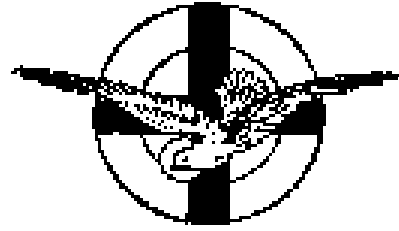


*'That they all may  
be one'*



*The Lesson of Love - Thérèse and sanctity*

For most of us our journey to God seems slow and ponderous. There are some souls, however, whom God chooses to draw swiftly to himself and this was certainly the case with St Thérèse of the Child Jesus. For our part we look on in wonder, but if we are wise we will also open ourselves up to whatever God seeks to teach us through the life of one whom he has so richly blessed.

The goal is the same for all, however much *we* might choose to dawdle on the way. The essence of the Christian life is Love. Shortly before her death at only twenty four years of age, Thérèse epitomises her life as follows:

My God, you know the only thing I've ever wanted is to love you; I have no ambition for any other glory except that. In my childhood, your love was there waiting for me; as I grew up it grew in me; and now it is like a great chasm whose depths are past sounding . .

*(The Story of a Soul, Chap XL)*

Even by the time she was fourteen Thérèse was learning what she called the lesson of love. She and her sister Céline used to meditate together on the beauties of creation which drew them to a deep mystical awareness of God's presence. With amazing spiritual intuition Thérèse perceived at once the primacy of love, beyond both faith and hope. The veil hiding God was so transparent that she cried out:

How could there be room for doubt, how could there be any need for faith or hope? It was love that taught us to find, here on earth, the Bridegroom we searched for. . .

*(Ibid Chap XVI)*

Later on, looking back, Thérèse could speak of this period of her life like this:

. . . just because I was so helpless and insignificant, he saw in me the opportunity for a startling exercise of his mercy. He brought himself down to my level, and taught me, all unobserved, the LESSON OF LOVE.

*(Chap XVI)*

We notice the intense humility. Thérèse knows herself to be nothing and all undeserving, but also she knows exactly what God was showing her - the secret of perfection, of sanctity, which even scholars and theologians cannot always grasp:

O dear, those learned people who spend a whole lifetime getting up their subjects! How surprised they'd have been to hear that there was a secret which all their scientific method couldn't discover for them, the secret of perfection. It wasn't to be understood except by the poor in spirit; and here was a girl of fourteen who was able to tell them about it.

*(Chap XVI)*

Seven years later, when Thérèse had been six years in Carmel, Céline was able to follow her there. At last the great desire of both had been fulfilled. Thérèse wrote:

And now I have no wishes left at all, except the wish to love our Lord to distraction . . . what is there left for me to desire? Not suffering or death, though both have their appeal for me; only love really attracts me.

*(Chap XXIX)*

Thérèse felt she had reached a new level of maturity - all her childish desires had vanished, as she expresses it. Certainly her understanding of God's love was deepening even more. To love him was to seek to fulfil his will in all things. To know herself loved by him was to have him bring about his own will freely in her. As she said later: 'God always gives me exactly what I want; or rather, he always makes me want exactly what he is going to give me.'

So now Thérèse was beginning to perceive that sanctity demands a total self-abandonment to God's will, and perceiving this she yearned to respond to the uttermost:

I thought at one time that to suffer was to skirt along the coasts of heaven; I made sure that I was to be carried off by an early death. Now self-abandonment is my only guide, the only compass I have to steer by; there's nothing I can pray for eagerly except the

fulfilment of God's will for my soul without the intrusion of any created thing . . .  
(*Chap XXIX*)

Thus, even the final sacrifice of her young life that was asked of her was not to be of her initial choosing. It was of God's requesting, though her whole being responded in joyful acceptance when the anticipation became an actuality.

All the same Thérèse did not have a morbid desire for suffering for its own sake. Whereas some generous souls protest that they wish to be victims of God's justice, Thérèse preferred always to speak of love. She found it hard to think of purgatory as a place of pain to satisfy God's justice: 'I feel confident that the fire of love can sanctify us more surely than those fires of expiation; why should our Lord want us to suffer unnecessary pain?' No, again Thérèse repeats:

There's nothing that can bring us comfort like this way of love; for me nothing matters except trying to do God's will with utter resignation.  
(*Chap XXIX*)

Even so, this love was not an airy-fairy business, an ideal merely to dream about. It was thoroughly down to earth and practical, though only made possible by God's enabling:

Dear Lord, you never tell us to do what is impossible, and yet you can see more clearly than I do how weak and imperfect I am; if then you tell me to love my sisters as you love them, that must mean that you yourself go on loving them in and through me . . . There would have been no new commandment, if you hadn't meant to give me the grace to keep it. . .

