

THE LITTLE WAY

In seeking to grow spiritually, we might sometimes think that we need something big to happen. While dramatic changes have often accompanied spiritual growth, holiness does not always take big steps. “The older I get,” Dorothy wrote, “the more I see that life is made up of many steps, and they are very small affairs, not giant strides.”¹

Little steps work just as well as big ones, sometimes better. Yes, the first actions Thérèse of Lisieux, Dorothy Day and Mother Teresa took were in some ways dramatic. But before too long they found their new vocations to be made up of small things: serving the “little ones” of God; doing small, everyday acts of faith, hope and love over and over again; pouring love and devotion into everything they did—in short, seeing the connection between the ordinary activities of life and the presence of God.

Why should the everyday tasks of life not reveal the divine any less than larger and more dramatic spiritual gestures do? The world tends to measure success and effectiveness in terms of big numbers: how much money someone makes, how much a person owns, how much they do and so on. But the little way gauges success much differently.

THE VOCATION OF LOVE

Thérèse's very life stands as a kind of monument to smallness. She lived only to the age of twenty-four, spending nine of her years in a Carmelite monastery that was itself small and poor. She marked her accomplishments in small favors she performed and little sacrifices she made, many of them invisible to others. One may wonder whether these sacrifices really amounted to much. But within the limited horizons of her convent she found a connection with the infinite love of God.

Eventually the small horizon within which she operated embraced the whole world. She became a popular saint and a doctor of the church. Her memoir sold 1,000,000 copies by the time of her canonization in 1925, and it has been translated into every major language. Millions of people have benefited from the little way of holiness she espoused.

The Catholicism in which Thérèse grew up came under the influence of a movement called Jansenism, which grew out of the thought of Cornelius Jansen (1585–1638), the Catholic bishop of Ypres in Belgium. Jansenism emphasized a kind of predestination, the thought that God had chosen those who would respond to his grace and those who wouldn't. The task of earthly life, then, involved demonstrating that one was among the saved by trying to achieve moral perfection, staying aloof from the world and its temptations and longing and preparing for life in heaven.

Looking at Thérèse's focus on doing small things well, it is easy to think that she had absorbed something of the spirit of the age. But it would be an error to think that Jansenism dominated her. On the contrary, Thérèse's spirituality showed how

God's love, not only his judgment, triumphs in the end. It did not take her away from the world but engaged her more deeply in everyday life and relationships.

In wanting to give little things her attention and do them well, she sought to reach heaven not by outward perfection but by letting God's love flow into even the most ordinary tasks. Whereas perfectionism is a malady of the soul that stresses doing things without making mistakes, the little way demands that we do things for the sake of love. The heart of Thérèse's life was "to live in one single act of perfect love.... For love is to give all and to give oneself."²

Love: giving oneself for the good of another. By doing things lovingly, we return God's love and care for creation to God. The way we work and relate to one another ripples outward in ever larger circles and eventually reaches all the way to God. God created us to do "small things with great love," Mother Teresa said.³

And she believed that this great love should start at home. "I want you to go and find the poor in your homes," she said. "Above all, your love has to start there. I want you to be the good news to those around you. I want you to be concerned about your next-door neighbor. Do you know who your neighbor is?"⁴ Thus devotion begins with the love God places in our hearts. To love is to devote oneself to the art of relationships and doing things well. In the little way, who and what we can love are all around us, all the time.

CHILDREN OF GOD

Dorothy thought Thérèse had found a secret, perhaps *the* secret. “She knew with a certainty that is heaven itself, or a foretaste of heaven, that she had been taught the secret, the ‘science of love.’... Her secret is generally called the Little Way, and is so known by the Catholic World.”⁵

Dorothy experienced this change in how she looked at things and how she saw God working in her life. Reflecting on her spiritual life around the beginning of World War II, a few years after the beginning of the Catholic Worker, she wrote that she had always felt that God had guided her and would reveal his will in the events of her life. At first she had looked for the divine will in “some big happening, some unmistakable sign.” She “disregarded all the little signs.” Then in those little things she began to see the signs she wanted, “and with such clearness that I have to beg not to be shown too much, for fear I cannot bear it. I need strength to do what I have to do—strength and joy and peace and vision.”⁶

But if the little way unlocks the mystery of love, how do we open this door and walk through it? By embracing spiritual childhood. “[Thérèse] called it little,” Dorothy wrote, “because it partakes of the simplicity of a child, a very little child, in its attitude of abandonment, of acceptance.”⁷

Thérèse was indeed Sister Thérèse *of the Child Jesus* and of the Holy Face. A few months before her death, she told her sister, “I feel that my mission is about to begin, my mission to make God loved as I love Him, to teach souls my little way.” When her sister asked what this little way was, Thérèse replied, “It is the way of spiritual childhood, the way of trust and

absolute surrender.”⁸ When Pauline asked how difficult it was for Thérèse to achieve perfection, the Little Flower replied, “Oh, that’s nothing,” and, “Sanctity...means being ready at heart to become small and humble in the arms of God, acknowledging our own weakness and trusting in His fatherly goodness to the point of audacity.”⁹

Three quarters of a century later, Pope John Paul II, during a pilgrimage to Lisieux, would describe the little way as “the way of ‘holy childhood.’...What truth of the Gospel message is indeed more fundamental and more universal than this: God is our Father and we are his children?”¹⁰ Thérèse’s grasp of basic gospel truths explains why in 1997 the pope named her a doctor of the church, the official honor for greatness in theology and holiness.

