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**Our cover photo is *The Last Supper* by Leonardo de Vinci**

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**W**elcome to the online version of **spiritual life**. After 60 years as a print magazine, we have chosen to offer our readers an electronic magazine that will continue the tradition of providing our readers with articles that will help them on their journey to intimacy with God. Our guides on this journey will be the Carmelite mystics Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, as well as Thérèse of Lisieux, Elizabeth of the Trinity, and many others.

It seems appropriate to me that our new magazine is being launched during the Easter season. During this time we continue to celebrate the Resurrection of Jesus—his victory over death and our hope of eternal life. The Risen Christ embodies for us the hope and promise of our eternal destiny, especially important for us as we struggle with the difficulties of our daily lives. In the midst of all that we do and suffer, we are always alert to the goal of all of our actions—eternal life with Jesus in glory.

Our Christian lives, lived in prayerful attentiveness to the Spirit of God, celebrate the joy that Jesus promises and that the liturgy proclaims during this Easter season—we are “Sons and Daughters” of the Lord, born for eternal life:

“All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I shall not turn away.” Jn 6:37

*Edward O'Donnell*

## **Teresa of Avila and Affability**

**T**hough a lover of solitude and prayer, Teresa of Avila possessed a heart magnanimously open to others, ever willing to communicate with them on many levels different from the decidedly spiritual level mainly found in her writings. In her letters, for example, one finds her pouring herself out to members of her family, to her religious sisters and brothers, to friends, theologians, advisors, patrons from the nobility, and business people.

One of the virtues that shines out here is her affability toward others (cordial, warmly polite). We might think that the strict way of life she established for her new Carmels, with its emphasis on prayer and recollection, meant that the members of her community must walk about with no interest in anything or anyone other than God. And that they must keep their eyes lowered and seldom laugh.

### **Teresa's Recommendation**

In recommending the virtue of affability to her sisters, Teresa understands this affability as being pleasant, cordial, polite, and kind in dealing with others in the community. She wants it to be

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a permanent trait in their life together. She sees affability as the opposite of being rude or harsh, tight-lipped or restrained in speech. Affable and pleasant and easy to speak with are equivalent terms in Teresa's lexicon (WP 41.7).

As with all the other virtues, affability also finds its model in Christ. In her mystical visions, Teresa sees the countenance of Jesus filled with extraordinary majesty and "the love that face shows, so beautiful in its tenderness and affability" (L 38.21). One of the facets that Teresa most admires in the penitential Fray Peter of Alcántara is affability:

"Yet with all this sanctity, he was very affable, although his words were few unless he was questioned. He was very pleasant in his speech." (L 27.18)

This trait equally charmed her about Jerome Gracián, and she proposes him as a model of the style of life of the discalced friars:

"For he is a very pleasant person, so that generally he is loved by those who have dealings with him—it is a grace that our Lord gives—and thus he is extremely loved by all his subjects, both friars and nuns." (L 23.7)

### **"Pleasing Others"**

In Teresa herself this quality is connatural. Well aware that she radiated a friendly nature, she underlines it from the first chapters of her *Life*: "And

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since you have granted me as many favors as you have (L 1.8); For in this matter of pleasing others I went to extremes even when it was a burden to me” (L 3.4). She declares that she does not think those who imagine that they must live a sullen life in order to become a saint are on the right track (IC 5.3.11). Her first biographer, Francisco de Ribera—who knew her personally—in his *Vida de la M. Teresa*, singled out this quality of affability among all the other natural characteristics that God placed in the holy Mother Teresa. After describing many traits in detail, he writes:

“These special traits I have known about from persons who had spent more time than I to reflect on them. Taken together the person of Teresa appears to be clearly in a good mood in her behavior. She was lovable and peaceful, and all those persons who had dealings with her were commonly very pleased. She took on with great ease the understanding, talent, and position of the persons with whom she conversed.

“But in their way she was leading them to Christ. She taught with much clarity and love, and she highly esteemed good theologians. Her speech was gracious and her conversation was very gentle, serious, joyful, and plain, and she marvelously entertained all the people who listened to her.... She spoke humanly and familiarly

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with everyone, with joy, with love, without shyness, and with a holy and peaceful freedom.”

The same Ribera points out how Teresa showed this same friendliness to muleteers and wagon drivers in her difficult travels throughout Spain to found her monasteries.

### **Restrains Rigor**

As for penitential rigor, Teresa lives and suffers in the context of the religious life of her times, in which penitential austerity was especially valued. She too accepted it. Her *Way of Perfection* begins, “When I began to take the first steps toward founding this monastery, ...it was not my intention that there be so much external austerity” (1.1). Yet, she felt she had to restrain the discalced friars from the extreme penitential life they were living in Duruelo (F 14.12).

