

VERY REV. DANIEL CHOWNING, OCD
ST. THÉRÈSE DE LISIEUX

Fr. Daniel is the provincial of the Province of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. He entered the province in 1978, professed his first vows in 1980 and solemn vows in 1985. He was ordained to the priesthood in 1988. He completed his undergraduate studies at Georgetown University and theological studies at the Catholic University of America.

He studied at the International Center of Teresian/Sanjuanist studies in Avila, Spain and completed his STL degree at the University of Salamanca, Spain.

He has ministered in retreat ministry, spiritual direction, parish and shrine ministry,

He served his province as novice director, as well student director. In 2015 at the General Chapter, he was elected to the General Definitory in Rome where he served the Order for six years. In 2022, he elected provincial and resides at the National Shrine of Mary Help of Christians, Hubertus, WI.

St. Therese of the Child Jesus and of the Holy Face: A Beacon of hope and love in a turbulent world.

I will divide my lecture into three parts. In the first part I want to present the “mystery of St. Therese” in the sense of how St. Therese became a beacon of hope in the early days before her beatification and canonization, especially in the trenches of the Great War - WW1. The impact of the *Story of a Soul* on the first readers and the soldiers devotion to her during WW1 is often unknown or overlooked.

In the second part I will explore how love was the heartbeat of her spirituality and what we can learn from her and how we can be beacons of hope through love.

In the last part, I hope to draw some conclusions and what her spirituality can teach us in becoming witnesses of hope and love in a turbulent world.

From her death in 1897

St. Therese of the Child Jesus of the Holy Face breathed her last breath around 7:20 pm on September 30, 1897, after months of intense spiritual, moral and physical suffering. Her last words were, “I love Him. My God, I love you.” These words sealed 24 years of existence, hidden in Lisieux, nine of which were lived in the Carmelite monastery. Very few sisters in her religious community knew her depths. “How unknown she in this community,” her prioress said.

Shortly before her death, Therese overheard one of her sisters say to another community member: “I don’t know why there is all this talk about my Sister Therese of the Child Jesus; she hasn’t done anything remarkable; we don’t even see her practice virtue; we can’t even say that she was a good religious.”

Earlier in her youth, after having read the patriotic deeds of French heroines, especially the Venerable Joan of Arc, Therese had a strong intuition that she was made for glory, but her glory would not be evident to the eyes of mortals. Her glory would consist in becoming a great saint even though she humbly recognized her weakness and poverty. She realized that God alone is holy and that her sanctity would be a share in God's holiness. She also recognized that the path of sanctity involves suffering.

"I have suffered very much since I've lived on this earth," she confessed at the end of her life. Her sensitive nature, the loss of her mother at the age of four, the loss of her "second mother" Pauline when she entered the Carmelite monastery and her psychological breakdown as a result of Pauline's entrance, her father's dementia and internment in Bon Sauveur psychiatric hospital, the pinpricks of community life, dryness in prayer, her trial of faith the last 18 months of her life, and the ravages of tuberculosis were some of the sources of her sufferings.

As early as 13 years of age, she realized that holiness isn't a matter of performing outstanding works but consists in "hiding oneself and practicing virtue in such a way that the left hand knows not what the right is doing." (Ms. A, 72) Her strong intuitions about the nature of true glory and sanctity were realized as she lay dying in the infirmary. What a mystery when we consider that Pope Pius XI referred to her as a "storm of glory,"

Therese was buried on October 4, 1897, in the Carmelite nuns' section of the public cemetery. The community had purchased a small section of the public cemetery in 1887 because it was against the French law at that time to bury corpses in the monastery garden for fear of water contamination caused by corrupted bodies. By the time Therese died, the first cemetery plot was full, so in anticipation of her death, her uncle Isidore purchased a second parcel of land. Therese was the first to be buried there. As we will see, being buried in the communal cemetery was

providential because it became a place of pilgrimage where people experienced powerful graces and healings.

One year after her death, in October 1898, two thousand copies of the first publication of the *Story of a Soul* were printed. Financed by her uncle Isidore Guérin, it was meant to be a simple necrology sent to Carmelite communities and certain ecclesiastics. Uncle Isidore didn't believe it would be successful, but to everyone's surprise, letters began to arrive at the Carmel expressing their glowing and inspired reaction.

Some of the early reactions:¹

Carmelite nuns of Angers:

“May God be praised forever in his Saints. We didn't think of writing you immediately, but under the charm of reading *The Story of a Soul*, we are asking for more copies. This beautiful life is destined to do as much good in the world as in our cloisters. After having begun reading it, it is a sacrifice to close the book; we don't want to finish it.

Lay woman:

Yesterday I received the life of your seraphic child, Sister Therese of the Child Jesus. I spent a great part of the night reading it. What a beautiful life. You cannot tear yourself away from reading it. I have returned to it several times this morning. How I would like to be more generous and to follow in her footsteps.

