

ST THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX AND THE WORD OF GOD

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St. Thérèse and the New Catechism

Among the great achievements of the Church in the last few years is the publication of the Book of Catechism. Bishop Christoph Schonborn of Vienna, secretary in charge of the 24,000 amendments to be included to the original text of the Catechism, in his presentation of the Catechism to the French bishops reunited at Lourdes, expressed the importance of the role given to the saints in this endeavour: "The saints have a special role in this Catechism. After all the saints retain "the last word" at the end of each chapter. Therefore we find Saint Radegonde and Saint Joan of Arc, Catherine of Sienna and Teresa of Avila, Rose of Lima and Elizabeth of the Trinity. And, evidently the Little Flower...".

In fact, Saint Thérèse of Lisieux is in the forefront with six citations taken from her writings: one from each of her manuscripts (A, B, C) which form the classic spiritual autobiography *Story of a Soul*, one from her *Act of Offering to Merciful Love*, one from her *Letters*, and one from the *Last Conversations*. Of these six citations, two strike us for obvious reasons:

"I believe, we believe" (par. 127)

In the first part of the Catechism text, entitled "I believe, we believe", which underlines the importance of the Scriptures, Saint Thérèse is quoted as a living example for the New Testament, saying: "It is especially the Gospels which sustain me during my hours of prayer; in them I find all that is necessary for my poor little soul. I am

always discovering in them new lights, hidden and mysterious meanings" (Ms A 83v).

Christian Prayer (Part IV, par. 2558, the realization of the faith we profess)

Teresa also introduces us to the fourth part of the Catechism, on Christian prayer, with her famous definition: "For me, prayer is an aspiration of the heart, it is a simple glance directed towards heaven, it is a cry of gratitude and love in the midst of trial as well as joy" (Ms B 25r). [Other translation: "For me, prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned towards heaven, it is a cry of recognition and of love embracing both trial and joy."]

This follows Thérèse's unique role in the magisterium of the Church, according to her own wish: "In spite of my littleness, I would like to enlighten souls as did the prophets, the Doctors; I have the vocation to be an apostle" (Ms B 3r). Her gospel teaching of abandoning oneself to God's Merciful Love in simplicity and child-like attitude has been read by millions of people in the pages of her autobiography, *Story of a Soul*, and her other writings. The movement to have her declared Doctor of the Church, thus, arised from an inner need: to confirm the special role which she enjoys as TEACHER OF THE EVANGELICAL LIFE (BENEDICT XVI)

Inspired by the upcoming Synod of Bishops on the Word of God, our Carmelite brethren, the O.Carms have recently published a document on their web-site about the Word of God and Carmel.

We must seek the dynamics of a guiding wisdom which includes three elements:

- a Word of God which seizes us, shapes us, and instils the "vivere in obsequio Jesu Christi" in us, accompanied by the

faithfulness of the Virgin Mary, all Carmelite saints, authors and tradition.

- a Word of God which calls us, convokes us, and instructs us, as a listening community of followers, journeying together in prayerful truth towards the wellspring of eternal life, always open to knowing the tender love of God in union with Him.

- a Word of God which awakens us, inspires us, and sends us, beyond the limit of the routine and familiar, to hear the words spoken to Elijah: "Get up and go."

From these three tenets, the Word of God in our Carmelite spirituality can inspire us, enfold us, and impel us to live out our calling to its fullest extent in our modern day, so that we may share without measure what we have received in abundance.

Long before the biblical renewal in the Church, long before the Second Vatican Council that placed the Word of God at the heart of Christian life, a young Carmelite, unknown among the Carmels in her province, was rendering a great service to the Church and Carmel: she was casting her nets deep in the hidden mysteries of this Word to discover her own route towards a merciful Father revealed in Jesus Christ. She was an inspiration to Carmel so much so that it was she who placed once again the Word of God as the corner-stone of Carmelite spirituality – together with Elizabeth of the Trinity. In their youthful energy they regained for Carmel what was lost along the ages, namely to have the inspired Word of God as the mile-stone of spirituality, as today it is for all theological methods and disciplines.

The Rule of St Albert, Patriarch of Jerusalem, is clearly a gem-stone of *lectio divina*. Two thirds of it are biblical quotations, not taken literally always, but most of the time they become the very language Albert uses to express himself... thus showing his familiarity with the Word of God. Such were the Fathers of the Church. St. Thérèse follows in his footsteps, as we shall see later on. The Rule is also a master piece of letter-writing of medieval times. Its value is found in its inspiration to lay out the Carmelite way of life: a biblical-classical Christ centred way of life.

Yet with the many elaborations accomplished throughout the centuries, these works took the place of Scripture. Reference to Scripture was rather rare in spiritual writings, or rather they were pushed to the background, so to speak. The Holy Spirit moved the spirit of St Thérèse to bring to the fore the inspired Word.

To do this, he took hold of Thérèse's Little Way. The spontaneity, simplicity, freedom of spirit, courage and perseverance are in fact traits of those who journey towards God in the spirituality of little ones. Thus she was opened to the wisdom of the Holy Scriptures. She was in no great need of teachings prompted by learned and wise men, because she found at first hand that it is true that Jesus reveals his secrets to the little and humble. "For simple souls, there is no need of complicated means" (C 33v).

