Phoenix from the Flames

When the National Shrine of Saint Jude in Faversham, England, suffered a fire on 31st October 2004, the Carmelite friars who care for the site set out to restore it as a place of simplicity and beauty.

The sketches of Carmelite saints which once adorned the walls of the chapel adjoining the sixteenth-century statue of Saint Jude the Apostle had been completely destroyed, and so the decision was made to commission new pieces of art that would be beauty rising from the ashes like the legendary phoenix. The resulting icons are the first major commission of new artwork for several years by the British Province of Carmelites, which has a long association with celebrated artists whose work adorn the shrines at Aylesford and Faversham.

In early 2007 the Prior Provincial, Fr. Tony Lester, O.Carm., approached a Benedictine hermit, Sister Petra Clare, who has many years experience of icon ‘writing’ (the proper name for painting an icon), and who is a member of the British Association of Iconographers (www.bai.org.uk).

Sister Petra Clare was an art student at Shrewsbury and Leeds in the 1960s. Her interest in iconography developed gradually as her religious vocation grew. After years of discernment she decided that she wanted to be a hermit inspired by the Benedictine tradition, and with permission from Rome received formation specific for this vocation at St. Cecilia’s Abbey on the Isle of Wight.

Sister Petra Clare now lives in a group of women hermits following a monastic rule. The community—located in the beauty of the Scottish Highlands—

is known as a skete also affording a hermit community dedicated to the The Rule of Saint Benedict. In this way the community is also able to foster relations between the skete and the outside world through visits from the public.

During the initial planning stage it became clear that the project was to be an integral part of the celebration of the 800th anniversary of the Carmelite Family. Therefore, The Rule of Saint Benedict was to be the focus of attention.

The friars wanted a Carmelite hermit community of women to enthroned to The Rule of Saint Benedict at the shrine. The Benedictine Province in Carelia, Carith, a site with which the Carmelite Order has a long association, was the obvious choice to provide the Carmelite masterpiece (The Book of the Rule to Saint Brother Carith, a site where the Carmelites were burned during the great consuming fire which

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During the initial discussions between the Carmelites and Sister Petra Clare, it became clear that the icon was a form of religious art well suited to depicting Carmelite spirituality, which draws on both Eastern and Western influences.

The friars wanted the icons to depict important figures from across the Carmelite Family. The first icon to be commissioned was of Saint Albert of Jerusalem, the ‘lawgiver’ of Carmel, which is appropriate not only because his way of life (formula vitae) document is inspirational for all Carmelites but because this year is being celebrated as the 8th centenary of the text which became the Carmelite Rule of Saint Albert.

The icon depicts Saint Albert, the Latin Patriarch (Roman Catholic Bishop) of Jerusalem approving the Carmelite way of life and giving a copy of the Rule to Saint Brocard (the name traditionally associated with the ‘Brother B.’ in the text).

To the left of the central figures is Elijah, one of the foundational figures in the Carmelite tradition. He is shown in a cave by a river, possibly the wadi Carith, a site whose spiritual significance is expounded in the medieval Carmelite masterpiece The Ten Books on the Way of Life and Great Deeds of the Carmelites (The Book of the First Monks). Elijah’s altar of sacrifice is shown with the consuming fire which proved the reality of the God of Israel over the false
god Baal during Elijah’s contest on Mount Carmel in the Bible’s Book of Kings.

Above the altar is a well or spring, known as the Fountain of Elijah, which still remains on Carmel today, and which the first Carmelite hermits are reported as living near in Albert’s Rule. Elijah’s cave is a place of purification. From its well flows one stream which divides into two, which reminds us that whilst Carmel has divided into different traditions (such as the Discalced Reform), we all derive from the same source. Sister Petra Clare said that she drew inspiration for the streams and the mountain from Saint John of the Cross’s drawing of Carmel.

