

Homily to St. Joseph's Community - August 20, 1997

by Fr. Dominic Borg, OCD

A few moments from now, I will be saying to these four new members the - after I examine them with an interrogation, a dialogue that goes on between them and myself in the name of the community ... then I will tell them that the Rule of Life of the Secular Carmelite is this "to live in allegiance to Our Lord Jesus Christ, following the doctrine and example of St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross. Let the word of God find a rich home within you." and then also, like Mary, that they should follow Jesus Christ in the footsteps of Mary.

So here we have this allegiance - to live in allegiance to our Lord Jesus Christ, and following the doctrine of St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross. Usually the doctrine and deeds of a person are summarized in a motto, in a certain principle. We know what was the motto of St. Teresa of Avila and we also know what was the motto of St. John of the Cross. St. Teresa of Avila "aut pati, aut mori". St. John of the Cross "Domine pati et contemni pro te" St. Teresa of Avila "Lord, either I suffer or I die for you", St. John of the Cross "to suffer and to be despised on account of your name - because of you" So in following the footsteps and doctrine of St. Teresa of Avila, and St. John of the Cross, this is what is going to be ahead of our new brothers and sisters. You know this is what is ahead of us. It is a part of our life. When people see us doing these things, following this doctrine, and following the example of St. Teresa and St. John of the Cross, and like Mary, opening our hearts for the Word of God, St. Luke uses two important words for Mary - he says Mary "pondered" and she "treasured". Mary pondered the word of God, and she treasured it in her heart. It is not enough for you and for me to know the Bible with our minds.

Recently there was a poll taken in Canada by a very serious company. The poll asked the question "From where do you think happiness comes?" and it was announced on the radio in London "90% of the people interrogated said that 'happiness comes by reading the Bible'". It's amazing. They were asked "do you read the Bible yourself?" and the reply was "not every day, but I am sure that even if you don't read it every day, by coming in contact with the page of the Bible, it gives you happiness."

Ninety percent (90%). That shows that people are in a situation where they are fed up of running after butterflies. They are fed up of running after material things, thinking that material things are going to fill the emptiness in their life. They are discovering that this emptiness that is in their life can only be filled by God, as St. Augustine used to say "We were created for you, and our souls will not find rest except in you." These are the same words that St. Teresa of Avila repeats.

In the first reading Isaiah said "When they see our actions, when they look at us, they will say "and all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed." To be called to this vocation to be a Christian is already a great blessing my brothers and sisters. It is a great blessing. In the future the world will give thanks to God for sending a Church to show the way towards salvation - to be the light for the nations. So to be a Christian is already a gift, a great grace. To be a Carmelite also is a grace, a vocation. God calls us not because we are stronger or better than others. I hope that as we travel this journey toward the promised land, you begin to discover that the more we travel, the more we come face to face with our weakness. The Word came to approach us, and the Word found us very courageous, full of enthusiasm, full of energy, the way the Word went to Gideon in the Old Testament. Yesterday we had a beautiful reading from Gideon. The angel of the Lord went to Gideon and

he found Gideon in the wine-press, grinding the wheat. He was afraid of the Midianites, that they would come and steal his wheat, so he was grinding it in the wine-press. The angel said to him "Peace be with you man of valour." He was being sarcastic. "Peace be with you man of valour." "The Lord be with you" he said to him. Gideon, as soon as he heard those words, he entered into a dialogue, a dialogue of rebellion with the angel. He said to him "If the Lord is with us, then why are there all these wars among us? Where are the good deeds that our ancestors spoke about. The angel told him that he should go - he has been chosen to go and set his people free. In front of that vocation Gideon begins to become conscious of his weakness. He said "my tribe is the least of the tribes, and my family is the least in the tribe of Manasse, and to make it worse, I am the weakest in my family. "To make it worse, I am the weakest in my family."