Thérèse discovered the passion for reading while still attending the Benedictine Abbey of Lisieux, and continued with the lessons carried by Mme Papinau. She was 14 at this time in her life. "At this stage in my life – she admittedly remarks – I was taken by a great desire to know."

More astonishing for her time was what Celine revealed during the process of beatification what Thérèse had confided in her: "If I had been a priest, I would have studied at length Hebrew and Greek, in order to understand the divine thought just as God was pleased to express it in our human language". Because as the same witness testifies: "The differences between translations grieved her" (PO 275). At this same time, in Jerusalem (1890), a certain Fr. Lagrange, a Dominican, opens a Biblical School, which already at its beginning was immediately contested and denounced to Rome as "rationalist and also protestant."

TO MEDITATE NIGHT AND DAY THE LAW OF THE LORD

Scholars, such as Urs Von Balthasar, remark how brilliantly Thérèse was able to achieve that kind of "freedom and an amazing magisterial grip of texts not only from the New Testament but also from the Old".

During her nine years of religious life, she followed the Rule of Carmel that ordained to each and every one: “meditate day and night the law of the Lord.” The entire Rule was read in the refectory on Fridays. Thérèse could hear: “Each stays in his cell, or close by, meditating day and night on God’s law, and being vigilant in prayer, unless one is occupied in other legitimate occupations.”

It is surely not Mother Mary of the Angels, Thérèse’s mistresses of novices, who could teach Thérèse in this domain of the Bible. As was customary in all Carmels of the time, one could not find an integral copy of the Bible since it was frowned upon, morally speaking, “indecent”. Three centuries earlier, Teresa of Jesus, our Mother Reformer, also could say that she never had at her disposal a complete Bible in Castilian.

Maybe it would be an exaggeration to claim that Thérèse never held in her hand an integral copy of the Bible. The Guerin Family had several copies. But did they have them before 1888? Since she was commissioned to prepare the theatrical plays for the community, it would be likely that she had permission to consult the library, but these short intervals were not enough to research deeply a given text (only Mother Prioress, the Sub-Prioress and the librarian had lending access to the library. Other sisters had to have special permission from Mother Prioress (and the novices from the Sister Mistress) to lend books from the library. Some books were left at the room before the chapel (l’avant chœur) (?). This was a great handicap for someone who wished to scrutinize the Word of God.

Yet all the testimonies of the sisters of her community agree unanimously on this point. All the Bibles were tampered with (frappes): They concur:

“She had a rare knowledge of Holy Scriptures, and for the rest (mill-bqija) one can judge from her way to explain them and discovering the meaning, in the history of her soul, in such a way that one can say it was a marvel” (Mary of the Angels PA 349), they were “the daily nutrition of her interior life” (Teresa of St Augustine PA 330). “Several (people/nuns) have remarked how with which penetration and which “justesse” she used in every way the thoughts and texts of Holy Scripture (Frances-Thérèse PO 493, 352), and others.

Even priests who knew her shared the same opinion: Canon Maupas, Superior of Carmel, remarks how the Scriptures were applied in every page of her Story of a Soul and in such a correct manner. The same, Fr. Godefroy Madelaine, abbot at Mondaye, first reader and censor of the autobiographical manuscripts, would say at the Ordinary Process: “I marked particularly the right employment she did without ceasing of the Holy Script.”

Yet one might think that Thérèse’s knowledge of Scripture derived from continuous reading allowed in her monastic life. That would mean two errors: first her time to write, let alone read, was limited due to her other duties in community; she wrote at intervals, for example at night. The religious community life did not permit any specific time for Bible reading.

Secondly her familiarity with the Word of God was manifested spontaneously. For example during a conversation. On one such occasion, Sr Marie of Jesus testifies: “During a conversation I had with her regarding the state of my soul, I was astonished how this sister, so young, was able to show me so well the mercy of God, quoting to me passages from the psalms so easily as if she were reading them out of a

book.” And again Sr Marie of the Trinity: “The books of the Holy Scriptures, in particular the holy gospels were her delices, their hidden meaning became enlightened, she interpreted them in an admirable fashion. During her conversations, during direction with her, some passage from these books always came to the fore, just like a source, supporting what she was saying. One would believe as if she knew them by heart.”

Let us remember also that Thérèse was gifted with a brilliant memory; contrary to our Holy Mother Teresa of Jesus, she had an excellent memory (Ms A 13v). On the day of her entry in Carmel Mother Marie de Gonzague was surprised when she recited by heart Chapter 7 of the second book of the Imitation. Another time, reports Mother Agnes of Jesus, Thérèse was gravely ill in the infirmary: “She asked me to read to her Sunday’s gospel. I didn’t have the prayer book and simply told her: It’s the Gospel in which the Lord admonishes us: “No one can serve two masters”. Then she assumed the voice of a child who recites a lesson and told it to me...” (CJ 12.9). Again, a few days before her death, Thérèse was able to recite by memory verses 24 to 33 of chapter 6 of the Gospel of St Matthew.

