



ST. THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX ON SUFFERING

by
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When Thérèse of Lisieux was eight or nine, a teacher asked her what she did on her afternoon off. Thérèse replied that she sat in a corner and thought. When the nun pressed her to say what she thought about, Thérèse answered rather indignantly that she thought about God, eternity, and other things: “I THINK!” And she kept right on thinking as she grew up.

One of the things she thought about most was the meaning of suffering. This was not an abstract, purely speculative subject for her. She thought about what she had experienced at first hand or seen those close to her endure. While philosophers and theologians may seek to reconcile the goodness of God with the horrors of wars and the devastation wrought by natural disasters, Thérèse had a narrower but legitimate focus: individual suffering. She explored the significance of the suffering endured by good people.

Why We Suffer

In her exploration of **suffering**, Thérèse **did** not challenge God. She did not shake her fist at the heavens and demand to know why bad things happen to good people. She did not ask because she was convinced that faith had already given her the answer. For her, suffering, like everything else in life, is enclosed within the parameters of God’s providence. We suffer because God loves us.

This is a hard saying, but Thérèse—who is, we must note, one of the cheeriest and wittiest of the saints—never shrank from it. Indeed, she saw suffering as a great good. She gloried in it. “Sanctity,” she declared, “consists in suffering.” Since she yearned to be a “great saint,” it is not surprising that whatever sufferings she endured only whetted her appetite to suffer even more.

Yet Thérèse was surely no masochist. She had no interest in pain for its own sake. She discovered soon after entering Carmel that the deliberate infliction of pain through the wearing of ascetical devices was not for her. Indeed, she suspected that spiked crosses and the like could become a source of pride to the religious who used them. Her attitude toward self-inflicted misery suggests that she would not have objected if the terrible pain of her last few months had been properly alleviated by medication. Pain was not her goal, but pain—whether physical, psychological, or spiritual—is, of course, a necessary component of suffering. It is, apparently, what suffering is! But there is more than that to suffering for Thérèse. She looks beyond the pain in search of the meaning of suffering. She finds it in the Cross of Christ through which we are saved and sanctified, and by means of which we share in Christ’s work of salvation.

This is, of course, the orthodox, Pauline teaching of the Church which John-Paul II reiterated in his 1984 apostolic letter on the meaning of Christian suffering, *Salvifici Doloris*. However, each era gives this teaching a different emphasis and a particular coloring. In Thérèse's time, pious French Catholics were determined to make reparation to



God for the blasphemous horrors of the French Revolution, which had spawned the godless state and moral climate in which they lived. God's love was certainly not neglected in the writings of the spiritual masters of the time, but a popular current of fervent spirituality focused rather heavily on God's avenging justice. Some devout souls offered themselves as victims of this justice. Their intention was to serve as lightning rods, as it were, for God's wrath. The sometimes terrible suffering of these "victims" was seen as a vicarious experience of God's just anger.

Thérèse had a more integral and wholesome view of suffering. Put simply, she regarded suffering as a loving word of God. When this "word" is welcomed and responded to, the individual enters into the salvific mystery of Christ crucified.

Thérèse's Credentials

Those who have read Thérèse's life, letters, and last words are aware that when she talks about suffering, she knows whereof she speaks. She wanted people to know that she had, indeed, suffered. She did not want to be written off as a spoiled little girl who had left the warm circle of her pious family for the monastic enclosure of Carmel and had died young, untouched by trials and ignorant of the unbelieving world beyond the convent wall.

Respect for Thérèse's desire to have her credentials acknowledged obliges us to begin this consideration of her teaching on suffering by noting the range of the sufferings she herself experienced. The record of her losses, traumas, and illnesses can be found in her autobiographical manuscripts, I have no intention of recounting her story once again. I confine myself to a quick survey of the varieties of psychological, spiritual, and physical pain which marked her life.

Thérèse not only wanted her readers to know that she had suffered, she also wanted them to know that her sufferings started early. Thérèse was only four when her mother died. Then, when she was nine, her substitute mother, her sister Pauline, entered the Carmel at Lisieux. Her departure took Thérèse by surprise because she had naively thought that her sister would wait until they could go off to the desert together. She described the blow as a "martyrdom." Perhaps as a psychosomatic reaction to her grief, Thérèse became ill for months in 1883, when she was ten. She was bedridden, immobile, and withdrawn. She would hardly allow her third mother substitute, her sister Marie, to leave her side.

In addition to these dramatic traumas, Thérèse suffered some of the more common pains of childhood. She felt that her formidable uncle, Isidore Guérin, thought her awkward and not too bright. She found it difficult to make friends at school and soon learned how fragile and one-sided friendships can be. In any case, she always felt somewhat out of things because the games her classmates played bored her. In fact, her discomfort at school became so great that her father withdrew her and had her tutored privately.

None of the losses and upsets of Thérèse's childhood and adolescence equaled the blow she sustained when, soon after Thérèse entered the Carmel of Lisieux, her beloved father suffered a debilitating stroke which affected his mind. After spending three years in an institution and two years in the care of his family, he died in 1894 without ever emerging from his confusion.