In his weakness, brothers and sisters, he experienced a grace. He experienced a call, and to this call he wanted to present a gift, he wanted to give something to the angel. And so he said to the angel "stay here, wait here, if I have found favour in your sight, stay here until I go and bring a present to you." He went, he cooked a meal, and he brought it there. The angel waited there for him. As soon as he arrived the angel said to him "Place it there on that stone", and then the angel hid the food with the stubs that they had, and it was consumed by fire. When someone invites you to eat, and you begin to eat, that person is very happy to see you eating, because when they invite you to eat, if they did not have opportunity to talk to you to ask "what do you like? what would you prefer? are you allergic to any foods?", they will be very tense and worried whether you will like the food. As soon as you sit down and you say "It's very good", immediately the person begins to sigh a sigh of relief. And when they see you begin to eat, and enjoying it, they are even more happy because you are consuming what they prepared for you.

And so Gideon experienced that the angel consumed the food, and immediately it communicated happiness to him, seeing that he liked his small gift that he presented in front of him. In front of this reaction, Gideon became conscious of God's power. And, in the middle of that war, in the middle of that disturbance, in the middle of that situation of discouragement, which for a while took possession of Gideon, Gideon built an altar and named that place "The Lord is Peace" What an irony - man of valour, the word comes to him and he discovers his weakness. A person who is grumbling because there are wars, enemies surrounding him, his life is being threatened, and in that situation of confusion he established the seal - the Lord is Peace. There was a transformation, a transformation that will take place in every person who takes seriously a formation, whether it be intellectual formation or spiritual formation. Today three sisters and one brother of ours are starting this period of formation, and if you take this formation seriously, it will bring you also a transformation where you begin with courage like Gideon - to enter into dialogue, thinking sometimes that you are even smarter than God, the way Gideon thought he was smarter than God - until you discover that this God is the Lord, the Lord is Peace.

When you begin to read the Psalms, sometimes you find the title "God", and sometimes you find "Lord". Many people think that they are the same. They are not the same. They are different concepts of the same God. When it is God "Elohim", it is the God of justice, God as a judge, God who comes to take vengeance on the enemy. When it is the title "Lord", "Yahweh", it is the one who is more merciful, full of compassion and love. When you and me look at God, and look at Jesus Christ, and accept God and Jesus Christ as our Lord, then we begin to open our life for his merciful action.

The very fact that we are here brothers and sisters, it is an act of mercy on the part of God for each one of us. If you think that by coming here we are doing a favour to God, or a favour to the

community, or doing a favour to the President or to the Master of Formation, we are kidding ourselves. No. It is for our own good, brothers and sisters. It is for our own good that the Lord brought us here. It is an act of mercy that we are here this evening. I hope that in this confusion of our life, like Gideon, we too will discover that the Lord is Peace. This peace that comes to you and to me with the word of God, because the word of God is the word that those who taste it will never taste death, and those who die, it will bring them back to life. "A time is coming and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of God, and those who hear it will live." That's what we read in the Gospel of St. John. This is going to be said to these new members "Let the word of God find a rich home within you, taking Mary as our model.." And that is what we are going to do here with the Scapular. In taking this Scapular -the habit of the Order of Carmel, and taking our Lady as their model, they follow in the footsteps of our Lord Jesus Christ, and Mary followed in the footsteps of our Lord Jesus Christ - and where did she end up? - she ended near the Cross. And that is a Christian. A Christian is a person who has discovered the meaning of the Cross, and so he hugs the cross. He embraces the cross. He doesn't run away from the Cross, because to run away from the Cross is to sin. That's what sin is. Sin is running away from God's love, and God's love is revealed to us at its utmost there on the Cross. Jesus Christ, when he was on the Cross, gave his life for each one of us. He gave us also his mother as our mother. Looking at John he said "Behold your mother." The evangelist said to us "and from that moment, he made a home for her" - he made a place in his life for her - he opened his heart so that she would teach him, she became his tutor. This is who Mary should be for each and every one of us, especially for you who are starting your period of formation. Fall in love with Mary.

