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Filial Relationship, Mercy and limitation in Thérèse of Lisieux: Towards a Thérésian Theological Anthropology and its Implications

Judith Schneider
University of Notre Dame Australia

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CONCLUSION

Findings, Significance, Implications for Further Research

This chapter will restate the research question, give a summary of the findings, some implications and further research directions.

We asked: What are the implications of Therese of Lisieux's experience of filial love, mercy and limitation, psychologically, autobiographically and theologically? For its methodology, the research used 'filial love', the core metaphor and integrating principle in Thérèse's thought, as both its hermeneutic lens and investigative tool. Filial love [and its components of grace/mercy and limitation] was applied in three forms:

a) Psychologically, using Sroufe's model of emotional development, and McDargh's model of religious development [Chs. 2 and 3];

Ch 4 represented a possible diverting influence, carrying Thérèse into adulthood;

b) Autobiographically, the interpretative window through which Thérèse comes to understand God in the light of her life experiences [Chs. 5 and 6];

c) Theologically, as a tool to explore the implications of Thérèse's interpretative account in terms of the theology of God and of the human person [Chs. 7 and 8].

1. Summary of the Findings

Context

Chapter One set the stage for Thérèse's entrance. Philosophy, science, and politics, responding to physical and social factors such as health, freedom/governance, industry, and learning, gave rise to rationalism, empiricism, romantic idealism and the beginnings of the disciplines of psychology and anthropology. Such movements affected European Christianity, where individual figures expressed publicly their inner response to God, sometimes prompting support, sometimes opposition. Diverse experiences, and their expressions (e.g., Calvin, Ignatius, Bérulle and Jansenius) led to clashes over doctrinal formulations, to varied spiritualities for living the faith, to frustration, even scorn (Voltaire), over parental harshness associated with Jansenist Catholicism and 'the Church hindering scientific research'. There was both resistance

to modernism (yearning for a God-oriented society), and disillusion over a punishing paternalistic Church and its God. Luther, felt and shaped by his father's harsh 'fairness', confronted it, uncompromisingly, in the Church. Alternatively, Ignatius, Bérulle, Teresa of Avila and de Hauranne sought reform within by various felt-missions. Using Erikson's study, we showed a link between Luther's parent-child relations and his theology, anticipating its presence in Thérèse. Finally, Thérèse entered a society and family where her course as a woman, if she was to be favoured by the God/the Catholic Church, was closely prescribed.

Psychological

Chapter Two strengthened the link between early-life experience and one's theology, introduced by Erikson in relation to Luther, via McDargh's research on religious development. Through Sroufe's paradigm of emotional development, we showed Thérèse experienced uniquely, and in a general way, mercy toward her limitation which could be understood as grace. Lastly, we proposed that Thérèse deviated from her 'true' infancy 'self', but, via suffering, gradually returned to it. In anticipation of theological grace and mercy (God's response to humanity), grace and mercy were explored in their non-theological form.

Human development was examined from the perspective of psychological/behavioural research through Sroufe (Ainsworth, Bowlby), and from the formation of basic trust leading to religious faith, through McDargh (Niebuhr, Winnicott and Rizzuto). Graciousness was found to be the caregiver/parent's characteristic disposition and behaviour toward their infant's limitation. Parent-infant dialogue organized and integrated the infant's complex of physical, cognitive, and affective growth, engendering basic trust, the basis for religious faith. In Sroufe's model for development, we noted that the (M)Other attends to her child so to be familiar with its needs, moods, limitations, capacities. In her desire to 'grow the child', the (M)Other relieves the child's limitation via a sensitive and merciful/gracious dialogue, to which the child responds. She bends down and lifts the infant, 'catches' its attention, holds it with her loving gaze (Fitzgerald), guides its affect, physical movement, and knowledge on its behalf, allowing herself to be impacted by the child's responses, so that it feels a sense

of being in control, until its capability is filled. This mutual contingency, a unique familiar ‘to and fro’ in what Winnicott terms as a “holding environment,” producing an inner psychic reality,¹ leads to a sense of security, and allows the child’s innate push to explore.

