

EMBRACING HIS GOSPEL: THE CARMELITE COMMUNITY IN FAITH, HOPE AND CHARITY

Introduction

In between the General Chapters of the Order held every six years, Carmelite friars gather for an international meeting known as the Council of Provinces. In September 2009 the Council of Provinces took place in the Italian town of San Felice, and the theme was looking at the community dimension of the Carmelite charism. To help communities of the Order to prepare for this event, a document was circulated entitled *Embracing his Gospel: The Carmelite Community in Faith, Hope and Charity*. This document enabled friars to gather for periods of reflection, discussion and prayer. Though written for friars, *Embracing his Gospel* contains a wealth of material that is relevant to other branches of the Carmelite Family, including the Third Order, and therefore the reflections have been adapted slightly for Lay Carmelites by Johan Bergström-Allen, T.O.C.. You can read and reflect on the document on your own, but since it is about how we live together in Carmel as brothers and sisters, it would be specially useful for reflection and ongoing formation in Lay Carmelite communities.

Life in community

As stated above, the theme of the 2009 Council of Provinces was “Embracing his Gospel: The Carmelite Community in Faith, Hope and Charity.” These words have their roots in our Carmelite *Rule of Saint Albert* and find their formulation in two chapters of the 1995 *Constitutions of the Carmelite Order*:

§ 2 Living in allegiance to Jesus Christ, and embracing his Gospel as the supreme norm of our lives, by the power of his Spirit who distributes his gifts to each according to his will, we seek to live together in mutual service of one another and of all people. In this way, we co-operate in God’s plan to gather all men and women into one Holy People.

§ 32 All of our activities outside the house [friar community] shall be closely related to our life within the house, and shall form with it a seamless whole. It is the very purpose of houses of apostolic Brotherhood to be present among the people: to be open and closely joined with them, stimulating a critical reflection on their human needs. In this way, our communities will be authentic **expressions of faith, hope and charity**, and will become places conducive to full human development.

The four reflections we are going to consider

Fraternity or ‘community’ is the core of Christian life; it is the starting point and the finishing point. It is the fruit coming from the root that is constituted by the experience of God as Father. Community life is the blood running through the veins of our Carmelite *Rule of Saint Albert*. Community makes the Interior Man (2 *Corinthians* 4:16; *Ephesians* 3:16), and the New Man (*Ephesians* 4:16; *Colossians* 3:10) grow inside us. Living as brothers and sisters in a community helps us to “live in allegiance to Jesus Christ” (*Rule 2*), in the prophetic and praying fraternity of Carmel.

Over the course of these four reflections on community, we can only look at a few aspects of Carmelite fraternity, but many more could be closely investigated (anyone interested in looking at how community is presented in the Carmelite *Rule* could read further in the studies of the following Carmelites: Carlo Cicconetti, Kees Waayman, Carlos Mesters, Bruno Secondin, Emanuele Boaga, Otger Steggink, Jo Tigcheler).

Four reflections cannot sufficiently describe the richness of Carmelite community. The text offered below is only a friendly invitation so that each Carmelite individual and community may deepen and expand their fraternal life. May the sharing that comes from these reflections show and irradiate the richness of brotherhood and sisterhood lived in our communities in Asia, Australia, Oceania, Africa, America and Europe. May the experience of diversity increase within us the will to be united in a common path: prophetic and praying communities in the midst of God's people.

We shall look at four topics:

1. Carmel: a praying community that lives the Gospel according to the Carmelite charism.
2. Carmel: forming community that lives in faith.
3. Carmel: fraternal community that lives in love.
4. Carmel: prophetic community that lives in hope.

As we look at each of these topics, we shall consider the following:

1. The "Challenge of Today": being aware of the context we live in, and what makes our life as brothers and sisters in Carmel difficult.
2. A teaching from the *Rule of Saint Albert* regarding some aspects of Carmelite community life.
3. A biblical text or a reflection starting from the Bible that can enlighten and deepen our understanding of community.
4. In-depth analysis and sharing of ideas in the community (if you are able).
5. A commitment starting from the "Challenge of Today" and a concluding prayer.

You might find it helpful to have a copy of the *Rule of Saint Albert* and the Bible to hand.

Let's now begin the first reflection...

1st REFLECTION

Carmel: a praying community that lives the Gospel according to the Carmelite charism

“I am not a person. I am a fragment of a person. The person is the community.
The more I live in the community, the more I become a person.”
(An anonymous peasant philosopher)

1. The Challenge of Today

Fraternal life – living as a community of brothers and sisters – is our major challenge today. How can we create a communion among different people? In some parts of today’s world neo-liberal consumerism pervades everything; it invades even the religious life, the wider Carmelite family, and threatens the very root of fraternal living. In some circumstances it is individualism that destroys our sense of being sisters and brothers of one another. In other cases, it is activism and excessive work. In some cases, it is extreme poverty. In other cases, it is the indifference of those who have already “made themselves comfortable”, or it is old age without expectations.

- * *Here in our community, what is the greatest difficulty to live fraternal life as Lay Carmelite brothers and sisters in a good way?*
- * *What are we doing practically to be fraternal communities?*

2. What the Rule of Saint Albert says about our community life

The Context of our Origins

From the earliest days of the Order, Carmelites have been mendicants, that is, begging brothers. One of the novel things about the mendicant lifestyle was that it was a fraternal – brotherly – lifestyle, which was lived in small communities or brotherhoods in the midst of the people. In the Middle Ages mendicant friars brought the revelation of the Good News of God’s love to the “little ones”, to the poor. The Franciscans emphasised the value of poverty. The Dominicans insisted on preaching sound Christian doctrine. The Mercedarian brothers promoted the liberation of prisoners. Each mendicant group, according to their charism – their particular gift from God – did their best to do a specific service for the people of God. The particular service that Carmelite fraternities tried to offer the people was prayer: *contemplatione aliis tradere* (to contemplate and to give to others the fruits of contemplation). The Carmelites formed prophetic and praying communities in the midst of the people.

