



**SUPERIOR GENERAL OF DISCALCED CARMELITES**  
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**LETTER TO THE ORDER**  
**ON THE SOLEMNITY OF OUR HOLY MOTHER SAINT TERESA OF JESUS**

Rome, October 15, 2024

My dear brothers and sisters of the Teresian Carmel,

It gives me great joy to be able to greet you on this feast of our mother Saint Teresa. I sincerely hope that, as you receive this letter, you will be at peace and with courage, even in the midst of the difficulties and struggles that are never lacking. Some time ago I wanted to have sent you this letter, with a very specific theme, in the spirit and passion of Teresa of Jesus for the truth and for a good intellectual, vital, integral formation, which helps us to walk in truth, as an Order, as communities and personally, always allowing us to be enlightened, humble and receptive, on the journey.

In the last week of June, I attended the third annual research seminar on the intellectual life of our Order. Established in 2022, this seminar aims to facilitate dialogue between Carmelites engaged in academic research, and to nurture and promote intellectual activity throughout the whole Order. The idea for the seminar was born after listening for several days to the professors and the Teresianum community in the beginning of my Generalate, with the question of how Carmel and Carmelite spirituality and theology are responding to the great challenges and questions of today. The question of thought and reflection based on prayer and listening to the present time. Where is the charism of Carmel as silence and opportune word for the man and woman of today?

More than fifty years ago the Second Vatican Council invited us as religious to return to the sources of our charisms, to the inspirations of our many and varied traditions (*Perfectae Caritatis*, 2). Within our own Order, a generation of scholars took up the task with enthusiasm, and today we continue to benefit from the fruits of their labours: critical editions of the writings of our saints, translations of their texts into languages which can be read around the world, careful biographies of their lives, and detailed expositions of their spiritual and mystical theology. As that generation of Carmelite scholars passes away – one thinks of the deaths of so many in recent years – we who follow them must ask ourselves how we can take up their work today; how we can both build on the foundations they so expertly laid and make the fullest use of all they have given to our Order.

Study and research do not occur in a vacuum, but within the living context of our Carmelite communities and amid the conditions of our contemporary world. In these circumstances, we find many factors that currently hinder us from devoting time and energy to the intellectual life. The declining number of vocations in so many regions creates a pressure to attend to that which is immediately necessary: the fulfilling of pastoral commitments, the care of our elderly brothers and sisters, administrative and bureaucratic tasks which enable the ongoing life of our institutions. Likewise, in areas where Carmelite life, newly planted, is flourishing, the establishing of new communities and the unfolding of new areas of preaching and other ministries, impose immediate and insistent demands on those at the forefront of this activity. Wherever we are, it seems we are not a generation of Carmelites who are looking for things to do. In this context, attending to our intellectual life can sometimes feel like either an indulgence or a distant wish at the bottom of a long list of more pressing priorities.

Similarly, much in our contemporary world mitigates against the pursuit of a serious and committed dedication to study. Social media has conditioned us to read superficially, to filter material only for the particular details we need, to think and communicate in sound bites. In what has been coined a ‘post-truth society’, established facts are disputed, truth has become relative, authorities and experts are viewed with suspicion, institutions, and the wisdom they offer, regarded as inherently untrustworthy. Of particular concern for us, the study of science and technology, aimed at furthering the knowledge and capabilities of humanity, is often seen as more valuable and productive than the pursuit of knowledge in realms such as theology and spirituality, where the fruits of knowledge may be seen as less likely to enrich human society, at least in terms of financial and technological gains. It is true that few theologians are destined for wealth and fame!

Even within the family of the Church, our Discalced Carmelite Order has not always been seen as possessing a strong and vibrant tradition of intellectual activity, perhaps in the way that the scholarship of the Jesuits and Dominicans is so highly regarded, or the monastic learning of the Benedictine family. Yet this belies the fact that St Teresa saw intellectual activity, and the need for a commitment to reading and serious study, as lying at the heart of her vision for the spiritual life. Teresa herself possessed a seemingly unquenchable thirst for knowledge. She was tireless in seeking the counsel of learned men – both as confessors and advisors – in her desire to understand the truths at the heart of her mystical experiences. Moreover, she saw this counsel as essential for the prioresses who would lead her new communities, and indeed beneficial for all the sisters: ‘always inquire, daughters, from those who are learned, for through them you will learn how to advance along the way of perfection’ (*Foundations*, 19.1). Nor was such guidance purely functional: Teresa understood that the opportunity to read deeply of the best of Christian literature would nourish the souls of her daughters, enriching them in ways which were essential to their flourishing as spiritual women: ‘the prioress should see to it that good books are available [...] this sustenance for the soul is in some way as necessary as is food for the body’ (*Constitutions*, 8 [=II.7]).

