

Thérèse's Prayer: Presence in Absence

This is the second of three articles on the Prayer of Thérèse of Lisieux.

Christmas, 1886, when Thérèse was almost fourteen, inaugurated a new phase in her life. The conversion experience at that time was surely mystical. Almost immobilized by hurt feelings when she overheard her father's criticism she was able to act with courage and grace and carry on in her excitement over the gifts as if she had heard nothing. It was a showcase of divine power overcoming human weakness.

All the next year, 1887, Thérèse's prayer was positive and upbeat, except for some occasional bouts with discouragement over failures to get permission to enter Carmel and one three-day dark night of her soul, October 19-22, when she felt "all alone in the garden of Gethsemane like Jesus, and found no consolation on earth or from heaven: God himself seemed to have abandoned [her]." (*Story of a Soul*, tr. John Clarke, OCD, Washington, DC: ICS Publication, 1975, p 109. Henceforth references to this autobiography of Thérèse will be indicated in brackets with S and page numbers; this reference, therefore, is [S 109]).

For the most part Jesus was very present. She had set her goal for entering Carmel for Christmas, 1887, so the year was spent in a flurry of meetings with Church authorities of every rank, including the local bishop and the pope himself during the famous pilgrimage to Rome, seeking the permission to enter at age fifteen. Perhaps this time was too busy, too distracted, to enter the darkness of deeper prayer. Or more likely this was the time of introduction and getting acquainted, the springtime of her spousal relationship with Jesus, when God smiled on her and on Céline too who were like one

person before God. Both enjoyed an idyllic relationship with God, which they shared in long conversation in the belvedere in Les Buissonnets. Thérèse described these days: "How light and transparent the veil which hid Jesus from our gaze!... Doubt was impossible, faith and hope unnecessary, and Love made us find on earth the One whom we were seeking" [S 104].

With her entry into Carmel on April 9, 1888, the door closed on such consolations and Thérèse entered a dark night that surely was the desert she had accepted as her vocation at the time of Pauline's entry. She had no illusions about Carmel. She was becoming a prisoner of love. Her heart was pounding as she entered the gate; suffering opened its arms and she embraced it. From that moment on her journey was one of dark faith, illuminated only occasionally by breakthroughs of the divine presence. Observers at the Lisieux Carmel would never have suspected that the warm, effusive, joyful young nun was hiding a heart bereft of comforting feelings or sensible consolations. She was a paradox of emptiness within and enthusiasm without. The latter was not make-believe or pretending, acting as if she were happy. She was at peace in the strength of the fruits of love and joy in the Spirit.

The peace in her heart was bought at a great price. Love "as strong as death" [*Song of Songs*, 8:6] was the driving force of her life and it translated into an intense desire to please God, whatever the cost. She welcomed the suffering: "her only consolation was to have no consolation" [S 187]. This way of the heart was all giving, with no kick-backs or reflex rewards; she was stabilized by the

knowledge that she was loving with God's very love, and that was enough. The darkness became her friend; the Darkness was her Beloved. Did she experience the words put into the mouth of Christ by Karl Rahner: "I am the blind alley of all your paths, for when you no longer know how to go any further, then you have reached me, foolish child, though you are not aware of it" (*The Great Church Year*, New York: Crossroads, 1993, p 51). However she identified the darkness, it was the place where her Beloved was hidden, and she loved with the "pure love" of John of the Cross, which is "more precious to God and the soul and more beneficial to the Church, even though it seems one is doing nothing, than all these other works together." (*Spiritual Canticle*, 29.2).

Eventually Thérèse would describe in her letter to Marie (Ms B of the *Story*) her discovery that her vocation was to BE LOVE in the Body of Christ. This vocation gave her "delirious joy." No, not delirious joy, she corrects herself, but "the calm and serene peace of the navigator perceiving the beacon which must lead him to the port" [S 194-195]. She offered herself to God to be consumed by Merciful Love and the way this occurred was darkness in prayer and "strewing flowers, that is, not allowing one little sacrifice to escape, not one look, not one word" [S 196]. This life was totally fulfilling for her. As often the case Thérèse is more descriptive of her actual feelings in her letters than her autobiography. Thus in January, 1889, in her reception retreat, she wrote several short letters to Pauline and to Céline that are a patchwork of pathetic statements of darkness, deprivation and desolation coupled with great strength, and even peace and joy. (See *Letters of St Thérèse of Lisieux, General Correspondence, I*, tr. John Clarke OCD, Washington: ICS Publications, 1982, pp 497-513, especially 498). In her emptiness she writes to Pauline: "If you only knew how great my joy is not to have anything with which to please Jesus!...

