

The Little Way of St Thérèse of Lisieux

The relics of St Thérèse of Lisieux traveled the USA from October 5, 1999 to January 28, 2000. Everywhere they went, huge crowds gathered with outpourings of devotion. The present article is a presentation made at one of the services in honor of the relics at St Agnes Church, Phoenix, Arizona, on December 21, 1999 and is offered here to a wider public.

Before her death, one of the sisters asked Thérèse if she would “look down from Heaven.” “No,” she said, “I shall come down.”¹ Thérèse has come down among us. The relics are one way she makes her presence felt. Over the centuries Christians have flocked to the catacombs in Rome to venerate the bones of the martyrs. I remember visiting the catacombs as a student there and being overwhelmed with a sense of the presence of the saints. The inscriptions carved in the tombs were the obvious response. “Peter, pray for us. Paul, intercede for us.” Instead of going to Thérèse’s tomb, she has come to us and we say to her: “Little Flower, pray for us. St Thérèse, intercede for us, for our families, our church and our world.”

Thérèse promised a shower of roses after her death. She said: “I will spend my heaven doing good on earth. I will send down a shower of roses.” The scent of these roses has filled the world. We are among the myriads of admirers and lovers of the Little Flower who have come out of their homes across the country to pay tribute to these relics. Why this amazing interest? Because people love this “littlest and greatest saint of modern times,” greatest because littlest. The two extremes – greatest and littlest – are the two poles of her life. At ten she realized that there were only two things really important in life: “to love God with all one’s heart and to be poor in spirit here on earth” (SS 93).² The two are mutually interdependent.

She is almost a contemporary. I am proud of the fact that one of my aunts was born on the same day and the same year as Thérèse, January 2, 1873. This aunt became a

Dominican sister and has long since died. Thérèse spent only 24 years on this earth, practically all of them in the little town of Lisieux in northwestern France, in Normandy, not far from the battle lines of World War II. She was mostly home-schooled, with only five years of formal education, yet she became a doctor of the Church two years ago, at the centenary of her death.

This title doctor, which is Latin for teacher, means that she is an official teacher in the Catholic Church, one of three women so honored. Her life and writing have something special to say to the whole church. She presents the gospel in a new light, with new insights, under the descriptive phrases “little way” or “little doctrine.” Her understanding of the gospel is the topic of this presentation.

Human Weakness and God’s Mercy

The starting point of her little way is the mercy of God. The mercy of God is God’s love in the presence of hurt and pain. God’s heart is moved to compassion as when Jesus saw humans suffer. This is what his Mercy means. *Le bon Dieu*, as Thérèse said, is a God of love and mercy; he is not a God of rigorous, recriminative justice. God is not obsessed with our sinfulness, on the lookout for the first false move on our part. We all say glibly: God loves each one of us unconditionally. Thérèse nuances that statement. God’s love is unconditional, but in order to receive it, we must be in touch with our weakness. Otherwise we give God no entree. We have to know and own our weakness for God’s Mercy to enter the picture. Thérèse’s sister Celine

said that Thérèse's spirituality was that of the Good Thief. The Bad Thief in the story closed the door on God's Mercy.

Her little way is about God's Mercy and human weakness. We need to be in touch with both these poles: God's fullness and our emptiness. But there is one more piece to the puzzle; Thérèse called it the centerpiece. It is confidence and trust. My way, says Thérèse, is all about confidence and love. We have to trust God's Mercy in the face of our neediness. Trust or surrender into God's arms is the bridge that connects divine Mercy and human inadequacy. Our task in life is to accept God's love and our own powerlessness, and in the strength of that love to let God heal us. Then we can get on with life. Does this sound familiar? It is the spirituality of the Twelve Steps.

All is grace, Thérèse said. By this she meant that God's love, or grace, is everywhere, in every turn of daily life, in every life situation. And it is there for the taking. And secondly, all is grace, because our success and well-being are ultimately God's gift. Our part is to let God's grace work in us in all the actions of our lives. In the end our lives are truly the human face of God.

The mystery of the gospel is that God's love and power flourish best in human weakness. St Paul puts it bluntly in II Corinthians [12: 9] in the words of Christ: "My grace is enough for you, for in weakness power reaches perfection." We have to acknowledge our infirmity. We have to own our weakness, confess our powerlessness. Then God will come.

