

Apostolate of Carmelite Seculars

by Nancy Thompson Flos Carmeli, Winter 2005

Revised September 2018 – *the Mission of the Order and Good Works as the Fruit of Prayer*

The apostolate of the individual Carmelite Secular demonstrates to the world how it is possible to seek intimate union with God even in the midst of the Secular's worldly duties and concerns. Apostolate also becomes a means of spiritual formation and growth for the individual and community to which he belongs, in this cycle of God's initiation and our response.

We recall in *The Interior Castle*, Holy Mother Teresa's conclusion when explaining the Lord's purpose in granting the great favor of union with him and how it is necessary that "Martha and Mary" join together. She says, "This is the reason for prayer, my daughters, the purpose of this spiritual marriage: the birth always of good works, good works." (VII.4.6.)

"To serve" is a Teresian verb that she uses 810 times in her written works to describe the life of prayer. As Teresian Carmelites, we need to seriously consider how this is meant to be understood in the lives of Seculars, who are charged with living our lives of contemplative prayer in the world. How can the Teresian verb "to serve" be translated in the life of prayer by today's Secular?

We are Catholic and Carmelite and Secular. There are many ideals to which we are called. It is our baptismal call to serve the Church and our neighbor. By virtue of our baptism, we are called to bring the Kingdom of God into every corner of the world that we enter. St. Teresa describes the life of prayer as "to serve". And John of the Cross says, "...where there is no love, put love, and you will draw out love..." (Letter 24). By virtue of our Promise we are called to live our contemplative lives in the world. Each of these ideals applies to each one of us. All of these ideals challenge us to discover in our own corners of the world, what it means to live the full life of a Carmelite Secular.

We are not called to activism (in our apostolate) any more than we are called to quietism (in our contemplation). Contemplative prayer is not just the absence of sound and image, it is a dynamic environment in which God acts in us and through which we experience intimate relationship with him. Apostolate is not just busying ourselves with tasks. It is a lived, dynamic environment that is the fruit of prayer in the life of a proficient or a perfect, using the terms of John of the Cross. Apostolate becomes synonymous with the mission we have as baptized Christians and Carmelites.

These "good works" that we do are the "transformation lived out" that has occurred in our lives through prayer. With the zeal of Elijah we go forth to "do" the life that awaits us in our corner of the world, animated by the fire of love which burns deeply within and bursts forth in divinized acts. As we grow in prayer, we desire to glorify God in all things and in all ways. We gain an equally strong desire to serve him and to sing his praise, as we do to help some soul, if we can.

We know that prayer is not for its own sake and the ultimate of ultimates in spiritual life is charity. Even the most interior soul must respond to the demands of charity in some form or fashion; otherwise, we can be lost in the maze of mirrors known as narcissism.

Elizabeth of the Trinity is known as one with a true contemplative soul. She is also known as an “apostolic contemplative.” She says,

“It seems to me that the attitude of the Virgin during the months that elapsed between the Annunciation and the Nativity is the model for interior souls, those who God has chosen to live within, in the depths of the bottomless abyss. In what peace, in what recollection Mary lent herself to everything she did. How even the most trivial things were divinized by her! For through it all, the Virgin remained the adorer of the gift of God. This did not prevent her from spending herself outwardly when it was a matter of charity; the Gospel tells us that Mary went in haste to the mountains of Judea to visit her cousin Elizabeth. Never did the ineffable vision that she contemplated within herself in any way diminish her outward charity” (“Heaven in Faith” paragraph 40)

It is one of the substantial challenges for Seculars of our time to define what it means to share Carmelite spirituality through apostolate. The mission of the OCD friar is “to know God so that God may be known.” This insight of our brother friars applies to Seculars as well. To know God so that God may be known can be considered the call to all Carmelites: friars, nuns, and seculars. It is an integral part of the charism of our order.

Apostolate as it is experienced for the Carmelite Secular can be thought of as three types of “infused” activity:

1. personal/private apostolate (usually family oriented for the Secular)
2. personal/public apostolate (usually related to the realm of work or public service)
3. community apostolate, which has two distinct forms:
 - a. the primary community apostolate, which seeks to share Carmelite spirituality, especially love of prayer, with others. This outreach includes personal contact and the participation of the whole community as far as possible.
 - b. a secondary community apostolate, which can be direct help to those in need, intercessory prayer, or service to the Church. As disciples of Christ and children of Mary, Carmelites show concern for the poor in concrete ways.

