

+ Jesus

1990 Constitutions – Solae Constitutiones

When the question arose of updating the Constitutions according to the norms of *Cor orans*, it was discovered that the 1990 Constitutions give no indication of who is responsible for making any modifications of the text.¹ This question was brought up, and it was found that no one is charged with organizing any modifications. In a letter dated Jan. 9th, 2020, Archbishop Carballo wrote: *“Our Dicastery will receive proposals for revisions of the Constitutions approved in 1990 from the monasteries, associations and federations concerned, with attention to the quality of the proposals made.”*

This is a totally new development in religious life. The Church is both hierarchical and charismatic. God gives a charism to a founder or foundress who passes it on to their children and who also incarnates it in the Rule and Constitutions. The Rule and Constitutions guarantee that the charism will be passed on to future generations. Both the charismatic element and the legislative text are necessary to guarantee a firm foundation on which the religious institute can stand. A charism only lives in human beings. It cannot be passed on in a text, but the text is necessary in order to establish who has the authority to interpret the text.

This is valid for the whole Church. Scripture has always been a foundation on which the Church can stand, but Jesus gave His Spirit to the Apostles in order that they may have the authority to interpret the Scriptures. To quote Alex Jones: *“The Bible could not be an authority in itself; it could only be an authority in the hands of someone competent enough to interpret it authoritatively. Just like the Constitution of the United States must have an authoritative body to interpret it, so the Bible alone cannot be an authority – it needs the infallible application of an interpretive body – the Church. Without an interpretive body, the Bible’s meaning is anybody’s guess.”*²

Of course, having the authority to interpret a text is no guarantee that one will interpret it wisely. We have seen how Doria tried to change the whole structure of the Order. The Prioresses who resisted him wisely appealed to a higher authority. They did not remove their Carmels from the hierarchical structure of the Order on the basis of a truer understanding of the charism. They worked within that structure, and their work was blessed.

St. Teresa rejoiced to see her charism confirmed in the Constitutions and she understood that the Constitutions need to be interpreted by an authoritative body **within the Discalced Carmelites**. Without the authoritative body, the Constitutions alone can

¹ No. 258b of the 1990 Constitutions states simply that “The interpretation, modification or derogation of these Constitutions belongs exclusively to the Apostolic See.”

² “No Price Too High,” Alex Jones, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2006, p.130.

be interpreted by anyone as they will. As with the Church, both the charism and the authoritative interpreters are needed. If one or the other is lacking, an institute will cease to be a living body of religious men and women. It will become a museum presenting the external aspects of the charism without its living spirit, or it will become a cult, dependent on a charismatic leader.

This is no imaginary danger. In 2015, the Monastic Conference of France wrote in the program for its Assembly of 2015: *“We hear about cases of monastic communities where the way of governing and the general climate correspond completely to sectarian aberrations. For years the brothers or sisters go through this without realizing it, and then one day it bursts.”*³ This risk of “sectarian aberrations,” which create a climate open to abuse of various forms, is especially a risk of new institutes which do not yet have the legislation in place for a balanced interpretation of the charism. The author goes on to write, *“In ancient Orders or congregations, the corrective elements have long been in place. They are not immune from a paranoid superior, but the disorder will usually be limited to a particular community without affecting the whole body.”*⁴ However, the 1990 Constitutions unwittingly jettisoned the traditional “corrective elements” in omitting the authoritative interpreters of the charism. The Carmels who follow the 1990 Constitutions therefore run the same risks of “sectarian aberrations” as the new institutes who do not have the corrective elements in place.

As soon as the 1990 Constitutions were approved, the individual Carmels applied to CICLSAL to confirm their Complementary Codes. This is effect forced CICLSAL to take on the role of the authoritative interpreter without the grace of the charism. CICLSAL can legislate norms, but they do not have the Carmelite charism any more than they have the Benedictine or Dominican charism.

It may be that some Carmelite or some Carmel with the 1990 Constitutions may stand out as embodying the charism. This can be good, but however good it is, this situation has no future, for it is not confirmed in the legislation. No charismatic leader in the Church lives forever, and, without the guarantee of an authoritative interpreter of the charism, such a leader has no guaranteed successor. We need to look further than 20 or 30 years. We need to hand on to future generations a stable constitutional organization, one that is both hierarchical and charismatic, and at present, that does not exist in the 1990 Constitutions nor does there seem to be any intention of establishing it.

³ Les risques de la vie religieuse, Dom Dysmas de Lassus, Prior General of the Carthusians (Version 1.0c - avril 2017) p. 12 – Translation DeepL

⁴ Ibid. pp. 15-16