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Module H03: Figures of Inspiration: Mary and Elijah Essay: Distinctives of Marian Carmelite Devotion Over the Centuries and the Relevance For Today

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Carmel: In the Beginning

The story of the Carmelite Order began with both Elijah and Mary. Recorded history of Carmelites began in the 12th century after group of hermits, composed of those who had come to the Holy Land during the Crusades, gathered near the fountain of Elijah on Mt. Carmel. These Crusaders chose to live there with the desire to imitate the spirit of Elijah in solitude, silence and unwavering zeal for the Lord.

Mary's place in Carmel originated from their interpretation of Elijah's vision in 1 Kings 18. Elijah saw a little cloud rising above the sea after the defeat of Baal worship on Mt. Carmel and the prophesied end of the devastating drought. This cloud, seen by the Carmelites as a foreshadowing of the Virgin Mary, rose above the impure sea of humanity in undefiled purity. It was of the same substance but pure and, like the cloud that promised rain to a drought stricken Israel, brought hope and promise of new life for a drought stricken world.

Thus, Carmel formed with a determined purpose to imitate both Elijah and Mary in unwavering zeal for the Lord, silence, contemplation and purity. As Mary became the centerpiece of the Order, our purpose here is to briefly reflect on some of the historical Carmelite titles for Mary that show her place in Carmel and her significance for us today.

Early Carmelite Life: Mary as Patron and Lady of the Place

In the early 13th century, hermits requested and were given in 1207 a rule of life from the local bishop, Albert of Jerusalem. In this Rule of St. Albert, the hermits were dedicated to Jesus Christ. The Carmelite Rule further stated that the hermits were to have an oratory in middle of their individual cells and they chose to dedicate this oratory to Mary as Lady of the Place. In the medieval feudal culture of their day, grounded in chivalry and knighthood, every Lord should have a Lady. Thus it was that Mary as the Mother of the Lord was chosen as Our Lady of the Place, the medieval feudal equivalent of confirming her patronage.

Mary and her motherhood, virginity and purity were of great importance to the early Carmelite hermits. They enjoyed a two way relationship in Mary's patronage. Mary took care of and protected them as her vassals while they in turn served her in unconditional devotion. With Mary as patron of the Order, all of Carmel was within her dominion.¹ The Carmelites became the only Order within the Church to have the Blessed Virgin Mary as the originator of their orders. All other orders could point to an earthly founder while Carmel could point to an origin in heaven from the Blessed Virgin herself. Mary belonged to Carmel and Carmel belonged to Mary.

In 1251 in response to ardent prayer, St Simon Stock received the visitation of Mary and received the Scapular as the visible sign of Carmel's consecration to Mary and her's to Carmel. The Carmelite Order was explicitly founded to serve and honor Mary by imitation of her virtues and total dedication in service to Jesus Christ. This was expressly confirmed by the General Chapter of Montpellier in 1287.² As Carmel belonged to Mary and its inner essence was to live in her motherly love, it was consecrated to her in personal and community devotion. "Fidelity to Mary is a guarantee of continuity with the purest tradition of Carmel. It renews the covenant of love which the Virgin has sought to have with our religious family in the Church."³

¹ Christopher O'Donnell, *A Loving Presence: Mary and Carmel* (Melbourne, AU, 2000), 44.

² Peter Slattery, *The Springs of Carmel: An Introduction to Carmelite Spirituality* (New York, NY, 1991), 40.

³ www.apostoliccarmel.org, September 14, 2016 page no longer available.

Mary: Mother of the Lord and of Carmel

Historical theological developments influenced and laid the groundwork for the deeper understanding of Mary's motherhood both within the Church and in Carmel. Prayers for Mary's patronage and assistance had been offered since at least the third century.⁴ In 431, the Council of Ephesus decreed that Mary was indeed the "Mother of God." Carmelite devotions such as Ave Maris Stella and Salve Regina, which emphasized motherhood of Mary, were in place from the 9th Century. By the 12th century, Mary's role as Mother of the Lord had been well established in the Europe to which the Carmelites arrived, having fled the invasion of the Turks in the Holy Land. Out of this theological grounding emerged an understanding of Mary as Mother of the whole Christ, both his members and his body. Mother became a favorite title for Mary from late medieval period.