This is the good news of Our Lord Jesus Christ according to Thérèse. It also happens to be the gospel according to Mark and Matthew and Luke and John, brought into clearer light by the genius of this doctor of the church.

Genesis of Thérèse's Teaching

What is the origin of this remarkable doctrine? It goes back to Thérèse's childhood, when she was about to turn 14. The previous years had been difficult ones. Her mother had died when she was four, her second mother, her sister Pauline, had entered Carmel when Thérèse was nine, leaving her doubly orphaned. The family tried to compensate. They lavished affection on the baby of the family. Her father became mother and father to his "little queen" and her older sisters doted on her. But Thérèse was not at peace. She was high-strung, super-sensitive, breaking into tears at the least provocation, unable to relate to outsiders, even children her own age. She was caught in a vicious circle "without knowing how to come out" (SS 101). She wrote of this time: "God would have to work a little miracle to make me grow up in an instant" (SS 97).

The miracle happened early Christmas morning in 1886, when papa, Celine, Leonie, and Thérèse came home from midnight Mass. As in each Christmas of the past, Thérèse had placed her shoes at the chimney for Santa Claus to fill them with goodies. Thérèse and Celine were putting their hats away upstairs, and they overheard their father complain a bit testily that Thérèse was getting too old for the childish foolishness of the shoes. Thérèse was devastated; the tears flowed down her cheeks. Celine begged her not to go downstairs in this condition. "You will ruin Christmas for every one," she said.

Thérèse drew herself up, wiped away the tears and said: "I am okay." She wrote in her autobiography: "Thérèse was no longer the same; Jesus had changed her heart" (SS 98). She skipped down the stairs and enthused over the gifts as if she had heard nothing.

A great healing had taken place. Later Thérèse summed up the conversion experience in these lucid words: "I felt charity enter into my soul, and the need to forget myself and to please others; since then I have been happy!" (SS 99)

“Charity Entered My Soul.”

This is the beginning of every conversion. God always starts the process. Paul roots the whole Christian life in this principle: We have free access to God, because “the love of God is poured forth into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, who is given to us” (Rom 5.5). Our life in God starts here: “You have not chosen me, I have chosen you” (Jn 15:16). “The love of God consists in this, not that we have loved God, but that God has loved us” (1 Jn 4:10). God’s love initiates the process and brings every good work to its conclusion.

But we must appropriate that love; we must access it. God’s love is there all the time, like that of an indulgent parent. We are the ones, as Eckhart says, who are out to lunch. We do not realize that God dwells in the depths of our being, calling us, offering friendship, desiring to sit at table with us. We have to get in touch with that divine intention. This is why we pay attention to God’s word in the Scriptures, why we celebrate the Sacraments, especially Eucharist, why we pray. These practices raise our consciousness and put us in contact with the Indwelling God.

Thérèse was disposed to hear and to do the word of God. She was ready for the Christmas healing. God was able to touch her heart, and she was ready to receive the in-breaking of God’s love, because she was in the process of struggling to grow up. What was the outcome of the grace? “I felt the need to forget myself and please others.” Here are the two main challenges of every Christian life, to die to self and to live for others. This is the Paschal Mystery of death and resurrection and it is made possible, even appealing by the gift of God’s love.

Forgetting Self and Pleasing Others

Thérèse’s conversion initiated a honeymoon adventure with God. Thérèse and her slightly older sister Celine, who were

copies of each other, embarked on the faith-walk together. Their days were filled with prayer and pious conversations, with consolations and fervor, with a sense of God’s presence. The period lasted over the next year-and-a-half. Thérèse wrote later: “Doubt was impossible, faith and hope unnecessary, and Love made us find on earth the One we were seeking” (SS 104)

The honeymoon ended when Thérèse entered Carmel in April, 1888. She was fifteen years old now. She exchanged the little bit of heaven in the family home of *Les Buissonnets*, for the desert of Carmel.