Sr Genevieve, the beneficiary of the letters that contain the most biblical references of her little sister, provides us with the best summary of the witnesses: “Above all she assimilated, promptly and with sure appreciation, the passages of Holy Scripture which were, in Carmel, her greatest treasure. She discovered its hidden meaning and made astonishing applications of it” (CSG 79).

THE SOURCES OF LIVING WATER
The Canticle of Celine PN 18, str.34

a) The Liturgy

One can never insist enough on the importance of the liturgy as a living source for Thérèse since her childhood days.

At Alençon, at the Notre-Dame Church, she was unable to understand any of the readings rendered in Latin, but the first sermon that struck her was on the passion of Jesus (A 17v). At home, at first at rue Saint Blaise, and later at les Buissonnets, she was initiated into biblical history, among others (fost l-ohrajn) the familial reading of l'ANNE LITURGIQUE of Dom Gueranger, pioneer of monastic renewal. Readings continued later in the refectory of Carmel. In the monastery, Thérèse lived the rythm of the Office that shaped the year, the season, the week and the day. The readings of Advent, and particularly those of Isaiah for Lent familiarised the young sister to the different stages of history of salvation (or salvation in history).

The daily recitation of the psalms, the readings of the Office, penetrated slowly but surely in her spirit. Latin was not an unsurmountable obstacle since complete translations were available. The previous night the French edition of the readings from the Office of Matins was read out loud in the refectory. And after Matins, as a preparation for mental prayer for the following day, the MEDITATIONS ON THE MYSTERIES OF FAITH AND ON THE EPISTLES AND GOSPELS EXTRACTED FROM HOLY SCRIPTURE AND THE FATHERS (of the Church)" were read.

b) Personal readings

Thérèse as a child the use of catechisms, abridged Bible stories and the Life of Jesus

were available to her. They were episodes more or less picturesque. I cannot leave unmentioned the story of Tobias and his dog, a fiction story she wrote for her French class addressed to her father who had just returned from a long trip (LTS 18a in CG1).

A verse from Job she loved to quote frequently, up till her days lying on her death bed: "Quand meme Dieu me tueriat, I will continue to have hope in him." Words that "marvelled (ravie) her since her childhood" (CJ 7.7.3). Most probably she found it at about 11 years of age in one of the books available to her (La Theologie des plantes ou Histiiore intime du monde vegetal" by Fr Chaude').

Her accompanying book from early childhood was The Imitation of Christ, which she learned by heart (A 47r). Already having biblical overtones, Fr. Lamemennais wrote comments to the biblical citations contained in this little book, and one could find 200 quotes from the psalms.

In the Spring of 1887, the adolescent Thérèse discovered the conferences of Abbe' Arminjon, THE END OF THE PRESENT WORLD AND MYSTERIES OF THE FUTURE LIFE, a "reading which was also one of the great graces of (her) life" (A 47v). Especially the 7th conference enlightened struck her intensely (The Eternal Beatitude and the Supernatural Vision of God". She copied passages after passages from the the book. The biblical index of the book reveals its wealth of citations: about 195 Old Testament quotes and 400 from the New Testament in the second edition of 1882. Thérèse discovered, among other books, the book of Revelations.

In Carmel, her sources were much more abundant. She discovered thick breviaries,

like the Proper of the Order, Missals, and Manual of Christians, etc.

“At the ages of 17 and 18 I had no other spiritual nourishment than the works of our holy Father St John of the Cross. How many lights have I not drawn from them” (A 83r). At this stage in her life, she read Scripture through these writings of our holy Father, an abundant use (in the four major works of 900 pages: 597 references to the Old Testament and 327 to the New Testament). Her preferred citations she found were from the Canticle of Canticles.

But, as she herself recounts, all books soon left her empty (aridity). “In this helplessness, Holy Scripture and the Imitation 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” (83r-v). This dates to the year 1892 (she was 19 years old). And this discovering feat continued to nourish her till her death.

The example of Cecile, her favourite saint, led her to do the same. From the liturgy of the hours on her feast day she discovered that this young roman martyr always carried the gospels on her heart (cfr also the poem dedicated to the saint PN 3 of 1894). Why not imitate such a holy custom? She immediately requested Celine, who was still “in the world” to re-bind (relier) the four gospels she extracted from her MANUAL OF THE CHRISTIAN. And there she placed them, carrying them always and everywhere. Later she had another copy of the gospels, smaller in size (115mm x 75), with very small print, very hard to read. But what’s the matter? As long as she kept the gospels with

her. At the end of her life she wrote to Pere Roulland: “The picture you gave me (ie a picture-souvenir of his ordination) is resting always on my heart in the book of the Gospels which never leaves me” (LT 193). No one in the Carmel of Lisieux had thought of this idea, but soon the novices wished to follow her example and the search was launched for pocket-gospel books. Other sisters in the community wished to follow suit.

YOUR WORD IS A LAMP TO MY FEET
(C 4r, Clarke)

In citing this verse from Psalm 118, some three months before her death, Thérèse underlines perfectly the role of the Word of God in her life. We must not forget that she never encountered great well-known spiritual masters which left some land mark. She had to find her way on her own, so to speak. Or better still, as she herself puts it more than once, her “Director” was Jesus (A 70r, 74r. 80v), he was the one that taught her “from this hidden science for the wise and the learned he pleases to reveal to the little ones...”

