

The God of Our Contemplation

Letter of the Prior General, Fr. Joseph Chalmers, O.Carm., to the Carmelite Family
1st January 2004

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Carmel,

1. At the beginning of this New Year and on this World Day of Prayer for Peace, I want to reflect a little on the connection between working for peace and justice and the Carmelite vocation. We form contemplative communities in the midst of the people and in this way we bear witness to God but who is this God who has called us and whom we seek to serve? Many barbarous deeds have been done in the name of God throughout history and in our present day. As was said in the six-year plan of the General Council, “As children of the Prophets, we must fight every effort to manipulate the name of God to support the selfish concerns of any group.” Sometimes religious piety has been used to hide the lust for power and to provide a sense of security in a changing world. As we grow and mature, our image of God changes because no image we can have of God is God. We are challenged to examine our image of God by the secularism of our times and the rise of the otherworldly sects in many parts of the developing world. We speak much of contemplation, which is the transforming action of God within us, but who is the God of our contemplation?

The Carmelite Charism

2. The Carmelite charism speaks of a deep human hunger for God. A charism is a gift given by God to an individual or a group for the benefit of the Church and the world. In the case of our Order, we of course have no founder, in the strict sense of the term, to whom we look back; we have our foundation in a group of hermits who gathered on Mount Carmel. We do not know much about these men or even when they went to Mount Carmel. It is likely that they went to the Holy Land at the time of the Crusades and perhaps some of them were soldiers. However between 1206-14, these hermits had formed themselves into a sufficiently cohesive group that they wished to seek the approval of the Church for themselves as a community. They had made a proposal regarding their way of life and based on this, St. Albert, the Patriarch of Jerusalem, wrote to them a letter containing a series of principles on which their life together should be based. They had no need of the weapons of the Crusaders; instead they were to take up spiritual weapons in the spiritual combat (Rule, 18-19).

3. After some difficulties, finally Pope Innocent IV definitively approved the Carmelites in 1247, and the letter of St. Albert became an officially accepted religious Rule within the Church. The Pope made some minor modifications to adapt the Rule to cover friars who were engaged in an active apostolate in the new cities. However, these small

modifications had profound implications for the Order because our forefathers thus joined the mendicant movement and identified with the new urban poor and sought to serve them. The Rule of St. Albert contains in a nutshell all the fundamental principles of the Carmelite charism. The hermits are named as those who live near the spring. This was the spring named in honor of Elijah the prophet. The fact that they also lived on Mount Carmel made it inevitable that they would have a devotion to the Prophet as all hermits looked to him as their model. St. Albert laid down: "An oratory should be built as conveniently as possible among the cells, where, if it can be done without difficulty, you are to gather each morning to hear Mass" (Rule, 14). This oratory was named in honor of Our Lady and this is the beginning of the special relationship between Carmelites and Mary, their Mother, Sister and Patroness.

4. The fundamental thrust of the Christian, and therefore the Carmelite life, according to the Rule of St. Albert, is to live in allegiance to Jesus Christ. The rest of the Rule works out the way in which Carmelites are to follow Christ. St. Albert uses the idea of the armor of God (Eph. 6, 10-17) to instruct the hermits. This concept would have been particularly relevant in time of war and great uncertainty. Carmelites are to put on the breastplate of justice (Rule, 19) and later, silence is declared to be the way to foster justice (Rule, 21). The values of prayer, fraternity and prophetic service are particularly important for us. The Word of God is central to our way of life. Like Our Blessed Lady, we are to ponder on this Word, and it will transform our lives. Indeed the guiding principle of the Carmelite Rule is transformation in Christ. By allowing the values of the Rule to shape our lives, we will gradually be transformed and become a new creation in Christ.

5. The way of prayer, which is not so much taught but assumed in the Carmelite Rule and which permeates the whole of it, is *Lectio divina*. This way of prayer was practiced for hundreds of years before any attempt was made to define it. The famous four stages or phases of *Lectio divina* (reading, meditation, prayer and contemplation) come to us from Guigo the Carthusian about the year 1150 in his book, *The Ladder of the Monks*. At the time of the writing of the Rule, there was not much concern about defining stages of prayer. Guigo's four steps of reading, meditation, prayer and contemplation were intended as teaching aids for young people who joined religious communities; they were never intended to be hard and fast definitions. *Lectio divina* was the normal way of prayer and it was intended to lead to transformation in Christ. Meditation at this time had nothing to do with discursive thinking about God and the things of God; instead it was a practice whereby the whole body became involved in the prayer. The hermits would murmur the words of the psalms and repeat them over and over until such time as the words took root within them and they would come spontaneously to mind during their daily work. Clearly St. Albert, and the hermits, had meditated long on the Word of God because the Rule is full of Scriptural allusions and direct quotes. The Word of God was part of their lives and so became the heart of the Rule which he wrote.

