

THE “LITTLE WAY” OF SAINT THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX

LOVE OF GOD

St. Therese understood that God is not only love, as St. John says in **1 Jn 4:8**, but that God is also **merciful love**. Merciful love reaches out to those who are small, weak, sinful, struggling ... it reaches out to those who need mercy. The Latin word for “mercy” is “**miser cordia**”. It’s a compound word. It puts together the words “**miseria**” - which means “**misery**” in Latin - & “**cordis**”, or “**cordia**”, which is the Latin word for “**heart**”. So being merciful means to look on sb else’s misery w/ a heart ... w/ compassion. God sees our misery, & He looks on us w/ mercy. [Think of **M&M** candies: “misery” & “mercy” ... where there’s no misery, there’s no mercy!]

If we know God’s true character – that He’s merciful love – then **it’s easier to go to Him w/ confidence** ... & St. Therese says that confidence then leads us to a greater love ... it leads to us being able to receive love from God & then to be able to give love back to Him (& to others), because, as the Apostle says: *“This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us & sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 Jn 4:10)*. So we can really learn the right way to love once we take God’s merciful love to heart.

Love is at the center of the Little Way of St. Therese – it’s the soul of her spirituality. And this is why **Franciscans & Carmelites** get along so well – because we both promote the primacy of charity, the primacy of love ... the Franciscans school of theology traditionally teaches **the primacy of the will**, which is where love is [love is in the will, not so much in the feelings or in the intellect] ... while the Dominicans, the Thomists, focus on **the primacy of the intellect**, whose object is the truth. Franciscans & Carmelites aren’t against truth, but we say that charity, or love of the good, has 1st place in the spiritual life.

In heaven, the Dominicans will see that we were right!

As we mentioned yesterday, **St. John of the Cross** taught that *“love is repaid by love alone”*, & also he said that “it’s important that we fill our lives w/ acts of love, in order that the soul may be quickly consumed & arrive w/ short delay at the vision of God.”

For her part, St. Therese had the gift of having **a loving, tender heart, combined w/ a thirst for contemplating God**. She would **repeat to herself** lines like the ones we just mentioned from St. John in order to increase her love for God ... but it was really in **the Scriptures** where she saw the depths of God’s merciful love. The Scriptures helped her to see that God’s love delights in stooping down to our miseries in order to deliver us from them.

God loves playing “the rescuer”. He loves rescuing His people. You see that in both the OT & the NT. Jesus is the true “knight in shining armor,” if you want to use a medieval image. Sometimes we want to “rescue” others, but instead, we need to let the Lord be the rescuer. He’s the real Savior.

Faith in God’s merciful love is the core principle of St. Therese’s entire spirituality. She wrote: *“I understand so very well that it’s only through love that we can make ourselves pleasing to the good Lord, that love is the one thing I long for. **The science of love** is the only science I desire.”*

[note] So for those who say that they “**believe in science**”, St. Therese would say that she believes in it too ... she believes in the science of love! And how do we make ourselves pleasing to the Lord? Simply by loving Him & loving others ... not by **performing perfectly** [for those of us who maybe struggle w/ perfectionism. God doesn’t look for the “perfect performance” ... He looks for love.]

“Regarding self,” Therese told her sister Leonie, “**I find it very easy to practice perfection, for I realize that we have merely to take Jesus by His heart,**” she said ... so not taking Jesus by the hand, but by the heart. And she told her sister Celine: “**Merit does not consist in doing or giving much. It consists in loving much.**”

Love was the driving force & the goal of all her actions ... it was both **her fuel & her final destination**, you could say. It was the means & the end. Her **goal or destination** was “Love” [w/ a capital “L”] ... & she was going to **get there** by “loving” [w/ her small “l”]. Therese looked at all the **attributes** of God – His power, His wisdom, His justice, His goodness, His omnipresence, His providence – she saw all of that through the prism of God’s merciful love & she strove to do everything out of love & for love, “**to give pleasure to the good Lord,**” as she would say, & “**give Him joy, that He might be loved.**”

