

Key Elements in Therese's Spirituality

... the little way, noticing the unnoticed drops of blood!

"Mysticism remains the great science and the great art, the only power capable of synthesizing the riches accumulated by the other forms of human activity." Teilhard de Chardin, September 9, 1923.

THERESE'S "LITTLE WAY"

When people think of the spirituality of Therese of Lisieux what often comes spontaneously to mind is the phrase "*her little way*". Maybe it is simply because of an association of images - "*little way*" and "*little flower*" - or maybe it is because so many of us think of Therese still as a child. Whatever the reason, most often the spirituality of Therese is simply identified with "the little way" and that little way is then, itself, reduced simply to the qualities of being childlike, naive, and innocent. Not all of this is wrong, mind you, but it is a simplistic and dangerous caricature ... and one which alienates a lot of people.

The essence of Therese's spirituality can, indeed, be captured in the expression "her little way", but that way, as she describes it, is complex, full of nuances, and ultimately a very adult spiritual path. What is the "little way" of Therese of Lisieux?

As already pointed out, commonly it is misunderstood (more accurately, under-understood). The popular conception of both Therese and of her spirituality tends to go the way of unhealthy piety. People call her "the little flower" and then tend to picture her as a very naive, innocent, and over-pious little girl. Her spirituality is then pictured in the same way. Her little way is conceived of as the quiet, innocent, anonymous martyrdom of obscurity, that is, a spirituality of doing simple, menial-type work for God without expecting to be noticed - "doing the dishes and laundry and scrubbing the floors while expecting no notice or thanks, except that of Jesus."

While, admittedly, there is nothing wrong with this (and many of us could profit spiritually by living out a certain martyrdom of innocence and obscurity) this conception does not do justice to Therese and her little way. What she proposes is considerably richer than this over-simplistic conception.

What, in essence, is her little way? And what, in essence, are the key prongs within her spirituality?

1) The basic metaphor - "noticing the unnoticed drops of blood on the face of Christ"

One basic metaphor undergirds her little way and, to understand her spirituality, we must grasp what is contained in this metaphor.

One day, while praying before a picture of the crucified Christ, Therese was struck by the fact that blood was flowing out of Jesus' hands and nobody was hastening to gather it up. Divine blood was falling to the ground and nobody noticed and nobody cared.¹

For Therese, this image, not noticing the blood of Christ dropping to the ground, is a whole commentary on the human condition - a commentary on our callousness, our myopia, our devaluation of what is precious, our blindness to the poor, and our lack of awareness in our relationship to God. She, for her part, resolved to notice where Christ's blood is being spilt: "Oh, I don't want this precious blood to be lost. I shall spend my life gathering it up for the good of souls."² After that, for Therese, "to live from love is to dry Your Face."³

What does she mean by those phrases, "gathering up" the drops of blood and "to live in love is to dry your face"?

These are all parts of a metaphor and are not to be taken literally. As well, the metaphor takes its root in the concept of the body of Christ. It is very important that her phrases be taken metaphorically because otherwise, as is so often the case, this is the place where piety can lose its grip and Therese's rich spirituality can become simply a bad holy card - with a little girl crying at the foot of the cross (as opposed to Mary, standing at the foot of the cross).

For Therese, Christ is still bleeding in the sufferings of persons on this earth, in our sufferings, yours and mine. And, as was the case in the historical crucifixion of Jesus, this blood is, mostly, dripping unnoticed, unvalued, and often indeed to the tune of others' indifference and even positive ridicule. Therese's sensitivity (born out of her own suffering, prayer, and especially out of the extraordinary way that she had been loved and valued as a child) alerted her to the preciousness that was seemingly being wasted. Like a sensitive artist watching a masterpiece being heartlessly defaced, the sight tore at her heart and demanded that she do something about it. That image, Christ bleeding (in the person of Jesus and in his body suffering on earth) while nobody notices or cares, in effect, baptized Therese and it became the center-piece of her spirituality. Even as she lay dying, she promised that she would spend her heaven, eternity, coming back to earth to continue to gather up those unnoticed drops of blood and to dry the sufferer's face.

At the centre of the little way lies the mandate to notice the suffering of Christ as it lies hidden, especially in the suffering members of his body. The task then is notice, to care, and to somehow respond so as to dry the face of Christ.

