

TANGAZA COLLEGE
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**THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX: HER SPIRITUALITY AND ITS
RELEVANCE TO THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH
IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICA**

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A long Essay Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Bachelor of Arts in Religious Studies

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In memory of our departed little sister Judy Wangui of Cottolengo Centre
whose confident and loving disposition in suffering remain a great challenge for us all
who persistently strive for total self-surrender to the Father's will.

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 but boldly confident in his goodness as a Father.
(St Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Thanks be to God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit for the ineffable mystery of our redemption whose aspect of merciful love we contemplate in this essay.

I greatly appreciate the exceptional gift and fraternal support of all my brothers and sisters of the Cottolengo Communities wherever they are. I thank them in a very special way for their total dedication in their gracious ministry to our underprivileged and suffering brethren. Through such selfless and loving service our world will know that God is Love and that his love searches out for all regardless of their tribes, nationalities, races, social status, and religious affiliations.

I do thank Fr. Giusto Cramerì, SSC, with whose consent I have attended monthly recollections in the Discalced Carmelite Community of Nairobi since 1995. These recollections, thanks to the Carmelite preachers, have significantly contributed to my interest in Thérèse and her spirituality.

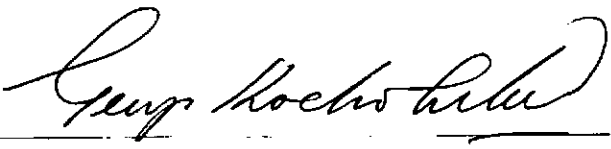
Thanks a lot to Fr. George Kocholickal, SDB, whose cheer, welcome, and patience have filled me with courage and determination all along my research. Thanks be to God for his diligent and skillful supervision. He has been specially insightful and his suggestions very supportive.

DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, declare that this long essay (thesis) is my original work achieved through my personal reading, scientific research method and critical reflection. It is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in Religious Studies. It has never been submitted to any other college or university for academic credit. All sources have been cited in full and acknowledged.

Signed: 
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This long essay has been submitted for examination with my approval as the college supervisor.

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The main objective of this essay is to make Thérèse of Lisieux better known and to make our contemporary world much more conversant with her teaching, which is so rich and relevant to our age. To meet our objective, we will divide the essay into three chapters.

In the first chapter we will study Thérèse from a biographical perspective with the aim of providing the historical context within which she developed, practised and taught her little way of spiritual childhood. We will divide her life into three phases or periods. The first period (1873-1877) which begins with her birth and concludes with her Mother's death, is a period in which Thérèse was surrounded by love and was full of life and happiness.

The second period of her life (1877-1886) starts with her mother's death, which made her so timid, retiring and hypersensitive that she could not bear the company of people other than her family members. This second period came to an end on the Christmas day of 1886 when she was relieved from her touchiness. She became strong, courageous, and other-centered. The Christmas grace gave way to her third period, which spreads from 1886-1897—the period in which her spirituality came into being and took shape.

The second chapter constitutes the heart of the whole study. In it, we will present the spirituality of Thérèse of Lisieux. We will divide our chapter into two major parts: The discovery of the little way of spiritual childhood, and the essential elements of this way. We will focus on Thérèse's religious experience, that is, her self-image in the light of the mystery of salvation and then look into the discovery itself. We will study in detail the essential elements of the little way of spiritual childhood, which are: confidence (filial trust), prayer, fraternal charity and missionary spirit.

In our third chapter, we will present the relevance of Theresian spirituality to the mission of the Church in today's Africa. We do this by first examining what the mission of the universal Church entails. Secondly, we will look into the African situation and the challenges that it poses. Finally, we will present the Theresian response to Africa by briefly exploring the implications of her spirituality of communion, which are: commitment to works of charity, pursuit of reconciliation and peace, and interreligious and ecumenical dialogues.

Chapter 1: Thérèse of Lisieux: Who is She?

Introduction

This chapter is intended to give some biographical information about Thérèse of Lisieux. The information will provide the historical context within which Thérèse developed, practised and taught her little way of spiritual childhood. Since according to Thérèse, her life unfolds in three phases/periods, our first chapter is divided into three parts so as to give a better focus on each of the three phases. The first period (1873-1877) begins with the birth of Thérèse and concludes with her Mother's death. It is a period in which Thérèse was surrounded by love and was full of life and happiness. During this period, she had a firm control over her actions and had great love for nature, which bore in her soul profound and poetic impressions.

The death of Thérèse's mother marked the dawn of the second period of her life (1877-1886). The trauma of separation from her mother made her timid, retiring and sensitive to an excessive degree. She could not bear the company of people other than her family members and as she confesses, she found joy only in the intimacy of her family. It was during this period that she attended school, received Holy Communion and was confirmed. The Christmas day of 1886 was a turning point in her life. On this day she received her *grace of conversion*—Jesus made her strong and courageous, and

since that night she was never defeated in any combat whatsoever but, as she testifies, she *walked from victory to victory*.

The third period (1886-1897) in Thérèse's own words, was "*the most beautiful and most filled with graces*." It is during this period that her religious vocation matures and finds its full realization. This is the time within which she discovers her little way of spiritual childhood, practices and teaches it.

1.1 Period I: 1873-1877

Thérèse was born in Alençon, France "At half-past eleven on the night of Thursday, January 2, 1873..." and "...was baptised Marie-Françoise-Thérèse on the following Saturday [4/1/1873]."¹ She was the ninth born in the family of Louis Martin and Zélie Guérin. By the time Thérèse was born, two of her sisters and her only two brothers had already died at infancy.²

Thérèse's mother "while quite young...had knocked herself violently against a piece of furniture. This blow led to a swollen gland in her breast. At first slightly painful, it became more so later on, and finally developed into a fibrous tumor."³ Because of her bad health, Zélie could not breast-feed her daughter and had to look for a wet-nurse to do the job. Rose Taillé was the choice. She was "a 37-year-old farmer's wife..."⁴ who lived at Semallé, some five miles from Alençon.⁵ Rose took Thérèse to

BEFVERS, J., *Saint Thérèse the Little Flower, The Making of a Saint*, Rockford, 1976, 24.

² Cf. O'CONNOR, P., *Thérèse of Lisieux, A Biography*, Huntington, 1983, 9-10.

³ GESU ALDA, *St. Theresa the Little Flower*, trans. by Margaret M. Repton, n.p., 1960, 1991³, 31.

⁴ O'CONNOR, *Thérèse of Lisieux*, 10.

⁵ Cf. BEFVERS, *Saint Thérèse the Little Flower*, 24.

her home in March 1873 and returned her a year later when Thérèse was already fifteen months old.⁶

The fifteen months that Thérèse spent with her surrogate mother constituted the first in a series of painful but *providential* separations that would play a significant role in her spiritual growth. Soon, she would realize that everything passes away and love alone endures forever. She would soon awaken to the fact that none of the created goods could fully satisfy the infinite desires that characterize the human person; only an infinite being can fulfill infinite desires. Thus, Thérèse would commit her entire life to the pursuit of the one and only thing that matters in life -- the perfect accomplishment of the will of God in everything and at all times.

In this first period of her life, Thérèse enjoyed in abundance the benefits of being the last-born. As Furlong puts it, "...she was the center of attention."⁷

Her mother's letters tell us that Thérèse is clever and original...good and sweet as an angel. 'She has a blonde head and a golden heart, and is very tender and candid.' 'The dear little one is our sunshine. She is going to be wonderfully good; the germ of goodness can already be seen.'⁸

Addressing her elder sister Pauline, who was then her prioress in Carmel,

Thérèse exclaims;

How happy I really was at that age, dear mother! I had already begun to enjoy life; virtue had its charming qualities for me, and I was, it seems to me, in the same dispositions then as I am now, enjoying a firm control over my actions...I recall especially the Sunday walks when Mama used to accompany us. I still feel the profound and *poetic* impressions that were born in my soul at the sight of fields enameled with *cornflowers* and all types of wild flowers. Already I was in love with the *wide open spaces*. Space and the gigantic fir trees, the branches sweeping

⁶ Cf. FURLONG, M., *Thérèse of Lisieux*, London, 1987, 2001², 27-28. According to the chronology recorded in Thérèse's Autobiography, *Story of a Soul*, trans. by John Clarke, Washington, DC, 1975, 1996¹, 279, Thérèse went to Rose's house in March 15 or 16, 1873 and returned home in April 2, 1874.

⁷ FURLONG, *Thérèse*, 29.

⁸ FURLONG, *Thérèse*, 29.

down to the ground, left in my heart an impression similar to the one I experience still today at the sight of nature...Oh! everything truly smiled upon me on this earth: I found flowers under each of my steps and my happy disposition contributed much to making life pleasant...⁹

Thérèse's happiness and vivacity would not last long; soon it would be interrupted by the death of her mother in August 28, 1877. The cancer in her breast had gradually undermined Zélie's health till she at last succumbed her life to it. When Zélie's funeral was over Thérèse and her four elder sisters¹⁰ dumb with sorrow, gazed at each other, their eyes swollen with grief and tears. When Louise, their old family servant, remarked that the five had no mother any more, Thérèse threw herself into Pauline's arms and cried "Well, as for me, it's Pauline who will be my Mama!"¹¹ The death of Thérèse's mother marked the end of the first period of her life and inaugurated the second.

1.2 Period II: 1877-1886

About two and a half months after Zélie's death, Martin moved with her entire family to Lisieux -some 80 kilometers north west of Alençon and about 160 kilometers north east of Paris.¹² This desertion of the home in which a great figure such as the mother of a family had been buried, seems strange at least to an African mind, that accords so much reverence to the departed and the soil on which they are buried. Furlong explains the intention of Louis Martin and the outcome of the move:

⁹ *Story of a Soul. The Autobiography of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux*, trans. by John Clarke, Washington DC, 1975, 1996³, 29-30.

¹⁰ The five daughters of Martin and Zélie became religious sisters. Four of them - Marie, Pauline, Céline and Thérèse, joined the Carmel Monastery of Lisieux while Leonie became a Visitandine.

¹¹ *Story of a Soul*, 34.

¹² *The Curtis-Doubleday World Atlas*, Garden City, 1962, 16.

[Thérèse's] Uncle Isidore and Aunt Céline lived at Lisieux, and *feeling that his children would need the guiding hand of a woman [emphasis mine]*, Louis moved to Lisieux, to a house called Les Buissonnets [little bushes/shrubbery]. It was a delightful house for a growing family, bigger than the one in Alençon and surrounded by a pleasant garden with many trees...In spite of their grief the children were excited by the change.¹³

Thérèse confesses that this second phase of her life was the most painful of all. She started schooling at the Benedictine Abbey¹⁴ in 1881. At this stage in her life, she was rather incapable of getting on with people other than the members of her family. She writes to Pauline,

I must admit, Mother, my happy disposition completely changed after Mama's death. I, once so full of life, became timid and retiring, sensitive to an excessive degree. One look was enough to reduce me to tears, and the only way I was content was to be left alone completely. I could not bear the company of strangers and found my joy only within the intimacy of the family.¹⁵

Thérèse timidity and excessive sensibility was aggravated by Pauline's entry into the cloistered convent of the Discalced Carmelite Nuns in Lisieux.¹⁶ She recalls very well how nasty it was to learn of her second mother's imminent departure. She says, "I didn't know what Carmel was, but I understood that Pauline was going to leave me to enter a convent. I understood, too, she *would not wait for me* and I was about to lose my second *mother!* Ah! how can I express the anguish of my heart!"¹⁷

When October 2, 1882 arrived, the entire family was drawn to tears. Pauline had to go and Thérèse had to learn to survive without her. Thérèse calls the day "a day of

¹³ Furlong, *Thérèse*, 38.

¹⁴ John Clarke explains that this was a "boarding school conducted by the Benedictine nuns and established at the beginning of the 16th century" in Lisieux. *Story of a Soul*, 53.

