

'Therese' delineates an ordinary life's extraordinary grace

By Emily Morrison

Pope Pius X called her "the greatest saint of modern times." Marie Françoise Therese Martin, who died a Carmelite nun in 1897, was canonized in 1925, only 28 years after her death from tuberculosis at 24.

"That an unknown French girl, born only yesterday in 1873, could in a mere half century have become one of the best-loved saints in the Church is a phenomenon that cannot be explained in merely human terms," reads a publisher's note in the John Beevers translation of *The Autobiography of St. Therese of Lisieux* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co, Inc., 1957). "It is unique in the history of modern Christianity, a prodigy of divine grace."

Now, the widely read convent journal of St. Therese has been reinterpreted by French director Alain Cavalier in an unusual film entitled *Therese* (in French with English subtitles), which opened February 11 for a two-week run at Rochester's Little Theatre. Cavalier's treatment of the daily life of the young woman who called herself "the Little Flower" appears to have been created in almost direct antithesis to the publisher's

assessment. This remarkably simple series of vignettes places the relatively uneventful life of the saint in almost entirely human terms, and the result is no less than simply remarkable.

Cavalier sets the story of Therese against the historical backdrop of a single slim volume that has proven an inspiration to millions of readers the world over. The cinematic collage created by this gifted filmmaker is no less inspirational, as it celebrates the very human dimension of an ordinary life lived with extraordinary grace.

To highlight what Stanley Kaufman of *The New Republic* has called the "dailiness" of Therese's life, Cavalier chose to tell her story in a series of painterly segments of varying lengths. Each brief scene fades unceremoniously into blackness before the next, in a repetitive pattern reminiscent of Ingmar Bergman's *Cries and Whispers*, with its similarly unflinching treatment of terminal illness and the inevitable death of the body.

Some of these scenes are single visual images — Therese's worn cloth espadrilles, a hand opening and closing a wooden pencil

box. Others are miniature stagings of recorded diaristic memories — Therese's white-haired father heating his daughters' beds with a long-handled warming pan, or Therese clutching three fish wrapped in her father's handkerchief, behind the convent grate that separates her and her two cloistered sisters — both spatially and temporarily — from their shared childhood.

The movie's stark set features a mottled gray backdrop and dramatic lighting rather like that used on a dance stage. "My principal reference was (the French painter Edouard) Manet," explained Cavalier. "Each morning when I arrived on the set, I was pleased to find that there were no doors, no light sources and no lamps. Occasionally, I worried about the actors, because, aside from this huge backdrop, they had no walls, no points of reference... But with our set, we could put any face, any object in the area, and automatically, it would be magnificent."

Painted in broad brush strokes, the cleaning of fish for supper, the bath given a dying nun by a still vigorous young Therese, the bandaging of hands chafed raw by a case of chilblains emerge as distinct canvases. When Therese (who wanted so badly to enter the Carmelite order at 15 that she went to Rome to plead her case with Pope Leo XIII) buries her face in the pope's white cassock, the visual effect is more like a poetic image than the linear sequence of a narrative.

This minimalist approach to filmmaking, bare of the furniture and baggage of our complex modern lives, creates a strikingly impressionistic effect that seems devoid of flat planes or sharp angles. Instead, the viewer is stricken by the overwhelming humanity of the Carmelite sisters, the serene sensuality of flesh, blood and objects both animate and inanimate.

These celibate women are imbued with a holiness more physical than ethereal, yet the juxtaposition of corporeality with piety is neither heavy-handed nor offensive. The startling roundness of faces, the softness and symmetry of hands engaged in prayer or daily travail, become a tribute to the very human face of divine grace.

Above all, the luminous countenance of Therese, played by French actress Catherine Mouchet in her film debut, serves as a testament to the vibrant devotion of a young woman who takes obvious pleasure in her role as the bride of Christ. Both in her

autobiography and its cinematic translation, Therese declares forthrightly her ambition to become a saint, yet Cavalier manages to present this desire without any hint of sanctimonious calculation or sentimentality.

"I wish to be a saint," Therese says impulsively to her *prieure*, who has just asked her to record in a journal the words that don't seem to come readily to the young novice's lips.

