

LOVE OF NEIGHBOR

“My Way,” wrote St. Therese, “**is one that is full of confidence and love.**” And she said that “**confidence leads to love.**” One of St. Therese’s mentors, **St. John of the Cross**, famously said that “**love can be repaid by love alone**” – meaning that the only way we can repay God is through love, and Jesus tells us in the Gospels that love is a coin with 2 sides: the “heads” side is the love of God, the “tails” side is the love of neighbor.

What we’ll focus on in this talk is that **2<sup>nd</sup> side of the coin** – love of neighbor. The spiritual writers will tell us that **one good indicator of how well we’re growing in the spiritual life** is by seeing how well we’re practicing charity towards others. St. John, in his NT letter, says that “*if we love one another ... (God’s) love is brought to perfection in us*” (**1 Jn 4:12**). So our love of God is perfected in how we love others.

**Fr. Jamart**, in his book on St. Therese, says that one of the reasons that we love our neighbor is because we’re all members of the Mystical Body of Christ – at least those of us who are baptized. We’re all one body in Christ, so when you love your brother and sister in Christ, you’re loving not only Christ, but you’re loving yourself as well. Even those who aren’t Catholics and who aren’t baptized ... they’re still “potential” members of Christ, so our charity needs to extend to them as well.

Self-denial and a spirit of faith

What’s required to practice charity towards others?

Mainly, 2 things: **1) self-denial**, and **2) a spirit of faith**. [We’ve said this verse already...] Jesus says in the Gospel: “*If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross daily, and follow me*” (**Lk 9:23**). So the 1<sup>st</sup> thing is that self-denial, and it has to be joined to spirit of faith, because that’s what supernaturalizes our life and our interactions with others.

Keep in mind that most of what we’ll say regarding St. Therese and the practice of charity will be in the context in which she practiced it – namely, **in the Carmelite cloister**. Even though we aren’t Carmelites and aren’t contemplative nuns, there’s still a lot that we can learn from what she shares w/ us.

[Actually, there may even be some Carmelites **who watch our retreat on youtube** ... they may even have better stories than St. Therese!]

1. Focusing on virtues, not on defects

Just like us, St. Therese saw the defects and imperfections and shortcomings of others – in her case, with the sisters in her convent. But **she didn’t focus on the faults** of others. It’s one thing to see the faults of others; it’s another thing to focus on them. Instead of focusing on the faults of her sisters, St. Therese made the effort to focus on **the virtues** that she saw in them.

“Charity,” she said, “**consists in disregarding the faults of our neighbor, not being astonished at the sight of their weakness, but in being edified by the smallest acts of virtue that we see them practice.**”

This is something where, if we have a tendency to **focus on the faults and flaws**, we probably can’t chance that overnight ... but if we bring it to prayer and ask Our Lord, as Our Lady to help us overcome

this defect, they will help us. It's good to be able to see and recognize that **focusing on flaws** – whether it's your own flaws or other people's flaws – focusing on flaws and defects **is a flaw itself**. And it's not what Our Lord wants from us.

**“There's nothing sweeter than to think well of our neighbor,”** St. Therese wrote. And I'll add that, when we think well of others, there's often an added bonus ... that **we're more at peace** as well. **It's like a 2-for-1 deal:** think well of others & you'll be more at peace at the same time.

## 2. Making excuses

Some of us are very good at making excuses for our behavior, for our words, for our actions. **We “accuse” others & we “excuse” ourselves.** St. Therese was also very good at making excuses ... but **she made excuses for others**, not for herself – she made excuses for the sisters in the things that she saw in them which were disagreeable.

**[Jesus from the cross: “Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do” (Lk 23:34)]** And that's a wise thing to do because, for the most part, we don't understand others from the inside, we don't know what's gone on in their lives or why they act or react in certain ways. And there are times when we do find out about certain things that have happened in people's lives or certain difficulties that they live with, and those things should help us to have more empathy and compassion towards those who don't behave the way that they should behave.

St. Therese's desire was to only have charitable thoughts towards others.

## 3. Not quick to judge

And she was also very smart in another thing. St. James, in his NT letter, asks us: *“Who are you to judge your neighbor?”* (**Jas 4:12**), and we know that Jesus famously said: *“Do not judge, so that you may not be judged”* (**Mt 7:1**). Now, when Jesus says that, He's not saying that we should never make moral judgments. If we stopped making moral judgments about people and about their behavior, then we would cease to be human beings. We are called to judge right from wrong; to call sin “sin” and virtue “virtue”. But what Our Lord and what St. James are telling is not to make quick, rash judgments, and not to condemn others.

