

# THE MESSAGE OF ST. THÉRÈSE IN RELATION TO THE LAITY

by Father Gabriel Barry, OCD

## I. INTRODUCTION

Thérèse Martin was born in Alençon, a town of Normandy, on January 2nd 1873. Her family background was middle-class. In the France of the late 19th century, most of the people in that social milieu led rather secluded lives, mixing little outside their own circle. Thérèse entered Carmel before she was yet 16, and for the rest of her short life, her world was limited mainly to the twenty or so nuns who lived with her in the convent. During some of that time, three of her own sisters and a first cousin were in the community. Even that miniature world grew smaller after the onset of her last illness. She was confined first to the infirmary or a wheelchair, and finally to bed. Externally, then, her life was very uneventful. What interest, you may ask, could it have for the average lay person of today? In this conference, I will attempt some sort of answer.



## II. SOURCES

What we know about Thérèse is drawn from four Principal sources: 1) her autobiography; 2) her letters; 3) reminiscences composed by her sisters, principally by Mother Agnes; and 4) the testimonies collected for the process of beatification. I will say a few words about each of these.

The Autobiography: it is made up of three manuscripts written at different times and addressed to three different persons. At first she was asked to write the narrative of her life up to the time she entered Carmel. This was meant to be only a family record, written for entertainment and edification. After the death of Thérèse, her sister, Mother Agnes, convinced the Prioress of the convent that the story had more than a domestic interest, so together with two other documents, it was released to the world just a year later. The printed version was called *The Story of a Soul*. Its success was instantaneous. The original edition of 2,000 copies was exhausted within a few months. Over the next 20 years, some 200,000 copies were sold. Today the sales can be counted in millions, and it has been translated into almost all the principal languages.

The first edition of the *Autobiography* was not exactly as Thérèse had written it. It was considerably edited by Mother Agnes. This was entirely necessary at the time; the Catholic world was not yet ready to receive the manuscripts as Thérèse had written them. Besides, on her death-bed, she authorized her sister to make whatever changes she saw fit, and this mandate, Mother Agnes used very literally. However, nothing essential was changed or omitted, but the general

tone of the edited work differs notably from the original. After many years of petitioning, the unaltered text was eventually published in 1957. The following year, it was translated into English by Monsignor Ronald Knox. All the other English translations follow the edited text.

The Letters: Letters written by St. Thérèse are obviously a valuable record of her spiritual development and shed light on her character. After the cause of her beatification had been introduced, the Carmel of Lisieux set about collecting every scrap she had written, even brief notes scribbled on the back of a holy picture. It was found that a fair number of her letters had been destroyed, including most of what she had written to her sister Leonie, and some very important ones addressed to her director, Fr. Pichon. However, in the early editions of *The Story of a Soul*, Mother Agnes published selections from 52 of the extant letters. Demands for a proper critical edition grew stronger with the years, and a fairly complete collection, numbering 247 pieces in all, was published, in 1947. Since then, 19 more items have come to light, and all have been published, together with several family letters referring to Thérèse, and various relevant documents. This splendid edition, in two volumes, was brought out in 1972 to honor the centenary.

Reminiscences and counsels: During the final weeks of St. Thérèse's life, her sisters who were with her in the Carmel, kept a kind of diary of events and made a habit of jotting down her more remarkable sayings. These documents were first used by the ecclesiastical tribunal charged with the process of beatification. In 1927, a selection drawn principally from the journals kept by Mother Agnes was published under the title *Novissima Verba*. Devotees of St. Thérèse were delighted with these new insights into the closing days of their heroine. It soon became obvious however that much of the reminiscences had been rewritten or amplified before printing. Again, a strong desire was felt for a faithful edition of the original texts. This has finally come in 1972 in a fine volume entitled *Derniers Entretiens*, or Final Teachings. As happened in the case of the *Autobiography*, nothing vital was omitted or added, but it presented a rather different Thérèse from the real one.

