

Thérèse of Lisieux: A Spirituality of Suffering

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Abstract

Thérèse of Lisieux wrote that a desire to suffer was “born within her heart” at the age of only 11 years which later in her life, she concluded that her vocation was in fact not suffering, but love. She developed a creative and individual approach to pursuing this vocation which she referred to as her “little way”. In the final months of her life, she faced the challenges of doubt and inner darkness, as well as the physical sufferings of her terminal illness, with the same spirit of love and prayer that she had brought to bear on smaller things. Thérèse did not show psychological awareness of how her desire to suffer may have been formed by her early losses or the religious culture of her time. However, her spirituality reflected a remarkably creative and dedicated approach to Christian living, within which small and great experiences of suffering were all grasped as opportunities to express love for God and her fellow human beings. The desire to suffer for suffering’s own sake may be identified as psychologically and theologically contrary to human flourishing and marks a different approach to that of John of the Cross or Teresa of Avila. However, the differences may be less than commonly appreciated and Thérèse modelled a creative approach to Christian living which is more characteristically Carmelite than it may at first appear.

Keywords: Suffering, Vocation, Teresa of Avila, Thérèse of Lisieux

Introduction

Thérèse was born in Alençon, In Normandy, on 2nd January 1873 to Louis and Zélie Martin (Clarke, 1996; Nevin, 2006). The youngest of five sisters, she died on 30th September 1897 at the age of only 24 years. She was doted on by her family, made only one significant trip away from home, and spent the last nine years of her life within the seclusion of religious life. Her life might reasonably be described as sheltered. She knew nothing first hand of the cruelties of crime, poverty, or war, and only in the last eighteen months of her life did she experience for herself the pain and diminishment of illness. It might well be said that Thérèse was protected by family and church from the worst that the world has to offer and that she could hardly be expected to have any familiarity with the awful and harsh realities of human suffering. In some accounts, her life has been subject to a kind of hagiographic idealization, and the sentimentalized perspectives provided by this completely bypass any critical engagement with the most difficult psychological or spiritual challenges of the human experience of suffering. And yet, in 1997, this young woman was made a Doctor of the Catholic Church, an honor afforded to very few saints and particularly few women. What, if anything, does this “little Doctor” have to teach us about the spirituality of human suffering?(Leslie, 2005).

In the span of the few years allotted to her, Thérèse experienced the pain of multiple bereavements, the shame and stigma associated with the mental ill-health of her beloved father, the ravages of tuberculosis, and sensitive awareness of the myriad of minor and mundane afflictions that, cumulatively, become significant sources of suffering for all of us. She reflected on these things and determined to find in all of them a way of expressing the depths of Christian love. Ultimately, the deepest challenge that Thérèse faced was the spiritual and psychological wall of doubt that seemed to be built around her as death approached, calling into question the very basis of everything that she had held most dear. However, to understand the challenges that this presented to her, and the resources that she developed in the face of her suffering, we need to see her life from a developmental perspective. We need to begin when she was very young.

The Martin Family

Thérèse’s parents, Marie-Azélie (née Guérin), known as “Zélie”, and Louis Martin, brought to family life a Christian faith which permeated

all aspects of the home and coloured all understanding of the world outside that home. Until 1877, the family lived in Alençon, where Louis owned and worked in a jeweler's shop. Following Zélie's death, they moved to a large house in Lisieux, known as "Les Buissonnets". Both Zélie and Louis had explored the possibility of religious life before marriage and had found the way barred to them. All of their children subsequently entered religious life, thus vicariously fulfilling parental ambitions.

Zélie became ill when Thérèse was very young so that a wet nurse had to be found to care for Thérèse. This early temporary separation from her mother was followed by Zélie's death in 1877 when Thérèse was only four years old. Most of us can remember very little from these early years of life, but the experience left its impact on Thérèse. Writing later for Mother Agnes of Jesus (then superior of the community, and so-referred to as "Mother", but also Thérèse's older biological sister and second "mother" within the family) Thérèse was able to identify within this bereavement the origins of her deep-seated sensitivities:

I must admit, Mother, my happy disposition completely changed after Mama's death. I, once so full of life, became timid and retiring, sensitive to an excessive degree. One look was enough to reduce me to tears, and the only way I was content was to be left alone completely. I could not bear the company of strangers and found my joy only within the intimacy of the family (Clarke, 1996).

