



# Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of July 6, 2014,  
Feast of Saint Maria Goretti

**Dear Friends,**

**F**ROM May 13 to October 13, 1917, the Blessed Virgin MARY appeared seven times to three young Portuguese shepherds in Fatima. During her final apparition, the Mother of God held in her hand two squares of brown wool connected by cords—a scapular of Mount Carmel. In August 1950, Sister Lucia, one of the seers, who had become a Carmelite, explained, “It’s because Our Lady wishes us to wear the holy scapular.” What is the origin of this religious ‘habit’ MARY presented?

The prophets sang of the beauty of Carmel, a mountain in Galilee that juts out into the Mediterranean as a promontory, made illustrious by the virtues and miracles of the prophet Elijah in the ninth century before the Incarnation of the Son of God. Around the fourth century of our era, Byzantine monasteries were founded there, on the ruins of which European hermits, who had come to Palestine in the great movement of the Crusades, later gathered. These monks would build on Carmel a beautiful little church to Our Lady, where the Mother of God would be called “Queen and Mother of Carmel.” This was the origin of the order of Our Lady of Carmel, or the Carmelites, the name they would later be given. But in the thirteenth century, driven out of the Holy Land by the Muslim persecution, these Carmelites were forced to return to Europe.

## Amazing privilege

**S**aint Simon Stock, born in England towards the end of the twelfth century, was probably present at the beginning of the Carmelite order on Mount Carmel. Having returned to England, he was elected prior general of the order around the middle of the thirteenth century. At the time, a great many of his order left for other mendicant orders such as the Franciscans and Dominicans, to the point that the very existence of the Carmelite order was threatened. In this dire situation, Simon Stock turned to MARY. The Mother of God responded to his hopes by appearing to him, most likely on July 16, 1251. An ancient document reports that: “Simon, a man of great holiness and devotion to MARY, often humbly and devoutly prayed to her, the glorious Mother of God, Patroness of the Carmelite order, that she grant a privilege to this order that was honored by her name. One day Our Lady appeared to him, surrounded by a great multitude of angels, holding in her hand a scapular, saying, “This shall be a sign to you and a privilege to all Carmelites, that whosoever dies clothed in this shall never suffer eternal fire.” (The scapular is the exterior



Blessed Isidore Bakanja

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portion of the monastic habit, a sort of large apron worn over the shoulders). This vision was soon recognized by Pope Innocent IV, and the news of this marvelous gift given by the Mother of God to the order of Carmel quickly spread. From everywhere people from all walks of life rushed in, eager to share in the great favors promised. In fact, the gift of the scapular was given to the entire Church, as the Blessed Virgin had said “whosoever dies clothed in this...”. In joining the confraternity of the scapular, lay people too can benefit from the message of salvation given to the Carmelites. The size of the scapular has been reduced to enable it to be worn discreetly.

This benefit of the scapular given by MARY puts all of us face to face with the question of our eternity. It reminds us that our lives on earth will end and at death we will be judged by God according to what we have done. “What is the particular judgment?” asks the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*. It answers, “It is the judgment of immediate retribution which each one after death will receive from God in his immortal soul in accord with his faith and his works. This retribution consists in entrance into the happiness of heaven, immediately or after an appropriate purification, or entry into the eternal damnation of hell” (no. 208). This truth about the final end of man is of capital importance—our behavior in this life determines

our eternity. The denial of these revealed truths by many makes them no less true; it does not change the reality.

Again and again in His preaching Our Lord returned to the issue of eternal life. He emphasized how foolish it is to risk one's eternity for goods that last but a short while: *For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his soul?* (Mt. 16:26). It is better to pass through the narrow gate and the hard way that lead to eternal life than the wide gate and easy way that lead to the perdition of hell (cf. Mt. 7:13-14). JESUS often spoke of the *fires of Hell that are never extinguished* (cf. Mt. 5:22, 29-30), reserved for those who to the end of their lives refuse to believe and convert, where both body and soul may be lost (cf. Mt. 10:28). He announced in somber terms that we will be separated from Him if we fail to attend to the grave needs of the poor and the little ones who are His brothers (cf. Mt. 25:31-46). Moreover, He warned us that it is impossible to know the moment at which He will come and demand an account of our deeds, for death comes without warning, like a thief (cf. Mt. 24:42-44). Ignoring the importance of eternal salvation is the height of folly, said Saint Eucherius, the bishop of Lyon, quoted by Saint Alphonsus.

