

# THE SPRINGS OF CARMEL

## Phase I Formation Lesson 9 Required Reading

By Peter Slattery

### Elijah

Carmelites see themselves as sons and daughters of the prophet Elijah. Because they were hermit-pilgrims living a life of silence and prayer on Mount Carmel, they felt a close association with Elijah. They did not just pluck this association out of the air. The desert fathers always saw John the Baptist and Elijah as models for hermits and monks. However, Mount Carmel was a holy place because Elijah, the Tishbite, had done great things for God there. It is not surprising then that the Latin hermits who settled on Mount Carmel took Elijah as a model to imitate. Jacques de Vitry, the Bishop of Acre from 1216-1228, described, “the hermits on Mount Carmel as leading solitary lives in imitation of the holy anchorite, Elijah, where like bees of the Lord, they laid up sweet spiritual honey in little comb-like cells.”

The Fathers of the Church saw religious life as a response to a Gospel call. Since they reasoned that the New Testament is foreshadowed in the Old Testament, therefore, there should be types of the monastic life in the Old Testament. Thus, the Fathers saw Elijah as such a type. Some of the early Fathers, for example Justin and Irenaeus, offer Elijah as a model for the perfect life. Origen cites Elijah as a proof of the efficacy of prayer, while Athanasius, in his *Life of Anthony*, recalls the saying of the Father of religious life that all who make profession of the solitary life must take the great Elijah as their model and see in his life what their lives must be. The monastic movement of the fourth century took Elijah as the model for the monk, emphasizing his celibacy, his poverty, his dwelling in the desert, his prayer and fasting. Jerome refers to the tradition which sees the prophet Elijah as the first monk to inhabit the desert.

It was on this patristic basis that the early Carmelite authors based the order’s connection with Elijah. This, and the fact that they settled on the holy Mount Carmel, brought them into contact with the Old and New Testament traditions concerning Elijah.

Today’s Carmelites would want to stress Elijah’s role as a champion of the people, and the embodiment of the faith of the community of the anawim (the remnant of the People of God).

When the Carmelites took Elijah as a patron of their Order, they followed the spirituality of the time and saw him as a model of the eremitical life. Throughout the history of the Order, Carmelite authors have seen Elijah as model of prayerful contemplation and prophetic action. This chapter will take a brief look at the biblical evidence and will show how this interpretation came into the Carmelite tradition; then Elijah as a figure who protects the poor and the alienated; how Carmelites are called to take an option for the poor; and, finally, how Elijah is an archetype for all believers in general and Carmelites in particular.

### *Elijah in the Bible*<sup>1</sup>

The Elijah saga-cycle is to be found in that part of Scripture starting from his sudden appearance in 1 Kings 17:1 and ending with his being taken up to heaven in the fiery chariot in 2 Kings 2:13. The background of the Book of Kings is the effort to show how the monarchy was a failure. The context of the Elijah stories is the

---

<sup>1</sup> This section (pp. 24-27) owes a debt of gratitude to the research of Chalmers, J., O.Carm, “The Prophetic Model of Religious Life: The Role of the Prophet Elijah in Carmelite Spirituality,” in *Nubecula* 36 (1985), No. 1.

struggle between the true religion and pagan influences. Yahweh was the God of the Israelites, who had brought them out of Egypt and given them a Promised Land. The God of the Hebrews was not one to look for elbow room on an Olympus with a lot of other gods. “You shall have no Gods except me” (Dt 5:7). At the time of Elijah, the pagan customs of the neighboring Canaanites had become strongly embedded among the common people in Israel. There was a strong possibility that adherence to the God of the Exodus would be wiped out.

Elijah appeared on the scene at a very critical moment in this struggle. Ahab, the King of Israel, married Jezebel, princess of Tyre. Her religion was called Baalism, which was based on the idea that humans must relate to and appease the mysterious powers that surround and support them. This was done through ritual, and these powers were often personified and made into gods—Baalism. Jezebel was allowed, together with her servants, to continue to practice her religion in Israel. A temple of Baal was built for her in Samaria (1 K 6:32 f.). However, Jezebel maintained 450 prophets of Baal, and 400 prophets of Asherah. Jezebel and her court actively campaigned to convert the Israelites to her religion. She was determined to wipe out faith in the God of the Israelites, and to substitute Baal for Yahweh. Jezebel remained in the memory of the people of Israel as the one who had invited the King to sin against Yahweh.

Ahab’s acceptance of his wife’s religion and culture had political overtones. He saw this as a means to unify the Israelites and Canaanites. In doing so he was carrying on the policy of his father, King Omri. The marriage of Ahab and Jezebel was a move in the attempt to unify the kingdom. However, the prophet Elijah was the leader of the opposition to this betrayal of Yahweh.

The scriptural stories of Elijah show a prophet who was actively involved in the problems of his times as the mouthpiece of Yahweh, upholding the true religion of Israel. The main reason for the Elijah cycle being included in the Deuteronomic history was that Elijah was the instrument used by God to preserve the true religion in Israel—a truly critical moment in the history of God’s people.

