

Thérèse's Prayer: Trial of Faith, the Absence of God

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

As difficult as was the dark night of the second stage, it was a time of "living faith," when the thought of heaven made up all her happiness (*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]). On Easter. April 5, 1896, that consolation left her and her faith itself went into remission. Heaven seemed like a chimera, an illusion, and Thérèse entered the "thickest darkness" of her trial of faith.

The veil of faith, once almost see-through, was now a wall that blocked out the supernatural. The very thought of heaven was "a struggle and a torment" [S 211]. She entered a dark tunnel, walked in a dense fog, no longer able to sing of a faith that resonated in her being, but only of a faith that was an abstract "will to believe." "When I sing of the happiness of heaven," she wrote, "I feel no joy in this, for I simply sing what I want to believe." In her letters at this time she admits that Jesus does speak on occasion, otherwise she could not survive. But in Ms C she says that these "small rays of the sun" relieved but then aggravated the trial, because "the memory of that ray made the darkness even more dense" [S 214].

She was experiencing the plight of the atheist, the suffering of sinners who had driven God out of their lives. The bitterness was like hell. The previous seven years had schooled her to the presence of God in absence. This trial was pure absence, with no shred of assurance of the invisible presence. The fatherland of heaven no longer beckoned;

it had disappeared. She writes of the demonic voices plaguing her: the darkness, borrowing the voice of sinners, says mockingly to me: "You are dreaming about the light, about a fatherland embalmed in the sweetest perfumes; you are dreaming about the eternal possession of the Creator of all these marvels; you are believing that one day you will walk out of this fog which surrounds you. Advance, advance; rejoice in death which will give you not what you hope for but a night still more profound, the night of nothingness" [S 213].

In October of 1896, on the advice of the retreat master, Father Godefroid Madelaine, the saint wrote out the creed in her own blood. Suicide confronted her as a way out. She was taking her place at the table of sinners, eating their bitter bread of a life without God, and the pain was incredible. Sinners would feel this very pain if they were in touch with their real condition, if they did not medicate themselves by denial, distraction and substitute gods. She experienced their tragic state. She was a countervailing force in their nihilistic world. Her suffering, she believed, was a bulwark against their hurling themselves to destruction. She loved people and she loved God, so she was willing to stay with the pain in confidence and in peace, trusting that God was using her in the work of salvation. She would stay there until such times as God called her home to heaven, where she would continue her salvific task.

Her call at this point was simply to love, to love with God's love on behalf of sinners and priests. Faith's light had dimmed, but love's flame blazed. Her love took on a superhuman quality, since she was flying

blindly, faithful to the laws of the supernatural world she could neither see nor even imagine. All the while she kept her peace and equanimity. She was a sacrificial victim, preferring vinegar to sugar, savoring humiliation over praise, which she called insipid. Why these choices? Because sufferings proved love and therefore were effective instruments in the divine plan. What Jesus wanted, Thérèse wanted, and what was happening was what Jesus wanted. So Thérèse accepted her call. Part of the mix was her own nothingness (in which she gloried); part was the merciful love of God that filled the vacuum of her inner self; and the catalyst that brought both these things together was her total confidence and trust in her God.

It is no surprise to students of Thérèse's "little way" that her most profound reflections on fraternal charity come from this period. They form the last two chapters of her autobiography and were from the last months of her life. Fraternal charity was an integral part of her love of God; it was "to love as Jesus loved," a phrase which opened up to the deep mystery of the gospel teaching, she says, for the first time. If her love of God was thriving in inner pain and darkness, she was also being called to keen attention and exquisite sensitivity in the area of loving her sisters and people. A down-to-earth, human love that noticed everything, omitted nothing and rose above every personal repugnance was the counterpart of her selfless love of God at prayer. The watchword was to "appear happy and to be so" in community no matter what the aggravation. The case of poor Sister St Pierre, who will be remembered in history for her teeth clicking, is one of the many examples of charity's demands. The noise annoyed Thérèse so much that she would break out in sweat. But she kept control, even offering a little humor to lighten the scene: Thérèse imagined the noise as a concert, and she offered the concert as a prayer to God "in peace and joy at least in the interior of her

soul." She notes facetiously that her prayer was not the prayer of quiet [S 249-250]. Thérèse would not be canonized for this one incident. But when it is multiplied a thousand times, it becomes a heroic way of life.

