

Therese of Lisieux - Teacher, Evangelizer, Mystic by Teresa Martinez, OCDS

If we could use quotes from Scripture to describe St. Therese of Lisieux, the following quote could surely be one of them: "Blessed are you Father, Lord of heaven and earth, you have revealed to little ones the mysteries of heaven and earth." Mt.1. 12. When we study and reflect on Therese's doctrine of spiritual childhood we soon realize that she is teaching us much more than meets the eye, but before finding out what we can learn from her as a teacher, evangelizer and mystic, we will first look briefly at St. Therese in the context of this Congress theme "Discalced Carmelite Saints In Love With Sacred Scripture".

THERESE IN LOVE WITH SACRED SCRIPTURE

We know that in Therese's time the laity was discouraged from reading the Bible. Carmelite Postulants and Novices most probably fell into the same category. Yet, in spite of this, we find that in her autobiography Therese quoted from Scriptures, expressed her love of the Word of God and used it literally as the light that guided her life which led her to great sanctity. She wrote that when all other readings failed to offer her any assistance, it was only with the solid and pure nourishment of Scriptures that she found satisfaction.

Keeping this in mind, raises the question about where and how did Therese get her knowledge of Sacred Scriptures? We can only guess that she must have had at least six sources. The first opportunity must have been when she listened to her father reading to the family from the series of books called THE LITURGICAL YEAR, by Dom Geranger, which contain some Scripture quotes.

The second opportunity was during her attendance at Mass when she listened to the Epistles and Gospels being expounded.

The third source must have come from reading the New Testament. The fourth might have been at the retreats she attended annually. The fifth could have come from the references to the Word of God in the book THE IMITATION OF CHRIST which she knew by heart. And sixth source was from Celine, who we know that after Mr. Martin's death and before she entered Carmel, moved in to live with her Aunt and Uncle Guerin in their home. While living with them, she copied by hand tracts of Scripture from her Uncle's Isidore's Bible. These treasured Bible tracts Celine brought with her into the Carmel when she entered, and of course shared them with Therese. The influence and fruit of her love of Scriptures is made visible in her life by her hidden purgative contemplative prayer in action, seen in her heroic practice of the evangelical counsels. Her life is a practical and concrete illustration of the doctrine of St. John of the Cross, as she becomes nothing to gain all.

The next question to be asked would be: What did all the Saints being presented here this week-end have in common, when they were individuals so diverse in character, personality, culture, up-bringing, gifts and gender?

The first thing held in common in all of their writings is through their response to their reflection on the word of God. Their minds, hearts and souls became the fertile ground for the seed of God's word to yield a hundredfold. They evangelized by the way they lived a deep and abiding faith, hope and love, nourished by the word of God. "But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty." Mt 13..

Another trait common to all of them, is their practice of heroic union with God's will, which turned all their actions into sublime expressions of love. This placed them among the blessed even before death and in spite of their faults.

This was Jesus' supreme teaching. In Luke 18.15 we read: "Blessed are they who have kept the word of God with a generous heart and yielded a harvest through perseverance."

THERESE AS TEACHER

The late Pope John Paul II said: "The Church needs credible witnesses more than teachers". JP II Zenit

ZE032324 12/14/03.

Therese was an incredibly credible witness and therefore an excellent teacher. Our Holy Mother wrote a commentary on the Our Father to teach her daughters the way of perfection. Therese did not set out to write a commentary on the Our Father, nevertheless, her autobiography turns out to be a living commentary on all that Jesus taught in the prayer the Our Father. During this talk, time permits only two examples of Therese's living commentary on the Our Father to be presented. The first example relates to God as Abba.

The second relates to the words: "...may thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven...". While the first obvious lesson being taught in these words is obedience, nevertheless, there is a far greater and deeper implication of what the words also mean and are related to.

THE FIRST COMMENTARY ON THE OUR FATHER

Therese's first commentary is on the concept of God as Father. She gained a full and true understanding of the fatherhood of God when she experienced what fatherhood was from her own devoted father. This conviction came from her observations, experience and insight into the dynamics of her own family life.

