

Reflections by Robert Donnelly

FLOWER POWER

INTRODUCTION TO A SPIRITUAL CHILD

Fame has a routine all to itself. It's a routine that involves front-page headlines, photo opportunities, big name associations and recognition. We are all familiar, at least from the outside, with the world of the famous. We see that world in our newspapers and magazines, on our television and radio programs. Being famous means becoming bigger than life, raised up as a star, higher than mere mortals, untouched and untainted by ordinariness.

In 1897 a young nun died, at the age of 24, in the Carmelite Monastery of Lisieux, in France. She had spent the few years of her adult life praying, working and sharing in the life of an enclosed community of contemplative nuns. It was a life of silence and simplicity. It was a life filled with the ordinary struggles of living in the daily company of others. This certainly isn't the background we would associate with fame. In fact the life of St. Therese of Lisieux was quite the opposite of a life of fame and yet, not long after her death, this young Carmelite nun would become famous throughout the world.

"The greatest saint of modern times" – Pope St. Pius X

This is the first of a series of reflections which were published to commemorate the centenary of the death of St. Therese of Lisieux, the saint who is popularly known as the Little Flower. In our reflections we will listen to this young woman as she speaks of her life and spiritual way to God. We will meet her as companion and guide in the journey of following Jesus in faith, hope and love.

In the Gospel we hear the parable of the treasure hidden in a field. A person who discovers such a treasure goes and sells everything so as to purchase the field and gain the treasure. The treasure, as we know, is the Kingdom of Heaven and that treasure is hidden and awaits discovery. It lies in the deep subterranean darkness waiting for one with the sensitivity to stop and notice

and dig deep. It lies waiting for one who will realise that below the ordinary surface there is depth and in that depth there is wealth.

It is fortunate that, in the monastery where Therese lived, there were certain individuals who sensed that beneath the ordinary surface of Sister Therese of the Child Jesus there was a treasure waiting to be uncovered. In a religious age which emphasized the demands of Divine Justice this young nun carried a treasure in her heart which she had received through her on-going relationship with God. The treasure in her heart was a living faith in a God of tender mercy.

In the last years of her life, Therese was asked to write her autobiography; a book which we now know as the *Story of a Soul*. In that book we can begin to discover the character of this saint. She writes in response to the request of those who realised she had a spiritual treasure. She begins her task with a determination to write "without false humility." And so begins a simple work of honesty and imagination: Therese begins her story with a field of flowers.

It seems to me that if a little flower could speak, it would tell simply what God has done for it without trying to hide its blessings. It would not say, under the pretext of a false humility, it is not beautiful or without perfume, that the sun has taken away its splendour and the storm has broken its stem when it knows that all this is untrue. The flower about to tell her story rejoices at having to publish the totally gratuitous gifts of Jesus.

– *Story of a Soul, chapter 1.*

In many ways Therese discovered that the key that unlocked the wonder of God's loving presence was the key of ACCEPTANCE. It's a very simple principle, and yet quite elusive. How much of our time is spent dreaming of doing something different from what we are doing, being somewhere different from where we are, being somebody different from who we are! We use a lot of time and energy planning our escape from ourselves and from what the present moment brings. What is it, inside us, that pushes us to seek an escape? Our human hearts are made to search for truth, goodness and love. In fact our hearts are made for the truth, goodness and love which is perfectly found in God alone. The problem is we often make the mistake of constantly directing our searching away from the one place where God has chosen to meet us. That meeting place is our everyday life.

Jesus deigned to teach me this mystery. He set before me the book of nature; I understood how all the flowers He has created are beautiful, how the splendour of the rose and the whiteness of the Lily do not take away the perfume of the little violet or the delightful simplicity of the daisy. I understood that if all flowers wanted to be roses, nature would lose her springtime beauty, and the fields would no longer be decked out with little wild flowers. – And so it is in the world of souls, Jesus' garden. He willed to create great souls comparable to Lilies and roses, but He has created smaller ones and these must be content to be daisies or violets destined to give joy to God's glances when He looks down at his feet. Perfection consists in doing His will, in being what He wills us to be. – Story of a Soul, chapter 1.

St. Therese has written her autobiography with her eyes fixed on the truth, goodness and love that God has given in the small, ordinary and simple aspects that make up her own life. She writes with faith in a God who has created her life and fashioned it especially for her. It is that kind of faith which leads her to explore the particular beauty and goodness of her life as a unique gift given by God. We learn from Therese that the life we have is both God's gift and the ongoing work-place of God's merciful love. Therese also writes with confidence in the pleasure that God receives from even the most simple and unnoticeable life which is offered up to God with love. Every life fits into the great picture of God's creation and every life can give great pleasure and glory to God.

A PRAYER FOR EYES OF FAITH

God, our Father and Creator, through the intercession of St. Therese we ask for eyes to recognise that the particular life you have given each of us is your gift, and the place of your blessing.

May St. Therese who offered you all the events of her daily life help us to confidently offer everything that each day brings to you, our loving Father. We make our prayer through your son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.

Extracts taken from THE STORY OF A SOUL by St. Therese of Lisieux, ICS Publications, Washington.
For more information read: St. Therese of Lisieux - her last conversations, ICS Publications. The Spiritual Journey of St. Therese by Guy Gaucher. Published by Darton, Longman & Todd, London.

Highlights of Therese's Life

- 2 January, 1873 – Marie-Françoise Therese Martin is born & baptised on 4 January
- 28 August, 1877 – Therese's mother, Zélie Martin, dies of breast cancer, when Therese is 4½
- 2 October, 1882 – Her sister, Pauline, enters Lisieux Carmel
- 25 March, 1883 – Therese is overcome with a serious illness
- 13 May, 1883 – She recovers from her illness attributing the cure to Our Lady.
- 8 May, 1884 – Therese receives her first communion and, the following month, is confirmed.
- During 1885 – Therese began to experience the spiritual problem of scruples.
- 15 October, 1886 – Another sister of Therese, Marie, enters the Carmel of Lisieux.
- 25 December, 1886 – Therese experiences a conversion. She had experienced the common problem of being over-sensitive to the remarks of others but in a moment of grace she found that God had released her from that problem.
- November, 1877 – Therese goes on a pilgrimage to Italy. During the pilgrimage she met Pope Leo XIII and requested permission to become a Carmelite nun.
- 9 April, 1888 – At the age of 15 Therese enters the Carmel of Lisieux.
- 8 September, 1890 – She takes her vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.
- 20 February, 1893 – Her sister, Pauline, known in the community as Sister Agnes of Jesus, is elected the prioress of the Carmel
- 1894 – Begins to write her autobiography.
- 29 July, 1894 – Louis Martin, the father of Therese, dies after having suffered from mental illness for some years.
- 14 September, 1894 – Celine Martin, another sister of Therese, enters the Carmel of Lisieux.
- Holy Thursday, 1896 – Therese experiences her first haemorrhage. During that Easter she experiences a time of terrible, spiritual darkness.
- April 1897 – She falls seriously ill and some members of the community begin to record their conversations with her.
- 30 July, 1897 – Therese receives the last rites.
- 30 September, 1897 – Therese dies and on the 4th of October she is buried in the Lisieux Cemetery.
- [more detailed version available at www.carmelite.com/therese2002]*

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Memories and Letters

TRACES OF GOD'S MERCY

Often people who have known some kind of poverty in their life can be heard to say, "We didn't own very much but we certainly valued the few things that we had." Stories from the years of the Depression are sometimes presented as testimonies to the great capacity of human imagination and ingenuity, "We were able, as kids, to find great treasure and entertainment in the most ordinary things." These stories tell us that in a situation of poverty the eyes can be sharpened to discover the value which is hidden beneath ordinary surfaces.

A rich child, who has been given the best of everything, may take a while to adjust to the imaginative play of a poorer child. The rich child may, at first, simply see the poor child playing around with rubbish, odds and ends, and things of little real value. If that is all the rich child continues to see then he will pass by and never know the world where the poor child plays and explores. Some kinds of sophistication can really become forms of blindness. The only way for the rich child to enter into that world is by listening and observing the poor child at play until a common vision is finally shared.

A mother's heart understands her child even when it can but stutter, and so I am sure of being understood by you, who formed my heart, offering it up to Jesus! – Story of a Soul, chapter 1.

If we were to open up the first chapter of the autobiography of St. Therese of Lisieux (*The Story of a Soul*) we might find ourselves like the rich child who comes across a poor child at play. We might be surprised and even put off by the world which she invites us to enter. In the first chapters of the *Story of a Soul* we are shown the world of an early infant, in a Catholic family, of 19th Century France. It is a world described with a simple mixture of enthusiasm and seriousness.

As we meet Thérèse, writing her *Story of a Soul*, we find her picking up bits and pieces of her early life. She sees a great deal in matters which might, at first, appear to us to be of very little consequence: childhood acts of affection for her parents and sisters, temper tantrums, tears and moments of sensitivity and generosity, the pleasure found in a parent's presence. These are the bits and pieces which Therese begins to take up, re-examine and explore through her writing. In order to see the treasure, and not pass by, we must come to

share in Therese's way of seeing. This can only happen by watching and listening just as the rich child, who watches and listens, is slowly drawn into the play world of the poor child. We can begin to understand Therese when we hear her speak about the one thing which she wants to explore and write about:

*It is not then, my life properly so called that I am going to write: it is my thoughts on the graces God deigned to grant me...
Story of a Soul, chapter 1.*

Therese is interested in exploring God's mercy in her life. A child who walks along the shore of the sea discovers the ways of the sea through exploring all that can be found on the shore. Each shell, each piece of drift wood or flotsam and jetsam, adds to the greater picture of the sea's life. Each piece lies waiting to tell its own story about the deep mystery of the sea. Therese picks up and explores the bits and pieces of her childhood because she believes each piece adds to the greater picture of God's merciful presence. She is a saint who believes that everything in life, even in the childhood years, is important because it all comes from God's hands. God is present in each moment (though sometimes in a hidden way). And so, each moment provides an opportunity to meet and move more deeply into God's mysterious presence.

In the first chapter of the *Story of a Soul*, Therese picks up and explores the letters that her mother wrote when Therese was still an infant.

I loved Mamma and Papa very much and showed my tenderness for them in a thousand ways, for I was very expressive. The means I employed at times were strange, as this passage from one of Mamma's letters proves: "Baby is a little imp; she'll kiss me and at the same time wish me to die. "Oh, how I wish you would die, dear little Mother!" When I scold her she answers: "it is because I want you to go to heaven, and you say we must die to get there!" She wishes the same for her Father in her outbursts of affection for him." – Story of a Soul, chapter 1.

