

# THE SPRINGS OF CARMEL

## Phase I Formation – Lesson 11 Required Reading

By Peter Slattery

St. Thérèse, Little Flower

The details of the life of St. Thérèse of Lisieux are fairly familiar to everyone, so we won't dwell on them. Suffice it to say that Thérèse Martin was born in 1873 and died Sr. Marie-Thérèse, a Carmelite nun in Normandy in 1897 at the age of 24. Her short life has amazed all who have read her autobiography and her biographies. She gained extraordinary insights into the meaning of life and enunciated an extremely simple formula for holiness. She drew on the spiritual heritage of Carmel, but added her own peculiar genius to the tradition. These can be summed up by the symbols and images Thérèse used in an attempt to describe her insights. The first is the Desert, the second is Mary's veil and mantle, the third is Spiritual Childhood/Little Way, and the fourth is Flower.

### *The Desert*

Thérèse used quite frequently one of the great Carmelite symbols which we have not examined up till now—the Desert. The early Carmelites and the Rule of St. Albert call the Carmelite continually back to the cell. There alone in the cell, the Carmelite seeks the Lord in the desert. Throughout the centuries, Carmelites have called their houses of special prayer, their hermitages, their houses of contemplation—deserts. For St. Thérèse, “Carmel was the desert where God wanted me to go and hide myself.” In 1888 when she entered the convent for the first time, she said, “Everything thrilled me: I felt as though I was transported into a desert.”

The experience of the desert for Thérèse is a freeing one, and an invitation to leave everything behind and set out on a journey of discovery. This would be a desert crossing—a separation from her familiar surroundings, into the austere environment of Carmel. The desert journey requires frugal meals, simple furnishings, humble surroundings, and a giving up of a protected middle-class lifestyle.

Like the Carmelites of old, Thérèse realized that when Carmel appears like a desert, it is because there is no clear definition of what the future holds. When Moses crossed the desert with the Hebrews, they began to complain. They wished to return to the familiar and somewhat comfortable security of Egypt.

St. John of the Cross teaches that the desert allows us to reach the goal of finding God quickly. “The shortest way to the summit is through the desert of nothing.” Thérèse wanted to go straight into the desert of solitude and silence, because she realized that she, the pilgrim, was walking towards the oasis at the center, and that oasis is God. The whole metaphor of the desert reveals for us a powerful insight into the spiritual life. We find as we journey in the desert that the Beloved does not stay in the oasis, because he moves out to meet us. It is our faith that teaches us that the Lord comes to meet us, and makes the journey with us.

Thérèse wrote from Carmel to her sister, Celine, “The wide open spaces, the magic horizons which open before you say profound things to your soul. I do not see any of those things, but I say with St. John of the Cross,

‘In my Beloved I have the Mountains,  
The lonely wooded valleys . . .  
And that Beloved instructs my soul,  
speaks to it in silence, in the darkness . . .<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Translation: Sheet, F.J., *The Collected Works of Saint Terese of Lisieux*, Sheed and Ward, London, 1949, p. 114.

St. Thérèse tells us in her story that at times the night came during her journey in the desert. It appeared that she had not only lost her way, but had lost sight of the Lord. Most spiritual writers from the early Fathers until the present day say that this is the most profound experience of the desert; to come to the realization that the heart of the desert—is the desert of the heart. In the night of the desert journey, she no longer experienced the presence of Jesus and she is tempted to think he is absent. But she can say with the eyes of faith: “Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have believed.” She extended the metaphor by saying there was nothing to see but dry sand, but her faith convinced her that her journey would not end in a mirage.

For Thérèse her journey was with her Carmelite sisters, a small remnant of the pilgrim Church, just like the anawim of the Bible. They represented a communal experience which shaped her life and kept her in contact with the world and the Church. As a contemplative she echoed St. Teresa, that she was very much a daughter of the Church. Even in the desert she retained her vision of the world and her love went out to embrace all people.

On her desert journey the only guide she used were the Gospels. “It is especially the gospels,” she wrote, “which sustain me during my hours of prayer, for in them I find what is necessary for my soul. I am constantly discovering in them new lights, hidden and mysterious meanings.”<sup>2</sup> To continue the image, she used the writings of the desert—those of St. John of the Cross which she devoured enthusiastically, and these guided her to that transforming love given to those who keep on the difficult desert journey.

