

## THE BASIC IDENTITY OF SECULAR CARMELITES

Secular Order Discalced Carmelites

### THE BASIC IDENTITY OF SECULAR CARMELITES

by Anthony Morello, O. C. D.

#### 1. Introduction: The Awakening

One of the more visibly successful consequences of the Second Vatican Council was the awakening of the sleeping giant --the laity. Gradually Catholics were sensitized to their baptismal identity and to their call to involvement in the public life of the Church in the world, beginning on the local level of parish and diocese. They were challenged to adopt a renewed 'Catholic Humanism' and to christen the secular city.

In the worshipping community the laity began to assume roles in the sanctuary as lectors and extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist. Many Married men were prepared for and ordained to the permanent diaconate. Outside the sanctuary roles on the newly established parish council developed for a good number of men and women. More Catholic involvement became apparent in civil issues on the state and national levels. Everyone was encouraged to throw themselves into the work of the Spirit in the Church and in the world, bridging the gap between the sacred and the secular.

The soul and depth, however, of the new consciousness was to be found in the most basic Christian awakening of all, namely in the effective realization that each baptized person is called to enter, through the Holy Spirit, into the immensely beautiful and transcendent relationship between Jesus the Man and God the Father! Whether it be through arduous action or the leisure of contemplation, the Christian stretches up to the Father and out to the brothers and the sisters in and with Jesus of Nazareth, Son of the Father and Brother to us all.

True Christian awakening began to see that all of Jesus' activity dramatized his interior vision of things and his rapport with everything. At heart, Jesus the Son of Man was a contemplative who dynamically stood in loving relationship to the Father of all things visible and invisible. No matter what he did, he but dramatized his contemplative orientation. Jesus lived in constant union of mind and heart with God the Father, his origin and destiny. Jesus was a contemplative in the world, a contemplative at work among ordinary people, and among the sick and the dying, and the hungry for the word of life.

It has become clearer and clearer that disciples of the Lord need to pursue their baptismal contemplative vocation in the ordinary affairs of their existence, dealing with everyday people and things. Such a pursuit constitutes the deepest level of discipleship. And that pursuit satisfies the deepest hunger of the human being. You and I and everybody else seek wholeness, a fulfilling union with total reality at its root and base. Our hearts are indeed restless and we know not why. No wonder so many, left in the dark, turn to substitutes for God like money and sex, drugs and gang crime.

Obviously nothing can satisfy us, for long. What we actually want is an eternal moment of satisfaction, of completeness. We know we cannot make ourselves happy, so the object of our contentment must be something other than the self, another someone, another some One, yes, the Transcendent One. In Christ our spirit stretches out beyond the limits of self and all natural reality until we reach what is final wholeness - the personal Holy of Holies that sustains the universes in Loving Mercy, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

## THE BASIC IDENTITY OF SECULAR CARMELITES

The deepest response to the Second Vatican council's call to universal holiness lies in our complete endeavor. To quote the Council "The most sublime element in human dignity consists in the call of man to communion with God: for he exists only because he has been created by God out of love and is ever preserved by that love, and does not live fully according to the truth unless he freely acknowledges that love and commits himself to his creator." [The Church in the Modern World, n.191].

As a member of the mystical body of Christ, one is called to partake of the mysticism, the contemplation of the Head. The whole Church like Jesus is called to be "contemplative apostle" in the world. Now, the one institution that we know well which expressly aims at giving the Church contemplative laity is the Secular Order of the Discalced Carmelites.

### II. Lay Carmelite Identity

The thesis of this article is simply this: the Secular Order of the Discalced Carmelites exists to give lay contemplatives to Christ and his Church.

Secular Carmelites and their spiritual directors should be guided by that principle. (This is indeed a matter of identity. We treat here a very definite purpose, a limited purpose to tell the truth, an almost narrow scope and goal when we address the question of basic identity of the Secular Order. The Secular Carmelite's Rule of Life, by way of direct formulation, does not propose a comprehensive plan of Christian living. For example, the Rule leaves it to each one to find a meaningful apostolate; there is no apostolic specification. The Rule, apart from structural and juridical sections, concentrates on a program of prayer, liturgical and private, and on interior attitudes of Christian perfection.

In the daily program proposed great emphasis is placed on meditation and contemplative prayer. This is because our constitution by the grace of its charism exists to pray, and to teach people how to pray and meditate in such a way that opens them up to the transforming contemplative experience. Contemplation is experientially infused. Light and love change the person by degrees, fashioning mind and heart after the interior Jesus, the contemplative Son of God. One's attitudes and behavior become more conformed to Christ, the new creation.