The Acts of the Process of Beatification and Canonization: This large collection of documents was assembled by the tribunal investigating the life and teachings of St. Thérèse. Three copies are known to exist. It has never been published in full, because of the danger of abuse by irresponsible writers and journalists. Even the *Summarium*, a lengthy digest of its contents which was made available, has not been handled with proper discernment. as witness some episodes described in Beever's book, *Storm of Glory*.

It is worth noting that as a result of these unpretentious writings and more especially on account of the shining example of her life, Thérèse has come to be regarded highly as a spiritual writer; "the humblest and certainly the best in our times" (Durwell); "a key figure in modern Catholic literature" (J. Dalrymple). Indeed, she may one day be proclaimed a doctor of the Church. (Process begun in May 1992)

### III. THE LIFE OF THÉRÈSE

It is clear even after a simple reading of the documents that there is nothing spectacular in the external life of St. Thérèse; all her glory is from within. If she had not been commanded to write the story of her life, we would know very little about her indeed, But in God's providence, that quiet undistinguished life has attracted more attention than many of her contemporaries; when the veil was drawn back, the world witnessed a "hurricane of glory." For some forty years it continued, accompanied at times by an almost undisguised adulation. The cult of the "Little Flower" found its way everywhere. Then a reaction set in, during which the glory of St. Thérèse suffered something of an eclipse. More recently, there is evidence by hyper-criticism and excessive reliance on psychology. It is to be hoped that, notwithstanding these defects, this new phase will eventually result in an authentic cult of the real Thérèse, "consisting not so much in a multiplicity of external acts or in sentimental expressions, but rather in an intensification of our love, whereby we seek example from her way of life, fellowship in her communion, and help through her intercession."<sup>1</sup>

It is unnecessary here to go over the life of St. Thérèse and comment on all its facets. But for the benefit of those who may not be acquainted with the various studies that have been done on her, a few remarks may be helpful.

First, she matured very quickly. She seems to have attained to the use of reason when only three, and by her tenth year, her intellectual perceptions were developing with remarkable rapidity. Children of this type, potential geniuses, are liable to run into severe physical and psychological crises during growth. There is no denying that St. Thérèse had an extremely sensitive and affectionate nature, and when she was about ten years old, circumstances provoked a very severe inner upheaval. So grievous was it that, according to her own narrative, only a special intervention of the Blessed Mother saved her life. This and certain other facts have led some unsympathetic critics to say that she was neurotic. Without going into the reasons for and against, one can say that nothing could be farther from the truth. The entire pattern of her behavior, her writings, her photographs, of which several survive, the testimony of those who knew her best, all point to one of the noblest, bravest and most unselfish persons of the whole century. If the actual writings left by Thérèse were set side by side with similar records of the psychiatrists who condemned her, one could only be amused at the contrasts. She towers above them on every score, most of all in psychological balance and good judgment. Nonetheless it can be conceded that without proper recourse to the healing power, of grace, she might have become eccentric and difficult.

St. Thérèse had a pleasing sense of humor. She could laugh at her own discomfiture as well as at the harmless foibles of others. According to the testimony of her community, she was also an excellent mimic, but used this rather dangerous talent with great tact; she was never known to hurt feelings. The early editions of the *Story of a Soul* give no evidence of this humor, apparently because Mother Agnes considered it out of place in a saint and removed the amusing passages.

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<sup>1</sup>Lumen Gentium, par. 51

But it was genuinely there; not indeed the Oscar Wilde kind of wit, but a brave playful spirit which comes to the fore even when she was suffering agonies of mind and body.

