THE ST. THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX PRAYER BOOK

The St. Thérèse of Lisieux *prayer book*

BY
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The St. Thérèse of Lisieux Prayer Book

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I

THE PRAYER LIFE *of* St. Thérèse of Lisieux

HER CHILDHOOD DEVOTION AND FAMILY LIFE

If you visit the U.S. National Shrine to St. Thérèse of Lisieux, in Darien, Illinois, and enter the spacious room dedicated to her, one of the first things you'll notice is a collection of portraits on one wall. These are reproductions of photos taken of Thérèse from childhood until just a few months before her death at age twenty-four. Most of these photos are familiar to anyone who has read her autobiography, *The Story of a Soul*, in one of its countless editions, or who has picked up books of her prayers, poems, or letters. Her sister Céline was the photographer in the family, and perhaps because she and Thérèse were closest in age, Céline succeeded in capturing the spirit of her younger sister. She is the child, open-faced and already in love with prayers and piety. She is the adolescent with hair arranged to make her look more grown up—on her way to ask the bishop if she could break rules and tradition to join a convent years before an admissible age. She is a novice, then a fully vowed nun, sober yet content in her work at the Carmelite convent in Lisieux, France. This convent is referred to throughout her story and letters simply as "the Carmel."

In every photograph the eyes reveal a quiet knowing. Here is a person who has figured out very early in life where her heart belongs—with Jesus. Here is a young woman who has made hard choices of the soul before many people have begun even to face their souls in an honest way. Here is person without a college degree who is one of a handful of people in history named "Doctor of the Church."

This series of portraits on the wall provides a short history of Thérèse. In the center of the room, roped off with thick velvet cords, are various artifacts that do the same: a little drum she played as a child, a swatch of blanket from her simple bed in the convent, a tiny piece of her "wedding" dress worn on the day she took her vows, a handwritten note of encouragement to one of the novices she trained, her prayer book, open and displayed in a small glass case. All year long, people come to this room to view the bits and pieces of Thérèse's life. They want to feel a little closer to her. They want to kneel in front of her statue and say *thank you*, or ask for help.

People trust Thérèse. She is young and unlettered and therefore not intimidating in the way St. Augustine might be, or even St. Teresa of Avila, who created a home for Thérèse when she reformed the Carmelite order centuries before Thérèse was born. Thérèse admits, through her writings and her conversations, that because of

her youth and various weaknesses of soul, she must thrive spiritually in a "little way" for God. This posture toward the spiritual life is undoubtedly the key to her popularity among millions of people down through the decades. Thérèse discovered, for all of us, that any person can please and love God, through the smallest and most insignificant means. We don't have to be big and important and heroic. We simply have to give God our love, and trust God to love us. This little way to spiritual maturity has opened up a grand thoroughfare for people longing after an authentic experience with God. This is why so many of us wander along those velvet ropes in awe and gratitude, why we gaze at her picture and feel some relief. She was just a child, just a girl, just a young nun with stars in her eyes for Jesus. Here's a person we can walk alongside, a person to whom we can confess our own fears, weaknesses, and immaturity.

Present-day onlookers would likely think of Marie Françoise Thérèse Martin, born January 2, 1873, as an odd child. And if we were to analyze her family life through the lens of twenty-first-century psychology, we would understand immediately that she could never turn out to be anything but a little odd. Both her parents were such devout Catholics that they had each tried, earlier in life, to enter monastic life. Such a life did not work out for either of them, and so they

married, had nine children (five of whom survived), and proceeded to create a home filled with prayer, devotion, sanctity, and a spiritual sensibility remarkable even for nineteenth-century France. An early edition of Thérèse's autobiography offers this description in an introductory chapter about her parents:

> "O my God"—[Zélie] repeated constantly—"since I am unworthy to be Thy Spouse . . . I shall enter the married state to fulfill Thy Holy Will, and I beseech Thee to make me the mother of many children, and to grant that all of them may be dedicated to Thee." God gave ear to her prayer, and His Finger was visible in the circumstances which led to her becoming the wife of Louis Martin. . . . They were joined together in matrimony—"solely for the love of children, in whom God's Name might be blessed for ever and ever." Nine white flowers bloomed in this sacred garden. Of the nine, four were transplanted to Paradise ere their buds had quite unfolded, while five were gathered in God's walled gardens upon earth, one entering the Visitation Convent at Caen, the others the Carmel of Lisieux.

