

AT THE FOUNTAIN OF ELIJAH

Phase I Formation – Lesson 11 Required Reading

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Overwhelmed by God's Loving Presence John of St. Samson and Lawrence of the Resurrection

The Church in France suffered greatly from the religious wars and conflicts of the sixteenth century—abbeys, priories and convents were devastated and many communities barely survived. Yet it was in France that, by the seventeenth century, an amazing spiritual renewal was taking place, and this renewal also helped to revitalize Carmel. The first stirrings of Carmelite renewal also helped to revitalize Carmel. The first stirrings of Carmelite renewal occurred in the west of France and this new life was given positive help by the Prior General, Henry Sylvio, who was personally committed to reform in the Order. A revitalized papacy also encouraged renewal so that Rome no longer smothered creative initiatives. However, what mattered most was an openness at the local level to the action of the Spirit.

The renewal of the Order in France owes much to the tact and vision of the Carmelite Philippe Thibault, but the heart of the reform was a blind brother, John of St. Samson. Philippe Thibault was a person who respected individuals and had an aversion to excess and legalism. He had a great love of Carmel and wanted to renew the Order by combining the best of its traditions with the vitality of contemporary French movements of spirituality. He was familiar with the Jesuit approach to spirituality and aware of the Discalced Reform that had just been introduced into France. Thibault also sought the support of competent authorities in the Order for his project, and began to work with a combination of vision and realism. He became Prior to the community at Rennes in July 1608, an event that marks the beginning of the movement in the Order that was to be known as the reform of Touraine. The reform was to revitalize Carmel in France and radically influence the parent body of the Carmelite family worldwide.

However, the soul of the reform was to be John of St. Sampson or John Moulin. John was born in 1571 at Sens. His family was relatively comfortable, his father being a tax assessor. However, his early years were not idyllic as he caught smallpox when he was three and this led to the loss of his eyesight. His parents died when he was ten, but fortunately his mother's brother took care of him. For many people who lose one sense, another compensates, and John used his acute sense of hearing and love of sound to the full. Music became his enthusiasm, while Ronsard's lyric poetry was his other love. At the age of seventeen he was competent enough to play the organ at St. Dominic's in Sens. His love of music and poetry shows a remarkable parallel with the early years of John of the Cross. Beside the organ John played the lute and harp and also wind instruments. He ventured into the realm of composition, writing and arranging a love sonnet for one of his cousins.

In 1597 John left his uncle's home in Sens to be reunited with his brother John Baptist in Paris. John Baptist had spent some years in Italy where he had made his mark and had become part of the Court of Marie de Medici, the future Queen of France. He was married, so a new family, a new household, was there to welcome John. For four years John enjoyed a full and happy life in Paris. He had scope for his music, but also began to develop his prayer life and his devotion to Mary. His brother-in-law, John Douet, proved a good friend, being willing to read to him. However, in 1601 this warm comfortable life came to a sudden end with the death of both John Baptist and his wife Anne. John now depended on people's goodwill and kindness and he gradually sank into near destitution. It was about this time that he began to frequent the Carmelite church at the Place Maubert. In the seventeenth century, the Carmelite Priory at Place Maubert was an important centre of studies for the Order in France. Sadly the priory was destroyed during the French Revolution and today only street names give witness to a once vibrant place.

The church at Place Maubert became John's home and he would spend seven or eight hours a day in prayer. To those who saw him, he seemed to be peaceful, caught up in divine love. The reality was different—it was a time of darkness and loneliness—but despite the dark, John remained faithful.

His material circumstances improved a little when he found a room to live in and also earned some money as organist at the Church of St. Pierre aux Boeufs. Gradually John began to build up a relationship with the friars at Place Maubert and also with the people who frequented the church; and in this way, he became more confident in talking to people about his prayer life, hoping to learn from others and share his own experiences. It was not easy for him to make contacts as his disability and poverty would have been formidable barriers.

John formed a friendship with a young friar, Matthew Pinault, and through this friendship he drew closer to the Community and was given a room in return for playing and teaching the organ. The next two years were formative and healing for him. He formed around himself a group of friars and lay people and together they began to read spiritual texts. The texts were read aloud and discussed, and John was able to hear both familiar and new material. All this was exciting and it consolidated his own experiences in prayer. At this time, he also heard of the ideals of reform that were stirring in the Order, and this inspired him to ask to be admitted to Carmel as a brother.

John received the Carmelite habit at Dol in Brittany. He took the name St. Samson at his reception as a novice in 1606, St. Samson being a Celtic saint, the first Bishop of Dol. Circumstances at Dol were far from ideal, as the priory was situated in a marshy area, the buildings were ramshackle and the community was poor and not overly observant. Plague ravaged the area over the next few years, and during this time, John realized that his prayer had to be translated into practical love and care for the sick—a healing ministry. This healing ministry attracted the attention of Antoine Revol, Bishop of Dol. The Bishop was a man of deep spirituality and he recognized the validity of John's ministry. A friendship was established that was to be of the utmost significance. Antoine Revol was also a friend and disciple of Francis de Sales, but he was willing, in the years to come, to see John as his guide in the spiritual life.

