

The poetry of Saint Therese of Lisieux. Translated by Donald Kinney, O.C.D.  
Washington, DC: ICS, 1996. 335 pages. \$12.95 (paper)

During 1996-1997, Carmelites throughout the world are celebrating the centenary of the death of Therese of Lisieux. This volume, the only English translation of the complete original texts, presents for reflection a critical edition of the saint's poems.

It is doubtful Therese will ever be classified among world-renowned poets; Jean Guilton remarks in his preface: Pay no attention to the banality, the awkwardness, and the way the material is put together. Keep only the flower, and beyond the flower, the fragrance (12). This is wise advice to those who might find these poems deficient in form and language--for what the poems offer is the passion of Therese's spiritual doctrine. She had no literary training and limited time to actually write down her verses. The poems, often composed and memorized as she went about her daily work, were put on paper in the evening. Many were written on request of individual sisters or family members or for community celebrations.

Therese has left us substantial writings: an autobiography, her last conversations (recorded by her sisters), letters, plays, prayers, and poems. All this material tells about her spiritual journey. Having the complete text of poems, and the extensive introductory notes for each poem, adds to our knowledge and deepens our appreciation of Therese's life and mission.

This Carmelite lived only a few years in her monastery, from the age of fifteen to twenty-four. She suffered a long, painful agony from tuberculosis

and experienced a dramatic eclipse of God during the last two years of her life. The poems presented in this volume tell part of this story; all but a few were written between February 1894 and May 1897. Therese died in September 1897.

There are sixty-two poems in the collection. Themes and images emerge in abundance throughout the poems showing the intelligence, imagination, and creativity of Therese. Several contain her thoughts on the Blessed Virgin, two are about her heroine, Joan of Arc, a number are dedicated to sisters in her community--composed for the profession of vows, jubilees, etc. The French text is included as well as an index of main words and themes. The most irresistible theme is love for Jesus to death and abandonment to that love in suffering.

I need a heart burning with tenderness,  
Who will be my support forever,  
Who loves everything in me, even my weakness...  
And who never leaves me day or night. (Poem 23)

In his Divine arms, I don't fear the storm.  
Total abandonment is my only law.  
Sleeping on his Heart, right next to his Face,  
That is Heaven for me!... (Poem 32)

I'll love you without limit and without law... (Poem 33)

The poems demonstrate her intense love for God and her constant ambition to depend on God's mercy--forsaking self without regret.

Jesus, for your love, I've squandered my life, My future.  
In the eyes of men, a rose forever withered, I must die! (Poem 51)

While one might evaluate this text as nineteenth century poetry, some phrases strike a contemporary tone. I was reminded of the strength in Etty

Hillesum's final postcard tossed from the train as she traveled to Auschwitz:  
"we left the camp singing." Therese writes, in the midst of physical and  
spiritual anguish:

Then I can sing of the strength and sweetness of your Mercies.  
Smiling, I bravely face the fire.  
And in your arms, O my Divine Spouse,  
I shall die singing on the battlefield... (Poem 48)

The poems have many possibilities for creative use in theology and  
religious studies. It is primary source material illustrating another perspective  
in the spiritual development of a saint. There is also new biographical  
information. And finally, the text is challenging; it calls us beyond the  
written words to the inspiration of a life given wholly to God.

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