



'GOD IS GREATER THAN OUR HEART

Thérèse of the Child Jesus and Prayer

By Sr. Aline Eraly, O.C.D.

Apparently Thérèse of Lisieux, (1882-1897) does not speak much on prayer - too little for our liking. On the other hand, her entire life is impregnated with prayer. A sort of fascination with Jesus manifests a captivating grace from God, to which Thérèse responds with fervour. In her case prayer and sanctity are but one. We are faced with immense horizons when questioning ourselves upon the prayer of Thérèse. After a few reflections animated by her prayer, let us choose from the start - in order to grasp a few aspects - to limit ourselves to the hours of prayer to which Thérèse was bound by her life in Carmel. As much as possible, we will let St. Thérèse speak for herself, in her manuscripts, her autobiography, and her Letters. In revealing, bit by bit, the secret of her prayer she could guide us in the obscurities of our own journey, and help us to give ourselves to the prompting of the spirit.

At first glance, we are greatly astonished at the prayer of Thérèse. Thérèse lives a contemplative life with set structures, and horarium entirely cantered on prayer under different forms: mainly the Eucharist, the Divine Office, and two hours of mental prayer. But Thérèse speaks very little of prayer, as such. She reaches a dizzying height of sanctity and yet it seems as though she never climbs the classical ladder of contemplation as described by our holy parents, Teresa of Jesus, and John of the Cross, two doctors of the ways of prayer. Furthermore, we know of her ardent love for Jesus and her great desire to be faithful in little things. Never-the-less we know, according to her own testimony, that her moments of prayer were, oftentimes, of dryness, aridity, sleep and distractions.

In fact, our answers assure us that {her praying} exceeded the official times of prayer: sanctity and contemplation are never copies, but original creation of the Holy Spirit who liberates; dryness and distractions in prayer are not necessarily signs of failure to pray, and they do not exclude joy, peace, happiness, which in faith, could be experienced at a deeper level.

Let us listen to Thérèse, herself, speaking to us of her prayer in Carmel. Her stories are very well known. In her habitual sincerity she never frosted over her difficulties, and her avowals are very explicit even to the point of disconcerting us.

In her own eyes, her prayer was not a grand success. *{Dryness was my daily bread}*. (Ms A, 73) (1888-9) *{I should be desolate for having slept during my hours of prayer and my thanksgiving}*. (Ms A, 75) Elsewhere she complains of wandering of her spirit, *{to let herself be distracted from her unique occupation - to busy herself with the trifles of earth}*. (Ms B, 54) *{Today more than yesterday, if that were possible, I was deprived of all consolation}*. (LT 76)

The retreat for her clothing was even more arid. The notes to her sisters are eloquent and leave no doubts on the state of her soul. *{Nothing between Jesus and me. Dryness! Sleep! But at least it is silence. Silence is good for the soul. Since Jesus wants to sleep, why should I hinder him? I assure you He makes no effort to make conversation. The poor little ewe lamb cannot say anything to Jesus, and above all, Jesus tells her absolutely nothing}*. (LT 100-101-104)

At the beginning of her life in Carmel, being a very young girl, dryness and sleep are surely due to a lack of rest and to physical and nervous exhaustion. This experience was very difficult, since before her entrance Thérèse experienced fervent prayers and indelible favours which unquestionably had intensified her desire for solitude.

At an early age Thérèse experienced the obscure presence of God which draws the soul to recollection. Her First Communion was a *{fusion with Jesus}*. *{Thérèse had disappeared like a drop of water which looses itself in the depths of the ocean. Jesus alone remained. He was the Master, the King}*. (Ms A, 34)

To this precious experience of the unifying captivation of Love, the Christmas grace would add the one of powerful transformation of this Love, which produces an infusion of charity, and extends itself to the sensible faculties. *{In an instant, the work which I had not been able to accomplish in ten years, Jesus had fulfilled it, being content with my good will}*. (Ms A 45)

Shortly after she received the grace of zeal and thirst for souls, which led her to penetrate into Love itself. She experienced His profound need for suffering: Love is thirsting to spread Itself, but man refuses to accept it.

All of these experiences in which Love more and more penetrates her, had drawn Thérèse to Carmel. There she would be capable of living in union with God, free from all worries, except to love Him, in a contemplation without any obstacles. But with her entry into Carmel began 7 years of dryness, interrupted in July 1889, by the favour received at the grotto of St. Mary Magdalen. The young Carmelite remained a week entirely absorbed by Love. *{It was like a veil thrown for me, over all the things of this world... It is a supernatural state, very difficult to explain. Only the good God can put us there. It suffices to detach a soul from this world, forever}*. (CJ 11.7.2) Her habitual recollection during her monastic life would be entirely inexplicable save for this exceptional grace.

