

## ***Aspirants Knock, Seek, and Ask Questions***

Aspirants approach Carmel with great eagerness, wanting to know “all about the Order.” They ask: What is the Secular Order all about? Is it for me? How do I go about becoming a member? What will be expected of me?

Following are some of the questions that aspirants ask most frequently, with brief replies.

**Q:** What is the Secular Order of Discalced Carmelites?

**A:** The Secular Order of Discalced Carmelites is an association of lay members who embrace a vocation to pursue Christian perfection, in the world, according to the spirit and ideals of the Discalced Carmelite Order. The emphasis is on (1) vocation, (2) living in the world, and (3) following the spirit of Carmel, namely, striving for close union with Christ through interior prayer.

Every Secular Order is part of a religious parent order. Its authenticity derives from the canonical approval of the Holy See, and its members are directed to a way of life by a rule which also is approved by the Pope.

The Secular Order of Our Lady of Mount Carmel was founded by Bl. John Soreth, General of the Carmelites, and approved by Pope Nicholas V in 1452. Soreth drew up the first rule of the Secular Order, following the broad outlines of the rule of St. Albert, the Rule given to the original hermits on Mt. Carmel in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century. The emphasis of the Rule is continual prayer. When the Discalced Carmelites became a separate order in the 16th century, following the Teresian reform, they were also given the right to have their own secular order.

**Q:** Is the Secular Order *really* a part of the Carmelite Order?

**A:** The Constitutions of the OCDS state unequivocally that the Secular Order is “an integral part of the Carmelite family; its members are therefore sons and daughters of the Order.” In other words, we are as truly Carmelite as the fathers, brothers, and nuns of the Order, sharing with them a common vocation of prayer and the pursuit of holiness. As members of the same order, we have a special claim on the rest of the Order for spiritual help and guidance. We, in turn, support the friars and nuns by our prayer spiritual activity.

**Q:** Why is the Order called “Discalced”?

**A:** “Discalced” literally means “without shoes.” The term was commonly used in religious

parlance at the time of St. Teresa of Jesus to indicate an order which had reformed itself and adopted a more dedicated and austere form of life. Members of these orders either went barefooted or wore some form of open sandals.

In Teresa's reformed convent of St. Joseph's, which she founded on August 24, 1562, the nuns wore strap sandals, and thus came to be known as "Discalced Carmelites."

**Q:** What are the requirements for admission to the Secular Order?

**A:** The OCDS Constitutions state that "any member of the Church, who is called by the Lord, is free from impediments, and conscientiously accepts his own vocation and the Rule and Constitutions offered by the Secular Order, can apply to a fraternity." Local Statutes also impose minor requirements.

I would say that, above all else, the individual should have a strong attraction to the spiritual life proposed by the OCDS Rule and Constitutions; that is, a vocation. This should be coupled with availability of time to spend with the Lord on a regular basis. Also, there should be indications that the person is seriously considering a lifetime commitment.

In general, an applicant must be at least 18 years of age, be a practicing Catholic in good standing in the Church, and may not be a member of another secular order. If one does belong to another order, a letter of release must be obtained before consideration is given to one's application.

Anyone interested in the Order is expected to attend several preliminary meetings to learn the obligations of a Secular Carmelite and to test one's interest in pursuing the proposed vocation before making formal application for admission.

**Q:** Why can't a person belong to more than one secular order? If one is good, wouldn't two be better?

**A:** A vocation to a secular order is a call to a distinctive way of life. Since no two orders have the same goals, objectives, or obligations, a person would be torn between two demands for a complete commitment.

**Q:** What are the obligations of a Secular Carmelite?

**A:** The Secular Carmelite assumes three principle obligations: (1) To recite the Church's Divine Office: Morning and Evening Prayer (Lauds and Vespers); and, if possible, Night Prayer (Compline) before retiring. (2) To spend at least half an hour each day in silent mental prayer. **Mental prayer constitutes the very essence of Carmel.** (3) To wear the brown Scapular of Carmel, the habit of the Order, as a sign of dedication to Our Lady's Order. For a good reason, the Scapular may be replaced by the Scapular Medal.