Yes, the daily program and the monthly meeting with its spiritual instruction and on-going educational study (as well as monthly lessons sent to Isolate Members) and discussion all intend to serve prayer, to teach and sustain prayer. The Order's radical interest in prayer cultivates openness to God through the purity of the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. Precisely in a faith which hopes and loves is the Christian religion located and identified. It is from there that both Christian virtue and apostolic energy flow. Carmel with great charismatic poignancy appreciates this.

The religion of Jesus Christ is primarily interior. It is as interior as friendship. It resides in attitudes. A prayerful person's interior attitude is recreated, refashioned, redeemed through faith, hope and charity.

Lay contemplatives are people whose ordinary lives are permeated with God's light and love. Our Secular Order exists to enable people to experience the divine life in Christ. The experience of divine life effectively sees the self and all things in God as Jesus did. The experience of Divine love is to be loved by the Father and to love all else as Jesus did. It is precisely living in this light and love which constitutes life in the spirit.

The lay contemplative, prayerfully seeing things through the eyes of Jesus, begins to create, from details of existence and all its dimensions of good and bad, acceptable and absurd, a mosaic of unified vision, of divine childhood, a picture of oneness with Christ and of wholeness in him. In

## THE BASIC IDENTITY OF SECULAR CARMELITES

spite of our imperfections and sins, things begin to come together in Christ in a mysterious integration and harmony. For it is God's prerogative to make all things work unto good of those who love him.

Carmel chooses and is busy about the "better part." That is why the Secular Order wants to get to and be at the heart of the better part. And at the heart of things, Carmel finds itself at prayer.

So the Secular Carmelite Order concentrates on the practice of prayer. The Order accordingly wants to teach each member how to pray well: how to say vocal prayers with real presence to, words and sentiments; how to meditate on the Word of God, being schooled in everything that issues from the mouth of God; how to move into affective rapport with God and simple company-keeping; and how in dry-bones aridity to merely desire God in the stillness of faith and trust, knowing that God's ways are not ours. For the Lord's ways are beyond concept and category. "God is Spirit and he seeks those who worship Him in spirit and in truth."

In its concentration on prayer, the Secular Order exercises us on the most private level. It reaches and touches us in the inner sanctum of our privacy, sealed off from the observation of others, where we stand alone before God and the mystery of life. Here we find ourselves face to face with that "existential dread" that Thomas Merton described so eloquently in his small work, *Contemplative Prayer*. He says that persons who pray let themselves "be brought naked and defenseless into the center of that dread where we stand alone before God in our nothingness, without theories, completely dependent upon his providential care, in dire need of the gift of his grace, his mercy and the light of faith" [Op. cit.: Herder & Herder / 1969 / p.85]

There, face to face with rock bottom reality, the contemplative must go about a heavy agenda, namely the destruction of two idols: the false image of self, and the false image of, God, created after the model of one's own narrow categories and hangups. The prayerful person gradually takes to the "real", and begins to see the "inside of things" with the Little Prince. He/she dies to illegitimate offenses before self and God. Our small, crippling notions of God and self reluctantly give way to the real.

The Carmelite begins to emerge, begins to stand in the pure light of divine truth and evangelical poverty: the truth about the self in desperate need of others; the truth about God from whom alone comes salvation in a total gratuitous, unmerited way. For God loves us independently of our merits. He loves us because He created us and willed us good from the beginning. He has loved us first because He chose to do so. "God is love." Upon, entering into one's dire poverty, the contemplative knows, yet experiences, that God is Merciful love beyond all telling, even in spite of ourselves, as St. Therese so prophetically came to appreciate.

Like the gospel, the Order's intent goes deep down to the root predisposition's of a person. Carmel's spirituality is like a fine two edged sword which penetrates the very marrow of a soul, the sensitive core of the person. Carmelite prayer tackles, first of all, the obstacles to faith, hope and charity.

## THE BASIC IDENTITY OF SECULAR CARMELITES

Carmel's interiority knows that to grow our attitudes and affect must be redeemed by prayer. Now the principal of the Church is the liturgy, and all prayer is necessarily ecclesial and related to liturgy. Private prayer prepares us for liturgical involvement in the Eucharist which is Christ's own thanksgiving to the Father for the "exodus" of his death and resurrection. We must never disassociate our private prayer from the great Catholic Eucharist. Indeed, our contemplation supports the deepest possible liturgical participation. And as the one kind of prayer feeds the other, together they transform the mind and heart so that we might perceive and act in Christ Jesus, the Man of the Spirit. Carmelite contemplation breathes the very spirit of Christ.

