

Mary: God's Brilliant Response

Mount Carmel symbolically harmonizes the pinnacle of the divine response to evil and unshakeable faith in the fulfilment of the sweetest and most sublime promise: the Incarnation of the Word in the most pure womb of Mary ever-Virgin.



Msgr. João Scognamiglio Clá Dias, EP

I – MOUNT OF WRATH AND OF HOPE

Mount Carmel, which lends its name to the Marian devotion celebrated on July 16, witnessed great events involving St. Elijah.

The first of them occurred when the fiery prophet purified Israel from the sin of idolatry after challenging the four hundred and fifty priests of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, introduced among the chosen people by Jezebel, the pagan wife of King Ahab.

Paradigm of exemplary punishment, symbol of Israel's hope

Challenged by God's envoy to offer a sacrifice to Baal that would be consumed by fire without human intervention, the false priests and prophets went unheeded by their idol despite their ludicrous supplications, songs and self-inflicted wounds, and the bull they had prepared remained intact. Elijah's prayer, however, simple but full of faith and ardour, immediately brought down fire from Heaven that consumed the holocaust, the wood, the stones and even the water that had been poured over the victim, filling the trench dug around the improvised altar (cf. 1 Kgs 18:15-40).

Before this spectacle, the people unanimously acclaimed Yahweh as the true and only God and, under the command of Elijah, put the impostors to death. Israel returned to the Lord; they no longer limped with two opinions (cf. 1

Kgs 18:21), persisting in an eclectic and polytheistic cult, an abomination in the sight of the Most High.

It was also on the heights of Carmel that Elijah saw the little cloud the size of the palm of his hand, which presaged a generous rainfall after three and a half years of drought (cf. 1 Kgs 18:44). Tradition sees in this fact a prophetic sign of the Redemption: after centuries of drought due to the scarcity of grace among men, the Blessed Virgin Mary, like a cloud laden with blessings, would bring abundant life to the earth by giving birth to the Saviour of the world.

Origin of the Order of Carmel

Nine hundred years before Christ, St. Elijah dwelt in one of the more than a thousand caves on the same mountain, surrounded by other prophets, his disciples. Centuries later, in keeping with this blessed tradition, some pious crusaders dedicated their lives there to recollection and mortification under the special protection of Our Lady, to whom they erected a much-visited shrine.

The founder of the first Carmelite community was St. Berthold of Malifaye, a warrior of French origin who gathered around himself some hermits scattered in El Hader, a region situated to the north of the mountain, near Haifa. At the dawn of the 13th century, St. Brocard, his successor, asked the Patriarch of Jeru-

The origin of the Order of Carmel goes back to the prophet Elijah, giving it a nearly three-millennia history in God's service

GOSPEL

⁴⁶ While Jesus was speaking to the crowds, His Mother and His brothers appeared outside, wishing to speak with Him. ⁴⁷ Someone told Him, "Your Mother and your brothers are standing outside, asking to speak with You." ⁴⁸ But He said in reply to the one who told Him, "Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?" ⁴⁹ And stretching out His hand toward His disciples, He said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. ⁵⁰ For whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is my brother, and sister, and mother" (Mt 12:46-50).

Our Lady of Carmel - Church of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (São Paulo); in background, aerial view of Mount Carmel (Israel)



salem for approval of the Order and for rules that would shape the life of solitude, asceticism and prayer of its members. This is the origin of the Carmelite rule, still in force today.

Following its pontifical approval, some members of the Order moved West, on account of the instability of Catholic dominion in the Holy Land. In Europe, the people of God received the venerable hermits as a gift from Heaven and adopted the custom of calling them Brothers of the Blessed Virgin of Mount Carmel. However, some princes and clerics were ill-disposed towards the Carmelites, initiating a terrible persecution against them.