Cleric:

Reverend Mother, I have to tell you all the good you have done for me with the *Story of Soul*. I received it yesterday and have devoured it. I have to tell you that I have never read anything that has delighted me so much. You come away from this reading with your soul literally embalmed, and also fortified, because this is not a frivolous child...The good God created this little flower to do good for souls and to convert them. Oh! This book will do good for priests, for souls and heads of families.”

¹ The following quotes are taken from Claude Langlois's study: *Les premiers thérésiens: De l'histoire d'une âme (1898) à la canonisation de Thérèse de l'Enfant-Jésus (1925)*, (Paris, Éditions Champion, 2015), 60-106.

Director of a seminary. *The Story of a Soul* had great success in seminaries.

“Everything in this life is marvelous. It’s all the rage here. For my part, I have a hard time interrupting my reading when I begin it. Putting the volume under my eyes is a real temptation. What a soul! What privileges! What correspondence to grace. How edified I am, but and shameful at the same time.” (This priest, director of a seminary, asked the nuns to pray for his poor soul.)

The Story of a Soul inspired readers so much that six months later, 4,000 more copies were printed, and every year more and more copies were printed. Of course, the first editions were Mother Agnes’s edited edition of Therese’s original manuscript. Mother Agnes died in 1951. It was after her death that Pope Pius XII requested the publication of the original manuscript which we read today.

What was it about the *Story of a Soul* that inspired readers? When you read through the various reactions, some were heartened by Therese’s path of sanctity and understanding of holiness. She was a model of how we can become a saint through confidence in God’s unconditional love and the practice of little virtues in daily life. Others, especially religious and clerics, were encouraged by her insistence on God’s unconditional merciful love and confident abandonment to God, especially in a religious culture of the 19th when Jansenistic ideas weighed heavily on the consciences of many Christians. A rigorist image of a vindictive God who demanded reparation, a God whose anger was ready to unleash on sinners, polluted the spiritual atmosphere. The idea of a God of love and mercy revealed in the person and deeds of Jesus Christ was hardly known or preached. People who read the *Story of a Soul* felt consoled: “There is hope for me in all my woundedness and poverty. I, too, can become a saint if I surrender myself to God’s merciful love with all my poverty and weakness and strive to perform the small actions of daily life with love and confidence in God.” Sounds so simple, but not easy!

Reading the *Story of a Soul*, and seeing various images of Therese holding roses, inspired people to make pilgrimages to Lisieux. The first pilgrimage place was to “les Buissonnets,” Therese’s childhood home, then to the Carmelite monastery where Therese had lived and prayed as a Carmelite nun.

The third pilgrimage site was the cemetery. This is interesting because it was at Therese’s tomb where spiritual graces and healings began. If Therese had not been buried in the public cemetery, one wonders if she would have been canonized in 1925. Perhaps later on due to the impact of the *Story of a Soul* and popular devotion. The graces and miracles that took place at her grave inspired devotion to her; her reputation spread and drew more and more pilgrims.

The first miraculous healing was four-year-old Reine Fauquet, afflicted by a serious bacterial eye infection incurable at that time, resulting in blindness.² Reine’s mother took her to Therese’s grave and placed some dirt from the grave over her eyes. The next day her mother began a novena in the chapel of the Carmel. While her mother was praying for her little daughter in the chapel of the Carmel, Therese appeared to little Reine in her bedroom and smiled. When Mme. Fauquet returned home, her daughter could see perfectly. The news of Reine’s miraculous healing profoundly touched the people of Lisieux.

In 1915, Edith Piaf, the famous French singer, was also healed of blindness after her paternal grandmother, who operated a brothel in Bernay, a nearby town, had heard about little Reine. She, and her “ladies of the night,” took little six-year-old Edith on a pilgrimage to Lisieux to pray at Therese’s grave. They collected some dirt from the grave, placed it in a small sachet, and rubbed

² Camille Burette, *Pluie de Roses : « Les plus beaux miracles de Thérèse de Lisieux*, (Paris, Éditions Emmanuel, 2023), 137-140.

it on Edith's eyes. A few days later, Edith could see perfectly. For the rest of her life, Edith Piaf was devoted to St. Therese, and before every performance, she said, "I sing for St. Therese!"³

The Great War

On June 9, 1897, Sr. Marie of the Sacred Heart told Therese that she and Mother Agnes would be full of grief after she died. Therese answered: "Oh no! After my death, you will go to the mailbox, and you will find many consolations." (DE, 248)

After hearing about the life of St. Aloysius Gonzaga, Therese confided to her sister Marie of the Sacred Heart: "After my death, I, too, will let a shower of roses fall. People will know better the gentleness of God. I feel that my mission is about to begin, my mission of making God loved as I love Him, of giving my little way to souls. I want to spend my heaven doing good on earth." (DE, 102)

Therese's roses have an apostolic meaning; they signify the goodness and gentleness of God's love poured out on those who ask for God's help through Therese's intercession.