She never tires of reminding Ambrosio Mariano of this. He was a former military man with little propensity to good manners and who preferred the feminine model of the extremely penitential Catalina de Cardona to the feminine delicacy of the Mother Foundress. When it was proposed to her to go to reform a monastery for women, Teresa resisted, alleging:

“I spoke with two of them in Toledo and know that they are doing well in the way of life they have

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chosen. On the other hand, I certainly don't know how I could receive them under my charge, for I believe they conduct themselves with more rigor and penance than mortification and prayer."

(L 79.6)

From her view of the religious life, Teresa decided to introduce recreation into the schedule of the community life, even contrary to the Carmelite Rule, and withdrew from the form of life followed by the nuns at her former monastery of the Incarnation. This gave the members of her new communities the opportunity to practice the virtue she so highly esteemed and recommends enthusiastically to all of us who are striving to live better lives:

"Strive as much as you can...to be affable and understanding in such a way that everyone you talk to will love your conversation and desire your manner of living and acting, and not be frightened and intimidated by virtue." (WP 41. 7)

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### **NOTES**

WP—*Way of Perfection*; L—*Life*;  
IC—*Interior Castle*

*Spring Tulips*

## **Finding a Place of Refuge During Prayer: The Practice of St. Thérèse**

**S**t. Thérèse of Lisieux tells us that it was a great penance for her to recite the rosary privately. The difficulty lay in her inability to focus her mind on what she was praying:

“When alone (I am ashamed to admit it) the recitation of the rosary is more difficult for me than the wearing of an instrument of penance.... I force myself in vain to meditate on the mysteries of the rosary; I don’t succeed in fixing my mind on them.”<sup>1</sup>

Thérèse had a similar problem with the recitation of the Divine Office. Her mind would wander.

So what did Thérèse do to keep her mind focused on God while she recited the Office? This is an important question to ask regarding Thérèse’s spiritual life, considering that the communal recitation of the Divine Office in Lisieux Carmel involved a substantial amount of time—about three hours a day.

First, she recollected her *body*. Her blood sister, Céline (Sr. Geneviève of the Holy Face) testifies that Thérèse taught her novices to be attentive to their exterior deportment while reciting the Office



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as a means of fostering an interior disposition of reverent recollection. Bodily deportment—custody of the eyes, an erect posture and stillness of one's body—is a sustained act of the will. It is a choice that helps focus our consciousness on God's presence.

Having recollected her body, Thérèse often used her imagination to sustain her awareness of God. Celine writes:

“She had no fixed method of prayer at that time. Thérèse went on to say that often she transported herself in spirit, during the Office, to some desert-cliff high about this earth. There, alone with Jesus, with the world at her feet, she would forget that creatures existed, and would simply tell Him over and over again how much she loved Him.”<sup>2</sup>

### Ways to Pray

At first glance, it seems that Thérèse deliberately distracted herself from praying the Divine Office by escaping to some place in her mind. This would be true if the *only way* to pray the Office was to concentrate one's mind on the words. However, there are other valid ways to pray the Office. In his counsels on how to pray the Divine Office, Jean Pierre De Caussade, the author of *Abandonment to Divine Providence*, writes the following:

## **Finding a Place of Refuge During Prayer**

“As for the divine office, here are three easy and very sound methods. The first is to keep yourself in the presence of God, reciting the office in a spirit of great recollection and union with God and raising your heart to him from time to time. Those who are able to recite it in this way must not trouble themselves about any other method.

“The second method is to concentrate on the words, keeping yourself united with the spirit of the Church, praying when it prays, sorrowing where it sorrows, and gathering instruction from what is instructive for us; praising, adoring, thanking, in accordance with the different meanings of the verses which you are saying. The third method is to reflect with humility: I am at this moment united with saintly souls in praising God.”<sup>3</sup>

### **Presence of God**

Notice, that it is only the second method that recommends that we focus our minds on what is being said; whereas, the first and third methods are forms of practicing the presence of God. Thérèse’s practice of mentally transporting herself in spirit in order to be alone with Jesus is an example of practicing the presence of God.

Why Thérèse would want to transport herself mentally during a time of communal prayer is not

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a hard question to answer for anyone who prays the Divine Office in a community.

### **Distractions**

Speaking from experience, we friars often chant off key and either intone an antiphon too high or too low, not to say anything about intoning the wrong antiphon. We often interrupt the person sitting next to us because we can't find our place in the Breviary. And of course there is the constant battle between those of us who feel that the pace of the Office is too fast with those who feel that it is too slow.

And when you throw into the mix the fact that sometimes the leader of the Office selects a hymn that nobody knows, you have a situation in which escaping to a “desert-cliff” high above a cacophonous choir would come as a welcomed relief. Reciting the Divine Office in common gives a whole new meaning to the Psalmist's prayer, “O that I had wings like a dove to fly away and be at rest. So I would escape far away and take refuge in the desert” (Ps. 54. 7-8.).

