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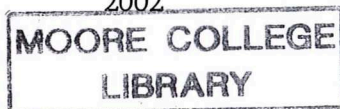
Unveiling a face:
Thérèse of Lisieux
Paul Chandler, O.Carm.

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IN SAINT THÉRÈSE'S TIME the Carmelite nuns celebrated the profession of vows and the taking of the veil separately, the first a private ceremony for the community only, the second a public one with family in attendance. Thérèse Martin took the veil on 24 September 1890; she had made her final vows as a Carmelite two weeks before. She was 17 years old.

Taking the veil was the expressive symbol of becoming a nun, all the more potent with Carmelites, who had the custom of veiling their whole face in the presence of all visitors except immediate family, seeming to cancel themselves from the world, disappearing into the mysterious desert of a life given only to God.

Thérèse spoke often of veils. There were many in her life.

From her childhood on she had experiences which seemed to her, when she looked back on them, to have lifted "the veil of the future" [A13r],¹ and to have given her some inkling of what lay in store for her. Perhaps the most poignant of these incidents was a vision she had when she was just six or seven. Her father was away on one of his trips. She was at the window looking out on the garden when she seemed to catch sight of him, but older than he was, stooped, his head covered with a veil which hid his face. Frightened, she called to him but he seemed not to hear and just continued walking away [A20r]. She says she often tried to lift the veil which hid the meaning of this vision from her, but she could not.

It was not until fourteen years later that "God himself tore away the mysterious veil" and revealed the meaning of the vision. It had been a revelation of Louis Martin's "glorious trial", his final humiliating descent into mental illness, in which, Thérèse was convinced, he was identified with the suffering of the Lord. Louis' face was veiled just like the face of Jesus during his passion, so that it too might shine in heaven [A20v].

The lifting of another veil preceded Thérèse's great discovery of her vocation to be love in the heart of the church. In a dream she saw three Carmelites with their long veils over their faces, and understood they were from heaven. She longed to see the face of one of them, and the tallest came to her and raised her veil and covered her with it. It was Anne of Jesus, the foundress of the Discalced Carmel in France, who had died in 1621, shining under the veil with a light that came from within [B2r]. Under that veil Thérèse discovered that her life would be short, that God was content with her, that heaven was full of love for her.

God, too, was veiled. The good Lord, she tells us, "communicates himself gently veiled": to her the veil once seemed so light and transparent that "doubt was impossible, faith and hope were already unnecessary, and love made us find on earth

the One we were looking for" [A48r]. But the day would come when it could not seem more different. She thinks people might imagine her to be a person for whom the veil of faith was almost torn aside, but at a certain point there was, she says, "no longer a veil for me, it is a wall which reaches right up to the heavens and covers the starry firmament" [C7v].

Thérèse was also conscious of a veil of a different sort which she wore, for she says that she felt her true self was veiled from others. She had a vivacious and open personality, but she was also self-contained and self-controlled, and she was aware of the impression of perfection that this created in the minds of some. It was as though God had veiled her faults, and she grew sick of the adulation she attracted. She says she was relieved when God sometimes lifted that veil to let her true self be seen, and was pleased to give disappointment to those who viewed her in an unrealistic way [C26v-27r].

It was above all when Thérèse died that the unveiling and the veiling started in earnest. First came the unveiling to all the world of the young nun, who, as we all recall, had lived an apparently uneventful life and died in an obscure convent in a small provincial town.

In place of the usual obituary notice, the Lisieux Carmel circulated an edited version of the autobiographical memoir Thérèse had written. The first 2,000 copies were gone within a year. Seven years later it had been translated into nine languages. In 1910 the Carmel received 10,000 letters, and four years later it was averaging 70,000 a year. By 1925, the year of her canonisation, they had distributed 30 million holy cards and 17 million relics.

Her popularity and the spread of her cult are truly astonishing. The story of Thérèse obviously spoke to the deepest spiritual aspirations of the Catholic faithful. She was soon an industry, all the world knew her, Pope Pius X himself called her "the greatest saint of modern times".

But all was not quite as transparent as it seemed: in more ways than one, her face was veiled.

