

Chapters Three through Five of *The Story of a Soul* find St. Thérèse documenting her life from the age of eight and a half until she was fifteen, beginning with her sister Léonie leaving for the Abbey and ending with her petitioning the local ordinary to enter the Carmel at an unusually young age.

For this reflection, I would like to highlight certain themes and virtues running through these chapters which I hope will encourage us to consider how we might emulate this beautiful soul.

I must begin with an overarching virtue, common to all saints (one cannot be a saint without it), and that is humility. My favorite definition of what St. Basil the Great called “the gem casket of all virtues” is a simple one, easy to remember, and that is: “acknowledgment of the Truth” (I like to use a capital “T”). God is God, we are not. All good things come from Him, but we acknowledge the gifts with which He blesses us. Thérèse is an exemplar of this virtue.

We see her living this virtue immediately in this section as Thérèse tells us she was “nearly always at the top of her class” (St. Thérèse of Lisieux. *The Story of a Soul* [Rockford, IL: Tan, 1997], 33) and how her studiousness caused jealousy from one of the older students which made Thérèse very unhappy (she says she would “cry and say nothing about it”). She immediately chalks this up to a lack of virtue on her part. We had already encountered this simple honesty in the first two chapters and it continues here and throughout her writing. There is no pretense in Thérèse. I am reminded of what Jesus said about Nathaniel “There is no duplicity in him” (Jn 1:47) and how this trait applies to the Little Flower. It seems that Thérèse was incapable of guile in recounting her spiritual journey.

We know of Thérèse’s precociousness from early in her story, and we see it in her descriptions of how she grasped her lessons and the Catechism, ironically being called by the

Chaplain “his little doctor” (55) (she was formally made a Doctor of the Church by Pope Saint John Paul II one hundred years after her death). She simply stated the facts, telling us of her love of reading and study, but always giving credit to her God for anything good she accomplished.

Later she states, “I am daringly confident that one day I shall become a great Saint.” Of course, she quickly adds that it is due to no merits of her own, but it is owing only to the merits given to her by the one she calls “Virtue and Sanctity itself” who, she continues, is “content with my frail efforts.” (48)

There is a simplicity that develops in Thérèse, evident on every page. Raoul Plus in his book *Holy Simplicity*, mentions Thérèse first in his examples of saintly persons who exemplified this trait. He quotes a lay sister who knew Thérèse who famously said “What can they write about her after her death?”, so much did Thérèse embody a simplicity that, as Plus puts it, “consists in a certain transparency of soul; perfect naturalness in all circumstances and before everyone; a gift of freshness, detached and entirely open; of frankness that is not merely artlessness, but trust in God and our neighbors; a faculty of wonder and an innate tendency toward admiration...” (Raoul Plus, S.J. *Holy Simplicity* [Manchester, N.H.: Sophia, 2009], 16-17).

An instance of Thérèse displaying simplicity comes near the end of chapter five. It struck me deeply, so please allow me to share the entire paragraph with you here.

One evening, not knowing in what words to tell Our Lord how much I loved him, and how much I wished that He was served and honoured everywhere, I thought sorrowfully that from the depths of hell there does not go up to Him one single act of love. Then, from my inmost heart, I cried out that I would gladly be cast into that place of torment and blasphemy so that He might be eternally loved even there. This could not be for His Glory, since He only wishes our happiness, but love feels the need of saying foolish things. If I spoke in this way, it was not that I did not long to go to Heaven, but for me Heaven was nothing else than Love, and in my ardour I felt that nothing could separate me from the Divine Being Who held me captive. (77-8)

She acknowledges upon reflection that she was “saying foolish things” but her simple desire to love God and have that love emanating from all creatures, all realms, was her sole focus.

Thérèse also distinguished herself in seeing God’s hand in everything. Allow me to provide just a few examples from these chapters.

