



**LETTER FROM FATHER PROVINCIAL, VERY REVEREND FR JUAN DEBONO,
OCD
TO ALL OCDS MEMBERS**

St Teresa's Monastery
St Teresa Street
Cospicua
3rd March 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Carmel,

I feel grateful to all the members of the Secular Order in Canada who have sent me their greetings and congratulations via email as soon as the news broke that the friars of the Maltese Province have elected me as their new Provincial.

First of all a very special thanks to Fr Manny, who led us for the last eight years. I can assure you that being a Councillor for five of those years, the task was not at all easy, but with the help of God, Fr Manny led us through the rough seas, we had to sadly endure.

Even if I belong to this Religious Province for almost 30 years, I may be quite 'new' to many of you. For this reason I think it's a must to shortly present myself. Though my uncle (who died six weeks ago) was a diocesan priest, my two elder brothers and me, grew up at our Cospicua monastery as altar boys. My elder brother, Fr José joined Carmel when I was just 7 years old. Fr Victor then was just ordained a priest (1975). As a young altar boy, Fr Victor filled our hearts with great love for St Teresa of Jesus, to whom our church at Cospicua is the very first in the world ever to be dedicated to our beloved Spanish Mystic.

1982 was a special year for us here at Cospicua with a special procession in honour of the great Mystic. That summer (1982) I spent 5 weeks at the Vatican serving as an altar boy. It was then that after looking into other Religious Orders, I came to the conclusion that the Discalced Carmelites are the real best. After 35 years of community life and after meeting other great figures of Carmel, especially the 'beloved' Elizabeth of the Trinity, I am by now 200% more convinced that our Religious Order is one of the 'richest' Religious Orders, with the 'best'

charism a Religious Order can ever have: intimacy with the Three Who created us, Who accompany us on a minute/minute basis and the Ones who are waiting for Us at the other end.

On the 14th September 1988 at 9.10 pm, I met Elizabeth of the Trinity. From that moment onward, my life changed. Immediately I felt all the time Elizabeth, centimetres away from me. 14th September was my very first day of my Novitiate.

I must say Elizabeth has kept her word expressed to Charles Hallo in her last letter (the only ever written to Charles) when she promised him, and all who are devoted to her: “you will have battles to fight, my little brother, you will encounter obstacles on the path of life, but do not be discouraged, call me. Yes, call your little sister, in this way you will increase her happiness in heaven, she will be so glad to help you triumph, to remain worthy of God, of your venerable father, of your mother, whose joy you must be” (L 342). Every time I read this letter, tears come to my eyes, as I have felt Elizabeth’s presence so often in the past 29 years. And Elizabeth is never alone. She is always with ‘her’ Three. How can we walk the walk of life without this Heavenly company?

One of the quotations I like most of Elizabeth is that which is found in L 333, “Dear Antoinette, in the light of eternity the soul sees things as they really are. Oh! How empty is all that has not been done for God and with God! I beg you, oh, mark everything with the seal of love! It alone endures. How serious life is: each minute is given us in order to ‘root’ us deeper in God, as St Paul says, so the resemblance to our divine Model may be more striking, the union more intimate” (L 333). Life is toooooo short to just lose energy on what office you’re fulfilling and which not. There is only one thing which counts: trying to accomplish God’s will on a day to day basis, according to the particular situation one is living. ‘Holiness’, writes St Teresa of Calcutta is ‘doing God’s will with a big smile’.

But let me continue to present myself. I joined Carmel in 1987 when I was just 17 years old. Fr Manny Schembri was my first Master as a Postulant. Later on during that same year, Fr Dominic took over that office. Fr Dominic was always scared that I would hurt someone while on my manual work lol. For that reason I am usually alone while I am doing manual work. My Novitiate was also at Cospicua. After my first Profession, Fr Pius, who was then Provincial, sent me to Brescia in Italy where I started my studies. After two years at Brescia, I was sent to the International College in Rome for three years. After this, I returned to Brescia for a year of Pastoral studies. Returning to Malta in 1995 I was ordained and assigned to Cospicua.

From that moment till now with every Provincial Chapter I was always moved from one monastery to another in Malta. Unfortunately I was never assigned to Canada. First I was moved to Ta’ Xbiex community (1996). I stayed there for six years, even if in the meantime, I passed four years at the St Teresa Parish in Rome (just near the General House), and a year at Tas-Silg community.

My research studies regarded Elizabeth. My only aim in those studies was my deep wish to know more and more about Elizabeth, and as a result how better reply to God’s call. While on my studies, I also came in contact with three of the nine children of Guite, Elizabeth’s sister. Now

they are all dead, but my memories are still full of unforgettable moments, especially with Francois, who used to insist that I stay at his home while at Dijon.