How does one do this? Therese's answer is developed throughout all of her writings and she calls it her "little way". As we shall see, her little way contains a number of rich prongs, each of which constitutes a key element in her spirituality. What are these prongs?

Seven of these might profitably be singled out and highlighted. Let us call them Therese's "**seven sacraments**":

i) Splitting the inner atom of love

Someone once remarked that if you harnessed all the energy from all the winds, rivers, and oceans on this planet you would not create as much energy as you would get by splitting a single atom.

There is a spiritual lesson in this. Spiritual energy is like physical energy. In all of our hustle and bustle, in all of our efforts to harness our energies and put them to work for love and justice in this world, we do not create as much energy and effect as we would get if we would split the inner atom of love inside us. In effect, that is what Jesus did. Analogously, the same might be said of Abraham, Buddha, and Mohammed. The energy they brought into this world was generated not by some exceptional external act, but by some extraordinary inner, moral act. In a manner of speaking, they split the inner atom of love.

Therese never uses this image explicitly, but it expresses nearly exactly one of the major prongs of her spirituality, namely, that what we have to do to bring justice and love into the world is done more by inner moral heroism than by great external acts. The proper shaping of our own soul is what we most desperately owe to the world. In her view, the most important thing you or I can do for the world is break our own selfishness and to break open, inside of ourselves, the divine energies of selfless love and forgiveness.

In this, Therese's spirituality is a healthy corrective to the over-sociological emphases within many of the spiritualities of our time. Too many of us today are under the naive illusion that what is wrong with our world in terms of bitterness and injustice can be fixed simply by fixing the system - without the searing personal change that this demands within even the most minute areas of our lives. Thus, we often rationalize our private faults by taking refuge in the notion that our private sins are not important because we are working to change the mega-system which is the real culprit regarding injustice, hatred, and Godlessness in our world. Therese would agree with half of this, namely, that sociology is important, that changing the system is important, and that working for justice is a non-negotiable gospel demand. But she would categorically challenge the other half of this, namely, that our private lives are not as important as is the larger system. For Therese, as for the gospel, the larger system is simply a magnification, a macrocosm, of our private lives. For her, God and love will not be born into our world through sociology. God will only be born, as was the case in the incarnation

of Jesus, when someone splits the inner atom of love so as to become pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Love and justice must be gestated and gestation is an inner process.

I doubt that Therese has often been compared to the novelist-poet, D.H. Lawrence, but on this point they are allies. Lawrence once wrote a poem entitled, **HEALING**, which underlines this same emphases as are found within Therese's spirituality:

*I am not a mechanism, an assembly of various sections.
And it is not because the mechanism is working wrongly,
that I am ill.
I am ill because of wounds to the soul, to the deep emotional
self
And wounds to the soul take a long, long time, only time
can help
and patience, and a certain difficult repentance,
long, difficult repentance, realization of life's mistake, and the freeing oneself
from the endless repetition of the mistake
which mankind at large has chosen to sanctify. ⁴*

John of the Cross also, obviously, agrees with Therese on this. In his view, the single most important thing we can do for the world (not just for ourselves, but for the world) is to let God be born inside of us. ⁵

For Therese, this inner, private, moral journey is also ultimately the way we journey towards each other. Intimacy, for her, is not a matter of being contiguous to each other, of being physically together, but of moral union, of sharing one spirit. Conversely, physical distance from each other is not what separates. Sin and selfishness separate. To be in union with the whole world is not a matter of trying to be everywhere physically or of being so famous that our name is known universally and our picture is on every billboard in the world. We come into unity with every one and with all things through entering deeply enough inside the order of things where one heart beats for everyone.

Anne Morrow Lindbergh, in her own Story of a Soul, verifies what Therese says when she writes: "*Yes, I felt closer to others too, even in my solitude. For it is not physical solitude that actually separates one from others, but spiritual isolation. It is not the desert island nor the stormy wilderness that cuts you off from the people you love. It is the wilderness of the mind, the desert wastes in the heart through which one wanders as a stranger. When one is a stranger to oneself then one is estranged from others too. If one is out of touch with oneself, then one cannot touch others. How often in a large city, shaking hands with my friends, I have felt the wilderness stretching between us. Both of us were wandering in arid wastes, having lost the springs that nourished us - or having found them dry. Only when one is connected to one's core is one connected to others, I am beginning to discover.*" ⁶

