

BEING FAITHFUL TO HIS FOOTSTEPS **Translating the Carmelite Rule for life today**

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A version of this article first appeared in 'Assumpta' magazine in April 2005.

Shortly before she died, St. Thérèse of Lisieux wrote on 9th May 1887 to Père Roulland, a missionary in China:

Sometimes, when I read spiritual treatises... my poor little mind soon grows weary, I close the learned book, which leaves my head splitting and my heart parched, and I take the Holy Scriptures. Then all seems luminous, a single word opens up infinite horizons to my soul.

Thérèse knew the richness of Holy Scripture, the Word of God, and in an age when it was suspicious for anyone who was not a priest (and especially for women) to read the Bible, she kept a copy of the gospels by her heart. She is depicted clutching the gospels to her heart in a beautiful icon painted by Lebanese Carmelites for the declaration of Thérèse as a Doctor of the Church in 1997. Thérèse knew that in the Scriptures we encounter the Good News: that God loves us.

Like Thérèse, St. Albert knew the richness of Scripture, as can be seen in the *Rule* (or strictly speaking *Way of Life*) which he wrote in Latin sometime between 1205 and 1214 for the community of hermits living on Mount Carmel. His Rule has been called a 'masterpiece of *lectio divina*' because it is full of references and allusions to the Bible.

In obsequio Jesu Christi

I don't want to split anyone's head with a spiritual treatise in the way poor Thérèse suffered, but I would like to share with you some of the resonances and richness of a particular phrase from the second paragraph of the Rule: *in obsequio Jesu Christi*. It is important to ponder the phrase *in obsequio Jesu Christi* periodically if we are to grasp all it has to say about our lives as Carmelites in the modern world. The multiple interpretations of this phrase were expounded by Fr. Paul Chandler, O.Carm., to the participants at a Carmelite Ongoing Formation Course in Rome in February 2005.

Sensitive translation

To understand a text from the Middle Ages, such as the Rule of St. Albert, and to translate it into a modern language, we must have specific skills and some knowledge about the context in which it was first written and read. If translations are not sensitive to the culture(s) of the language they are being translated into, they will be unintelligible. A balance must be struck between being faithful to individual words and phrases, whilst retaining the sense of an overall sentence or passage. Translation is not the same as transposition or transliteration, that is, taking a text in one language and translating it literally, word for word, even if it does not make sense in the new language. (This, by the way, is one of the objections that some have made against the recent draft re-'translation' of the text of the Mass; but that's another story.)

The limits of language

The phrase *in obsequio Jesu Christi* is familiar to all Carmelites, because it occurs near the beginning of our Rule. In some languages (such as Italian) *obsequio* is fairly easy to translate because there is a corresponding word, but in other languages it is more complicated. Some words are almost impossible to translate from one language into another, as I realised during the ongoing formation course: even though we were celebrating the same Eucharist, there were subtle differences in the phrasing adopted by each different language, though this was not problematic and it opened up the richness of our diverse cultures.

In English, we have the word ‘obsequious’, which the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as meaning “servilely obedient or attentive”. The dictionary says that it came into the English language from an Old French courtly term, which itself derived from the Latin word “obsequium”, meaning “compliance”. So, should we translate the phrase *in obsequio Jesu Christi* as ‘servilely obedient to Jesus Christ’, ‘attentive to Jesus Christ’, or ‘compliant to Jesus Christ’? They are all similar, but each phrasing has a slightly different connotation and emphasis.

The 1970s translation in Holland

About thirty years ago, three Dutch Carmelite scholars – Otger Steggink, Jo Tigcheler and Kees Waaijman – produced a translation of the Rule (later translated from Dutch into English), that became very influential in the Order. They decided to translate *in obsequio Jesu Christi* as ‘living in the footsteps of Jesus Christ’. This is also a phrase we have become familiar with. Compare how the Dutch scholars translated paragraph two of the Rule with the Latin original and a later translation:

Latin original (1205-14)	Dutch/English translation (1970s)	English translation (1999 OCarm-OCD agreement)
Multipharie multisque modis sancti patres instituerunt qualiter quisque in quocunque ordine fuerit, vel quemcunque modum religiose vite elegerit, in obsequio Ihesu Christi vivere debeat, et eidem fideliter de corde puro et bona conscientia deservire.	In many and various ways the holy fathers have laid down how everyone, to whatever state of life he may belong or whatever form of dedicated life he may have chosen, should live in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, and serve Him faithfully with a chastened heart and sensitive feeling.	Many and varied are the ways in which our saintly forefathers laid down how everyone, whatever his station or the kind of religious observance he has chosen, should live a life in allegiance to Jesus Christ - how, pure in heart and stout in conscience, he must be unswerving in the service of the Master.

