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## Thérèse of Lisieux: “Doctor for the Third Millennium?”

In October 1997, one hundred years after her death, St. Thérèse of Lisieux was named “Doctor of the Church.” The focus of this article is on what this newest Doctor may contribute to the development of theology in the current era. After a brief reflection on various evaluations of what Thérèse has to offer, I will review her milieu, her education, and some moments in her life story that were particularly significant for her development in theological insight. Finally, the concluding section will take a closer look at Thérèse’s potential contributions to theology in the postmodern age.

### ASSESSMENTS OF THÉRÈSE’S SIGNIFICANCE

While some are horrified at Thérèse’s doctorate, and others find it difficult to fathom, a third group rejoices at the new affirmation of her outstanding sanctity and wisdom. Even among those who acclaim the power of her charisma, however, a crucial question further differentiates the assessments of her significance. This is the question of whether her gift is essentially a confirmation of traditional, premodern understandings of the Christian way, or whether her life and work uniquely address the needs of humanity as it moves into the postmodern era.

This differentiation of views comes to the fore most clearly in discussions of Thérèse’s final “trial of faith.” Eighteen months before she died, only a few days after she began coughing up blood and realized that death was imminent, Thérèse fell into a profound state of spiritual darkness from which she apparently never emerged. The degree and character of this climactic experience have only comparatively recently become matters of public discussion; many who know Thérèse only from pious devotional materials or from reading her *Story of a Soul* in older versions are still unaware of it.

A recent review article summarizes the positions that various commentators have taken on this “trial of faith” (Marxer). At least two basic questions are under debate. First, was this final trial simply a manifestation of the “normal” development of the deeply-lived spiritual journey, such as has been described by Thérèse’s Carmelite mentor John of the Cross under the rubric of the “dark night”? Or, alternatively, was Thérèse being given a special charism of lived identification with the contemporary non-believer, so that she shared to the full the emptiness,

alienation, and darkness of those without faith? The second question is related: Did Thérèse actually doubt? Or did she simply rest ever more deeply in dark, unrewarded faith, bearing patiently the tortures of temptations against faith even as she underwent the most intense agony of unanesthetized physical suffering?

Of even greater interest than the often complex and sophisticated answers that commentators give to these questions is the simple fact that they are being so seriously debated. Thérèse's "trial of faith" seems to strike to the quick of what is most at issue in the modern-become-postmodern world. Is the core of the human spirit empty? Are all our grand stories of "meaning" only pomp and circumstance? Is there really any balm for the vast and horrifying suffering—physical, emotional, and spiritual—that has been the lot of so many of our fellow humans? "The Little Flower" participates in these questions to a far greater degree than many of her ardent, but more traditionally-minded, devotees have ever imagined. Still, in order to assess the appropriateness of the title given her in a circular letter from the Superiors General of both major orders of Carmelites, "Doctor for the Third Millennium," we will have to examine more closely her life and work.

#### THÉRÈSE'S CULTURE, FAMILY LIFE, AND EDUCATION

Many of the concerns about Thérèse's doctorate arise from uneasiness with the character of the culture and upbringing that humanly shaped her. She came from a bourgeois, royalist, ultramontane milieu that practiced a highly visible and insular form of Roman Catholicism. Devotion to the pope, obedience to the laws and customs of the Church, reverence for priests, and the almost ostentatious practice of multiple devotions and penances were *de rigueur*. This ethos lumped materialism, positivism, liberalism, republicanism, and anticlericalism together as one massive evil, and the rising influence of these views in French society of that era was regarded with great horror. Many French Catholics developed a fortress mentality, devoting themselves to their families and withdrawing into rural or semi-rural enclaves where they could avoid the evils of "the world." The "grand narrative" of penance, spiritual warfare, trial, and heroic sacrifice on earth, followed by the reward of eternal life in heaven, shaped everything that these believers did. As has frequently been noted, much of their piety was sentimental and lacking in theological or aesthetic depth. It was also often legalistic and rigoristic, encouraging believers to count up their devotions and penances so as to earn divine favor and, ultimately, assure their entrance to heaven.

