

CIRCULAR LETTER OF THE SUPERIORS GENERAL
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ON THE EIGHTH CENTENARY
OF HONORIUS III'S "UT VIVENDI NORMAM" (1226–2026)

I. LET US REMEMBER

A CENTENARY TO REMEMBER

1. Dear brothers and sisters, eight hundred years have passed since, on 30 January 1226, Pope Honorius III sent the Carmelite hermit friars the letter that begins with the words *Ut vivendi normam*. With it, the Holy See recognised for the first time the existence of that community of hermits. We therefore wish to commemorate this anniversary and to reflect on it together with you.
2. Although groups of hermits and monasteries had settled on the slopes of Mount Carmel from at least the fourth century onwards, we know that Latin hermits established themselves there towards the end of the twelfth century, after Richard the Lionheart had reconquered the city of Acre for the Christians in 1191. Acre became the military, political and religious centre of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem. At a certain point, the hermits of Carmel asked the patriarch for a “norm of life” (*formula vitae*), which was not a Rule in the strict sense—that is, a text intended to regulate the life of a fully constituted religious Order, such as those of St Augustine, St Basil or St Benedict—but rather a simpler text suited to a group of hermits, mostly laymen, who lived with great austerity, devoted to prayer and service to pilgrims, and who sought juridical recognition within the Catholic Church. More precisely, they received something akin to a *typikon*, as such statutes were called in the East when intended to organise the life of a group of believers gathered in a particular place for prayer and penance. Between 1206 and 1214, St Albert gave the Carmelite hermits a brief treatise on the spiritual life in the form of a letter, in which he gathered together the ideal they wished to follow and the means necessary to realise it.¹ In this way, they became a religious group recognised by the Church, with all that this entailed at the time: the obligation to wear a habit, to take the vow of obedience to the prior, to recite the psalms for those who could read and other prayers for those who could not, exemption from certain taxes, the possibility of collecting alms, of opening their own chapel and cemetery, and the inviolability of the space they inhabited.
3. This “norm of life” embodies the *propositum* of the Carmelite hermits. The term may be translated either as ‘purpose’ or as ‘central intention,’ and it denotes their resolve to “live in allegiance to Jesus Christ and serve him faithfully with a pure heart and a good conscience” (no. 2). St Albert makes clear that this should be the fundamental motive not only of Carmelite life, but also of the life of all consecrated persons and, ultimately, of every Christian. The explicit reference to Jesus Christ is highly significant. Those hermits had withdrawn to the Lord’s land in order to serve him “with a pure heart and a good conscience.” They wished to

¹ We find this information in Siberto di Beka, *Considerationes super regulam ordinis Carmelitarum*, in *Speculum Ordinis Fratrum Carmelitarum noviter impressum* (henceforth *Spec. Carm.* 1507), Iohannes Baptista de Cathaneis (ed.), Venetiis 1507, f. 31; *Speculum Carmelitanum* (henceforth *Spec. Carm.* 1680), Daniel a Virgine Maria (ed.), vol. I/1, Antverpiae 1680, 83 n. 39.

live close to the places sanctified by his presence, to contemplate his mystery and to follow more closely in his footsteps. According to some commentaries on the Rule, number 10 constitutes one of the foundational elements of the whole normative framework: “Let each one remain in his cell or near it, meditating day and night on the law of the Lord and keeping watch in prayer, unless he must devote himself to other legitimate occupations.” It is no accident that what gives direction to our lives is neither a disciplinary precept nor an ascetical practice, but persevering attentiveness to the Word of God in prayer. Everything else is ordered towards making this living relationship with the Lord possible. Following the example of the prophet Elijah and the Virgin Mary, we Carmelites—men and women alike—are called to strive to live always in the presence of God, allowing him to fill our minds and hearts, living with him in a relationship of love through prayer and allowing ourselves to be guided and instructed by his Word.