The authenticity of her spiritual journey becomes apparent when we see that the more she loved Jesus, the more she loved her fellow travelers. Those who were her immediate sisters in the religious life were her constant concern, but her brothers and sisters in the world were those with whom she shared her joys and her sufferings. Whether they be convicts in prison, missionary priests in Vietnam, or relatives in Lisieux or Caen, she kept them all in her mind’s eye. Her desert gave her huge horizons—a boundless perspective which gave her a spiritual responsibility for what she described as “millions of souls.”

#### *St. Thérèse and Our Lady of Mount Carmel*

At various times some have suspected the “Carmeliteness” of St. Thérèse.<sup>3</sup> It has been said that she does not follow the spiritual paths set out by the “greats” of Carmel like St. Teresa and St. John of the Cross. Redemptus Valabek shows that in recent times, however, there is increasing evidence that Thérèse of Lisieux captured the essential traits of the Carmelite rationale like few other members of this religious family. The clearest pointer to her Carmelite roots is her tender and confident devotion to Mary, the Lady of Mount Carmel.

In her famous statement: “Mary is more Mother than Queen”, Thérèse shows how anchored she was in the earliest Carmelite understanding of Mary. Whereas at the time of the discalced reform, owing to cultural and political factors, Mary was often venerated as “Queen of Carmel,” however, the more primitive appreciation of Mary was as mother. The fact that Thérèse did not make this statement for philosophical or theological reasons, but because this was her lived experience in Carmel, actually reinforces the conviction that Thérèse was a “natural” Carmelite.

As Thérèse was thoroughly Catholic, she had no restrictive concept of Carmelite tradition. In her devotional life she embraced all that she found worthwhile in the life of the Church. She chose all as a child; and in her later life she never changed. She had a great love of Our Lady, believing that Our Lady had cured her of a strange illness as a teenager.

---

<sup>2</sup> Translation: Clarke, J., OCD, *The Story of a Soul*, ICS Publications, Washington DC, 1975, p. 179.

<sup>3</sup> See: Valabek, R., O.Carm., *Mary, Mother of Carmel, Our Lady and the Saints of Carmel*, Vol, II, Carmel in the World Paperbacks, Rome, 1988, pp. 75-100.

Thérèse's charism was to grasp the inner dynamism of the commonplace ways in which God loved her. She would have been untrue to form had she not appreciated the central role of Our Lady in the Order of Carmel. The Order has no "founder" in the usual sense; through the centuries Carmelites have looked to Mary as the original inspiration of their way of life. Thérèse takes this for granted in a number of ways.

In a poem she wrote for her cousin, when she entered Carmel, she said:

"It is in the blessed order of the Virgin Mary  
That I find genuine wealth." (*Poem 21*, 15 August 1895).<sup>4</sup>

From their very first chapel on Mount Carmel dedicated to Mary, Carmelites have been convinced that their family has the Virgin Mary as its mother. Thérèse expresses this traditional view:

"The Blessed Virgin is truly our mother because our monasteries are dedicated to her in a special way." (*Letter 154 to Leonie*, 27 December 1893).<sup>5</sup>

Thérèse believed that Mary led her to Carmel in the first place. "I love to think it is for this reason that she [Mary] was so kind as to make me her child ever more perfectly in granting me the great grace of leading me to Carmel" (*Letter 70 to Mother St. Placid*, December 1888, Vol. I, p. 482). Thérèse, who had become Mary's child on her first communion day when she had become a member of the sodality of Children of Mary, knows Mary as the sure guide who, even in a dark night, keeps pointing out the summit of Mount Carmel which is Christ himself. Towards the end of her life in dreadful sufferings Thérèse writes:

"O queen of the heavens, my beloved shepherdess;  
Your invisible hand knows how to save me.  
Even when I was playing on the rim of precipices,  
You were showing me the very summit of Carmel.  
I then must love if I am to fly to heaven."  
(*Poem 53*, May 1897).

Much of the language of Thérèse sounds rather strange to our modern ears, but she shows she has the Carmelite fundamentals firmly in her life and grasp. She calls the scapular Mary's veil and mantle which reveals a basic understanding of the meaning of the scapular devotion: a symbol of dedication to Mary, and a sign of being associated with the life of the Carmelite family.