Next, Thérèse had an exceptionally loving and loyal nature. Her father, naturally, came in for the lion's share of her love. It is not difficult to imagine what it cost her to leave him, when she was as yet only 15. Nor need we wonder at his reaction. In the words of one of his few extant letters "God alone could exact such a sacrifice, but He helps me mightily," One of the unpardonable accusations brought against her by some writers is that in her decision to leave her home, the thought of the distress it would cause her old father does not seem to have occurred to her. "When she enters Carmel. he is in tears, but not she."<sup>2</sup> One glance at the *Autobiography*<sup>3</sup> reveals that she felt it so much she thought she might die. When less than a year later after her entry to Carmel, he was stricken by cerebral palsy to the extent that during the rest of his life he was incapable of recognizing her, she was prostrate with grief. "I no longer talked about being able to put up with worse." So she writes in the *Autobiography*. No cross could have been more painful and it threw its somber shadow over the next five years of her life.

In the convent, she found herself once more in the company of two of her older sisters, Marie and Pauline, who had entered some years earlier. It was tempting to revert to old familiarities, especially since Marie had been appointed to train her to say the divine office. Thérèse, at tremendous cost to herself, resolutely refused to indulge in purely human conversations, apart from what was permitted on feast days. Such was her sense of uprightness that not the slightest taint of favoritism entered in where the higher interests of God or the good of her convent required it. she would not lift a finger, she said, to advance personal preferences. In the *Autobiography*, she discusses at length this theme of true love, even within the family circle. Only when it is purified does one arrive at the type of kinship our Lord promised: "He that does the will of my Father is mother and sister and brother to me."<sup>4</sup>

Thérèse did not get much formal schooling. After she left the Benedictine day school at the age of 13, her sister Marie and later a private tutor continued her education. She had a good mind and loved reading; she could have spent her life at it, she said.<sup>5</sup> It is certain that had she so chosen, she might have become quite proficient in some area of human learning. History and natural science were her favorites, but she also had considerable talent for fiction, and some ability in poetry, painting and drama. The fact is that she loved truth and beauty in all its forms, and had many of the qualities of a great artist. But she elected to go straight to God, the source and fountain-head of truth and beauty. Ever since her childhood, she longed for heavenly things. This unusually strong eschatological sense stands out on almost every page she wrote. There are some who would find fault with her for this, feeling that she should have been interested in current affairs, and gone out to her fellowmen. Here we are up against one of the paradoxes of Christianity: loving the world but not being of it. In a hundred different ways, the New Testament tells us that this world is not our real home; that while we are here, we must try to the best of our ability to make it a better place to live in, but we must always look forward to God's kingdom to

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<sup>2</sup>Robo, *Two Portraits of St. Thérèse*, pp. 93, 198.

<sup>3</sup>p. 147

<sup>4</sup>*Autobiography*, 204-205; *Letters*, p. 45.

<sup>5</sup>*Autobiography*, p. 75.

come.<sup>6</sup> This does not mean that created things are unreal or evil, but they have their own place in the divine order. Thérèse did not fall into any excesses in this matter. Her love for mankind has scarcely a rival in this age, and in addition she seems to have had an unusually strong appreciation of all that can be perceived by the senses: color, flavor and tone. Women will be pleased to know that before entering the convent, she found great delight in eau de Cologne. Later, when a novice, she happened one day on a portion of a fashion magazine that had been used to pack some merchandise. Her natural interest was so keen that for several minutes she feasted her eyes on the pictures before catching on to herself and throwing it away.

