

One look at understanding our Charism in Carmel, as the Lay/ Secular Order

Dr. Jim Bryan, T. O. Carm

Our Charism as Lay Carmelites is a blend of PRAYER, COMMUNITY, and SERVICE. Each Province recognizes that we have always seen our mission as an adjunct to the friars, nuns, and sisters living the Carmelite Rule and ideal, while expressing ourselves as laity with our own set of particular blessings and problems.

In embracing prayer, we are making a commitment to not only recited prayers, such as the Liturgy of the Hours, or Rosary, but a deeper commitment to explore and engage in being contemplatives. Carmel has always been focused around contemplation. It is that which gives us the breath in which our lives and souls continue to experience growth. St. Teresa of Avila said we must develop our lives as we grow in our understanding of “the God whom we know loves us.” We also understand the purpose of our formation and continuing formation is to bring about an evolved understanding in our work to cohesively incorporate contemplation and action. Theologian Karl Rahner warns us “The Christian of the future will be a mystic or will not exist at all.” In our understanding of prayer, we must continue to be open to the Holy Spirit to show us how to explore, judge, and adopt, change, or to enhance our style and attitude of contemplation and vocal and written prayers. In our favor we do have our own history which is a tale of adaptation and renewal throughout our history, and thankfully, continues today.

The original Rule of St. Albert encourages us to involve ourselves in the study of Scripture to aid our life and our prayers. As we look at the Rule we shall grow to understand our lives of prayer better. We also see the different kinds and types of prayer and the heart of prayer: No matter how beautiful, short, long, sung or said, our prayers need to speak to us as we speak... and then listen. We must listen. When we do, He will speak to us.

We are a Monastery on the

HILLS

We are a Monastery in the

CITY PARTY

Sometimes, I think, we spend an inordinate amount of time in studying the Bible and in ways to pray, or learning how to read or pray. In this we do both ourselves and the Holy Spirit a disservice. If we spend more time reading about praying or reading about how to read the Bible, we are missing the point on why we are reading the “Word” and why we are praying. Here I would use the expression: *Keep it simple!* We, as Carmelites, have and are allowed to remember... *ere is no single form of Carmelite Prayer!* I guess Martha Stewart was right, *“It’s all good!”*

In being the *Monastery on the Hill and in the City*, we might want to approach our Charism component of Community much as we understand the Reign of God. We are in it *and* it is yet to come.

We know our communities are human institutions and as such are fraught with the problems and issues of various personalities and ways of doing things. When the Psalmist jotted down Psalm 133:1 about the community dwelling together as one, I would assume he knew what he was talking about. e time of the Psalms was a time of war, invasion, killings, and just plain murder. If they found a place of contentment and peace, they were doing really well.

In our communities we have all kinds of people with all kinds of backgrounds and opinions. It can be amusing when someone is asked to assume an office in the community how they can excuse themselves since they aren't 'leadership' material. My take on that is *“Do you really think we don't notice your type ‘A’ personality? You're perfect for the job!”*

“A hermit rarely lives alone,” as an early Church writer observed, *“If I live alone, whose feet do I wash? If I live alone, compared with whom am I the least?”* e early Carmelites moved toward the fraternal symbols of community life and St. Teresa reminds us that all Carmelite communities are meant to be communities of friends who are friends of Jesus Christ. Distinctions which create divisions, whether secular or religious, are to be shunned. Teresa says “All must be friends, all must be beloved, all must be held near, and all must be helped.”

To use the motto of Hilbault, one of the reformers of the Order: *“More unity, less perfection.”*

Community is a difficult thing. Just like a marriage, community is also very hard at times. e same can be said for any group in a community, whether secular or religious. No group is immune, and it is a constant to keep working for inclusion, representation, and equality.

Service is the third leg of the Carmelite Charism “stool.” Within our order, we recognize that each leg of our charism must depend upon the other two to maintain balance. Service is our understanding of having an active result of our contemplation and community. With the graying of our membership we begin to process different ideas in our areas of community and service from times before. With our graying is also the graying of the friars and sisters and we are aware of the ongoing vocation crisis in the world. Our sense of service may have to change radically. We may have to re-look at what we do as community and how we do things. Many of the small things we did, we can still do. A ministry of calling seniors, a get well card for the sick of our community or our parish. Perhaps something like sponsoring “a coffee and...” event.

We do need to be mindful of the struggle for funding; the cost on our older members *and* our new members; the health of our older members; and what about special needs? We can arrange to appear at parish ministry opportunities and other venues that show people the Carmelite charism and life. Each member of each community, even the isolates, belong. Each is part of our prayers, our lives, and our witness to Jesus Christ and His Holy Mother.

As our 1st, 2nd, and 3rd order regular numbers are shrinking, we will need to continue to develop our Lay Carmelite leadership teams and work together with the Order. We may be the only Carmelites some people ever meet, we will need to initiate a deeper understanding of our lives representative of/to the total Order and see our worth as our Prayer, Community life and Service.

None of this is new, and as Carmelites our history of adaptation and change is part of who we are. We live the tension of being *on the Hill, and in the City...* but we are the brothers and sisters of Our Lady of the Place, and we serve! ☩