Thérèse was the baby of the family and, obviously to everyone, the crowning joy of her father.

He called her his little queen, and even into her teen years, she referred to him as her king. Thérèse, along with her four older sisters, enjoyed a comfortable, middle-class life. Mother, father, and girls attended Mass often and prayed daily as a family. Moral and spiritual instruction was woven into the girls' ordinary moments and activities, and early on their mother, Zélie, recognized in their little Thérèse a strong spiritual aptitude. She remarked in a letter: "This poor little one is our happiness, she will be good, you can already see it coming. All she talks about is God; she wouldn't miss saying her prayers for anything."

When Thérèse was only four, Zélie died of breast cancer, and this shattering loss was the first of several that would shape Thérèse's formative years. After her mother's death, the baby of the family claimed the second eldest sister, Pauline, as her new mother, and Pauline took upon herself Thérèse's care, including spiritual formation. Understandably, Thérèse grew extremely attached to Pauline, so much so that when Pauline decided five years later to join the Carmelite Order, nine-year-old Thérèse was so distraught that she became ill. When Pauline left home for life in a cloistered convent, Thérèse clung to the eldest sister, Marie. When, in her twenties, Thérèse would write her autobiography, she would mention numerous times and with great affection how well these sisters had cared for her and

helped shape her character and spirituality. Four years after Pauline's departure, Marie followed her to the convent. By this time Thérèse already felt called to become a Carmelite herself. While she remained at home, she took comfort in the constant companionship of Céline, the sister closest to her in age.

As a small child, Thérèse thoroughly enjoyed prayers, the Mass, and devotional practices in general. This love only deepened as she dealt with her mother's death and her sisters' departures from family life. As a young girl she developed a habit of going off by herself, hiding behind a bed or in a closet, to simply think about God the Father, and about Jesus. This sort of spiritual attention is fairly natural to children, something psychologists and experts in faith formation have established in recent times. Thérèse herself realized later that she had been practicing a form of contemplation. And, just as any of us picks up patterns of expression from parents and siblings, her conversations became sprinkled with talk of love and service, sacrifice and humility, all frequent topics of discussion in her household.

It's not surprising that Thérèse did not find companionship outside her own family. She didn't connect with other children at school and seemed to have little interest in events out in "the world" at large. Her own world was small and well-insulated from any culture or viewpoint different from

what she experienced at home and church. Because her father and sisters had doted on her, she was for the most part spoiled, self-involved, and hypersensitive—qualities she readily confessed to in her writings, years later. The sensitivity turned out to be a spiritual gift, but for a child bereft of her mother and then two of her favorite sisters-turned-foster-mothers, such tenderness of heart was the source of much pain and distress. Even she understood, as she grew older, that some of her illnesses during that time were in part her own doing, her ability to translate emotional and spiritual distress into severe physical symptoms. What is not so apparent, at first reading of Thérèse's written memories, is that underneath her genuine spiritual appetite and pious language lay a strong will.

During her early adolescence the desire to become a Carmelite nun grew into a strong conviction. She made this known to her sisters and father when she was fourteen. Although Louis Martin was saddened at the prospect of losing one more daughter to the cloister, he respected her wishes and took her to meet with the bishop, because the Superior of Carmel had already made it clear that Thérèse could not enter until age twenty-one. The bishop's decision could alter this. Unfortunately, the bishop was not convinced; perhaps he saw in Thérèse a precious sort of devotion that he feared would prove thin and

short-lived when subjected to real life inside the cloister.

