

GENERAL CONGREGATION 2011

Final message to the Carmelite Family

“Qualiter respondendum sit quaerentibus” – “How shall we respond to those who are seeking?”

To all the Members of the Carmelite Family: Peace and the Grace in the Lord.

“As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in Him, rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.” (Colossians 2:6-7). With these words of the Apostle Saint Paul, proclaimed in the liturgy of the first day, and praying for the wisdom of the Holy Spirit, Prior General Fr. Fernando Millán Romeral inaugurated the 2011 General Congregation.

1. The General Congregation was celebrated at *Mount Carmel Spiritual Centre*, Niagara Falls, from the 5th to the 15th of September 2011. The theme was *“Qualiter respondendum sit quaerentibus” (“How shall we respond to those who are seeking?”)*. These are the opening words of the *Rubrica Prima* which can be found in our 1281 Constitutions, the oldest Constitutions that we have. This document can be traced back to 1247, when the Order, while migrating to Europe, adopted a mendicant lifestyle. The *Formula vitae* and our *Rule* already presented an implicit ecclesiology. The *Rubrica Prima*, from an ecclesiological point of view, was the official answer to those who asked us about the origins of our Order. The present question, we suppose, has nothing to do with how we were born or about our origins, but it challenges us to ask ourselves: “Who are we? What are we doing here? (cf. *1 Kings 19:10*), and why do we do what we do in the Church?”
2. Following the directives given by our General Council, we dealt with the second part of a reflection already begun at the 2007 General Chapter: *“In obsequio Jesu Christi: Praying and prophetic communities in a changing world.”* We dealt with the first part of this theme (*“Praying and prophetic communities”*) at the Council of Provinces meeting at San Felice del Benaco in 2009. During these past days, using an ecclesiological criterion, we dealt with the second part: *“in a changing world”*. Three experts helped us, from different points of view, to deepen our Carmelite identity. Fr Richard Rohr, OFM, a Franciscan friar, proposed some areas which religious life can offer to the Church and to the world. Professor María Dolores López Guzmán, from the point of view of a committed lay woman in the Church, described to us the hope that religious life offers in dialogue with other states of life. Fr Michael Plattig, O.Carm., highlighted certain questions and practical examples of how our Carmelite spirituality can contribute to the Church.
3. We recalled during the past few days how throughout our history and in our spiritual tradition, contemplation is not only the heart of the Carmelite charism, but also the best gift, the hidden treasure, the precious pearl (cf. *Matthew 13:44 -46*) that we can offer to the world and to the Church. One is a contemplative where love becomes active. Contemplation is a process of gradual transformation from the *false self* (the

old person) to the *true self* (the new person) hidden in Christ (cf. *Colossians* 3:3), and realized in us by the Holy Spirit to achieve union with God in love (*Ratio Institutionis Vitae Carmelitanae*, 1). It is love which transforms our works, our thoughts, our feelings (cf. *Constitutions* 17; *RIVC* 23): that love which comes from God and with which we serve humanity. It is love which purifies our thoughts, heals our wounds, unites us to our brothers and sisters, alleviates our sufferings, denounces injustice and opens ways to reconciliation. Certainly, it is love which changes and transforms our world. Our mystics remind us not to forget that it is love which gives value to all of our works, since “*God looks only on the love with which you do what you do*” (St. Teresa of Avila, *Exc.* 5). Love is the vocation of the contemplative: “*to love you and to make you loved*” (St. Thérèse of Lisieux, *Letter* 119).

4. What is the specific characteristic of Carmelite religious life? Religious life itself already refers to and speaks of the goodness of the Lord, and visibly offers to the world a clear message: “*God alone suffices*” (St. Teresa of Avila, *Poetry*). One need do nothing special, except just to be, since “*the dignity of the religious vocation has an intrinsic value in the bosom of the Church, beyond its connection to any ministry or service* (cf. *RIVC*, 112). The best icon of Religious Life is the very presence of the consecrated person. Consecrated life, as *Lumen Gentium* 44 points out, invites us Carmelites to live our contemplative attitude, imitating “*much more closely (pressius) that life form which the Son of man undertook by coming into the world...*” The comparative *pressius*, translated into our vernacular languages as “*much more closely*” loses the intensity of the Latin term. *Pressius* is derived from the verb *presso*, which means “to press”, “to squeeze”, “to unite more tightly”. Inspired by this image, our consecration “conforms” us better to the lifestyle of Jesus of Nazareth. We better understand who we are when we enter into permanent dialogue with all God’s people, because no single vocation in the Church can fully fathom the depth of the mystery of Christ. “*Carmel understands its life according to the evangelical counsels, as the most appropriate means of moving towards full transformation in Christ*” (*RIVC* 7, 9, 19c; 25) and towards liberty (*RIVC* 16). Hence the exercise of the evangelical counsels, rather than being “the renouncing of something” or a means of moral perfectionism, “*is rather a means of growing in love and so reaching the fullness of life in God*” (*RIVC* 25). We become a gift for God (“*in obsequio Jesu Christi vivere debeat*” *Rule* 1) and for others, rendering our lives as an offering.
5. The question which we have been examining in the past few days is not so much “*What do we hope for?*”, but rather “*What does God hope for us?*” Our hope and our joy are based in Jesus Christ, the beginning and the end of all reality. The present, even if filled with burdens, can be lived with enthusiasm; it is moving towards an end, but this goal is so great that it justifies the effort needed (cf. *Spes Salvi* 1). Christian hope is *God-centered*. The Apostle Saint Paul reminds us that the community of Ephesus was without hope because they lived in this world as if they were “*without God*” (*Ephesians* 2:12). Our hope is rooted in knowing God, the true God (cf. *1 Kings* 18), the crucified Lord, the Risen Lord (cf. *Luke* 24:5-6). Amongst the things that we can hope for, even if it leads to rejection, is the cross of the Lord. Only by being friends with the cross of the

