

THE RENEWAL OF THE SECULAR CARMEL WITHIN THE NEW EVANGELIZATION

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Introduction

The theme of this First International Congress of the Secular Order, "The Renewal of the Secular Carmel within the New Evangelization", demonstrates on the one hand a keen awareness of an identity that implies fidelity, and on the other, a desire for openness to the signs of the times with their challenges.

Pope John Paul II, in his talk to the International Congress on Religious Life (22-27 November 1993), points out the way to accomplish this. What he says about religious life can also apply to all Christians, and so to you Carmelite lay members:

"The religious life (and we'd say the Secular Carmel) today is experiencing a particularly significant moment of its history, because of the demanding and vast renewal that the changed socio-cultural conditions at the threshold of the third millennium of the Christian era, impose on it. .. The founders knew how to incarnate in their lives the Gospel message with courage and holiness. It is correct to say that, faithful to the urgings of the Spirit, their spiritual children promote this witnessing over time by imitating their creativity with a mature fidelity to the original charism and constant attention to present-day needs."

To home in on this approach to the renewal of the Secular Carmel within the New Evangelization one must avail oneself, first of all, of a brief historical overview of the laity in the Church: this will help us to understand the underpinnings of what was once called the Third Order. Next we ought to examine the meaning and the goals of the New Evangelization to which the Church has been calling us since Vatican II. Finally, to reach a number of practical conclusions we ought to keep a close eye on the essential contours of the Teresian Carmelite charism which then characterize the evangelizing service of those who give their lives to it.

I. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE LAITY IN THE CHURCH

To use the study of Church History in a consideration of the laity leads us to own up to numerous shadows rather than bright light. That is, for many centuries lay people were considered second class citizens in the People of God and their active role in the Church was hampered.

As it developed the Church turned away from being a community relying on brother/sisterhood and equality flowing from the charisms and ministries, and thus the clergy progressively drifted apart from the laity. Little by little the Pauline structure of apostles/prophets/teachers gave way to that of bishops/presbyters/deacons. At that time the terms "clergy-laity" came into use and started to show how the gifted contribution of the latter group to the Church (which counts 98% of all baptised persons) was weakening. This has lasted even into modern times.

The Church of Christ is the same all along the extent of its history. It possesses in its make-up divine and human elements. The former are lasting and stable, even if they should not be mistaken for the forms that convey them and that are influenced by time and cultural changes. The latter change and are subject to transformation.

Thanks be to God, today we witness a Church that questions sincerely the vocation and mission of the laity within its borders and in the world. All the same a long journey lies ahead of us so that the searching may really bear fruit.

1. Laypeople in the Primitive Church

The Primitive Church (until the fourth century) had a biblical image of itself: that of the new family, the new people of God. Its predominant structure was charismatic. The charisms showed forth diversity and a unity that

was sustained and guided by Christ and his Spirit. They gave form to the community that was organized in line with the social and cultural contexts in which it existed. Each believer received a free gift suited for the service of the rest (see 1 Co 12.1-7; 1 Pt 4.10). Paul directed the primary use of the charisms, before all else, to the mission of evangelization (see 1 Co 12.28).

The Primitive Church showed forth the centrality of a reciprocal communion involving multiple ministries. All were orientated to strengthen and make manifest this communion. Even though there is a hierarchy in the charisms, the most important ones are those which render most service to the community. In this fashion we do not see yet the distinctions that showed up later on, that derived from their structural origins: power, organization, worship. The latter separated sharply the clergy from the laity, the hierarchy from the people.

2. Laypeople in the Church of Christendom

A new stage in the life of the Church began when Constantine issued the Edict of Milan (313) to grant the Christians full religious freedom. Till then persecuted, or at most tolerated, Christianity thus became the official religion of the Roman Empire.

This official recognition sped up the process that distinguished the faithful from those who exercised authoritative service in the Church. The word "lay" was originally used to designate a member of the "laos" or People of God; now it began to be used as a description for that segment of the Church members who were not ordained or to non-clerics or non-monastics.

