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"Danced spiritual life of Teresa of Avila & Current Witnesses" Sophie Lespinasse-Milan, Dancing the desire of God

*[From now on, English and Spanish speakers will find the translations
in the program (link below) and in the video conference chat.*

*Important! This document must remain open until the end of the seminar,
for translations of transitions between guests and for the conclusion.]*

<https://sophielespinassemilan.wordpress.com/programme-program-programma/>

The videos and other documents, in their complete and final version,
including French transcripts and other testimonies,
will be available in December at the following address:

<https://www.danceandchristianity-cid.com/dancedspirituallifeofteresaofavila>

INTRODUCTION

Before I begin, I would like to thank Constantin, Claudine, and Nathalie from the CID for suggesting I organize this seminar and for appointing me in the role of referent. I thoroughly enjoyed myself and am already looking forward to our future work together. I would also like to thank the guests and interviewees I spoke with to prepare a first draft of a film that has been in development for about ten years, and from which I will present some initial excerpts today.

Finally, thank you to everyone who helped me in one way or another to find sources or to proofread this research, which I dedicate to my children.

TESTIMONY

How did I come to be here today, talking to you about spiritual life, dance, and specifically about Teresa? (That's what I'll call her here, by her first name.)

I started dancing at a very young age, and dance has always been a part of my life. So much so that by the age of 13, I had acquired a solid enough technical level in classical ballet to be a soloist in my class's performances, experiencing the joys of effortless suspension in the air, the balance anchored on pointe that allows you to rise...



However, the awareness of a spiritual life within me and my interest in it came later in life, when I was almost 28. I had just returned from humanitarian missions where I had been struck, particularly after the tsunami, by the transient nature of our material world. I wondered what I could possibly build my life on, something that would last forever. This was one of Teresa's constant concerns, whom I didn't yet know.

It was then that my husband became terminally ill, at the very moment I was welcoming life into my womb, pregnant with our first child. We were atheists, and with such a tragedy shattering our lives, we weren't exactly inclined to believe in God.

I'll skip over our entire journey... the turning point, a few years later, was our discovery of silent retreats, which we then attended frequently, even embracing them wholeheartedly. After traveling extensively, all over the world, we had the decisive experience of a vast world opening up within us, a world we have never ceased to explore. It became the joyful and wondrous priority, the center of our lives. Later, reading Teresa's work, with its description of her vast Inner Castle and all its mansions, filled me with profound joy.

After this discovery of spiritual life, I began my research in 2009, pursuing a Master's degree in Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Paris Créteil, focusing on reinterpreting one's life from a spiritual perspective, whether atheist or religious. Above all, I gave up dance, which seemed completely irrelevant, a waste of time, a pointless and futile pursuit.

Life has a sense of humor... In 2012, when I decided to abandon dance, it was offered to me again. Subsequently, this decision was reinforced by events, coincidences, encounters, and callings... each time I was tempted to give it up or doubted this spiritual path, this spiritual exercise, that is dance.

I'd like to offer a brief recap of this journey, highlighting five key dates:

In 2012, I met a priest and brother (who lives in a community and leads a life of prayer) who is also a dancer, Mr. Laloux. It was with him that I danced for the first time during Mass. I found it strange and a little crazy, but the result was a deep and irrepressible, growing desire to pray much more... and to dance much more.

In 2013, I providentially met my current dance teacher, who had danced with Béjart, at La Scala in Milan... and abruptly ended her career to dance in the most prestigious churches in Europe. She shared with me a highly refined yet humble method of sacred dance. Thanks to her, my dancing was transformed, and so was my state of mind.



In 2014, I was asked to dance during two Masses. During my dance, I experienced, within my body, the act of dancing with my back to the congregation, which was, in fact, facing them; that is to say, like everyone else in the congregation, I was oriented towards the altar. There, I understood that this dance was truly a prayer: I had nothing to offer or to put on a show. There was nothing to see, simply, I was praying.

It is an improvised, tentative dance, welcoming and responding to a presence, an intimate dialogue between friends. I let myself be inhabited by the inner movement, subtle as a light breeze, which requires listening intently in the silence to hear it, like the small rustling of butterfly wings that a pregnant woman feels in her womb as she carries life stirring within her. It's a connection between from the body and to the heart, and *vice versa*.

2015 was a pivotal year for me, during which everything fell into place.