The Text of our Rule of Saint Albert

In several ways the *Rule of Saint Albert* encourages a communal sense of being brothers and sisters: the root of community is the celebration of the Eucharist as an offering of ourselves to others (*Rule 14*); saying the Divine Office together helps build the fraternal feeling of being united in the presence of God the Father (*Rule 11*); taking meals together (*Rule 7*); sharing the goods of the community (*Rule 12*) and working together for what is required (*Rule 20*) promote community life. According to the *Rule*, the Carmelite community has to be a brotherhood that fights (*Rule 8-19*), works (*Rule 20*) and lets the strength of God’s silence emerge (*Rule 21*). Such a strength can emerge through personal prayer (*Rule 10*), through communal prayer (*Rule 11*), through the choice for the poor (*Rule 12-13*), through daily Mass (*Rule 14*), and through a weekly review of how the community is and the loving correction of each other’s faults (*Rule 15*). Community, lived in such a way, becomes a preaching of the Good News of God to everybody, especially towards the poor. Building community – a sense of being sisters and brothers – is not another task to be added to our other commitments; it is instead an attitude of how we live that has to permeate everything. For us Carmelites, community is as important as “pondering the Lord’s law day and night” (*Rule 10*). Just

as God is a constant presence in our life, so the brother or sister has to be a constant presence. The exercise of fraternity comes from the experience of God as Father and leads to a deeper experience of God.

3. Pondering the Scriptures: The *Rule* invites us to imitate the fraternity of the first Christians
Chapters 10 to 15 of the *Rule of Saint Albert* describe the ‘nucleus’, the essence of Carmelite life, the ideal of the prophetic and praying community. When he described this central part of our *Formula Vitae (Way of Life)*, Saint Albert had in mind the model of the community of the first Christians in Jerusalem, as it appears in the *Acts of Apostles*. Let’s read that Biblical description of the first Christian community as we find it in two passages in the New Testament:

These remained faithful to the teaching of the apostles, to the brotherhood, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers. And everyone was filled with awe; the apostles worked many signs and miracles. And all who shared the faith owned everything in common; they sold their goods and possessions and distributed the proceeds among themselves according to what each one needed. Each day, with one heart, they regularly went to the Temple but met in their houses for the breaking of bread; they shared their food gladly and generously; they praised God and were looked up to by everyone. Day by day the Lord added to their community those destined to be saved. (*Acts 2:42-27*)

The whole group of believers was united, heart and soul; no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, as everything they owned was held in common. The apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus with great power, and they were all accorded great respect. None of their members was ever in want, as all those who owned land or houses would sell them, and bring the money from the sale of them, to present it to the apostles; it was then distributed to any who might be in need. (*Acts 4:32-35*)

When we compare the description of the community of the first Christians in the *Acts of Apostles* with the ideal of community expressed by Saint Albert in his *Rule* (Chapters 10-15), we can see a number of similarities:

The first Christian community in *Acts*

- prayed regularly (2:42; 4:24)
- went regularly to the Temple (2:46-47)
- held everything in common (2:42, 44; 4:32, 34-35)
- broke the bread in their houses (2:42, 46)
- were united, heart and soul (4:32; 1:14)

The Carmelite community in the *Rule*

- personal prayer and vigilance (10)
- prayed the Liturgy in common (11)
- put goods to common use (12 & 13)
- celebrated Mass daily (14)
- reviewed the state of community (15)

These five points, that determined the communal life of the first Christians, also form the basis of community as it should be lived by the Carmelites.

1. Fraternity must be nourished by the Word of God and by the regular prayer of each member: this requires prayerful reading and ongoing meditation (*Rule 10*).
2. Fraternity must have its communal expression: liturgical prayer or communal celebration of the Word of God (*Rule 11*).

3. Fraternity must be lived out economically, through holding everything in common, through a substantial equality, and through poverty that leads us to remain alongside the “little ones” (the poor) (*Rule* 12 and 13).
4. Fraternity must find its nourishment in the Eucharist, which is our participation in the Death and in the Resurrection of Christ: a radical gift of oneself to God and to the brothers and sisters alongside whom we worship (*Rule* 14).
5. Fraternity becomes deeper and stronger through the weekly review of the community’s affairs (the local chapter or meeting), that promotes the co-responsibility of everybody in the general organization and the welfare of each of the members (*Rule* 15).

Such an ideal of a **prophetic and praying fraternity in the midst of the people**, specific to the Carmelites, is ritualized in the whole of our *Rule* as follows:

The Rule Chapters 4 to 9 deals with the infrastructure of life. Saint Albert sets out things that ensure a space for Carmelites to live together; he points out the conditions necessary for Carmelite life, and sets out the required infrastructure.

The Rule Chapters 10 to 15 deals with the ideal to be achieved. Albert describes the Carmelite ideal as the imitation of the first Christian community in Jerusalem.

The Rule Chapters 16 to 21 deals with the means to achieve the ideal. Albert, drawing on the richness of the monastic tradition, considers how the community is to find the means necessary to achieve the ideal of imitating the Jerusalem community.

4. In-depth analysis and sharing of ideas

We began our reflection by looking at the challenges facing us today as we try to live together as Carmelite brothers and sisters in community. We then looked at what the *Rule of Saint Albert* has to say about Carmelite community life, and how that was itself based on the model of Christian community described in the *Acts of the Apostles*. Now let’s spend some time reflecting upon this material and our own experiences, insights and reactions. You can do this on your own, as well as with your Carmelite community.

