

HOLY ORDERS FOR LAY PEOPLE

Following in the Footsteps of St. Elijah the Prophet -THIRD ORDER CARMELITES-

The Carmelite Order is unique in tracing its origins back to an Old Testament prophet. By tradition, their founder is the Prophet Elijah and their spiritual home is on Mount Carmel in the Holy Land. You can even find a statue of Elijah at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome near the Papal Altar where the inscription attests to Saint "Elias" as the spiritual founder of the Carmelites. And the words spoken by the Prophet form the motto of the Order: "With zeal I have been zealous for the Lord God of Hosts" (1 Kgs 19:14).

The lay members of the Carmelite Order can doubly claim this heritage for their own, citing this passage from 2 Kings 2:9: "Elijah said to Elisha: Request whatever I might do for you, before I am taken from you". Elisha answered, "May I receive a double portion of your spirit". The Secular Carmelites have described this double spirit as the blending the contemplative life with the active life. It was in a gentle breeze that Elijah heard the voice of God, and this contemplative disposition of heart and mind is the foundation of Carmelite spirituality.

When the first Christian monks came to live on Mount Carmel is not known. The foundation of the Carmelite Order dates to around 1154 when by tradition, Saint Berthold formed a hermit community by the well of Elijah. Jacques de Vitry (d. 1240), Bishop of Acre, wrote that men, "In imitation of the holy anchorite the prophet Elijah, led solitary lives on Mount Carmel... where in little comb-like cells, those bees of the Lord laid up sweet spiritual honey". Around 1210, St. Albert Avogadro, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, presented them with a "formula for life," the Rule of St. Albert, which enjoined them to live a life of prayer, purification, abstinence and poverty. This Rule of Life received the approval of Pope Honorius III in 1226 and with some modifications still inspires the whole worldwide Carmelite family today.

During the collapse of the Latin Kingdom of the Crusaders in Palestine and continued harassment by the Moslem Saracens, the monks began an exodus to Europe. "The inroads of the pagans," wrote Pope Innocent IV, "have driven our beloved sons, the hermits of Mount Carmel, to betake themselves, not without great affliction of spirit, to parts across the sea". In 1291, the last of the Mount Carmel monks, who were known for their deep devotion to Our Lady, were killed as they sang the Salve Regina.

Life was difficult for the Carmelites who were evolving from being a community of desert hermits into the more active life of a mendicant order. In 1247, Pope Innocent IV approved a modified Rule more suited to their increasingly cenobitic lifestyle. During this time of change, tradition says that Our Lady appeared to the Minister General St. Simon Stock in Aylesford, England, on July 16, 1251. Holding the Baby Jesus, she presented him with the Brown Scapular and said: "This shall be the privilege for you and for all the Carmelites, that anyone dying in this habit shall be saved". Historians dispute the actual lineage of the Brown Scapular, but it is true that the small Brown Scapular is the sacramental given to new members of the Lay Order as the sign and reminder of their participation in the life and mission of the Carmelite family.

Since the late 13th century, lay people are known to have been associated with the Carmelite Order. In 1452, Pope Nicholas V issued the famous bull Cum Nulla addressed to the Minister General, Bl. John Soreth, authorizing the aggregation of lay people into the Order. Thus, was the beginning of the Second Order of Nuns and the Third Order. Throughout the intervening centuries, there was little uniformity amongst the lay fraternities, though some interpretations of the life enjoyed more widespread popularity than others. It was said that Bl. John Soreth wrote the first Rule, but the first published Rule was issued by Philip of the Visitation in 1675.

In 1562, St. Teresa of Avila instituted a reform of the Carmelite Order in Spain and founded a new branch of the Carmelite family called the Discalced Carmelites, that followed the so-called Primitive Rule of the Carmelites. The Carmelites eventually separated into two distinct congregations: the Order of Discalced Carmelites (O.C.D.) and the Carmelite Order of the Ancient Observance (O.Carm.). In 1594, Pope Clement XIII declared that both branches of the family had the same right to a Third Order. Today, there are two Third Order Secular branches: The Third Order of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel (T.O. Carm. or Lay Carmelites) and The Ordo Carmelitarum Discalceatorum Saecularis (Secular Order of Discalced Carmelites - OCDS or Secular Carmelites).

While sharing a common patrimony, the two Third Order Seculars have some different emphases though both embrace a common heritage. The Lay Carmelite spirituality is inspired by the example of Our Lady and the Prophet Elijah. The Secular Teresian Carmelites place a strong emphasis on the charism of St. Teresa of Avila. Both encourage the following of the teachings of Jesus Christ in fraternal friendship with their fellow Carmelites and as Christian witnesses to the world.

