

Praying and Prophetic Communities in a Changing World

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Professor Miguel Norbert Ubbari gave the following presentation as the Keynote Talk at the Sixth National Gathering of the Carmelite Third Order in the British Province, which took place at Aylesford Priory in May 2011. Miguel is a member of the Third Order from Puerto Rico who teaches on John of the Cross and contemporary Spanish literature at the University of Antwerp in Belgium. He is a member of the International Lay Carmelite Commission, and has been developing a Lay Carmelite community in Antwerp.

Introduction

The Second Vatican Council made a universal appeal for sanctity, and called the laity to their concrete mission of transforming the world. The calling of the laity is to discover God in the world, and to bring order to temporal reality, bringing forth the Kingdom of God. The Third Order Carmelite, as part of this venerable religious family, shares in the graces to live a “life of prayer” and take part in Elijan prophesy. I will therefore divide my intervention in three parts: (1) the life of prayer of a Lay Carmelite (whether a lay person or diocesan cleric); (2) community life for a professional person not living in the cloister, and quite often overwhelmed with work, family and church commitments; and (3) the possibilities for a prophetic contribution in a changing world.

1. The Prayer Life of a Lay/Third Order Carmelite

For St. John of the Cross, spiritual life is a matter of “science and experience”. Prayer as experience is a *sine qua non* of being a Carmelite. The 2003 *Rule for the Third Order of Carmel* (RTOC) invites us to participate frequently – even every day – in the Eucharist, and to pray the Liturgy of the Hours in communion with the universal Church. In my twenty-two years as a Carmelite tertiary, I confess that I would be unable to remain centred without the daily Eucharist, the practices of Marian devotion and the Liturgy of the Hours (as well as *Lectio Divina*, when some time remains). My professional commitments, my travels, my everyday problems, I bear them all in Christ, who strengthens me, because I am centred in the Eucharist and supported by the Church’s prayer.

Having been a member of the Third Order for so many years now has allowed me to know many people with different ways of life in Carmel: young, mature, elderly; simple labourers, housewives, professionals of all sorts, retired; single, celibate, married, divorced, remarried; lay people and secular clergy. Therefore, when addressing myself to the members of the Carmelite Family, we must take into account many forms and possibilities. And let us here not speak about cultural differences, from Europe to America in the West, to the Philippines and Indonesia in the East, to Africa and Latin America in the South. Some Lay Carmelites live in industrialized and quite often deeply secularized countries, while others still enjoy the blessings of living in a country with a strong religious culture, even when they may be less industrialized, and quite often poor.

But all Lay or Secular Carmelites in the world have a common denominator: an intense love and devotion for Our Lady of Mount Carmel and Jesus Christ her son, sacramentally present in the Holy Eucharist until the end of times. Lay Carmelites in every country or environment are aware of the importance of being centred in Christ, and open to the teachings of the Church. But every country, Province or Commissariat must make the necessary adaptation which best

suits the temperament and possibilities of every nation, and every particular individual. Some regions are more devotional than others, others are more rational and sceptic.

Every tertiary – each within his or her own political, religious and social reality – must be a man or woman who, like Elijah, is always looking for the face of God, in his own self, and in the designs of history. God is in everything and in everyone. However, not everything is good nor completely evil. Not everything in us is good, nor completely evil. Catholic teaching tells us that original sin brought a disorder in us. As a modern-day Carmelite in Avila, Spain, so wisely explained to me recently, when God walks in the Garden of Eden in the Book of Genesis, it does not literally mean that God himself was walking in the Garden. We must look deeper into the figurative meaning of these words. When Adam and Eve hide in the Garden and God asks them “Where are you?”, God is not referring to a temporal space but a spiritual one. As a result of the first disobedience, the first human beings moved themselves outside their own centre. They lost their place, their centre. They lost contact with God, the one who lives in the centre of the soul, and they lost their perspective of the master-plan that God had for them since the beginning of history. In fact, we were not made for suffering and nevertheless to die. We were made as the centres of Creation, and for eternal life. God glorifies himself in his Creation, and in every one of us. However, the effect of this fall outside the centre makes the history of salvation possible and necessary, the reason why spiritual writers and mystics have conceived the way to holiness as a journey of returning to the centre of our soul, the place where God abides in full glory.