6. The Rule provides the elements of a spiritually healthy way of life that leads people towards transformation in Christ. The Rule does not teach contemplative prayer; it

prepares the way for it. Despite the fact that the words “contemplation” and “contemplative prayer” are not mentioned in the Rule, other terms are used that point to this reality for example: “pondering (or meditating on) the Lord’s law day and night” (10); “your breast fortified by holy meditations” (19); “The sword of the spirit, the word of God, must abound in your mouths and hearts. And whatever you do, let it all be done in the Word of the Lord” (19). The Rule, as we have said, assumes the rhythm of *Lectio divina*, which leads towards contemplation. We can decide to read the Word of God and to ponder on it. Our response to the Word is usually spontaneous and the fruit of what has gone before but nevertheless we are still in control. Contemplative prayer is qualitatively different from any other prayer that has preceded it. We lose our control when it comes to contemplative prayer. This is God’s transforming action within us and we are put to sleep in a sense while God, the great Physician, operates deep within us to transform the hidden recesses of our hearts into the image of Christ. Of course this is not completely passive as the Song of Songs declares: “I slept but my heart kept vigil” (Song 5,2). The process of contemplation goes on in daily life but reaches a high point in contemplative prayer. It cannot be grasped; it can only be received: “So delicate is this interior refreshment that ordinarily if one desires it or tries to experience it, it will not be experienced; because, as I say, it does its work when the soul is most at rest and most free from care; it is like the air which, if one desires to close one’s hand upon it, escapes” (Dark Night, I, 9,6). At the beginning, contemplation is so vague and so gentle that the individual will normally be unaware that anything unusual is taking place. In some people this awareness grows enormously and we can see the results of this contemplative awareness in the abundance of mystical literature throughout the centuries.

Contemplation

7. The Order has always considered that contemplation lies at the heart of our vocation. The *Institutio Primorum Monachorum* [*The Ten Books or Book of the First Monks*], which from the late 14th century was the formation document for all young Carmelites, says this – “The goal of this life is twofold: One part we acquire by our own effort and the exercise of the virtues, with the help of divine grace. This is to offer God a heart that is holy and pure from actual stain of sin. We attain this goal when we are perfect and ‘in Carith’, that is, hidden in that charity of which the Wise Man says, ‘Love covers all offences’ (Prov. 10,12). ...The other goal of this life is granted to us as the free gift of God; namely, not only after death but even in this mortal life, to taste somewhat in the heart and to experience in the mind the power of the divine presence and the sweetness of heavenly glory” (Book 1, chap. 2). St. Teresa and St. John of the Cross were well formed in the Carmelite tradition and recalled the Order to its initial inspiration, as did all the other reforms throughout the history of the Order. Saints Teresa and John of the Cross of course are original spiritual geniuses and for those who wish to understand more of the development of contemplation within the individual, study of these saints is essential.

8. In the current presentation of the Carmelite charism, the Order says the following in the Constitutions of the friars: “Carmelites seek to live their allegiance to Jesus Christ

through a commitment to seek the face of the living God (the contemplative dimension of life), through fraternity, and through service in the midst of the people” (Const. 14). Another article of the Constitutions of the friars goes on to say, “ The tradition of the Order has always interpreted the Rule and the founding charism as expressions of the contemplative dimension of life, and the great spiritual teachers of the Carmelite Family have always returned to this contemplative vocation” (Const. 17). According to the Constitutions of the friars, contemplation, “is a transforming experience of the overpowering love of God. This love empties us of our limited and imperfect human ways of thinking, loving, and behaving, transforming them into divine ways” (Const. 17). In the Constitutions of the affiliated Congregations and the recently approved Third Order Rule, there appears the same insistence on contemplation.

9. The *Ratio Institutionis Vitae Carmelitanae* (formation document hereinafter referred to as the *Ratio*) of the friars clarifies the role of contemplation in the charism of the Order: “The contemplative dimension is not merely one of the elements of our charism (prayer, fraternity and service): it is the dynamic element which unifies them all.

In prayer we open ourselves to God, who, by his action, gradually transforms us through all the great and small events of our lives. This process of transformation enables us to enter into and sustain authentic fraternal relationships; it makes us willing to serve, capable of compassion and of solidarity, and gives us the ability to bring before the Father the aspirations, the anguish, the hopes and the cries of the people.

Fraternity is the testing ground of the authenticity of the transformation which is taking place within us (*Ratio* 23). The *Ratio* goes on to say, “Through this gradual and continuous transformation in Christ, which is accomplished within us by the Spirit, God draws us to himself on an inner journey which takes us from the dispersive fringes of life to the inner core of our being, where he dwells and where he unites us with himself.