To live out Therese's little way, to gather up the unnoticed drops of blood off of the face and hands of Christ, is to enter one's own self deeply enough so as to have the sensitivity needed to see beyond the blindness that is caused by self-interest. To do this requires, in Therese's view, an inner journey that is as demanding as any heroic epic ever recorded. We are summoned to pilgrimage, to battle, to heroism, to do combat with the forces of evil, but the journey towards that battle is inward.

ii) Being antibiotics within the body of Christ

Again, a metaphor best captures this: Inside any living organism there are billions of unseen processes whose outcome determines whether a body will be healthy or sick. The health of any physical body depends upon millions of tiny, invisible enzymes which, acting as an immune system, keep a body healthy by fighting off deadly invading substances. These enzymes are not seen but the health of the body depends upon their activity and when they no longer work the body will soon be overpowered by bacterial and viral invaders and will break down and die.

Every true mystic who has ever written will tell you that the health inside the body of humanity and inside the body of Christ depends upon exactly the same thing. Certain good enzymes must constantly do battle with and overpower malevolent and malignant invaders. When these enzymes are absent the health of a social body, like the health of a physical body, will deteriorate and eventually there is death.

Therese does not explicitly employ this metaphor but it expresses her view on things fairly accurately. She understood her real vocation as that of being antibiotics within the body of Christ. Thus, in the famous passage within which she describes her vocation she writes:

"I understood that the Church has a Heart and that this Heart was BURNING WITH LOVE. I understood it was Love 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 IN A WORD, THAT IT WAS ETERNAL!

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!'

For Therese the "love" that she speaks about here is not an abstract thing that can be made to mean anything. In this context, love, for her, means sacrifice, self-denial, self-effacement, and a certain healthy, scrupulous, private virtue. A former generation of Christians used to refer to this as "offering one's sufferings up, in love, for others". It is this that Therese is speaking of here - especially of those sufferings that come our way from the renunciation of our own wills, our own narcissistic ambitions, and our own need to be the centre of the universe. To offer us this kind of love, for Therese, is to become part of the immune system within the body of Christ. When we do silent, private acts of virtue, the net result is that other people get more healthy.

She has her own wording for this, of course. Thus, for example, in Her Last Conversations, she says: "*It is the same with the communion of Saints. Very often, without our knowing it, the graces and lights that we receive are due to a hidden soul, for God wills that the saints communicate grace to each other through prayer and with great love, with a love much greater than that of a family, and even the most perfect family on earth. How often have I thought that I may owe all the graces I've received to the prayers of a person who begged them from God for me, and whom I shall only know in heaven. ... In heaven we shall not meet with indifferent glances, because all the elect will discover that they owe to each other the graces that merited the crown for them.*"⁸

That is also the vocation she suggests for each of us. To gather drops of blood falling from the suffering Christ is, through offering up our own inner suffering for others, to be antibiotics within the body of Christ.

iii) Glory through hiddenness

Therese was very aware that God was calling her to some extraordinary destiny, that she was born to be special. Thus she could, unabashedly, write: "*I considered that I was born for glory.*"⁹ However, for her, the road to glory was not that of worldly fame and achievement, but the martyrdom of obscurity, and the special destiny of being a saint who is hidden away and whose glory lies with God. Thus, she writes: God "*made me understand that my glory would not be evident in the eyes of mortals.*"¹⁰ ... and ... *Carmel was the desert where God wanted me to hide.*"¹¹

In this, Therese has something very important to offer to our age, an age that is pathologically restless and obsessed with fame and glory. Therese's little way teaches that the route to attaining what is universal, timeless, and glorifying, is not the route of achieving something so great that we stand out and become a household word all over the world, nor is it the route of trying to be everywhere at the same time and drinking in the whole world in a single lifetime. That is the route of restlessness, the route of frustration, and the route of envy. Therese's little way is the route of solitude. To attain the glory that we feel ourselves destined for (and which our false humility never does a good job of disguising) the task is precisely not to stand out but to melt in with what is timeless so that eventually we can say with Thomas Merton:

"It is enough to be, in an ordinary human mode, with one's hunger and sleep, one's cold and warmth, rising and going to bed. Putting on blankets and taking them off, making coffee and then drinking it. Defrosting the refrigerator, reading, meditating, working, praying. I live as my ancestors have lived on this earth, until eventually I die. Amen. There is no need to make an assertion of my life, especially about it as mine." ¹²

For Therese, the glory we are born for is not found by making ourselves stand out but, through the opposite route, by making ourselves melt in.

iv) Humility and Obedience

Simone Weil once suggested that we spend our whole lives searching for freedom but, unconscious in that and ultimately driving it, is the search for someone to be obedient to. C.S. Lewis complements this insight. In analyzing both the initial agony and the eventual ecstasy of his acceptance of God, he says that the hardness of God is kinder than the softness of humanity and God's compulsion is our liberation.