1. First, spend a moment in silence. Be aware that you are in God’s presence.
2. Here are some questions that might help you analyse and reflect on the above material in more depth, and to share your thoughts and feelings:
 - * What particularly drew your attention during this reflection about Carmelite community life? Why?
 - * How does our community live the five aspects of the ideal of fraternity proposed by the *Rule of Saint Albert*? Namely: personal prayer; common liturgical prayer; sharing goods in common; celebrating Mass regularly; reviewing the state of the community?
 - * How could our community contribute to achieving a sense of being brothers and sisters in Carmel, both in our Province and in the wider Carmelite family: friars, enclosed nuns, active sisters, hermits and solitaries, laymen and laywomen?

5. Commitment and prayer

We've reflected on Carmel as a praying community that lives the Gospel according to the Carmelite charism. Now is the time to consider making some form of practical commitment to help build up the Carmelite community, as well as praying for a deeper sense of shared brotherhood and sisterhood. Here are some suggestions (you might have others):

- * Go back to the first section on "The Challenge of Today". Formulate a commitment – either individually or as a community – that is practical, possible, and achievable.
- * Offer some spontaneous prayers to God.
- * Reflect (perhaps as a form of *Lectio Divina*) on Psalm 24 (23) "Who shall go up to the mountain of the Lord?"

In the next reflection we shall consider the topic of "Forming community that lives in faith".

2nd REFLECTION

Carmel: Forming Community that Lives in Faith

Reminder of the previous reflection

The first reflection was *Carmel: a praying community that lives the Gospel according to the Carmelite charism*. It began by looking at the challenging of building community today: how do we create a sense of brotherhood and sisterhood when our sense of community can be undermined by consumerism, individualism, activism, poverty, old age, or indifference? The text went on to consider what the *Rule of Saint Albert* says about our community life, such as praying together, eating common meals, sharing goods, working together, and discussing the welfare of the community. It was pointed out the *Rule* invites Carmelites to imitate the fraternity of the first Christians that we read about in *Acts of the Apostles* (2:24-27; 4:32-35). This model inspires Carmelites to form prophetic and praying communities in the midst of the people. The text then provided some questions for reflection, on your own or in a group, and concluded with some suggestions for prayer and practical commitment.

Overview of the second reflection

In this second reflection we shall consider the topic of “Forming community that lives in faith”. Again, we will approach this topic in five sections:

1. The “Challenge of Today”: being aware of the context we live in, and what makes our life as brothers and sisters in Carmel difficult.
2. A teaching from the *Rule of Saint Albert* regarding some aspects of Carmelite community life.
3. A biblical text or a reflection starting from the Bible that can enlighten and deepen our understanding of community.
4. In-depth analysis and sharing of ideas in the community (if you are able).
5. A commitment starting from the “Challenge of Today” and a concluding prayer.

You might find it helpful to have a copy of the *Rule of Saint Albert* and the Bible to hand. So, let’s begin...

“Faith must be your shield on all occasions,
and with it you will be able to quench
all the flaming missiles of the wicked one:
there can be no pleasing God without faith” (*Rule of Saint Albert* 19)

Obedience corrects and purifies the relationship with God

1. The Challenge of today

The historian Fr. Emanuele Boaga, O.Carm., tells us that in less than seventy years from when the Carmelites began leaving Mount Carmel, that is from 1238 to 1300, the Carmelites had founded more than 150 communities all over Europe. Their way of living the charism – their particular way of life given by God – appealed to young people.

In the twentieth century in Europe there were many vocations to the religious life, and it was possible to send lots of Carmelites to Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Nowadays, in Europe vocations to religious life seem to be disappearing. Many young people look for a meaning to their life in community, but our way of living community does not seem attractive to them. A similar situation exists for many Lay Carmelite communities.

In Asia, Africa and Latin America vocations to religious life are increasing, but even within this context fraternal life is a big challenge. The laicizing process and increasing social disparity seem to suggest that religious life – or a community based on faith – is an unreal and unrealisable dream. It does not appeal.

* Exchange ideas about this issue. What do you think? Do you agree?

* Why do you think that our Carmelite communities – lay or religious – might not be sending an attractive appeal that could fascinate the youth of today? What could change in the way we are organised and in our institutional structures?

2. What the *Rule of Saint Albert* affirms about the Community of faith

The Context of our Origins

The first requirement of the *Rule of Saint Albert* is not about prayer, or about the prayerful reading of the Bible, nor does it deal with the Sacraments; rather, it deals with the choice of a *Prior*, to whom *each of the others must promise obedience, and also chastity and the renunciation of ownership*. Why is the choice of the Prior, or community leader, so important that it should be the first requirement of our *Rule*?

At that time of the thirteenth century, the superior in large monasteries was an **Abbot**. An abbot was elected to be the superior for life (*ad vitam* as they called it). Sometimes, he was appointed by the bishop. Among the Carmelites, the superior was not an abbot, nor was he appointed by the bishop, but he was and still is a **Prior**, that is, one chosen among the Carmelites, elected by all of us, not for ever, but only for a few years. The *Rule* clearly states that communities should be led by ‘one of yourselves, who is to be chosen for the office by common consent’ (*Rule 4*).

The institution of the prior changed the style of relationship between people inside the community. It introduced a democratic element in the organisation of community life, and prevented the superior from feeling that his power was something due to him personally. The one who is elected for three or six years knows that he or she is ‘one of yourselves chosen by common consent’ (*Rule 4*) and that after a few years, he or she will be a subject again, equal to the others.

The Text of the *Rule*

In the *Rule of Saint Albert*, the prior has the following characteristics:

1. He is elected by all the others or by the majority of the brothers and he receives their obedience (*Rule 4* and *23*).
2. Together with the brothers he decides where to stay (*Rule 5*).
3. Together with the brothers he makes sure that each brother has his own cell (*Rule 6*).
4. He authorizes any exchanges of dwelling place (*Rule 8*).
5. He receives visitors at the entrance of the dwelling place to direct and guide them (*Rule 9*).
6. He appoints one brother to take care of distributing the goods according to the needs of the brethren (*Rule 12*).

