RECIPROCAL UNION IN
ST. THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX STORY OF A SOUL

SHELDON R. TABILE, O.CARM.

TITUS BRANDSMA INSTITUUT
Radboud University
sheldon_ruah@yahoo.com

This paper takes a spiritual perspective on St. Thérèse of Lisieux's Story of the Soul. The central focus of this study is on the text's portrayal of God and St. Thérèse of Lisieux as partners in a reciprocal relationship. The reader's ability to read becomes sharper as he explores the soul's receptivity, reciprocity, responsiveness, and responsibility in response to God's action. In spiritual reading, the emphasis is on identifying the ongoing relationships in the text. Readers are given knowledge of reciprocal union in this manner: the soul completely surrenders to God, and He fully submits to them in this relationship.

Keywords: Spiritual Reading, Story of a Soul, St. Thérèse of Lisieux, Reciprocity, and Union
INTRODUCTION

The Story of a Soul is the spiritual autobiography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux. More than just a flow of her experiences from childhood until her last years, it is a narrative of the dynamic relationship that takes place between God and her. This paper looks into the dynamics of relationships through spiritual reading.

Spiritual reading, in a general understanding, focuses on the dynamic relationship that takes place between God and the human reality, in this case, St. Thérèse. On the one hand, the reader sharpens his eye in looking to God’s reality as it purifies, purgates, illuminates, perfects, absorbs, and unites with the soul. On the other hand, he looks into human reality as it responds to God’s action through receptivity, reciprocity, responsiveness, and responsibility. Spiritual reading is not to achieve identification, oneness, approximation, projection, or sharing of our experiences. It is not an epistemic exercise in the sense of sympathy or empathy, but rather the discernment of the relational processes that take place in the text.

The captured dynamics of relationships are paradigms. Through this paradigmatic approach, each chapter of the Story of a Soul expounds on the dynamic relationship in the text that is, reciprocal union, a perpetual giving of the soul and God to each other making them in the union. As the paper goes chapter by chapter, we pay attention to the various layers and aspects of this reciprocal union.

DESIRE AS SIMPLY OBEYING AND PLEASING GOD

Chapter 1: Alençon (1873–1877). In the beginning Chapter of St. Thérèse’s Story of a Soul, she lays down the foundation of her soul’s story: simply obeying God, pleasing Him, and choosing all that God wills for her! We situate these lines in her dynamic relationship with God. Thérèse chooses God and God chooses Thérèse. This is not to be seen in terms of sequence but as one moment in the relationship understood as reciprocity. Thérèse chooses God as she attunes and disposes her entire self to God (the sensitive life and all the faculties —intellect, memory, and will), and at the same moment, God gives Himself entirely to her. God’s giving of Himself is not conditioned by the desire of the human person. God gives Himself entirely; however, He is not received well because the human person is not attuned and disposed to Him. In that mutual giving of self, God fulfills and satisfies the person’s deepest desire as expressed in Thérèse’s words: “I shall begin to sing what I must sing eternally: ‘The Mercies of the Lord.’”

Fulfillment and satisfaction lie not in seeing that we have done better or that we have advanced in our lives when we compare ourselves with others. Nor does it lie in whether we are lilies, roses, daisies, or violets; rather, “[p]erfection consists in doing His will, in being what He wills us to be.” This is perfection in terms of the satisfaction and fullness of our fundamental desire, for in choosing to do God’s will, one chooses all, one gains all.

1 St. Thérèse of Lisieux wrote three manuscripts: A narrative of her upbringing was written for her sisters in 1895; a recollection of her last private retreat was written for her sister Marie in 1896; and a reflection on her religious life was written for her prioress, Mother Marie de Gonzague, in June 1897. This timeless classic, in which Thérèse relates the narrative of her soul, has been translated into more than sixty languages and has had a magical impact on countless other souls as well. In addition to being the sole English translation from Thérèse’s genuine manuscript, Fr. John Clarke’s translation published by the Institute of Carmelite Studies in Washington D.C. is by far the greatest English translation available.
3 Ibid.
4 Thérèse of Lisieux, 14.
We find similar counsel in St. John of the Cross – “If you want all, desire nothing.” The desire for nothing is detachment from all attachments that make us unfree to choose God as our all. When one chooses all, one must detach from the limited ways of desiring. To choose all, we must relinquish all and, only desire God.

