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*The Marian Spirituality of the Medieval Religious Orders:
Medieval Devotion ... Carmelites*

**MEDIEVAL DEVOTION TO MARY AMONG THE
CARMELITES**

*Eamon R. Carroll, O.Carm.**

The word Carmel virtually defines the religious family that calls itself the Carmelite Order. It is a geographical designation (as in also Carthusian and Cistercian), not a person's name like Francis, Dominic and the Servite Seven Holy Founders. In the Church's calendar, Carmel is one of three Marian sites celebrated liturgically, along with Lourdes and St. Mary Major. It may be asked: Who founded the Carmelites on Mount Carmel? There is no easy answer, though some names have been suggested, beginning with the letter B—Brocard, Berthold, . . . What is known is that during the Crusades in the late eleven-hundreds some Europeans settled as hermits on Mount Carmel, in the land where the Savior had lived. Mount Carmel, a promontory facing the Mediterranean, near the city of Haifa, was biblically sacred to the memory of Elijah and his followers. Christians for centuries had chosen to live lives of prayer and penance in this remote site. A good trivia question would be: What are the existing survivors of the Latin Kingdom of the Crusades? Actually, there are three: first, the Commissariat of the Holy Land, still in the care of the Franciscans (under the embattled conditions of waning Christian and Catholic witness in the state of Israel); second, the Knights of Malta (with full title "Sovereign Military Order of the Hospital of St. John, of Rhodes and of Malta"), a religious and military order dating from the eleventh century; and third, the Order of Carmel.

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The bond between devotion to Mary and Mount Carmel is reflected well in the entrance prayer of the Carmelite liturgy for July 16th: “Lord God, you willed that the Order of Carmel should be named in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of your Son. Through her prayers as we honor her today bring us to your *holy mountain*, Christ our Lord . . . (emphasis added).” This prayer evokes the physical Carmel, a reference to the holy mountain who is Christ himself, and evokes the mystical imagery of the “ascent of Mt. Carmel,” as in the writings of St. John the Cross. The English translation of this collect in the current Roman Sacramentary unfortunately misses the significant allusion to the holy mountain, a point Pope John Paul II has underscored more than once, most recently in his letter to the Carmelite superior generals for the Carmelite Marian Year commemorating the 750th anniversary of the Scapular (March 25, 2001).

For the origins of Carmelite devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, we must return to the heights of Carmel. The patriarch of Jerusalem, then resident at Acre, the Italian-born St. Albert of Avogadro, acceded to the request of the hermits on Mt. Carmel for approval of their way of life, some time between 1206-1214 (dates he was patriarch); his murder, in 1214, is an event recalled on September 17th in the Carmelite calendar. In 1247 Pope Innocent IV gave the Church’s approval.¹

As early as 1238, Saracen pressure had led to the return of some Carmelite hermits to the West—to Cyprus, England, Sicily, France—and to their assuming the life of mendicant friars. By 1291 the Latin Kingdom was conquered. The historian Father Joachim Smet, O.Carm., is also a poet and many years ago he composed a ballad about the end of Carmelite religious life on Mount Carmel. It would be many centuries before there would

¹On July 25-28, 2001, the Carmelite Institute in Washington, D.C., embracing both branches of the Order, sponsored a conference in San Antonio, Texas, on the “Rule of Carmel: A Mystical Way.” Speakers included the two Generals: Joseph Chalmers, O.Carm., and Camilo Maccise, O.C.D. A similar Mariological seminar was held in Sassone/Rome (June 14-21, 2001), on the Order’s Marian patrimony.

But the Turks rushed in with their
 scimitars
 In a flashing tide of power,
 And they butchered the hermits as
 they sang
 At the Salve Regina hour.

We pray you, brethren, to think of
 us
 Whom the sword has sought to
 devour,
 And finish the song that we once
 began
 At the Salve Regina hour.

