

How I learned to love Thérèse of Lisieux

**At first I found the "little flower" insufferable.
Then I read her unedited writing.**

by [Suzanne Guthrie](#) in the [December 7, 2016](#) issue



Altar to St. Thérèse of Lisieux at a basilica in Buenos Aires, Argentina. [Some rights reserved](#) by [Gabriel Sozzi](#).

In my early adulthood I studied the 16th-century Carmelite mystics Teresa of Ávila and John of the Cross at a Roman Catholic seminary. On my own I plowed through spiritual formation tomes written by Thomistic theologians mapping the interior journey of the soul.

Tome reading did not impress my teacher. He wanted me to love the 19th-century Carmelite mystic Thérèse of Lisieux. No, thank you. I'd read *The Story of a Soul*. The most loved saint besides Francis of Assisi? The greatest missionary of all time who never left her convent walls? Doctor of the church? The *little way of spiritual childhood*? I found her insufferable.

A decade later this teacher came to visit my husband and me when we lived in Europe. He made a pilgrimage to Lisieux and brought me presents: a picture book in French about the shrine, a collection of photographs of Thérèse, and a real treasure: a facsimile of the two notebooks and one letter which composed the original manuscript. This material rearranged, edited, and prettied up became *The Story of a Soul*, which those of us who read spiritual classics knew and loved—or hated.

This Roman Catholic priest still wanted this Episcopal priest to love Thérèse.

OK. I tried again, but now through the feminist eyes of Monica Furlong and Dorothy Day. Both women, embarrassed a bit for loving the “little flower,” nevertheless drew depth from Thérèse, saw through the kind of piety and language expected of her (some of which, it turns out, was not her own, including “little way of spiritual childhood,” which was an invention of her sister Pauline).

Furlong and Day took into account the narrow intellectual and cultural life Thérèse was born into, the dysfunction of the enclosed contemplative Carmelite community she entered at age 15, the convent's hothouse atmosphere of manipulation and emotional blackmail, and Thérèse's impending early death from tuberculosis. To feminist writers, Thérèse's apotheosis in spite of her milieu makes her story remarkable.

A young bourgeois girl grows up with four older sisters (Marie, Pauline, Léonie, Céline) in an overly pious Norman family. Both parents had tried religious vocations unsuccessfully but brought their sense of dedication to God into family life. Thérèse is four when her mother dies, and five years later the sister to whom she transfers her maternal affection leaves the family to enter a local Carmelite convent. Thérèse

herself wants to enter Carmel earlier than canonically allowed, and on a pilgrimage to Rome she throws herself at the feet of the pope himself. Eventually all the sisters but one join the same community. Léonie enters another order.

A clever raconteuse, Thérèse amuses her sisters with stories about her childhood. Pauline, having authority over the younger nun, asks her to write them down. These become the first of the three manuscripts.

In Manuscript A, Thérèse writes about the time Léonie, having outgrown her playthings, presents the two younger ones with a box of doll clothes and ribbons. Céline chooses one item, expecting Thérèse to choose one, and so on back and forth until the box is empty. Instead, Thérèse announces, “I choose everything,” and carries off the lot. “Everyone thought this quite fair.” (Is she implicating her family in her infantilization?) “This episode sums up the whole of my life,” she says.

Instead of cringing at this memory of the selfishness of a spoiled child, she observes that now, as a nun, she sees her flaws as an early signal of her own spiritual ambition. She still chooses all. “I do not want to be a saint by halves.” Clever twist. (But after her death her family will continue to participate in her infantilization.)

When I first read *The Story of a Soul* I was in my twenties and struggling to shed my own juvenilia, piousness, and prudishness. (Would you want anyone to read what you had written under the age of 25?) But Thérèse digs right in and uses her embarrassments and hypersensitivity as material for transcendence. It’s all she has to work with.