In 1612 John moved to the community of Rennes which had now embraced the reform initiated by Philippe Thibault. John was to live at Rennes until his death in 1636. Over these twenty-four years John was the keystone in forming friars in the spirit of the Order. His writings, which he began in 1615, articulate his own vision of prayer, but also lay out the fundamental principles that were to guide the Reform. John's writings come to some four thousand pages of manuscript and, while they were published in the mid-seventeenth century, it is only in the last few years that the critical edition has been attempted. Hein Blommestyn, a Dutch Carmelite of the Titus Brandsma Institute at Nijmegen University, has been entrusted with this remarkable task.

John's life was remarkable, and it is out of that context that his teaching flows. While it is clear there were many authors who influenced him, it was his own personal prayer that inspired his teaching. He had a keen memory, knowing much of the Bible by heart, and he could quote patristic texts with ease. He also knew the Flemish mystics and, while he had no contact with the works of John of the Cross, he knew of Teresa of Avila's writings. His writings also show how deeply he had reflected on the Rule and the *Institute*.

John's Carmelite formation made him emphasize the practice of living in the presence of God like the prophet Elijah, who said, 'The Lord lives in whose presence I stand' (cf. 1 Kings 17:1). Again, like many of his Carmelite predecessors, John believed that all Christians could come to a direct experience of union with God through grace. He was deeply conscious of the generosity of God's love for us, a love that is freely given and utterly transforming. In the face of such overwhelming love, the only response is to break out of the shackles of selfishness and allow love to hold us and bring utter fulfilment. At the request of his friend Antoine Revol, the Bishop of Dol, John wrote a treatise, *L'Aiguillon, les flames, les flèches et le miroir de l'amour de Dieu*, where he tried to outline the way of allowing God's love to shape our lives. This is a book where John takes the reader along paths that he himself has trod. The whole exercise is done with great gentleness and the only thing that John stresses is the need for perseverance. We should conform to the rhythm of Christ's life, putting on Christ's personality, and allow the paschal mystery to energize our lives. We die to self-love to rise into God's gift of love, and move towards new horizons of relationships. John talks of the way we should allow self-love to be purged—and it is at this point that we can submit to God's action. The time of change is difficult and can be challenging, leaving us vulnerable or in darkness. It is at such times we need perseverance. However, when we have let our selfishness be stripped away, we are then able to allow the Holy Spirit to breathe through us.

This activity of the Spirit—this outpouring of God’s love—brings us into a union with the Father as we live in Christ.

The treatise is a good introduction to John’s teaching and his way of working with people. He wants us to risk loving God by being close to God, but he sees it as a gentle process that takes us deeper and deeper into the relationship. He uses the image of God’s love as being like a wave that laps around life:

Make use of this very simple aspiration: ‘you and I, my love, you and I, you and I, and never another nor more!’ To which you could add some burning words like: ‘since you are entirely good and all goodness itself; since you are entirely glorious and all glory itself; since you are entirely holy and all holiness itself!’¹

L’Epithalame, The Wedding Song, is perhaps the most personal and lyrical of John’s writings. It is in some respects almost a paraphrase of the Song of Songs and, in its intensity of expression, seems akin to John of the Cross’s poetry. This short work in poetic prose expresses the union of John with the eternal wisdom of God. It is an intensely personal expression of total union with God. The experience was so intense that John felt he was dying in the moment of loving embrace with his God. Those who knew John, and especially Donatien of St. Nicholas, his friend and editor, believed that such intense moments of union took place when John received Communion at Mass. Donatien said that at times John seemed like an angel in human form, giving off such a power of love and light. Certainly the language of *The Wedding Song* expresses the ardor of an ecstatic love. There is no clever use of language or rhetoric, only outpourings of love. Love has become an adventure, the whole meaning of John’s life.

John’s teachings and his way of guiding people had a wide-ranging impact on the Carmelite friars in seventeenth-century France, and the sense of renewal gave new life to the whole of the parent branch of the Order. However, Jansenism and Quietism, each in their way did much to discredit mysticism and mystical teachings; and as a result, John’s writings came to be treated with suspicion, or ignored.

John had taught his insights with great sensitivity and gentleness. He did not advocate shortcuts to union with God, but emphasized the need for a realistic and disciplined framework. The opening up to God could only come through a positive approach to silence and solitude. Time had to be given to the relationship. Again it is important to remember that John experienced deep union during the Eucharist. The time he gave to silence and solitude according to the Rule gave him the focused heart that drew him to the Eucharist and prayer with his community. John was rooted in experience and in the sacraments, and his images of God came from his devotion to the humanity of Christ. Like Teresa of Avila and his Carmelite forebears, the following of Jesus Christ with a pure heart was at the core of his commitment.