In comparison with the written rules of religious Orders, the Albertine version is unusual in a number of ways. It has twenty-four brief chapters; in the first, Patriarch Albert addresses "his beloved sons in Christ. B." [maybe Brocard?] and the other hermits under obedience to him who live near the spring on Mount Carmel.² Chapter twenty-four concludes: "Here are a few points I have written down with a standard of conduct to live up to; but our Lord, at his second coming, will reward anyone who does more than he is obliged to do." The final sentence shows a Benedictine balance: "See that the bounds of common sense are not exceeded, however, for common sense is the guide of the virtues." Neither Elijah nor Mary are named in the Rule, though the "spring on Mount Carmel" can be identified with the fountain of Elijah, and chapter fourteen recommends the building of an oratory among

²In 1999, Orbis Books (Maryknoll, New York) published *At the Fountain of Elijah: The Carmelite Tradition*, by Wilfrid McGreal, O.Carm., in the series *Traditions of Christian Spirituality*.

again be a Carmelite presence there. In 1634 the Discalced Carmelites returned and, in spite of setbacks, have managed to survive: they now staff a monastery on the headland of Mt. Carmel, with the sanctuary of Stella Maris and shrine of Flos Carmeli. Excavations of recent years have uncovered the ruins of the earliest Carmelite foundations. For many centuries, at general chapters of the Order a delegate would be appointed to represent the long-gone parent community on Mount Carmel. Here is Father Smet's poem:

THE SALVE REGINA HOUR

Mount Carmel's sides are tall and
steep
And bright with many a flower,
But not too steep for the Turk to
climb
At the Salve Regina hour.

The sun sank down in the western
sea,
Sank down in his blood-red bower,
But not so red as the choir stalls
At the Salve Regina hour.

We heard the tinkling of swords and
spears,
Like a Vesper-bell's brittle shower,
And the puffing of horses that rode
from dawn
To the Salve Regina hour.

'Some Christians knights are come,'
we thought.
'To mingle their voices with ours.
To pray for the weal of the Savior's
tomb
At the Salve Regina hour.'

the cells and daily Mass. It would develop that the oratory bore the name of "the Lady of the place," and pilgrim accounts soon after 1231 specify that the oratory was dedicated to Mary, inevitably Our Lady of Mt. Carmel.

All considerations of a Marian aspect to Carmelite origins must keep in mind that the hermits on Carmel and their successors in Europe came into a medieval Church and society with a highly developed sense of Holy Mary. Carmelite Marian life absorbed much of what was around them. There are two aspects of particular note: one the theme of patronage, the other the name of Mary in the Order's title. The dedication of their oratory to Mary reflected the understanding that she was their patroness; she was present to their community. The second element is the incidence of Mary's name in the title of the Order, particularly important given the Carmelite problems of origin and identity, for they encountered opposition as they migrated back to the West. The Holy See was prohibiting the formation of new religious congregations, as a result of legislation promulgated at the 4th Council of the Lateran, A.D. 1215.

Albert's Rule refers to hermits, more frequently to "brothers" (Latin *fratres*, whence *frati*). A bull of Innocent IV (1252) was addressed to archbishops and bishops "in favor of the hermits of St. Mary of Mount Carmel." It was common to use Marian titles for many enterprises—monasteries, churches, hospitals, religious congregations. Through the balance of the thirteenth century, pontifical documents used such titles as "the Order of St. Mary of Mt. Carmel," "hermit brothers of the Order of Blessed Mary of Mt. Carmel," or simply, in legal and civil documents, "Order of Saint Mary of Mount Carmel." A rescript of Urban IV (1263) called Mary "patron of Carmel." Among Order documents, the 1294 Constitutions were the first to declare Mary as patron. About the same time (1274, under Gregory X) "Carmelites" became a common term. When a woman's branch was founded, similar titles were used; the 1481 Parma Constitutions were "Statutes of the

Religious Sisters of the Order of the Most Blessed Mother of God of Mount Carmel.” The current title is “Order of the Brothers of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mt. Carmel,” abbreviated to simply Carmelites. The sister Order is “Discalced Brothers of the Order of the Most Blessed Mother of God of Mt. Carmel,” or, simply (since St. Teresa of Jesus [d. 1581] and St. John [d. 1591]), the Discalced Carmelites. Our abbreviations convey the difference: O.Carm.³ and O.C.D.