The modern reader can’t help but wonder what Thérèse might have done with a college education, some experience in the world away from her family, or some theological training. She says she’s never going to be a soaring “eagle” like Teresa or John. Her ingenious solution to her “littleness” became the practice she writes about in Manuscript B, where again, she champions nothingness as a springboard to holiness. After all, most people are not geniuses like John and Teresa, but ordinary and limited, like herself.

Manuscript B is a letter written to her sister Marie, a “souvenir” of a retreat Thérèse made in the fall of 1896. Marie wants to know how Thérèse manages to love God with such passion. Thérèse reflects on her thwarted ambitions—Apostle! Warrior! Martyr! Priest! Missionary! Reflecting on 1 Corinthians 13, Thérèse realizes that the vocation of love encompasses all those others. By loving heroically the difficult

people within her convent, she can, in a way, choose everything.

Perhaps she knew John of the Cross's comment written during a rough time near the end of his life: "Think nothing else but that God ordains all, and where there is no love, put love, and there you will draw out love." Expanding on John, Thérèse wrote that her nothingness forces her to "borrow" God's own love in order to love.

Thérèse tries to tell Marie that the passion attributed to her is not as keen as it looks. What she doesn't tell Marie is that she is dying.

In June 1897, Pauline manipulates the mother superior into encouraging Thérèse to write again. Manuscript C, the thinner of the two notebooks, addresses Mother Marie de Gonzague, an aristocratic and attractive woman with an unreliable temperament, who, though at odds with Thérèse much of the time, was the one person in her community with the background to appreciate Thérèse's gifts. Sounding cheerful and affectionate, trying to stay focused on her task—to write about her insights as the community's novice mistress—Thérèse nevertheless confides about the "pitch black darkness" which encompasses her, and about God's abandonment. Having longed for heaven all her life, her inner self says go ahead and dream of heaven and death, but it is "not what you hope for: but a still darker night, the night of annihilation!" If she says any more, she'll blaspheme, she writes.

Previously, the absence of God would have disheartened her. "Now it has only one result: it removes all natural satisfaction from my longing for heaven."

In these confidences, played down and suppressed in the familiar classic, Thérèse at age 24 sounds like the soaring mystics she admired. A careful reading reveals the expected outcome of a dark night of the soul—a universalizing compassion.

Upon the onset of darkness, Thérèse observes within herself a humbling solidarity with atheists—a way of seeing the world she simply could not understand or imagine before.

She admits to eating the "bread of sorrow," but again, the dark night accentuates not her own suffering but an identification with all the "wretched sinners" at the table. And yet this is where Jesus chooses to have table fellowship, she observes. "O God, be merciful to *us* sinners. . . . Send *us* away justified!" And here, as if church teaching interrupts her train of thought, "if the table defiled by them must be cleansed by one who loves You I will gladly stay there alone . . . until You are

pleased to lead us to Your Kingdom of light” (italics mine).

This is the once selfish, spoiled “little white flower” in full maturity, blooming in darkness.

Manuscript C breaks off mid-thought.

She lives another three months in perpetual agony, with gangrenous intestines and raw bedsores, coughing up what is left of her lungs. Mother Marie de Gonzague did not think morphine was appropriate for a nun.

On September 30, 1897, at 7:20 in the evening, the community was called to Thérèse’s bedside. Looking upon the crucifix the sisters held before her eyes she said, “OH! . . . I LOVE HIM! . . . MY GOD, I . . . LOVE . . . YOU!!!” and she died.

Sweet statues of Thérèse holding roses belie the shadow-eyed photos of Thérèse during her Job-like face-off with the absent God. Spiritual childhood does not make Thérèse great, but realizing adulthood, wholeness, losing the “I” to embrace the “we” of humanity, does. She finds limitlessness within the limited material of life at hand.

On the table in front of me I have the precious facsimile of Thérèse’s notebooks. Before he died I told my teacher that Thérèse speaks to my soul in the ways that he had hoped she would. But I myself had first to face the abyss.

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