

St Therese of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face:
Invitation to Growth through Abandonment, Love and Mission

1. Introduction

From April 2-6, 2024, the General Councils of the OCD and that of the OCarm met at the Discalced Carmelite Monastery of Santa Croce, Bocca di Magra, Liguria, as has become the tradition since 6 December 1991 (cf. *Analecta Ordinis Carmelitarum*, Vol. XLIII, no. 2, July-December 1992, p.187). Two times in the year, during June and December, the two General Councils regularly have days of meeting to update each other on developments in the two branches of Carmel and discuss matters of mutual concern. Every three years, the Councils meet for an extended length of time to reflect on an agreed theme. This time we reflected on some lessons from the life and writings of St Therese of the Child Jesus with the guidance of Fr Emilio J. Martinez, OCD, professor at the Teresianum, Rome.

2.

Father Emilio reflected with us on two themes concerning St Therese: abandonment and mission. On the first day we were invited to reflect on the abandonment suffered by Therese caused by several events that run through the first years of her life: the problems shortly after birth, the illness and death of her mother, the entry of her sisters Pauline and Mary, her 'surrogate mothers', into the Carmel of Lisieux, etc. St Therese, through her effort and above all, thanks to the gift received at Christmas of 1886, managed to integrate the fragilities linked to these episodes of physical and psychological abandonment. Aware of her own fragility and weakness Therese entrusted herself to Jesus Christ and learnt that there was no other way to live a happy life except through giving joy to others through service. She no longer sought love but to love others in the style of Jesus Christ.

We believe that multitudes of people in our world today can identify with Therese's experience of feeling abandonment, isolation, inadequacy and helplessness in the face of rapid socio-economic and political upheavals, mass migration and conflict situations that have fractured the sense of fraternity, community and hospitality. The irony for us is that we also live in a world of increasing interconnectivity where people have thousands of virtual friends and followers on social media and yet feel quite alone and abandoned because they feel disconnected with those they live in close vicinity. Like the Prophet Elijah, the temptation can be to give up and even at times, to wish for death in the face of challenges, insecurities and doubts.

3.

On the second day, Father Emilio reflected on the deepest spiritual abandonment experienced by Therese of Lisieux: the test against faith experienced during her suffering from tuberculosis that led to her premature death. Wrapped in the thick fog of doubt, Therese was still able to defend her faith by loving: the wound became, once again, a loophole of love and closeness to the most distant, even atheists. Reflecting on Therese's letter to her sister Celine (23 July 1893, LTR 144), we recognized the enormous empathy for and understanding of Celine which allowed Therese to accompany her. Therese counselled Celine to let the sail

follow the wind even if she could not see it. She encouraged her to make small sacrifices in movement towards the horizon, sometimes in darkness. Feeling all alone on a tiny boat on a vast ocean with no sight of the shore and with the pilot asleep, we are invited to offer our heart as a pillow for Christ to sleep on.

We are persuaded to believe that many people can still identify with Therese in her letter to Celine. Written over a hundred years ago, this letter appears very modern, real and relevant because contemporary people feel this sense of abandonment – by society, by life, governments, and sometimes by the Church. Therese offers a solution in two parts to her sister, first, in trust to allow herself to be moved by the wind, that is, to keep going and not giving up: “The only thing he can do is abandon himself, let his sail float with the wind”(LTR, 144). Equally for us, in moments of crisis or feeling abandonment, our resilience will be in keeping going. In second place, Therese offers the idea of “small sacrifices”. When the ocean is too vast and the horizon too far away, it is important to bring in the horizon to something more manageable, that is, to focus on small practical steps. Therese suggests to her sister that she tries to look to the needs of others rather than be caught up in her own crisis. She encouraged her to focus on doing small acts of charity (‘small sacrifices’) for the people closest to her. Third, Therese tells her sister to trust that Jesus – even if she could not hear or see him above the noise of the storm – is in reality with her, in the boat, and is in fact resting in her on the pillow of her heart.

We also explored the poem *To the Sacred Heart of Jesus* (P 23) in which Therese speaks about her need for a heart burning with tenderness which could never be replaced with something created that dies. Therese teaches that to be holy is to become that which God wants us to be. She urges us to discover our true personal nature – what type of flower we are in the garden – and just be that.

4.

On the third day, we reflected on the theme of Mission in the life of Therese of the Child Jesus – a broad and complex subject. The discussion was cast in the light of Pope Francis’ reflection in the Apostolic Exhortation, *C’est la confiance*. St Therese became a missionary driven by her intimate personal relationship with Jesus, whom she wanted to know and love to better make him known and loved by others. She became a missionary through her life of prayer and sacrifice in Carmel through her writings and the works of charity that made her a living witness of the Gospel. Therese’s mission did not end with her death; on the contrary, as she desired, she continues to witness until the end of time, doing good and showering roses on earth.

