



# FRIENDS IN HEAVEN

GETTING TO KNOW THE SAINTS

FALL 2024 ISSUE OF THE WRITER SHOWCASE

WORD on FIRE  
INSTITUTE



# FRIENDS IN HEAVEN

GETTING TO KNOW THE SAINTS



# Contents

Introduction	iii
St. Guiseppe Moscati	1
St. Hildegard of Bingen	4
Blessed Karl of Austria	7
St. Teresa of Avila	10
St. Teresa of Avila	13
St. Ignatius of Loyola	16
St. Lutgarde	19
St. Dymphna	22
St. John the Baptizer	25
St. Martha	28
St. Margarel Clitherow	31
St. Teresa of Calcutta	34
St. Joseph	36
St. Thérèse of Lisieux	39
St. John the Apostle	42



# Introduction

DR. HOLLY ORDWAY

*Cardinal Francis George Professor of Faith and Culture, Word on Fire Institute  
Editor, Institute Writer Showcase*

Welcome to the Fall 2024 issue of the Institute Writer Showcase! The theme of this issue is “Friends in Heaven: Getting to Know the Saints.” As Catholics, we affirm belief in the “communion of saints” every Sunday at Mass, and veneration of the saints is an important part of Catholic life. The witness of the saints during their earthly lives and their prayers for us from heaven are important elements in our evangelization. However, as evangelists, we can’t give what we don’t have! Having a strong understanding and appreciation of the Communion of Saints helps us to be evangelizing disciples. I invited the members of the Institute’s Writing Community to write short pieces reflecting on particular saints or blessed, with the aim of showing how this saint is a good friend, guide, or role model in the spiritual life. In their Writing Groups, members shared drafts of their pieces, offered feedback, and encouraged each other in the writing process. More than sixty Writing Community members submitted pieces for consideration for this issue. The fifteen excellent pieces that I have selected for publication in this issue present a wide range of saintly figures, from the Old Testament to the modern day, some well known and others unfamiliar, all presented in compelling ways by our Institute writers. Enjoy!



# St. Giuseppe Moscati

## Physician, Intercessor, Mentor

ANDRE F. LIJOI, MD

*St. Catherine of Bologna Writing Group*

“You should look carefully at this. You must get to know him,” one of my residents said, and handed me an article about the canonization of St. Giuseppe Moscati, MD. It was 2013—I had been in practice for thirty years and I had yet to meet a colleague with whom I could share my experience of faith as I practiced medicine.

Early in my residency I yearned to live my faith in a genuine way as a physician. I was early in what Richard Rohr, OFM, in *The Wild Man’s Journey*, called “the journey of descent,” that embrace of God’s desire to have a much bigger presence in my life. I was fortunate that the Holy Spirit kept me grounded in my Catholic faith without detour during college and medical training, despite some bumps.

I had yet to learn how to balance my professional responsibility while being true to my faith, a faith that offered rich blessings to those under my care. I had not yet realized the personal blessing that comes with seeing the face of the suffering Jesus before me, and the equal blessing of bringing the face of the merciful Jesus

to those I served. What I did know was that I had an ethical responsibility to do what was in the patient's best interest, avoid harming them, not judge them, not impose my biases, and never proselytize. I did not know how to navigate the spiritual and moral responsibility to put God first in my work. Medicine, like many things in life, presents conflicts for those who feel compelled to make faith a real part of their life by living it. Faith is not merely an intellectual exercise. I needed a mentor.

Giuseppe Moscati, a physician saint, practiced medicine in the first quarter of the twentieth century and was canonized in 1987. He was a teacher at the Hospital for the Incurables in Naples, Italy, and was known for his diagnostic prowess, which drew many students to him. He was also known for his compassion toward his patients, and he directed their care as whole persons. Michael Miller, in the *Lay Witness* article of March/April 2004 given to me by my resident, quoted Giuseppe: "Not science, but charity has transformed the world. . . . All can leave the world a better place by their charity." Miller also quoted a letter to a young doctor: "Remember that you must treat not only bodies, but also souls, with counsel that appeals to their minds and hearts."

I was immediately drawn to Giuseppe. We both valued careful diagnosis and embraced the shared humanity before us with charity. I prayed to him for intercession, to help me be the compassionate physician and teacher that he was. I "invited" him on rounds and to my office each day in my prayer, hoping to be ever mindful of the suffering humanity I encountered, and to teach my students to do the same.

Gradually, my relationship with Giuseppe brought joy that I had not experienced before. His intercession prompted me to remove any restraint from willing the good of my patients. This was *caritas*. It was safe to "love" my patients without crossing boundaries. After all, I was caring for Christ himself. When *caritas* forms the physician-patient relationship, hope becomes palpable

to patients. Faithfulness to my oath made love the foundation of my relationship with them.

When the pandemic arrived, retirement was nearing and the inclination to retire was potent. I considered Giuseppe's discernment as he cared for his patients while facing cholera outbreaks and volcanic eruptions, with the walls of his hospital falling around him. Giuseppe, like so many saints before him, including the prophets, opted to continue his mission, despite uncertainty. Faithfulness to the mission, rather than success, was most important. My path was clear: continue the mission God set before me, knowing that I might not survive the first pandemic year.

When I first read Giuseppe's words, I recalled a letter I had published in *America Magazine* before I knew this saint. In this letter, I had articulated a belief that the Catholic virtues of charity and compassion are the foundation of my vocational work as a physician. Giuseppe's intercession and my reflection on his life have led me to understand that when we become vehicles for God's compassion as doctors, we find ourselves enveloped in that same compassion and are deeply blessed by the call to serve.

St. Giuseppe and I are kindred spirits. His intercession provided courage to grow as a physician who witnessed his faith not by rationalizing it but by living it. I found the mentor colleague I desired. His introduction that day in 2013 was providential, and I believe it is no coincidence that his memorial is celebrated on November 16, my birthday.



# St. Hildegard of Bingen

## Friend, Role Model, and Guide

THERESA PIHL

*St. Hildegard of Bingen Writing Group*

St. Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179) lived nearly a millennium ago, but like her Old Testament forebears Judith and Esther, she has been brought to our attention for “such a time as this” (Esther 4:14). In 2012, Pope Benedict XVI declared this German Benedictine a Doctor of the Church, a position she shares with thirty-six other canonized saints, only three of whom are women: St. Teresa of Avila, St. Catherine of Siena, and St. Thérèse of Lisieux. The image of the Word—*on fire*—emblazons her work. She was a polymath: abbess, writer, poet, mystic, composer, herbalist, and prophetess (to name a few of her genius-level abilities and interests). When Pope Eugene III read Hildegard’s deep theological insights based on the mystical visions she had received since childhood, he encouraged her to keep writing. He also authorized her to preach in public—a remarkable stamp of approval during that male-dominated age. In *Scivias* (“Know the Ways”), St. Hildegard writes about people who “glorified the Word by yielding themselves to the Word’s brightness,” who, “living in their souls and bodies, raised the Word up with faithful joy.” I feel that call here at the



Word on Fire Institute, where St. Hildegard continues to serve as a trustworthy friend, role model, and guide.

