

M.E.C.

A WEB OF “CARMELITE COMUNITIES” THROUGHOUT THE WORLD¹

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THE FACT

Ecclesial Movements have always been a part of the history of the Church. They have always developed around a charism received from the Holy Spirit (whose authenticity must be officially approved by the Church). A charism is a “gift from God” through which the Spirit enkindles a *particular* love for Christ in certain individuals (a love for Christ reflecting a specific aspect of His Mystery i.e. poverty, obedience, acts of charity or evangelization, contemplation, the Eucharistic offering, and so forth). The Spirit ensures that the person thus endowed can share a “*spiritual home*” with members and friends where they can experience fraternal communion and receive a formation, which is *pedagogically sound and efficacious* for their personal sanctification and for the edification of the Church and evangelization of the world. In the past Ecclesial Movements were preferably oriented towards a consecrated religious form of life (giving rise to Religious Orders and Institutes) that nonetheless involved the laity in certain experiences of spiritual formation and apostolic cooperation. In our times “new types of associations for the laity” have developed, giving rise to “*new Ecclesial Movements and Communities*” approved by the Church whose members chiefly belong to the laity.

One of these is the **ECCLESIAL CARMELITE MOVEMENT** (established in June 1993 and approved by the Church in July 2003), which has the inspiring characteristic of having been founded on a centuries-old charism (spanning over 800 years, with a remarkable heritage of Sainthood and Doctrine). Its aim is to rediscover and experience the charism within a *spiritual home*, which can be shared by *consecrated religious and lay persons alike* (in keeping with the individual vocations and the ordinary conditions of the family and society).

THE CARMELITE CHARISM

The *Carmelite* charism consists of learning how to cherish the experience of “*continuous prayer*” that draws one intimately to God in line with the example set by Saint Theresa of Avila. It entails penetrating the heart of the Christian Mystery as deeply as possible, to the point of devoting continuous “*loving attention*” to the Most Holy Trinity dwelling within the individual, and in relationships and events. It is a charism that leads a Christian to experience a *normal intimacy* with Jesus and with His Holy Mother. It makes the individual *discover God’s presence in every episode of daily life* (whatever it may be), such as to ensure that everything is accomplished *in relation to Christ*. In brief, it means constantly reflecting on one’s *personal love for Christ* in every action – including the most infinitesimal– whereby a *mystical attention* becomes the normal way of life.

¹ These pages include extracts from the second part of the book ‘*Antichi carismi nella Chiesa. Per una nuova collocazione*’ (Jaca Book, Milan 2002).

Prayer – intended as a *prayer life* with prayer *actions* – is a “journey” where a Christian learns how to draw nearer to God and to live in His presence; to lovingly listen to Him and converse with Him “*uninterruptedly*”. However, in order to begin such a journey one needs to hold firmly to certain truths and keep them constantly in one’s mind and in one’s heart, namely:

- God loves every creature He creates in a unique way and He desires to establish a privileged union of love with every soul. We learn from Saint John of the Cross that «*If a man seeks God ... even more so does God seek man*». No Christian prayer can be achieved without a deep awareness of «*God’s primacy*» of love, which is made evident by the fact of «*knowing that we are loved*».
- God is not external to man but dwells in every soul with His creative power and His grace as well as «*personally*», trinitarianly. An individual must therefore seek God above all «*within*». However, God is not the result of our intimacy, therefore at prayer an individual should not only «*con-centrate*» but also «*de-centrate*» i.e. heed to the call for an interior life in order to seek God and remain lovingly in His Presence.
- Although particular «*times and settings*» are useful in prayer one can pray anywhere: «*love must be made known; not in secret places ... in truth, this desire is ever present in those souls which really love God. » (The Book of Foundations, 5, 16).*
- All our love experiences and the relations we have cultivated on earth help us to discover the attitude we must have toward God and how we should relate to Him
- «*...speak with Him as with a Father, a Brother, a Lord and a Spouse ... » (Way of Perfection, 28, 3).*
- As a synthetic formula of this truth MEC has chosen the Magisterium’s most expressive text on Christian anthropology regarding «*man’s intimate and vital link with God*», which is illustrated as follows: «*The root reason for human dignity lies in man’s call to communion with God. From the very circumstance of his origin man is already invited to converse with God. For man would not exist were he not created by God’s love and constantly preserved by it; and he cannot live fully according to truth unless he freely acknowledges that love and devotes himself to His Creator*» (*Gaudium et Spes*, No. 19)

The purpose of everything should always be to participate in the intimate life of God (“*theological life*”) with increasing intensity, by letting the trinitarian life gradually penetrate into all the individual’s thoughts and actions, i.e. learn to think like Jesus thinks (= *Faith*), desire like Jesus desires (= *Hope*), love like Jesus loves (= *Charity*).