Her image, her physical appearance, was sweetened and manipulated. Her sister Céline (Sr Geneviève of the Holy Face) had brought a camera with her when she entered Carmel in 1894, and numerous photos of Thérèse existed, but Céline, who was also a painter, considered that her painted portraits of her sister were a better likeness. Even when the photos were used they were retouched. Fr François de Sainte-Marie, who eventually published the original photographs, commented: "The sisters of the Carmel, living in a closed milieu, were subject to the influence of a literature, an imagery, in which the ideal gradually tended to replace the real. They also

influenced one another so as to arrive finally at a sort of common vision of Thérèse which incorporated a large element of projection".²

Céline, not a great artist, was never satisfied that she had captured the face of her sister: one portrait followed another, each sweeter and more idealised than the one before, now with roses, now rays of light, until we arrived at the familiar ethereal iconography of the Little Flower, which has not been overcome even by the revelation in 1961 of the original photographs of Thérèse, which showed the strong, handsome face of a robust young woman.

The issue at stake was not only one of artistic taste: Thérèse's spiritual journey took her beyond the kind of romanticism and perfectionism which the portraits expressed. Céline, says Fr François, "obeyed a devouring anxiety for perfection which led her restlessly to correct artistic works with which she was never satisfied, because her means were not equal to her ideal. There is a family characteristic here which explains why there was this perpetual retouching by the sisters of St Thérèse of the documents in their possession."³

Thérèse herself grew to renounce such self-regarding quests for perfection. She was irritated by the nuns who pestered her on her death-bed to get her to say things which would confirm their melodramatic notions of holiness and heroic suffering. She sought constantly to deflate them and to remind them that it is God's love which saves us. What are you dying from? one asked, no doubt expecting an answer about "the death of love". "I'm dying of death", Thérèse replied [DE 3 Aug., 9]. A few days later someone told her she was a saint. "No I'm not", she replied, "just a very little soul on whom God has bestowed his graces" [9 Aug., 4]. The next day someone quoted John of the Cross to her about how perfect souls like her saw their own supernatural beauty. "What beauty?", was the terse reply. "I don't see my beauty at all. I see only the graces I've received from God. You always misunderstand me. You don't realise that I'm only a little seedling..." [10 Aug., 2]. Céline, the most anxious and perfectionistic of the Martin sisters, told Thérèse that she thought getting to heaven was like a cripple with one arm trying to climb a greased pole. Thérèse told her to stop this preoccupation with her own salvation, and to stretch out her hand to God like a beggar, confident of his goodness [5 Aug., 3].

The retouching of Thérèse's writing was similar to that of her portraits, but even more serious. According to her sister Pauline (Mother Agnes), Thérèse had given her *carte blanche* to edit her autobiographical manuscripts. Even those most hostile to Pauline admit that some editing was necessary. The manuscripts, never intended for publication, the last unfinished when Thérèse reached the end of her strength, could not have been published as they were in the France of 1898. Thérèse's formal education had been scanty, and Pauline corrected grammar, spelling and style, and then went on to divide the work into chapters, and to delete and add extensively. At the insistence of the prioress, Marie de Gonzague, Thérèse's three autobiographical

manuscripts, written in three different years and addressed to three different people, were rewritten to seem a single work addressed to the prioress alone. Pauline claimed that the changes were few and unimportant, but altogether they numbered over 7,000.

Some changes merely made the text even more flowery than it already was. Where Thérèse says of her father, "Never had he looked more handsome, more dignified", Pauline wrote: "Advancing towards me, his eyes full of tears, and pressing me to his heart, he cried, Ah! here she is, my little queen!" [A72r]. But other changes were of greater import and show that Pauline had not always understood the most important elements of Thérèse's spiritual and theological outlook. There is space for only one example. In an important section of Manuscript B, Pauline's edited version read: "For as long as you wish, I will remain with my eyes fixed on you". Thérèse had written: "For as long as you desire it, O my Beloved, your little bird will remain without strength and without wings, it will always stay with its gaze fixed on you" [B5v]. Pauline removed not only the intimate, personal tone of the text ("O my Beloved"), but also an image of powerlessness and dependence on God's love fundamental to Thérèse's thought (the bird without wings). In this way a text about love and surrender became a text about love and human effort.

Perhaps the most spectacular interpolation into the Theresian documents was the phrase for which Thérèse became known above all else: the "way of spiritual childhood". Pope Benedict XV said: "In spiritual childhood is a secret of sanctity for all the faithful of the Catholic world... It is our desire that the secret of sanctity of Sister Thérèse be revealed to all", and for long spiritual childhood has been considered by many the kernel of Thérèse's message.

