

Being Discalced Carmelite Brothers Today

Contribution to the XCII OCD General Chapter, based on the Declaration on the Carmelite Teresian Charism

And you are all brothers (Mt 23,8).

We are filled with joy at your invitation to participate as observers in this General Chapter, and to be able to express our word as religious brothers in this shared effort of renewal in the five continents. We are also happy with the light offered by the *Declaration on the Carmelite Teresian Charism*¹, prepared by the General Definitory in its two versions; it frames the word you ask of us. We also take the 2015 CIVCSVA instruction, *Identity and mission of the religious brother in the Church*² as a reference.

We congratulate ourselves because our religious family is gradually realizing the value and dignity of our vocation as brothers. Today we reflect on our identity with all of you, to discover the novelties that God leaves in our conscience, and that only makes sense within the framework of the fraternal relationships of our religious family.

By offering you the following reflections, we pay attention to what we can mean as brothers, not only for the Order and its renewal, but also before the world, for which we are light and salt (*Cf.* Mt 5,13), or as Saint John of the Cross says, “light and warmth” together with our beloved (F stanza 3). The most important thing about this identity, is that we know that we have a destiny, a common home from which we left and to which we return, which is the bosom of the Father. We are for God, and God sends us to make him known to the world (*Cf.* DC 2020, 46).

¹ From now on we will cite it with the acronym **DC** accompanied by the year of its writing and by the number.

² **Identity and mission of the religious brother in the Church**, we will quote it with the initials **IMRB** followed by the paragraph number and a letter when there are several paragraphs of the same number.

Hopefully we are very embodied, without remaining in a merely reflective discourse, that isolates us from the life and concerns of everyone.

We structured our presentation in a very simple order, inspired by the IMRB document, but trying to adjust it in parallel with the subtitles of the *Declaration on the charism*. Thus, we divide it into three parts: **identity**, the gift we receive; **communion**, a gift that we share; and **mission**, a gift that we give.

I. Our identity, gift that we receive.

Our male branch of the Discalced Carmel has cultivated two forms of fraternal expression. Indeed, we are two faces of the one fraternity: clerics and non-clerics, who share the same spirit, forming a single family.

We form a single community with the entire Order, because we share a single faith, an experience of God, the same call, in the difference of the vessel in which each one receives the gift of God (*Cf.* Eph 4: 4-6; 2Co 4, 7: and 2S 21.2). Our faith in the Father carries with it the gift of being family brothers. In prayer, we identify an element essential to our vocation, but since we pray to the Father of all, we cannot pray without cultivating interpersonal relationships (*Cf.* Mt 6,14s; 1 Jn 4,7-8.21).

In the document on our identity (IMRB 11f) we read: “The name ‘brothers’ positively designates what these religious assume as a fundamental mission in their lives: ‘These religious are called to be brothers of Christ, deeply united to Him, *the first-born among many brothers* (Rm 8,29)’ ...” The IMRB document prefers to call us **religious brothers**, but without debating what we should call ourselves, we emphasize that we define ourselves by something positive which is the value of our fraternity shared with all the members of the Order, but whose specificity is shown in the way of living in our communities as non-clerics. *Fraternity* is a divine gift to the family, a value in itself (DC 2020, 35). Today we strive to overcome those differences that may arise from the temptation of clericalism (*Cf.* DC 2019, 41).

The question that we ask ourselves today about the identity of the non-clerical brothers within our beloved Order, fulfills the constant renewal that the Church asks of us. This renewal is

an update of the unique identity that has always given us a face, but which over time has acquired new dimensions and challenges, always “from good to better” (Found. 29,32). This process, in fact, can never end (DC 2019, introduction).

Our vocation must be understood within the framework of an *ecclesiology of communion* (IMRB 3). Fraternity is the heart of the identity of the religious brother, “gift that receives (mystery), gift that shares (communion) and gift that gives (mission)” (IMRB 4b).

Our vocation is not born from the initiative of our flesh, but as a consequence of the love of God, Friend, Father, Brother... who calls us to bear witness to him and to the Kingdom, through fraternity. Indeed, we try to reciprocate with generosity and self-giving to the free love of God, *who honors us by putting us at his service* as brothers in our religious order (Cf. Is 49,5). And since everything that God gives, he gives in fullness and forever, we brothers experience that divine fullness in our earthen vessels (2Co 4,7), like a *drop* with which we quench our thirst throughout our lives (CB 1, 6). In responding to his call, we have not been left in an incomplete vocation, but, in a free and full correspondence, we exceed all our expectations and desires of the flesh (Cf. FB 3,75) to follow God as his servants and friends. This deference that God has with us when he calls us, we do not live it as a *status* or a dignity; we try to correspond to it with all responsibility.