Elijah, as God’s prophet, was both contemplative and active in his response to God’s call. He was a person who was totally at God’s disposal. He stood before Yahweh like a servant waiting instruction (1 K 7:1; 18:15, 36). This implied Elijah was in a constant state of prayer. He, like all the prophets, was dominated by the Word of God. The subject of the Elijah saga was not the prophet himself but Yahweh, whose Word was not simply something to reflect on in solitude and silence, but a fire to burn evil out of the hearts of people. Total openness to God’s word led Elijah to live a very special style of life.

He was a visible sign of Israel; a sign which challenged the whole people. He did not live like others but stood out as a criticism of their lives and values. The prophet could be a sign to others only because first of all he himself had been grasped by the Word of God. Elijah was a person of mystery. He was famous for his sudden appearances and disappearances (cf. 1 K 8:12). His final disappearance in the fiery chariot left a lasting impression on God’s people.

Two characteristics of Elijah stood out—his faithfulness and his creativity. He was faithful to the true religious tradition of Israel, being the champion of covenant fidelity in a day when the covenant nearly disappeared. He refused to allow anyone to take away his religion. God alone was the Lord of Israel and Elijah would take no interference in Yahweh’s domain by the Baals of Jezebel.

On the other hand, Elijah was not afraid to be creative in religious matters. As the people settled in Israel, they began to forget the God who had seemed to fit in well with their experiences in the desert, but did not seem to have much to say to their new life in the Promised Land. The Israelites tended to adopt the worship of Baal who was more useful to farmers as he was the supposed master of the rain and the sunshine and lord of fertility. The image of their God Yahweh was in serious need of “modernization.” If he was the true God

of every situation in which Israel might find herself, it was Elijah who succeeded in transforming the image of Yahweh who commanded the rain, who sent fire from heaven; it was Yahweh who was the one and only God of Israel and not Baal.

### *Elijah and Carmelite Spirituality*

So far we have seen Elijah as he was in the biblical tradition, now we shall see what effect he has on Carmelite spirituality. The order sees Elijah as patron and spiritual father. The characteristics of the prophet—fidelity to tradition and creativity are basic to understanding Carmel in the past and present.

Joseph Chalmers says that every Christian is called to be perfect (Mt 5:48). However, this perfection cannot be reached in a day; it requires constant growth. The Christian life is a continuous becoming with many stages striving towards maturity in Christ. In Hebrew Scriptures we see how Yahweh taught Israel with great patience and over a long period of time. In the Christian Scriptures we see a gradual deepening of faith. The Christian cannot stand still, but must strive for a fullness of life in Christ. Jesus, himself, was not immune from this basic Christian experience—“and Jesus increased in wisdom, in stature, and in favor with God and people” (Lk 2:52).

The Carmelite order has followed and is following this law of growth throughout its history. This must be the path of any order which takes the prophet, Elijah, as its spiritual father. The word of the prophets was always directed to their own situation. They were always modern because they sought new answers to new problems. Prophets always opposed the idea that history has been fulfilled, and that there are no new challenges. So Carmelites, following the spirit of Elijah, must not only be faithful to the traditions of the past, but must be creative when faced with new challenges.

Elijah was a man of vision. He used his experience of God in silence and solitude to clothe the word of God in a garb suitable for his times. So, too, Carmelites listen to the word of God in a garb suitable for their times. They hear God in prayer, experience the signs of the times in reflective contemplation, and face the challenges of their own times. This is how they live according to the inspiration of the prophet Elijah.

As Elijah was a person deeply committed to the religious traditions of his people, so too, Carmelites must be faithful to their tradition of prayer in silence and solitude, contemplation and mysticism. The order has produced men and women who have attained mystical experience of God, perhaps with a concept of the world not in tune with today’s outlook. Elijah did not simply repeat the past, but wanted to reinterpret the tradition in the light of new circumstances. Faithfulness among Carmelites is not clinging to the past, but rethinking the tradition of the Order in creative ways. The spirituality of Carmel must continually ask how being intimate with God and listening to his word can be done in the world of today.

The Order forms part of the mendicant tradition, which not only lived in simplicity and poverty, but served the Church with an active apostolate. With Elijah there was no conflict between prayer and activity. So Carmelites, like Elijah, can be both faithful to the traditions of the Order, and yet creative in applying this tradition to modern problems. When Carmelites are creative, they are open to growth. Therefore, by following the prophet Elijah, Carmelites are called to be prophets in the Church. For the prophet there is a combination of contemplation on the word and active service of the Church and the world.

A Carmelite is one who seeks the face of God; a Carmelite is one who hears God’s word both in tradition and in the world about him/her. Consequently, modern Carmelites see their prophetic lives to be lived as a fundamental option for the poor. To read Carmelite tradition from the perspective of the poor is to imitate our forefathers. It is a case of fidelity.

