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Dear Brothers and Sisters of the Secular Order,

On this day when we commemorate the 505th anniversary of the birth of our Holy Mother Saint Teresa, I greet you, using the words with which Teresa used to begin her letters: may *Jesus and the grace of the Holy Spirit be with you*.

This anniversary reminds us of the great gifts that the Lord gave to Holy Mother. We also remember this year the 50th anniversary of the Doctorate proclaimed by St. Paul VI on September 27, 1970. The Apostolic Letter *Multiformis sapientia Dei*, which I invite you to read and meditate on, recognizes that Teresa “has always been celebrated, both for the extraordinary facts of her life, for the rare virtues of her soul and for her spirit of good judgment”, and “a very sure guide and teacher of sacred sciences”. As Teresa herself wrote, to remember what “is a gift and that we possess it, we are compelled to love the giver.” (cf. *Life* 10:5). Therefore, in recognizing the gifts received from God’s goodness in the lives of our Saints, in the history of our Order, as well as in the personal history of each one of us, everything invites us to thank Him and to grasp the signs of His living, faithful, and active presence in the events of our time.

In this context I would like to recall this year another important event of 20 years ago: the 2nd International Congress of the OCDS held in San Juan de los Lagos (Mexico) from August 31 to September 7, 2000.

In commemorating this event, I would like, first of all, to thank all those who collaborated in the organization and in the organization of the Congress, in particular Fr. Aloysius Deeney OCD (General Delegate for OCDS), Irma Estrada Franco OCDS (General Secretary of the OCDS), and the members of the OCDS of Mexico.

Secondly, after a brief reminder of the Congress, I would like to enumerate some of its fruits, offering some reflections so that you may continue on your path of following Jesus according to the charism of the Teresian Carmel with that attitude dear to the Cardinal, and now Saint, John Henry Newman: “To live is to change, and to be perfect means to have changed many times”.

The 2nd International Congress

The Letter to the Congress participants (of 23 September 1999) stated that “the theme and purpose of the Congress will be the revision of the Rule of Life [of 1979], with particular attention to the responsibilities and gifts of the laity in the Order and in the Church, as expressed in *Christifideles laici*, *Vita Consecrata*, and other documents of the Church”.

This objective responded to the request of the 1st International Congress of the OCDS in 1996 (held in Rome) and the operative conclusions of the OCD General Chapter of 1997: “The Secular Order should be promoted and supported in the various Circumscriptions of the Order, according to the diversity of situations. Particular attention should be given to the revision of the *Rule of Life* from the laity’s point of view” (n. 107.a).

The 2nd Congress, in which about 250 lay and religious delegates participated, had as its motto: *A single Order with the same charism*. It emphasized that the one charism of the Order is lived

differently by the friars, the nuns, and the seculars, and that from a solid formation on the identity of the laity of the Order, based on the doctrine of our Holy Founding Parents, also springs the essence of their mission, that of witnessing to friendship with Christ and with their brothers and sisters in the midst of the world.

Some Fruits of the Congress

A first fruit of the 2nd Congress was the creation of an International Commission composed of 10 members of the OCDS of different nationalities. The objective was to continue the drafting of the new Constitutions. It was coordinated by the General Delegate and took into account the contributions of the 1st International Congress and the proposals of the working groups of the 2nd Congress, as well as other contributions sent by the Provinces. The editorial work was carried out in 3 years, thus in 2003 a draft of the new Constitutions of the OCDS was presented at the General Chapter of Avila. This draft was then revised by the General Definitory and finally sent to the Holy See, which approved it in June 2003.

The new Constitutions were enriched with the insertion of the text of the Rule of St. Albert. This was an important addition because the Rule is the primordial inspiration common to all: the friars, the nuns and the laity. This was confirmed with the insertion in the Constitutions of the affirmation that *the laity of the OCDS are members of the Order*, like the friars and nuns (cf. *Proemio* and Art. 1); Secular Carmelites live the charism of Teresa of Jesus and John of the Cross in the world and enrich consecrated life (OCD friars and nuns) with their secular style of life.

A challenge that perhaps we must continue to face in the circumscriptions is that the experience of the charism of the Teresian Carmel for OCDS should be realized first of all in the family environment, work, and other commitments in the midst of the world. It is there that the witness of the living God, who desires to maintain a relationship of friendship with every human being created in His image and likeness, should take place and bear witness. Unfortunately, it is perceived that there are still members of OCDS who live their vocation only in the sacristies of monasteries or convents, without an effective “spreading” of the charism in the world around them.

Another fruit of the Congress was the clarification of the identity of the laity in the Order. Your vocation is both contemplative, lay and apostolic, which presupposes a daily commitment to integrate these three key elements. This identity brings with it the awareness of having common elements of the Teresian charism with the other branches, with which to collaborate in an interdependence that respects the differences, the right autonomies, and the vocational identity proper to each one.

The autonomy of the OCDS must be well understood. It concerns government according to its own Constitutions and Statutes, but also formation. The accompaniment of the friars, on whom for historical reasons the OCDS depends juridically (cf. Const. 41; Ratio 19; cf. Const. 2), should promote the maturity of lay identity in the Order and fraternal relationships of collaboration, with mutual respect for the autonomy of each one.

A third fruit of the Congress was the emphasis on the need to participate in the mission and apostolate of the Church and the Order as an integral part of the OCDS lay identity. The Church asks for this in the documents of the Second Vatican Council, in *Christifideles laici* (1988) and in *Vita Consecrata* (1996). This dimension was somewhat underestimated and hidden because of a reductive vision of contemplation. Instead, we know that the fruit of authentic contemplative prayer is service to others, striving to bring about “good works” (cf. St. Teresa, 5M 3,11; 7M 4,6) according to one’s own abilities and talents, for the good of the Church, the Order and society, as did Teresa and John of the Cross (cf. Const. 26).