THE CARMELITE CHARISM AND THE LAITY

What does the Carmelite charism offer the ‘layperson’ who lives in the ordinary daily circumstances of secular family and social life?²

It offers a *spiritual home* (which also includes concrete places and concrete

² All the notes that follow refer to the experiences of married and unmarried lay persons, who are members of the *Ecclesial Carmelite Movement*, and who live their lives in the secular world in the ordinary conditions of the family and society. The experiences are different for those members of the Movement who freely choose to “consecrate their chastity to God” though still remaining in the world. Their specific “*Rule of Life*” is proposed as the ideal way of experiencing «*Carmel in the heart of the World*».

friendships) where one can learn how to foster a unique "understanding of the human dimension": a specific pedagogy involving an internal and external attitude based on a commitment to live an intense Christian life according to God's law whilst fulfilling the same duties as any other individual engaged in secular occupations. There are two main settings that distinguish the calling of lay Carmelites: the family and the work environment.

We shall therefore provide a list of specifically *lay* tasks, meditating on how the charism we are involved with can lead us to a "*normal mystical attention*".

This term should not discourage us and appear too lofty and difficult or cut out only for the best. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches us that «Spiritual progress tends toward ever more intimate union with Christ. This union is called "mystical" because it participates in the mystery of Christ through the sacraments – "the holy mysteries" – and, in Him, in the mystery of the Holy Trinity. God *calls us all* to this intimate union with him, even if the special graces or extraordinary signs of this mystical life are granted only to some for the sake of manifesting *the gratuitous gift given to all*» (No. 2014).

We shall thus proceed to describe what this "*mystical attention*" comprises.

"MYSTICISM OF THE PERSON". ("The unity of body and soul") is the first '*attention*' that needs to be learned. And it begins specifically from care for the human body. If the world is to be the setting and means of the laity's Christian vocation, then the body is obviously the first concrete reality of the layperson's vocational setting. We must not forget that our society pays undue attention to the human body and demeans it, displaying extreme forms of benevolence as well as extreme forms of violence. From this standpoint the Carmelite charism has a privileged 'culture', inasmuch as its most cherished icon is the body of Mary, inhabited by the Son of God. One learns how to respect one's own body – and that of others – and to treat it like a «*pure and holy temple of God*», «*inhabited*» by the Mystery and made «*for the Lord*». It is definitely not a way of considering the body detached from the soul. Quite the contrary, it means accepting all the dignity of an indissoluble unity, which makes the body the temple of the soul in communion with God. An aesthetic image of the body – in the most theological sense of the term – is deeply engrained in the Carmelite culture where even asceticism is taught *with sweetness*, thus the transfigured bodies offer the Lord the sweetness of their spirit with symbolisms of love. Starting from the special theological care for the body, one then acquires a clear awareness of the «*great beauty and infiniteness of the soul*»³ to which the body is joined (a soul that must likewise be cared for, protected and nourished) and consequently the «unity and uniqueness» of communion with God of the whole person. As to the care for our soul, in order to develop a truly «*mystical personality*», the Carmelite tradition specifically underlines the importance of the following teaching of St. John of the Cross: «A soul that is hard because of self-love grows harder. O good Jesus, if you do not soften it, it will ever continue in its natural hardness...» (*Sayings*, No. 31). Lastly, even if engaged in temporal affairs, a lay Carmelite should cherish the essential values of the *way of life of the hermits* that characterized the original founding charism. Seeking – whenever possible – «places and moments of privacy» in order to experience the *original solitude* (virginal), where an individual lives in God's presence and consents to God's will.

Pedagogically, this mysticism induces a person to:

³ *The Interior Castle*, 1,1,1.

