

Praying with St. Thérèse of Lisieux: The Nineteenth-Century World and the French Church

~ *Barbara Jean LaRochester, OCD* ~

At the canonization of St. Thérèse of Lisieux on May 17, 1925, Pope Pius X proclaimed Thérèse “the greatest Saint of Modern Times.”¹ What is it about her that continues to capture the imagination of the world in this twenty-first century? Why do people still entrust their cares and concerns, their pain and anxieties to Thérèse who lived a cloistered life and was virtually unknown? If we look at the Church and world in which she lived, we might better understand how her thoughts developed and perhaps, see things as she did.

History tells us that Thérèse of Lisieux was born in 1873, entered Carmel in 1888, and died in 1897. These years were structured by political unrest and disputes between the Church and state. By reading the daily paper or speaking with someone who did, Thérèse grew up knowing every detail about what was going on in France. This is how she learned about the criminal Henri Pranzini, who was sentenced to death because of his crimes. The missions were also a big part of Thérèse’s thought and prayer. The knowledge that French colonies were being founded in distant places increased Thérèse’s desire and zeal to preach the gospel to the people of these lands.

During Thérèse’s time, there was little cooperation between the Church and state. Catholics torn between the Church-centered life and the pull of moral corruption in the culture arranged their lives accordingly. On the one hand was the tendency to turn inward and settle for a purified world of home, family, and church with minimal outside contact. Or one could opt to make reparation for the horrors committed against God and the Church through one’s own personal suffering. The Martin girls were raised within this social construct.

THÉRÈSE: LIFE AND TIMES

Thérèse Martin was the youngest of nine children born to Louis and Zélie Martin on January 2, 1873. Because they lost three infants and a five year-old, Thérèse was especially welcomed into life. Due to a physical condition Thérèse had, or her mother who would later die of breast cancer, two-month-old Thérèse was unable to nurse. Zélie,

fearing the child would starve, gave her to a wet nurse, Rose Taille, who took Thérèse away to her farm, where she thrived and grew. Thérèse was fifteen months old when she rejoined the Martin household. The Martins were a prosperous middle-class bourgeois family who lived a largely insular life, creating a comfortable and pious world within the confines of the home. With family members having few opportunities for serious interaction with outsiders, relationships tended to be super invested with emotional freight. The lifestyle provided a safe environment for the expression of a rich and delicate affective development, but it could also be subtly manipulative or oppressive. Thérèse's early development was shaped by both the positive and negative aspects of this insular way of life.

All five of the Martin girls became nuns. Leonie entered the Visitation Sisters; the other four sisters entered Lisieux Carmel. This may have been the fruit of their particular family lifestyle, in which an intense quest for holiness was woven into every aspect of daily life. The larger context was the Catholic culture with its strengths and weaknesses which shaped Thérèse and her spiritual quest for authentic holiness.

In 1877 when Thérèse was four years old, her mother died of breast cancer. This loss changed Thérèse, who was so full of life and exuberance, to a timid, retiring, sensitive child. She chose her sister Pauline to be her second mother. It was from her that Thérèse learned her catechism, prayers, and reverence for God. In October 1882, Thérèse was hit with another loss. Her sister Pauline entered the Lisieux Carmel. Thérèse, who was only nine years old, had already experienced three traumatic experiences. It should not surprise us that Pauline's entrance left Thérèse distraught. Entrance into Carmel in those days meant that the nun would never again leave the cloister, and family visits were a group affair with a barrier separating the religious from her lay family. Pauline's departure so affected Thérèse that she came down with a mysterious illness and would have died had it not been for the intervention of the Virgin Mary who worked a miracle in her behalf. Thérèse describes how "The Blessed Virgin appeared to [her] and her ravishing smile penetrated the very depths of [her] soul. In an instant, all [her] pain disappeared."² Thérèse continued to mature in grace, interacting with her sisters, her cousins, and her father, for whom she had a profound affection.

After Pauline left for Carmel, Marie took on the role of mother for young Thérèse. Four years later, in 1886, Marie joined Pauline at the Carmel of Lisieux. With this third departure, we can understand that Thérèse, in spite of her many advantages, suffered from a very early age.

THÉRÈSE'S CHRISTMAS GRACE

It was customary for young children to leave their slippers by the chimney to be filled with gifts at Christmas. Since Thérèse was the youngest in the family, her sister Celine wanted to continue the custom. After midnight Mass in 1886, her tired father saw the shoes and said, "Well, fortunately, this will be the last year!" Thérèse heard the remark as she was going up the stairs. Forcing back tears, she quickly descended the stairs, took the slippers and placed them in front of her father, withdrawing all the gifts joyfully. She said, "I had the happy appearance of a Queen."³ Having regained his own cheerfulness, her father laughed. Seeing all this, Celine believed she was dreaming. Thérèse had discovered once again the strength of soul which she had lost at the age of four and a half. She was to preserve it forever.