- Speaking of time spent with her cousin Marie, Thérèse says: “We thought about and loved the same sort of things. It was as if God were preparing us, even then, for the day when both of us would be in Carmel.” (34)
- Telling us of a four-month long headache that became quite severe and led to symptoms that her father thought would soon lead to her death, Thérèse does not think of her own travails, but rather imagines the Lord quoting Scripture to her deeply worried King, as she was fond of calling her father: “This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God” from John’s Gospel (John 11:4). (40)
- Thérèse endured much suffering after she allowed to be told the story of her miraculous cure from those headaches when Mary’s statue came to life. The grilling she received was a great trial and made her believe she had done something wrong. Yet she attributed all to being allowed by Our Lady for Thérèse’s own good to keep her humble instead of being tempted to vanity. (45)
- Receiving the sacraments was that for which Thérèse longed. Nevertheless, a delay in the Confirmation ceremony of which she was to be a part elicited this response from her: “I was only too glad to have a little longer in retreat.” (55) She wished to be as well-prepared as possible and could use the extra time to contemplate what completing the Sacraments of Initiation meant for her.

- “I thank Our Lord that he let me find nothing but bitterness in human affections,”

Thérèse says elsewhere and then goes on to say, “Our Lord knew that I was far too weak to face temptation...Where stronger souls find joy, but remain detached because they are faithful, I found only misery. I can’t take any credit for not getting entangled in this way; it was only because God had mercy on me and preserved me.” (56-57) She finds God even in her weakness and in being spared tests she felt others were better disposed to endure.

- When recalling her frequent crying due to oversensitivity, Thérèse reflects that “when I look back on those days, my soul overflows with gratitude, for the graces I received from Heaven have so changed me that I do not seem to be the same person at all.” (63) She is very aware that by her own power she can make no progress, but with God all things are possible.

- Even in her faults, she sees the hand of God, as they led to the graces needed to grow in virtue. This oversensitivity, what she calls a “tiresome fault” (64) (“I seemed to make troubles out of everything then,” [63] she tells us), was on display often. It ended on Christmas Day 1886 (in her fourteenth year) when she overheard her father say “Thérèse ought to have outgrown all this sort of thing, and I hope this will be the last time.” In this event, she found that “Jesus had changed me completely.” (65). Thus, begins the third period of her life. For her, “Charity took possession of my heart, making me forget myself, and I have been happy ever since.” (66)

Supporting all of this was a family that was thoroughly Catholic – it pervaded every aspect of each member’s life. Thérèse tells of daily preparation for first Holy Communion that

her older sister Céline received from their sister Pauline. Telling was The Little Flower's attitude listening in on the lessons: She says, "Surely...four years was not too long to spend preparing to receive Our Lord." (36)

In her terrible illness of 1883 (the headaches and worse mentioned already) Thérèse found relief only in hearing of her caretakers going to Mass, visiting Pauline at Carmel, or, as she tells it, "weaving crowns of daisies and forget-me-nots for the statue of Our Lady" (42). We also hear of her father giving gold coins for a novena for the recovery of his "little queen."

And Thérèse was provided many wholesome and religious reading materials, the love for which was apparently engendered by Pauline but kept up by Thérèse after her beloved "mother" (as Thérèse adopted Pauline for that role upon their birth mother's death) entered Carmel. She particularly was drawn to Thomas à Kempis's classic, *Imitation of Christ*, and memorized it. A particular thirst for knowledge came at age fourteen after her conversion from oversensitivity and scrupulosity. (68-9) But even back to the time leading up to her own First Communion, she diligently studied a certain "wonderful little book" she received from Pauline three months prior that Thérèse very happily told others helped prepared her so well for that glorious day.

In addition, her cousin Marie regaled her with lessons for hours each day as the moment approached when Thérèse was to receive Jesus. And how Thérèse loved and appreciated all her family members who were so caring of her and virtuous in their own lives.

We can learn much from Thérèse's anticipation of, and receiving of, her First Holy Communion. She eagerly waited for that day for years. How she prepared herself through study, attentive listening to instruction, and thinking of God! "I am sure I could not have been better prepared than I was," she says. (49) And on that day, her tears were due to, in her words, "joy alone, that deep ineffable joy that filled my heart." (52) As the day ended, she was already

thinking of her death as she considered the “first day of Communion in eternity [that] will never end.” (53)

In those days, Communion was received by the faithful much less frequently. She longed deeply for Jesus’ next visit to her in the Blessed Sacrament. It was during this time that it came to her that she was to bear many crosses of suffering, but after receiving Communion one day her soul was inflamed with a desire for suffering, an attraction to it, and consolation along with it. This love for Holy Communion only increased over time and she was overjoyed when granted permission to receive several times a week by her confessor. (71)

