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Ste. Therese

Paul Marion

University of Massachusetts at Lowell (alumnus and former staff), PAUL_MARION@UML.EDU

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Ste. Thérèse

by Paul Marion

My family belonged to a French Catholic parish in Dracut, Massachusetts: *Ste. Thérèse*. Known as the Little Flower of Jesus, *Thérèse* of Lisieux in France is pictured on holy cards as a beautiful young Carmelite nun with a dark veil and high white collar around her delicate throat. She is usually portrayed holding a crucifix and a bouquet of roses. Her life model was the child Jesus of Nazareth. She is remembered as simple, humble, patient, kind, and pure—a perfect even if impossible example of a loving and genial youth in the eyes of French Catholic parents. She wrote holy poetry. Therese was twenty-four when she died of tuberculosis in 1897.

In her autobiography, completed just before she died, she writes: “I have never given to the good God anything but love. He will return that love. After my death I will let fall a ceaseless shower of roses upon earth.” She is considered extraordinary among Catholic saints because of the vast following she won after being canonized in 1925. She was young, she was an ideal, she delivered miracles, and she was French, which made her a rock star among the Franco-American faithful.

Soon after *Ste. Thérèse* parish was founded due to an overflow of French families from *St. Louis de France* parish in the Centralville neighborhood of Lowell, the next-door city, there were grand prayer sessions with Catholics coming in buses for the healing services at a grotto built to honor the saint before the church was constructed. When I started school in 1960, the side altars in the church were hung with crutches and braces of those believed to have been cured through her intercession. In the artificial grotto between the church and the parish school, a plaster cast of the saint lay in a glass-covered case set among flowering bushes and a stone shrine.

Soeur Thérèse de L’Enfant Jesus taught me in the first grade. How old was she? Maybe 22? The Sisters of the Assumption held us to a godly standard. In addition to the basic subjects, English-

Math-History-Geography-Science, we studied French grammar and practiced speaking French. At least once, we were assigned a nun who spoke only French. That made Geography a higher hill to climb. Fortunately, the maps and textbook were in English. On Thursdays, for a few years, half the classes were taught in French. In the play yard, a student could earn a *jeton*, meaning you got a little credit ticket redeemable for something of value if you said a sentence in French to the nun on patrol during recess. The something of value might be a holy card of a glow-in-the-dark statue of St. Joseph carrying a hammer. There would be a small flock of model students hovering around the nun outside during the thirty-minute lunch break. With all that training, plus four years of French classes in high school and two semesters of grammar refreshing in college (I did not do well because I had been doing mostly reading and conversation in high school classes)—with all that in the language bank I still lost my fluency in French for lack of use.

If I was dropped down into Montreal or Paris for three months, I think the skill would work its way forward from a network of deep brain caves. I can read well enough to get a sense of what's going on. Writing is a struggle, although I had fun in the 2000s writing poems back and forth with a Canadian writer with whom I was engaged in a poetry challenge tied to the hockey playoffs with the Bruins battling Montreal's *Canadiens*. If Montreal won, I had to write a poem in French, and François Pelletier was required to compose in English if the Bruins prevailed. Crazy as it sounds, we wound up on nationwide public radio in Canada being interviewed about our poetry "face off." We did this for two playoff series and collected the poems in a chapbook published by bookstore-owner Richard Gingras in Montreal (Librairie Le Chercheur de trésors)—popular enough to warrant a second printing. Both of us deviated from the original rules and wrote in French and English with all the associated fractures and foolishness.

By the end of my eighth grade in the school, the crumbling grotto had been removed, opening up the barrier between the girls' yard and boys' yard, which was major progress in our eyes.

Keeping the sexes apart at playtime had been consistent with the teaching of moral purity it would seem, even before the adolescent download of hormones that set us on our way to teen-age. Of course, all the blockades and warning signals still had not prevented a Bernadette from taking a rawhide bracelet from a Eugene on the school bus going home.

We were young Catholics when the altar in church had been turned around, allowing the priest to look at the congregation during the Mass, and, second, the language of the service changed to English from Latin which had been the liturgical language all our lives. In most cases the traditional altar remained in place while a simple long table draped in the appropriate cloth had been installed for a forward-facing holy celebration. These dramatic outward changes had emerged from the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), a worldwide event. Convened by Pope John XXIII, the proceedings registered like a Constitutional Convention in the secular nation. The goals and objectives were high-minded and complex, much of which was lost on us, but we took the visible result as modernization. And now only an invisible line separated the boys' and girls' yards. The old-world grip loosened on past rules and procedures. When the bishop withdrew the longstanding ban on eating meat on Fridays, we knew the modern world had arrived. That weekly penance, abstaining from something as simple as a pork chop, had been a way to remind Catholics that strength of spiritual character matters. We believed Jesus had suffered and died on earth to ensure we could have everlasting life in Catholic heaven. "Suffer it up," one of my aunts would say.

