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Introduction

Everything Is Grace, a reflection on the life and spirituality of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, is intended to serve as an introduction for those who know little or nothing about Thérèse, as well as a further study for those who are more acquainted with this “greatest saint of modern times,” as Pope Pius X called her (*Divini Amoris Scientia: Apostolic Letter of His Holiness Pope John Paul II*, 10). It is also intended to be a corrective for those who consider the spirituality of Thérèse to be merely sentimental and syrupy, basically focused on trivialities, perhaps a passing fad of interest, but mainly irrelevant for those who live in this world of harsh realities and complex issues.

Including material from the autobiography of Thérèse, her poems, and her correspondence, as well as references to the testimony presented during the process of her canonization, this reflection also addresses the concerns of those who were surprised that “the Little Flower,” as Thérèse has been popularly known, was proclaimed a doctor of the church by Pope John Paul II in 1997. And finally, it may also address the unspoken questions of those put off by the very label “the Little Flower.”

Following a brief overview of some of the aspects of Thérèse’s spirituality, the main body of *Everything Is Grace* will explore the life of Thérèse, as her unfolding experience revealed to her a fresh view of the spirituality of the gospel.

Thérèse’s spirituality, which Pope John Paul II called a revelation of the “*fundamental mystery*, the reality of the Gospel,” is inseparable from her life (DAS 10). It is displayed by the way she actually lived, and cannot really be understood outside of her life. She did not write a spiritual treatise that can be read independently of her life; rather, she lived a relationship of love, and as she came to understand God’s ways with her, she put that spiritual wisdom into words—words that were mostly autobiographical.

In her correspondence, in her poems, prayers, and plays, in her teaching to the young sisters who were under her care, and in her autobiographical writings, Thérèse spoke about her way of living a life of love. She also warned that some of what she said could be misinterpreted if not put into the larger context of her life.

To understand and appreciate Thérèse's spirituality, there is no better way than to see it lived out by Thérèse herself. Yet her life contains nothing extraordinary; in fact, many of the details are similar to the details of the lives of multitudes of common holy men and women who, at their deaths, are quickly forgotten because their lives were so ordinary. This is especially true of the details of Thérèse's inner distress. She suffered a great deal from her *excessive sensitivity*, as she expressed it, but her sufferings, emotional and physical, while filling her subjective capacity, were not more than many ordinary people suffer. Her own mother, who died of breast cancer, suffered extraordinary physical pain, and her father, who was committed to an insane asylum for three years at the end of his life, suffered extraordinary emotional pain. Some of the saints suffered for years the darkness of faith that Thérèse suffered for the last eighteen months of her life.

Thérèse's virtue and prayer were also ordinary in many ways. She lived the last years of her life in a convent with sisters who rarely noticed that she was acting beyond what was usually expected of the members of the community and what was accomplished by every good nun. Shortly before Thérèse's death, one sister said, "My sister Thérèse of the Child Jesus is going to die soon; and I really wonder what our mother [superior] will be able to say after her death. She will be very embarrassed, for this little sister, as likeable as she is, has certainly done nothing worth the trouble of being recounted" (*Saint Thérèse of Lisieux: Her Family, Her God, Her Message* by Bernard Bro, 9). Another sister who had also lived with Thérèse for seven years expressed what several of the other nuns thought as well: that there was nothing to say about her; that she was very kind and very retiring; that there was nothing conspicuous about her and that no one would have suspected her sanctity. And when first approached about the possibility of canonizing Thérèse, Mother Marie de Gonzague, the prioress of the convent, laughingly remarked, "In that case, many Carmelites would have to be canonized" (*The Story of a Life* by Guy Gaucher, 210).

Thérèse's sanctity is not really the blossoming of rich human potential. It is not the result of the cultivation of extraordinary precociousness. Some saints have been humanly gifted with skills and capacities that are brought to fruition as part of their holiness. A talent for organization, an ability to envision reform, a bent for leadership, a flair for teaching, or even unusual psychic powers are among the natural gifts that contribute to the human

base of holiness for some saints and founders of religious communities. Thérèse was gifted with none of these.

The one capacity Thérèse possessed is actually often an obstacle to holiness rather than a contributing factor—namely, a capability to be self-preoccupied and self-reflective. Thérèse noticed everything about herself, and she was willing to share that not as a display of ego-centeredness, but as a manifestation of God’s work in her. The difference between these two attitudes constitutes a very fine line, and the temptation to cross the line is always lurking. Thérèse’s glory is that she did not give in to that temptation. Her capacity for self-preoccupation finally became her greatest gift, for it allowed her to be attentive to the working of God in her.

