

VINTAGE Saints & Sinners

Reading
with
Leader's
Guide

Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-1897)

1. In order to live in one single act of perfect Love, I OFFER MYSELF AS A VICTIM OF HOLOCAUST TO YOUR MERCIFUL LOVE, asking you to consume me incessantly, allowing the waves of infinite tenderness shut up within You to overflow into my soul, and that thus I may become a martyr of Your Love, O my God! ...I want, O my Beloved, at each beat of my heart to renew this offering to You an infinite number of times, until the shadows have disappeared and I may be able to tell You of my Love in an Eternal Face to Face!

**Based on this brief prayer, what do you learn about Therese's personality?*

***The English novelist Vita Sackville-West said that the experience of reading Therese's book, *Story of a Soul* was "as nauseating as a surfeit of marshmallows". Remember how young Therese was when she wrote this. Isn't it like many other teenaged journal entries? Or angst-filled pop songs? What does it remind you of?*

**What is Therese asking of God?*

**If you were writing your most heartfelt prayer, what would you ask of God?*

2. Springtime story of a little white flower written by herself

It is to you, dear Mother [Superior]...that I come to confide the story of my soul. The day you asked me to do this, it seemed to me it would distract my heart by too much concentration on myself, but since then Jesus has made me feel that in obeying simply, I would be pleasing Him; besides, I'm going to be doing only one thing: I shall begin to sing what I must sing eternally: "The Mercies of the Lord."

Before taking up my pen...Opening the Holy Gospels my eyes fell on these words: "And going up a mountain, he called to him men of his own choosing, and they came to him" (Mark 3:13). This is the mystery of my vocation, my whole life, and especially the mystery of the privileges Jesus showered on my soul. He does not call those who are worthy but those whom He pleases or as St. Paul says: God will have mercy on whom he will have mercy, and he will show pity to whom he will show pity. So then there is question not of him who wills nor of him who runs, but of God showing mercy.

I wondered for a long time why God has preferences, why all souls don't receive an equal amount of graces. I was surprised when I saw Him shower His extraordinary favors on saints who had offended Him, for instance, St. Paul and St. Augustine, and whom He forced, so to speak, to accept His graces. When reading the lives of the saints, I was puzzled at seeing how Our Lord was pleased to caress certain ones from the cradle to the grave, allowing no obstacle in their way when coming to Him, helping them with favors.... I wondered why poor savages died in great numbers without even having heard the name of God pronounced.

Jesus deigned to teach me this mystery. He set before me the book of nature; I understood how all the flowers He has created are beautiful, how the splendor of the rose and the whiteness of the lily do not take away the perfume of the little violet or the delightful simplicity of the daisy. I understood that if all flowers wanted to be roses, nature would lose her springtime beauty, and the fields would no longer be decked out with little wild flowers.

And so it is in the world of souls, Jesus' garden. He willed to create great souls comparable to lilies and roses, but He has created smaller ones and these must be content to be daisies or violets destined to give joy to God's glances when

He looks down at his feet. Perfection consists in doing His will, in being what He wills us to be. Our Lord's love is revealed as perfectly in the most simple soul who resists His grace in nothing as in the most excellent soul...

**Did any phrases or sentences catch your attention in this passage? If you see one, read it out for everyone.*

**What spiritual questions does Therese struggle with?*

**What answers does she find? Do they ring true for you?*

**What spiritual questions have you wondered about?*

**By Therese's description, what is God like?*

3. **Everything is a grace**, everything is the direct effect of our Father's love - difficulties, contradictions, humiliations, all the soul's miseries, her burdens, her needs - everything, because through them, she learns humility, realizes her weakness. Everything is a grace because everything is God's gift. Whatever be the character of life or its unexpected events - to the heart that loves, all is well.

**How do you feel when you read these words?*

**What do you think she means when she says, "Everything is a grace?"*

**Why would you agree or disagree with Therese on this?*

4. I long for no other treasure but love, for it alone can make us pleasing to God. Jesus has shown us the only path which leads to this divine furnace of love. It is the complete abandonment of a baby sleeping without a fear in its father's arms...In his name the prophet Isaiah reveals that on the last day the Lord "shall feed his flock like a shepherd: He shall gather the lambs with his arm, and shall take them up in his bosom." (see Isaiah 40:11)....

