

Albert of Trapani:  
A Saint of Yesterday for Today

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*Father Giovanni, a Carmelite from our Italian Province who combines historical research and writing with pastoral ministry, gives us not only a biographical outline of the Saint, but an understanding of why he is important to us today as an example of Carmelite life and values.*

*A Saint Of Yesterday For Today – Albert* is one of the two most ancient saints in the Order. Along with St. Angelus, he is called the “Father of the Order,” *pater ordinis*, for his sanctity and the exemplary quality of his life. We do not have much information about his life, but we can trace its main lines with reliability. The oldest biography was written probably a little after 1385 and is the basis of a second manuscript text by an anonymous Carmelite now preserved in the Vatican Library. We know of two other ancient biographies of St. Albert, one by Vincenzo Barbaro and the other by Theodore de Aquis.

There are also medieval biographies of Albert by Giovanni M. de Poluciis of Novarella, and the *Legenda aurea*, both dating from the fifteenth century. These depend on the saint’s biography by Theodore de Aquis. In the same period various items of information were gathered in the lists of saints which goes under the name of the *Catalogus sanctorum*.

A tradition confirmed by various documents says that Albert was born in Trapani around the middle of the thirteenth century. His parents were Benedetto degli Abati and Giovanna Polizi, a couple who had been unable to have children in twenty-six years of marriage. This detail recalls the great biblical examples of Samuel (1 Sm 1:1-2, 11) and John the Baptist (Lk 1:5-25, 5 7-80). The mother initiated his vocation by promising him to the Lord and she sustained this commitment even in the face of the plans of Albert’s father, who wanted to see him married and inheriting the family fortune. Albert joined the Carmelites who had established a priory in Trapani and whose foundation had been endowed by his family. After ordination Albert was sent to Messina. Various documents testify the he had returned to Trapani not later than August 1280, when he witnessed the will of Ribaldo Abati. He was in the city again on April 4, 1289, when he witnessed the will of Perna, the second wife of the same Ribaldo, and again on October 8th the same year, when he witnessed a contract relating to property of the knight, Palmerio Abati. Albert was remembered as a man of prayer and as a celebrated preacher sought after throughout Sicily. A document of 10 May 1296, recording a gift by Palmerio Abati to Donna Perna, mentions that Albert is Carmelite Provincial of Sicily. There is no record of Albert’s participation in the crucial events in the history of the Order in those times, nor of how he may have contributed to the consolidation and growth of the Order, but there is no doubt that as a friar who had a deep experience of God and a real capacity to recognize people’s needs, his work in preaching and charity contributed much to the growing appreciation of the Order in Sicily. It is perhaps not only by reason of antiquity that the title *pater ordinis* came to be conferred on him.

Tradition is that Albert died in Messina on August 7<sup>th</sup> 1307. The tradition also records the episode of an argument between the clergy and the laity at the time of his funeral. Popular affection and devotion led to the people to want to celebrate Albert as a saint, but the clergy preferred a normal Requiem Mass. The legend recounts that, in the middle of the argument, some angels appeared and intoned the *Os justi*, the Introit for the Mass of a Confessor, and thus confirmed the popular feeling and Albert’s reputation for holiness.

The translation of his relics took place either in 1309 or more probably, in 1317. The skull was taken from Messina to Trapani by the provincial Cataldo di Anselmo of Erice. Other relics of Albert were dispersed to various places. All through Sicily there are memories of the presence of Albert and of miracles he performed. In Agrigento there is a well whose water he purified; at Corleone his flask for wormwood was preserved; at Petralia Soprana there is a stone which he used as a pillow; at Piazza Armerina there is said to be the first chapel in his honour.

Many miracles were attributed to the saint, both in his lifetime and after his death. While he was in Messina he managed to lift the blockade imposed on the city in 1301 by Robert of Calabria, then King of Naples. Through Albert's intercession one or more ships—the sources mention from one to twelve—succeeded in breaking the siege and bringing provisions to the starving people of Messina.