The scapular, sign of Marian predilection

Alarmed by the risk to the Order's future, its ninth Superior General, St. Simon Stock, turned to the Patroness of the community to implore her special protection and a pledge of her benevo-

lence. Here are the words of the hymn he composed to beseech the kind Lady to assist them with tokens of her love: "Flower of Carmel, tall vine blossom laden; splendour of Heaven, child-bearing yet maiden. None equals Thee. Mother so tender, who no man didst know, on Carmel's children thy favours bestow."

His ardent prayers were answered. The Blessed Virgin Mary appeared to him accompanied by angelic legions, bearing in her blessed hands the Scapular of the Order. And Our Lady promised eternal salvation to those who would wear it with authentic piety. With the passing of the centuries, this Marian devotion became as universal as the Church herself, and the scapular came to be worn by a great number of Catholics as a sign of submission, reverence and affection for our Mother, the Co-Redemptrix. Thus, from the heights of Mount Carmel, Marian blessings spread over the face of the earth.

Mount Carmel evokes grandiose events, linked to the divine promises for the Chosen People and the world.

Is it possible to harmonize Marian tenderness, represented by the scapular, with the fiery combativeness of Elijah?

Vengeance and benevolence: can they be harmonized?

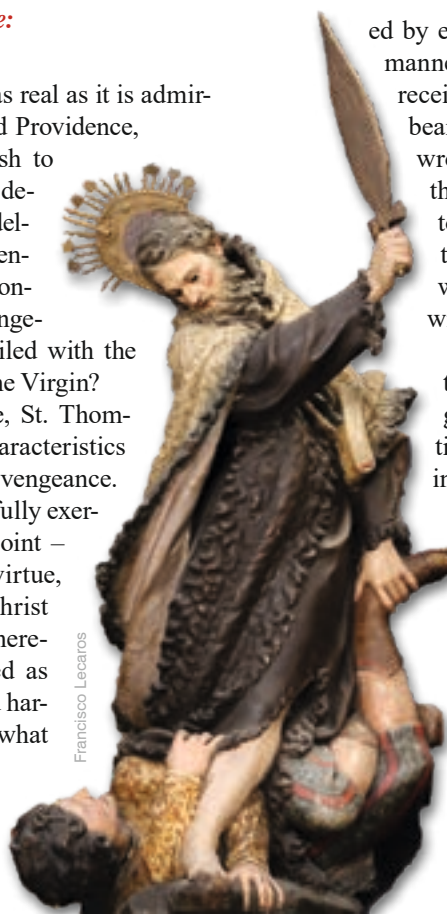
In the light of this story, as real as it is admirable, one might ask: why did Providence, in His infinite wisdom, wish to combine the most tender of devotions with a mountain indelibly branded by divine vengeance? Does this not seem contradictory? How can the vengeful zeal of Elijah be reconciled with the incomparable sweetness of the Virgin?

In his *Summa Theologiæ*, St. Thomas Aquinas sets out the characteristics of a forgotten virtue: holy vengeance. Yes, dear reader, when rightfully exercised – this is the crucial point – vengeance is an evangelical virtue, of which Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself gave us example. Therefore, it should be considered as sister of the other virtues and harmonious with them. But in what does it consist?

The Angelic Doctor explains that vengeance is not in itself bad or unjust. He bases this assertion on the fact that the Most High, always good and just, also takes vengeance, as the Scriptures affirm: “But we are to look to God for vengeance on His enemies: for it is written (Lk 18:7): ‘Will not God revenge His elect who cry to Him day and night?’ as if to say: ‘He will indeed.’”¹

St. Thomas shows the importance of the intentions of the one exacting vengeance. If he seeks evil for the sinner out of personal hatred, and not to remedy the effects of his fault, vengeance is evil and illicit. “If, however, the avenger’s objective be directed chiefly to some good, to be obtained by means of the punishment of the person who has sinned (for instance that the sinner may amend, or at least that he may be restrained and others be not disturbed, that justice may be upheld, and God honoured), then vengeance may be lawful.”² Therefore, “vengeance is lawful and virtuous so far as it tends to the prevention of evil.”³

