

“A Tremendous Experience”: The Influence of St. Thérèse of Lisieux on the Spirituality of Thomas Merton

By **Fiona Gardner**

Thomas Merton writes mostly about the influence of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, the Little Flower, in his early journals, and in particular around the time of his entrance to Gethsemani Abbey, when he promises her, “I will be your monk.”¹ He also discusses her influence in his hagiography on the Trappistine nun Mother Berchmans.² In this paper I shall argue that the influence of the saint extends also into Merton’s later spirituality, and is implicitly exemplified by his interest in the concept of the inner life and the child mind.

The Early Influence

The first mention of Thérèse is in the summer of 1941 when Merton, describing St. Bonaventure College, writes, “There was a grove along the west side of the football field, and in the grove were two shrines, one to the Little Flower and the other a grotto for Our Lady of Lourdes” (*SSM* 337). In that October, Merton writes that he has “just read straight through Gheon’s book about Saint Theresa of Lisieux and am knocked out by it completely.”³ This book, *The Secret of the Little Flower*, was published in 1933; the author, Henri Gheon, was himself a new convert, somewhat sceptical about the image of St. Thérèse, and, as Gheon writes about himself, initially “full of futile aesthetic prejudice.”⁴ His first chapter, “The Initial Resistance,” presents Gheon’s horror at the mawkish nature and the “tinselled and sugary manifestations of devotion to the ‘little saint’ (the abuse of this diminutive drove me frantic)” (Gheon 11). He confesses his irritation at *The Story of a Soul*, the autobiography of Thérèse, and his initial astonishment at the veneration of the young woman who apparently had done nothing for her short life.

Merton’s own critique of the “scandal of cheap, molasses-art and gorgonzola angels that surrounds the cultus of this great saint” (*RM* 432) does not prevent him, like Gheon, once the initial resistance is overcome, from realizing her extraordinary nature. As Merton writes, “The big present that was given to me, that October, in the order of grace, was the discovery that the Little Flower really was a saint, and not just a mute pious little doll in the imaginations of a lot of sentimental old women. And not only was she a saint, but a great saint, one of the greatest: tremendous!” (*SSM* 353). At this stage Merton sees Thérèse as “more extraordinary than even Saint John of the Cross or Saint Theresa of Avila” (*RM* 432), partly because her simplicity includes the love and wisdom of both these earlier saints, but perhaps also because her



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simplicity and sanctity emerged, it appears, against such odds in her background. From the reading of Gheon's book, Merton gains "a faint glimpse of the real character and the real spirituality of St. Thérèse" and then is "immediately and strongly attracted to her" (*SSM* 354).

Gheon's somewhat cynical stance also would have attracted Merton who, while similarly critical of the manufactured image, was like Gheon fascinated by the background of Thérèse. Gheon acknowledges in his work that he too, like Thérèse, was "born of the *petite bourgeoisie*, in a provincial town, and at about the same time" (Gheon 19). Merton comments in his account of his discovery of Thérèse, how it is less surprising when saints appear amongst the disadvantaged, and in places of deep poverty and need, but Thérèse appeared "in the midst of all the stuffy, overplush, overdecorated, comfortable ugliness and mediocrity of the *bourgeoisie*" (*SSM* 353). This familiar context is for Gheon and Merton part of both the resistance to and interest in taking her seriously.

Therefore the immediate attraction would seem inevitably to include some sort of conscious and unconscious identification linked to her background. Merton from his own childhood would have had first-hand experience of French bourgeois life (and indeed Western bourgeois life) and writes of the need not to underestimate the power of grace to break through such an unpromising context and the strongest of personal or social defenses: "The one thing that seemed to me more or less impossible was for grace to penetrate the thick, resilient hide of *bourgeois* smugness and really take hold of the immortal soul beneath that surface, in order to make something out of it" (*SSM* 354). The awareness of the power of grace is also personal to Merton the reader: the "attraction . . . was the work of grace, since, as I say, it took me, in one jump, clean through a thousand psychological obstacles and repugnances" (*SSM* 354). Furthermore, Merton explains that Thérèse did not repudiate her background (which Merton would have wanted to do) but rather clung to it. "The discovery of all this was certainly one of the biggest and most salutary humiliations I have ever had in my life." He reaches the insight that "as far as sanctity was concerned, all this external ugliness was, *per se*, completely indifferent. And, what is more, like all the other physical evil in the world, it could very well serve, *per accidens*, as an occasion or even as the secondary cause of great spiritual good" (*SSM* 355).