A characteristic of Albert's ministry was healing. He restored the sight of a blind lad, who then became a Carmelite; some women were cured of abscesses of the breast; and others who were cured of fever. A Jew with epilepsy was converted after the saint's intervention. As well as such physical healings, the legends also recount spiritual ones, and particularly his work as an exorcist.

### **St. Albert and hearing the Word of God**

Legend relates that Albert recited the entire Psalter every day, as well as the Liturgy of the Hours. It's not possible to say to what extent this story is true, but nevertheless it gives us a glimpse of the spiritual personality of the saint and the way of praying characteristic of his time. The custom of reciting the entire Psalter was not an eccentricity but a well-attested practice among medieval hermits. The first hermits on Mount Carmel also used this type of prayer, which was a response to the Lord's command to pray without ceasing. In the solitude of his cell the hermit marked out the time and accompanied his manual work with the recitation of the Psalms, which he knew by heart. The Psalms, which Jesus used for his prayer, had been born as the prayer of the devout Israelite and in the early years of the Church became the backbone of Christian communal prayer. Christians found new depths of meaning in the ancient Jewish texts. Themes, symbols, and images from the Psalter called the substance of the Gospel to mind, so that monks, canons and hermits felt that they were praying the psalms "through Christ, with Christ, in Christ," in the Church and with the Church.

The recitation of the Psalter, therefore, is reminiscent of the love for the Word of God recommended in various ways by the Carmelite Rule. In fact, the whole Rule is a tapestry of direct and indirect references to Scripture, the fruit of a kind of *lectio divina*. The Carmelite Rule makes several explicit references to the Word: reading the scripture during meals (Rule 7); *lectio divina* or meditating day and night on the Law of the Lord (10); The Liturgy of the Hours, (11); the daily Eucharist (14); "the sword of the Spirit.., let everything be done in the Word of the Lord" (19). None of this is strange, for the whole of the first Christian millennium the Word of God constituted the heart of common and private prayer. It was read, or rather heard, committed to memory, and "ruminated" in continual meditation, which flowed into prayer. The first step, reading, allowed one to understand the literal sense

of the text, what it says, what is its purpose. Meditation was not a purely mental or intellectual exercise, but a repetition of the phrases of the biblical text under the breath. This was something, then, which involved the whole person— speaking, hearing, and, in the case of someone who could read, seeing. In meditation, furthermore, one explained the text from other pages or words of Scripture, and one considered its allegorical sense (what does this word refer to? what is it a symbol of?), its anagogical sense (what is the purpose of my life, of our life, of history?), and its moral sense (what must I do, must we do?).

At this point, after this intense reflection on the word, a person would feel prompted by the Spirit to pray, to respond in prayer to God who has spoken through his word. The continuing and progressive path of familiarity with Scripture and meditation on it would open the mind and heart to contemplation, that is to the joyous and grateful recognition of the action of God in one's own story and in the history of all. This method was developed by the monks and was the heart of their formation, a rather different one than the "scholastic" approach worked out in the universities, which was more intellectual, logical and speculative.

All this effort served to allow the Word to penetrate into the heart of a person, which little by little would be transformed and progressively identified with Jesus. In St. Albert's case the identification is very marked—he acts in ways which are typical of the evangelical person, of the disciple of the Lord, the authentic witness of the Resurrection (cf. Mk 16:9-20). He heals the sick, frees the possessed, purifies the waters of poisoned wells... only one who has encountered the Lord in a deep and decisive way, one who has discovered in Jesus of Nazareth the Messiah, the Son of God (cf. Mk 1:1; 3:11; 5:7; 15:39), can perform these miracles.

### **St. Albert and proclaiming the Word of God**

St. Albert has often been portrayed with an open book in his hand, or with the Child Jesus in his arms. This is not by accident, for these are both iconographical attributes which indicate a preacher of the Gospel, which is precisely what Albert was.

In order to be authentic proclaimers it is necessary to have encountered Jesus, and this is possible primarily through the hearing of the Word. It was his familiarity with Scripture, cultivated in *lectio divina* with purity of heart and openness to the transforming action of the Holy Spirit, which made St. Albert capable of proclaiming the Gospel. People could say of him the same thing as they thought about Jesus: "They were astonished by his teaching, because he taught them as one with authority and not like the scribes" (Mk 1:22; cf. Mt 7:28-29; Lk 4:32).

