

THE CARMELITE MARIAN YEAR

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LECTURE ONE: NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN MARIOLOGY

We need to see new developments against a wider 20th century background.

1. The Marian Movement (ca. 1900—ca. 1954)

At the beginning of the 20th century there was a movement towards the definition of the Assumption. There was great Marian enthusiasm: congresses, devotional and theological writing. Some excesses. Mariologists were known as “maximalists” who sought to draw as much as possible from scripture, Church Fathers, magisterium, devotion—including new dogmas; “minimalists” who were less enthusiastic. The Marian movement ran out of steam by the Marian Year (1954).

After this the Mariological Congress at Lourdes (1958) which saw theologians and theologies about Mary as being characterised by a more Christological emphasis or a more ecclesiological one. These two can be illustrated in the Prefaces for the feast of Immaculate Conception and Assumption in which these dogmas are seen in parallel relation to Christ and to the Church.

2. Vatican II

One of the major controversies of the Council was about whether to speak of Mary in the Constitution on the Church or in a separate document. The former view prevailed and so we have the *Church Constitution*, *Lumen Gentium*, ch. 8, with, however, parallel treatments of Marian truths as related to Christ (LG 55-59) and to the Church (LG 60-65). The Council refused requests to have a dogmatic statement on Mary’s mediation and dealt with it rather quietly but accurately in LG 62. The main achievement of Vatican II was perhaps to place Mary within salvation history.

3. Paul VI

Pope Paul VI noted that there was a serious decline in Marian devotion during the years following the Council, despite Vatican II having given such prominence to Mary in its documents. In his Apostolic Exhortation, *Marialis cultus* (“To Honour Mary”—1974) he proposed four principles for renewal: biblical, liturgical, ecumenical and anthropological.

a) *Biblical*

Careful study of the bible shows a surprisingly rich picture of Mary as

- A Hebrew Woman, a Jew of the 1st century;
- A Responsible Woman in dialogue with and obedient to God;
- A Servant, indeed a Slave of the Lord;
- A Virgin pondering the Word;
- A Woman of faith who knew both divine darkness and light;
- One of the *anawîm* or poor of the Lord;
- An Icon of Liberation from oppression and sin;
- A daughter of Adam, our Sister.

b) *Liturgical*

In liturgical texts, such as feasts, hymns, prayers, we see how Mary is to be honoured— always with her Son and supremely in the Eucharist.

c) *Ecumenical*

In Ecumenism we share and we learn. Positively we can learn from the insights of other Christians, especially in the Eastern Churches, but also from Protestants who stress so much the faith of Mary and her dependence on God. Negatively, we should hear, not perhaps always agreeing with, the problems Protestants have with our Mariology. They remind us of the true perspective of Marian devotion, which is Christ, and they warn us against exaggerated language (see also LG 67).

d) *Anthropological*

The Pope invited the Church to see Mary as truly a model for modern woman, and he sought to draw out some lines of reflection.

4. **John Paul II**

In 1987 Pope John Paul II addressed an encyclical to the Church, *Redemptoris Mater* ("Mother of the Redeemer"), which is not only a reinforcement of Vatican II, but in many ways a re-reading and a development of the Council. The main thrust is the need for a relationship with Mary, rather than merely truths about her. The truth most to the fore in this encyclical is Mary's maternal mediation.

