

# JOURNEYING WITH THÉRÈSE

By JANE KHIN ZAW

**A**LTHOUGH THIS ARTICLE IS TO BE a reflection on what Thérèse means to me personally, how her story helps me read mine, I have also been asked to include some basic information on Thérèse for readers who know little or nothing about her. Thérèse Martin lived in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Born and brought up in a bourgeois French family who took their religion very seriously, she entered a Carmelite convent at the unusually early age of fifteen, preceded there by two of her elder sisters and followed later by a third. Sister Thérèse died of tuberculosis in 1897 at the age of twenty-four after only nine years in Carmel. Three texts that she had been asked to write towards the end of her life were published as one volume the year after she died, with the title *Story of a soul*. It is chiefly through this book that Thérèse came to be known and loved by millions in the Christian Church as well as many outside it. Thérèse speaks to the ordinary person with a simplicity which makes her accessible to everyone. At a time when religious practice tended to be complicated and Jansenistic, Thérèse rediscovered a gospel freedom in her approach to God. She identified her own apostolic vocation to be love in the heart of the Church. Other articles will describe her spirituality, which she so fully spelled out in her life and in her death, showing us what being love in the heart of the Church is all about.

When Thérèse was writing the pages of Manuscript C, exhausted from her illness, she did not make heavy weather of it. 'I'm not breaking my head', she said, 'over the writing of my "little life"; it's as though I were fishing with a line: I write whatever comes to the end of my pen.'<sup>1</sup> I would like to carry out my own task with the simplicity of Thérèse; and I can see that she will have to do it for me. Such an odd assortment of items come up on the end of my line and need untangling, from a background and history so different from hers. Thérèse reassures me by her conviction that each person has a unique identity, a hidden name, as each becomes the self God wants them to be. But my story will resonate with Thérèse's too. The charism that Carmelites are trying to live with creative fidelity today was embodied by her with such creativity that it is vibrant with her spirit. So she is close to me in

read more at [www.theway.org.uk](http://www.theway.org.uk)

all sorts of ways, lighting up my journey at many points. Her influence is implicit in the whole of my life and goes on growing as I struggle to write this article.

Of all the vocations in the Church, the one Thérèse most thrilled to was that of the apostle, the missionary preaching the gospel 'even to the most remote isles' and shedding her blood for it.<sup>2</sup> With joy she discovered how she could effectively fulfil this vocation along with every other: 'O Jesus, the soul who plunges into the shoreless ocean of Your Love, draws with her all the treasures she possesses'.<sup>3</sup> Her treasures are the legion of 'little souls' entrusted to her. Now patroness of the missions, Thérèse is perhaps especially at work today among those churches and peoples struggling to survive under oppressive regimes. Being myself Burmese I am thinking for instance of the Church in Burma, and indeed of all the Burmese people and their heroic democratic leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, whose persevering stand for justice is a beacon of hope in the present dark night of our country.

It was in 1962, the year I entered Carmel, that General Ne Win seized power in Burma and all church institutions were nationalized. The Burmese bishops were not allowed to attend the Vatican Council, and in 1965 all foreign missionaries were expelled. Control by the military has only continued to increase. Yet miraculously the Church there has gone on growing ever since, more than doubling in numbers, mostly among the ethnic minorities. There is great devotion to Thérèse among the Catholics in Burma: her spirituality was used in guiding the priests' retreat in Myitkyina this year; a Karen Sister told me of a 'Little Way Association' for the children in Lashio; and a young priest in Myaungmya, working for his bishop to establish a contemplative presence in the local church,<sup>4</sup> looks to her as his 'best spiritual guide'. Meanwhile CAFOD workers from England have been helping them to tackle the huge threat posed by HIV and AIDS among one of the poorest and most exploited of peoples. I see my life of prayer in Carmel here as very much part of Thérèse's apostolate to little ones, the most helpless and needy, those deprived of human dignity in crushing situations such as theirs.

