I shall begin to sing what I must sing eternally: 'The Mercies of the Lord'

To me the Lord has always been 'merciful and good, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love'.

Alas, poor little Mother was already too sick to eat the fruits of virtue in such a way that the left hand knows not what the right is doing.

I see that all is vanity and vexation of spirit under the sun, that the only good is to love God with all one's heart and to be poor in spirit here on earth.

Well, I did make up my mind to have His mercy shine out in me. My heaven was none other than Love, and I felt, as did St. Paul, that nothing could separate us from the Divine Being who so ravished me!

I understood true greatness is to be found in loving, to love Jesus with a passion, giving him a thousand proofs of my love while it was possible.

He, who cried out in His mortal life 'I thank thee, Father, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and the prudent and revealed them to babes', willed to have His mercy shine out in me. My heaven was none other than Love, and I felt, as did St. Paul, that nothing could separate us from the Divine Being who so ravished me!

I understood true greatness is to be found in loving, to love Jesus with a passion, giving him a thousand proofs of my love while it was possible.

Jesus thirsted for love. How fortunate we are, dear Sister, to understand the intimate secrets of our Spouse. Ah! if you wished to write all you know about these secrets, we would have beautiful pages to read, but I know you prefer to keep theoria.

I am constantly discovering in them new lights, hidden and mysterious meanings. I understand and I know from experience that: 'The kingdom of God is within you'. After so many graces can I not sing with the Psalmist: "How GOOD is the light of your countenance, O Lord!"

The First Epistle to the Corinthians fell under my eyes. I read there, in the first of these chapters, that all cannot be apostles, prophets, doctors, etc., that the Church is composed of different members, and that the eye cannot be the hand at the same time.

"For to him that is little, mercy will be shown." The Prophet Isaias reveals in His name that on the last day: "God shall feed his flock like a shepherd; he shall gather together the sheep in his arm, and shall carry them upon his shoulders; he shall gather together the lambs with compassion, and shall lead them to safety."

"I will comfort you; you shall be carried at the breasts and upon the knees they will caress you." See, then, all that Jesus lays claim to from us; He has no need of our works but only of our love, for the same God who declares He has no need of any human work to save us is also the God of love, the God of grace, the God who gives us His Son to win us back for Himself. He has no need of any human work to save us; He has only need of our love. In order to show us that His thought, His will, His desire is only to have our love for Him, the Church has given us the Gospel, which is the history of our salvation, the story of our love for Jesus, and the story of Jesus' love for us.

The word of God is a primary source of sustenance on the pilgrimage through life. It is the food of the soul, the source of all wisdom and comfort that nourished her friendship with Jesus more than any other written word. The Gospel sustains me through prayer and reflection.

The Gospel sustains me through prayer and reflection. As the Superiors general of the Carmelite order put it: a short opening prayer or recite part of a Psalm to call upon God's Word, then spend a moment in silence, recalling what you have read. Read slowly or listen attentively to the Bible passage you have chosen for the day.

Some guidelines for personal or group reflection are: make a prayer of thanks for your time spent attentive to God's presence. Conclude by making an intention for the day - what do you hope to get out of the day? What is the goal of your prayer? It is often helpful to choose a significant phrase or word to ponder occasionally while you are praying. Put the text aside, and enter into the silence where God is seeking you. You might like to spend some time resting in God's presence through 'the prayer in secret' suggested in the back cover flap of your book. Why not make a prayerful attentiveness to the Word of God a regular part of your day? You might like to choose a signifi cant phrase or word to ponder occasionally while you are praying.

Ask yourself: What is God saying to you in this text? What does God want me to do about this? How can I apply this to my life today? What is God's will for me in this situation?

You might like to choose a significant phrase or word to ponder occasionally while you are praying. Put the text aside, and enter into the silence where God is seeking you. You might like to spend some time resting in God's presence through 'the prayer in secret' suggested in the back cover flap of your book. Why not make a prayerful attentiveness to the Word of God a regular part of your day?
THE GOSPEL SUSTAINS ME

The word of God in the life and love of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux

Edited by Johan Bergström-Allen, T.O.C.
& Wilfrid McGreal, O.Carm.
Contents

Note on editions used and symbols denoting them ........................................... 6
Foreword by the Dean of York Minster .............................................................. 9
Preface by the editors ....................................................................................... 11
A brief biography of Saint Thérèse .................................................................. 17
The Bible in the life and in the writings of St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus ...... 23
Alexander Vella, O.Carm.

Thérèse, the Carmelite way of life, and the Bible ............................................ 31

The Rule of Saint Albert .................................................................................... 43
translated by Christopher O'Donnell, O.Carm.

A vocation to love inspired by God's Word ..................................................... 49
Wilfrid McGreal, O.Carm.

Back to the Gospel – The Message of St. Thérèse of Lisieux ......................... 59
Joseph Chalmers, O.Carm. & Camilo Maccise, O.C.D.

Thérèse of Lisieux: Journeying into Weakness .............................................. 83
James McCaffrey, O.C.D.

An introduction to Lectio Divina meditation on the Scriptures .................... 121
Joseph Chalmers, O.Carm.

Saint Thérèse – infused with the Word of God .............................................. 133
The Contributors. ............................................................................................. 148
Recent resources on St. Thérèse and Carmelite spirituality .......................... 151
The Carmelite Family in Britain .................................................................... 156
Carmel on the web ......................................................................................... 158
Also available in the Carmelite Bible Meditations series ............................ 159
The Carmelite Institute of Britain & Ireland (CIBI) ........................................ 160

© The contributors and the British Province of Carmelites.
All rights reserved. Except as permitted under current legislation no part of this work may be photocopied or reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, published, performed in public, adapted, broadcast, transmitted, recorded or reproduced in any form or by any means without the prior permission of the copyright owners.

The right of the contributors to be identified as the authors of this work has been asserted in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

The British Province of Carmelites does not necessarily endorse the individual views contained in its publications.

First published 2009 by Saint Albert’s Press & Edizioni Carmelitane.
Saint Albert’s Press
Whitetribe, 35 Tanners Street,
Faversham, Kent, ME13 7JN, United Kingdom
www.carmelite.org
ISBN-10: 0-904849-40-6

Edizioni Carmelitane
Centro Internazionale S. Alberto
Via Siora Pallavicini, 10
00193 Roma, Italy
www.carmelites.info/edizioni


Typeset by Ing. Jakub Kubů, Prague, Czech Republic, on behalf of Karmelitánské nakladatelství s.r.o., Thákurova 3, 160 00 Praha 6, Czech Republic.

Printed by ERMAT Praha s.r.o., Czech Republic.


Saint Albert’s Press is grateful to the individuals, communities and churches which have allowed us to reproduce their artworks, and to the assistance of Family Publications in Oxford in securing some illustrations. Photographs of Thérèse, her family and places associated with them are copyright © Office Central de Lisieux and Pelerinage de Lisieux, and are used with permission. Images from the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes © Sanctuaires de Lourdes. Other photographs are taken by Johan Bergström-Allen, T.O.C., Fr. Richard Copsey, O.Carm., Fr. Tony Lester, O.Carm., and James Postlethwaite.

Every reasonable effort has been made to trace copyright permission where applicable; Saint Albert’s Press apologizes for any inadvertent contraventions which will be rectified in future editions of this publication.
Note on editions used and symbols denoting them

Works by Thérèse of Lisieux


Books of the Bible in biblical order

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Old Testament</th>
<th>New Testament</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Genesis Gn</td>
<td>Ephesians Ep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exodus Ex</td>
<td>Joel Jl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leviticus Lv</td>
<td>Amos Am</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numbers Nb</td>
<td>Obadiah Ob</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deuteronomy Dt</td>
<td>Nahum Na</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joshua Jos</td>
<td>Habakkuk Hab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judges Jg</td>
<td>Zechariah Zc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruth Rt</td>
<td>Malachi Ml</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Samuel 1 S</td>
<td>Matthew Mt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Samuel 2 S</td>
<td>Mark Mk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Kings 1 K</td>
<td>Luke Lk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Kings 2 K</td>
<td>John Jn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Chronicles 1 Ch</td>
<td>Acts Ac</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Chronicles 2 Ch</td>
<td>Romans Rd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ezra Ezr</td>
<td>1 Corinthians 1 Cor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nehemiah Ne</td>
<td>2 Corinthians 2 Cor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tobit Tb</td>
<td>Galatians Ga</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Apocrypha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Judith Jdt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Maccabees 1 M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Maccabees 2 M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psalms Ps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proverbs Pr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecclesiastes Qo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Song of Songs Sg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wisdom Wis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecclesiasticus Si</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaiah Is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeremiah Jr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lamentations Lm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baruch Ba</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ezekiel Ezk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel Dn</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Foreword by the Dean of York Minster

St Thérèse has become deeply valued and loved by innumerable people both within the Roman Catholic Church and beyond. This is of a piece with the paradox of her whole life. On the surface her life was a withdrawal, a career in obscurity and seemingly without significance in the wider world. But this same Thérèse seems to us now of huge importance to our world, a major element in God’s mission in our time. The journeying of her physical body in the form of her relics expresses this powerfully. She, for whom the loving mission of God was central, now literally embodies the direct approach of God to those who are far away, apparently on the edge.