Whilst this family intimacy seems to have brought all the girls close to their father, and it is not easy to identify significant evidence of sibling rivalry or jealousies within the family, some bonds do appear to have been stronger than others, or at least different in quality. Thérèse, understandably, became very close to her father. She also adopted her older sister, Pauline, as a second mother. Pauline's departure from the family home in 1882, only five years after Zélie's death, to enter religious life in the Lisieux Carmel, must thus have been particularly painful for the young Thérèse. It was at this point that her headaches began, and from 25th March to 13th May 1883 she suffered her "serious illness".

Thérèse's illness in early 1883, characterized principally by episodes of shaking and delirium, remains mysterious. Thérèse, worrying that she had in some way fabricated it, later attributed it to "the work of the devil" (Clarke, 1996), and understood her recovery as due to an intervention

of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Nevin (2006), agreeing with the tentative diagnosis of the doctor who attended Thérèse, proposes that it may have been an episode of Sydenham's chorea. Foley (2008) explores the possibility that it was an episode of hysteria, a diagnosis which the doctor excluded on grounds of age. Whatever the true diagnosis, it is certainly possible to see this illness as a somatic expression of the very real inner suffering experienced by a young girl coming to terms with repeated losses of mother figures. It is noteworthy that it began on a day when her uncle had been talking to her about memories of her mother, a conversation that moved Thérèse to tears (Clarke, 1996).

A Desire to Suffer

On 9th May 1884, at the age of 11 years, Thérèse first became consciously aware of what she later described as a "great desire" to suffer:

I felt born within my heart a great desire to suffer and at the same time the interior assurance that Jesus reserved a great number of crosses for me..... Suffering became my attraction; it had charms about it that ravished me without my understanding them very well. Up until this time, I had suffered without loving suffering, but since this day I felt real love for it. I also felt the desire of loving only God, of finding my joy only in Him. Often during my Communions, I repeated these words of the Imitation: 'O Jesus, unspeakable sweetness, changes all the consolations of this earth into bitterness for me.' This prayer fell from my lips without effort, without constraint; it seemed I repeated it not with my will but like a child who repeats the words a person he loves has inspired in him (Clarke, 1996).

Why would anyone, let alone an eleven-year-old girl traumatized by the loss of her mother, actually *want* to suffer? One might identify a paradoxical psychological defensiveness in such expressions, not so much against the suffering of bereavement itself, as against the threat of giving credence to possible invalidating contradictions between faith in a loving God and the human vulnerability to loss. (Questions about why a loving God would cause or allow such things to happen thus being reframed as assertions of willingness to suffer for love of God, to avoid the more painful conclusion that God may not care or may not exist.) Leaving aside such possible psychodynamic explanations, which are not difficult to propose and impossible to verify, it is important to understand that such a desire makes complete sense

within a certain catholic tradition of thinking about suffering. Thérèse specifically refers to the *Imitation of Christ*, a Christian classic that appears to have been a favourite within the Martin household. Whilst she seems to be somewhat uncritical of the context within the *Imitation* of the words that she quotes (Sherley-Price, 1952),¹ she nonetheless reflects accurately a certain tradition that does understand suffering as desirable, if not for its own sake then at least for the spiritual benefits that it brings (Nevin, 2006).² In facing the painful loss of maternal love, mysteriously allowed by God, she thus retreats to a desire to suffer pain as an expression of love for the God whom both her parents loved so deeply. The alternative would be to lose not only her mother(s) but to lose both her mother(s) and any possibility of trust in the love of a God whom her family loved so well.

In February 1886, Thérèse writes in a school exercise book, apparently quoting St John of the Cross, “SeigneurSouffrir et être méprisée” (Lord, to suffer and to be despised) (Clarke, 1996).³ Yet, despite this avowed willingness to suffer, it seems that she was still touchy and sensitive within the family, making a big fuss, and crying profusely, over the smallest things. This all changed with an experience on Christmas day 1886, after midnight mass, which she subsequently described as her “conversion”. Like many French children, she had long enjoyed a ritual of finding presents in shoes put out around the fireplace on Christmas Eve, rather as children today receive presents in stockings. In an unguarded moment, tiring of his daughter’s childish ways, her father was heard by Thérèse to say, “Well, fortunately, this will be the

¹ Thérèse quotes from Chapter 26 of Book III of *The Imitation of Christ* (Sherley-Price, 1952, p.129). The focus of the chapter is on the need to set the mind on heavenly things and to avoid undue attachment to worldly things. It does not exhort total renunciation of all worldly pleasures, but rather their enjoyment in moderation.

