

# One look at understanding our Charism in Carmel, as the Lay/Secular Order

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Recently, the Church celebrated the 50th Anniversary of Vatican II. One of the most sublime, yet controversial declarations to come out of the Council centers around understanding and living the life of Religious Orders and their Lay [or Secular] Orders. (*Perfectae Caritatis*) In the United States alone the number of male religious has reached an all-time low, and for the female religious of the church the numbers are so critical that it is suggested many familiar sisters' orders and their work will disappear within the next twenty to thirty years.

BUT...there is good news, too. The Council encouraged each religious community, including the lay orders, to review those areas of the inner spirit of the founders, including their original Rule for Life. They should reform, review, and renew the understanding of what the particular religious community was and is doing within the Church and the world. Thereby they update their basic understanding of who they are, why they exist, and what is the matrix for their vision in the Church.

For Lay Carmelites, this opens a world of new understanding for who we are: our mission as Carmelites, and as Catholic Christian men and women in society, and the Church. As our own Third Order Rule was rewritten over a course of years and promulgated by our Prior General in 2003 we need to renew our commitment to the vision which shapes our relationship to each other, the Church, and the world around us.

We face the responsibility of embracing, following, and living the Third Order Rule of Carmel no less than the First and Second Orders, and with no less intent of having our "...light shine before others" [Mt 5:16] as witnesses to draw others to this great light sharing in our task of living the Gospel in this, the third millennium of the Faith.

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For most of us, we spend some time in reading from the Spiritual Documents and Legislation from *Carmel's Call* (pp 17-123) during our monthly meetings, as well as during our education classes in seeking to become a Lay Carmelite. I have found, for myself, as worthy as that exercise has been, I also need to read and reflect and “eat the rule” [cf Rev 10:1-11] to make it part of me and my life. This, of course, means to read, meditate, and “digest” what is written, as well as the intent of the writing, to help us grow as Carmelites. In understanding our “Way to the Way” let me reflect on something I read years ago:

*We need to be radical Christians, and I need to add: radical Carmelites. But before anyone starts thinking radical means that which destroys, let me remind you “radical” comes from the Latin word “radix” which means “roots” and implies “back to the original”. For us, as Carmelites, understanding of who we are must start with a renewed understanding of what was our original purpose, what were our original goals, and what brought those men together on the Mount, by the Wadi named for the prophet.*

According to “Living the Carmelite Way” Carmel has provided a short insightful clarification of the reason for our existence: “...to live a life of allegiance to Jesus Christ, in a contemplative attitude which fashions and supports our life of prayer, fraternity and service. (Part 1, #31)

And, aware of not having a nominal historical founder, there is no great encyclopedia of actions, debates, and historical records for us to look back upon to glean the early interest and actions of the original “Brothers of our Lady of the Place.”

This might make some of us “suck in air,” but don't... not just yet. This is a wonderful blessing for us. It is something which makes us ever more appealing to the current generation looking for religious truth and seeking an eternal anchor. Those searching for meaning and values which are both eternal and are *Truth*.

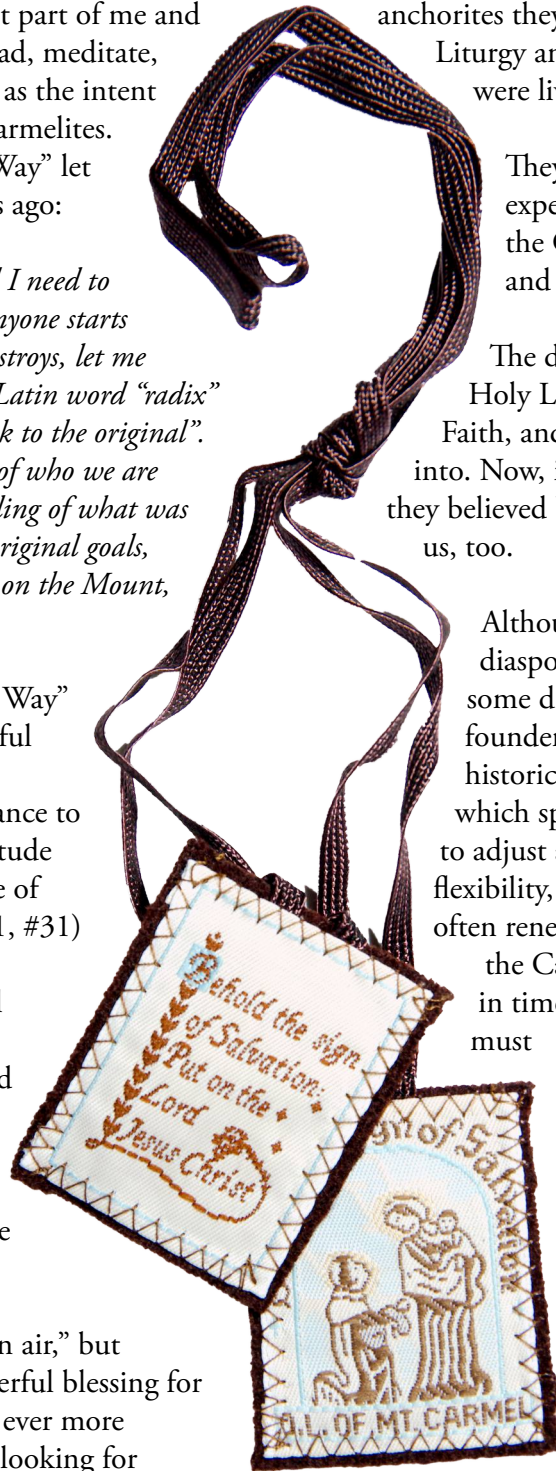
Our forebears did not have someone to tell them how to live and how to pray and what to pray until the Rule of St. Albert. They were laymen who, due to the horror of war, the horror of hate, and the horror of the times, grouped themselves together. They made huts to live apart from each other, but differently from other hermits and anchorites they came together to pray, to celebrate the Liturgy and to share the work and wit of what they were living.