The big losers were the fresh-fish markets and fish-fry places like Nichols' on Lakeview Avenue in Lowell where my mother had worked part-time for a short while. On Fridays, the line of customers stretched out to the sidewalk. Happy, hungry, obedient Catholics emerged with their oil-stained brown paper bags of fried haddock and hand-cut French fries. Overnight, hamburgers were allowed on Fridays. Ham sandwiches instead of tuna fish salad. No more tomato-rice soup with saltines in the school cafeteria on Fridays.

The reforms, the changes, made it easier for me to choose public high school rather than continued Catholic education like my brother David had done at St. Joseph's in Lowell. He walked a mile to a bus stop on Lakeview Avenue and then took a bus (two buses) into Lowell his first year, and later car-pooled with Skippy Paquette who lived up the hill off Janice Ave. Our older brother Richard had broken the pattern and gone to Dracut High after going to school for eight years with the nuns. David had made his own decision. My parents had no problem with me choosing public school.

While I may not have been able to articulate in eighth grade the lasting effects of Catholic instruction and Jesus' example, I can say now that the models of simple kindness towards others and long practice of interior reflection have stayed with me all this time. (For reflection, we sat quietly at our desks and examined our souls before walking the short distance to the church where we would confess sins and be absolved of wrongdoing by the priest.) Parochial school spoke to the metaphysical in life. We contended with sin, eternity, mysteries, and miraculous healing. That's big for ten-year-olds.

Ralph Waldo Emerson writes that the young in New England of the early 1800s "were born with knives in their brain, a tendency to introversion, self-dissection, anatomizing of motives." Reform movements would follow as engaged individuals contested established structures and ways of being and acting. They were alert for the transcendent. In our own way, using the Catholic map, my classmates were shown a direct route to the supreme, the ultimate, the invisible unknown source of the universe. The nuns encouraged us to speak to God, to pray, even if much of our expression was mimicry. The repeated practice developed in us a spiritual muscle-memory with the potential to flex in an authentic moment and draw a clarifying insight from the mind.

Many years ago, while driving north on Pawtucket Boulevard along the Merrimack River, I had a moment that I can't fully explain. All of a sudden, passing the Heritage Ice Cream Stand, my

brain gave me an image of a seemingly endless sequence of open doors, one swinging open onto another in a receding line, that is, going away from me in the direction toward which I drove. Although I was looking at the road ahead, my mind's eye was seeing something else above tree height. I could have been looking at a movie scene. If this was a satori moment out of Buddhist culture, it was almost embarrassingly ordinary. Doors opening? More important than what I was seeing, however, was the feeling of "getting it."

Words are not adequate in describing the sensation of understanding. "Okay, I see what this all means" was unstated in my brain. I felt an overall sense of coherence as if a secret explanation had been revealed to me. I'm not sure I can interpret the message, if that's what it was, but I've come to think of it as "Everything is connected" and "Way leads on to way" (as Robert Frost writes in a poem). There was something ecological and holistic about the vision, if it can be given such a high-status label.

Midway through high school I told my parents that I would not go to Sunday church services anymore. They objected, and so I walked to the early Mass by myself for about three months, complaining all the way, after which the struggle subsided. I didn't want the ritual anymore. The authorities may have made a mistake with me by forcing me to go along with the system for so many years. I didn't have a choice, really. For a reason or reasons unknown to me my father had dropped out (or been kicked out) of the junior seminary in New Hampshire at about the same age that I quit the church ceremonies and rejected the dogma. He remained a populist Catholic who saw the wisdom in Christ's teachings as presented in the New Testament of the Bible. At the same time, he was anti-clerical and skeptical of the claimed sacramental powers of priests. "Those guys have no magic," he said. "They like having a big new car and a housekeeper in the rectory. The church should sell all its gold and use the money to help poor people."

In the late Seventies, I worked on a poem about a different Therese, also a Carmelite sister, Spanish mystic St. Teresa of Ávila (1515-1582) whom I had become fascinated with after reading about her life. I made eight pages of handwritten notes as I researched and used these to write a poem that I sent to the *Paris Review*, one of the many literary journals I submitted work to in those years. Sister Teresa grew up in a Christian family with some Jewish lineage, people with resources but not wealthy, in mountainous Spain, Castile.

