

Garment of Grace:
A Historical Appreciation
of the Carmelite Scapular

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Recently while reading a book by the late medieval historian, Norman Cantor, I was troubled, even angered, to hear him declare that Christianity – like all Mediterranean religions excepting Judaism – had been contaminated by magic. I knew Professor Cantor. I had taken several courses from him at New York University and he sat on the boards for both my comprehensive exams and doctoral defence. And I knew Norman well enough to know that while he was extremely precise in his lectures and equally demanding of exactness in his students; he sometimes wrote things that were designed to get a rise out of his reader. A frequently quoted aphorism, given as an aside in his lectures, was “better to be wrong than to be boring;” Norman was never above exciting a certain anger in his reader, an anger that would make the reader think for him- or herself. I wanted to “punch out” this fondly remembered curmudgeon because I know, and I know that Norman knew, that ancient Judaism was as prone to fall under the spell of magic and superstition as any other religion.

What tempered my passion to assault was that I also knew that, unfortunately, his point about Christianity had merit. The Christian religion has, from its earliest days, contained factions that confused magic for faith and superstition for doctrine. We can see the problem of magic being confused for faith in the Acts of the Apostles, but the problem is by no means unique to Christianity. Anthropology shows us that descent into magic and superstition is a danger within any and every religion. Alongside true believers are those who think they can manipulate the religious symbols that convey the Sacred in order to control their various gods.

Christianity is no exception to this abuse. Alongside orthodox Christians stand those who with their words profess faith in Jesus Christ but whose practice of that faith presupposes that certain words or actions can win specified outcomes from God. In the pews of many a Catholic church one finds little slips of paper telling the reader to “say this prayer every day for nine days and it has never been known to fail.”

My work over the years with the Brown Scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel has shown me that it is among those sacred symbols which are meant to dispose us for grace but which are too often abused as a talisman than relied upon as an approved sacramental. There are still many Catholics who think that the Brown Scapular has in itself some power to save those who wear it from hell or to deliver them from purgatory. Only this past year, I received a booklet, recently reprinted, that purported to show the many ways the devil was cheated of souls he otherwise would have richly deserved because the various sinners had, despite their wicked lives, not abandoned the scapular. Of course, such stories overlook the detail that all the various leg ends regarding the Brown Scapular insist not only on wearing the sacramental, but on a certain minimum level of virtue, prayer, and ascetical practice.

While wanting to take a new look at the Brown Scapular, I do not mean to say that it is not a power-filled means of disposing us to receive divine grace, but rather that we must be careful to use the Brown Scapular only in a way that supports our Catholic faith: that all saving grace comes from, and only from, the saving merits of the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Various stories and legends about the Brown Scapular that, at least in some interpretations, propose to offer a grace independent of the paschal mystery must be rejected as contrary to the true faith as taught by the Church. To this end the Church itself over the

last fifty years, has examined its rites and rituals, simplified them, suppressed some, revised others and made changes necessary to keep us focused on the Cross and Resurrection of Christ as the single origin of our salvation.

In this light, the Fathers of Vatican Council II clearly stated that our approach to the sacramentals of the Church has changed. First class historical research and theological reflection, along with insights from other intellectual disciplines such as anthropology and psychology, have helped us understand the old ceremonies and rituals in new ways, uncovering new meanings to replace understandings no longer acceptable as authentically religious. Perhaps no single sacramental has undergone as much revision of its theology and practice as the Brown Scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, but then again perhaps no other sacramental, even the rosary, has been as popular as the Brown Scapular. Consequently we need to look at both the history of the scapular and the way both the Church and the Order present it for today's Catholic.

Historical background

Scapulars come in different colours, but in one basic shape. The classic scapular was simply an apron consisting of two panels, one worn down the front and one worn down the back. The panels prevented the wearer's clothing from being soiled by the work at hand much as a modern apron protects the cook, the chemist, the machinist, or others who wear an apron while working.

The scapular became part of the standard monastic habit with the sixth century Rule of St Benedict. Benedict prescribed that monks wear it as an apron over their tunic. It was not—and still is not—a sacramental for monastic monks or nuns; indeed technically it is not even part of the monastic habit proper which consists of the cowl or *cuculla*, the large sleeved outer garment worn over the tunic and scapular. The use of the scapular was restricted to monks and nuns, other clergy or religious eschewing its use until the twelfth century when some of the more recent religious orders appropriated its use for themselves.

