

Our Lady of Mount Carmel

**Talk by Fr Matt Blake OCD given on 15th July 2020,
the Vigil of the Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel**

We're celebrating the Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, which is the principal feast of the Carmelite year, and in celebrating Our Lady of Mount Carmel we are celebrating the Order's origin and spirit. But more than that, we are celebrating the Order's identity. What does it mean to be a Carmelite? The very identity of the Order, the very identity of this spiritual tradition in the church. It's a tradition that has certainly existed now for almost 850 years. We can't be exactly sure when it begins – the beginnings are so extremely vague. However, we have the reality of this tradition, this profound tradition that has grown up in the Church and that has been so fruitful throughout all these centuries. And one of the things that make devotion to Our Lady of Mount Carmel so unique in the Church's history is that there's no clear origin to it. There's no record of Mary ever being on Mount Carmel. There's no link between Mount Carmel and Mary. Mount Carmel is not even mentioned in the New Testament. It's there in the Old Testament several times, particularly in association with Elijah. Neither is there any major event associated with the beginnings of this devotion, this tradition in the Church – there are no miracles, no apparitions that we normally associate with these kinds of devotions, of traditions and spiritualities like Lourdes, that have such profound influence. Our Lady of Mount Carmel has grown exclusively out of the life of faith, the spiritual tradition of people. It has grown out of the prayer life of the church, the prayer and contemplation of so many people. Its roots are very deep and therefore this evening we will be searching around for some of these roots and how has this come about.

Perhaps a good place to begin is not at the beginning but with the two most famous Carmelites of all these centuries of history, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. And from what we see in both of these, in their life, their experience and their writings, it is just so clear that for them, their understanding of Carmel is that it's Mary's Order. This belongs to Mary. This is who we are. This is our identity. And it's not just identity as understood from within – what I mean by that is how we as Carmelites see ourselves. It is also how others saw the Order, it's how the Order was seen in the Church. This is Mary's Order, where you become a Carmelite, and from what we know about John of the Cross's vocation story, though we know very little, is why did he choose the Carmelites? Almost certainly it was because of his devotion to Mary: he wanted to be in Mary's Order. No other reason has ever been suggested. John wanted to be in Mary's Order because of the devotion to Mary that was part of his life right from the very beginning and would be so important to him right to the very end. John wanted to be part of Mary's Order. That seems to be the one reason why he chose the Carmelites, though he had many other alternatives at Medina del Campo at the time, particularly the Jesuits, who had been so helpful to him and with whom he would have fitted in so well. He also had another offer of education for the priesthood and the chaplaincy, which he turned down, because he wants to be part of Mary's Order.

I want to read a little passage from St Teresa. These lines give us a sense of what the order is for Teresa, how she understood what being a Carmelite is. It gives us this

sense of the atmosphere, the environment that Teresa and John of the Cross and all the Carmelites of that era of history inhabited. We're talking about the sixteenth century, so the Order has existed for 300-350 years at the time when Teresa enters. So there are a few centuries of tradition, and they would have entered into this atmosphere, this environment that would have just spoken of this tradition. It didn't need explaining, it didn't need any introducing, it was just there. It was the atmosphere, the environment, this whole world that Teresa and all Carmelites of that era inhabited. This is from her *Interior Castle*, it's the *Third Dwelling Place*, first chapter, a few lines from paragraph three. Teresa is speaking here about herself: it's one of these texts where she turns directly to address her sisters. Those of you familiar with Teresa's writings – and I'm sure most of you are – we know when Teresa writes, she sometimes addresses her readers, other times she is addressing specifically whoever asked her to write this, sometimes she's addressing the future, sometimes she's addressing God directly, and at other times she turns and addresses very directly her sisters. And here in this particular passage, she is speaking about herself and her own experience of God's mercy and she is addressing her sisters. We can almost see her there writing this and getting carried away with what a wonderful life they have. *His Majesty well knows that I can boast only of His mercy, and since I cannot cease being what I have been, I have no other remedy than to approach His mercy and to trust in the merits of His Son and of the Virgin, His Mother, whose habit I wear so unworthily, and you wear. Praise Him, my daughters, for you truly belong to our Lady. Thus you have no reason to be ashamed of my misery since you have such a good Mother. Imitate her and reflect that the grandeur of our Lady and the good of having her for your patroness must be indeed great since my sins and being what I am have not been enough to tarnish in any way this sacred order.*