Lawrence of the Resurrection

While John of St. Samson was forming young friars in Rennes, a young man was growing up in Luneville in Lorraine who was to have a similar impact on young Carmelites. Nicolas Herman was born in 1614 and became a Discalced friar in Paris in 1640. The priory in Rue Vaugirard near the Luxembourg was a fine house of formation for the recently established communities of Discalced friars in France. Nicolas had served as a soldier, but left the army after a bad leg wound. He was accepted as a member of the Paris community as a lay brother and was given the name of Lawrence of the Resurrection.

Lawrence found his first few years in religious life difficult. He felt that compared to the bright young men who were studying theology, he himself was rough and awkward. He entered into his work with vigor,

¹ *L’Aiguillon in Complete Works of John of St Samson*, ed. Hein Blommestijn O. Carm and Max Huot de Longchamp (1992), p. 85.

spending long hours in the kitchen cooking. During these early years, besides feeling somewhat lost in this large community, Lawrence also experienced a long dark night. His very being was in a state of terrible inner turmoil. He wanted to please God because he was so aware of the beauty and wonder of God, and yet he felt he could never really be good enough to come close to the One he loved. He could only see himself in a negative light. He even reached the stage where he said that he felt that salvation would elude him. Finally, however, he reached a turning point and described what happened in a letter to his spiritual director:

When I accepted the fact that I might spend my life suffering from these troubles and anxieties—which in no way diminished the trust I had in God and served only to increase my faith—I found myself changed all at once. And my soul, until that time always in turmoil, experienced a deep inner peace as if it had found its centre and place of rest.

Since that time I do my work in simple faith before God, humbly and lovingly, and I carefully apply myself to avoid doing, saying, or thinking anything that might displease him. I hope that, having done all that I can, he will do with me as he pleases.

I cannot express to you what is taking place in me at present. I feel neither concern nor doubt about my state since I have no will other than the will of God, which I try to carry out in all things and to which I am so surrendered that I would not so much pick up a straw from the ground against his order, nor for any other reason than pure love.

I gave up all devotions and prayers that were not required and I devote myself exclusively to remaining always in his holy presence. I keep myself in his presence by simple attentiveness and a general loving awareness of God that I call ‘actual presence of God’ or better, a quiet and secret conversation of the soul with God that is lasting. This sometimes results in interior, and often exterior, contentment and joys so great that I have to perform childish acts, appearing more like folly than devotion, to control them and keep them from showing outwardly.

Therefore, Reverend Father, I cannot doubt at all that my soul has been with God for more than thirty years. I will omit a number of things so as not to bore you. I think, however, it would be appropriate to indicate the manner in which I see myself before God, whom I consider as my King.²

He had found himself in the presence of God and that state, that reality, became the meaning of his life and the substance of his teaching.

Lawrence spent fifty years in the Carmelite Community in Paris. As he grew older he found work in the kitchen too heavy and he took on the role of sandal maker. With the passing years more and more people began to see Lawrence as a guide and a friend. He became a great influence on his fellow Carmelites and gradually the word went round that he was a man of insight, holiness and wisdom. Fénèlon, the great Archbishop of Cambrai, came to see him and said he might be rough by nature, but he was delicate in grace.

What we know about Brother Lawrence and the writings attributed to him come through the care and friendship of Joseph de Beaufort. This intelligent but self-effacing priest became a friend of Lawrence in 1666 and was obviously deeply affected by him. De Beaufort ended his life as Vicar-General of the diocese of Paris, respected by Archbishop De Noailles and by the great Fénèlon.

² *Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection: On the Practice of the Presence of God*, trans. Salvatore Scurba (Washington Province of Discalced Carmelites, ICS Publications, 2131 Lincoln Road N.E., Washington DC 20002, © 1994), p. 52.

De Beaufort said that Lawrence ‘had the best heart in the world’. He was an easy person to be with, warm and understanding. There was nothing inflexible about him, but he had great integrity. He was at home with everyone—with the passage of years, his earlier shyness and awkwardness vanished. His long years in Carmel gave him the chance to develop intellectually and he was well versed in the writings of John of the Cross and Teresa, and enjoyed picking the brains of his confrères. As he grew older his leg wound gave him more and more trouble, sciatic pains giving way to severe ulcerations. His last years brought terrible suffering. The last letter he wrote, on 6 February 1691, expresses his hope for peaceful release: ‘I hope for the merciful grace of seeing Him in a few days.’ He died six days later.

