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Very Dear Brothers and Sisters of the Secular Order

With that joy that is the Lord's special gift I write to you on this feastday of Saint Joseph, "the provident protector of our Order" (CC OCD 52). Matthew's Gospel describes him as "a man of honour" (Mt 1, 19), faithful to the will of God and to the teachings of Sacred Scripture, and wise because of this. As such, Joseph is alert to the designs of God in history and can act in accordance with the will of the Lord. Matthew also portrays Joseph being humble and immediately obedient (cf. Mt 1,24; 2, 13-16. 19-23), following the example of the Virgin Mary. In this way, with his unique mission in salvation history, Joseph faithfully and wholeheartedly fulfils the role God entrusted to him as the protector of Our Lady and the Child Jesus.

Keeping these attributes of St. Joseph in mind as well as the theme of the Bishops' Synod this year, I would like to reflect in this letter on some important aspects of the *identity of the OCDS vocation*. In the complex reality of today's world we cannot afford to lose our way in secondary aspects of that vocation, thus running the risk of diluting it with extraneous trends in spirituality, that, at times, are not even Christian. I would just like to re-emphasise some "absolute terms" of reference that I hope may help you in living faithfully your vocation as Secular Carmelites.

1. We are all aware that the alterations occurring in the age in which we live bring about rapid and profound changes in our society. These particular times are characterised by the vast amount, variety and rapidity of the information we are deluged with at every moment. Often we are unable to assess it properly and our knowledge of events and our relationships with others remain blocked at a superficial level. Add to this the political and economic problems of so many countries where corruption, violence, wars, migration, social insecurity, famine etc. are rife. In a word, we live in an environment that is multicultural and secularised, full of conflict, and pluralist as regards religion. All of this leaves us with a sensation of being without any safe and lasting point of reference to direct us; it is a fluctuating and changing reality, a source of perpetual unrest.

On the other hand, we note what is occurring within some communities of the Order – disgregation due to lack of fraternal cohesion, the ageing process of many members, conflict arising from different interpretations of the charism, attachment to power, disagreement over superficial details (as, for example, external symbols of membership of OCDS) etc. Such factors certainly weaken the sense of membership or belonging and, at times, can lead to actual abandonment. All of this contradicts the whole meaning of the existence of communities and of their mission.

Clarity regarding your precise identity and its fundamental components allows you to confront this internal and external reality with courage and equilibrium. It helps you to live the call to the OCDS with the prophetic determination of one walking resolutely towards "the summit of the Mountain which is Christ" as "witnesses of the presence of God" (CC 25) among His people.

2. To begin with, one common element which is essential to the identity of all members of our Order, is our awareness of being a member of the Church, the people of God and the mystery of communion (cf. LG ch. 11; ChL 8). As Catholics and Carmelites we are called to "a life of allegiance to Jesus Christ" (Rule 2), thanks to our membership of the Church, originating with Baptism and Confirmation and constantly sustained by the Eucharist and the grace of the other Sacraments.

More specifically still, your vocation as Christian laypersons in the Teresian Carmel is characterized by your being "secular". It is the call to follow Jesus in the secular world, to live and give witness to Gospel values in "friendship with Him who we know loves us" (L 8,5), serving the Church and dealing with temporal affairs in accordance with the will of God (cf. LG 31; ChL 15;

CC 3). In a spirit of faith, hope and charity, as you carry out your daily commitments of family life, work and other cultural and secular engagements, you live in constant union with God and are thus sanctified. We remember that this is possible due to your sharing in the three offices of Christ, priest, prophet and king (cf. LG 10. 34-36; ChL 14; cf. CC Introduction 1).

3. Secondly, Secular Carmel is historically linked with all the religious of the Discalced Carmelite Order (cf. CC2). The Magisterium's recognition of this bond gives the Secular Order its juridical standing. Your OCDS Constitutions state that you are part of the nucleus of the Order, together with the Nuns and Friars: "they are sons and daughters of the Order of Our Lady of Mount Carmel and of St. Teresa of Jesus" and "they share the same charism as the religious" (CC Introduction 1). Furthermore, the OCDS has been recognised and approved by the Church as a public association of the faithful (cf. CC 37; CIC can. 303), whereby you have a juridical "personality" with rights and obligations in the Church (CC 40; CIC cans. 116. 113. 301-315). And although you depend juridically on the Discalced Carmelite friars (CC 41), you still have autonomy of government and formation, as is defined by the documents that regulate the OCDS. Finally, as I pointed out in my letter to you last year, you are called to collaborate in the various modalities of the Order's mission in the Church, particularly in the area of promoting the spiritual life (Cf. CC 25-28).

4. Another consideration, this one essential in the formation, development and maturing of vocational identity, is the role of prayer in its various expressions (cf. CC 35). St. Teresa sees it as "basis and fundamental role of her religious family (CC 17). The life of prayer, particularly with *lectio divina*, lets us see the meaning of life and the events of history with the eyes of God, as well as understanding that "all the harm which comes to the world is due to a failure to know the truths of Scripture in the clarity of their truth" (L 40, 1).

