



SUPERIOR GENERAL OF DISCALCED CARMELITES
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Letter to the whole Order on the feast of st. John of the Cross

14th December 2021

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GREETINGS AND THANKS

Dear brothers and sisters of the great family of the Teresian Carmel:

It is very gratifying for me to address you in these very special days of Advent, on the way to Bethlehem, in expectation of the Life that is woven in the womb of Mary, in the bosom of the history of our days and in each one of us. With the feast of St. John of the Cross also approaching, I would like to make a double reflection with you: firstly, I would like to share with you what these first months have been like, being a General, offering you some keys that shed light on my path and, I hope, can accompany yours; secondly, I would like to offer you a reflection on some keys to the life of our Holy Father John, interpreted from a synodal perspective. These are just a few notes that I would like to offer to stimulate our walking to the rhythm of the Church in this historical moment.

JOURNEYING

Three months have passed since our General Chapter, which was a time of reflection and fraternal encounter, open to the Spirit. A Chapter always recalls and brings to light the urgency of working in communion, in collaboration, at the service of the Order and the Church. I thank Father Saverio for his vigilance, his dedication and the wisdom of his service as General, as a senior brother, together with all his government team, and with it, all the work and dedication of all the local and provincial superiors, etc., as well as that of the monasteries, federations, associations and councils, of the nuns and of the Secular Order. Thank you all for your dedication and perseverance in serving selflessly to seek the good.

After the first period of adaptation, learning and knowledge, the initial fear of feeling so small in front of the task entrusted to me is giving way, little by little, to a confidence that allows itself to be led and taught: "*Do what lies in your power, surrender yourself to me*" (Spiritual Testimonies 10), as the Lord said to Saint Teresa. Those words have left their mark on my first steps.

Together with these words, which invite us to leave the Lord as the protagonist, my first months of service as a General – united to the Definitors and the brothers of the Curia – have been accompanied by a deep conviction of the strength of the communion of the whole Order. This places before me the first need that I experience as a project for these years: the experience of the living God, being a united family; to live the Eucharist, taking care of the meaning of communion in diversity; committing ourselves to guarding the gift received, which is, in the first place, that of the shared vocation, as an invaluable gift, a treasure of incalculable value.

FOUR WORDS FOR A CHALLENGING PRESENT

There are four words that burn within me in this first period of the journey, that I give you so that you can help me to work them out and to walk in their light, in the air of the Spirit, in the hands of Mary and Joseph. I propose them as a reflection to shed light on this hour of our life and communities:

- **What is impossible**
- **Magnificat**
- **Productiveness of the present**
- **Obedient Exodus**

1. On so many occasions and circumstances the path appears to us as *impossible*, as if we were facing a *Goliath* that surpasses us in everything. The temptation is to give up and cast ourselves aside; we are assaulted by discouragement and desolation, together with an existential, emotional, physical fatigue, which, however, fail to extinguish the flame that burns inside, like a 'little spark' reminding us that all this was not started by us, but that it was and is a desire and dream of God. In the midst of so much struggle, an inner voice resonates in each one of us: «Because it is impossible for you, that is why it is possible for Me». «Be humble. Ask for help, do not give up.» We only find rest in the certainty of that voice: «It is I, fear not.» The impossible is the privileged terrain for the experience of God, of Carmel. The best of our history has taken place in 'impossible' circumstances. I am telling you this with great conviction, encouraging you to recover the strength that is born when our strength and imagination are no longer useful, and only trust will bring us back to the true dynamism where God is protagonist.

2. The *Magnificat* of Mary is our school of life for this time. Mary is always a guarantee of fruitfulness in the toughest of times. The *Magnificat* is the song that reveals God's truth in times of darkness. In the heart of Mary, poor and humble, is heard the most unquestionable truth in history, the victory of God, his salvation in the midst of all the catastrophes and injustices. The free and humble heart of a young woman from Nazareth, available and open to the passage of God, changes the history of humanity in an unprecedented way. The powerful do not have the last word. The humble rewrite the history of salvation. **What is the *Magnificat* of Carmel today? What is the song we hear deep in our fragility and smallness?** I am referring to the one that no failure or open wound manages to silence. I invite you to live this time as a *Magnificat* in listening to God's desire in our wounded land.

3. Our mystics have always sung God's faithfulness *in the present time*. They never renounced the *fruitfulness* of the Holy Spirit to generate life in the now, even if it seemed disastrous. The Spirit, as our Fathers knew, is capable of illuminating paths in the deserts and making wounded people true healers of their own time. The saints of Carmel are teachers of Christian perseverance, of resilience, as we would

say now: they recycle the battered life and recompose, 'against all hope', in the manger of life, the dream of God, the one that St. Joseph listened to and believed in on the most disconcerting night of his life.

4. In so many parts of the planet we are witnessing a forced *exodus*. The world is looking for their house, their home. We are in a time of transit to a promised land. Some say that we are walking towards the destruction of the planet or towards the end of time. Prophets of calamities emerge in the most turbulent times in history... as well as the greatest saints. It is true that our earth is sick, in body and soul. But apparent endings are always times of 'beginnings not forecasts'. We too, nuns, friars, laity, are in a time of *obedient exodus*. We are no strangers to this time of history, although many times we cling to the security 'of Egypt', to the 'tranquillity' of what is already known. It is not time to hang on to our comfort, for Teresa it was always time to set out walking. Without the risk of a bold *yes*, we will not give birth to a Carmel of the future that is alive and believable. We do not defend buildings, we do not defend ourselves, but a living experience: in faith, hope and charity. **To what obedient exodus are we today called as a community and as Carmelites?**

JOHN OF THE CROSS, IN A SYNODAL KEY

- **Quiet love**
- **St John's creative thinking born from attentive listening**
- **Friendship with some women and laity**
- **The Holy Spirit as Protagonist**

On December 14, we celebrate the 430th anniversary of the death of St. John of the Cross. That moment of his passing, in which the fabric of the encounter was broken and the mystery of love, lived by him in the night of this life, was revealed. Our whole life points to that decisive moment. And everything we do and live will be lit up in the light of that very moment that John of the Cross accomplished, a short time after hearing the bells of the church of our Saviour ringing for Matins. One day, we too will hear bells that ring for us to be born definitively. Our whole life is an Advent, preparing us to give birth to true life. In thinking of John of the Cross, the meaning of our journey today is always made clearer.