After Lawrence’s death De Beaufort gathered his writings, which included some letters and other fragments, and edited them. It is this small collection that is now known as *The Practice of the Presence of God*. Lawrence’s writings sadly failed to find favor in France, not for any intrinsic fault, but because he was incorrectly caught up in the Quietist controversy. The fact that Fénelon admired him became a source of disapproval by association. Quietism was condemned because it taught that perfection was achieved by passivity of the soul before God. In its extreme form, Quietism would imply that the will is annihilated and that sin is impossible. In France a great controversy raged over the issue, with Fénelon sympathetic to the tendency and Bossuet vehemently opposed. Fénelon’s position was condemned by Pope Innocent XII in 1699, and as a result, Brother Lawrence, who stressed abandonment to God’s will, was linked to Quietism. Even though any such link was tenuous, Lawrence’s work suffered—he was guilty by association. More seriously, however, the reaction against Quietism produced a negative attitude to mysticism which is only receding today. It is interesting that an English translation of Lawrence’s writing caught the attention of John Wesley. Wesley was impressed by what he read and included Lawrence in the syllabus of his college at Kingswood, recommending the work to his preachers. For English-speaking Christians, Lawrence’s work became a classic alongside Thomas a Kempis and Francis de Sales.

Like all Carmelite writers and teachers, Lawrence believed that we can come close to God in this life. Union with God is not elitist; it is part of our Christian life. Like John of St. Samson, Lawrence appreciated that it is God who loves us first and his love is sheer generous gift. The treasure is offered, and to respond we have only to believe that something beyond our dreams can come into our lives. He wanted people whose lives were pressurized and fragmented to realize that union with God was possible. He saw complicated methods of prayer as a great barrier for most people. Lack of time and the ability to do all that seems necessary can make people feel that prayer is beyond them. He wanted people to realize that we only need to create moments where we allow God to be present to us, to believe that we have an inner life and that there God is happy to dwell. It is a matter of seizing those moments that suddenly become free, even in a busy day, and turning them into time for God. When we are caught in a traffic jam, when the train stops for no reason, we can turn what could be frustration into a moment of grace.

For Lawrence, the more we allow ourselves to be in God’s presence, the more change can happen in our lives. Our heart becomes more fixed and focused on God. In the light of God’s presence, we recognize the changes we need to make and we gain God’s perspective in the shaping of our lives. Closeness to God also brings a freedom from negative self-consciousness and this means we feel much more at ease in relating to other people. The fact we know we are lovable to God helps us realize we have something good to share with other people. Being in the presence of God brings a connectedness: everything is brought into right relationship because the love of God becomes the energy that helps us overcome the fears and negativity that so often haunt our lives. All this needs a radical trust that opens us to God and to other people and, crucially, helps us to be much more at ease with ourselves. Certainly in Lawrence’s life, his living in God’s presence helped him in his work and his relationships so that he was no longer self-conscious about his roughness or lack of intellectual background. His closeness to God helped him at times when he was entrusted with community business. On a number of occasions, he had to oversee the buying and transportation of wine for the community. The journeys to

Burgundy and back were physically demanding, but Lawrence learnt to put the project into the context of prayer and, while the responsibility was still great, the business was not allowed to crush his spirit.

Rather than analyze or talk about the core of Lawrence's teaching, it would be better to let him speak to us himself:

On the Presence of God—the [practice of the] presence of God is an application of our mind to God, or a remembrance of God present, that can be brought about either by the imagination or the understanding.

I know someone who for forty years has been practicing an intellectual presence of God to which he gives several other names. Sometimes he calls it a 'simple act', a 'clear and distinct knowledge of God', an 'indistinct view' or a 'general and loving awareness of God'. Other times he names it 'attention to God', 'silent conversation with God', 'trust in God', or 'the soul's life and peace'. This person told me that all these forms of God's presence are nothing but synonyms for the same thing, and that it is at present second nature to him. Here is how:

This person says that the habit is formed by the repetition of acts and by frequently bringing the mind back into God's presence. He says that as soon as he is free from his occupations, and often even when he is most taken up by them, the recesses of his mind [*esprit*] or the innermost depths of his soul are raised with no effort on his part and remain suspended and fixed in God, above all things, as in its centre and resting place. Since he is generally aware that his mind, thus held in suspension, is accompanied by faith, he is satisfied. This is what he calls 'actual presence of God', which includes all the other types of presence and much more besides, so that he now lives as if only he and God were in the world. He converses with God everywhere, asks him for what he needs, and rejoices continuously with him in countless ways.

It is important, however, to realize that this conversation with God takes place in the depths and centre of the soul. It is there that the soul speaks to God heart to heart, and always in a deep and profound peace that the soul enjoys in God. Everything that takes place outside the soul means no more to it than a lit straw that goes out as soon as it is ignited, and almost never, or very rarely, disturbs its inner peace.

