

**THE LORD HEARS  
THE CRY OF THE POOR**

*A Letter*  
*from the Prior General*  
**Joseph Chalmers**  
*to the Carmelite Family*

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Per uso interno - Edizione fuori commercio

## Introduction: poverty, desert and Carmelite charism

1. In 2003 I published a letter to the Order, entitled *The God of Our Contemplation*. I wrote this at the request of the International Commission on Justice and Peace and the Integrity of Creation. The thrust of the letter was to look at the issue of the connection between contemplation and the work for justice. This present letter has also been occasioned by a request from the Commission. The members asked me to write about the meaning of poverty for Carmelite life.

I believe that the idea of journeying through the desert can be a very fruitful beginning for such a reflection. As the RIVC says, *“The authentic contemplative journey allows us to discover our own frailty, our weakness, our poverty - in a word, the nothingness of human nature: all is grace. Through this experience, we grow in solidarity with those who live in situations of deprivation and injustice. As we allow ourselves to be challenged by the poor and by the oppressed, we are gradually transformed, and we begin to see the world with God’s eyes and to love the world with his heart. (cf. Constitutions of the friars, 15). With God, we hear the cry of the poor, (Ex. 3,7) and we strive to share the Divine solicitude, concern, and compassion for the poorest and the least.”* (No. 43)

2. The United Nations has declared 2006 to be the year of the desert in order to get the message across that their continuing loss is a major problem for humanity and to protect the unique ecosystem and cultural diversity of deserts worldwide.<sup>1</sup> The desert is of course an important biblical symbol and plays a vital part in the Carmelite spiritual tradition. It speaks to us of the journey towards God and reminds us particularly of Elijah’s journey towards Mount Horeb (I Kings 19, 4-8), when Elijah took the same road as did Moses in order to encounter God.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on this and other United Nations projects, see the links on the *carmelites.info* website.

3. In the Bible, both poverty and the desert express a harsh reality of people's lives. At the same time, they are also symbols for the long journey that the people must accomplish in obedience to the mission they have received from God. The desert is the place of utter poverty, crisis, of fleeing, complaining, struggling and temptation, where the people discovered their own interior poverty, their limits, and their weaknesses. The poverty of the desert is also the place from where the people escape to freedom. They journeyed for forty years towards the sources of their faith, where they rediscovered their memory and their identity. The desert is where the remains of Pharaoh's oppression are left behind and where the people learn to live fraternally. It is the place where they meet their God once again, the place of the covenant, of a renewed commitment, of prayer, of rediscovering the presence of God as a completely free gift. (cf. Hos. 2, 16-17; Ex. 5, 1.3)
4. The experience of the desert marked the life of the Prophet Elijah. He confronted the deserts of Karith (1Kings 17,5), of Beersheba (1Kings 19, 4) and of Horeb (1Kings 19,8). The desert is not only a geographic place, but also is an interior experience. In the desert Elijah experienced his own poverty (1Kings 19, 4-5). He did not reach the point of losing his faith but he did not know how to utilise the faith he had inherited to confront a new situation. The interior desert, his crisis, showed itself in the fact that he sought the presence of God in the traditional signs (earthquake, mighty wind, great fire) and he discovered that these signs no longer revealed anything about God. (1Kings 19,11-12). The experience of the desert on Mount Carmel deeply marked the life of the first Carmelites. Leaving Palestine, they carried with them, within themselves, the Carmelite desert. Living in Europe, they met the desert once again, not in the regular life of the large independent monasteries, far from the cities, but in the poor style of life of mendicant communities, close to the poor and in the cities. Poverty and the desert taken together can express the profound meaning of the Carmelite charism.
5. One of the important documents of the Carmelite Order (RIVC), has this to say about the journey through the desert: "*The first*

*Carmelites, in tune with the spirituality of their time (the 12th - 13th centuries), attempted to live out this ascetic commitment by withdrawing into solitude. Their desert was more than a physical reality; it was a place of the heart... In the footsteps of the first Carmelite hermits, we too journey through the desert, which develops our contemplative dimension. This requires self-abandonment to a gradual process of emptying and stripping ourselves, so that we may be clothed in Christ and filled with God. This process "begins when we entrust ourselves to God, in whatever way he chooses to approach us" (Constitutions of the friars, no. 17). For we do not enter the desert by our own will: it is the Holy Spirit who calls us and draws us into the desert; it is the Spirit who sustains us in our spiritual combat, clothes us in God's armour (cf. Rule, 18-19) and fills us with his gifts and with the divine presence, until we are entirely transformed by God and reflect something of God's infinite beauty." (see St. John of the Cross, Canticle B, 36,5 and 2 Cor. 3, 18). (No. 27)*

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## ***Poverty in the Old Testament***

6. In the Old Testament, poverty is an evil against which one must struggle and ask God to be set free (Dt. 15, 7-11). The consequences of poverty are humiliation, oppression, and dependence (Sir. 13, 3-7. 21-23). From this comes the evil. God, who made a covenant with the Chosen People, has a particular care for the disinherited, widows, slaves and orphans (Ex. 22, 25-26; Lv. 25, 35-38; Dt. 24, 10-15). Some people were so burdened by debt that they saw no option but to sell themselves into slavery. The law of the covenant protected them and defended them against cruelty so that if a slave was injured in the eye or lost a tooth, the master was obliged to set the slave free. (Ex.21, 1-11.21.26-27; Dt. 15, 12-15)). The Israelites experienced in Egypt the weight of servitude. They were foreigners serving the local people. God intervened and brought the people out of Egypt. This was a profound experience for them that remained foundational. (Ex. 21,20). However, it took forty years of wandering in the desert before they were ready to enter the Promised Land. When they began to settle down, they had to learn that the foreigner is poor and that God loves him too. The widow and orphan are in the same

situation, as they have no protection against injustice and mistreatment (Ex. 22, 21-23). It was believed that God hears the cry of the poor, those who suffer and the humiliated (Ex. 2, 24; 3,7; Sir. 4,1-6; 21,5). The messiah king will protect the poor. (Is. 11, 4; Ps. 34,7). God takes the side of the poor, of the victims of injustice, the persecuted, and the weak:

