



---

## **‘HIS FACE WAS AS THOUGH HIDDEN’: St Therese's understanding of suffering.<sup>1</sup>**

by  
**Vincent O’Hara, OCD<sup>2</sup>**

‘Never would I have believed it was possible to suffer so much!’ (LC p 205).<sup>3</sup> These words, among the last spoken by St Thérèse are an indication of the depths of suffering she plumbed in her final years - she who from an early age wanted to suffer as part of ‘loving Jesus, loving him with a passion’ (SS p 102).<sup>4</sup> Among the many riches she has left us, her insight into Christian suffering is among the most precious and unique. Thérèse was a spiritual genius and she brought newness to everything she touched, so it is no wonder that she gives her own unique stamp to her reflection on suffering.

Thérèse knew a lot of suffering in her short life. That comes as no surprise to us, for sanctity and suffering are intertwined. You can have suffering without sanctity but you cannot have sanctity without suffering. The sign of the cross is the core sign of our Christian faith, and suffering is the lot of all those who try to follow the *Man of Sorrows*.

---

<sup>1</sup> This article appeared in *Mount Carmel*, vol. 48, no. 4, January-March 2001, pp. 25-33.

<sup>2</sup> Provincial of the Anglo-Irish province of the Teresian Carmelites, the author was one of the key-speakers at the symposium held in Aylesford to celebrate the official proclamation of St Thérèse of Lisieux as a doctor of the church on October 19, 1997. Once again he shares with us his reflections on the saint's deepening experience of suffering in her life.

<sup>3</sup> Abbreviations used are: SS = Story of a Soul; LT = Letters of Thérèse LC = Last Conversations.

<sup>4</sup> All quotations from the writings of St Thérèse are taken from Fr John Clarke's translation, as published by the Institute of Carmelite Studies, Washington.

## A way of loving

We can trace a development in Thérèse's understanding of suffering right through her life. Initially, she saw it as the inevitable concomitant or companion of life. But she soon came to see it as a condition of following Jesus, whom she loved; she graduated further then to see it as a way of being like Jesus, of imaging him. Further on, she came to see it as a redemptive force or power - the idea of vicarious suffering, suffering on behalf of the world, on behalf of sinners. She saw that very much as part of being a contemplative enclosed nun that she was there to make intercession before the Lord and to suffer and make sacrifices for the sake of sinners, taking their place, so to speak, vicariously. And finally then, the last refinement in her concept of suffering was that she came to see it as a way of loving, to the point where in fact she wondered how she could be happy in heaven without suffering. She says in a letter to Celine in 1889: 'Let us not believe we can love without suffering, without suffering much. Our poor nature is there! and it isn't there for nothing! Our nature is our riches, our means of earning our bread. It is so precious that Jesus came on earth purposely to take possession of it' (LT 89).

Her own early suffering is well-documented by herself—her mother's death, her unhappiness at school, Pauline leaving her to enter Carmel and then her mysterious illness, not to mention her turbulence and frustration as her steps to Carmel were continually thwarted. In all this, Thérèse had an inkling that suffering was to be part of her life. In fact, she says, on the very next day after her First Communion: 'I felt born 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 an attraction for me' (SS p 79).

## 'I thirst!'

These were Thérèse's thoughts when she was only eleven years of age. And then after the well-known grace of Christmas, or her *conversion*, as she calls it, she speaks about 'one Sunday looking at a picture of Our Lord on the cross, I was struck by the blood flowing from one of the divine hands. I felt a great pang of sorrow when thinking this blood was falling to the ground without anyone's hastening to gather it up. I was resolved to remain in spirit at the foot of the cross and to receive the divine dew. I understood I was then to pour it out upon souls. The cry of Jesus on the cross sounded continually in my heart 'I thirst'. These words ignited within me an unknown and very living fire' (SS p 99).

In her autobiography she speaks about the various traumas and delays she experienced in preparation for her entry into Carmel. She says: 'I was in a sad desert; or rather my soul was like a fragile boat delivered up to the mercy of the waves and having no pilot. I knew Jesus was there sleeping in my boat; but the night was so black it was impossible to see him. I felt I was all alone in the garden of Gethsemane like Jesus and I found no consolation on earth or from heaven. God Himself seemed to have abandoned me' (SS p 109).

So already, at fourteen years of age, Thérèse had a precociously mature vision of suffering. Her entry into Carmel a year later brought a further refinement to her concept. From the beginning, she says, 'suffering opened its arms to me wide and I threw myself into them with love. I had declared at the feet of Jesus-Victim that I came to save souls and especially to pray for priests. And when one wishes to attain a goal one must use the means, and Jesus made me understand that it was through suffering that he wanted to give me souls' (SS p 149). And then she uses her favorite image of the flowers, and the little flower in particular: that 'the little flower transplanted to Mount Carmel was to expand under the shadow of the cross. The tears and blood of Jesus were to be her dew, the sun was his adorable face veiled with tears. Until my coming to Carmel I had never fathomed the depths of the treasure hidden in the Holy Face' (SS p 151).