- *nurture an authentic devotion to the Eucharist (Holy Communion, Adoration) and receive Communion as frequently as possible;*
- *work earnestly towards personal transformation, humbly receiving the Sacrament of Penitence with frequent confessions as established with the confessor;*
- *dedicate some time for mental prayer each day (if possible at set times) and form the habit of "conversing with God" instead of "talking on one's own" (try to begin with: "Lord,...");*
- *concentrate scrupulously on personal "formation", dedicating time and effort to the tasks that the "School of Christianity" proposes;*
- *foster a desire for sainthood, reading the "Portraits of Saints" and never being afraid to covet "great aspirations";*
- *evaluate one's journey towards God based on personal experience and assimilation of the evangelical counsels, desiring to be rich of God alone; loving God in any other love and holding God's word above all else;*
- *be led by the Gospel and feel responsible in revealing Christ to others;*
- *provide the kind of service that was promised with courtesy at all times;*
- *pay particular attention to personal behaviour and decorum and to the communication tools that are used (the Media in general, etc.);*
- *participate regularly in the various activities organized by the Movement;*
- *value personal dignity above everything else, always remembering that a person should never be used as a means under no circumstances whatsoever.*

"MYSTICISM OF MARITAL AND/OR FAMILY COMMUNION". The lay translation of the Carmelite charism means making it operate principally for the sanctification of the little *"domestic church"* whose members belong to the "big" Church and live their secular identity in the world. In our times, the family has become the main *"issue"* of debate between secular society and the Church, where the mystery of God and the mystery of man are the prime targets of attack from diverse groups of non-believers. Creator and creature, Giver and gift are denied through ruthless manipulation of the "data" and the essential features of man. The Church's concern for the family and its large-scale evangelization efforts (focused on crucial issues such as life, sexuality, marriage, and education), is not just "another chapter of Christian morality like many others" that needs to be preached. Rather, it concerns the unfaltering principles for the ultimate safeguard of humanity. The first task for husband and wife is therefore the *«attention to marital communion»* in body and soul, which becomes the means for reciprocal communication of the grace of God. A place where husband and wife are thus *«exclusive»* to each other (preferentially chosen); where they are bound to love and bound by love *indissolubly*; the place of *fidelity* where forgiveness is a certainty. The Carmelite charism in this case requires experiencing the sacramental project– from the very beginning of the engagement period– with an acute awareness of the needs of a *Jealous God*, who incorporates every marriage into His Alliance. Christian married couples need to be made aware of the fact that God, through their love, continues to benevolently influence and remain *"familiar"* with the history of man. In Carmelite mysticism *the symbol of marriage* (with its poetry, its apprehensions, daily problems, and sad and joyful experiences) has always been placed at the heart and pinnacle of the mystical experience. And now, not only the symbolism but also the sacramental sign endowed with immense potential – *concrete marriage* – is found at the foremost point of this mysticism.

The Carmelite charism strongly encourages married couples to *fully exploit the mystical potential of the Sacrament of Matrimony* to the point of achieving – if God so wills – the ultimate experience that Carmelite mystics have described as “spiritual betrothal and marriage”, albeit via a different way. It is not hard to imagine how wonderful it would be for the Church should one day the symbol of “spiritual marriage” be used not only by virgins wanting to express their individual union with Christ, but also by those who achieve the union *together*, specifically by bringing the potential of the Sacrament of Marriage to full maturity.

With the “sacrament” husband and wife become “one flesh”, joined indissolubly and, as such, the “spousal union of the couple” stands *nuptially* (ecclesiastically) before Christ. Indeed, there is a level of spousal unity that leads husband and wife into the ambience of chastity where both, as an individual virgin soul, stand before the love of Christ seeking communion with Him. This does not imply “ideal marriages” in which there are no trials or hardships. The mystics who have best described the pinnacle of “spiritual marriage” with God are also those who narrate that to achieve this the soul must first experience “*dark nights*” set in emptiness and poverty of spirit and purged of every natural support, consolation and apprehension. Endeavouring to achieve all “*the mystical potential*” included in the mystery of the Sacrament of Marriage does not mean following ideal, lofty paths but involves an itinerary where both husband and wife experience the *Cross* required for their *Resurrection*.

