

# THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX AND THE DISCALCED CARMELITE TRADITION

By MARGARET DORGAN

ST TERESA OF AVILA and St John of the Cross, looking at their sixteenth-century Spanish world, see an empire on the verge of change, yet one in which political stability is linked to religious accord. Very different is the nineteenth-century France of St Thérèse of Lisieux with its religious and political upheavals. Followers of the Enlightenment challenge the Roman Catholic Church in its public and private spheres. Science struts about with assurance that eventually it will have all the answers to human problems. This secular optimism provokes increasing hostility among French Catholics who take an entrenched position to protect themselves from what they perceive as a baneful influence.

Thérèse Martin grew up in Normandy, the youngest daughter of a prosperous middle-class family. Devout Catholics like the Martins refused to participate in the public school system. Efforts to provide education under religious auspices could result in the very limited schooling we see exemplified in Thérèse's case.

Teresa of Avila and Thérèse of Lisieux are both strikingly under-educated by modern standards, although not by what was common to women of their class and time. Initially John of the Cross grew up in extreme poverty. Nevertheless, he was able, through avenues open to an intelligent young male, to attain advanced degrees. This academic difference explains the very subjective approach of the two Teresas, who resort to imagery available in their everyday perceptions to explain sublime spiritual doctrine. Having little or no exposure to philosophy, they develop their own creative strategies for conveying a message. Teresa uses water in the *Book of her life*, and the symbol of successive mansions or apartments in *The interior castle*. Thérèse, an innate naturalist, turns to flowers, birds, the wonders of natural phenomena – especially in their smallest forms. John, with his ready access to philosophical theory, employs the techniques of Scholasticism to develop his thoughts. Actually this makes John less accessible for readers of a later age who are unfamiliar with that terminology. This

is the reason his *Spiritual canticle* tends to be the most popular among his prose commentaries. In the *Canticle*, John's philosophy gives way to poetic language and as a poet he ranks among the greatest in Spanish literature. Teresa and Thérèse wrote poetry too, often closer to jingles, with obvious rhymes that become boring. They did not have the high poetic gift of their Carmelite brother. While the content of their versification can be moving, the style is, with rare exceptions, pedestrian.

In the prose they have left us, however, Teresa of Avila and the Norman Thérèse make a powerful, direct contact with readers. We are involved in a heart-to-heart exchange. They engage with a deceptive ease of expression and then lead us gradually into profound depths of spiritual enlightenment.

In St Thérèse we find a companion who is a thorough opportunist. She grasps hold of all that makes up her everyday life and recognizes it has been given to her for profit. Like a financial adviser assuring us of high return, she takes as her supreme selling point, 'Everything is grace'. Nothing available to us in our ordinary life should be wasted since it bears the mark of eternal design and carries assurance of a hundredfold return. Thérèse tallies the joys and sorrows of her short life and sees them as pluses on her balance sheet.

'Everything is grace.' Yet the accumulation of treasure is not for herself alone. Any gain must multiply itself beyond the circumscribed limits of her existence to enrich the lives of others. Teresa of Avila describes 'souls more inclined to give than to receive. Even with respect to the Creator himself they want to give more than to receive. I say this attitude is what merits the name "love".'<sup>1</sup> Thérèse was such a lover. In her Act of Oblation to Merciful Love she declares, 'In the evening of this life, I shall appear before You with empty hands'.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, her hands had reached out to possess all they could clasp, what she called 'the practice of nothings', letting nothing escape. Then all is poured out for others. Social reformers like Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker movement and Saul Alinsky, an American Jewish social activist, found inspiration in Thérèse's selfless ongoing desire: to spend her life that others might partake of the riches a generous God gave her.

Thérèse of Lisieux felt herself blessed from early childhood. Her contemplative vocation took root in a family atmosphere that emphasized spiritual values. Both parents had been disappointed in their plans to enter religious orders and viewed with repugnance the power of France's Third Republic. The sense of being under siege and the call to

martyrdom inflamed Thérèse. Words describing fire appear often; they are also prominent metaphors she would have found in John of the Cross.

In her autobiography, Thérèse explains that she had no director: 'I needed no other guide but Jesus'.<sup>3</sup> A few lines later she quotes two stanzas of John's poetry to describe how God led her to Carmel. His writings became a map for her journey, especially in the last agonizing year-and-a-half of her life as she walked the subterranean passages of her night of faith.