*“For he has not spurned nor disdained  
the wretched man in his misery.*

*Nor did he turn his face away from him.” (Ps. 22,25).*

7. Initially, above all starting from the period of the monarchy, the appearance of poor people was a challenge to the existing mindset. The simple fact of there being poor people was believed to be an indication that the covenant had been broken. The prophets became spokesmen for the demands of divine justice. Among them, the Prophet Elijah holds a special place (1Kings 21,17-22; 2Chr. 21,11-15). Later, especially during the Babylonian captivity, when the whole people were oppressed and poor, those who found themselves in such a position were no longer to be assisted simply by receiving alms from those who were rich, but it was understood that the poor themselves had a mission to accomplish with regard to the Chosen People and with regard even to the whole of humanity. This mission is expressed clearly in the songs of the Servant of Yahweh (Is. 42,6-7; 49,6; 61,1), which shaped Jesus’ understanding of his mission (cf. Lk. 4, 18-19).
8. Slowly, over the centuries, the term “poor” came not only to express a social or political status but also it is understood to be an interior attitude of faithfulness that often brings with it isolation and persecution by the powerful. The little book of Zephaniah affirms that the opposite of poverty is not wealth but pride. The poor are humbly submissive to the will of God. (Zeph. 2,3) Yahweh’s poor (the *anawim*) are the object of his benevolent love (cf. Is. 49, 13; 66,2) and are the first fruits of the “humble and modest people” (Zeph. 3, 12) that the Messiah will gather together. God gives salvation to those who accept his will. Jeremiah was not an indigent prophet (Jer. 32, 6-15) but he experienced persecution. From his experience of being despised, persecuted and being weak, Jeremiah learned trust in God and so he discovered the source of his salvation (Jer. 20,7-13).

Jeremiah also is one of the poor of the Lord. Material poverty is not a value in itself but it does have a particular religious significance. It is a call to open oneself to God. It is a mysterious preparation to accept God as the giver of all things. As a spiritual attitude, the person is poor who, in a situation of need, seeks humbly the help of the Lord (cf. Ps. 34,7-11).

9. The idea that we find in the Law and the Prophets can also be found in the Wisdom Literature. The book of Job, for example, describes in a very lively way, the situation of the poor. (Job 24, 1-12) The psalms have a wonderful spirituality of the poor. There is a loving dialogue between the poor and God. The one who prays presents his own misery and suffering, abandoning himself to God (Jer. 20, 7-13). The poor look for their salvation to Yahweh on whom they depend. The danger of wealth is seen in the fact that it is the source of pride. ( Ps. 49,17-18) For this reason there tends to be identification in the Bible between "rich" and "wicked". (Is. 53,9). The rich person tends to be self-satisfied and proud and therefore does not believe in God. (Ps. 52,9).The Lord will give justice to the humble and the poor. The justice of God is not that of strict law but comes from the promises of the covenant:

*"He raises up the lowly from the dust;*

*from the dunghill he lifts up the poor*

*To seat them with princes*

*With the princes of his own people"* (Ps. 113, 7)

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## *Poverty in the New Testament*

10. The Gospel of St. Luke presents us with the figure of Mary as the epitome of the *anawim* (the poor ones of Yahweh). She trusted in God and believed that the promises made to her would be fulfilled (Lk. 1, 45). Mary is the "servant of the Lord" (Lk. 1,38), the only woman in the whole Bible so named. At the beginning of the New Testament, Mary brings the trust and faith of the *anawim* of the Old Testament to a new peak and she is declared to be "full of grace" (Lk. 1, 30) and "blessed among women" (Lk. 1. 42). The Magnificat (Lk. 1, 46-55) is a prophetic song of thanksgiving to God for the wonders that He has accomplished.

It contains the core of the Gospel in a few words. Mary can see through the externals that surround her to the reality beneath. She proclaims the Good News of the Kingdom of God as already realised and so she sees that God's mercy extends from generation to generation to those who fear Him. She rejoices that God has shown his strength scattering the proud in the conceit of their hearts, putting down the mighty from their thrones and exalting the lowly. She proclaims that God has already filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. The Magnificat reveals that God is on the side of the lowly and the poor. When the Reign of God is fully established, these people will come into their inheritance. Those who trust in God's promises now will be amply rewarded.