Unfortunately, with regard to this, there are still misunderstandings and many people think that it is enough to attend community meetings for some practices of devotions, reflection or conferences, but without a real and concrete commitment of service in the activities of the Order or the Church in which one finds oneself. Perhaps this is due to weak formation which does not take into account what the Constitutions recommend: “In the last three years of initial formation there will be a deeper study of Scripture, the documents of the Church, the Saints of the Order, prayer, and how to participate in the apostolate of the Order...” (n. 36 d).

In the Congress, and as it appears in the Constitutions, the importance of the organization of *Provincial Councils* in the circumscriptions of the Order was highlighted (cf. Constitutions 57). Their specific mission is to prepare the Statutes of the circumscription and to coordinate the initiatives of the apostolate and formation in the communities. In this sense, many circumscriptions have organized and developed the OCDS with great commitment and have collaborated to increase awareness of the lay identity in the Order and a mature autonomy, growing in number, internal organization and formation, as well as developing communion among the communities. In other countries or circumscriptions, unfortunately and for various reasons, this has not been the case. The Provincial Council has not acted as a body of communion and animation both in the life of the communities and in relationship with the friars and nuns. And here, for all of us, we have a good way to go according to the principle of *synodality*, as I mentioned in last year’s letter.

Finally, as a further fruit of the Congress, in 2009 the *Ratio Institutionis* of the OCDS was published, which offers the guiding principles for the formation of the laity of the Teresian Carmel, reiterating the need for a solid formation that allows us undertake a vocational journey and service in the mission animated by the spirit of our Saints. More recently, the aspect of fraternal communion in the OCDS has been highlighted with the insertion of the chapter on fraternal communion (3 B) and the paragraph on St. Joseph (31 a). Thus, what is essential in the OCDS has been completed in the documents, defining your identity, objectives and goals as lay members of the Order.

Dear brothers and sisters of the OCDS,

With this commemoration of the Second International Congress of the OCDS, the signs of some of its fruits, as well as commemorating an important event in the history of the OCDS, I would like to thank the Lord with you for his gifts. At the same time, this urges us to grow spiritually, especially in living charity so that we may return love to the infinite Love of the Holy Trinity (cf. John of the Cross, *Song* 38, 2-4).

I urge you to know your documents more and more, especially the Constitutions, both in initial and ongoing formation. Always remember that a charism in the Church is a gift of the Holy Spirit; it is a living and dynamic reality which must be constantly cultivated and made to bear fruit, otherwise it rots. It is there, in the documents of the OCDS, that you find the essential elements of the charism of the Teresian Carmel adapted to your lay life. Faced with the many commitments and rapid changes in our post-modern world, many times we risk losing our roots and we forget who we are. Returning from time to time to the Constitutions and the writings of our Saints will confirm you in a solid doctrine that allows you to walk with firmness and enthusiasm on the streets of the world.

I ask the Lord to enlighten you so that you may continue to be faithful to the essential elements of your vocation as Secular Carmelites. May the light and strength which come from prayer as friendship with the Lord and fraternal relationship with your brothers and sisters enable you to respond to the challenges and needs of your personal, family and community realities.

I also entrust to your fraternal and filial prayer the last *Extraordinary Definitory* of this sexennium, which will take place in September in Mexico City, as well as the preparation work for the General Chapter to be held in May 2021.

I wish a Holy Easter of Resurrection to each of you, your families and communities. May the contemplation of the Risen Christ fill you with peace and joy (cf. *Way* 26:4). May Mary, Queen of Heaven, give you the joy of her Living Son forever.

Fraternally



Fr. Saverio Cannistrà
Fr Saverio Cannistrà OCD
Superior General

PS: I would like to add to you Secular Carmelite sisters and brothers, and to your loved ones, a word of closeness, comfort, and hope in these moments of trial due to the Covid-19. It is an unexpected, fast, and enveloping situation that makes us experience our human fragility and precariousness: physical, psychological, economic, and above all it leads us to reflect on our relationship with God, others, and nature.

Obviously, our first duty is to abide by the dispositions of the civil and ecclesiastical authorities in order to avoid exposing ourselves to contagion and putting our own family and the people around us at risk.

I know that there are many challenges facing you, especially being unable to work to support the family. Those who have children and the elderly at home find themselves having to manage their own care and educational needs in confined spaces. Even this creates tension and requires sacrifices. Others, on the other hand, experience loneliness and isolation, locked up at home without the possibility of receiving visitors. These situations require a great deal of balance, great patience, and the daily commitment to live harmoniously and peacefully with others. Definitely, it is a propitious time to exercise the Teresian virtues.

Today we are rightly concerned to equip ourselves with devices to protect ourselves from contagion, but it is also important to wear the armor of which our Rule speaks to us, the “weapons of the virtues, living an intense life of faith, hope and charity” (CC 6 f), trusting in God, who allows trial, but does not abandon us in it. We constantly remember the words of Isaiah, quoted in our Rule: “In silence and hope will be your strength” (Is 35:15; *Rule of St Albert*, 21).

Let us take advantage of this time of apparent powerlessness to pray, read, form ourselves, strengthen family relationships, making virtue out of necessity, as our Holy Mother St. Teresa said (cf. *Way* 32:4; 5; M 3:7; 6 M 5:2). Let us intensify our prayer, asking the Lord’s Mercy for an end to this pandemic and other evils; may He give strength to all those involved in the fight against the virus and assistance to the sick.