As a friend, St. Hildegard is my go-to for advice. Her title, Doctor, seems apropos; she is used to being sought out for remedies, medicinal as well as spiritual. She wrote hundreds of letters responding generously to those seeking her counsel. And like a true friend, she did not shy from speaking the truth, even when it ruffled feathers, such as when she admonished the notorious emperor Frederick Barbarossa for his support of three antipopes (a telling example of the scandalous times in which she lived). Hildegard respected authority but fearlessly advocated for those misjudged by it. One poignant example is when she allowed an excommunicated man to be buried in her monastery's cemetery. Local church authorities demanded his removal, but because Hildegard knew the man had repented and received the sacraments prior to his death, she refused to give him up. For this act of mercy, her monastery was placed under an interdict—deprived of the Eucharist—until the slow-moving ecclesial wheels overturned the order. It is important to note that her decisions were rooted in humility. She loved the Church! She advocated for authentic reform and did so within the Church's authority. She also sought advice from other holy men and women, such as her future fellow Doctor of the Church St. Bernard of Clairvaux.

As a role model, St. Hildegard demonstrates how to embrace the gifts of the Spirit, which she refers to as “the seven burning gifts.” She also encourages those under her patronage to develop the talents God has given them to their full potential. My own work-in-progress development in the St. Hildegard of Bingen Writing Group testifies to her example. Hildegard challenges not only me but all of us Christians to embody the virtues so that our lives may be a holistic witness to “the unity of faith” (Eph. 4:13). This unity is meant for all men and women, and St. Hildegard witnesses—prophetically—to the meaning of vocation, the calling

of each of us, male and female, to love God and neighbor in a unique way. “In the sphere of what is ‘human’—of what is humanly personal,” Pope John Paul II states in his encyclical *Mulieris Dignitatem*, “‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ are distinct, yet at the same time they complete and explain each other.” He also clarifies that “‘to prophesy’ means to express by one’s words and one’s life ‘the mighty works of God’ (Acts 2:11).”

St. Hildegard’s life is an anchoring witness to God’s mighty works. As we navigate our fractured cultural milieu, St. Hildegard’s acumen, humility, mercy, and ability to see truth as a whole, in balance and harmony, make her an astute guide. But it is not to herself that she points but to the Church, who instructs, “Do whatever he tells you” (John 2:5). And though the apocalyptic imagery in Hildegard’s mystical visions calls us sinners to repentance and penance, it also summons us to join in the triumphant, joyous strains of creation. With St. Hildegard, may we “raise up the Word with faithful joy.”

*Biographical details about St. Hildegard of Bingen are drawn from the Encyclopedia Britannica, Franciscan Media, and two general audiences given by Pope Benedict XVI on September 1 and September 8, 2010.*



# Blessed Karl of Austria

## Can a Wartime Foe Be a Friend in Heaven?

ERIK CURREN

*St. Robert Southwell Writing Group*

“The decisive task of Christians consists in seeking, recognizing and following God’s will in all things,” said Pope John Paul II in October 2004 when he beatified a most unusual Catholic monarch. “The Christian statesman, Charles of Austria, confronted this challenge every day.”

When I first learned that the Catholic Church had recognized Charles—known to history as Kaiser Karl I of the House of Habsburg, the last ruler of Austria-Hungary—I was surprised. During World War I, Karl took the helm of a nation whose armed forces fought alongside Kaiser Wilhelm’s Germany and against the entente of Britain, France, and the United States. As an American, I wondered: Why should I venerate a wartime enemy of my country?

So, I read up on Karl. And I discovered surprising things.

First, though he led his nation in war, Karl also campaigned for peace. When fighting broke out in 1914, then-archduke Karl answered the call to military command, but he always thought the war was a mistake. “To his eyes, war appeared as ‘something appalling,’” said Pope John Paul II.

Two years later, when the aged emperor Franz Josef died in November 1916, Karl inherited the throne for which he was prepared along with the war that he never wanted. Once in office, Karl immediately tried to stop the fighting. He was the only leader of a combatant nation to embrace the peace plan of Pope Benedict XV, and Karl negotiated with the Western powers until the last few weeks of the conflict. Tragically, his peace overtures were blocked by leaders of both sides determined to fight to total victory.

Meanwhile, Karl did what he could to reduce the war's barbarity. He opposed unrestricted submarine warfare, stopped the mining of harbors, and prohibited his troops from shelling civilian towns or using poison gas in combat.

For these efforts, Karl became known as the Peace Emperor. And for his innovative and compassionate work to reduce suffering on the home front, Karl was also called the People's Emperor.

"His chief concern was to *follow the Christian vocation to holiness also in his political actions*. For this reason, his thoughts turned to social assistance," said John Paul II. Karl used his brief two years in office to establish a social ministry, perhaps the world's first government agency supporting veterans, the unemployed, widows, orphans, and the poor—more than fifteen years before FDR's New Deal in the US. During winter, Karl also sent his own carriages to deliver coal to heat the households of Vienna.

Karl was an active Christian who invited government officials and military officers to pray with him whether in the office or on the battlefield. Devoted to the angels, Karl made St. Michael patron saint of the imperial army. A loving family man, Karl raised eight children with his wife, the empress Zita.

After the war, Karl was exiled to the Portuguese island of Madeira. There, in 1922, weakened by the many sacrifices he had made to serve his people, Karl died of pneumonia at age thirty-four. His last words were prayer: "Thy Holy Will be done. Jesus, Jesus, come! Yes-yes. My Jesus, as You will it—Jesus."

I now see that Karl was not really an enemy of the United States during World War I. Quite the opposite. If American leaders had heeded Karl's calls for peace, our nation and many others could have avoided hundreds of thousands of deaths in the war's final bloody months. An early peace would also have allowed Europe to avoid the harsh terms imposed by the victors in the Treaty of Versailles, with its terrible consequences: economic depression, the rise of dictators, and even the outbreak of World War II.

More and more Americans seem to agree that Karl is worth venerating. The number of shrines to Blessed Karl in the United States has doubled over the last decade or so, with twenty-five sites as of October 2024.

Karl reminds me that the line between good and evil runs not along the borders of nations but through the hearts of all people.

Of course, I will never face the challenges of a monarch and head of state. Yet Karl's life provides me an example of service, courage, self-sacrifice, and devotion to God, whatever challenges life brings. A failure in worldly terms, Karl succeeded where it counted more, in his spiritual life. In a competitive age where human worth is too often measured in wealth, power, and fame, Karl's life encourages me to seek favor less in the eyes of the world than in the eyes of God.

*Biographical details are from The Emperor Karl League of Prayer.*



# St. Teresa of Avila

## Finding a Friend in St. Teresa of Avila

JO BURR

*St. Catherine of Bologna Writing Group*

A friend asked me, “Who is your favorite go-to saint?” I asked her what she meant. She replied, “You know, the saint that you ask to intercede for you, as a friend. The one you chat with as you move through your day.”