- I was surprised by the reaction of my spiritual director, a rather traditional priest, who, seeing one of my gestures, danced, confirmed that I should continue.
- That same year, I gave my first presentation at Paris Cité/Diderot University on the subject of danced prayer in churches and presented my first thesis proposal.

- I then met an anthropologist specializing in death rites who told me he had seen, in France, a Benedictine monk dancing around a brother's coffin... I delved deeper into the subject and realized that there was a discreet but shared reality among other praying people who danced and were willing to share their experiences.

Madeleine Delbrêl's poem, "The Ball of Obedience," pointed me in the right direction. She writes: "If we were content with you, Lord, we could not resist this need to dance, like Frances of Assisi, John of the Cross, and Teresa of Avila!"

This was the year of my presentation at the Studium Notre-Dame de Vie, an article of which was published in 2017 in the proceedings of the conference and is available on the CID website, concerning the practice of dance in the life of Teresa of Avila.

- 2015 was also the year of my husband's death. The spirituality of mourning, especially that of widowhood and orphans, is mysterious and leads to surprising inspirations. I am raising my children alone, and I increasingly rely on encounters with a presence within me. My prayer-dance took on a new color, a new hue, and I deeply experienced what the Psalm recounts: "You have turned my mourning into dancing."

In 2018, after a long period of discernment, both individually and together, Brother Michel Laloux invited me to co-lead with him the pilot liturgical dance group "Dancing God," for three years, during 16 Masses in movement. An anecdote: the very first reaction was a woman who came up to me at the end of Mass to say, "That's exactly what I want for my funeral!" Luckily, I was prepared...



Since then, in addition to the retreats I regularly attend, silent prayer has become a significant part of my daily life, as has attending Mass. So, I pray by dancing, everywhere and constantly, for the prayer intentions of the sick and the bereaved: alone or with others praying, on pilgrimage routes, in crypts, monasteries, and chapels after hours (like at the Franciscan convent of Michel Laloux, where I also organize two vigils of danced prayer), sometimes even at work, or at home, in my own space for prayer and dance...

Finally, one last example that shows life has a sense of humor... This year, I announced, rather solemnly, to my spiritual director that I would no longer dance at all, neither at Mass nor in parishes, but only in monasteries, alone or perhaps with nuns.

Two days later, my parish called me to ask me to dance at Mass! It was the first time in 12 years. Obviously, I refused, but then I was told it was very prayerful, so I accepted, and I'm glad I did.

[PHOTOS] A few photos to illustrate my point.

First line: I was between 13 and 15 years old.

Twenty years later (2012): I meditated on the metamorphosis of the caterpillar into a butterfly, a spiritual metaphor for Teresa. Then, I prayed alone, in a closed church or, more rarely, during Mass. Then, at the cemetery, I prayed for my husband's burial.

What matters is what is unseen, so I never show videos.

*

This is where I speak from today, as a member of the Carmelite family, committed to a path toward consecrated widowhood, and a researcher in dance and especially in the anthropology of the body/gesture and spiritual life (particularly mystical prayer), having co-led a liturgical dance group.

For my research, I needed time for reflection and discernment, practice as well, and to collect a body of work. In 2020, my third doctoral thesis project was accepted by Paris Cergy University. I did not enroll due to a lack of funding and will present my fourth project, which is still evolving, in 2026.

The collection of testimonies I have been gathering since 2012 (you are welcome to contribute, including anonymously or confidentially), excerpts of which you will discover, concerns anyone, consecrated or not, who prays through dance, or during moments when they pray through dance.

A testimony from a non-consecrated person was recently sent to me by the ICD, by the director of a museum with an adjoining chapel: "In the evening," she said, "I sometimes returned to the church and, in the dim light, illuminated by the light of the Real Presence (the Blessed Sacrament), I prayed and danced in the nave and the choir. I danced instinctively, talking or singing or remaining silent while I danced. It was a secret, intimate



moment, a heart-to-heart with the Lord. I could not have experienced it with others or in front of an audience.”

Today, my aim is to fulfill the objective and the request of the CID: first, to share my experience, which I have just done, and second, to present an overview of my research on the spiritual life of dance and its practice in the Church and in churches. This is what I will do now: on the one hand, with Teresa of Avila, and on the other hand, in France, in our time, with consecrated persons, whether religious or lay.”

