

## AN EXPLANATION OF THE “LITTLE WAY” OF ST. THERESE

(in a letter to a religious by her spiritual director)

As you probably know, Sister Marie had asked Therese to write down for her "all the feelings of her heart" and what she called her "little doctrine." Therese does this and then — it is just this that makes the correspondence so useful to us — Sister Marie misses the essential point completely — just as we all do at first. Her misunderstanding is providential because it gives Therese the chance to correct the error, not only for Sister Marie, but for us.

That is why I thought it would be good to use this correspondence to explain the Little Way. What I shall say will be only a commentary on Therese's own words. So ask her to get you the light to understand her.

By way of explaining her "little doctrine" Therese begins with a problem: On the one hand she is overwhelmed by the knowledge of her weakness; on the other, she has the ineradicable desire to become a great saint. There seems to be no proportion between her capacity and her ambition:

*How can a soul as imperfect as mine aspire to possess the plenitude of love?*

Why do I not limit my desire to things which my capacity would enable me to attain? Why am I obsessed with the desire for things I will never be able to realize with the limitations I see so clearly in myself?

But here is the beginning of the solution: Therese *knows* that this great desire does not come from herself: it is not her pride which causes her to desire such greatness, but Jesus Himself. And so she almost scolds Jesus for giving her these unbounded desires:

*O Jesus, my first, my only Friend, You Whom I love solely, tell me what the mystery is? Why do You not reserve these measureless aspirations to great souls, to the eagles flying in the upper air?*

But when you read more closely, you see that Therese is not upbraiding Jesus. Like her Mother she is asking "How shall this be done, Lord?" (*Lk 1 :34*). She knows there must be a solution, and she desires to know the solution, not out of curiosity, but in order to carry out God's Will. If God wants something to be done, then we know that it is possible, that it can be done — and therefore there must be a solution. And we do know that, for all our misery and weakness, God wants us to desire greatness, to be saints. The desire for greatness is a virtue, the virtue of magnanimity, of great-souledness, and too often we virtually make a vice of it, opposing it to the virtue of humility. But this desire for great things is a virtue as it is based not on our strength, but on the power of God: "My soul doth magnify the Lord . . . for He Who is mighty hath done great things to me" (*Lk 1:49*). The reason for Mary's greatness is that "He Who is mighty hath done great things to me." And therefore the desire for greatness *is* humility, a knowledge of our weakness which is measured by a realization of God's strength.

Here then, are two truths, two things which come from God: my own weakness and the insuperable desire for greatness:

*I see myself as a feeble little bird, with only a light down to cover me; I am not an eagle, yet I have an eagle's eyes and an eagle's heart, for in spite of my extreme littleness, I dare to gaze upon the divine Sun, the Sun of Love, and my heart feels within it all the eagle's aspirations.*

Since these are both from God, we know that He will provide the means. What, then, are these means? How will God provide the way to fulfill such tremendous aspirations? For certainly we do not have it in our power. Many souls, for want of faith, have been tempted to think that God would want to let His little ones suffer — that He deliberately, almost maliciously, gives them desires that they cannot fulfill, yet such that they cannot be happy unless they are fulfilled, so far can we go in misunderstanding God's Love.

For what, then, does God want of us? What He wants is for us to trust not in our own strength, but in His, to realize that when we trust in Him, His Strength becomes ours: the very weakness which the Spirit of Truth shows us in ourselves, is really an invitation from our Heavenly Father to trust in Him — "Give us this day our daily bread" (*Mt 6: 11*). The little bird, then, is humiliated in the knowledge of its weakness:

*The little bird wants to fly toward that radiant Sun which charms its eye, it would imitate the eagles its brothers, as it sees them mounting up to the divine Fire of the Blessed Trinity. . . . Alas! all it can do is to lift up its little wings, but to fly — that is not in its small power.*

What, then, is the resolution of this weakness? What the little bird knows it cannot do, is just what it does. It wants to gaze upon its divine Sun, and so it gazes at It. With impudent audacity, the little bird presumes to do just what it knows it *cannot* do:

*What will it do? Die of grief to see itself thus impotent? Oh! no, the little bird will not grieve at all. With reckless abandon, it wants to stay gazing upon its divine Sun; nothing can frighten it, not wind nor rain . . .*