The inner process which leads to the development of the contemplative dimension helps us to acquire an attitude of openness to God’s presence in life, teaches us to see the world with God’s eyes, and inspires us to seek, recognize, love and serve God in those around us” (*Ratio* 24).

10. The goal of the contemplative journey is to become mature friends of Jesus Christ to such a degree that his values become our values and we begin to see with God’s eyes and love with God’s heart. Authentic contemplation must find expression in a commitment to serve others, whether this is done by means of an active apostolate or within a monastery. When God gazes on the world, God sees beyond the externals; God sees the motivation of the human heart. A contemplative community’s authentic experience of God necessarily leads us to make our own “the mission of Jesus, who was sent to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom of God and to bring about the total liberation of humanity from all sin and oppression” (*Ratio*, 38).

To See With God’s Eyes

11. In the post-synodal document *Vita Consecrata*, Pope John Paul II states, “At the beginning of his ministry, in the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus announces that the Spirit has consecrated him to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to captives, to give sight back to the blind, to set the oppressed free, to decree a year of favor from the Lord (cf. Lk. 4,16-19). Taking up the Lord’s mission as her own the Church proclaims the Gospel to every man and woman committing herself to their integral salvation. But with special attention, in a true preferential option, she turns to those who are in situations of greater weakness, and therefore in greater need. ‘The poor’, in varied states of affliction, are the oppressed, those on the margins of society, the elderly, the sick, the young, any and all who are considered and treated as ‘the least’. The option for the poor is inherent in the very structure of love lived in Christ. All of Christ’s disciples are therefore held to this option, but those who wish to follow the Lord more closely, imitating his attitudes, cannot but feel involved in a very special way. The sincerity of their response to Christ’s love will lead them to live a life of poverty and to embrace the cause of the poor. For each institute, according to its charism, this involves adopting a simple and austere way of life, both as individuals and as a community. Strengthened by this living witness and in ways consistent with their choice of life, and maintaining their independence vis-à-vis political ideologies, consecrated persons will be able to denounce the injustices committed against so many sons and daughters of God, and commit themselves to the promotion of justice in the society where they work” (VC, 82).

12. Faithful to the Scriptures, the Church and the Order have made a preferential option for the poor because Christ was sent to bring Good News to the poor (Lk. 4,18). We cannot remain untouched by the cry of the poor (Ex 22,22.26; Sir. 21,5). A commitment to justice and peace necessarily involves doing something concrete for the poor but it also involves asking questions. Why is the situation like this? What can we do about it? Obviously the reasons for the situation of poverty of so many in the world and the reasons for the lack of true peace are extremely complex. This preferential option comes from our contemplative vocation. “The authentic contemplative journey allows us to discover our own frailty, our weakness, our poverty - in a word, the nothingness of human nature: all is grace. Through this experience, we grow in solidarity with those who live in situations of deprivation and injustice. As we allow ourselves to be challenged by the poor and by the oppressed, we are gradually transformed, and we begin to see the world with God’s eyes and to love the world with his heart. With God, we hear the cry of the poor, and we strive to share the Divine solicitude, concern, and compassion for the poorest and the least.

This moves us to speak out prophetically in the face of the excesses of individualism and subjectivism which we see in today’s mentality - in the face of the many forms of injustice and oppression of individuals and of peoples” (Ratio 43).

13. The fundamental reason for the existence of so much poverty in the world lies in the depths of the human heart. It is a great mistake to blame only others for the situation because each of us bears some responsibility. The commitment to justice and peace must go hand in hand with the contemplative process of putting on the mind of Christ so that

our service of the poor does not become a subtle way to make the poor serve our own needs. The human heart is very devious, and, in order to serve others according to the mind and heart of God, we must submit to the profound purification, which is an intimate part of the contemplative process (Js. 4,8; Heb. 4,12-13).

The Prophet Elijah

14. In recent years the Carmelite Family has rediscovered the importance of the Prophet Elijah as an inspiration in the work of justice and peace. His contemplative experience impelled him to prophetic action. He denounced without fear the actions of the powerful people of his day and he brought the light of the Word of God into situations of sin. The story of Naboth's vineyard (1 Kgs. 21, 1-29) is a good example of Elijah's prophetic activity. King Ahab wanted Naboth's vineyard for himself but Naboth did not want to sell his patrimony. The Queen, Jezebel, mocked her husband and challenged him to show who in fact was King in Israel. The queen had hatched a diabolical plot to accuse Naboth unjustly of blasphemy and to assume the control of the vineyard when Naboth was out of the way. The Prophet Elijah came on to the scene when Ahab had taken the vineyard into his possession and he condemned Ahab for abusing his authority. Obviously this was a very courageous step. Proclaiming the Word of God in certain situations can be very dangerous. In the Prophet Elijah, we see a man who translated his contemplative experience into prophetic action.

