

Catholic Attitudes to Peace and War at the Time of the Munich Agreement

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Hitler's demands for the complete cession of the Sudetenland to Germany on 22 September 1938 led to an international crisis. There was widespread fear of war with the mobilization of troops in Czechoslovakia and partial mobilization in France on 24 September. The peace was saved with the signing of the Munich Agreement on 29 September 1938 which coincided with three anniversaries related to Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face, commonly known as Thérèse of Lisieux (henceforth Thérèse): the centenary of the foundation of the Carmelite Monastery at Lisieux, the entry of Thérèse into the Carmel of Lisieux (henceforth the Carmel) in 1889 and her death in 1897. A three-day celebration of the anniversaries had brought hundreds of pilgrims and Churchmen from around the country to Lisieux. There were messages from the Pope and other high ranking prelates including the Archbishop of Venice, who was unable to attend due to the tense international situation to which he alluded without going into precise details. Notably he remarked on the strong devotion of Italians to Thérèse and the reasons for that devotion.¹ News of the Munich Agreement made the closing ceremonies at Lisieux heavy with meaning. For Thérèse's devotees this happy convergence of the acts of statesmen on the world stage saving the peace, and the series of anniversaries related to the young French woman who became one of the most loved saints of the twentieth century, was no mere coincidence. It precipitated a flood of letters (henceforth the Munich letters) to Lisieux documenting people's gratitude to the "Little Saint" or the "Rose of Peace": due to her intercession war had been averted.

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¹ *Les Annales de Ste Thérèse de Lisieux*, 14:11 (November, 1938).

The appeal of Thérèse, canonized in 1925, was international, cross class, and cross generational.² It seems that men and women, including Catholic intellectuals – though not always to begin – were equally devoted to her. Thérèse’s intense “spirituality of the ordinary,” or her “Little Way,” was explained in her writings published posthumously as a book, *Histoire d’une Ame* (1898). It was soon translated into several languages and became a hugely successful publishing enterprise. Following the “little way” meant following Thérèse’s example by seeking the opportunity to do good in the course of one’s normal life and by embracing readily the often unexceptional and irritating crosses borne daily. It was about seeking the heroic (spiritually speaking) in the anti-heroic. The “little way” was the ordinary Catholic’s path to sanctification. Catholics wrote to the Carmel at Lisieux much as if they were writing to Thérèse herself. This was in part because three of Thérèse’s actual sisters (Pauline, Céline and Marie) were still in the monastery. Pauline (Mother Agnès), to whom virtually all the letters were addressed, was the prioress. The correspondents left a record of their emotional and spiritual lives and their daily preoccupations at this time of crisis. During the Great War Thérèse was described as the “little sister” of the *poilus*. Thousands of letters to the Carmel from the trenches documented graces received and a multitude of miracles attributed to her intercession which, some argue, led to her fast track canonization just twenty eight years after her death.³ The voluminous correspondence from the interwar period has been referred to less frequently.⁴

This article introduces new material from the interwar correspondence and demonstrates how faith informed the responses of ordinary believers to the Munich crisis. More broadly, it contributes to debates about the relationship between the memory of the Great War, pacifism and “war anxiety,” and the behavior of Catholics in the Second World War. Its conclusions are based on an overview of seventy five – including a close reading of six – of the 293 Munich letters. These letters arrived at the Carmel soon after the Munich Agreement was signed and they were preserved in the archives under the heading “Rose of Peace.”⁵ Most of the 293 letters are from French Catholic women, normally mothers and wives or widows. The thirty four letters from men (including priests, seminarians and men writing with their wives) reveal that they were grateful either for having been saved from mobilization or, if mobilized, extremely relieved that the alert had not lasted long. Priests wrote about how people were responding to the crisis and whether men who had been called up had special needs or intentions. A large proportion of the letters were accompanied by a money order. The amounts of money donated ranged between 5 and 1,500 francs. Almost all of the money sent was to contribute to the completion of the construction of Thérèse’s Basilica in Lisieux.

² For a study of Thérèse’s life see Thomas R. Nevin, *Thérèse of Lisieux: God’s Gentle Warrior* (Oxford, 2006) and *The Last Years of Saint Thérèse: Doubt and Darkness, 1895-1897* (Oxford, 2013).

³ See John Clarke, ed., *Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of St Thérèse of Lisieux*, 3rd edn, trans. John Clarke (Washington, 1996). See also numerous works by Claude Langlois on Thérésian texts and interpretative approaches. For an insight into devotion to Thérèse during the Great War see Annette Becker, *La Guerre et la foi: De la mort à la mémoire 1914-1930* (Paris, 1994), 69-77.

⁴ I have drawn on some of the wartime correspondence in Vesna Drapac, “The Devotion of French Prisoners of War and Requisitioned Workers to Thérèse of Lisieux: Transcending the ‘Diocese behind Barbed Wire’,” *Journal of War and Culture Studies* 7, no. 3 (2014): 283-96.

⁵ Most of the letters date from the first weeks of October. There is no way of knowing how many letters were actually sent to the Carmel at this time. Not all the correspondence was preserved and it was up to the discretion of the archivists to decide what would be discarded. Initially the letters were filed in a dossier entitled ‘Paix’.