What does it mean when one chooses God? It means endlessly re-inclining and re-desiring God. Every now and then, we slide into “attachments” that hinder our relationship with God. When this happens, our natural, immediate, and habitual response should be to re-incline and re-desire God. To choose God is not a one-shot deal. It is a never-ending desire for Him. God is not one of many choices of which we say, “God I choose you.” God is the ONLY option. He is the “all” in our options. I choose all, I choose God, I will only God.

**LOSING AND EMBRACING: A MOMENT TO RE-DESIRING GOD**

Chapter 2: Les Buissonets (1877–1881). In this chapter, we see St. Thérèse’s initiation into the dark night experience as she loses her mother. St. John of the Cross speaks of one dark night in different phases: Purgative, Illuminative, and Unitive. In each phase, a type of wound is experienced: absence, intimacy, and union respectively. St. Thérèse’s loss of her Mother was a wounding experience for her, which initiated her into the one dark night. Losses in our lives are not just deprivations but ways of purgation and purification. These losses (persons, dreams, health, among others) are opportune moments to once again embrace God. They are a deeper layer of re-desiring God. With one’s rekindling of desire, God acts on the person. St. Thérèse tells us, “Ah! if God had not showered His beneficent rays upon His little flower, she could never have accustomed herself to earth, for she was too weak to stand up against the rains and the storms.”

Purgation is a moment of God’s action. It is important to note that God gives us only what we can bear. This applies both to graces and trials in life. St. Thérèse reminds us, “God will grant His elect as much glory as they can take, the last having nothing to envy in the first.”

Part of the dark night experience is the inability to meditate, yet one is absorbed in real prayer. St. John of the Cross “tells us that the longing, the ‘sweet melancholy,’ the feeling of ‘Absence’ that results from our encounters with creation is an experience of God, a glimpse of God that fills us with the desire to see God face to face...Thus, the God whom we long for is in the longing.”

Also, in this chapter, St. Thérèse reminds us of what will make us full and what will truly satisfy us. It does not come from comparing our spiritual life with others but by directing our attention to our receptiveness to God – to the kind of receptacle we are before God. We are full when we see that we are little vessels before God but fully receptive to Him in our lives. To have this disposition is to imitate the Blessed Mother, little before God and yet totally receptive to Him, making her full of grace.

**PURIFICATION AND PURGATION AS PERFECTING OF DESIRE**

Chapter 3 – The Distressing Years (1881–1883). In this chapter, we read of the ongoing suffering of St. Thérèse as she experienced a continual separation from her loved ones since Pauline was
now set to enter the Carmelite Monastery. This filled her heart with sorrow affecting her deeply. St. Thérèse tells us, “I admit that the sufferings which preceded your entrance were nothing in comparison with those which followed it…I didn’t understand, and I said in the depths of my heart: ‘Pauline is lost to me!’ It is surprising to see how much my mind developed in the midst of suffering; it developed to such a degree that it wasn’t long before I became sick.”

We can say that St. Thérèse’s sorrow contributed to her sickness that was “so grave that, according to human calculations, I wasn’t to recover from it.” However, for St. Thérèse it was not just a psychosomatic condition but a spiritual one, “The sickness which overtook me certainly came from the demon; infuriated by your entrance into Carmel, he wanted to take revenge on me for the wrong our family was to do him in the future….I believed I had become ill on purpose, and this was a real martyrdom for my soul…. God, willing no doubt to purify and especially to humble me, left me with this interior martyrdom until my entrance into Carmel.” To speak of our sufferings as spiritual is to see them from God’s action of purifying and purging our soul.

What sustained St. Thérèse in these spiritual battles were prayers. It was not just her prayers for herself but prayers offered for her: “One day I saw Papa enter Marie’s room…He…told her to write to Paris and have some Masses said at Our Lady of Victories so that she would cure his poor little girl. Ah! how touched I was to see my dear king’s faith and love!”

The experience of being touched interiorly is God’s action in our soul. That people pray for us is a profound expression of their love for us. This helps us see even more that God is actually working in our very condition.