As a child she was head-strong and once ran away with her brother, hoping to be martyred for her faith. When she joined a convent at sixteen, the other sisters thought her to be happy. Ailments plagued her from teenage years to age forty-five. Teresa associated her bodily trials with Christ's sufferings. Teresa's ecstatic seizures set her apart as a figure in rapture. She believed her extreme physical episodes were spiritually sparked. My poem ends: "a mad Fire gets the bones as if marrow were to luminesce / with the light of a thousand suns. / The body brims in cool peace, aching to stay lit, aching to release, alive, / hot blood in a jar of ice." Productive beyond compare, she established more than thirty convents and monasteries while teaching and writing a sprawling autobiography—maybe the first Western woman to write this way.

My Teresa poem came back from *Paris Review* with a form rejection slip on which poetry editor Jonathan Galassi had written: "I found 'St. Teresa' impressive and would like to see more work from you." He made a few suggestions on the poem typescript and added, "Is this finished?" I made the changes and sent back the poem with a few others—but he didn't take anything. It was a big step for me, though, to get the attention of an elite editor. I was twenty-six years old.

St. Therese of France. One early winter morning, I went downstairs to the lower level of the townhouse on a former ski hill in Amesbury, Mass., where I live with my wife Rosemary, to get a better look at two deer grazing in the rain on the slope shorn of its brushy summer plenitude. Mild air had melted the snow cover to give the animals a clean shot at the still-green scrubby grass and

nubs of plants. The slope was a lighter gold tint of the deer themselves in between the last of the weeds.

While down there I pulled from one of the glass-doored barrister bookcases a hardcover of Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* minus dust jacket, a first-edition copy I had picked up for \$20 years ago in a Portsmouth, New Hampshire, antiquarian bookshop. I opened it and began reading about Ray Smith in the California boxcar with the "St. Teresa bum" who'd torn the shower-of-roses prayer from a newspaper to carry in his pocket. I don't know why Kerouac anglicized Therese's name in this story. Like a lot of the Lowell French Canadians, he had a soft spot for Thérèse of Lisieux. I can't prove it, but he may have made "Martin" the family name in his sprawling first novel *The Town and the City* as a quiet tribute to *Thérèse Martin* of Lisieux who encouraged humility and simple love of one another. Still thinking of her, Ray heats a solitary monk's supper of beans and cheese-macaroni in the small wood fire on the beach on the outskirts of Santa Barbara.

It's a damn fine story that makes me nostalgic because of all the Kerouac water under my bridge at sixty-five years old, almost twenty years longer than he got on Earth. In the quiet of the morning on the high hill in Amesbury, looking at the deer in back of our townhouse, I felt the loss of things gone by. All the current cultural critique of Jack as misogynistic and racially presumptuous or worse fell away and what remained was the voice of a man saying what it was like to be alive in his moment of the twentieth century. A man from my first neighborhood and parish where I was baptized, from my ethnic people, a man who could have been swapped out for one of my uncles, especially Francis Roy, Pinky, who lived a bounce-around Kerouac life, going from the Second World War in Europe as a kid, practically, to learning from my grandfather Marion how to cut meat in a butcher shop, which gave him a marketable trade his whole life, and then taking his young family on the road. He tried on for size the Southwest and Southeast.

In Orlando, Florida, he cut meat in a corner market frequented by none other than Kerouac. Pinky would fix homestyle Franco-American specialties like *corton* (a poor man's *pâté*, ground pork with spices), jellied head cheese, and blood sausage for Jack, the two guys from *St. Louis de France* parish in Lowell howling over the coincidence of finding each other. In the Sunshine state, Kerouac was scribbling his "Orlando Blues" and drinking highballs at happy hour with his mother, Gabe.

Pinky liked his beverages, played the horses, and spent later years in New Hampshire with a longtime woman friend who looked after him and made sure he got to the Veterans hospital for medical services. He died there, leaving his son Robert, a successful attorney in Los Angeles, and daughter Priscilla, whom I know less about. I haven't been good about keeping up with my California cousins.

Pinky had thick dark hair like Jack's and could tell a story worthy of a stand-up comic or raconteur from Quebec. He'd have everyone choking from laughs with his tales and crazy voices. He wore sunglasses and flashed a wide, white-toothed smile. The style was Rat Pack and Las Vegas of 1960. My mother, his oldest sister, used to say he fell in with older sketchy guys as a boy soldier and never recovered from their wayward ways. I don't know about that. He was not going to be contained in the limited mill city of Lowell, Massachusetts. He wanted a baby-blue Cadillac convertible, laughs, wife and kids, enough money, lively friends, and the high life where the orange groves shine with fruit. In the end, he went back home where the maple trees make sap for syrup.