What catches our attention is that the prior is almost never alone when he exercises his authority, but he always does it together with other brothers (he is elected *unanimously or by the majority*, he decides *together with the brothers*). It is a participatory way of exercising authority that involves all the members of the community and creates a sense of co-responsibility. For the Carmelites, the exercise of authority promotes community life and not the reinforcement of authority itself.

Obedience, promised to the Prior as the representative of Christ (*Rule 23*) and of the Community, refers to each brother's commitment to 'live in allegiance to Jesus Christ' (*Rule 2*), following the orientation indicated in the *Rule*. This implies that a Carmelite has to live the ideal of the *Rule* in the community. In this way, the community becomes a forming community, a natural space for the initial and permanent formation of all its members. Obedience does not mean that the person has to lose or waive his (or her) will; on the contrary, it means that we have to activate our will at the maximum level, until it totally complies with God's will. In this way, the Carmelite imitates Jesus, who affirmed: 'I do nothing of my own accord. What I say is what the Father has taught me. I always do what pleases him.' (*John 8:28-29*).

3. Pondering Scripture: 'Living in allegiance to Jesus Christ', imitating Jesus' obedience to the Father

Meditating on Scripture can help us better understand how we can practice obedience, doing the will of God.

Doing the will of the Father and completing his work was the centre of Jesus' life. It was his daily food (*John 4:34*). We read in the *Letter to the Hebrews* that 'On coming into the world, Christ said: "Here I am, I am coming to do your will, God".' (*Hebrews 10:5-7*). On leaving the world Christ said: 'It is fulfilled!' (*John 19:30*). Jesus fought to be faithful to the Father. He had to pray a lot to be able to win (*Hebrews 5:7; Luke 22:41-46*). But he won. 'He was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross.' (*Philippians 2:8*).

Jesus specified: 'By myself I can do nothing; I can judge only as I am told to judge' (*John 5:30*). Where and how did Jesus listen to what the Father wanted him to do? Jesus discovered the will of the Father in the Sacred Scriptures (*Luke 4:18*). There he found the answer against temptations that tried to divert him from the path of the Father (*Luke 4:4, 8, 12*). He found the will of the Father in the people and in their state of mind. When Jesus heard the answer of the Canaanite woman, he changed his mind and said: 'Woman, you have great faith! Let your desire be granted.' (*Matthew 15:28*). He found the will of the Father in prayer (*Luke 5:16; 6:12; 9:18, 28-29; 11:1*). In the Garden of Olives, he prayed and faced a fight. The angel came and helped him to see it through. Jesus sweated blood, but he found peace in the total handover of himself to the Father (*Luke 22:43-44*). He won by his praying. The communion between Jesus and the Father, resulting from such a total obedience, was so perfect that they identified with one another. When we obey someone, we do not speak for ourselves, but on behalf of the one we obey. Obedience made Jesus become totally transparent. Through obedience he emptied himself and let the Father take care of everything. For this reason, everything Jesus fulfilled was by revelation of the Father: 'Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father' (*John 14:9; cf. 10:30; 17:10; 12:45*). This loyalty to the Father was the well from which Jesus drank: 'I do nothing of my own accord. What I say is what the Father has taught me.' (*John 8:28*). First of all, the Good News that Jesus announced was not a doctrine to be learned by heart, nor a discipline to be imposed, or a culture to be exported, or a new idea to be taught, but it was and still is, first of all, the face of the Father to be revealed to the people, especially to the poor, through a radical obedience to him!

The obedience of Jesus was not a mere observation of discipline, but it was a prophetic obedience. Through his obedience, the voice of Jesus was the voice of the Father. For his obedience to the Father Jesus contravened human traditions and criticized them. Obedience only makes sense when it represents a revelation of the Father! Jesus left a considerable testimony in this sense when he said: 'I shall not talk to you much longer, because the prince of this world is on his way. He has no power over me, but the world must recognise that I love the Father and that I act just as the Father commanded. Come now, let us go.' (*John 14:30-31*). He stood up and went to the Garden of Olives, where he was arrested. Jesus' passion started there and it finished with his death on the cross. The answer of the Father to the obedience of Jesus was his resurrection (*Hebrews 4:7; Philippians 2:9*).

4. In-depth analysis and sharing of ideas

We began this reflection by looking at the challenges facing Carmelite community life today, and the decline in vocations, particularly to the religious life, considering what might have to change if we are to attract younger people to Carmel. We then looked at what the *Rule of Saint Albert* has to say about Carmelite community life, particularly the role of the prior. This led on to a pondering of Scripture, especially the way in which Jesus was totally obedient to his Father. Now let's spend some time reflecting upon this material and our own experiences, insights and reactions. You can do this on your own, as well as with your Carmelite community.

1. First, spend a moment in silence. Be aware that you are in God's presence.
2. Here are some questions that might help you analyse and reflect on the above material in more depth, and to share your thoughts and feelings:
 - * How do you live this ideal of brother/sisterhood that obeys, as witnessed in the life of Jesus and proposed by our *Rule of Saint Albert*?
 - * How does our community live out and make manifest the relationship between the prior (leader) and the members of the community as envisaged by the *Rule of Saint Albert*?
 - * We often speak of our desire to know and discern what God is asking of us as members of the Carmelite Family today. How does the situation of the people amongst whom we live inform how we obey God's call? How does God call to us through those around us and their reality, and how does our service of them show that we listen to God and obey?

5. Commitment and prayer

We've reflected on Carmel as a community that lives in faith, that is formed in a particular way set out by the *Rule of Saint Albert*, and which manifests our obedience to God's will. The Carmelite notion of community is a reality to strive for and now is the time to consider making some form of practical commitment to help build up the Carmelite community, as well as praying for a deeper sense of shared brotherhood and sisterhood. Here are some suggestions (you might have others):

- * Go back to the first section on "The Challenge of Today". Formulate a commitment – either individually or as a community – that is practical, possible, and achievable.
- * Offer some spontaneous prayers to God.
- * Reflect (perhaps as a form of *Lectio Divina*) on Psalm 40 (39) 'Here I am; in the scroll of the book it is written of me. I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.'

