

## **PART II**

### **Mary Mother of God & the Carmel**

#### **The Landscape is shaped by the Early Legends and Tradition**

Throughout its very existence, the Order of Carmel has been known for its dedication to a life of prayer and to Mary, the Mother of Jesus. The early Carmelites had a deep and instinctive devotion to the Blessed Virgin that came from their understanding that her life was the perfect Christian expression of the prophetic vocation of Elijah.

The Elijah narrative is bound to the lush and luxuriant Mount Carmel, overlooking Haifa, above the Mediterranean coastline of Israel. This is where the prophet Elijah battled the 450 priests of Baal and where Elijah sent his servant seven times to the mountaintop to look for rain after years of drought which ended as he proclaimed, "Behold a little cloud arose out of the sea like a man's foot." (1 Kings 18:44) and torrents of rain fell, and the people of Israel were saved. Theologians see in that little cloud a figure of Mary, bearing salvation for the world.

The medieval Carmelites recounted legends to create and sustain the connection between Elijah, Mary and Carmel. They told the tale of Elijah's foundation of a school of prophets and its continuance through the Old Testament. They even told a legend of the prophets from Mount Carmel being in Jerusalem hearing of the Lord's resurrection, perhaps supported by the account in Acts chapter 3. According to a tradition, backed by Church Liturgy, they erected a church dedicated to Our Lady on the same spot where Elijah saw the little cloud.

The Carmelite Order has always claimed Elijah as its own and has seen in him the one who laid the foundations of the eremitic and prophetic life that formed part of its character. The Carmelite devotion to Our Lady can be traced back to the hermits who lived on Mt. Carmel.

Despite the cloud of mystery and controversy surrounding these beginnings, in 1725 Pope Benedict XIII granted permission to the Carmelites, in an apparent show of support and approval, to

erect in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome among the statues of founders of Orders and patriarchs, one of Elijah with his own inscription to honor the Carmelite founder, St. Elijah, the prophet.

#### **The Landscape is further shaped by the proof of the existence of hermits on Mount Carmel with spiritual links to the prophet Elijah and the Blessed Mother.**

One of the earliest existing texts dates to 1177. A profound, authentic and historically undeniable Marian tradition is embedded in the Carmelite history of the 1100s and 1200s. The first monks who retired to Mount Carmel around 1150 were to be known as Brothers of our Lady of Mount Carmel. Thus, devotion to Our Lady formed a distinctive part of their character and spirituality even before St. Albert of Jerusalem gave his Rule and both Elijah and Mary therefore occupied prominent positions in the original Carmelite tradition.

#### **The hermits who gathered together on Mount Carmel built in their midst a small chapel dedicated to Mary.**

A pilgrim early in the thirteenth century, in a document concerning the roads and pilgrimages of the Holy Land, describes a very pretty little church of Our Lady which the Latin hermits known as the 'Brothers of Carmel' have in the Wadi 'ain es-Siah. He also tells of "a church dedicated to Our Lady". This chapel must have had an image of the Mother of God in a place of honor so that in her presence the hermits of Mount Carmel could dedicate themselves to a life of devotion to Jesus Christ. This dedication of a chapel on Mount Carmel to the Mother of God was a very significant event: it merged the dual inspirations of the prophetic vocation of Elijah and the devotion to the Blessed Mother: Mount Carmel, Elijah and Mary together, the inspiration for the Carmelite Order.

#### **Defining the landscape further, is the place of the Blessed Mother in Carmelite Liturgy and Vows.**

Just as in the very first foundation, wherever a new Carmel came into existence, it was almost always with a church dedicated to Mary under the title of

her Annunciation, Immaculate Conception, or Assumption.

The ancient Rituals of the Order, from the thirteenth century onwards, show the liturgical eagerness of Carmel in the celebration of the Marian feasts of the Church and the full and immediate acceptance of celebrations such as the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. The Carmelite liturgy helped to consolidate the Marian spirit in the Order's spiritual tradition and sustain the Carmelite dedication to Our Lady. Together with the liturgy, devotional practices have thrived, such as the Angelus and the Rosary and others, alongside the scapular devotion.

The devotion of Carmel to Our Lady was incorporated into Carmelite vows and recognized in the liturgy and documents of the Church. In the earliest known profession ceremony, dated to 1281, the Carmelite vowed to 'God and the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel.' Other records from 1287 state: 'Let us implore the suffrage of the Virgin Mary, Mother of Jesus, for whose service and honor our order of Mt. Carmel was founded.' And Pope Clement V continues the same theme in a bull of 1311 when he writes of the Carmelite Order which was 'divinely instituted in honor of the glorious and blessed Virgin Mary.'

**And the last piece of the defining landscape: The Name: "Brothers of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel".**

Following the giving of the Rule of St. Albert, no later than 1214, the group was originally known as 'The Hermit Brothers of Mount Carmel'. But by the year 1227 they were called the 'Hermit Brothers of St. Mary of Mount Carmel'. In 1253 Innocent IV addressed them as 'The Hermit Brothers of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel', and that title was used exclusively in official documents since then and the name of the Order has always appeared in various pontifical documents with this explicit reference to the Virgin Mary. As the Order migrated to Europe and became mendicant, the Carmelites maintained the right to always be known as the "Brothers of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel."

**On the feast of the Nativity of our Lady I feel special joy. When this day comes, I think it's good to renew my vows. And once while I was about to do so, the Blessed Virgin, our Lady, appeared to me through an illuminative vision; and it seems to me I renewed them in her hands and that they were pleasing to her. This vision remained with me for some days, as though she were next to me at my left.** St. Teresa of Avila: Spiritual Testimonies, 43

In **Part III**, let's consider now some of the **modalities** of the relationship, the many ways in which Carmelites over the centuries have addressed and invoked her. Many beautiful titles have been given to the Mother of God, to honor her and to thank her for the help she has given to us. These titles will illustrate different facets of the relationship between Carmelites and the Blessed Mother.