

God Experienced Through Love - St Thérèse Of Lisieux

This article is based on notes from a retreat given by Fr Charles Serrao, OCD to the OCDS, Malaysia, Aug 8-11, 2002. Written by Madeleine Chan, OCDS ; Edited by Paul Buis

We have many Carmelites saints of whom three have been declared Doctors of the Church: St Teresa of Avila (our foundress), St John of the Cross (our Holy Father), and St Thérèse of Lisieux. St Thérèse was canonized by the Pope, who recognized her heroic virtues and the simplicity of her doctrine. She is recognized as one of the great masters of the spiritual life in modern times and is declared the Doctor of the Church for the Third Millennium.

St Thérèse contributes something new to the Church. Her spiritual teaching and doctrine are simple and easy to follow. Her message the 'Little Way' is nothing other than the Gospel way of holiness for all. God manifests Himself in His people and works within our human events through the presence and action of the Holy Spirit. St Thérèse is popularly known as "The Little Flower" as she had a love for nature.

Will her spiritual teaching enter into our lives, or will we remain indifferent like a stone immersed in water? No matter how long the stone remains in the water, it remains impervious to the water. Will our heart remain cold to the whisperings of God?

St Thérèse's spirituality is attractive because everyone can follow her spirituality regardless of their walk of life and there is an immense depth to her doctrine and spirituality.

We too can follow the saints the common elements in all the saints we see are two: have loved God with all their heart and mind and soul; they sought God's will in everything they did and put it into practice; they saw the reality of the spiritual life within the realm of the everyday.

The central teaching of St Thérèse includes a total surrender to God's merciful love and taking refuge in God with bold confidence and trust. She was filled with the love of God and she learned how to practice this love towards her sisters in the very ordinary events of daily life.

The ascetical practices which prevailed during the times in which she lived included mortification and weakening the body so that one's spirituality would grow. But asceticism to St Thérèse meant helping others, understanding them and forgiving them. Today, a healthy body means a healthy spirituality. There should be complete harmony of mind, soul and body, with everything held in a balance. Internal penances are encouraged and promoted. Holiness is a gift of God and we have to work for it. Let us seek to build up our relationships with God, seek God's will in everything, and put ourselves completely into God's hands.

How can we come to know God's will for us? We come to discern God's will through the practice of prayer, devout reading of the Word of God, seeking to find God's presence in the events of our everyday life, and by the frequent reception of the Sacraments of the church.

Spirituality has a relevance provided we live it; it should come from within, transform us and change our lives. We need to be authentic, spiritual people -- to strive to make the effort and to persevere in prayer as best as we can. The spiritual life should help us to abandon our innate selfishness and to move towards a deeper harmony with God and with our brothers and sisters.

St Thérèse is deeply spiritual, deeply human and deeply emotional.

Goodness can come from suffering. Do not be discouraged. Seek to know what is God's will for you and put it into practice in your response to suffering. You can respond at different levels: You can be passive and emotional, you can be rational and intellectual, or you can transcend both levels and respond spiritually with faith. This highest level of response will bring harmony to life and increase the depth of the spiritual life.

We should start loving, for love can cure many illnesses. An impoverished heart is incapable of love. Every

problem has a solution. Approach the right people to get the right solution. We should not compare ourselves with one another; for we are different from each other.

The Psycho-Spiritual Development of St Thérèse

St Thérèse had two disorders. She had this strange sickness on March 25, 1883. She had this nervous trembling, hallucination and scrupulosity from 1883 - 1886. From February - March 1886, she had an acute headache (some of these are signs of depression). She overcame these through God's special intervention because of her total surrender to God. The first illness was cured through the gift of Christmas and the second by the smile of the Blessed Virgin Mary; the 'one' smile. A 'small' touch of God can transform a person. However, weak we are we can be spiritual and become saints.

Holiness in heaven starts on earth. In heaven they breathe love and love God. We should promote love, allowing God to create a heart within us to love with His love -- a love that is pure. Altruistic love promoted by Jesus brings pain with love.