We can almost picture Therese, as a young Carmelite nun, picking up and thoughtfully reading the letters of her mother. These letters are filled with the reflections of a mother who gazes on her young children and ponders all the little details of their lives. Zelig Martin writes about her children with interest and honesty. We see this in the way she writes and describes her young infant daughter Therese: a child who is expressive and emotional, honest and quick to apologize, full of laughter and very intelligent, sometimes a "little imp" who could be thoughtless and stubborn and yet who also has "a heart of gold."

As Therese picks up these letters, reading and quoting from them, she meets the reflective gaze of her mother. We should not underestimate the

importance of these letters: Zelig Martin died when Therese was only 4½ years old. These letters were a unique place where Therese was able to discover the way she was seen in the eyes of her mother and the qualities of her mother's love.

God granted me the favour of opening my intelligence at an early age and of imprinting childhood recollections so deeply on my memory that it seems the things I'm about to recount happened only yesterday. Jesus in His love willed, perhaps, that I know the matchless mother He had given me, but whom His hand hastened to crown in heaven. – Story of a Soul, chapter 1

Often, when we turn our minds to our own past, we can experience many feelings. We might think about the past with a sad longing for the happy times we have known. We might be able to remember our past with joy and with thanks for all that we have received. We may even feel regret or bitterness when we think of memories which we simply try to forget. Our own life history is something deeply personal. It can be made up of memories that give us hope and confidence or memories that hold us back and drag us down. In the *Story of a Soul*, Therese reflects on both the times of happiness and sorrow in her life. One of the beautiful things about Therese is that she sees and understands her life from the point of view of faith. Her faith made her able to believe, more and more deeply, that God was hard at work in every moment of her life, providing for her deepest needs and strengthening her faith. In fact Therese believed that it was her journey through the difficult times which gave her the maturity to look back on her past and see God's mercy at work:

*I find myself at a period in my life when I can cast a glance upon the past; my soul has matured in the crucible of exterior and interior trials.
Story of a Soul, chapter 1*

If we spend time with a saint like Therese of Lisieux then we not only learn from her but we can be positively influenced by her presence and her prayerful support. In our reflections we have seen that Therese believed that God's mercy was to be found even in the early years of her life. She was able to respond with thanksgiving because she was able to recognize that all was a gift from God. It is important that we not only think about Therese's ideas but also pray that we might see the real signs of God's mercy in the people and events of our lives. We might also pray, if we are troubled by our memories of the past, for the healing power that can gradually be given through faith. As we recognise the signs of God's mercy and healing we should also pray for a spirit of thanksgiving to God who always desires our love and our healing.

A PRAYER FOR A SPIRIT OF WISDOM AND THANKSGIVING

God, our Father and Creator, through the intercession and friendship of St. Therese, we ask for wisdom to see the signs of your mercy in the love of people and in the events of our lives. Give us hearts to give you thanks and sing your praises. May St. Therese pray for us in all our needs. We make our prayer through your son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen

Who are the Discalced Carmelites?

St. Therese of Lisieux was a member of a religious order within the Catholic Church, called the Discalced Carmelites. This Order continues to be a living presence in the church dedicated to daily self-giving to God through prayer and the shared life of the community.

Why do people become Carmelites?

Men and women, from various backgrounds, become Discalced Carmelites because they have experienced the call of Christ. Each person would have their own unique story to tell. Often the call of Christ has been recognised through reading the spiritual teachings of our saints: St. Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross and, of course, St. Therese of Lisieux, among others. These great saints speak of the possibility of a deep and life-giving relationship with God through prayer.

How would you describe the spirituality of the Carmelites?

The Carmelite saints are all concerned with one basic question: if each one of us is made for God, then how can we give ourselves to this great God of love? We give ourselves through prayer. For Carmelites an important part of our daily prayer is simply, silently to meet with God in love. The saints speak about prayer not only as our act of self-giving to God but also as the place where we can receive, ever more deeply, the gift of God's transforming presence.

We also give ourselves to God through sharing our life with the community. St. Teresa of Avila, foundress of the Discalced Carmelites, emphasised that our life should be a balance between times of solitude and times spent with our Carmelite brothers and sisters who are part of God's gift to us. Our life and prayer is never just for our own spiritual benefit, we are called to serve the church. St. Therese described her Carmelite vocation as living at the heart of the Church and drawing love into the Church through prayer.

A PRAYER FOR THOSE SUFFERING LOSS

Lord Jesus Christ in your humanity you have embraced us with love, you have shared in our pain, and you have poured your life into our hearts through your saving death. In our time of suffering help us to see the light of your loving presence in those who support us in our need. May St. Therese assist us through her intercession. Amen.

The girl who watched in silence

THE LOSS OF A MOTHER AND A FAMILY'S TENDERNESS

The uniqueness of each person is often revealed in the way he or she reacts to the common events of life. In the face of danger some will respond with great courage and self-giving, others will experience crippling fear, and still others will respond in a self-centred way. Our response often uncovers and makes clear the values, loves and matters of greatest importance to us. Over time we can even discover how we have been changed by life: things, that were once important, now no longer seem of much concern, and matters that we once overlooked now have become important to us.

An important event, in the life of St. Therese of Lisieux, happened when she was only 4½ years old. At that early age Therese was faced with the death of her mother, Zelie Martin. A number of years later, when Therese had become a Carmelite nun, she began to write about her mother's death and the changes that it brought to herself and to her family. She tells a moving story about the heartbreak that such a death can bring, but she also writes about the supportive presence of God that gradually emerges through the love and tenderness of other people. Therese looked back on the highs and lows of her life and discovered a God who was a loving Provider.

In Chapter 2 of the *Story of a Soul*, the autobiography of St. Therese of Lisieux, we are taken into the Martin home in the days before and after the death of Zelie. The young Therese quietly watched and pondered the many unfolding events: the sobbing of her Papa as her mother received the sacraments for the last time, the way the children were arranged according to age at their mother's bedside, the final kiss she gave to her mother. She even writes about the feelings she experienced when she saw the "dismal sight" of the coffin lid in the hall.

*All the details of my Mother's illness are still present to me and I recall especially the last weeks she spent on earth.
Story of a Soul, chapter 2.*

Children naturally take in many details of the world around them. They see and absorb and are constantly searching to find out the meaning of all that is happening. The death of a mother would not only be heart-breaking but also very mysterious and strange to a four year old. Therese was confronted, from

the earliest age, with that side of life which cannot be understood or controlled or avoided. She speaks about the events leading up to her mother's death as making a deep impression on her. It was an impression which she would ponder for the rest of her life.

The day of Mamma's departure, or the day after, Papa took me in his hands and said: "Come, kiss your poor little Mother for the last time." Without a word I placed my lips on her forehead. I don't recall having cried very much, neither did I speak to anybody about the feelings that I experienced. I looked and listened in silence.

Story of a Soul, chapter 2.

As a child, after the death of Zelie, there were some obvious changes in the little girl who was once very outgoing. Therese looked to her remaining family for the safety and security that had been shaken up by her mother's death. She became sensitive and even, at times, afraid of all that was outside the family environment where she felt safe and secure:

I must admit, my happy disposition completely changed after Mamma's death. I, once so full of life, became timid and retiring, sensitive to an excessive degree. One look was enough to reduce me to tears, and the only way I was content was to be left alone completely. I could not bear the company of strangers and found my joy only within the intimacy of the family. – Story of a Soul, chapter 2.

The fears and the timid personality of Therese which emerged after her mother's death are not untypical of any child, particularly a child who had experienced such a dramatic loss. Therese was shy of strangers, afraid of the dark, frightened by the deep sounding voice of her uncle reciting frightening poetry. As the youngest child she looked up to her sisters. She was sensitive to their opinions and expectations, especially those of Pauline who, in many ways, took over the role of mother for Therese.

As we read Therese's descriptions of the changes that happened after her mother's death we might say that it all sounds very normal and understandable. We might even wonder why she seems to make such a fuss about the ordinary childhood experience of being shy and timid. The important thing that we should always keep in mind, as we listen to Therese, is that she always writes from her particular point of view of faith. She sees everything in her life as fitting into the greater picture of her developing relationship with God and God's ongoing work of calling and moving her to holiness.

Pieces of a Jigsaw Puzzle

THE SCHOOL DAYS OF ST. THERESE

An example will show us Therese's way of seeing her life within the greater picture of her relationship with God. We have already seen that Therese writes a lot about the way she changed after her mother's death. She became shy. She felt a very deep need for maternal love and a protective environment. Therese is a saint with a very strong awareness of the way that difficult events in life, like the death of a mother, can uncover and make known the deep needs of the human heart.

At the same time, Therese had great confidence in a God who positively desires to come into our human hearts and provide us with all that we most truly need. This confidence in God, as Provider, was an important tool that Therese used in remembering and uncovering the truth of her life. In answer to the question "how did God care for me after my mother's death?" Therese was able to look back to that sad time and remember her family's loving tenderness. She believed that God is present and works through people's love. And so God answered the needs of her heart through the love and care of her family. Once again we come back to that strong sense, in the writing of Therese, that all is a gift from God. In the *Story of a Soul*, God's blessing and love is often shown in and through a human face: the face of her father and sisters and ultimately the face of the Lord Jesus.

Our Father's very affectionate heart seemed to be enriched now with a truly maternal love! You [Pauline] and Marie, Mother, were you not the most tender and selfless of mothers? Ah! if God had not showered His beneficent rays upon His little flower, she could never have accustomed herself to earth, for she was too weak to stand up against the rains and the storms. She needed warmth, a gentle dew, and the springtime breezes. Never were these lacking. Jesus had her find them beneath the snow of trial! - Story of a Soul, chapter 2.

The experience of loss and even the death of one we love can be deeply disturbing. Therese of Lisieux is a saint who has gone through such heart-break and disturbance in her own life. It can be helpful to prayerfully ask such a saint for support and guidance in our own troubles. We might also try to follow her example of reflecting on God's loving presence in those who have given us the love and support that has helped in the process of healing and regaining our strength to go on. God's answer to the deep, uncovered needs of our heart is often far less obvious than the losses that we experience. Time and prayer can gradually open our eyes to see God's hidden answer to the needs of our heart, the answer that Therese described as being hidden "beneath the snow of trial."

Imagine, for a moment, a child sitting down in a quiet room with the scattered pieces of a jig-saw puzzle before her. She picks up each piece and tries to discover where it belongs. She tests to see how the curves and shapes and colours match the other pieces of the puzzle. She goes through the work of comparing and contrasting and judging. It is a slow business. The full picture is only arrived at when each piece finds its true place.