Her particular genius as a teacher was to draw from the lessons she learned from the loving care that she received at home when growing up, and was able to transfer these observations to a spiritual level as she related them to God. Her observations of the kindness, care and help that the grown-ups in her family gave to her, the smallest and youngest in the family, made her realize how childhood littleness, simplicity and dependence drew down love and evoked compassion and assistance from those older, wiser and bigger, especially from her father.

She transferred this concept of loving Dad to God, not only as Almighty and Omnipotent, but most of all as loving Abba.

Through her insight that childlike loving trust was the sure way to relate to God, she was consoled, motivated and gained a bold confidence in her spiritual life when she realized that great public deeds were not necessary to please a Father who already loves us beyond measure. She understood that a loving father simply wants his children to return his love, for true love never deliberately hurts the beloved.

Therese realized that the best way to show a loving God how much she loved Him, was through the concrete way of simple childlike obedience to His will in the ordinary events and duties of her state of life, done in the extraordinary way of love. In 1 Jn 4, we read: "God is love and he who lives in love, lives in God, and God in him".

This simple yet profound message is the crux of what makes Therese a spiritual teacher so universally loved, because we all can identify with the concept of the littleness, helplessness and the poverty of childhood. Like St. Paul, she understood how powerlessness can draw down God's merciful help.

However, when we try imitating her, we learn very quickly, that the way of spiritual childhood is a martyrdom to everything that the ego holds sacred, a total renunciation of self.

A second short perspective of Therese as teacher was downloaded from the internet. It comes from a talk given by Bishop Ahern upon the conferral of the title doctor ecclesiae to St. Therese. Bishop Ahern found that Therese's writings related in many ways to Vatican II teachings.

Bishop Ahern addressed various groups, including Centenary Symposia of several Carmelite Centres. He said:

"... serious scholars 'point to the similarity between many Conciliar teachings and those of Therese'. He examined how positively she would relate to Vatican Council II teachings on ecumenism, the Bible, Mary and the universal call to holiness...Most do not know that she has given us more prose than John of the Cross and

three time more poetry".

Therese did not write her autobiography with the intention to teach, yet her writing becomes a great teaching because it is a testimony of how deep faith leads to holiness and ultimately to mission. "Holiness and mission are inseparable aspects of the vocation of every baptized person." Pope John Paul II On World Mission Sunday on Feb.21, 2003 ZENITH Code: ZE0322109

This concludes the brief observations of Therese as teacher.

THERESE AS EVANGELIZER

We Discalced Carmelite Secular Order members, are called to the same holiness and mission as are our Friars and Sisters in the Order - first by our baptism into the Catholic Church, second by Vatican II teachings, and third by our vocation in and Profession of Promises to the Teresian Carmel.

Cardinal Ambrozic gave some very clear and insightful guide-lines to the lay faithful on how and what we should do to prepare ourselves to undertake our important mission of evangelizing. The Cardinal said: "... their rightful position of importance can be attained by means of profound Christian self-awareness, spiritual depth, Christ-like concern for this world and evangelization of individuals and cultures..." And when referring to the importance of the lay faithful for the future of the Church, he went on to say: "They are vastly significant for our present and future.." The Importance of Lay Movements. Talk given at the Cardinal's Dinner October 28, 2004, by Aloysius, Cardinal Ambrozic.

This statement jolts us out of a sanitized Christianity and a comatose attitude towards apostolate. The practice of our Christian faith and vocation in Carmel is not only for our own sanctification, but for the sanctification of all those we come in contact with. How is this done?

Our vocation in the Discalced Carmelite Secular Order assists our personal sanctification, by giving us:

Human Formation to "develop the capacity for introspection, interpersonal dialogue, mutual respect, tolerance and have the ability to collaborate with others in forming community..."

