

Five

Thérèse of Lisieux

A French girl entered a convent at a very young age; she died at 23. This happened on September 30, 1897. Within a few years she was known all over the world. Not quite 28 years later, on May 17, 1925, she was canonized a saint for the universal church. This is the remarkable success story of Marie Françoise Thérèse Martin, daughter of a simple clockmaker, now one of the most popular patron saints, often referred to as "The Little Flower."

Thérèse became known by her autobiography, *The Story of a Soul*, in which she described her life and her religious ideals. It was a rather personal and confidential account, never intended by her for wider circulation. But when it was released after her death, it proved an immediate bestseller. At present it is available in 35 languages and sales are reckoned in millions of copies. What is there in this short, 70,000-word book that it merited such a response?

In fact, reading the book for the first time it may well be that one is appalled. Here, one thinks, is a book such as any schoolgirl might write. Small incidents are blown up as if they were major events. The vocabulary flows over with terms of endearment. Sentiment and emotion abound. But, if one takes the trouble to read on and to read more carefully, one discovers the fallacy of this first impression. Under the undeniable teenage style—and what else can one expect from a French girl, born and bred in a bourgeois family, writing in a romantic period?—one meets a spiritual tough-mindedness that fascinates and inspires.

Thérèse struggled with questions that are still relevant today: What is the purpose of existence? What happens at death? Will there be an afterlife? How can we reconcile human loneliness and smallness with our desire to be great and worthwhile? As Bernard Bro remarked, Thérèse was as radical in facing such questions as her contemporaries Rimbaud, Dostoyevski, Nietzsche, Claudel, Freud and Van Gogh.¹ Thérèse had tasted the reality of death. When she was four years old, her mother died. She witnessed the soul-destroying agony of her father. During her first year in the convent an epidemic of influenza brought five deaths among the sisters. "Death reigned everywhere. No sooner had a sister breathed her last than we had to leave her to look after others."²

Thérèse completed the last chapters of her book two months before her death. She had had a premonition of her death. She had been coughing up blood and medical science could do little about it in those days. With horror she stood before the abyss of nothingness that awaits every human being. A mist of doubt and uncertainty engulfed her. "I can't believe anymore in eternal life," she confided to a friend. "It seems to me that after this mortal life nothing will remain. I have lost everything."³ "I am in a dark tunnel and you would have to go through it yourself to understand how dark it is." At times her whole life seemed an illusion:

You dream of light and of a fragrant land; you dream that the creator of this loveliness will be your own for all eternity; you dream of escaping one day from these mists in which you languish! Dream on, welcome death; it will not bring you what you hope; it will bring an even darker night, the night of nothingness!⁴

In the face of such existential questions, Thérèse knowingly and happily opted for a complete surrender to God in faith. Her book is the candid testimony of a great person, a unique example of how faith can be

lived with intensity and depth in a seemingly short and insignificant human life. Small wonder that many people all over the world have recognized their own problems and aspirations in *The Story of a Soul*.

The Influence of Scripture

As I stated before, first impressions are deceptive. This also applies to the way in which Thérèse quoted scripture. The texts she uses are presented in such an easy, offhand manner that we hardly notice what an extraordinary collection they form! Since Thérèse was not writing a scriptural essay and only referred to texts because they had personal meaning for her, their prominence throughout her writing is truly impressive.

The Story of a Soul contains a total of 121 quotations. Almost half are from the gospels (22 in Luke, 18 in John, 16 in Matthew, 2 in Mark). She cites a verse from the psalms 21 times; from St. Paul's letters nine times. Revelation, Exodus, 1 and 2 Kings, Ezekiel, Joel and Ecclesiastes each merit one quotation. But this does not exhaust her Old Testament treasury. Her favorite texts are from Isaiah (7), Canticles (7), Wisdom (5), Proverbs (5), and Tobit (2). If we keep in mind that only five texts are quoted a second time and that Thérèse did not write to impress an audience, the wide range is truly astounding! Clearly her preference went to the gospels, the psalms, Isaiah, Canticles and the Wisdom books.

Thérèse had made scripture her special source book. Repeatedly she testified to having found in it the inspiration and enlightenment she was looking for. Scripture satisfied her where other books failed.