## *Elijah and the Poor*

In Elijah's time, the people had forgotten their tradition of caring for the poor, the widows, the orphans, and those who were oppressed. The original enthusiasm which in times past had given Israel strength and originality had been forgotten. The king, Ahab, had changed the tradition. This reinterpretation suited Ahab and Jezebel to strengthen their kingdom and forget God's commands. Ahab's turning away from the God of Israel would take no opposition. When he challenged this betrayal of Yahweh, Elijah was considered a traitor to the King and the nation.

Ahab's betrayal of God had economic, social and political consequences for the people of God. Ahab became master of commerce, took money and goods from the poor, and built his marble palace and temple of Baal in Samaria. He robbed the poor and murdered when necessary to gain his ends. When the country was stricken by drought, his only concern was for his horses (army) and donkeys (commerce). That means his only concern was power and money, not the stricken people of God. The King tried to hide the face of Yahweh from the people and stifle the cry of the poor.

Carlos Mesters<sup>2</sup> notes that to understand Elijah's opposition and intervention, we need to look at the three functions of the Elijah tradition: first, the tradition; second, the situation of the oppressed; third, Elijah himself.

First, Elijah relived the Exodus journey of the people. He went to Karith and relived spiritually the experience of God's people when Moses led them out of captivity in Egypt. He experienced denunciation, and the hunger and thirst of the desert. He became one with God's people by remaking their Exodus.

Second, Elijah sought out the favorites of God among his people—the poor. This is evident in his going to the widow of Sarephtha. She was a widow and a stranger. All of these characteristics described the alienated people, those whom King Ahab did not want in his kingdom. In contrast to Ahab, the widow preserved the ideal of sharing, with the capacity to recognize God's call to life. In other words, she preserved the ideal of the covenant. Elijah prayed at the request of the widow and his prayer became an expression of the cry of the poor. In the end, the widow gave her witness: "You are a man of God."

In his search for the true God of Israel, Elijah went to the tradition and to the poor. However, the search for God does not end in the tradition or in the people. God surpasses both, as was indicated by Elijah's journey to Mount Horeb where he learned that God was not in the storm, the earthquake, the lightning—all signs that accompanied the giving of the law to Moses. Instead Elijah found God in the gentle breeze. In his journey to God, Elijah passed through tradition, contacted the poor, and walked in darkness and reflection to find Yahweh, the living God. Elijah, as we will see later in the chapter, stands out as an archetype, an everyman figure, by his scriptural experience and his journeys. People often find it easy to identify with many biblical personalities, because of the universal nature of their experiences—Elijah is such a one.

Mester believes that by passing through these three functions—the reliving of the Exodus experience, seeking the favorites of God, and seeking the true God of Israel—Elijah gradually distanced himself from Ahab and Jezebel and their re-interpretation of the tradition of Israel's history. Elijah became the leader of the opposition to Baal and his prophets. As a prophet of God, he stood for Yahweh against the prevailing religious, social, and political structures, and with the poor and the alienated. He was a faithful prophet, and God blessed the people through him and his ministry. Elijah was creative in re-establishing worship of Yahweh. In the end, Yahweh defended Elijah and once again freed the people.

---

<sup>2</sup> Mesters, C., O.Carm., "The Mystical Tradition at the Service of the Poor," in D. Blanchard, O.Carm. (Ed.) *Liberation Spirituality: Carmelite Perspectives*, Sword 67 (1987).

### *Carmelites and the Poor*

Carmelites share a vocation to seek the face of God. The face of God is revealed in the poor in two ways. The poor are an expression of God's denunciation of injustice. Our Carmelite tradition tells us to seek the presence of God in the gentle breeze. This is the God who unseats the powerful and raises up the humble. Before Carmelites can be practitioners of mysticism, we must learn to be disciples and apprentices. This demands a conversion of life and an identity with the poor and alienated. This is a prophetic message which Carmelites have for today's Church and society.

Carmelites need to analyze critically what our mystical tradition has to offer the poor of today's world. Often poor people live contemplation; they climb Mount Carmel and pass through the dark night, but rarely understand what our spiritual theologians and writers are saying. This is often because Carmelites may be speaking to an elite few. Carmelites often deal with individual problems and do not pay sufficient attention to unjust structures. These structures alienate people and keep them oppressed. Carmelites may be in danger of not being faithful to the traditions of Elijah and Jesus who walked among the people and struggled against infidelity to God's word. The lives of today's poor can provide Carmelites with a better understanding of our tradition.

The Elijah tradition calls Carmelites to prophecy. The prophetic dimension of Carmelite spirituality challenges men and women of Carmel to be immersed in the world of their own times. They, like the prophets of old, need to have an attitude of openness to the word of God, to be attentive to the signs of the times, and need to speak out against injustices wherever they see them. They need to seek the face of God both in solitude like Elijah, but also in the alienated, like Elijah did in the heart of the widow. As the prophets were the heart and conscience of Israel, so Carmelites need to be the same for the Church and stress Elijah's role as a champion of the people and the embodiment of the faith of the community. The prophetic model for Carmelite life helps to give a deeper understanding of vowed life.