St. Albert is remembered for an extraordinary ability to speak to people with conviction and immediacy. We don't know whether he had studied in some university, or if, as perhaps is more probable, his formation was of a more monastic type. In either case, it would have been cantered on the Word of God, the continuous, deeply-felt, insightful reading of the Sacred Page, as the Bible was called at that time. Formed by the biblical and gospel texts, Albert had assimilated their spirit and was able to translate them in an attractive and understandable way, so they could be light and inspiration moving his listeners to put the word into practice.

Popular preaching was precisely a characteristic of the new religious families founded from the end of the 12th century onwards. Preaching was not restricted to the liturgy. The ministry of preaching, which until then had been a prerogative of bishops and their official delegates, was assumed also by simple friars and even by lay people. The Carmelites, too, almost from their beginning and especially after the Second Council of Lyons (1274), dedicated themselves to this activity, considering it a true and proper vocation of service to the people of God. Therefore, the first two saints of the order, St. Albert and St. Angelus, were also outstanding preachers. Indeed, it is told of St. Angelus that he was killed precisely because of accusations made against a corrupt nobleman in the course of a sermon.

St. Albert appeared as a true disciple of the Lord, an authentic witness of his incarnation, passion, death and resurrection. In fact, he spent the greater part of his time and energy as a preacher. His preaching was confirmed by the wonders it accomplished: he not only proclaimed the Gospel, but healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, and drove out demons according to the commission Jesus gave to the disciples (Mk 16:9-20). The Word he preached was materialized in gestures of tender attention to those who were in real need of healing and new life. His arrival in a place really brought good news, the Gospel. His life, simple and coherent, spoke on its own, spoke of Christ and his gift of salvation and grace. This transparency of his life allowed him to translate the Word into concrete actions, and this also expressed in a certain way his devotion to the Blessed Virgin: like Mary he knew how to give life to the Word, he was a “God machine,” as his confrère Blessed Titus Brandsma would have said some centuries later.

His attention to the basic and primary needs of the people he met is a powerful indicator of his capacity to talk to those who had the most need of hearing the Gospel proclamation. Albert did not distract his listeners with elegant forms of preaching but stressed the vital content of the message. The Carmelite gets down to basics: he hastens to meet men and women who need a word of salvation and life and hope, and to them, the least, he comes in the power of love, faith and hope. Therefore, his word is effective and powerful, capable of producing extraordinary effects of inner and outer healing, for which he was venerated as a miracle-worker.

### **St. Albert, man of purity**

Another iconographical attribute of St. Albert is the white lily, symbol of purity. This means that his life shines as an example of virtue and sincerity, recognized and venerated by the people of God as a gift and reminder for all. The chastity of St. Albert became a radiant expression of a radical, definitive and complete choice for God.

Two other elements of the legend of St. Albert converge, in different ways, on this same value of purity. We are told that his mother, Giovanna, grateful to God for having given him to her after such long expectation, wished that her son would come to a life of total consecration to the Lord. His father, on the other hand, would have preferred to see him married, perhaps to the daughter of some powerful noble or a rich merchant, the usual way to elevate the social and economic condition of the family, as well as guaranteeing the son a comfortable future. The legend continues that the son, faced with this choice, preferred the spiritual intentions

of his mother to the more worldly outlook of his father. His wife eventually won over the father to the decision.

As if this was not enough to show Albert's radical choice for God, the legend also recounts the temptation to which he was subjected as a novice. The devil disguised himself as a beautiful young woman in order to attract the attentions of the young novice and to draw him away from the decision he had made. But, as they say, the devil makes pots but not lids, and Albert discovered the Tempter's true identity, which the beauty of the girl failed to totally conceal, the devil accidentally showing his cloven hooves beneath the girl's skirts. The novice was quick to drive the devil away, entrusting himself once again to the divine protection. There are paintings which depict Albert, in a sign of his victory, trampling a devil with feminine features but with goat's feet. The story, of course, needs to be understood in symbolic terms: even the most beautiful realities can be transformed into temptation if they are detached from the realization of God's will and one's own vocation.

