

INTRODUCTION TO THE ORIGINS OF THE CARMELITE ORDER

The link between the origins of Carmel and St. Teresa

To really get the full picture of the renewal that St. Teresa was inspired to initiate within the Carmelite Order, it would be good to step back and look at the history of the Order of Carmel. There is a good reason for this because the renewal that our Holy Mother brought about within Carmel is drawn from the roots of the Order's origins. It is necessary to keep the origins of Carmel and St. Teresa together, even though about three and a half centuries separate them. We cannot understand the work of our Holy Mother St. Teresa without a good understanding of what preceded her.

Another important reason for looking back to the origins of the Order of Carmel in order to understand St. Teresa is because the kind of renewal of Religious life that was called for by the Second Vatican Council finds a genuine precedent in St. Teresa of Jesus. At Vatican II, the Church exhorted all Religious to base the *renewal* of their vocation on a *Return to the Sources*. This simply means to make a careful and prayerful study of what our founders established under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, to draw from the roots of that founding inspiration, and to base our own renewal upon it. Our Mother St. Teresa brought about this very kind of renewal within Carmel in her own time. She *returned to the sources* of Carmel's origins. All of this will be further

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explained and will become clearer in both the aspirancy and postulancy. For now, by way of introduction, let us take some time to learn about the beginnings of the Order of Carmel, as well as its development through the centuries before the time of St. Teresa.

The Origins of the Carmelite Order



*The ruins of the first Monastery
on Mt. Carmel*

Latin hermits began to live on Mount Carmel in the late 12th century. Originally, they came to the Holy Land as soldiers on the Crusades, or in the wake of the Crusades, as pilgrims or merchants or sailors. They were Europeans from Western Europe: England, France, Spain, Italy, Germany; hence, they were known as “Latin” hermits who belonged to the Western (Latin rite) Church. This group of men settled on Mount Carmel, renowned for its natural beauty, and were desirous of living in the Land of Christ and His Mother Mary. They settled in a gorge or valley on Mount Carmel called the “Wadi Ain-es-siah”, near the spring of Elijah. The inspiration for their manner of life was the holy Prophet Elijah who lived on Mount Carmel; he lived in prayer for his people and as a witness to the presence of the living God: “The Lord God lives in whose sight I stand.” Here these hermits lived a very simple life in individual caves

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or cells on Carmel after the example of Elijah, in silence, in solitude, in prayer and spiritual combat and manual labor. The Lord Jesus was central to this unique Community of hermits; their principle aim was to follow in solitude the poor Christ. It was a deeply evangelical way of life. The little Church, or Oratory, they built and in which they gathered together for daily Mass, was dedicated to Our Lady—the *Domina locus*--to whom they promised fealty as her vassals, and more intimately, as her brothers. They called themselves the “Hermit-Brothers of St. Mary of Mount Carmel”.

Who were these hermits of Carmel? Their names, the accounts of their individual lives and deeds are shrouded in obscurity. Unlike other great founders of monastic life, such as Antony, Pachomius, Basil and Benedict, or the founders of the mendicant movement, such as Francis and Dominic, these hermits of Carmel are virtually unknown. The Rule, formulating their way of life and given to them by Albert the Patriarch of Jerusalem about the year 1209, is the earliest extant document giving evidence of their existence on the holy Mount. It was addressed to “Brother B and the other hermits under obedience to him...” Carmelite tradition later identified “Brother B” as Brocard. A little later, in the 13th century, accounts were written about these hermits of Carmel by pilgrims to the Holy Land.



St. Brocard

Here is an example written by an anonymous pilgrim between 1220 and 1231:

“Behind the Abbey of St. Margaret, on the slope of the same mountain, one comes across a picturesque place where Latin hermits, called Carmelites, live. In that place there is a little church of the Holy Virgin. There is also a great abundance of good water that gushes down the cliffs. The Abbey of the Greeks is about a league and a half away from the Latin hermits.”

