

But What Should I Read?

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Because the Discalced Carmelite friars are not numerous in the United States (although we are one of the larger Orders in the church), many young men in this country first encounter us through our saints. Even as children they may have heard about St. Thérèse of Lisieux, for example, and in college they may have studied the poetry of John of the Cross. Still, one of the questions I'm most often asked is, "What should I read to learn more about the Discalced Carmelites?"

Many start with our "classics." St. Thérèse's ***Story of a Soul*** is undoubtedly the most popular Carmelite work of all time, and though some readers are "put off" at first by Thérèse's flowery style, they usually discover in her a depth of spiritual wisdom far beyond what one would ordinarily expect from such a young author. Others begin with St. Teresa of Avila's ***Way of Perfection***, written specifically to explain to the nuns of her discalced reform the purpose of their way of life, and full of practical advice on personal prayer. John of the Cross's ***Spiritual Canticle*** is perhaps the most accessible of his major works, tracing our spiritual journey from its beginnings to the heights of mystical union. Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection's ***Practice of the Presence of God*** boils everything down to a very simple message of living continually in God's presence, an approach which has found an enormous following among both Catholics and Protestants.

Many of the recent surveys of the Carmelite tradition in English are written by O.Carms., that is, friars of the Ancient Observance, from whom the Discalced Carmelites separated after the death of Sts. John and Teresa. Thus the perspectives and emphases regarding the Teresian Reform and its subsequent history sometimes differ from what one might get from a Discalced Carmelite author. Still, John Welch's ***The Carmelite Way: An Ancient Path for Today's Pilgrim*** (New York: Paulist, 1996) and Wilfrid McGreal's ***At the Fountain of Elijah: The Carmelite Tradition*** (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999) are both reliable and well written.

On the Discalced side, we have recently reprinted Peter-Thomas Rohrbach's 1966 volume, ***Journey to Carith*** (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2003); the first chapter on the origins of the Carmelites is now woefully out of date, and his account of the conflicts surrounding the Teresian reform is biased toward the "discalced," but he does offer a very readable overview our history and saints. Still, for a more concise introduction I often recommend Paul-Marie of the Cross's little book, ***Carmelite Spirituality in the Teresian Tradition*** (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1997) which we have updated with informative notes and a bibliography of further readings.

Since tastes in reading vary, you may or may not find these recommended works helpful. I will indicate other resources in future issues. But the books mentioned here should be readily available through your local Catholic bookstore or online (our own editions can be found at www.icspublications.org), if you want to add them to your Christmas wish list. Happy reading!