In the archives, which will be online in December, in addition to the video of this seminar, you will have access to today's testimonies in a longer version and will also have writings from other witnesses, including Protestants.

TERESA

So now I'm going to talk to you about Teresa. Some of you know her very well, much better than I do, while others know her only slightly; some are well-versed in her work, others are not. I'll try my best to bridge the gap—if you'll allow me this analogy—between your different expectations.

Teresa was a 16th-century Spanish nun, known, in particular, for founding numerous Carmelite monasteries in Spain, based on the original Rule dating from the 13th century, and relying on an intense and refined practice of prayer.

She is also the patron saint of Spain and its writers.

What I appreciate about her is her legendary humor and lightheartedness, her determination and quiet confidence, her humility without false modesty. What is very interesting and quite rare is that she was sometimes formed, sometimes questioned, sometimes supported by all the currents of the Catholic Church (Ignatian, Franciscan, Augustinian, Dominican... the Benedictine Rule, the foundation of monasticism), and that she represents for me something of a synthesis of all these charisms.

Before entering into the dance, and in order to understand her fully, it seems important to mention two aspects of Teresa's spiritual life and personality, which have touched me, speak to me, and continue to inspire me regularly.

- A crucial key to understanding her work and spiritual life is **desire**.

It is with this key that I invite you to enter the Carmelite enclosure.



In her works, the word "desire" constantly reappears. For example, in her autobiography, out of 450 pages, the word "desire" appears approximately 200 times—almost one page out of two.

It should be noted that this was probably a phenomenon of the time in Spain,

under the influence of Jews whose ancestors had been forced to convert and thus, to bury deep within themselves their ancestral faith, passed down through generations.

Teresa herself was not a "purebred," as the term was aptly put at the time! Her grandparents were precisely among these converted Jews.

Perhaps this is why she is particularly fond of Saint Augustine, whom she quotes about a God she encounters "within" herself, and I draw a parallel with the daily Jewish prayer in which God says to his people:

"Shema [listen]... I have put my Law within your heart..."

You will find a clue in the archives concerning desire in Thomas of Villeneuve, a Spaniard, perhaps descended from conversos, religious of the Order of Saint Augustine.

Moreover, Teresa's formation with the Augustinian nuns was an important stage in her journey, and she enjoyed it very much.

Thus, through prayer, Teresa is in constant dialogue with God; this is how she understands it, this is what she believes. In the silence of her heart, she listens and quickly understands that God speaks to her through her desires.

So when she is criticized and questioned (constantly), she writes:

But "who puts these desires in me?" It is God!

The equation is very simple and without unknowns: what she desires = what God wants.

And what God wants is what she desires and what brings her joy.

She finely exercises her discernment to distinguish between envy and desire. On this point, she develops in particular thanks to the questions of the Jesuits who question her very often.

The Jesuit approach, that of Ignatius of Loyola, a Spaniard and contemporary of Teresa, is to empower the person praying so that they themselves discover their deepest desire, to which God calls them, without anyone from the outside being able to interfere in this internal dialogue.



Thus, Teresa writes, with all the necessary diplomatic caution, that she “would not want to contradict those who have knowledge on their side,” a classic rhetorical device that announces she is about to contradict them, which she does: “but if I had listened to what they told me, I would have been mistaken and I would even have been in danger.”

Finally, on the subject of desire, prayer with God confirms Teresa in this uniqueness, her singular path, as if for all Christians. Perhaps this is unsettling, and she hears it from all sides, slander and the like, because it is too different, too innovative and progressive, too traditional, outside the norm. She doesn't care, ¡Adelante!, she is the only one capable of determining what God places in her heart, for her lasting happiness. And one of her greatest longings is freedom!

• **Freedom.** This will be the second key to understanding that I propose.

Teresa is a free woman—almost an oxymoron in her time—free to think what she wants, to desire what God wants for her, and free to do what she wants.

Or almost!

This may seem paradoxical when we speak of Teresa, a woman who chose to be confined within the four walls of a churchyard.

But God offers her the freedom to be herself and to discover who she is, her mission.

Yet, in a world of constraints, she is constantly hindered. She will therefore choose to protect her freedom, which she will conquer (it is indeed a struggle), by deciding to adopt the least bad solution, which is not her first choice: namely, to shut herself away with her sisters so they will be left in peace, under a governance of her own choosing.

