

The Gift of Thérèse of Lisieux



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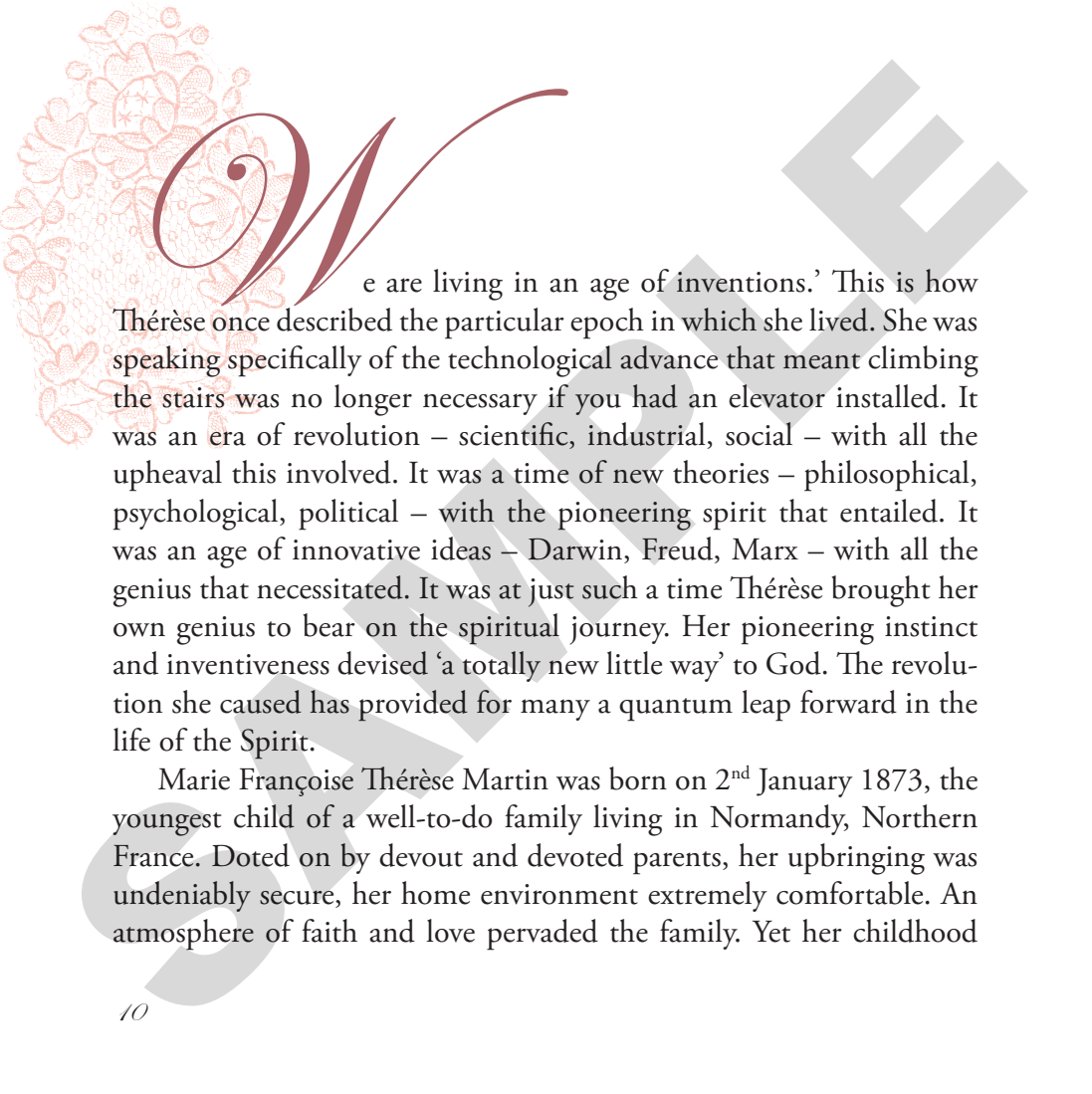
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As little birds learn to sing
by listening to their parents,
so children learn
Divine Love's sublime song
close to the souls
responsible for
fashioning them.

Manuscript A, 53, 14-16







We are living in an age of inventions.' This is how Thérèse once described the particular epoch in which she lived. She was speaking specifically of the technological advance that meant climbing the stairs was no longer necessary if you had an elevator installed. It was an era of revolution – scientific, industrial, social – with all the upheaval this involved. It was a time of new theories – philosophical, psychological, political – with the pioneering spirit that entailed. It was an age of innovative ideas – Darwin, Freud, Marx – with all the genius that necessitated. It was at just such a time Thérèse brought her own genius to bear on the spiritual journey. Her pioneering instinct and inventiveness devised 'a totally new little way' to God. The revolution she caused has provided for many a quantum leap forward in the life of the Spirit.

Marie Françoise Thérèse Martin was born on 2nd January 1873, the youngest child of a well-to-do family living in Normandy, Northern France. Doted on by devout and devoted parents, her upbringing was undeniably secure, her home environment extremely comfortable. An atmosphere of faith and love pervaded the family. Yet her childhood

was marked by repeated loss. For most of her first year Thérèse was separated from her mother who, unable to breastfeed her baby, gave her over to a wet nurse to be brought up in the countryside. When Thérèse was only four years old her mother died of breast cancer. From being a happy, carefree, outgoing child she became shy, sensitive and introverted. It marked the end of the first of what Thérèse herself saw as three distinct periods of her life. This first phase she would describe as ‘the sunny years’. The second, which lasted until she was 14, she called ‘the winter of trial’.