15. Elijah won a great victory for Yahweh on Mount Carmel (1K. 18,36-40) but he was threatened by Jezebel and immediately his internal voices drowned out his trust in God. He went into the desert, (1Kgs. 19,3-4) which is traditionally the place of silence (Hos. 2,16). God spoke to Elijah through the angel so that Elijah would continue his journey. Elijah had difficulty in discerning the voice of God in the midst of all his troubles but eventually plodded on to Horeb (1K. 19,5-8). When he arrives, God asks him what he is doing there. Elijah replies that he is filled with great zeal for the Lord God of hosts. He tells God that he is the only champion of Yahweh remaining in the whole of Israel (1Kgs. 19,10). God does not respond at this point but simply tells Elijah to go out and stand on the mountain. There Elijah meets God but not in the way he expects nor in the way that his whole religious tradition has taught him to expect. Elijah has to silence all his internal voices that tell him what God is like so that he can receive God as God is (1Kgs. 19,11-12). Once Elijah has met God on God's terms, and not on his own terms, he is open to hear the truth, which sets him free from illusion. He thought that God really needed him since he was the only prophet left. God very gently points out that in fact there are 7,000 others who have not bent the knee to Baal (1Kgs. 19,18). Now freed from illusion, Elijah receives a new mission from God, which is in fact mostly carried out by his successor, Elisha, who is the recipient of a double portion of his spirit (1Kgs. 19,19; 2Kgs. 2,11).

16. God uses everything, big or small, good or bad, to challenge our normal way of being in the world, just as Elijah was challenged to let go of his expectations of how God would come to him. These expectations were deeply rooted in Elijah and our expectations and

perspectives are deeply implanted in us. Before we can receive God as God really is, we have to learn to let go of all these. This is a painful process, a real dark night, but essential so that we can bear the light of day and be prepared for the encounter with God. Our Carmelite tradition speaks of a journey of transformation. The events of our life are not meaningless. At the heart of every event, God is calling to us to take a step forward on our journey. God is calling to us to take a step forward from our predictable way of judging situations and people, including ourselves, so that we can begin to see things from God's perspective. The end of our journey is our completed transformation when we are able to look upon all that is as if with God's eyes and love what we see as if with God's heart. We need to eat and drink lest the journey be too long for us. We find the necessary food for our journey in the daily celebration of the Eucharist, pondering the Word of God and in our Carmelite tradition.

Mary the Mother of God

17. Carmel is famous for its Marian devotion, which is expressed in many ways. The greatest devotion is to be conformed to the object of our devotion. Titus Brandsma said that the vocation of a Carmelite was to be another Mary. The "fiat" of Mary gave the necessary space for Christ to be born and thus she co-operated with the plan of God. Through her, God now has a human face. Our devotion to Mary must not stop at the imitation of her virtues, though that is very important. We must allow Christ to grow within us to the point that we become transformed in him so that we can say with St. Paul, "it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2,20). In that way we will be a word from God, a tabernacle of the presence of God in the world (cf. 1Cor. 3,16; Eph. 2,21-22). In that way we will live our prophetic vocation.

18. The divine maternity was the subject of much reflection among the Carmelites from the earliest times. As an Order with a strong contemplative thrust, the Carmelites sought to gaze on God even here on earth. Our Lady was the model of all they were aiming to be. No closer union with God could be thought of than Our Lady carrying God's only Son in her womb. The fact that she was sinless meant that there was no resistance in her to God. Her faith made her unswerving in her trust in God no matter what happened. She listened attentively to the Word of God and did what God asked of her. In this way she came to the fullness of life.

19. Mary had to walk by faith. She had to penetrate the mystery of God's plan and the mystery of her Son with loving faith. She pondered everything that happened to her and stored up everything in her heart in order to follow where God desired to lead her (Lk. 2,19.51). All the disparate elements of life reveal something of God and of God's plan. Mary is presented to us as a model (Lk. 11,28). She is the woman of faith, the perfect disciple of Jesus Christ. By imitating her faith, we are enabled to see beyond the external things that surround us. She was able to "see" God at the heart of the universe drawing all things and all people to Himself through Jesus Christ. Mary was a contemplative, which does not mean that she spent all day on her knees. A contemplative is a mature friend of God who

looks upon reality as if with the eyes of God and loves what she sees as if with God's heart. Prayer of course is very important but the test of the authenticity of prayer is how we live in daily life. Even prayer can be used as an escape from reality. The reality that surrounds us is the place of the encounter with the Living God. This reality can be difficult; it can be challenging but nevertheless it is the sacred space where we meet God. Prayer is not just bombarding God with requests and petitions; it is above all an opening of our hearts, our lives, to God. God has a plan for us and for our world and this plan is borne out of love for us. God does not impose on us but invites us to be co-workers in making the divine plan a reality in our world. We cannot pray with sincerity "Your Kingdom come" unless we seek to bring the values of the Kingdom to our own little part of the world.