"Pride," the mother superior summarily responds.

"No," Therese insists. "I'll become a great saint in secret."

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Alain Cavalier
Director, *Therese*

In secret and primarily in silence, without fanfare and false piety, Therese is shown acting on her lifelong resolve. True to her vow of obedience, she keeps the rule of silence, salvaging the small miracle of a dead woman's tear as she herself walks closer and closer to her own passage into eternal life.

In a succession of scenes unenhanced by music or a preponderance of props and dialogue, Cavalier accentuates the dominant blacks, browns and grays of his canvas with momentary splashes of brilliant color — droplets of blood, the flame-colored belly of a lobster, the silver foil "shoes" made for Therese by her beloved sister Celine, who dresses Therese prophetically as Joan of Arc, just before the future secondary patron saint of France falls gravely ill for the final time.

Like the rule of silence and the vows of the cloister, the film's very omissions become a pure and beautiful devotion in themselves. The silences of this incomparable movie speak far more clearly than a panoply of words.



Catherine Mouchet makes her movie debut as Therese in the French film version of the life of "the Little Flower," one of the most beloved saints of modern times.

'Mid-winter' brunch scheduled for Finger Lakes D/S/W

People who are separated, divorced or widowed are cordially invited to a "mid-winter" brunch scheduled for Sunday, February 22, from 11 a.m. until 1:30 p.m. at Abigail's Restaurant at Waterloo-Seneca Falls, Routes 5 and 20, in Waterloo.

The event is sponsored by the Geneva/Finger Lakes Separated, Divorced, Widowed group. The group schedules such programs as trips, conferences, workshops and drop-in socials. Activities are being planned for the spring and early summer by the group, whose members live in Ontario, Seneca, Yates, Wayne and Cayuga Counties.

Reservations can be made by calling Patti, (716)526-5625; Tom, (315)781-0897; Jackie, (315)781-1933; Nancy, (716)526-5629; Marge, (315)834-9775; John, (716)657-7246; or Carl, at the Finger Lakes Office of Social Ministry, (315)789-2686.

Noted anthropologist to speak at University of Rochester

Anthropologist Maurice Bloch, noted for his recent study of ritual in religion and his field research in Madagascar, will be the guest lecturer at the 1987 Lewis Henry Morgan Lecture Series at the University of Rochester.

Bloch, who is a professor of anthropology at the London School of Economics and Political Science, will deliver four lectures on the topic "Prey into Hunter: The Politics of Religious Experience."

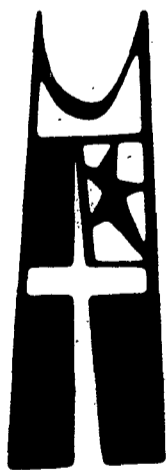
The remaining lectures, which will all begin at 8:30 p.m. in Lander Auditorium on the University of Rochester's River Campus, will be offered on the following topics and dates: "Sacrifice: The Aggressive Death," on Thursday, February 19; "Marriage: Being Swallowed and Swallowing," on Tuesday, February 24; and "Myth and Millennium: The Uncertainties of Continuity," on Thursday, February 26.

All lectures are free and open to the public.

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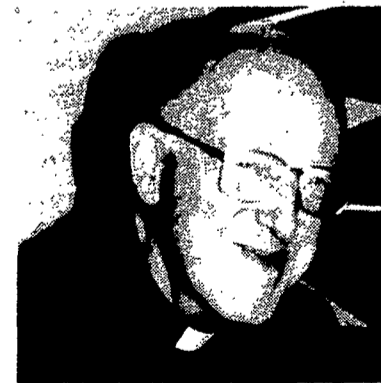
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REV. DR. ROBERT F. McNAMARA
Professor Emeritus, St. Bernard's Seminary.

When the priestly formation program at St. Bernard's Seminary was closed in 1981, I grieved that the Rochester Diocese would lose its theological center since 1893. Fortunately, the other programs have been preserved at St. Bernard's Institute. Because it continues the proud intellectual tradition of the Seminary, SBI deserves our faithful support.



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