

## FRANCES OF AMBOISE (1427-1485)

Blessed

Frances was born, probably at Thouars, on Sept. 28, 1427; her parents were Louis, Viscount of Thouars, and Mary of Rieux, of the baronial family of Encenis. When she was only four years old, she was promised as a bride to Peter, the second-born son of the Duke of Brittany, and spent the rest of her childhood with Joan, her future mother-in-law, the sister of Charles VII, king of France. It was Joan who impressed upon her a deeply Christian spirit received through the teaching of St. Vincent Ferrer. Upon the death of Peter's father and older brother, he himself ascended to the ducal throne of Brittany and, together with Frances, was crowned in the cathedral of Rennes in 1450. Her positive influence on her husband, the Duke, and on the policy of the court and the affairs of state was profound, so much so that the seven years of his government were to be remembered by the people as «the times of the blessed duchess.»

When Frances became a widow in 1457, she not only opposed a second marriage for herself — despite the pressures of her father and the king of France — but oriented her life towards the religious state. After repeated conversations with Bl. John Soreth, the prior general of the Carmelites, she decided upon Carmel, and offered her personal belongings for the foundation of the first monastery of Carmelite nuns in France. The monastery rose at Bondon, near Vannes, in 1463, with nuns whom the Bl. Soreth had transferred from Liège. Frances joined them on March 25, 1468. Wishing to bridge the social gap between herself and the nuns, she asked them to substitute the title «handmaid of Christ» for that of duchess. In 1477 she founded a second monastery at Nantes, under the protection of Our Lady *des Couets* (of the Scots). Two years later this monastery welcomed the nuns remaining from the former monastery of Bondon.

By reason of these foundations and of her influence on the legislation adopted in these and other French Carmels, Bl. Frances is acknowledged as foundress of the Carmelite nuns in France. She is responsible for the introduction of the practice of frequent Communion (even daily Communion for the sick) and for the imposition by vow, under the pain of excommunication, of the strictest kind of cloister, which forbade both access to the monastery of all outside persons (including women) and egress of the nuns from the claustral precinct. With this vow she anticipated the legislation of St. Pius V by a century and preserved her religious from those evils that the absence of cloister produced in other places.

Frances died at Nantes on Nov. 4, 1485. During the French revolution the nuns were forced to abandon the convent, the mementos of the blessed were dispersed, and her remains were profaned. A series of claustral instructions are attributed to the blessed; the original manuscript seems to have been lost. Also reputedly hers are some meditations, published by Christopher Le Roy. Her cult was publicly recognized by Pope Pius IX on July 16, 1863. Today her memorial is celebrated on Nov. 5.

She is usually shown with her eyes turned to the crucifix that she holds in her hands. Over her Carmelite habit she wears a cape of ermine (instead of wool), to designate her rank of duchess.

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