

Saint Albert of Trapani



Since shortly after the time of his death, probably in 1307, the Carmelite friar Albert degli Abati was hailed as a saint, first by the people he ministered to in the Sicilian town of Trapani, and then by his religious order.

In 2007 his Order will mark the seventh centenary of Albert's death with events in Sicily and around the globe. The same year has also been chosen to celebrate the eighth centenary of the giving of the Carmelite *Rule* by another Saint Albert; Albert Avogadro, Patriarch of Jerusalem. It is perhaps a confusion between Albert of Jerusalem – *lawgiver of Carmel* – and Albert of Trapani – *father of the Order* – which has caused the latter to be somewhat overlooked. Yet as the accounts which follow make amply clear, there is much in the life of this simple Italian friar that is worthy of emulation.

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Albert of Trapani: a saint of yesterday for today

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1. A saint of yesterday for today

Albert was one of the two most ancient saints in the Carmelite Order: for his sanctity and the exemplary quality of his life he was called, along with Saint Angelus, the “Father of the Order”, *pater ordinis*.

We do not have much information about his life, but at least we can trace its main lines reliably. The oldest biography was written probably a little after 1385, and was the basis of a second manuscript text by an anonymous Carmelite now preserved in the Vatican Library. Still others set themselves to write about Saint Albert: we know biographies by Vincenzo Barbaro and Theodore de Aquis; on the latter depend biographies by Giovanni M. de Poluciis of Novarella, and the *Legenda aurea*, all dating from the fifteenth century. In the same period various items of information were gathered in the lists of saints which go under the name of the *Catalogus sanctorum*.



The Carmelite community in Trapani was one of about fifteen friaries of the Order founded in about the 13th Century in the major cities of Sicily and what is now Italy.

A tradition confirmed by various documents says that Albert was born in Trapani around the middle of the thirteenth century. His parents were Benedetto degli Abati and Giovanna Polizi, who had been unable to have children in twenty-six years of marriage. This detail recalls the great biblical examples of Samuel (*1 Samuel* 1:1-2, 11) and John the Baptist (*Luke* 1:5-25,

57-80). The mother promised him to the Lord, initiating his consecration, and she sustained the commitment even in the face of the plans of Albert's father, who preferred to see him married and inheriting the family fortune. Albert joined the Carmelites, who were already present in the city and who had been endowed by his family. Once ordained a priest he was sent to Messina. Nevertheless, various documents testify to his presence in Trapani: on 8th August 1280, when he witnessed the will of Ribaldo Abati; 4th April 1289, when he witnessed the will of Perna, the second wife of the same Ribaldo, notary; and 8th October the same year, when he witnessed a contract relating to property of Palmerio Abati, knight. Albert was remembered as a man of prayer and as a celebrated preacher sought after throughout Sicily. A document of 10th May 1296, recording a gift of Palmerio Abati to Donna Perna, mentions that he is Provincial of Sicily.

There is no record of Albert's participation in the crucial events in the history of the Order in those times, nor of how he may have contributed to the consolidation and growth of the Order, but there is no doubt that as a friar who had a deep experience of God and a real capacity to recognise people's needs his work in preaching and charity contributed much to the growing appreciation of the Order in Sicily. It is perhaps not only by reason of antiquity that the title *pater ordinis* came to be conferred on him.



A fresco depicting Albert receiving the Carmelite habit, in the chapel dedicated to him in the Carmelite Church of Santa Maria in Traspontina, Rome.

Albert died in Messina on 7th August 1307 – the year is not entirely certain but is probable enough. Tradition records the episode of an argument

between the clergy and people at the time of his funeral: popular affection and devotion suggested celebrating Albert as a saint, but the clergy preferred a normal Requiem Mass. The legend recounts that, in the middle of the argument, some angels appeared and intoned *Os justi*, the Introit for the Mass of a Confessor, and thus confirmed the popular feeling and Albert's reputation for holiness.



The translation of his relics took place either in 1309 or, more probably, in 1317. The skull was taken from Messina to Trapani by the provincial Cataldo di Anselmo of Erice. Other relics of Albert were dispersed here and there. All through Sicily there are memories of the presence of Albert and of miracles he performed: in Agrigento there is a well whose water he purified; at Corleone his flask for wormwood was preserved; at Petralia Soprana a stone where he rested; at Piazza Armerina there is said to be the first chapel in his honour.

Many miracles were attributed to the saint, both in his lifetime and after his death. While he was in Messina he managed to evade the embargo imposed on the city in 1301 by Robert of Calabria, then King of Naples: through Albert's intercession one or more ships – the sources mention from one to twelve – succeeded in breaking the siege and bringing provisions to the starving people of Messina.

A characteristic of Albert's ministry was healing: he restored the sight of a blind lad, who then became a Carmelite; some women were cured of abscesses of the breast; and others were cured of fever. A Jew with epilepsy was converted after the saint's intervention. As well as such physical healings, the legends also recount spiritual ones, and particularly his work as an exorcist.



*This illumination by Giovan Pietro Birago, from a manuscript known as the Sforza Hours, shows Saint Albert healing a fever-stricken family. The manuscript was made in Milan c.1490
(British Library MS Add. 34294, f.204v).*

2. Saint Albert and hearing the Word of God

Legend relates that Albert recited the entire Psalter every day, as well as the Liturgy of the Hours (Divine Office). It's not possible to say to what extent this story is true, but nevertheless it gives us a glimpse of the spiritual personality of the saint and the way of praying characteristic of his time.

The custom of reciting the entire Psalter was not an eccentricity, but a well-attested practice among medieval hermits. The first hermits on Mount Carmel also used this type of prayer, which was a response to the Lord's command to pray without ceasing. In the solitude of his cell the hermit marked out the time and accompanied his manual work with the recitation of the Psalms, which he knew by heart. The Psalms, born as the prayer of the devout Israelite, were also used by Jesus to pray, and so, by means of the apposite Christological interpretation, became the backbone of Christian

communal prayer. Themes, symbols, and images from the Psalter called the substance of the Gospel to mind, so that monks, canons and hermits felt that they were praying the psalms “through Christ, with Christ, in Christ”, in the Church and with her.