Moreover, the virtue of vengeance is not opposed to patience in suffering wrongs, but is in keeping with it: “The good bear with the wick-



Francisco Leccaros

St. Elijah exterminates a priest of Baal - Church of St. John of the Cross, Alba de Tormes (Spain)

ed by enduring patiently, and in due manner, the wrongs they themselves receive from them: but they do not bear with them as to endure the wrongs they inflict on God and their neighbour. For Chrysostom says: ‘It is praiseworthy to be patient under our own wrongs, but to overlook God’s wrongs is most wicked.’”⁴

St. Thomas⁵ further identifies the relationship between vengeance and the virtues of fortitude and zeal, the latter being the daughter of charity. Fortitude predisposes to vengeance, removing from the soul the fear of imminent danger. Zeal, since it implies the fervour of love, gives origin to vengeance for injuries committed against God and neighbour, considered as one’s own.

Vengeance, in turn, has two opposite vices. The first, by excess, is cruelty, as immoderation in punishment; the other, by defect, consists in being too remiss in the application of due punishment, as the Book of Proverbs warns:

“He who spares the rod hates his son” (13:24).⁶

On reading these lines, some readers may jump to the conclusion that the present article is intended to exalt some kind of human revenge. Nothing could be further from reality, since this kind of vengeance is always liable to manifest the misery of the disordered passions so common to our fallen nature. The aim is rather to emphasize the beauty of a vengeance that, by its very essence, is invariably perfect and balanced: that which God wields against His enemies. And its faithful reflection is found in the most exalted of creatures.

Understood in this way, vengeance has its dwelling-place in the Wise and Immaculate Heart of Mary, as indeed does every other virtue. Although She is the Mother of all sweetness and gentleness, Our Lady acts promptly and forcefully when circumstances demand it. The greatest victories of Christendom have been obtained through her intercession, and this is why

the Church proclaims Her as the most implacable and effective enemy of those who rise up against the Faith: “The Virgin Mary, the loving Mother of God, by her offspring has crushed the head of the wicked Serpent, and has single-handedly destroyed all heresies.”⁷

Contemplated in her unique sanctity and in her providential mission as Mother Co-Redemptrix and Mediatrix, Our Lady is God’s most beautiful act of vengeance against evil, the devil and sin. Let us see why.

II – THE HIGHEST MEANING OF THE DIVINE MOTHERHOOD

In Chapter 12 of St. Matthew’s Gospel, Our Lord manifests the divine grandeur of His Person to His disciples and to Public Opinion at large. Amidst a profusion of miracles and controversies with the Pharisees over His exorcisms, the Redeemer denounces the sin of that wicked and adulterous generation: “The men of Nineveh will arise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. The queen of the South will arise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here” (12:41-42).

In this passage, as part of the unsurpassable didactics Jesus uses to progressively reveal His real identity as God Incarnate to the people, He wisely and persistently affirms His superiority over the great figures of the past, while pointing out, with severity and rigour, the gravity of the sin of rejection committed by the Pharisees.

It is in this context that the visit of the Blessed Virgin and some of her relatives, presented in today’s Liturgy, takes place. This is a bold step the Divine Master takes towards manifesting the Eternal Father and His own eternal filiation, as well as the participation in this filiation of all those who, with authentic faith, place their trust in the Messiah.

A sublime, but unknown bond

⁴⁶ While Jesus was speaking to the crowds, His Mother and His brothers appeared outside, wishing to speak with Him. ⁴⁷ Someone told Him, “Your Mother and your brothers are standing outside, asking to speak with You.”

From the beginning, the venerable tradition of the Church has based all the privileges of Our Lady on her Divine Motherhood, debated and dogmatically declared at the Council of Ephesus. The Blessed Virgin is the Mother of God and not of a mere man, which confers on Her a singular relationship with the Word made flesh, to the point that eminent theologians consider her participation on the hypostatic plane. Her maternity is therefore both natural and supernatural, and the latter aspect infinitely surpasses the former, although the two are inseparable.