A further implicit identification may also have taken place at the deeply personal level. Both Merton and Thérèse had suffered early maternal abandonment through death, Merton at the age of six and Thérèse at four and a half. Gheon comments that Thérèse "had not imagined that death could cleave so great a gulf" (Gheon 49). Her autobiography describes both the pain of the loss, and, similar to Merton, the deepening of her relationship and dependency on her father. Another commentator writes,

She was affected by a nervous condition at this loss until at the age of 10 years . . . She suffered from maternal abandonment even though she was surrounded by love. As a child and adolescent she suffered greatly from emotional distress . . . an affective weakness which would mark [her] whole life: "*Am I loved?*" asks Thérèse. She relates one year before her death that in one of her dreams she asks the question: "*Is the Good God content with me?*"⁷⁵

It has been suggested that following such an early loss, later struggles to obtain human love open up "something insatiable." Repeated losses leave "a legacy of longing and fear so great that to live with love means to evoke the terrible danger of loss. . . . The love of God . . . has the total advantage that it can never be lost except perhaps by one's own wilful choice."⁷⁶

A further identification that perhaps resonated with the newly converted Merton was Thérèse's devotion to entering the religious life, and the struggle fully explained in her autobiography to enter the convent despite the usual conventions. Whilst the setbacks experienced by Merton were different, the single-mindedness of Thérèse might well have appealed to Merton in 1941. Indeed it is to this saint that he turns for guidance for his future. He also gains from reading Gheon's biography "a faint glimpse of the real character and the real spirituality of St. Thérèse" (*SSM* 354) and from this a grace that an underlying family anxiety can be entrusted to her: "to take charge of my brother, whom I put into her care . . . I set the Little Flower as a sentry to look out for him. She did the job well" (*SSM* 355-56). Parenthetically, the following summer when Merton was at Gethsemani his brother, John Paul, came to visit before being sent overseas on war service. He asked if he could be baptized, and as part of his instruction was given a box of books to read: "John Paul looked them all over. He said: 'Who is this Little Flower anyway?'" And he read the *Story of a Soul* all in one gulp" (*SSM* 395).

One direct response for Merton from reading Gheon's book was the realization that "I no longer needed to get something, I needed to give something" (*SSM* 356). There was the possibility of the planned move to Harlem, but also the desire for the priesthood and a vivid conviction to become a Trappist. Merton wonders where such a thought came from and turned to Thérèse: "I walked and prayed. It was very, very dark by the shrine of the Little Flower. 'For Heaven's sake, help me!' I said" (*SSM* 364). He walks round and round the grove praying all the time with urgency and so special an anguish. . . . But I said this time to the Little Flower: "You show me what to do." And I added, "If I get into the monastery, I will be your monk. Now show me what to do." . . .

Suddenly, as soon as I had made that prayer, I became aware of the woods, the trees, the dark hills, the wet night wind, and then, clearer than any of these obvious realities, in my imagination, I started to hear the great bell of Gethsemani ringing in the night

The bell seemed to be telling me where I belonged – as if it were calling me home. (*SSM* 364-65)

At Louisville station, on his way to the monastery, Merton prays again to the Little Flower and other saints that he may be accepted at Gethsemani, and once in the novitiate chapel notices "a statue of my friend St. Joan of Arc on one side of the door, and on the other was, of course, the Little Flower" (*SSM* 378). In a later journal Merton comments, "The Little Flower does a lot of recruiting for La Trappe. My vocation is not without her influence. Pray for me, Thérèse, to be a true child of God, to love God alone, to belong entirely to Him, to give Him joy and glory forever."⁷

A Vocation within a Vocation

In one of his early books, published in the same year as his autobiography, Merton further examines the influence of the "simple and fundamental spirituality" (*EEG* 152) of Thérèse in his writing about another vocation – that of the French Trappistine Mother Berchmans. The spirituality described by Thérèse in her autobiography helped to shape the struggles experienced by Mother Berchmans, exiled in Japan, into a meaningful and coherent rationale of sanctity as compatible

with a completely ordinary life (an ordinary life in the context of a mission to Japan and the strict observances of convent life). For both women it was to be above all a life of intensity of love for God. Merton explores the idea of their vocations as “to be a victim to the love of God” and the place of suffering for the glory of God (*EEG* 153). He notes the similarity in the lives of the two women: their obedience within the monastic tradition; their weaknesses and little faults; their responsibilities as novice mistresses and, indeed, for both in their early and painful deaths from tuberculosis.