¹⁵ *Story of a Soul*, 34-35.

¹⁶ This monastery was founded on March 16, 1838 by Mother Genevieve of St. Teresa (1805-1891). Genevieve had been sent by the Carmel monastery in Poitiers- her hometown, which she had joined in 1830. "Thérèse witnessed her death ...in the very same bed she was to occupy later on in her last illness in 1897." *St. Thérèse of Lisieux, Her Last Conversations*, trans. John Clarke, Washington, D.C., 1977, 300.

¹⁷ *Story of a Soul*, 58.

tears and blessings when Jesus gathered the first of his flowers...”¹⁸. She adds, “In one instant, I understood what life was; until then I had never seen it so sad; but it appeared to me in all reality, and I saw it was nothing but *continual suffering and separation* [*emphasis mine*]. I shed bitter tears because I did not yet understand the joy of sacrifice.”¹⁹

Despite the fact that Thérèse did quite well in her studies, especially in history and composition, she was far from being at peace in school. She laments, “I have often heard it said that the time spent at school is the best and the happiest of one’s life. It wasn’t this way for me. The five years I spent in school were the saddest in my life...”²⁰. Thérèse thus spent only five years at school. Had she not been continuously sick, she would have gone for some other two years of higher studies. She left the Abbey in March 1886 and thereafter received some private tuition from a madam Papinau— a 50-year-old lady who lived near their house.²¹ Beevers explains that for the eleven months that Thérèse spent with Papinau, she “had only sixty-four lessons—a few of them lasting for an hour and a half, but most of them were only an hour’s duration.”²²

It was during her school days that Thérèse received First Holy Communion and confirmation.²³ Her First Holy Communion occupies a special place in the development

¹⁸ *Story of a Soul*, 59.

¹⁹ *Story of a soul*, 58.

²⁰ *Story of a soul*, 53.

²¹ Cf. GATCHER, G., *The Story of a Life. St. Thérèse of Lisieux*, trans. by Anne M. Brennan, San Francisco, 1987, 57.

²² BEEVERS, J., *St Therese of the Child Jesus*, Nairobi, 1987, 18.

²³ Thérèse received her First Holy Communion at the Benedictine Abbey on May 8, 1884— the very day that her second mother, Pauline [Sister Agnes of Jesus] professed in the Carmel with the name. Thérèse was confirmed on June 14, 1884. Cf. *Story of a Soul*, 80.

of her spirituality, which is significantly Christocentric. Thérèse recalls this encounter with Jesus in these words:

Ah! how sweet was that first kiss of Jesus! It was a kiss of *love*; I *felt* that I *was loved*, and I said: "I love You and I give myself to You forever!" There were no demands made, no struggles, no sacrifices; for a long time now Jesus and poor little Thérèse *looked at* and understood each other. That day, it was no longer simply a *look*, it was a fusion; they were no longer two, Thérèse had vanished as a drop of water is lost in the immensity of the ocean. Jesus alone remained; He was the Master, the King. Had not Thérèse asked Him to take away her *liberty*. for her *liberty* frightened her? She felt so feeble and fragile that she wanted to be united forever to the divine strength! Her joy was so great, too deep for her to contain, and tears of consolation soon flowed, to the consternation of her companions.²⁴

Thérèse is an experiential knowledge of Jesus. She naturally speaks about Jesus the way a bride would speak about her bridegroom. Thérèse receives a kiss of love from her 'spouse' and consequently feels deep within her that she is loved. Overwhelmed by a love so immense, Thérèse spontaneously does her utmost to respond to it with her love. In their mutual self-giving process, Thérèse disappears into Jesus. From now henceforth Jesus is the sole in-charge; he is simply the master and the king of Thérèse's life. Under the all-encompassing influence of Jesus, Thérèse's outlook is greatly transformed. She confesses that until she received Holy Communion, she had suffered without loving suffering but since her First Holy Communion experience she developed a real love for suffering. Another effect of the Holy Communion was her immense and resolute desire to love God above all else and to find her joy in him alone.²⁵

Even with the spiritual empowerment of the reception of First Holy Communion, Thérèse remained caught up in her timidity and excessive sensibility. She writes, "I was really unbearable because of my extreme touchiness...I was quite unable

²⁴ *Story of a Soul*, 77.

²⁵ Cf. *Story of a Soul*, 79.

to correct this terrible fault. I really don't know how I could entertain the thought of entering Carmel when I was still in the *swaddling clothes of a child!*"²⁶ Thérèse however, was never the type that gives up in life; she kept hoping. She firmly believed that the God, who puts good desires within us, never leaves them unfulfilled. She kept waiting for a day when her spouse would step in and snatch her from her misery. She says, "God would have to work a little miracle to make me *grow up* in an instant..."²⁷.

God did not delay in working a liberating miracle for Thérèse. He knew when to do it and how to do it. When the predestined time arrived, God acted; he acted in a way that Thérèse would live to remember. She writes:

...this miracle He performed on that unforgettable Christmas day. On that luminous *night* which sheds such light on the delights of the Holy Trinity, Jesus, the gentle, *little* Child of only one hour, changed the night of my soul into rays of light. On that night when He made Himself subject to *weakness* and suffering for love of me, He made me *strong* and courageous, arming me with His weapons. *Since that night I have never been defeated in any combat, but rather walked from victory to victory ...It was December 25, 1886, that I received the grace of leaving my childhood, in a word, the grace of my complete conversion [emphasis mine].*²⁸

Thérèse's 'complete conversion' brought about the rediscovery of the happiness and vivacity that had been taken away by her mother's death. In her own words she exclaims, "Thérèse had discovered once again the strength of soul which she had lost at the age of four and a half, and she was to preserve it forever!"²⁹ Thérèse would no longer be childish; she would enjoy a firm control over her actions.

²⁶ *Story of a Soul*, 97.

²⁷ *Story of a Soul*, 97.

²⁸ *Story of a Soul*, 97-98.

²⁹ *Story of a Soul*, 98.

1.3 Period III: Christmas 1886-September, 1897

Thérèse remarks, “On that *night of light* begun *the third period of my life, the most beautiful and the most filled with graces [emphasis mine]* from heaven. The work I was unable to do in ten years was done by Jesus in one instant.”³⁰ From this text we gather that before the third period of her life, Thérèse largely relied on her personal efforts in attaining perfection. The third period as we shall see, was exactly the opposite—she relied on Jesus [God] who was able to accomplish *in one instant* what she could not in ten years.

It is during this period that Thérèse’s vocation to religious life matures and gradually comes to its full realization. It is during this third period of her life that we see her developing a spirituality of her own based on an eminent doctrine that is typically hers. During this period, we encounter Thérèse undergoing a process of purification that culminates into love—the one and only proper disposition of a human person before God. “My God, I love You!”³¹, were the last words that Thérèse uttered on her deathbed on September 30, 1897, the day she passed away.

Let us now examine the beauty of this third period and the abundant graces that filled it and that brought Thérèse to her final and irreversible option for God.

1.3.1 Thérèse's Carmelite Vocation

It should not be forgotten that even when we have divided Thérèse's life into three phases, none of them stands on its own; rather, the three are closely interconnected and inevitably influence one another. This is clearly the case when we consider her the

³⁰ *Story of a Soul*, 98.

³¹ *St. Thérèse of Lisieux, Her Last Conversations*, 243.

unfolding of her vocation. The first certitude of her vocation could be traced back to 1882 around the time that Pauline entered Carmel. She recalls her encounter with Pauline shortly before Pauline left for Carmel.

[Pauline,]...you explained the life of Carmel to me and it seemed so beautiful! When thinking over all you had said, I felt that Carmel was the *desert* where God wanted me to go also to hide myself. I felt this with so much force that there wasn't the least doubt in my heart; it was not the dream of a child led astray but the *certitude* of a divine call; I wanted to go to Carmel not for *Pauline's sake* but for *Jesus alone*.³²

A few days after Pauline's entry, Thérèse visited her and had the chance of confiding her vocation to Mother Marie de Gonzague³³ who was then the prioress. Thérèse says, "Mother Marie de Gonzague believed I had a vocation, but she told me that they didn't receive postulants at the age of *nine* and that I must wait until I was sixteen."³⁴

Thérèse's father did not oppose her vocation. The first in the chain of oppositions that she was to face came from her uncle Isidore Guérin (1841-9109). When Thérèse confided her vocation to him, he forbade her to speak about it again until she was seventeen. He said, "It was contrary to human prudence...to have a child of fifteen enter Carmel. This Carmelite life was...a life of mature reflection, and it would be doing a great wrong to the religious life to allow an inexperienced child to embrace it."³⁵ After a short while however, Isidore gave his consent.

³² *Story of a Soul*, 58.

³³ "Mother Marie de Gonzague (1834-1904) entered Lisieux Carmel in 1860 and was elected for first time as Prioress in 1874. Thérèse had her as her superior all through her religious life except for the years 1893-1896 when her sister Pauline (Mother Agnes of Jesus) was Prioress." *Story of a Soul*, 148.

³⁴ *Story of a Soul*, 59.

³⁵ *Story of a Soul*, 109.

The second opposition came from Father Delatroëtte, the ecclesiastical superior of Lisieux Carmel. He told Thérèse that there was no danger in staying at home and that she would lead a Carmelite life there. What gave Thérèse some hope is his conclusive remark that he was only the *Bishop's delegate* and would have nothing to say if the bishop gave his consent. Thérèse was resolutely determined to obtain the permission. She confesses, "I was determined *to do all within my power*, even saying I would go to the *Holy Father* if the Bishop did not want me to enter at fifteen."³⁶

Thérèse's audience with bishop Hugonin³⁷ on October 31, 1887 was a disappointing one. She and her father went to Bayeux to see the bishop and were received by the bishop's vicar general—Father Révérony. After doing her best to demonstrate to them the genuineness and firmness of her vocation, "The Bishop said an interview with the *Superior of Carmel* [Delatroëtte] was indispensable before making his decision." Thérèse remarks, "I couldn't have heard anything that would cause me more pain than this because I was aware of his formal opposition."³⁸

Thérèse had only one more chance. All authorities having disappointed her hopes, she was left with the most supreme ecclesiastical authority—the pope. On the occasion of the golden jubilee of Leo XIII's priestly ordination, a pilgrimage to Rome was organized. Louis Martin and her two daughters, Celine and Thérèse took part.

³⁶ *Story of a Soul*, 111.

³⁷ Bishop Hugonin Flavien-Abel-Antoine (1823-1898) was named the bishop of Bayeux on July 13, 1866 and was the bishop of Bayeux and Lisieux from 1867 to 1898. It was he who confirmed Thérèse, permitted her to enter Carmel, gave her the habit on January 10, 1889, and granted the imprimatur for the publication of her autobiography in 1898. Cf. *St. Thérèse of Lisieux, Her Last Conversations*, 301.

³⁸ *Story of a Soul*, 117.

Thérèse was determined to present her petition to the Holy Father. The day of the audience was November 20, 1887. Thérèse describes the scene with these words:

Leo XIII was seated on a large armchair; he was dressed simply in a white cassock, with a cape of the same color, and on his head was a little skullcap. Around him were cardinals, archbishops, and bishops, but I saw them in general, being occupied solely with the Holy Father. We passed in front of him in procession; each pilgrim knelt in turn, kissed the foot and hand of Leo XIII, received his blessing, and two noble guards touched him [the pilgrim] as a sign to rise...³⁹

Two factors confused Thérèse as her turn approached. The first was Father Révérony's presence. He stood at the right side of Leo and Thérèse feared that he would interfere with her petition. Secondly, the pilgrims were forbidden to speak with the Holy Father "as this would prolong the audience too much."⁴⁰ With the moral support of her sister Celine, Thérèse cried out, "Most Holy Father, I have a great favor to ask you!" She continued, "Holy Father, in honor of your jubilee, permit me to enter Carmel at the age of fifteen!"⁴¹ Leo did not understand exactly what Thérèse was asking for and so he sought the help of Father Révérony. What Thérèse feared most happened. Révérony watered down her plea. He said, "Most Holy Father...this is a *child* who wants to enter Cannel at the age of fifteen, but the Superiors are considering the matter at the moment."⁴²

Finally, Thérèse's *great favor* was not granted. The pope told her to go by whatever the superiors would decide and assured her that her plea would be answered if it was God's will. For Thérèse, this was no too bad an answer; it made her re-think her

³⁹ *Story of a Soul*, 134.