Therese's little way teaches this truth: Freedom, even the freedom we want as human beings, ultimately lies in freely giving our freedom away, to something that is higher and more trustworthy than ourselves. It will seem like a harsh thing to do, but it will, at the end of the day, bring us freedom and joy. God's compulsion is our liberation.

Key to the spirituality of Therese are humility and obedience, but humility and obedience understood in the sense that Simone Weil and C.S. Lewis understood them. In this view, humility is not about having a bad self-image and being self-deprecating, just as obedience is not about the infantile search for someone else to take responsibility for our lives. Rather humility means being grounded and obedience means being free from the tyranny of our own egos. How is this so?

Humility has its root in the Latin word **HUMUS**, soil. Thus, the most humble person you know is the most grounded person you know. Obedience, which is really one aspect of humility, takes its real meaning in genuflection, in the healthy respect for and acquiescing to the contours of a reality that is infinitely richer and more encompassing than the simple contours of one's own ego. The healthiest person you know is also the most obedient person you know (in the best sense of the word) because that is the person who, by virtue of no longer considering himself or herself the centre of the universe, will be the most respectful person you know. That person will also be the freest person you know - free as Jesus was free standing before Pilate - because he or she will now be free from the tyranny of narcissism and thus able to think about the world and respond to it in terms beyond the simple need to protect and promote one's own self.

Therese's little way emphasizes humility and obedience. But what Therese proposes is not simply the powerlessness and necessary obedience of a child before grown-ups. What the little way teaches is that only by acquiescing and giving ourselves over to something greater than ourselves can we break through our congenial

selfishness, crack the asphyxiating tyranny our own egos, and notice the unnoticed drops of blood flowing out of the wounds of our fellow human beings.

Hence Therese advises us to be little before God and each other:

*"Sanctity does not consist in this or that practice, it consists in a disposition of heart which makes us humble and little in the arms of God, conscious of our weakness, and confident to the point of audacity in the goodness of the Father. ... [Sanctity] is to recognize our nothingness, to expect everything from God as a little child expects everything from its father; it is to be disquieted about nothing, and not to be set on gaining our living."*¹³

v) Childlike/non-pragmatic, playful before God

Thomas Merton was once asked by a journalist: "What do you consider the leading spiritual disease within Western culture?" His answer surprised some people: "Efficiency! Efficiency and our need to be useful is the leading spiritual disease in our culture because, from the highest offices of government down to the nursery, the plant has to run, things have to be run efficiently ... and after we take care of that there is little or no energy left for anything else."

What Merton is saying here is that our need to be efficient, useful, to do things, seriously gets in the way of our spiritual lives. We are habitually so busy doing things that there is no time for simply being. Ultimately, life and meaning are not about what we do but about who we are. The purpose of existence is not to achieve something, but to be in the presence of God and each other for no useful purpose whatever. Love and celebration are not pragmatic things. A friend of mine likes to comment: "Every once in a while we catch ourselves doing what we should be doing all of our lives - sitting still and loving."

Therese's little way is essentially about this, sitting still and loving. It is for this reason she emphasizes being a child before God. Children cannot do anything useful. Their function is not to keep the plant going, the mortgages paid, and country running efficiently. A child's role is to play, to "gather flowers", as she puts it:

"I never wanted to grow up, feeling that I was incapable of making my living, the eternal life of heaven. I've always remained little, therefore, having no other occupation but to gather flowers, the flowers of love and sacrifice, and of offering them to God in order to please Him. To be little is not attributing to oneself the virtues that one practices, believing oneself capable of anything, but to recognize that God places this treasure in the hands of His little child to be used when necessary, but it remains always God's treasure. Finally, it is not to become discouraged over one's faults, for children fall often, but they are too little to hurt themselves very much."¹⁴ ... Look at little children: they never stop breaking things, tearing things, falling down, and they do this even while loving their parents very, very much. When I fall in this way, it makes me realize my nothingness more."¹⁵

In American literature, there is a classic novel by J.D. Salinger, called The Catcher in the Rye. In it, Salinger mourns the fact that children - so beautiful and loving in their child's innocence - must some day grow up to be the depressed, cynical, and non-so-innocent adults that all of us have turned out to be. His mythical hope is that someone, some catcher in the rye field, could keep the children there, playing in joy and innocence in the rye field, forever.