Her retreat for Profession, as was that of her clothing, *{and all those that followed, were retreats of great aridity}*. (Ms A, 75) These lines written in 1895, are clarified by many notes Thérèse wrote to her sisters. *{The lamb is mistaken in believing that Jesus' toy is not in darkness}*. (LT 78) In her perceptivity and her giftedness it seems to her as if her powerlessness grows evermore. *{But I don't understand the retreat I am making. I think of nothing; in a word, I am in a very dark subterranean passage!}* (LT 112) But Little Thérèse holds resolutely through all the difficulties, all the sensations of emptiness and weakness.

The divine Spirit has placed her, in effect, under the slow and prolonged action of His love, in order that the work which He has begun grows in quality and in depth. Thérèse on her part, could not perceive anything but a layer of grey ashes like that which covers a fireplace. The long contemplative dryness which she is undergoing, little by little, teaches her, even reassures her, that she will gradually be consumed till she is transformed into a brazier of love.

On the 31st of August 1890, Thérèse describes to Mother Agnes her spiritual journey. In quoting it in its entirety, we learn how she reacts to the situation *{which she does not understand}* and we find remarkable traits of her obscure prayer.

*{Before she left, her Fiancé seemed to ask in what country she desired to travel, what route she desired to follow. The little fiancée answered that she had but one desire, that of being taken to the summit of the **MOUNTAIN OF LOVE**. Then she said to her Divine Guide: You know the One whom I love and the one whom I want to please solely; it is **FOR HIM ALONE** that I am undertaking this journey. Lead me, then, by the paths which He loves to travel. I shall be at the height of my joy, provided that He is pleased. Then Jesus took me by the hand, and made me enter an underground passage where it is neither hot nor cold, where I see nothing but a half-veiled light, the light which was diffused by the lowered eyes of my Fiancé's Face! My Fiancé says nothing to me, and I say nothing to Him except **THAT I LOVE HIM MORE THAN MYSELF**, and I feel at the bottom of my heart that it is true, for **I AM MORE HIS THAN MY OWN!** I don't see that we are advancing towards the summit of the mountain since our journey is being made underground, but it seems to me that we are approaching it without knowing how.*

The route on which I am has no consolation for me, and nevertheless, it brings me all consolations since Jesus is the one who chose it, and I want to console Him alone, alone!}. (LT 110)

The indefinable atmosphere in which Thérèse describes with exact words and forceful, expressive images, permits us to foretell that an unveiling is beginning. What peace in this young Carmelite! And what security of heart! In the deep obscurity of the voyage, travelled in pure faith, a certitude gushes forth. *{This Beloved instructs me, He speaks to me in silence}*. (LT 135) Mysteriously Thérèse *{knows}* the necessity of dryness in order to purify her faith and her love, to keep herself in a receptive state like a flower under the action of the sun. Her interior sight accustoms itself to semi-darkness: finally she discovers the qualities, *{half-veiled}*, of the Face she seeks, and she *{senses}* a superior love, a love above all else, which expresses itself in her heart: she walks in obscurity towards the goal which hides itself. Moved by an interior force, her look fixes itself slowly, peacefully, on *{the One she loves}* without any other attraction but Him.

She recognizes the awakening of her heart. In faith she lives under the look of love, without any other purpose but to persevere to please Jesus, and this look, in return, nurtures her love. Only one thing matters to Thérèse, to please Jesus, and to prove to Him *{that she loves Him more than she loves herself}*, to rejoice in the joy of being able to give herself while she is losing herself: *{I find this only*

natural, since I offer myself to Jesus... in order to please the one who offers Himself to me. (Ms A 79)

A secret life has opened to Thérèse, nevertheless, she judges her arid retreat and finds the underground passage very dark... in her dry contemplative prayer, the obscurity does not disappear, but now she welcomes it: the darkness *{instead of painning me gives me much pleasure}*. (Ms A, 75) As an echo *{I desire not to see. I prefer to live by faith}* (CJ 11.9.7;5) We are touching upon the most mysterious realm of Thérèse's prayer. We are facing opposites. Can a difficult dry and insipid prayer, therefore, be simultaneously, a peaceful, easy and consoling prayer? Can the divine Presence, then, be experienced in an apparent absence?