This was new to me. I pray and converse with God, but a specific go-to saint, that was new. I felt like I was missing out. How amazing to have a go-to saint in heaven. What was I waiting for?

I was heading off to Pacem in Terris for a silent retreat. I was staying in my own one-room hermitage in the woods with a basket of fruit and bread. My prayer focus would be to search for my go-to saint. Once there, I went to the main house library to seek out some wisdom. With three days alone in the woods and with no electricity, I was excited to see what adventure lay ahead of me.

As I browsed through the stories of the saints, Teresa of Avila made me stop in my tracks. She was adventuresome. I like adventures. She liked extravagant parties before she decided to get serious about her vocation. Me too! And she was funny and honest.

Teresa lived from 1515 to 1582. She worked hard to reform the Discalced (“without shoes”) Carmelites. I love one particular story,

which is attributed to her and gives insight into her relationship with God: One day, as her carriage was being pulled along a bumpy road, she was thrown out into a cold, muddy puddle. Her response to God was: “If this is how you treat your friends, no wonder you have so few!” Her ability to be frustrated and honest with God was something I wanted as well.

Once Teresa gave up hosting elaborate parties in the convent and dedicated her life to restoring it, she was fiercely devoted to her sisters. Her teaching them how to pray and loving them with truth and humility are qualities I try to emulate in my vocation as a wife and mom.

I decided to read *The Interior Castle*. Teresa was instructed to write it for her sisters as a tutorial on contemplative prayer. I brought it back to my hermitage and read through the entire book in twenty-four hours. I took notes and could not get enough. The beautiful thing was that a lot of it went right over my head, and that was OK with me.

In chapter 1 of the First Dwelling Place, the imagery of the castle is introduced: “We consider our soul to be like a castle made entirely out of a diamond or of very clear crystal, in which there are many rooms . . . where the Lord says He finds His delight.”

My face beamed and my heart swelled when I read that quote and sat with the words surrounding me like a warm blanket. Thinking of the Lord finding his delight in my soul changed me. I wanted to do better, because really, I may have done a few things in my life that the Lord did not put in the delightful category. But now, I felt a great responsibility. My dignity as a daughter of God was awakened in a new way. And with that came a great responsibility.

How could I not make a more solid effort to be more attentive to my family, to be more attentive to my work, to be more attentive to everyone I encounter? Because, I continued thinking, everyone I meet also has a soul that the Lord delights in. And if he can find some delight, maybe I can too.

A bit further in the first book, Teresa writes, “And in the center and middle is the main dwelling place where the very secret exchanges between God and soul take place.”

Wow! A place for God to exchange secrets with me. Ever since I was little I have wanted a secret place to go and be with friends. Throughout *The Interior Castle*, Teresa is giving her readers instructions on how to find that secret place in our own souls.

At the end of my retreat, I had made my acquaintance with St. Teresa of Avila. And now we are dear friends. She is my spiritual guide, teaching me to pray and showing me that everything she shares is from God and is intended to lead me to a closer relationship with God. What more could I ask for from a friend?





# St. Teresa of Avila

## St. Teresa of Avila, Who Am I?

JOHN FAIRBANKS

*St. Gregory the Great Writing Group*

It was about four in the afternoon on a hot day when I decided to go swimming. Jumping in the backyard pool, hoping for a bracing jolt, I was disappointed. The water was lukewarm. I went back inside to read.

St. Teresa of Avila's *The Interior Castle* was on the table next to my recliner. Settling in, I was soon asleep.

I woke around dusk, no longer in my chair. I stood in a courtyard before a magnificent castle. Looking around, I saw St. Teresa coming toward me. She wasn't walking, though. She was elevated, gliding above the ground!

"Where am I?" I asked in disbelief.

"You're where he lives," she replied. There was no confusion, no doubt. I knew exactly whom she meant.

"How did I get here?"

"He invited you."

I was in legal trouble. Jail time wasn't on the table anymore, but punishment was ahead. Something in this experience had drawn me back to my childhood faith, which was why I was reading St. Teresa in the first place.

“Will I meet him?”

“That’s up to you, but I’ll show you the way.”

I trailed behind her as she glided toward the castle’s broad and soaring doors, which, as she drew near, opened by themselves, like welcoming arms preparing to embrace an old friend. We entered a giant chamber, befitting such tremendous doors. It was filled with the most beautiful paintings and sculptures and pottery and leather-bound books; the most bold, the most subtle, the most sublime of all that man can make was there.

“Stay close,” she instructed. “It’s easy to lose yourself in here.” Going through a door tucked behind a colossal statue of John Lennon, we descended some stairs, disorienting me in no small way. “Shouldn’t we be climbing?” I thought.

Torches burning in wall sconces lit the room at the bottom. Torture devices were arranged inside, like cars parked in an automotive museum. Georges Lemaître sat at a table in the corner sanding glass lenses.

He smiled knowingly at St. Teresa. Then, turning to me, he said, “Look closely, because one of these objects leads to your next destination.”

I shuddered. Truly I desire to meet him, but this? Must I be tortured? Then I recognized something strange about the rack. The wheel for elongating the table had a chain leading from it to a hatch in the ceiling. Spinning the wheel wouldn’t spread a victim to death. Instead, it would give him an escape route. Confidently, I spun the wheel and a ladder dropped from the hatch.

“I did it!” I exclaimed. “I outsmarted your test.”

Lemaître sighed. “How did you get here?”

“I came from outside and through the big chamber and down the stairs and . . .” My voice trailed away. I couldn’t sufficiently explain how I came to stand where I stood.

“He’s not ready,” Lemaître said to St. Teresa. “He should go back up.”

“No,” she replied. “He’ll learn.”

A torrent of gratefulness rushed over me. I had just claimed greater understanding than that of the father of the Big Bang Theory, and St. Teresa, whose soul darts around the universe like a spark through stubble, not only forgave me but defended me.

She floated up through the hatch. I climbed the ladder slowly, arduously, painstakingly, with my head hung low, only raising my eyes to the next rung after being certain my feet were secure on the one below.

What seemed an eternity later, I arrived at a solarium. The view was spectacular. I could see over the castle wall out into a countryside of oak-studded hills. There was a town not far in the distance with simple houses and children playing outside. An emerald-green river flowed past the houses and a bridge crossing the river led to wheat fields and a cherry orchard. For the first time since being in the courtyard, I felt at rest.

St. Teresa was smiling. "Who are you?" she asked.

"I'm me," I replied, perplexed.

"How are you made?"

Oh, I'm beginning to understand. "I'm made in God's image."

"Yes," she said. "Never forget you carry the most precious gift of all. You're more loved than you can ever imagine. You already possess more riches than you can ever dream of."

Pointing to a door leading out of the solarium, she continued, "Stay here and pray for perfect charity for your neighbor. He wants to give that to you, but don't imagine it won't cost anything. Think what he bore to save you. When you're ready, the door will open, but never forget who he is and who you are."

At that moment, I felt myself moving at great velocity, like a dust particle drawn into a black hole. When I stopped, I was back in my recliner, but I was different. There was fire in my heart.