### *The first degree*

**I**n the Prologue of his Rule, Saint Benedict turns his monks' attention toward these great truths: "For we ought at all times so to serve [God] with the good things which He has given us, that He may not, like an angry father, disinherit his children, nor, like a dread lord, enraged at our evil deeds, hand us over to everlasting punishment as most wicked servants, who would not follow Him to glory." And, in his chapter on humility, the saint expresses himself in these words: "The first degree of humility, then, is that a monk always have the fear of God before his eyes, constantly beware of ever forgetting it. He must be ever mindful of all that God has commanded, frequently thinking about Hell, where those who scorn God will burn for their sins, and the eternal life that is prepared for those who fear Him."

That is why the Second Vatican Council addresses this exhortation to all: "Since however we know not the day nor the hour, on Our Lord's advice we must be constantly vigilant so that, having finished the course of our earthly life, we may merit to enter into the marriage feast with Him and to be numbered among the blessed and that we may not be ordered to go into eternal fire like the wicked and slothful servant, into the exterior darkness where there will be the weeping and the gnashing of teeth" (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 48). The way that leads to eternal life is first and foremost the way of faith: *Go into all the world*, JESUS commands His disciples. *Preach the gospel to all of creation. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned* (Mk. 16:15-16). But authentic faith finds expression in good works, and first of all in observing God's commandments: *And behold, one came up to Him, saying,*

*"Teacher, what good deed must I do, to have eternal life?" And He said to him, "Why do you ask Me about what is good? None is good but one, that is, God. If you would enter life, keep the commandments." He said to Him, "Which?" And JESUS said, "You shall not kill, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself"* (Mt. 19:16-19). Conversely, evil works lead to hell. Saint Paul reminds us: *Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God* (1 Cor. 6:9-10).

On August 6, 1950, Pope Pius XII declared, "How many souls even in circumstances which, humanly speaking, were beyond hope, have owed their final conversion and their eternal salvation to the Scapular which they were wearing! How many more, thanks to it, have experienced the motherly protection of MARY in dangers of body and soul." Ancient accounts report that the first miracle of the scapular was the deathbed conversion of an English nobleman who had scandalized the area. Saint Simon Stock had obtained it by throwing his scapular on the dying man. He saw in this miracle an encouragement to reveal the secret to his brothers and to show them the precious garment received from the very hands of MARY. Countless saints and famous persons have worn the scapular, for example saints Robert Bellarmine, Charles Borromeo, Alphonsus Liguori, John Bosco, Bernadette Soubirous, and most of the Popes over the last three centuries, including Saint John Paul II.

### *The natural law*

**A**t the beginning of the twentieth century, a young African remained faithful to wearing the scapular to the point of suffering a bloody death. Isidore Bakanja was born around 1885 in Bokendela, in what is now the Republic of the Congo. His father, Iyonzwa, came from a family of farmers; the family of his mother, Inyuka, made their living from fishing. Bakanja had an older brother and a younger sister. The family was pagan, but honored the values of the natural law, which the greatest African traditions convey. Iyonzwa did not practice polygamy. Bakanja was exemplary in his obedience to his parents. Much later, his torturer would try to justify his treatment of the young man by accusing him of stealing some bottles of wine, but all the witnesses protested this slander, since no one had ever caught Isidore Bakanja committing the slightest theft.