⁴⁰ *Story of a Soul*, 134.

⁴¹ *Story of a Soul*, 134.

⁴² *Story of a Soul*, 134.

vocation. She offered herself to the child Jesus as his toy. She remarks that “At Rome, Jesus pierced His little plaything; He wanted to see what there was inside it and having seen, content with His discovery, He let His little ball fall to the ground and he went off to sleep.” However, the *ball* did not remain abandoned for long. The owner made arrangements in secret and it was soon picked up. Mother Marie de Gonzague received a letter from Hugonin on December 28, 1887 allowing Thérèse to join Carmel. Her entry was delayed till April 9, 1888.⁴³ Presenting Thérèse to the nuns of Lisieux Carmel, Delatroëtte said, “As the bishop’s delegate I give you this fifteen-year-old child whose entrance you have wished for. I hope she does not disappoint your hopes, but I remind you that if she does you alone will bear the responsibility.”⁴⁴

1.3.2 Thérèse as a Carmelite

Thérèse spent nine years in Carmel. During these years her life unfolds in an astonishing way. Contrary to the fears of Delatroëtte, Thérèse eventually outshines her fellow sisters in the pursuit of perfection (holiness), which from her perspective, “consists in doing His [God’s] will, in being what He wills us to be.”⁴⁵ She displays an excellent grasp of the significance of charity as the core of the Christian teaching. For her, “*Charity is the EXCELLENT WAY that leads most surely to God.*”⁴⁶

Several significant events took place in the religious life of Thérèse. We shall focus on those events that had remarkable contribution to the birth, development and

⁴³ Cf. *Story of a Soul*, 147.

⁴⁴ GAUCHER, G., *The Story of a Life*, 87.

⁴⁵ *Story of a soul*, 14.

⁴⁶ *Story of a soul*, 194.

application of her spirituality. The first in the series of these events is her religious profession –an event that Thérèse calls the day of her *wedding*. She says, “In the morning of September 8, [1890]...I pronounced my Holy Vows...*I offered myself to Jesus in order to accomplish His will perfectly in me [emphasis mine]* without creatures ever being able to place any obstacle in the way.”⁴⁷ In the accomplishment of the divine will, God comes first; we cooperate with him by availing ourselves to him and letting him take over and exercise his rule over all that we are and have.

Thérèse's father was unable to attend her profession because he was hospitalized.⁴⁸ Recalling the event Thérèse remarks, “On the day of my wedding I was really an orphan, no longer having a Father on this earth and being able to look with confidence, saying in all truth: ‘Our *Father* who art in Heaven...’”⁴⁹. Therese experiences herself as an orphan--poor, defenseless and prone to all kinds of dangers. She needs a defender; she needs a friend and somebody she can count on. She turns her eyes to heaven and there she sees the father of the orphan. God himself would be her father henceforth.

1893 saw the election of Pauline as the prioress in place of Mother Marie de Gonzague. Furlong makes the observation that, “The election in fact had nearly split the convent in two with factions rooting for each of the two powerful leaders, and Mother

⁴⁷ *Story of a soul*, 166-167.

⁴⁸ “Mr. Martin was cruelly afflicted during the last years of his life. He had a very slight stroke just before the journey to Rome with Céline and Thérèse. It was the first sign of a physical and mental deterioration which finally paralyzed him and reduced him to the state of an imbecile.” Beevers, *Saint Therese, The Little Flower*, 110-111.

⁴⁹ *Story of a soul*, 161.

Marie de Gonzague openly sulking when she failed to be re-elected.”⁵⁰ The reason for the sulking of Gonzague could easily be understood if we consider what kind of a person she really was. Beevers describes her as,

A woman of a strong and passionate nature, she had the potentialities of a great prioress, but failed to respond to the high demands of her position. She never understood the true, inner significance and purpose of the Carmelite Rule and she never forgot that she was an aristocrat and a highly intelligent and well-educated woman ruling over subjects greatly inferior to her in worldly attributes. She had no equal in brains and force of personality until Pauline and Marie Martin entered Carmel...She remained too closely attached to her family. Her sister...was a frequent visitor to the Carmel, and it was nothing unusual for her to arrive with her grandchildren and stay for some weeks in the gatehouse of the convent. During her stay, the nuns acted as her servants, even having to mend her underclothes and embroider her coat-of-arms onto her tablecloths and handkerchiefs.”⁵¹

Pauline—now Mother Agnes of Jesus, understood well the fears of Gonzague and decided to give her a position of considerable influence. She named her the mistress of the novices. At the same time, Mother Agnes “took an unexpected initiative: she ordered Sister Thérèse of the Child Jesus to ‘to help’ Mother Marie de Gonzague in her task.”⁵² Mother Agnes says that she had no doubts that Gonzague was unsuited for her new task but she felt bound to appoint her so as to avoid a greater evil. She adds, ““to try to lessen the mischief she might cause, I assigned Thérèse to supervise her two companions, but in reality I was relying on her to guide the novices.””⁵³ All this happened in February 1893. After the death of Thérèse's father in July 29, 1894, Celine was now free to join her other three sisters in Carmel. She was admitted on the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross.

⁵⁰ Furlong, *Thérèse of Lisieux*, 94.

⁵¹ BEEVERS, *Saint Therese, The Little Flower*, 98-100.

⁵² GAUCHER, *The Story of a Life*, 125.

⁵³ BEEVERS, *Saint Therese, The Little Flower*, 106.

Celine's entry to Carmel was a remarkable event and a turning point in Thérèse's. Celine brought two important items to Carmel –a camera and a biblical anthology, which Father Conrad de Meester refers to as *Celine's notebook* and is, according to his research, the primary source of Thérèse's little way of spiritual childhood.⁵⁴ Bishop Gaucher supports De Meester's stance with the following observation:

On September 14[1894], she [Celine] arrived at the monastery. In her luggage, besides her massive camera equipment, she carried the notebooks she had filled in the course of her studies. At the Guérins she had been able to copy passages from the Bible; she even had access to two! Behold! This was something that could have made her sister "jealous," who was not allowed to study the Old Testament in the novitiate. Thérèse very quickly seized these notebooks and, thanks to the masterly study of Fr. Conrad De Meester, we know that she found in them the two texts that would be decisive for the discovery of her way.⁵⁵

We shall come back to the two texts when we address the question of the origin and development of the little way.

Thérèse instructed and directed the novices throughout the term of Mother Agnes, which ended with the *difficult* re-election⁵⁶ of Mother Marie de Gonzague in March 21, 1896. Gonzague did not let go the office of novice mistress. She however, confirmed Thérèse as her auxiliary mistress. In her instruction and direction of the

⁵⁴ DE MEESTER, C., *The Power of Confidence. Genesis and structure of the "Way of Spiritual Childhood" of St. Thérèse of Lisieux*, New York, 1998, 29.

⁵⁵ GAUCHER, G., *John and Thérèse. Flames of Love, The Influence of St. John of the Cross in the Life and Writings of St. Thérèse of Lisieux*. New York, 22-23. Gaucher remarks that even when a professed Carmelite was supposed to leave the novitiate after three years, Therese, on September 8, 1893, requested to stay there permanently and permission was granted by Mother Agnes. This meant that for her entire "life Sister Thérèse would therefore have to ask permissions, follow a special timetable and attend novitiate gatherings; in a word, remain a minor. To remain in the novitiate meant never being a fully-fledged nun...". GAUCHER, *Story of a Life*, 129.

⁵⁶ "On Saturday, 21 March, the eve of Passion Sunday, a silent air of expectancy pervaded the Lisieux Carmel. They were preparing for the election of the prioress... That day, out of twenty-four nuns, sixteen chapter sisters assembled in the choir. The others [Therese included] prayed. Time dragged on – it took no less than seven ballots to decide between Mother Marie de Gonzague and Mother Agnès. The senior, aged sixty-two, was finally elected by a narrow margin [emphasis mine]." GAUCHER, *The Story of a Life*, 155.

novices, Thérèse had a golden opportunity to develop and test her way. She practised it in all its details and was amazed at how successful it turned out to be. She says, “I understand so well that *it is only love that makes us acceptable to God [emphasis mine]*, that this love is the only good I ambition. Jesus deigned to show me the road that leads to this Divine Furnace, and this road is the *surrender* of the little child who sleeps without fear in its Father’s arms.”⁵⁷

The period between 1893-1897 is, as we have already seen, very crucial in the understanding and appreciation of Theresian spirituality. During this period, Thérèse gradually develops her talent of writing. She writes up to fifty-four poems and well over two hundred and sixty letters, some of which are invaluable and indispensable for an accurate grasp of her spirituality—especially its missionary dimension. In the early days of 1895, Thérèse starts writing her autobiography. When she was re-elected, Marie de Gonzague approved the writing, which had been the initiative of Mother Agnes of Jesus. Thérèse did the writing till a few weeks to her death. Another interesting move taken by Mother Marie de Gonzague was to assign Thérèse a second⁵⁸ missionary brother—Adolphe Roulland (1870-1934).⁵⁹ The significance of Thérèse’s letters to her two brothers lies in the fact that they were meant to assist them in their spiritual

⁵⁷ *Story of a Soul*, 188.

⁵⁸ Thérèse’s first missionary brother, Maurice Bellière (1874-1907) “was born at Caen; began his studies for priesthood in October, 1894. The following year, October 15, 1895, he wrote the Carmel of Lisieux asking that one of the nuns pray for his vocation. Mother Agnes, Prioress, assigned her sister Thérèse as his spiritual sister. He left for Algiers [Africa] to enter the novitiate of the White Fathers. He was ordained on June 29, 1901...He returned to France in January, 1906, because of poor health and died at Caen the following year.” *St. Thérèse of Lisieux, Her Last Conversations*, 297-298.

⁵⁹ Roulland “entered the Foreign Missions seminary at Paris. On may 30, 1896, he asked mother Marie de Gonzague that one of her religious be associated with him in his missionary apostolate. Thérèse was assigned to this by the Prioress...He sailed for China on August 2, 1896.” *St. Thérèse of Lisieux, Her Last Conversations*, 307.

struggles and that they were never meant for publication. In her letters, as we shall see, Thérèse spontaneously shares her little way of spiritual childhood with her spiritual brothers. She explains them all that it consists in and how it works.

Finally, we shift our focus to Thérèse's terminal illness. Gaucher remarks that "For some time dust from sweeping and the steam from the washing-up...had often made Sister Thérèse cough. Despite several applications of silver nitrate her sore throats would not go away and she sometimes had chest pains."⁶⁰ This was Thérèse's condition in the early days of 1894. Apart from cauterization nothing more was done. This was due to the tension between de Gonzague and Agnes. Agnes would have called in another doctor besides the official doctor of the community who was Marie de Gonzague's great friend but did not dare do so. Henceforth, Thérèse's health gradually deteriorated till her first hemoptysis on the eve of Good Friday in 1896. On Easter Sunday, April 5 of the same year, her trial of faith started, "*a trial that will last until her death.*"⁶¹

By means of her little way Thérèse had learnt to count on God alone. She once exclaimed: "Now, abandonment alone guides me. I have no other Compass! I can no longer ask for anything with fervor except the accomplishment of God's will in my soul without any creature being able to set obstacles in the way."⁶² Through her little way, Thérèse had learnt to always see the good side of things. She firmly believed that whatever happens in our lives is directed by the paternal providence of God. From this

⁶⁰ GAUCHER, *Story of a Life*, 132.