Thérèse’s holding environment was deemed to be “good enough” (Winnicott’s term for enabling a normative development) through the evidence of her confident outgoing bids for affection, and exploration. Chapter Three, then, supplied further evidence for experiencing grace/mercy in toddlerhood, in Zélie and Thérèse’s sister/mothers furthering Thérèse’s intentionality and value sensitivity (here Zélie transmitted some high expectations, channelled further through her sisters Marie and Pauline who Thérèse was eager to please/emulate) and in preschool years with father Louis in role play (an intermittent event). This would impact Thérèse’s self-development, the implicit subject of Chapters Five and Six.

Chapter Four

In an effort to demonstrate a return to a former sense of self, we showed Thérèse, through her engagement with Arminjon’s thought, diverting from an early dialogue of grace and mercy. Thérèse drew symbols from Arminjon, which had negative aspects. God was ‘dangerous’ for those who did not act with self-deprecating docility, did not reject secularism and its proponents, or did not fastidiously seek purity. Bodiliness itself seemed an obstacle to God, as sin coincided with products of bodiliness such as being a relational subject in space and time, possessing sexual and survival drives, incomplete mastery of affects, and partial knowing.

Autobiographical

McDargh’s elaboration of Winnicott’s True Self/False Self paradigm (a collection of positive and negative constructs about the self) was applied to Thérèse’s self-perception (predominantly in *Story of a Soul*) in chapters Five and Six. A contrast emerged between a True Self and a False Self in Thérèse’s own sense of self and God. The True

¹ Donald W. Winnicott, *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development* (London, New York: Karnac, 1965, 1990), 45.

Self represented a sense of being ‘good’, through the prenatal symbiotic union with another (Balint), confirmed by a valuing gaze (Fitzgerald), and by a dialogue where the caregiver empowers the limited one to initiate affective-engagement; the False Self represented a poor sense of being of value, a sense of limitation as dangerous, distasteful, and a hindrance to (maintaining) relations with another, ‘the rules for operating in relation’ as self-destroying. In the True Self, limitation is perceived as eliciting tenderness; in the False Self as refusal and rejection.

We found in Thérèse’s writing no pronounced diversion away from, and return to, her early self, but found she held her True Self and False Self constructs together. Her False Self constructs (e.g., I am childish in my neediness and should ‘grow up’, I am proud and should learn humility through humiliations, I must strive to be perfect to be acceptable to God) diminished through a dialogue with God which increasingly resembled her holding environment – where limitation was graciously eased or tenderly smiled upon. It also emerged that Thérèse’s self-becoming involved the projection of the drama of an inner world onto exterior persons and events, the resolution of which was often found by fulfilment of expectations. Early experiences repeated themselves in different guises (God/Zélie as abandoning, Thérèse as a stranger in her own family, her true family in heaven/elsewhere). Further, Thérèse felt this drama watched like the hagiographer’s narrative, where a divine-parent benevolently watches “heaven’s” child.

In her reliance on an affective knowing of the past, we found Thérèse rejected her culture’s theology of striving to *prove* acceptability to God through a kind of morbid, shrinking adulthood. The research hoped to find signs of her refusing images devaluing this-world processes (perpetual pre-sexual vulnerability, an ethereal state, with ultimate order oriented around purgatory’s purification and hell’s punishments, preferring symbols – relics, statues – mediating the non-embodied over bodily encounters), and of her refusing to succeed in what amounted to the religious ambitions of others (being an unobtrusive “flower”). Our investigation showed that while these remain in Thérèse, she does return to knowing that a child’s love for God (unacknowledged by Pauline when she is eight) is still love for God, and that her ‘unimpressive’ (unnoticed) efforts to love, her ‘immature’ ways (running away from failure, getting others to decide things) are well received by God. Images such as sexual

abstinence as ‘perfection’ fade into the background behind an emphasis on God’s parent-like advocacy for the ‘small’ one.