One outcome was emphasis on a pyramid type structure in the Church. As with the feudal and monarchical system, the people then assumed a merely passive position. Both power and functions started to concentrate themselves in the clergy. The faithful became simply those who were supposed to listen and obey. A text written around 1140 drew an eloquent picture of that state of affairs:

There are two classes of Christians. One is dedicated to divine service and committed to prayer and contemplation. It is fitting they stay far away from the noise of temporal things. These are the clergy and those consecrated to God or those who've converted to a new way of life. ... The other class of Christians are the laity. "Laos" means the people. They are allowed to own temporal things, but only to use them. Nothing is more lamentable, surely, than to rate money higher than God. They are allowed to take a wife, work the land, judge and initiate legal suits, to place offerings on the altar, pay tithes, and so they can be saved if they avoid vice by doing good.

3. Laypeople in the Church of the New Christendom

The Protestant Reformation at the beginning of the sixteenth century shook up church structures. The reaction to it came with the Council of Trent which, polemicizing against the Protestants with all that such an apologetic stance implied, reaffirmed the previous church practice regarding ministry and organization. The sacral nature of the priesthood was underscored along with its sacramental powers. Its relationship to other Christians was considered a relation of dominion and superiority over them. This priestly image would thereafter predominate until Vatican II.

The introduction of Father Congar's famous book, *Lay People in the Church*, (written in the first half of the fifties) contained a fascinating anecdote of Cardinal Gasquet in 1914 that explained well the idea then current of the laity's role in the Church. [to note following text from Sydney conference:]

'once a catechumen asked his bishop about the "position" of a layperson in the Catholic Church in order to know if it was worth his while to take up Baptism. The bishop replied sincerely that "in the Catholic Church the laity occupy a double position: they kneel to pray and they sit to hear the clergy's sermons." Cardinal Gasquet added that he forgot a third position for the laity: placing their hands in their wallets.'

4. The Laity in the Church of Vatican II

Changes came about with the Second Vatican Council -- changes decisive for ecclesiology. This science had

been reduced to a "hierarchology", as Cardinal Congar put it. The Council returned to the concept of the Church as the People of God.

A full chapter of the document on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, deals with the laity (see chap. 4). In it the lay person comes through as someone incorporated in Christ by baptism and made a sharer in the priestly, prophetic and royal functions of Jesus.

5. The Laity in the Document "Christifideles Laici"

In 1987 the General Synod in Rome met to discuss "The laity and their Vocation and Mission in the Church." The outcome of this synod was the Apostolic Exhortation "Christifideles Laici" (Lay Faithful), promulgated in December 1988.

That document discusses the dignity of lay believers and their participation in church life. Emphasis is placed on co-responsibility for the laity in the mission of the Church, and on the need for their adequate formation so they can share fully in the New Evangelization: helping in the missions, promoting human dignity, culture, science, technology, politics, finances. The Exhortation states:

The lay faithful ... are fully involved in this task of the Church [=the New Evangelization]. Practically their role is to give witness to how Christian laity ... represents the fully valid answer to the problems and expectations stirred up by life in every person and society. This will be possible if lay people can overcome in themselves cleavage between the Gospel and life. Unity of life that finds inspiration and strength toward fulfilment will come about through working at daily family life, at work, and in society.

Even with this, one would say the laity does not yet apply the full extent of their capacities to the service of the community, with all that this would provide, from their God-given charisms. To a certain degree a paternalistic attitude of the hierarchy persists; and an adequate ecclesiology of communion implying participation is still wanting.

II MEANING AND AIMS OF THE NEW EVANGELIZATION

The Church's essential mission is to evangelize all humankind. This engages its deepest identity. It exists for this. The fulfilment of this evangelizing service has progressively revealed to the community of believers, clarifying by degrees the different dimensions of evangelization. It has demonstrated that there are anthropological, theological and Gospel bonds between evangelization and human development, promotion and liberation. Along with liberation from sin (with its personal dimension) goes also liberation from structural evils and of social sin (with a socio-historical dimension). This includes a thrust toward the eschatological liberation that death brings as it introduces us into the fullness of life.