Thérèse was very much part of this milieu. She was born January 2, 1873, the youngest of five surviving children (all girls) in the family of Zélie and Louis Martin. Both parents had considered religious life, and they established a home life that was deeply immersed in Catholic

piety. Mme. Martin—a lacemaker whose business acumen had made the family financially quite comfortable—died when Thérèse was only four. Subsequently the family turned even more decidedly inward, moving permanently to the semi-rural refuge of Les Buissonnets (near Lisieux). Living on their investments, they rarely had occasion to engage in significant interaction with anyone outside the extended family. Thérèse's only education outside the home consisted of five years of intermittent studies at a Benedictine abbey, and a few more years of individual tutoring. At the abbey she was exposed to the invigorating freshness of Guéranger's liturgical renewal, but also to the stultifying remnants of Jansenistic "hellfire and damnation" spirituality.

Before Thérèse had reached puberty, her three oldest sisters entered cloisters—two of them at the Carmel of Lisieux. In 1887, at age fourteen, Thérèse conceived the intense desire to enter Lisieux Carmel herself. Despite much opposition, she prevailed; on April 9, 1888, the fifteen-year-old Thérèse became a Carmelite postulant.

Female Carmelites of those days did not study theology in any formal sense. Rather, Thérèse imbibed the lived theology of her particular Carmelite tradition, especially through the liturgy and through observation or conversation with her novice mistress and other sisters. Some written materials that were available and highly regarded included the traditional documents of the Bérullian Carmels, the writings of the Carmelite saints Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, and certain other contemporary devotional texts. The Bible was usually available only in printed excerpts and through the liturgy.

In the end, young Thérèse only had nine and a half years to complete her life's work, for she was to die of tuberculosis on September 30, 1897. The sum total of her writings consists of the well-known *Story of a Soul*, plus 64 poems, 266 letters (some mere fragments or inscriptions), and 8 plays written for community recreations. All except the last are now widely available in English translation. The *Last Conversations* recorded during her final illness by her sisters and others are of more uncertain authenticity, but nevertheless offer another perspective on her spiritual journey. Also of great interest are numerous photographs, art works (many done by Thérèse herself), and other visual memorabilia. Besides these, there are the letters, testimonies, and statements of dozens of people who had some interaction with her, some of whom were still alive into the 1960s.

#### KEY MOMENTS OF THEOLOGICAL INSIGHT

Here I will present eight events or periods in Thérèse's life in which significant theological insight emerged.

1. *May 8, 1884: First Communion.* Thérèse made her First Communion when she was eleven years old. Her report, written in 1895, states: "Ah!

How sweet was that first kiss of Jesus! It was a kiss of *love*; I *felt* that I *was loved*, and I said: 'I love You, and I give myself to You forever!'" Of her next communion, about a month later, she reports: "My tears flowed again with an ineffable sweetness, and I repeated to myself these words of St. Paul: 'It is no longer I that live, it is Jesus who lives in me!'" (*Story 77, 79*). While yet a child, Thérèse already manifests her characteristic instinct for going straight to the heart of the matter—and for linking it intimately with the text of the Bible.

2. *December 25, 1886: Her "Grace of Conversion."* After Christmas Midnight Mass of 1886, in the midst of a trivial family incident, Thérèse received a grace that she remembered throughout her life as a definitive moment of conversion. Although she was nearly thirteen years old, she was still accustomed to being pampered with certain childish treats—in this case, little gifts in her shoes upon return from Midnight Mass. When her over-tired father made a disparaging remark about her babyish ways, Thérèse started to react with tears but then was astonished to discover that she was able to maintain her serenity and to seek to give her father joy despite the remark. In 1895 she summed up: "The work I had been unable to do in ten years was done by Jesus in one instant . . . I felt charity enter into my soul, and the need to forget myself and to please others; since then I've been happy!"

She then notes that shortly thereafter she began to hear echoing in her soul the cry of Jesus on the cross, "I thirst!" (John 19:28), and "I wanted to give my Beloved to drink and I felt myself consumed with a *thirst for souls*" (*Story 98–99*). Subsequently she began to pray for the conversion of the famous criminal Henri Pranzini, who did in fact kiss the cross before his execution. In this series of incidents we see young Thérèse already discovering the other-oriented thrust of her charism. In her adulthood this would develop into a deeply-felt missionary vocation, which she primarily manifested through prayer.