In giving a *formula vitae* to the hermits on Mount Carmel, St Albert of Jerusalem did not prescribe a habit; they probably wore the standard hermit/pilgrim gear of tunic, belt, and capuce.

By 1238 the hermit brothers of Mount Carmel had migrated west and, over the next ten years, founded houses in modern day Sicily, Italy, France, and England. In 1247 they held a chapter in England to which representatives from all over the Order came. The Chapter decided to appeal to Pope Innocent IV for certain changes to be made in the *formula vitae* that Albert had given them, changes demanded by the situation in Europe: in particular they were anxious to become proper religious and not simply a community of lay hermits. This was a transition other lay hermit communities had made, and Pope Innocent IV appointed two Dominicans, Cardinal Hugh of St Cher, and Bishop William of Tortosa, to advise the Carmelites as to the changes they needed to make in their *formula vitae* if it were to become a proper Rule for a religious Order.

The actual changes to the *formula vitae*/Rule were few, for the two Dominicans were careful and cautious men. There were, however, many innovations for the Carmelites, things not considered in their Rule: how to organize themselves into provinces with definitories and chapters: how to celebrate the liturgy; how to fast; how to organize their finances.

The oldest known Carmelite Constitutions are those of 1281; they do, however, incorporate material from earlier constitutions, and presumably some of the work of the Dominicans survives in the 1281 text. Maybe someday a researcher working in an obscure library or archive somewhere in Europe will find the missing earlier constitutions and help clear up many questions, including when the scapular was introduced into the Carmelite habit.

Nobody knows with certainty how the scapular became part of the Carmelite habit; but it is not unlikely that in 1247 the Dominican legislators, not finding any mention of a habit in Albert's *formula vitae*, first described the habit that would be repeated in the 1281 constitutions. This habit consists of a tunic, scapular, belt, and capuce, along with a mantle and capuce to be worn over it in choir and on other occasions. It is the same habit in design, though not in colour, as the Dominicans themselves had. This would not only explain how the scapular came to be part of the Carmelite habit, but how the even more enigmatic canons' mantle came to be part of our habit. The mantle made sense for the Dominicans: their origin had been as canons regular. But the Carmelites had never been canons, and yet somehow they ended up wearing a mantle that is distinctive of canons regular.

At whatever point it was introduced, the Carmelites seem to have accepted the scapular with an embarrassing lack of enthusiasm. Various early constitutions find it necessary to insist on the friars wearing it while celebrating mass. They were also required to wear the tunic and scapular for sleeping. Nowhere in the constitutions is there any reference to a supernatural origin for the scapular. Indeed lay affiliates received into public association with the Order wore not the scapular, but the mantle as a sign of their belonging to the Order. The Constitutions themselves refer to the mantle as the distinguishing mark of the Carmelite habit, leaving the scapular as something with no more sacred depth of meaning than the work apron of the Benedictines.

Thoughtful critique

It was the Bollandists, the Jesuit scholars who since the seventeenth century have been responsible for editing the *Acta Sanctorum* - official Vatican approved edition of the lives of the saints – who called into question the historical accuracy of the legends of the Blessed Virgin Mary conferring the scapular with its accompanying promises on St Simon Stock. They did not do this by what they wrote, but rather by what they did not write, refusing to include the account of the vision in the *Acta Sanctorum*, claiming that if they did so they would have to make comments that would anger the Carmelites. Their silence was as offensive to the Order as any comments would have been, but while the Order would long defend the stories, modern scholarship by Carmelites as well as others has made the historicity of the scapular vision very difficult to defend.

Stories of visions with the Blessed Virgin or various saints conferring habits on religious orders and introducing various sacramentals abound in medieval literature. Most are clearly

inventions and can be traced to the rather extravagant preaching of medieval clergy anxious to win esteem and alms for their Orders. The lack of any mention of the scapular vision from its alleged 1251 occurrence until the end of the fourteenth century some 150 years later, and the unfamiliarity of any Carmelite of this period with the story raises serious questions about the historical basis of the legends. For example, when the English Carmelite John Hornby debated the Dominican John Stokes at Cambridge in 1375 and Stokes mentioned the Blessed Virgin revealing the Dominican habit in a dream to Blessed Reginald, Hornby never replied with the story of Simon Stock and the scapular. Hornby's apparent unfamiliarity with the story, a story about an event that supposedly had taken place at the near-by English Motherhouse of Aylesford, is particularly problematic. While some Carmelite historians such as Joachim Smet still hold to the historicity of the vision, the majority of scholars agree that we need to recover the original meaning of the scapular beneath the legends. There is here an issue of faith that does not depend on historical data.

