Lay Carmelite Conference
Atlanta
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I am very happy to be here and to meet again so many good friends of the Carmelite Family. More than 450 people reflecting together on the spiritual journey of Carmel is quite impressive, especially for our times.

The theme of this gathering is not something I have expertise in. My “academic” field is (or was before my election) dogmatic sacramental theology. I used to talk about Thomas Aquinas, the Council of Trent, Martin Luther and many other boring things. But I am a Carmelite and this theme, “Carmelite Transformation: A Lifelong Journey” is for me very important and a rather fascinating topic to explore.

Let me tell you something I saw a few weeks ago when I was doing a so-called “canonical visitation” to the ancient Carmelite church of Saint Gallo in Prague. This church was ours for many years and it is full of some wonderful baroque Carmelite iconography.

In the right aisle of the Church, you are able to walk forward, towards the tabernacle. The Carmelite saints (on both sides of the aisle) seem to be showing you the way. They indicate how to get to the tabernacle to meet the Lord in the Holy Eucharist. At the tabernacle one finds two more Carmelite figures, a painting of Mary and a statue of the Infant Jesus, in addition to the tabernacle. This representation of the Christ Child is a very popular devotion in Prague, best known as the “Infant of Prague.” There are many aspects to comment on and to study, but I want to underline just one idea. The Carmelite saints (Carmelite spirituality) bring us to an encounter with God, and, therefore, to a genuine transformation of ourselves.

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Encountering God presupposes a change in our lives. This change is not only psychological (even if this psychological aspect is quite important and this type of transformation has consequences in the psychological realm). Nor is this change only in the sociological sphere (even if the sociological aspect is quite important and this type of transformation also has consequences in the sociological realm). This change we are speaking about is deeper and broader. The whole person is invited to a new understanding, to a new praxis, to new behavior, to enjoy life as a gift lived in thankfulness and gratitude.

But we should not be too naïve or simple about this. Except in the case of the great saints or in strong mystical experiences, this encounter with God is not usually so clear nor so evident. The path that leads us to God is very long. It is not straight. Many times we choose other paths, or we return to where we are. That is why I really like the title you have chosen for this convocation: “Carmelite Transformation: A Lifelong Journey”.

Since many, many years ago (when it was not so fashionable) I have been a distance runner. I have completed several marathons. Many times I have suggested that the marathon is a very good metaphor of our spiritual journey. You cannot give up.
Sometimes you go slowly. Or you might suffer a new pain in your knee. Or you need to drink something. Or you might be presented with a myriad of other problems and difficulties that come with running. But the philosophy of the marathon man or woman is to not give up. It does not matter too much how well you are running, what your record is, or what your position will be at the goal. The important part is to arrive.

“Perseverance” seems to me to be a very old fashion word (and very difficult to pronounce in English!). It seems to be a word for old novice directors in cloistered monasteries. But, more and more, I am aware of the importance of this value: perseverance, loyalty, to be able to stay with something, “determinada determinación” (in St. Teresa’s vocabulary). Perseverance is not just “endurance” (something for heroes or strong people); perseverance has to do with wisdom, hope and humility. We keep on going in the spiritual life, because we know (wisdom), that even though we are weak and fragile (humility), God is waiting for us in the goal line to hug us and to give us the gold medal (hope).

Another difficulty comes from the fact that the encounter with God cannot be direct or immediate in this life. Only in heaven will we meet God face to face. We will look at him and He will look back at us in a tender and loving way.

But in this life, the encounter with God only comes through mediations. That further complicates the whole experience significantly. We have to find him in the little, fragile, humble and, many times, contradictory signs of his presence among us. It is a wonderful challenge, but it is not easy. We need to bring some “attitudes” (the “dispositions” of the classical spiritual writers) to the journey. Let me underline just three:

- **Discernment**: this is a classic topic in the history of spirituality. Many times we try to manipulate God. Or we have the false illusion that something comes from God and it only comes from ourselves. Remember the terrible suffering of Teresa over her mystical experiences and “mental prayer”: do they come from God or from the devil? She speaks with many people about this.

  That’s why we have to be careful in discernment. God always has to be God. He is near, but He is also beyond any human expectation, idea, or definition. We have to be careful not to convert God into a puppet who says what we want to hear.

- **Capacity of contemplation** (a very Carmelite value). Many times I have defended my belief that the contemplative person is not the one who is always looking up to heaven, or watching the cloud. The contemplative person looks around and tries to perceive those humble signs of the presence of God. We have to open our eyes, focus, and be attentive.

- **Courage**, because that experience of God may change our ideas, our routine, and/or our prejudices. Let me express this in another way: it changes our lives.

Pope Francis often and very strongly insists on this. We cannot observe life from the outside, like we are spectators. We must be involved, especially with the suffering of our brothers and sisters. Remember the criticism of “balconear” (a neologism in Spanish) who just watches life from the balcony.
We find these three attitudes in a wonderful text in Scripture. Remember the Gospel of John, Chapter 21 (the story of the miraculous catch of fish) which occurs on the Lake of Galilee. John presents a very idyllic image in Galilee. This takes place immediately after the scenes filled with dust, blood, cries, arms, crosses, and death. The Apostles return to Galilee as if nothing had happened.