### *Chastity*

Consecrated chastity is a demonstration to the world of the possibility of love. Our times seem to be involved in a never ending search for the kind of pleasure which depersonalizes many fellow humans. Consecrated chastity in religious life is a positive commitment to others, and those who live this vow want to mirror the concern God has for all people. Religious are so in love with God and all his creation that they are incapable of giving themselves in love exclusively to one person. They make themselves eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom (Mt 19:12). This is a witness to the absolute transcendence of God and to the universality of Christian love, because religious pledge themselves to all those whom God sends them. This involvement of the whole of one's life as a sign to others is prophetic witness. From that moment on, the prophet and the religious are totally involved in God.

The function of this prophetic form of love in the Church and in the world is to make religious different within the context of the universal call to holiness. It calls all Christians back to the authentic, faithful, loving and joyful gift of self which is the mark of all Christians, whether they be celibate or married. In the Carmelite tradition, there is a link between contemplation and chastity—having a heart free for concentration on the love of God and openness to the mystery of every person.

### *Poverty*

The voluntary poverty and simple lifestyle of religious is prophetic because it condemns the oppression of the poor and the idolatry of wealth, which are evils in our world. The prophets of the Bible criticized these vices.

One of the best examples of condemnation of injustice is when Elijah condemned King Ahab for acquiring Naboth's vineyard by violent means (1 K 21). Modern religious witness to the need for all to share in the good things of God's creation. The religious must prophesy against all that divides person from person, especially oppression, alienation, and grinding poverty. These divisions are also found in the Christian Churches and their structures. The religious vowed to poverty and simplicity must live the Gospel as a sort of counter-culture to the Church and the world.

The vowed life of poverty, which is a radical sharing of all that we have and all that we are, takes on this prophetic function. Carmelites have publicly committed themselves to showing by their shared life, that true humanity and Christianity can be lived in the Church and fired by the same ideals which fire all vowed religious, Christians, and the whole church.

### *Obedience*

Vowed to obedience, Carmelites are prophetic in the Church and the world by making everyone consider the correct use of power and authority. The prophets of the Bible not only sought the face of God but were totally obedient to his call. They were chosen by God to speak his word to the world; vowed religious follow Jesus, who completely followed the will of God. In this, religious witness to the place God should have in the Church and the world.

Francis Molony<sup>3</sup> says that this is at the heart of Christian calling. All Christians are called to follow Jesus in obedience like the prophets. We must be seen as living under the divine urgency to love in the plan of our mysterious God. In this way, we will continue to proclaim to the people among whom we live, the freedom which a radical openness to God creates. We can be a challenge and worry to an over-institutionalized Church, over bureaucratized democracies, and dictatorial totalitarian states. Our freely chosen vow of obedience keeps posing awkward questions to the Church and secular organizations—such as, why are you instituted?

### *Elijah Archetype*

John Welch<sup>4</sup> has shown how Carl Jung, the psychologist, chose Elijah as an example of an archetype because the Elijah stories contain mythical elements and because posterity has added legends to Elijah. We are dealing with an archetype. For Jung, archetypes are primordial images common to all humankind. By primordial images, Jung did not mean specific images and ideas, but predispositions or patterns. Archetypes have also been called channels, watercourses, and imprints. They are similar to negatives which need to be developed.

Jung found common elements in all peoples and cultures, in their stories, dreams, fairytales, and mythology. These are birth, death, rebirth, resurrection, journey, hero, wise old man, earth mother, and God. These archetypes provide patterns of meaning and guides to developing one's personality. A person's conscious experience is what gives an archetype specific content. Archetypes cannot be known in themselves. They become symbols which help the individual to understand his/her experiences of life.

For Jung, Elijah is a powerful archetype which has given birth to new forms of understanding. One of these phenomena was the first Carmelites' choice of Elijah as their spiritual father.

---

<sup>3</sup> Moloney, F., SDB, *Disciples and Prophets*, Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1980, p. 168.

<sup>4</sup> Welch, J., O.Carm., *Spiritual Pilgrims*, Paulist Press, NY, 1982, pp. 82-83.

Jung believes that the archetype gets itself chosen rather than being deliberately chosen. He says that the first Carmelites would have felt an almost unconscious and natural attraction to Elijah. This would be because of the very atmosphere of Mount Carmel—a holy place, holy to the Canaanites, Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, and Hebrews. Today it is still holy to Druses, Christians, Jews, and, of course, Carmelites. Jung believes that the Carmelite hermits were influenced by the legend of Elijah because Mount Carmel and Elijah are inextricably linked. This is why Elijah is still a powerful archetype to Moslems, Jews, and Christians who today make pilgrimages to Mount Carmel, a sacred site linked to the holy prophet Elijah.