Translating the metaphor of the little bird, Therese, seeing her own weakness, does not let that keep her from the contemplation of the Blessed Trinity, because she knows that God has called her to Himself It is He, therefore, Who draws her, and therefore, aware as she is of her weakness, that is enough:

*Draw me: we will run after Thee to the odor of Thy ointments (Cant 1 :3).*

This is her "little doctrine", then: that her hope is founded, not on her own strength, but on the power of Him Who calls her. It is the pure faith of a little child who believes that she can do whatever her Father asks her — simply because He asks it. In this faith, too, she perseveres, even when everything seems dark. For this is a Light that shines in the darkness, and therefore she does not measure her happiness by what she can see — "faith is the evidence of things not seen" (*Heb 11: 1*).

*And if dark clouds come and hide the Star of Love, the little bird does not move, it knows that beyond the clouds its Sun shines still, that its radiance is not for a single instant eclipsed.*

But sometimes, not only does it feel its own weakness, but the little bird almost feels itself rejected by God — as though Jesus, after all, does not want her, as though the very happiness she desired was nothing more than an illusion:

*Sometimes of course, the little bird's heart is beaten upon by the storm, it feels as if it believed that nothing exists save the clouds wrapping it round.*

Will this little soul, therefore, give up, concluding that, after all, she *did* strive too high? The very contrary. This is the moment of her conquest, of her perfect joy:

*Then is the moment of perfect joy for the poor feeble little creature. What happiness for it to stay there just the same! To gaze steadily at the invisible light which stays hid from its faith!!!*

What is this perfect joy? St. Thomas tells us that we experience joy when we are united with the good of our desire. But Therese tells us her joy is perfect when she seems to be separated from the object of her desire. But she has already insinuated the answer to this question: This good of Therese's desire is an *invisible* light, upon which she gazes, therefore, while it is hidden. And therefore she will "gaze steadily at the invisible light which stays hid from her faith." For the certitude of faith, the faith by which we know God in this life, by which we know that He loves us, is the certitude, the evidence of what is *not* seen. "Because thou hast seen Me, Thomas, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and have believed" (*Jn 20:29*).

And this explains, not only why Therese continues to gaze when the light is invisible, but why her joy is perfect then: her joy is perfect because her union with God is perfect, and that is perfect because it is a union in the darkness of a pure faith.

And here we catch a view of Therese's purity: "Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God" (*Mt 5: 8*). What is this purity? It is that disposition by which she does not expect God to conform to her, by which she does not measure reality by herself, by her senses. She does not say, as most of us do, "This cannot be, because I do not feel it, or because I cannot touch or see it. "

It is because we unconsciously assume some such premise that we end up feeling that God does not love us. For God wants to communicate Himself to us, so much so that He gave His only-begotten Son to do so. But God, by His very Nature, can only communicate Himself to us in the measure that we permit Him to confirm us to Himself. And because God is a Pure Spirit, that process of conforming us to Him must be effected in the darkness of faith, not by sense or reason alone. Yet is it not true, that very many of our acts during the day are motivated by sense and mere human reason, rather than by faith? And right here we can see a profound teaching of the *Little Flower* (pointed out by Abbe Combes) that mystical theology and ascetical theology, love and mortification, are really one. For what is the very meaning and purpose of mortification, if it is not to remove those impediments to the Love of Jesus, those unceasing attractions to the creature, to what conforms to us in our fallen nature, to our senses, to our imagination, to our human judgment — and this even when we are concerned with the things of God?

But do those imperfections keep us from Jesus? Oh no! The only thing that keeps us from Him is to doubt His Merciful Love, and then we do to ourselves, making excuses in sin (*Ps 141:4*), by which we would convince ourselves that we are acceptable to God because we are perfect — when all the time He keeps calling to us: "Come over to me, all ye who are burdened" (*Mt 11:28*).

But if we have convinced ourselves of our innocence, that we are perfect as we are, then we are not burdened, and the invitation is not for us: by our lie we have thrown the burden back on Jesus — we have refused to carry our cross.

But, as is more likely, we have failed to convince ourselves that we are perfect, and then we are disturbed and distressed — or at least our relation to God has become very vague and remote — as though He had said: "Come over to me, all ye who are perfect!" And then, like the poor proud man (*Sir 25:2*), we become attached, not to the virtue we have, but to the virtue, the wealth which we don't have.

