

**Pontifical University
St. Patrick's College
Maynooth**

**The Relevance of the Spirituality
of St. Thérèse of Lisieux
for Today**

A Scriptum submitted to the faculty of theology
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of
Licentiate in Sacred Theology

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LG Lunch Gentles, from *Adrian Flannery, OP (ed.), Vatican Council II, The Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents, Vol. 1, Revised Edition, Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1975.*

LT Letters of Thérèse, from *Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, General Correspondence, John Clarke, OCD (trans.), Vols. I & II, Washington, D.C.: ICS, 1982, 1988.*

MS A, B, C Manuscripts A, B & C, from *Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, John Clarke, OCD (trans.), 3rd Edition, Washington, D.C.: ICS, 1996.*

WP Way of Perfection, *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila, Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD, and Otilio Rodriguez, OCD (trans.), Revised Edition, Vol. II, Washington, D.C.: ICS, 1980.*

All abbreviations for biblical references are taken from *The New Jerusalem Bible, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1985.*

Abbreviations

- 1A Ascent of Mount Carmel, Book 1, from, *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, Kieran Kavanagh, OCD, and Otilio Rodriguez, OCD (trans.), Revised Edition, Washington, D.C.: ICS, 1991.
- GS Gaudium et Spes, from, Austin Flannery, OP (ed.), *Vatican Council II, The Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents*, Vol I, Revised Edition, Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1975.
- IC Interior Castle, *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, Kieran Kavanagh, OCD, and Otilio Rodriguez, OCD (trans.), Revised Edition, Vol II, Washington, D.C.: ICS, 1980.
- LC Last Conversations, *St. Thérèse of Lisieux, Her Last Conversations*, John Clarke, OCD (trans.), Washington, D.C.: ICS, 1977.
- LG Lumen Gentium, from, Austin Flannery, OP (ed.), *Vatican Council II, The Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents*, Vol I, Revised Edition, Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1975.
- LT Letters of Thérèse, from *Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, General Correspondence*, John Clarke, OCD (trans.), Vols. I & II, Washington, D.C.: ICS, 1982, 1988.
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All abbreviations for biblical references are taken from *The New Jerusalem Bible*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1985.

General Introduction

Acknowledgements

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General Introduction

On January 2, 1873, Zélie Guérin, married to Louis Martin, gave birth to their ninth child, Marie-Françoise-Thérèse. Four of their nine children had already died young and even Thérèse's first years showed a fragile child. She was to get used to suffering almost from the beginning. By her own account, she enjoyed a very happy childhood, and at the age of fifteen she entered the Carmel in Lisieux, Normandy, fulfilling a childhood desire to give herself completely to God. She died nine years later at the age of twenty-four. Who would have guessed that one so young and so hidden for most of her life, would have such a big impact on the world? And yet this young Carmelite has already had over nine hundred biographies written about her, and her three texts, collectively known as *Histoire d'une âme* (Story of a Soul), have been translated into many languages. They were first published a year after her death and became a best-seller almost immediately. In these short texts, along with 226 letters, some poems, plays, prayers, and 'last conversations' recorded by her Sisters, Thérèse reveals herself as a woman deeply in love with God, very mature for her age, and with a great understanding of the human person. Although her 'sugary' style of writing does not appeal to many today, the wrapping is often mistaken for what is inside. With a little patience one soon begins to recognise the profound insights that God granted her, with regards the way of holiness, the need for love at the heart of the Church, the problem of suffering and the need to persevere. God taught her what has become known as the 'little way' of spiritual childhood. The beauty of this is that it makes the way of holiness both very simple and very appealing. It is for everyone, without exception. It gets away from all complications, special methods, or practices, sometimes associated with the way of holiness. It is *the* way, which is for everyone. The little way is not something totally new, in the sense that it is simply the message of the Gospel, yet it has a new freshness about it, which is attractive.

In this thesis, we will look at Thérèse's discovery of the little way, and ask what is so special or important about it. Does it have anything to say to our sophisticated,

on-line, twenty-first century world? We will also look at the terrible sufferings that Thérèse endured during her life, which many people are quite unaware of, and how this influenced and matured her thinking. Towards the end of her life she found herself suffering physically from tuberculosis, while at the same time enduring a night of spiritual darkness, which left her sharing the table of atheists. We will ask, does she still have anything to say to people today? We will try to show that Sainte Thérèse de l'Enfant Jésus et de la Sainte-Face, not only has something to say to our modern world, but is hugely important for our times, being able to touch on issues which only God in his wisdom could have provided someone so hidden to speak to us about.

Since she has become so well known, people have taken a great interest in her life. Because of this, many thousands, if not millions, are being exposed to the idea of the contemplative life and why people try to live it at all. Since contemplatives are not just a thing of the past, it means that people are being continually reminded that many people are prepared to dedicate their lives to God in this extraordinary way. This is a form of evangelisation in itself. Little did Thérèse guess just how much she would preach about God to people all over the world.

In the first chapter we will look at the historical background to and the various influences on Thérèse's life, how she discovered her vocation within the Carmelites, namely her call to holiness and the little way of spiritual childhood. We will try to show that, while this is something that Thérèse discovered at the end of the nineteenth century, it still has huge importance for today.

I believe that her understanding of suffering, its value and meaning, is also greatly significant for the beginning of the twenty-first century. The world of today has great difficulty dealing with the 'problem' of suffering. We tend to view suffering as a problem, rather than a mystery from which we might learn something. St. Thérèse, who was quite young herself, has much to say to us about the darkness which affects everyone at some stage. In the second chapter we will look at suffering in her life, how it affected her, and how she matured through the experience of

prolonged suffering. A proper understanding of the meaning of suffering is vital for a huge number of people who have lost hope. I will try to show how Thérèse's understanding could give great hope to people today.

Finally we will look at some of the more recent writings on Thérèse and the various themes that are emerging from them, such as the dignity of work and the human person; living the Gospel in practice; the need to persevere in a 'disposable' world, and the problems of atheism and indifference, all of which are also speaking to the modern world.

Thérèse and the Church of her Time

Every one of us is influenced by the society that we grow up in, its thinking, its movements. Despite our best efforts to be objective and neutral, we will invariably see things, to some degree, through the coloured lenses of the environment that surrounds us. In order to better understand the mind of Thérèse, we will now take a brief look at some of the currents of thought of the Church in France at the end of the nineteenth century, which may have influenced Thérèse's spirituality, either positively or negatively.

The Church and the State

Many of the problems of the Church in Thérèse's time were rooted in the ongoing problem of Church-State relations. To understand why this was so, we must go back a few steps to before the French revolution in 1789. Up to the revolution, the Church and State were considered the two great pillars of society, but traditional religion had developed a bad name in the eyes of politicians, and understandably so. The hierarchy were all nobility without exception, consisting of prince-bishops, and

¹ Cf. Leopold Gunkel, 'The World of Thérèse Emma, Child and Girl in the Late Nineteenth Century,' John Salzman, O.S.B. (ed.), *In Spirituality Thérèse's Way* (Catholic Studies 3), Washington, D.C.: ICS, 1990, 13.

Chapter 1

The Little Way of Love

Introduction

In this chapter we will look at the core of Thérèse's spirituality, the little way of spiritual childhood, how she discovered it within the particular historical situation of her day and the special circumstances of her home. We will see her originality and how she transcended all the influences of her time.

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¹ Cf. Leopold Glueckert, 'The World of Thérèse: France, Church and State in the Late Nineteenth Century,' John Sullivan, OCD (ed.), in *Experiencing Thérèse Today*, (Carmelite Studies 5), Washington, D.C.: ICS, 1990, 13.

quite removed from the common people. No one expected to find holiness among the hierarchy, or even good theology. There were certainly many good 'people of God,' but they were to be found among the priests and religious on the ground, and the many devout lay people. The politicians and intellectuals of the time were also heavily influenced by the Enlightenment. If they believed in a God, then it was at most Deism, namely belief in a 'Divine Watchmaker' who could create the universe, but who had no personal interest in it. The Church was seen by many in power as an unnecessary obstacle to progress, which badly influenced the more gullible of society into all sorts of superstitious practices. Those religious in convents or monasteries were highly suspect as well, since 'they represented much of what these forward-looking modernizers hated and wanted to destroy'.² They felt that the Church had too much influence over the State and over the majority of people, who would listen to the Church, rather than to the better reasoning of the intellectuals. During the French revolution, the built-up anger of the people exploded and went completely out of control during the Reign of Terror. All Church property was confiscated by the government and thousands of priests and religious were executed, including Carmelites. Religious orders were forbidden and disbanded. Some would never recover. Those that survived went underground, but were greatly reduced in number when it was eventually safe to re-emerge. But even after the revolution and right up to the time of Thérèse, many people still saw the existence of religious orders as a failure on the part of the revolution. By the end of the nineteenth century religious houses were only beginning to get on their feet again, with many of the monasteries still 'illegal,' that is, not officially allowed by the government, but with officials just turning a blind eye to them. By 1880, when Thérèse was considering her vocation, out of the 113 monasteries of Discalced nuns in France, only sixteen were legal.

From before the Revolution, there were two main camps within the French Church: the Gallicans and the Ultramontanists. The Gallicans wanted an independent Church in France, to be allowed run its own affairs with little or no influence from Rome, though they still wanted to be linked to Rome. They were interested in a more nationalist Church than a Rome-centred Church. This they saw as necessary if the

² Ibid., 14.

Church was to have any influence on society and politics. The Ultramontanists, on the other hand, could see the value and need for remaining part of the universal Church, which wouldn't be so easily influenced by nationalism and the various shifts in political thought. The French Church at the time of Thérèse was more Gallican than Ultramontanist, though the two were beginning to blend. In spite of this, Thérèse herself was strongly papalist and had a great enthusiasm for the pope of the time, Leo XIII, whom she met on pilgrimage in Rome in 1887.

With the defeat of the Second Empire in 1871, the Third Republic began to emerge. This Republic consisted of three groups in serious opposition to each other: Legitimists, Orleanists and some Bonapartists.³ Each group wanted to see a king, but none would give an inch to the other. The result was terrible division. They eventually agreed on a republic, since it was what divided them least. This Republic also showed itself hostile to the Church, since many of the old wounds had not yet healed. Over the following thirty years, many laws were passed against Church institutions. 'In 1875, independent universities were founded by the church to compensate for their exclusion from the Sorbonne and other venerable institutions. In 1879, there were laws against the Jesuits; in 1880 came laws against other religious orders, though not as severe as those of the previous century. By 1882 there was mandatory secular education for all children.'⁴ As we can see there was still great anti-clericalism in France and the Church was still persecuted in many ways. Ongoing efforts were being made for reconciliation between Church and State, so that the Church could enjoy greater freedom. Despite many tensions and misunderstandings, virtual peace was at hand only a decade after Thérèse's death.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century the Church greatly encouraged the practice of devotions among the laity. 'Obedience and submission were cardinal virtues at the time',⁵ but the religious outlook tended to be quite self-centred, with

³ The Third Republic was made up of about 400 monarchist representatives, out of a total of 650 from the National Assembly. They all wanted a crowned king, but were deeply divided over who should be chosen. There were three 'pretender' kings: the Legitimist Count of Chambord, the Orleanist Count of Paris, and the now exiled Napoleon III, each with its own party of supporters.

⁴ Glueckert, 'The World of Thérèse,' 24.

⁵ Christopher O'Donnell, O. Carm., *Love in the Heart of the Church* (Dublin: Veritas, 1997), 27.

many people preoccupied with gaining merits in order to reach a higher place in heaven. People were focused on how to attain their own salvation, rather than thinking of souls in general. However, Thérèse's outlook is refreshingly different. She has a great sense of the need to pray for other 'souls' and for priests. Interestingly she doesn't often mention the word 'Church,' but she is very aware of how important her role as a Carmelite is to pray for others.⁶ 'Ah! Céline, let us not forget souls, but let us forget ourselves for them'.⁷ Before she entered Carmel, she told her older sister Pauline that she wanted to enter Carmel, even if it was only to save one soul, and that all the suffering in the world would be worth it. At the age of fourteen, she had heard through the papers about the notorious criminal Pranzini. He had been sentenced to death for some horrific crimes. She decided to pray for his conversion and began to redouble her efforts in prayer and fasting. She kept looking to the papers for some sign of his conversion, being completely convinced that God would answer her prayer. She had asked God for a small sign so that she would know that her request had been granted and sure enough, just as Pranzini was about to be executed, he asked for a crucifix, which he kissed. Then he exchanged a few words with the chaplain before he was led away. Thérèse took this as her sign and after this her zeal for saving souls increased greatly. Later in Carmel, when she sometimes was given money she would have Mass offered for this same man's soul. 'It's for my child; he must need it after all he's done. I mustn't abandon him now.'⁸ When she was about to make her profession, she was asked, in accordance with the requirements of Canon Law, what were her motives for wanting to follow this way of life. She replied, 'above all it is to save souls and to pray for priests'.⁹

Bérullian Spirituality

There were also various aspects of the spirituality of the time, which could well have influenced Thérèse. The first was the Bérullian School of spirituality, which

⁶ One important instance where Thérèse does use the word 'Church', is found in her *Act of Oblation to Merciful Love*, where she says, 'I want to work for the glory of Holy Church.' See appendix 1. This is also discussed later in the section 'Offering to Merciful Love.'

⁷ LT 130, 732-733.

⁸ Christopher O'Mahony, OCD (ed.), *St. Thérèse of Lisieux by Those Who Knew Her. Testimonies from the Process of Beatification* (Dublin: Veritas, 1975), 131.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.

seems to have been a positive influence. Its name comes from its founder Cardinal Pierre de Bérulle (1575-1629). Bérulle was brought up in a very religious home and was considered a master in the spiritual life by the age of seventeen! After he was ordained in 1599 he turned down several influential appointments, being more interested in the work of spiritual reform of the religious orders. He undertook the long and difficult task of introducing Carmelite nuns of the Teresian reform into France. He took a great interest in the education of the clergy and formed the Oratory of Jesus, in Paris, which became known as the French Oratory. This was modelled on the Oratory of St. Philip Neri, and was hugely successful. A French school of spirituality developed from the Oratory. This school showed great interest in St. Paul's understanding of the mystical body of Christ. They said that Christianity is essentially a mystery focused on the divine action of Christ's life, death and resurrection, singling out Christ's servitude as the central point. They emphasised Christ's complete self-renunciation and his clinging to God. We are to imitate this example. This servitude and self-renunciation is a form of continual adoration of God, also enabled by habitual grace, which every Christian enjoys. Jean Jacques Olier, one of the masters of the school, wrote: 'Christianity consists in these three points;...to look upon Jesus, to unite oneself to Jesus and to act in Jesus.'¹⁰ Thérèse frequently mentions the need for self-renunciation and complete focus on Jesus. Her Act of Oblation to Merciful Love¹¹ shows her desire to do everything for God. Thérèse also showed a great interest in the priesthood, as we shall see. Towards the end of her life she was delighted at the opportunity to be a 'spiritual sister' to two different priests, supporting them through prayer.¹²

Jansenism

The Jansenist heresy also had quite an influence on the Church at this time. This heresy gets its name from Cornelius Otto Jansen, although it was in existence

¹⁰ E. A. Walsh, 'French School of Spirituality,' *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol 13, 605.

¹¹ See appendix 1.

¹² Thérèse was asked by the Prioress, if she would spiritually adopt two 'brothers.' Fr. Maurice Barthélemy-Bellière (1874-1907), who was a seminarian at the time, and later Fr. Adolphe Roulland (1870-1934). Cf. *Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux* (Washington, D.C.: ICS, 1996), 251, 253. For a more detailed account of the correspondence between Thérèse and Maurice Bellière, see Patrick Ahern, *Maurice and Thérèse: The Story of a Love* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1999).

before him. Jansen wrote a book interpreting Augustine's theology of grace entitled, *Augustinus* (1640). He interpreted Augustine in a very rigid way, giving special attention to the fall of humanity, the sinfulness of the body and the power of concupiscence over free will. 'Dogmatically, Jansenism is summed up in five propositions. The sense of these propositions is (1) that without a special grace from God the performance of His commandments is impossible to men, and (2) that the operation of grace is irresistible; and hence, that man is victim of either a natural or supernatural determinism, limited only by not being violently coercive.'¹³ Jansenism was inflexible, rigorist and emphasised the difficulty of achieving salvation, as well as our unworthiness to receive Holy Communion. As a result, frequent reception of Communion was discouraged. We can see how this was still an influence in Thérèse's time from the delight she experienced at being allowed to receive more often than people usually did then. 'All through the time the community was undergoing this trial, I had the unspeakable consolation of receiving Holy Communion *every day*.'¹⁴ The Jansenists saw Jesus as a severe and inscrutable redeemer and the Church as being in bad need of reform. Human nature was corrupt and the body was a sinful thing. It is interesting that Thérèse at one stage in her writings mentions that she was never happy with her body. 'My body has always embarrassed me; I've never been at ease in it...even when very small, I was ashamed of it.'¹⁵ This may well have been influenced by Jansenist thinking, elements of which lasted well into the nineteenth century,¹⁶ although it was officially gone from early in the century. However, it is important to mention that Thérèse's thinking was far from Jansenist, but could perhaps be understood as an antidote to it. While the Jansenists emphasised the difficulty of achieving salvation, Thérèse rejoiced in the love of God and in total trust and confidence. She said that she had no fear of purgatory since she trusted everything to Love.¹⁷ Whatever influence it may have had on her early development, as she matured spiritually, she moved beyond it.

¹³ 'Jansenism,' *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd Ed. (Oxford: OUP, 1997), 862.

¹⁴ MS A, 172.

¹⁵ LC, 118.

¹⁶ Cf. A. J. Krailsheimer, 'Jansenism,' Gordon S. Wakefield (ed.), *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, London: SCM, 1983.

¹⁷ Cf. MS A, 181.

Devotion to the Sacred Heart

What could be called a counter movement to Jansenism, was devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Although this devotion is quite old, going back to at least the eleventh century, it is primarily associated with private revelations granted to the Visitation nun St. Margaret Mary Alacoque (1647-90). She received these revelations in Paray-le-Monial (1673-75). 'In the devotion to the Sacred Heart the special object is Jesus' physical heart of flesh as the true natural symbol of His threefold love: the human love, sensible and spiritual (infused supernatural charity) and the divine love of the Word Incarnate. Both the physical heart and the total love of Christ are included in the object of the cult.'¹⁸

The heart is singled out as worthy of special devotion because of its symbolism. Unlike Jansenism, this devotion focused on the infinite love of God for us and the great hope and confidence we should have in the One who loves us so much. Pope Pius VI encouraged this devotion in a Bull entitled *Auctorem Fidei* as a vindication against some of the objections of the Jansenists. As we shall see later on, Thérèse mentions this devotion as being influential in the discovery of her vocation to be love in the heart of the Church.¹⁹

Quietism

The Jansenist crisis was just beginning to calm down when a new struggle emerged between those who followed the Ignatian method of meditation and those who saw in it the denial of contemplation, as taught by the great Spanish and French mystics. This became known as Quietism, a spiritual doctrine proposed by Miguel de Molinos, but condemned as heretical by Innocent XI, in 1687. 'The protagonists exaggerated the approved spiritual doctrines, literalized the symbols and figures of the canonized authors, and in general made man's approach to God in prayer a matter of partisanship.'²⁰ Quietism emphasised resignation and the pure love of God, in reaction to the very organised and intellectual approach to the spiritual life, which marked the preceding century. This current of thought played down the role of the

¹⁸ C. J. Moell, 'Devotion to the Sacred Heart,' *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol 12, 818.

¹⁹ Cf. MS B, 187.