In the next reflection we shall consider the topic of "Carmel: fraternal community that lives in love".

3rd REFLECTION

Carmel: Forming Community that Lives in Love

Reminder of the previous reflections

The first reflection was *Carmel: a praying community that lives the Gospel according to the Carmelite charism*, which reflected on the challenge of building a sense of brotherhood and sisterhood in today's fractured world, proposing that we return to the *Rule of Saint Albert* and its vision of community derived from the *Acts of the Apostles*.

In the second reflection we looked at the idea of *Carmel: forming community that lives in faith*. This reflection began by considering honestly the decline in vocations to the religious life, which has implications for Lay Carmel as well. The text went on to consider the Carmelite understanding of community as set out in the *Rule of Saint Albert*, and the role of the Prior as a leader who is chosen by the consent of the community and who acts consultatively. To understand better the notion of obedience to the prior, the reflection turned to the Bible to see how Jesus was totally obedient to his Father. This paved the way for some questions designed to aid individual and group reflection, and the text concluded with some suggestions for prayer and practical commitment.

Overview of the third reflection

In this third reflection we shall consider the topic of "Forming a fraternal community that lives in love". Again, we will approach this topic in five sections:

1. The "Challenge of Today": being aware of the context we live in, the reality in which we build community as brothers and sisters in Carmel.
2. A teaching from the *Rule of Saint Albert* regarding some aspects of Carmelite community life.
3. A biblical text or a reflection starting from the Bible that can enlighten and deepen our understanding of community.
4. In-depth analysis and sharing of ideas in the community (if you are able).
5. A commitment starting from the "Challenge of Today" and a concluding prayer.

Again, you might find it helpful to have a copy of the *Rule of Saint Albert* and the Bible to hand. So, let's begin...

"Put on holiness as your breastplate,
and it will enable you to love the Lord your God
with all your heart and soul and strength,
and your neighbour as yourself. (*Rule* 19)

Chastity corrects and purifies interpersonal relationships.

1. The Challenge of today

A big challenge to living as a united community today is the matter of disinterested love. These days "love" is a word used to indicate almost anything. It is even used to sell commercial products. But which love? Nowadays there is an idea of love that debases and limits to eroticism any sort of efforts at living together. But does this promote real love?

* Exchange ideas about this issue.

* What are we doing in our community to spread real love?

2. What the *Rule of Saint Albert* says about the community and about living love

The Context of our Origins

The *Rule of Saint Albert* recommends that every week the members of the Carmelite community should come together to review their life as brothers (and we could say today also sisters): ‘On Sundays too, or other days if necessary, you should discuss matters of discipline and your spiritual welfare; and on this occasion the indiscretions and failings of the brothers [and sisters], if any be found at fault, should be lovingly corrected.’ (*Rule 15*).

This community review was one of the characteristics of the mendicant orders’ way of life. In large medieval monasteries there was the practice of *collatio*. Every week the Abbot gathered the community together and made an exposition (*collatio*) in which he presented to his subjects his thoughts and instructed them both on the spiritual path and on the traditions of the monastery life. Many of these thoughts and teachings have been preserved in books of *collations*; the *Collationes* of Cassian, for example, contain great richness. In them we find the spirituality that animated the life of the monks. Much of the material in chapters 16 to 21 of our *Rule of Saint Albert* comes from the *collationes*.

However, the Carmelite *Rule* does not impose the *collatio* in its monastic form. Instead of one abbot instructing and correcting the community, the Carmelite model is that all should participate in the weekly community review, with every member able to discuss the problems in the community and their solutions. In this difference we can see that the first Carmelites were not simply monastic but were adopting a new style of religious life. By practicing the weekly review, they acquired more and more the distinctive character of the mendicant movement, and in this way they became *prophetic and praying fraternities in the midst of the people*.

The Text of the Rule

Let’s read again Chapter 15 of the *Rule of Saint Albert*:

On Sundays too, or other days if necessary, you should discuss matters of discipline and your spiritual welfare; and on this occasion the indiscretions and failings of the brothers, if any be found at fault, should be lovingly corrected.

The original Latin text of the *Rule of Saint Albert* contains some important phrases for us to consider.

The Latin term *custodia ordinis* means ‘care of the order’. Every six years the Carmelite friars hold a General Chapter, with representatives coming from every place where the brothers have a presence to discuss the status of the Order. The Carmelite nuns and congregations of apostolic sisters also have such gatherings, and periodically members of the Third Order gather in their own Provinces and internationally. Every three years the friars of each Province hold a Provincial Chapter.

In addition to these gatherings at provincial and international levels, the *Rule of Saint Albert* would suggest that Carmelite religious should gather every week, preferably on Sundays, to hold a Local Chapter. In the Local Chapter or Weekly Review, Carmelite religious have to take care of the observance of the Order (*custodia ordinis*). This does not refer to the Carmelite Order in its whole, or to order in the meaning of discipline, but to the order and the organisation of life in the local community. Once a week, the brothers have to gather to verify if they are living according to the aim of the *Rule*. This task is not given to the superior, but to all the brothers. It is the whole community that has responsibility for this. Lay Carmelite communities must also consider how

often they are required to meet to discuss the welfare of the group in the spirit of the *Rule of Saint Albert*.

The Latin phrase *animarum salute* means ‘the well-being of the people’. This expression is not to be interpreted as ‘the salvation of souls’ in the sense of an apostolate to others; rather, it means the well-being (*salute*) of the people (*animarum*). During the community review we have to take care not only of fraternity in general as the community’s witness to the outside world, but we also have to look inwards at our own sense of community, towards each brother or sister, so that reciprocal relationships may become deeper and more transparent. Practicing the community review (*care of the order*) makes Carmelite brothers and sisters engage in a process in which everybody takes responsibility towards all and towards one another. It increases our conscious awareness of equality and co-responsibility!