This is how it will feel for us at York Minster when we welcome her relics on her feast day, 1st October 2009. People of every Christian tradition, and people of no allegiance, and even of no faith, pour through this place every day. And there we shall join in prayer to God that He will find His way, through Thérèse’s prayers and witness, to draw everyone to Himself, so that we may all see Him face to face and be united in His love. This is surely how Thérèse has always wanted it to be: her prayer and longing attracts her, like her Lord, beyond the expected borders, to the outsider, even to the lost.

Keith Jones
Dean of York

... all books left me in aridity and I’m still in that state ... In this helplessness, Holy Scripture and The Imitation of Christ come to my aid; in them I discover a solid and very pure nourishment. But it is especially the Gospels which sustain me during my hours of prayer, for in them I find what is necessary for my poor little soul. I am constantly discovering in them new lights, hidden and mysterious meanings.

Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, Story of a Soul, Manuscript A, Chapter VIII
Thérèse of Lisieux is one of the best-loved saints within and beyond the Roman Catholic Church, and she is undoubtedly one of the ‘superstars’ of her religious family, the Carmelites, who have published this book to make her message better known. Her message is essentially that of the Gospel, the Good News, of Jesus Christ, which sustained Thérèse in times of happiness and sadness, light and dark.

Thérèse’s appeal lies in the fact that she is able to point people simply, authentically, and directly to Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Her confidence and trust in God in all circumstances gives us hope and encouragement on our own faith journey. If we will let it, the relationship Thérèse had – and still has – with Jesus can inspire us to live more closely with him, and her evident closeness to Christ assures us that she’s able to intercede with him on our behalf.

Thérèse is a model for Christians – and indeed for all people of good will – to follow, because she took to heart the words of the early Bible translator Saint Jerome: “Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ”. What this publication hopes to do is to encourage people not only to know Thérèse better, but more importantly, to help them get to know better the Jesus that she loves so much.

Many books have been written about Thérèse, a selection of which you will find listed at the end of this publication along with other resources that might help you to know Jesus better through the experience of Carmelite spirituality.

This book begins with a very brief biography of Thérèse but does not attempt to give her complete life-story or summarise her spirituality; it is best, perhaps, to encounter that by reading her own autobiography, Story of a Soul, as well as her poetry, plays, and the transcripts of her last conversations. Rather, this publication is about the love that Thérèse of Lisieux had for another book, the Bible, and the God that she encountered in its pages. This is the subject that Alexander Vella introduces for us in his chapter. In an age when access to the Bible in one’s own language wasn’t common, Thérèse carried a copy of the Gospels next to her heart, and she must surely be delighted to think that her story might inspire us to do the same.

The chapter by Johan Bergström-Allen and Hugh Clarke sets Thérèse’s love of the Bible in the context of Carmelite spirituality, which repeatedly emphasises the importance of Holy Scripture in the Christian life. The chapter is followed by a modern translation by Chris O’Donnell of the Rule of Saint Albert, the ‘vision statement’ of the Carmelite Family, which Thérèse, as a Carmelite nun, would have known well.
The chapter by Wilfrid McGreal highlights the important role that the Bible – especially the writings of Saint Paul – had in helping Thérèse to discern her vocation within the Church. It seems appropriate that this book is being published on the feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul in 2009, in the year designated by Pope Benedict XVI as a special ‘Year of Saint Paul’. A reading of the Rule of Saint Albert shows just how important Paul is to Carmelites, both as a teacher and a model of faith.

Like all the saints, Thérèse wishes only to point her fellow Christians towards Christ. Her spiritual wisdom simply points us back to the Gospel, and this is the focus of the article which Joseph Chalmers and Camilo Maccise wrote as a joint letter when they served as Prior General and Superior General of the Ancient and Discalced branches of the Carmelite Family.

The chapter by James McCaffrey reveals how Thérèse gently draws us into an intimate friendship with the Jesus of the gospel accounts who is ‘gentle and humble of heart’ (Matthew 11:29), a Saviour eminently human, weak and vulnerable, revealing the heart of a God of mercy who is himself in need of our love. Thérèse also reminds us of the fragile nature of the Church, which is this same Christ spread out in the world.

Thérèse said towards the end of her short life that spiritual reading – even the most beautiful and touching – left her feeling dry and unmoved. The only text that spoke to her heart in this period of darkness and doubt were the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ life. Even better than reading Thérèse’s own words and the books about her is reading the word of God in the Bible. If you feel inspired to put this book down at any point and pick up the Scriptures instead, then this publication will have fulfilled its purpose.

In case you need some help and encouragement to take the Bible in hand, simple and useful guidance is offered by Joseph Chalmers in the chapter on Lectio Divina. This is followed by some excerpts from the writings of Thérèse juxtaposed with Bible passages that she quoted from; these might help you reflect on the word of God in your own life. You might first like to offer a short prayer asking Thérèse, Christ’s ‘Little Flower’, to help and accompany you as you delve into the word of God which is ‘living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword’ (Hebrews 4:12).

The immediate impetus for this book is the visit of the relics of Saint Thérèse to England and Wales in September-October 2009, and we are delighted that – like the tour – this book draws on the contributions of Carmelites of both the Ancient Observance and the Discalced Reform. One of the highlights of the tour will be the visit to York Minster, the only non-Roman Catholic venue to host the relics. The fact that Thérèse’s relics will be brought to a place of Anglican

St. Thérèse depicted in wood at the cathedral in the Belgian city of Ieper, which was largely destroyed during the First World War. Several soldiers and civilians spoke of Thérèse as a source of hope during the conflict, and attested to her intercession.
worship highlights the place of affection that many non-Roman Catholics have for the Little Flower. It is hoped that this booklet will help people of all faith backgrounds and none to come to better know Jesus of Nazareth, as seen through the eyes and the heart of his ‘little Thérèse’. That would be her wish. As mentioned above, this book is being published on the feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul, which also marks the end of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. We hope and pray that in the years to come the communion of saints that is the Church will grow closer in bonds of love, united by our love of God’s word.

As we welcome the relics of Thérèse across England and Wales, let us reflect on the words that the Little Flower jotted down at the top of one of her poems; they are words which Christ reputedly addressed to Saint Gertrude, and which surely apply to today’s Christian as well:

My daughter, seek those words of mine which most exude love. Write them down, and then, keeping them precious like relics, take care to reread them often. When a friend wishes to reawaken the original vigour of his affection in the heart of his friend, he tells him:

‘Remember what you felt in your heart when I said such and such a word,’ or ‘Do you remember your feelings at such a time, on such a day, in such a place?’... Be assured then that the most precious relics of mine on earth are my words of love, the words which have come from my most sweet Heart.\(^1\)

Johan Bergström-Allen & Wilfrid McGreal
The Feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul
25\(^{th}\) January 2009

A brief biography of Saint Thérèse

The remarkable woman we now know as Saint Thérèse, the ‘Little Flower’, was born Thérèse Martin in Alençon, France, on 2nd January 1873. When she was aged just four years old her mother Zélie died, and she moved to the Normandy town of Lisieux with her father Louis, a watchmaker, and her sisters. Three of those sisters – Marie, Pauline and Céline – entered the monastery of Carmelite nuns in Lisieux, and a fourth sister, Léonie, later became a Visitation nun.

Though raised with the comforts of a bourgeois household, Thérèse was not always a happy child, particularly due to the death of her mother and the gradual separation from her sisters as they entered religious life. On Christmas night in 1886 Thérèse had a powerful experience of the love of God and resolved to make a new more positive beginning. She felt strongly called by God to join her sisters in the Carmel monastery, even asking the Pope for permission to enter despite her young age. The Bishop of Lisieux finally relented and allowed her to enter the community aged 15. She took the religious name of Sister Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face.

In 1894 her father Louis died, and Thérèse herself became increasingly aware of the tuberculosis that would shortly take her own life. In January 1895, at the request of her sister Pauline, Thérèse began writing her autobiography, a collection of childhood reminiscences and accounts of her life in the monastery that together with some other writings was given the title *Story of a Soul*. More than simply a piece of nostalgia, *Story of a Soul* gave Thérèse the opportunity to describe her profound relationship with God, and to ‘sing eternally the mercies of the Lord’.
Thérèse is also revered for her confidence; despite great opposition she always strove to follow her dreams and her desire for God. She didn’t always find life or her relationship with God and other people easy, but she spoke frankly and openly about her experiences, with which many people can identify. Thérèse wanted to do great things to preach the Good News of Jesus, but realised that she could not achieve these things by herself; she realised that God does great things through those who let God act in them. She realised that her vocation was to be ‘love in the heart of the Church’, having read the letters of Saint Paul. It was through reading such extracts from the Bible that Thérèse came to be nourished by the Word of God.

