

MESSAGE OF FR. SAVERIO CANNISTRA, OCD GENERAL SUPERIOR

October 23, 2010 Manila, Philippines

The first thing that I would like to tell you is that I am happy to be here with you. I say this not as a conventional formality for winning you over, but because it is really a pleasure to meet with my brothers and sisters; it opens up my heart. It helps me to see the authenticity and richness of our Carmelite Family. It is a precious occasion for me to know that reality of our Secular Order.

From my part, I would like to share with you some simple reflections on what unites us profoundly; that is the charism of Teresa, or if you prefer, the Carmelite charism as lived and reinterpreted by Teresa of Jesus.

We traditionally say that the Teresian charism is a charism of contemplation, charism of a spiritual life that tends towards contemplation. Contemplation, in fact, as we understand it in its original and strict sense, is a gift of God, and as such it cannot be the fruit or outcome of a method. We can express this in different words, interpreting it in other terms and categories. For example, we could say that the charism of Teresa is charism of knowledge, and this can carry us further in the sense of formation. When I say knowledge, I intend the whole depth of meaning that the Scriptures attribute to it. Here it would certainly be interesting—I would invite you to do that personally – to make a research, a scrutiny of the Scriptures, going through the Old, but specially the New Testament, lingering over those passages where the semantic field tied up with “knowing”, is particularly in question. So many passages come to my mind: I think, for example, of the Canticle of Canticles in the Old Testament, but all the more of two texts of the New Testament. The first one is Matthew, Chapter 11, verses 25 to 27 (No one knows the Son but the Father, and no one knows the Father save the Son and those to whom the Son will reveal Him), where the knowledge stands for that relation of which the model and foundation is the intratrinitarian life., a mystery that goes beyond us, but which, at the same time, is a profound truth of what we are. Basically, what is man if not an image of the Trinitarian God. And therefore the relations that exists between the Father and the Son, between the Son and the Father and those to whom the Son will reveal Him, --what is it if not the very meaning and destination to which we are called and directed. “Knowledge”, hence, from the knowledge of God becomes knowledge of man, of what is man is in his deepest essence. It is in this sense that in another biblical Book, the Gospel according to John, the word “to know” is rich in meaning. I quote only one peak text, Chapter 17 (a text that had a particular relevance in the Carmelite tradition; John of the Cross was reciting it by heart) “And Eternal life means knowing you, the only true God, and knowing Jesus Christ whom you sent”: To know is to live. A relation of progressive identification is built between the truth one knows and the life that is lived. Life resolves in the tension of knowing and knowledge becomes a generating source of life.

I believe this is what Teresa experienced. If we wish to transfer from a more generic or general topic—spiritual life, mysticism, contemplation – to a theme replete with Biblical contents (and saying this, we intend also historical contents, themes regarding baptismal, wherein we immersed) then I think, we can say that the charism of Teresa is charism of knowing. To know the Father, know the Son in the Spirit and in this knowledge know ourselves in the way we are known.

In fact, what is charism? Charism among other things, works as a kind of radar within the world, within the ocean of Scripture and Tradition. I feel that if we project the Teresian charism over the Scripture, It will bring us to find a way that gathers precisely these points as emerging in a particular way. The Teresian reform, its meaning and its ecclesial relevance, would be unexplainable if her charism were not to have anything to do with Christian identity as such, found and announced again in a fully changed spiritual and cultural context.

Obviously when we say knowing knowledge, we use these terms not in a way that is immediately clear. It does not correspond to our idea of intellectual knowledge, which specially today, in an informatized society, deals mainly with information. Today to know is spontaneously translated into: updating ones knowledge in a horizontal, extensive perspective. I should say that it is exactly on this point that we need to work: in the perspective of Teresian knowledge, which contrarily, is an intensive knowledge, not constituted of information but of formation, of trans-formation of the person. The person is known in the measure in which one allows oneself to be known. The person knows the other in the measure in which one opens oneself, one offers oneself in the relation with the other. Teresa lived exactly in this way. This has been the big bang of her vocation and of her mission after long years of fight with God and with herself, she gives herself over. An abandonment that is an act of profound humility. Teresa is aware that she is no more able to govern her life to know herself well, to understand God, her history, her vocation, her situation.