In the Christmas of 1886, she has a profound spiritual experience of a 'complete conversion'. As a result, she overcame her sensitive nature. She was helped by her saintly parents, her love for her sisters, and her keen intellect.

Love means to give and to make others happy. Jesus gives Himself to others, and we should follow His example. This love should be cultivated and generated. St Thérèse experienced the grace of God and cultivated this love. She surrendered herself with humility. Humility is truth.

Listen to God when you invite Him into your heart and receive Him as your Guest. Your prayer life should make your family happy, according to your state in life. Discover this hidden power that we possess. Use it for the realization of God's will for you and your family, according to your talents, and they will multiply to generate the Kingdom of God in your life. Let us give everything we have -- give ourselves totally for the love of God.

Abandonment of Self, Trust in God (Spiritual Childhood)

It is important to seek the will of God, to put it into practice, and to trust in God.

St Thérèse was devoted to abandoning herself completely into God's hands. Her teaching conforms to Scripture -- her doctrine is an experience of the Christian mystery and a way of holiness. She discovered in Scripture the starting point of the 'little way': to put our trust in God as Our Father. The source of her spiritual experience and teaching is the Word of God.

She knew her limitations and imperfections and learned to accept them. By this means, she was liberated from them. She strived to trust and abandon everything into the hands of God. She was submerged in deep darkness that overwhelmed her, yet she trusted and kept her faith. She did not stop loving God in whom she trusted. God has given us freedom but we have to use it responsibly. In her spirituality we must be like little children. This is a positive attribute. It goes with trust and surrender to God, to become child-like and not childish. Recall the words of Jesus: "Unless you become as little children you will not enter into the kingdom of God."

Learn to let go, to surrender to God and to respond to God like a child. We do our duty, God has an obligation to us, trust in God. Littleness was the key to everything for St Thérèse.

In the heart of Scripture, she finds faith. Jesus came down from heaven, He died, rose again, and has set us free from the slavery of sin and death. This, we must believe. Experience is for each individual. Children are capable of love, are receptive, want to be loved and truthful. Love means sacrifice and giving.

To be "little" in Scripture means to have a child-like love, humility, confidence, self-surrender and joy. When St Thérèse could not pray in an experience of deep aridity, she still put her trust in God. She was not able to adhere to the spiritual life, but she was undeterred as she made a strong effort. Her spirituality involves not running away from God when weaknesses and fear overwhelm, but to go closer to God, put more trust in Him for He is our Father. Her way is a surrender to God with the confidence of a child who sleeps fearlessly in the arms of the Father.

Consider some examples of total confidence in the God of Love which are found in Scripture: In the parable of the Good Shepherd, He finds the one that is lost and celebrates once he finds the lost one. In the parable of the prodigal son, we see the mercy of God. In the story of the Samaritan woman, Jesus told her of the Living Water. In the experience of Mary Magdalene, we see that all sins, however grave, will be washed away in God's merciful love. There is nothing to be afraid of. Pray for the gift of spiritual childhood, child-like trust, and for a disposition of the heart which will render us humble so that we may be able to follow God's will. In the story of the Canaanite Woman, we learn the importance of having strong faith in God, even if it seems impossible. In the story of the woman with the hemorrhage, we are taught to trust in God, for faith works miracles and makes us whole.

Self-Surrender (Spiritual Childhood II)r

Surrendering your works to God and you will not be discouraged when there is no response.

From the Part of Man and Woman

God wants collaboration from us in our spiritual life. There must be motivation -- a desire to surrender. If you want God's directive in your life, you must make sacrifices. There should be no contradiction in the social and spiritual life; rather, there should be harmony. If there is no collaboration on your part, the Holy Spirit will not be able to work in you. God gives us the gift of freedom so that we can choose and change.