Thus, by her personal reflection and in her writings, Thérèse has given us a glimpse into the working of the Holy Spirit in a very ordinary, and in some ways, a very limited soul. A challenge of the life of Thérèse—the essence and challenge of her “Little Way” of spirituality—is that if God could raise her to such a state of holiness, then any soul who is as willing and available as Thérèse could also be raised to sanctity. Thérèse’s life was a manifestation of the gospel truth that the good tidings are for the “poor in spirit.”

Devotion to Thérèse

Devotion to Thérèse of Lisieux has had a rather curious history in the Catholic Church. It actually began well before she was beatified and canonized. Within a few years of her death in 1897, she was the object of veneration and was already fulfilling her promise to shower graces on those who asked her help. By the time Pope Pius XI canonized her in 1925, devotion to Thérèse was already widespread among Catholics throughout the world. Missionaries were proclaiming her name and teachings as part of their evangelizing efforts, particularly in Asia and Africa. In Europe and North America she was quickly becoming the most popular saint among ordinary people. Statues of Thérèse were proliferating, stained-glass images were appearing, and holy pictures were widely distributed in Catholic schools and churches. Novenas to Thérèse were becoming more and more popular as well.

Then, in the 1940s and early 1950s, devotion to St. Thérèse met with obstacles. Freudian psychology had just emerged. Freud himself was a contemporary of Thérèse. As she was writing the manuscript that has come to

us as her autobiography, *Story of a Soul*, Freud was writing his book on dreams. In the context of Freudian psychoanalysis, not many of the saints did well. Thérèse fared worse than most: she was more often than not diagnosed and dismissed as neurotic, or even as psychotic. Some Catholics began to have second thoughts. By the late 1950s and into the 1960s, fewer girls were receiving the name of Thérèse at baptism or confirmation, and novenas to Thérèse were subsiding, although she was still counted one of the most popular saints worldwide. By the late 1960s and 1970s, even the title “Little Flower” was drawing some criticism and seemed to trivialize her teaching and relegate interest in her to pious schoolgirls or to sentimental old women.

Devotees, however, of this young woman who had lived only twenty-four years—her last nine years in a Carmelite convent secluded from the world—have included such diverse personalities as Dorothy Day, Edith Stein, George Bernanos, Paul Claudel, Gustavo Gutierrez, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, and Thomas Merton.

Thomas Merton never wrote a biography of Thérèse, but he attributed his vocation to her inspiration and introduced his novices to her spirituality. He saw the Little Way as a call for the “democratization” of holiness and as “an explicit renunciation of all exalted and disincarnated spiritualities.”

Edith Stein wrote of Thérèse, “My only impression when thinking about her was that I was faced by a human life uniquely and totally driven until the very end by the love of God. I know nothing greater than this, and it is a little of this which I would like as far as possible to carry over into my life and into the lives of those around me.”

Dorothy Day at first thought that Thérèse really had nothing to teach her. Yet later, twenty-five years into her ministry with the Catholic Worker Movement, she returned to Thérèse, noting that she was the saint needed for our time. Dorothy Day eventually focused several years of her life on writing a biography of Thérèse—so impressed was she with Thérèse’s Little Way of spirituality. In concluding the biography, she compared the power of the Little Way with the force of the atom and the atomic bomb:

Is the atom a small thing? And yet what havoc it has wrought. Is her little way a small contribution to the life of the Spirit? It has all the power of the Spirit of Christianity behind it. It is an explosive force that

can transform our lives and the life of the world, once put into effect.
(*Thérèse* by Dorothy Day, 175)

Dorothy Day experienced Thérèse's Little Way as a force more dynamic in its nonviolent love and its spiritually transforming energy than an atomic bomb or a nuclear weapon is powerful in its ravaging and destructive capacity.

Since the Second Vatican Council, devotion to Thérèse has again surged. The extensive outpouring of devotion by lay Catholics as well as by the hierarchy during the worldwide pilgrimage of Thérèse's relics, beginning in the mid-1990s, testifies to the universal esteem in which Thérèse continues to be held.