In the section where Merton explores the effect of Thérèse’s book on Mother Berchmans, it is possible to appreciate Merton’s distillation of the essence of Thérèse’s spirituality as he too had understood and experienced it. He writes of the psychological impact of setting souls free for action using a sentence from Thérèse’s work: “My nature is such that fear only *drives me back*; but with love, I not only advance, I fly” (*EEG* 158). “[T]he saint’s only concern is with hastening toward divine union,” aware that:

the most hidden obstacle . . . is the fact that we rely upon our own powers and place our trust in our own miserable efforts which, without the assistance of grace, are absolutely incapable of any good in the supernatural order. . . . The realization of our weakness, helplessness, misery, incapacity, delivers us from the illusion of our own wisdom and sanctity The soul that discovers the way of spiritual childhood is happy in a way that it had never before imagined possible, because, by discovering its own nothingness, it is at last liberated from the prison of futile introversion and fruitless self-consideration, and can devote itself altogether to . . . the knowledge and love of the great, immensely good God. (*EEG* 159, 161)

It is the essence of these ideas that Merton incorporates into his own contemplative spirituality as a lasting influence, and that then permeates his later, less constrained and more creative writings.

Later Influences – “I Will be Your Monk”

While the first three volumes of the Merton journals have references to St. Thérèse, it is noticeable that she does not appear in the later ones. However, my suggestion in this paper is that in certain ways it seems that Merton implicitly remains *her* monk throughout his vocation. There are two main areas where this is exemplified: the first is Merton’s emphasis on the interior life and a theology shaped through personal experience; the second is his concept of the child mind which has links to the childhood spirituality espoused by Thérèse.

An Interior Life

From her autobiography it becomes clear that living in community Thérèse developed an inner life instead of a defensive way of responding. Each personal experience, no matter how apparently insignificant, led to insights that shaped her views and ultimately her theology. Her theology was still framed within tradition, from her rereading of the Gospels and certain spiritual classics, but her personal experience distilled a simple set of insights within that tradition. As Monica Furlong notes,

The truly remarkable thing about Thérèse, however, is that she took her own very human failings – her longing for love and attention and acclaim, her overweening

spiritual ambition – exactly as they were in all their silliness and childishness and began to work with them . . . she detached herself from the particular shame of such feelings by owning them . . . she took the scrap of life allowed to her and transformed it. (Furlong 134)

In her work with the novices and epistolary ministry to missionaries, Thérèse did not use theory or deduction, but would offer practical solutions often based on her personal experiences: “she is properly experimental and intuitive . . . everything in her teaching is spirit and life . . . she considered that the hardest labour of all is that of self-conquest which we undertake within ourselves.”⁸

Merton indicates his conscious awareness of an interior life to his conversion experience when he writes, “I had an interior life, real, but feeble and precarious” (*SSM* 277). Later he notes Father Prior’s conversation about his own vocation, “how he discovered the Little Flower when he read *The Story of a Soul* in the seminary. And how that was his introduction to the interior life. That situation has been reproduced a hundred times in our order and our generation, I am sure” (*ES* 80). Thérèse demonstrates a process also found in Merton’s writings, particularly in the journals, where he becomes a witness to his responses and experiences, then analyzes and works with them. From this emerges in particular his personal understanding of the concept of the false and true self.

In this focus on the personal as contributing to the theological, the encounter with God for both Thérèse and Merton becomes a dynamic and ongoing encounter. Both demonstrate a capacity to live in the present moment with awareness, so that their lives are not static, instead changing from instant to instant, but within a framework of the sacraments and prayer. Both demonstrate devotion to the Eucharist, and from their first communion: “[Thérèse’s] view of [Jesus] in the Eucharist resembles a genuine human relationship far more than was customary in her day”;⁹ and for Merton: “from the very outset of his life as a Catholic, Merton places a strong stress on the paschal reality of the Eucharist, not merely as a doctrine, but as an experience.”¹⁰

