



Comisión Internacional Const. 1991
International Commission Const. 1991

“The Order of the Virgin Our Lady” Mary in the Life and Constitutions of the Teresian Carmel

Dear Sisters, receive a fraternal and cordial greeting from Rome. I am Fr. Agustí Borrell, Vicar General of the Order, and I am very pleased to share with you some data and reflections on the Virgin Mary and Carmel. The Commission for the Revision of the 1991 Constitutions of the Discalced Carmelites is carrying out an intense process of dialogue and work on the constitutional text and wishes to have the greatest possible collaboration of the entire Order. To this end, it is providing various materials that help to deepen important issues related to the Carmelite charism.

In this particular case, I have been asked to present the fundamental elements related to the presence of the Virgin Mary in Carmelite life. Thus, after this brief introduction, I will first discuss the role of Mary in the beginning and early times of the history of Carmel; I will then dwell on the experience and proposal of Saint Teresa of Jesus, with some reference to other Saints of the Teresian Carmel; and, thirdly, I will make some observations on the Mariological reflection of the Church and the Order since the Second Vatican Council. Finally, as a conclusion to this journey, I will collect some points that may be useful in the revision of the Constitutions of the Discalced Carmelite Nuns.

Teresa of Jesus refers on several occasions to the Carmelite family as “the Order of the Virgin, our Lady”.¹ Mary’s central place in Carmelite life is a tradition that Teresa received in her early years as a Carmelite nun, and which she welcomed as her own, developed and enriched.

The Virgin Mary occupies a fundamental place in the life of the Order. For this reason, it is also necessary that the Constitutions collect and express the Marian dimension of the Order and how the relationship of Carmelites with Mary should be. The current Constitutions of the Discalced Carmelite Nuns affirm: “The origins of the Order, the title of the ‘Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel’, and the ancient spiritual traditions demonstrate the Marian and biblical nature of the Carmelite vocation.”² It is important to emphasize that these are not two independent elements, but that the relationship with Mary and attention to the Word of God are intimately connected. Knowledge of the Virgin is given through Scripture, and we must start from it. The few biblical texts that speak of Mary trace the main features of her person and her life.

¹ F 27:11; 28,37; R 14 (cf. F 14:5).

² 1991 Constitutions, n. 2.

1. Mary in the origins and early times of Carmel

The fundamental text of the origins of Carmelite life is the Rule that Patriarch Albert of Jerusalem gave to the hermits of Mount Carmel. In the Carmelite Rule, the Virgin Mary is not explicitly mentioned. However, there is talk of an oratory that the hermits will have to build in the middle of the cells, intended for the celebration of the Eucharist.³ We know that from the beginning, or shortly after, the chapel was dedicated to the Virgin Mary, as attested by the chronicle of a pilgrim around the year 1220 and the Constitutions of the general chapter of Barcelona in 1324.⁴ Dedicating the chapel was the way to recognize a patronage: for the first hermits of Mount Carmel, Mary is the Lady of the place, and the idea of Mary as Patroness, in the context of the time, implied a mutual commitment and a serious bond: a service and an “*obsequium*” of quality corresponding to the honor of that patronage.⁵

Over time, the Carmelites’ relationship with Mary evolved toward greater intimacy and familiarity. The Virgin Mary, without ceasing to be Patroness, came to be considered mainly as Mother, and also as a Sister. From very early on, according to the Constitutions of 1324, the Carmelites were called “Brothers of the Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel”,⁶ a title not without controversy, which was contested by other religious orders.

Although the Rule does not speak of Mary, the ideal of life that it proposes finds in the Virgin a precise model. John Baconthorp, a well-known English Carmelite of the fourteenth century, affirms that the Carmelite Rule is a faithful and profound reflection of Mary’s life, and emphasizes conformity with her: Mary is the perfect model of the Carmelite, who must honor and glorify her, serve her and imitate her. Observing the Rule, Carmelites imitate Mary. Thus, for Carmelites, the Virgin is not a substitute for the search for God and the life of loyalty to Jesus Christ for a pure heart and total dedication, but she constitutes the dynamic model and the complete figure of this ideal.⁷

An emblematic testimony of the Carmelite mentality of the first centuries is the book *Institution of the First Monks*, the work of the Carmelite Philip Ribot at the end of the fourteenth century⁸. This spiritual text presents a norm of life and an ideal of perfection for the Order of Carmel, inspired by the prophets Elijah and Elisha as models of contemplative life. Joining traditions and legends, but with a strong biblical sense, this text provided an articulate narrative of the origins of the Order, linking it directly to the Old Testament prophets, which reinforced the sense of identity. It was a key work in later history, and undoubtedly influenced Saint Teresa of Jesus and Saint John of the Cross.

