



Carmelite Communities Associated

CCA

Charter of Life

A contemporary statement of the Teresian charism
by the Carmelite Communities Associated

We are Christians

We have been baptized into Christ, sealed by the Holy Spirit and joined to Christ's body the church, where we share the heritage of children who confidently say with Jesus: Abba!

We are Carmelites

We believe that each of us is called by Christ to follow him in a life of apostolic love, by searching the depths of divine intimacy in solitary prayer. To guide us we have taken the Rule of Carmel as it has come down to us from St. Teresa. For from within the ancient Carmelite tradition, imaged in the figures of Elijah and Mary, Mother of God, Teresa, daughter and doctor of the church, evolved a distinctive style of contemplative life and spirit of prayer, infused with her own remarkable sense of the Risen Christ and the church. We, in our time, have recognized in the Teresian Carmel the substance of our own desires. In Christ's name, therefore, we have gathered to live a life of prayer in the light of Carmel's Rule, quickened by Teresa's spirit. We set forth here, our way of life for ourselves and for all who would know us better.

The Spirit within presses us to pray always and our Rule counsels us to continual meditation in silence and solitude. Thus, we ordinarily seek to be alone and to preserve about us an atmosphere of gentle silence so as to give ourselves to an ever-deepening communion with Christ Jesus. Our solitude is a desert of time and space for uncluttered attention, our silence, a climate of peace for listening. One permeates the other, and together they make up the environment of prayer. Yet neither is stranger to struggle and dread. Rather, they engender a fertile starkness of inner freedom and presence, awesome with the overshadowing of the divine and alive with the experience of all that is human. Here the life of prayer roots itself and thrives, surrendered to God's Spirit impelling us whither she will. It is this aloneness we seek for ourselves and accord to one another with simplicity and appreciation.

Each sister has her own room apart. Our room is for us a place both sacred and familiar, a desert where we are at home. We reserve two hours each day for solitary prayer, but the spirit of prayer overflows into the hours of reading, study and work, gracing each, as we take it up, with a quality of unhurried attention and esteem. This spirit of prayer and leisure, nurtured in solitude but all-pervasive, gives to the successive moments of our life a contemplative dimension and knits them together into a single fabric.

Within the contemplative wholeness of our life, there are certain times when we exchange the presence of solitude for the presence of community. The Rule we follow indicates these occasions, bidding us gather for worship, community meetings and the common meal.

We are a community of faith and when we meet for worship, it is to break the bread of God's Word and the bread of God's Life. Our celebration of the Eucharist is the source and summit of Christ's life in us and of our shared life in him. For when we eat the bread and drink the cup of this Pasch, we are created and renewed as disciples who live the dying and rising of Jesus, and who, by their love for one another, proclaim the presence of God's reign. Daily in the Eucharist, Christ calls forth from each of us the deepest personal response, only to transform this gift of ourselves into a communion of life.

The Liturgy of the Hours creates a setting for the Eucharist and continues the church's unceasing worship. In union of heart and mind with the church, we extend the memorial of the Paschal Mystery to the hours and seasons of the liturgical year, savoring the psalms and scriptures in greater fullness. With God's Word in our hearts and God's praise on our lips, we pray together the liturgical hours, gathering the prayer of all creation into our own. Thus, quietly and imperceptibly, the Word of God effective in our midst continues the Eucharistic work of creative and saving love. How, we do not know, except that the ground itself brings forth fruit.

Again, we meet regularly to discuss our affairs and to explore the meaning and direction of our life together. In this sacred time, we break the bread of the Spirit for one another, for we believe that the Spirit of Jesus abides in each of us and quickens us as community. Thus, we rely on one another for the openness of heart and mind so necessary to fruitful dialogue, and for a willingness to share the responsibility of creating a quality of human and religious life befitting us as children of God.

Finally, we come together for the common meal and a time of informal recreation. There is a sacredness about this time, too, for we reserve it to be together, believing that our communion of life is strengthened when we break the bread of joy and peace for one another.