3. *January 10, 1889: Taking the title "of the Holy Face."* When Thérèse entered Carmel, she took the title "Thérèse of the Child Jesus." Only nine months later, however, when she entered the novitiate, she chose to be known as "Thérèse of the Child Jesus and of the Holy Face." Devotion to the Holy Face of Jesus, centered around the story of Veronica's Veil and the image that was said to have been imprinted thereon, was widespread in her milieu. Thérèse's particular way of developing this devotion focused strongly on the "hiddenness" of Jesus' face. Her discovery a few months later of the text of Isaiah 53, which includes the line "His face is as though hidden," was an intensely revelatory moment to which she returned repeatedly throughout her life in Carmel. The Holy Face became a symbolic node that nourished many of the most profound themes in Thérèse's spirituality: the deep, childlike hunger for Jesus' intimate presence; the sense of the "veil" that hides

the face of the Beloved; the identification with the passion, and with Jesus' own hiddenness; the eagerness to love Jesus in the smallest details of life, as Veronica had done.

4. *Late 1894: Growing Insight into "The Little Way."* In Thérèse's letters, especially the earlier ones, anything and everything is termed "little": little Thérèse, little heart, little Jesus, little place, little rabbit, etc. etc. On that level, this way of speaking comes across as merely a sort of cultural affectation. At the end of 1894, however, Thérèse discovered two scriptural texts that catalyzed a more profound appropriation of this theme of "littleness" within her spiritual life. The texts were: "Whoever is a little one, let him come to me" (Prov 9:4); and, "As a mother caresses her child, so I will comfort you; I will carry you on my breast, and I will rock you on my knees" (Isa 66:13, 12).

In September 1896, in a letter to her sister Marie, Thérèse used these texts to express her insight that "It is only love which makes us acceptable to God . . . Jesus deigned to show me the road that leads to the Divine Furnace, and this road is the surrender of the little child who sleeps without fear in its Father's arms" (*Story* 188; *Letters* II, 994). In May and June of 1897, she made the creative link between this insight and the image of an elevator "lifting me without fatigue to the infinite regions of love" (*Letters* II, 1098; *Story* 207–8). This image of the "elevator of grace" is perhaps the most succinct and engaging encapsulation of Thérèse's "little way" of radical, childlike trust.

5. *June 9–11, 1895: The Offering to Merciful Love.* On Trinity Sunday 1895, Thérèse received the inspiration to offer herself completely as a "victim of Merciful Love." This was a new and creative twist on the widespread spirituality of reparation, in which pious people offered themselves as victims of Divine Justice to make up for the sins of the world. It was also an explicit rejection of the then-common assumption that one must present God with many and difficult acts of asceticism and charity in order to "earn" salvation for oneself and others.

Thérèse's insight was that what God desires most is to love the world; therefore, simply to open oneself radically to that love—to be completely consumed by it, and thus to be its "victim"—is the greatest act of love for both God and neighbor. She wrote: "In order to live in one single act of perfect Love, I offer myself as a victim of Holocaust to your merciful love, asking You to consume me incessantly, allowing the waves of *infinite tenderness* shut up within you to overflow into my soul, and thus I may become a *martyr* of Your Love, O my God!" (*Story* 277). On June 11, along with her sister Celine, the twenty-two year old Thérèse made this Offering. It is perhaps the definitive statement of Thérèse's understanding of her vocation as lover, missionary, and martyr.

6. *April 5, 1896: Entrance into the "Night of Faith."* On the night of Good Friday of 1896, Thérèse coughed up blood and knew that her life

on earth would not last much longer. At that time her spirit was so clear and full of peace that the prospect of imminent death only increased her fervor and joy. Easter Sunday, however, told a different story. She found herself “invaded by the thickest darkness,” so that “the thought of heaven, up until then so sweet to me, [was] no longer anything but the cause of struggle and torment.” The works of John of the Cross, who had already been a favorite mentor for some years by this time, offered an interpretation of this sort of trial; but in this case the depth of the darkness was so extreme that it overwhelmed any attempt at finding meaning, even from such an old friend.