How does one justify the vocation of Therese? Does it not seem odd to bury oneself behind an enclosure in order to make God better known and loved? Certainly the hidden life is not easy to explain in rational terms. The only real explanation is to point to the example of Our Lord Himself. He knew who He was, the Eternal Son of God become Man. He could have made a tremendous impact on the world of His day, and indeed this course had a strong natural appeal for Him. I think this may explain at least one aspect of the temptations of Christ. Instead of yielding, He deliberately chose to hide Himself, to be insignificant for some thirty years. Even after His public ministry began, He continued the same self-effacement. And there it is: the mystery of the “hidden life.” It baffles reason, but in the designs of God, it is the most effective apostolate of all. It works from within, like yeast in the bread or like life burgeoning in the seed. And even though not all are called to follow it exactly as Therese has done, the principle holds good all round. No lasting good can be done in God’s kingdom except through union with Christ in prayer, lowliness and sacrifice. This is an idea which the activist finds most unpalatable, and will hurl at it all the uncomplimentary epithets he can find: “reactionary,” “conservative,” “Tridentine,” “monastic” and so on. But a calmer assessment shows that it is truly evangelical; one of the scandals of the cross. This is one way in which the life-story of Thérèse of Lisieux is an outstanding example for us all. Her little book, written at odd moments on the pages of a cheap notebook, has a universal appeal. It shows a way of following Christ which is not confined to those who live in convents but is also entirely suitable for lay-folk. It demands no special feats but shows us how to respond lovingly to God’s grace, no matter where we may find ourselves. It gets down to essentials and shows all of us how to do the same. As Pius XI said, if this way of spiritual childhood were generally followed, it would work a total reform in mankind. For in truth, St. Thérèse rediscovered something very simple and profound: that we have a Father in heaven, that He makes Himself known to us through His Son Jesus Christ, that without Him, we can do nothing, that if we trust in Him and rely on Him, we can do everything; rather He will do it for us.

Thérèse indeed had a prophetic mission. That is why she was raised up by God to deliver a message; to be witness to a truth. For the greater part of her life. she was unaware of such a mission, except perhaps in its wider Christian context. In the last months of her life, her spirit purified by intense pain and deep inner darkness, she began to see that her life was indeed meant to be a sign for all the world. With the danger of self-esteem and vanity purged away, God allowed her to glimpse a little of the glory that would be hers, even in this world. It was then that she uttered her famous saying, “I will spend my heaven doing good upon earth.” One of the first

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<sup>6</sup>Hebrews, 13, 14

essentials of prophets is that they live the message in their own lives before passing it on. It is a difficult vocation; for prophets are sent at a time when some aspect of the divine teaching is forgotten or ignored. This usually means that the burden of their message is not straight-away understood. It may even be resented or rejected as happened to so many of the ancient prophets and to Our Lord Himself. St. Therese was sent to recall the world to the simplicity of the gospels. She first lived out this message in its fullness, and then God set her up to guide us along the “little way to heaven.” She writes: “I’ve got to take myself just as I am with all my imperfections, but somehow I have to find a little way, all of my own, which will be a direct short cut to heaven...Can’t I find an elevator which will take me up to Jesus, since I am not big enough to climb the steep stairway of perfection? Yes, I can be lifted up to heaven in the arms of Jesus Himself.”<sup>7</sup> It was only after she had died that the real significance of this was appreciated. Our Lord had said: “Unless you change your ways and become like little children, you shall never enter the kingdom of heaven. If you do not look for the kingdom of heaven with the simplicity of a child, you will never find it at all.” The kind of sanctity to which God called Thérèse consisted precisely in cultivating this simplicity and trust. Her life, as Pope Pius XI has pointed out, is proof positive that everyone can arrive at the highest levels of sanctity without going outside the common order of things. Neither great deeds nor uncommon spiritual favors are needed; only childlike confidence in our Lord, together with unswerving loyalty in carrying out the duties of our state, no matter what they may be, and wherever our lot may be cast. All this became very clear to Thérèse during the few crowded years she lived in Carmel. Her knowledge of divine things was such that not only did she herself walk on the true path of salvation, but also she was able to point out the road to others. Where did she gain this wisdom? Not from her own resources, as she herself said over and over again; rather it came from the Holy Spirit to whom she was always so heroically docile. He reveals His secrets to those who are humble and lowly of heart.

#### IV. “WITHIN THE COMMON ORDER OF THINGS”

Since it is the laity who mainly concern us here. let us see how these principles apply to them. First, I would like to refer to some statements of Vatican II, as contained in the *Constitution on the Church*, chapter IV, and in the *Decree on the Laity*.