St. Albert Patriarch of Jerusalem, Carmel's Lawgiver

About the year 1209, this group of hermits desired to be formally established as a Community and recognized by Church authority. Therefore, they approached the Latin-rite Patriarch of Jerusalem with their request. The Bishop (or Patriarch as he was called) of the Latin Church in Jerusalem at that time was Albert of Avogadro who was born of an Italian family of nobility in Castrum Gualteri around the year 1150. In his youth, he became a Canon Regular of the Holy Cross of Martara, following the Rule of St. Augustine. In 1180 he was elected Prior of the Community of Martara; four years later, he was appointed Bishop of Bobbio, and shortly after in 1185 was transferred to Vercelli where he remained as a prudent and capable shepherd for 20 years. During this period, he undertook diplomatic missions of national and international importance with rare prudence and firmness.

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St. Albert of Jerusalem

In 1194, he effected a peace between Pavia and Milan and, five years later, also between Parma and Piacenza. In 1191, he celebrated a diocesan synod which proved of great value for its disciplinary provisions which continued to serve as a model until modern times. He was also involved in a large amount of legislative work for various religious orders: he wrote the statutes for the Canons of Biella and was among the advisers who drew up the Rule of the Humiliati. In 1205 he was elected Patriarch of Jerusalem by the Canons of the Holy Sepulchre, which was ratified by Pope Innocent III who also named him Papal Legate of the Holy Land. He arrived in the Holy Land in 1206 and took up residence in the port city of Acre, because Jerusalem was occupied by the Saracens. In Palestine, Albert was involved in various peace initiatives, not only among Christians but also between the Christians and non-Christians and he carried out his duties with great energy. On September 14, 1214, during a Holy Cross Day procession, he was assassinated by the resentful Master of the Hospital of the Holy Spirit whom Albert reprimanded and deposed for immorality.

As the Bishop of the Latin Church in the Holy Land, the hermits of Carmel contacted Albert, explained to him their way of life, and asked him to draft a Rule for them based

on how they felt inspired by God to live. Unfortunately, there are no actual documents left by the hermits recording their inspiration and intentions or what they discussed with the Patriarch Albert. Rather, this request of the hermits is evidenced in the Rule where Albert writes: "It is to me, however, that you have come for a rule of life in keeping with your avowed purpose, a rule you may hold fast to henceforward..." The "avowed purpose" or *propositum* of the hermits was already a living entity, expressed in the activity and spiritual path that they were already observing in the Wadi. The *propositum* can be surmised from the Rule itself. The main points are:

- ~ A life totally dedicated (consecrated) to the service of the Lord and Lady of the Holy Land (Jesus and Mary).
- ~ To follow the example of the Prophet Elijah: living in the presence of God in a life of continual prayer.
- ~ To profess the evangelical counsels under the leadership of one of the Brothers.
- ~ To live in imitation of Christ, by embracing a lifestyle of silence and solitude, in poverty and manual labor.
- ~ To form a Community (a Brotherhood) of hermits who live in proximity to each other in individual cells.

The Rule of St. Albert for the Hermits of Carmel

To compose a Rule for a religious family was not something to be taken lightly. A Rule had a great sense of

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permanence and stability about it. Once approved, it could only be changed or modified by the Pope. As a religious, Albert himself was keenly aware of how complicated religious legislation could be. Even before becoming a Bishop, and later Patriarch of Jerusalem, he lived as a Canon under the Rule of St. Augustine. He also served as one of the papal legates to reorganize certain vigorous lay groups, such as the Humiliati, and he composed new legislation for them which was elaborate and detailed.

By way of contrast, the Rule he wrote for the hermits of Carmel, is a masterpiece of simplicity. With an introduction and conclusion, it is no more than 21 chapters—which are really only paragraphs.



