

Living the Little Way

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SIX KEYS TO THE
SPIRITUALITY OF ST. THÉRÈSE

Fr. Joseph Spence, FFm

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“The whole world will love me.”

—SAINT THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX



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ABBREVIATIONS

Writings and Sources of St. Thérèse of Lisieux

- CJ ***Carnet Jaune*** (*Yellow Notebook*) of Mother Agnes of Jesus, in: SAINT THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX, *Her Last Conversations*, Translated by JOHN CLARKE, OCD, ICS Publications, Washington, D.C. 1977.
- CSG ***Conseils et Souvenirs*** (*Advice and Memoirs*) of Sister Geneviève, in: *My Sister St. Thérèse, by Sister Geneviève of the Holy Face (Celine Martin)*, Authorized Translation by the Carmelite Sisters of New York of *Conseils et Souvenirs*, Tan Books and Publishers, Inc., Rockford, Illinois 1997.
- LT ***Letters*** from Thérèse, in: SAINT THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX, *General Correspondence*.

Volume I (1877-1890), Translated by JOHN CLARKE, OCD, ICS Publications, Washington, D.C. 1982; SAINT THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX, *General Correspondence. Volume II (1890-1897)*, Translated by JOHN CLARKE, OCD, ICS Publications, Washington, D.C. 1988.

Ms A ***Manuscript A***: Autobiographical Manuscript dedicated to Mother Agnes of Jesus, in: *Story of a Soul. The Autobiography of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux* (Translated from the original manuscripts by JOHN CLARKE, OCD). A Study Edition prepared by MARC FOLEY, OCD, ICS Publications, Washington, D.C. 2019.

Ms B ***Manuscript B***: Letter to Sister Marie of the Sacred Heart, in: *Story of a Soul. The Autobiography of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux* (Translated from the original manuscripts by JOHN CLARKE, OCD). A Study Edition prepared by MARC FOLEY, OCD, ICS Publications, Washington, D.C. 2019.

Ms C ***Manuscript C***: Autobiographical Manuscript dedicated to Mother Marie de Gonzague, in: *Story of a Soul. The Autobiography of Saint*

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- Thérèse of Lisieux* (Translated from the original manuscripts by JOHN CLARKE, OCD). A Study Edition prepared by MARC FOLEY, OCD, ICS Publications, Washington, D.C. 2019.
- P ***Poems*** of St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus, in: *The Poetry of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux. Complete Edition. Texts and Introductions*, Translated by Donald Kinney, OCD, ICS Publications, Washington, D.C. 1996.
- Pr ***Prayers*** of Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus, in: *The Prayers of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux*, General Introduction by GUY GAUCHER, OCD, Translated by Aletheia Kane, OCD, ICS Publications, Washington, D.C. 1997.
- PR ***Pious Recreations*** of St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus, in: *The Plays of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux. "Pious Recreations"*, General Introduction by GUY GAUCHER, OCD, Translated by SUSAN CONROY AND DAVID J. DWYER, ICS Publications, Washington, D.C. 2008.



INTRODUCTION

What more can be said of St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus and of the Holy Face? Why another book on Thérèse? Why *this* book on Thérèse? These valid questions demand an answer.

I believe that the answer is threefold. One aspect regards Thérèse and her doctrine. A second consideration takes into account the world as it is today. The third reason is based on studies already done (or not done) on Thérèse.

On October 19, 1997, Pope St. John Paul II officially declared Thérèse as the youngest Doctor of the Church.¹ Her “science of love,” her doctrine, is thus universally valid and important. The Doctors of the

¹ See: The Apostolic Letter of His Holiness Pope John Paul II, *Divini Amoris Scientia*. Cf. https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1997/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19101997_divini-amoris.html (Consulted on March 27th 2025).

Church—more so than other saints—have an experience and a doctrine that is something like a goldmine. Thankfully, the search for their wisdom is no exploitation; rather, it's a noble pursuit: "Choose my instruction instead of silver, knowledge rather than choice gold, for wisdom is more precious than rubies, and nothing you desire can compare with her" (Prov. 8:10-11). A goldmine is destined to terminate its yield, whereas, in the case of the Doctors of the Church, and thus of Thérèse, their wealth is practically interminable. It's a question of knowing how to extract it well.

The second response to the questions above lies in the contemporary world and its needs. In 2023, Pope Francis promulgated an entire Apostolic Exhortation dedicated solely to Thérèse and to her teachings: *C'est la confiance*.² At the end of the document, Pope Francis invited all believers to draw from Thérèse's doctrine and insight:

² Pope Francis, *C'est la confiance: Apostolic Exhortation on Confidence in the Merciful Love of God for the 150th Anniversary of the Birth of St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face*, October 15, 2023, accessed March 27, 2025, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20231015-santateresa-delbambinogesu.html

As theologians, moralists and spiritual writers, as pastors and as believers, wherever we find ourselves, we need constantly to appropriate this insight of Thérèse and to draw from it consequences both theoretical and practical, doctrinal and pastoral, personal and communal. We need boldness and interior freedom to do so.³

The world is needful, according to Pope Francis, of Thérèse's insight and wisdom. I certainly agree!

