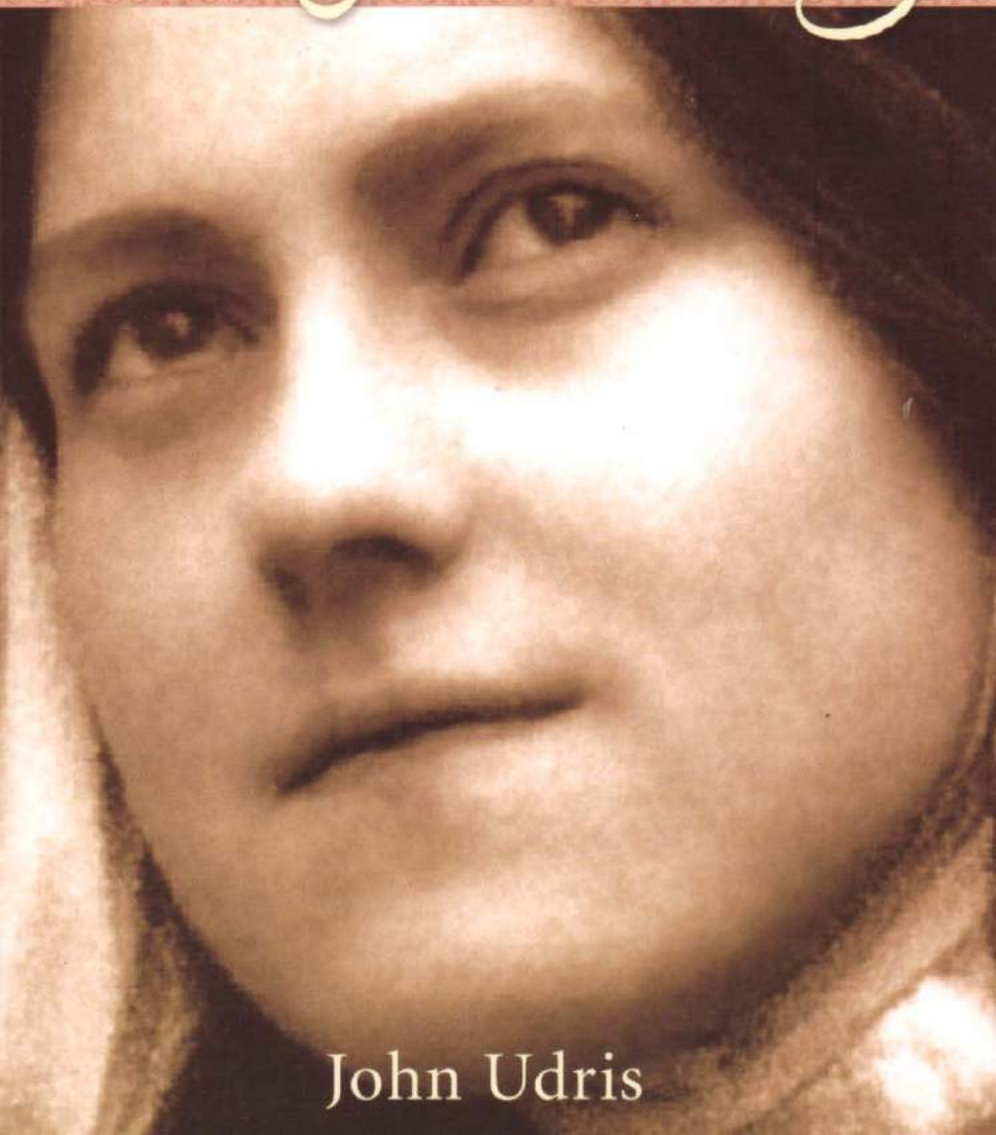


THE FEARLESS TRUST OF
ST. THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX

Holy Daring



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Jesus and Thérèse: Two Icons of Confidence

A SIGNIFICANTLY new factor in the presentation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is its use of Christian art to enrich the communication of the mystery of our faith. Between its pages we find color plates of frescoes, sculptures, icons, and, in some editions, other works of art that directly relate to the material under discussion. It is striking to notice, first of all, that central to each picture is the figure of Jesus, emphasizing the Christocentric nature of all catechesis. But it is also important to observe how each illustration corresponds to its immediate context, to some extent focusing, and even synthesizing, the subject matter at hand.¹