St. Albert gives the Rule to the Hermits of Carmel

Along with its brevity, the text is rooted in Sacred Scripture and shows a remarkable sense of balance and common sense. In its basic principles, the Rule he wrote for the hermits is a return to the Gospel way of life and is deeply Christocentric characterized by an intense devotion to the Person of Christ. Here is a summary of the specific elements of the Rule given by Albert to the hermit Brothers about the year 1209:

- ~ The hermit-Brothers would live in allegiance to Jesus Christ, serving Him with a pure heart and

steadfast conscience; they were to hold fast to the Rule that has been given to them.

~ They were to have a Prior (a Superior), one of themselves, and chosen for the office by common consent.

~ To the Prior they would promise obedience.

~ Each Brother was to have a separate cell, allotted by the Prior with the agreement of the other Brothers. The original Latin text of the Rule says: *...singuli vestrum singulas habeant cellulas separatas...* (lit. each one of you is to have an individual, separate cell); this highlights the importance of solitude in the way of life of the hermits.

~ They were not to occupy another cell than the one allotted to them by the Prior, nor were they allowed to exchange their cell with another without permission.

~ The cell of the Prior was to be at the entrance of the property, so he would be the first to meet any visitors.

~ Each hermit was to remain in his own cell, or near it, meditating day and night on the law of the Lord and watching in prayer, unless attending to some other duty. This is the central precept of the Rule.

~ Those Brothers who know how to read are to pray the psalms in place of the hours of the Divine Office throughout the day; and those who cannot read, they are to recite a certain number of *Our Fathers* in place of the hours of the Divine Office. This norm of

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praying the psalms, naturally follows the previous norm of prayer in solitude. In the original Rule (1209) of St. Albert, each Brother prayed the psalms in his own cell.

~ None of the Brothers were to own individual property, everything was to be held in common; each one was to receive from the Prior or the Brother appointed for this purpose, whatever he needed in accord with his age and necessity. The norm of remaining in the cell is repeated, and each one is to live on what is given to him.



*The ruins of the Oratory of the early hermits
in the Wadi Ain-es-Siah, Mt. Carmel*

~ An Oratory (a small Chapel) was to be built in the midst of the cells, and if possible, the Brothers were to gather each morning for Mass. The prescription to have daily Mass was very original to the

hermits of Carmel; the hermits in the East met for the Liturgy only on Sundays.

~ On Sundays, or other days if necessary, they were to have a Community meeting (also called "Chapter") to discuss matters of discipline (i.e. their way of life) and their spiritual welfare, if there were any faults or

indiscretions among the Brothers, they were to be corrected with charity.

~ The Brothers were to fast every day, except Sundays, from the Feast of the Holy Cross (Sept. 14) until Easter day, unless bodily sickness or feebleness, or some other good reason should demand a dispensation from the fast; for necessity overrides every law.

~ They were to abstain from meat, unless as a remedy for sickness or feebleness.

~ One of the longest chapters in the Rule is the exhortation to spiritual warfare and to be clothed in the armor of God.

~ The Brothers were to do some kind of manual labor, so as to earn their own bread, and as a safeguard against idleness.

~ They were to keep silence in their work. A stricter form of silence was to be kept from Vespers until Terce the following day. At other times, they were permitted to speak when needed, but they were exhorted to be careful with their words.

~ The Prior was to be at the service of the Brothers after the example of Christ in the Gospel.

~ The Brothers were to hold their Prior in humble reverence, seeing Christ in his person.

~ The final words of the Rule are an exhortation to live up to this standard of conduct; if anyone does more than he is obliged, the Lord will reward him. But they

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were not to exceed the bounds of common sense which is the guide of the virtues.

These elements place the eremitical life of the Brothers of Carmel firmly within a framework, simple but unmistakable, of fraternal life; that is, they formed a *Community of hermits*. As a synthesis of solitary and fraternal life, the Rule of St. Albert is unique in the eremitical movement of the Middle Ages.

