

THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE SECULAR ORDER TO THE CHURCH CO-RESPONSIBILITY AND COLLABORATION

Looking out over this assembly, I can't help but think of the mystery of the Church, the pilgrim People of God, throughout the world. We are here, in effect, lay people, religious, priests, women, men from different races, speaking different languages, expressing a rich variety of cultures. The common faith in the Risen Lord unites us, we who must bear witness to His presence in the heart of the world. At the same time, the Teresian-Carmelite charism unites us, a gift of the Spirit for the service of the Church and the world. You, members of the Secular Carmelite, form part of the Carmelite Order of Theresa of Jesus and John of the Cross.

The celebration of this Second International Congress of the Secular Carmelites signifies a step towards raising an awareness of your lay and Carmelite identity. In fact, as already noted 13 years ago by the post-synod document *Christifideles Laici*, the Spirit has stirred up new energies of holiness and of participation in many of the lay faithful. A new style of collaboration among priests, religious and lay people is gradually evolving; groups, associations and movements of spirituality and of committed lay people are springing up. There is a search for a wider and more active participation of women in the Church and in society. Nowadays it is all about finding concrete ways to bring to reality all the theoretical reflection about the dignity and mission of the lay faithful.[1]

The subject which I have been asked to develop: *The Contribution of the Secular Order to the Church- Co-responsibility and collaboration*, has a past dimension and a dimension for the present and the future. These three dimensions correspond to the three sections into which I have divided my presentation.

1. THE CO-RESPONSIBILITY AND COLLABORATION OF THE SECULAR ORDER TO THE CHURCH IN THE PAST

In the past, the Secular Carmelite lived out his/her service of collaboration and co-responsibility conditioned by the position of the lay faithful within the Church. This, in turn, depended on an excessively hierarchical model of the Church in which the lay faithful were treated as second class 'citizens'. They were expected to have a passive and receptive attitude to the authority of the Church. This, combined with the scarce catechetical, theological and biblical training, was leaving lay faithful unable to collaborate fully and effectively in the field of evangelisation.

Within the religious Orders, the so-called Third Orders, even though they formed part of the religious Institute, they did so *without a clear lay identity*. They were called upon to be practically 'religious in the world'. The co-responsibility and collaboration were reduced to very secondary aspects which, in general, were not related to the charism and spirituality of the religious Order. Rather, they were directed to very secondary aspects

of a practical, organisational nature involving activities, initiatives, services connected with the celebration of religious festivals and private devotions such as the Scapular.

As a consequence of the position of the lay faithful in the Church on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the lack of a strong charismatic-spiritual identity, the Secular Order was unable to undertake full collaboration and joint responsibility at pastoral levels, in decision making, in the promotion of the Christian way of life within the Church. With a few exceptions, there was also a lack of adequate training in Carmelite spirituality. This reduced the realistic opportunities for the Carmelite charism to make a distinctive contribution to the Church. Of course, participation in the liturgy, recitation of the *Little Office*, completion of some ascetic exercises (fasting & abstinence), and the practice of certain devotions were a means of collaborating in the mission of the Church through prayer, the source of all missionary service. Equally, witness through a Christian way of life was a means of evangelising others.

Moving from the personal level to the community level of the Secular Carmelite, we encounter an absence of qualified personnel in the pastoral field. This latter was entrusted almost exclusively to priests and religious, as much in the Church as in the Carmelite Order. The Secular Carmelite assisted with organisational structure or materials. The situation was far removed from that expounded in *Christifideles Laici* when it affirms that the evangelical images of salt, light and leaven which apply to all followers of Christ, are more specifically connected to the lay faithful because it speaks of their complete absorption in the world and in humanity for the purpose of spreading the gospel.[2] Although it was affirmed that not only the Pastors instituted by Christ could and should take on by themselves the complete saving mission of the Church in the world, in reality, the service and charism of the lay faithful were not recognised, nor, as a result, was their active collaboration in the field of evangelisation.

