

A Modern Presentation Of
Carmelite Spirituality:

The 1995 *Constitutions III*

Christopher O'Donnell, O.Carm.

Sharing

A third value emphasised by the *Constitutions* is sharing. In the past sharing was more or less an ascetical value, associated with material things or generosity. Now it is a rich and diverse concept, taking many forms. Thus the *lectio divina* as a communal prayer makes it possible for “the brethren to share their experience of God and respond together to the challenge of his Word” (# 82, § 2);

the notion of sharing is found more generally in the programmatic article 31, which is inspired by our Italian fraternity in Pozzo di Gotto. This article indicates “moments of particular intensity” of our life in common; sharing in our communities is at various levels: human, spiritual, intellectual; moreover, our mission in the midst of the people is also seen as sharing; a most important instance of sharing is dialogue, which is mentioned about a dozen times in various places in the *Constitutions*.

The integrating idea behind the various references to sharing appears to be fraternity. But it must be admitted that in various parts of the Order there are serious problems with regard to sharing. Our young Carmelites will experience frustration in this area, and will often notice a dichotomy between the ideal in our documents and the lived experience. It is important that this issue be openly discussed so that younger members will understand where the older generation are coming from.

Some people were brought up in an atmosphere in which sharing at a personal level was alien, except for complaints and discussion of problems of physical health. Moreover, apostolic activities like preaching and the celebration of liturgy were felt to be a matter of professionalism for the individual; these were “no go” areas; one did not comment on another’s ministry. Sharing at the level of feelings, hopes, joys, sadness, as well as about one’s spiritual journey were not generally a feature of our Carmelite life prior to 1971. Those who became involved in some of the modern renewal movements like The Better World, Marriage Encounter, Charismatic Renewal found an atmosphere of encouragement and trust in which sharing became easier.

Nowadays there is an expectation of, and desire for, sharing on the part of younger members. This is a trend that older members find difficult and threatening. Sharing is not inbred. It has to be learned. There is need for a lot of patience as people slowly learn to trust and to share in some appropriate way. We can expect that sharing will for a long time be rather shallow. But shallowness is not a problem. Any sharing that is truthful is valuable; in time and with patience it can become deeper. In the meantime sharing remains an area of deep challenge. It is nonetheless a most important value that we must continually cultivate.

Mission

Even though for us community and fraternity come before mission, the value of mission is nonetheless crucial as it will inevitably shape and determine our fraternity. The final section will be an examination of the criteria of both fraternity and mission.

When we look back at our earliest history in Europe, there were three particular marks of our ministry:

- like the other friars, we were noted for preaching and hearing confessions;
- we led the people in prayer;
- we cared for people pastorally in parishes, which we already had in the 13th century.

When we recall that the most acceptable ministry to women and religious up to modern times was through the confessional, we can see that the whole area of counselling, spiritual direction belongs to our traditional mission.

Our medieval history, especially in the 14th and 15th centuries show that those who pursued more advanced theological studies tended to concentrate on Scripture. In this period we had few dogmatic theologians, no canon lawyers and few enough philosophers. The “sacred page” was the preferred area of Carmelite study.

When we look to the *Constitutions*, we can find support for all kinds of ministry. Our law excludes no ecclesial ministry. But there is a special preference for ministry in the area of spirituality; “a care for those who show an interest in the spirit, the spiritual heritage, and the life of Carmel” (# 93). But there is a critical matter of how we are to discern our mission, to which we now finally turn.

Criteria

This final section may seem somewhat arbitrary. It consists of four values, which are not just good features of our life or elements to be respected and cultivated. They are also criteria inasmuch as they are crucial for decision-making in our fraternity, in our mission and in our fidelity to our charism. There is already an article, which indicates guidelines for the discernment of our apostolic ministry:

- a life of brotherhood and prayer in the midst of the people;
- a response to the needs of the local and universal Church;
- a preferential service to the poor and the marginalised
- a special attention to issues concerning women;
- a commitment to justice and peace;
- a care for those who show an interest in the spirit, the spiritual heritage and the life of Carmel (# 93).

But there are also criteria, which govern aspects of our life apart from apostolic mission. I suggest that these are principally four: the Word of God, discernment, human values and the poor.

The Word of God

Scripture holds a special place in our tradition. Already in the *Rule* the seventh chapter gives as somehow essential to our life the pondering of the law of the Lord. But chapter fourteen demands that the Word of God be in our hearts and the penultimate chapter notes that we are taught by the scriptures.