We can spend many years of our own life, particularly our early years, working on a certain kind of puzzle. It is the puzzle of trying to find out where we belong. It is the puzzle of trying to see clearly how we might fit into the bigger picture of our world. The puzzle of human belonging can be as frustrating as that impossible piece of a jig-saw that just doesn't seem to fit anywhere. Just as we might be tempted to bend or break that jig-saw piece to force it to fit in, so we can be tempted to bend or break ourselves in our efforts to belong. Clearly, in both puzzles, we need a lot of patience and confidence that everything does have a true place in that greater picture.

I have often heard it said that the time spent at school is the best and happiest of one's life. It wasn't this way for me. The five years I spent in school were the saddest in my life... - Story of a Soul, chapter 3.

In the early chapters of the *Story of a Soul* (the autobiography of St. Therese of Lisieux) she tells us of her family life. She grew up in a close-knit Catholic family in nineteenth century France. Her family was strongly bound together by faith and their love of God. God was a presence in their daily life and this sense of God's presence in the family was strongly felt by Therese, the youngest child. The family members communicated God's tender love to her and this was particularly important to Therese after her mother's death.

The familiar and tender environment of home communicated something of God's loving embrace to Therese. Reflecting back on those early years, she recognized the God-given privilege of such a positive and loving family environment. In her own words, her family was the "chosen soil" where she could grow and flourish like a flower. In a real sense Thérèse began to discover herself as loved by God through the love of her family.

The poor little flower had become accustomed to burying her fragile roots in a chosen soil made purposely for her. It seemed hard for her to see herself among flowers of all kinds with roots frequently indelicate; and she had to find in this common soil the food necessary for her sustenance!

Story of a Soul, chapter 3.

It is a common experience in human life that we most clearly recognize the things that matter to us when those things are taken away from us. We are all familiar with the saying “absence makes the heart grow stronger.” We could also say “absence uncovers and shows what the heart loves and needs most deeply.”

Therese’s school years were a sad and difficult time for her. During those years she was faced with the question of belonging. The other children played and acted in a way that Therese couldn’t understand. She had become used to her way of life at home: times of being alone, times of quietly reflecting and imagining. God, family devotion and play were all woven together in the home-life of young Therese.

At school the other children almost seemed to speak a different language to her: she was intelligent, imaginative and devotional and they seemed content to spend their lives playing with dolls! The young child, Therese, offered what she could in order to find a place in the common soil of her school. She told delightful and imaginative stories during lunch-time and soon had a large, happily captive audience of her fellow students. In the end the teachers put an end to her entertainments that drew the children away from their playground activities.

It comes as no surprise that Therese fell ill during this difficult time of her life. She had been through the death of her mother at an early age. Her dearest sister, Pauline, had left home and entered an enclosed monastery of Carmelite nuns. Therese herself was faced with the disheartening experience of feeling out of place and alone in the playground crowd of school. Soon there would be talk of another sister, Marie, leaving home to enter the same enclosed Carmelite community as Pauline. The safe and dependable environment of the family that spoke so reassuringly of God’s tender presence seemed to be gradually slipping away from her. The strain of so much loss finally became obvious both in her relationship with God and in her physical health.

One evening Uncle took me for a walk and spoke about Mamma and about past memories with a kindness that touched me profoundly and made me cry.... That night we were to go to the Catholic Circle meeting, but finding I was too fatigued,

Aunt made me go to bed; when I was undressing, I was seized with a strange trembling. Believing I was cold, Aunt covered me with blankets and surrounded me with hot water bottles. But nothing was able to stop my shaking which lasted almost all night.

Story of a Soul, chapter 3.

We are all familiar with the Old Testament story of God’s chosen people as they left the slavery of Egypt in search of the Promised Land. In that story the Promised Land represented many things: God’s gift of freedom, security, a place of great fruitfulness, a place where the hard-worn people could finally settle and belong. God did not lead those people to the Promised Land by an easy path. The Lord led the chosen people into the wilderness in order to teach them His ways. The wilderness was a place that forced the people to wonder, in their deepest hearts, “How can we go on? How can we survive day after day in such an impossible place?”

That impossible situation opened up the possibility of discovering the Lord in a deep and new way. God led his people into the wilderness so that they might discover, believe and say, “Our staying together and surviving as a people is impossible, and yet, here we are still together and surviving. There can only be one reason why this is so—it is because God is with us as our deep and true Provider. We know God is present because the impossible has become possible for us!”

Each of us shares that common journey of discovery. St. Therese was led into her own wilderness: the death of her Mother, the eventual departure of her two oldest sisters who were like mothers to her in her many needs, the difficulty of fitting into a school-life so different from her home life. She felt and was even physically shaken by this same question, “How can I go on when so much has been taken away? How can I go on when faced with such a daunting wilderness?” Therese began her journey of discovering the answer to these questions at the moment when she was most seriously ill. In her sickness she cried out for her mother. The pain of her loss was uncovered and cried out for an answer. At the moment of her greatest need for a mother’s tender embrace and beauty she experienced the tender beauty of Mary, the Mother of God. This was the beginning of an unfolding experience in the life of Therese; an experience of the truth that lies behind the words “God hears the cry of the poor.” In the Carmelite monastery of Lisieux, Therese would ponder her life experiences of God answering her cries and she would piece together a spiritual teaching which she would eventually call the Little Way. As a young Carmelite nun she would begin to teach, through word and

example, that the uncovering of our poor human needs and limitations can become an opening where God can enter our heart and make a permanent home.

Finding no help on earth, poor little Therese had also turned towards the Mother of heaven, and prayed with all her heart that she take pity on her. All of a sudden the Blessed Virgin appeared beautiful to me, so beautiful that never had I seen anything so attractive; her face was suffused with an ineffable benevolence and tenderness, but what penetrated to the very depths of my soul was the "ravishing smile of the Blessed Virgin." At that instant, all my pains disappeared, and two large tears glistened on my eyelashes, and flowed down my cheeks silently, but they were tears of unmixed joy.

Story of a Soul, chapter 3

Therese discovered great healing in the smile and the loving gaze of the Blessed Virgin Mary. It was the healing that flowed from the power of Mary's intimate, personal love. Therese's healing was united with the discovery that could only be expressed with the simple words "I am truly seen and loved." Such love can overcome, either suddenly or gradually, the deep barriers and torments in our hearts. And it is in meeting such a loving gaze that we discover our ultimate place of belonging.

At times when we feel that life is on top of us and we begin to feel drained and out of place it can be helpful for us to return to God through prayer. How often do we increase the pace of our lives out of fear of what we might find if we slowed down? How often do we madly scramble to fix up our own lives, and the lives of others, without calling to mind the possibility that God might be offering a better way if we would only turn to meet His loving gaze? Saints like Therese show us that there is nothing to fear and everything to gain if we bring our deepest needs into the presence of God. We can be truly nourished by simply spending time with the One who loves us. If we make time and space each day then God's love, and the love of Mary, can soak into us and gradually begin to change our whole way of living. Placed into God's hands, through such prayer, we find that God will move us into the place where we truly belong. No puzzle is too complicated for our God.

A PRAYER TO MARY

Holy Mary, mother of my Lord, you once gazed with tender love on St. Therese.

Let my eyes meet your eyes so that you might guide me into the peaceful presence of your son, Jesus Christ. Pray that my heart, in its poor and hungry need, might be drawn more closely to your son who truly is the bread of life now and forever. Amen.

SAINT THERESE OF LISIEUX - CENTENARY REFLECTIONS AUSTRALIAN DISCALCED CARMELITES NO. 5

Heaven in My Soul

ST. THERESE'S FIRST COMMUNION

Christians do not believe in an impersonal god who looks down on us from a vast distance with disinterest. We do not believe in a god who uses us like pieces in a game of chess. Christians put their faith and hope in a God who was revealed one night in an upper-room in Jerusalem and on the following day at a place called Golgotha. Jesus gathered His disciples in an upper-room on the night before he died on the cross. He took bread and wine, said the blessing and gave them to His disciples saying "This is my Body" and "This is my Blood." In these simple words and actions the desire of Jesus was revealed: He wanted to give Himself totally to those He loved. He wanted to give Himself so that those He loved would be filled with His strength, love and forgiveness. His desire on that night was that of a passionate lover who wants to be totally given to the beloved.

The great desire of Jesus pushed Him hard against the wall of human rejection and misunderstanding. He was moved by His Heavenly Father, through the love of the Holy Spirit, to be given to a world that could not receive Him. On the cross the desire of God was pushed against the deepest hardness of human rejection. The words and actions of Jesus during the Last Supper were shown to be true as His life was poured out from the Cross. Jesus' death was the passionate offering that He spoke about during the Last Supper as He said "This is my Body" and "This is my Blood." He made a gift of His life to us through His death on the Cross. He made His death the final, passionate giving of Himself into the depths of those He loved.

The great saints of the Church did not become saints simply by their own power or self-motivation. They became saints because of the overpowering life of Jesus whom they had received. We find in the writing of a saint, like Therese of Lisieux, a tender and intimate appreciation of Jesus' presence and the strength of Jesus' desire to give Himself. She was fascinated by the love of God which she discovered as Jesus came to her in the Eucharist. We can hear this in the writing of Therese, in Chapter 4 of the *Story of a Soul*, as she remembers the joy of her First Communion:

How sweet was that first kiss of Jesus! It was a kiss of love; I felt that I was loved, and I said: "I love You, and I give myself to You forever!" There were no demands made, no struggles, no sacrifices; for a long time now Jesus and poor little Therese looked at and understood each other. That day, it was no longer simply a look, it was a fusion; they were no longer two, Therese had vanished as a drop of water is lost in the immensity of the ocean. Jesus alone remained; He was the Master, the King.

Story of a Soul, chapter 4.

Therese looked back on her First Communion and thought of it as "a kiss of love." In her reflection she recognised that the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist was not a cold, unchanging presence. She saw that the Eucharist was the presence of Jesus actively loving her. In fact, Therese was often fascinated with the image of Jesus' life poured out as a gift from the Cross: Jesus' life-giving presence was like a river which she desired to totally receive. She dreaded the thought of that gift being un-received and wasted. She quite often writes about the joy of being lost in Jesus like a "drop of water is lost in the immensity of an ocean."

Therese's deep sense of the activity of God's love flowing into her through her Holy Communion had a big impact on the way she lived and related to others. We will see in later reflections that she became a woman full of holy desires: the desire to preach, to be a missionary and even to be a martyr. Basically the joyful inflowing of Jesus' presence awoke and shaped, in Therese, the desire to pass on that presence of Christ's life to others.