The Munich letters are replete with references to the greatness of Thérèse, but at the same time are suggestive of a strong affinity with the woman often referred to as “our Thérèse,” “our dear little saint” or “our dear little sister.”⁶ Underpinning these references to the “little saint” is the ultimately reassuring recognition that a woman from a conventional and provincial French Catholic background, who had chosen the contemplative life, had come to be perceived as one of the most powerful of the heavenly intermediaries and was venerated globally: Thérèse, a mere slip of a girl who had died at the age of twenty-four from tuberculosis was nearer to God than the greatest of men. She was the Joan of Arc of and for a new era. This perception in large part explains her enormous popularity and her importance through much of the twentieth century. Thérèse was declared a Doctor of the Church in 1997, at the time only the third woman to be elevated to that position.

According to Philippe Artières, Thérèse and her impact must be understood within the framework of what he calls a “written life.”⁷ Artières argues that Thérèse’s life and cult were shaped by reading and writing, her own and that of her Carmelite sisters initially, and that of her correspondents and devotees subsequently.⁸ The letters that arrived in Lisieux after her death also reveal the role of the texts and images produced by the Carmel of Lisieux in the spread of her following.⁹ There is a large body of literature on the ways in which historians can usefully draw on letters as sources as well as the significance of different kinds of letters.¹⁰ Martyn Lyons has noted that in the nineteenth and twentieth century there was a surge in the various genres of “ordinary writing,” including “writing to God” which included intercessionary letters, inscriptions and plaques (*ex votos*) as well as graffiti indicating thanks for prayers answered and protection afforded individuals and families in times of need or suffering.¹¹ Lyons suggests that this form of writing “has a lasting power that lends efficacy and intimacy to communication with God and the saints”: “The mounting quantity of mail directed heavenwards in the twentieth century is a massive archive of human anxiety, suffering and maladjustment. It also suggests the importance of the written word in our time, and the unexpected range of its applications in daily life.”¹² The extent to which the letters are indicative of a kind of “maladjustment” is open to debate. But the evidence supports Lyons’s observations regarding the perceived efficacy and intimacy of the writing, which seems to have performed a spiritual function in itself.

⁶ These and similar phrases appear repeatedly in the Munich letters.

⁷ Philippe Artières, *La vie écrite: Thérèse de Lisieux* (Paris, 2011).

⁸ American convert, Dorothy Day (1897-1990), with whom we identify the robust and socially aware Catholicism of *The Catholic Worker*, initially thought Thérèse had “nothing to offer” workers but, on reading her works, Day was won over to Thérésian teaching. See Dorothy Day, *Thérèse* (Springfield, 1979; first published 1960). This was a common experience: many, at first put off by the predominantly saccharine imagery created by the Carmel, were “converted” to Thérèse by her writings.

⁹ For an interesting study of this phenomenon see Sophia L. Deboick, “Céline Martin’s Images of Thérèse of Lisieux and the Creation of a Modern Saint,” in *Saints and Sanctity*, Peter Clarke and Tony Claydon, eds (Suffolk, 2011), 376-89.

¹⁰ See for example, Martyn Lyons, ed., *Ordinary Writings, Personal Narratives: Writing Practices in 19th and 20th Century Europe* (Bern, 2007). See also Miriam Dobson, “Letters,” in *Reading Primary Sources: The Interpretation of Texts from Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century History*, Miriam Dobson and Benjamin Ziemann, eds (London, 2009), 57-73 for a good introduction to the various approaches to the use of letters by historians.

¹¹ Martyn Lyons, “‘Ordinary Writings’ or How the Illiterate Speak to Historians,” in *Ordinary Writings*, 13-31.

¹² Lyons, “‘Ordinary Writings,’” 22.

Public and Private Intentions in the Expressions of Relief and Gratitude to the “Rose of Peace”

Generally, the Munich letters follow a common format. The authors note their gratitude to Thérèse for her role in averting war and make some (inevitably humble) reference to the enclosed donation. This is often followed by requests for prayers from the Carmelite community and for Thérèse’s intercession in private matters. There are varying levels of detail with regard to the personal information contained in the letters.

The “miracle of Munich” was seen to be Thérèse’s work. Msg B. from Aix-la-Chappelle, like many others, recognized that it “was no accident that the glorious feast coincided with the recent events.”¹³ Another correspondent wrote that “the good lord has answered so many fervent prayers for peace” and went on to ask rhetorically: “How not to see the coincidence of the meeting in Munich and the 30th of September?”¹⁴ Mme E. L. writing from the Eure sent a “little banknote” as a mark of thanksgiving for the “great good deed,” that is “the preservation of the peace so providentially signed on the dawn of the feast of our dear little great saint.”¹⁵ Mlle L. L. from the Seine also sent a “modest offering” as an acknowledgement of her gratitude to Thérèse who, “on this day, the anniversary of her holy death, deigned to save us from a horrible war.”¹⁶

Evident in all of the letters is a sense of relief. We read that Thérèse had let forth “her roses” again, thus continuing to fulfill her promise to shower the world with her graces and favors after her death.¹⁷ Mlle B. from Indre sent a “small offering,” a “grain of sand” – a money order for 10 *francs* – to help with the completion of the Basilica, grateful that Thérèse had “interceded on behalf of our country to stem the tide of war which was menacing us so.”¹⁸ L. D. wrote that he derived great pleasure in sending the Carmel an offering “to thank St Thérèse for having spared us from the terrible scourge which was threatening us all.” He enclosed 200 *francs* for a mass of thanksgiving and a mass for the repose of the souls of his parents. The remaining money was for the Basilica.¹⁹ People wrote variously: that Thérèse had “saved” them from war; that due to her intercession war had been “averted” or “prevented”; that she had “offered her protection” and helped them to “avoid disaster”; and that she had “sent them peace” or “preserved” world or universal peace.²⁰

