

## MESSAGE FROM FR. PROVINCIAL

*Fr. Emmanuel Schembri, OCD*

“Why O Lord, should I be preoccupied with my fears and lose courage in the face of my weakness? You give me to understand that I must fortify myself in humility, and convince myself that I can do very little alone, and that without your help I am nothing. I shall put all my confidence in your mercy, and shall distrust my own strength, convinced that my weakness is caused by my self-reliance. You teach me not to be astonished at my struggle, for when a soul wishes to give itself over to mortification, it encounters difficulties on all sides. Does it wish to give up its ease? What a hardship! To scorn a point of honour? What a torture! To endure harsh words? Intolerable suffering! In short, it becomes filled with extreme sadness, but as soon as it resolved to die to the world, every anguish is at an end.” [Saint Teresa of Jesus]

Carmel is called to live in a unique way the closeness of God. For our God is not someone who does not care for us, rather on the contrary he finds joy in showering us with his love and grace. So much so that he became human and lived among us to reveal to us how to live... and die. It may be easy for us to comprehend a God as the giver of life, yet the idea of death may seem foreign to many who may consider it as just a part of life, a moment in life to cross the threshold and pass through the Golden Gate of heaven. Yet God created us for himself, of course not in a selfish way, but to share with us true life. Holy Scripture calls it eternal life. It is an experience whereby nothing and no one can separate us from our Beloved. Love reigns supreme.

As a seed needs to die in order to bear fruit, so also must we “die to ourselves” so that life to come forth in an outstanding way. This implies that we need to learn the true meaning of penance and mortification, as moments of grace which not only make us “die to ourselves” but also are the seeds of life. Penance may be linked to the exterior exercise of “dying to ourselves”, while mortification deals with the interior, inner part of our soul. Both are recommended by our Holy Mother in the evangelical self-detachment or renunciation necessary for a fruitful life of prayer. It means to be resolved “to die to the world”, as we reject the attractive enslavements that surround us in the secular world, for it is very dear to God to set us free. To be free entails that we truly live, even though this may seem awkward to admit in the “free and developed” society we live in. True freedom gushes from within, the inner self, it is the gift of the Holy Spirit bestowed within. That is why Holy Mother rather speaks of detachment, as does our Holy Father John of the Cross in *The Ascent and Dark Night*. Our Carmelite saints follow suit. It is not so much a matter of possessing something or the lack thereof. The first step of a genuine conversion is accepting deep within a contrition that flows from the heart. The parable of the Merciful Father in Luke 15:18-19 “I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands’”. It is the contrition that moves the entire process of penance undertaken by those who approach the sacrament of Reconciliation (cfr. Catechism of the Catholic Church nos. 1450 to 1460).

The dynamics of conversion must thus start from a gift of the Holy Spirit within. Even the confession or disclosure of sins and the Penance or Satisfaction that follow in the sacrament are subject to the inner penance that indicates genuineness and change of heart. In the tradition of Carmel this is called the “purity of heart” (“*puritas cordis*”), a cleanliness of the spirit which makes it possible for us to discern the untainted will of God. The heart is pure enough that it

perceives the true will of God. The greater the cleanliness, the more intense and clear is the perception of God. The greatest of all was Mary, the Mother of God, whose purity of heart led her to recognize God's will and accomplish it. At the outset of our Rule, St Albert of Jerusalem recalls our calling as Carmelites to serve Jesus in "purity of heart". He echoes 1 Timothy 1,5.

The heart is the seat of wisdom and emotions, decisions and understanding. True purity is that of the heart, the interior purity. *"There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile... It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come"* (cfr. Mk 7:15.18-23). Hence the need to humbly acknowledge the truth of weakness and sin. In St Teresa's terminology, she would say humility, the queen of virtues. Humility sets us free to be aware of ourselves, who we are and what we are capable of. Our inner being is transformed by the grace of God, namely our thinking, feeling, desiring, and affectivity, for the grace of the Holy Spirit purifies the heart (Acts 15:9). A humble person entails a simple person, that is some one who is no longer double minded and divided between God and the world, but rather enjoys a unified and peaceful existence (cfr. Jam 4:8). Jesus calls us to himself, the *"gentle and humble of heart"* (Mt 11:29). The poor in spirit inherit the Kingdom of God (Mt 5:3).

The Rule of St Albert places before us a way to achieve a "new heart", a "pure heart" by putting on the arms of God, since Christian life is perceived as a true and genuine battle (2 Timothy 2:3). The spiritual arms we Christians and Carmelites are called to bear have two meanings: the baptismal grace in our hearts and the power of God that enable us to put on the new Man, Jesus Christ (Eph 4:22-23). Leaving behind our sinfulness, we are vested with the new Man. The Rule, in paragraphs 18-19, recalls three spiritual arms which attain purity of heart: chastity, justice and in a particular way the Word of God. These arms deliver us from our own selfishness and open us to God and our neighbour. The Secular Carmelite community would be the place where the love of neighbour may mature into the unconditional love God has for each and every one. We are not left to our own whims and fancies but fraternal life procures the structure and environment to live the gospel demands. *"The Lord walks among the pots and pans helping you both interiorly and exteriorly"* (Foundations 5:8). Even the ties of community life come from within our hearts. Love cannot be imposed, but must come from the heart, freely given and freely accepted. When the heart is in place, then we achieve the fullness of life God has willed for us.

We are not alone on our journey. The Spirit that accompanied Jesus has been bestowed and lives within us. He makes possible the life of prayer in a heart to heart dialogue with the One who we know loves us.

May Jesus bless you brothers and sisters of the OCDS as you take your spiritual journey in Carmel. It is nothing less than an adventure of love. I was so happy to meet you at the Congress last year, and was encouraged by your presence, vitality and dedication. May the spiritual reading of the book of Foundations we are undertaking this year assist us in our experience of God's providence for us. May this Lent be truly a season of grace. I pray the Blessed Virgin of Mt Carmel to keep you under her protection and attain for you the blessings of the Risen Lord.



Please remember me in your prayers as I do for you, and pray especially for vocations to Carmel. Also my deepest congratulations to His Eminence Thomas Collins on his appointment as Cardinal of the Church, an appointment we truly cherish and which will enrich and benefit the Church. God bless Canada.

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