To quickly understand the context of the outside world that traps and confines her, where everything is locked down, where she feels imprisoned and trapped:

- one must not be Jewish under penalty of humiliation (which her Jewish family experienced);

- one must not be Muslim, but that's okay, she is creative and would like to participate in the Reconquest, but there's just one problem: she is a woman;

- One must not be a Protestant Christian; at the time of the Reformation, she was even criticized, as a Catholic, for being too close to God, for belonging to the Alumbrados, those overly mystical "enlightened" individuals, who were censored (like several of her relatives and, as an aside, she herself once threw one of her writings into the fire to



demonstrate her obedience, confident that God would prevail) and imprisoned (like several of her relatives);

- She had a certain inclination towards the priesthood, but again, a minor detail: she was a woman.

This theme of womanhood would appear many times in her writings and in those of Anne of Jesus, who succeeded her.

She was suffocating! Marriage remains an option for her, but she refuses to be under male domination or any kind of control: man, woman, organization, way of thinking...

This is why she creates the only living conditions that will allow her to be free. She is prevented from going right, left, forward, or backward; she will conquer what no one can steal from her, what no one can deprive her of: the vertical axis between earth and heaven, her inner world.

So she closes the door and even reinforces the enclosure, returning to the first Rule. Because upon entering the Carmel, she discovers so many worldly things and external influences that she writes: "You leave one world and find ten more," including the world of the other nuns. It's even worse.

She chose marriage with God and remained faithful to her commitment. What can reassure us all is that it wasn't easy, but she was rewarded for staying the course: for several years, she went to prayer reluctantly, whereas much later it would become a place of fruitful and fertile joy.

It was within this framework, constrained on both sides, that she discovered infinite freedom. Like many artists who experience the powerful creativity that springs forth when channeled through constraints they transcend.

With these two keys, desire and freedom, let us now enter the dance, through the gate of the Camel compound and through that of the enclosure.

- Teresa of Avila danced. Her Carmelite sisters too, with her, without her, and after her.

"Where, when, how, and why?" ";" are the questions I have continued to ask myself since 2015, the date of my first communication on this subject (the article of which, published in 2017, can be found on the CID website). Michel de Certeau, a 20th-century academic and Jesuit priest, evokes "the orant [prayer] seized by a holy choreography, whose gesture is spirit," like "those Spanish Carmelites who danced before the Blessed Sacrament to the



great astonishment of their French companions.” Where did he get that from?! I had to consult some uncommon sources to find explicit written traces of this dance practice.

[The precise references will be provided in the final version, which will be published in December in the seminary archives.]

- In one of her letters, Teresa recounts this speech: “The Foundress [therefore referring to herself] arrives at recreation; Let us dance and sing, and ring, ring!

First, note the plural, "we dance," therefore together. The Carmelite sisters dance during recreation time, which takes place in the garden or in dedicated rooms.

First, regarding the time devoted to recreation: this time is no less sacred than any other. According to Mother Marie de Saint Joseph, Teresa's confidante and friend, recreation is a "fertilizer" that makes spiritual life "fertile." The Carmelite Rule perfectly balances times of prayer with times of recreation. Not because the poor women are so sad to be confined, that they need an outlet.

Second, regarding the location of recreation. In a Carmelite monastery, every space within the enclosure is sacred; everything is for God, with God, in God, belonging to God... Moreover, during recreation, in moments of joyful celebration, this is recalled to the the sisters —through various means—that God is present. Not to extinguish joy, but rather to amplify it and remain in constant prayer. Joy is prayer.

- Teresa writes this in her last book, considered her spiritual testament, and thus she stands by it: “It is sometimes, my sisters, a particular joy for me to see, when we are gathered together, what inner jubilation you possess and what praise you inspire to offer to our Lord for the happiness you have in living in this monastery. It is clear that your praise springs from the very depths of your souls. I would like, my sisters, for you to often inspire one another in this way, or for one of you to begin, and for her to immediately lead the others to imitate her. Oh! What a wonderful folly that is!” “What grace God has bestowed upon you by placing you in a sanctuary, where, if He grants you this folly I speak of and you express it, you will find only encouragement and not blame, unlike the criticisms of the world.” It is akin to holy folly. Just before, she had spoken of Francis of Assisi:

“This is what other saints must have felt when they went into the deserts so that, like Francis, they could loudly sing God’s praises. Oh, how many celebrations, how many demonstrations my soul would make, if it could, so that everyone would understand its joy. It is no small sorrow for it, amidst these transports of excessive jubilation, that it must remain silent and conceal its feelings.”



