

Walking in the Truth

Message of the Extraordinary Definitory OCD
Old Goa (India), 4-10 February 2019

St Paul exhorts the Christians of the community in Rome to allow themselves to be transformed by a profound personal renewal that will enable them to live always according to the will of God: “Do not be conformed to the world, but be transformed by the renewal of your minds, so that you will be able to discern the will of God and to know what is good and acceptable and perfect.” (Rom 12:2). With this desire and in this spirit, the Extraordinary Definitory met from the 4th to the 10th of February 2019 in Old Goa (India), very close to the place where the presence of the Order in India began, as well as to the Basilica which guards the tomb of St Francis Xavier, one of the great missionaries in the history of the Church. We heartily thank our brothers of Karnataka-Goa and of the other Indian provinces for their fraternal and warm welcome and the solicitude with which they prepared the meeting.

During these days we celebrated with joy the Fourth Centenary of the arrival of the first Discalced Carmelites in India (Goa 1619), and we thanked the Lord for the abundance of vocations in recent times, which has made India a country in the world that currently has the greatest number of Discalced Carmelite Friars. This double gaze at the past and the present allows us to confirm the vitality of the Teresian charism which, without disassociating itself from its historical roots, continues to develop with ever renewed energy, combining the necessary continuity with permanent updating.

Rereading the Constitutions

The General Chapter held in Avila in May 2015 decided that the Order should enter into a process of reflection and discernment on how to live the charism in the present time. To this end, it asked all the friars to embark upon a prayerful and communitarian re-reading of the Constitutions, with the main objective of discovering whether our real life corresponds to the charismatic ideal and to the practical norms that regulate it. On the other hand, the reading of the constitutional text should serve to discern if it was advisable to rewrite it, in whole or in part, so that it continues to express in an updated and understandable way the permanent values that constitute the charism of our religious family.

The Definitory of Goa has been the opportune moment to gather the experience of the first stage of this process, to evaluate its results, and to guide the future steps. Following the indications and materials of the international commission - to whose members we are grateful for the effort they have made - the communities have carried out a work which in some cases has already produced good fruits of renewal and of personal and community commitment.

After analyzing the proposals and suggestions received from the whole Order on the legislative texts, the Definitory responded to the mandate entrusted to it by the General Chapter to take a decision on the way forward from now on, on the basis of these hypotheses: “re-elaboration of the Constitutions, a revision on certain points and/or drafting of a Declaration on Carmelite-Teresian life” (*It is time to walk!*, 32).

The Order in the Present Context of Change

The process followed up to this moment has led us to verify the vitality of the Order, its capacity to be implanted and to be enculturated in multiple zones of our world. In recent years, although there has been a significant decrease in regions of traditional presence such as Europe, the expansion of the Teresian Carmel has been rapid and extensive in many other places. It is evident that so many centuries later the relevance and universality of a charism gives meaning to the lives of many people from so many different places.

At the same time, we have become aware of some tendencies in the life of the Order. One of them is the great diversity in the concrete forms of life and activity. There are notable differences of all kinds: number of members in the communities, type of apostolic service, practice of common prayer... The variety of lifestyles seems to reflect, and also produce, different ways of understanding the charism, ranging from an almost monastic vision to an approach totally centered on ministerial activities.

Another tendency we observe is the growing practical autonomy that is given at various levels in the life of the Order: from the friars to the community, from the communities to the province and, moreover, from each province to other provinces and to the Order as a whole. Together with many other factors, this tendency is certainly not alien to the increasingly marked individualism which characterizes modern societies and which has a powerful influence on religious life. The joyful acceptance of a diversity which enriches the whole must be accompanied by a serious discernment which allows the cohesion and unity of the Order to be maintained.

Resuming the Path of Renewal

One factor that has a decisive influence on the situation of the Order is the magnitude of the change that is taking place in our societies in many areas: technological, cultural, anthropological, ecclesial... The ways of living and thinking today have little to do with those of 40 or 50 years ago. We live in a world that changes more and more rapidly.

The Church needs to respond to these changes with an ongoing renewal that allows her to continue living and transmitting the Gospel message with languages and forms appropriate to the present situation, as well as to the different cultural, political and social contexts of our world. The call to be attentive and to react seriously to the changing situations and needs of the times and places made by the Second Vatican Council has not lost its validity, but must constitute a constant attitude of the Church and of all those who form it.

Consecrated religious, moved by the Spirit, have known how to respond in every historical moment with creativity and generosity to the needs of humanity, and now, too, they are called to remember with special interest and intensity the urgent invitation to renewal. The Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, taking up the invitation of Pope Francis to live in the newness of the Gospel, has exhorted religious to deepen the dynamics of post-conciliar renewal and to “take on the challenge of a change that requires acceptance, as well as discernment. We must create structures that are truly faithful to preserve the innovative richness of the Gospel so that it can be experienced and put to the service of all, while preserving its quality and goodness” (*New Wine in New Wineskins*, 2).