20. In prayer we invite God into our lives to shape and mould our hearts so that we can be instruments of God's peace and love, so that we can be tabernacles of the divine presence. Jesus himself gave us the model of all prayer (Mt. 6,9-13; Lk. 11,1-4). God is Father of all and therefore all of us are members of the same family. We bless and thank God because by our faith we have grasped something of the divine plan for us and therefore we desire that God's will may be done. Mary was eager that God's will be accomplished and she was more than willing to play her part. This eagerness for God's will remained unchanged despite the sufferings that came to her because of her acceptance. She proved that her prayer really was an opening to God by her acceptance and active co-operation with God's will.

21. We are asked to be faithful to God in our own particular situation. We are asked to live the Gospel where we are. We are asked to be contemplatives at the heart of the world, being aware of God's presence not in dramatic ways but in the midst of our ordinary everyday lives. Each of us then will be a focus for God's presence in our own little part of the world. First of all in faith we need to be aware of the presence of God within us and then in the people we meet. God lives at the centre of each human being no matter what that person is like. As we become more and more aware of God's presence everywhere, we become more sensitive to the signs of the presence of God's Kingdom. This appears clearly in the visit of Mary to Elizabeth and in the beautiful words of the *Magnificat* (Lk. 1,39-55).

22. The Hebrew Scriptures speak of watchmen on the towers. They would be the first to see the dawn of a new day from their high positions (Is 21,11-12; 40,9). The psalms speak of people who get up very early in the morning to anticipate the dawn (Ps. 57(56),9; 108(107),2-3; 119(118),147-148). We are to be "Kingdom spotters" (people who can recognize the values of the Kingdom in unlikely situations (cf. Lk. 17,20-21; 12,54-56)). Many people with no obvious religious affiliation live by the values of God's Kingdom, the same values that Jesus lived by and taught (cfr Lk. 10,13-14). We will be able to spot these even in the most unlikely people and encourage these values wherever we meet them. The visit of the poor shepherds to the crib and what they said made Our Lady ponder in her heart (Lk. 2,8-20). She recognized the hand of God at work.

Prophets of Justice and Peace

23. God is not deaf to the cry of the poor and neither must we be deaf. In the words of the Prophet Isaiah, God says, “Is not this rather the fast which I desire: break unjust fetters, untie the thongs of the yoke, set free the oppressed and break every yoke? Does it not consist perhaps in sharing your bread with the hungry and to bring the oppressed and homeless into your own home, in clothing those who are naked without neglecting your own people?” (Is. 58, 6-7). We live in God’s world and creation has been entrusted to us as God’s stewards (Gn. 1,28; Sir. 17,1-4; Wis. 9,2-3). This does not mean that we have complete liberty to use or abuse the goods of the earth without thought for tomorrow or for future generations. We have certain rights but also certain duties towards the rest of creation. The Word of God is concerned with the whole of life and not just spiritual things (Ps 104(103), 27-30).

24. Jesus Christ is for us the primary model of what it means to be a prophet. We are above all followers of Christ and therefore we must seek to put into practice his teachings every day. Jesus Christ is priest, prophet and king because in him all the promises and roles of the Old Testament are fulfilled. He is the one in whom the work of the prophets reaches its culmination (cf. 2Cor 1,20; Mt 7,12). The prophets of the Old Testament proclaimed the Word of God in particular situations. They warned and condemned but also comforted the people in times of difficulty. They sought to turn the hearts of the people towards God (Mal. 3,24) and they spoke with severity or with tenderness according to the situation.

25. The prophets of the Old Testament spoke to the imagination. They asked the people to imagine another possible future. For example the prophets Isaiah and Micah spoke in a time of war or a time of peace when “from their swords they will forge ploughshares and from their blades, scythes. No nation will lift the sword against another nation and they will not learn the art of war anymore...” (Is. 2,4; 11,5-9; Mic. 4,3). When the future is very dark, the prophets bring hope. However in order to do this, it is necessary to see beyond the present situation to the reality that lies beneath. This is the faith of Our Lady in the *Magnificat* who sees the proud cast down, the hungry filled with good things and the rich sent away empty when those who see only the external appearances would believe the opposite to be true (Lk. 1,46-55).