From the Part of God

God will reward us by revealing Himself. There is a relationship: as the Father revealing to the Son; the Beloved to the spouse. In joys and sorrows, we remain safe in the hands of God: there is inner peace, serenity and strength.

There should be a continual surrender of our will to God's will. If we do not succeed in what we are trying to achieve, surrender to God. Jesus accepted the cross as a surrender to God's will, in obedience to the Father's will without condition. He asked the Father if it were possible to take away the chalice of suffering, yet He still accepted it as God's will. So too must we surrender to God's will. Once we surrender, things become easier. This is not sentimental surrender, nor lip-service; it is a carrying out of God's will in our lives. By doing this we depend on Him. This is known as the 'little way' of St Thérèse and this leads us to the furnace of Merciful Love. When there is love everything is possible, and our efforts become easy; otherwise life becomes difficult.

The fruit of this surrender is to not worry about things. This puts us in the present and frees us to do what we are called to do. Anxiety can drag down physical and mental health. Do not be too anxious about things which may never happen, as this will leave us burdened with imaginary fears. God will take care of us and will free us from all that binds us.

St Thérèse suffered not only physical but spiritual sufferings. She suffered total darkness in her soul and endured three years of deep spiritual and physical sufferings before her death. She underwent a trial of faith which lasted until her death. Perseverance is important. We have to undergo trials and sufferings to be the spouse of God. Every soul is tried this way. God will give us this strength to surrender which becomes the highest energy we possess within us. We will learn how to face problems when they occur.

It is only when you surrender your will to God's will that you will enjoy inner peace. Total surrender of your will

to God's will is very difficult but you will have continual peace. This will lead to conversion of heart and inner transformation with the right motivation. You will be able to distribute this peace to everybody. Spiritual people are those who move the hearts of others.

God allows sufferings to test the soul. Not all sufferings come from Him.

Prayer

Prayer is important to every believer. It is "a dialogue with Him who loves us" (St Teresa). It is "a relationship with God which is spontaneous, simple and free from artificiality" (St Thérèse).

There are three types of prayer to consider: vocal prayer (devotions like the Rosary), meditation (which is a discipline of the mind), and contemplation (which is a prayer of the heart where we place ourselves fully in the presence of God). Contemplation is a gift of God by His grace. The signs of contemplation include a sense of justice, detachment, inner joy, and a peace which nothing can disturb.

Once you know God as our Father, it is spontaneous, free, and uncomplicated. As you advance in the practice of prayer, the need for a method is left behind. Simple souls do not need complicated means to speak to God. Prayer is work which proceeds from contemplation (which is an outcome of prayer). In prayer, you listen to God, amplify it in work, and relate it to one another. The fruit of prayer is an equation of two-thirds work and one-third contemplation. In other words it is better to illumine than to shine. What you contemplate and experience God, you need to express to others.

Prayer has two aspects: action (allow the work of the Holy Spirit in your soul -- disposition of the heart is important) and re-action (our response to the action of the Holy Spirit -- that is to bear fruit).

We need silence and solitude in prayer. A believer must begin and end with the 'bowl of prayer' which is important to our daily life. To know prayer, one must experience and taste it. You cannot give to others what you do not have. Work to experience prayer if you want to be able to give to others.

There are four pre-requisites for prayer:

1. *Faith and trust in God* (Mt 9:20). Consider the story of the woman who suffering from a hemorrhage. Jesus told her: "Your faith has restored you to health." Believe and trust that God will act and He will.
 2. *Forgiveness* (Mt 18:21-35). In the parable of the forgiving servant we learn that we are called to forgive one another since God forgives us. Forgiveness brings healing, peace, and happiness.
 3. *Perseverance in prayer* (Lk 18:1-8)
Consider the story of the widow asking for justice. Do not give up on prayer even when in deep darkness, as it may be a test from God.
 4. *Gratitude and thanksgiving* (Lk 17:11-19) Learn from the story of the ten lepers. God gives us everything we ask for.
-
-

Community

In a group, people come for a gathering and disperse afterwards. In a community, there is a deeper inter-relationship. A community implies a uniting of people in a spirit of commitment to a common purpose and with support for one another.

