

OUR CARMELITE PROMISE: An Overview

Before the surprise of being named Formation Director even wore off a scary thought came to me: I'm going to have to make some formation talks to the community. Immediately all sorts of objections came to mind ... I don't have time ... I don't have the ability ... what if I say something wrong and lead someone to error ... I can't think of any good topics that haven't already been discussed. But mostly what concerned me was what on earth can I say to all you good and holy people who should be giving talks to me! Then, in a moment of inspiration, an idea was suggested by two dear Carmelite friends who had the exact same thought. First, there are many good topics to discuss if we just stop and think about it. And even if it's already been discussed, it's our personal perspective that brings it new life. Second, a topic particularly ripe for discussion and reflection is one the friars – especially Fr. Deeney – feel is typically neglected by Seculars: Our Promise.

And it occurred to me: “what a wonderful idea!” In my nearly seven years here in Carmel I've heard many good and uplifting talks; but I don't recall the Promise ever specifically addressed. Further, while I often reflect on our vocation I found myself guilty of the very thing the friars describe. I don't think I ever once tried to relate my personal meditations to the actual words of the Promise itself. So after spending just a few minutes reviewing the text of our Promise, it became clear there's so much richness and depth in these brief words ... and enough content for several months of talks to probe it's meaning and hopefully encourage us to think about it more often ... and live it more fully.

Here are the words of our Promise:

I [], inspired by the Holy Spirit, in response to God's call, sincerely promise to the Superiors of the Order of the Teresian Carmel and to you my brothers and sisters, to tend toward evangelical perfection in the spirit of the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty, obedience, and of the Beatitudes, according to the Constitutions of the Secular Order of Discalced Carmelites, for [3 years/rest of my life]. I confidently entrust this, my Promise, to the Virgin Mary, Mother and Queen of Carmel.

Let's parse these words and try to unpack some of their meaning and hopefully reveal some of the richness we can delve into in coming months:

1. Inspired by the Holy Spirit: What a wonderful Carmelite theme! Our entire vocation can be described as a path or journey through the ascetic and mystical leading to the Carmelite pinnacle on the teaching on the spiritual betrothal and marriage. And the Holy Spirit is the prime driver and teacher of souls in all of this. In fact, it is sometimes said that two of St.

John of the Cross' most important works – namely *The Spiritual Cantic* and *Living Flame of Love* – are treatises on the Holy Spirit. Even his more ascetic works like *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* spend considerable time on the workings of the Holy Spirit ... in infused contemplation itself ... and discernment of the inspirations He sometimes gives in prayer and even in the midst of our day-to-day activities. The role of the Holy Spirit is central to our vocation; devotion to whom St. John, in particular, continually stressed.

2. In response to God's call: The Carmelite charism is prayer. And one of the many fruits of prayer is the gift of listening ... hearing His voice in the many and varied ways He comes to us: the words of Scripture; the people and events of our lives; the thoughts and inspirations that come to us in prayer itself. Our Carmelite life is one of continual listening and discerning the meaning of what we hear to orient ourselves toward an ever deeper union with Our Lord.

But it's important we know whose voice we're hearing. St. John of the Cross teaches in his treatment of the active night of spirit from "The Ascent" that our spiritual faculties can easily misinterpret the inspiration we receive and that the evil one sometimes poses as an angel of light. So a great trap of spiritual souls is to be too quick to "baptize all as coming from God and supposing to say God told me." More often than not, it is our voice we hear, though it is often the case we may be truly inspired by the Holy Spirit at such times. So the most important thing we can do is to test the spirit we receive against the Gospel, Church teachings and the directives of our Carmelite superiors. And we need to be detached from the expectation of particular outcomes.

3. Entrust this, my Promise, to the Virgin Mary, Mother and Queen of Carmel: We are members of an Order devoted to Our Lady in very particular way: to emulate her model of prayer "to ponder always" and to walk in spiritual simplicity so that our very lives become a continual living and breathing Magnificat. Mary is – as our Constitutions show – our "ideal and inspiration" . . . our "model of total commitment to God's Kingdom" and all it entails. Mary's example challenges us to grow beyond mere devotionism in order to seek mature friendship and relationship. We are to learn to practice the Teresian example of mental prayer until it's becomes, in Brother Lawrence's words, like second nature . . . where we are habitually recollected. From our Ratio:

75. The particular aspect of the Blessed Virgin Mary that must be present in any person called to Carmel is that of an inclination to "meditate in the heart", the phrase that St

Luke's gospel uses twice to describe Mary's attitude in regard to her Son. All the other aspects of Marian life and devotion can be present, for example, the Scapular, the Rosary. They are, however, secondary to this aspect of Marian devotion.