The Secular Carmelite is also urged, as far as possible, to assist at daily Mass; to have a special devotion to Mary; to undertake spiritual reading, especially the Bible and the Carmelite writings, on a regular basis; to practice fraternal charity and participate in the

Church's apostolate.

An important requirement is faithful attendance at the monthly community meeting, where one's vocation is nourished through study the Teresian tradition of the Order.

**Q:** Why should I become a Secular Carmelite? Can't I be just as good a Christian without joining an order?

**A:** It is not necessary to join an order to strive for, and advance in, holiness. Every Christian, by virtue of his Baptism, is called upon to do that. However, it is not easy to make progress on our own. We need a proved plan, as well as frequent inspiration and prodding to persevere and to advance. We need, so to say, professional help. That's where a religious order is so important. Religious orders have been nurturing the spiritual life for centuries. They give us the benefit of this heritage that produced saints throughout the ages. It is important, of course, to affiliate ourselves with an order we are strongly attracted to. The spirituality of Carmel is rooted in the Gospel, drawing souls to God through a life of quiet, contemplative prayer. The rule of the Order has but one purpose: to outline a way of life centered on intimate friendship with Christ.

**Q:** We all have our favorite morning and night prayers. Why can't we say them, instead of the Divine Office?

**A:** The Divine Office is the official prayer of the Church. It contains the inspired prayers and readings of the Old and New Testaments. We come to these prayers not to find favorites, but to grow closer to the mind of God -- to pray the way God wants us to pray; to say the very prayers that Our Lord himself prayed. The content of the Office brings about a spiritual development and maturity that cannot be found elsewhere. In addition, it brings us into a unity of prayer with the entire Church. The purpose of the Office is the sanctification of the day. Morning Prayer (Lauds) is principally a prayer of praise, recited as soon as possible after rising. The theme of Morning Prayer is set by the opening words: "Lord, open my lips and my mouth will proclaim your praise." Evening Prayer, or Vespers, sanctifies the closing hours of the day and is recited in the very late afternoon or early evening, when the day is drawing to a close. Although all the Hours are ideally prayed in common, this is particularly true of Vespers, which commemorates the gathering of Our Lord and his apostles at the Last Supper. Night Prayer, or Compline, sanctifies the final hour of the day and should be prayed just before retiring. Night Prayer is not mandatory for Secular Carmelites but it is highly recommended. It prepares us not only for sleep but also for death. It is the Night Prayer of the day and of life itself.

**Q:** The very words "mental prayer" and "contemplation" frighten me. They sound so exalted and difficult. I wonder whether mental prayer isn't beyond me.

**A:** Mental prayer is sublime, but it is not unattainable. St. Teresa of Jesus tells us that mental prayer is nothing more than conversation with one who loves us. What do those in love say to each other? How do they behave? They react according to the measure of their love. First one brief word, then another, and another ... until words become inadequate and even unnecessary. It is joy just to be in each other's presence.

So it is also with the One who loves us more dearly than any human being possibly could. And He inflames our hearts to return that love. In the words of St. Augustine, our hearts remain restless until they finally rest in Him.

Instead of binding us to formulas and to words framed by others, mental prayer sets us free to pour out our heart in its own song of love, and then to rest contentedly, clasped in the loving embrace of the Lord.

Perhaps mental prayer would be easier if we realized that true praying is not making oneself audible; it is making oneself attentive. God knows much better than we ever could what we are, what we need, what we wish to say to Him. The important thing is for one to hear what He has to say. Or perhaps He, too, may be content just to rest quietly with us for the few minutes of daily mental prayer.