This unsolicited and spontaneous correspondence attests to the strong Catholic identification with saints as protectors and intermediaries, and a particular confidence in the intercessory powers of Thérèse. A number of letters refer to the protection Thérèse afforded France, the “dear patrie.” On 7 October Mme A. C. from the Seine sent the 10 *francs* for the Carmel that she had promised “to your dear little saint when

¹³ Archives of the Carmel of Lisieux (ACL). Letter from Msg F. B., Aix-la-Chappelle, 5 October 1938. Please note I will be referring to the correspondents by their initials. The information in the archival references may vary and reflects the fact that not all the letters contain the full address of the correspondents

¹⁴ ACL, extract copied from the letter from P.G., 30 September 1938. See the archivist’s note explaining that the extract was copied for the “Peace” dossier.

¹⁵ ACL, Mme E. L., Vernon (Eure), 13 December 1938.

¹⁶ ACL, Mlle L. L., Clamart (Seine), 30 September 1938.

¹⁷ ACL, Mme C. A., Bourg-lès-Valence (Drôme), 14 October 1938 is one of countless examples. Thérèse promised to “let fall a shower of roses’ of miracles and other favors after her death.” See David Hugh Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints* (Oxford, 1978), 373-74.

¹⁸ ACL, Mlle B. (Indre), 4 October 1938.

¹⁹ ACL, L. D., Tain-l’Hermitage (Drôme), 3 October 1938.

²⁰ Countless letters include these words and phrases in various combinations.

I asked her that there be no war for the French.”²¹ Mme F. from the 12th *arrondissement* in Paris hoped that the Reverend Mother’s prayers would result in “our dear little saint” allowing her “shower of roses” to fall once again on “our France and our Family.”²² But mostly it was recognized that Thérèse did not reserve her favors for the French alone and that all people would benefit from the preservation of the peace. Mme L. from the Landes wrote that the “whole world” joined in thanking the community of the Carmel for their prayers to Thérèse through whose intercession they had obtained “the great universal peace.”²³

Events outside the home or the parish were intertwined with the correspondents’ perceptions of themselves as Catholics both in a local and international context. The Munich letters demonstrate what religion meant to people in terms of their daily interactions with their family, in the work place and in their parishes. More generally they show how Catholics made the connection between the crisis, their personal lives and their local communities. The correspondence thus also alerts us to the way that Catholics sought to balance the secular and the spiritual aspects of their lives. Negotiating this balance was a key theme in Catholic writing at this time and in the new Catholic teaching about the lay apostolate.²⁴ Where correspondents wrote about themselves or those close to them we can observe how private intentions co-existed or, in some circumstances, merged with public or national and international intentions. Many letters noted simply that the “miracle of 30 September” had saved their sons. Mme A. C., who, as we have seen, had sent 10 *francs* when she learnt there would be no war, noted that her son would have been forced to leave had war been declared: “I only have him.” Her daughter had died at the age of twenty two and her husband died three years later, heartbroken. But there was some consolation because: “for her feast the good Thérèse has sent us peace.”²⁵ Mme F. from Paris, referred to above, wrote that she was grateful to the “most beautiful Rose of Peace ... for having saved me from the terrible sadness of seeing my son and husband depart for war.”²⁶ As a mark of gratitude Mme E. sent 50 *francs*, as she had promised to do, if “by her intercession” Thérèse “saved us from war”: “having a son ... on the Maginot Line I was very worried.” She pledged another 50 *francs* and asked to be remembered in the Reverend Mother’s prayers.²⁷ Men also worried about those in their care. G. D. from the Vosges sent the 100 *francs* he had promised at the time of the mobilization when he asked Thérèse “to do everything in her power to get me back home to my sick sister.”²⁸ A chaplain hoped that the nuns would “pray for a young father who has been mobilized and whose health leaves much to be desired.” He sent the 100 *francs* promised in the event that “war was averted.”²⁹

²¹ ACL, Mme A. C., Saint-Maur-des-Fosses (Seine), 7 October 1938.

²² ACL, Mme F., Paris (12th *arrondissement*), 3 October 1938.

²³ ACL, Mme L., Saint-Aubin (Landes), 2 October 1938.

²⁴ This was particularly evident in the specialist Catholic Action groups (for example the Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne and the Jeunesse Étudiante Chrétienne) and their mission to proselytize on the terrain with which they were most familiar. For a general overview of Catholic structures and life in this period see Étienne Fouilloux, “‘Fille aînée de l’Église’ ou ‘pays de mission’? (1926-1958),” in *Histoire de la France religieuse*, Jacques Le Goff and René Rémond, eds (Paris, 1992), 129-252.

²⁵ ACL, Mme A. C., Saint-Maur-des-Fosses (Seine), 7 October 1938.

²⁶ ACL, Mme F., Paris (12th *arrondissement*), 3 October 1938.

²⁷ ACL, Mme E., Belfort (Franche-Comté), 16 January 1939.

²⁸ ACL, G. D., Epinal (Vosges), 4 January 1939.

²⁹ ACL, Abbé R. C., military chaplain in the Ardennes, 1 October 1938.