Teresa’s famous injunction that our task in prayer is ‘not to think much but to love much’ (*Interior Castle*, IV.1.7), is frequently placed at the heart of her spiritual teaching, and rightly

so. Taken out of context, however, it can give the impression that Teresa saw the head and the heart as somehow in opposition to one another; that reason and critical thinking were an obstruction to the burning desire which lay at the heart of her relationship with God. Yet in reality Teresa saw no such opposition. Rather, intelligence was a valuable asset in the spiritual life, enabling sisters to grasp the good and yield to its transforming power (*Way of Perfection*, 14.2). Intelligence was, indeed, to be a criterion for accepting aspirants (*Constitutions*, 21 [=VI.1]). Similarly, Teresa commended those who could support their prayer with the knowledge they had acquired through learning, and saw it as a valuable aid to progress in the mystical life: ‘in my opinion a background of studies is like a treasure to aid in this practice [of prayer]’ she told her sisters (*Life*, 12.4). The intellectual life was thus at the service of prayer, underpinning it and nourishing it, and was therefore worthy of the sisters’ energies and attention: ‘since prayer must be the foundation of this house, it is necessary that we strive to dedicate ourselves to what most helps us in prayer’ (*Way of Perfection*, 4.9).

This essential harmony between our intellectual and spiritual lives is observable in Teresa’s example as well as in her teaching. She read the great authors of the Christian tradition – the Church Fathers and the spiritual writers of the Middle Ages – in order to inform her response to the present; she read scripture to deepen her encounter with Christ; she read the spirituality of contemporary writers such as Francisco de Osuna and Bernardino de Laredo to guide her quest for God. Teresa teaches us not only that we should read, but how and why we should read, bringing a critical engagement and a lively mind to the text, allowing our preconceptions to be challenged, our horizons to be broadened, and our way ahead to become clearer.

Following Teresa’s witness to the integral relationship between spirituality and study, we might go further in identifying a ‘spirituality of study’. There is a necessary asceticism to the task. In these times, especially, we are threatened with distraction, neglect, and dispersion. Serious reading requires a conscious discipline, a setting aside of distractions, a resolute turning of the mind and heart from other occupations. It is, for the most part, a solitary activity, requiring the silence and seclusion which allow ideas to resonate and unfold, enabling connections and implications to be painstakingly uncovered. It is, all too frequently, a task which yields its rewards only slowly, requiring us to set aside the desire for immediate feedback and reward, applause and affirmation. As such, it demands a particular poverty and engenders a certain humility. The ascetic demands of study are thus entirely in keeping with the founding values of the first hermits on Mount Carmel who were tasked to remain alone in their cells, pondering the Lord’s law day and night (*Rule*, 10). It is not for nothing that Teresa set aside an hour in each day for solitary reading (*Constitutions*, 6 [=II.3]).

At the same time, there is an additional community dimension to intellectual endeavour. We need to walk together in our quest for truth; to share insights and open new dimensions to one another. We need to support and assist each other; encouraging, challenging, sharing the joys and the frustrations. Teresa recognised this all too clearly. She delighted in the opportunity for discussion among like-minded friends: ‘I should like the five of us who at present love each other in Christ to make a kind of pact that [...] we might seek to gather together some time to free each other from illusion and to speak about how we might mend our ways and please God more’ (*Life*, 16.7). As Teresa would counsel, ‘since this spiritual friendship is so extremely

important for souls not yet fortified in virtue [...] I don't know how to urge it enough' (*Life*, 7.21).

Above all, spirituality and study, prayer and the intellectual life, arise from the same desire – the desire for God. In both prayer and study we are called to search for God, to seek Him who lies beyond human knowing yet reveals himself within it. Both prayer and study are pathways by which we enter into his mysteries, to stand, ultimately, at the limits of what can be known and spoken by the human mind. It is this Teresian desire for God, for the one thing necessary (Luke 10: 42), which validates all our intellectual activity, which animates it and gives it purpose. It is, in truth, utterly Teresian in its nature and goal.

If intellectual activity is wholly in accord with both the founding intention of the hermits on Mt Carmel and the reforming vision of St Teresa, there are, I believe, specific and urgent reasons why we need to re-situate it at the heart of our spiritual lives. In the first place, we read the writings of our saints to further our own development as Carmelites. As Teresa loved to point out, each new generation necessarily provides the immediate foundation on which its successors will build (*Foundations*, 4.6). We must take the care and the time to steep ourselves in the wisdom of our tradition, to appropriate the rich legacy of those who have gone before us, so as to fulfil their vision for our Order and enable future generations to do the same. The task of continually nourishing our spiritual lives by returning to the sources of our tradition is not an option or a luxury, but a necessity; it is the search for our deepest identity as Carmelites and our future depends on it.