Therese, I am sure, would have liked this novel, though her perspective isn't exactly that of Salinger. For Therese, to remain always the child, before God, helps us spiritually to live in the face of three things: First, as we have already developed, the fact that being is more important than doing; second, the fact that we, like children, should not take ourselves too seriously, especially when we fall; and third, that, like children, we should always understand that life is being given to us and it is never something we can create for ourselves.

And she, ever the child, does not take herself too seriously. Thus, lying on her deathbed, she sees a certain irony and humour in her situation: *"And I who desired martyrdom, is it possible that I should die in bed!"*¹⁶

Finally, for Therese, being little, a child before God, meant always receiving life as a gift. A child is not self-sufficient. A child depends upon adults in order to be fed and this attitude, of receptivity before powers greater than ourselves, is what is asked of all of us within the spiritual life. Let me attempt to illustrate what she means by this and, its spiritual importance, with an example:

Some years ago, in spiritual direction, a Benedictine monk shared with me how, during his early years in the monastery, he used to resent the fact that he had to ask permission from his Abbott for anything we wanted: "If I wanted a new shirt or a new pencil," he said, "I would have to ask the Abbott for it. I thought it was ridiculous and demeaning, me, thirty-five years old, and having to ask permission for a new pencil!" But his attitude changed after he began to understand the gospel more deeply: "Today, I'm no longer resentful about this because I realize that everything, absolutely everything, from the air we breathe to the food we eat - to every pencil we use - comes to us as gift. Nobody is owed anything! Everything is gift. Thus, everyone, not just monks, should be asking permission to receive everything that life gives."

What this monk describes is really the opposite of the original sin of Adam and Eve - who tried to seize as by right what could only be theirs by gift. Therese, in emphasizing the fact that our posture must always be that of a child before God, teaches this and it is the central point in all of spirituality - everything is gift.

vi) Boldness and confidence in prayer

Therese, as we know, had an extraordinary relationship with her family, especially

with her father and mother. Few persons have ever been loved and valued as purely as was Therese as a young child. She was blessed with parents who were extraordinary in their gentleness and understanding. Hence, in her mother and father, she had absolute trust. Not surprisingly, therefore, she also had a certain boldness towards them, confident that she could ask for anything and they would never refuse her.

This sense of being so loved and valued, along with a concomitant confidence and boldness, she simply transferred to God. ¹⁷ God, for her, was the consummate loving parent whom she could approach with complete trust. Her idea was that, in prayer, one could ask for anything and God would (more than likely) grant that request.

Thus, for example, we have the now-famous prayer of hers that it might snow on the day when she received the religious habit. Therese had always loved snow as a child and, as the day approached for her to receive the religious habit of the Carmelites, she felt that it would be nice touch if the grounds were covered with snow - to symbolize purity of her intent. She prayed for snow and you can guess the result. God, like the loving parent who could never disappoint her, had it snow on the day of her profession. ¹⁸ It was also this boldness towards God that gave her the confidence to say on her deathbed that she would spend her eternity begging favours of God for those of us on earth. ¹⁹

Despite her near brazen boldness in petitioning God in prayer, one should not, however, get the idea that Therese, like a bad Tele-evangelist, gives the impression that being intimate with God is a pass-card for anything one's heart desires. For her, intimacy with a loving parent allows for boldness but it also asks for maturity and respect on the child's part. A child who truly loves her parents will, in asking for anything, also weigh the parents' side of things. Thus, Therese, like Jesus in the Garden, would ask God for things, but would always add a little subordinate clause to the prayer, "yet not my will, but yours, be done."

