

The relevance of Thérèse of Lisieux in our daily lives, relationships and prayer

Prayer: asking Jesus for everything she wanted and needed

How presumptuous is that? Thérèse tells us, “I remembered having heard that on our First Communion day we can obtain whatever we ask for.”(p38)

The Catechism of the Catholic Church uses Thérèse’s definition of prayer as an introduction to 66 pages on prayer: *It is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward heaven, it is a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy.* (2558) She goes on to say, “It is something great, supernatural, which expands my soul and unites me to Jesus.” (p242) She is truly convinced that everything we ask the Father in His name; he will grant it. “The Almighty has given them [the saints] as fulcrum: HIMSELF ALONE; as lever: PRAYER which burns with a fire of love. And it is in this way that they have *lifted the world.*” (p258)

So, where did Thérèse’s immense TRUST in Jesus come from? Was it from wonderful prayer, with Jesus feeling very close? Or was it due to her certain knowledge and awareness of God the loving and forgiving Father? Perhaps she had a foot in heaven, lived in constant joy in knowing that the glory of heaven and union with Christ awaited her. In her Carmelite life, did she relish and find sustenance in the Latin Divine Office, or in reciting the rosary did the Divine Mysteries fill her with religious fervour? The retreats at school may have been a wonderful spring-board, followed by inspiring and heart-warming books on prayer and the spiritual life. Frequent Holy Communion with the consolation of Jesus’ closeness may have sustained her day to day. Was Thérèse lucky to benefit from a secure and stable child-hood? Did this 15-year-old merely transfer from one home to another, following her sisters into a warm and loving religious community where the example of the other nuns was nurturing and illuminating?

Derivation of trust

The answer is a resounding *no* to all these suppositions. In Thérèse's own words: "Do not believe I am swimming in consolations; oh, no, my consolation is to have none on earth." For the last eighteen months of her life, Therese tells us that Jesus "permitted my soul to be invaded by the thickest darkness...One would have to travel through this dark tunnel to understand its darkness."(p212) Thérèse's earlier certainty in God as a loving father like her own beloved father was replaced by doubt and self ridicule. Her advice after receiving Holy Communion was to remain peaceful in the midst of aridity and distraction. She found saying the rosary a trial and could not meditate on the Mysteries. We feel sympathetic when she tells us that she often dosed off during community prayer. Her school retreats about hell and punishment filled her with fear and she tells us that spiritual books were so full of beautiful words that she could not choose what to read, the words only confused her.

As for a secure childhood, Thérèse suffered one loss of one mother figure after another from her birth onwards, had a terrible time at school and as a vulnerable ten-year-old, suffered a terrifying and debilitating mental illness. The Lisieux Carmelite community had accepted some unsuitable and unstable applicants; it was not an easy community for anyone to live in, let alone a fifteen-year-old child, resented by some as being yet another member of the Martin family.

From where, then, did Thérèse derive her immense trust? She rose from the pain of abandonment, a sense of exile, from being a "poor little *thing*". As a child, she described isolation and unresolved grief with a terror of failure and need for constant reassurance and reward. Although a talented and delightful child, she was ill at ease with strangers and really only felt safe when at home.

Yes, Thérèse had a warm, close-knit and loving family. She was the cosseted youngest child, her hair beautifully curled and her dresses carefully chosen. Yes, her mother gives busy women a wonderful model of running a business while bringing up five children (and giving birth to nine) and a husband who was often away on business. How modern is that? Yes, Thérèse's parents were holy, generous and open-hearted, bring tramps into the house for a meal, refusing to sell lace on Sundays, attending mass at 5.30am every morning. Yes, her family was a haven of prayer and Catholicism in a secular and anti-Catholic society.

Hidden reality of childhood

For Thérèse this meant a hidden reality. Three years before her birth on 2nd January 1873, her bonny five-year-old sister, Helen and two-month-old sister Melanie-Thérèse had both died. Thérèse's mother, Zélie, was consumed with anguish and continued to mourn Helen until she herself died on 28th August 1877. Thus, Thérèse came into the world as a ray of hope but within two months was herself at death's door so was rushed off to live with a wet-nurse and her four children in the country until she was fourteen months old. Naturally, she bonded with this surrogate mother, was afraid of her mother's smart friends and needed to make a big adjustment when she returned home to her own family. By this stage, her mother was ill with undiagnosed breast cancer, while working flat out in the lace trade. Much of Thérèse's care was in the hands of the maids and her older sisters. She was the baby of the family, perhaps augmented by Zélie's regret at having to send her away and the knowledge that there would be no more babies.