According to Jung, when an archetype becomes known to the consciousness, it does so through a symbol. Many things we understand only partially, but a symbol helps us to understand more about ourselves and our world. It transforms energy in our unconscious into an equivalent conscious form. The symbol is not consciously created, but is a spontaneous formation out of the unconscious. This symbol is pregnant with meaning and is generative of new understandings.

So the early Carmelites were led to a deeper understanding of themselves when they reflected on Elijah the prophet. They were called to a similar prophetic life on Mount Carmel. Although they were physically living on Mount Carmel, both Elijah and the holy mountain became archetype and symbol for their lives. Then they understood that even if they did not physically live on Mount Carmel, they would always be called to climb the holy mountain and live the prophetic life in whatever place or whatever time.

For reflection: individuals or groups

1. Who are the prophets for you in your life? How much do you imitate them? Do you see yourself as a prophet? In what sense?
2. Who are the heroes and heroines in your life? How much of “hermit,” “pilgrim,” “prophet,” “mendicant,” (or any other image which relates to your heroes and heroines) is in them?

---

### Mary and Carmel

From the beginning, the hermits on Mount Carmel had a special devotion to Mary, the Mother of Jesus. The brothers had a simple chapel at the center of their cells dedicated to St. Mary, the Lady of the Place, or the Lady of the Manor—Our Lady of Mount Carmel. In this chapter, we will investigate how Carmelites see Mary as Patroness, Virgin Mother, Sister, and Beauty of Carmel.

#### *Patroness of Carmelites*

Patronage was an accepted reality of the middle ages. Vassals would express their belonging to a patron in both words and gestures, like placing their hands in his, a custom that still survives at religious professions. Patronage involved two persons, with mutual rights and obligations. The lord of the manor undertook to protect the subject, or vassal, who in turn promised service. The rule of St. Albert stressed that the Carmelite has an allegiance to Jesus Christ, as the feudal vassal had to his lord. The Latin term in the rule, “obsequium Jesu Christi” is usually translated, “in the footsteps of Jesus Christ.” This translation tends to miss the original meaning of the mutual bond of responsible lordship and loyal service. The first hermits of Carmel thought it was natural that they would have a similar allegiance to the mother of Jesus their Lord. Consequently, in the feudal logic, they had not only a Lord of the Manor, but a Lady of the Manor, or *the*

*Lady of the Place.* When the hermits on Mount Carmel dedicated their oratory to Mary, the Lady of the Manor, they regarded themselves as bound, feudal style, to her service, under her protection and patronage. Their religious lives were in her constant care; they were her concern and she was theirs.

The initial understanding of the bond between the Carmelites and Mary continued as a strong tradition throughout the writing of medieval Carmelites. The sense of special dedication appears early in the extant documents of the Order, for example, in those from the General Chapter of Montpellier, 1287. This was the chapter at which the white cloak replaced the earlier and somewhat Palestinian striped mantle of the first hermit brothers. As the Carmelites moved into the European mainstream of the mendicants, they began to send students to the universities. This General Chapter said, “we beg the prayers of the glorious Virgin Mary, in whose service and honor our institute of Mount Carmel was founded.” The Marian tradition of the medieval Carmelites was summed up by the friar, Arnold Bostius, in a work entitled, “The Patronage of Mary and the Exercise of that Patronage with respect to the Order of Carmel that bears her name.” The primitive understanding of the Carmelite dedication to Mary, the Lady of the Manor, was to the Mother of Jesus, with an emphasis on her virginity, her purity, and her motherhood.

### *Title of the Order*

This stress grew stronger in a later controversy, which concerned the very survival of the Order. As latecomers to Europe, the Brothers of St. Mary of Mount Carmel were not welcomed by some. They had to justify their right to exist as a separate Order and be counted among the mendicant friars, as well as face the opposition of some bishops and diocesan clergy. They had to show that they lived on Mount Carmel according to a rule of life given by St. Albert, Patriarch of Jerusalem (d. 1214). They pointed out that they were living a regular life prior to the restrictive legislation of the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. Even as late as 1274—the Second Council of Lyons, the issue was still in doubt and was resolved by Pope Boniface VIII.

As early as 1252, the title, the Brothers of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, appears in a letter written to the Order from Pope Innocent IV. The early Carmelites struggled to retain the name of the Order as the Brothers of Our Lady of Mount Carmel because the philosophers and theologians of the middle ages attached enormous value to the name of something as conveying its inner essence. Consequently, the prayer from the Carmelite liturgy of the Mass of the Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, 16 July, reveals this struggle.

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,  
who lives and reigns...

### *Virgin and Mother*

The medieval Carmelites found in Mary’s virginity a model for their own lives. Even the legends they loved emphasized virginity. They loved to say that they were linked to virginal prophets Elijah and Elisha, because of the presence of holy hermits living on Mount Carmel right back to the time of Elijah. They emphasized the fact that Elijah was the first man to practice voluntary virginity, and Mary the first woman to do so. In their life of dedicated chastity, they were therefore, living in the imitation of both. Because of the virginity they had in common with her, they thought of Mary as their sister.