Thérèse realised the link between a love for the Bible, and a love for the God who inspired its books. Thérèse found that in reading the Gospel accounts of the life of Jesus Christ, she could draw closer and closer to him in the here and now. A century after her death, Pope John Paul II said: ‘The real greatness of Thérèse of Lisieux is that, through her, we have discovered once again the simplicity and freshness of the gospel, which has its origin and source in the heart of Christ.’

In 1925 Thérèse was canonised a saint. In 1927 she was declared patron saint of the missions. In 1944 she was made one of the patron saints of France, and in 1997 she was declared a Doctor of the Church because her simple teaching is regarded as having universal significance for all followers of Jesus Christ.

Today over two million pilgrims visit Lisieux each year, as well as numerous shrines of Saint Thérèse around the world (details of some of which can be found at the end of this book). As well as being a marvellous model of how to live in allegiance to Jesus Christ, many people attest to her intercessory power with him. The miracles and graces that are granted through the intercession of Saint Thérèse are referred to as her ‘shower of roses’, since she predicted
herself that her real work of serving Christ and his followers would begin once she entered heaven.

Since the 1990s the mortal remains of Saint Thérèse have toured the world, and the visit of her relics has given people the opportunity to reflect on her message, which is simply a call back to the Good News of Jesus Christ that Thérèse discovered in the Scriptures.
One of the things which impressed the Carmelites of Lisieux in their young Sister Thérèse of the Child Jesus was her love for the Bible and her knowledge of it.

We have not had the privilege of living with Thérèse of Lisieux and listening to her conversations. We know her only through her writings and what her contemporaries recalled about her after her death in 1897. But these are enough to show us how much Thérèse was imbued with Holy Scripture. We find in her writings more than a thousand biblical quotations, besides very many allusions to biblical texts. Quite often in her works Thérèse does not simply quote a Bible passage, but dwells on it for quite a while, sometimes even commenting on it word by word. For us today this love for the word of God is considered only normal in someone who is taking his or her Christian faith seriously, but it was not so in Thérèse’s time.

The sources of Thérèse’s biblical knowledge

The time when Thérèse of Lisieux lived – the second half of the nineteenth century – did not favour the reading of the Bible. Some Old Testament passages which were considered to be ‘indecent’ could not be read, and you were looked upon with suspicion if you had a copy of the whole Bible among your books (because it was sometimes seen as an indication that you were seeking theological understanding outside the supervision of the Church). It is very probable that a copy of the entire Bible was never available to Thérèse. Her uncle, Isidore Guerin, had two copies of the Bible in his library, and after Thérèse’s entrance into ‘Carmel’ (the Carmelite monastery of nuns), her sister Céline consulted those books and copied some passages from them. But Thérèse had been too young when she entered Carmel and she would not have been allowed to consult the Bible herself.

In the library of the Carmel of Lisieux there was a French translation of the Bible that, however, did not contain all the books of Holy Scripture; only the prioress, the sub-prioress and the librarian could consult it. The other nuns had to ask the permission of the prioress – and the novices also that of their mother mistress – to borrow a book from the library.
There was, however, a nun in the Carmel of Lisieux, Mother Coeur-de-Jésus (Heart of Jesus), who had a French translation of the Bible of her own; with the due permission of the prioress she could lend her Bible to the other nuns. Therefore Thérèse came to know the Bible not by reading the Bible itself, but by reading passages from it which she found in other books.

Besides the fact that it was a rare privilege to have a Bible of your own, we should also remember that the Liturgy in those days was all in Latin and therefore incomprehensible for the greatest part of the people, including Thérèse whose mother-tongue was French. Yet the Martin family used to gather in the evening to read a book by Dom Guéranger called The Liturgical Year which included a French translation of the biblical texts proclaimed in the liturgy. The same book was also read in the Lisieux Carmel, where they also had a French translation of the Breviary (the texts of the Divine Office).

In her childhood, Thérèse read various books of ‘Sacred History’ and a Life of Jesus from which she learned the principal events narrated in the Bible and picked-up some of the parables and sayings of Jesus. Avid as she was for the word of God, Thérèse used to look for biblical quotations in almanacs, liturgical books, lives of saints and holy pictures. She kept them in her mind and often quoted them. Two books that were very dear to her in her youth were the medieval classic The Imitation of Christ by Thomas à Kempis, and a book by Abbé Arminjon entitled The end of the present world and the mysteries of the future life. Happily these books are full of biblical quotations.

In Carmel, besides the Imitation of Christ, Thérèse loved to read the works of the Spanish Carmelite friar St. John of the Cross in which she found an abundance of biblical quotations. When Céline entered Carmel, she brought with her a notebook in which she had copied passages from the Old Testament. Thérèse not only consulted it, but made a copy of it for herself. It was in this notebook that later on she would find the passages that constitute the biblical foundation of her ‘Little Way’.

The only books of the Bible which Thérèse had for her own use were the four Gospel accounts: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Originally they were part of a book entitled Manual of the Christian, but Thérèse tore them from the Manual and bound them as a small book which she always carried on her heart.

**Thérèse nourished by Holy Scripture**

We have seen that already as a child Thérèse looked for biblical quotations wherever she could find them. However, in her early youth the book that nourished her spiritual life was the Imitation of Christ by the medieval monk Thomas à Kempis. She knew it by heart and it remained for her a point of reference up to the end of her life. Later, at the ages of seventeen and eighteen years, she said that she found much illumination in the works of St. John of the Cross, but then she discovered Holy Scripture, particularly the Gospel, and this became the main source of her spiritual nourishment. She wrote in her autobiography:

> After that, I found that all spiritual books left me as dry as ever, and I’m still like that. I’ve only to open one – even the finest, even the most affecting of them – to find my heart shut up tight against it; I can’t think about what I’m reading, or else it just gets as far as my brain without helping me to meditate at all. I can only escape from this difficulty of mine by reading Holy Scripture and the Imitation of Christ; there you have solid, wholemeal nourishment. But above all it’s the Gospels that occupy my mind when I’m at prayer; my soul has so many needs, and yet this is the one thing needful. I’m always finding fresh lights there; hidden meanings which had meant nothing to me hitherto.

It is interesting to notice that, without knowing it, Thérèse here uses the same words of the medieval Carthusian monk Guigo, who describing meditation – the second step of the Lectio Divina method of praying with the Bible – says that the purpose of meditation is ‘to bring out the truth hidden in the text’ (the traditional stages of Lectio Divina are discussed later in this book by Joseph Chalmers). Thérèse returns to this same image in one of her poems in which she says to Jesus: ‘Show me the secrets hidden in the Gospel. Ah! This golden book is my most cherished treasure!’ In a letter to Céline she wrote: ‘Again and again we come down into the fertile valleys where our hearts love to pasture; the vast field of Scripture, which had so often opened before us to spread its rich treasures for our profit.’ We believe that we have here an allusion to the parable of Jesus on the treasure hidden in a field. Quite often, speaking of her reading of Holy Scripture, Thérèse speaks of ‘searching’ and ‘finding’.

**Holy Scripture illuminates the spiritual journey for Thérèse and others**

But what was it that Thérèse searched for in the Bible? She searched for illumination for her spiritual journey and for that of others. She sought to understand what she and others were going through in the light of the word of God. The Bible provided her with an answer to her spiritual problems and...
confirmed her spiritual intuitions. It was for her like an oracle which she consulted regularly: ‘One day, as I was thinking what I could do to save souls, I received light through a word of the Gospel’. Elsewhere she stated: ‘After reading your letter, I went to pray, and taking up the Gospels, I begged Jesus that I would find a passage suitable for your situation and this is what I have found …’

It was the word of God that led Thérèse on from one step to another on her spiritual journey. At the age of fourteen she began to feel the call to work for the salvation of sinners. ‘That cry of Our Lord’s on the cross – “I am thirsty” – went on echoing in my heart; and they kindled in me a zeal which I’d never known before – how could I allay his thirst for souls, except by sharing it?’

During her pilgrimage to Rome to ask the Pope’s permission to enter Carmel at the early age of fifteen, during the Mass which preceded the papal audience, Thérèse says that she:

… had a great feeling of confidence; there were those splendid words in the Gospel for the day: “Do not be afraid, you, my little flock. Your Father has determined to give you his kingdom”; and could I doubt that in a short time the kingdom of Carmel would be mine? I had forgotten those other words of Our Lord’s about allotting a kingdom to his disciplines just as his Father had allotted a kingdom to him: that meant, surely, that they could only prove themselves worthy of their ambition by enduring crosses and trials. It was expected (he told them) that Christ should undergo sufferings, and enter so into his glory; no sitting at his side until they had drunk of his own cup. Well, I was to drink the cup the Holy Father gave me, a cup of bitterness, not without tears.

