

The Carmelites – discerning God’s call

By Pat O’Keeffe O Carm

AS vocations promoter for the British Province of Carmelites, people often ask me what I look for in a potential friar.

Really, this is the wrong question. The question we actually have to ask is what God is wanting for the man pondering God’s call, rather than running through a check-list of criteria.

The ministry of the vocations promoter, however, is not recruitment, but rather to help the person discern how God is calling him. Having said that, there are some key things to consider, and the role of the vocations promoter in any religious order or diocese is to help the enquirer to discern whether they would feel at home with that particular community, or not.

A common misconception – particularly in this age of psychological profiling and criminal records bureau checks – is that we’re looking for ‘perfect’ people. In reality, we accept people as they are.

One key sign that God may be calling someone to religious life is if they have a mature relationship with God, combined with a capacity for human growth, which will be seen in the quality of their existing relationships.

Entering an order such as the Carmelites means entering into a two-way relationship. We ask the man what contribution he can bring to our community; not only his talents and abilities, but the presence of his very self.

He also has to ask if he can be at home and grow with this family who will welcome, challenge and value him. That is why discerning a vocation together requires a dialogue, listening to each

other, and listening together to God’s call, which is usually a gentle whisper in the heart, rather than a shout from the heavens.

The friars’ way of life is to be very much at the heart of society and on the fringes of society, forming praying communities at the service of all God’s people. This means that the potential friar needs to have – like Christ – a spirit of service and availability, a willingness to listen, and the ability to stand alongside others, rather than judging them.

Precisely how the friar is going to serve depends upon his particular gifts and interests, and the needs of the Church and society at the present time. Many religious orders were founded with a specific purpose, or ‘charism’, such as teaching, nursing, or education.

The Carmelite charism is not based on one specific ministry; rather, our mission from the Lord is to help people become contemplative, which means developing a friendship with God and being transformed into ‘another Christ’ by being open to the Holy Spirit. This can come about through the way we pray, the way we live in community, and the way we serve those in need.

Since our ministries are adaptable, we try to make use of the gifts and talents that each brother brings to the order.

Many of our friars are ordained, but all our brothers are in ministry serving the Church in parishes, as chaplains working in universities, schools, hospitals and prisons, or as retreat-givers and spiritual directors.

Some friars join us having had a professional career, and in recent years we have welcomed men



Multi-talented: Brother Ged, a former radiologist, speaking to the media during the visit of the relics of St Thérèse to Aylesford Priory

who were radiographers, social workers, nurses, linguists and teachers. Where appropriate, these men have been able to develop and utilise the skills and experience they bring with them into Carmel.

A calling to the priesthood is not heard by all our friars, and our founding Rule of St Albert makes no distinctions between the ordained and unordained. We are brothers first and foremost.

Apostolate

It is rare these days for a man to approach the order who doesn’t have some experience of work and relationships, and normally we would not accept anyone under the age of 21, since it’s important for someone making this step to have a certain degree of maturity before entering one of our six friar communities in Britain.

A crucial part of a friar’s apostolate is to stand alongside people in the joys and difficulties of life; this requires a certain

empathy and the wisdom that comes from experience. At the same time, we rarely accept a man over 45, since it is often too hard for people to adapt to the very real challenges and demands of community living in the second half of life.

In the British Province, God has continued to bless us with vocations and we currently have five friars in initial formation, that is, who have yet to make Solemn Vows.

We pray that we will continue to be a community of communities which is attractive and welcoming to someone wanting to devote his entire life to God as a friar.

Interestingly, we have also seen in recent years a resurgence of vocations among lay people who want to devote themselves entirely to God by following the Carmelite way of life according to their own circumstance.

These ‘Lay Carmelites’ in our Third Order Chapters and Carmelite Spirituality Groups are

increasingly sharing our work and mission – and that of the Carmelite sisters – to preach and to be Good News.

We live in exciting times, as the Carmelite charism continues to develop and grow.

If you would like to know more about the Carmelite vocation, please consult our website www.carmelite.org or give me a call on: 01904 428492



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