“How easy it is to please Jesus, to ravish His Heart,” she wrote to Celine. “**We have merely to love Him, while, at the same time, forgetting ourselves.**” And to Leonie, she wrote: “**If you wish to be a saint, it’s easy ... aim only at pleasing Jesus, at uniting yourself intimately with Him.**”

So how do we become saints? Aim at pleasing Jesus. Sometimes we aim at pleasing everyone else except God. **Some people are people-pleasers.** It’s okay to be a people-pleaser if the first person on your people-pleasing list is God ... b/c if you please Him, then you don’t have to worry about anyone else on this list! We’re called to live for “**an audience of One**” - & that “One” is Christ. St. Therese figured that out pretty early on ... so **all of her actions were motivated by love.** She said she learned this method from Jesus Himself: “**Directors make people advance in perfection by performing a great number of acts of virtue, & they’re right [to do so]. But my Director, who’s Jesus Himself, teaches me to do everything through love.**”

[note] My guess is that when she says “**directors**”, she’s talking about spiritual directors there! But even if you think of **movie or stage directors** ... one thing a good director knows how to do is they know how to get the best performance out of their actors & actresses. That’s what our Director, Jesus, knows how to do w/ us ... He’s knows how to get the best out of us ... & St. Therese said He did that w/ her by teaching her to do everything out of love ... to make everything an act & an offering of love to Him.

For her part, **seeing that God is so little loved**, even by those who have consecrated themselves to Him, & “**knowing that Jesus is thirsting more than ever for love,**” Therese desired to make up for it, to compensate the Lord for other people’s ingratitude. She said: “**While growing up, (she is speaking about the time when she was about five years old) I loved the good Lord more & more. I often gave my heart to Him. I did my best to please Jesus in all my actions & was very careful never to offend Him.**”

Her love for God was lived out every day, even in the smallest actions that she did - in her **love of suffering** ... her **zeal for souls** ... as well as her spirit of recollection that kept her united to Christ in all circumstances.

[note] When we talk about **spiritual “recollection”** ... “recollection” is placing yourself in the presence of God – being mindful of His presence ... focusing “inward”, on the Lord living w/ us & inside of us, rather than focusing “outward”, on external things. (I guess that’s the simplest way of explaining it.)

St. Therese’s love for God **usually wasn’t a sensible feeling**, though sometimes, under the influence of an emotion, she had **transports of love** which she was unable to control. She had experiences of that kind even before she entered Carmel in 1887, & it also happened a few times after becoming a Carmelite, but not frequently.

While finishing the manuscript of her autobiography written for Mother Mary Gonzaga, Therese was seized w/ one of those transports of love, & it inspired her to write one of the most beautiful pages that she wrote: “You know, O my God,” she exclaims, “that I have never desired to love anyone but You, & that I seek no other glory. Your love went before me in my childhood. It has grown with me & now, it is an abyss of which I cannot sound the depth. Love attracts love. Mine leaps towards You. I would like to fill the abyss which attracts it, but, alas! it’s not even a drop of dew lost in the ocean! **In order to love You as You love me, I must borrow your own love. ... O my Jesus, it seems to me that You could not fill any soul with more love than you have given to me. ...** No, here below, I cannot conceive a greater immensity of love than that which it has pleased You to bestow gratuitously on me without any merit on my part.”

On another occasion, while **walking in the garden** w/ Mother Agnes [her sister Pauline], Therese stopped to look at a **small, white hen** covering her chicks w/ her wings, her eyes filled w/ tears & Mother Agnes said to her: “You’re crying!” - “I can’t answer you at this moment,” she replied, “I’m too greatly moved.”

Having returned to the infirmary, she said: “I wept because I remembered that the good Lord used that comparison in the Gospel to make us believe in His love. That is the way He’s acted towards me throughout my life. **He’s hidden me entirely under His wings.** A moment ago I was unable to control myself. My heart was overflowing with gratitude & love. It’s a good thing that the good Lord hides Himself from my sight & only rarely &, as it were, through bars, shows me the effects of His mercy.”

[note] Reading these words of St. Therese, it’s clear that she had a poetic & delicate soul, just like one of her patrons: **St. Francis of Assisi**. She’s Marie Françoise-Thérèse Martin.

