Adaptation in Carmel

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In his address of the "State of the Order" during our General Chapter in Avila in May of 2015, Fr. Saverio presented a sociological model that we have taken as the inspiration for our conference and have been reflecting on in light of your experience The aspect of the model in which I have been assigned concerns adaptation: What does it mean to live the Teresian-Carmelite vocation as men and women in a particular time and place? How have we as Discalced Carmelite men and women adapted to our historical reality and embraced the challenge of inculturation? This is particularly challenging because it presupposes the integration of the first three levels: internalization, integration, and the capacity for discerning the goals for effective strategies.[1]

Fr. Saverio reminds us that our Order, with its traditional religious life in the Western world, or in the Northern hemisphere, is living in a new and dramatic situation. He maintains that the Second Vatican Council's call to renewal of religious life and our place in society has remained essentially unchanged compared to fifty years ago. Therefore, this is especially important today because not only has society and culture changed over the past fifty years, but the challenges we face as an Order, at least in the Western world, in terms of lack of vocations, diminishing numbers, and aging communities calls for an adaptation to the reality in which we live.

This topic, and the questions they raise, present us with one of the major challenges we face as Teresian Carmelites, perhaps the greatest: how do we Teresian Carmelites live our charism in the here and now in this culture and society with our present challenges and crises, and yet remain faithful to our original charism? How do we adapt to the reality in which we live? I think this is particularly challenging for you because of your vocation as enclosed contemplative nuns, although you share a strong apostolic charism with the friars.

I would like to begin with a story told by the American Trappist monk, Thomas Merton. Thomas Merton told this story in Bangkok, Thailand in 1968 at an international conference on monasticism the day he died tragically of electrocution. I'm sure you are familiar with Thomas Merton through his writ-

1 Saverio Cannistra, Es Teimp de caminar, Documento del 91Capitolo Generale, OCD, Avila, 39-42

ings on monastic life that are translated into Spanish. In 1959 the Chinese military invaded Tibet and killed tens of thousands of citizens and monks and destroyed hundreds of monasteries. A Tibetan monk was outside the monastery when the Chinese invaded. He was hiding in the mountains and he didn't know what to do, so he sent a message to an abbot friend asking "What shall we do?" He received this strange reply: "From now on, Brother, everyone must stand on his own feet." [2]

Merton explained what this message meant and its importance for monastic life. "Everyone must stand on his own feet." It means that we can no longer rely on structures that may be destroyed by political power, social, and economic circumstances. Structures may change; historical events, as well as internal forces may remove them. The historical event of the Chinese invasion of Tibet forced the monks to delve deeper into the meaning of their vocation. They could no longer reply on the external, or even internal structures of their monastic life. They had to rely on something deeper; they had to delve deeper within themselves.

Merton gave this lecture in the midst of the turmoil of the 1960's. If you remember, the 1960s were years of social, cultural, political and religious upheaval. The Second Vatican Council also took place in the 1960's. The Second Vatican Council called for a renewal of religious life. The renewal of religious life thrust religious orders and congregations into a crisis. The structures of religious life that had given meaning to religious for years were examined, changed, and many were abandoned. As we know, this led to a mass exodus of many priests, nuns, and brothers from their congregations because the familiar external structures (the habit, the monastic schedule, the ministry) that supported them were questioned, altered, or completely abandoned, and people felt lost. In many cases, the religious who left during those years found their identity on structures, practices, and old customs, rather than the deeper interior life. Novitiates that once had been full of novices became empty. Thousands of men and women left religious life. The decline of religious vocations led to discouragement.

