

*The love of Christ
surpasses knowledge*

cfr *Eph* 3:19

St Mary Magdalene de' Pazzi
(1607-2007)

Letter
of the Prior General
Joseph Chalmers
to the Carmelite Family
on the occasion of the
IV centenary of the death of
st Mary Magdalene de' Pazzi

14 November 2006
Feast of all Carmelite Saints



Dear Brothers & Sisters in Carmel,

1. In the letter I wrote in 2002 to commemorate the 550th anniversary of the Papal bull *Cum Nulla* of Nicholas V, I mentioned that since the official recognition of the Carmelite life among women, Carmel has given to the Church innumerable women who have consecrated their lives to the service of God and neighbour in a joyful life of prayer and witnessing to the absolute demands of the love of God. Among the many exemplary figures from the cloistered life I briefly wrote about St. Mary Magdalene de' Pazzi. In the year 2007 we celebrate the IV centenary of her death that took place on 25 May 1607. I would like to take up my reflection once again and focus particularly on St. Mary Magdalene in order to examine some of the riches that can be found in her experience and doctrine

The mystic from Florence

2. In the history of Christian mysticism, there are few individuals who have experienced so many different phenomena in such a brief life: a succession of visions, ecstasies and raptures, often accompanied by great suffering. She is said to have had 429 extraordinary experiences in her life!

3. Rather than examine some of these experiences individually, I want to concentrate on the central phase of St. Mary Magdalene's mystical experience, in 1585, from which emerges a global view of the Christian mystery, and at the centre of which we find the suffering and risen Christ. She had a vision of twelve channels of water. Most scholars are agreed that this vision represents the history of salvation, looked at from the final stage: the presence of Christ who was slain and who is forever active in the bosom of the Father, an image that appears in the book of the Apocalypse, with the figure of the Lamb. In the Lamb that was slain, Mary Magdalene sees the whole history of salvation, starting from the relationship of the Persons of the Blessed Trinity from all eternity, to the incarnation of the Word, his passion, death and resurrection, right through the time of the Church to the second coming of Christ.

The theocentric and Christocentric vision of life

4. Part of Mary Magdalene's vision was the contemplation of the Blessed Trinity as an immense fire. She came to understand that at the origin of human life is divine love that continues to be present throughout the whole course of life until the end of time. The spiritual journey is viewed from the perspective of two scenes: the first before time began and the second within time. In the first scene, Mary Magdalene presents a kind of council or conversation taking place within the Trinity concerning the creation of the cosmos as a communication of love. There follows the creation of the angels and then the creation

of human beings in a state of innocence, so that men and women could communicate with God and receive God's gifts. Human beings do not respond adequately and so the second scene opens. Because of sin, men and women become incapable of understanding God and of receiving God's gifts in themselves. Then within the Holy Trinity there emerges a plan to free humanity from the slavery of sin and confer upon them sublime gifts of grace in order that they will be faithful and capable, each in his or her own way, once more of communicating with God. This plan of salvation is brought about through the Incarnation of the Word and his immolation on the cross.

5. The spiritual journey is understood by the saint as a re-creation in Christ incarnate, who is the bridge and staircase to salvation. In order to attain life, one must go through the Word made flesh. Through him the complete return to God is not only a possibility but is a joyful reality.
6. It is interesting to note that St. Mary Magdalene, like other theologians and mystics, says that the Word would have become flesh even if human beings had not sinned. However, she also repeatedly stresses that the Word came clothed with our humanity in order to redeem us from sin and to show us the greatest and final expression of love in his passion and death on the cross. The blood of Christ, symbol and witness to his burning love for men and women, is the means offered to us to be free from sin and to become like God. In the ecstasies of the saint, the passion, the cross, the death and the blood of Christ constitute the place where men and women are re-created, in an even more perfect way than originally and in a way that surpasses the state of the angels.

The conflict between the two loves

7. The image that recurs frequently in the accounts of the ecstasies of St. Mary Magdalene is the classic one of the conflict between the two loves: love of oneself and love for God. In this conflict the weapon that brings about the victory is a pure heart, that one can attain with humility and self-denial, which makes it possible to descend to the centre of one's nothingness. This is where the Spirit of God can be found and it is in this Spirit that one can return everything to God.

The ladder of love

8. The motor that drives the process of re-creation and the return to God is love. St. Mary Magdalene was convinced that we were created by God through love and with love, and it was by that road that we must return to God. It is love that guides every step and every event of our human history, which is the history of salvation.
9. She felt that she was grasped and held by love. She desired with all her heart that all people, and especially those who are consecrated to God practice this love. As an aid to understand this call, she spoke about various degrees of love and how to attain them by climbing the ladder of love, which has eight steps. According to St. Mary Magdalen, there are two types of step on this ladder: four aid the process of purification and four are of a more mystical character. Some of the terms used to describe this love can sound negative but they are of course eminently positive.