We have already seen the mediaeval preference for study of the Word of God. The revival, for such it is, in our time is due to several causes. There is the biblical renewal movement in

the Church at large, which goes back to the beginning of the 20th century, and which was formally approved and given new impetus by Pius XII in *Divini afflante Spiritu* in 1943 and triumphantly endorsed by Vatican II in its documents and in the subsequent liturgical renewal. But in the Order the experience of Latin America and the new committed pastoral reading of the Word, spearheaded by Carlos Mesters among others, was mediated by general meetings such as Councils of Provinces and General Chapters, from the mid-1970s. There was also in various provinces, for example in Italy and Holland, a renewed interest in Scripture. When the *Constitutions* came to be written there was a wealth of lived experience about the Word of God. I suggest that it is henceforth to be a decisive factor in the evaluation of the authenticity of our fraternity and its works. Beginning with its summary of the *Rule* (# 11), the *Constitutions* find inspiration and light in the Word of God in every aspect of our lives:

- we are to examine the signs of the times in the light of the gospel (# 13);
- our contemplative dimension is marked by a prayerful attention to the Word (# 16);
- fraternal values find expression and nourishment in the Word
- (# 20);
- the *lectio divina* is recommended (# 20);
- we are drawn into prayer and fraternity by the Word (# 20);
- Elijah and Mary are models for our living by the Word and interiorising it (## 276, 27);
- as communities we listen prayerfully to the Word (# 31); we need to discern in the light of the Gospel (# 40);
- obedience involves listening together to the Word (## 46, 47); chastity is fostered by silence and attentiveness to the Word (#
- 63);
- our prayer is to be biblical and we are to have common biblical prayer (# 65) – almost every article on prayer has a reference to the Word;
- the apostolic mission is seen in terms of proclaiming the good news (# 91); the mission or ministry of Carmelites involves an attentive listening to the Word (# 91);
- in our apostolate of teaching prayer and spirituality, we are directed to Mary's attentiveness to the Word of God (# 95);
- we look to the Carmelite family as it orders its life according to the Word and the Carmelite spirit (# 109);
- the innovative chapter nine on Justice and Peace is a strong meditation on the Word, and emphasises the need of reading the bible in the context of today's world and also from the perspective of the poor (## 110-116).

One could summarise and say that the post-Vatican II emphasis on Scripture finds a profound echo in our tradition and is re-presented powerfully in the *Constitutions*. But a question arises about how the Scripture is so to inform our lives that it becomes a criterion for all our lives. It is certainly not merely a matter of dedicated attention to *Formgeschichte* or *Redaktiongeschichte*. We need to allow a scriptural culture to develop in our communities. It is an urgent task of formation to see how this might be encouraged, not merely for the younger members but as a life-long search.

Discernment

Allied to the emphasis on the Word, there is a continual call to discernment. Discernment is a complex and often misunderstood word, which is why it is not often used in the *Constitutions*, in fact only three times. Discernment can be a charism, a special gift of the Spirit that is given to a person who can then have an instinctive recognition of what is from God or from another spirit, including the human one. The word is also used more loosely as indicating judgements that are made in a spirit of faith by an individual or group. This latter can be taught to some degree; the charism cannot be taught; though a bearer of the charism must learn to use it with prudence and wisdom. The *Constitutions* use more or less equivalent expressions such as prophetic charism, searching for God's will, being enlightened by the Word of God, reading the signs of the times.

The key insight of the *Constitutions* is that we must be people continually taught by the Holy Spirit. It is *continual*: we do not have once-for-all answers and we must therefore evaluate, be ready to change, to modify our opinions and actions. We are to be *taught*: we are not self-sufficient, able to rely on our own strength or intelligence. We depend on the *Holy Spirit*. That teaching will rarely be direct inspiration, but more often come to us mediated by the Word of God, by our brothers and sisters, by the signs of the times, by the poor and marginalised.

Several difficulties can arise in this area of discernment. People may have different ideas as to what discernment consists: a charism; a technique; an inevitable and reliable consequence of sincere dialogue. Discernment may be misused, so that people await discernment about even the most ordinary and routine matters. It is also possible to have manipulation, either when people claim to have discerned, or when people deny that there has been genuine discernment. It is interesting that in the Ignatian tradition, genuine discernment demands the second degree of humility in which a person is totally indifferent as to the final outcome except only that God's will be done. There is much purity of heart required for this attitude. At the conclusion of the first chapter that surveys the Order in the Church, there is an agenda setting out the call for discernment.