Our identity as religious brothers is reflected in two biblical icons indicated in Lk 10: 25-41: the intimacy of the inner house, made up of *Martha and Mary*; and the *Good Samaritan*, who in outward service, becomes a neighbor of his brothers ... In the house of Bethany, *we share the gift* of vocation with all brothers and sisters; and as good Samaritans *we give our gift* so that everyone may receive God’s health.

Our vocation is the expression of our baptismal consecration, the greatest and the foundation of any other form of consecration (Cf. IMRB 14). Through baptism we live our common priesthood with all the faithful, and our vows become its manifestation: it is the gift of ourselves as an offering to the Father.

We do not want to confuse our vocation with the satisfaction of human pursuits so longed for by modern society: personal serenity, silence and interiority, by natural necessity or as a moral good (Cf. DC 2020, 22). Our life practices such as prayer or fraternal life, we do not live

merely for natural or human reasons. John of the Cross tells us that it is lawful to do so (*Cf.* 3A 6,3 and 27,4), but, out of fidelity to the vocation we receive, we must not follow the natural inclination of our “flesh”, but verify that its cause be truly supernatural (*Cf.* FB 3,75). This consideration is key at the moment of vocational discernment, where what mainly encourages us to respond as clergy or non-clergy may be the pure *honor and glory of God*, not the desire, the social ascendancy that we acquire with our vocation, prestige or dignity (*worldly honors*), calculation or other human reason.

The awareness of our identity is a process that matures throughout our life. Each age, each progress, is marked by the experiences that God gives us in each encounter with the brothers, in each circumstance, in each responsibility or challenge, as a path through *strange islands* (CA stanzas 13/14, 8), like a journey through which the Lord leads us as through a *path of enchantment* (2N 9,5). We persevere on the *Way* through trust and abandonment, allowing ourselves to be guided by the charisma that burns inside each one of us.

We make our friendship with God as a permanent state (*Cf.* DC 2020, 23) a true relationship of love. We share with all Discalced Carmelites the call to union with God, which marks our interior life in all its dimensions and in all its moments. Like the prophet Elijah, “we live in the presence of God. This expression indicates the goal to which we tend: that our entire life becomes prayer, constantly being before the face of God. This is precisely the zeal that burns at the center of our vocation as Carmelite brothers, clergymen or non-clergymen.

Our formation is essentially that of our inner being. Our being as Discalced Carmelites impels us to live our vocation as brothers in the safe darkness of our faith, following the light and guidance that burns in our hearts, allowing ourselves to be guided on that *Way of Perfection* that is Christ, as Mother Teresa shows us.

In order to form ourselves as brothers, we do not need a special or parallel formation to that of the clergy, but a similar one, to fully mature in all aspects of our humanity, inhabited by the Trinity, so that the Three feel at home (*Cf.* LB 4,14). Formation is primarily the responsibility of each religious; what we must develop within ourselves is the “person in relationship”, the inner man capable of taking responsibility for his brothers and the mission that God entrusts to

him in history, for the good of humanity. Indeed, through formation we must consolidate the gift that we receive in our identity, that we share in fraternity, and that we offer in our mission.

A formation similar to that of all clerical brothers is convenient insofar as it enables us to dialogue with the contemporary world, and for the responsibilities of any work that the Church requires of us, as disciples and missionaries of Christ.

However, we must not confuse our formation with training, the purpose of which is to develop skills, to “specialize” to perform specific tasks. Formation must broaden the potential with which God is constantly enriching us, to improve our dealings with others and for his service.

We will not be able to form ourselves, but only through the friction of fraternal human relationships, in which we disillusion ourselves (L 16, 7). Proposing a special formation, that is, separate from the human and pastoral interests of the entire religious family, is not a good way for our maturation as religious who live in community.

Let us remember that our mission is not only reduced to the priestly ministry, but that today more than ever the Church expects from the Order to carry out the pastoral care of spirituality and listening. In this shared task, the brothers, both clerical and non-clerical, have an enormous responsibility.

The difference in our religious vocation as clergy and non-clergy, makes the diversity among us a reason for mutual enrichment, where we encourage each other to openness and dialogue that boosts our human and spiritual development. We believe that it can be of great benefit to religious living in initial formation, not to separate clerical from non-clerical during the stages of initial formation.