⁶¹ *Story of a Soul*, 284.

⁶² *Story of a Soul*, 178.

her perspective, there are no accidents in life; everything is providential, everything works out for our good. It is with this attitude that she underwent her trial of faith.

Addressing Mother Marie de Gonzague on June 9, 1896, she writes:

Never have I felt before this, dear Mother, how sweet and merciful the Lord really is, for He did not send me this trial until the moment I was capable of bearing it. A little earlier I believe it would have plunged me into a state of discouragement. Now it is taking away everything that could be a natural satisfaction in my desire for heaven...I no longer have any great desires except that of loving to the point of dying of love.⁶³

During her moment of trial and suffering, Thérèse's heart became greatly captivated by the mission of the Church. Burning with a missionary zeal she writes,

I have the *vocation of the Apostle*. I would like to travel over the whole earth to preach Your Name and to plant Your glorious Cross on infidel soil. But *O my Beloved*, one mission alone would not be sufficient for me, I would want to preach the Gospel on all the five continents simultaneously and even to the most remote isles. I would be a missionary, not for a few years only but from the beginning of creation until the consummation of ages.⁶⁴

Thérèse was never the kind of individuals who stuck in life. For her, life consisted of successive and inexhaustible possibilities such that the end of one always opens way for another. The thought that she would soon depart from this passing world never preoccupied her. In stead, it turned her entire being to the life she was about to embrace. She was certain that she would continue her noble task of interceding for the salvation of the world. On July 17, 1897, when her tuberculosis had come to its final stages and caused occasional coughing up of blood, Thérèse revealed her mission to Mother Agnes. She said,

"I feel that I'm about to enter into my rest. But I feel especially that my mission is about to begin, my mission of making God loved as I love him, of giving my little way to souls. If God answers my desires, my heaven will be spent on earth until the end of the world. Yes, I want to

⁶³ *Story of a Soul*, 214.

⁶⁴ *Story of a Soul*, 192-194.

spend my heaven in doing good on earth...I can't make heaven a feast of rejoicing; I can't rest as long as there are souls to be saved...⁵⁵

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have addressed the question: who is Thérèse of Lisieux? This we have done by making a biographical study of her life with special focus on the events that help us grasp the exact context within which her spirituality is born, develops and spreads out. We have examined the three periods into which she subdivides her life and have tried to show how closely interconnected they are. More effort has been dedicated to the last period because it is within it that we find the core of our study --the Theresian spirituality. This our first chapter provides the background against which Theresian spirituality will be presented in the next chapter.

⁵⁵ *St. Thérèse of Lisieux, Her Last Conversations*, 102.

Chapter 2: Theresian Spirituality

Introduction

This chapter is the core of our essay. It draws from the previous one and leads to the next. Its subject of study is the spirituality of Thérèse of Lisieux. The chapter is divided into two major parts: The discovery of the little way of spiritual childhood, and the essential elements of this way. Under the discovery of the way, we shall focus on Thérèse's religious experience, that is, her self-image in the light of the mystery of salvation. Next, we will look into the discovery itself —how Thérèse's way came about.

The essential elements of the little way of spiritual childhood will be addressed in depth and at length. We will consider confidence (filial trust) as our primary response to God-Love, prayer as the acknowledgement of our dependence on God and our concern for one another; fraternal charity as our way of sharing the experience as children we are brothers and sisters to one another, and finally we shall focus on the missionary dimension of Theresian spirituality whereby we strive to share with others the experience and conviction that we are loved by God.

2.1 The Discovery of the Little Way of Spiritual Childhood

In order to understand Theresian spirituality, we got to dig into its genesis. How did this spirituality come about and from what sources did Thérèse draw it? What are the essential elements of this way and how does Thérèse put it into practice? We shall categorize the sources of Theresian spirituality as Thérèse's religious experience and the scriptures.

2.1.1 Thérèse's Religious Experience

A brief survey on Thérèse as an individual in need of salvation and as a religious in pursuit of holiness will help us situate the discovery of the little way of spiritual childhood in its proper context. The question is: what is Thérèse's self-image in relation to her experience of the mystery of salvation? This question can be answered from several perspectives but we choose to approach it from her names viewpoint. She calls herself *little flower* and is called *Sister Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face*. The origin of name little flower is traced to the feast of Pentecost, May 29, 1887—the day Thérèse disclosed to her father her desire to enter Carmel. She recalls her father performing a symbolic action. She writes:

Going up to a low wall, he pointed to some *little white flowers*, like the lilies in miniature, and plucking one of them, he gave it to me, explaining the care with which God brought it into being and preserved it to that very day. While I listened I believed I was hearing my own story, so great was the resemblance between what Jesus had done for the *little flower* and the *little Thérèse*. I accepted it as a relic and noticed that, in gathering it, Papa had pulled all its *roots* out without breaking them. It seemed destined to live on in another soil more fertile than the tender moss where it had spent its first days. This was really the same action that Papa had performed a few moments before when he allowed me to climb Mount Carmel and leave the sweet valley which had witnessed my first steps in this life.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ *Story of a Soul*, 108.

Thérèse perceives herself as a little flower that owes its existence to God who not only created it but also continues to sustain it in being and to direct it to its providential end. The significance of the image of the little flower becomes clearer when Thérèse reflects on the variety of graces bestowed upon different saints. She wonders why God does not give an equal measure of his graces to all souls. She later understands “that if all flowers wanted to be roses, nature would lose her [its] springtime beauty, and the fields would no longer be decked out with little wild flowers.”⁶⁷ Furthermore, “Just as the sun shines simultaneously on the tall cedars and on each little flower as though it were alone on the earth. Our Lord is occupied particularly with each soul as though there were no others like it.”⁶⁸

Thérèse is also known as ‘of the Child Jesus and of the Holy Face’. John Clarke remarks that she signed this name for the first time on the day she received her habit (January 10, 1889).⁶⁹ How did Thérèse acquire this name? A few days after Pauline entered Carmel, Thérèse visited the convent. While at home she was thinking hard about the name she would be given in Carmel. By God’s providence, Mother Marie de Gonzague raised the issue during the visit. She started asking her subjects what name they would wish Thérèse to assume upon her entry to their convent. They settled on Sister Thérèse of the Child Jesus. Thérèse exclaims, “My joy was great and this happy meeting of minds seemed to be a singular favor from my beloved Child Jesus.”⁷⁰

⁶⁷ *Story of a Soul*, 14.

⁶⁸ *Story of a Soul*, 14.

⁶⁹ *Story of a Soul*, 152.

⁷⁰ *Story of a Soul*, 71.

The 1886 Christmas conversion remained a central event in the life of Thérèse. In a way it confirmed the name that she had been assigned in anticipation of her entry to Carmel. It also strengthened her confidence in the littleness of the Child Jesus—one does not have to be big/great to perform wonders. In the person of the Child Jesus, Thérèse sees the God-With-Us. She sees the God of history—the God who is ever-present in the lives of his people. Devotion to the Child Jesus creates in Thérèse the image of God as Father who not only walks with us but also carries us and caresses us with his merciful love.

Therese is also called ‘of the Holy Face’. Clarke explains us that,

Devotion to the Holy Face sprung up in the 19th century, following certain revelations made to Sister Marie of St. Pierre in the Tours Carmel. Thérèse was introduced to the devotion by Sister Agnes of Jesus. She studied it in a very personal way, using the texts of prophet Isaiah [52.13-53.12]. She did this principally at the time of her father’s illness.⁷¹

Through her devotion to the holy face of Jesus, Thérèse desired to pursue holiness in a hidden way, in a way that no one on earth would know it. She wanted to do good without attracting the attention of her fellow human beings. She wanted to love God above all things and to serve him with absolute self-surrender and detachment from all created goods. After the example of her *Master*, Thérèse intended to practice virtue in a silent, patient and loving way. Marie-Eugène explains how Thérèse’s fixed gaze on Christ helped her realize her goals. He writes,

Devotion to the Holy Face practiced by Saint Therese of the Child Jesus offers us an example of the marvelous enrichment that interior experience can derive from the soul’s gaze on Christ Jesus. Actually, it was this devotion together with the trial of her father’s illness and the interior

⁷¹ *Story of a Soul*, 152.

experience that it illumined, which oriented the Saint toward her oblation to merciful Love and the sublime summits of her spiritual life.⁷²

Closely connected to the holy face is the mystery of the cross. On the cross we see “The despised Christ, the last of men, with a hidden look, without splendor or beauty, His eyes lowered, the man of sorrows whom Isaías describes...”⁷³. This close connection comes out in an impressive way in the writings of Therese. She recounts an experience that struck her and charged her with an immense missionary enthusiasm:

One Sunday, looking at the picture of Our Lord on the Cross, I was struck by the blood flowing from one of the divine hands. I felt a great pang of sorrow when thinking this blood was falling to the ground without anyone’s hastening to gather it up...The cry of Jesus on the Cross sounded continually in my heart: “*I thirst!*” These words ignited in me an unknown and very living fire. I wanted to give my Beloved to drink and I felt myself consumed with a *thirst for souls*...I burned with the desire to snatch them from the eternal flames.⁷⁴

As we have already mentioned in chapter one, the discovery of the little way of spiritual childhood occurs towards the end of 1894. The events surrounding the discovery were Thérèse’s ministry to the novices as the novice mistress’s helper, the death of her father (July 29, 1894), the entry of Celine to Carmel (September 14, 1894), and the writing of her autobiography.⁷⁵ All these events called for intense reflection and concentrated self-evaluation. The ministry to the novices must have led Thérèse to re-examine her life in the light of the call to holiness. She was well aware that actions speak louder than words and that witness of life is far much more credible than mere

⁷² MARIF-EUGENE, P., *I am a Daughter of the Church, A Practical Synthesis of Carmelite Spirituality*, Vol. II, trans. by Verda Clare, Westminster, 1955, 1989², 443.

⁷³ MARIF-EUGENE, *I am a Daughter of the Church*, 443.

⁷⁴ *Story of a Soul*, 99.

⁷⁵ John Clarke points out that Sister Thérèse received the order to write her childhood memories from Mother Agnes of Jesus at the end of December 1894. Cf. *Story of a Soul*, 284.

use of words. She questioned whether she was really an exemplar as her new responsibility demanded.

Her father's death seems to have turned her whole attention to heaven. She longed to go to heaven where four of her siblings and parents had already gone. She was however, conscious that to enjoy the beatific glory one had to be holy. Her father's death had set Celine free to enter Carmel. We have already seen that Celine introduced her sister Thérèse to Old Testament texts that were until then unknown to her. Thérèse was also to minister to novice Celine who was four years older than her. This was no easy task for Thérèse. Gaucher explains the reason for this by telling us what kind of a person Celine was at the time she entered Carmel. "She was a strong young woman of twenty-five with an independent outspoken temperament. After having cared for her father, managed a house and refused two proposals of marriage, it was not easy to conform to all the minute details of Carmelite life."⁷⁶ Thérèse had to find a way of dealing with her sister because she had to execute her responsibility anyway.

Thérèse's writing of the story of her life contributes greatly to the little way—perhaps not so much to the moment of the discovery itself as to the development of the way. We are compelled to make this conclusion following the first pages of her autobiography, in which she tells Mother Agnes, "It is to you dear Mother...that I come to confide the story of my soul. The day you asked me to do this, it seemed to me it

⁷⁶ GAUCHER, *The Story of a Life*. 137.

would distract my heart by too much concentration on myself.”⁷⁷ Thereafter she clarifies,

“It is not, then, my life, properly so-called, that I am going to write; it is my *thoughts* on the graces God deigned to grant me...The flower about to tell her story rejoices at having to publish the totally gratuitous gifts of Jesus. She knows that nothing in herself was capable of attracting the divine glances, and His mercy brought about everything that is good in her.