Lisieux Carmel was a notably Teresian monastery; the writings of the great Spanish foundress of the Reform dominated. Thérèse pays tribute to one who is always referred to in a Discalced Carmel as 'Our Holy Mother'. She acknowledges a debt to the great Teresa in her apostolic longings: 'Being unable to be an active missionary, I wanted to be one through love and penance just like Saint Teresa, my seraphic Mother'.<sup>4</sup> Thérèse makes use of Teresa's counsel to put some small kindling on the embers of a prayer whose fire seems to be going out.<sup>5</sup> She writes to her sister Céline,

St Teresa says we must maintain love. The wood is not within our reach when we are in darkness, in aridities, but at least are we not obliged to throw little pieces of straw on it? Jesus is powerful enough to keep the fire going by Himself. However, He is satisfied when he sees us put a little fuel on it.<sup>6</sup>

Yet after Scripture, John of the Cross is the persistent guide for this young French nun, who so obviously walks not a way of light as did Teresa but the apophatic path of darkness, a *via negativa*, where John provides understanding and encouragement. Thérèse uses primarily his poems and brief counsels, which reflect teaching contained in the major treatises. She does not give extensive quotations from these latter. Did she ever read *The ascent of Mount Carmel* and *The dark night*? The clear descriptions John gives of the second night of the spirit would have cast light on her own interior sufferings at the conclusion of her life. John writes in Book Two of *The dark night*, 'It seems to the soul that all blessings are past . . . it is conscious of nothing but its own bitterness'.<sup>7</sup> A few pages later he describes 'the spiritual darknesses in which a person is engulfed and which afflict her with doubts and fears'.<sup>8</sup> We have no evidence Thérèse had read these particular passages; yet the account of her spiritual desolation echoes their harrowing bleakness. 'The fog that surrounds me becomes more dense. It penetrates my soul.'<sup>9</sup>

What attracts her especially to the Mystical Doctor of Carmel is the centrality of love in his teaching. He declares 'Souls are cleansed in the other life by fire, but here on earth they are cleansed and illumined only by love . . . Blessedness is derived from nothing else but love.'<sup>10</sup> Thérèse echoes those sentences: 'I understand so well it is only love which makes us acceptable to God that this love is the only good I ambition'.<sup>11</sup>

She writes to Céline, 'My director who is Jesus, teaches me not to count up my acts. He teaches me to do all through love, to refuse Him nothing, to be content when He gives me a chance of proving to Him that I love Him. But this is done in peace.'<sup>12</sup> If love is the goal for Thérèse, love is also the way. John of the Cross explains in the Book One of *The ascent* that all the denials he has listed so graphically in chapter 13 – 'To come to possess all/ desire the possession of nothing./ To arrive at being all/ desire to be nothing'<sup>13</sup> – none of this is possible unless a person is 'fired with love's urgent longings'.<sup>14</sup>

These stark counsels are embodied in Thérèse's 'little way', which is just as demanding and all-embracing. For her as for her sixteenth-century mentor, God is definitely in the details; no least possibility for holiness can be allowed to escape her vigilance.

Thérèse's striving for totality focuses on the passing nature of time, of duration which offers us each moment only fleetingly; and then ineluctably continues on. Carmelite spirituality has this marked characteristic of being in a hurry, no time to waste. John makes it clear in the opening paragraph of *The ascent*: 'This treatise explains how to reach divine union quickly'.<sup>15</sup> The adverb carries the weight of his intent. 'Quickly' in Carmel means no lingering; it means moving ahead with detachment according to the power of grace at work in our life. We can all too easily deceive ourselves by slowing down the pace. 'Quickly' is like a banner carried by travellers up the mountain of Carmel. We do not settle down for a while, finding a pleasing plateau somewhere on the mountainside.

The 'little way' is not an easy route dispensing us from serious effort. Simplicity is no excuse to bypass exertion; rather, its opposite. The very ordinariness of the 'little way' expresses totality: there is no excuse for omitting anything we can give to God. Just as the image, mountain, tells us we must keep moving higher and higher in union with our God, so the image of a little way sees nothing so small that it cannot be embraced and used for God. Striving is involved in both cases, and strength for giving grows as we put forth spiritual energy to advance the journey onward.

When I am feeling nothing, when I am incapable of praying, practising virtue, then is the moment of seeking opportunities, nothings which please Jesus more than mastery of the world . . . For example, a smile, a friendly word when I would want to say nothing or put on a look of annoyance.<sup>16</sup>

The journey's momentum is provided through a love energized by hope. Thérèse writes to her missionary brother, 'My way is all confidence and love. I do not understand souls who fear a Friend so tender . . . it is sufficient to recognize one's nothingness and to abandon oneself as a child into God's arms.'<sup>17</sup> John sees the mountain climb as a collaboration with One who draws us upward. 'O Lord, my God, who will seek you with simple and pure love, and not find that you are all one can desire, for you show yourself first and go out to meet those who seek you?'<sup>18</sup>

Hope for Thérèse is based wholly on the mercy of God. She sees omnipotence bending over us to cleanse and transform.