Thérèse’s ‘youngest daughter’ state became a metaphor for her relationship with God – allowing a correspondence between her this-life experience and a transcendent God-for-her reality. A projected God-perspective gave meaning to the physical boundaries of existence. By imagining God as ultimate parent, she re-engages with the God-object representations of her holding environment, to experience God as a living presence who enables, empowers, responds, imparts courage to her. In her sense of ‘longing for God’ as pointing to God previously implanting desires in her, and feeling sustained “from one moment to the next” rather than depending on a store of provisions, Thérèse intuitively grasps the phenomenology of human development. Longing represents a conditioned desire for one’s parent, and feeling sustained, the secure base a parent provides. Sudden knowing (“lights”) – owed to the miracle of subliminal mind activity – is valued for its opening a new pathway from darkness/pain to possibility.

Theological – Toward a Thérésian Anthropology

Toward deriving a Thérésian theology, we noted that Thérèse’s experience of God as within pointed to God’s transcendence as immanent. In the activity of prayer, a person enters their “inner world,” which reliably attests to their unique history and objective fact of their development. This living and organic ‘world’, constituted by experience felt as certainty – as prior and true – encapsulates a concrete primary, or foundational, experience of grace. Change occurs in relation to this; here the felt-dimensions of God are reaffirmed or reassessed. Here Thérèse interacted with Jesus – early-experience symbols informing her of the true character of mercy. Responding to the Other blessing from within resembles the Holy Spirit’s effect on a person. From here ‘inspiring’ wisdom welled up, such as sensing that practicing virtue is aided by external means, and motivation flowed (to sustain all vocations). From here arose a sense of limitation and vulnerability as the good ground of human relating – leading Thérèse to assert these as pivotal to her reception of God – and from here, during her loss of feeling and vision with respect to the things of heaven, Thérèse drew the tenacity to persevere in confident trust in God to continue to ‘the shore (heaven’s hearth) to where her sailboat was

aimed'. Constructively re-engaging with transitional objects for God (one's loving Other) restored self-becoming and revived relations with the Other as gracious.

Chapter Seven observed three types of self-understanding in relation to God, represented by the metaphor of Hebrew Scripture, existential self-examination (universalising the human "condition"), and scholastic Aristotelian substantialism. We noted that Thérèse's shift from substantialism (especially its rigid/mechanical nineteenth century form) to the relational metaphor of Hebrew scripture resonated with William James' research, and with the thought of John Macmurray and Reinhold Niebuhr. James asserted that creedal formulations are derived from experience. Macmurray proposed that knowing is at the service of relation, our being's primary aim (as opposed to relation at the service of the primary aim of knowing.) Niebuhr noted that humans self-transcend through the height at which the human spirit is able to survey the scene, none other than the human capacity to know God. Rejecting this as the basis for any mystical union with God, he names two poles of sin: on one side, imagining ourselves as all spirit we fall to pride over our knowing (our spiritual capacity), and on the other, holding ourselves as physical and focusing on our bodily self alone we fall to anxiety over its limitation and loss.

Chapter Eight critically reviewed Lonergan's underlying anthropology: human consciousness, equipped with four *a priori* transcendent aims, is progressing in history (Hegel), and has the capacity to be enlightened to a transcendent knowing, by love. It stated Thérèse's thought according to Lonergan's four forms of meaning, and argued that Lonergan's categories might encourage a focus on "conversion" as a phenomenon rather than observing the inherently relational nature of the process involved in becoming authentically human. It finally noted von Balthasar's writing in relation to Thérèse regarding personhood. His thought on holiness and mission sometimes imposed on her rather than drew from her. While not acknowledging Thérèse in his writing on "becoming a child," his thought here relates to hers.

