



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE CARMELITE FAMILY

To the Most Reverend Fathers

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and

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1. The providential event of grace, which the Jubilee Year has been for the Church, prompts her to look with trust and hope to the journey we have just begun in the new millennium. *"At the beginning of this new century", I wrote in the Apostolic Letter Novo millennio ineunte, "our steps must quicken.... On this journey we are accompanied by the Blessed Virgin Mary, to whom ... I entrusted the third millennium" (n. 58).*

I therefore learned with deep joy that the two branches of the Order of Carmel, the ancient and the reformed, intend to express their filial love for their Patroness by dedicating the year 2001 to her, invoked as the Flower of Carmel, Mother and Guide on the way of holiness. In this regard, I cannot fail to stress a happy coincidence: the celebration of this Marian year for the whole of Carmel is taking place, according to a venerable tradition of the Order itself, on the 750th anniversary of the bestowal of the Scapular. This celebration is therefore a marvellous occasion for the entire Carmelite Family to deepen not only its Marian spirituality, but to live it more and more in the light of the place which the Virgin Mother of God and of mankind holds in the mystery of Christ and the Church, and therefore to follow her who is the "Star of Evangelization" (cf. *Novo millennio ineunte*, n. 58).

2. In their journey towards the "mountain of God, Christ the Lord" (*Roman Missal*, Opening Prayer of the Mass in honour of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, 16 July), the various generations of Carmel,

from the beginning until today, have sought to model their lives on Mary's example. In Carmel therefore and in every soul moved by tender affection for the Blessed Virgin and Mother, there has thrived a contemplation of her, who from the beginning knew how to open herself to hearing God's Word and to obeying his will (Lk 2: 19, 51). For Mary, taught and formed by the Spirit (cf. Lk 2: 44-50), was able by faith to understand her own history (cf. Lk 1: 46-55) and, docile to the divine promptings, "advanced in her pilgrimage of faith, and faithfully persevered in her union with her Son unto the cross, where she stood, in keeping with the divine plan (cf. Jn 19: 25), enduring with her Only-begotten Son the intensity of his suffering and associating herself with his sacrifice in her mother's heart" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 58).

3. Contemplation of the Virgin presents her to us as a loving Mother who sees her Son growing up in Nazareth (cf. Lk 2: 40, 52), follows him on the roads of Palestine, helps him at the wedding at Cana (cf. Jn 2: 5) and, at the foot of the Cross, becomes the Mother associated with his offering and given to all people when Jesus himself entrusts her to his beloved disciple (cf. Jn 19: 26). As Mother of the Church, the Blessed Virgin is one with the disciples in "constant prayer" (Acts 1: 14); as the new Woman who anticipates in herself what will one day come to pass for us all in the full enjoyment of Trinitarian life, she is taken up into heaven from where she spreads the protective mantle of her mercy over her children on their pilgrimage to the holy mountain of glory.

Such a contemplative attitude of mind and heart prompts admiration for the Virgin's experience of faith and love; she already lives in herself all that every believer desires and hopes to attain in the mystery of Christ and the Church (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 103; *Lumen gentium*, n. 53).

Therefore, Carmelites have chosen Mary as their Patroness and spiritual Mother and always keep before the eyes of their heart the Most Pure Virgin who guides everyone to the perfect knowledge and imitation of Christ.

Thus an intimacy of spiritual relations has blossomed, leading to an ever increasing communion with Christ and Mary. For the members of the Carmelite Family, Mary, the Virgin Mother of God and mankind, is not only a model to imitate but also the sweet presence of a Mother and Sister in whom to confide. St Teresa of Jesus rightly urged her sisters: "Imitate Our Lady and consider how great she must be and what a good thing it is that we have her for our Patroness" (*Interior Castle*, III, 1, 3).

4. This intense Marian life, which is expressed in trusting prayer, enthusiastic praise and diligent imitation, enables us to understand how the most genuine form of devotion to the Blessed Virgin, expressed by the humble sign of the Scapular, is consecration to her Immaculate Heart (cf. Pius XII, Letter *Neminem profecto latet* [11 February 1950: AAS 42, 1950, pp. 390-391]; Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium*, n. 67). In this way, the heart grows in communion and familiarity with the Blessed Virgin, "as a new way of living for God and of continuing here on earth the love of Jesus the Son for his Mother Mary" (cf. *Angelus Address*, in *Insegnamenti* XI/3, 1988,

p. 173). Thus, as the blessed Carmelite martyr Titus Brandsma expressed it, we are put in profound harmony with Mary the *Theotokos* and become, like her, transmitters of divine life: "The Lord also sends his angel to us ... we too must accept God in our hearts, carry him in our hearts, nourish him and make him grow in us so that he is born of us and lives with us as the God-with-us, Emmanuel" (*From the report of Bl. Titus Brandsma to the Mariological Congress of Tongerlo, August 1936*).

Over time this rich Marian heritage of Carmel has become, through the spread of the Holy Scapular devotion, a treasure for the whole Church. By its simplicity, its anthropological value and its relationship to Mary's role in regard to the Church and humanity, this devotion was so deeply and widely accepted by the People of God that it came to be expressed in the memorial of 16 July on the liturgical calendar of the universal Church.

5. The sign of the Scapular points to an effective synthesis of Marian spirituality, which nourishes the devotion of believers and makes them sensitive to the Virgin Mother's loving presence in their lives. The Scapular is essentially a "habit". Those who receive it are associated more or less closely with the Order of Carmel and dedicate themselves to the service of Our Lady for the good of the whole Church (cf. "Formula of Enrolment in the Scapular", in the *Rite of Blessing of and Enrolment in the Scapular*, approved by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, 5 January 1996). Those who wear the Scapular are thus brought into the land of Carmel, so that they may "eat its fruits and its good things" (cf. Jer 2: 7), and experience the loving and motherly presence of Mary in their daily commitment to be clothed in Jesus Christ and to manifest him in their life for the good of the Church and the whole of humanity (cf. "Formula of Enrolment in the Scapular", cit.).

Therefore two truths are evoked by the sign of the Scapular: on the one hand, the constant protection of the Blessed Virgin, not only on life's journey, but also at the moment of passing into the fullness of eternal glory; on the other, the awareness that devotion to her cannot be limited to prayers and tributes in her honour on certain occasions, but must become a "habit", that is, a permanent orientation of one's own Christian conduct, woven of prayer and interior life, through frequent reception of the sacraments and the concrete practice of the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. In this way the Scapular becomes a sign of the "covenant" and reciprocal communion between Mary and the faithful: indeed, it concretely translates the gift of his Mother, which Jesus gave on the Cross to John and, through him, to all of us, and the entrustment of the beloved Apostle and of us to her, who became our spiritual Mother.

6. A splendid example of this Marian spirituality, which inwardly moulds individuals and conforms them to Christ, the firstborn of many brethren, is the witness to holiness and wisdom given by so many Carmelite saints, all of whom grew up in the shadow and under the protection of their Mother.

I too have worn the Scapular of Carmel over my heart for a long time! Out of my love for our common heavenly Mother, whose protection I constantly experience, I hope that this Marian year will help all the men and women religious of Carmel and the devout faithful who venerate her with filial affection to grow in her love and to radiate to the world the presence of this Woman of silence and prayer, invoked as Mother of Mercy, Mother of Hope and Grace.

With these wishes, I gladly impart my Apostolic Blessing to all the friars, nuns, sisters and lay people of the Carmelite Family, who work so hard to spread among the people of God true devotion to Mary, Star of the Sea and Flower of Carmel!

From the Vatican, 25 March 2001.