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Therese: Devoted in Spirit and Body: The Love Affair of a Young Woman

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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Living only twenty four years, Thérèse Martin left a priceless legacy. She exemplified the act of simple adoration. Her humble attitude and constant battle of will are inspiring mostly at the recognition of her completely human existence. Her truly romantic view of the relationship with the Divine is beautiful and signifies the foundation she built her life upon."

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Thérèse

Devoted in Spirit and Body: The Love Affair of a Young Woman

I: “My Vocation is Love!” (Ellsberg 428)

Living only twenty four years, Thérèse Martin left a priceless legacy. She exemplified the act of simple adoration. Her humble attitude and constant battle of will are inspiring mostly at the recognition of her completely human existence. Her truly romantic view of the relationship with the Divine is beautiful and signifies the foundation she built her life upon.

Thérèse’s life began as any average citizen. Being the youngest of nine children (although most literature focuses on the five youngest daughters), she was born in Alençon, France in 1873 and moved to Lisieux following the death of her mother, Thérèse being only the age of four (cfr Delaney 550). She was described as an emotional child who often suffered from extreme sadness and sensitivity. One author, Sainte-Marie, labeled the death of her mother as a “profound blow for the young girl” (70). She was then raised by her sister Pauline, and referred to her as mama from that point on. She attended the Benedictine Abbey school at Lisieux, however was not well received by her classmates. Incredibly bright, her social demeanor seemed to be affected by her innocence and purity. After seeing two of her sisters enter the Carmel at Lisieux, she felt her calling at fourteen. Ellsberg states, “as a teenager she had literally stormed heaven to win acceptance into the Carmelite Convent” (427).

She entered Carmel on April 9, 1888, at the age of fifteen. The last nine years of her life were spent within the walls of this cloistered community. Again battling and overcoming skepticism due to her age and questionable intent behind her entrance, Therese quickly gained respect and admiration from the sisters. She was described by many as having an angelic

presence, from first appearance. Her “little ways” inspired not only those who knew her while alive, but her autobiography continues to light the path of many on the spiritual journey.

II. “Suffering is the Key, Love Isn’t”

Thérèse, directed by Leonardo Defilippis was a beautiful film produced in 2004. This modern approach focused on the Martin family dynamic and developed the character of Thérèse through these connections. He assisted the viewer in understanding the relationship between Thérèse and each member. Although little can truly be presented about her mother, Thérèse did experience a change from her carefree early days to the difficult time she had expressing and coping with the loss of her mother. It was touching to hear her speak the words, “Pauline will be my mother now,” after the funeral. Leaving her prone to tantrums and hysteria, she was coddled by her family and this presented her with an innocence that seemed difficult for her peers to digest. It spoke clearly of the love and commitment a family can exhibit and, I believe, allowed for the devotion she developed for her faith.

A short time was spent depicting the difficulty she experienced at school, labeled as a teacher’s pet. Although not uncommon, Thérèse appeared to be the victim of jealousy. There was a scene that took place at school; Therese overheard two students speaking irreverently of one of their instructors and responded to these comments of ill intent by asking the two girls to take it back, that they should never speak in that manner. They were quick to tell her that no one could stand “baby” Thérèse and her “perfection”. This greatly troubled Thérèse, and the innocence of her naïve nature was tainted. She then experienced unhappiness at school and in her social interactions. Her father, Louis Martin, was convinced by the five girls to allow Pauline to teach Thérèse at home. For the first time after the death of her mother, Thérèse was shown happy and full of life. Defilippis illustrated the unique relationship between Pauline and Thérèse in a captivating approach and enabled the viewer to comprehend the devastating impact of Pauline’s entrance to the Carmelite convent in Lisieux. Again finding herself alone, Thérèse began to sink

back into depression at the age of ten. Unable to visit Pauline at Carmel, it was at the end of 1883, that she experienced her “Christmas conversion” (Sainte-Marie 76). Rich with symbols of Catholic statuary and Marian devotion, the vigilant prayer the Martin family engaged in was successful at demonstrating the transformation of Thérèse from child to young woman.