The book dedicates a fundamental chapter to the Virgin Mary, where Ribot develops a Marian doctrine that became a pillar of Carmelite spirituality in the centuries to come. The early Carmelites consecrated themselves to God under Mary’s patronage, forming a “brotherhood”

³ Carmelite Rule, no. 14.

⁴ Nilo GEAGEA, “Presenza di Maria nel recupero del Monte Carmelo”, *Teresianum* 45 (1994) 553-556, p. 533.

⁵ Bruno SECONDIN, ““Sub tutela Matris” Dire Dio vivendo in ossequio di Gesù Cristo sotto la protezione di Maria”, *Rivista di Vita Spirituale* 4-5 (1993) 402-421, p. 415.

⁶ Benedict ZIMMERMAN (ed.), *Monumenta historica Carmelitana: volume primum continens antiquas ordinis constitutiones, acta capitulorum generalium, tractatus de prioribus generalibus [et] de magistris parisiensibus, necnon epistolas diversa*, Lirinae [Îles de Lérins, France]: Ex typis abbatae 1905, p. 20.

⁷ SECONDIN, ““Sub tutela Matris” Dire Dio vivendo in ossequio di Gesù Cristo sotto la protezione di Maria”, 403.

⁸ Felipe RIBOT, *Libro de la Institución de los primeros monjes*, Madrid: Espiritualidad 2012.

in her honor. This vow of special devotion and service to Mary is presented as a distinctive element of the Order since its origins.

The book stresses that the Virgin Mary is the perfect model of Carmelite life: prayer, silence, meditation on the Scriptures and union with God. Carmelites must “follow in her footsteps,” imitating her humility, purity and total availability to God; they promise Mary an “*obsequium*” (i.e., a service of love and special veneration) which includes honoring her with liturgical offices, imitating her virtues, and spreading devotion to her. Mary is called “Mother and Beauty of Carmel,” and her protection in life and death is assured if Carmelites are faithful to her. This idea was the basis for the subsequent spread of the scapular, which contributed to the rapid spread of devotion to Our Lady of Mount Carmel among the Christian people.

2. Teresa of Jesus and the Virgin Mary

Turning to St. Teresa of Jesus, the current Constitutions of the Discalced Carmelites affirm that “As she carried out her work, she intended faithfully to secure the continuity of Carmel. She renewed its filial devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel.”⁹ and they add that “Saint Teresa of Jesus and Saint John of the Cross confirmed and renewed Carmel’s devotion to Mary.”¹⁰

Upon entering Carmel, Teresa of Jesus was able to imbue herself with all the rich Marian spirituality of the Order, as expressed in the sixteenth century by historical tradition, spiritual legends, the liturgy, popular devotion and Carmelite iconography. Teresa intensely lived the Marian tradition of Carmel and enriched it with her mystical experience, her devotion and the doctrinal orientation of her writings.

St. Teresa, who, as we have seen, often speaks of Carmel as “the Order of the Virgin our Lady,” speaks of the nuns’ service to Mary as “our Mother, Lady, and Patroness.”¹¹ These are some of the titles with which she most often refers to the Virgin. In addition to calling her Mother, she says that the nuns are “daughters of the Virgin,” thus insisting on the need to imitate her: “May Our Lord be pleased, Sisters, that we live our lives as true daughters of the Blessed Virgin.”¹² On occasion, she also called her intercessor¹³ and prioress¹⁴ (as was traditional in Carmel).