Interest in Thérèse over the years and throughout the world has continued even to the present day at an extraordinarily high level; indeed, since 1925 there has continued to be published worldwide, on average, a book a month dealing with her life and teaching.

On October 19, 1997, one hundred years after Thérèse's death, Thérèse was proclaimed a doctor of the church. To be named a "doctor" is an enormous honor for any saint; for Thérèse, it affirmed all that the ordinary faithful had understood about her, as well as all that the theologians and hierarchy had come to respect about her teaching. Pope John Paul II's declaration affirmed that Thérèse's teaching carries the depth of authentic Catholic spirituality, revealing the essence of the gospel with new freshness.

Everything Is Grace

The title of this book, *Everything Is Grace*, refers to a remark that Thérèse made just a few months before she died. She knew that she was entering her last days. *If you find me dead one morning, don't be troubled*, Thérèse told her sisters. *It is because Papa, God, will have come to get me*. Then she added a comment that responded to her sisters' expectations that she would have a beautiful death. They imagined that, at the end, she might die in an ecstasy of grace, or at least she would certainly receive Holy Viaticum in much peace and joy, befitting a saint. But Thérèse wanted to prepare them in case her death was sudden or that she would not be able to receive the last sacraments. In fact, because of her inability to retain food during the last weeks of her life, she could not receive the Eucharist as she was dying. She

told her sisters quite simply, *Without a doubt, it's a great grace to receive the sacraments; but when God doesn't allow it, it's good just the same; everything is a grace* (St. Thérèse of Lisieux: *Her Last Conversations*, translated by John Clarke, 57).

The remark reveals much about Thérèse. On the emotional level, even as she was in agony on her deathbed, she was concerned about her sisters' feelings and how they would experience her death. She wanted to please and accommodate them. They hoped that she might die "like a saint," on a special Marian feast day or on another significant religious day. They wanted her to receive the last rites of the church, in saintly fashion, and to receive Communion. In her pain she responded to their expectations as best she could, but knew that she might not succeed in fulfilling their image of her dying like a saint. And their feelings of disappointment, even at this late time in her life, concerned her.

Also, from a more spiritual point of view, she was speaking words that she had learned from St. Paul, her most important scriptural teacher. She wanted to help her sisters understand that God's grace was not limited to the sacraments or to projects of human choosing. From her own experience she knew that she had received some of her most important graces in the ordinary and unbidden events of life.

And finally by her comment that *everything is a grace*, she was also sharing her spirituality of the Little Way—the spiritual way of accepting with loving surrender and gratitude all the happenings of life as sent by divine providence. If the experiences of life, even the ordinary and trivial, are received in this attitude of surrender and gratitude as gifts of God, then not just appropriate religious devotions and sacramental activities communicate grace, but surely *everything is grace*.

Part One

CHAPTER 1

The Spirituality of Thérèse of Lisieux

The spirituality that St. Thérèse of Lisieux lived and taught is nothing other than the very heart of the gospel made convincing and accessible to modern people. Thérèse's way of holiness, the way of spiritual childhood, the Little Way, is the gospel way, the way of Jesus. As such, ordinary Christians will recognize it as resonating with the deepest truth of the gospel—truth they have learned from meditating on the Scriptures, from their contact with the rich tradition of the church, from their involvement in the liturgy, from their religious education, and from their own grace-filled intuition and experience.

Pope John Paul II spoke of this fundamental gospel mystery as the reality that God is the loving Father and we are the beloved. The pope confirmed that this is Thérèse's fundamental teaching when he noted in his apostolic letter making her a doctor of the church, "The core of her message is actually the mystery itself of God-love. . . . At the root, on the subjects' part, is the experience of being the Father's adoptive children in Jesus; this is the most authentic meaning of spiritual childhood. . . . At the root again and standing before us, is our neighbor, others, for whose salvation we must collaborate with and in Jesus, with the same merciful love as his" (DAS 8). Thérèse explores, elaborates, and unfolds this mystery with a rich freshness, originality, and simplicity, making it clearly available to modern people.