They could see God calling them together to experience what has come down to us today, as the Carmelite Charism: Prayer, Community, and Service.

The desire to offer their lives to the Lord in the Holy Land was a concrete expression of their Faith, and in essence, what their lives had evolved into. Now, it was time for the Brothers to express what they believed by living their conviction. This is true for us, too.

Although after the Rule of Saint Albert and the diaspora to Europe, the Brothers experienced some discomfort in not having a literal physical founder (and this did cause some questionable historical claims) the order became an entity which spread over Europe, in part due to the ability to adjust and change. The order understood flexibility, and more importantly, the Carmelites often renewed themselves, as necessary. Historically, the Carmelites constantly go back to their roots in times of need or conflict. For us, those roots must be: Prayer, Community, and Service; the expression of those pillars in our living and being...one could say “to our roots!”

While preparing this article, I came across a story regarding a founder of a religious community in the 1800's in Britain. The part of the story which interested me was a short “sound bite” which said the Mother Foundress wore a ring to symbolize her vows. In the ring she had engraved the words: “Crux in corde. Cor in cruce.” (The Cross in the heart. The heart in the Cross). Those words, for me, speak of the *radical* call to Carmel.



## PART 1. Prayer:

In understanding the first part of our charism, let's make sure we have the same definition for the word. According to the Carmelite website "...charism describes our spiritual orientation and any special characteristics or values. A charism in general denotes any grace that God gifts to an individual or group to perform a specific mission in the Church and the World."

Prayer, for us, is seen as both prayer itself, and also worship. St. Teresa of Avila tells us to develop our life with God; "The God whom we know loves us." This prayer must grow, must develop and evolve... we must understand the process may not occur overnight, or even in a few years (think of Mother Teresa of Kolkata or St. Thérèse).

As difficult as it might seem, we must grow in our understanding of prayer by melding the two streams of prayer and worship into a strong current of action and cohesive strength for our lives and witness.

St. Teresa also tells us: "There is but one road which reaches God and that road is prayer. If anyone shows you another, you are being deceived." Prayer is the door to enter into our hearts and souls. Prayer is the realization of an intimate union with a God who loves us so much, and only sees us through His loving eyes, not as we or others see us. Prayer is the means by which "I look at Him, He looks at me." Words may or may not be necessary. Through prayer we learn to reach out and embrace our Lord in a new and powerful way which frees us from our old habits and ignites our spirit to want to be His Spirit. Our loving union with God should be our source of prayer and the result of such prayer should be fuller union with the Lord Jesus.

It has been said that Prayer is so necessary in our lives that without it we cannot hope to breathe spiritually or even be open to the Holy Spirit when He speaks to us.

Karl Rahner, SJ (20th century theologian) has said: "The Christian of the future will be a mystic, or will not exist at all." This is a powerful statement. But, for us Carmelites, it is nothing other than our further reflection on Elijah and Our Lady. What better examples do we have of seeking contemplation than Our Lady who "kept all these

things, reflecting on them in her heart." [Lk 2:19] Or Elijah, who finally heard the voice of God in the stillness. [1 Kngs 19:12 ff] They call us to the intimacy of their experience, the experience of Carmel, too.

We must remember that Prayer, whether in the Liturgy of the Hours, in the Mass, or in other forms, may seem dry and distant at times. Other times, prayer may be so powerful that we are "stopped in our tracks" and rejoice over one or two words or a sentence or two (as in *Lectio Divina*). All this is prayer and each of us has to understand our own individual "roots" on the manner, method, and expression of what speaks to us in prayer. Some of our greatest saints weren't overly fond of some of their daily prayers. Of course, the Rule also speaks of our using the Scriptures in our prayer life. We use our "toolbox" and open it up for whatever is needed to advance our time of prayer and contemplation. Importantly, we understand there is no single "form" of Carmelite Prayer.

Prayer is also something that requires us to listen. I can remember being told in elementary school that prayer is a conversation with God. Often we might need to rethink the "listening part" to our "conversation" with God. Many times we exercise "our wish list" and then go on our way, not wanting or needing to just praise the Great God for His grace and goodness. We need to remember the listening part is as necessary as the talking part, maybe more important! Also for us, *Prayer in Carmel* speaks more about attitude and understanding of who and what rather than perfection in the execution.

Prayer is nourishment. Prayer is also our strength. For most people the only Carmelites they may ever meet will be the Lay Carmelite. We will be the book that will be read as to what a Carmelite does and believes and who we worship. Hopefully, attentive to our understanding of the Rule with regards to our first "grace/charism," they will see that Carmel is radically involved with the Lord's vineyard. Also, they will see a community of welcome and a powerhouse of mercy and peace. Living like the original brothers, but open to constant reform to grow in Christ.

*to be continued.....*