

The Brown Scapular: The Gift to the Order from the Blessed Virgin Mary

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The scapular began as **work apron**, worn by the Brothers of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel, the Carmelites, to protect their tunics from stains and damage while they were working. It consisted of large pieces of cloth front and back joined over the shoulders with strips of cloth.

As such, it was the **humblest of garments**, an insignificant item of clothing that the Brothers wore over their tunics, the kind of thing a chef or cook would wear in the kitchen.

There was nothing impressive about it, **no historical meaning, no spiritual connotation, and no meaningful connection to the Carmelite charism.**

The scapular, originally, was no more meaningful to Carmelites than any apron is to a cook; and bore no more relationship to the devotional life of the Brothers than an apron bears to the quality of the meal prepared by a chef.

And yet...for some reason... it **suddenly, very suddenly**, attained tremendous spiritual significance as the **preeminent symbol of the Carmelite charism**, recognized as an explicit gift to the Order from the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Clearly, something of lasting import happened. The Carmelite tradition identifies this something as the scapular **Vision of St. Simon Stock** and dates this vision to **July 16, 1251.**

St. Simon was an Englishman, a man of great holiness and devotion, who always in his prayers asked the Virgin to **favor his Order with some singular privilege**, appealing to the Virgin Mary in her role as **Protector of the Order** at difficult moments in its establishment and spread in the West.

The **first official notice** about St. Simon Stock was in the sanctology of Carmelite saints by Father John Grossi in the middle of the fourteenth century, and

contains one of the **earliest descriptions of the scapular vision.**

The ninth saint was **St. Simon of England**, the sixth general of the order. **He continually pleaded with the most glorious Mother of God to grant some special privilege to the order of Carmelites**, which enjoys the special title of the virgin. He prayed devoutly:

**Flower of Carmel, fruitful vine,
Splendor of heaven, Mother Divine-
None like to thee;
Mother of meekness, Spotless Virgin,
To the Carmelites a favor impart,
Star of the sea.**

Surrounded by a multitude of angels, the Blessed Virgin appeared to him, holding in her blessed hands the scapular of the order. She said: **This shall be a privilege for you and for all Carmelites, that whoever dies clothed in this shall not suffer eternal fire; rather, he shall be saved,**'

The said Simon died in the province of Bordeaux while on a visitation to the province of Vasconia' John Grossi was a distinguished and saintly Carmelite who served as elected superior of the whole order in 1411. He claimed to be quoting from ancient documents which are not available today. Even so, **absence of evidence is not evidence of absence**, particularly when medieval documents are concerned. What is undeniably true is a clear scapular tradition from the Carmelites of the thirteenth century testifying to their belief that the **Blessed Virgin appeared to Simon Stock and promised him that the scapular would be the sign of her protection of the individual Carmelites.**

In its original context, the meaning of this promise was that Carmelite religious who persevered in their vocation would be **saved.**

The significance of this humble piece of clothing was changed for ever. The scapular devotion inaugurated by St. Simon Stock soon became widespread.

The **Constitutions of 1281** commanded all Carmelites to wear the scapular at all times. The Constitutions of 1357 said that the **scapular is the special habit of the order**. In 1369 any Carmelite who attended Mass without a scapular was automatically excommunicated.

This reverence is **astonishing, amazing and convincing** when we remember that it is directed towards an insignificant part of the habit which was originally nothing more than an apron to keep the habit itself clean.

The earliest Carmelite writers cite only the **fact of the vision** of St. Simon Stock **without any explanation of the promise contained**. At the time no explanation was necessary. The Carmelites as an Order were particularly devoted to the Blessed Virgin and it seemed logical that those who persevered until death in loyalty would obtain assistance to save their souls. And the symbol employed in the vision was readily accepted – the **common scapular of religious life** which was used to protect the hermit was **elevated to a higher and more important protection**.

Later, the scapular was explained as a **manifestation of Mary's maternal love and powerful mediation**; as a sign of Mary's continuing protection and the cause of numerous miracles.

The most influential writer of that time, a Belgian Carmelite Arnold Bostius, wrote in 1479:

'All Carmelites, encouraged by the dignity of the honor and grace of Mary, rejoice to wear this gift of Our Lady night and day as an impenetrable shield. It reminds them that they must always consider the holy life of Mary as their model, that they must engrave her image, along with her Son's, on the shield of their faith, and that they must place all their trust in the all-powerful protection of this Sovereign Queen who is always ready to come to their aid. Happy are they who affectionately receive the gifts of Mary in the embrace of reciprocal spiritual love. They

can look at this habit and joyfully remember the special love their most loving Oenefactor bestows on them, and thus they know that they have been selected by her for so great an inheritance'.

His basic point is that the Scapular is a **symbol of reciprocity** on the part of the Blessed Virgin – in return for the Carmelite's love and loyalty she reciprocates with her love and protection. This thought is derived from the original Carmelite **tradition of Mary's ownership of the order**. Father Bostius calls Mary 'Mother of Grace and Mother of Mercy' and he reminds the scapular wearer of his obligations and commitment to Mary:

'To invoke her in all our necessities, to contemplate her life and virtues, keeping her always in our memory, to imitate her, to live in continual dependence on her.'