Thérèse's spirituality was described by one of her novices, Sr. Marie of the Trinity, who learned of it directly from Thérèse's instructions and example:

[She] has done nothing extraordinary: no ecstasies, no revelations, no mortification which frighten little souls like ours. Her whole life can be summed up in one word: she loved God in all the ordinary actions of common life, performing them with great faithfulness. . . . She took everything as coming from God; . . . to abandon yourself to God and to think of yourself as little as possible, not even to seek keeping an account of whether you make [spiritual] progress or not. That's not our business. We have only to try to perform all the little acts of daily life with the greatest possible love, to recognize humbly but without

sadness, our thousand imperfections which are always resurfacing and to ask God with confidence to transform them into love. (*Thérèse of Lisieux and Marie of the Trinity* by Pierre Descouvemont, 121, 118)

As “the greatest saint of modern times,” Thérèse addresses the modern dilemma: not only the issue of our fundamental human limitations, our sense of guilt, the depth of suffering inherent in human life, and our fear of annihilation—but more so, our sense of alienation, our tendency to self-hatred and violence, our quest for meaning in life, our search for authentic existence, our complete divorce from any sense of hope, our loss of the security of truth, and our fear of “eternal solitude,” as Nietzsche put it. A contemporary of Thérèse, Nietzsche, having proclaimed the “death of God,” asked the question that reverberates down the years even to today, Where could I feel at home? This was Thérèse’s question, as well.

Thérèse says to modern people, burdened with a sense of homelessness in life and suffering a sense of quiet despair, You are searching in the face of death for meaning in your life, for authentic existence, for liberation, for happiness, for freedom, and for truth; you are looking for love and transcendence, for connectedness and companionship, for affirmation and a sense of fulfillment. I have discovered what you search for: it is God, it is divine love stooping down to embrace you. And I know a way that will lead you out of your darkness and suffering. The way is the path of accepting divine love into your life, of willing to be available to the beloved God even in your weaknesses and despair. It is the way of being aware of your need for love, willing to give yourself to God’s loving embrace like a child abandons itself with confidence and love into the arms of its loving parent, and then freely sharing love with others in creative good works of peace and justice. It is the willingness to be the person God calls you to be.

I know a way—Thérèse would continue—a Little Way to the fullness of life that you seek, a way to joy, to happiness, to peace, indeed, to eternal life. The way is short, and you have access to it in your present state, in the reality of your present task, whether small and trivial or big and complex; you have access to it in the immediacy of the here and now. It is a matter of awareness and willingness, of surrender and gratitude, of confidence and love. If you are entangled in the vicissitudes of life, in the messiness of your

own weaknesses, in the distress of feelings, this way is for you. Everyone desires to love and to be loved, and it is a matter of awakening to this desire and directing it to its true source, its divine source.

Thérèse, like all the great saints and teachers of wisdom, does not propose a blueprint that would help modern people solve all the distressing social and human problems of life, but she does offer a way that will transform the lives of modern people and allow them to address these problems with peace, creativity, compassion, and justice.

A Gospel Way of Holiness

On one occasion, Thérèse spoke of her way as *totally new* (*Story of a Soul*, translated by John Clarke, 207). However, the way of spirituality Thérèse expressed has been within the church from its beginning, flowing from the gospel and founded in the best of Christian spirituality. She understood her way from her own experiences, which were confirmed by the light of the Scriptures. It is really the gospel way, the way of the Holy Spirit, which had been lived before Thérèse by countless ordinary, hidden, holy men and women through the centuries under the Spirit's influence and will be lived by countless more in the future who may never hear of Thérèse. Thérèse herself prayed that God would raise up a legion of little souls like her. In a sense, that has already happened in the countless people who have lived their lives fulfilling the divine will by their inconspicuous acts of fidelity, justice, peace, and love.

Thérèse's Little Way is really a way that had been dormant and hidden rather than a completely new way. God raised up Thérèse to proclaim and confirm the hidden, authentic gospel way. "The Spirit of God," Pope John Paul II said, "allowed her heart to reveal directly to the people of our time the *fundamental mystery*, the reality of the Gospel" (DAS 10). Thérèse lived and taught in a manner that reveals this very traditional gospel way to modern people who might not otherwise know the way. And for those already on the way under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Thérèse's life and teaching provide confirmation and validation, giving confidence to those who might otherwise doubt. This makes Thérèse and her teaching a great gift to the modern church and to modern people.