Also striking is Thérèse’s appreciation for, and understanding of, the sacrament of Confirmation. She longed to become “a perfect Christian.” (55) How beautifully profound and simple was her understanding of this full initiation into the Church. She especially appreciated the power that is provided by Confirmation, particularly the “strength to suffer, strength I was to need, for the martyrdom of my soul.” (55)

The importance of a solid upbringing in the faith is brought home to Thérèse in her teaching the two young children (under six years of age) of a poor woman taken ill. Thérèse spoke to them of Jesus and heaven. She says of this experience, “Innocent souls like these...were like soft wax, ready for any impression, evil ones, unfortunately, as well as good.... How many souls might reach a high degree of sanctity if properly directed from the first.” (79)

A final note on this matter of Thérèse’s family being thoroughly Catholic, now focusing on Thérèse’s father, a shining example of a head of household. Thérèse loved her King completely. Time and again she notes his outstanding character and loving attention. A particularly wonderful episode with her father occurs when Thérèse went to the bishop to petition to enter Carmel. Her father was there with her completely supporting her vocation even

when the bishop inferred that it would be better for her to stay with her father a longer time. She records the astonishment of those present: "The Vicar General took us to the door, remarking that such a thing had never been seen before – a father just as anxious to give his child to God as that child was to offer herself." (82-83) Louis Martin was not about to stand in the way of the call to religious vocation that he was convinced his "little queen" had, even though it meant giving her up from his home.

I cannot close this reflection without mentioning Thérèse's life of intense prayer and deep contemplation. She tells us how she continued to pray even to her final illness for a childhood friend who hurt her deeply due to her indifference toward Thérèse. (56) This habit of prayer for others extended to a notorious unrepentant serial murderer whom Thérèse wanted to save from losing his soul. While confident he would be saved by Jesus, she boldly, but simply, asked for a sign, which she received: just before being executed, the newspaper reported that he kissed the crucifix being held out by a priest. She considers this man her "first-born" after her conversion from scruples and over-sensitivity to charity. (67) The last example in these chapters of intense prayer has to do with her desire to enter Carmel at an unusually young age. While she confided in her cousin about this longing (who she says "did all she could to stop me"), and her sister Céline eventually found out (unlike her cousin, Thérèse tells us that "she accepted the sacrifice with wonderful courage"), she was particularly anxious about telling her father who already had two daughters sacrificed to Carmel. She chose Pentecost as the day to tell him and prayed fervently to the Holy Ghost and the Apostles for help. She need not have feared. Her father offered no objection but was tender with her, giving his consent after being convinced by her that she had considered this carefully even at her young age and had desired this since the age of three. Her obstacles were not yet completely overcome, though. When her uncle vehemently

objected she took her misery back to Jesus in prayer asking for a miracle and patiently waiting for it without further mention of her desires to her uncle. It was during this period that she experienced her own dark night for three days. It ended suddenly and unexpectedly when her uncle, without prompting, said that God had enlightened him through prayer and that he would not stand in the way of her joining Carmel. (76)

The section closes with these words, appropriately, after Thérèse faces more setbacks: "in the depths of my soul I never ceased to have the profoundest peace because I sought the will of God alone." (83)

Simplicity, humility, seeing God in all things, a Catholicism that permeates, prayer and contemplation, seeking God's will alone. All lessons from our reading of St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus.

Humility acknowledges the infinite gap between God and us and our total reliance on Him to be virtuous. There is no growth in virtue without humility.

Simplicity consists of transparency, freshness, detachment, openness, frankness, trust, wonderment, and admiration – all qualities we would be wise to emulate.

Seeing God in all things not only acknowledges God's ordained will but His permissive will and recognizes that good will ultimately result -- regardless of present circumstances -- if we are submissive.

A Catholicism that permeates means being Catholic when we are alone, when we are with family, and when we are in the world. We are not to don it or shed it due to circumstances of time or place. It informs us, guides us, and strengthens us in all things. It brings Christ to others and sees Christ in others.

Prayer and contemplation are indispensable in developing our relationship with Christ and being the Christians we are called to be. These are foundational to our lives as Christians. We know Jesus often went off to pray, particularly before significant events in His life. We are called to do the same.

Seeking God's will alone conforms us to Christ, who said in the Garden, "not my will but yours be done." (Lk 22:42) It shows a trust in the Lord that He knows what is best for us, even if we can't see it under present circumstances.

You are welcome now to share your thoughts on any of this or anything else that particularly struck you in this section.