As Thérèse and each of her sisters left, Defilippis had dressed the women in black. This to me held significance in several aspects. On one hand, there is the death of life according to will of self as they each were surrendering to the will of God, not only abandoning life in the outside world, but truly losing their identity and given a new name in the monastery. Also, there is the grief and loss felt as each ventured away from the home, losing the physical and emotional love they were able to express while living under the same roof. Leaving behind the footprints of their childhood and entering womanhood with the sacrament of marriage, not to any man, but God alone, the stark contrast to the bride in white speaks of the solemnity of these sacred vows.

The scenes depicting Thérèse’s struggle to gain acceptance into Carmel at fifteen, show her courage and conviction as she felt her “beloved calling to her”. Knowing that a simple change in her appearance would present an older woman, she displayed maturity as she sought permission from her priest, then the bishop and finally the pope. Although none of these men were quick to grant her admission, I believe her strong commitment emanated from her pleading words as she was ultimately admitted in 1888. It is here, that the movie begins to celebrate her yearning for Jesus and true love for the romantic relationship she sought in her spiritual life. Humor could be found, in this film, in her beginnings at Carmel as she was at the mercy of a nun who was sure to break her. Doubting Thérèse’s intentions, assuming instead to be a means of being close to her sisters, she was quick to point out her shortcomings and mistakes, as well as discount her abilities. Where normally she might defend herself, Defilippis instead identified her decision to sacrifice her will and simply accept blame where it was planted regardless of accuracy. A powerful statement to the submissive nature she was adopting. Represented here is her “method of spirituality”, self named, “the Little Way,” in which she chose to “perform[ing]

her everyday actions and suffer[ing] each petty insult or injury in the presence of love of God” (Ellsberg 427).

Alain Cavalier, in his movie, incredibly portrayed her life in the monastery and I was taken with his choice of romantic language. Thérèse was often viewed in conversation with a fellow novice speaking of the courting with her Beloved and His calling to His bride. There was a beautiful scene of her long awaited entrance and the bridal ceremony with her family present. Here she was dressed in a white gown and exuded authentic pleasure in this induction. As she entered her room in Carmel, she stated “I will be here forever” with such profound peace and resolution. Previous to her entrance into Carmel Cavalier told of her prayer for Pranzini, a man on the verge of execution. She intervened with relentless hope for his salvation and upon hearing he had kissed a crucifix the day he was beheaded, she proclaimed, “I saved him. I won.” This was powerful in displaying her transformation from self will, outside Carmel, to relinquishing all honor to God inside the walls of the monastery where she stated, “a grain of sand bears no shadow”.

She began to question her favor after being diagnosed with Tuberculosis, the disease that ultimately claimed her life, when she inquired of Pauline, “Is he mad at me?” I was reminded of a scene earlier in the film where Pauline calmed Thérèse’s doubt with the words, “Knock again, suffering is the key, love isn’t”. As Therese lay in extreme suffering, her sister Céline was by her bedside. She instructed Céline to respond each time she said “it hurts” with “good”. After the two went back and forth several times, weeping together, again her faith was rewarded as calm returned to her face, replacing the pain that had stricken her physical body.

III. Romancing the Ordinary

“Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face is the youngest of all the “Doctors of the Church” but her ardent spiritual journey shows such maturity, and the insights of the faith expressed in her writings are so vast and profound that they deserve a place among the great spiritual masters.” (Pope John Paul II)

Appropriately named Thérèse of the Child Jesus her writings lead many on the journey of little ways, that of spiritual childhood. Her message radiates out from the Catholic church and has spread throughout the world. Her autobiography, now titled *The Story of a Soul*, was compiled from three manuscripts she wrote in the last years of her life. It was published just one year after her death and has been translated in about 50 languages (cfr Society of the Little Flower, no page). She is recognized as one of the great masters of the spiritual life in our time. Studying intensely the wisdom enlightened by Sts. Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, Thérèse lead her novices on the path of holiness, centering her teaching on love.

Manuscript A was written at the request of her sister Pauline, then prioress of the monastery and called sister Agnes of Jesus. In this section, Therese recounted her childhood experiences, especially those contributing to her religious growth, up to her entrance into Carmel. Manuscript B, written at the request of her sister Céline, called sister Marie of the Sacred Hearts, speaks more of the maturity of her spiritual life and her vocation as “the Bride of Christ and Mother of souls” (cfr Society, no page). A few months before her death, again at the request of one of her sisters, she completed her recollections of her life in Carmel. Here, Thérèse recounts some of her spiritual experiences during the final days of her life. She devoted much of this writing to her trial of faith during her illness and “a grace of purification that immersed [s] her in a long and painful dark night, illuminated by her trust in the merciful, fatherly love of God” (cfr Society, no page).