**Q:** What is the difference between the Promise and the Vows?

**A:** The Promise is a commitment to seek perfection through the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty, obedience, and the Beatitudes, according to the Constitutions of the Secular Order of the Discalced Carmelites. Upon completion of the two-year formation period, and with the approval of the local Council, the candidate makes a temporary Promise for the period of three years. At the end of that time, one's makes the definitive Promise.

Three years after having made the definitive Promise, a member may request permission from the local Council to take the vows of chastity and obedience. These vows are interpreted in the same way as the Promise, except that they add the merit of the virtue of religion. They constitute a more complete offering of oneself and therefore entail a greater moral responsibility.

The imposition of a time interlude between making the Promise and taking the vows reinforces the seriousness of the step by which one commits oneself even more deeply to one's Carmelite vocation and to the observance of chastity and obedience. This should be the preeminent motivation impelling one to consider taking the vows.

The vows neither add to nor detract from our standing as full-fledged members of the Order, that is acquired by virtue of the Promise. In fact, our Order is the only one that allows the laity to take vows; members of all other orders only make the Promise.

In summary, the Promise, and to an even greater extent the vows, establish a fixed and permanent commitment to strive for evangelical perfection according to the ideals of

Carmel as embodied in the Constitutions. Should a member leave the Order, he is automatically released from the Promise and the Vows.

**Q:** I know all about Carmel, and I am convinced that I have a vocation to the Secular Order. Why can't I be received immediately?

**A:** Knowledge alone is not sufficient for reception or profession as a Secular Carmelite. The purpose of the period of aspirancy, and even more so the years of formation program, is to help us translate knowledge into practice, to transform one into genuine Carmelites. It is not enough to have Carmel in our head; it must be in one's heart and in every aspect of one's life. In addition, one's vocation is only a nebulous thought or aspiration until it is transformed into reality with the approval of the Order, through the Council.

Such a serious vocation calls for humility, acknowledging that there can be a wide gulf between knowledge and practice. One needs all the time and help one can get to assimilate knowledge and to personalize the spirit of Carmel in one's life. Actually it is a lifetime job.

Even the Little Flower, who was already well on her way to sainthood, had to wait longer than the normal period of novitiate before making profession. This was a disappointment to her too, yet she recognized that it was more pleasing to God to submit to His will than to serve Him as a professed nun.

**Q:** What is the significance of the Carmelite coat of arms?

**A:** The first thing about the coat of arms to catch your eye is a mountain and three stars. The brown mountain, of course, denotes Mount Carmel in Palestine, where the Order came into being, but it also symbolizes the sublime charism of the Order: aspiring to union with God through prayer and contemplation. The lowest star, in silver, represents the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Star of the Sea. Two upper stars, in gold, represent the prophets Elijah and Eliseus, the Fathers of the Carmelite Order. These three stars point to the Marian character of the Order and to its Elijan origins even before the birth of Christ.

The three stars also represent the three epochs in the history of Carmel: the first, the prophetic era, from the time of the Prophet Elijah to the time of John the Baptist; the second, or Greek epoch, when the Order spread throughout the East and the West, from the time of John the Baptist to that of Berthold, the first Latin General of the Order; and the third, from Berthold to the present.

Above the shield with the mountain and three stars is a five-flowered crown, surrounded by twelve stars, symbolizing Mary, since Carmel is her Order. Over the crown is an arm brandishing a flaming sword, signifying the fiery spirit of Elijah, burning with zeal for the Lord his God. A scroll contains the motto of the Order, taken from the words of Elijah: ZELO, ZELATUS SUM, PRO DOMINO DEO EXERCITUUM ("With zeal have I been zealous for the Lord God of hosts").

A cross on the summit of the mountain was added in the sixteenth century, by St. John of the Cross, as the distinctive mark of the Discalced Carmelites.

**Q:** Would you tell us about St. Teresa and her reform of the Carmelite Order?

**A:** It would take volumes to do justice to the holy Mother of our Order and to her work in reforming the Order. Anyone who is interested in Carmel should read some of the books that have been written about her, particularly her own writings which are a perpetual monument to her immense spirituality, especially her autobiographical *Life, The Way of Perfection, The Foundations*, and her masterpiece, *The Interior Castle*.