St. Therese knew that we can be quick to judge, but that often are judgments can be wrong. **What looks like a fault to us** could be a virtue because of the intention of the other person. [~~example: someone who sings badly at Mass; example: someone who spontaneously volunteers to give someone a hand with something, but they're clumsy about what they're doing, or they “help” in a way that the other person doesn't find helpful; example: children “helping out” mommy with the cooking ... esp. if they're little children, they're probably less of a help and more like a hindrance at times, but there's the good intention to help; example: someone's late for an appointment, and you find out that the reason that they're late was that they had to help someone who needed immediate help]~~

St. Therese always tried to make excuses for others and she tried to focus on the good that's in others, not on the faults, not on the bad things.

#### 4. Avoiding quarrels

Another thing she did in community was that **she avoided quarrels.**

St. Paul says in **2 Tim 2:23-25**: *“Have nothing to do with stupid and senseless controversies; you know that they breed quarrels. And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome, but kind to everyone, an apt teacher, patient, correcting opponents with gentleness.”* In St. Therese’s community, there was one sister who usually expressed views which were contrary to what St. Therese thought. **[Sometimes you’ll get that in rel. communities: there’s 1 or 2 friars that always seem to think the opposite of what you think about things!]** Therese would let her speak, and then she would gently turn the conversation in another direction. **“It’s better,”** she said, **“to let others keep their own opinions and preserve the peace.”**

Some of us seem like we’re born quarrelers and instigators. It’s like that **old Irish saying**, when then Irishman walks down the street and sees a skirmish going on and he asks: **“Is this a private fight, or can anyone join in?”** St. Therese wasn’t a quarreler – she was wiser than that. And remember: **it takes two to quarrel.** If someone else starts it, you don’t have to continue it; and when we feel like arguing over something, in many cases we should restrain ourselves. It’s that “dying to ourselves” That we need to work on.

#### 5. Not a criticizer

St. Therese wasn’t a criticizer, either. To her novices, she said: **“You’re wrong to criticize this or that, to desire that everybody should adopt your view of things.”** And then she put it in terms of the Little Way, by adding: **“Since we want to be little children, little children do not know what is best. Everything seems right to them.”** If someone else is wrong about something – particularly if they’re wrong about something in matters of faith or morals – we don’t want to adopt their wrong position, but I don’t think that’s what she’s referring to. I think that 1) she’s referring to not insisting on our own likes and dislikes, on our own opinions, on our own preferences, and 2) simply just not being a fault-finder. They say that fault-finders seldom find anything else. One of the problems with being a fault-finder is that it can kill the spirit of other people. It’s better to be merciful towards people in their eccentricities and in their mistakes and in their preferences.

#### 6. A spirit of service

True charity makes us forget ourselves and seek the good of others. In her convent, St. Therese always put herself at the disposal of others. She was always ready to help anyone who asked her, and she would interrupt her own work to do so.

Sometimes we’re willing to help others, but on condition that they ask us in the right way, or on condition that they’re pleasant or reasonable. **What happens if they don’t ask nicely, or if their request is inconvenient?** Therese says: **“Then a soul that is not firmly established in the practice of charity finds a thousand reasons for refuting, or at least she’s not disposed to grant what’s expected of her, and she makes sure that the petitioner be made to understand her lack of delicacy.”**

In her charity towards others, St. Therese went even a step further. She said: “I must anticipate the desires of others ... show that we are much obliged, very honored to be able to render service. The good Lord wants me to forget myself in order to give pleasure to others.”

Her sister Celine said: *“Whatever little free time she had at her disposal, was spent in the service of others. While she was sacristan, I noticed that on free days when her own work was finished, she would remain near the sacristy so that she might be called on to help others to finish theirs. She put herself in the way of the sister who distributed ‘charges’ so that the latter might ask her to undertake some task—as she invariably did. Knowing that in reality this cost her a great deal, I often showed her how it could be avoided. But it was all in vain. She wanted to be at the beck and call of everybody.”*

But when she was **training the novices**, Therese taught them not to impose on others, nor ask assistance from others unless it was absolutely necessary. She also warned them against helping someone else for unworthy or selfish motives. “I must not be obliging in order to appear so,” she said, “or with the hope of forcing another sister to render me service in her turn.” This is what Our Lord taught: “Do good and lend, expecting nothing in return” (Lk 6:35).