This year we have been re-reading her life, where especially in the crucial chapters (5-8) this fundamental experience of Teresa is dramatically described, bringing out efficacy and richness of impressive data. Every time I read these pages, I am struck by the truth of what is being said by Teresa. She entrusts herself to the person of Jesus Christ and that radically changes, not so much what she does, but the way in which she lives. It is like inverting the poles. If earlier Teresa was the protagonist of everything, of her human relations, of her spiritual search, of her prayer, it is Jesus, who after her “conversion” is living and present in her life, who guides, frees and detaches her, who gives her sure criterion of judgment. She achieves such a profound communion with Jesus Christ as to render it a way of life, the way in which Teresa is present in the world, being “in Christ”. When we speak about knowledge, we refer exactly to this transformation of life, whereby we know Him as love and mercy turned towards us; we know as “the One by whom we know we are loved”. This knowledge is altogether different from a catechetical knowledge, deriving from reading a book or listening to a spiritual conference. This is a direct experience. Knowing Him in this way, we know ourselves in a different manner, in a humble way. Even in this case Teresa gives particular importance to this virtue. Knowledge of Christ is a knowledge that renders us humble, not because it is small and poor (instead as knowledge it is great and rich), but because it is knowledge received from without, from above and as such it is a powerful and capable of changing the life and widening it according to the measures of God and not of man.

We can put so many questions about Teresa’s charism: following up with this experience we can wonder how Teresa knows God, how she knows human persons, how she knows the Church. Teresa has certainly offered abundant replies to these queries and these replies have also been studied profoundly. There is a bibliography on Teresa’s Christology, her Mariology and Anthropology and so on. These objective contents of Teresian mysticism have been studied in

depth from early sixties. While in the foregoing tradition, from the 17th century onwards, the Carmelite mystical school had insisted on the subjective mystical aspects on the spiritual way, interpreting them according to certain categories of Thomistic provenance (the soul with its faculties, virtues, etc.) Fr. Thomas Alvarez, Jesus Castellano and many others insisted rather on the contents. They delved deeper into what Teresa thought and found in the truth of faith, not in the light of academic studies which Teresa never had, but as fruit of contemplative experience. Today all these studies being available to us, we can profit from them and that would certainly be enriching. But naturally not every one of us needs become a specialist on Saint Teresa, in this scientific sense. What is expected of us as her heirs, as the repositories of her charism, is something different, it is a different manner of elaborating. Teresa has left us a method (in etymological sense), a way to be trodden, in such a way that we can give our answers to those queries, not by simply repeating, but by retrieving the truths learnt from her how God is known, how Jesus Christ is known, how human person is known, how Church is known. Through this Teresian road of knowledge, if it really becomes our road of life, we men and women of the XXI century will have new fresh view angles, original intuitions, different highlights with regard to Teresa's experience of XVI century. It is this that we note in the great figures of Teresian Carmel in the subsequent centuries. If we take into consideration, for example, Therese of the Child Jesus, her replies are certainly not a mere repetition of the answers of St. Teresa of Jesus. Her highlights are different and correspond to a true experience, lived historically in a different atmosphere, with different problems and anguishes, with different gifts and opportunities. If we take Edith Stein, we find again different answers, but the method is the same, because the charism is the same: putting oneself questions and looking for answers through that road.

Our saints have trodden this path. Do we also tread the same? I would answer: Yes, certainly; but don't ask me now who and where at this moment someone is doing that...because I don't know. In the invisible life of prayer and contemplation of so many nuns, friars and members of the Secular Order, there will be certainly those who have found their answers; perhaps they have not spoken about it; may be they had no occasion to say that; perhaps they haven't been capable of communicating it. (because this too has not been given to everyone). And yet, if we could listen to these answers, we could have solved so many problems of governing the Order. In fact, we will either be able to listen to these answers or else will govern the Order as one governs any human institution. But a religious Order needs be governed from viewpoint of a charism...I know this is a problem that particularly concerns me, so excuse me for this parenthesis.