The recitation of the Psalter, therefore, is reminiscent of the love for the Word of God recommended in various ways by the Carmelite *Rule of Saint Albert*. In fact, the whole *Rule* is a tapestry of direct and indirect references to Scripture, the fruit of a kind of *lectio divina*. We just mention a few explicit references to the Word: the reading during meals (*Rule* chapter 7); *lectio divina* (chapter 10); liturgical prayer (chapter 11); the daily Eucharist (chapter 14); “the sword of the Spirit... let everything be done in the Word of the Lord” (chapter 19).

None of this is strange: for the whole of the first Christian millennium the Word of God constituted the heart of common and private prayer. It was read, or rather heard, committed to memory, and “ruminated” in continual meditation, which flowed into prayer. The first step, reading, allowed one to understand the literal sense of the text, what it says, what is its purpose. Meditation was not a purely mental or intellectual exercise, but a repetition of the phrases of the biblical text under the breath: something, then, which involved multiple organs: mouth, hearing, and eyes in the case of someone who could read. In meditation one explained the text from other pages or words of Scripture, and one considered its allegorical sense (what does this word refer to? what is it a symbol of?), its anagogical sense (what is the purpose of my life, of our life, of history?), and its moral sense (what must I do? what must we do?).

At this point a person would feel prompted by the Spirit to pray, to respond in prayer to God who has spoken. The continuing and progressive path of familiarity with Scripture and meditation on it would open the mind and heart to contemplation, that is, to the joyous and grateful recognition of the action of God in one’s own story and in the history of all. This method was developed by the monks and was the heart of their formation, a rather different one than the “scholastic” approach worked out in the universities, which was more intellectual, logical and speculative.

All this effort served to allow the Word to penetrate into the heart of a person, which little by little would be transformed and progressively identified with Jesus. In Saint Albert of Trapani’s case the identification is very marked: he acts in ways which are typical of the evangelical person, of the disciple of the Lord, the authentic witness of the Resurrection (cf. *Mark* 16:9-20): he heals the sick, frees the possessed; heals the waters... These actions can be done only by one who has encountered the Lord in a deep and

decisive way, by one who has discovered in Jesus of Nazareth the Messiah, the Son of God (cf. *Mark* 1:1; 3:11; 5:7; 15:39).

3. Saint Albert and proclaiming the Word of God

Saint Albert has often been portrayed with an open book in his hand, or with the Child Jesus in his arms. This is not by accident, for these are both iconographical attributes which indicate a preacher of the Gospel, which is precisely what Albert was.



Traditional images of Albert of Trapani show him with the infant Jesus or an open book, signifying his fidelity to the Word of God.

In order to be authentic proclaimers it is necessary to have encountered Jesus, and this is possible primarily through the hearing of the Word. It was his familiarity with Scripture, cultivated in *lectio divina* with purity of heart and openness to the transforming action of the Holy Spirit, which made Saint Albert capable of proclaiming the Gospel. People could say of him the same thing as they thought about Jesus: “They were astonished by his teaching, because he taught them as one with authority and not like the scribes” (*Mark* 1:22; cf. *Matthew* 7:28-29; *Luke* 4:32).

Saint Albert is remembered for an extraordinary ability to speak to people with conviction and immediacy. We don’t know if he had studied in some university, or if, as perhaps is more probable, his formation was of a more monastic type. In either case, it would have been centred on the Word of God, the continuous, deeply-felt, sapiential reading of the *Sacred Page*, as the Bible was called at that time. Formed by the biblical and gospel pages,

Albert had assimilated their spirit and was able to translate them in an attractive and efficacious way, so they could be light and inspiration for the present.

A characteristic of the new religious families founded from the end of the 12th century onwards was precisely popular preaching. It was not restricted to the liturgical assembly, in places and moments considered until then officially connected with preaching. The ministry of preaching, which until then had been a prerogative of bishops and their official delegates, was assumed also by simple friars and even by lay people. The Carmelites, too, almost from their beginning and especially after the Second Council of Lyons (1274), dedicated themselves to this activity, considering it a true and proper vocation of service to the people of God. Therefore, the first two saints of the order, Saint Albert and Saint Angelus, were also outstanding preachers. Indeed, it is told of Saint Angelus that he was killed precisely because of accusations made against a corrupt person in the course of a sermon.



Saints Albert (right) and Angelus (left) depicted alongside the Blessed Virgin Mary in an early Carmelite painting.

We concluded the previous reflection by saying that Saint Albert appeared as a true disciple of the Lord, an authentic witness of his incarnation, passion, death and resurrection. In fact, he spent the greater part of his time and energy as a preacher. And not only that, for his preaching was confirmed by the wonders it accomplished: he not only proclaimed the Gospel, but healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, drove out demons (*Mark 16:9-20*).

The Word he preached was materialised in gestures of tender attention to those who were in real need of healing and new life. His arrival in a place really brought good news, like the Gospel. His life, simple and coherent, spoke on its own, spoke of Christ and his gift of salvation and grace. This transparency of his life allowed him to translate the Word into concrete actions, and this also expressed in a certain way his devotion to the Blessed Virgin: like Mary he knew how to give life to the Word, he was a “God machine”, as his confrère Titus Brandsma would have said some centuries later.

His attention to the basic and primary needs of the people he met is a powerful indicator of his capacity to talk to those who had the most need of the Gospel proclamation. Albert’s preaching was not addressed to a public distracted by and attentive to the elegant forms of preaching rather than to the vital content of the message. Rather, the Carmelite gets down to basics: he hastens to meet men and women who need a word of salvation and life and hope, and to them, the least, he comes in the power of love, faith and hope. Therefore, his word is effective and powerful, capable of producing extraordinary effects of inner and outer healing, for which he was venerated as a miracle-worker.

4. Saint Albert, man of purity

Another iconographical attribute of Saint Albert is the white lily, symbol of purity. This means that his life shines as an example of virtue and sincerity, recognised and venerated by the people of God as a gift and reminder for all. The chastity of Saint Albert became a radiant expression of a radical, definitive and complete choice for God.