Thus, we are solitaries and we are community, without confusion or contradiction, for embracing and embraced by Christ, we are united by our love for him in a presence unfettered by the demarcations of matter and time. Indeed, as the love of Christ lures us into the wilderness, so the love of Christ gathers us together. The vocation to solitary prayer itself inclines us toward community as toward the visible presence of its call to communion. There too, do we find the strength of a tradition which roots us in the church, and the support of a common life which frees us for prayer.

Yet we know that solitude, the secret chamber of a loving heart forgetful of self and wholly taken up with Christ, is an ideal. Our life is a moving towards it, under the action of God's Spirit, working through our own efforts in part, and in part, through the refining processes of life. Likewise, the Gospel ideal of community stretches before us, for our communion of life wrought in the Eucharist shares in the "already" and the "not yet" of the church's own life, and with the church, we are continually called to attain the full stature of the Risen Christ. Daily we grow towards this ideal, as we take on the likeness of Christ Jesus who laid down his life for his friends and are built up by the Holy Spirit into a living temple of Christ, a sacrament of God's saving love in

the world. These two lofty and compelling ideals mark our way as Carmelites, a way which is our Paschal journey as Christians. Between fidelity to solitary prayer and commitment to creating a community of love, our days move in a rhythm of creative tension, not without its stress and demands, but sweetened always by a joyful gratitude for the abundance of life and the beauty of the calling which is the portion of our heritage.

We are a people who share the history and tradition of a long established, world-wide religious family. Our story begins some 800 years ago with an original group of Christian solitaries on Mount Carmel. But the depths of our tradition recede into the penumbra of meaning enveloping the figures of Elijah, the prophet, zealous proclaimer and champion of God's Word, and Mary, Mother of Christ, its perfect beholder and disciple. Down through the ages, women and men, stirred by the ideal they image, have found their fulfillment in Carmel. Even today, these women and men continue to enrich us with the inspiration of their lives and the wisdom of their experience. Teresa of Jesus and John of the Cross stand out among them, for they fashioned and passed on to us a rich doctrine of mystical prayer which continues to shape our understanding of the Rule. Indeed, Teresa and John are the principal exponents of the Carmelite tradition of prayer, not only for us, but for all those women and men throughout the world whom we call our sisters and brothers in Carmel.

We, in our turn, are impelled to hand on this tradition in a living way. And thus, as we receive new members into our communities, we share together the responsibility of incorporating each one into the life and tradition we ourselves have received and cherish.

The quiet presence of Mary has accompanied Carmel in its long pilgrimage and goes with us today. We know her as mother, sister and friend, she who is the virginal abode of God's Word. In secret she ponders the Word, and in bringing forth Christ, she becomes mother of the church. From age to age, she gives herself over to an untiring

solicitude for Gods people, as all generations call her blessed. Thus, do we honor her as the grace-filled woman of faith and look to her as the model of all to which we aspire.

We are Religious

We believe that the Spirit within bids us follow Christ as poor, chaste and obedient. The church summons us, and to the church we hold ourselves accountable. It is this community of faith that receives the vows which solemnly symbolize our assent to Gods call and ratify our desire to consecrate ourselves body and spirit to Christ Jesus in service to the community of life.

In choosing celibacy we commit ourselves to a way of loving which binds us to Christ Jesus and in him to the community of life in all-embracing, inclusive, creative love. Jesus, whom we take as Beloved, Friend and Companion for the Way, himself teaches us this love. We celebrate it in the Eucharist and give it flesh and blood day to day, in the mutual self-giving of community life. Centered in Christ and in community as in a source, celibacy frees us for relatedness to all as sister, neighbor and friend. Like every truly human life, the celibate life is a Paschal journey with its own shadowed valleys and arid places. But in the friendship of Jesus, in the simple shared affection of our small familial communities and in the freedom for friendship within and beyond community, we are gifted with an abundance of human fulfillment and a blessed foretaste of the Resurrection.

In choosing poverty we commit ourselves to a way of living which undergirds our life of prayer by its witness to the Gospel amid the spiritual and material bounty of creation. The poverty of the desert magnifies the cry of the poor, and in its silence, love hears their voice. Gospel poverty reaches to the heart of prayer as the familiar echo of its own nakedness of spirit, shaping our consciousness and inflaming our commitment to the life community of the earth, especially to the plight of all who are needy, weak or small.