This was written in January 1895 and clearly reflects the perspective of somebody already consciously walking in the little way of spiritual childhood-- somebody who is not mistaken about her true identity and actual disposition, and who readily acknowledges her spiritual poverty and powerlessness and consequently welcomes God’s grace with unwavering confidence and humble gratitude.

2.1.2 The Account of the Discovery

All the events surrounding Thérèse’s discovery, point to her one project in life—holiness. If she has to be effective in assisting others to be holy, she has to be holy herself; she cannot convince her fellow human beings that holiness is attainable by all unless she herself is convinced. It is in this context of pursuing holiness that her little way is born. She writes to Mother Marie de Gonzague,

You know, mother, I have always wanted to be a saint. Alas! I have always noticed that when I compared myself to the saints, there is between them and me the same difference that exists between a mountain whose summit is lost in the clouds and the obscure grain of sand trampled underfoot by passers-by. Instead of becoming discouraged, I said to myself: God cannot inspire unrealizable desires. I can, then, in spite of my littleness, aspire to holiness. It is impossible for me to grow up, and so I must bear with myself such as I am with all my imperfections. But I want to seek out a means of going to heaven by a little way, a way that is very straight, very short, and totally new.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ *Story of a Soul*, 13.

⁷⁸ *Story of a Soul*, 207.

In the above-quoted text, Thérèse acknowledges her intense and ineradicable desire—she has *always wanted to be a saint*. Comparing herself with the saints, for example, Augustine of Hippo, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, she feels *small*. She is like an unnoticeable granule of sand that people and animals trample on. On the contrary, the saints stand out as gigantic mountains whose summits pierce the skies. With these sentiments,

Thérèse is one with every woman or man who has ever felt the yawning distance between one's deepest aspirations and the disappointing reality of one's deficiency. She, too, has been taunted and tortured by the breach between what one hopes for and what actually happens to be the case.⁷⁹

Confronted by her desire for holiness and her inability to realize it by her own efforts, Thérèse turns to her innermost conviction—*God does not inspire unrealizable desires*. Here shines a truth that cannot be underestimated—God has sown the seed of holiness in the heart of each and every human person. However, the germination and growth of this seed depends, to a good extent, on how open we are to his salvific action. Faced by the wide gap between the greatness of the saints and her littleness, Thérèse could have easily given up the entire project of holiness, but she chose to have recourse to God as the source of all that is good.

Thérèse's recourse to God illumined her real state—it was impossible for her to grow up, but was this to be the end of everything? Not so! She quickly discovers the need to accept and put up with whatever she could not change in her life. She resolutely sets out to look for a way that would lead her to holiness. Her way would have to be little as contrasted with that of the great saints. Thérèse's way would be founded on the

⁷⁹UDRIS, J., *The Fearless Trust of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux*, Leominster, 1997, 41.

day-to-day activities and would not run after uncommon or extraordinary accomplishments. It would be very straight, that is, uncomplicated and direct—you do not set yourself on this way if your goals are not clear, you have to know exactly what you are looking for. Thérèse's way does not allow its adherents to move aimlessly and indecisively. The way is very short because "it brings the traveler to the desired end almost as soon as he has started his journey, or even—if he understands well—before he starts."⁸⁰

Thérèse looks around in hope that she gets some insight about the kind of way she is looking for. It is certain that during her 1887 pilgrimage to Rome she had seen innumerable fascinating things—an elevator was one of them. An elevator could easily bridge the gap between the grain of sand trampled underfoot and the mountain whose summit is lost in the skies. What a great insight! Let us listen to her reflection:

We are now living in an age of inventions, and we no longer have to take the trouble of climbing stairs, for, in the homes of the rich, the elevator has replaced these very successfully. I wanted to find an elevator which would raise me to Jesus, for I am too small to climb the rough stairway of perfection. I searched, then, in the scriptures for some sign of this elevator, the object of my desires, and I read these words coming from the mouth of Eternal Wisdom: "Whoever is a *LITTLE ONE*, let him come to me [Proverbs 9.4]." And so I succeeded. I felt I had found what I was looking for. But wanting to know, O my God, what you would do with *the very little one* who answered Your call, I continued my search and this is what I discovered: "As one whom a mother caresses, so will I comfort you: you shall be carried at the breasts, and upon the knees they shall caress you [Isaiah 66.13,12]." Ah! never did words more tender and more melodious come to give joy to my soul. The elevator which must raise me to heaven is Your arms, O Jesus! And for this I had no need to grow up, but rather I had to remain *little* and become this more and more.⁸¹

In this text, Thérèse contrasts the strenuous climbing of stairs (human efforts in pursuing holiness) and the effortless lift on an elevator (pursuit of holiness under the

⁸⁰ COMBES, A., *The Spirituality of St Thérèse (An Introduction)*, trans. by Philip E. Hallett, New York, 1950, 136.

⁸¹ *Story of a Soul*, 207-208.

initiative and guidance of God). At this point, Thérèse is thinking like modern scientist—all she wants is to *make work easier* for herself and for all those who share her experience of littleness and powerlessness. She does not get stuck because her goals are clearly set—she knows exactly what she is after; it is nothing but holiness, that is, to be drawn to perfect communion of love and life with God and consequently with her brothers and sisters. Who is to do that? It is Jesus Christ—the “one mediator between God and the human race (1 Timothy 2.5).”

The two scriptural texts from Proverbs and Isaiah served as Thérèse’s key to holiness. Through their inspiration, she understood that true holiness did not consist in becoming great but in becoming small/little in the eyes of God. De Meester observes that,

At last Thérèse has understood the one needful thing. She has finally arrived at the idea that her fundamental task is one of being receptive, and completely, widely open to the saving, caring and nurturing love of God’s maternal heart. Thérèse must no longer try to save herself. Instead she must accept being saved and sanctified, and for that she must surrender herself with absolute trust in the God who offers her his gratuitous, overflowing love.⁸²

At the heart of Thérèse’s discovery is the image of a child—littleness. To acknowledge our littleness, our frailty, helplessness and dependence calls for truthfulness and humility. As human beings we are creatures and therefore contingent beings—beings that do not exist in and by themselves but owe their existence to their creator. To admit our contingency is to confess that whatever we are and whatever good we have, have been gratuitously given to us. We have nothing to be proud of and nothing to cling to except our one and only Lord and God.

⁸² DE MEESTER, C., *With Empty Hands. The Message of St Thérèse of Lisieux*, London, 2002, 61.

2.2 The Essential Elements of the Little Way of Spiritual Childhood

When on August 6, 1897, Mother Agnes asked Thérèse the exact meaning of *remaining a little child before God*, Thérèse gave this answer,

‘It 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. Even among the poor, they give the child what is necessary, but as soon as he grows up, his father no longer wants to feed him and says: ‘Work now, you can take care of yourself.’...“To be little is not attributing to oneself the virtues that one practices, believing oneself incapable of anything, but to recognize that God places his treasure in the hands of his little child to be used when necessary; but it always remains 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.’⁸³

Thérèse’s answer gives us the kernel of her way. From it we can single out six elements: 1) recognition of our nothingness, 2) expectation of everything [and anything] from God, 3) to be disquieted about nothing, 4) not to be set on making our living, 5) not to attribute to ourselves the virtues we practice, and 6) not to be discouraged over our faults. To recognize our nothingness means to acknowledge what we really are—poor little creatures who are limited all round. We do not know what the future holds for us and even if we knew, how often do we find ourselves without the strength to meet the demands of life? To acknowledge our nothingness is to admit that alone we cannot make it. This humble confession leads us to a trusting self-surrender to God. If we want God’s salvific intervention to be efficacious in our lives we are bound to give way to him. God fills us in the measure that we empty ourselves to him.

To surrender to God is to give in to his will and this implies expecting everything and anything from him. Our part is to avail ourselves to him day by day, what happens to us thereafter should not worry us. In his infinite mercy and

⁸³ St. Thérèse of Lisieux, *Her Last Conversations*, 138-139.

omniscience, he will give us in the right measure what we need and at the proper time. Therefore, there is no need whatsoever of being anxious or disquieted about anything—God is in control. With such surrender and filial trust, it is simply impossible to get discouraged in life. This is because when we seek nothing but the accomplishment of God's will in our lives, we learn to receive and accept whatever comes our way as God's gift to his children.

The conviction that left to ourselves we can do nothing makes us not attribute to ourselves the virtues we practise as if they flow from our own power. Following Thérèse's example, each one of us must be bold enough to say, "It is to God alone that all value must be attributed; there's nothing of value in my little nothingness."⁸⁴ When we consider ourselves as essentially limited creatures, we find it easier to understand why we often fail to live up to our calling. Sometimes we make wrong choices, other times extremely imprudent decisions. These we do often because of underestimating our limitations and their implications. Explaining the above-quoted Theresian text Gavarres stresses that,

Remaining little is the greatest difficulty in the little way. It is therefore the secret of its success. Remaining little means renouncing, once and for all, *growth* in the eyes of others and in one's own eyes. It means expecting nothing from our own nothingness, it means being immersed in the ocean of the divinity, with no possibility of seeing the least progress, it means living in the purest of faith. It is total poverty, abandonment pushed to its ultimate extent.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ St. Thérèse of Lisieux, *Her Last Conversations*, 141.

⁸⁵ GAVARRÉS, À. d. I., *Thérèse, The Little Child of God's Mercy. Her Spiritual Itinerary in the Light of Her Autobiographical Manuscripts*, Washington, D.C., 1999, 298.

2.2.1 Confidence (Filial Trust) in God's Merciful Love

Thérèse's little way of spiritual childhood is a dynamic "state of [constant] awareness of God's fatherhood and a consequent filial dependence on him."⁸⁶ At the heart of Thérèse's message is the mystery of God's merciful love to which, in June 9, 1895, Thérèse offered herself as a victim of holocaust. She was astonished at offering as victims of God's justice, made by her fellow sisters so as to turn away the punishment reserved for sinners. She confesses that the offering was quite noble and generous but was far from captivating her and she opted for what was in line with her deep convictions and aspirations. She cried out:

O my God! Will your Justice alone find souls willing to immolate themselves as victims? Does not Your *merciful Love* need them too? On every side this love is unknown, rejected; those hearts upon which You would lavish it turn to creatures, seeking happiness from them with their miserable affection; they do this instead of throwing themselves into Your arms and of accepting Your infinite *Love*.⁸⁷

Thérèse's act of oblation to God's merciful love has holiness as its primary goal. Having discovered who she really is in the eyes of God and the means by which her one purpose in life is to be attained, Thérèse unreservedly offers herself to God with the one desire of loving him and making him loved.⁸⁸ This becomes her way of becoming holy. Her unwavering confidence in God's merciful love becomes the source of her strength and the foundation of her hope so much so that even with just a few days to her death she could confidently say "even if I had on my conscience all the sins that can be

⁸⁶ ROHRBACH, P. T., "Spiritual Childhood" in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 13, Washington, D.C., 1967, 577.

⁸⁷ *Story of a Soul*, 180.

