

The Discalced Carmelites - A New Marian Order In 17th Century Malta - Mary and the Discalced Carmelites

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Dona Teresa de Anumada y Cepeda became Teresa of Jesus in the Reform of Carmel which she had begun by founding 'with the full weight of authority the convent of our most glorious father Saint Joseph in the year 1562, ... when the Lord was pleased that some of the sisters should take the habit on Saint Bartholomew's Day" (1) Yet, though this great Spanish Mystic thus began her own Order of the Discalced Carmelites within her own city of Avila on the 24th of August 1562, she was inspired to do so by the rich spiritual traditions of Carmel, as manifested in the long and checkered history of the Carmelites from their cradle on the slopes of Mount Carmel.

St. Teresa of Jesus had lived as a Carmelite nun at the Convent of the Incarnation outside the walls of Avila for over a quarter of a century, so that her own experience and knowledge of existing traditions filled her with the hermetical spirit, the Elianic spirit and, above all, the Marian spirit of Carmel. (2) That St. Teresa was imbued with this Marian spirit is evident in all her writings, wherein she refers to the Virgin Mary as Mother, Lady, Queen, Empress, Heavenly Prioress of the Order, and to the Scapular as Our Lady's habit in Mary's own Order, so that she does not hesitate to declare that she had undertaken the great work of the Carmelite Reform for the greater glory of the Virgin Mother and Queen.(3)

The new Constitution of the Discalced Carmelites - as their official name of Discalced Brothers of the Order of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel clearly shows to all - emphasize all this in chapter 3 of Part I, entitled: "The Blessed Virgin in our life." The Constitutions declare that the Order's dedication to Mary's love and service form a special bond with Our Lady which pervades the Order's communities and stamps the life of their members with a distinctly Marian character. This was a characteristic of the Carmelite Order from its very beginning, a characteristic which remained so throughout the centuries, so much so that the Holy Parents of the Carmelite Reform, Teresa of Jesus and John of the Cross, treasured this commitment to Mary and strongly reaffirmed it. For these two Reformers, Mary is the perfect Model of prayer and surrender of self on our pilgrimage of Faith, inseparably united with her Son in the sorrows and joys of His Paschal Mystery; and consequently, Mary is the perfect model of all their teaching on the religious and spiritual life.(4)

THE DISCALCED CARMELITES IN MALTA

The above is briefly mentioned, because the Discalced Carmelites are the only Marian Order that set foot in Malta in the early 17th Century, and then, up to the end of the 18th Century, played an important role in the spreading of the devotion to Our Lady, not only in the Maltese Islands but also in far off lands, for the Order's first Monastery in Malta was to become an International Missionary college, catering for the evangelization of the East, from Asia Minor to Mesopotamia and even to Malabar in India.(5)

Indeed it was for this purpose that the Teresian Reform of Carmel came to make its first foundation in Malta. The then Head of its Italian Congregation, Fr. Paul-Simon of Jesus-Mary (Rivarola), with his farsighted and practical mind, decided that the order should put foot in Malta as a stepping stone towards its Missions in the Near East. As a port of call in the hands of the Knights of St. John the Baptist, Malta offered a unique opportunity not to be missed. Apart from the Missionary College in Rome, generally known as "St Pancratius" from the adjacent old Roman Basilica at the Gianicolo, the Order had a College in Belgium at Louvain for the training of underground pastoral work towards the re-evangelization of the northern parts of Europe; but, an international college in the very heart of the Mediterranean on the route of many christian fleets was deemed to be in need for the training in oriental languages of the missionaries to the East.(6)

Fr. Paul-Simon obtained the patronage of the Pope himself, Urbanus VIII, and of the Catholic King of Spain, Ferdinand III, for his project; then he approached the Order of St. John through two emissaries he sent to Malta in October 1625, namely the Frenchman Fr Theodosius of the Holy Spirit and the Spaniard Fr Joseph-Angelus of the Mother of God. With the help of the Bishop of Malta, Fra Balthasar Cagliares, they succeeded in obtaining the required consent from the Grand Council of the Knights of St John under Grand master Antoine de Paule. (7) Bishop Cagliares, together with his family - especially his sister Ursolica - was to be the greatest

benefactor of the Discalced Carmelites. The Public Deed published at the Bishop's Curia in Valletta on the 11th of December 1625 shows that the Bishop himself, out of his own resources, bought an extensive site from Fra Claudio Decosse and other private owners at Bur-Mula and then donated this site, with few houses and large adjoining orchards, to the Discalced Carmelites. Here they "could build a Monastery and a Church dedicated to the honour of God and to the Most Blessed Virgin Mary and St Teresa, and for the purpose of their engaging in divine worship and the spiritual welfare of the people in these Islands".(8)