These days, I think of the path that the Church is traveling, inviting us to Synodality, to a process of mutual listening, co-responsibility and receptivity to what is new, to allow ourselves become enlightened and to discern. *We dialogue to understand, not to convince*, Benedict XVI said in his last speech as Pope on December 21, 2012.

1. QUIET LOVE and LOVING ATTENTION:

John of the Cross was hearing in the heart of his story the eloquent silence of God. The adverse events of life – 'the pilgrimage of hunger' as a child, the 'prison of Toledo' and the 'banishment to La Peñuela' in his last months – forged him into a fine listener to the quiet love of God, during contradiction and night. John of the Cross learnt quiet love and loving attention, letting himself be wounded and led by God 'further into the thicket'. He allowed himself to be penetrated by the truth of things, of people and of God, armed with the language that God hears most, 'quiet love'. The first virtue of a true Synodality: the loving attitude, as a principle that interprets life from an empathy of involvement, which discovers God in his silences, in the depths of one's

own self and in every other person. John of the Cross is a discoverer of pearls in the nights and garbage dumps of the world.

2. ST JOHN'S CREATIVE THINKING BORN OF ATTENTIVE LISTENING

Sometimes, when a person recited a verse, John of the Cross asked him to repeat it so he could memorize it; and then commented on those verses learnt from someone else. He once asked Brother Francis, "*Brother, what will God be?*" And the little brother replied, "**God is what he wants to be.**" This answer gave Friar John material to comment for several days on that very original definition of the absolute freedom of God, who does what he wants, for our benefit. Very well-known is the question he asked Francisca de la Madre de Dios: "*Sister: what does your prayer consist of these days?*" She replied, "**In looking at God's beauty and rejoicing that he has it.**" And from this dialogue came the last five verses of Canticle B, especially the 36th on the beauty of God. This style of teaching, which seems so friendly today, we would call "synodal", that is, knowing how to make use of dialogue, collecting what has been learnt to teach others, making all our brothers and sisters fully competent in that pedagogical style. May our Father St. John of the Cross make all his children truly competent.

3. FRIENDSHIP WITH CERTAIN WOMEN:

John of the Cross cultivated very beautiful friendships with some women who appeared in his life. His ability to listen to women, and enter into deep dialogue with them, understanding them, and understanding himself through his listening, started with Teresa of Jesus, followed by Ana of Jesus and the Carmelite nuns of Beas or Granada. Also there were lay women like Juana de Pedraza or Ana de Peñalosa. It was not something frequent in his time, nor was it considered the most perfect, but he, like Jesus himself, knew how to approach and listen to what women could also contribute to his life and even to his own work. John of the Cross entered the 'Teresian' style, by making his particular novitiate amongst the Carmelite nuns of Valladolid, letting himself be guided and taught by the life these women were living. That attitude, I think, is the first step that makes possible different relationships between people, between friars and nuns. The Order has a path to follow, in the style of John of the Cross, in this mutual listening, in which the charism is revealed in the Synodality of the shared experience between nuns, friars and laity. "Only this reciprocity and this appreciation of the various sensitivities, masculine and feminine, can lead to an understanding that creates a credible us" (Rosalba Manes, *La melodia del silenzio. La figura sorprendente di Giuseppe di Nazareth*, Milan 2021).

4. NOT POSSESSION. THE SPIRIT, A PROTAGONIST ON THE PATH OF TRUTH:

In the Living Flame of Love the Saint invites directors to understand that they are simple mediators between the person and the Spirit: he calls us to listen without trying to possess", to be spokespeople and seekers of signals, rather than broadcasters and directors (cf. LF 3:46). In a few texts the Saint does become so serious against those who hinder the action of the Spirit and make themselves protagonists of the path of the person accompanied. This attitude is one of the most genuine contributions of Carmel to this journey of Synodality that the Church proposes to us: our ability to listen to each person and respect the rhythm and desire of the Spirit, his action in each one, without manipulating, without imposing one's own desire.

These four pearls are an example of the synodal richness of John of the Cross, inviting us to walk with the Church in deep communion, without shrivelling up with in ourselves, without neglecting the house and garden that God has given us (contemplation, mission and fraternal life), at the door of the cave (like Elijah), listening, in nakedness and poverty, to what the Spirit is saying to the Churches and to Carmel, to the world and to each one of us. Do not be afraid to listen to the truth that carries within it any kind of poverty or growing smaller. The Order has before it a precious path of deep listening in the years to come. I invite you all, lay people, nuns, friars, to live this time using the key of LISTENING and BOLDNESS, supporting one another and taking determined care to serve the Lord. In the spirit of Mary's Magnificat and the loving daring of the Canticle of John of the Cross. Let us walk together!

A HAPPY FEAST OF SAINT JOHN OF THE CROSS TO EVERYONE
A happy season of Advent

fr. miguel



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