

Carmelite Conversations: Wednesday 8 April 2020

The Way of Confidence and Love: *The Spirituality of Thérèse of Lisieux*

Part Two

The religious milieu of late 19th century France.

The message of Thérèse known as her *little way*.

Images, for the *Story of a Soul*, that Thérèse used to express this way of being in relationship with God.

Examples of her lived experience drawing especially on the *Memoirs* of her sister Céline.



Thérèse at 15 just before she entered Carmel. [April 1888]

The Religious Milieu of the Time

[from the Introduction by Mary Frohlich to *St Thérèse: Essential Writing*.]

Devout French Catholics of the late nineteenth century were still reacting to the shock of the French revolution, in which the privileges and property of the Church had been violently wrested away by advocates of a radically secularistic and atheistic philosophy. Almost a hundred years later, many French Catholics remained entirely unreconciled to the new reality.... many Catholics still configured their personal lives in terms of a black-and-white division between a holy, Church-centered life and the utter moral corruption they perceived in the mainstream culture.

This had several consequences for spirituality. One was the tendency, [as Celine mentioned “we shunned the disturbance of worldly acquaintances, and tended to keep to ourselves.”] ... another was the conviction that the duty of a good Catholic was to “repair” the damage done by the blasphemers by engaging in the maximum number of pious acts. ... the truly holy person was seen as one who prayed to take on the fullest form of reparation by becoming a “victim soul” whose personal suffering would make up for the horrors committed against God and the Church.



The Religious Milieu of the Time (continued)

[Taken from the Introduction by Mary Frohlich to *St Thérèse of Lisieux: Essential Writing*.]

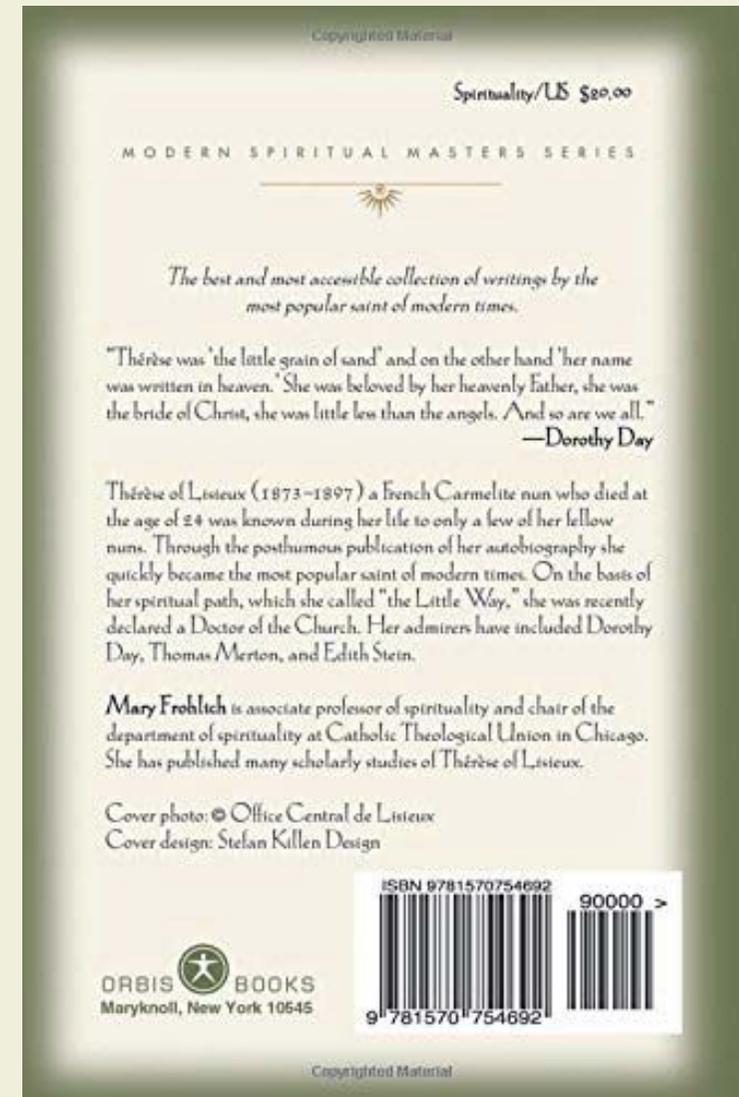
The Martin girls were raised within this mentality.