Subsequent to the decrees of the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 which prohibited the proliferation of religious institutes, the hermits of Carmel applied to the Holy See for recognition of their way of life and the Rule given to them by Albert about 1209. Pope Honorius III acceded to their request in 1226 and granted apostolic approval. Three years later in 1229, Pope Gregory IX confirmed the approbation and juridical recognition of their way of life.

New Foundations and the Need for Adaptation

Despite the continuous upheaval in the Holy Land with wars and truces, followed by more wars, the little hermit Community in the Wadi flourished with new members. Though there are no exact dates of the first new foundations, houses were established by the Carmelites in Acre and Tyre. In 1238 a hermitage was established off the main-land in Cypress. The ten-year truce of 1230 provided the opportunity for the hermits to make foundations in Europe, the first being that of Valenciennes in Flanders in 1235. Other houses were

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formed in Europe in the 1230's, such as Messina and Trapani on the island of Sicily. A little later in 1241, some Englishmen of the Carmelite Community returned to England and began a foundation in Hulne, Northumbria, near the Scottish



*The medieval Carmelite Monastery in
Aylesford, Kent*

border, then another at Aylesford in Kent. By 1254 there were other European houses established in Pisa (Italy), as well as Marseilles and Paris (France). These earliest Communities were built according to the physical layout of the Wadi, whenever possible, with a central Chapel and individual cells surrounding it. In imitation of the original foundation, these Chapels were often dedicated to Our Lady of Mount Carmel.

Though it was relatively easy for these hermits to return to their European homelands, it would be far more difficult to transplant their way of life and live it out in the places where they had originated. On their return to Europe, the hermits were given places to live that were vastly different than the Wadi on Mount Carmel; their new “space” was sometimes in remote areas, but often they had to establish their houses in the towns and cities of their homelands. Besides the problem of space, the transfer of their peculiar way of life proved much more difficult to be

accepted among European Christians. These “new-comers” from the Holy Land seemed odd and alien. Their striped cloak, a common style in the Holy Land, seemed outlandish in Europe and was a source of ridicule; their Rule required abstinence from meat which was simple enough on Mount Carmel, but not so in the harsher climates of European countries; their prayer structure around the recitation of the Psalms in solitude was “out of step” with every other Religious Community that prayed the Divine Office; they tried to support themselves by begging, but ordinary working people hesitated to give anything to them.

Now the hermits had to face the hard question: could their solitary vocation to prayer and silence adapt to life in the busy conditions of European towns and cities? For them it was a matter of survival.

Adaptation of Pope Innocent IV in 1247 and Carmelite Life in Europe



Pope Innocent IV

In 1247 the hermit-Brothers gathered together for a major meeting, called a “Chapter”, at Aylesford, England. At this Chapter, they addressed the question of adaptation of their way of life within a European context. The hermits who attended the Chapter sent two delegates, Brothers Reginald and Peter, to the Holy See requesting the Pope “to clarify and correct” certain points in the Rule given by the Patriarch

Albert. Pope Innocent IV assigned two Dominican scholars to help adjust the Rule of St. Albert to the new conditions. The adaptations of the Rule were confirmed by the Apostolic Letter of October 1, 1247, *Quae honorem Conditoris*, of Pope Innocent IV which is perhaps the most far-reaching of all pontifical documents in Carmelite history.

In its more than eight-hundred year history, this was the first and only time that the text of the Rule itself was adapted. The relatively few additions and modifications to the text proved successful in two ways: first, the eremitic vocation to prayer, silence, solitude, poverty and manual labor remained completely intact; and above all, the Rule still hinged on the central precept: "Each of you is to stay in his own cell or nearby, pondering the Lord's law day and night and keeping watch at his prayers unless attending to some other duty." Second, the much needed adaptations were made to ensure the future of Carmelite life in other cultures, climates and circumstances. Here is a summary of the points in the Rule that were adapted:

- ~ The vows of chastity and poverty (renunciation of ownership) were added to the original vow of obedience made to the Prior.
- ~ It was permissible to make foundations in solitary places or wherever the Brothers were given a site, provided that the place was suitable and convenient for the observance proper to their way of life.