People's immediate concerns did not have to have an overt relationship with the crisis for the relationship between public and private intentions to be evident. Mlle L. L. from the Seine asked for a novena so that Thérèse would provide direction prior to her having to make "a personal decision."³⁰ Mme F. from Aude asked the Reverend Mother to pray "for my family and for our business so that St Thérèse will bring us work." She was especially concerned for the well being of "our little Alain" who was aged two.³¹ Mme L. from the Landes asked for prayers for the recovery of someone "dear to my heart" and "about whom I am anxious." She requested a mass and wanted the nuns to light a candle for the intention of this sick friend as soon as possible.³² And finally, a widow asked for better health to be able to continue to devote herself to her vocation as a Christian teacher.³³ Thus we can see that reflection on the wider social and political context – in short, the state of the world – was also the occasion for reflections on the believers' own moral and ethical – as well as social – standing in their private and public lives. A letter from a seminarian, M.C., from Mayenne, illustrates this point well.

M.C. wrote just after he had returned from his military service which, for him, had lasted a month during the partial mobilization. He thanked the Reverend Mother "from the bottom of his heart" for all the "fervent prayers" offered "for my intentions." He wrote that "even in the most difficult and distressing hour I felt within me a force which was not at all my own but which was the fruit of your tireless supplications", concluding that it would be best to thank Thérèse simply by asking her "to help me better to follow her little way of hope and total abandon" to divine will.³⁴ The unequivocal expression of a strong personal identification with Thérèse – her example and her teaching – is one of the most remarkable features of the Munich letters.

Pilgrimages, Actual and Imagined

Pilgrimages, constituting devotional journeys to holy places, often as acts of thanksgiving or penance, had become more accessible to larger and larger numbers of people in the wake of the transport "revolution" of the nineteenth century. Almost all of the donations enclosed in the Munich letters were for the completion of the Basilica, indicating the importance of the idea of pilgrimage and the sense of place in the minds of our correspondents. The foundation stone of the Basilica at Lisieux had been laid in 1929 and the structure was completed in 1954. It was one of the largest churches built in France in the twentieth century. Planning and constructing it was an ambitious undertaking, an expression of optimism that flew in the face of the foreboding of some of the religious sociologists who were declaring France a de-Christianized, even in some regions a pagan, country.³⁵ The crypt, gloriously decorated with mosaics depicting the life of Thérèse in the art deco style, was completed in 1932. In July 1937 Cardinal Pacelli (who would become Pope Pius XII two years later), visited Lisieux and blessed the (unfinished) Basilica. It was a religious event on the grand scale complete with a radio broadcast from the Pope, Pius

³⁰ ACL, Mlle L. L., Clamart (Seine), 30 September 1938.

³¹ ACL, Mme F., Azille (Aude), 30 September 1938.

³² ACL, Mme L., Saint-Aubin (Landes), 2 October 1938.

³³ ACL, Mme Vve. F., (Puy-de-Dôme), 20 October 1938.

³⁴ ACL, M. C., Laval (Mayenne), 20 October 1938.

³⁵ The concept of the country as *paganisée* was articulated most succinctly by Henri Godin and Yves Daniel in *La France, pays de mission?* (Paris, 1950; First published 1943).

XI. There was still much to be done in 1938 and Catholics beyond Lisieux recognized that completing the Basilica was a pressing goal.

In people's minds there was an association between expressing gratitude for the graces showered from above, and the completion of the Basilica. Mme F from Savoie and her friend, Mme P., sent a "modest offering" (150 *francs* between them) for the completion of the "beautiful Basilica" which they hoped would "foster the love of men for God" and the veneration of "our little Thérèse." Their wish was that from the Basilica there would come "many prayers for the intentions of the Pope our Holy Father ... for all our intentions ... and for World Peace."³⁶ The woman writing from Tunis on Armistice Day was typical. She offered 100 *francs* from her family for the construction of "Thérèse's basilica" saying "this gift is offered to her in gratitude for world peace."³⁷ The letters reveal the importance of Lisieux as a site of pilgrimage. Our correspondent from Aix-la-Chapelle, Msg F. B., had "not forgotten" his two visits to Lisieux, which, though "long ago", had nonetheless left their mark.³⁸ If they had not been there already, many people expressed the desire to visit Lisieux. In the meantime they had to content themselves with other forms of pilgrimage.

The idea that the act of writing itself constituted a kind of pilgrimage seems to be confirmed both by the Munich letters and the correspondence which arrived between 1939 and 1945.³⁹ Facilitating the completion of the Basilica was an integral part of this pilgrimage of the imagination as each advance on the works signaled the extension of Thérèse's (and thereby the Church's) influence in the world. Their direct line of communication with Lisieux signified the correspondents' virtual presence and their solidarity with actual pilgrims. Mme B. wrote that the Thérésian relics distributed for mobilized men "had provided protection" and alleviated "many pains" including the "cruel separations." She asked that a novena be offered at the saint's tomb for the intentions of "those of us who cannot be there."⁴⁰ Mme L. from the Landes asked for a mass of thanksgiving to be offered at Thérèse's altar as soon as possible and for candles to be lit before her statue for a "dear, invalid" friend.⁴¹ Visiting Thérèse in their local churches was another option for the virtual pilgrims. After learning that there "would not be a war," Mme A. C. thanked the little saint by leaving flowers at Thérèse's statue in her own parish.⁴² This was typical and possible because, after her canonization, Thérèse's material presence was ubiquitous in the decoration of Churches everywhere. She was the most frequently represented saint in the Churches of Paris, for example.⁴³

The identification with Lisieux and its triumphalist architectural monument honoring Thérèse might be seen to be an extension of what Ruth Harris has described as the "pilgrimage movement". This movement arose in the aftermath of the apparitions of the Virgin Mary in Lourdes in 1858 and had some bearing on – or was shaped by – the strained relations between Church and State in *fin de siècle* France.⁴⁴ But there are also some differences that we need to take into account. In the Great

³⁶ ACL, Mme F., Chambéry (Savoie), 3 November 1938.