²⁰ T. K. Connolly, 'Quietism,' *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol 7, 27.

person in his co-operation with grace. It advocated the complete cessation of all activity in order passively to rest in God's presence. This included denial of the need for confession, or even examination of conscience. Those who followed this way of thinking also discouraged the use of any kind of images for meditation. They believed that God did everything in the soul, and as a result we should do absolutely nothing. One was simply to rest in a contemplative gaze, which even sleep wouldn't interrupt. The Quietist movement gave contemplation a bad name. It is interesting that Thérèse rarely mentions the word contemplation. Neither does she go in for the technical breakdown of the various stages of the spiritual life. However, she does speak of 'abandonment,'²¹ and also emphasises the humanity and divinity of Christ. This is something which Teresa of Avila also recommends in her work *Interior Castle*, where she says that as long as the soul is inclined to, it shouldn't be afraid to stop meditating on the humanity of Christ.²²

Pietism

Pietism, by way of contrast, took a different approach. 'Broadly defined, pietism denotes a distinctive quality of religious life issuing in rigorous morality and personal piety.'²³ Pietism claimed that it was not only possible to be free from sin, but also free from its power. It greatly encouraged all kinds of pious practices, which were a sign of one's 'rebirth' in God. The fight against sin is crucial to salvation. What you did through prayer, humility and good works was hugely important. Pietism called for a return to personal devotion and morality. It believed that Christianity was more a matter of the heart than of the head. Loving ones neighbour was an essential part of being Christian, but adhering to doctrine wasn't as important. Although its influence was biggest in the Lutheran Church, its influence spread to the Catholic Church as well. It probably would have been much more successful only for its lack of organisation. While Thérèse and the community frequently practised

²¹ 'Abandonment' according to Thérèse, seems to be very similar to J. P. de Caussade's understanding of abandonment, in his work *Self-Abandonment to Divine Providence* (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1933). De Caussade says that this kind of abandonment involves an openness to the divine order; accepting and working with God's providence (Cf. 4, 6). As we will see later on, especially from her suffering, Thérèse was totally resigned to God's will. She saw all things, even suffering, as having their part in God's divine order.

²² Cf. IC, VI 7, 402.

²³ J. C. Hoffman, 'Pietism,' *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol 9, 355.

novenas and devotions of different kinds, at the same time she was not constrained by them in any way, and in fact said that she preferred to use her own prayers and the Scriptures, rather than speak with the pious prayers of others. In a letter to P. Roulland, she complains that she is unable to read some of the learned books on spirituality, as they don't help her. Instead, 'I take up Holy Scripture. Then all seems luminous to me.'²⁴ It is also worth noting that Thérèse had such a great love for the Scriptures, at a time when the use of them was not encouraged.

Thérèse's home

Finally we should mention Thérèse's own home environment. Thérèse Martin grew up in an extremely protective family, though by no means oppressive. Thérèse had nothing but happy memories from her childhood. Most of her schooling was at home, except for a short time in school, which she obviously found very difficult, being used to great pampering at home. Eventually she had to be taken out of school to finish her education at home. The Martin children were not allowed to read newspapers, which meant that they were fairly sheltered from the goings-on in the outside world. Thérèse made an exception to this rule when she wanted to find out about the progress of the criminal Pranzini, but even then Céline was still not allowed to read the papers although she was eighteen! Her father and mother were both extremely devout Catholics and God was a constant topic of conversation for the family. So Thérèse grew up with a great sense of God's love for her, as reflected in the affection she received from her parents and from her devoted sisters, who took such special care of her, being the youngest. This was the world of Thérèse's childhood, sheltered but happy, with a strong religious flavour.

²⁴ LT 226, 1094.

The Call to Holiness

A common misconception that many people still have is that holiness is only for a select few, or for priests and religious. However, all people without exception are called to holiness. After all, what is holiness if not growing closer to God in the ways that lead to our own happiness and fulfilment? It is growing to the heights of the Christian life, by imitating Christ. The Second Vatican Council teaches: 'all in the Church, whether they belong to the hierarchy or are cared for by it, are called to holiness, according to the apostle's saying: "For this is the will of God, your sanctification" (1 Th 4:3).'²⁵ All people are called by God to follow the way of holiness, to become holy: 'You therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Mt 5:48). 'All the Christian faithful, of whatever state or rank, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity.'²⁶ Circumstances of life will vary from person to person, but the call is no different, and while a religious life may be more conducive to growing in holiness, it is possible for everyone, everywhere, if they are open to it. This Conciliar teaching was anticipated by Thérèse, who discovered its truth at a time when few of her contemporaries appreciated it.

Perhaps it is the great simplicity with which St. Thérèse of Lisieux presents the path of holiness to us, that makes her spirituality so attractive. The same simplicity hides the greatness of her 'discovery'. Because of what she discovered in her *little way*, holiness now seems more accessible to everyone, not as far away as it might have appeared. She shows us that holiness is within everyone's reach, no matter what their circumstances, since it's not a matter of going anywhere, or of following any particular methodology, save that of living the Gospel wherever you find yourself. It is especially in the 'perfection of charity,' that her little way shines out. She presents this to us with the simplicity of a child and shows us that it is a call which is made to each person without exception. It is no wonder that having discovered this little way, she was so keen to make it known to as many people as possible. She seemed to feel keenly just how much in her day holiness had become 'out of reach' for so many

²⁵ LG 39

²⁶ LG 40

people including herself. Yet if it is a call to come closer to God, it shouldn't be out of reach for anyone.

Holiness was something that Thérèse took very seriously from an early age. '...I've wanted to be a nun since I was three'.²⁷ Her writings continually mention her desire to reach holiness, to be holy for God. Just before she entered Carmel she said: 'I want to be a saint...I am not perfect but I *want* to become perfect'.²⁸ Thérèse, through her spiritual reading, began to realise that the only way to attain this holiness, was through love. 'As for myself, I know no other means of reaching perfection but love'.²⁹ In the 'Imitation of Christ,' one of her favourite books, she read and reread, 'love can do all things; and the most impossible things don't appear difficult to it.'³⁰ So she began to do everything through love, even before she had discovered her *little way*. Before she entered Carmel, she made her own private retreat. Aware of her self-love, she recognised that she needed to begin to do all things to please Jesus, rather than herself. As she waited to make her profession in Carmel, she realised that her impatience was a selfish one. So she resigned herself to wait 'for as long as Jesus desires.' 'I understood that my intense desire to make my profession was mixed with a great self-love.'³¹ She wanted everything to be for him. In the convent, under Mother superior's guidance, she worked especially hard to overcome self-love. She practised little penances, since she felt unable to undertake the great ones. She took a private vow of chastity while still a novice³² and she took great care in being faithful to the vows she made, especially that of poverty. Thérèse was under no illusions when she entered Carmel. Everything was exactly as she expected it to be. Yet while she was delighted with it, she didn't find it easy either. There were many sacrifices from the very beginning, but this was to be expected. '*Illusions*, God gave me the grace *not to have* A SINGLE ONE when entering Carmel. I found the religious life to be *exactly* as I had imagined it, no sacrifice astonished me and yet, as you know,

²⁷ O'Mahony, *St. Thérèse of Lisieux, by Those Who Knew Her*, 27.

²⁸ LT 45, 406.

²⁹ LT 109, 641.

³⁰ LT 65, 468.

³¹ MS A, 158.

³² LC 111, 559.

dear Mother, my first steps met with more thorns than roses!³³ The sisters in the convent themselves all testified that Thérèse was always very zealous in her love for God and beyond reproach in her way of life. Her desire for holiness came into every area of her life, and her great desire to reach it led to her discovery of *the little way*. Just before her death she admits to her sisters that she had no regrets about all the sacrifices that she made from the very beginning of her life in Carmel.

In May 1890, she met a Jesuit, Fr. Blino, and she told him: ‘Father, I want to become a great saint; I want to love God as much as St. Teresa.’³⁴ However, he was far from encouraging: ‘What pride and what presumption. Confine yourself to correcting your faults, to offending God no longer, to making a little progress in virtue each day, and temper your rash desires.’³⁵ In spite of his response, Thérèse was not put off and boldly challenged him saying that she didn’t believe that God would give her desires that she couldn’t fulfil, and indeed this is what led her later to discover the *little way* of spiritual childhood, which would lead her and perhaps many others, to great holiness. She says that, if she didn’t manage to become a great saint, it would be her own fault and not that of the Lord.³⁶ But her desire for holiness was not just for her own satisfaction, she wanted to be holy for Jesus. Everything she did, she did for love of him, including entering Carmel. ‘I wanted to go to Carmel not for *Pauline’s sake*, but for *Jesus alone*’.³⁷ During her time in Carmel this desire increased more and more. Shortly before taking the habit she said, ‘I would like so much to love him!...To love Him more than He has ever been loved.’³⁸ This was a desire that Teresa of Avila also expressed, saying that she couldn’t bear to think that anyone would love Jesus more than she did. Thérèse was even keen to know the details of her cousin Jeanne Guerin’s wedding, and how she gave her fiancé so many signs of her love, so that she would also know how to treat her beloved spouse

³³ MS A, 149. Following the method used by John Clarke, OCD, in *Story of a Soul. The Autobiography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux*, words in italics indicate words from the original manuscript which Thérèse emphasised in various ways. Words in the upper case, are words which she underlined two or more times.

³⁴ LT 107, n 8, 623.

³⁵ LT 107, n 8, 623.

³⁶ Cf. LT 72, 493.

³⁷ MS A, 58.

³⁸ LT 74, 500.

properly. But Thérèse was not unrealistic, she knew that holiness meant the path of suffering and humiliation, and that this would follow, and indeed it had already begun with many trials from the moment she entered the convent. The way of suffering had to be the way of love as well, if it was real holiness. 'Yes, suffering stretched out its arms to me and I threw myself into them with love.'³⁹

Thérèse found great comfort from Fr. Pichon during a retreat in May 1888, when he told her that she had never committed a mortal sin. She describes these words as, 'the most consoling words I ever heard in my life'.⁴⁰ The offering of herself as a victim of love,⁴¹ was a fulfilment of her life-long desire for holiness. In this offering, we can see how much she has advanced in the spiritual life. Now she not only desires to be holy and to love, but she also has a keen insight as to what this call means, and how to live it out. To be truly holy is to give oneself completely to God. She had realised that, to love God as totally as she desired to, was only possible with the love of God himself. So she must abandon herself completely to him and allow herself to be consumed by the fire of divine love. Only then could she love as God had inspired her to. We see therefore, a whole pattern to her discovery. God gives her the desire to love him greatly, totally. She realises she can not do this by her own strength, but only by his grace. Therefore, she must abandon herself to him, to trust herself to God's working in her, knowing that he will not fail her, even when she can not see where the journey is taking her. This is the journey to what is known in mystical theology as divine union. This is also how and why holiness is a call for everyone. It is not something that *we* achieve, rather what God achieves through us, once we are open. Thérèse's discovery of how God will do this, if we let him, is what is so important for today's world. It doesn't come down to any particular methodology or practice, save that of knowing that God will bring about this holiness in us, if we remain little and abandon ourselves to him totally. If we remain 'little', then he will do everything. He will be our holiness, and he will raise us up to the great heights of the spiritual life, by his own grace, not ours. This is central to Thérèse's understanding of the call to holiness, namely that we must allow God to

³⁹ MS A, 149.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ See appendix 1.

bring it about in us. It is grace. Then it is no longer beyond anyone's ability, since it doesn't depend on their ability, rather on their openness.

Some people who follow their Lord on the journey of faith are called to martyrdom, which is the greatest witness to love anyone can give. 'No one can have greater love than to lay down his life for his friends' (Jn 15:13). Thérèse also had a great desire to be a martyr. 'Martyrdom was the dream of my youth and this dream has grown with me within Carmel's cloisters.'⁴² Yet Thérèse was totally realistic about her desires and realised that what was important was to be a martyr where she was. 'Before dying by the sword, let us die by pin pricks.'⁴³ Again we see how her approach makes the path to holiness so accessible to everyone. Not many people are called to a bloody martyrdom, yet everyone experiences the daily 'pin pricks,' which they could offer to God if they chose. Martyrdom for her would be realised in being consumed by love, and in an ongoing way through the daily struggles, offering all things to God and learning to be detached from everything. The cloistered life was a continual dying to self and to the world. Some people are critical of Thérèse, saying that an enclosed Carmelite nun does not have the same trials as most people 'in the world.' However, most of the sufferings she went through are no different to the sufferings everyone goes through. One could say that the difference between the convent and 'the world' is that, in the convent, the daily wear and tear of human interaction is magnified and so intensified by the intimacy and silence of the cloister. How many parents are making small sacrifices every day for their children? They are continually having to let go, and put up with so many difficulties. It is the same journey for all people, if they are open to it. The difference is in how we respond to the opportunities and circumstances presented to us at each moment.

⁴² MS B, 193.

⁴³ LT 86, 552.

A Vocation Within a Vocation

To many it may seem strange that an enclosed Carmelite nun would want to know *what* her vocation was. It might seem obvious that her vocation is to pray and work in a convent. Yet this is the experience of many priests and religious, the desire to know what they are called to *within* their vocation, to a particular role or task. Thérèse also sought to find out what her particular role was within the general mission of the mystical body. It is mainly in manuscript B that we get an account of her discovery of *the way of love* and that this is what she felt her Lord was calling her to.

This manuscript was written in response to a request from Sister Marie of the Sacred Heart, to give her a souvenir from Thérèse's retreat. It was during this retreat that Thérèse, in trying to discover what exactly she could or should do as a Carmelite, asked the Lord to teach her. At the end of a particular time of prayer, she remembered the words of Jesus to St. Margaret Mary:

Here is the teacher whom I am giving you; he will teach you everything that you must do. I want to make you read in the book of life, wherein is contained the science of LOVE.⁴⁴

She found herself reading the writings of St. Paul, where she read through the first letter to the Corinthians, chapters twelve and thirteen. Here she read about the various callings in the Church and realised that she felt called to them all, and yet knew that she couldn't live them all. The very desire which she expresses to fulfil all these vocations, is a powerful indication of the intensity of the love of God within her. Her longing is to do all things for God, while at the same time she realises her own limitations, both physical and spiritual.⁴⁵ Finally she reads where St. Paul explains how all actions are empty and meaningless unless they have love.⁴⁶ Now at

⁴⁴ Words of Our Lord to St. Margaret Mary, found in the *Little Breviary of the Sacred Heart*, MS B, 187.

⁴⁵ Teresa of Avila in *Interior Castle*, VI 2, describes these attributes as being part of the spiritual marriage. The soul has a great longing to do all things for God, and to make God known to others. The fact that she had such an intense desire to do all things for the love of God, does not necessarily say that St. Thérèse had already experienced divine union; it is difficult to classify these experiences as the different stages overlap. Both John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila agree on the difficulty of classifying these kind of experiences.

⁴⁶ Cf. 1 Co 13:1 ff.

last she finds peace and in a beautiful passage she expresses why love must be at the heart of the Church if it is to survive:

I finally had rest. Considering the mystical body of the Church, I had not recognized myself in any of the members described by St. Paul, or rather I desired to see myself in them *all*. *Charity* gave me the key to my *vocation*. I understood that if the church had a body composed of different members, the most necessary and most noble of all could not be lacking to it and so I understood that the Church *had a Heart and that this Heart was BURNING WITH LOVE*. I understood it was *Love alone* that made the Church's members act, that if Love ever became extinct, apostles would not preach the Gospel and martyrs would not shed their blood. I understood that LOVE COMPRISED ALL VOCATIONS, THAT LOVE WAS EVERYTHING, THAT IT EMBRACED ALL TIMES AND PLACES... IN A WORD, THAT IT WAS ETERNAL!

Then in the excess of my delirious joy, I cried out: O Jesus, my Love... my *vocation*, at last I have found it... MY VOCATION IS LOVE!⁴⁷

Thérèse had finally found her vocation, one which she was certain that God was calling her to, and one which she knew was possible, because God was also showing her how to live it, that is, in *littleness*. In the following few pages Thérèse explains her understanding of what it means to have a vocation of love, and in only a few pages she presents us with a treasure of insight into what it means to live out this vocation of love. I refer again to the Conciliar text on holiness quoted earlier, which speaks of the call of all people to 'the fullness of Christian life and *to the perfection of charity*'.⁴⁸ This is what Thérèse had recognised, that you can't have holiness without love. Love must be at the heart of our vocation. What is interesting is not just that Thérèse had recognised the necessity of love, but also how she subsequently discovered it could be lived out in daily life, through her little way. This is what makes it possible for everyone.

Returning to manuscript B again, Thérèse says 'I am only a child, powerless and weak, and yet it is my weakness that gives me the boldness of offering myself as *VICTIM of Your Love, O Jesus!*'⁴⁹ Herein lies the key to the way of childhood. She realises that she cannot possibly do anything of herself, except to abandon herself to the love of God, who can fill her and then enable her to do all things out of love, if she is willing. This is the theology of grace, that we can do nothing without God's

⁴⁷ MS B, 194.

⁴⁸ LG 40 (italics mine).

⁴⁹ MS B, 195.

grace, and that it enables us to do all things. *'The charity of Christ is the source in us of all our merits* before God. Grace, by uniting us to Christ in active love, ensures the supernatural quality of our acts and consequently their merit before God and before men.'⁵⁰ This is also where many people stumble, feeling that they cannot reach the heights of holiness by their own strength, and of course they are right. It is not by our own ability that we become holy, but by the grace of God. Realising this is essential to progress in the spiritual journey. Thérèse uses the term 'victim of love' meaning that she would offer herself to God allowing God to pour out his love on her so that she might experience this love and in turn offer it back to God, for the sake of other souls who do not show such love for God. This is how she will love, *on behalf of* others, so to speak. The love that they do not offer, or show to God, she will offer in their place. This will be her work, her vocation. She also makes it clear that she is not attracted to being 'a victim of God's justice,' as was a popular spiritual idea of the time. 'This offering [to God's justice] seemed great and very generous to me, but I was far from feeling attracted to making it.'⁵¹ Instead she offers herself to God, to be a victim of his love.

⁵⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Dublin: Veritas, 1994), #2011, 437.

⁵¹ MS B, 180.

Offering to Merciful Love⁵²

Thérèse had received a sharp insight that many in the spiritual life overlook, namely ‘that the most intense love for God consists in letting him fully love us’.⁵³ On Trinity Sunday 1895, she received the grace of understanding how much God desires to love us. Straight away, rather than talking about how *she* could actively do this she begins to describe how she realised that she needed to offer herself to God, to be a victim of his love, that God would love, through her. When she first composed her *Act of Oblation to Merciful Love*, she went to Mother Prioress, who was Sr. Agnes of Jesus at the time, and asked her for permission to make it. Sr. Agnes granted her permission but didn’t think much of it. Thérèse also wanted it to be checked by a theologian, to make sure that its contents were sound. It was checked by Fr. Le Monnier, and the only amendment that he made to it was to change the words ‘infinite desires,’ to ‘immense desires.’ Thérèse was very happy that her offering now had Church approval, although she didn’t see the need to change the words. Sr. Agnes recalled later that Thérèse frequently repeated this offering during her life, as Thérèse told her on her death bed. *The Act of Oblation to Merciful Love*,⁵⁴ gives us a great insight into how she understood what this meant.

O My God! Most Blessed Trinity, I desire to *Love* You and make You *Loved*, to work for the glory of Holy Church by saving souls on earth and liberating those suffering in purgatory. I desire to accomplish Your will perfectly and to reach the degree of glory You have prepared for me in Your Kingdom. I desire, in a word, to be a saint, but I feel my helplessness and I beg You, O my God! to be Yourself my *Sanctity!*⁵⁵

Even in this first part of her offering, we can already see what vision she has. She wants to love, *for the glory of the Church*, by saving souls and liberating those in purgatory. Her desire is *to be a saint*, to completely fulfil God’s will. Here we see more of Thérèse’s ecclesiology and her desire to help all souls, God’s people, all over the world. She will be love in the heart of the Church, where it is absolutely vital to have love. Without love, there is no life in the Church, and indeed it is no longer the Church, since the Church is meant to be the visible sign on earth of God’s kingdom in

⁵² For the full text of ‘Act of Oblation to Merciful Love,’ see appendix 1.

⁵³ O’Donnell, *Love in the Heart of the Church*, 38.

⁵⁴ Cf. appendix 1.