Christian Formation to " receive the necessary theological base by means of the Catechism of the Catholic Church and the documents of the Church,

Carmelite Formation - confirm Carmelite identity through formation in the Scriptures, Lectio Divina, and the spiritual doctrine of Carmel, - placing the importance of the Liturgy of the Church, especially in the Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours. - Engage in silent prayer daily." A.Deeney,ocd, Report from the General Delegate for the OCDS at the OCD Extraordinary Definitory, held in Santiago, Chile, Oct. 6 - 12, 2005

It is in community that we learn that religion and life cannot be separated, and are taught how to integrate them into daily life.

THERESE THE MYSTIC

We will now move on to the meat of this talk, looking specifically for what it was, by the way in which she lived her life and vocation, that points out and teaches a new concept of mystical prayer within the grasp of all, that has gone unnoticed and undetected simply because it is not associated with historical and traditional mysticism.

When studying Therese's writings to prepare to give a talk at our Congress in 1996, a different side of Therese was discovered. My observations and the discovery of this aspect of Therese that will be shared and presented to you now are purely personal thoughts on a discovery that was made then. This is not the teaching of the Church nor of the Order. Some may consider it a preposterous or presumptuous proposal. But as we all know, "Fools barge in where angels fear to tread.". Here is the discovery.

When reflecting on The Story of A Soul, I discovered that Therese was a mystic par excellence. Though, this is not readily identifiable, because none of the historical or traditional criteria of mysticism is overtly manifested in her writings, excepting of course, that of the extraordinary incident during her illness as a child, when she saw the statue of Virgin smile at her. Later on in Carmel, contrary to what everyone else thought, we find in her letter to Marie in Manuscript B, Therese writes that she does not enjoy any consolations, but rather, that aridity and dryness are her lot.

This statement obscures the fact that she is indeed a mystic, albeit, not in the traditional mysticism we are used hearing or reading about, which is judged or defined only by the extraordinary traditional norms shown to mystics of the past, which was suited to the mentality of the historical era in which they occurred.

Serious study of Therese's life, introduces us to the possibility of the high prayer of mystical union with God, open to all the faithful, which must become the path and hope for the challenge of the future sanctification of the Church, not only by a holy clergy but by and through a holy laity as well. The understanding and acceptance by the laity of their baptismal responsibility must become the "way" the goal and hope of the future for a new era of evangelization and revitalization of the Church. In this particular moment in history, we see the Church suffering, for the most part, from a diminishment of priestly and religious vocations amidst the overwhelming global secular social revolution of the post-modern era. Things have changed, and so must methods of evangelization change. The faith of the lay faithful must be put into Catholic action in the world. The Church knows this, and is now looking at its assets to do this. We the lay faithful are its assets.

While our first thrust for evangelizing starts in our homes, it is also particularly needed in the market place of work and recreation, where priests and religious have no access to.

Current events dictate that evangelization is no longer the sole responsibility of a shrinking supply of the clergy and religious, and neither is holiness the prerogative of the cloister only.

When Jesus said: "Be holy" he was talking to all his followers, not just the apostles.

TWO OF THERESE'S TEACHINGS THAT LEAD TO MYSTICAL PRAYER

Here then, is the first of the two extraordinary opportunities for great sanctity through union with God that Therese's little way teaches us, that are truly mystical union, for by them we practice the likeness of love.

Understanding that she was loved by her own Dad without having to do anything to make him love her more, Therese received the grace of true understanding and insight into the fact that we, as children of God, are already so loved by God our Father, that we do not have to buy or earn His love, for He can never stop loving us.

John the Evangelist comments on this concept when he writes: "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God: and that is what we are." 1 Jn 3.1

When this truth or concept becomes a part of us, our actions are then motivated by love, and not by our desires to earn "brownie points" or because God is viewed as a punitive agent.