"Mother" conveyed the intimate relationship between Mary and Carmel and her gentle presence to them. The concept of Mary's patronage was not abandoned but her motherhood grew in importance to the Order. Mary was seen as a mother who loved and cared for Carmelites in a special way and who specially favored the Order.⁵ The giving of the scapular to her Carmelite children gave evidence of Mary's care for Carmel in a special way. It was the sign and symbol of the reciprocal love between Mary and Carmel. The wearing of the scapular was in itself a commitment to grow in Mary's virtues and to receive her maternal care and guidance.

Mary: Most Pure Virgin

Early Carmelite references to Mary's purity and virginity were noted in *The Institute of the First Monks*.⁶ In the 4th Century, Marian doctrine had come to understand Mary as "The Ever Virgin." The Feast of the Annunciation had been held in high regard and from this developed an admiration for the purity of Mary. Mary began to be appreciated as the "Most Pure Virgin."

⁴ L'Observatore Romano Weekly English Edition, December 4, 1996, 11.

⁵ O'Donnell, A Loving Presence: Mary and Carmel, 46-47.

⁶ *ibid*

Within Carmel, an understanding of Mary's purity was deepened and widened and came to be seen not merely as chastity but purity which was related to her undivided heart. Mary's heart belonged only to God where she continually pondered his word (Luke 2:19, 51). This purity of Mary was much more than the absence of sin but was due to her fulness of grace. This quality of purity made Mary the perfect model of discipleship and contemplation for Carmelites.

An understanding of Mary's purity eventually led Carmelite John Baconthorpe to support Mary as the Immaculate Conception. He had struggled to come to an understanding of the concept of the Immaculate Conception in light of original sin. Duns Scotus had written earlier in defense of the Immaculate Conception and proposed that Mary was indeed redeemed by the merits of Jesus and that God, who exists outside of time, had applied these merits to Mary at her conception and thus she was not subject to original sin. Initially, Baconthorpe had rejected the opinion of Duns Scotus as overly pious but, after reading some thoughts from Eadmer (disciple of St. Anselm) on Mary's eternal divine predestination to be the Mother of God, he was able to resolve his objections. Because of the divine maternity, it made sense that Mary not be subject to the general law of original sin, that she was an exception. Later in life, Baconthorpe moved from mere acceptance of the logic of the Immaculate Conception to full advocacy of the position, including advocacy of the liturgical celebration of the Immaculate Conception. After this, it was generally supported by virtually all Carmelite theologians and the Carmelites joined the Franciscans as "defenders of the dogma and its feast."

The true meaning of the Immaculate Conception was clarified by an understanding of the meaning of original sin. Many thought to describe original sin as something one is born with: a stain or contaminated mark on the soul. However, the true meaning was that original sin was something one was born without: sanctifying grace. Since Mary was born with this sanctifying grace, she was never without that grace of God and thus sin never entered into her experience. Mary was conceived and always continued in that state of sanctifying grace, allowing her to live in sinless perfection. Carmelite theology contributed to the understanding of the entire Church that Mary was conceived and lived always as the Most Pure Virgin.

Carmelites looked to their roots and appreciated the relationship between the chastity of Elijah as the first celibate and Mary in her perpetual virginity and followed their examples in seeking undivided hearts, purity and consecrated virginity.

Mary: The Beauty of Carmel

History had enshrined Carmel with the concepts of victory, beauty, worship and zeal. Carmel, whose name meant “garden of God,” was the most beautiful place in all of Israel and it exemplified Mary’s beauty in purity and virginity. Mary in her spotless purity of heart was acknowledged by Carmelites as the summit and perfection of beauty.

In the late medieval era, the Carmelites had inserted into the Litany of Loreto Mary’s title “Mother and Beauty of Carmel.” Mary’s beauty was at the heart of the Flos Carmeli. Later Arnold Bostius expanded on the work of John Baconthorpe to express in flowing and eloquent terms just how beautiful Mary actually was. The Italian Carmelite mystic, St. Mary Magdalene de’Pazzi, wrote of Mary as “the one who through her beauty and virginal purity merited to be filled with God” .⁷ Beauty became a key idea in Mariology and gift to the Church because of Carmelite devotion to Mary, the Beauty of Carmel.