Her love for God, says Fr. Jamart, had all the qualities which a human soul could hope for. And then Fr. Jamart outlines 4 qualities of St. Therese’s love for God: he says her love was 1) exclusive, 2) disinterested, 3) generous, 4) tender & thoughtful. Let’s take a look at each of those.

1. Therese's Exclusive Love

First of all, remember that **Therese was special** ... it's certain that no other love ever touched her heart, and that Jesus possessed her heart entirely. She was still very young when she felt a great desire of never loving anyone but Him ... to find no joy except in Him. Jesus was her first, her only friend, the one and only one whom she loved ... He was her all-in-all.

Perhaps the rest of us – or **most of us – didn't start out our spiritual life that way** ... but we can certainly finish it that way! That's another one of our favorite quotes from **St. John Vianney**: “The saints did not all start out well, but they all finished well.”

The exclusiveness of Therese's love for Christ was mainly the fruit of her **1st Communions**, and her love continued to grow even stronger as time went on. “**When Jesus shall have transported me to the blessed shore of Carmel,**” she wrote a few days before her entrance, “**I will give myself entirely to Him, for I want to live for Him alone.**” She was 15 when she wrote that.

However, when she entered the cloister, **her heart thirsted for affection**. She felt very lonely & friendless. Religious life can be a “shock to the system” when we first enter ... esp. for someone as young & impressionable & sensitive as the 15-year-old Therese. Instinctively, she turned to her Mother Prioress (Mother Marie de Gonzaga), but, sensing the danger **that she might become too much attached to her Superior**, she immediately repressed her feeling, for she knew that Jesus wanted her for Himself alone. She wrote: “**Jesus knows well that if He gave me but a shadow of happiness, I would attach myself to it with all the energy and all the powers of my heart.**”

It's amazing how wise she was – she was very desirous for affection, but at the same time, she knew that she had to guard her heart in order to not give away what Jesus wanted only for Himself. One of our favorite proverbs is **Prov 4:23**: “*Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life*”. Therese was wise enough to do that, even at such a tender age.

During her retreat before receiving the habit, she reaffirmed her resolution: “**Since I cannot find any creature that satisfies my heart. I want to give everything to Jesus. I will not give even one atom of my love to creatures.**” And, on the day of her profession, she placed over her heart the following prayer: “**O Jesus! May I never seek nor find anyone but You alone! May creatures mean nothing to me and may I mean nothing to them, but may You, Jesus, be everything!**”

She was accustomed afterwards to renew this resolution to love Christ with a fervor that revealed how strongly and completely it bound her to Him. “**Let us not leave anything in our heart except Jesus,**” she wrote to Celine. And to Mother Agnes: “**You know the One whom I love and whom alone I want to please.**” “**Jesus alone; no one but Him. The grain of sand [meaning herself] is so small. If it wished to put anyone beside Him in its heart, there would be no room for Jesus.**”

Even though St. Therese's love for Jesus was exclusive, that doesn't mean that she didn't love other people. We know that she loved her family very much. When we love God, that doesn't mean that we shut others out of our heart! Rather, our love for others is purified, because we learn to love them in God, as it were. The Psalmist says of God: *"He has put into my heart a marvelous love for the faithful ones who dwell in his land"* (Ps 16:3). So **exclusive love** for God doesn't mean that we **exclude** loving others ... I hope that makes sense. We have to be careful how we interpret things at times.

2. Therese's Disinterested Love

The most perfect selflessness marked Therese's love for God b/c **she loved Him solely for who He is in Himself** – she loved God b/c He is perfection & infinite charity. **She love Him b/c ... He's lovable.** Divine Charity filled her soul w/ gratitude for all God has done for us, especially in preparing us for eternal happiness with Him by sending His only begotten Son to become one of us. Therese loved Jesus for Himself and for the excessive love which made Him sacrifice Himself for us. Therese didn't love in order to receive. She never even thought of serving God *"in order to merit heaven or obtain graces."* *"I do not want to give,"* she said, *"in order to receive. I'm not a self-seeker. It is God that I love & not myself."*

Remember Jesus' words in the NT: *"It is more blessed to give than to receive"* (Acts 20:35). She gave God her love b/c 1) she had it to give & 2) because He deserved it, essentially! Sometimes we have to ask God to place His love in our hearts so that we have something to give back to Him.