The historicity of the Sabbatine Bull and its accompanying privilege has been discredited with more certainty than the apparition to Simon Stock. Again there were many stories about the assistance of various saints to those in purgatory, and this assistance was often tied to religious habits. Franciscan preachers, for example, often talked of Francis going to purgatory each year, on his feast day, to free all the souls who wore the Franciscan cord.

It was long troubling to historians how John XXII could have been told by Our Lady that she would free souls from purgatory on the first Saturday after their deaths when John XXII himself did not believe in the doctrine of purgatory. Moreover, the Portuguese Inquisition had condemned the Sabbatine Privilege as heretical in 1609; when the Order appealed to the Holy See, silence was imposed on all parties, and the Carmelites forbidden to preach the privilege (an obedience which they generally ignored). The Order was permitted to preach that pious people *might* believe that Our Lady would assist after death the souls of those who had worn the scapular; and that this succour might be particularly strong on Saturdays; but it was clearly a matter left to the pious belief of individuals and not the teaching of the Church.

In the years after World War II, the Carmelite scholar Ludovico Saggi clearly demonstrated that the alleged Bull of John XXII had not been issued from the Avignon chancery in 1322, but was rather a forgery from the Agrigento region of Sicily in the early fifteenth century.

More Recent Studies

The critical approach of modern scholarship to the history of the scapular has not been without popular controversy, because devotion to Our Lady of the Scapular is so strong throughout the Church. Both in preparation for the celebration of the 750th Anniversary of the Scapular Vision and in that of the revised rites for blessing and conferring of scapulars, the Order waited to see what the Holy See and the Pope himself would say. Would the Holy Father simply repeal the claims of previous Popes, or would the Church exercise caution regarding the origins and promises connected with the scapular? The Holy See asked both the Carmelite Order and the Order of Discalced Carmelites for information about the extensive research that had been done on the matter. When the various documents appeared, the Congregation of Rites skirted the issue of the historicity of the vision of Simon Stock by mentioning the vision but without committing itself to its authenticity. It spoke of the vision

only in the subjunctive or possible mood that is used to relate an opinion without affirmation or denial:

During one of its difficult times, the order asked to get full recognition and stability within the Church. Mary, Patroness of Carmel, seemed to have answered this plea with a vision to the English Carmelite, St. Simon Stock....

The choice of the phrase “seemed to have answered this plea with a vision” is a significant backing off from any declaration of the authenticity of the vision, without actually denying it. The Congregation then went on to speak of the Sabbatine Privilege as a belief that arose in popular opinion rather than in any revelatory event. John XXII is never mentioned, nor is his alleged Bull.

During the celebration of the anniversary of the scapular, Pope John Paul, for his part, wrote of the importance of the scapular to him personally, but mentioned neither the Sabbatine Privilege nor the vision of Simon Stock, although he recognized that the celebration “is taking place, according to a venerable tradition of the Order itself, on the 750th anniversary of the bestowal of the Scapular.”

Thus the documents that came out from the holy See and from the Pope give very different rationales for the scapular than had been given previously; yet these rationales are not new but are rooted in the original understanding of the pious custom of the faithful wearing the Brown Scapular. They speak of the scapular as a sign of identification of the wearer with the Carmelite Order, which is under the protection of the Mother of God, so that the wearer shares in this special privilege of Mary’s patronage over Carmel.

The small scapular

In the Middle Ages, and even later, the tertiaries of the various mendicant orders wanted to have some external sign of belonging to their particular order—a habit of some sort that they could wear at least on solemn occasions to manifest their identity. Unmarried tertiaries often took public vows as members of an order and wore the actual habit of the order to which they belonged (St Catherine of Siena and St Rose of Lima, Dominican tertiaries, wore the white and black Dominican habit).

The early Constitutions of the Carmelite friars required them to sleep in tunic and scapular. Many friars, however, found sleeping in their habits to be, at the very least, uncomfortable, so gradually the custom arose of a night habit whose scapular was much smaller, much like the current third order scapular – two pieces of brown cloth held together by ribbons, it was this scapular that many married tertiaries began wearing under their daily clothes as a sign of their membership in the Order, much as Franciscan tertiaries wore a cord under their clothing.

A good tale

Friars always enjoyed preaching on the glories of their various orders. Dominicans loved to talk about Thomas Aquinas and his great theological contribution to the Church. Franciscans told the stories about Francis – how he went into purgatory every year on his feast and rescued all those wearing the Franciscan cord. Not all these stories were literally true. Just as Jesus told stories, the parables, that were meant to point out truths but which

were not literally and historically factual, preachers have always used stories as a means to make people reflect on deeper theological truths.