There was a time when the Protestants were prejudiced about Mary, today even the Protestants themselves are falling in love with Mary because they can see that she is the one who treasured the Word, and if they put so much emphasis on the word of God, surely she is the one who is going to teach them how to study this Word with prayer and silence. And here again, in the Acts of the Apostles we find Mary there, together with the Apostles, that they pass their time in prayer. As Carmelites, brothers and sisters, not only as Carmelites, but also as Christians, but much more so as Carmelites, we are called not just to pray, but we are called to become a prayer. To be prayer, in such a way that when people see our actions, they will praise God. The Jewish people say that the soul has three garments. It has the garment of the thought, the garment of the speech, and the garment of the actions. What matters most is the garment of the actions. It is there that the person can reveal most, not in his thoughts, not in his words, because sometimes we say one thing and we do another, but in our actions. Today's Gospel told us, "When they see your good works, they will give praise to your father who is in heaven."

This is the duty of the Christian, that with his life, and the life of those people who surround him, he becomes an act of praise to God. The psalms are the book of praises of a person who has experienced how the Lord delivers him from the attack of his enemies. You and I have these enemies brothers and sisters. If you think that you don't have any enemies, then you must be living in the clouds. Each one of us has enemies. If they are not physical enemies, they are spiritual enemies, they are the temptations, the sin, the devil. These are all our enemies, and as soon as we experience that the Lord has set us free from these enemies to lift us up as the psalmist will say 'he lifted our head up', then, together with the psalmist we will begin to praise God.

To be a Carmelite, as to be a Christian, is not a privilege. Some people unfortunately think of Christianity as being a privilege. Christianity is not a privilege, it is a call to service. It is a call to service. It is a person being sent with a mission. That's what it means to be a Christian. "As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you." And we ourselves are called to be the salt, as the Gospel told us, to be the leaven, to be the light for others. It's amazing, when people see our

actions, what great influence we can leave upon them. It is amazing. St. Francis of Assisi used to send the brothers to preach, to proclaim the word of God, and before they left, he would say to them "Go, and proclaim the Good News, and if need be, use words." , because if people cannot understand our actions, they are not going to understand our words.

Hopefully you and me, with the grace of God we will live up to this call, to make this world a garden, literally a garden where people can enjoy life, where people stop existing and begin to live. This is the reason why we say that 'he who teaches is greater than he who gives birth', that's what they say, that he who teaches is of more value than he who gives birth - because the person who gives birth to a child communicates life - the one who teaches communicates the art of living. You can give life to a person, and that person all his years continues to exist, risking nothing, lives his life only for himself. St. Paul in his letter to the Philippians said "Have this mind among yourselves which was in Christ Jesus. He did not look at his own interests, but to the interests of others. He who was rich became poor, so that you and me would become rich." Like John the Baptist, each Christian, and each Carmelite is called to say "He must increase, I must decrease" The more the I decreases, the more God increases in our life.

It is, brothers and sisters, with the power that this word of God will give us, and I hope that you new members will really fall in love, you will literally have a love affair with the word of God. The power that this word will give you is something incredible. It gives you the power to conquer your enemies. And as the psalmist says in the third psalm, you have to read it in Hebrew to understand it - he says "to the leader" in Hebrew "to the leader" can also mean "to the victorious one". If you want to conquer your enemies, first you will have to learn how to conquer your selves. As soon as we conquer ourselves, then the conquest of our enemies will be that much easier. But if we do not yet know how to conquer ourselves, how to control this old man in us, how are we going to control the enemy outside of us. This is the greatest enemy, the one inside us. Our greatest enemy is inside us. St. Paul used to say "wretched man that I am, who is going to deliver me from this situation of this old man of sin" ... he said .. "Christ Jesus". So, taking Christ Jesus as the model in your life, learning from Mary how to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, treasure the Word of God and ponder constantly upon it. This love of Mary, for sure, will help you to make this journey, and like the prophet Elijah, with the energy that that food gave him, was able to reach the summit of the mountain. You too will one day praise God by reaching the summit of the mountain, who is Jesus Christ.