

'A totally extraordinary saint'

A meditation on St Thérèse of Lisieux's influence on Thomas Merton

Kerri Fox

'Everything in her story knocks me flat', was Thomas Merton's response to reading the life of St Thérèse of the Child Jesus in Henri Gheon's *Secret of the Little Flower* (1934). "I am completely knocked out by it", he repeats in his journal *Run to the Mountain* in October 1941. This book brought about a complete turnaround in Merton's opinion of Thérèse which he calls 'a big present', the discovery that Thérèse was an authentically real saint and not a 'mute, pious little doll'. Completely won over by her, he sets Thérèse apart: 'It is not possible to doubt that she was a totally extraordinary saint, more extraordinary than even St John of the Cross or St Teresa of Avila. No matter how vile the statues of her, her life in her convent was not sentimental, not sweet but a life of great heroism'. Although Merton had initially been put off Thérèse by popular representations of her and dismissed 'the scandal of cheap molasses-art [...] that surrounds the cultus of this great saint [and] statues that revolt anyone who ever knew what taste was', he declared that Thérèse was 'not one whose religion was mawkish or sentimental'. On the contrary, Thérèse 'allowed herself to be totally annihilated for Christ, in favour of sinners, with no reward, no recompense, not even heaven, which she would sacrifice to do good on earth.' The implications of this are, he wrote, 'tremendous' as is the effect on him. Such was the impact of reading Gheon's book that not only was he unable to rest, he found himself 'terrified and excited at the thought that a soul so great should suffer so much on earth and after her death remain on earth with us, foregoing until after the Last Day her heavenly reward'.

Merton is referring to Thérèse's desire to come back after death, a desire which Thérèse repeats emphatically. 'I will come down', 'I will return', 'I will let fall a shower of roses', and 'I want to spend my heaven doing good on earth', Thérèse told her blood sister, Mother Agnes, during the last few months of her life. Mother Agnes kept a record of her final

conversations with Thérèse as she lay dying in the Carmel infirmary, and they were eventually published as *Her Last Conversations*. Thérèse is assured in her belief that she will return to earth: 'God would not have given me the desire of doing good on earth after my death, if He didn't will to realise it; He would rather have given me the desire to rest in Him', Thérèse told her sister in July 1897. The proliferation of miracles and answers to prayer shortly after Thérèse's death was seen as the fulfilment of Thérèse's promise to 'let fall a shower of roses'. *La Pluie de Roses (The Rain of Roses)* recorded more than 3200 testimonies of graces and healings obtained through the intercession of Sister Thérèse of the Child Jesus before her canonisation.

St Thérèse's sanctity was quickly acknowledged after her death from tuberculosis at just 24 years of age on 30 September 1897, and her canonisation came just 28 years later, in 1925, with Pope Pius XI calling her 'the greatest saint of modern times'. On the centenary of her death, in 1997, Pope John Paul II proclaimed Thérèse a Doctor of the Church making her not only the youngest Doctor of the Church, and one of only four women to have received the title but also, Pope John Paul II said, 'the closest to us in time, as if to emphasise the continuity with which the Spirit of the Lord sends his messengers to the church, men and women as teachers and witnesses to the faith.'

In *Divini Amoris Scientia*, The Apostolic Letter Proclaiming St Thérèse a Doctor of the Church, Pope John Paul II wrote: 'The knowledge of divine love, which the Father of mercies pours out through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit, is a gift granted to the little and the humble so that they may know and proclaim the secrets of the kingdom hidden from the learned and the wise...Shining brightly among the little ones to whom the secrets of the kingdom were revealed in a most special way is Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face...she received from the divine teacher that "knowledge of love" which she then expressed with particular originality in her writings.' Further, he called her 'a teacher of the spiritual life with a doctrine both spiritual and profound...passed on to us primarily by her autobiography which, has aroused an extraordinary interest down to our day.'

This is not the place to go into detail about the story of Thérèse's life, and she tells it best in her own words. Under obedience to her superiors in Carmel, Thérèse recorded memories of her childhood and of her time in the Carmelite monastery in Lisieux, and after her death in 1897 these memories became the obituary notice that was sent to other convents of the Order under the title *Histoire d'une Ame (Story of a Soul)*. It was the Carmelite tradition to send a circular letter to convents of the order and

give brief details of a deceased sister's life but the response to Sister Thérèse's memories was anything but normal. Convents lent out copies of the manuscript to family and friends and demand for more copies kept growing. By the time of Thérèse's canonisation in 1925, her autobiography had been translated into 35 languages.

On 17 July 1897, two months before her death, Thérèse told her sister, 'I feel that my mission is about to begin, my mission of making God loved as I love him, of giving my 'little way' to souls.' Asked what this 'little way' was, Thérèse replied 'It is the way of spiritual childhood, the way of confidence and complete abandonment to God'. Thérèse's 'little way' is the way that Jesus recommended when he held up a little child as the exemplar and told his disciples, 'Unless you be converted and become as little children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.' (Matt.18.3) The 'little way' is the authentic gospel way, presented and confirmed by Thérèse in a new and original way. Thérèse said the 'little way' 'is to recognise our nothingness, to expect everything from God as a little child expects everything from his or her father; it is to be disquieted about nothing, and not to be set on earning our own living ...To be little is not to attribute to oneself the virtues that one practices. ... It is not to become discouraged over one's faults, for children fall often, but they are too little to hurt themselves very much.' (*Her Last Conversations*).