Saint Albert depicted with a lily, symbol of purity, in a painting by Marelli Servino at the National Shrine of Saint Thérèse in Darien, Illinois, U.S.A.

Two other elements of the legend of Saint Albert converge, in different

ways, on this same value of purity. We are told that his mother, Giovanna, grateful to God for having given him to her after such long expectation, wished that her son would come to a life of total consecration to the Lord. His father, on the other hand, would have preferred to see him married, perhaps to the daughter of some noble or rich merchant, the usual way to elevate the social and economic condition of the family, as well as guaranteeing the son a comfortable future rich in possibilities. The legend continues that the son, faced with this choice, preferred the spiritual intentions of his mother to the utilitarian outlook of his father, who in turn was also persuaded by his wife.

As if this was not enough to show Albert's radical choice for God, the legend also recounts the temptation to which he was subjected as a novice. A beautiful young woman tried to attract the attentions of the young man and to draw him away from the decision he had made. But, as they say, the devil makes pots but not lids, and Albert discovered the Tempter's deception and his true identity, not entirely hidden under the beauty of the girl. The novice was quick to drive the devil away, entrusting himself once again to the divine protection. There are some paintings which depict Albert, in a sign of his victory, trampling a devil with feminine features but with goat's feet, the sure sign of his true nature. But be careful not to interpret the image in the sense of a disdain for woman, for her dignity and beauty: quite the contrary! You only have to think of how many women Saint Albert helped, consoled or healed in body or spirit. The story needs to be understood in symbolic terms: even the most beautiful realities can be transformed into temptation if they are detached from the realisation of God's will and one's own vocation. It hasn't been done, but one could tell an analogous story of a young woman called to marriage and sent astray by a devil who convinces her to enter the convent... Also in this case to give in to the temptation would be tragic.



A fresco of Saint Albert of Trapani trampling the Tempter underfoot, painted by the so-called Master of Saint Albert (1471) in the Carmelite Church of San Felice del Benaco in Italy.



So much attention and insistence on this point is not an accident. These are figurative ways – as much in the paintings as in the “images” of legend – to tell about Saint Albert, true Carmelite and follower of Mary, the *Virgo purissima*. The “purity” practised by Albert is not simply a physical fact, but primarily spiritual. It is certainly not a chastity which is lived as a renunciation of human love and natural fruitfulness. Rather it serves to translate in existential terms a fundamental, radical choice for God and his plan of salvation, which requires total availability and complete dedication. Albert allowed himself to be seized by God: he placed himself totally at his service, gave him his life and capacities, and welcomed his call as a gift and a commitment for life.

The purity of Saint Albert expresses his full conformity to Christ, his simple and total adherence to the Word of life, the transparency with which his character manifested and communicated this fundamental choice for God. Like Mary, Albert knew how to accept the word which was addressed to him and how to make it come alive and real in the experience of his life. His character is made so transparent by the Holy Spirit that his words and actions are able to give explicit witness to the activity of salvation which the Lord continues to exercise through the work of his disciples.

5. Saint Albert, man of poverty

There is no doubt that Saint Albert professed and lived a life of poverty. It is demonstrated by his decision to enter the community of Carmelite friars, already taking their place in the mendicant movement, that is, among those religious who did not base their livelihood on rents or fixed incomes but who

preferred simplicity of life, “uncertain mendicancy”, as travelling preachers who would eat whatever the people offered them according to their possibilities and generosity. They held everything in common and shared all their goods, considering themselves brothers, and therefore members of the one family, for which the Father of all would provide.

Saint Albert had made poverty a real life-decision. Coming from a well-off family of some social standing was not an obstacle. He could have made a different choice and joined the city clergy, or some abbey or canonry. Instead he chose to put himself alongside the *minores*, the least of his time, sharing their style and condition of life. This doesn't mean that he wasn't able to appreciate his family experience and connections; it was perfectly easy for him to make use of them from time to time. For example, it's possible that during the blockade of Messina Saint Albert had some influential support which enabled him to arrange supplies for the city. On the other hand, it's clear that his motivation for action on that occasion was the hunger of the people and his sense of responsibility towards those who really needed help at that moment. The gospel command to give food to the hungry came before all opportunity, calculation and security.

Evangelical poverty implies a struggle for life, justice, truth, peace. Saint Albert, poor by choice, was able to recognise the true needs of the people beside him, and he had learned how to intervene with evangelical generosity, however it was required in the circumstances.

A consequence and a relative of poverty is the penitence and austerity of life proper to the Order of Carmel, still fairly close to that of its origins. Tradition records at least two facts linked to this practical-spiritual dimension of Albert's life: the flask of wormwood preserved in Corleone, and the rock of Petralia Soprana, where he is supposed to have rested. The latter offers us a glimpse of the saint's way of life, often on the move along the bright roads of Sicily to preach, heal, counsel, and mend spirits. The Carmelite could have found better accommodation: he had friends and family connections which would have guaranteed him better circumstances. Nevertheless, he chose to travel as a poor man. Poor among the poor, he sought chance accommodation during his travels: he was no stranger to barns, caves and natural shelters.

Bitter wormwood had become a customary condiment on penitential days, on Fridays, for example. Saint Albert used to mix it with foods and drinks, making them less pleasing to taste. It was another way of mortifying the senses. Today we have a different idea about food and a different concept of penance, but we shouldn't judge the ways of acting of previous generations. There is still validity in a poor and austere life, which concentrates on the

essential, without getting lost in useless things, which is committed to building authentic and non-manipulative relationships with others and with the reality around us. The Gospel poor, like Saint Albert, know that they cannot count on anything except God and his grace. They accept as a gift whatever they receive from their brothers and sisters, without presuming anything, and they are thankful for it all. Evangelical poverty makes one able to see the needs of others and to respond with generosity.

