

St. Thérèse of Lisieux

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One of the most recently named Doctors of the Church and a spiritual writer that deserves attention from any student of Christian Prayer is Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, also known as Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face or, colloquially, as The Little Flower. Thérèse lived as a Carmelite in the waning years of the nineteenth century, and left behind an autobiography and a collection of letters written to different people. It should be noted that, among well-known spiritual writers, Thérèse is rare, if not unique, in that she intended nothing she wrote for consumption by a wide audience. The letters were always personal, and the autobiography was written in three individual manuscripts. Two of them were written in obedience to a specific instruction from her superior. The third, the second chronologically, was written in response to a request from one of her sisters.

Thérèse was born Marie-Françoise-Thérèse Martin in Alençon, France on January 2, 1873. She entered Carmel when she was fifteen years old after fighting to get in for a year since she was thought to be too young. In the end of December 1894, Thérèse's blood sister and superior in Carmel, Mother Agnes of Jesus, ordered her to write her childhood memories. This text, Manuscript A, was completed on January 20, 1896, just over a year later. Thérèse wrote Manuscript B, a shorter manuscript than the other two in response to a request from Sister Marie of the Sacred Heart on September 8 and 13, 1896. Thérèse wrote the final folio, Manuscript C, in response to a command from Mother Marie de Gonzague, her then

superior. Sadly, Manuscript C was never completed; Thérèse died on September 30, 1897 while it was still in progress.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to her autobiography, Thérèse left behind correspondence and letters. The most notable of these were to two priests who had been entrusted to her by her superior as spiritual brothers, Father Maurice Bellière, to whom she began writing while he was discerning and a seminarian, and Father Roulland.

Thérèse's approach to prayer and spirituality is often called her "Little Way." It was, in fact, this Little Way that prompted Sister Marie of the Sacred Heart to ask Thérèse to write what has come to be known as Manuscript B. Sister Marie wanted a description of this approach to prayer that she could use for her own guidance. Thérèse's approach to prayer does not reject necessity or value for some to engage in mortification or penance, but, for her, and for those who would follow her Little Way, it unnecessary. Instead of these great acts, Thérèse pictured herself as "a child falling asleep in her parent's lap."<sup>2</sup> Like so much about Thérèse, the intimacy and simple love in this image is unique in Catholic spirituality. Whereas Saint Teresa of Avila, who reformed Carmel and was, therefore, undoubtedly influential on Thérèse, referred often to Christ as "his majesty" and other similarly royal terms. While these did put God in his proper place, they lacked the intimacy that Thérèse introduces with her image of relating to God as her Daddy and Christ as her lover, spouse, and husband. It is interesting to note that this intimacy is the same intimacy that Christ seemed to be suggesting when he invited us to address God as Abba, which means

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<sup>1</sup> Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux*, 3d ed., trans. John Clark (Washington DC: I C S Publications, 1996), 279-285.

<sup>2</sup> The Monks of Saint Meinrad Archabbey, *The Tradition of Catholic Prayer* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2007), 120.

something akin to Daddy. Thérèse's Little Way is well summarized in a short story that she recounts in Manuscript B. During Thérèse's lifetime, she struggled to find what her vocation was to be even as she was living her life as a cloistered nun in Carmel. She said that she felt the "vocation of the WARRIOR, THE PRIEST, THE APOSTLE, THE DOCTOR, THE MARTYR."<sup>3</sup> Thérèse realized, in the midst of this what her true vocation was to be in Carmel:

I understood that LOVE COMPRISED ALL VOCATIONS, THAT LOVE WAS EVERYTHING, THAT IT EMBRACED ALL TIMES AND PLACES....IN A WORD, THAT IT WAS ETERNAL!

Then, in the excess of my delirious joy, I cried out: O Jesus, my Love....My vocation, at last I have found it.... MY VOCATION IS LOVE!<sup>4</sup>

Hence, Thérèse identified her Little Way as being entirely encapsulated in an open, free, and nearly reckless love for Jesus and his Church.

In addition to her autobiography, Thérèse left behind letters and correspondence with various individuals. One of the most touching of these examples is the correspondence between Thérèse, first through the Prioress at Carmel of Lisieux then directly, and Maurice Bellière. These letters have been collected and combined in a book called *Maurice and Thérèse: The Story of a Love* by Patrick Ahern. The correspondence between Thérèse and Maurice began in 1895 when Maurice, then a seminarian for the Diocese of Bayeux, wrote to the mother superior of the Carmel at Lisieux and audaciously asked that "a nun devote herself particularly to the salvation of [his] soul, and obtain for [him] the grace to be faithful

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<sup>3</sup> Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux*, 3d ed., trans. John Clark (Washington DC: I C S Publications, 1996), 192.

<sup>4</sup> Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux*, 3d ed., trans. John Clark (Washington DC: I C S Publications, 1996), 194.

to the vocation God has given [him], that of a priest and a missionary.”<sup>5</sup> The prioress assigned this task to her blood sister, Thérèse, and the two maintained correspondence from that time until Thérèse’s death in 1897. Ahern’s book even preserves a final letter that Maurice wrote to Thérèse two days after her death before he was aware that the Lord had called her home.<sup>6</sup> Thérèse’s letters, like her musings and reflections in her autobiography, were always written in simple and direct language. Both the flowery high style of Augustine and the deep symbolism of Teresa of Avila or John of the Cross are absent in Thérèse. Instead, she simply and earnestly wrote in the style of the child she saw herself to be before God. Her directness and simplicity of style is reminiscent of Thomas A Kempis’ *Imitation of Christ*, a fact that is unsurprising when one recalls that it was her favorite spiritual book during her own formative years.

It is unlikely that Thérèse would have imagined that her correspondence or her manuscripts would have been of interest to anyone after her death. Ahern recounts a tale that summarizes the humility that permeated the life of Thérèse as well as her approach to prayer. If one bears in mind this humility, then her approach to prayer is obvious and as simple as her style. During the last days of Thérèse’s life, as she lay in the infirmary at Carmel, she overheard two sisters talking the garden. The sisters were trying to discuss what of interest could be said in the announcement of Thérèse’s death that would be sent to the other Carmels when she died. They were concerned that there was nothing of import or interest that had

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<sup>5</sup> Patrick Ahern, *Maurice and Thérèse: the Story of a Love* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 16.

<sup>6</sup> Patrick Ahern, *Maurice and Thérèse: the Story of a Love* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 234.

been done by Thérèse in which they would be interested. “Thérèse was amused and smiled with pleasure, for she had succeeded in keeping the low profile for which she had always aimed.”<sup>7</sup> Little did they know that in 1925, less than thirty years later, Thérèse’s holiness would be recognized with her canonization, and, in 1997, a century after her death, Blessed John Paul II would hold her up to the Catholic world as an example for prayer and spirituality in naming her a Doctor of the Church.

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<sup>7</sup> Patrick Ahern, *Maurice and Thérèse: the Story of a Love* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 5.

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