Among Teresa’s many texts, one stands out in the Third Mansions that clearly summarizes some of the main characteristics of her Marian spirituality and the Marian lifestyle that she proposes to the Carmelite nuns:

“But His Majesty well knows that I can boast only of His mercy, and since I cannot cease being what I have been, I have no other remedy than to approach His mercy and to trust in the merits of His Son and of the Virgin, His Mother, whose habit I wear so unworthily, and you wear. Praise Him, my daughters, for you truly belong to our Lady. Thus, you have no reason to be ashamed of my misery since you have such a good Mother. Imitate her and reflect that the grandeur of our Lady and the good of having her

⁹ Const. 1991, n. 7.

¹⁰ Const. 1991, n. 54.

¹¹ F 29:23.

¹² F 16.7; cf. 27:10.

¹³ 1M 2:12.

¹⁴ Cf. Letter to María de Mendoza, March 7, 1572.

for your patroness must be indeed great since my sins and being what I am have not been enough to tarnish in any way this sacred order.”¹⁵

Here, in fact, Carmel appears as the Order of Mary; Mary as Mother, Lady and Patroness; the invitation to trust in her and, above all, the call to imitate Our Lady. Mary is a model of all virtues, and especially of humility, Teresa’s favorite virtue. Thus she writes in the Way of Perfection: “Let us, my daughters, imitate in some way the great humility of the Blessed Virgin, whose habit we wear.”¹⁶ Later, when she uses the image of the game of chess and presents humility as the queen who manages to defeat the king, she evokes Mary again as an example: “There’s no queen like humility for making the King surrender. Humility drew the King from heaven to the womb of the Virgin, and with it, by one hair, we will draw Him to our souls.”¹⁷

Speaking on another occasion of poverty and humility, Teresa exhorts us to practice these virtues like Mary and like the Carmelites of old: “If we say that these are the beginning steps in order to renew the Rule of the Virgin, His Mother, our Lady and Patroness, let us not be offensive to her or to our holy fathers of the past as to fail to live as they did”¹⁸, and she goes so far as to exclaim strongly: “If only they would learn something from the humility of the most Blessed Virgin!”¹⁹ Mary’s canticle, the *Magnificat*, is a splendid expression of Our Lady’s humble attitude and of her identification with the poor of the Lord, who expect everything from her merciful love.

For Teresa, one cannot think of the Virgin Mary without thinking of St. Joseph, who helped and cared for her so much during her earthly life. Teresa took him as her “father and lord,” always feeling helped beyond what she knew how to ask for. For the Saint, St. Joseph was the guardian of her work. She recounted a vision in which the Lord promised her that St. Joseph would guard one door, and the Virgin, the other.²⁰

For his part, Saint John of the Cross, in his few references to Mary, presents her as a model of prayer and contemplation. In the Spiritual Canticle, he cites Mary at the wedding feast at Cana as an example of intercession before the Beloved²¹. In the Ascent of Mount Carmel he affirms that Mary is the perfect example of availability before the Holy Spirit: “... the most glorious Virgin... Raised from the beginning to this high state, she never had the form of any creature impressed in her soul, nor was she moved by any, for she was always moved by the Holy Spirit.”²²

Among the great Teresian Carmelites of the early days, it is enough to mention Ven. John of Jesus Mary, called the Calagurritano, one of the promoters of implanting the Order in Italy and of its missionary expansion, mystic, teacher, prolific spiritual writer, general of the

¹⁵ 3M 1:3-4

¹⁶ C 13:3.

¹⁷ CE 24,2

¹⁸ F 14:5.

¹⁹ MC 6:7.

²⁰ V 32:11.

²¹ Cf. CB 2:8.

²² 3S 2:10.

Italian congregation, who affirms: “The best worship of the Virgin, which she particularly desires, is to imitate her.”²³

Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus revolutionized the piety of her time by proposing a look at Mary stripped of artificial grandeur and centered on the simplicity of the Gospel. For her, Mary is “more Mother than Queen,” a conviction that led her to prefer to see the Virgin in the daily life of Nazareth, sharing our hardships and common faith, instead of placing her on an unattainable throne of privileges. Thérèse called for a Mariology that was not afraid to be based strictly on what the Scriptures say, criticizing those devotional exaggerations that, in order to exalt the Virgin, end up distancing her from human reality. Her approach coincides with the current invitation of the Church and the Order to live a biblical Marian devotion, sober, and profoundly Christocentric.