Sometimes when I read books in which perfection is put before us with the goal obstructed by a thousand obstacles, my poor little head is quickly fatigued. I close the learned treatise which tires my brain and dries up my heart, and I turn to the Sacred Scriptures. Then all becomes clear and full of light.⁵

The works of St. John of the Cross have been such a source of light to me. Between the ages of sixteen and eighteen I read no one else. Later on, spiritual writers always left me cold, and still do. Whenever I open a book, no matter how beautiful or touching, my heart dries up and I can understand nothing of what I read; or if I do understand, my mind will go no further, and I cannot meditate. I am rescued from this helpless state by the Scriptures and the Imitation, finding in them a hidden manna, pure and substantial; but during meditation I am sustained above all else by the Gospels. They supply my poor soul's every need, and they are always yielding up to me new lights and mysterious hidden meanings. I know from experience that "the kingdom of God is within us," that Jesus has no need of books or doctors to instruct our soul; he, the doctor of doctors, teaches us without the sounds of words.⁶

Scripture addresses each person in a different way. In my analysis of what scripture did for Thérèse, I believe that its main function was to supply metaphors which helped her understand herself and her relation to God. Without, perhaps, being aware of it, each one of us has a number of concepts through which we interpret ourselves and the world around us. These "personal constructs" are of great psychological importance: They provide the framework within which we think and act.⁷ It is my opinion that Thérèse, like many other people, used metaphors when formulating her constructs and that scripture guided and confirmed her in this.

Take, for example, the metaphor of sailing through life like a ship. It was a natural expression on Thérèse's lips. "I seem to be lost like a little boat without a pilot, at the mercy of the storm-tossed waves."⁸ "Instead of the howling wind, a gentle breeze was swelling my sails, and I thought I had already reached harbor."⁹ "Tranquil, unruffled by the slightest wind, were the waters on which the little boat was sailing under a sky of cloudless blue."¹⁰ "God

launched me full sail upon a sea of confidence and love."¹¹ Thérèse herself said about the metaphor:

I remember how often I would say that line from a beautiful poem that father used to recite: "The world is but a ship and not thy home"; these words young as I was encouraged me, and although so many of my childish dreams have faded with the years, the symbol of a ship still charms me and makes my exile easier to bear. Does not the Book of Wisdom say: "Life is like a ship that passeth through the waves: when it is gone, the trace thereof cannot be found."¹²

Here we have a characteristic sample of Thérèse's thinking. A metaphor which she knew from her own experience is further deepened and confirmed by a quotation from scripture.

Thérèse called herself "the little flower." When we read her life story we are not surprised at this. From early childhood flowers meant a lot to her. She tells of the flowers the family used to grow in the garden, of the children collecting daisies in little baskets. She remembers a storm in the field and how "the huge daisies, taller even than I was, were glistening with jewels." She used to weave crowns of daisies and forget-me-nots for the statue of our Lady. During the procession of the Blessed Sacrament she used to be one of the little brides. "Then I could scatter the flowers beneath the feet of God! I used to throw them up high into the air before they fell and when my rose petals touched the monstrance my happiness was complete."¹³ When she told her father that she wanted to enter the convent, it was he who explicitly compared her to a flower.

We went on walking for a long time; my heart grew light again, and father dried his tears, talking to me just like a saint. Going to a low stone wall, he showed me some little white flowers like very small lilies; then he picked one of them, and gave it to me, explaining how carefully God had brought it to blossom, and preserved it

till that day. So striking was the resemblance between the little flower and little Thérèse that it seemed as if I was listening to the story of my own life.¹⁴

Therefore when Thérèse called herself “the little flower” she did so deliberately, expressing at once her purpose in life and her place in God’s plan. “It pleases him to create great saints, who may be compared with the lilies or the rose; but he has also created little ones, who must be content to be daisies or violets nestling at his feet to delight his eyes when he should choose to look at them.”¹⁵

Thérèse acknowledged that the origin of the metaphor was her own experience: “Jesus chose to enlighten me on this mystery. He opened the book of nature before me, and I saw that every flower he has created has a beauty of its own.”¹⁶ But she delighted in finding that in the Song of Songs the bride of the beloved is compared to “the flower of the field and the lily of the valley.”¹⁷

There are other metaphors that Thérèse uses. She compares herself to a toy, a plaything with which Jesus may do as he pleases.¹⁸ She is a brush with which Jesus paints; she is a shepherd, a queen.¹⁹ Most of these metaphors were based on her experience; any other person in her stead might have developed them too. But there are other metaphors, quite decisive in Thérèse’s spiritual journey, which came to her as an insight from scripture. They were spiritual discoveries that caused her to see herself in a new light. It is this influence of scripture on Thérèse that I would like to trace in a few important examples.