⁵⁵ *Story of a Soul*, 276.

heaven. How could this kingdom exist without love? It would be a contradiction in terms. The Church is the mystical body of Christ. How could the body of Christ not have love? This is one of the great needs of our time, to uncover the heart of love within the Church. If people cannot see this heart of love, they will not be drawn to the mystical body of Christ. If people only see the institutional Church, something has gone wrong, and we must work hard to put it right. I believe that this is exactly what God is doing in the Church at the moment, especially through the influence of people like St. Thérèse. We are discovering again love at the heart of the Church.⁵⁶

Thérèse makes her offering knowing that she herself has nothing, and so she offers the merits of the angels and saints, those of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and above all the merits of Jesus himself. In other words she has nothing to offer herself, but being part of the Church, she enjoys what belongs to the Church and so she offers it all to God. She adds: 'I know, O my God! that *the more you want to give, the more You make us desire.*'⁵⁷ Teresa of Avila mentions in 'Interior Castle,' that as the soul comes closer to union with God, its desire for God increases, and its capacity for loving God also increases.⁵⁸ As Thérèse was being drawn closer to God, so her love and desire for God increased. More and more everything was for Jesus, even the smallest act. Indeed the very last words that she spoke as she died reflect just how much she had been consumed by God's love. 'Oh! I love Him...My God, I love You!'⁵⁹ It might be said that many of the mystics strove for perfection in order to attain love, but Thérèse did the opposite. She realised that love was the way to perfection, and so she gave herself completely to love, in order to attain perfection.

There are two unusual requests made in this offering. First she asks that Jesus remain present within her between each communion she receives, just as he is in the tabernacle. In other words, that Jesus would be a living presence continually within her. Secondly, an even more unusual request was that she would see the wounds of

⁵⁶ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger develops this idea and shows that the love at the heart of the Church is of course the Eucharist. See, 'Eucharist and Mission', *ITQ*, 65/3, (2000), 245-264.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Several times in *Interior Castle* Teresa of Avila mentions how the Lord increases the soul's desire for him, as it progresses on the spiritual journey. See especially books 5 and 6 in, IC.

⁵⁹ LC, 243.

the passion on her own glorified body when she died. This seems to be an indication that she wanted to suffer the passion of Christ herself, to share in a very intimate way his very own suffering. During the process for beatification the judge asked Sr. Agnes of Jesus if she understood Thérèse to mean these words literally or metaphorically. Sr. Agnes replied, 'she often enlarged on these ideas when speaking to me, and I am certain she meant them literally. Her loving confidence in our Lord made her extraordinarily daring in the things she asked him for.'⁶⁰

Another interesting line in the offering is this: 'Time is nothing in your eyes, a thousand years are but a day (Ps 89:4); *so in one instant you could make me ready to appear before you*' (italics mine). This very much gets away from the idea of us being able to obtain, or merit in any way, our own salvation. It is God who does this, while of course he looks for our co-operation and free will in the matter, but it is ultimately God who has done everything. It seems quite logical that once realising this, we would totally abandon ourselves to God in loving trust, and never be afraid of his wrath, since his love is so great. 'Love comes to its perfection in us when we can face the day of judgement fearlessly... In love there is no room for fear, because perfect love drives out fear' (1 Jn 4:17, 18). Thérèse was not afraid of dying since her confidence in God's love was so great.

⁶⁰ O'Mahony, *St. Thérèse of Lisieux by Those Who Knew Her*, 46.

The Little Way of Spiritual Childhood

The term 'spiritual childhood,' is not a new one. It has been used in the Church for centuries. It is described as 'a state of awareness of God's fatherhood and a consequent filial dependence on him'.⁶¹ On the occasion of her canonisation, Pius XI said that Thérèse's spiritual program 'consists in feeling and acting under the discipline of virtue, as a child feels and acts by nature'.⁶² It is an attitude of spirit, but the term is now especially associated with St. Thérèse.

Jesus, the Revelation of God, came to teach us about God and to help us understand that God is love and how he wants us to live in this same love. According to Jesus, the whole meaning of the law and the prophets is to love.⁶³ To love God means to love those whom God loves, that is everyone. To follow Christ means to deny oneself and follow him in this way of love. The whole spiritual life can then be reduced to two elements: love of God and detachment from ourselves. In order to be a saint we must cling to Christ, who will then enable us to love our neighbour. By loving Christ, we deny ourselves, since the closer we come to him, the less attached to the world we are. The spirituality of the early Christians seemed to have had a very clear focus on the person of Christ. They realised that he must be at the heart of their way of life and nothing must obscure it. They tried to put on the mind of Christ. 'Make your own the mind of Christ Jesus' (Ph 2:5). As time went on, in an attempt to help people grow in their spiritual lives, all kinds of ascetical practices and rules developed. They became more and more complicated until holiness seemed quite out of reach for many people. It often had the impression, and for some still has, of being only for those who could dedicate their time to some particular means of following Christ through the priesthood or consecrated religious life. However, Thérèse turned these notions completely on their head with her discovery of the *little way*, in all its simplicity.

⁶¹ P.T. Rohrhach, 'Spiritual Childhood,' *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol 13, (New York: McGraw Hill, 1967).

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Cf. Mt 22:34-40.

All through her writings Thérèse speaks in terms of *littleness*. She frequently describes herself as a 'little flower,' of no importance, or as 'a weak little bird'.⁶⁴ To some, this style of writing may seem unattractive and even childish, but she is revealing her attitude of mind, her spirit, recognising her own insignificance before God, and this is the key to growth in the spiritual life: humility.⁶⁵

It is generally recognised that Thérèse herself did not use the term 'spiritual childhood'.⁶⁶ She frequently spoke of the 'little way,' but not of spiritual childhood. It is thought that Mother Agnes was probably the first one to use it, referring to Thérèse's little way. Thérèse had given Mother Agnes full authority, as she saw fit, to add or subtract from the texts she had written and it is only in the seventh edition of her writings, produced in 1907, that this expression first appears.⁶⁷

While Thérèse had found her vocation to be love in the heart of the Church, she still wanted to find a way to God that was specific to her situation. 'But I want to seek out a means of going to heaven by a little way, a way that is very straight, very short, and totally new.'⁶⁸ She was aware of her own weakness and inability to do so many things. 'Alas! I have always noticed that when I compared myself to the saints, there is between them and me the same difference that exists between a mountain whose summit is lost in the clouds and the obscure grain of sand trampled underfoot by passers-by.'⁶⁹ She felt that she could not be like them and so she wanted to find some way to reach holiness, to which she knew God was calling her. God answered her prayer and spoke to her once again through the Scriptures.

The text from St. Matthew's Gospel, 'unless you become like little children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven' (18:3), has sometimes been considered the text on which Thérèse based her little way. While it is probably the first text that

⁶⁴ MS B, 198.

⁶⁵ Cf. WP, 54.

⁶⁶ Cf. Conrad De Meester, OCD, *The Power of Confidence. Genesis and Structure of the 'Way of Spiritual Childhood' of St. Thérèse of Lisieux* (New York: Alba House, 1998), 3-8.

⁶⁷ For a further study of the initial use of the term 'little way of spiritual childhood,' see De Meester.

⁶⁸ MS C, 207.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

comes to mind, it is not the one that inspired Thérèse's little way, and in fact is hardly mentioned at all by Thérèse. In manuscript B, Thérèse writes:

Jesus deigned to show me the road that leads to this Divine Furnace, and this road is the *surrender* of the little child who sleeps without fear in his Father's arms. 'Whoever is a *little one*, let him come to me' (Pr 9:4). So speaks the Holy Spirit through the mouth of Solomon. This same Spirit of Love also says: '*For to him that is little mercy will be shown*' (Wis 6:7). The Prophet Isaiah reveals in His name that on the last day: '*God shall feed his flock like a shepherd; he shall gather together the lambs with his arm, and shall take them up in his bosom*' (Is 40:11). As though these promises were not sufficient, this same prophet whose gaze was already plunged into the eternal depths cried out in the Lord's name: '*As one whom a mother caresses, so will I comfort you; you shall be carried at the breasts, and upon the knees they shall caress you*' (Is 66:13,12).⁷⁰

This was her answer and she knew that God was telling her that this journey was possible for her, in littleness.

This little way is a means to holiness, not an end in itself. Her search was to find a way to reach holiness that was possible for her, and here she discovered it, realising that God would accomplish everything through her, if she just remained little. It is based on the idea of complete confidence in him. He could then be her 'elevator,' to lift her up to God, so that she could avoid the 'rough staircase of penance,' which she felt was beyond her. The *little way* is strictly speaking not even Thérèse's little way. Rather it is *the way*, since it is the way of love, which encompasses all other ways.

Various attempts have been made to get a deeper understanding of which particular charism or virtue Thérèse emphasises. However, the key to understanding the little way, is to realise that there is no particular virtue or charism, but simply that it is in littleness, in total confidence in, and abandonment to God. The Carmel in Lisieux remarked, 'we have often noticed that everyone tries to adapt the Theresian doctrine to his own views of the ascetical and mystical life, and thereby takes away its originality'.⁷¹ They miss the point, as it were. It is not a method, but simply a

⁷⁰ MS B, 188.

⁷¹ Francois Jamart, OCD, *Complete Spiritual Doctrine of St. Thérèse of Lisieux* (New York: Alba House, 1961), 27.

recognition of what God will do if we give ourselves to him in complete surrender and abandonment, as a child does to his parents. A child takes completely for granted that his parents will do everything for him. He demands what he wants and usually expects to get it. It doesn't occur to him that his father or mother *couldn't* do something. If he is trying to climb the stairs and it is too much for him, he waits for his mother to come and carry him up. And this is exactly what Thérèse understood, that God would do everything for her, that *he* would be her holiness himself, since she felt that otherwise it was way beyond her. 'When we carefully look for the dominant character of Thérèse's doctrine, we find that it does not consist in any particular virtue but in a special attitude of mind. Everything is based on and flows from an attitude of spiritual childhood.'⁷² God will do everything, once we realise our nothingness, our littleness, and then give ourselves completely to him. This is one of the reasons why the little way is so important for today, because it is a way that is open to all people of all ages, whether they are saints or sinners. It shoots straight to the heart of the Gospel, leaving all complications or extras, to the side. People hunger for God and how to get closer to him, and a simple way that is 'very straight, very short, and totally new',⁷³ is exactly what people are looking for. God in his wisdom, continues to open up the Gospels and the call to holiness to us. When things seem impossible to us, God suddenly opens up the way again, often by the most unexpected means. 'Who can be saved then?' they said. Jesus gazed at them. 'By human resources,' he told them, 'this is impossible; for God everything is possible' (Mt 19:26).

Thérèse was asked by Mother Agnes why she wanted to teach souls this little way, and what exactly she meant by remaining a little child. She replied:

It is the way of spiritual childhood,⁷⁴ the way of confidence and abandonment to God. I want to teach them the little means which have proved so perfectly successful for myself. I want to tell them that there is only one thing for us to do here below: to

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ MS C, 207.

⁷⁴ Although the term 'spiritual childhood' is used here, the first edition of *Histoire d'une âme* published in 1898, omits it. The text runs: 'Ma Mère, c'est le chemin de la confiance et du total abandon' (ch. xii, 241). Cf. Sainte Thérèse de l'Enfant-Jésus et de la Sainte-Face, *Derniers Entretiens* (Paris: Cerf DDB, 1971), 578.

throw at Jesus' feet the flowers of little sacrifices,⁷⁵ to win Him through our caresses. That is the way in which I have taken hold of Him, and that is why I will get such a good welcome.⁷⁶

It means that we acknowledge our nothingness; that we expect everything from the good Lord, as a child expects everything from its father; it means to worry about nothing, not to build upon fortune; it means to remain little, seeking only to gather flowers, the flowers of sacrifice, and to offer them to the good Lord for His pleasure. It also means not to attribute to ourselves the virtues we practice, not to believe that we are capable of anything, but to acknowledge that it is the good Lord who has placed that treasure in the hand of His little child that He may use it when He needs it, but it remains always God's own treasure. Finally, it means that we must not be discouraged by our faults, for children fall frequently.⁷⁷

In these two texts we see all the elements of the little way of spiritual childhood. The child recognises his *littleness*. He can do nothing without his parents. He depends on them for the smallest help. The child is *poor* and knows that everything he has, comes from them. If he needs anything, he must turn to them as well, and he has no hesitation in doing so. The child has total *confidence* in his parents. It would never occur to him that they wouldn't or couldn't help him. He knows especially that he is *loved* in a beautiful way, and he responds to this love by loving in return. There is a joyful love between parents and their little children. The child *abandons* himself into their care in every way. The child is also *simple* in everything. A child's life is not complicated. These are the characteristics of spiritual childhood for Thérèse, who saw that our relationship to God can be exactly the same. It is the way that leads straight to God, just as a child holds the hearts of his parents in his hands, so we can captivate, as it were, the heart of God through love.

Possibly the clearest expression of the little way that we have, is found in a letter that Thérèse wrote to her oldest sister Marie, at the end of her retreat in 1896. She had already explained her doctrine of the little way to Marie in the letter found in manuscript B. But she realised that Marie didn't fully understand it. So in another letter Thérèse wrote:

⁷⁵ To many this kind of language may be off-putting, but it is important to remember the kind of background to Thérèse's life. She came from a bourgeois family, spending much time at home and in the garden surrounded by flowers. While it is not as attractive now, it would have been quite acceptable for her time.

⁷⁶ LC, Jul 17, 257, as quoted in, Jamart, 28.

⁷⁷ LC, Aug 6, 138, as quoted in, Jamart, 28.

Let me tell you, Marie, that my desires for martyrdom are *nothing*. It is not they which give me the unlimited confidence which I feel in my heart...What pleases God in my little soul *is that He sees me loving my littleness and my poverty: it is the blind hope that I have in His mercy*. That is my only treasure. Why can it not be yours?...To love Jesus, the more one is weak, without desires and without virtues, the more one is suitable for the operations of (God's) consuming and transforming love. It is confidence and nothing but confidence that must lead us to love.⁷⁸

Thérèse explains that it is our complete confidence in God's love and mercy, which is so attractive to God. God's love is merciful love, and for us to recognise this and approach God with confidence in his mercy, is to capture God by the heart, as it were. Our sinfulness is not something that should make us afraid of God, rather it should give us all the more reason to turn to his mercy with confidence.

Thérèse demonstrates the power of her little way, in a series of letters to Maurice Bellière, a struggling young seminarian. Maurice was weighed down by thoughts of his past sins, how this was so displeasing to God and perhaps even that he should not go on to be a priest. Thérèse reassures him, explaining how he should have total confidence in the mercy and love of God, rather than fearing him in any way. She uses a parable of a father with two little children, both of whom were bold. When the father comes to punish them, one shrinks away in fear, but the other turns to his father with love, throws himself into his fathers arms and promises that he will be good from now on. This little child wins the heart of the father, since he shows such confidence and love.⁷⁹ Thérèse explains that this is how we should be with God. Her letters won over the fearful Maurice and gave him great courage to continue on.

Thérèse uses various images to describe this grace of God, which comes down to us and lifts us up to himself. She sees herself as a little bird fluttering on the ground trying to get up, unable to reach the great heights. She is aware of her own sinfulness and weakness. The little bird contemplates the Sun whom she can not see most of the time because it is blocked by the clouds and she is unable to fly properly. Then the eagle, her divine lover, swoops down and immediately takes the little bird

⁷⁸ LT, 999-1000, as quoted in, Patrick Ahern, *Maurice and Thérèse*, 113.

⁷⁹ Cf. Patrick Ahern, *Maurice and Thérèse*, 167.

into the great abyss of light, soaring right into the light as no other bird can do.⁸⁰ It is her great desire for the Sun, which attracts the eagle to her.

When she was small Thérèse had a kaleidoscope in which she could see beautiful colours and patterns. One day she took the tube to pieces to see how the magic happened and discovered that there were only a few little coloured bits of paper and some small pieces of cloth, along with three mirrors. She saw in this clever bit of engineering an image of the divine love for each of us. 'So long as our actions, no matter how trivial, remain within the focus of love, the Blessed Trinity...gives them a wonderful brilliance and beauty. When Jesus looks at us through the little lens, which is to say Himself, He finds all our doings beautiful. But if we abandon the ineffable centre of love, what does He see? A few straws... besmirched and worthless deeds.'⁸¹ It is God that transforms our littleness into great beauty through his grace. The Father looks at us through the face of the Son and can only see us with great love. And so Thérèse begs God to look at her through the face of Jesus. She had clearly grasped the theology of grace and presents it to us in a marvellously clear image. All depends on God, we need only recognise this and then entrust everything to our divine Father. 'The point is that man cannot be hypnotized by grace apart from his own will and self-surrender, but that once he is in the power of this higher will then he carries it out without knowing its laws and purposes.'⁸²

Another powerful image that she uses is that of playing at the divine bank, or rather God playing on her behalf. The winnings keep coming back, although she does not know how. She knows that all she has to do is to stake all if she wants to win, and not only to stake all, but also to stake the winnings themselves and even the knowledge of them. None of the winnings belong to her, but to God, but she gets to use them. 'The lover's stake in God's play is himself; he throws himself into it for God's sake. He does not care to know whether he will be multiplied a hundredfold,

⁸⁰ Cf. MS B, 198-199.

⁸¹ Thérèse, as quoted in, Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Thérèse of Lisieux: The Story of a Mission* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1953), 183.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 184.

sixtyfold, or thirtyfold, for the sum of his winnings no more belongs to him than the ear of wheat belongs to the seed that died.⁸³

Thérèse seems to have had quite an insight into the importance of her discovery and that it was definitely from God. Soon before she died she expressed this to Mother Agnes: 'What I am reading in this copybook reflects my soul so well! Mother, these pages will do much good to souls. They will understand God's gentleness much better.'⁸⁴ She also encouraged her novices to practice this little way, which she made known to them. She told them that if it was not a good way, or if it led them into error, she would come back to them after she had died and tell them to take a different way.

She describes herself as having been entrusted with a mission to make God loved through this little way: 'I feel that my mission is about to begin, my mission of making others love God as I love Him, my mission of teaching my little way to souls. If God answers my requests, my heaven will be spent on earth up until the end of the world. Yes, I want to spend my heaven in doing good on earth.'⁸⁵ Her desire was 'to make Love loved.' And this is exactly what happened almost as soon as *Histoire d'une âme* was first published. A huge number of requests began to pour in from all parts of the world, asking for copies of this extraordinary book. And today her mission continues as she foresaw.

Mother Agnes was feeling sad one day thinking of Thérèse's approaching death, but Thérèse said to her: 'After my death you will go to the mailbox and there you will find many consolations.' To some, a comment like this may not seem very humble, but perhaps it is a sign of the insight that God gave her, even of what was to come in the future. Pope Benedict XV confirmed this: 'St. Thérèse who was very humble during her life, would not have been able to express herself at the hour of her death, in terms that were seemingly contrary to humility, except under the influence of a divine inspiration...and God's special will to exalt the merits of spiritual childhood.'

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ LC, 126.

⁸⁵ *Story of a Soul*, 263.

And referring to the little way he added: 'this *secret* must not remain hidden from anyone.' '[It is not] reserved for innocent souls in whom evil has not destroyed the graces of childhood; it is also suitable for those who have lost their childhood innocence.'⁸⁶ Indeed this is one of the reasons why the little way is so important today, since it reaches out to all people and makes the call to holiness so possible and even attractive. Just as with the early Church, the focus was solely on Jesus Christ at the centre, now with the little way, Thérèse is helping us to rediscover the necessity of this all over again. It seems likely that it was also this total confidence in, and abandonment to God, that gave the Apostles and early Christians their zeal and ability to do so much and to preach the Gospel with such daring. They understood that love must be at the centre. 'Many things are necessary for the Church's journey through history, not least in this new century; but without charity (*agape*), all will be in vain.'⁸⁷

Thérèse also has a refreshing approach to the problem of our sinfulness, especially in the light of the Jansenist tradition. 'Finally, it means that we must not be discouraged by our faults, for children fall frequently.'⁸⁸ To believe with confidence in the unbounded love of God for us, and to know that He is going to look after us as a Father, is also to have a great love for his mercy, rather than a fear of his wrath. In years past in the Church, preaching has focused on different aspects of God. Sometimes on his justice, perhaps less on his mercy. From working as a chaplain in a hospital, I am very aware of how very frightened dying people often are, with regard to sins they may have committed. People long to know that they have been forgiven. The approach of Thérèse to God's mercy is a very reassuring one. If God loves us as much as we claim he does, then surely he will be quicker to overlook our faults, than to dispense his justice. A father is quick to excuse his own child when it has done wrong. With the attitude of spiritual childhood, are we not just as much a child in this way? How much more then can we expect from the tender love of God, so often expressed by Jesus himself in the Gospels? At this point in history we see a great need to help people be aware of the reality of their own sinfulness, which is so often

⁸⁶ Benedict XV decree on the heroicity of the virtues of St. Thérèse, as quoted in, Jamart, 23.