4. The evangelical counsels: As Carmelites we are called to live a life of poverty, chastity and obedience. The counsels (especially obedience) deserve to be a stand-alone talk; but for now I'd like to touch upon the virtue that underpins the counsels and makes it possible to practice them to the highest degree. Docility is sometimes said to be a particularly Carmelite virtue. To be docile is to be accommodating ... adaptable ... agreeable ... easy going ... flexible ... governable ... obliging ... trusting. Docility is the flipside of willfulness and the virtue that makes it possible for us to say "Your will and not mine be done." Without docility, obedience will never be a joy and its practice will be a constant struggle.

5. The Beatitudes: Here we have the meat of it all . . . what it truly means to be a Carmelite! What we recognize in the Beatitudes is that there's a distinctly Carmelite flavor to it where each teaching is a separate building block in the "Interior Castle" that is our soul. And each Beatitude depends on the others ... the loss of one is to render the entire structure unstable. Let's take a brief look at some of the Carmelite themes we can explore:
 - *Blessed are the poor in spirit*: "Humility, humility, humility." There's a very good reason St. Teresa made this the bedrock virtue on which our Carmelite vocation is built. Without this, we build our Interior Castle with straw instead of stone.

 - *Blessed are they who mourn*: Temptations, trials and suffering will be with us always. And why should we expect otherwise? A large part of our Carmelite teaching is meant to show us that sufferings are for our own good for that is how we are purified and strengthened. This is one of the core meanings of St. John of the Cross' definition of Night. When we come to understand this, we are one step closer to becoming more like our Saints where we can embrace our crosses with joy and loving acceptance. Through this beatitude – and the ascetic practice of detachment and self-denial on which it is based - we learn the deeper meaning of "He must increase; I must decrease."

 - *Blessed are the meek*: As Carmelites, we are taught to do all within their power to moderate passions at the root. We need to become aware how our exterior senses – seeing, hearing and so on – are the gateways to our soul that allow our interior senses of "phantasy and imagination" to create "forms and images" that are often distortions of reality. To combat this, we must become aware of our "first movements" in an almost continual act of discernment as to what is and is not of God. Should our will cling to the less than virtuous thoughts and feelings that proceed from our "first movements; we put at risk our recollection and become susceptible to sinful action. Much of St.

John's ascetic teaching on the active night of spirit is devoted to combating our deep seated impulses and passions.

- *Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness:* St. Teresa teaches that of all the different kinds of union that are possible in this life the one we are to seek with greatest vigor is the union of wills. All the sublime teachings on mystical and infused graces that also go by the name "union" are secondary to this overriding goal.
- *Blessed are the merciful:* This goes to the heart of the Gospel imperative summed up in Christ's teaching on love of God and neighbor. And we as Carmelites have a unique perspective on this as our teachings can, in a certain sense, be described as profound and mystical reflections on the supremacy of love. And what wonderfully unique and diverse ways these teachings bloom! St. Teresa expresses herself differently than St. John who embraces a style different from St. Therese and so on. Yet each in their own way came to a very clear and personal understanding ... that God *is* love.
- *Blessed are the pure of heart:* This, perhaps, is the most contemplative of the beatitudes where we probe the 4th mansions and beyond of our Interior Castle ... where we are led to ever deeper depths of union in which we come to "see the face of God." Our efforts and vocal prayer and meditation yield to God's initiative in St. Teresa's sublime descriptions of the prayer states of recollection, quiet and union. And not to be outdone, St. John of the Cross probes similar heights in his teachings on the spiritual stages we must all pass ... the purgative, illuminative and unitive ways.
- *Blessed are the peacemakers:* Our prayer isn't about ourselves, how we feel or what we get out of it. No, this would be mere navel gazing. Rather, true Carmelite prayer – to the degree that it's about us – is about *personal transformation* that leads us to be more "other" focused. And what better example of this is the grace to rise above our own personal opinions, likes and dislikes and in-grained biases to embrace the conflicts and contradictions of daily life in the role of a peacemaker. Further, it's no wonder the higher mansions that comprise the unitive way are filled with descriptions of the interior peace, harmony and unity experienced by those even in the midst of the chaos of daily life. This is His gift to souls approaching the perfection that is possible in this earthly life.
- *Blessed are those who are persecuted:* If the suffering and trials that are the hallmarks of St. John's depictions of night are for our own personal transformation, what can we say of the sufferings of those already brought to transforming union and are no longer in need of purification? For these special individuals, trials in the heights of union take

on a “reparative” or redemptive nature ... that is, they are meant for the good of souls. And what better example of this do we have than our very own St. Therese and her crisis of Faith!

All of this provides a wealth of topics related to our Promise worthy of greater exploration and personal reflection. Perhaps future talks can be devoted to expanding these outlined themes in greater detail.

Today, though, I’d like to spend a few moments on the *foundations* for what it is we actually promise to do through the beatitudes and evangelical counsels. Specifically, the nature of a Promise itself, what it means to make one and what our underlying dispositions toward it should be.