Even in small things, Thérèse taught us, we can find the love of God in the presence of Jesus. “You know very well,” she wrote in a prayer, “that never would I be able to love my Sisters as You love them, unless *You, O my Jesus, loved them in me...* Yes, I feel it, when I am charitable, it is Jesus alone who is acting in me, and the more united I am to Him, the more also do I love my Sisters.”¹¹

TEACHING THE LITTLE WAY

Thérèse felt she had a mission to teach others her little way to love God. “I would show them the little method I have found so perfectly successful and tell them there is but one thing to do on earth; to cast before Jesus the flowers of little sacrifices. That is what I have done and that is why I shall be so well received.”¹² She liked to quote Matthew 18:3: “Amen I say to

you, unless you turn and become like little children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.”

But what kind of “childhood” are we to obtain? To become helpless and dependent on others? In the words of Catholic psychoanalyst Karl Stern, for an adult to “regress” to a childlike state “in our relationships with people is a most serious form of neurosis.” We all probably know grown men and women who have damaged themselves and their relationships by acting like children. But we call this behavior *childishness*.

What Thérèse meant was childlikeness. To find our way back to childlikeness “on the supernatural plane, in our relationship with God,” Stern says, “is the highest degree of maturity. ‘As one whom the mother caresses, so will I comfort you,’ says God (Is 66:13). But for this to be possible there has to be a child on the receiving end.”¹³

“Thérèse’s childlikeness” another commentator writes, “has nothing to do with infantilism. It is practice in simplicity, obedience, and satisfaction with the little things and hidden work of everyday.”¹⁴ The very fact that serious minds have expounded on Thérèse’s idea of childhood testifies to its depth.

It is this spiritual childhood that the popes who confirmed the advance of Thérèse’s journey to canonization emphasized. Catechist and author Father John Hardon said that this childhood takes the form of humility: It “knows nothing of spiritual pride,” realizes the need for supernatural help to be holy, relies totally on God for help in times of temptation, believes God’s presence is in everything, trusts God’s power and mercy and has faith in providence, the guiding hand of God behind everything.¹⁵ These are not new spiritual ideas. What the little

way brings to these values is their practice in the ordinariness and hiddenness of everyday life.

“[This] meant living with a childlike sense of wonder at God’s gifts, with a child’s sense of dependence and trust,” author David Scott wrote. “It meant, Thérèse said, finding the true divine significance ‘in the least action done out of love.’”¹⁶

Childlike dependence on God, Karl Stern said, “sounds easy. Depend on God like a little child. Trust him blindly no matter what happens. Use the inconspicuous events and situations of everyday life as material for sanctification. Do it in obscurity.” It is, however, “just about the most difficult thing to do.”¹⁷

“The final word is love,” Dorothy wrote, and she knew that love is not child’s play. “At times it has been, in the words of Father Zossima [in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*], a harsh and dreadful thing, and our very faith in love has been tried through fire.”¹⁸ “Love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams.”¹⁹

GOD’S PENCIL

Mother Teresa too lived the little way. She said that “all of us are but [God’s] instruments, who do our little bit and pass by,”²⁰ and she conveyed this ideal to her fellow workers. When she disbanded the Missionaries of Charity Coworkers as an organization, their spiritual adviser, Father Paul Chetcuti, wrote:

We have said so often in the past that we are all Co-Workers of Jesus. Mother is just a small pencil in the hands

of the Lord. With this small pencil Jesus has called us to serve and love him. With this same pencil he is calling us to concentrate more on him. Perhaps we have forgotten the hand that has been writing all these years and concentrated too much on the pencil. So the difficult and hard words that pencil has just written may be an invitation to look a bit higher up and see the Author of Life calling us closer to Him, for his own sake and nothing else.... Let us continue to be Co-Workers of Jesus. No single act of love and of service to the needy must be stopped.²¹

Mother Teresa's smallness—both her spirituality and her physical size—made an impression on many, especially in their contrast to the greatness of her person. “She is tiny to look at,” said Indira Gandhi, the late prime minister of India, “but there is nothing small about her.”²² A man who lived in the Missionaries’ New York home for people dying of AIDS said that Mother Teresa was “like a quiet storm that will shake you. She says little things—but from them come oak trees.”²³

Have not all of us felt the desire to give ourselves completely for something greater than ourselves? We too can be God's small pencils, with which he will write an invitation of salvation to the world.

Strength and joy come when we focus our attention on the matter at hand. Such focus is an antidote to the “continuous partial attention” disorder that journalist Thomas Friedman sees to be the “disease of our age.”²⁴ In the midst of our endless stream of cell phone calls, e-mails, text messages and television channel options, we humans are having more

and more trouble focusing on what is right in front of us. Adjusting our vision to the small things around us can put the big things in perspective.

The first step of the little way is to see God in every moment. As the eighteenth-century Jesuit spiritual writer Jean-Pierre de Caussade said, “Embrace the present moment as an ever-flowing source of holiness.”²⁵ In every step we take after that first one, we commit ourselves to finding God. It is a path of contemplation in action: seeing God’s presence and letting that awareness shape what we do.

It is a paradox of Christian faith that God is revealed especially in the little—the poor in both material goods and in spirit. In the humbleness, limitations and imperfections of life, we can contemplate the presence of God. The life of Christ shows a concern for the small: the sick in body and soul, the disenfranchised, the forgotten and abandoned, the lost sheep.

Christ’s attitude offers us an example. “When we meditate on Our Lord’s life we are meditating on our own,” Dorothy observed. “God is to be found in what appears to be the little and the unimportant. Don’t look back 1900 years. Look around us today.”²⁶