Children of pious families were taught to take pride in counting up the number of their prayers, devotions, good deeds, acts of humility, little acceptances of suffering, and so on. ...

Those who were most caught up in this spirituality often suffered from the affliction of scruples – an all-consuming anxiety that one might be doing something wrong, or in the wrong way, or not doing enough, and that this had radically alienated one from God.

Customs and attitudes like these must be recognized as forming the backdrop of Thérèse's spiritual development.

This cultural spirituality, with its particular strengths as well as its very evident distortions, was the raw material that Thérèse had to transform in the crucible of her personal quest for authentic holiness.



Lived family spirituality – Zélie’s letters to Pauline

December 5, 1875 [Thérèse almost 3 year old.]

I’m quite happy with Céline. She’s an excellent child who prays to God like an angel, learns well and who’s also very docile with Marie. We’ll certainly make something good of her with the grace of God. The baby [Thérèse] is an absolute imp. She comes to caress me while wishing me dead, “Oh! How I wish you would die, my poor little Mother!” We scold her and she says, “But it’s so you’ll go to Heaven, since you say that we have to die to go there.” She wishes for the death of her father, as well, when she’s in the middle of her outpourings of love for him.

[Marie is the eldest sister who had finished her schooling and was now back at home in Alençon and responsible for Céline’s education. In order not to leave Céline, Thérèse attended the lessons that Marie gave Céline.]

March 12, 1876 [Céline almost 7 years old]

Céline is doing quite well now. Little Thérèse is doing perfectly well. She’s always very good. This morning she said to me that she wanted to go to Heaven, and, in order to do that, she was going to be as good as a little angel.

November 3, 1876

Little Céline is very cute and makes many sacrifices for her aunt. Sometimes, however, she’s not consistent, like last night. She didn’t want to give something to her little sister... Marie and Louise [the maid] made silly remarks to her, saying, among other things, that she only made sacrifices that pleased her ... I told Marie she was wrong to discourage her that way, that it was impossible for such a young child to suddenly become a saint and that she had to overlook little things.

Even Thérèse wants to join in doing the practices. This little one is a delightful child, perceptive and very lively, but she has a sensitive heart. She and Céline love each other very much, and they only need each other to entertain themselves.



Pauline Martin at 20 years old.

Lived family spirituality – more letters

October 29, 1876

Céline is always doing her “practices,” and she did 27 of them today. It’s easy for her with her little sister. That one is truly funny sometimes. The other day she asked me if she would go to Heaven. “Yes, if you’re very good,” I answered. “Ah! Mama,” she continued, “If I’m not good, then I’ll go to Hell? But no, I know what I’ll do. I would fly off to be with you who’d be in Heaven. Then you would hold me very tightly in your arms. How would God be able to take me?” I saw in her expression that she was convinced God could do nothing to her if she was in the arms of her mother.

Letter from ‘Mama’ in 1876

It’s funny to see Thérèse put her hand in her pocket a hundred times a day to pull a bead of her chaplet every time she makes a sacrifice of some kind. [footnote 19 Chapter 1 in *Story of a Soul*]

Note: Zélie was writing to her teenage daughter Pauline as she was away at the boarding school adjoining the Visitation convent of Le Mans to which Zélie’s sister belonged – Elise or Sr. Marie-Dosithée. Thérèse had access to these letters when writing her manuscript for Pauline, since she quotes from them, suggesting that Pauline had given them to her to jog her memory of childhood experiences. This seems to contradict the Study Edition that recalls that Pauline had said “I order you to write down your childhood memories.” Then writes, “Pauline had said these words in jest, but Thérèse had taken them seriously.” (page 34 of the ICS Study Edition of *Story of a Soul*.)



Zélie Martin, shortly before
her death in August 1877

Before moving on ... pause to ponder

Take a moment to reflect on your own response to the spirituality in which Thérèse was raised.

