

4-6-2022

At Worship with Thérèse of Lisieux

Tom Ryan SM

Follow this and additional works at: <https://researchonline.nd.edu.au/pastoral-liturgy>



Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#), and the [Liturgy and Worship Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ryan, Tom. "At Worship with Thérèse of Lisieux." *Pastoral Liturgy* 52, no. 3 (2021): 1-3. <https://researchonline.nd.edu.au/pastoral-liturgy/vol52/iss3/5>

This Article is brought to you by ResearchOnline@ND. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pastoral Liturgy by an authorized administrator of ResearchOnline@ND. For more information, please contact researchonline@nd.edu.au.





At Worship with Thérèse of Lisieux

By Tom Ryan sm

What is at the heart of the spiritual teaching of Thérèse of Lisieux?

It is God who does the work, God who ‘possesses’ us. God, in Christ, loves each of us unconditionally. The Gospel of Jesus begins and ends there. Thérèse’s life and writings centred on trust and confidence in the God of love.

What does this imply? The path of holiness is available to everyone—to the ordinary person, in any walk of life, within daily life. It is not for special people with ‘special’ vocations. Its core is the quality and depth of one’s love—from God, for God and for others. Again, Thérèse anticipates the universal call to holiness articulated in the documents of Vatican II.

How did this influence Thérèse’s attitude to worship?

The core of her faith was to become like a little child. ‘The ‘little way’ sums up her teaching. She uses the image of the elevator: of Jesus lifting us up with tender love. It is the child’s helplessness that is so enticing. When we come to God helpless and needy, that is irresistible in God’s eyes.

Towards the end of her life, we find a shift in Thérèse’s attitudes. It takes the form of a special gift of being able to identify with others.

This has its roots in the grace she received of truly experiencing what is like to have no faith, to be ‘in country covered by a thick fog’.¹

The images, stories and truths of Christian revelation that had been the signposts and sustenance of Thérèse’s spiritual life lost their meaning, falling away ‘like so much dust’. Her faith became a ‘pure’ faith, one anchored in the desire to believe in the midst of darkness.

In the last eighteen months of her life, she experienced in the depths of her being what it was really like to share in broken, wounded and fallen human nature. She speaks of a ready sympathy for those who commit suicide—in her day a sign of utter despair and of unbelief. ‘If I had not had any faith, I would have committed suicide without an instant’s hesitation’.² Towards the end of her life, she observed that the pain of choking fits, haemorrhages and intestinal gangrene was such that she asked her sister not to leave any poisonous medicines around her.

Again, she experiences a solidarity with unbelievers. ‘Jesus made me feel that there were really souls who have no faith’.³ Prior to this, she believed that if people rejected heaven or God, it was a deliberate rejection of divine grace, going against their inner convictions.

¹ John Clarke, OCD, *Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux* (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, Third Ed., 1996), 212.

² *Last Conversations*. Translated by John Clarke (Washington, DC: ICS Publications (1997), 196.

³ *Story of a Soul*, 212.

This was a significant shift in Thérèse, with important implications.

There may be forms of ‘unbelief’ that are made ‘in good faith’—an expression of conscience that is sincere, even if, misguided (which anticipates the Church’s position in Vatican II. She foreshadows a later growth in the appreciation of how the Spirit is at work beyond the boundaries of the Church. There are many people who seek an unknown God through a sincere search for what is true and good, namely, according to their lights.

To capture this, she draws on the rich and resonating image of table fellowship used by Jesus in the Gospels; of sitting at a ‘table filled with bitterness at which poor sinners are eating’ and that they are her ‘brothers’ (and, hence, she is their sister).⁴

Notice what is happening. Thérèse does not want to pray for sinners in expiation. Rather, as a companion, she wants to be with them to pray in their name ‘Have pity on us, O Lord, for we are poor sinners! [Luke 18:13].’

