

CARMELITE GENERAL CHAPTER: INTRODUCTION

I feel deeply honoured to be invited to be with you for these few days. I am not sure that I have anything very wise to say, but I accept of gratitude for all that I have received from Carmelites, especially the great Carmelite saints, such Teresa of Avila, Therese of Lisieux, Teresa Benedicta of the Cross and John of the Cross whose poetry I love. When I was based in Rome I got to know John Malley before his unexpected death some years later in the United States and many other of your brethren and sisters. Thank you for all that you give to the Church and to me personally!

Our Orders are both born at roughly the same time. It is true that in more imaginative moments, some Carmelites used to claim that you were founded by Elijah and so much older than the Dominicans. But a fourteenth century English Dominican claimed that we were founded by Samuel and so much older than you!

I hope that my input will resonate with your experiences. Though an American Dominican Provincial gave a lecture in Chicago. When he sat down, the applause was unenthusiastic. He turned to his neighbour and said, 'I hope that it was not that bad.' The man replied, 'Oh, I don't blame you at all. I just blame whoever asked you to come and speak in the first place!' So blame Richard Byrne!

My predecessor as Master of the Dominicans was an Irishman called Damian Byrne. When he visited our London Priory, one of the brethren told him that he thought that General Chapters, as we call them, were a complete waste of time and money. Some of you may be thinking that too! Damian replied that they were the lungs of the Order, breathing in and out, oxygenating our Dominican blood. Breathing might not seem to achieve much, but if we stopped we would die quickly.

In my experience of attending ten General Chapters, they are also times when we discover again that our religious life really is a way of flourishing. Jesus said, 'I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly.' St Irenaeus famously said, *Gloria Dei, homo vivens*. The glory of God is a human being fully alive. We have a crazy life with vows that deeply contradict what most young people think as flourishing. No sex! A friend of mine had a job in a factory just before entering seminary, and someone said to him, does this mean that you can never have sex. Not ever! This seemed utterly incomprehensible!

To be perfectly honest, quite a few religious themselves, cease to think that religious life is a way of happiness, and can either drift away and get married or else become in effect diocesan priests, marginal to our communities.

We should never despair of their return. In my experience, many brethren who have become marginal do want to come home, if we can find a path for them to do so. One of our South African brethren, Peter, had a love affair not long after ordination. His lover became pregnant. They decided that for the sake of the child, he should leave the Order so that they could raise their child. After a few years it became clear to both that he was pining for the religious life. They waited for several years, until their child was old enough, and then with

the consent of his wife, Peter asked to come home. I remember the joyful party when the Vatican document came through and he was once again one of the brethren. He lived a happy and fruitful life in our community in Soweto. It is never too late to rediscover the joy of our religious life.

So these meetings are a time, in my experience, for us to rediscover together just how liberating is our mad way of life. It really is a way to happiness and freedom. I also believe that religious life speaks to our world. We are friars, *fratres*, brothers, and we have sisters too. The world is desperately in need of living symbols of fraternity.

Pope Francis wrote *Fratelli Tutti*, 'All brothers', because our world is in danger of losing the old dream of universal brother and sisterhood. Now we see war in Ukraine, and China flexing its muscles. For the first time for sixty years, there is the threat of nuclear war. Millions of people are on the move trying to escape violence and poverty. Everywhere walls are going up to keep strangers at bay. The world order into which I was born seems to be crumbling. Many fear that we are entering a time of chaos.

In the face of this disintegration, we friars embody something wonderful and desperately needed: brotherhood. These are the oldest Christian titles and the only important ones: brother and sister. Not just brothers and sisters of each other in the Order, but as living symbols of the human family, children of Our Father, gathered into Christ's kinship.

In the thirteen century, Europe was living through some of the same problems we face. The old hierarchies were crumbling. Strangers were appearing in the streets, often merchants like the father of St Francis of Assisi. The big question then was: How do we relate to strangers? In this new exciting world, the Franciscans and Dominicans were founded, and I think that the Carmelites ceased being hermits and became brothers. This new spirituality of fraternity spoke to this new world and I believe that it speaks to our world too.

It is also of immense importance for the Church. Pope Francis is summoning us to leave behind stifling clericalism. Most Carmelites are priests. But how can we be priests without being clericalist? We friars can embody just what the Church is looking for, a brotherly way of being a priest. I must confess that when it came to time for my ordination, I felt uneasy. I wanted to be one of the brethren. I had no great desire to a priest. After my ordination, my parents' parish priest rushed up, knelt down and started to kiss my sacred hands. I was utterly repelled. It was in hearing confessions that I began to embrace priesthood. Here I was beside people in their sorrow, one of them. If I had not committed their sins, I had probably thought of doing so. I was their brother.

In my favourite TV series, *The West Wing*, Leo McGarry tells of a man who fell into a hole. A doctor walked by. Help, Help. The doctor threw down a prescription and walk on. A priest came by. Help, Help. The priest threw down a prayer and disappeared. Then another person came by. Help, help. The third person dropped into the hole. 'What's the use of that?' he cried. 'Now there are two of us here'. 'But I have been here before and I know the way out.' That's my image of the brother who is a priest.

But what about the brethren who aren't priests? When I became a Dominican, a third of the brethren were lay brothers. Now they are a tiny minority. In recent chapters we have constantly sought to recover the vocation of the lay brother as an intrinsic part of our life. We have endlessly discussed their identity. What does it mean to be a brother in a clerical institute? I have always argued that the real question is the other way around: What does it mean to be a priest in an order of brothers? What does it mean to a priest in "the Brothers of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel."

So I hope to open a realistic down-to-earth discussion on how our brotherly way of life, with its crazy vows, can be a way of flourishing. This means that we must all have the freedom to speak openly, boldly, about our joys and our struggles. Lovingly but fearlessly and truthfully.

At the General Chapter in Spain in 1995, I remember we talked openly about homosexuality, perhaps for the first time in the history of the Order. At first there was a tremendous silence. Then a Spaniard who worked in the Amazon said that he did not believe that there were any homosexuals in the Order. Loud laughter. And then we began to talk. We had lots of Spanish Dominican students who worked at the Chapter as translators, interpreters, drivers, photocopiers etc. They all came and stood at the edges of the hall to listen. It was not that they were especially interested in the gay issue. The question was whether we would speak truthfully. Or would skirt around the issue with diplomatic and empty words? Truth is our Dominican motto. Would we live up to it and talk about the difficult issues?

So I wish to open up a discussion of the pillars of our religious life, our vows, and search for how they may be live with joy and freedom. I will begin with obedience, then look at chastity, how we live our sexuality. Then leadership. I will not devote a special lecture to poverty. This is because religious orders have such deeply different ideas of poverty. St Francis fell in love with Lady Poverty. He loved poverty as such. His friend St Dominic had an entirely different idea of poverty, much more practical. Benedictines have an utterly different idea from Jesuits. In Rome, it was always said that the Jesuit motto, IHS, stood for *Jesuiti, habent satis*: the Jesuits have enough! I confess that I have no idea as to what is a Carmelite understanding of poverty!

But I think that the other vows each imply a profound poverty. The vow of obedience invites us to a more radical form of poverty than not just owning things. We do not own our lives. With chastity we learn not to own other people. And leadership is a sort of dispossession of oppressive power. So I hope that we shall see how poverty certainly *includes* a simplicity of life, but it is also much more radical than. It is a poverty of spirit. 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven'. (Matthew 5.3).

So I shall begin later today with some words about how obedience invites us to an extraordinary freedom! My hope is that it will open a free and liberating discussion!

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