Oh, if only we could see how important this Spirit of Truth is! Little Therese can find this perfect joy in the darkness of faith because she is pure, because she does not want to be justified in herself, because she is filled with the Spirit of Truth. She has lost her life in that Spirit, and having lost her life, she finds it in God.

And now I can almost hear you sighing: "Ah! if only I had that purity of heart, if only I had Therese's faith and love of truth!" Such thoughts and futile aspirations are the very opposite of her little way. In fact what you are doing, if you are thinking this way, is deciding that you are not an eagle like Therese, you cannot soar as she soared on wings of perfect faith. Rather, now, by the measure of Therese's faith, you are able to see how weak you are, how you are scarcely able to lift your little wings, and therefore now you can begin to trust in Jesus. When we see ourselves as we are in ourselves, we know that we are helpless and hopeless in ourselves. We must do this. Jesus wants us to see this — not that we may be depressed, but in order to give us His joy, to give us Himself. Our sins and our faults are ordered to confidence in Jesus, not to gloom and despair:

*Jesus, . . . You know that the imperfect little creature — though it stays where it is (that is under the rays of the Sun) — does let itself be distracted a little from its sole business, takes a little grain on this side or that, runs after a small worm . . . again it finds a little pool of water and wets its barely formed plumage; it sees a flower that pleases it, and its little mind is occupied about the flower. . . . In a word, not being able to soar like the eagles, the poor little bird still bothers with the trifles of this earth.*

The little bird is very much aware of its weakness, knowing that it is very far from being perfectly mortified, "like the eagles." That is to say, its nature is still very far from being conformed to the Divine Nature Which it would contemplate. It sees how very far it is from being absorbed in contemplation. Is this the time, therefore, for getting depressed by shortcomings?

What does a good child do when it realizes that it had been bad? It is only the good child who realizes it (in theological language, one who fears the Lord). The good child goes to its father, realizing that its good father delights in nothing more than in consoling it, than in providing for it all that it needs:

*But even now, after all its misdeeds, the little bird doesn't go and hide in a corner to bewail its wretchedness and die of contrition, but it turns to the Sun its Beloved, presents its little wet wings to its kindly rays and "cries like the swallow"; and in its sweet song, it confides its infidelities, tells them in detail, thinking, in the audacity of its total trust, to win in greater plenitude the love of Him "who came not to call the just but sinners"*

Why does our little bird behave this way? Because she realizes that her imperfections and sins, far from being an impediment to the love of her Father, were foreseen from all eternity by a loving Father Who permitted them only to show His child how much she needed Him. Yes, for when we understand God's ways, we realize that our weaknesses, far from being an obstacle, are our very title to God's compassion. In fact, God owes this to us, having made Himself our debtor, if only we will ask! Did He not say, with utter simplicity, "Ask, and you shall receive!" (*Mt 7:7; Lk 11:9*). Did He set up any other condition? Did He say we must make firm resolutions, that we must make ourselves miserable in order to move Him? No! He says just what He means: "Ask!" Just as, in another place, "Come over to Me, all ye that desire Me, and be filled with my fruits" (*Ecclus 24:26*). Notice, there is no requirement except that we desire Him. As, again, "all you that thirst, come to the waters: and you that have no money make haste, buy, and eat: come ye, buy wine and milk without any money, and without any price. Why do you spend money for that which doth not satisfy you? Harken diligently to Me, and eat that which is good, and your soul shall be delighted in fatness" (*Is 55:1-3*). What is this buying without money, except a way