The rediscovery of the Church as the People of God, brought to reality in Vatican II, marked the beginning of a new age for the lay Christian. Recognition was given to his/her dignity and mission which is rooted in joining with Christ through baptism, combined in the People of God, and involves him/her, in their own way, 'in the priesthood, prophetic and royal, of Christ'[3], to carry out in the Church and in the world, Christ's mission according to their own vocation. The lay person is invited to associate him/herself with the work of the hierarchy since s/he is participating in the saving mission of the Church.

In Vatican II we start to speak of collaboration and joint responsibility of the lay people in the Church. It underlines that they are called 'to make the Church present and active in those places and circumstances in which She can only become the salt of the earth through them..... Thus it is incumbent on all lay faithful to collaborate in the clear task of ensuring that the divine plan of salvation increasingly reaches out to men across all time and throughout the earth. Therefore, open up the way to them wherever it may be, following the opportunities and according the needs of the times, so that they may participate enthusiastically in the saving work of the Church.'[4]

The bishops of the Church are invited to promote the dignity and responsibility of lay people in the Church; to give them freedom and opportunity to work; to encourage them to take initiatives. Lay people, for their part, have an obligation 'to express their opinion about issues concerning the well-being of the Church ... thus strengthening in the lay faithful a sense of their own responsibility.' [5]

The postsynodal exhortation *Christifideles Laici* underlined some specific fields in which the co-responsibility of the lay faithful in the missionary Church might be exercised: the promotion of the dignity of the person, defence of life and religious freedom, the family as the first area of social commitment, witness of a charity demonstrated in solidarity, putting the human person at the centre of socio-economic life and evangelising culture and cultures. [6] It also spoke of personal and joint forms of participation in the life and apostolate of the Church. [7] The Secular Carmelite would be one of those group forms of participation.

Finally, the same postsynodal document invites the lay faithful to find their own vocation and mission and speaks of the need to give them a thorough training so that their human and Christian vocation may exist together. To achieve this vital combination, what is required above all is a spiritual and doctrinal training which might enable them to confront the challenges of our times and of their socio-cultural context from the perspective of the Christianity and the preaching of the Gospel. [8]

These changes and new requirements of the Church concerning the lay faithful deeply questioned the structures and priorities of the Secular Orders of the Religious Institutes. While their legal connection to the Religious Orders remained firm, new challenges and rich prospects for the present and future appeared.

II CO-RESPONSIBILITY AND COLLABORATION OF THE SECULAR ORDER WITH THE CHURCH *IN THE PRESENT*

Having set as a background to our reflection a brief panoramic view of the distant and more recent past concerning the concept and position of the lay faithful in the Church, we may now speak more specifically about the Secular Carmelite and what the Church expects of it in the field of joint responsibility and collaboration in its mission of evangelisation.

The postsynodal Document on the consecrated life, speaking of the cooperation and communion of the lay faithful with the Religious Institutes, explicitly mentions the Third Orders: 'In continuity with the historical experiences of the different Secular or Third Orders, we can say that a new chapter has begun, rich with hope, in the history of relations between religious and lay.' [9]

The same document concentrates especially on three areas in which the lay faithful participate – in the case of the Secular Orders which form part of the Institute – in the life

of the Religious Institutes: charism, spirituality and mission. It is only within the context of these three aspects that we can understand and direct the joint responsibility and collaboration which is asked of the Secular Order in today's Church. This requires a training which has as a basic objective the discovery of its lay vocation within the charism and spirituality of the Institute, to be able to live it out through the completion of a mission characterised by joint responsibility and collaboration with the Church.

Charism is a gift from the Spirit, given freely for the service of the Church. Each Order or Congregation to the consecrated life has its own charism expressed in its Rule and Constitutions. From the charism arises a style or way of living out the Christian and religious life, in other words, a spirituality. This spirituality emphasises certain elements of the Christian way of life and, on the basis of these, lives out what is considered fundamental: life in Christ and from the Spirit, which is received through faith, is expressed through love and lived out in hope. Charism and spirituality lead to apostolic commitment in all fields of evangelisation, but more specifically enable and guide one of these. It is as if they provided an experiential and practical specialisation in order to create a qualified service for the Church.