Pedagogically, this mysticism induces the spouses to:

- *pay great attention to “spousal prayer” together and/or individually, entrusting each other to God;*
- *help each other to perceive Christ as being personally involved in their relation, starting from the most basic and reciprocal forms of courtesy;*
- *learn to consider the relation with their spouse as central and munificent (“trinitarian”) (“... for you I am love...”);*
- *honour each other at all times (... “I promise to honour you all the days of my life!”), with particular attention to kindness, forgiveness and the mastering of emotions;*
- *work together in order to make their home as lovely as a Church and their Church as familiar as a home;*
- *participate in the liturgical celebrations together, attending the Holy Mass with utmost love and devotion, and treasuring the experience;*
- *use spousal friendship as a model for all other friendships but do not use other friendships as an excuse to neglect the friendship with their spouse;*
- *extend their family into a “family of families” whilst maintaining the warmth that characterizes their specific family;*
- *never create problems or object – within possible limits– when their spouse wishes to take part in the life of the community;*
- *do not consider the misfortunes, sorrows and inevitable disappointments of married life a failure; each spouse should endeavour to accept them as a means for the edification of a highly personal chastity;*
- *learn to mitigate the other spouse’s flaws not because they annoy you but because the love for him/her makes you want to be a means for his/her sanctification.*

“MYSTICISM OF PATERNITY-MATERNITY”. The Sacrament of Matrimony unites the two spouses into “one flesh”, also in the sense of incorporating their children

through the Sacrament of Baptism when they acknowledge their children as "children of God" in Christ.

This mysticism therefore embraces the following.

➤ ***Mysticism of femininity and masculinity***

Husband and wife should experience this mysticism not only by giving a trinitarian nature to their love (as previously stated) but also through a mutual orientation towards the *mysticism of fecundity*. Fecundity not solely viewed as begetting life through mutual *generosity* (from the term "generate") but also perceived as the greatest form of cooperation with the Creator. Nowadays it is evident how fiercely society attacks and demeans this experience and how hesitant and insensitive some persons who God calls to fatherhood/motherhood really are. There is an increasing focus on the «self-gratification of the couple» (and its «rights»), and as a result fecundity is often treated as if it were a «problem» or even an «illness». In such circumstances only a *mystical calling* can prevail over all forms of opposition and rekindle a holy nostalgia for God's marvellous design. The spouses need to become aware of the «generosity» and «preciousness» involved in every human creature's experience in participating in the Creator's plan, and thus acknowledge the reciprocal «gift» of masculinity and femininity as the basis of the marital union.

With this awareness the *mysticism of every form of fecundity* is possible, i.e. not only parents generating their own children but also adopting or fostering children in the need of parents.

➤ ***Mysticism of pregnancy and childbirth***

A pregnant woman is called to experiment «*the unity which is the prototype of every unity in the world*» (von Balthasar). In «bringing a child into the world» a woman also experiments the prototype of all inter-human relations (that should all serve to *re-generate the person one relates to* otherwise they are useless). This "*mysticism*" of course does not exclude the suffering that pregnancy and childbirth entails (not to mention the subsequent difficulties involved in "raising" the child) but embraces it, knowing well that only the pain connected with childbirth is able to reveal the meaning of every other more obscure form of suffering. Jesus himself compared the sorrow and subsequent joy of a woman who gives birth with the experience of those who witnessed the Mystery of His Death and Resurrection. No other experience in this world is as close to the Paschal Mystery as childbirth, consequently through it a woman can learn how to penetrate profoundly into the Mystery of the Death and Resurrection of Jesus.

Pedagogically, the mysticism of paternity-maternity implies that:

- *the spouses help each other appreciate the "gift" of parenthood (when God calls a human life into existence through the spouses, whereby a husband becomes a father through his wife and a wife becomes a mother through her husband);*
- *the spouses help each other to appropriately (unselfishly) convey their masculinity and femininity to their children;*
- *after becoming parents the spouses live with the strength of faith the gift of parenthood granted by God the Father, the source of life and of all gifts;*
- *the spouses learn to perform their roles of co-operators of God's Divine Paternity with responsible awareness;*
- *the spouses (particularly the mother) strive to experience pregnancy as a*

- time of continuous prayer, knowing that in this period they are the nearest they will ever be to their Creator (to the extent of being "pro-creators");*
- *after becoming parents they responsibly carry out their roles as active instruments of the Divine Mercy (= "love for their offspring");*
 - *parents must always avoid being possessive (even in minor details) with their child, who is essentially a "shared gift";*
 - *the spouses cooperate together in the education of their children without delegating any of their obligations;*
 - *the spouses, with utmost serenity and coherence, reject any physical or cultural form of infertility, allowing no compromises for "single" or "gender" oriented styles of life (i.e. as if the male or the female gender were a matter of opinion) or any alternative or "extended" family forms or lifestyles.*