Understanding how much she was loved by God our Father, was a catalyst for change in Therese's life, for God was not loved and served in fear because He was a punitive agent to be placated constantly. Rather, the way of spiritual childhood introduces us to the means of mystical union with God open to all, who, motivated by love, unite their will to God's will through the practice of obedience. Samuel the prophet points out how important obedience is when he asks: "Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices - as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Surely to obey is better than sacrifice ... For rebellion, is no less a sin, than divination, and stubbornness is like iniquity and idolatry."

1Samuel 15, 22

Stubbornness and rebellion are like idolatry, because when we do what we think best rather than being

obedient to what we are supposed to do, we are adoring our self, our opinion and our own will, more than God's will as it manifests itself for us daily through our Christian and Carmelite vocations.

Therese motivated by love, lived in a constant state of union with God through her heroic obedience to the commands of her Christian faith, the Rule of Carmel and all the normal daily events of her state of life. The practice of this contemplative obedience, kept her constantly in a mystical union with Jesus on the Cross. However, it was a mystical union experienced in dryness, aridity and lived in the agony of the dark night of faith, hope and love, therefore unidentifiable as a prayer of mystical union.

This example of contemplative union was also the supreme prayer and teaching of Jesus Christ nailed to the cross in obedience to the will of Father. His example of obedience to the will of the Father reveals that obedience motivated by love, is a mystical prayer of divine union with God. But sadly we are totally blinded to the value of obedience leading to deep union with God. We hang on to our own opinions and decisions because letting go of my super-logical plans, my wants and my personal agendas hurt and annoy the ego and sometimes the body. So inadvertently we keep ourselves shackled in poverty and darkness when opportunities, for the most part ordinary but pesky, chosen by Divine Providence present themselves to us.

WHAT MAKES HUMBLE OBEDIENCE MYSTICAL PRAYER?

Here is why and what makes humble obedience mystical prayer.

From all eternity by God's Holy Spirit, we were conceived and existed in the mind of God. We were created in the womb of God's Love, His Heart, so we know that we were created by Love and for love. Four references to our pre-earthly existence in God's mind were found in Sacred Scriptures. There must be many more. First, in Isaiah 49, Isaiah describes our state of pre-earthly existence when he said: "The Lord called me before I was born". Next, in Psalm 139.16-17, we also find the psalmist describing it when he says: "Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me when none of them as yet existed." This tells us that the earth was not even made when we existed in God's mind. The third reference to this state is found in Jeremiah 1.5 where we read: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I consecrated you...". Fourth - we find in 2 Timothy 1.8-9, "...but join with me in suffering for the Gospel, relying on the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to His own purpose and grace. This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began...".

Because of our pre-birth existence in the mind of God, after our birth, unconsciously, and without knowing why, there remains deep within our subconscious a primordial memory of this state of blissful contentment that we existed in and experienced. Therefore each of us carries within us an unexplainable feeling of emptiness and inner yearning.

As rational adults, we mistakenly think that the interior void or illusive blue bird of happiness can be found or satisfied by things, work, education, or people. But experience teaches us the hard way, that no matter how many or varied our possessions, after a while we become bored, and when emptiness returns, we ask ourselves, 'Is that all there is?'

We begin to wonder if our interior void can ever be satisfied in this vale of tears? Can the suffering of interior emptiness ever be conquered? How can we become satisfied, when our yearnings or longings are so illusive and frustrating? St. Thomas Aquinas identified this state and gave us an eternal truth when he wrote: "My soul is restless until it rests in you."

God's Word in Sacred Scriptures and our Faith teach us that the only way that the void within can be filled with inner peace and the gifts of the Holy Spirit here on earth, is through obedience to, and union with God's will. For inner peace and contentment are the gifts and fruit of the Holy Spirit. (See Gal 2.22-25); and "When anyone acknowledges that Jesus in the Son of God, God dwells in Him and he in God." 1Jn 4:14-15