The Council tells us that the call to holiness is not confined to priests and religious alone, though they have special obligations in that respect. The vocation to sanctity is derived from baptism itself and it applies to all without exception. The people of God is one in this respect, sharing a common dignity from their regeneration in Christ; having the same grace as children of God. and the same vocation to perfection. For St. Paul has written: “We are no longer Jews or Greeks, slaves or freemen, or even merely men and women. We are all the same now, we are Christians. made one in Jesus Christ.”<sup>8</sup>

Next, all Christians are called to follow Christ, to be perfect as the Father in heaven is perfect. And here too they have certain things in common: one salvation, one hope, one undivided love. They have also the same mind which was in Christ Jesus, and a heart like His, too. And

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<sup>7</sup>*Autobiography*, pp. 194-195

<sup>8</sup>Galatians, 3:28

therefore they try to the utmost to fulfill the special command of the Lord: “Love one another as I have loved you.”<sup>9</sup> The essence of the Christian way of life is the following of Christ. The saints are those who have been particularly successful in doing this, and for that very reason, every saint is a

source of inspiration and encouragement, and has a universal appeal.

“All the faithful of Christ, of whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity. By this holiness as such, a more human manner of life is promoted in earthly society.”<sup>10</sup> Although Christian holiness is one, it can take on many varieties. “In the various classes and differing duties of life, one and the same holiness is cultivated by all who are moved by the Spirit of God and obey the voice of the Father, and worship God in spirit and in truth; these people all follow Christ, poor and humble and bearing His cross. They do this in order to be worthy to share in His glory. Everyone must walk unhesitatingly according to his own personal gifts and duties, in the path of faith.”<sup>11</sup>

And love is all its meaning. “For God is love, and he who abides in love, abides in God and God abides in Him.”<sup>12</sup> In order that love may grow and bring forth fruit in the soul, each one of the faithful must willingly hear the word of God and accept His will. And in their daily lives, they complete what God has begun, relying on the power of grace.” The principal actions which they perform consist especially in the use of the sacraments, more particularly of the Eucharist, frequent participation in the liturgy, the practice of prayer, self-denial, fraternal love and the exercise of all the virtues.<sup>13</sup>

It is obvious that there is no stereotyped way of following Christ. Each one, according to the grace that is given him, must conform himself to the master in his own way, while never departing from the common heritage of all. Every saint is stamped with individual characteristics, with the manner of life he follows, and with the culture to which he belongs. Christ is the same, yesterday, today and for ever; but in the Person of the sincere Christian, He adapts Himself to the conditions of today, of tomorrow, and of every day until the end of time. Holiness is more than the mere reproduction of the material conditions in which Christ lived, or following the social customs of His age. It consists rather in putting on Christ Himself, in acquiring His mind and adhering to His will.

As was said already, the world of St. Thérèse was unusually hemmed in, but that put no limits to her holiness. Even while her social life narrowed, her spirit matured and her horizons expanded, until in the end, her love embraced all mankind. And in the restricted circumstances of her convent life, she found everything she needed to attain to a holiness of a very high order. Her fidelity to God amid ordinary, humdrum duties, and in the face of great suffering is one of the finest lessons we can learn from her. For the truth is that the majority of Christians have to live in limited and even discouraging conditions, which seem to be in no way conducive to holiness. The tendency is to lose heart, or to revolt, or to blame others for our own mediocrity. St. Thérèse

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<sup>9</sup>John 15:1

<sup>10</sup>*Constitution on the Church*, 40, 41

<sup>11</sup>*Constitution on the Church*, 42

<sup>12</sup>I John 4:16

<sup>13</sup>I John 4:42

did none of this; rather she shows us how adverse circumstances and human failings can be used to raise one to great heights. “God writes straight with crooked lines.”