It is no accident that the legends and stories pay so much attention to Albert's purity. These are figurative ways, even as the use of symbols and images in paintings, to tell about St. Albert, true Carmelite and follower of Mary, the *Virgo purissima*. The purity practiced by Albert is not simply a physical fact, but primarily a spiritual reality. It is certainly not a chastity which is lived as a renunciation of human love and natural fruitfulness. Rather it serves to translate in concrete terms a fundamental, radical choice for God and his plan of salvation, which requires total availability and complete dedication. Albert allowed himself to be seized by God: he placed himself totally at God's service, gave God his life and capacities, and welcomed God's call as a gift and a commitment for life.

St. Albert's purity expresses his full conformity to Christ, his simple and total adherence to the Word of life, the transparency with which his character manifested and communicated this fundamental choice for God. Like Mary, Albert knew how to accept the Word which was addressed to him and how to make it come alive and real in the experience of his life. His character is made so transparent by the Holy Spirit that his words and actions are able to give explicit witness to the activity of salvation which the Lord continues to exercise through the work of his disciples.

### **St. Albert, man of poverty**

There is no doubt that St. Albert professed and lived a life of poverty. It is demonstrated by his decision to enter the community of Carmelite friars, already taking their place in the mendicant movement, that is among those religious who did not base their livelihood on rents or fixed incomes, but who preferred simplicity of life, "uncertain mendicancy," as travelling preachers who would eat whatever the people offered them according to their possibilities and generosity. They held everything in common and shared all their goods, considering themselves brothers, and therefore members of the one family, for which the Father of all would provide.

St. Albert had made poverty a real life-decision. Coming from a well-off family of some social standing was not an obstacle for him to embrace the poverty of Christ and his disciples. He could have made a different choice and joined the city clergy, or some abbey or canonry.

Instead he chose to put himself alongside the *minores*, the least important people of his time and place, sharing the style and condition of their lives. This doesn't mean that he wasn't able to appreciate his family experience and social connections. He did, in fact, make use of them from time to time to help others. For example, during the blockade of Messina St. Albert had some influential connections which enabled him to arrange food supplies for the city. On the other hand, it's clear that his motivation for action on that occasion was the hunger of the people and his sense of responsibility towards those who really needed help at that moment. The gospel command to give food to the hungry was his motivation. Evangelical poverty implies a struggle for life, justice, truth, and peace. St. Albert, poor by choice, was able to recognize the true needs of the people beside him, and he had learned how to intervene with evangelical generosity, however it was required in the circumstances.

A consequence of poverty is the penitence and austerity of life proper to the Order of Carmel, at that time still fairly close to its origins on Mount Carmel. Tradition records at least two facts linked to this practical-spiritual dimension of Albert's life: the flask of wormwood preserved in Corleone, and the rock of Petralia Soprana, where he is supposed to have rested. The latter offers us a glimpse of the saint's way of life, often on the move along the bright roads of Sicily, to preach, heal, counsel, and soothe spirits. The Carmelite could have found better accommodation: he had friends and family connections which would have guaranteed him more comfortable accommodations. Nevertheless, he chose to travel as a poor man. Poor among the poor, he sought chance accommodation during his travels: he was no stranger to barns, caves and natural shelters.

Bitter wormwood had become a customary condiment for food on penitential days, on Fridays, for example. St. Albert used to mix it with foods and drinks, making them less pleasing to taste. It was another way of mortifying the senses. Today we have a different idea about food and a different concept of penance, but we should respect the ways of acting of previous generations. There is still validity in a poor and austere life, which concentrates on the essential, without getting lost in useless things, which is committed to building authentic and non-manipulative relationships with others and with the reality around us. The Gospel poor, like St. Albert, know that they cannot count on anything except God and his grace, they accept as a gift whatever they receive from their brothers and sisters, without presuming anything, and they are thankful for it all. Evangelical poverty makes one able to see the needs of others and to respond with generosity.