11. In the Old Testament we do not meet a spirituality of renunciation. This comes with the lifestyle and spirit of Jesus. Material poverty is a sorrowful experience, but many poor people have accepted their condition with a complete trust in God. The example of Mary, who understood herself to be "the servant of the Lord" marked the life of her Son. He too defined himself in terms of service: "*The Son of Man has not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.*" (Mk. 10,45) In the synagogue at Nazareth, when he outlined his mission to the people, Jesus used a phrase from the Prophet Isaiah, taken from the summary of the Songs of the Servant of Yahweh, where the prophet described the mission of the Messiah as the servant of the poor: "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me and has anointed me to announce the good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, to restore sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, and to proclaim the Lord's year of favour*". (Lk. 4, 18-19).
12. The public ministry of Jesus was marked by itinerant preaching. The simple people followed him. They were fascinated by the power of his teaching (Mk. 1, 22. 27). He chose a group of disciples who followed him, in his way of life as well as in his teaching (cf. Lk. 10, 1-9). The Jewish teachers taught the Law and its interpretation. They did so in a fixed place, were surrounded by students, men only. Jesus was also called "master" (rabbi). However, Jesus did not belong to any of the schools of the Jewish teachers. The doctrine of Jesus did not come from any

particular school or course of study. What he taught came from his own experience of intimate dialogue with the Father (Jn. 5,19. 30; 15,15). There was amazement at his learning (Jn. 7,15. 46). Jesus overcame the abyss between the learned doctors of the Law and the simple people (Mt. 11, 28).

13. Jesus lived in uncertainty, in a precarious situation. He lived without a home, as a stranger and pilgrim on the earth. Following him means facing an existence deprived of human security and characterised by poverty (Mt. 8,20). The disciples of the Master do not have permission to establish themselves comfortably in this world. (Lk. 9,57-58). The disciples are called to take risks and to live a precarious existence, uncertain, insecure on a material level and even more so on a spiritual level, in the sense that they have to let go of their lives in order to receive life in abundance. (Mt. 16, 25). The radical poverty of Jesus consists in his self-emptying. (Phil. 2,7). In Jesus we meet the help of God under the form of poverty. God takes on our poverty and shares his own riches with us. (2Cor. 8,9). Of course the riches of God have nothing to do with money. In order to participate in the riches of Christ, it is necessary also to participate in the mystery of poverty and of self-emptying, which is fully revealed to us in the death of Jesus on the cross. God reveals his power in powerlessness (2Cor. 12,9-10; 1Cor. 1,25).
14. Jesus fully accepted our human condition (Heb. 2,17; Rom. 8,3). He took upon himself our weakness. (Mt. 8,17). He lived a life of obedience even to death on a cross. Jesus did not impose himself with violence. On the contrary, he is with the humble and poor. His yoke is easy and his burden light. (Mt. 11, 30) We are called to imitate him in his attitude of compassionate and merciful love towards the humble and the lost. (Mt. 11,28). Those who are poor like Jesus, pour out love without counting the cost. The generosity of the poor widow is contrasted with the avarice of the scribes and the proud rich people. (Mk. 12,41-44). On the other hand, even the disciples protested at the woman who poured out the costly ointment on Jesus. (Mt. 26,8-9). Whoever is seduced and attracted by the love of Christ, gives away everything, sharing his poverty and experiencing his generosity (Mk. 10,28).

15. Wealth is not condemned but its value is relativised and human beings are warned to use it wisely and moderately. The Sermon on the Mount is fundamental to the concept of Christian poverty (Mt. 5,3-12; Lk. 6,20-38). In this famous sermon, Jesus lays out the fundamental values of God's Reign. Luke's Gospel has "blessed you who are poor" (6,20) as the first beatitude while Matthew has "blessed are the poor in spirit". (5,3). The poor, because of their situation, have no one else but God on whom to depend. The poor are meek and humble of heart. They are the most likely to hear the message of Jesus. There is a spiritual character to poverty as availability for the Gospel, and as an interior renunciation of trying to save oneself and relying on God. Poverty in spirit includes an interior emptiness, a waiting that can only be assuaged by God in Jesus Christ. Those who are aware of their human lack, awaiting all things from God, are poor in spirit (cf. Lk. 12,33-34).
16. Christ invites us to abandon ourselves into the hands of the Father, trusting to live today, as a gift of God's goodness and love. We are not alone but walk in the presence of the providential love of the Father. Freedom from anxiety and the preoccupations of daily life finds its justification in the fact that life is more than the material things that sustain it. God cares also for the flowers of the field. (Mt. 6, 28-30) It is stupid to be worried about life because human beings do not have power over it. Trusting in God is to seek the Kingdom. When our centre of gravity and our point of reference are the search for the Kingdom, which absorbs our energy and interest, we are set free from the preoccupations of life. The Kingdom is a gift of the Father to the little group of disciples and so they need not be afraid. (Lk. 12,32). The Kingdom begins to take shape when the disciples put their goods at the disposition of the poor. The only way to rescue the human being from the bonds of material goods is to share them. (Lk. 12,33).
17. To serve God and Mammon is not possible. (Lk. 16,13). Mammon gives power over others and lays claim to goods that all have need of. It is not the same as simply money but refers to economic power that takes over the human heart. Mammon is an idol. It is always evil because it is the fruit of cupidity and is the source of false trust. The paradox of Christianity brings

about a profound change of values. Christ is very severe regarding mammon because it can imprison the human heart and obscure the clear will of God toward one's neighbour. Adoration of mammon happens when people allow themselves to be seduced by material things. They multiply their possessions and their riches, desiring and exercising dominion over other people. On the other hand, giving away money and sharing it with the poor, they become friends and clients before God. Wealth has a demonic power since it tends to bind the human heart and makes it deaf to the call of God's Kingdom. St. Luke, in his parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk. 16, 19-31), stresses the vastly different destinies of the two men. The rich man, who is indifferent to the poor, ends up as a total and irreversible failure. The destiny of the poor man ends in communion of life with all the just. The Gospel does not condemn one economic condition or another. Jesus does warn about the lure of riches that can suffocate the seed of the Word and prevent it from bearing fruit (Mk. 4,19). For the one who is invited by Jesus to follow him, the Kingdom must be the absolute priority. In order to follow him, one must be prepared to sacrifice every other connection, even those of a family nature, and also all one's own plans and interests, if these interfere with the primary cause of the Reign of God (Mk. 8,34-35; 10,29-30).