In the mist of this social, cultural and religious turmoil Merton reminded monastic men and women that we cannot rely on structures that may be changed or abandoned due to cultural and historical events. We have to depend on God. This does not mean that structures are not important. Structures keep us grounded, organized, disciplined, and secure. However, when the structures upon which we have relied are changed or modified, or they are no longer helpful for our present life situation, what do we do? We have to return to what is essential, and for consecrated men and women it is inner transformation, transformation into Christ. The purpose of our life is ongoing interior transformation through a life of unceasing prayer in service to the Church and striving to live the Gospel and the evangelical counsels as best we can in our community. In Teresian terms: good friends of Christ and good friends of one another, striving to live the Gospel and the evangelical counsels as perfectly as we can. "All my longing was and still is that since He has so many enemies and so few friends that these few friends be good ones. As a result I resolved to do the little that was in my power; that is, to follow the evangelical counsels as perfectly as I could and strive that these few persons who live here do the same." (W.1.2)

I think the story of the Tibetan monk has a lesson for us Carmelites in the 21st century. No doubt, we live in a different political, cultural, and religious world than the Tibetans of 1950. Our present challenges are also different than the religious who lived through the changes after the Second Vatican Council. Our culture and society has an impact on our religious life and the way we structure our lives.

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[2] Thomas Merton. Asian Journal. New Directions Books, New York, 1973, 326.

In his conference to the Carmelites nuns on ongoing formation in Rome on February 3 of this year, Fr. Saverio reminded us that we are living in a historical time of major changes that present us with questions. Change creates a crisis and thus calls for discernment. "Discernment and crisis come from the same Greek work, that means, "to judge, to evaluate, to separate." [3] Change, crisis, and discernment imply adaptation to our present reality. Adaptation means a dynamic ongoing process by which we interact with our social and cultural environment.[4] Quite simply, adaptation is the process of adjusting to new situations. Fr. Saverio quoted Blessed John H. Newman: "On this earth, to live is to change, and perfection of the result of many transformations." [5] In this same spirit we can say: to live is to learn to adjust to the new situations in our lives.

What are the historical changes, challenges, and crises that impact the structures of our Carmelite life?

Our world and society of the 21st century

We live in a pluralistic, multicultural, post-modern, post-Christian, globalized world, shaped by information and communication technologies, e.g. media and communication through the Internet, etc. We live in a secularized society that forms part of the ethos of postmodernity. During his Pontificate Pope Benedict XVI reminded us of the threat of secularization in Europe and the Western world. God is no longer the center of our cultural values and moral choices. Secularization has had a major impact on religious life. For many young people and their parents, religious life is no longer seen as a meaningful life choice. In fact, with the decline in births and families having only one or two children, parents discourage their children's vocation to religious life. In this cultural and social context, the evangelical counsels are not appreciated, much less understood. They are considered inhuman and render human beings immature and unfulfilled. The vows are seen as attacks on human freedom, sexuality, and the material goods of this world.

Postmodernity has had a major impact on our culture and society. Postmodernity is a complex term that describes the contemporary and philosophical milieu. Modernity emphasized objective, logical thinking and a universal morality and law. Postmodernity, on the other hand, claims that all knowledge comes from the self who interprets reality, thus there is a loss of a unified vision of reality and a deep sense of contingency and relativism. [6]

The socio-cultural and ecclesial context over the past fifty years has influenced consecrated life and has provoked a critical situation: decrease of vocations, increase of departures, and aging members.

Challenges to Carmel

My experience of my Carmelites Sisters is from the reality of the United States, Great Britain and Ireland. From what I have seen in Spain the challenges seem similar. I will give a few of the major challenges and crises the nuns have shared with me.

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[3] Saverio Cannistra, "Ongoing formation of the Discalced Carmelite nuns: a proposal." Rome, Feb 3, 2016, p.2.
[4] "Adaptation," definition from Wikipedia, Free Encyclopedia.
[5] Ongoing formation of the Discalced Carmelite nuns: a proposal, p.2.
[6] See Stanley J. Grenz, A Primer on Postmodernism (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 39-56. Also the profound study on Postmodernity by David Harvey, The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry in the Origins of Cultural Change, Massacuhetts, Blackwell Publishers, 1990.