Nevertheless, the crowds who followed Our Lord were ignorant of this sublime reality, because they did not yet see the Saviour’s divinity with the clarity of faith. For the public, this respectable Lady was only Jesus’ parent considered strictly in His humanity. When the Evangelist mentions “His Mother and His brothers,” he evokes this earthly outlook of the audience.

Although the relatives of Jesus did not always adhere with full conviction to His doctrine and way of acting, the fact that they appear in this scene accompanied by Our Lady suggests that they were moved by an action of grace. The occasion was therefore propitious to reveal the existence of a new family in the supernatural order, which would constitute God’s vengeance against the sins of successive Hebrew generations in the line of promoting false notions of a sterile nationalism, detached from faith. In fact, the Pharisees placed their hope in the human filiation of the Jews in relation to Abraham, as well as in circumcision as a carnal rite, but they did not want to imitate the obedience and confidence of the great patriarch, virtues that earned him sanctity and eternal salvation.

Vengeance has a lofty significance, and shines with splendour when it is practised for God, against the evil one

Mount Carmel (Israel)

Mary, like no other, merits the title of mother and sister of Jesus, for the sole desire of her Immaculate Heart is to do the will of God

The family of God

⁴⁸ But He said in reply to the one who told Him, “Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?” ⁴⁹ And stretching out His hand toward His disciples, He said, “Here are my mother and my brothers. ⁵⁰ For whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is my brother, and sister, and mother.”

Our Lord’s answer surprises everyone. For Him the bonds of consanguinity represent nothing as compared with the supernatural relationship existing among those who do the will of the Father. These are the true children of God, for they live in grace and in obedience to the Faith. Consequently, the spiritual bond that unites the Trinity to Their children is much more consistent, perfect and real than the bonds arising from mere nature.

The explanation of the new divine family brings with it the need for a *metanoia*, a change of mentality. *Ubi maior, minor cessat* – where the superior is, the inferior ceases. In the face of the inestimable gift of being a child of God, human connections pale, like the light of a candle at sunrise. Jesus Himself states: “He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me” (Mt 10:37).

The profound relationship between Our Lord and Mary Most Holy

How then should we understand the relationship between the Divine Redeemer and His Mother? Far from casting a shadow on the intimate and close bond between Jesus and Mary, this Gospel sheds light on the beauty and holiness of the union between them.

Our Lady was the most obedient creature of all time. To do the will of God was the sole desire of her Immaculate Heart, and She accomplished it with unswerving determination, adapting herself generously to the designs of the Most High, however incomprehensible and painful they might be. Docile to the message of the Archangel Gabriel, the Blessed Virgin opened the gates of justice so that the Word could descend to earth, and She was proclaimed blessed by her cousin Elizabeth for having believed what had been announced to Her. She showed herself ready to make any sacrifice, even to see her Son die on the gallows of the Cross, giving her “*fiat*” at each step.

Mary, like no other creature, merits the title of mother and sister of Jesus Christ in the spiritual sense that is attributed to Her in the above passage. And it is from this point of view that we must enthusiastically praise her Divine Motherhood, the indissoluble bond that unites Her to her beloved Son – a natural bond, no doubt, but one that would mean nothing if it were not assumed and perfected by a supernatural bond of incalculable splendour.

In this way, the Virgin-Mother is, in the highest sense of the term, the divine vengeance against Eve’s fault and against the one who tempted her in the belief of obtaining a definitive triumph. The malice of this first virgin was far exceeded by the holiness and fidelity of Mary, thus giving God a most glorious victory in the order of Redemption, in the face of the relative failure caused by man’s sin in the order of creation.