## V. NEGATIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SPIRITUALITY OF ST. THÉRÈSE

As early as 1926, one year after the canonization of St. Thérèse, a competent French theologian, Henri Petitot made an analysis of her spirituality. Although now some 50 years old, it is still one of the best studies available on the spirit of Thérèse. He does not read into her writings interpretations of his own; he does not make a text bear more than what it was meant to carry; and he makes her say what she actually said. The publication of the original texts call for minor adjustments here and there; very likely, Fr. Petitot, if he were writing now, would revise some sections. But by and large, it is a solid study. It takes an over-all view of the teaching of St. Thérèse. It points out that in truth, she inaugurated a real spiritual renaissance, a return to the simple undiluted truth of the gospels. He writes: “The most striking aspect of Sister Thérèse’s sanctity is its balance, the stable and harmonious equilibrium of all the virtues.” One of her confessors who knew her best declared: “I never noticed anything rash or inadvised in her, no sign of natural exaggeration or impulsiveness...There can be no reason for such perfect poise than the fact that in her the most opposite virtues counterbalance one another.”<sup>14</sup>

It would be interesting to develop this perspective remark not only in respect of Thérèse herself, but also in relation to the Church in our times. For it would seem that the centrifugal forces which have resulted largely in polarization, might well be and made to serve the ends of growth and expansion. But that task is for another day. Our concern now is to show that in its essence, the spirituality of St. Thérèse, containing as it does valuable guidelines for many classes of people, has also profound lessons for the laity. She achieves this by bringing the gospel within their reach. This does not mean that she waters down the gospels; on the contrary, she exalts them and gives back to them something of their wholesomeness and severity, and she shows us that, granted we are open to the grace of Christ, we can implement His teaching in any one of the lawful avocations of secular life. To mention once more the Constitution on the Church, it states as follows: “The laity, by their very vocation, seek the kingdom of God by engaging in secular affairs and ordering them according to the plan of God...They work for the sanctification of the world from within, as a leaven, and in this way they make Christ known to others by the testimony of a life resplendent with faith, hope and love.” This is essentially what Thérèse herself did; she made Christ known to the world by the testimony of a life resplendent with faith, hope and love. Only she worked from the milieu of an enclosed convent. But the sources of strength and inspiration, as well as the opposition that one encounters from human nature and from the powers of evil, are the same. God chose Thérèse to teach us anew what He Himself had taught when He walked this earth of ours “If any man would come after me, let him go against himself and take up his cross and follow me.”

Fr. Petitot points out four negative qualities in Thérèse’s approach to the spiritual life:

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<sup>14</sup>*St. Thérèse of Lisieux*, pp. 152-153



1. She did not demand of herself or others violent or severe mortifications; rather she concentrated on accepting, in a spirit of generosity, the inevitable trials, hardships, and frustrations that one encounters in everyday life. Even then, she would not have us preoccupied with them or attach too much importance to them; they were simply to be utilized according as they came.

2. She did not seek out new or elaborate methods of prayer. Rather, like Mary of Bethany, she placed herself at the Master's feet in a childlike, humble way and listened to His words. For Therese, the voice of Christ was the Bible and the living Church. These she loved with unswerving loyalty. However, we must not get the idea that it was all plain sailing, or that she never experienced boredom or physical weariness. It is interesting to know that she found it very hard to say the Rosary.<sup>15</sup> One of the most helpful parts of her writings tells us how she handled these very real problems. She never gave in, but she battled on literally to the bitter end when she was enveloped in a type of spiritual anguish such as few people are asked to bear. For in truth, during a great part of her religious life, she found very little sensible attraction in prayer. Not for her were the flights of the spirit nor the heady consolations which some Pentecostals claim to be the normal concomitant of prayer. St. Thérèse, like all great spiritual guides, would have nothing to do with this type of spirituality, which could be a form of subtle self-seeking. She stood for ideals that were less spectacular but more Christ like; quiet perseverance in faith and love and self-sacrifice.

