

Introduction to Mount Carmel feast, July 16, 2020

Welcome to this feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. We are so grateful that you have come to be with us, to pray with us.... In this introduction to the liturgy, I want to touch on three facets of this feast: Mary, Elijah the prophet, Mount Carmel. This is a feast of Mary, yes, but it is much more multifaceted than that for Carmelites. This feast is rooted in the wonderful extravagance of myth, the fruit of the Carmelite imagination as it has woven its way through history creating a powerful Carmelite identity. Long before the first Carmelites called themselves *brothers* of Our Lady of Mount Carmel to bolster their identity and assure their continued existence in the Church, they were simply *hermits of Mount Carmel*, named not for a person – like Benedict, Francis, Augustine, even Mary; but named only for, defined only by, a place, a mountain in northern Palestine.

When hermits gathered in a narrow valley opening toward the Mediterranean Sea on the slopes of Mount Carmel near the spring or fountain of Elijah at the beginning of the 13th century, they claimed for themselves a place long, long associated with the great Old Testament prophet Elijah. They lived solitary lives of silent prayer in mountainside caves, they came together weekly for mutual encouragement and spiritual guidance and they gathered daily for Eucharist in a small stone chapel built in the midst of the cells and dedicated to Mary, Lady of the place. The Lady of Mount Carmel.

We do not know how this little oratory in the habitations of these solitary men came to be dedicated to the Woman who rose out of the earth of nearby Nazareth. She is not mentioned even once in the hermits' Rule of life, nor in Carmelite documents for almost a century, but her presence is here at the center of their contemplative existence. So it is that when their meditative style emerges into historical disclosure in the Rule as "pondering day and night on the Word of the Lord and watching in prayer" it is in the Marian mode. (*Mary pondered all these things in her heart.*)¹ So that while "the whole Rule is centered on the following of Christ,

¹ Luke 2, 19.

obsequium Jesu Christi, it is lived in the ambience of Mary," in the place of Mary.² I think this foundational intuition is the most fundamental presence of Mary in the Carmelite imagination: Mary of the New Testament, of the Gospels, as sister and companion in the following of Christ by way of contemplative prayer. This is by no means the only presence of Mary in Carmelite history, but it is the foundational one bequeathed to us by the first hermits on Mount Carmel.

Twentieth century excavations at the site have revealed the physical layout of the hermits' life and the spring of Elijah still flows there, but it is the mythic power of this place, Mount Carmel, which has called to and inspired Carmelites for generations and informs to this day the Carmelite soul. Like Mary, Elijah is not mentioned by name even once in the Carmelite Rule. He appears, like her, only a century later in order to cover the Carmelites need for a founder and to cement a strong credible identity beside the Franciscans and Dominicans, but behind the historical foundation of Carmelite monasteries there has always been this Palestinian prophet and a biblical institution, a place, Mount Carmel, a physical and mythical presence to which Carmel was related since its origin on its slopes in the 13th century.

Long centuries earlier (9 B.C.) that mountain sheltered Elijah when he overcame the priests of Baal, turned the people from their idols and reclaimed them for God, just as another mountain received him into its silence and protected him from the wrath of Jezebel, and then drew him out of his cave by "the whisper of a gentle breeze" – "the sound of sheer silence" - the song of the mountain by which the Voice of God spoke to the wild prophet.³

In the sixteenth century that same whispering sound seized the woman who had withdrawn into the Teresian castle (that mountain of crystal) with a 'whistling so soft that one could scarcely hear it' and yet 'so penetrating that the soul cannot not hear it.' It was the spirit of the place. John of the Cross also unfurled upon Mount Carmel the "ascent" of his discourse and

² Noel Dermot O'Donoghue, "Mary and the Carmelite Imagination," 186,187, in *Albert's Way*, edited by Michael Mulhall, O. Carm (Rome: Institutum Carmelitanum, 1989).

