Voices of Sisters
Spirituality



During a tour of the Holy Land, Sr. Molly Fernandes visited Elijah's cave, which is at the Stella Maris Monastery at Mount Carmel in Haifa, Israel. (Dreamstime.com/Ryszard Parys)



by Sr. Molly Fernandes

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It was in the washroom that I saw a brown scapular hanging on a hook that someone had left after taking a shower. This act of wearing or removing a scapular is optional for many, but it is a common habit for Catholics not only in Goa, but also in different states of India where I have worked. However, we find different fashionable scapulars worn even by skeptics as accessories.

I call the tiny brown scapular a "weapon" and an armament against the forces of evil. It is the sign of an interior silent disposition to the inner grace that controls all weird emotions and attitudes. This small brown scapular is hung around our necks from the day we become members of the church through the sacrament of baptism. This scapular is blessed and put around the neck of the little infant on the day he or she becomes a child of God.

While I put down my thoughts, a memory comes to mind of how our elder sisters prepared the brown scapular when I joined the congregation. The sisters also gifted a small brown scapular during their visits to those who didn't have it and relied on its sales for income for the community.

I have often heard these remarks: "These brown scapulars at times leave a stain on your inner garment due to sweat or wetness." Surely, the other nylon thread scapulars are free of stains. I say this as some forsake this scapular because of the stain it leaves on the inner garment.

But for me, whether it stains my garments or not, the thought of removing the scapular from my body doesn't arise. The scapular has become a part of my life as it reminds me of a sudden call from my nephew from a distant land, who was disturbed because his scapular kept breaking while he slept. He narrated the incident with sadness: "Sister aunty," he said, "I don't understand what is happening to me. Every morning when I wake up, I notice that the scapulars I wear break while I sleep." He was perturbed and looking for answers as a devoted follower of Mother Mary. After I spoke to him, he was at peace, and I made sure that he picked up a brown scapular from me when he came down.

There are varieties of scapulars found in religious stores, but the brown scapular lasts for years. I have been wearing mine for three years, even during daily showers.

This habit of wearing the scapular daily has been nurtured in me since childhood. The scapular represents for me the comforting presence of the Blessed Mother in my life and her maternal protection each and every moment and in all situations. I feel

her presence like at the wedding at Cana, with Jesus on his way to Calvary and at the foot of the cross. Though the small woollen piece at times is itchy, it reminds me of Mary's silence when she did not understand the prophecy of Simeon. The scapular is a reminder to follow her interior life of prayer and penance.

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There are stories of people who have escaped death due to wearing the scapular. A quick Google search will lead you to many powerful testimonies that can enlighten and increase your faith in this small but powerful sacramental.

I have my very own testimony. In 2016, on my tour to the Holy Land, I had the privilege of visiting Mount Carmel in Haifa, Israel, at the Stella Maris Monastery, which contains the cave of Elijah, a grotto associated with the Biblical prophet Elijah. This place gave me goosebumps. I indeed felt the presence of the Divine. Hundreds of people from different walks of life visit this place because the sanctity of the place and the divine atmosphere rejuvenate one's soul. In this place, Elijah had a profound experience of God:

> Then the Lord said: Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord; the Lord will pass by. There was a strong and violent wind rending the mountains and crushing rocks before the Lord—but the Lord was not in the wind; after the wind, an earthquake—but the Lord was not in the earthquake; after the earthquake, fire—but the Lord was not in the fire; after the fire, a light silent sound (1 Kings 19: 11-12).

We had to walk from the hill to the holy place, and I was a bit tired. Nevertheless, as I entered the church, a cool breeze swept over me, and I felt refreshed. It was a completely different feeling. The presence of the Lord was very tangible. The experience in the cave cannot be expressed in words; it captivated my being, and I had a glow on my face, which the people with me noticed and said I looked different as we moved toward the Mount Carmel chapel for the celebration of the Eucharist.

Even after so many years, the memory of the cool breeze and feeling of the presence of my Almighty Loving God, has stayed with me. If you ever have a chance, do not miss the opportunity to go to Elijah's cave.

Adjacent to the monastery is a window where I bought more brown scapulars, which tradition holds the Blessed Virgin Mary in the 13th century gave to Simon Stock, who saw her in a vision.

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I came across a writing byCarmelite Fr. Gabriel of St. Mary Magdalene de' Pazzi, OCD, a revered authority on Carmelite spirituality. He explains what devotion to Our Lady of Mount Carmel means: "Those who want to live their devotion to Our Lady of Mt. Carmel to the full must follow Mary into the depths of her interior life. Carmel is the symbol of the contemplative life, the life wholly dedicated to the quest for God, wholly orientated towards intimacy with God."

The other way of understanding what Gabriel says is not just to wear the outward vesture but to resemble her in our way of thinking, our attitudes and perceptions, and yes, to live for others. To look into the purity of Mary's soul and live a life for others, as protectors and saviors in their time of need without the need to make it known, in silence. Just as the scapular is worn inside and remains hidden. A call to choose to live an interior life.

After having the unique experience of visiting the site of Mount Carmel, I experienced the blessings of the scapular and felt Mary's motherly protection inspiring me to spend more time in prayer and contemplation, listening for the "light, still sound" to become aware of His presence.