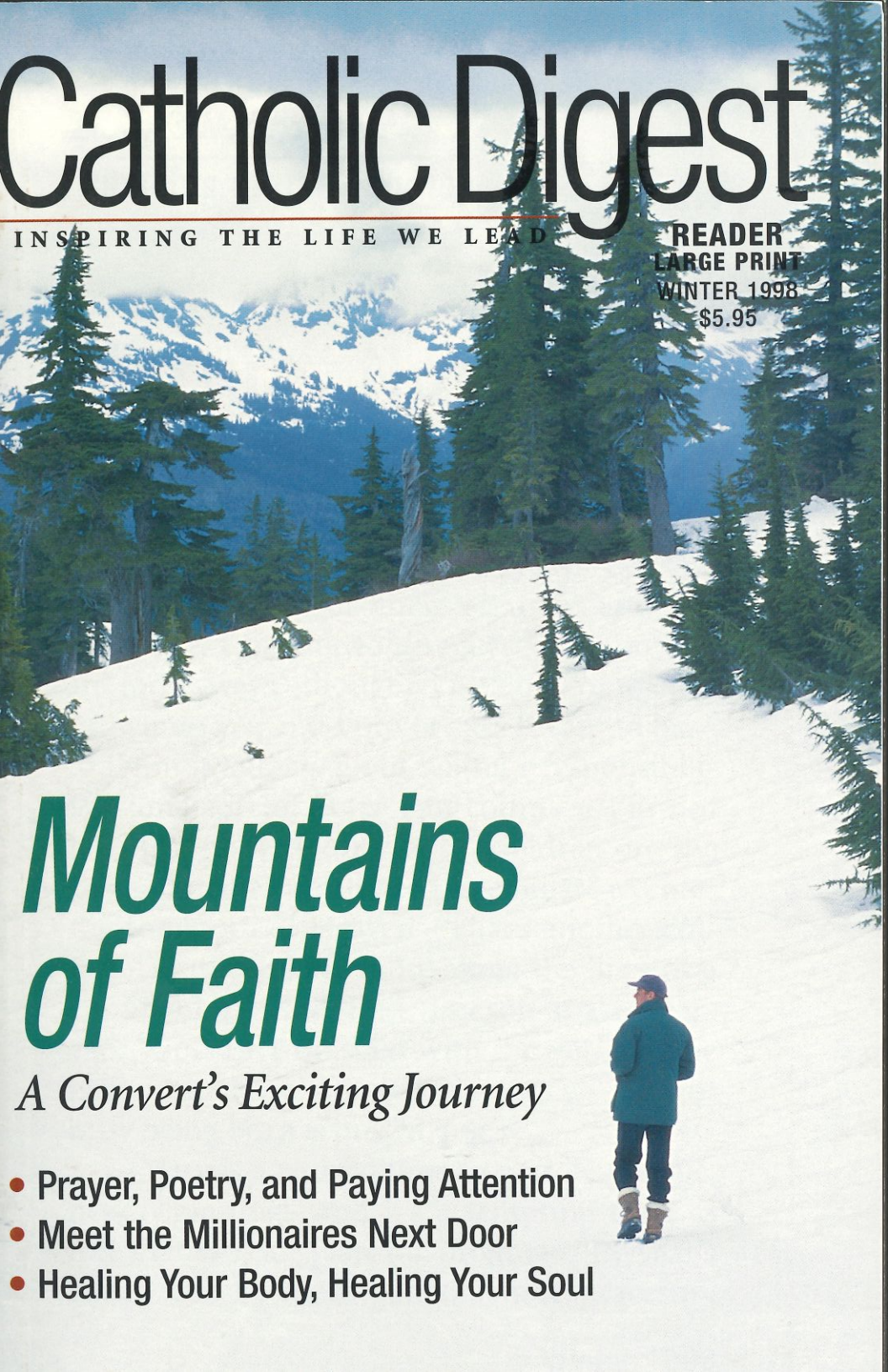


# Catholic Digest

A scenic photograph of a snowy mountain landscape. In the foreground, a person wearing a blue jacket and a cap stands with their back to the camera, looking out over a vast, snow-covered field. The middle ground is filled with numerous evergreen trees of varying sizes. In the background, majestic snow-capped mountains rise against a clear blue sky. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and serene.

INSPIRING THE LIFE WE LEAD

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## *Mountains of Faith*

*A Convert's Exciting Journey*

- Prayer, Poetry, and Paying Attention
- Meet the Millionaires Next Door
- Healing Your Body, Healing Your Soul