The particular work of art introducing "Christian Prayer," the fourth and final section of the *Catechism*, is an eleventh-century painting that depicts Christ standing confidently before the Father, eyes and hands raised in prayer, while his disciples look on. The picture provides the reader of this section of the *Catechism* with the proper focus for all that is to follow. This icon is an open window inviting us to view our subject. And that subject is prin-

1. Unfortunately, in one English edition these color plates are slightly out of phase.

cipally a Person. Any consideration of the “what,” and the “how,” of genuinely Christian prayer cannot begin without an answer to the preeminent question, “Who?” To draw accurately the unique shape of truly Christian praise, adoration, and intercession, we need to trace the lines of our Lord’s own relationship with his Father. The prayerful Jesus is our paradigm; he himself is the “master and model of our prayer.”² Situated purposefully at the threshold of this section of the *Catechism*, the icon bids us to meditate upon Christ’s own prayer, contemplating the distinctive features of his own communication with the Father. We are to gaze in wonder at the unique way in which he engages in intimate conversation, letting ourselves be drawn into the mystery of his communion with the Most High. We take our bearings from this definitive point of reference. There is something here that is non-negotiable, that we can never escape from: “A disciple is not above the teacher...; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher” (Mt 10:24–25). The *Catechism* uses the expression “the great practitioners of prayer”³—the icon makes it crystal-clear who is chief among them. Jesus alone is the lodestar of this divine dialogue. He is the measure of the methods we employ when we come to pray, and the guarantee of their authenticity. Indeed, “there is no other way of Christian prayer than Christ,”⁴ for he himself is its heart-beat, its pulse, its lifeblood. Like the disciples in the painting, we are to look on in order to learn from him that “filial prayer”⁵ to which, by grace, we have all become heirs.

Christ’s very stance in the painting—his upright posture and even the simple gestures of his raised eyes and his outstretched and open arms—seems to capture and convey an essential characteristic of this “filial prayer” that is the specific subject of our exploration

2. CCC, 2775.

3. Ibid., 2793.

4. Ibid., 2664.

5. Ibid., 2599, 2605, 2673.

and that is explicitly named in the *Catechism* as *parrhesia*. In the introductory remarks to the section on the Our Father, this “beautiful, characteristically Christian expression,” is translated as:

straightforward simplicity, filial trust, joyous assurance, humble boldness, the certainty of being loved.⁶

The fivefold exposition has been carefully crafted. It captures the manifold and interlocking layers of meaning with which *parrhesia* is laden. So successfully does this fivefold motif embrace our subject, I have incorporated it into the framework of the following chapters. While providing a useful backdrop, these descriptions will also form the perfect outline for a compelling portrait of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, to which this look at her life and teaching will, with hope, lend color and texture.

From the beginning, however, we need to recognize these descriptions primarily as characteristics of Jesus. In broad brushstrokes they paint the dynamics of his unique way of relating to the Father as well as to those around him. They pinpoint with striking accuracy the key aspects of Christ’s own approach and orientation in prayer. The *Catechism* icon recalls that scene from the Gospel in which the disciples have stumbled upon Jesus praying (cf. Lk 11:1–4). They find themselves privileged to witness, with breathtaking immediacy, the astonishing intimacy of his communion with the Father. They are spellbound. What they observe makes them long to share the same experience. They have wandered in on what makes their Master tick, and they want to be let in on his secret. Eagerly they ask him to teach them to pray. According to the evangelist, it is in reply to this request that Jesus entrusts them with the words of the Our Father. The context here is significant. The Lord’s Prayer is pioneered in the wake of this glorious discovery of the Son surrendered in the presence of his Father. The words of the Our Father are a sacrament of his perfect surrender.