# St. Ignatius of Loyola

## A Path to True Discipleship

CAROLYN THANEL

*St. Clare of Assisi Writing Group*

I've always revered the saints for their heroic virtue, self-sacrifice, and great accomplishments. However, it was not until recently that I befriended a saint, one who lived on another continent over five hundred years ago: St. Ignatius of Loyola.

One Sunday, after singing the Gloria at Mass, I recalled St. Ignatius' motto and the focus of all his endeavors: *Ad majorem Dei gloriam*, "For the greater glory of God." So I decided to begin my morning routine differently. The next day I intentionally wrote the initials AMDG (For the greater glory of God) at the top of my to-do list. I was determined to order my tasks, no matter how mundane, to the honor and glory of God. To my surprise, I noticed that I accomplished many of the tasks with greater ease, even feeling energized after their completion.

On another occasion, after singing the hymn "These Alone Are Enough," I noticed in the footnotes that the words were based on the Suscipe prayer of St. Ignatius of Loyola. His words, offering his liberty, memory, understanding, and will to the Lord, truly stirred my heart.

It was not long afterward that St. Ignatius began surfacing and resurfacing in my life in mysterious ways, much like the way dolphins appear and reappear in the sea. For example, I was sitting at a table next to a priest at a church event, when the priest shared that he had received his mission, and the clarity to pursue his path to the priesthood, at an Ignatian retreat.

By this time, St. Ignatius had piqued my curiosity enough that I desired to learn more about him. I purchased a book, *Ignatius of Loyola: The Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works*. It revealed some interesting facts about this influential saint that I didn't know about but felt worth sharing.

I was surprised to learn that St. Ignatius was a cultural Catholic and a soldier before his conversion at the age of thirty. Tragically, both of his legs were seriously wounded in battle. The painful surgeries that followed left him bedridden for a long time. While recovering, he was given two books to read. One was on the life of Christ and the other on the saints. It was through reading and contemplating the life of Christ and his saints that St. Ignatius made the decision to become a courageous soldier for the Lord and to live as a true disciple.

As someone who has always loved reading, and most recently began writing for evangelization, I could only imagine the transformative effects that reading and meditating must have had on St. Ignatius. What impressed me most about this saint was that he proved his great love by writing extensively *for others*. Although he traveled preaching the Gospel, much of what he accomplished was through his writings of over seven thousand five hundred letters, the *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, an autobiography, and his practical *Spiritual Exercises*. St. Ignatius truly followed Jesus' great command: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19).

I believe that St. Ignatius is more than just a guide and a role model. He is a modern-day road map for those who seek a

closer walk with the Lord and desire to live as true disciples. It is through his teachings that I am learning to make choices that are intentional and focused on giving God the glory. Encouraged by St. Ignatius, I now pray the Examen (a reflection exercise) at the end of each day for the purpose of finding God in all things and resolving to do better. Since I accepted St. Ignatius' invitation to more intimacy with Christ and desire to delve deeper into Ignatian spirituality, I am planning an Ignatian retreat in the springtime. In the meantime, I look forward to many more prayerful conversations with my new heavenly friend.



# St. Lutgarde

## St. Lutgarde and the Heart of Jesus

GIOVANNA GARBELLI

*St. Francis de Sales and St. Hildegard of Bingen Writing Groups*

St. Lutgarde has been a companion along my journey of intimacy with the Lord. She can teach everyone that devotion to the Sacred Heart requires an unrestrained gift of oneself to the will of Christ. Lutgarde is also an icon of the spiritual marriage as union of the wills—nothing sentimental, but a complete surrender to the will of the Beloved, preferred above everything else. Indeed, I owe my understanding of St. Bernard of Clairvaux’s mystical theology to the discovery of *The Life of St. Lutgarde* by Thomas of Cantimpré, translated and commented on by Thomas Merton.

Four hundred years before St. Margaret Mary prayed and suffered for the institution of the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart, St. Lutgarde’s mystical life began with a vision of the pierced heart of the Lord. It ended with her mystical espousal with the Incarnate Word by an exchange of hearts with him.

St. Lutgarde was a contemporary of St. Francis of Assisi, and she too had received a wound in her heart which can be classed as stigmata. While well known to her contemporaries, she has been forgotten probably because sources about her are in Latin, but thanks to Thomas Merton’s translation, she can again inspire

many to participate in the Lord's work of redemption by offering him their daily sacrifices.

A well-to-do businessman, Lutgarde's father wanted a good marriage for her because she was beautiful in soul and face. Her mother, however, managed to put the twelve-year-old girl under the protection of the Benedictine nuns of St. Catherine's at St. Trond. When she turned eighteen years old, she had her first vision of Christ. Being just an oblate, she used to spend long intervals in the parlor with a young man who was in love with her. One day, Christ suddenly appeared, blazing before her astonished eyes. He revealed the spear wound in his side and said to her, "Seek no more the pleasure of this unbecoming affection: behold, here, forever, what you should love, and how you should love: here in this wound I promise you the most pure of delights." Struck with terror and love, she dismissed her suitor with these words: "I belong to another lover."

Yet, she had to pass through another trial before she was resolved to a life of hiddenness and penance. Another friend, a soldier who had long been pursuing her, tried to kidnap her during one of her visits to her biological sister. She escaped by running to the woods. When she returned to the convent, the news had spread, and crowds gathered to see her. Lutgarde had to suffer the shame of being suspected of impurity. Her thoughts turned to Christ and to the shame he had suffered for men. Once again safe in the convent, she imposed on herself a voluntary rule of enclosure and solitude to give herself entirely to God. Furthermore, she transferred to a monastery of more strict observance and became a Cistercian nun at Aywières.

Soon afterward, Lutgarde experienced in a vision the spiritual marriage, as Jesus allowed her to exchange her heart with his. Jesus had just asked her to give him her heart and she replied, "Take it, dear Lord. But take it in such a way that Thy Heart's love may be so mingled and united with my own heart that I may



possess my heart in Thee, and may it ever remain there secure in Thy protection.”

Lutgarde was the first saint to whom Jesus showed his heart. Even though I cannot aspire to the same grace, this vision shows how much Jesus desires collaboration in the work of salvation. Lutgarde’s sufferings and prayers for the salvation of sinners encouraged my commitment to the redemption of the world. We need people dedicated to prayer and sacrifice in this era of warfare against the mystery of iniquity. We need Lutgarde’s intercession.

Lutgarde was at the disposal of Jesus’ plan. The Blessed Virgin asked her to fast for the salvation of the Albigensian heretics and for sinners. She fasted on a piece of bread and a glass of weak ale for three periods of seven years.

Few saints in the history of the Church show the ideal of vicarious suffering in reparation for sin more than St. Lutgarde. Vicarious suffering and reparation are the core of the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Lutgarde’s story may strengthen the resolve of many who daily consecrate themselves to the hearts of Jesus and Mary to participate in the work of redemption.

She was called to heaven on June 16, 1246. How fitting that her feast day is in mid-June when the whole Church devotes herself to the Sacred Heart.