Therese taught us how to live this through her way of humble childlike obedience motivated by love. Her faith was so deep and strong that she responded to the God of love with all the love in her heart, even though she

felt that it was inadequate and suffered dryness in prayer. We too suffer from feelings of never being able to pray well enough, no matter how hard we try, and for the most part all we are capable of giving are little ordinary things. In the writings of St Bernard of Clairveaux' we find consolation to us as he says: "It is true that the creature loves less because she is less. But if she loves with her whole being nothing is lacking where everything is given." Liturgy of the Hours Vol. IV Page 1334

To this day, the enormous implications of obedience are still unidentified, unrecognized and not understood for its potential and value as prayer that places us in a mystical union with God. John of the Cross refers to this death to self obedience as the perfect spiritual life. (Living Flame of Love, Introduction)

We are so pre-conditioned to identify mystical prayer by the complex signs of traditional and historical mysticism of ages past, which were suited to the mentality of their particular age, that we fail to grasp the enormous significance of, and the extra-ordinary potential for mystical union with God that every humble loving voluntary act of obedience is.

HOW DO THESE LITTLE ACTS OF OBEDIENCE TO GOD'S WILL BECOME MYSTICAL UNION?

Simply because every loving voluntary act of humble obedience to God's will returns us to the state of Divine union with God, closest to that which we experienced when we existed in God's mind before our birth here on earth; it is the prelude to a union that will only happen again after death, when we return to our Source, if we have lived in obedience to the laws of God.

Aridity, dryness, lack of consolations and living in the agony of faith and hope, must not be allowed to blind us to the holy potential Divine Providence offers us each day to live in God, united with God, through the union of our will with God's will. Our enemy is our natural tendency to avoid pain to the ego, and our reasoning that obedience seems too ordinary and is associated with pain and not ecstasy. Plus of course when I have to make a choice between what I must do, and what I want to do, my own rational or pride, convinces me that I know what is best for me, so its my way or the highway.

Also, my pride plus my own preconceived ideas of mysticism and holiness, mistakenly lead me at times to seek and embrace my will, because I measure the merit or worth of my agenda and plans by the satisfaction or consolation they bring, or the false reasoning that they are or would be more fruitful than the humble, humdrum, boring and irritating duties that my Superior or my state of life demand, that are a pain in the neck.

Sadly, all the while God, our loving Father, remains silently begging, with His hands open in love's urgent longings for our union with Him, albeit in the agony of the cross of the dark night of faith and hope, during this one and only short opportunity of life. None of us are exempt from these temptations.

Therese's life shows and teaches us, that through the martyrdom of voluntary acts of obedience motivated by love, trust and confidence in God, we can experience a mystical union with God even though it is devoid of any consolations. This is the imitation of Christ.

This painful and humbling death-to-self obedience is the last thing we would associate with mystical prayer. However, the truth of mystical union is that when we are "crucified with Christ, it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" Gal2.19. John of the Cross refers to this state as a likeness of love. Introduction to the Living Flame of Love

Jesus also told us that not everyone who says Lord, Lord will enter into the Kingdom of heaven, but those who do the will of the Father.

Therese received the extraordinary grace to fully understand the implications of that statement. Like a little child too poor to buy expensive gifts to please its father, she gave wholeheartedly what was within her ability to give to show God how much she loved Him.

In the dark night and agony of faith, hope and love, she embraced every little opportunity for Divine Union with God while still living on earth, through her obedience to God's will, for it made her one with God even before

death, in the unexplainable mystical way of God's love. for the ultimate expression of love is always union with the beloved. "God is love, and he who lives in love, lives in God, and God in Him." 1Jn 4

A SECOND OPPORTUNITY FOR MYSTICAL UNION

Let us look now at the second opportunity, which is the most sublime and supreme of unidentified mystical union with God that one can experience here on earth. It is none other than the worthy reception of the Most Holy Eucharist, for three reasons:

- 1) Because in the worthy reception of the Most Holy Eucharist we become one with God, this places or transports back to our original pre-birth conception or primary state of union with God, when we existed in the mind of God, from all eternity.
- 2) The worthy reception of the Most Holy Eucharist is also a Spiritual Marriage between the soul and its Spouse.