3. There were no dramatic favors in the life of St. Thérèse but an abundance of substantial graces, to which she responded with unparalleled generosity. And it was through this response that she attained to a high level of spiritual maturity. It is a popular notion that holiness is in some way connected with exceptional charisms and that God grants extraordinary favors almost at the whim of His servants. The truth is that exceptional graces are no conclusive proof of holiness. St. John of the Cross, no mean authority surely, asks us to be cautious about them. The problem is that we can rarely be sure where they come from. St. Thérèse thought the same. The kind of sanctity she admired was the one that proceeded from the indwelling of Christ. "This is the truest and the best kind of holiness, the kind that I would like to attain, because there is no danger of illusion about it."<sup>16</sup> At another time, referring to the deep sorrow that she and her sisters were undergoing at the time of their father's tragic illness, she remarked: "These three Years of our father's cruel torment were years of great value and spiritual profit to the family. No ecstasies or revelations could have been so well worth having."<sup>17</sup>

4. She took no part in intense or multifarious apostolates. Notwithstanding this, she is one of the great apostles and missionaries of our times. This too is perhaps something of a mystery, but the principles on which it rests are solidly founded on the teaching and example of our Lord. The Church will always need her great leaders and active apostles, but even more will she need those "who in a profound sense are united with the faithful in the heart of Christ,

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<sup>15</sup>*Autobiography*, p. 229

<sup>16</sup>*Autobiography*, p. 165

<sup>17</sup>*Autobiography*, p. 155

and who spiritually cooperate with them.”<sup>18</sup> It is through these that God makes the apostolate to bear fruit. This is one of the really striking discoveries made by St. Thérèse and which she explains eloquently in a long memorandum addressed to her sister Marie.<sup>19</sup> It is commonly believed that in order to attain to holiness, one must do great things. This is true, of course, but not in the sense in which it is often understood. It is rather an inner greatness toward which one must aim: “You don’t need to perform any dazzling exploits; you have only to live a hidden life, doing good in such an unobtrusive way that you don’t even let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.”<sup>20</sup> The mission of Thérèse consists in the fact that she discovered, or rather rediscovered from the gospels, that one’s ordinary day to day life is rich in opportunities of growing in divine love if only we have eyes to see and a good will to avail of them.

Likewise, she discovered that human weaknesses can be turned to advantage. The final victory of God’s friends is not a triumph of will-power but of grace, and this grace operates even in the midst of infirmities. It is true that one’s natural defects have to be healed at least to the extent that one can choose God with the maximum of freedom, but some failings may well be left as they were, especially if they have the effect of making one more dependent on God. This healing process is clearly traceable in the history of St. Therese. First there was the cure from a very serious nervous ailment when she was 10 years old, bringing with it a heightened sense of trust in our Lord. Next, came the cure of her scruples. After that, there was the particularly strong Eucharistic grace of Christmas 1886, which transformed her spiritual life from the level of weakness and tears to one of fortitude and apostolic zeal. And finally came the crowning graces of transforming union, when human frailty became her strongest title to the mercies of the Lord.<sup>21</sup>

## VI. ON THE POSITIVE SIDE

Having said this much on the negative aspects of the life of Thérèse, one can be brief in speaking about its positive values. Suffice it to say that they flourished and matured in the measure that one would expect in one who was so consistently docile to the impulses of the Holy Spirit. This deeply Christian life-style of hers has been described and commented on by all who have analyzed the story of Thérèse, and surely it is an object-lesson for every one of us. I will mention three points that are of special interest.