18. Jesus and his disciples used material goods (Lk. 8,3). What Jesus denounces as dangerous is the aspiration and the anxiety to accumulate wealth as a guarantee of life and of security. The source of life cannot be found in material things. The security of human life cannot be found in possessions. (Lk. 12,15). The one way to be set free is to give away one's possessions (Mk. 10,21). The abandonment and the privation of goods, as an experience of liberty, are an invitation that Jesus makes to those who are willing to follow him. (Lk. 12,22). Those who worry about material things, to the point of tormenting themselves, show that they have not yet discovered that the One who has given all - life - will also give the lesser things - food and clothing. Cupidity is an illness; it is an unsatisfied desire, that anxiously seeks new and more numerous possessions, transforming life into a useless, insatiable and endless chain of unfulfilled desires (Ecc. 5, 9-11).

## *Poverty in the Consecrated Life*

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19. All Carmelites look back to the founding experience of the small group of nameless hermits on Mount Carmel. They were laymen who simply wished to live in allegiance to Jesus Christ following an eremitical and penitential lifestyle in his own land. Somewhere between 1206 and 1214 they had achieved sufficient cohesion as a group to seek formal recognition by the Church and to receive some direction. St. Albert of Jerusalem gave them this by means of his letter, the *formula vitae*. When the hermits received formal approval of the “formula vitae” by Pope Innocent IV in 1247, they became religious through the commonly accepted three vows. At present, the Carmelite Family includes friars, cloistered nuns, hermits, sisters of apostolic life, all of whom make profession of the three vows of chastity, poverty and obedience, as well as many lay Carmelites, some of whom also take vows, although most do not.
  
20. As the Order prepares to celebrate in 2007 the 800th anniversary of the giving of the *formula vitae* by St. Albert to the hermits on Mount Carmel, it is an opportunity to reflect on what inspired the whole Carmelite movement. In 1247, Albert’s *formula vitae* became an official Rule of the Church with the acceptance of it by Pope Innocent IV. The Pope inserted some modifications into the text to make it suitable for mendicant friars. The desert and the mountaintop always remained important for Carmelites but the friars also responded to the call of the Church to evangelise the poor in the new cities of Europe. Contemplation was and is at the heart of the Carmelite vocation. Mendicant friars live this contemplative vocation in the midst of the people, whereas the hermits and the cloistered nuns live the same vocation in a different way. For all Carmelites, whether we live in the city or on the mountain, the journey through the desert, another way to express the contemplative path, is essential.
  
21. In the XI and XII centuries, the term *pauperes Christi* (the poor ones of Christ) was often used for those who wished to serve Christ in and through the abandonment of goods and the embracing of poverty. These movements arose among lay people.

The mendicant movement was a response to a particular situation in the Church. Francis and Dominic opted for a collective poverty for their new Orders. They brought together the best insights of the previous two centuries. The friars established themselves mostly in the cities, where there were acute social and moral problems. In 1247 the Carmelites joined this movement.

22. The foundation and essence of the consecrated life is the radical following of Jesus Christ. The evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience professed publicly in the Church are a radical form of witness to the following of Christ. They are «above all a gift of the Most Holy Trinity»<sup>2</sup>, whose eternal and infinite love «reaches the roots of one's being» (VC, 18). When the vows are embraced with a generous commitment, the evangelical counsels contribute to the purification of the human heart and to the attainment of spiritual freedom. Religious are called to become conformed to Christ and a «living memory of Jesus' way of life and way of acting» (VC, 22). Far from taking religious out of the world, by the profession of the evangelical counsels they become a leaven for the transformation of the world and witness of the «wonders that God accomplishes through human fragility» (VC, 20).
23. Chastity, poverty and obedience are not virtues exclusive to consecrated people. All Christians are called to live in some way these evangelical counsels. The Consecrated Life is proposed as an alternative way of life in the Church. It is the vocation of all Christians to live in the world following the Gospel: the consecrated life is one way. Religious try, with more or less success, to create a different kind of world<sup>3</sup>. Religious seek to offer an alternative vision of reality through the vows that they profess. The vows express a commitment to the person of Jesus Christ and

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<sup>2</sup> *Vita Consecrata*, 20. This is the document written by Pope John Paul II in 1994 after the Episcopal Synod on the Consecrated Life. Hereinafter it is referred to as VC.

<sup>3</sup> This idea comes from the Congress on the Consecrated Life held in Rome during November 2004. See my letter, *Passion for Christ. Passion for humanity*, (Curia Generalizia, Rome, 2005) for a summary of this Congress and an application to the Carmelite life.

are a way of participating in the mission of the Church by bearing witness to the Reign of God in this world. In his message at the end of the Congress on Consecrated Life, the Pope wrote: «*The witness of your chaste, poor and obedient lives becomes at the beginning of the third Christian millennium an ikon of the loving face of Christ*» (art. 5). Religious are called to live this witness in a very ambiguous reality, in social settings that are constituted often by sinful structures that are locked in mortal combat with initiatives that promote a just relationship between human beings.