I know that the Lord is infinitely just, and it is this justice which frightens so many souls that is the object of my joy and confidence. To be just is not only to exercise severity . . . it is also to recognize good intentions. I expect as much from God's justice as from His mercy.<sup>19</sup>

Human frailty becomes a call to a Creator God who fashioned us in weakness and makes use of this very fragility to draw us and empower us. Understanding the human clay out of which we are fashioned does not depress us; instead, it becomes the 'source of our beseeching'. The pre-Christian Roman dramatist Terence declares, 'Nothing human is alien to me'. The saints of Carmel would say, 'Nothing human is worthless to me'. They celebrate our humanity, even its tendency to waywardness, since all can be turned into gain. And this transformation is achieved through a Redeemer who did not simply save us through the consummation of one sacrifice: he continues each moment to purify us with redeeming grace. Thérèse consoles herself and us:

One can fall or commit infidelities, but, knowing how to draw profit from everything [an echo of John of the Cross], love quickly consumes everything that can be displeasing to Jesus; it leaves nothing but a humble and profound peace in the depths of the heart.<sup>20</sup>

The centrality of Jesus Christ for Carmelites is evident in all their writings. Every spiritual reality is connected to a personal Saviour. The

experiences of love and confidence are an encounter with the One who is their basis. St Teresa writes in *The interior castle* of 'all our good and help which is the most sacred humanity of our Lord Jesus Christ', and tells her nuns, 'If they lose the guide who is the good Jesus, they will not hit upon the right road'.<sup>21</sup>

Her advice for every stage of prayer is to make sure Jesus is part of the suggested process. She would not understand some current meditation techniques that hold the mind on an exclusive word or phrase – unless it were related to Jesus. Methodologies adapted from Far Eastern sources or based on contemporary psychological insights would be baptized in her eyes only if they are in some way connected to the Sacred Humanity.

The pages of John of the Cross do not contain as many explicit references to Christ; yet at the most significant developments of his doctrine, Jesus comes to the fore. In the *Spiritual canticle*, a paean of praise for the divine Bridegroom and a longing for fullness of union, John cries, 'O faith of Christ, my Bridegroom, would that you might show me clearly now the truths of my Beloved'.<sup>22</sup> The *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, which is a primary source for explaining the discipline of John's asceticism, gives all of chapter 7 in Book Two to a consideration of Christ as our model for the path of renunciation and freedom. It is not wholly negative, for John promises, surprisingly, 'great relief and sweetness'.<sup>23</sup> 'A person makes progress only by imitating Christ.'<sup>24</sup> He wants to open for us 'the mystery of the door and way, which is Christ, leading to union with God'.<sup>25</sup> Sorrowfully he concludes this important chapter, 'Christ is little known by those who consider themselves his friends'.<sup>26</sup>

In a letter to her sister Marie, incorporated into Manuscript B of her autobiography, Thérèse writes that she 'knows only one thing: to love you, O Jesus'.<sup>27</sup> In other letters she adds to that, or rather includes in that, her longing to make Jesus loved.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, appears prominently throughout Thérèse's life. The order she entered is dedicated to Our Lady of Mount Carmel. Teresa of Avila, living in Spain's golden age of wealth and territorial expansion, often uses the adjective 'glorious' when referring to Mary. She and John both turn to gospel incidents centred on her. For Thérèse, however, she is a much more constant presence. To this French nun who lost her mother at the age of four, Mary is 'more mother than Queen'. To express the affectionate closeness of their relationship she goes even further. 'I understood she (the Blessed Virgin) was watching over me, that I was her child. I could no longer

give her any other name but “Mamma”, as this appeared ever so much more tender than Mother.’<sup>28</sup> Thérèse’s prayer aims at intimacy, closeness, in a sense of loving presence.

Teresa is the great teacher of prayer from the very beginning of wanting to pray until its consummation in the spiritual marriage. *The way of perfection*, which was written for her nuns, reminds them, ‘Our primitive rule states that we must pray without ceasing . . . unceasing prayer is the most important aspect of our rule’.<sup>29</sup> In her chapter on active recollection she says simply, ‘Remain with so good a friend [Christ] . . . you will find Him everywhere’.<sup>30</sup> This is her solid instruction for any stage of prayer. In the final stage of union in the seventh mansion the soul reaches ‘supreme happiness for having found repose and because Christ lives in it’.<sup>31</sup>

Although all of John of the Cross’s writing deals with progress in prayer, he does not use the explicit word ‘prayer’ with the frequency of his contemporary Teresa. We find a phrase like ‘loving attentiveness to God’. Since he deals most extensively with prayer in its passive mode, he writes of ‘the inflowing of God’. ‘The drink given her is no less than a torrent of delight.’<sup>32</sup> His is the vocabulary of a poet who is also a mystic.

