

**Discalced Carmelite Seculars and Friars:  
Working Together to Foster the Practice of Prayer  
By Elizabeth M Korves OCDS**

(presentation to the 2009 General Chapter, April 27, Fatima, Portugal)

I thank you for the invitation to address the General Chapter on the topic of the working relationship between the friars and the seculars. The relationship between the friars and seculars dates back to the Middle Ages and has undergone much change throughout our history. It continues to change and to deepen to this very day.

In 1996, the Church recognized that many religious institutes were finding ways to more fully involve laity in their charism. For those Orders that have secular or third orders, *Vita Consecrata* pointed to a “a new chapter, rich in hope” in regards to the relationship between consecrated members of religious institutes and the laity who belong to those institutes by way of secular/third orders. *Vita Consecrata* invited laity to share *intensely* in not just the spirituality but also in the mission of the religious institutes.<sup>1</sup>

1996 also happened to be the year of the first International Congress for the Secular Order. This congress surfaced the need for updated legislation for the OCDS in light of the new Code of Canon Law, *Vita Consecrata*, and *Christifidelis Laici*. When that new legislation, the *Constitutions of the Secular Order of Our Lady of Mount Carmel and St Teresa of Jesus* was promulgated in 2003, it reflected this deeper call to participate in the charism of the Order by not just embracing the spirituality of the Order but also more fully embracing its mission.

The ways in which seculars share in the spirituality and mission of the Order with our friars are spoken of throughout our *Constitution,s* but it is Article 1 that provides some framework for developing my topic today. There we read that the OCDS “share the same charism with the religious, each according to their particular state of life. It is one family with the same spiritual possessions, the same call to holiness, and the same apostolic mission.”

---

<sup>1</sup>Vita Consecrata, 58

I want to address briefly each of those three areas in which we share: spiritual possessions, call to holiness and apostolic mission.

### **Same Spiritual Possessions**

By spiritual possessions, I understand this to mean our rich Carmelite heritage. As members of the Order, we receive formation in that rich heritage. While most seculars will never have the opportunity for the level of study that our friars experience in theology and in the spirituality of the Order, we are still called to be formed in “the teachings of the Church and the spirituality of our Carmelite saints” so that we may be “mature in the practice of (our) faith, hope and love and in (our) devotion to the Virgin Mary”.<sup>2</sup>

Formation is an area in which the friars and seculars are called to work together since it is the Order that provides the guidance on what should be included in our formation. I know formation is an area of great importance to the friars and it is just as important among the seculars. For this reason, we too have a number of documents from the Order that touch upon the formation of seculars: the *Constitutions*, the provincial statutes of each province, the December 2006 letter from the Father General entitled *Pastoral Care of the Secular Order*, and the *Ratio Institutionis* that was discussed in Madagascar and again here.

In *Pastoral Care of the Secular Order*, the Father General spoke of the need for the center of the Order to take an active role in guiding and developing formation programs for the OCDS because “formation is the responsibility of the Order”.<sup>3</sup> The content of our formation programs is specified in the *Constitutions* in a broad sense while provincial statutes give more detailed specifications for formation. Those provincial statutes are reviewed and approved by the General Definitory.

At the local level, it is the Local Council of each community that has the responsibility for implementing the formation guidelines. Visitations provide an

---

<sup>2</sup> OCDS Constitutions, Art. 32

<sup>3</sup> Pastoral Care of the Secular Order, Introduction

opportunity for those at the provincial level to evaluate how well formation is happening within each province.

Our *Constitutions* require that each community have a Spiritual Assistant. It is preferred that the Spiritual Assistant to be a friar of the Order although in many places that is not possible to implement. Even in those places where the Spiritual Assistant is a friar, it is also true that he is often not able to be present at the monthly meetings of the community. The *Constitutions* are clear that the Spiritual Assistant is to support the formation in the community but not be the Formation Director. Often the assistant provides support by occasionally giving a conference to the full community or to those in a specific level of formation.

There are many communities in the United States that see a friar only when they hold their annual retreat. In some areas of the world, there is even less access to our friars. In the United States, many of the communities in this situation use video or audio tapes of talks given by friars that are available via the Institute of Carmelite Studies and other Carmelite sources. It is also the case that many of the formation materials for seculars were written by friars. Our friars, whether regularly available or only occasionally available, provide seculars with access to a depth of knowledge about our heritage that seculars are often not able to obtain for themselves.