III – OUR LADY OF MOUNT CARMEL TODAY

The memorial of Our Lady of Mount Carmel shines in the liturgical calendar with particular brilliance for its connection with the prophetic cohorts of Mount Carmel and the fiery spirituality of St. Elijah, as well as for the universal diffusion of the holy Marian scapular. Nevertheless, a halo of mystery surrounds this very special title.

The Blessed Virgin herself encouraged this devotion in her most celebrated apparitions. At Lourdes, the last manifestation of the Blessed Virgin took place on July 16, and at Fatima, Mary showed herself to the three little shepherds clothed in the habit of Carmel on October 13. Both occurrences unveil a magnificent horizon that arouses lively interest.

A light of hope amidst the general apostasy,

We are living in a time of prevarication that embraces all peoples, the most varied cultures and even religion itself; accordingly, it is imperative that the mission of Elijah be renewed with urgency and redoubled zeal. At the time of that providential man, all Israel was following false gods; today, however, an even worse situation is evident. Centuries after the Redemption wrought by Our Lord, the old Christian Civilization is being swept away by a torrent of apostasy that drags great multitudes with it. Moreover, the crisis that has taken hold in Catholic circles has reached

such proportions that – oh, sorrow! – we see “the abomination of desolation [...] standing in the holy place” (Mt 24:15).

Faced with this sombre prospect, there is only one way out: the Virgin of the Apocalypse, clothed in splendour, with the moon under her feet and on her head a crown of twelve stars (cf. Rv 12:1). For our times, the Most High has entrusted the mission of Elijah to Her – a mission incalculably more heroic and grandiose than that of the fiery prophet.

The flowering Virgin of Mount Carmel, who in the fullness of time was God’s reprisal for Eve’s disobedience, will in these latter times be His most sublime vengeance against the sin of those who trample the most precious Blood of Christ underfoot. Through her faithful children, She will overthrow the idols of today and free the Church from the dark and festering prison in which her enemies intend to keep her as if immured alive, since they cannot destroy her by virtue of the promise of immortality that sustains her (cf. Mt 16:18).

During the holy battle of the Faith, exhortations to courage will be heard from Mary’s most pure lips, similar to those found in the Book of Revelation of St. John, predilect son of the best of mothers:

“After this I saw another Angel coming down from Heaven, having great authority; and the earth was made bright with his splendour. And he called out with a mighty voice, ‘Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! It has become a dwelling place of demons, a haunt of every foul spirit, a haunt of every foul and hateful bird; for all nations have drunk the wine of her impure passion, and the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the earth have grown rich with the wealth of her wantonness.’ Then I heard another voice from Heaven saying, ‘Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues; for her sins are heaped high as Heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities. Render to her as she herself has rendered, and repay her double for her deeds; mix a double draught for her in the cup she mixed. [...] Since in her heart she says, “A queen I sit, I am no widow, mourning I shall never see,” so shall her plagues come in a single day, pestilence and mourning and famine, and she shall be burned with fire; for mighty is the Lord God who judges her.” (18:1-8).



Our Lady of Fatima
clothed in the mantle of Carmel

Symbolized by the little cloud that announced to Elijah the approach of the rain, Mary Most Holy will shine on the summit of Mount Carmel, encouraging the hosts of the good and scattering God’s enemies, so as to establish the Reign of Christ on earth, as She announced in Fatima: “In the end, my Immaculate Heart will triumph.” With our eyes fixed on Our Lady of Mount Carmel, let us strive with fidelity and zeal to fight for God’s cause, certain of victory. The day of holy vengeance will not delay; let us rejoice and be glad, for our deliverance is near! ✧

*She who was
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the Blood of
her Divine
Son underfoot*

¹ ST. THOMAS AQUINAS. *Summa Theologiae*. II-II, q.108, a.1.

² Idem, *ibidem*.

³ Idem, a.3.

⁴ Idem, a.1, ad 2.

⁵ Cf. Idem, a.2, ad 2.

⁶ Cf. Idem, ad 3.

⁷ ST. PIUS V. *Consueverunt Romani Pontifices*, n.1.