In following Thérèse on her way, we understand that it is with enthusiasm that she discovers and nourishes herself with the writings of St. John of the Cross. These were a revelation to her. She finds herself described there. Her experience has already taught her that it is the look of faith, firmly fixed on God that allows God to give Himself. Humanly speaking, prayer is but a continual exercise of faith, a repetition of the act of dark faith, binding the soul to God in a way that allows that He can give Himself and transform the soul.

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St. John of the Cross will teach her that contemplative prayer, in fact, is situated in the spirit where faith becomes more alive than we are able to comprehend. God instructs the soul in a luminous cloud leaving the human faculties to their natural operations. From thence come the contradictions which cause suffering as long as the soul does not conform to God and His action. The struggle will be felt less as the purification progresses. This work being achieved, the human powers will unite their prayer to that which the Spirit will accomplish in them.

From the poverty which the soul suffers, is born hope and confidence, which will allow God to give Himself boundlessly, to realize the infinite desires of the soul, and to exercise His proper rights of love, so as to *{become one in love}*. So it appears to have been with Thérèse. The purity of her love can lead her to transforming union with Divine Love, to the extent of loving God with His own love. *{Ah! what lights did I not receive from the works of St. John of the Cross!... From the age of 17-18 years I did not have any other spiritual nourishment}*. (Ms A, 83) This reading, is for her, light, security, plenitude, confirmation of her most inexpressible intuitions. *{He is a saint of love, par excellence}*. Is it not in this depth that Thérèse will one day pronounce her most beautiful words on prayer? *{Love is everything}*. (Ms B, 3) *{It is love which attracts me}*. (Ms A, 83)

Without anticipating the singular graces with which Love gratified Thérèse, let us follow her simply, without haste, in her poor and purifying prayer. Thérèse knew the stages of growth; she must advance patiently in her night of faith and acquire new interior attitudes, which process took years to evolve.

If the young Carmelite, initially, attributed her dryness to lack of fervour, she is mistaken. However, Thérèse becomes increasingly aware of her profound poverty, and she must learn how to live with it. Her powerlessness is fruitful, for it encourages *{becoming little}* like a grain of sand in an arid desert. It does not destroy her love, but intensifies her thirst. There is a new aspect given to her generosity. Jesus teaches her that her poverty is *{the means that pleases Him}*. (Ms A, 76)

Gradually the soul of Thérèse grows in deep humility, detachment, confidence and abandonment, to the extent of loving her littleness. In regard to *{having}*, Thérèse is poor; in regard to *{being powerful}*, Thérèse is equally poor. She can do nothing. The earth seems ready for a fresh seeding! Her weakness grows into a capacity for receiving, a capacity for love. Soon she will perceive *{the great thing God has accomplished in her soul. He showed her insignificance and powerlessness}* (Ms C,4); in a word, her weakness is extreme. She is so convinced that she will tell Céline *{The poorer you are, the more Jesus will love you}*. (LT 211)

A movement towards abandonment develops and manifests itself, and towards 1894 she discovers her distinct *{little way}*, *{a little way, very straight, very short, and completely new}* (Ms A, 2): a way which will lead to, and identify itself with Jesus, who is *{The Way}* (Jn 14:6). Thus she will experience that *{God carries her in His arms}* (John of the Cross) and elevates her to the summit.

Without haste and without looking back, a change occurs in her desire for sanctity. We know two phases in Thérèse's spiritual evolution. Until the age of 22, she cherished the secret desire of

sanctifying herself. *{I will give all! I have always desired to become a saint!}*. (Ms C, 2) *{I want to love God as St. Teresa did}*. (PA 159) Sanctity! We must conquer it at the point of the sword}. (LT 89) The dream of acquiring sanctity will crumble bit by bit, by the constant encounter with her own weakness, and the growing, even supreme knowledge of Infinite Love.

In the last three years of her life, Thérèse implores her sanctity from God. *{I want to be a saint, but I feel my inadequacy. I ask You, O my God, to be Yourself, my sanctity}*. (Pri 6) Thérèse becomes aware of God's desire: to shower upon and flood a receptive soul with merciful tenderness. Unconsciously she changes her prayer *{Lord, I love you. I want to live for you}* becomes *{Lord, You love me, and You live for me}*. Instead of being a prayer of payment, it is a gift deposited in Thérèse, by another, by which she blossoms out fully.

It is evident that growing in sanctity profoundly influences the prayer of the individual. After a long period of maturation, 1895 is, so to speak, a springtime for Thérèse, the happiest of her life. It is a year of fullness, intensity and light. It is a decisive moment in her spiritual history.