⁸⁸ Cf. *Story of a Soul*, 276.

committed, I would go, my heart broken with sorrow, and throw myself into Jesus' arms, for I know how much He loves the prodigal child who returns to Him."⁸⁹

Answering to a novice who was greatly upset by her shortcomings, Thérèse encouraged her by giving the analogy of a child who tirelessly but fruitlessly kept trying to climb up to his mother. The account reads,

You make me think of a little child that is learning to stand but does not yet know how to walk. In his desire to reach the top of the stairs to find his mother, he lifts his little foot to climb the first step. It is all in vain, and at each renewed effort he falls. Well, be like that little child. Always keep lifting your foot to climb the ladder of holiness, and do not imagine that you can mount even the first step. All God asks of you is good will. From the top of the ladder He looks lovingly upon you, and soon, touched by your fruitless efforts, He will himself come down, and, taking you in His arms, will carry you to His Kingdom never again to leave him. But should you cease to raise your foot, you will be left for long on earth.⁹⁰

The message this Thérèse's counsel is that in her little way there is absolutely no room for discouragement. This is because God allows us to approach him regardless of who we are and what our condition is. In fact, "the only requirement is that we put our trust in His merciful love."⁹¹

2.2.2 Prayer

Thérèse defines prayer as an aspiration of the heart, a simple glance directed to heaven, a cry of gratitude and love in the midst of trial as well as joy; it is something great, supernatural which expands the soul and unites us to Jesus.⁹² Thérèse's prayer, like all other aspects of her life, is imbued with confidence and love. Prayer is an aspiration of the heart in the sense that it stems from the innermost longings of our

⁸⁹ *Story of a Soul*, 259.

⁹⁰ "Counsels and Reminiscences" in *Sœur Thérèse of Lisieux, The Little Flower of Jesus*, ed. by T. N. Taylor, New York, 1922, 225.

⁹¹ AHERN, P., *Maurice and Thérèse, The Story of a Love*, New York, 1998, 114.

⁹² Cf. *Story of a Soul*, 242.

being. It is a love-driven outpouring of one's entire self to our God who is rich in merciful love. Prayer is a simple glance in that when we pray we simply shift our gaze to God— we let God be the centre of our attention.

In the Theresian way, where we are constantly aware of God's fatherhood and our filial dependence on him, prayer is chiefly marked by an attitude of humble gratitude and love. In the Theresian school we learn that all time is time for prayer. This is not to rule out the need for the precious moments in our lives when we invest heavily in prayer. Moments of intensification of prayer are indispensable but it would be wrong to presume that they are the only occasions in which we can genuinely pray. We do not pray only when good things come our way; we pray at all times, especially when we are in the midst of trials for it is then that we must prove that we trust in God and in his infinite love. The greatness of prayer lies in the fact that through it we give God his due—we acknowledge his greatness/glory, and at the same time open ourselves to the action of his divine love. It is in this sense that prayer expands the soul and unites us God.

According to Thérèse, the greatness of prayer compares to that of “a Queen who has at each instant free access to the King and who is able to obtain whatever she asks.”⁹³ This is an expression of Thérèse's firm conviction that our prayers never go unanswered. When we ask for something and we do not get it, it is perhaps because in God's judgement, our requests are not what we truly need at the moment and so God gives us what he deems our genuine needs. Following Thérèse's line of thought, God in

⁹³ *Story of a Soul*, 242.

his paternal love, may also choose to direct our requests to our more needy brothers and sisters wherever they are even when they do not have to have made the requests themselves. Thérèse expresses this conviction when she says,

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 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 the graces I've received to the prayers of a person who begged them from God for me, and whom I shall know only 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.⁹⁴

Theresian prayer always has a missionary dimension. Since it is essentially God-centered, there is no way it can fail to open doors to one's neighbor. Anyone who prays genuinely cannot seek his well-being alone—he/she must think of his fellow brothers and sisters wherever they may be. Thérèse's conviction is that prayer is the primary and the surest means by which radical transformation of the world can be achieved. This her conviction shines forth in her reflection on the genius of Archimedes. She writes,

A scholar has said: '*Give me a lever and a fulcrum and I will lift the world.*' What Archimedes was not able to obtain, for his request was not directed by God and was only made from a material viewpoint, the saints have obtained in all its fullness. The Almighty has given them as *fulcrum*: *HIMSELF ALONE*; as *lever*: *PRAYER* which burns with a fire of love. And it is in this way that they have *lifted the world*; it is in this way that the saints still militant lift it, and that, until the end of time, the saints to come will lift it.⁹⁵

2.2.3 Fraternal Charity

Our experience of being children of God our loving Father, leads us to consider our fellow human beings as our dear brothers and sisters. This is specially true among Christians who partake in the divine sonship of the Jesus Christ the only begotten Son

⁹⁴ St. Thérèse of Lisieux, *Her Last Conversations*, 99-100.

⁹⁵ *Story of a Soul*, 258.

of God. The Theresian way has Jesus as the exemplar of what it means to be a child of God. To be a child of God consists in being loved and being loving. It is a matter of receiving love and giving back love. Love is thus the distinguishing mark of a Christian. The radicality of the Christian love lies in its disinterestedness in the sense that it is directed even to one's enemies. It is in love for enemies that the genuineness of Christian love is tested and proved. Regarding fraternal love and love for enemies Thérèse has the following to say,

No doubt, we don't have any enemies in Carmel, but there are feelings. One feels attracted to this Sister, whereas with regard to another, one would make a long detour in order to avoid meeting her. And so without knowing it, she becomes the subject of persecution. Well, Jesus is telling me that it is this Sister who must be loved, she must be prayed for even though her conduct would lead me to believe that she doesn't love me...it isn't enough to love; we must prove it.⁹⁶

The Christian love is not about what gives us pleasure but what is in accordance with God's will as revealed to us through Christ Jesus in the Holy Spirit. Since our love is fashioned after that of Christ, it ought to be self-emptying, self-sacrificing and thoroughly self-transcending. Our love can never be genuinely Christian if all it seeks is self-gratification. Thérèse's little way has no room for self-love and self-pity. The kind of love that Thérèse teaches is the evangelical love—the merciful love that prioritizes the good of the other party. It is a love that pays attention to those surrounding it. It considers their needs and puts up with their limitations. For Thérèse, true “charity consists in bearing with the faults of others, in not being surprised at their weakness, in being edified by the smallest acts of virtue we see them practice.”⁹⁷

⁹⁶ *Story of a Soul*, 225.

⁹⁷ *Story of a Soul*, 220.

Thérèse believes and teaches that true love must not remain hidden in the heart; rather it ought to be manifested in action. She recounts several little acts of fraternal charity that she performed in her community. Here is an example:

There is in the Community a Sister who has the faculty of displeasing me in everything, in her ways, her words, her character, everything seems *very disagreeable* to me. And still she is a holy religious who must be very pleasing to God. Not wishing to give in to the natural antipathy I was experiencing, I told myself that charity must not consist in feelings but in works; then I set myself to doing for this Sister what I would do for the person I loved most. Each time I met her I prayed to God for her, offering Him all her virtues and merits. I felt this was pleasing to Jesus, for there is no artist who doesn't love to receive praise for his works, and Jesus, the Artist of souls, is happy when we don't stop at the exterior, but, we admire its beauty. I was content simply with praying very much for this Sister who gave me so many struggles, but I took care to render her all services possible, and when I was tempted to answer back in a disagreeable manner, I was content with giving her my most friendly smile, and with changing the subject of the conversation...⁹⁸

Thérèse takes care not to erroneously attribute to herself the acts of charity that she performs. She knows pretty well that whatever good is in her originates from God and him alone deserves the credit. She expresses her disposition with these words: "Yes, I feel it, when I am charitable, it is Jesus alone who is acting in me, and the more united I am to Him, the more also do I love my sisters."⁹⁹ Charity must be practised with total detachment because its ultimate objective is meant to be an experience of God's own merciful love. Our charity is not meant to draw people to ourselves but to direct them to God who is the Father of us all and who alone deserves all honor and glory.

2.2.4 Missionary Spirit

Bernard Bro writes, "God has only one love, and when he loves, this is the only love he can give. The Father wants to re-live with us what occurs between his son and

⁹⁸ *Story of a Soul*, 222-223. The sister referred to in this text was Sister Thérèse of St. Augustine (1856-1929). She entered Carmel on May 1, 1875 and professed two years later. Thérèse of St. Augustine testified at the process of Thérèse's canonization. Cf. *St. Thérèse of Lisieux, Her Last Conversations*, 308.

⁹⁹ *Story of a Soul*, 221.

himself; the gift of his son to us is the gift which he offers us.”¹⁰⁰ Such is the noble gift that God freely offers us. Its effects are so tremendous and invaluable that no one would keep such a gift to himself/herself without being gravely unjust. Pope John Paul II had this to say about Thérèse's way. “Through spiritual childhood one experiences that everything comes from God, returns to him and abides in him. for the salvation of all, in a mystery of merciful love.”¹⁰¹

Thérèse's missionary spirit springs from this experience. She feels that it would be selfishness of the highest order not to make such an experience accessible to others. As already seen, love is not to be kept hidden, it has to be shared. According to Thérèse, then, the heart of the mission of the Church is none other than love—a love that forgives, restore hope to the broken-hearted, and irreversibly transforms them into sons and daughters of God. Our mission is to convince our fellow human beings that they are loved by God and that their fundamental call is to respond to this love with total confidence absolute self-surrender.

In cherishing a missionary zeal, Thérèse was authentically answering to her Carmelite vocation. The aim of Teresa of Avila's reform was to restore Carmel's original emphasis on prayer. According to the reform,

To intercede is the Carmelite's primary role—to intercede with the whole of one's being. That means being in touch with God but also in touch with one's humanity, with the humanity of others, and with the needs of the poor. It means thirsting for solitude and prayer while having

¹⁰⁰ BRO, B., *The Little Way, The Spirituality of Thérèse of Lisieux*, trans. by Alan Neame, London, 1979, 1997², 98.

¹⁰¹ JOHN PAUL II, “Apostolic Letter *Divini Amoris Scientia*, The Science of Divine Love” in *L'osservatore Romano* (Weekly Edition, Vatican, July 29, 1997), October 19, 1997, 8.

the courage to proclaim God's word. It means inspiring others to share in the mission entrusted to all who seek the Lord with a sincere heart.¹⁰²

"Teresa did not divorce prayer and apostolate. She saw prayer as the *contribution* of her nuns to the apostolate. They had no work outside to distract them and so they were to support the theologians and preachers by lives of holiness and self-sacrifice..."¹⁰³.

Thérèse believed that she had a missionary vocation. As already stated in the first chapter, her desire to carry out the missionary mandate was immense—she desired to preach the gospel simultaneously in all the five continents from the dawn of creation to the consummation of ages. Following her reflection on the twelfth and thirteenth chapters of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, Thérèse "understood that LOVE COMPRISED ALL VOCATIONS, THAT LOVE WAS EVERYTHING, THAT IT EMBRACED ALL TIMES AND PLACES.... IN A WORD, THAT IT WAS ETERNAL!"¹⁰⁴ She exclaims that at last she had found the place reserved for her in the Church- in the heart of the Church she would be love. It is only in this way that she would simultaneously evangelize the whole world.

Thérèse would henceforth act as a hidden source of energy and zeal for the Church and her members. On her letter to Father Bellière of July 17, 1897, she promised to accompany him in his missionary endeavors with these words: "When I come into harbour, I shall instruct you, dear little Brother of my soul, how you must

¹⁰² OBBARD, E. R., *The Land of Carmel, The Origins and Spirituality of the Carmelite Order*, Leominster, 1999, 79.

¹⁰³ OBBARD, E. R., *The Land of Carmel*, 138-139.

¹⁰⁴ *Story of a Soul*, 194.

navigate on the tempestuous sea of the world: with love and utter trustfulness of a child who knows that his father loves him too much to forsake him in the hour of peril.”¹⁰⁵

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have discussed the spirituality of Thérèse of Lisieux. We have seen when and how Thérèse discovered, lived and taught her little way of spiritual childhood. Since the discovery came about as the answer to her quest for holiness, her way stands before us as a means of pursuing and attaining holiness, that is, the perfect realization of God’s will in our lives, which according to Thérèse consists in loving God and those he has given us to be our brothers and sisters wherever we are.

We have also investigated into the essential elements of Theresian spirituality. Under this subtopic we have discussed: Thérèse’s teaching on confidence in God’s merciful love, prayer, fraternal charity, and missionary spirit.

