



Last week, we covered the biblical foundation of St. Thérèse's teaching on trust, which, as we'll learn this week, is called "the Little Way." This Little Way will bear striking similarities to Abraham's and Mary's faith, the essence of which is to believe that what is spoken by the Lord will be fulfilled. In fact, this young woman from the French town of Lisieux, who died in 1897, well before her twenty-fifth birthday, and who lived a quiet, sheltered childhood among doting sisters and then a quiet, sheltered adolescence as a cloistered Carmelite nun (with some of those very same sisters) — that woman, after Abraham and Mary, is perhaps the Church's greatest example of the faith that "hopes against hope." Thus, St. Thérèse truly merits both blessings of Elizabeth: "Blessed is she who believed that what was spoken to her by the Lord would be fulfilled" and "Blessed are you among women" — of course, we'd have to add, "after Mary."

But how can this be? How can such a seemingly unimportant woman be so amazingly blessed? It can be so because God's ways are not our ways, and he delights in lifting up the lowly and making the greatest from the littlest — and perhaps no sinner is more lowly and little than Thérèse of Lisieux.

DAY 8

None More Lowly

I just said that perhaps no one among sinful humanity is more lowly and little than Thérèse of Lisieux. Of course, that may be hard to believe. After all, St. Pius X called her "the greatest saint of modern times," and in 1997, she became one of the Doctors of the Church. So, sure, God lifts up the lowly. But is she really that lowly?

Well, consider the following.

First, Thérèse Martin grew up in a France that was deeply affected by the Jansenist heresy, a heresy that teaches a joyless moral rigorism, emphasizing fear and justice, punishment and severity, judgment and condemnation. It proclaims not the Good News of God's mercy for sinners but its own bad news of God's consuming wrath for whoever dares to commit the slightest infraction against what it sees as his many oppressive rules. It teaches that few are saved, that you have to be perfect to go to Jesus, and that you must earn his love, especially by multiplying great works and painful sacrifices.

Now, Thérèse was deeply affected by Jansenism during her younger years. Perhaps its influence came through her mother, Zélie, whose own mother was severely Jansenistic and used to hound her poor daughter with the litany, "That's a sin, that's a sin, that's a sin." But leaving aside the question of exactly how Thérèse fell under Jansenism's influence, we can say this much: It affected her at a very young age. For instance, as a child, whenever she'd make some mistake or do something wrong, even without meaning to, she'd be filled with anxiety and ask for "pardons which never end." Her mother relates, "We tell her she's forgiven but in vain. She goes on crying just the same."

We see Jansenism's effect on Thérèse in her later childhood as well. For instance, in preparation for her First Holy Communion at age 10, she made and recorded 1,949 small sacrifices and 2,773 short prayers! (Thankfully, Jesus himself later taught her, as she put it, "not to count up my acts.") Much worse, though, was her painful bout with scruples, which often goes along with Jansenist thinking.

Thérèse's battle with scruples began during her retreat in preparation for her First Holy Communion, a retreat that was led by a very severe priest. She remembers the

experience as follows: “What [the priest] told us was frightening. He spoke about mortal sin, and he described a soul in the state of sin and how much God hated it.”

Thankfully, Thérèse could confide in her dear sister Marie whenever she was tempted to think that God had rejected her — but Marie’s words only brought temporary comfort, and Thérèse’s scruples followed her even into the Carmelite convent (also called “Carmel”). In fact, her sister Pauline (Mother Agnes) wrote: “The fear of offending God ‘poisoned’ Thérèse’s existence at the beginning of her religious life.”

Jansenism poisoned Thérèse’s early religious life not only by creating in her an excessive fear of offending God but also by causing her to develop an unhealthy preoccupation with suffering. This becomes clear through her letters of the time. For instance, and this is just one example among many, we read: Holiness does not consist in saying pretty things, not even in thinking or feeling them! It consists in suffering and suffering from everything ... Holiness! One must conquer it at sword point, one must suffer ... one must agonize.

Now, apart from the influence of Jansenism, Thérèse’s lowliness is also the result of her simply being a very fragile and broken little girl. Having lost her biological mother to cancer at the age of 3 and her adopted mother to Carmel at the age of 9, she became an emotional mess who would cry at the slightest provocation. In fact, others used to say to her, “You cry so much during your childhood, you’ll no longer have tears to shed later on!” (Her oversensitivity wouldn’t be healed until she received the grace of her “Christmas conversion” at the age of 14.)