But it was especially in Thérèse’s discovery of the ‘Little Way’ and of her vocation in the Church that Holy Scripture played a fundamental role.

The Bible and Thérèse’s ‘Little Way of Spiritual Childhood’

Towards the end of 1894 or the beginning of 1895, Thérèse was devouring the desire to become a great saint, but at the same time she felt the whole weight of her imperfections. So she began to look for ‘an elevator lift which will take me up to Jesus’:

I looked in the Bible for some hint about the elevator lift I wanted, and I came across the passage where Eternal Wisdom says: “Is anyone simple as a little child? Then let him come to me.” To that Wisdom I went; it seemed as if I was on the right track; what did God undertake to do for the childlike soul that responded to his invitation? I read on, and this is what I found: “I will console you like a mother caressing her son; you shall be like children carried at the breast, fondled on a mother’s lap.” Never were words so touching; never was such a music to rejoice the heart – I could, after all, be lifted up to heaven, in the arms of Jesus! And if that was to happen, there was no need for me to grow bigger; on the contrary, I must be as small as ever, smaller than ever!

Around two years after this, Thérèse was enkindled with intense desires; she felt called to be a warrior, a priest, an apostle, a doctor of the Church, a martyr. Again she turned to Holy Scripture for a solution:

I was still being tormented by this question of unfulfilled longings and it was a real martyrdom in my prayer, when I decided to consult St. Paul’s epistles in the hopes of getting an answer. It was the twelfth and thirteenth chapters of First Corinthians that claimed my attention. The first of these told me that we can’t all of us be apostles, all of us be prophets, all of us doctors, and so on; the Church is composed of members which differ in their use; the eye is one thing and the hand is another. It was a clear enough answer, but it didn’t satisfy my aspirations, didn’t set my heart at rest. The Magdalen, by stooping now and again into the empty tomb, was at last rewarded for her search; and I, sinking down into the depths of my own nothingness, rose high enough to find what I wanted! Reading on to the end of the chapter, I met this comforting phrase: ‘Prize the best gifts of heaven. Meanwhile, I can show you a way which is better than any other.’ What was that? The Apostle goes on to explain that all the gifts of heaven, even the perfect of them, without love, are absolutely nothing; charity is the best way of all, because it leads straight to God. Now I was at peace; when St. Paul was talking about the different members of the Mystical Body I couldn’t recognise myself in any of them; or rather I could recognise myself in all of them. But charity – that was the key to my vocation. If the Church was a body composed of different members, it couldn’t lack the noblest of all; it must have a heart, a heart burning with love.
And I realised that this love was the true motive force which enabled the other members of the Church to act; that if it ceased to function the Apostles would forget to preach the gospel, the martyrs would refuse to shed their blood. Love, in fact, is the vocation which contains all other vocations, love is everything. It knows no limit of time or space for it is eternal. Then, bursting with delirious joy, I exclaimed: ‘Oh Jesus, my Love, I have found my vocation at last, my vocation is love! Yes, I have found my place in the Church and this place was given to me by you, oh my God! In the heart of the Church my mother, I shall be love. This way I shall be everything ... and my dream will be fulfilled!

Yet there were times when this living source from which Thérèse drank so abundantly dried up. The oracle remained without word. In one of her letters, Thérèse shared with her sister Céline: “... that vast field [of Scripture] seems like an arid and waterless desert; we no longer even know where we are: instead of peace, light, we find only trouble or at least darkness ...”

**Holy Scripture is Jesus**

It is not only for illumination or clarification that Thérèse looked in the Bible. Above all, she looked for and discovered in it the word of her Beloved. In the first manuscript of her autobiography, Thérèse said that in the Gospel accounts she finds all that she needs for her spiritual life, before adding:

It’s an experience that makes me understand what’s meant by the text, “The Kingdom of God is here, within you.” Our Lord doesn’t need to make use of books or teachers in the instruction of souls; isn’t he himself the Teacher of all teachers, conveying knowledge with never a word spoken? For myself, I have never heard the sound of his voice, but I know that he dwells within all the time, guiding me and inspiring me whenever I do or say anything.

That’s why Thérèse loved Holy Scripture so much: through it she met Jesus speaking to her. It was the same experience of Saint Bernard who wrote: ‘The thirsty soul loves to prolong her contact with Holy Scripture because she knows that there she will find the One she thirsts for.’ Speaking of Saint Cecilia, Thérèse wrote: ‘Her life was nothing but a melodious song even in the midst of harsh trials and this doesn’t marvel me since “she used to keep the holy gospel close to her heart” and in her heart dwelt the Bridegroom of the virgins.’ Thus Thérèse intuitively understood that ‘the whole Bible constitutes a single book and that book is Christ’, as the learned medieval monk Hugh of Saint-Victor had written. In a letter to Céline, Thérèse wrote: ‘To keep Jesus’s word – that is the sole condition of our happiness, the proof of our love for him. But what is this word? ... It seems to me that Jesus’ word is Himself, Jesus, the Word, the Word of God!’

**God’s words became Thérèse’s words**

It is clear therefore that Thérèse approached Holy Scripture convinced that when she read the Bible she was in fact listening to Jesus who was speaking to her through the sacred books. But there is still another aspect in her use of the Bible that we would like to mention. Thérèse prayed with the Bible not only in the sense of listening prayerfully to the Word of God contained in the Scriptures, but also in the sense that she used the very words of Scripture to express her feelings to God:

Entering my cell, I began to wonder what Jesus was thinking. Immediately I recalled the words He addressed one day to the adulterous woman: “Does anyone condemn you?” And with tears in my eyes I answered Him: “No one, Lord ... neither my little Mother, the image of Your love, nor Sister, the image of Your justice; and I feel that I may surely go in peace, for you do not condemn me either.”

But perhaps the most beautiful example of Thérèse’s use of the Bible to formulate her own personal prayer is found in the last pages of Manuscript C of her autobiography, where she writes a beautiful prayer using the words of Jesus himself in Chapter 17 of the Gospel of John.

**Conclusion**

One of the characteristics of St. Thérèse of Lisieux is that both in her experience and in her doctrine she insists on what is really important in the Christian message and in the spiritual life. This is true also with regard to Holy Scripture. Thérèse is one of the most eloquent examples of how important the Word of God should be in our life. With her we learn to read our daily experience in the light of the Word of God, to encounter Jesus in His Word and to speak to the Father using the same words He addresses to us.

---

This article was printed in the international periodical for Lay Carmelites, *Carmel in the World*, Volume XXXVII, Numbers 1-2, (Rome: Edizioni Carmelitane, 1988), pp. 73-82.
Thérèse, the Carmelite way of life, and the Bible


As a young girl in nineteenth-century France, Thérèse Martin was influenced by a number of people, things, ideas and events: the death of her mother whilst Thérèse was just a child; the *Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis; the entry of her sisters into a Carmelite monastery of nuns; her father’s tender care for her, and his later psychological breakdown; a pilgrimage to Rome; political events in the world, and so on.

The Bible: a guide for life and a mirror of life

One of the most important and life-transforming influences on Thérèse Martin was her contact with God’s Word in the Bible, the Holy Scriptures. In reading and meditating upon the Bible, Thérèse was given a vision of God’s kingdom which deeply appealed to her. She recognised the Bible not simply as a set of rules or a compendium of historical myths but rather as a collection of stories about God’s love for Creation, especially for humanity. Most importantly, she encountered in the Gospels – the accounts of Jesus of Nazareth – the real and living presence of the Son of God.

In the opening chapter of Manuscript A of her autobiography, *Story of a Soul*, Thérèse describes the process of writing her life story, which involved prayer and ‘opening the Holy Gospels’ for inspiration. In opening the accounts of Christ’s life, Thérèse found within echoes of her own life and religious vocation.

Today all Christians of every denomination are encouraged to read the Bible regularly, but in France in the 1800s there was some suspicion of doing so. Since the time of the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church had been nervous about encouraging ‘ordinary people’ to take up the Bible, which was read out in Church in Latin, or depicted in art, but not generally available in people’s homes. Some clergy were nervous that untrained and barely literate lay people might misunderstand the Scriptures, or read them out of context without clerical supervision. Protestant reformers had broken away from the Roman Catholic Church over this and related issues, and reading the Bible was sometimes perceived as an indication of heresy. Book production was expensive, and it was often only the rich who could afford to have a copy in their homes.¹

The Bible in the Churches today

Thanks be to God this attitude of suspicion towards Bible reading has changed drastically in the last century, particularly since the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s. The Roman Catholic Church has rediscovered its love of the Scriptures, allowing for a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit, as well as a coming together of different Christian traditions. Pope Benedict XVI has encouraged Catholics and others to read the Bible with new vigour, not only studying it but also engaging in the prayerful meditation on Scripture known as Lectio Divina (a guide to which you’ll find in Joseph Chalmers’ chapter in this book). Initiatives such as the ‘Year of Saint Paul’ and the Synod of Bishops in Rome on ‘The Word of God in the Church’ (both in 2008) have also highlighted the central place of the Bible in Christian Catholic communities.

