

like all the retreats I've made since, was a time of great dryness.

(Chap XXVI)

Similarly, her reception of holy Communion, unlike her first one, brought no consolation either and spiritual reading left her unmoved:

Don't think of me as buoyed up on a tide of spiritual consolation; my only consolation is to have none on this side of the grave. As for instruction, our Lord bestows that on me in some hidden way, without ever making his voice heard. I don't get it from books, because I can't follow what I read nowadays; only now and again, after a long interval of stupidity and dryness, a sentence I've read at the end of my prayer will stay with me . . .

(Chap XXX)

It was the same with the rosary, with the Offices in choir and with any help she might have had from those guiding her. Yet all this was only the background to more costly interior trials. On the eve of her profession, for example, she had severe doubts about her vocation: 'I saw life at Carmel as a desirable thing yet the devil gave me the clear impression it was not for me . . . darkness everywhere.'

Then came that fatal Maundy Thursday when Thérèse began to spit blood. She knew she had not long to live. This filled her with immense supernatural joy, but by the end of Eastertide came the reaction, the last great spiritual darkness, the testing of her faith - 'To appreciate the darkness of this tunnel you have to have been through it', she wrote. Even thoughts of heaven became impossible and the darkness itself taunted her: 'It's all a dream this talk of a heavenly country . . . All right go on longing for death! But death will make nonsense of your hopes . . .'

All this Thérèse endured while living outwardly a life of loving and joyful self-forgetfulness - her soul in 'a state of unruffled calm' as an observer imagined. Such was the prayer-life of a saint while we are left gasping. However, there is an invitation for us to follow suit - to take the joys and sorrows of our daily ordinary living, THE WHOLE LOT, be they small or great, and let God make them into the stuff of our sanctification - not for ourselves alone but for the whole of his purpose for his agonising world.

Never mind if the going is hard or our prayer feels dead. We are in good company. Thérèse, in her 'little way' is telling us to let go and let God. With Jesus nothing shall be impossible.

'THAT THEY ALL MAY BE ONE' Holy Cross Series U56B
Holy Cross Convent, Rempstone Hall, Nr Loughborough, LE12 6RG.

Community of the Holy Cross. A Registered Charity.

*'That they all may
be one'*



Choosing the Whole Lot - Thérèse and prayer

God gives his own pattern to the life of prayer. Firstly he attracts us and we are drawn; we offer everything. Then comes the cost, the suffering. Only in the End do we find the lasting consolation. True, on the way there are glimmerings of light to make the ongoing possible, but they are only glimmerings. The dying and rising repeats itself in spiral movement till we lose all apparent sense of progression. This is something of what St John of the Cross and the Carmelite tradition mean by the dark nights of sense and spirit.

Thérèse of the Child Jesus lived this experience intensely. We see the pattern emerging in early childhood, as she herself recognised. Leónie decided one day that she was too old for dolls and other childish things and asked her two younger sisters to choose what they would like for themselves:

I thought for a moment and then said, as I held out my hand: "I choose the whole lot!"

Only a childish trait perhaps, but in a sense it's been the key to my whole life . . . Later on I realised that there was no reaching sanctity unless you were prepared to suffer a great deal . . . every soul was free to answer our Lord's invitation by doing a little for him or a lot . . . and then, as in babyhood, I found myself crying out: "My God, I CHOOSE THE WHOLE LOT." No point in becoming a saint by halves.

(Story of a Soul Chap IV)

A few years after this, when she was about ten years old, Thérèse met her second great trial (the first had been the death of her mother when she was only four years old). This time Pauline, her elder sister and confidante, entered Carmel. Thérèse plunged herself headlong into school-work by way of compensation, and before long fell prey to a mysterious and debilitating illness, probably in part of a psychological and spiritual nature. Writing of herself at this time she says that she somehow felt convinced that she was called to be a saint:

That sounds conceited of course, when you consider how imperfect a creature I was, and still am . . . But this daring ambition has never left me. I put all my confidence in him who can make a saint of me. I didn't

realise then how much suffering it had to cost, this road to sanctity; but God lost no time in assuring me of that, by sending me the trials I have been telling you about (ie her illness).