She writes it down and, a few years later, she does it... Yes, until the end of her life, Teresa maintained this habit of spontaneously expressing her divine joy.

[IMAGE: exhibition catalog] Castanets belonging to another Carmelite nun (and sandals worn without shoes for walking for miles...) and Teresa's castanets, which she used at a celebration less than two years before her death.

Whenever you read in Teresa's work, "Let us sing, let us ring, transports of jubilation..." it means there's a possibility of dancing, even if it's not always the case.

Moreover, she writes: "Such must have been the admirable transports of David when he took up the harp and intoned his hymns to the glory of God."

She plays all three families of instruments: guitar, flute, castanets, and tambourine (percussion; she knows how to bang her fist on the table and stomp her feet). She also walked for miles, and didn't spend her days sitting in front of a computer or living in seclusion!

She also sings, writes verses, invents music... the question is not why dance but how not to dance?

- Sister Anne of Saint Bartholomew, Teresa's companion and nurse, wrote in one of her letters: "I am sending you the verses you asked for so we can dance together afterward. Since we had danced so much near the cells, I did it in the choir to cheer them up."

So the places where the sisters danced were everywhere, including in the choir.

Before discussing the choir, the important word here is "joying" one another. There were not only recreation periods, but also celebrations, and the sense of celebration, the festive spirit, was ever-present.

ARCHIVES forthcoming on recreation periods, but not only that, also on the sense of celebration (see the plays of the Carmelite nun Thérèse of Lisieux).

The website of the Carmel of Puzol, in Spain, mentions an 18th-century manuscript [to be found in its entirety in the archives] kept at the Carmel of Toledo, which contained some poems by the Saint. It says of the one she composed for the Circumcision: "One evening, before this feast, while the nuns were enjoying themselves,

the Holy Mother came out of her cell, seized by an extraordinary fervor and spiritual impulse. She began to dance and sing, and she asked all the sisters to help her, which



they did with remarkable joy. The dance that the Holy Mother and her daughters were then performing was neither formal, nor accompanied by a guitar; They clapped their hands, as King David said: "Let all the peoples clap their hands!" And they continued in this way, with incomparable harmony and spiritual grace. The Carmel of Puzol adds: "May this fragment bear witness to the joyful and festive character not only of the Mother, but also of the style she transmitted to her communities, a style that endures to this day.

This joy is neither naive nor alienating. On the one hand, Teresa rejects the states of ecstasy she experiences. She is rooted, anchored to the earth; I often say that she has 'a spirituality of pots and pans.' On the other hand, and this is related, she is well aware of the limitations of her body: she is ill daily, and above all, she was presumed dead, her eyes glazed, ready to be buried in the grave dug for her. The dance is also, in a way, a defiant gesture against our finitude and death." In fact, sometimes she waits, "Long live death!", because she knows the afterlife, in God. To die is to live.

Marcelle Auclair, Teresa's undisputed biographer, the only one to have obtained papal permission to enter the convent walls to conduct her research, writes:

"For [Teresa], death is indeed resurrection, therefore joy [... and, for a deceased person, she] forbade funeral chants and composed joyful coplas that the sisters sang while dancing around the coffin." One can also dance at the moment of death.

One sister even says: "I felt great joy [for her] upon learning of her death."

- Having mentioned this mature joy, I would like to return to the subject of the choir.

It is the place of prayer and contemplation, the place par excellence of nuptial union with God,

the place of contemplation of the Blessed Sacrament, of communion at Mass.

At UNESCO, and therefore at the CID, we seek a mindset of openness to intercultural exchange.

So, I wondered if, in Spain, the relationship to this space of the choir was different from that in France. Perhaps less sacred? Indeed, we learn, in a book on the foundations of the Carmelites in France, that "Monsieur de Bérulle [...] did not allow spinning with a distaff in the choir and singing while working, a practice in which the Spanish nuns enjoyed themselves and which would have greatly surprised the faithful in France." "First, according to my information, this isn't a common practice in Spanish Carmelite convents. Second, Anne of Jesus, Teresa's assistant, who founded the Carmelite convents in France and Belgium, explains how shocked she is by the way the Blessed Sacrament is treated—



"mistreated," she says—in France, worse than in Spain (so it's not much better). She even finds a "host teeming with worms."

