

OUR FIRST DUTIES AS CARMELITES

Fr. David Centner, OCD

What is the *pars potior* (the most important part) of the Carmelite vocation? The answer usually given was prayer; by that meaning quiet or contemplative prayer. Is this a sufficient answer?

The Rule itself makes it clear that our first duty is to serve Christ with pure hearts and upright consciences. In scriptural terms, that means that we believe in him and put his word into practice.

To serve Christ rightly, we must turn to the gospels and learn what it is that he commands us to do. In the pages of John's Gospel we learn that his commandment is: "Love one another as I have loved you." It would follow that the *pars potior* of our vocation is to love and cherish one another.

That statement surprises many Carmelites who think that their chief responsibility is prayer and sacrifice. Yet, as St Paul tells us, if we do not have charity, everything else; including our prayer and sacrifices is of no avail. He even tells us, "Bear one another's burdens and you will fulfill the Law of Christ."

When Mother Isabel of the Angels, the only one of the Spanish Mothers to remain in France when Carmel was established there, was asked by the Carmel of Amiens to write some words of encouragement, she wrote (in deliciously mixed French and Spanish) about charity, not about observance. Her words were something like this: "As we have so little opportunity to converse with one another, we must anticipate one another's needs. This is what our Mother Teresa wanted, for this is the principal part of our religious observance."

Secular Carmelites have even less opportunity to converse with each other than do friars or nuns who live in communities. Yet the obligation of cherishing one another is as important for seculars as for religious. When we see communities that fail to love one another unconditionally as Christ does, we can doubt if all their knowledge of our spirituality and their practice of prayer has any value at all.

But how do we learn to cherish one another, especially when we know that all of us (myself included) have moments when we are disagreeable and all of us have natural antipathies? I think these things are extremely important:

"Do not judge and you will not be judged...for the measure you measure will be measured back to you." Holy Mother Teresa put this into practice by refusing to say anything negative about anyone, especially in their absence. As a consequence, she drew many to herself.

Always consider others better than yourself. By this we do not mean false humility. We mean the recognition that God gives different talents to everyone. There is no one alive who is not naturally better than I am in some respect. And as for supernaturally better, only God knows. But we do know this, the moment we exalt ourselves for some virtue, we lose it, for then charity has gone out of it.

As a consequence we listen readily to one another, and we reach out to help one another. We grow in patience and compassion, for we know that God has been very compassionate with us. In this way, we open the door to letting Christ bring to perfection His charity within us.

Conclusion: If we are to be true friends of Christ, as Holy Mother so ardently desires, because Jesus himself desires that, we must determine to be true friends of one another.