The Lisieux Carmel at this time earned some income by making and selling scapulars. Thérèse showed a deep understanding of the meaning of this Carmelite devotion when she wrote to a friend: "How happy I am that you are clothed with the holy scapular! Are you not united more closely still with your little sisters in Carmel?" (*Letter 166*). The scapular as a part of clothing symbolized the constant care that Mary had for her devotees. An ordinary part of a mother's care is to provide clothing for her children. In the spiritual life there are various ways in which this motherly charity of Our Lady is symbolized. Beyond the scapular Thérèse continually referred to the veil of Mary, under which her children were sheltered (*Poem 13*) or hidden (*Poem 1, 13*).

Far from being an escape, being hidden under the veil of Mary was important for Thérèse because it was under there that Jesus was to be found. "Jesus sleeps in peace under the folds of your veil" (*Poem 54:12*). And for Thérèse Jesus is everything (*Poem 45:5*). In this sense, for Thérèse Carmelite life was nothing else than remaining under the mantle of

---

<sup>4</sup> Translation of the Poems: as quoted by Valabek, R., *O.Carm.*, *op. cit.*

<sup>5</sup> Translation of the Letters: Clarke, J., OCD, *St. Thérèse of Lisieux General Correspondence*, Vol. I and *Letters of St. Thérèse of Lisieux*, Vol. II, ICS Publications, Washington DC, 1982 and 1988.

Our Lady. The white cloak of the Carmelite habit was a constant reminder of the mantle of Mary, which in medieval images covered the whole spectrum of the members of the Church.

In Carmel this cloak symbolized the purity of heart by which members of this religious family were to be characterized among all the followers of Jesus. Thérèse appreciated these truths even before she entered Carmel. She describes her experience at the shrine of Our Lady of Victories in Paris:

“I understood that she was watching over me, that I was her *child*. I could no longer give her any other name but *mamma*, as this appeared ever so much more tender than mother . . . I begged her about my dream to hide *beneath the shadow of her virginal mantle*. When growing up, I understood that it was in Carmel I would truly find the Blessed Virgin’s mantle and towards this fertile Mountain I directed my steps. I prayed to Our Lady of Victories to keep me far from everything that could tarnish my purity.”  
(*The Story of a Soul*, trans. Clarke, p. 123).

For Thérèse, life in Carmel hardly had more basic purpose than to remain under Mary’s protective mantle in order to present a pure heart reserved for the Lord. Mirroring the ancient Carmelite document, *The Institution of the First Monks*, Thérèse understood that Carmelites have as their charism: “the offering to God of a holy heart, purified of every actual stain of sin in a way that not only after death, but also in this life, they could to a certain extent taste in their hearts and experience in their minds the power of the divine presence and the pleasantness of heavenly glory” (*Institution of the First Monks*, in *Analecta Ordinis Carmelitarum*, [1914 to 1915] 348). Thérèse merely added the Marian dimension. To Celine she wrote . . . “hide yourself in her [Mary’s] mantle, that she will make you a virgin like her” (*Letter 105*, 10 May 1890, Vol. I, p. 618). As she recruits Celine to pray for the renegade Carmelite friar, Hyacinth Loyson, she feels responsible for this brother of Carmel, who for that reason is a son of Mary. “In any event, it is not our merits but those of our spouse, which is ours, that we offer to our Father who is in heaven, in order that our brother, a son of the Blessed Virgin, shall come back vanquished to throw himself beneath the cloak of the most merciful of mothers” (*Letter 129*, 8 July 1891, Vol. II, p. 729).

When she was dying, Thérèse never ceased calling on Mary. A few hours before her death, the Prioress placed a picture of Our Lady of Mount Carmel before her and assured Thérèse that she would soon be caressing the Mother of Jesus. Mary had taught her well—there were no consolations in this final hour, nothing but purification, exile and suffering in the desert, journeying to Jesus.

### *Little Way*

St. Thérèse’s “little way” is not a childish conception of sanctity, but is really a very mature way of looking at the relationship with God. It is based on utter and complete confidence in God, an unconditional trust and love of God—this is the foundation of Thérèse’s “little way” or doctrine of spiritual childhood.

Freud has shown how coping with one’s parents can be an extremely liberating step to take. Many parents want to exert a deadening influence on even their grown-up children, and turn the beautiful notion of “family” into a false relationship. Many people are inordinately attached to their parents and their parents’ world, and this can hold back the development of maturity. Marriages and progress in the religious life can be adversely affected by demands of parents and the guilt of children. The call of the desert, as Thérèse well knew is a call not to look back, but to be free from attachments so as to continue one’s mature development in a relationship with God. Parents have to learn to “let go” and children have to learn to stand free and independent. This is a liberation, and a new sort of love develops between parents and grown-up children when this happens. Thérèse knew nothing about Sigmund Freud, but she realized that to travel across the desert of Carmel she had to trust not in herself or her own efforts, not in any created thing, but only in God. It took Thérèse nearly her whole life to discover her “little way.”