5. **New theological developments**

In the post-Vatican II period there are several crucial areas for theology as a whole as well as for Mariology in particular. These are mainly three.

a) *Pneumatology*

It was clear at Vatican II that the Western or Latin Church had a poorly developed pneumatology or theology of the Holy Spirit. The renewal after the Council in liturgy and pastoral life has seen new emphasis on the Spirit and his gifts. Pope Paul VI invited theologians to study the relation between the Spirit of God and the Virgin of Nazareth, and "to give due prominence to his life-giving action" (*Marialis cultus* 27) . At the same time we need to be careful about some exaggerations in this regard, especially of any language which speaks of some (quasi) Hypostatic Union between the Holy Spirit and Mary.

b) *Mary and the Church*

The Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar alerted the Church to the Marian principle of the Church, as a corrective to an over-emphasis on the Petrine or institutional dimension. Towards the end of his life he saw that we cannot equate Mary with other aspects of the Church. The supreme model of the Church is Mary, who is Mother of its Head, Jesus Christ, and Mother of the Body. The Church itself has many facets: Petrine (institutional), Pauline (missionary), Johannine (contemplative), and Jacobean/James (law). But Mary stands above these and shows how each of them can be life-giving.

The issue of women is one of the crucial ones facing the Church today. There are many feminisms in the Church ranging from those who insist on the rights of women to those who radically critique or even they reject the Church for its excessive maleness or patriarchy. Some feminists see almost a conspiracy in the Church which would fob women off with am

idealised Mary, whilst keeping power in male hands. We need to listen to feminists and share the pain of women who feel marginalised in the Church. But we have to avoid the neat but false division, which would leave Christ as a model for men and Mary the model for women. Christ and Mary are for both men and women. Indeed the health of the Church depends not on women becoming more like men in the Church, but all, especially men, becoming more like Mary.

6. Conclusion

It is a rich time for the Church and for Mariology. We need to return to the sources, and to read the signs of the times. The Church has a rich Marian heritage, which needs constant renewal. If theologians and clergy do not take responsibility for proper devotion to Mary, then marginal extreme groups will hijack devotion to the detriment of the Church.

LECTURE TWO: THE LETTERS OF POPE JOHN PAUL II TO CARMELITES

The Carmelite Order declared a Marian year in 2001. The motive was to deepen our appreciation of our Marian heritage. This year has been marked by various events in the different provinces, for example a series of lectures in one province, a Marian retreat in another, publications in several provinces. The Order was honoured with a letter from Pope John Paul on 25 March 2001, whose title is its opening words, *Il providenziale evento*. The “providential event” to which the Pope alludes is the Jubilee Year of 2000, which marked a new century, a journey on which the Church is accompanied by Mary.

The letter, addressed to the Superiors General of the Order, Frs. Joseph Chalmers, OCarm. and Camilo Maccise, O.D.C., is rich in Carmelite themes both ancient and modern. Whatever sources the Pope drew on—persons or documents—he is clearly deeply sympathetic to Carmelite spirituality, especially its Marian dimension. It is a valuable letter for reflection. One might see three aspects: its key ideas; the titles of Mary that the Pope uses; a rather new insight that reflects the deepest experience of Carmel, past and present. In the first of its six paragraphs the Pope expresses his delight that the Carmelites have dedicated this year to Mary, whom he says, “is invoked as the Flower of Carmel, Mother and Guide on the path to holiness.” He also notes that the celebration takes place “according to a venerable tradition of the Order itself, in the 750th anniversary of the giving of the Scapular.” (# 1)

Some key ideas

We can indicate some of the key ideas of this letter:

- We are accompanied by Mary #1
- Contemplation of Mary flourishes in Carmel; in her we see the one able to read her own life experience in the light of faith. #2
- Protective mantle of her mercy; a model to imitate who is present as Mother and Sister. #3
- Intimacy and communion; a communion and familiarity with the Holy Virgin. #4
- Scapular: “an efficacious synthesis of Marian spirituality” experiencing tender and maternal presence of Mary.” #5
- Presence of this woman of silence and prayer. #6

Titles of Mary

The letter uses some titles of Mary that are well-loved in the Carmelite Order. There are three general titles using “Mother”

- Attentive Mother,
- Mother of all,
- Spiritual Mother.

Then there are Carmelite titles with Mother:

- Mother and Guide,
- Mother and Sister,
- Patroness and Spiritual Mother.