If people who are as weak and imperfect as I am only felt what I feel, not one of them would despair of scaling the summit of the mountain of love. Jesus does not demand great deeds. All He wants is self-surrender and gratitude. *"I will not accept any bull from your homes, nor a single goat from your folds. For all forest creatures are mine already, the animals on the mountains in their thousands. I know every bird in the air, whatever moves in the fields is mine...Since the world and all it holds is mine... Let thanksgiving be your sacrifice to God" (Psalm 50:9-14).*

That is all Jesus asks from us. He needs nothing from us except our love. God, who declares he has no need to tell us he is hungry, does not hesitate to beg a drop of water from the woman of Samaria (see John 4:7)...He was thirsty! But when he said: "Give me something to drink," the Creator of the universe was asking for the love of the poor thing he had created. He was thirsty for love! And now more than ever Jesus thirsts. From the worldly he meets with only gratitude and indifference, and even among his disciples...very few...surrender fully to the tenderness of his infinite love.

**Growing up, what did you imagine that God wanted of you? How did your childhood & adolescent understanding differ from Therese's understanding of what God wants?*

**How does this passage challenge your thinking now?*

**Therese often spoke about taking "the Little Way" ---an attitude of lowliness, poorness of spirit, trust. To be satisfied to feel nothing as we serve God and others whenever and wherever we can. She believed that, however obscure and unnoticed we may be, Jesus will come to seek us out and transform us with his love.*

The Little Way

5. "Without love, deeds, even the most brilliant, count as nothing." "Miss no single opportunity of making some small sacrifice, here by a smiling look, there by a kindly word; always doing the smallest right and doing it all for love."

6. **Dorothy Day**, activist & founder of the Catholic Worker Movement: “Is the atom a small thing? And yet what havoc it has wrought. Is her ‘Little Way’ a small contribution to the life of the Spirit? It has all the power of the Spirit of Christianity behind it. It is an explosive force that can transform our lives and the life of the world, once put into effect.”

**Why do you think the idea of The Little Way captivated Dorothy Day, who spent her life working for huge, societal justice and transformation?*

**Have you ever known a person who took “the Little Way”? What did that look like in their lives? What was it like to be around them?*

**If you really believed these words, how would you change your life?*

**Therese believed that suffering intensifies devotion. After all the years of planning, praying, envisioning her ecstatic life with God, she must have been privately disappointed by how things turned out. Imagine the teenaged Thérèse, realizing that she’s truly stuck for life inside an obscure convent in chilly Lisieux. She’s crowded in with much older nuns who apparently do not share her passion for Christ-like loving service. In fact, all the sisters annoy her in a million little ways. The next passage gives you some insight into her daily struggles...*

7. Formerly one of our nuns managed to irritate me whatever she did or said. The devil was mixed up in it, for it was certainly he who made me see so many disagreeable traits in her. As I did not want to give way to my natural dislike for her, I told myself that charity should not only be a matter of feeling but should show itself in deeds. So I set myself to do for this sister just what I should have done for someone I loved most dearly. Every time I met her, I prayed for her and offered God all her virtues and her merits. I was sure this would greatly delight Jesus, for every artist like to have his works praised and the divine Artist of souls is pleased when we do not halt outside the exterior of the sanctuary where He has chosen to dwell but do inside and admire its beauty.

I did not remain content with praying for this nun who caused me so much disturbance. I tried to do as many things as I could, and whenever I was tempted to speak unpleasantly to her, I made myself give her a pleasant smile and tried to change the subject. *The Imitation [of Christ]* says: “It is more profitable to leave everyone to his own way of thinking than to give way to contentious discourses.”

When I was violently tempted by the devil and if I could slip away without her seeing my inner struggle, I would flee like a soldier deserting the battlefield. And after all this she asked me one day with a beaming face, ‘Sister Therese, will you please tell me what attracts you so much about me? You give me such a charming smile whenever we meet.’ Ah! It was Jesus hidden in the depth of her soul who attracted me, Jesus who makes the bitterest things sweet.

(The New Jerusalem Bible: Saints Devotional Edition, Doubleday, 2002)

**What is Therese’s problem? What are her strategies?*

**What do you think of how she deals with conflict? Would you do things differently?*

**In what ways would you like to be more like Therese?*

**In what ways would you choose another way? Take a different approach to life? To spirituality?*

**What possibilities does this idea of the Little Way hold for you?*