Returning back to Malta, in 2002 I was elected as Superior of Tas-Silg Retreat House. I was very glad in that house (as in all the houses I have been), even if as one can imagine one is very very busy there with groups coming in and out all the time. The House can accommodate 50 sleeping and around 80 for lunch/dinner.

Three years later I was then elected Prior at our Sanctuary at B'Kara. It was a fast aging community. After three years I was called back to Tas-Silg, as a supporting friar to my brother, who had just been elected Superior. In 2010, I was re-appointed Prior to B'Kara. By now the community was even older. Unfortunately most of the members of our Province are no longer young. Myself at 46, I'm the second youngest priest. Especially those three years at B'Kara, I was mainly busy with the caring of the friars in community. Most of the time we had someone in hospital or in a rehabilitation facility. The community was then made up of twelve members, four of whom died in a two year span. Three years ago I was elected Prior, this time to the Cospicua community.

I have mentioned Elizabeth, and can't skip mentioning that last 16th October was the most beautiful day I was ever looking forward to in all my life. Thanks to Elizabeth, even if the date was the worst possible date for me (having to celebrate our Holy Mother), I managed to be there and be the closest concelebrating priest to the Pope (less than fifteen metres away) when he declared Elizabeth as a Saint. It was the only dream I always wished that would be accomplished in my life time. I feel so grateful to the Lord that my dream came true. This video was taken by me <https://youtu.be/nuwd9GqdWdE>. If Heaven is even more beautiful than this moment, I really look forward to go to Heaven. I can't describe what I felt inside when I saw Elizabeth's picture hanging on the façade of St Peter, and when the Pope declared Elizabeth as a Saint. You can also see me (bald priest in first row) at the 3.27 min of this official video <https://youtu.be/A7Hs4xFSVik>.

Regarding a possible visit to Canada, I will have to try to adapt a new calendar. As maybe you would understand I was not expecting this election, so I had already given my word to a religious community in the States to give them their annual community retreat. I was only waiting for the election of our Provincial to ask the needed permission to plan that retreat. It was always my policy to stay the least possible away from my community, and I used to give these retreats instead of taking holidays. I wouldn't wish to be away for long now that I have been elected Provincial. During the past sixteen years I have given talks about Elizabeth in the States, in Egypt, Libia and many countries in Europe.

I ask your for your prayers. I also ask you to continue praying for our Province, especially for every friar of our Province, and not least for new vocations for our Province in Malta and in Canada. Without new vocations, our future looks so blurred. It's true that Jesus promised to be always with us till the end of times (cfr. Mt 28.20), but it's also true that the first public action of Jesus (even before starting preaching) was to choose the twelve Apostles. Now if Jesus first chose His Apostles, and only then cared to start His ministry, the same must be with us.

Even if in our times, replying to God's call is harder than it was twenty years ago, this does not mean that God is not still calling new members for our Religious Orders, to keep alive the charism started by our Holy Mother. The deep thirst that the world leaves to all those who give themselves to it, enlarges even more the wish one has deeply buried in one's heart to abandon oneself completely in the hands of God. That's why I am of the opinion that we Discalced Carmelites have an extra gear compared to other Religious Orders. St Teresa of Jesus, St John of the Cross, St Teresa of Lisieux, St Elizabeth of the Trinity, St Teresa Benedetta of the Cross, St Teresa of Los Andes, St Mary of Jesus Crucified are just few of the powerful magnets that our Order is blessed with and that can attract anyone who is struggling in life.

"I surrender myself to You as Your prey" (Elizabeth's Prayer to the Trinity) is the ONLY possible attitude of a human being while alive. It's useless to continue playing the hide and seek game with God, when life is so short. By surrendering oneself to God's transforming actions, we reach the perfect union we have been created for, and for which we are kept alive by God, union our hearts so deeply long for. How can we continue running away from God's call to deep dive in His Abyss? Elizabeth became the great Mystic we all admire today because, believing in His Love, trusted Her God, and accompanied by the Three who dwell in her heart, walked step by step along the path of life till perfect union.

"This Heaven of the saints is our homeland, the 'Father's House' where we are awaited, where we are loved, where one day we too will be able to fly and rest in the bosom of Infinite Love! When we consider the divine world that envelops us already here in exile and in which we can move, oh, then things here below disappear: all of that doesn't exist, it is less than nothing. The saints, for their part, understood true knowledge so well, the knowledge that makes us leave everything, and especially ourselves, so we can fly to God and live solely with Him!" (L 184).

This is my ONLY wish to every member of the Secular Order in Canada, hoping to be with you on this path of life.

God bless you all.

Fr Juan Debono, ocd