

lambs of your flock. If they read what I am writing now, they would say: "That's all very well, but she doesn't seem to mind it much, running about after us and lecturing us". Oh dear, the spots I have had to point out on those white fleeces, the wool that gets caught in wayside hedges for me to retrieve! Never mind; let them say what they will, at the bottom of their hearts they know that I really do love them.

(Chap XXXVI)

There is a teasing, bantering tone about it all and one can well imagine the affection in which Thérèse would have been held by her charges, and the gratitude they must have felt, despite the heavy demands a saint in the making would have made on them.

Clearly, then, even in the face of severe spiritual testings and, latterly, of physical sufferings, Thérèse shows consistently that essential gaiety, that joyfulness which is one of the most significant marks of sanctity. Here too she is at one with her great predecessor in the Carmelite tradition, John of the Cross. As we look out now on our sometimes weary and cynical world, and into our own hearts which all too often re-echo these sentiments, we could do worse than pick up again and read prayerfully through 'The Story of a Soul' to regain our hope and sanity, our love for God and our trust in his overshadowing Providence.

*'That they all may
be one'*



Thérèse of Lisieux, her human face.

For one who has been apprehended by the burning fire of divine love there can be no option but to respond to Love with love - love for God, for all mankind, for the whole of creation. Such all-embracing love is a sure mark of sanctity. St Thérèse of Lisieux is no exception.

It would be a grave mistake to think that Christianity is world-denying, or, more especially, that a vocation to the enclosed religious life involves a disparagement of the human and the natural. Rather it is a concentration of all the powers of body mind and spirit on the one thing needful and so opens up the human person to the wholeness of reality.

From early childhood Thérèse knew and loved God with all her heart and soul and revelled in the beauty of his creation. Such love spilled over to all with whom she had contact. In all this she was being prepared for her Carmelite vocation and is in direct line with the life and teaching of St John of the Cross. But Thérèse and John alike went directly towards God, and the very speed of that journey entailed a discipline and asceticism which to unaccustomed eyes could seem like a disparagement of created things and of natural human affections. By paradox, however, they shew us the infinite worth of all that God has made. A proper detachment teaches us to value God's creation as a manifestation of his glory, to use and not abuse it, and to accept ourselves and one another with reverence and respect as sharers in it.

Thérèse is manifestly a poet and an artist, as she admits herself in her writings, and which they themselves illustrate only too well. Imagery from nature, insights into human behaviour, humorous anecdotes abound, despite, in the 'Story of a Soul,' the restrictions of style necessarily imposed in an autobiography written by a religious in obedience to her superiors. To the end of her short life Thérèse was positive and outgoing keeping secret the inner trials which go to the making of a saint. Her love of beauty and of people will out, but always in the last analysis with reference to God their creator, source and goal.

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As a child of no more than six or seven Thérèse was already discovering in her own delightful way the majesty of God in creation while also sensing that anything less than him was only second best:

On the way home (ie on Sunday evenings) I would look up at the stars that shone so quietly, and the sight took me out of myself. In particular there was a string of golden beads which seemed, to my great delight, to be in the form of the letter T. I used to show it to Papa and tell him that my name was written in heaven; then, determined that I wasn't going to waste any more time looking at an ugly thing like the earth, I would ask him to steer me along, and walk with my head well in the air, not looking where I was going - I could gaze for ever at that starry vault!
(Story of a Soul Chap VI).

A year or two later Thérèse caught her first sight of the sea:

I couldn't take my eyes off it, its vastness, the ceaseless roaring of the waves, spoke to me of the greatness and the power of God . . . I made a resolve that I would always think of our Lord watching me, and travel straight on in his line of vision till I came safe to the shore of my heavenly country.
(Ibid Chap VII)

But she also remembered, on the same occasion hearing a lady and gentleman ask her father if the pretty little girl was his daughter! Thérèse enjoyed the compliment since she didn't think she was pretty at all.

By the age of thirteen Thérèse felt herself to have grown up. She recalls some of the moving times she and her sister Céline (four years her senior) spent together. Both shared a deep love for God and of the natural world. Once again it is the night sky that Thérèse remembers:

Those were wonderful conversations we had, every evening, upstairs in the room with a view. Our eyes were lost in distance, as we watched the pale moon rising slowly above the height of the trees. Those silvery rays she cast on a sleeping world, the stars shining bright in the blue vault above us, the fleecy clouds floating by in the evening wind - how everything conspired to turn our thoughts towards heaven!
(Chap XVI)

We might be inclined to think that this preoccupation by Thérèse

with the beauties of nature was something of a pious exaggeration, a reading back into the past of artificial sentiments self-consciously acquired later in the cloister. But this is hardly so. There is a natural freshness and poetic beauty about her writing which somehow rings true. This is especially so when she describes her journey to Italy. Her over-riding objective was to gain permission from the Pope to enter Carmel at fourteen. But this did not prevent her from drinking in all she saw. We can feel her intense excitement as she crosses Switzerland by train:

Rome was our goal, but there were plenty of experiences on the way there. Switzerland, where the mountain-tops are lost in cloud, with its graceful pattern of water-falls, its deep valleys where the ferns grow so high and the heather shows so red! . . . I was all eyes as I stood there, breathless at the carriage door. I wished I could have been on both sides of the compartment at once, so different was the scenery when you turned to look in the other direction . . .
(Chap XIX)

All the same her eyes were set upon the future and her vocation:

“Later on”, I thought, “when the testing time comes, I shall be shut up within the four walls of Carmel, and my outlook will be restricted to a small corner of (the) starry sky. Very well, then, I shall be able to remember the sights I'm looking at now, and that will give me courage ..”

No doubt that was how it was, though monastic enclosure proved to be no obstacle to the development of her imaginative and creative powers. Not only did she write poetry and paint pictures but over and over again in the *Story of a Soul*, Thérèse uses imagery from the world of nature to illustrate her thought, often in a light-hearted and humorous way. For instance, in trying to explain that she didn't care a scrap if other people stole her thunder by claiming her ideas as their own, she puts it like this:

To suppose that this “thought” belongs to me would be to make the same mistake as the donkey carrying the relics, which imagined that all the reverence shewn to the Saints was meant for its own benefit!
(Chap XXXV)

Or again, there is the delightful picture of the novices who had been put under her care as a lot of playful sheep getting into mischief:

Of course they (the novices) think I'm terribly strict with them, these