



*A letter to Carmelite Friars, Contemplative Sisters, Sisters and Brothers of Congregations of Apostolic Life, Members of the Carmelite Third Order, Lay Carmelites in general and all who celebrate the feast of our Lady of Mount Carmel with special devotion from Fr Miceál O'Neill,
Prior General:*

Mary kept all these things in her heart. Lk 2,52

Dear sisters and brothers in Carmel,

On this day of celebration, as we rejoice in being brothers and sisters of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel, I reach out to each one of you, in the bond of love. These days we are thinking a lot, pondering like Mary, everything that is happening in our world. Mary kept all these things in her heart (Lk 2,19) and pondering what was happening in her world, she found the will of God. Mary the contemplative, Mary full of grace, full of God, full of Gospel: That is the type of person who can respond to what is happening in today's world.

In our time of confinement, it is possible that we as people with a sense of God, capable of pondering, found in these new conditions new opportunities for solidarity and for the evangelization of the world. Here there are new manifestations of God's will, helping us to grow and mature as custodians of our world and one another.

We have grown together in our communities. Forced to remain indoors, by pondering alone or with others, we have discovered so much of the truths of our faith and of our Carmelite vocation. While some of us had the Eucharist all the time, others had to rely on the internet and use the prayers for spiritual communion. This raised questions about how we value the Eucharist. For people who normally celebrate the Eucharist every day, it was difficult to adapt to its absence. For people who were faithful to the Sunday Eucharist, it was something very new to be told that they are not to go to Mass. When we return to the normal celebration of the Eucharist, it may be that we will do it with greater conviction and understanding, on account of what became a Eucharistic fast.

We have lived with restrictions and with some fear now for many months. Families are grieving. Hospitals are still taking care of victims of the virus. Doctors, nurses and the whole medical profession and staff have shown all their dedication, professionalism and zeal, beyond the call of duty. People have made sacrifices to make sure there was bread on our tables, and as everywhere people are counting the toll that the virus has taken on their lives through bereavement, illness, loss of employment and livelihood, we might say that we are seeing an explosion of humanity.

If it was all behind us, we could take a different view. However, now that we are learning to co-habit with the virus, and we try not to give in to the fear that there is more to come, we all have to ask, how are we to take care of one another, how are we to act in the future, to limit the negative effects of this virus, and a create a society in which we are not bound by fear, and no one is left in need? It may well be simply a question of caring and sharing.

I am on fire with zeal for the Lord (I Kg 19,10)

Generating, caring and protecting are among the charisms that we see in Mary, the Mother of God and our Mother. As I think about the various Carmelite communities of both men and women around the world, I am struck by how important this feast is to us all. In some places it is just the day itself; in some places it is three days of reflection and prayer and in other places it is the full nine days of the novena. The celebrations are imbued with warmth and devotion, and with conviction that makes us think that perhaps this is a moment when we as Carmelites are most zealous.

The world of today is asking us to be zealous. Down through the centuries, Carmelites have echoed and repeated the words of the Prophet Elijah, "I am on fire with zeal for the Lord God of hosts". (I Kg 19) Our celebration of the feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel may be a very good time for us to renew, revive and direct our zeal. Four days later, we will have another opportunity, when we celebrate the feast of the Prophet himself.

Zeal is a gift. As such we must pray for it. We must ask God to give us zeal, to make us who we say we are. But, zeal is not always an attractive word. It sometimes suggests extremism. We do not automatically feel that we want this gift. I recall the zeal of John the Baptist, the voice crying in the wilderness, living on locusts and wild honey (Mk 1,7) and I compare that to the calm of Jesus speaking to the people in the Synagogue. (Lk 4,21-22) I think of the Gospel, where we see Christ on the Cross, Mary and John standing by. These are all moments of zeal, if by zeal we mean a heart burning with desire for all that is good and a spirit that will work hard and make sacrifices to achieve it. The globalization of zeal for the things of God might be the antidote to the globalization of indifference that Pope Francis so often talks about.

And no one was left in need. Acts 2,45

As we become aware of one another's needs, we are entering a new age of sharing. Within our family, we are aware that many communities have lost some of their sources of income. Among lay Carmelites there are those who have lost their jobs, and whose homes may be threatened. New projects in our family will always need funding. In the face of the needs that are emerging, we have to look again at the model of the early Christian community, an image and reality that inspired the Carmelite Rule. That community was built on prayer, the pondering of the Scriptures, the breaking of bread, and the sharing of all that people possessed so that no one was left in need. (Acts 2,42-45) As we become aware of one another's needs, we can help one another and be an example to others of the kind of sharing that will be needed in our society in the future, if no one is to be left in need. The dialogue in John's Gospel (Jn 6,9-10) comes to mind: Andrew said, "There is a small boy here with five barley loaves and two fish, but what is that between so many? In the end no one was left in need. In our zeal for the things of the Gospel, we will take up the challenge of Mary at the wedding feast of Cana, "Do whatever he tells you to do". (Jn 2,5)

This year's celebration will be different to that of other years. As a family, we have been spared in many ways, but we do not forget those who have died in the Netherlands and in Italy. Let our celebration this year be marked by our prayer for the individuals, families and communities who suffered the worst effects of the Coronavirus.

On this feast may each one hear again the words from the cross, "Behold you son", "Behold you mother", (Jn 19,26-27) and know that as our Saviour gave us to one another and to Mary, we may know how to take care of one another in the common home that is blessed by the presence of Mary our Mother and Sister.

Míceál O'Neill, O.Carm.
Prior General