I believe it is important to remember, with regard to this position, what the essential elements of the charism and spirituality of the Teresian Carmelite consist of. In the light of the *Constitutions* of the brothers, we may say that its fundamental elements are the following:

- to live giving thanks to Jesus Christ, leaning on the imitation and care of the Blessed Virgin, whose form of life constitutes for the Carmelite a model of imitation of Christ;
- to seek the 'mysterious union with God' by the path of contemplation and apostolic activity, indissolubly linked to the service of the Church;
- to accord a particular importance to prayer which, nourished through listening to the Word of God and the liturgy, should lead to the covenant of friendship with God, not only when we pray but when we live. We commit ourselves in this life of prayer, which must be nourished by faith, hope and above all, charity, to live in the presence and the mystery of the living God;
- to immerse oneself in prayer and in life with apostolic zeal in a climate of human and Christian brotherhood;
- to live out a life of self-sacrifice according to the gospel from a theological perspective.[10]

From this charism and spirituality arises a type of apostolic service which, in particular, should be given as much priority in the consecrated way of life as in the Secular

Carmelite: *the mission or pastoral nature of spirituality*. Open to the needs of the Church and the challenges of the world today, we must also give priority to this apostolic service in the Secular Carmelite. This would be the practical means of offering, in co-responsibility, a more efficient collaboration to the Church, on behalf of its Carmelite-Teresian identity.

To face up to the challenges of the world today as lay Carmelites.

The changes in the world are rapid and continuous. Today changes take place in a short time which previously took centuries. On the other hand these changes are universal due to scientific, political, economic, cultural and technical interdependence. They have a profound effect because they impact on the whole human being and his personal existence. Some people and groups create the changes, others are affected by them, but nobody is excluded. Rather than talk of changes, one might consider one change of the age characterised by modernity and postmodernity, by subjectivity and ideologies in crisis. In particular, one recognises *secularisation, freedom, globalisation* and *new ethics*.

Secularisation brings with it a transformation of the relationship between the human being and nature, with others and with God. It is the phenomenon of de-sanctification in order to affirm the legitimate autonomy of the person, of culture and of technology. This causes certain imbalances between the autonomy of the human being and the loss of the sense of transcendence which leads to secularisation; between religious values and new myths and idols. This phenomenon offers the Secular Carmelite the possibility of living and bearing witness to the presence of God in the heart of the world; of helping others to discover in earthly realities the presence of God, as our saints did, but, at the same time to open them up to the transcendence of a God also present in the deepest centre of our being. And this can be made possible through the witness of one's life and with an apostolic commitment which can be present in varied forms.

Another phenomenon which cannot be ignored is that of *liberation*. People, groups, nations and cultures do not want to be objects in the hands of those who hold on to power. They want to be protagonists in an environment of equality, responsibility, participation and communion. And this cannot be happen when new forms of oppression, marginalisation and exploitation of the weakest arise. Acknowledgement of the dignity of the human being creates a desire to search for the means to realise this dignity through the exercise of one's fundamental rights, effectively recognised, guarded and nurtured. In this field one must also include the feminist movement which seeks to give woman the position she deserves in society and in the Church. The members of the Secular Carmelite are called upon to promote the defence of human dignity, proclaimed by our saints when they reflect on the calling of the human being to be transformed in God. St. John of the Cross said that ' a man's thought is worth more than the whole world and, in consequence, only God is worthy of it (thought)'. In addition, the way to internal freedom, the source of all true freedom, appears in the spirituality of the Carmel.