C'est la confiance, Pope Francis's Apostolic Exhortation on Thérèse, was promulgated on the 150th anniversary of her birth (January 2, 1873–October 15, 2023). On the same occasion, the *United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization* (UNESCO) recognized Thérèse, particularly in the years 2022–2023, as a World Heritage Person. Moreover, 2025 was the centenary of Thérèse's Canonization, solemnly celebrated by Pope Pius XI on May 17, 1925. The Catholic Church and world-renowned organizations, such as the UNESCO, thus recognize in Thérèse a leading figure for today's cultural and spiritual welfare.

³ Francis, *C'est la confiance*, no. 50.

Let us now come to the third and final reason behind the publication of this study on Thérèse. It regards the studies done—or not done—on Thérèse so far. Yet, we must take a brief step back to have a view of the entire “picture” as it were. The topics chosen for this book try to offer a sort of “key,” or rather six “keys,” to more easily penetrate the sanctuary of Thérèse’s heart and soul. They had to capture, therefore, at least some of the main elements of her spirituality. Still, only two of the topics have already been widely researched and discussed: namely, her “Little Way” and her devotion to the Child Jesus.

The other topics, that is, her devotion to the Holy Face; the theme “Jesus as Spouse and Thérèse”; the relationship between Thérèse and the Blessed Virgin Mary; her “fraternal charity”; and her “Passion” and death, have actually *not* been widely or deeply researched as of yet. This could seem surprising, yet so it is. Leaving aside a few articles which broach these subjects—articles are always purposefully incomplete—we must quote a few books to briefly demonstrate this point.

One book—that is, one doctoral thesis—has been published regarding Thérèse and the Holy Face.⁴

⁴ Cyprien Niyitegeka, *The Metaphor of the Face in Thérèse of Lisieux from the Philosophical Perspective of Emmanuel*

However, it does not seem to delve deeply into Thérèse's own experience, but only in a peripheral way and from a philosophical point of view. I do not know of any book directly regarding, instead, the theme of "Jesus as Spouse" and Thérèse.⁵ The same must be said regarding Thérèse and the Blessed Virgin Mary.⁶

Instead, one good book has been published regarding Thérèse's "fraternal charity": the Theresian expert Fr. Pierre Descouvemont's *Thérèse de Lisieux et son prochain*⁷ (*Thérèse of Lisieux and her neighbor*). However, it is only available in French. And, as far as Thérèse's "Passion" is concerned, thankfully, one great book

Lévinas: Creating a Model for Contemporary Mission Spirituality (PhD diss., The Catholic University of America, 2017).

⁵ Joseph Spence, *Un'esperienza sponsale con Dio: l'influsso di san Giovanni della Croce su santa Teresa di Lisieux* (doctoral diss., Teresianum, Rome, 2019–20). English title: *A Spousal Experience with God: The Influence of St. John of the Cross on St. Thérèse of Lisieux*. See also C. Ermatinger, *St. Thérèse of Lisieux, Spouse and Victim* (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2010).

⁶ M. E. Patrizi, *Il Patto segreto: L'amicizia mistica di san Massimiliano Kolbe e santa Teresa di Lisieux* (Rome: C.d.C. Editrice, 2008).

⁷ P. Descouvemont, *Thérèse de Lisieux et son prochain* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2003).

has been published, by the world-renowned expert on Thérèse, Bishop Guy Gaucher, OCD, *The Passion of Thérèse of Lisieux*.⁸

This glance at the world of studies on Thérèse helps one to understand the need to still deepen—surprisingly enough—various important topics regarding this young and inspiring Doctor of the Church. Therefore, without further ado, we must now delve into Thérèse’s own experience and words. My aim is to let Thérèse speak for herself: the facts regarding her life, her *Writings*, and the testimonies of those who knew her will be the main and wholesome ingredients for this new spiritual “dessert,” hopefully both short and sweet, yet equally nourishing!

⁸ Guy Gaucher, *The Passion of Thérèse of Lisieux* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1990).



From left to right: Céline and Thérèse Martin (1881). Thérèse was 8 years old in this picture.⁹ © Archives du Carmel de Lisieux. Used with permission.

⁹ Carmel of Lisieux Archives, “Photographs of St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus and of the Holy Face,” accessed March 27, 2025, <https://archives.carmeldelisieux.fr/en/>.