

New Sections in the OCDS Constitutions on Community Life and St. Joseph

Atlanta, August 22, 2014

Dear Brothers and Sisters in the Teresian Carmel,

To repeat the theme of the Atlanta Congress, I wish you “a heart blessed in love, centered on God alone”. Thank you for your presence here. I especially thank the Atlanta OCDS Group and the Oklahoma OCDS Province for organizing this 2014 Congress.

In this conference, I would like to present the new additions to the OCDS Constitutions, sections 24 and 31. They were approved by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life on January 7, 2014. First, I will tell how the text was written. Then I will give a summary of its content. Finally, I will present some related points from Pope Francis’ Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* on community life and evangelization.¹

1. The history of the text

In September 2012, the Discalced Carmelite Friars’ General Definitory asked the OCDS General Delegate to write a new chapter for the OCDS Constitutions on fraternal communion as well as a new paragraph on St. Joseph. Part of this task was a consultation about the proposed texts with all the OCDS Provinces and Communities in the world. (There are some Communities in the world that do not belong to a Province, such as Lithuania and the Caribbean.)

¹ I would like to express my gratitude to the people who helped me in the translation and revision of this conference, namely Vera OCDS from Brazil, Fr. DK, Fr. James, Filomena.

A first draft, written by the OCDS General Delegate and also Fr. Aloysius Deeney, the OCDS Delegate for East Asia, was sent to the Communities and Provinces on January 21, 2013. They made comments, additions and changes that were summarized by their respective Provincial Councils. All the material received from them up to July 16, 2013 was taken into consideration.

Eleven Communities and four Provinces approved the original draft. Seven Communities and twenty-seven Provinces sent in their suggested changes to the draft.

In July and August, a second draft was prepared. In September, this draft was presented to the General Definitory. They made new corrections and additions, and they requested that number 24e be added. On September 14, 2013, this text, in Italian, was sent for approval to the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life.

The Congregation replied on October 21, 2013, requesting that two phrases be added: "...and liable for dismissal from the Community," at the end of number 24c; and "the request is to be made in writing 'to the competent authority of the Community'" in number 24e. The Congregation also determined that the text's translation would be in Spanish so that it would be in the same language in which the Constitutions were approved in 2003.

When everything was ready, the material was sent to the Vatican on November 23. It was approved by Decree on January 7, 2014 (Prot. n^o. C. 228-1/2003). There is an interesting coincidence about these dates: The approved text was received by the OCDS General Delegate on January 21, 2014, the liturgical feast of St. Agnes, exactly one year after the original draft was sent for consultation to the Communities and Provinces.

The new sections, translated into English, French, and Portuguese, were sent by e-mail to the Provinces, with a letter from the Superior General, dated January 25, 2014.

2. Fraternal Communion – Chapter III B of the OCDS Constitutions

This chapter was inserted after those dealing with identity, values and commitment (chapter I), following Jesus (chapter II) and prayer (chapter III). There had been proposals to insert it at the beginning of the Constitutions, at the end, etc. The final option was to follow the order of the friars' Constitutions: communion with God, following Christ, fraternal life, apostolate, etc.

Chapter IIIB begins with the mystery of the Holy Trinity, of the Church, and of the human person called to follow Christ and to be a part of the community of Faith (number 24a). Afterward, it presents a summary of the teachings of St. Teresa of Jesus and St. John of the Cross on community life (number 24b). Then, it gives some explanations about the purpose of community life and the need to participate in it: help and encouragement to live out the lay Teresian Carmelite vocation at all levels of family and civilian life (number 24c). Next, it emphasizes the formative responsibility of each person in the Community, the role of authority in fraternal life, as well as other means of fraternity with those who can no longer participate at meetings, or with other Communities of the Province and the Teresian Carmelite family. It concludes by recalling that each and every witness of communion is evangelization (number 24d). The last number (24e) is juridical. It emphasizes that there must be a balance between rights and obligations, whether personal or communal. It also presents ways to leave a community: by dismissal or voluntarily.

Now I will briefly summarize each of those sections:

Number 24a presents the biblical and doctrinal basis for the human person and community in the mystery of the Church.

The Church, as God's family and people reunited in the name of the Holy Trinity, is a mystery of communion. Jesus came to us as the one who reveals this mystery. At the same time, it is the vocation of each person to participate in this mystery, for each person is created in the Trinity's image and likeness. Each person has in his inner-most being, in his spirit and body, the seal of the Trinity. As a result, a human being is a

social being who fulfills his vocation only in an authentic relationship with God and with others. This is our most profound identity.