Was ‘living in the footsteps of Jesus Christ’ a good translation of the phrase *in obsequio Jesu Christi*? The Dutchmen explained their decision in a commentary:

In obsequio Jesu Christi: This is a reference to 2 Corinthians 10:5. There Paul speaks of the “arms of our struggle”, and by this image says he will captivate all thinking for the *service* of Christ, or for the

following of Christ. In the feudal society of the thirteenth century “fealty/allegiance” (“obsequium”) meant the relation of service of the vassal to his Lord. In the Christian view of the time, Jesus was lord of the Holy Land. Crusaders and pilgrims to the Holy Land, therefore, joined “the service” of Jesus in the pregnant sense of the term, either to defend the Holy Land, or as devout Christians to visit the holy places and thus to follow in the footsteps of Jesus and – if they remained permanently – to engage in battle with Satan, as Jesus himself had done in the desert. Considering their status of “hermits”, the early Carmelites belonged to the latter category. We use the word “footsteps”, because it evokes the Pauline meaning (service, in someone’s train) and the meaning given it by contemporary feudal society (fealty/allegiance), as well as “walking in the footsteps of Jesus” as practised by the pilgrim hermits.

The phrase used by Albert, *in obsequio Jesu Christi*, is one of the many times the Carmelite Rule-giver uses a phrase from the letters of St. Paul, in this case, 2 Corinthians 10:5. In that letter to the church at Corinth, Paul speaks about bringing everything into obedience or subjection to Christ. We could therefore translate *in obsequio* as meaning ‘in obedience’, and this would retain the biblical sense of the original quotation from Paul.

However, the Dutch translators in the 1970s didn’t translate *in obsequio Jesu Christi* as ‘obedience’ to Christ. They thought it best to use the sense of ‘living’ or ‘following in the footsteps’ of Christ. Again, the idea is similar, but the distinction is subtle. Let’s look at their choice of words a little further.

Peter, Paul, Francis, and Wenceslas!

‘Living in the footsteps of Christ’ is not a phrase that the Dutch experts just made up. Again, it is biblical allusion, coming from 1 Peter 2:21 – *For this is what you were called to, that Christ suffered on your behalf, leaving behind an example, for you to follow in his footsteps*. The phrase also calls to mind Christ’s command that we should each take up our cross and follow him.

This phrase of ‘following in the footsteps of Christ’ was also used a lot by St. Francis of Assisi to summarise the life of a friar minor, so it has resonances for a mendicant order such as ours.

Think also of the advice of Good King Wenceslas in the Christmas carol of that name; that his servant should follow in his footsteps to keep warm and be saved from getting lost. In this context, following in someone’s footsteps is a pleasant and intimate image. This intimacy is also conveyed in the famous *Footsteps* tale (‘One night I had a dream. I was walking along the shore with God...’).

So, the phrase ‘in the footsteps of Christ’ has good roots in the Bible and in the life of the Church. It is certainly a beautiful image, and seems especially relevant for those early hermits on Mount Carmel, who – living as they did in the land made holy by the life of Jesus and the prophets – must have had a special sense that they were literally following in the footsteps of the Saviour.

The footsteps of a child

Try to picture in your mind what it means to 'follow' in someone's footsteps, which St. Peter's letter speaks of. When have you or other people followed in someone's footsteps? It is something done by hikers following a guide. It is often something that children do, trailing behind a grown-up. But when someone follows in another's footsteps, he or she only sees the leader's back. If you walk in someone's footsteps, you may or may not have a certain equality with them, but you never see them face to face. Is this how Carmelites should be with Jesus?

Jesus – the 'eikon' (image) of the invisible God

The idea of seeing Jesus face to face is very important, because Jesus is the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15), and whoever has seen Jesus has seen his Father (John 12:45). What does this mean?

The Creation stories (yes, there are two of them!) in Genesis tell us that man and woman were made in the image of God. We actually looked like God. At the Fall, humanity's relationship with God was harmed; Adam and Eve no longer looked perfectly like God and so covered themselves up, they were banished from Eden, and humanity no longer saw God face to face.