Whereas previously she could not even imagine that some people actually had no faith, now she learned from experience that there are “souls who have no faith, and who, through the abuse of grace, lost this precious treasure, the source of the only real and pure joys” (*Story* 210–11). In this state of darkness and trial, which apparently lasted until her death eighteen months later, Thérèse learned to pray in a new way: “Have pity on us, O Lord, for we are poor sinners!” She no longer set herself apart; she sat at the table of sinners as one among the others. Yet even here, she was faithful to her missionary vocation. She wrote: “O Jesus! If it is needful that the table soiled by [sinners] be purified by a soul who loves You, then I desire to eat this bread of trial at this table until it pleases you to bring me into Your bright Kingdom” (*Story* 212).

7. *September 8, 1896: “Love in the Heart of the Church.”* Thérèse was on a private retreat from the evening of September 7, 1896, to the morning of September 18. During the period prior to the retreat she apparently had been struggling mightily with the contrast between her vast desires and her painfully limited and mundane actuality. As was her wont, she turned to Scripture — in this case, to 1 Corinthians 12 and 13. On September 8 she wrote down the astonishing insight that emerged. First she named all her desires: to be warrior, priest, apostle, doctor, martyr, crusader, papal guard, prophet. Then, reading 1 Corinthians 12, she saw that each of these gifts is given to a different member of the body, and no member can have them all. Continuing on to 1 Corinthians 13, she read that the greatest gift of all is love.

Thérèse then made perhaps the best-known and most magnificent of her creative leaps to insight. “I understood that if the Church had a body composed of different members, the most necessary and noble of all could not be lacking to it, and so I understood that the Church *had a Heart and that this Heart was burning with love*. . . . I understood that love comprised all vocations, that love was everything, that it embraced all times and places . . . in a word, that it was eternal! Then, in the excess of my delirious joy, I cried out: O Jesus, my Love . . . my *vocation*, at last I have found it . . . my vocation is love!” (*Story* 194). Thérèse had discovered the culminating insight of her “little way”: no

matter how small or limited one's sphere of life, one can embrace the infinity of God simply by loving.

8. *June–August, 1897: Letters on "Heaven."* Thérèse's final testament comes in the last letters she was able to write to the two priests who had been given to her as "spiritual brothers." She wrote that she was happy to be dying—not, however, because she would be freed from her trials and suffering, as was a common theme in the "grand narrative" of her era. Rather, her eagerness was for the opportunity to fulfill her vocation of loving both God and her neighbor much more totally and freely from heaven than she could from earth.

On July 14, in her last letter to Père Roulland, she wrote: "Ah! Brother, I feel it, I shall be more useful to you in heaven than on earth, and it is with joy that I come to announce to you my coming entrance into that blessed city . . . I really count on not remaining inactive in heaven. My desire is to work still for the Church and for souls. I am asking God for this and I am certain He will answer me." In several letters to Abbé Bellière, she repeats similar themes. Once again, we see Thérèse boldly revisioning the received wisdom of her era in view of her charism of radical trust and love.

#### THÉRÈSE AND THEOLOGY

What could it mean to call Thérèse a "Doctor for the Third Millennium"? The suspicion of some is that this is an effort on the part of Church authorities to return to certain problematic forms of either premodern or modern understandings of the theological task. There are significant witnesses in the patristic tradition for the idea that the true theologian is the person who knows God—that is, the saint or mystic—rather than the one who has studied a great deal. While few would dispute an element of truth in this premodern view, its simplistic application as a standard of theological astuteness could easily reduce theology to little more than the collection of wise insights from holy people. In the modern context, on the other hand, a significant stream of Roman Catholic theology has strongly emphasized such themes as papal primacy, the extrinsic authority of the magisterium, and an exclusivist view of the Roman Catholic Church as "true Church." Thérèse's cultural insertion, as well as certain aspects of her personal worldview, seem at face value to reinforce this sort of theology. If either of these views is the central meaning of Thérèse's doctorate, it does not seem to bode well for theology's future development.