First of all, there is the challenge of unity vs. diversity. Nuns often ask me: "How much diversity do we allow and still maintain unity, for instance, in terms of the enclosure and going out to meetings? How far can we go and still be united and remain faithful to the enclosure?" This is a difficult and complex question to answer. The challenge of unity and diversity, the diverse ways of living and expressing the Teresian charism is an ongoing concern and raises many questions.

Secondly, there is the decrease of vocations. Many Carmels have not seen a solemn profession in twenty, thirty, or even forty years. Some Carmels have received novices over the years, but few or none have persevered. There are many reasons for lack of perseverance, some of which are very complex. For instance, for some the departure was the fruit of good discernment, for others however, the community's inability to change and to absorb new life and new ideas resulted in departures. At times there is a lack of understanding of the issues contemporary women bring into religious life. Generally speaking, women today are highly educated, independent, and have life experience. They also bring with them psychological fragility. Some communities are not ready to deal with challenges of today's youth or the psychological issues with which they enter.

It is interesting that in the United States the traditional Carmels tend to draw more vocations. Many young people are looking for a highly structured life, the traditional habit, strict enclosure, and in some Carmels, even the Mass and Divine Office in Latin. The search for a highly structured life-style is often symptomatic of the insecurity present in society and in young people who are looking for something radical and secure. Some Carmelite nuns ask the question: Will these women will persevere beyond the initial stage of fervor and their need for external structures?

An aging community is the second major challenge for many Carmels. I recently visited a community of three Carmels that amalgamated two years ago. They have built a new monastery and there are about 30 nuns. However, almost all are over the age of 75. They have had to hire cooks, people to help with cleaning, and night nurses. Another Carmel has only four nuns, the prioress is in her 80's. In their resistance to close, supported by the Bishop, they deny the reality of diminishment. With only four nuns who are in the 70's and 80's, how can they invite novices, form them in the Carmelite life, and live a regular observance? Oftentime in an effort to survive diminishing and aging communities invite religious from other cultures, for instance, from Africa or Asia. The new Apostolic Constitution, *Vultum Dei Quaerere*, strongly discourages this practice.[7] The mixture of cultures in this context fails to solve the fundamental problems of diminishment.

I know two Carmels in the United States in which no vocation had persevered for years. They realized that new members were not forthcoming, so they went through a discernment process, and wisely decided to sell their monastery while they had the health to move. They relocated on the campus of an active congregation where they live their Carmelite life and when they become too infirmed for self-care they move to the infirmary of the congregation and are cared for until the Lord calls them.

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[7] "Even though the establishment of international and multicultural communities is a sign of the universality of the charism, the recruitment of candidates from other countries soley for the sake of ensuring the survival of the monastery is to be absolutely avoided." VDQ, Conclusions and Regulations, Art 3S 6.

Other Carmels are diminishing; however, they have enough "younger" sisters to follow their contemplative prayer life and to keep up with the maintenance of the monastery. Nevertheless, the complaint I often hear is: "Father, it is becoming more and more difficult to keep the observance of our life of prayer and shoulder the burden of the work in the monastery. The younger sisters are obliged to carry most of the work in the community. We've had to modify our prayer schedule because we have too much work."

Illness is another challenge. I know of a Carmel of only six nuns, two of whom were bedridden. Their entire day was absorbed in the care of the two sisters in the infirmary. As much as we want to care for our sick sisters, caring for them can become a heavy burden on the community and impact the monastic schedule and time for prayer and reading.

Other challenges are leadership and formation. In many monasteries it is difficult to find a sister who has the leadership skills to assum the office of prioress, or novice mistress. More than once, I've heard prioresses say that they don't know who the community can choose as prioress at the next elections, or who has the gifts necessary for formation.

In the United States some nuns resist having to attend meetings. It is a burden for them because it takes them away from the enclosure and community life. This touches upon the theme of enclosure, which as you know is a major issue. I think you would agree that it is not possible to live enclosure as it was lived in the 16th century, or even twenty or thirty years ago due to varied circumstances. Undoubtedly, enclosure is essential to the Teresian charism of our nuns, but how enclosure is understood and lived realistically today is an important topic for prayer, reflection, and discernment. So much depends on the circumstances of the community. What does enclosure mean? How can it be lived realistically in today's society and still remain faithful to the Teresa's reasons for establishing strict enclosure?

