



Session 5: Navigating New Thresholds Together: Communal Discernment

Reference Reading

Introduction

It is helpful to reference the many ways in which we have been encouraged by friends and scholars of the Carmelite tradition to open our minds and hearts as we explore new ways to navigate the future. The following document is comprised of excerpted quotes drawn from recent key Carmelite documents: *Looking to the Future* (1997), *It is Time to Walk* (2015), *Vultum Dei quaerere* (2016) and *Cor Orans* (2018). All of these call us to be women at the well engaged in contemplative prayer, dialogue, and hopeful exploration. These excerpts underscore the value in responding to the signs of the time, remaining faithful to our charism and open to new expressions, standing firmly on the foundation of Teresian community while balancing the cultural and pluralistic realities of our day and prayerfully exploring new considerations of governance and collaboration that strengthen, safeguard and enliven our Carmelite charism.

Session 5 is not designed to explore these excerpts. We offer them for the work we are doing in Session 5.

Excerpts from *Vultum Dei quaerere*, 2016

FRATERNAL LIFE IN COMMUNITY

24. Fraternal life in community is an essential element of religious life in general, and of monastic life in particular, albeit in the variety of different charisms. The relationship of communion is the manifestation of that love which wells up in the heart of the Father and is poured into our hearts by the Spirit whom Jesus has bestowed on us. Simply by making this reality visible, the Church, God's family, is the sign of profound union with Him and appears as the home in which this life-giving experience is possible for all. By calling some men and women to share in His life, Christ the Lord formed a community that makes visible "the capacity for the communion of goods, for fraternal love, for shared projects and activities; and this capacity comes from having accepted the invitation to follow Him more freely and more closely". The fraternal life, in virtue of which consecrated men and women seek to become "one heart and one soul" on the model of the earliest Christian communities, "aims to be an eloquent witness to the Trinity".

25. Fraternal communion is a reflection of God's own way of being and bestowing himself; it testifies to the fact that "God is love". The consecrated life professes to believe in, and live by, the love of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The community of brothers and sisters thus becomes a graced reflection of the God who is a Trinity of Love. Unlike the life of hermits, who live "in silence and solitude" and are likewise esteemed by the Church, the monastic life entails a growing community life meant to create an authentic fraternal communion, a *koinonia*.

This means that all the members must see themselves as builders of community and not simply recipients of its eventual benefits. A community exists inasmuch as it comes about and is built up by the contribution of all, each according to his or her gifts, through the development of a strong spirituality of communion whereby all experience a sense of belonging. Only in this way can life in community provide its members with the mutual assistance needed to live their vocation to the full.

26. You who have embraced the monastic life must never forget that today's men and women expect you to bear witness to an authentic fraternal communion that, in a society marked by divisions and inequality, clearly demonstrates that life in common is both possible and fulfilling, despite differences of age, education and even culture. Your communities ought to be credible signs that these differences, far from being an obstacle to fraternal life, actually enrich it. Remember that unity and communion are not the same as uniformity, and are nourished by dialogue, sharing, mutual assistance and profound compassion, especially towards the most frail and needy.

27. Lastly, remember that fraternal life in community is also the primary form of evangelization: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another". For this reason, I urge you not to neglect the means suggested and provided by the Church to consolidate community life and to be ever vigilant with regard to this sensitive but fundamental aspect of monastic life. Together with sharing the word and the experience of God, and communal discernment, "we should recall fraternal correction, review of life and other forms typical of the tradition. These are concrete ways of putting at the service of others and of pouring into the community the gifts which the Spirit gives so abundantly for its upbuilding and for its mission in the world"

THE AUTONOMY OF MONASTERIES

28. Autonomy favors the stability of life and internal unity of each community, ensuring the best conditions for contemplation. But autonomy ought not to mean independence or isolation, especially from the other monasteries of the same Order or the same charismatic family.

29. "No one contributes to the future in isolation, by his or her efforts alone, but by seeing himself or herself as part of a true communion which is constantly open to encounter, dialogue, attentive listening and mutual assistance". For this reason, take care to avoid "the disease of self-absorption" and to preserve the value of communion between different monasteries as a path of openness towards the future and a means of updating and giving expression to the enduring and codified values of your autonomy.