Thérèse’s definition of prayer is inclusive, deceptively simple, something possible at any instant of human living.

For me, prayer is an aspiration of the heart, it is a simple glance directed to heaven, it is a cry of gratitude and love in the midst of trial as well as joy; finally it is something great, supernatural, which expands my soul and unites me to Jesus.<sup>33</sup>

This is not so much a teaching, as with Teresa and John; rather it declares how prayer can be all things at all times.

It resembles the down-to-earth maxims left by the seventeenth-century Carmelite, Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection. ‘The soul . . . sees and senses God present by a simple remembrance. It calls out to him easily and effectively, thus obtaining what it needs.’<sup>34</sup> Thérèse probably did not know this laybrother, who worked in the kitchen and sandal shop of a Discalced monastery in Paris a century after the Spanish reformers. Lawrence’s extant letters and the record of his conversations became involved in the Quietist controversy. His words were printed outside France by Protestant publishers and would not have been available during Thérèse’s lifetime. Teresa and John were guides for Thérèse and Lawrence. In similar though distinctive ways they distilled the reformers’ teaching into a simple, comprehensive awareness that the divine touches every aspect of human existence.

Subject as our humanity is to suffering, loss and death, how do we reconcile that omnipresence of the divine with our experience of so much deprivation and affliction? Thérèse's answer is the merciful love of God. She plunges into the mystery of an all-powerful love which allows the agony of Jesus' crucifixion and our own personal agonies. Thérèse knows she cannot unlock the full meaning of suffering in this world, but she sees her individual pain as part of a design that sculpts the contours of her life and at the same time reaches out to affect the lives of others. Overwhelmed today by the vision of excruciating suffering on every continent, we ask why of our God.

Thérèse faces the mystery and fathoms its import only in the light of eternity. From her childhood, she understands that all human loss will be returned superabundantly. Every least distress, every excruciating torment, will find an everlasting recompense. But then as her own death draws near, the threshold to an eternal existence where all is rewarded, she finds herself plunged into the black gloom of unbelief. 'Everything has disappeared.' The darkness speaks mockingly to her: 'Advance, advance; rejoice in death which will not give you what you hope for but a night still more profound, the night of nothingness'.<sup>35</sup>

John of the Cross describes the second dark night of the spirit as being in a 'sepulcher of dark death'.<sup>36</sup> He explains it further: 'These are the ones who go down into hell alive'.<sup>37</sup>

Thérèse still converts every experience into gain, even when it seems to be an encounter with annihilation and perdition. Her descent into hell will be for the sake of those who have no faith. Hope and love, which have always given her wings to fly to her Beloved, now seem to crawl in a desert where nothing can lift the spirit. Thérèse acknowledges, 'I do not have the joy of faith . . . I tell Him (Jesus) I am happy not to enjoy this beautiful heaven on this earth so that He will open it for all eternity to poor unbelievers'.<sup>38</sup>

Thérèse shows the advanced enlightenment of one purified 'in an oppressive undoing and an inner torment' such as John describes.<sup>39</sup> She also fulfils other words of his and 'grows conscious of the spiritual light she possesses'.<sup>40</sup>

Thus Thérèse beholds divine mercy in all she endures.

How sweet and merciful the Lord really is for He did not send me this trial until the moment I was capable of bearing it. A little earlier I believe it would have plunged me into a state of discouragement. Now it is taking away everything that could be a natural satisfaction in my desire for heaven.<sup>41</sup>

Consistent to the end, Thérèse, the great opportunist, takes what could beckon her to despair and discerns it as an expression of God's empowering compassion.

Thérèse and all Carmelites agree with the statement of Socrates, 'The unexamined life isn't worth living'. The young French nun who never studied the wisdom of the Greeks had examined human existence from an early age and found at its core a metaphysics of merciful love. If she had met Parmenides, she would have told him the One is merciful love. To Heraclitus she would say that all change embodies merciful love in its ongoing flux.

