

St. Therese of Lisieux: Her Inner Journey, part 4

Self-Surrender

Therese puts it simply: “Jesus was pleased to show me the only path which leads to the divine furnace of Love: the path is the abandonment of the little child who sleeps without fear in its Father’s arms”, 111. Abandonment is the key. Abandonment means to surrender self. It’s easy to say surrender self, but it’s very difficult to do. Surrender self means to give self entirely, without reserve. Just as God gives Himself to us without holding anything back, so we must give ourselves entirely to Him. Though we try to give ourselves entirely, we always hold something back. There is always something of self we refuse to give to God, fearing that our total gift will wipe us out. So life is a process of more complete giving, day by day, little event by little event. It is the unfolding of the “little way” to surrender progressively more of self to God. We can surrender if we remind ourselves that God is our Father, the source of all our being. Since He is the one who gives our self to us, we can relax like the little child. We can sleep in our Father’s arms without fear. We can give ourselves entirely to Him Who has created us.

In her own words: “When the way of perfection was opened before me, I realized that to become a saint I must suffer much. ... I cried out: “My God, I choose everything. I will not be a saint by halves. I am not afraid of suffering for Thee. One thing only do I fear: to follow my own will. Accept then the offering I make of it, for I choose all that Thou willest,” 111. Self surrender means to will what God wills. This is hard because we are free. We can will what we will instead of what God wills. This tension pains us. We suffer because we will what we will instead of what God wills. This suffering of cross purposes is our main pain. God wills our best purpose, and we will some other purpose. For example, God wills that our purpose is to be one with Him. But we will to be rich. This cross purpose pains us until we give up being rich. Then we discover how much better it is to be one with God than it is to be rich. Being rich is not worth the effort. We observe rich people suffering so much because they fear that someone will take money away from them. Howard Hughes was the richest person of his time, and lived in horror that he might lose a dollar to all those who wanted to become rich. Riches are limited. Every dollar that I have I must take from someone else. So they want to take that dollar back, away from me. The process is silly. But I can desire that money. I can will to take it. Then the race is on to become the richest person in the world. If I win that race, and replace Howard Hughes as the richest person, I will be no more happy that Hughes was. If I give up on being the richest person, I can unite with God, and become happy.

Therese simply understood how silly it is to seek riches, or any other illusion. She understood that we must have God. But to get God, we must give up all the silly illusions. We must surrender them. Ultimately, we must surrender self to God. Most of the self that we surrender to God is false self, like the rich self. When we surrender this false self, we have both God and our real self. Therese’s poem expresses abandonment:

Rappelle-toi que ta volonte’ saint
Est mon repos, mon unique bonheur,
Je m’abandonne et je m’endors sans crainte
Entre tes bras, O mon divin Sauveur.

Remember, Lord, that Thy most holy will
Alone is joy to me, alone is rest.
Fearlessly trusting, see I sleep so still,
Savior divine, close-folded to Thy breast. 112

As usual, Therese goes right to the heart of the problem. We need to abandon ourselves to God because He is the one who loves us the most. She learned this from the good example of Jesus, who abandoned Himself entirely to His Father. Then she prayed: “I offer myself to Thee, O my Beloved, that Thou mayest perfectly accomplish in me Thy Holy Will”, 113. There’s the reason for abandonment, to let God accomplish His Will. For us Americans, this is a huge problem, since we do not allow that another will could possibly be better than our

own. It's a challenge for us who are so urgently seeking to gain control, and impose our own wills, to surrender to God's will. We interpret this surrender as ignominious defeat, purely passive failure to succeed.

But Therese notices that abandonment is an act. "My desire is to do always the will of Jesus. Let us leave Him free to take and give whatever He wills. Perfection comes in doing His will, surrendering ourselves wholly to Him," 114. This emphasis upon doing Jesus' will puts surrender into its proper perspective. We act by joining our act to Jesus' act. Love is active uniting of wills. In this case, God's will is more important than ours, so surrender is the proper relationship. God loves us more than we could love Him. His will is the better will to unite with, so we abandon our selves to Him. Therese sums it up thus: "The more content a soul is to accomplish His will, the more perfect it is," 114.

Therese's "little way" is easy to take, step by step, and leads to perfection, as she illustrates. Her parable of the little ball illustrates this abandonment. When her pilgrimage to Rome, asking the Pope for permission to enter Carmel early, failed, she wrote: "My journey had failed in its purpose. ... For some time past I had offered myself to the Child Jesus to be His little ball. I told Him to treat me just as it might please Him. In a word, I desired to amuse the Holy Child, to let Him play with me just as He felt inclined. My prayer had been heard. You can imagine, dear Mother, the desolation of that little ball as it lay abandoned on the ground! Yet it continued to hope against hope," 114. "Great indeed is my trial, but I am the little ball of Jesus, if He wishes to break His plaything to pieces, he is quite free to do so. Yes, I want only what He wills," 115. She was only 14 years old, but affirmed: "All the time, deep down in my heart, reigned a wonderful peace because I knew that I was seeking only God's will," 115. We have experienced this difficulty of wanting one thing while not getting it. So we seek the trial, comprehend the suffering. But can we grasp the relief, the peace, when we abandon our will to be one with God's. There should be at least one important instance of abandoning our will to remember, and to see how Therese developed this little way to abandonment.