Each OCDS Community is seen from its lay identity, and within the mystery of communion in the Church. It is a visible sign of the Church and the Order. It is called to live and promote communion with God and with other members of the Community, according to the Teresian charism. For each member is called by Jesus to follow him and, like the twelve Apostles, to form a group around Him. Those who answer this call, like the first Christians, come together to live out the same Faith, strengthening it and celebrating the sacraments: When St. Teresa founded her monasteries, she reminded her communities that each person follows Christ by following his new commandment of love and by seeking unity in Christ.

The promises made by each member are a commitment to live in Community, seeking perfection in charity, in the spirit of the counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience, as well as in the spirit of the Beatitudes and other Christian virtues: such as gentleness, kindness, and forgiveness.

Number 24b is a synthesis on Community, as viewed from the doctrine of St. Teresa and St. John of the Cross.

St. Teresa believes that each Community lives out this Faith: with the risen Lord and the Virgin Mary in its midst. The risen Christ assures us that God is trustworthy. His love expresses the Father's love in the Holy Spirit and in ecclesial communion among the faithful, who believe and want to share with everyone that same joy that comes from Faith. Mary, the Mother of the Community and model of faith, hope and love, is present there too. But being together has a specific aim: to collaborate with the Church's mission. In order to achieve this, we must nurture our fraternal relationships built on the virtues of humility, detachment and love, the same virtues as in our life of prayer, conditions necessary for interior and exterior peace.

Teresa also knows from her own experience that walking alone, with no one's help, is very difficult. That is why she wanted the members of her communities to be friends and to help each other, primarily in the quest to please God through prayer and the

practice of the virtues. This help, given in the spirit of humility and charity, contributes to self-knowledge. It stimulates the practice of the virtues and perseverance in one's vocation. We know how essential this solidarity is for the human and spiritual development of each one of us.

St. John of the Cross wrote little about community life. However, we know that he was very conscious of community life and was very attentive to each brother, especially the sick. For example, in the Beatification Process twenty-five years after St. John's death, the friars in Granada where he had been prior reminisced about his fatherly ministry to them.

St. John's doctrine aims to lead a person to union with God, through the theological virtues. These virtues purify the person, whether in the active or passive dark night of sense or spirit. In this purification, the person is gradually transformed in his relationship with God and others. He stops being driven by human instincts and passions. He lives his life through the human and Christian virtues, instead of the capital vices and passions. That is why it is said that the theological virtues also purify us in our life with others, especially in love, because love comes from God and enables us to love. So St. John's counsel is always timely: "Where there is no love, put love and you will find love."

Number 24c reminds us that the commitment to community life is made through the promise and the significance of promoting a fraternal and family-like atmosphere in the Teresian style.

Above all, making the promises means making a commitment to live in communion with the Church, the Province and the Order, especially the members of one's own Community, with whom we must live the commandment of love and help others by living a life of virtue. We should remember that St. Teresa intended the monasteries she founded to be smaller than that of the Monastery of the Incarnation so that the nuns could cultivate and grow in human and spiritual friendship and at the same time help each other seek God through charity (which seeks the good of others) and humility (which goes beyond one's self).

Another commitment of Community is to help each other in the spiritual life in joy and in dialogue, by sharing and openness among its members. In the words of Pope Francis:

“Dialogue is much more than the communication of a truth. It arises from the enjoyment of speaking and it enriches those who express their love for one another through the medium of words. This is an enrichment which does not consist in objects but in persons who share themselves in dialogue” (EG 142).

Let’s remember the reason for Community meetings: mutual help in self-knowledge and in seeking God. The OCDS Community is not a social club, even though it has its recreational moments. Starting with the help received in Community, the member can live and bear witness to his or her Christian identity in other settings: at home, at work, in other social situations, etc. It is there that the layperson has his theological place to live out his life of Faith, union and friendship with God (cf. LG 31; CL 15-17; AA 4).

The fourth section, **24d**, recalls the *formative* aspects of the Community and of each person, the service of leadership in the Community and the many *ways of practicing communion and fraternity*. Life and the example of a communion of love are evangelization.

Formation in Community comes about, in the first place, by being a living witness. The roles of the Director of Formation and his formation team are important, but they are not a substitute for the formation that comes from the example of fraternal life in the Teresian charism (cf. also St. John Paul II, in *Novo millennio ineunte*, #43). The food for Christian fraternity is our Eucharistic life and listening to the word of God.

