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Our Lady of Mount Carmel

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The Brothers of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, a Roman Catholic religious order commonly called the Carmelites, began in the early 1200s as a collection of hermits gathered together in a semi-monastic lifestyle on Mount Carmel in present-day Israel. They requested a rule of life from Saint Albert, the Latin-rite patriarch of Jerusalem, not long before his death in 1214. This original Carmelite foundation was under the patronage of Mary from the beginning. However, after the purported apparition of the Blessed Virgin Mary to Saint Simon Stock in the 1250s, in which she told him that those who died wearing the scapular (q.v.) of the Carmelite Order worthily would not suffer eternal fire, the Carmelites began to stress Marian devotion as a defining characteristic of their order and identity.

In particular, Carmelite spirituality emphasizes the imitation of the virtues of Mary as the best way to express devotion to her. The primary component of Carmelite spirituality is contemplative prayer, and Mary is venerated as the supreme example of one who "ponders in her heart" the mysteries of God (Lk. 2:19). The virginity of Mary mirrors the commitment to celibacy and purity of heart in Carmelite spirituality, as symbolized by the white mantle of the religious habit. Mary's humility is seen in her acceptance of the words of the angel Gabriel in the Annunciation, and in her silence, since she speaks on only four occasions throughout the Gospels. Her detachment from material goods is seen in her poverty and exile as expressed in the Gospel of Luke during the early years of Jesus' infancy and childhood. Her charity is seen in her visitation to her cousin Elizabeth, and in her concern for the wedding couple who ran out of wine at Cana. Finally, her acceptance of God's will in all things, no matter how painful, is seen in her compassionate presence with Jesus at the foot of the cross.

All of these virtues of Mary are to be imitated by those following Carmelite spirituality. Humility, detachment, and charity were identified by St. Teresa of Avila (in her *Way of Perfection* 4:4) as the primary virtues that should be fostered by Carmelites, and contemplative prayer and silence are enjoined in the Rule of Saint Albert mentioned above.

Carmelite spirituality also emphasizes relating to Mary in a familial manner. While Mary is certainly venerated as Queen and Splendor of Carmel, she is also seen as mother and even sister, as implied by the original name of the order. One of the most well-known Carmelite saints, Saint Therese of Lisieux (sometimes referred to as the Little Flower), expressed this familial approach by stating that for her, Mary was "more mother than queen" (in the "Yellow Notebook" of *Her Last Conversations*, Aug. 21 1897 entry, p. 161).

The image of Mary as Our Lady of Mount Carmel is found in other miraculous events. Most famously, in the final apparition of Our Lady of Fatima (q.v.), on Oct. 13, 1917, the Blessed Virgin Mary appeared to the children as Our Lady of Mount Carmel, clothed in the habit of the Carmelite order. It would seem that this apparition is the only one in which the Blessed Virgin Mary is seen wearing the habit of a particular religious order.

Because of the legend that the Blessed Virgin Mary miraculously appeared to Simon Stock on July 16, 1251 (although modern historians may debate this date), the Roman Catholic church continues to celebrate the feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel as an optional memorial on July 16, and it is celebrated as a liturgical solemnity by all the branches of the Carmelite order today.

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