The Way of Childhood

Thérèse’s main insight was the recognition that sanctity does not lie in our human efforts and successes, but in allowing God to do his work in us. This was her way of “spiritual childhood.” “To remain small

means to acknowledge one's own nothingness, to expect all from the good Lord as a small child expects all from his father, not to be worried about anything."²⁰ Although this may seem simple and straightforward, it was in fact a startling insight.

With her contemporaries, Thérèse strove after greatness. She wanted to make something of her life, to achieve something worthwhile, to do great things for Christ. "I want to be a warrior, a priest, an apostle, a doctor of the Church, a martyr—there is no heroic deed I do not wish to perform. I feel as daring as a crusader, ready to die for the Church upon the battlefield."²¹ She understood quite well that she could also make something worthwhile of her life as a contemplative nun, but how could she reach the summit in this vocation? Her weak constitution did not allow severe mortification; time might be too short for many years of slogging at the acquisition of virtue.

The insight she arrived at was almost like a paradox. Greatness in the biblical sense does not lie in external achievements, not even achievements in virtue and spirituality. True greatness consists in becoming like a child, in accepting oneself with all simplicity, in surrendering oneself unconditionally to God's care and love. This wholehearted submission of oneself in poverty of spirit, deceptively easy as it may look, does in reality require a real conversion of heart and heroic strength. But it was a "short cut" to sanctity which, Thérèse felt, was just the thing for her and "little souls" like herself!

In a revealing passage of her autobiography, Thérèse narrates how she discovered this metaphor of "spiritual childhood" which became an important key to her own self-understanding:

I said to myself: "God would never inspire me with desires which cannot be realized, so in spite of my littleness, I can hope to be a saint. I could never grow up. I must put up with myself as I am, full of imperfec-

tions, but I will find a short cut to heaven, very short and direct, an entirely new way. We live in an age of inventions now, and the wealthy no longer have to take the trouble to climb the stairs; they take a lift. That is what I must find, *a lift* to take me straight up to Jesus, because I am too little to climb the steep stairway of perfection.

“So I searched the Scriptures for some hint of my desired lift until I came upon these words from the lips of eternal wisdom: ‘Whosoever is a little one, let him come to me.’ I went closer to God feeling sure that I was on the right path, but as I wanted to know what he would do to ‘a little one’ I continued my search. This is what I found: ‘You shall be carried at the breasts and upon the knees; as one whom the mother caresses, so will I comfort you.’ My heart had never been moved by such tender and consoling words before!

“Your arms, my Jesus, are the lift which will take me up to heaven. There is no need for me to grow up; on the contrary, I must stay little, and become more and more so. Oh God, you have gone beyond my dreams and I—I only want to sing your mercies!”²²

In another text Thérèse again refers to this discovery in scripture. She recognizes that it was Jesus himself who revealed his will to her through the sayings of scripture. “Jesus has chosen to show me the only way which leads to the divine furnace of love; it is the way of childlike self-surrender, the way of a child who sleeps, afraid of nothing, in its father’s arms.” She then enumerates four scripture texts that contain this message: To Proverbs 9:4 and Isaiah 66:12-13, already quoted above, she adds, “To him that is little, mercy is granted” (Wis 6:7) and “The Lord shall feed his flock like a shepherd. . . and shall take them up into his bosom” (Is 40:11). Again she witnesses to her emotion at the discovery of this message. “One can only remain silent, one can only weep for gratitude and love, after words like these. If only every one weak and imperfect like me felt as I do, no one would despair of reaching

the heights of love, for Jesus does not ask for glorious deeds. He asks only for self-surrender and for gratitude."²³

Thérèse was convinced that Jesus himself had spoken to her through these texts. Applying to herself the scriptural metaphor of being "a little one," "a child," she gave a new direction to her spiritual life.

Crying Like a Young Swallow

When Thérèse was small she possessed various birds, among them a canary and a linnet.²⁴ With her natural tendency to see herself reflected in what happened around her, she must have thought of herself as she saw the birds fluttering in their cage. Writing that the authorities at first refused to allow her to enter the convent on account of her young age, she remarks, "The dove was free to fly to the ark, but the ark refused to let her in."²⁵ In another text she says, "I long to fly and imitate the eagle, but all I can do is flutter my small wings. I am not strong enough to fly."²⁶ Although the metaphor came naturally enough to her, it had acquired a special meaning through Thérèse's reflection on scripture.