In the chapter titled *The Night of the Soul*, she wrote to Pauline about her intense desire to become a Saint. She stated that, in comparison, she herself was “as far removed from them as a grain of sand trampled underfoot by the passer-by is from the mountain whose summit is lost in the clouds” (Lisieux 151). Instead of being discouraged by this realization, she felt it was God’s will that she recognized her own little way and seek out her path to heaven amidst her many imperfections. In searching scripture for a “suggestion” on how to accomplish this great feat, Thérèse quoted Proverbs 9:4, “whosoever is a little one, let him come to Me” (Lisieux 152). This

served as the basis of her spiritual journey and set the course for her life of devout intention. Here she found that one experiences that everything comes from God and returns to Him.

Her complete abandonment of physical awareness was replaced with a natural focus on spiritual awareness. In recounting her experiences with tuberculosis she wrote, “Jesus gave me the hope that I should soon join Him in His beautiful Heaven” (154). After laying her head down to rest, she felt “a hot steam rise to her lips”; however, because she had already blown out her lamp for the evening, she willed herself to sleep, and awoke the next morning remembering that she “had some good news to learn” (154). Upon seeing the blood on her handkerchief, she responded, “What hope filled my heart!” (154). She believed this to be the calling of her Beloved, “like a sweet distant murmur, heralding his joyful approach” (154). Only genuine communion with the Divine could elicit such a unique response. Although she did later relapse with episodes of extreme desperation, her courage and faith are clearly evident amidst these times of physical agony as demonstrated in this letter to her brother missionaries, “Our Divine Lord asks no sacrifice beyond our strength” (Lisieux 369). Enduring the anguish of tuberculosis, she lived with this illness in the spirit of true faith and patience. Continuing to serve as mistress of novices, she devoted herself to prayer and meditation and began in 1894 to write the first of her manuscripts (cfr Delaney 551). In a letter to one of her spiritual brothers, Fr Bellière, she wrote, “I am not dying; I am entering life” (Lisieux 308).

From childhood she was taught by her family to participate in prayer and worship and as she immersed herself in meditation on the Word of God with passion and dedication, her exceptional faith took shape. In what society would deem the prime of youth, she received the maturity of holiness. Adopting a quote from St John of the Cross, her motto became “Love is repaid by Love alone” (Lisieux 204). Understanding the fragile nature of her own physical body, she demonstrated her commitment to love in the prayer of salvation for all others. On page 205 of Lisieux’ autobiography, she continues, “I can neither preach the Gospel nor shed my blood... but

what does it matter? My brothers labour in my stead while I, *a little child*, stay close to the Throne and love Thee for all those who are in the strife.”

In the last days of her life she spoke intently of her excitement to enter heaven. Leaving behind fear and doubt she proclaimed with great boldness her anticipation to truly begin her mission, that which she described, “to make others love God as I love Him... to teach souls my little way... I will spend my heaven in doing good upon earth”. “And what is the ‘little way’ that you would teach?” asked Mother Agnes of Jesus? “It is the way of spiritual childhood, the way of trust and absolute self-surrender,” (Lisieux 231-2). Ellsberg describes this vision as the ability to “transform any situation into a profound arena for holiness”, that essentially, “through the effect of subtle ripples, (one can) make a significant contribution to transforming the world” (428).

The Society of the Little Flower points to her autobiography as the primary source for her spiritual doctrine, however it does reference to a possession by the Vatican of 266 letters Therese wrote in addition to over 50 poems. On page 379 of her autobiography is published *My Song of To-Day*. Simple was her focus on one solitary day to set her intention on preparing her heart for a few hours at a time. The first of four stanzas declared her love for Jesus and her soul’s desire to imitate His love. She begs Him to fill her heart, repeating for today, today. The second stanza states that if her mind does wander into tomorrow, and she allows these thoughts to plague her heart with “dreary, dull dismay”, that she would crave these “trials and sufferings” yet only for one day. She leads the third with a lovely devotion to Mary, pleading her to intervene with Jesus and let her “tired spirit rest”, for just one passing day. Her poem ends in the fourth and final stanza by expressing, again, her anticipation to enter Heaven, where she will celebrate for eternity and sing in angelic concordance for “then shall be mine the joy that never knows decay” (Lisieux 379).