Thérèse was not that easily defeated. Soon after this her father took her and Céline on a pilgrimage to Rome, where they had an audience with Pope Leo XIII. Although they, along with the other pilgrims in line, were instructed not to speak to the pontiff, Thérèse knelt before him and asked that, in honor of his jubilee, she be allowed to enter the Carmel at age fifteen. At first he simply told her to do what her superiors told her. The assistants motioned for Thérèse to rise and move on, but she grabbed the pope's knees and said, "Oh, Most Holy Father, if you were to say yes, everyone would be willing!" The Pope looked into her eyes and said, "All right . . . all right. You will enter if it is God's will." Even this did not satisfy the girl completely; the assistants literally had to pick her up and move her away from the pontiff!

That winter, Thérèse learned that she would be allowed to enter the novitiate after Lent. Her fervent prayers had been answered.

PRAYER IN THE CARMELITE CONVENT

It is impossible to understand Thérèse without understanding the Carmelite order she joined at age fifteen, in which she eventually took her

final vows, and in which she died at age twenty-four. She would live out her short life in "the Carmel" (as it was called in her conversations and writings) in the town of Lisieux, where her father and remaining sister lived near the family of Zélie's sister and brother-in-law. The spiritual practices of the Carmel fit Thérèse's personality and her family's perceptions of Christian devotion and commitment. The vocabulary used by the Carmelite nuns had been familiar to her from an early age. And her developing ideas about a life calling and an intimacy with God were greatly influenced by life as a Carmelite nun. Some of those ideas seem severe, even unhealthy, to us today. But at that time the Carmelites practiced a form of faith that was considered difficult but well within God's design for a life committed to Christian prayer and service. They lived very simply, in unheated rooms, with few possessions and each nun to a "cell"—a very small room sparsely furnished with a bench and uncomfortable bed. Thérèse and her religious sisters literally prayed for hours each day, did physical labor several hours each day, and fasted regularly—in fact, the reason Thérèse was not allowed to enter the convent at the first of the year was that her older sisters, who were already nuns there, feared that the long fast of the Lenten season would be too severe for a fifteen-year-old girl. Carmelites also practiced self-flagellation—physical whipping

for the purpose of disciplining the body—which was not uncommon in religious orders of the day.

The Carmelite order was named for Mt. Carmel of biblical account, where the prophet Elijah faced down the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:20–40). During the twelfth century, a group of men lived on the slopes of the mountain range in Palestine known as Carmel, seeking a life of prayer and contemplation. A few decades later, St. Albert, Patriarch of Jerusalem, wrote a rule for them to follow, which was subsequently amended and approved by Pope Innocent IV. This order followed a strict way of life, dedicated to prayer and self-sacrifice. In the thirteenth century, these men left the mountains to live out their devotion elsewhere, and by the fourteenth century they were joined by sister Carmelites of convents in Spain and Italy.

Along with most other religious orders, the Carmelites fell into disarray and corruption during the sixteenth century. In Spain, Carmelite houses were restored largely by the work of St. Teresa of Avila, and the men and women of that order renamed themselves the Discalced Carmelites (*discalced* means "without shoes"—indicating a return to the sort of poverty practiced by the original Carmelites). The writings and teachings of St. Teresa remained influential in the daily life of the Carmel at Lisieux, where great emphasis was placed upon prayer, contemplation, and work.

It was into this way of life little Thérèse, with much ardor and determination, immersed herself. From childhood she had learned, from mother and older sisters especially, that suffering can be a good thing when offered to God for the good of others. Suffering was a major theme in Thérèse's life, and this became even more significant once she had become Jesus' bride. We might wonder about the glory she attributed to suffering and the way she revered the smallest slight or persecution as an opportunity to grow in God's love and favor. But this attitude was in keeping with what people considered Christian piety at that time—and is not so different from Catholic attitudes even in recent decades, about "offering up" our trials and burdens to the Lord. In this context, one aspect of our suffering is that it provides a way for us to be joined with Christ, who suffered for all. In fact, in some mysterious way, we can suffer on behalf of others, taking upon ourselves the sorrow for their sins and interceding for them as we suffer. It's almost as if we are helping Christ to carry the burden of the world's sin, and likewise that we share with Christ in bringing grace to others by submitting in love to our own suffering. This theology of suffering is referenced in the New Testament Epistles that speak of our being in the fellowship of Christ's sufferings, or of being partakers in Christ's suffering.