The Latin phrase *caritate media* means ‘fraternal correction’. Inevitably, because of our humanity, our defects are revealed when we review together our community life. The gathered community must try to take care and correct these defects, but lovingly. The text indicates *caritate media*, and *caritate* means ‘charity’ or ‘love’. Charity must be **the tool** used to correct these defects. *Media* means ‘in the middle’ or ‘in the midst’, so this phrase can also mean that charity, love, must be present **in the midst** of the brothers (and sisters) gathering together. Love must be at the centre of everything and it must be the criterion by which the community restores any balance lost by the brotherhood. For this reason, the community review must preferably be done on Sunday. Why Sunday? Because Sunday is the day when fasting is not observed (*Rule 16*), and the day when we commemorate the Resurrection of Jesus, the reconciler. The community review should take place on Sunday because on that day it is less likely to disintegrate into an uncivilised group therapy session, full of accusations and counterclaims; on Sunday the community review must be cheerful and full of Paschal joy.

When reflecting about Carmel as a *Community that lives Love* it is appropriate too to talk about the evangelical counsel of chastity. Carmelite religious undertake to live in chastity as part of their vows, and Carmelite tertiaries likewise promise to live a life of chastity according to their state in life. Chastity must be lived according to the condition of life that a person has chosen: as a married person or as an unmarried person. For those who choose a religious life, chastity means not to get married ‘for the sake of the kingdom of Heaven’ (*Matthew 19:12*). For everybody else it means living the fullness of love. Living the vow of chastity helps the Carmelite friar to become available to God and to his brothers and, in doing so, to be a sign of the future God offers to all of us. It does not mean that the unmarried person must be frustrated or full of complexes, as if he was not fully human. On the contrary! It means that he takes friendship and love to the maximum level, up to the point he is able to irradiate the love of God towards all those he lives with. In this way, the Carmelite friar imitates Jesus who said: ‘I shall no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know the master’s business; I call you friends, because I have made known to you everything I have learnt from my Father’ (*John 15:15*).

3. Pondering Scripture: What the apostle Paul teaches about living love in the community

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul describes what love becomes when it is put at the centre of the life of a person and of a community. Below are some extracts from Paul’s letter to the Christians at Corinth (*1 Corinthians 13:1-13*), accompanied by comments that might apply to us as Carmelites:

‘Though I command human languages’

I might be particularly good at communicating the Good News to others; but without love I am nothing!

‘Though I have the power of prophecy’

I might speak out against injustice and involve the people; but without love I am nothing!

*‘Though I have the power to penetrate all mysteries and knowledge’
I might be a great theologian and have a great critical consciousness; but without love I am nothing!*

*‘Though I have all the faith necessary to move mountains’
I might have a steady doctrine and a miraculous faith; but without love I am nothing!*

*‘Though I should give away to the poor all that I possess’
I might choose to live for the poor and give them everything I own; but without love I am nothing!*

*‘Though I should even give up my body to be burned’
I might even go to prison and be tortured; but without love ‘it will do me no good whatever’ (1 Corinthians 13:3)*

All these very important actions do not identify with love, and they do not even exhaust it. They only reveal love. Love is a gift that goes beyond all this! What is love? Paul does not answer this question, but he quotes a song of the community, which he offers as a key so that each person can assess whether or not such a love exists in their life. Here are the words of the song:

Love is always patient and kind;
Love is never jealous; love is not boastful or conceited,
It is never rude and never seeks its own advantage,
It does not take offence or store up grievances.
Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but finds its joy in the truth.
It is always ready to make allowances, to trust, to hope and to endure whatever comes.
Love never comes to an end. (1 Corinthians 13:4-8)

4. In-depth analysis and sharing of ideas

We began this reflection by considering how the word ‘love’ is bandied about, and asking what it really means. We then read Chapter 15 of the *Rule of Saint Albert* and saw how a regular review of our community life can help us to grow in love as brothers and sisters. The idea of putting love at the heart of our communities was reinforced by pondering Saint Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. We can now spend some time reflecting upon all this material in the light of our own experiences, insights and reactions. You can do this on your own, as well as with your Carmelite community.

1. First, spend a moment in silence. Be aware that you are in God’s presence.
2. Here are some questions that might help you analyse and reflect on the above material in more depth, and to share your thoughts and feelings:

* Reflecting on the hymn of love that Saint Paul quotes in his letter to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 13:4-8), verify whether love that builds community exists in your life.

* In our Carmelite communities – including our Lay Carmelite communities – do we hold a ‘local chapter’ or regular review? What is the most profitable consequence of these meetings?

- * Do we apply the ‘chapter culture’ in our provincial and inter-Carmelite meetings, our regional, national, and international gatherings? Has this produced any positive results that have brought improvements in the way we live together as sisters and brothers? What improvement?

5. Commitment and prayer

We’ve reflected on Carmel as a community that lives in love, a love discerned by the community gathering together, and informed by Scripture. Now we can consider making some form of practical commitment to help build up the Carmelite community, as well as praying for a deeper sense of shared brotherhood and sisterhood. Here are some suggestions (you might have others):

- * Go back to the first section on “The Challenge of Today”. Formulate a commitment – either individually or as a community – that is practical, possible, and achievable.
- * Offer some spontaneous prayers to God.
- * Reflect (perhaps as a form of *Lectio Divina*) on Psalm 64 (63) ‘Better your faithful love than life itself.’

In the final reflection we shall consider the topic of “Carmel: fraternal community that lives in hope”.

4th REFLECTION

Carmel: Forming Community that Lives in Hope

Reminder of the previous reflections

The first reflection was *Carmel: a praying community that lives the Gospel according to the Carmelite charism*, which pondered on the challenge of building a sense of brotherhood and sisterhood in today's fractured world, proposing that we return to the *Rule of Saint Albert* and its vision of community derived from the *Acts of the Apostles*.

