

Love Responding to Presence (1): The Daily Life of Thérèse

This is the first of two articles on the “The Daily Life of Thérèse.”

When we look for one word to sum up Thérèse of Lisieux, the word love comes quickly to mind. Love was her spirituality. Love was her life. She spent most of her time plumbing its meaning, savoring its beauty, and searching out its implications. Eventually she saw love as her total vocation, the gifted way to fulfill all her fantastic desires to be everything and to do everything for God in the Body of Christ. She would be the heart of that body; she would *be love*. In this way she would be associated with every activity of Christ’s body, since the heart animates every organ and participates in every action.

These were grandiose ideas for one who saw herself in relation to the saints as a grain of sand against a mountain, a drop of dew in the ocean, a tiny daisy in a forest of tall cedars. Thérèse dealt in absolutes. Everything and nothing, God and Thérèse, Merciful Love and littleness: these are the two poles of her spirituality. The link between the two, the dynamism that got her going between her poverty and God’s love was confidence, casting herself into the arms of God. The formula came to be described as her “little way.” She discovered this “little way” only in the last years of her life. In that final period she drew up her oblation to Merciful Love (June, 1895); she wrote her “dream and little doctrine” in a letter to her sister Marie, which became Ms B and chapter 9 of *The Story of a Soul*; and finally in the last months of her life she spelled out her “little way” in Ms C, chapter 10, of *The Story*. All these discoveries, however, came out of a life-time of experience. She lived the little way before she put it into words.

Thérèse learned well the lesson of John of the Cross about emptiness and fullness. She would go to God with “empty hands,” with nothing of herself and everything from her spouse Jesus. In that way her love would be God’s love in a pure state. Even acting out the gift of charity is gift too. Note the way she describes merit, which is love in action. She writes to Celine: “Merit does not consist in doing or in giving much, but rather in receiving, in loving much.”¹ It is clear that the end result of love is giving. To love is to give and give and give. It is Thérèse’s insight that, not only is the love from the prior infused gift of God, but that the giving itself is God’s work, that thrives in proportion to the self-effacement of the person before God. At the age of ten she learned that the only good in life was to love God and to be poor in spirit, the two sides of the one coin. [S 73] Later she would write to Celine that “Jesus does not ask for great actions, but only abandonment and gratitude.”² The reason is simple: pleasing God is God’s work in us, and this work thrives in poverty and littleness. Thérèse puts it eloquently in a subsequent letter 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 The law of God’s love is that we be ourselves, aware of our emptiness without God and the fullness of grace with him.

Thérèse learned this “science of love,” not from books, but from life, specifically from the experience of her great desires for holiness in the face of her own littleness. She would be a saint like Joan of Arc. But how could this be? How could she prove herself?

By actions? Great feats? She was not a “great soul.” She was too little for anything but “little actions and desires.” Little nothings, the strewing of flowers cast at the Lord’s feet to soften his passage were her way of showing her immense love. This had been her practice since childhood. Were these little acts sufficient? Was *le bon Dieu* content with these fervent acts and aspirations as he was with the heroic accomplishments of the saints? Thérèse asked this question often. Once in a dream she posed the query to Venerable Anne of Jesus, the Spanish Carmelite who brought the Discalced Carmelites to France. The answer: “God asks no other thing from you. He is content, very content.” [S 191] All God asks is that we live in the truth, recognizing our indebtedness and God’s loving kindness; the rest is simply acting out this new life as God leads.

Thérèse’s problem was peculiar to herself. It was her immense desires that bordered on the infinite. [S 192] How could she possibly fulfill them? Her problem was not her own unworthiness spawned by the Jansenism in the air at that time. In her earlier years she had suffered from self-doubt and scrupulosity, but these destructive feelings had been put to rest. She was assured by Father Prou that God is not hurt by our human failings [S 118] and by Father Pichon that she had never offended God by mortal sin. [S 149] But there was simply no proportion between her desires to be everything and to do everything for God and her petty little services in her hot-house life. Thérèse discovered that there did not have to be material correspondence between her heart and her deeds. She learned that great love can be delivered in small packages. Her vocation was precisely love, to be the heart of the Mystical Body, a vocation that was validated precisely in the humble, unpretentious, matter of fact doing God’s will moment to moment in her daily life. This was the work of God, the law of God’s love discovered by Thérèse:

“Yes,” she wrote in Ms B, “in order that Love be fully satisfied, it is necessary that It lower itself, and that It lower itself into nothingness and transform this nothingness into *fire*.” [S 195] “Astounding works” like foreign missions or shedding one’s blood were not necessary. Little sacrifices were enough, because love was the measure. So she writes:

...Yes, my Beloved, this is how my life will be consumed. I have no other means of proving my love for you other than that of strewing flowers, that is, not allowing one little sacrifice to escape, not one look, one word, profiting by all 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 unpetalling it for You. [S 196]

Her poem, “Strewing Flowers” identifies the flowers as “My slightest sighs, my greatest sufferings,/ My sorrows and my joys/ my little sacrifices....”⁴ A later poem describes how the petals are to be tossed with abandon, “blown away” in the total gift of self.⁵ When the sister for whom she composed this poem suggested that a final verse should be added to show that in death the scattered petals are gathered up “to form a beautiful rose that would shine for all eternity,” Thérèse disagreed. True love is giving without counting and without expectation of return. “My wish,” she responded, “is to be unpetalled forever, to make God happy. Period. That is all.”⁶ Thérèse will sing while gathering these flowers or unpetalling them, even in the midst of thorns, and Jesus will be charmed by the melody and the fragrance of these sacrifices. They are nothing less than manifestations of the “pure love” of John of the Cross which is “of more value than all other works together.” [S 197]

How could the tiny actions carry the weight of her overwhelming love? How could she invest herself in the little nothings with a heart as full as hers? Could she not have better invested her time in prayer, in mystical

encounters like those celebrated in the *Song of Songs* or the *Spiritual Canticle*, or in some heroic action like going to the missions instead of suffering the indignity of getting splashed in the laundry without complaining or taking the blame for a broken vase? [S159] Would God not have been better served if she had done something with her life? One of the sisters in the convent, Sister St. Vincent de Paul, made this point at the end of Thérèse's life: "She is a pleasant little sister, but...she has done nothing."⁷ Why did she choose the humble road? Why did she become the saint of the ordinary? The answer is simply that God gave her the life she had. It had obvious limitations, but genius that Thérèse was, she drew out its rich possibilities.⁸ There were privileged moments of encounter with God in her life, but even her prayer in the convent was mostly dark and empty and the times in-between were matter of fact duties. But Thérèse saw every moment as equally important in God's eyes, because each one offered the occasion for meeting God and expressing love.⁹ She wrote to Celine that Jesus was teaching her to "do all through love, to refuse him nothing, to be content when he gives me a chance of proving to him that I love him. But this is done in peace and abandonment, it is Jesus who is doing all in me and I am doing nothing."¹⁰ Her life was simply response to the moment-to-moment presence of God.

Beginnings of the Little Way in Her Conversion

From the very beginning of life Thérèse had an immense desire to please God. In the Martin family this was not one value; in a sense it was the only value, and Thérèse took up the challenge with vigor and thoroughness. She confesses that from the age of three she did not refuse God anything.¹¹ She counted her good deeds on beads and kept track in notebooks, trying to prove herself before God and family. She always had "a

great desire to practice virtue," but she confesses that before her Christmas conversion in 1886, when she was almost fourteen, she "went about it in a strange way." [S 97] In the days of her childhood she was prisoner to a self-centered "Jesus and me" piety.

The marvelous grace of that Christmas gave her a new beginning. She picked up where she had left off at the time of her mother's death, when she was four-and-a-half, and she began the third and final period of her journey to God, in which she ran "like a giant." From this point forward she was in charge of her life; she was a match for her hypersensitivity and, more important still, able to live for others. The Christmas conversion in 1886 allowed her to grow up. It gave her the strength to deal with her babyish, self-serving ways and to become solicitous for others. The in breaking of God with the gift of charity made the difference. Charity broke her out of narcissism and freed her life God and others. "The work I had been unable to do in ten years," she wrote, "was done by Jesus in one instant, contenting himself with my good will, which was never lacking." [S 98] Good will was now empowered by mystical love. She was no longer victimized by her feelings, but able to rise above them. The victory was not total, but she was launched on a solid pattern. Thérèse puts the whole experience in terse and accurate words: "I felt *charity* enter my soul, and the need to forget myself and please others; since then I have been happy." [S 99]

The new path was her apostolic vocation. From now on the desire to help sinners gave direction to her life. She would be a "fisher of souls," especially sinners, such as the criminal Pranzini, her "first child;" later after the pilgrimage to Rome and observing many priests she would add priests to her special ministry. The task was clearly beyond herself, but it was viable, because it was the work of Jesus and the communion of saints.