⁸⁷ John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (London: CTS, 2001), n 42, 39.

⁸⁸ LC, Aug 6, as quoted in, Jamart, 28.

denied, and yet at the same time to assure them of the infinite love and mercy of God. Thérèse's little way is one which very much embraces reality. While it is very simple, it is very realistic in acknowledging the limits of the human condition, the need for us to be aware that we are very much creatures in the world of the Creator, and not the other way around. This is humility. At the same time it re-affirms our position as children of God, with all the dignity and privileges that go with being a child, as opposed to a servant or slave.

Another aspect of Thérèse's understanding of God which is important for today's world is her relationship to God as Father. This is something which is often contested today, with people arguing that too many have had an unhealthy relationship with their earthly father, or that it is too masculine, and that God should be referred to as both mother and father. Thérèse's understanding of God gives us the beautiful and very powerful image of a child with total trust in her Father. She presents God as the loving Father, as the one to turn to, who can and will provide everything for us. The Father gives us heaven as a gift. He only waits for us to claim it. It in no way denies the feminine aspect of God's Spirit, who is all things, but rather it presents us with a very healthy understanding of God as Father in a way that needs to be rekindled. 'The knowledge that we can say "Abba, Father" is especially important for a generation marked by fear and lack of confidence.'⁸⁹ Rather than avoid the use of the term 'Father,' I believe it is essential to help people rediscover exactly what this image is supposed to convey and even to teach people what the role of a father is. Thérèse does this in an unthreatening way, using images which could only help us to see God as Father, in a positive light.

⁸⁹ Thomas Schmitt, 'John Paul II and Thérèse of Lisieux,' *Communio*, 24, (1997), 542.

Living the Way of Love

It is fine to talk about Thérèse's discovery of the little way, and all that it entails, but what use would this be to us apart from academic interest, if we could not apply it to our daily lives wherever we find ourselves? The practical side of living the little way is hugely important, and it was certainly Thérèse's intention that it be more than a point of interest and discussion in books, or even theses.

Thérèse describes the work of being love, or living love, using the analogy of unpetalling flowers, offering each petal as a small act of 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.'⁹⁰ And so she continues with her vocation, apparently as before, but now she realises how much she can do by offering each action to God with great love. In doing this, she turns the most mundane events and chores into acts of love for God. It is mostly hidden, of course, and few will see it, but this is the whole message of the Gospel being lived out in reality. '*I understood that it was Love alone that made the Church's members act, that if Love ever became extinct, apostles would not preach the Gospel and martyrs would not shed their blood.*'⁹¹

Pauline's testimony (Sister Agnes of Jesus) during the process of beatification reveals a lot to us about the way in which Thérèse managed to live this way of love in practice. She testified that Thérèse used to try and spend more time with those sisters who didn't like her, rather than with the ones who did. She deliberately avoided her own sisters at recreation times, and she was extraordinarily patient in putting up with insults from other sisters who didn't particularly like her. A small community is a sure test of one's ability to get on with others, and Thérèse, along with all the others, had plenty of opportunities to make small sacrifices. It is in this way that love is made real, by loving those that we find ourselves with, especially those who are more difficult to get on with, or who we find irksome. 'For if you love those who love you,

⁹⁰ MS B, 196.

⁹¹ Ibid., 194.

what reward will you get?' (Mt 5:46). Thérèse gives many examples of this, such as the following.

Sister St. Pierre, an old nun, needed to be walked from the choir to the refectory every day. She was difficult to please and Thérèse knew this. One particular time, the sisters who normally did this were too busy, and so Thérèse decided to offer her services to her. 'I did not want to lose such a beautiful opportunity for exercising charity.'⁹² Since she acted so lovingly towards the old sister, her offer was accepted and Sister St. Pierre insisted it continue. This was an ordinary task that could initially have been avoided, since she was reluctant to let Thérèse help at all, but she could see in it an opportunity to live out her calling to bring love into every situation. This calling was to be lived out primarily in loving the sisters she lived with.

Céline Martin (Sr. Genevieve of the Sacred Heart), who was so close to Thérèse as a sister, also testified that Thérèse had a marvellous way of giving someone the benefit of the doubt when it came to bad humour or temperament. She said that Thérèse was so loving in dealing with a sister who caused her a lot of suffering, that you would think the two were best friends. 'She became kinder, gentler and more considerate towards that person in order to heal the embittered heart which she felt was suffering.'⁹³ When Céline complained that she felt unable to do this herself, Thérèse replied to her, 'it is because you do not soften your heart in advance'.⁹⁴ Here again is the Gospel in practice, going the extra mile and loving those who persecute you,⁹⁵ though the persecution involved might seem quite trivial.

Love has to be at the heart of the Church, or the Church will die. Perhaps this is why her discovery is having such an impact on people today, because people recognise that the Church is nothing more than a cold institution if there is no love at the heart of everything she does. Jesus did not intend to establish a bureaucracy, instead he came announcing a kingdom based on love. 'Love one another *as* I have

⁹² MS C, 247.

⁹³ O'Mahony, *St. Thérèse of Lisieux by Those Who Knew Her*, 132.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Cf. Mt 5: 20-48.

loved you' (Jn 15:12). Thérèse had realised the great commandment of Jesus to his disciples. How could anyone love another *as* Jesus loved them, unless they were filled with the love of Jesus himself? What was needed, Thérèse saw, was to be filled with the love of God, in order to love as Jesus asked us to. This is the way of love that she discovered. Not something new, but perhaps a message discovered all over again in all its freshness – and more importantly the very practical side of living out this commandment in ordinary ways, on a daily basis.

Soon after making her *Act of Oblation to Merciful Love*, she began to experience great waves of God's love within herself. 'Ah! since the happy day, it seems to me that *Love* penetrates and surrounds me, that at each moment this *Merciful Love* renews me, purifying my soul and leaving no trace of sin within it and I have no fear of purgatory.'⁹⁶ A few days later she was to receive a mystical wound while making the stations of the cross. In her work 'Interior Castle,' St. Teresa mentions that sometimes a soul may receive a wound like 'a fiery arrow,' which seems to pierce the soul, as though physically. With it comes a great increase in desire for God. The soul loses interest in all earthly things. It is only interested now in God.⁹⁷ Thérèse described this experience as being very brief, but that she felt as if she was totally on fire with love for God. 'Oh! What fire and what sweetness at one and the same time! I was on fire with love and I felt that one minute more, one second more, and I wouldn't be able to sustain this ardour without dying.'⁹⁸ Within a moment she returned again to her 'habitual state of dryness.' She also distinguishes this experience from earlier experiences of what she calls 'transports of love'.⁹⁹

Thérèse made her act of oblation along with her sister Céline, and she invited her godmother, Sr. Marie of the Sacred Heart, to make this act too, though the latter initially declined, saying that she feared its implications. 'Certainly not. I am not going to offer myself as a victim; God would take me at my word, and suffering

⁹⁶ MS A, 181.

⁹⁷ Cf. IC, 422.

⁹⁸ Cf. LC, 77.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

frightens me very much.'¹⁰⁰ However, after Thérèse explained that this was not an offering to be a victim of God's justice, but of his love, and that this would simply enable her to love God all the more, Sr. Marie changed her mind and admitted later that she was glad she did.

Thérèse noted the date of this act of oblation as one of the very important dates in her life, along with such dates as her baptism and entry into Carmel. It was a new beginning for her, one which she never regretted to the end of her life. She would repeat the act whenever she could, and a month before she died she confessed to Sr. Agnes, '...everything that I do, my actions, my looks, everything, since my Offering, is done through love'.¹⁰¹ She had learned to live love in everything, to fulfil the great commandment of Christ, 'love one another as I have loved you' (Jn 15:12).

The Mystery of Suffering

It is therefore through Christ, and in Christ, that light is thrown on the riddle of suffering and death which, apart from his Gospel, overwhelms us.¹⁰² St. Therese of Lisieux is sometimes unfairly criticised as not being truly in touch with 'the world.' How could one who led such a sheltered life really be in touch with the world and all its problems? What could she have to say to so many people who have to suffer so much? Yet a closer look at her life shows us a woman who was very familiar with suffering, even from an early age. As she grew, her understanding of suffering changed and matured. Most importantly she did not see suffering as an end in itself, but rather as a means of showing love, of helping others, and of coming closer to God, which is what the spiritual life is all about.

Since the beginning of time people have struggled with the mystery of suffering and evil. Why do good people suffer? What is the meaning of suffering and death? Why is there so much suffering in the world, despite so much effort to be rid of it? Why does a good and all-powerful God allow us to suffer? Why doesn't God

¹⁰⁰ Recollection of Sister Marie in, LT 197, 1001.

¹⁰¹ LC, 141.

Chapter 2

The Darkness of Faith

Introduction

In this chapter we will look at the age-old mystery of suffering, suffering in Thérèse's own life and how she understood it. We will ask if it has any meaning or purpose and what, if any, is God's role in it. We will also ask if the experience of Thérèse has anything to say to our modern world and the continued mystery of why people must suffer. Finally we will look at some of the teachings of St. John of the Cross, who greatly influenced Thérèse and see how his writings fit in with Thérèse's own experience of suffering. It is part of the soul's journey into God.

The Mystery of Suffering

'It is therefore through Christ, and in Christ, that light is thrown on the riddle of suffering and death which, apart from his Gospel, overwhelms us.'¹ St. Thérèse of Lisieux is sometimes unfairly criticised as not being truly in touch with 'the world.' How could one who led such a sheltered life really be in touch with the world and all its problems? What could she have to say to so many people who have to suffer so much? Yet a closer look at her life shows us a woman who was very familiar with suffering, even from an early age. As she grew, her understanding of suffering changed and matured. Most importantly she did not see suffering as an end in itself, but rather as a means of showing love, of helping others, and of coming closer to God, which is what the spiritual life is all about.

Since the beginning of time people have struggled with the mystery of suffering and evil. Why do good people suffer? What is the meaning of suffering and death? Why is there so much suffering in the world, despite so much effort to be rid of it? Why does a good and all-powerful God, allow us to suffer? Why doesn't God

¹ GS, 22.

intervene? The bible addresses many of these questions. The history of the people of Israel shows that the people suffer when they are not faithful to God's law. Yet when they repent, God helps them again. Moses commands the people to choose life or death, blessing or curse, from the hand of the Lord.² In other places it gives the assurance that the just will not suffer,³ and in the book of Job it presents us with the paradox that the just do suffer, but that God permits it and that ultimately God will bring great good out of it, for those who are faithful to him. There is no simple solution to the problem, but our faith gives us hope. But what if our faith should disappear?

Many people today look for ways around, or out of, suffering. Various different spiritual practices try to offer solutions to it, or escapes from it. Christianity, however, stands alone with the belief that *through* suffering we are redeemed. We do not try to run from it, because we believe that we are redeemed through it, rather than from it. We follow the example, although a baffling one, of Jesus, who allowed himself to suffer so much on our behalf. The way of the cross is the way of love for us. 'No one can have greater love than to lay down his life for his friends' (Jn 15:13). The way of the cross is the bewildering expression of God's love for us. It is only in the light of the paschal mystery that suffering can make any sense for us. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to understand suffering outside the context of faith.

We will now take a closer look at the various sufferings that Thérèse experienced, how her understanding of suffering changed over the years, and how this is important for our world today.

² Cf. Dt 30:19-20.

³ Cf. Ps 1:1-6.

Suffering in the Life of Thérèse

When Thérèse was only just born she was separated from her mother because of ill health and given to a wet nurse, Rose Taillé, with whom she stayed for fifteen months. Then when she was only four and a half, her mother Zélie died (28 August 1877). After this Thérèse chose Pauline to be her mother. However, Pauline left the family home to enter Carmel when Thérèse was only nine. This was another deeply painful separation for Thérèse. 'I understood that Pauline was going to leave me to enter a convent. I understood too, she *would not wait for me* and I was about to lose my second *Mother!* Ah! how can I express the anguish of my heart! In one instant, I understood what life was; until then, I had never seen it so; but it appeared to me in all its reality, and I saw it was nothing but a continual suffering and separation. I shed bitter tears because I did not yet understand the *joy* of sacrifice.'⁴ Thérèse then adopted Marie as her 'third' mother. No doubt these various painful separations at such a young age contributed to Thérèse's being such an extremely sensitive child, liable to burst into tears at the slightest thing.

After Pauline's entry into Carmel, Thérèse experienced a very serious illness, which lasted for five months. During this time she was excessively sensitive, she suffered from insomnia, weakness, rashes and at times even had difficulty moving. Towards the end of this sickness, the family and their doctor were afraid that she would die, but she was miraculously cured by the Virgin Mary's 'smile' at Pentecost 1883. 'All of a sudden the Blessed Virgin appeared *beautiful* to me, so *beautiful* that never had I seen anything so attractive; her face was suffused with an ineffable benevolence and tenderness, but what penetrated to the very depths of my soul was the *ravishing smile of the Blessed Virgin*. At that instant, all my pain disappeared.'⁵ Thérèse perceived that she was cured and from then on she began to recover. Thérèse along with her family believed that this illness was demonic. It is possible that Pauline's leaving had an effect on Thérèse, which contributed to the sickness, but Thérèse herself was later plagued with the thought that she became sick on purpose. This was a real martyrdom for her. 'God, willing no doubt to purify and especially to

⁴ MS A, 58.

⁵ MS A, 66.

humble me, left me with this *interior martyrdom* until my entrance into Carmel, where the Father of our souls, as with the wave of his hand, removed all my doubts. Since then I am perfectly calm.⁶

Being so sensitive made life difficult for her at school. She was a very intelligent child, but she had been hugely pampered at home, so much so, that at the age of eleven she was embarrassed to have to ask one of the teachers to brush her hair, as she wasn't used to doing this herself. During the pre-Communion retreat, the other children also realised that she wasn't able to dress herself properly. Thérèse also suffered from scruples, from May 1884 to August 1885, which she also called a 'martyrdom'. 'One would have to pass through this martyrdom to understand it well, and for me to express what I suffered for *a year and a half* would be impossible.'⁷

The next major trial that she experienced began from the time she decided to enter Carmel at the age of fifteen. First she was afraid to tell her sister Céline, because of the suffering it would cause her. Then she met with all kinds of opposition from her uncle, from the religious authorities, and her great disappointment when the Pope would not consent to her wish to enter, which was her last hope. On the day she finally entered Carmel, she described the moment of parting from her father as being so difficult that she thought she would die. 'I was the only one who didn't shed any tears, but my heart was beating *so violently* it seemed impossible to walk when they signaled for me to come to the enclosure door. I advanced, however, asking myself whether I was going to die because of the beating of my heart!'⁸

Once she entered Carmel, she found that life there wasn't easy either, although she hadn't expected it to be. Mother Marie de Gonzague, was prioress when Thérèse first entered and she was keen to make sure that Thérèse wouldn't be spoiled, especially since she already had two sisters there. So she was quite harsh with Thérèse and often humiliated her in public. Thérèse later thanked her for this, since

⁶ MS A, 62.

⁷ MS A, 84.

⁸ MS A, 147.

she recognised the good it did her in the long run. 'You will see, dear Mother, in the copybook containing my childhood memories, what I think of the *strong* and maternal education I received from you. From the bottom of my heart I want to thank you for not sparing me.'⁹ Throughout her time in Carmel, Thérèse also suffered terribly from the cold. The convent wasn't properly heated, and Thérèse remarks that sometimes she found this to be one of the greatest difficulties; she even thought that it would kill her.

Finally, one of the most difficult trials, apart from the night of faith, that Thérèse experienced, must have been her father's illness. When she was only six years old, she had a prophetic vision of her father as an old man, stooped over and with his face covered. She only understood this vision later on when she recognised that it referred to her father's mental illness. When Thérèse was fourteen, Louis Martin experienced his first paralysis. However, he wasn't long in recovering from this. The following year was a very stressful year for him, with Thérèse leaving for Carmel on 9 May, Marie taking the veil on 23 May; Léonie also indicated that she wanted to try her vocation again and Céline too told him of her desire to enter Carmel. On the 23 June, he went missing and was finally found four days later, in Le Havre. In September he had a serious relapse. Later he began to experience hallucinations, and eventually he had to be confined to a mental hospital. Although he came out of this hospital again in May 1892, he never fully regained his health. He used to keep his face covered, which helped Thérèse understand the vision she had had much earlier. Her father's sickness was a serious blow to Thérèse and to all the family. His admission to the huge mental hospital was very difficult for a family with the kind of status that the Martin's enjoyed. To make matters worse, well-intentioned people who visited the sisters in Carmel made remarks suggesting that it was their fault that their father became sick. While one might expect Thérèse to become bitter or angry through such suffering, her remarks on it are very interesting. 'I did not think that on the February 12, a month after my reception of the Habit, our dear Father would drink the most *bitter* and *most humiliating* of all chalices. Ah! that day, I didn't say I was able to suffer more! Words cannot express our anguish...Papa's

⁹ MS C, 206.

three years of martyrdom appear to me as the most lovable, the most fruitful of my life; I wouldn't exchange them for all the ecstasies and revelations of the saints.'¹⁰ A comment like this might surprise many people, but it is an indication of how Thérèse's understanding of suffering had matured, that she could see it in such a positive light.

Bad and all as these trials may have been for her, she was yet to experience the most difficult of all. On Good Friday of Easter 1896, Thérèse entered into a darkness of faith, from which she would not be free until her death. Along with this trial of faith, her health began to deteriorate as she had contracted tuberculosis, which was slowly eating away at her intestines and lungs. It would eventually reduce her to the use of half of one lung. This made breathing extremely difficult and painful, and would eventually suffocate her. She often suffered from severe fevers and sweated so much that the sisters regularly had to change all the sheets. She had the humiliation of no longer being able to look after her own bodily functions. She continually coughed up blood and lost so much weight that her bones began to protrude through her skin. As a result, when she was put sitting up she says it felt as if she were sitting on 'iron spikes'. Strangely, her face remained pretty and didn't tell of the suffering of the rest of her body, hidden by the Carmelite habit. As she grew worse, she was eventually relieved of all her duties but only gradually, as the sisters initially didn't realise the seriousness of her sickness. Because of this, some of the sisters were inclined to make hurtful comments to the effect that she wasn't really suffering that much, or that she was exaggerating. This caused her great mental anguish. Right up to the end, her physical pain continued to increase, and Mother Marie de Gonzague refused to let her be given morphine injections, despite strong recommendations from the doctor, since she said it wasn't appropriate for a religious. She was also treated with various painful remedies, such as a piercing with hot needles, which was supposed to relieve her pain. She was given a special milk diet which continually made her sick (they eventually gave it up) and even a drink made on snails, which one of the sisters felt would be good for her, but which she also found very difficult to take. Because she was perspiring so much, she was frequently dehydrated and

¹⁰ MS A, 156-7.

consequently suffered from a constant thirst. Earlier in her life Thérèse had said that she believed the worst kind of suffering was interior, but later she changed her mind. A few hours before her death she said: 'Never would I have believed it was possible to suffer so much! never! never! I cannot explain this except by the ardent desires I have had to save souls.'¹¹

It is important to mention this terrible physical suffering of Thérèse, as many people have a mistaken idea that she lived a very rosy life, with few trials. This would be a false picture of Thérèse who was only too familiar with physical and spiritual suffering.

Beginning of the Darkness

On the eve of Good Friday, April 3, 1896, as Thérèse lay in bed she felt what was like a stream bubbling up inside her mouth. Not wanting to turn on the light again, she didn't look to see what it was until the following morning, although she suspected that it was blood. She was right. She informed Mother Marie de Gonzague, who was the prioress at the time. The prioress decided that it would be better if she kept it to herself and not tell the other sisters. Thérèse agreed. This was one of the first indications that her death was not far away, and she greeted it with joy. 'Ah! my soul was filled with a great consolation; I was interiorly persuaded that Jesus, on the anniversary of His own death, wanted to have me hear His first call. *It was like a sweet and distant murmur that announced the Bridegroom's arrival.*'¹² The following night she experienced the same thing again. Up to this her health had been relatively good and she was feeling strong despite having observed the full fast of Lent. 'Never had I felt so strong, and this strength remained with me until Easter.'¹³ But from then on her health began to deteriorate.

