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Scapular

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A scapular is a sacramental garment of the Catholic church, usually consisting of two pieces of sewn cloth attached by strings and worn over the shoulders with one piece hanging over the chest and the other hanging over the back. The scapular was originally a component of some religious habits, the set of garments worn by members of a religious order, but later a smaller version (usually one inch by two inches) began to be worn under the clothes by laypersons who wished to associate with a particular religious order.

The most famous scapular is the Brown Scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel (q.v.) The Brothers of Our Lady of Mount Carmel (commonly referred to as Carmelites) were originally founded as an order of hermits that lived together on Mount Carmel in Israel in the early 1200s.

According to legend, the Blessed Virgin Mary miraculously appeared to Saint Simon Stock, the Prior General of the Carmelite Order on July 16, 1251, and promised that whoever died wearing the scapular of this order worthily would enter into heaven. Also according to legend, in 1322 the Blessed Virgin Mary miraculously appeared to Pope John XXII and extended the promise to include the so-called Sabbatine privilege, namely that those who died wearing the scapular of the order and who fulfilled certain other conditions would be rescued by the Blessed Virgin Mary from the punishment of purgatory on the first Saturday after their death. In the ensuing centuries many laypersons were enrolled in the scapular by Carmelite priests or other designated priests as a result of these promises. Devotion to the scapular was an important component of the final apparition of Our Lady of Fatima (q.v.) in 1917 as well.

The Carmelite Order has taken pains throughout the centuries to distance itself from a "magical" view of the scapular, as though simply wearing it was a "get out of purgatory free" card. Rather, wearing the Brown Scapular is a visible expression of affinity with the spirituality of the Carmelite Order, which emphasizes contemplative prayer, detachment from any created being that detracts from the primacy of God, and penance for the atonement of one's sins and for the sins of others. It is a sign of being clothed with the virtues of the Blessed Virgin Mary and under the mantle of her protection. A person who committed mortal sins without repentance would not be considered to be wearing the scapular "worthily" and hence the promise of the scapular would not apply to them.

Scapulars are often worn by members of a "third order," consisting of laypersons who make a promise to live the spirituality of a religious order while living and carrying out their ordinary duties in the world. Members of a Carmelite third order (either the Lay Carmelites or the Secular Order of Discalced Carmelites) wear a large brown scapular (approximately eight by six inches) outside of their clothes during their meetings or special religious ceremonies. Members of the Dominican third order (now called the Lay Dominicans) may wear a white scapular underneath their clothes as a sign of membership in the order.

Scapulars are also sometimes worn to express a particular religious devotion. For example, the Green Scapular is worn to express devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, with the intention of contributing to the conversion and salvation of the souls of non-believers.

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