As far as **the time which the sisters would take away from her**, she said: “I lose nothing; what I do is done for God ... to give pleasure to our good Lord ... so I’m always paid for the trouble I take in serving others.” **There are times, though, that we can’t or even shouldn’t grant the favor that’s asked of us.** St. Therese would say that, in that case, we should refuse graciously. “There’s a way of refusing that’s so gracious,” she said, “that the refusal gives as much pleasure as the gift.”

## 7. Seeking out the marginalized

In her religious community, St. Therese deliberately sought the company of the sisters who pleased her least or who, on account of their imperfections, were shunned by others. There was in particular one sister who was very difficult to live with because she was “**crotchety and disagreeable**”. Therese forced herself to treat her “as she would the person that she loved most.” [This is the “**dying to ourselves**” that we talk about.] At times, when she was tempted to give a sharp answer, she responded to the sister’s rudeness with a friendly smile. This puzzled the nun so much that she asked the Saint one day why she was so attracted to her. Therese replied that she smiled each time they met because she was “glad to see her.” In recounting this incident later, she added with a twinkle in her eye: “Of course I didn’t tell her that I was acting from a supernatural motive.”

When others complained to Therese about the unpleasant character of that nun and the annoyance they suffered on her account, she replied: “Be very kind to that Sister. It’s both an act of charity and an exercise of patience. **We must not allow our own souls to be upset and yield to interior bitterness.** We must sweeten our minds by charitable thoughts. After that, the practice of patience will become almost natural.” When engaged in work with other nuns, Therese would choose as her companions **sisters who seemed to be depressed or sad.** Not being allowed to break the silence, she smiled affectionately at them. She knew that a smile is often enough to gladden a human soul.

**When she found it impossible to console or help a sister, she prayed that God do it.** To those who were tempted to anger against a sister who had offended them, she counseled prayer for the benefit of the offender and advised them to ask God to reward her for the suffering she had procured for them. **“How could we prove our love to Jesus,”** she asked, **“if we did not act with gentleness and charity towards those who make us suffer?”** [Remember Jesus says in the Gospels: *“If you love those who love you, what reward will you have? Even sinners love those who love them”* (Lk 6:32).]

### Suffering from others

When St. Therese suffered from others, she would keep silent and do her best not to worry about it. And she tried to spare others the humiliation they might feel when they realized the mistakes that they made. [So she felt compassion even towards those who caused her suffering ...]

### Was charity easy for her?

She admitted that the practice of charity hadn't always been easy for her. She said that sometimes she **“had to grasp her patience with both hands, lest it should escape”** her, or she **“had to run away like a deserter, so as not to go down in defeat”**.

### During her illness

We'll give a couple of examples of her charity from her last illness. **As we noted before, typically, it's harder to practice virtue when we're ill or sick,** and so some of the ordinary actions of charity almost become heroic at those times.

There was one sister who would come in every evening to look at St. Therese, and **the sister would just come in and smile at her from the foot of her bed.** And she would just stay there, smiling at her (my guess is that she didn't say anything to Therese because of the rule of silence). However good the sister's intentions were, it was very painful for St. Therese when the sister would do this – but Therese never complained, and she even managed to smile at the sister. One day she was asked if these visits by the sister fatigued her, and she said: **“Yes, it's very painful to be looked at with a smile while one suffers, but I say to myself that Our Lord on the cross was much gazed at in this way in the midst of His sufferings.”**

Another incident was on the night that she actually died. She was sitting in her bed, in a state of exhaustion. One of the sisters who was watching her fell asleep, and the other dozed off while Therese was sipping the drink that she'd been given. Through compassion for her sisters, St. Therese kept the glass in her hands until one of them woke up.

### Perfect charity

However perfectly Therese had practiced charity throughout her life, in June 1897 she wrote that up **to the time of her last illness, she had not fully understood the extent of that precept.** Our Lord told His apostles to love one another as He had loved them, but Therese wrote that she hadn't yet penetrated the depth of those words.

In the OT, God had commanded His people to **love their neighbor as themselves**, but when Jesus came, He was no longer satisfied with that measure of love. **He commands us to love others as He loves them.** [That was today's Gospel, from the Mass for St. Maximilian ... Jn 15] "Now," says St. Therese, "I put myself to the task of finding out how Jesus had loved His disciples. I realized that it was not for their natural qualities, for they were ignorant and full of worldly thoughts. And, yet, He calls them friends, His brothers. He desires to see them near Him in the kingdom of His Father and, in order to open that kingdom, He chose to die on a Cross, saying that there is no greater love than that of laying down one's life for those whom one loves."