# St. Thérèse: A Love Story

*The Little Flower left a big legacy*

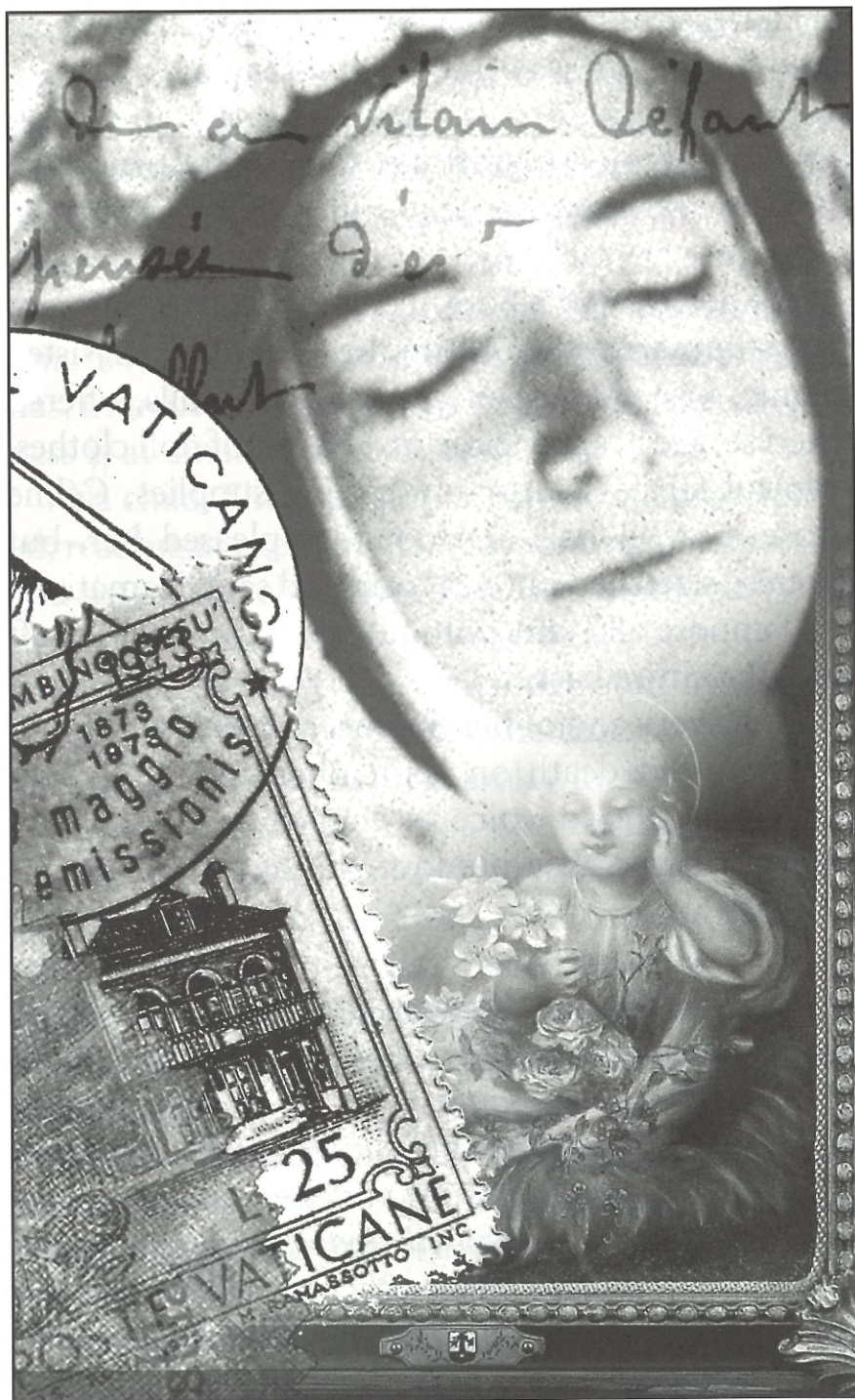
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**By Sister Colette Ackerman, O.C.D.**

ONE HUNDRED YEARS ago, Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face died of tuberculosis at the monastery in Lisieux, France, after nine years of Carmelite life. She was 24, and known to hardly anyone beyond a small circle of family and friends.

But Thérèse left behind a spiritual autobiography, some poems and plays, and many letters. In addition, her three familial sisters, also members of the same Carmelite Community, had recorded in notebooks the words she spoke during the last months of her life.





Thérèse's autobiography, published the year after her death, was titled *The Story of a Soul* — words from the first sentence of her manuscript. Perhaps the most significant spiritual testimony of the 20th century, the text still sells thousands of copies every year.

In *The Story of a Soul*, Thérèse recalls a moment that summarizes her entire life. One day her sister, Léonie, past the age of playing with dolls, offered Thérèse, age 3, and Céline, 7, a basket of doll clothes, colorful fabric scraps, and sewing supplies. Céline chose a small ball of wool that pleased her, but Thérèse stretched out her hand and said dramatically, "I choose all," and, without ceremony, walked off with the entire basket.

At the very end of her manuscript, written shortly before her death on September 30, 1897, that earlier childhood voice is echoed when Thérèse rejoices in the absolute love she has for God and God for her:

*Just as a torrent, throwing itself with impetuosity into the ocean, drags after it everything it encounters in its passage, in the same way, O Jesus, the soul who plunges into the shoreless ocean of your love draws with her all the treasures she possesses.... You know, O my God, I have never desired anything but to love You, and I am ambitious for no other glory. Your love has gone before me, and it has grown within me, and now it is an abyss whose depths I cannot fathom.*



THÉRÈSE SPENT A lifetime giving herself to the absolute love of God. This saint was also a woman possessing a rich, multifaceted personality, a woman who recorded her spiritual journey and her love for God in words that have proved genuinely durable. The paradox of Thérèse is that she lived and wrote about the ultimate richness of the mystical life, union with God, and made it understandable. She has, moreover, told all of us that such spiritual richness is attainable here and now!

