

Love Responding to Presence (2): The Daily Life of Thérèse

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

The nine-and-a-half years in the convent were a progressive development of her contemplative spirituality. Built on the profound prayer relationship with Jesus cultivated in prayer and religious disciplines her spirituality was existential and concrete, reaching into every action of her life, every moment offering the opportunity to love Jesus in himself and in her neighbor. Her whole life was caught up in the venture of love. It became the “little way,” because it was so simple, so connected to personal powerlessness and the merciful love of God, so energized because of her utter confidence and surrender into his arms. God was satisfied with her little way, because it had so little of herself and so much of God within it.

Thérèse seems to give more attention to the outer demands of the moment than to the inner experience as such. For example, she finds God in the numerous interruptions in her writing during her last illness because of the nuns dropping in to see her by “taking care for the love of God and my sisters to appear happy and to be happy.” [S 228] Her attention is outward rather than inward. Unlike her Holy Mother Teresa of Jesus she does not analyze interior movements or distinguish stages of prayer. She is intent only on “forgetting herself and pleasing others.” In this way she practices a presence to reality that is concrete, more akin to Buddhist mindfulness than to an abstract recall of God’s presence. This total presence certainly included God’s presence, which is at the base of every human activity. She was caught up in God always and everywhere in the concrete now. She became a saint because she lived in the present moment.¹ She is mindful of the

Mystery, which she sees, hears, touches, and lives out in persons, places and events. This is the practice of Christian recollection.

What are the elements that go into her mindfulness? First, there is the exterior, human condition of incompleteness and imperfection that provides opportunities “to fill up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ for the sake of his body, the church.” (Col 1:24) These are the opportunities for Thérèse’s little “nothings, which please Jesus more than the mastery of the world or even martyrdom suffered with generosity. For example, a smile, a friendly word, when I would want to say nothing, or put on a look of annoyance, etc. etc.”² The convent in Lisieux was much like any other setting where human beings try to live together. Life there was a mixture of high-mindedness and mediocrity, fervor and weariness, with occasional flashes of heroism or pettiness. Life in the Lisieux Carmel was in the ordinary. Gorres paints a realistic picture and equates the environment in which Thérèse became a saint with the typical milieu of everyday life.³ There were difficult nuns as well as sweet personalities, the noble and the small-minded, the charitable and the critical. The negative qualities as well as apparent lack of fervor were no problems for Thérèse. They were, rather, the raw material of her sanctity. She would be a saint in the existential conditions of the Lisieux Carmel, in literal and perfect obedience to the least jot or tittle of the law, always acting so deftly with her engaging smile and no shadow of criticism or condemnation. Her secret was to forget herself and please God by doing his will and not intentionally displeasing others. Her mortification was, not heroic penances or

austerities beyond the Rule, but the breaking of her own will in the service of others.

The interior dispositions necessary for Thérèse's program were humility and love. Since the age of ten she wanted God's will and knew the cost of discipleship. But until she came to accept her utter weakness and God's merciful love, she was not able to turn her whole life over to God. Her littleness became her strength. Little bird that she was and not an eagle, she could parlay her weakness and entrust herself to the Divine Eagle's power to be carried on his wings. [S 200] She confesses that her recognition of her frailty and littleness was the greatest gift of her life. [S 210] In the spirit of the "Magnificat" she confesses that the greatest thing the Almighty had done for her was to reveal her littleness. No one was weaker than she [S188, 193, 224], and this was a point of advantage, because the law of the little way is "the weaker the better."⁴ She writes: "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." [S 200] It would be hard to find a more compact statement of the little way than these words which close Ms B. This was her uncomplicated way of letting go, letting God.

On her deathbed in the afternoon of September 30, 1897, in the midst of incredible pain, Thérèse asked Mother Gonzague to help her prepare for death. She was prepared, she was told. Then she responded: "Yes, it seems that I have ever only sought the truth. Yes, I have understood humility of heart. It seems to me I am humble."⁵ Thérèse sought "only the truth;" she asked repeatedly if her love was real or her desires authentic. [S 197] She saw herself as the least of God's children, not because she was worse than everybody else, but because she understood the source of her privileged state. She had been protected by prevenient grace, both external and internal.

Her grand desires and visible heroism were not her justification before God; her great desire for martyrdom, for example, could give the wrong impression. When her sister Marie extolled these desires, Thérèse replied:

My desires for martyrdom *are nothing*; they are not what give me the unlimited confidence that I feel in my heart. They are, to tell the truth, the spiritual riches that *render one unjust*, when one rests in them with complacency...Ah! I really feel that it is not this at all that pleases God in my little soul; what pleases him is *he sees me loving my littleness and poverty, the blind hope that I have in his mercy. ...*⁶

Thérèse did recognize her gifts. While she was a tiny bird she had the "eyes and the heart" of an eagle, because she was flying "with the Divine Eagle's own wings." [S 200]

This meant that in reality she was a very strong person, full of love, courage and generosity, but these virtues were God's doing in her.