THE LETTER OF POPE HONORIUS III

4. The Fourth Lateran Council, held in Rome in 1215, prohibited the creation of new religious Orders and required existing groups to adopt one of the Rules recognised by the Church. The Dominicans and Mercedarians, for example, adopted the Rule of St Augustine. Some prelates put pressure on the Carmelites to do likewise. They already possessed, however, a document that served them in the function of a Rule: St Albert’s norm of life, drawn up before the Council. The Carmelites sought the support of St Albert’s successor, but he did not know how to respond and advised them to appeal directly to the Holy See. It is in this context that Honorius III’s letter should be situated: a simple *mandatum*, which may also be described, in a broad sense, as an executive letter. It was therefore not a solemn document, a bull with a seal suspended by purple and gold silk cords, but nevertheless a text which, in its simplicity, offered the group the first recognition it had sought. The letter reads as follows:

“To our beloved sons, the Prior and the Hermit Friars of Mount Carmel, greeting and apostolic blessing. We enjoin upon you and your successors, insofar as you can with God’s help, that, for the remission of your sins, you observe the norm of regular living written by the Patriarch of Jerusalem, of blessed memory, which, as you say, you humbly received before the General Council. Given at Rieti, in the tenth year of our pontificate, two days before the Kalends of February (30 January 1226).”²

Today we no longer possess the original text, which is not found even in the *Registers of the letters* of Honorius III. The first time this bull was printed was in the *Speculum Carmelitanum* published in Venice in 1507,³ from which the editor of the *Bullarium Carmelitanum* most probably copied it. Other evidence tells us that copies must have existed in Toulouse⁴ and London.⁵ Yet the existence of this recognition is continuously attested: already in the earliest Constitutions that have come down to us—the London Constitutions of 1281⁶—the intervention

² *Bullarium Carmelitanum* (henceforth *Bull. Carm.*, I), Eliseus Monsignano (ed.), vol. I, Romae 1715, 1. Honorius Episcopus, Servus Servorum Dei, dilectis Filiis Priori et Fratribus Eremitis de Monte Carmelo salutem et apostolicam benedictionem. Ut vivendi normam regulariter, a bonae memoriae Hierosolymitano Patriarcha editam, quam ante Generale Concilium, vos dicitis humiliter suscepisse, in posterum vos et successores vestri, quantum cum Dei adiutorio poteritis, observetis in remissionem vobis injungimus peccatorum. Datum Reate, 3 Kalendas Februarii, Pontificatus nostri anno decimo.

³ *Spec. Carm.* 1507, ff. 29v-30r.

⁴ Cf. *Spec. Carm.* 1507, 29v.

⁵ Cf. John Baconthorpe, *Compendium historiarum et iurium*, in *Medieval Carmelite Heritage*, (henceforth *MCH*), Adrianus Staring (ed.), Rome 1989, 206.

⁶ Cf. *Rubrica prima (1281)*, in *MCH*, 41.

of Pope Honorius III is mentioned; and, as noted above, Sibert of Beka and John Baconthorpe discuss it in their treatises.