Brothers in the title of the Order had the meaning of a group of brothers, like other religious, brothers to one another and to the poor people they served as begging friars. However, the Carmelites developed this idea into a special sense of brotherhood, with Mary as sister, whom they were to imitate with their own virginal lives.

If they imitate Mary, they realized they would find her constant and faithful. This would resonate with such titles as Virgin most pure, in defense of the Immaculate Conception, which was the Order's patronal feast before 16 July. The white cloak worn by the Carmelites was seen as a symbol of Mary's purity.

They understood purity as not simply the absence of sin, nor even simply chastity, but the offering of oneself totally to God, as Mary did, nothing held back, giving God a pure heart. The picture of Mary as the most pure Virgin reflects the ideal of the Order as found in one of the earliest writings, the Book of the Institution of the First Monks: "to offer to God a heart holy and pure from all stain of sin."

The most pure virginity of Mary has for us today important contemporary relevance. It can lead us to examine the riches of virginity in its narrower sense of celibacy to show it as giving a possibility of a full flowering of the whole person, in spirit as well as body, in a rich and fulfilled life in service of the Church and society. However, the most pure virginity of Mary is more than that. It is her complete availability before God; "I am the handmaid of the Lord," (Lk 1:38). She is above all the one "who heard the word of God and kept it" (Lk 11:28). She was praised for her faith, as she pondered God's will in her heart. Her most pure heart, desiring only that God's will be done, shows us the way to renewed Christian and Carmelite authenticity.

Medieval patronage developed gradually into the concept of consecration. Consecration in the first place, is an act of religion, and as such, can be made only to God. Hence, to speak of consecration to Our Lady is an adapted use of the word for a particular form of devotion to Mary, and one of special intensity.

In Christian and Carmelite life, begun in baptism and renewed through religious vows, what comes first is always the grace of God. Carmelite consecration has two focal points.

The first is consecration to God in the spirit of Mary. The second is God consecrates us through giving us Mary, Our Lady of Mount Carmel, as our patroness, sister, and mother—we are consecrated by receiving this great gift. The gift must mean what was meant for the beloved disciple at the foot of the cross on Calvary. We Carmelites take Mary into our own, both the person of Mary and the community of which she is the embodiment, that is the Church, the body of Christ, and more specifically, the Carmelite family. Carmelite spirituality implies a dedication to the acceptance of the gift of Mary from Jesus, and a deeper commitment to the Church.

### *Spiritual Mother*

Mary as the spiritual mother of Carmelites is a central theme in the spiritual tradition. We are her sons and daughters, as indeed are all the brothers and sisters of Christ, her Son and liberator. Emphasis of the title "Mary as Mother" is found in early Carmelite writings, and in our own time. St. Thérèse of Lisieux said Mary for her was more mother than queen. Blessed Titus Brandsma wrote that Carmelites, by imitating Mary as Mother of Jesus—bring Jesus spiritually into today's world. Titus Brandsma used to say that St. John of the Cross is a Marian Doctor of the Church because his writings are concerned about how Christ is formed within us. Carmelites loved to compare the beauty of Mount Carmel with the spiritual beauty of Mary.

Carmelites recognized that it was the mother's task to conceive, nurture, and foster life. Just as Mary brought Jesus into the world, so too, Carmelites are called to bring Jesus into the world. It is part of Carmelite contemplative prayer and ministry to continue that maternal task of Mary. To be other Jesus and Marys in the world, they must be united with both Jesus and Mary in mystical prayer and service.

For Carmelites the communal, ecclesial dimension of Mary's spiritual motherhood is of great importance. Both the Mother of Jesus and the beloved disciple stand larger than their private persons in their station at the cross on Calvary. Mary represents all believers and John represents all who need Mary to be mother and present Jesus to them. By the time Carmelites came on the scene, the truth of Mary's spiritual motherhood was well established, and our theologians and spiritual writings speak easily of Mary as Mother of all Carmelites.

Care must be taken not to interpret Mary's motherhood in a childish sense. There is nothing infantile about the notion of spiritual childhood of the Gospels or that of St. Thérèse of Lisieux. An awareness of being children of Mary is a corollary to the biblical teaching that we are children of God. Children in both cases emphasizes truths about ourselves (our needs, our weakness, our dignity) and also truths about God, our Creator and Redeemer, as well as about Mary, who has been given to us by her Son.

### *The Scapular*

One of the great symbols of Carmelite spirituality is the scapular. From the days when the Carmelites became European mendicants, the scapular has been an important, though never exclusive, element of Carmelite attitudes towards Mary of Mount Carmel. This is so whether Mary be regarded as patroness, mother or virgin, model and sister to her Carmelite sisters and brothers. By way of the scapular, the revered title of Mary, Our Lady of Mount Carmel, spread to the whole Church.