Thérèse was but four and a half when her mother died, the family moved house, and the maid who had been with Thérèse all her life said good-bye. Marie and Pauline took over the care and education of Thérèse and Céline, and Léonie boarded at school in Lisieux. Marie imposed on Thérèse an intense reward system: her treasured walk with her father would be cancelled if she did not do well in lessons, and she described her dread of the end of Sundays, the prelude to lessons on Monday. She changed from a delightful, bubbly

pre-school child to a sensitive, anxious and tearful little girl. Beautifully dressed and hair painfully curled each morning, like a doll (she always cried), she was beautiful for her father, as a queen for her king. She was a queen unable to care for herself or manage any basic chores.

The shock of school for this vulnerable and clever eight-year-old who did not know how to play with other children was immense. Achieving top marks in a class where struggling fourteen-year-olds were “held back”, ensured that she was bullied and further isolated. Depending on Céline to protect her, Thérèse, now thirteen, simply broke down when Céline left school. Eventually, her beloved Papa took her out of school and arranged private tuition.

This heart-rending experience of childhood within the love of her family gave Thérèse a deep experience of helplessness and gratitude which she was able to integrate into her universal guide for life, her Little Way.

Our daily lives

Fay Weldon, the celebrated feminist, tells us (26.8.09), pick up your husband’ socks, make the coffee, clean the loo, it’s much easier just to do it yourself. Yes, but with how much resentment? At work I am accused unjustly of not completing a project on time, some-one makes slighting comments, I feel drawn into the juicy gossip and slander of those who “should do something”. I see the office cleaner leaving as I arrive; no-one notices what she does until she forgets the crumbs under the desk. Thérèse guides us in all these little ways, her Little Way.

The Little Way is a whole new way of life, a way of holiness that is open to all because it requires nothing from anyone but the ordinary, day-to-day experience of which every life is made.

The Little Way teaches how to live with others, with their annoying habits, their moods and idiosyncrasies, their forgetfulness and ungratefulness.

The Little way teaches us how to live with ourselves, with our own annoying habits. Thérèse tells us: God is nothing but mercy and love and asks nothing from us but that we believe in his love. She asks us to love Jesus, for the more one is weak, without desires and without virtues, the more one is open to the operation of God's consuming and transforming love. It is confidence and nothing but confidence that must lead us to love.

So, we don't have to *feel* loving and good and kind and virtuous. We don't have to earn God's love. Ivan, the severely handicapped child of Samantha and David Cameron (former Prime Minister), did not have to coo and smile and count on to ten or become dry aged two or walk aged one or say "da-da" as his first word, to earn his parents' love. They organised their lives round him, as do all parents of handicapped children, foregoing the usual things we call enjoyment, but in his vulnerable *being* he filled their lives with joy.

If we are confident that Jesus meant it when he told us that as the Father has loved him, so he loves us, we find him in those around us, in the fields and skies, in the streets and the gutters. Or rather, he reveals himself.

So, who is Thérèse, really? She is a saint for troubled children, for worried and distraught mothers. She is a saint for fathers called away from their families and for fathers who find themselves bringing up their children on their own. Thérèse is for teenagers who are bullied at school, who feel isolated and lonely, unable to "fit in" who have no friends, who are suicidal. She is for those who feel "stupid".

Thérèse's own father, her "king" was incarcerated for three years at the Caen "madhouse", the Bon Sauveur institution for the insane run by the Bon Sauveur sisters. Later, Maurice Bellière, the missionary with whom she corresponded as a sister to a brother, was also admitted for the final six weeks of his life, suffering from the end stages of sleeping sickness. These two men in her life were severely mentally ill. Thérèse

herself experienced a complete mental breakdown as a child, and then suffered from “scruples (a form of obsessional-compulsive disorder), anxiety, and possible childhood depression (crying all the time). She is certainly the patron saint of those troubled by mental health problems.

Thérèse is for ourselves and those we meet who have been submerged in a pit of despair. She is a saint for those who feel that everyone is a threat to them. She is the patron saint of those who are crushed by the overwhelming loss of people they depended on, people they trusted. She is for those who feel deeply insecure, abandoned, let-down. She can empathise with us when we have no way of sharing our awful feelings with others, for fear of hurting them or of being further rejected.

Thérèse is a *fantastic* saint for our times. She is a saint for the most damaged and hurt, the excluded and marginalised.

For those of us who are pensioners with a bus-pass, Thérèse may seem too young, too sweet and childish. But she is a young woman into whose short life God concertina'd a full life's experiences, who had the wisdom of a 50-year-old and was lined up to be Prioress.

Thérèse is a teenager who emerged strong and free from a loving but what would nowadays be called a troubled family. She became a mature and wise woman in a community where her fellow travellers were difficult, did not get on with each other, had exasperating habits and had little in common. Indeed, some had clear mental health problems.

How did this “little sparrow” become a saint? Through her “Little Way” of utter reliance on Jesus, of TRUST in his love and the love of his mother, her mother, his Father, her

Father. With her, we too express this total trust with a “cry of gratitude and love in the midst of both trial and joy”.

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