THE CONTENT OF THE LETTER

5. But what does the text tell us? Was it an approval of the Rule, as has sometimes been claimed? Are there other obligations? Let us consider the matter calmly. The letter as it has come down to us lacks the so-called *arenga*, that is, the summary of the petition addressed to the pope, together with the reasons for and object of the request. We therefore cannot know precisely who the petitioners were or what they had asked. From the text, we can establish that the pope recognises Albert's "Formula of Life" and obliges the friars to observe it faithfully in order to obtain the remission of sins. In other words, the exact observance of the "Formula of Life" constitutes a form of penance or satisfaction for sins, and the pope enjoins (*iniungimus*) such observance. We can recognise here a continuity between this obligation-cum-concession and the original *propositum* of the first pilgrim-hermits: to live the eremitical life in penance.
6. Two expressions used by Honorius III are particularly interesting. The first is the term *regulariter*, which refers to the regularity of life according to a norm. In some sense, the term anticipates the idea that observance of the "Formula of Life" opens up to religious, or indeed regular, life established by a Rule. This would take place with the approval, in 1247, of the text modified by Innocent IV in order to adapt the life of the hermits who had emigrated from Mount Carmel to the European context.⁷ The other interesting phrase concerns the text itself of the "Formula of Life", which is said to be something "which, as you say, you humbly received before the General Council." This statement contains two aspects. The first concerns the friars' testimony that they had received the "Formula" from Albert, while the Holy See had no other information about it. The second concerns the time at which Albert had written to the friars: before the Fourth Lateran Council, held in 1215. This is certainly true, since the holy patriarch had been stabbed to death on 14 September 1214, before he could leave for Rome and take part in the Council. Moreover, the fact that they had received Albert's text before the Council was celebrated protected the Carmelites from objections arising from the prohibition of new foundations established by canon 13 of the same Fourth Lateran Council. Nevertheless, even Honorius III did not oblige the hermits to adopt "*una ex regulis approbatis*," as the conciliar canon required.

WHAT DID THE POPE GRANT?

7. The pope therefore recognises the community of the hermit friars of Carmel, regards the "Formula of Life" as authoritative and returns it to them with the command—*iniungimus*, he says—that they observe it, so that they may enjoy the remission of sins. This last point is important because, in addition to recalling the penitential origins of the group, it recognises it as one of the many communities of penitential hermits that had flourished in the preceding decades. This was not an 'approval of the Rule,' as has sometimes been asserted rather hastily, but the first recognition of the community and of its norm of life.
8. Indeed, the *Bullarium* places the text of the "Formula of Life" immediately after the bull of Honorius, just as it is also reported in the eighth book of *The Ten Books on the Institution of the First Monks*, the collection compiled by Felip Ribot around 1380.⁸ Clearly, some text of

⁷ Innocent IV, *Quae honorem Conditoris* (1st October 1247), in Archivio Apostolico Vaticano, Registrum Vaticanum 21, ff. 465v-466r.

⁸ Cf. Felip Ribot, *Libri decem de institutione primorum monachorum*, Book VIII, *Epistula Cyrilli*, in Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Ms.778, ff. 57v-59r.

the ancient Albertine “Formula” had survived Innocent IV’s order to destroy copies of it when he approved the *Rule* and gave it the status of a *Regula bullata*. It is nevertheless interesting that the text published in the *Bullarium* gives the date as 1171 rather than the precise period in which it was given by Albert (between 1206 and 1214). This may be a reminiscence of the legends surrounding the foundation of the Order, which tended to push its beginnings further back. Historically, it is difficult to envisage them occurring before the Battle of Hattin (1187), and thus before 1192 or 1193, when the situation in the Holy Land stabilised following the reconquest of Acre and of a narrow strip of coastline.

9. The question of dates and the tradition of foundation narratives may also help explain why the expression “primitive Rule” has sometimes been used, in effect confusing the Innocentian text with the Albertine one. Formally speaking, only the text approved and promulgated by Innocent IV in 1247 is the Rule. Among other things, it introduced the possibility for the Carmelites to establish houses wherever they were offered a place, rather than only in deserted locations far from population centres; it established the profession of the three vows, by then obligatory for all religious; it ordered them to recite the hours of the Divine Office together, whereas previously each person had recited the psalms or other prayers in his own cell; and it prescribed that they eat together, something they had previously done only on special occasions. The oldest copy of the Rule known to us is preserved in the Vatican Archives, together with this bull. For this reason, all reconstructions of the earlier text (St Albert’s “Formula of Life”) are necessarily hypothetical. When Blessed John Soreth and St Teresa of Jesus speak of the “primitive Rule”, they are referring to the 1247 text. In reality, it was an adaptation of St Albert’s document, which was not subsequently revised. The later ‘mitigations’ were added in the form of notes or concessions, without altering the text itself, in a manner analogous to amendments added to a constitution without changing its fundamental body.