As we have said previously, the moment of purgation and purification is a moment for God to communicate His presence to us. In Thérèse’s case, it came through the Blessed Mother: “All of a sudden, the Blessed Virgin appeared beautiful to me, so beautiful that never had I seen anything so attractive; her face was suffused with an ineffable benevolence and tenderness, but what penetrated to the very depths of my soul was the ‘ravishing smile of the Blessed Virgin.’ At that instant, all my pain disappeared, and two large tears glistened on my eyelashes, and flowed down my cheeks silently, but they were tears of unmixed joy… Ah! it was really to her [Marie], to her touching prayers that I owed the grace of the Queen of Heaven’s smile.”

Chapter 4 – First Communion, Boarding School. In this chapter, St. Thérèse speaks of ‘fidelity in little things,’ an important layer in desiring God. Faithfulness is sustained in the ‘little things’ in our lives – daily tasks, duties, responsibilities, devotions. One grows in patience and perseverance through this. There are times when we dream of doing great things only to escape the task that God has placed before us. We want to help the suffering people of Africa however, we fail to assist those who are suffering within our families and communities. “St. Teresa of Avila writes: ‘The devil gives us great desires so that we will avoid setting ourselves to the task at hand, serving our Lord in possible things, and instead be content with having desired the impossible.’

Holy Perseverance: Desire that Remains in God

11 *Thérèse of Lisieux*, 89.
12 *Thérèse of Lisieux*, 92.
13 *Thérèse of Lisieux*, 90.
14 *Thérèse of Lisieux*, 95.
15 *Thérèse of Lisieux*, 96.
16 *Thérèse of Lisieux*, 146.
Further, we also read of moments when St. Thérèse temporarily experienced union with God through the reception of communion, “...I felt that I was loved...for a long time now Jesus and poor little Thérèse looked at and understood each other. That day, it was no longer simply a look, it was a fusion; they were no longer two, Thérèse had vanished as a drop of water is lost in the immensity of the ocean.” This is an important insight into the dynamics of the relationship that took place between God and St. Thérèse. The foretaste of oneness was primarily the action of God in St. Thérèse. Union is God’s work. But it also shows the extent of the receptivity of St. Thérèse for the union to take place. Unobstructed desire is necessary for union which means that at this point, St. Thérèse had grown into that unhindered and full desiring of God. However, it is important to note that this foretaste of union takes place in ‘dark night’ moments which become God’s way of infusing strength, fortitude, and peace into the soul. Scrupulosity is the effect of being initiated into the dark night and receiving illumination. In the darkness, the ‘eyes’ do not see in the way they should. They are not accustomed to God’s light that comes into the soul. Instead of delighting in the light, the eyes gaze on what the light reveals: imperfections, wretchedness, and sinfulness. This makes the soul scrupulous. “[But] scruples came to paralyze this impetus, and she was very troubled, too, during her first years in Carmel. This was partly because she had heard it said in some sermons that it was very easy to offend God and to stain one’s purity of conscience. This was a real torment to her.” However, once the eyes become attuned to the light, the attention shifts from one’s sins to the grace that comes through the light.

**Conversion as Re-desiring God**

Chapter 5 – After the Grace of Christmas. In this chapter, we get a glimpse of what took place in St. Thérèse’s desire. On Christmas night of 1186, after hearing her father’s remark, Thérèse spoke of a change that took place in her heart. What was this change? It was a change in terms of desire – a redirection. Through the work of God, she outgrew her childishness. She no longer acted “immaturely,” swayed by her emotional life, but instead acted based on her fundamental desire. This speaks of a rediscovery of her soul’s strength, lost since the death of her mother. It seems that the loss of her mother weakened her will.

However, it was not only St. Thérèse acting on her “childishness” but also God. She tells us, God “made me strong and courageous, arming me with His weapons. Since that night, I have never been defeated in any combat. The source of my tears was dried up,” [and I received] the grace of leaving my childhood, in a word, the grace of my complete conversion.” The conversion here took place in, once again exercising her will, a re-desiring of God.