From Pope Francis’s *C’est la confiance*, we marveled at how the Pope captures Therese’s evangelical radicality and ability to discover what was essential and indispensable in her little way when he writes:

In an age that urges us to focus on ourselves and our own interests, Therese shows us the beauty of making our lives a gift.

At a time when the most superficial needs and desires are glorified, she testifies to the radicalism of the Gospel.

In an age of individualism, she makes us discover the value of a love that becomes intercession for others.

At a time when human beings are obsessed with grandeur and new forms of power, she points out to us the little way.

In an age that casts aside so many of our brothers and sisters, she teaches us the beauty of concern and responsibility for one another.

At a time of great complexity, she can help us rediscover the importance of simplicity, the absolute primacy of love, trust and abandonment, and thus move beyond a legalistic or moralistic mindset that would fill the Christian life with rules and regulations, and cause the joy of the Gospel to grow old.

In an age of indifference and self-absorption, Therese inspires us to be missionary disciples, captivated by the attractiveness of Jesus and the Gospel”(CLC§52).

5.

In two groups randomly composed of friars from the two traditions of Carmel as well as in plenary sessions comprising all, we engaged in a synod-like methodology that is now popularly referred to as conversation in the Spirit. We engaged with questions and reflections proposed by Fr Emilio and shared openly appreciating and marveling at Therese’s depth of insight inspired by her deep configuration to Jesus Christ the Lord which was the source of her transformation in her life, and enduring spring of strength in the times of the dark night experiences.

On the afternoon of the second day we shared and discussed a wide-range of topics about issues of mutual concern ranging from information sharing and areas of possible cooperation and collaboration: an update on the Wadi project in the Holy Land; Carmelite Formation in terms of scope, thrust with particular attention on accompaniment of friars during the first five years after solemn profession and / or ordination to the priesthood in light of the many challenges that emerge; the great need for formation of formators in the Carmelite tradition; collaboration in the renewal of Mariology and Marian life of the two traditions of Carmel; promotion of the experience of Carmel by way of making them known through studies, devotion at sanctuaries, experience and iconography; sharing insights on the processes of the updating of the Constitutions of the Nuns of both traditions; collaboration between the General Definitior and the Prior General in issuing a letter on Mary and Prayer for the solemnity of Our Lady of Mount Carmel 2024. In light of this collaboration and cooperation at the leadership level, it is encouraged that Carmelites sharing in the two traditions in the various countries will be inspired to initiate various forms of sharing, dialogue and joint engagements in their respective countries.

6.

Our encounter was set in a Carmelite Spiritual Centre where many people come for prayer, reflection and retreat. Daily we celebrated the Eucharist and recited the morning and evening

prayer together. We appreciated the tremendous hospitality of the friars and sisters at the Monastero Santa Croce to the gentle humming motion of the Mediterranean Sea in the background. On a tour of the monastery church of Santa Croce guided by the prior of the community of Santa Croce, we were brought to see the retirement house of the late eminent Carmelite and Cardinal Anastasio Alberto Ballestrero. We also took time to go on tours to the city of La Spezia where we took a boat ride around the three islands of Palmaria, Tino and Tinetto which trips offered us an opportunity to recap on the epochal historical upheavals that took place in the Mediterranean waters over the centuries such as the Napoleonic wars and the Second World War. As we sailed around the little island of Tinetto, the guide drew our attention to the Stella Maris, a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary with folded hands facing the open sea. The statue, is a signal to sailors to avoid the dangerous *Scoglio do Diaio*, that is, the Devil's rock, on which the statue is mounted.

Our second outing was a visit to the city of Lucca, where we got a guided tour led by a brother priest of the Church of St Concordio who took us on a tour of the fifth century church of Saints Giovanni and Reparata, and the majestic cathedral of St Martin of Tours whose eighth century figure of the Crucified Christ is unique to the region which depicts the Crucified Christ as priest and king. We visited together the Shrine of La Madonnina which has been in the care of the Discalced Carmelites since 1954. The pilgrimage ended with a visit to the Discalced Monastery of Regina Carmeli on the outskirts of the city of Lucca where the sisters had prepared a banquet for us.

7.

We give thanks to God who has gathered us at Monastero Santa Croce. Inspired by St Therese of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face, we feel energized to leave this place to go back to our daily tasks to carry them out with renewed commitment as we seek our own configuration to Christ. We commit ourselves to accompany our brothers and sisters in Carmel with renewed evangelical love by choosing like St Therese to follow the little way which consists in trusting God even during the periods of darkness and living for others through making little sacrifice. The way of Carmel is holy and good: it is not for theoretical exercises but for walking on it (cf. Rule §20). May God grant us the gift of bearing testimony to the beauty of Carmel through our commitment to follow Christ and because of Him, to be joyful missionary disciples who wake up the world with the force of our humble witness.

Monastero Santa Croce

Bocca di Magra, Liguria, Italia

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