

The Brown Scapular of
Our Lady of Mount Carmel

Our Lady of Mount Carmel

“Our Lady of Mount Carmel” means “Mary as she is honoured in the Carmelite Order.” Mary is first seen as patron. The chapel of the original hermits on Carmel was dedicated to her. By God’s providence the name of the Order is “The Brothers of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel”; the Order is dedicated to her, so that it becomes, as it were, her house in which people receive the gift of divine intimacy.

The Carmelite contemplative vocation, “pondering the law of the Lord” (*Rule 7*), resembles Mary’s own vocation for the greater part of her life; as servant/handmaid of the Lord, she becomes the model of true discipleship, of the service of Jesus Christ which lies at the heart of the *Rule*. These points are of inspiration not only for professed members of the Carmelite Order but for all who are touched by Carmelite devotion to Mary through wearing the Brown Scapular.

Brown Scapular

One way in which Mary is honoured in the Carmelite family is through the Brown Scapular. The Scapular is a symbol of Mary’s protection. A garment as a symbol is found elsewhere in the Christian tradition, most notably in the Eastern icon tradition “Madonna of the Mantle.” Along with the understanding of Mary’s protection, the Scapular (itself a symbol of the Carmelite habit) includes the idea of consecration to Mary. Consecration is most properly an act done by God, so that when we say we consecrate ourselves to God and to Mary, we are principally stating that we freely want God’s will, the Lordship of Jesus, to be manifest in our lives. The wearing of the Scapular is a sign that we want the values lived out by Mary to be evident in our actions and dispositions.

Tradition suggests that in 1251, Our Lady appeared to the Prior General of the Carmelite Order, St. Simon Stock at Aylesford, England. In this apparition, Our Lady gave him what we call the brown Scapular... a garment that has become the symbol of the bond between Our Lady and the Order of Carmel. The Carmelites have always been her devoted servants. However, whether or not this apparition actually took place is something we shall never know. But Our Lady did not give the Scapular just to the Carmelites. She gave it to the whole world so that all her sons and daughters could wear an outward sign of her love for them. As a “cloak” of grace and love, the Scapular represents the protection and security we find in our heavenly mother’s love. Our Lady has given us her Scapular to wear; a garment of special concern a sign of belonging. Her Scapular is a mantle of grace and love.

The Carmelite Scapular is not a magical charm to protect you, or an automatic guarantee of salvation or an excuse for not living up to the demands of the Christian life. The Scapular holds us to live as authentic Christians in line with the teaching of the Gospel, to receive the sacraments, to profess our special devotion to the Blessed Virgin, which should be expressed each day, at least by saying the Hail Mary three times.

The Scapular – A Sign of Christian Faith and Commitment

Signs in Ordinary Human Life

The world in which we live is full of material things which have symbolic meaning: light, fire, water..... There are also, in every day life, experiences of relationships between human beings, which express and symbolize deeper meanings such as sharing a meal (as a sign of friendship), taking part in a protest march (as a sign of solidarity), joining together in a national celebration (as a sign of our identity). We need signs and symbols to help us understand what is happening at present, or what happened before, and to give us an awareness of who we are, as individuals and as groups.

Signs in Christian Life

Jesus is the great sign and gift of the Father's love. He founded the Church as a sign and instrument of His love. Christian life also has its signs. Jesus used bread, wine and water to help us understand higher things which we can neither see nor touch. In the celebration of the Eucharist and the other sacraments (Baptism, Confirmation, Reconciliation, Matrimony, Orders, the Sacrament of the Sick) the symbols (water, oil, the laying on of hands, the rings), all have their own meaning and bring us into communication with God, present in each of them. As well as liturgical signs, the Church has others related to some event, to some tradition, or some person. One of these is *The Brown Scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel*.

The Scapular is a Sign of Mary

One of the signs in the tradition of the Church from many centuries ago is the Brown Scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. It is a sign approved by the Church and accepted by the Carmelite Order as an external sign of love for Mary, of the trust her children have in her, and of commitment to live like her. The word "scapular" indicates a form of clothing which monks wore when they were working. With the passage of time, people began to give symbolic meaning to it: the cross to be borne every day as disciples and followers of Christ. In some religious Orders, such as the Carmelites, the Scapular turned into a sign of their way of life. The Scapular came to symbolize the special dedication of Carmelites to Mary, the Mother of God, and to express trust in her motherly protection, as well as the desire to be like her in her commitment to Christ and to others. Thus, it became a sign of Mary.