Teresa, the third of twelve children, was born to an affluent Spanish family on March 28, 1515 in a small village about thirteen miles from Avila. She was reared in a strict religious home atmosphere. Her mother died when she was 14. On November 2, 1535, at age 20, Teresa de Ahumada y Cepeda joined the Carmelite Convent of the Incarnation in Avila. Her entrance into Carmel marked the beginning of a new era for the Order.

Soon after profession, while recuperating from a serious illness, she came upon the book, *The Third Spiritual Alphabet*, which opened up new vistas into mental prayer. This she later defined as “an intimate friendship, a frequent heart-to-heart conversation with Him by Whom we know ourselves to be loved.” Thus was sown the seed that would eventually flourish into a life of intense prayer, a profound yearning for union with God—a legacy which she was to bequeath to the Church through the Carmelite Order.

Convent life at the Incarnation was not all it should have been. Intended as a place for solitude and silent prayer, the convent had become a veritable social center, to the detriment of the spiritual advancement of the 180 nuns. At the age of 38, Teresa, experiencing a “conversion,” withdrew from these social activities, opened her soul to God’s graces, and found herself favored with extraordinary gifts of mystical prayer.

On August 24, 1562, after many years at the Incarnation, Teresa responded to divine inspiration and founded the convent of St. Joseph’s in Avila where a small group of nuns, limited to not more than 13, would undertake the strict observance of the primitive, unmitigated Carmelite rule. There was strict cloister, with almost unbroken silence and extreme poverty. The nuns’ habits were of coarse material and they wore sandals, the reason for their being called “discalced” (literally, without shoes).

Teresa’s intention was to found only one convent, where she could live a genuinely contemplative Carmelite life. However, about four years after the establishment of St. Joseph’s, she was again moved by the Holy Spirit not only to found additional convents for nuns, but also to push the reform to include the friars.

St. Teresa has the distinction of being the only woman to reform a male religious order. In this work, she was blessed with the support of a young friar, John of the Cross, 27 years her junior. While she had the genius for organizing the reform and the winning personality to obtain the necessary permissions and donations, John of the Cross was the embodiment

of total commitment and fidelity to the original Carmelite ideals. He was a tower of dedication to a life of asceticism, detachment and profound mysticism.

Teresa's reform flourished, but conditions at her former convent, the Incarnation, were in a steady decline. As a solution, the apostolic visitor ordered Teresa to return to the Incarnation for three years as prioress. She was deeply concerned that the nuns would regard the appointment of a Discalced nun as a personal reproach. After a troubled beginning, it required all of Teresa's prayers, persuasion and personal charm to win over the nuns.

Teresa realized that to bring about a real change at the Incarnation she needed the help of an exceptional spiritual director for the nuns. She decided it would be John of the Cross, and she told the nuns: "I am bringing you as a confessor a priest who is a saint." John arrived at the Incarnation in 1572, when Teresa's term as prioress still had two years to run. Those two years were the only time in their lives that the holy parents of the reform had any sustained close association, and they both benefited greatly from the experience.

At the end of three years, Teresa left the Incarnation and continued the work of the reform. Finally, having completed the foundation of her seventeenth convent, at Burgos, Teresa, exhausted and suffering from terminal cancer, started back to Avila so that she could die at her beloved St. Joseph's. However, her physical condition was deteriorating rapidly, and she was exhausted by the time she arrived at her convent in Alba de Tormes. Despite the solicitude and care of the nuns for the Mother of their Order, Teresa died at Alba two weeks later, on October 15, 1582 at the age of 67.

Teresa of Jesus was beatified in 1614 and declared a saint in 1622. In 1970, she had the distinction of being the first woman to be named a doctor of the Church, bearing the title MATER SPIRITUALIUM - Mother of Spirituality.

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