

## **“Walking On with Determination”**

### **The Teresian Carmel Before the Call to Renewal**

Final Document of the General Extraordinary Definitory OCD  
(Ariccia, August 29-September 6, 2017)

As we approach the end of the first Extraordinary Definitory of the sexennium 2015-2021, held in Ariccia from the 29<sup>th</sup> of August to September 6, 2017, we want to express the journey we have traveled and to transmit a word of encouragement to all the friars. During these days we have had the opportunity to work on specific questions that can help us in our task of government and in the journey of rereading the Constitutions that constitute an opportunity of renewal for the Order. Thus, we have assumed St. Teresa’s invitation to “walk with determination.” (L. 11.13). We feel committed to follow the renewal process that the Church asks of us and to respond with integrity to Jesus’ call in the Gospel. In the words of Pope Francis: “Consecrated men and women of our time are invited to accept this call: to leave our own comfort and to risk going out to the peripheries that need the light of the Gospel.”<sup>1</sup>

The same Pope Francis, addressing the Plenary of the Congregation for Institutes of Religious Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CIVCSVA), confirmed that together with the Church and consecrated life, we find ourselves in “a time of change, and not only a time of change, in which it remains difficult to assume serious and definitive commitments.”<sup>2</sup> In this context, consecrated life must remain in a constant state of renewal and return to the origins as a revitalizing element. The Pope added: “There is much holiness in consecrated life, but situations of counter testimony are not lacking... If consecrated life wants to maintain its prophetic mission and fascination, continuing in its essence to be a school of fidelity for those who are near and far away (cf. Ephesians 2, 17), it must maintain its freshness and the novelty of the centrality of Jesus, the attractiveness of spirituality and the strength of mission, showing the beauty of following Jesus, and of radiating hope and joy.”<sup>3</sup>

As a fruit of the good experience of reading the works of St. Teresa of Jesus, and guided by the document of the General Chapter held in Avila in 2015 (*It is Time to Walk!*), we have undertaken in this sexennium a new stage of reflection with the rereading of the Constitutions as an element of renewal of our life and mission. Welcoming this invitation to seek the centrality of our life, with conviction to follow the path we began, we faced these days desiring to “undertake

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 20.

<sup>2</sup> Discourse of Pope Francis to the participants of the plenary of the CIVCSVA, January 28, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

new steps so that the ideals and doctrine take flesh in life: systems, structures, services, styles, relationships and languages.”<sup>4</sup>

## 1. The Challenge of Renewal

As Father General presented in his “Report on the State of the Order,” we want to keep our present reality before us. We joyfully give thanks for the great richness we have in our hands and for the multiple possibilities of the present moment, but at the same time, we try to identify “the knot that needs to be untangled in order to come out of paralysis and overcome fears regarding the future,”<sup>5</sup> and thus be able to confront the challenge of revitalization of our life and Order. As Fr. Saverio stated in his report: “Our Order shares in the general situation of religious life today. We might define it as a path of renewal stuck halfway, a path slowed down, or even blocked, due to the uncertainty about the direction to which we are headed, or to the complexity of the journey and the fatigue of the travellers.”<sup>6</sup> We highlight some concrete elements that are necessary to review in order to prepare for a future worthy of the vocation we have received.

### A. *The Contemplative Dimension*

An essential component of our charismatic life is the desire to know God and to let ourselves be known by Him. Our heart thirsts for this encounter; we aspire to live the joy of friendship with the interior guest who gives meaning and fullness to our existence. However, at times this desire finds itself buried by many realities that preoccupy us and lead us to seek other centers in our life. When this happens, Fr. General says, “we distance ourselves further and further from our contemplative vocation until it becomes extraneous to us, unintelligible, and this in turn convinces us that we must seek fulfillment elsewhere.”<sup>7</sup>

To recognize our difficulty in living a truly contemplative attitude and to feel the desire for friendship with God is already a first step, so necessary and positive. Now then, “If we lack the patience to wait, the freedom to change, or the courage to renounce a way of life that is only interested in seeking our personal comfort, it’s not worth even beginning... Do we desire to undertake it, to attempt living this way, to embark on this adventure?”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> CIVCSVA, *New Wine in New Wineskins, The consecrated life and its ongoing challenges since Vatican II*, Introduction.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*,10

