

## ***Secularity and the Lay Carmelite***

In the last chapter we were looking at the specifically spiritual dimensions of the life of the lay Carmelite. Perhaps we seemed to have left behind the ordinary things of the world and the ordinary cares and problems that weigh so heavily upon mankind. But, of course, the impression is readily cured when we look at the more practical aspects of life, and that is exactly what we plan to do in this chapter.

The true measure of holiness is often best found in the ordinary aspects of a saint's life. It is safe to say that most people seem to admire many of the simple aspects of Saint Teresa of Jesus. The Saint of Avila had her head in the heavens, but her feet were planted squarely on this earth. Thus she does not appear to be unreal, but rather the kind of person who understood and lived the same kind of life that everyone else on this planet must live. Only such a saint could tell us that "God moves among the pots and pans."

How different are the ideas of many who think that being religious or devout means being exempt from the duties demanded of all. Their ideas are somewhat like those described by one of the Cardinals at the Second Vatican Council. He said "for many of them, being a Christian consists in living in the Church as deluxe passengers on a cruise ship, without any other concern than keeping well and getting the most benefit to their health. Their Christianity becomes a 'comfortable' one that is held only as a tradition and as a kind of inheritance." The Second Vatican Council vigorously reacted against such a mentality as being opposed to the strong roots of Divine Revelation.

**Ordinary Things of Life** - Experience shows that when people want to make progress they immediately elevate their expectations, wanting to think of a form of life that is anything but ordinary. In fact they become oblivious to the simple duties and obligations of life. Nothing is more pleasing than such a vision. But in reality this vision is not true to life; it is only part of the truth. Carried to its extreme it can make one lose the common touch and ultimately become untrue to life itself.

Hence I want to raise some issues that need to be faced and seriously discussed before you consider taking the step of entering the Carmelite Order as one of its secular members. The main issue that needs to be honestly faced is the matter of secularity and your life, or we can term it the "secular" dimensions of your life. It is helpful to keep in mind that the goal of entering the Carmelite Order as a secular member is not to become a mini-monk or a semi-nun. Quite simply, you are to remain who you are, and you are not to seek to evade your responsibilities and duties of life. Actually one ought to enter an order so that one can better fulfill one's obligations and duties, not to flee or be liberated from them.

From the outset it would be a serious mistake to be seeking a false identity. Thomas

Merton, the American Trappist, warns those who seek a false identity that they are seeking a way of life wherein they will not even be recognized by God Himself, because God did not call them to such a life. But in embracing all the dimensions of your life, you will be able “to grow in wisdom and grace before God and man.”

**A Word About Secularity and Secularism** - When one comes to a religious order, even in the secular branch of the order, it must be evident that God does not want just a part of your life, but that God wants the entirety of your life, your complete life. He does not seek your heart only when you pray or attend devotional exercises. He seeks your whole life, for He wants to give Himself entirely and without reservation to you.

Immediately we notice that the word “secular” is a very ambiguous word and needs to be clarified. “Secular” has reference to the present world and the present conditions of the world. In this sense we find the word acceptable. But the problem arises when we try to determine when God is being left out of the picture and when God is being excluded from the lives of men and women.

Thus the word “secularism” has been defined as “the separation of God from His creation and the denial of His presence in the world, if not His existence. The secular city is the world of men and things moving on without Him, doing without religion. Secularism as a world view and as a way of life denies the immanence of God and His existence as well as man’s religious nature. Secularism denies both the hidden presence and action of God and the cosmic or world influence of Christ. This leads to desacralization and denies two basic truths of the Christian faith: the Creation and the Incarnation. It is secularism that the Church roundly condemns.

Not to be confused with secularism is secularity. Quite simply secularity stresses the benefits of the secularization of many areas of human life. This is now almost universally recognized in all civilized countries. Religious secularity considers such an outlook to be compatible with faith in God, and Christian secularity finds it favorable to the message of the Gospel.

