

+ Maria

May 16th – St. Simon Stock – Pre-Chapter Meetings

A very Happy Feast of St. Simon Stock to all of you! I ask you, dear Sisters, to always keep in your prayers our Carmelite Parish of St. Simon Stock on 182nd Street and Valentine Avenue in the Bronx. The Archdiocese of New York is presently going through the “Making All Things New” Program, a pastoral planning program to determine the future make-up of the Archdiocese of New York and, gratefully, all of our Carmelite parishes are being left open. Also being kept open is the Church of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel nearby, where over the altar there is a magnificent painting of Our Lady giving the scapular to St. Simon Stock, and he is wearing our old, original habit with the striped mantle. St. Simon Stock Church is important in the history of our Province and your Congregation. One evening, when I was visiting St. Simon’s, Brother Robert Chiulli asked me if I would like to make a pastoral visit to Arthur Avenue. I had never been to Arthur Avenue and nobody from Brooklyn, really, would ever have any need to go there. But, I consented, and Brother Robert, Father Christopher Iannizzotto and I went. On the way, Brother Robert wanted to show me the location of Our Lady’s Home where Mother Angeline was the local superior as a Little Sister and where she decided to start a new venture and way of caring for the elderly, giving birth to the Carmelite Sisters. We saw the building and I think there is a statue, but I never realized how close Our Lady’s Home was to St. Simon Stock! It made so much more sense of how Mother knew the Carmelites, and why Father Dionysius Flanagan, O.Carm., our Superior, would have brought her a bouquet of blessed roses on the Feast of St. Therese on October 3, 1928, a sign she felt pointed her toward Carmel. From the beginning, we are deeply connected, and St. Simon’s was an important place.

My dear Sisters in Christ and Our Lady of Mt. Carmel – On this last day of Pre-Chapter meetings, our Order marks the memorial of St. Simon Stock who tradition tells us was the first English Prior General, and lived in the mid-thirteenth century. The Carmelites were just about fifty years old and still struggling to get established in a rapidly changing world, and they had migrated from the Holy Land to Europe, while at the same time adapting the mendicant lifestyle as friars

in place of the hermit lifestyle of Mt. Carmel. For sure, their chapter would have had to have taken a 2/3 vote for this was a really significant change of lifestyle. But, they changed without losing their roots. We, Carmelites, remain always hermits at heart, keeping the injunction we heard from Paul to the Ephesians today, "Pray all the time" or from Psalm 1, "Ponder God's law day and night" both of which quotes are preserved in our own Rule of St. Albert. In the midst of this transition, they too had to "Renew their vision and see through the eyes of faith." Tradition also tells us that St. Simon Stock had two sterling characteristics: he was a man of prayer, and he loved the Blessed Virgin Mary. Maybe he could serve as a facilitator for us to be people of prayer, and to love Mary, and this can help each of us to be renewed people and guide our communities to authentic refreshment, as people who find their comfort and guidance in the Lord, and their help and example from Mary the best and first disciple of that Lord, Her Son.

St. Simon Stock also bequeathed us our most important Marian symbol, the brown scapular which we wear and even kiss every day. The scapular is a visible reminder of the "armor of God" referred to again, in the first reading. The scapular is part of our defense against not only human enemies and attacks against our exterior virtues and manner of living, but also the "sovereignities and powers" Paul mentions, that are temptations to our faith and other assaults of the Evil One, of darkness, that want to upset our relationship with God interiorly and disrupt the blessings that he wishes to shower upon us. The spiritual armor we wear consists in prayer, meditation, holy thoughts, faith and chastity. The only offensive weapon we are given is the word of God, the same weapon Our Lord used when he struggled with the temptations of the devil for 40 days and 40 nights in the desert. God knows we are assaulted and tempted to lose heart, lose our faith and maybe even sometimes to lose our minds! But, we are not alone. We have spiritual armor to protect us and we always, always have Mary on our side, Mary – who through the scapular – protects our hearts and covers our backs. She protects us now, today, and at the hour of our death, as you know so well from your assisting at the bedsides of countless residents as they make their final journey home to God – where Jesus has prepared many dwelling places in His Father's house. We have faith in Jesus, and like St. Simon Stock advises us, we

pray to Him constantly. And, as Carmelites in an altogether special way, we also have Mary, who has clothed us in her own garment and is always with us as we seek to live our vocations, be of service and useful to the Lord, and find our own peace in union with Him.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. You have faith in God. Have faith too in me,” says the Lord. These are the words of today’s gospel which we have just heard. As St. Therese images for us – God is like a loving father who is reaching down with arms outstretched and open to lift us up to Himself. God is active, not passive. He only looks for us to keep taking each step forward, no matter how small, and he delights to see us moving our little feet towards him, as his children. “Do not let your hearts be troubled.” Our hearts are troubled when we think we are alone, when we think everything depends on us, when we feel overwhelmed. “Have faith in me” comes the answer. God is always protecting us. And, as Carmelites we have a heightened sense that Mary is always protecting us and is with us, don’t we? Through her scapular, she is guarding us and leading us. Through her scapular we are saying that we belong to Mary and are consecrated to her, that is, we will become holy by being with and like her. As your song says, “We are clothed in her special livery too” and can rely on her maternal and sisterly help. As she loved her Son, so does she love his brothers and sisters. As Jesus loved Mary, so do we strive to love her. Never alone, we can understand the meaning of the words, “Do not let your hearts be troubled.”

Father Mario, O.Carm.
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