see her appear before us as an exceptional woman, as a religious, who, all enveloped in humility, penitence and simplicity, radiates the flame of her human vitality and spiritual vibrancy, and then as reformer and foundress of a historic and distinguished religious Order, and a most genial and prolific writer, teacher of the spiritual life, incomparable contemplative and tirelessly active; ... How great she is! how unique! how human! how attractive a figure!”. Today, nearly 50 years later and in the heart of the V Centenary, Teresa still speaks to us and invites us to follow in her footsteps: “Es tiempo de caminar!” (It is time to walk!).

May the Mother of God, Queen and Beauty of Carmel, with St Joseph, guard us on this journey that we are undertaking.

Avila, 23 May 2015

Most Rev. Saverio Cannistrà, OCD
Superior General