At the top of the icon in the place of highest honour is Mary the Theotokos (the God-bearer), presenting her son to the world. The sky is golden to represent the presence of God, and Mount Carmel as a place—or rather a way of life—that can lead the pilgrim closer to heaven. The mountain is Carmel, a fertile place by the sea, on which grow cedar trees and olive groves, both symbolic of peace, nourishment and shelter.

Albert’s Rule said that the hermits were to live in separate cells, in which they are depicted on the icon. The image of hermits in caves doing various tasks is derived from Byzantine icons of the Death of Saint Ephraim. In the top-most cell the hermit is following Chapter 10 of the Rule by meditating day and night on the law of the Lord. The law of the Lord is the Word of God—both the Bible and the person of Jesus—and so the text he is reading is the opening of Saint John’s account of the Gospel: In principio erat verbum (In the beginning was the Word).
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tion principio erat verbum the Word).

Beneath him another hermit contemplates the cross, and the fact that life on earth is a time of trial (Rule, Chapter 18).

To the right another hermit is seen washing his cloak. Until the 1280s when the white cloak (or mantle) was adopted as the principle symbol of the Order, the hermits wore striped cloaks. In this icon they do not wear the capuche (the cowl around the shoulders derived from canons), which reminds us that the majority of the first hermits were not ordained clerics but rather laymen who had consecrated themselves to live in allegiance to Jesus Christ (Rule, Chapter 2).

Saint Albert specified that the hermits should do work of some kind (Chapter 20), and this is not only depicted by the washing of clothes but also by the chopping of wood by another of the hermits.

Next to him two brothers sit talking together, perhaps the younger receiving advice or instruction from one of the 'senior or more mature' of the brethren (Chapters 4 & 6). The hermits were told by Albert to gather once a week for mutual support, correction, and spiritual welfare (Chapter 15).

To the side of these figures a hermit carries a basket of food, perhaps bread that is the reward of silent toil (Rule, Chapter 20) that will be used for the common meals (Chapter 7) and the celebration of the Eucharist which Albert recommended daily when convenient (Chapter 14).

At the bottom right-hand corner of the icon the prior — a
miniature of Brocard – is depicted outside the prior’s cell which Albert said should be at the entrance of the community (Chapter 9). He is giving a member of the community a fraternal embrace.

In the midst of the cells, as required by Albert (Chapter 14), an oratory or chapel has been built. The building incorporates styles from both the East and the West (a Byzantine dome and Crusader architecture), reminding us that Mount Carmel was a site for hermits from both Christian traditions.

Albert is depicted sat on a throne, reminding us of his role of authority as a bishop. His mitre and chasuble are decorated with the cross of Jerusalem, reminding us that Carmel originates in the land where Christ came to establish God’s kingdom. Albert wears around his shoulders a pallium, a symbol of office given by the Pope, reminding us of Carmel’s place of recognition within the wider Catholic Church. Albert’s face is based on depictions of Byzantine patriarchs. Albert’s hand is raised in blessing over Brocard, recalling the introductory words of the Rule which are found on the parchment passed between them.

The icon of Saint Albert and the Carmelite hermits was installed at Faversham on 25th October, along with the first of a series of three further panels depicting holy men and women of Carmel.

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other panels – due to be in place by October 2008 – will depict Titus Brandsma and Edith Stein, as well as Isidore Bakanja (the martyr of the Brown Scapular) and Elias Kuriakos Chavara (founder of the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate in India).

The icon of Blessed Jean Soreth and Blessed Françoise d’Amboise depicts the two figures responsible for the development of the Carmelite nuns in the fifteenth century. To show how the entire Carmelite Family is inspired by the *Rule of Saint Albert*, passages of the *Rule* form part of the central panel on this and on the future icons. Images of Elijah – in this case his being fed by ravens and taken to paradise in a fiery chariot – also run across the central panels, as does water from the Fountain of Elijah. Jean and Françoise are shown standing on ground that is red, a colour associated with Elijah, showing that they are grounded in the tradition of the prophet.