6. Saint Albert, man of charity

Holiness is manifest principally as Christian life lived in its fullness, and especially on the level of charity. In *Novo millennio ineunte* John Paul II called holiness the “high standard of ordinary Christian life” (n. 31). This is true for Saint Albert: he is one of that band of saints remembered and venerated for a radical, intense life, committed in all its dimensions, especially in its generous attention to the needs of the people of his time.

Saint Albert, the Carmelite friar, was truly a brother to many sisters and brothers who turned to him because they recognised him as a man of God, that is, as someone able to reveal the grandeur of the love of God for them in delicate situations or those which were not easily resolved. Albert was a man of concrete and generous charity on more than one occasion, attentive to the needs of all, especially the poorest. It’s not by chance that among the many miracles he performed a number are in favour of women suffering from some illness, and for Jews, who converted to Christianity after their cure, recognising in the work of Saint Albert the hand of Jesus the Messiah.

Saint Albert’s charity is seen in quite different situations, which can be considered in three broad categories. A first group of deeds is concerned with community and problems of a social character; a second with physical sickness; and third with psychological or spiritual problems. In this and in the next section we’ll examine each of these three groups.

The first category concerns the social communitarian sphere. Tradition recounts at least two miraculous interventions, which took place in the cities of Messina and Agrigento, whose purpose was to relieve populations in trouble.

The first and more famous concerns the breaking of the blockade of Messina by Robert of Calabria (later King of Naples) in 1301. Through Albert’s intervention some ships – from one to twelve, depending on the story – managed to break the naval blockade and bring supplies to the starving Messinese. This episode was also recorded by a source outside the Order, for it is mentioned in chapter 10 of the *Chronicle* of the Roman Anonymous, also known under the title *Life of Cola di Rienzo*. Apart from

the obvious relief for the exhausted populace, Albert's intervention was a clear overture for peace: why is it always the ordinary people who have to suffer in the struggles and disputes of the powerful? Control of the Strait of Messina, unification of the kingdoms of Sicily and Naples, hegemony in Europe: these were all interests which did not much concern the inhabitants of Messina. Saint Albert made himself the spokesman for exigencies that otherwise were going unheard, and managed to make the circumstances of war less burdensome for many families.

At Agrigento the memory is still preserved of the saint purifying the water of a well. In this case there is a clear biblical reference to the episode of the well of Jericho purified by the prophet Elisha (*2 Kings 2:19-22*); and the Carmelite was part of the prophetic family which originated with Elijah, of whom Elisha was the direct successor. In this way people had the possibility of getting drinkable water without too much difficulty – and this at a time when having running water at home was beyond imagination for most people. Water still remains one of the most precious goods of creation, and even now is not accessible to everyone. All too often sectional interests, not always acknowledgeable, have made water a weapon of blackmail and oppression and an instrument of power. The prophetic gesture of Saint Albert reminds us that water is a sacred gift, meant to give life to all without exception.



In Whitefriar Street Carmelite Church in Dublin drinking water from the Well of Saint Albert is reputed to bring healing.

Saint Albert's charity also has a beautifully personal dimension: we often find him ready to cure the sick in body and soul with the delicacy and attentiveness which are characteristic of genuinely spiritual people. The

healing of physical ills, spiritual direction, and the practice of exorcism are three complementary aspects of Albert's life. His whole self is caught up in the Gospel message, which is revealed in inner and outer healing and liberation working on any kind of impediment or bondage which blocks a fully human and spiritual life.

Sickness, suffering, pain: these are always situations we want to avoid; they discomfort us and we try to avoid them whenever we can. When they come to people who are already weak, physically, morally or socially, they become still more burdensome. Young people and women were categories particularly needy of attention and healing, but relatively neglected by the society of the time. Albert stood beside them, put himself at their disposal, offering a concrete and practical help to anyone in need of healing and with nowhere to turn except to God. Albert was a man of God who revealed his maternal tenderness in healing his weakest sons and daughters.

Various miracles of healing are recorded, both in life and after his death. In Palermo a boy who had been blinded by his sister during an unfortunate game regained his sight, and afterwards became a Carmelite. Another boy, from Lentini, healed through the faith of his mother, who covered him with a piece of the saint's clothing, also became a Carmelite. However, gratitude and indebtedness are not always signs of a true vocation, and after a time he left the Order. Sometimes a physical cure plays itself out in an enduring influence and spiritual discernment regarding a choice of life.

A woman in Trapani was helped by the saint during a difficult childbirth, which risked both her life and that of her child: Albert managed to comfort the young woman, who then bore her baby safely. It's no marvel, therefore, that women turned to the saint to be cured of abscesses of the breast, or fevers, especially puerperal fever, which was a cause of many deaths in childbirth in those days. The death of a woman, a wife, a mother, as well as being a grief for the one who died prematurely and for her loved ones, was also a social disaster of considerable consequence. Mortality among infants and mothers was high in Albert's day, and he put himself at the service of life and of family serenity.

However, he was not concerned only with the physical. Saint Albert was always on guard against the devil. As well as their personal battles, he was also an exorcist. In Licata on one occasion a woman came and asked him to liberate her daughter, who was suspected of being possessed by the devil. The saint went and succeeded in freeing the daughter from the evil presence with a gesture of humility, offering the other cheek after the young woman struck him a blow. Someone is really free only when all the dimensions of his life – body, soul and spirit – are completely oriented to God and his will.

Even though the Lord rarely permits it, possession by the devil prevents a full life, and the man of God is able to restore wholeness, self-control and openness to the will of the Lord.

What counts about these actions, leaving aside their historicity and their importance, is their meaning: they signify to us that Albert is a saint, a prophet, a man of God, who still shines for us today as a person made new by the Gospel, so united with the Lord and so permeated by his Word that his every action becomes a practical and eloquent continuation of the healing and liberating action of Christ.