Jesus thirsted for souls, and Thérèse would slake that thirst by being the conduit of the precious blood into the lives of those estranged from God. In sympathetic reaction this ministry to the thirst of Jesus increased her own thirst for the same souls, and she experienced this as “the most delightful drink of love.” [S 101] In this flowery language Thérèse is signaling the death of self-centeredness: “God was able in a very short time to extricate me from the very narrow circle in which I was turning without knowing how to come out.” [S 101]

An awakened Thérèse reached out for more secular learning, but she soon discovered that *The Imitation of Christ* and Abbe Arminjon’s conferences were all the nourishment she needed. She was being taught by God and formed in a “passionate love” of her Master. [S102] Thérèse continued to live at *Les Buissonnets* at this time with her father, Leonie, and Celine until her entrance into Carmel on April 8, 1888. There were some dark days connected with her struggle to enter Carmel, but the period was an idyllic one of intense sensible consolation in which she and Celine shared the immediacy of the divine presence in the manner of a Monica and an Augustine at Ostia. [S103] Thérèse wrote: “Doubt was impossible, faith and hope were unnecessary, and Love made us find on earth the one we were seeking.” [S 104] It was the romance time of both her and Celine’s spousal

relationship with Jesus, the honeymoon period before the serious married life in Carmel.

Once the door closed behind her in the convent she entered the desert with only occasional consolations or felt experience of God’s presence. These were the long years of aridity and darkness that brought her to full maturity in God, and they culminated in the even greater trial of faith in her last year-and-a-half on earth, which was her participation in the redemptive mission of Jesus.¹²

Thérèse Finds God Everywhere

It is revealing to find Thérèse less than completely satisfied with this life of sensible and spiritual consolations. God was obviously present in the family home. But Thérèse looked for more, for sterner stuff. She yearned for the “desert” of Carmel, a wish that surfaced first at Pauline’s entrance, and took more mature shape with her growth in appreciation of the role of suffering in her life. She had no illusions about Carmel [S 88]. It symbolized a life of abnegation, the way of Cross for the salvation of sinners and for priests. Carmel fully matured her. There in the words of Ida Goerres, the author of the first complete and still unsurpassed biography, Thérèse developed “from piety to sanctity, from beginnings to perfection, from obedient practice of set exercises to the breakthrough of a new, creative form of Christian life.”¹³

¹ *Letters of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, General Correspondence, II, 1890-1897*, (tr. John Clarke, O.C.D., Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1988), Lt 142, July 6, 1893, 794-795.

² *Ibid.*, Lt 196, September 13 (?), 1896, 994. This letter became part of Ms B, Story, 188.

³ *Ibid.*, Lt 199, September 17, 1896, 999.

⁴ *The Poetry of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux*, (tr. Donald Kinney, O.C.D., Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1995) PN 34, 158.

⁵ *Ibid.*, PN 51, “An Unpetalled Rose,” 203.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 202.

⁷ Pierre Descouvemont and Hemuth Nils Loose, *Thérèse and Lisieux* (Toronto: Novalis, 1996) 190.

⁸ Monica Furlong, *Thérèse of Lisieux* (New York: Pantheon, 1987) 134-135.

⁹ Victor Sion, O.C.D. *Chemin de priere avec Thérèse de Lisieux* (Paris: Cerf, 1993) 74-81

¹⁰ *Letters II*, Lt 142, July 6, 1893, 796.

¹¹ Furlong, *op.cit.*, 31.

¹² These matters were developed in the present author's earlier article, "Thérèse's Prayer: Love Growing in Darkness."

¹³ Ida Friederike Goerres, *The Hidden Face* (tr. Richard and Clara Winston, New York: Pantheon, 1959) 162.