Formation among the seculars varies greatly from province to province, and even within each province. I have met seculars who have received great formation and have a deep understanding and knowledge of our saints, our heritage, our mission, and of the secular vocation itself. I have also encountered seculars who have received a formation that was little more than information about devotional practices relating to Our Lady of Mt Carmel and our saints. Through the various documents of the Order addressed to its secular members, we are called to receive a robust formation. Seculars are as much in need of a deep and broad understanding of the rich heritage of Carmel as our friars and our nuns. If we receive good formation, then we are better able to live out the other two areas we all share – the call to holiness and the call to apostolic mission.

Friars can assist seculars in our formation by being available to help with conferences, days of recollection, retreats and as spiritual directors. As the major superiors of the Order, you can help by supporting your OCDS provincial councils who

are called upon to assist the communities of their province in better formation. You can appoint Provincial Delegates and Spiritual Assistants who understand the importance of good formation. Whether you or your Delegate or (in some places) the OCDS Provincial Council makes the visitation of communities, those visitations need to include a review of formation at the local level.

One other area that you as Major Superiors can be of assistance, is making sure that the formation of friars includes some formation regarding your relationship with the Secular Order. I know of one province that requires that their students attend the meetings of a secular community at least once a year and that they also attend the Regional Congress when it is held in their province. I was told that those responsible for the friars' formation program in this province felt that the best way for the students to learn about the vocation of the Secular Order was from seculars themselves. Since the OCDS Provincial Council often has experience of what sorts of problems have come up around the province, they would be a good resource for consulting regarding what should be included about the Secular Order in the formation of friars.

I also want to ask that you support and encourage seculars in developing formation materials, and providing conferences, retreats and similar things themselves. If we are doing formation well within the Secular Order, then many seculars should be able to contribute in these areas. There are aspects of the Carmelite secular vocation that are not always as fully understood by our friars as they are by fellow seculars. There are seculars with the gift for teaching and sharing the gifts of Carmel both within the Order and within the larger Church and we as an Order should be calling upon those gifts in our service to God.

### **Same Call to Holiness**

*Setting Out From Essentials*, the document from the last General Chapter, reminds us all that “All our communities of apostolic and contemplative life, friars, nuns and laity, ought to be committed to the task of living a deep spiritual life based on the Gospel and sharing it”.<sup>4</sup> This call finds expression in the obligations outlined in our

---

<sup>4</sup> *Setting Out from Essentials*, 66

*Constitutions*. These obligations are sometimes referred to as the 6 M's (which works in English but I'm not sure works so well in other languages). These six M's are our call to Mental prayer, Morning and Evening Prayer, daily Mass, devotion to Mary, participation in the Meetings of our local community, and participation in the Mission of the Order. I'll touch upon our involvement in the mission of the Order shortly.

In some ways, these obligations are pretty self-evident. The wording of these obligations in our *Constitutions* takes into consideration our secular state of life. So, the *Constitutions* use terms like "as far as possible" to take into account the fact that most seculars are living out their vocation in the midst of the obligations of family life and work. There are days when fitting in mental prayer, the Liturgy of the Hours, and Mass are difficult due to family and/or work. This is part of our challenge in living out the Carmelite charism in secular life.

Yet the challenge of these obligations is something that we seculars (and the occasional friar) sometimes downplay in importance. I have encountered many seculars who quite willing to embrace the practice of mental prayer, the participation in the liturgical life of the Church and the devotion to Mary, but then want to ignore the obligation to participate in the community aspects of our vocation and our call to participate in the mission of the Order. There are many people out there who wish to benefit from the spiritual graces of the Order without realizing that being a member of a religious order is more about a call to give than it is a call to receive...even for those of us called to the Secular Order.

Many people confuse having a Carmelite spirituality or a devotion to Our Lady of Mt Carmel with having a vocation. While having a Carmelite spirituality and having devotion to Our Lady are certainly necessary for the vocation, they are not sufficient.