of showing that justice in relation to God is not the justice between men? For men buy from one another, by paying a certain price for what they need. But in our dealings with God, what have we that we have not received (*I Cor 4:7*), and if everything we possess is His, why do we come to Him bearing gills? (*Ps 26: 10*). For those gifts can only be our sins, if we have not received them from Him. And that is why the gill He would have is the broken heart of the sinner (*Ps 50: 17*) who is so weighed down by his corruption that he can scarcely lift up his head - but who yet cries out for mercy. Because this is the divine dispensation, that we were all lost, and then God came to save what was lost (*Mt 11:18; Lk 19:10*). And just as the efficacy of God's sacrifice was totally in His immolation on Calvary, yet the efficacy of that sacrifice is communicated to us in the Mass which re-enacts that sacrifice, so Jesus bought us out of the slavery of sin, paying abundantly with His Blood, yet the efficacy of His redemptive act is communicated to us only if we ask. For as Therese says here, recalling the words of Our Lord, "He came to call, not the just, but sinners" (*Mt 9: 13; Mk 2: 17; Lk 5:32*). But all men are sinners; only those who acknowledge their sins and turn to Jesus are bought back by His Blood. Do you see, then, that you are unduly disturbed by your weaknesses and sins because you do not realize that we are "a purchased people" (*Ex 15: 16; Eph 1: 14; I Cor 6:20; 7 :23*) — it is really as though you believed you had to redeem yourselves.

Do not, then, allow your feelings of guilt and shame to keep you from this Merciful God. He has paid in full for your transgressions - only that you might come to Him, quickly, "make haste" (*Is 55: 1*), for when you withdraw from Him for just a little bit, the Enemy is quick to persuade you that there is no hope for you — as indeed there is not, outside of Jesus.

And so of course Little Therese "will win in greater plenitude the love of Him "Who came not to call the just, but sinners" when she confides her infidelities to Him. That was why He permitted them, to convince us that there is no hope in ourselves, but only in Him: "Destruction is thy own, O Israel: thy help is only in Me" (*Hos 13 :9*). Do you understand, it is by the Purity and Goodness of Jesus that we are saved, not by our own? That was why the Pharisees were given us in the Gospel, as an example of what not to be; for the Pharisees were justified by their own goodness — that was why they could not understand how Our Lord would dine with publicans and sinners (*Mt 9:11*).

"Come over to Me, then, all ye who are burdened!" Because only in Me will you be able to overcome your weakness; Come to Me first, right away, without any hesitation, because then you will be honoring Me with your confidence. Then, in contact with the Fire of My Love, you will gain the strength to overcome your weakness in the measure of My desire. For I know just how much and how long to leave you in your weakness. *But beware of trying to be your own redeemer! I am your Redeemer. I have paid for all your sins and faults.* And I have paid for them so that you might have confidence, absolute confidence in Me when you see your sins, so that you might come running to Me as a little child who has hurt herself - as my Little Therese comes to Me. Why, then, do you stay away from Me so much of the time? Why are you so diffident about My Love? Do you not see that I rejoice in your weakness when it becomes the motive of your trust in Me?

That was why My Paul rejoiced in his weakness - can you not see it? - because he was rejoicing with Me. And why do I rejoice in it? Because it is then that I can give you my love.



*O Jesus, how happy Your little bird is to be feeble and little! What would become of it if it were big? It would never have the boldness to appear in Your Presence, to sleep before You. . . . Yes, for that too is a weakness of the little bird. . . . When it wants to gaze upon the divine Suri and the clouds keep it from seeing a single ray, its little eyes close in spite of itself, its little head is hid under its little wing, and the poor little thing sleeps, still fancying that it is gazing upon its dearest Star! When it wakes, it is not at all desolate, its little heart stays at peace; it resumes its task of love . . .*

Do you think this means that our Little Flower is indifferent to her faults, that she is not striving to mortify them? Of course not! What it means is that she mortifies herself by acts of love. For otherwise she would be cultivating her pride in the very act of trying to acquire virtue. She realizes that only Jesus can make her into another Himself, and so her weaknesses become the occasion of letting Him do this. In this way she cooperates perfectly with God in His intention whereby He permitted sin to come into the world — so that where sin abounded, grace would abound more (Rm 5:20). But it is Jesus, in principle, not ourselves, Who overcomes sin. We are His instruments, and as any instrument operates as it should only when it is in the hand of the artist using it, so we operate as we should only when we are in contact with Jesus. And what is this contact if it is not the union of love with Jesus, a union which is motivated by our knowledge of His Merciful Love and our own wretched corruption outside of Him? Oh, if only we realized how frequently, even with good intentions, even with the best of intentions, we break the Sacred Heart of Jesus because we do not permit Him to love us, because we allow our sins to become the occasion of withdrawing from His Sacred Heart — in order to make ourselves worthy of It!!! But who can make us worthy of the Heart of Jesus except Jesus?