From her early childhood until this time, Thérèse had enjoyed a lively faith. The religious outlook of the time very much focused on the next life and it was

¹¹ LC, 205.

¹² MS C, 211.

¹³ MS C, 210.

constantly spoken of. Thérèse, along with her sisters, spoke about God, heaven, the angels, becoming saints. 'Earth again seemed a sad place and I understood that in heaven alone joy will be without any clouds.'¹⁴ Everything was focused on the spiritual world. In manuscript B, she admits that she found it hard to believe that some people really did not believe in heaven. 'At this time I was enjoying such a living faith, such a clear *faith*, that the thought of heaven made up all my happiness, and I was unable to believe there were really impious people who had no faith.'¹⁵ That was up until Good Friday 1896. Then out of the blue her soul was invaded by a 'thick darkness,' where suddenly she seriously doubted the existence of heaven. 'He permitted my soul to be invaded by the thickest darkness, and that the thought of heaven, up until then so sweet to me, be no longer anything but the cause of struggle and torment.'¹⁶ This trial was to last for the next eighteen months until she died.

The Experience of Unbelief

It is worth taking a closer look at the word 'impious' that Thérèse uses to describe those who claim they don't believe in heaven. Until she experienced this herself, Thérèse found it hard to believe that there really were people who didn't believe in any kind of heaven. At the time the word 'impious' meant 'someone who has no religion, who is opposed to the ideas of religion. *Impious* is stronger than *irreligious* and that is stronger than *incredulous*...The *impious* takes pleasure in attacking religion and even blaspheming against God.'¹⁷ It is therefore the highest form of unbelief. Before her trial of faith began, Thérèse could not understand the impious, but thought that they must be insincere. 'I believed they were actually speaking against their own inner convictions when they denied the existence of heaven'.¹⁸ Her childlike faith had been so unshakable up to this, that the very idea of there not being a heaven seemed impossible, but now she began to understand the impious, as she experienced the same darkness, where heaven seemed to disappear. This is quite a

¹⁴ MS A, 37.

¹⁵ MS C, 211.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ *Le Grand Larousse du XIX siècle* (1873), as quoted in, Jean-Francois Six, *Light of the Night. The Last Eighteen Months in the Life of Thérèse of Lisieux* (London: SCM, 1996), 26.

¹⁸ MS C, 211.

turn around. For the first time she understood that there were people who rejected the light of God's grace, and turned their back on God. They had been given enlightenment about God, but had rejected it. This is more than just never having believed, since these people had been given faith and then rejected this same faith with all their heart and reason. She is not just talking about luke-warm souls here but about those who consciously and freely reject God. God now gave Thérèse the grace to experience and understand this herself. This is the sin that Jesus refers to as being the unforgivable sin. 'And I tell you, every human sin and blasphemy will be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven' (Mt 12:31). It is an unforgivable sin, because it is the free and conscious rejection of the Spirit of God, which is the love of God. To turn one's back on God, is to reject God and to reject his love and forgiveness. How can God forgive us if we don't accept his forgiveness? We reject God ourselves and this is what hell is, the complete loss of God, by our own choice. John's Gospel continually deals with this theme through the images of light and darkness. Jesus is the light of the world, but people have shown that they prefer the darkness to the light.¹⁹ Thérèse now understood that there were still people who consciously rejected the light and preferred the darkness. Love is rejected. Perhaps it was partly this experience that made her so keen to want to 'make Love loved'. She understood that the love of God was rejected and she wanted with all her heart to help people to understand and accept the love of God. 'O My God! Most Blessed Trinity, I desire to *Love* You and make You *Loved*'.²⁰

In her autobiography she speaks often of her 'trial.' In spite of the darkness she experienced, she remained cheerful on the outside and she says that, if people knew what she was actually thinking, they would be quite surprised. The faith she expressed in her letters and writings was what she *wanted* to believe. 'When I sing of the happiness of heaven and of the eternal possession of God, I feel no joy in this for I sing simply what I WANT TO BELIEVE.'²¹ Not only did the joy of her faith not return, but the darkness got worse. 'Then suddenly the fog that surrounds me becomes more dense; it penetrates my soul and envelops it in such a way that it is

¹⁹ Cf. Jn 3:19.

²⁰ *Story of a Soul*, 276.

²¹ MS C, 214.

impossible to discover within it the sweet image of my Fatherland; everything has disappeared!’²² During this time she made more ‘acts of faith’ than at any other time in her life. She clung desperately to what she believed was true. Rather than try to fight the darkness, which she knew she could not, she continually turned to Jesus, knowing that he was the only one who could help her. ‘I believe I have made more acts of faith in this past year than all through my whole life. At each new occasion of combat...I run towards my Jesus.’²³ What kept her going during this time of darkness was her complete confidence in God, that He would never abandon her. She was quite sure that, no matter how bad the suffering got, God would not leave her, even if she could not feel his presence. As she was dying, Thérèse said: ‘but God is not going to abandon me, I’m sure...He has never abandoned me.’²⁴

She also experienced many temptations to kill herself during this trial. ‘What a grace it is to have faith! If I had no faith, I would have inflicted death on myself without hesitating a moment!’²⁵ She said she was surprised that more atheists didn’t kill themselves. Mother Agnes notes that Thérèse asked her to be careful not to leave any poisonous medicines for external use within her reach, as the pain was enough to make her lose her reason and she was afraid that she might try and kill herself.²⁶

All consolation that her faith had previously given her had disappeared. The sisters who were looking after her, and her own blood sisters, were afraid that she might despair, and it seems that she came very close to it several times. From her last conversations with Mother Agnes of Jesus, we get some insight into this darkness, although Thérèse herself said that it was only God who could understand her. On one occasion, when Mother Agnes was asking her about heaven, she said that she admired the material heavens, as the other was closed to her. One of the most vivid pictures she gives us of the temptations against faith which she experienced, is found in manuscript C:

²² MS C, 213.

²³ MS C, 213.

²⁴ LC, 205.

²⁵ *Story of a Soul*, 264.

²⁶ LC, footnote p162.

When I want to rest my heart fatigued by the darkness that surrounds it by the memory of the luminous country after which I aspire, my torment redoubles; it seems to me that 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 believe that one day you will walk out of this fog that 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'.²⁷

To understand Thérèse, it is crucial to see just how much she struggled both physically and spiritually. The struggle of unbelief in Thérèse's life is very important for those who also struggle today with their faith, or the lack of it. So many people can relate to the pain of unbelief and the hopelessness it leaves within. If we have no hope in an after-life, in a supreme Being, what motivates us to keep going when everything is going wrong? Even if surviving for the sake of raising our children is the motivation for many, what about those who don't have children? Thérèse is a canonized saint and Doctor of the Church, but this doesn't mean that she had the benefit of a vivid faith all through her life, while she performed great wonders to inspire conversion. Instead she was a fragile woman, living almost completely out of the sight of most people, who apparently did nothing extraordinary and who struggled with deteriorating health, as well as the terrible darkness of faith, just when she seemed to need it most. She is an important example for the many who struggle in similar ways today. She can understand the struggle of unbelief, of physical pain, and of the temptation to commit suicide, which sadly today is in such great numbers. A saint who does extraordinary things for the love of God is very inspiring, but perhaps out of the reach of many as they may feel that cannot relate to such a person. St. Thérèse on the other hand is a saint that a huge number of people can relate to, because of her very down-to-earth experiences. What is even more important than her experience of suffering, is her understanding of it and how she dealt with it. Otherwise, why would she be any different from anyone else?

²⁷ MS C, 213.

Does God Abandon Us?

In his book, *The Cry of Jesus on the Cross*, Gerard Rossé asks the question, why did the Father allow Jesus to feel so abandoned just at the time when Jesus needed to know that the Father was with him as he underwent his most terrible agony. He notes that the cry of Jesus, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me' (Mk 15:34), comes at the time of death, and also shows that Jesus died at the time when he felt most abandoned. For one thing, it shows that the presence of God is found, where perhaps no one would think of looking, that is, in darkness, pain and suffering. It is the definitive presence of God among his people, in an experience that most people can well relate to: suffering. It is the cry of one abandoned by God, the ultimate suffering. The suffering Jesus experienced is the night of faith, the loss of God's presence, at a time when it would be most welcomed. It is the ultimate act of self-giving love and it must be understood as being connected to Jesus' cry in Gethsemane, 'Let it be as you, not I, would have it' (Mk 14:36), because he suffers out of love for the Father's will. 'By refusing intervention, God avoids the task of filling the voids of human ignorance and weakness which man would like to assign him.'²⁸ We are forced to face this abandonment and negativity ourselves, and to find God there. Suffering is the most intense human experience and God meets us in the depths of it. Rossé also suggests that this cry of Jesus points to the Father enabling Jesus to make the ultimate act of self-giving love, because there is no consolation of any kind. If the Father had intervened in some way, even in a small way to make his presence felt, he would have prevented Jesus from suffering fully or giving himself in an act of completely selfless love. In other words, to allow Jesus the consolation of his presence, would have been to limit his suffering. This suffering is then the climax of the revelation of God's love. This is the stumbling block in Christianity for many people, that God's love is revealed through an act of intense suffering. An apparent contradiction. 'While the Jews demand miracles and the Greeks look for wisdom, we are preaching a crucified Christ: to the Jews an obstacle they cannot get over, to the gentiles foolishness, but to those who have been called, whether they are Jews or Greeks, a Christ who is both the power of God and the wisdom of God' (1 Co 1:22-24).

²⁸ Gerard Rossé, *The Cry of Jesus on the Cross* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1987), 123.

Suffering With a Purpose

Now let us return to the sufferings of Thérèse and ask, why did God allow her to suffer so much by withdrawing the consolation of faith? Perhaps it was to allow her to give herself fully, just as she had prayed in her *Act of Oblation to Merciful Love*. 'I desire to accomplish Your will perfectly and to reach the degree of glory You have prepared for me in Your Kingdom...I want to work for your love alone, with the one purpose of pleasing you.'²⁹ Her desire was to do God's will completely, to be consumed in the fire of his love, and this is what God was doing. He was also allowing her to give herself fully, without any consolations, so that she would hold nothing back. One could say that her suffering was an answer to her own prayer. She wanted to give herself completely to God in a manner that imitated the Son and this was what was happening. 'God has bestowed the gift of suffering on His Son. He would likewise bestow that grace on those whom He loved in a special way.'³⁰ This is similar to what St. Paul expresses in several of his letters: '...that I may come to know him and the power of his resurrection, and partake of his sufferings by being moulded to the pattern of his death' (Ph 3:10).³¹ Thérèse was being transformed into the likeness of Christ, by the power of the Spirit.

But what is this exact process doing then? Doesn't He see our anguish, the weight that is oppressing us? Where is He? Why doesn't He come to console us since we have His love for a friend? Again, He is not far, He is near, very close. He is looking at us, and He is forgetting His comfort, His glory from us. He needs it for souls and for His work. He wants to give us such a beautiful recompense, and His intentions for us are very great. But how can He say: 'My pain.' If our hasn't come, if we have given him nothing? Also, it does pain Him to give us sorrows to drink, but He knows this is the only means of preparing us to know Him as He knows Himself and to become God ourselves!

While we speak of suffering as something 'necessary' and as 'a gift,' that doesn't imply that suffering as the cross suddenly becomes any easier. Suffering means pain and anguish, or else it is no longer suffering. It would be a mistake to give the impression that suffering is any easier because God has given it a redemptive value. Pain is still pain - as anyone who is suffering will tell you. It is usually easier to see the value of suffering than during the suffering itself. Indeed part of the

²⁹ *Story of a Soul*, 276, 277.

³⁰ Jamart, *Complete Spiritual Doctrine of St. Thérèse of Lisieux*, 168.

³¹ Cf. Rm 6:5; Ga 3:19; 4:27; Ep 4:24; Col 3:10.

Suffering With a Purpose

When we speak about suffering in the life of St. Thérèse, it is important to realise that she did not have some kind of morbid desire to suffer, as though it were an end in itself. Suffering for Thérèse, and in the Christian life, has a very specific purpose.

When God first created humanity, there was no suffering, nor was there intended to be any. However, because of sin, suffering entered the world. But God in his infinite goodness has transformed suffering so that it might have a redemptive value. 'In God's wisdom, however, it has been transformed into a means of sanctification, a proof of love, an instrument for the salvation of souls. It is thus, one of the most admirable provisions of divine mercy.'³² Humanity had lost the eternal happiness that God designed for it; God himself willed to restore to us an even greater plan through the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus. Because of this, suffering and the cross were given a greater dignity and value than they had ever had before. Suffering was transformed into a way of expressing love, of helping other people, of drawing closer to God. Even at the age of fifteen Thérèse had a great appreciation of the value and need for suffering. In a letter to Céline she wrote:

But what is this sweet Friend doing then? Doesn't He see our anguish, the weight that is oppressing us? Where is He? Why doesn't He come to console us since we have Him alone for a friend? Alas, He is not far; He is there, very close. He is looking at us, and He *is begging* this sorrow, this agony from us. He needs it for souls and for our soul. He wants to give us such a beautiful recompense, and His ambitions for us are very great. But how can He say: 'My turn,' if ours hasn't come, if we have given him nothing? Alas, it does pain Him to give us sorrows to drink, but He knows this is the only means of preparing us to 'know Him as *He knows Himself* and to become *Gods ourselves*'.³³

While we speak of suffering as something 'necessary' and as 'a gift,' that doesn't imply that suffering or the cross suddenly become any easier. Suffering means pain and anguish, or else it is no longer suffering. It would be a mistake to give the impression that suffering is any easier because God has given it a redemptive value. Pain is still pain, as anyone who is suffering will tell you. It is usually easier to see the benefit afterwards, rather than during the suffering itself. Indeed part of the

³² Ibid., 167.

³³ LT, 449, 450.

suffering of Christ was the very fact that in his human nature it was as much a mystery to him as to the rest of us, and this was a suffering in itself.

Thérèse's desire for suffering increased as she began to understand its value. One of her first references to her desire to suffer, is from an incident during her childhood when Léonie offered Céline and Thérèse her dolls' dresses, and Thérèse said, 'I choose all'.³⁴ Later she referred to this incident as being a summary of her whole life and how she embraced everything, including suffering. Giving her reasons for entering Carmel she expressed her desire to save souls and to pray for priests. But she realised that this would come at a cost. 'Jesus made me understand that it was through suffering that He wanted to give me souls, and my attraction for suffering grew in proportion to its increase.'³⁵ The more she suffered in Carmel, the more she desired suffering, because she understood more and more its value. This was the 'price' for helping other people, for bringing souls to God, and for coming closer to God herself, which is what she wanted so much. It was not a desire for suffering for the sake of suffering, but because of its value. Recalling the time after her first Communion, Marie said to her that God would probably not make her suffer much (presumably deduced because of Thérèse's very sensitive nature), but Thérèse writes: 'I felt within my heart a *great desire* to suffer, and at the same time the interior assurance that Jesus reserved a great number of crosses for me...suffering became my attraction.'³⁶ 'A desire for suffering would stay with Thérèse for much of her life. But it never terminated merely in the suffering itself, which would be highly suspect from a psychological point of view. Through suffering she wished to express her love. It also had an ecclesial dimension as she saw its value for others.'³⁷

In 1887, as mentioned earlier, she heard about the notorious criminal Pranzini and she felt a great desire to pray for his conversion, which she did. She says that she began making lots of extra sacrifices for him. God was teaching her the importance of interceding for souls and of suffering for them. Later on she would be expected to

³⁴ MS A, 27.

³⁵ MS A, 149.

³⁶ MS A, 79.

³⁷ O'Donnell, *Love in the Heart of the Church*, 88.

do the same without necessarily seeing the results. This is how God helps us to grow in faith. Thérèse says: 'after this unique grace my desire to save souls grows each day'.³⁸ Just after their father had been admitted to the mental hospital, Thérèse wrote to Céline: 'Let us really offer our sufferings to Jesus to save souls, poor souls...Jesus wills to make their salvation depend on one sigh from our heart...What a mystery! If one sigh can save *a soul*, what can sufferings like ours not do?... Let us refuse Jesus nothing!'³⁹ She also felt a great desire to pray for priests, which she often expressed. Shortly before she died we can see how her understanding of suffering had increased: 'I hold nothing in my hands. Everything I have, everything I merit is for the Church and for souls.'⁴⁰

Thérèse also experienced great *joy* in suffering, again because she recognised its value. This may seem like a contradiction in terms, that suffering could bring any joy, but it could only do so if one believes in the value and power of suffering to do good. This seems to have been Thérèse's experience. Shortly before she died she wrote: 'I have suffered very much since I was on earth, but, if in my childhood I suffered with sadness, it is no longer in this way that I suffer. It is with joy and peace. I am truly happy to suffer.'⁴¹ However, her understanding of suffering had not always been as developed. Earlier in her life, she did not find as much joy in it. At that stage she referred more to 'suffering with *peace*,' a word she uses frequently throughout her writings, when referring to suffering. In a letter to Céline referring to their father's illness, she wrote: 'Let us suffer in *peace*!...I admit that this word *peace* seemed a little strong to me, but the other day, when reflecting on it, I found the secret of suffering in *peace*...The one who says *peace* is not saying joy, or at least, *felt* joy...To suffer in *peace* it is enough to will all that Jesus wills...To be the spouse of Jesus we *must* resemble Jesus, and Jesus is all bloody, He is crowned with thorns.'⁴² And further on in the same letter: 'The canticle of suffering united to His sufferings is what delights His Heart the most!'⁴³ This last line points to the reason

³⁸ MS A, 100.

³⁹ LT 85, 547.

⁴⁰ LC, 91.

⁴¹ MS C, 210.

⁴² LT 87, 553.

⁴³ Ibid.

why Thérèse saw the value in suffering, because it pleased Jesus, and this is all she wanted to do. She had dedicated her life to pleasing him, to doing everything for him. Saving souls and praying for priests were ultimately because of her love for Jesus. This is what kept her going through the darkness, without any consolation, because she believed blindly that this was happening through her suffering, and that's what made it worthwhile.

In order not to give up hope when one is suffering, it is a huge strength if you can see some purpose to it, some meaning behind it. People have often said to me in hospital, 'Father, there must be a reason for it...' We need to know that there is some purpose to what we have to endure. Otherwise life has no meaning and God becomes very cruel. This is where faith and fortitude are so important. Faith gives hope and hope leads to perseverance. Fortitude gives us the ability to endure suffering because we believe in a greater good that is worth the suffering. The ultimate suffering is death, and the ultimate good is eternal life. Thérèse's example is a powerful one for our times, from this point of view. She didn't despair, or give up, even when faced with the same darkness as those who have no faith. She believed in spite of everything telling her to give up. She clung on to what she 'wanted to believe' was true, that God was good and that He wouldn't abandon her. Even when she felt abandoned, she went on believing. Faith is not based on feelings, it is first of all a gift, but it then also a decision on our part.

The peace that Thérèse so often refers to, is an indication that she had great fortitude, in spite of the darkness around her. It is also an indication of the fruits of the Spirit within her.⁴⁴ 'Aren't you surprised, little Mother, at the way I'm suffering?...But I have great peace.'⁴⁵ Josef Pieper says: 'In the gift of fortitude the Holy Spirit pours into the soul a confidence that overcomes all fear: namely, that He will lead man to eternal life, which is the goal and purpose of all good actions, and the final deliverance from every kind of danger.'⁴⁶ On September 8, 1897, she

⁴⁴ Cf. Ga 5:22.

⁴⁵ LC, 171.