*As the human race enters into a new period of its history,
we seek, as Carmelites inspired by the Spirit at work in the Church,
to adapt our way of life to new conditions. We seek to understand the signs of the times and to
examine them in the light of the gospel, of our charism and of our spiritual heritage, so that we
may incarnate this way of life in different cultures
(# 13).*

Some key statements on discernment from the *Constitutions* are:

- *The search for God in contemplation and "openness to the gifts of the Spirit make us more attentive to the signs of the times and more sensitive to the seeds of the Word in history, seeing and evaluating facts and events within the Church and within society" (# 18).*
- *In the section on fraternity we note: "A contemplative attitude towards the world around us allows us to discover the presence of God in the events of ordinary life and especially to see him in our brothers and sisters" (# 19).*

Treating of service in the midst the people we read:

- *“As a contemplative brotherhood, we seek the face of God also in the heart of the world...Carmelite brotherhood knows itself to be a living part of the Church and of history – a open fraternity, able to listen to the world it lives in, and willing to be questioned by it; ready both to meet life’s challenges and to give an authentic, evangelical response based on our own charism” (# 21).*
- *“Discernment (here the word is used) at all levels must precede both the appropriate distribution of work and the community’s choice of particular activities” (# 33).*
- *“Daily conversion to the Gospel is essential if we are to remain faithful to our vocation to fraternal life...We must seek concrete forms of conversion, above all through a constant discernment of life in the light of the Gospel, of the signs of the times, and the experience of the poor” (# 40).*
- *The articles on obedience voice a demand for discernment:*
- *“For us today, following Christ in his obedience means listening together to the Word of God, received and lived in the Church; learning to read the signs of the times in order to discern the will of God today” (# 46).*
- *Again in the section on obedience there is an emphasis on the communal dimension of discernment for true obedience:*
- *“We commit ourselves to obey God’s will not only as individuals, but also as a community. It is in community that together we seek to know the will of God. We engage in this search in a spirit of mutual discipleship and co-responsibility, as we listen to and fulfil the Word of God, read in the light of the signs of the times and in keeping with the charism of the Order” (# 47).*
- *The Prior is to engage in timely dialogue and discernment (# 48).*
- *The authentic living of poverty in our times demands that among other things,*
- *we engage in healthy and balanced discernment with regard to the ways in which we are present among the people, choosing ways which foster the liberation and the integral development of human beings” (# 54).*
- *Prayer enables us to*
- *“view the events in our own lives and in the world around us in the light of God. Thus our whole life must be deeply contemplative, so that we may come to see all that happens as if with the eyes of God” (# 78).*

We have already seen criteria for apostolic mission (# 93). This chapter also stresses the need of guidance in our apostolic choices:

“We are guided in this by the teaching of the pastors of the Church; by our tradition and by the values it upholds; by the signs of the times; and above all by attentive listening to the Word, having regard also for its interpretation from the perspective of the poor” (# 91).

This criterion of discernment in the complex riches of the Constitutions will make serious demands on formation. It runs counter to much of the individualism that is endemic in our society. Discernment as a criterion is possible only in a contemplative fraternity in the midst of the people; conversely it is only through discernment that we will incarnate this charism where we find ourselves.

Human values

Human values are also a criterion for our life and mission. It is a difficult area to address as there are many distortions. It is commonplace to speak of the lack of humanity in pre-Vatican II religious life. I remember an old Irish Christian Brother saying to me about 20 years ago as he contemplated the past: “When a new superior was appointed, we always wondered if he would be bad or worse.” Yet there was a lot of humanity in practice, even though you may have to be old or sick before it was very obvious. Love as I said earlier was coded and enciphered.

In our days there is a cult of the self, an idolatry of fulfilment. People have become wary of long-term commitments; they tend to be generous on their own terms; they have hypersensitive sensors that tell them when anything will impinge on their comfort or convenience. The way in which many young people speak, it is almost as if we have a right to be fulfilled. We have, but it will always be under the Cross.

Despite an idolatry of human values and a serious neglect of preaching of the Cross, there remains an importance of human values, which surfaced at Vatican II. We find the theme also in the 1971 *Constitutions*, which began for example to warn about overwork. The present legislation has many fine things to say, but there is a problem about reception in this area. We have particularly to be wary that what is said about human values is not taken in isolation from other elements like the desert, fraternity, contemplation, mission.

The following seem particularly noteworthy:

The quality of interpersonal relationships within the Carmelite community needs to be constantly developed:

- “*For us to be brothers means to grow in communion and in unity, overcoming privileges and distinctions in a spirit of participation and co-responsibility, in sharing material possessions, a common programme of life, and personal charisms; to be brothers also means to care for one another’s spiritual and psychological well-being, through walking in the way of dialogue and reconciliation*” (# 19).
- In the community a moment of particular importance is “in the sharing of joys, anxieties and friendships” (# 31h).
- “*By its very nature, community must promote human, intellectual, spiritual and pastoral growth of all religious*” (# 33).
- “*Communities shall ensure that no member is so overloaded with work – be it apostolic or other – that community life and religious exercises become impossible or too difficult*” (# 33).
- The mass media are praised, provided they do not “endanger human dignity and freedom” (# 34).