Therese wasn't indifferent to **acquiring merits**. To Mother Agnes, who had asked her, "Do you want to acquire merits?" she answered: *"Yes, but not for myself; for souls, for the needs of the Church."* Also, it doesn't mean that she wasn't interested in **Heaven**. She desired to reach the degree of glory that God had destined for her. From her infancy, she had longed for the happiness of heaven, & the desire for it had constantly increased. Her letters express that on every page. It was the **hope of heaven** that mainly sustained her in her sufferings, especially during the difficult trial of her father's illness. However, she didn't do good & suffer **in view of reward** [it's not bad to do that, but that wasn't her way]. *"My dear Celine,"* she wrote, *"you understand that it's not to win a crown or to gain merit for myself; it's to give pleasure to Jesus; for it's not glory, even heavenly glory that my heart seeks. ... My glory will be the splendor reflected on me from the brow of my mother, the Church. What I seek is love. I want nothing else but to love You, O Jesus."*

That's a beautiful picture that she gives there: she says **her glory** will be the splendor reflected on her from the brow of her mother, the Church ... so, as if the Church looks down on her & shines upon her, like a mother looking down on her child w/ love ... that's where her glory will be, she says. She can say "I told you so!" to us from heaven regarding that one!

In the connect of rewards & merit, she confessed that it was with a **certain repugnance** that she sang at Sext on Sundays [at midday prayer], in a faulty Latin translation, the words in which the Psalmist declares that **He fulfills the divine law in view of recompense** (propter retributionem). While singing these words, Therese, interiorly, would protest. She said: *"O my Jesus, You know well that it's not for the reward that I serve You, but solely because I love You and in order to save souls."*

Nevertheless, **the thought of heaven** encouraged her to love even more: “Reflecting [on the fact] that [our] eternal reward has no proportion to our small sacrifices in this life,” she wrote, “I wanted to love Jesus passionately . . . give Him a thousand marks of love, as long as I was able to do so.”

She had the same disinterestedness regarding the **favours or consolations** which God ordinarily grants to souls that serve Him generously. She said: “**Jesus does not want us to serve Him for His gifts; it is He Himself who must be our reward.**” “I do not desire sensible affection, a love that I feel, but only a love that is felt by Jesus. Oh! to love Him & cause Him to be loved!” She even said that she was happy not to be consoled, & commended others to be detached from such favours, so that they might be attached to Jesus alone.

Therese recognized that **self-love** often insinuates itself into sensible affection, especially when it’s accompanied by consolations. “You do not feel your love for your Spouse,” she writes to Celine. “You would like to have your heart be a flame that rises towards Him without a trace of smoke. . . . But notice that the smoke that surrounds you is intended only for you. It has for its purpose to hide from your eyes your love for Jesus. **The flame is seen by Him alone.** In this way, He has it all for Himself, for when He lets us catch a glimpse of it, self-love soon comes along like an evil wind that extinguishes everything.” She also said: “**Our love for Jesus is truly great when we do not feel its sweetness.** It then becomes a martyrdom. . . . When, on the contrary, we begin to seek ourselves, true love dies away. Unfortunately, many serve Jesus when He consoles them, but few are willing to keep Him company when He is asleep.”

She went so far in her desire to love God for Himself alone that **she would have been glad to have God remain unaware of her good actions:** “I love Him so much that I would like to give Him pleasure without His knowing that it is I. When He knows that I am giving Him pleasure and sees it, He is, as it were, obliged to return love for it. I would not like to give Him that much trouble.” She knew, of course, that that’s impossible, but it was her way of expressing the disinterestedness & purity of her love.

3. Therese’s Generous Love

As we can see from her selflessness, Therese’s love is also marked by a very great generosity. Very early in life she had understood that love is proved by deeds & is nourished by sacrifice. As Jesus told **St. Catherine of Siena:** “*I am one who delights in few words & many deeds*” – St. Therese knew that, & so she was always careful never to refuse anything to Jesus. “**We do not bargain when we love.**” “Jesus,” she writes, “teaches me not to refuse Him anything and to be pleased when He gives me an opportunity for proving to Him that I love Him. This I do peacefully, with complete abandonment.”