### **St. Albert, man of charity**

Holiness is manifest principally as Christian life lived in its fullness, and especially on the level of charity. In *Novo millennio ineunte* John Paul II called holiness the "high standard of ordinary Christian life" (n. 31). This is true for St. Albert: he is one of that band of saints remembered and venerated for a radical, intense life, committed in all its dimensions, especially in its generous attention to the needs of the people of his time.

St. Albert, the Carmelite friar, was truly a brother to many sisters and brothers who turned to him because they recognized him as a man of God, that is as someone able to reveal the grandeur of the love of God for them in delicate or difficult situations. Albert was a man of concrete and generous charity on more than one occasion, attentive to the needs of all,

especially the poorest. It's not by chance that among the many miracles he performed a number were to benefit women suffering from some illness, and for Jews, who converted to Christianity after their cures, recognizing in the work of St. Albert the hand of Jesus the Messiah.

St. Albert's charity is seen in quite different situations, which can be considered in three broad categories. A first group of deeds is concerned with community and problems of a social character; a second with physical sickness; and third with psychological or spiritual problems. In this and in the next section we'll examine each of these three groups.

The first category concerns the social communitarian sphere. Tradition recounts at least two miraculous interventions that took place in the cities of Messina and Agrigento and the purpose of which was to relieve populations in trouble.

The first and more famous concerns the breaking of the blockade of Messina by Robert of Calabria (later King of Naples) in 1301. Through Albert's intervention some ships—from one to twelve, depending on the story—managed to break the naval blockade and bring supplies to the starving citizens. This episode was also recorded by a source outside the Order, for it is mentioned in chapter 10 of the *Chronicle* of the Roman Anonymus, also known under the title *Life of Cola di Rienzo*. Apart from the obvious relief for the exhausted populace, Albert's intervention was a clear overture for peace. Why is it always the ordinary people who have to suffer in the struggles and disputes of the powerful? The ordinary citizens of Messina had more pressing concerns than who controlled the Straits of Messina, or the unification of the kingdoms of Sicily and Naples, or who held power in Europe. St. Albert made himself the spokesman for the needs of people that were otherwise going unheard, and in the process managed to make the circumstances of war less burdensome for many families.

At Agrigento the memory is still preserved of the saint purifying the water of a well. In this case there is a clear biblical reference to the episode of the well of Jericho purified by the prophet Elisha (2 K 2:19-22); and the Carmelite was part of the prophetic family which originated with Elijah and Elisha. Albert's purifying the well and making its water drinkable gave the people the possibility of getting water without too much difficulty—and this at a time when having running water at home was beyond imagination for most people. Water still remains one of the most precious goods of creation, and we often forget that even now is not accessible to everyone. All too often political interests, not always acknowledged, have made water a weapon of blackmail and oppression and an instrument of power. The prophetic gesture of St. Albert reminds us that water is a sacred gift, meant to give life to all without exception.

St. Albert's charity also has a beautifully personal dimension. We often find him ready to cure the sick in body and soul with the unique compassion which is characteristic of genuinely spiritual people. The healing of physical ills, spiritual direction, and the practice of exorcism are three complementary aspects of Albert's life. His whole self is caught up in the Gospel message, which is revealed in inner and outer healing and liberation working on any kind of impediment or bondage which blocks a fully human and spiritual life.

Sickness, suffering, pain—these are always situations we want to avoid. They discomfort us and we try to avoid them whenever we can. When they come to people who are already weak, physically, morally or socially, they become still more burdensome. Young people and women had particular needs for attention and healing, too often neglected by the society of the time which favoured the strong, the rich, and the powerful. Albert stood beside those who had no protector, put himself at their disposal, offering a concrete and practical help to anyone in need of healing but with nowhere to turn except to God. Albert was a man of God who revealed God's maternal tenderness in healing his weakest sons and daughters.