Another aspect of the redirection of the desire was when Thérèse was disappointed because Celine did not notice her little services, making her unhappy and leaving her in tears. Though there was a consciousness that all was done for God alone, still St. Thérèse needed to grow in this awareness. We see in this chapter that the emotional life is not the same as our spiritual life. When we do not receive the expected praise for our good actions, frustration sets in. This frustration which arises from our emotional life, reveals more of ourselves than God. This frustration can be a snare in which the soul wallows. However, when one does not allow

17 Thérèse of Lisieux, 140.
18 Thérèse of Lisieux, 142.
19 Thérèse of Lisieux, 152.
oneself to be trapped, it becomes a moment of reclining to God. St. Thérèse tells us, “I don’t allow myself to be trapped by it, for I expect no reward at all on earth. I do everything for God, and in this way, I can lose nothing (italic added).”

Together with St. Thérèse, we also see what took place in the desire of Louis. Although Louis had reservations at the outset concerning St. Thérèse’s intention of entering the monastery, he did not discourage her. Instead, St. Thérèse recounts that “[h]e didn’t say one word to turn me from my vocation, simply contenting himself with the statement that I was still very young to make such a serious decision.” St. Thérèse saw this as an encouragement from her father, “Papa seemed to be rejoicing with that joy that comes from a sacrifice already made.”

**Obedience as Growing Desire to God**

Chapter 6 – The trip to Rome (1887). St. Thérèse experienced a series of losses in her life: the death of her mother, the entry of her sisters into the monastery, and leaving the home due to schooling, among others. These tested the intimacy she enjoyed in her early years, but she responded well on their trip to Rome. When Thérèse knelt before Our Lady of Victories, she experienced God’s love through the maternal presence of the Blessed Mother. It was not just a restoration of the intimacy that was cut off due to the losses in her life. It was a Divine intimacy, healing her woundedness: physically, emotionally, and spiritually. “I understood she was watching over me, that I was her child. I could no longer give her any other name but ‘Mama.’”

On this trip, we note Thérèse’s ability to see through the exterior of persons. This was specifically about the weakness and fragility she saw among priests. However, instead of being scandalized or discouraged from her calling to become a Carmelite, it led her to deepen her vocation as she saw the need to pray for the priests, “I understood my vocation in Italy.” (Emphasis supplied.) She knew what to do with human weakness, not making a mountain out of a molehill but lifting it to God. For it is only God who can bestow the necessary strength in human weakness.

We also see in this chapter how St. Thérèse’s desire grew in obedience. One of the main reasons for the trip to Rome was to seek permission from the Pope to enter the monastery at an earlier age. We see that intense self-will was tempered by the counsel of Pope Leo XIII, the opposition of Fr. Delatroëtte (the Delegate to the monastery), and the reservations of Pauline, her sister. Once again, St. Thérèse received these oppositions with a heart that grew in peace as learned how to trust more and surrender everything to God. These circumstances did not discourage her, rather Thérèse saw them as God’s message to her that came through the Pope, “Well, my child... do what the Superiors tell you! ...Go...go...You will enter if God wills it.” In other words, there is an appointed time for you to enter the monastery. For now, in her failed attempts, she was asked to rest her will in God.

**Breaking One’s Will in Conformity with God**

Chapter 7 – The First Years in Carmel. There was sadness in the heart of St. Thérèse when she left her family to enter the monastery. However, this emotional state did not hinder her from exercising her will, and now, in an intensified

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20 *Thérèse of Lisieux*, 181.
21 *Thérèse of Lisieux*, 186.
22 *Thérèse of Lisieux*, 164.
23 *Thérèse of Lisieux*, 192.
manner. In her early years in the monastery, she encountered various challenges: relating with nuns from different backgrounds, doing chores which she was not used to, and finding excessive care and comfort from her elder sisters (Pauline and Marie) who were ahead of her in the monastery. In these areas, we see how she exercised her will in embracing what was uncomfortable and resisting the comfortable. Though falling short many times in her chores, she carried them out faithfully and with holy perseverance. Nor did she give in to the temptation to find excessive comfort from her sisters, “I didn’t come to Carmel to live with my sisters but to answer Jesus’s call. Ah! I really felt in advance that this living with one’s own sisters had to be the cause of continual suffering when one wishes to grant nothing to one’s natural inclinations.”