24. The three vows together form a unified way of following the poor, chaste and obedient Christ. By means of the vow of poverty, God frees the human heart from disordered attachments to material things. Our world has abundant resources for each and every human being but the way in which one part of humanity chooses to live means that the majority must live in poverty. When the rich countries give aid to the developing nations, they normally do so with many conditions, which condemn the latter to a never-ending cycle of poverty. The wealthy nations refuse to take the simple step of opening up their markets to the goods of these countries under the same conditions that they extend to their own goods. The rich nations often heavily subsidise their own goods making it impossible for developing nations to compete. These are structural sins, but there also exists a disordered relationship at an individual level. We must care for creation. All things have been created to be used, but it is very easy to become enslaved by them. Many peoples are living at such a level that the good things of the earth that sustain human life are not being renewed and this will have disastrous effects on future generations unless we each choose to live in this world as good stewards and not as rapacious lords.
25. Our relationship with material things must be purified during the journey in the desert, so that our hearts do not grasp onto these things. God will help us find our treasure in God alone and not in any created thing. In this experience we find that many things that have given us great pleasure in the past can become quite tasteless. This is true also for spiritual things. For example, prayer can be very pleasurable at a certain stage

on the journey and the danger is that we can pray for the pleasure that we receive and not because prayer is the privileged means of communication with God. Often prayer will become arid and without any meaning for us. Through such experiences we lose the exaggerated dependence on our own feelings. God makes us capable of accepting reality as it is, and in this way we learn that things, even spiritual things, can never satisfy us fully. They may give us a momentary pleasure and then our heart looks around for the next thing. We learn that only God can fully satisfy the human heart. We learn this important lesson through experience and sometimes experience can be bitter.

26. Sometimes when we are experiencing the desert, it can seem that everything is going wrong, but God is at work deep within us, putting in order all our feelings and disordered desires. This experience is a blessing, even though it seems to be the opposite. The way in which we relate to God, to others and to the world around us changes. We can then understand those mysterious words of Jesus: *"the one who wants to save his life will lose it; but the one who is prepared to lose his life for love of me, will save it."* (Lc. 9,24). We begin to understand not only intellectually but also from the heart, because we have experienced the truth of the words. The vow of poverty is one means that God uses to liberate our heart so that we can be in a life-giving relationship with God, with other people and with material things.
27. Certainly the vows demand a renunciation but the reason behind it is to free the heart in order to love. Living the vows as well as possible, leaves space for God to transform the human being in order to see as if with God's eyes and love as if with God's heart. There is no virtue in renunciation for its own sake; it is only valuable when it is to benefit other people. Think of athletes. They train very hard and the goal can seem very far away. It is difficult not to become disillusioned and think that it really is not worth all the struggle. However the desert is not always dry; at times we might be permitted to glimpse something of what is happening deep within us and this gives us new strength

when we understand that God is liberating us so that we can love God and other people as our brothers and sisters, and to love the whole of creation as a divine gift for the whole of the human family.

28. The option for the poor requires a compassionate way of looking upon the world. It challenges us to evaluate our lifestyle, our ways of making decisions on a personal as well as an institutional level in terms of their impact on the poor. By means of a simple lifestyle, religious communities bear witness to and announce the Good News of God's Reign. Communities of consecrated men and women can make present in this world in a very concrete way an alternative way of living, which is a sign of God's Reign. A poor, humble and simple lifestyle is also a denunciation of the present systems of our world, because they go against the current. The poverty of the religious will challenge other people only if we allow ourselves to be challenged first of all. If we become prisoners of the lifestyle of our own societies and accept the customs and ways of thinking of the more privileged sectors, we religious will not serve anyone, neither the poor nor the rich, and the wealthy can only be saved by becoming poor like Christ, who *"though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty, you might become rich."* (2 Cor. 8.9).

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### *Poverty in Carmel*

29. Below you will find what the Order says regarding poverty in some of our more important official documents. I suggest that you read these in the light of what has gone before, i.e. the relationship between poverty and the desert, and the concept of poverty in the Bible and for the consecrated life. I also invite each Carmelite to read again what the important documents of one's own Congregation, or the Rule for lay Carmelites, has to say about poverty.

## THE CARMELITE RULE

- [4] The first thing I require is for you to have a Prior, one of yourselves, who is to be chosen for the office by common consent, or that of the greater and maturer part of you. Each of the others must promise him obedience - of which, once promised, he must try to make his deed the true reflection - *and also chastity and the renunciation of ownership*<sup>4</sup>.
- [12] None of the brothers must lay claim to anything as his own, but you are to possess everything in common; and each is to receive from the Prior-that is from the brother he appoints for the purpose-whatever befits his age and needs.
- [17] You are to abstain from meat, except as a remedy for sickness or feebleness. But as, when you are on a journey, you more often than not have to beg your way, outside your own houses you may eat foodstuffs that have been cooked with meat, so as to avoid giving trouble to your hosts. At sea, however, meat may be eaten<sup>5</sup>.
- [20] You must give yourselves to work of some kind, so that the devil may always find you busy; no idleness on your part must give him a chance to pierce the defences of your souls. In this respect you have both the teaching and the example of Saint Paul the Apostle, into whose mouth Christ put his own words. God made him preacher and teacher of faith and truth to the nations: with him as your teacher you cannot go astray. We lived among you, he said, labouring and weary, toiling night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you; not because we had no power to do otherwise but so as to give you, in your own selves, as an example you might imitate. For the charge we gave you when we were with you was this: that whoever is not willing to work should not be allowed to eat either. For we have heard that there are certain restless idlers among you. We charge people of this kind, and implore them in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, that they earn their own bread by silent toil. This is the way of holiness and goodness: see that you follow it.

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<sup>4</sup> The words "*and also chastity and the renunciation of ownership*" were added to St. Albert's original "*formula vitae*" by Pope Innocent IV in 1247 in order to bring the lay hermits into line with other mendicant friars and therefore make them officially religious.