Almighty God, our Spouse, entering into and penetrating the inner most depth of our being, our soul. There is no closer union with God in heaven or on earth. For in this extraordinary union with God in the reception in the Most Holy Eucharist we participate in God's Divinity. In Jn 5 we get confirmation of this : "Who ever eats my flesh, and drinks my blood, will live in me and I in him, says the Lord."

Isaiah tells us: "For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, and as a bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you." Isaiah 6.5

St. Augustine writes of this union: "I thought I heard your voice from on high: 'I am the good of grown men; grow then, and you will feed on me. Nor will you change me into yourself like bodily food, but you will be changed into me" Liturgy of the Hours Vol IV, Page 1356 Feast of Augustine Bishop and Doctor

And, 3) The worthy reception of the Most Holy Eucharist, is also a prelude of our eternal union with God in heaven, where we will be re-united to the Source of our being, returned to our pre-birth perfect union with our Creator forever.

The little way of spiritual childhood teaches us two opportunities for mystical union with God. One, that every time, with love's urgent longings we unite ourselves to God, through the worthy reception of His Body, Blood Soul and Divinity, we participate and are united in the life of the Holy Trinity, which is a return to our first existence when before creation of the world we existed in the mind of God. And our second opportunity for mystical union with God is by the death-to-self union of obedience to God's will, by which we not only anticipate our blissful existence in heaven, albeit in faith, but we participate in a mystical way in the very life of God while we are still here on earth.

St. Bernard of Clairveaux speaks of this spiritual marriage when he writes of the soul who loves so ardently:

"To love so ardently then is to share the marriage bond; she cannot love so much and not be totally loved, and it is in the perfect union of two hearts that complete and perfect marriage consists..." Liturgy of the Hours Volume IV Page 1334

It is proposed here, that the concrete example of Therese's life introduces us to a new, simple, yet profound doctrine of mystical prayer, attainable to all who obey Jesus command "Follow Me" because they love Him. We are too little and too poor to strive for huge tasks. We are not eagles but little helpless birds that God gives the tools to soar to great heights in prayer.

The first tool is the through humble practice of obedience, motivated by love and done in complete confidence and trust in God's help. St. Paul encourages this radical confidence when he wrote of God: "My grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness" 2Cor.12. 9

The second opportunity for unrecognized mystical union with God is as already stated, the worthy reception of the Most Holy Eucharist.

WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF THESE?

Both of these tools are directly related to the words in the Our Father: "...may Thy will be done earth as it is in heaven...". But not just for the obvious reason of obedience, there is a deeper meaning. By these words, Jesus is not only inviting us to do God's will, but He also giving us the reason why we should embrace these opportunities for union, and what the practical and helpful consequence of this Divine union of wills means.

By these particular words in the Our Father, Jesus reveals the secret, that the union of love is His gift to us to fill the emptiness or void within that we so urgently long to satisfy. For by our participation in the life of Christ here on earth, we will already possess the peace being enjoyed by the blessed in heaven. May "thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven".

We know that Therese knew this secret, for we see that she enjoyed interior peace in spite of her sufferings. John Paul II tells us that "An unmistakable characteristic of Christian joy is that it can coexist with suffering because is it totally based on love." JP.II 14/12/03 ZE031214

My prayer for all of us is that:
Through the mingling of our will with God's will
May we share in His Divinity,
Who humbled Himself to share in our humanity.

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(Biblical quotes taken from NRSV).

POEM

When I am dying,
How glad I shall be
That the lamp of my life
is burned out for Thee,
That sorrow has darkened the path I trod.
That thorns and not roses
were strewn over the sod.
That anguish of spirit
was so often mine,
Since anguish of spirit
was so often Thine.
My cherished Rabboni,
How glad I shall be
To die with a hope of a welcome from Thee.

(Poem downloaded from OCDS Yahoogroups, July 2004. The one who posted it said that she found it in a diocesan priests' newsletter in India, years ago. The author might be Cardinal Parecaattil, she was not sure.)