

JOHN SORETH (1394-1471)
Blessed, priest

John Soreth was born near Caen in Normandy in 1394 and took the Carmelite habit in the convent of that city. He was ordained a priest about the year 1417. In Paris, he obtained his licentiate in theology in 1437 and his master's degree on May 26, 1438, after which he was regent of studies in the convent of his Order. In 1440 he was elected superior of his religious province in France, and from 1451 until his death (1471) he was prior general of the entire Order. In 1452 he was also granted, *honoris causa*, a degree of master in theology at Padua.

He is especially remembered as a reformer, that is, for his constant efforts to bring the Order back to the splendor of religious observance at a particularly critical period of history. His activity took two directions: inculcating the observance of the rule and constitutions; and introducing «observance» into as many convents as he could — that is, observance in its specific meaning with regard to poverty and to interior and exterior recollection. Both ends were procured by pontifical bulls, the decrees of general and provincial chapters, a new edition of the constitutions and a commentary on the rule.

The first type of observance was imposed by authority and was obligatory for all; the second derived from the desire of individuals or of groups who desired a greater perfection, a desire which the general acknowledged, favored and defended, even by proclaiming decrees and granting privileges adapted — or at least believed to be such — to his aim. Obviously, the second form had greater probabilities of success; hence the efforts of the blessed to implant it everywhere.

This form, in turn, was twofold: an «observance» which arose within the confines of a convent that remained under the obedience to the provincials and served as a salutary ferment; the other form had already existed for some years under the name of the Mantuan congregation and had shown separatist tendencies. The first was called «Callixtine», because it was officially sanctioned by the general chapter of Paris in 1456 and was confirmed on April 13 of the following year by Pope Callixtus III. The second was also called «Eugenian», because it had been Pope Eugene IV to approve it. Blessed Soreth was also generous with this second group; together with other actions, he favored the passage of some convents to its jurisdiction and dealt with its religious with such familiarity that, when he was among them, he seemed to be their local prior rather than the general.

Bl. Soreth often visited the Order, presiding at chapters, putting statutes in order, protecting the rule and constitutions. Rubric IV of the second part of the constitutions, rearranged and promulgated by him in 1462, contains the manner of conducting the canonical visitations. It is legitimate to suppose that it was his method: to interest oneself minutely in the individual convents, to study the causes of eventual defects and to prescribe the remedies, but then to return later in order to be assured that the religious have really done something in the directions indicated.

In order to explain his thoughts better, he composed the *Expositio paraenetica in Regulam Carmelitarum* /A Hortatory Exposition of the Rule of the Carmelites/: paternal counsels and warm exhortations, not only to have the indispensable observed, but also to reach the spirit, the perfection of the regular life. The whole treatise is permeated with his personal experience as religious, provincial and general.

Another activity of the blessed had to do with the beginnings of the Carmelite nuns. As early as 1452 he had received the Beguines of the monastery «Ten Elsen» of Gueldren under the direction of the Order; and this affiliation he perfected in the following year, after the concession of the bull *Cum Nulla* (Oct. 7, 1452) on the part of Pope Nicholas V. At Florence he entrusted the «Sisters of the Order» to a priest of the observance of the Selve /Woods/; in 1455 he incorporated the «cloistered Sisters» of Nieu Kirk into the Order. During the same period the monastery of Dinant was founded; then there arose the monasteries of Liege in 1457, and of Harlem and Huy in 1466. In 1463 the monastery of Bon-don was begun in the duchy of Brittany; and here, on March 25, 1468, the blessed received the duchess herself, the Blessed Frances of Amboise, into the Order. In 1468 the monastery of Namur was inaugurated, and in 1469 that of Vilvoorde.

Blessed Soreth died at Angers on July 25, 1471, and Bl. Baptist Spagnoli dedicated an elegy to him. He was beatified by Pope Pius IX in 1866.

He is represented with a pix in his hand, in memory of an event which occurred in Liege during the devastation of the city on the part of Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy and Count of Flanders. Braving death, Bl. Soreth gathered up the Sacred Hosts which the populace had seized and thrown about on the ground, and carried them into the church of his Order.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: I. Soreth, *Expositio paraenetica in Regulam Carmelitarum* Paris 1625; *Collectanea praecipuorum aliquot praeclaire gestorum per B. Patrem Ioannem Sorethium, ex variis antiquis monumentis digesta*, in *Anacleta Ordinis Carmelitarum*, XI (1941-42), pp. 24-49; Li. Saggi, *La Congregazione Mantovana dei Carmelitani sino alla morte del B. Battista Spagnoli (1516)*, Rome 1954, p. 334 (index). *Prima biographia B. Ioannis Soreth e codice Viennensi Novae Sanctorum (12709) transcripta* ed. Marcus Reuver, in *Carmelus*, V (1958), pp. 73-99; Adalbert Deckert, *Die Oberdeutsche Proxrmss der Karmeliten nach den Akten ihrer Kapitel von 11/21 bis 1529*, Rome 1961, p. 378 (index); Emond, I, pp. 189-191; A. Staring, *The Carmelite Sisters in the Netherlands in Carmelus*, X (1963), pp. 56-92; Vital Wilderink, *Les premiers monasteres de Carmelites en France*, *ibid.* pp. 93-148; id., *Les Constitutions des premieres Carmelites en France*, Rome 1966, p. 295 (index); C. Catena, *Le Carmelitane; storia e spiritualita*, Rome 1969, 434 sg. (index). V. also *Vies des Saints*. VII pp. 620-22.

Louis Saggi