The *Ratio Institutionis* reminds us that what distinguishes a vocation to the Secular Order from membership in a devotional, parish or other spiritual group is that we make a commitment to the Order, we make a commitment to the service of the Church through collaboration and cooperation with the goal of the Order.<sup>5</sup>

Among both the seculars and the friars, it is important that we do not water down this vocational aspect of secular membership in the Order. Long before I knew that

---

<sup>5</sup> Ratio Institutionis of the Secular Order, 25

secular/third orders existed, I had heard that Carmel was a demanding vocation. It is just as demanding for seculars as it is for the friars and the nuns, only in different ways. Our *Constitutions* take into account how our state of life impacts our vocation. When we make our profession, we make a commitment to the obligations of our vocation as outlined in our *Constitutions* and our provincial statutes.

As seculars and friars, we need to explore and understand more fully this vocational aspect of the Secular Order. We need to be sure that we all understand that we are more than just another parish or spirituality group. There are some friars and nuns who refer to the Secular Order anyone who expresses the smallest sign of devotion to Our Lady or to our saints. Then we run into misunderstanding when it becomes clear during formation that the person does not have the vocation but more appropriately should belong to something like the Confraternity of the Scapular or a similar group that is associated with Carmel but does not involve the same obligations as the Secular Order.

It is in the challenges and struggles of living out our vocation and through the obligations of the vocation that the secular demonstrates “how it is possible to seek intimate union with God even in the midst of worldly duties and concerns, in addition to responding to the Gospel's call to serve one another. In this way, they share in the prophetic mission of Christ to which they are called in baptism and put into practice the prophetic dimension of the Carmelite charism”.<sup>6</sup>

### **Same Apostolic Mission**

Our *Constitutions* see seculars as offering to “the Teresian Carmel fresh inspiration for ““a renewed spiritual and apostolic dynamism”, “with creative fidelity to their mission in the Church.””<sup>7</sup> The *Constitutions* call seculars to “the ministry of spirituality as the particular collaboration of the Secular Order”<sup>8</sup> and they see this ministry as something we should do in collaboration with our religious superiors, as a participation in the apostolate of the Order.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> OCDS Provincial Statutes of the Oklahoma Province, Sec. VIII.1

<sup>7</sup> OCDS Constitutions, Art. 28

<sup>8</sup> OCDS Constitutions, Art. 9f

<sup>9</sup> OCDS Constitutions, Art. 26

Many seculars view our participation in the mission of the Order as something new that was added when the *Constitutions* were promulgated. But if you go back and review the 1979 OCDS Rule of Life with the idea of apostolate in mind, it was very present there. When we seculars make our profession, we are first asked if we are willing to collaborate with the Church “in her mission by means of contemplative prayer and apostolic activity”.<sup>10</sup> At the last General Chapter, the Order included the seculars when speaking about how our world has a thirst for God and how Carmel is able to lead people into a deeper relationship with God. According to *Setting Out from Essentials* “All our communities of apostolic and contemplative life, friars, nuns, and *laity* (emphasis mine), ought to be committed to the task of living a deep spiritual life based on the Gospel and *sharing it*”.<sup>11</sup> The document suggested further that the friars work with the laity on such things as workshops, lectures and retreats that introduce the Word with reflection and prayer and promoting the writings and lives of our saints.<sup>12</sup>

This call to participate more fully in the mission of the Order which began in some respects with *Vita Consecrata* and was taken up by the Order in subsequent legislation and documents is an area of much discussion among seculars. In many places, communities have found creative ways to become more involved in an appropriate apostolate that reflects the spirituality of the Order. I am aware that in the Philippines, seculars run a retreat center. In my own province, seculars have sponsored days of recollection in which they have done all the organizing while having a friar do the presentations. One community hosts pod-casts of short reflections from our saints that can be downloaded from the Internet for listening. Another community has offered classes in prayer in various local parishes. Some put together small booklets of sayings from our saints that they distribute to parishes or at Eucharistic Adoration chapels. At our Mt Carmel Center in Dallas, the seculars assist in distributing flyers about the programs offered there and in the cleaning and upkeep of the center. In San Antonio, our seculars assist in giving tours of the Basilica of the Little Flower.

