

A close-up portrait of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, a young woman with a serene expression, wearing a dark brown veil and habit. The background is a warm, golden-yellow color with faint, decorative scrollwork patterns. The text is overlaid on the bottom right of the image.

My Vocation Is Love

St. Thérèse's Way to Total Trust

Jean Lafrance

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PART I

“I Will Sing the Mercies
of the Lord”



CHAPTER 1

“Show Us the Face of Your Mercy”

Thérèse replied with some reticence to her sister Pauline’s desire that she write the story of her soul. (At that time, Pauline—whose name in religious life was Mother Agnès—was prioress of the Carmelite monastery and therefore Thérèse’s superior.) Thérèse’s hesitation is quite understandable. She was afraid that, in recounting it, she might put herself in the foreground by attracting attention to herself when God must always take first place. Men and women find their true greatness when kneeling, in second place, before God. Too many spiritual writers speak about themselves instead of focusing on God. This is also true in prayer, which for many becomes an appreciation of “me” rather than a gaze directed toward God and his merciful Love.

As always, Thérèse ponders over her sister Pauline’s desire, and Jesus makes her “feel” in prayer that she will please him by simply obeying. Note how Thérèse never lets herself be externally coerced. God’s will comes to her from without, certainly, but it is always inscribed in the depths of her being, “on the

tablets of the heart.” In prayer, Thérèse “felt” that by obeying her sister she would please Jesus:

The day you asked me to do it, it seemed to me that my heart would become distracted by concentrating on myself, but Jesus has made me feel that by obeying simply I would please him; besides, I am going to do only one thing: I am going to begin singing what I must sing for all eternity: “The Mercies of the Lord.”¹

Vocation and mission

The starting point is clear. We don’t have to rejoice in ourselves or make a drama about our own person. What is important is God, his holiness, and, above all, his merciful Love. Thérèse knew that her ultimate vocation both on earth and in heaven would be to sing eternally the mercies of the Lord. In this sense, her mission will continue in the next life, and this is why she will “spend her heaven doing good on earth,” helping men and women to place absolute confidence in God’s mercy. She will never tire of contemplating mercy, while here on earth we weary our minds trying to fathom this deepest aspect of God, trying to comprehend his infinite tenderness and mercy.

By stating Thérèse’s plan at the beginning of her writing, we will be restricting ourselves. We are not here attempting a comprehensive study of God’s mercy, nor even of how Thérèse has sung so beautifully about it. We simply wish to push ajar some of the doors that surround the mystery of divine mercy. We often feel that we should remain silent before them. So we wait before these doors, behind which someone is

knocking (cf. Rev 3:20), and we let the Holy Spirit gradually open them for us. We must allow this presence of God to be free in us, to lead us by the hand to the threshold of the mystery of mercy.

The goal of spiritual theology and Christian experience is one and the same, which means that theology is useful to those who have already felt the impact of the thunderbolt of mercy. While mercy itself is a living fire, theological reflections on its mystery run the risk of leaving us with only the ashes. This is why we are always apprehensive when it comes to speaking about prayer. As Karl Rahner said, “Either our theology will be a theology on our knees or it will not be.”

We will devote this first section to approaching the climate of prayer, which allowed Thérèse to sing the mercies of the Lord. Then we will apply ourselves to her perception of the Face of Mercy that she glimpsed in prayer. At the same time, we’ll look at how she saw her own face in relation to God’s. Indeed, it is impossible to discover God’s mercy unless we are acutely aware of our own nothingness and our need to be saved.

Thérèse writes to pray

As soon as she says that she desires only to sing the mercies of the Lord, without being preoccupied with herself, Thérèse shows the climate of prayer in which she wished to write her autobiography. Her stated intention gives us a practical guide as to how we should approach her writings. Unless we do so in the same prayerful attitude, we will run the risk of understanding nothing of Thérèse’s thought.

Before taking up my pen, I knelt down before the statue of Mary (the one that has given so many proofs of the Queen of Heaven's maternal preferences for our family). I asked her to guide my hand so that I might not write one line displeasing her.²

So it was in this spirit of prayer and intercession that Thérèse wanted to record what the Spirit would prompt her to write. She didn't write merely for the sake of writing, or of being read. She wrote to pray. When Thérèse begins to recall God's grace at work in her life, she prays so that she can spiritually retain it and give thanks to God for it.

Then, opening the holy Gospel, my eyes fell on these words: "[Jesus] went up the mountain and called to him those whom he wanted, and they came to him" (Mk 3:13). That is the mystery of my vocation, of my whole life, and above all the mystery of the privileges Jesus has showered on my soul.³

Thérèse contemplates the privileges Jesus gives her, the mysterious ways in which he draws her after him. The book of her writings especially shows us how writing can help us to pray. When Thérèse was looking at God's interventions in her life, she never became introverted. Instead, she discovered in prayer the meaning of God's action in her regard.

By means of such prayer, which resembles the constant flowing of a stream that is fed from the most mysterious depths of the heart, Thérèse touched the presence and action of God within her, and every moment of her human destiny was transfigured by God's Mercy. Thérèse's autobiographical manuscripts come to us as a providential witness to the fact that we too can have an interior life of prayer.