My two sisters and I were born in Rangoon and were not brought up in any religion, though my father was Buddhist. Like many of our generation we had a precarious childhood in the upheaval of the Second World War. I was five when the Japanese invaded Burma and we caught the last plane out to India. The three of us were sent to a convent boarding school in Simla in the foothills of the Himalayas. After the war my father returned to Burma while my mother brought us

to England in 1947. But we always remained in touch with him. When I wrote to tell him I was becoming a Carmelite, he discovered for himself and bought a copy of *Story of a soul* in a Rangoon bookshop and read it from cover to cover. He had become very devout, regularly practising meditation. From the heart of his own Buddhist experience he recognized the authenticity of Thérèse's consecrated life and was very happy that I was sharing it. I sketched a plan of the convent for him – 'But you forgot to show the place where you fold your wings at night!' he teased. Later he sent me a booklet of the *Sunlun* way of mindfulness he practised. Only last summer I was delighted to find that Burmese Theravadan Buddhist meditation is being practised and taught in the States in the context of Carmelite spirituality as a path to Christian prayer, something undreamt of in Thérèse's day!<sup>5</sup>

My mother's total and energetic devotion to her family mirrored God's love to us throughout her long life; indeed she radiated it among all who knew her. The memory of her integrity and compassion go on inspiring me. Owing so much to my mother, I am struck to find Thérèse so close to me in her lively sense of the depths of maternal love, even though she lost her own mother before she was five. She came to treasure very specially the images she found in Scripture of God our mother. Not in childish dependency (the last thing she wanted on entering Carmel was to have her sisters mothering her, and she avoided them as best she could), but in maturity she recognized her unremitting need for the relationship to a mother as a vehicle of God's love. Above all it is Mary, 'more Mother than Queen', whose presence she clings to at the last during her mortal illness. Thérèse is deeply conscious of Mary's chosen solidarity with all human suffering, and she looks to her as the example 'of the soul searching for him in the night of faith'.<sup>6</sup>

I associate my mother too with this most bitter of Thérèse's experiences, the long drawn out interior darkness at the end of her life. Although my mother had no explicit religious faith, she certainly lived the Christian ideal of self-sacrificing love and admired it in others. Yet when I became a Catholic and entered a Carmelite convent it broke her heart. She thought it a terrible waste of my life and the rule of enclosure positively inhuman; moreover it would wither my mind and personality. She tried passionately to convince me of this for five years, till at my solemn profession her honesty compelled her to give way. After that she heroically resigned herself to it, but she still could not understand, and my fumbling attempts to explain were just so much religious jargon to her. My mother's anguished incomprehension of my vocation and our inability to share deeply through many years was a

very real dark night she endured with a love that remained steadfast through thick and thin. When Thérèse confided to Sr Thérèse of St Augustine: 'I don't believe in eternal life; I think that after this life there is nothing. Everything has disappeared on me, and I am left with love alone',<sup>7</sup> she was putting into words the situation of countless people who silently accept and suffer their personal dark nights without support: yet by the very way they live it is clear they find their meaning in love. But my mother also wanted desperately to *understand* us. In the end she came closest to it through Mother Mary, my first prioress, whose holiness in all its warm humanity conveyed our charism better than any words: Mother Mary was very like Thérèse in her whole approach, her simple abandonment to everything that came, her giving without measure. I can picture them both in heaven now, with my mother glancing keenly and appreciatively from one to the other and seeing the resemblance.

Writing her story, Thérèse focuses on the One who sums it all up: 'Your Love has gone before me, and it has grown with me, and now it is an abyss whose depths I cannot fathom'.<sup>8</sup> She recalls how the first beginnings of prayer came very early in her life when she was a small child, rapturously delighting in fields and flowers, trees and 'wide-open spaces'. On walks with her father 'I would prefer to go *alone* . . . and then my thoughts became very profound indeed! Without knowing what it was to meditate, my soul was absorbed in real prayer.'<sup>9</sup> Like Thérèse I have always loved nature; the mystery brimming in each curled leaf or budding twig; the sheer beauty of its chaotic disorder inexplicably resolving itself into unbelievable patterns. Just looking at the daisies in the grass can draw me into stillness. Watching hailstones bouncing in erratic directions is like tuning in to the joy of God. As I was growing up images like these would catch at my imagination as glimpses of a depth below the surface of my life. I tried to put them into words, into poems. These came out of the blue, like gifts. Often they focused on my gradually unfolding identity: a solitary kestrel in a tree, 'quiet with herself and with the morning', struck me as an image of my true self; or my sense of incompleteness had me searching through a forest festooned with a net of birdsong for 'the grey bird of wisdom with the singing voice' which was 'my severed soul'. The themes of the desert and the mountain also spoke powerfully to me. Thérèse herself describes how she first knew her vocation with 'certitude' when as a child she felt that Carmel was the desert where God wanted her to hide herself. I only discovered Thérèse's poetry quite recently and was spellbound. Although most of her poems were written on request for