(*Chap XXXIV*)

The demands are absolute all the same. Love of God of necessity means love of neighbour, and that requires not merely a kind action now and then but consistency. We are to love even our enemies. All moodiness is to disappear. There is to be no jealousy, envy or unkind judgement even in thought:

I realise now that perfect love means putting up with other people's shortcomings, feeling no surprise at their weaknesses, finding encouragement even in the slightest evidence of

good qualities in them. . .

*(Chap XXXIV)*

All are to be loved equally, even those we find it difficult to get on with. Our antipathy is to be hidden and love only is to shine out, just as Jesus told us to let our lamps burn on the lampstand in full public view - 'the cheerful light isn't meant simply for the people we are fond of; it is meant for everybody in the house without exception . . . There's one sister in the community who has the knack of rubbing me up the wrong way . . . I determined to treat this sister as if she were the person I loved best in the world . . . Once at recreation she actually said "I wish you could tell me, sister, what it is about me that gets to the right side of you? you've always got a smile for me whenever I see you." . . . '

*(Chap XXXIV)*

Over and over again in her writings Thérèse shows us this love in action, in all the tiny details of daily life in community. It involves utter detachment from everything - letting others borrow from us or even take things without showing any resentment whatever. How would this be in family life?

Not that Thérèse was bragging about it all. She knew her failings as she also knew God's mercy:

I'm certain of this - that if my conscience were burdened with all the sins it were possible to commit, I would still go and throw myself into our Lord's arms . . . I know what tenderness he has for any prodigal child of his . . .

*(Chap XL)*

Such a high degree of love is fraught with dangers, however, and can only be attained by much labour. 'The food of real love is sacrifice,' as Thérèse puts it. There is always the hazard of finding ourselves beginning to love others more than Jesus, for what **we** get out of it, if we are not watchful. This involves at times severe discipline of our natural affections but, by God's grace, if we really do seek to love our Lord supremely, in the end our love for others is itself purified and strengthened:

. . . just in proportion as you deny yourself any kind of self-indulgence, your affection for the other person becomes something stronger and less self-regarding.

*(Chap XXXVI)*

Closely allied to all this are the difficulties of intercessory prayer, which we know only too well. Even Thérèse was not immune from them. But here, as so often, our Lord himself became her teacher. He showed her the depth of his own Love which could not fail to draw her into himself. As she was drawn, so too were the countless people and concerns he had laid upon her heart - there was no need of lists of names or complicated methods:

Your love, Jesus, is an ocean with no shore to bound it; and if I plunge into it, I can carry with me all the possessions I have. You know, Lord, what those possessions are - the souls you have seen fit to link with mine; nothing else.

*(Chap XXXIX)*

Indeed, as with all the great saints of prayer, Thérèse embraced the whole world in her intercession. As her death drew nearer she grasped ever more clearly the graces that had been given her and longed that others too should come to share in them. And if they, in their turn, should come to be more richly blessed than she, well that was immaterial. God's love alone matters:

I want our Lord to draw me into the furnace of his love, to unite me ever more closely with himself, till it is he who lives and acts in me. Still, as that flame kindles, I shall cry out to be drawn closer, closer; and its effect on those around me will be the same, although I am only a poor piece of iron filing, that outside the furnace would be inert. They will be as active as I am . . . The soul that is enfolded by Divine love cannot remain inactive.

*(Chap XL)*

So then, if we do feel we are making heavy weather of our journey heavenwards, we have some pointers for the way. The saints have the secret, Thérèse says, and we know that she herself has now joined the ranks of the initiate, having learned to the full the LESSON OF LOVE:

“Give me a lever and a fulcrum,” said Archimedes, “and I’ll shift the world.” He wasn’t talking to God, so his request wasn’t granted. But the Saints really have enjoyed the

privilege he asked for; the fulcrum God told them to use was himself, and the lever was prayer. Only it must be the kind of prayer that sets the heart all on fire with love; that's how the Saints shift the world in our own day, and that's how they'll do it to the end of time.

*(Chap XL)*