A Traditional Way

As Thérèse came to understand the gospel way, her Little Way, she was greatly influenced by many people. We cannot say that Thérèse was some kind of independent, precocious spiritual genius. She learned the spiritual life as we all do, basically from the holy people with whom we associate. Chief among her mentors were her own saintly parents, Zélie and Louis Martin. By their example, they sowed the seeds of the Little Way in a family life steeped in simple reverence and love for God and for one another, a family life that embraced many liturgical and devotional expressions of faith as well as a spirit of prayer, detachment, surrender to the divine will, and dedication to gospel values. Among Thérèse's four sisters, all of whom had some influence on her, Pauline was particularly important in forming Thérèse's vision of holiness and in providing her with devotional piety, even from the earliest days of her childhood. Thérèse, however, had to make her own way, and she significantly modified some of Pauline's ideas, especially her idea about the role of one's own effort in the path of holiness.

In the gospel Thérèse found her fundamental vision. She was inspired especially by Mary Magdalene's audacity to love Jesus in the face of her own weaknesses, and she was enlightened particularly by the teaching of St. Paul.

In the history of spirituality we also find those who were precursors to Thérèse's way, as well as those who modeled it for her. Thérèse admired and was influenced by various saintly people of history. Joan of Arc, not yet canonized in Thérèse's time, was among her favorites. Thérèse was attracted by Joan's heroism and courage in the face of wrongs committed against her, personal pain, and internal distress, as well as by her simplicity, inner strength, faith, and confidence in the divine call. Thérèse also admired a young missionary priest and martyr not yet canonized, Théophane Vénard, *because he was a little saint* and for his courage, trust, and apostolic spirit. Faith, love, courage, boldness, inner strength, and zeal—these were the characteristics of spirit that resonated with Thérèse, even as a little child.

Among other precursors who inspired Thérèse was St. Francis of Assisi, who lived the same spiritual poverty and nonviolent love that we find at the heart of the Little Way. Thérèse was influenced by her aunt, Sr. Marie-Dosithée, a religious of the Sisters of the Visitation community, which lives the spirituality of its founder, St. Francis de Sales. We find Francis de Sales'

way of holy simplicity, abandonment, trust, gratitude, gentleness, patience, and love in the essence of the Little Way.

The great founding saints and doctors of Carmel, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, were the mother and father of Thérèse's spiritual teaching. Mother Geneviève, a founder of the Carmelite convent in Lisieux in which Thérèse lived, practiced the ordinary virtues in an inconspicuous way of holiness in total self-surrender that Thérèse much admired. Fr. Pichon, a Jesuit whom Thérèse considered her confidant and confessor, and Fr. Alexis Prou, a Franciscan who preached the one retreat that Thérèse most appreciated and *launched* her on the path of *confidence and love*, were among others who helped Thérèse on her way.

When Thérèse speaks of her way as *totally new*, she does not deny that she has taken a deep drink at the well of that ever-pervasive and profoundly rich spiritual tradition flowing directly out of the gospel through the lives of both ordinary and extraordinary Christians. Yet, for Thérèse, that rich tradition was not always available, and sometimes was misrepresented. Thérèse lived at a time, for example, when it was taken for granted that to be a holy person, one had to be an extraordinary person who had achieved some exemplary works, had attained a high state of prayer and asceticism, and perhaps even had had visions and ecstasies.

Thérèse's era was also a time when perfectionism was thought to be the ideal of Christian life. Jansenism, a heresy that promoted a false image of God as punitive and vindictive, had been condemned two centuries earlier, but was still sending out roots and tendrils into Catholic teaching. Pelagianism, an even earlier heresy that taught that people could successfully strive to merit God's love, also contaminated Catholic life. As a child and then as a nun in Carmel, Thérèse heard preaching purporting to be gospel truth that advocated perfectionism as the ideal, fostered human effort as the basis of hope, and represented Jesus' Father as a God of vengeance and wrath, of limited patience and punitive justice. Thérèse had no theological or scriptural education to counter such teaching theoretically, but she did have her own experience of human love and the gospel teaching of Jesus, "If you, with all your sins, know how to give your children what is good, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to anyone who asks him" (Matthew 7:11).

From a contemplation of the gospel and from reflection on her own expe-

riences, Thérèse knew that the Father of Jesus was not correctly represented by a Jansenistic image. She knew also that she had been called to holiness, but that she could not reach perfectionism, or accomplish great works, or attain high levels of asceticism. She knew from her own experience that the peace that Jesus gives is different and much more merciful than the peace of this world. Furthermore, she knew that the justice of God would also be different and much more compassionate than the justice of this world. She knew that she could reach holiness by grace even if she did not have the capacity or the achievements of the great saints.