6. Ibid., 2778.

What we see, graphically expressed in the icon, is what those disciples witnessed: boundless confidence in bodily form. The Jesus depicted in this painting is making eye contact with his heavenly Father. Clearly there is in progress a direct and unhampered communication composed of complete openness and utmost abandonment. He has nothing to hide. His prayer appears impressively free and unrestrained: he is standing rather than kneeling, his head is lifted up rather than bowed down, his eyes are open wide rather than shut tight, and he is stepping forward rather than keeping his distance. His whole body language speaks fluently of a candor and confidence that seem to burst from this portraiture. Nothing is withheld. His trust is transparent. Not only is this trust the impulse behind his words; it is their very breath. In giving his disciples the Our Father, Jesus is not merely handing them a formula of words but his own way of being before God, the hallmark of which is "a humble and trusting heart."⁷ The painting effectively conveys this, helping us begin to formulate in our mind's eye an image of *parrhesia*. Not only does the icon give us some important clues as to the yet unfamiliar term; it assists us in appreciating its stance-like nature. Such trust is a quality of presence—a characteristic disposition. It is something that must permeate our prayer. Perhaps that is why the concept itself seems to pervade this part of the *Catechism*.

Pope John Paul II referred to the *Catechism* as a "symphony."⁸ Taking up the musical metaphor, it might be argued that *parrhesia* comes through powerfully as a recurring melody, the principal theme of the final movement of this great symphony of faith. In the *Catechism*, there are over thirty explicit references to boldness and trust in various combinations, whether "trust without reservation," "trust and confidence," "bold confidence," or "joyful trust."⁹ In

7. Ibid., 2785.

8. John Paul II, *Fidei Depositum*, in CCC, page 4.

order to simplify the fivefold exposition, we can already identify two particular strands that complement each other to formulate this expression with its unique thrust. Fundamentally, *parrhesia* refers to the kind of trust or confidence that is unimpeded because it is pushed to its furthest limits by boldness or fearlessness. It seems, then, that the constellation of meanings surrounding this rich concept best converge in the descriptions *bold confidence* or *fearless trust*. They are the preferred synonyms we have chosen to translate *parrhesia*. Primarily, fearless trust is an aspect of Jesus' own identity and a principal feature of his prayerful approach to the Father. Bold confidence is the characteristically Christian stance in prayer exemplified by Jesus Christ. The section of the *Catechism* entitled "Christian Prayer" clearly teaches what is evident at the outset from its icon: the Lord Jesus himself is preeminently the one who "teaches us filial boldness."¹⁰

However, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* also recognizes the many other witnesses, who

share in the living tradition of prayer by the example of their lives, the transmission of their writings, and their prayer today.¹¹

Thus the saints, too, are guides for our growth in prayerfulness. If we reflect on the *Catechism's* fivefold exposition of *parrhesia*, there can be no doubt that, aside from the Lord Jesus, it seems most clearly to paint a convincing portrait of the little Carmelite from Lisieux. Strong grounds exist for such a claim. Hers is the first voice to speak in the final part of the *Catechism* in response to the question "What is prayer?" This is not to be underestimated. It seems Thérèse holds a privileged position in answering that important

9. "Filial trust"—CCC, 2734, 2738, 2756, 2778, 2830, 2861. "Trust"—2728, 2733, 2741, 2753, 2797, 2828, 2836, 2837. "Assurance"—2778, 2797. "Filial boldness"—2610, 2621, 2777. "Boldness"—2577, 2778. Other combinations—2571, 2579, 2620, 2633, 2739, 2741, 2777, 2819, 2839.

10. Ibid., 2610.

11. Ibid., 2683.

question for contemporary Christians. Her simple words supply the first authoritative description of prayer that forms the prefix to this whole section:

For me, prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward heaven, it is a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy.¹²

Here the *Catechism* appears to be acknowledging the lasting value of Thérèse's teaching in this area, perhaps even giving her a certain pride of place among "the great practitioners of prayer." But more particularly, the language of *parrhesia* is so evidently the theological vocabulary of Saint Thérèse. "Simplicity," "trust," "boldness" are all words that figure prominently in her dictionary of discipleship. They express, concisely and comprehensively, her understanding of the Gospel.¹³ They are the key components of her Little Way. As we will begin to see, the writings of Saint Thérèse are laden with such language, so much so that it can be perceived as paramount in her own development and pivotal to her spiritual doctrine. Progressively, we shall discover how she illuminates each and all of the different dimensions of Christian confidence. Thérèse teaches us the importance of *straightforward simplicity*, advocating an unambivalent and direct approach in our relationship with God. She demonstrates the *filial trust* that should animate our access to the Father in prayer, and that should mark especially our prayers of petition and intercession. She manifests the *joyous assurance* the Gospel would have us bring to the awareness of our weakness, as well as the *humble boldness* we are urged to exercise when weighed down by our sin. Moreover, through our contact with the heart and