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- ~ The meals of the Brothers were to be taken in a common refectory while listening to a reading from Sacred Scripture.
- ~ The canonical hours (the Divine Office), rather than just the Psalms, were to be prayed together.
- ~ The Brothers were permitted to own a certain amount of things for their livelihood, such as asses and mules for travel, as well as livestock or poultry for food.
- ~ The Brothers were permitted to eat meat outside their own houses when travelling.
- ~ The period of strict silence from after Vespers until Terce the next day, was shortened to *from after Compline until after Prime the next day*. However, the exceptions for speaking during strict silence given in the original Rule were removed in the modification.

Along with this legislative adaptation, the hermits of Carmel, were brought into the mendicant way of life, as the Franciscans and Dominicans, which became increasingly popular among the Christian faithful. Thus, they became known as *Friars* (Brothers), and were distinguished from the monks of huge abbeys by a simpler and evangelical style of life, in smaller Communities, and with an apostolate, for those in Holy Orders, of preaching, offering Mass, hearing confessions and teaching in Universities. Although this transition to an active ministry was gradual, it tended more and more to shift the focus from the silent life of prayer to

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activity. Another contributing factor towards this shift, was the need for better formation among the new members in the Order. Many talented young Friars were educated in the Universities of Europe such as Paris and elsewhere, and along with obtaining degrees in studies, came the commitment to preaching and teaching. Conflict would be inevitable between those who were committed to the eremitical roots of life in the Wadi, and those who saw the adaptations as a matter of future survival. As a result, the subject of the Order's purpose and mission came to the fore.



St. Simon Stock receives the Scapular, the sign of Our Lady's protection

In this period, an English Carmelite, Simon Stock was elected Prior General, most likely at the General Chapter of London in 1254. Although there is not much by way of historical records about him, what is certain is that he led a holy life and promoted prayer among the Brothers, especially prayer to Our Lady as Patroness of the Order. According to Carmelite tradition, St. Simon Stock is associated with the use of

the Carmelite scapular as a symbol of consecration to Mary. Our Lady promised him that this garment (originally the scapular was commonly used by monks and friars as an apron over their religious habit) would be the sign of her favor, the "privilegium", over her Carmelite sons. Later in

the 14th century, the scapular became a widespread and popular devotion to Our Lady among the Christian peoples. St. Simon died in 1266 while visiting the Brothers of the Carmelite priory in Bordeaux and is buried in their Chapel.

One of the most famous of the early Prior Generals was Nicholas of Narbonne, also called Nicholas the Frenchman (Prior General from 1266-1271). Though he saw the need for good scholarship among the Brothers if they were to be truly spiritual guides and effective preachers, he also saw with great clarity that life in the cities



Nicholas of Narbonne

posed the real risk of losing the life of communion with God which the desert represents. He issued a strong “warning” to the members of the Order in his passionate letter, *Ignea Sagitta* (The Flaming Arrow) in which he sets forth in detail the bad fruits (and sins!) that come from immersion in city life and the loss of the spirit of prayer which is at the roots of the Order. Though he laments loudly, his words were not able to put a halt to the movement towards the cities and the transformation of the eremitical brotherhood into a busy mendicant Order. However, his *Flaming Arrow* did leave its mark as an enduring reference point for the members of the Order to its eremitical roots. Carmel continued to flourish.

Formative Influence: The Book of the Institution of the First Monks

Before considering the later mitigations of the Rule, it would be beneficial to dwell briefly on the formative influences affecting the way of life and spirituality of the first centuries of the Carmelites. Besides Sacred Scripture, it is beyond question that the Rule of St. Albert, even in its adapted form of 1247, had (and still has) the greatest formative influence on the members of Carmel. The Rule is not merely a set of laws to keep, but a whole program of following Jesus in the solitary aspects of His life. The Rule influences and shapes the exterior details of daily life in the Monastery, as well as the interior life of prayer and the practice of the virtues that conform the Carmelite to Christ.