One element which characterises the present day is undoubtedly *globalisation*. Today the world is living through a process of unification due to growing interdependence in all spheres of life. The earth is a 'global village' with economic, commercial, political and military links. The *mass media* and communications have brought people close to each other in a world full of news, communications and meetings. It is a process full of contradictions. Economic power is concentrated in the hands of a few, as are the means of communication and information. Everything is controlled. Deep imbalances appear between rich and poor countries and the growing phenomenon of large, poor groups in rich countries and of rich minorities in poor countries. There are different dimensions in globalisation: technological, economic, political, cultural. Positive aspects in this are the possibility of extensive global interconnection, access to information and the shortening of distances which can improve the quality of human life. Nevertheless there are negative aspects: the excessive search for economic profit which reduces the person to no more than a consumer, the increasing gap between rich and poor, the break-up of cultures and ways of life which globalisation tries to standardise. Confronted with this challenge, the Secular Carmelite is called upon to spread the concept of solidarity throughout the world as a requirement of the gospel. The Carmelite-Teresian charism places the emphasis on brotherhood: to be 'small schools of Christ' like the apostles and the early Christian community in which the believers had 'one heart and one soul and there was no one among them who needed anything'. (Acts 4: 32, 34)

At the core of the changes is the crisis of the *ethics* of the past and the search for a *new ethic* outwith the religious institutions and which relegates God and religion to the private domain. We are witnessing the development of bioethics with the great challenges of genetic engineering which threatens to create a standardised humanity. Through manipulation of the human genome scientists sometimes try to 'play God'. There is an urgent need for an ethic based on the dignity of the human person created by God, the only absolute. It is here too that the experience and writing of the Carmelite saints outline the ways to bear witness and give guidance when making decisions.

However, not all is negative in this world of change. There are also *positive tendencies* such as the awareness of personal value and the fundamental rights of the individual, the search for a new harmony between humanity and nature, sensitivity to the problems of life, justice and peace, awareness of the value of individual cultures, responsibility of the human being towards the future, a greater feeling for religious and mystical experiences as a means of advancing the process of liberation and personal growth, a new position for women in society. In all these spheres the spirituality of the Carmel has something to say: Theresa of the Child Jesus, John of the Cross, Theresa of Lisieux, Elizabeth of the Trinity, Edith Stein, Titus Brandsma and many others light up and reinforce these signs of the times with their experiences and teaching.

The Church asks of the Secular Carmel a collaboration and co-responsibility to assist it in 'deeply scrutinising the signs of the times and to interpret them in the light of the Gospel in a manner which, by adapting to each generation, the Church might be able to respond to the timeless questioning of humanity about the meaning of life - present and future, and how these are related'[11]. To achieve all of this, it is necessary to have

practical pathways and specific strategies in the Secular Order to facilitate co-responsibility and collaboration with the Church. This brings us to the possibilities for the future.

I JOINT RESPONSIBILITY AND COLLABORATION BETWEEN THE SECULAR ORDER AND THE CHURCH *IN THE FUTURE*

The invitation made by the Church to the religious to renew their charism with creative faith can and must also be extended to the Secular Order. Creative faith implies a return to basics in order to confront actively the challenges of the moment. Within this compromise it is necessary to plan practical ways and to identify the means by which creative faith can be enabled.

Practical pathways

In the effort to make a contemporary interpretation of the identity and mission of the Secular Carmel we must, above all, follow three 'ways': *spirituality, training, brotherhood.*

Spirituality is the first element which must be present in the process of creative faith for the Secular Order. Only a spiritual experience can lend authenticity to the search for new forms of life and existence. We are talking about Christian Spirituality in general and Carmelite spirituality in particular. Spirituality is the starting point of creative faith. It is the unifying element.

For the renewal of the Secular Carmel to evolve in dynamic faith, an *initial and continuous programme of training* is also required. The *initial* training requires a dialogue and collaboration with today's generation from the standpoint of the reality of modern life and the challenges which they have to face. In this way the charism and spirituality of the Teresian Carmelite can be constantly active through the lay faithful empowered to release the energy which they themselves possess. *Continuous training* aims to provide the ability to reinterpret the charism and spread the word using language which is realistic and which can be understood by a world very different from past ages.

