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Carmelites and Miracles

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The Brothers of Our Lady of Mount Carmel were a religious order of Roman Catholic hermits that gathered together in the early 1200s to live a semi-monastic lifestyle in the mountain range of Carmel, near Haifa in present-day Israel. The Carmelites, as they came to be called, followed a rule of life written by Saint Albert, the Latin-rite patriarch of Jerusalem, and approved by Pope Honorius III in 1226. Due to military conquests in the region by Muslims, the Carmelites soon migrated to various parts of Europe and were transformed into a mendicant order, although their rule specified a preference for the contemplative life. Initially they had difficulty justifying their status as a mendicant order, since their origins were shrouded in mystery without a clear founder.

Because the prophet Elijah had lived a solitary and contemplative life on Mount Carmel, the Carmelite order claimed him as their founder. In fact a legend developed that the Order could trace its origin in an unbroken line of contemplative hermits living on Mount Carmel since the time of Elijah to the 1200s. Thus in a sense the many biblical miracles associated with Elijah, including the miracle of the widow's oil, calling down fire from heaven during the confrontation with the prophets of Ba'al, the raising of the widow's son from the dead, and his ascension to heaven in a fiery chariot, could be considered as Carmelite miracles.

In 1321, Saint Peter Thomas reportedly had a vision of the Virgin Mary in which she stated "have confidence, Peter, for the Carmelite Order will last until the end of the world. Elijah, its founder, obtained it a long time ago from my Son" (Rohrbach, 91).

The founder of the Discalced Carmelite reform, Saint Teresa of Avila, had many mystical experiences during prayer, such as visions, locutions, and raptures, and occasionally she even levitated off the ground during prayer, to her great embarrassment (*The Book of Her Life*, ch. 20, no.5, and *The Interior Castle* VI, *passim*). She received a mystical piercing or "transverberation" of her heart (*The Book of Her Life*, ch. 29, no. 13), which is depicted in Bernini's famous sculpture in Rome. However, St. Teresa warned that having such mystical experiences was not necessarily a sign of holiness, and could even be a source of spiritual pride. Rather, true holiness always finds its expression in charity towards one's neighbor (*The Interior Castle*, VI: 9, and VII:4).

One of the most famous saints of the Discalced Carmelite Order, Saint Therese of Lisieux, experienced a miracle during her childhood through the intercession of Mary. While suffering from an illness that made her appear delirious, she prayed for deliverance before the statue of Our Lady of Victories in her family home. She saw the statue come to life and smile at her, and at that instant, she was cured (*Story of a Soul*, Manuscript A, ch.3). This particular statue of Mary, preserved in the Carmelite convent in Lisieux, has come to be known as Our Lady of the Smile.

The best known miracles associated with the Carmelite order are the granting of the Scapular (q.v.) by Our Lady of Mount Carmel (q.v.) to Simon Stock in the mid-1200s, and the association of Carmel with the apparitions of Our Lady of Fatima (q.v.) in 1917. It should be noted that the

only Fatima seer to survive into adulthood, Sr. Lucia of Jesus, joined the Discalced Carmelite Order. Furthermore, Bl. John Paul II was an honorary member of the Carmelite Order, and attributed his survival during the assassination attempt of May 13, 1981 to the miraculous intercession of Our Lady of Fatima. Thus the miracles associated with the Carmelite order span the time of Elijah to our own century.

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