³⁷ ACL, Mme C., Tunis, 11 November 1938.

³⁸ ACL, Msg F. B., Aix-la-Chapelle, 5 October 1938.

³⁹ See Drapac, "The Devotion of French Prisoners of War and Requisitioned Workers to Thérèse of Lisieux."

⁴⁰ ACL, Mme B., Chambrey (Moselle), 20 February 1939.

⁴¹ ACL, Mme L., (Landes), n.d. (post mark 2 October 1938).

⁴² ACL, Mme A. C., Saint-Maur-des-Fosses (Seine), 7 October 1938.

⁴³ Stephen Wilson, "Cults of Saints in the Churches of Central Paris," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22, no. 4 (1980): 548-75.

⁴⁴ Ruth Harris, *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age* (New York, 1999).

War Catholics had defended and died for the Republic and their collective sacrifice could not go unnoticed. Many have argued that it had the effect of reintegrating Catholics into “the nation”.⁴⁵ The memory of the Great War was a shared memory and its presence in the correspondence is pervasive even where it is not referred to directly. War widows feared for their sons. Veterans referred to their devotional practices in *la guerre précédente* and described how these practices had sustained them. After the papal condemnation of the Action Française in 1926, Catholics had been forced to rethink their political affiliations. They had to search for new methods of promoting Christian values in the secular world and this in part explains the extraordinary success of the Catholic Action movement.⁴⁶ The Church of 1938 was different in significant ways from the Church of 1898.

Work on the Basilica continued during the war. Masses for returned prisoners of war and for the intentions of those French soldiers who were still incarcerated were held regularly in the crypt. It was clearly communicated that collections for the building works would not be suspended in the crisis. Donations arrived from parishioners across France and even from prisoner of war camps, further reinforcing the notion that pilgrimage was a central concept in the minds of French Catholics at this time regardless of whether there was any hope of actually visiting the holy site in person.⁴⁷ In 1938 Thérèse’s correspondents expressed their desire to see the Basilica completed, interpreting this vast work as an act of thanksgiving for all the graces showered upon them in the past, but now, especially, for the gift of peace. In addition it would prove an impressive draw card for Thérèse’s international cast of devotees.

A Most Powerful Intermediary

The Munich letters reveal a deep gratitude towards Thérèse. They reflect the intensity of the devotion to her and the strong material identification with Lisieux as a site of pilgrimage worthy of the greatness of the “little saint.” Evident, too, is the appeal of her spirituality of the “little way,” to which many refer specifically. The integration or merging of public and private intentions in the calls for Thérèse’s intercession give us a sense of the way in which the correspondents negotiated their local identity as citizens and their international identity as members of a global Church. In order to demonstrate how these themes are woven into the letters to Thérèse, I have chosen to focus on six unremarkable and thus representative examples: one letter from a widow, one from an enlisted lay man, two from a teacher in a Catholic school in Brittany and two from the girls she taught.

The widow, Mme Vve B., wrote on 3 October 1938 and asked the nuns “to pray to our little St Thérèse” for her and her family and to thank Thérèse “for preventing war.” She continued: “I am a worker, not at all rich, who loves Thérèse I entrust my future in her in the hope that she preserves my good health so that I can continue to earn my living to support myself and those close to me.” Those close to her included her brother, sisters, brothers-in-law, nephews and nieces. She asked that the nuns pray “that your little sister might help me a lot in this at times painful and difficult life.” She had confidence in the Reverend Mother (as noted, Thérèse’s actual

⁴⁵ See Stephen Schloesser, *Jazz Age Catholicism: Mystic Modernism in Postwar Paris, 1919-1923* (Toronto, 2005) for a discussion of this idea of renewal and the realignment of religious sensibilities after the war.

⁴⁶ See note 24 above and various articles in Kay Chadwick, ed., *Catholicism, Politics and Society in Twentieth Century France* (Liverpool, 2000).

⁴⁷ Drapac, “The Devotion of French Prisoners of War and Requisitioned Workers to Thérèse of Lisieux.”

sister, Pauline) and in closing added: "I trust that you will pray for me and my needs." Enclosing a money order for 100 *francs* she asked the nuns to acknowledge receipt of the donation and provided a stamp for their response. This brief letter illustrates that the act of giving entailed sacrifice and how the correspondents broached their private concerns in a disarmingly direct fashion.⁴⁸

In his letter Brigadier D. recalled his pilgrimage to Lisieux a few months previously (May) saying he had experienced "unforgettable hours there." He humbly thanked the Reverend Mother for allowing him to serve at the mass for the community. He also served at the mass on the main altar of the Basilica for the anniversary of Thérèse's first communion. For him the pilgrimage had been a source of renewal. Four months later he could write that "during the grave hours of September" he went with part of his regiment to Rochefort-sur-Mer and that there, "in the midst of preoccupations of all kinds" he turned to Thérèse and every morning for eight days went to mass and took communion. He concluded: "Finally on 30 September the peace was saved. St Thérèse, the angel of peace had arranged everything." Earlier in the year he had also attended the first mass of a young priest and witnessed the blessing of a new statue of Thérèse. Brigadier D. remained very grateful to Thérèse. He asked the Reverend Mother to thank "our dear little saint" for all the gifts she had bestowed on him and for prayers for his intentions and those of his future fiancée.⁴⁹ Though pilgrims always noted their visit to Lisieux had been a pivotal moment for them, as we have seen, one did not have to go to Lisieux to be near Thérèse.