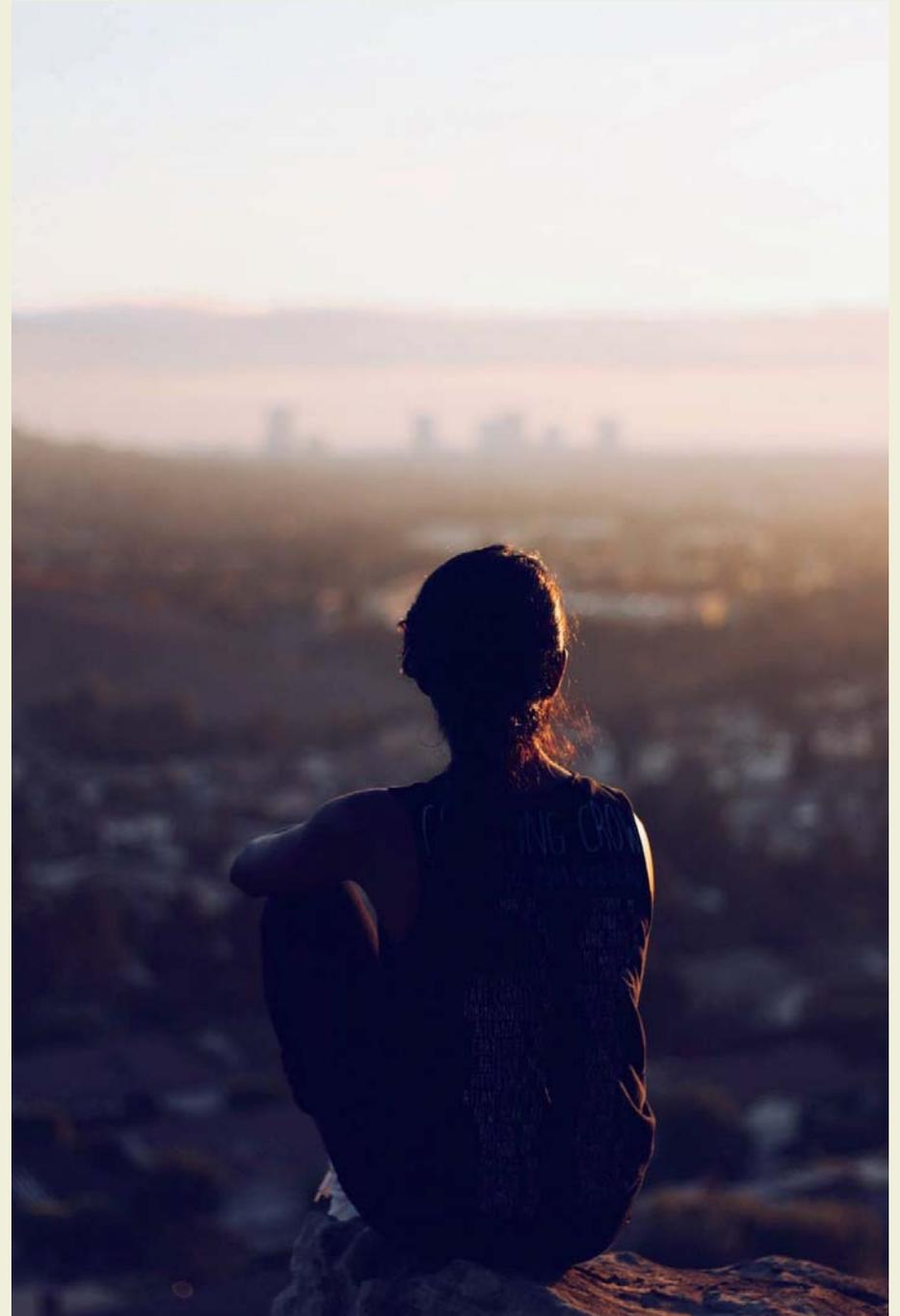
What strikes you?

What resonates with you?

What doesn't resonate?

What image of God supports this spirituality?