Of course Thérèse lived before the Second Vatican Council. How did she come to know and to love the Bible as the revelation of God’s Word?

Carmelite love for God’s Word

Part of the answer to the question of how Thérèse came to know and love the Bible can be found in the fact that Thérèse became a Carmelite nun at the age of fifteen. Although it is unlikely that the monastery she entered in Lisieux had a complete copy of the Bible (on this see the preceding chapter by Alexander Vella), the Carmelite tradition of prayer and spirituality placed great importance upon the Word of God. To appreciate the love Thérèse had for God’s Word, it’s helpful to know something about the close bond between the Carmelites and the Bible.2

What is now the international Carmelite Order began around the year 1200 as a small community of hermits gathered on the mountain range known as Mount Carmel in the Holy Land. Carmel had been revered as a holy place since the time of the Old Testament prophet Elijah (possibly even earlier), and sometime around the start of the thirteenth century a group of Christian hermits assembled together in a community to live the contemplative life, blending prayer with service of each other and of the pilgrims who came to the mountain en route to the holy places.

The Carmelite Rule of Saint Albert

Those hermits eventually approached the Latin Patriarch (Roman Catholic Bishop) of Jerusalem, Saint Albert Avogadro, to ask him to approve a document setting out their way of life. This text, which eventually became known as The Rule of Saint Albert, stipulated that the prayerful reading of the Bible was to be given a central role in Carmelite existence. Of course all Christians are now encouraged to take up the Bible regularly, but in the Middle Ages contact with the ‘Sacred Page’ (as the Bible was known) was not always widespread and was often second-hand. There is no one single ‘method’ of Carmelite prayer, but the Rule of Saint Albert makes it clear that attentiveness to hearing God in silence and in the Scriptures is a strong component in the Carmelite tradition.3

The Rule of Saint Albert which Thérèse followed as a Carmelite nun was focussed entirely on Jesus Christ. In approving a document setting out the way that Carmelites should live, the Patriarch of Jerusalem echoed the words of Saint Paul: ‘live a life of allegiance to Jesus Christ, and pure in heart and stout in conscience, be unswerving in the service of the Master’. This is just one of many references and allusions to Scripture that Saint Albert included in the Carmelite Rule.

The law of the Lord

The way of life document which Saint Albert gave to the hermits is not a long Rule by the standards of contemporary medieval religious orders – just 24 short paragraphs or chapters (the whole Rule is printed at the end of this article). Within those 24 chapters, many consider Chapter 10 to be at its very heart:

All the brothers are to remain in their cells or near them, meditating day and night on the law of the Lord, and being vigilant in prayers, unless otherwise lawfully occupied.


The term ‘law of the Lord’ has been interpreted by Carmelites as meaning both the person of Jesus Christ (who came as the fulfilment of God’s law), and the Bible, the Word of God. Meditating on God and God’s teachings is therefore central to the Carmelite project which Saint Thérèse engaged in. The Rule of Saint Albert is characterised by a very strong devotion to the Word of God in both Scripture and in the person of Jesus Christ. The Rule encouraged the hermits to ‘live in allegiance to Jesus Christ’, serving him unswervingly (Chapter 2). This focus on Jesus in the Rule of the Carmelite Order was to make a great impact on Thérèse’s close relationship with him. Thérèse of Lisieux was truly Carmelite in her love of the Word of God, both in the person of Jesus Christ, and in the Bible. As Fr. Vella said in the preceding article, ‘Thérèse approached Holy Scripture convinced that when she read the Bible she was in fact listening to Jesus who was speaking to her through the sacred books’. We cannot stress sufficiently: Christ is the Alpha and Omega of the Carmelite Rule. The Rule begins and ends in Jesus Christ. To live in the service of Christ and to live devotedly in Christ: in these words of Saint Paul the first Carmelites outlined to Saint Albert (who approved their document) the fundamental purpose of their hermit way of life. They were simply to serve Christ by nurturing a close relationship with Christ. They were to imitate Christ in his prayer at night on the mountain and to keep watch with him in the garden.

The Bible and prayer

The central precept of the Rule of Saint Albert concerns the Bible and prayer, the basic activity of the Carmelite: ‘Each one of you is to stay in his (or her) cell or nearby, pondering the law of the Lord day and night and keeping watch at prayers unless attending to some other duty’ (Chapter 10). In its simplicity this reminds us of the words of the other great medieval Lawgiver, Saint Benedict, who simply states in his Rule that ‘If a monk is so inclined, let him go into the chapel and pray’. No further directives are given as regards prayer in either the Carmelite or the Benedictine Rules. Prayer must always involve a fundamental attitude to God, the attitude of wanting nothing but the will of the Father. This must underlie any view of prayer, as it did that of Jesus himself who always did the things which pleased his heavenly Father. ‘To live a life of allegiance to Jesus Christ’, to love Jesus, involves a relationship which must begin and end in prayer, for, as Jesus himself is the Son of God and is in continual communion with his Father, so also must be the one who has promised to follow him.

Prayer is simplicity itself, once this fundamental relationship – this friendship between God the Father and his children – is appreciated. Thérèse knew herself to be a little child of God, that God was her ‘Papa’, her ‘Daddy’ (and also ‘more tender than a mother’). Thérèse wanted to talk to God, to be with God as much as possible. In the Rule of Saint Albert silence is enjoined as a means of being open to God. On one occasion when asked what she said to God, Thérèse replied ‘I don’t say anything to him; I love him.’ Silence in the loving presence of God is the highest form of prayer, and is in the true line of Carmelite spirituality which seeks to help us be contemplatives, that is, friends with God who are open to the inpouring of the Spirit.

Encountering the Word in many places

Even before Thérèse entered Carmel it was Jesus who ravished her heart. Once inside the monastery Thérèse’s love was nourished and nurtured by the focus on Jesus found in the Rule of Saint Albert. The Rule formed part of the book containing the Constitutions of the Discalced Carmelite Order which Thérèse was expected to read and study. Thérèse would therefore have known that the Rule of Saint Albert had more to say about the Bible, such as Chapter 7, which states that the Carmelites should ‘eat in a common refectory … listening together to a reading from Holy Scripture’. Thérèse would have heard Bible passages regularly not only in the refectory dining-room at the Carmel in Lisieux, but also when the community attended the celebration of the Eucharist and the Divine Office, litanies that presented passages of Scripture to ruminate on. Such communal prayer is also specified in the Carmelite Rule: ‘Those who know their letters [how to read] and how to read the psalms should for each of the canonical hours say those our holy forefathers laid down and the approved custom of the Church appoints for that hour’ (Chapter 11). Praying the Psalter – the Book of Psalms – is a characteristic form of prayer for the Carmelite.

The Psalms and the Divine Office

What place did the psalms and the Office play in the life of Saint Thérèse? We know indeed what joy she found in those words inspired by the Holy Spirit. Those who know both the psalms and the writings of Thérèse will appreciate how often the sentiments of the psalms and often the very words inspire her own writings (as we can see in a later section of this book). The Psalter is the book of the Old Testament most quoted by Thérèse. In the psalms Thérèse found an echo of her own thoughts and desires. A child of God, always looking...
towards God as to her Father and Mother, whose arms she never left, Thérèse found instinctively in the psalms the expressions which could translate her own feelings. Just as those psalms were constantly on the lips of Christ himself, so also were they the daily expression of the attitude of Thérèse to her heavenly Father.

The teaching and example of Saint Paul

The second half of the Rule of Saint Albert consists largely of quotations from Scripture, especially the writings of Saint Paul who was very influential in the life of Saint Thérèse. In Chapter 19 of the Rule Saint Albert states:

The sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, is to dwell abundantly in your mouths and hearts. So whatever you have to do is to be done in the word of the Lord.

These are words Thérèse took to heart, as she did the advice contained in Chapter 20:

You have both the teaching and the example of Blessed Paul the Apostle; Christ spoke through his mouth; he has been set up and given by God as a preacher and teacher of the nations in faith and truth; in following him you cannot go wrong.

The love of Holy Scripture is therefore part of the very fabric of the Carmelite way of life; as the Carmelite Bible scholar Carlos Mesters says, a vibrant engagement with the Bible is part of the Carmelite Order’s DNA. Since the Rule of Saint Albert was given to the hermits on Mount Carmel centuries ago, their descendents – the hermits, friars, enclosed nuns, active sisters, and lay members of the Carmelite Family – have nourished their relationships with God particularly through meditation of God’s living Word.

