

Interview with Sr Maria Stella Marzano, Superior General of the Institute of Our Lady of Carmel

Blessed Maria Teresa was deeply connected to Carmelite spirituality. Which Carmelite figures inspired her and in what way did she reflect this in her writings and teachings to the sisters?

Sr. Maria Stella: Mother was most devoted to the Florentine saint, Mary Magdalene de'Pazzi who she was familiar with from adolescence when she read the saint's life story. She remained fascinated and attracted by her spirituality so much so that when she felt the vocation to consecrated life she chose the Carmelite monastery preserving the mortal remains of the saint "of whom I had always been a devotee."

The spirituality of St. Mary Magdalene had a profound effect on the spirituality of Mother Scilli and the Institute. The first glance goes to the Passion of Jesus which becomes a passion, a participation in the sufferings of Christ for "the good of souls." Scillian spirituality, therefore, has as its center the suffering Christ. Mother was "willing to suffer any pain or martyrdom, and this in meditating on His sufferings. It is so beneficial for us to meditate on His pain." Our distinctive sign on the scapular is the bare cross.

The second element that we share with the Florentine saint is the unity of the two sisters Martha and Mary, action and contemplation. There is no dualism between love of God and love of neighbor. For St. Mary Magdalene, it is not enough for the soul to love God alone, but it must be united with the love of neighbor. She recommends that there be a balance between these two dimensions. Mother Scilli says that one must "leave God for God, that is, leave God in the contemplation of Mary to find Him in the duties of Martha. God enjoys our leaving to enjoy Him, to toil for Him, and then return to rest in Him."

Another important figure for Mother Scilli was St. Teresa of Avila who entered her life when she enrolled in the Teresian TOC in Florence. She then followed in her footsteps so much so, that she named the fledgling institute Teresian Oblates.

Blessed Maria Teresa Scilli had to live with the political conflicts, anticlericalism and Freemasonry, which were widespread at the time and which endangered several projects she undertook.

What are the challenges facing the congregation today and how are they being addressed in the spirit of Blessed Maria Theresa Scilli?

Sr. Maria Stella: At the beginning of the foundation, anti-clericalism and Freemasonry were very present in Montevarchi, the place the Institute was founded. They had such a negative influence that it led to the Institute's

suppression. Even though Mother was held in high esteem by the notables of the town, they were strongly opposed to the presence of religious women educators.

Mother Maria Teresa did not just quietly accept this. She faced adversity, politicians and those who opposed their living as consecrated and free persons with great diplomacy and authority. She claimed for herself and her sisters the rights and respect due any other citizen. These are teachings that even today we can and must put into practice.

For the Institute of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, the task of education is central. This was the desire of Mother Maria Teresa Scilli, who lived at a time when access to education was the privilege of a few.

What is Mother Scilli's relevance in the human and Christian formation of children and young people? How are parents involved in the education of their children?

Sr. Maria Stella: Mother Scilli was an educator by vocation. She wanted the education of youth to be the main objective of the Institute, so much so that she made it a fourth vow. The hospitals and rest homes are ministries that came about after her death. They were started by the co-founder Mother Maria Mosca in response to the needs of the time—the First World War, the wounded from the war, assistance to invalids from the war.

"The educator is committed to serve freely," with attention to the poorest. This is what the foundress wanted and passed on. But this gratuitousness must be accompanied by essential elements that that educator must possess: authority of the person, fruit of experience, competence, coherence of life, personal involvement together with a sense of responsibility. All of these are implemented in the seriousness with which the mission is carried out.

The virtues that an educator in our Institute of Our Lady of Mount Carmel must practice, according to the Founder, are: charity, loving kindness combined with dignity, decorum, austerity, always trying to assimilate the same feelings of their "divine Master and Spouse Jesus" and "tend to the good of those creatures given by God to cultivate" but never for personal satisfaction. In Mother Scilli one can notice a particular affinity, the same feelings and actions, to Don Bosco and his Preventive method. These two beautiful souls met in Florence, talked to each other, and exchanged letters.

The commitment to education, according to the teaching of Mother, must be sustained by prayer in imitation of Jesus who "preached the Gospel of God," healed the sick, and then "withdrew to a deserted place and prayed there" (Mk 1,35).

The involvement of parents in the educational work of their children is fundamental in order to have a unique, shared, collaborative path. For this reason, formative and recreational meetings are organized to make them active participants in the life of the school.

The Sisters' work also extends to the sick in hospitals and the elderly in rest homes.

How is Blessed Maria Teresa Scilli an inspiration to unite Carmelite spirituality with a strong dimension of service?

Sr. Maria Stella: "To live in obedience to Jesus Christ ... meditating day and night on the Word of God and keeping watch in prayer" is the contemplative ideal of Carmel. To this is added fraternity, inspired by the first community of Jerusalem, and service to the most disadvantaged in body and spirit.

As already mentioned for Mother Scilli, Martha and Mary come together. Prayer must support the service of the sisters." Prayer is the soul of our apostolate.

The good seed sown by Blessed Maria Teresa developed after her death. Today we see her institute present in many nations throughout the world.

How are the teachings of Blessed Maria Teresa Scilli in meeting other cultures in the world?

Sr. Maria Stella: In the encyclical *Brothers and Sisters All (Fratelli tutti, Oct 2020)* Pope Francis says that we are all children of the same Father and therefore no one is a stranger to another.

Living and caring for all the things that are common to us, all well mixed, with a good dose of love is the recipe for welcoming that we have lived since we opened ourselves to other cultures about 50 years ago. Tenderness, loving-kindness, affability, respect, and acceptance of diversity are the virtues that Blessed Mother Mary Theresa recommends to her daughters in order to establish fraternal relationships among sisters.

What is needed is a continuous and constant effort to overcome the obstacles that can make the journey difficult, the appreciation of different cultures and respect for each one of them.

To be open and welcoming to them is a proclamation and a provocation in a world dominated by selfishness and closure to what is different.