<sup>6</sup> Saverio Cannistrà, *Report on the State of the Order*, presented at the Extraordinary General Definitory, Ariccia, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

## *B. Knowledge and Care for Ourselves*

For Teresa, contemplation is inseparable from self-knowledge. “And take care about this: however sublime the contemplation, let your prayer always begin and end with self-knowledge.” (W. 39.5)

Fr. General points out: “Self-knowledge and care for oneself has become a particularly difficult undertaking. We are constantly looking outside ourselves; our gaze and hearing are continually focused on electronic devices that have become appendages of our own bodies. In such an atmosphere, listening to oneself, to the messages coming not from within, but from without, is a task that requires courageous determination and motivation.”<sup>9</sup>

He presents to us again the enormous challenge to continue growing in our humanity and self-knowledge in order to live from within. Teresa of Jesus has shown us from her experience the incomparable richness found in our interior life and urges us not to lose ourselves in the exterior, to open the door of prayer in order to encounter our deepest identity through a loving relationship with the One who lives within us and loves us. The path that we are called to follow is before all else an exciting journey into the interior of ourselves.

## *C. Fraternal Life in Community*

A central dimension of our consecrated life is our relationship with our brothers with whom we form a community. This aspect acquires a particular prominence in our Teresian family. We all know Teresa’s decisive and demanding invitation: “All must be friends, all must be loved, all must be held dear, all must be helped.” (W. 4.7)

Observing the present situation of the Order, Fr. General affirms: “Often in our communities we don’t feel “at home.”<sup>10</sup> The widespread individualism in modern society should not infiltrate our practical behavior. Our life style and our community ideal must be a gratifying and humanizing alternative that is enlightening and attractive for men and women of our time who are so much in need of true human relationships.

For this reason, it is necessary that we base our desires and decisions on the Teresian vision of community. To begin with, our communities must depend on an adequate number of friars that fosters a family style of relationships, and on the other hand, the program of activities and commitments must take into account the cultivation of fraternal life. To strengthen our fraternal ties and our communion on all levels, beginning within our own community, is an urgent and

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

absorbing task. Moreover, we know that fraternal life in community, far from enclosing us in ourselves, leads us to be a Carmel going out in mission in order to deliver the charism we have received as a gift for the Church.

#### *D. Charism and Ministerial Ordination*

The charismatic and gratuitous dimensions that characterize consecrated life are treasures to cultivate. The apostolic activities are important for us, but they have to harmonize with other equally important elements and decisions of our life. At the same time, Fr. General notes in his report that “our religious way of life is becoming increasingly more and more clerical... Today we identify ourselves much more with the role of an ordained minister and in the functions he must perform than in the role of a religious. With this point of view our identity as religious is at stake.

All of this leads us to raise the question again in how we can transmit our identity as Discalced Carmelite friars to our men in formation, those in the stages of initial formation, but also how we can nourish this same identity in all the friars through continuing formation. It requires transmitting, continually deepening, and constantly updating the living knowledge of Carmelite spirituality, and personal identification with the Teresian charism.

#### *E. Cultural Poverty*

Another aspect that goes hand in hand with all that was previously mentioned is a certain cultural poverty, perhaps because “the impoverishment of religious identity also weakens an element traditionally present in the life and mission of religious – this is, their dedication to study and theological-spiritual formation.

It is a recurrent reality that, at this time in which so much information comes to us at the same instant it is produced (in “real time”), we have become habitual consumers of information, but without going deeply into it or verifying its content, and we limit ourselves to mere repeaters of what we have heard and seen. If we lack a serious dedication to study and to theological-spiritual formation, the quality of our ecclesial service suffers and weakens. Without being the only thing, this is an element of continuing formation to which we are insistently called. Today more than ever, because of the profound and continual changes that take place in our environment, we can only respond to these changes with a deep understanding of the culture in which we live that allows us to translate the Gospel and the Teresian charism in a language and in meaningful ways for our time.