Jean Soreth is depicted holding a manuscript of his *Commentary on the Carmelite Rule*, the extract of which is used in the Carmelite Supplement to the Divine Office: *It is from Christ himself that you will learn how to love him.*

Hanging from the parchment is a seal depicting the crest and motto of the Carmelites, since as Prior General Blessed Jean was the senior brother of the Order.

Facing Jean – in fact in dialogue with him – is Blessed Françoise d’Amboise. The image of Françoise is based on Annunciation imagery where Our Lady is shown in conversation with the angel Gabriel. Like Mary in such images, Françoise has her hand out in an act of self-giving,
but her empty hand is also open to receiving whatever God sends. The crest alongside her is that of the Duchy of Brittany, reflecting the fact that she was a member of the French royal family who rejected the privileges of power for the values of the heavenly kingdom and that she became a founder of Carmelite nunneries at Jean Soreth’s suggestion. Typically in Carmelite art Françoise has been depicted wearing her crown and ermine fur (the signs of royalty) over her Carmelite habit, but in this icon she puts these aside, literally placing them out of the frame.

The architectural backdrop behind her represents her role as a builder of monasteries, and the walls are green, the colour of natural growth, which is associated in iconography with the Holy Spirit, showing that Françoise dwelt in the presence of God.

Between the holy Carmelites the central panel contains Chapter 2 of the Rule of Saint Albert which declares that ‘In many and various ways the holy fathers have laid down how everyone, whatever their state of life or whatever kind of religious life he has chosen, should live in allegiance to Jesus Christ’. This text was taken to heart by Jean and Françoise who nurtured new forms of religious life. The image of Elijah ascending to paradise and passing his cloak to Elisha (2 Kings 2) reflects how the Carmelite way of life is passed on between generations and we are sons and daughters of the prophets. At the bottom of the panel Elijah is again depicted in his cave.

Before writing the icons, Sister Petra Clare immersed herself in prayer and reading about the Carmelite saints to be depicted, a process which she said led her to be inspired by the Carmelite Family past and present.

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learn more about the theology behind the images, since the technique of creating them is closely bound to their sense of mysticism. An icon and the Gospel witness to each other, which is why both are venerated and kissed in the eastern Church.

An iconographer is bound to an icon through a process of death and resurrection. The wood on which icons are written is treated as the wood of the cross, and wrapped in a cloth to symbolise Christ’s grave clothes. Gesso, a mixture of glue and slate-lime, is then applied on top of the wood creating a white stone-like substance. This is regarded as a tomb and a new stone on which a new name is to be written that witnesses to the name of Jesus. The paint that is applied is tempera made of egg, and the pigments added have been washed again and again so that they have changed from their original identity. Everything the iconographer handles has thus been through a ‘death-life’ process.

When the iconographer is ready to write, the gesso is covered in darkness. The first colours set down are dark, just as God is dark to the human intellect. From the darkness shapes and forms emerge, just as in God’s act of creation. Light builds gradually in tonal layers, leaving ‘lightning lines’ around the eyes and elsewhere, and the image becomes clearer, just as the unknown and invisible God becomes known in Jesus. It is thus appropriate that the feast of iconographers is the Transfiguration, when Christ’s nature as human and divine became clear to his followers. Angular shapes and rounded shapes develop in the icon which provide a counterbalance to each other. Precision is important, and clear precise lines, because the icon becomes a creedal statement. The icon which emerges is a means through which God and his saints can be revered.

According to Sister Petra Clare, drawing on the ancient traditions of iconography set out at the seventh Ecumenical Council, the icon must never arise purely out of the artist’s imagination. The icon must also be about real people, not a ‘theological theory’, since in the incarnate Jesus God is made real. The artist is a vessel for God to work through; the artist is a servant of the Church and must have an attitude of service and emptiness. There was therefore a limit to which she could prepare for the process of writing these icons, since there must be room for the subjects to emerge. Leaving ‘space for God’ (*vacare Deo*), Sister Petra Clare also drew on images and iconography common in Carmelite art, so that the icons were grounded in the tradition and heritage of Carmel.

*Johan Bergström-Allen*