## The Holy Face

This devotion to the Holy Face was to have a profound effect on Thérèse's spirituality and her understanding of suffering. The name she took when she received the habit on January 10, 1889, was Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face. Some commentators would say it is an impoverishment of Thérèse when we just speak of her as Thérèse of the Child Jesus, that her later spirituality was very much founded on this whole concept of the hidden face of Jesus. It was her sister Pauline (Sister Agnes) who introduced her to this devotion to the Holy Face. It had become popular in France during the nineteenth century and took its scriptural inspiration from Isaiah 53.

Thérèse's discovery of this devotion coincided with her father's illness when his face too was veiled and he became for her a kind of living embodiment of the *Man of Sorrows*. Of all the trials that Thérèse had to undergo up to the last 18 months of her life, this was the most severe, this terrible illness of her father, when his mind was gone and the family felt they had lost him because part of him had gone already. In fact, she was to say when he died, that 'after a death of five years what a joy to find him once more always the same' (LT 169).

In the acute experience of what was happening to her father, there is something very profound at work in the heart and soul of Thérèse. Her own concept of God was changing. The *Father* image faded, to be replaced by that of the *Suffering Servant*. That intense love she had for God as her Father, based on her experience of her own father's love - that image was clouded over and out of those features came the *Man of Sorrows*. 'His face was as though hidden' (Is. 53:3).

## A Spouse of blood

Around this time (February 1889), her frequent letters to Celine have a fiery intensity and passion about them, born as they are out of the searing suffering she was undergoing. It is hard to believe she was only 16 at the time! The letters are important in the context of Thérèse coming to her understanding of suffering and also as a way of bonding to her new-found Spouse. She said: 'Jesus is a spouse of blood. He wants for himself all the blood of her heart. Oh, how it costs to give Jesus what he asks! What joy that it costs! What an unspeakable joy to carry our crosses feebly.' And she says, almost grandly, to Celine: 'The martyrdom is beginning. Let us enter the arena together' (LT 82).

In another letter to Celine she writes: 'Let us really offer our sufferings to Jesus to save souls, poor souls. They have less grace than we have and still all the blood of a God was shed to save them. And yet Jesus wills to make this salvation dependent 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' (LT 85). We can see how at this stage she was strongly motivated by the idea of suffering on behalf of the world, vicarious suffering as it is called. Again to Celine: 'Jesus is offering us a chalice as bitter as our feeble nature can bear. Let us not withdraw our lips from this chalice, prepared by the hand of Jesus. To be the spouse of Jesus we must resemble Jesus, and Jesus is all bloody, he is crowned with thorns' (LT 87).

## The tears of God

It was around this time too that she discovered that text of Isaiah Chapter 53. We have to bear in mind that Thérèse did not have ready access to the scriptures. She had to depend, for the most part, on whatever she was able to make out from the Latin in the Divine Office that the community recited every day. And one particular Office that was prevalent then was the Office of the Five Wounds celebrated on the first Friday of Lent. It was there she discovered the text of Isaiah 53. We are very familiar with it as the first reading on Good Friday. It spoke to Thérèse's heart—so much so, in fact, that she sent a copy to Celine as well. She speaks of it as 'a page which says much to my soul. The soul of the prophet Isaiah was immersed, just as our own soul is, in the hidden beauties of Jesus. Since Jesus was alone in treading the wine which he is giving us to drink, let us not refuse to wear, in our turn, clothing stained in blood. Let us tread for Jesus a new wine which may quench his thirst, which will return him love for love. This face is as hidden. Celine, it is still hidden today, for who understands the tears of Jesus. Jesus has sent us the best chosen cross that he was able to find in his immense love. How can we complain when he himself was looked upon as a man struck by God and humbled' (LT 108).

On the last occasion that her father visited Thérèse in Lisieux Carmel (May 1892), he had a handkerchief on his head. He was embarrassed himself about his condition and how he must have appeared to people. That reinforced for Thérèse the idea of the *face being veiled* and the reminder of the *Man of Sorrows* and the God of love who had lowered himself to become hidden. The Lord's true divinity was hidden in his passion and Thérèse wanted to imitate that hiddenness out of love for him. 'He, the king of kings, humbled himself in such a way that his face was hidden and no one recognized him. I too want to hide my face. I want my beloved alone to see it, that he be the only one to count my tears' (LT 137).

## A little grain of sand

Thérèse is constantly coming back to this theme—the way the Lord's true face was hidden in his passion, and how she, in her turn, wanted to be hidden herself out of love for him—and that could remain a secret between Jesus and herself. It would sustain her in the rough and tumble of community life when people were misunderstanding her and cutting things were said about her. She took it all very meekly as something she could do for Jesus whom she loved, a secret between the two of them. So she got energy from being put down, from being trodden underfoot, from being this grain of sand that she often refers to. In fact she begins to sign herself in letters to Celine around the time of her father's illness as 'the little grain of sand'. And she prays to Jesus on the day of her profession: 'Let nobody be occupied with me. Let me be looked upon as one to be trampled underfoot, forgotten like your little grain of sand' (SS p 275).