Because of Thérèse’s deep emotional fragility — which led to a debilitating psychological breakdown at age 10 — her sisters sheltered her and doted on her so much that she became a socially awkward outcast and loner when she finally started going to school. In fact, the other school kids bullied her and made fun of this girl who didn’t know how to join in their games and couldn’t even comb her own hair.

In the midst of her extreme loneliness and sensitivity, Thérèse deeply longed to be loved. In fact, hers was so great a longing that, she admitted, given the opportunity, she basically would have thrown herself into the arms of the first creature who came along. As she herself put it, “With a heart such as mine, I would have allowed myself to be taken and my wings to be clipped ... I know that without Him, I could have fallen as low as St. Mary Magdalene.”

Thanks be to God, the Lord showed amazing mercy on this littlest of souls by actually preserving her ahead of time from a life of grave sin by removing the obstacles that would have caused her to fall. Now, Thérèse was painfully aware of all the weakness just described and more — so don’t even try to tell her that she’s not a little soul! Were you to say that, she’d probably look you in the eye and respond in all seriousness, “My friend, there’s none more lowly than I.”

Today’s Prayer:

Come, Holy Spirit, fire of mercy.

Help me to recognize my own lowliness and to rejoice in God’s mercy.

Volume 12, February 9, 1919

Jesus caressed me and told me: “My daughter, why do you let yourself be disturbed? Isn’t it my usual practice to raise souls from the dust and to make them wonders of

grace? All the honor redounds to Me, and the weaker and lowlier the subject, the more I am glorified.”

Volume 20, January 25, 1927

And I replied: “My Jesus, I feel as if I am doing nothing—and You tell me that in your Fiat I take All and I give All?” And Jesus added: “My daughter, when the All acts, the nothing remains in its place—it only makes itself available to receive the All. And besides, do you not feel within yourself the strength of this All which makes you embrace and penetrate everything—heavens, stars, sun, seas and earth—and which makes you embrace all the acts that My Fiat carries out in the whole Creation? And do you not feel the strength of this All that makes you bring all of these things to your Creator—as though in one breath—to give everyone and everything back to Him? Has there been anyone until now who has given and has been able to say: “I give everything to God, even God Himself, because—since I live in His Will—God is mine, the heavens are mine, the sun and everything that this Supreme Fiat has done is mine—indeed, since everything is mine, I can give and take everything”?”

“Now, it happens as a result that the soul who lives in My Will possesses the All. And this build and draws down the Kingdom of the Divine Will upon earth—because it takes the strength of the Power of the All to build a kingdom.”

After this, He showed Himself to me as a little child, who stared at me so intently that He seemed to impress Himself within me. And He wanted me to look at Him intently enough so that I would also be impressed upon Him. Then, filled with love and tenderness, He said to me: “My daughter, this is the true image of living in My Eternal Volition: The soul stamps the image of the Divine Will within herself—and the Supreme Will stamps the image of the soul, so that your Creator keeps the replica of your image stamped within His womb. He cherishes her—because He sees her exactly as He brought her forth from her Source—she has lost nothing of her freshness and beauty. His fatherly features are stamped upon this replica; and in God’s paternal womb this replica joins with all His works to sing for Him the praises of all Creation. And she whispers continuously into His ear: ‘You made everything for me. You loved me and You love me so very much. And I want to transform everything—everything—into love for You.’ This copy is the prodigy of God in His womb—she is the memory of all His works. This is the copy of the soul in God, and the copy of God in the soul, and the carrying out of the Divine Life in the creature. How beautiful is the Kingdom of My Will—the nothing dissolved in the All, and the All fused in the nothing—the lowliness of the creature rising up into the Divine height, and the Divine height descending into the depth of the creature. They are two beings joined together—inseparable, transfused, identified, so that one can scarcely tell that they are two lives throbbing together. All the magnificence, sanctity, sublimity, and prodigies of the Kingdom of My Will shall be precisely this: ‘The faithful copy of the soul in God, and the copy of God, whole and beautiful, in the soul.’ “Indeed, the children of the Kingdom of the Divine Fiat will all be images of little gods in My Kingdom.”