The struggle was a purification. The rarefied air she was breathing in the trial was removing every "natural" satisfaction she might have had, even the desire to suffer. The love of God was the single and exclusive motivation of her daily life now. There is absolutely nothing holding herself to earth now. She notes: "I no longer have any great desires except that of loving to the point of dying of love" [S 214]. This observation is dated June 9, 1897, the second anniversary of her oblation.

In view of her raging tuberculosis and the loss of any felt sense for the world of faith, how did she escape being disoriented and immobilized in depression? The answer is heroic love. Love was her lifeline. In prayer this love expressed itself in immovable faith and trust. Love kept her sane, down to earth in her human contacts and waiting on God in prayer.

How are we to interpret this trial of faith? Is it only an intensification of the classic dark night of the spirit, whose thrust is personal purification? Or is it more? It seems clear to me that it is redemptive suffering for sinners, a personal call to Thérèse to "fill up in her own body what was lacking in the sufferings of Christ" [Col 1:24]. She herself saw the suffering in this light. She clearly distinguishes the trial from the previous years.

Of course the trial contributed to a greater purity of heart in Thérèse. But that was not its *raison d'être*. It was, rather, part of her apostolic vocation to pray for sinners and for priests. The trial of faith was similar, but not necessarily the same, as the latter half of the life of St Paul of the Cross, the founder of the Passionists. Biographers and the famous Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange interpreted the last forty-five years of St Paul's life as

mystical reparation (Reginal Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., *The Three Ages of the Interior Life* – tr. Sr Timothea Doyle, OP, St. Louis: Herder, 1948, II, 508-509). Paul of the Cross had reached the transforming union by age thirty-one and the rest of his life was filled with incredible interior and exterior suffering. The only reasonable explanation seemed to be vicarious suffering in reparation for sin. Thérèse's trial was like that, but her suffering was not for the satisfaction of divine justice, but the salvation of sinners. Her perspective was not divine justice, or even reparation for sin, both of which were popular themes in the spirituality of the times. Her view on God was merciful love, love like that of the great mystics of love, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. Thérèse saw herself collaborating in the salvific mission of Christ by her configuration to his passion; one day in heaven she will continue that mission, no longer by suffering, but by showering roses as part of her sharing in the victory of Christ.

Jurgen Moltmann places this interpretation in historical perspective: While medieval and baroque mysticism had as their goal the purification of the soul, the thought of sharing in the passion of Christ has since John of the Cross won more room for itself. With Teresa of Lisieux what comes to the fore is a *compassio Christi* which is mystical and also involves physical suffering. Her experience of death in the absence of God combines Christ-mysticism, martyrdom and the world of every day. ("Theology of Mystical Experience", in

Scottish Journal of Theology, 32, 1980, p 515).

Conclusion

Prayer as love growing in darkness is an apt description of Thérèse's prayer. She entered into progressive darkness as she moved through life and her love grew apace with her interior suffering. The darkness created empty space and utter freedom from competing influences for the full infusion of God's love. In the beginning the darkness was exterior to her prayer, coming mostly from her struggles with the vicissitudes of life and her own immaturity. In this period her prayer offered her surcease and strength to carry on the struggle. The darkness in the convent years was interior to the prayer. It originated for the most part in the purifying influence of the theological virtues, hollowing out her interior and filling her with the divine life. This darkness brought her to the highest sanctity. But the darkness was to take on one final quality that constituted a special vocation. She was called to walk in the darkness of the absence of God for the salvation of her brothers and sisters. She herself had said that the Holy Face, which was part of her name, was the heart of her spirituality ("Descouvemont", *op. cit.*, 312). Her whole life was in the service of the Church and especially sinners and priests. The last year-and-a-half of her life was the sacrament of that gift of God to the Church. May God be glorified in this greatest saint of modern times.