Finally, Father Bostius comments on a custom that developed sometime in the late 1300s:

'Many devout persons well aware that it would be most advantageous to be enrolled in the family of Mary were anxious to have the protection of the armor of Mary, the scapular of our Order. They secretly wore the scapular during life that they might be able to resist in the evil day and remain perfect in all things; and they ultimately died holy deaths wearing this garment'.

The **practice of giving small scapulars to laymen** to wear under their clothing is another phase - the affiliation of lay people with the Carmelite Order so that they may enjoy the **benefits of the scapular promise**. Pope Pius XII wrote that **'All who wear the scapular, whether they live in a monastery or not, belong to the same family of the Blessed Mother Mary through a special kind of love.'**

In beginning of the sixteenth century the Prior General Nicholas organized the **scapular confraternity** and ever since Popes have recommended the confraternity and the wearing of the scapular. The scapular is one of the most popular forms of **Marian devotion**.

In 1653 Father John Launoy of the University of Paris published an **attack on the historicity of the original scapular vision to St. Simon Stock**. This attack was in the spirit of the new scientific approach. He based it on the **doubtful nature of two documents**. On this he was correct, but the **authenticity** of the scapular vision does not depend on them. It depends on the **undeniable scapular tradition** among the Carmelites dating back to the thirteenth century, the fourteenth century documentation particularly that of Father John Grossi, and the ensuing papal documentation over the centuries.

St. Simon's vision occupies a preeminent position in the history of the Carmelite Order, and it profoundly influenced its fortunes. It took place at the nadir moment of the **Order's migration to the West**, and helped reestablish its pride and confidence in itself, **providing a tangible symbol of Carmel's original tradition and continuing relevance**. It is a **symbol of family unity within the Carmelite Order**. The scapular also helped the Order **gain prestige** in the medieval world of Europe. And it **increased the Order's sphere of influence** by eventually incorporating millions of lay people throughout the centuries into the Carmelite family. As Pope Pius IX said:

“This most extraordinary gift of the scapular from the Mother of God to Saint Simon Stock brings its great usefulness not only to the Carmelite family of Mary, but also to all the rest of the faithful who, affiliated to that family, wish to follow Mary with a very special devotion.”

The Sabbatine Privilege and the Brown Scapular

The Sabbatine Privilege is **not related** to the tradition of the **scapular vision of St. Simon Stock** but refers to a **vision granted to the Pope John XXII** himself in which the Virgin promised him personal protection in return for the help the Pope would give the Carmelites. A document, commonly known as the **Sabbatine Bull**, bearing the date of March 3rd 1322, and attributed to Pope John XXII was circulated in the 1400s.

In the Bull, he reports a **vision** from the Blessed Virgin promising **liberation from the pains of purgatory** for all those who had worthily worn the Holy Scapular through the maternal help of the Virgin who would come to **free those devoted to her on the Saturday following their death**.

There are references to it in the 1400s and at the Carmelite chapter of 1517. This became known as the **Sabbatine bull**. Its historicity is doubtful. However, in 1530 Pope Clement VII did issue an **authentic bull** which states that the Blessed Virgin would help the confreres of Carmel after their deaths ‘with her continued intercession, with her prayers, and with special protection to insure their **speedy release from purgatory**.’

In 1613 Pope Paul V issued a decree finalizing the Church's position on the Sabbatine aspect of the scapular devotion. Without mentioning the bull of John XXII or the vision of the Blessed Virgin, it states:

The Carmelite Fathers may preach that the Christian people can piously believe in the aid of the souls of the brethren and confreres of the sodality of the most Blessed Virgin of Mount Carmel. Through her continuous intercessions, pious suffrages, merits, and special protection, the most Blessed Virgin, especially on Saturday, the day dedicated to her by the Church, she will help after their death the brethren and members of the sodality who die in charity.

In life they must have recited the Little Office. If they do not know how to recite it, they are to observe the fasts of the church and to abstain from meat on Wednesday and Saturday, except for the feast of Christmas.’

In 1890, Pope Leo XIII allowed confessors to commute the obligation of recitation or abstinence into **other prayers or good works for obtaining the Sabbatine privilege**. It acquired a justification independent of the authenticity of the original Sabbatine bull.

The Order is justified in teaching that the scapular wearer who observed the requirements of 1613 can expect special help from the Blessed Virgin after their deaths particularly on Saturday.

The problem of historicity of the 1322 bull will probably never be solved, nor need it be, its absence from Papal medieval registers is not conclusive.

In 1959 John XXIII said about John XXII:

‘Above all he was very devoted to Mary. It is to him that history attributes the paternity of the Sabbatine privilege – so precious and dear to those who wear the Scapular of our Lady of Mount Carmel.’

AMEN