

5 THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT OUR LADY OF MT. CARMEL AND THE BROWN SCAPULAR

by [Ellyn von Huben](#) · July 16, 2015



“What’s that thing you’re always wearing?” And so began another discussion of the Brown Scapular that hangs around my neck. This time it was while visiting New Orleans with my sister. A city suffused with Catholicism plus voodoo shops, gris-gris and the like was, perhaps, the perfect place to explain the two small pieces of brown wool on a cord that I always wear. The Brown Scapular is neither a good luck charm, talisman, amulet nor gris-gris. It is a sacramental; a symbol of devotion and yoke of obedience to Our Lady of Mount Carmel whose feast we celebrate on July 16. Simply put, in the words of the always humorously orthodox John Zmirak, the Brown Scapular is “a sleek and minimalist version of the Carmelite habit.”(1)

1. THE STORY

Our Lady of Mt. Carmel is – no surprise here – the patroness of the Carmelite Order. Mt. Carmel, near the modern port city of Haifa, Israel, is not far from where Christ grew up. This had been a holy mountain long before the birth of Our Lord and by the twelfth century it had become a home to Carmelite monastics with a particular devotion to the Virgin Mary as their patroness. By the end of the thirteenth century assorted political and religious strife had caused

the Carmelites to depart from Mt. Carmel and travel to Europe. Some Carmelites established monasteries as far north as England.

For more background, a brief yet thorough explanation of the history of the Brown Scapular has been written by the brilliant Discalced Carmelite writer and translator, Reverend Kieran Kavanaugh. It can be read [here](#).

2. THOSE SCAPULAR PROMISES YOU'VE HEARD ABOUT

It was in England in the thirteenth century that one Carmelite, St. Simon Stock, is said to have received the Brown Scapular from Our Lady after having written the beautiful Flos Carmeli prayer. In (small t) tradition, St. Simon Stock was also given Mary's promise of final perseverance and the Sabbatine privilege to those who die wearing the Brown Scapular. Simply put, the Sabbatine privilege consists of the intercession of Our Lady to take the soul of the scapular wearer to heaven on the first Saturday after his death. As I said, small t tradition. The Carmelites themselves have said, "Well-meaning people have often spread the devotion with extravagant claims that have no historical background and which are difficult to reconcile with sound Christian Doctrine.(2)

The Carmelite Order certainly does want to share Our Lady's patronage with those devoted to her and still extends their habit (in the form of the Scapular) and affiliation to the Church Universal. Regarding the promises made to St. Simon Stock, "Carmelite Superiors then point out that private revelation can neither add to nor detract from the deposit of faith in the Catholic Church."(3) Rather than dwell on concerns of scapular promises, it may be better to remember the words of the great Carmelite, St. John of the Cross, "Strive to preserve your heart in peace; let no event of this world disturb it; reflect that all must come to an end."

3. MODERN POPULARITY

For over four hundred years the wearing of the Brown Scapular was popular among the Catholic faithful. While it may have always caused questions from non-Catholics, the period since the Second Vatican Council found it falling into disuse thereby making it an object of curiosity among Catholics and non-Catholics alike. This sacramental, along with others, are now finding a resurgence of popularity, especially among young Catholics. Matthew Lickona's spiritual memoir, [Swimming With Scapulars](#), testifies to the new popularity of the old devotions.

4. WEAR. WASH. REPEAT.

I had an acquaintance who, misunderstanding some information that challenged the veracity of the stories surrounding St. Simon Stock and his visions, declared that I was obligated to immediately discard my scapular. To her chagrin I did not, as All or Nothing is not the official status of the Brown Scapular.

The Church's official position regarding the Brown Scapular is, according to Fr. Kavanaugh's article, that it is a garment that we wear as both a sign of our belonging to Mary and pledge of her maternal protection in this life and the next. It is also a sign of three entwined elements: a) belonging to the Carmelite 'family, b) consecration to and trust in Mary, and c) an incentive to imitate Our Lady's virtues, especially her humility, chastity, and prayerfulness. That is all. The Church has made no official pronouncements regarding St. Simon Stock, the Sabbatine privilege or any other particular rules and rewards attached to wearing the Scapular.

We wear this scapular as a sign of devotion to Mary, under her title of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. Intentionality is everything. We don't wear it as a talisman against any evil befalling us, even as we draw our final breaths. And should we need to remove it for repair or washing, there is no way that Our Lady would withhold her protection from us. Seriously, what good mother would disapprove of basic hygiene measures, right? (It is wool but not high maintenance, mild hand soap or shampoo in warm water is sufficient.) So wear it if your devotion leads you to this. If you are hesitant at first, remember this from St. John of the Cross, "He who loves is not ashamed before men of what he does for God, neither does he hide it through shame though the whole world should condemn it."

5. EVANGELIZATION

I was particularly touched by Fr. Kavanaugh's mention that of the rich meanings of the Brown Scapular, he finds it most powerful as a sign of "Mary's quiet presence." The quiet, unfailing love of our Blessed Mother is always with us, and we are silently reminded of this day after day. When memory fails, the slight tug of the scapular's cords or the occasional itch of the wool against the skin is a quiet yet distinct reminder.

Quiet as this sacramental may be, there are always the moments when someone will mention a curious tag sticking out the back of our shirts. Or someone more forward may actually come right out and ask about that 'thing' we are always wearing. In this moment, we can break the

silence and give witness to the saving love of our Lord Jesus Christ and his mother's quiet love and devotion for all of her children.

“O Beautiful Flower of Carmel, most fruitful vine, splendor of heaven, holy and singular, who brought forth the Son of God, still ever remaining a pure virgin, assist us in our necessity. O Star of the Sea, help and protect us. Show us that you are our Mother. Amen.”

(1) John Zmirak and Denise Matychowiak, *The Bad Catholic's Guide to Good Living* (New York, NY, Crossroad Publishing Company, 2005) p. 84

(2) Ann Ball, *Encyclopedia of Catholic Devotions and Practices* (Huntington, Indiana, Our Sunday Visitor Publishing, 2003) p. 366

(3) *Ibid.*, p. 493

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Ellyn von Huben is a native of Wisconsin, and has never lived more than five miles from the shores of...

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