Therefore, she was quite different from Teresa of Avila who, in her own time, benefited from the assistance of several great masters of the spiritual life, she never had supernatural visions or revelations. Jesus guided her solely by His word, by His interior inspirations. This is what she explains to Celine, the usual confidante of her discoveries, “To keep the word of Jesus, that is the sole condition of our happiness, the proof of our love for him, but what, then, is this word?... It seems to me that the word of Jesus is HIMSELF... He, JESUS, the WORD, the WORD OF GOD (LT 165, 7/7/1894).

Let us look further into some of these important stages which marked her life:

At 14 years and a half, her vocation to intercede for sinners crystallized in the Pranzini event, a well-known assassin. The image of Jesus on the cross touched her during the Sunday mass but also one of His words of distress: “The cry of Jesus on the cross sounded continually in my heart: I AM THIRSTY! These words ignited within me an unknown and very living ardour (Clarke: fire)...” (Ms A 45v).

During her pilgrimage to Rome where she battled to have her vocation accepted by the Church authorities, she remarks that the Sunday’s Gospel on November 20 1887, gave her a hope-filled reply, at a time when even the audience with Pope Leo XIII was a disappointment. The words of the Gospel echoed sweetly in her heart: “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Lk 12.32). Four and half months later, at 15 years of age, she was finally a Carmelite postulant.

Nearly immediately after her entry, she is faced with a great trial in her life: her father (soon to be declared blessed), she loved so much, who she had to leave behind because of her calling to Carmel, was falling seriously ill mentally. She finds a meaning behind this Calvary in discovering the texts of Isaiah 53. M. Martin was living in some way the on-going passion of the suffering Servant described by the prophet. “How can we complain when He (Jesus) himself was looked upon as a man struck by God and humbled” (Is 53.4 in LT 108, 1890). Thérèse copied these words for Celine and served not only as a beacon of light shining forth in her dark night, but marked her intensely up till her own death. One day she would say to Mother Agnes, her sister Pauline, how these words of Isaiah (whereby the suffering Servant is without éclat (brightness?), without beauty) were the basis of her

devotion to the Holy Face, or better still, the foundation of all her devotional life. For she also desired to be without beauty, unknown to all creatures” (CJ 5.8.9). This is why she chose to take the name of Sister Thérèse of the Child Jesus of the Holy Face from the day she received the habit (10 Jan 1889).

Another enlightenment about the passion she had to endure because of her father came during her yearly retreat, in October 1892: “Let us listen to what (Jesus) is saying to us: ‘Make haste to descend, I must lodge today at your house... To be so poor that we don’t have a place to rest our head. This is, dear Celine, what Jesus has done in my soul during my retreat.’ To descend like Zaccheus.

THE DISCOVERY OF THE LITTLE WAY...

At the end of 1894, beginning of 1895, Thérèse tries to resolve a vital issue which tortures her: how to become a great saint (her ever-present desire) regardless of her imperfections (C2v and ff.). Is this mediocrity? But Thérèse is to be counted among those “who never lose hope”. Where does she look for a response that can free her from this apparent dilemma? The Holy Scriptures.

Celine entered Carmel on September 14, 1894, a joy indeed for her sister Thérèse (A 82v). With her she brought a small black covered note-book. In it she copied some passages from the Old Testament from the two Bibles the Guerin family had in their household. Celine had copied them out as it was not permitted at that time for a young Carmelite to read the whole of this strange Old Testament. So it was providential for Thérèse that she could take charge of the small book.

Shortly after, certainly before the end of 1895, while reading it there occurred an

event of paramount importance. Thérèse DISCOVERED at last her “Little Way” of spiritual childhood. She found her answer. Thérèse had been already introduced somewhat to this Little Way (abandonment, confidence, etc.), but it is only now that she receives a confirmation, an enlightenment on how to be a great saint (not just regardless of) but due to her littleness. (God showed his greatness not so much when he created the world but rather when he became little and became man, his love is so great precisely because it is not merited but is full of mercy, Merciful Love). Scripture provides her with a reply, not by making an objective analysis of the texts of Scripture, but rather by PONDERING on them. (Just a few months before her death, Thérèse wrote down an account of the discovery which still bore traces of the enrichment made by the original grace. Ms C 2v-3r.)

--- She reads in Proverbs 9.4: “Whoever is a LITTLE ONE, let him come to me.” The term LITTLE, this was precisely the problem with which Thérèse was at grips. The Little springtime Flower now knows that her littleness pleases God who deigns to look down on his Little Flower (the daisy and rose), and gives her his full attention as if she were the only creature that exists. But this idea of littleness is taken from mother nature. Here, in Proverbs 9, the term LITTLE enables her to consider this divine word as addressed to her and she opens herself completely to it. She continues to search for what God was going to reveal to her about himself and about the problem of her sanctification.

--- She then reads Isaiah 66.13,12: “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.”

(Psalm 70.17-18 and Psalm 89.4)

These are the texts as Thérèse read them, using the translation God made use of to enlighten her. The Jerusalem Bible translates this passage: “Who is ignorant? Let him step this way”, and the word LITTLE does not appear, neither does the personal phrase “to me”. In this version, Thérèse would have probably read through the text and not found the light that shone there so brightly for her in the other translation.