This new concept of evangelization definitely springs from a faith vision of reality. It does not have for objective the "salvation of souls", but the salvation of persons. These live multi-faceted realities, immersed in the individual problems of each social context where they take up the challenges produced by the flow of constant change.

The world we live in is influenced by a deep economic divide between North and South, and by some lingering divisions between the West and the East blocks. Ours is also a world with a plurality of cultures. From region to region and even within individual countries we find different ways to transform and use nature; different forms of familial, educational, labour and economic relations. Reality itself is interpreted differently.

All this has obvious ramifications for efforts at evangelization. It places equally special demands on each socio-cultural area so that the proclamation of the Good News maybe directed to emerging problems. The 1994 Synod on Religious Life referred to this pluralistic situation when it spoke thus about missionary activity:

"It is necessary to have a pedagogy of the "signs of the times" ... or the art of educating people to read history from this viewpoint, namely, as 'the voice of God calling the Church here and now' to renew its mission in the new *aeropagi* (=marketplaces) of our times. ... It is necessary to face up to the challenges of those new

marketplaces adequately, that is, with the clear awareness of those same challenges and, above all else, of their meaning for the current mission of the Church. This involves proper fixing of priorities among many and differing challenges.

The focal point in First World countries and societies is the interplay between faith and science. The one to evangelize is the person threatened by materialism as he esteems science and technology. Here one must insist on gospel and transcendent values, on the compatibility of faith with science; on the meaning of Christian hope that transforms history; and on acknowledging social injustices on both national and international levels so as to accept responsibility for whatever one contributes to the causes and persistence of those injustices.

In the former communist world, still undergoing upheavals, restructuring and profound changes, the main problem is to show the liberating dynamism of faith; human rights to religious freedom; and a gospel route toward transformation of society's structures. The main target for proclaiming the Gospel are people formed by atheism who see religion as the "opium of the people".

In the Third World priority is to be given to the interplay between faith and justice, with particular nuances in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. In Latin America evangelization is to be directed mostly to believers living at an inhuman level of poverty. Emphasis there should be placed on faith as a motor force toward transformation and liberation from individual and social sin -- "from all that tears apart humans and society and finds its source in the mystery of evil". In Asia one ordinarily (that is, outside the Philippines) presents evangelization to those practising one of the main eastern religions. Dialogue with them and their ancestral culture is at the root of evangelizing work. Finally, in Africa, just recently colonized and now trying to affirm its own identity, the inculturation of the Gospel ought to give rise to thrusts at promoting human dignity and liberation.

The new Evangelization faces challenges today that have been evoked by the Church itself. The main ones are the promotion of justice joined to the option for the poor, enculturation, and the apostolate of spirituality.

III ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF THE TERESIAN CARMELITE CHARISM

To attain authentic renewal within the New Evangelization we must become aware of who we are; aware also of the fundamental elements of the charism and spirituality of the Teresian Carmel, as well as the lifestyle proper to the lay state in which you live it out.

1. The Teresian Charism

To sum up briefly the fundamental outline of the Teresian Carmel's charism we have:

a. Witnessing to the Presence of God in the World

This means:

- to cultivate and witness to the experience of God
- to live prayer as a life attitude
- to maintain living and committed attentiveness to the Word of God
- to focus our life on a spirituality of the following of Jesus
- to help others in their prayer life and their meditation on the Word of God

b. Living and Witnessing to Christian brother/sisterhood

For this it is necessary for you as members of the Secular order to work at

- being Christian communities
- being simple and caring communities connected to others around you: "small schools of Christ"

c. Living the Prophetic Dimension of the Christian Life

I already said that we, along with all Christians, are called to live the prophetic dimension of our baptism. This implies:

- living in the presence of God
- defending God's plan
- adopting in our human weakness a prophetic stance as we remain open to the inscrutable ways of the Spirit

d. Imitating Mary

In the spiritual tradition of Carmel Mary is seen as our model:

- of openness to God,
- of attentive concern for our neighbour's needs,
- of contemplative prayer which finds God in all things,
- of faith, love and hope.