As a child, Thérèse was precocious and high-spirited, reading at age 4 and cleverly amusing her parents and sisters. She also formed her own opinions: When her mother dressed her in a sky-blue outfit but suggested that she cover her arms to protect them from the sun, Thérèse obeyed. But she thought to herself, How much prettier I would look with bare arms!

When sent away to school, Thérèse did well in her studies but found it hard to make friends. She dreamed, instead, of entering Carmel and (in the spirit of Teresa of Avila) pulled every string she could, even speaking to the pope in person when her bishop refused permission. Her persistence was her success — at age 15.

When Thérèse was 20 and had been in the monastery for five years, the prioress praised the young woman warmly in a letter to a friend:

*She is tall ... with a childlike face, and with a tone of voice and expression that hide a wisdom, a perfection,*

*and discernment of a woman of 50.... She is innocent ... but her head is filled with tricks to be played on anyone she pleases. A mystic, a comedienne, she is everything! She can make you shed tears of devotion, and she can as easily make you split your sides with laughter during recreation.*

THÉRÈSE LIVED HER short life in a very circumscribed area of geography; yet, in her writings, she expresses a vitality, a sense of discovery, a continuing maturity. She searched for new ideas, new ways.

In the Carmelite family of saints, she is certainly the inventor. "I want to seek out a means of going to heaven," she wrote, "by a little way, a way that is very straight, very short, and totally new."

Thérèse began her Story of a Soul, which really recounts her experience of God, by saying that all she desires is to sing the mercies of the Lord.

Thérèse, theologian that she was, always put together plenty of evidence to support her new way of interpreting God. The liturgical readings for her feast, celebrated October 1, even reflect this.

Thérèse used Isaiah, for example, to describe her own experience of God: "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" (Is 66:13). And she was launched on her way of confidence and love because she believed in and was consoled by the text from Matthew which tells us

that it has pleased God to “hide these things from the learned and the clever and reveal them to mere children” (Mt 11:25–26). Indeed, Jesus is the great eagle who raises her up and supports her always in the shadow of his wings.

FROM HER EARLIEST days, Thérèse was focused on a single, passionate relationship with God. She was in love with God and she was graced in her development with the gradual intensification of that love.

Thérèse embraced many vocations. She wanted to be a martyr like Joan of Arc; she wanted to be an apostle; she wanted to be a priest. But, in her breakthrough, her discovery:

*I understood that love comprised all vocations, that love was everything, that it embraced all times and all places ... in a word, that it was eternal! Then I cried out, My vocation, at last I have found it.... My vocation is love! ... in the heart of the Church I shall be love.... Thus I shall be everything and my dream will be realized.*

Thérèse sought God in prayer and was faithful throughout a lifetime. She was faithful even in the midst of a darkness that veiled her belief in God during the final two years of her life. Thérèse had the sanctuary of her soul invaded by a suffocating darkness and anguish of spirit that was mirrored in her physical suffering of pulmonary tuberculosis.



But, in spite of her afflictions, she said to her sister:

*Do not believe I am swimming in consolations; oh no, my consolation is to have none on earth.... Jesus teaches me in secret.... Sometimes a word comes to console me at the end of prayer.... I understand so well that it is only love which makes us acceptable to God that this love is the only good I ambition....*

To this wisdom, Thérèse was faithful; she held on and she held out.

Contemporary writers often seek to define the simplicity of good in ways that Thérèse might approve. The brilliant Leslie Marmon Silko, for instance, recounts such a philosophy in a scene of her novel *Ceremony*. An old man, the wisdom figure in the story, speaks to his young friend, an ex-GI, whose adopted brother was mortally wounded walking beside him during a march through Vietnam. The mountains have outdistanced their destruction, the old man tells the younger one, just as love has outdistanced death. As long as you remember what you have seen, then nothing is gone. As long as you remember, it is part of the story we have together.

In the same way, Thérèse is part of our story. Her centennial is a time to reflect deeply on her life, to perhaps read or reread *The Story of a Soul*. Let us believe more intensely in the graces of contemplative prayer, contemplative wisdom. Thérèse was a



mystic and a revolutionary; she challenges us to follow closely in her steps during this special year of grace. CD

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## The Wiseguy in Ward Three

THE DIRECTOR OF nursing at a large hospital answered the phone in her office. The caller, in an authoritative manner, asked the condition of Jack Jones in ward three.

Referring to the records, the director replied that Mr. Jones had undergone an operation the previous night and was progressing. Then she asked, "And who is speaking?"

"It's Jack Jones in ward three," the caller answered. "They tell you nothing in here!"

*The Rotarian*

## Little Interloper

IN FIRST GRADE my son penned an autobiography for a school assignment.

Later, I peeked at it. "Everything was fine," Loren had written. "Then one day, a terrible thing happened. My sister was born."

M. Brindley