³ The ancient Carmelite tradition, un beholden to our historical consciousness, hardly distinguishes the two mountains of Carmel and Horeb (or Sinai).

drew his famous map of Mount Carmel showing the lifelong climb of purification and transformation to communion with God. That mountain was the silent foundation of the mystical languages of St. Teresa and St. John of the Cross that crowned its summit. "Their writings were instituted by means of a place, defined by a site, Mount Carmel. Placed beneath the authority of this mount, their words, their teachings ... were voices in which the spirit of the place was manifested."⁴

The Carmelite Order in our Gospel reading for this feast, mindful perhaps of the mythic significance of the mountain, brings us with Mary to Mount Calvary, where Mary's place and the Carmelite's place is at the cross of her dying Son. The mountains merge as we enter into the deepest recesses of the world's darkness with Mary, the Mother, and hold in our arms the shattered body of Jesus Christ.

Today, in these troubled, soul-wrenching times, we are so conscious that this is the place, Calvary, white America has allotted to our black brothers and sisters since our nation's beginnings – enslaved, crucified people, thousands upon thousands, year after year, century after century. David Truer, a member of the Native American Objjwe tribe, writing in an article entitled *The Magic Mountains of the Acoma Pueblo and Thomas Mann* in the *New York Review* for June 5 reminds us, "For people of color, America has for centuries been an inhospitable mountain on which we toil and in whose cold shadow we live."⁵

The first American Carmel founded in Southern Maryland in 1790 in the ambience of Mary, in the aura of the mystic mountain of Elijah, called by many at the time simply "Mount Carmel," was no different. Tragically, Carmel's very first place in America, our community's first place, was rooted in the slavery of black persons, its life and livelihood dependent on the farm labor of slave persons. Our first sisters came from the slaveholding families of Southern Maryland.

⁴ See Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable* (Chicago: The Chicago University Press, 1992), 133,134. I have drawn on *The Mystic Fable* for these thoughts and words.

⁵ David Truer, "The Magic Mountain of the Acoma Pueblo and Thomas Mann," in the *New York Review*, June 5, 2020.

So we Carmelites must hear with special resonance the call of people of color for a full “place” in America’s life and wealth and bounty. For over eight hundred years we have been defined by a place. It has formed our souls. Today the spirit of our place, Mount Carmel, urges us, commands us, to align ourselves with those calling out for a safe place, an equal place, a secure place, a respected place, a prosperous place, for black Americans, for native Americans, for people of color, for the battered body of Jesus Christ, the Son of Mary. In the 13th century Mount Carmel was a place of equality where all the hermits shared in decision making, where goods were allocated strictly according to need, not position nor financial resources nor personal entitlement, where each had their own precious, inviolable cell, their place, and the way to intimacy with Jesus Christ, communion with God, was available to all. We are accountable to the past, the tradition; we who know the importance of place are doubly accountable to the present and to God’s good future, God’s dream for humanity, acting now in light of what will be, as Bryan Massingale said so eloquently last Saturday.

David Truer, a native American whom I mentioned before, tells how he visited Acoma Pueblo in New Mexico where the Pueblo people have been living atop their mountain, a three hundred fifty-seven foot Mesa, for over a thousand years. He writes about his encounter with Brian Vallo, the governor of Acoma:

Vallo touched something in me when he talked about The Rock, [the Mesa], and the Pueblo’s relationship to it that feels true of my tribe and my community, but perhaps not true of the rest of America. We see ourselves as from a certain place much more powerfully and much more often than we think of ourselves as individuals. We are the people of our homelands, [our place,] that is who we irreducibly are. So, it makes sense that we have a more pronounced sense of common purpose ... than other people who are trained to put more stock in individualism and individual rights.⁶

⁶ Op. cit.

As we move now into our liturgy whose theme is Mary of Mount Carmel and Racism, I want to put on the lips of all persons of color the words Sr. Theresa Kane spoke to her Mercy Sisters. She said: *We are women made in God's image and likeness.* I change it to say:

[We are persons of color made in God's image and likeness.] As such we truly have a "place" and "belong" in every level of human effort, whether in Church or in society, where God is to be imaged for the continual redemption of the world.⁷

This is our prayer. Now let us now lift up our hearts and sing of Mary!

⁷ Christine Shenk, CSJ, *To Speak the Truth in Love, A Biography of Theresa Kane, RSM* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2019), 207.