➤ **"Mysticism of filiality"**

This mysticism is inevitably tied to the "mysticism of paternity-maternity". In this regard we must bear in mind that childhood is not just a stage of life but also a permanent structure of the human person. Revelation tells us that all things were created "in Christ", i.e. through, in and in view of the eternal and incarnate Son of God. In human generations what is transmitted naturally "from father to son" is the awareness of being children of God. In a family the children are the living expression of its members who are all children of the one Divine Father. The "Mysticism of filiality" therefore denotes the relationship binding Christian adults to children (their own and those of others), which draws its inner strength from the Mystery of the Baptism they have all received.

Pedagogically the mysticism of filiality presupposes that:

- *the children will receive a valid education, essentially based on the filial Christian behaviour of the parents and other family members (siblings, relatives, friends);*
- *the family sets aside specific moments where all the members express their filial love for God (for instance in prayer, in the «Our Father ...», during liturgical celebrations...);*
- *parents (and adults in general) learn how to offer, whenever reasonably possible, their paternal and maternal care to all "other children" who are neglected or abandoned (if adults are unable care for any underprivileged children they may encounter they will also be unable to truly love their own children);*
- *children be taught the sense and worth of the most essential words relating to them (such as belong, obedience, care, trust, kindness, responsibility, etc.) which, though essential throughout one's lifetime, can only be appreciated and respected if learnt at the right time and in the right way, i.e. when the child is ready and able to understand the love these terms denote;*
- *children be taught the value of certain decisions, behaviours or customs (mainly regarding religion and morals) only if they can visibly relate them to their parents' positive conduct;*
- *a concrete form of Christian involvement (like that of a Movement) cannot be imposed on children but parents can point out its attraction and plus points; however, in the event of refusal they should respect the child's freedom to choose bearing in mind the problems the child may be facing in a particular stage or they might question themselves as to whether they have conveyed the advantages appropriately;*
- *it is never wise to talk about the problems and sacrifices involved in belonging*

to a movement if the child has not fully understood its worth.

"MYSTICISM OF EDUCATION". This mysticism implies a «*continual commitment*» to "bringing children into the world" and "introducing them step by step into the *total reality*". We use the term *mysticism* for the simple reason that the "reality of the world" cannot be understood unless one perceives the heart of the world, i.e. "*the design of the Father is to place Christ at the heart of the world!*". And linking the Heart of Christ to the heart of the world inevitably involves passing through the *Heart of the Church* where the heart of a human person is sheltered and edified. A Christian education is in fact carried out within a sort of *spiritualis uterus* (a spiritual uterus that enfolds and moulds a person for his/her entire lifetime), which makes the heart of the Triune God, the heart of Christ, the heart of the Church, the heart of the world, and the heart of every individual beat in unison. The pedagogical method that Christ bequeathed us consists in the organization of a life in which the seven sacraments are the true *paradigm of a person's existence* – of birth, growth, nourishment, love, renovation, sanctification and death – in such a way that the "natural" and "supernatural" are amalgamated. Indeed, it is the mission of evangelization the Church must accomplish throughout the world. And it demands a huge commitment from all its members.

Pedagogically, "Carmelite" educators can benefit from their charism as follows:

- *it is essential to convey, with joy and conviction, the beauty of the "humanly divine and divinely human" found in everything around us;*
- *it is likewise essential to keep the meaning of gift, commitment and joy tied together; a gift that is not followed by a commitment makes us shallow and presumptuous; a commitment that is not preceded by a gift alarms us and makes us resentful; if a gift and a commitment do not generate life they inevitably result in disappointment and frustration;*
- *parents must personally help their children to advance in the «mystical exploration» during privileged moments when they intensely perceive the nearness of God. God is always near His creatures but there are times when His presence can be felt more intensely both in natural and supernatural terms: for example when a child is being formed in the womb; when a child is born in the mystery of the mother's pain; when parents request (through Baptism, or with their prayers) God's paternity and the Church's maternity for their child; when their child experiences the First Confession, the First Holy Communion or Eucharistic «fusion» with Christ, the first outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and when an adolescent needs to concentrate on a vocational calling. In the Carmelite tradition there is a clear teaching to this regard: practically all Carmelite saints based their life on one of these experiences, which they lived through with an extraordinary mystical intensity thanks also to the help of their parents and educators;*
- *to this we must add an authentic mysticism related to the commitment (arising from the Mystery linking the Sacrament of Matrimony of the parents with the Sacrament of Baptism of the children) parents undertake in helping their children discern the vocation the Lord calls them to. When God Himself is practically obliged to designate a vocation it means that the parents (His first representatives on earth) have neglected certain aspects of the child's education;*
- *in particular, the parents should help their children identify the valid "teachers" they encounter (at school or elsewhere), and require the teachers*

to respect the parents' right to ensure that their children's education is in conformity with their own convictions.