Another important area is sharing your life or prayer in a way that invites people to pray with you and to participate in your liturgy, yet maintain the balance and the space for solitude and silence. It does not seem right to separate ourselves from people who want to pray with us. As Teresa said, "Others already know that you are religious and that your business is prayer. Don't think to yourself that you don't want them to consider you good, for what they see in you is to the benefit or harm of all. And it is a serious wrong for those who have so great an obligation to speak of God, as do nuns, to think that it is good for them to hide their feelings about God; although they may be allowed to do this sometimes for a greater good. God is your business and language." (C 20,4)

Adaptation

How do we Teresian Carmelites live our charism in the here and now in this culture and society with our present challenges and crises, and yet remain faithful to our original charism? How do we adapt to the reality in which we live?

When we speak of adaptation, I think we need to look at it from an interior perspective. We need to adapt ourselves to the inner reality of our lives; adjust ourselves to the present reality in which we are living. It means accepting in faith, hope, and love the challenges, diminishments and crises we face every day. If we look at adapting from an external perspective, for instance, modifying the habit, removing grilles, altering the horarium, or changing the Constitutions, it is like putting on make-up. Like the monk who was told, "Everyone must stand on his own feet." We must do the same: we must return to

the essential of our life which is transformation into Christ, living a life of unceasing prayer for the Church and striving to the live the Gospel in our communities as perfectly as we can.

"I realized I was a woman and wretched and incapable of doing any of the useful things I desired to do in the service of the Lord. All of my longing was and still is that since He has so many enemies and so few friends that these few friends be good ones. As a result I resolved to do the little that was in my power; that is, to follow the evangelical counsels as perfectly as I could and strive that these few persons who live here do the same. I did this trusting in the great goodness of God, who never fails to help anyone who is determined to give up everything for Him. (C 1,2) Our primitive rule states that we must pray without ceasing. If we do this with all the care possible – for unceasing prayer is the most important aspect of the rule – the fasts, the disciplines, and the silence the order commands will not be wanting." (C 4,2)

St. Teresa's foundation of St. Joseph's was the fruit of interior transformation. Many factors led to her reform, i.e. the social-economic situation of the Incarnation monastery, the division within the Church (the Protestant Reformation), her vision of hell (Life, 32), and her knowledge later on of Spain's expansion in the New World. Above all, interior transformation led her to seek another form of living the Carmelite life more conducive to the way the Spirit was leading her. She returned to the primitive Rule of St. Albert, to the essentials of the Carmelite charism. "*I was thinking about what I could do for God, and I thought that the first thing was to follow the call to the religious life, which His Majesty had given me, by keeping my rule as perfectly as I could. Even though there were many servants of God in the house where I was, and He was very well served in it, the nuns because of great necessity often went out to places where they could stay – with the decorum proper to religious. Also, the rule was not kept in its prime rigor, but was observed the way it was in the whole order, that is, according to the bull of mitigation.* " (V 32,9)

Of course, we can't just return to the exact structures she established in St. Joseph's. Culture, society, and religious life have changed radically since 1562. Our challenges and crises are different than St. Teresa's. However, Teresa demonstrates remarkable "flexibility" during her foundations.[8] Yet, the essentials of her charism are valid for all time. This is why unceasing prayer in an atmosphere of silence and solitude (enclosure), living the fundamental virtues of love of neighbor, detachment, and humility, striving to live the Gospel values and to love one another, is the discerning path that leads to adjusting our lives to our present reality. When there is interior depth, outward changes take place peacefully.