Thérèse’s trial of faith and time of darkness towards the end of her life does not diminish her trust in God, which remained unwavering throughout. Thérèse used this experience of doubting certain aspects of belief to shape another aspect of her theology – to be one with unbelievers and identify with them. Merton’s trust too remains firm, yet his correspondence shows his flexibility and ability to relate to those outside of the mainstream, including people with little or no belief. The autobiographies by both Thérèse and Merton spoke to many who were not previously believers. O’Connor notes, “Thérèse lived out the mystery in which she believed; and . . . translated that mystery into simple, fresh, common images that speak to the heart of her times” (O’Connor 30). It is Furlong, biographer of both St. Thérèse and Merton, who points out that *The Story of a Soul* “had one immediate and striking effect which was the stream of postulants waiting to enter the Lisieux Carmel,” and that this can be compared to “the flood of novice monks who wanted to enter the monastery of Gethsemani” after the publication of Merton’s *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Furlong also notes some similarities in the style of the two books: “certain phrases he uses, and even more a sort of wry joking about the hardships of the life are extraordinarily reminiscent” (Furlong 124).

The examination of the interior life inevitably leads to a recognition of imperfection, and Merton notes after reading Gheon’s book that he was not to assume, despite Church teachings, a blueprint for sanctity: “For God is greatly magnified and marvellous in each one of His saints: differently

in each individual one” (*SSM* 353). Some years later he writes more directly of imperfection in the context of Thérèse: “Fr. Urban . . . told of the Little Flower being glad on her deathbed, not only that she could be judged as imperfect, but that it actually was true. That struck me very deeply” (*ES* 219). Merton characteristically acknowledges his own imperfections as part of this ongoing work in his interior life.

From this ongoing witness to the inner world a certain simplicity, clarity and style seem to emerge. It is clearly expressed by Thérèse as childhood spirituality and there are some aspects of this found in the later writings of Merton, linked to his concept of the child mind.

The Child Mind

This is the second area that reflects the influence of Thérèse on Merton’s later spirituality. Thérèse’s “little way” was to surrender to live as a child dependent on the mercy of God. She was reliant on her early life experiences alongside her religious tradition when she writes of her relationship with God as full of “the unconcern with which a child goes to sleep in its father’s arms” (Thérèse 180). She writes of remaining little so that she can be raised to heaven in the arms of Jesus:

“Can’t I find a lift which will take me up to Jesus, since I’m not big enough to climb the steep stairway of perfection?” So I looked in the Bible for some hint about the life I wanted, and I came across the passage where Eternal Wisdom says: “Is any one simple like a little child? Then let him come to me.” To that Wisdom I went; it seemed as if I was on the right track; what did God undertake to do for the child-like soul that responded to his invitation? I read on and this is what I found: “I will console you like a mother caressing her son; you shall be like children carried at the breast, fondled on a mother’s lap.” (Thérèse 195)

Here we have a spirituality originating in and energized by her early experiences but reframed through prayer, experience and life in the convent community into a personal theology. Merton comments on Thérèse’s spirituality as “this mystery: that being as a child was to be crucified, but crucified in a kind of innocence . . . a child whose childishness involves maybe a maturer mysticism than all Saint John of the Cross, something that rejoins the awful mystery of the Stigmatization of Saint Francis” (*RM* 433).

In Merton’s early writings, especially at the time of his conversion, he acknowledges dependence on God as parent in a similar style to Thérèse. For example he writes, “I was being fed not only with the rational milk of every possible spiritual consolation . . . I was all at once surrounded with everything that could protect me” (*SSM* 277). As suggested earlier, it could be hypothesised that for both Merton and Thérèse there may have been unfinished business from their experiences of loss which could have provided both impetus and a predisposition for their theology and particular way of encountering and relating to God, but this theology was cultivated and honed by both of them from their adult inner life. It was based on self-knowledge and an awareness of the ego derived from thinking about what was happening in them and around them. It is in his maturer mysticism that Merton suggests that the child mind is the essence of mature spirituality in the sense of being truly ourselves, the person that we are meant to be. In a letter written April 1, 1961, Thomas Merton sent John C. H. Wu belated birthday wishes, adding, “I . . . ask the Lord to give you every blessing and

joy and to keep ever fresh and young your ‘child’s mind’ which is the only one worth having.”¹¹

