

**FINAL CONFERENCE OF THE PRIOR GENERAL
JOSEPH CHALMERS
TO THE GENERAL CHAPTER
SASSONE, 4TH SEPTEMBER 2007**

I am presuming that everyone has read my report to the General Chapter, which was sent out several months ago in order to aid your preparation for this very important moment in the life of the Order. In it I tried to describe the state of the Order as we approached this General Chapter.

In the front and back pages of the report we have the Chapter prayer in 11 languages. These represent only some of the languages spoken in the Order. We are an international family. During the sexennium, a General Commissariat was established in the Philippines, and a new Province was erected in India. There is also another group of 24 solemnly professed friars in India of the Latin rite, who came to us from the Discalced Carmelites. This situation was amply discussed at the level of the General Councils and has not affected our relationship. The group was placed directly under the Prior General and Fr. Dionysius Kosasih, of the Indonesian Province, was appointed to oversee the formation programme for the three years of probation.

It is heartening to note that several joint novitiates have been established or are planned. I believe that this is obviously the way to go for the future. It immediately brings the young Carmelites a sense of the internationality of the Order and it concentrates our formation personnel. Clearly there must be a serious commitment to bring the candidates from different areas or countries to the same level of formation before entry into the novitiate. Following the RIVC would go a long way to ensure this. Another possible challenge is the establishment of a common language for some novitiates. It would be very good for all our men to learn one or two of our official languages from the earliest age.

Another heartening development is the co-operation of several groups or Provinces for the establishment of a mission of the Order. This, I believe, will become more and more common in the future, as the numbers of friars in the older Provinces continues to decline. The Provinces and Commissariats in Africa, Asia and Latin America will have to take over the role of establishing or running missions. Other Provinces or Commissariats may no longer be able to send friars but can help in other ways, including economically. As we begin this General Chapter, there are a number of new missions being considered and I have great pleasure in passing these on to the new Prior General and Council.

Lay Carmel is a rapidly growing reality all over the world. Clearly our spirituality is very attractive to many lay people. We have a serious responsibility to assist our lay Carmelites in living fully their Carmelite vocation. We should also listen to them because we have much to learn from their experience of life and of the charism. I think that the growth of this area of the Carmelite Family is one of the elements of a changing world that we need to take into account when we discuss the Chapter theme.

Like every religious group we have many problems to face or many challenges that give us new possibilities, depending on your perspective. The theme of this Chapter as you know is: *In Obsequio Jesu Christi. Praying and Prophetic Community in a Changing World*. How do we remain faithful to the charism given to us by God in a rapidly changing world? To give some direction towards answering that question is the work of this Chapter. In these few words I simply want to remind you of what the fundamental thrust of our Order is.

Over the past six, and indeed twelve years, I have stressed the contemplative dimension of our charism, while hopefully not forgetting the other essential elements. According to the Constitutions, the experience of the desert unites the different elements of our charism. The RIVC explains that the experience of the desert is in fact the process of contemplation. I wrote in the introduction to my report to the General Chapter that at the Chapter we would "listen to our world and seek to understand more clearly what God is asking of our Order". Our Rule asks us to listen to the Word of God and to each other (Rule 7, 10, 14, 15) but if we are at all self-aware we know how difficult it is to really listen. We are filled with our own concerns and these produce so much noise inside us that we have difficulty in hearing another person or indeed even the Word of God. Therefore the Rule stresses the virtue of silence (Rule 21). This is not just an ascetical discipline but provides the right circumstances so that we can hear what God is saying to us. External silence nurtures internal silence without which we are only able to hear the sound of our own voice.

Our Rule, with reference to St. Paul, tells us to put on God's armour (Rule 19). The first Carmelites knew about war. It was raging very close to them and in a few years it would force them from their home on Mt. Carmel. Both St. Albert and the hermits were aware that the spiritual journey can be perilous and, without the spiritual armour that comes from God, we run the risk of being devoured by our adversary (Rule 18). We have different ways of thinking about the spiritual journey but the reality is the same. If we do not silence the noise within us, we will be dominated by our own needs and we will interpret everything, including the Word of God, in terms of how it will affect us.

It is vital that we are hearers of the Word so that we can be doers of this same Word. *Lectio Divina* has become very important in our Order and this is something to

rejoice in. Listening to the Word of God must not be an irregular occurrence but every day we must set aside quality time to be alone with the Lord so that we gradually become attuned to the voice of God who spoke to the Prophet Elijah in the sound of silence (I Kings 19,12). God spoke to Mary, our Mother and Sister, through the message of an angel but also through the events of her Son's life. In whatever way we spend that daily time with God, it is good to remember that interior silence is not easy and so listening to God needs commitment and honesty.