With this indignation, we understand that the choir is indeed an eminently sacred space for the Spanish nuns, and that's precisely why they dance there, praying through their holy dance!

It makes sense. Let's remember: who puts these desires in them...?

Another cultural distinction to highlight, perhaps." Anne of Jesus, as always, explains that French nuns have a "spirituality [that is] too abstract" (a term coined by Sister Christiane Meres): "I try to get them to look at and imitate Jesus, because here he is rarely remembered; everything consists of a simple vision of God, I don't know how they can do that all the time [...] They all engage in it more through suspension than through imitation. It's a strange way, I don't understand it." But the border between Spain and France is porous, as Teresa had already written about how sharply she was criticized in her own country for her contemplations of the Incarnation and the humanity of Christ. So this line of inquiry doesn't seem relevant to me.

- I will conclude by giving the floor to the French Carmelite nuns of that time,

through two testimonies. I take this opportunity to remember the Carmelites of the first monastery in Paris, thanks to whom we have these accounts,

and who maintained the oldest crypt in Paris, a heritage site now abandoned and whose state of preservation is very worrying.

The first account, in Limoges: "Mother Isabelle took great care to teach her Sisters everything she had learned in Spain, particularly the chanting and recitation used in the choir. [...] My daughters, we were taught all of this in our novitiate. These practices may seem of little importance in themselves; however, if one applies them with an inner spirit, they greatly advance a soul toward perfection." What may seem insignificant takes on paramount importance, provided it is imbued with meaning.

The second testimony, moving in its own way, demonstrates the good understanding between the French and Spanish sisters, and above all, sums up everything I have just said.

The prioress of Dijon leads you, dancing, from recreation to choir...



A French sister, “who had a special gift for charming the recreation sessions, once sang in her angelic voice verses whose refrain is as follows: O glorious Angels, Come and fetch my soul, carry it to heaven.” These words made such an impression on Mother Anne of Jesus that, unable to conceal the divine fire that consumed her, she led all her daughters before the Blessed Sacrament. There, transported like David before the Ark of the Lord, this venerable Mother, more like a Seraphim than a mortal creature, was seen forming certain turns in the choir, singing and clapping in the Spanish style, but with such majesty, gentleness, and gravity that, seized by a holy reverence at the sight of her, one felt inwardly touched and lifted up to God. Our Frenchwomen, unaccustomed to these pious demonstrations,

were no less edified than the others.

I now propose that we allow ourselves to be edified by the astonishing testimony of living faith that is dance. I first felt the desire for a cultural immersion in another place, another era. Allow me to take you to Spain, in the 16th century.

Nathalie, I'll let you continue.

[Reminder: English and Spanish speakers should keep this document for transitions between guests and until the end, for the conclusion.]

HISTORICAL INSIGHT

• Catherine Ingrassia

[Nathalie Guillemé speaks] For this historical perspective, Sophie and I have invited Catherine Ingrassia, PhD in Art History, archaeo-choreographer, and costume designer. She offers some insights into the dances of the period. On her website (referenced in the credits), you can explore this unique world further through dance reconstructions.

In the archives, after the credits, you will find an opening sequence of the dance of “Los Seises”, which is now part of a Jesuit college, in Seville Cathedral, and which I discovered thanks to my Spanish baroque dance teacher, Ana Yepes.

[Translations: open the supplementary document]

• Nathalie Guillemé

[Sophie Lespinasse-Milan speaks] For the continuation of the historical insight, here is Nathalie Guillemé, dancer and choreographer.

We worked together on a tribute to Teresa, not to meticulously recreate the steps she might have danced, but to do as she did: to allow ourselves to be inspired, in the present



moment, by the spontaneous impulse of heart and body under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who calls us to be led and continually recreated.

In the first part, we started with the steps of the "Tourdion" dance (see Catherine Ingrassia), and Nathalie, equipped with her tambourine and castanets, improvised some dances. For this sequence, we deliberately chose a garment that, while reminiscent of Carmelite nuns, nevertheless has a different shape and color.