other sisters or community occasions, she found in them a means of expressing her most personal aspirations. They are immensely moving in their passionate sincerity: you touch her heart in them; you feel yourself being caught up in the fire of her love and longing. And yet, she says, she cannot express in words all she understands. In the end silence is the most eloquent melody for her. All of this throws light on my own youthful attempts to write poems of a sort. I think these were faint premonitions of a relationship with fathomless depths, one that was gradually to absorb the whole of myself: the relationship of unknowing knowing that only silence can express.

Thérèse's last poem was a song of thanksgiving to Mary which drew its inspiration from the Gospels and from her own experience. The Blessed Virgin had been part of Thérèse's life from the very beginning. She tells us how at her first confession 'I promised myself to redouble my tenderness for her'.<sup>10</sup> I knew her simply as the mother of Jesus in the Christian story. On the wall of my room at Oxford I had a French railway poster of the Blue Madonna stained-glass window in Chartres Cathedral, just as a decoration. But one night, in misery over a friendship that was breaking up, I found myself turning to Mary. With no faith as yet that I knew of, I looked towards her as a living person who could and would help me. Although nothing special happened at the time I am convinced that she took the rest of my life into her hands. When I read how Thérèse, as a child of nine in the grip of her frightening psychosomatic sickness, 'finding no help on earth . . . turned towards the Mother of heaven, and prayed with all her heart that she take pity on her'<sup>11</sup> and was cured, it connects strongly with my own first encounter with Mary.

I had taken it for granted that I would soon fall in love, get married and have children. How else could I live a fulfilled life? But my friendships never seemed to go deep enough. I longed for a relationship of genuine intimacy. Meanwhile in one of my first philosophy essays I was summarily dismissing all the proofs of the existence of God; but in my heart I began to feel that though everything else might just happen by chance, beauty and love could not. My tutor was a convert herself and if someone of her intellect could believe, I thought, it could hardly be against reason. In the end it was Teresa of Avila and Newman who convinced me of the truth of the Catholic faith. Margaret, an Anglican friend of my mother, had suggested I read them, not mentioning Thérèse though she was very devoted to her. I was moved to discover that Margaret herself became a Catholic in 1992 after a severe stroke which has left her paralysed and helpless. Yet she is unfailingly cheerful and speaks of Thérèse as her first and lifelong love.

What struck me most in the book of Teresa's *Life* were her visions of Christ. He is so real to her that I became certain of his reality too and wanted to know him as she did. In books I was reading, the gospel texts lit up for me and went to my heart with an urgency that demanded total commitment. My vocation came to me more or less along with the faith. If God existed, I should certainly live my whole life for God. The way Thérèse grasped the truths of her faith as a child is perhaps explained by the prayer she was drawn into, 'thinking' behind her bed-curtain.<sup>12</sup> I started going to daily mass at the chaplaincy, presided over at that time by another great lover of Thérèse. (She seems to have been invisibly dogging my footsteps!) Without knowing what was happening to me I found myself anchored there after mass each morning in a deeply withdrawn silence. I did not want to get up and go. I was being given this incomprehensible gift of prayer without having made any effort to pray, and it went on being given. Gradually it grew on me that Christ was not only real, he *is* Reality, and everything else only real in him. During my course of instruction from a Jesuit in London the whole Christian revelation just fell into place, like a vast landscape suddenly coming into perfect focus.