10. The first step is a love that needs to be constantly exercised. This is the step proper to people of action. The problem with this stage is that it is very easy to fall into confusion and to become despondent as soon as something is thought to be lacking. According to the saint, this kind of person does not love God for Himself but out of self interest. The next step is impatient love, better than the previous stage but still far from perfect because it lacks firmness and stability. The one who possesses this degree of love is upset on seeing others who have advanced further on the spiritual journey. Such a person does not esteem those who are more perfect, does not take account of those on an equal footing and despises beginners. Such people lack stability and move here and there always seeking a place to stop and a road to follow. They fail to abandon themselves to God and lack stability in anything, and as a result have many imperfections. Not even the third step of painful love is perfect, because the one who possesses it complains a great deal and suffers when he or she lacks the felt experience of love. Such a one feels worthy only of hell and is greatly saddened not so much because there is no feeling of loving God, but because he or she does not want to suffer. At these stages, taking account of human weakness, each person must seek not to go backwards, not to fall into tepidity, and to be disposed for an *abandoned love*, which is the last step possible without the extraordinary grace of God. It desires nothing and possesses nothing. It does not aspire to any particular perfection and does not stop at any particular gift. It does not waste time thinking about what perfection it might attain, nor at what stage it has reached. It looks only toward God and how to honour God.

11. In the second group there is inactive, anxious, sated and dead love, and this refers to contemplative souls. Inactive love belongs to those who live for the contemplation of God, who is the perfect good, infinite majesty, and profound wisdom. These people believe themselves incapable of responding to such greatness. They consider the infinite perfections of God and leave to God what must be done. In this sense, the degree of love attained by these people can be called “inactive” but it is very fruitful because it actually accomplishes great things. Anxious love is that which generates a continual and burning desire to know God. It is not yet perfect because of these desires. Sated love is when the soul rejoices in God and directs every action towards God, in whom all things have their beginning and end. This rejoicing impedes the perfection of love, which is attained only with the gift of “dead” love. In this kind of love there is no more desire.
12. This ladder of love leads to the purest kind of love in which and from which the soul is completely recreated. In this pure love, the soul becomes equal even to God. The union with God, on which we depend for our happiness, demands the most profound and complete purification. It begins with a process that assimilates the person to God, setting free specially by means of a love that expresses itself in humility. The intervention of God can be painful as it purifies and illuminates. The person must undergo this treatment with humility and abandonment.
13. In this process, even if the powers of the soul are put to sleep, they do not die and so the soul’s passivity is not absolute. By means of the cardinal virtues (fortitude, temperance, prudence & justice), the person is brought

close to God; with the theological virtues (faith, hope and charity), the individual adheres directly and in an intimate way to God. In this way the purified soul is united with and is transformed in God, becoming God by participation.

Theology of love

14. In the ecstasies and raptures of St. Mary Magdalene de' Pazzi we can find a veritable theology of love. This does not consist in mere rational speculation, but comes from a serious contemplative life and meditation on the sufferings of Christ.

The presence of Our Lady

15. The Mother of God is specially present in St Mary Magdalene's spiritual journey. Our Lady is a wonderful instrument of the divine plan of salvation, and she attained a level of sanctity beyond anyone else. St. Mary Magdalene affirms the Immaculate Conception, the divine maternity, the fact that Our Lady is the mediatrix of graces and that she is for us a comfort and our source of hope.
16. By meditating on the Immaculate Conception, Mary Magdalene came to love Our Lady's "purity", as did the Carmelites of the XIV century before her. She did not simply praise God for Our Lady's virginity, but also contemplated the depths of its significance as a way to express her humility, abandonment to God and her awareness of her own nothingness. In the figure of the Most Pure Virgin,

Mary Magdalene saw the model of the purity that prepares for the most profound union with the Lord.

17. In very tender terms she describes the relationship of love between the Mother and her divine Son. Mary has an important role as our helper, advocate and mediatrix of graces. Above all, St. Mary Magdalene thinks of the place that Our Lady has in her own monastery, which is “the little house of Mary”. She is the sure guide for the observance of the Rule and on the journey towards God. Just as the Magi were guided by the star, so we are guided by our star, Our Lady. She does not lead us to the stable but to the encounter with God. While some spiritual authors of the time affirmed that in the union between the soul and God, no other created thing could enter, and even ignored the humanity of Christ, Mary Magdalene spoke of Our Lady at her side even at the stage of mystical marriage.

The connection between spiritual experience and the Word of God

18. Another interesting theme is that of the link between mystical experience and the Word of God. From the description of her ecstasies it is clear that the source of Mary Magdalene’s mystical experience is the life giving relationship with Christ who is communicated in Word and Sacrament. Many of her ecstasies took place after receiving Communion, which she understood to be the sacrament of love. During her conversations with God that were written down, words of the Bible flow spontaneously from her, which shows her great

familiarity with Sacred Scripture, a fruit of the command of the Rule “to meditate day and night on the law of the Lord”. Also it can be observed that the texts of Scripture that sustain her are those that come from the Breviary and the Missal.