*Biographical information is from Thomas Merton’s What Are These Wounds? The Life of a Cistercian Mystic Saint.*



# St. Dymphna

## Running with St. Dymphna

ERIKA WALKER

*St. Gertrude & St. Gregory the Great Writing Groups*

A few years ago, St. Dymphna pulled me out of the muck within my mind and helped me flee from the dark thoughts that dwelt there. Such thoughts grew more menacing the more I looked at them, and even began to influence my actions. Becoming a mother was not at all what I thought it would be, and I was rapidly spiraling into depression. I needed someone who had faced the darkness and won. I never would have guessed a young girl from the seventh century would be that person. Her name was St. Dymphna.

Princess Dymphna was only fourteen when her mother died. She must have grieved, as her mother was known for her holiness and beauty, but Dymphna was not overcome by this tragic event. Her father was not as fortunate, and his grief eventually drove him insane. He sought to replace his bride, but his advisers planted a rotten seed in his grieved mind: Princess Dymphna was just as beautiful as her mother. Desire took root and he sought to marry his daughter. When his plan was revealed, Dymphna, recalling her vow of chastity taken just before her mother's death, chose Christ over her father and fled to her confessor for advice. The wise priest may have recalled Jesus' words: "Brother will betray brother

to death, and a father his child. . . . When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next” (Matt. 10:21–23). Flee they did, some seven hundred miles over the land and sea from Ireland to Geel, a town in Belgium. How many sleepless nights did Dymphna face on that journey? Would her father find them? What would they eat? Where would they sleep?

Sleep, or rather the lack of it, was the trigger that sent me careening toward depression. When my firstborn was placed into my arms and I thought I would be ecstatic, I instead felt confused—a baby? Struggling with infertility for two years prior, I had accepted the idea that I would never be a mom. Despite nine months of preparation, her arrival still didn’t feel real. My whole life was turned upside down. I quickly became worried she would be taken away from me. Nightmares of gruesome deaths plagued what little sleep I could find and I would wake suddenly, drenched in sweat. Sleeping had rarely been a problem for me before, so I quickly became angry at myself due to this newfound insomnia. I sought out the patron saint of mental illness and found St. Dymphna, or maybe she found me. I discovered a historical fiction book about her, *The King’s Prey* by Susan Peek, and sped through it. Her tragic plight and lengthy journey gave me something other than my own misery to ponder, and I soon thought of her in the dark of night rather than phantoms chasing down my baby girl. I hung a painting of St. Dymphna on my wall. I pleaded for her intercession upon fitful wakings.

After several months, St. Dymphna had helped me gain the habit of calling for heavenly aid when the darkness came lurking, and suddenly, as with St. Dymphna, the roles were reversed: the prayers sent the darkness itself fleeing.

It may seem that the darkness overcame St. Dymphna; after all, her race on earth ended in a swift beheading by a deranged father. But death was not the end for St. Dymphna. Her holy mother and Jesus, the true King she chose, welcomed her home

with open arms. Her race had not ended; in fact, it had only just begun.

Not long after St. Dymphna's arrival into heaven, miraculous healings began to occur in Geel, the town she was martyred in, especially for those afflicted with mental illnesses. St. Dymphna was not stingy with her intercessory prayer, and got right to work racing around bringing pleas before her King. Eventually, there were so many pilgrims visiting Geel that they began living with the townspeople. Now, the pilgrims are called boarders and are treated as part of the families they live with. They usually stay with their families at least thirty years. This foster-family model of mental health care has been so successful that dozens of other towns are starting to adopt it. St. Dymphna's life on earth was a short fifteen years, but she inspired a system of love and care that has already lasted hundreds of years. Her influence is not restricted to mental illness. A visit to the testimonials page on the National Shrine of St. Dymphna website reveals reports of a wide range of healings, from cancer to seizures.

While St. Dymphna may have thought she was running from evil, she was actually training for her heavenly marathon. In this race, she would run to the aid of any soul seeking her intercession.



# St. John the Baptizer

## A Paragon of Humility

NICK PIZZI

*St. Hildegard of Bingen Writing Group*

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight’” (Mark 1:2–3). With these words, Isaiah foretells the arrival of St. John the Baptist.

Mentioned in all four Gospels, this great evangelizer, messenger, baptizer, and last prophet before Jesus’ ministry could have succumbed to a haughty pridefulness. His birth was announced to Zechariah, his elderly father, and Elizabeth, his barren mother, by an archangel. Massive crowds surrounded him during his public ministry. His popularity was so great that Herod had him imprisoned out of fear, and after his death, mistakenly believed that Jesus was “John the Baptist; he has been raised from the dead” (Matt. 14:2). And, finally, let us not forget the greatest praise from Jesus himself: “Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist” (Matt. 11:11).

Yet, John eschewed such accolades and praise, for he knew his station with respect to his cousin Jesus. “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). The Baptizer chose deference over hubris and conceit.

St. John the Baptist prophesied the arrival of Jesus: “I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Matt. 3:11). When Jesus came from Galilee to be baptized, “John would have prevented him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’” (Matt. 3:13–14). Finally, it was John the Baptist who solemnly declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29).

St. John the Baptist was a paragon of a life well lived in service to God. His greatness was undergirded by his humility. His attendant confidence allowed him to never shirk his responsibility to speak divine truth to temporal power.

John rebuked the Pharisees and Sadducees when they came to be baptized: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance” (Matt. 3:7–8). Finally, John condemned the powerful Herod’s marriage to his half brother’s wife. For this, John the Baptist was imprisoned and eventually, through deceit, beheaded.

As a prophetic prelude to Jesus Christ, St. John the Baptist was a herald whose clarion call to repentance ushered in a new kingdom: from sacrifice to mercy; from Leviticus and the Law to forgiveness and redemption; from man for the sabbath to the sabbath for man; and from Jewish and pagan religious tribalism to Christ-centred catholicity.

I have a particular love and respect for St. John the Baptist, and I am blessed to share my birthday with his solemn nativity. He is my contemplative touchstone when I pray for humility. When I suffer from the disease of conceit, I turn to the Baptizer as my intercessor to the Lamb of God for the cure. As I pray, I cry out from my own wilderness the realization that “it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). And as I take in the spiritual medicine of locusts and wild honey, I feel my pride dissolve away and humility retake my soul. So, if you feel yourself

succumbing to pridefulness, clad yourself in the Baptizer's saintly armor of camel's hair, and through him, ask the Lord to restore your humility, the truest form of spiritual sight.



# St. Martha

## Seeing St. Martha for Who She Is

WENDY GIGLIOTTI

*St. John Henry Newman Writing Group*

We are in every parish. Every parish needs us. We see things others don't. The spent bloom in the floral arrangement near the tabernacle. The hardened splattered wax on the candleholder standing sentinel to the altar. The unkempt hymnals and missals spilling out of their holders in the pews. Once seen, we cannot unsee them, cannot rest until things are put right. We are a silent team often working behind the scenes and between Masses making sure that all is calm and all is bright, that the sanctuary is always worship ready. We are strong at the minute detail; our challenge is keeping the big picture in focus.