Mlle H., a teacher at St Anne's school in Redon (Brittany) and her pupils in the class of St Thérèse wrote to the Carmel on two occasions in 1938.⁵⁰ The first letters predate the crisis by five months and the following letters arrived after the Munich Agreement. I end with these examples both because they draw together all the points raised thus far and because they provide evidence of continuities in the nature of letter writing to Lisieux before and after the crisis. Furthermore they offer valuable insight into how school-aged girls described their devotion to Thérèse.

The first item of correspondence to Lisieux from the school is dated 4 April 1938. It is written on behalf of her classmates by Marie-Thérèse R. who addresses the letter not to the Reverend Mother, but to "My Dear Little Saint Thérèse." The aim of the letter was to alert the Carmel of the girls' spiritual preparation to mark the upcoming fiftieth anniversary of Thérèse's entry into the Carmel. This preparation entailed a series of sacrifices and devotions which, combined, would amount to a "spiritual bouquet," their gift to Thérèse.⁵¹ Enclosed was a money order for 5 *francs* for the Basilica.⁵² In order to be adequately prepared and to be able to "give of their best," the girls had begun their "[spiritual] offensive" on 19 March. They took their lead from Thérèse in the hope that "united to the sacrifice of the Cross" their "small mortifications" would be agreeable to "Our Lord." Marie-Thérèse added that she had fully recovered from an illness the previous year, no doubt due in part to the intercession of Thérèse whose protection had been sought on her behalf. Now they

⁴⁸ ACL, Mme Vve. B., (Seine-et-Oise), 3 October 1938.

⁴⁹ ACL, Brigadier J. D., Tarbes (Hautes-Pyrénées), 11 December 1938.

⁵⁰ ACL, Mlle H. and the girls from the class of St Thérèse at St Anne's school in Redon (Brittany), 4 April 1938 and 21 October 1938.

⁵¹ A spiritual bouquet is a series of prayers or devotions gathered together as a gift for a particular intention and marking a special occasion or commemoration.

⁵² ACL, Mlle H. and the girls from the class of St Thérèse at St Anne's school in Redon (Brittany), 4 April 1938.

asked for prayers for their school's director who was sick and for the teachers whose "devotion" to them was "so great." Signing off she wrote: "On behalf of all my little companions I would like to say once more that we love you and I ask that you protect our families and our school and all the people who look after us." There were thirty-one additional signatories and Mlle H. added: "All your little sisters love you dearly and ask for your protection."⁵³

The teacher, like hundreds of others, shared details of her life and observations on the world around her with the Carmel. Writing separately, she stated that she hoped that the girls' sacrifices would demonstrate to the Reverend Mother how well they had applied themselves in preparing for the September anniversaries, thus showing how great was their affection for Thérèse and how deep their gratitude for all that she had already done for them. For her part, Mlle H. asked for help in her work, which was "difficult at times," and a deeper understanding of the saint's "Little Way" so that through Thérèse's guidance and that of the Virgin Mary, her life would become an act of continual love towards "our divine master." It was "good to look towards Lisieux," she wrote, "when hate and distrust of God are growing from all sides." She hoped that the prioress's "holy little sister would protect the Church, our dear France and those who are dear to us." She noted the wide reach and impact of Thérèse – "truly a light that shines in our sky that is charged with so many clouds" – and thanked the Lord for all the blessings and graces bestowed upon Thérèse as, clearly, the "whole world" was now profiting from these.⁵⁴ She asked for prayers for a young priest who had just taken charge of one of the parish's youth works, "flourishing" but "full of difficulties on occasion." Some words of assurance that Thérèse was protecting him in his ministry would encourage him. Similarly, some kind words directed to the children would inspire them "always to do better and to please Jesus." Mlle H. apologized for unburdening herself but, having received support and kindnesses in the past, she had come to the realization that the Carmel "refused nothing" and brought "joy and strength" to souls that were distraught or grieving.⁵⁵

Six months later more correspondence arrived from Redon. Mlle H., like so many others, thanked the "good Lord for having preserved the peace and our dear Patrie." Once more a number of intentions converged in her letter which touched on private matters as well as the concerns about the parish raised in her earlier correspondence.⁵⁶ The girls, continuing in the same vein as their April letter, wrote directly to Thérèse. Like "everyone," they had "experienced some anxious days at the end of September." But as the "most terrible days" came to an end they began to breathe in "peace and freedom again." They had observed the feast of the saint of the "countries most threatened" (St Wenceslaus's feast day was celebrated on 28 September) and, especially, the anniversary of Thérèse's death: "Above all, on 30 September between 7 and 8 o'clock we thought of you ... watching over our dear Patrie, so loved by all We thought there had been a miracle for things surely would not have been arranged as they had been without heavenly intervention." To thank God and the Blessed Virgin for having preserved the peace they offered up to Thérèse, their intermediary, a novena and more "little sacrifices": "We would like to ask you to pray for France, to save her from other dangers that darken the horizon and to help her to be more Christian." They enclosed a collage comprising a holy card of

⁵³ ACL, girls from the class of St Thérèse, 4 April 1938.