19. The Word of God was the daily nourishment for Mary Magdalene on her journey towards the encounter with the Word himself. She believed that the word responded to every situation in which she found herself and provided the light necessary for her journey.
20. The Word of God was at the centre of her entire life. She believed that to welcome this Word and interiorise it was to encounter God. She encouraged all to listen to the Word with great reverence, sincerity and humility.
21. This way of welcoming and interiorising “the words of the Word”, is not an individual adventure but is part of the journey of a community that leads to loving one another. In the vision of the twelve canals, it is always the Word of God that reveals the work of salvation and guides us from listening to a generous commitment to announce the Word with our lives.

For the whole Church

22. Mary Magdalene’s experience of God as Love led her to desire that everyone come to know “Love that is not loved”. It is well known that on one occasion she ran round the monastery in the middle of the night and rang the bells: “Come to love Love!”. Here we can see an apostolic element of her life that flowered in her ardent desire for the

reform and expansion of the Church. Mary Magdalene contemplated the mystery of the Church and described it in St. Paul's terms as the Mystical Body. She also used patristic terminology like spouse, virgin and mother. She invoked two striking images to indicate the pilgrim nature of the Church: the sea in which many creatures swim, and the ship on the river of God's goodness. Born of the Word and nourished by the blood of Christ, the Church was seen above all by St. Mary Magdalene as "an enclosed garden", cultivated by the Holy Spirit and with the Word made flesh at its centre as a most beautiful tree.

23. She greatly loved the Church, the "Spouse of the Word", as a mother who heals, nourishes, and transforms. She was appalled at the widespread decadence of her time and wanted to do something about it. She felt called by the Lord to help renew the body of the holy Church. She sought to save the shower of blood and merits with which Jesus had made the Church greatly fruitful. She was acutely aware of the evil within the Church and did her bit to reform it with passionate letters to powerful people. She uses strong words about heretics, and about the unfaithfulness of many that repudiates the love of Christ. She suffered most of all because of the laxity of those who had positions of authority within the Church.
24. She deplored the many iniquities and sins committed by members of the Church, which spoil the look of the garden. She repeats her invitation often in her letters to cultivate the garden that is the Church with the blood of the crucified Christ.
25. In all the letters that St. Mary Magdalene sent to various people from the Pope to Cardinals, to bishops

and other personalities of the day, one concept appears very clearly: the reform of the Church will come about as an act of love, manifested as a radical return to Christ and to love of the Church in humility and in obedience to the hierarchy. In order to bring about this reform with love, the one who does so must possess a great purity of heart. This requires a great love for God, for Christ crucified and for souls. For the salvation of souls, one of the fundamental requirements is the renewal of the Church.

The consecrated life

26. Finally, it is good to record how St. Mary Magdalene understood and lived her own religious life or consecrated life, as it is more usually called in our days. She often uses the idea of the “narrow way” to understand the religious life, and it is a way that few follow. Mary Magdalene loved the religious life greatly and, if possible, loved her Carmelite vocation even more. She considered her vocation as a “spouse of Christ” to be the most worthy vocation there is.
27. She believed that her vocation made the soul docile to the Spirit and ready for heaven. She also sang the praises of obedience and chastity as the place in which the Word finds rest. In this context the religious community becomes not only a place of calm in the tempestuous sea of the world, but also a little heaven on earth, because wherever Jesus is, there is paradise.
28. In the account of the way in which Mary Magdalene treated the novices and how she related with the

sisters in her community, and in numerous pages relating her experiences, she is presented as the promoter of “fraternal charity”. Her appeal to love among the sisters was constant. In an era like hers, which focused on the vertical relationship that each individual had with God, she affirmed the contemplation of “God in creatures”, the giving of oneself to one’s neighbour as the authentication of the truth of one’s love for God. She often interrupted moments of ecstasy to perform acts of charity. Without fraternity, the Christian experience is empty. In this sense one can understand her affirmation that “even the mystical kiss must be given with both lips: with the love of God and of neighbour, with contemplation and action”. Therefore we see in her an harmonious synthesis of the love of God and of neighbour.

Today

29. What can the experience of St. Mary Magdalene de’ Pazzi say to us today? Certainly the way in which she was presented in the past is very far from our way of thinking today. There was a progressive assimilation of her whole being to that of Christ crucified and risen, in order to become a channel of love, her fruitfulness coming from God as the source of the mystery of salvation and redemption in the world. Mary Magdalene lived her whole life of prayer in the heart of the Church, and sought to join her “yes” to that of Jesus Christ and his mother, Mary. Mary Magdalene’s life of prayer was also an experience of the cross for the benefit of the Church and the world. The world and the Church expect from us Carmelites today, men and women of

contemplation and fraternity, that we each live personally and profoundly our spirituality and that we share it with others. The example of St. Mary Magdalene reminds us of the absolute demands of the love of God. Her life, lived in a radical way, bears witness to the centrality of contemplation for the Carmelite life and bears witness to the world that only God can respond to the infinite desires of the human heart.

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