26. God has sent us a Savior and in Jesus we see the way that God works in our world. Jesus preached Good News, healed the sick, pardoned sinners and welcomed those who were excluded by the religious leaders of his day. He did not resist violence when it came to him as a result of his fidelity to the Father. He willingly and freely gave up his life on the cross so that we may have life and have it to the full (Jn. 10,10). He faced the full force of evil and seemed to be submerged by it but the Father raised him to life on the third day (Heb. 5,7-9). The resurrection of Jesus means that love is stronger than hatred or evil, life is stronger than death (Rom. 8,35-39).

27. To be a peacemaker is a Christian obligation (Lk. 10,5; Mt. 5,9). It is not an optional extra to our Christianity. What does being a peacemaker mean for us? First of all I think that we need to make ourselves aware of the root causes of conflict in our world. We often cut the heads off weeds and they simply grow again. There can be no lasting peace until the causes for discontentment have been addressed. We can go even further back in our search for the root causes any war or injustice. The name of God is used for many demonic actions. It is the safest mask of Satan and we must continually tear this mask off if we are to be peacemakers. The great spiritual tragedy is that many cruel and inhuman acts are committed in the name of serving God (Jn. 16,2). Our father Elijah struggled against the worship of idols and indeed the great danger in his day was that the people might claim to worship Yahweh but in fact were worshipping the idol Baal (1Kgs. 18,16-39). Idol worshipping is still prevalent in our day. The names of the idols may have changed but the substance is the same. An idol is any person, place or thing, that we put in the place of God and from which we seek complete happiness. It is very easy to condemn other people for the evils that they do. It is much more difficult to see and accept the truth that we are part of the evil which we protest against.

28. Jews, Christians and Muslims venerate the Prophet Elijah and so we Carmelites must be ecumenical in our outreach. This would be a real prophetic action in the situation of our days. We cannot contribute to peace in our world until we are at peace in our own hearts, until we are able to live in peace with the people around us. The lack of peace in our own lives contributes to the lack of peace in our world.

29. But what can we do? We have no political power. How can we change the world? We can certainly take seriously the suggestions that are presented to us by our local and International Justice and Peace Commissions. As you know, the Carmelite Family has recently formed a Carmelite NGO (Non Governmental Organization), associated to, and recognized by, the UN. That has given us a much wider forum in which to share our charism. The General Chapter of 1995 encouraged the Order to enter the new *areopaghi* of our world and the UN is surely one of these. There are many Carmelites involved in promoting justice and peace as a constituent part of working for the coming of God's Reign. We need to be aware of the many signs of hope that exist. Who would have thought that they would have seen the tearing down of the Berlin Wall or the dismantling of the Eastern Block? What was responsible for these major events? Obviously there is no simple answer to that question. However can we not say that the thousands of little people who struggled and suffered for justice for many years had some effect? Ordinary people can change things. Take the example of slavery. For a time keeping slaves and making vast sums out of selling some human beings to other human beings was considered to be perfectly socially and morally acceptable. However several people in a number of countries decided to do something about this. Within a few years they had changed the attitude of whole societies.

30. We can certainly also pray for peace and justice in our world. However, in a situation in which the world is threatened by annihilation, prayer does not mean much when we

take it only as an attempt to influence God or as a search for a spiritual fallout shelter or as a source of consolation in stress-filled times. Real prayer is such a radical act because it asks us to criticize our whole way of being in the world; lay down our old self and accept our new self, which is Christ.

The Sound of Sheer Silence

31. Where is God in the midst of all our problems? (Ps. 42(41), 4; 79(78), 10; Joel 2,17). Our faith tells us that God cannot really be absent from our lives. That would be hell. The Prophet Isaiah speaks of the hidden God (Is 45,15). Perhaps we need to learn to discern the presence of God in the apparent absence of God and to learn a new language, God's language. St. John of the Cross, tells us that, "One word the Father spoke, which word was His Son, and this word he speaks ever in eternal silence, and in silence must it be heard by the soul" (Maxims & Counsels, 21).

32. We have to cultivate a profound silence within so that we can hear what God wants to say to us (cf. Is 50,4). We need to listen to God in prayer of course but also in the events of daily life. Often we have so much noise going on inside us that we cannot hear or discern anything else. As Carmelites, this silence should come naturally to us, or at least the desire for it. This is not just an ascetic practice and it is not referring merely to an external silence. It is an internal silence in order to discern the presence of God in the midst of even the most hopeless situation so that we can continue our journey with hope. Our Rule tells us: "The apostle recommends silence, when he tells us to work in it. As the prophet also testifies, Silence is the cultivation of justice; and again, in silence and hope will be your strength" (Rule 21).