In the face of Jansenism, perfectionism, and Pelagianism, Thérèse's teaching was something of a purification of doctrine, bringing the church back to the gospel holiness that is accessible to everyone. This purification Thérèse achieved in her Little Way, without being against anything, without trying to reform anything, but being for a life of nonviolent love. Her teaching is a fresh and creative expression of the traditional gospel teaching.

A New and Contemporary Way

In many aspects traditional, Thérèse's presentation of the gospel way might be considered "new," however, in the sense that Thérèse is our contemporary. Had she lived to be ninety years old, an age that two of her sisters, Pauline and Céline, each attained, Thérèse would have died in 1963. That the fundamental mystery of the gospel has been newly revealed to us by a young woman who died just over a hundred years ago necessarily gives that revelation a certain contemporary quality. Thérèse's Little Way has a newness about it simply because it presents to people of modern times a way to understand God and gospel holiness by a woman who is a contemporary.

Thérèse struggled, just as do modern people, in the search for truth and integrity in life. She faced the challenge of living with the inner conflicts of her own self-centeredness and willfulness; with the tension to remain true to herself while carrying the burdens of the expectations of others, personal feelings of animosity, and vain self-love. She knew the inner distress of loneliness and abandonment; the struggle of scrupulosity and self-doubt; the sort of helplessness that men and women today feel in the face of psychosomatic illness, addictions, and obsessions; the physical pain and inner darkness that make suicide a viable option. She was confronted with the religious

questions of whether God and the afterlife of heaven really exist; with a felt experience of atheism; with the tension between faith and feelings; with the uneasy gap between science and religion; with the profound difference between violence and nonviolence as a way of dealing with evil.

These issues and tensions Thérèse resolved from the point of view of a mature woman—within a feminine perspective—in the workings of her own mind, with the light of the Scriptures—and in doing so has offered modern people the personal and social possibility of doing likewise.

Thérèse's teaching may also be considered new in that Thérèse brings to the understanding of the gospel a spirit of delight and awe that we associate with newness. Thérèse sees the Scriptures with the audacity and boldness, the freshness and hope, the directness and bluntness, the astonishment and utter trust of a child who looks for the first time at infinite possibilities and promises.

When the gospel speaks of our being called to be like God and tells us that God is love, Thérèse accepts this as a truth to be lived brashly. When Jesus assures us that the two great commandments are really one commandment, she accepts that as a truth to be lived selflessly. When Jesus speaks of having come not for the righteous but for sinners, she embraces that as a truth to be lived gratefully. When Jesus requests mercy and not sacrifice, she welcomes that as a truth to be lived personally and socially. When Jesus assures us that he will draw everyone and everything to himself, she rejoices in that as a truth to be lived literally. When Jesus commands love of the enemy, Thérèse applies that in an all-embracing way, to the enemy within ourselves as well as to the enemy outside ourselves. And when Jesus tells us that the reign of God is at hand and that all are welcome, especially the poor, the weak, and the suffering, Thérèse realizes that the opportunity to participate in the call to holiness is to be found in every experience of daily life, especially in suffering, and even in her own imperfect, weak response to grace. In the evening of life she will come before God, Thérèse says, *with empty hands*, confident that she will be clothed in God's own justice and goodness (SS 277). This is the same "old" gospel, but seen through the eyes of a young woman who is dazzled with the promise of the gospel message.

Thérèse's Everyday Mysticism

Thérèse's teaching is also contemporary in that it addresses a very modern problem. Until relatively recent times, even with the decline in faith among academics and philosophers, there had been an enduring undercurrent of religious values and belief permeating the lives of simple, ordinary people in Western culture. But this religious culture, more specifically this Christian, Catholic culture, has begun to fade completely as a context for life in modern times. The decline of cultural support for traditional religious values and Christian beliefs is a recent phenomenon that led the eminent modern theologian Karl Rahner to remark that the Christians of the future will be mystics or they will not exist at all.

What exactly could it mean that the contemporary Christian's baptismal call and challenge is to be a mystic in a modern world suffering the loss of cultural religious faith? The mystic has often been equated with the person who has had transcendent religious experiences that are far beyond the ordinary events of life. Such a person might have had extraordinary prayer experiences as did St. John of the Cross. Or as did St. Teresa of Avila, such a person might have recurring visions of Jesus, as well as unusual spiritual accomplishments or experiences of levitation. Even some modern saints have had the remarkable religious phenomenon of bearing the wounds of the crucified Christ, the stigmata.