The other source which had much influence on the formation of the early Carmelites was a work written by the 14th century Provincial of Catalonia, Felip Ribot, *The Book of the Institution of the First Monks*. This book formed the first part of a larger work, *The Way of Life and Great Deeds of the Carmelites* which comprised ten books written about the year 1390.

Felip Ribot was a doctor of Sacred Scripture, and he draws abundantly from the sacred text, as will be seen, to bring home his lessons to his Carmelite readers. In the opening pages of the *Institution* Ribot plunges into Sacred Scripture by presenting the great Prophet Elijah as the “founder” (this must be understood in the sense of a spiritual founder or inspiration, not in the sense of a founder of an

institute of religious life) and model of the eremitical/monastic way of life on Mount Carmel. This is reflected in his *Prologue* to the work where he writes:

... just as the Israelite people, before all other people, were taught by God through Moses about the great wisdom of the law, so the Carmelite monks before all other men of the Israelite people were instructed by God through the prophet Elijah about the special writings and rules of the monastic life. They should, though, lest they incur God's wrath, not boast that they have so great a prophet as this as the author and founder of their Order, but rather they should strive to imitate the life of this prophet, to study and understand his teachings and the rules of this Order, and to copy his deeds.



*Image of the Prophet Elijah from
The Book of the Institution of
the First Monks*

With the Prophet Elijah as the model set before the eyes of the monk, Ribot sets forth the two-fold goal of the eremitical life. This is the high point, the “jewel” of Book 1, where he gives an exegesis of the word of the Lord to the Prophet in the first book of *Kings*. It is worth quoting a substantial portion of the text of Book 1, chapter 2 to

convey the significance of this passage which has influenced Carmelite spirituality throughout the ages. Ribot writes:

This prophet of God, Elijah, was the first leader of monks, from whom this holy and ancient way of life took its origin. For he, having reached divine contemplation and filled with the desire for higher things, withdrew far from the cities, and laying aside all earthly and worldly things, was the first to begin to devote himself to following the religious and prophetic eremitical life, which, under the inspiration and command of the Holy Spirit, he initiated and formulated.

This is all proved by the clear testimony of Holy Scripture, for we read about this in the first book of *Kings*, chapter 17: "The word of the Lord came to Elijah saying, 'Depart from here and go towards the East, and hide yourself in the wadi Carith, which is over against the Jordan, and there you will drink of the torrent, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there.'"

Now these salutary commands which the Holy Spirit inspired Elijah to fulfil, and these welcome promises which He encouraged him to strive for, should be meditated upon by us hermit monks word for word, not only for their historical sense but

even more for their mystical sense; because our way of life is contained in them so much more fully, that is, the way of arriving at prophetic perfection and the goal of the religious eremitical life.

The goal of this life is twofold. One part we acquire by our own effort and the exercise of the virtues, assisted by divine grace. This is to offer God a pure and holy heart, free from all stain of sin. We attain this goal when we are perfect and “in Carith”, that is, hidden in that love of which the Wiseman speaks: “love covers all offences” (Proverbs 10:12). Wishing Elijah to reach this goal, God said to him, “Hide in the wadi Carith”.

The other goal of this life is granted to us as the free gift of God, namely, to taste somewhat in the heart and to experience in the mind the power of the divine presence and the sweetness of heavenly glory, not only after death but already in this mortal life. This is to “drink of the torrent” of the pleasure of God. God promised this to Elijah in the words: “And there you shall drink of the torrent”...