2. The Teresian Charism and the Christian Layperson

Like other religious families Carmel has had from its beginning groups of lay people who wished to live the charism and spirituality of Carmel through its vocation and mission. The notion of these lay groups was influenced by the vision of a church in which was found a sharp demarcation first between clergy and religious, then between clergy with religious and the laity. The resultant so-called "Third Orders" sought to be, after a fashion, a reproduction of the monastic or conventual life of the different religious orders.

Vatican II, as already mentioned, marked a new era in the Church. From that point on recognition of the laity as full-fledged members of the Church has grown. The identity is to be persons of the Church at the heart of the world, and persons of the world at the heart of the Church.

In the world you find your specific realm of action. You are called to make present the plan of God for humankind with the witness of your life and activities. Or, you are to live as responsible children of God to deepen human brother/sisterhood, and to share in justice for peace in the world.

Your lay vocation carries the colours of the Carmelite charism and spirituality. As you know, it emphasizes the profound living out of the contemplative experience of God. Based on it you are to live your evangelizing commitment in today's world as Carmelite lay people. Our forebearers, Teresa of Jesus and John of the Cross, are acclaimed masters of the experience of God and of a prayer that both listens to God and commits itself to others.

Your Rule of Life (art 8) addresses the need to integrate prayer with apostolate:

Prayer and the apostolate, when they are genuine, are inseparable, and each profits the other. The Secular Carmelites are therefore bound to the fervent practice of fraternal charity and must take their share of apostolic responsibility in the Church and in the world.

With this object, the Secular Carmelites will first of all seek to intensify their personal union with God, and to bear witness to Christ by their life of prayer. They are also free to engage in any type of apostolic activity. They will dedicate themselves especially to the promotion of priestly and religious vocations, [the missions], and collaborate in the Order's activities and undertakings. All these activities will be evaluated and made more precise by local statutes according to the various geographical regions.

IV PRACTICAL CONSEQUENCES

In the light of these reflections it is clear that the apostolate of the Secular Carmel calls for a new dynamism. Oftentimes in the past a life of prayer and devotions aimed at interior realities was stressed, with very little regard for external matters. The apostolate took place mostly on a personal basis, and not as groups of the Secular Carmel.

I feel that, with regard for the circumstances of each socio-cultural and ecclesial milieu, the Secular Carmel is called to live like associated laity; in the field of spirituality and in a commitment to the New Evangelization, in ever increasing co-responsibility. For this we need adequate initial and ongoing formation.

I believe that the future of the Secular Carmel depends precisely on this active, mature and responsible collaboration in the apostolate of the Order on all levels:

- in the missions: temporary commitments
- in Houses of Prayer and Retreat Houses
- in Spirituality Institutes
- in creating prayer groups
- in the full range of apostolic initiatives.

Fraternities of the Secular Carmel ought to be open to and found active also in the full range of the efforts of today's New Evangelization by their lay contribution, through lay collaboration flowing from the charism of the Teresian Carmel.

CONCLUSION

Work at living and witnessing to the experience of God. In a world threatened by materialism and consumerist values, by atheism and the loss of respect for transcendental values, your life is included in the calling to underscore the reality of the presence and action of God in history. It stresses how much we humans need God and our need to be open to transcendence.

We want to see you joined to us, men and women religious, as a maturely associated laity that is aware of both your Carmelite and lay identity.

May Mary, whom we call Mother of Carmel, walk the way ahead with you as you discern and reflect together this week. She is and will always be our model. Discover in her especially the praying Virgin, open to God and listening to God's word in either the Scriptures or life. She believed in God's word and put it into practice by showing real concern for the needs of others. We commend this First International Congress to her and to her maternal vigilance over you.