Other titles include:

- New Woman,
- Flower of Carmel,
- Woman of Silence and Prayer,
- Mother of Mercy,
- Mother of Hope and Grace,
- Star of the Sea—Flower of Carmel.

An ancient insight recovered—Presence

Several times in the letter the Pope speaks of Mary's presence, sometimes by using the word itself, at other times speaking of its reality. Thus:

- The Marian year is for Carmel “a marvellous occasion to deepen not only its Marian spirituality, but to live it more and more in the light of the place that the Virgin mother of god occupies in the mystery of Christ and the Church.” (#1)
- Since Carmelites have chosen Mary as “as their Patroness and spiritual Mother and keep her always in mind, She who is the Most Pure Virgin and who leads all to the perfect knowledge and imitation of Christ. In this way a spiritual intimacy develops in which communion with Christ and with Mary is always growing.” (# 3).
- Through the Scapular communion and familiarity with the Holy Virgin grows.” (# 4).
- “The Scapular represents an efficacious synthesis of Marian spirituality. It nourishes the devotion of believers, making them sensitive to the loving presence of the Virgin Mary in their lives.” (# 5).
- Referring to the *Formula for the Imposition of the Scapular*, the Pope notes: “Those who put on the Scapular are introduced into the land of Carmel so that they might ‘eat its abundant fruit’ (see Jer 2,7) and experience the tender and maternal presence of Mary, as they commit themselves to put on Christ and make his presence manifest in their lives for the good of the Church and of the whole of humanity.” (# 5)
- The Pope concludes by hoping that the Marian Year will be for Carmelites, an aid “to grow in their love of her and to radiate in the world the presence of this Woman of silence and of prayer, who is invoked as the Mother of Mercy, the Mother of hope and of grace.” (# 6)

Presence is an obvious sort of word, until we try to reflect on its exact meaning. When people meet, they are present to one another. But if I visit a person who is in hospital and is actually asleep or unconscious, then they are present to me, but I am not really present to them. When we read the Carmelite classic by Brother Laurence of the Resurrection, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, we see that Laurence knows that God is present everywhere, sustaining creation by his power; we, however, may not be not alert to, or conscious of, this presence. Mary is always around, caring for us, praying for us. But her presence is incomplete when we do not advert to it. So it is good to remind ourselves of Mary's care, to see her as “A Gentle Presence,” like an elder Sister who is looking after her. The texts of the Pope on presence can awake us to deep riches within our Carmelite tradition.

Another letter

On the occasion of its General Chapter the pope sent another letter to Fr. Joseph Chalmers, Prior General, 8th September 2001. He gave some special prominence to the titles “Sister and

Beauty of Carmel.” The biblical text he suggested to the Order was the Visitation as they continue on the sacred journey that climbs the sacred mountain, which ultimately is Christ. Carmel can feel encouraged by the Holy Father in its ongoing Marian reflection and for the renewal of its heritage following its two icons, the Prophet Elijah and Mary (## 2-3).

LECTURE THREE: THE SCAPULAR OF CARMEL

In the Carmelites' Marian Year (2001) there has been renewed focus on the their Brown Scapular. This interest has been greatly helped by two important letters which members of the Order. The first was a letter from Pope John Paul II sent to the two Generals, Frs. Joseph Chalmers, O.Carm., and Camillo Maccise, O.D.C. (25 march 2001). The second letter was addressed to the two branches of the Order by the same two Generals (16 May 2001). Both dealt generally with the Marian heritage of the Carmelite Order and offered some reflections on the Scapular.

In the previous twenty years there had been much devotional and some scientific writing on the Scapular. The present state of scholarship can be summed up with E. Boaga in his recent and very important book, *The Lady of the Place: Mary in the History and in the Life of Cannel*. The Scapular is:

- a habit recalling Carmelite clothing and symbolising its life;
- a means of affiliation to the Order;
- entrustment or consecration to the Virgin Mary;
- alliance and communion;
- a sacramental which fosters a special relationship with Mary;
- a memorial or sign of commitment to Christian and Carmelite virtues such as prayer, sacramental life, service of others.