The role of leadership in the Community, that is, the role of the local Council, following the way of Jesus, is to serve in charity and humility. Moreover, leadership should seek the human and spiritual growth of each member, trying to preserve a family setting for all. Leadership is also called to work out conflicts through dialogue, forgiveness and reconciliation.

This section also warns the Council of attachment to power and to one’s own beliefs in governing the Community, as opposed to the spirit of the Teresian charism in the

Constitutions. Prayer, visiting the sick, the elderly and others who cannot attend community meetings are strong expressions of fraternity.

This reference to fraternity with one's Province, as well as with the Teresian family of Carmel, invites each Community to be present at and to contribute to provincial events (retreats, congresses, gatherings, pastoral initiatives, etc.), as we are doing right now, in this Congress.

Finally, section 23d reminds us that the witness of fraternal communion is evangelization, as St. John Paul II wrote in *Christifidelis Laici*, 32, and recently Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*:

“But if they see the witness of authentically fraternal and reconciled communities, they will find that witness luminous and attractive. It always pains me greatly to discover how some Christian communities, and even consecrated persons, can tolerate different forms of enmity, division, calumny, defamation, vendetta, jealousy and the desire to impose certain ideas at all costs, even to persecutions which appear as veritable witch hunts. Whom are we going to evangelize if this is the way we act?” (EG 100)

Last, **section 24e** reminds us of the need for balance between individual and community rights. It gives guidance for the dismissal process for a member or for a member leaving voluntarily. In both cases the Provincial Delegate must be informed.

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The last addition to the Constitutions, **section 31a**, is about St. Joseph. We pray to him in the Order as our Providential Protector. His intercession and his presence in the Reform of St. Teresa and in our Order's history have been constant. This section seeks to remember St. Joseph's importance in the life of an OCDS member.

With the Virgin Mary, this “just man” (Mt 1,19) is the protector of the mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God. In St. Teresa's writings, he is the model and master of prayer, and also of vigilance and availability to God's plans.

For all these reasons, St. Joseph is an incomparable protector to whom we can entrust our hopes, our labors, and our everyday troubles. Ven. Pope Paul VI said: “St. Joseph is the proof that, to be good and authentic in the following of Christ, we do not need great deeds, but only common, human—but true and authentic—virtues” (Paul VI, *Insegnamenti*, 1969).

3. *Evangelii Gaudium*: Perspectives for our Communities

The greatest strength of Christianity, at all times, has been the witness of fraternal love in its communities. St. Teresa, as she restored the value of the human person called to dialogue with God in friendship, also reestablished the need of pursuing a spiritual path with others, of helping each other in following Christ and in fulfilling one’s own mission. We know her missionary fervor: “I would give a thousand lives to save a single soul.”

In Pope Francis’ Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (November 24, 2013), he attempts to motivate the Church to a “missionary outreach” (EG 17a) through evangelization in “the joy of the Gospel.” For him, “The Church which ‘goes forth’ is a community of missionary disciples who take the first step, who are involved and supportive, who bear fruit and rejoice” (EG 24). These five verbs are essential for the life of every Community. For your homework, I ask you to think about the meaning of this section in your communities.

According to *Evangelii Gaudium*, we all face challenges, and we are invited to overcome them. Some of them are: the *individualism* of our postmodern, globalized era (EG 63, 67, 78); an *identity crisis* and a *cooling of fervor* (EG 78); a sterile *pessimism* (EG 84); a *defeatism* and a *spiritual desertification* (EG 85-86).

We will overcome these challenges by an openness to the light and strength of the Holy Spirit (EG 259-261), by prayer and work on behalf of others (EG 262), rooted in love for Christ (EG 264), with the consciousness that “the Gospel responds to our deepest needs, since we were created for what the Gospel offers us: friendship with Jesus and love of our brothers and sisters” (EG 265). Then, “in union with Jesus, we seek what He seeks, we love what He loves. In the end, what we are seeking is the glory of God the Father;

we live and act ‘for the praise of the glory of his grace’ that he granted us in the beloved” (Eph 1,6) (EG 267).

When we acknowledge that we belong to the Church, which is God’s People, Jesus becomes “the model of this method of evangelization which brings us to the very heart of his people.” “Moved by his example, we want to enter fully into the fabric of society, sharing the lives of all, listening to their concerns, helping them materially and spiritually in their needs, rejoicing with those who rejoice, weeping with those who weep; arm in arm with others, we are committed to building a new world” (EG 269).