Perhaps the greatest gift her writings offer is a testimony to the attainable grace of God. A grace that is available to all, through no tremendous act of courage or bravery, but through the purification of body and spirit. From a young woman who sought so fervently the distinction of a

Saint, her ordinary life leads all to an extraordinary faith. “According to Thérèse, each moment, accepted and lived in a spirit of love, is an occasion for heroism and a potential step along the path to sanctity” (Ellsberg 428). Thérèse is a teacher of spiritual life whose profound message continues to illuminate those that study her writings, not solely her autobiography, but also her correspondence and poetry. Not only does she create an accessible pathway to the Gospels, as she quotes both the Old and New Testaments extensively, she also inspires a deep love affair with the Divine. Following the teachings of Teresa of Avila, she urges examination of the heart, for where sincere love is, there also will the heart be. And if one is truly living from the heart, in imitation of Christ, then one’s actions have no choice but to radiate this. Her words serve as a window to her soul, allowing her life to continue to enlighten generations on a sacred journey.

IV. “Little Queen”

Henri Ghéon paints an entertaining picture of the childhood of Thérèse Martin in his book, *Secrets of the Saints*. He brings to light the tragedy her family faced, losing four of nine children in between the ages of six months and six years, however beautiful balance is present in the fact that the five surviving daughters became nuns (cfr 150). Thérèse, the youngest, was worshipped by the Martin family. Ghéon recounts, “Everything she did was right, everything she did was clever, everything that happened to her was miraculous” (152). I cannot help but feel that this constant celebration in every action and attitude she possessed cultivated a spirit of strength and self confidence that could have conquered the world. He reflects after his first review of *The Story of a Soul* by expressing his disinterest in St Thérèse and the praise she received from around the world. Certainly she was not the first to speak of “the way of the child” (Ghéon 139). Before her were St Francis of Assisi, the Curé of Ars and St Germaine. Although not discounting the incredible spiritual movement experienced by many, through the study of her life and writings, he did not find cause to follow this path. On page 137 he states, “Spiritual writers only restate in words, and saints only re-live in deeds, those things which Christ said and did.” How does one human compare to the greatness of Christ Jesus, he poses? None can out do the Savior.

Determined to look again at her autobiography, this time while exploring Alençon and Lisieux, he found a treasure in her work. “God himself, slipped a rare grace between the pages of her book... a grace immediately efficacious and capable by its very presence of opening hearts to her teaching” (137). Reading the honor he eventually bestowed upon St Therese was incredibly touching. His thought was moved from critical analysis to an admiring heart. Her life called him to a deeper place; beckoning his return to the childlike place where she felt we all encounter the Master.

V. Humility

The pride of humans has often preceded our downfall and many spiritual teachers have warned against this excessive attitude. Thérèse possessed an innate understanding of this and clung to a humble existence, constantly offering herself up to God. She prayed her own sacrifice would be price enough to lead others to Jesus and grant their admission. I was moved with her clearly genuine love of God, her indestructible faith and ever present courage. I spent much time, while writing this paper, contemplating the idea of sainthood. She inspired me with her commitment to do all her physical body was able, and multiply its fruits ten fold with the work of her heart. There can not exist one without the other, faith without action or action without faith. She showed me that they feed each other intensely and at each experience new lessons were learned.

In reading some of the remembrances her sisters recorded, I found myself imagining her as a young girl, when she would call to her mother from the stairwell. Not one stair would be climbed without her mother’s response. Standing and waiting for the voice of her mother to call her closer. Just as she would place her foot on the next step, feeling a sense of accomplishment in her journey, the depth of her relationship with God was immediately challenged. Thérèse continued, with a beauty only humility can shine. Always in prayer, whether meditating on scripture, studying the teachings of another saint or simply through her own mind she maintained

a constant vigil. Striving for purification, she acknowledged her imperfections and these continued to motivate her growth. In only twenty four years she reached a well of spiritual knowledge people spend their whole lives in search of. Thérèse taught me that it is not an intellectual search alone that will enlighten my heart and bring me to communion with the Divine. It is with pure intention and willingness to let my heart be molded in the spirit of Christ.

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