7. Saint Albert and the Jews

Today there is a quite widespread understanding of the relationship between Christians and people of other religions which is very different from the one that was normal in the past, even until quite recently, and which still today is not found in some other religious and cultural contexts. Faith is such an intimate reality that it concerns and marks a person's entire life, it orients the way he or she sees the world and the personal choices he or she makes at every level. Education, culture, social context, these things also greatly influence the way one views one's own religion and those of other people. Today, also, the secularised Western world is infected with relativism, for which there is no single truth. Moral principles are cast in doubt and subjected to the exclusive and sovereign assessment of personal conscience (or opportunity?) so that many people think that the forms of religious expression are indifferent or equivalent.

The problem is a serious one, not to be resolved by propaganda, slogans or crusades. On the other hand, it's not only a matter of dialogue, of mutual knowledge, welcome and appreciation, but also of proclaiming the Gospel through an authentic testimony. That means having to place oneself with humility and patience alongside every man and woman, respecting their dignity, appreciating their point of view and their culture, adapting oneself to their times and rhythms. Above all it is necessary to put forward our experience of the resurrection of Christ from death, and therefore of salvation and new life experienced through union with him in the Church, while still acknowledging the universal value of the incarnation, passion, death and resurrection of Christ, which implies the gift of the Holy Spirit to humanity and its presence in every life, even before the explicit proclamation of the Gospel. Moreover, the Jewish religion is a special case: John Paul II addressed the Jews as "our older brothers", which is a very different attitude from when they were called "perfidious" or even "deicides". What was Saint Albert's attitude?

On at least two occasions Albert had dealings with Jews. Once the saint saved three Jews from drowning near Agrigento, and on another occasion he cured a Jewish boy of epilepsy in Sciacca. In both cases the legends speak of explicit confessions of faith and subsequent baptism. So are these stories to be understood as examples of evangelisation, dialogue, proselytism, or forced conversion? An answer must be developed without prejudices and in the light of the historical context and the mentality of the times.

There have been various occasions throughout history when Carmelites and Jews have come into contact. The convent in Toulouse was established on land donated by a Jew who was grateful to Mary, whose intercession had led to his cure. Other legends, apart from those related to Saint Albert, tell of more or less amiable relations between Carmelites and Jews. A few convents were close to Jewish quarters and became centres for preaching aimed at their conversion. However, there are some interesting accounts of respect for members of the Jewish people, of which Jesus and Mary were, of course, a part: in France, in the 17th-18th century Carmelite Reform of Touraine the novice masters urged novices to greet Jews they encountered with respect, and the Venerable Albert Leoni (†1642) rebuked some novices of his who had taunted some Jews in the street.

Perhaps the memory of Elijah had some influence. Albert and the Carmelites considered it a point of honour to proclaim the true faith to the members of the Chosen People in imitation of the Prophet (*I Kings* 18:20-40). These days the discussion has moved on to a level of dialogue and of recognition of the fundamentals which we hold in common, of the need to work together in the proclamation of faith, but the example of Saint Albert reminds us that the most basic witness is at the level of authentic, delicate and courteous charity. Only someone who makes himself “all things to all people” (*I Corinthians* 9:22) is able to help others experience the salvation of God and to favour a personal encounter with Christ.

8. Saint Albert, devotee of Mary

Saint Albert’s profound devotion to the Mother of the Lord is attested by more than one of the old legends, but anyway it would be strange to imagine a Carmelite of the first generations who did not share the Marian character proper to the Order. Even if we can’t attribute to Albert all the characteristics of the Marian piety developed in Carmel in subsequent centuries, we can at least indicate those which were common in the time he lived and which are found in texts from the same period.

Mary was originally venerated by the Carmelites as the Lady of Carmel (from the place where the first hermitage was) and of the Holy Land,

because she was the mother of Christ, feudal lord of that land acquired at the cost of his blood. For this reason, and also as a choice made in the theological and ecclesial context in which Mary was a spiritual model for those who wished to commit themselves to the reform of the Church, the Carmelites dedicated to her an oratory built in the midst of their hermitage cells. In this way they committed themselves to the service of the Virgin.

In her the Carmelites saw the new woman, obedient to the Word of God, completely devoted to discerning God's will and carrying it out in purity and humility. In this context it was natural to contemplate the virginity of Mary and to understand it as purity: interior virtue, psychological and spiritual rather than physical. This was in fact one of the central points in the spirituality of Saint Albert. Obedience to the Word of God, which finds expression in obedience to a superior and in fraternal life, develops to the full in a pure heart, transparent to the light of God, able to contemplate the beauty of his will and to translate it freely and imaginatively in the world of the everyday. The Annunciation in this context becomes one of the natural and attractive points of reference for the Carmelites of the first generations.

As a consequence, the Mother of the Lord is understood as the "most beautiful", who best enshrines the newness brought by her Son. She is the new Gospel woman, the prototype of every Christian, the "new Eve", true mother of all the living and of all believers. Beauty embraces all aspects of Mary's existence, for which reason she is recognised as immaculate and assumed into heaven, completely associated with the radical holiness of the Son and risen with him. It's not strange then, that in line with the interpretation of the Church Fathers and medieval writers, the Carmelites too recognise in the little cloud which rises from the sea at Elijah's prayer (*I Kings* 18:44) an image of immaculate Mary assumed into heaven.

An ancient tradition links Albert with the statue of the Madonna of Trapani. It could have been carved and brought to Trapani while the saint was provincial of Sicily. It's difficult to say what foundation this story might have, but the luminous beauty of the image of painted marble, the twist of the Virgin's body enabling her to look at the face of her child, the smile at once sweet and sad, perhaps gives us some idea of the sensibility with which Albert would have contemplated the Mother and Sister of Carmelites. In the affectionate movement of the child towards his mother he would have recognised a reflection of his own devotion, of a love which is tender and intimate but not sentimental, but rather demanding: for one who knows how to love and venerate Mary knows that it means to commit oneself to follow her in total dedication to the plan of salvation which the Father has for humanity. To be devoted to Mary, today as in the time of Saint Albert,

means to feel that one is accompanied and sustained in the journey of faith, on a down-to-earth path of humble and quiet charity towards one's brothers and sisters, open to the hope of the new and full life which Christ gives us in the Holy Spirit.