This site at Bur-Mula was situated in the limits of the old parish of Vittoriosa, where a new city was to be developed and is today known as Bormla or Cospicua. Temporary alterations were immediately carried out to the already existing buildings on this site, especially for setting up a provisional chapel. Bishop Cagliares himself celebrated the first solemn High Mass on the Sunday within the Octave of the Epiphany of the following year 1626.(9)

The new House at Cospicua was at first under the jurisdiction of the Roman Province, but in the same year 1626, it passed to the new Neapolitan Province, and three years later to that of Sicily, till in the General Chapter of the Order held in 1632, the Cospicua Priory became the sole and exclusive responsibility of the Definitory General, in order to begin to fulfill its mission as an International Missionary College. At this General Chapter, Fr Paul-Simon of Jesus-Mary was elected to serve his second term as Superior General and he saw to it that the Holy See would confirm the erection of this College in Malta and approve all the necessary provisions decided upon by the Chapter General of the Order. The result was the Papal Bull of Urbanus VIII "Decet Nos" issued on the 2nd of March 1633. By this time, it appears that the construction of the new church and monastery was brought to a happy conclusion,(10) as is recorded to posterity on the interior facade of the church above the High Altar.

THE CHURCH AT COSPICUA

Conscious of their obligation to dedicate their church to the Virgin Mary as well as to St Teresa, the Discalced Carmelites chose as a subject of the titular painting of the church above the High Altar the rapture of St. Teresa on the Feast of the Assumption of Our Lady in the year 1561 at the Chapel of the Santissimo Cristo in the Dominican Church of St Thomas.(11) In this painting, masterly executed by Fra Luca Garnier, Our Lady dominates the whole scene as she places the very beautiful gold collar around the Saint's neck as a sign of her protection over the Reform.(12)

Saint Joseph has his special place in this titular painting. He is seen helping to put upon Teresa the garment of great whiteness and brightness she mentions in the description of this vision. And, indeed, from the Acts and the Chronicles of the Monastery at Cospicua, one can see that the devotion to St Joseph and to Our Lady of Mt. Carmel were the two main pillars of the Fathers' pastoral work amongst the lay people, reflecting the trend of popular devotions of the time throughout the christian world, and, in a very special way, the main devotions of the Teresian Reform. Many are the Acts referring to the foundation of Masses on Wednesdays and Saturdays, as well as on the Feast day of Our Lady of Mount Carmel and of St. Joseph.(13) While the two side chapels nearest to the Main Altar were from the very beginning dedicated to Our Lady of Mount Carmel and to St. Joseph. The titular-painting of Our Lady in this Chapel is attributed to Preti, whilst that of St. Joseph to his school.(14)

From the Acts of the Conventual Chapter held on the 6th day of July 1693, it is quite clear that the picture of Our Lady of Mount Carmel was a new one to replace an older one, which was deemed of little artistic value.(15) The Acts and Chronicles of the Cospicua Monastery, give abundant information attesting how the side chapels of Our Lady of Mount Carmel and of St. Joseph were constantly enriched and redecorated throughout the 17th and 18th centuries.(16)

In fact, it was during the eighteenth century that two large lateral pictures were added to each chapel, all four showing Our Lady as Mother of God and Carmel. Those in the chapel of St. Joseph are the work of Enrico Arnaud and depict the scenes of the Birth of Christ and the Adoration of the Magi, whilst those in the chapel of Our Lady are the work of Rocco Buhagiar and are meant to show the special protection of the Virgin Mary on all those who wear with devotion the Brown Scapular of Carmel.(17)

The other side chapel dedicated to Our Lady is on the right as one enters the church. It is dedicated to the

Presentation of the Most Blessed Virgin, linked with the special devotion of St. Teresa towards this Feast of Our Lady and her explicit desire that this Marian Feast be solemnly celebrated every year in Discalced Carmelite Houses.(18) The painting on the Altar of this chapel was donated to the Fathers by a devout benefactor in the year 1694. This same benefactor donated other pictures, and the Fathers decided upon a re-allocation of the main paintings in the Church, as is clearly shown in the Acts of the Conventual Chapter of the 8th of August 1694.(19)