How is it the same as or different from your own image of God today?



An image of her ‘little way’

[*Story of a Soul*, ICS Publications, 207,
Manuscript C, written June 1897, three months before Thérèse died.]

You know, Mother, [Mother Gonzague the Prioress]
I have always wanted to be a saint. Alas! I have always noticed that when I compared myself to the saints, there is between them and me the same difference that exists between a mountain whose summit is lost in the clouds and the obscure grain of sand trampled underfoot by the passers-by. Instead of becoming discouraged, I said to myself: God cannot inspire unrealizable desires. I can, then, in spite of my littleness, aspire to holiness. It is impossible for me to grow up, and so I must bear with myself such as I am with all my imperfections. But I want to seek out a means of going to heaven by a little way, a way that is very straight, very short, and totally new.

We are living now in an age of inventions, and we no longer have to take the trouble of climbing stairs, for, ... an elevator has replaced these very successfully. I wanted to find an elevator which would raise me to Jesus, for I am too small to climb the rough stairway of perfection. I searched, then, in the Scriptures for some sign of this elevator, the object of my desires ...



An image of her ‘little way’ (continued)

I searched, then, in the Scriptures for some sign of this elevator, the object of my desires, and I read these words coming from the mouth of Eternal Wisdom: “*Whoever is a LITTLE ONE, let him come to me.*” [Proverbs 9:4] And so I succeeded. I felt I had found what I was looking for. But wanting to know, O my God, what You would do to *the very little one* who answered Your call, I continued my search and this is what I discovered: “*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.*” [Isaiah 66:13, 12]

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! And for this I had no need to grow up, but rather I had to remain little and become this more and more. O my God, You surpassed all my expectation. I want only to sing of Your mercies.

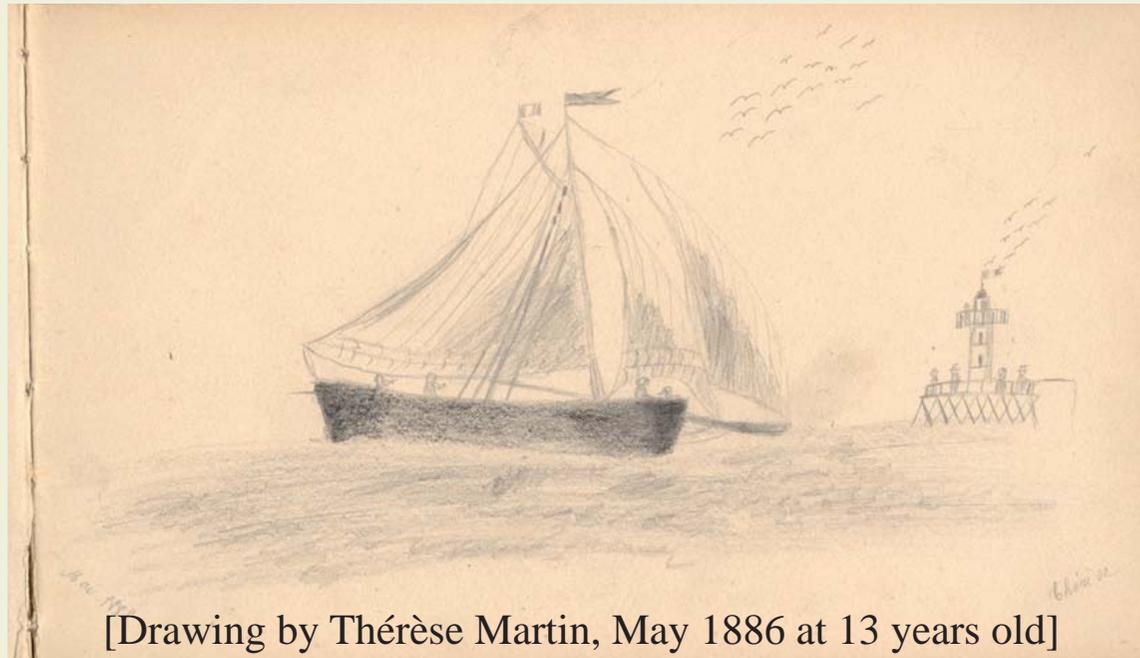
Pause to ponder

What do you think Thérèse means by ‘grow up’?