First, she sees with the eyes of the eagle. Her *Story* and *Letters* make it clear that that the invisible world was always real to her; so was the practical world of human behavior. This explains her originality, for example, in defining fraternal charity, not in theoretical terms like gracious love, but in down-to-earth examples like "bearing with others' weakness, ... not being surprised at their weakness, ... being edified at the smallest acts of virtue." [S 220] The whole chapter ten of her life is a profound analysis of what "to love as Jesus loved" means in our lives. She could write so concretely, because she looked at reality straight in the eye. As a little child at her mother's deathbed, she "looked and said nothing." This gaze was caught in the Cavallera movie "Thérèse," when the very ill Louis Martin visits Carmel for the last time. His three daughters are behind the grille. Pauline and Marie cannot stand to look at their father; they hide their faces in their veils. Not Thérèse. She looks unflinchingly at her father, her heart broken, but her eye steady and her voice silent. This scene could be the artistic translation of the last family Mass on

the day Thérèse's entered Carmel, when everyone was sobbing except Thérèse, who was as grief-stricken as her family, but silent and intent. [S 147]

Thérèse could look hard at the periphery because her heart was fixed on the center. She could see God everywhere, because she was pure at heart, transparent and open. She did not project or impose her agenda; her interests were those of her spouse Jesus. This route allowed her to let go of her grandiloquent aspirations for heroic sanctity and martyrdom in favor of the very ordinary life that was hers. Her seeing was often in dark faith, without positive emotional or spiritual resonances like joy or felt trust; it was seeing without seeing, knowing by unknowing. These were dark night experiences. At times the storm raged around her with no reassurance from the invisible Presence behind the clouds. She was flying blindly on the wings of the Divine Eagle.

Besides seeing with the eyes of the eagle, she loves with an eagle's heart. This fact gives her special insight beyond mere intellectual understanding. Heart knowledge is real knowledge; it is contemplative knowledge that comes by way of love. It is the secret of the fox in Saint Exupéry's *The Little Prince*. The fox says: "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly: what is essential is invisible to the eye."⁷

Thérèse is the spouse in *The Song of Songs*, alert and searching for the Beloved in the persons and events of her simple life. She lives among the little things. This is an excuse: the little bird can be distracted and even fall asleep at prayer without incurring condemnation, because she is only a child. At the same time materially insignificant actions can carry the immense weight of the love of God, because they are the actions of a child.

The eagle's great desires become sound bites of aspirations and sacrifices that are small in appearance but large with meaning. At one time before her entry into

Carmel Thérèse needed to avoid vocational literature for missionary orders lest it deflect her from her true calling. In her spiritual maturity ambitious projects and grand desires no longer attracted her. She had reduced her desires to size and settled for the little nothings that were her way to God.⁸

Thérèse was intellectually bright, but her wisdom, the wisdom that has made her a doctor of the Church, did not come from books but from a loving heart empty of selfishness. Her judgments were unerring, because she lived under the inspiration of a loving God, whose presence and will she intuited as if by a sixth sense, by way of connaturality. She found God, and not just thoughts about him, in each moment.

A special consciousness is involved here, the consciousness of a prayerful person who is open and receptive to divine signals. Thérèse had this consciousness in a high degree. It was total presence of her whole being to the action at hand, as recommended in Colossians 3:23, "Whatever you do, work at it with your whole being. Do it for the Lord rather than for men."

This is more than a material or physical nearness or even a psychological presence of ego. It is a spiritual presence to the whole reality that includes both the phenomenal aspects and the ultimate reference and rootedness in God. The knowledge in question is not pragmatic; it is not for control or management. It is wisdom that appreciates the object, that savors, engages, participates in creation and Creator in a personal way.⁹ It is the contemplative attitude to life.

Thérèse's spirituality is the love of God. Her last words on earth, spoken at 7:00 P.M., twenty minutes before she died on September 30, 1897, were "My God, I love you." She gave her own commentary on these words earlier to Mother Agnes: "Oh Mother," she said, "love is everything in this world. And we love God to the extent that we practice it."¹⁰ The two loves, of God and

neighbor, are closely connected in Thérèse. Intimacy with God finds expression in pedestrian human forms. Thérèse does not develop a Christian humanism in the usual sense. She is not concerned about the autonomous good of terrestrial realities. She has no social philosophy. She sees the world as the stage for the love of God and the love of souls, souls being human beings in their ultimate orientation. Thérèse lived for heaven. She would people heaven for the glory and delight of God via her little sacrifices for the salvation of souls.

The Dutch artist Arie Trum designed “a visual interpretation” of the Carmelite Rule of St Albert that expresses the centrality of the love and the poverty of spirit that are the core of the gospel. He wrote out the text of the

Rule on a single, cruciform page and drew an empty circle in the middle of the crossbar. The circle represents the center of the Rule, the center of the universe, one’s personal center, the community’s center, the place where the Resurrected Christ dwells. It is the place of the emptiness and the fullness of the Christian life. This center was Thérèse’s home, the place from which and for which she lived her life. But her life was attentive to the surrounding details, to subtle calls on her charity. So her concern was both/and, the center and the periphery. She was faithful to the void and to the gift of God in the moment-to-moment choices of her life. This is what made her a model and inspiration for everybody.

¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Two Sisters in the Spirit, Thérèse of Lisieux and Elizabeth of the Trinity* (tr. for Thérèse by Donald Nichols and Anne Elizabeth Englund, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992) 67-70.

² *Letters II*, Lt 143, date 801.

³ Goerres, *op.cit.*, 204-205;277.

⁴ Descouvemont, *op.cit.*, 226.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 306.

⁶ *Letters II*, Lt 197, September 17, 1896, 999.

⁷ Antoine de Saint Exupery, *The Little Prince* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World Inc., 1943) 87.

⁸ Furlong, *op.cit.*, 96-97.

⁹ Jurgen Moltmann, “Theology of Mystical Experience,” in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 32 (1980) 503-505.

¹⁰ From “Summarium 2,” cited by Goerres, *op.cit.*, 245.