Besides the two side chapels dedicated to Our Lady mentioned above, in the year 1771 a certain Francesco Ferranti gave to the Monastery a small anonymous painting of the Madonna della Pietà, an oval shaped picture of great beauty, which the Fathers placed as a "sottoquadro" on the altar of the chapel of St. John of the Cross, the second one on the left as one enters the church.(20) This picture of Our Lady attracted the devotion of the faithful, who flocked to venerate it and to pray before it, so much so that later on, in the 19th century, a Sodality of Our Lady of Mercy was set up in its honour.(21)

However, in keeping with the two main devotions the Discalced Carmelites spread on the Island, that towards Our Lady of Mount Carmel and that towards St. Joseph, the first Confraternity to be set up in the Cospicua Church was the Veneranda Confraternita Della Buona Morte eretta nella S. Ven. Chiesa di S. Teresa dei Carm. Scalzi sotto il titolo di San Giuseppe e sotto la protezione de Maria Vergine del Carmine. In the Book of Regulations and Statutes of the same, the origin, progress, title and motives are illustrated in full details. (22) It was first set up in the year 1780, when various pious persons, in their devotion to Saint Joseph as Patron of the Dying, manifested their desire to aggregate themselves in a Confraternity. The request was presented to Can. Albino Portughes at the Curia in Valletta, and the Decree for the erection of the said Confraternity was issued on the 24th of May 1780. With the Rescript of the 14th of August 1784, Pope Pius VI gave special indulgences to its members upon certain conditions. It is clearly stated that from the very beginning the title of the Confraternity was that of St. Joseph and the "Buona Morte", but soon the Fathers and the members thought it fit to add the title of the Most Blessed Virgin of Mount Carmel, in order to be able to aggregate it to the Arch-confraternity of our Lady of Mount Carmel in Rome, so that its members would benefit from "the immense spiritual goods" of the said Arch-confraternity because "the aim of this Confraternity is the Glory of God, the cult towards the Blessed Virgin, the devotion towards St. Joseph, and the good of Souls." (23)

The Statutes of this Confraternity go into great detail as to the manner of dress, the number of meetings, the dependence from the Monastery Community, the contributions to be made, the various officials, especially the Spiritual Director, who had to be elected every year from the Discalced Carmelite Fathers and to be confirmed in his office by the Chapter of the Community, which always had the last say in the matter. (24) In fact, this Confraternity flourished in an astonishing manner, as the list of members manifests. (25) It seems that this success encouraged the Fathers to set up the Confraternity of Our Lady of Mount Carmel proper. Preparations seem to have begun in the last years of the 18th century, because it was in 1802 that the permission from the Superiors General in Rome reached Malta. (26)

Another Marian devotion in conformity with the trend of the Christian way of life at the time all over Europe was that of Our Lady of Sorrows. This devotion seems to have grown up around the picture of the Madonna della Pietà mentioned above, so much so that the same benefactor, who donated the said Icon of Our Lady, gave the Cospicua Monastery the sum of one hundred scudi for the annual solemn celebration of the Feast and "Settena" of the "Addolorata", a foundation approved by the Fathers in the Conventual Chapter of the 29th January 1779. (27) This devotion flourished so much that there still exists in the Cospicua Archives a register of the mid-19th century, showing the way in which the two Feasts of the "Vergine Addolorata" had to be celebrated annually and setting down in detail the administration of the foundations and income of the same. (28)

Great as the influence of the Discalced Carmelites on the inhabitants of these Islands may have been, it must be remembered that their pastoral ministry in church was restricted to a bare two hours in the morning, besides the hearing of confessions in the early hours of the afternoon on Saturdays and some other rare occasions. For their main activities had to be teaching and prayer. (29)