What are the characteristic of being ‘little’?

How would you describe Thérèse’s image of God?





[Drawing by Thérèse Martin, May 1886 at 13 years old]

Child, you know my name,
And your sweet gaze beckons to me.
It says to me: simple abandonment.
I want to steer your little boat.

With your little child's hand,
 O what wonder!
With your little child's voice,
You calm the roaring waves
 And the wind!...

If you want to rest
While the storm is raging,
Let your little blond head
Rest on my heart.

How delightful your smile is
 While you're asleep!...
With my sweetest song
I always want to rock you tenderly,
 Fair child!

[Poem by Sister Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face, December 1896]

‘to expect everything from God’

[Conversation with Thérèse in the infirmary on 6 August 1897 recorded by Mother Agnes (Pauline) in The Yellow Notebook.
St Thérèse of Lisieux: her last conversations, ICS Publications, 138-139]

I asked her to explain what she meant by “remaining a little child before God,” She said:

It is to recognize our nothingness, to expect everything from God as a little child expects everything from its father; it is to be disquieted about nothing, and not to be set on gaining our living. Even among the poor, they give the child what is necessary, but as soon as he grows up, his father no longer wants to feed him and says; ‘Work now, you can take care of yourself.’

It was so as not to hear this that I never wanted to grow up, feeling that I was incapable of making my living, the eternal life of heaven. I’ve always remained little, therefore, having no other occupation but to gather flowers, the flowers of love and sacrifice, and of offering them to God in order to please Him.

To be little is not attributing to oneself the virtues that one practices, believing oneself capable of anything, but to recognize that God places this treasure in the hands of His little child to be used when necessary; but it remains always God’s treasure. Finally, it is not to become discouraged over one’s faults, for children fall often, but they are too little to hurt themselves very much.

ST. THERESE OF LISIEUX



her last conversations

translated from the original manuscripts by john clark, o.c.d.

Pause to ponder

Notice your response to the poem. Maybe read it again.

What strikes you about Thérèse's explanation of what it means to be a little child before God?

What phrase most appeals to you? What most challenges you?

A Story of Confidence and Abandonment

[*A Memoir of My Sister St. Thérèse* by Sister Geneviève (Céline Martin), 59-60]

It was her spirit of Abandonment and Love that made her hope to [go to Heaven]. The virtue of humility, so dear to her heart and so characteristic of childhood, gave her still another motive for this hope; the child truly loves his parents and, since he is powerless and weak, he had no other thought than to abandon himself to them entirely.

“Can a father scold his child when the child is the first to own up to his fault?” she used to say. “Certainly not. He just presses the little one to his heart.”

To illustrate her point, she recounted a story we had read in our childhood.

A king who had set out on the chase ...

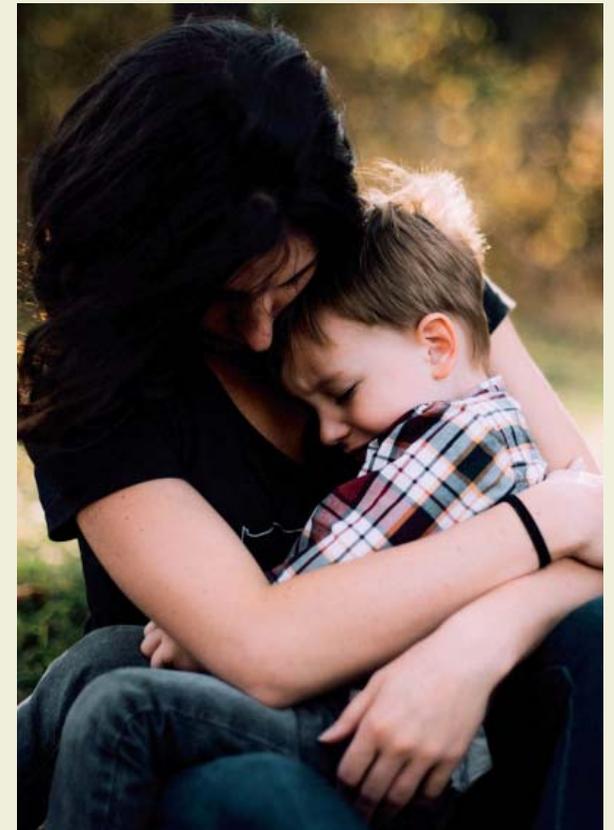


Photo by Jordan Whitt on Unsplash

A Story of Confidence and Love (continued)