Another source of reflections on the Scapular is the *Rite for the Blessing and Imposition of the Scapular*, approved by Rome in 1996. This rite was prepared by a commission of OCarm. and ODC and approved by the Congregation for Divine Worship and Sacramental Discipline in 1996. Since the Holy See is approving of a rite for a sacramental for the whole Church, we should regard the document as authoritative. It gathers up the themes emerging in the previous decades. We find the meaning in three sections of the rite. The underlying theology of sign in the *Blessing* is that since the Incarnation God has used simple material things to show his mercy, and we can use such things to demonstrate our commitment. The sign is outlined:

- a sign of Mary's motherly care;
- a sign of the reciprocal love we should have for Mary;
- a sign of communion with the Order of Carmel and of a desire to take part in its life and spirit;
- a sign of the humility and purity of the Virgin and of our dedication to her and commitment to her service.

The Scapular is a reminder of the presence of Mary in our daily commitment to be clothed in Jesus Christ. Its nature as a garment can be illustrated by biblical themes of clothes and of being clothed. The wearing of the Scapular is a call to imitate and serve the Virgin Mary and to have a special relationship with her, as well as to live for Christ and his Church in the contemplative and apostolic spirit of Carmel.

So far we have not mentioned the Vision traditionally associated with the Scapular, nor the so-called Sabbatine privilege. There are good reasons for not speaking about these very much

to-day. The medieval evidence for both is unsatisfactory. In the case of the vision, it cannot be either proved or disproved. In the case of the Sabbatine Privilege historians are now quite sure of some forgeries in the century, so that it is now better to show Mary's care at the time of death and afterwards by reflecting on the second part of the Hail Mary.

The results of recent studies point to two key notions for an understanding of the Scapular. It is a sign of Mary's protection during life and at our death. It is a sign of her Order, the Carmelites dedicated to her. In the past people saw affiliation to the Order through the Scapular in rather mercenary terms: if I wear the Scapular I share in the good works of the whole Carmelite Order: friars, nuns, sisters and laity. This is still true. But there is now a deeper emphasis on being joined to the Carmelite Order not just as it were to get some blessings as it were on the cheap, but it be led into its life. The Carmelites have long used in their liturgy the text of Jeremiah 2:7 "I have brought you into the garden land—Carmel—to eat its good fruits." In this vision being enrolled in the Scapular is a desire to live from the riches of Carmelite spirituality, which is chiefly to model ourselves on the Blessed Virgin Mary and on the great prophet Elijah. It is also a commitment to live according to the Carmelite charism of contemplation joined to active love wherever we may be. In the world of to-day that shows a hunger for spirituality, we can point to these two great concrete models of service of God, and to the need to seek God in prayer and to give practical expression to our love of God and of our neighbour. These are the true fruits of the land of Carmel, which in wearing the Scapular we can enjoy under the protection of the Virgin Mary.

LECTURE FOUR: MARY MODEL OF CONSECRATED LIFE

Speaking to religious about the Mother of God could well be likened to bringing coals to Newcastle. All the more so in Malta which has a vibrant Marian piety among its people. But there are some reasons why it might be appropriate to reflect on Mary and consecrated life, despite the fact that so many congregations are dedicated in some way to Mary, and already have beautiful things written about their relationship to her. In his apostolic letter for the close of the Jubilee Year, *Novo millennio ineunte* (6 January 2001), Pope John Paul recalled that he had entrusted the new millennium to the Blessed Virgin Mary and added, “Now I point to Mary once again as the radiant dawn and sure guide for our steps” (# 58). Can we take these words seriously as religious, that Mary is “a sure guide for our steps?” What might they mean? Such references to Mary that we find at the end of documents of religious congregations or of the Holy See can easily pass us by. We would not dream of denying them, but really affirming them is quite another matter.