To get back to the presence of God, I say that this gentle, loving awareness of God imperceptibly ignites a divine fire in the soul, inflaming it so intensely with love of God that one is forced to perform various activities in an effort to contain it.

We would be surprised to know what the soul sometimes says to God, who is so pleased with these conversations that he grants it all its desires, proving it is willing to remain with him always, and in its centre. To discourage the soul from returning to created things, God takes care to provide it with everything it desires, and to such an extent that it often finds within itself a very savory, delicious nourishment, though it never sought nor did anything to obtain it, and in no way contributed to it itself, except by its consent.

Means to Acquire the Presence of God—the first means is great purity of life.

The second is great fidelity to the practice of this presence and to the fostering of this awareness of God within, which must always be performed gently, humbly, and lovingly, without giving in to disturbance or anxiety.

We must take special care that this inner awareness, no matter how brief it may be, precedes our activities, that it accompanies them from time to time, and that we complete all of them in the same way. Since much time and effort are required to acquire this practice; we must not get discouraged when we fail, for the habit is only formed with effort, yet once it is formed, we will find contentment in everything. It is only right that the heart, the first to beat with life and the part that controls the rest of the body, should be the first and the last to love and adore God, whether by beginning or by completing our spiritual and physical activities, and generally in all life's exercises. This is the reason we must take care to foster this awareness, which we must do naturally and normally, as I have said, thus making it easier.

It would be appropriate for beginners to formulate a few words interiorly, such as: 'My God, I am completely yours', or 'God of love, I love you with all my heart', or 'Lord, fashion me according to your heart', or any other words love spontaneously produces. But they must take care that their minds do not wander or return to creatures. The mind must be kept fixed on God alone, so that seeing itself so moved and led by the will, it will be obliged to remain with God.

This [practice of the] presence of God, somewhat difficult in the beginning, secretly accomplishes marvelous effects in the soul, draws abundant graces from the Lord, and, when practiced faithfully, imperceptibly leads it to this simple awareness, to this loving view of God present everywhere, which is the holiest, the surest, the easiest, and the most efficacious form of prayer.

Please note that to arrive at this state, mortification of the senses is presupposed, since it is impossible for a soul that still finds some satisfaction in creatures to completely enjoy this divine presence; for to be with God, we must abandon creatures.

Benefits of the Presence of God—the first benefit that the soul receives from the [practice of the] presence of God is that its faith becomes more intense and efficacious in all life's situations, and especially in times of need, since it easily obtains graces in moments of temptation and in the inevitable dealings with creatures. For the soul, accustomed to the practice of faith by this exercise, sees and senses God present by a simple remembrance. It calls out to him easily and effectively, thus obtaining what it needs. It can be said that it possesses here something resembling the state of the blessed, for the more it advances, the more intense its faith grows, becoming so penetrating in the end that you could almost say: I no longer believe, for I see and experience.

The practice of the presence of God strengthens us in hope. Our hope increases in proportion to our knowledge. It grows and is strengthened to the extent that our faith penetrates the secrets of the divinity by this holy exercise, to the extent that it discovers in God a beauty infinitely surpassing not only that of the bodies we see on earth but even that of the perfect souls and of the angels. The grandeur of the blessing that it desires to enjoy, and in some manner already tastes, satisfies and sustains it.

This practice inspires the will with a scorn for creatures, and inflames it with a sacred fire of love. Since the will is always with God who is a consuming fire, this fire reduces to ashes all that is opposed to it. The soul thus inflamed can live only in the presence of its God, a presence that produces in its heart a holy ardor, a sacred zeal and a strong desire to see this God loved, known, served, and adored by all creatures.

By turning inward and practicing the presence of God, the soul becomes so intimate with God that it spends practically all its life in continual acts of love, adoration, contrition, trust, thanksgiving, oblation, petition, and all the most excellent virtues. Sometimes it even becomes one continuous act, because the soul constantly practices this exercise of his divine presence.

I know that few persons reach this advanced state. It is a grace God bestows only on a few chosen souls, since this simple awareness remains ultimately a gift from his kind hand. But let me say, for the consolation of those who desire to embrace this holy practice, that he ordinarily gives it to souls who are disposed to receive it. If he does not give it, we can at least acquire, with the help of ordinary grace, a manner and state of prayer that greatly resembles this simple awareness, by means of this practice of the presence of God.³

Much of Lawrence's teaching echoes John of the Cross, but his sense of love, trust and simplicity points forward to Thérèse of Lisieux and to a new context of the Carmelite tradition.