Carmelites too told stories – stories about the Prophet Elijah founding a band of hermits on Mount Carmel and stories about how the Blessed Mother and the Holy Family would come to Mount Carmel and visit the descendants of these hermits of Elijah, monks who would be the predecessors of the Carmelite friars. Carmelites also told many stories about their scapular and how it was a sign of Mary’s protection for the Order and its members. Not all those stories were factual, at least in the strictest sense, but beneath the fiction was the truth that Mary had shown great protection to the Order over the years. Carmelites had come to see the scapular as a sign of Mary’s protection as well as of their own devotion to their patroness. Many people – many, many, people – wanted to share in the protection the Mother of God offered the Carmelite Order, and even more wanted to express their devotion to the Mother of God. The Brown Scapular has now been a sign of that protection and of that devotion for more than five centuries.

In his letter to the Carmelite Family regarding the scapular, Pope John Paul reminded Carmelites that they are to “always keep before the eyes of their heart the Most Pure Virgin who guides everyone to the perfect knowledge and imitation of Christ.” It is this contemplative vocation of Carmel wherein we come to an “ever increasing communion with Christ and Mary” that provides the foundation for true devotion to the Mother of God. Contemplation of the Virgin leads us to imitate Mary in her role of first disciple of her son; and, the Pope wrote, that “This intense Marian life, which is expressed in trusting prayer, enthusiastic praise and diligent imitation, enables us to understand how the most genuine form of devotion to the Blessed Virgin, expressed by the humble sign of the Scapular, is consecration to her Immaculate Heart.” Indeed, our hearts are purified by such contemplative union with Mother and Son and indeed this union transforms us, making us over into the image of Christ so that we can say with the apostle: it is no longer I who live, but Christ Jesus who lives in me.

In such a spiritual scheme the external sign of the scapular leads us to contemplation, contemplation to union, and union to transformation. This is a very different understanding of the scapular, and one far more consistent with our Christian faith, than that of the scapular being some sort of a protection against hell or a ticket out of purgatory. This authentic understanding of the scapular makes it a badge of discipleship and conversion. The salvation for which we hope is not effected by two pieces of cloth but by our fulfilling the call of Christ to come and follow him.

The scapular is no mere badge of piety; rather it is the token of our pledge to lead the spiritual life of a disciple of Jesus. The scapular is a potent sign, a sign of our devotion, but it is the devotion, not the sign, that saves. Such devotion is, of course, empowered by God’s grace, not by our own efforts.

During the preparation of the catechesis on the Brown Scapular which Discalced Carmelite Father Sam Anthony Morello and I carried out on behalf of the Order in the United States and Canada, the *ensor deputatis* of the Archdiocese of Washington who was reviewing the

text for orthodoxy on behalf of Cardinal Hickey, under whose *Imprimatur* the text was published, demanded quite a few changes. Sam and I had rather carelessly written that the scapular conveyed graces to the wearer, and the ecclesiastical censor pointed out to us that while sacraments convey grace, sacramentals do not. Sacramentals prepare us to receive grace and dispose us to cooperate with it, but they do not of themselves have any power. Sacramentals are only as effective as those using the sacramental allow them to be. The scapular confers no saving grace, but rather prepares and disposes us to receive the saving grace won for us Christ on the cross.

Some years ago in the United States, the Order produced a scapular which, on the reverse side from the usual picture of Our Lady, had the words: "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ." One angry woman wrote demanding to know why we put what she termed "those Protestant words" on the scapular. She did not know, of course, that "those Protestant words" are in fact from Paul's letter to the Romans. A Carmelite who cannot recognize the words of scripture, especially such a famous phrase, has not well fulfilled their Carmelite vocation. The scapular is about putting on the Lord Jesus Christ, about being conformed to Christ in imitation of his Blessed Mother.

The Scapular is the sign of the Carmelite way of discipleship. As the Patriarch Albert wrote those first hermits: "Many and varied are the ways in which our holy forefathers laid down how everyone ... should lead a life in allegiance to Jesus Christ. It is to me, however; that you have come for a rule of life..."Carmel offers a particular way of following Jesus Christ. Like his Blessed Mother we hear the Word of God and put it into practice. The scapular is the sign of our adherence to this path of discipleship, and we have faith that this path of discipleship, like all authentic paths of following Jesus Christ, leads to salvation.