Carmelite saints such as Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, and Thérèse of Lisieux have been popular and revered teachers of prayer for centuries. Yet each generation is challenged to hear them afresh, in terms that are authentic to both the saints’ historical realities and the reality of today. This column reviews a selection of books published in the last ten years that strive in various ways to do this.

The Carmelite Tradition

Many admirers of the great saints know little about all that transpired between Carmel’s beginnings on Mount Carmel in Palestine of the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries and the sixteenth century when Teresa and John lived. The early chapters of Wilfrid McGreal’s *At the Fountain of Elijah: The Carmelite Tradition* fill in this gap. McGreal also reviews high points of the order’s subsequent development and comments in an epilogue on how the Carmelite traditions of attentive listening, simplicity, and friendship can speak anew in the context of postmodernity.

*Carmelite Prayer: A Tradition for the 21st Century* is a much more extended exploration of the tradition’s potential to engage afresh with today’s world. This anthology is the work of the Carmelite Forum, a group of Carmelite scholars who offer a week of lectures in a contemplative setting each summer at St. Mary’s in Notre Dame, Indiana. These scholars are noted for combining creativity and spiritual depth with good scholarship. Among those with essays included here are Kevin Culligan, Constance FitzGerald, Roland Murphy, Vilma Seelaus, and John Welch.

Teresa of Avila

Among the abundant literature on Teresa of Avila, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish what is really worthwhile. Two recent books wonderfully combine scholarship with practical guidance for the contemplative journey. One is Gillian Ahlgren’s *Entering*...
**Teresa of Avila’s Interior Castle.** Ahlgren, author of a previous monograph on Teresa’s “Politics of Sanctity,” provides a gentle but wise theological commentary on the process of transformation that Teresa describes in her most mature work. A different angle on the same Teresian text is opened up by contemplative Carmelite sister Vilma Seelaus in her *Distractions in Prayer: Blessing or Curse?* Seelaus invites the reader to regard “distractions” as wisdom teachers, alerting us to just what we need to learn next in our spiritual journey. Both of these authors demonstrate how Teresa’s 450-year-old teachings can speak with wisdom and intelligence to people with twenty-first-century minds and concerns.

A very different approach is taken by Georgetown professor Barbara Mujica in *Sister Teresa: A Novel*. Mujica recounts Teresa’s life story through the voice of Sister Angelica, a nun who accompanies Teresa on all her journeys and comes to know her intimately. Readers who already know Teresa’s life and writings well may find the fictionalized format somewhat jarring, since many of the characters (including Sister Angelica) have no historical basis. On the other hand, Mujica clearly has done her homework on Teresa’s historical, cultural, and theological context. Once one accepts that this is a novel and not a biography, it can be an enjoyable way to enter imaginatively into what Teresa’s world could have been like. Mujica brings Teresa down from the clouds into an earthy, violent, and ambiguous world—rather like our own.

**John of the Cross**

In the case of John of the Cross, I always recommend that those who do not yet know John’s writings begin by reading Marc Foley’s *John of the Cross: The Ascent to Joy*. Foley, a Carmelite priest, provides a twenty-five-page introduction and then guides the reader with commentary and notes on about a hundred pages of selected texts from John’s writings. Foley does an excellent job of dispelling the gloomy image that many have of John, while still conveying the profound seriousness and rigor of his spirituality. With that background one is ready to tackle John’s own writings, as well as to bring an informed and critical eye to the insights of his contemporary interpreters.

An example of an interpretation that needs to be read with such a critical eye is Gerald May’s *Dark Night of the Soul*, in which he offers a psychiatrist’s view on the meaning and value of Carmelite prayer and especially John’s “dark night.” May details how times of confusion and failure in one’s life can be moments of healing, for their darkness may conceal and protect necessary processes of growth that are in progress. Again, those who know John’s teaching very well will not always be happy with May’s approach. He tends to cast the Carmelites primarily as therapists for the “Type A” personality that is driven by a need for admiration and success. Nonetheless, his expertise in dealing with conditions such as depression and other pathologies, combined with his deep respect for each human person as a spiritual being, enable him to make very helpful bridges between today’s psychologically informed adult and the sixteenth-century teaching of John of the Cross.

A more profound interpretation of John of the Cross for today is that of British Carmelite priest Iain Matthew in *The Impact of God*. With great simplicity, Matthew brings John alive as a tender and brilliant man who wrote out of his experience. Matthew is able to draw the reader into John’s spiritual world and engagingly demonstrate its connections with the kind of problems spiritual seekers still face today. Above all, he lifts John up as a witness for hope—the absolute, radical conviction that God is irrevocably present to us in love. This little book is hard to find, since it was published...
in England, but it is definitely worth the search.

**Thérèse of Lisieux**

It seems as if nearly everyone has read Thérèse of Lisieux’s *Story of a Soul* at some point in their life. Many, however, will say that they remember it as “sappy” or “sugary.” It may be time to pick up one of several recent works on Thérèse that reveal her as tough-minded, highly creative, and entirely human. I will shamelessly recommend first my own anthology, *The Essential Writings of St. Thérèse of Lisieux*. The selections from Thérèse’s writings include letters, poems, and plays that have been little known until recently. They are arranged in chapters that introduce various facets of Thérèse, such as her devotion to Joan of Arc, her understanding of martyrdom, and her guidance of the missionary priests she called her “spiritual brothers.” This short book enables the discovery of Thérèse’s breadth and complexity and may whet the appetite to encounter her afresh.

The recent appearance of *Thérèse of Lisieux: God’s Gentle Warrior* by Thomas R. Nevin is a breakthrough in English-language publishing on Thérèse. Nevin has thoroughly probed the primary historical sources related to Thérèse’s life, including some that have been neglected by others. For example, his careful study of the voluminous correspondence of Thérèse’s mother Zelie provides us with a far more nuanced and human view of this woman who has more typically been either placed on a pedestal or vilified as hopelessly neurotic. This is just one example of the way Nevin takes the edge off many of the “loaded” interpretations of Thérèse, who so often appears as either wholly admirable or wholly distasteful. Nevin instead presents a deeply informed and readable historical narrative. This is not devotional reading; some may find the amount of cultural and historical detail overwhelming. For anyone who wants to be reacquainted with Thérèse in her human context, however, this is a treasure.

Finally, for a more devotional book on Thérèse that is both wise and practical, there is Marc Foley’s *The Love that Keeps Us Sane*. In just eighty pages, Foley shows us Thérèse as she comes to terms with her own emotions, discovers and claims her identity, and learns and teaches lessons about how to deal with people of various psychological types. Thérèse comes across as a woman with her feet very much on the ground in the midst of the kind of stressful challenges that make up all our lives.

If there is a theme that runs through nearly all these recent, revisionary perspectives on the Carmelites, it is the reclaiming of the saints’ humanity. For too long, what was available to the general public on the Carmelite saints was largely confined to admiring reviews of their lofty spiritual teachings. Increasingly, however, readers are being offered not only wide-ranging historical and cultural contextualization, but also studies with considerable psychological sophistication. We discover their struggles, their limitations, their breakthroughs and breakdowns. From all this we learn that while we may not yet be entirely like the saints, the saints were in fact very much like us.

### References