So what is God saying to our Order and our individual Provinces and monasteries at this time in history? Clearly our world is changing in many ways. For example the social structures that supported faith have largely disappeared in our secularised western societies and living in allegiance to Jesus Christ with a pure heart and stout conscience and an unswerving commitment to the service of the Master is not easy to maintain. Our Order has not been immune to the sexual abuse crisis, which has severely challenged the faith of many people. It has also affected the voice of the Church in other matters. The Church and the Order have taken great strides to ensure that children and vulnerable adults will be protected at all times. Another issue is the grim poverty, with all its attendant problems, which is an ever-present reality for many parts of the world and specifically for many countries where we have communities. We have to find creative ways to help our brothers and sisters survive and flourish in their Carmelite life and ministry.

During this General Chapter we will hear experts who will give us some ideas on which to base our vision for the future. I believe that God is calling us to renew our commitment to adhere to Jesus Christ in this time of rapid social change. How we live emerges from who and what we are. An interior commitment to Jesus Christ will spill over into our exterior lives. The RIVC also reminds us that the way to test our inner experience is how we live in daily life (RIVC 23). Giving time to grow in our relationship with God, in and through Jesus Christ, is not time taken away from a commitment to those we seek to serve. Living in allegiance to Jesus Christ makes sure that our service sets people free and does not bind them in a web of emotional dependency on us. A serious commitment to prayer is not an optional extra for us but is essential if we are to be faithful to the vocation to which we have been called.

It is a great temptation to get so immersed in our own work that we cannot see beyond the confines that we ourselves set up. There is always something more to do but unless we are firmly anchored in a strong relationship with the Lord, we can very easily slip into activism that in the end helps no one. We are part of a long tradition. This year we remember and we give thanks for those men who left their homes and travelled to the Holy Land in order to live in the land where Jesus Christ himself had lived and died. They adopted an eremitical lifestyle on Mount Carmel and gradually came together to form a community. They finally went to Albert, the Patriarch of Jerusalem, to ask him for some guidelines for their way of life. This Formula Vitae

became the Rule as we know it by the adaptation and approval of Pope Innocent IV in 1247. There have been many high points and low points in the following centuries but a strong thread that runs from the very beginning is the commitment to prayer. We remember with gratitude those countless men and women who have tried to live this way of life throughout the centuries, and particularly this year some important models of Carmelite life – Saint Albert of Trapani, St. Mary Magdalene de' Pazzi, and Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity. Soon we will have more Carmelite blessededs – the Catalan martyrs during the Spanish civil war and Madre Candelaria from Venezuela.

It is by means of a faithful and constant prayer that we are able to discern the false from the true in our world and in our own lives. The false and selfish part of us can easily misuse even holy pursuits like prayer so long as the focus remains on oneself. Over the last 12 years I have seen and heard some wonderful stories about what Carmelites do and I have said more than once that I am proud to be a Carmelite. However, at times I feel that the commitment to prayer could be stronger. Prayer is not just saying the right words; it is to enter into communion with the Living God. If our prayer is not an opening to God's Holy Spirit but instead simply going through the motions, it will not be life changing. Is our personal and community prayer an invitation to the Spirit to "blow where he wills" (cf. Jn. 3,8) or an attempt to channel the Holy Spirit so that God will agree with whatever we want to do?

The challenge we have set ourselves at this General Chapter is to listen to God who speaks in the liturgy, in our lectio divina, in our personal prayer and through the changing needs of our world. We want to be faithful to God of course and this involves us in being faithful to our charism but what does that actually mean in a world which is in the throes of great cultural change? What is God saying to us through these events? This discernment is the work of this General Chapter. The General Congregation accepted that others would be invited to the General Chapter. There are a number of friars from different countries who have accepted the invitation to come here without the right to vote. They come from nations or groups that would otherwise not be represented here. They will not be passive listeners. Their very presence, as well as that of the representatives from the other branches of the Carmelite Family, who will join us for a few days in the middle of the Chapter, will remind us that we cannot confine our discernment. We are an international family and this fact is an important element in our discernment.

Finally I want to thank the whole Order for all the support I have received over the years that I have had the privilege of serving as Prior General. I want to thank the Provincials for your co-operation and support. I particularly want to thank the members of the General Council and the Curia community with whom I have lived for the past six years, along with the staff who have collaborated with us in different ways. I want to call to mind Fr. Manuel Anguiano, the former archivist, librarian and

sacristan of the Curia. Manolo, as we called him, died on 17th July. May he rest in peace.

I also want to ask pardon of this General Chapter for the times that I have failed to respond to the needs of the Order or when you found me unresponsive to your legitimate requests. I make no apology for talking a lot about prayer and contemplation!

The Carmelite charism is a gift from God for the Church and the world. Each one of us has received the great gift of a vocation to Carmel. We are inspired by the Prophet Elijah and Our Blessed Lady as we seek to live in allegiance to Jesus Christ, who calls us to grow in intimacy with him as members of a community that serves in the midst of the people. Let us seek to be ever more faithful to this vocation given us by God and seek together to live in obsequio Jesu Christi by forming a prophetic and prayerful community in the midst of our changing world.