The Spiritual Meaning of the Scapular

The Scapular finds its roots in the tradition of the Order, which has seen in it a sign of Mary's motherly protection. It has, therefore, a centuries' old spiritual meaning approved by the Catholic Church.

- It stands for a commitment to follow Jesus, like Mary, the perfect model of all the disciples of Christ. This commitment finds its origin in baptism by which we become children of God.
- The Blessed Virgin teaches us:
 - to be open to God, and to His will, shown to us in the events of our lives;
 - to listen to the Word of God in the Bible and in life, to believe in it and to put into practice its demands;
 - to pray at all times, as a way of discovering the presence of God in all that is happening around us;

- to be involved with people, being attentive to their needs.
- It leads us into the community of Carmel, a community of religious men and women, which has existed in the Church for over eight centuries. It calls on us to live out the ideal of this religious family: intimate friendship with God in prayer.
- It reminds us of the example of the saints of Carmel, with whom we establish a close bond as brothers and sisters to one another.
- It is an expression of our belief that we will meet God in eternal life, aided by the intercession and prayer of Mary.

Some practical rules

People are enrolled in the Brown Scapular only *once*, by a priest or authorized person.

The Scapular can be replaced afterwards by a medal which has on one side the image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and on the other, the image of Mary.

The Scapular holds us to live as authentic Christians in line with the teaching of the Gospel, to receive the sacraments, to profess our special devotion to the Blessed Virgin, which should be expressed each day, at least, by saying the *Hail Mary* three times.

Short Form for Giving the Scapular

“Receive this Scapular, a sign of your special relationship with Mary, the Mother of Jesus, whom you pledge to imitate. May it be a reminder to you of your dignity as a Christian, in serving others and imitating Mary. Wear it as a sign of her protection and of belonging to the Family of Carmel, voluntary doing the will of God and devoting yourself to building a world true to his plan of community, justice and peace.”

The Brown Scapular

is not:

- ✗ a magical charm to protect you
- ✗ an automatic guarantee of salvation
- ✗ an excuse for not living up to the demands of the Christian life

is a sign which:

- ✓ has been approved by the Church for over seven centuries;
- ✓ stands for the decision to follow Jesus like Mary:
 - open to God and to His will;
 - guided by faith, hope and love;
 - close to the needs of people;
 - praying at all times;
 - discovering God present in all that happens around us;
 - introduces people into the Family of Carmel;
- ✓ points to a renewed hope of encountering God in eternal life with the help of Mary's protection and intercession.

The Popes and the Brown Scapular

Pope Leo XIII: “The Carmelite Scapular, because of the nobility of origin, its extraordinary spread among Christian peoples for many centuries, the spiritualizing effects produced by it and the outstanding miracles worked in virtue of it, render the Scapular of Carmel commendable to a wondrous degree.”

Pope Pius XI: “The munificent goodness of the heavenly Mother towards her children; it surely ought to be sufficient merely to exhort those who belong to the scapular confraternity to persevere in the holy exercises which have been prescribed for the gaining of the indulgences to which they are entitled.”

Pope Pius XII: “All Carmelites, whether they live in the cloisters of the First or Second Orders or are members of the Third Order or of the Confraternities, belong to the same family of our Most Blessed Mother and are attached to it by a special bond of love. May they all see in this keepsake of the Virgin herself a mirror of humility and purity; may they read in the very simplicity of the Garment a concise lesson in modesty and simplicity; above all, may they behold in this same Garment, which they wear day and night, the eloquent expressive symbol of their prayers for divine assistance.”

Pope John XXIII: *He spoke* “of the Mother of God, who is honoured in this Church of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. Devotion to her becomes a necessity; towards Our Lady of Mount Carmel we are drawn with a most tender, yet irresistible, attraction.”

Pope Paul VI speaking of Marian devotions, especially of the Scapular, says “Let the faithful hold in high esteem the practices and devotions to the Blessed Virgin approved by the teaching authority of the Church (Vatican II). It is Our conviction that the Rosary of Mary and the Scapular of Carmel are among these recommended practices. The Scapular is a practice of piety, which by its very simplicity is suited to everyone.”