

St. Therese of Lisieux: Her Inner Journey, part 2: Mercy

Therese learned God's infinite mercy early in life. Many Frenchmen believed that God was vengeful, demanded justice, and condemned most people to hell. This doctrine drove mercy out. This Jansenistic approach stressed justice. We see that justice is beyond our reach. We fall short of justice. Jansenists were so gloomy because they realized that their attempt to do justice was silly. Instead, Therese realized that we must rely entirely on God's mercy. His mercy saves us.

This mercy appears in Christ's passion and death on the cross. If we accept God's mercy, it cleanses us. We ask to be washed clean in the blood of Christ. This poetic expression reminds us of God's infinite mercy, poured forth to wash us clean of sin. All we can contribute acceptance of God's salvation. This contribution is small, but is too often lacking. Therese experienced this interaction between God's infinite mercy and our paltry response. This experience grew as she concentrated on it, and urged her forward. Jesus loved us so much that he suffered more than any ordinary human could.

We may have to stretch ourselves to get beyond revulsion for suffering. As we follow Therese's inner journey, we realize that she was more sensitive than we are, so she was even more bothered by suffering. But she penetrated this suffering to recognize the merciful love behind it. We can do the same. We too can find the mercy, based on the love, that Jesus reveals. As we try, and try again, our prayers to unite with Jesus help us transcend revulsion, and arrive at merciful love. In this process, we gradually see that love inspires mercy. Mercy is what the lover does for the beloved who is hurt. Love rushes to help the injured beloved. Because we are wounded, mercy is an observable mark of invisible love.

Therese noticed that we are wounded, broken, sinful. So she knew that God's love must reach out to help us. She found excellent ways to say this. One of them is: "The weaker we are and the more wretched, the better material we make for His consuming fire" (of love), 43. Her inner journey clarified that we are all very weak. She learned this from her own profound experience of weakness. She realized that she was nothing of herself, but owed her existence to God's creative love. She owed her salvation to God's merciful love. As she contemplated Christ's passion, she became more and more convinced of His loving outreach in mercy. Praying to get beyond the surface of the passion, she lived it with Jesus.

That's how she could compare herself with Jesus, and recognize important relationships, said so well in the following words. "My very weakness makes me dare to offer myself, O Jesus, as victim to Thy love. In older days, only pure and spotless holocausts would be accepted by the Omnipotent God, nor could His Justice be appeased save by the most perfect sacrifices. But now that the law of fear has given way to the love of love, I have been chosen, though a weak and imperfect creature, as Love's victim. And is not the choice a fitting one? Most surely, for in order that Love may be wholly satisfied, it must stoop even unto nothingness, and transform that nothingness into fire," 43.

As we unpack this statement, we notice that Therese accepted her nothingness. This truthful agreement with what exists makes her dare to offer herself. Behind this realization is the fact that God loved her into existence. Without His love she would not exist. That's the first instance of His stooping into nothingness to create her. God created her to be free, and to love as she chose. But God stoops again to her nothingness to redeem her from sin. She also accepts that act of love. God stoops a third time to ask her to freely love Him in return. She sees that she cannot love God as an equal, since she is nothing of herself, and He is everything of Himself. So justice is out of the question. But love is possible, since God made her free. So she freely loves God in return. As Jesus showed his love by suffering for us, so she agrees to return that love by suffering for others. The Old Testament emphasized returning perfect gifts for God. Therese knows that no creature is perfect enough for God, so she realizes that a perfect gift is impossible. Fortunately, the law of love has replaced the law of fear, so she can return imperfect love to God. She can be a victim to Love, in spite of, or precisely because of, her imperfections. This is the true relationship of humans to God: imperfect creatures returning some of the love that God provides for us. Love, out of mercy, loves us without measure, so we love Him as much as we can. It's not enough to satisfy justice, but it's a start. As we grow in love, we return a higher percentage of the love He gives.

This is the simple dynamic of the "little way". First we honestly agree to God's love, then we love Him in return. That is an essential characteristic of love: to love those most in need of love. We who are nothing in ourselves need love the most. God loves us into existence, gives us free will, then asks us to love Him in return. This teaching, so desperately needed by us all, made Therese a doctor of the Church. She lived this loving union to the full. Her experience of this union was so simple and entire that she could express it marvelously well. Therese excelled in responding to God's love. Her emphasis upon His mercy enlightens us as we study it through the years. If it seems strange, read it a few more times.

Consider this expression: "I offer myself as a victim of holocaust to Thy Merciful Love, imploring Thee to consume me unceasingly, and to let the flood tide of Infinite Love pent up in Thee pour into my soul, so that I may become a martyr to thy Love, O my God," 42. You can see how her words inspire millions of people. She spoke to them in simple terms. Her emphasis upon doing simple, everyday, things also touched them (us). Her impact relies upon the truth of our nothingness, God's infinite mercy, and our ability to give our little acts entirely to Him in return. Our weakness arouses God's love. As we join in His love-dynamic, we come alive to Love.