*O divine Word, you are the adored Eagle, I love You, and You draw me to You. It is You, descending into this earth of exile, Who have chosen to suffer and die to draw souls to the heart of the eternal Fire of the Blessed Trinity. It is You, ascending again to the inaccessible Light which is ever after to be Your dwelling-place, Who remain still in the valley of tears under the appearance of a white Host. . . . Eternal Eagle, You will to nourish me with Your divine substance, me, a poor little thing who would return to nothingness if Your divine gaze did not give me life from instant to instant. . . .*

Here, then, is the heroic strength of Therese, that she is willing to depend on the divine Strength, that she permits Him Who is mighty to do great things to her. Her strength is to be without strength in herself, receiving all her strength from the Son, rather from the Father through the Son, just as He (the Littlest of us all) received everything, all His Being, from the Father:

*As long as you will, O my Beloved, Your little bird will remain without strength of wings; it will stay with its eyes fixed upon You, its desire to be fascinated by Your divine gaze, to become the prey of Your Love.*

Therese does not even desire to be strong. She will remain in her weakness as long as it is God's will, since all her strength is from Him. Nothing is too low for Him, if only we will trust His loving condescension:

*O Jesus! Why can I not tell all little souls that Your condescension is beyond utterance. . . . I feel that if, by an impossibility, You found a soul feebler and smaller than mine, You would take delight in showering upon it favors greater still, if it abandoned itself with entire trust to your infinite Mercy. . . .*

There's the rub. Because the effect of sin is to make us do precisely the opposite, to mistrust God's Love. That was why our first parents, after they had sinned, hid from God: "*And she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave to her husband who did eat. . . . And when they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in paradise at the afternoon air, Adam and his wife hid themselves from the face of the Lord God, amidst the trees of paradise*" (Gen 3:6-8).

We, their children, still hide from the Lord God in the knowledge of that concupiscence — even more we hide from the knowledge of that concupiscence too, making excuses in sin (*Ps 141:4*). That is why we must meditate day and night (*ps 1:2*), in consolation and in desolation, on the Law of God's Merciful Love, to offset the tendency of sin, by which we would hide from God's Love — by which everything is lost, instead of embracing it in the realization that it is Jesus Who makes us just, not ourselves. This is Therese's "little doctrine". Incredible as it may seem, Sister Marie missed the point of Therese's letter quite completely. For the whole point of Therese's doctrine is, as we have seen, that our joy and our hope are founded on God's power and goodness, not our own. Yet the one thing that strikes Sister Marie is how good, not God is, but Therese. "Therese has something I do not have; therefore she can be a great saint. For Therese has great desire, which I do not have":

*A single word about myself: Like the young man in the Gospel, I am seized with a certain sadness at your extraordinary desire for martyrdom [Therese had written of her desire "to become the prey of Your love", to be plunged "for eternity in the burning Abyss of the Love" to which she had offered herself as a victim]. That is indeed the proof of your love. Yes, love you do possess; but not I! You will never make me believe I can attain the desired goal, for I fear all that you love. That of course is a proof that I do not love Jesus as you do.*

Do you see, how convinced Sister Marie is of the need that the creature bring something to God, something which it has not received, in order to be loved by God? As though our sanctity was purchased by our works!

*Ah! You say that you do nothing, that you are a poor miserable little bird, but what about your desires? How do you reckon them? The good God certainly regards them as works.*

And so, in Marie's mind, the Little Flower has something that she does not have, at least the works of her holy desires. That is in fact true. But what Sister Marie does not see is that those desires, if they are holy, come totally from God.

Therese is almost indignant with her sister:

*I am not embarrassed to answer you. . . . How can you ask me if it is possible for you to love the good God as I love Him? If you understood the story of my little bird, you would not ask me such a question.*

Then she goes on to show that any created good, such as the desires Sister Marie had referred to, is worth nothing in itself, that it, like any good which the soul may find in herself, far from justifying her, would make her unjust if she based her confidence on it — because then the object of her love and her trust would be her own virtue, instead of God Himself:

*My desires for martyrdom are nothing, it is not they that give me the limitless confidence I feel in my heart. In fact they are the spiritual riches which make us unjust — when we rest in them complacently and think: they are something great.*