We are ordinary people who have chosen a life-style of Gospel simplicity. We work for our living and hold our possessions in common, sharing them in the kindly spirit of concern for personal need counseled by our Rule. Receiving all things as Gods gifts, we desire to share them with gratitude and to consecrate them by use and non-use, in reverence, responsibility and freedom. In all things we keep before us the example of Christ Jesus, for whom poverty was the servant of love, for it was out of love that he emptied himself to make us rich.

In choosing obedience we commit ourselves to a way of fidelity to the will of God which depends on a listening heart. Christ Jesus went this way of obedience to glory, and we follow him. We believe that Love has spoken all things in Jesus, and that the Holy Spirit discloses the meaning of the Christ-mystery as it engages each of us personally, and all of us as community, in our day to day living. It is our part to listen to the Spirit of Jesus speaking in each one of us, in the community, in the church, and in the signs of the times. Therefore, we rely on one another for openness in the processes of communication by which we seek to discover Gods will for us and to do it.

With this understanding, the government of our communities is simply structured, we choose leaders from among ourselves and together with them, share the responsibility for discernment, for making and supporting decisions, and for all that pertains to the peaceful ordering of our everyday lives.

In professing our vows, we have said "yes" to Love graciously calling us to live out our Baptismal grace according to the evangelical counsels. As people of the church, we know that we are built up and sustained by Gods love made visible in the lives of Christians all about us, so also do we believe that our lives of celibacy, poverty and obedience, manifest still another dimension of that unfathomable love, gracing the Body of Christ with their own unique gifts. Yet' not as though we had reached any perfection, but we press on hoping to lay hold of Christ

Jesus who laid hold of us, and to hasten the day when Love will be all in all.

We are people on the Way, and therefore we value the support of a disciplined life. Our asceticism, however, is of a piece with our life itself. Its source is the Gospel call to a change of heart, its shape is the shape of Christ's good cross, its direction follows the Spirit's breathing, and its work is to free us to live our vocation in wholeness and joy. Our tradition teaches and our experience confirms the singular value of the daily renewed effort to immerse ourselves in the Word of God through reading, meditation, study and celebration. Likewise, the asceticism of silence and solitude admits of endless refinement in motivation, meaning and expression. There is also that subtler dimension of asceticism arising from the unchosen austerities inherent in work and community life, in change, growth and aging, and in the fragility of the human condition itself. All these have a prior claim on our attention and energies. At the same time, we value those disciplines both old and new, which heal, support and develop us in body, mind and spirit, and dispose us more fully for prayer and community living. Our care is to grow strong in Christ, guided by the Holy Spirit, who teaches us the ways of freedom and the measure of truth.

We are children of our time. We claim as our own its history, its culture, its greatness, its sin. What we are by inheritance, we choose in love, for we believe that the God whose face we seek comes to meet us in each unfolding moment of the cosmic story. At the same time, we believe that Carmel's life of prayer is a vital part of the Christian response to the Gospel imperative that we redeem the times. And so, we are continually fashioning our life of prayer in ways appropriate to itself, yet new, in order to become within the local church and community, a more visible and accessible presence of the universal love to which we aspire. Whatsoever things are just, noble, gracious and true, these we ponder and hold fast, while our lives proclaim that the reign of God is among us.

We walk in faith. Faith is the perennial Wellspring of our life for we are centered in One whom we love but do not see, and the principal apostolic fruitfulness of our prayer is the unseen work of love in the secret places of the human spirit. Moreover, we believe that our life, though ordinary as we ourselves, speaks of more than ourselves. For when we are present in the neighborhoods and cities of the human community, we are a prophetic presence of the church pointing beyond ourselves to the infinite mystery of God and the immanence of God's love in the universe. At the same time, like the prophets of old, we are free to move in those narrow places at the frontiers of society and culture, living and speaking the truth as we increasingly come to see it. Faith is, of course, the substance of things unseen, we do not possess what we hope for. But we know in whom we have believed and we are certain that we shall not be disappointed. And so we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. His love impels us and zeal for Gods reign consumes like fire, yet we go our way with quiet hearts, having a common care for unity and for the peace which binds us together, praying continually in the power of the Holy Spirit, and, whatever may come, giving thanks to God, always and everywhere.

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