Lord (cf. *Philippians* 3:18-19) will we live contentedly and give hope to the weak. Our saints remind us that the principal cause of not advancing in the spiritual life is that we are sometimes enemies of the cross of the Lord: “*There will be many who will begin but they will never end. And I think the main reason is that they do not embrace the cross from the very beginning.*” (St. Teresa of Avila, *Life* 11, 15). Curiously enough, our motto “*Zelo zelatus sum pro Domino Deo exercituum*” is not a triumphal cry of the prophet Elijah, but rather a “prayer of complaint” in which the prophet recognizes his impotence and expresses his crisis and doubts, addressing himself directly to God. We should not consider our poverty and our limitations as failures, nor simply resign ourselves to them, but rather we should see them as an authentic school of transformation and of contemplation. Moreover it is necessary to recognize our weakness in order to be able to better know who God is and to let ourselves be saved by Him (cf. *2 Corinthians* 12:9). The God of revelation, who showed Himself so powerful in creation, wanted to manifest Himself as weak and powerless in redemption. It is only in this way that He can be our Redeemer and our Hope.

6. The experience of God lived in fraternity urges us to take ownership of “the mission of Christ” to be prophets of hope. The authentic contemplative is the bearer of the light of the Risen Christ in the midst of the darkness of the night of humanity. There are many forms of desert in the midst of the night: the desert of poverty and of abandonment, of loneliness and of destroyed love. There is also the desert of God’s darkness, that of forgetting the dignity of the person. The external deserts are multiplied in the world because they have extended the dark nights of the interior deserts. Our mission does not consist in passive hope, but rather in hastening the coming of the kingdom of God (cf. *2 Peter* 3:12). All that we have received in our Carmelite charism, our history, our spirituality, by the very logic of gift, does not belong to us, because we have received it “to donate it” and “to give it in the same way that it was given to us” (cf. John of the Cross, *The Call* 3, 78). And it was given to us without interest and in abundant measure (cf. *Luke* 6:38). Benedict XVI in conversation with the Prior General during the Pilgrimage of Hope at Castelgandolfo in August 2010 reminded us that “*The Carmelites teach us how to pray*”. Any Carmelite apostolate or mission should teach us not to accumulate prayers, turning devotions into pure superstition and magic or mere collectors’ items, but to really pray, that is, to nurture a mature relationship with God and with others. The expressions with which the mystics speak of the relationship with God enjoy a great freshness and simplicity, and precisely because of this, they connect powerfully with the heart of God and with the essentials of life.
7. In these days we also recalled how the practice of living in the presence of God (cf. *1 Kings* 17:1), the mystery of allowing God to be God, the rediscovery of the spirituality of the cell, the balance between silence and words, solitude, “*vacare Deo*”, the “dark night” and our mendicant lifestyle are the yeast which nourishes the Church and our world and which offers us food for thought in our pastoral ministry. We are aware that we are rich in tradition and theological models. But perhaps we need to revitalize our mystical journeys which, in practice, serve to transmit to others the wealth of Carmel

and the *beauty of having seen the Lord*. The Carmelite in the midst of the world is at the service of the cultivation of God's garden, Carmel, creating sacred places, mystical spaces where God can shine. Our ministry should present us with a series of questions: (a) Do we respect and presuppose the maturity of the faithful in our preaching? Do we tell them only what they should or should not do? (b) Does our work for justice and peace really flow from our contemplative dimension? Are we politicians or prophets and people of God? (c) How do we celebrate the Eucharist? Is it only a duty, a place to instruct the people? Is it a service that we give to God or rather a service which God gives to His people? (d) In spiritual accompaniment, do we seek to lead people to moral perfectionism or to spiritual freedom? Carmelites work without appropriating the results of their work. They must decrease so that God can increase (cf. *John* 3:30). They enlighten without eclipsing the action of God, fully aware that if in our mission we belittle God, we belittle ourselves. We do not announce to the world a spirituality of efficiency, of success and of productivity, but rather a spirituality of the little way and humility where our trust is placed in God.

8. Blessed Titus Brandsma, from this very place in 1935 during his tour of North America (Washington, Chicago, New York, Allentown, etc.) was deeply moved by the spectacle of Niagara Falls. He wrote in his diary: *"I am contemplating the imposing Niagara Falls ... from the high channel, I see them rushing down ceaselessly. What is surprising is the marvellous and complex possibility of the waters ... I see God in the work of his hands and the marks of his love in every visible thing. I am seized by a supreme joy which is above all other joys."* Certainly Fr. Titus did not reduce contemplation to a mere private and narcissistic self-complacency, but felt that he was in solidarity with the men and women of his own time. In fact, in his famous speech on the occasion of his investiture as Rector of the Catholic University of Nijmegen, on the 17th of October 1932, he asked: *"Why has the image of God become so obscured to the point that it no longer says anything to so many? Among the many questions that I have, none disturbs me more than the enigma of why so many learned and proud people, engulfed by progress, alienate themselves from God."* We also share the doubts and concerns of the people of our own time.
9. We Carmelites salute Mary the Mother of God, as the "Star of the Sea". Life is like a voyage through the sea of history in which Mary shows us the way. Holy Mary, Mother of Hope, teach us to believe, to hope and to love. *Ave Maris Stella* enlighten and guide us on our path.

Mount Carmel Spiritual Centre, Niagara Falls, Canada
15th September, 2011