What was this strength of soul? It was the grace to move away from self-centeredness and focus more generously on being a child of God. As Thérèse continued to grow, her one desire was to offer her life totally to God as a Carmelite nun. At the age of fourteen when a group of people from the diocese of Bayeux-Lisieux visited Rome, Thérèse and her father were among them. The group had an audience with Pope Leo XIII and Thérèse took the opportunity to ask the pope for the grace of entering Carmel by the age of fifteen. This was an unheard of gesture, but very courageous of Thérèse. The pope did not give her direct permission, but told her to "abide by the decisions of the Bishop of Lisieux."⁴ Although Thérèse was made to wait for some months, her prayer, persistence in asking, and the support of her father provided the context for this unusual request to be granted. On April 9, 1888, at the age of fifteen, Thérèse joined her sisters Pauline and Marie in the Carmel of Lisieux.

THÉRÈSE IN CARMEL

When Thérèse entered Carmel, she took the name Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face. She spent six years in Carmel before her father got sick and passed away in 1894. During these years, Thérèse had extraordinary spiritual insight and creativity. She wrote three manuscripts that formed her autobiography *Story of a Soul*. In June of 1895, Thérèse wrote her *Act of Oblation to Merciful Love*. This is perhaps the richest and most significant testament of her spirituality. In this *Oblation*, Thérèse offers herself as a victim of merciful love transforming the spirituality of reparation which was common within her cultural environment. While others offered themselves as victims of divine justice and prayed to suffer, Thérèse offered herself as a sacrifice to be consumed by love. This meant that she would work for God's love alone and save souls who would love him eternally. For Thérèse, Christian martyrdom was total committed love that would stop at nothing to manifest and fulfill that love.

There are many things that can be said of Thérèse during her relatively short time in Carmel. What she has taught us through her confidence, unconditional love, her experience of littleness, of suffering, her trial of faith, all remain her legacy to us. In her correspondence, in her autobiography, Thérèse speaks only of God's mercy and love. Her way of spiritual childhood was simple and spoke to her experience. It is my belief that people are still attracted to Thérèse today because she lived everyday life in an extraordinary way. With her help, we can do the same.

HOW JESUS TAUGHT THÉRÈSE

Jesus set before Thérèse the reality of a garden and helped her understand that all flowers made by God are beautiful. She learned how the splendor of the rose and the whiteness of the lily do not take away from the perfume of the little violet or the simplicity of the daisy. Thérèse considered herself a wild flower. Wild flowers are hidden in the woods, very few people see or even notice them, yet they give glory to God by being there and blooming. Today, Thérèse is best known as the "Little Flower." She is an example of unhistorical significance because of her great sanctity. Why? She places herself as an equal among simple people who will never be especially noticed or acclaimed and affirms the capability for each one of us to follow in her little way of sanctity.

We live in a society today where most of us want to be noticed, acclaimed, soar like eagles, and do great things. Thérèse, however, saw herself as a little bird with an eagle's heart. From her, we can learn true humility, the ability to accept life, to recognize our limits and see ourselves as part of a larger picture. God will use our strengths and weaknesses, our dreams and disillusionments, to create the garden of his delight in Carmel, in families, in the world. We need to understand why we are planted in that garden, and blossom into what God is creating in us. The variety and the richness of the garden will be compromised and limited if we try to become something we are not. If we live from the truth in our heart that is transformed by the love of God growing in us, God is glorified. This is the lesson of Thérèse. We are invited to live ordinary life with extraordinary love. Thérèse, with her protected, privileged environment, was and is a wild flower that still captures our souls and inspires our hearts today.

MEDITATION AND CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER

Thérèse was fond of the countryside, the flowers, and the birds. She preferred to be alone, to sit on the grass filled with flowers, and to be carried away with deep thoughts. Without knowing what it was to meditate, her soul was absorbed in real prayer. She was aware of the sounds of music from far away, the murmuring and movement of the

wind through the trees, and for her this was heaven. Like Thérèse, we can also grow in prayer by taking every opportunity to please God, by being aware of all that is around us. We can allow our spirits to touch the Holy as we contemplate a beautiful sunset, look on the face of a newborn baby, or watch children at play. Prayer is as simple as raising our hearts and minds to God. Thérèse used the ordinary things of daily life to help her grow in love and prayer. We can do the same.

Someone may ask, what about the desert times? What were they like for Thérèse? How did she handle dryness in prayer? Thérèse didn't force herself or allow herself to become discouraged when her prayer was dry. She simply recited a prayer such as the Our Father very slowly or spoke the simple words "Draw me" and knew that everyone she loved would be drawn into her prayer. She says, "I say very simply to God what I wish to say...and God always understands me."⁵ For Thérèse, prayer was an aspiration of the heart, a simple glance directed to heaven, a cry of gratitude and love in the midst of trials or joys. Notice the words: a glance, a cry, a movement of the heart. These simple acts are open to all of us and can direct the inner attention of our soul and our prayer to God. They are the kindling that keeps the fire burning when times seem hard.

DESIRE

Thérèse had a great desire to become a saint, but in her autobiography, she writes, "To be your Spouse, to be a Carmelite, and by my union with You to be the Mother of souls."⁶ While these three privileges sum up her vocation—Carmelite, Spouse, Mother—Thérèse also felt called to be a priest, a missionary, and martyr. Though none of these things happened in her lifetime, it never disillusioned her spirit. She believed that God's grace was refining her in surrender in marvelous and powerful ways through love, and not just through her deeds. We need faith like Thérèse because we all get trapped in betrayal, unanswered questions, and unfulfilled longings. Thérèse invites us to trust God's work in our lives.