II. The gift we share in communion

If the gift of God that is brotherhood did not exist, we would not be able to give ourselves with such great generosity as his. In the communion of brothers, we belong to one another, and together we give ourselves to God. In community, we make prayer a place where we receive life, and in life we pray assiduously to the Lord to allow us to be guided and strengthened by him. A

sign of this vitality and of the quality of our prayer is underlined by the saying of St. John of the Cross: “until we come to give ourselves” (S 136).

In fraternity, we love God with all our heart, with all our mind, with all our strength (Cf. Dt 6,4-9) and we love our neighbor as Jesus loved us (Cf. Lev 19,18; Jm 2,8 and Jn 15, 13.17; 17.21-23.26): we make the two commandments a single experience (Lk 10.25-28).

Our fraternity is sustained by *friendship*. Mother Teresa tells us of a “perfect friendship” (MS 2, 21). Love is at the center of our vocation, it is the fullness of relationships with God and others. Thérèse of Lisieux expresses it most in *Manuscript B* of her *Story of a Soul*. It is also in friendship that we discover that God's gift is both personal and shared, and that friendship with God is what unites us as friends (Cf. CV 4,15³; 6,7-9; 7,4-5). The experience of God is a community heritage; community is like the *wedding coins* of God's gift that is given to us as a family. And as a *sacrament*, it becomes a sign that the innermost part of the human heart is a reflection of the divine heart. Through this fraternal intimacy, we can give flesh to the *embrace of God* (Cf. CB 22,8), who likes to communicate through the mouth of another man (Cf. 2A 22,9.12-13). Our relationships as brothers bear witness to this before the world, fulfilling the commandment of Jesus: “love one another as I have loved you” (Jn 13:34), so that the world may know me (Jn 17:21)⁴. With our witness we teach the world to live this form of love inaugurated by Christ. For this reason, our fraternal relationships lived in community are a prophetic sign of the Church as communion and as the only bride of Christ, penetrating the inescapable mystery of being persons (Cf. DC 2020, 16).

If what unites us is the experience of Jesus the friend, we brothers support each other in friendship, to make this path of intimacy with him more secure. We accompany each other, we enrich ourselves, we encourage each other and we help each other. God's love enables us to love ourselves as much as he loves us⁵. And in our fraternity, when we live it in fidelity to the love of

³ This text literally says at the end of the paragraph: “for if they see that a person doesn’t understand their language and doesn’t love to speak of God, they will not be able to love him ...”

⁴ Jn 17: 9-10: “I pray for them ... in them my glory is revealed.”

⁵ If we apply LB 3,77.80 to love between brothers, we become *interpreters* of the divine love embodied in each one of us, giving each other their “light and warmth” as *lamps* of their *fire*. Cf. also FB 3, 10: rereading it, love between brothers is an act of each one of us and of the Holy Spirit, *together*. On the infinite capacity we have to love like him, cf. CB 38, 3-4: “to love as much, as we know we are loved ... Until this is reached, the soul is not happy ... that perfection of glorious love ...”

God, our hearts reach the peak of fullness in the satisfaction of what we need most as persons. The parallel and assiduous cultivation of our relationship with God is the foundation to grow deeply in love.

When we grow in this type of mutual love, we become shields for each other in the following of Christ: *In obsequio Iesu Christi vivere*. Living in the gift of Jesus Christ is living following him ... together, as his disciples.

This formula is beautiful. Etymologically, “obsequio” comes from the Latin roots *ob* – “from the front”, and *sequi* – “to follow”. We translate it as “entertainment”, or in other senses as “affability”; and sometimes we use it as a synonym for “obey”. The formulation is extraordinary, because with the richness of this word we can connote various meanings: to entertain Jesus Christ⁶; or, to obey Jesus Christ through our vows as an attitude of following him. Thus, we connote several meanings at the same time: “obey”, “follow”, “honor”, “please”; meanings that permeate the meaning of our vocation as Carmelites. Each of the verbs becomes a reference to make an examination of conscience of each of the daily actions that we carry out, of our motivations, even more, of the joy that overwhelms us when we live *together* in this way.

Teresa de Jesús also uses the verb to order: “order love” (*vid.* MS 6,11.13); We can extend this use to every good that God orders in the person, from within himself, as well as within the community. Obedience is an act by which we listen, follow, and honor our Teacher and Shepherd together.