It is a refined joy [but wholly unfelt]" (*Ibid.* 511).

Her prayer at this time came from a pure heart very much in touch with the Holy Spirit. Given the purity of her love we rightly assume that graces of infused contemplation dominated her prayer. Her prayer was the arid contemplation of the dark night of the Spirit. But she was also a practitioner of *lectio divina* to the end of her life. In other words Thérèse did not always experience the binding of her faculties associated with the sanjuanist dark night that made active prayer impossible. She is not a textbook example of the mystical categories of the great Carmelite saints. Her experience, as Hans Urs Von Balthasar shows, is unique and he characterizes it as "anti-mystical." Her dark night he designates a "semi-night" and sees it as "a prior state or a variation" of St John of the Cross (*Two Sisters in the Spirit, Thérèse of Lisieux and Elizabeth of the Trinity*, tr. of Thérèse, Donald Nichols and Anne Elizabeth England, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992, pp 333-343, especially 334). In any case Thérèse never left the ordinary ways of prayer. She began her prayer with a text or a scene or a memory from the gospels or some other spiritual book. Her reflection deepened the recollection, and this led to loving conversation. Thérèse poured out her soul until there was nothing more to say. Then there was silence. The silence enclosed the graces of infused contemplation.

In the allegory of the eagle and the tiny bird at the end of Ms B, the letter to Marie in September, 1896, describing her "little doctrine" and forming chapter 9 of *The Story of a Soul*, Thérèse sums up her habitual stance before God as "a fixed gaze" on God, being "fascinated by the divine glance" [S 200]. She is a weak little bird, but she has an eagle's heart and eyes. She stares at the Divine Sun from afar, since she cannot fly like an eagle. When storms come and the Sun is eclipsed, she feels deprived of God's presence. But she

knows he is there behind the clouds. Paradoxically the deprivation of the divine presence is “a moment of perfect joy for the poor little weak creature” [S 198]. The little bird will stay riveted at attention, even when she sees nothing but the storm that envelops the Sun.

This experience is the silence of absence, but it is truly an experience of the presence of God in absence, the typical experience of this second stage of her prayer. Sometimes there was the silence of sleep, a frailty Thérèse experienced from sheer physical exhaustion. She worried about this earlier in her life, but eventually saw it as part of the weakness that made her vulnerable to the mercy of God.

Sleep is not only a physical fact in Thérèse's prayer. It is also a metaphor for the absence of Jesus. “Nothing near Jesus,” she complains to Pauline. “Aridity! Sleep!... Since Jesus wants to sleep, why will I hinder him?... I assure you, he is going to no trouble about carrying on a conversation with me!” Jesus goes to sleep on Thérèse, she thinks, in the same way as he slept in the boat with the

disciples. Céline gave a Christmas present to her sister: a small basin with a little boat inside with Jesus asleep in the boat. Thérèse once said that Jesus “was not doing much to keep the conversation going.” But she also surmised that Jesus was making up for her dozing off in prayer as if to assure her that her sleep, which was involuntary, was no obstacle to her prayer. The sleep only dramatized her weakness.

The little bird is in fact earth-bound, easily taken with distracting inquisitiveness and its own pursuits. What should one expect of a tiny little bird? God expects nothing; he overlooks the antics of a child. More than that God comes to the rescue of the poor little thing and at prayer prays within it [Rom 8:26]. Thus even little infidelities are turned to advantage. God's folly is to love unconditionally. Thérèse's folly is to trust with no safety net, in all her vulnerable child likeness and even childishness. The trust includes the final outcome of being consumed by the incomprehensible love of God and taken up on the wings of the Divine Eagle to the furnace of the Trinity. [S 198-200]