

## **10. Therese of Lisieux: Theology of the Cross**

Therese's life and times were the palette on which she painted her theology of the cross. Her personal suffering, her focus on the face of the crucified, and her desire for martyrdom are key elements of her most profound theological insights into the meaning of the crucifixion. At its heart, this theology embodies the paradox of suffering wedded to love and unflagging joy.

**I. A Wisdom Theology Born of Suffering:** In spite of her dislike of book learning, Therese of Lisieux has left us a theology of the cross that is complex, mystical, and moving. John Paul II summarized the range of her theological interests: "the mysteries of [Christ's] infancy, the words of his Gospel; the passion of the suffering servant engraved on his holy face...his Eucharistic presence. Christ's mystical body, the variety of its charisms; the gifts of the Holy Spirit; the eminent power of love...the mystery and journey of the Virgin Mary." But the cross can be said to be a centerpiece of her thought.

The cross was a preoccupation of nineteenth century French Catholic culture. A popular book at the time was Thomas a Kempis's *Imitation of Christ*, which notes the inevitability of suffering and the need to embrace it as part of one's spirituality. This spirituality of sacrifice provided a lens through which French Catholics could view their suffering. French women especially were drawn to the idea of sharing in Christ's suffering as martyrs.

Therese's life and imagination were infused with concrete images of the cross. In August 1896, a large image of the Holy Face was placed over Therese's bed as she entered the final months of her life. In her autobiography she writes: "I shall sing even when I must gather my flowers in the midst of thorns, and my song will be all the more melodious in proportion to the length and sharpness of the thorns." *Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of St. Therese of Lisieux*, pp. 196-197

**II. Therese's Personal Suffering:** Life brought Therese sustained, intense suffering and loss: Loss of her parents; Loss of her sisters to Carmel; The challenges of life in Carmel; Her own illnesses.

Therese faced, and even embraced, this suffering by transforming it into a way of the cross. Her thirst for suffering led her to see it as the only desirable thing in her life, a precious gift from God, a form of heaven on earth. She notes that humans were superior to angels because of their capacity to suffer. She saw her vocation as winning souls for God, a feat that was accomplished through participation in the

cross.

**III. The Holy Face:** A particular and distinctive embodiment of Therese's theology of the cross was her focus on the face of Jesus. Therese's official name in religion was St. Therese of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face.

A great deal of attention has been given to the first part of her name—the "little way." Less known is her devotion to the Holy Face, which may be more central to her theology. But after Easter of 1896, Therese no longer mentions the Holy Face on the cross - perhaps her final experience of living the cross made speaking about it unnecessary.

Therese's sister Celine wrote that: "Devotion to the Holy Face was, for Therese, the crown and complement of her love for the Sacred Humanity of Our Lord. This Sacred Face was the mirror wherein she beheld the Heart and Soul of her Well-Beloved... We can say unequivocally that this devotion was the burning inspiration of the Saint's life." Genevieve of the Holy Face, A Memoir of my Sister St. Therese (1959), pp. 111-112 For Therese, "facing the cross" was a way to think about the meaning of salvation. It involves a mutual reverent gaze in which we know and are known; love and are loved.

The biblical inspiration for Therese's theology of the cross was Isaiah 53:2-3: "He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces; he was despised, and we held him of no account." □ Shortly before her death, Therese commented to Pauline: "These words of Isaiah: ...there is no beauty in him, no comeliness, etc., have made the whole foundation of my devotion to the Holy Face, or, to express it better, the foundation of all my piety." St. Therese of Lisieux: Her Last Conversations, 135

**IV. Martyrdom:** Therese was no minimalist when it came to articulating her call from God: Carmelite, Spouse, Mother, Warrior, Priest, Apostle, Doctor, Crusader, and Papal Guard. She also felt called to martyrdom, desiring "to die on the field of battle in defense of the Church" (Story of a Soul, 192). 1. She wanted all types of martyrdom, including that of the missionary. But this vocation was not to be hers in any literal sense. Nor would she follow in the heroic footsteps of Joan of Arc whom she deeply admired as an elder sister. Her martyrdom took the form of the "four walls" of Carmel: bearing injustice in silence; guarding her tongue; serving without recognition; seeking out the most irritating sisters; accepting the sisters' faults; and refusing to impose her will on others.

**V. Joy in Suffering:** Surprisingly, Therese's theology of the cross has joy at its center. In his review of the 1987 film, *Therese*, Roger Ebert commented: "The movie is one long question: What was the secret of Therese Martin's joy...why was she so happy?"

Therese is very deliberate about choosing to see the glass half full. "I always see the good side of things... If I have nothing but pure suffering, if the heavens are so black that I see no break in the clouds, well, I make this my joy!" (*Last Conversations*, 51). Underneath her simple language, we sense a will of steel. She chose to smile and assume a peaceful demeanor - even in the midst of severe suffering.

Therese's theological creativity is notable in her desire to give Christ joy and consolation. Traditional doctrine on divine perfection can make it difficult to imagine that God needs us. However, in a letter to her sister Celine, Therese wrote: "Let us make our life a continual sacrifice, a martyrdom of love, in order to console Jesus." *Letters of St. Therese of Lisieux: General Correspondence*, Letter 96. She prayed that the only thing she wanted was to give Jesus joy and console him (*The Prayers of St. Therese of Lisieux*, trans. Aletheia Kant (1997), Prayer 2). In her letters, Therese mentions her desire to console Jesus 19 times.

Therese's joy is not flamboyant. She felt called to suffer even without joy or courage or strength. In the midst of her final agony she wrote: "I'm very happy, but I can't say that I [am] experiencing a living joy and transports of happiness, no!" (*Last Conversations*, 183). Her model was Jesus who, she says, "suffered in sadness."

In the last eighteen months of her life, Therese discovered and embraced a God radically different from the God she knew as a child. She grew from being a simple, trusting child to an adult with insight into atheism and despair; from a Christianity of meritocracy, focused on human ego and accomplishment, to one with a dramatic, heart-wrenching surrender into the hands of a nonjudgmental, loving God.

**VI. Therese's Theology of the Cross Today:** Every era must come to terms with the cross. We are more likely than Therese to embrace a Christology in which the cross is closely knit to Christ's entire life and Resurrection. We balk at the idea that God "sends" suffering, and we are not likely to see suffering as an automatic sign of divine friendship, or a way to attain a higher place in heaven.

Our history of inflicting horrendous destruction on others reminds us that not all suffering makes us better people. We are less likely to think that God wants or needs our suffering and more prone to focus on God's demand of love, which almost always involves suffering. Nonetheless, Christians continue to turn to Therese in their suffering - extreme pain, persecution, hopelessness, poverty, routine, doubt, or meaninglessness.

### **Reflection Questions**

1. Recall an important encounter with another in which you were attentive to their facial expressions. How would you compare a face-to-face encounter with an email, phone call, or letter? Do you see this kind of relational "facing" redemptive? Related to Christ?
2. Have you ever questioned your experience of God or had doubts about aspects of your faith? Does Therese's theology give you permission to be honest about the fullness and complexity of your theology and spiritual experience?
3. Engage in a brief spiritual practice in which you gaze at the face of Christ hanging on the cross. What does this experience reveal about your identity and about who Christ is for you?
4. Do you find Therese's theology to be a comfort or aid in moments of profound suffering?