Among our authors of the past and in popular preaching, the scapular has been described as a sign of Mary's protection in life and death. The great promise embodied in the St. Simon Stock tradition concerns the gaining of eternal salvation—no one devoutly wearing the scapular of Mount Carmel will suffer damnation.

There are several legends in the Carmelite tradition concerning a vision of Our Lady giving the Scapular to the Order.<sup>1</sup> One such legend is that Our Lady appeared to Saint Simon Stock at Aylesford in England, another says she appeared in Oxford, yet another in Bordeaux. None of these can be verified. However, what is absolutely clear is that the Carmelites on Mount Carmel and when they came to Europe, were certain that they had a special relationship with Mary. They were convinced that she protected them because of their dedication to her. So they developed a strong symbol of this close relationship with Mary, which was a part of their clothing—a scapular, the sign that they and Mary were closely bound together, like a vassal wore the livery of his lord during the middle ages.

Some Carmelite writing and preaching has been exaggerated and superficial, but the solid tradition among Carmelite men and women has been both Christocentric and ecclesial.

Devotion to Mary's Carmelite scapular has no magic about it. It is worn as a sign that the devotee is turning to Mary in prayer expressing confidence in her motherly intercession. By wearing the scapular, we show the Catholic conviction that persevering in prayer is indeed a sign of salvation.

### *Scapular as Symbol*

In order to understand the devotion to the scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, we need to appreciate the meaning of symbols.<sup>2</sup> One model of symbols sees them in several stages.

The first stage of the symbols is the engendering experience which given birth to the symbol; the second is a reflection on the symbol; the third stage is a period when contact has been lost with the engendering experience; and the fourth stage is the need to invigorate the symbol anew.

All four stages can apply to the scapular. The first, the engendering experience, is the felt need of our Carmelite ancestors, which they found answered in God's love through the motherly mediation of Mary, mother and sister of all Carmelites, the Lady of the Manor, of their historical origins of Mount Carmel.

The scapular would never have become diffused in the Order unless its members resonated with and experienced the need of Mary's favor. In the initial experience, which we traditionally have associated with St. Simon Stock, a number of elements are found. Mary's role as Virgin mother, her favor to her children, her protection and intercession.

In stage two, the meaning of the symbols is spelt out for the adherents. For Carmelites, the 14<sup>th</sup> century brethren developed the scapular tradition in documents and traditions. One such is the sabbatine privilege—conveying the belief that Mary's protection extends even to purgatory. Reflections on the garment character of the scapular belong to this stage. This is when the scapular confraternities develop—sharing in the habit or sign of Carmelites' dedication to Mary.

In the third stage, contact is often lost with the original experience. For the scapular, the engendering experience involved many elements. The order had a patron to whom it owed dues and from whom it received favors. The order's patron was also mother and sister; most particularly perhaps it was a sense of its own and its members' need and Mary's protection. With the passing of time, both the need and sense of Mary's response came to be simply repeated rather than reflected upon.

The final stage is the reinterpretation of the symbol. Today Carmelites are reflecting anew on the scapular tradition. The reconstruction of the symbol of the scapular comes not merely by study but by prayer. Experience of Mary and the Carmelites' relationship with her has to be born anew in the hearts of individuals and communities, with the scapular simply a sign of the Carmelites' devotion to Mary, seeing her as patroness, mother, and sister. Those Catholics who wear the scapular or scapular medals simply share the Carmelites' love and relationship to Mary, the mother of the Church.

To appreciate the Marian charism, we must know its origins, but for that charism to be living and productive, we must integrate our history with what is best in contemporary biblical, liturgical, and ecumenical perspectives. Mary is seen as the poor one of Nazareth, and is aligned with the poor and oppressed of the world. Mary of Mount Carmel is often revered by those who are alienated in many countries of the world. Through devotion to Mary, Carmelites reach out to those who need her protection, and those who used to hear Jesus' message of liberation. They imitate the motherhood of Mary by bringing Jesus into the world of the poor, and model their life on their patroness, Mary, by hearing the cry of the poor. Part of the solemn blessing for the Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in the present sacramentary reads: "Lord, grant that those who in devotion have put on the habit of Our Lady of Mount Carmel may put on her virtues and enjoy her unfailing protection."

One of the great contributions of the pontificate of Pope John Paul II has been his reminder to the universal Church of the value of popular devotions. Devotion to Our Lady of Mount Carmel and the scapular is indeed very popular in many countries of the world. The challenge to the Carmelite Order is to support these popular

devotions in local churches, while prophesying about abuses, superstitions, and magic which can take over. Encouragement of processions, icons, pilgrimages, statues, paintings, stained glass windows are all part of a pastoral realism which supports popular devotions like the scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. There is a danger in multi-cultural societies like Australia and the USA that an Anglo-Celtic or sometimes an elitist Catholicism may dominate the local church. However, ethnic groups cannot be starved of genuine popular devotions which nourish their faith, life, and culture.