In Chapter 4 of the *Story of a Soul*, Therese sets the scene for her First Holy Communion. She spends quite a lot of time in this chapter writing about the changing, unreliable side of life which she began to discover as a child. She was hungry for the kind of love that passing friendships could not deliver — in a childhood full of so much loss and change Therese hungered for a deep and dependable love. She hungered for a relationship where the great desire and love which she felt in her own heart could be truly answered with the deep felt love of Another:

My heart, sensitive and affectionate as it was, would have easily surrendered had it found a heart capable of understanding it. I tried to make friends with little girls my own age, and especially with two of them. I loved them and they, in their turn, loved me insofar as they were capable. But alas! how narrow and flighty is the heart of creatures! Soon I saw my love was misunderstood. ... How can I thank Jesus for making me find "only bitterness in earth's friendships!" With a heart such

as mine, I would have allowed myself to be taken and my wings to be clipped, and then how would I have been able to "fly and be at rest?"

Story of a Soul, chapter 4.

As a young nun Therese looked back on her disappointments and actually saw that they contained a hidden blessing. How could there be a blessing in being let down by her friends and in not having her deeply felt love reciprocated? Therese looked back on her childhood and saw that her many disappointments were like guideposts which kept her directed towards God who was the only true and full answer to her longing. Each disappointment reminded her that God was the One she was looking for and who alone could fully answer the hunger of her heart. Each disappointment opened up the space within her where God was waiting to enter in. In Therese's First Communion, and the many that followed in her life, her deep hunger met that total desire of Jesus to give Himself which we pondered at the beginning of this reflection.

It is not to remain in a golden ciborium that He comes to us each day from heaven; it's to find another heaven, infinitely more dear to Him than the first: the heaven of our soul, made to His image, the living temple of the adorable Trinity!

Story of a Soul, chapter 5.

The story of Therese can help us in many ways. First of all she can teach us a way of seeing and reflecting on Jesus, particularly the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. She shows us that Jesus is there for each of us, desiring to be given into the depths of our hearts. Therese's sense of the Eucharist can help us to focus on the power of Jesus' love flowing into us through the self-giving words and actions of the Last Supper which were then fulfilled in His handing over of life to us through His death on the Cross.

PRAYER TO JESUS IN THE BLESSED SACRAMENT

Lord Jesus Christ, you have taught us that those who come to you will never hunger. Through the intercession of St. Therese give us a deeper awareness of your powerful desire to share your life with us. Let the river of your love, from your broken body on the cross, flow into our hearts, our minds and our daily lives. Give us a deep love and desire for your presence in the Blessed Sacrament both now and forever. Amen.

Therese also teaches us how to look on disappointments from the point of view of our relationship with God. Our disappointments teach us a great deal about our own hearts. Disappointment happens because of our struggle to find someone or something in which we can place our hope. Disappointment uncovers the unfinished business of the searching in our lives and the still unsatisfied hunger of our hearts.

It can be helpful to ask St. Therese to support us in hearing what God is saying to us during our times of searching. For example, during times of disappointment we might prayerfully reflect in God's loving presence: Does this disappointment in my life tell me that I have been looking for something which only God can give? Is God trying to wake me up and show me that I need to readjust my priorities so that I am directed more truly to the Lord in all that I say and do? Have I lost touch with Jesus in the intimacy of Holy Communion and the other Sacraments? Do I need to give some time to remembering the way that Jesus has seen me, loved me and given Himself to me? Have I been depriving myself of the full nourishment that can only be found in God's love?

A PRAYER WITH EMPTY HANDS

Heavenly Father, we come to you with empty hands; and into these hands you place your Son, Jesus Christ. Make this emptiness a fruitful homeland for your son so that He may reign in us and pour the waters of his mercy into the world through us. In answer to your love we offer you Jesus, your beloved son, in whom you are well pleased.

St. Therese assist us through your prayerful intercession that we may have confidence in God's merciful love especially when we fail.

We make our prayer through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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THE EUCHARIST IN THE POETRY OF ST. THERESE OF LISIEUX

In previous reflections we have discovered that St Therese was a young woman with a powerful and creative imagination. As a child she won her fellow school-children over with her ability to tell stories. As a young nun, in an enclosed contemplative community, she turned her creative mind towards the powerful presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

Therese gazed on the Eucharist and believed that her own life and destiny and the life and destiny of the rest of the community, in relationship with Jesus, could be discovered and seen in the actions carried out in the celebration of the Mass. She expressed the riches, uncovered through her loving gaze, in the poetry which she composed for her community.

... .. O my Divine King
I am a bunch of grapes
who should disappear for you...
it's in the wine-press of suffering
that I shall prove my love to you...

... .. I am chosen
among the grains of pure wheat
who lose their life for Jesus...
great good is my ravishment!

Translated from the poem "Mes Desirs aupres de Jesus cache dans sa Prison d'Amour"

As we can see in the above lines of poetry, Therese understood her own spiritual journey by thinking of the journey of the grapes which were crushed to become the wine which would be consecrated to become the Blood of Christ. She would often think of the circumstances of life, the small daily acts of sacrifice and loving self-giving, as being food which could be given to the Child Jesus. In many ways she explored the depths of her relationship with God through various images. In some ways she thought of herself as joining Mary in the intimate, maternal love and self-giving in answer to the Child Jesus' hunger. The beautiful fulfilment of this image was the transformation of this self-giving into the gift of Jesus Himself. At other times she would think of herself as a helpless child unable to do anything without calling out to her Heavenly Father. These images pointed towards the unfolding truth which would emerge through the way she lived and the way she endured her suffering and finally died at the age of 24.

Christmas Conversion

GRACE AND THE LIBERATION OF ST. THERESE FROM
OVER-SENSITIVITY

Have you ever come across a young child who is crying, and stopped to ask what's the matter, only to be given the answer, "She is *looking* at me!!" No doubt we have come across people, not always children who are like minefields of sensitivity. A look, a tone of voice, or even silence can result in an explosion of wounded cries and tears. It can be easy to come to the disheartening conclusion that we can do nothing right by this sensitive person: no matter what we do or say it will always be taken as a criticism or an attack. In this reflection we will hear the story of a young girl who received a grace, a special work of God within her, which set her free from the imprisonment of such sensitivity. That young girl was St. Therese of Lisieux:

I was really unbearable because of my extreme touchiness; if I happened to cause anyone I loved some little trouble, even unwittingly, instead of forgetting about it and not crying, which made matters worse, I cried like a Magdalene and then when I began to cheer up, I'd begin to cry again for having cried. All arguments were useless; I was quite unable to correct this terrible fault.

Story of a Soul, chapter 5

In previous reflections we have seen that the writing and the spiritual teaching of St. Therese focuses on the way that we can meet God and respond to God in the most ordinary circumstances of our lives. Other saints can fill us with awe as they describe the huge spiritual extremes of their lives: the great sinners who were overpowered by God and who then converted to become great saints. St. Therese learnt to see the same awesome love and power of God in the small, hardly earth-shattering, changes in her own life and in her own heart.

It was December 25, 1886, that I received the grace of leaving my childhood, in a word, the grace of my complete conversion. We had come back from Midnight Mass where I had the happiness of receiving the strong and powerful God. Upon arriving at Les Buissonnets, I used to love to take my shoes from the chimney-corner and examine the presents in them; this old custom had given us so much joy in our youth that Celine wanted to continue treating me as a baby since I was the youngest in the family. Papa had always loved to see my happiness and listen to my cries of delight as I drew each surprise from the magic shoes, and my dear King's gaiety increased my own happiness very much. However, Jesus desired to show me that I was to give up the defects of my childhood and so He withdrew its innocent pleasures. He permitted Papa, tired out after the Midnight Mass, to experience annoyance when seeing my shoes at the fireplace, and that he speak those words which pierced my heart: "Well, fortunately, this will be the last year!" I was going upstairs, at the time, to remove my hat, and Celine, knowing how sensitive I was and seeing the tears already glistening in my eyes, wanted to cry too, for she loved me very much and understood my grief. She said, "Oh, Therese, don't go downstairs; it would cause you too much grief to look at your slippers right now!" But Therese was no longer the same; Jesus had changed her heart! Forcing back my tears, I descended the stairs rapidly; controlling the poundings of my heart, I took my slippers and placed them in front of Papa, and withdrew all the objects joyfully. I had the happy appearance of a Queen. Having regained his own cheerfulness, Papa was laughing; Celine believed it was all a dream! Fortunately, it was a sweet reality; Therese had discovered once again the strength of soul which she had lost at the age of four and a half, and she was to preserve it forever!

Story of a Soul, chapter 5

The special grace which Therese received that Christmas is important from a number of points of view. The "strength of soul" which she writes about is an important part of her spiritual teaching. It played an important role in the way she lived her life when she went to live in an enclosed community of Carmelite nuns. What is this "strength of soul" which she writes about?

We all have certain habits — certain automatic and often repeated ways of thinking and acting. Our habits can be good. For example if we do a good work, like regularly helping someone with a particular need, then our repeated efforts can become a regular part of our way of life. We are also familiar with certain habits, certain deeply rooted ways of thinking and acting, which hold us back from being fully alive and fully responsive to God.

Often our habits are a sign of the way we think about ourselves, other people and life in general.

Therese, as a child, carried a lot of sadness inside herself: her mother died when she was young, her older sister Pauline left home to enter an enclosed monastery, and Therese had difficulty with the ways of the world that lay beyond her family home. She was certainly determined to be good yet even the vaguest hint that she might have failed in her efforts opened up the depths of that sadness within her. It's impossible for us to fully understand why Therese suffered from such sensitivity. Did she think that the only way to prevent losing the remaining love in her life was through earning or paying for that love by succeeding in being good? Did the smallest personal failure cause her to feel threatened by the possibility of losing the remaining love in her life, after all she carried the memory of so much loss already?

Only Therese could fully answer these questions. We are simply left with her reflections on her childhood sensitivity in the *Story of a Soul*. We can see from those reflections that, as a young child before the Christmas conversion, she was often trapped and unable to see beyond her feelings of failure and sadness. For many years she did not have the strength to move beyond this sensitivity and frustration. The conversion of Therese was not just about her powerfully receiving the God-given strength to move beyond the grip of being over sensitive. The conversion was the beginning of a new way of thinking about God and relating to God. The God whom Therese encountered on that Christmas was a God who was moving her towards the way of Jesus' active and unconditional love.

We had come back from Midnight Mass where I had the happiness of receiving the strong and powerful God.

In the previous reflection we reflected on the loving desire of Jesus at the Last Supper and during His death on the cross. Jesus was deeply hurt and deeply wounded by rejection yet He did not allow His love to be smothered by the pain of being rejected. His love was stronger than the rejection and misunderstanding which He suffered.