Seeing God's face in the Old Testament was rare: Jacob, after wrestling with God (Genesis 32) says 'I have seen God face to face and I have survived', which shows how awesome the face of God was perceived to be by the people of Israel.

No one saw the face of God again fully until the arrival of Jesus. He is the 'Emmanuel' ('God with us'), and the 'new Adam', who restored our relationship with his Father through his passion, death, and resurrection. At the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor, the apostles saw Christ in his glory as fully human, and fully divine.

St. Irenaeus of Lyons, one of the 'Fathers of the Church', said in the second century after Christ that Jesus – as the image of the Father – has reminded humanity of what we are called to be at Creation: both human and divine. That's an awesome concept! When we look at the life of Jesus, it should be like looking in a mirror; we see reflected back what we are called to be.

That is why it is important for Carmelites and all Christians to look Jesus in the face and not only at his back!

Albert's selection of Scripture

So let's get back to considering the phrase *in obsequio Jesu Christi*. When St. Albert wrote the Rule at the request of those hermits on Mount Carmel, he didn't use the image of 'following in the footsteps' of Jesus that is conveyed in 1 Peter 2:21. He could have done so, but instead he chose to echo St. Paul's phrase in 2 Corinthians 10:5. Why not have a look at that passage from Paul, and consider how that context might have resonances for Carmelites?

Allusions to contemporary culture

In using the phrase *in obsequio Jesu Christi*, Albert probably knew that the word *obsequio* had other allusions and resonances beyond the echo with St. Paul. If we are to understand all the implications of this phrase, we must look at Paul and

also beyond Paul to the social context in which Albert and the first hermits on Carmel lived.

When Albert was writing in the early thirteenth century, the Latin word “obsequium” had taken on the meaning not only of ‘obedience’, as explained above, but also of ‘service’. A phrase often used by Christians of the time was *in obsequium pauperem*, meaning ‘in the service of the poor’. As we know, Carmelites, and Christians generally, are indeed called to serve, so perhaps ‘in the service of Jesus Christ’ would be a good translation for *in obsequio Jesu Christi*.

Words can change or acquire meaning over time, and in the twelfth century the idea of service gave the word *obsequium* another resonance. By the High Middle Ages, *obsequium* had come to mean the service that a vassal (servant or serf) owed to his lord. It was a legal and technical term of allegiance and vassalage. These words sound a bit old-fashioned in English today, so let’s explore what they meant in the Middle Ages.

The medieval ‘feudal system’

Perhaps you remember from your history lessons at school something about the feudal system, in which the medieval vassal promised service to his master or patron, even at the cost of his own life. The lord commanded his vassal’s complete service and unswerving loyalty. However, the relationship was reciprocal, because in turn the master had to protect his vassal, and if necessary lose his life to defend his servants. The master was certainly the person in authority and control, but although the relationship was not one of equality, it was one in which both parties had an interest. It was a sacred social relationship that had biblical resonances with the idea of ‘the Good Shepherd’ who protected his flock.

This sense of ‘vassalage’ was important to the hermits who had originally come to the Holy Land as crusaders serving Christ the King in an attempt to win back ‘the land that belongs to him’. This view of the world was also important in the way the hermits on Carmel regarded Mary, whom they served, and whom they looked to for protection (on this notion of Mary as *Lady of the Place* see Emanuele Boaga’s excellent book of that title).

In the Middle Ages, this sacred social relationship between the vassal and his lord was formalised in a ceremony dating back to the ninth century, sometimes known as the *Immixito manuum*. In this ceremony, the servant kneeled in front of the master, placing his hands in those of his lord. In this position the servant is submissive, but physically touches the master, and sees him face to face, rather than looking at his back. It is a gesture of both respect and intimacy. Elements of this ceremony are still seen today in ordinations, and in the profession of Carmelites. When a friar, nun, sister, or sometimes a lay person is professed as a Carmelite, they kneel in this way to promise obedience and service, and in return the Order undertakes to protect and nourish him or her. Many registers or certificates of profession are signed by the Provincial or his equivalent with the words *I received this profession into my hands*. The notions of allegiance and service – on both sides – are very important.