Meanwhile I came across a book of prayers to the Sacred Heart and touched in them a love deeper than human. Thérèse wrote to Céline from Carmel that she did not see the Sacred Heart as everyone else did: 'I think that the Heart of my Spouse is mine alone, just as mine is His alone . . .',<sup>13</sup> expressing her sense of Jesus' love as a deep personal involvement specifically with her. In the original version of her poem to the Sacred Heart, she could even write 'For my love alone you became man'.<sup>14</sup> Here was the Person whose love was the deep reality of all love. Thérèse recalls her first meeting with him in communion: 'For a long time now Jesus and poor little Thérèse looked at and understood each other. That day, it was no longer simply a *look*; it was a fusion.'<sup>15</sup> She felt herself uniquely loved. I find that Thérèse's descriptions of her prayer response strike a chord in me: a look, a surge of loving gratitude for an infinite love that is *always* there. Prayer seems to be primarily something that happens in us, not something we do: a silence gradually taking over; an intimacy I can only receive and hardly dare advert to; a tremendous longing that nevertheless only beckons, invites, courteously, humbly:

The seraphim in Heaven form your court,  
And yet you beg for my love . . .<sup>16</sup>

I am awed by Thérèse's overwhelmingly wholehearted response to that divine longing. It is revealed especially in her devotion to the Holy

Face. As one of her novices testifies: 'The sight of this divine Face kindled in her soul a passionate desire to resemble Him, as she put it to me'.<sup>17</sup> There is a total solidarity between lovers. It was the paschal mystery of the Suffering Servant in his passion and death that gave a fullness of meaning to Thérèse in her own sufferings, as it does to us in ours in their lesser measure.

I must have been nearly twenty-four when I first read *Story of a soul* and Thérèse entered my life. The simplicity of her approach to God and the totality of her choice correspond with what I wanted most deeply and confirmed the path of Carmel as the one for me. It was also impressed on me how God calls for the sake of innumerable others. Again, thinking over my possible vocation, I had been feeling a bit daunted at the idea of being vowed to strive for perfection when I happened to read an ancient sermon about Christ the gardener who tills the overgrown field of our soul, uprooting the weeds . . . What was I worrying about? All I had to do was love him. He would do the rest. As Thérèse writes to Céline from Carmel, Jesus will 'play the bank' for her, so that she draws profit from the good and the bad.

Oh, Céline, how easy it is to please Jesus, to delight His Heart, one has only to love Him, without looking at one's self, without examining one's faults too much . . . That is His affair.<sup>18</sup>

Once in Carmel, however, I had to struggle with the inevitable ups and downs to put her simple way of trust and confidence into practice. During a specially fraught time when I was also physically at a low ebb, I had a vivid dream in which I was lying sleepless when I found myself as it were invaded by a powerful force which shook every part of my body from within. It was as if some other person had got inside and taken control. In my helplessness I turned my eyes to the opposite corner of the room and saw two pictures facing me and each other at the end of the adjoining walls. One was of Mary and the other Thérèse. As I looked at them I became myself again and woke up with a tremendous sense of relief. I had a deep realization that Mary and Thérèse could bring me through anything.

The Sisters were friendly and welcoming and I adjusted easily to the simple family life, with prayer, work and recreation in a balanced routine lived in God's presence. The greatest strain came from knowing that it was my mother who was effectively bearing the brunt of my choice. My delayed reaction was to come out in a rash all over. Ah, I thought, this must be the hairshirt! I was told that the elderly Irish community doctor who saw me had given his verdict: 'She'll stay'. I

entered as Vatican II was beginning so I did not have the strict training the others had – they must have thought I got away with murder! All the same I was told of the faults in my performance and I used to get very worked up about it. Mother Mary was firm yet endlessly patient with me. But I was too concerned that she should think well of me. If there had been a misunderstanding I could not rest till she saw my side of it. How totally different I was from Thérèse in my behaviour! We had a scripture scholar as chaplain who launched me into studying the word of God; it soon became engrossing and helped to extricate me from this kind of trivial preoccupation with myself. While painting endless batches of Christmas cards I also learned my favourite passages by heart, including the whole of John's Gospel. This was to stand me in good stead ever after as I grew to share in Thérèse's own experience: 'It is especially the *Gospels* which sustain me during my hours of prayer, for in them I find what is necessary for my poor little soul . . .'.<sup>19</sup>

Early on in Carmel I copied out a sentence from Manuscript B on the back of a picture of Thérèse. The sentence is often quoted, surely because it makes it possible for us to identify with her: 'If all weak and imperfect souls felt what the least of souls feels, that is, the soul of your little Thérèse, not one would despair of reaching the summit of the mount of love'.<sup>20</sup> What Thérèse is saying here meant a great deal to me then and still does. I do not think I have a poor self-image. My friends tell me I am warm and outgoing. They speak of my 'infectious dynamism' and my heart sinks, knowing how often I run right out of energy. For in spite of a stubborn streak of independence my prevailing impression whenever I stop to look inside is one of nothingness. Willy-nilly, as it were, I have to recognize myself as one of the '*little souls*'<sup>21</sup> whom God must sustain at each moment'. And I am increasingly conscious of incapacity with the passing years. Equally I can see the persistent bias towards the good in all that has happened to me, and I am constantly thanking God for it. Thérèse more than anyone contagiously transmits to me her unlimited confidence in the invisible, enduring gift of God's merciful love, coming to us each moment of our lives. Why then can I not once for all rejoice in my weakness, since it positively draws him to save me?