In the second reflection we looked at the idea of *Carmel: forming community that lives in faith*. This reflection began by considering honestly the decline in vocations to the religious life, which has implications for Lay Carmel as well. The text went on to consider the Carmelite understanding of community as set out in the *Rule of Saint Albert*, and the role of the Prior as a leader who is chosen by the consent of the community and who acts consultatively. To understand better the notion of obedience to the prior, the reflection turned to the Bible to see how Jesus was totally obedient to his Father.

In the third reflection we looked at *Carmel: forming community that lives in love*. This reflection acknowledged that 'love' is a term sometimes misunderstood in today's world, but that love must be at the heart of Carmelite communities. The text proposed that we return to the teachings of the *Rule of Saint Albert* regarding regular community reviews, and that we take Saint Paul's letter to the Corinthians as a guide of how to live in love. This paved the way for some questions designed to aid individual and group reflection, and the text concluded with some suggestions for prayer and practical commitment.

Overview of the fourth reflection

In this fourth and final reflection we shall consider the topic of "Forming a fraternal community that lives in hope". Again, we will approach this topic in five sections:

1. The "Challenge of Today": being aware of the context we live in, the reality in which we build community as brothers and sisters in Carmel.
2. A teaching from the *Rule of Saint Albert* regarding some aspects of Carmelite community life.
3. A biblical text or a reflection starting from the Bible that can enlighten and deepen our understanding of community.
4. In-depth analysis and sharing of ideas in the community (if you are able).
5. A commitment starting from the "Challenge of Today" and a concluding prayer.

Have a copy of the *Rule of Saint Albert* and the Bible to hand might be helpful for your time of reflection. So, let's begin...

"On your head set the helmet of salvation,
and so be sure of deliverance by our only Saviour,
who sets his own free from their sins" (*Rule* 19)

Poverty corrects and purifies social relationships.

1. The Challenge of today

Another big challenge facing Carmelite life today is forming communities that live in hope. Considering the situation of humanity, what hope can we receive? What future can we expect? Indeed, what are we Carmelites: prophets of the future of God, or mere officers in sacred matters? Do we really believe that another world – God's Reign – is possible? How can and must we

Carmelites contribute so that other world becomes reality? What is the future of our Order, of our Province, of our community? What changes must happen in our community life – whether lay or religious – so that we can prepare a better future for those who will come after us?

* Exchange ideas about this theme among yourselves.

2. What the *Rule of Saint Albert* says about the community that lives of hope

The Context of our Origins

When the first Carmelites started their life on Mount Carmel, the large monasteries of Europe often had large lands and several properties. As a result they could lead a self-sufficient life, detached from the people and from the great economical, social and political changes of the 12th and 13th centuries. Fanatical religious groups like the Cathars and the Albigensians confused the crowds and led them astray. The monks did not feel called to support the people, and the secular clergy were not prepared to give an answer to the problem of the poor who populated growing towns and boroughs.

The mendicant (literally ‘begging’) movement of friars (brothers) arose as an answer to these challenges. In particular, Saint Francis of Assisi was able to mould this new model of religious life. The mendicants were poor with the poor; they shared everything among themselves and with the people. They had no property and they lived in small fraternities at the people’s service, especially *the little ones* (‘minores’) of society, to whom they announced the Good News of God. In exchange for this, the mendicants received some charity.

Such a fraternal life was an example of the new society they dreamt of for the future. They did not serve a feudal lord but rather the new Lord that is Jesus, and they served Our Lady, the Virgin Mary, the *Domina loci* or ‘Lady of the Place’. They called each other brothers. This fraternal – literally brotherly – life in the midst of the people was like a taste, a foreshadowing, of God’s Kingdom, a source of hope, a proclamation of Good News for the poor. The friars’ vow of poverty was not only a means of asceticism to enable them to pray better; it was primarily the establishment of a prophetic and praying presence of the Christian community that announced that ‘another world is possible’ through the testimony of their own life in the midst of the people.

The Text of the *Rule of Saint Albert*

The *Rule of Saint Albert* specified that Carmelites should *hold all the goods in common and waive the right to property* (Rule 12 & 4). The Carmelites did not consider themselves as the owners of what they could dispose of, but rather they owned everything in common. Like the poor, they lived from their own work or from what they received in charity. Poverty does not mean that we have to be negligent or to live in misery. On the contrary! It means that we must have maximum care of the goods God grants us; we must appreciate them as received gifts that God wants for everybody and not just for a few people. It means being the seed of the new community that the Gospel proposes to us. In this way, the Carmelite imitates Jesus who lived poor with the poor, sharing with them what he owned and denouncing unfair wealth (Luke 6:20, 25; 12:22-34; 16:19-31).

The *Rule* gives a word of hope to building community in the matter of work (Rule 20). Firstly, the *Rule* says that the Carmelite must live from his (or today her) own work: *whoever is not willing to work should not be allowed to eat either*. Working is a way to be part of ‘the little ones’ in society, to be in solidarity with the poor, and it makes the relationship among the members of the community more peaceable because it avoids one member being an idle burden on the others. Secondly, the *Rule* says that through his work the Carmelite must prevent idleness from letting the devil get in. On the door of the Carmelite’s soul there must be the following notice: *Work in progress! No entry!* Thirdly, the *Rule* repeats twice that the Carmelite must *work in silence*. In the *Rule* the idea of work is expanded to refer to the practice of silence.