Therese recognised that this was the strength and power of God whom she received in the Eucharist at Midnight Mass. The "strength of soul" which she writes about is a sharing in the strength of Jesus' life-giving love which continues its work even when unnoticed, unrewarded or even actively

opposed. Therese had a strong sense of the connection between the giving of Jesus in Communion and the strength to face suffering in her own life. She knew and increasingly lived according to the truth that God's loving action is often concerned with facing the situation or even the person who is in most need of that love of Jesus (and often that means the most difficult people in our lives).

I was resolved to remain in spirit at the foot of the Cross and to receive the divine dew. I understood I was then to pour it out upon souls. The cry of Jesus on the Cross sounded continually in my heart: "I thirst!" These words ignited within me an unknown and very living fire. I wanted to give my Beloved to drink and I felt myself consumed with a thirst for souls.

Story of a Soul, chapter 5.

It can be a helpful exercise, in our own lives, to reflect on the truth that Jesus' thirsts for the life and love of the many people whom we meet. Jesus desires to communicate all that is in His Heart to each person we know. The saints were so caught up in that strong desire of Jesus that they forgot about themselves and their own self-interests. They were drawn through a gradual dying of their self-centredness into the new life of Jesus. Each one of us is called to become a sharer in that same desire of Jesus but we cannot do it simply by our own power. Like St. Therese, we need to be open to the grace of God and the gift of God's presence. We need to pray and reflect and become familiar with the way of Jesus which we discover in the Gospels. It is important to be aware of our limitations but we should always keep in mind the presence of our God who loves us and is constantly at work within us.

A Prayer for Strength of Soul

Heavenly Father, you touched your daughter St. Therese with the loving desire of Jesus for all people. You gave her strength of soul to forget herself as she shared in Jesus' work of love. Grant that we may share in this same grace through the intercession of St. Therese. We make our prayer through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Against the Odds

ST. THERESE'S JOURNEY TO BECOME A CARMELITE NUN

Great love stories often involve a moment of confrontation. Just when love seems to have won the day a complication often arises that would make love's destiny impossible to fulfil. In these stories the great momentum of love pushes hard against surrounding, frustrating circumstances. We are drawn into the tension of such stories because they uncover the basic questions which we all must live with: Will love have the final word, stamping my life with its own particular beauty, or will the possibility of love, hope and truth in my heart be trampled down by all that would oppose their growth and flourishing?

Often love, truth and beauty prove their greatness most clearly in the presence of opposition. Darkness often provides the most powerful setting for the unique beauty of light to emerge and be seen. In fact darkness, that place where light is needed most truly, can awaken our hunger for that light to come and when it comes we are all the more ready to follow it.

On that glad night,
in secret, for no one saw me,
nor did I look at anything,
with no other light or guide
than the one that burned in my heart.

This guided me
more surely than the light of noon
to where he was awaiting me
— him I knew so well —
there in a place where no one else appeared.

St John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*

In Chapter 5 of her autobiography, the *Story of a Soul*, St. Therese tells of a period of great grace in her life. She had passed through a wonderful conversion which had given her strength of soul. This strength helped her to move beyond the tendency to be over-sensitive and she was able to be, more truly, an instrument of Jesus' unconditional love. She had known the darkness of her own frustrating weaknesses and she had encountered the burning light of Jesus' presence.

Thérèse knew that the answer to the question "where do I belong?" is discovered in *the call to love God in and through our lives*. She quotes the poem from the great Carmelite, St. John of the Cross (see above) because she shared in John's understanding of love. God is always drawing us into His loving presence. There is nothing more important or valuable than simply and truly being with the One who loves us. Each of us belongs in this kind of loving relationship with God. God desires to draw each of us into this loving relationship through our own particular calling or vocation. Therese knew from an early age that her particular calling was to the life of the Discalced Carmelites Nuns.

*I was to pass through many trials, but the divine call was so strong that had I
been forced to pass through flames,
I would have done it out of love for Jesus.
Story of a Soul, chapter 5.*

Any vocation is a mysterious gift from God. It is always more than we can explain with our own understanding and words. Any Christian vocation (religious life, marriage, priesthood or single life) involves being touched by God's loving desire for us and desiring to respond to God with the love of our own hearts. A Christian vocation also involves the discovery that there is a certain hunger in our hearts that only God can satisfy — truly discovering that *I am made for God*. Therese became more and more aware that her deepest desires were meant to lead her to share her life with God. Our deepest desire to live the life that we are meant to live prepares a place, inside our hearts, where God can do His loving work.

ST. THERESE AND POPE LEO XIII

St. Therese desired to give herself totally to God as a Carmelite Nun. As a 15-year-old her desire came face-to-face with quite reasonable reservations from family members and from the Church representatives who spoke to her about her vocation: Surely she is too young! Is she simply desiring to enter Carmel in order to be with her two older sisters? What about her father, surely he has made so many sacrifices already with his wife dead and his two eldest girls already living in the enclosed monastery of Lisieux Carmel? ...

The desire in Therese's heart provided a sharp contrast with this world of human arguments, interpretations and reservations. Therese, quite simply, wanted God. Everything else paled into insignificance in the presence of the bright light of that desire for God. She believed that such desire could only come through the touch of God awakening her and calling her to love. The God-given nature of that desire was the source of strength that Therese needed in continuing to do all that she could to become a Carmelite nun:

It was surely only love of Jesus that could help me surmount these difficulties and the ones that followed, for it pleased Him to have me buy my vocation with very great trials. – Story of a Soul, chapter 5

Often the greatest difficulty for anyone who feels called to a particular vocation (religious life, priesthood, marriage, or single life) comes in the effort to uncover and express the secret desire of the heart in the presence of another person. We can feel vulnerable when we uncover that personal treasure of God's loving call in our life and all kinds of thoughts can pass through our mind: what if I can't find the right words? what if they don't believe in my call? St. Therese knew such difficulties: she uncovered her desire for Carmel and faced the judgments, reservations and doubts of a number of important people. Reflecting back on her journey through these difficult meetings, she was able to see that only "love of Jesus" could have sustained her in the journey. "Love of Jesus" strengthened her and made her able to say what she had to say and do what she had to do in answering God's call.

The life-giving presence of Jesus transformed a timid sensitive little girl into a woman with the strength to speak and express that same life that Jesus

was pouring into her. This was the foundation of Therese's courage and audacity. Her story shows us the way in which God can be present and at work in our lives. Jesus' love is life-changing and delivers its own kind of hope which cannot be overcome by negative circumstances.

After a number of set-backs in Therese's efforts to be accepted in the Carmelite Monastery, her father took her on a pilgrimage to Rome. She gives an account of this pilgrimage in Chapter 6 of the *Story of a Soul*. The pilgrimage culminated in an audience with Pope Leo XIII. Each of the pilgrims went up to the Pope, who was seated on a throne and surrounded by Cardinals, Archbishops and Bishops, and each person received his blessing. Eventually it was Therese's turn to approach the Pope:

The Sovereign Pontiff lowered his head towards me in such a way that my face almost touched his, and I saw his eyes, black and deep, fixed on me and they seemed to penetrate to the depths of my soul. "Holy Father, in honour of your Jubilee, permit me to enter Carmel at the age of fifteen!"

Story of a Soul, chapter 6

The Pope assured Therese that she would enter Carmel if it was God's will. She would have to wait in the dark a little longer. Eventually the Superiors agreed to accept her into the monastery. The day of her entrance into Carmel was 9th April, 1888.

A PRAYER IN THE DARKNESS

Lord Jesus, you once drew St. Therese into the darkness of suffering and temptation. You made her a beacon, of faith and a loving sister to unbelievers as she suffered by their side. Renew her prayerful influence for those in our world who do not believe in you. May they know you and love you Lord through her powerful intercession. May your kingdom come and reign in our hearts now and forever. Amen.

The Bitter and the Sweet

ST. THERESE'S FIRST YEARS IN THE
CARMELITE COMMUNITY

Imagine walking through the wards of a large city hospital. If you are familiar with such a situation then you would know that in each ward you would find a wide range of thoughts and attitudes amongst the hospital patients. You would encounter despair in some, hope in others, inspiring generosity and sometimes bitter selfishness. The many patients would all have suffering in common but each one would be unique in the way they continue to live in the midst of that suffering.

The deepest suffering often comes about when we begin to feel the basic building blocks of our lives being taken away. We build up a sense of who we are and of our life through our ways of living, acting and thinking. We build up a sense of our life through the familiar ways of other people in relationship with ourselves. The deepest suffering can knock down that sense of who we are and what our life is all about.

Our present way of life is changing: those close to us pass away, the energy of our youth subsides, our quick thinking can slow down, people come and go. In suffering we touch on the real truth that our life and the lives of those we love will not remain the same. All is destined to move on and eventually pass away. Suffering can make us face up to the most important questions in our lives: "Is what is being taken from me, in my suffering, simply lost and wasted away or is there some kind of value in what I am going through? Where is all of this leading to and what will be left of me in the end?"

In this reflection we will listen to the beginning of St. Therese of Lisieux's reflections on her early years as a Carmelite nun living in an enclosed monastery. Her thoughts are a weaving together of joys and sorrows: the joy of beginning to give her life to God as a nun, the struggle of living in an enclosed religious community, the difficulties of not being able to speak about her spiritual life and the sorrow of seeing her beloved father overcome by a terrible illness. In the midst of her reflections Therese uncovers her own unique and challenging attitude towards suffering:

My desire for suffering was answered, and yet my attraction for it did not diminish. My soul soon shared in the sufferings of my heart. Spiritual aridity was my daily bread and, deprived of all consolation, I was still the happiest of creatures since all my desires had been satisfied.

Story of a Soul, chapter 7

During Therese's first years in the Carmelite monastery her father, Louis Martin, began to experience a decline in health. He suffered from a painful tumour and also from serious kidney trouble which caused a wide range of problems which included memory loss, mood swings and irrational urges to run away.

Louis Martin was an important person in the spiritual life of young Therese. There is a strong connection between her experience of being loved by her father and her understanding of the way that God loved her. Her father was soft-hearted towards her. He looked on Therese as his princess and was ever-protective and ready to provide her with all that she needed. Just as Therese discovered God's love through the love of her father so, during those early years as a Carmelite nun, did she discover Christ's suffering within the heart of her father's suffering.

Like that of our Divine Master, Papa's glory of a day was followed by a painful passion and this passion was not his alone. Just as the sufferings of Jesus pierced His Mother's heart with a sword of sorrow, so our hearts experienced the sufferings of the one we cherished most tenderly on earth.