We often speak today of prayer in our life and of prayer in action, without being too sure just what these expressions mean. Thérèse bears special testimony to that form of prayer that is intended above all for apostles. Her prayer penetrates her entire life as the rhythm of her breathing and the beats of her heart animate her body. Here we are touching on the great Eastern idea that prayer should become part of the two great rhythms of human life, one's breathing and heartbeat. It's a matter of bringing prayer from the mind to the heart. For Thérèse, prayer was the very source of her existence, the means by which that real union with God in action can occur. Prayer accompanies our life, making it possible to experience God's presence and action in the very fabric of our own story.

Thérèse doesn't write to look at herself but to contemplate Jesus's privileges in her soul. He does not call those who are worthy, but those whom he pleases or, as Saint Paul wrote: “[God] says, ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.’ So it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy” (Rom 9:15–16).

The face of God's mercy

It is therefore not my life properly so called that I am going to write; it is my thoughts on the graces God has seen fit to grant me. I find myself at a period in my life when I can look back over the past: my soul has matured in the crucible of exterior and interior trials. . . . To me the Lord has always been “merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love” (Ps 103:8). So, Mother, I am happy that I am coming to sing near you “the Mercies of the Lord.”⁴

When Thérèse looks back over her life, she acknowledges that God has always led her with gentleness: “He leads me beside still waters, He revives my soul. He is compassionate and full of kindness.”⁵ And she first reads this mercy of God on the Face of Christ: “Learn from me,” says Jesus, “for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Mt 11:29–30).

Prayer is essentially a personal encounter, an encounter between a person and God. But for it to be a genuine encounter, the two persons must be truly themselves. Too often, truth is missing from our prayer. Instead of turning to the living and true God, we address ourselves to something we imagine to be God. Thérèse, instead, sought the real face of God in truth, and this is why her relationship with him was so genuine.

We wonder, then, what face of God Thérèse encountered in prayer when she began to write her *Story of a Soul*. It was the face of kindness, of tenderness, and of mercy. She could have focused on other attributes, especially that of divine justice, because she had been in contact with several Carmelites who had offered themselves as victims to God’s justice. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, however, she understood that Jesus Christ is not the incarnation of any face of God, but the incarnation of his deepest and most mysterious face—his face of mercy. Jesus came to earth to show God’s tenderness to those who are far off and afflicted. “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners” (Mt 9:12–13).

If we want to learn how to pray at the school of Thérèse, we have here a very important guide as to how to go about it. As we begin, the first thing we have to do is to seek the true face of God, the one that Jesus revealed to us. Too often, a crowd of mental and visual images prevent us from meeting the true God. We have drawn these images from our contacts with others, from our reading, and even from our own personal experience. They are not exactly false, but they inadequately represent the reality of God. If we wish to encounter the Lord as he truly is, and stand before the One who is both known and unknown, we must go to God with all our experiences and knowledge, but also with the will to renounce our false ideas of him. The only sincere prayer that must rise both from our lips and from the depths of our heart is: “Show us, Lord, the true face of your mercy and we will be saved.”

God is free to reveal himself as he is

What will happen then? It’s very simple. God, who is free to come and show himself to us, to answer our prayer, will perhaps do so, and we will then be aware of his presence and his gentleness. But he can also choose not to reveal himself to us. If we live twenty-three hours of our day without giving God a thought, wouldn’t it be a bit out of place to ask him to show himself to us during the short hour we devote to prayer?

We return to Thérèse and to how she reacted when God was absent during her prayer. She approaches prayer as she approaches writing, not seeking herself but desirous only of pleasing God. She goes to prayer simply to be with Jesus and

to sing again of his love. If he shows himself she rejoices, but she is not put out if he is absent.

We must never forget that aridity in prayer was Thérèse's daily bread. "I should be distressed for having slept (for seven years) during prayer and thanksgiving."⁶ This was a trial for the young Carmelite called to devote several hours each day to prayer. She goes even further and admits that Jesus was often absent from prayer, and she uses the same image of sleep: "Jesus was asleep as usual in the boat."⁷ Concerning this, Monsignor Combes was to define, humorously, Saint Thérèse of Lisieux's prayer as "the meeting of two sleepers," Jesus and Thérèse.

So Thérèse experienced the apparent absence of God in her prayer. This experience is as important as its opposite, because in both cases she touches on the reality of God's right to answer or to be silent. What mattered above all for Thérèse was to do God's will:

Today as yesterday, if it is possible, I have been deprived of all consolation. I thank Jesus, who finds this good for my soul; perhaps if he consoled me, I would stop at the consolation, but he wants everything for himself! Well, everything is his, everything. Even when I feel I have nothing to offer him, as this evening, I will give him this nothing! . . . If you knew the great joy that is mine when I have nothing to please Jesus! It is a subtle joy (not in the least felt).⁸

In her prayer as in her relations with others, Thérèse makes a distinction between love and mere feelings. Too often, we run the risk of surrounding both our prayer and our fraternal charity with emotion. She wants to sing forever the mercies of the

Lord and not recount her life’s story. Returning to this aspect of Thérèse’s prayer concerning her very arid profession retreat, we can understand better her acute perception of God’s mercy and her own nothingness.