A king who had set out on the chase noticed his dogs pursuing a white rabbit which was a little ahead of them. When the little rabbit began to sense that the dogs were about to pounce upon him, turning suddenly around, he bounded back quickly and jumped up into the arms of the king.

Deeply moved by this show of confidence, the king cherished the rabbit thereafter as his own; he allowed no one to pursue him and nourished and cared for the little animal himself.

“This is how God will treat us,” Thérèse added, “if, when hunted down by the claims of Divine Justice, represented by the little dogs in the story, we run for refuge into the very arms of our Judge ...” Here, of course, she had in mind those little souls who walk in the Way of Spiritual Childhood but she held out the very same hope even for the worst sinners on earth. It was for such as these that she wrote in her Autobiography:

Ah! I am certain that even if I had on my conscience every imaginable crime, I should lose nothing of my confidence; rather would I hasten, with a heart broken with sorrow, to throw myself into the Arms of my Jesus. I remember how He cherished the prodigal son who had returned to Him. It is not because the good God in His *preventing* love and mercy has preserved me from mortal sin that I lift up my heart to him in confidence and love ...



Image by skalekar1992 from Pixabay

Motivated by Love

It was during her last illness that the Saint said to me one day: “My chief desire through life has been to give pleasure to the good God. How sorely tempted to discouragement I should be at present had it been otherwise – if, for instance, I had been intent on storing up merit for myself.” [*Memoir*, 64.]

I heard my holy little sister affirm on her death-bed:
“Fortunately I did not ask for suffering, for if I had prayed for it, then it would be my own suffering and I should fear not to have the strength to endure it.” ...

[*Memoir*, 84.]

Her last words were:

“Oh! I love Him! ...

“My God ... I love you!”

[*Last Conversations*, 206.]