Through the first of these, that is, through purity of heart and perfection of love, one comes to the second, that is, to an experiential knowledge of the divine power

and heavenly glory. As the Lord says in *John* chapter 14: “He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and will show myself to him”. And so God, by what He had proposed to the holy prophet Elijah in all the above words, wanted greatly to persuade him – the first and outstanding leader of monks – and us his followers, that we should “be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect”, “having above all things love, which is the bond of perfection” (*Matt.* 5:48 and *Col.* 3:14). Therefore, in order that we may be worthy of the perfection urged on us and the promised vision of glory, let us seek attentively to understand clearly and logically, and to fulfil in our actions, the form of life given by God in the above words to blessed Elijah as a way to achieve them.

This passage is, by far, one of the most well-known and most quoted of the *Institution*. It expresses very concisely what is at the *heart* of the Carmelite life and spiritual tradition which is the union of the human person with God. In this lies its significance. For anyone intent on living a life of prayer (not simply “saying prayers”, but communion with God) must also be intent on living the virtues, especially charity. The virtues dispose the interior of the person to come to the experience of intimacy with God. Like nothing else, this has a transformative effect in the life of a person; the Saints of

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Carmel bear witness to this beautiful reality. It is almost certain, that St. Teresa was familiar with *The Book of the Institution of the First Monks* and was formed by it. Though she does not explicitly quote from this passage of the *Institution*, her teachings on the search for God within one's soul through prayer and the practice of the virtues in her writings are enough evidence to show that she was immersed in this spiritual tradition of Carmel.

The Mitigations of the 14th and 15th Centuries

As the Order developed along mendicant lines and was established "in a firm state" in 1298 by Pope Boniface VIII, and was later granted full mendicant privileges in 1326 by Pope John XXII, the Carmelites became more and more exposed to the abuses which affected all the mendicant Orders in the 14th century. In particular, the privileges and titles that went with academic distinctions did much to undermine the poverty and common life among the Friars, as well as the times of prayer, silence and solitude. The calamity of the Black Death plague (1347-1351), the divisive influence of the Western Schism (1378-1417), as well as the heavy losses during the Hundred Years War (1337-1453), affected Carmel (as well as other Orders), and produced a general spirit of lassitude.

In this state of affairs, the members of the 1430 General Chapter of the Carmelite Order determined to request the Holy See to mitigate certain points of the Rule which were considered to be too strict and austere to keep

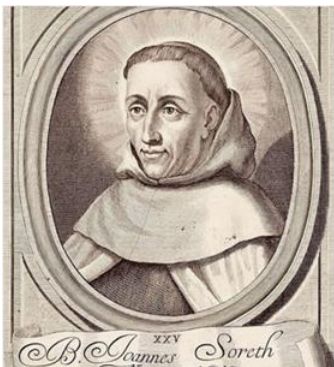
and which deterred new candidates from entering the Order. The request was granted by Pope Eugene IV with the Bull of mitigation of February 15, 1432. The points of the Rule that were affected by the mitigation were: the abstinence from meat, allowing the Communities to eat meat three days a week except during Advent and Lent; and the prescription to remain in one's cell meditating on the law of the Lord, permitting the Friars to remain out of their cells and walk about at suitable times in the Church or cloister. These mitigations were merely annexed to the Rule, so that the Rule adapted by Pope Innocent IV in 1247 remained untouched.

Around the mid-15th century, further concessions to the Rule were made regarding dietary prescriptions, dispensing the Friars from the fast for two days a week. Later in the century, the Holy See gave to the Prior General the power to regulate the fast and abstinence for the members of the Order. These mitigations and regulations were eventually incorporated into the Constitutions. Again, it is important to note that although mitigations were the practice of the time, the Rule of 1247 remained intact and was confirmed "in perpetuity" by Sixtus IV in 1476.