To be truly a "Doctor for the Third Millennium" would, it seems, require that the individual offer a response to the issues of what we call "postmodernism." The postmodern world is one in which all "grand narratives" and overarching schemes of order have been pronounced illusory, and even personal identity has been discovered to lack basic

coherence and continuity. “Things fall apart, the center cannot hold,” Yeats wrote, naming in poetry the forboding of a world whose very foundations appear to have crumbled into teetering piles of ruins. Do Thérèse’s life and writings significantly address the theological issues this raises? Here I will make a case that they do.

Bernard Lonergan has spoken of “foundations” as the conversions (religious, moral, intellectual) which establish the horizon within which one can judge what is true and commit oneself to it. In the full theological enterprise, the functional specialties of research, interpretation, history, and dialectic can proceed even without these conversions; but the specialties of doctrines, systematics, and communications require them (1971: 267f). An argument can be made, I believe, that Thérèse is a “foundational theologian” even though she was not formally trained in any of the other functional specialties which normally make up the repertoire of a professional theologian.

The key moments of theological insight reviewed above have in common that they are events of profound, experiential conversion for Thérèse. Her understanding of who God is, what God is doing in the world, the nature of the Church, and other theological themes emerges as autobiography. In this, she represents in an unvarnished way the “turn to the subject” that has restructured theology in the past 150 years. Yet, significantly, Thérèse does not fall into the trap of a subjectivism that simplistically claims one’s own experience as the final authority. Powerful insight into truth emerges for Thérèse as she engages in profound conversation with liturgical events, biblical texts, or other Christian classics. This conversation is mutually reinterpetive: Thérèse’s identity and personhood are reshaped, at the same time that she discovers a fresh and deeply-grounded interpretation of the event, text, or classic. Often, these Theresien interpretations are quite at odds with what was commonly believed and taught in her environment; yet they are not merely idiosyncratic reflections. Rather, Thérèse’s theological insights are, at their core, articulations of the religious and moral conversions she experienced in a life-conversation with Christian traditions. In this sense, she seems to fulfill the most basic qualifications for being a “foundational theologian” in Lonergan’s sense.

One may raise a question, however, about her “intellectual conversion.” In Lonergan’s framework, this differentiation of what he terms “interiority” requires a conscious awareness of the different types of operations of knowing (i.e., experiencing, understanding, judging, deciding) as one engages in them, along with the ability to move among them appropriately and intentionally. Not surprisingly, Thérèse is far from manifesting such sophisticated cognitive introspection—at least in the discursive form commonly described in Lonerganian literature. Elsewhere, however, I have explored the possibility that the most pro-

found contemplatives develop a form of interiority that is even more significant for cognitional knowing; that is, the ability to differentiate the contents of mind from the primordial ground of knowing, which is a state of "bare consciousness" without explicit content (Frohlich: 196f).

At this stage of research my application of this to Thérèse is still speculative, but the question I would propose is whether perhaps her "night of faith" can be understood from one angle in terms of this more contemplative form of interiority. The chief terror of this night for Thérèse seems to have been that it forcibly shifted her mental center of gravity away from the images and stories about "heaven" that had given her personal world coherence since childhood. These suddenly seemed like fairy tales; nothing remained except an abyss in which one lives by faith or not at all. My suggestion is that this was—among other things—a kind of radical "intellectual conversion" that definitively shifted Thérèse's core way of knowing from one that was still delimited by psychological and cultural frameworks, to one that could relativize these in favor of a way of knowing based in the boundlessness of God.

The doctrine of "heaven" that Thérèse began to expound during her last months, under the influence of the night of faith, can easily be interpreted at first glance as nothing more than a new version of the childish stories that she had heard all her life. A deeper look, however, finds that it is exactly the cotton-candy image of heaven that has fallen away. What remains is one thing: absolute fidelity to the love of God and neighbor. Thérèse begins to teach that heaven is not a far-away happy land of ethereal beings, but rather is love—love in this small time and place, and love unbounded by time or space. Thérèse's growing conviction that the love she has begun to practice in her earthly life will only grow and become more effective for others after she has passed from this life is not just a naive "continuation of life" view of bodily resurrection. Rather, it is an insight into the mutual coinherence of eternity and each moment of time, so that this small moment already opens out onto eternity, and entrance into eternity does not remove one from presence in time.