First and foremost, from the example and teaching of Jesus we learn to be daughters and sons and to pray to our Father with trust (cf. Mt 6, 5-15). Our Holy Mother recommends that we learn from His divine lips (cf. W 26, 10). As well as Jesus, we have the example of Mary who pondered all these events in her heart (cf. Lk 2, 19-52). She is the model of fidelity in listening to the Lord (CC4) "in Scripture and in life" (CC 29) and she teaches us to behold and to praise His work in history (cf. Lk 1, 46-55). With her, St. Joseph is a master of prayer (cf. L 6, 6-8): his watchful silence teaches us to be attentive to the needs of others.

As well as that, prayer life according to the doctrines of Sts. Teresa and John of the Cross, demands the practice of the virtues, calling each person to experience and live their personal and liturgical prayer as friendship with Jesus. For St. Teresa, living in His friendship means loving Him and trying to have Him always alongside us, remembering frequently and lovingly that we are in His presence even in the midst of our daily occupations (W 26, 2; L 22, 7; F 5, 16). These are ways of behaving very similar to those recommended by St. John of the Cross: loving attention to God (2 As 14, 6; 15, 2. 4-5; 1 DN 10, 4), vigilance in faith, hope and charity (cf. CC 8). It is obvious, according to the teaching of our Saints, that prayer must have a solid foundation, like the house built on rock (cf. Mt 7, 24-26; cf. 5 M 2, 3-6).

These brief references to the doctrine on prayer will remind us of how important it is to take it seriously in our personal lives and to find time to remain in silence with the Lord. And the same holds true for communities. During their meetings, some time should be reserved for meditation, where they remain together in silence in the Lord's presence. In this way, from the depths of their personal meetings with the Lord each individual can share with others their own spiritual journey (cf. CC 18; 24 c). In this sharing you obviously also help each other in disengaging from worldly affairs and in being grateful to God, as St. Teresa writes concerning those who genuinely love one another in Christ (cf. L 16,7).

5. Finally, but equally important, I would like to emphasise one further consideration that follows on what I have just mentioned: fraternal community with regard to the vocational identity of the OCDS. This is a matter of the utmost importance at a time when individualism is becoming

increasingly prevalent. This individualism isolates people and threatens their deepest social instincts, which is being an image of the Blessed Trinity. Fraternal life has already been highlighted in Chapter 3B which was recently added to your Constitutions. You will find there a synthesis of doctrinal teaching and Teresian and San Juanist charism on fraternal life in the Secular Carmel.

Your *Ratio* states that communities are called to “incarnate in today’s world a Carmelite identity and the service which this identity offers to God, to the Church, to the Order and to the world” (*Ratio Institutionis* 3). Here we see the dynamic aspect of this identity and the reasons why your communities must make constant efforts at *aggiornamento* and adaptation to the times and places in which they are located. This aspect of the dynamics of our charism will prevent lapses into formalism based on secondary matters or on traditions that are closed off within themselves, often indeed obsolete or without any significance for people of today. In *Evangelii Gaudium* the Pope asks us to break free from “the hackneyed pastoral excuses that ‘it has always been done like this’, instead of being courageous and creative in efforts to re-think the objectives, structures, style and evangelizing methods of your own communities” (EG 33). To avoid possible aberrations and not make – again in the words of Pope Francis – “a museum mummy” of the Order’s charism and in order to be faithful to the true purpose of your communities, it is important to find ways of making Teresian Carmelite spirituality relevant for today. It means being courageously responsive to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit. This can only be achieved if every one in your communities has a strong sense of membership, together with creative fidelity and responsibility (cf. CC 24c).

My dear Brothers and Sisters, these are some reflections that I considered it important to share with you for the times in which we live. If the points that I refer to are embraced devotedly and diligently they will allow you to live the OCDS vocation faithfully. You will progress in constancy and courage, strengthened by the mysterious presence of the Risen Lord who walks with us.

Just as He supported St. Joseph in his mission and encouraged him “not to be afraid” (Mt 1, 20), He will do the same for us. St. Teresa reminds us: “For the time is always propitious for God to grant His great favours to those who truly serve Him” (F 4, 5). We pray to the Holy Spirit that He may enlighten us and make us signs of God’s presence in our world today.

May the examples of the Mother of Carmel, St. Joseph, and our own Saints assist us in living and protecting faithfully our vocations to Carmel in allegiance to Christ, thus ensuring that we pass on the heritage to those who come after us.

Dear Brothers and Sisters, while wishing you, your families and communities a very Happy Easter, I also pray that the Risen Lord may renew you in His Paschal mystery and help you become shining beacons of His love everywhere. Please pray for me, too, and I ask the Lord to bless you all.



Father Saverio Cannistrà, OCD
Superior General

Rome, 19 March 2018 - Solemnity of St. Joseph, Patron of the Church

N.B. Would the Provinces that have not already done so, please send to E-mail address ocdinfoweb@gmail.com details of your web links, facebook, twitter, blogs etc., so that we can include them in the official web page of the General Curia:

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Thank you for your cooperation