Most parishes call us the Altar Society, and most of us who serve are really St. Marthas at heart.

Martha is a saint revealed to us in the Gospels of Luke and John. Along with her siblings, Mary and Lazarus, Martha lived in Bethany, a few miles from Jerusalem. She is known for sharing her gift for hospitality, generously opening her home to Jesus and others.

We first meet St. Martha tattling to Jesus about her sister, who isn't helping her serve as she thinks she should. "But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked,



‘Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.’ But the Lord answered her, ‘Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her’” (Luke 10:40–42).

For years, that was how I saw Martha, as a woman who was so busy focusing on small details that she missed the big picture entirely.

When I entered the Catholic Church through the RCIA process nearly thirty years ago, I was a young stay-at-home mom. As the patron saint of servants and cooks, St. Martha would have been a logical choice for my confirmation saint. I chose St. Mary because, given a choice between cleaning the house or sitting at Jesus’ feet, I wanted to be found at Jesus’ feet.

Much as I once hated to admit, my nature aligns more intuitively with St. Martha. I instinctively navigate toward hospitality ministries. Even when I worked with adult faith formation programs for ten years, I was behind the scenes—organizing classes, coordinating speakers, registering participants, and providing event hospitality. I was the worker bee buzzing about getting everything in place so that others could figuratively sit and learn at the feet of Jesus. And, like St. Martha, too often I fretted that others weren’t helping as I thought they should, only to catch myself and lament, “Martha, Martha!” I saw St. Martha more as an adversary than an ally.

But we encounter Martha in the Bible three times. To focus only on the first encounter is to be just as shortsighted as she was in it. Because somewhere between it and the next—the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead—Martha changed. “She said to him, ‘Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world’” (John 11:27).

Clearly, she has spent time at Jesus’ feet learning who he is and what he can do.

She is still the same Martha in this second encounter, attending to the needs of others through her gift of hospitality. But now she is willing to leave them—and her own mourning—and put Jesus first when he arrives on the scene. And in this encounter, I now see not only the glory of God revealed, but the faith of a saint to be emulated.

When we last see Martha in John 12:2, she is still serving—it's not just what she does; it is who she is. But she is no longer anxious because she now knows who she serves. And in my coming to understand this, I too am able to see the bigger picture and find a friend in St. Martha.

So now when I slip into the church during its quiet off-hours to freshen the flowers by the altar or tidy up the chapel before Adoration, I stop and take a moment to pray first. I sit quietly before the tabernacle at the feet of Jesus, sharing my heart before I apply the work of my hands. Because, after nearly thirty years of her whispering in my ear, I'm finally listening to St. Martha and her example to remember who I serve first.



# St. Margaret Clitherow

## A Grain of Wheat Crushed for Love

KATHARINE TARVAINEN

*St. Gregory the Great Writing Group (Co-Leader) & St. Bede Writing Group*

Lately it seems that the whole world is fighting. Politicians are fighting in the news, keyboard warriors are fighting in the comments section, and my children are fighting in the living room. In the Gospel of St. Matthew, our Lord warned us that an enemy “sowed weeds among the wheat” in this world, but what should we do when the wicked weeds appear to outnumber the good wheat? When everything around me is in shambles, I find it helpful to turn to a heavenly intercessor named Margaret Clitherow, whose life was quite literally in Shambles, a neighborhood in York.

St. Margaret lived in the sixteenth century, during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, which was not a particularly pleasant time to be a Catholic in England. It speaks a great deal to her faith that St. Margaret *converted* to Catholicism during a period of increasingly brutal persecution of that religion. As historian Carlos Eire writes in his book *Reformations*, during this time “the Catholics of England had few choices: dissembling, exile, martyrdom, or resistance.” St. Margaret’s fate would be martyrdom. On March 25, 1586, Good Friday that year, she was pressed to death for refusing to plead to charges of harboring priests and attending Mass. As St.

Margaret did not see forfeiting her Catholic faith as an option, her death was all but inevitable. However, by not entering a plea, she ensured that there could be no trial, meaning her family and friends were spared from either perjuring themselves to save her, or feeling complicit in her death by providing evidence against her.

St. Margaret's heroic act of complete self-giving seems so outrageously beyond anything I would be brave enough to do, and yet I can't help but feel inspired, rather than discouraged, by the witness of the "Pearl of York." As a wife and mother like myself, St. Margaret must have died a thousand tiny deaths in the years before she gave that ultimate sacrifice. St. Margaret's biographer Margaret Monro notes, "The high charity of her death was all of a piece with her life." Her martyrdom, therefore, was not the beginning of her heroic virtue, but rather the culmination of countless small acts of sacrifice, offered with love. It is here, in St. Margaret's earthly life, that we can learn a great lesson in combating the evils of our own time: leave the weeds to God and focus on the wheat.

As St. Margaret heard news of martyrdoms, imprisonments, and apostasy among her fellow Catholics, it would have been easy for her to give in to anger or self-pity. Yet Fr. Alban Butler's *Lives of the Saints* describes St. Margaret as being "full of wit and very merry," despite being imprisoned multiple times. That collection also describes her pious habits, including starting the day with prayer, twice-weekly confession when possible, and barefoot pilgrimages to the sites of priests' executions. Although her husband remained a Protestant, St. Margaret instructed her children in the Catholic faith and risked her life to offer fugitive priests safe harbor in her home. Through every act of love and sacrifice, St. Margaret was cultivating a hardy crop of living wheat amid encroaching plots of deadly weeds. In the end, St. Margaret allowed herself to be crushed by the hatred of the world for love of God and his Church, trusting that death would not have the final say: "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into

the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24).

Over four hundred years later, that grain of Yorkshire wheat continues to bear fruit as a heavenly friend to all who are fighting to sow truth, goodness, and beauty in a weed-choked world. When I catch myself viewing my circumstances with bitterness and debating which nasty little weed I should fight with first, I call upon my merry friend St. Margaret to set me right. Through her intercession, I have been able to embrace even the most mundane of household martyrdoms with peace and, dare I say, cheerfulness. By her example, I strive to nurture rather than destroy, to joyfully cultivate love in my own home and community, and to trust God to raise up any seeds I may plant along the way. When the weight of the world seems ready to crush me, St. Margaret reminds me not to rely upon my own pitiful efforts. Rather, I can cry out, as she did in her final moments, to the one who gives us hope and strength to bear all trials: “Jesu! Jesu! Jesu! Have mercy on me!”

*Unless otherwise noted, biographical information was drawn from St. Margaret Clitherow by Margaret T. Monro.*



# St. Teresa of Calcutta

## My Kitchen Saint

THERESA BAREITHER

*St. Gertrude Writing Group*

St. Teresa of Calcutta is close to my heart because she is my kitchen saint. Known during her lifetime as Mother Teresa, she is the only saint thus far to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Born in 1910 in Albania, she spent most of her life and ministry in India, where she died in 1997. Pope Francis declared her a saint in 2016. She received many other awards, but the only thing important to her was the recognition of the people she served.