We follow him together, praying together, like the prophetic and liturgical communities of Revelation. Through our shared prayer and life in community, we are an echo of the fraternal praise of God that Psalm 133 (132) sings. It is beautiful to see that today the prayer, of the liturgy of the hours is a common practice of priests and brothers, and it is no longer a sign of differentiation as in the past. In the old days, and perhaps for cultural reasons, due to the lack of literacy, the brothers did not necessarily attend the choir. Today, it seems that these circumstances, like other similar ones that affected the apostolate, are no longer a cause to differentiate us one from the other, except for the specific call to priestly ordination.

⁶ ... Translating St. John of the Cross we would say “to seek in everything the only honor and glory of God” (DMC; 3A 27,4)

III. The gift we give in the mission

It is the fragile vessel of brotherhood, the bowl where God becomes a source of wealth for the people. It is in our fraternal relationships where this *Living Water* is going to be offered to all those who are thirsty. In community, we have to put the container where the peoples come to drink from God.

Indeed, through fraternal communion, God makes us mediators of his gift for people who are hungry and thirsty. Hence, as the *Congregation for Institutes of Religious Life* says, the community is the source of the mission ... but also, by sharing the mission, we unite more as brothers. It is in the mission that our fraternal ties are further strengthened, and the community becomes, in turn, the fruit of the mission (IMRB 23)⁷.

Mission is not so much a work external to the community, as the expression of that union between the brothers, who share the experience of God, and now offer it as a service to all those who need to satisfy their multiple hunger, their thirst for fullness and fulfillment, as a response to their personal and human concerns, but above all, to prepare the *Way of the Lord* for those who seek it.

Today we differentiate the mission from its various expressions in the different apostolates. We know that our mission is to live our own life as a prophetic sign of the values of the Kingdom. With our interpersonal relationships in prayer, shared life in community, with all the people we serve, the people of God or with anyone else from a different culture or religion ..., we show them and share God through our “demeanor”; with our face we give flesh to the face of Jesus, who dwells in each one of the friars; and as communities that are woven with authentic relationships, we give a face to the ecclesial community, which is the Bride of the Lamb. Fidelity to our Teresian lifestyle constitutes the first proclamation of the Gospel, our mission is to live our own life. And from this faithful communion, any apostolic commitment will be born, discerned and decided in community.

“The one who carries out the ministry is not the individual but the community” (IMRB 23d). In community we are all united as one body. The work is of the body; and each one, from

⁷ The Instruction of the Congregation quotes the phrase: “Communion represents both the *source* and the *fruit* of the mission” (taken from *Christifideles Laici* 32. Bold italics ours).

his own wealth and possibility of service, carries out the work with all: as “one voice and one heart”, bringing the gift of God to the world. Already the fraternal union itself becomes a sign of the gift of God and of his values, which in itself evangelizes people. “There is an indissoluble bond between communion and mission” (IMRB 23e)

The mission, therefore, is not an escape from fraternal relationships, nor the mere project of personal development, but the shared experience of what God does among us when we live together with him.

On the other hand, the vocation of a religious must not be defined by what he does, but by what he is, by what his being *means* to the human community. The specificity of our identity as *brothers* is directly indicated by what is characteristic of all Carmelites, formulated in the conjunction of the elements of the charism. Therefore, our identity is not marked by a function, whether serving in domestic or administrative tasks, internal to the community and its needs, nor for apostolic services, but rather as religious brothers we share with religious priests the mission of being witnesses to the experience of God, a mission that is proper to the entire fraternity.

We believe that our mission unites us when we give our gift, as religious, to the Christian faithful and to the people. Our ministries no longer mark the differences between clerics and non-clerics: we are all disciples and missionaries of the Lord, each one from the specifics of his calling. We brothers cannot be brothers if we are not brothers to the priests.

Nor do we believe that mission should be a cause for giving preference to apostolic activity over the other elements of our vocation (prayer, the time shared in recreation or eating, for example), but rather that the mission itself is our witness to community and personal life, and gives vitality and flesh both to prayer and to authentic love for one another. In fact, deciding together the rhythm and direction of our apostolates is only authentic when they are born from that fraternal dialogue, guided by God's love for the world. Mission does not separate us: it integrates us, it makes us one with the Supreme Shepherd.

Neither can apostolic zeal be the cause of reducing the number of people in a community, to encompass more works: these are born of love, and are never detrimental to fraternity, especially when our fraternal life is the first mission that Jesus entrusts to us when he calls us to “*live with him, to preach and cast out demons*” (Mk 3,14).