Thérèse welcomed the exchange. She was ecstatic that her dream was coming to fulfillment. She had no illusions about Carmel. From the first inklings of a vocation at age nine at Pauline’s entry, Carmel meant offering her life for sinners; lately after the pilgrimage to Rome, Carmel also meant praying for priests. Carmel was the Paschal Mystery, the way of the Cross that opened up to the fullness of life.

In the early years in the convent Thérèse thought she had to prove herself before God. She had to earn God’s love. So it was hard work to “forget herself and please others.” Thérèse strove to be letter perfect. The struggle gave her a profound sense of her own unworthiness, her littleness. She always saw herself as weaker than anyone else. She wrote in the statement of her “little doctrine” for her sister Marie: “If all weak and imperfect souls felt what the least of souls feels, the soul of your little Thérèse, no one would despair of reaching the summit of love” (SS 188). She wrote at the end of her life: “I feel that if you found a soul weaker and littler than mine, which is impossible, You would be pleased to grant it still greater favors, provided it abandoned itself with total confidence to Your Infinite Mercy” (SS 200). It was not a question of her being a great sinner. One confessor, Fr Pichon, had assured her that she had never committed a mortal sin; another, Fr

Prou, told her that her faults did not hurt God. Much of her self-recrimination had to do with physical weakness, like her sleeping through prayer in chapel. She wrote: "I should have been desolate for having slept for seven years at prayer and after Holy Communion" (SS 165).

Thérèse was very honest and very insightful about who she was without the grace of God. Some years ago I heard a lecture on Thérèse by a perceptive speaker who was a recovering alcoholic. He sensed in her writing a profound understanding of the human condition similar to what he himself had learned by experience in his own addiction to alcohol. Thérèse was not an alcoholic, but she was a kindred spirit to himself, who knew human powerlessness in her own areas of weakness.

In the great trial of faith in the last year-and-a-half of her life she interpreted the experience as a special vocation to suffer for sinners. The sinners included her; she was one of them and she sat at the same table with them, a table "filled with bitterness." She identified with them and prayed in the first person plural: "Can she [i.e. herself] not say in her name and in the name of her brothers, 'Have pity on us, O Lord, for we are poor sinners.' Oh Lord, send us away justified" (SS 212).

What preserved Thérèse from discouragement, even despair, in the face of this self-understanding? Her trust in God. Even the conviction of moral innocence was secondary, if operative at all. She ended *The Story of a Soul* with these remarkable words:

...even though I had on my conscience all the sins that can be committed, I would go, my heart broken with sorrow, and throw myself in to Jesus' arms, for I know how much He loves the prodigal child who returns to Him. It is not because God, in His anticipating Mercy, has preserved my soul from mortal sin that I go to Him with confidence and love. (SS 259)

Trust like this was part of her whole life. But she was able to put it into words only

late in life, after Celine's entry into Carmel in September, 1894. Celine had brought some notebooks with passages from the Old Testament written out in longhand. One passage was *Proverbs* 9:4: "Whoever is a little one, let that person come to me." Another was the image of God as Mother in *Isaiah* 66:12-13: "As one whom a mother caresses, so will I comfort you; you shall be carried at the breasts and upon the knees..." (SS 208). These quotations were key to a new understanding of God's Mercy and to the response of trust and confidence that would bring together the holiness of God and the weakness of little souls. From now on God's love appeared as God's Mercy.

This new insight was the solution to a desperate problem that had racked Thérèse's mind for years: how could she put together her immense desires for holiness and her littleness? God's Mercy was the answer. God would be the elevator that would carry her to the heights without her having to do heroic acts like a Joan of Arc. God would be her holiness and justice and goodness. She would have no good works to recommend herself. She would have only God's works in her. She would go to God with empty hands, but clothed in the good works of her Spouse Jesus.

Thus she wrote in her prayer of oblation: "In the evening of this life, I shall appear before you with empty hands... All our justice is stained in Your eyes. I wish to be clothed in Your own Justice..." (SS 277). Pauline could not understand such audacity. But the letting go was liberation for Thérèse. After a clear exposition of her view Thérèse wrote to Marie: "Let us love our littleness, let us love to feel nothing, then we shall be poor in spirit, then Jesus will come to look for us... and transform us into flames of love."³

Thérèse's Vocation of Love

All this emphasis on littleness and nothingness would skew Thérèse's doctrine, were we to leave it there and forget that these

negatives are in the service of the love of God, love of people, and love of creation. No word sums up her life and teaching better than the word love.