So that just gives us a little sense of what Teresa saw in the order, who we are as Carmelites and her way of seeing it. There are many other things that are plucked out, but Teresa just refers and gives hints of this because this is the world she would have entered in 1531; she would have just walked into this world, this tradition that had grown over these centuries. It was just taken for granted. And notice some of the terminology that Teresa uses. She says Mary is our Mother and our patroness. Both of those titles go right back to the beginnings of the Order and we could add to it also sister. Those three titles go right back to the beginning, and the original one was patron. The first Carmelites – we don't know who they were, we know nothing about them – they settled on Mount Carmel some time in the latter part of the twelfth century and they would have come from various parts of Europe. They would have come from a feudal society: therefore the term patron would have a very specific meaning for them. In a feudal society you belong to a patron, you depend upon a patron; your identity is tied up with a patron. Conversely, the patron has a responsibility for you, for your welfare, for your protection. It was that kind of a society, the feudal society that they would have been very familiar with. And why would these Carmelites have chosen Mary as their patron? Obviously we can't give an historic answer to that, because we don't know. They haven't told us, they haven't left us any record, but there are certain things we can pick up, that we can surmise. They would have gone to the Holy Land with the Crusades, as part of that, but with a very different purpose – others went there to make war, others went there to make money, others went there for prestige and for fame and for adventure, but they went there to pray, they went there to bear witness to what this land of the bible was all about. They went there to the land of the bible, to the land of Jesus Christ, choosing

Mount Carmel as a place to settle partly because that was a part of the Holy Land that was still open to them. But they would have picked up there that this had been a place of prayer for centuries, even right back to pre-biblical times it was a sacred place. It was a sacred place, a place of prayer: there is a vast tradition associated with Mount Carmel, its geographical location, its natural beauty etc. They would also have picked up that on Mount Carmel there was a monastic tradition going back to almost the beginnings of Christianity, and they would have picked up from that tradition, they would have seen themselves as continuing that tradition, not starting something new, but picking up. They would have seen the ruins of monasteries and hermitages around Mount Carmel and would have picked up the tradition that was already there, and undoubtedly the seeds of this Marian tradition were already sown.

In the Rule of St Albert, the rule given by the Patriarch of Jerusalem to the Carmelites at the beginning of the thirteenth century, which is really a description of the way of life that they were living, it was recommended there – though obviously this was a decision already taken by the Carmelites – that they were to build a church dedicated to Mary. There is no mention of Mary specifically in the Rule of Carmel, but the church they were to build was to be dedicated to Mary. In other words, they were going to give witness to the presence of Mary in their lives. Mary was going to be the centre, the heart of their lives, the place where they gathered for prayer, the place that brought them together as a community, the place where they would welcome many pilgrims who would have come there for prayer. It was dedicated to Mary. Of course, the geographical location was very important: the main port at the time would have been Acre, in the Northern part of the Bay of Haifa, and for those travelling South the first Christian church they would encounter would be this church dedicated to Mary.

So, that early tradition of the Order began then and the pilgrims would have taken and spread it. In a sense it was the welcome to the land of the Bible, it was Mary, patron and mother. These first Carmelites wanted to make it known that they belonged to Mary, that what they were building there belonged to her, not to them. So, she is patron. The title, mother, is something more intimate, there is more warmth to it than the title patron, though obviously we see from Teresa that both of those titles lived on and have come right down to us. A little bit later “sister” was also added. They are titles that show us, indicate this sense of belonging: we belong to Mary. And so this tradition in the church grew and developed in the light of so many people whose names, whose experience, whose prayer is unknown to us, but the fruits have come down to us. In celebrating of Our Lady of Mount Carmel we are celebrating prayer and a tradition that has come down to us through the lived experience of people.