Another important point which must be emphasised in the Secular Carmel is *brotherhood*. In fact, the community dimension of the history of salvation must be highlighted for all Christians. We must help to create a community mentality in the various fraternities, so that the commitments of the Secular Carmel within individual parishes not only possess an individual dimension, but are also collective. The fraternities will have to be able to discern their faith in the light of the times and situations in order to create a united plan of service containing diverse charisms and personal points of view.

Means by which these journeys may be travelled

Among the methods which experience has shown to be effective in raising awareness and, especially in bringing the journeys mentioned above to reality, we have, in the first place, *community reflections, provincial reflections, and those at a general level*. These reflections are the starting point for opening new horizons and for controlling the tensions which arise out of this time of change.

Another great help in this process is the *organisation of continuous training courses* on the charism and spirituality of Carmel and on the new position of the lay faithful in the Church. This helps to reinforce the distinctive identity of the lay Carmelite and facilitates the re-interpretation and absorption by the lay faithful of the Teresian-Carmelite charism.

An effective method is also that of *periodic meetings with the regional office bearers* of the Secular Carmel and with their religious helpers. In that wider forum of those in charge it becomes possible to better evaluate the various circumscriptions and to plan projects in the certain knowledge that they can depend on the joint support of those who nourish the spiritual and apostolic life of the members of the Secular Carmel.

Finally, *national, regional and international congresses*, such as this one, are a valuable means to take stock of who we are, and for a combined resolve to face the challenges of the moment, a time of transition and search for new models which will give back to the Secular Carmel an understandable, existential language.

CONCLUSION

At the end of these reflections we may conclude that the new ecclesiastical and Carmelite consciousness are an occasion of grace to re-interpret the contribution which the Secular Carmel must make to the Church and of the meaning of its joint responsibility and collaboration.

The Secular Carmel is called upon to offer, in local parishes and on the level of the universal Church, a particular contribution similar to that of the friars and sisters of the Teresian Carmelites: to give witness and to spread the riches of the experience of God and a life of prayer as a way towards transcendence, a source of hope and commitment, common ground for the Christian faiths and the great religions. And to make this contribution at all levels: popular religious practice, broadcasting, academic studies, prayer groups, bible meditation, preaching of spiritual exercises, publications.

The different Institutes are called upon to provide a 'specialised' service which emerges from their charism and spirituality. This special apostolate has shown a notable increase within the Order in recent years. We now have 159 houses dedicated, in one form or another, to this distinctive characteristic of our charism in the church: **68 retreat houses, 67 prayer houses, 24 Institutes of spirituality, 47 Sanctuaries**. The active presence of

Secular Carmelites in these areas will undoubtedly enrich them and will also reveal the lay face of the Carmel-Teresian charism. This should be the distinctive contribution of the Secular Order of the Carmel to the Church.

Mary, Mother and Sister, extends to us from Our Lord the gifts of evangelical discernment and an acceptance of the risk of faith and the pathways of God at the start of the Third Millennium.

FOR REFLECTION

- 1. What is the state of the Secular Carmel in your area vis-à-vis this type of collaboration in the Church?**
- 2. What are the main difficulties encountered in the creation of this new model for the members of the Secular Order of the Teresian Carmel? How can we overcome them?**
- 3. What could be done at the level of the Centre of the Order to support this new co-responsibility and collaboration of the Secular Order?**

References

- [1] Christifideles Laici, n. 2
- [2] Id. n.15.
- [3] Lumen Gentium 31.
- [4] Id. 33.
- [5] Id. 37.
- [6] Christifideles laici, nn. 36-44.
- [7] Id. nn. 28-30.
- [8] Id. nn. 57-60.
- [9] Vita consecrata, 54.
- [10] Constituciones OCD, n. 15.
- [11] Gaudium et Spes 4.