## *F. Our Rapport with our Nuns and the Laity*

A last element that Fr. General presented in his report on the state of the Order as a danger for religious is to “retreat within ourselves and not allow ourselves to avail of the riches that our Carmelite family offers. In this sense, our relationship with our Discalced Carmelite Sisters, with the Secular Order, and other people united to the Teresian Carmel is especially important.”<sup>11</sup>

In a more excessively hierarchical consecrated life that we are living, more than ever, we need conversion in order to give space to horizontal relationships with those with whom we share the same charism in our Discalced Carmelite family. The fact that our Teresian family is made up of religious women and men and laity, is an eloquent sign and an extraordinary opportunity to live the richness of unity in diversity, sharing the way and mutually helping each other to grow day by day.

## **2. An Invitation to keep advancing with determination**

Acknowledging the deficiencies of our present reality does not mean to keep us in lamentation, but rather to continue going forward on the road of revitalization already undertaken by the Order in these last years. We need to continue on, with Teresian determination, the itinerary of the reform and renovation of our life and mission that we are travelling.

The documents of the Church insistently speak to us about renewal. Suffice to quote the recent document of the CIVCSVA, *New Wine in New Wineskins*: “It requires open mindedness to imagine prophetic and charismatic ways, lived according to possibly unprecedented, frameworks.”<sup>12</sup> Isn’t this the proposal of our last General Chapter, “*It is Time to Walk*,” a decided wager to renew our identity and to deepen in the richness of our charism so that it passes from our mind into our heart and returns to inspire our commitment to religious life? We cannot and must not forget the programmatic text of St. Teresa: “Now we are beginning, and let them strive to advance always from good to better.” (F. 29.32)

As Major Superiors present in this Extraordinary Definitory, we have been able to face each other in the need to accompany and to guide the life of the friars in our circumscriptions toward an interior renewal and a revitalization of our life in order to advance toward a more significant presence in the Church and in society.

At the basis of this path of renewal, we have to place personal identification with Christ and the Gospel. As the document of the CIVCSVA says: “At the basis of every journey, we find it

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> CIVCSVA, *New Wine, New Wineskins*, 3.

important to underline the need for consecrated men and women to have a new aspiration to holiness, which is unthinkable without a jolt of renewed passion for the Gospel at the service of the Kingdom.”<sup>13</sup> This renewal’s fundamental perspective is service to the Church and proclaiming the Gospel; we are called to a missionary conversion that makes us apostles of Christ before humanity.

#### *A. Rereading the Constitutions*

The process of rereading the Constitutions that we are carrying out is for ourselves an adequate form of rediscovering Christian holiness as proposed by the Teresian charism and reflected in our norm of life. During these days we have recalled that the objective that we sought from the beginning is to deepen in a revision of life that allows the Order to continue living the Teresian charism in a fuller and more authentic manner in the present time and circumstances. The document of the General Chapter presented the project as a way of proposing to us if we are faithful to the vocation we have received to serve God and humanity in the family of Teresa: “We want to ask ourselves about the quality of our service to God and to humanity in fidelity to our Teresian charism.”<sup>14</sup> The Chapter began with the observation that the charism is not a static reality, but that we have to update our way of living it in order to be meaningful in the present moment.

Perhaps the new makes us afraid of what may emerge. We are not taking blind steps; we always have a reference. Pope Francis confirms for us this journey: “What does the Gospel bring us? Joy and newness. Newness, newness, new wine, new wineskins. Don’t be afraid to change things according to the law of the Gospel. The Church asks us for this, to all of us, some changes. It asks us to leave aside obsolete structures: “They don’t serve! And it asks us to take new wineskins, those of the Gospel.”<sup>15</sup>

The rereading of the Constitutions is leading us to a better communion and fraternity, first in our communities, then in our circumscriptions, and finally in the entire Order. We must not fear the result of this rereading, since the first goal is being reached, as Fr. General expressed in announcing the effect of the project in October of 2015: “We are beginning an exciting and demanding process of reflection, dialogue, prayer, and commitment that must encourage us to intensify our theoretical identity and practice with our ideal of life.”<sup>16</sup>

The contributions that are arriving from the work of the communities on the Constitutions reveal the effort of the friars to renew their life with a growing desire to know our charism, to

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<sup>13</sup> CIVCSVA, *New Wine, New Wineskins*, 10.