⁴⁶ Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues* (Notre Dame, I. A.: University of Notre Dame, 1966), 138. Pieper says that fortitude involves endurance as its essential act, which gives the soul its strength to

celebrated the seventh anniversary of her profession and was surrounded by flowers. She was delighted and said: 'This is because of God's goodness toward me. Exteriorly I am surrounded with flowers; but interiorly I am always in my trial; however, I am at peace!'⁴⁷ She had become so used to suffering that she found it hard to imagine how she would be happy without it: 'The thought of eternal beatitude hardly thrills my heart. For a long time, suffering has become my heaven here below, and I really have trouble in conceiving how I shall be able to acclimatize myself in a country where joy reigns without any admixture of sadness.'⁴⁸

Towards the end of her life Thérèse had moved beyond everything except love. She wanted nothing but to love Jesus and suffering didn't matter to her one way or the other. She neither looked for suffering nor avoided it. Whatever was the will of God for her was all important. In a letter to Céline she writes: 'And now I have no other desire except to love Jesus unto folly. My childish desires have all flown away...Neither do I desire any longer suffering or death, and still I love them both; it is love alone that attracts me, however... Now, abandonment alone guides me. I have no other compass! I can no longer ask for anything with fervour except the accomplishment of God's will in my soul.'⁴⁹

It is essential to realise that Thérèse's desire for suffering was based on this love for God and the good she saw that could be accomplished through it. Apart from faith, suffering makes no sense, and even with faith it can be difficult enough. For all who suffer today and are weighed down by its shadow, we need to believe that God can do great things through it. A common expression that used to be heard in Ireland when someone was suffering was, 'offer it up.' In the light of faith this makes a lot of sense. It is a way of saying that this suffering has great value if we have the right approach to it. God will bring great good out of it, if we are open. But unless we

face evil, suffering and even death. Even though endurance may be passive, it is a 'vigorous grasping of and clinging to the good' (128). Fortitude also involves patience, which is not simply putting up with hardship indiscriminately, but means to 'preserve cheerfulness and serenity of mind in spite of injuries that result from the realization of the good' (129). Thérèse showed extraordinary cheerfulness during her illness, to such an extent that many of the sisters came to her sick bed, to be cheered up.

⁴⁷ *Story of a Soul*, 268.

⁴⁸ LT 254, 1142.

⁴⁹ MS A, 178.

have some sort of understanding of this, it is indeed a very cruel world, where so many suffer for no apparent reason. This is a message that people need to hear all over again, to give them hope. We need to rediscover the redemptive value of suffering. It can be the difference between life being bearable or unbearable. Thérèse's habit of offering up her little sufferings enabled her to offer more and more, until she was finally quite resigned to it. Her approach to suffering offers us a great example to follow. She knows in a very real way what it means to suffer. She is under no illusions about its 'sweetness.' She was also very young when she died, which again adds to the power of her own witness. Baffling and all as suffering is, when it happens to the young it is the most confounding, as we always feel, 'it shouldn't happen to them.' Well it does happen even to the young, but our approach to it is what makes the difference.

St. John of the Cross

St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila are two people whose writings had a big impact on Thérèse. In this section I would like to look at some of the teachings of John of the Cross, as he also talks specifically about suffering and its purpose.

In 1577, while trying to reform his order, John was kidnapped by members of his own order and imprisoned in a tiny room, meant as a toilet for visitors, for nine months. This became one of the most difficult but important experiences of his life. During this time he was flogged, starved and began to suffer a psychological torture spurred on by whisperings outside his door, that his reform had failed and that he would never get out alive. Here he also felt that he was abandoned by God. He experienced terrible dryness in prayer, and yet it is from this time that he really matured in his writings and gained some of his most profound insights.

For John there is only one goal and that is divine union, or perfection. He says that we were created for this and that we will never be satisfied until this happens. This call to divine union is for everyone: 'We are excluded, not by where we are, but

by an unwillingness to go farther.⁵⁰ People go to great lengths to advance in the spiritual life by following all kinds of practices, even very difficult ones. However, if we knew where to put the emphasis we would advance much more quickly. 'If they would attempt to devote only half of that energy to the renunciation of their desires, they would profit more in a month than in years with all these other exercises.'⁵¹ God desires to enter into our soul; every initiative in the spiritual life comes from God, not us. God seeks out the soul as though there were no other soul, and what God finds in the soul is not disappointing, but causes him to celebrate. The soul's invasion by God is intense and passionate. He wounds the soul with a burning desire for himself and then begins to draw the soul to himself. All this is God's doing and all that the soul need do is not resist. Our response to this is faith, the faith that believes that God is continually working in our soul whether we feel it or not. This was the experience of Thérèse towards the end of her life. She felt she was in darkness, but believed all the time that God was working within her. God makes 'space' within the soul for himself. It is not the soul that has to make space for God, but the other way around. Once we realise this it is much easier, since the burden is taken off our shoulders.

Thérèse also realised that all she had to do was to be little in the sight of God, to remain like a child, and in this way God would come to her. Thérèse describes herself as the little bird which cannot fly far, so it waits for the eagle to come down and take it up to the heavens, to her divine Sun.⁵² This is exactly what John is talking about. This is where we try and let go of everything, not be attached to anything, so that there is more space for God. God will accomplish this in us if we simply don't resist. 'For John, God is an approaching God, and our main job will be not to construct but to receive; the key word will be not so much "achievement" as "space". "Making space for God in order to receive".'⁵³ God is always seeking us out, but is blocked by our disordered desires. It is not so much what we have, as our disordered desires for certain things. Extreme asceticism is useless if we are still enslaved by a

⁵⁰ Iain Matthew, *The Impact of God: Soundings from St. John of the Cross* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1995), 18.

⁵¹ 1A, 8.4, 136.

⁵² Cf. MS B, 199.

⁵³ Matthew, *The Impact of God*, 35.

desire for what we no longer have. We have to learn to let go. We are not free as long as we are obsessed with a desire for something. We aren't meant to be living with a kind of 'high' all the time. We need to get used to being with the very ordinary. So we need to learn to say 'no' to things, and 'yes' to God. We put him at the centre. John calls this moving from the sense to the spirit and it is done by staying with the very ordinary things, the mundane things. If we choose to stay with the mundane, we can move on to a deeper level of living, the level of the spirit.

In manuscript C, Thérèse gives a beautiful example of this. She is bringing Sister St. Pierre back to her room. It is cold and dark. In the distance she hears music playing, which makes her think of a beautiful drawing room filled with people in fine clothes, enjoying the evening together. Then she looks down at the invalid before her and the drab room around her, but she is filled with an indescribable joy. 'I cannot express in words what happened in my soul; what I know is that the Lord illumined it with rays of *truth* which so surpassed the dark brilliance of earthly feasts that I could not believe my happiness.⁵⁴ This is the movement from the sense to the spirit. She had begun to live at a deeper level, because she had persevered with the mundane, and not looked for the 'new taste' all the time.

John describes the journey of faith into God as 'night'. It is symbolic of the journey, just as the 'flame' is symbolic of God, the fire that consumes. The night comes upon us whether we like it or not. We can't stop it. The night should be allowed to speak for itself. This night can be the time when everything seems to be going against us, for example, our health and our work at the same time. For Thérèse this was the time from Easter 1896, when her health began to fail and then she was plunged into the trial of faith at the same time; she felt within her the desire to go to a foreign Carmel, but could not. John is speaking from his own experience of nine months in prison under the most terrible conditions. It was essentially solitary confinement, the kind that would drive many people insane. This is the darkness of night, which he is coming from. It is through this darkness that God makes himself known. Just as growing pains are a sign of growth, so this can be a sign of God

⁵⁴ Cf. MS C, 248.

making his space within us. Since God is completely beyond us, then his approach is going to leave us feeling out of our depth. This is the night. In the night we are no longer in control. As God gets closer we have to let go and prepare no longer to be in control. It is now God's agenda that takes over, not ours. It is in this darkness that change takes place. But the important thing is that this darkness isn't just for an élite few who are up to it, or who have discovered a special method of getting there. Rather, it is the sign that God is close to those who are already 'in the dark', where everything seems to be against them and they have no chance to begin with. It is the many who are struggling in the dark, feeling hopeless, alone, maybe faithless. This is a message of great hope for those who are suffering. If we can recognise its transforming value, then it takes on a new meaning, and perhaps the darkness is not quite as black as it was before. Instead of it being the time when God has apparently abandoned us, we begin to see it as the time when God is close to us and helping us to mature and grow.

John says that the journey has a definite purpose. It is going somewhere and there is a guide, the Holy Spirit. But in order to grow we must go by a path we are unfamiliar with, like the people of Israel in the Desert of Sin. They zig-zagged continually, but it was part of the journey. All of this journey through the night involves what John calls a movement from sense to spirit, where we are beginning to become detached from the material and journey, a journey that was led by the Spirit. 'To come to what you know not, you must go by a way where you know not.'⁵⁵

The night is a journey into truth. It helps us to recognise who we are before God and so brings humility. When we are stripped of all our self-confidence, no matter whether it is based on achievement, power, prestige, strength, etc., we recognise that we are nothing before God. On the day she died Thérèse said: 'Yes, it seems I never looked for anything but the truth; I have understood humility of heart. It seems I am humble.'⁵⁶ This humility also puts our relationships in order. It makes us more sensitive to others. 'What the night journey does – where that which comes

⁵⁵ 1A, 13.11, as quoted in, Matthew, *The Impact of God*, 61.

⁵⁶ *Story of a Soul*, 270.

upon us takes us out of our control – is retrieve our scattered human potential, place it in our hands and so enable us, at last, to employ it in loving.’⁵⁷ The experience of the night seems to open up a new ability in us to love. Because God is making space for himself within us, then he becomes present within us and so he can love within us. This is where this great power of love comes from of course, from God. Here again we can see the pattern of Thérèse’s life. She desired to love God and make him loved and although she suffered enormously, her ability to love increased as the suffering increased. God was approaching her and filling her, enabling her to love all the more.

According to John, there are three elements which can be recognised in the dark night: an inflow of God; darkness, with the accent on bewildering suffering; a creative response, faith, acceptance. The soul must remain open to God, since He is always pressing to come in. All we have to do is to remain receptive and this can happen even in the middle of terrible suffering. Often when people are suffering they are more open to God than at other times. In spite of the suffering there is a continuous inflowing of God.

John does not look for suffering. The world is full of suffering and he wants to put it to creative use. ‘One conviction that John clearly has is that suffering is not foreign or alien to God. If the cosmos is drenched in the Fountain water, everything in it can be a channel for that water. If God’s gaze holds the world in being, it holds it all in being, including its pain.’⁵⁸ When someone suffers he is close to God, when someone is not burdened he is on his own. Thérèse didn’t look for suffering either, indeed she specifically didn’t want to take on being a victim of God’s justice, for that very reason. This is a very important point for anyone trying to understand either John or Thérèse. They didn’t go looking for suffering as though they had some strange desire to suffer for its own sake, but God gave them an insight into the value of suffering that comes to us anyway. We have no choice in this suffering, but we can allow God to turn it to the good for us. This is what is especially important in the understanding of suffering, how God can help us and transform us through it, so that

⁵⁷ Matthew, *The Impact of God*, 63.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.

good comes from the darkness. This is the difference between hope and despair, and that is why their understanding of suffering is so important for today, when many are despairing in the midst of suffering, because they have no hope.

The kind of suffering that John is talking about is not necessarily spiritual suffering either. It is the very ordinary sufferings of life that all seem to come on you together at the wrong time and unfairly. For example, you make a sacrifice of giving up your job to work for the Church and then the Church says it's not interested, while your wife begins to turn on you. It can be physical sickness, loneliness, misunderstanding, rejection, grief, etc. The ordinary sufferings which everyone encounters continually, but to the point of bewilderment. It is here that God can transform us, in this suffering, in the darkness.

What do we do in these situations? John says, trust, persevere, keep going. You attend to the suffering in whatever way you can, so as not to suffer unnecessarily, but then you just 'hang in there'. The very act of not running away is very important. We shouldn't seek change as soon as things get tough. It is in the struggle that the power of God is working. We are not to look for consolation, but to stay with the pain and not be afraid of it.

In John's Gospel, Jesus encourages the disciples not to be afraid. He is warning them of the sufferings that are to come. He doesn't try to give them a way out of the suffering. He is not worried about the suffering. What he is concerned about is that they might give up. 'I have told you all this so that you may not fall away' (Jn 16:1). Everyone continually encounters suffering in different ways, but the key to it is to stay with it, to confront the fear and believe that God is working in the middle of it. It's what Thérèse calls the way of confidence and love. Complete abandonment to God, believing against belief that God will not abandon us, but that He is in the middle of it all, even though we cannot see him. 'God is surely not going to abandon me! He has never abandoned me before.'⁵⁹ Thérèse said this the day of her death, after suffering physically and in spiritual darkness for eighteen months. Even though

⁵⁹ *Story of a Soul*, 270.

she clearly experienced being on the brink of despair, her confidence and love of God were the graces which kept her going. The message is the same to all who are suffering, not to be overcome by fear of the darkness, but to abandon themselves to God and let God work in the darkness, not to be afraid of it. It is in the darkness that we are transformed. This is a big difference from the modern world's many attempts to avoid suffering, or to run from it as soon as it comes. Many New Age practices offer remedies through supposed self-healing and all sorts of ways out of suffering, but to acknowledge our weakness is to recognise our need for a Saviour outside ourselves, to realise that we cannot do it alone. This openness to God is crucial.

All of us have an enormous desire for God, which cannot be satisfied by anything else, but where can we encounter him? John warns us not to rely on feelings. Feelings of darkness are not a sign of God's absence, and neither are feelings of warmth or holiness a sign of his presence. 'Do not set store by such phenomena, visions, inner words, "because all that they are in themselves cannot help one in the love of God as much as the smallest act of living faith and hope made in emptiness and renunciation of all".'⁶⁰ He must be sought primarily in faith, hope and love. The more faith one has, the more real the experience of God. 'Believe in the God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ...take on board other events only in so far as they point to and rest within that event of faith'.⁶¹ Again this was Thérèse's experience. Everything she did was for love and 'to make Love loved'.⁶²

Faith, hope and love make up the experience of God. Mind, memory and will are three aspects of the human person and John relates faith to the mind, hope to the memory and love to the will. John says that it is from faith that real illumination comes and not through mystical experiences. Mystical experiences shed light on certain truths, but faith illumines all truths. However, faith is not just drudgery either. Although it is dark, this is because it illumines so much that it is blinding. Just as we can gaze up at the stars and enjoy the light, though we cannot look at the sun because it would blind us, so with the approach of God, it causes blindness, darkness.

⁶⁰ Matthew, *The Impact of God*, 98.

⁶¹ 2A, 27.4, as quoted in, Matthew.

⁶² *Story of a Soul*, 276.

Memory for John isn't just recollection of the past, but also awareness of the present and future. We can be dominated by past memories and enslaved by future worries. Hope helps us to be free from the domination of these. Actively it helps us to let go of them and be free from them. Passively God heals us through the night of faith. He heals our memories, not to forget them, but so that we may not be enslaved by them. It is to help us live for the present. This is the teaching of so many of the mystics, to live in the present moment. Thérèse also found herself living this way, moment by moment, as it was the only way she could get through the suffering. This is also the teaching of the now world famous and hugely successful 'Twelve Step Programme,' of *Alcoholics Anonymous*: One day at a time. Living life moment by moment, and relying on the 'higher power,' they are enabled to overcome the tyranny of alcohol addiction and many other addictions besides. 'So do not worry about tomorrow: tomorrow will take care of itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own' (Mt 6:34). Hope releases the soul, not just 'from,' but 'for,' for what is meant to fill it, and that is for God. 'Hope means easing the mind of what inflames it or frightens it, and cupping it upwards to the God who alone can fill it.'⁶³ Hope also helps one to rely on God only and not on the memory of past achievement or future possibilities.

Lastly the virtue of love. Love is what Christianity is all about. John says that love is God's activity in us. This is what makes it possible to love people in very difficult situations. For example, when John was dying his superiors treated him very harshly, but he went on loving them and eventually they repented and asked his forgiveness. Thérèse likewise went on loving those around her to such an extent that she even managed to convince one sister who really aggravated her, that she really liked her and was even pleased to see her.⁶⁴ Such is the power of the love of God in a soul. Love changes a person, and this is why it is so important to love all those around us, especially those we don't like or get on with. This is what God does with us. He loves us so that we might love him through the love He has put in our hearts. This love is put in our hearts especially when God makes space for himself in us, through the night of faith. This is why this night is so important and can be seen as an

⁶³ Ibid., 107.

⁶⁴ Cf. MS C, 222-223.

act of love. Love consumes like fire and perhaps that is why God allows so much suffering, because of its transforming value, through grace. While people are suffering of course they want it to end. It is usually only afterwards that people can see it as a time of real growth.

The message of John and Thérèse about suffering is essentially one of hope. We needn't look for it, as it will come anyway, as surely as the night. But equally we needn't be paralysed by fear of it, as this suffering, this night, is what can transform us, what can bring us to a new reality, a new depth of living, opening us up to God in a new way. 'Alas, it does pain Him to give us sorrows to drink, but He knows this is the only means of preparing us to "know Him as *He knows Himself* and to become *Gods ourselves*".'⁶⁵

Thérèse and Work

'We know that one impulse of grace is of infinitely more power than a shell bomb. Thérèse has said, "all is grace".'⁶⁶ Dorothy Day became a Catholic at the age of thirty, shortly after the birth of her first child, and spent most of her life working for justice and equality through peaceful means, trying to spread her faith in the work place in America. Before her conversion, she had lived a 'sinister worldly lifestyle'.⁶⁷ She was a communist and worked and wrote vigorously for social rights. She was arrested and imprisoned on various occasions for public protests. She was married twice and also had had an abortion. After her conversion, she became a dedicated Catholic, with great zeal in working for the poor and against social injustice. She helped to set up *The Catholic Worker*, a newspaper which promoted and encouraged Catholics to live out their faith in daily life, especially in looking out for those who were deprived. Having been exposed to the Gospels from an early age, she was conscious of how the poor were supposed to be treated, but she didn't see it happening around her. 'Children look at things very directly and simply - I did not

⁶⁵ Dorothy Day, 'Thérèse', *Crossroads* 21 (1977), 610.

⁶⁶ LT 57, 450.

⁶⁷ Day and the Catholic Worker Movement, *Crossroads* 21 (1977).

Chapter 3

The Pastoral Significance of her Teaching and Life

Introduction

An enormous amount of material has been written on St. Thérèse. In this chapter we will focus on a few particular themes which frequently emerge in some of the current writings. These include the dignity that she gives to work and the human person; rediscovering the Gospel teaching of loving God by loving those around us; the need to persevere in a fickle world; the journey that discovers the reality of self; atheism and the problem of indifference; the witness of the contemplative life; and a final word on the mystery of suffering.

Thérèse and Work

‘We know that one impulse of grace is of infinitely more power than a cobalt bomb. Thérèse has said, “all is grace”.’¹ Dorothy Day became a Catholic at the age of thirty, shortly after the birth of her first child, and spent most of her life working for justice and equality through peaceful means, trying to spread her faith in the work place in America. Before her conversion, she had lived a ‘bohemian worldly lifestyle’.² She was a communist and worked and wrote vigorously for social rights. She was arrested and imprisoned on various occasions for public protests. She was married twice and also had had an abortion. After her conversion, she became a dedicated Catholic, with great zeal in working for the poor and against social injustice. She helped to set up *The Catholic Worker*, a newspaper which promoted and encouraged Catholics to live out their faith in daily life, especially in looking out for those who were deprived. Having been exposed to the Gospels from an early age, she was conscious of how the poor were supposed to be treated, but she didn’t see it happening around her. ‘Children look at things very directly and simply. I did not

¹ Dorothy Day, ‘Thérèse,’ *Communio*, 24, (1997), 610.

² Mark and Louise Zwick, ‘Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement,’ *Communio*, 24, (1997), 416-417.

see anyone taking off his coat and giving it to the poor. I didn't see anyone having a banquet and calling in the lame, the halt and the blind. And those who were doing it, like the Salvation Army, did not appeal to me.'³ So she began to set up 'houses of hospitality' to help the poor and those who were rejected by society, those who are often difficult to deal with, even when you are trying to help them. The different houses she established lived on providence, and sometimes had to do without even heating and plumbing. However, she believed that to reach out to the poor you need to be like the poor yourself. She was described after her death as being, 'the most significant, interesting and influential person in the history of American Catholicism'.⁴

Dorothy was greatly inspired by the life of St. Thérèse and wrote an excellent biography of the saint entitled *Thérèse*. In an article on how Thérèse influenced her, Dorothy says that what makes Thérèse appealing to people today is that she is the saint of the worker, of the everyday person. Most people don't consider themselves to be saints, or even aspire to be, and yet Thérèse makes sainthood very appealing, because it is very accessible to everyone. It is interesting that Dorothy's first reaction to the writings of St. Thérèse was one of contempt:

[I] found it colourless, monotonous, too small in fact for my notice. What kind of saint was this who felt that she had to practice heroic charity in eating what was put in front of her, in taking medicine, enduring cold and heat, restraint, enduring the society of mediocre souls, in following the strict regime of the convent of Carmelite nuns which she had joined at the age of fifteen? A splash of dirty water from the careless washing of a nun next to her in the laundry, was mentioned as a 'mortification' when the very root of the word meant death, and I was reading in my Daily Missal of saints stretched out on the rack, burnt by flames, starving themselves in the desert and so on.⁵

Yet later she proved to be a big influence on Dorothy, as she began to see the importance of love done in all things. 'Throughout the world there is homelessness,

³ Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of Dorothy day* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1952), 39, as quoted in, Mark and Louis Zwick, 417.