### **Place of Rest**

Sometimes we have to go somewhere in our minds in order to stay where we are. This is the paradox of Thérèse's practice. Situating herself far above the

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choir on a “desert-cliff” is what helped Thérèse to remain in the choir for the purpose she was there—to pray.

Thérèse’s practice is an expression of St. Augustine’s advice regarding prayer:

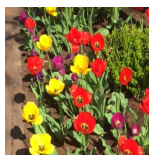
“Look within yourself. See whether there be some delightful hidden place in your consciousness, where you can be free of noise and argument, where you need not be carrying on your disputes and planning to have your own stubborn way.”  
(*Sermon* 52. 22 or 56)

For Thérèse, the quiet hidden place in her consciousness was a desert-cliff high about this earth. What is yours?

**Marc Foley, OCD, lives in Washington, D.C. He is an author and editor, and chairman of ICS Publications.**

### NOTES

1. St. Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, trans. John Clarke, O. C. D. (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1976), p. 242.
2. Sr. Geneviève of the Holy Face (Céline Martin), *A Memoir of my sister St. Thérèse*, trans. Carmelite Sisters of New York (New York: P.J. Kenedy & Sons, 1959), p. 102.
3. J. P. De Caussade, S.J., *Self-abandonment to Divine Providence*, trans. Algar Thorold, (Springfield: Templegate, 1959), p. 436.



## **A Birthday with Thomas Merton**

**T**homas Merton's 100th birthday was on January 31, 2015. On that morning, a sizable group of spiritual companions gathered in Des Moines, Iowa, to celebrate his life. Regional Merton scholars were invited to present reflections on his works. I explore the intimate Merton, to explain to the group some aspects of Merton's relationship with himself, with his God, his friends, and the woman he loved so deeply. This article recreates some impressions of what took shape at this gathering.

### **In the Shadow of Some French Mountains**

I stand in the presence of the group as we listen to an opening reading, Tom's description of his origins in *The Seven Storey Mountain*:

"On the last day of January 1915, under the sign of the Water Bearer, in a year of the great war, and down in the shadow of some French mountains on the borders of Spain, I came into the world. Free by nature, in the image of God, I was nevertheless the prisoner of my own violence and my own selfishness, in the image of the world into which I was born."<sup>1</sup>

## **A Birthday with Thomas Merton**

In 1948, this often-quoted summary invited a curious readership to enjoy an insider's look at the monastic life, and Tom was soon propelled to a reluctant visibility as an authority on spirituality. By 1966, he looked at his life differently, and other birthday reflections invited him to compose an unnamed poem. He recaptures a moment of awareness as he awaits the train that will carry him to a new life at Gethsemani.

### **Out From Under The Shadow**

...Birth is question and revelation.

The ground of birth is paradise

Yet we are born a thousand miles

Away from our home. / Paradise weeps in us

And we wander further away.

This is the theology / Of our birthdays.

Obscure theology / On the steps of Cincinnati Station:

I am questioned by the cold December / Of 1941.<sup>2</sup>

I suggest that if intimacy is transparency about the burdens of existence, interior conflict, unruly emotions, or conflicting values, these realities continued to manifest themselves over the next twenty years as Merton evolved through life's changes.

### **First Years**

His published works are sterile at times, since he lived under the shadow of censorship from the Cistercian Order. With the publication of his private journals, twenty-five years after his death in 1968,

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we know more about the intimate Merton than did those with whom he lived at Gethsemani.

I've been reading his works since my college days and enjoy an intimate connection with him that is much larger than any work in print. *I think I know who he is* and continue to invite him to remain the mentor for how I deal with spiritual growth. The joy of encountering Merton is that he opens up for the reader the kind of person we believe we see—poet, prophet, misguided monk, spiritual guide. In the intimate explorations of his own consciousness, he invites us to explore our interior landscape.

We fast forward from a cold day in 1941 to a magnificent early summer afternoon in 1991. It is the first annual meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society. We are listening to Ron Seitz of Louisville's Bellarmine University English Department. Ron and Tom were close friends, and Ron is still acknowledged as knowing Merton as well as anyone. As we listen with eager expectancy, Ron describes Tom's connection with others at some length.

"I really don't think that anyone ever knew Tom," he says, between poetry readings—some from Tom, some from his own works:

"That includes his abbot, his fellow monks, those he named as friends and people who write about him, including me. I can only offer to you the Mer-

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ton whom I know. Tom was so good at adjusting his continually-changing ideas, that no two persons ever saw the same side of him. He was so many different things to so many admirers and critics. People see what they want to see in him. So feel free, today, to see a different person than I'm presenting."