33. We need to try to identify the noise inside us: the commentaries on others, on events, and on ourselves. Once we have become aware of our internal noise, we can begin to let it go so that it does not influence everything we do, think and say. If we continue the journey we will be brought face to face with our prejudices, our irrational fears and our presumptions. This experience is not to depress us but so that we can be liberated from them.

34. It is necessary to cultivate an interior silence so that we will be aware that God is speaking to us through some simple and humble messenger. If we are not silent within, life passes us by and we never grasp the true significance of what happens to us (cf. Mt. 16,1-3). Many of us are not completely at ease with external silence. We have an internal tape or cd that comments on everything and everyone throughout the day. The comments on the internal tape are based on our particular perspective on life, which of course is usually in our favor. We instinctively defend ourselves if we feel under attack and we seek the esteem and acceptance of others. We do this usually without being aware of what is going on inside us. It is a constant internal noise that makes it difficult to hear any other voice. The journey of faith towards transformation takes us through bright sunlight and dark valleys (cf. Ps 23(22),4). God uses all the events of our life, good and

bad, as instruments of purification, which is essential if we are to become what God has created us to be. We have to make the effort to attempt to discern the hand of God at work but this discernment is much easier if we can calm the noise inside us and hear the voice of God who speaks in the sound of the gentle breeze, or as some exegetes have it, “the sound of thin silence” or “the sound of sheer silence” (I K 19, 12).

Say "No" to Death

35. We are the people of the resurrection. The resurrection is God’s “yes” to life. If we are to say “yes” to life, we must say “no” to death in all its forms. Saying “no” to death starts much earlier than saying “no” to any form of physical violence. It requires a deep commitment to the words of Jesus - “Do not judge” (Lk. 6,37). It requires saying “no” to all violence of heart and mind. (Mt. 5,22). The judgments I make of people are a form of moral killing (Rm. 14,4). When I judge other human beings, I label them, put them in fixed categories and place them at a safe distance from me so that I do not have to enter into a real human relationship with them. By my judgments I divide my world into those who are good and those who are evil and I thus play God. But everyone who plays God ends up by acting like the devil. The words of Jesus go right to the heart of our struggle, “Love your enemies, and do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who treat you badly” (Lk. 6,27-28).

36. What my enemy deserves is not my anger, rejection, resentment or disdain but my love (Mt. 5,44-45). Only a loving heart, a heart that continues to affirm life at all times, can say “no” to death without being corrupted by it. Increasing starvation and poverty around the world, the wars that go on all the time offer us many reasons to be fearful even despairing. When we hear the voices of death all around us and see the many signs of the superiority of the powers of death, it becomes hard to believe that life is indeed stronger than death. However, it must have been hard to believe in a bright future on the first Good Friday.

37. Our God is a God of surprises. If we say “no” to death in all its forms, we may seem to be on the losing side. Indeed at times it may seem that we are on our own but we are not. There is a whole army of unimportant people, in the eyes of the world, praying and working for peace. These people are allowing God to change their lives from within, to take out of their bodies the heart of stone and replace it with a heart of flesh, which is able to love (Ez. 11,19). These people are letting go of the false self which is based on external criteria e.g. success, wealth, power, the good opinion of others and so on, and discovering the true self which is found in God. The true self is created in the image and likeness of God (Gn. 1,26-27) and nothing can destroy it. The true self does not judge others or label them but it sees another true self struggling to release itself from the chains of the false self. This army of peaceful people is having an effect on our world. Jesus said, “Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth” (Mt. 5,5). The power of our God is stronger than all human weapons (Judith 9,7; Is. 40,15). When will the promise be fulfilled? We do not know but fulfilled it will be.

38. Jesus Christ is the Word of God (Jn. 1,14), God's "yes" to the world. God created the world and found everything very good (Gen.1,31). Through creation we can come into contact with God (Rm. 1,20) and therefore we have a serious duty to protect it and nurture it so that it will continue to speak of God to future generations. By means of the death and resurrection of Christ we are redeemed and reunited with God (Rm. 6,4-11). The Word of God does not return to its author without having completed what it was sent to do, according to the prophet Isaiah (Is 55,11). This is true in a sublime way in the case of Jesus Christ through whom the whole of creation finds once again the road that leads to God (John 14,6).

39. To become a word from God it is necessary to enter a process of interior transformation and consent to the presence and action of God in our life. This is the work of God but God will not do it without our consent. This process can be painful because through it we come to see ourselves as we really are and not as we would like to be. The great danger is that we will seek to run away from this encounter with ourselves because we do not want to accept what is being revealed to us. This process of transformation includes a disintegration of what is false within us so that the true self can come to birth.