The problem is that she never used this phrase in any of her writings; it was Pauline who introduced it in 1907 as a summary of her sister's teaching. Whether it is an authentic expression of Thérèse's insight is a matter on which there is disagreement. Most scholars have presumed its validity, and Conrad De Meester, perhaps the most respected of modern commentators on Thérèse, has defended it.⁴ It seems to me that there is a case for preferring Thérèse's own term, the "little way".

At least we should be clear that "the way of spiritual childhood" is not Thérèse's own expression, and try to be clear about what she wished to say. In this context, it is worth noting that commentators generally refer to the gospel text, Matthew 18.3-4: "Unless you are converted and become as little children you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven... Whoever humbles himself as a little child will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven". But Thérèse, who knew the gospels very well, never quotes it! Her discovery of the little way was based rather on texts from the Old Testament, with three in particular being the foundation of what she has to say: Proverbs 9.4: "Whoever is a little one, let him come to me"; Wisdom 6.7: "For to him that is little, mercy shall be shown"; and Isaiah 66.12-13: "As one whom a mother caresses, so will I comfort you; you shall be carried at the breast, and upon the knee you

but he had given a new stimulus to the study of Thérèse and was instrumental in initiating the publication of authentic editions of all Thérèse's writings, a process, however, which met with some resistance and which was not completed until 1973. François de Sainte-Marie's publication of the facsimile edition of the autobiographical manuscripts in 1956 was also a very important step forward, though the revelation of the extent to which the *Story of a Soul* had been edited caused consternation to some.

As well as a constant stream of devotional literature, more or less repetitious, there were important biographical and theological works by Hans Urs von Balthasar, Ida Görres, Conrad De Meester, Guy Gaucher, Giovanni Gennari, François Jamart, and others. Thérèse began to be taken with a new seriousness as a theologian in her own right and an important teacher in the church, a theologian whose source was not book learning but her own experience of God. This process culminated in the declaration of Thérèse as a Doctor of the Church in 1997.

It's worth noting, too, that along with devotional and theological literature, there has always been controversial literature about Thérèse, who has been something of a sign of contradiction. Until the '60s this was largely psychological: from Ubald d'Alençon in 1926 to Maxence van der Meersch in 1947 and Étienne Robo in 1955, various critics of Thérèse have called her neurotic, her family dysfunctional, her image manipulated, her fame a reinforcement of the most infantile, neurotic and destructive aspects of Christianity. More recently feminist authors (Ida Magli, Monica Furlong and others) have criticised either Thérèse or her supporters as champions of the Christian oppression of women, of a masochistic submissiveness, as a safe and deadening model of an outmoded sanctity. Or alternatively she is seen as someone who managed to achieve some small triumph in the face of an oppressive patriarchal system, as the girl who dared to dream of all the things usually denied to women, of being a warrior, an apostle, a doctor, a missionary, a martyr, a priest.

Saints, like playwrights, hold a mirror up to us. It is inevitable that different generations will see something different in the saints, because each generation sees in them reflected, for better or for worse, something of itself, its questions, its preoccupations, its hopes for itself, its fears. Depending on how and where we choose to look, a saint may reflect for us something of the values to which we most ardently aspire, or something of the values we most determinedly wish to supersede. Thérèse does both and more.

Some see Thérèse as a 19th-century figure who can never be liberated from the constraints of a sugary bourgeois piety. It is true that her girlish style is a barrier to many, but this too is a veil that can be lifted. For many other people, however, the "little way" continues to exercise its liberating fascination and attraction, and Thérèse remains the very image of a person set free by the spirit of the gospel. She continues to speak to them a message which undermines every Jansenist streak in Catholicism: that nearness to God grows not from our righteousness but out of the receptive emptiness

of our poverty. "Jesus does not demand great deeds of us, but simply *surrender* and *thankfulness*" [B1v]. This is the Thérèse who replies to a novice who speaks of how much she has to acquire: "Or rather to lose. You want to climb the mountain, whereas God wants you to go down it. He is waiting for you in the valley of humility." This is the Thérèse who teaches us the mysterious glory and fruitfulness that love gives to the smallest things and the most ordinary people, the Thérèse for whom trust and nothing but trust must bring us to Love. There is perennial worth in this message, which taught generations of Catholics and others not to be afraid to throw themselves into Jesus' arms [C36v], that life is lived on the shoreless ocean of God's love [C34r]. No doubt this will continue to draw people to Thérèse, but does she have something to say also to the many people of today who are alienated from saints and churches?