Contemplation is, by nature, behind the scenes. It is intimately private, a loving communion with another. The Secular Carmelite has learned the secret of the legitimacy of the explicit personal desire for contemplation. The Secular Order is truly unique and must be appreciated as such. Of set purpose it leads us through meditation to a contemplation born of the simple desire for God. Without forcing God's timing and manner, the Carmelite desires the infused contemplative light (presence) and love (rapport) for one reason only, namely because contemplation is a shortcut to mature charity.

Charity is the goal of the Christian life. Charity unites one with God. Charity unites one to others. Charity prays. Charity works. Charity saves. In charity one is constituted by the Holy Spirit in the will of the Father with the Son.

If charity is all these things, and prayer is for the sake of becoming charity, then the lay contemplative rises from private prayer, as from liturgy, to offer a practical love and service to one's spouse, family, neighbors and society. Authentic contemplative people are sensitive to the life and problems of loved ones, the local Church, and the world. The contemplative identifies with the world of people and events. Christian prayer does not take us into "nirvana"; rather it embraces humanity in its global needs and concerns. The contemplative sees the real, world in the compassion of God who loves and acts.

The Secular Order wants to make us real and holy in God through prayer. With that principal concern clear, our identity is clear. We could speak of our Secular Order as a Catholic Meditation or better a Catholic Community of Lay Contemplatives. The point is simply one of identity.

True to character, our Carmelite School of Prayer lives an essentially Marian spirituality. We, the disciples of Jesus, our eyes on Mary of Nazareth, the first and perfect disciple of the Lord. She is our sister as well as mother and queen in the order of redemption. In real life she lived in the darkness of faith. She prayed in hope. She worked and did her duty. She exercised heroic virtue. Her charity easily went out to kith and kin. Yieldingly she stood at the foot of the cross. She held the crucified. She beheld him glorified. She gave herself in service to the Church, his Body yet on earth. But all of this because she "heard the word of God and kept it." And precisely in her contemplative stance of "listening to the word of God," and "pondering all these things in her heart" do Carmelites easily identify with Mary. In love with the scriptures, and attuned to the divine light, she was transformed by the new Adam into the new Eve as she uttered her "Yes" to God. Carmel hears and says "yes" with Mary, the contemplative mother of the living.

As a Teresian School of Prayer, we follow a specific tradition of spirituality within the Church. We pray in line with the doctrine of St. Teresa of Jesus and St. John of the Cross, our Carmelite parents. And we allow our spiritual quest to be nuanced by the ever developing and expanding experience of Carmelite Saints like St. Therese of the Child Jesus, and Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity, Francis Palau y Quer, and Edith Stein. We pray quietly, effectively attentive to the divine presence within the self or as we are moved. We have learned that God normally leads us into contemplation slowly and subtly. And we are taught to recognize the gentle breeze of the Spirit it comes and to yield to the action of God. And in times of consolation as well as of desolation, we stand instructed by our own, letting God be God. As we do all these things, we bring our own

## THE BASIC IDENTITY OF SECULAR CARMELITES

experience and creativity to this great tradition and exercise the utmost personal liberty at prayer. And we ever sometimes discretely share our experience with others.

Naturally our prayer is backed up by the daily practice of virtue and evangelical self denial. Perfection, lies in charity and the virtues, not in contemplation. We pray to be virtuous. But that is the point we have been making all along. Carmel sees everything in relation to prayer because prayer is the principal focused means to Christian transformation. Carmel is about prayer. The Secular Order is about prayer. And Lay Carmelites strive to be contemplatives in the world. Our identity is clear. If we know who we are, by the grace of God we will act accordingly.

## THE BASIC IDENTITY OF SECULAR CARMELITES

### III. Some Practical Conclusions

#### Based on the Nature and Purpose of the Secular Order

1. Secular Carmelites treasure the notion of vocation -- a call from God. The Preamble of the Rule of Life says the Order welcomes those who 'by special vocation undertake to live in the world an evangelical life of fraternal communion imbued with the spirit of contemplative prayer and apostolic zeal according to the example and teaching of the Carmelite saints."

Let me point out that a vocation is two sided. There is first of all the interior experience of the call, an attraction to the Order for supernatural reasons. This gives way, after careful discernment, to a free decision to apply. The personal dimension is easily appreciated and usually meant when speaking of a vocation from God.

