

## WORKING TOGETHER TO BUILD GOD'S FAMILY

For some months now the Carmelite Family has been celebrating an important anniversary: 800 years of being at the service of the Church and the World. Inspired too by more recent history – the Second Vatican Council – this ancient religious order is looking back to its roots, reconnecting with its founding spirit, so as to be of continued relevance to the modern world.

Most people, if they have heard of Carmelites at all, think of enclosed nuns who devote themselves to prayer. There are, in fact, many different types of Carmelite, men and women in every continent who live very different sorts of lives but who all draw inspiration from the first community of Carmelites who began as a small group of Christian hermits in the Holy Land. Early in the thirteenth century they asked the bishop of Jerusalem, Saint Albert, to write for them a document setting out how they should live. Most of these hermits were not ordained priests but rather were lay people who had consecrated themselves to God, with a special devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Old Testament prophet Elijah.

From this first band of hermits an international order of friars developed in Europe, living in the heart of cities where they could preach God's word to the people and share lives of prayer and active service. To serve the needs of the urban poor the Order produced many priests, although there were always lay men and women who were inspired by their living of the Gospel, and who followed the Carmelite *Rule* in their own homes according to their circumstances. In 1452 these 'lay Carmelites' gained formal recognition from the Pope, as did the enclosed Carmelite nuns. Active Carmelite sisters followed some centuries later.

Today there are thousands of people who describe themselves as Carmelite, living out their calling from God in many different ways. All these different people – hermits, friars, nuns, sisters, and laity – bring something unique and precious to this international family, and as the Carmelites reflect on the challenges and opportunities facing them after 800 years they are working together more closely than ever.

This is particularly the case in Britain, where Carmelites have been present since 1242. Today there are 6 communities of Carmelite friars in the country, as well as 5 communities of friars in the Discalced Carmelite tradition of Saint Teresa of Avila. There are 22 communities of enclosed nuns, and 3 communities of the apostolic Corpus Christi Carmelite Sisters. The largest section of the Carmelite Family in Britain is 'Lay Carmel', which includes those who wear the Brown Scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, and the 60 or so communities of the Third/Secular Order. In addition to these groups there are Carmelite Secular Institutes (known as *The Leaven* and *Notre Dame de Vie*), Carmelite solitaries, Carmelites of Mary Immaculate, Carmelite Missionary Sisters, and other groups inspired by the Carmelite tradition such as the Community of Our Lady of Walsingham.

A religious order can only survive for 800 years if it constantly reads the signs of the times and ponders in every age what God is asking of its members. As Carmelites reflect on the origins of their family on Mount Carmel, they are realising afresh an important truth about the nature of Carmelite identity. The Carmelite *Rule* makes it clear that every member of the first hermit community was to undertake work of some

kind so as to contribute to the mission and well-being of the whole group. The community chose its own leaders, and it was their role not to keep power for themselves but to delegate tasks and enable others to flourish. This radical model of a praying community at the service of all people, itself based on the vision of the early Church in the *Acts of the Apostles*, is what informs Carmelite life to this day. The Carmelite way of life encourages collaboration and the sharing of responsibilities.

Earlier this year the Carmelite Family came together to reflect upon its past and its future during a Provincial Chapter, held at Aylesford Priory in Kent. Until recently such a meeting would have involved only the friars of the Order, but the growing sense of family and shared mission meant that this year, for the second time, other branches of 'Carmel' were represented. Two sessions of the Chapter were devoted to reflecting upon future collaboration between Carmelite religious and lay people. It was an exciting opportunity for Carmelites to work together and the discussion was animated and enthusiastic.

Since Vatican II the notion of *collaborative ministry* has grown significantly within dioceses, parishes and religious orders. Simply put, collaborative ministry means clergy, religious and lay people working together, each person contributing their unique gifts rather than relying on one person or group to run every aspect of life in a church community.

In some respects the Carmelites and other religious orders (notably the Jesuits, Benedictines, Congregation of Jesus, and others) are leading the Church in the complex and sometimes delicate area of collaborative ministry. At times it has been difficult because so many church-goers are used to relying on priests and deacons to administer parishes and communities, and sharing responsibility can leave some people worried that priesthood is being undermined. However, as people get used to the idea it becomes clear that collaboration is not about undermining the ordained ministry but rather about realising that all Christians have a vocation to holiness, and all Christ's followers have a priestly ministry to live out.

For decades lay people have been working alongside Carmelite religious in running retreat centres, shrines, counselling services, schools, parishes, nursing homes, publishing houses, chaplaincies and other apostolates. Increasingly these lay people are not simply carrying out tasks at the instruction of religious brothers and sisters but are involved in decision-making, sharing responsibility and accountability for a wide variety of important ministries that build up God's reign on Earth.

During the Provincial Chapter at Aylesford, Carmelites pondered how perhaps the model of religious life encourages collaboration; many lay people are attracted to the monastic and mendicant orders because they are not overly clerical or hierarchical, but rather acknowledge the input and voice of all within the community. Instead of being possessive of their traditions most religious communities are keen to share their experience of God with others.

The discussions at Aylesford were therefore open, honest and optimistic. It is certainly true that in the early years of collaborative ministry some lay people 'overstepped their mark' and were put forward for ministries they were unsuited to, which in some cases made bishops, priests and religious nervous of handing over

responsibility to other people in matters of liturgy, finance, pastoral work and so on. Some wounds still exist between various sections of the Church, and trust is important for collaborative ministry to work. Power and possessiveness can be significant dynamics across all sections of the Church, and dialogue and trust are vital for effective collaboration.

