



Carmelite Spiritual Center

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Life is Worth Living

DEVOTION TO OUR LADY OF THE BROWN SCAPULAR

BY Fr. Kevin Shanley, O.Carm.

Some 70 years ago a young Polish boy named Karol Wojtyla was enrolled in the Brown Scapular of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel on the occasion of his First Communion. To this day, as Pope John Paul II, he still wears the Brown Scapular.

Many other Catholic boys and girls around the world were enrolled in the same way, and on the occasion of the 750th Anniversary of the Brown Scapular its most prominent wearer is expected to write about his life-long Marian Devotion in the context of Christian living. And as a member of the Carmelite Third Order, Pope John Paul II is expected to join with Carmelites around the globe to honor this age-old devotion.

Origins in Israel

Historian Fr. John Welch, O.Carm., traces the origins of the Carmelite Order back to Mt. Carmel in Israel during the late 12th Century A.D. It is a place sacred to the memory of Elijah, the great prophet of the Book of Kings in the Old Testament filled with great zeal for the God of Israel.

At the end of the Crusades to free the Holy Land from Saracen^e rule, the Carmelites were forced to leave their sacred place. Some migrated with English Crusaders to a place called Aylesford in England near Canterbury.

From their earliest days, the Carmelites focused on devotion to Mary under the title of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel. An account written in the late 14th Century tells of an appearance at Aylesford of Our Lady to St. Simon Stock who was elected prior general of the Carmelites much earlier in 1254. According to pious tradition, Our Lady held the scapular, even then part of the Carmelite religious habit, in her hand and said that the one who dies wearing it would be saved.

The Scapular Today

Although it is impossible to verify the historical fact of this event, a more contemporary approach to devotion to the Brown Scapular understands that it is an expression of devotion to Mary, a sign of her protection and care, and a type of affiliation to the Carmelite Order. In addition, it also signifies a willingness on the part of the wearer to imitate Mary in her prayerful submission to God's plan of salvation. It also offers a rich, spiritual tradition that honors Mary as the first and foremost of her Son's disciples. The Scapular is an outward sign of the protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and an effective symbol of Mary's protection to the Carmelite Order.

Carmelite Spirituality

Carmelite Spirituality remains one of the outstanding religious traditions of the Catholic Church. Among its basic principles, as exemplified by three of its greatest saints, John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila and Therese of Lisieux, would be for Scapular wearers: 1) Frequent participation in the Mass and Communion; 2) Frequent reading of and meditation on Scripture; 3) The regular praying of at least part of the Liturgy of the Hours (the Church's official prayer); 4) Imitation of and devotion to the Blessed Mother as the woman of Faith who hears the Word of God and practices it; and, 5) The practice of the virtues, especially Christian charity, chastity according to one's state in life, and obedience to the will of God.

Unusual Notions of the Scapular

At the height of the popularity of the Brown Scapular in the years prior to Vatican II, some people actually treated it as something of a magical charm that not only would grant that its wearer would not go to hell, but even that it could override any just punishment awaiting a sinner in the afterlife. It was even bandied about by some that Mary would guarantee that those who wore the Brown Scapular would get into heaven no matter how they lived on earth.

Such thinking, of course, was contrary to the role of Jesus Christ who is the saviour of all. Certainly Mary would never do something that would be contrary to what her Divine Son would do. She is not a parallel way to heaven, and is certainly not going to sneak people into eternity.

Current Understandings

Although not nearly as popular as it was decades ago, the Scapular is second only to the rosary as part of the devotion to Mary on the part of many. Over the years, lay people joined groups connected to the Carmelites and received the Scapular. As its popularity grew, for practical reasons, its size lessened so that in our current times the normal Scapular for lay people is reduced to two postage-stamp-sized cards sewn onto brown ^{wo}ollen fabric connected by ribbons. Thus the Scapular may be worn over the shoulders in a somewhat inconspicuous manner. The cards or panels display a picture of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel on the front, and usually on the back a depiction of the Sacred Heart, or St. Simon Stock, or the Scapular Promise.

The ancient tradition of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel told St. Simon Stock that anyone wearing the Scapular would not go to ^Hell truly makes sense if the wearer realizes that he or she is called to strive with one's whole life to live the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

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Wearing the Brown Scapular is, indeed, an acknowledgment of the protection and love of the Blessed Mother. It is also a pledge on the part of the wearer to imitate her as the exemplar of Christian discipleship.

It is hoped by many Carmelites and others that during this 750th Anniversary of the Brown Scapular of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel that its authentic devotion and theology will remain part of the spirituality of both religious and laity in the Church and elsewhere.

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