

The Abysses of Love and Mercy of the Heart of Jesus: St. Thérèse of Lisieux and the Sacred Heart

by Maureen O’Riordan

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Thérèse Martin grew up in the Church of late 19th century France, in which the cult of the Sacred Heart was omnipresent, shaped most recently by the humiliation of France during the Franco-Prussian war. Her family’s spiritual director, Father Almire Pichon, was called an apostle of the Sacred Heart. Her sister Marie took “of the Sacred Heart” as her religious name, and the Carmelite monastery Thérèse entered was dedicated to the Sacred Heart. In 1887 Thérèse participated in a pilgrimage to Rome intended to show the French church’s loyalty to the embattled Pope Leo XIII on his sacerdotal jubilee. Like the other pilgrims, before leaving Paris Thérèse was consecrated to the Sacred Heart in the crypt of the unfinished Basilica of the Sacred Heart at Montmartre. Later she sent her gold bracelet to form part of the large monstrance at the basilica. And, like all the pilgrims, she wore the badge of the Sacred Heart.

But Thérèse had no interest whatever in this cult of the Sacred Heart, focused on making reparation for the outrages of sin. Nor did she relate to the Sacred Heart as a national symbol. The pilgrim Thérèse was seeking only Jesus. She appropriated the Heart of Jesus in an intensely personal and relational way. For Thérèse the Heart of Jesus is always *for her*, and it always seeks a response from her heart. At fifteen she called Jesus “Him whose heart beats in unison with my own.”¹ At seventeen she wrote to her sister Céline, who was at Paray-le-Monial for the second centenary of the death of Blessed Margaret Mary:

Pray to the Sacred Heart; you know that I myself do not see the Sacred Heart as everybody else.² I think that the heart of my Spouse is mine alone, just as mine is His alone,³ and I speak to Him then in the solitude of this delightful heart to

¹ Excerpt from LT 67, letter from Thérèse to her aunt, Mme. Guerin, November 18, 1888. *Letters of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, Volume I, 1877-1890*. Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1982, p 478.

² “Crowned with thorns, with a big cross set up in the center,” as Sister Marie of the Sacred Heart wrote to Celine on October 13, quoting P. Pichon.

³ See Canticle of Canticles 2:16.

heart, while waiting to contemplate Him one day face to face. . . .⁴

In June 1895, the “year of the Sacred Heart” for Thérèse, she had a new experience of the heart of God:

I was thinking about the souls who offer themselves as victims of God’s Justice in order to turn away the punishments reserved to sinners, drawing them upon themselves. This offering seemed great and very generous to me, but I was far from feeling attracted to making it. From the depths of my heart, I cried out:

“O my God! Will Your Justice alone find souls willing to immolate themselves as victims? Does not Your *Merciful Love* need them too? On every side this love is unknown, rejected. . . . O my God! Is Your disdained Love going to remain closed up within Your Heart? It seems to me that if You were to find souls offering themselves as victims of holocaust to Your Love, You would consume them rapidly; it seems to me, too, that You would be happy not to hold back the waves of infinite tenderness within You.”⁵

Thérèse experienced God not as outraged justice demanding atonement from her but as rejected love arousing her compassion and inviting her to be a channel of God’s infinite love to humanity. In her poem “To the Sacred Heart of Jesus,” written either in June or in October 1895 for her sister, Marie of the Sacred Heart, Thérèse returns to many of the themes of her “Offering of myself as a victim of Holocaust to Merciful Love.”⁶ The editors of her poetry write:

“Thérèse does not linger over the *symbol* of Christ’s Heart wounded by the lance, which was so popular in her day. She goes straight to the *reality*: the loving Person of Jesus, his deep feelings, and the love that fills his Heart.”⁷

She speaks of the heart her own heart desires:

I need a heart burning with tenderness
Who will be my support forever,

⁴ Excerpt from LT 122, letter from Thérèse to Celine, October 14, 1890. The second centenary of Blessed Margaret Mary’s death, October 17, 1890, attracted crowds to Paray-le-Monial. *Letters of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, Volume II, 1890-1897*. Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1988, pp. 709-710.

⁵ *Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux*, tr. John Clarke, O.C.D., 3rd edition. Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1996, pp.180-181.

⁶ This prayer is often called the “Act of Oblation to Merciful Love,” but Thérèse never called it that.

⁷ PN 23, Introductory notes to “To the Sacred Heart of Jesus,” June or October 1895, in *The Poetry of Saint Therese of Lisieux*, tr. Donald Kinney, O.C.D. Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1996, p. 117.

Who loves everything in me, even my weakness...
And who never leaves me day or night.”⁸

She finds this heart in the humanity of Jesus and in the Eucharist:

You heard me, only Friend whom I love.
To ravish my heart, you became man.
You shed your blood, what a supreme mystery!...
And you still live for me on the Altar.

Deprived of palpable consolation, she can rest on the Sacred Heart:

If I cannot see the brilliance of your Face
Or hear your sweet voice,
O my God, I can live by your grace,
I can rest on your Sacred Heart!

The Heart is not a distant symbol to her: it is all her joy:

O Heart of Jesus, treasure of tenderness,
You Yourself are my happiness, my only hope.
You who knew how to charm my tender youth,
Stay near me till the last night.