We’re not always as **well-disposed to love the Lord** as she was. This is especially true when the Lord seems to deprive us of His presence & leave us to ourselves. “Life is often burdensome,” Therese confessed to Celine. “What a bitterness . . . but also what sweetness! Yes, life is painful. It is hard to begin a day of labor. . . . **If only we could feel Jesus! We would do everything for Him . . . but no!** He seems to be miles away. We are alone with ourselves. **Oh, what annoying company we are to ourselves when Jesus is not present . . .** but . . . He is not far away. He is right there, quite near and looking at us. Indeed, He’s there begging us to offer Him our sorrow . . . He hides, but we feel [or know] that He is present.

Hence, the grain of sand [talking about ourselves] determines to set to work without joy or courage or energy. This good-will, then, eases and energizes His undertaking. He wants to labor through love.”

Elsewhere she says: **“What great grace is ours when, in the morning, we seem to be filled with lassitude & to lack both courage & strength to practice virtue!** Then is the ideal moment to put the axe to the root of the tree, though our effort may lag for a few moments & we may neglect to gather our treasures. This is the critical moment, for we may be tempted to give up everything. However, we can repair everything and even gain in grace through an act of love, though it be unaccompanied by any sensible feeling. Jesus smiles. He helps us without appearing to do so and the tears He sheds over the wicked are wiped away by our poor, feeble efforts, by our small gift of love. Love can accomplish all things. **Things that are ‘most impossible’ become easy where love is at work.”**

See what she says there ... that’s is a grace when we wake up & don’t want even begin the day ... because then we can choose to go forward, as an act of love for Jesus. That’s actually very beautiful, when you think about it ... & more beautiful when we do it.

She herself proved the truth of her words. She gave to God all He asked. **“To love,”** she wrote, **“means giving everything and giving ourselves.”** **“I love Him so much that I’m always satisfied with anything He sends me.”** **“I love all that He does.”** At the end of her life, she testified that **since the age of three** she’d never refused anything to God.

Jesus repeatedly proclaimed that we prove our love for Him by fulfilling the divine will. That’s why believers try to conform to that rule. **When we live in union with God’s will, we live in God.** Therese lived that way; she loved to say that **“her only desire, her only joy on earth, was to do God’s will.”**

“Perfection,” she also declared, **“consists in doing the will of God, in being what He wants us to be.”** [Not what others want us to be.] She proved that during her religious life. In every state of life, we’re called to recognize God’s will in the orders of our lawful superiors, & that’s even more true of **religious life** where the life is regulated by obedience and tends by means of it to lead us to perfection.

Therese had understood this. On the day of **her profession**, she asked God the grace of fulfilling her promises to perfection [her religious vows]. It was her intention to live the Carmelite life as St. Teresa of Avila had ordered it. To her, it was the straight-way that leads to God.

Religious life, considered in itself, usually gives few opportunities for anything but ordinary actions ... so Therese had no opportunity of undertaking work of any importance. Moreover, she considered herself to be **“but a very small soul which can offer only very small things to God.”**

But **very small things can have very great value** ... it depends on the love with which they’re done: **“Our Lord considers not so much the greatness of our actions nor the difficulty that accompanies them. He had no need of our works but craves only our love.”**

Therese applied herself to the observance of the Rule with all the care which works done for God deserve, and with all the love she was capable of. Obedience guided her at every moment and her fidelity was absolute. *“When I wanted to recall the text of one of our rules,”* a novice said, *“I had merely to watch the way Sister Therese acted.”* So, in religious life, **St. Therese was the rule, not the exception to the rule.**

Religious life, however, is more than just regular observances. It’s **often filled with renunciations and sacrifices.** Therese learned this from her own experience but she accepted everything in a spirit of perfect submission to the divine will: *“Allow Jesus to take and give whatever He wills,”* she said, *“perfection consists in doing His will.”* It even happens that God, judging a soul to be capable of showing Him a greater love, sends her trials which give her an opportunity for such love. **“The greatest honor He can do to a soul is not to give her much, but to ask much from her.”**

It was thus that God acted towards Therese. He tried her severely in both body and soul, and, during the last months of her life especially, she suffered a true martyrdom.