² Nevin, 2006, p.105 finds evidence of such a Catholic understanding, of suffering as having a purifying effect, in the response of Thérèse’s mother the death of her sister (Thérèse’s aunt).

³ See Gaucher, 1999, pp.11-13. These words are referred to by Thérèse in *Story of a Soul* (Clarke, 1996, p.157). According to an account written by his brother Francisco, when praying before a painting of Christ, St John of the Cross heard a voice which asked him what he desired. The saint’s response was to ask for trials and for suffering, and to be despised. Whilst this event is not recorded by John himself in any extant manuscript, it led to a vigorous artistic tradition portraying John praying before a painting of Christ (Ruiz, Roascio, Salvatico, Rodríguez, Egido, San Román, Giordano and Restani, 1991, pp.338-341). Thérèse was clearly very familiar with this tradition (Gaucher, 1999, pp.11-12).

last year!” Usually, Thérèse would have dissolved into tears at hearing such a thing, and this is exactly what her sister Céline (who observed the whole episode) expected her to do. Instead, forcing back the tears, she ran downstairs and outwardly showed only enjoyment at enacting the ritual for the last time as a child before her father. According to her later account, “Thérèse was no longer the same; Jesus had changed her heart!” She had “discovered once again the strength of soul which she had lost at the age of four and a half, and she was to preserve it forever!” (Clarke, 1996).

Jesus’ Little Plaything

The following year, in November 1887, her “strength of soul” was tested. Impatient to follow her sister Pauline into religious life, Thérèse took the opportunity of a visit to Rome to ask the Pope if she could become a Carmelite at the younger than the usual age of only 15 years. The Pope gave an ambiguous, if wise, response and did not simply accede to her request.

bitterness filled my soul, for Jesus was silent. He seemed to be absent, nothing served to reveal His presence. That day, too, the sun dared not shine and Italy’s beautiful blue skies, covered with dark clouds, never stopped crying with me... (Clarke, 1996)

In a letter to her sister, she wrote:

I was crushed. I felt I was abandoned, and, then, I am so far....
I was crying a lot when writing this letter; my heart is heavy
(Clarke, 1982).

Whilst she perhaps coped with this bitter disappointment better than she might have done a year earlier, one might well ask whether her Christmas 1886 conversion had been as complete as she had implied. Did it show “strength of soul” to be in tears at the prospect of having to wait to fulfill her vocation, or did it simply show childish impatience and emotional petulance at not getting her way? Might it not have been rather overdramatic to talk of being “abandoned”, simply because she had to wait a while? (Might the real abandonment has had more to do with the loss of both her mothers?) What had changed was shown not in her emotional response to the frustration of her wishes, but rather in her ability to reflect on the situation afterward.

I had offered myself, for some time now, to the Child Jesus as His little plaything. I told him not to use me as a valuable toy child are content to look at but dare not touch, but to use me like

a little ball of no value which He could throw on the ground, push with His foot, pierce, leave in a corner, or press to His heart if it pleased Him; in a word, I wanted to amuse little Jesus, to give Him pleasure; I wanted to give myself up to His childish whims. He heard my prayer.

At Rome, Jesus pierced his little plaything; He wanted to see what there was inside it, and having seen, content with His discovery, He let His little ball fall to the ground and He went off to sleep (Clarke, 1996).

The image of the little ball seems first to have been taken up by Pauline, in a letter to her sister dated 8th November 1887 (Clarke, 1982). In many ways, it is still a very childish image. However, Thérèse shows herself able to take it up in a very mature way. Affectively, she has recognized that Jesus is not absent simply because she does not get her way. Moreover, she has recognized that although superficially her prayer to enter Carmel has not been answered, and Jesus is “silent”, in fact, her prayer for suffering, expressed in her identification with the image of a little plaything maltreated and neglected by a child, *has* been answered. Using childish imagery, and in her adolescent emotional turmoil over a very small matter, the 14-year-old Thérèse had begun to grapple with some central Carmelite concerns that John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila had identified as being matters of concern to those more advanced in the spiritual life. How do we deal with the darkness that we feel when God deprives us of those things that we feel we most need and most want? Ostensibly, Thérèse was concerned about having to wait another year or two to become a Carmelite, but was her real concern not more with Jesus’s silence in the face of the death of her mother? And was it not Jesus who had taken Pauline away from her too? How much could she distinguish, emotionally speaking, between a genuine desire to become a Carmelite nun and the associated possibility of this enabling a reunion with the sister who had become her second mother? None of this is explored explicitly by Thérèse, but the careful reader is left with the distinct impression that she is now dealing emotionally with these issues in a much more mature, and distinctively Carmelite, way.