The Second Vatican Council endorses such a view when it fully recognizes that the secular dimensions of life have their own autonomy. These are the words of the Council: “If by the autonomy of earthly affairs we mean that created things and societies enjoy their own laws and values which must be gradually deciphered, put to use, and regulated by men, then it is entirely right to demand that autonomy. Such is not merely required by modern man, but harmonizes also with the will of the Creator.” (*The Church in the Modern World*, #36).

Experience shows that it is not good to have people who want to be “too” spiritual, for that often means they are getting away from the natural and ordinary things of life, and much of the beauty and charm of life comes from a proper appreciation of the simple things. Those who try to escape or bypass these things turn out to be flat, a little aloof, and even a bit boring. Sometimes, in an extreme case, nature can take its revenge and the person may even display

sourness of disposition. At any rate, he or she will not reflect the joy of God the Creator and Redeemer.

**The Gospels and Simple Virtues** - When I go to the Gospels, how refreshing it is to contemplate some small but important virtues in the life of Jesus. For example, when the Lord celebrated the Last Supper with His apostles, it is evident that one of the apostles was to perform the simple service of washing the Lord's feet as well as the feet of the other apostles. This service was rendered at such a gathering. But the Lord, noticing that no one else had done this, takes it upon Himself to wash and kiss the feet of His apostles. And how many times the Lord takes time out to listen to the cares and problems of His apostles. He was always at their beck and call. He did not think such humble services beneath His dignity.

Or again, how beautiful it is to think of Mary, the Mother of my Lord. She was overshadowed by the Holy Spirit of God and becomes the Mother of the Lord. And the Scriptures tell us that "immediately" she goes in haste to visit her cousin who was soon to bear a child. One might think that in becoming the mother of the Lord she would expect people to wait on her hand and foot. Certainly, it would appear that Elizabeth should be forced to visit Mary. But so sensitive was Mary to the need and possibility of helping her cousin that she hastened to visit her.

**The Saints** - I often marvel that the canonized saints apparently could have been stricter with themselves, could have practiced greater austerities. This is a theoretical opinion, of course. But we see that they were led by the grace of God to practice virtues in a very simple but attractive way, a way that deeply touches our hearts.

Saint Thomas More is a good example of this. He did live a comfortable life, he did provide amply for the needs of his family. And he loved to be with them, and in his letters to his children it is marvelous to see how he allows them to banter with him, not keeping aloof from them or trying to lord it over them. So gentle was he that when he went to the scaffold, he went with a smile and even asked the executioner to spare his beard as it never did anything to anyone.

Saint John Kemble, one of the martyrs of England and Wales canonized a few years back, shows us a priest who was eighty years old when he was led to the gallows. He was a diocesan priest, not a monk or a member of a religious order. Truly he was loved by all because of his gentleness. When asked if he had one final request before his execution he asked for a small glass of sherry and a pipe full of tobacco.

The lessons of the Scriptures and those we learn from the lives of the saints are precious teachings to us, and they remind us that all aspects of our lives are important. Strictness, aloofness from others, these are not the principal elements of holiness. Holiness is doing all

things, and especially the small and ordinary things, for the love of God and with our hearts filled with His love.

**Practical Issues to Be Faced** - If I were thinking of becoming a member of the secular branch of the Discalced Carmelites, I think there would be many practical problems in the area of secularity and my ordinary life that I would have to face. The following are but a few:

*1. What does my family think of this move on my part?*

A move such as that of entering a religious order can easily cause uneasiness on the part of spouse or children. And I would not want to lightly take it for granted that they will understand and not mind. Hence this matter should be discussed with them. This is a general rule, perhaps there might be exceptions, but I would not think they should lightly be omitted.

One should keep in mind that previously all the members of the secular branch of the Order took vows. But the Order decided that the word "vows" seemed to be too monastic and hence capable of being misinterpreted. The Order did not think that it was previously harmful for the members to make vows, but it thought that at the present time, it would be better for all to make promises and only after three years of living their Definitive promise can they make vows. I think this move is reassuring to some of the members of the family and hence very helpful.