Thus Pope Francis writes of the importance of the “‘mystique’ of living together” (EG 87), which means

“sharing a ‘mystique’ of living together, of mingling and encounter, of embracing and supporting one another, of stepping into this flood tide which, while chaotic, can become a genuine experience of fraternity, a caravan of solidarity, a sacred pilgrimage. Greater possibilities for communication thus turn into greater possibilities for encounter and solidarity for everyone. If we were able to take this route, it would be so good, so soothing, so liberating and hope-filled! To go out of ourselves and to join others is healthy for us. To be self-enclosed is to taste the bitter poison of immanence, and humanity will be worse for every selfish choice we make.” (EG 87)

If today’s world imposes defensive practices on us, “the Gospel tells us constantly to run the risk of a face-to-face encounter with others, with their physical presence which challenges us, with their pain and pleas, with their joy which infects us in our close and continuous interaction. True faith in the incarnate Son of God is inseparable from self-giving, from membership in the community, from service, from reconciliation with others” (EG 88).

So an authentic spiritual life brings us to “a personal and committed relationship with God which at the same time commits us to serving others” (EG 91); to a person-to-person evangelization (EG 127-129), from the knowledge we have that Jesus loves and saves us, living in loving contemplation of his Person, urged to love Him and speak of

Him (EG 264). “If I can help at least one person to have a better life, that already justifies the offering of my life” (EG 274). That is the answer to the challenge of so many “market spiritualities”, full of individualism and well-being, that alienate people from themselves and from the faith of the Gospel.

So the Secular Order Community has an important formative task: “We need to help others to realize that the only way to learn how to encounter others with the right attitude, which is to accept and esteem them as companions along the way, without interior resistance. Better yet, it means learning to find Jesus in the faces of others, in their voices, in their pleas. We learn to suffer in the embrace of the crucified Jesus whenever we are unjustly attacked or meet with ingratitude, never tiring of our decision to live in fraternity” as St. Thérèse lived it (EG 91). (Pope Francis refers to her example in footnote 69.)

“When we live out a spirituality of drawing nearer to others and seeking their welfare, our hearts are opened wide to the Lord’s greatest and most beautiful gifts. Whenever we encounter another person in love, we learn something new about God. Whenever our eyes are opened to acknowledge the other, we grow in the light of faith and knowledge of God. If we want to advance in the spiritual life, then, we must constantly be missionaries. The work of evangelization enriches the mind and the heart; it opens up spiritual horizons; it makes us more and more sensitive to the workings of the Holy Spirit, and it takes us beyond our limited spiritual constructs” (EG 272).

Here I am thinking of our approximately 1,700 OCDS Communities (canonically established or not), spread throughout 74 countries in the world. If we are able to incarnate St. Teresa’s ideal of helping one another to better serve God and the Church, bringing the message of the Gospel to all dimensions of daily life, in our family, at work, at play, and in other social activities, we will be a source of spiritual replenishment. If we encourage each other through prayer, formation, dialogue, and in caring fraternal relationships, we will go forward in our daily mission. We will be answering Pope Francis’ call in *Evangelii Gaudium*:

“I especially ask Christians in communities throughout the world to offer a radiant and attractive witness of fraternal communion. Let everyone admire how you care for one another, and how you encourage and accompany one another: ‘By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another’ (Jn 13,35)” (EG 99).

“In our world, especially in some countries, different forms of war and conflict are re-emerging, yet we Christians remain steadfast in our intention to respect others, to heal wounds, to build bridges, to strengthen relationships and to ‘bear one another’s burden’” (Gal 6,2) (EG 67).

“*I am a mission* on this earth; that is the reason why I am here in this world. We have to regard ourselves as sealed, even branded, by this mission of bringing light, blessing, enlivening, raising up, healing and freeing. All around us we begin to see nurses with soul, teachers with soul, politicians with soul, people who have chosen deep down to be with others and for others” (EG 273).

In conclusion, we turn our eyes to the Virgin Mary. She was a woman who “walked in faith,” was with the disciples at the wedding at Cana and urged them to believe in her Son. In the Cenacle she begged for the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1,14). In the Order’s tradition, she supports and accompanies us, with maternal love and with her scapular. Despite our poverty, Holy Mary inspires us in evangelization, since she “was able to turn a stable into a home for Jesus, with poor swaddling clothes and an abundance of love” (EG 286).

This is my wish for each of our Communities: Blessed is that Community where each person has his or her heart centered in this same love and unity in Jesus Christ, through power of the Holy Spirit.

Muito obrigado!

Fr. Alzimir Francisco Debastiani, OCD

Rome, June 27, 2014