



*A Year with
Saint Thérèse of Lisieux*



SHIRT *of* FLAME

HEATHER KING

Getting Started: Use this Group Discussion Guide together with *Shirt of Flame* and your *Spiritual Journal*. Either individually or as part of a group, discuss these questions; they are organized according to the chapters of *Shirt of Flame*. Then journal your answers.

INTRODUCTION

1. Heather King discusses what draws her to St. Thérèse. Is St. Thérèse what drew you to *Shirt of Flame*?
2. Have you read St. Thérèse's bestselling book, *The Story of a Soul*? Why do you think it has had so much effect on people, both when it was originally published, and today?

— JANUARY —

EARLY LOSS

(On Facing Ancient Grievances)

1. Heather King tells readers of some of the serious losses she has experienced over the last decade. How does shared loss connect King to St. Thérèse?
2. In what ways does loss connect all people?
3. Is it easier—or tougher—to give everything to God when you have experienced serious losses in life?

— FEBRUARY —

THE CONFLUENCE OF WILL AND GRACE

(On Illness and Healing)

1. King begins this chapter by reflecting on what it means to “walk with a saint.” Do you agree with her that is hard to “walk with a saint” today?
2. Consider an instance of healing from your own life, even perhaps one that you never considered to be a case of divine protection. Can you see it differently now, after reading of St. Thérèse’s experiences and perspective?

— MARCH —

THÉRÈSE’S SECOND CONVERSION

(On Learning to Serve)

1. This chapter is titled “Thérèse’s Second Conversion.” What was her first conversion?
2. There are different ways to understand “conversion.” How would you explain conversion to a friend?
3. How might you draw the path of your conversion in your Journal? Give that a try.

— APRIL —

THE PAPAL VISIT

(On Daring to Ask)

1. Take a moment in your Spiritual Journal to reflect on a turning point in your life, a time when you made such an important decision that it literally altered the course of your life. Then reflect: What were your motivations back then? List them.
2. How did courage and discernment, play a part in your taking that path long ago?
3. Do courage and discernment play a different role in your life today?

— MAY —

POVERTY, CHASTITY, OBEDIENCE

(On Radical Social Conscience)

1. Take a moment to open a Bible to these passages: Matthew 6:33, Matthew 19:21, and Luke 9:23. And if you have a copy of *The Rule of St. Benedict*, begin to read the Prologue.
2. What has motivated women and men for 2,000 years to become nuns and monks?
3. How was St. Thérèse different from, and similar to, other women religious?

— JUNE —

THE CONVENT

(On Shedding Our Illusions)

1. Heather King says that the convent “was brimming with neurotics and misfits.” Isn’t this just like every other place in life?
2. What illusions did St. Thérèse have to shed? What illusions has Heather King been trying to shed?
3. What illusions do you need to shed?

— JULY —

THE LITTLE WAY

(On the Martyrdom of Everyday Life)

1. Our own suffering can teach us many things. Do you think that God wants us to suffer, or does God simply allow us to suffer? Is there a difference?
2. St. Thérèse wrote in *The Story of a Soul*, “I want to seek the means of going to heaven by a little way that is very straight, very short, a completely new little way.” What do you think she meant by this?

— AUGUST —

ARIDITY

(On Praying Without Ceasing)

1. Following the chronology of *Shirt of Flame*, focus this month on praying anew, with fresh attention.
2. What do you think of St. Thérèse’s method of prayer: direct, conversational, speaking to God as a loving Father? Are there any reasons why it might be difficult for you to pray this way? Read Isaiah 64:8 and Matthew 6:26–33.
3. Pray the Lord’s Prayer each day this month, both upon waking up in the morning and before going to bed at night. What happens when you write out the Lord’s Prayer in your Spiritual Journal? Do you “see” new truths in this prayer?

— SEPTEMBER —

THE LONG, SLOW DECLINE OF THÉRÈSE'S FATHER

(On Being Stripped Down)

1. In this chapter—in Thérèse's life as well as Heather King's—we are introduced to suffering of another kind, the suffering of our loved ones. Which is tougher to handle, our own suffering or the suffering of those close to us?
2. Spend time throughout this month journaling the phrases of the following prayer offered by King at the end of the chapter. Consider what it means in your life right now.

Lord, when the world tells me I am nothing, help me to remember that you are not
of the world.

When everything I do turns to ashes, help me to remember to turn to you.

When everywhere I turn is a blank wall, help me to see your face.

When I feel like an orphan, help me to remember that you are my Father.

When I feel like a frightened bird in a dead universe, help me to remember that
love reigns eternal.

When I feel like I'm being stripped down to nothing, help me to know that
you are especially near.

— OCTOBER —

THE STORY OF A SOUL

(On Offering Up Our Work)

1. Are there any ways that you currently incorporate your spiritual interests, passions, and commitments into your work every day?
2. See pages 89–90. How does Heather King connect the Resurrection with the value of our work in the world?

— NOVEMBER —

MY VOCATION IS LOVE!

(On Letting Our Flame Burn Hot)

1. While you read this chapter—or before you do—turn in your Bible to that very familiar chapter, 1 Corinthians 13. Read it again, and again. Journal its phrases until they reveal new insights to you. It has been said that St. Paul (who wrote 1 Cor. 13) is the architect of Christian love.
2. The Russian novelist Dostoevsky wrote in *The Brothers Karamazov*, “Love in reality is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams.” What did he mean by that?

— DECEMBER —

THE DIVINE ELEVATOR

(On Facing Death with Joy)

1. Heather King summarizes two important things taught by the life of St. Thérèse. They are these:
“First, she never made her life into some kind of warped, weird, private martyrdom.”
“Second, in loving others we have to continue to be open to our own terrible, terrible brokenness and wounds.”
Which of those things is more important for you to learn in your life?
2. There are some people (perhaps you are one of them) who have never experienced much personal suffering or loss—at least, not yet. Do you think faith is easier, or tougher, for such people? Are they fortunate—or unfortunate?

CONCLUSION

1. Consider again, for a moment, the epigraph at the opening of the book—and the book’s title. Do you remember? It is from a poem by T. S. Eliot:

The dove descending breaks the air
With flame of incandescent terror
Of which the tongues declare
The one discharge from sin and error.
The only hope, or else despair
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre—
To be redeemed from fire by fire.

Who then devised the torment? Love.
Love is the unfamiliar Name
Behind the hands that wove
The intolerable shirt of flame
Which human power cannot remove.
We only live, only suspire
Consumed by either fire or fire.
(from “Four Quartets”)

Why do you think Heather King selected this as the book’s epigraph? What does it have to do with St. Thérèse?

2. In the introduction, King writes, “To allow your ego to be crucified, you have to get very close to Christ.” What does this mean to you?



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