The term Our Lady of Mount Carmel, of course, has more meaning than that, and right from the very beginning Carmelites would have been aware of the significance of linking Mary and the biblical mountain. It’s a very unique title for Mary. Mary has been given many, many titles down through the centuries: this is a very unique one – Mary and the biblical mountain. The mountains are very important in scripture; they are the places of the theophanies, they are the places where God makes himself known to his people. And God did that, of course, on Mount Carmel through Elijah, in the famous episode that took place, the sacrifice on Mount Carmel, where God made himself known. And through Elijah Mount Carmel and Horeb (which is another name for Sinai) are linked, because Elijah made the journey from one to the

other. The biblical mountains are the place of meeting with God, the places where God makes himself known, the places where human beings come face to face with God, and there is no human being who has come more face to face with God than Mary in her son Jesus Christ. She is the human being who more than anybody else experienced what it is to know God, what it is to come face to face with God, what it means to have God make himself known to you, to manifest himself to you. Nobody more than Mary. So, this is to link Mary with the mountains, to link Mary with these theophanies, to link Mary with Carmel and Sinai and the transfiguration and so many other biblical episodes. Because the first Carmelites were people of the word, of the bible; this is an order that has its roots, its foundations in the land of the bible, it has grown out of the bible. Carmel has grown out of prayer and contemplation of the scriptures: the Carmelite meets God in the scriptures, in the word of God. For Carmelites the word of God is the theophany: at the very heart of the Rule of Carmel is the exhortation to meditate day and night on the law of the Lord, to live day and night with God's word in the scriptures. Mary, of course, is the one who did that more than anyone else, with the Word who is her son. The Carmelites saw their lives as quite literally living on a biblical mountain, living with the word of God. It wasn't so much about meditating in the sense of being conscious of it or as something intellectual, it was living with it, being in that atmosphere. The word of God is the atmosphere of Carmel, the law of the Lord, the bible. It is the atmosphere, the place where Carmelites live.

So, Our Lady of Mount Carmel lifts Mary to the mountains, lifts her with the great theophanies, with the tradition of prayer and meditation upon the bible which is at the very core, the very heart of the Carmelite vocation. But it also does something else. It's Our Lady of Mount Carmel, it's not Our Lady of the mountains or the biblical mountains. It's a very specific mountain, and because of that very specific mountain, it lifts Mary with a very specific biblical figure, and that is Elijah. Elijah was linked to Mount Carmel and it is on Mount Carmel that Elijah has what we might call his greatest victory, his greatest manifestation of the power of God. But looking more deeply at that biblical story, it is Elijah bearing witness to what true spirituality is, to what a right relationship with God is, to the right way of relating with God. All these themes have been there all the time in Carmelite spirituality, and there are no greater proponents of them, of course, than Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross on how do we relate to God, what is the right way to relate to God. So, it is linking Mary and Elijah, and in the Carmelite tradition both Mary and Elijah have been considered to be founders – not of course in an historic sense of being founders, but rather as people with whom we can identify, in whom we can see, in everything that they are and that they stand for, the true spirit, what it is that as Carmelites we feel called to be.

I am going to read now a little passage from the book of Kings (1 Kg.18: 42-45) that is used as our First Reading at Mass for the Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel and it brings together the Marian tradition and the Elijah tradition. It is always interesting when we look at the scripture readings that the Church chooses for a particular feast day. There's always a lot of care put into the text, and the Church has chosen this particular reading for the Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel because it sums up for us the spirit of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, what this means, what this feast is all about, what it is we're celebrating. *Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel and bowed down, putting his face between his knees. 'Now go up,' he told his servant, 'and look out to the sea.' He went up and looked. 'There is nothing at all,' he said. 'Go back*

seven times,' Elijah said. The seventh time the servant said 'now, there is a cloud, small as a man's hand, rising from the sea.' Elijah said 'go and say to Ahab, harness the chariot and go down before the rain stops you.' And with that, the sky grew dark with cloud and storm, and rain fell in torrents.