2. The Significance of the Findings

Original to the research was an attempt to make an explicit connection between Thérèse of Lisieux's childhood experience and her felt-sense of mercy, a corrective for the spiritual practices and non-merciful ideas of God around her.

While psychological insights with respect to Thérèse have been previously offered, this study focused on a return to what is most real (felt-knowing via transitional object-representations), using McDargh's work on religious faith-development. Thérèse's 'most real' was found to surround being-in-relation, critical to human goals, and important to theology in sensitizing us to the poverty of human-being apart from relation. Further, an exploration into Arminjon's influence on Thérèse revealed a sense of heaven (hope in the future drawn from the past) emanating from the memory of her family gathered around the hearth (*foyer*).

It is also significant, as we saw through Sroufe and the studies of McDargh, Macmurray and Fairbairn, that being in relation opens the opportunity for being real (to impact our environment). What Thérèse senses as most real (her True self) affirms the felt-realities of filial-favour, a metaphor in the Hebrew tradition, which is ultimately the privilege of unconditional relation, and belonging to one's parent-creator. This is central to a contemporary psychological understanding of confidence generated from an inner-world construct, needed for self-becoming, and the development of our God-representation.

Finally, as indicated at the start of this investigation, we have endeavoured to offer a *preliminary* study in making Thérèse's thought available to theological anthropology. We see in Thérèse an affirmation of an original 'you are good' (in place of an Aristotelian-Thomistic 'good from one's final end' perspective) as the matrix and continuance in life. Such a perspective respects life as progressive and allows psychological insights to be integrated with theology in a positive way.

3. Implications

The first implication concerns the experience of and the theology of grace. Thérèse's activity and written thought shows grace is felt along a continuum of the developing

self, first as indispensable help given in the face of early-life limitation, but then, when needed, as a conscious existential sense (of God our universal help in the wide bounds of embodied existence in time in this universe). This understanding of grace has three significant implications. First, it reveals *prayer* as critical to our self-becoming in relation to God, our ultimate other, and the neighbour we are estranged from. Second, to feel ourselves/our goodness as defended by God's gracious (merciful) activity, impels us *to offer likewise to others* from a wellspring of (transcendent) grace. Finally, we are called to *share* the reality of our *limitation*, which was/is the beginning ground for grace (concrete in history). In this world, limitation binds us together in relation; here we partake in God's gracious action. Limitation precedes grace, and, as its intended locus, leads to one necessary thing: relation.

4. A Mediated Theology, and Further Research

To bring this research to a close, all may be brought into synergy via Lonergan's second phase in his methodology, 'mediated theology', comprised of: Foundations, Doctrines, Systematics, and Communications.²

Foundations: What has Been Attended, Interpreted, and Evaluated. What is my commitment to the matter under discussion?

Thérèse felt joy through a sense of God valuing her. She felt God's "grace" and mercy consonantly: both described what she received as an infant from her parents. The Biblical call to not forget God in a time of sufficiency is a call to remember our origin of entire dependence on another and the mercy we then received. Dependence on another who sought to interact with us, and delighted to treat us mercifully made our life's procession possible, physically, intellectually, emotionally, psychologically and spiritually. It was where communion began.

Our agency first emerges through parental grace. Later, when it is thwarted, it is enabled through feeling 'God's gracious mercy', noted by Fitzgerald and Matthew in their exploration of "impasse" and "impact," respectively. There is value in

² Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 127-132; 267- 368. Supplementing the four forms of meaning earlier used in this thesis, "mediated theology," will be used to convey Thérèse's activity and thought as theology. Foundations, Doctrines, Systematics, and Communications, are preceded by "Research, Interpretation, History, and Dialectic," which lead to "foundations" whose central concern is 'conversion'. Consistent with our argument in Chapter Eight, we will name Thérèse's progress not 'conversion', but: True Self realization based on felt remembrance.

incorporating the processes visible in Thérèse into the theology of grace, similar to Dom Sebastian Moore's incorporation the phenomenon of victimhood into the theology of sin. Many of us, on reading *Story of a Soul*, were relieved to find that, in spite of apparent failure in expressing goodness, our sense of being good and desire to increase in it, is itself of value. Thérèse shows that this feeling is not futile. In realizing our efforts were distorted by a compromised agency, resulting from less than merciful relationships, we found ourselves healed of a poor sense of self. Further, by recognizing our own limitation and its causes, we might better respond to the call to 'love our neighbour'. Comprehending others' limitation through our own, we become forgiving, and humble with regard to what we can do, lessening the tendency to accuse others of bad intent.