The motto of her life is the words painted in huge letters over the archway of the sanctuary of the basilica at Lisieux: "My God, I love you." These were the last words she spoke on earth, twenty minutes before she died. They resounded through her life. At fourteen, her consuming desire was love: "I wanted to love, to love Jesus with a passion, giving him a thousand proofs of my love while it was possible" (SS 102). She never wavered from this goal; her life experience only clarified its meaning and perfected its expression.

Even as a little child Thérèse betrayed an "all-or-nothing approach to life." One time, when her sister Leonie was cleaning house, she put her treasures in a basket and offered them to Celine and Thérèse. Each was to take something. Celine chose a small woolen ball. Thérèse looked into the basket and said: "I choose all." All or nothing.

This all-embracing character of her love shines out in the discussion of her vocation in the letter to Marie that describes her "little doctrine." Thérèse recounts her search for her own identity in the Mystical Body. General descriptions, like Spouse, Carmelite, or Mother of souls, were not enough. Neither did the calls she felt to become "warrior, priest, apostle, doctor, martyr" satisfy her. She wanted more. Then it dawned on her that the body demands a heart. The body lives by its heart and the heart enters into every function of the body. "I understood," she exclaims, "that LOVE COMPRISED ALL VOCATIONS... MY VOCATION IS LOVE! ... In the heart of the Church, my Mother, I shall be Love" (SS 194).

How did Thérèse carry out this vocation? By her life. Her life was her relationship with God, expressed in the

outpourings of prayer and in the actions of her daily life. Prayer for her was basically love; she called it "an aspiration of the heart...a simple glance directed to heaven...in the midst of trial as well as joy." SS 242 Prayer was her intimate love affair with Jesus.

Some days before her death Celine had moved into the infirmary to be close to her dying sister. One night she looked in on Thérèse and found her awake. "You should be sleeping," she said. "I can't sleep." "What are you doing?" "I am praying." "And what are you saying?" "I am saying nothing. I am loving him." This was her prayer in one form or another. Sometimes it was pondering a mystery, more often it was silent presence. But from the time of her entry into Carmel to her last days her prayer was marked by progressive darkness. Her whole life in the convent was a low-density darkness, culminating in the absolute blackness of the last year-and-a-half of her life. Thérèse negotiated this emptiness and absence of God, this lack of consolations with grace and wit.

Wit: she accused Jesus of sleeping on her watch just as he did in the boat with the apostles during the storm. Sometimes she joked about it, saying that Jesus was not doing much to keep the conversation going, or that he was getting even with her for her sleeping during meditation, or else he was letting her know that he loved her whether she was asleep or awake.

Grace: the progressive darkness ultimately became excruciating desolation. But throughout this time she gave no evidence whatsoever about what she was going through. No one suspected. How could they? This little sister was the life of the party at recreation and the perfect example of peaceful demeanor elsewhere. She carried on with joy and high spirits however she felt inside. She wrote, for example, beautiful love poetry that celebrated her happiness and joy even in the darkest years. Often she did not feel this joy.

She wrote exuberantly, because this is the way she wanted to feel with all her being.

Her prayer enveloped every moment of her life. Every moment was an opportunity to make a choice for God, to respond in love. This was her way to sanctity: to make each duty, each challenges the expression of her love for God and for others. It is the love that counts, not the size of the action. Great love can be delivered in small packages.

How did Thérèse become a saint? By doing the little things of daily life—the tasks, the encounters, the disappointments—with love and self-effacement. Here is one typical example of her life project:

...Yes, My Beloved, this is how my life will be consumed. I have no other means of proving love for you than that of strewing flowers, that is, not allowing one little sacrifice to escape, not one look, one word, profiting by the smallest things and doing them through love. I desire to suffer for love and even to rejoice through love, and in this way I shall strew flowers before Your throne. I shall not come upon one without unpetting it for you. (SS 196)