There's a reading filled with biblical symbolism, filled with Carmelite symbols. In the Carmelite tradition, that little cloud, small as a man's hand, is a symbol of Mary, symbolically it depicts her. Why might that be? There have been three and a half years of drought, the country is dead, quite literally; and this little hand, this little cloud is a sign that life is coming back into the world. Mary is the one who brings life into the world; her son is the light of the world. Mary is bringing life into the world. Historically, the faith of the people of Israel, their worship, their cult is dead, and what Elijah is doing at that moment is reviving it – and not just the physical ground, the land with the miraculous water coming from heaven, the abundance of rain that is coming, bringing life and growth. But Elijah is also restoring, bringing life back in again to the people of God. That is of course the role of the prophet – to hear the word of God, to speak the word of God – the prophet was always a sign that God was favouring his people. The worst times in the story of the people of Israel was when they had no prophets, they were praying for prophets. And Mary is a prophet. Right from the beginning of Christianity Mary is always seen in the prophetic tradition. She is the one who hears the word of God, brings the Word of God into our world, meditates day and night on the word of God, treasures the word of God in her heart. Carmelites, first and foremost, have always seen Mary as a contemplative, one of ourselves, one like us. She's a contemplative, she's a person of prayer, of contemplative prayer; that's who she has always been in the Carmelite tradition; and Elijah likewise, the prophet of prayer. Carmelites weren't, of course, the first people to call Elijah the prophet of prayer. He had been considered to be that, almost right in his own day, and certainly in the Christian tradition there are many religious orders and prayer movements in the church that have looked to Elijah as their model –that's not anything exclusive to Carmelites. But what Carmelites have exclusively is Mount Carmel and all the traditions around Mount Carmel and linking Mary and Mount Carmel. There we find the uniqueness, the originality of the Carmelite tradition and Carmelite identity.

So, Our Lady of Mount Carmel gives Carmelites their spirit, their sense of understanding of who they are. But Carmelites weren't able to continue living on Mount Carmel. They had to move. The place had to be abandoned from the middle of the thirteenth century until one of Teresa's disciples went there in approximately 1620, so we're talking about over three hundred years of total abandonment of Mount Carmel, and that included the time when Teresa and John of the Cross were living. So there was no physical connection with Mount Carmel, but the tradition had continued to grow, the seeds sown on Mount Carmel continued to grow and flourish in so many places and none more so, actually, than in England, where we are here today. The first place in the world where the Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel was celebrated was England. This is a universal Christian feast that officially began in England and which was then taken up to be a feast for the whole Church. Then there was the link with Simon Stock and all of that. There was a very strong tradition of devotion to Our Lady of Mount Carmel in England and right throughout Europe, and that again is a phenomenal work of the Holy Spirit.

To give a sense of just how big that is, there's a lovely little text of St Teresa's and she tells us this twice in *The Book of Her Foundations*. She is writing about her second Carmel, that's Medina del Campo. She founded St Joseph's in Avila and now five years later she's founding a little one and after she's made the foundation she marvels, because what Teresa did not know and what she had no way of knowing was how do you transport a spiritual reality, some spiritual entity that has been born, that has developed? How do you transport it from here and put it there? And she marvels: *The sisters are living exactly the same life as we lived in St Joseph's and even more than that, the new ones joining them have exactly the same spirit, want exactly the same things, have the same desires, the same goals*, and she is just marvelling that this spirit had travelled. That's not something we can ever take for granted, something that can work well, that can flourish in one place and particularly that was so linked to the mountain and Carmel. How do you create Mount Carmel? You can't pick up the mountain and take it, yet there was a phenomenal rapid expansion right throughout Europe with vast numbers and places. This seed that was sown on Mount Carmel by a few men flourished so rapidly, spread so quickly and took very deep roots, not just in the members of the Order but also among the faithful, making our Lady of Mount Carmel very popular. Later it spread to Latin America, Asia and Africa and everywhere, throughout the whole world.

Carmel grew or evolved from being a tradition, a prayer, a way of living associated and linked with a particular biblical mountain to being something now that becomes a symbol, the spiritual power, the spiritual Mount Carmel that we have everywhere, a spiritual Mount Carmel that's with us. When John of the Cross wants to write the story of spirituality, when he wants to set before the people he is teaching and directing what the true authentic spiritual road is, he says it is the ascent of Mount Carmel. That's very significant – he's doing exactly what Elijah did all those centuries beforehand, when Elijah was faced with the prophets of Baal. The circumstances may be different, but what John of the Cross is doing is exactly the same. Carmel stands for the right, authentic way to relate to God. At the top of John of the Cross' Mount Carmel he has: *Here only the honour and glory of God lives*. Carmel is the sacred place where only the honour and glory of God lives. Carmel is within everyone's heart, Carmel is now the interior journey; it is more than just a physical journey, it is interior, it's a spiritual reality, it's a spiritual symbol that is so powerful.