The 1281 Constitutions provided a foundational text in the initial article (*rubrica prima*), as the answer to questions of younger members about origins of the Order. The Elijan origin was stressed, but it was not until the 1324 version that Mary was mentioned. The question then became: How did our Order originate and why are we called Brothers of the Order of the Blessed Mary of Mount Carmel? The answer (along with the reference to Elijah) became: After the Incarnation, the successors of Elijah built a church there (on Mt. Carmel) in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and chose her title. Therefore, from that time they were by apostolic privilege called the “Brothers of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mt. Carmel.”

All subsequent documents are colored by the Elijan and Marian emphases. A letter of the prior general Peter of Millau requests the favor of King Edward I of England, promising the prayers of the brethren “to the most glorious Virgin . . . to whose praise and glory the Order itself was especially instituted in parts beyond the sea.” The general chapter of Montpellier (1287) begs “the prayers of the glorious Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus, in whose service and honor our institute of Mount Carmel was founded.”

A major source of information about the Marian dimension of the Order is the liturgy. The Ordinal of Sibert de Beka (d. 1332) appeared about 1312. When there was no Marian feast, there was to be sung Mass in her honor daily, and, normally, on Saturdays

³With O-period Carm-period—I have not yet succeeded in persuading even family members that it is not spelled like “o'clock”!

there were to be the office and Mass of our Lady. The canonical hours of the Blessed Virgin were to be said daily. Such details as the addition of Mary's name to the *Confiteor* were also known. The *Salve Regina* was said on many occasions. The ancient prayers showed the same influence; for example, from 1281 the *Concede* was prayed at professions: "Grant to your servants, we beseech thee O Lord, unfailing health of mind and body, and through the intercession of the glorious and blessed ever Virgin Mary may we be saved from present sorrow and partake of eternal joy, through Christ our Lord." This prayer was in Carmelite liturgical books, just after the Litany of Loreto, up until modern times; most recently, it is found in the 1938 breviary.

A subsequent prayer, *Protégé* (from 1324), was somewhat shorter: "Protect, O Lord, your servants with the support of peace, and they being confident of the patronage of Blessed Virgin Mary, secure them from all enemies, through Christ our Lord." This prayer was used in many contexts (note the term "patronage"). Though not unique to Carmelites, the profession formula began: "I make my profession and promise obedience to God and to Blessed Mary . . ."

Authors, as early as the first part of the 1300s, wrote that Elijah and Elisha began a form of life that lasted until their successors became Christians and built an oratory in honor of the Virgin Mary. Beyond the legendary writings were those of a skilled English theologian John Baconthorpe (d. ca. 1348). He delighted in applying biblical references of the beauty of verdant Carmel to our Lady: "The beauty of Carmel is given to her" (Isaiah 35:2), where Carmel means the holy life of hermits, and, comparably, "Thy head is like Carmel" (Cant. 7:6). Among Baconthorpe's extensive writings are the pieces *Tract on the Rule of the Carmelite Order* (tracing our Lady's life paragraph-by-paragraph of the Rule) and *In Praise of the Carmelite Order Devoted to Mary* (arguing that the Order belongs by right to Mary). His *Speculum de institutione*

ordinis pro veneratione B. Mariae is a defense (and exaltation) of the Order's relation to Mary.⁴

An outstanding contribution of Baconthorpe was the union of the Marian and Elijah elements of the Order's tradition. In the scriptural story of Elijah, he interpreted the little cloud in the shape of a man's hand, that presaged the end of the three-and-a-half-year drought, as a symbol of Mary (1 Kings 18:44). He wrote: "The love of God descended on Mary . . . and through Mary the rains of mercy and grace descended on what was dried up, and thus restored all things." He is remembered as well for his defense of the Immaculate Conception—a conversion story, for his usual point of departure was the common scholastic denial of that privilege. His writings reflect the factors that turned him into a strong defender, summed up in two statements: 1) the Son of God who came to destroy sin kept his Mother free of all sin; 2) the Mother of God was not to have less than was given to Eve in the state of innocence.