FEDERATIONS

30. Federation is an important structure of communion between monasteries sharing the same charism, lest they remain isolated. The principal aim of a Federation is to promote the contemplative life in the member monasteries, in accordance with the demands of their proper charism, and to ensure assistance in initial and continuous formation as well as in practical needs, through the exchange of nuns and the sharing of material goods. In view of these aims, federations ought to be encouraged and increase in number.

Excerpts from Cor Orans, 2018

7. **Federation of monasteries** means a structure of communion among some autonomous monasteries of the same Institute, erected by the Holy See that approves the Statutes, so that in sharing the same charism, the federated monasteries overcome isolation and promote regular observance and contemplative life.

8. **Association of monasteries** is meant a structure of communion between several autonomous monasteries collaborate among themselves according to the Statutes approved by the Holy See.

86. The Federation is a structure of communion among monasteries of the same Institute erected by the Holy See so that monasteries which share the same charism do not remain isolated but keep it faithfully and, giving each other mutual fraternal help, live the indispensable value of communion.

Excerpts from Looking to the Future, 1997 – Camilo Maccise, OCD

PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE

26. In thinking on the journey made during the sexennium coming to an end and considering the signs of the times, we are presented with a series of challenges that must be faced if we wish to live the Teresian charism with creative fidelity and according to the directives of the Church.

27. *Vita consecrata*, issued after the synod, invites consecrated persons to live in depth the meaning of Church in order to follow the directives of the magisterium faithfully: “*Consecrated persons are asked to be true experts of communion and to practice the spirituality of communion as ‘witnesses and architects of the plan for unity which is the crowning point of human history in God’s design’.* The sense of ecclesial communion, developing into a spirituality of communion, promotes a way of thinking, speaking and acting which enables the Church to grow in depth and extension...” (VC 46.)

SOME CHALLENGES WE HAVE TO FACE

42. The experience I have gained in these six years of accompanying you in your journey has made me realize the truth of what was stated in the Propositions of the Synod on consecrated life in regard to the *excessive autonomy* of your monasteries: “to seek to overcome the excessive autonomy ruling in some monasteries is an evident need”. (*Proposition 23 a*). In effect, in the present world it is impossible to face and resolve problems without a much wider collaboration and communion at every level of society and of the Church. Your monasteries are no exception to this. Rather, I would say, they are experiencing with greater intensity the limitations of living isolated and locked up in their tiny world.

49. We live in a pluralist world. The situation of society, the Church, religious life and of our Order has become diversified according to cultural and geographical areas. We cannot pretend, as in the past, to have unity in uniformity. As was stated by the 1985 extraordinary Synod for the closure of Vatican II, we must be open to unity in diversity.

50. The diversity is not made up of fundamentally opposed positions leading to dissolution, destruction or loss of identity, but rather *a diversity faithful to what is essential in the charism and which is enriched by the variety of all that is secondary and cultural.* (*Exente coetu secundo*: II:C:2). Outside of the essential elements of your charism which grew out of the life and experience of our Holy Mother Saint

Teresa, in which all should concur and which are expressed in your *Constitutions*, the other aspects of your life, fruit of a culture or of an epoch, are relative and can be lived in an enriching diversity.

51. The creation of Associations – Federations constitutes, as I have said to you, a step forward in the line of renewal sought by the Church since the time of Pius XII. Frequently I receive letters from monasteries and nuns thanking God for being able to form part of an Association or Federation. Prejudices they had against them have disappeared in the light of experience. While they are not a panacea to cure all woes and to overcome all problems, they broaden the possibility of knowing and appreciating one another, of collaboration, formation, and the search for solutions to common problems. Associations – Federations are giving you a voice in the Church allowing you to have your word as consecrated women and contemplative Carmelites.

52. My intention in assisting the creation of Associations - Federations was not solely to fulfil a duty your *Constitutions* impose on me, but primarily to help you yourselves seek the ways of God in your history, using your own experience as contemplative women. It is my experience that you have come quite some way in this area. But above all you are beginning to be aware of the necessity of a wider structure permitting dialogue, search and collaboration on a national and international level between Associations – Federations. This already exists in other female contemplative religious Orders. In dialogue with the Church you should seek something similar, in agreement with the demands of your contemplative life of enclosure. The Holy Spirit will help you to find the right way with regard to just autonomy and liberty between monasteries and Associations – Federations.