At the time Bakanja was born, the Berlin Conference recognized the sovereignty of the king of Belgium, Leopold II, over what would later become the independent Republic of the Congo. From then on, the region saw an influx of missionaries, but also of adventurers seeking to get rich with little effort. Later, exploiters working for the king harvested the riches of the Congolese basin,

mainly rubber and ivory, transporting them to the Atlantic coast. The local population provided low-cost labor for this work. Like many youth in his village, Bakanja dreamed of going to work in Mbandaka, a town not far away to the south. Soon after coming of age, he went down the river and was hired as a stonemason in Mbandaka. There, he met Trappist (Cistercian) monks at the mission in Bolokwa-Nsimba. He discovered with wonder the Christian religion. Impressed by the welcome, the goodness, and the dedication of the missionaries to the poor and the sick, he asked to be baptized. Instructed by the Trappist fathers, he was baptized at Saint Eugene's parish, in Bolokwa-Nsimba, on May 6, 1906, receiving the name Isidore. That same day, he was clothed with the scapular of Mount Carmel. The following November 25, he received Confirmation and, on August 8, 1907, in keeping with the customs of the day, he made his First Communion. Isidore vowed great devotion to the rosary and the scapular, which he always wore to show his faith. He became an apostle to his friends and fellow workers, drawing them by word and example to the Christian faith.

### Giving up amulets

When his work contract ran out, Isidore returned to his village. His father asked him what had happened to the amulets that he had given him before he left. He calmly answered that he had given them up because from now on he possessed a much more effective protection—that of Christ, the Son of God, and of His Mother, the Virgin MARY. In spite of the warnings of his friends who feared the Europeans, Isidore accepted a post as a domestic servant in Busira, in the home of a plantation supervisor named Reynders, who worked for the S.A.B. (Société Anonyme Belge), which harvested rubber and ivory. There Bakanja was recognized as an exemplary worker, hard-working and conscientious. Struck by his wisdom, many chose him as a catechist. Transferred to Ikili, Reynders took Isidore, whose qualities he appreciated, with him. The regional manager for the S.A.B., Van Cauter, was known for his harshness and his fierce opposition to Christianity and to Christian missionaries. Reynders made Isidore promise to hide his Christian faith so as to avoid problems. However, Isidore was the only Christian in Ikili, and he could not keep the joy of knowing Christ to himself. Van Cauter became aware of it, and forbade him from teaching his fellow workers to pray.

On February 1, 1909, Van Cauter harshly ordered Isidore, who was serving at table, to take off his scapular. The young man answered, "Master, you are demanding that I remove the habit of the Blessed Virgin. I will not do it. As a Christian, I have the right to wear the scapular." Furious, the manager of the plantation ordered that he be given twenty-five strokes with the "*chicotte*," a leather whip. Isidore accepted this unjust punishment with angelic patience, uniting himself in spirit with JESUS in His Passion. An investigation would later show that

Isidore's case was far from alone: a veritable persecution had been organized against the Catholic missions by some of the S.A.B. management. The watchword was to use any means to prevent African employees from having a scapular or a rosary.

Shortly thereafter, Van Cauter ordered Isidore to no longer spread "the garbage learned from the Fathers," adding, "I don't want any more Christians here! Understood?" Then, tearing the scapular from the young man's neck, he threw it to his dog. Then he himself went and got an elephant skin *chicotte* with two nails driven through it, and had Isidore beaten till he bled. At first, the employees charged with this task did not want to obey, but, threatened with the same torture, they eventually complied, while Van Cauter kicked Isidore. Yet the young Christian continued to openly and freely show his faith, withdrawing to pray the rosary or to meditate, alone or in the company of several workers eager to be catechized. One day, Van Cauter spotted him in an attitude of prayer during a break. Furious, he ordered him beaten on the spot. Isidore received numerous blows from a hippopotamus skin whip studded with nails, which tore his flesh and penetrated his skin. During his beatification in 1913, witnesses spoke of at least two hundred blows. He was then dragged away, unconscious, into prison, where he remained for four days without treatment or food, his feet locked in two metal rings closed with a padlock and chained to an enormous weight.