⁴ David O'Brien, on the occasion of Dorothy's death, op. cit., 415.

⁵ Dorothy Day, *Thérèse* (Springfield, I.L.: Templegate Pub., 1979), viii, as quoted in, Peter Casarella, 'Sisters in Doing the Truth: Dorothy Day and St. Thérèse of Lisieux,' *Communio*, 24, (1997), 472-3.

famine, fear and war and the threat of war. We live in a time of gigantic evil. It is hopeless to think of combating it by any means than that of sanctity.’⁶

The way of holiness is the way to God, which gives hope. What use is all the work done in the world if it doesn’t give hope and somehow point to God? Dorothy was keen to ‘lift the veil of desiccated piety from the familiar image of the Catholic saints’.⁷ She wanted the saints to be people she and others could really relate to in everyday life and its struggles. She was convinced that the way to combat injustice in the world, to which she dedicated most of her life’s work, was through holiness of life. In Thérèse she began to discover someone she could relate to. While Thérèse did ‘nothing’ she did everything, because she made her whole vocation a mission of love. Dorothy recognised the applicability of the little way to her own everyday life of serving meals, making beds and getting on with the humdrum tasks of her calling to serve the poor and struggle for justice. She realised that this kind of work, and any which purports to serve the Gospel, must begin with personal conversion.

Dorothy knew that the social principles to which she had devoted her life derived from a simple message of personal (but not individual) conversion of self: ‘Even those dread words, *pacifism* and *anarchism*, when you get down to it, mean that we try always to love, rather than coerce, “to be what we want the other fellow to be”, to be the least, to have no authority over others, to begin with that microcosm *man*, or rather, with ourselves’.⁸

From years observing the many people who worked with her, Dorothy watched many holy people quietly doing their work, living the Gospel, though noticed by few. These people were living the little way that Thérèse talked about. They were bringing the love of God into everything, into their daily work, and this was really possible. The little way is possible for everyone, and that is why it is so important for our world. It is an example of just how accessible holiness is for everyone.

Thérèse repeatedly used the term “little”, Dorothy explained, not because she was endorsing the practice of good deeds on a small as opposed to large scale. For Thérèse the Little Way was not about the achievement of virtue at all. “It is rather to recognise

⁶ D. Miller, *Dorothy Day: A Biography* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), 431, as quoted in, Peter Casarella, ‘Sisters in Doing the Truth,’ 470.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 470.

⁸ ‘Fall Appeal,’ *The Catholic Worker*, November 1957, 2, as quoted in, Peter Casarella, ‘Sisters in Doing the Truth,’ 480.

the fact that God puts treasures of virtue into the hands of his little children to make use of them in time of need".⁹

Dorothy gives a beautiful example of this kind of hidden work that she so often witnessed. She describes Marie, who each day collected discarded newspapers from the bins and brought them back to the house. This was her way of contributing to the work of the paper. Then each evening she swept the floor of one of their hospitality houses before she went home. Most people wouldn't even know who had swept it, yet Marie did this each evening with love and pride in what little she could do. This is the Gospel in practice.

Thérèse realised herself that she couldn't do any of the extraordinary things that the saints she read about did, so she decided that her way to God would be done through 'little' things, little sacrifices, offerings, acts of love, presented to God as if they were flowers. 'I applied myself to practising little virtues, not having the capability of practising the great.'¹⁰ This is exactly what everyone who wants to live the Gospel can do. It is not about extraordinary feats, but about little acts done with love.

Dorothy points out that Thérèse helps to bring dignity to the practice of ordinary work. In the world we live in, people are generally judged by what they can do, as opposed to the fact that they are human beings. You are important in so far as your work is considered important, or if you make lots of money. The poor are cast aside as being a nuisance, or lazy. If they aren't working, it's their own fault. If they have no money, it's their fault as well. Thérèse turns this around by showing us that the smallest works done with love, even if they are completely hidden, are hugely important. These little acts are what change the world, and not the huge impressive ones that make millions. 'Thérèse offers an implicit critique of all attempts to measure human action by the sole criterion of performance. This lesson applied to the whole of *The Catholic Worker's* apostolate...[The houses of hospitality] are intended to force the world to reckon with the absolute priority of the personal.'¹¹

⁹ Peter Casarella, 'Sisters in Doing the Truth,' 476-77.

¹⁰ MS A, 159.

¹¹ Peter Casarella, 'Sisters in Doing the Truth,' 493.

Thérèse believed in the dignity of the person and showed this by the way she treated those around her, even those she didn't like.

Thérèse was taught from an early age to respect and help the poor. Once a week, the family gave a day to helping others, with their own hands, and not just from a distance. So Thérèse could not be accused of not being in touch with the poor. She took great joy in doing her daily mundane chores. She understood that the secret was to do all for God, for love of God. 'Thérèse shows us that within our ordinary life – going to work in our cars or on the subway, doing our taxes, getting our children ready for school, fixing meals – we can find the mysterious exchanges between ourselves and God in prayers and meditation, no matter how brief or hurried. She reveals the hidden works of love that go on daily, not in some special precious time, but in ordinary everyday time.'¹²

This is what makes the difference: that we act out of love for God, rather than out of pure necessity. It is in the ordinary things, the 'little' things, that we can achieve this. Once we realise this, then everyone's work takes on great value. No one can be dismissed as being unimportant. Everyone has their place.

¹² Ann Belford Ulanov, 'Religious Devotion or Masochism? – A Psychoanalyst Looks at Thérèse,' *Experiencing Saint Thérèse Today*, (Carmelite Studies 5), Washington, D.C.: ICS, 1990, 141.

Love of God and Love of Neighbour

'We want to grow in love, but do not know how. Love is a science, a knowledge, and we lack it.'¹³ If it is true that we need to learn how to love again, then certainly one of the teachers of this science must be Thérèse. In his letter on the occasion of her canonization John Paul II says, 'Thérèse of the Child Jesus possesses an extraordinary wisdom and with her doctrine helps so many men and women of every state in life to know and love Jesus Christ and His Gospel.'¹⁴ The title of the letter itself is *The Science of Divine Love*. God taught Thérèse her 'little way', which is 'nothing other than the Gospel way of holiness for all'.¹⁵ It would be a mistake to think that this is something completely new, or unheard of, since it is the message of the Gospel, but one could perhaps see it as a fresh approach to the Gospel, discovering the beauty of the Gospel all over again. While many argue for new methods and means to get the message of the Gospel through to people, perhaps what is more important is for us to rediscover the simplicity and accessibility of the Gospel. If it seems complicated or beyond us, it is because we have made it so. Thérèse pulls away all the 'red tape' and re-presents the message of the Gospel to us in all its beauty.

One of the most fundamental and powerful experiences of the human person, is the realisation that we are loved. When people know that they are loved, they blossom. Equally when people feel constantly rejected, they begin to wither, to turn in on themselves, to become cold. Thérèse had a great sense of being loved by God, felt also through the love which she received from her family from an early age. She knew that she was deeply loved by God, and in return she was able to love greatly. In a self-centred, self-seeking world such as this one, this is an important message that people need to hear again: that we are loved and lovable; that we have great worth because we are human, regardless of what we can, or cannot do. We are loved by God infinitely, and not depending on what we can do in return. There are no conditions. This was a fundamental experience for Thérèse which influenced everything she did and as a result she was eventually able to come to the stage of total 'confidence' in God, based on her understanding of this love. If we are loved this

¹³ Dorothy Day, 'Thérèse,' 596.

¹⁴ John Paul II, 'The Science of Divine Love,' *The Pope Speaks*, 43/2, 1997, 91.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 90.

much, then why shouldn't we be bold in asking and expecting great things from the One who loves us beyond measure. People need to hear this again. 'In this century, where on every side we feel personhood diminished, questioned, anything but seen, held, and cherished, this young woman, this girl, this wise woman makes us see that each of us is precious as a center of being. She shows us we are held in the sight of God, precious to the Lord, precious to one another. She links through the chain of love our nearest neighbor and our most distant neighbor.'¹⁶ Thérèse was conscious of the sisters she lived and worked with, that she must love them as God himself, but she was also conscious of all the souls many miles from her, who needed her help. Her vocation was to pray for them, to bring God to them through her prayers and sacrifices. This is what she did and continues to do. She gets away from the focus on self, which can suffocate us with worry. Instead she looks to the other and sees what she can do for them. This is the love of God in practice. In this way, Thérèse is very 'modern,' very conscious of the needs of our times. In fact, in many ways she was ahead of herself, as so much of what she taught and lived in her little way, is even more badly needed today than in her own lifetime.

When we open ourselves to the love of God, God enables us to do great things, even if only in little ways.

Thérèse acts as a perfect complement to our century's huge explosions that force power outward – into bombs, into space, across new frontiers. Thérèse shows us explosions of energy inward, into inner space, and a spirit so powerful it spills over into relationships with others, near and far. She uncovers an energy of tremendous intensity in daily life.¹⁷

This is the power of the Gospel, the power of God working through individual people, who are open to his love. 'She emphasizes what love has that is specifically *divine* in the midst of a specifically *human* reality.'¹⁸ Thérèse tells us that we too can be filled with this love and bring it everywhere. It is not just for the 'saints,' it is for everyone, everywhere, in all circumstances. In this way we have no excuse, because it is being offered to everyone. If we don't experience it, it is because we are resisting it. Our

¹⁶ Ann Belford Ulanov, 'Religious Devotion or Masochism?' 142.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar, 'Timeliness of Lisieux', John Sullivan (ed.), *Spiritual Direction*, (Carmelite Studies 1), Washington, D.C.: ICS, 1980, 106.

love for God can be a powerful thing, but real love for God is lived out in love for one's neighbour. This is what transforms the world, the love of God lived out in love for our neighbour. 'The love of God is lived in so radical a manner that the love of neighbor seems to have no place within it. But, for Thérèse, the real proof of the Christian authenticity of our love for God is precisely our love for our neighbor, and thus she resolves practically a problem which *theoretically appears insoluble*.'¹⁹ Her little way calls to all people, as a way to live a life of holiness, starting with the self and moving out to other people. She says that everyone has value, worth, dignity, no matter how 'useless' they may seem to others. In the convent with Thérèse, there were quite a number of sisters, some of whom were probably not suitable to convent life. This made it all the more difficult for Thérèse and those who were suitable for this kind of life. However, Thérèse did her best in her work as novice mistress (though she was never officially novice mistress),²⁰ to make sure that all were treated with equal respect, even though it meant that some of the sisters in her care needed stronger treatment than others, depending on their personalities. 'It is impossible to act with all in the same manner. With certain souls, I feel I must make myself little, not fearing to humble myself by admitting my own struggles and defects...With others, on the contrary, I have seen that to do them any good I must be very firm and never go back on a decision once it is made.'²¹ She was aware that it was Jesus she was serving in each person, and that was why each one must be treated with great respect. Today we must work to rediscover the dignity of the person and learn to respect each one as a work of art created by God, as opposed to an object to be used or exploited for our own benefit.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ From March 1896, Thérèse became Novice Mistress without the title. Mother Marie de Gonzague held the title of both Prioress and Novice Mistress at the same time.

²¹ MS C, 240.

The Need to Persevere

As we have already seen from the influence of Jansenism, the religious world in which Thérèse lived, was greatly influenced by fear. People were weighed down by their own sense of sin and the 'high' chance of being damned forever. To such a way of thinking, Thérèse's approach, which focused on love and mercy rather than fear, must have been very welcome indeed. But now we have largely moved on from this kind of negative thinking (or at least we would like to think so), so has she anything else to say to us today?

To begin with I believe that her approach to God, through his love, in all simplicity, is a very attractive one. I say this thinking in particular of the many young people who find so many 'devotions' in the Church very off-putting. Perhaps they will come back to them in time, if and when they come back to their faith. In the mean-time, a straight-forward young woman like Thérèse is very appealing. She had no set formulas of prayer, no complicated meditation techniques, in fact hardly anything at all in this line. But this in itself is very appealing. You simply take her as you find her, and her 'little way' involves little more than openness and willingness to come closer to God. Young people are always looking for the authentic, the genuine, with no frills attached. This is exactly what we find in Thérèse. The response in Ireland to the visit of her relics in June 2001, was a testimony to the interest people have in this young saint. People gathered in their thousands and were prepared to queue for hours to see the reliquary. Hunger for authentic spirituality is still strong.

Thérèse offers us a personal challenge to live the Gospel, because it is livable. There are no half measures with Thérèse. You are either in or you're out, but not both. The age we live in is riddled with lack of commitment. If you're not happy with your marriage, you leave, or more likely, you don't get married at all in case you might want to get out. Even the attitude of many to religious life is that you leave it if you're not happy. Vows don't seem to count for much. Television and Hollywood don't help either, with the constant promotion of a disposable world, 'because you're worth it'. Thérèse's approach is the very opposite to this. If you want to follow the way of love, then you must commit yourself to it. She sought the truth and realised

that it asked her for everything, which she willingly gave: 'I've never acted like Pilate, who refused to listen to the truth. I've always said to God: O my God, I really want to listen to You; I beg You to answer me when I say humbly: What is truth? Make me see things as they really are. Let nothing cause me to be deceived.'²²

Meeting the Naked Self

To the many who are not familiar with religious life, and more particularly enclosed contemplative life, this way of living may well seem like a form of escape from the real world. However, those who have lived this way of life authentically assure us that it is anything but. The enclosed Carmelite nuns also have to worry about material needs, in the sense that they also have bills to pay. 'A Carmelite community is entirely self-supporting, relying exclusively on its own resources. I doubt if there is any community which has not, in its history, experienced dire poverty.'²³ This will probably surprise many, who are under the impression that life in such a place is care free and religiously romantic. Another point worth mentioning is that this kind of life lived properly is 'the starkest encounter with the experience of being human'.²⁴ While a husband and wife choose each other to be partners for life, those who enter into a convent for life don't have any choice in the people they are going to have to live with. They have to put up with them and get on with them just as a husband and wife do. If they are struggling they cannot get up and move to another convent which might be more suitable. The life-style itself with much time given to prayer, reflection and hard work, is conducive to having to face the self, that many of us don't really want to meet.

We can see from her writings that Thérèse was deeply in touch with the human person, in all its loveliness and with all its weaknesses. From this point of view she is well qualified to speak to the world about what it means to be human and the need to persevere when the going gets tough. Along with John of the Cross, she insists that

²² LC, 105.

²³ Ruth Burrows, 'Carmel: A Stark Encounter with the Human Condition,' *The Way Supplement*, 89/2, (1997), 97.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

when we are suffering, when everything is going wrong, and even when God seems to have abandoned us, what we need is to keep going and not be afraid. This is one thing that the world at the beginning of the twenty first century needs to learn again. We have become very quick to get rid of what makes us uncomfortable. We like to be distracted all the time, so that we feel good. We listen to music constantly lest in the silence we hear something we don't like. But Thérèse tells us that this really is not living at all.

According to Ruth Burrows,²⁵ who has lived as a Carmelite for over fifty years, when a postulant begins life in Carmel they often find themselves quickly disappointed at what begins to happen. They find that they are faced with the stark reality of themselves in a way that they never were outside. They may have come from a job where they were confident and even had a certain amount of prestige. Now they have nothing but their own self, completely uncovered in all its beauty and ugliness together. As a result many feel that their entering was a mistake, that this way of life is not for them after all. However, this is exactly what this kind of life is designed to do: to help you grow in the most ideal conditions, but this means being stripped of all illusion first. There is no longer anything to cover up the parts of us that we would rather not see. This can be a very painful experience for some, and yet it is so important for real growth. Once this happens, then we see ourselves before God, without any illusions of grandeur. This is humility, another ingredient which we greatly lack today.

Thérèse brings us to a point of personal commitment to God. Her own journey shows us that she didn't arrive at the point of 'confidence' without a lot of struggle. We see from her letters that 'her journey took her from the conquest of love, to surrender to love, to the vocation of love. Significantly, the word 'surrender', *l'abandon*, does not appear in her writings till 1893'.²⁶ But she persevered, she had commitment and she invites us to do the same. If we want to find Love, we must be prepared to search and keep searching wherever the journey may take us, even

²⁵ Cf. op. cit., 97-105.

²⁶ Iain Matthew, 'Thérèse of Lisieux: A Way for Today,' *The Way Supplement*, 89/2, (1997), 21.

through suffering, as hers did. Her message is that we should not panic when it gets difficult, that this is the time when it is most important not to try something new, but to keep going. God is bringing us deeper, but He can only do this if we are prepared to journey on into the unknown. He gives us the grace to do this, if we are open to it. Again, this is fortitude. We are to keep on believing, even when the odds may seem against us. Thérèse could say this from her own personal experience of darkness in faith. From Easter 1896 onwards, all that she had hoped for and believed in went into a fog and she found herself hearing only the mocking voice of despair speaking to her, telling her to give up, to resign herself to the 'night of nothingness' which was to follow, but she never gave up. Perhaps the most important significance of her final struggle is that she assures us, from her own experience, that when we abandon ourselves to God, he will not abandon us, but keeps us going even when we feel we are no longer able ourselves.

Atheism, Indifference and the Modern World

'Belief in the Christian God is not the outcome of a philosophical process. Faith in this God comes from an immediate knowledge of the heart.'²⁷ As we saw earlier, God granted Thérèse the grace of understanding the 'impious,' the 'sinners,' those who had deliberately rejected grace and no longer believed. Before she received this grace, in Easter 1896, she didn't believe that these people were sincere in their unbelief, but that they were going against their own inner convictions. This grace had the strange, but powerful effect, of enabling her to relate to those who don't believe, to experience their distress and anguish. This puts Thérèse on the side of the many thousands who don't believe today, for one reason or another. Here is a short quotation from a professed atheist writing on the death of his brother Jonathan Philbin Bowman: 'To be an atheist is to acknowledge that there is a gun pointed at your head. There's no question about whether it will go off; the question is simply "When?" And when it does, all that you have worked for, all that you have achieved, all that you have destroyed and ruined, all the memories and experiences that you have

²⁷ Shay Kelly, 'Roots of Modern Atheism,' *Doctrine and Life*, 47/10, (1997), 596.

accumulated will no longer matter to you.’²⁸ While the author also says that he finds atheism a ‘great comfort’ in the face of death, the above quotation seems to express more emptiness than comfort.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, atheism, especially in the western world, is widespread. Many have left the formal practice of religion, and many feel alienated from a Church they once considered themselves part of. But why is it important that Thérèse had this experience of understanding their unbelief? Perhaps it is because she is someone that those who struggle with unbelief can relate to. She has understood their pain. They can no longer say, ‘you who have faith, don’t know what it’s like.’ Thérèse has known what it is like, much as Jesus has understood all our pain, having gone through the greatest depths of pain himself and even the experience of feeling abandoned by God. In many respects, atheists are the marginalised of today. How do we reach out to them? Jesus himself was quite prepared to sit among them, to share table fellowship with them and we are to imitate Christ.

Thérèse did not choose to sit at the table of sinners – in the context, she has mainly unbelievers in mind – but she quite suddenly and oh, so unexpectedly, simply found herself there. Nonetheless, this experience of shared dereliction with those who have no hope is the logical crowning of her childhood’s ‘I choose all’. She who wanted to go all the way in love was taken at her word.²⁹

Although she spent all her religious life in the enclosed walls of Carmel, her words of understanding have reached millions, including many who don’t believe. She has gone into their homes and shared meals with them, so to speak. As Thérèse reminds us, to love God is to love our neighbour, and to reach out to them, we must not forget this call to share the table with those who don’t believe, and not just remain comfortably within our own communities of faith. It’s not so much that we have to do anything when we are there, as to just be there in their midst. Thérèse kept hoping and holding on to what she wanted to believe, without telling anyone else what they should believe. The same holds true for us.