The 'little way' is synonymous with spiritual poverty. Closeness to God, Thérèse explains, depends upon the extent of our poverty and the poorer the soul, the more God will fill it. 'Understand that to love Jesus, to be His victim of love, the weaker one is, without desires or virtues, the more suited one is for the workings of this consuming and transforming love', Thérèse writes to her blood sister Sr Marie in September 1896 (*Story of a Soul*). In one of her final conversations with Thérèse as she lay dying, Mother Agnes lamented that she would have no good works to offer God, 'I shall arrive with empty hands and that troubles me deeply'. Thérèse tells her she will be in the same circumstances but feels the opposite way about it: 'If I had all the works of St Paul to offer, I would still feel myself to be an unprofitable servant; I would still consider that my hands were empty. But that is precisely what gives me joy, for since I have nothing, I must receive everything from God'. (*Her Last Conversations*). Thérèse reasons that as she has nothing to give God, He will supply everything as what is empty can be filled.

Thérèse was aware that her 'little way' could be misunderstood as Quietism, a philosophy which holds that Christian perfection is found only in a complete passivity of the soul and that any human effort or activity interferes with God's action. What Thérèse is not teaching is that

we should do nothing. Instead, Thérèse taught that we should produce all the good works that are within our strength. Asked how she would teach her little way to souls after her death, Thérèse says she would tell them that 'there is but one thing to do on earth: to scatter before Jesus the flowers of little sacrifices' (*Her Last Conversations*). In *the Story of a Soul*, she wrote, 'I can prove my love only by scattering flowers, that is to say, by never letting slip a single little sacrifice, a single glance, a single word; by making profit of the very smallest actions, by doing them for love'. Thérèse's teaching is the opposite of passivity.

Though Merton rarely mentions Thérèse in his writings after the 1940s (the latest known pertinent reference is in a letter to Sr Thérèse Lentfoehr dated December 27, 1948), we have Merton's own word for it of Thérèse's profound influence on him, so it is not surprising to find similarities between his spiritual writings and those of Thérèse. In *Thoughts in Solitude*, which was published in 1956, Merton wrote: 'If we know how great is the love of Jesus for us, we will never be afraid to go to Him in all our poverty, all our weakness, all our spiritual wretchedness and infirmity. Indeed, when we understand the true nature of His love for us, we will prefer to come to Him poor and helpless. We will never be ashamed of our distress. Distress is to our advantage when we have nothing to seek but mercy.' In these words, we can discern Thérèse's teaching that it is God's grace that counts and not personal merit which is at the heart of the 'little way', and they are closely similar to Thérèse's final words of her autobiography, *Story of a Soul*: 'Yes, I feel it; even though I had on my conscience all the sins that can be committed, I would go, my heart broken with sorrow, and throw myself into Jesus's arms, for I know how much He loves the prodigal child who returns to Him. It is not because God, in His anticipating Mercy, has preserved my soul from mortal sin that I go to Him with confidence and love...'

Merton is clearly bowled over by Thérèse and so persuaded is he by Thérèse's unique holiness that he chooses Thérèse to be his special intercessor when praying for discernment about his vocation: 'You show me what to do. ... If I get into the monastery, I will be your monk.' He doesn't wait long for a response to his prayer, and in *The Seven Storey Mountain* he describes hearing (in his imagination) the great bell of Gethsemani, The Trappist Abbey, which seems to be calling him home. Merton attributed the grace of his vocation to St Thérèse and entrusted his future to her.

'The Saints are not mere inanimate objects of contemplation', wrote Merton. 'They become our friends, and they share our friendship and reciprocate it, and give us unmistakable tokens of their love for us by the

graces that we receive through them.’ Merton then went on to speak of St Thérèse in a uniquely personal way, in a way that he does not speak of other saints: ‘And so, now that I had this great new friend in heaven, it was inevitable that the friendship should begin to have its influence on my life.’ He entrusts to her intercession that which is closest to his heart: his vocation, his brother John Paul’s conversion and his future. In Thérèse, Merton sees something different and is profoundly touched by her. ‘[The] thing that overpowers you in everything is the realisation of her sanctity. It is always deeply moving ... [And] I am reassured by the fact that I can find it moving.’

Kerri Fox is a former teacher and senior leader who has worked in secondary schools for the past twenty years. She has had a particular interest in St Thérèse since trying a vocation in a Carmelite Monastery and working as a volunteer at the pilgrimage centre in Lisieux in the 1990s.

John Moses 1938 – 2024

Sadly John passed away on 14th July. He was Dean of St Paul’s Cathedral from 1996 to 2006, and published several books including *Divine Discontent: the prophetic voice of Thomas Merton* (2014)

John discovered Merton through his reading of *Elected Silence* in the 1960s and found himself drawn increasingly to Merton’s writings over the years, fascinated by the man, the contradictions that he presents, and the prophetic voice with which he speaks.

A member of our society, he was one of the speakers at our Merton centenary celebrations in London in January 2015 where he gave a talk titled ‘Why Merton Matters’ — an edited version of which appeared in the Eastertide Journal in 2016 — in which he said:

I guess what I value most — the reason why Merton matters to me — is that I find in him a type of Christian discipleship that is open, questioning, passionate and engaged. Those of us, and I include myself, for whom God and faith and prayer and the meaning of discipleship are at times very uncertain can take encouragement from one who was a mass of contradictions, but who still speaks with a prophetic voice and who does so with courage, hope and love.

May he rest in peace and rise in glory.