1. E. Allison Peers, Complete Works of St. Teresa, London 1946, Vol. 1, 249
2. Otilio Rodrigues OCD, History of Teresian Carmel, Darlington 1979, 10-15.
3. Fr. Thomas OCD and Fr. Gabriel OCD, St. Teresa of Avila, London 1963, Chapter 9 which gives more than eighty references to St. Teresa's writings on Our Lady.
4. Constitutions Fratrum Discalceatorum Ordinis B. Mariae Virginis de Monte Carmelo, Rome 1981, 21-23.
5. Silverius of St. Teresa, OCD, Carmel's Missionary Spirit, Oklahoma 1952, 24.
6. John Leone, OCD, Short Historical Survey St. Teresa's at Cospicua in retrospect - 1975, unpublished manuscript.
7. Louis de St Therese OCD, Annales de Carm Dechauses de France, Vol. II, 812. It is stated that some members of the Grand Council of the Order of St John opposed the idea of having 'just another Religious Order on the Island', one French member went so far as to propose to evict the Calced Carmelites from their Monastery in Valetta in order to give their house to the Discalced - a proposal refused most vehemently even by the two Discalced emissaries. Finally, all agreed to grant the required consent, the Grand Master himself being most favourable.
8. This deed was recorded by Notary Pietro Paolo Vincella (Cospicua Priory Archives, Loose Manuscript, Foundation, p. 4; A. Ferres, Descrizione Storica delle Chiese di Malta e Gozo, 385). Bishop Cagliares has always been considered as the first great benefactor of the Discalced Carmelites in Malta. His portrait is still held in great esteem at the Cospicua Monastery.
9. ACDC, Loose Document of Foundation, p. 8.
10. Arthur Bonnici, History of the Church in Malta, Vol. II, 43. The year on the interior facade of the church is MDCXXXII. Various acts of the Conventual Chapters of 1641 and 1642 refer to the church as already completed.
11. E. Allison Peers, op. cit., Vol. I, 230-231.
12. This rapture of St Teresa of Jesus took place in the Dominican church at Avila. The vision of Our Lady and St Joseph clothing the saint in a garment of great whiteness and brightness, and throwing around her neck a very beautiful gold collar, to which a most valuable cross was attached, whereby they meant to manifest their deep appreciation for her work in the Reform of Carmel, has inspired many artists. In artistic circles, its representation on canvas is normally called the Crowning of St Teresa.
13. The Acts of various Conventual Chapters give details of such bequests.
14. Bernardo de Domenicis, in his Life or Preti, p. 104, refers to Preti's painting at Cospicua's Monastery which represented Our Lady of Mount Carmel together with St. Elias. Regarding the painting of St. Joseph confer Ferres (A. Ferres, Descrizione Storica, 305).
15. ACDC, Acta Capitulum Conv. Sanctae Matris Theresiae Melitae, anno 1661 ad 1796 - Vol. II.
16. ACDC, Cronache del Convento, p. ???. The register for the expenses incurred during the years 1701 - 1703, enlist payments made during the eleventh week for the allocation and painting of the niche of Our Lady signed by the Prior on the 14th October 1703. Typical of the mentality of the times when popular devotions presented an alternative to the liturgical celebrations proper, the Monastery Inventory of 1717 mentions the silver Reliquary for the relic from St. Joseph's mantle and a replica of the ring of the Virgin's Betrothal, which were held in high esteem. The Fathers, on this account, thought it fit to make this Reliquary identical with that enclosing the rib of St. Teresa of Jesus, which was officially authenticated (ACDC, Cronache del Convento, p. 59).
17. The lateral pictures in the chapel of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, as well as two others on each side of the high altar and other decorations in church, were paid from the funds made available to the Monastery by the Ximenes family, because the Spaniard Fr Philip-Mary of St Nicholas, elected Prior of Cospicua on the 17th of April 1785, was for many years the confessor of the Prince of the Island, Grand Master Don Francisco Ximenes de Texada, and his family as well as of other Knights of the same nationality.
18. E. Alison Peers, op. Cit., Vol 1, 364-365. It was the 21st of November 1575 at Seville that Gracian was presented with the Brief of Nuncio Ormaneto appointing him as Visitor to the Calced in Andalusia and Superior of the Discalced Carmelites, a Brief St. Teresa was hopefully longing for.
19. ACDC, Acta Capitulum Conv. Sanctae Matris Theresiae Melitae ab anno 1661 ad 1796 - Vol II, p. 83
20. ACDC, Cronache del Convento, p. 88 - July 1771.
21. ACDC, Libro della mensualita dei Congregati nella Pia Unione sotto il Patrocinio della B.V. Maria de Pieta eretta nella Conventuale Chiesa dei RR. PP. Carmelitani Scalzi, che si comincia dal mese di giugno 1844, and following registers.
22. ACDC, Regolamento e Statuto della Confraternita, pp. 1-23 in the Cospicua Archives
23. Ibid., p. 4.

24. Ibid., p. 13.
25. ACDC, Registers of the members to the said Confraternity.
26. ACDC, Atti Capitolari del Convento di S. Teresa dal 1796 al 1849 - Vol. III.
27. Idem.
28. ACDC, Libro contenente il modo da fare le due feste in onore della Vergine Addolorata: Intarito ed Esito della Procura della Vergine Addolorata.
29. ACDC, Book of Visitations, wherein the Superiors General on Canonical Visitations to the Cospicua Priory again and again emphasize and enforce these regulations.