Suffering and Love in Carmel

On 9th April 1888, Thérèse’s wish was granted and she entered the Lisieux Carmel. In June 1888, Thérèse was still expressing a conscious desire for suffering. In her autobiography, about this time, she wrote “I

am suffering very much, but feel I can still bear greater trials” (Clarke, 1996). If it is true that we should be careful what we wish for, it must be even truer that we should be careful what we pray for. From 23-27 June 1888, Thérèse’s father went missing. In August of 1888, he experienced a second episode of paralysis.⁴ In October, he became “like a child” and in February 1889 he was hospitalized at Bon Sauveur in Caen. It was five years later, on 29th July 1894 that he eventually died. Meanwhile, Thérèse and her sisters experienced the shame by association that was linked to mental illness in 19th Century France.

All of this hit Thérèse hard. She continued to express a desire for suffering, and yet she also became aware that she should be careful what she asked for. She began to show a realization of the awful reality of suffering and death, and yet she continued to express joy. Writing of 12th February 1889, she said:

Ah! That day, I didn’t say I was able to suffer more! Words cannot express our anguish, and I’m not going to attempt to describe it..... Papa’s three years of martyrdom appear to me as the most lovable, the most fruitful of my life; I wouldn’t exchange them for all the ecstasies and revelations of the saints..... My desire for suffering was answered, and yet my attraction for it did not diminish. My soul soon shared in the sufferings of my heart. Spiritual aridity was my daily bread and, deprived of all consolation, I was still the happiest of creatures since all my desires had been satisfied (Clarke, 1996).

In 1891, Thérèse began to experience doubts about the existence of heaven (Clarke, 1996). However, she was also growing in awareness of the mundane realities of living in a community with women who were not her biological family, and her attention turned to these matters. Writing about this later, she shows both humour and humanity as she reflects on the challenges that life in the community presented. She might be thought to be making much of small things, but sometimes small things can be the most annoying to bear. One example from this period will suffice to illustrate:

I was in the laundry doing the washing in front of a Sister who was throwing dirty water into my face every time she lifted the handkerchiefs to her bench; my first reaction was to draw back

⁴ The first episode had been in early 1887. Louis Martin is thought to have suffered from cerebral vascular disease, manifesting itself both in episodes of paralysis and, in the behavioural and cognitive signs and symptoms of dementia.

and wipe my face to show the Sister who was sprinkling me that she would do me a favour to be more careful. But I immediately thought I would be very foolish to refuse these treasures which were being given to me so generously, and I took care not to show my struggle. I put forth all my efforts to desire to receive very much of this dirty water and was so successful that in the end, I had taken a liking to this kind of aspersion, and I promised myself to return another time to this nice place where one received so many treasures (Clarke, 1996).

In a letter to her sister, dated 13th August 1893, she wrote: it is the little crosses that are our whole joy; they are more common than the big ones and prepare the heart to receive the latter when this is the will of our good Master (Clarke, 1988)

Perhaps it was the death of her father in 1894 that finally began to change Thérèse's attitude both to suffering and to her vocation. Writing in her autobiography of how she felt in 1895, she stated:

Neither do I desire any longer suffering or death, and still I love them both; it is love alone that attracts me, however. I desired them for a long time; I possessed suffering and believed I had reached the shores of heaven, that the little flower would be gathered in the springtime of her life. Now, abandonment alone guides me. I have no other compass! (Clarke, 1996)

On 9th June 1895, Thérèse made an Act of Oblation to Divine Mercy, in which she offered herself as victim and martyr on behalf of those who are ungrateful to God and sinful (Clarke, 1996). Whilst Thérèse's desire to suffer is still in evidence here, the emphasis has moved away from suffering onto love – both Thérèse's love for Jesus and God's love for those who abandon themselves to him.

Writing on 8th September 1896, Thérèse explored her vocation in all its different manifestations, including those of Carmelite, warrior, priest, and martyr. She concluded, however, that her true vocation was love:

I understood that love comprised all vocations, that love was everything, that it embraced all times and places... in a word, that it was eternal!

Then, in the excess of my delirious joy, I cried out: O Jesus, my Love... my *vocation*, at last, I have found it... my vocation is love! (Clarke, 1996)

Her Final Illness

On 2nd and 3rd April 1896, Thérèse experienced two episodes of haemoptysis, the first signs of the tubercular illness that was to take her life. She instantly recognized the significance of her mortality. By 8th September 1896, the emphasis of her vocation had shifted completely:

What this child asks for is Love. She knows only one thing: to love You, O Jesus.... But how will she prove her love since love is proved by works? Well, the little child will strew flowers, she will perfume the royal throne with their sweet scents, and she will sing in her silvery tones the canticle of Love (Clarke, 1996).

