



SUPERIOR GENERAL OF DISCALCED CARMELITES  
Corso d'Italia, 38  
00198 Roma – Italia

## **To the Discalced Carmelite Nuns**

Rome, April 20, 2021

Dear Sisters,

today marks the twelfth anniversary of my service as Superior General of the Teresian Carmel. As it happened, I was elected on the 20<sup>th</sup> of April at Fatima. In the rite of election, when I was asked, “Do you accept?” I believe I replied, “Yes, I do accept”, believing this to be God’s will. And within me I added: “although (or perhaps precisely because) it is absolutely incomprehensible, considering who I am, with almost no experience (only one year as Provincial Superior of a small Province) and my rather young age for this assignment (I was 50 years old)”. Twelve years later, and now nearing the end of my mandate, I can only thank God for calling me to this responsibility. Even in the awareness of the many mistakes made and the many more things I could have done, as well as better, I thank the Lord and the brothers and sisters who welcomed me with great affection and showed me a gratitude far greater than I merited. It seems to me that I have given everything I have and that I am, for better or for worse, but above all I know that I have received the abundance of a family blessed by the Lord, and custodian of an invaluable gift of grace for the life of the Church and of the world.

Part of this unique experience, which has formed and changed me in many respects, is the relationship with you, my dear sisters and mothers. I have learned much *about* you and *from* you. Previously, I had a rather limited knowledge of you. Above all, I did not understand how deep the bond is that unites us and how our ways are and must remain inseparable. Distinct, of course, so that there may be the complementarity and mutual enrichment desired by Holy Mother Teresa, but taking care that distinction and autonomy do not turn into distance, which creates strangers, incapable of communicating with each other and in depth. During these years I have often spoken of the importance of the relationship of family communion and equal exchange between us and I am still convinced that this is one of the paths through which the renewal of our Order passes. Renewing ourselves means renewing our relationships. We know that for the male branch of the Order the relationship with the female branch is not a secondary or incidental aspect, but lies at the origin of its existence. We men have often been ashamed of this, we have tried to hide it and forget it, but every

time we have done so, we risked losing our identity and turning ourselves into something other than what the Spirit had suggested to Teresa, be it a group of hermits or a society of apostolic life. The typically Teresian balance between the hermit dimension and the community dimension, as well as the unique quality of her idea of contemplative life, which does not separate itself from history, but takes it and brings it into the relationship with God, is somehow linked to the correctness of relationship between brothers and sisters. In that creation of the Spirit that we call charism, there is such a balance between the parts that, if a dimension is weakened or omitted, this has consequences on the overall harmony. Perhaps we can say that the fullness of experience of the Teresian charism, the "beauty of Carmel", happens only in the integration of the two ways of living it, that of the sisters and that of the brothers. We have to walk with two legs, breathe with two lungs, feeling them both as our limbs, parts of the same body.

It is not my intention to describe this relationship in an idyllic way, because that would not be true. We must not nourish ourselves on illusions, which are quickly disproved by reality, but on convictions, to fight for, first and foremost within ourselves, and to remain faithful to, in the midst of trials and difficulties. If we reflect on our relationship with each other, at a personal and community level, I believe that we will feel the need to ask forgiveness for having made many mistakes 'in our thoughts and in our words, in what we have done and in what we have failed to do'. But a real relationship exists and grows only in this conflict of light and shadow, of resistance to the 'old man' and following the inspirations of the new creature, of prejudices to overcome and freedom to be gained. It is a challenging journey, which requires energy, time and passion. All in all, it is easy to provide useful services: what is difficult is to build a humanly and spiritually solid relationship, on which one can count. But this is precisely what we need: to support the other, to find that we are actually supported and that when the other is missing, a vacuum is created that risks causing us to fall. Saint Teresa would say that we must "support one another to move forward".<sup>1</sup>

If I have picked up my pen to write to you, it is not just to offer my thanks for the prayers and affection by which you have sustained me during these years, but also to leave you this invitation to join forces. Teresa, in order to carry out the project of refounding Carmel entrusted to her by God, sought allies. She found very few, in fact, but without them, despite all the graces with which she had been favored, she would not have been able to complete her mission. What is striking when reading her writings is the lucidity with which she recognizes on the one hand the greatness of the enterprise to which she has been called, and on the other hand her smallness and the need for human help, counselors, guides and companions in the journey, and for this reason she prays incessantly to the Lord for them. When she finds brothers and sisters capable of understanding and sharing her

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<sup>1</sup> *Life* 7: 22: «it is necessary for those who serve Him to become shields for one another that they might advance».

adventure, she makes a firm pact of friendship and covenant with them, which goes beyond feelings and emotions. Teresa knows that she is a vulnerable woman in her relationships with others, but after a long and tiring struggle she has been given the peace of a heart liberated from affective dependency. The more the work she is doing takes concrete form, the more Teresa throws herself into the enterprise, struggling and loving, suffering and exulting, hoping and trembling. Many enemies are made, but also a few real friends yet that was enough for her to go ahead.