What is the striking light in the Isaian text which her eyes fell upon? The caress of God will touch her deeply and this little one will be raised up to the breasts and upon the knees of God. By whom? “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!”. Once again, the Old and the New Testament meet. The Old Testament leads her to the New, the New enlightens the Old.

She approaches Scripture to find the confirmation of her intuitions. She can relieve her anxiety and rest safely in the arms of Jesus. He is the elevator that will lift her up to the holiness that seemed so impossible to obtain. “O my God, you surpassed all my expectation” (Ms C 3r).

Her audacity did not stop there. Nearly two and a half years later, she was interrogating her vocation. To be a Carmelite, bride (epouse), mother were not enough for her. She also felt the callings to be a warrior, priest, apostle, doctor, martyr (B 2v). Her way to handle the situation provides us with a valuable insight in how she used Scriptures, her method. During mental prayer her desires were burning to the extent of making her a true martyr. She opens the letters of St. Paul randomly, and reads from the First letter to the Corinthians (12.29.12.21). She continues to read and comes upon the hymn to love. She explodes with joy to the

discovery of her vocation “My vocation is Love” (B 3v).

This is a good example which perfectly shows Thérèse’s method of reading the Scriptures. It is a method totally spontaneous, perseverant, based on the dynamics of faith, hope and love. She summarizes the whole process in “I searched, I found...” (Ms B 4r).

The undeniable conviction of Thérèse is that Holy Scripture speaks to her TODAY, it comes to meet her in the situation she is in. It is a personal experience, but also an experience for others. Let us remember, for example, that Paul does not speak of a “heart”. It is Thérèse who deduces it from the Pauline writing. She “adds” to the text without deforming it. “It was one day when I was thinking of what I could do to save souls, a word of the gospel gave me a real light” (LT 135). And to Celine again: “After having read your letter, I went to prayer, and taking the gospel, I asked Jesus to find a passage for you, and this is what I found: ‘Behold the fig tree (...)’ and gives it a deeper meaning (LT 143).

Another way of being close to Scripture is her remembering, recalling events and words (Sr. St. John the Baptist requested the assistance of the ailing Thérèse for a painting and Mother Agnes was not happy with the idea, and with the sister’s insistence some agitation appeared on the face of Thérèse): “When reentering our cell, I was wondering what Jesus was thinking of me, and immediately I recalled these words he addressed one day to the adulterous woman: ‘Has no one condemned you?’ And I, tears in my eyes, answered him: ‘No one, Lord...’” (LT 230 28/5/1897).

Scripture does not only serve as a response or a confirmation. It is also REALIZED, actualized in her and in others, as she

repeatedly asserts: “I can raise my head and see the words of Psalm 22 realized in me: ‘The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want’...” (Ms A 3r – at the opening pages of *Histoire d’une Ame*). “In us (Sr. Martha and herself) was realized this passage from Scripture: ‘A brother who is helped by a brother is like a strong city’ (Proverbs 18.19)” (C 21v; cf. LT 193).

But St Thérèse goes beyond. She adopts as her own the very words of Jesus “Had I no fear of profaning them when making use of them, I could speak Jesus’ words addressed to his apostles, the night of his passion: ‘It is YOU who have been with me in all my trials’ (Lk 22.28 Ms A 55v). Approaching her death, she had no hesitation: “I dare to borrow the words you addressed to the heavenly Father, the last night which saw you on our earth as a traveller and a mortal.” And then she adopts as her own a long passage from chapter 17 of the gospel of St. John, she changes it to the feminine gender and adapts it in detail according to her situation, skipping verses, inverting others, changing the words, etc. (Ms C 34r –v).

Her closeness to the Word of God is reflected in all the stages of her life. We cannot imagine that her footsteps will all roses and that the scripture was always easy to identify with, so to speak. She knew what it means to experience aridity, crisis at prayer-time (A 75v), and during the last 18 months of her life, the trial of faith. Before Easter 1896 she understood completely that sometimes even the Scriptures were made obscure for her “Frequently, we descend into the fertile valleys where our heart loves to nourish itself, the vast field of the scriptures which has so many times opened before us to pour out its rich treasures in our favour; this vast field seems to us to be a desert, arid and without water... we know no longer where we are; instead of peace and light, we find only turmoil or at least darkness... But

like the spouse (of the Canticle), we know the cause of our trial (...) We are still not as yet in our homeland, and trial must purify us as gold in the crucible (LT 165 to Celine).

All this familiarity is but the fruit of a long-time daily RUMINATIO of the Word, particularly during the 2 hours of mental prayer. This is the heart of the formation for Thérèse in the Word of God. To P. Roulland she writes a letter including 23 lines of Scripture citations, and yet she remarks: "If I wanted to copy all the passages that touched me the most, I would have to have much time" (LT 193).

In her souvenirs she makes note of the evolution of her awakening to Scriptures, the Gospels in particular. "As yet I had not discovered the treasures hidden in the Gospels" (at age 14 – only The Imitation of Kempis), Then at 17 and 18 the Gospels (Ms A r-v).