"MYSTICISM OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION". The general opinion on education appears to indicate that everything should always be solved within the family, the school or other educational institutes. But if you reflect a little you can appreciate it is not that simple. An entire life is nothing other than «constant education». And a spiritual counsel helps us to comprehend the innermost essence of our being yearning to follow the Gospel, which invites us to «become like children». Laypersons should however appreciate that spiritual direction does not mean leaning on someone to help them when taking important decisions or accepting responsibilities in various areas of their life. Instead, they should try to regard it as a motivation for self-assurance and improvement of personal skills. The Carmel has always been distinguished for its particularly competent «spiritual guides» who exemplify the paternity of God and the maternity of the Church.

Pedagogically:

- *"Spiritual direction" is the privileged area for conveying and sharing the Carmelite charism because on the one side it perfects a spiritual guide and on the other it moulds an individual to a personal vocation in the special, unique sense of the Creator's calling;*
- *the Carmelite charism helps a Christian to walk trustfully through all the stages of life towards «the last childhood» when a person stands alone before God the Father, looking forward to rebirth in a new life; this is why a Christian should never abandon the «spiritual childhood » that keeps him/her «little» before God (and only before Him!). In this regard, the teaching of Saint Therese of Lisieux sets the example;*
- *any spiritual direction within the Carmelite charism must never lead laypersons to becoming "dependent" or insecure when making decisions or taking risks as may be required; it should instead strengthen their convictions on the beauty of the sainthood they wish to cultivate;*
- *openness to the indwelling of the Spirit – which is a typical aspect of a Carmelite style of life – must not result in an isolated intimism or inwardness but should instead favour the relations with others.*

"MYSTICISM OF LIFE". In a family the roles and tasks of the members are never set once and for all. They change over time with the different stages. From childhood to late adulthood. There is a *mystical way* (I repeat once again: a way that *draws strength from the Mystery and increasingly interiorizes it*) to experience the different stages of life. For instance, there should be:

➤ **"A mysticism of childhood"**

Childhood is the time when a human being is the *nearest ever to its origin*, instinctively attracted to a spiritual landscape and sensitive to God and to His world. Hence more *trusting* and more receptive to the faith. Although even children are flawed by original sin throughout history many have achieved *sainthood*. There have been children whose particularly precise and intense preparation for First Confession and First Holy Communion resulted in the most crucial mystical experience of their entire life. For others, it was the *piety* of their parents. And for others it was their childhood experience of

sorrow and in these cases– like in many others – sensitive, caring parents and educators played a fundamental role. So why wait to grow up in order to learn how to “become like children”? Why not exploit the resources of childhood when still a child? We should never forget that children are the prime recipients of the mysteries that theologians call the “Mysteries of Jesus’ Infancy”. And that children are also natural “*masters of contemplation*” because they are prone to believe that the wonders of the world could only have been made by a Divine Creator. The feeling of powerlessness a child so often experiences can provide the occasion to make him/her understand the value of humbleness and trustful abandonment. Even when a child misbehaves can offer parents a good opportunity to teach him/her the beauty of repentance and forgiveness. And the task of “*teaching children to pray*” – which is already carried out with excellent results in our Movement – may prove to be decisive.

➤ **“A mysticism of late adulthood”**

It is one thing to age *badly*, looking back on everything one has lost (often with resentment or frustration) and quite another to age while *pressing forward* and becoming like children (in the true Gospel sense), getting ready for the definitive tug into the arms of God the Father, and even *getting one’s body ready* for the mystery of the Passion, Death and Resurrection. The experience also greatly depends on the type of family an elderly person belongs to, and whether its members lovingly help him/her face the difficulties involved. At a late age many things may appear out of control or no longer depending on a person’s own will or on that of those close to him/her. However, this happens only when a person has not fulfilled the responsibilities involved in preparing for death; it does not occur when a person is prepared and realistically accepts the likelihood of death as it approaches.