For St. Elizabeth of the Trinity, the Virgin Mary is the supreme model of “interiority” and the perfect example of a person who lives in uninterrupted communion with the Trinity. Elizabeth contemplates Mary during the time of the Annunciation and the Incarnation as the “Ark of the Covenant” that carries God within her in adoring silence. Her spiritual proposal invites the Carmelite to imitate this attitude of recollection and surrender, turning one’s soul into a “house of God” where heaven on earth is lived through faith and love. Elizabeth stresses that Mary’s greatness does not lie in extraordinary deeds, but in the depth of her hidden life and her ability to “keep all things in her heart.” She presents Our Lady as the “*Janua Coeli*” (Gate of Heaven), who teaches interior souls to listen to the Word of God and to remain open to the action of the Spirit.

Many more examples could be added of Carmelites who, throughout history, have lived the Marian spirituality of the Order with special intensity and who are examples and encouragement for us today.

3. The Virgin Mary in the Church of Our Time

After having seen some brushstrokes on the role of the Virgin Mary in the beginnings of the Order and in the vision of Saint Teresa and the Teresian Carmel, we will observe some characteristics of recent Mariology in the Church and in our Order.

The Church of Vatican II

Chapter 8 of the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* of the Second Vatican Council is entitled “The Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, in the Mystery of Christ and of the Church,” and is the foundational text of the renewed vision of Catholic Mariology in recent times. The first and principal novelty is that the Council did not draw up a separate document on the Virgin (as was initially proposed), but integrates her into the Constitution on the Church, emphasizing that Mary is not an isolated figure, but that her mission is only understood in relation to Christ and to the Church. Mary’s uniqueness is thus balanced with her belonging to the believing community, laying the foundations for a renewed, more Christocentric and ecclesial devotion. This perspective influenced all the subsequent magisterium and Marian spirituality of the post-conciliar period.

²³ *De amore cultuque Regina Coeli.*

In the same vein, the conciliar constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* on the liturgy, summarizes precisely what true worship of Mary ought to be, relating it to the celebration of Christ's saving work that is continually updated in the liturgy, and emphasizing the ecclesial dimension of veneration of Mary: "In celebrating this annual cycle of Christ's mysteries, holy Church honors with especial love the Blessed Mary, Mother of God, who is joined by an inseparable bond to the saving work of her Son. In her the Church holds up and admires the most excellent fruit of the redemption, and joyfully contemplates, as in a faultless image, that which she herself desires and hopes wholly to be."²⁴

The Mariological contributions of recent popes have developed, deepened, and applied the vision of Vatican II, each with particular emphases. Pope Paul VI, in the important apostolic exhortation *Marialis cultus* of 1974, sought "to help the development of that devotion to the Blessed Virgin which in the Church is motivated by the Word of God and practiced in the Spirit of Christ."²⁵ The pope invited us "to use the Bible ever increasingly as the basic prayerbook, and to draw from it genuine inspiration and unsurpassable examples," also in the cult of the Virgin²⁶. Paul VI also insisted on the Church's concern for the re-establishment of Christian unity, which must be reflected in a cult of the Virgin that takes into account ecumenical sensitivity.²⁷

John Paul II had a pontificate that was extraordinarily rich in Mariological contributions, characterized by a profound spirituality and theological development. His encyclical *Redemptoris Mater* (1987) stands out among them. He develops Mary's concept of the "pilgrimage of faith," presenting her as a model of the believer who advances in faith through the signs of God. It reaffirms her role in the economy of salvation and her spiritual motherhood.

Benedict XVI was characterized by a theological, biblical and liturgical approach. He insisted that Mary is the "model of the Church" in her being "wife" and "mother," highlighting her obedience of faith as openness to God's action. In his encyclicals, such as *Spe Salvi* (2007), he presented Mary as a "star of hope," showing how Marian faith and hope guide Christian existence. He highlighted the liturgical dimension of Mariology, emphasizing that Marian feasts always celebrate the mysteries of Christ, and he promoted a Marian piety well integrated into liturgical worship. In the face of minimalist tendencies, he reaffirmed with clarity and depth the Marian dogmas, showing their coherence with Christology and theological anthropology.