By the time of her father's death, Thérèse's own decline had already begun, although no one suspected that she was suffering from anything more serious than a chronically sore throat. Two years later she began to cough up blood. After several months in the Carmel's infirmary, undergoing treatments that seemed, in the main, to increase her discomfort, she died on 30 September 1897 at 7:20 P.M.

Her physical sufferings, which were horrendous, were unrelieved by interior consolations. In fact, almost immediately following her first hemorrhage, Thérèse descended into a terrible spiritual darkness where she affirmed the truths of faith by a sheer act of will. The certainty that there is a heaven whose existence gives meaning to all we suffer here on earth was blotted out. All that stood in its place was a question mark and mockery.

This agony in the last months of her life was the worst of Thérèse's spiritual trials, but it had been preceded by others. She had walked through long stretches of spiritual dryness before the utter darkness of night descended on her. In fact, she had traversed periods of thick fog even before she became a Carmelite. In her early adolescence she had struggled through an eighteen month long period of scrupulosity.

Thérèse knew about suffering, although those who were captivated by her wit, good humor, and the "big smile" she was so proud of might not have realized it. Thérèse had suffered her share of psychological pain through the death or departure of those dear to her. Her strange childhood illness dramatized the depth of her emotional anguish. She had known physical pain as well and was certainly no stranger to the dark valleys of the spiritual journey. Thérèse had earned the right to speak authoritatively about suffering.

Suffering Sanctifies

We noted earlier that Thérèse's faith in the goodness of God convinced her that we suffer because God loves us. Actually, she expresses this in a more intimate way by saying that it is Jesus' "gentle hand which strikes" us. He is the source of our pain. He may not enjoy making us uncomfortable, but he knows—Thérèse boldly proclaims—that this is the only path to divinization open to us. Nothing else can transform us. Jesus therefore smiles and sends more bitterness.

Thérèse is so convinced of this that she astounds us by arguing that eternity will be too short for her and her sisters to thank God for her father's illness. Not only does she see his decline as an honor bestowed on a saintly man but as a providential move to separate Thérèse and her sisters from the love of this world. It is, she states, a "loving blow" of the jealous hand of God.

Thérèse sees suffering as the prerequisite for salvation because it detaches us from material things and reminds us of our destiny. Suffering, therefore, is part of the mix of good and bad we all experience in life. How much we suffer, however, is to some degree under our control. We can pick and choose. We can, as the saying has it, "make things easy for ourselves." We can walk the broad, safe path of mediocrity, or we can take risks and opt for a more demanding trail. Greater suffering is the price we pay for choosing the more difficult route or—to abandon the metaphor—if we dare to love much, we will suffer accordingly. Suffer we must, whatever our choice.

But Thérèse has heard the call to follow Christ too clearly to want to have anything to do with picking and choosing this suffering or that. If suffering is the consequence of the welcomes whatever comes. Indeed, she enthusiastically suffering which, actually, can never be her's: "I choose it and over again to be able to preach Jesus to every place and



attempt to respond to Jesus' love, then she reaches out to embrace the totality of all!" She would gladly pay any price over time and in every way conceivable.

Her only excuse for her extravagant outreach is the example of Jesus' own "foolish," self-sacrificing love so vividly expressed, for example, in the great kenotic hymn of Philippians 2:6-1. Thérèse wants to be one with her beloved and he, as the second part of her religious name reminds us ("of the Holy Face"), was a man who suffered. Indeed, he became man, she remarks, so that he might possess the capacity to suffer. Since love drew Jesus to suffering, the identical love, alive in his followers, draws them in the same direction. The love and concern they share with Jesus makes them eager to participate in his ongoing work of redemption.

Jesus suffered and humbly accepted the death of a slave, Thérèse states, in order to draw souls into the very intimacy of the Trinity. He suffered on the Cross, and he continues to suffer in the members of his Mystical Body. It is this active, participatory, for-neighbor aspect of suffering that makes it so appealing to Thérèse.

Thérèse opts for suffering because it is salvific. This is why she went to Carmel and why she made herself, as she puts it, a "prisoner" within its cold, brick walls. This is why she volunteered to help a crotchety old sister make her way to the refectory. This is why she silently put up with the inconveniences and annoyances of community life.

Suffering, however, retains its active meaning for Thérèse. even when it is not the consequence of her deliberate choice. She bore her father's humiliating illness and her own slow death as a share in Christ's cross. She is, in fact, convinced that the salvation of others depends on our willingness to be so joined with Jesus—so taken over by

him—that our sufferings serve his salvific purpose. Like St. Paul, who was confident that Christ was strongest in him when he himself was weak, Thérèse wanted to be able to say, “I live no longer I, but Christ lives in me” (Gal 2:20).

