

IT IS GOOD TO HAVE A MOTHER

by Fr. Pius Sammut, O.C.D.

What does Our Lady of Mount Carmel mean?

It all started as a story of hermits and pilgrims and adventurers who at the time of the Crusaders dared to travel to the Holy Land. We are in the years 1100. Traveling was not easy. So much so, that many of the pilgrims made their final will before they left, because they knew that there was a serious possibility of never coming back. Bandits on the way, the threat of the Muslims, sickness, or simple fatigue would mean death for many a pilgrim. But they went, fascinated by the idea of walking on the same ground as Jesus Christ did, led on by this desire to see the places where Jesus Christ was born, lived, died. After all they knew that He was not a simple man. He was God! Some of them were so seduced by what they saw that they decided to remain there. Quite a few stayed and lived the rest of their lives up in the north of the Holy Land, on the fertile promontory of hills of what we call Mount Carmel, adjacent to today Haifa.

Mount Carmel always had a certain charm. Here the prophet Elias made his epic battle with the prophets of Baal. These adventurers felt that God was calling them to live a life of solitude and penance. Not simply to save their souls but to unleash the tremendous power of prayer on the world that was suffering. They built huts, they utilized caves, they lived a very simple frugal life alternating manual work and prayer. They were called Carmelites.

Crisis

But no one can live in a vacuum. External events overtook them and their dream. Just a few years after being given a norm of life which simply underlined their main thrust to "dwell in their cells pondering on the Lord's law day and night", the Saracens started another advance into this land, killing anyone in their way. By 1235, it was obvious that the Turks would soon be in complete control. The hermits decided to emigrate - go to Europe - Cyprus, Italy, France, Low Countries, England. It was the right decision. Mount Carmel was taken and destroyed by the Turks in 1291

But bustling Europe was different from the solitude and tranquility of Mount Carmel. They felt lost, disorientated. They started losing their drive. Adaptation and flexibility which history was demanding of the Carmelites do not come out easily. The new environment called for creativity. Trail blazing. They had to modify their whole style of life -- from desert to city, from hermit to friar.

Many started losing hope. Discouragement crept in. Many foresaw a graceful death of the whole Order! But God wanted them to survive.

In a little town called Aylesford, about forty miles from London, lived a very holy Carmelite. His name was Simon Stock. He was the leader of the Carmelites. He tried hard to give a basic thrust to this 'new' religious family. It was not easy. Many Bishops were rather skeptical about these Middle East itinerants. Novelty always arouses suspicion.

Then something happened. A woman intervened. We do not know the details. This Carmelite, Simon Stock, was pleading for help from above. He was pleading with Mary. The Carmelites always had a particular allegiance to Mary. The hermits had even built a small chapel on their beloved Mount and dedicated it to our Lady. They loved the tradition that Mary used to come and spend time in prayer on this Mount!

They had even built a whole spirituality around Mary. Their reasoning was simple. Carmel means a

garden. Mount Carmel is known for its verdant beauty. It is always green. It is always fresh. Living with Mary can make our life an oasis of peace, a Carmel. Our passions subdued, the noise within us quieted, we can enjoy an intimate relationship with the One who always loves us.

Mary apparently appeared to Father Simon holding a scapular in her hand. "Hoc erit tibi et cunctis Carmelitis privilegium, in hoc habitu moriens salvabitur" - 'This shall be the privilege for you and for all the Carmelites, that anyone dying in this habit shall be saved'. A sign of a special and dedicated protection. An emblem of salvation. A shield in time of danger. A great privilege.

A different Mother

This image of Mary clothing us is very powerful, because it speaks of motherhood. A mother clothes her children, and she enjoys doing it.

It is good to have a mother. Ask someone who did not have a mother. A mother gives you security and warmth. This Friday a woman was emotional when she was telling me how her mother never really cared for her; she even told her that it was a mistake she did not abort her when she was in her womb! 'Oh I hate that song which quotes the Prophet saying 'Can a woman forget her child?' Yes - she told me, trying hard to hold her tears - a mother can forget her child! Mine did!' And yesterday, another woman was saying how lonely and uprooted she felt when her mother died early in her life. 'All the girls at school had a mother. I did not have one. I used to go home to no-one!'

Yet even a good human mother is limited. A mother dies. A mother cannot help us in our real problems of sadness, depression, loneliness. My mother loves me immensely but she lives thousand of miles away from me.

This is why we need a different mother. Someone who can follow closely our steps day by day, encouraging us, sustaining us, so that we are never alone.

She can give us the wisdom to avoid drinking that dangerous cocktail which everyone around us is forcing us to drink, a cocktail made up of pleasure, comfortable life and addiction to work, a lethal cocktail which is leading so many to depression and grief.

Mary is wise. She can make us smart. This is why Jesus decided to give her to us just before dying. As one last terrific gift.

Just let me be near you

There is a small village in Germany which holds a passion play every ten years. All the inhabitants of the village take part in this play. There is one moving scene when Jesus is about to leave Nazareth and His mum, to start His mission of announcing the Gospel. He is now thirty - an adult. He thanks His mum and asks her whether He can make this departure easier in any way. She looks at Him and simply tells Him, 'Yes, Son, You can. I want a favor from You. Please let me be near You when You are suffering.'

This is the only wish of our Mother in heaven. This is the only thing she asks of us. Let us let her be near us. Let us 'take her into our home'. Life will be different