The scapular as a potent image and symbol must be developed, renewed, and re-presented to the people of the local churches. Many countries of the world have virtually adopted Our Lady of Mount Carmel, so it is up to Carmelites to build on this love and to present our love of Mary, and our generative symbol, the scapular—as a solid part of Christian piety. It is also our challenge to present Mary as a genuine woman for today's world—a feminine charism basic to the full understanding of the Gospel message of Jesus. Again, Carmelites are among those Christians who prophesy against the demeaning and inequality of women which are part of the cultural and political structure of so many countries today.

Consequently, the generative symbol of the scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel reminds us of Mary—woman and mother, a reminder of the dignity and partnership of women, and the intercessory role of Mary in our liberation. The wearing of the scapular reminds us that Mary is aligned with the anawim—the poor and powerless of Christ.

In our devotion to Mary, we are reminded that she is identified with her people in her fidelity, her poverty, her commitment. She is the teacher of contemplative prayer by her silence, her Magnificat, and her standing beside the cross of Jesus. Her flight into Egypt allies her with the refugee, the voiceless, and the most oppressed.

Mary and her scapular are symbols of reconciliation. Many places of pilgrimage bring people of all races, classes, and languages together. It means that all become poor pilgrims with Mary, and she challenges all to conversion and reconciliation not only with God, but with each other. It brings people into contact with the pascal mystery of Christ, the liberating work of Jesus.

Many present Mary in an elitist way. But a popular devotion like the scapular has the power to integrate people and liberate them into the family of the liberated and reconciled. Popular Marian devotions can bring people to Jesus. Carmelites are called to build on the popular devotion to the scapular and to Our Lady of Mount Carmel by stressing Mary, the woman of the people, the woman who leads people to Jesus. All that Carmelites love and know about Mary can be handed on to the people through an authentic renewal of popular devotions.

The Marian charism of Carmelite spirituality is related to the prophetic charism, the inheritance of Elijah. Mary was seen by the early hermits as Queen of prophets. No one is more jealous than Mary for the rights of the true God. The message of Christianity gives the lie to human ideologies of omnipotence. The closer God draws us to himself, the more aware we become of our ignorance before mystery. The poverty and suffering of the world reflect the deeper hungers of the heart.

The biblical picture of Mary, the poor woman totally dependent on God, who lifts up the lowly, reminds us of our own need and sends us to God for help.

### *Masculine and Feminine*

Carmelite spirituality, right from the inception of the tradition, has maintained a balance between the masculine and the feminine elements of humanity.

John Welch says that according to Carl Jung, every man has a feminine quality within him and every woman has a masculine quality within her.<sup>3</sup> Jung called the feminine element in a man the anima, and the masculine element in a woman the animus. Jung describes the anima as that which sees relationships, makes whole, values and communicates, whereas the animus refers to the ability to discriminate, differentiate, define, and rationalize.

These generalizations are difficult to make and sustain; but the experience of many men and women seems to agree that a fully mature man needs to develop and appreciate the feminine elements of his personality, and a fully mature woman, the masculine elements of her personality. Consequently, men and women must have a healthy balance in their lives of the masculine and feminine side of their personalities. This balance leads to a union which many Carmelite writers have described in terms of marriage.

Spiritual marriage symbolizes the object of much of human longing for union with the other. The other can be seen as the other in ourselves, the other human being, or the ultimate other who is God. The growth of each individual requires that the inner masculine and feminine figure be acknowledged, met and related to in genuine dialogue.

In choosing Elijah and Mary as their inspiration, the original Carmelites were integrating the masculine and feminine elements of their lives. They have developed a spirituality which calls each man and woman who wants to follow Christ more fully, to put into their lives the Elijah and Mary elements of the tradition. There are both the prophetic and the contemplative elements of life in Christ. For the Carmelite, these elements must be present although in different proportions at different times of one's life.

For reflection: individuals or groups

1. What part does Mary play in your spiritual life?
2. What popular Marian devotions do you find helpful? What ones do you find unhelpful in your spiritual life?
3. Do you recognize a balance or an imbalance between the masculine and feminine elements of your personality?  
How do Jesus and Mary help you in this regard?
4. Is there an equal number of heroes and heroines in your life? What does this tell you about your personality and  
and your spiritual experience?

---

<sup>1</sup> Carmelites today assess such visions, including the Scapular vision, according to two principal criteria established by Saint John of the Cross: (1) Visions are possible (The Ascent of Mount Carmel Bk. II, Ch. 16, Par. 3); (2) because visions, even if true, can mislead, it is better to renounce visions themselves, and take from them only the spirit of devotion to which they give rise. (Ascent Bk. II, Ch. 17, Par. 9).

<sup>2</sup> See: Carmelite Marian Commission: *Interim Report*, Rome, 1985, pp. 25-28.

<sup>3</sup> Welch, J., O.Carm, *Spiritual Pilgrims*, op. cit., pp. 166-170.