

An interview with Robert J. Edmonson, CJ, concerning Edmonson's new translation of St. Thérèse of Lisieux's autobiography, *The Story of a Soul*:

*** This book is part of Paraclete Press's classics series. Can you tell our audience what that is?**

Paraclete Press is trying to preserve, and make available to our readers, many Christian books that have stood the test of time and have something important to say to readers in our fast-paced twenty-first-century world.

*** On the chance that some of our audience might not be familiar with St. Thérèse of Lisieux, can you tell us briefly who she was?**

St. Thérèse was born in northwestern France in 1873 and died of tuberculosis in 1897 at the age of 24. The youngest of nine children, of whom four died early, she lost her mother when she was four and was raised by her saintly father and her four surviving sisters.

Her quest to join two of her sisters in the Carmelite convent by becoming a nun at the age of 15 took her all the way to Rome to appeal to the Holy Father. When the authorities determined that she truly had a vocation, and was not just copying her sisters, her unusual request was granted. This began a period of nine years that led to this young girl's becoming a saint.

*** St. Thérèse lived over a century ago. Why is she still so popular?**

Thérèse is perhaps one of the most beloved of saints because she is so accessible. Some saints, such as Augustine, might seem too cerebral, and others, such as Francis de Sales, might seem too holy for ordinary people to relate to. Thérèse set out to be little, to be child-like, and to be God's humble little flower. Every one of us can relate to that.

*** Why is St. Thérèse known as "The Little Flower"?**

Thérèse may have called herself by this name because she had a favorite child's picture book that illustrated an anonymous nineteenth-century poem called *The Divine Prisoner's Little Flower*. A rare English translation of that poem can be found on the paracletepress.com website. Thérèse called herself a little flower beginning with the first pages of *The Story of a Soul*, and the name has stayed with her ever since.

*** St. Thérèse never intended to write a book. How did *The Story of a Soul* get published?**

Perhaps sensing that her little sister was destined to become a saint, in 1894 Thérèse's sister Pauline asked her to write down the story of her soul, a story that was intended originally only as a personal reflection from one nun to another.

After Thérèse's death, Pauline gathered the notebooks, edited them to eliminate overly personal stories, and sent them to a priest who had led retreats at the convent. It was Dom Madelaine who suggested the book's title and its chapter divisions.

The edited manuscript was sent out to other Carmelite houses in place of the obituary that is usually sent to other houses at the death of a nun or monk. The first printing of 2,000 copies brought a demand for another, then another and another, and by the time Thérèse was canonized in 1925, twenty million copies had been sold in France alone, besides the millions of copies sold in other languages.

*** There are other translations of *The Story of a Soul* on the market. Why do we need a new one?**

Numerous English-language editions of the book have been released since the early 1900s, including the Carmelite Fr. John Clarke's translation from 1975, which set a high standard. No translation replaces a previous one, but adds another dimension to it, in the same way that the Revised Standard Version of the Bible didn't replace the King James Version, or, in a Catholic context, the New American Bible didn't replace the Jerusalem Bible or the Douay-Rheims, all of which have their place.

Paraclete Press felt there was a need for a new translation of *The Story of a Soul* that would:

- Use contemporary North American English, in contrast to the British language of many other translations,
- Be complete and unabridged, including stories that are often left out of other versions, thus giving the reader access to every word that this Doctor of the Church wrote in her autobiography,
- Include short, helpful notes in brackets directly within the text to help the reader understand names, places, and events that would otherwise be unclear without some explanation, and thus avoid the reader's needing to flip pages to read endnotes, and
- Reach a new readership with the message of "The Little Flower" in a beautifully presented new paperback edition that contains an insightful introduction to Saint Thérèse and to her book.

*** Many of us have heard of St. Thérèse's "little way." What is that?**

I'll let Thérèse tell you herself, in this passage from the book:

"I want to seek the means of going to heaven by a little way that is very straight, very short, a completely new little way.