However, in order to reach spiritual maturity or holiness, spiritual writers encourage us to ask for the help of the Holy Spirit and spiritual discernment. St. John of the Cross reminds us in his *Counsels to a Religious* there are three enemies or antagonists to spiritual growth: the world, the devil and our own concupiscence. Let me make very clear that a sound interpretation of the message of St. John of the Cross’ works reveals a very positive view of the world and of the human person. When speaking about the World as a deterrent to spiritual growth, it is not because John regards it as something evil. It cannot be, since the World has been created by God. Creation is good! However, most people who have lived long enough in it, and who know and read the Gospels, may find it easier to acknowledge that evil is also present in Creation. The human being is not evil by nature. For many years I have been impressed by some words of St. John of the Cross that remind us that God is never absent from the soul, not even when it might be in mortal sin:

“A great contentment for the soul is for it to understand that God is never absent from the soul, although it be in mortal sin, and still less from the soul in grace. What more desirest thou, O soul, and what more seekest thou without thyself, since within thyself thou hast thy riches, thy delights, thy satisfaction, thy fullness and thy kingdom, which is thy Beloved, Whom thy soul desires and seeks? Rejoice thou and be glad in thy inward recollection with Him, since thou hast Him so near. There desire Him, there adore Him, and go thou not to seek Him outside thyself, for so shalt thou be wearied and distracted; and thou shalt neither find Him nor rejoice in Him more surely or more quickly or more intimately than within thyself.”
(*Spiritual Canticle* B 1, 8)

Before the documents of the Second Vatican Council made a general call to holiness, I still remember some traditional Catholics in Puerto Rico who thought that spiritual life and perfection was something reserved for priests and nuns. And some even thought that a beatification or canonization was only possible for people living in cloisters. It was for them practically impossible to reach perfection while having a family or taking active participation in the world. Tertiaries very often considered themselves as some sort of third class citizens in religious life.

I believe that the laity was not aware that spiritual life and perfection may be lived and achieved by everyone. However, tertiaries were often focussed on imitating the way of life of friars and nuns, not realizing that family and professional life could also be a road to sanctity or perfection. However, I come back to my initial point. Prayer, in whatever form it may be, is a *sine qua non* for Lay Carmelites and Secular Clergy in the Third Order. But everyone must make the necessary adaptations. Speaking about devotional types of prayer in the Seventeenth Century, Saint Francis de Sales wrote some beautiful lines in his *Introduction to the Devout Life*:

“When God created the world He commanded each tree to bear fruit after its kind; and even so He bids Christians – the living trees of His Church – to bring forth fruits of devotion, each one according to his kind and vocation. A different exercise of devotion is required of each – the noble, the artisan, the servant, the prince, the maiden and the wife; and furthermore such practice must be modified according to the strength, the calling, and the duties of each individual. I ask you, my child, would it be fitting that a bishop should seek to lead the solitary life of a Carthusian? And if the father of a family were as regardless in making provision for the future as a Capuchin, if the artisan spent the day in church like a religious, if the religious involved himself in all manner of business on his neighbour’s behalf as a bishop is called upon to do, would not such a devotion be ridiculous, ill-regulated, and intolerable?” (Chapter III, ‘Devotion is suitable to every Vocation and Profession’)

Following the Fifth Council of Provinces in 1979 the Carmelite Order issued a document entitled “*A Return to the Sources – Elijah and Mary: An examination of the biblical significance of Mary and Elijah*”. This document calls all members of the Carmelite Family to prayer and contemplation, inspired by the zeal of Elijah and the prayer and fellowship of Mary.

In order to become contemplative laity, please allow me to share with you some practical tips (and they are just that, tips) that have helped me in my life as a tertiary:

- i. Pray to God the Father, through the Son, and build up a strong relationship with the Holy Spirit.
- ii. Ask the Holy Spirit for a Spiritual Master (figure of inspiration), especially in the first stages of spiritual life.
- iii. Centre your spiritual life around Church Liturgy, meditate on the mysteries of Christ, Mary, and the teachings of the Church Fathers and saints.
- iv. Be constant in your morning, afternoon and evening prayer. If possible, meditate on the Gospel of the day or any reading proposed in the Liturgy of the Hours.
- v. Chose any form of suitable Marian devotion.
- vi. Build up a strong Eucharistic life.
- vii. Read the documents of the Church.

I realize that most Lay people do not have the time to do all of his. However, that is why most spiritual fathers, including St. John of the Cross, remind us to be creative with our spiritual life and practices. Do not fall into the temptation of rigidity!!! Allow the Holy Spirit to be the protagonist of your spiritual life.

In paragraph 46 of the third book of *The Living Flame of Love*, John of the Cross speaks to spiritual directors:

“Directors should reflect that they themselves are not the chief agent, guide, and mover of souls in this matter, but the principal guide is the Holy Spirit, who is

never neglectful of souls, and they themselves are instruments for directing these souls to perfection through faith and the law of God, according to the spirit given by God to each one. Thus the whole concern of directors should not be to accommodate souls to their own method and condition, but they should observe the road along which God is leading one; if they do not recognize it, they should leave the soul alone and not bother it. And in harmony with the path and spirit along which God leads a soul, the spiritual director should strive to conduct it into greater solitude, tranquillity, and freedom of spirit. He should give it latitude so that when God introduces it into this solitude it does not bind its corporeal or spiritual faculties to some particular object, interior or exterior, and does not become anxious or afflicted with the thought that nothing is being done. Even though the soul is not then doing anything, God is doing something in it.”

Let us, thus, brothers and sisters in Carmel, be men and women of the Spirit who walk in the spiritual path of Elijah, Mary and in the Carmelite tradition.