I had taped a printed quote of hers above my kitchen sink, and when my sister visited this summer, she took note, and sent me a properly framed print for my birthday a few weeks later. It is a ready reminder for me not to grumble or to feel put upon when my family leaves their messy dishes for me to clean. The quote is “Wash the plate, not because it is dirty, not because you were told to wash it, but because you love the person who will use it next.”

So, did Mother Teresa win the Nobel Peace Prize for encouraging people to clean their kitchens with a loving attitude? Maybe not, but the meaning behind her point is love. Just like Thérèse of Lisieux, the saint from whom she took her religious name and

spiritual mode, she did all things with love. The dishes quote is a perfect example.

St. Teresa of Calcutta is one of our most quotable saints. Many of her pithy remarks delight me, and all reflect her core philosophy of love. Another of my favorites is “Peace begins with a smile.” What a great idea! Just smile at everyone you meet for a day, and notice how people reflect your smile and how much better your day goes. It costs nothing but giving of yourself.

Then, did Mother Teresa win the Nobel Peace Prize for smiling at everyone? No. And yet, the reason she did win had much to do with her smiling at the many destitute people she helped. She won it in 1979 for her work to help the world’s suffering and alleviate poverty and distress. She won it for bringing hope and dignity to the poorest of the poor. She won it for founding the Missionaries of Charity, who build homes for orphans, nursing homes for lepers, and hospices for the terminally ill. More than 5,750 of her followers work in 133 countries today. No wonder she is said to have quipped, “I know God will not give me anything I can’t handle. I just wish that He didn’t trust me so much.” Despite her incredible body of work, such remarks as these make her relatable.

I know a doctor who once spent a summer in Calcutta volunteering in one of her clinics. He told me that being in her presence and soaking up her attitude changed his life. When I catch myself doing things, saying things, thinking things that do not reflect the love that I should show to family, friends, and strangers, I can turn to her reminder that “God doesn’t require us to succeed. He only requires that you try.” With that thought in mind, I am now going up to my kitchen, ready to clean it with a smile.



# St. Joseph

## Guide and Father for Our Time

JENNIFER TAN

*St. Gertrude Writing Group*

“When you pray to St. Joseph, be careful about what you ask for, because you’ll most certainly get it!” So said my friend, a staunch devotee of St. Joseph. That was when I first heard of St. Joseph’s intercessory efficacy. However, I remained distant from the husband of the Blessed Virgin Mary and foster father of Jesus. It was one of the Akita messages exhorting devotion to St. Joseph that caught my attention. The messages given (1969–1982) by Our Lady and the guardian angel of the visionary, Sister Agnes Sasagawa, at Akita, Japan, essentially repeat those given at Fatima more than fifty years earlier. At Akita, the angel specifically mentioned that invoking St. Joseph pleases Jesus and Mary, and asked that St. Joseph be publicly honored, as described in John Haffert’s *The Meaning of Akita*. Reflecting on St. Joseph’s life, I wonder how I could have overlooked such a great role model and spiritual father.

Besides being the patron of a happy death and the Catholic Church, St. Joseph is invoked by people with various needs, including families, fathers, pregnant women, travelers, immigrants, and workers in general. From biblical accounts, the virtues that



struck me most are his trusting abandonment to God's will and his heroic care of Mary and the baby Jesus.

St. Joseph is an apt model for facing urgent, life-threatening, and uncertain situations. Following an angel's advice in a dream, he had to flee to another country with his wife and newborn to save the baby's life. They lived as refugees in an unknown land until it was safe to return home. His faith, obedience, and steadfastness made our salvation possible. Perhaps the closest and most widespread of similar situations in our time was the COVID-19 pandemic. How many among us had felt helpless when a loved one caught the virus, or died from it? Weren't we at a loss in facing the pandemic in its early days? The pandemic solidified my awareness that we can never be certain where we will be at any point in time. When we leave a place, we can't be sure of returning. War refugees who have to flee to unknown places for safety and shelter can relate even closer to the Holy Family. In such circumstances, we have much to learn from St. Joseph's faith in God's providence, a virtue as relevant in our time as then. As Pope Francis wrote in his apostolic letter *Patris Corde* ("With a Father's Love"), "Each of us can discover in Joseph—the man who goes unnoticed, a daily, discreet and hidden presence—an intercessor, a support and a guide in times of trouble."

St. Joseph's attitude in saving and providing for the Holy Family shows us how a husband and a father should be. He was totally obedient to God's will in caring for his family. His charity is evident in his acceptance of Mary, whom he found to be pregnant seemingly out of wedlock, the punishment for which was death. Upon the angel's advice in a dream, he forewent his rights and took her as his wife, thus saving Mary from death and public disgrace. Even though life was unimaginably difficult after their marriage—the census episode in Bethlehem, the flight to Egypt—he didn't shy away from his duties as head of his family. He faithfully brought up the child Jesus and observed religious

laws and obligations. His life was thrown into disarray, but he showed self-sacrificial love in putting himself totally at the service of his wife and foster child. In saving these two lives, he became instrumental in saving mankind by his role in salvation history. As crises threaten both marriage and the family in our time, St. Joseph's witness as the head of the Holy Family is more important than ever. He is the image of our Heavenly Father as father.

On reflection, my past hesitance in seeking St. Joseph's intercession for specific needs could be due to fear of asking for the wrong thing, as my friend had thought she did. However, as St. Joseph protected and brought up Jesus, so can we expect him to love us—the Church—who make up Jesus' Mystical Body. If he obtains for his spiritual children temporal things as my friend attested, how much more would he intercede for our eternal salvation! I could have sought St. Joseph's intercession more specifically and fervently. Now, for my present circumstance, as if reclaiming lost time, I find myself praying, "Father Joseph, please teach me how to be a good child like you taught Jesus."



# St. Thérèse of Lisieux

## The Little Way of St. Thérèse of Lisieux

MICHELE COHEN

*St. Robert Southwell Writing Group*

When I was in my early thirties and filled with the zeal of my recent reversion to Catholicism, I read of Mother Teresa and Dorothy Day. I dreamed of becoming a medical missionary, of volunteering in a Catholic Worker home, of feeding the poor and of picking up the destitute on the street—no matter that I was married and raising four daughters. At the same time, I discounted what seemed to me to be the sentimental spirituality of St. Thérèse of Lisieux. I didn't understand that Dorothy Day and Mother Teresa lived out the "little way" of St. Thérèse, and that it can be anything but simple.

Thérèse was born on January 2, 1873, in the town of Alençon, France. She was the ninth child and the fifth surviving daughter of her parents, Zélie and Louis Martin, who were canonized in 2015. When Thérèse was fourteen, she had a strong calling to the religious Carmelite community, but because of her age she met with resistance. She petitioned the bishop and when that didn't work, she petitioned Pope Leo XIII in Rome, who blessed her and told her that if it was God's will, it would work out. It proved to be God's will when she was granted permission to enter at the age of

fifteen. Thérèse lived at Carmel of Lisieux, in virtual anonymity, until her death in 1897 at the age of twenty-four.