This paper points to two paths that might be worth investigating for religious. One is to look in some detail at the person, gifts and life of Mary as a model for religious life. The other is a further development of this theme in terms of the “dark night” that is being experienced by congregations as well as individual religious. This second theme may perhaps be congenial in Malta with its special devotion to the Addolorata, the Sorrowful Mother as well as the title of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, venerated in so many Churches there.

The Vatican II watershed

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) clearly marked a new phase in Catholic life. All aspects of the life of the Church were affected, and not always positively. For those who are not senior citizens it is hard to imagine the Council event. The description of it by the Irish theologian Gabriel Daly, OSA, has possibly never been bettered: “A piece of drastic surgery performed without anaesthetic on a patient who did not know he was sick.” The council itself was a surprise; its evolution unsuspected; its outcome still uncertain.

No one can doubt the energy of religious after the Council about renewal. Paul VI mandated extraordinary renewal chapters to be held in the late 1960s. New Constitutions were written by all religious institutes. After the publication of the new *Code of Canon Law* in 1983, these constitutions were further updated. And it still goes on. Religious have seen all kinds of documents, green papers, red, blue, cream, and white—an immense flood of documentation. There have been many structural changes, different models of administration, revisioning and changes in apostolate or mission.

Despite all this effort there is still a deal of pessimism among religious. There is also quite an amount of literature about the demise or the collapse of religious life. Some religious take the view that their communities will last until they themselves die. Many general and provincial chapters still manage to produce hopeful or optimistic documents, but one might wonder about the quality of their hope. One senses the same ambiguity in Rome. Whereas the seriously ill and elderly pope speaks constantly about hope, fear and negativity frequently mark the utterances of Vatican congregations.

Where then are religious to go, and with what mind? Can we do better than Pangloss in *Candide*: put down our heads to cultivate our cabbages? There is a clear case for stating that the future will not be the past, and that we need some new assurance and grounds of hope. It is in this context that a consideration of Mary as the continuing model for religious life seems particularly important, as well as a careful analysis of what kind of dark night we may be travelling at this time.

Mary model for consecrated life

The most profound statement of Vatican II about the Mother of God is perhaps to be found in the *Constitution on the Liturgy* 103:

In celebrating the mysteries of Christ, Holy Church honours the Blessed Mary, Mother of God with a special love. She is inseparably linked with her Son's saving work. In her the Church admires and exalts the most excellent fruit of redemption, and joyfully contemplates, as in a faultless image, that which she herself desires and hopes wholly to be.

These words of the Council invite us to see Mary as a model for consecrated life. But she is a model in a wholly unique way. As Hans Urs von Balthasar never ceased pointing out, she is not so much a model as the embodiment of the perfect response to Christ. So it is not a matter of copying her as seeing in her person and life how to respond in the consecrated life.

Religious life is constituted by vows lived out in community through the theological virtues of faith, hope and love.

Vows

Obedience was originally the only vow in monasticism. It is both Christological and ecclesiological. Its purpose is to direct the religious to God's will. For many religious the ideology of personal fulfilment and dare one say it, a distorted view of discernment, can obscure the central point of religious obedience which is like Mary to be a "slave of the Lord" (Luke 1:38), setting out on what Vatican II called her "pilgrimage of faith" (LG 58).

The living of poverty is fraught with ambiguity. It aims at a simplification of life in imitation of Christ. But it is much more a statement of hope: we do not rely on possessions, but are content to be alongside Mary one of the *anawim*, the poor of the Lord.

Chastity is concerned with a special kind of love: one that is radically unselfish. Though negative in expression, chastity is positive in its aim: it is to reflect the fruitful virginity of Mary who brought forth Jesus to the world (see Luke 1:39-45). The fruitfulness of chastity is for us, as it was for Mary, a work of the Holy Spirit.