And now let me turn directly to you: Teresa was not a lay person, she was a nun; from her childhood she always desired to be a nun (well, not always: there was a bit of struggle at first, but then she was convinced). You are lay persons, or better, baptized persons called to live in the world – Christifideles Laici – and you have been asked an analogous course (because you have been donated with it), to put these fundamental questions for your life and to give answers. I would like to place before you lay Teresian Carmelites a couple of questions on which, I believe, each one should reflect personally. Questions like: how does the life of a lay person change when one chooses to live a friendly relation with Jesus? What change comes in the experience of the family, of work or other thousand occupations of every day?

I believe, that if one is a member of the Carmelite Secular Order; one is given a charismatic possibility of knowing all this reality at a different level, a more profound one. Woe to one who

would live a division: if on one hand one listens to spiritual discourses and lives a high devotional level and on the other, one maintains certain relations or takes daily decisions that don't correspond and communicate with the first level, or they do only at a so-called moral level. "I believe in God, in the Church...", but this touches upon or influences my life only because the Catechism teaches us the ten commandments or code of moral norms; if I believe, then I must observe also certain norms and laws. This is a relation of legal or moral category. Well, the word 'moral' says something more, says that there is not merely an external law, but develops in you a personal conscience and thus you interiorize law. We often speak about laws in a legal or moral sense, and we examine, verify and confess basing ourselves on the law and not on the relation.

In Teresa – if you have noted – one of the schemes in the narration of her life which can be followed up is the transition from a more-or-less observed law (with all possible subterfuges that one can find out) to the relation with a PERSON (who is much more exigent in reality) . It is a personal relation with Christ who makes you overcome immature attitudes, like acting due to fear of judgment (this worldly or eternal) or desire of gifts (natural or supernatural). Even practicing prayer according to her later experience, only to enjoy consolation, makes her furious, because for her it is as if to say that she is with her friend only when his company is pleasant. Anyone would be horrified if one were to put to a very dear friend a condition like: *"You should be pleasant when you are with me. If you are not pleasant I get annoyed, will go away and interrupt our relation."*

Another very Teresian question, connected with the previous one is: What is the Church for you, laity? This is a question that is put to us friars as well, who are mostly priests. This is a very important for us Teresian Carmelites: What is our experience of the Church? Teresa is a woman who discovered everything in a fragment. In that small community of twelve nuns, gathered around Jesus, there is the whole mystery of the Church, communicated through the heart of Jesus Christ, who is at the same time the heart of the Community. This is the 'ecclesiality' (Church-being) of the Teresian community and any other method of being-Church (ecclesiality), which wouldn't pass through this channel, I think wouldn't be genuinely Teresian. It is true that we risk having communities that are closed on themselves, not communities that concentrate around the person of Jesus and who, by the person of Jesus, are opened wide to his love that can't be measured (the height, the width, the dept – as reminded by the letter to the Ephesians). We run the risk of having communities that concentrate around themselves, small clubs of spirituality. Teresa would not welcome us; she would say in face to this communities: I do not know you! Are you my sons and daughters? No! Teresa knows the Church. Here too, observe, "knows" the Church, she knows her through Jesus Christ, she knows what the Church is suffering, what makes her good or bad, and she feels with the Church. She offers herself as an answer to the problems of the Church. She makes of her own life an answer to the problems of the Church. Externally it can appear that Teresa did not solve any problem of the Church of that time. We could say the same thing also of St. Therese of the Child Jesus: What could a little girl, who entered the monastery at the age of 16 and died at 24 in a little village of France towards the end of the 19th century do? Nothing. And yet, if there is a person who has known the Church of her times, has carried her within her heart with all her problems and anguishes, with her questions, it is exactly her. Her life became an answer, in whom so many have found light, courage, comfort. Carmel builds her Church thus, by working in her Carmelite charism.

This is a very delicate point, because one cannot deny the fact that in the past (and perhaps even today) we have practiced a certain closure, introversion, which is not Teresian, which doesn't help us grow; but at the same time, we need to find a Teresian way of being in the Church, with the Church and for the Church.