<sup>14</sup> *It is Time to Walk!*, 17.

<sup>15</sup> *Homily at Santa Marta*, September 5, 2014.

<sup>16</sup> Saverio Cannistrà, *Letter to the Whole Order*, October 15, 2015.

identify personally and communally with it, and express it in daily reality. Times have changed, the forms can also change, but the substance of our charism reflected in our Constitutions remains because the message of Teresa of Jesus and John of the Cross are valid today.

Let us remember that during this course we will go forward with the process of the rereading with the help of the study guides that facilitate a prayerful proximity to the text and a communal dialogue on it. The international commission that coordinates the process will continue collecting the responses of the circumscription to the questions asked in each study guide. In accord with the orientations of the General Chapter, further on (February of 2019) a General Extraordinary Definitory will take place and decide between three proposed options in the chapter document: rewrite the text of the Constitutions, introduce modifications, or write a preliminary document of a charismatic type.<sup>17</sup>

Therefore, we mutually exhort each other to go forward decisively in this proposal to encounter again our Teresian charism through the prayerful rereading, personal and communal, of our Constitutions. The provincial superiors have the responsibility of helping all friars to rediscover the Constitutions as an expression of the patrimony that has been confided to us in the spirit of Teresa of Jesus and John of the Cross, and not as a compendium of norms. We commit ourselves personally, and we encourage our brothers to give a new impulse to understanding, to updating, and to the practical living experience today as Teresian Carmelites.

### *B. In Service of Authority*

We know that in this Gospel renewal to which we are called, a special responsibility is given to major superiors who have received the charge of a particular service to their brothers. Therefore, during this encounter of the Extraordinary Definitory, we have dedicated special attention to this service in light of the Gospel, of ecclesial teachings, and of our charism. We had the opportunity to listen, reflect, and to share important elements on how to energize the service of authority in order to better direct the life and activities of the circumscriptions; to foster relationships and coordination with the other circumscriptions and the center of the Order; to maintain a style of collegial and participatory government; to keep a frequent presence in the areas of initial and continuing formation; to administer in an evangelical and transparent way economic goods; and to direct with charity and clarity the juridical processes of the brothers who are in irregular and special circumstances, etc.

Superiors are particularly called to watch over fraternal communion at all levels of the Order. Fraternity is the responsibility of all, and superiors have the mission to help advance in this direction in their own circumscription, in each of the communities that form them, and in the

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<sup>17</sup> *It is Time to Walk!*, 32.

entire Order. Neither can we forget that this fraternal communion extends to the entire Carmelite family, beginning with our Discalced Carmelite sisters and for the laity who are affiliated to the Order. In relationship to the nuns, during these days we have also had the opportunity to deepen our understanding of some aspects of Pope Francis's recent Apostolic Constitution, *Vultum Dei Quaerere* that offers important directions for the renewal of feminine contemplative life that the Church desires and will continue to be progressively applied.

In this sense, superiors of the circumscriptions must give priority to the work of renewal and not allow their attention and that of the circumscriptions to be absorbed by purely administrative questions. Renewal demands the sacrifice of some of our commitments in favor of a more intense community life that strengthens our religious identity.

Among the themes treated, the Definitory also confronted a new situation that has extended in the life of the Order: the presence of friars in the territory of other circumscriptions, often without community life. We feel an urgency to deepen discernment on this question and strive that everyone has an adequate balance between prayer, fraternal life, and apostolate in accord with the charism of the Order and demands of the present moment.

## **Conclusion**

Fr. General affirms: "Personally I do not doubt that the breeze of the Holy Spirit is blowing among us in our Carmelite family. There are desires, questions, and dreams that would like to be translated into experience. I believe that we must favor such experiences, but also acknowledge the risk of committing errors. The worst error, in reality, would be to remain quiet and closed to the future."<sup>18</sup> We want to share with conviction what inspires, animates and opens the heart to live with joy the newness of the Gospel.

We are on the way and we need "to walk with determination," so that what we are living will reach a good end. The protection of the Virgin Mary will help us in this desire. She who always gazes upon us as Mother and Sister. To her and to St. Joseph we confide our dreams and our projects.

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<sup>18</sup> Saverio Cannistrà, *Report on the State of the Order*.