THE FIRST STEP ON A LONG JOURNEY

10. It should also be said that this first intervention by Honorius III was only the first piece in a mosaic of papal interventions that continued throughout the thirteenth century and into the first decades of the fourteenth. In addition to the fundamental approval by Innocent IV, it is worth recalling another bull of John XXII, granted on 21 November 1326—seven hundred years ago—in which the pope granted the Carmelites all the privileges already enjoyed by the Dominicans and Franciscans.⁹ This document marked the Order’s full and definitive incorporation into the group of mendicant friars. A critical moment had first to be overcome, however, following the Second Council of Lyons (1274), when it was decided to suppress all *religiones novae*, that is, those founded after the Fourth Lateran Council, with the exception of the Dominicans and Franciscans, whose *utilitas* for the Church was by then firmly established. The Augustinian Hermits and the Carmelites were left in suspense until the Holy See should decide. This conciliar decree prompted these Orders to undertake a process of renewal and growth, with a view to having their own *utilitas* recognised. Various measures were taken with regard to the apostolate, including greater involvement in universities, with the possibility of obtaining academic degrees and thus teaching, preaching and hearing confessions; and the assumption of responsibility for some parishes. For the Carmelites there was also the question of changing the colour of their mantles, from striped to white, authorised

⁹ Giovanni XXII, *Inter coeteros* (21 November 1326), in *Bull. Carm.*, I. 66-67, with which he extended to the Carmelites the *Super cathedram* given to the Dominicans and Franciscans.

by Pope Honorius IV at the Chapter of Montpellier in 1287. This was a means of facilitating their acceptance in dioceses, universities and cities.

II. LET US REFLECT ON THE PRESENT

WHY COMMEMORATE THE LETTER?

11. At this point we may ask ourselves: what meaning does commemorating this document have today? What, then, is the message of Honorius III's intervention for us, women and men of the twenty-first century? What impact does it have on the members of the great and multifaceted Carmelite Family? Certainly, this is not a matter of archaeology or of a purely historicist celebration. In itself, Honorius III's letter, after eight hundred years of history and all that has happened during them, might seem to offer little of interest to us. Yet, on closer examination, it offers several insights of relevance to the present. Let us try to reflect on them together, and let us do so as though this were a *lectio divina*. Let us reread the operative part of the letter slowly:
12. "*We enjoin upon you and your successors, insofar as you can with God's help...*". First of all, we should note that we are personally involved: Honorius III speaks of "your successors"—that is precisely us. What follows therefore concerns us directly. We are invited to observe "regularly" what the patriarch Albert wrote to us, the "Formula of Life" which has by now become our Rule. This is not an occasional commitment, undertaken when we happen to feel like it, but the practice of a continuous, regular and regulated commitment, precisely according to the Rule. We are to do this "insofar as you can with God's help;" this expression contains the whole personal commitment we undertake through religious profession or profession in the Carmelite Third Order (TOC) — Secular Order of Discalced Carmelites (OCDS). Certainly, always with God's help: "apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5), Jesus warns us. This flexibility is necessary if Carmelite life is to be lived concretely: while remaining faithful to what is essential, members of the Order are called to engage with the surrounding reality in an ongoing dialogue with the cultures, mentalities and customs of the sisters and brothers with whom they journey and work. Spiritual maturity is also expressed in the capacity to adapt.
13. "... *observe, for the remission of your sins, the norm of regular living...*". The pope continues with a formula common in documents of the period, stating that such observance is "for the remission of sins," that is, a commitment towards holiness and the attainment of the fullness of life, of full communion with God. *In nuce*, this contains everything that Carmelites, women and men, in different parts of the world have experienced and taught during the following eight centuries concerning the spiritual life and the journey of purification and mystical union with God. The charism of Carmel is, in a certain sense, already recognised by Honorius III, albeit in embryonic form. In this sense, the command to follow the text of the "Formula of Life"—for us today, the Rule—is a clear invitation to continue the holy pilgrimage towards the Holy Land, towards the heavenly Jerusalem. We are called to undertake a path of inner transformation structured around the charism of our Order: its fundamental contemplative dimension, nourished by prayer and service in community, enables us to receive the gift of the Spirit and to allow ourselves to be purified and enlightened together, so that we may "see God" and allow the Spirit to unite us to him, recognising his presence in ourselves, in our brothers and sisters, in nature and in history.