Thérèse: the Doctor of Love taught by God’s Word

In 1997 Pope John Paul II declared Saint Thérèse a Doctor of the Universal Church, that is, a pre-eminent teacher of Christian doctrine, and she has been nicknamed the Doctor Amoris (‘Doctor of Love’). In his apostolic letter marking the occasion, Divini Amoris Scientia, the Pope frequently pointed out how Thérèse’s writings, including her poetry, were inspired by the reading of the Word of God:

§7 This young Carmelite, without any particular theological training, but illumined by the light of the Gospel, feels she is being taught by the divine Teacher who, as she says, is “the Doctor of Doctors” (Ms. A, 83v), and from him she receives “divine teachings” (Ms. B, 1r). She feels that the words of Scripture are fulfilled in her: “Whoever is a little one, let him come to me … For to him that is little, mercy shall be shown” (Ms. B, 1v; cf. Proverbs 9:4; Wisdom 6:6) and she knows she is being instructed in the science of love, hidden from the wise and prudent, which the divine Teacher deigned to reveal to her, as to babes (Ms. A, 49r; cf. Luke 10:21-22).

§9 The primary source of her spiritual experience and her teaching is the Word of God in the Old and New Testaments. She herself admits it, particularly stressing her passionate love for the Gospel (cf. Ms. A, 83v). Her writings contain over 1,000 biblical quotations: more than 400 from the Old Testament and over 600 from the New. Despite her inadequate training and lack of resources for studying and interpreting the sacred books, Thérèse immersed herself in meditation on the Word of God with exceptional faith and spontaneity. Under the influence of the Holy Spirit she attained a profound knowledge of Revelation for herself and for others. By her loving concentration on Scripture – she even wanted to learn Hebrew and Greek to understand better the spirit and letter of the sacred books – she showed the importance of the biblical sources in the spiritual life, she emphasized the originality and freshness of the Gospel, she cultivated with moderation the spiritual exegesis of the Word of God in both the Old and New Testaments. Thus she discovered hidden treasures, appropriating words and episodes, sometimes with supernatural boldness, as when, in reading the texts of Saint Paul (cf. 1 Corinthians 12-13), she realized her vocation to love (cf. Ms. B, 3r-3v). Enlightened by the revealed Word, Thérèse wrote brilliant pages on the unity between love of God and love of neighbour (cf. Ms. C, 11v-19r); and she identified

---

with Jesus’s prayer at the Last Supper as the expression of her intercession for the salvation of all (cf. Ms. C, 34r-35r).

The apostolic letter *Divini Amoris Scientia* praises Thérèse’s grasp of the mysterious love of God that she gained through attentively listening to and reading of the Scriptures.

**God’s Word is a light in the dark**

Towards the end of her short life on earth, Thérèse experienced the ‘dark night’ that fellow Carmelite Saint John of the Cross wrote of as a normal part of the spiritual journey, in which she could not feel the presence of God, relying solely on faith. The writings of John of the Cross helped her for a time, but eventually only the Scriptures were enough to guide her in the darkness:

Ah! how many lights have I not drawn from the works of our holy Father, St. John of the Cross! At the ages of seventeen and eighteen I had no other spiritual nourishment; later on, however, all books left me in aridity and I’m still in that state. If I open a book composed by a spiritual author (even the most beautiful, the most touching book), I feel my heart contract immediately and I read without understanding, so to speak. Or if I do understand, my mind comes to a standstill without the capacity of meditating. In this helplessness, Holy Scripture and the *Imitation* [of Christ by Thomas à Kempis] come to my aid; in them I discover a solid and very pure nourishment. But it is especially the *Gospels* which sustain me during my hours of prayer, for in them I find what is necessary for my poor little soul. I am constantly discovering in them new lights, hidden and mysterious meanings.

I understand and I know from experience that: *The kingdom of God is within you.* Jesus has no need of books or teachers to instruct souls; He teaches without the noise of words. Never have I heard Him speak, but I feel that He is within me at each moment; He is guiding and inspiring me with what I must say and do. I find just when I need them certain lights which I had not seen until then, and it isn’t most frequently during my hours of prayer that these are most abundant but rather in the midst of my daily occupations.

O my dear Mother! after so many graces can I not sing with the Psalmist: *How GOOD is the Lord, his MERCY endures forever!*\(^5\)


This passage makes it clear that during the eighteen-month period of doubt and darkness that engulfed her, Thérèse found light in the Gospels. Her emptiness was filled by God’s own self, allowing her to echo the words of the Psalmist that God is good and merciful.\(^6\)

**Discovering new lights**

Thérèse learned to turn to the Sacred Page whenever she sought confirmation of an idea. She also had no difficulty in seeing the relevance of the Bible for her own times, invoking a very contemporary image:

We are living now in an age of inventions, and we no longer have to take the trouble of climbing stairs, for, in the homes of the rich, an elevator has replaced these very successfully. I wanted to find an elevator which would raise me to Jesus, for I am too small to climb the rough stairway of perfection. I searched, then, in the Scriptures for some sign of this elevator, the object of my desires, and I read these words coming from the mouth of Eternal Wisdom: *Whoever is a LITTLE ONE, let him come to me.* And so I succeeded. I felt I had found what I was looking for. But wanting to know, O my God, what You would do to the very little one who answered Your call, I continued my search and this is what I discovered:

*As one whom a mother caresses, so will I comfort you; you shall be carried at the breasts and upon the knees they shall caress you.* Ah! never did words more tender and more melodious come to give joy to my soul. The elevator which must raise me to heaven is Your arms, O Jesus! And for this I had no need to grow up, but rather I had to remain little and become this more and more.\(^7\)

In this exquisite passage Thérèse quotes from two books of the Old Testament (*Proverbs* 9:4 and *Isaiah* 66:13, 12), discovering in them the maternal love of God which will carry her to Christ. The ‘ littleness’ of which she speaks is her famous ‘Little Way’ of childlike confidence and trust in God. Though revolutionary in many respects, Thérèse’s ‘doctrine’ was rooted in her reading of the Old Testament. In that sense it was truly ‘radical’, returning to the roots.


\(^7\) *Story of a Soul*, Manuscript C, trans. John Clarke, pp. 207-08.
Openness to God

From *The Song of Songs*, the gospel accounts, and other passages of Scripture, Thérèse learnt how to open herself to God. As James McCaffrey puts it later in this book, ‘Thérèse is in touch with her own infinite emptiness for God’. Thérèse practiced a spirit and attitude of the heart that the Carmelite tradition refers to as *Vacare Deo*, literally ‘openness to God’, or ‘making space for God’. In letting herself be infused with God’s Word, Thérèse showed the same spirit of *Vacare Deo* that allowed the Blessed Virgin Mary to speak using the very words of Scripture (namely *Isaiah* 61) during her *Magnificat* (*Luke* 1:46-55). In her openness to God and ability to speak in the words of Scripture Thérèse was also a true daughter of Saint Albert of Jerusalem, who (as discussed in the next chapter of this book) echoed numerous Bible passages when writing the Carmelite *Rule* that Thérèse followed.

Conclusion

Thérèse of Lisieux was rooted in the Carmelite tradition which encouraged her voracious appetite for the Word of God, and which in turn fuelled and expressed her passion for Jesus Christ. Thérèse’s wisdom is a new articulation of the ancient wisdom of Carmel, gifts of God for the benefit of the Church and humanity. It is surely no accident that the declaration of Thérèse as a Doctor of the Church has coincided with a renewed interest in the study of Scripture and a revived commitment to the prayerful pondering of God’s Word. Thérèse is an inspiration for all Christians to encounter God’s Word on a daily basis and to share it with others by the way that we live ‘in allegiance to Jesus Christ’.

Thérèse found that in the ‘Garden of Carmel’, the soil must be fertilised by the Word of God. As God said through the prophet Isaiah (55:10-12):

>For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

Some of the material in this chapter is adapted from the late Hugh Clarke’s *Message of Love: Reflections on the Life of St. Thérèse*, (Faversham: The Carmelite Press, 1976), pp. 50-55.
As a Carmelite nun, Saint Thérèse would have known and reflected on the vision of her Order as set out in *The Rule of Saint Albert*, which places great emphasis upon the importance of Scripture (as discussed in the previous chapter). The numbers in brackets refer to the older chapter numbering previously used by different branches of the Carmelite Family.

1 [Prologue, i] Albert, called by the grace of God to be Patriarch of the Church of Jerusalem, greets his beloved sons in Christ, B. and the other hermits living in obedience to him near the spring on Mount Carmel: salvation in the Lord and the blessing of the Holy Spirit.

2 [Prologue, ii] Many times and in different ways the holy Fathers have laid down that everyone – whatever be their state in life or the religious life chosen by them – should live under the patronage of Jesus Christ and serve him zealously with a pure heart and a good conscience.

3 Now then you have come to me seeking a formula of life according to your proposed manner of life, which you are to observe in the future.

4 [I, iii] The first thing I lay down is that you shall have a prior, one of yourselves, chosen by the unanimous consent of all, or of the greater and more mature part. All the others shall promise him obedience fulfilling it by deeds, as well as chastity and the renunciation of property.

