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Review of Marc Foley, O.C.D.'s "The Context of Holiness: Psychological and Spiritual Reflections on the Life of St. Thérèse of Lisieux"

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Marc FOLEY, O.C.D., *The Context of Holiness: Psychological and Spiritual Reflections on the Life of St. Thérèse of Lisieux.* Washington DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 2008. pp. 159. ISBN 978-0-935216-46-2. \$13.95 pb.
Reviewed by Jason Paul BOURGEOIS,

This book provides exactly what its subtitle describes, namely a combination of psychological and spiritual reflections on the life of St. Thérèse of Lisieux. Its author is a Discalced Carmelite friar who is trained in both psychology and spirituality, and his aim is to situate the sanctity of St. Thérèse in its "real-life" context.

His psychological insights into the spirituality of St. Thérèse offer a fascinating window into her personality, often giving a "secular" explanation for her spiritual desires and problems. For example, he diagnoses her as having a severe case of separation anxiety resulting from the personality of her mother, and exacerbated by her mother's untimely death. He uses this diagnosis to explain her transference of the maternal role to her older sisters, and shows how each of her family members (especially her father) offered her the shelter of an overprotected childhood home that she needed to recover from the shock of her mother's death. Interestingly, he hints that St. Thérèse's attachment to her older sisters (almost all of whom became Carmelite nuns) and her need for shelter from the world might have motivated her strong desire to enter into Carmel.

Furthermore, he diagnoses St. Thérèse's battle with scrupulosity as a form of obsessive-compulsive disorder, perhaps resulting from the rigorous Jansenism of 19th-century French spirituality. He hints that she overcame her temptations of scruples by formulating what has become a hallmark of her spirituality: supreme confidence in the mercy of God.

Finally, he analyzes St. Thérèse's "dark night of the soul," expressed as doubts about the existence of God and of heaven towards the end of her life, as a subconscious appropriation of the skeptical atheist currents of 19th century France, from which she was sheltered but not immune.

During the course of the book, the author often shifts from psychological diagnosis to spiritual application, by providing pastoral reflections on how to use the life of St. Thérèse to understand and overcome our own spiritual problems. In doing so, he occasionally offers insights from his own personal experience. These parts of the text almost read like a *lectio divina* of the life of St. Thérèse, as applied to the spiritual problems of people in the late 20th/early 21st century.

Although the book focuses primarily on the early childhood and adolescence of St. Thérèse, it also offers valuable psychological and spiritual insights about St. Thérèse's

experience in the convent, and the difficulties that she overcame in relating to her fellow nuns there. This is at the heart of St. Thérèse's "Little Way," in which she offers to God the sacrifice of "tolerance" of the annoying habits of her companions. In analyzing these situations, the author supplements St. Thérèse's own writings with the written observations of the nuns who lived with her in the convent.

The only major flaw of the book is that it is marred with an unusually high number of spelling and format errors, which the publisher should take care to correct in future reprints!

Overall however, this is a great little book with a light and non-academic tone that will be most appealing to readers already familiar with the life and spirituality of St. Thérèse, and that will also be worthwhile to readers with a general interest in spirituality and religious psychology.