In fact, this was not only an intellectual insight for Thérèse, but a summary of the witness of her life. Thérèse indeed lived a remarkably "small" life—small in years, in diversity of personal contacts, in education, in the concrete scope of her deeds. What she discovered was that far from being an obstacle to God, smallness is in fact the only avenue of approach. Each one of us will find God nowhere except in this small place where we are standing, and in this small present moment. And yet from this small place, intimately linked to God, it is possible to love without boundaries. There is profound material here for reflection on how to resolve one of the quandaries of postmodernism: How can we

affirm the vast diversity of cultures and worldviews, without gutting completely the notion of “truth”? Thérèse witnesses to a kind of truth that is known only through complete immersion in particularity, yet which blossoms into a communion accessible to all without exception.

These theological insights, of course, call for further reflection and systematic articulation of a type that Thérèse herself was not equipped to do. Nevertheless, her contribution functions as what David Tracy calls a “classic”: “the disclosure of a reality we cannot but name truth” (108). In a similar vein, William Thompson has explored how the lives and writings of the saints are central to the development of theology. And Paul Ricoeur has written about the core role of “testimony”—“words, works, actions, and . . . lives which attest to an intention, an inspiration, an idea at the heart of experience and history which nonetheless transcend experience and history” (119–20). It is only in testimony, he observes, that “the self-manifestation of the absolute here and now indicates the end of the infinite regress of reflection” (144).

It is thus, I think, that we can affirm the contribution of Thérèse as a “foundational theologian.” By no means do Tracy, Thompson, or Ricoeur suggest that recourse to saints’ lives or writings should bring an end to the discourses of professionally-trained theologians. Rather, they should stand at the beginning, as the witnesses to foundational truth without which our discourses soon begin to chase their tails. At the beginning of the twentieth century Friedrich Von Hügel observed that in our times it is only the life of a saint that can resolve for us the antinomy between “the particular concrete experience which alone moves us and helps to determine our will, but which, seemingly, is untransferable, indeed unrepeatable; and the general, abstract reasoning which *is* repeatable, indeed transferable, but which does not move us or help directly to determine the will” (von Hügel: 10).

Perhaps we should see in von Hügel’s comment, and in Thérèse’s doctorate, the beginnings of a sort of “second naivete” period in the Christian theological undertaking. Paul Ricoeur speaks of the “first naivete” as involving an enthusiasm born of the comparatively uncritical mixing of our own projections and a text’s witness. In theology, the period when allegorical methods reigned would be an example of first naivete. The second period is one of critique and analysis, in which one strips away both one’s own and the text’s pretensions. The entire modern era has emphasized this sort of mentality. A “second naivete” period may emerge when one can return to the text able to receive its witness as actually enhanced by the humility born of the fruits of critique (Ricoeur: 23). The postmodern era may be such an opportunity for such a “second naivete” in theology, as theologians—without abandoning all the highly-developed tools of critical analysis—search for theological foundations in the testimonies of the saints.

A recent book by Christopher O'Donnell (1997) proposes that insight into the "Communion of Saints" is at the very core of Thérèse's contribution to theology. O'Donnell points to the "Offering to Merciful Love" and the famous discourse on "Love at the Heart of the Church" as key documents with which ecclesiologists can develop a more profoundly-based doctrine of the Church. While basically agreeing with his analysis of the significance of this theme, I would place Thérèse's core contribution at an even deeper level. In her final night of faith, when the very face of God—indeed, every representation that had sustained her—sank irretrievably into the darkness, she witnessed to what may be the only "foundations" upon which theology in a postmodern age can build: namely, a small and naked person standing in the abyss, trusting in God and absolutely committed to loving. That is, after all, how the Church began. It would not be surprising if it had something to do with how it will continue.

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<http://www.catholic-pages.com/saints/>

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