Of course, our Order must do the same. Father General, in his presentation in this Extraordinary Definitory, stressed that the main theme at this moment is precisely “that of renewal, that is, of adapting the ways of understanding and living the charism in the changed anthropological context of our time”; it is a question of “resuming the journey of renewal begun, but certainly not concluded with the approval of the post-conciliar Constitutions” (*Objective, method and themes of a charismatic declaration*, p. 2 and 11). Following the recent directions of the Church, our Discalced Carmelite sisters are also advancing on this path.

Revision of Legislative Texts

A revision of the Constitutions and of the Applicative Norms would undoubtedly be a help in this desire for renewal and charismatic updating that we share. The Constitutions, like any legislative text, are necessarily limited and contingent, and require permanent updating. However, we have noted that the Order as a whole values the richness of the present Constitutions and does not feel the need for a thorough reworking of the text. There is a more shared impression that it would be possible and necessary to revise some concrete points; however, the consensus is far from being the majority, and even less on what elements to modify, suppress or add. We are also aware that a serious and profound updating of the Constitutions requires a prior time of doctrinal reflection and process of assimilation in the whole Order, which will necessarily be long, regarding the Carmelite-Teresian charism and the signs of the times and places.

For all these reasons, the Extraordinary Definitory has decided not to undertake for the time being the drafting of a new constitutional text, nor the revision of the present one. Many of the proposals for modification that have been presented can be assumed with the revision of the Applicative Norms, which is in the competency of the General Chapter already foreseen in the legislative text itself. In this sense, during the Definitory of Goa we have already begun the dialogue on some of the points that it would be advisable to revise, starting from the suggestions received from the communities and from the experience of the General Definitory. The work will continue during the coming months so that the General Chapter can have the necessary instruments to advance in this revision.

Towards a Charismatic Declaration

In keeping with the desire expressed by a considerable number of circumscriptions of the Order, the Extraordinary Definitory has accepted by a large majority to undertake the drafting of a Declaration on Carmelite-Teresian life (sources, history, actuality), which was one of the possibilities pointed out by the General Chapter of 2015.

As defined by Father General, the objective of this Declaration would be “to help read and understand the charism and Constitutions in a way appropriate to the present time, its challenges, and the diverse socio-cultural contexts in which the Order is present.” It is a question, then, of presenting in a synthetic way and with an updated language the essential elements of our charismatic identity, those which define us as a particular family in the Church and which we all aspire to put into practice, whatever our place of origin or residence, our culture, our community, or our activity.

An indispensable first step is to truly return to the sources of our family and our spirituality. On the other hand, it is necessary to know and analyze with clarity the reality of our times. We must also take into account the diversity of regions, cultures and situations in which we are currently living. The adequate conjunction of these perspectives should allow for an updating of the forms of expression and of the ways of living the charism that will give it new strength and vigor.

The document that we want to give ourselves is called to be an updated exposition of our charismatic identity, a reference text with which we all feel identified, to help us strengthen our sense of belonging to the Order and to guide us in the commitment to respond with joyful fidelity to the call we have received from the Lord to live in his service in the family initiated by Teresa of Jesus and John of the Cross. Such an updated redefinition of our identity should also contribute to reinforcing some of the weaker aspects of our present way of walking in the truth and of living with creative fidelity.

The Itinerary to Follow

The General Definitory will take on the task of specifying how to prepare the revision of the Applicative Norms and the drafting of the Charismatic Declaration. While the qualified contribution of concrete persons will be fundamental, means will also be sought to facilitate and include in the process a wide participation of the circumscriptions of the Order.

Therefore, we are all invited from now on to deepen our reflection on our charismatic identity and on our legislative texts, maintaining in the communities the spirit and the practice of fraternal dialogue on these topics which we have intensified in recent months with regard to the Constitutions.

Above all, we are called to foster an attitude of ongoing renewal, which presupposes a sincere and constant openness to the Spirit who speaks to us through the Word of God, the brothers and history. We must continue to nourish the desire to assimilate and to live the elements that make up our identity with enthusiastic commitment.

All the members of the Teresian Carmel family (friars, nuns and laity) are committed to this path of renewal, on which we must advance together. We thank everyone for praying to the Lord that this process will bear fruit for the good of the Church and of humanity.

At the end of our meeting in Goa, we entrust ourselves in a special way to the Blessed Carmelite Martyrs Denis and Redemptus, who began here the journey of Carmelite life that led them to give witness to Christ with the offering of their own lives. We invoke upon the whole Order the protection of Mary, Mother of Carmel, so that she may help us now and always to walk in the truth.

Old Goa, 10 February 2019.