When our apostolic works are born from the communal agreement, our vocation is no longer individual or private, but communal and shared. Only when “together” we make the community fabric, do we fulfill our *mission* of being signs of the body of Christ, the concrete and incarnate face of the community spread throughout the world, which is the Church. We believe that without this nuance, we run the risk of continuing to define our vocation as “non-clerical brothers” as an individual call and split from the community, the same that is true for any clergyman, and thus we lose the evangelical and Teresian flavor of “being such” as “light of the world and salt of the earth”. When we are a community, our mission acquires meaning, our prayer is authentic, and both in fraternal encounter and in apostolic services, everything is self-denial in love professed for our neighbor, serving our brothers and sisters, and with them, serving the people of God.

When we harmoniously integrate mission with fraternal encounter and prayer (*Cf.* DC 2020, 60), we show the world personal fulfillment, maturity and balance, human fulfillment through deep interpersonal relationships, so longed for by the heart of our contemporaries. It is then that we fulfill our mission, modeling to the world that biblical and Teresian anthropology, which transcends any ideological or scientific fashion on the human being, and we attest to this when we dare to live what Saint Leo the Great said: “Jesus was human, so human, as only God can be”. Everything that humanizes, brings God closer, and vice versa. When we are deeply brothers, we are truly human.

Likewise, we make our own the reflection of IMRB 30, 33 and 40: In the community we can understand that our consecration, being directed to God, is also directed to the brothers, especially those most in need. Saint Luke the Evangelist shows us how to live ourselves inside and outside in our fraternities: *Mary* shows us the hunger for the Word, with which God orders our desires towards him; *Martha* shows us the solicitous attention to the brothers in domestic service; *both* encourage us to seek God in all people, in all goods, in all circumstances⁸. The *Good Samaritan* shows us how to be a neighbor in solicitude towards those in need (Lk 10, 25-41).

IV. Saint Joseph, Man of Action - model of the Discalced Carmelite Religious Brother

⁸ The words of John of the Cross recorded in 3S 23, 1; 24, 4-6. are illuminating.

The life of a Carmelite friar, much like that of St. Joseph, can be considered in two parts: before the call and after the call. St. Joseph had plans for his life, but when God called him, he totally dedicated the rest of his life to the service to God's most precious treasures which he confidently entrusted to him. That is why St. Joseph continues to be the protector of all consecrated persons. For that reason also we address him, among other invocations, as guardian of virgins and model of purity.

In this year dedicated to him, as we pray in his honor, we cannot fail to dwell on his many virtues that could serve as an inspiration to consecrate our lives to God's service as St. Joseph did.

We note with delight that our glorious father St. Joseph, who was not a priest but a layman, did the usual work in the presence of Jesus and Mary with devotion to his mission which outwardly appeared hidden and without seeking notice, but inwardly he was 'filled with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places' (Eph 1,3). Therefore, St. Joseph is a wonderful example to all Carmelite friars, but more directly to non-cleric ones, in a quiet and unassuming way.

On his part the Discalced religious brother becomes an incarnation of the Teresian charism. Having been open to receiving it, and having sought to assimilate it, he is enabled to transmit it to the world around him. We are talking of reducing our life to the sole pursuit of God's will so that the evangelical refrain concerning St. Joseph becomes the rhythm of our life: Joseph 'did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him' (Mt 1,24); 'he rose and took the child and his mother by night' and fled (Mt 2,14); 'and he rose and took the child and his mother' and returned (Mt 2,21).

Final words.

We are thankful to God for our calling; with all of you, our family, for welcoming us into their bosom, for receiving our thoughtful word which is not the last. Authentic words provoke reflection and dialogue; and through the latter, God manifests the light of his will.

We are the discalced brothers of the blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel. Let us live worthily of her as her children and her brothers, emulating and honoring her through the love between brothers with fidelity and commitment.

May our General Chapter gather us together to seek and find God, who is among us, and may he reveal himself to the world in us. We have the enormous historical responsibility to interpret and update our heritage, so that God may be known, and his Name be honored by all. To him be the glory forever and ever.

Abbreviations:

Biblical references are cited as in ordinary usage.

Saint Teresa of Jesus:

L: Book of Life

CV: Way of Perfection, Valladolid manuscript

Found.: Foundations

MS: Meditations on the Songs of Songs

Saint John of the Cross:

S: Sayings of Light and Love

CA: Spiritual Canticle, A

CB: Spiritual Canticle B

L: Living Flame of Love poem

LB: Living Flame of Love B

2A: Second book of the Ascent of Mount Carmel

3A: Third Book of the Ascent of Mount Carmel

2N: Second Book of the Dark Night