<sup>5</sup> Chapters 12 and 17 were added by Pope Innocent IV for the above reason.

## CONSTITUTIONS OF THE FRIARS

[24] Finally, this way of being “in the midst of the people” is a sign and a prophetic witness of new relationships of fraternity and friendship among men and women everywhere. It is a prophetic message of justice and peace in society and among peoples. As an integral part of the Good News, this prophecy must be fulfilled through active commitment to the transformation of sinful systems and structures into grace-filled systems and structures. 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 life 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 out also through allegiance to the poor and to those in whom the face of our Lord is reflected in a preferential way.

[50] Jesus Christ the poor man, was born and lived in lowliness. During his life on earth, he chose to be deprived of all worldly riches,<sup>6</sup> power and prestige.<sup>7</sup> He took the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are,<sup>8</sup> and identified with the “little ones” and with the poor.<sup>9</sup> He shared all of his life with his disciples;<sup>10</sup> he shared his Father’s plans,<sup>11</sup> his mission,<sup>12</sup> his prayer.<sup>13</sup> In this way, he became not only their master, but their friend and brother.<sup>14</sup> On the cross, in keeping with the Father’s plan, Jesus experienced absolute nakedness and radical poverty. From the cross he gave himself up completely, for the sake of humanity. Rich though he was, Jesus became poor for us, so that, through his poverty, we might be made rich.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Luke 9:58.*

<sup>7</sup> *John 6:15; 5:41.*

<sup>8</sup> *Phil 2:7.*

<sup>9</sup> *Matt 25:40.*

<sup>10</sup> *John 1:39.*

<sup>11</sup> *John 15: 15.*

<sup>12</sup> *Matt 10.*

<sup>13</sup> *Luke 11:1-4.*

<sup>14</sup> *Heb 2:11; Rom 8:29.*

<sup>15</sup> *2 Cor 8:9.*

- [52] As we follow Jesus and take as our model the life of the primitive Church, we too wish to embrace willingly the gift of the evangelical counsel of poverty, by our vow to hold all things in common, and by declaring that no object belongs to any of us personally. We believe that all we have is gift, and that all we have - all the spiritual, material, and cultural goods that are obtained by our labour - must be freely returned, in whatever way can best serve the good of the Church and of our Order, for the human and social development of all.
- [53] Poverty is a complex and ambiguous reality. When it is the absence of the necessary means for survival, resulting from injustice or personal and social sin, it is an evil. But it can also be a Gospel form of life adopted by those who trust in God alone, sharing all their possessions, identifying with the poor in a spirit of solidarity, renouncing all desire for dominion or self-sufficiency. In contemplation, we internalise the authentic attitude of poverty, which is a deep process of inner self-emptying through which we become less and less in control of our own activity and ideas, of our virtues and of our ambitions, as we open ourselves to God's action. In this way, we become truly poor as Christ was poor, even to the point of not owning the poverty we have chosen in this process by which God's love empties us.
- [54] Thus, we who freely chose poverty as our evangelical lifestyle feel called by the Gospel and by the Church to awaken people's consciences to the problems of destitution, hunger and social injustice. We shall accomplish this purpose if - first and foremost - our own poverty witnesses to the human meaning of work as a means of sustaining life and as service to others; if we undertake to study and to understand the economic, social and moral causes of that poverty which stems from injustice; if we use our possessions with restraint and simplicity, making them available to others, even free of charge, in the service of the human and spiritual development of our fellow men and women; and, finally, if 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.

- [58] Let us remember that in our time the best way to make manifest our vow of poverty is to faithfully fulfil the common law of work. Let us, therefore, embrace with enthusiasm the precept of the Rule, which invites us to work assiduously, for we know that by our toil we co-operate in God's work of creation and, at the same time, develop our own personalities; by our active charity we assist our confreres, and all others; and we contribute to the good of the Order. Moreover, we perpetuate the dignity Jesus gave to work - for he never disdained manual labour - and we follow the example of the Blessed Virgin Mary, whose life on earth was full of ordinary concerns and work.
- [110] Christ did not bring about the salvation of the human race as an outsider or as a stranger to the history of the world. On the contrary, he identified both with his people and with the whole human race. Those who «claim to be followers of Christ must heed his call, especially when he says: "I was hungry and you gave me to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me to drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me; I was naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you visited me; I was in prison and you came to me"»<sup>16</sup>.
- [111] We live in a world full of injustice and disquiet. It is our duty to contribute to the search for an understanding of the causes of these evils; to be in solidarity with the sufferings of those who are marginalized; to share in their struggle for justice and peace; and to fight for their total liberation, helping them to fulfil their desire for a decent life.
- [112] The poor, the "little ones" (*minores*), constitute the vast majority of the world population. Their complex problems are linked and, to a large extent, are caused by current international relations and, more directly, by the economic and political systems which govern our world today. We cannot turn a deaf ear to the cry of the oppressed who plead for justice.

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<sup>16</sup> Matt 25:35-36.