She does not propitiate the Heart, but always locates herself *inside it*:

It's in your ever-infinite goodness
That I want to lose myself, O Heart of Jesus!

The Heart of Jesus does not demand atonement; it simply burns with love. Faced with her human weakness and the justice of the law, Thérèse takes refuge in that heart, which not only protects her but also is itself her virtue (reminiscent of her offering of herself: “I beg You, O my God, to be Yourself my *Sanctity!*”⁹):

⁸ PN 23, “To the Sacred Heart of Jesus,” June or October 1895, in *The Poetry of Saint Therese of Lisieux*, pp. 117-120.

⁹ *Story of a Soul*, p. 276.

Ah! I know well all our righteousness
Is worthless in your sight.
To give value to my sacrifices,
I want to cast them into your Divine Heart.
You did not find your angels without blemish.
In the midst of lightning you gave your law!...
I hide myself in your Sacred Heart, Jesus.
I do not fear, my virtue is You!...

Thérèse's confidence reaches its height in her daring prayer choosing the Heart of God as her purgatory and asking to go straight to the Heaven of that Heart:

To be able to gaze on your glory,
I know we have to pass through fire.
So I, for my purgatory,
Choose your burning love, O heart of my God!
On leaving this life, my exiled soul
Would like to make an act of pure love,
And then, flying away to Heaven, its Homeland,
Enter straightaway into your Heart.

In another poem she wrote in October 1895, she audaciously prays to love Jesus with His own heart:

Remember that on earth I want
To console you for the forgetfulness of sinners.
My only Love, grant my prayer.
Ah! give me a thousand hearts to love you.
But that is still too little, Jesus, Beauty Supreme.
Give me your divine Heart Itself to love you.¹⁰

Several months later she again appropriates the Heart of her Spouse "to love more tenderly." She writes to her Visitandine sister Léonie:

Dear Sister, I love you a thousand times more tenderly than
ordinary sisters love each other, for I can love you with the
Heart of our celestial Spouse.¹¹

Far from demanding reparation, the Heart of Jesus ("more than maternal") repairs us. In 1896 Thérèse writes that this heart "restores innocence:"

O you who knew how to create the mother's heart,
I find in you the tenderest of Fathers!
My only Love, Jesus, Eternal Word,
For me your heart is more than maternal.

¹⁰ PN 24, "Jesus, My Beloved, Remember!" October 21, 1895. *The Poetry of Saint Therese of Lisieux*, p. 130.

¹¹ LT 186, from Thérèse to Léonie, April 11, 1896. *Letters, Volume II*, p. 951.

Your heart that preserves and restores innocence
Won't betray my trust!¹²

Thérèse writes often of “resting” or “sleeping” on the heart of Jesus

And if sometimes Jesus sleeps,
You will rest beside Him.
His Divine Heart that always keeps vigil
Will serve as your sweet support.¹³

The little child . . . sleeps always on the Heart of the Great
General.¹⁴ Close to this Heart, we learn courage, and
especially *confidence*.¹⁵

Three months before her death, writing to Maurice Bellière, the seminarian who was her spiritual brother, Thérèse gives her most powerful witness to her experience of the Heart of Jesus:

When I see Magdalene walking up before the many guests, washing with her tears the feet of her adored Master, whom she is touching for the first time, I feel that *her heart* has understood the abysses of love and mercy *of the Heart of Jesus*, and, sinner though she is, this Heart of love was not only disposed to pardon her but to lavish on her the blessings of His divine intimacy, to lift her to the highest summits of contemplation.

Ah! dear little Brother, ever since I have been given the grace to understand also the love of the Heart of Jesus, I admit that it has expelled all fear from my heart. The remembrance of my faults humbles me, draws me never to depend on my strength which is only weakness, but this remembrance speaks to me of mercy and love still more.¹⁶

On July 17, 1897 she ends her last letter to Léonie, promising to be her sister's messenger to the Sacred Heart:

¹² PN 36, “Jesus Alone,” August 15, 1896. *The Poetry of Saint Therese of Lisieux*, p. 165.

¹³ PN 13, “The Queen of Heaven to her Beloved Child Marie of the Holy Face,” December 25, 1894. *The Poetry of Saint Therese of Lisieux*, p. 78.

¹⁴ Jesus [my footnote].

¹⁵ LT 200, from Thérèse to Sister Marie of St. Joseph, end of October 1896? *Letters, Volume II*, p. 1013.

¹⁶ LT 247, from Thérèse to abbé Bellière, June 21, 1897. *Letters, Volume II*, p. 1133.

You want me to pray in heaven to the Sacred Heart for you.
Be sure that I shall not forget to deliver your messages to
Him and to ask all that will be necessary for you to become
a great saint.¹⁷

The next day Thérèse writes to Maurice Bellière about the heart of Jesus. For more than a century her message has echoed in the heart of humanity, as it echoes today:

Ah! how I would like to make you understand the
tenderness of the Heart of Jesus, what He expects from
you.¹⁸

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¹⁷ LT 257, from Thérèse to Léonie, July 17, 1897. *Letters, Volume II*, p. 1149.

¹⁸ LT 258, from Thérèse to abbé Bellière, July 18, 1897. *Letters, Volume II*, p. 1152.