WE ARE PART OF THE CHURCH AND LIVE WITHIN HISTORY

14. “... written by the Patriarch of Jerusalem, of blessed memory, which, as you say, you humbly received before the General Council.” Yet another point can be discerned in the pope’s brief words: the ecclesial dimension, present in at least three respects. First, precisely in the fact that we are dealing with a papal document; thus, the Church’s highest authority provides us with an authoritative document in which it expresses recognition of our existence as Carmelites. Pope Honorius III’s act was an act of discernment, by which he recognised the goodness and truth of an experience destined to develop an original charism. Secondly, both the patriarch Albert, author of the “norm of life,” and the General Council (the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215), which had issued precise directives for the establishment of new regular communities, are mentioned. These elements are important because they place us, as they rightly should, within the ecclesial body, and this leads us to the third point for reflection: we are members of the community of believers in Jesus the Lord; we are living stones for the building of the temple (cf. 1 Peter 2:5). Through our penitential and prayerful life, our apostolic and missionary commitment, and our fraternal communion, we can contribute to offering a “living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God” (Romans 12:1). We are Carmelites with, in and for the Church; we cannot withdraw into ourselves or turn in upon ourselves, but must open ourselves to a humble and simple service of the people of God. On this journey we are in relationship with all the components of the Christian community, from whom we learn, with whom we engage in dialogue, and with whom we share our experience.
15. “Given at Rieti, in the tenth year of our pontificate, two days before the Kalends of February (30 January 1226).” One final consideration may be drawn from the date. The period in which the hermits of Carmel received the letter was rich in significant events. In that same year, on 3 October, St Francis of Assisi died, and Pope Honorius survived him by little more than a year, dying on 18 March 1227. Frederick II, known as *stupor mundi et immutator mirabilium* (wonder of the world and transformer of marvellous things), occupied the imperial throne; he would soon come into conflict with the new pontiff, Ugolino, Count of Segni, who became Pope Gregory IX (1227–1241). The latter would issue other important letters to the Carmelites, including one requiring poverty while allowing them to keep animals for transport and poultry, a provision later incorporated into the text of the Rule. The period was not an easy one: there were widespread and continuous conflicts between pope and emperor, between cities and feudal lords, between heretical movements and the Church, and between Muslims and Christians in the Holy Land. It was no better a time than many others, nor than our own. Our fathers had withdrawn into the desert of Carmel to live in holy penance, adopting a prophetic stance towards the society of their time and proposing a way of life that was essential, simple, peaceful and fraternal—authentically human because evangelical.

CALLED TO EVANGELICAL PROPHECY

16. For our troubled age, beset by a thousand problems, obedience to the Rule can be a humble yet powerful testimony of total adherence to Christ and his Gospel. We are all called, brothers and sisters of both Orders and in its different expressions of Carmelite life, to the silent listening to the Word, withdrawal from the world and its mentality, personal and communal prayer, silent work for our support and for the good of the people of God, welcoming and available fraternity, spiritual combat and communal discernment. All this is taught to us by the Rule and the tradition that has sprung from it. Pope Honorius III’s invitation to live “*regulariter ... in remissionem peccatorum*” remains valid for us: it directs us towards the path of inner transformation to which we are called, following the example of Mary and Elijah.