Doctrines (How do I express my new commitment?)

God, as Thérèse gives witness to, is indeed gracious. God is the source of one human valuing another, and like a warming hearth ("foyer") that we gaze into, in the passage of self-becoming.³ Here is an opportunity to appreciate God's creative work – God's valuing us is central to unfolding human existence. As Thérèse endeavoured to, we should promote an environment conducive to valuing the other, a sign of God in our midst.

Systematics (How am I to make sense of this new commitment?)

God, the source of our value, communicates our value through human care, from one generation to the next, through birth and during the infant's development. We see God in the psychic structures that form in human self-development. These structures ensure agency toward forming new relationships, ultimately allowing us to value others into self-hood, and fullness of life. All humans are born into a life where mercy is integral to the possibility of survival, let alone happiness. Parental mercy, a repeating behaviour, in its most sensitive shape may be described as 'graciousness': the one who has ability, helps, with restraint, humour, lightness, and generosity, the one who is limited in some way. Human grace is not felt as a mere chore by the parent, but giving favour is pleasurable— the giver also receives. If, analogically, God is like us (humans created in God's likeness) the argument as to whether God's freedom is compromised when

³ This metaphor suits the winter temperatures of Normandy. For biblical regions, cool running water is apt.

responding to limited creatures fails to appreciate human parent-child relation. All that the parent-child relationship entails might be brought into the discussion on God-human relation, Theological Anthropology.

Communications (How do I enter my new commitment into dialogue with the contemporary situation?)

With psychology and theology in tandem, the subject of grace may become relevant to all persons. Instead of 'losing' people of faith to psychology as a rival, psychological truths may be transferred to faith practice, especially in the meeting between psychoanalysis and spirituality. Lonergan's merging agency with intentionality, under four imperatives, should be qualified to accommodate the fact that those who experienced a graceless infancy are being entirely reasonable in directing their adult energies to finding a face whose gaze values them.

We must continue to critique religious and existential writing from the perspective of the fully fledged mature male, barely aware of his growing years, let alone of the significance of his mother's help given in his infancy. Theology should welcome the efforts in psychology and psychoanalysis to understand the human process of becoming. Moral theology could rethink notions of good in the light of humans pursuing a fundamental God-originating goal: to be in a relation with one who gives us value.

In the light of the above, further investigation could be directed

- i. to consciously incorporating the metaphors of Hebrew Scripture that aid self-development and renewed trust in God's mercy, into our present day liturgy/pastoral practice.
- ii. to the insight from psychological studies that show neglect (rejection) or violence imposed on the infant is assimilated into its sense of self. Felt by some (Augustine, Luther) to be an original 'condition', this tends to be projected as an expectation. Thérèse, while not immune from such assimilation, tried to assert something other with regard to how God views us. A thorough theological exploration into psychological research on infants and into Alice Miller's comments about self, sin and victimhood is

needed to bring theology in line with current understanding on the helplessness of the victim who sins.