Thérèse wrote remarkably little about the physical suffering associated with her final illness, not least because she became too ill to continue with her writing. We know she experienced a series of episodes of haemoptysis which became increasingly frequent and severe. She was short of breath, feverish, and became increasingly weak and emaciated. She suffered vomiting of blood, diarrhea, and abdominal pain due to intestinal tuberculosis. Confined to bed, she developed pressure sores which ulcerated and became gangrenous. At the height of her suffering, she even confided to her sister that she could understand how one might think of suicide in the face of such suffering (Clarke, 1977). Eventually, difficulties with swallowing, vomiting, and exhaustion, made it impossible even for her to receive Holy Communion. All of this was quite apart from the almost barbaric, and completely ineffective, treatments that were imposed by physicians of the time (Nevin, 2006). Yet none of this was of significance to Thérèse in comparison with the spiritual and internal suffering that she experienced.

Writing of how she felt in June/July 1897, she said:

[Jesus] permitted my soul to be invaded by the thickest darkness, and that the thought of heaven, up until then so sweet to me, be no longer anything but the cause of struggle and torment... (Clarke, 1996)

She continued:

the darkness, borrowing the voice of sinners, says mockingly to me: ‘You are dreaming about the light, about a fatherland embalmed in 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! Advance, advance; rejoice in death which will give you not

what you hope for but a night still more profound, the night of nothingness (Clarke, 1996)

The voice of darkness was not hallucinatory, but its phenomenology did not lessen its spiritual and existential significance (Cook, 2018). Experiencing the absence of God, she entered psychologically into the experience of those who have no faith, those on behalf of whom she had made her act of oblation to divine mercy. Experiencing abandonment by God, she abandoned herself to God (Renault, 1997).

The words that she penned as a playwright, and spoke in her role as Joan of Arc, for a Lisieux Carmel play performed on 21st January 1895 seem to have been prophetic for how she felt herself in the final months of her life:

Oh, how it consoles me to see that my agony is like that of my saviour.... But I do not feel His Divine presence, and death still makes me afraid! (Gaucher, Conroy, & Dwyer, 2008)

On 8th July 1897, Thérèse entered the Carmel infirmary. Despite the significant physical and spiritual suffering that she endured, she remained cheerful. Her cousin Marie, also a sister at the Lisieux Carmel (Sister Marie of the Eucharist), writing to her father on 31st July 1897, commented on how Thérèse amused herself the previous day at the thought of what would happen when she died. Marie observed:

Because of the way she did this, whereas we should have been crying, she had us bursting out with peals of laughter, so amusing was she. She reviews everything; this is her joy, and she shares it with us in words that make us laugh. I believe she'll die laughing because she is so happy (Clarke, 1977).

This joy gives the lie to any notion that Thérèse was depressed but also concealed her continuing attraction for suffering and its relation to the joy that was observed by the sisters. Thérèse's sister Pauline (Mother Agnes of Jesus) recorded Thérèse's explanation of this on 31st July 1897:

I have found happiness and joy on earth, but solely in suffering, for I've suffered very much here below.... Since my First Communion, since the time I asked Jesus to change all the consolations of this earth into bitterness for me, I had a perpetual desire to suffer. I wasn't thinking, however, of making suffering my joy; this is a grace that was given to me later on (Clarke, 1977).

On 30th September 1897, after two days of agony, Thérèse died. Her last words were recorded by her sister, Céline. The Mother Prioress had just dismissed the community, saying that Thérèse's agony would be prolonged a little more. Thérèse replied:

“Well, all right! all right! oh! I wouldn't want to suffer less!...”

“Oh! I love Him...”

“My God...I...love You!” (Clarke, 1977)

A Spirituality of Suffering

Thérèse is known for the spirituality of her “little way”, paying attention to how we manage the small things in life prayerfully and well, but she also faced suffering in its bigger forms. Thérèse thought that managing the former well enables us to manage the latter better. Thérèse started out dealing with the denial to her of that which she desired, and the losses that she experienced were many and various. Losing her mother to death early in her life, she went on to “lose” her beloved sister to religious life. The permission to enter religious life herself, which she sought from the Pope, was denied to her, at least for a time. At home, and in Carmel, she learned to suffer the loss of smaller pleasures and comforts. The real challenges came, however, as she learned to embrace those things that she did not desire. The physical sufferings associated with her terminal illness was not among the foremost challenge, but rather the aridity, the absence of divine presence, and the doubt that accompanied her final months of life.