It is good for us to remember from what events of the past, from what human experience we came into existence, because if today we feel the need to be reborn and to rediscover the original spirit, that can only happen by having similar experiences. A new life is always born through the pains and risks of childbirth. You do not buy it, nor do you create it by decree. The decrees come later, to recognize the work that God has done in us. Perhaps the word '*reborn*' will be too much for some. And yet the spiritual life of each of us is made up of so many deaths and rebirths and only in this way is it kept alive. The path of a human being is not a straight one, with a uniform motion, nor is the path of a religious community, if we do not want to reduce it to its institutional profile. It is the nature of institutions to be stable and measurable in quantitative terms: we can count how many members of an Order or community there are, how many vocations arrive and those that leave, how many years a foundation lasts, the number of houses, the amount of economic resources. These are important data, which make us aware of the objective reality of the institution and enable us to make predictions about its near future. Living, however, is much more and quite different than administering an institution. One of the dangers, perhaps *the* greatest danger of our time, is to forget what it means for a human being and a Christian to live, as well as being convinced that existence is divided between working time to make the structure work, and free time to distract attention and relax tensions. If by chance this vision of life and a human being had also entered our communities and souls, then there is a need to be reborn, to back down and start over. It does not matter, in fact, which institution or company you work for: what matters is to understand if we have also become part of a system that gets used to working rather than existing<sup>2</sup>. Even the pandemic in which we have been immersed for more than a year, we risk thinking about it and living through it as if it were only a jammed machine, waiting for it to resume functioning as before and even better than before.

This is not the place to delve into complex philosophical and sociological analyses of the time in which we live, but neither can we dispense ourselves from seriously reflecting upon it, as if the space within our convents and monasteries was impervious to the mentality of today's world. Well we know that this is not so, nor can it be. The Lord did not remove his disciples from the world, but gave them, through the gift of the Spirit, the freedom not to be of the world (Jn 15:19). Being His

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<sup>2</sup> I am referring to the title of the book by M. BENASAYAG, *Funzionare o esistere?*, Vita e Pensiero, Milan 2019.

means not being of the world and this implies a constant struggle and vigilance concerning ourselves. If our attention is taken over by other concerns and our freedom of thought and action is heavily conditioned by the environment around us, we could give up our battle as lost. Our sight becomes blurred and we are no longer able to see beyond the surface, to discern the signs of God's presence and the seeds of the future that he places in our lives. In this way we deprive the Church and the world of our most authentic and essential service. Indeed, who more than religious and contemplatives should help the Church and the world to see with clear and prophetic eyes God's plan woven into the intricate fabric of our history? Remember pope Francis' exhortation to you: " Be torches to guide men and women along their journey through the dark night of time. Be sentinels of the morning, heralding the dawn. By your transfigured life, and with simple words pondered in silence, shows us the One Who is the way, and the truth and the life, the Lord Who alone brings us fulfilment and bestows life in abundance". And he concludes: "Cherish the prophetic value of your lives of self-sacrifice" (VDQ 6). This is precisely what it is all about: keeping alive the prophecy inherent in our Teresian Carmelite vocation.

I'm not pessimistic, dear sisters. How could I be after these years that I have lived in contact with so many people who love God and give their lives with joy? I am sure that the fire of the Spirit is not going out, but remains and is preserved like the embers under the ashes, waiting for new breath to revive it. We must pray that this breath of life may still blow over Carmel. But we must also help each other to 'undeceive ourselves', as Saint Teresa loved to say. It is not time to worry about 'matters that have little importance'<sup>3</sup>. It pains me to observe that often it is precisely these less important things that occupy us, wasting time and energy on what does not give life or is already dead, while neglecting to draw on the sources of living water. In recent years I have been accompanied by a verse from the *Book of Proverbs*, which I have mentioned several times, a verse particularly dear to an author, indeed a witness, who has recognized with prophetic clarity the challenges of the Church in our time, Dietrich Bonhöffer: "More than all else, keep watch over your heart, since here are the wellsprings of life" (Pr 4: 23). I fear that we are not guarding our hearts enough, that we are not listening to it and we are not treating and cultivating it. Then, in it easily lurk what ancient monasticism called "bad spirits". This is a matter worth dealing with: who is living in my heart? In whose hand have I put its keys? We think we are the masters of it and we sincerely want to hand it over to our Friend and Lord, but in reality it is often not so. Without realizing it, we have let into ourselves and our communities evil spirits, which now circulate freely and orient us towards the dead ends of worldliness.

We need to talk about all this, to help one another as brothers and sisters, to make a common front against this invasion that deprives us of the sole thing that makes living this life worth the pain:

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<sup>3</sup> Way 1: 5 "negocios de poca importancia".

the radicality of a heart that gives unreservedly to Jesus and his Word. We do not need fearful marches backward or illusory flights forward, both of which seem to me to be evasions of the real problem to be faced. It is not the number of houses, nor the vocations, it is not the amount of activity that we will be able to carry out that will ensure a future worthy of our past. It is the courage to seek the truth both within and outside of ourselves and to make decisions consistent with what we have recognized as true, no matter if it does not correspond to what the world expects or what has been done so far. There is no doubt that in the next few years we will grow less and less, but that does not bother me. If we separate, if we allow ourselves to be distracted by the interests of the world and of the flesh, often disguised as religious and spiritual forms, then, yes, we will have something to fear.

I entrust to your prayers all that goes into the preparation of the next General Chapter. I know that we will not lack your spiritual and sisterly support. May Mary be our guide and teacher in welcoming the Word and allowing him to become flesh in our midst.

Your brother in Carmel,

Br. Saverio Cannistrà ocd