But vocation is also ecclesial. It is not complete until there is another call, the call to enter, and then again to make Promises, on the part of the ecclesial community; this is an official invitation by the authorities of the community. This second aspect of vocation is the result of a communal discernment. It is a second call that comes to the person from outside the self.

The government of the Secular Order assumes the role of communal discernment. It is seriously negligent to simply profess anyone who holds on during the entire formation program. The Director of Formation and the Council must decide, without scruple, on the authenticity of the candidate's vocation. It is not for them to leave difficult cases to the judgment of the priest assistant. It is a sin against truth and charity to refuse to confront problems. And the absence of a genuine vocation is indeed a problem for the community.

As the period of formation progresses on-going shared discernment with the candidate is essential. And as the Period concludes, if there is still a substantial doubt about suitability, the person must not be professed. The Promises may be postponed for a while, but eventually a decision must be made in favor of the vocation or against it. Good will is not sufficient. If a person is not habitually given to our kind of prayer and/or cannot fit into the group socially, a negative decision must be made and communicated. The promises cannot be made.

Look to the quality of one's commitment to daily program, and scrutinize the person's capacity for community. We are a community support system to lay contemplative life. Community is essential. If a person does not contribute to peace and harmony, is antisocial, factious, a trouble maker, ambitious, etc., there is no ecclesial vocation.

One can pursue contemplation alone without us. Our Order needs social contemplatives. The Teresian community emphasis applies to the Secular Order as well as to friars and nuns, though secular community is more loose knit.

When officers fear making a mistake, for the love of God they ought to make it in favor of exclusion rather than Inclusion of the doubtful. Include only those who clearly belong! To rise to this challenge is to exercise real lay leadership. To think that you will have to answer to God for a sin against charity because of excluding someone doubtful is but a defense mechanism to avoid responsibility. You will have to answer to God for not living out your role in the order and the Church.

Do not turn to Isolated status as the solution for persons who do not belong. Isolates are tertiaries who do not have access to an actual community, not those incapable of community. The Director of Formation or the President must sit down with such a candidate and explain that God is not calling him to the Order. The candidate can be led to understand that God wants him/her to benefit from affinity to Carmel in a non-judicial way: that is, in private, by reading, by devotion, etc. But there is no ecclesial call to the Order. Something difficult to communicate and

## THE BASIC IDENTITY OF SECULAR CARMELITES

to accept, true enough, but this is the stuff of real life. Unless we walk in the truth, all else is but vanity.

2. Discernment of vocation also has to peer into the actual circumstances of a candidate's life. Good people who otherwise would qualify, but who presently do not have any leisure time or cannot manage to impose some order on their hectic schedule, should postpone their entry. Neither an adequate formation is presently possible nor implementation of our daily program.

Again, hard as it is to admit, good will is not sufficient. We have gone beyond the legalistic days of dispensations. A person needs to have at least enough time to be able to habitually follow our daily prayer program. We are slaves to nothing; but neither are we to make believe that we are Secular Carmelites when life cannot yield us enough leisure to exercise the charism of the Order. One should wait until life eases up and offers some respite.

3. The Secular Order must successfully sustain the contemplative prayer of the members over the years. The monthly meeting should contribute to the knowledge of prayer by instruction and by on-going formation study and discussion. It should fuel motivation to persevere daily in the arduous practice of private prayer. Although there are other goals of the monthly meeting, this is the primary one.

### IV. Conclusion

When the members demonstrate clarity about the nature of the Secular Order, and when officers assume their rightful roles according to the Rule, they make the Order effective, credible, and appealing to others. The quality of the Order is constituted by its members. You are the Secular Order of Discalced Carmelite. Carry it forward with clarity, decision and peace before God and the Church. Make It serve the interior life of its members. Enable it really to give Christ and his Church lay contemplatives in the world.

Rome, October 3, 1988

Reverend Anthony Morello, O.C.D. Provincial Delegate to the Secular Order of the Central Jurisdiction from 1969 until 1978, and Director of Mount Carmel Center in Dallas since its establishment in 1974 is now General Definitor of the Order in Rome, and is the Fr. General 's delegate to the Secular Order.

Fr. Anthony received his licentiate in theology from our Carmelite College, the Teresianum in Rome in 1963. He has worked with the Secular Order for all of his priestly ministry. At the 9th Regional OCDS Congress of the Oklahoma Province in August 1968, Harold Comeaux of Lafayette, the Congress chairman, introduced a resolution that the Fathers of the province appoint a priest to coordinate the activities of the Secular Order throughout the province. At the chapter of 1969, Fr. Anthony was appointed to fulfill this new office of Provincial Delegate.