Pope Francis developed a Mariology with pastoral, popular and missionary accents, very focused on the spirituality of the "faithful people of God." Mary as "missionary disciple" is perhaps his most original contribution. He presented Mary as the first disciple and missionary who "goes out" (remember the Visitation) to serve and bring joy. He called her the "Mother of evangelization" and a model for the Church that goes forth. He greatly revalued "popular Marian piety" as a theological place and expression of the faith of the People of God. He reaffirmed the Marian dogmas with accessible, relatable language full of images.

The current pope, Leo XIV, has repeatedly insisted that Marian devotion "has Jesus at its center" and has warned against forms of worship that distract from that encounter with Christ. He has also encouraged serious study of Marian theology and academic Mariology,

²⁴ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 103.

²⁵ *Marialis cultus*, intro.

²⁶ *Marialis cultus* 30.

²⁷ *Marialis cultus* 32.

noting that a better understanding of Mary helps the faithful to grow in their faith and to live an authentic piety, grounded in the Word of God. Pope Leo has quoted an interesting and illuminating passage from St. Augustine, citing Mary as an example of attentive listening to the Word: “Each one asks you what he wants, but he does not always hear the answer he wants. Your most faithful servant is he who does not seek to hear from you what he wants, but he who wills what he hears from you.”²⁸

Carmel Today

Today’s Carmel is called to live the strong Marian spirituality that has characterized the Order throughout its history and to do so in the context of the world and of the Church of our day.

In 2001, which was dedicated to Mary to remember and renew the tradition of the scapular, Pope John Paul II wrote a letter to the two Carmelite Orders. In it he invited us to deepen our understanding of the Marian spirituality characteristic of Carmel in order to live it more and more in the light of the place that the Virgin Mother of God and of men occupies in the mystery of Christ and of the Church,²⁹ and he emphasized that for the members of the Carmelite Family, Mary is at the same time a model to imitate and a sweet presence as a Mother and Sister in whom we trust.³⁰ He also affirmed that “devotion to her cannot be limited to prayers and gifts in her honor in some circumstances, but must constitute a ‘habit,’ that is, a permanent tone of one’s own Christian conduct, interwoven with prayer and the interior life, through the frequenting of the sacraments and the concrete exercise of the spiritual and corporal works of mercy.”³¹

That same year, the superiors general of the two Carmelite Orders wrote the letter “With Mary, the Mother of Jesus,” to reflect on the importance of the Virgin in Carmelite spirituality. They start from the conviction that each generation has the responsibility not only to live the heritage of Carmel, but also to enrich it and communicate it, since this heritage is something alive.³² Picking up on the Church’s insistence on cultivating a devotion to Mary solidly based on Sacred Scripture, they invite us to have a vital and, above all, biblical image of Mary:³³ “In the modern context, Mary shows us how to listen to the Word of God in the Scriptures and in life itself, how to be open to God and close to the needs of our brothers and sisters.”³⁴

The current Constitutions of the Discalced Carmelites nuns affirm that “In Our Lady we contemplate the ideal of the Order lived to perfection ... She best exemplifies contemplative life in the Church.”³⁵ They also invite us to practice the worship that corresponds to Mary: “The

²⁸ *Confessions*, X, 26; Address of His Holiness Pope Leo XIV to the participants in the International Marian Mariological Congress, 6 September 2025.

²⁹ Letter of Pope John Paul II to the Superiors General of the OCarm and OCD of 25 March 2001, n. 1.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, n. 3.

³¹ *Ibid.*, n. 5.

³² *Ibid.*, n. 4.

³³ “With Mary, the Mother of Jesus”, Circular Letter of the Superiors General OCarm and OCD of 16 May 2001, n. 19.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, n. 31.

³⁵ Const. 1991, n. 55.

sisters will honor the Mother of God with the veneration that is due her, in the light of Christ's paschal mystery, and in compliance with the directives of the Church."³⁶

In line with the tradition of the Order and with Teresian spirituality, the Constitutions insist on the importance of the imitation of Mary. Our Lady is presented as a model of consecration³⁷ and she is explicitly related to each of the three evangelical counsels: "When religious profess (the evangelical counsels) by public vows, they follow more closely the form of life which the Son of God chose for himself and which his Mother embraced."³⁸ (the Constitutions of the Friars express this in a similar way).

