

Pope Francis' Message to the Prior General of the Carmelite Order

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Here is a translation of the Message that the Holy Father Francis sent to the Prior General of the Order of Brothers of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel, Reverend Father Fernando Millan Romeral, on the occasion of the General Chapter.

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To the Most Reverend Father

FERNANDO MILLAN ROMERAL

I address you, dear Brothers of the Order of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel, who are holding the General Chapter in this month of September. At this moment of grace and renewal, which calls you to discern the mission of the glorious Carmelite Order, I wish to give you a word of encouragement and hope. For eight centuries, the ancient charism of Carmel was a gift for the whole Church, and still today it continues to offer its peculiar contribution for the building of the Body of Christ and to show the world its luminous and holy face. Your contemplative origins spring from the land of the epiphany of the eternal love of God in Jesus Christ, Word made flesh. While you reflect on your mission as today's Carmelites, I suggest you consider three elements that can guide you in the full realization of your vocation, which is the ascent of the mount of perfection: homage to Christ, prayer and mission.

Homage

The Church has the mission to bring Christ to the world and because of this, as Mother and Teacher, she invites each one to come close to Him.

In the Carmelite liturgy for the feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel we contemplate the Virgin who is "next to the Cross of Christ." That is also the post of the Church: close to Christ. And it is also the post of every faithful son of the Carmelite Order. Your Rule begins with the exhortation to Brothers to "live a life in homage to Jesus Christ," to follow and serve Him with a pure and undivided heart. The close relationship with Christ is realized in solitude, in fraternal assembly and in mission. "The fundamental option of a life dedicated concretely and radically to the following of Christ" (*Ratio Institutionis Vitae Carmelitanae*, 8) makes your existence a pilgrimage of transformation in love. The Second Ecumenical Vatican Council recalls the role of contemplation in the journey of life: the Church has "in fact the characteristic of being at the same time human and divine, visible but gifted with invisible realities, fervent in action and devoted to contemplation, present in the world and yet a pilgrim" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 2). The ancient hermits of Mount Carmel kept the memory of that holy place and, also if outside or far away, they maintained their gaze and heart constantly fixed on the glory of God. Reflecting on your origins and on your history and contemplating the immense array of all those who lived the Carmelite charism over the centuries, you will also discover your present vocation to be prophets of hope. And it is in fact in this hope that you will be regenerated. Often what appears new is something very ancient illumined by a new light.

In your Rule is the heart of the Carmelite mission of the past and also of today. While you prepare to celebrate the eighth centenary of the death of Albert, Patriarch of Jerusalem, in 1214, remember that he formulated a "course of life," a space that enables us to live a spirituality totally orientated to Christ. He delineated external and interior elements, a physical ecology of the space and the spiritual armor necessary to respond adequately to the vocation and to carry out one's mission effectively.

In a world that often refuses to recognize Christ and, in fact, rejects Him, you are invited to approach and adhere to Him ever more profoundly. It is a constant call to follow Christ and to be conformed to Him. This is of vital importance in our world which is so disoriented, "because when His flame is extinguished all the other lights also end by losing their vigor" (*Lumen fidei*, 4). Christ is present in your brotherhood, in the communal liturgy and in the ministry entrusted to you: renew to Him the homage of your whole life!

Prayer

Before your General Chapter of 2007, the Holy Father Benedict XVI reminded you that "the interior pilgrimage of faith to God begins in prayer"; and at Castel Gandolfo, in August of 2010, he said to you: "You are those who teach us to pray." You define yourselves contemplatives in the midst of the people. In fact, if it is true that you are called to live on the heights of Carmel, it is equally true that you are called to give witness in the midst of the people. Prayer is that

“royal road” that opens to the profundity of the mystery of God One and Triune, but it is also the obligatory path that meanders in the midst of the people of God pilgrimaging in the world towards the Promised Land.