In the second part, we present a workshop and research session on the metamorphosis of the silkworm into a butterfly (a metaphor for spiritual life according to Teresa), based on Loïe Fuller, whose work Nathalie has been dancing since 2015.

We were accompanied by Odile Jutten, organist of Evreux Cathedral, who also improvised. In the archives, you will find some bonus features after the credits.

These evocations will therefore serve as our transition between Teresa's dance and that of contemporary witnesses, such as Nathalie.

[Translations: open the supplementary document]

⇒ Nathalie Guillemé speaks after the video:

Thank you, Sophie, for this opportunity to speak. It was in 2018, when I joined the CID, that I had the pleasure of discovering Sophie's article. I immediately suggested to Dr. Kontogiannis that it be posted on the CID website, and then I proposed organizing a seminar for the "Dance and Christianity" program.

Today, you can see the result, and my collaboration with Sophie, an unforgettable and moving experience, has opened doors to wonderful projects to come.

May the energy of Teresa of Avila guide us and bring you beautiful discoveries through this seminar. Thank you.

CURRENT WITNESSES

• Michel Laloux

As my first witness, a praying dancer, I chose Mr. Laloux, a Franciscan friar and priest. I selected a few topics from a collection I have been gathering from him since 2012 and prepared an interview on the themes of Teresa, how her dance was confirmed by his friars, and the responsibility that this also represents.

He is currently on a pilgrimage, and I give him the opportunity to speak through this film.

[Translations: open the supplementary document]

• Poor Clares of Cormontreuil

The next witness will be the religious community of Clare of Assisi in Cormontreuil, France, near Reims. They have a long history of liturgical dances within their community.



It seemed worthwhile to interview them on this subject, within the framework of the ICD, one of whose missions, entrusted to them by UNESCO, is the inventory of the world's dance heritage.

[Translations: open the supplementary document]

• Marie Annet

The final speaker will be Marie Annet, a consecrated laywoman and coordinator of the pilgrim-dancers for Belgium. Here, she presents a teaching method that originated in France 50 years ago.

In the archives, you can read the testimony of someone who has been teaching this method in France. And, as an opening, after the credits, I have chosen a method of Christian dance, the Foatelli method, created in France between the two World Wars, including its presentation by the chaplain for artists at the time.

[Translations: open the supplementary document]

⇒ Marie Annet speaks after the video:

Thank you to Sophie for this magnificent collection. Yes, we will dance for you, Lord, as we still sing in today's psalm. And I would simply like to add that we, the pilgrim-dancers, are indeed connected to the spirituality of Carmel through the silence of the Ooaison, which is translated at the level of movement precisely by a silence; which makes it a gestural language, not a mere gesticulation.

This "hollow," as we call it, is truly that space within the gesture where we make room for God to enrich us and sanctify our movement.

Our dance then becomes the expression of profound listening, and, like the Virgin Mary, we can then bring the Word to the world.

A WINK FROM MIREILLE NEGRE

The seminar is drawing to a close, and I would like to offer a glimpse into the life of Mireille Nègre, who was a principal dancer at the Paris Opera before entering a Carmelite monastery where she lived the religious life for ten years.

She is now a consecrated laywoman and has agreed to offer us a piece of music she composed and performed, as well as a drawing of Teresa dancing.

We worked together to select and rearrange certain passages from her works, which you will hear me read before she shares a short message that I hope will have a profound impact.

I should point out that there are virtually no images, except at the beginning and end. Therefore, French speakers can close their eyes to listen to these texts inwardly.

[Translations: open the supplementary document]



International Dance Council, official partner of UNESCO
Dance and Spirituality Program, Dance and Christianity Group
Seminar n°12 of November 22nd, 2025
"Danced Spiritual Life of Teresa of Avila and Current Witnesses"
Sophie Lespinasse-Milan, Dancing the desire of Gd



CONCLUSION

In conclusion, following Mireille Nègre's message of a dance for peace, I would like to remember Kurt Jooss (Pina Bausch's teacher), the founder of the CID, for his famous and sadly relevant choreography, "The Green Table," which addresses the powerlessness of the powerful to bring peace to the world.

Perhaps, then, following the example of Teresa of Avila, we can listen to the prayer for inner peace that rises within us, humbly in the silence of our hearts.

Thank you to those who will dance this prayer: *Do not let your hearts be silent* (Psalm 29:30), and thank you to those who will encourage them in this mission of theirs.

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