Well, her words were prophetic. Her roses showered down abundantly in the trenches of WW1. During the Great War many soldiers (from Generals to simple soldiers), their families, nurses, and chaplains wrote to the Carmel relating experiences of apparitions, protection, healing, conversions, and returning to the faith through Therese's intercession. Even before the War, devotion to Therese spread among the French soldiers. WW1 was horrendously destructive and dehumanizing due to chemical warfare such as the mustard gas developed by the Germans. In the trenches, soldiers

³ Jacqueline Cartier et Hugues Vassal, *Édith et Thérèse. La Sainte et la pêcheuse*, (Paris, Éditions Anne Carrière, 1999), 116.

endured horrific suffering. In France alone, approximately 2 million soldiers were killed in battle in war.

Many of the soldiers may not have been pious or even practicing, but their mothers, grandmothers, family members, and friends who were devoted to the little Sister Therese told them to pray to her. (Therese was not beatified at this time.) They carried in their pockets a small image of Therese painted by Celine, the size of a stamp, or a medal, or third-class relic. The Lisieux Carmel compiled an abridged copy of the *Story of a Soul* and diffused it among the soldiers. It was small enough to carry and fit in their pocket or backpack.⁴

Devotion to Therese was diffused primarily through the military chaplains, nurses, religious, and lay people devoted to her.

The Lisieux Carmel spread devotion through images of Therese, relics and medals. The abridged *Story of a Soul* circulated among the soldiers in the trenches. Reading her life inspired and encouraged them and transformed their lives. They shared their enthusiasm with their comrades. The images and medals of Therese the soldiers carried on them became a sign of God's presence and protection.

Therese was their sister, faithful friend, and companion who encouraged them and reminded them of God's unconditional love and taught them the way of confident abandonment to God and to fulfill their duties and to offer their sufferings to God. Some combatants saw her as a warrior, another Venerable Joan of Arc who "booted out the English." For most of the soldiers, she was a close friend, a compassionate and loving presence in the midst of horrendous suffering. She

⁴ I refer the reader to the interesting book reporting some of the letters soldiers wrote to the Carmelite nuns of Lisieux during the Great War. *Stronger than Steel: Soldiers of the Great War Write to Thérèse of Lisieux*, translated by Sr Marie of the Child Jesus, (Brooklyn, NY, Angelico Press, 2021).

transmitted hope to them. She was their sister who reminded them of God's presence and encouraged them. She taught them God's unconditional love and to trust God in the midst of the battles, even if they were wounded and faced possible death.

Soldiers prayed to Sister Therese and she answered their prayers! They wrote to the Carmel reporting protection in the most dangerous moments, apparitions, healings, conversions, and returning to the faith. When possible, on leave from the battlefield, soldiers made pilgrimages to Lisieux to pray in the chapel and at Therese's grave.

Here are just a couple examples of the 1,061 letters the Carmelite nuns received during the Great War.⁵

1916 August:

(Sergeant Boucaud) "The poilus (name of the soldiers in WW1) love Soeur Thérèse de l'Enfant Jésus and never tire of saying so; I want to pay my debt to her today, as they do. Life at the front is not always cheerful: great sadness can overwhelm us, and real dangers threaten us. I've felt these sadnesses, and I've experienced these dangers. But, reading the beautiful pages of the Story of a Soul, courage and faith, resignation and trust came back to me with greater strength, a more indomitable zeal."

Oh, I can tell you how I regained my lost energy. It's simple: I followed as best I could the "Delightful Way of Spiritual Childhood", the path that leads us to happiness through the spontaneous fulfillment of all our duties. And all my gratitude goes to the lovable Servant of God.

1918 August:

"I make a point of telling you how much confidence I have in the power of little Sister Thérèse, to whom I owe my protection last April in the Somme... In the midst of the danger of combat, against which we can do nothing on our own, we feel like little children, needing to rely blindly on the

⁵ The following quotes are only two taken from the *Archives of the Lisieux Carmel*, the section on St. Therese and the great war. It is worth reading this section of the Archives and the many letters soldiers wrote reporting the impact of the Story of a Soul on the soldiers' lives in the trenches of the Great War, as well as the apparitions, miracles, and protection.

<https://archives.carmeldelisieux.fr/naissance-dune-sainte/therese-et-la-premiere-guerre-mondiale/>

Father's protection, and from this point of view, the little way of trust and abandonment is quite natural to the soldier. With war so close at hand, we regret having so little time to acquire merits, and Sister Thérèse's example is invaluable, showing how much can be gained from the humblest actions simply offered to Jesus... In this easy way, I was able to endure with confidence and resignation all the trials that God sent my way. Through Sr. Thérèse, I was able to place the fate of my life in His hands; and as He was pleased to preserve it for me, I have come here today to pay homage to this powerful intermediary.”

After the War soldiers made pilgrimages to the Carmel to give thanks and to offer their medals of honor as votives offerings to Therese. There are display cases of honorary military medals in the archives of the Lisieux Carmel.

After the war high ranking officers as well as simple soldiers wrote letters to Pope Benedict XV requesting Therese's canonization.

