

ST. THERESE OF LISEAUX

Queen of Peace Monastery

1 October 2018

Dear Sisters:

Introduction

Today's feast of the "Little Flower" has always fascinated me, from time of reading her *Autobiography of a Soul* in the 8th grade. There was also a statue of her in my home parish.

At various times in my life I have felt both a pulling towards her as an attractive saint but also, I must admit, a standoffness, even perhaps kind of repulsion to "the Little Flower," as she was and is called. For me, Therese has been a force that is both centripetal and centrifugal force.

Centrifugal Force

Perhaps I should first confess my reasons for drawing away from our saint. To me, her piety was so "girlish." Her writings have all the feeling of a flowery girls' boarding school style. Moreover, she seemed so bourgeois and cosseted by her father, for whom she was his "little Queen" and by her sisters who waited on her and spoiled her. As she was dying these same sisters saw her as "a saint" and gathered relics from her bedclothes before she died. In a word, she was, I thought at times, a thoroughly 19th century French girl, pious and good, to be sure, but hardly worth imitating when compared to great saints like her namesake the strong Teresa of Avila, Ignatius Loyola or Thomas Aquinas.

Centripetal Force

But, at some point during my seminary years, I did an about-face. I think it was from reading the very fine biography of Ida Goerres, *The Hidden Face*. Then I realized, as millions of Catholics had before me, that, in fact, Therese was a much stronger personality, overcoming all that was around her that would have made her a plaster saint. And her language, when stripped of its time-bound expression, is remarkably understandable and attractive. Benedict XVI certainly got it right when he said: “*The Story of a Soul*, in fact, is a marvellous *story of Love*, told with such authenticity, simplicity and freshness that the reader cannot but be fascinated by it!”¹

In 1894, on the morning of Good Friday, Thérèse awakes to find her mouth full of blood. Though she had been praying ardently that she might be accepted for missionary service in far-off Vietnam, Thérèse rejoices that she will soon be in heaven.

Yet the onset of tuberculosis proved not a quick and painless journey to heaven, but rather three years of intense suffering. During that same fateful year, her father died, and she was asked by her superior to write what would become her spiritual testimony. She titles it “Springtime Story of a Little White Flower Written by Herself and

¹ Benedict XVI, General Audience (6 April 2011).

Dedicated to Mother Mary Agnes of Jesus.”

It is this book that ultimately drew millions of believers to Jesus, through Thérèse. The life lacking in outward drama was revealed to be full of inward drama. Surprisingly, she described a powerful call to the priesthood: “I would like to perform the most heroic deeds. I feel I have the courage of a Crusader. I should like to die on the battlefield in defense of the church. If only I were a priest!”

Thérèse devoted herself to prayer (especially for priests) and to the service of God in the monastery. She suffered small indignities at the hands of her sisters, striving to be as generous as possible even during her illness, always offering all of her “little” efforts to the God with whom she fell in love as a girl. Her book reveals both the pain and joy that accompany a life of faith.

As Thérèse continued writing, her physical condition deteriorated. The last few chapters are written during a period of extreme suffering. Therese suffered dark nights of complete dryness, of abandonment, and even of temptations against faith. In the Easter before her death, she received what she called the “Grace of Easter,” “which opened the last period of Thérèse’s life with the beginning of her passion in profound union with the Passion of Jesus. It was the passion of her body, with the illness that led to her death through great suffering, but it was especially the passion of the soul, with a very painful *trial of faith* (Ms C, 4v-7v).

With Mary beside the Cross of Jesus, Thérèse then lived the most heroic faith, as a light in the darkness that invaded her soul. The Carmelite was aware that she was living this great trial for the salvation of all the atheists of the modern world, whom she called ‘brothers’.”²

On September 30, 1897, at the age of 24, she died saying the simple words, “My God, I love you!,” looking at the Crucifix she held tightly in her hands. These last words of hers are the key to her interpretation of the Gospel. The simple words “*Jesus I love you*”, are at the heart of all her writings.”³

But even at her death, she considered her work unfinished. There is so much more to do, by way of intercession for those she leaves behind: “After my death I will let fall a shower of roses. I will spend my heaven in doing good on earth.”

Therese was genuine, with an indomitable temperament, a strong will; she was impatient with all tepidity, all resignation and all false humility. She was not easily put off when her mind was made up. She was convinced that God had plans for her – and she showed this by getting Pope Leo XIII to assent to her entry into Carmel at the age of fifteen.

² Benedict XVI, General Audience (6 April 2011).

³ Benedict XVI, General Audience (6 April 2011).

Hers was truly a revolutionary piety in which she anticipated that everyone is called to holiness – a teaching so forcefully taught at Vatican II. She was, we can say, a precursor of the Council’s universal call to holiness so well developed in *Lumen Gentium*. She realized, long before many of the more learned, that the perfection called for by the Gospel is accessible to all.

Especially extraordinary is her understanding of *spiritual childhood*, what she called her “little way.” This was not just romantic or gushy, but a profound insight into the Gospel. It is called the “little way” because it understands that we should be concerned only with the next step that needs to be taken right now. Not high-flying plans for tomorrow, but concentration on the little bit that is required right now. “Maybe we put up with some unpleasant person. Maybe we persevere in patience with some work, without stopping early. Maybe we go to the end of some prayer in which apparently nothing will come out right.”⁴

Even though she longed for eternity, and today is like a passing shadow, she understood that God is found in the “now.” And she wanted to fill these moments with Christian love, to the limits. Then she taught as she experienced, that she was in contract with eternal, divine love, which accompanies us from moment to moment. Sometimes that

⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The von Balthasar Reader*, ed. Medard Kehl and Werner Löser (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 400.

moment is filled by God with traces of redemptive suffering.

It is a matter of indifference whether what I am doing now appears important or unimportant; what makes the difference is *how* I do it. Love is what gives our actions worth in the eyes of God.

Then, too, her religious name, “Therese of the Child Jesus and of the Holy Face.” A child trusts. A child is vulnerable. A child is needy. A child does not think about tomorrow trials, nor does it hoard.

Conclusion

In Therese there was simplicity, need, vulnerability, but these did not make her weak but immensely strong. Like all saints, she “embodied Christ” – perhaps especially Christ in his own childhood. She was a “living exegesis of the Gospel.”

May Therese of Lisieux inspire us and pray for us!

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