Most Seculars begin to connect their “Martha and Mary” early in formation. Personal apostolate in one’s own family develops as a result of changes happening in the new Carmelite that call for new-found levels of charity being extended to those we encounter. Family members are normally the first beneficiaries of this blessing. Then we begin to apply these principles at our jobs or in public service that remains part of our new Carmelite life, after one is well into the process of “letting go” of extraneous activities.

An evaluation note from Teresa when she visited her foundations read, “How are the needs of the poor being addressed?” Even Teresa’s enclosed nuns were not excused from this challenge. Neither are today’s Seculars. This fits in many ways with personal apostolate or secondary community apostolate.

It is worth mentioning again that Teresa says, “This is the reason for prayer, my daughters, the purpose of this spiritual marriage: the birth always of good works, good works.” (VII.4.6) She is

speaking to the spiritually mature here. And, just as our prayer lives are in continual stages of development and purification, so the Secular's actions are progressively purified through the effects of prayer and the formative effects of apostolate on the one doing it.

What makes these apostolic activities more than simply "good works" in a philanthropic or cultural sense is our participation with God in them. This allows us to become his living flame of love in the midst of these good works. They truly become our "moments" of living the contemplative life in the world.

All of this purification and maturation takes time for an individual or for a community. But maturity in the charism of Carmel is necessary for apostolate. Community is an important aspect of our charism and must be learned. The Secular intentionally seeks to live and become molded as a member of community. This maturation and purification process takes time and the grace of God.

In early stages of formation, an individual, a Group in Development, or a Study Group needs to immerse itself first in learning and adopting the charism of Carmel. Time is needed to gain Carmelite identity with one another and with the rest of the Order. We must be formed as people of prayer, community, and schools of prayer first. Then our initiatives of personal and group apostolate really can take on the character of the Carmelite Secular defined by our membership in the Carmelite Order and the Church: to live/take the charism of contemplative prayer in/into the world.

When the individual Secular or the community is evaluating its good works, the questions can be asked, "How does this help us live our Carmelite charism?" "How does this good work add to or diminish my life as a Carmelite?" We can expect to go through some trial and error, discernment and discovery, as we seek to grow in this aspect of our vocation.

Apostolate is the fruit of advanced prayer. However, just as the Secular strives to faithfully continue to pray and live the Rule of St. Albert in our Constitutions, long before we reach maturity in any significant ways, so we practice apostolate at the stage in which we find ourselves. We know and trust that someday, just as we persevere with the hope of experiencing union with God, we also persevere in hope as we struggle with our imperfect attempts at apostolate. Knowing that grace comes through all, the Secular trusts in our good God to continue to help us grow as individuals and communities in that twofold movement of love: a filial movement toward God and a fraternal movement toward souls.

Finally, let us be reminded of what Teresa told her sisters near the end of the last chapter in *The Interior Castle*,

" . . . what I conclude with is that we shouldn't build castles in the air. The Lord doesn't look so much at the greatness of our works as at the love with which they are done. And if we do what we can, His Majesty will enable us each day to do more and more, provided that we do not quickly tire. But during the little while this life lasts – and perhaps it will last a shorter time than each one thinks – let us offer the Lord interiorly and exteriorly the sacrifice we can. His Majesty will join it with that which He offered on the cross to the Father for us. Thus even though our works are small they will have the value our love for Him would have merited had they been great" (*Interior Castle*, VII.4.15).

Additional comments:

Your primary community apostolate does not have to be big and elaborate. Start small and see where it takes you. Don't be afraid to change apostolates if what you are doing isn't working well. Three points to keep in mind: sharing Carmelite spirituality, personal contact, and most of the members are involved in some way.

Secondary apostolates include traditional works of mercy or service to the Church.

Your Carmelite vocation underlies your good works and makes them effective. Your good works should not compete with your commitment to Carmel.