This boldness of hers towards God also helped, very positively, to influence her overall theology of prayer (and not just as it pertains to the prayer of petition). Two dimensions of this might profitably be named:

First, for her, prayer, since it is intimacy with a loving parent, is never something done out of a sense of duty or because it somehow makes us feel good about the act of praying. Prayer, for her, was a question of being in love with God and not of being in love with praying or with how praying makes you feel. Hence, she could write: "*I felt it far more valuable to speak to God than to speak about Him, for there is so much self-love intermingled with spiritual conversations*"²⁰

As well, catching herself falling asleep during prayer at times, Therese could comment that a child is equally pleasing to her parents, whether she is awake or asleep. Only a very healthy confidence and boldness towards God can give someone this kind of perspective.

An important part of the little way is a way of approaching God and resting in God's presence with the confidence and boldness that a young child has in approaching very loving parents.

vii) Chastity

Central to Therese's little way is the concept of chastity. However, chastity needs, here, to be defined properly.

Therese was a nun with a vow of celibacy and, for her, chastity had, among other things, a clear connotation of celibacy. Thus, for example, before her beloved sister, Celine, entered the convent, she fretted considerably, worrying that Celine would marry and thus forfeit (in Therese's mind) the highest of all states, the "white lily", chastity.²¹ At one level, for Therese, chastity meant celibacy.

However, that is only one part of her view of chastity and, ultimately, not the key part of it. For Therese, married people could also be chaste. She had two saintly parents, Louis and Zélie, whom she idolized as near gods and who were obviously not celibate. Yet, in her view, her parents were still models of chastity. Thus, she understood that celibacy and chastity were not the same thing.

What was chastity for Therese and why is it so important for her little way? For Therese, chastity meant two, interpenetrating, things: **reverence** and **the willingness and capacity to carry unresolved tension**.

Chastity, for her, meant reverence. It had to do with how one experiences all things, not just sexual things. And, in her mind, this was connected to child-like-ness and was best exemplified in a child. Children have a certain conscriptive chastity. First of all, they are pre-pubescent, and thus not yet focused on sex. Then there is an natural

innocence inside of a child that is a mixture of a child's natural wonder, naivete, simplicity, and lack of experience. Children get wide-eyed about Santa and the Easter Bunny ... and about God. A child still respects the world and, as a child, is still in a posture of waiting for the really important things in life to still happen. Thus a child lives in both innocence and waiting. These, innocence and waiting, are, for Therese, what chastity is all about.

But she pushes this further in her challenge to us as adults to live chastely. For her, to live chastity as an adult is to be willing, in the name of faith and love of Christ, to hold things in, to carry tension, to live in inconsummation, to not demand from God that we have a full and final symphony right here in this life. Chastity, in her view, means living the incompleteness of this world and carrying faithfully the tensions this creates in our lives. For her, the opposite of chastity is what we see today in nearly all of our movies and regard as normal, namely, a woman and a man meet and, within hours of that, are in bed with each other rather than carrying unresolved tension for any period of time.

Being a professed nun at the turn of this past century - caught as we all are in the limited perspective of our concrete place in history - Therese felt that the best way to live out chastity was in vowed religious life, as a professed celibate. Hence she was anxious that her sister, Celine, in whom she sensed an extraordinary soul, might marry and thus forfeit the highest road (as Therese understood things) in this regards. But, in the end, that belief is an aside to her spirituality of chastity.

In her little way, chastity is important because there can be nothing sublime unless there is first some sublimation; there can be nothing wonderful unless there is first some wonder; and there can be no profound coming together in unity unless the tensions that keep us apart are respected and carried unresolved for a long, long time.

Therese saw religious vows, especially the vow of celibacy, as aiding this process, but she also saw her parents (and her Uncle and Aunt) as models of this, despite the fact that they were not celibate.²²

An integral part of Therese's little way is the way of chastity. For her, this does not necessarily mean celibacy, but it does mean the wonder and innocence of a child, coupled with the truly heroic adult's capacity to carrying tension without needing prematurely to have it resolved.

Conclusion

For the first three centuries of Christianity, there was an interesting spirituality regarding how one should, ideally, finish off his or her life. The dominant view was that it was normal that a Christian should die as a martyr. Natural death

was what was not normal. Martyrdom was considered the ideal way for a Christian to end his or her life; certainly it was considered the high road.