Mary: Her Relevance To Us Today

Many authors agree that each time and culture has its own special devotion and relationship with Mary which reflected their devotion to her as someone to whom they could closely relate. The torch has been passed to our generation and we must ask whether or not our day has and will faithfully maintain a loving devotion to Mary. There is the possibility that our culture, no longer as familiar with the mystical element and so enmeshed in self-reliance, might conclude it no longer needs Mary as our Mother. We must ask ourselves whether we have more knowledge *about* Mary than a loving relationship *with* her.⁸

⁷ Charlo Camilleri, “The Contemplation of Mary’s Beauty in the Spirituality of Saint Mary Magdalene de’Pazzi”, available from www.ocarm.org, access date 14 November 2016.

⁸ O’Donnell, A Loving Presence: Mary and Carmel, 55.

One area to explore is the effect on Marian devotion after Vatican II. The Council had reiterated importance of Mary within the history of salvation and her relation to the Church while deemphasizing over-devotion to Mary from popular piety whose orthopraxy was not grounded in orthodoxy.⁹ As a result did our day, at least for a while, throw out the proverbial baby with the bath water? Are we now seeing a new emergence and attention to Marian devotion? It seems likely that the answer to this last question is “yes.” Carmel has the distinct honor and responsibility of maintaining and restoring Marian devotion and authentic contemplative and mystical experience within the Church.

Still under examination is the work of Hans Urs von Baltazar, who wrote of the ecclesial aspects of Mary and described her as the temple of the Holy Spirit and archetype of the Church.¹⁰ How will we proceed over time in this understanding of Mary and her place in the Church? Revelation is progressive in nature and perhaps new ways of knowing Mary will continue to be revealed over time.

We submit that Mary remains a beautiful example to follow in our day. This young woman who listened to the message of an angel and was willing for what she understood was being asked of her and, even beyond that, for what she did not understand. She trusted God and offered her unrestricted fiat. Mary was open to hearing the voice of God whether it came by and angel or from others (such as Joseph, Elizabeth or Simeon). She believed in the Son of God, her son, and offered her wise words to “do whatever he tells you.” Mary was willing to take steps in the darkness of faith and never put a limit on her response to God, no matter what it cost her. Mary journeyed in a pilgrimage of faith, whether in light or darkness, and lovingly honored God in her life in every circumstance. Elizabeth said of her, “Blessed is she who believed,” and Mary’s life shows all of us how we, too, can believe by following her example.

The Magnificat of Mary reflects her immersion in the scriptures and her understanding of

⁹ Austin Flannery, *Vatican Council II: Lumen gentium chapter 8 and Sacrosanctum concilium*, 103. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press 1975) 98, 350.

¹⁰ O'Donnell, *A Loving Presence: Mary and Carmel*, 54.

how her experience fits into the story of salvation history. It is said of Mary that "she kept all these things and pondered them in her heart." In her contemplation of scripture and of her experience, she was able to begin to make sense of what God was accomplishing in and through her life. As Mary absorbed the word of God and became more and more at one with it, so we, by following her example of contemplation, may also find that we become more in tune with the heart of God.

From Mary we learn that we are not the masters of our own lives but we serve God and willingly choose to yield to him the responsibility of masterhood. Isaiah saw the Messiah portrayed as a servant and Philippians describes the kenosis of the Lord, who set aside his own glory to become a servant among us. Mary followed this same spirit of Christ when she chose to take the place of the servant of God. Mary spoke of herself as the handmaid (servant) of the Lord and served, not with resentment, but with faith and loving gratitude. When the disciples first began to follow Jesus, it was a service of servanthood. As they began to know Jesus better, he said he no longer called them servants but friends. Mary gave us an example of loving servanthood and the disciples learned that to serve in love brought forth friendship with Jesus. Mary as the servant of the Lord shows us the beauty of trusting God to be God and of taking our place in humility to serve his pleasure in his kingdom. By following the example of Mary the servant of God, we too may know deeper friendship with her Son.

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