Ever since the second Vatican Council there has been a great desire, a generous effort to open the doors to not so well known culture of a world with overwhelming change, to a series of contexts that had remained outside our houses, of our monasteries, and probably also outside: the fraternities of the Secular Order notwithstanding the secularity of its members. Today things have changed. Everything has entered into our environments. But opening to the world does not automatically mean opening to the truth of things; does not mean that we have known the world in the sense that I mentioned at the beginning. That is to say, that we have entered into a profound relation with the world, because of which I carry within me the humanity of my time with its suffering and anguishes, with its joys and hopes. I do not have any superficial and external relation with them, but they have become flesh of my flesh, bones of my bones, in such a way that my life is now with and for all these realities and persons. If it is so, my life wouldn't be any more a private life. Teresa had understood that very well, and she expressed it, among other things also through a change of name: she is no more Teresa de Ahumada, but Teresa of Jesus. This means, that now onwards her person is at least a "comproperty", is a field of loving tension, delicious but at the same time crucifying, between herself and Jesus. The world is in between and Teresa knows it is this manner, in this relational context. This is what I intend with the word 'knowledge': to understand, to take with and in oneself (comprenderere, prendere con).

If it is true that this Teresian charism has been given to you as well, lay persons, who live in the world, married, who work, who have a series of relations, how can our vocation express itself in the secular world? How are you called to build the Church? It is probably precisely by knowing all these realities at a different depth. But this means, concretely, to expropriate. It means that I make space in my life for the Order, who is Jesus Christ, a Jesus who carries within himself the world that he has known. To give an answer to the fascinating question that has been proposed to me, namely, how Teresa would form the laity today. I think that Teresa would send one in the world setting out from one's experience of the knowledge of Jesus Christ and, within this experience, would say to him: Integrate your word within this relation and you will know it and yourself in a different way. You will discover that there are so many mansions within you and thus you will meet the Church and put yourself at the service of the Church.

In fact, Carmel is not easy. When one laments about the scarcity of vocations (certainly today we are not living a world that favours choice of this life) we need to consider that vocation to Carmel is not an easy one, it is a very exacting vocation, and above all, it is a vocation which is either everything or nothing. Precisely because it is contemplative, it either produces fruit or risks to be only *effatus vocis* (hissing of voice). It either forms, transforms persons from within – and then it brings an inestimable richness to the Church, or else it becomes something rather trivial. It would be better not to aim very high (or better so profound), if 'being Carmelite' does not become the true center and focusing point of my life. This can clearly be seen in a cloistered Carmelite Nun, for the absolute purity of her vocation; but then this is true for any vocation within the Teresian Carmel. One either succeeds in overcoming the "crisis of uselessness" and delves into the profound; or else one remains on the outskirts of the mountain admiring its

grandeur, but without daring to face the harshness of its climbing, nor experiencing the world from the top of the hill. It is a true crisis, especially for the youth of today. But you either succeed in knowing tenderly and intensely or else you don't reach anywhere.

As a conclusion: why do I like the terminology of knowledge? Because it is based in the Bible and the Tradition, but also because it saves us from the ambiguity of the word Mysticism. One thing that I always smiled upon and which has posed several interrogatives in Carmel, is this kind of "waiting" to enter into the mystical phase. It might seem that if I don't reach this mystical phase, which is completely different from the supernatural" way (let us skip over the paradox) of progressive involvement and transformation of one's life. Our General Chapter too, during the elaboration of the document *Para vos naci* (For you I was born), had to face a similar problem and finally one preferred to speak about Teresa without highlighting the mystical aspect, and emphasizing more on the progress of theological knowledge of God. I think it was a sound selection. I understand that now, *a posteriori*, as it usually happens when one has to choose from what has been inspired by someone else.

I hope you will find something useful for your life from these reflections. What is important for me is that all of us involve ourselves in the same search: as men and women of today, all formed by the Teresian vocation. Only thus will we have criterion according to which we can make our selection; what more, only thus we have a future. ~~~