Thérèse, in her dialogue with God, had become the listener rather than the speaker. She decided to trust simply in God. She describes how she had travelled through her life practically blind with stops, mistakes and hesitations along the way. She says that God showed her the “little way.”

She grew to the realization that God loved her unconditionally simply because she was little, weak and powerless. She discovered God’s love and mercy at the center of her whole life and she learnt that God’s mercy is there for the little one precisely because she or he is a little one.

This insight was to give fresh meaning to her whole desert journey—the dynamic force of her life was confidence, knowing that whatever happened, wherever he led her, God’s intervention was assuring and faithful.

As Conrad de Meester<sup>6</sup> explains, Thérèse experienced a liberation when she meditated on the text: “Whoever is a LITTLE ONE, let him come to me!” (Pr 9:4). Thérèse felt herself personally called in this message God wanted to tell her something. She continued to search for the insights that the Lord would reveal to her about himself. She read Isaiah 66:12-13, “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.”<sup>7</sup>

Thérèse explains in her own words: “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!” For Thérèse the symbol of the elevator indicates that her way was a quick way to Jesus. She tells us that it is God who makes a person holy. “And for this I had no need to grow up, but rather to remain little and become this more and more . . . .”<sup>8</sup>

The condition for being among the “little ones” is to acknowledge that we are poor and needy and it is God who lifts us up. Thérèse teaches us the great lesson of the Carmelite school of mysticism: that in our seeming darkness and littleness it is the light and strength of the Spirit which shows us how to proceed. She says we must entrust ourselves to God, and abandon ourselves. As Conrad de Meester notes, this is the very heart of Thérèse’s teaching.

In St. Mark’s Gospel, when children were brought to Jesus, the disciples became annoyed. Jesus in his turn, was indignant and said to them: “Let the little children come to me, do not turn them away, for it is to such as these that the Kingdom of God belongs. I tell you solemnly, anyone who does not welcome the Kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it” (Mk 10:13-15).

Fr. De Meester remarks that this was what Thérèse was thinking of when she said that she wanted to remain little, “to become this more and more,” until she was just such a “little one.” The abandonment of our own ways, the emptying of our heart permits the Lord to fill us with his gifts. We can now see that her little way is like the *nada* (nothing) of St. John of the Cross: her little way became the slogan of her life. She learned to allow God to be God in her life, to empty her hands and her heart and allow his mercy to take over.

Connected to the “little way” is Thérèse’s use of the word mercy. While saying the divine office, Thérèse would have often read this word in the psalms, but before the discovery of 1894, it did not appear to have awakened the same echo. Fr. De Meester shows that in all her writings previous to this date, and there are 300 pages of letters, poetry and plays, only once does the word appear and the adjective, merciful, one other time. After the discovery of God’s mercy as the starting point from which the person who trusts in it becomes holy, we find the word, “mercy,” used about 20 times in the first manuscript of her autobiography (about 200 printed pages). This is understandable because Thérèse was full of it; she was overwhelmed by the insights given her by the Holy Spirit.

---

<sup>6</sup> Conrad de Meester, OCD, *With Empty Hands*, St. Paul Publications, Homebush, NSW, 1982, pp. 46-58.

<sup>7</sup> Trans. Clarke, J., OCD, *The Story of a Soul*, p. 208.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 202.

So when, in January 1895, Thérèse began to write the prologue of her autobiography, it was a meditative hymn of praise to this mercy of God, which she saw more clearly than ever before running like a golden thread through the fabric of her story.

### *The Flower*

Thérèse realized that in the desert of Carmel were the springs of refreshment and life, and that is where the flowers bloomed. Thérèse saw herself as a flower, and this flower is her prayer. In trying to describe her prayer, the best image is that of a completely trusting child talking to a loving parent. The best possible prayer is that of Jesus—the Our Father—a prayer of filial confidence. St. Thérèse pointed out that the highest degrees of contemplative prayer can be reached by a simple, loving recitation of the Lord’s Prayer. Prayer is not a flower, but a weed, if it does not express our inner truth. Our lives, as well as our prayer, must be childlike in innocence, simplicity, truthfulness and ardor. Fr. Noel-Dermot O’Donoghue, a Carmelite friar,<sup>9</sup> writes:

“Essentially the Christian way of Childhood is a way of entry into the Trinitarian mystery of fatherhood, filiation and that eternal breathing of love which is the Holy Spirit. The life and death of Jesus of Nazareth is the revelation of eternal childhood in history. The Eucharist is the most complete recapitulation now open to all that is, to God and men and all creation. It is a creative environment in the dynamism of creation. It identifies with creation at the point where all creation is prayer, a response to the God who creates because he loves. It is not easy to achieve, because it demands detachment from the possessive self and from all that is finite and particular, and it is never finally achieved. But it must be emphasized that the detachment is only the negative side; positively what is in question is a deep warmth and tenderness, an all-fathering, all-mothering love, for the child of God shares his father’s attitude towards creation. It is in the child as beauty is in the flower; it is only in maturity that a human being can make his own of it, can detach the idea of it and make it a living ideal.

“As I see it, the basic dynamism of prayer, especially mystical prayer, is the affectivity of childhood, enlarged, refined and purified through experience. Experience presents us with much that is easy to accept, but it also presents us with the cross, and this is not easy to accept, certainly it is not easy to accept with open arms. Yet it is only insofar as we open our arms to the cross that we can open our arms to the world and that we can open our arms to God in filial love. It is the cross that extends our affection beyond the particular; in fact the very process of detachment from particular love is no small part of the experience of the cross. Mystical prayer is essentially the expression of a love that has grown beyond the particular by growing through the experience of the love of the particular, especially to particular persons. This love is full of pathos and loneliness, for it is an exile in the world; it is always being misunderstood in its most innocent and spontaneous expressions and manifestations, for the world can only understand love grossly, having lost childhood. It is deeply marked with the sign of the cross; otherwise it is not genuine. Yet if there is any state that may be termed blessed and heavenly, it is here it is found, here and in the most perfect days of childhood.

“I think it must be admitted that the mystic will always be at odds with the world. There is nothing the worldly person, especially if he be a successful and respected clergyman, judges so quickly and so harshly as the mystical and the mystic, since he has by the very nature of his gift, the simplicity of a child and leaves himself wide open to this judgment. Yet I do not despair that the world may change in this matter. Rather, it seems to me, the world will have to change in this, or else one has to despair of the world. For today, for the first time in history, man can destroy himself, and there is nothing more certain than that man will destroy himself utterly unless there is a change in the forces within him from which his

---

<sup>9</sup> O’Donoghue, N.-D., OCD, “The Paradox of Prayer,” *Doctrine and Life*, XXIV (Jan. 1974), pp. 36-37.

decisions spring. The balance must shift from the performance principle and all its attendant ambitions and hatreds in favor of the creative principle which has its final basis in the simple, spontaneous, as yet undifferentiated affectivity of the child. This is the way of mystical prayer. It is not a way of our own doing. It is the work of the Spirit of God. Our work is to prepare for his coming. Our prayer is that he may transform our prayer into the eternal love of the Son for the Father.”

This quote from Fr. Noel-Dermot O’Donoghue not only sums up the teaching of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, but expresses an important element in Carmelite spirituality. The spirituality of childlikeness, which is very strong in the Carmelite tradition, runs through much of the Christian spiritual heritage. It requires no strong personal acts, no glittering achievements, no spectacular successes. It does demand total trust and love in God and a fidelity to the ordinary things of life.

This is Thérèse’s teaching on prayer. Her basic attitude is one of simplicity in her lifestyle, her needs and expectations.

Thus, her prayer is not so much an I-Thou dialogue, but a Thou-I listening. She used the ordinary prayers like the Our Father, the Hail Mary, the Rosary to get started. She found the Gospels a helpful introduction to her meditations. She found inspiration for her prayer in the ordinary daily things, people, events and surprises. Some people ask to be taught to meditate or do contemplation, when they explain that they spend most of the day in the presence of God, and use frequent aspirations. These people are possibly closer to God than sophisticates in the methods of mystical prayer. Thérèse was one of these. So her flower of prayer was indeed a little one, but because of this, very pleasing to God.

**For reflection: individuals and groups**

1. *Do you see your spiritual life in the simple terms that St. Thérèse uses like a “little way?” For you does she oversimplify the spiritual life?*
2. *How do you reach positively or negatively to the notion of spiritual childhood? Why?*
3. *What image or metaphor would you choose to describe your relationship with God? What insights does the use of your image give you to understanding your relationship with God?*