A Witness of Hope

In 2016, as one of the general definitors of our Carmelite Order, I made the pastoral visitation of our friars in the Paris Province. While visiting the friars' community in Lisieux, I met with Bishop Jean-Claude Boulanger, the Bishop of the Diocese of Bayeux/Lisieux, regarding our friars' ministry in Lisieux. He had just returned from the Episcopal Conference of French Bishops in Lourdes. He described the pilgrims who come to Lisieux in a most impressive way. “The sick go to Lourdes, but “les paumés” come to Lisieux. (“*paumés*” – the lost, the godforsaken, those who feel rejected and unloved, the marginalized,). “These are the people who come to Lisieux. Those who feel unloved, alienated, forgotten, poor; those suffer from addictions. They need hope, encouragement, trust, love, and understanding. They need to know that God loves them in all their poverty, sinfulness, and misery. They need a listening ear and open heart to hear their pain. We have to give them hope and instill confidence in their hearts. This is the friars' ministry here in Lisieux. It is a ministry of listening and compassion.”

From the first the publication of the *Story of a Soul* and the devotion to her that developed into a “storm of glory,” as Pope Pius XI expressed it, Therese is a beacon of hope. Her spiritual testimony recorded in the *Story of a Soul* has given hope to people searching for holiness, healing, inner peace, and a sense of meaning that comes from confidence in God’s unconditional and enduring love despite their weakness, imperfections, poverty, and sinfulness. Their very poverty draws God’s mercy to them like a magnet to steal.

This is why UNESCO chose to honor St. Therese on the occasion of the 150th Anniversary of her birth. UNESCO chose Therese because of the impact the SOS has had on people’s lives. She is a woman who brings greater visibility and justice to women who proved by their actions the value of peace. She is one of those women who have fought against poverty and war. UNESCO describes her as a “woman, young, a seeker, a Doctor in the Science of Love.”

It is interesting that early on people prayed at her grave seeking her intercession. Children and adults desperate for healing asked for her intercession: the blind, the lame, those afflicted with various physical and spiritual illnesses. Therese became known as a “healer,” a hopeful and healing presence and friend, a witness that God never abandons us. God’s loving presence envelops us in all our sufferings, trials and illnesses.

On March 26, 1923, one month before her beatification, her relics were transported from the cemetery to the Carmel accompanied by a large group of people as well as a guard of honor of military officers and soldiers, both French and American. The procession took place under a beautiful springtime sun, and all in silence because she was not yet beatified so it was not permitted to sing or play music. Only the recitation of the rosary broke the silence. As the draped casket passed by healings took place. A man paralyzed from the war began to walk, a young blind man waiting before the Carmelite monastery suddenly felt his eyes open and he contemplated Therese’s

triumphal entry into the chapel of her Carmel. People experienced first-hand the Merciful love of God touching them where they were most wounded and in need of healing.⁶

In the trenches of World War I, soldiers desperate for protection, courage, strength and perseverance in the midst of the horrific suffering and death cried out to Therese for help. She heard their prayers. She did not take them out of the living hell in which they found themselves. She protected some of them in extraordinary ways; to others she transmitted a powerful message of confidence, love, and hope. She taught them to have confidence in God's love and to surrender themselves into God's faithful loving care, even in the face of death. In her own way, we can say that she taught the soldiers what St. Paul tells us: "Who can separate us from the love of Christ? Hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril or the sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, or life, or angels, or rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom. 8:35.37-39.)

St. Paul calls hope a "helmet of salvation." (1 Thes. 5:8). John of the Cross picks up this image when he writes about the importance of the theological virtue of hope as we journey through the purgative dark night, the journey of transformation. John describes the "helmet of salvation" in terms of medieval armor used for battle to protect the head from injuries. The head is completely covered with only a visor to keep one's vision directed ahead without distractions. Hope allows the soul a visor to look toward heavenly things, and no more.⁷ This is the task of hope in the soul: to raise one's eyes to look to God alone who will never abandon us, to keep our eyes on heavenly

⁶ Pierre Descouvemont and Helmuth Nils Loose, *Thérèse et Lisieux*, (Office Central de Lisieux, Éditions du Cerf, 1991), 318.

⁷ St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night*, Book Two, chap. 21, no. 7.

things. However, to keep our eyes fixed on heavenly things does not mean we fall into a dreamy, infantile idea of heaven simply as a reward for a good life and place of rest on the other side of the grave. Keeping our eyes fixed on God alone makes us capable of performing heavenly acts which are acts of love in the here and now of daily life. Heaven begins in this life with concrete acts of love.

Hope as Love in Action

This brings us to hope as an expression of love and the beginning of eternal life here and now.

Love is the heartbeat of St. Therese's life and spirituality: "To love Jesus and make him loved" was her great desire.

