

‘A Spiritual Road Trip Through The Diocese’

Michael Wojcik

Shrine of St. Thérèse in Boonton represents gratitude of founder

[EDITOR’S NOTE: This story is the first in a series that will feature many of the devotional sites that local faithful can visit on their travels throughout the diocese in Passaic, Morris and Sussex counties this summer.]

BOONTON — Take a short drive up a wooded street to an out-of-the-way dead end at the top of a hill in Boonton. Then, step out and walk through the doors of a small stone structure that resembles a country church — in reality an ornate shrine that takes you a world away from life’s worries and into the peace only Christ can give.

Welcome inside of the 81-year-old Shrine of St. Thérèse of the Little Flower, which also gives visitors not only a glimpse into the life and religious devotion of its patron, St. Thérèse of Lisieux, but also into the life of the local Italian man, Achille Arci, whose gratitude to her inspired him to build this devotional place in her honor. Today, the shrine also represents the love and devotion to Arci by his family, which continues to take care of the building and grounds in his honor.

“The people who come by appreciate the shrine. It’s a peaceful and serene place where, at least for a while, your troubles can go away, said Catherine Arci, a parishioner of Our Lady of Mount Carmel (OLMC), in Boonton, who maintains the shrine on behalf of the Arci family.

Walk through the black wooden doors of the shrine, encircled by ring of brown bricks, and enter a small, peaceful room aglow with candles — including devotional ones you can light for an intention for 50 cents. Adorning the space are pictures of Jesus and St. Thérèse; and statues of various sizes. Next to the altar stands a tall statue of St. Thérèse, greeting you, smiling down and holding a crucifix and bouquet of roses. You can sit and pray in one of the many rows of folding chairs with kneelers before the altar. On a clear day, sunlight pours through the colored stained-glass windows that line both sidewalls of the shrine.

Shrine: Shrine of St. Thérèse first stop on Spiritual Road Trip series

Continued from Page 1

A small sign on Rock Lane points you in the direction of the shrine up the hill at the end of the road in a residential area. Outside, you can see a large cross, outlined in stone on the ground to the right of the shrine, and several park benches that dot the scenic grounds, where visitors can pray and reflect. Arci opens the shrine seven days a week from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. in the spring and 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. in the fall. It closes for the winter on Nov. 1 and reopens on May 1.

A photo of Achille Arci displayed on a wall next to the tall St. Thérèse statue reminds visitors about the promise that he made in 1920 — the promise that compelled him to build this shrine. Back then, he became ill and learned from doctors with no bedside manners that there was no cure. So he prayed to St. Thérèse — also known as the “Little Flower of Jesus” [see timeline below about her life] for help. He made two promises if cured — that he would construct a shrine in her honor and that he would make a pilgrimage to her home in Lisieux in France.



Achille Arci

After a five-year fight, Achille Arci was miraculously cured. He kept his promises, first forming a small society of faithful Catholics — local Italian tradesmen and artisans — who asked for donations and contributed their time and talents to building the shrine. The group completed the project in three years, erecting it on what was the Arcis’ property at the time. In 1952, Achille Arci kept his second promise: traveling to Lisieux, according to the shrine’s history.

“My father had a great devotion to St. Therese even before he got sick. He thought that she was the greatest saint,” Arci said. “This shrine was my father’s. He loved this place until the day he died. Now, when I’m in trouble, I pray to her,” she said.

Achille Arci kept taking care of the shrine until he died in 1957. Eventually, ownership of the shrine was transferred to Our Lady of Mount Carmel Parish, Boonton. Today, the Arci family keeps caring for the shrine and grounds in memory of their father and out of their devotion to St. Thérèse — all with the help of generous donations from visitors, Arci said.

Many people visit the shrine during a typical day, but because not all of them sign the guestbook that greets them near the entrance, it is not possible for Arci to determine how many visitors come on a yearly basis. The guestbook does reveal that visitors come from all over — as close as Boonton, Denville, Totowa, Lake Hiawatha and Verona to as far at Florida and Switzerland. The shrine does have an altar but the shrine does not usually host Masses or weddings, Arci said.

One of the shrine’s frequent visitors, Louise Carter, has maintained a special devotion to St. Thérèse for most of her life.

Carter first visited the shrine at two-years-old. Shortly after, she was stricken with polio, a crippling disease considered incurable at the time. One day, her mother pushed her in a wheelchair up the hill from Boonton to the shrine. There, visiting Sisters of the Immaculate Conception came with a relic of the saint and held it up to Carter’s feet. To weeks later, the little girl could walk again.

“I love St. Thérèse. When I have a problem, that’s where I go — to her,” Carter said. “I have always loved the shrine. It’s peaceful and it’s a beautiful place to pray,” she said.



HOLY PLACE — Above left: A statue of St. Therese of Lisieux at the shrine in her honor in Boonton. Above: The shrine’s main entrance. Left: stained-glass windows that line both sides of the shrine’s interior. Below: The shrine’s interior, which includes an altar. *Beacon photos / Michael Wojcik*



Directions to shrine from Route 46 West: turn right on the Boulevard; take first left onto Powerville Road; take a right onto Cobb Road; take first left on Rock Lane; proceed to 54 Rock Lane on right.

The life of St. Thérèse of Lisieux

- Born Marie-Françoise-Thérèse Martin in Lisieux, France, in 1873.
- Joined the Carmelites to become a religious sister in 1888 at the age of 15 and went to a cloistered community of Lisieux, Normandy.
- Known as “The Little Flower of Jesus,” perhaps because of her religious commitment at an early age.
- Wrote “The Story of a Soul,” a series of autobiographical texts, during her nine years as a religious sister.
- Died in 1897 of tuberculosis at age 24. Her writings were published and read widely, making her one of the 20th century’s most popular saints.
- Beatified in 1923 and canonized in 1925.
- By the Apostolic Letter Divini Amoris Scientia (The Science of Divine Love) of October 19, 1997, Pope John Paul II declared her a Doctor of the Church, one of only four women so named.



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