The *Rule* says that *silence is the way to foster holiness (Rule 21)*. Cultivating holiness through silence means that we have to work so as to still inside us anything that prevents our accurate perception of things; in this way we will make reality appear for what it really and intrinsically is, and not the way it appears to be, distorted by mass media propaganda and by any dominant ideology. In order to achieve this, we need work (*culto*). We need discipline and control, study and reflection. Nowadays, because of the lack of silence, there is such a noisy flow of words and images that it prevents us perceiving reality for what it really is. Besides, many times, consumerism kills any attempt at critical consciousness. This cult of silence creates in us holiness, it stops the devil entering inside us and it creates the conditions by which we can be invaded by the other aspect of silence, as the *Rule* says: ‘Your strength will lie in silence and hope.’ The other aspect of silence does not depend on our work only, but it comes from the action of the Spirit of God in us. Once we have opened our hearts to God through the active and even painful work of silence – that silence that tries to know reality for what it really is – the strength of the silence of God will blossom inside us and inundate our being. Thus work creates a one-way path out of our hearts. From the outside inwards nothing can enter. From the inside outwards the strength of new life blossoms, generated by silence and released by work. It is the path that passes through the *Dark Night*, that hopes for light to come soon, as Saint John of the Cross said. Indeed ‘this is the way of holiness and goodness: see that you follow it’ (*Rule 20*). It is exactly at this point that the *Rule* says: ‘In this respect you have both the teaching and the example of Saint Paul the Apostle.’

3. Pondering Scripture: ‘In this respect you have both the teaching and the example of Saint Paul the Apostle’

Saint Paul was a tent-maker and a wandering missionary. Wandering missionaries had three alternative ways of making a living: setting a price for their services, living on charity, or finding a job as instructors giving private lessons (like Aristotle). These three alternatives had one thing in common: none involved manual labour. ‘Manual labour’ was seen as something peculiar to slaves. The common ambition of the Greeks was to live a quiet life of study and meditation, without having to do manual labour. Philosophers and missionaries realized this dream, and the community gladly received and supported them because they were seen as a model for their common hopes.

Paul recognises the right to receive a wage for his efforts (*1 Corinthians 9:4, 6-14*), but he desires to announce the Gospel as a courtesy (*1 Corinthians 9:18; 2 Corinthians 11:7*). He does not want to depend on the community nor does he want to be a burden on it (*1 Thessalonians 2:9; 2 Thessalonians 3:8; 2 Corinthians 11:9; 12:13-14; Acts 20:33-34*). And he makes this conviction a matter of honour, ‘a ground of boasting’ (*1 Corinthians 9:15*). He never accepted charity or help, except from one community only: the Philippians (*Philippians 4:15-16; 2 Corinthians 11:9*). Instead of the three alternative ways for a wandering missionary to make a living accepted by society, Paul chooses a fourth one: ‘we earn our living by labouring with our own hands’ (*1 Corinthians 4:12*). Why didn’t Paul behave like all the others? Here we get to the central point of Paul’s apostolic life. Paul broke with what today we would call the dominant ideology, and opened the way towards a new ideal of life.

In Paul’s day most of the urban crowds were mainly constituted by slaves: they were poor, and worked with their own hands. Among them the first communities were constituted (see *1 Corinthians 1:26; 2 Corinthians 8:1-2*). For his condition of life, a slave could never become a free citizen. Whoever was born into slavery was born into a prison for life! He or she could have never realized the common dream of having, one day, a quiet life of study and meditation, where it was not necessary to work with one’s own hands anymore. More or less the same as today: television and the common ideology foment a dream that can be realized only by a few rich individuals of the middle class; indeed, in order to exist most people are prisoners to their minimum wage! For the crowds, the television dream is an illusion, an impossible dream. By presenting himself as a

missionary living on the labour of his hands, Paul broke with convention: in this way the Gospel announced by Paul did not appear like something out of the reach of slaves and workers, but like something that was part of their life. Nowadays, the poor would say of Paul: ‘This man is one of us!’ Paul proposes a new, more realistic dream; a dream that is different from the impossible dream presented and fomented by the dominant ideology of the time.

It was through the labour of his own hands for his own maintenance that Paul helped the people of the community to understand that the source of a real dignified life (*1 Thessalonians* 4:11-12) was in their condition of being workers and not in the impossible dream proposed by the ideology of the Empire. It was through his work to maintain himself that Paul showed concretely how the Gospel could be and had to be incarnated in the life of the poor people living on the outskirts of the big towns of his time.

4. In-depth analysis and sharing of ideas

We began this reflection by considering whether we live as people in hope of another world, God’s Kingdom. We then saw how the mendicant movement which formed Carmel was a movement of poor brothers living among the poor. Reading the *Rule of Saint Albert* showed us how hope can be found in our communities when we share our goods, work, and foster silence. Such an attitude was exemplified by Saint Paul who by working for his living showed that the Gospel was truly Good News for the poor and enslaved. There is much here for us to reflect upon in the light of our own experiences, insights and reactions. You can do this on your own, as well as with your Carmelite community.

1. First, spend a moment in silence. Be aware that you are in God’s presence.
2. Here are some questions that might help you analyse and reflect on the above material in more depth, and to share your thoughts and feelings:
 - * What drew your attention in this testimony of Saint Paul as a worker? And why?
 - * How does our community contribute to increasing hope in the poor through the witness of poverty?
 - * How does the Carmelite Family place itself with regards to the great problems of world poverty, injustice, exploitation, human trade, drugs, arms trade, etc.?

5. Commitment and prayer

We’ve reflected on Carmel as a community that lives in hope, a hope sustained by Albert’s vision of a community where all contribute, a hope sustained by the mendicant tradition, and a hope rooted in the experience of Saint Paul and the early Church. Now we can consider how we are going to make some form of practical commitment to help build up the Carmelite community, as well as praying for a deeper sense of shared brotherhood and sisterhood. Here are some suggestions (you might have others):

- * Go back to the first section on “The Challenge of Today”. Formulate a commitment – either individually or as a community – that is practical, possible, and achievable.
- * Offer some spontaneous prayers to God.
- * Reflect (perhaps as a form of *Lectio Divina*) on Mary’s hymn the *Magnificat*: ‘The Almighty has done great things for me’ (*Luke* 1:46-55).