Nor is the task simply about retrieving a static wisdom immortalised in the past. Eternal truths exist in a dynamic relationship with the circumstances of the present; they speak to our contemporary world with fresh relevance and, in turn, are illumined and amplified by that world. Edith Stein recognised this clearly, echoing Teresa in her understanding that the world in her time was once again in flames and of the absolute necessity of a Carmelite response (*Elevation of the Cross, September 14, 1939: Ave Crux, Spes Unica*). It is our duty now, as Carmelites of the present day, to bring the wisdom of our saints into dialogue with our contemporary circumstances, to understand how their words resonate in the current context and to offer the world a distinctly Carmelite witness to the power of Christ's victory over death. Only by doing so can we hope to respond to the cry of our modern-day world, a world torn apart by suffering, injustice, fear and inequality – one needs only to think of the ongoing wars and persecutions in Ukraine, Gaza, Lebanon, Burkina... of the conflicts in so many other regions, of the desperation of refugees and migrants, and of those struggling to exist in dire hunger and poverty.

Likewise, our Carmelite tradition has particular treasures to offer the Church, the community of Christ within that world. Our saints speak of God, of his all-encompassing love and saving action; they speak, with particular astuteness, of the mystery of the human person; they understand the nature of the Church's identity and mission. As such, our Carmelite saints are a resource not just for our own religious family, but for the whole Body of Christ. We need to be able to offer their rich wisdom to the Church to further her self-understanding and proclamation, to be a resource for all her theologians and preachers. To do so, we need to have

understood and appropriated that wisdom for ourselves. Likewise, it is fitting that we as Carmelites should, like Teresa, drink deeply from all the riches which Christian theology and spirituality have to offer, bringing them, in turn, into dialogue with the wisdom of our particular tradition.

In the light of these reflections, I cordially invite each one of us to renew our commitment to study and intellectual activity, seeing it as a central component of our Carmelite lives. Reading, study and intellectual enquiry inform our identity as Carmelites, nourish our life of prayer, and enable us to fulfil our specifically Carmelite mission to the Church and the world. All too often, study can be seen as nothing more than a means to an end, perhaps moving us towards the goal of profession or ordination. A serious obligation to reading and study is, however, far more essential than that; it is, quite simply, a constitutive dimension of our Carmelite vocation, a core component of the life to which we have committed ourselves.

True, there is a 'vocation within a vocation': to take that intellectual study to the highest level, to further the Order's knowledge and self-understanding, to contribute new insights and fresh understanding to our Carmelite tradition. This is the particular call of those who engage in research, teaching and writing. Those who carry out such tasks truly serve our Order. I would assert, however, that each and every one of us needs to take up the task at our own level, in our own place and time. We, too, need to nourish ourselves, to grow and expand our appreciation of our charism, to live out our Carmelite vocation in a way that is fruitful and life-giving, even in hidden and unknown ways, in the intimacy of our prayer and in the immediacy of our communities.

I wish to state unequivocally that this is not simply a task for the friars. Our sisters live out the Teresian vision in the particular context of their enclosed communities. Their wisdom and insights are forged within the crucible of the life Teresa marked out at the beginning of her reform. As such, our sisters bring a particular voice of experience to our Order's intellectual life; they bring insights, knowledge and perceptions which are unique to them. They read the writings of our saints in the resonating chamber of their enclosed communities and embody their teachings in the details of their daily lives. We need the indispensable contribution that only the sisters can make. Like Teresa, I urge prioresses to make adequate time and resources available to all sisters for reading, study and theological enquiry and to re-situate this task at the heart of the horarium. At times, it can be rightly feared that intellectual activity is an evasion; a distraction from the furnace of purification, or a temptation to pride and personal advancement. Yet, with proper discernment and prudence, study and intellectual work hold us to the tasks of personal transformation and spiritual maturation to which we are all committed. I therefore encourage all sisters to see this as a vital and vitalising component of their life and prayer in the Teresian Carmel.

Likewise, we need to pay greater attention to the wisdom that our brothers and sisters in the Secular Order can offer. They live our Carmelite charism in the heart of the world; in their homes, workplaces and local communities. They see and experience with particular acuity the dialogue between our spiritual tradition and the needs and circumstances of our contemporary world. Again, this is a crucible in which new insights and fresh levels of understanding are

forged. Our common intellectual life as Carmelites will only be complete when it incorporates all the voices of the Order – friars, sisters and secular Carmelites. Only then can we fathom the fullness of our tradition. Only by listening to one another in depth, Nuns, OCDS and friars, will we be able to complete the meaning of our charism in an adequate and just way (Cf. *Declaration on the Carmelite-Theresian Charism*, 43-44).

My dear brothers and sisters, at the heart of my desires for our Teresian family, I wish us to foster a love and regard for intellectual activity which can nourish our living of the charism, deepen our prayer, inform our identity and fuel our mission as Carmelites in the Church and the world.

Taking advantage of the occasion of this very special and joyful day of the Solemnity of Our Mother Saint Teresa, as I am returning from visiting our family in Asia (Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong) and heading back to Africa (Burundi-Rwanda and Senegal), I offer you this vision, but, above all, my closeness, my blessing and my gratitude for your dedication, your humble and courageous struggle, and for not to let hope wane.

My brothers and sisters, a very happy feast of our mother Teresa! May she gift us with her passion for God, for the Church and for humanity.



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