Story of a Soul, chapter 7

Some of us may struggle with the way Therese seems to write about suffering with an almost eager enthusiasm. What does she mean when she says she desires suffering and finds a certain satisfaction in the deprivation that comes through suffering? The answer to this question is found in the suffering of Jesus.

Therese is very Christ-centred in her understanding of suffering. Jesus' suffering and ultimate death on the Cross remains at the heart of her reflection on her own suffering and that of her father. She sees suffering, through the eyes of faith, as opening up the opportunity to be with Jesus and to offer ourselves, with Jesus, to the Father. How can we understand this way of seeing suffering?

At the beginning of the reflection we considered the changing nature of our life: someday all that we have at this present moment will have gone. God entered into the passing, changing movement of our life by becoming like us in all things but sin — in the person of Jesus. In Jesus God has shared in all that we go through. The life of Jesus was full of the unfolding changes and the passing away that we all experience. He went through His life, and finally lost His life on the Cross, with the desire to give Himself to His Heavenly Father. The Heavenly Father received and accepted Him. The unavoidable changes and the final loss of life that we all go through were transformed, by Jesus own death, to become moments where we can be given to God. In union with Jesus our daily experiences of “losing ourselves” have become moments of “being given to God.”

Therese’s Christ-centred view of suffering tapped into this truth. As she reflected back on the time when her father, Louis, was being stripped of so much through his suffering she recognised that this was really about her father being gradually gathered into the deep, hidden heart of God. Louis’ life was not wasting away to nothing but, rather, was being gathered up and claimed as a much loved gift by God.

Papa had just made a donation to God of an altar, and it was he who was chosen as victim to be offered with the Lamb without spot. — Story of a Soul, chapter 7

Therese looked back and believed that her father, through his suffering, was being gathered up into the acceptable offering of Jesus to the Heavenly Father. This provides us with a good basis for understanding Therese’s way of recognising God’s active love in our experience of suffering. Nothing that is taken away is lost. All that seems to be lost is, in fact, gradually being taken into the hidden depths of God’s embrace. God’s active desire to receive us is the transforming final word that can make our suffering a pathway — in and through Jesus — to eternal life.

The little flower transplanted to Mount Carmel was to expand under the shadow of the cross. The tears and blood of Jesus were to be her dew, and her Sun was His adorable Face veiled with tears. Until my coming to Carmel, I had never fathomed the depths of the treasures hidden in the Holy Face. — Story of a Soul, chapter 7

I found the religious life to be exactly as I had imagined it, no sacrifice astonished me and yet, as you know, dear Mother, my first steps met with more thorns than roses! Yes, suffering opened wide its arms to me and I threw myself into them with love. — Story of a Soul, chapter 7

Therese experienced various difficulties as a young nun. Looking back she describes the Superior of the community as being “VERY SEVERE without her even knowing it..” Therese was often misunderstood, at times corrected for faults she had not committed, she had difficulty talking about her spiritual life and she only had fleeting contact with one of the few people whom she felt understood and could direct her. In the first years living in the monastery Therese was often only noticed when a superior thought she needed correction. In many ways, throughout her religious life, she was often passed by and unnoticed.

Out of this whole experience there gradually emerged a spiritual teaching most often known as the Little Way. We have already reflected on Therese’s thoughts on suffering: all that seems to be lost is, in fact, being gathered into the heart of God. Therese waits to teach us whenever we are misunderstood, lose face, are falsely accused or are left ignored and unnoticed. Our daily sufferings and losses are an encounter with God who desires to take a little more of ourselves, each day, into the hidden depths of His Heart. Each day presents opportunities to let go of something in our lives so that we might be given more fully to God. In union with Jesus this letting go, these small sacrifices of our daily lives, can make a positive difference in drawing others closer to God.

Our daily life is God’s chosen work-place where the ever present God waits to give Himself more fully to us and also waits to totally receive us as a gift of love. God desires to work through everything that we go through in our life and God can bring about good even through the unavoidable difficulties and suffering which we all experience. This is just as we hear in St. Paul when he writes that all things work for the good of those who love God (*Rom 8:28*).

A Victim to God's Love

ST. THERESE'S ACT OF SELF OFFERING AT THE HEART OF HER COMMUNITY

A farmer wanders through his drought stricken property. He sees the dust, the dying vegetation, and he hears the mad bellowing of the thirsty cattle. He has just been told that some distance below the ground there is water. There is no one to help him and all he has is a single shovel. What does the farmer do?

He begins to dig. At first his effort is filled with strength but as he digs deeper he gradually loses his strength. We could almost say that the farmer is allowing himself to be lost through his effort to reach the water. He is paying a personal price by giving himself in answer to the needs of his property. The strong influence to uncover what is needed coaxes him to give more, to dig deeper, to persevere. The closeness of the water, and the goodness it can bring, draw the farmer on as he spends himself in work. The farmer will only be satisfied with one answer to all his self-giving effort the rising up of the water from the depths of the earth.

*In order to live in one single act of perfect Love,
I offer myself as a victim of holocaust to your merciful love,
asking You to consume me incessantly, allowing the waves of infinite tenderness
shut up within You to overflow into my soul,
and that I thus may become a martyr of Your Love, O my God!*

*"The Act of Oblation to Merciful Love"
St Therese offered herself to God through this act.*

The Act of Oblation to Merciful Love, partly quoted above, uses imagery which is similar to our story of the farmer in the drought. This prayer speaks with confidence in the "waves of infinite tenderness" of God. The merciful love of God is like the water deep below the surface of the ground. It is "shut up" and must be uncovered so that it might overflow into all the places where it is most needed.

The farmer must heroically spend himself in order to reach the water which will save his property. In *the Act of Oblation to Merciful Love* there is an important acknowledgment — we do not have the strength or the equipment to dig down deep enough to break open the well-springs of God's Merciful Love.

Why are there contemplative Religious orders in the Church?

The church exists because Jesus draws people to himself and as they are drawn to Jesus they become one people, a community of believers who are brothers and sisters in Christ.

People who love each other share everything — they become so much part of each other's life that their mind and heart become a home where that other person belongs. Where there is true love the presence and loving influence of one person is shown through the one who loves. The presence of that other person is shown through words and actions, through expressions and mannerisms, of the lover.

Jesus is really present in the Church as a loved one in the minds and hearts of believers. Because of this relationship of love, the Church shares in the destiny of Jesus. It is formed and shaped by all that Jesus is and by all that he does in his life, death and resurrection. In the life of the church Jesus continues to be present in the world loving, healing, forgiving, praying and offering himself as a gift of love to the heavenly Father.

Every Christian vocation involves love of Jesus which leads, more and more, to a sharing in the life of Jesus. Loving him leads us to follow him, to share in his destiny, so that our lives become a visible sign of his action in our world.

The holy Spirit draws particular people to share in particular aspects of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Contemplative orders exist because some people are drawn to be with Jesus as he goes off to solitary places to pray to his heavenly Father. People often speak about their reason for joining a contemplative order as being based on a desire for a life of prayer.

The Church has always cherished and valued the presence of contemplative orders such as Therese's order, the Discalced Carmelites, this is because the Church knows that it needs to have a loving heart in prayerful communion with the life-giving presence of God.

A VOCATIONS PRAYER

Lord Jesus, source of my life, shed your clear light on my mind and heart so that I may hear and respond to your call.

St. Therese pray that I might have strength of soul in following Jesus and loving him now and forever. Amen.

God, and only God, can provide us with the strength, the direction and all that we need in order to break open and be filled with God's infinite tenderness:

In the evening of this life, I shall appear before You with empty hands, for I do not ask you, Lord, to count my works ... I wish, then, to be clothed in Your own Justice and to receive from Your Love the eternal possession of Yourself. I want no other Throne, no other Crown but You, my Beloved!
"The Act of Oblation to Merciful Love"

Being able to say to God, "I shall appear before You with *empty hands*," was an important part of the growing spiritual maturity of Therese. You may remember that her over-sensitivity, as a child, often led her to explode in tears whenever she failed in her efforts to be virtuous. Her growing and realistic maturity flourished in and through her faith in the tender mercy of God who comes down to provide whatever is needed. Loving confidence in God changed the way she understood and experienced failures. Failure had become an opportunity for God's glory to break in and shine.

In Chapter 8 of her autobiography, *the Story of a Soul*, Therese almost rejoices in her failures simply because she sees them as situations where God's loving and merciful healing will finally prevail. In the midst of failures she keeps her mind on God's mercy and, in her account of falling asleep in prayer, feeling distracted and dry, we find that we have a sister who shares our own experiences. We hear, in Therese's story, that even a saint goes through all the ups and downs which can sometimes lead us to think of ourselves, quite mistakenly, as un-spiritual. Her secret is a loving faith in a God who never wavers in loving us and who mercifully provides what is needed:

Really, I am far from being a saint, and what I have just said is proof of this; instead of rejoicing, for example, at my aridity, I should attribute it to my little fervor and lack of fidelity; I should be desolate for having slept (for seven years) during my hours of prayer and my thanksgivings after Holy Communion; well, I am not desolate. I remember that little children are as pleasing to their parents when they are asleep as well as when they are wide awake; I remember, too, that when they perform operations, doctors put their patients to sleep. Finally, I remember that: "The Lord knows our weakness, that he is mindful that we are but dust and ashes."
Story of a Soul, chapter 8

Some people, who are trying to take their spiritual life seriously, can occasionally be heard to say, "If *only I was more like this person or that person ... if only I was better or more capable ... if only my life situation was different...*" We can become

quite caught up in the believing that *if only* things were different then we would be more acceptable to others and to God. We can use up a lot of energy and experience a lot of frustration trying to be someone other than ourselves in the hope it will make us more acceptable. St. Therese provides a good remedy for the times when we can be caught up in this world of *if onlys*. She knew that God accepts us because God chooses to love us. She knew, not just in her mind, but in her heart, that we could never pay God back for that love even if we were more perfect.