The first is her devotion to her family, which I have already touched on. It has scarcely a parallel in the history of the Church. Alice Meynell has a lovely poem on “San Lorenzo’s Mother.” It describes the sentiments of that deeply Christian woman who had many years before given her son to God in a religious Order and had never seen him in all that time. One day, a friar of the same Order came to her door asking for an alms. She gave it, trembling with anticipation that maybe this was her son. If it were, he gave no sign of recognition. And the brave mother comments that it really did not matter; her gift was not just for her son, but more for that other

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<sup>18</sup>*Constitution on the Church*, 46

<sup>19</sup>*Autobiography* pp. 185-186

<sup>20</sup>*Autobiography* p. 75

<sup>21</sup>I Cor. 12:9-10

Son, Jesus, to whom she had donated her own boy long before. St. Thérèse would certainly have endorsed these sentiments, for that was how she too acted. But I feel she would have interpreted them in a more humane way.

Next, she possessed a very high sense of personal responsibility and fidelity. “Act as if the perfection of the entire Order depended on your conduct...From time to time ask yourself, if everyone were to do what I am doing now, what would happen to community life.” In an outstanding way, she cultivated this supernatural single mindedness; but without diminishing inner freedom and without contracting that Jansenistic rigorism which sometimes afflicts those who lay heavy stress on duty. This, I think, is a relevant virtue in our times when so many seem more concerned about other peoples’ business rather than their own; when homelife, marriage vows, religious vows, and even the priesthood are often discarded on flimsy pretexts. In these circumstances, one of the best witnesses we can give to Christianity, is to be loyal.

Thirdly, Thérèse was remarkably uncomplaining. I would like to comment on this, because of itself alone, it is enough to refute the charge that she was neurotic. She was, as we have seen very sensitive equally to pain and to delight. She had a long hard road to travel before she became the well-balanced, smiling person we know her to have been. She was raised in a well-to-do home where she experienced nothing but love and care. Her religious vocation called for the surrender of much of this. There was little in the convent to replace the admiration and affection she had received in the family circle. Very sensitive to cold, she suffered exceedingly during the long winters of Normandy; at that time, apart from a fire in the community room, there was no heating in the convent. Her health seemed good during the first six years of her religious life; she said in 1894 that she had an iron constitution.<sup>22</sup> In actual fact, she was never really well, though no one would have guessed that. After the beginning of her last illness, she was badly neglected, but this was due more to ignorance than to ill will. At the time, nobody knew how to handle tuberculosis. On the spiritual level, the convent where she entered left much to be desired. Her last weeks on earth were so dark that the only explanation of them is to identify Therese with the Suffering Servant of Yahweh; both of them dying of love. In spite of all this, not a single complaint did she make. It is astounding to note the light-hearted playful tone of many of her letters written at a time when she was suffering acutely. By any standard, she must be regarded as one of the most patient and manly persons of the age, and in this respect, too, her life is an inspiration to us all.

## VII. A SAINT AND A BOOK FOR ALL SEASONS

On this note we bring to an end our brief survey of the saint from Lisieux. No one can deny that she lived out her life in a heroic way. Her message, however, goes beyond the person of Thérèse herself, because it was meant for everybody. The *Autobiography* has become a book for all seasons and for all manner of people. It is not a new gospel but a fresh introduction to the simplicity of the gospels, leading to a re-discovery of one of the most profound truths of revelation: that God is our Father, and we, all of us, are His children. Only when we acknowledge this do we attain to the full measure of human greatness. Her sister Marie has written: “People must see what Thérèse wanted them to see, that they must have unbounded

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<sup>22</sup>Letters, p.206

confidence in God's mercy, and that holiness is accessible to all kinds of people." By the example of her life, Thérèse proves that everything is a grace: temperament, situations, duties of life - even failures. Holiness itself is basically a disposition of heart that makes one humble and little in the presence of God. This grace, once acquired, is with us all the time, on the streets, at home, at manual labor, in the cloister. Necessary tasks all fall into their rightful place. In its essence, Christianity is not a theory; it is a way of life, full and enriching. It is the life which Christ came to bring in the greatest possible abundance, leading to a discovery of the kingdom of God in the human heart; to the peace and glorious freedom belonging to the children of God.

"To me, prayer is a lifting up of the heart;  
it is a glance thrown towards heaven."  
St. Thérèse

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