For Thérèse, there seems to have been a complicated dynamic of attraction to that which is unattractive. In her childhood and adolescence, this was relatively naïve. As it became clearer to her exactly what suffering might involve, she became more cautious about what she asked for but more courageous in what she proved able to overcome. Eventually, she became resigned to abandonment to the divine will but realized that her vocation was not so much to suffer as to love. Her love for her fellow human beings, in all their small and great failings, was exceeded only by her love for God, and this love was tested most severely. How was she to love the one whose presence she experienced only as an absence, and who had taken from her those whom she loved the most in this world? For Thérèse, suffering was primarily about the pain of loss in relationships, human and divine, and only secondarily about physical pain.

It might be said that Thérèse was not very emotionally self-aware. She experienced strong emotions, especially as a child, and she was able to verbalize them well. In time, she learned also to contain them. However, she lived within the moment and did not reflect on how losses might be interconnected, or how physical symptoms might have an emotional cause. She interpreted and managed her affective experiences in the context of her faith, and her experiences of doubt and abandonment were given spiritual, not psychological, significance. She coped with these experiences, principally, through prayer and ultimately, she was able to express her understanding of prayer very simply:

For me, prayer is an aspiration of the heart, it is a simple glance directed to heaven, it is a cry of gratitude and love amid trial as well as joy; finally, it is something great, supernatural, which expands my soul and unites me to Jesus (Clarke, 1996).

At first sight, Thérèse's experiences do not map well onto those described in depth in the writings of Teresa of Avila or John of the Cross.⁵ It is probably truer to say that Thérèse's writings about her experiences are of a completely different genre. Where John employs a systematic and at times complex taxonomy of experience, most notably elaborated at length in his discourses on the active and passive nights of sense and spirit, Teresa employs a variety of metaphors and images (such as those of the chrysalis and butterfly, and the interior castle). Thérèse, in contrast, writes very directly about the loss of her mother and older sister, the failure of the pope to grant her wishes, the sister who splashes her with water in the laundry, and eventually, God seems absent in the final days of her life. With Thérèse, we have a stream of consciousness, mindfulness of each present moment, honesty about what she finds hard, and simplicity of faith that is both strength and trial to her.

A straight forward reading of the *Story of a Soul* might suggest that Thérèse welcomes suffering for suffering's sake and that suffering is a good thing in the Christian life. This is not completely without foundation, even on closer examination, but it might be a mistaken view if expressed without nuance or qualification. There is a transition, from a naïve view of suffering as heroic to one that is tempered by a

⁵ Thérèse does not leave us, for example, with treatises such as those on the *Dark Night*, by John of the Cross, or on the *Interior Castle* by Teresa of Avila. It should be remembered, however, that Thérèse died much younger than either John or Teresa, neither of whom had written any of their major works by her age.

realization of its cruel realities, through to an appreciation that it is love, not suffering, that matters most in this life and for eternity. In the context of this love, Thérèse learns self-abandonment. It is the seeming absence of her beloved that troubles her above all else but, as a true Carmelite, she learns also to transcend this.

Thérèse's dark night had its roots in her childhood. Many of her early struggles might easily be seen as consequential upon the early death of her mother and the subsequent loss of her sister. Although she never expresses it, and perhaps never dared to admit it to herself, being brought up in a family where God allows, perhaps even wills, such a cruel thing to happen must have been challenging to faith. Perhaps God intends suffering? This seems to be the answer that the childish Thérèse consciously adopted. But the alternative, almost unthinkable, is that there may be no God, no heaven. It is this possibility that Thérèse seems not to have consciously entertained before she was 18 years old, and even after that only as unbidden thoughts, as the mocking voice of darkness, rather than as something consciously and intellectually grappled within the search for a satisfactory theodicy.

In the final days of her life, God seems absence presented a far great challenge to Thérèse, far greater darkness than did the undoubtedly severe physical suffering associated with the advanced stages of tuberculosis. Finally, she loses not only her earthly parents but also the consolations of divine presence. Here, she experiences darkness which John of the Cross might have identified as a passive night of the spirit. Whilst she was familiar with at least some of John's writings (Gaucher, 1999), she navigates this darkness in her distinctive way. Her vocation is, ultimately, not to suffer but to love.

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