Various miracles of healing are recorded, both during his lifetime and after his death. In Palermo a boy who had been blinded by his sister during a game gone tragic regained his sight, and afterwards became a Carmelite. Another boy, from Lentini, healed through the faith of his mother, who covered him with a piece of the saint's clothing, also became a Carmelite. However, in this case, gratitude and indebtedness were not sufficient signs of a true vocation, and after a time he left the Order. Sometimes a physical cure plays itself out in an enduring influence and spiritual discernment regarding a choice of life.

A woman in Trapani was helped by the saint during a difficult childbirth, in which both her life and that of her child was at risk. Albert managed to comfort the young woman, who then bore her baby safely. Women turned to the saint to be cured of abscesses of the breast or fevers, especially puerperal fever, which was a cause of many deaths in childbirth in those days. The death of a woman— especially a wife, a mother—as well as being a grief for the survivors was often a social disaster of considerable consequence, leaving children with no one to care for them. Mortality among infants and mothers was high in Albert's day, and he put himself at the service of life and of the security of the family.

However, he was not concerned only with the physical. St. Albert was always on guard against the devil. Albert was also an exorcist. In Licata on one occasion a woman came and asked him to liberate her daughter, who was suspected of being possessed by the devil. The saint went and succeeded in freeing the daughter from the evil presence with a gesture of humility, offering the other cheek after the young woman struck him a blow. Someone is really free only when all the dimensions of his life—body, soul and spirit—are completely oriented to God and his will. The man of God is able to restore troubled and tormented souls to the wholeness, self-control and openness to the will of the Lord for which God has created us.

The historicity of these events aside, what matters is their meaning: they signify to us that Albert is a saint, a prophet, a man of God, who still shines for us today as a person made new by the Gospel, so united with the Lord and so permeated by his Word that his every action becomes a practical and eloquent continuation of the healing and liberating action of Christ.

### **St. Albert and the Jews**

Today there is a quite widespread understanding of the relationship between Christians and people of other religions which is very different from the one that was normal in the past, even until quite recently. Even today our attempts at understanding and cooperation with those of other faiths is not always reciprocated. Faith is such an intimate reality that it concerns and marks a person's entire life, it orients the way one sees the world and the

personal choices one makes at every level. Education, culture, and social context all influence, and are influenced by, the way one views one's own religion and the religion of others. In addition, today the secularized society of the West is infected with relativism which denies there to be a single invariable truth. Moral principles are cast in doubt and subjected to the exclusive and sovereign assessment of personal conscience, so that many people think that all forms of religious expression are indifferent or equivalent.

The problem of relativism is a serious one, not to be resolved by propaganda, slogans or crusades. On the other hand, encountering those of other religions is not only a matter of dialogue, of mutual knowledge, welcome and appreciation, but also of proclaiming the Gospel through an authentic witness. We give this witness by placing ourselves humbly and patiently not above those of other faiths but alongside them, respecting their dignity, appreciating their point of view and their culture, adapting oneself to their times and rhythms. Above all it is necessary to witness to our experience of the Resurrection of Christ and of our union with him in the Church while, at the same time, acknowledging that the Holy Spirit does not wait for the Gospel to be proclaimed before being active in each person's life. In this matter of showing respect to other religions, we must keep in mind that the Jewish religion is a most special case. Pope John Paul II addressed the Jews as "our older brothers,"—this is a long way from the days when "Christians" referred to them as "perfidious" or branded them "Christ-killers." What was St. Albert's attitude?

On at least two occasions Albert had dealings with Jews. Once the saint saved three Jews from drowning near Agrigento, and on another occasion he cured a Jewish boy of epilepsy in Sciacca. In both cases the legends speak of explicit confessions of faith and subsequent baptism. So are these stories to be understood as examples of evangelization, dialogue, or proselytism? An answer must be developed without prejudices and in the light of the historical context and the mentality of the times.

There have been various occasions throughout history when Carmelites and Jews have come into contact. The convent in Toulouse was established on land donated by a Jew who was grateful to Mary, whose intercession had led to his cure. Other legends, apart from those related to St. Albert, tell of more or less amiable relations between Carmelites and Jews. On the less amiable side, in the Middle Ages a few friaries were close to Jewish quarters and became centres for preaching aimed at their conversion. However, there are some interesting accounts of respect shown for members of the Jewish people, of whom Jesus and Mary were, of course, a part. In France, in the 17th-18th century Reform of Touraine the novice masters urged novices to greet Jews they encountered with deference, and the Venerable Albert Leoni (died 1642) rebuked some novices of his who had taunted some Jews in the street.