The mission of every lay Carmelite is rooted in Baptism, whereby they are called to contribute to the sanctification of the world. In a letter to the Carmelite Family on the 550th anniversary of the issuance of the Papal Bull Cum Nulla, Prior General Joseph Chalmers, O.Carm., wrote: "I believe strongly that lay Carmelites in the sense of members of the Third Order have a true vocation and are bearers of the Carmelite charism just as much as the friars, nuns and sisters". The vocation of a secular Carmelite is to live in allegiance to Jesus Christ, under the patronage of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The primary obligations include daily contemplative prayer, the Liturgy of the Hours (Morning and Evening prayer, and Night prayer recommended), Mass if possible, daily examination of conscience and regular reception of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Retreats and days of recollection are encouraged. Studying the writings of the great Carmelite saints give them holy lives to imitate.

Lay Carmelites have a deep devotion to Our Lady and receive the woolen Brown Scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel during their formation. The scapular is the visible sign of belonging to the Carmelite family, of their devotion to Mary, and of the commitment to imitate her virtues. Participating in monthly meetings with other members is a sign of community and fraternity and is part of the vocational call. Secular Carmelites also prepare for the special Carmelite feast days with fasting, penitential prayers and self-denial. One of the blessings of belonging to a lay order is that after death you are remembered in prayer and in masses offered for the repose of your soul.

As they grow in their relationship with Christ, they can be the Lord's instruments in areas where the friars and sisters cannot go - in their families, parish, workplace and community, thus having a powerful sanctifying influence on the secular world. In Lumen Gentium, it says: "By reason of their special vocation it belongs to the laity to seek the Kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God's will" (31). In a visit to Colombia in 1986, Pope John Paul II said: "You lay people, loyal to your secular identity, must stay in the world as in your own environment and there realize an active and evangelical presence - a dynamic and transforming presence - as the leaven in the dough, as the salt giving the Christian sense to the light of work, as the light in the midst of the darkness of indifference".

As a young man, St. John Paul II seriously thought about becoming a Carmelite and wore the Brown Scapular throughout his life. On the 750th anniversary of the bestowal of the Scapular, he wrote:

"Two truths are evoked by the sign of the Scapular: on the one hand, the constant protection of the Blessed Virgin, not only on life's journey, but also at the moment of passing into the fullness of eternal glory; on the other, the awareness that devotion to her cannot be limited to prayers and tributes in her honor on certain occasions, but must become a 'habit,' that is, a permanent orientation of one's own Christian conduct, woven of prayer and interior life, through frequent reception of the Sacraments and the concrete practice of the spiritual and corporal works of mercy."

A little known secular Carmelite was Ven. Annie (Anicka) Zelikova (1924-1941), born in Czechoslovakia, who from her earliest years "yearned for Carmel" and wanted to imitate St. Therese of Lisieux, the great Carmelite saint. After hearing her mother admonish a relative for having an abortion, Annie offered herself in expiation of sins. Ill-health prevented her entry into Carmel, but she was admitted into the Third Order Secular of Carmel, despite her young age. She died of tuberculosis in 1941 and was interred with her First Communion picture, the Carmelite brown scapular and the Third Order Secular Rule.

To begin the process of becoming a Secular Carmelite, there is a period of discernment between the candidate and the community, usually a year in duration. With approval, the candidate begins a two-year period of formation leading to first promises/temporary profession. With further approval from the Council, the candidate makes the first promises to follow the evangelical counsels and to live in the spirit of the beatitudes for three years. At the end of this period, the candidate is invited to make the Final/Definitive Promises to live the Secular Carmelite life for life. These promises are "to tend toward evangelical perfection in the spirit of the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty, obedience, and of the Beatitudes... for the rest of my life".

In chastity, they love God above all as well as their neighbor and are chaste according to their state in life. In poverty, worldly goods are placed at the service of the Gospel. In obedience, they are docile to the will of God and those guiding the local community. The Beatitudes "shed light on the actions and attitudes characteristic of the Christian life" (CCC, no. 1717). In short, they strive for holiness by living as a disciple of Jesus Christ and "by special vocation, undertake to live in the world an evangelical life of fraternal communion imbued with the spirit of contemplative prayer, in imitation of the Virgin Mary, and animated with apostolic zeal according to the example and teaching of Carmelite saints".

"The first and foremost form of apostleship of the members of the OCDS is to bear witness to the presence of God and of His love according to the situation in which each one finds himself," said Very Rev. Saverio Cannistra, OCD, Superior General. "With the commitments undertaken with the promise, you are bearers of the Life of the Gospel within the family, in your professional work, and in your social relationships.... Thus, 'consecrate the world' by being 'sanctifiers of temporal reality'".

CARMELITE THIRD ORDER

Founder: Bl. John Soreth in 1452 Motto: "With zeal I have been zealous for the Lord God of Hosts" (1 Kings 19:14) External Sign: Brown scapular Spirituality: To live in allegiance to Jesus Christ and to serve Him faithfully Mission: Service of the Church through collaboration with the Carmelite Order Formation Stages: Aspirancy (12 months), First Promises/Temporary Profession (2+ years), Definitive Promises/Final Profession (3+ years) Websites: SecularCarmelite.com or OCarm.org Religious life