

## Carmel, COVID, and the Year 2020

by Neal Facione

If I were some criminal mastermind and I wanted to bring this world to a state of evil and chaos, I would find something that could cause fear and mistrust in others to dominate the minds of everyone. Then, I would isolate them and prevent them from having as many ways as possible in which they could vent their anger. I would prevent them from hugging and kissing and showing other signs of intimate expression including the common handshake. I would hide even the most basic means of sharing by hiding their facial expressions from each other by requiring that they wear masks. I would find a way to upset their spiritual grounding by closing their churches. And, as if I were tightening a spring, I would then wind and tighten this whole process over and over for as long as I thought that they would tolerate the tension. And then I would suddenly release the tension and let them all go. Evil and chaos would then dominate the world. There would be widespread mistrust of authority and of each other. Rebellion would be the order of the day. There would be many with a sense of self-righteous anger. Others would just be angry not knowing the reason, but nevertheless they would still look for ways to vent their sense of nebulous anger and anxiety.

Isn't this similar to what the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to our world? Now don't get me wrong. Many of the things that were put in place to help isolate this disease have been justifiable common-sense efforts. And I am certainly not criticizing those who have had to make these decisions, because I understand that their primary goal was to save as many lives as possible. But this pandemic has brought humanity to a crisis on many levels. I use this as a background to discuss our responsibilities toward each other on a spiritual level.

Why is it that we first try to fix our outer world rather than dare to look deep within ourselves?

The COVID-19 Pandemic and the year of 2020 with all its many natural disasters, such as raging forest fires and an unbelievable number of severe hurricanes, has produced a scenario as described above. For many, it is a time where despair and hopelessness seem to prevail. However, for those who have faith, there is still a sense of hope and a sense of peace. Personally, the parable of the ten virgins seems to make more sense now than ever. For it makes sense that our spiritual growth as individuals is something that we must take seriously. We can help others along the way, but we come to understand that this type of growth must be taken up by each of us individually. And we must check our oil levels daily and as St Teresa of Avila said, "strive always to advance".

As Carmelites, we are called to share our Carmelite charism with those that we encounter in our everyday lives, such as our friends, our families, and our co-workers. Sometimes that can be as simple as leading some to the peace of Christ through the simple way in which we live out our lives as Carmelites. Other times, we are called to aid our fellow Christians on their spiritual paths through the Carmelite charism of teaching them how to pray. And in other times, especially in those times of stress and turmoil, we are called to share with others the light and the encouragement of the Carmelite charism in the area of spiritual direction.

We know that our primary spiritual director in life is the Holy Spirit. However, there are times when we lose contact with that "tiny whisper of a voice" within. And sometimes we feel as though we have been tossed about in every different direction and have not only lost our way on the road that God has always asked us to travel, but we may also feel as though we have completely lost our conscious contact with God.

Our own St. John of the Cross, a Discalced Carmelite priest in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, spent most of his life as a spiritual director. He certainly knew what it was like to experience darkness in his spiritual life. He has walked this road before us and has laid out a path for us all to follow in his writings. However, for many of us, in order to have the ability to comprehend this path, we must first get past the notion that the spirituality of Saint John of the Cross is too aloof for us to comprehend. For some, the mere mention of St. John of the Cross brings about something similar to what we know as the terror of the “math block”. His name causes those individuals to make an almost blank stare on their faces and say, “Saint John of the Cross is too deep for me to understand”. And then they either dismiss or refuse to hear anything that is said concerning this saint’s great treasure of spiritual direction. How many times have you heard it said, “Oh, I can’t read John of the Cross, he’s too deep for me”?

Perhaps, the better approach would be for us to strive, as Carmelites, to take our formation in St. John’s spirituality to a deeper level. And once we take the responsibility to not only live out, but also allow ourselves the time in order for St. John’s spirituality to take root deep within our beings, we can then express what he is teaching in a much easier and friendly manner to those individuals with the “St. John of the Cross block”. We can give those in need of spiritual direction and consolation our real-life personal experiences of handling times of spiritual darkness. We can do this without speaking a word of where it is that we gleaned these spiritual treasures.

We see this time of the COVID-19 pandemic as a time for real change to take place. Our world can be a place where love prevails. Justice and equality can truly begin to flow from within each of our hearts. As Carmelites, we are gifted with this treasure of our charism. For us, to summarize the saying “to those that have, more will be given, and the

more will be expected”. Let us all begin to take personal responsibility for our individual spiritual growth and formation as Carmelites.

How is your “oil level” today?

Lord, grant us the courage to look deep within our hearts and grow in your love daily. “May your kingdom come on Earth as it is in Heaven”

LIVE JESUS!

*Neal Facione is a Professed Lay Carmelite for 22 years. He is a retired Doctor of Veterinary Medicine after 40 years of practice and has been married for 45 years with three children, and six grandchildren.*

*“I have had a lifelong friendship with St. John of the Cross mostly out of necessity. He seems to console me along my spiritual path in life. I am by no means an expert in St. John’s spirituality, but for some reason I can see the desire that so many have for the wisdom of his spiritual direction in their lives. I have given a day of reflection on St. John’s spirituality that I called “Longing for the Break of Day, A Reflection on the Dark Night and Contemplation”.” Neal*