We have only exemplified the two extreme stages of life. Many things could be said about youth and adulthood but here we will just mention the characteristic “*cry*” that both these «stages» raise towards the Mystery (to attain and consequently to fulfil a *vocation*, for example), and how God reveals Himself to those who seek Him.

MYSTICISM OF THE “STATES OF LIFE” AND RELATIVE

“ENVIRONMENTS” (work – leisure –cultural and social-political commitments – health and illness – friendships and social relations ...). Obviously we cannot mention here all the commitments a layperson should responsibly carry out nor the values he/she must bear witness to or defend. We will only underscore the charismatic (*Carmelite*) attitude the layperson should adopt when performing them. In certain situations the Christian Mystery is harder to express and interiorize; at times virtually impossible the cruder the reality is (such as the work environment) or the more distractive it is (either because we are surrounded by triviality or absorbed by problems or heavily conditioned by the world’s copious occasions for sin). In all these situations laypersons must never strive to adopt the mystical attitude of religious or consecrated persons. The latter are required to maintain a certain *distance* (work performed with an apostolic or ecclesial approach; many moments of prayer and contemplation in order to familiarize with the Mystery; ascetic detachment from the world and its customs etc.). The mystical path for laypersons is quite different. It entails *dealing with all aspects* of a person’s state of life as proficiently as possible (at

work or other areas a layperson should always show competence, empathy, and ask God's forgiveness in the event of deliberate omission or wrong behaviour) in order to express one's personal vocation according to God's plan and achieve Salvation. It means dealing with day to day matters with infinite patience, consistent with how we pray: *«Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven»*. Work means taking care of our cherished ones as well as ourselves (and the world God entrusted to us), through the commitment and love with which we face the complex chain of circumstances that constitute our reality.

Pedagogically:

- *the Carmelite charism can help laypersons face even very difficult circumstances at work and other places through preventive love, which is able to appreciate the beauty to be found in situations and relations greatly in need of caring attention, knowing they are part of a world destined for salvation;*
- *to understand specific Carmelite characteristics one just needs to identify the deep meaning of certain terms we regularly use; a layperson who wants to remain sensitive to the Mystery of God and to the mystery of man should likewise strive to penetrate the core of the mysteries of the world (including the so called "mysteries" of science and the "mysteries" of the various arts and professions). In this charismatic sphere an individual should try to discern the core qualities of the reality surrounding him/her with the conviction that there he/she will find traces of God's infinite mercy;*
- *to acquire competency in one's own profession is a duty, however it can also become an expression of love.*

MYSTICISM OF THE MISSION. The entire Church has no other purpose – no other reason for being – than carrying out the mission of Jesus through time and space. Anyone who becomes a Christian and wants to live like a Christian is inevitably involved in His mission of proclaiming the love of the Father and the gift of Salvation. The entire Church has a responsibility to the good of society and every Christian must consistently assume this responsibility according to his/her specific vocation and gifts received from the Holy Spirit. The mission of laypersons who are distinguished by the Carmelite charism is similar to that of all other baptized persons, i.e. to take Christ to the world especially in those environments where only laypersons can gain access. Laypersons are therefore principally responsible for all the "worldly realities", which should always be "respected" in the light of truth and charity. However, this responsibility should not only remain in the mind or in the actions of an individual lay Christian but should also be extended to involve other lay acquaintances.

Pedagogically, the Carmelite charism can in any case:

- *constantly remind laypersons to keep an attitude implying the maximum depth for the maximum extension, at all times and in any situation; being supportive and generous to the fullest extent often proves to be the easiest and most immediate way to relate to others;*
- *what enables us to accept every person, every situation and every event with benevolence is the awareness that "the heart God made for Himself alone" always beats in every human breast in the same way and in every age: « ... the heart, which is dissatisfied with anything less than God» (Canticle 35, 1), just as "anything less than the infinite fails to satisfy us " (F, 3, 18);*
- *under a theological and cultural perspective, we should always hold firmly to*

the two truths that "Christ is everything for us" and that "Christ is for everyone"; consequently, the more He is everything for us, the more open we are for everyone; the more open we are for everyone, the more He is everything for us;

- moreover, seeing that the Mission always requires a demanding, "self-sacrificing" love and an "unconditional motivation", the Carmelite charism shows that the best way to remain loyal to the mission is not only that of counting on one's moral or ascetic virtues, but to let our Triune God "trinitize" our very nature, making it essentially relational, essentially selfless;
- lastly, our Movement acknowledges with joy that, from a Carmelite viewpoint, the finest and most precise doctrine exemplifying the Mission is found in the writings of Madeleine Delbr el who God graced with the gift of living her original Carmelite vocation in the world.