Thérèse's perception of the interconnectedness of all that exists underlies the importance of 'not allowing one little sacrifice to escape, not one look, one word, profiting by all the smallest things and doing them through love'.<sup>42</sup> The antinomies of smallness and greatness exist in harmony. 'Because of my weakness, it has pleased You, O Lord, to grant . . . desires that are greater than the universe.'<sup>43</sup>

No limitation of space or time can bind this nun, held in the confines of an enclosed monastery. 'I would want to preach the Gospel on all five continents simultaneously . . . I would be a missionary . . . from the beginning of creation until the consummation of the ages.'<sup>44</sup>

If merciful love is the ultimate meaning of reality, then in her created being she will reflect that love and become a channel of its compassionate energy. 'In the heart of the Church, my Mother, I shall be love. Thus I shall be everything.'<sup>45</sup> This is no pantheistic effusion. God still remains God.

O luminous Beacon of Love, I know how to reach You. I have found the secret of possessing Your flame . . . In order that Love be fully satisfied, it is necessary that it lower Itself . . . to nothingness and transform this nothingness into fire.<sup>46</sup>

Called the greatest saint of modern times, Thérèse passes on her fire to give warmth and light in the chill and darkness enveloping so many human beings today. Two months before her death, she explained that what most attracted her to heaven was not the assurance of everlasting bliss. When asked, 'What then?' she replied, 'It's Love. To love, to be loved, and to return to earth to make Love loved.'<sup>47</sup>

## NOTES

References to writings of St Teresa of Avila, St John of the Cross, St Thérèse of Lisieux and Brother Lawrence are from the editions published by the Institute of Carmelite Studies, Washington DC. Abbreviations used are *Life* (*St Teresa of Avila: the book of her life*); *Way* (*The way of perfection*); *Castle* (*The interior castle*); *Ascent* (*The ascent of Mount Carmel*); *Night* (*The dark night*); *Canticle* (*The spiritual canticle*); *Sayings* (*Sayings of light and love*); *Story* (*Story of a soul*); *Conversations* (*St Thérèse of Lisieux: her last conversations*); *Letters* (*Saint Thérèse of Lisieux: general correspondence*; reference is to the number of the letter quoted).

<sup>1</sup> *Way* 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Story*, p 277.

<sup>3</sup> *Story*, p 105.

<sup>4</sup> *Letters* 189.

<sup>5</sup> *Life* 30.20.

<sup>6</sup> *Letters* 143.

<sup>7</sup> *Night* 2.10.8, p 418.

<sup>8</sup> *Night* 2.11.6, p 421.

<sup>9</sup> *Story*, p 213.

<sup>10</sup> *Night* 2.12.1, p 422.

<sup>11</sup> *Story*, p 188.

<sup>12</sup> *Letters* 142.

<sup>13</sup> *Ascent* 1.13.11, p 150.

<sup>14</sup> *Ascent* 1.14, p 151.

<sup>15</sup> *Ascent* 1.1.1, p 113.

<sup>16</sup> *Letters* 143.

<sup>17</sup> *Letters* 226.

<sup>18</sup> *Sayings* 2, p 85.

<sup>19</sup> *Letters* 226.

<sup>20</sup> *Story*, p 179.

<sup>21</sup> *Castle* VI.6, pp 399, 400.

<sup>22</sup> *Canticle* stanza 12.2, p 516.

<sup>23</sup> *Ascent* 2.7.7, p 171.

<sup>24</sup> *Ascent* 2.7.8, p 172.

<sup>25</sup> *Ascent* 2.7.11, p 172.

<sup>26</sup> *Ascent* 2.7.12, p 173.

<sup>27</sup> *Story*, p 196.

<sup>28</sup> *Story*, p 123.

<sup>29</sup> *Way* 4.2, p 53.

<sup>30</sup> *Way* 26.1, p 133.

<sup>31</sup> *Castle* VII.3.1, p 439.

<sup>32</sup> *Canticle* stanza 26.1, p 574.

<sup>33</sup> *Story*, p 242.

<sup>34</sup> Brother Lawrence, *The practice of the presence of God* 7, p 42.

<sup>35</sup> *Story*, p 213.

<sup>36</sup> *Night* 2.6.1, p 404.

<sup>37</sup> *Night* 2.6.6, p 406.

<sup>38</sup> *Story*, pp 213–214.

<sup>39</sup> *Night* 2.6.5, p 405.

<sup>40</sup> *Night* 2.8.4, p 411.

<sup>41</sup> *Story*, p 214.

<sup>42</sup> *Story*, p 196.

<sup>43</sup> *Story*, p 193.

<sup>44</sup> *Story*, p 193.

<sup>46</sup> *Story*, p 195.

<sup>45</sup> *Story*, p 194.

<sup>47</sup> *Conversations*, p 217.