(Ibid Chap X)

But Thérèse recovered, thanks in large measure to the prayer with which she was surrounded and the special intervention of our Lady. This, together with the profound effect of her first Communion and subsequent Confirmation, both in the following year, was the blessing after the trial:

What comfort it brought me . . . I knew that I was loved . . . (I) was giving myself to him for all eternity. There were no demands on me; there had been no struggles or sacrifices . . . something had melted away and there were no longer two of us - Thérèse had simply disappeared, like a drop lost in the ocean; Jesus only was left, My Master, my King.

(Chap XII)

All the same there were tinges of sadness even on this wonderful day of her first Communion. Thérèse was taken to see Pauline at Carmel but it could only be for a brief visit. The rest of the family did all that they could to make for her happiness but Thérèse was being drawn elsewhere:

Don't think that I wasn't touched by the family party which was held that evening . . . but it was a restrained happiness; there was a peace in my soul which nothing could disturb. Marie (her eldest sister) took me to sleep with her on the night of that wonderful day; for our happiest times on earth must end in darkness . . .

(Chap XII)

Marie was her great support at this time, giving Thérèse the motherly care she needed. In particular she used to help her prepare for Holy Communion:

On the eve of every such occasion Marie would still take me on her knee and prepare me for it. Once, I remember, she talked to me about suffering, and told me it was a path I probably wouldn't have to tread . . . Her words came back to me after Communion next day and I felt a great desire for suffering spring up in my heart, together with the conviction that God had a lot of crosses in store for me . . . *(Chap XII)*

Thus the cycle of prayer was repeating itself: God's call, the response, the cost. But what was the nature of the suffering she anticipated? At the age of fifteen Thérèse was granted special leave to enter Carmel. There been a hard battle and a delay but at last the day came and she was really there. Perhaps now her pathway would be all roses? Hardly. Her sufferings, and the intermittent glimpses of God's glory and love that had drawn her on had so far only been a prelude. The pattern was intensified now, for she was destined to travel swiftly to her goal.

But Thérèse had also been preparing herself in another way. She had never been attracted to inflicting severe physical penances on herself as she knew some of the saints had done. Instead:

I'd allowed people to wrap me up in cotton wool, to treat me like a bird that's being fattened up for the market, as if there were no need of penance in my life at all. What I did try to do by way of mortification was to thwart my self-will, which always seemed determined to get its own way; to repress the rejoinder, which sometimes came to my lips; to do little acts of kindness without attracting any attention to them . . .

(Chap XXIII)

Here we see the unique quality of Thérèse's sanctity - her little way of spiritual childhood, which in reality was far from trivial and was more costly than the greatest of ascetic feats undertaken deliberately. This she took with her into the cloister, and by these means speedily attained her end - union with the divine will, holiness. The ordinary, sometimes hum-drum life of the monastic enclosure was lived in complete self-forgetfulness and patient concern for others:

I tried my best to do good on a small scale . . . all I could do was to take such opportunities of denying myself as came to me without the asking; that meant mortifying pride, a much more valuable discipline than any kind of bodily discomfort . . .

(Chap XXVI)

Then too, there are countless illustrations elsewhere of her immense patience with the foibles and infirmities of her sisters, her way of making the less attractive feel loved, and all this without showing any feelings of repugnance. Mind you, there were occasions when things nearly got the better of her, as Thérèse admits - then she would slip away in the nick of time from the situation as best she could: 'In the last resort my recipe for victory is to run away'. This is only a playful rejoinder, however. Thérèse teaches us that sanctity and staying-power go together.

There were other difficulties as well. One might have thought that the life of prayer, in the conducive atmosphere of the cloister, would come easily to Thérèse. She had already tasted something of union with God, as we have seen. However, she had also reached out to embrace suffering and so was taken at her word. Any kind of spiritual consolation whatsoever was denied her. **Everything** had to be done by faith rather than by feeling - and even this Thérèse accepted gladly. She describes her profession retreat as follows:

It brought no consolation with it, only complete dryness and almost a sense of dereliction. Once more our Lord was asleep on the boat; how few souls there are who let him have his sleep out! . . . for my own part I am content to leave him undisturbed . . . Anyhow, my profession retreat,