17. We are living in a climate of widespread and permanent conflict (a “world war fought piecemeal,” as Pope Francis called it),¹⁰ and we are also challenged by dramatic climate change, by the various forms of poverty and exploitation suffered by populations subjected to the abuses of multinational corporations and political powers unconcerned with peace and people’s well-being, but deeply concerned with their own capacity for enrichment, imagined as limitless. In the face of all this, we can set against it a choice of simple living, founded on the Gospel, obedience, poverty, respect and fraternal love, and generosity in service. All this makes it possible to offer dialogue and reconciliation as a response to difficult situations of conflict. Likewise, in the face of the allurements of artificial intelligence, we can keep alive an appreciation of our ‘*magnifica humanitas*’ ever capable of freedom and responsibility.¹¹ Only continual prayer and union with God can enable us to live in this way as men and women capable of recognising the absolute of God while also recognising our own dignity and the relativity of every other creature.

TOGETHER, ON THE JOURNEY TOWARDS THE FUTURE

18. Many people are still called to live according to the Carmelite Rule. For all of them, there is a commitment to know, appreciate and reinterpret the ancient tradition of Carmel. Older generations have the task of bearing witness to and recounting what they have received, so that those who have been called from afar and more recently may truly come into contact with the origins of the Order and fall in love with them. Jesus continues to call: let us become loudspeakers for his voice.
19. Hope, which has always nourished Carmelite spirituality, founded on the experience of the empty tomb and the encounter with the Crucified and Risen One, sustains us and guides us on the journey towards the fulfilment of history. Mary, our Mother and Sister, accompanies us and goes before us towards the goal. Devotion to the Mother of God and our Mother is not a sentimental or emotional reality; rather, it arises from the awareness that we are not alone on the journey and, above all, that creation and every person are not destined for perdition and annihilation, but for the fullness of life (cf. Romans 8:18–25).
20. Dear sisters and brothers, may this centenary be an occasion for renewed vitality and fresh impetus. May each of us rediscover the beauty of the Carmelite vocation and continue the journey in a spirit of genuine conversion and commitment to fraternal life and service in its various forms, but above all along that path, nourished by prayer, which leads to perfect union with God, as our saints teach us. Encouraged by their experience and teaching, let us live in the world without belonging to it (cf. John 17:14–19), while offering it the selfless witness of Christian life according to the Carmelite way.
21. We wish to conclude our reflection with a text by St Teresa of Jesus, which invites us not merely to remain with the memory of a glorious past, but to make it present today in order to build the future. It may serve as a fitting conclusion to all that we have considered: “I sometimes hear it said about the first members of religious orders that since they were the foundation the Lord granted them greater favours as He did to our holy forebears; and this is true. But we must always observe that they are the foundation for those who are to come. If we who live now had not fallen from where our forebears were, and those who come after us

¹⁰ Pope Francis used this phrase for the first time on 18th August 2014, during the conversation with journalists on the return flight from the apostolic journey to Seoul in South Korea; the expression was repeated several times during his pontificate.

¹¹ Cf. Leo XIV, Encyclical *Magnifica humanitas* on safeguarding the human person in the time of artificial intelligence (15 May 2026), Vatican City 2026.

would live as they did, the edifice would always be firm. What does it profit me that our forebears had been so holy if I afterward am so wretched that I leave the edifice damaged through bad customs? For it is clear that those who come will not so much remember those who lived many years ago as those they see before them” (F 4.6).

22. May Mary, *Mater et Decor Carmeli*, turn her gaze upon each one of us who keep the Rule of Carmel as a project of life. To her we entrust the whole Carmelite Family, so that it may “live in allegiance to Jesus Christ, serving him faithfully with a pure heart and a good conscience.”

Given at Rome, 17 September 2026.

Feast of St Albert of Jerusalem, bishop and legislator of our Order.

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