So Carmel has evolved through prayer and meditation on the scriptures, on the bible, on the law of the Lord, to be a symbol of true, authentic, deep relationship with God. The whole spirituality of Carmel is all about silence, quiet – relationship with God; what an authentic true and deep relationship with God is. And Mary remains always the symbol of that. In a little text of St John of the Cross, when he is speaking about the person who now lives totally by the grace of God, the person with a full, mature, spiritual life, almost as an aside, he says, *That's how Mary lived from the very beginning, she always lived by the grace of God. Everybody else has to grow and mature and be purified and transformed into that. Mary has lived that from the beginning*. So she is, always has been, and always will be the model, an ideal of Carmelite spirituality, because she is the one who is depicted in the gospels for us as having a true, authentic, mature relationship with God that is there from the beginning and is seen in her total openness, saying yes to the Lord, to living by the will of the Lord, the will of God. As St Teresa tells us, and St John of the Cross: *Every authentic*

spiritual life, every authentic following of Jesus Christ, every authentic Christian life leads to where the life of Jesus Christ went to, and that is the Cross. The Cross is always there at every stage of the spiritual journey and is always the end, the point of arrival, the goal. And in John's gospel, which is the gospel significantly chosen for the Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, we have Mary, standing at the foot of the Cross. There she is representing all Carmel, all Carmelites, because that is where the spirituality, the light, the teaching of Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross and everybody else leads to – the Cross. Mary has already walked the road; she is the authentic true follower, disciple of her son Jesus Christ and the model for all disciples and for all Carmelites.

So Mary profoundly influenced who Carmelites are, how they see themselves, what our identity is. Everything that is in the core essential teaching on Carmelite spirituality is to be seen in Mary, and seen to be lived out by us. We could pick up the teaching of Teresa and the teaching of John of the Cross and we could say with total truthfulness, with certainty, that they both would have seen that Mary lived this to perfection. We, as her children, as her followers, who live under her protection, we are following her and she is guiding and protecting us on this journey. There are several pieces of art, ancient Carmelite art – you can see them in various countries of Europe – depicting Mary with the mantle of the Carmelite order stretched out, and the friars and nuns and Carmelites there beneath her mantle. She is protecting us, guiding us on this journey, and Teresa tells us that at one of the critical moments when she is making her first foundation, she has the vision where Mary and Joseph appear to her and they are protecting her, protecting the work that she is doing and Jesus appears to her and says, *Thank you for doing what you are doing for my Mother.* So, her work of founding has been a great service of Mary, to serve Mary, to assist Mary in this great work of protecting and bringing her children to Jesus Christ.

Perhaps we could sum up with one other image from Teresa about Mary. When she is speaking about her communities that have been founded, and by now she has communities of both friars and nuns, she refers to them as, *These little dovecotes of Our Lady* – these lovely dovecotes, beautiful places of protection, of sacredness, of belonging, places where we can live and feel secure and at home. And that's who Mary is for Carmelites, that's who she has always been in the tradition: patroness, mother, sister, protector, model, guide – the one who is accompanying us along this road with her Son and through her Son. All Carmel belongs to Mary, as I said at the very beginning. That's not about some general or physical protection, it is something much deeper than that. All of Carmel, all that is in this very rich spirituality, in this very deep and authentic way of living, belongs to Mary. She is protecting it. Mary is our spiritual protector. She mothers not just her son, but she mothers, gives life to – symbolised by this water – she gives life to, gives growth to, nurturing to our spiritual lives, our relationships with her son. Hence, water is a symbol of prayer, a symbol that both Teresa and John of the Cross use for prayer, it's a symbol of life. Mary is giving life, she has brought life into the world, she brings life into our spirits, into our souls, into our hearts.

So let us give thanks to the Lord and let us pray finally a prayer used for Our Lady of Mount Carmel, that she will lead us to the true mountain, Christ, her Son. There, in that tradition of Carmelite prayer used for the feast, Jesus himself has now become the mountain, and we are praying that Mary will lead us to that mountain, Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the great theophany, the great God showing himself, making himself known to us. So we pray this evening that Mary will lead us to this mountain as we celebrate Our Lady of Mount Carmel. Amen.

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