"We're in an age of inventions. Now there's no more need to climb the steps of a staircase. In rich homes there are elevators that replace stairs to great advantage. I would also like to find an elevator to lift me up to Jesus, because I'm too little to climb the rough staircase of perfection. So I sought in the holy books the indication of the elevator that is the object of my desire, and I read these words that come from the mouth of Eternal Wisdom: 'Let all who are simple come to my house.' So I came, suspecting that I had found what I was looking for, and wanting to know, God, what You would do with the simple little one who would respond to Your call.

"I've continued my search, and here is what I've found: 'As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you. . . . [Y]ou will nurse and be carried on her arm and dandled on her knees.' Oh! Never have words more tender, more melodious, come to rejoice my soul. The elevator that must lift me up to heaven is Your arms, Jesus! For that I do not need to become big. On the contrary, I have to stay little—may I become little, more and more."

*** Pope John Paul II declared St. Thérèse a Doctor of the Church. When did that happen? Can you tell our audience what he said about her?**

Of the thirty-three Doctors of the Church, only three are women: St. Catherine of Siena, St. Teresa of Avila, and this youngest of all the Doctors. No better explanation of Thérèse's contribution to all of Christendom can be given than that of Pope John Paul II, in his homily of October 19, 1997:

"Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face is the youngest of all the 'doctors of the Church,' but her ardent spiritual journey shows such maturity, and the insights of faith expressed in her writings are so vast and profound that they deserve a place among the great spiritual masters. . . .

"Thérèse of Lisieux did not only grasp and describe the profound truth of Love as the centre and heart of the Church, but in her short life she lived it intensely. It is precisely this convergence of doctrine and concrete experience, of truth and life, of teaching and practice, which shines with particular brightness in this saint, and which makes her an attractive model especially for young people and for those who are seeking true meaning for their life."

*** You've said that the book contains some charming stories. Would you please share one?**

One childhood event revealed much about the future saint's character. "One day Léonie [an older sister], thinking she was now too big to play with dolls, came and found us both with a basket full of dresses and pretty little pieces of cloth intended to make others; on top was sitting her doll. 'Here, little sisters,' she said, 'you choose, I'm giving you all this.' Céline [another sister] stuck out her hand and took a little ball of yarn that she liked. After thinking about it for a moment, I in turn stuck out my hand and said, 'I choose all!' And I took the basket without further ceremony."

Reflecting on this incident, Thérèse wrote, "This childhood trait sums up my whole life. . . . I understood that in order to become a saint you have to suffer a lot, always be in search of what is the most

perfect, and forget yourself. I understood that there are many degrees of perfection, and that each soul is free to respond to Our Lord's advances, to do little or much for Him—in a word, to choose among the sacrifices that He requires. Then, just as in the days of my childhood, I cried out, 'Dear God, I choose all. I don't want to be a halfway saint. It doesn't scare me to suffer for You; I'm afraid of only one thing, and that is to hold onto my will. Take it, because "I choose all," all that You want! . . .'

*** What's the single most important thought from St. Thérèse that you'd like to leave with our audience?**

Here's a passage from near the end of the book:

"Since Jesus went back up into heaven, I can follow Him only by the prints that He left behind. But those prints are so resplendent that they're perfumed! I have only to cast my eyes on the Holy Gospel, and immediately I breathe the perfumes of Jesus' life, and I know in which direction to run. . . . It's not to the first place, but to the last one, that I cast myself. Instead of pressing forward with the Pharisee, I repeat, full of confidence, the humble prayer of the tax collector.

"But above all I imitate Mary Magdalene's behavior, her surprising—or rather her loving—audaciousness that charmed Jesus' Heart and captivates mine. Yes, I feel it. Even when I might have on my conscience all the sins that can be committed, I would go with a heart broken with repentance to throw myself into Jesus' arms, because I know how much He cherishes the prodigal who comes back to Him."

Such humility and such hope radiates from this passage!

Just before St. Thérèse died, she told her sisters that she would spend her heaven doing good on earth, and would send a shower of roses. For well over a century, St. Thérèse of Lisieux's words have brought a spiritual shower of roses to all who have read them. It is to that aim that this new edition is offered.