Later in life, Therese suffered much more. Her humiliations in Carmel, her ill health, and finally losing her lungs to TB, meant that she had severe physical suffering. Her psychological suffering was to live all but a few moments of her life in dryness, or spiritual darkness, known as the dark night of the soul. These three years of spiritual desolation drew from her this response: "At the moment of my greatest trials, when it was my turn to intone the psalms in choir, if you only knew with what surrender I would say out loud the verse: In thee, O lord, Have I hoped," 115. Her self-surrender unfolded almost without hope. She had to produce that hope, rather like the apostles in the boat on stormy seas, when Jesus was asleep. As He said to them, so He says to us: "O you of little faith", Mk 4:38-40.

Therese says of her profession retreat: "I went through it in a state of utter spiritual desolation – as if abandoned by God. Jesus slept in my boat, as was his wont. But how rarely will should allow Him to sleep in peace! Wearied with making continual advances, our good Master readily avails Himself of the repose I offer Him, and will in all probability sleep on till my great and everlasting retreat. This, however, rather rejoices than grieves me," 116. She is happy to tend the boat while Jesus sleeps, as she says in this poem:

Vivre d'amour lorsque Jesus sommeille,
C'est le repos sur les flots orageux.
Oh! Ne crains pas, Seigneur, que je t'evelle,
J'attends en paix le rivage des cieux.

All my life Love! No sign though Jesus make,
He is but sleeping on the storm-tossed sea;
Jesus sleep on; for me thou shalt not wake;
Till the clouds part, I will wait patiently. 117

How does she tend the boat? She says: “In order to guide his barque, the one thing proper for a little child is to abandon himself, to let his sail be filled at the mercy of the wind,” 117. Our work is to do the little things well, and to observe how the wind blows. If it blows up a storm, we trust in Jesus, do what we can, and perhaps bail out as much water as we can. The point of all this is that our honesty admits that we are not in control, that God controls all the important events, and does so out of merciful love. So we take care of the little things that are ours to do. In that sense, we are like rose petals scattered around at God’s will.

<p>La rose en son éclat peut embellir ta fete Aimable Enfant! Mais la rose effeuillee, on l’oublie, en la jette Au gre du vent.</p>	<p>Dear Lord, the flowers that blossom yet .Thy feast day with their perfume fill; The rose that’s fallen, men forget, And winds may scatter when they will.</p>
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<p>La rose, en s’effeuillant, sans recherché se donne Apour n’etre plus, Comme elle, avec honneur, a toi je m’abandonne Petit Jesus.</p>	<p>The rose that’s fallen questions not. Content, as for thy sake, to die, Abandonment its welcome lot. Dear Jesus Christ, that rose be I. 118</p>
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Therese lived these sentiments, never saying something just for effect. In her words: “It is such folly to pass time fretting, instead of resting quietly on the Heart of Jesus. Neither ought the little child to be afraid in the dark, nor complain at not seeing the Beloved who carries her in His arms. She has only to shut her eyes – that is the one sacrifice God asks of her. If she does this, the dark will lost its terrors, because she will not see it, and before long, peace, if not joy, will return once more,” 118. An example is that her father was sick, but she abandoned his condition to God entirely, praying: “I was told to beg for the recovery of our darling father, but I was unable to make any other prayer than this: ‘O My God, I beseech Thee that it may be Thy will for my father to recover’”, 119. This shows advanced self-surrender, since she loved her father so very much.

Even more explicitly: “I often pray to the saints without being heard. ... But the more deaf they appear to my voice, the more I love them,” 119. What a far cry from most of us, who quit praying after just a few delays. For her own health, she prayed, but got worse, so she said: “you see I am asking God not to hear the prayers that would place an obstacle to the accomplishment of His designs upon me,” 120. Therese applied this to the present, and admitted that the future could terrify her. She could imagine so many things going wrong.

But self-surrender cures that: “It is a great mistake to worry as to what trouble there may be in store for us. It is like meddling with God’s work. We who run in the way of love must never allow ourselves to be disturbed by anything. If I do not simply suffer from one moment to another, it would be impossible for me to be patient. But I look only at the present. I forget the past, and I take good care not to forestall the future. When we yield to discouragement or despair, it is usually because we give too much thought to the past, and to the future,” 121. This is great wisdom, for which we should be grateful. As she expresses it so simply and clearly, we find her work extraordinarily helpful. It supports well the Scriptural statement: “Be therefore not solicitous for tomorrow. For the morrow will be solicitous for itself. Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof,” 121.

Therese put these supporting images into a poem:

An instant is my life, a passing hour, no more,
 A moment swift, whose flight no mortal hand can stay.
 To love my God on earth, to love Him and adore,
 I have but this brief day.

In her last year, Therese suffered terrible attacks upon her faith. As she put it: “Once I was able to see clearly afar off the lighthouse which showed me the harbor of heaven, but now I see nothing. God wills me to surrender myself as to be altogether like a little child who is not disturbed by whatever is done to him,” 122. In great pain, wracked with fever, she became helpless. “O my Mother, what would become of me if God did not give me His strength? I have only my hands free. Never would I have believed it possible to suffer so much. And even yet I do not believe I am at the end of my suffering, but He will never abandon me,” 122. Faith under attack grows toward the infinite God.

Someone suggested that she might wish for death. She replied: “I desire neither life nor death. Were Our Lord to offer me my choice, I would not choose. I only will what He wills, and I am pleased with whatever He does. I have no fear of the last struggle, or of any pain, however great, which my illness may bring. God has always been my help. He has led me by the hand ever since I was a child, and I count on Him now. Even though suffering should reach its furthest limits, I am certain He will never forsake me,” 122. That’s the ultimate abandonment, self-surrender to God. Amen

Johnson, Vernon; *Spiritual Childhood: The Spirituality of St. Therese of Lisieux*; Ignatius, 2001