### What have you done?

At this point, the news of the arrival of an S.A.B. inspector reached Ikili. Panicked, Van Cauter had Isidore transported to Isako to hide him. But Isidore escaped his torturer and was soon discovered by an African who led him to his own village. There a German geologist employed by the S.A.B., Doctor Doerpinghaus, found him and tried to treat him. Isidore's body was one massive wound. His exposed bones caused him terrible suffering. "I saw a man," Doerpinghaus would testify, "whose back was lacerated with deep wounds... using two sticks to come towards me, crawling rather than walking. I asked the unfortunate man: 'What have you done to deserve such a punishment?' He answered that as a catechist for the Trappists' Catholic mission in Bamanya, he had wanted to convert the workers at the trading post, and it was for that that the white man had him beaten with a heavy whip with sharp nails sticking through it."

The infection had become irreversible. Blood poisoning had set in, and Isidore was taken to the home of a cousin in Busira to be cared for. On July 24 and 25, two Trappist Fathers came to administer the last sacraments: Confession, the Anointing of the Sick, and Communion. Isidore forgave his torturers and prayed for them. "Father," he said to one of the missionaries, "I am not angry. The white man beat me, that is his busi-

ness. He must know what he did. Of course in Heaven I will pray for him." On August 15, the Christians in the area gathered in front of the house where the dying man lay. Isidore was radiant with joy to be able to be united with the community to praise MARY in the mystery of her Assumption into Heaven. To the great astonishment of all, he got up and took several steps in silence, his Rosary in his hand. He then lay down again, entered into final agony and died, his scapular around his neck.

On June 7, 1917, his remains were transferred to the parish church of the Immaculate Conception in Bokote. On April 24, 1994, during the special assembly of the Synod of Bishops for Africa, Pope John Paul II beatified Isidore Bakanja, who in 1999 would be proclaimed Patron of Laity of the Republic of the Congo.

### *A second privilege*

**A**mong the many spiritual favors granted those who wear the scapular, the "Sabbatine Privilege" holds an important place. It originates from the "Sabbatine Bull" which Pope John XXII decreed in 1317, after having received a vision of the Blessed Queen of Carmel. The Blessed Virgin promised the Holy Father to release from Purgatory, the Saturday after their death, all those who wear her scapular. Two conditions were set in order for wearers of the scapular to benefit from this new promise: observation of the chastity of their state of life (absolute chastity for the unmarried, conjugal chastity for the married), and recitation of the breviary (or the

Little Office of the Blessed Virgin MARY). When they impose the scapular, priests are authorized to commute the somewhat difficult obligation of saying the breviary, by prescribing in its place, for example, daily recitation of the Rosary. The authority of the Church has often confirmed the contents of this Bull, known as the "Sabbatine Privilege", in the most formal terms. Few indulgences have received as many and as solemn pontifical commendations.

On the eve of his death, a Friday evening, Saint John of the Cross indulgently recalled, "On Saturdays the Mother of God of Carmel rushes with her aid to Purgatory and delivers the souls of those who have worn her holy Scapular." Nevertheless, the scapular is not a "salvation guarantee" that dispenses the wearer from having to grow in holiness and obey the commandments of God, as though a sinner, having received the scapular, could give himself over to every sin in complete security, telling himself: "Since I wear the scapular, I am sure not to go to hell." Anyone who so abused devotion to the Blessed Virgin would be unworthy of her favors; one would be wrong to count on the scapular in order to sin more freely, for *God is not mocked* (Gal. 6:7). In her desire to see her children arrive at the joys of Heaven, the Blessed Virgin has given them the gift of the Scapular as a garment of salvation, a spiritual breastplate and shield, a robe of innocence in which she clothes them to help them live without sin and follow JESUS under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The scapular expresses consecration and voluntarily belonging to MARY: "Through the scapular," declared Saint John Paul II, "those devoted to Our Lady of Mount Carmel express their desire to mold their existence on the example of MARY as Mother, Patroness, Sister, and Most Pure Virgin; to accept God's word with a purified heart and to devote themselves to the zealous service of others" (*L'Osservatore Romano*, English Edition, August 1, 1988). In return, Our Lady has promised to protect those who wear this habit, at all times but especially at the hour of death. Let us then entrust ourselves totally to MARY, who will preserve us in love of God and neighbor.

*Dom Antoine Daie  
o.s.b.*

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