The one-parent family moved from Alençon to Lisieux to be near Thérèse’s uncle who owned a business there. They made their new home at Les Buissonnets, a large house on the edge of town. Thérèse became a day boarder at the local Benedictine school. Though she hated her time there, she loved learning – history and science being among her favourite subjects. Then, when Thérèse was nine years old, her eldest sister Pauline, who had become her adopted mother, entered the Carmelite convent in Lisieux. It was yet another trauma which seemed to reopen the wounds of that earlier bereavement. Not long afterwards Thérèse was afflicted with a ‘strange illness’ that left her bed-ridden and delirious for weeks, with her family and the doctors fearing for her life. Her cure was as miraculous as the sickness was mysterious. Thérèse credited her recovery to the Virgin Mary and spoke of it as ‘my grace’.

Zélie & Louis

Thérèse



Hélène
Joseph Louis
Joseph Jean Baptiste
Melanie Thérèse

Céline





It strengthened her special bond with Mary who was for her, understandably given her story, ‘more mother than queen’.

Another such grace would usher in the third and ‘most beautiful’ period of Thérèse’s life. It happened at Christmas 1886 when she was in her teens. In the humble setting of opening her Christmas presents Thérèse recovered the confidence she had lost at the age of four. Moreover she felt her centre of gravity shift, overtaken as she was by a desire to forget herself and go out to others. She described it as a ‘night of light’ and as ‘the grace of my complete conversion’. In the ensuing months she felt moved to seek out such remarkable graces for others. The most celebrated example of this was a murderer, Henry Pranzini, whose conversion she prayed for and whose last minute sign of repentance before his execution Thérèse put down to the power of that intercession. She called him her ‘first child’. He would turn out to be the first of many.

Thérèse was determined to enter the local Carmel where her days and nights could be spent interceding for others. There she would, ‘people heaven’ as she liked to put it, fulfilling her aspiration to be a ‘fisher of souls’. For her Carmel symbolised this aim and provided the supreme opportunity to answer this call. But she was too young. The superior of the Carmel wouldn’t hear of her entering before the age of 21. Her desire to overturn this decision took her first to the local bishop and finally to the Pope in search of the necessary permission. Despite

disappointment in both cases, her persistence finally paid off. Thérèse entered Carmel in April 1888 aged just 15.

This community of 26 women lived according to an ancient rule that looked back to the prophet Elijah, whose ministry had been located on Mount Carmel in the Holy Land. Hermits had lived there under the inspiration of this prophet since the 12th century. Lisieux Carmel was part of a reform instituted by the 16th century Spanish Carmelites John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila, who had wanted to return their order to a stricter, more primitive observance of the rule. Life in Carmel was austere. The timetable they followed was rigorous and demanding: seven hours of prayer; four hours of manual work; a meagre vegetarian diet; no electricity or heating, except in one room where they enjoyed only two hours of recreation in which they were allowed to speak. Otherwise silence. Thérèse's cell measured about three metres square and was furnished with a simple bed and bench. It was in this garden of God – which is what the name 'Carmel' literally means – that the one now known the world over as 'the Little Flower' grew.

The Church in France at that time was still under the influence of Jansenism, which featured an oppressive emphasis on God's judgement. The fear of offending his justice often led to an excessively scrupulous approach to the spiritual life. In this prevailing climate keeping God's law often felt like a losing battle and the danger of eternal damnation

Daily



Horarium



at

4.45am Rise

5am Meditation

6am Divine Office

7am Mass

8am Breakfast followed by work

9.50am Examination of Conscience

10am Lunch

11am Community Recreation

12noon Silence/free time

1pm Work



at the



time

the



Lisieux



Barne

- 2pm Evening Prayer
2.30pm Spiritual Reading
3pm Work
5pm Meditation
6pm Supper
6.45pm Community Recreation
7.40pm Night Prayer
8pm Silence/free time
9pm Divine Office
10.30pm Sleep



of



Thérèse



was ever present. Consequently receiving Holy Communion was rare, even in religious life, and had to be prepared for with a careful and thorough Confession. It was during one such Confession that a Franciscan priest, Alexis Prou, told Thérèse that her faults were not offensive to God and did not dent or diminish his love for her. This corroborated her own intuition. Thérèse felt this watershed moment launched her 'full sail on the waves of trust and love'. These were the chief characteristics she espoused in her own spirituality. They would become the distinguishing features she sought to inspire in her novices with whose formation she was now entrusted. Her insights into the mystical journey developed into what she began to call her 'Little Way'. An approach to God accessible and available to everyone, it is refreshingly free of the strident, negative tones of Jansenism. There is no trace in Thérèse of the white-knuckled struggle for perfection it had once encouraged, with its almost frantic weeding out of one's faults and weaknesses. In her teaching she finally takes the lid off this pressure-cooker kind of approach to the Christian life. Her spiritual instincts were crystallised on Trinity Sunday 1895 when she made an offering of herself – not to God's Justice as Jansenism had previously promoted – but instead to Merciful Love, the aperture through which Thérèse invites us to see all the other attributes of God.