¹⁰⁵ *Collected Letters of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux*, trans. by F. J. Sheed, London, 1949, 1972², 316.

Chapter 3: The Relevance of Theresian Spirituality to the Mission of the Church in Contemporary Africa

Introduction

So far, we have treated the person of Thérèse and her spirituality. We have seen how Theresian spirituality comes into being, develops and is proposed as an aid in the pursuit of intimate communion of life and love with God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit and with one another.

In our third chapter, we will present the relevance of Theresian spirituality to the mission of the Church in today's Africa. We do this by first examining what the mission of the universal Church entails. Secondly, we will look into the African situation and the challenges that it poses. Finally, we will present the Theresian response to Africa by briefly exploring the implications of her spirituality of communion.

3.1 The Universal Mission of the Church

In his message for the World Mission Sunday of the year 2002, John Paul II had the following to say about the mission of the Church:

The evangelizing mission of the Church is essentially the announcement of God's love, mercy, and forgiveness revealed to mankind through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord. It is the proclamation of the good news that God loves us and wants all people united in his loving mercy, he forgives us and asks us to forgive others even for the greatest offences...Only God's love, able to make brothers and sisters of people of all races and cultures,

can heal the painful divisions, ideological conflict, economic unbalance and violence which still oppresses humanity.¹⁰⁶

This message of God's merciful love and our appropriation of it, is the good news that ought to resound throughout the whole universe. Men and women of our age need to be reassured that they are loved by God and that with the empowerment of his Spirit, they can love one another as Christ has loved and continues to love them. The form of love that we are referring to here is the New Testament love—*agape*.

Agape is understood first of all to refer to God's love for us as that love is revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ. It is at work in human beings insofar as God has poured out his Holy Spirit into their hearts, enabling them to love one another with his own love. Agapaic love, therefore, is an enabling, transforming power in the life of the individual person; it is a power which enables one to act freely and deliberately, and not merely to feel a certain way.¹⁰⁷

Agape is essentially a gratuitous gift— a grace, communicated to us by God through Christ in his Spirit. It is a gift to be received in a spirit of humble gratitude and full awareness of its preciousness and the challenge that it puts forward to its recipients. Hanigan observes that *Agape* is the kind of love “that is unmotivated by any quality or function in the object of love.”¹⁰⁸ It is an other-directed love in the sense that

The good on which agapaic love is intent is the good not of self but of the neighbor. *Agape* is a love motivated or called forth by no need of the self, by no desire of the self for the self. It is called forth by the need of the other. Agapaic love is love for the other in his or her own interest. It is a love that seeks nothing for itself, but which affirms and delights in the being and the well-being of the other. *Agape*, therefore, is a love both universal in scope and particular in practice. It is universal in scope because it is not dependent upon some quality or some activity of the other to call it forth. It requires only the decision of the lover to love, the decision to rejoice in and serve the well-being of others for the simple reason of who and what they are, children of God made in his own image and redeemed in the blood of Christ. It is particular in practice because it loves this neighbor here and now in specific ways responding to specific

¹⁰⁶ JOHN PAUL II, “Message for 20 October 2002: Mission is Proclamation of Forgiveness” in *L'Osservatore Romano*, June 5, 2002, 7.

¹⁰⁷ HANIGAN, J. P., *As I have Loved You, The Challenge of Christian Ethics*, New York, 1986, 149.

¹⁰⁸ *As I have Loved You*, 150.

needs...Agapaic love is, indeed, a demanding form of love, for it calls us to repentance and conversion and new life. It summons us to live up to the very best in us, to be holy as the divine love is holy. *Agape* is truly a free love freely given with no strings attached and not dependent upon the response it seeks. But it is also a tough love, so tough, in fact, that it cannot be turned back or overcome, no matter what the response of the person toward whom it is directed.¹⁰⁹

Following the insights of the above-quoted text, the universal mission of the Church could be adequately represented by love. It is a mission that is destined to draw all human beings to the infinite merciful love of God. As a missionary principle,

The whole concern of doctrine and its teaching must be directed to the love that never ends. Whether something is proposed for belief, for hope or for action, the love of our Lord must always be made accessible, so that anyone can see that all the works of perfect Christian virtue spring from love and have no other objective than to arrive at love.¹¹⁰

The kind of love that is to be the goal of all our undertakings is a redeeming and forgiving love. It is a love that draws its zeal and power of action from the redeeming power and supreme example of Jesus Christ who died for all—friends and enemies alike.

The Church's mission of charity (love) is not a theoretical but a practical project. In its totality and concreteness it embraces several elements. The document *The Attitude of the Church Toward the Followers of Other Religions* explains:

Mission is already constituted by the simple presence and living witness of the Christian life...There is also the concrete commitment to the service of mankind and all forms of activity for social development and for the struggle against poverty and the structures which produce it. Also, there is liturgical life and that of prayer and contemplation, eloquent testimonies to a living and liberating relationship with the active and true God who calls us to his kingdom and to his glory...There is, as well, the dialogue in which Christians meet the followers of other religious traditions in order to walk together toward truth and to work together in projects of

¹⁰⁹ *As I have Loved You*, 150-151.

¹¹⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Homebush, 1994, 25. This is a quotation from the preface of the *Roman Catechism*, 10.

common concern. Finally, there is announcement and catechesis in which the good news of the Gospel is proclaimed and its consequences for life and culture are analyzed.¹¹

Thus, the mission of the Church takes into account all the dimensions of the human existence and strives to respond to human needs from a Christian perspective that is faith-filled and love-imbued.

In his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, John Paul II emphasizes the primacy and centrality of love in the lives of those who carry out the mission of the Church. He teaches that,

The missionary is a person of charity. In order to proclaim to all his [her] brothers and sisters that they are loved by God and are capable of loving, he [she] must show love towards all, giving his life for his neighbour. The missionary is the 'universal brother [sister]', bearing in himself [herself] the Church's spirit, her openness to and interest in all peoples and individuals, especially the least and the poorest of his [her] brethren. As such, he [she] overcomes barriers and divisions of race, caste, or ideology. He [she] is a sign of God's love in the world—a love without exclusion or partiality.¹²

3.2 The Mission of the Church in Contemporary Africa

It is not to be expected that the mission of the Church in Africa be radically different from that of the universal Church elsewhere. Even when there are situations typical to Africa, the Church's mission basically remains that of charity—inviting our fellow human beings to encounter the infinity and richness of God's merciful love. What John Paul II says about the contemporary situation applies very well to the state of affairs in Africa. He observes that,

In our own time, there are so many needs which demand a compassionate response from Christians. Our world is entering the new millennium burdened by the contradictions of an

¹¹ SECRETARIAT FOR NON-CHRISTIANS [PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE], *The Attitude of the Church Toward the Followers of Other Religions, Reflections and Orientations in Dialogue and Mission*, May 10, 1984, 13.

¹² JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio*, *On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate*, December 7, 1990, 89.

economic, cultural and technological progress which offers immense possibilities to a fortunate few, while leaving millions of others not only on the margins of progress but in living conditions far below the minimum demanded by human dignity. How can it be that even today there are still people dying of hunger? Condemned to illiteracy? Lacking the most basic care? Without a roof over their heads?¹¹³

Africa is a continent where most people live on the margins of progress and a vast majority find themselves groaning under conditions far below the minimum that human dignity calls for. Africa is a continent where starvation is a very common phenomenon and where illiteracy is far from being wiped away. Many of our African brothers and sisters go without the most basic needs such as shelter and health care. The African continent is confronted by peace-related problems whereby its inhabitants are often divided by ethnicity, political ideologies, and religious affiliations.

The synod of the bishops of Africa pointed out increasing poverty, the problem of refugees and displaced persons, ethnocentricity and tribal opposition as some of the fundamental challenges facing Africa today.¹¹⁴ The mission of the Church in Africa cannot satisfactorily address such challenges unless it first digs out their root causes. A keen analysis will point towards some failure in human authenticity. Without being simplistic, we cannot help admitting that most of our problems arise from failure to practice true love. By true love we intend the kind of love that enables us to relate with persons and things as what they really are. True love treats the creator as creator, fellow human beings as human beings, and created goods as created goods. In true love there is

¹¹³ JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, *At the Beginning of the New Millennium*, January 6, 2001, 50.

¹¹⁴ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, *On the Church in Africa and Its Evangelizing Mission Towards the Year 2000*, September 14, 1995, 51.

no inordinate attachment to creatures, there is no disregard for one another and God is worshipped and glorified without giving in to any form of idolatry whatsoever.

In the religious sphere, our contemporary society, is also

...marked by cultural, religious and ethnic pluralism, relativism, indifferentism, irenicism, and syncretism, it appears that some Christians have become accustomed to a form of 'Christianity' lacking any real reference to Christ and his Church. In these circumstances, the pastoral mission is reduced to social concerns which are envisaged in exclusively anthropological terms, often based on a vague appeal to pacificism, universalism or to loose reference to 'values.'¹¹⁵

The Church in Africa cannot evade these challenges. We got to have effective ways of carrying out the mission of the Church amidst diversity of cultures, religions, ideologies and attitudes such as relativism and indifferentism. We cannot grow tired of reminding our people about our fundamental vocation to enter into perfect communion of life and love with God and with one another.

Considering the African situation, which is largely influenced by what is happening in other continents, we agree with the Congregation for the Clergy that,

The most important and basic pastoral challenge facing the priest in the parish is to bring the faithful to a consistent spiritual life based on the principles of Christian doctrine as lived and taught by the Saints. Pastoral planning must give priority to this essential aspect of all pastoral action. Today, more than ever, prayer, the sacramental life, meditation, silent adoration, talking heart to heart with the Lord, daily exercise of virtues which make us more like him, must be rediscovered, since such are far more productive than any discussion, and ultimately the necessary condition for all effective discussion.¹¹⁶

Under the inspiration of the teaching of Thérèse, we have to have our eyes always fixed on God who is our creator and the Father of us all. Our unwavering filial trust in God constantly urges us to pursue the holiness of God following the example of Christ. The desire for holiness—perfection of charity, that is characterized by total

¹¹⁵ CONGREGATION FOR THE CLERGY, *The Priest, Pastor and Leader of the Parish Community*, August 4, 2002, 29.

¹¹⁶ *The Priest*, 27.

submission to the divine will, ought to be the motivating force for every Christian enterprise. In fact,

A truly pastoral promotion of the holiness of our parish communities implies an authentic pedagogy on prayer, a renewed, persuasive and effective catechesis on the importance of the Sunday and the daily celebration of the Most Holy Eucharist, on community and personal adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, on the frequent and individual practice of the Sacrament of Penance, on spiritual direction, on marian devotion, on imitation of the Saints, as well as on a renewed apostolic commitment to live the daily duties of the community and of individuals, proper pastoral care of the family, and on consistent political and social engagement.¹¹⁷

3.3 The Relevance of Theresian Spirituality in Contemporary Africa

3.3.1 *A Spirituality of Communion*

As we have already seen, Theresian spirituality—the little way of spiritual childhood, is primarily a way of perfection. It is all about trusting in God’s merciful love. In the Theresian way everything is seen from the perspective of truth, humility, confidence, and love. Once we commit ourselves to the Theresian way, all possibilities of disappointment vanish. This is because in the little way of spiritual childhood everything is based on truth. It is impossible to be frustrated when we know what we truly are and how much we can do. Can we ever be disappointed when we know who God really is and how much he can do and he actually does for us and his entire creation? We can never be frustrated in life if only we humbly acknowledge our finiteness and count on God’s infinity.

¹¹⁷ *The Priest*, 27.