²⁸ Abie Bowman, ‘You Only Live Once,’ *The Sunday Independent*, March 3, 2002, 12.

²⁹ Miriam Vaughan, ‘Solidarity with Unbelievers,’ *The Way Supplement*, 89/2, (1997), 108-109.

The famous French writer Georges Bernanos puts his words into the mouth of an imaginary agnostic, addressing a Church congregation on the Feast of St. Thérèse.³⁰ He reminds us that we are in danger of applauding Thérèse, instead of following her call to become little children. Indeed we are in danger of doing this with many of the saints, applauding all their marvellous works, and claiming them for our own, without listening to what they are saying to us.

My dear brothers, I keep on saying the same thing, because it always is the same thing. Had you followed that Saint instead of applauding, Europe would never have known the Reformation, nor the religious wars, nor this horrible Spanish Crusade. Saint Francis was calling to you, but death did not pick and choose: death descended on us all. The danger is the same today. It must be even greater. The Saint of Lisieux, whose prodigious career is sufficient token in itself of the tragic urgency of the message entrusted to her, asks you to become as children. The purpose of God is impenetrable, as you say. Yet I cannot help feeling that this is your last chance. Your last chance—and ours. Are you capable of rejuvenating our world or not?³¹

This is a powerful reminder to us not to get caught up in all that is unimportant, while neglecting the essence of what it means to be Christian. We are always in danger of placing our hopes in Christ, while not doing any of the things that he commanded us to do, much as some of Jesus' accusers looked to Moses to justify them.³² This is what happened to the Pharisees and the religious leaders of the time. They were so concerned with keeping the law exactly, that they forgot why they were keeping the law, and as a result turned it around so that it was working against them instead of for them. Indeed Jesus reminded them that 'tax collectors and prostitutes are making their way into the kingdom of God before you' (Mt 21:31). Thérèse calls us to be like children, but we mustn't forget that children make no distinction between those who believe in God and those who don't, or indeed between people of different creeds. If we believe we are following Christ, then we are to be the 'salt of the earth and the light of the world'.³³ We must reach out to those who don't believe, and not be afraid to find ourselves eating with them.

³⁰ Cf. Georges Bernanos, 'Sermon of an Agnostic on the Feast of St. Thérèse,' *Communio*, 24, (1997), 611-625.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 622.

³² Cf. Jn 5:45.

³³ Cf. Mt 5:13-16.

Thanks to the advances in technology, the world and all its problems now come into our sitting rooms, through television and radio. We witness the suffering of millions through war, famine and disease. We get to see scenes of terrible brutality and injustice, as parts of news clips. As a result there is a great danger that we are becoming desensitised to it, thinking that it is just a fact of life and little to do with us. Even though we are more aware of the problems, there doesn't appear to be a great increase in charity, especially on a one-to-one basis.

Thérèse's vocation was to pray for sinners and especially priests. God made her aware of how much she could do for souls, through suffering silently and offering her sufferings to God, which she did. Today, 'the idea of suffering freely undertaken for the good of another, particularly an unknown other, would tend to meet with astonished incomprehension'.³⁴ But Thérèse is a powerful witness to the need for us to get involved once more, that our brothers and sisters all over the world need our help, and that there is something we can do. Her call to us is a wake-up call, to remember that we are needed and expected to help. 'Having offered herself to Mercy she knew it was not for herself alone. That we feed, clothe, heal and comfort our needy sisters and brothers, is made the touchstone of our love of God. "Whatever you did to the least of my brethren you did to me (Mk 25:40)", and who more needy than the person bereft of the hope that only comes through faith? The young Carmelite had received great insights on the meaning of Jesus' new commandment that demands the demolition of any reservations in our self-giving.'³⁵ Christianity is a serious business and Thérèse is reminding us of this, with a smile.

³⁴ Miriam Vaughan, 'Solidarity with Unbelievers,' 112.

³⁵ Ibid., 113.

The Mission and Witness of Contemplative Life

'The basic motive of every mission is to announce to men that Jesus became man and was crucified for our salvation.'³⁶ For Thérèse herself, this mission was even more specifically to make God loved throughout the world. 'O My God! Most Blessed Trinity, I desire to *Love* You and make You *Loved* to work for the glory of Holy Church by saving souls on earth and liberating those suffering in purgatory.'³⁷ Although she was in an enclosed monastery in Lisieux, she wanted to reach out to the whole world. In manuscript B, she expresses her desire to fulfil several different vocations. She wanted to be the warrior, the missionary, the priest, the apostle, the doctor and the martyr.³⁸ When she eventually recognised her vocation as being love in the heart of the Church, this gave her the means to fulfil all the work that she felt called to do.

'Of all the truths about the church, the Second Vatican Council impressed most deeply on our generation the certainty of a divine mission. Thérèse gives the man of today her Little Way as a sort of practical guide to carrying out his mission.'³⁹ Our mission is to make the salvific work of Christ known to all people, but we preach this more by the way we live than by what we say. Therefore we must follow the path that leads to holiness, so that God may shine through us and speak to all people. Living the little way of Thérèse is the simplest way to live this holiness, and in turn to preach the Gospel.

The importance of a life given to intercession for others is something that might not appear in many career-guidance classes, but the need for it is enormous. St. Benedict opened his monasteries to the world because he was afraid of how many souls were in danger of being lost on account of the terrible state of society at the time. 'Vicarious expiation is an idea essential to monastic prayer.'⁴⁰ Vicarious prayer and suffering were also part of Thérèse's mission to help others. Her life was

³⁶ Thomas Schmitt, 'John Paul II and Thérèse of Lisieux,' *Communio*, 24, (1997), 546.

³⁷ See *Act of Oblation to Merciful Love*, appendix 1.

³⁸ Cf. MS B, 192.

³⁹ Thomas Schmitt, 'John Paul II and Thérèse of Lisieux,' 542.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 544.

given over specifically to this in Carmel, to pray and make sacrifices on behalf of others in need. This is the work of the contemplative. The language of Thérèse's time has changed, but the goal is essentially the same.

We use a different vocabulary today from that of Thérèse. We no longer 'pray for sinners' but pray from our place among all sinners, in solidarity with all our brothers and sisters, for God's gracious mercy which still wants to pour itself out, as Thérèse had experienced in herself. Though the eternal destiny of human beings is still Carmel's primary concern, we do not merely pray for 'souls' but people of soul, body and spirit, who have to work out their salvation in their life on earth with its heights and depths.⁴¹

The witness of a life dedicated to this kind of work is a great mystery to people today, but also a great signpost to faith in God and the afterlife. Their way of life is itself a teaching on the power of intercessory prayer. Few enough appreciate just how important this kind of work is. 'But if they just came out even once a week and did some *real* work, it would be so much better,' was an objection someone made to me regarding the life of similar contemplatives in Galway. It's the argument that says: 'I know prayer is important, but I don't really see how it could be *that* important.' People don't understand, and yet the very fact that it leaves people puzzled is a good thing, because it means they are aware of those in contemplative life. Yet prayer is essential to the work of the Church. 'Each of the faithful is called to pray and strive for sanctity after the example of Saint Thérèse, since prayer and holiness are the *sine qua non* of evangelization.'⁴² Without the work of those in contemplative life, the Church would surely die, since they are the power-house, the hidden generator keeping all the other work going. 'The great theologian Karl Rahner maintains that Christians of the future will be contemplatives or they will cease to be anything at all.'⁴³

Thérèse and other contemplatives also speak to many just by the fact that they are physically enclosed. This in itself is a powerful witness to faith, one which I believe is often underestimated. The idea of celibacy or virginity raises eyebrows for

⁴¹ Lucia Wiedenhöver, 'The Apostolate of Prayer and Intercession,' *The Way Supplement*, 89/2, (1997), 69-70.

⁴² Thomas Schmitt, 'John Paul II and Thérèse of Lisieux,' 546, who refers to, John Paul II, *Insegnamenti*, XI/1 (1988), 550 and John Paul II, *Insegnamenti*, IX/2 (1986), 109, in that order.

⁴³ Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* (New York: Seabury Press, 1971), as quoted in Vilma Seelaus, 'Carmel and the Nuns' Changed Self-Understanding,' *The Way Supplement*, 89/2, (1997), 38.

many, as they find it baffling that anyone would want to 'waste' their life in such a way. It is a wonderful witness to faith, one which not everyone can understand.⁴⁴ How much more so when those who live a life consecrated to God spend that life enclosed in one building? 'Enclosure does not isolate contemplative souls from the communion of the Mystical Body. Far more, it puts them at the heart of the Church.'⁴⁵ Contemplative life speaks volumes to the world, about God. Those who live this way may not be understood, but they are a tremendous witness, and this is another way that Thérèse is speaking to the world today.

Fear of Suffering in the Modern World

As we have seen, the modern developed world has great difficulty with suffering. Sickness and death are not acceptable in our society. We have reduced suffering to the problem of pain, in an attempt to regain control over it. Modern medicine has become a system which tries to deal with pain, rather than heal the individual. Pain is considered 'a social curse from which society must be institutionally relieved'.⁴⁶ We have separated sickness from those who are sick, and medicine now tries to deal with the sickness, as opposed to the sick. Once this happens, it is easier to get away from having to face up to our mortality. Instead of trying to look after someone who is sick and may be dying, medicine can just treat whatever sickness, or pain, it encounters. It is no longer personal. Babies are aborted if they are not 'perfect,' and the justification for this is that a child born with a 'defect,' or handicapped in any way, would be a 'burden' to themselves and society. The elderly may be disposed of, once they are considered a burden to society, or because they are suffering, 'and they shouldn't have to'. Today euthanasia is justified as being compassionate, whereas the very origin of the word means 'to suffer with'. We don't want to look on suffering of any kind, so we take it out of the picture if possible. Yet suffering is a distinctly human phenomenon, which is bound up with the contemplative, or spiritual aspect of our

⁴⁴ Cf. Mt 19:12.

⁴⁵ John Paul II quotes Paul VI, 'Folly to the World, Wisdom in the Spirit,' *Consecrated Life*, (1981), 173, as quoted in Thomas Schmitt, 545.

⁴⁶ Ivan Illich, *Limits to Medicine. Medical Nemesis: The Expropriation of Health* (London: Marion Boyars, 1995), 135, as quoted, in Lisa Tierney *Changing Attitudes Towards Death and Suffering: A Cultural Perspective on the Euthanasia Debate* (M.Th. Thesis), Maynooth: 2001, 43.

being. Suffering requires both physical pain and awareness. 'Whereas traditional cultures make pain tolerable by integrating it into a meaningful setting and interpreting its necessity, cosmopolitan medical civilisation detaches pain from any social context or meaning in order to annihilate it.'⁴⁷ Pain no longer has meaning for many, and so of course people will try to annihilate it. Why would one hold onto something that is meaningless? Yet since suffering is an integral part of the human condition, we must rediscover its meaning, or we will no longer be able to cope with life at all, since we cannot get away from suffering. If suffering is a mystery, as opposed to a problem, then by definition it does not have a solution, so instead of finding the answer, we must look for the meaning.

Many of the advertisements we are continually bombarded with, reinforce the mentality that suffering is unacceptable. You are in pain, but we will get rid of your pain and make your life 'acceptable' again, because as long as you are suffering, your life is not acceptable, and you should change it. So we are offered pain-killers and health-care systems that promise to make life all right, when life is not all right. We can buy the product and fix the problem. There is no room for suffering. However, 'the technological mentality from which modern society operates fails to see that there are certain areas of life in which technological intervention is inappropriate.'⁴⁸ You cannot treat spiritual suffering with drugs. This kind of suffering (which is really an aspect of all suffering) forces us to ask questions and to address the deeper issues: 'what does this mean? Why am I suffering at all? Since there is suffering, what is the purpose of my life?' Here we have a lot to learn from traditional societies, which were much better at coping with suffering than we are. They didn't have the medical advances which we enjoy today, and were far more accustomed to living with the mystery of suffering and death. They didn't try to sort it out. They lived with it and allowed it to be a mystery. It is interesting that towards the end of Thérèse's life, she had suffered so much that it was simply part of her world and she couldn't imagine what it would be like without it. 'The thought of heavenly bliss not only causes me not a single bit of joy but I even ask myself at times how it will be

⁴⁷ Lisa Tierney, *Changing Attitudes Towards Death and Suffering*, 38.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 46.

possible to be happy without any suffering. Jesus no doubt will change my nature, otherwise I would miss suffering and the valley of tears.⁴⁹

Because of our 'success' at eliminating pain, society now looks for increasingly stronger stimuli to give a sense of being alive. High adrenaline sports, such as sky-diving and bungy jumping are increasing, as are the use of drugs and violence, to give people more excitement. Music is played louder and more extreme violence is seen in films. An interesting advertisement on television for road safety, shows a horrific car crash where three out of four are killed, but worse still is the one who is left alive, as a permanent invalid. Being an invalid is made out to be worse than death. 'Medical civilisation's war against suffering has sapped the will of the people to suffer.'⁵⁰

Against this background of an inability to live with suffering, Thérèse has a message for us. It is of course the message of Christianity, that suffering has meaning, and that not only can we live with it, but that it has an important role to play in our world. However, it should also be said that we should not suffer needlessly, that is to say, if suffering can be alleviated, it should be, so long as the measures taken to do so are reasonable. We are not expected to suffer unnecessarily, when relief could be obtained, but there are limits beyond which we must not go.⁵¹ To completely suppress suffering, even by means of death, is going well beyond the reasonable means of relief. Suffering is redemptive, and as we can see from Thérèse's own experience, it forms us and helps us to mature in a way that nothing else can. It can enable us to enjoy and appreciate the simple things in life, and it brings us closer to God. One thing that is absolutely clear from Thérèse's writings, is that the more she suffered the closer she came to God, inspite of spiritual darkness. She also wants us to see this. However, it is important for us not to over simplify the situation either. We remember the many temptations Thérèse had to kill herself.

⁴⁹ LT, 1152.

⁵⁰ Lisa Tierney, *Changing Attitudes Towards Death and Suffering*, 52.

⁵¹ For a further development of this discussion, see Benedict M. Ashley, OP, and Kevin D. O'Rourke, OP, *Health Care Ethics: A Theological Analysis*, Second Edition, St. Louis, M. O.: Catholic Health Association, 1982, 387.

‘What a grace it is to have faith! If I had no faith, I would have inflicted death on myself without hesitating a moment!’⁵² Yet suffering is a necessary part of the way to God, the way of the cross. In Matthew’s Gospel, Peter’s reaction to Jesus’ first prophecy of the passion typifies the modern world’s approach to suffering. ‘Heaven preserve you Lord, this must not happen to you.’ But Jesus turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle in my path, because you are thinking not as God thinks but as human beings do’ (Mt 16:21-23). Perhaps this is often our downfall as well, that we are too quick to produce a ‘solution’ to what is really a mystery which we must learn to live with. God holds Thérèse up to us as a wonderful example of how we needn’t be afraid of suffering, but that we should go with it and allow God to form us through it. Thérèse is helping us to look beyond what seems to make no sense and to know that God is with us when we are suffering. She tells us not to despair, but to enter into it knowing that God is with us and will never abandon us. Having said all this, I will finish with words from Thérèse herself, who reminds us not to be too lofty in speaking about suffering. ‘O Mother, it is very easy to write beautiful things about suffering, but writing is nothing, nothing! One must suffer in order to know!’⁵³

⁵² Story of a Soul, 264.

⁵³ LC, 199-200.

Conclusion

In every age, God raises up men and women of outstanding holiness, to be signs of hope and encouragement for his people. While Thérèse of Lisieux never considered herself to be anything special and always wanted to be 'little,' it seems obvious that she is indeed a great saint, specially chosen for our times.

Through the little way of spiritual childhood, she has opened up the way of holiness to everyone. She has made it more accessible, or at least helped us to see just how accessible it really is. Holiness is not just for a few who have the time to try and live it, but for all people in every situation, from the dole queue to the office block. She has shown us the dignity of the human person and the importance of all types of work, no matter how small or apparently trivial. She speaks to the struggling Christian and to the atheist. She knows what it is to suffer, but her message is that we shouldn't be afraid of suffering, but keep going, because the love of God will see us through, baffling and all as God's ways often are to us.

St. Thérèse of Lisieux, almost totally unknown before her death, is a saint for our times, with a powerful message of hope and encouragement for us. Her spirituality is not only relevant, but hugely important. She is helping people in a confusing world of suffering and selfishness, to discover God all over again.

Appendix 1

Act of Oblation to Merciful Love

J.M.J.T.

Offering of myself as a Victim of Holocaust to God's Merciful Love

O My God! Most Blessed Trinity, I desire to *Love* You and make You *Loved*, to work for the glory of Holy Church by saving souls on earth and liberating those suffering in purgatory. I desire to accomplish Your will perfectly and to reach the degree of glory You have prepared for me in Your Kingdom. I desire, in a word, to be a saint, but I feel my helplessness and I beg You, O my God! to be Yourself my *Sanctity!*

Since You loved me so much as to give me Your only Son as my Saviour and my Spouse, the infinite treasures of His merits are mine. I offer them to You with gladness, begging You to look upon me only in the Face of Jesus and in His heart burning with *Love*.

I offer You, too, all the merits of the saints (in heaven and on earth), their acts of *Love*, and those of the holy angels. Finally I offer You, *O Blessed Trinity!* the *Love* and merits of the *Blessed Virgin, my dear Mother*. It is to her I abandon my offering, begging her to present it to You. Her Divine Son, my *Beloved Spouse*, told us in the days of His mortal life: "*Whatsoever you ask the Father in my name he will give it to you!*" I am certain, then, that You will grant my desires; I know, O my God! that the *more You want to give, the more you make us desire*. I feel in my heart immense desires and it is with confidence I ask You to come and take possession of my soul. Ah! I cannot receive Holy Communion as often as I desire, but, Lord, are You not *all-powerful*? Remain in me as in a tabernacle and never separate Yourself from Your little victim.

I want to console You for the ingratitude of the wicked, and I beg of You to take away my freedom to displease you. If through weakness I sometimes fall, may your

Divine Glance cleanse my soul immediately, consuming all my imperfections like the fire that transforms everything into itself.

I thank You, O my God! for all the graces You have granted me, especially the grace of making me pass through the crucible of suffering. It is with joy I shall contemplate You on the Last Day carrying the scepter of Your Cross. Since You deigned to give me a share in this very precious Cross, I hope in heaven to resemble You and to see shining in my glorified body the sacred stigmata of Your Passion.

After earth's Exile, I hope to go and enjoy you in the Fatherland, but I do not want to lay up merits for heaven. I want to work for Your *Love alone* with the one purpose of pleasing You, consoling Your Sacred Heart, and saving souls who will love You eternally.

In the evening of this life, I shall appear before You with empty hands, for I do not ask You, Lord, to count my works. All our justice is stained in Your eyes. I wish, then, to be clothed in Your own *Justice* and to receive from your *Love* the eternal possession of *Yourself*. I want no other *Throne*, no other *Crown* but *You*, my *Beloved!*

Time is nothing in Your eyes, and a single day is like a thousand years. You can, then, in one instant prepare me to appear before You.

In order to live in one single act of perfect Love, I OFFER MYSELF AS A VICTIM OF HOLOCAUST TO YOUR MERCIFUL LOVE, asking You to consume me incessantly, allowing the waves of *infinite tenderness* shut up within You to overflow into my soul, and that thus I may become a *martyr* of Your *Love*, O my God!

May this martyrdom, after having prepared me to appear before You, finally cause me to die and may my soul take its flight without any delay into the eternal embrace of *Your Merciful Love*.

I want, O my *Beloved*, at each beat of my heart to renew this offering to You an infinite number of times, until the shadows having disappeared I may be able to tell You of my *Love* in an *Eternal Fact to Face!*

Marie-François-Thérèse of the Child Jesus
and the Holy Face, unworthy Carmelite religious

This 9th day of June,
Feast of the Most Holy Trinity,
In the year of grace, 1895.

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