It is also a chapter rich with symbols: the numbers, the fishing, the signs, etc. John plays with real, historical elements in the story but those elements take on a deeper meaning, a sort of “semantic ambiguity.” For example: the whole story takes place very early in the morning (at dawn, early in the morning). It is the right moment for fishing in the lake of Galilee (the fishermen still follow this practice today), but at the same time, it perhaps means something else. It is the time of the day in which you see yet you do not see. It is a time for discernment. John, from the boat, sees that strange character in the shore.

There is a dialogue and, after a while, John, the beloved disciple, says “It is the Lord.” John is the model contemplative. He is able to see the presence of the Lord in our lives.

But they do not stay inactive; they do not contemplate in a way that is cold, distant, and antiseptic. They jumped into the water and they swam to the beach to meet the Lord (courage).

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Journey

In the title of our gathering you have included also the word “journey.” It is also an important image, not just in the history of spirituality, but also in the Carmelite symbolic universe.

- The first Carmelites probably went to the Holy Land as individual pilgrims and were nourished by this kind of spirituality.
- The Carmelite Rule speaks of “journeys” and “ways.” Albert or whomever takes it for granted that the Carmelites would be walkers:

  “Since you must more frequently beg on journeys” (c. 17)
  “This is a good and holy way: follow it” (c. 20)

- The Institution of the First Monks presents the spiritual life as a four-step journey by which we “ascend to the peak of prophetic perfection” (1, 2). It is a journey that we undertake at God’s command. In fact, the book sees the whole spiritual journey contained in God’s words to Elijah, “Depart from here and go towards the East...” (1 Kgs 17, 2-4).

- Many other Carmelites have written about the “way” or the “journey” of Carmel. Allow me to cite a couple of examples:

  * In the writings of St. Teresa of Jesus the word “way” occurs 500 times.
John of the Cross conceives of the spiritual life as the ascent of a mountain, with the peak as the place where we are united with God in love. This ascent is essentially a journey of transformation in God.

St. Thérèse of Lisieux discovered “a little way that is completely new, straight, and very short”

In recent times the Ratio Institutionis Vitae Carmelitanae (RIVC) has developed this image. But in its latest edition, the entire RATIO appears as a “way of transformation.” According to the RATIO, formation is a lifelong process of ongoing transformation until we reach full maturity in Christ (RIVC, 14.63.114).

Pope Francis, in his November 2014 meeting with the Union of General Superiors (USG), invited the religious superiors to walk with their communities: to walk ahead of the group (to lead them giving witness, to open up new ways); to walk within the group (to be a brother); to walk behind the group (to take care of those who need help, or perhaps with humility to learn from the group).

Conclusion
Let me finish with a rather strange and contradictory sentence as well as with an invitation: The strange sentence would be this: there are as many “ways” for people, but nevertheless there is only one way.

Every human life is unique: our conditions, our background, our family roots, our prejudices, our lights, and our shadow. Every human being, every believer, every follower of the Lord, every Carmelite has to find his or her own way. It is a responsibility that we cannot ignore or avoid. Of course, there are methods, programs, and various examples but sooner or later, each person has to find their own way to God.

Some ways and processes are quite strange. Let me tell you something I was reading in a magazine in the plane coming here from Rome (I don’t read sport newspapers in the plane, but rather high intellectual staff!). Emmanuel Carrère, a French writer who has just published his book Le Royaume” (The Kingdom), tells his personal story about religion: sociologically catholic, he left the Church, had a conversion, then he had a sort of psychological crisis and so on. After experiencing the terrible sickness of a four-year-old child, he wrote: “I leave you, I leave you, but, Lord, you don’t leave me.”

This is why I don’t rely very much on the programs of formation that try to evaluate every candidate using the same criteria. Every human being is a mystery and there is no “taxonomy.” Formation does not take place in a factory. We are not dealing with building cars, or writing books, or creating bricks. There are as many journeys as there are persons.

But at the same time, there is only one way, and that is Jesus Christ. He calls every body to the plenitude of life and to salvation. In different ways, He is the only way. “I am the way, the truth and the life” (John 14,6).

Clarification and Invitation
Some of you may be surprised that I have not mentioned Titus Brandsma in this talk. Actually, in a very authentic and heroic way, he persevered in his own journey of
transformation. His “way” took him from Bolsward in Friesland, Netherlands, to the Carmelite Order which was not very well known at the time in the Netherlands. From Nijmegen he went to Rome and from Rome he began his frenetic activity in the fields of education and press. From his teaching in the university he went on to confront the Nazi power in Holland and that led to one jail to another, and finally to the concentration camp in Dachau.

The last stage of his journey took place in a terrible train, one of those animal and cargo trains that traveled all around the continent in the so-called “night of Europe.” But at the same time Titus was travelling towards the Lord, growing in faith, in hope, and in tenderness for everybody, even to the nurse who give him the injection that would finish his life.

Titus created his seventh mansion (he was an expert on Teresa, as you probably know from reading the wonderful publication “The Sword”) in the midst of a lager, in a terrible infirmary where people were killed day after day. Twenty years later, that same nurse went to Rome and testified in the beatification process for Titus. Among many other things, she said, “That little man looked at me with compassion.” That was the goal of his journey.

As Saint Albert did to the first Carmelites, I dare to invite you to follow this “holy and good way.” If you are in a moment of joy, enthusiasm and commitment… try to share that with all who walk with you. If you are tired or if you are in a period of discouragement, disappointment or sorrow for any reason: Courage! Move forward. Don’t give up.

May Our Lady of Mount Carmel, Star of the Sea, and all the saints of Carmel help us in our “way” of transformation and salvation.

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