5 [II, iv] You can take up places in solitary areas or in sites given to you, one suitable and convenient for your observance in the judgment of the prior and the brothers.

6 [III, v] Moreover, taking account of the site you propose to occupy, all of you are to have separate cells; these are to be assigned by the prior himself with the agreement of the other brothers or the more mature of them.

7 [IV, vi] You are, however, to eat in a common refectory what may have been given to you, listening together to a reading from holy Scripture, if this can conveniently be done.
8 [V, vii] No brother is permitted to change the place assigned to him or exchange with another, unless with the permission of the prior at the time.

9 [VII, viii] All are to remain in their cells or near them, meditating day and night on the law of the Lord and being vigilant in prayers, unless otherwise lawfully occupied.

10 [VIII, ix] Those who have learned to say the canonical hours with the clerics should do so according to the practice of the holy Fathers and the approved customs of the Church. Those who do not know the hours are to say the Our Father twenty-five times for the night office, except for Sunday and solemn feasts when this number is doubled, so that the Our Father is said fifty times. It is to be said seven times for the morning Lauds and for the other Hours, except for Vespers when it must be said fifteen times.

11 [IX, x] None of the brothers is to claim something as his own; everything is to be in common and is to be distributed to each one by the Prior – that is, the brother deputed by him to this office – having regard to the age and needs of each one.

12 [XI, xi] You may have asses or mules according to your needs and some rearing of animals or poultry.

13 [X, xii] An oratory is to be built as conveniently as possible in the midst of the cells; you are to gather daily in the morning for Mass, where this is convenient.

14 [XI, xiii] On Sundays, or other days if necessary, you shall discuss the preservation of order and the salvation of souls; at this time excesses and faults of the brothers, if such come to light, are to be corrected with boundless charity.

15 [XII, xiv] You are to fast every day except Sundays from the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross until Easter Sunday, unless illness or bodily weakness, or other just cause counsels a lifting of the fast, since necessity has no law.

16 [XIII, xv] You are to abstain from meat, unless it is to be taken as a remedy for illness or bodily weakness. Since you must more frequently beg on journeys, in order not to burden your hosts you may eat food cooked with meat outside your own houses. At sea, however, meat may be eaten.

17 [XIV, xvi] Since human life on earth is a trial and all who want to live devotedly in Christ suffer persecution; your enemy the devil prowls about like a roaring lion seeking whom he might devour. You must then with all diligence put on the armour of God so that you may be able to stand up to the ambushes of the enemy.

18 [XV, xvii] You should do some work, so that the devil will always find you occupied and he may not through your idleness find some entrance to your souls. In this matter you have both the teaching and the example of Blessed Paul the Apostle; Christ spoke through his mouth; he has been set up and given by God as a preacher and teacher of the nations in faith and truth; in following him you cannot go wrong. In work and weariness, he said, we have been with you, working day and night so as not to be a burden to you; it was not as though we had no right, but we wished to give ourselves as a model for imitation. For when we were with you, we gave this precept: whoever is unwilling to work shall not eat. We have heard that there are restless people going around who do nothing. We condemn such people and implore them in the Lord Jesus Christ that working in silence they should earn their bread. This is a good and holy way: follow it.
21 [XVI, xviii] The apostle therefore recommends silence, when he tells us to work in it; the prophet too testifies that silence is the promotion of justice; and again, in silence and in hope will be your strength. Therefore we lay down that from the recitation of Compline you are to maintain silence until after Prime the following day. At other times, though silence is not to be so strictly observed, you are to be diligent in avoiding much talking, since Scripture states and experience likewise teaches, sin is not absent where there is much talking; also he who is careless in speech will experience evil, and the one who uses many words harms his soul. Again the Lord says in the gospel: an account will have to be given on the day of judgement for every vain word. Each of you is to weigh his words and have a proper restraint for his mouth, so that he may not stumble and fall through speech and his fall be irreparable and fatal. He is with the prophet to guard his ways so that he does not offend through the tongue. Silence, which is the promotion of justice, is likewise to be diligently and carefully observed.

22 [XVII, xix] You, Brother B., and whoever is appointed prior after you, shall always keep in mind and practice what the Lord said in the Gospel: Whoever wishes to be greater among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first must be your slave.

23 [XVIII, xx] And you too, the other brothers are humbly to honour your prior, and rather than thinking about him, you are to look to Christ who set him as head over you; he said to the leaders of the Church, whoever hears you hears me, and whoever despises you despises me. Thus you will not be judged guilty on account of contempt but, on account of obedience you will merit the reward of eternal life.

24 [Epilogue, xxi] I have written these things briefly to you establishing a formula of your common life, according to which you are to conduct yourselves. If anyone does more the Lord himself when he comes again will repay him. You are, however, to use discretion, which is the moderator of virtue.

Thérèse Martin, often known as The Little Flower, was declared a Doctor of the Church in 1997. This ranks her along with such figures as Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and Teresa of Avila as having some profound insight into the Christian message. Thérèse was not a great writer like Augustine, but she did something crucial: she helped to bring spirituality and theology together again, demonstrating in word and by her life the centrality of prayer and love for theology (the study of the nature of God and religion). She is an important impetus in the Church’s rediscovery of the value of the mystical and its moving away from the over-intellectual approach to theology that had been fostered since the seventeenth century.

Thérèse’s World and Church

Thérèse had to transcend many aspects of life both in society and in the Church, and even after her death her true self was almost submerged. She was born in Normandy in 1873 into a devout Roman Catholic family, at a time when Roman Catholicism in France was very much on the defensive. Catholics saw themselves as under siege in a rationalist, anti-clerical world. In their retreat to a ‘fortress Church’, Catholics brought with them an often pietistic faith. There was a retreat into piety and devotion, a withdrawal into a safe space – almost a private world. Allied to a disapproval of secular society and a nostalgia for the ways things were in the ancien régime, such Catholics adopted a fierce middle-class respectability; “What will people think?” was often the criterion of behaviour. These attitudes coloured Thérèse’s family life and were certainly present in community life in the Carmel (Carmelite monastery of nuns) in Lisieux where she spent the last nine years of her life. It was this spirit of correctness that caused Thérèse’s sister to edit her manuscript so that the early editions of The Story of a Soul contained radical revisions. Since the 1950s the original manuscripts have been available, and also original photographs that show a more vigorous person, a real human being.

Spirit of creativity

The remarkable aspect of Thérèse’s life and ministry was the way she was able to live her years in Carmel with such maturity and creativity. She was the author of her own vision of life and there is a genuine originality in what she
wrote and how she lived. Thérèse was a Carmelite in her faithful following of Jesus: he was her guide. Sadly she was not able to immerse herself entirely in the Scriptures after the spirit of the Carmelite Rule of Saint Albert because the Bible was not readily available in the French Church of that time (as discussed in previous chapters of this book). Bourgeois susceptibility led to the attitude that many passages of Scripture were too realistic, not ‘nice’. The realities of human nature were too much for the post-Jansenist mind. Despite these difficulties, Thérèse was able to read the New Testament and she eventually obtained access to a Bible.

When Teresa of Avila founded her Carmels she wanted them to be communities where friendship could flourish and a simple lifestyle could be realised. She did not want communities to be too large because institutionalism could creep in and financial problems could grow. The Carmel at Lisieux was not entirely in that mould. The community numbered about twenty-five, and it is clear some of the nuns were difficult characters. The prioress, Mother Gonzaga, came from the nobility and never freed herself entirely from her social background. There was tension between her and Thérèse’s sisters, and sometimes the community had to wait on the prioress’s visiting relatives. The Rule of Saint Albert was interpreted with a strictness that missed its essential humanity and was certainly far from Teresa of Avila’s creative spirit. Mother Gonzaga was strict in her vision of Carmelite life both for herself and for others. This rage for correctness and the entrenched bourgeois mentality touched Thérèse during her illness when the community went into denial over its nature. For whatever reason, tuberculosis was seen as a disease to be ashamed of – it was an attitude not unlike that adopted today by some people to HIV/AIDS.

Thérèse: true to herself

The great achievement is that Thérèse emerges from this unlikely environment to be so original, creative and self-possessed. She achieved an autonomy that is remarkable, and she was a likeable, strong-minded, humorous and idealistic young woman. She could have been dependent on her sisters, she could have played the games others played, but she found her own place in which to be.

Thérèse always had a lively imagination and a sense of fun. This aspect of her personality enabled her to feel free as a writer, expressive as a poet and fascinated by theatre. She had a great admiration for Joan of Arc, admiring her courage and decisiveness, and there is a striking photograph of her playing the part of the Maid of Orleans in a dramatic presentation she organised for the Carmelite community.