Up until the year 325, when the Emperor Constantine became a Christian, there was too ample opportunity for Christians to die as martyrs. The persecutions provided plenty of high road for Christians to exit the world. However, after 325, when the persecutions stopped, Christians began to wonder how one could now die as a martyr when nobody was any longer ready to kill you for your faith. Various spiritualities gave different answers to this question.

Therese's little way is one such answer - and an excellent answer it is! What Therese maps out, with great warmth and gentleness, is the spiritual path for a certain martyrdom of obscurity. Thus, it is a high road, an ideal road, not one for the faint of heart. Her little way prescribes a martyrdom for the ordinary person.

Some years ago, talking to a young religious novice, I asked her the question: "Why did you choose this particular religious order?" She answered: "I looked at quite a number of orders and finally settled on this one **because it asked the most from me**. I don't want to give my life for nothing!"

If you are searching for a spiritual path so as not to give your life for nothing, Therese's little way will, I promise, not disappoint you.

To this end, M.M. Grace has written a little poem to Therese:

**World-stained, world-weary, tempest-tossed, I sought
For some great saint to listen to my cries,
I was too big her littleness to prize,
Too deaf to hear the message she taught,
Too blind to see her anguish as she trod
The way of thorns from which her roses sprung,
Roses of sacrifice, with which she wrung
Life-giving roses from the heart of God.
And yet Therese has stooped to let me see
Some glimpses of her secret source of grace,
Unfolding mysteries of Christ's infancy,
Disclosing hidden sorrows of His Face,
That I amidst life's constant strain and stress
May strive to follow her great littleness.** ²³

Endnotes ...

- 1) Story of a Soul, ICS Publications, Washington, D.C., 1996 edition, p. 99.
- 2) Last Conversations, ICS Publications, Washington, D.C., 1977 edition, p. 126.
- 3) Last Conversations, *ibid.*, p. 134.
- 4) D. H. Lawrence, **HEALING**, in, The Rag and Bone Shop of the Heart, A Poetry Anthology, Edited by Robert Bly, James Hillman, and Michael Meade, N.Y., Harper, 1992, p. 113.
- 5) John of the Cross, The Living Flame of Love, commentary on Stanza three.
- 6) Anne Morrow Lindbergh, Gift from the Sea, pp. 43-44)
- 7) Story of a Soul, *ibid.*, p. 194. The emphases are her own.
- 8) Last Conversations, *ibid.*, p. 99-100.
- 9) Story of a Soul, *ibid.*, p. 72.
- 10) Story of a Soul, *ibid.*, pp. 152; 175; and especially 216 where she talks explicitly about the martyrdom of hiddenness.
- 11) Story of a Soul, *ibid.*, pp. 72-73.
- 12) Thomas Merton, quoted by John Howard Griffin, in, Follow the Ecstasy, Latitudes Press, 1983.)
- 13) Last Conversations, *ibid.*, pp. 129 & 138.
- 14) Last Conversations, *ibid.*, p. 139.
- 15) Last Conversations, *ibid.*, p. 140
- 16) Last Conversations, *ibid.*, p. 132.
- 17) Hence her famous line: "I knew then that if I was loved on earth, I was also loved in heaven." (Story of a Soul, *ibid.*, p. 93.)
- 18) Story of a Soul, *ibid.*, pp. 154-155.
- 19) See Last Conversations, *ibid.*, p. 102, for her statements on this.

20) Last Conversations, *ibid.*, p. 87.

21) See, Story of a Soul, *ibid.*, pp.176-177, for her fretting over whether or not Celine danced with a man, but especially see, her letter to Celine of July 23, 1888, within which she calls marriage a "yellow lily" and religious profession a "white lily" and clearly sets the latter above the former: Saint Therese of Lisieux, General Correspondence, Volume I. 1877-1890, ICS Publications, Washington, D.C., 1982 edition, pp. 448-450.

22) For a good example here, compare these two recent movies: The Bridges of Madison County and Sense and Sensibility. In the former, a man and a woman meet and, within hours, are in bed with each other. Heart-warming, but hardly sublime. In the latter story, based on Jane Austin's novel, a woman carries an incredible tension for years. Needless to say, in Jane Austin's novel, when the woman finally does get to resolve her tension the effect has a sublimity that Robert Waller's couple in Madison County can never approximate.

23) M.M. Grace, **To St. Therese of Lisieux**, in The Steep Ascent of Mount Carmel, p. 22.