St Thérèse entered Carmel with the desire to: be a woman of prayer (experience God), to develop a life of simplicity (honesty), and to love all the sisters equally. For her to become a saint she had to love Jesus with all her being and to love all the sisters as equally as possible.

We need to take charge in life and we will be masters of ourselves. Charity must enlighten and rejoice not just those who are dearest to us but to everyone. We should not avoid those we find difficult; the heroic virtue is to love the person you least like.

There are three important characteristics of a good leader, spouse, or parent: availability, impartiality, and setting a good example.

It is important to become detached from all that is not God so that we will be able to become more fully attached to God. Detachment is a condition for the spiritual life. Continuous resistance to clinging to things, people, emotions, impulses, ideas, preoccupations and habits affirm that you are worthy even in the spiritual life (St Thérèse). Charity is the main virtue of the soul aspiring for holiness. The practice of charity requires faith and self-denial. There is no love without sacrifice. True love is giving of self.

When people misunderstand you, explain the truth; do not go into arguments. Say only what is needed. There is no need to convince others that you have done right and please God.

"My Vocation is Love." St Thérèse said. Her spirituality is Love. Today there is a thirst for love.

Formation

We are born to form and be formed, to train and be trained, to influence others and allow ourselves to be influenced by others.

In formation, we begin with information. We absorb this information, taking some elements to become part of our understanding, and we grow from there. Spirituality should become part of us through the process of formation. Formation leads to transformation, where spirituality should be seen in our example. Transformation enables us to be able to assist others in their reformation - we can help others reform themselves.

Good formators have certain qualities of the mind, the heart and some experience of life. They strive to be united with God. St Thérèse' had the qualities of a heart to love God and the desire to love all the sisters. She reached out to that person in need, who became a concern for her.

Formation Modelled on St Thérèse

1. Prayer

Deep union with God is the inner strength of a formator - a constant dialogue with One who is the Master, Jesus. St Thérèse's strength was prayer, her strength was God. Her task as formator makes her feel closer to God. She put her trust in Him. Her desire was to enkindle the love of God in the hearts of the novices.

2. Private Instruction

She would adapt herself to each person and deal with each sister differently. The spiritual journey of each person is different and her best solution was to listen. The job of the spiritual director is what God wants for the soul of that person. With certain souls she must be very strict, certain souls she must be kind. She must be firm if they are wrong.

St Thérèse had two sources of spiritual insight: natural psychological insight and infused wisdom from above.

Be kind but demanding. Give yourself to God the best you can. Give the best of yourself to Carmel. St Thérèse was not hurrying and worrying. Spiritual life should not go fast; rather, it should flow slowly but steadily. Leave it to God to work in the soul.

3. *Disinterested Love*

Your main concern as formator is to leave the soul in God's hands, apart from your hands. What counts is your relationship with God. If you are not detached from the person in formation, you are misleading the person away from God.

4. *Love and Self-Sacrifice*

Love and understanding leads the person to the right path. Empathy is to be promoted in the community.

5. *Freedom*

St Thérèse believed that her novices should grow in freedom. They were free to talk to her about her. Decisions were made from opinions that were expressed.

6. *Firmness*

She would say things firmly and energetically and confront them. When directing souls, you must be truthful and say what you think. Be authentic. When you do the work of God, you are progressing and growing. When you put yourself in the presence of God, forget what you think, forget the human elements.

7. *Do without expecting the result*

Do everything for God and do not expect anything. Too much worrying is not good.

8. *Golden Rule*

In correcting the person, do it for the glory of God and for the good of that person. The motivation must not spring from the desire to succeed in making the novices efficient, nor for your merit; you must be motivated by what is good for the person and the community. In giving correction, it must cost you. You must do that if you really love. We must remain detached emotionally in correcting the person.