What a paradox! She had to wait for the last year of her life to fathom the depth of fraternal love and the commandment of love she explains in her third manuscript: "This year, dear Mother, God has given me the grace to understand what charity is; I understood it before, it is true, but in an imperfect way. I had never fathomed the meaning of these words of Jesus: 'The second commandment is LIKE the first (...) my love was not only to be expressed in words (...) At the Last Supper, when he knew the hearts of his disciples were burning with a more ardent love for him who had just given himself to them in the unspeakable mystery of his Eucharist, this sweet Saviour wished to give them a new commandment (...) 'A new commandment I give you that you love one another: THAT AS I HAVE LOVED YOU, YOU ALSO LOVE ONE ANOTHER (Jn 13).' (...) It is no longer a question of loving one's neighbour as oneself but of loving him as HE, JESUS,

HAS LOVED HIM, and will love him to the consummation of ages" (C 11v-12v).

In a letter to P. Roulland, one can find her last testament on the Word of God: "At times, when I am reading certain spiritual treatises in which perfection is shown through a thousand obstacles, surrounded by a crowd of illusions, my poor little mind quickly tires; I close the learned book that is breaking my head and drying up my heart, and I take up Holy Scripture. Then all seems luminous to me; a single word uncovers for my soul infinite horizons, perfection seems simple to me, I see it is sufficient to recognize one's nothingness and to abandon oneself as a child into God's arms (LT 226)... The same she says a few days later to Mother Agnes: "This book (of the Gospels) is sufficient for me" (CJ 15.5.3).

THIS BOOK IS SUFFICIENT FOR ME

Show me the secrets hidden in the Gospel
Ah! This golden book
Is my dearest treasure
Remember! (PN 24, str. 12 - 12/10/1895)

Even to begin writing her Story of a Soul, she takes the time, first of all to pray and open the Gospels: "My eyes fell upon these words: 'And going up a mountain, he called to him men of his own choosing, and they came to him' (Mk 3.13), referring to Romans 9.15-16, she recalls once again the mystery behind her vocation, for God does not call those who are worthy but those whom he pleases (A 2r).

It is necessary to meditate the verses of Scripture, word by word. One can make every effort to assimilate this nourishment for life, a nourishment for our heart and mind. Yet Thérèse is well aware that, ultimately, it is the gift of the Spirit of Jesus: "I have frequently noticed that Jesus doesn't

want me to lay up provisions; he nourishes me at each moment with a totally new food; I find it within me without my knowing how it is there. I BELIEVE IT IS JESUS HIMSELF HIDDEN IN THE DEPTHS OF MY POOR LITTLE HEART; he is giving me the grace of acting within me, making me think of all he desires me to do at the present moment” (A 76r). THE WORD IS JESUS HIMSELF – LECTIO: TO SEE THE FACE OF THE BELOVED.

WHERE DO YOU GO TO GET EVERYTHING YOU SAY? (C 26r). This is the question the novices frequently placed to Thérèse.

The most biblically rich letters are 135, 137, 142, 143, 144, 145, and above all 165. To this epistolary of Thérèse, one can apply a remark regarding St John of the Cross: “He does not quote, but incorporates.”

We must remember what the Saint remarks quite so often about her inability to express all that she felt, and for this reason she found solace in “the very words of Jesus” (C 18v).

One day, Thérèse confided to Sr. Mary of the Trinity that, if she had the time, she would have loved to write a commentary on the Song of Songs, this text which fascinated all mystics (our Holy Mother comments in part on the Song of Songs in her Thoughts on the Love of God). She, in fact, on one or other verse, she comments on a total of 36 verses.

Without carrying the title, St Thérèse of the Child Jesus exercised the responsibility of mistress of novices from February 20th, 1893, but especially beginning on March 21st, 1896. This was providence in action, because she transmits to others what she had, not so much in some systematic

instructions, but informally. All five novices, except one, were older than her.

SOME STATISTICS

In a work which extends to 125 pages of exercise-books, 245 letters, 54 poems, 8 dramas, 21 prayers, some texts on images and photos, we find about 440 quotes (explicit and implicit) from the Old Testament and 650 quotes of the New Testament.

Thérèse cites heavily the gospel according to St. Matthew (most used in the liturgy), and much less St. Mark. St. Paul’s masterpiece letter to the Romans is the most important Pauline letter used, together with the first letter to Corinthians.

From the Gospels, Jesus’ parables and teachings interest her more than his miracles. One remains yet astonished how little she speaks of the Resurrection. But for her, Jesus is alive.

From the Old Testament, impressing is the part the psalms hold, which can be normal for a nun who prays them every day. We have already underlined her special preference to the Song of Songs. Second Isaiah holds a place of honour, followed by the wisdom books. The Pentateuch and the historical books remain in the shadow. We find texts which gain her affection more than others, for example:

Psalm 22 (the Lord is my shepherd)

Ps 30.21 (hide herself in the secret of his Face)

Ps 88 (sing the mercies of the Lord)

Ps 89.4 (a thousand years are like a single day)

Ps 91.5 (you fill me with joy with ALL that you do)

Ps 102.8 (the Lord is slow to punish and abundant in mercy)

Ps 136.1-4 (exile and the rivers of Babylon)

Ecclesiastes 1.2 (everything is vanity)

Job 13.15 (when God himself forsakes – tuerait – me).