An article on chastity notes that the internalisation of the vow “occurs through a process of continuous transformation of our affectivity” and “our interpersonal relationships grow in truth and transparency” (# 61).

The articles on chastity end with a splendid vision of full human development through well-integrated love (# 63).

I do not think that this criterion on human values is well developed in the *Constitutions*. It is strongly indicated, but it is not very forthcoming about the means. It will, I think, be an important area for searching, and a particular challenge for formators. We do have to take it seriously, but we will also learn that not everything that will be advanced in the name of human values will always be in conformity with evangelical values. Discernment here will be vital.

The Poor

A final criterion for our fraternal life and apostolic mission comes from the poor. This is an insight that has seen rapid development. The convents of friars have always been places where the poor have been cared for. The fact that they come to us is an indication of their perception and their expectation. One of the very attractive characteristics of the Carmelite Order is the fact that we were never very much to the fore. Except for the field of spirituality we have had few major theologians. We were not important in the historical and cultural development of European society. We even escaped the Inquisition. It was from the Franciscan and Dominican Orders which had learned canon lawyers that supplied inquisitors; the role of Carmelites was more often to comfort the poor wretches as they went to the *auto-da-fé*. Carmelites tended to get on with helping the poor most often in quiet, hidden ways.

In our time there has been a significant development, which can conveniently be dated with a lecture given by the Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez in 1968. With it liberation theology was born. We found a new theology, which did not merely seek to understand reality, but sought to change the situation of the dependent. Liberation theologies evolved rapidly. I say “theologies” for they are many. Crucial for liberation theologies is an analysis of why people are poor or marginalised. There has been resistance to liberation theologies from many quarters and for many reasons. One reason, perhaps less applicable in recent years, is the fact that many liberation theologians at the beginning used Marxism as an analytic tool. That was sufficient to provoke opposition. We all know the saying of the former Archbishop Helder Camara of Recife in Brazil: “I feed the poor and they call me a saint; I ask why they are poor and they call me a communist.”

Liberation themes figured largely in central meetings of the Order in the period 1971-1987. But there is a development. Nowadays the poor, or as the *Constitutions* often call them, the *minores*, are all who are marginalised and alienated. They include not only the materially poor, but also all who are marginalised by culture, gender, sexual orientation, and race, religion, dependency situations, violence... All the oppressed of our world need liberation.

A noteworthy insight from our *Constitutions* is the need to learn from the poor, that we are to read the bible from their vantagepoint. The bible is a very different book when read in a Brazilian favela or a Latin American barrio. Yet the poor can show us how they find good news in the Word of God.

The following insights from the *Constitutions* are important as we seek criteria for our lifestyle, our fraternity and for our apostolic mission:

Carmelites show solidarity with all who suffer, who hope and who commit themselves to the search for the kingdom of God (# 21).

Being in the midst of the people

“is a prophetic message of justice and peace in society and among peoples... It is also an expression of the choice to share in the lives of the ‘little ones’ (minores) of history, so that we may speak a word of hope and of salvation from their midst – more by our lives than by our words. This option flows naturally from our profession of poverty in a mendicant fraternity, and is in keeping with our allegiance to Christ Jesus lived also through allegiance to the poor and to those in whom the face of our Lord is reflected in a preferential way” (# 24).

Elijah “was in solidarity with the poor and the forgotten and defended those who endured violence and injustice” (#26).

The section on vowed poverty stresses Christ’s sharing with the little ones and the poor (# 50). The same section notes that

“poverty is a complex and ambiguous reality” and we are to identify “with the poor in a spirit of solidarity, renouncing all desire for dominion or self-sufficiency” (# 53).

The text goes on to emphasise the need

“to study and understand the economic, social and moral causes of that poverty which stems from injustice” (# 54)

One is reminded of a thesis being done in Milltown Theological Institute - “Sin but no sinners.”

It would bring us too far if we were to examine in detail chapter 9 on “*On our Apostolic Mission and the Promotion of Justice and Peace throughout the world.*” It was a chapter that very nearly was not included. The key thing to notice is that the chapter is both a call to read the signs of the times and it itself is such an exercise. It presents the call for justice and peace not as one among the many tasks of the Order but a primary one, one indeed that should influence the way we approach all other works.

It remains to note the importance of the vision of the poor and of the poor being a criterion for our lives. As formators there is an additional cause for concern. We need to analyse also why the justice and peace issue has not taken root widely in the Order, unlike other issues, which too evolved, from the 1970s.

Conclusion

The *Constitutions* for all their flaws and inadequacies are a fine attempt to present a *viable* Carmelite spirituality for our time. They open new visions for our time, but they also pose profound challenges; we seek to incarnate their beauty in the frailty of our communities.