9. *Capacity to listen and understand*

Our listening must be non-judgmental, with an open mind and heart. We should have disinterested zeal, display more compassion for the weak, be honest, open, and kind.

10. *Learn from experience*

We need to be open to the truth, to take advantage of the right moment, to listen then communicate. We need to use kind words and work with courage and sharpness of mind.

11. *Command respect*

We have 3 models of formators to emulate: Jesus, St Teresa of Jesus and St John of the Cross

12. *Joviality*

Formators should be joyful

13. *Impartiality*

14. *Love for and obedience to the Rule*

Think and live the Rule. Do not make mortifications, do only what are essential. Promote love among you, more meritorious. Have a determined determination to follow Jesus.

15. *Faith in and respect for the Superiors*

They are representatives of God. They will not allow you to go wrong.

16. *Good examples*

Action speaks louder than words.

Mary's Place In The Life of St Thérèse

The Carmelite Order is a Marian Order. We have a special devotion to Mary. She cares and protects us. Mary has a special place in St Thérèse's life. The role of Mary is the spiritual childhood, abandonment and self-surrender.

What aspect does St Thérèse consider Mary as Mother?

1. Mary is the mother of all graces. She collected all the disciples together at Pentecost. She was the instrument.
2. She is the mother of all mankind. A mother has a special role. In the scene of Calvary, John represents us. We are the children of Mary.
3. The simplicity of Mary attracted Thérèse. Her spirit of faith, silence and recollection (solitude) was a model for us. Prayer is a dialogue. She listens to God and others.
4. Mary is the mother of service. When we experience Jesus within us we have to go out of our way to serve one another.
5. Mary is the mother of love and care. In the marriage at Cana, Mary asks her Son to put the wine of love into our hearts.

Thérèse's devotion to Mary was evident early in her life, well before she entered Carmel. We must resemble Mary as true Carmelites.

After Thérèse entered Carmel, Mary continued to be an important part of her spiritual life. She celebrated many Marian feasts: She entered Carmel on the Feast of the Anunciation. She took the veil on the Feast of Our Lady of Mercy. Her profession took place on the Feast of the Nativity.

Thérèse desired to become a priest so that she could preach about Our Lady. To Thérèse and to us, Mary is more a Mother than a Queen. She watches over us and comes quickly to our aid. We should entrust ourselves to her. We should strive to follow her example of simplicity, ardent charity deep faith, and confidence in God.

Thérèse's Challenge to the Modern World

Surrender and confidence are the keywords.

St Thérèse is the youngest Doctor in the Church. She's popular and attractive to the young. People from all walks of life can follow her doctrine. Her doctrine is based on the teachings of scripture. Her spirituality cannot be outdated. She is a teacher of our time, which thirsts for living and the Word of God. She is also loved and accepted by everyone. She loves God and her sisters. on 19 October 1997, Pope John Paul II proclaimed her Doctor for the Third Millennium.

In this day, our world faces many challenges: fear and anxiety, materialism and consumerism, a crisis of faith, moral decay, and so on. The "little way" meets these challenges head on with confidence in God, detachment from things, persons, and sentiments, surrender to God, and most of all, a deep, resonating love for God and

for all of humanity.

Can this be put into practice? Everything is possible with God. Confidence can work miracles. Start with small things. Start at home. Confidence and trust in God can change people.

Remember that "Love is not that we love God but that God loved us first." (1 Jn 4:10). In our experience of being loved by God, we must absorb the truth that God loves each of us deeply as sons and daughters. How are we to respond to this awesome love? Love is best repaid with love alone -- to do God's will and to see one another through the eyes of love.

Remember that God's grace can overpower all the weaknesses and constraints within us and heal all of our ills.

Respond to God in a unique way. Each spiritual journey is unique and He has a customized plan of salvation for each of us.

This inner power can be channeled for many causes which we are called to intercede for. Let us work alongside St Thérèse who said: "I want to spend my heaven doing good on earth."