Unlike Thérèse of Lisieux, whose writings and life were to be so readily received by the Church, Lawrence and his fellow seventeenth-century Carmelite John of St. Samson fell under the shadow produced by the reaction against Quietism. John and Lawrence shaped the lives of their contemporaries both in Carmel and in society at large, but by the end of the seventeenth century, their works had been sidelined. However, today their voices are again being heard and they can be seen as belonging firmly within the long tradition of Carmelite spirituality. Certainly both speak clearly as Carmelites of the call of all people to a closeness to God in this life.

Love in the Heart of the Church—Thérèse of Lisieux

Thérèse Martin, often known as the Little Flower, has recently been declared a Doctor of the Church. This ranks her along with such figures as Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and Teresa of Avila. Thérèse was not a great writer like Augustine, but she did something crucial: she helped to bring spirituality and theology together again, demonstrating in word and by her life the centrality of prayer and love for theology. She is an important impetus in the Church's rediscovery of the value of the mystical and its moving away from the over-intellectual approach to theology that had been fostered since the seventeenth century. The reaction to Quietism was at last being addressed.

Thérèse had to transcend many aspects of life both in society and in the Church, and even after death; her true self was almost submerged. She was born in Normandy in 1873 into a devout Roman Catholic family, at a time when Roman Catholicism in France was very much on the defensive. Catholics saw themselves as under siege in a rationalist, anti-clerical world. In their retreat to a 'fortress Church' Catholics brought with them an often pietistic faith. There was a retreat into piety and devotion, a withdrawal into a safe space—almost a private world. Allied to a disapproval of secular society and a nostalgia for the *ancien régime*, such Catholics adopted a fierce middle-class respectability. 'What will people think?' was often the criterion of behavior. These attitudes colored Thérèse's family life and were certainly present in community life in Carmel where she spent the last nine years of her life. It was this spirit of correctness that caused Thérèse's sister to edit her manuscript so that the early editions of *The Story of a Soul* contained radical revisions. Since the 1950s the original manuscripts have been available, and also original photographs that show a more vigorous person, a real human being.

³ *On the Practice of the Presence of God*, pp. 39-43.

The remarkable aspect of Thérèse's life and ministry was the way she was able to live her years in Carmel with such maturity and creativity. She was the author of her own vision of life and there is a genuine originality in what she wrote and how she lived. Thérèse was a Carmelite in her faithful following of Jesus: he was her guide. Sadly she was not able to immerse herself in the Scriptures after the spirit of the Rule, because the Bible was not readily available in the French Church of that time. Bourgeois susceptibility led to the attitude that many passages of Scripture were too realistic, not 'nice'. The realities of human nature were too much for the post-Jansenist mind. Despite these difficulties, Thérèse was able to read the New Testament and she eventually obtained a Bible.

When Teresa of Avila founded her Carmels, she wanted them to be communities where friendship could flourish and a simple lifestyle could be realized. She did not want communities to be too large because institutionalism could creep in and financial problems could grow. The Carmel at Lisieux was not entirely in that mold. The community numbered about twenty-five, and it is clear some of the nuns were difficult characters. The Prioress, Mother Gonzaga, came from the nobility and never freed herself from her background. There was tension between her and Thérèse's sisters, and sometimes the community had to wait on the Prioress's visiting relatives. The Rule was interpreted with a strictness that missed its essential humanity and was certainly far from Teresa of Avila's creative spirit. Mother Gonzaga was strict in her vision of Carmelite life both for others and for herself. This rage for correctness and the entrenched bourgeois mentality touched Thérèse during her illness when the community went into denial over its nature. For whatever reason, tuberculosis was seen as a disease to be ashamed of—it was an attitude not unlike that adopted today by some people to HIV/AIDS.

The great achievement is that Thérèse emerges from this unlikely environment to be so original, creative and self-possessed. She achieved an autonomy that is remarkable, and she was a likeable, strong-minded, humorous and idealistic young woman. She could have been dependent on her sisters, she could have played the games others played, but she found her own place in which to be.

Thérèse always had a lively imagination and a sense of fun. This aspect of her personality enabled her to feel free as a writer, expressive as a poet and fascinated by theatre. She had a great admiration for Joan of Arc, admiring her courage and decisiveness, and there is a striking photograph of her playing the part of the Maid of Orleans in a dramatic presentation she organized for the community. This lively imagination links her to the great sixteenth-century Carmelites, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. Thérèse shared the great Teresa's romanticism and clear vision. She also lived out in her last months the passive night of the spirit that John of the Cross spoke about in his commentaries. Thérèse knew the writings of the Carmelite Spanish mystics and her teaching on love echoes and repeats John's own words in a new and creative way.