Before Therese died, she said: "I'm not sorry for having offered myself to love." When asked what attracted her to heaven, she said, "Oh! It's Love! To love and be loved, and to return to the earth to make love loved." (Celine, *Last Conversations*, p. 194)

To her cousin Marie Guérin, "I know of no other means of reaching perfection but love...Love, how well our heart is made for that! (Letter to Marie Guerin, 109)

In Manuscript B of the *Story of a Soul* she shares her discovery of her vocation in the Church. "I understood that Love comprises all vocations, that love is everything, that it embraces all times and places...in a word IT IS ETERNAL. My vocation, at last I have found it...My vocation is love. In the Heart of the Church, my Mother, I will be Love." (Ms. "B")

"My way is all confidence and love." (Letter to P. Roulland, 226.)

Love is a profound and vast theme in the writings of St. Therese. It would take us too far afield to explore the many references to love in her writings and how she understands love. For Therese,

God is love. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son so that those who believe in him may have eternal life.” (Jn. 3:16) “In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he has loved us and has sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.” (1Jn. 4:10).

In the beginning of Manuscript A, Therese writes that God loves each individual human being as though there was no one else like her or him existed. Inspired by St. Paul’s letter to the Philippians, she saw God as self-emptying love. God pours out His love upon creation and all humanity; God lowers himself and descends upon what is nothing and transforms it into fire. “In order that Love be fully satisfied, it is necessary that it lower itself to nothingness, and transform that nothingness into fire.” (Ms. B).

Above all for Therese, God is Merciful love. She begins the SOS by singing God’s mercy. “I shall begin to sing what I must sing eternally, “The Mercies of the Lord.” (A) The story of her life is all about the graces God has granted her - God’s Merciful Love.

“To me he has granted His infinite Mercy and through it I contemplate and adore the other divine perfections. All of these perfections appear resplendent with love, even His Justice (and perhaps this even more so than the others) seems to be clothed in love. What a sweet joy it is to think that God is Just, i.e., that he takes our weakness into account, that He is perfectly aware of our fragile nature. What should I fear then? Ah! must not the infinitely just God, who deigns to pardon the faults of the prodigal son with so much kindness be just also toward me who am with Him always.”
MS. A.

Therese discovered the heart of the Gospel: Divine Mercy. Our God is a God of the little ones, the poor and struggling of this world. With the light of the Holy Spirit, the Scriptures revealed to her a God who pours himself out in the weak, the miserable, and the imperfect – in those who have to “sweat it out in life.” His love leads him to pardon and heal what is darkest in human beings, what is most broken, vile, and repugnant: the sinners, the forgotten, those enslaved by addictions. Jesus came for the sick and imperfect, not for the healthy and self-righteous. Therese learned the

lesson of the prodigal son: God is so good and merciful. Sinfulness, weakness, and imperfection prevent no obstacles to God's merciful love.

Therese also received the grace to understand how much Jesus thirsts for our love. "I received the grace to understand more than ever how much Jesus desires to be loved." (Ms. A) I think next to her discovery of the "little way," which was a charismatic grace, to comprehend how much Jesus desires to be loved is the greatest grace anyone can receive. The grace to know that God is not indifferent to our love; rather, God who longs for our love. What a grace! How this will change our lives in the way we love God and others! One of the Fathers of the Church wrote: "God is like a spring that longs to be drunk." (God longs to be drunk in our neighbor, longs to be loved in our neighbor.) Therese received the grace to understand the mystery of God's love that surpasses all understanding. *"See, then, all that Jesus lays claim from us; He has no need of our works but only of our love, for the same God who declares that He has no need to tell us when He is hungry did not fear to beg for a little water from the Samaritan woman."* (Ms. "B," p. 189)

Therese's insights into God's Merciful Love inspired her to offer herself to Merciful Love, to be a vessel through which God's love would flow into the world and touch the hearts of humanity. She offered her poverty, weakness, human fragility, her heart as an empty vessel through which God's merciful love would be satisfied in her and through her radiate to the world. Therese doesn't offer *her* love, but her poverty, her imperfection, and human fragility. She offers her heart as an empty vessel to be filled in order to be poured out for others.

With Therese, the experience of love always begins with her poverty. It was because of her inability to love as she desired and her weaknesses and imperfections that she offered herself to Love. We come to God as we are, not as we would like to be. God loves us, not only in spite of

our human weakness and imperfections, but because of them, knowing that the weaker we are, the more we need God's healing love to take our nothingness and transform us into divine life.

What I find so amazing in Therese is how she began the combat against her tendency to focus on self at such an early age. On Christmas of 1886, she had what she calls the grace of leaving her childhood, her complete conversion. Having returned home from midnight Mass, it was time to open Therese's many presents before the fireplace. Her father, tired and a bit exasperated by this Christmas custom, said, "Finally, this is the last year." His little queen heard these words from the top of the staircase. "His words pierced her heart." But a miracle took place, rather than burst out in tears, Therese mastered her emotions, descended the stairs with a smile, opened her gifts and embraced her father who laughed with joy.

A seemingly small event at Christmas, was major for Therese. She learned that it is by Jesus that we become an adult. The miracle of that night was that she began to live what she believed. She learned to love, to forget herself, to master her hypersensitivity, let go of her tears and childish reactions. It was a combination of exercising her will and of God's grace. She writes that from that moment she went from victory to victory.