"En una noche oscura"

I believe that we have entered into passive dark night of faith in Carmel. [9] We ask ourselves: What is God asking of us at this present time? Is Carmel as we have known and lived it dying? What will our future be? How do we adjust to our present reality to secularism and the ethos of postmodernity that is removing God from the center of life and having a dramatic impact on religious life? Some Carmels are reduced to the point of having to close, which is a certain type of death. Others have had to amalgamate. Some monasteries still thrive and carry on with interested women who knock at their door.

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[8] Fr. Steven Payne, OCD delivered an interesting lecture at the Avila Congress 2015, entitled: "Saint Teresa of Avila and the Virtue of Flexibility."

[9] Sandra Schneiders has also analyzed the present reality of religious life from the perspective of the dark night of St. John of the Cross. See: Sandra Schneiders, IHM, Finding the Treasure: Locating Catholic Religious Life in a New Ecclesial and Cultural Context,

Despite the challenges and crises we face, we must not look upon them as negative, but we must try to see them as a new way that God is coming to us. God is doing something new. Pope Benedict XVI said in one of his interviews that the Church of the future may become a smaller Church. Perhaps this is true of Carmel: we will become a smaller Carmel, but one of deep faith. We are struggling with the mystery of a God who transcends our ideas, images, feelings, and plans. John the Cross tells us that because of God's transcendence we have to seek him in a hidden way, the way of faith and love. (CB 1, 12) The dark night experience, especially passive purification, is an experience of powerlessness. We are placed in a situation where we are powerless to change ourselves. In this situation, we have to surrender and let God work. We must remember that the dark night is a symbol of transformation. It is the Paschal Mystery of dying to the old and rising to new life. God's merciful love takes the initiative and enters into our lives to purify, heal, and transform us of what we cannot do through our efforts.

One dark night,
Fired with love's urgent longings
-ah, the sheer grace!-
I went out unseen,
My house being now all stilled.

One way I believe that we an adapt to our present reality in the 21st century is by trying to live St. John of the Cross' doctrine on the role of hope in the purification of the memory.

For St. John of the Cross the pathology of the memory is our tendency to obsess over and cling to past memories and experiences. For instance, we carry in our memory a past experience of the way life was lived in Carmel thirty years ago, and in order to relive this experience, we project onto the future our past experience and strive to recreate the past based upon our wishes and expectations. In doing this we fail to live in the present moment, the only place where God is present, and miss the way God is coming to us in this present moment. However, God comes to us anew every day, every year, and in every event of our lives. "Being unconditionally open to God's future is what John of the Cross means by "hope." [10] Hope is not only a way of facing the future, but living today. Hope roots us in the present, in living today in faith and love, heals us of the past, and opens us to a future that lies in God's mysterious plan. For John of the Cross, the theological virtue of hope empties us of clinging to the past (memories of what was) and frees from our drive to control the future. We remain open in the present to how God is coming to us anew.

"I should like spiritual persons to have full realization of how many evils the devils cause in souls that make much use of their memories; of how much sadness, affliction, vain and evil joy from both spiritual and worldly thoughts these devils occasion; and of the number of impurities they leave rooted in the spirit. They also seriously distract these souls from the highest recollection that consists in concentrating all the faculties on the incomprehensible Good and withdrawing them from all apprehensible things, for these apprehensible things are not a good that is beyond comprehension. (#S, 4, 2)

John tells us that our memory can be the source of suffering, depression, sadness and discouragement by fixing our eyes on the incomprehensible Good, on God, we can find freedom and peace. This is

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[10] Hein Blommestijn, Jos Huls, Kees Waaijam, The Footprints of Love, Leuven, Fiery Arrow, 71-71. I have drawn upon the authors' understanding of hope and memory.

hope: fixing our eyes on God, depending on him. In the second book of the Dark Night he compares hope to a visor: "*Hope had this characteristic: It covers all the senses of a person's head so they do not become absorbed in any worldly thing, nor is there any way some arrow from the world might wound them. Hope allows the soul only a visor that it may look toward heavenly things, and no more. This is the ordinary task of hope in the soul; it raises the eyes to look only at God"* (2N 21, 7)