The Dark Night

There is a growing literature on the "dark night" in the spiritual journey, in life itself, and more recently in religious life. One could note in particular the study by Sandra Schneiders, *Finding the Treasure: Finding Religious Life in a New Millennium* (Paulist Press, 2000). The topic is quite vast, but some orientation or approach may be helpful.

As used in spirituality the words “dark night” generally refer to two books of St. John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Cannel* and *The Dark Night of the Soul*. The Carmelite doctor discusses in these works the difficulties of the journey to the Mountain of God, symbolised by the rugged slopes Mount Carmel. Not every distress or pain, depression or lack of understanding is a dark night in this sense. The dark night is a great favour that allows the person seeking God to be purified. John of the Cross calls it a sheer gift (*¡Oh dichosa ventura!*). It is a grace that enables people to transcend selfishness, to be purified and healed so as to grow in union with God.

The nights are of several kinds: there is exterior and deep inner purification needed (the dark night of the senses and the dark night of the spirit). In each of these there is a work to be done by the individual under grace, and there is a still deeper purification of senses and of the spirit that can only be achieved by God.

If religious life is experiencing a dark night at this time, then it is truly a grace, a great gift of renewal. But we need to remember why St. John of the Cross wrote these two classics of spirituality: it was because people did not understand what was happening to them, and they resisted or tried to do it their own way, and so were seriously slowed down on the journey to God, or even went astray.

It is at this point that the person of Mary has a special role for religious today. There are three passages of St. Luke’s gospel which will give the necessary guidance for religious today as they undergo the pain and darkness of the night which God has allowed to come upon them for their healing and purification. These are:

- Luke 1 :26-38—The Annunciation story. Many religious are being asked to set out in a “pilgrimage of faith.” They can indeed like Mary be distressed, confused, and fearful. But the assurance that Mary received is also for us: the Holy Spirit will overshadow us.
- Luke 1 :46-55—The *Magnificat*. The only sure guide for religious at this time is the spirituality of the *Magnificat* which celebrates God’s blessing and great acts towards consecrated life in the past and a reliance on his continuing protection. But the *Magnificat* is above all a celebration of God’s values and way of looking at human desires and achievements. The bottom line is God’s mercy that gives us hope in our radical poverty as individual and corporate sinners
- Luke 2:41-51—The loss and finding of Jesus, along with John 19:25-28a— Calvary. Mary continued to search for Jesus, in sorrow and with some trepidation. She found him in the moment of his deepest humiliation and triumph on Calvary. Many religious, and other Christians, are reacting to an excessive and distorted vision of the Cross by neglecting its power (see 1 Cor 1:17-25). We do not like to hear of negative virtues or values. In this we can forget that the vows of religious life despite being positive in orientation and aim, include serious negative elements. If people are in denial about what is negative, they will not rightly be committed to, or appreciate what is positive. The negative must be transformed by love. But the supreme love of Jesus and his Mother on Calvary did not take away the torment of the event. We will have a distorted view of Mary if we neglect seeing her as the Sorrowful Mother. But she has also many other titles that we need to consider in our own journey under the shadow of the Cross.

Finally as we look on Christ and on the world with the eyes of Mary, as we continue our journey in darkness suffused by light, we have to learn with Mary to find Jesus in the temple. We need the gurus, we need to cultivate a healthy life-style, we have to learn from sound psychology, we can be helped by sociology, but the Temple is where we need to bring all together. For the Jews the Temple was where God dwelt and was worshipped, where priests interpreted the Law of God. In the Temple which is the Church and the heart of the individual, we can hear with Mary the teaching of the old man Simeon who proclaimed her Son “light for the gentiles and glory for his people” (see Luke 2:32). In one of the most important icon types, Mary is the *Hodigitria*, the one pointing the Way, that is her Son. Religious life can find in her a sure ground of hope and guidance.