How do these divine, overwhelming graces affect Thérèse's prayer? God does not change His action in Thérèse's soul. *{Do not believe that I swim in consolation. Oh no! my consolation is having none on this earth. Without revealing Himself, Jesus instructs me secretly; it is not through books, for I do not understand what I read}*. (Ms B, 1) Her powerlessness is constant...but accompanied by the growing certitude of being united to God, and being led to the summit of the mountain. The path remains obscure, but to love, it is to take the hand of the Lord and abandon oneself to Him, *{in blindly hoping for His mercy}*. (LT 197)

The heart always attentive to *{let itself be instructed in secret}* Thérèse listens; Thérèse searches - no, *{not in books for she understands nothing what she reads}*. (Ms B, 1) But then, what should she do? *{In this powerlessness, Holy Scripture comes to my aid. In it I find solid and pure nourishment. But it is above all the Gospels that sustain me during prayer. I am constantly discovering in them new lights, hidden and mysterious meanings...}*. (Ms A, 83)

And precisely: *{I read the words coming from the mouth of Eternal Wisdom: If one is little let him come to me. Wishing to know what He would do to the little ones answering His call, this is what I found. As one who is caressed by a mother, so shall I comfort you. You shall be carried at the breasts and upon the knees they shall caress you}*. (Ms C, 2)

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{THE VERY LITTLE CHILD} behold the key word which produced the spark between the two words of God. It brings forth all the teachings of Jesus, *{Unless you change, and become like one of these little ones}*. (Mt 18:3) In the love of a child for her mother, we find a quality unknown in adults; it is the simplicity of the one who allows self to be loved. Thérèse understands it! In **ABANDONMENT** she surrenders herself completely to God. This form of love which is called **CONFIDENCE** will be from now on, the fundamental quality of Thérèse's disposition. The word **MERCY** possesses her and sounds like music. The heart is full and overflows.

In reading the Bible during prayer, all these truths become crystal clear! Shortly after this discovery she launches her Manuscript A; the theme of mercy highlights her writings up to the last page of Manuscript C. Thérèse the contemplative, *{understands more than ever, how much Jesus desires to be loved}*. (Ms A, 84) His mercy is like an impetuous sea which no longer can *{contain its flood of infinite tenderness}*. On the Feast of the Holy Trinity 1895, she throws herself blindly into the arms of God, and offers herself, forever, as a prey to His Merciful Love.

God is not slow in His response: *{Oh! since that happy day, it seems as though Love penetrates and surrounds me at every moment; this Merciful Love renews and purifies my soul and leaves no trace of sin...}*. (Ms A, 84) Thérèse's prayer is habitual - so much so that she can affirm *{I understand and now I know by experience that the kingdom of God is within us}*. *{Jesus teaches me without noise of words, I have never heard Him speak but sense that He is within me every instant. He guides and inspires me in what I should say and do}*. (Ms A, 83)

All, thereafter, proceeds from this high experience of transforming Love. On her part Thérèse reaps the fruit of the Holy Spirit, and reaches full maturity. New lights flood her and her apostolic desires reach unlimited horizons. A peaceful and profound mysterious joy - inseparable companion to

Christian Love - never leaves her, not even in the midst of suffering; nor during the night of faith to which she was destined in the last months of her life. Thérèse does not belong to herself; she belongs to Christ, to the Church and to the entire world. Such is the loftiness of her praying vocation, of her fidelity to obscure prayer, in dryness, in powerlessness.

Her total gift to the Church is the culmination, the inexhaustible source of her mystical life. No desire except love, love crucified, because **{LOVE INCLUDES ALL VOCATIONS, (because) LOVE IS ALL, THAT IT EMBRACES ALL TIMES AND ALL PLACES}**. (Ms B, 3) And Thérèse exclaims: *{O Jesus, my Love, ... my vocation, at last I have found it. MY VOCATION IS LOVE! In the heart of the Church, my Mother, I shall be Love}*. We ask her if it is to enjoy God that she wants to go to heaven. *{No, that is not what attracts me - What is it then? Oh! it is Love! To love, is to be loved, and to return on earth to make Love loved}*. (DE/G - 7.4)

Love! Thérèse has found it: it was perfected in suffering, the highest redemptive suffering. It was through her life of prayer that Thérèse received this grace. Likewise could she say in the last page of her manuscript: *{All the saints have understood this, and especially those who filled the world with the light of the Gospel teachings. The Almighty has given them as fulcrum: HIMSELF ALONE as lever: prayer which burns with the fire of love: and it is in this way that they have lifted the world: until the end of time, the saints will come to lift it}*.

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