12. Ibid., 2558.

13. In the original French of the *Catechism* the key vocabulary here is "*simplicité sans détour, confiance filiale, joyeuse assurance, humble audace, certitude d'être aimé.*" *Catéchisme de L'Église Catholique*, Service des éditions, Conférence des évêques catholiques du Canada, Ottawa, 1992, 2778. It echoes exactly the French of Saint Thérèse.

mind of Saint Thérèse, we cannot but become increasingly conscious of an abiding *certainty of being loved*. This certainty enabled her to call God "Papa!"—and she invites us to make such evangelical certainty our own.

In the autobiographical material of this trustworthy witness to fearless confidence, there is an image that seems to match, with particular poignancy, the *Catechism's* painting of Christ at prayer. Thérèse describes herself as a little bird gazing up confidently at her divine Sun. She likens herself to a fledgling whose feathers have hardly formed, looking toward the sun that symbolizes God, the goal of her desires. Compared to the great saints, represented by the eagles, she feels utterly insignificant and completely unable to reach the heights they inhabit. Yet, far from being disheartened or discouraged by her impotence, she seizes it as the springboard from which to launch her importunate appeal to the divine eagle—Jesus—to lend her his own wings. With them she is supremely confident that she will succeed in her holy ambition. Though the capacity to fly is beyond this little bird, its aspirations are those of an eagle. Thérèse is not tortured by these desires, because she believes they have been planted in her by the Lord in the first place and "God never gives desires that He cannot realize."¹⁴ For Thérèse, not only is God the author of these aspirations, she is sure that they actually comprise the Lord's own desires in her.

In vivid colors this image conveys a powerful message: frailty and fearlessness are not incompatible. In one who is living by grace they can—indeed must—be two sides of the same coin. Furthermore, for all its innocence, Thérèse's story of the bird is not insipid or sentimental. Its simplicity belies its gravity. Such imagery is born of suffering. As we enter into the mystery of this parable, we will find ourselves being taken to where it was composed, to that terrifying, harrowing place where the sun is eclipsed by clouds and

14. *LT* 197, in *GC* II, 1000.

darkness covers the land. We will be led to the dereliction and destitution of the cross, where trust is tried and tested. The story will bring us to the heart of the paschal mystery, for this little bird embodies the fearless trust Christ brought to his crucifixion and that Thérèse took to her own passion.

Focusing and synthesizing the subject we have undertaken to explore, this image provides us not only with a useful point of reference, but also with an actual way of bringing to our own prayer all that we will begin to discover. It is another icon we can profitably take with us from the outset to guide our steps. We will frequently revisit this image as our familiarity with the spirituality of Saint Thérèse gradually unfolds in its full meaning and significance. But, like the best of icons, it awaits our participation. There is room for us in it. We are to identify with its aspirations and recognize our own reflection in its mystery. It invites us to take our place "under the rays of the Sun."¹⁵ It ushers us into a kingdom where the reason and reward of filial trust is love alone. It dares us to live in a world where "all is grace."¹⁶

Coupled together, the icon of Jesus in the *Catechism* and the image of Thérèse as a little bird are complementary. They comprise a compelling diptych upon which to contemplate Jesus and Thérèse—two remarkable icons of Christian confidence. The haunting image of the bird under the rays of the sun captures all the salient features of this fearless trust of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux. It will help us to see that if Jesus is the paradigm of *parrhesia*, then she is a magnificent parable of it. Furthermore, she can be for us its foremost protagonist in our following of the Lord.

15. Thérèse's own expression and her favorite image for living by grace. Cf. *LT* CLXXV in *CL*, 284.

16. Cf. *CJ* 5.6.4. in *OC*, 1009.