*The statue of Mary – the Madonna of Trapani – in the city’s Carmelite Church.
In 2006 the Madonna of Trapani was designated patron of the local diocese,
and Saint Albert as secondary patron.*

The liturgical cult of Saint Albert of Trapani

*Emanuele Boaga, O.Carm.
translated by Paul Chandler, O.Carm.*

1. History of Saint Albert's canonisation

The marvellous life of Saint Albert degli Abati immediately earned him an extraordinary cult both in Carmel, where he was called *pater Ordinis* and considered its patron and protector, as well as outside the Order.

After the saint's funeral Mass, when according to tradition two angels were supposed to have intoned the Introit for a holy confessor, Frederick, king of Sicily, son of Peter, the former king of Catalonia, the archbishop Guidotto, and the people solemnly agreed to have the cult offered to the saint confirmed by the Holy See, and to provide for the necessary expenses.



A renaissance woodcut showing the 'tree' of Carmel depicts Saints Albert and Angelus alongside the Virgin Mary.

Just seventy years after Albert's blessed passing into glory, the Order also

committed itself to raising whatever funds were necessary to obtain his canonisation. The general chapter of Puy-en-Velay in 1375 decreed that every religious who was given permission to dispose of his own goods should set aside a sum “for the canonisation of blessed Albert”, and also decided that the prior general could impose a tax on the provinces to sustain, among other things, the expenses “for the canonisation of blessed Albert and the holy Legate” [Saint Peter Thomas].

The general chapter of Brescia in 1387 appointed Bartolomeo da Sciacca as procurator to seek petitions from the princes, prelates and nobles of Sicily beseeching the Pope “for the canonisation of blessed Albert, our brother”, with the obligation, under oath, to account for the offerings he collected and the expenses incurred in obtaining the petitions.

The work proceeded at a great pace. In 1399 the general chapter of Delle Selve gave the provincial of Sicily the task of petitioning the Pope, in the name of the prior general and the whole chapter, for the canonisation of blessed Albert of Trapani.

In spite of these failed attempts, the general chapter of Montpellier of 1420 decreed that “in each and every convent there should be painted a picture of blessed Albert with rays”, and in her testament of 13 March 1424 Donna Eleanora de Bosco declared herself “to have, hold and possess a chapel known by the title of Saint Albert in the blessed church of Santa Maria Annunziata in Trapani”.

Again in 1425, the general chapter of Pamiers entrusted to M. Giovanni di Scolio the task of obtaining letters of petition from prelates, communities and cities to beseech the Pope “for the canonisation of Saint Albert”.

The year 1457 was a decisive date for the glorification of our saint. At this time the great reformer Blessed John Soreth was the head of the Carmelite family. He requested Pope Callistus III that the public cult already shown to the saint through the erection of altars and churches in his honour should be allowed to continue in Sicily and elsewhere. The Pope graciously consented, and wished expressly that his permission, which was given verbally, be certified in a letter from the Cardinal Protector of the Order, who was present at the meeting. The letter is reported by the historians of the Order and was published in 1507.

Later the prior general Cristoforo Martignoni obtained from Sixtus IV the bull *Coelestis aulae militum* (31st May 1476), which confirmed the permission given by Callistus III “vivae vocis oraculo”.

In 1524, at the general chapter of Venice in which Nicholas Audet was elected prior general, it was decided that in the seal of the general chapter alongside the image of the Madonna would be placed images of Saint John

the Baptist at her right and of “our holy father Albert on the left”. Audet wanted every church of the order to include an altar dedicated to the saint.



A 17th Century seal of the General Chapter of the Carmelite Order depicting Saint Albert on the left.

2. Liturgical cult of Saint Albert in the Order of Carmel

The general chapter of Bologna of 1411, attended by Gerard of Trapani, provincial of Sicily, decided the following when it dealt with the liturgy: “A double feast is celebrated of blessed Albert of Trapani on Saint Donatus’ day [i.e. 7th August] whose office is as a confessor not a pope, until the proper office, which in fact is already prepared, is distributed”. Originally circulated in manuscript copies, this office in honour of the saint went through various editions after the invention of printing, of which the most notable are those of 1495 and 1573. The Carmelite Missals of the 16th and 17th centuries also contain texts for the Mass proper of Saint Albert.

The fathers of the general chapter of 1564, held at the convent of San Martino ai Monti in Rome, expressed and obtained their wish to have the feast celebrated with an octave in order to make it more solemn.

Finally, at another general chapter in 1625, the procurator general of the Order was entrusted with the task of asking the Holy See the favour of inserting the feast in the Roman Calendar. Besides inserting the memory of the saint into the Roman Martyrology on 7th August, the Congregation of Rites also permitted the feast to be celebrated on 7th August in Messina and its diocese.

The Mass and Office texts proper to the saint which were in use among the Carmelites until the reforms after the Second Vatican Council were confirmed by Pope Gregory XIII in 1584 when the breviary of the Order was reformed. There was a rhymed office composed by Blessed Baptist of

Mantua.

In the liturgical reform mandated by Vatican II the Order was permitted to celebrate Saint Albert liturgically on 7 August with the rank of feast. The proper texts used by the old branch of the Order were completely rewritten, because the preceding rhymed texts were no longer usable. The hymns remain as before, but revised and corrected by the Benedictine Dom Anselmo Lentini. The plan of the Mass texts aims to set out the main features of the saint as religious, Carmelite, and benefactor of the people.

3. Liturgical cult of Saint Albert in the Teresian Carmel

The importance which the cult of Saint Albert had assumed in the Order passed via Saint Teresa of Jesus (of Avila) to the Discalced Reform. In the “ancient” Constitutions of the nuns (1576?) and the “definitive” ones of 1581, Saint Teresa included the feast of “our father Saint Albert” among the days for Holy Communion. The saint also heads the list of Saint Teresa’s holy protectors, according to the autograph transmitted to us by Ribera. We should also recall that Saint Teresa wanted a picture of Saint Albert painted for the monastery of Toledo, and persuaded a Dominican (perhaps Diego de Yanguas) to translate an old biography from Latin, and then arranged that it be printed by Don Teutonio de Braganza along with the *Way of Perfection*.