40. We do not fulfill our prophetic vocation simply by preaching or when we work with the poor and the marginalized, vital though that work is. We fulfill our prophetic vocation when we become a word from God and this involves a death in view of a resurrection, a new life in the image of God. To work for justice is an essential element of the preaching of the Gospel. This has been underlined innumerable times in church documents. However those who work in the area of justice and peace often meet with incomprehension or even antagonism from their own brothers or sisters. Why is not easy to explain but this fact has obscured a very important element of our work as religious.

A Dark Night

41. In our faith journey, there are moments when we are brought into the desert. Sometimes we walk into the desert following God's call or sometimes we just find ourselves there by force of circumstance. The desert is arid and it can be a frightening place. What does it all mean? We can be tempted not to go any further on the journey because we feel it is just not worth all the trouble. Then God sends a messenger to us (cf. 1K. 19,4-7). This messenger can come in all shapes and sizes and he or she encourages us to eat and drink for the journey is long. We are encouraged to eat the bread of life and drink from Carmel's wells, that is the Carmelite tradition, which has given life to many generations before us. But perhaps we are too depressed to even be aware of this, so God's messenger nudges us again and encourages us to eat and drink. It is a great challenge to recognize what God is saying to us in the midst of daily life and to recognize the voice of God in and through the voice of some very unlikely person.

42. Our faith, hope and love, those three essential Christian virtues, are at the beginning of our journey, based on what we have learned from others. As we continue on the journey, our human reasons for belief, for hoping in God and for loving as Christ commanded, begin to fail us. They are no longer sufficient. We can throw it all in because the journey is too precarious and the end is uncertain or we can reject the messenger and stay right where we are. Or we can continue the journey into the night (1K. 19,4-7). An essential element on our journey towards transformation is the dark night. This was never intended to be gloomy and impossible but an invitation to let go of our human and limited way of thinking, loving and acting so that we can think, love and act according to God's ways (cf. Const. 17).

43. John of the Cross gives masterful descriptions of various elements that go to make up the night but it is not uniform for everyone. The night is experienced by each person in a different way and is made precisely to assist the purification of the particular individual. The dark night is not a punishment for sin or infidelity but is a sign of the nearness of God. The dark night is God's work and leads to the complete liberation of the human person. For this reason it is to be welcomed despite the pain and confusion involved. The dark night can be experienced not only by individuals but also by groups and whole societies (cf. Lam. 3,1-24).

44. The journey of transformation usually lasts a long time because the purification and change that is wrought in the human being is so profound. This is not just a change of idea or opinion; it is a complete transformation of how we relate to the world around us, to other people and to God. The Native Americans have a saying about walking a mile in someone else's moccasins before we can understand another person. Jesus warned his followers not to judge (Lk. 6,37; Rom 14,3-4) and the reason is very simple: we cannot see things from another person's perspective and therefore we do not know what are the motives behind his or her actions. The process of Christian transformation, however, leads the human being towards a profound change of perspective, from his or her own particular way of seeing things to God's way. This involves a profound purification and emptying of all our attachments so that we can be filled with God.

45. This contemplative journey, both on a personal and communitarian level, cleanses our hearts that we may truly have room in our hearts for others and may have the possibility of hearing the cry of the poor without translating it through the filter of our own needs. We will then be able to carry out the challenge laid down by Pope John Paul II: "Consecrated men and women are sent forth to proclaim, by the witness of their lives, the value of Christian fraternity and the transforming power of the Good News, which makes it possible to see all people as sons and daughters of God, and inspires a self-giving love towards everyone, especially the least of our brothers and sisters" (VC, 51).

Our Response

46. Our vocation as Carmelites is very profound. We are called to serve the people as contemplative communities. By responding to Christ's call to follow him, we pledge ourselves to take on his vision and values but we soon find that we are incapable of living up to our ideals on our own. As we mature in our relationship with God, we give space to God to purify us so that we begin to see the way God sees and love as God loves. This way of seeing and loving is painful for the human being because it requires a radical transformation of the heart. The cry of the poor will penetrate our defenses and our response, freed from the distortion of the false self, will be from a pure heart.

47. Commitment to justice, peace and the safeguarding of creation is not an option. It is an urgent challenge, to which contemplative and prophetic Carmelite communities, following the example of Elijah and of Mary, must respond, speaking out in explicit defense of the truth and of the divine plan for humanity and for creation as a whole. Our community lifestyle is in itself such a statement: it is founded on just and peaceful relations, according to the plan outlined in our Rule. Let us pray for one another that we may be faithful, individually and as communities, to the vocation given us by God and always remember that "the Christ encountered in contemplation is the same who lives and suffers in the poor" (VC, 82). In St. Matthew's Gospel, Jesus reminds us: I assure you, as often as you did it for one of the least of my brothers, you did it for me" (Mt. 25, 40).

1st January 2004
World Day of Prayer for Peace