

## **Mary and the Scapular**

*Joseph Chalmers, O.Carm.*

*The Prior General's Letter to Lay Carmelites  
on the occasion of their International Congress in 2001.*

Dear Fellow Carmelites,

On the occasion of the Congress for Lay Carmelites, I want to express my best wishes for a good meeting and that it will bear fruit in the daily life of all Carmelites.

Unfortunately, I am unable to be present because I have a previous engagement in Australia. However I want to be with you by means of this letter and above all through my prayers.

This year 2001, the whole Order is celebrating a Marian year to give thanks to God for the gift of the scapular. We were honoured to receive a letter from the Pope for this important event. The Pope places the scapular devotion within the whole structure of the Church's relationship with Our Lady, to whom he has entrusted the third millennium. He desires that we Carmelites, not only deepen the Marian spirituality of the Order, but above all live it more and more in the light of the place that the Mother of God and ours occupies in the mystery of Christ and the Church.

For Carmelites, Our Lady is Patroness, Mother and Sister. For many years, the relationship that Carmel has with Mary was symbolised by the scapular. By means of this humble sign, our spirituality reached very many people. The Pope wrote that Carmelite Marian spirituality is a treasure for the whole Church and brings out the two fundamental truths that the scapular devotion contains: on the one hand, it signifies the continual protection of Our Lady, not only in this life but also at the moment of moving from death to new life; on the other hand, there is the understanding that devotion to Mary must involve the whole of life, including time for prayer and time for service of one's neighbour.

We bear witness that we are indeed children of Mary by living a truly Christian life. The Pope joyfully admits to wearing the scapular and desires that all Carmelites radiate in the world the presence of Mary, the Woman of silence and of prayer.

Another very important event for the Order is the celebration of the General Chapter of the friars in September. The General Chapter occurs every six years and is the gathering that sets the future direction of the Order. The theme of the next General Chapter is: Carmel, the journey continues. The idea behind the theme is that after years of research and study, we have a very clear idea of our charism but the most pressing challenge for now is to translate the theory into daily life. We want to study how the charism is lived in the different continents in which we are present; we want to learn from the experience of each other.

The fundamental Carmelite values are very clear: we are first and foremost followers of Jesus Christ and his person and his message shape our lives. Jesus began his public ministry with an appeal to conversion, which is to change one's life and believe the Good News from God. Conversion is the work of a lifetime. We cannot be good Carmelites if we are not first of all good Christians. For this reason we must fix our eyes always on Christ and open our hearts to his Word. Our principal inspiration for the following of Christ comes from the Prophet Elijah and Our Lady, our Patroness, Mother and Sister. She is a continual presence in Carmel. Every religious family has its own particular perspective on the Christian life. We Carmelites focus on the values of fraternity, prayer and service.

The heart of the Carmelite charism is contemplation. Christian contemplation blossoms in service of others. The source of a prayerful life, which is according to the heart of God, is contemplation; equally the source of a fraternal life in which all are enabled to grow as human persons is also contemplation. We take inspiration from our saints; they are our friends and they help us to run the race to the finish. I suppose that each person has his or her own favourite saint but in the area of contemplation, the great masters are Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, our fellow Carmelites. St. Thérèse of Lisieux reminds us that the spiritual journey is not our work but God's. God desires to transform us so that our human, limited ways of thinking, loving and behaving are transformed into divine ways. The road is long but God accompanies us every step of the way.

The Carmelite way is an ancient way, full of wisdom. Each Carmelite enriches or impoverishes our spirituality by the way he or she lives. I hope that this Congress helps you who are present but also all Carmelites to live our vocation in depth.

May God bless you and may Our lady cover you with the mantle of her special protection.