Thérèse's sufferings even intensified after the death of her father, particularly with her own illness and with the prospect of dying young. And within a few days of that discovery—that she would die young—there was the onset of this tremendous darkness in her life, the darkness of faith. Some people feel that there is a direct causal connection between what happened on the night of Holy Thursday/Good Friday and the subsequent plunging of Thérèse into this darkness just a few days later. From the 'human' point of view, Thérèse's Christian faith had accepted too meekly the prospect of dying, and now the body began to reassert itself and wanted to hold on, for everything within us instinctively 'rages against the dying of the light'. There resulted a kind of division within her spirit, leading to a withdrawal of that comfortable feeling she had about eternal life and about heaven—even to the extreme point that she wondered if she believed in this at all. Of course, all this is God's sanctifying action in Thérèse but there is a psychological dimension to it too nobody wants to die, least of all die young. And the onset of Thérèse's dark night was partly the human reaction to the realization that she was going to die.

## A dark country

She describes the intensity of this experience in memorable words: 'Jesus permitted my soul to be invaded by the thickest darkness, and the thought of heaven, up until then so sweet to me, was no longer anything but the cause of struggle and torment. This trial was to last not a few days or a few weeks. It was not to be extinguished until the hour set by God Himself, and this hour has not yet come. One would have to travel through this dark tunnel to understand its darkness' (SS p 211).

Although she rarely spoke about what she was going through—for fear it would frighten others—she did say subsequently to one of the Sisters: 'I no longer believe in eternal life.' That's how bad it was for her. We know, of course, that Thérèse never ceased to believe, for she is a saint today. But as regards how she felt, it made no difference. She literally ate the bread of atheists and sat at their table. She knew what it was like not to believe. And she was pushed to the very extremity of suffering. It is almost as if she had to be the best exponent of her own 'little way' that she was to pass on to thousands of people; and that it was tested in her in a way that it would never be tested in anybody else.

Robert Frost has a poem, a few lines of which are relevant to how Thérèse must have felt:

The rain to the wind said:  
You push and I'll pelt.  
They so smote the garden bed  
That the flowers actually knelt  
And lay lodged though not dead.  
I know how the flowers felt.

Well, Thérèse the Little Flower, certainly knew how the flowers felt! She was totally reduced in body and in spirit to the ultimate point of endurance. 'Never would I have believed it was possible to suffer so much' (LC p 205). The one thing she was convinced of, and knew, was that she still loved, that 'all my activity is in loving alone', her favorite quotation from St John of the Cross. And in fact she said she would not have it otherwise. 'I am not sorry for delivering myself up to Love' (LC p 205).

That was the ultimate refinement that she had come to in her suffering and in her understanding of suffering—that suffering had become for her a way of loving her Beloved; suffering was grist to the mill of her love. The two had somehow merged—suffering and love.

### **‘Love strong as death’**

To sum up then: For Thérèse suffering was a way of being like Jesus, mirroring his face, and especially a way of loving him. He did all this for her, so she wanted to do something similar for him. He suffered out of love and he did it with a heart and a half, and she knew he’d do it again if he had to - rather reminiscent of what Our Lord said to Julian of Norwich in one of the showings: ‘It gives me endless pleasure,’ he said to her, ‘ever to have suffered for you; and if it were possible for me to do the same thing again for you every day, I would gladly do it.’ So Thérèse wanted to love this tremendous lover in a similar way. All her suffering, particularly in the latter part of her life, was shot through with love; her love was fed by pain. She often said, ‘Love feeds on sacrifice.’ Or, as her favorite book, *The Song of Songs*, puts it: ‘For love one will give up everything and think nothing of the loss’ (8,7).

So that was the pitch to which Thérèse brought her understanding of suffering: that suffering had become synonymous with loving. And that’s a vision that, if we could share it in some way, would bring a transformation into our pain and our suffering too and would lead us, like Saint Paul, to ‘glory in the cross of Our Lord Jesus Christ’ (Gal. 6,14). One of the encouraging things that Thérèse says is that we don’t have to suffer well for suffering to be beneficial to us. In fact, she says the worst kind of suffering is not being able to suffer well. In another letter to Celine she says: ‘Let us suffer feebly and without courage. Jesus suffered in sadness. Without sadness, would we suffer? And still we would like to suffer generously, grandly. Celine, what an illusion! We’d never want to fall. What does it matter, my Jesus, if I fall at each moment? I see my weakness through this, and this is a great gain for me’ (LT 89).

### **‘Was it not necessary... ?’**

In the intractable mystery of suffering that besets our nature, Thérèse offers us the invaluable insight that suffering can be made into a way of being like Jesus; she transforms it into a way of loving Jesus, thereby realizing her childhood ambition to ‘love him with a passion’. She is an outstanding exponent of the truth that suffering borne in union with the Crucified ennobles and refines the human spirit.

Thérèse radiates the truth of the great Christian paradox of glory through suffering. The Garden of the Resurrection lies beyond the Hill of Calvary. We leave the last word to her: ‘When we see Him in heaven, then we shall understand the price of suffering and trial. Like Jesus, we shall say it was truly necessary for suffering to try us and bring us to glory’.