Therese's conversion was not a passage from atheism to faith, but a daily activity, beginning each day, to become a great saint, that is to die to selfishness and unhealthy self-preoccupation in order that others may live. She threw herself into the battle of life, the spiritual battle, upheld by God's grace to battle constantly against her tendency to focus on self in a narcissistic way. She was conscious that it was a grace and that she must die to herself to allow Jesus to love through her.⁸

"On that night of light began the third period of my life, the most beautiful and the most filled with

⁸ Jean de Saint-Cherron, *Éloge d'une guerrière*, (Paris, Bernard Grasset, 2023), 80-81.

graces from heaven. The work I had been unable to do in ten years was done by Jesus in one instant, contenting himself with my good will which was never lacking...He made me a fisher of souls. I experienced a great desire to work for the conversion of sinners, a desire I hadn't felt so intensely before. I felt charity enter into my soul, and the need to forget myself and to please others, since then I've been happy." (Ms A., p. 98-99.)

Following her Christmas grace, Therese had the experience of looking at a picture of Jesus on the Cross and the blood flowing from one of his divine hands. she heard the cry of Jesus in her heart, "I thirst." This awakened within her a great desire to help others, to pray for priests and great sinners. She had a burning desire to pray for the salvation of sinners. She began to live for others, to help them.

When we reflect on this, it is amazing that at age 13, going on 14, her burning desire to help others was enkindled in her heart. Shortly after this she read about the gruesome murder of three women in Paris and the murderer, Pranzini.

In Lisieux, as you make your way into the main Basilica, there is a corridor through which you pass called the "Cloister of Mercy" (Cloître de la Miséricorde). This is an exhibition of artwork depicting the Pranzini story and Therese's prayers for his conversion. When you come to the end, you encounter a bronze statue of Pranzini kneeling with his hands tied behind his back, waiting for his execution by the guillotine.

This "cloister of mercy" says so much about Therese, her mission, spirituality and message to us, and how we must live our lives. We must be vessels of mercy in a world marred by violence, hatred, conflict, poverty, and bloodshed.

Therese was a realist. To surrender to God's merciful love did not mean to sit back and "enjoy" an easy ride to heaven! She knew that love is proved by works. Hope for eternal life begins now with our love. The light of love cannot be hidden under a bushel basket; it must be placed in the open so that it can shine and dispel the darkness. Therese learned from John of the Cross that "Love is never idle; it is always in movement emitting flames everywhere." (F.1.) Love seeks to give itself. ("Aimer c'est tout donner.") "*To love is to give everything.*" Therefore, Therese made a firm choice to love in the nitty-gritty of daily life, by changing the water of daily life into the wine of eternal life – striving daily to make love the center of her life and actions: doing everything out of love: a look, a word, picking up a pin, washing a dish, offering a helping hand, bearing patiently and joyfully trials, poor health, temptations, and the suffering of daily life. Therese lived with great intentionality. Her program of love implies a heightened awareness of the present moment and a constant effort to do all for the love of God and neighbor. The Holy Spirit graced her with the intuition that love is eternal and has a ripple effect in the world. Simple acts of love, these "little nothings," as she called them, would pass through God's hands and have an ecclesial value for the Church Militant struggling on this earth and for the Church Suffering, souls who may be in their own process of purification in the next life. Her love would have a transforming effect in the world. Love is a powerful energy that radiates through space and time.

However, we must not think that Therese's desires to love and her commitment to love in daily life was fueled by sensible feelings. Therese suffered a martyrdom of love in the sense that she lived in dryness and aridity most of her nine years of religious life, and in dark faith the last 18 months of her life. Even though she felt immense desires to love, she realized that those desires were spiritual riches if she clung to them.

In her remarkable letter of September 17, 1896, to her sister, Marie of the Sacred Heart, who felt discouraged after having read in her letter, Manuscript “B,” that Thérèse possessed intense desires to love God and to proclaim God’s love, even to be a martyr. Therese shared her vocation to be ‘Love’ in the heart of the Church. Marie didn’t share Therese’s desires for martyrdom, nor did she understand the parable of the little bird who remains steadfast gazing at the Divine Sun obscured by stormy dark clouds. Thérèse replied by saying that her desires and feelings are not what pleases God. *“What pleases Him is that He sees me loving my littleness and my poverty, the blind hope that I have in His Mercy...That is my only treasure...Understand that to love Jesus, to be His victim of love, the weaker one is, without desires or virtues, the more one is suited for the workings of this consuming and transforming Love.”* We must remain always poor and without strength and Jesus will come looking for us and will transform us into flames of love. *“It is confidence and nothing but confidence that must lead us to love.”*

Love is not a matter of feelings, but an act of the will. It is steadfast in faith and confidence in the midst of the storms and darkneses of life. Love remains fixed on the Divine Sun even when dark clouds cover it. Hope keeps our gaze on God alone, even in the darkest moments.