The lay people and female religious attending the Carmelite Chapter encouraged the friars who have care of parishes and pilgrimage centres in Britain to continue seeking lay input in their ministry and worship. All those present acknowledged that for effective ministry lay people and religious need to have discernment, support, and affirmation. Professional development as well as better initial and ongoing formation for all branches of the Carmelite Family have given people confidence in their vocation and ministry.

During the Chapter the Carmelites gave particular thought to the situation of lay people employed by the Order's British Province. There is great variety in this area, from employees given very specific tasks in a particular house, to others with a wider brief whose work is not simply a job but also a vocation and a ministry.

For example, in 2005 the Province employed for the first time a lay person to work with the communities of Lay Carmelites across Britain. Until then a friar had undertaken this role, giving instruction and encouragement to laity following the Carmelite way of life. Now a married man from Birmingham is employed to visit and support the communities across England, Wales and Scotland. Additionally a layman in the north of England is employed by the friars to promote the heritage and spirituality of the Order through publishing, academic research, and organising pilgrimages. A lay woman in London is charged by the friars with raising awareness within the Order of issues of justice, peace, and the integrity of creation. Many Carmelites, both lay and religious, work in partnership with organisations such as CAFOD and Pax Christi. The forthcoming visit of the relics of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux to Britain will involve input from all sections of the Carmelite Family working together, using the skills and experience of all.

It is now also common in Britain to find lay people who promote the spirituality and heritage of the Carmelites by teaching, writing, public speaking, and broadcasting. Friars and sisters continue to work in these ministries, but they now collaborate more closely than ever before with lay colleagues. The friars have been very generous in giving laypeople the resources and training they need for their ministry, and lay members of the Order have been likewise generous in contributing their resources.

In the case of the British Carmelites, such collaboration is not simply a question of lay people 'filling in the gaps' because of declining numbers of friars and sisters; indeed, the British Province of Carmelites has been blessed with a steady number of young men entering the novitiate in recent years. Rather, the friars have come to see the particular gifts that lay people bring to spreading the Good News, especially women and young people who can often seem to be on the margins of the Church. Lay people sometimes also have easier access than friars to certain sections of society, opening up new paths in the areas of ecumenism, interfaith encounter, and reaching out to the unchurched.

One of the most exciting developments for the Carmelite Family in the twenty-first century has been the growth of Spirituality Groups. These are communities which meet regularly in a friendly and informal way to discuss topics of Carmelite spirituality, pray together with the Bible (*Lectio Divina*), and share social time. Although various sorts of Carmelite communities have existed for centuries, these Spirituality Groups are new in that they bring together in the one place different expressions of the Carmelite vocation – lay people and religious – along with anyone who is interested in the Order’s charism, regardless of their background. Carmelite Spirituality Groups in York, London, and elsewhere attract people from every way of life, every race and culture, and every Christian denomination. The Order believes that such communities will be important places for Carmelites to collaborate in the future.

The average lifespan of a religious order is 200 years. The fact that the Carmelite Family has surpassed that fourfold is testimony to its ability to adapt and be open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. It would seem that the future of the Order lies in the hands of its members, religious and lay, working together to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ.

For more information about the Carmelites please visit:

[www.carmelite.org](http://www.carmelite.org)

[www.laycarmel.org](http://www.laycarmel.org)

[www.carmelite.org.uk](http://www.carmelite.org.uk)

[www.carmeliteforum.org](http://www.carmeliteforum.org)

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As Prior General of the Carmelite Order, Most Rev. Fernando Millán Romeral – pictured here with Pope Benedict XVI – is a figurehead for the Carmelite Family.



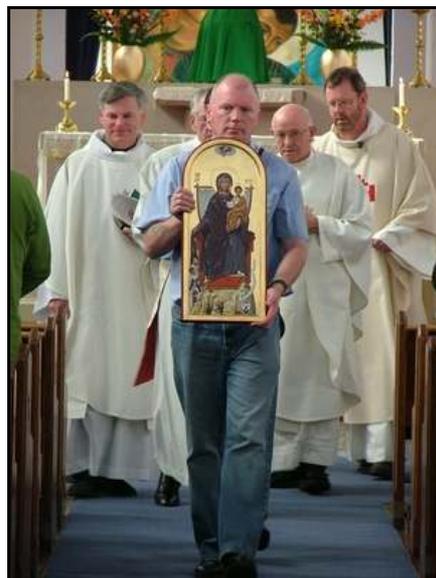
Professed lay members of the Carmelite Family gathered in Rome from all parts of the world in 2006 to reflect upon ways to work together.



Last year representatives of different branches of the Carmelite Family gathered in Rome for a General Chapter of the Order. It was the first time a General Chapter had formally involved non-friars.



Collaborative service: friars and young people associated with the Order work closely in offering care to sick and disabled pilgrims in Lourdes.



Lay Carmelites join with friars and sisters in organising liturgies and days of prayer.



Carmelites of every branch in Britain gathered in York Minster recently to celebrate 800 years of their shared way of life.



Helping hands: Carmelite friars, nuns and lay people work together to build up a religious family that strives to be (in the words of Saint Thérèse) 'love in the heart of the Church'.



Two sisters in Carmel: one is an enclosed nun, the other is a married teacher, but both are inspired by the same Carmelite vision of living in allegiance to Jesus Christ.



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