We might expect that being exhausted by illness and hovering between life and death, she would have felt a great longing for heaven ... but that wasn’t the case. In her, the very strongest aspirations were subordinated to the divine will. The desire of pleasing God was so deeply anchored in Therese’s soul that she no longer desired anything for herself. *“The only thing that satisfies me,”* she said, *“is doing the will of God. . . . What pleases me most is what God loves and what He chooses for me.”*

She didn’t ask that prayers should be offered to give her relief in her sufferings: *“I have asked the good Lord not to hear the prayers which would put an obstacle in the way of His designs in my regard.”*

She didn’t prefer to die rather than to live; or, if at times she expressed some satisfaction because she felt death was near, it was only because God was calling her. *“I’m glad to die,”* she wrote, *“not because I shall be freed from suffering here below; on the contrary, suffering is the only thing which seems desirable to me in this valley of tears. But I’m glad to die because I know well that such is the will of God.”* And a little later: *“The thought of heavenly bliss gives me no joy. ... It is only the thought of accomplishing God’s will which constitutes all my joy.”*

4. Her Love was tender & thoughtful

Finally, Therese’s love was tender and thoughtful. It was this delicacy that made her hide her sufferings, **for fear that God would see them and suffer on their account.** That’s a pious exaggeration, of course, b/c Therese knew that God doesn’t change and that He is unable to experience pain. But those sentiments express in a childlike way the extreme sensitivity of her soul.

The same delicacy prevented her from invoking God directly to obtain temporal graces from Him. She didn’t want Him, as she expressed it naively, *“to experience the regret of having to refuse those that were not in conformity with His will.”* She transmitted such petitions through the hands of the Blessed Virgin; for since Mary knows God’s designs, she would present to Him only those prayers that were agreeable to Him.

It's been said that her love was a filial love, the love of a child for his Father in heaven. It's certain that Therese loved God in a filial manner. She had towards God, considered as a father, that confident love "which has no fears, which goes to sleep and forgets itself as it lies on the Heart of its God, like a child in its father's arms." "She loved God, as a child loves his father," said Sister Genevieve, "and used the most unexpected ways to express her affection."

She also loved Jesus in a very particular way. As soon as we begin to read her writings, we notice that it is above all Jesus that she desired to please. The part which Jesus had in her love was such that, according to her sisters' testimony, her interior life was "centered in Jesus."

She dealt with Him with that familiarity which seems natural to those who remember that our God has "loved us to excess." She herself told us that she loved to "take hold of Jesus through His Heart," and to "caress Him."

On several occasions she urged her correspondents to act likewise. If anyone had objected that such conduct showed a lack of respect and exaggerated sentimentalism, Therese would, no doubt, have answered that a most tender love and even familiarity are quite compatible with the greatest reverence. For Jesus called us brothers and friends. He surrounds us with loving care; He even anticipates the desires of those who are totally devoted to Him. Hence, He allows us to approach Him in a familiar, intimate way. God has revealed Himself as Love; "God is Charity." Jesus, by His example, has revealed that one loves truly only when one pushes love to its extreme consequences, "because of the excessive love with which He loved us." Hence, we cannot claim that we love God unless we love Him to that same degree and give ourselves entirely to Him. Therese's message, which is entirely based on love, reminds us of this truth in an admirable manner. Her life was a living illustration of it. We owe an immense debt of love to God, for "He has loved us first" and from all eternity "in perpetual charity." We are debtors towards Jesus Christ because of His life and His death. To so much love we should have responded by an unwavering fidelity.

Love is, at the same time, the root principle, the food and the end of all spiritual life. Without it we cannot forget ourselves nor give ourselves to God. Without it, we will lack fidelity and generosity. This is what Therese meant when, on the eve of her death, she told Sister Genevieve: "It is love alone that counts."