But to limit the notion of the mystic to those who experienced unusual spiritual gifts would hardly allow many of the Christians of the future to qualify to be numbered among Rahner's mystics. In the past there have been very few reported mystics of the stature of St. John of the Cross or St. Teresa, and it is hardly likely that there will be many more in the future. Rahner encourages an expansion of the notion of "mystic" to include the "mysticism of everyday life."

Lacking the support of a culture that respects Christianity, the future Christian, to be secure in faith, will need to have personally experienced God's existence, love, and providence in the ordinary circumstances of life. Secondhand faith will no longer be enough to safeguard the Christian of the future from being swallowed up by an atheistic and materialistic culture. No longer will it suffice for the Christian to know about God's existence and

about divine love from a sermon or a book. The Christian of the future will need to know God through personal experience.

A personal encounter with the Divine, however, does not need to happen through extraordinary events such as unusual prayer experiences, visions, or levitations. And that is just the point of Thérèse's life and teaching. Thérèse herself is regarded as a mystic, but she did not have what is usually understood to be extraordinary mystical experiences. She did report what were for her subjectively profound, albeit momentary, spiritual insights and experiences. Among these, she spoke of her exhilaration at first seeing the majesty of the ocean; she spoke of the sense of being united with God at her First Communion and also on other occasions when she received the Eucharist; she mentioned the importance of the grace of her reception of the Sacrament of Confirmation as well as the blessing of the smile that appeared on the face of a statue of the Virgin Mary and freed her from a youthful psychosomatic illness. She also wrote of a prayer experience of profound passionate love for God, the effects of which lasted for about a week, and another prayer experience that lasted for a very brief time. But these are the kinds of experiences that many ordinary Christians, as well as other religious people, report frequently. They seem to be the kinds of experiences that Rahner had in mind when he spoke of the Christian mystic of the future (cf. *The Practice of Faith* by Karl Rahner, 57–64, 69–70).

Besides the experiences that Thérèse recounts, the “everyday mysticism,” “the experience of the Spirit” that Rahner refers to might include experiences similar to what Rahner himself suggests—for example, an occasion of fulfilling a duty that required complete self-forgetfulness without any affirmation; a comforting or confronting insight into ourselves that reveals a truth that liberates us; a time of silent peace and joy flowing from a brief prayer; quiet awe in the beauty and majesty of nature; an experience of profound happiness without any particular thing being the source of that happiness, that is, happiness at simply existing and living; a moment of freedom, for no apparent reason, from an emotional or physical burden.

“Everyday mysticism” might also include an encounter with a beloved person who gratuitously embraces and affirms us; an experience of beauty in the presence of music or art; a time of desperate longing that opens out into a mysterious certainty and peace; a moment of participating with awe in

the wonder of a child; or an experience of freely forgiving someone without needing anything in return.

“The experience of the Spirit” could also include an occasion when we were able to remain tranquil and not retaliate in the face of an unjust accusation; an event of meaninglessness, borne in patience and suddenly yielding meaning; the spontaneous goodness of a stranger to us in a time of need and our spontaneous recognition of the deep goodness of human nature; a personal sacrifice we made solely because we believed it needed to be done and without concern about whether it was even noticed.

We also know God in an experience of being held in existence during a period of personal weakness and desolation; a series of chance happenings leading to physical or emotional healing and well-being; the ability to maintain patience and inner freedom in a time of personal diminishment, loneliness, and suffering; the capacity to respond to personal hurt with forgiveness and without violence; faithful and honest perseverance in a situation in which compromise would lessen personal suffering.

“Everyday mysticism” might also include the capacity to bear serenely trials and pain that had previously seemed impossible to endure; the ability to trust, surrender, and yet act lovingly without cheaply or cowardly giving up even in the face of confusion, fear, and mystery (cf. PF 82–84).

These “experiences of the Spirit,” “everyday mystical experiences” are both ordinary and extraordinary: ordinary in that they happen often in daily life and that sociological surveys have documented their frequency. But they are extraordinary in that they open out into the experience of the reality of divine mercy and love. God is present in these experiences, as if slightly under the surface, awaiting our notice. They are called, in the Catholic tradition, experiences of divine providence and grace. When anyone at that moment allows the thin veil of ego-centeredness to part and permits the full depth of the meaning of the moment to enter consciousness, mysticism happens—and then one not only knows about God but also knows the divine reality in the experience of that moment. They are examples of “mysticism in everyday life.”