- [113] We must hear and interpret reality from the perspective of the poor - of those who are oppressed by the economic and political systems which today govern humanity. Their problems are many, and we must set priorities in responding to them. In this way, we shall rediscover the Gospel as good news, and Jesus Christ as the liberator from all forms of oppression.
- [114] Social reality challenges us. Attentive to the cry of the poor, and faithful to the Gospel, we must take our stand with them, making an option for the "little ones". "There is a growing desire within the Order to choose solidarity with the "little ones" of history, to bring to our brothers and sisters a word of hope and salvation from their midst, more by our lives than by our words... We recommend this option for the poor, because it is in keeping with the charism of the Order, which can be summarised as 'a life in allegiance to Jesus Christ'; allegiance to Jesus also means allegiance to the poor and to those in whom the face of Christ is mirrored preferentially."
- [115] Our Elujan inspiration, which our prophetic charism is founded on, calls us to walk with the "little ones" along the paths the prophet travelled in his time - along the path of justice, opposing false ideologies and moving towards a concrete experience of the true living God; along the path of solidarity, defending the victims of injustice and taking their part; along the path of mysticism, struggling to restore to the poor faith in themselves by renewing their awareness that God is on their side.
- [116] To prepare and educate ourselves so that we may take on "the circumstances of the poor" in an evangelical manner, we propose to re-read the Bible, also from the perspective of the poor, of the oppressed and of the marginalized; to consider the Christian principles of justice and peace as an integral part of our formation at every level; to immerse ourselves in the circumstances of the poor; to use the tools of social analysis, in the light of faith, as a means to discover the presence of sin incarnated in certain political, socio-economic and cultural structures; to defend and to encourage even the smallest traces of vitality.

## THE RATIO INSTITUTIONIS VITAE CARMELITANAE

- [5] The Father - who, through the action of the Holy Spirit, calls us to a spiritual experience of deep attraction to and love for Jesus Christ the chaste, poor and obedient One - is the source and the goal of religious life, and therefore of Carmelite life. Through the Holy Spirit, the Father consecrates us, transforms us and conforms us to the image of Christ, guiding us to communion with himself and with our brothers and sisters.

As individuals and as communities, we in turn choose Jesus as the one Lord and Saviour of our lives. We commit ourselves to a journey of gradual and progressive conversion encompassing every aspect of life, allowing ourselves to be conformed to Jesus by the action of the Spirit and to come to union with God.

- [9] The evangelical counsels of obedience, poverty and chastity, publicly professed, are a concrete and radical way of following Christ. They are "above all a gift of the Holy Trinity,"<sup>17</sup> whose eternal and infinite love touches "the very root of our being."<sup>18</sup>

When they are embraced with the generous commitment which flows from love, the evangelical counsels contribute to purification of the heart and to spiritual freedom. By means of the evangelical counsels, the Holy Spirit gradually transforms us and conforms us to Christ. We become "a living memorial of Jesus' way of living and acting."<sup>19</sup>

Far from becoming estranged from the world by the profession of the evangelical counsels, we become a leaven for the transformation of the world, and we bear witness to "the marvels wrought by God in ... the frail humanity of those who are called."<sup>20</sup>

- [43] The contemplative dimension of Carmelite life allows us to recognise God's action in creation and in history. This free gift challenges us to commit ourselves to the working out of God's plan for the world. The authentic contemplative journey allows us to discover our own frailty, our weakness, our poverty - in a word, the nothingness of human nature: all is grace. Through this

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<sup>17</sup> VC, 20.

<sup>18</sup> VC, 18.

<sup>19</sup> VC, 22.

<sup>20</sup> VC, 20.

experience, we grow in solidarity with those who live in situations of deprivation and injustice. As we allow ourselves to be challenged by the poor and by the oppressed, we are gradually transformed, and we begin to see the world with God's eyes and to love the world with his heart.<sup>21</sup> With God, we hear the cry of the poor,<sup>22</sup> and we strive to share the Divine solicitude, concern, and compassion for the poorest and the least.

This moves us to speak out prophetically in the face of the excesses of individualism and subjectivism which we see in today's mentality - in the face of the many forms of injustice and oppression of individuals and of peoples.

Commitment to justice, peace and the safeguarding of creation is not an option. It is an urgent challenge, to which contemplative and prophetic Carmelite communities - following the example of Elijah<sup>23</sup> and of Mary<sup>24</sup> - must respond, speaking out in explicit defence of the truth and of the divine plan for humanity and for creation as a whole. Our community lifestyle is in itself such a statement: it is founded on just and peaceful relations, according to the plan outlined in the Rule, which our tradition traces back to the experience of Elijah, who founded on Mount Carmel a community where justice and peace dwell.<sup>25</sup>

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### *What does poverty say to Carmel now?*

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30. In the Carmelite Rule, which is the foundational document giving rise to all the different forms of Carmelite life, we are told that, like all those who seek to live a Christian life, we must live in allegiance to Jesus Christ. To do so means to be like him and assume his poor and fraternal style of life (Mk. 3, 14). It also means to imitate him when faced with the difficulties and privations of life (Lk. 22, 28), and finally to follow him to Calvary (Mk. 15, 41). We are to identify ourselves with Christ to the point of saying: "*I live, now not I, but it is Christ who lives in me!*" (Gal. 2, 20)

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. *Constitutions of the Friars*, 15.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. *Ex.* 3, 7.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. *1 Kings* 21.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. *Lk.* 1, 46. 55.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. *Institutio Primorum Monachorum*, 3, 3, 5.