I note that Ron is now deceased but more detailed remarks made their way into his book entitled *Song For Nobody*.<sup>3</sup> I decided that becoming an expert on Thomas Merton was not within reach. I made a decision instead to find a pathway through the dense woods of his writings and enjoy the fresh air.

## A Path Through the Woods

The richest exploration of the intimate Merton is facilitated by two Merton scholars. In their work, entitled *The Intimate Merton*, Patrick Hart and Jonathan Montaldo select the writings that represent the heart of the man and they offer readable glimpses into the interior landscape of the Merton that we call "intimate." Their selections represent a pathway through the dense woods of his journals. They introduce their work in this fashion:

"His writings operate for readers as both a window and a mirror. By hearing Merton's literary voice, readers are seduced into listening to that still, quiet voice within themselves, one that



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longs to become incarnate in some outward gesture uniquely their own.”<sup>4</sup>

### Random Windows

I touch on several dimensions of intimacy. A window into Merton’s struggle with intimacy with himself can be seen in an entry of March 6, 1949. His fame is spreading:

“Every book that comes out under my name is a new problem. To begin with, every one brings with it an immense examination of conscience.... Every book I write is a mirror of my own character and conscience. I always open the final printed job with a faint hope of finding myself agreeable, and I never do.”<sup>5</sup>

At that time, Merton was deeply involved in a quest for God and found moving expressions in poetry that an abstract theology did not provide. I read from *Evening: Zero Weather* as a window into intimacy with God:

For we are sunken in the summer of our adoration,  
/ And plunge, down, down into the fathoms  
of our secret joy /

That swims with indefinable fire.<sup>6</sup>

### A Personal Mirror

*Seven Storey Mountain* carries a moving account of Tom’s relationship with his brother John Paul. After a long period of estrangement, John Paul came

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to the monastery to visit Tom before he joined his B-17 bomber crewmates in England. Tom recounts that John Paul was reported missing in action on a bombing run over Germany in 1943. The poem is completed before he finds out that his brother died as the bomber goes down in the North Sea. The narration is moving, but Tom's poem *For My Brother: Reported Missing in Action, 1943*, is a clear mirror for me to wrestle with darkness.<sup>6</sup>

I pause to regain my composure, as I narrate that my own brother John was killed at the December 5, 2007, Omaha Westroads Mall murders. An enraged nineteen year old opened fire on the Christmas shoppers with an assault rifle, killing eight people and seriously wounding twenty. My brother tried to stop the shooter and that cost him his life. The shooter brought the final death toll to nine as he killed himself.

I explain that I spent an entire year of sleepless nights reading and rereading Merton's poem to his brother. I would read a line or two—"Sweet brother, if I do not sleep / My eyes are flowers for your tomb"—clutch the poem to my chest, and reenter the darkness, hoping for a still, small voice within that brought relief from the pain of loss. The still small voice didn't say much. I turned toward Tom Merton to help me find some voice that would bring relief. The words of the poem helped: "If in the heat

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I find no water for my thirst. My thirst shall turn to springs for you. Poor traveler.”

My imagination told me that Tom Merton was with me as a loyal brother through the long nights of emptiness. Our common roots in the hidden ground of love assisted me to trust that God’s love is larger and more lasting than what we know through our life story. Merton gave a small voice to a rich faith tradition. That sustains me.

### Back To Celebrating Tom’s Birthday

I bring my part to a close by completing the poem from Tom on birthday and theology:

So all theology is a kind of birthday.

A way home to where we are....

No one ever got born all by himself.

It takes more than one. Every birthday has its own theology.<sup>8</sup>

**Patrick J. McDonald, LISW, LMFT**, is a frequent contributor to *Spiritual Life* and lives in Des Moines, Iowa.

#### NOTES

1. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948) p. 3.
2. Excerpt from an unnamed poem by Thomas Merton, in *Eighteen Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1986).
3. Ron Seitz, *Song for Nobody* (Liguori Publications, 1993).
4. Patrick Hart and Jonathan Montaldo, *The Intimate Merton* (San Francisco, Harper Books, 1999) p. XVI.
5. Journal entry from March 6, 1949, taken from *The Intimate Merton*, p. 60
6. “Evening: Zero Weather” excerpts taken from Thomas P. McDonnell, *The Merton Reader* (New York: Doubleday, 1989) p. 174.
7. “For my Brother: Reported Missing in Action, 1943,” excerpt taken from *The Merton Reader*, p. 170.
8. Excerpt from the unnamed poem.

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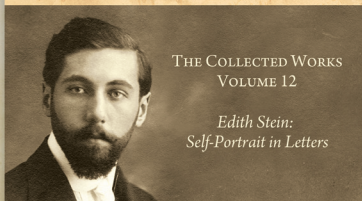
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