Thérèse stands at the centre of the Carmelite tradition with her belief that we can all achieve closeness to God through our prayer and our following of Jesus Christ as we live the Gospel. This is her teaching on the 'Little Way'. For Thérèse, holiness, closeness to God, is not achieved by spectacular ascetic practices. We come to God by infusing love into every aspect of life. The 'Little Way' is one of childlike trust in God, but it is not infantile and naïve, or a searching for the lost innocence of some idealized childhood. Thérèse had known through childhood and early adolescence the pain of separation from those she loved. However, she gained the maturity to realize that trust and consistency were possible, and she began to express them in her wholehearted commitment to God. She wanted a quiet hidden relationship, to live out in secret her love for God. This 'Little Way' was a reaction to the strictness and spectacular ascetic practices that seemed to be demanded by her Prioress.

Thérèse was able to come to God in such loving trust because, like Teresa of Avila, she realized that the humanity of Christ was at the heart of Christianity. Jesus is the source of love and happiness for her—the Gospels were her book.

However, the most profound insights of Thérèse came during the last eighteen months of her life. Her illness took hold with full seriousness at Easter 1896 and became progressively more painful and crippling. During these last months of her life, Thérèse underwent the passive night of the spirit. For her, the experience was one that seemed like the purification of purgatory. She felt she had been placed in darkness and that her belief was an illusion. She began to feel that heaven could not exist. It was as if she had been placed in solidarity with non-believers. This struggle was to last until her death. Most difficult of all were the times when she found not just blasphemous thoughts but even blasphemous words welling up inside her. Mocking voices spoke to her, telling her that in the end there was just nothing—it was all an illusion. Thérèse even began to think that science would be able to disprove everything and end up explaining God's existence away. She felt the force of rationalism like a great wave ready to sweep away all traces of belief and, in her own way, she was akin to Matthew Arnold and the grey vision of 'Dover Beach'. Even more terrifying for her were suicidal thoughts of ending the pain and the sense of futility:

Watch carefully, Mother, when you will have patients a prey to violent pains; don't leave them any medicines that are poisonous. I assure you, it needs only a second when one suffers intensely to lose one's reason. Then one would easily poison oneself.

However, just before her death she was able to say,

Yes! What a grace it is to have faith! If I had not had faith, I would have committed suicide without an instant's hesitation.⁴

In his insightful study on Thérèse, *Love in the Heart of the Church*, Chris O'Donnell has shown that Thérèse's experiences have something important to teach us about terminal illness, and may help people face death in an age when there is so much denial about its reality. The doubts and the trial do pass, and in Thérèse's writing we are helped to understand that even in the dark we are not abandoned by God. She is a living commentary on John of the Cross's teaching.

During this time of trial and struggle, Thérèse clung on to her relationship with God and tried to express her love in her poems and in her relationships with the community. It was only when she was very near death that those closest to her became aware of her struggle, and even then perhaps could only guess at what was happening.

In the October of 1896 in the middle of her sufferings, Thérèse had a moment of light and insight which helped her to find a sense of what her life was really about and what her real vocation was. Perhaps it is best to allow her to describe the moment and its import in her own words:

My desires caused me a veritable martyrdom, and I opened the Epistles of St. Paul to find some kind of answer. Chapters Twelve and Thirteen of the First Epistle to the Corinthians fell under my eyes. I read there, in the first of these chapters, that all cannot be apostles, prophets, doctors, and so on, that the Church is composed of different members, and that the eye cannot be the hand at one and the same time. The answer was clear, but it did not fulfill my desires and gave me no peace. Without becoming discouraged, I continued my reading, and this sentence consoled me:

⁴ *St. Thérèse of Lisieux: Her Last Conversations*, trans. John Clarke (Washington Province of Discalced Carmelites, Inc., ICS Publications, 2131 Lincoln Road N.E., Washington DC 20002, © 1977), Aug/258.

‘Yet strive for the better gifts, and I point out to you a yet more excellent way.’ And the Apostle explains how all the most perfect gifts are nothing without love. That charity is the excellent way that leads more surely to God.

I finally had to rest. Considering the mystical body of the Church, I had not recognized myself in any of the members described by St. Paul, or rather I desired to see myself in them all. Charity gave me the key to my vocation. I understood that if the Church had a body composed of different members, the most necessary and most 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 it was love alone that made the Church’s members act, that if love ever became extinct, apostles would not preach the Gospel and martyrs would not shed their blood. 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!’

Yes I have found my place in the Church and it is you, O my God, who have given me this place: in the heart of the Church, my mother, I shall be love. Thus I shall be everything, and thus my dream will be realized.⁵

Thérèse found her vocation in love—love at the heart of the Church. She came to this insight as she read St. Paul’s letters and discovered his teaching on the Mystical body. This Pauline vision with its emphasis on the Spirit gave Thérèse a generous sense of the Church which helped her to see herself as a missionary even though she never left Carmel. It also enhanced her awareness of the Communion of Saints. This profound awareness of the Church is akin to Teresa of Avila’s missionary sense when, in the context of the Reformation, she sought a healing mission in the Church.