It is equally important to keep in mind that these mitigations were not always a sign of wholesale decadence on the part of the Carmelites. The request for mitigations came after long deliberations by the Superiors of the Order and were mainly due to the difficulties and, sometimes dire circumstances of the time. Nevertheless, the mitigations did, in time, create a trend towards self-indulgence and laxity, as

well as a loss of the solitary dimension of the life and the spirit of prayer which struck at the essence of Carmel. Thus a growing number of Friars saw the need of a real reform among their ranks. Some of these Friars became the pioneers of a renewal within the Order, the so-called “reform congregations”, one of the most famous was the Congregation of Mantua. One of the features of these reform houses was that the Friars, with permission of the Superior, would set up a more rigorous observance of silence, simplicity of life, and attention to remaining in or near one’s cell.

Blessed John Soreth, the Prior General of Reform and the Establishment of Carmelite Nuns



Blessed John Soreth

During the 15th century the Lord raised up one of the most outstanding Prior Generals of the Carmelite Order, John Soreth of Caen, Normandy. After leading a reform movement as Provincial of Francia, encouraging his Friars to return to a fervent life of prayer, he was elected General in 1451. He led the Order for 20 years using both legislation and personal influence to promote his reforms. He traveled much attempting to visit as many priories as possible. It was principally by this means that he was successful in bringing about reform.

His “program” of renewal consisted in pointing out weaknesses and encouraging an increase of fervor. John worked with one Community at a time and would exhort the Friars to enter a kind of “second novitiate” and to commit themselves to their vocation to Carmel by making a new beginning. They renounced personal goods, privileges and exemptions that might weaken their commitment to living the Gospel and their vows; they would eat at a common table with their Brothers asking for nothing special in food or living quarters; they also pledged themselves to keeping the central precept of the Rule by remaining in their cells as much as possible. More than implementing laws for reform, he sought to revitalize the interior life of prayer in the Friars. In this was his secret of genuine renewal.

The last point, a very significant one, that we want to present about John Soreth is his initiative in bringing women into the Order of Carmel. Just a year after his election as Prior General, he attended a Provincial Chapter in lower Germany; he was approached by a group of Dutch women from Ten Elsen, known as beguines, who lived an informal Community life without vows, and were devoted to prayer and good works. These women were under the spiritual direction of the Carmelite Friars of Guelders and they desired to formalize their membership in the Order. This was just one group of beguines, among other groups from other countries, that desired to be affiliated to the Carmelites. John agreed that it was time to establish a sisterhood in Carmel.

In the same year, 1452, John requested authorization from Pope Nicholas V to affiliate to the Order already existing feminine Communities and to found new ones. The Pope granted permission to receive these Communities into the Order, and John Soreth composed for these Sisters a modified version of the Carmelite Constitutions. Communities from Florence, and several other Italian houses, as well as those from the Rhineland and Low Countries were brought into the Carmelite family. In 1463 convents were founded in France, by the French noblewoman Blessed Frances d'Amboise. A number of these convents came under the influence of the Mantuan Congregation, and were directed by the Friars who helped to organize the life of the sisters.



Blessed Frances d'Amboise

Within the next three decades many other convents were established throughout Italy and Spain. The convent of the Incarnation in the city of Avila, Spain was founded in 1479, and it was here that the young Doña Teresa de Ahumada entered Carmel in 1535.

These Monasteries of women were more or less organized depending on which statutes they followed that regulated their life. Some kept the enclosure rather strictly and recited the Divine Office together in Choir and devoted

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themselves to times of prayer. Others had a more loose observance allowing lay persons within the Monastery, with the consequent coming and going. Sisters who came from noble families would bring their servants with them into the Monastery; others were entrusted to the Community by their parents who could not afford a dowry for the marriage of their daughter. In the midst of this variety of observance, came St. Teresa of Jesus.



*Ancient icon of Our Lady
called "della Bruna"
venerated by the early hermits of
Carmel*

*Carmel's Fair Flower,
God blossom laden,
Splendor of Heaven,
Meek Mother-Maiden
None like to thee.*

*Virgin and Mother,
Grant us a sign,
Thy Carmelite children
Mark us as thine,
Star of the Sea!*

*Prayer to Our Lady
attributed to St. Simon Stock*