31. The saints of Carmel have consistently stressed poverty as a spiritual value by means of which we come to realise our own need for God. According to St. John of the Cross, one of the results of dark contemplation is precisely the coming to know intimately one's own poverty and misery (Dark Night 2, 6, 4). He tells us that, "*All the wealth and glory of creation compared to the wealth that is God is utter poverty and misery in the Lord's sight. The person who loves and possesses these things is completely poor and miserable before God and will be unable to attain the richness and glory of transformation in God.*"<sup>26</sup> St. Therese of Lisieux had a profound understanding of her own poverty. She knew that she could do nothing and so she trusted totally in the power of God to bring her to the summit of Mount Carmel. Edith Stein and Titus Brandsma have given us the powerful example of their own life and death. Titus had an important job and led a very busy life. Despite all that, he was well known for having time for everyone. Finally he had to let go of everything when he was imprisoned and sent to Dachau, the infamous concentration camp, where he met his death with peacefulness and forgiveness for his torturers. In his famous poem we see that in his experience of utter poverty, Titus experienced a greater closeness with Christ than ever before:

*Leave me here freely alone,  
In cell where never sunlight shone,  
Should no one ever speak to me,  
This golden silence makes me free!*

*For though alone, I have no fear;  
Never wert Thou, O Lord, so near.  
Sweet Jesus, please abide with me;  
My deepest peace I find in Thee.*<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *Ascent I, 4, 7.* This translation is taken from K. Kavanaugh and O. Rodriguez, *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, (Washington DC, ICS Publications, 1991), p. 126.

<sup>27</sup> The whole poem can be found published in various places including, J. Rees, *Titus Brandsma. A Modern Martyr*, (London, Sidgwick & Jackson, 1971), p. 122.

32. We began our reflection with the desert and I would like to end there also. The hermits went to Albert of Jerusalem to receive from him direction for their lives and he specifically states in the “Formula Vitae” that he based himself on the proposal which they themselves had brought to him. They are to prepare themselves for a battle by putting on the armour of Christ. Albert in chapter 19 of the Rule details what this armour is: *Your loins are to be girt with chastity, your breast fortified by holy meditations, for as Scripture has it, holy meditation will save you. Put on holiness as your breastplate, and it will enable you to love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength, and your neighbour as yourself. Faith must be your shield on all occasions, and with it you will be able to quench all the flaming missiles of the wicked one: there can be no pleasing God without faith; and the victory lies in this-your faith. On your head set the helmet of salvation, and so be sure of deliverance by our only Saviour, who sets his own free from their sins. The sword of the spirit, the word of God, must abound in your mouths and hearts. Let all you do have the Lord’s word for accompaniment.*
33. The desert was often considered to be the stronghold of Satan and hermits were considered to be in the forefront of the battle against evil. They went out into the desert not for a quiet life away from it all but in order to take part in this battle. They discovered that the battle was mostly interior against their own selfishness or false self that was always ready to spoil even the best of intentions. In the desert the hermits experienced their own poverty. They came to realise that without the help of God, they could do nothing.
34. The Rule is an ancient document that has something to say to each succeeding generation. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century we too have a battle to fight and we too need to be protected by the same armour that the first Carmelites donned. When the hermits left Mount Carmel for Europe, they brought with them the desert of Carmel, no longer a geographical place, but now an expression of the charism. They rediscovered the desert when they assumed the mendicant life, in the midst of the poor in the great cities of Europe. The Carmelite vocation takes us on a journey through

the desert, just like our father Elijah. At times we may feel that we cannot win. We may have struggled for many years in various apostolates and not seen much fruit. We may have tried for many years to overcome the selfishness and rebellion that lurks in every human heart. God hears the cry of the poor and asks us to hear it too but what can we do? Despite our best efforts, it can seem that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Through the experience of the desert, we come to realise our own poverty, the fact that of ourselves we can accomplish nothing. The Kingdom of God is a gift not something that we can force by our good deeds. Perhaps like Elijah we may realise that we are no better than our ancestors (I Kings 19,4) and that we have been adding to the problem instead of alleviating it. If we lie down under the nearest bush and refuse to carry on, we too will receive a visit from an angel. This being will not have six wings and be surrounded by light but will look very ordinary, indeed he or she will look remarkably like a member of our own community whom we have known for many years. God uses anyone and anything to convey a message to us. The message is that we must get up and eat lest the journey be too long. (I Kings 19,7) The daily food for our journey we receive is the Eucharist and our Carmelite tradition. Like the Prophet Elijah we must go on a long journey. We must never cease what we have been called to do but in and through all things we must seek the face of the living God. Elijah received a great surprise when he reached Mount Horeb for God was not in the earthquake, or in the mighty wind or in the great fire. Instead Elijah encountered God in a way that nothing had prepared him for, in the sound of sheer silence. (I Kings 19,12)

35. In our service of the poor, we too must come to realise that God's work is often accomplished in seemingly very quiet ways. Perhaps we wish that we could see with our own eyes what Our Lady prophesied: *the poor he has filled with good things and the rich he has sent empty away.* (Lk. 1, 53) However, we do not see that. Perhaps we need to adjust our way of seeing so that we begin to see as God sees and love as God loves. (cf. Constitutions of the Friars, art. 15). In our journey through the desert we are stripped of all our pretensions so that we can truly accomplish the Lord's will and not our own.

36. Poverty can be degrading and is for millions of our brothers and sisters throughout the world. It is this poverty against which we must never cease to struggle so that every human being might be able to live a decent life. However, people need more than material things. Pope Benedict XVI, in his first encyclical, *Deus caritas est*, writes, “*Seeing with the eyes of Christ, I can give to others much more than their outward necessities; I can give them the look of love which they crave... Only my readiness to encounter my neighbour and to show him love makes me sensitive to God as well.*” (art. 18) Poverty as a spiritual value can be taken as a synonym for humility, by means of which we realise our own nothingness, that all is grace, and that we must depend utterly on God who clothes the flowers of the field in a way that not even Solomon in all his glory was arrayed. (Lk. 12, 27)

*Joseph Chelimo O. Carr.*

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