Excerpts from It is Time to Walk, 2015 – Saverio Cannistrà, OCD

Note: this document affirms the need to invest in community

PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE

I would just like to conclude my report on the state of the Order, by briefly indicating some perspectives that logically arise from the analysis that I have outlined in the preceding paragraphs.

The first perspective is the need to continue the work of assimilating our identity. The second perspective, related to the first, concerns the veiling of community. We need a more integrated community, able to communicate more and better, that believes in itself, and where the members value their prayer, their work, their recreation and their friendship, freely made.

We need a greater detachment from our structures. We must learn to relativize them in view of the goals we seek – to a very different historical situation. But we often lack the courage and the freedom to make decisions. Indeed, we sometimes lack the will to begin a journey in this sense, by taking preliminary, preparatory steps, of coming together, of collaboration. Fear leads us to shut ourselves up in our own little worlds, without dealing with one another or submitting ourselves to ecclesial verification.

The more we close ourselves off, the more we shut ourselves out from the world around us. We need to find a missionary zeal that makes us open the doors of the upper room and go outside, onto the street, in the midst of people, not to tell them something, but to listen, to learn, to understand. We need transparent communities that are able to live this osmosis with the environment that surrounds them.

In conclusion, we need to enter into dialogue with ourselves, among ourselves and with the world around us. We do not need words or even the performance of works: we need dialogue, that is, act of real communication, which lead to a deeper knowledge of ourselves and the world. I believe this form of dialogue is at the heart of the Teresian charism and that, starting from the nucleus of prayer, it should inspire a whole way of being, of living and of witnessing as communities born from the intuition of

Teresa. It is only in this way that our family will continue to be as it was, during these new times, given us to live in by the Lord.

23. Finally, adaption to its present historical reality is decisive for the survival of the group. In the measure that it loses contact with this reality, perspectives for growth diminish. We cannot live with our backs to the human, social, and cultural context that surrounds us because, if this is the case, the word and action of the group loses its significance and influence. Its word reaches less people. It is no use deceiving ourselves thinking that it is enough for us to influence a small social group who may listen to us, and yet we leave aside a society who walks along as though they are lost. On the other hand, we need to pay close attention; it is very important in this phase to become aware of the preceding conditions: *“An adaptation to the context that forgets the model of life that identifies us or ignores the requirement to maintain the integration of the group would evidently be destructive. At the same time, to avoid the problem of adaptation, falling into a resigned acceptance of the end of religious life or hoping to resolve the problem with little strategies or image operations would be an irresponsible choice.”* (Fr. Saverio, General Chapter)

24. Therefore, in reference to our Teresian charismatic identity, rereading the Constitutions will help us to assimilate more personally, to share communally, and to set out to live concretely the model of life that Teresa of Jesus has proposed to us (*interiorization*); to see if in the life of our communities and circumscriptions there is a real reciprocal relationship of roles – within a world of shared roles, in which each one assumes his responsibilities and accepts the corrections according to the style of life that Teresa has bequeathed to us (*integration*); to verify if we are clear about the goals toward which we want to direct our collective action (*goal achievement*); and finally, to check if we are taking seriously the challenge of inculturation, assuming the life of people, their culture and their real problems (*adaptation*).

25. The Second Vatican Council has taught us that understanding the dogmas of the living Tradition grows with contemplation, study, the teachings of the Magisterium, and with the experience of the faithful. Undoubtedly, we can affirm the same regarding updating a charism in the time that each one of us is called to live, precisely because the charism is something *living*. The work that is put before us is, in essence, an act of obedience to God who has gifted the Church with a charism, and at the same time, has given us the strength of the Spirit to make it alive in our time.

26. This task of searching will allow us to recuperate strength, love, and wisdom with respect to our charismatic identity. It must remain clear that we are not proposing a legalistic rereading that limits itself to pointing out and denouncing a lack of observance regarding the written norm. As St. Teresa wrote to P. Ambrosio Mariano in December 1576: *“I am fond of strictness in the practice of the virtues but not of austerity.”* We must encounter anew the motives for what is written in the norm and rediscover its meaning, and if necessary, expressing it in a more adequate form for our time.