... God is more tender than a mother, and were you not, dear Mother, always ready to pardon the little offenses I committed against you involuntarily? How often I experienced this! No word of reproach touched me as much as did one of your caresses. My nature was such that fear made me recoil; with love not only did I advance, I actually flew. – Story of a Soul, chapter 8

We are all called to do the best we can in living a good life but, at the end of the day, we all come before God with *empty hands*. The mature insight of Therese says: here I am, trying to do the best I can, desiring to live a good life, endeavouring to show love in my relationships, trying to spend time with God in prayer, and yet I know that all my efforts are incomplete and far from perfect. The answer to this incompleteness and lack of perfection is not going to be found in thinking *if only things were different* or *if only I was someone else*. The answer to who I am and what God calls me to become is found simply in the truth that this incomplete, imperfect person is seen and loved by a God of tender mercy. Therese, once again, has a very Christ-centred understanding of how God embraces us in our incompleteness and imperfection:

I believe it is Jesus Himself hidden in the depths of my poor little heart: He is giving me the grace of acting within me, making me think of all He desires me to do at the present moment. – Story of a Soul, chapter 8

We all wonder how we can be more patient, more loving, more sensitive and more wise. Therese knew that all these great gifts, that we seek, are found in Jesus. God provides us with these great gifts through giving us Jesus. In Jesus, particularly in the Eucharist, we can all say *here is Jesus, God's patience given to me; here is Jesus, God's love generously poured into me and seeking to go out to the world through me; here is Jesus, God's sensitive and merciful heart touching and influencing me in this communion; here is Jesus, God's deep and hidden wisdom taking me by the hand to guide me in the darkness; here is Jesus, all I truly seek and need is here in this intimacy with Him, all that I need is given to me in Him.*

My Vocation is Love

THE SECRETS OF JESUS AND THE POWER OF LOVE IN THE CHURCH

True love is always concerned with providing for the needs of the person who is loved: *just tell me what needs to be done and I will do it; just tell me what you are searching for and I will do whatever I can to help you find it; just give me the message and I will communicate it.* The desire to provide for the needs of that other person can lead to a frustrating discovery — we cannot always answer the needs of the person whom we love; we can never be the complete and perfect answer to all that the other person is searching for in their life. Love often leads us to discover our own limitations as we face and try to answer the deep needs of that other person. St. Therese had a similar experience in her desire to answer Jesus. She experienced her limitations but she did not become disheartened. Instead she focused her attention on the real presence of the love that awakened her desires:

No doubt, these three privileges sum up my true vocation: Carmelite, Spouse, Mother, and yet I feel within me other vocations. I feel the vocation of the WARRIOR, THE PRIEST, THE APOSTLE, THE DOCTOR, THE MARTYR. Finally, I feel the need and the desire of carrying out the most heroic deeds for You, O Jesus. I feel within my soul the courage of the Crusader, the Papal Guard, and I would want to die on the field of battle in defense of the Church.
— Story of a Soul, chapter 9

Whenever Therese writes about the love of God she often uses images that speak of overpowering force that cannot be held back: the merciful love of God is a wave within which a person might be lost as a victim of love; the Trinity is an Eternal Fire that consumes with love. Therese lived with a maturing sense of God powerfully reaching out with merciful love in answer to the deepest needs of the world. She experienced herself as being drawn into the action of God loving the world.

We hear this young Carmelite nun, at the end of the 19th Century, writing about her desire to live all the vocations of the Church. Gradually, with the help of St. Paul's words in *I Corinthians*, Therese came to see that she felt these vocations within her heart because she shared in the power that gave life, direction and meaning to Warriors, Priests, Apostles, Doctors and Martyrs:

Charity gave me the key to my vocation. I understood that if the Church had a body composed of different members, the most necessary and most noble of all could not be lacking to it, and so I understood that the Church had a Heart and that this Heart was BURNING WITH LOVE. I understood it was Love alone that made the Church's members act, that if Love ever became extinct, apostles would not preach the Gospel and martyrs would not shed their blood. I understood that LOVE COMPRISED ALL VOCATIONS, THAT LOVE WAS EVERYTHING, THAT IT EMBRACED ALL TIMES AND PLACES. Then, in the excess of my delirious joy, I cried out: O Jesus, my Love my vocation, at last I have found it
MY VOCATION IS LOVE! – Story of a Soul, chapter 9

Therese makes a very important connection between her own life and the overall life of the Church. If we were to ask Therese “*what is the Church?*” what answer would she give? The heart of the Church is LOVE. The Church is kept alive by LOVE. In a great act of love God comes to be with us, and share in our life, in Jesus. All who receive the gift of Jesus' presence, through faith, are drawn together to become the community of believers known as the Church. The Presence of Jesus and His *loving work* seeks to reach out into the world through the Church. The Church is always meant to be a sign and an instrument of the powerful presence of Jesus loving all the people of the world. This LOVE is the life-giving force that makes all the good works, brave deeds and powerful preaching possible. In answer to the question “*what can I do as a Christian?*” the starting point must always be love: feed on the love that Jesus has for you and pray for the freedom to respond to the prompting of His Love.

I understand so well that it is only love which makes us acceptable to God that this love is the only good I ambition. Jesus deigned to show me the road that leads to this Divine Furnace, and this road is the surrender of the little child who sleeps without fear in its Father's arms. – Story of a Soul, chapter 9

The market-place has its own rules. If we wish to possess a product then we must have the right amount of money to pay for it. If a performer wants to make a profit then he must show enough skill to be of interest to the people passing by. The market-place teaches us that we cannot gain anything unless we have enough money and we cannot earn what we need unless we have enough skill. We can often be tempted to think about holiness in the same way. Someone might say to us, “Follow the example of the saints...” but how often do we reply, “It was easy for them ... they were saints and I am far from being one! God worked in their lives in a powerful and obvious way and God has never been so obvious in my life!”

A cry to God from the Darkness

THE LITTLE WAY AND THE TRIAL OF FAITH OF ST. THERESE

In the third section of St. Therese's *Story of a Soul*, often referred to as Manuscript C, we are presented with the very heart of her teaching on the Little Way. Therese is writing to the recently elected Prioress in her community, Mother Marie de Gonzague:

You know, Mother, I have always wanted to be a saint. Alas! I have always noticed that when I compared myself to the saints, there is between them and me the same difference that exists between a mountain whose summit is lost in the clouds and the obscure grain of sand trampled underfoot by the passers-by. Instead of becoming discouraged, I said to myself: God cannot inspire unrealisable desires. I can, then, in spite of my littleness, aspire to holiness. It is impossible for me to grow up, and so I must bear with myself such as I am with all my imperfections. But I want to seek out a means of going to heaven by a little way, a way that is very straight, very short, and totally new. — Story of a Soul, chapter 10

Therese is a saint of realistic wisdom. She looks at her life with all its limitations, she looks at her prayer filled with times of dryness and moments of failing asleep, and she knows that it is all small and quite ordinary. Therese does not find the smallness and the ordinariness disheartening. Her realistic wisdom is in touch with the deep power of desire that God has placed in her heart. She does not hesitate in writing that she desired to be a saint — a holy one of God. She knows that if God gives such a holy desire then God will also provide what is needed to make that desire possible.

A person with many gifts and abilities might, at times, be tempted to think and act in a way that suggests that they have enough to earn or pay for God's blessing. Or they might be tempted to think that they can do very well on their own without God's help. Therese values her smallness because it keeps her aware of her total need for God. She knows that she can never be anything other than a small child who needs to be lifted up and cared for by God:

Therese knew that the true heart of holiness was not found in powerful gifts or visions or spiritual fame. Once again she turned her mind to the image of a child and the loving Father to uncover the key to holiness. A child feels most at home, and far less self-conscious, when in a loving environment. The child is most fully alive and most fully himself or herself where there is love. Therese knew that we all live in the environment of God's love. God is not a passer-by who will only stop and give us attention if we have certain skills or gifts. God is not a market keeper who will only give us what we want if we have enough to pay. God is a devoted Father always ready to catch us when we jump into His arms, always lovingly fascinated with the small things that we bring to Him, always concerned with our healing whenever we fall. The truth is we can do very little and yet we are loved very much. Each of us is called to receive and surrender to the great love of God. Our small, limited human hearts then become powerful instruments of Jesus' love reaching into the world.

*O Jesus! why can't I tell all little souls how unspeakable is Your condescension? I feel that if You found a soul weaker and littler than mine, which is impossible, You would be pleased to grant it still greater favors, provided it abandoned itself with total confidence to Your Infinite Mercy. But why do I desire to communicate Your secrets of Love, O Jesus, for was it not You alone who taught them to me, and can You not reveal them to others? Yes, I know it, and I beg You to do it. I beg You to cast Your Divine Glance upon a great number of little souls. I beg You to choose a legion of little Victims worthy of Your LOVE!
— Story of a Soul, chapter 9*

In the song of Mary, the Magnificat, we hear a truth that is often mentioned in the Scriptures. Mary sings that the Lord "looks on His Servant in her lowliness... He casts the mighty from their thrones and raises the lowly ...He fills the starving with good things, sends the rich away empty." St. Therese knew that God particularly favours the small, the lowly and those with the deepest needs. If we feel that we are small with little to offer, or if we sometimes feel that we have achieved little in our lives, then we might find a new source of confidence in the words of St. Therese. God desires to give great love and mercy to the small and the lowly.

The elevator which must raise me to heaven is Your arms, O Jesus! And for this I had no need to grow up, but rather I had to remain little and become this more and more. – Story of a Soul, chapter 10

As we meet Therese in her *Story of a Soul* we come to know that she is an extremely gifted young woman and she did not hesitate in using her gifts in her writings and her efforts to live a good and fruitful life as a Carmelite nun. We might be inclined to think that Therese is mistaken in her judgment of herself as small, however her understanding of her own smallness is not an exaggerated, unreal modesty. Being small is not an act of “hiding your light under a bushel.” Therese sees herself as small because she realizes that all she has is given to her from God. Being small means going through each day knowing, in mind and in heart, that there is a total need for God every step of the way. Being small means constantly reaching out to God, placing our hand into God’s hand as a child would hold a parent’s hand when going through unfamiliar territory or facing the danger of crossing a road. In Therese’s life being small meant looking back on times of sleeping through prayer, for example, and focusing her attention on a God who would hold and embrace that sleeping child. She believed that her small offerings, little acts of patience or generosity, brought pleasure to God in much the same way that a child’s gifts bring pleasure to a parent.

You didn't fear, dear Mother, that I would lead your little lambs astray. My lack of experience and my youthfulness did not frighten you in the least. Perhaps you remembered that often the Lord is pleased to grant wisdom to the little ones, and that one day, in a transport of joy, He blessed His Father for having hidden His secrets from the wise and prudent and for revealing them to the little ones. – Story of a Soul, chapter 10

A PRAYER WITH EMPTY HANDS

Heavenly Father in answer to our need you gave us life and love through the gift of your Son Jesus. He reached out in love wherever healing love was needed. In our emptiness let us receive Jesus and offer Him to you O heavenly Father and may our emptiness become a channel of your love for the world. May St. Therese assist us through her prayers. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

WHAT DOES THE LITTLE WAY OF ST. THERESE TEACH US?

1. Jesus says, “Whoever is a little one, let them come to me.” This is a calling to each of us when we feel that we have very little to offer. Jesus freely loves us, chooses us and calls us to be with Him.
2. Our closeness to God cannot be measured by simply looking at our natural gift and abilities. We should certainly use our gifts for the glory of God and in the service of loving our neighbour. Nevertheless our closeness to God is made possible because of God’s love for us, drawing us to intimacy through the Life, Death and Resurrection of Jesus. We are close to God because God loves us. Therese encourages us to have confidence in this caring, generous love of God.