A statue of Saint Albert in the main altar façade of the Incarnation Monastery in Avila, Spain, where Saint Teresa began her Carmelite life.

Another sign of how substantial the cult of “our father Saint Albert” was at the beginning of the Discalced Reform is the decision of the chapter of Madrid in 1590 about giving names to the first Discalced provinces. Apart from the name of Saint Elijah given to Castile, the only other saint of the

Order who gave his name to a province, that of Mexico, was Saint Albert.

Already in the year before this decision the first *Proprium Sanctorum* of the Reform in Spain (Segovia, 1589) included the saint's feast with the rank of double with octave, while in the first Italian *Proprium* of 1609 it was of the second class with octave. The octave was dropped in 1909 and the rank reduced to double major in 1913.

In the liturgical reform after Vatican II the feast of Saint Albert was given the rank of obligatory memorial for the Discalced Carmelites.

The iconography of Saint Albert of Trapani

*Emanuele Boaga, O.Carm.
translated by Paul Chandler, O.Carm.*

The oldest information we have to date about an image of the Carmelite saint, Albert degli Abati of Trapani, comes from the end of the 14th century. In the inventory of the Carmine (Carmelite friary) of Florence compiled in 1391 with additions in 1397–98, we read of “a tabernacle of gilt bronze with enamel with the arms of Pietro di Caglie dantonii of the relics of Saint Albert of Trapani, who was a friar of Santa Maria del Carmine”.

A few years later, the Carmelite general chapter of 1420 decreed that there should be an image of Albert “with rays” in every convent, an evident sign of the reputation for sanctity which he then possessed. In this way the iconography of the saint began its development.

Among the first known pictures executed after this decree are those which we owe to the graceful and charming brush of Filippo Lippi (1406–1469), who portrayed him four times. In chronological order, Lippi painted him for the first time in the work called the Madonna of Trivulzio, finished before 1431 and now in the museum of Castello Sforzesco in Milan. The saint appears in the background on the right of the scene, kneeling with a lily in his hand and talking with another Carmelite saint, Angelus of Sicily. The next is another work from his youth, a panel with the Madonna enthroned with saints now in the Museo della Collegiata in Empoli, which represents the saint in the act of offering a lily to the Madonna. In the panel of the Coronation of the Virgin, known as the Mazzinghi Coronation, completed between 1439 and 1447 and now in the Uffizi in Florence, Lippi again represents the saint among angels honouring the Madonna under a shower of lilies. Finally, he chose to represent the figure of Saint Albert again, placing him in a cycle of frescoes with stories of Saint Stephen and Saint John the Baptist which he carried out in 1462–1465 for the choir of the cathedral of Prato. Here the saint appears, without attributes, in a contemplative pose on a column at the left, watching the scene of the preaching of the Baptist.

From the end of the 15th century is a very beautiful panel attributed to Tommaso de Vigilia, who painted it for the Carmine Maggiore of Palermo, where it is still admired. It depicts the saint with a lily in his right hand and a book in his left, whose pages seem as though they are being ruffled by the

wind.



This tableau by Tommaso de Vigilia represents Mary as protector of the Carmelite Order.

A German woodcut from the end of the 15th century shows Saint Albert, along with the other “father of the Order”, Angelus of Sicily, alongside a group consisting of the Madonna, Saint Anne and the Child Jesus. This motif of the two *patres Ordinis* at either side of the Madonna, each with his characteristic attribute (the lily and the palm), will subsequently recur in prints of the official device of the Order, the so-called *vexillum Ordinis*, and later continue to be symbolised in the two upper stars which appear on the Carmelite shield, while the Madonna was symbolised by the star placed at the centre of the stylised Mount Carmel. We should note, too, that in southern Italy the Carmelite shield has often been represented without stars, but rather with a lily and a palm, a clear reference to the two Sicilian saints.

From the end of the 15th century through the modern era and into contemporary times there has been further development of artistic production in honour of the saint. Pictures of Albert, archival sources make clear, were in practically all the convents and monasteries of the Order, and in many cases churches and convents had more than one image. Rather than offer a catalogue of these images, it will be more useful here to mention some examples of the characteristics and various attributes and different modes of composition with which our saint has been presented.

In particular, he appears beside the Madonna, holding a lily in his right hand and an open book in the left in which one can read the words of the Marian antiphon *Sub tuum praesidium*. The oldest example is the 1487 fresco by Giovanni Maria da Brescia in the second chapel on the left side of the sanctuary of San Felice del Benaco. A similar painting, but of a later date, is in the parish church of Sirmione.



One of the frescos of Saint Albert in the Carmelite Church of San Felice del Benaco.

In other works the attributes of lily and book remain the same, but the book is closed in the saint's hand, which often is also holding on to his white

cloak. He appears in this way in a painting by Nicola Rondinelli in the Accademia of Ravenna, and in the centre of an altarpiece attributed to Francesco Pinna (ca. 1600) in the Carmine of Cagliari. He is portrayed again with lily in hand on the wing of a polyptych in the Jarves Collection of New Haven attributed to a follower of Agnolo Gaddi, and in a painting by Gerolamo Muziano in the church of San Martino ai Monti. Lily and book become the traditional attributes in Albertine iconography, followed again in the canvas painted in 1952 by Galimberti for the chapel of the International College of Saint Albert in Rome.



A painting of Saint Albert in the community of San Martino ai Monti, Rome.

There are also paintings and statues which feature only the attribute of the lily in the saint's right hand. Among the statues the most beautiful is the one in silver crafted in the 18th century by the engraver Vincenzo Bonaiuto of Trapani for the saint's altar in the basilica of Trapani, which should strictly be also considered a reliquary since the skull of the saint is contained in the head.



The reliquary statue of Saint Albert in the basilica of Trapani made by Vincenzo Bonaiuto.

