

A Lay Carmelite's Expectation of the 2013 Carmelite General Chapter

Sylvia Lucas

In September 2013 the friars of the Carmelite Order held their General Chapter in Rome. The final week of the Chapter included representatives of the wider Carmelite Family who joined the friars for reflection and discussion. The Chapter heard presentations from four voices within the Carmelite Family: a Lay Carmelite, a cloistered nun, an apostolic sister, and members of a Carmelite Youth initiative. Each spoke about what they expected from the Chapter in relation to its theme: "A Word of Hope and Salvation" (1995 Carmelite Constitutions §24) – Living the Charism and Mission of Carmel Today. The following presentation was given by Sylvia Lucas, a Lay Carmelite from the Order's British Province.



Thank you for inviting me to speak to you; it is 'good to be here'. I have been asked to talk about my expectations as a lay woman of this Chapter. I would like to begin by asking you, my brothers, what are your expectations of me? In order for me to say something worthwhile, I need to have some idea of how you perceive me. If I think that that you see me one-dimensionally, as the woman sitting in the pew listening to you Sunday after Sunday, saying the rosary, perhaps being useful occasionally to help out with some practical task, then I don't think we can have a meaningful dialogue. Before anything else is said, I need to have some assurance that you see me as the person I am, in all my complexity.

May I offer a few observations from the reality of my experience as a woman in the Church and in Carmel?

We make up the largest part of any church congregation, including the Carmelite Family; as married people we take the greatest share of the responsibility for bringing up our families in the faith; as religious, we are the majority in contemplative and active communities; women are the highest proportion of teachers and advisers in Catholic education at all levels other than universities; we offer our time and talents to help and, in some cases are responsible for, the day-to-day running of our parishes; we are readers, musicians, catechists, Eucharistic ministers, visitors of the sick. Many of us do all this and have professional roles while managing the practicalities of our family lives, including care of children and elderly relatives. We are experts in multi tasking!

So how can you help me? What is the Word of Hope and Salvation you can give to me?

It has been at times when my life just didn't seem to make sense that Carmel has mysteriously appeared. As a troubled teenager I found St. Thérèse and her *Little Way*. Later, when I was completely overwhelmed with family responsibilities, I found the friars. At a later date, when other life changes happened, I found the nuns. I understand now that I was searching for a spirituality which would help me make sense of the complexity of my life, to help me see it holistically although at the time I couldn't have explained that. It has been through the quiet presence and patient listening of Carmelites, men, women, lay, religious, and their example, that I have come to understand that my life too, as crazy as it sometimes seems, is where God wants me to be. It is a vocation in its own right. God is here, a real presence in my life. But God is also in the absence, the absence of a formal, institutionalised place in the Church.

So what more can this Chapter do?

First and most importantly, it must affirm the authentic witness of your lives and your prayers which speak to me and many others of Hope and Salvation. Please, simply continue to be present and available for us; this seems to be a modest 'ask' but I know that it isn't and I do see, especially among younger men, a desire to do something more exciting and dramatic, perhaps to attract attention. I think this is misguided; the quiet presence of a praying community in the midst of this often chaotic world speaks volumes.

Secondly, there are too few of you in places in the world where a Carmelite presence would be beneficial. Please support and trust me and the other lay people, female and male, who live or work in these places, to reach out on your behalf, so that with your support, together we can share the gift of the Order with others who are searching. We are already in the places that you cannot reach. These are not necessarily the traditional mission territories. In my case it is the City of London, sometimes called the richest square mile in the world. Here, people like

the City bankers and lawyers, as well as those on the fringes of city life, have a desperate need for our Carmelite values of listening, stillness, justice, gentleness, prayer.

As lay people in the Church, since the Second Vatican Council, many of us have been encouraged by our bishops to undertake further study in theology and aspects of ministry, and are entrusted with aspects of pastoral ministry, so that we can live our baptismal consecration as fully as possible while continuing our ordinary family and professional lives. Sometimes we are better academically-qualified in these areas than those who serve us in ordained ministry. I would ask that you fully recognise this sheer abundance of gifts that is available within the Order to be called on. We are able to prepare and lead prayerful and heartfelt liturgies which speak to people in their real need and we are confident in giving public witness to our faith when asked to speak.

Thirdly, in many places the traditional Third Order has become institutionalised and clericalised. It no longer attracts those who are searching for a deeper spirituality. Other expressions of Carmel, such as the *Carmelite Spirituality Groups* in the British Province or *Carmelite Explorers* in Ireland, are more open and vibrant; they draw people of all ages and from all walks of life, ranging from the poor and marginalised in society to those in senior professional roles and with a high degree of social capital; they are increasingly ecumenical and possibly even interfaith, reaching pastors of other Christian churches and leaders of other faiths. I would ask that in the coming six years, the General Council looks seriously at the contribution of these new expressions to the life of the Order and how they might be nurtured.

Along with this comes a need to re-consider the language in current usage: for instance, 'Lay Carmel' when not everyone is 'lay'; 'Third Order', which we know is not hierarchical but supposedly chronological – or is it? – we hear conflicting interpretations; 'Carmelite', when we mean 'friar'.

As we mature we are taking on more responsibility for ourselves; we are searching for ways in which we can be self-sustaining and live as fully-contributing members of the Family. As in any human family, there are the inevitable tensions which will require investment in terms of formation and training to enable us all to reach a mutual understanding where lay people are taken seriously. For us to be fully Carmelite and not second-class citizens or merely humoured, this means being in a position of financial independence with the clear recognition of what follows naturally from this in ordinary human family life: a mutual respect and a share in the decision-making and responsibility for the future. The ambivalence that surrounds this process, from both the 'adult' and the 'offspring', will need much patient listening and discernment and a clear Word of Hope to the Order as a whole that this is genuinely what you have in mind.

My final 'ask' from this Chapter is for you to be a Word of Hope and Salvation for those women and men whom I would term 'hidden' Carmelites, that is, those who are no longer living their Carmelite lives in regular and formal contact with the Order, including those who have been dispensed from their vows or the obligations of active ministry, but who do live prophetic lives in the mendicant tradition. They make a tremendous contribution to the life of the Church through their particular gifts. Rather than continuing the model from the past which saw such individuals as failures in their religious vocation, the Spirituality Groups are a place of ministry and witness for them. I hope that you will fully embrace these 'hidden' Carmelites and include them positively in your discernment for the future.

So in summary, what are my expectations as a Lay Carmelite from the Order as a whole? Belonging, support, love, challenge, friendship, a place to learn how to be myself and to enable others to do the same, an environment in which I can live my life in contemplative service; an identity that ultimately transcends time, a way of being, a language with which to make sense of the journey we are all on. The Lay Carmelites I know are extremely hopeful and feel that much of all this is already being given to us, for which we are grateful. Many of us have always felt part of the Order in a very real way. We intend to continue to encourage others to know what it is they want, and reach out for it; to understand that it is no good just lurking in the shadows and feeling resentful or slighted or unnoticed! I truly believe that if we express an honest desire and are prepared to work towards trying to achieve it, we will be given much. It is a bit like the enigmatic parable that Jesus tells: the one who has much will be given more, but the one who has little, even what they have will be taken away from them! We have to be clued-up, informed about possibilities, enthusiastic but also selfless in taking on new roles. It is not about gaining power, or prestige, or our own agenda. At the end of the day, we are all here to serve the Gospel with 'holy indifference'.