As to prayer, Thérèse found both fruitfulness and frustration at the Carmel. She deepened her private prayer and meditation, taking more and more joy in her time with God, whether before a picture of Jesus' suffering face, or in Jesus' presence in the Eucharist, or in the silence and loneliness of her cell. What frustrated her—or, rather, what brought out frustration with herself—was the communal prayer, the praying of the offices. Christopher O'Donnell describes a typical day of prayer at the Carmel:

> In Thérèse's time, the Office was spread throughout the day. But the time at which the parts were said no longer reflected the original meaning of each part. In winter the sisters rose at 5:45 AM, and, after an hour of silent prayer, said all the small hours—Prime, Terce, Sext, and None. Vespers were said at 2 PM and Compline at 7:40 PM. Matins and Lauds, which took between 75 and 100 minutes, were said at 9 PM. (In Summer the nuns rose an hour earlier, and everything was advanced by sixty minutes to allow for a siesta or rest period at 1 PM.)

This prayer schedule would be daunting for anyone, but keep in mind that the offices were chanted or sung in Latin. So it's not surprising that Thérèse wished she could connect better with the

Divine Office. She sometimes fell asleep during community prayer. She was obedient to the prayers around the clock, but it seems that her best prayer was in silence, isolation, and contemplation.

MENTAL PRAYER

In being attracted to solitude and prayerful meditation, Thérèse was following in the footsteps of her founding Carmelite saint, St. Teresa of Avila. The great reformer of the order had not only brought its religious back to a lifestyle of true poverty, work, and prayer but had, along with fellow Carmelite St. John of the Cross, further developed the concept of mental prayer.

Teresa and John were both what we would call natural mystics. They used vocal prayer—that is, prayers of the regular liturgies and of the Divine Hours—but much of their most profound spiritual formation and communion with God happened during times of silence, solitude, meditation, and deeper contemplation. Their writings, with which young Thérèse was quite familiar as a Carmelite, testified to the kind of union with God that happened when a person was alone and focused simply upon God's presence.

Thérèse was also a natural for mental prayer. In fact, traditional modes of prayer were often difficult for her.

> "I feel then that the fervor of my sisters makes up for my lack of fervor; but when alone (I am ashamed to admit it), the recitation of the rosary is more difficult for me than the wearing of an instrument of penance. . . . I force myself in vain to meditate on the mysteries of the rosary; I don't succeed in fixing my mind on them. . . ." When she felt so arid that it was "impossible to draw forth one single thought to unite me with God, I *very slowly* recite an 'Our Father.'" Though no more conscious of what was occurring than she had been conscious of praying in the old days [as a child] when she sat behind her bed and thought about God, Thérèse's difficulty with conventional forms signaled, according to the teaching of John of the Cross, the call to contemplation.

Not only did Thérèse have trouble with vocal prayers, she didn't take easily to spiritual direction either. She was willing, but with the exception of one priest she had known briefly, but who subsequently moved away, she had difficulty connecting spiritually to a confessor:

> I went to confession only a few times, and never spoke about my interior sentiments. The way I was walking was so straight, so clear, I needed no other guide but Jesus. I

> compared directors to faithful mirrors, reflecting Jesus in souls, and I said that for me God was using no intermediary, he was acting directly!

For Thérèse, as with most mystics, her spiritual nature tended toward solitude and a fellowship with the Divine that was as profound as it was uncomplicated.