Enlightened by these reflections, Therese understood that, if until then she had loved Jesus in her sisters, trying even to sow joy and peace in their hearts, henceforth, in order to fulfill the new commandment, she would have to cultivate **a personal love for each one**, forming in her own heart the same feelings that Jesus had for them. **So, since God loves us individually, personally, that's how we are called to love others ... that's why we say that "charity is an art"**.

Always conscious of her own littleness, **she asked herself how this could be achieved**. She felt that she was incapable of realizing such an ideal of love, so she begged that Jesus Himself would implant His own love in her heart. Since He gave us the commandment of loving as He loves, that meant that He was prepared to give us the grace to do so. [note: **Jesus doesn't ask anything of us that He's not prepared to help us accomplish.**]

From that time on she endeavored to remain more closely united to Him b/c she was convinced that the more intimate that union would be, the more also she would realize the precept of charity. Jesus would then love in her, and she would love through Him and like Him.

She herself wrote that without grace it's impossible to practice supernatural charity or even to understand all that it requires. To those who found such a practice difficult she replied: "**It's only the first step that is difficult.**" God will help us when we have good will. Just the desire alone of practicing charity gives peace to the soul.

**Example:** It was towards the end of her life and Therese was very ill. When the weather permitted it, **she was brought to the garden and there worked on the final pages of her autobiography**. The sisters who passed near her, while showing friendliness, constantly disturbed her. At every interruption, Therese put down her pen, closed her copybook and replied to the sisters with a smile. Mother Agnes asked her how she found it possible, under such conditions, to connect even two consecutive thoughts. Therese replied: "**I am writing about fraternal charity. This is a case of practicing it.**" And she added these words: "**My dear Mother, fraternal charity is everything on this earth. We love God in the measure in which we practice charity.**"

**Her zeal for souls**

On the feast of Christmas, 1886, she received a grace which “changed her heart ... charity entered her heart with the desire of always forgetting herself.” She experienced a fervor unknown until then, a great desire to labor for the conversion of sinners. Jesus made her a fisher of souls.

Sometime later—it was a Sunday of July, 1887—while closing her missal at the end of Mass, a picture of the divine Crucified slid from its pages, showing her a hand pierced and bleeding. That sight made her experience an ineffable wave of feeling that was quite new to her. “Her heart was filled with sorrow at the sight of that precious blood falling to the ground without any one hastening to collect it.” She was struck with sorrow to see how that precious blood was wasted because there was not one to collect it and pour it out over the souls of men.

From then on, she understood the part that God assigned to her in the work of redemption, the kind of consolation He expected from her.

It would be her role to remain constantly in spirit at the foot of the Cross and to cooperate in the work of redemption by collecting the precious blood and pouring it out for the benefit of souls. From that time onwards, she thought she heard constantly the cry of the dying Jesus expressing **His thirst**. She burned with the desire of saving sinners. **[example: Mother Teresa’s convents]**

She considered that in the cloister she could consecrate herself more fully to a life of self-denial and mortification and that her sacrifice would be all the more fruitful for souls, as she would be deprived of the consolation of working actively amongst them.

“When we want to reach a certain goal,” she wrote, “we must use the proper means. Jesus made me understand that it was through the cross that He would give me souls; so the more my suffering grew, the more I loved it, and that was my main objective for five years. Nothing, however, revealed to others the sufferings I endured and they were all the more painful because they were known only to myself.”

Therese even desired that the prayers said to obtain some relief for her in her cruel sufferings, should be offered for the salvation of souls.

She was willing to renounce all joy on earth in order that God might bring heaven to unbelievers. (to Celine) She told her of the words of Jesus urging the Apostles to ask the Lord of the harvest to send laborers into His harvest. “What a mystery!” she exclaimed. “Why does Jesus say this? Is He not all-powerful? It is because He has such an unfathomable love for us that He wants us to have a share with Him in saving souls. He does not want to do anything without us. The Creator of the universe awaits the prayer of an insignificant human being to save others who, like herself, were redeemed at the cost of all His blood.” And she proudly recalls the share of Carmelites in that work: “Our special vocation is not to work in the harvest fields ourselves. It is something still more sublime. Listen to the words of Jesus: ‘Lift up your eyes and see: see how in heaven there are empty places. It is your task to fill them. Become like another Moses praying on the mountain; ask for laborers and I will send them. I await but a prayer, a sigh of your heart.’”