And of course. Proverbs 9.4 and Isaiah 66.12-13 about the motherly tenderness of God. Isaiah 53... especially contemplating the hidden face of the Suffering servant (16 quotes), struck by God's thoughts being different from our human thoughts (55.8-9) (...) certain themes of the book of Wisdom, such as: gold and the trial by crucible (3.5-6), the premature of the just man (4.7-17) which makes her think of her little brothers and sisters, Joan of Arc, Theophane Venard, and... (why not, herself)?

When she turns to the New Testament it is easy to consider where her thought lays: she has her eyes fixed on Jesus “gentle and humble of heart” (Mt 11.28-29), sleeping in the storm (Mk 4.37-39), forgiving the adulterous woman (Lk 7.36-50), revealing himself to the little ones (Lk 10.21), carrying fire to earth (Lk 12.49), recounting the parable of the merciful father and the prodigal son (Lk 15.11-32) or either the seed that dies and bears many fruit (Jn 12.24). She wishes to partake of Jesus' thirst on the cross (Jn 19.28) and of his chalice (Mt 20.22-23), during his agony (Lk 22.32), to love just as he loves (Jn 13.34) and so on and so forth, up to the point where God will dry the eyes of the elect (Apoc. 21.4) in the eternal enjoyment face to Face (1 Cor 13.2).

Among the biblical figures she loves, the following stand out: Moses praying at the time of (au fort de) battle, Judith, Mary of Magdalene (who, as was traditionally done mistakenly at her time, did not distinguish from two Mary's??), St. Peter, and in an absolute priority, there was the Blessed Virgin, Mary of Nazareth.

Her vocation to announce the Good News to all corners of the earth: “I would want to announce the Gospel on all the five continents simultaneously and even to the

most remote isles. I would be a missionary, not for a few years only but from the creation of the world until the consummation of the ages” (Ms B 3r). The charism of St. Thérèse before the Word of God made her not only a receiver of this Word, but it even transformed her and established her as a “Word of God” for the world, according to the famous words of Pope Pius XI (speech of February 11th, 1923, in Italian), she herself became Word of God.

Thérèse shows that the authentic way to hear the Word of God is to hear it with the heart of a little child, simple and deep, moved by the Holy Spirit, to be little and become little ever more. She is sent with a mission, she cannot remain idle in heaven. The final words she wrote in Ms B summarize it all: “Why do I desire to communicate your secrets of Love, O Jesus; was it not you alone who taught them to me, and can you not reveal them to others? Yes, I know, and I conjure you to do it. (I beg you to cast your divine Glance upon a great number of little souls. I beg you to choose a legion of LITTLE Victims worthy of your LOVE)” (B 5v).

Strengthened by this prayer of St. Thérèse, may we also let the Word of God capture us, enlighten us, and send us with a mission.

JESUS IS THE WORD, THE LOVE OF JESUS

The dynamics of the Little Way derives its force from the Love of Jesus. "I understood that Love was Everything."¹ Jesus is not merely a model to be imitated, but the very one who acts in the souls of the little ones. The magisterium of Saint Thérèse magnificently points out the source and

¹ Ms B 3vE.

dynamics of Christian love. It is Jesus, her God and Love, who has given her the place to be love within the heart of the Church. Her tridimensional call given to her by Jesus to be a Carmelite, Spouse and Mother is but the unfolding of her vocation to be love within the Church:

“To be your spouse, to be a Carmelite, and by my union with you to be mother of souls, should not this suffice me? And yet it is not so. No doubt, these three privileges are truly my vocation: Carmelite, Spouse and Mother.”

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## THÉRÈSE AND THE SONG OF SONGS

(by Msgr. Guy Gaucher ODC

in *Sicut Parvuli LII* (January 1990) n.1, 17-20)

A number of critics have noted how Alain Cavalier punctuated his film *Thérèse* with quotations from the Song of Songs. Whatever one may think about this film, it seems that in this respect the maker was quite faithful to the young Carmelite. She herself had confided to her novice, Sister Marie of the Trinity: “If I had but the time I would like to write a commentary on the Song of Songs: I have found such fundamental things in this book touching on the subject of the union of the soul with our Beloved Lord”.<sup>2</sup>

“If I had but the time ...” In reality, she hardly had any. The timetable at Carmel was a very rigid one.<sup>3</sup> When she received the order to put on paper her family recollections (which would become Manuscript A), she wondered how she would find the time to do it. (She wrote only

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<sup>2</sup> Une novice de Sainte Thérèse (Cerf, 1985), p.94.

<sup>3</sup> *Derniers Entretiens* (Cerf-DDB, 1972), pp. 805-806.

86 little pages in a whole year). Though she had rather more leisure in which to compile her final work (Manuscript C) this was simply because she was ill and now excused from all routine duties. But on this occasion her extreme weakness would force her to stop at Folio 36. An oral tradition says that Sister Thérèse would have liked to comment on the Song of Songs nonetheless. Mother Agnes of Jesus persuaded her against it<sup>4</sup> and suggested other subjects (novices, brotherly love, etc.), she considered her sister far too young (at 24) to dare to comment on such a Biblical masterpiece, and to follow in the steps of mystics like Gregory of Nyssa, Catherine of Siena, Basil of Caesarea, Augustine, Bernard, Francis de Sales . . . and especially of the Carmelite leaders Teresa of Avila<sup>5</sup> and John of the Cross.