MYSTICISM OF THE "CARMELITE FRATERNITY"

The following points are a synthesis of the distinctive features of the **Ecclesial Carmelite Movement** for all those who wish to experience the charism to the fullest extent.

We wish to describe here the precise "Carmelite home" as experienced by those who inhabit it and have consolidated its structure with a view to interweaving "a web of authentic Carmelite communities" in the world, the focal point of the laity's mission.

We shall proceed systematically:

1. The Movement – a grouping of Carmelite communities – is our hub, the "home" we have to love, inhabit and promote. MEC is where we experience and embrace the Church every day as members of the Body of Christ like all the other movements that live their specific charism within the Church.
2. A Movement serves to generate and to form persons, but it too in turn is formed by persons. We must therefore be absolutely convinced of the fact that we need persons who can work patiently in order to develop a strong identity, i.e. *persons moulded by the Carmelite charism*.
3. The two aspects above are complemented perfectly when the Carmelite identity is expressed by *persons-in-communion* who seek the face of God in a uniquely personal way as well as communionally, and are thus nurtured and moulded both in body and in soul.
4. The *Ecclesial Carmelite Movement* has a heritage of Doctrine and Sainthood spanning over eight hundred years, which is mainly expressed in a consecrated form of life. Friendly relations between lay and consecrated persons are therefore essential. Consequently, the Movement should also include "*states-of-life-in-communion*" in addition to "*persons-in-communion*".
5. Said "*persons-in-communion*" and "*states-of-life-in-communion*" should not base their unity only on interpersonal relations but mainly on the fact that lay and consecrated persons alike recognize the evangelical *counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience* as being the original anthropology or design according to which man was created in holiness with the object of becoming reconciled in Christ. We thus need to acknowledge one unique Treasure, one unique Love and one unique Word.
6. The most common way to inhabit the "Carmelite home" for laypersons is the *family circle*. The prime, inimitable *Carmelite community* is the family and the

prime, inimitable *"web of communities"* is composed of a *"family of families"*. A person with a Carmelite identity must necessarily represent a family with a Carmelite identity. Friendship between members of the community is an essential factor, including persons who do not have a spousal vocation.

7. The family is where the spirit of the Movement is mostly perceived. Family members must strive to live as recommended by the Movement (prayer, formation, fraternal meetings, charity, mission) not only personally but also together whenever possible (without conflicting with any members who may choose otherwise), as in a small religious community.
8. It is not only advisable but also necessary that a family belonging to MEC has its specific *"rules"*, *"routines"* and *"schedules"* – both *material* and spiritual – as in every human cohabitation with solid objectives. Love, education and sanctification should have priority over all other objectives.
9. The weaving of *"a web of Carmelite communities throughout the world"* is carried out through warm relations among the families belonging to the Movement. All friendships are different from one another in various ways and so too are those between the families belonging to the Movement. What can make the difference in a friendship is the time one is willing to dedicate to it in activities like sport, hobbies, which however should never lead to any form of rivalry or criticism. You can always *"be a friend"* to someone and *"make friends"* with someone. You should never ignore any friendship you may be offered but always be grateful for even the minimum sign of kindness. Everyone should offer friendship without expecting anything in return. There are also those informal friendships we strengthen through interests in common (for instance, the *"small discussion groups of the School of Christianity"*). However, the Movement should be deeply motivated to forming and cultivating *"Grandi Amicizie"* (*Firm Friendships*).

We call *"Firm Friendships"* those that are totally oriented to experiencing the Carmelite charism in friendship and allegiance to Christ, motivated towards fraternal communion and dedication to the Church (similar to the early Christian community described in the *Acts of the Apostles*). Although clothed in spiritual armour these *Friendships* do not exclude anything that is authentically human. *Firm Friendships* can be wisely oriented towards forms of genuine *"fraternity"* with precise rules of life. Furthermore, due to their specific nature these *Friendships* tend to become permeated with charity and thus always willing to take on the burdens of the weak, to be hospitable, and to offer disinterested help.

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