Victims of Love

Suffering is so much the reflection of love that Thérèse believes, as we have seen, that there is a correlation between suffering and sanctity. Great love, great holiness, go hand in hand with great suffering. The more the self focuses on Jesus, the more *sympathetic* it becomes. Love much and you will suffer much. We must take care, though, to note that the greatness of love is what matters in this equation. It is only because suffering and love are intertwined that Thérèse speaks of welcoming suffering. God’s love and our love responding to it are what matter, not the suffering itself. Therefore, she emphasizes that little acts of kindness or little slights ignored *with great love* gain infinite value in Jesus’ hands.



It is clear, then, that when Thérèse announces that as victims of Jesus’ merciful love, she is not inviting them into some dark pit of misery. She is encouraging them to love actively and to make whatever comes an expression of that love. She is asking them to let themselves be consumed by the fire of divine love.

Thérèse—a joyful young woman, if ever there was one—was so sisters described her as being possessed by God the way some though she maintained that pain is not the measure of the worth was indifferent to whether she got better or died soon, went to Lisieux—the intensity of her suffering seems somehow suffering matched the intensity of her love. God’s merciful resembled the martyrdom for which she had always yearned.



bursting with love that one of her are possessed by demons. Therefore, of suffering—and though she herself the missions or lived to an old age in appropriate. The magnitude of her providence gave Thérèse a death that

Suffering is an inescapable consequence of love. Some, according to the will of God, suffer nothing more than the miseries that are integral to human life, while others are called to take on greater burdens or to share more visibly in Christ’s salvific action. Thérèse not surprisingly thinks that, whatever our portion of the Cross, we should suffer joyously and patiently. But she has no illusions that we can suffer without expressing what we feel. Obviously, we must always be considerate of others. Nonetheless, we must not imagine that the worth of our suffering depends on the grand manner in which we bear it. We should not strive to make suffering a proud feather in our cap. It is the interior dispositions that matter.

Thérèse therefore, glories even in her limitations and her failings. She suffers in union with Jesus, but not in any proud, superhuman manner. She accepts her moments of irritation, her tears and complaints as reflections of her smallness. She has no intention of storming heaven with her heroic credentials clutched tightly in her hand. On the contrary, her hope is to be borne up on the eagle wings of Jesus. Any illusions of grandeur, even in her last days, would have clashed with her lifelong conviction that she is merely a grain of sand on the beach of a loving God or the little ball that Jesus plays with as he likes.

Three months before her death, Thérèse states in a letter that “suffering has become my heaven here below.” In the spiritual darkness and physical misery in which she lived throughout her illness, she firmly held to her belief that suffering united her to her beloved. She had lost all sense of heaven. The vision of a heavenly paradise which had played such a large role in her readiness to abandon the world and to suffer for Jesus was clouded over.

It is in defiance of the dark night of her faith that Thérèse speaks so often of heaven in her last days. Her insistence that suffering has been her heaven for so long, making her wonder how she will adjust to the joys of heaven, is more than just an ironic witticism. Thérèse’s active love has found its expression in suffering. In heaven she will be more united to Jesus’ love than she is now, but she will be unable to suffer. How, she asks, can her face-to-face encounter with Jesus separate her from his own passionate concern for the salvation of souls? How can heaven cut her off from love of neighbor? She is sure, therefore, that her love will remain active and productive.

Love prompts Theresa to make Jesus' concern for the salvation of individuals her own. It also moves her to want to comfort him or, as she puts it a number of times, to wipe away his tears. Her joy, then, is not simply to suffer with Jesus but to suffer for him.

Thérèse offered Jesus all the little things of her life, but the greatness of her love pushed her to want to do more than that. She may not have felt that she was one of the eagles called to do great things in the Church, but her desire to love Jesus was boundless. This "for Jesus" aspect of her devotion is evident in the heartfelt prayer she offered on the day she made her vows: "Jesus, may I die a martyr for you, a martyr in body or heart or, preferably, in both."

Conclusion

Thérèse's childhood practice of sitting in a corner pondering the mysteries of faith was the beginning of a theological effort that continued right to the end of her life. Theresa was a thinker and, while she was certainly influenced by the spirituality of her time, her thought is bold, solid, and distinctive.

The events of her life forced Thérèse to reflect on the meaning of suffering. She could have followed a popular current of spirituality that valued suffering as a means to propitiate the wrath of God, but behind this spirituality lay the image of God as an angry, avenging deity. This was not the God Thérèse knew. When Thérèse uses terms such as "victim" and "holocaust" to describe her own surrender to God's will, she is speaking the familiar language of this spirituality but giving the terms new meaning by addressing her offering to a merciful, loving God. This is not a God who delights in suffering for itself or who measures its benefit in terms of its intensity.

Consequently, when Thérèse mentions suffering, she is referring to the misery that remains after everything that can be done to alleviate psychological, physical, and/or spiritual discomfort has been done. Unfortunately, no medication, therapy, or consolation can completely rescue us from the losses, pains, and ups and downs of life. Thérèse, therefore, sees suffering as an inescapable experience of our vulnerability and littleness. She glories in it, not for the pain it brings, but because it is a salvific word through which God sanctifies us and makes us participants in the redemptive work of Christ Crucified. Suffering is a word which speaks God's love to us and through which we may speak our love for God and neighbor.