What gives Therese this unbounded confidence is not the goodness she sees in herself, but the Goodness of God. "Why do you call Me good?" Our Lord says to the woman in the Gospel, and, speaking in His humanity: "God alone is good" (*Mk 10: 18; Lk 18: 19*). And this is substantially what Therese is saying to her sister. Why would you make an idol out of the consolation Jesus gives me by allowing me to see something good in my soul, these desires? That is merely a condescension to my weakness:

*These desires are a consolation that Jesus sometimes grants to weak souls like mine (and such souls are numerous), but when He does not give this consolation it is a grace of privilege.*

Notice that Therese here says "sometimes grants", for she is very much aware that for the most part she saw no goodness in herself. The essential basis for our confidence is, as she has already explained, the Love that Jesus has for each one of us as it is known in the darkness of faith. As for desires, Jesus Himself was without this desire for martyrdom:

*Yes, Jesus said: "Father, take away this chalice from Me" (Mt 26:39). Dearest Sister, after that how can you say that my desires are the mark of my love? Ah! I realize that what pleases God in my little soul is not that. What pleases Him is to see me love my littleness and poverty, the blind hope I have in His mercy. . . . That is my sole treasure, dearest Godmother; why should not this treasure be yours? . . .*

It is God Who is the Giver of every good gift (*Ja 1: 17*). As a vacuum by its very emptiness draws into itself, so we, by the knowledge of our nothingness, our misery and poverty in ourselves — and not merely our knowledge, for notice, Therese says that what pleases God is not that she *sees* her littleness, but that she *loves* it — by this love of our poverty we draw Jesus into ourselves. In God's intention, sin itself is only a device to teach us our misery, to make us spiritual vacuums, so to speak, that we might draw Jesus to ourselves. And the very thing we would want, those spiritual riches in ourselves, which we think would make us lovable to God, would in fact make us hateful. That was just what the Pharisees had done — convinced themselves of their own virtues, that they were loved for what they had in themselves.

And it is not that Jesus would have us imperfect, as though He would want us to do nothing to overcome our defects. No, but we must realize that it is charity alone that makes all the other virtues genuine — and if we love our own virtue more than God, then we are without charity. Therefore, when you are overwhelmed by your own misery, turn quickly to Jesus, realizing that this very misery is your claim on His Love, if only you will turn to Him! Do you notice how these two things are one in Therese's mind, "to see me love my littleness and poverty" and "the blind hope I have in His Mercy"? For unless she hoped in His Mercy, hoping against hope (*Rm 4: 18*) because she had no hope in herself, how could she love her poverty?

She loves her poverty because she hopes in God's mercy, and she hopes in His Mercy because she loves her poverty. And as she asks her sister, Marie, "Why should not this treasure be yours?" so I ask *you*. You see, there is no reason at all, there are no requirements for God's Love. Just as in the beginning "the earth was void and empty, and darkness was upon the face of the deep" (*Gen 1:2*), and from this God made all the beauties of this earth, so it is from our own emptiness that God will make His saints. For it was over the darkness upon the face of the deep, that God's Spirit



moved: "and the Spirit of God moved over the waters!" (*ibid*). In the beginning God made everything out of nothing, and now He makes His saints out of our nothingness, that is, out of our realization of our nothingness, and our love of our nothingness. For this love of our nothingness liberates the creative power of God in our souls. And now, I will let St. Therese finish her message to you in her own words, the very ones which she used to conclude the exposition of her "little doctrine" to Sister Marie:

*O my dearest Sister, please understand your little sister, understand that to love Jesus, to be His victim of love, the weaker one is, without desires of virtues, the more apt one is for the operations of that consuming and transforming Love. The desire to be' a victim is enough of itself but one must consent to stay always poor and without strength, and that's the difficulty, for where are we to find the man truly poor in spirit? He must be sought afar, says the psalmist. He does not say we must look for him among great souls, but "afar", that is in lowliness, nothingness. Ah! So let us stay very far from all that is brilliant, let us love our littleness, love to feel nothing, then we shall be poor in spirit, and Jesus will come for us, far off as we are, He will transform us in love's flames. Oh! how I wish I could make you realize what I mean! . . . It is trust, and nothing but trust, that must bring us to Love. . . . Fear brings us only to Justice — to strict justice as it is shown to sinners, but that is not the Justice Jesus will have for those who love Him.*