She writes in passing about a teacher at school who was particularly popular with her classmates. Thérèse says that for some reason or other she herself was not carried away by this particular friendship. She muses that this was a good thing because too intimate a human affection might have drawn her away from God. "I should have been caught easily, and had my wings clipped, and then how could I have 'flown away and been at rest'? How can a heart that is taken up in human love be fully united to God? I am sure that is not possible."²⁷ The remarkable thing here is the casual way in which Thérèse quoted Psalm 55:6: "I wish I had wings like a dove: I would fly away and find rest!" Surely Thérèse had often repeated this passage

to herself because it expressed her desire to fly like a dove and find rest.

A similarly unexpected reference comes in the context of a discussion on her novitiate. Looking back at that time of initiation, Thérèse admitted that she made many mistakes and that God had given her much progress since. "God is certainly very good to have lifted up my soul and lent it wings. The nets of the hunters can no longer frighten me for 'a net is set in vain before the eyes of them that have wings.'"²⁸ The turn of thought is so unexpected, the connection with the verse quoted so tenuous, that we can only infer that here again Thérèse is quoting a scripture verse she had internalized. Otherwise, Proverbs 1:17 would hardly be the kind of passage one would remember in such a context! No, the image of hunters setting their nets to ensnare unsuspecting birds must have seemed very powerful to her!

The longest elaboration of the metaphor she gives in the last chapter of her book, a chapter she wrote two months before she died. Again quoting an unusual scripture text, Isaiah 38:14, she likens herself to a small, helpless bird: "I cry like a young swallow." And presupposing Deuteronomy 32:11, although she does not quote the text explicitly, she considers Christ to be the eagle which teaches its young to fly. Her own small inadequacy is of no importance. As long as she lives on love and raises her eyes to the eagle, he will carry her aloft on his wings and plunge her into the bosom of the Blessed Trinity, the eternal home of love. Thérèse expressed her relationship to Christ with this prayer: "I stay with my eyes fixed on you, longing to be the prey of your love. I hope that one day you will swoop upon me and carry me off to the furnace of love."²⁹ The metaphor of the dove here received its deepest significance.

Thinking Modeled on Scripture

Although Thérèse had some "peak experiences," a vision during a dream and some moments of ecstasy, these were exceptions rather than the rule. As we have seen before, her inner experiences were characterized by periods of spiritual darkness and uncertainty. She had met death, had gazed into the abyss of nothingness, and intelligent as she was, she recognized the arguments of the rationalists and agnostics of her time who rejected God and revelation. Thérèse lived in face of the existential question.

The value of Thérèse's testimony for our age is her option for faith and surrender to God in spite of the agnostic temptation. Her stand was based on insights that went beyond logic to an experience of the divine that consumed her. Radical as she was, she knew she had to give herself totally to Jesus and in doing so she found that Jesus responded with unmistakable directness. She knew Jesus had a special plan for her, that he guided her on a particular path and helped her to walk the way that suited her best.

What we can learn from Thérèse is the interaction between her self-understanding, based on her experience of life, and the inspired word of God. She allowed her thinking to be molded by that word. She saw her constructs refined and she acquired new ones so that, while remaining her own, they grew out to be a genuine Christian theology. She was right when she said, "One's most intimate thoughts, the children of one's heart and mind are riches which one clings to as one's very own."³⁰ It was these thoughts, remodeled by scripture, that made her the saint she was.

It is also good to notice Thérèse's use of metaphor in her self-understanding. This is not a sign of simplistic thinking. Thinking in images and metaphors is rather a very powerful means of understanding and expressing reality. Metaphor has always been the best tool of theology and worship, often much more expres-

sive than abstract notions or theoretical definitions. When we call God "Father" or Jesus "the way," these metaphors carry a wealth of meaning that cannot be contained in speculative concepts. Perhaps we too could examine our own metaphors, the metaphors that best express our own position and task; perhaps we too could enrich our metaphors with the thoughts of scripture.

Thérèse's devotion to "the hidden face of Jesus" made her adopt a deliberate policy of covering her inner suffering with the veil of joy and contentment.³¹ Thérèse lived her dramatic life, with its intense longing and fierce struggles, in a small convent, hidden from the world, hidden even from her own companions. She herself never suspected that her personal notes would make her inmost thoughts so public and widely known. It is, perhaps, one of these contradictions of which she herself was so conscious: the unusual in what is ordinary, greatness in smallness. Thérèse lived but a few years in very ordinary, humble circumstances, yet she had a genuine experience of God. It gives all of us, "little ones" like her, hope that we too may achieve some greatness in spite of our smallness.