The formula of profession of the Discalced Carmelite Nuns (and of the Discalced Carmelite Friars) speaks explicitly of imitation: the profession is made "desiring to live faithfully with the Virgin Mary a life of allegiance to Jesus Christ," in "the Order of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel," and "the help of the Mother of God" is invoked to achieve "perfect charity in the service of our Mother the Church."

An important aspect that has been increasingly highlighted in recent times is Mary's intimate relationship with the family life characteristic of the Order. Saint Teresa already wrote to the nuns of Seville: "you are all daughters and sisters of the Blessed Virgin and should try to love one another."³⁹ Fr. Saverio Cannistrà, Superior General of the Order from 2009 to 2021, especially deepened this aspect. He emphasized that the relationship with Mary is an extraordinary resource that we have in Carmel to live our family life. Knowing that we are Mary's discalced sisters and brothers, "family" is not for us an accessory element, but a substantial one, and it unites us, with Mary and through Mary, among ourselves.

Likewise, the Declaration on the charism of the Teresian Carmel, approved by the general chapter of the Discalced Carmelite Friars in 2021, emphasizes the fraternal dimension of the Order's lifestyle and its relationship with Mary. The document, after affirming that "the relationship with Mary is not a particular aspect or devotion in Carmel, but expresses the essence of our vocation," observes that "There is a kind of reciprocal reflection between Mary and the community: on the one hand, Mary is the image and model of the community, and, on the other hand, the community is the image of Mary."⁴⁰

According to the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 1:14), Mary was present at the beginning of the Christian community in Jerusalem, persevering in prayer with the disciples of her Son. There she appears as a mother, sister and teacher who shares with the followers of Jesus the expectation of the Spirit.

4. Conclusions

The Virgin Mary occupies a central place in the spirituality of the Teresian Carmel. It is therefore important that the Constitutions express the importance of the relationship with Mary in the life of Discalced Carmelite Nuns and offer concrete guidelines for nurturing this. Based

³⁶ Const. 1991, n. 56.

³⁷ Const. 1991, n. 2.28.

³⁸ Const. 1991, n. 21.

³⁹ Letter to the nuns of Seville, January 13, 1580, 5 (o 6.)

⁴⁰ Declaration on the Carmelite-Teresian Charism, n. 34.

on the above data and reflections, we indicate some key points that summarize the Marian identity of Carmel that can be taken into account in the revision of the constitutional text:

1. The Order defines itself as the “family of the Virgin,” an identity that was born from the first hermits of Mount Carmel, who dedicated their oratory to Mary to recognize her patronage and commit themselves to a quality service of her or *obsequium*.
2. The relationship with Mary has evolved from the recognition of her original patronage to an experience of greater intimacy, where she is felt primarily as Mother and Sister of the Carmelites.
3. Following the proposal of St. Teresa of Jesus and St. John of the Cross, Marian devotion in Carmel is not limited to devotional practices but focuses on the imitation of her virtues, especially her humility, her poverty and her absolute availability to the Holy Spirit.
4. Carmel today takes up the vision of Vatican II, integrating Mary into the mystery of Christ and of the Church, presenting her as a disciple of Jesus and a perfect model of listening to the Word of God.
5. Marian spirituality is intimately linked to the Word of God; Mary is the complete figure of the Carmelite ideal of meditating on the law of the Lord day and night, she being the “ideal of the Order lived to perfection.”
6. The relationship with the Virgin is an essential resource for living community life; by recognizing us as “brothers and sisters of Mary,” the community becomes a reflection of her, strengthening the fraternal bond.

The constitutional text must include this Marian synthesis to ensure that devotion is a permanent “habit” that orients the whole life of the Discalced Carmelite towards the following of Christ.

Thank you all very much for your attention.

Mary, Beauty of Carmel, our Mother and Sister, *ora pro nobis*.

P. Agustí Borrell, ocd.

Rome, January 2026.