Strewing flowers sounds easy; as a life project it is heroic. In 1928, a year after her conversion to the Catholic Church. Dorothy Day received a copy of *The Story of a Soul*. Dorothy had a good deal of life experience by this time, and she was well on her way to becoming an apostle of the poor and a witness for peace. The book disappointed her. She wrote: “What kind of saint was this who felt she had to practice heroic charity in eating what was put in front of her, in taking medicine, enduring cold and heat, ... enduring the society of mediocre souls.”⁴ Thérèse’s *Story* sounded like “pious pap” to her, not the fare of saints. She asked: “Is the time of the saints over?” Thirty years later Dorothy Day sees the matter differently. Now the “little way” is heroic sanctity, and Thérèse is the saint for our times of hate and destructiveness. Her way is a martyrdom, which only one who experiences it understands. Dorothy experienced it in the daily demands of ministry to the destitute. She also agrees that

“Thérèse is the saint we should dread.”⁵ Non-violent love, love like that of Jesus is not cheap grace, it comes at a heavy price. “To love as Jesus loved” was one of the last discoveries in the saint’s life. It is the counterpoint to “My God, I love you.” No, not the counterpoint, it is the same one melody, because authentic fraternal love is the same one gift of charity. That is the strong opinion of our saint. She said to her sister Mother Agnes “Oh Mother, love is everything in this world. And we love God to the extent that we practice it.”⁶

Thérèse’s life was totally God-centered, but that centeredness included people. Her whole life was a struggle “to forget herself and please others.” But the deepest meaning of that challenge was understood only at the end of her life. She discovered then what charity really means and that is to love like Jesus and with his love.

She is referring to the new commandment of Jesus: “As I have loved you, so you also love one another” (Jn 13:34-35). In the new dispensation, she says, it is no longer sufficient to love others as us. We must love as Jesus loved.

Let me single out two characteristics of this new understanding. One is the very meaning of charity. It consists, she says, “in bearing with the faults of others, in not being surprised at their weakness, in being edified by the smallest acts of virtue we see them practice” (SS 220). To love the other person precisely in the face of negative qualities is a variation on the theme of loving enemies.

The second point is an application of the little way. We can only love as Jesus loved if we love with his love. We need to let Jesus love others in us, his love passing through us as through a conduit. We need to let his love flow through us to our difficult neighbor, the disagreeable person, the one who can be loved only for the Jesus within. The presence of Jesus dominates the whole scenario. A nun asked why Thérèse was

attracted to her and smiled every time she looked at her. Thérèse answered: “I was smiling because I was happy to see her.” She did not add that the real reason was “Jesus hidden in the depths of her soul; Jesus who makes sweet what is most bitter” (SS 223). If this sounds inauthentic, remember that these choices were what she really wanted. In such circumstances she took care “to appear happy and especially to be so” (SS 228).

Shortly before her death the Sisters were discussing the obituary of Thérèse to be sent to the other convents. One of the sisters said, “Sister Thérèse of the Child Jesus is a good person, but she has done nothing. What

can we write about this poor little creature?” Thérèse did not raise a family, she built no schools or hospitals, she made no scientific discoveries. But she has left a legacy for rich and poor, learned and unlearned, single or married, religious or secular. Her legacy is *The Story of a Soul*, two volumes of *Letters*, some random words of wisdom collected by her sisters and published under the title *Her Last Conversations*, and a book of poetry. In this small body of literature Thérèse has left enough to make her a doctor of the Church, who is at the same time the beloved friend and patroness of millions of Christians today.

¹ John Beevers, *Saint Therese of Lisieux, the Little Flower* (Rockford: Tan Books, 1976) 139.

² “SS” is the abbreviation of St Therese’s autobiography, *The Story of a Soul*, and will be used to reference this text in the translation by John Clarke, OCD (Washington: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1975). The numbers refer to the pages cited.

³ Letter 197, dated September 17, 1896, in *General Correspondence, Letters of St Therese of Lisieux, II, 1890-1897* (tr John Clarke, OCD, Washington, D.C.; Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1988) 999.

⁴ Preface in *Therese* (Springfield: Templegate, 1960) viii.

⁵ James Allaire, “Dorothy Day and Therese of Lisieux,” in *Spiritual Life* 43(1997) 198.

⁶ Ida Goerres, *The Hidden Face* (tr Richard and Clara Winston, New York: Pantheon, 1959) 248.