Therese's inner journey emphasized mercy. From God's love-dynamic she learned to love each fragment of life. This echoes Jesus' behavior in the multiplication of loaves and fishes, Jn 6:5-13. He did not neglect the leftover fragments, but had the apostles gather them up. Therese realizes that Jesus loves even the fragments of bread, the crumbs. This penetration of God's love, expressed in Jesus, is a great achievement. Her ability to tell others about it in a very accessible way

shows her teaching success. Gathering up the fragments, and counting the baskets of crumbs is a simple thing that anyone can do to see how much God loves us.

If God loves the crumbs, He surely must love people. So God must love even the most disgusting, annoying, decrepit person. As Therese grew in this Love, she became increasingly eager to reach the poorest of the poor. She reached out to a condemned rapist/murderer, famous for rejecting God. When he converted, she saw God's miraculous mercy. This is a point of contact with Mother Teresa of Calcutta. We shall develop that contact in the final session. Theresa loved others with God's love. This is the "little way": accepting our nothingness, but allowing God's love to flow freely through our nothingness to others. God loves our nothingness, so He makes us creatures, makes us persons in His image and likeness. So we are something because of God's love, and can relate to God by His love, shared with us freely. If we freely partake in the love-dynamic, we flourish, and we assist others to flourish in God's love.

Difficulties

Therese noticed that we aren't willing to admit our nothingness. Her inner journey stopped at the roadblock of her self. Her Christmas conversion was precisely to let go of the illusion of her self in order to accept her real self. This real self is little, but it's real. All that's real about it is God's loving us into existence. In and of ourselves we are nothing. But in and of God's love we exist. Therese noted our difficulty with this reality. In a letter to her sister, Therese said: "In order to enjoy the treasure of the Merciful Love, we must humble ourselves, must acknowledge our nothingness. Here is where many a soul draws back," 44. Until her conversion, she drew back, after it, she accepted. So her inner life spread from the usual refusal to be "little" to the great joy of admitting the truth, and relying upon God's tender Mercy. She lived on both sides of this conversion to littleness, or admission of creaturely dependence on God for existence itself. She identified with those whose refuse to admit their intrinsic nothingness, and she extended God's love to them all.

God is so generous with Merciful Love, that all we need to do is accept it. But most people don't. Instead, they suffer hunger and thirst for that love, and rage against their needs. Therese understood that "The simple desire to be a victim suffices," 44. She affirms that it's enough to desire God's love to enter His love-dynamic. But that desire must be simple, or entire. It must be real. It is not enough to say that others seem to be enjoying God's love, and I want to join the party. If a person really opens to God's love, then God sweeps through that person, washing sins away. That cleansing opens our eyes to truth, our hearts to goodness, and we become more real. Since prayer enables us to get into this dynamic, prayer is being real. That's how all this unfolded for Therese. She did not sit down and think about it. She prayed, and she never imposed illusions about herself being somebody important. Most of us are so busy projecting an illusory image that we waste away instead of developing. Therese wants us to be truthful, and to develop as the people God loves.

The first step to overcome our difficulties on the way to God is to admit our nothingness. This is not easy, and few people do it. But those who do shine forth with God's love, as Mother Teresa and Pope John Paul II did. Therese also shines forth with truly human qualities, because she loved her humanity, loved the fragment that God has made her to be. This mystical experience inspired Pope John Paul II to develop Christian anthropology in a brilliant way. It's not as accessible as Therese's teaching, but it is more thorough. Mother Teresa says the same thing mostly by her actions of loving the poorest of the poor. These fragments need to be gathered, just as Jesus gathered the crumbs so long ago.

But to do that, we need to overcome another difficulty. We want control. Therese knew that control is the opposite of love. Love requires that we relinquish control. Control belongs to God. Since God loves us, His control will be best for us. Since God is Mercy, His control will help us more than anything we could impose, if we try to control events. In her own words: "I do not like one thing more than another. Whatever God prefers and chooses for me, that is what I like best. It is what He does that I love," 45. Her act of oblation begins in the same way: "I desire, O my God, to accomplish Thy Will perfectly," 45. Her inner development reached this pure love: preferring Merciful Love to her control.

We see that she gradually became more one with Merciful Love, overcoming her self in favor of God. She totally abandoned herself to Mercy. She says it gracefully: "the self-surrender of the little child who sleeps without fear in his father's arms,... This self-surrender alone really delivers the soul into the arms of Jesus," 45. Her contemplation of the entirety of God's love led her to see its integrity, its oneness. Contemplation includes both understanding and love. She emphasizes love. Therese shows us how everything comes together in Merciful Love. She's so simple that she accepts the simplicity of God. She followed Jesus, Who invited: "Learn of me for I am meek and humble of heart. And you shall find rest for your souls," Mt 11:29.

Therese insisted she was just accepting and passing on Jesus. In her words: "I long to be a saint, but I know that I am powerless, and implore Thee, O my God, to be Thyself my sanctity. All our good deeds are stained in Thy sight. I desire, therefore, to be clothed in Thy own justice, and to receive from Thy Love the eternal possession of Thyself," 46. What a glorious expression of our difficulties, how to overcome them in Christ, and to attain Him by accepting His Loving Mercy! We are happy to reflect upon it, accepting it from Therese.