Perhaps the memory of Elijah had some influence. Albert and the Carmelites considered it a point of honour to proclaim the faith to the members of the Chosen People in imitation of the Prophet (1 K 18:20-40). These days the discussion has moved on to a level of dialogue and of recognition of the fundamentals which we hold in common, of the need to work together in the proclamation of faith, but the example of St. Albert reminds us that the most basic witness is at the level of authentic, delicate and courteous charity. Only someone who

makes himself “all things to all people” (1 Cor 9:22) is able to help others experience the salvation of God and to favour a personal encounter with Christ.

### **St. Albert, devotee of Mary**

St. Albert’s profound devotion to the Mother of the Lord is attested by more than one of the old legends, but it would be strange to imagine a Carmelite of the first generations who did not share the Marian character proper to the Order. Even if we can’t attribute to Albert all the characteristics of the Marian piety developed in Carmel in subsequent centuries, we can at least indicate those which were common in the time he lived and which are found in texts from the same period.

Mary was originally venerated by the Carmelites as the Lady of Carmel (from the place where the first hermitage was) and of the Holy Land, because she was the mother of Christ, feudal Lord of that land acquired at the cost of his blood. The Carmelites dedicated the oratory built in the midst of their cells to her because she was “the Lady of the Place” and a model for all who were trying to follow Christ in an evangelical life. By dedicating their chapel to her, they committed themselves to the service of the Virgin.

In Mary the Carmelites saw the new woman, obedient to the Word of God, completely devoted to discerning his will and carrying it out in purity and humility. In this context it was natural to contemplate the virginity of Mary and to understand it not merely as something physical, but as interior virtue, purity of heart, a psychological and spiritual orientation devoted exclusively to God. This was in fact one of the central points in the spirituality of St. Albert. Obedience to the Word of God, which finds expression in obedience to his superior will and in a life of charity for others develops to the full in a pure heart, transparent to the light of God, able to contemplate the beauty of his will and to translate it freely and imaginatively in the world of the everyday. The Annunciation becomes one of the natural and attractive points of spiritual reference for the Carmelites of the first generations when we understand it as a manifestation of the surrender of the human will to the divine plan.

As a consequence, the Mother of the Lord is understood as the “most beautiful,” who best enshrines the newness of life brought by her Son. She is the new Gospel woman, the prototype of every Christian, the “new Eve,” true mother of all the living and of all believers. Beauty is not something physical but embraces all aspects of Mary’s existence, for which reason she is recognized as immaculate and assumed into heaven, completely associated with the radical holiness of the Son and risen to new life with him. It’s not strange then, that in line with the interpretation of the Church Fathers and medieval writers, the Carmelites too recognize in the little cloud which rises from the sea at Elijah’s prayer (1 K 18:44) an image of the Immaculate assumed into heaven.

An ancient tradition links Albert with the statue of the Madonna of Trapani. It could have been carved and brought to Trapani while the saint was provincial of Sicily. It’s difficult to say what foundation this story might have, but the luminous beauty of the image of painted marble, the twist of the Virgin’s body enabling her to look at the face of her child, the smile at once sweet and sad, perhaps gives us some idea of the sensibility with which Albert would have contemplated the Mother and Sister of Carmelites. In the affectionate movement of the

child towards his mother Albert would have recognized a reflection of his own devotion, of a love which is tender and intimate but not sentimental, but rather demanding: for one who knows how to love and venerate Mary knows that **it** means to commit oneself to follow her in total dedication to the plan of salvation which the Father has for humanity. To be devoted to Mary, today as in the time of St. Albert, means to feel that one is accompanied and sustained in the journey of faith, on a down-to-earth path of humble and quiet charity towards one's brothers and sisters, open to the hope of the new and full life which Christ gives us in the Holy Spirit.

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