- iii. To Abrahamic inter-faith dialogue in the light of the findings.⁴ We are bound together in God's gracious love. In common, we can hold Jesus (increasingly claimed by the Jewish community as one of their own) as pre-eminently sensing goodness as originating from/connected with God. In this understanding, God's spirit is a metaphor for grace, the 'holding environment' that enables life's continuance.
- iv. To the shape of priesthood as less the administration of Sacraments and molding of creedal fidelity in the Catholic 'citizen', and more of ministering grace, using filial imagery. We should perhaps reclaim the familial God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (giving wisdom from the mother's 'lap'), lost to the Hellenistic God of the citizen (in the public training of a good kingdom member).
- v. To rethinking a moral theology which focuses on an 'other', an *exterior* assessor, expertly evaluating our activity. The role of the other, rather, should be remedial – mercifully restoring our value. Evaluation, an *interior* mechanism, will then function properly.

Conclusion

In Chapter One of this study, John McDargh sets the scene. An understanding of human development follows from the "metaphor of the world as a stage," where human birth is "like the entrance of a new character onto the stage. The drama is one that began well

⁴ Chapter Four highlighted the underlying psychology in certain points found in Arminjon's *The End of the Present World*. For example, its desire for vengeance, and negative generalizations about those it castigates – Jews, secularists, and atheists – reflects an adversarial disposition. While Thérèse does not repeat this aspect of Arminjon's millenarism, *The End of the Present World* is now advertised under the guise that, because it inspired Thérèse, it remains of value. See <http://www.susanconroy.com.com/endoftheworld.shtml> and <http://www.spiritdaily.net/theend2.htm> , accessed on 16/02/2013. A concern is that anti-Semitism lingers in some circles. Where the Christian Scriptures are interpreted as a timeless text, first century Jewish quarrels are read as though they belong to our present day.

before his or her arrival and will continue indefinitely after the character utters his or her last lines...”⁵

Upon its entrance on to that stage, the infant develops an inside as well as an outside, an “inner psychic reality,” (Winnicott) via a “holding environment:” a place of mutual contingency between itself and a maternal other, a familiar and unique ‘to and fro’ (Sroufe) towards a sense of self, enabling a separate initiative and the innate push to explore.

Thérèse’s mother’s face functions as the first “mirror” into which Thérèse looks to discover her own identity, Fitzgerald observes; “her own reflection in a loving gaze of total *regard* is foundational for ... [her] life and her experience of God.”⁶ At three years of age, Thérèse exercises her sense of self and initiative.⁷

What Therese receives from her mother she then gives; her texts mother the reader and the drama, begun before her birth, continues beyond her death. We leave the final words to Thérèse.

I am a child and ...their parents...do not hesitate to satisfy the desires of the little ones whom they love as much as themselves...(1896),

You have said to me as the father of the prodigal son said to his older son:
EVERYTHING that is mine is yours (1897),

leading her to confidently say in the year of her death (1897):

⁵ John McDargh, *Psychoanalytic Object Relations Theory and the Study of Religion: On Faith and the imaging of God* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983), 214.

⁶ Constance Fitzgerald, “The Mission of Thérèse of Lisieux,” *The Way Supplement* (Summer 1997), 74-96.75-76, At 86, Fusing mother-regard with God, she becomes the “‘heart’ of all that there is... the ‘core’ within the core,” of God imaged as “the body of Mother-God, that is, “that which supports all life [and is] the matrix out of which everything evolves.”

⁷ Thérèse states (Zélie reports), “...if I were not good, I would go to hell... but I know what I would do. I would fly to you who would be in heaven. What would God do to take me?” Zélie adds “I saw in her eyes that she positively believed that God could do nothing to her if she were in the arms of her mother.” Thérèse of Lisieux, *Letters of St. Thérèse of Lisieux: General Correspondence Volume II 1890-1897*, translated by John Clarke OCD (Washington DC: ICS Publications, 1988), 1226.

I really count on not remaining inactive in heaven. My desire is to work still for the Church and for souls. I am asking God for this and am quite certain He will answer me. Are not the angels continually occupied with us without their ever ceasing to see the divine Face and to lose themselves in the Ocean of Love without shores? Why would Jesus not allow me to imitate them? ... I shall see all that is necessary for him [you, my little brother], and I shall leave no rest to God if he does not give me all I shall want!