So Thérèse gave up the idea . . . and yet we have but to examine The Bible of Thérèse of Lisieux<sup>6</sup> to ascertain that she did in fact comment on 36 verses of this famous poem - - ‘this Biblical jewel’ (Osty) in 78 sections of her writings! She enjoyed quoting and then writing a few sentences on a particular verse or phrase: 14 times in the Manuscripts, 32 times in her Letters, 18 times in her Poems, 12 times in the Recreations, 3 times in the Prayers.

In the limited space here there can be no question of analyzing everything that Sister Thérèse said regarding each of these 36

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<sup>4</sup> *Derniers Entretiens*, p. 441.

<sup>5</sup> Fr. Diego de Yanguas, so shocked by the *Thoughts on the Love of God* by Teresa of Avila on the Song of Songs, wrote to her: “Throw it in the fire! It is not fitting for a woman to write about the Song of Songs.” (Blaise Arminjon, *La Cantate de l’Amour. A lecture on the Song of Songs* (DDB-Bellarmin, 1983, p. 35). We will look again at this splendid book.

<sup>6</sup> Cerf-DDB, 1979.

verses (she frequently returned to the same one). Let us simply say that she instinctively went back to the essential: 'I found in this book very fundamental things regarding the union of the soul with our Beloved Lord'. Fr. Urs von Balthasar remarks: 'The Song of Songs, which has been a secret sanctuary of the Church for centuries past, was at the center of Thérèse's spirituality'<sup>7</sup>.

A 'secret sanctuary', because this love-song is capable of many different interpretations. One can regard it as a purely physical love-poem. This interpretation of it has had many supporters. The 5th Council of Constantinople (428) condemned this limited interpretation and laid bare the underlying meaning of the poem.

Sister Thérèse went spontaneously to the very heart of the mystical interpretation, so traditional in both Judaism and Christianity. The Song of Songs is the love song of God for his people, of God for the soul. For Thérèse, it is the search of the Beloved Son for his bride, and of their meeting at the end of this search.

A few quotations will suffice:

"My Beloved is a sachet of myrrh, lying between my breasts." (Letter 108, quoting Poem 1, v.12)

"Jesus knows how to hide himself, only talking to me from time to time, and even 'through the lattice' (Poem 2, verse 9), for I understand fully well that I cannot sustain more than this, my heart would be shattered, being unable to bear such perfect bliss." (Letter 230)

"My Beloved is mine and I am his forever." (Prayer 5, quoting Poem 2, v.16)

"It is not necessary to waken the Beloved who sleeps." (Letter 145, quoting Poem 5, v.2)

But 'the lily of the valley', Jesus, is hiding: so one must seek him out, and, in turn, hide with him: 'As the dove hides in the clefts of the rock, so will the bride seek out your face'." (Poem 2, v.14)

Sister Thérèse never ceased longing to see this Holy Face: "I am at your door, open to me, my sister, my love, for my head is covered with dew, my locks with the drops of night". "Long ago you sighed for Jesus to visit you (. . .) now he is here at last." (Letter 158, quoting poem 4, v.2)

One could enlarge on these quotations, which are all shot through and through with tenderness and theological understanding. Let us simply quote one more of the astonishing allegorical interpretations which the Holy Spirit suggested to the young Thérèse who had never made any study on the subject.

It concerns the original interpretation of the Prologue, verses 3 and 4: "Draw me in your footsteps, let us run in the fragrance of your perfume". What Thérèse is deriving from contemplative prayer is a source of action which is almost her last testament as expressed at the close of Manuscript C. "One morning, during my thanksgiving, Jesus (. . .) made me understand these words of the Song of Songs: 'DRAW ME, LET US RUN in the fragrance of your perfume'. O Jesus, it is not even necessary to say 'When drawing me, draw the souls whom I love!' This simple statement, 'Draw me' suffices, I understand, Lord, that when a soul allows herself to be captivated by the fragrance of your perfume, she cannot run alone, all the souls whom she loves follow in her trail; this

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<sup>7</sup> Conference at Notre Dame, Paris 1973, published by l'Institut Catholique de Paris.

is done without constraint, without effort, it is a natural consequence of her attraction to You. (. . .) The soul who plunges into the endless ocean of your love draws with her all the treasures she possesses.” (Ms C)

Here we are in the presence of a vital discovery about the contemplative-apostolic nature of prayer which was so important in Carmel . . . and for the whole Christian life.

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One can but dream of an integral commentary on the Song of Songs written by a young Carmelite “the King’s bride, like an angelic choir on the field of battle” (Poem 48) who, at 24 years of age was reaching the pinnacle of her sanctity, with prodigious courage, by following the way of spiritual childhood and love. But the few crumbs which we have from these partial commentaries on the Song of Songs prove that she had gone spontaneously to the very core of this basic Old Testament book, following in the steps of many great searchers after God. It was the Holy Spirit indeed who inspired our Carmelite and opened the secrets of the Scriptures to her.