

+ Maria

Opening of the 13th General Chapter

Votive Mass of Our Lady of Mount Carmel

My dear Sisters in Christ and Our Lady of Mt. Carmel – And so, under the patronage and protection of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, the 13th General Chapter of the Carmelite Sisters for the Aged & Infirm begins. This Chapter, like those that went before, is well-prepared, and well-prayed for. Like entering into a marriage, it is not taken lightly and without advisement, and not entered into for any selfish motive beyond wanting what is best for the Congregation and for its growth. Even if nothing else goes right today – which we don't believe, we will have begun in the right fashion, gathered here at the altar of God to celebrate the Eucharist together as our Rule commands us. "Beneath the cross of Jesus stood his mother, and his mother's sisters, Mary the wife of Clopas and Mary of Magdala." With these holy women, we too stand beneath the cross and will meet Jesus – dying and rising – in His word and in His body and blood during this Eucharist. With the apostle John whom Jesus loved, we will receive again Mary to be our Mother and we will be renewed as her sons and daughters. We will go forth from this chapel having received the best of all food and drink, having been united to God himself in Holy Communion. All will be well.

The General Chapter, canon law tells us, has the supreme authority in the institute in accordance with the constitutions. It must represent the whole institute and become a true sign of its unity in charity. Its principal function is to protect the patrimony of the institute and foster its appropriate renewal. It also elects the supreme moderator, deals with matters of greater importance, and issues norms which all are bound to obey. As I said, this is not to be taken lightly. But a General Chapter is a mysterious thing, as well, because it is undertaken under the light and guidance of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit does several things, as the scripture tells us. Seen as both flames of fire and as silent breath, it burns away fear and confusion and brings about unity. The Spirit burns away sin and selfishness which prevents one from seeing God or His truth. The Spirit warms the heart with God's love which fosters confidence

and trust in the Lord. The Holy Spirit refreshes like cool water in the heat. Finally, the Spirit illuminates the path to truth. The Spirit is present in the capitulars during Chapter as he is present in all the baptized – but they must listen deeply to that Spirit who comes often like a silent breath, like the tiny whispering breeze to Elijah our Father. That Spirit cannot work in a heart or mind already filled up with many truths. And thus, we must be receptive to the Spirit of love and truth so that the mystery of God's will can be revealed and that those to whom it is revealed can experience the unity in charity necessary for a successful Chapter.

There is one more thing that the Spirit can do. The Spirit, sent by God can birth Christ in us. Mary, our Mother, is praised by St. Augustine because she conceived within her Christ not once, but twice – once in faith, by her loving and faithful obedience to God, and secondly in the flesh in her womb. Augustine tells us quite clearly that the conception of Christ in Mary's soul, her loving and open obedience: "I am the handmaid of the Lord. Be it done unto me according to your word. Fiat." was the greater incarnation, the greater conception of the Son of the Most High within her. If true, if you the capitulars of the General Chapter are truly open to the Holy Spirit, you too will conceive Christ and bring Him into every discussion and decision that you make. He will give you the peace, the freedom, the humor, and the wisdom to choose and judge wisely based not on preference, or friendship, or ideology, but on faith, and hope, and charity. What a responsibility you have, and yet what a promise you have that like Mary, our Mother in Carmel and armed with her scapular, you will have all the powers of heaven at your disposal to walk you through this 13th General Chapter.

In 1983, I was in Aylesford just before the general chapter which elected Father John Malley as Prior General. The tension and excitement about the Chapter was quite high for many reasons and the chapter was the constant topic of discussion at every meal, every period of recreation, and every two-by-two walk in the cloister. When are the delegates leaving? Three days, two days, one day. Who will be elected General? Which Councilors will be selected? This one, that one. Never him, or no never that one. Etc. You get the picture. This was endless. Finally, the day came when the English Provincial

and the two delegates went off to the chapter and it was quiet. There had also been a huge pilgrimage over the weekend. Although I was a guest, the Prior had said to me, "O Mario, can you take just a half an hour hearing confessions to give one of our fellows a break?" "Sure, I said." Well, a half hour turned into three hours, so you can imagine the crowd. At lunch the day both the delegates left and the day after the pilgrimage, the sub prior was laughing and said, "This morning, I helped old Brother John in his little three-wheeler collect the garbage all around the Shrine grounds. He said to me, "Well Father, here we are collecting the garbage and they are going off for the general chapter. In three weeks, they will be back and we'll still be going around the grounds picking up the garbage."

I recall this story before every general chapter. Life goes on. We stay grounded. We try and keep it real. Your Sisters, your employments, your little rooms, are all home waiting for you. The gospel tells us Jesus was born, and the next minute he's preaching. But, for thirty years in-between, he shared the ins and outs and ups and down of life. Mary cooked and cleaned and did laundry. Joseph worked and supported the family. Jesus learned to be a carpenter. Even as the Holy Family, they shared human life as it is. It was in the course of that life that Jesus was molded into being true man. Now, as we go into Chapter, we realize that there was a before and there will be an after, and what will happen in the next 12 days is deeply connected to it. Heart and soul, we know that Mary our Mother in Carmel will help us, and the Spirit of the Father and the Son will not fail us. Amen.

Father Mario Esposito, O.Carm.
Avila - On - Hudson
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