We see a more intense exercise of the will, in the deterioration of her Father and his eventual death. To know that her father was suffering from a mental condition was already painful. However, it was aggravated by the thought that it was a result of St. Thérèse’s departure from her Father to enter the monastery. In the words of Louis, “Oh, my children are abandoning me!” Despite this, St. Thérèse speaks of the peace in her heart. “For seven years and a half that inner peace has remained my lot...in the midst of the greatest trials... ‘In the bottom of my heart, I felt a great peace since I had done everything in my power to answer what God was asking of me. This peace, however, was in the depths only; bitterness filled my soul, for Jesus was silent’... ‘Everything was sadness and bitterness. And still peace, always peace, reigned at the bottom of the chalice.”

Peace amid trials and pains? How is this possible? St. Thérèse’s heart was occupied with peace because God made it so. As she intensified her re-desiring of God, God also worked more in her soul. Peace amid trials and pain is God’s action in the soul who has grown in total trust and surrender to Him.

However, it is important to note that God was not only working in St. Thérèse but in all who have the clarity that God is our ultimate goal. On May 10, 1892, Isidore Guérin brought Louis back to Lisieux for a visit. Here, her father spoke these words, pointing upwards and said, “Au ciel!” For Louis, it was clear that the goal was in heaven and there they would see and delight in the presence of each other eternally. This is not just consolation. It is fulfillment, the completeness of satisfaction – beatitude.

Clearly in this chapter, St. Thérèse grew in understanding what it deeply means to desire God: “My mortifications consisted in breaking my will...” To break one’s will is to receive and surrender to God’s will for us. A layer of desiring God is to break our will in order to conform to Him.

**FAITH AS GOD’S WISDOM IN THE DARKNESS OF THE SOUL**

Chapter 8 – Profession and Offering to Merciful Love. This chapter articulates the illumination in the soul of St. Thérèse as part of one dark night. She speaks of the absence of consolation – an important sign of the dark night. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the dark experience triggers scrupulosity since the light that God infuses shocks the soul. The soul is not accustomed to the light, jolting the soul. Due to

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24 Thérèse of Lisieux, 248.
25 Thérèse of Lisieux, 250.
26 Thérèse of Lisieux, 230.
27 Thérèse of Lisieux, 206.
28 Thérèse of Lisieux, 262.
29 Thérèse of Lisieux, 251. Translated as In heaven!
30 Thérèse of Lisieux, 216.
the unfamiliarity, the soul gazes more on what
the light reveals, (which is one’s sinfulness) rather
than the light itself, making one scrupulous.

However, every dark night is also a moment of
God’s communication. As St. Thérèse struggled
with “whether God loved [her or not],”31
God communicated to her soul as she visited
Mother Geneviève in the infirmary. Mother
Geneviève said to her, “Serve God with peace
and joy; remember, my child, Our God is a God
of peace.”32 These words were such a healing
balm for Thérèse’s beleaguered soul. This gives
us an insight that the best condition for God’s
communication is when we are placed in the
darkness. The best ground for God’s message
is the soil of the desert. Why? Because in the
nights and deserts of our souls, the sensitive life
and faculties are silenced and stilled. It is in this
state that the soul receives God’s communication
best.

What happens to us when we receive our God’s
communication? St. Thérèse’s encounter with Fr.
Alexis in the confessional box gives us a picture
of what could happen. “[B]ut I had hardly
entered the confessional when I felt my soul
expand. After speaking only a few words I was
understood in a marvelous way...He launched me
full sail upon the waves of confidence and love
which so strongly attracted me...He told me
that my faults caused God no pain....this assurance
filled me with joy... My nature was such that
fear made me recoil; with love not only did I
advance, I actually flew.”33 We need to remember
that St. Thérèse together with the community
had “lowered” their expectations of Fr. Louis in
terms of what he could give them. Yet the soul
of St. Thérèse’s expanded. Such expansion was
the effect of receiving God’s presence in the
soul. The heart is dilated when it receives God as
Psalm 119 tells us, “Viam mandatorum tuorum
cucurri, cum dilatasti cor meum.” “I have run
the way of your commandments, when you did
enlarge my heart.”