⁵⁴ ACL, Mlle H., 4 April 1938.

⁵⁵ ACL, Mlle H., 4 April 1938.

⁵⁶ ACL, Mlle H., 21 October 1938.

Thérèse at the feet of the Virgin holding the child Jesus surrounded by hand-drawn and hand-colored roses, Thérèse's favorite flower. The girls' most recent "spiritual bouquet" offered to their "dear little saint" in grateful recognition for the grace received ("the preservation of peace") included various personal sacrifices, prayers, decades of the rosary and periods of silence.⁵⁷

Collectively, these six letters reveal the spiritual and social practices that were important to Thérèse's correspondents. We learn that the crisis was deeply troubling and that the example of Thérèse as a loyal and loving servant of the Church, as well as her powers of intercession, were held in high regard by those who were particularly devoted to her. The correspondents looked to Lisieux as a source of hope, enlightenment and strength in a period of political turmoil to which they responded in various ways that were appropriate to their personal circumstances. The letters from the school in Brittany also alert us to certain continuities in form and content before and after the Munich Agreement.

Catholics in the Crisis: Eschewing Teleology and the Old Dichotomies

Apart from giving us a unique insight into Catholic mentalities during the international crisis, the Munich letters provide useful background to the debates about Catholic life during the occupation. The seeming weakness demonstrated by France in 1938 was long interpreted as the precursor to the crushing defeat of June 1940. According to this line of argument France's lack of vigilance toward Hitler was due in part to the widespread fear of war and the fear of communism and had tragic consequences. Thus France's collapse was moral as well as military: the collective bereavement in 1918 and the ever present – or "brooding" – memory of the Great War resulted in the "immobilism" and "stagnation" of the 1930s that created the "spirit of Munich" and the desire to avoid another war at any cost.⁵⁸

Interpretations of Catholic behavior in the 1930s and 1940s generally replicate this teleological framework. The received wisdom holds that the extent of French Catholicism's complicity and culpability in regard to the appeasement of Nazi Germany resulted from its understandable, though regrettable, pacifism and its conservatism. This was the essential precondition of Catholic acceptance of Vichy and, hence, Catholic collaborationism. Underpinning this thesis is a dichotomous approach that pits Catholic resistance (largely the work of progressive Catholic elites) against its polar opposite, Catholic collaboration (the stance of the hierarchy and of rank and file Catholics).⁵⁹

However, deterministic arguments about the relationship between interwar pacifism and collaboration have been modified considerably. For a start, the pacifist label is used more cautiously than it once was. Interwar pacifism did not align directly with a particular political position and not all political positions with which it did align "led" to collaboration, however defined. Indeed, the opposite is the case for a number of individuals and groupings on the Right and Left of politics. Moreover, only a very small number of people were ever integral or ideological pacifists who rejected

⁵⁷ ACL, girls from the class of St Thérèse, 21 October, 1938.

⁵⁸ See Jean-Pierre Azéma, *From Munich to the Liberation, 1938-1944*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Cambridge, 1984; First published 1979), chapter 1. See also Maurice Larkin, *France since the Popular Front: Government and People 1936-1996* (Oxford and New York, 1997) for an exposition of the "stagnation" thesis.

⁵⁹ See for example, W. D. Halls, *Politics, Society and Christianity in Vichy France* (Oxford and Providence, 1995) where this position is argued. See also Renée Bédarida, *Les catholiques dans la guerre 1939-1945: Entre Vichy et la Résistance* (Paris, 1998); and Nicholas Atkin, "Ralliés and résistants: Catholics in Vichy France, 1940-1944," in *Catholicism, Politics and Society*, 97-118.

war on any grounds. Hating or fearing war is not the same as pacifism and hating or fearing war in the 1920s and 1930s did not necessarily – or even at all – equate with an anti-patriotic or anti-war position.⁶⁰ Historians like Daniel Hucker warn that we must not conflate principled pacifism and the dread of war. Hucker writes that it is more accurate to speak of “war anxiety” than pacifism in regard to what, in retrospect, is so readily and teleologically categorized as the “appeasement mentality” of the late 1930s.⁶¹

The idea that France’s defeat was moral rather than military has lost credibility. Hucker’s argument demonstrates this. When war was declared a year after Munich, mobilization was smooth and efficient. There is no evidence to support the view that the collapse in 1940 resulted from defeatism among the troops or from the treachery of “fifth columnists”. A study of French teachers in the interwar period shows that, for all their anti-war or “pacifist” tendencies, they stuck to a firmly nationalist agenda in their curriculum. They were, almost paradoxically, “patriotic pacifists.”⁶² A study of the Munich letters seems to confirm this in another sphere and suggests that by broadening the base of our research into Catholic thought and practice, the lines between the old dichotomies become more porous.