Sometimes a crucifix is added to the lily and book, as can be seen in a 15th-Century Carmelite Missal preserved in the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana. This is a theme which was often taken up in Spain, the most outstanding example being the polychrome statue by Alonso Cano executed for the Carmelite convent in Seville. With the three attributes of lily, book and crucifix the saint is represented in the mosaics above the altars of the right nave in the Carmine of Cagliari, carried out by the architect Pierotti about fifty years ago, when the church was reconstructed after the destruction due to bombing during World War II.

Other images of the saint from the 15th and 16th centuries add the figure of a devil to the attributes already mentioned. There are three variants of this theme. The first represents the devil in chains at the feet of the saint, as in an engraving of the 15th century in the Stadtbibliothek Bamberg, Germany. A

second variant shows the devil attempting to seize a lamp which the saint is holding in his right hand. A third and more widespread variant shows the devil in the form of a woman under the saint's feet, as in the fresco of Albert surrounded with medallions of other Carmelite saints (1470) in front of the arch of the apse in the Carmine of San Felice del Benaco, and in 16th-century paintings in Carmelite churches in Bergamo, Modena and Florence.

From the end of the 17th century there are many paintings which feature the Madonna showing the Child Jesus to Saint Albert, as in the Carmine of Genoa, or the Madonna surrounded by saints including Albert, as in the Carmelite church in Mesagne or the convent of Saint Hermengild (today the parish of Saint Joseph) in Madrid. In a painting of the Pietà of 1515 now in the Pinacoteca of Turin the celebrated Francesco Francia shows the saint alongside the Virgin, a theme taken up again by Andrea del Sarto in a Deposition in the Galleria Borghese in Rome. Another variant of the Madonna with Albert and other saints is found in a painting in Ghent attributed to François in which the Virgin appears to be showing the way to them, while Saint Albert kneels at their feet and offers a lily to the Child Jesus.

There are also 17th-century canvasses with groups of Carmelite saints which include Saint Albert, among them the two paintings in the second chapel on the right and in the chapel of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in San Martino Maggiore in Bologna, paintings respectively by Cesare Gennari and Alessandro Tiarini.

From the modern era there are numerous compositions featuring scenes from the life, death and miracles of the saint. He is depicted saving some Jews from drowning in a scene above the lavabo of the Carmine of Florence, and in the fresco of the counterfacade of the chapel of Masseria Monaci (Martina Franca), carried out in 1709 by Generoso Cavallo. A recurrent scene in paintings which depict the miracles is his healing of the sick with water: interesting examples include the altarpiece by Pietro Liberi (1638) in the Carmini of Venice, and the image in the Sforza Golden Book in the British Library in London. The water associated with the saint also appears in the choir of the Carmine of Brescia, while the Carmine in Padua has a statue of the saint (with lily and crucifix) carved by Giovanni Bonazza and placed above the holy water font with the inscription *Mundi estote*.

Other paintings, statues and engravings recall the saint's miraculous protection of the besieged city of Messina. Among them we can note the painting in the chapel of Saint Albert in Trapani, and closer to our own time a life-size wooden statue from the workshop of Obletter of Ortisei was installed in 1955, beneath the feet of which are the stern and prow of the

historic “vascelluzzo” which came to the city through the intercession of the saint, and a flowing banner inviting the city to rejoice in having so great a protector.

There are cycles which depict scenes from the life of the saint, including notable ones in Antequera in Spain, Forlì and Rome. The paintings in the choir in Antequera are the work of an eclectic 17th-century painter from Seville influenced by Roelas, Pacheco and Herrera. They depict the saint’s reception of the Carmelite habit, his death, and his burial. Among these pictures the one of the saint’s death while he is supported by his brothers is very evocative and dramatic.

The second of these cycles in the chapel of Saint Albert in the Carmine of Forlì, shows Saint Albert healing a blind man on the altarpiece, in the style of Giuseppe Marchetti (1722–1801), even though it has been attributed to Paolo Cignani. Another two miracles are depicted in the ovals above the doors, attributed to Antonio Fanzaresi, who painted them in 1752. The first shows Saint Albert as he miraculously makes supplies arrive in the besieged Messina, while the second presents him as he saves some shipwrecked Jews, who then convert to Christianity.

The third cycle is the one in the chapel dedicated to the saint in the church of Traspontina in Rome, which the prior general Sebastiano Fantoni had decorated at the beginning of the 17th century. The altarpiece represents the saint standing with a lily in his right hand and a glory of angels above his head, and is the work of Antonio Pomarancio (1570-c.1630). In the octagon at the centre of the vault the same artist has painted the saint’s birth, and in the side panels some scenes from his life, his vesting on the right and a miracle on the left. On the side walls Pomarancio continued the scenes from Albert’s life in two large frescoes depicting his preaching and his death.

There are also notable cycles in the Carmelite churches of Venice and Brescia, and in the cloisters of the convents of Verona and Lugo.



Saint Albert depicted in a painting in the chapel of the Centro Internazionale S. Alberto in Rome.

To conclude, these notes on the iconography of Saint Albert call to mind the curious history of a painting in which the saint appears half-length with a lily and book and the legend in Latin, *Studiorum mecenati divo Alberto theologiae bacconicae candidati tabulam inaugurarunt 1704*. The painting is in the Centro Internazionale S. Alberto (CISA) in Rome. The origin of this painting, by an unknown artist, is linked to a dispute between the Carmelite theology students in the *studium generale* of the Order, which at that time was in Traspontina and named after Saint Albert, and the prior general Giovanni Feijo of Villalobos. In 1692 he had issued a series of demanding decrees about studies in the Order, constituting a program which proved impractical, especially in the houses of studies in Italy, and which gave rise to numerous protests from various regions. When the prior general attempted to give effect to his decrees in the *studium generale* of Traspontina, the students appealed to the Holy See. After a controversy lasting several years and involving also the subsequent prior general, Carlo Filiberto Barbieri, the students succeeded in having their “rights” recognised by the Holy See and by the general chapter of 1704. It was the occasion for the students to have a painting made of their protector and in a sign of reverence to present it to the prior general.



Saint Albert depicted in a window of the chapel of the Carmelite Curia house in Rome.