Continually returning to the Rule

Perhaps Albert spoke of Carmelites being ‘in allegiance’ to Jesus Christ, because of these notions of duty and protection. Perhaps also because of these cultural resonances, the prior general, Joseph Chalmers, chose to use the phrase ‘in allegiance to Jesus Christ’, rather than ‘in the footsteps of Jesus Christ’, for his collection of talks on Carmelite spirituality. His combined writings with the father general of the Discalced Carmelites were published under the title *In obsequio Jesu Christi*. The two orders of the one Carmelite Family recognise that this phrase really is at the heart of our calling as Carmelites. This is summarised succinctly in the 1995 *Constitutions of the Carmelite Order*:

“To live a life of allegiance to Jesus Christ
and to serve him faithfully
with a pure heart
and a clear conscience”:
these words, inspired by St. Paul,
are the basis for all the elements of our charism;
they are the foundation upon which Albert constructed our way of life.
The particular Palestinian context in which the Order originated,
and the approval bestowed by the Holy See
at the various stages of the Order’s historical evolution,
gave new meaning and inspiration
to the way of life set out in the Rule.

Carmelites live their life of allegiance to Christ
through a commitment to seek the face of the living God
(the contemplative dimension of life),
through fraternity,
and through service (diakonia)
in the midst of the people.

[*Constitutions*, (1995), Section 1, paragraph 14, ‘The Charism of the Order’]

In this paragraph of the *Constitutions* the Order concisely points out the different ways in which the phrase *in obsequio Jesu Christi* can be interpreted:

- as the construction of St. Albert
- as an echo of St. Paul
- as part of a specific historical and geographical context
- as giving new meaning and inspiration to Carmelites of every age

Infinite horizons

In the *Constitutions*, the Order does not restrict us to reading the Rule in only one way. It’s not that either ‘in allegiance’ or ‘in the footsteps’ are right or wrong translations; each has different implications and opens up different nuances. A simple phrase like *in obsequio Jesu Christi* shows that St. Thérèse was right: *a single word opens up infinite horizons*. One word can have many different layers of meaning. If we are not careful we can twist a text to fit whatever interpretation we want it to have. Spiritual reading is an art we have to practise. We must have an open mind and an open heart, so that instead of imposing our own interpretation on a text we let it speak to us, whilst at the same time being sufficiently self-aware to see how our own experiences and insights respond to the text.

Love beyond words

Our first calling as Carmelites is to live in allegiance to Jesus, to follow in his footsteps, to enter into a relationship with him.

Ultimately, our relationship to Christ will be too deep for any word or phrase to express, but St. Paul does write beautifully about his pursuit of Jesus in the *Letter to the Philippians*:

Because of Christ, I have come to consider all these advantages that I had as disadvantages. Not only that, but I believe nothing can happen that will outweigh the supreme advantage of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For him I have accepted the loss of everything, and I look on everything as so much rubbish if only I can have Christ and be given a place in him. I am no longer trying for perfection by my own efforts, the perfection that comes from the Law, but I want only the perfection that comes through faith in Christ, and is from God and based on faith. All I want is to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and to share his sufferings by reproducing the pattern of his death. (Philippians 3:7-11)

A relationship deeper than any other

In order to have this kind of relationship with Jesus, we must get to know him, especially through prayer, in serving him in other people, and in reading the gospels. St. Jerome, another great Father of the Church and Bible scholar said 'ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ'. What a challenge! As Carmelites living in allegiance to Christ, we have to read the gospels more often (and I include myself in that!)

When reading the gospels – the accounts and interpretations of the life of Jesus – it's sometimes helpful to read a new translation, so that the story strikes us afresh. I would recommend a version called *The New Testament: Freshly translated*. It has been produced by a friend of mine, Fr. Nicholas King, a Jesuit priest. Although he is a very clever biblical scholar (Professor of New Testament Studies at Oxford University no less!), his translation would not have given Thérèse a headache. Nick is rooted in human experience as well as scholarship, and when not translating Greek, Aramaic and Latin he can often be found in Lourdes looking after severely disabled pilgrims. Such experiences inform his simple commentary, which can help anyone wishing to study the implications of the gospel more deeply.

Called to allegiance, called to imitation

However you translate the Carmelite Rule or the gospels, they can point us to the Christ, the 'anointed one' whom we follow. We follow him because he has walked on earth like us. We live in allegiance to him, because he cares for us, protects us, touches us, and identifies with us. He is both master and servant. He is the image of God, in whose image we too were made. He is the model of what we are called to be: the perfect integration of the human and the divine. Let us live in allegiance to him!