She wants to share in God’s redemptive love which participates with such souls in compassion. This finds its origins in her ‘Act of Oblation to Merciful Love’ made in 1895 in which she offered herself to be consumed by the ‘unknown, rejected’ excesses of divine love.⁵

How, then, does Thérèse’s share in the mystery of this redemptive love embracing unbelievers converge with the Church’s worship?

In the Intercessions for Good Friday, the Church prays for those who do not believe in Christ that they ‘find the truth as they walk before (God) in sincerity of heart’; and for those who do not believe in God that ‘they may find him by sincerely following all that is right’.

In *Eucharistic Prayer 4* the Church goes even further when it prays:

Remember those who take part in this offering,
those here present and all your people,
and all who seek you with a sincere heart.

In this way, the Church’s prayer acknowledges how, through the Spirit’s call, all those ‘with a sincere heart’ participate [‘take part’] in the offering of Jesus to the Father. The Church prays not just *for* them but *with* them.

In these examples we see, in the Church’s prayer, that, in a hidden, mysterious way, non-believers can be ‘associated with the paschal mystery’ in the Church’s worship.⁶ The Church is stating that there are people who, by their good lives, reveal an implicit love of ‘God in their hearts while not knowing him with their heads’.⁷

Does Thérèse’s growing conviction of being seated at the table of ‘sinners’ also embrace those who strive to live a good moral life and find the hidden God rather than the God articulated in conscious theism and religious faith?

Would Thérèse of Lisieux be surprised at this development in the Church’s awareness sixty years later with the Second Vatican Council and reflected today in the Church’s worship?

⁴ *Story of a Soul*, 212.

⁵ *Story of a Soul*, 180.

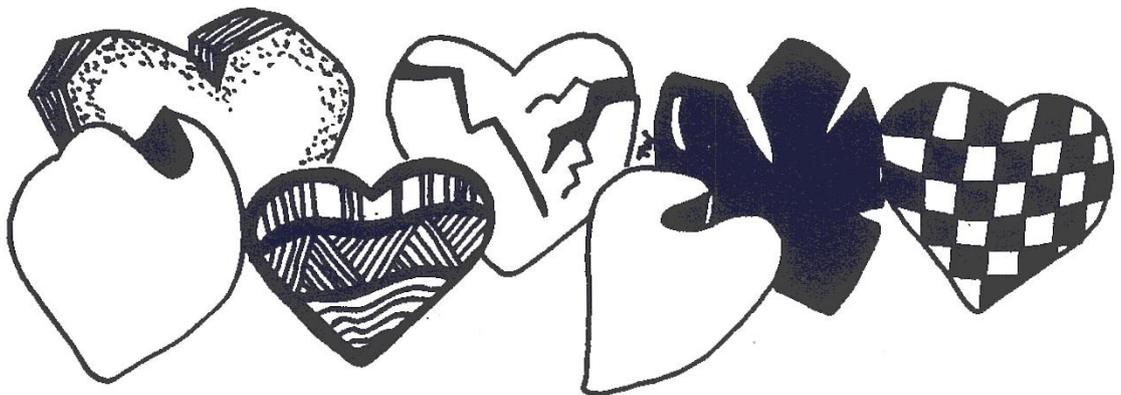
⁶ *Gaudium et Spes*, par. 22.

⁷ Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (London, Darton, Longman and Todd; New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 278.

Perhaps, it is now a Thérèse breaking bread with her loved brother and sister 'sinners', less around a table of 'bitterness' but more one of rejoicing—in the scope of God's mercy and hospitality...

For Reflection

1. What image do you have of Thérèse of Lisieux as a person?
2. Do these thoughts about her make a difference in how you see her? How so?
3. Do you consider that Thérèse of Lisieux might have something to offer people who find belief difficult or who struggle with life, even, to the point of thinking about suicide?
4. How do you respond to the way the Church includes in its worship 'those who seek [God] with a sincere heart'?



*May the changing moods of the human heart
never blind us to God.*