In developing the theme of a spirituality of communion, John Paul II builds on the famous text of Thérèse in which she considers herself the heart of the Church that is aflame with love. According to the Pope,

A spirituality of communion indicates above all the heart's contemplation of the mystery of the Trinity dwelling in us, and whose light we must also be able to see shining on the face of the brothers and sisters around us. A spirituality of communion also means an ability to think of our brothers and sisters in faith within the profound unity of the Mystical Body, and therefore as 'those who are part of me'. This makes us able to share their joys and sufferings, to sense their desires and attend to their needs, to offer them deep and genuine friendship. A spirituality of communion implies also the ability to see what is positive in others, to welcome it and prize it as a gift from God: not only as a gift for the brother or sister who has received it directly, but also as a 'gift for me'. A spirituality of communion means, finally, to know how to 'make room' for our brothers and sisters, bearing 'each others burden' ... and resisting the selfish temptations which constantly beset us and provoke competition, careerism, distrust and jealousy.¹¹⁸

This text contains several Theresian elements. First, is the Trinitarian dimension of the spirituality of communion. It is God's salvific love that draws us to himself and to one another. The greater our love for God, the greater our love for our fellow human beings. The more we grow in our being sons and daughters of God the more we grow in our being brothers and sisters to one another. When we love God we spontaneously reach out to our brothers and sisters whereas when our love for God diminishes we tend to close the doors of our lives to our fellow human beings.

A spirituality of communion considers the other person as a unique gift from God and their gifts as our gifts. Such a healthy attitude puts off all malice and jealousy in our relations with our brothers and sisters. The ability to focus on what is positive in others is a great Theresian contribution to contemporary theology that is significantly characterized by a dialogical approach.

¹¹⁸ *Novo Millennio Inuente*, 43.

The Pope expresses his conviction that “To make the Church the home and the school of communion...is the great challenge facing us in the millennium which is now beginning, if we wish to be faithful to God’s plan and respond to the world’s deepest yearnings.”¹¹⁹ What then does it mean for the Church in Africa to be the home and school of communion? It means commitment to works of charity, pursuit of reconciliation and peace and renewing efforts in interreligious and ecumenical dialogues.

3.3.2 Commitment to Works of Charity

In the spirituality of communion, each person is aware of the fact that he/she shares a common origin, vocation and destiny with the rest of humanity. This awareness gives rise to a sense of responsibility for others. We are called to remind each other of our true dignity as creatures made in the image and likeness of God. We are invited to live this dignity both as individuals and together as brothers and sisters.

Our contemporary African society offers endless possibilities for realizing our concern for one another. Our mission should give special attention “to the poorest and most abandoned of the sick, such as the elderly, and those who are handicapped, marginalized, or terminally ill, and to the victims of drug abuse and the new contagious diseases.”¹²⁰ We are never to forget that our mission is essentially a mission of charity. It is a mission whose primary goal is to allow its beneficiaries to experience the depth and

¹¹⁹ *Novo Millennio Inuente*, 43.

¹²⁰ JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata, On the Consecrated Life and Its Mission in the Church and in the World*, March 25, 1996, 83.

warmth of God's love. Our mission is to let our African people be convinced that they are loved and that they too are capable of loving in a truly Christian way.

3.3.3 Pursuit of Reconciliation and Peace

Without the readiness and serious commitment to pursuit of reconciliation and peace, genuine experience of love would remain merely a wish. It is necessary to inculcate a spirit of reconciliation first and foremost within the Church and in the lives of the faithful. It is only after experiencing the fruits of living a reconciled life with God, with oneself and with one another that we can see the need and the urgency of inviting others to be reconciled. It has to be insisted that there is no true love where the spirit of forgiveness is lacking. As Thérèse insists, it does not help to focus on the wrongs done unto us, what bears fruit is to consider the many good aspects and intentions of the other. If we were to excuse others as much as we excuse ourselves, reconciliation would be such an easy and a pleasant enterprise to accomplish.

In Africa we need peace. We need to be one with each other. This however, presupposes commitment at all levels. At the personal level, we need to let ourselves be pervaded by the Spirit of God who fills us with the peace of Christ. There can never be true peace where sin reigns. It is thus our mission to root out sin and its traces in our lives and invite and assist our brothers and sisters to do likewise. Rooting out sin will entail detesting all forms of injustices that we inflict on others and that are inflicted on us. Only a heart that is free from sin is able to love truly and disinterestedly. In pursuing reconciliation and peace we need to be convinced beyond doubts that violence has never and will never solve any problem; it will always and everywhere worsen situations.

Peaceful means imbued with a spirit of dialogue and respect for human dignity will always bear desirable results. It may take ages to attain peace in some parts of Africa, but it does not matter; what counts is that we resolutely commit ourselves to working for a peaceful Africa in which its inhabitants harmoniously coexist as brothers and sisters.

3.3.4 Interreligious and Ecumenical Dialogues

3.3.4.1 Interreligious Dialogue

The Christian mission is essentially dialogical. This is because it concerns human beings who are endowed with reason and need to be approached as free and responsible subjects. In Africa, the Christian mission faces people of diverse religious affiliations. We cannot deny this fact. The spirituality of communion suggests to us a dialogical approach to other religions.

The Church...feels itself called to dialogue principally because of its faith. In the Trinitarian mystery, Christian revelation allows us to glimpse in God a life of communion and interchange. In God, the Father, we contemplate a pervasive love unlimited by space and time. The universe and history are filled with his gifts. Every reality and every event are surrounded by his love. In spite of the sometimes violent manifestations of evil, in the vicissitudes in the life of each individual and every people there is present the power of grace which elevates and redeems. The Church has the duty of discovering and bringing to light and fullness all the richness which the Father has hidden in creation and history, not only to celebrate the glory of God in its liturgy, but also to promote among all mankind the movement of the gifts of the Father.¹²¹

In interpersonal dialogue we experience our own limitations as well as the possibility of overcoming them. We discover that we do not

“possess the truth in a perfect and total way but can walk together with others toward that goal. Mutual affirmation, reciprocal correction, and fraternal exchange lead the partners in dialogue to an ever greater maturity which in turn generates interpersonal communion. Religious experiences and outlooks can themselves be purified and enriched in this process of encounter.

¹²¹ *The Attitude of the Church*, 22.

The dynamic of human encounter should lead us Christians to listen to and strive to understand that which other believers communicate to us in order to profit from the gifts which God bestows so generously. Socio-cultural changes in the world, with their inherent tensions and difficulties, as well as the growing interdependence in all sectors of society necessary for living together, for human promotion, and, above all, for pursuing the demands of peace, all render a dialogical style of human relationships—today ever more urgent.¹²²

The practice of dialogue raises many questions in the mind of many. Some ask whether dialogue should simply replace proclamation in the contemporary Church. Some question the value of interreligious dialogue. There are also those who “are perplexed and ask: If interreligious dialogue has become so important, has the proclamation of the Gospel message lost its urgency? Has the effort to bring people into the community of the Church become secondary or even superfluous?”¹²³

To insist on dialogue is not downgrade proclamation in any way. Dialogue presupposes the humble recognition and acknowledgement of positive elements in the religious traditions of other people and at the same time, a clear grasp and firm conviction of one’s own religious heritage. This being the case, there can be no true opposition between sincere dialogue and the proclamation of the merciful love of God revealed to us through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Interreligious dialogue and proclamation, though not on the same level, are both authentic elements of the Church’s evangelizing mission. Both are legitimate and necessary. They are intimately related, but not interchangeable: true interreligious dialogue on the part of the Christian supposes the desire to make Jesus Christ better known, recognized and loved; proclaiming Jesus Christ is to be carried out in the Gospel spirit of dialogue. The two activities remain distinct but, as experience shows, one and the same local Church, one and the same person, can be diversely engaged in both.¹²⁴

¹²² *The Attitude of the Church*, 21.

¹²³ CONGREGATION FOR THE EVANGELIZATION OF PEOPLES AND THE PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE. *Dialogue and Proclamation, Reflections on Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel*, May 19, 1991, 4.

¹²⁴ *Dialogue and Proclamation*, 77.

3.3.4.2 Ecumenical Dialogues

If dialogue with other religions such as African Traditional Religions and Islam is vital, dialogue with all the baptized is even more urgent. Is it not ridiculous to call peoples and nations to unity when we tread the road of division and enmity? Is our lack of unity not a stumbling block to the faith-response of the beneficiaries of the gospel? What is at stake here is our credibility: –who will believe what we teach if at the existential level we do exactly the opposite?

The Theresian doctrine on love for those we would rather avoid because of their disagreeableness could apply to this context very well. Love cannot be a matter of feelings; it must learn to transcend personal interests and prejudices. As Thérèse teaches us, it is impossible to love our brothers and sisters as the Lord loves them unless he himself loves them through us or lends us his divine love that knows no limits. At this point, we realize the need to abandon ourselves to God in order that he may use us as the instruments of his unifying love. As John Paul II explains, dialogue among Christians has both a horizontal and a vertical dimension.

Dialogue cannot take place merely on a horizontal level, being restricted to meetings, exchanges of points of view or even the sharing of gifts proper to each Community. It has also a primarily vertical thrust, directed towards the One who, as the Redeemer of the world and the Lord of history, is himself our Reconciliation. This vertical aspect of dialogue lies in our acknowledgement, jointly and to each other, that we are men and women who have sinned. It is precisely this acknowledgement which creates in brothers and sisters living in Communities not in full communion with one another that interior space where Christ, the source of the Church's unity, can effectively act, with all power of his Spirit, the Paraclete.¹²⁵

In the contemporary socio-political African situation, it is very important that Christians join hands in witnessing to the gospel message, especially when responding

¹²⁵ JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Ut Unum Sint*, On Commitment to Ecumenism, May 25, 1995, 35.

to questions related to faith and morals. Ecumenism cannot stop at mere exchange of nice ideas about this and that. We got to get into common action, apostolate and serious life commitments. *Ut Unum Sint* explains,

Relations between Christians are not aimed merely at mutual knowledge, common prayer and dialogue. They presuppose and from now on call for every possible form of practical cooperation at all levels: pastoral, cultural and social, as well as that of witnessing to the Gospel message...ecumenical cooperation is a true school of ecumenism; a dynamic road to unity...cooperation among Christians becomes a form of common Christian witness and a means of evangelization which benefits all involved.¹²⁶

Conclusion

This chapter has been dedicated to the relevance of Theresian spirituality to the mission of the Church in contemporary Africa. In it, we have presented the universal mission of the Church as one of love (charity)—a love that is a gratuitous gift, other-centered, and forgiving. We have seen the impact of diminished love in Africa as being poverty, suffering and war-related problems.

Thérèse's greatest contribution to the situation of Africa is a spirituality of communion that is based on consciousness of our common origin, vocation and destiny. It is a spirituality in which we are aware of ourselves as being children of God and therefore brothers and sisters to one another. This awareness compels us to show concern for one another through works of charity, commitment to reconciliation and peace, and renewed efforts in the field of interreligious and ecumenical dialogues.

¹²⁶ *Ut Unum Sint*, 40

GENERAL CONCLUSION

In our first chapter, we addressed the question about who Thérèse of Lisieux is by means of a biographical study of her life, which we divided into three periods: 1873-1877, 1877-1886, and 1886-1897. The first chapter was intended to give the foundation for the entire research because sufficient knowledge of a person usually makes it easier to understand the underlying reasons for his/her stance.

In the second chapter, we discussed the Theresian spirituality and saw when and how Thérèse discovered, lived and taught her little way of spiritual childhood. We also investigated into the essential elements of Theresian spirituality by exploring her teaching on confidence (filial trust) in God's merciful love, prayer, fraternal charity, and missionary spirit.

Finally, we presented the relevance of Theresian spirituality to the mission of the Church in contemporary Africa. This we did by first presenting the universal mission of the Church, then surveying the African situation, and finally gave Thérèse's response. We saw that Thérèse's greatest contribution to the situation of Africa is a spirituality of communion that is based on consciousness of our common origin, vocation and destiny.

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