2. Community life for a professional person not living in the cloister, and quite often overwhelmed with work, family and church commitments

Lay communities are not cloistered communities. In the Third Order most people do not live together, do not eat together, do not pray together on a regular basis. The reality of a Lay Carmelite (whether a layperson or secular priest) is very often complicated. Most people have a husband, a wife, children, grandchildren, have burdensome work, some even have important positions in the secular society or in a parish. However, in my experience, a good lay community which meets once or twice a month, or with some regularity, is often enough to build up spiritual ties which at times may be stronger and more meaningful than living under the same roof. In highly secularized contexts, a lay Carmelite community can become a very strong support mechanism for many. Let me share some examples.

Church attendance often plays not only a vertical role, in bringing the people close to God in worship, but also a social or horizontal role, in bringing people close to each other, in sharing a faith and common values. A secularized and multi-cultural society, where in some regions church assistance tends to diminish, quite often brings a feeling of loneliness amongst Christians. A lay Carmelite community often does bring people together in the spirit, and even in the flesh, when sharing diverse forms of apostolate.

When building up a lay Carmelite community the key word is Creativity. In this respect, a Carmelite document published in 1980 entitled *In the midst of the people: New and renewed forms of life and of the apostolate* could give us some tips on how to build up a lay community. I will highlight some points that could be adapted to a Lay Carmelite Community.

1. The contemplative charism of the Order according to the three key words of the 1977 General Chapter are “prayer, fraternity and justice”.
2. The living tradition of Carmel of “meditating day and night on the law of the Lord”, or living the presence of God in a concrete context (p. 103).

This means that a Carmelite community must be centred in prayer, fraternity and the desire for justice. The same document also shares the following new features of a Carmelite community and their principal manifestations:

1. Communion of prayer.
2. Solidarity with the people in their material as well as their spiritual needs.

3. It develops and grows in the midst of people, listening to it and being stimulated by it (p. 104).

The tertiary must be aware of his or her reality, and be able to enter into dialogue with it. Many tertiaries could by God's grace achieve contemplation and become prophets if, in addition to Carmelite spiritual formation, they had a profound knowledge of their social, economic and political reality, and of the historical processes of their country. Only then they can commit to bringing order to reality in accordance with the heart of God.

A solid and holistic Carmelite formation is of the utmost necessity, today more than ever before. In developed countries, many Christians and non-Christians have more access to information. When we go out into the world, we encounter many well-informed people, with some knowledge about the mistakes we, as Church, have done in the past. The media informs people about the scandals within the Church, about some actions considered as historical mistakes. Without knowledge of secular, political and Church history, without profound knowledge of the Gospel, without a solid knowledge of our rich Carmelite heritage, we will not have arguments to respond and preach the good news of salvation.

Therefore, we must seize the opportunities provided by modern methods of communication to spread Christian culture and values. To achieve this end, the tertiary must be spiritually centred in prayer, and have a very good formation in order to discern the form and measure of his or her actions in today's world. In order to be a prophet in our contemporary world, the Carmelite tertiary must be strong and prepared.

3. Possibilities for a prophetic contribution in a changing world

Many common forms of apostolate may be inspired by the Gospel account of Mathew, Chapter 25 verses 35-36: "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."

When a Lay Carmelite community reaches some maturity, some forms of apostolate may be organized: giving food to the poor, providing shelter for strangers and the homeless, visiting the sick, visiting prisons, working as pastoral agents in parishes, assisting in spiritual and human formation programmes, making rosaries, scapulars, and other devotional objects.

The 1980 document entitled *New and renewed forms of life and of the apostolate* gives us tips for other more ambitious apostolates:

1. The promotion of human dignity by an option for the poor.
2. Sharing their lives and collaboration for a better world.
3. Profound understanding of the historic moment.
4. Re-discovery of the faith as a stimulus for change and progress in the world, together with an effort to build a kingdom of justice and peace.

This type of community is in line with the identity of the mendicant orders, who from the beginning were involved with "humble folk" (p. 106).

As a member of the Carmelite Order's International Commission for the Laity, I would like to share with you today some thoughts that have been circulating:

1. The Order has an NGO (Non-Governmental Organisation presence) at the United Nations. Would it be possible for the Third Order – not as individuals but as a group – to collaborate in the Order's efforts to make this world more just?

2. We are growing more and more aware of the internationality of the Third Order and other members of the Carmelite Family. Would it be possible to have a common project that involves everyone?

These are questions that will surely be at the forefront of discussions in the times ahead.

Conclusion

We, the lay members of the Carmelite Family, and the secular priests within it, face quite a challenge. It is a challenge that can only be faced by Carmelites who are centred in prayer, knowing and living according to the values of the first Christian communities and in the spirit of the Carmelite tradition, and who are fully committed to collaborating in the work of creation, because God the Father has a plan for the world since the beginning of time. Should we want to collaborate in his plan, we must then take the challenge: like Mary and Elijah, become contemplatives in the world, prophets of fire in the midst of the people.