In St. Thérèse’s expansion of her soul, the more
she was strengthened and fortified in desiring
God all the more. In January 1892, influenza
ravaged the community. Thérèse was one of three
nuns who cared for the sick and prepared the
dead for burial. This not only won her the esteem
of the community, but also shows what takes
place in us when we dwell in God’s presence. We
overturn our weakness with the strength and
fortitude that comes from God. This intimate
encounter with God assured St. Thérèse of the
abiding presence of God captured in the images
of sleeping Jesus and the loving parent.

**LOVE AS VOCATION, PRESENCE IN GOD,
SACRIFICE, AND BEGGING GOD**

Chapter 9: My Vocation is Love. In what is
perhaps the most famous chapter, we read here St.
Thérèse’s words, “MY VOCATION IS LOVE!”
However, there are also other important lines
that we read from this chapter, “I shall be love,”
“victim of love,” and “I beg you!” These lines are
not only interrelated with each other but enrich
our appreciation of St. Thérèse’s desire for God.

St. Thérèse opens the chapter with these lines:
“Nevertheless, I am going to stammer some
words even though I feel it is quite impossible
for the human tongue to express things that the
human heart can hardly understand….I feel how
powerless I am to express in human language
the secrets of heaven...”34 Intimate encounters
with God are actual experiences. However, they
go beyond the powers of the human faculties;
hence, they resist being captured in language.

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31 Thérèse of Lisieux, 264.
32 Thérèse of Lisieux, 281.
33 Thérèse of Lisieux, 269.
34 Thérèse of Lisieux, 296.
This is what we mean by mystery. It is an actual experience, a close encounter with God that silences our senses and faculties…. causing us to behold God, delight in Him, and say “ah…. oh…. in the manner of stammering before God. To deal with this limitation, St. Thérèse sets chapter 9 in conversation with Jesus, “I shall address them to Jesus since this makes it easier for me to express my thoughts, but it does not prevent them from being very poorly expressed!” which frames how to read this part of the Story of a Soul, which is a mystical dialogue between God and St. Thérèse.

In this chapter, St. Thérèse speaks of many desires in her: “the WARRIOR, THE PRIEST, THE APOSTLE, THE DOCTOR, THE MARTYR.” How would she get hold of and deal with all of these? St. Thérèse realized that the DIVINE LOVE was both the root of all of her desires and the bond that connected her to all the members and works of the Mystical Body of Christ. “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!”

When St. Thérèse abided in the love of God, she abided in God and in others. Vocation as love is to hear God’s loving voice and to desire to live in this love. Along these lines, we understand the words, “I shall be Love.” This meant that St. Thérèse lived in the Divine Love whose consequence was her contribution to and participation in all the works of the entire body.

The doctrine of the little bird is beautifully shared in this chapter. The little bird, though weak, finds her eyes and heart as those of an eagle. What does this mean? It means that the attention and disposition are totally directed to God. “In spite of my extreme littleness I still dare to gaze upon the Divine Sun, the Sun of Love, and my heart feels within it all the aspirations of an Eagle…. With bold surrender, it wishes to remain gazing upon its Divine Sun.” The little bird cannot fly toward God because of its feeble wings and distraction of earth’s trifles. How, then will the little bird go to God? “[T]he Adorable Eagle, will come to fetch me, Your little bird; and ascending with it to the Furnace of Love, You will plunge it for all eternity into the burning Abyss of this Love to which it has offered itself as victim.” As the little bird fixes its eyes and heart on God, God comes to fetch the little bird to bring it to Himself. In coming to fetch the little bird, God chooses her to become a worthy victim of love. The coming down of God is His sanctification of the littleness of the bird, making her worthy to be a victim of love. The chapter ends with a paragraph repeating the words, “I beg you” three times. “But why do I desire to communicate Your secrets of Love, O Jesus, for was it not You alone who taught them to me, and can You not reveal them to others? Yes, I know it, and I beg You to do it. I beg You to cast Your Divine Glance upon a great number of little souls. I beg You to choose a legion of little Victims worthy of Your LOVE!” (Bold emphasis supplied.)