Normally historians draw on the example of Catholic notables and debates between them, or the example of priests and members of religious orders to assess Catholic thinking or Catholic life and sensibilities. This is understandable given that these groups and individuals often left detailed accounts of their ideas in their writings or correspondence. Katherine Davies has shown that the Catholic convert, essayist and critic, Charles du Bos (1882-1939), was much troubled by the Munich Agreement and wrestled with the challenge of determining an appropriate balance between the quest for personal sanctification and political engagement.⁶³ Often rank and file Catholics are seen to be in a separate category from Catholic elites or individuals like Du Bos: undifferentiated and clinging to anti-intellectual devotional practices that were politically manipulated or politically driven, they blindly followed a conservative hierarchy or the lead of particular individuals or organizations.⁶⁴ It is difficult to find the voice of the lay “Catholic in the pews” and to assess the extent to which there was a convergence between the sensibilities of a Du Bos on the one hand, and a faceless parishioner on the other. This is largely because, as I have already intimated, outdated dichotomies have yet to be dislodged. While the dividing lines between progressive and reactionary, masculine and feminine, intellectuals (as progressive) and Catholics in the pews (as reactionary), and, finally, resisters and collaborators are more permeable than they once were, these dichotomies still inform many assumptions about twentieth century religious history. The sources under

⁶⁰ See Robert J. Young, *France and the Origins of the Second World War* (Basingstoke, 1996) for a comprehensive summary of this historiography.

⁶¹ Daniel Hucker, “French Public Attitudes Towards the Prospect of War in 1938-1939: ‘Pacifism’ or ‘War Anxiety’?,” *French History* 21, no. 4 (2007): 431-49; and *Public Opinion and the End of Appeasement in Britain and France* (Farnham, 2011).

⁶² See Mona L. Siegel, *The Moral Disarmament of France: Education, Pacifism, and Patriotism, 1914-1940* (Cambridge, 2004).

⁶³ Katherine Jane Davies, “A ‘Third Way’ Catholic Intellectual: Charles du Bos, Tragedy, and Ethics in Interwar Paris,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 71, no. 4 (2010): 637-59.

⁶⁴ Popular devotions in the nineteenth century, including the cult of the Sacred Heart and the growth in popularity of Lourdes as a site of pilgrimage, are often interpreted politically as examples of Catholic anti-republican triumphalism. For a discussion of the different interpretative frameworks for understanding these practices see Harris, *Lourdes*. Richard D. E. Burton describes what he terms the Catholic Right’s politicization of Thérèse in *Holy Tears, Holy Blood: Women, Catholicism and the Culture of Suffering in France, 1840-1970* (Ithaca, 2004).

review in this article provide some clues as to how we might begin to dispense with the old binaries.

Conclusion

If we consider the Munich letters in the light of the historiography of Catholic experiences in the crisis of the late 1930s and the 1940s, then it becomes clear that they tell a much more complex story than one of a straight line from “appeasement” to “collaboration.” Interpretations of Catholic quietism, and even the concept itself, have long been seen to be evidence of a number of negative traits. These include a deep conservatism (often conflated with fascistic tendencies) or a flight from politics and from the “real world,” positions that placed the Church’s institutional “interests” and personal sanctification above social justice, for example.

The letters I have studied do not indicate that people were ideologically opposed to war or that they would not fight or support a war if they had to do so. The laymen and priests who wrote to the Carmel did not rail against mobilization in 1938 but expressed relief that it was short lived. However, while the correspondents often noted that they could not overlook the coincidence of the meeting in Munich and the Thérèsian anniversaries falling in late September 1938, there are actually very few direct references to the Munich Agreement or to the specific political context in which it was negotiated. Mostly correspondents alluded to Munich with phrases like “the recent events.” Out of a total of 293 letters, Munich is mentioned by name seven times and once in the sample of seventy five to which I refer here. Thus, ironically, in the Munich letters there is near total silence on the subject of Munich. And, in all of the letters, other than a single (negative) reference to Hitler, there is only one mention of an individual politician (Daladier) while the national “policies” of the signatories to the pact are not analyzed. Yet, there is no doubt that the crisis was at the forefront of the correspondents’ minds, indeed it is precisely the reason that they wrote “to Thérèse.” Significantly, Catholic “silences” on what we now regard as the pressing moral questions of the age have been seen to represent a disregard for wider social and political events or, more broadly, an acceptance of - and therefore responsibility for - injustice. The wartime “silence” of the Pope regarding the persecution and genocide of Europe’s Jews is the most obvious and disturbing example of this line of argument. The Munich letters’ “silence” on the very issue that precipitated the correspondence to the Rose of Peace alerts us to the need for caution when we are tempted to fill this and other silences by reasoning backwards from the war years.

When war broke out in September 1939 there was another flood of letters, many from mobilized men. After the defeat, prisoners of war and then requisitioned workers wrote to Lisieux asking for protection and describing the altars and chapels they built in their camps and barracks. Thérèse was one of the most venerated saints in these makeshift spaces of worship. The saint of the *poilus* had become the saint of the prisoners of war. Thérèse provided the *absents* with a practical spirituality and an accessible model of heroism that enabled them to endure the helplessness of their situation as they followed her “little way”. For them, seeking the heroic in the anti-heroic was more pressing the longer they were incarcerated.⁶⁵

The fact that war had been averted in September 1938 led to a deep and palpable gratitude toward the heavenly intercessors for their role in this happy outcome. But at the same time there were other concerns that needed attending and

⁶⁵ Drapac, “The Devotion of French Prisoners of War and Requisitioned Workers to Thérèse of Lisieux.”

could not be neglected. The Catholics who wrote to the Carmel felt that they had to do what they could in the realm over which they had a direct impact to make the world safe and peaceful, whether it was in the home, in the parish, in the classroom, in the workplace or in one's regiment. The Munich letters reveal that Thérèse's spiritual and practical example offered her correspondents the inspiration and the spiritual means to work towards this ideal.