

A MESSAGE FROM YOUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN CARMEL

(This is the official statement on the Brown Scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel issued by the Carmelite Order, both of the Ancient Observance {O. Carm.} and the Discalced Carmelites {O.C.D.}. It is to the Carmelite Order that the Church has entrusted responsibility for the administration and catechesis of this sacramental.)

Signs in Christian Life

The world in which we live is full of material things which have symbolic meaning: light, fire, water...there are also, in every day life, experiences of relationships between human beings, which express and symbolize deeper meanings such as sharing a meal (as a sign of friendship), taking part in a protest march (as a sign of solidarity), joining together in a national celebration (as a sign of our identity). We need signs and symbols to help us understand what is happening at present, or what happened before, and to give us an awareness of who we are, as individuals and as groups.

Jesus is the great sign and gift of the Father's love. He founded the Church as a sign and instrument of His love. Christian life also has its signs. Jesus used bread, wine and water to help us understand higher things which we can neither see nor touch.

In the celebration of the Eucharist and the other sacraments (baptism, confirmation, reconciliation, matrimony, orders, the sacrament of the sick) the symbols (water, oil, the laying on of hands, the rings), all have their own meaning and bring us into communication with God, present in each of them.

As well as liturgical signs, the Church has others related to some event, to some tradition, or some person. One of these is the Brown Scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel.

The Brown Scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel

The word "scapular" indicates a form of clothing which monks wore when they were working. With the passage of time, people began to give symbolic meaning to it: the cross to be borne every day as disciples and followers of Christ. In some religious Orders, such as the Carmelites, the Scapular turned into a sign of their way of life. The Scapular came to symbolize the special dedication of Carmelites to Mary, the Mother of God, and to express trust in her motherly protection as well as the desire to be like her in her commitment to Christ and to others. Thus, it became a sign of Mary from Religious Orders to the People of God.

In the Middle Ages many Christians wanted to be associated with the Orders founded at that time: Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians and Carmelites. Groups of lay people began to emerge in associations, such as confraternities and sodalities. All the religious Orders wanted to give these lay people a sign of affiliation and of participation in their spirit and apostolate. The sign was often a part of their habit: a cloak, a cord, a scapular.

Among the Carmelites, the stage came when a smaller version of the Scapular was accepted as the sign of belonging to the Order and an expression of its spirituality.

The Spiritual Meaning of the Scapular

The Scapular finds its roots in the tradition of the Order, which has seen in it a sign of Mary's motherly protection. It has, therefore, a centuries' old spiritual meaning approved by the Catholic Church. It stands for a commitment to follow Jesus, like Mary, the perfect model of all the disciples of Christ. This commitment finds its origin in baptism by which we become children of God.

The Blessed Virgin teaches us:

1. to be open to God, and to His will, shown to us in the events of our lives;
2. to listen to the Word of God in the Bible and in life, to believe in it and to put into practice its demands.
3. to pray at all times, as a way of discovering the presence of God in all that is happening around us;
4. to be involved with people, being attentive to their needs.

The scapular finds its roots in the tradition of the Order, which has seen in it a sign of Mary's motherly protection. It has, therefore, a centuries' old spiritual meaning approved by the Church.

1. It stands for a commitment to follow Jesus, like Mary, the perfect model of all the disciples of Christ. This commitment finds its origin in baptism by which we become children of God.
2. It leads us into the community of Carmel, a community of religious men and women, which has existed in the Church for over eight centuries.
3. It calls us to live out the ideal of this religious family; intimate friendship with God in prayer.
4. It reminds us of the example of the saints of Carmel, with whom we establish a close bond as brothers and sisters to one another.
5. It is an expression of our belief that we will meet God in eternal life, aided by the intercession and prayers of Mary.

Some Practical Rules

A priest or authorized person enrolls people in the Brown Scapular only once. The Scapular can be replaced afterwards by a medal, which has on one side the image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and on the other, the image of Mary. The Scapular holds us to live as authentic Christians in line with the teaching of the Gospel, to receive the sacraments, to profess our special devotion to the Blessed Virgin, which should be expressed each day, at least, by saying the Hail Mary three times.

The Brown Scapular is not:

- a. a magical charm to protect you;
- b. an automatic guarantee of salvation;
- c. an excuse for not living up to the demands of the Christian life.

The Brown Scapular:

- a. is a sign which has been approved by the Church for over seven centuries
- b. stands for the decision to follow Jesus, like Mary:
 - 1) open to God and to His will;
 - 2) guided by faith, hope, and love;
 - 3) close to the needs of people;
 - 4) praying at all times;
 - 5) discovering God present in all that happens around us.

The Brown Scapular introduces people into the Family of Carmel and points to a renewed hope of encountering God in eternal life with the help of Mary's protection and intercession.