

## **Message for the centenary of the procession of Our Lady of Carmel**

**Haifa, 5 May 2019**

This year we celebrate the centenary of the procession of Our Lady of Carmel in Haifa. The first procession was held on April 27, 1919, Sunday in albis, and was organized to solemnly bring back to the sanctuary of Stella Maris the statue of Our Lady of Carmel, that in 1914 at the beginning of the First World War, had been transferred to the parish church in the city. The Vicar Father of Mount Carmel at that time, the Englishman P. Francis Lamb (1867-1950), writes in his memoirs that there was an extraordinary participation of the people and that the English authorities were struck by this manifestation of faith and devotion for the Mother of God in the Latin Catholic community of Haifa. It was linked to the end of the Great War and the desire to thank the Lord and Our Lady for the return of peace. The procession was repeated in the following years until it became the most important in the Holy Land after that of Palm Sunday in Jerusalem.

Here in Haifa, devotion to Mary is like a centuries-old tree with large branches and deep roots. As in the Gospel parable, everything was born from a very small seed: a group of hermits, who gathered about eight centuries ago under the protection of Mary on the slopes of Carmel, "near the fountain of Elijah". To Mary, they dedicated the oratory they built in the midst of their cells. We can see the relationship that bound them to Mary: Mary was at the center, at the heart of their life. In her, they perfectly contemplated their intention to "live in honor of Jesus Christ". Mary was the model, the living icon of their vocation. Just as Mary kept in her heart every word and deed of her son Jesus, so the Carmelites wanted to spend their lives in friendship with Jesus Christ and in meditation on his gospel. Mary was therefore for them the mother, the guide, and the companion on this covenant journey with Jesus Christ.

Although even after a century the historical events forced the Carmelites to abandon Mount Carmel to expand elsewhere, this did not change their spiritual geography. Mary always remained at the center of their vocation and with her Mount Carmel, the emblematic place of the prophet Elijah, the man of the desert, the passionate witness of the living God. This memory of

the roots, well present in the vision of the Carmel of Santa Teresa, quickly translated into the project of returning to the Holy Land, to the place where the adventure of the Carmelite family had begun. What was the emotion of Fr Prospero of the Holy Spirit when, on November 29, 1631, he was able to celebrate Mass for the first time in what he called Our Lady's Grotto , now known as the Cave of Elijah!

The story of the Carmelites return to Mount Carmel coincided with the modern history of the city of Haifa. When Fr. Prospero arrived there, Haifa was a tiny village of a hundred inhabitants. The small community of Discalced Carmelites lived for 130 years in a cave adapted as a convent. However, when in the mid-eighteenth century, the new Haifa began to be built, the Carmelites also undertook the construction of their monastery on the terrace of the promontory of Mount Carmel. The monastery was built, destroyed, and rebuilt, thanks to the tenacious commitment of some friars, which today leaves us full of wonder and admiration. More and more the events of the religious community were intertwined with those of the city. Together with the population of Haifa the Carmelites lived the trials of the many wars, the changes of political power, and the social and economic transformations.

I like to think that the procession, of which we are celebrating the centenary, is the sign and recognition of this journey taken together, which continues under the guidance of Mary, star of the sea. It is a paschal journey, which passes through the labors, the pains, and the anguish of a story in which the names, faces, and forms change, but violence, hatred, and the force of destruction remain unchanged. We walk in the midst of the wounds of this story, to make them the furrows in which to sow seeds of hope and love, of humanity and respect. Haifa Bay is a safe harbor for ships. We also make it a safe haven for souls and hearts, in which every man of good will can find shelter and peace under the maternal gaze of Mary, Mother and Lady of Carmel.