What pleases Him is that He sees me loving my littleness and poverty, the blind hope I have in His mercy . . . That is my only treasure . . . why would this treasure not be yours?<sup>22</sup>

Everything we read in her life and her letters shows us a Thérèse who is constantly relating with others, always open to give and receive,



to befriend even those who were being generally condemned – Pranzini, her ‘first child’,<sup>23</sup> Fr Hyacinthe Loyson, her ‘brother’.<sup>24</sup> How quickly she responds to any need around her or to the least kind gesture. I am myself deeply conscious of how much I owe to the people in my life, my Carmelite sisters, my family and friends, each with their own personal apostolate supporting and inspiring mine. In a mysterious way they are all in me as I am in them. The earthly network of human relationships is a real symbol of the Communion of Saints. Graces leap out from one to another like sparks in a loving and mutual influence. This was Thérèse’s own insight, and she rejoiced that in heaven she would know the hidden soul to whom perhaps she owed all the graces of her life.<sup>25</sup> Thérèse had a profound grasp of this mysterious communion, this mutual interdependence among ourselves, and our total dependence on God in Christ. The one goal she aspires to is to be plunged into the burning abyss of the communion of love in the heart of God, because then she will be able to spend her heaven drawing a multitude of others into this communion.<sup>26</sup> Open to receive all from God through other people, she becomes herself a channel of healing grace.

Your Love has gone before me, and it has grown with me, and now it is an abyss whose depths I cannot fathom. Love attracts love, and, my Jesus, my love leaps towards Yours; it would like to fill the abyss which attracts it, but alas! it is not even like a drop of dew lost in the ocean! For me to love You as You love me, I would have to borrow Your own Love, and then only would I be at rest.<sup>27</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> John Clarke OCD (trans), *St Thérèse of Lisieux: her last conversations* (Washington, 1977), p 63.

<sup>2</sup> John Clarke OCD (trans), *Story of a soul* (Washington, 1976), p 193.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p 254.

<sup>4</sup> There are as yet no contemplative religious in the Burmese Church, although the bishops are very anxious to have them. The present military government would probably impose restrictions on the entry of foreign religious to make foundations there.

<sup>5</sup> Cf Kevin Culligan, Mary Jo Meadow and Daniel Chowning, *Purifying the heart: Buddhist insight meditation for Christians* (New York: Crossroad, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> Donald Kinney OCD (trans), *The poetry of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux* (Washington, 1996), no 54, p 218.

<sup>7</sup> Christopher O’Mahoney OCD (ed and trans), *St Thérèse of Lisieux by those who knew her* (Dublin, 1975), p 195.

<sup>8</sup> *Story of a soul*, p 256.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p 37.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 40–41.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p 65.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p 74.

<sup>13</sup> John Clarke OCD (trans), *Letters of St Thérèse of Lisieux* vol II, no 122, p 709.

<sup>14</sup> *Poetry of Saint Thérèse*, no 23, p 118.

<sup>15</sup> *Story of a soul*, p 77.

<sup>16</sup> *Poetry of Saint Thérèse*, no 36, p 165.

<sup>17</sup> Cf O'Mahoney, *St Thérèse*, p 242.

<sup>18</sup> *Letters* vol II, no 142, p 795.

<sup>19</sup> *Story of a soul*, p 179.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p 188.

<sup>21</sup> *Letters* vol II, no 243, p 1122.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, no 197, p 999.

<sup>23</sup> *Story of a soul*, p 100.

<sup>24</sup> *Letters* vol II, no 129, p 729.

<sup>25</sup> O'Mahoney, *St Thérèse*, pp 99–100.

<sup>26</sup> Cf *Story of a soul*, p 200.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p 256.