One of the most highly respected spiritual teachers of our time, Thomas Merton, also speaks of “real mystics” who are “hidden contemplatives.” Merton speaks of ordinary people who have “abandoned themselves to the

will of God, seeking only to keep in touch with the . . . inner and spiritual realities” of the present moment. These mystics simply live life as a “walk with God,” “not seeking anything special or demanding any particular satisfaction,” living truthfully each day in great simplicity and inner freedom, doing “what is to be done,” “not worried about the results of what is done,” “content to have good motives and not too anxious about making mistakes.” These hidden contemplatives are focused primarily on the divine will in “the living stream of life,” finding the “extraordinary in the ordinary,” and remaining “at every moment in contact with God, in the hiddenness and ordinariness of the present moment with its obvious task.”

Merton gives examples. “At such times, walking down a street, sweeping a floor, washing dishes, hoeing beans, reading a book, taking a stroll in the woods—all can be enriched with contemplation and with the obscure sense of the presence of God. This contemplation is all the more pure in that one does not ‘look’ to see if it is there. Such ‘walking with God’ is one of the simplest and most secure ways of living a life of prayer, and one of the safest. It never attracts anybody’s attention, least of all the attention of the one who lives it.” “A genuine mystical life,” Merton assures us, “may be lived in this condition” (*The Inner Experience* by Thomas Merton, 66). This is Thérèse’s kind of contemplation and mysticism: the awareness of the divine love in the usual events of daily life, “everyday mysticism,” “hidden contemplation,” the kind of mysticism and contemplation that will be needed by the Christian of the future.

Thérèse’s Little Way

Thérèse teaches that the call to sanctity is extended to everyone, even to the psychologically and spiritually weak, because divine love is actively present here and now in the ordinary experiences of life, loving us, healing us, empowering and uniting us with God’s own love. Thérèse through her own experience was convinced that sanctity was available because divine love is always available.

Thérèse died at the age of twenty-four. She is not so much a spiritual genius or spiritually precocious, but more a living gift to the church through whom the Holy Spirit “reveals” the essence of the gospel anew. She manifested once again for our time the reality that gospel holiness does not require, as the mix

of Jansenism, perfectionism, and Pelagianism pretended, extraordinary experiences in prayer or virtue, or sinless perfection, or fear of God, or penitential violence to oneself, all of which we could achieve with a bit more effort. Her message is simply Jesus' message of love: that we receive divine love and ought to share that love in acts of justice and charity. Thérèse lived this truth with such freshness and simplicity that she is a blessing for modern people.

The Little Way of Thérèse is not new or original in the sense that it presents newly discovered techniques or formulas of prayer; nor is it new in the sense that it attempts to explain a new theology, or that it directs us into new devotional activities. Nor is the Little Way a new outline of spiritual practices, nor a new model of stages of spiritual growth.

Rather, the Little Way, paraphrasing Thérèse herself, is an attitude, a disposition of heart, a way of awareness and willingness. It is a way of accepting and reciprocating God's love, available in all life's experiences. It is a way of responding, under the impulse of the Spirit, to divine love with confidence, abandonment, and trust, and sharing that love with others in justice and peace. It is the child delighting in and sharing a gift with the giver and those around it. Thérèse's way, just as the gospel way, does not require a prior attainment of a degree of perfection to receive God's free and merciful love, but requires only, within our human condition of weakness, a spirit of abandonment and a willingness to receive and to share that love.

O Jesus! Thérèse wrote at the end of her life, why can't I tell all little souls how unspeakable is Your condescension? I feel that if You found a soul weaker and littler than mine, which is impossible, You would be pleased to grant it still greater favors, provided it abandoned itself with total confidence to Your Infinite Mercy. . . . 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! (SS 200).

Thérèse's Little Way of holiness assures us that intimacy with God is available to all of us in the ordinary experiences of the here and now of life. Yet not everyone willingly receives the divine love fully. She noted one reason for this: *Ah! How many souls would have reached sanctity had they been well directed*, she wrote. For us, Thérèse's own life and teaching now provide that kind of necessary direction in the spiritual way, the "mystical" life of everyday experiences.