When John counsels people who are living in the purifying process of the dark night, he says that the primary "work" is to be still, to walk in secret, in darkness, without trying to analyze or improve, or make something happen. What is necessary is to remain in rest and quietude even though it may seem they are doing nothing. In this space of quietude God is strengthening them on a deeper level and uniting them to himself. If they walk in faith, hope, and love (wear the white, green and red garments symbolizing faith, hope and love), they will grow strong in love. (2N 21, 2-3) [11]

In terms of our lives and how to adjust to the challenges and crises of our time, we are called to keep moving, to live day-by-day, moment-by-moment, doing the best we can to live prayerfully, lovingly, and then leave the rest to God. This attitude is not fatal resignation, but a hopeful way of living and awaiting the coming of our God who comes daily in new ways and who is transforming us little by little. Certainly, we have to plan, continue with our projects, care for each other, attend meetings, clean the monastery, and invite new members. We do all that we can to grow in depth spiritually, living the essentials of our Teresian life of unceasing prayer for the Church and our world. "We have to learn to care and not to care, learn not to invest ourselves to the point that we lose ourselves." [12]

I think another way of living with this hopeful attitude is following Teresa's advice in the book of Foundations. She tells that prayer is not thinking much, but loving much. (F5, 2) "How does one acquire this love? By being determined to work and to suffer, and to do so when the occasion arises." (F.5.3) We would like to be alone thinking of the Lord and what we owe him, that is, we would like to enjoy more solitude. Teresa says that this is understandable, but when it comes to obedience and the benefit of our neighbor, then we have to abandon what we would like to give God.

"But it must be understood that this is true provided that nothing interferes with obedience or benefit to one's neighbor. When either of these two things presents itself, time is demanded, and also the abandonment of what we so much desire to give God, which, in our opinion, is to be alone thinking of Him and delighting in the delights that He gives us. To leave aside these delights for either of these other two things is to give delight to Him and do the work for Him, as He Himself said: What you did for one of these little ones you did for Me. And in matters touching on obedience He doesn't want the soul who truly loves Him to take any other path than the one He did: obediens usque ad mortem." (5.3)

One way we can interpret this teaching is to respond to the obedience of daily life, to the work at hand, to the demands of daily life and community, striving to grow in genuine love and care for one another, growing in the demands of daily life and community, striving to grow in genuine love and care for one another, growing in the three fundamental virtues of love of neighbor, detachment, and true humility,

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[11] Finding the Treasure: Locating Catholic Religious Life in a New Ecclesial and Cultural Context, p.208
[12] Finding the Treasure, p.208

or according to the doctrine of John of the Cross: growing in the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. I think our major work is to care for one another, to show love, concern, and compassion for one another. Yes, we need to continue to do what we can to organize and plan our lives and to attract new vocations. However, in living this way we are first called to care for one another and to remember that we are not alone in our poverty. We are in this together; therefore, we must strive to show genuine care for one another and remain obedient to the needs of the community and our sisters with all life's uncertainties and insecurities. If we strive to live this way, with God's grace alone, our eyes fixed on God's goodness and fidelity, we will grow interiorly and have the grace to adjust to whatever circumstances and crises come our way. We will "stand on our own feet," as the Tibetan abbot advised his friend.

Please take some time to reflect on the reading and respond to the following reflection questions. These are thought-starter questions designed for your personal reflection. What you share of your own personal reflections, in a dialogue session or with others, will be completely at your discretion. Taking the time to reflect on these readings and questions will prepare you to enter into dialogue. The readings and questions are intended to prepare hearts and minds to thoughtfully enter into communal and association dialogue.

Reflection Questions:

- The key words, phrases and concepts in this article that stood out for me are . . .

- When I consider the changes that are taking place in my life and the life of my community, I feel...

- How does our Carmelite charism inform our response to change and adaptation?

- In light of changes the question I would most like to explore with CCA is . . .