We see Therese’s teaching on hope and love exemplified in her relationships with her sisters in community and her thoughts on charity. With exquisite depth and honesty, she shares in Manuscript “C” her reflections on charity. These pages are a masterpiece on fraternal love. She wrote this document between the 12 and 15th of June 1897, and in a very dark moment of her life of faith and the uncertainty of her illness.

“This year, dear Mother, God has given me the grace to understand what charity is; I understood it before, it is true, but in an imperfect way. I had never fathomed the meaning of these words of Jesus: “The second commandment is LIKE the first: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

First of all, she tells us that it was only the last months of her life that she was given the grace to understand the depths of Jesus' commandment of love. (This is always a consolation for me.) In 1896, she wrote Manuscript "B," and discovered her vocation to be 'Love' in the heart of the Church and the value of apostolic love. Charity is only mentioned 2 times in Ms. B, and in reference to the love of God. In Manuscript "C," however, love is mentioned 26 times and always in reference to love of neighbor.

The last months of her life she received the grace to penetrate into the meaning of Jesus' new commandment: *"A new commandment I give you that you love one another: THAT AS I HAVE LOVED YOU, YOU ALSO LOVE ONE ANOTHER. By this will all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."*

To understand fraternal love is a grace. We don't always consider that to understand the real meaning of Jesus' command to love is a grace. She was given the grace to penetrate the meaning of Jesus' commandment of love. We, too, must ask for the grace to love our neighbor, to understand what love is.

Therese acknowledged that her love for her sisters was imperfect. Even though she was striving to love her sisters, she recognized that her love was still imperfect.

She understood that love is not a matter of beautiful thoughts and wishes. "Love must not remain hidden in the bottom of her heart," but must be like a lamp shining in the dark; it has to give light and warmth to others. Love has to be expressed in action.

She realized that her love of others was a participation in the love of Christ!

"Ah, Lord, I know that you don't command the impossible. You know better than I do my weakness and imperfection; You know very well that never would I love Sisters as you love them, unless You, O my Jesus, loved them in me. It is because you wanted to give me this grace that You made your

new commandment. Yes, I feel it, when I am charitable, it is Jesus who is acting in me, and the more I'm united to Him, the more also I love my Sisters."

The deeper our union with Christ, the more we love. Our love is a participation in divine love.

Charity consists in simple but challenging ways such "*as bearing with the faults of others, in not being surprised by their weaknesses and in being edified by the smallest acts of virtue they perform.*" Not judging them by what we see exteriorly or what annoys us. We never know the inner battles that our sisters or brothers undergo and their hidden virtues. (Ms. "C," p. 220) She realized that she could only love her sisters as Jesus loved them to the degree that she allowed the Spirit of Love to transform her and love others in and through her. (Ms. C., p. 221)

We can see the Holy Spirit purifying and transforming Therese's love in her efforts to overcome her natural antipathy towards Sister Therese of St. Augustine, a woman whose personality displeased Therese in every way from the beginning of her religious life.

Through the difficult personality of Sister Marie de St. Joseph, the Holy Spirit taught Therese most about fraternal charity. Alienated from the community due to her outbursts of anger and mood swings, Therese offered to work with her in the linen room from March of 1896 until May of 1897. She serenely bore Sister Marie's mood swings. Therese described Sister Marie as "an old clock that had to be wound up every 15 minutes." Undoubtedly, it through was Sister Marie de St. Joseph that Therese came to her deeper insights into fraternal love.⁹

When reading what Therese writes about her antipathy towards Sr. Therese of St. Augustine, I cannot help of thinking about the multitude of "little souls" who, like Therese, struggle with inevitable antipathies, or people with whom we live, like Sister Marie of St. Joseph, who are

⁹ See: Pierre Descouvemont, *Thérèse de Lisieux et son prochain*, (Paris, Éditions du Cerf, 2003), 270-271.

psychologically wounded or whose temperament becomes so annoying and unbearable that we avoid them. Therese's spirituality does not suppress obstacles. Rather, obstacles become the very means of growing in dependency on God's love to flow through us. In humbly embracing her weakness, Therese let divine love lower itself and communicate His love and transform her into a vessel of hope and love.

Conclusion

Pope Francis has proclaimed 2025 a Jubilee Year of Hope. In the bull of Indiction, *Spes Non Confundit*, Pope Francis explains why we need a Jubilee Year of Hope. Heedless of the horrors of the past, we find ourselves immersed in the tragedy of war; humanity is confronting yet another ordeal as many people are prey to brutality and violence: Russia and the Ukraine, Israel and Gaza. Violence is rampant in the United States. We hear of mass shootings almost daily. We view on the TV or internet the plight of immigrants attempting to enter our country for a more dignified, safe, and healthy life. We know of human trafficking that degrades the dignity and safety of the human person, as well addiction to drugs, alcohol and pornography that seriously wound the mind, heart, and body. Reverence for human life, from the womb to old age is a critical and divisive issue in our country. Secularism permeates more and more our society and feeds into the lack of faith in God and eternal values. We see daily the sufferings of those who struggle with serious illnesses and disabilities and lack proper medical care, incarcerated prisoners who suffer from inhuman conditions and the death penalty. At Holy Hill the sacrament of confession is one of our primary ministries. So many people come with hardships, both physical, psychological, and spiritual; conflictual marriages and family divisions. Fervent and faithful Christians, they often complain that they do not feel God's love for them. All these sufferings are the "trenches" in which we find ourselves in our world. What do we do in the face of sufferings and trials such as these?