When one is contemplating this vocation, it is easy to be filled with enthusiasm for the recently found graces of this vocation, but in charity you must consider the feelings as well as the rights of the other members of the family. Hence their consent should ordinarily be sought.

For example if I was a married man and my wife came home to tell me that she was to enter a secular Carmelite Community, I am sure that I would have many questions. I might easily wonder exactly what she had in mind. I could reasonably wonder if she were "renegotiating the marriage contract," perhaps making restrictions on what she promised on our wedding day. And I am sure the children would have questions about this matter.

I think we are dealing with a situation that is somewhat parallel with that of the married deacons. It is my understanding that when they are in training, they must get the consent of their spouse to be ordained deacon. And with great reason, for the Sacred Orders that they are to receive cannot interfere with their primary obligations and duties to their wives and families.

*2. Time for my family*

If one decides to enter the secular branch of the Order, there is a question of the time that I must give to my family. Does it follow that if I decide to go to Mass each day I will not be available to make breakfast for the family? Is my own sanctification so important that I

can neglect my own family? There may be ways of working out an agreement so the family will consent and not feel neglected. But this issue should be faced before taking joining the Secular Order and making promises in the Order.

### *3. A stricter way of life*

As I enthusiastically plan to embrace the task of possibly fasting on certain days or of practicing poverty according to the, *Constitutions* I must be careful not to put any burdens on my family. If I want to fast, I must not force them or try to get them to do the same.

### *4. Will I be the “better than thou” member of the family?*

It is always possible that I may have one thing in mind, but it is perceived quite differently by my family. I may think it is a wonderful idea to enter more fully on a spiritual journey, but I must be careful that I do not hurt my family. I must discern the issue with circumspection so that I do not merely aspire to achieve a moral superiority over the rest of the family.

**A Good General Rule** - If you feel called by God to enter the Order of Carmel as one of its secular members, that is a wonderful grace. But this grace must be handled very gently. If it is, you will do more good for your family, but if you do not go about this in the right way, you may alienate your family’s respect and love.

Hence a good rule to follow is this: I must be determined that in entering the Order of Carmel, I want to live this life in such a way that I will be able to strengthen my ties with the members of my family. As is brought out in the Gospel, I want to be able to love them more and serve them more generously. I must keep asking God for the grace to pray for my family, not as if I assume that I am the superior one in the family, but so God will give me the grace of being more Christ like toward them, by growing in love and service.

Finally, I would not like my vocation in Carmel to disrupt the love and harmony that is central to my married life and to my family. Hence this must be thought out carefully, and an agreement reached that respects the wishes and feelings of all. If I want to join a Carmelite Community that takes a good part of one Sunday per month for its meeting, I want to make sure that my family does not feel left out or neglected. And if I want to pray each day, do my spiritual reading or recite the Liturgy of the Hours, can I do this in such a way that I will not grow apart from my loved ones? After all, these are responsibilities that I embraced with the graces of the Sacrament of Matrimony, and I cannot fail to honor these commitments.

If you sincerely are seeking God’s will and if God is truly giving you a vocation, be sure that these things can be solved. But you cannot just take them for granted; instead, you must work through them. This may be inconvenient, but it can only make your vocation stronger.

**The Documents of Vatican II** - If you are looking for more information and discussion on the point of secularity, you can find a wealth of information in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. Look at the chapter on the laity in the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, and you will also find much enlightenment in the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*. And, of course, the decree on *The Apostolate of the Laity* will provide plenty of inspiration.

The Council had in mind that we must consecrate all dimensions of our life to Christ and the aims of His divine Kingdom on earth. This means that we must use all the time and talents that God has given us. It also means that we must constantly be seeking to grow in our skills and talents so that we can be effective instruments in His hands.

Michael D. Griffin OCD

***Discussion points for Secularity and the Lay Carmelite:***

What is deceptive about making progress by raising expectations?

*What is false identity?*

*What are secularity and secularism?*

*Give several examples of everyday virtues in the Gospel lives of Jesus and Mary.*

*Do you believe that love, not strictness, is the essence of perfection? Which is harder to practice?*