What is striking in the more recent writing about Thérèse over the last fifteen or twenty years is the greater attention given to the dark side of her spiritual experience. There has even been a study comparing her and Nietzsche and their experiences of the night or death of faith. I would like to conclude with a few comments on this aspect of Thérèse's life.

On the night of 2-3 April 1896, Holy Thursday night, Thérèse coughed up blood. It was the first sign of the tuberculosis that would kill her painfully over the next eighteen months. She interpreted it joyfully, without fear, as a gift from Jesus, who on the anniversary of his own death wanted her to receive his call, a sign that her entrance to eternal life was not far off, "a sweet and distant murmur which heralded the bridegroom's arrival". "The hope of going to heaven", she says, "soon transported me with joy" [C4v-5r].

But within days there was a cruel reversal, and from then until her death she lived in the darkest night, a black hole. Thérèse describes this experience:

At this time, I was enjoying a faith so alive and clear that the thought of heaven was all my happiness, and I could not believe that there really were impious people who had no faith... [But Jesus] permitted my soul to be invaded by the thickest darkness, and that the thought of heaven, so sweet to me, should no longer be anything but the cause of struggle and torment... I wish I could express what I feel, but alas it's impossible. You need to have travelled in this gloomy tunnel to understand its darkness... It seems to me that the shadows... say mockingly to me, "You are dreaming about the light, about a homeland scented with the sweetest perfumes, you are dreaming about the *eternal* possession of the Creator of all these marvels; you believe that one day you will walk out of this fog that surrounds you! Dream on, dream on: rejoice in death which will not give you

of which we spoke earlier, in which Thérèse is visited by Anne of Jesus, and under her veil, seeing with a light that seems to come from within, discovers that heaven is full of love. It is this dream that initiated her great discovery of her vocation, described in Manuscript B:

I understood that Love encompassed all vocations, that love was everything, that it embraced all times and places... in a word, that it is eternal... Yes, I have found my place in the church and it is you, O my God, who have given me this place; in the heart of the church, my mother, I will be LOVE. Thus I shall be everything, thus my dream will be realised [B3v].

Thérèse had written Manuscript B for her sister, Marie, on 8 September 1896 (it is a letter to her), but Marie missed the point almost entirely. She was awed by the intensity of Thérèse's desires, telling Thérèse that her great desires must mean that she had a great love for God. She wondered if she could love God as much as Thérèse did. "If you had understood...", Thérèse replied the following day,

you wouldn't be asking me this question. My desires of martyrdom are *nothing*; they are not what give me the unlimited confidence that I feel in my heart... Jesus said, Father, make this chalice pass away from me. Dear sister, after that, how can you say that my desires are the sign of my love? Ah! I really feel that it is not this at all which pleases the good Lord in my little soul; what pleases him is to see me love my littleness and my poverty; it's the blind hope that I have in his mercy... It is trust and nothing but trust which must lead us to Love [LT 17 Sep. 1896].⁶

We have perhaps not been sufficiently aware of the chronology of this famous text of Thérèse, of just when it comes in the course of her life. It is precisely in the night that Thérèse makes her great discovery of love, of her vocation, of her place in the church, of the paradoxically humble nature of her desire to be everything and to mother the world. In the face of the terrible absence and silence of God, before the wall that stands between her and him, when she cannot believe but only wish to believe, she discovers there is nothing to do but surrender and let herself be loved.

Does it surprise us that sweet Thérèse, the Little Flower, lived the bitter experience of the absence of God that so many have experienced since her time in this century of holocausts and camps, of total war and terrorism, of ethnic cleansing and the "death of God"?

Thérèse was the most popular saint of an era that longed for holiness and for God. Countless millions of people found in her "little way" a bright path that opened a new perspective on Christian life and saintliness. But this path really began for

Thérèse in deep darkness and terrible night, when she felt herself helplessly “gazing at the invisible light which remains hidden even from her faith” [B5r], when she thought of suicide and warned her sisters not to leave poisonous medicines near her.