Very early in her religious life Thérèse understood that the Church had a heart burning with love and that it was love alone that made members of the Church act. She understood that love comprised all vocations, that love was everything, that love embraced all times and places. In short, love is eternal. Thérèse had found her vocation. In the heart of the Church, she would be love. From that moment on, Thérèse knew how her life would be lived. She would prove her love for God by doing the smallest things with great love and would not allow one little sacrifice to escape her attention. Jesus taught Thérèse perfection in and through hiddenness, humility, surrender, and gratitude. She learned that happiness would consist in hiding herself

and remaining unconcerned about created things. Her one desire was “to love Jesus to folly.”⁷ It was love alone that drew her and abandonment that guided her. What mattered most to Thérèse was the accomplishment of God’s will. She often exclaimed, “O how sweet is the way of Love! How I want to apply myself to do the will of God always with great self surrender.”⁸ Thérèse reminds us that Jesus does not demand great actions from us. All God wants is our love, our surrender, and our gratitude.

Because Thérèse was an open and willing learner, God was able to teach her in many different ways, and she used this to her advantage. Her Little Way is a way of love that is straight and very short. It doesn’t provide for detours or side trips for relaxation. It guarantees that *anyone* can walk this route at any time. Thérèse wrote, “My way is all confidence and love.”⁹ The only prerequisite for the journey is trust and a willingness to take the first step from wherever we are, knowing that Jesus will accept us, just as we are.

Thérèse’s Spiritual Childhood and little way are an echo of the gospel message, “Come to me all you who labor and are heavily burdened.”¹⁰ Thérèse had faith in a God of love, mercy, kindness, and compassion, in a God who communicates grace and new life. She believed in her littleness that she knew her limitations and believed that we can give God glory by being who we are. Who among us does not feel at times the labor and heavy burden of human existence? Who among us does not need loving kindness to make the journey of life not only bearable but worth celebrating? To be human is to take on the ups and downs of everyday life, to rejoice and to live in wonder. Thérèse believed in living ordinary, daily life selflessly.

Because Thérèse lived in community, her context for union with God was living with others in community. She once remarked, “You live with some people in community who are difficult to get along with, who make life hard for you.”¹¹ They may be people who are uneducated, stubborn, naïve, or emotionally or physically challenged. With God’s grace, Thérèse accepted the limited character of her environment by her affirming and loving presence within the community. By forgiveness, understanding, and loving outreach, she became the mediator of new life. This is how grace worked for Thérèse in community. This is how grace can work in us, with our sisters and brothers, with family and friends, at any moment or circumstance in life. We are to be the instruments of God’s love in the world because God is present in us. Thérèse understood this and lived it well.

Today, St. Thérèse of Lisieux is a perfect complement for our twenty-first century’s obsession with power. She uncovers the tremendous intensity of energy in daily life and shows that this energy residing within each of us is so powerful that it can spill over into relationships with others. We can no longer say, “I cannot love like that,” or,

“I am not a member of a religious community,” or, “I know nothing of that kind of power,” or, “I do not have Thérèse’s genius or her power to love.” Thérèse has closed all escape routes. She demonstrates that we can love at any moment, any day, any place, anywhere, here and now. Whatever the circumstances, if we open ourselves, we will find the way that God chooses for our journey of growth and relationship with him. This is how Thérèse lived. She is an example of how God’s grace, a family’s love, a community’s support, honest work, loyal friends, a smile, and an attitude of acceptance can help all people to live with faith, hope, and love. Her overwhelming desire for communion with God, her enduring spirit, and her intercession for others still affect and continue to draw people to love, blossom, grow, pray, and serve as she did. Her spirit may draw you to extraordinary self-sacrifice. Will you be ready to answer the call to serve as she did and, at times, to live at odds with the direction of the world as you know it?

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1. Bernard Bro, OP, *The Little Way: The Spirituality of Thérèse of Lisieux* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1997), 3.
 2. *Story of A Soul: The Autobiography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux*, 3rd ed., trans. John Clarke, OCD (Washington, DC: ICS, 1996), 66.
 3. SS, Manuscript A. See *Story of A Soul*, 98.
 4. SS, Manuscript A. See *Story of A Soul*, 134.
 5. Christopher O’Donnell, OCarm, *Prayer: Insights from St. Thérèse of Lisieux* (Dublin: Veritas Publications, 2009), 14.
 6. SS, Manuscript B. See *Story of A Soul*, 192.
 7. SS, Manuscript A. See *Story of A Soul*, 178.
 8. SS, Manuscript A. See *Story of A Soul*, 181.
 9. SS, Manuscript A. See *Story of A Soul*, 174, 178.
 10. The New American Bible, Matthew 11:28.
 11. *Experiencing St. Therese Today*, ed. John Sullivan, OCD (Washington, DC: ICS, 1990), 134.