In a previous reflection (No. 8) we listened to Therese as she reflected on the terrible suffering of her father, Louis Martin. We saw that Therese had a strong, Christ-centred understanding of the good that can be achieved through suffering. Her Christian faith told her that the loss that comes through suffering is not a wasting away of a person - all that seems to be lost is being drawn into the hidden depths of God’s heart. Suffering opens up the opportunity of stepping into the river of Jesus’ letting go of His Life so that it might be offered and taken into the heart of His Heavenly Father. Jesus has transformed the darkness and loss that suffering causes. It has now become an opportunity to be more fully given to God. In the final stages of life Therese went through that darkness and loss. Not long after the first signs of her final illness Therese began to be deeply tempted to doubt the existence of Heaven:

When I want to rest my heart fatigued by the darkness which surrounds it by the memory of the luminous country after which I aspire, my torment redoubles; it seems to me that the darkness, borrowing the voice of sinners, says mockingly to me: “You are dreaming about the light, about a fatherland embalmed in the sweetest perfumes; you are dreaming about the eternal possession of the Creator of all these marvels; you believe that one day you will walk out of this fog which surrounds you! Advance, advance; rejoice in death which will give you not what you hope for but a night still more profound, the night of nothingness.” – Story of a Soul, chapter 10

The true holiness of St. Therese of Lisieux shone most brightly during that time of temptation. As we read about the way she lived through her sufferings and temptations we come face to face with a person who is becoming like Jesus. Before her temptations she could never understand how people could not believe in God and in Heaven. As she was tempted not to believe she felt a new closeness to non-believers. They were her brothers and sisters in the darkness and love moved her to pray for them as she shared in their suffering.

At each new occasion of combat, when my enemy provokes me, I conduct myself bravely. Knowing it is cowardly to enter into a duel, I turn my back on my adversary without deigning to look him in the face; but I run towards my Jesus. I tell Him I am ready to shed my blood to the last drop to profess my faith in the existence of heaven. I tell Him, too, I am happy not to enjoy this beautiful heaven on this earth so that He will open it for all eternity to poor unbelievers. — Story of a Soul, chapter 10

Therese is a powerful intercessor because of her deep sharing in the way of Jesus' love. She is with us in times of temptation and doubt because she has journeyed through that darkness herself. She makes a fire in our darkness and that fire is loving and believing in Jesus even when there is nothing but dryness and dissatisfaction all around and the voices of doubt are loud. In the darkness of suffering Therese became more fully self-less in her faith and in her prayer for others. When the immediate reward of positive, consoling feelings was taken away she was faced with the same choice which we all must face: Will I continue to love and follow Jesus when I feel unrewarded and tempted by doubts? Will I pray for the strength to persevere in trying to do what God wants, and trying to be the kind of person that God wants me to be, when I feel most helpless and most far from God? Will I give God as much lime as He chooses to achieve His work in my life? Will I entrust myself to God in the times of darkness, believing that Jesus is totally with me, holding me and strengthening me? Will I turn back to God, after I stumble and fall, with the confidence of a Little One who knows that Love is waiting to comfort and embrace me? Will I allow the Prayer of Jesus to dominate my heart more and more, in my suffering, so that I might share in His Saving Work?

A PRAYER FOR UNITY WITH JESUS

Lord Jesus Christ, in your true and perfect freedom, you offered every moment of your life to your beloved Father. Let the powerful river of your offering draw me into your freedom.

St. Therese, be my companion in this life: in times of loss, pray that my eyes might rest on Christ, who gathers me into his heart through the journey of my life. Protect me from the prison of anger and resentment.

Pray that my heart might be broken open with love and so become a perfect gift in union with the gift of Jesus offered to our Heavenly Father. Amen.

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Carried to God in a Saint's heart

THE NATURE OF ST. THERESE'S POWERFUL LOVE FOR US

The great saints of the Church never underestimated the powerful influence of love. In a very real way our destiny and our identity is formed and shaped by the influence of what or who we choose to love. Let's think, for a moment, of a person who loves material possessions. He lives his life guided and directed by the desire for wealth, and whenever he speaks it is always about what he is planning to buy next or how he is going to raise money for some future plan.

The saints knew, by their own experience and by pondering the wisdom of the Gospel, that the human heart and mind are made for something more than material possessions. Our hearts and minds are made for God — the God who reaches out to meet us in the person of Jesus. The saints were formed and shaped by the influence of the One who they loved and their holiness was a real sharing in the life and the love of Christ.

In the final pages of the *Story of a Soul* we meet St. Therese of Lisieux speaking of her life as a Carmelite Nun. She writes only a few months before her death. We hew the ordinary, small details of her life in Carmel - her little acts of charity, her acts of resisting the impulse to speak out when another nun has done something wrong by her, her efforts to speak the truth even if it might cause a certain pain — but if we look at those details carefully we discover something extraordinary. What is our extraordinary discovery? In a sense it is a discovery of the truth of Therese's message — Christ enters the world through the heart of a little child; Christ's light can shine beautifully in a small, ordinary life; the saving influence of Christ spreads throughout the world through the easily overlooked victories of love in our hearts.

[The Lord] is always using His creatures as instruments to carry on His work in souls. — Story of a Soul, chapter 11

In Chapter 11 of the *Story of a Soul* Therese reflects on the way that she has been an instrument of the Lord's work. In the Carmel of Lisieux Therese had the responsibility of helping the novice-mistress in the

training and formation of the novices. This would have been a daunting responsibility for a young nun but Therese believed that God spoke to her through her superior. And so it was God who was asking her to take on this responsibility and Therese had confidence that God would provide whatever was necessary to carry out the work of helping with the novices.

Mother, from the moment I understood that it was impossible for me to do anything by myself, the task you imposed upon me no longer appeared difficult. I felt that the only thing necessary was to unite myself more and more to Jesus and that "all things will be given to you besides." In fact, never was my hope mistaken, for God saw fit to fill my little hand as many times as it was necessary for nourishing the soul of my Sisters.

— *Story of a Soul, chapter 11*

Therese's great spiritual teaching, the Little Way, tells us that we are called to become little children, with empty hands, who confidently turned towards our Heavenly Father who will provide whatever is necessary. God will provide whatever is needed at the- time that it is needed.

The impossibility of the work did not discourage Therese. She did not get weighed down with the thoughts of all the possible difficulties nor did she spend her time focused on the likelihood of not being able to succeed in doing what was asked. Seeing the impossibility actually had the opposite effect — because the task was impossible it no longer appeared to be difficult. Therese had a certain confidence that the impossible is God's chosen place, the place where His glory enters and shines most clearly.

Therese positively desired and chose the simple, direct situations where there was most clearly no choice but to rely on God alone. Living in an enclosed religious community she was faced with sisters of varying ages and temperaments. She saw the imperfections and the difficult characteristics of her sisters and she felt her own limitations and imperfections.

In the midst of all of this Therese would listen to Jesus speaking to her in the Gospel. She would listen to Him as He challenged her inclination to only share her life with lovable people whilst avoiding difficult

people. She would hear Him calling her to go beyond what is asked, go the extra mile out of love. She listened to this Jesus whom she loved and she felt the way His words stretched her heart towards His way of loving. She believed in the fruitful, life-giving nature of His commands and teachings: if He asks for this then He will provide what is needed. At the same time there must be a space made for hearing and receiving the necessary strength, direction and loving support of God's presence. In other words, in all of this, the ongoing relationship of prayer is essential:

Ah! it is prayer, it is sacrifice which give me all my strength; these are the invincible weapons which Jesus has given me. They can touch souls much better than words as I have very frequently experienced. ... For me, prayer is an aspiration of the heart, it is a simple glance directed to heaven, it is a cry of gratitude and love in the midst of trial as well as joy; finally, it is something great, supernatural, which expands my soul and unites me to Jesus.
— Story of a Soul, chapter 11

Therese spends a lot of time in Chapter 11 of the *Story of a Soul* writing about the people who had been “given to her.” These were people like the novices and her two spiritual brothers, who were missionaries, who she prayed for and loved. She was able to see something extraordinary in this day to day activity of loving and praying for these people: she saw Jesus was present and at work in her love and her prayer.

Near the end of John's Gospel Jesus prays a long and beautiful prayer to His Heavenly Father. It is a prayer that speaks of Jesus' love for the people who come to follow Him — in His love Jesus uncovers and shares His loving relationship with the Father with all who follow Him. It is a prayer where Jesus thanks His Father for calling and drawing these followers into His Presence. It is also a prayer where Jesus commends His followers to the ongoing protection of the Father.

“I pray for them, not for the world do I pray, but for those whom you have given me, because they are yours; and all things that are mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I am glorified in them. And I am no longer in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep in your name those whom you have given to me. ...” — Story of a Soul, chapter 11 (Quoting John 17:4)

At the end of the *Story of a Soul*, St. Therese does an astounding thing: she prays this prayer of Jesus as her own prayer. She prays in Jesus' own words for those whom the Heavenly Father has given to her, those who have come to her and received the treasure of her own relationship with the Father. In other words she is praying for us, her voice united with the voice of Jesus, her heart animated with the love of Jesus reaching out to us. This is the powerful nature of a saint's prayer — this is the powerful nature of the prayer of St. Therese of Lisieux.

IN CONCLUSION

This series of reflections has been a brief introduction to the great work of St Therese known as the *Story of a Soul*. We have journeyed with her, through the story of her short life, and by listening to her we have been introduced to her way of seeing and relating to God through the ordinary circumstances of life. Her way to God is a little way. It is a way that involves turning with a child's confidence towards God's loving mercy, protection and providence. It is a way that leads us to God with empty hands outstretched to receive God's total gift of Jesus who is the Answer to our incompleteness and our searching.

The *Story of a Soul* is a classic Christian Spiritual Book. It is also easy to read and thoroughly recommended to any who have an interest in the life and teaching of St. Therese of Lisieux. May her powerful prayer be a source of blessing and encouragement to you all.

Fr. Robert Donnelly ocd (©1997)

A PRAYER OF SELF-SURRENDER

Lord Jesus, on the night before you died you offered us in prayer to your heavenly Father. As we are gathered and offered through your love, overpower the resistance of our heart so that we might be surrendered to your loving action.

St. Therese, draw us to Jesus through your prayers.

Help us to surrender with a child's confidence into God's loving work. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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* Please note, as at Sept 2001, these email addresses are not yet active.

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