So there are places where seculars are coming up with creative ways to share Carmelite spirituality with the larger Church and thus participate in the apostolic mission

---

<sup>10</sup> OCDS Ritual, Rite of Making the Promise

<sup>11</sup> *Setting out from Essentials*, 67

<sup>12</sup> *Setting out from Essentials*, 68

of the Order. But there are also many seculars who resist this aspect of our vocation. Many feel that with family, work, and just the daily prayer obligations of the vocation, adding something more by way of an active apostolate is asking too much of already very busy lives. This is a genuine concern and challenge for seculars both individually and at a communal level. It requires much dialogue and discernment on the part of both the individual and the community to develop apostolates that are “sensitive to the feelings, interests, abilities and talents, and physical and financial capabilities of the members of the community”.<sup>13</sup>

Participation in the apostolic mission of the Order is also an area in which seculars and friars might develop ways to collaborate. I mentioned already one great example of this where two of the communities in the Oklahoma Province did all the organizing work to sponsor a day of recollection based on Carmelite spirituality. The seculars arranged the place and lunch, handled the registrations, and did the advertising. And the speaker for the day was a friar who flew in to give the presentations.

I think there are probably many opportunities out there for friars and seculars to work together on sharing our spirituality with the larger Church. In *Setting Out From Essentials*, the Order recognized that for this to happen, we must “promote dialogue and reflection together”.<sup>14</sup> The upcoming anniversary of the birth of St Teresa is an excellent opportunity for friars and seculars to find ways to work together in helping others learn about Teresa’s contributions to the life of prayer.

In many provinces, the OCDS Provincial Council is now invited to join the friars for a day at their Provincial Chapter. We hope that the Provincial Chapter is a time for more than merely having the seculars report on what is happening among the secular communities of the Province. It should also be the time when dialogue happens between the friars and the seculars.

In those foundations of friars in which a secular community is present, dialogue should also be happening there. There may be many opportunities for the friars and seculars to work together in sharing our spirituality in the parishes run by the Order, in

---

<sup>13</sup> OCDS Provincial Statutes of the Oklahoma Province, Sec VIII.4

<sup>14</sup> *Setting out from Essentials*, 73.1



our houses of spirituality and retreat centers, etc. Together we have great potential to develop creative ways of helping people everywhere deepen their relationship with God.

I want to add one caution in relation to seculars and friars working together and that is in the area of fund raising. I should add that this concern is also present when it comes to the relationship between the seculars and our nuns. In some places, the seculars have been heavily relied upon to assist in fund raising activities for the local community of friars or nuns. We encountered one place in our province where our nuns have the seculars do all their fund raising for them. While seculars want to support and should support our friars and nuns, this is an area in which much caution should be exercised. I have heard more than one secular remark that the friars (or nuns) see us only as a source of money. Such remarks point to the friars (or nuns) not being in right relationship to the seculars. Secular should help with fund raising, but such requests should not be the primary focus of the relationship among the branches within the Order.

### **Conclusion**

The Church is enriched through the charism of the Discalced Carmelite Order. God has given us a rich treasury of prayer. As Carmelites, we are called to use that treasury to bring people closer to God by fostering the practice of prayer within ourselves and also in others. Seculars share in that calling.

The *OCDS Constitutions* recognize that the secular vocation is also an enrichment to the consecrated life of the friars and nuns. Together we are to learn from one another how to recognize the signs of the times.<sup>15</sup> All of us, friars, nuns, and seculars -- contribute to the Order in our own ways. We share the fundamental elements of the Discalced Carmelite charism: allegiance to Jesus Christ, meditating upon the law of the Lord, participation in the liturgical life of the Church, seeking union with God, following the teachings of our great Carmelite saints and service in the Church through a ministry of spirituality.<sup>16</sup>

Today I have touched upon a few ways in which friars and seculars relate to each other. When he was Father General, Father Maccisse used to call seculars to greater co-

---

<sup>15</sup> OCDS Constitutions, Art. 38

<sup>16</sup> OCDS Constitutions, Art. 6-9

responsibility and collaboration in the Order. Our *Constitutions* embodied that call and subsequent documents of the Order have continued to deepen our understanding of how seculars live out their vocation at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Many seculars have embraced this growth in the understanding of our vocation. Some have resisted it. Among the friars, we've seen similar reactions, some embracing and some resisting. Both seculars and friars are called to continue to explore, to dialogue, to deepen our understanding of how the charism of the Order is lived out by those of us in the secular state.

I thank you for this opportunity to contribute to that process here at the General Chapter. May God continue to gift the Church through our Order!