Thérèse wanted to be a great saint, yet recognized her littleness. In *Story of a Soul*, her spiritual autobiography published in 1898, she wrote, “Great deeds are forbidden me. The only way I can prove my love is by scattering flowers. Every little sacrifice, every glance and word, and the doing of the least actions for love.” In *Walking the Little Way*, Joseph F. Schmidt, FSC, states that Thérèse’s genius is “her recognition of authentic Gospel holiness, which was lost to many ordinary Christians of her time.” Many believed sanctity was like climbing a ladder; only by struggle through the stages of virtue could one advance to higher rungs. Thérèse, who at fourteen experienced a deeper conversion on Christmas Day, knew otherwise.

Traditionally in France at the time, young children left their shoes by the hearth to be filled with presents. After the midnight Mass, Thérèse overheard her father say how glad he was that this would be the last year. Thérèse, who had lost her mother at four years old and who had suffered a nervous illness when she was thirteen, was a hypersensitive child and the doted-on baby of the family. The remark broke her heart. Instead of ruining the evening as her hurt feelings tended to do, Thérèse was empowered by God’s grace to overcome them. Joyfully, she ran to the hearth to open her presents. In this small moment she realized she needn’t climb by her own efforts; instead, Jesus had stooped down to lift her “in all her littleness.”

With thirty years of striving behind me, I can now appreciate the value of Thérèse’s “little way.” She nudges me to let God help, to make small acts of love that no one notices, to rethink the email that attempts, however subtly, to make myself look better at my coworker’s expense, to bear patiently the multitude of little things that annoy or offend me, to keep my mouth shut when my husband makes the coffee too strong. These simple things can be anything but simple, which Thérèse knew all too well when

she said, “They cost me much.” Thérèse is a powerful friend and intercessor, especially for those who yearn to do great things yet recoil at the thought of a small sacrifice, or for those who, at the receiving end of a bad comment, spiral out of control for days.

In her short life it seemed she accomplished nothing extraordinary, yet in 1997, Pope John Paul II declared St. Thérèse a Doctor of the Church. In his apostolic letter *Divini Amoris Scientia* (“The Science of Divine Love”), he writes, “The Spirit of God allowed her heart to reveal directly to the people of our time the fundamental mystery, the reality of the Gospel.” St. Thérèse lived a cloistered life and is now the patroness of the missions. She has inspired saints, popes, Catholic workers, and countless individuals to, as Mother Teresa says, do “small things with great love.” Dorothy Day, in her book *Thérèse*, says that St. Thérèse’s “little way” is of the child in its attitude of abandonment and acceptance. While St. Thérèse suffered from tuberculosis in 1896, she wrote a letter to Sister Marie and spoke of how Jesus taught her his secrets of love. She begged him to reveal these secrets to all the little souls.

May we be little and let Jesus lift us up.



# St. John the Apostle

## Nearness to Christ

RADHIKA SHARDA

*St. Venantius Fortunatus Writing Group*

Years before my conversion to the faith, I encountered a painting by the Greek painter El Greco that was seared into my memory: his portrait of St. John the Apostle. It showed a youth holding a chalice in one hand, gesturing toward it with the other, and all the while gazing at the viewer with great intentness, as if offering some deep secret to the soul. I knew very little about the Christian faith in those days, yet this figure of the young St. John fascinated me. The shimmering hues of his face and his robes imbued the piece with supernatural beauty.

This year I have placed a small copy of this painting in my prayer corner. Looking upon this image of the young St. John has suffused my prayer time with a spirit of both immediacy and transcendence. Put simply, to come close to John is to come tangibly close to Christ. The more I have reflected upon this saint, the Beloved Disciple, the more I come to find in him a whole treasury of insight.

John was the only Apostle who remained with Jesus at the cross. While the other disciples had fled, John alone remained to accompany Jesus through his Passion and Death. It is no easy thing

to witness the suffering of one's master, from his arrest and trial, to the scourging, and finally to the Crucifixion, yet somehow John stood fast to the very end. As we place ourselves in the scene with John, we find ourselves right there at the foot of the cross, close enough to touch the pierced feet of our Lord and catch drops of his blood spilling to the earth. Such meditations bring us searingly close to not only the visceral reality of the Passion, but even deeper into the secrets of the Paschal Mystery.

What did John see, think, and feel as he stood there at the cross? The experience of watching the Lord suffer and die must have transformed John profoundly. Though John likely could not grasp the immensity of what was happening, he must have come to perceive, somewhere beyond the realm of what could be expressed, that Jesus was offering himself up freely. God was pouring forth his very Word on the cross, and the Word was Love. In this vein, many medieval altarpieces and paintings depict the patron at one side of the cross, with John and the women at the other, all contemplating the mystery of Christ's sacrifice. To adore Christ on the cross with John and the others draws us into a wellspring of prayer.

John invites us into a transcendent understanding of Christ. John knew him intimately as a friend but at the same time came to recognize in him someone far more than anyone had ever expected in the Messiah. This Jesus of Nazareth was more than priest or prophet; he was the Son of the living God. It is for this reason that John's Gospel has taken on the symbol of the eagle, for again and again he soars beyond the plane of physical things to the heavens, attesting to the divine, eternal nature of Christ.

One could spend a lifetime of prayer on the prologue to John's Gospel. Deep, rich insights into the nature of God and his relationship with man permeate the opening lines: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.* From the first words, John leads us to the mountaintop, allowing us to meditate upon God as the Author of life, revealed in Christ as

the divine Word. The Greek rendering, *Logos*, invokes the pattern and meaning which undergirds all of reality. To pray in this space is to plumb the depths of reality and to ascend to the heavens. Such is the unique gift of John's Gospel. Even a nonbeliever who opens up to these remarkable words from the prologue finds himself in a sublime place brimming with meaning, life, and eternity. I am convinced that it was through the profound experience of standing before Christ at the cross that John sweeps us aloft to such heights of understanding in his Gospel.

Perhaps most notably, John reveals to us that the life of the Christian is a life of belovedness. Throughout his Gospel, he is described as the "disciple whom Jesus loved," not to point to himself but to allow each of us to place ourselves right in his spot in the story. I have long been struck by the scene during the Last Supper in which he lays his head tenderly against the breast of Christ. It is a singular icon of pure-hearted love. Do we have such honesty, such simplicity of heart in our prayer time with the Lord? What would it be like to lay oneself against the breast of Jesus? I have often taken this image to prayer. Allowing myself to come this close to the Lord, to lay my head against his heart, has always kindled my awareness of his love for me.

The gift of coming close to John is that he brings us close to Christ. Befriending John has infused my prayer time with an ability to gaze upon the Lord through a lens of both intimacy and majesty; to see in him both the deep friend of one's heart, as well as the *Logos* governing all of reality. Perhaps most importantly, he invites each of us to step into his place as *the beloved disciple*. What more is there in the Christian life than to abide in the heart of Christ, he who has loved us from the beginning?