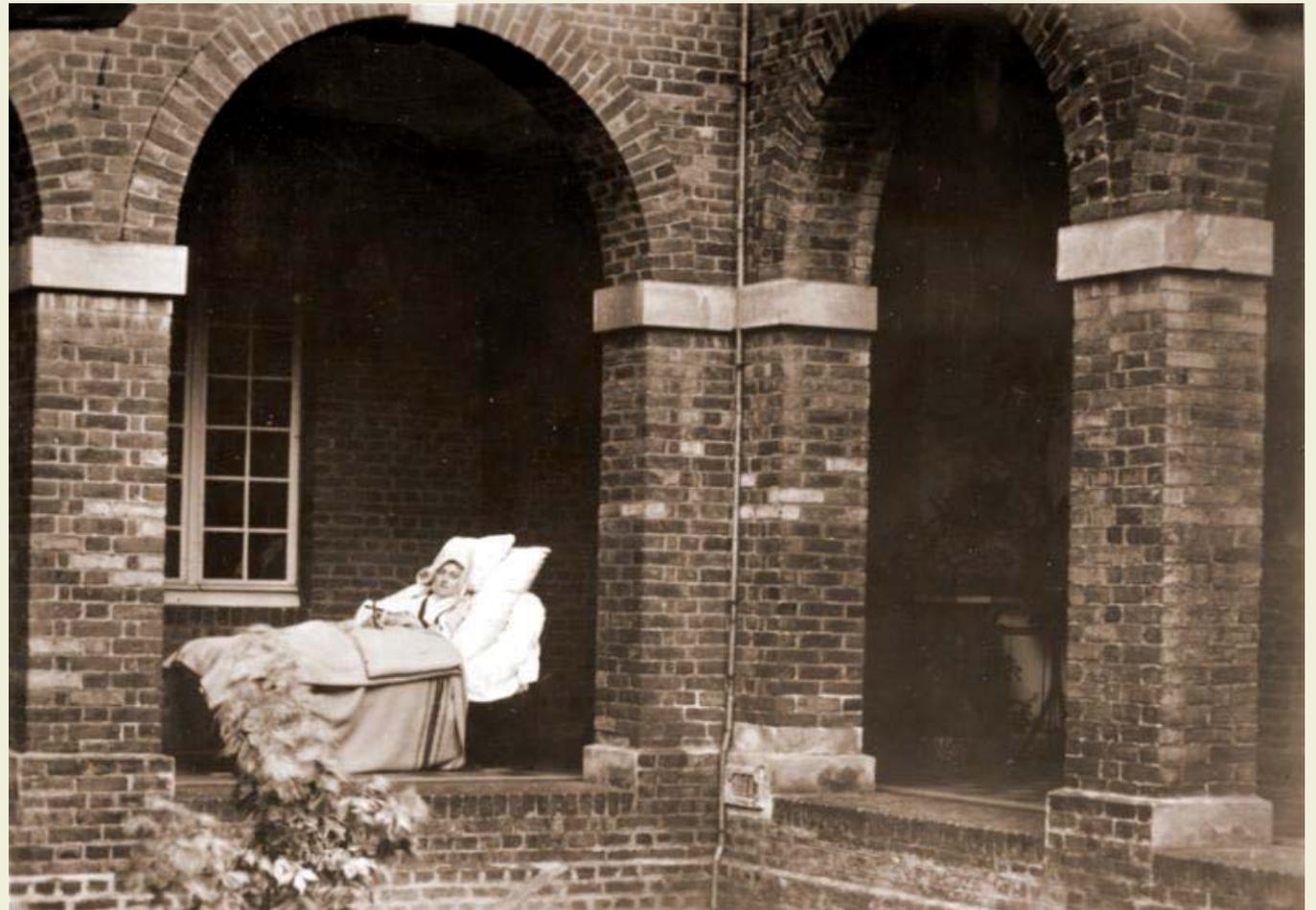


Photo taken by Céline outside the infirmary. The entrance to the infirmary is behind the pillars on the right. (August 30, 1897 - a month before Thérèse died)

Two examples for reflection

It was my duty to keep the blankets of the monastery in good repair. One day when we were shaking them I asked rather sharply that they should be handled with greater care because they were already threadbare and worn. Saint Thérèse then said to me:

“Suppose it were not your duty to mend these blankets? Then when you called attention to the fact that they are easily torn, you would do so impersonally, and then there would be no thought of self in the matter. In all your actions, try to avoid the least trace of self-seeking.”

[*A Memoir of My Sister St. Thérèse* by Sister Geneviève (Céline Martin), 36]

In an unpublished passage of her Autobiography, the Saint tells us about her visit, when she was twenty-eight months old, to the Visitation Convent at Le Mans, where, for the first time, she met her mother's sister, Sister Marie Dosithea.

In remembrance of the visit, the proud aunt gave the child a little beaded basket filled with candies, on the top of which were two sugar rings. [She decided to give one to Celine, but accidentally dropped the basket on the way home, losing one.]

Years later, at Carmel, when reminding me of this incident, Thérèse made this observation; “See how deeply rooted in us is this self-love! Why was it Celine's sugar ring, and not mine, that was lost?”

[*A Memoir of My Sister St. Thérèse* by Sister Geneviève (Céline Martin), 37]



Thérèse's on-going mission

That God be loved as I love Him.

I was speaking to her about the manuscript of her Life, about the good it would do to souls.

“... But how well they will understand that everything comes from God; and what I shall have of glory from it will be a gratuitous gift from God that doesn't belong to me; everybody will see this clearly...” [*Last Conversations*, 88]

Join us for a conversation on Zoom on
Wednesday 15th April at 10:30

Please book through the website
www.thecarmelitecentremelbourne.org



Photo by Katrina Berban on Unsplash