Thérèse’s lively imagination links her to the great sixteenth-century Carmelites, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. Thérèse shared the great Teresa’s romanticism and clear vision. She also lived out in her last months the passive night of the spirit that John of the Cross spoke about in his commentaries. Thérèse knew the writings of the Carmelite Spanish mystics and her teaching on love echoes and repeats John’s own words in a new and creative way.1

Infusing love into all of life

Thérèse stands at the centre of the Carmelite tradition with her belief that we can all achieve closeness to God through our prayer and our following of Jesus Christ as we live the Gospel. This is her teaching on the ‘Little Way’. For Thérèse, holiness, closeness to God, is not achieved by spectacular ascetic practices. We come to God by infusing love into every aspect of life. The ‘Little Way’ is one of childlike trust in God, but it is not infantile and naïve, or a searching for the lost innocence of some idealised childhood. Thérèse had known through

---

childhood and early adolescence the pain of separation from those she loved. However, she gained the maturity to realise that trust and consistency were possible, and she began to express them in her wholehearted commitment to God. She wanted a quiet hidden relationship, to live out in secret her love for God. This ‘Little Way’ was a reaction to the strictness and spectacular ascetic practices that seemed to be demanded by her prioress.

The humanity of Christ

Thérèse was able to come to God in such loving trust because, like Teresa of Avila, she realised that the humanity of Christ was at the heart of Christianity. Jesus is the source of love and happiness for her – the Gospel accounts were her book. However, the most profound insights of Thérèse came during the last eighteen months of her life. Her illness took hold with full seriousness at Easter 1896 and became progressively more painful and crippling. During these last months of her life Thérèse underwent the passive night of the spirit. For her, the experience was one that seemed like the purification of purgatory. She felt she had been placed in darkness and that her belief in God was an illusion. She began to feel that heaven could not exist. It was as if she had been placed in solidarity with non-believers. This struggle was to last until her death. Most difficult of all were the times when she found not just blasphemous thoughts but even blasphemous words welling up inside her. Mocking voices spoke to her, telling her that in the end there was just nothing – it was all an illusion. Thérèse even began to think that science would be able to disprove everything and end up explaining God’s existence away. She felt the force of rationalism like a great wave ready to sweep away all traces of belief and, in her own way, she was akin to Matthew Arnold and the grey vision of his poem Dover Beach. Even more terrifying for her were suicidal thoughts of ending the pain and the sense of futility:

Watch carefully, Mother, when you will have patients a prey to violent pains; don’t leave them any medicines that are poisonous. I assure you, it needs only a second when one suffers intensely to lose one’s reason. Then one would easily poison oneself.

However, just before her death Thérèse was able to say:

Yes! What a grace it is to have faith. If I had not had faith, I would have committed suicide without an instant’s hesitation.

Thérèse: a guide on death’s journey

In his insightful study on Thérèse, Love in the Heart of the Church, Carmelite theologian Chris O’Donnell has shown that Thérèse’s experiences have something important to teach us about terminal illness, and may help people face death in an age when there is so much denial about its reality. The doubts and the trial do pass, and in Thérèse’s writing we are helped to understand that even in the dark we are not abandoned by God. She is a living commentary on John of the Cross’s teaching.

During this time of trial and struggle Thérèse clung on to her relationship with God and tried to express her love in her poems and in her relationships with the community. It was only when she was very near to death that those closest to her became aware of her struggle, and even then perhaps could only guess at what was happening.

Thérèse’s clarity of vocation

In the October of 1896 in the middle of her sufferings Thérèse had a moment of light and insight, inspired by the Word of God, which helped her to find a sense of what her life was really about and what her real vocation was. Perhaps it is best to allow her to describe the moment and its import in her own words:

My desires caused me a veritable martyrdom, and I opened the Epistles of Saint Paul to find some kind of answer. Chapters Twelve and Thirteen of the First Epistle to the Corinthians fell under my eyes. I read there, in the first of these chapters, that all cannot be apostles, prophets, doctors, and so on, that the Church is composed of different members, and that the eye cannot be the hand at one and the same time. The answer was clear, but it did not fulfil my desires and gave me no peace. Without becoming discouraged, I continued my reading, and this sentence consoled me: ‘Yet strive for THE BETTER GIFTS, and I point out to you a yet more excellent way.’ And the Apostle explains how all the most PERFECT gifts are nothing without LOVE — that charity is the EXCELLENT WAY that leads most surely to God.

I finally had to rest. Considering the mystical body of the Church, I had not recognized myself in any of the members described by Saint Paul, or rather I desired to see myself in them all. Charity gave me the key to my vocation. I understood that if the Church had a body com-

---


3 Christopher O’Donnell, Love in the heart of the Church - The Mission of Thérèse of Lisieux, (Dublin: Veritas, 1997).
Thérèse’s sense of love being the energy of the Church was the inspiration for her missionary dreams and her support for priests. She had hopes that she might be sent to the Carmel that was being set up in Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam). However, realising that her health was broken, she turned her energies into a power of love for all involved in that work. She hoped that her prayers, her pain, could support those working to bring the Gospel to remote areas of the world. Once again it was her deep reflection on Paul’s teaching that helped her live out the doctrine of the Mystical Body.

Thérèse had a great love for priests and their ministry. It is possible to read her works with our modern eyes and to wonder if she ever wanted to be a priest herself. Certainly her deep sense of communion with Jesus in the Eucharist made her value the liturgy above all else, and she saw the role of those who ministered at the altar as precious. In the last months of her life she was involved in correspondence with two missionary priests. Her enthusiasm and commitment in offering them support and encouragement is amazing given her frail health and the darkness of spirit she was enduring. Her words are full of energy and her warmth of understanding shows her generosity and altruism.

She maintained the correspondence almost to the end of her life, and in a poem to Father Roulland, who was ministering in China, she writes:

---


---

Thérèse found her vocation in love – love at the heart of the Church. She came to this insight as she read Saint Paul’s letters and discovered his teaching on the Mystical Body. This Pauline vision with its emphasis on the Spirit gave Thérèse a generous sense of the Church which helped her to see herself as a missionary even though she never left Carmel. It also enhanced her awareness of the Communion of Saints. This profound awareness of the Church is akin to Teresa of Avila’s missionary sense when, in the context of the Reformation, she sought a healing mission in the Church.

One of the rich veins of spirituality that flows from the doctrine of the Communion of Saints is a wonderful appreciation of intercessory prayer. The notion of belonging to a fellowship that goes beyond the here and now is also a powerful antidote to an individualistic approach to salvation.

For Thérèse the saints were her friends. This sense of intimacy began with her attraction to the life of Joan of Arc, but soon extended to other saints and especially to Mary, the Mother of Jesus. She also had a belief that members of her family who had died were part of that community of love and that in a special way a closeness was achieved in the Eucharist between those in heaven and those on earth. Her Church, her community, was one that went beyond the limits of time and space. She spoke to the saints as friends and asked them to intercede for those troubled by doubt or experiencing loss of faith.

---


A Vocation to Love Inspired by God’s Word

Make love real where you live

Thérèse’s greatness is her ability to grasp that the Christian life is the realisation of love in the community where you live. Moreover, that community, if inspired by the dynamic of love, will always be open and creative. She realised that the call to love was linked to the same obedience that brought Jesus to the Cross. Her last months were a painful journey to Jerusalem and to her Calvary. Like Jesus she came to the end in a time of terrible darkness and in this she fulfilled her faithful following, her allegiance to him. By faith she grasped the meaning of the heavenly Jerusalem. Yet at times during her last months she felt as if that reality could be snatched away from her, that her hope might even be in vain. We know that she kept journeying and in the end peace broke through the darkness and the pain.

However, the great contribution, the message that Thérèse has for us today, is of the self-sacrificing love that Christ has for his community, which we learn in a special way by attentive listening to God’s word in the Bible. By her life Thérèse became an icon of that love and shows us a face of the Church that is more than the institution. The Carmelite writer Chris O’Donnell is influenced by the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar when he says that Thérèse has something vital to teach the post-Vatican II Church. If we want a renewed and missionary Church we need to move away from mere organisational and structural change and live love. We will then see the wonderful reality of the Communion of Saints and learn to understand how much worth there is in an act of pure love – in living the ‘Little Way’. In her discipleship Thérèse is in many ways a wonderful window into the faith of Mary, whose unconditional trust lived through Calvary and then experienced the fullness of the Resurrection.

The Letter to the Ephesians speaks of all of us as ‘God’s work of art’ (2:10). Thérèse is an immortal diamond, crafted by love in her suffering and in her creative way of living life. She was strongly inserted in the Carmelite tradition, living the Rule of Saint Albert, and loving the Scriptures. Like the prophet Elijah, she too journeyed to her own meeting with God. Like the prophet, she came to the end of her tether, yet was fed and enabled to carry on. As we read in the Bible’s Books of the Kings, the prophet encountered God in the Wadi Cherith and on Mount Horeb. Thérèse journeyed with Christ and came to the eternal Mount Sion and the New Jerusalem.

This article is adapted from Wilfrid McGreal, At the Fountain of Elijah – The Carmelite Tradition, Traditions of Christian Spirituality Series, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1999), pp. 86-94.