How can Therese's way of confidence and love help us to become beacons of hope and love?

To begin with, we are called to renew our faith in God's merciful love - each and every one of us are "*les paumés*" in one way or another. We have our weaknesses, defects, and wounded history. Therese discovered the heart of the Gospel: Divine Mercy. Our God is a God of the little ones, the poor and struggling of this world. God who pours himself out in the weak, the miserable, and the imperfect. He pardons and heals what is darkest in human beings, what is most broken, vile, and repugnant. Jesus came for the sick and imperfect, not for the healthy and self-righteous. Therese learned the lesson of the prodigal son: God is so good and merciful. Sinfulness, weakness, and imperfection prevent no obstacles to God's merciful love.

Therese's presence in the trenches of WW1 and the graces the soldiers received, some extraordinary, reminded them and instilled in their hearts trust in God's unconditional love in the face of suffering and death, and to abandon themselves into God's hands. "Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Despite all appearances to the contrary, God is with us, and we are called to abandon ourselves into God's care with childlike trust.

Therese's act of oblation was a response to her great desire to love God and make him loved. It was not her love that she offered, but her poverty, her weakness and fragility, her empty heart so that the Merciful love of God would flow through her and heal and transform hearts. She was convinced God descends upon what is nothing and transforms it into fire.

Don't we want to love God and make him loved? Therese wanted people to know the gentleness and tenderness of God's love? Do we desire that others know God's tender and gentle love? Don't we desire to do what we can to heal and transform this broken world? We, too, are called to offer our lives to Merciful love so as to be vessels of God's merciful and transforming love in our world

marred by sin, war, and violence. Yet, we feel our powerlessness and weakness. We look at our world and think, “What a mess! What is the answer?” When we look at our world and country and the massive suffering, it is easy love hope and fall into despair. This is where hope comes in: we must fix our eyes on God alone. Hope looks to eternal life. Eternal life begins now with love. We offer our poverty to allow God’s Mercy Love to flow through us and becomes vessels of God’s merciful love in a world of unrest, war, hunger, and violence.

Therese realized the transforming power of love. She believed that love is eternal and has a power to radiate beyond space and time. So, she chose to love in the small event of life. She made a commitment to love in the here and now, to transform the events of daily life into occasions of love, to change the water of daily life into the wine of eternal life. It was the little things she chose: a look, a smile, a helping hand, patiently accepting a disagreeable person, containing an angry word or look, or vengeful attitude such as the silent treatment; resisting an antipathy, offering up a headache, a busy day, an inconvenience, a prolonged medical appointment. But also offering the beautiful things of life: a sunny day, waking up feeling loved by our family and friends, a delicious meal with glass of good wine, a refreshing shower after a hot day, and a healthy and loving friendship. There are so many blessings to rejoice in and offer to God. They, too, are acts of love and confidence.

We need to strive to be peacemakers and merciful. How much we need mercy for ourselves and for others. Can we look at each other with mercy, with compassion and not with judgement? Julian of Norwich wrote that “*God looks at us with pity, not with blame.*” Therese would agree with Julian.

Of course, we need to open ourselves to God's merciful love that transforms us through a life of prayer and meditating on the Word of God. Therese learned that when she loved, it was Jesus loving through her. Charity is a participation in divine love.

We need to commit ourselves to renouncing violence in our daily lives by becoming conscious and attentive to our thoughts of jealousy, anger, pride, envy and how we express them in our relationships in ways that create division, antipathies, and vengeful behavior. Peace and love begin where we live in the here and now.

Patience, compassion, forgiveness. We must attempt to live one day at a time St. Paul's hymn of charity in 1st Corinthians: "Love is patient, love is kind, it is not envious. Love does no evil, suffers all things, endures all things."

To be vessels of mercy in a world marred by violence and suffering of all kinds, calls us to abandon ourselves to God with confidence and love in all that happens in our life as we engage in the spiritual battle to grow in love and to become witnesses of hope and love in our world.

I would like to conclude with two stanzas of Therese's poem: *Vivre d'amour, (Living on Love)*.

It is a profound poem expressing Thérèse's desire to be love in the heart of the Church and the world.

On the evening of Love, speaking without parable,

Jesus said, "If anyone wishes to love me

All his life, let him keep my Word.

My Father and I will come to him.

And we will make his heart our dwelling.

Coming to him, we shall love him always.

We want him to remain, filled with peace,

In our Love!

*Living on Love is sailing unceasingly,
Sowing peace and joy in every heart.
Beloved Pilot, Charity impels me,
For I see you in my sister souls.
Charity is my only star.
In its brightness I sail straight ahead.
I've my motto written on my sail:
"Living on Love."*