St. Thérèse begs Jesus to teach the little souls the secrets of His love. Such teaching of secrets takes place in begging God. To beg God is to make ourselves teachable by God. Begging God disposes us more to Him; humbles us before Him; relinquishes our control, recognizing that God is in charge; deepens our desire for Him; makes us grow in faith that we will receive the love we ask for; and changes not just our external environment but the interiority of our hearts.
Doubt is Longing to See God

Chapter 10: The Trial of Faith (1896–1897). In this chapter, we see the theological virtues of hope, faith, and love being clothed by God in St. Thérèse. Consistently, St. Thérèse speaks of her steadfast desire for God, which comes from her pursuit of a saintly life. “My one purpose, then, would be to accomplish the will of God, to sacrifice myself for Him in the way that would please Him... For a long time, I have not belonged to myself since I delivered myself totally to Jesus, and He is, therefore, free to do with me as He pleases... I have always wanted to be a saint.”41 However, this is realized not in St. Thérèse’s hands, for she is a little bird, but only through God’s action. Her analogy of the elevator helps us understand how this takes place. An elevator helps us reach another floor by just stepping into it, and the elevator does the rest. This is similar to our relationship with God. When we step into His presence – or better still – throw ourselves into His arms, that saintly life becomes a reality for He realizes it in us. “Whoever is a little one, let him come to me.”42 What will Jesus do when the little one comes to Him? He will bring the littleness of the soul to completion and perfection. “As one whom a mother caresses, so will I comfort you; you shall be carried at the breasts, and upon the knees, they shall caress you.”43 When the baby cries because it needs milk, it is the mother who comes to the baby and not the other way around. Remember that the little bird comes to God, not because of its feeble wings but because God fetches her and brings her to Himself.

As mentioned in the previous chapters, part of the dark night is the obscurity of understanding which we know as doubt. This is expressed by St. Thérèse in this chapter, “I do not believe in eternal life. It seems to me that after this mortal life, there is nothing anymore. ...At that time, I was having great interior trials of all kinds, even to the point of asking myself whether heaven really existed.”44 Doubt must be seen as inherent to faith. Since the faculty, specifically the intellect, is silenced and stilled, it does not produce that understanding that one usually has. Although there is obscurity in one’s seeing, there is certitude in the soul in the desire to recline to God, “When I sing of the happiness of heaven and the eternal possession of God, I feel no joy in this, for I sing simply what I WANT TO BELIEVE.”45

We also see in this chapter how St. Thérèse examines her feeble and selective love for her sisters as God makes her don the garments of Divine love. “…I understood how imperfect was my love for my sisters. I saw I didn’t love them as God loves them. Ah! I understand now that charity consists in bearing with the faults of others, in not being surprised at their weakness, in being edified by the smallest acts of virtue we see them practice. But I understood above all that charity must not remain hidden in the bottom of the heart... charity must enlighten and rejoice not only those who are dearest to us but “ALL who are in the house” without distinction...You know very well that never would I be able to love my Sisters as You love them, unless You, O my Jesus, loved them in me....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.”46

God Drawing Us: Perfecting our Desire for Him

Chapter 11 – Those Whom You Have Given Me (1896–1897). The last chapter gives the full
stroke of what it means to desire God. Although in the previous chapters, St. Thérèse talked about detachment, here she speaks not just of detachment on the sensitive level (which is the usual kind of attachment) but detachment on the level of the faculties. This means that the soul lets go not just of any thoughts, but of her most revered and cherished thoughts. Those that she considers as apodictic and indubitable must now go. It is not just letting them go for their sake alone, but letting go to let God instruct the soul fully. A similar thing takes place in the heart. Those that the soul holds dearest and most beloved other than God Himself must now go, so that by untying itself from attachments, the heart becomes fully free in desiring God totally. St. Thérèse says, “Jesus has given me the grace of not being any more attached to the goods of the mind and heart than to those of earth.”

In this chapter, we also read of St. Thérèse’s way of accompanying the souls entrusted to her. Though perceived as severe by her novices, it was clear to St. Thérèse that her mission was to bring them closer to God, “With the grace of Jesus never have I tried to attract their hearts to me; I understood that my mission was to lead them to God…” Prayer has the most important role in the accompaniment. For in prayer, one not only expresses her love for God and others but becomes a channel for saving those who are being accompanied. “[I]t was not through letters Carmelites must save souls but through prayer.”