What is the cut-off date for "medieval" in this quartet of presentations on the Marian spirituality of the medieval religious Orders? I have chosen 1380 as my final entry, because of a book of enormous influence on all subsequent Marian devotion in Carmel. In that year, Philip Ribot (d. 1391), of the Catalonian province, put together *The Institution of the First Monks*, purportedly the work of a fifth-century patriarch of Jerusalem, John 44th (ca. 414). There was such a bishop, but he had nothing to do with this interesting and important collection.⁵ Much of that book is on Elijah as the founder of Carmelite life, but there is significant material on Mary and Carmel. Ribot finds the spiritual meaning of the "little cloud" of Elijah as reinforcing the sense of Mary's virginity, along with traditional notions about Mary and her Order—mother, patron,

⁴See A. Staring (ed.), *Medieval Carmelite Heritage: Early Reflections on the Nature of the Order* (Rome: Institutum Carmelitanum, 1989).

⁵A critical edition of *The Institution* is in preparation by the Australian Carmelite Paul Chandler, and, as "Carmel's Foundational Story," it was the subject of a study week held in Washington, D.C., in September 1996.

sister—all indications of what my Irish confrere, the theologian Christopher O'Donnell, likes to describe as “a loving presence: the Marian heritage of Carmel.”

You may wonder why I have not so far spoken about the most widespread Carmelite devotion. Although known as the feast of the Brown Scapular, July 16th had as proper title the “commemoration of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mt. Carmel.” In the general calendar this feast survives as the memorial “Our Lady of Mt. Carmel.” One reason I have not yet mentioned the Scapular is the late emergence of this devotion, especially in terms of its spread to the laity. There is the complicated historical problem: Did or did not the Blessed Virgin appear to the prior general, St. Simon Stock, on July 16, the traditional date of the appearance? And, did she promise final perseverance to those who would wear her habit devoutly, specifically the Scapular as part of the Carmelite religious habit? The earliest written allusion to such a vision is from the end of the 1300s. It reads: “St. Simon was an Englishman, a man of great holiness and devotion, who always in his prayers asked the Virgin to favor his Order with some singular privilege. The Virgin appeared to him holding the Scapular in her hand saying, ‘This is for you and yours a privilege; the one who dies in it will be saved.’” Associated with that first Scapular promise was the so-called “Sabbatine privilege”—Mary’s motherly concern extending even to those in Purgatory. The term “sabbatine” may derive from Saturday, our Lady’s special day (or it may be a misreading for *subito*). Serious scholarship (especially by the late L. Saggi, O.Carm.) has shown there was no vision to John XXII in 1322. Yet the “conditions” for the so-called Sabbatine privilege remain fully valid as criteria of true devotion to Our Lady of Mt. Carmel: prayer, penance (often abstinence on Wednesday and Saturday as well as Friday), and the chastity of one’s state of life.

It may also be noted that the Scapular devotion began to spread in the late-fifteenth century—the exciting time of nascent humanism, exploratory voyages to the New World, religious unrest that would explode in the Reformation. The same period saw the

spread of Rosary confraternities under Alan de la Roche, devotion to St. Anne and St. Joachim, conflict about the Immaculate Conception. In 1479 a Belgian Carmelite, Arnold Bostius, wrote a significant book on the patronage of Mary towards Carmel, with the reciprocal obligations of her clients. He had much to say about the Scapular. One of the beloved legends he recounted was that our Lady visited the hermits on Carmel. He found their witness compelling. I conclude with his tender evocation:

I believe that the holy flock of Carmel, instructed by the example and doctrine of so perfect a teacher, must have often cried out under the influence of her great love: "How have we deserved to be visited by the Mother of our Lord? O most blessed Mother, whom up to now we have been waiting for, who instituted our Order, organized it and now rules it perfectly—you are the fulfillment of the Law, the completion of the figures, the declaration of the prophets, the showing of the truth. We who are privileged to live here fill our hearts at your fountains. We openly profess that we are guided by your light, transformed into you and our life into your life. Nothing is better for us than your assistance, nothing more joyful than your consolation. Remain with us, O Lady Mary, we seek refuge in your bosom. A mother must stay with her sons, a teacher with her pupils, a superior with her subjects, and a queen remain with her servants. Our holy father Elijah dedicated himself and his sons to you. By your great merits you have given beauty and nobility to the whole family of Carmel from its very beginning.