One of the rich veins of spirituality that flow from the doctrine of the Communion of Saints is a wonderful appreciation of intercessory prayer. The notion of belonging to a fellowship that goes beyond the here and now is also a powerful antidote to an individualistic approach to salvation.

For Thérèse the saints were her friends. This sense of intimacy began with her attraction to the life of Joan of Arc, but soon extended to other saints and especially to Mary, the Mother of Jesus. She also had a belief that members of her family who had died were part of that community of love and that in a special way, a closeness was achieved in the Eucharist between those in heaven and those on earth. Her Church, her community, was one that went beyond the limits of time and space. She spoke to the saints as friends and asked them to intercede for those troubled by doubt or experiencing loss of faith.

Her sense of love being the energy of the Church was the inspiration for her missionary dreams and her support for priests. She had hopes that she might be sent to the Carmel that was being set up in Saigon. However, realizing that her health was broken, she turned her energies into a power of love for all involved in that work. She hoped that her prayers, her pain, could support those working to bring the Gospel to remote areas of the world. Once again it was her deep reflection on Paul’s teaching that helped her live out the doctrine of the Mystical Body.

⁵ *Thérèse of Lisieux: Story of a Soul*, trans. John Clarke (Washington Province of Discalced Carmelite Friars, Inc., ICS Publications, 2131 Lincoln Road, N.E., Washington DC 20002, © 1975, 1976), p. 194.

Thérèse had a great love for priests and their ministry. It is possible to read her works with our modern eyes and to wonder if she ever wanted to be a priest herself. Certainly her deep sense of communion with Jesus in the Eucharist made her value the liturgy above all else, and she saw the role of those who ministered at the altar as precious. In the last months of her life, she was involved in correspondence with two missionary priests. Her enthusiasm and commitment in offering them support and encouragement is amazing given her frail health and the darkness of spirit she was enduring. Her words are full of energy and her warmth of understanding shows her generosity and altruism. She maintained the correspondence almost to the end of her life, and in a poem to Father Roulland, who was ministering in China, she writes:

Heaven for me is feeling within myself the resemblance
Of the God who created me with his Powerful Breath.
Heaven for me is remaining always in his presence,
Calling him my Father and being his child.
In his Divine arms, I don't fear the storm.
Total abandonment is my only law.
Sleeping on his Heart, right next to his Face,
That is Heaven for me! . . .

I've found my Heaven in the Blessed Trinity
That dwells in my heart, my prisoner of love.
There, contemplating my God, I fearlessly tell him
That I want to serve him and love him forever.
Heaven for me is smiling at this God whom I adore
When He wants to hide to try my faith.
To suffer while waiting for him to look at me again
That is Heaven for me! . . .⁶

Thérèse's greatness is her ability to grasp that the Christian life is the realization of love in the community where you live. Moreover, that community, if inspired by the dynamic of love, will always be open and creative. She realized that the call to love was linked to the same obedience that brought Jesus to the Cross. Her last months were a painful journey to Jerusalem and to her Calvary. Like Jesus she came to the end in a time of terrible darkness and in this she fulfilled her faithful following, her allegiance to him. By faith she grasped the meaning of the heavenly Jerusalem. Yet at times during her last months, she felt as if that reality could be snatched away from her, that her hope might even be in vain. We know that she kept journeying and in the end, peace broke through the darkness and the pain.

However, the great contribution, the message that Thérèse has for us today, is of the self-sacrificing love that Christ has for his community. By her life, Thérèse became an icon of that love and shows us a face of the Church that is more than the institution. The writer Chris O'Donnell is influenced by the theology of von Balthasar when he says that Thérèse has something vital to teach the post-Vatican II Church. If we want a renewed and missionary Church, we need to move away from the mere organizational and structural change and live love. We will then see the wonderful reality of the Communion of Saints and learn to understand how much worth there is in an act of pure love—in living the 'Little Way'. In her discipleship Thérèse is in many ways a wonderful window into the faith of Mary, whose unconditional trust lived through Calvary and then experienced the fullness of the Resurrection.

⁶ *The Poetry of St. Thérèse of Lisieux*, trans. Donald Kinney (Washington Province of Discalced Carmelites, Inc., ICS Publications, 2131 Lincoln Road N.E., Washington DC 20002, © 1995), pp. 153-4).

The Letter to the Ephesians speaks of all of us as 'God's work of art'. Thérèse is an immortal diamond, crafted by love in her suffering and in her creative way of living life. She was strongly inserted in the Carmelite tradition, living the Rule, and loving the Scriptures. Like Elijah, she too journeyed to her own meeting with God. Like the prophet, she came to the end of her tether, yet was fed and enabled to carry on. The prophet encountered God in the Wade Cherish and on Hereby. Thérèse journeyed with Christ and came to the eternal Mount Sino and the New Jerusalem.