When we remember this, do we perhaps unveil another side of Thérèse for our own time? Can “the greatest saint of modern times” also be the saint for postmodern times, in which so many people do not know what to long for, or to whom trust can be given, or if there even can be faith, but still need to discover that heaven is full of love, and that in a most mysterious way there is always before us a face which is veiled now, but which one day we shall see face to face?

ENDNOTES

1. References to Thérèse’s autobiographical manuscripts A, B and C, which were combined for publication as *The Story of a Soul*, are given according to the now standard referencing system drawn from the French critical edition and reproduced in the 3rd ed. of the Institute of Carmelite Studies translation by John Clarke: *Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux*, Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1996. While I have made grateful use of this edition, in general I have translated quotations from Thérèse’s writings from the French: *Histoire d’une âme: manuscrits autobiographiques*, Paris: Cerf-Desclée de Brouwer, 1992. DE stands for *Derniers entretiens*, 1971 (= *Her Last Conversations*, 1977); LT and LC for letters from Thérèse or her correspondents respectively in *Correspondence générale*, 1972-73 (= *General Correspondence*, 1982, 1988).

2. *Visage de Thérèse de Lisieux*, Lisieux: Office Central de Lisieux, 1961, 41.

3. Ibid. 33.

4. *The Power of Confidence: Genesis and Structure of the “Way of Spiritual Childhood” of St. Thérèse of Lisieux*, tr. Susan Conroy, New York: Alba House, 1998.

5. Noëlle Hausman, *Frédéric Nietzsche, Thérèse de Lisieux: deux poétiques de la modernité*, Paris: Beauchesne, 1984.

6. The first part of the Manuscript B (1r-v) was written after the second part [B2r-5v], to which it is an introduction. To follow Thérèse’s thought it is helpful to read these texts in chronological order: first the original letter, then the introduction, then Marie’s letter of reply (LC170 in the *General Correspondence*), and finally Thérèse’s clarification [LT197].

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Most of Thérèse's writings are available in English translations by John Clarke, OCD, based on the best French editions and published by the Institute of Carmelite Studies, Washington, DC:

Story of a Soul. 3rd ed., 1996.

Her Last Conversations. 1977.

General Correspondence. 2 v. 1982, 1988.

Poetry. Tr. Donald Kinney. 1996.

There are many biographies. Among the best are the following:

Guy Gaucher, OCD, *The Story of a Life: Saint Thérèse of Lisieux*, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987, an excellent biography by a leading scholar.

Ida Görres, *The Hidden Face: A Study of Thérèse of Lisieux*, London: Burns and Oates, 1959, in many ways still the most thorough and insightful biography.

Monica Furlong, *Thérèse of Lisieux*, London: Virago, 1987, a controversial but stimulating study of Thérèse from a feminist perspective.

Patricia O'Connor, *In Search of Thérèse*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1987, is a fine introduction.

Pierre Descouvemont, OCD, *Thérèse and Lisieux*, Dublin: Veritas, 1996, is a detailed and lavishly illustrated guide to Thérèse and her world with an excellent text.

There are also many theological studies:

Conrad de Meester, OCD, is considered by many to be the leading scholar of Thérèse. His *The Power of Confidence: Genesis and Structure of the "Way of Spiritual Childhood" of St. Thérèse of Lisieux*, tr. Susan Conroy, New York: Alba House, 1998, is a thorough, sometimes technical, study of Thérèse's spiritual doctrine.

———. *With Empty Hands: The Message of Thérèse of Lisieux*, Homebush, St Paul, 1982, is a brief and accessible summary of the main ideas of his larger study.

Guy Gaucher, OCD, *The Passion of St. Thérèse of Lisieux*, Homebush: St Paul, 1989, is a study of Thérèse's last months.

John Nelson, *Living the Little Way of Love with Thérèse of Lisieux*, New York: New City, 1999, is a practical guide to living the spirituality of Thérèse.

Han Urs von Balthasar, *Two Sisters in the Spirit: Thérèse of Lisieux and Elizabeth of the Trinity*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992, is an introduction by a great 20th-century theologian to two great Carmelite women.

Let nothing disturb you.
Let nothing frighten you.
All things are passing.
God never changes.
Patience attains
all that it hopes for.
Who has God
wants for nothing.
God alone suffices.

St Teresa's Bookmark

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