For Merton the child mind is linked to the experiential, to a condition of complete simplicity and innocence without artifice, excluded from worldly power, participation and recognition, in other words from ego-orientated identity. The child mind sees the illusory nature of the world and dares to speak truth to power. The child mind is characterized by awareness, mystery and value-sensing. The crux of this is a dependence on God framed within the concept of mercy exemplified in God’s relationship with his creation and each one of us. Merton writing on mercy reflects on this as what binds us in relationship to God, and it does not depend on our perfection.¹² Similarly, for Thérèse the way of spiritual childhood “is nothing other than a mystical asceticism suited to God’s action which revealed itself . . . as mercy.”¹³

The child mind is another way of Merton speaking about the true self – the self beyond the self-consciousness of the ego. It is not a regression to an infantile state of mind, but a state beyond consciousness. It is ending the sense of separateness from God and accepting our deep dependency in which we find “Him in Whom is hidden our original face before we are born” (*HGL* 624). In that state the dualism of being in relationship with God becomes a uniting of subjectivities. Merton writes, “Our knowledge of God is paradoxically a knowledge not of him as the object of our scrutiny, but of ourselves as utterly dependent on his saving and merciful knowledge of us.”¹⁴ Thérèse at her first communion writes, “something had melted away, and there were no longer two of us – Thérèse had simply disappeared, like a drop lost in the ocean; Jesus only was left” (Thérèse 82). Existing within this dependence we are carried by God, and in a letter to Jacques Maritain, Merton says that then all we do becomes play which is “the only genuine seriousness. . . . All life is in reality the playing and dancing of the Child-God in His world, and we, alas, have not seen it and known it.”¹⁵

The way of childhood spirituality and living in the child mind is about a deeply embedded relationship with the Divine, a form of inner merging with Christ fostered through different forms of contemplative prayer that empowers actions. When Merton writes of “the tremendous experience” of his discovery of St. Thérèse of Lisieux he explains that this is then a relationship and a process of grace through which much may happen: “And so, now that I had this great new friend in heaven, it was inevitable that the friendship should begin to have its influence on my life” (*SSM* 355). And there is evidence from Merton’s writings of this ongoing influence on his later spirituality. For both, their vocation was to live out what they discovered about themselves. As Merton writes, “Living is the constant adjustment of thought to life and life to thought in such a way that we are always growing, always experiencing.”¹⁶

1. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 364; subsequent references will be cited as “SSM” parenthetically in the text.
2. Thomas Merton, *Exile Ends in Glory: The Life of a Trappistine, Mother M. Berchmans, O.C.S.O.* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1948); subsequent references will be cited as “EEG” parenthetically in the text.
3. Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation. Journals, vol. 1: 1939-1941*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995) 431; subsequent references will be cited as “RM” parenthetically in the text.
4. Henri Gheon, *The Secret of the Little Flower* (New York, Sheed & Ward, 1934) 9; subsequent references will be cited as “Gheon” parenthetically in the text.
5. J. Linus Ryan, O. Carm., “Edith Piaf and Thérèse of Lisieux” (www.sttherese.com/EdithPiaf.doc – accessed 04/27/2012). See also the dream referred to in *The Story of a Soul: Autobiography of a Saint, Thérèse of Lisieux*, trans.

- Ronald Knox (London: Fontana Collins, 1958) 183; subsequent references will be cited as “Thérèse” parenthetically in the text.
6. Monica Furlong, *Thérèse of Lisieux* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1987) 55; subsequent references will be cited as “Furlong” parenthetically in the text.
 7. Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer. Journals, vol. 2: 1941-1952*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 62; subsequent references will be cited as “ES” parenthetically in the text.
 8. H. Petitot, “A Spiritual Renaissance,” in Michael Day, ed., *Christian Simplicity in St Thérèse* (London: Burns & Oates, 1953) 18, 20.
 9. Patricia O’Connor, *In Search of Thérèse* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1987) 59; subsequent references will be cited as “O’Connor” parenthetically in the text.
 10. Patrick O’Connell, “Eucharist,” in William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O’Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002) 141.
 11. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 614; subsequent references will be cited as “HGL” parenthetically in the text.
 12. See William H. Shannon, “Mercy,” *Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* 292.
 13. See Francois Girard, “Spiritual Childhood – Life in the Spirit: Fr. Marie-Eugene and St Thérèse,” *Mount Carmel* 57.3 (2009) 75.
 14. Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969) 103-104.
 15. Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993) 38.
 16. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1958) 28.