Still, contemplation was not merely a matter of sitting around and allowing thoughts of God to float to the surface. Often a person would use an image to focus upon—for Thérèse it was sometimes a picture of the Holy Face of Jesus. Sometimes she used a prayer such as the "Our Father." Thérèse mentioned that this was at least a beginning point.

But what most commonly informed Thérèse's long hours of mental prayer were the Scriptures, and more specifically, the Gospels. This aspect of her life is discussed later, but it's important to connect it here with the mental prayer she practiced. Without the Gospels—without God's revelation as a foundation—any sort of contemplation would have been meaningless to Thérèse—as it would have been to Mother Teresa of Avila, whose own words were a regular part of the young nun's life.

For Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, Thérèse of Lisieux, and others, mental prayer has served as a powerful spiritual discipline for placing

themselves in God's presence with few, if any, outer trappings. Most mystics don't seek this kind of relationship; rather, it is their most honest and natural mode of being with their God.

LOVING JESUS

When Thérèse took her final vows as a Carmelite nun, she wore a wedding dress and veil. Women in religious orders at that time took quite literally their role as brides of Christ. They used love language to describe their relationship with him. However we view this today—as perhaps repressed or at least sublimated sexuality—when Thérèse took the veil, she was choosing what to many was an option preferable to marriage. After all, marriages were often arranged or at least entered into for primarily financial, political, or pragmatic reasons. And once married, a woman could count on having children fairly continuously and, subsequently, might expect to die young from childbirth or complications surrounding it. A married woman was not her own person but more or less the property of her husband. She was expected to serve and obey him and to act in a way publicly that would bring honor to the family. If she belonged to the middle or upper class, she had some opportunities for education, but responsibilities to husband and children trumped all other dreams or desires.

Little wonder that so many young women chose marriage to Jesus rather than to another human. Jesus would not burden them with sexual demands and multiple pregnancies. Jesus' love would always be perfect, never cruel and oppressive, as human love could sometimes be. And, in their union with Jesus, they could bring God's love to others on a much grander scale. Rather than tending to the spiritual lives of their own offspring, they would pray night and day for the whole world. They would offer their hard beds, unheated rooms, rigorous schedules, and long loneliness for the salvation of others.

Thérèse had loved Jesus since earliest childhood. For her, entrance into the Carmelite way simply allowed her to love Jesus more completely and without worldly distractions. She never appeared to be interested in traditional marriage. And although life in the convent was hard, she claimed that it was what she had imagined—no unpleasant surprises. Unfortunately, she didn't connect with the community of sisters and her Mother Superior much better than she had with her classmates years before. She continued to be the odd one, the youngest person in the room whose enthusiasm for faith seemed a little too good to be true and whose fervent spiritual practice sometimes made others uncomfortable.

Given her history—middle-class childhood, high sensitivity and emotional neediness, a series of

deep hurts and disappointments—we might expect that life in the convent would only push Thérèse into emotional shutdown or worse. (Her father suffered an episode of mental illness not quite a year after Thérèse left home for the Carmel.) However, Thérèse—despite her childishness and naiveté—truly was called by God to serve as a Carmelite. As time passed, she was able to take hold of her own soul and allow Jesus' love and the Holy Spirit's power to use her hurt to shape and discipline her. She took upon herself the practice of what she termed the "Little Way," giving herself completely to the ordinary details of life because, she reasoned, she would never be a spiritual giant (After all, she kept sleeping through prayers!).

When she contracted tuberculosis at age twenty-three, she received the diagnosis as a final calling to suffer for Jesus, to somehow accomplish through her own hardship the holy work of the world's salvation, continuing the work Jesus' suffering had begun.

It took her roughly fourteen months to die, and during that time, at the Mother Superior's request, Thérèse continued a task she had begun a few years earlier: writing the story of her life and of her soul's development. At that time she was also training novices, becoming for them a sort of spiritual director. That she was given this responsibility is evidence that the Mother Superior recognized in