First, let’s take a look at how the dictionary defines the word promise. It says, quite simply, giving “one’s word that something will be done.” When we look at variations for the word promise we can begin to see the richness and depth “keeping one’s word” can come to mean: agreement ... bond ... commitment ... consent ... covenant ... espousal ... oath ... pact ... vow. While we make promises in our daily lives all the time – real or implied - in a religious setting a promise takes on added significance. This we can see in salvation history itself which some Scripture scholars describe as a continual story of covenant making between God and man: first with Adam, followed by Noah, Abraham, Moses and David. These covenants, of course, were brought to fruition and fulfillment in Christ himself.

While Scripture is full of examples of *God’s* promises to us; our Carmelite promise is essentially one of *our* response to *His* call. We return the favor, in a manner of speaking, by offering our thoughts, words and actions in greater allegiance to Christ our Lord, the Church He has given us and the Order on which our vocation is based. The Catechism states that “fidelity to promises made to God is a sign of the respect owed to the divine majesty and of the love for a faithful God.” (2101) Further, a religious promise “is an act of *devotion* in which the Christian dedicates himself to God or promises him some good work.”

So what is it we “dedicate ourselves to” and what is the “good work” we propose when we say the words of our Promise? Following are two guiding principles given to us by the Superior General as laid out in our Statutes:

1. “By making their formal Promise in the Order, they declare their firm purpose of striving more effectively day by day after the fullness of Christian charity.”

2. “The making of the Promise confers membership in the Secular Order and establishes spiritual and juridical ties with the Discalced Carmelites.”

The centrality of commitment and obedience to the order can't be stressed enough. Again from our Ratio:

83. What is the element that distinguishes those called to be Secular Carmelites? It is not the spirituality, nor the study, nor the devotion to Mary. Simply put, the Secular Carmelite is moved to commit himself or herself to the Order

These points, in a nutshell, are what we set out to do when we make our Promise. And the beatitudes and evangelical counsels are the specific means we employ to put our Promise into action.

While these descriptions attempt to show something about the nature of a Promise and what it is we do when we make one, it's equally important to look at our underlying attitudes and dispositions for trying to live it out. The Superior General speaks of the “fullness of Christian charity” as a principal task which reveals once again the supremacy of love. All of the virtues can be thought of as particular types of love ... each with their own particular flavor and hue ... like differing colors of the rainbow or flowers in a field.

The very words we say in our Carmelite Promise reveal a wealth of these rainbow colors to be practiced. I will briefly describe two but I'm sure each of you could come up with many more. First, we say I “*sincerely* promise.” To be sincere is to be straightforward and honest about what we are setting out to do realizing full well our abilities and limitations. To be sincere is to act in a manner that is aboveboard ... genuine ... open ... righteous ... truthful ... trustworthy.

Second, we also say “for 3 years/rest of my life;” ... the time aspect implying the importance of *fidelity* to the keeping of one's word. Fidelity demonstrates faithfulness in our relationships to God and each other. It is to show constancy ... dependability ... devotedness ... steadfastness. Or in more explicit Carmelite terms: to persevere and to practice determined determination. And we will certainly need these traits! All the trials, temptations and contradictions we face living out our vocation are meant to weaken our resolve. And no matter how far we progress on the spiritual path Sts. Teresa and John laid-out for us we will never be free of the need to faithfully preserve.

But, I suppose, all of this is getting a bit ahead of ourselves and perhaps, in closing, it would be good to try and step back a bit from this dry theory I'm presenting to recapture some of the

fevor I'm sure we all had on the day we all had when we made our Promise. For this lies at the heart of it all! And I can think of no one better than our very own St. Therese who wonderfully captured the essence of the beatitudes and evangelical counsels in this letter she wrote for the day of her final profession:

O Jesus, my Divine Spouse! May I never lose the second robe of my baptism! Take me before I can commit the slightest voluntary fault. May I never seek nor find anything but yourself alone. May creatures be nothing for me and may I be nothing for them, but may You, Jesus, be *everything*! May the things of earth never be able to trouble my soul, and may nothing disturb my peace. Jesus, I ask you for nothing but peace, and also love, infinite love without any limits other than yourself; love which is no longer I but You, my Jesus. Jesus, may I die a martyr for you. Give me martyrdom of heart or of body, or rather give me both. Give me the grace to fulfill my Vows in all their perfection, and make me understand what a real spouse of yours should be. Never let me be a burden to the community, let nobody be occupied with me, let me be looked upon as one to be trampled underfoot, forgotten like your little grain of sand, Jesus. May your will be done in me perfectly, and may I arrive at the place you have prepared for me.

Jesus, allow me to save very many souls; let no soul be lost today; let all souls in purgatory be saved. Jesus, pardon me if I say anything I should not say. I want only to give you joy and to console you.

Saints of Carmel ... pray for us that each of us listening today may have some taste of these very words!