One of the most beautiful ways to enter into prayer passes through the Word of God. Lectio Divina introduces us to direct conversation with the Lord and opens the treasures of wisdom. Intimate friendship with Him, who loves us and renders us capable of seeing with the eyes of God, of speaking with His Word in our heart, of preserving the beauty of this experience and of sharing it with those who are hungry for eternity.

A return to the simplicity of a life centered on the Gospel is the challenge for the renewal of the Church, community of faith which always finds new ways to evangelize the world in continuous transformation. The Carmelite Saints were great preachers and masters of prayer. This is what is requested once again of the Carmel of the 21st century. Throughout your history, the great Carmelites were a strong call to the roots of contemplation, roots always fecund of prayer. Here is the heart of your witness: the “contemplative” dimension of the Order, to be lived, cultivated and transmitted. I would like each one of you to ask himself: how is my life of contemplation? How much time during my day do I dedicate to contemplation? A Carmelite without this contemplative life is a dead body! Today, perhaps more than in the past, it’s easy to let oneself be distracted by the concerns and problems of this world and allow oneself to be fascinated by false idols. Our world is shattered in many ways; the contemplative instead turns to unity and is a strong call to unity. Now more than ever is the moment to rediscover the interior path of love through prayer, and to offer the people of today -- in the testimony of contemplation, as well as in preaching and in the mission --, not useless shortcuts, but that wisdom that emerges from meditating “day and night on the Law of the Lord,” Word that always leads to the glorious Cross of Christ. And, united to contemplation, austerity of life, which isn’t a secondary aspect of your life and of your witness. To fall into spiritual worldliness is a very strong temptation also for you. The spirit of the world is an enemy of the life of prayer: never forget it! I exhort you to a more austere and penitent life, according to your most authentic tradition, a life far from all worldliness, far from the criteria of the world.

Mission

Dear Carmelite Brothers, your mission is the same as that of Jesus. All planning, all meetings won’t be very useful if the Chapter does not undertake first of all a path of true renewal. The Carmelite Family had a wonderful “Spring” throughout the world, as fruit given by God, from the missionary endeavor of the past. Today the mission entails sometimes arduous challenges, because the evangelical message is not always received and at times is actually rejected with violence. We must never forget that, even if we are thrown into turbid and unknown waters, He who calls us to the mission also gives us the courage and strength to carry it out. So, celebrate the Chapter animated by the hope that never dies, with a strong spirit of generosity in recovering the contemplative life and evangelical simplicity and austerity.

Addressing the pilgrims in Saint Peter’s Square I was able to say: “Every Christian and every community is missionary in the measure in which they bring and live the Gospel and witnesses the love of God to all, especially those who are in difficulty. Be missionaries of the love and tenderness of God! Be missionaries of the mercy of God, who always forgives, always waits, who loves us so much!” (Homily, May 5, 2013). The witness of Carmel in the past belongs to the profound spiritual tradition, which grew in one of the great schools of prayer. It also aroused the courage of men and women who faced danger and even death. We recall only two great contemporary martyrs: Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross and Blessed Titus Brandsma. I now wonder: among you today, do you live with the temper and courage of these Saints?

Dear Brothers of Carmel, the witness of your love and of your hope, rooted in profound friendship with the living God, can be as a “light breeze” that renews and reinvigorates your ecclesial mission in today’s world. You have been called to this. The Rite of Profession puts these words on your lips: “With this profession I entrust myself to the Carmelite Family to live in the service of God and in the Church, and to aspire to perfect charity with the grace of the Holy Spirit and the help of the Blessed Virgin Mary” (Rite of Profession, Carmelite Order).

May the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother and Queen of Carmel, accompany your steps and render fecund of fruits your daily journey to the Mountain of God. I invoke on the whole Carmelite Family, and particularly on the Chapter Fathers, abundant gifts of the Divine Spirit, and I impart to all from my heart the implored Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, August 22, 2013

FRANCIS

[Original text: Italian]

[Translation by ZENIT]