What is Important in this chapter is St. Thérèse’s experience of prayer, “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 in the midst of trial as well as joy; finally, it is something great, supernatural, which expands my soul and unites me to Jesus.” (Italics supplied.) This captures the very core of the Divine-Human relationship. In desiring God, the soul aspires to God and directs her glances to heaven. God acts (contemplation) on the soul as she cries for gratitude, love, and joy in the midst of trial. In God’s action in the soul, the soul expands herself and brings her in union with God. This description of prayer captures reciprocity and union with God in the spiritual life – the full giving oneself to each other, wherein God consumes the soul into His love. This union of the soul is expressed further in St. Thérèse’s reflection on being drawn by God.

What does to be drawn by God mean? St. Thérèse explains, “to be ‘Drawn’ is to ‘be united in an intimate way to the object which captivates our heart’". And such was the prayer of St. Thérèse, “I ask Jesus to draw me into the flames of His love, to unite me so closely to Him that He live and act in me. I feel that the more the fire of love burns within my heart, the more I shall say: “Draw me,” the more also the souls who will approach me…will run swiftly in the odor of the ointments of their Beloved, for a soul that is burning with love cannot remain inactive.”

Consistently, St. Thérèse expresses her simple desire “that we all be one day united in Your beautiful heaven.” This desire to be in heaven was all about resting her desire in the love of God. “You know, O my God, I have never desired anything but to love You, and I am ambitious for no other glory. Your Love has gone before me, and it has grown with me, and now it is an abyss whose depths I cannot fathom. Love attracts love, and, my Jesus, my love leaps toward Yours; it would like to fill the abyss which attracts it, but alas! it is not even like a drop of dew lost in the ocean! For me to love You as You love

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57 Thérèse of Lisieux, 374.
58 Thérèse of Lisieux, 381.
59 Thérèse of Lisieux, 383.
60 Thérèse of Lisieux, 384.
61 Thérèse of Lisieux, 403.
me, I would have to borrow Your own Love, and then only would I be at rest.”52 (Italics supplied.) It is interesting that St. Thérèse ends her story similarly with the ending of the first two stanzas of St. John of the Cross’ The Dark Night, “my house being now all stilled.”53 And this is heaven. When the soul loves God through His love, the soul finds its rest. It is important to note how it is formulated. It is not finding rest in God but upon finding God the soul rests. The desire of the soul is not rest but God Himself. This finding God is captured in the last lines of the chapter, “even though I had on my conscience all the sins that can be committed, I would go, my heart broken with sorrow, and throw myself into Jesus’ arms, for I know how much He loves the prodigal child who returns to Him. It is not because God, in His anticipating Mercy, has preserved my soul from mortal sin that I go to Him with confidence and love…”54 Finding God is to throw oneself in His arms and simultaneously God embraces us fully. The soul, finding God, embracing her rests.

CONCLUSION

What is the Story of the Soul all about, then, when a spiritual reading of each chapter of the book has been completed? It is the soul completely surrendering herself to God, and God completely surrendering Himself to the soul. The inherent yearning to be with God, as His imago Dei, plays a crucial role in this process. However, while this fundamental desire is innate in us, it is the human person who must make it active so that it naturally, immediately, and habitually re-inclines to God every time it steps forth onto the path away from Him. Such an endeavor necessitates holy determination and perseverance. As it was said, God is found in our very longing and seeking for Him. And with this, God acts as it becomes present in the soul, purifying, purgating, illuminating, perfecting, absorbing, and uniting the soul to Himself. The reciprocal union that we have witnessed between God and St. Thérèse is the result of this relational dynamics. God and soul give themselves to one other on an eternal basis in this reciprocal connection. It is in this union that the soul that has been attracted to God is consumed and perfected in the splendor of God. What happens to a soul who is living in the presence of God’s glory? There is rest: לַבָּשׁ shabbat, in finding God, the soul rests.

In the priestly account of creation, the word of God plays an unassailable role. God’s saying is a conditio sine qua non without which creation would not take place. And “God said…” then, light, firmament, dry ground plants, the sun, moon, and plants came into being. However, not only that. The more important event is that, through God’s word, they are brought in His presence, dwelling in Him. Moreover, since they have been brought into God’s presence, they are at rest. It is for these reasons that, while the text states that God rested on the seventh day, the entire creation was also at rest since they were in God’s presence, in reciprocal union with Him.

REFERENCES


